

Lord's magical realism eco-novel—by witnessing one human's startling transformation—dramatizes how Earth contains the same mysterious power of healing each person innately possesses, within our deepest, most natural being.

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THE BRIDGE TENDER

a novel by
t e Z a L o r d

“Marginality (is) much more than a site of deprivation ... just the opposite ... it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance.”

bell hooks, *Marginality as a Site of Resistance*. 1998

1

All Thea Bowman's life she's had an Itch. The strangest, weirdest, most indefinable sensation known to man, woman or child, and nothing—nothing!—Thea does can make it go away. It is an annoying remembrance, or some damned thing. She becomes obsessed by inner urges that Itch's persistence presses upon her. She can't scratch it; she can't even tell where it's coming from—if it is inside her body, in her mind, or if its source is in the world somewhere. Is it on her skin, in her hair, deep in her bones, under her nails? Or is she having some allergic

reaction, from something outside herself? All Thea knows is something has to change—*big time*—or that relentless sensation will eat her up. The only thing that makes it bearable, that insufferable, annoying tingling that never subsides—is to keep busy. Hanging around with her new wild crazy girlfriend will take it away. So does fooling around. No pain when the lovemaking gear is engaged, and oh, how Thea loves that! Making art distracts her attention from it too, but that’s hard work. So naturally, Thea’s favorite remedy for that damn Itch is to party—anytime, anywhere, any which way, with anything that gets her out of her head and into oblivion.

On this lonely midnight she’s strolling on the haunted, creaky docks of Sausalito. Thea had wandered over from her too-empty attic aerie, atop a hill in San Francisco. In a faraway Asiatic country, another senseless war is being fought with far too many casualties, way too many heartbreaks. Angry fervor is bittering everyone’s hearts here at home. Humanity’s feet have just touched upon the face of the moon. Even more surprising, Thea Bowman had somehow, the year before, managed to survive her twenty-first birthday, a feat that left her more shocked than anyone. Yet it is just today she’s discovered she failed to get into the Art Institute, what she thought would be the perfect next step in her making-art-dedicated life. Naturally, Thea feels unbearably lost. And even more lonely after this latest rejection—more than being new to town, having no friends—there’s not much reason for her trying anymore. Anywhere. So it’s surprising, on that wharf when an unknown voice blinds her, and a muscular, fearless woman gruffly makes herself known, simply by stepping out of the shadows on the unlit dock.

“Hey. What’cha up to?”

The huge figure of a stout female walks toward Thea and into the beam of a streetlight. The glow of a cigarette forms a bulls-eye around the stranger's mouth. "Friends call me Big Sue."

Thea sees the strange figure has a dog at her side. "And this here's Dr. Bob," he's quickly introduced.

Thea instantly likes the woman's aggressive friendliness. She looks up at this statuesque, six-foot two Amazon and recalls a childhood tale of a grubby tugboat Annie. She feels a shift inside, her usual clam-tight self cracking open to this stranger. In an equally friendly tone Thea says,

"Friends usually call me fucked-up."

They both make chortling noises, instantly hitting it off, right there in the half-bowl darkness of a seal-honking salty night on that Sausalito pier. Thea finds Big Sue's tough sailor talk intriguing. She quickly discovers that this Big Sue character *really is* a sailor, even though she looks more like a lumberjack, bundled in grimy oversized clothes. Thea has never met another female so uninterested in appearances. This woman before her, taller than not-short Thea, is that rare version of female who hasn't one iota of either affectation, beautification, or couth.

Thea looks at this surprise person in the streetlight's mellow cast. Big Sue isn't bad looking, with a heavy dark braid like a squaw that must keep her spine warm all the way down her back. Her features are not unrefined, just not particularly notable. If it weren't for her voluminous size, it would be easy to miss her. Her looks warrant no special attention other than the sheer mass of a surprisingly agile, bulky body. The continuous scowl on her face might put

people off, Thea thinks. However, it is precisely this that immediately draws Thea to her, another soul-in-pain.

“Fuck it!” Big Sue’s war cry comes with a slap to her new friend’s sturdy shoulder.

“Let’s go get us some libations, what’ dya say?”

What relief it is to meet a pal! Someone Thea can commiserate with and feel not at odds with herself or the world. Thea and her new companion, the Queen of Wasted and her black-and-white tuxedo dog, enigmatically called Dr. Bob, walk down the dock together, a tight trio already.

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At the end of the dock is the Noname Bar, Big Sue’s home away from home. When she isn’t out at sea or at the Noname, Big Sue can be found on her own boat, an old wooden tug, the *Raven*. The towering figure amuses Thea as they walk in step, Big Sue’s arm warmly around the lost little dock rat she’s just discovered.

Thea feels an incredible energy rush from this powerful person’s body into her own. Surely, Thea figures, Big Sue has to be a real life she-pirate, and no doubt, one hell-bent incarnation of Bluebeard himself.

“Wanna smoke?” Big Sue extends a pack of Pall Malls to Thea as they settle themselves into a wooden booth at the Noname, the dog nestled in the shadows underneath, used to being incognito in bars apparently.

“Sure,” says Thea.

“So what are ya doing out here, so late and so alone?”

Thea shrugs. She bends to the lighted match Big Sue cups in her hands against the steady breeze of so much boozed-soaked B.S. wafting around the darkened, antiseptic-smelling bar.

“Figured I’d come over to see the boats on the dock. I like to look at them. Already checked the ones over in town, where I live.” Thea indicates across the bay with a toss of her jaw. Moments before, they’d seen San Francisco’s lights bursting through a thickening night fog as they entered the Noname.

The stranger takes a drag from her cigarette and leans back. Under the table lies Dr. Bob. The whites of his eyes, watching them both, combined with his coat’s spots speckle a lively presence in the darkness. When Thea first came upon Big Sue on the dock, her dog checked the stranger out more than his companion did. He sniffed Thea’s outstretched fingers, then quickly returned to his position inside the center of a coiled-up line on the dock. Now, the dog’s ears respond to every lisp of the two women’s banter. His radio-beacon ears are simultaneously tuned: one to them, the other to the taunting barks of a harbor seal he hears through the walls of the Noname, languishing on a nearby floating buoy, vocalizing whenever a chilly wave washes over it.

Thea is glad to finally meet at least one person who extends a simple kindness to her. A year earlier she’d hitchhiked from the Midwest, having run as far and as fast as she could from a past that brought too much pain and anger. Since arriving in the Bay Area she’d only been talked to with condescending authority from her new boss at the restaurant where she works, or demandingly by its patrons. In this era of hippies and mind-bending drugs, compounded by throngs of gays proclaiming San Francisco to be their sequined Mecca, Thea noticed no one, absolutely no one, made eye contact with her on the streets. The entire city was in a state of siege, shocked from the tidal wave of freaks and misfits, all of them proclaiming the hilly city theirs, only theirs.

Later that night Thea sits in Big Sue's tugboat galley drinking rum. She feels embraced by the mannish woman, who never feels a stranger to her after their initial meeting. Thea bids her new friend goodnight around two in the morning and grabs a cab and heads back to her rented room, glad to accept Big Sue's invitation to join her for a camping trip this upcoming weekend.

A chick after my own heart, Thea mumbles, climbing the stairs: one who's not afraid to sleep in a tent and go without fancy stuff.

A few days later Big Sue pulls up at a Victorian painted lady, at the address Thea gave her. Dr. Bob jumps over the seat when Thea gets in front, tossing her pack in the rear alongside him. "Hello fella," Thea says, patting the queerly smiling dog, all teeth and canine jollies.

After driving over the Bay Bridge and through the Caldecott tunnel, the land becomes wide open.

"I need the ultimate experiences in life, M'llasses," Big Sue says, spontaneously baptizing Thea with a nickname she knows is hers the first she hears it. "Wait till you see the mind-blowing campsites on Mount Diablo. See, over there."

A tall mountain looms up before them. Flat land and busy towns surround its golden base of dried grass meadows. "I never knew Nature could be so strong as it is out West," Thea murmurs.

"You're right there, girl," Big Sue says in delight. "This here mountain makes Mount Tamalpais cringe like a city park. Just you wait."

Thea had spent hours exploring the trails and craggy spots around Mount Tamalpais on the Sausalito side of the Golden Gate. It's true though, wherever she went there, she knew she was in a city park, not close to anything like a wilderness.

The two friends with Dr. Bob in the back, drive to the summit of Mount Diablo, then choose the most scenic campsite, number thirteen, overlooking the surreal, crowded San Francisco valley below. The view transforms the city and its environs into a wall-length Baroque landscape painting that barely, but actually, moves—when you look real closely at its minute details. Big Sue rolls a big fat joint and hands it to Thea. After smoking it they put up the tent and throw in their sleeping bags, zipping everything up tight as a drum.

“Gotta keep the coons from ruining everything. Come on, let’s hit the trails,” Sue says.

The trio walks vigorously for several hours. Big Sue has a stash of j’s with her, besides a nipping bottle of Southern Comfort. “Just for energy,” she grimaces at her new partner in mental blitzkrieg-ing. Thea is impressed at the larger woman’s stamina. They walk up craggy hillsides, down fern-drenched valleys, across wide grassy meadows that sprinkle the otherwise rocky mountain with alarming beauty. At twenty-five, Big Sue’s strength matches Thea’s, who usually is unrivalled by anyone, man or woman. Her friend’s knowledge—of plants, of interpreting approaching weather systems by reading the ever-varying clouds, along with knowing seemingly countless legends about local Indian tribes, especially of the ancient Anasazi people—revealed in detailed stories that Big Sue relates nonstop as they explore the trails—electrifies Thea. Because she cares deeply about these things too, even though she feels hopeless about her own nowhere life, and the state of the entire messed-up world. At their first meeting, Big Sue provided the camaraderie of a drinking partner, period. By now though, she’s revealed how aware, how sensitive she is to how bad things actually are for all Earth’s inhabitants—fulfilling the prerequisites that Thea’s hurt soul cherishes in another person’s company. But the more she finds out about this fascinating, taboo-feeling, odd-looking, he-she person, Thea knows Big Sue is a treasure chest of knowledge, especially about ways indigenous people everywhere revere Nature.

Every other word out of Big Sue's mouth is another fact about how sacred our home, Earth is, was, and always will be, " ... even if its dumbass human residents don't start waking up to what Mother Nature, the entire planet needs," she growls.

(If Thea had met this spellbinding person in our present time, requiring a major cultural shift and another deadly pandemic to separate fact from fiction, Big Sue would be speaking about sustainability, kombucha, and being vegan, wearing those buzzwords like a jeweled crown with her grimy jeans. But back then, in the late sixties, Big Sue is obsessed with Native Americans, referring to the Life Source with their native tongues translated into English names such as Great Mother and Great Spirit, as she draws more libations from a hip-pocket.)

"That's a good enough God-name for me—the Mystery," Big Sue says as she swigs from the Southern Comfort pint before handing it to Thea, scratching her dog's head as she does.

Then the hike brings them suddenly to a clearing, in between corridors of rock and thick overhead oaks and pines. Big Sue suddenly bursts into a run. Flailing her arms about her head she screams, "Get away, you fuckhead!" at a big red hawk that's diving repeatedly, joined by Dr. Bob's enthusiastic barks and mad dashes to and fro. Thea spies a panicked rabbit zigzagging across the open field. Big Sue jumps and runs, foiling one dive after another, until the hawk suddenly turns and zooms after her. She punches and swings, yelling at the top of her lungs, Dr. Bob joining the fracas. Finally, the hawk flies off and the bunny scurries into a hole in the hillside.

Thea runs to her friend who squeezes her wrist to stop the bleeding where the hawk's talons scratched her.

"It's nothing. Motherfuckers takin' advantage of the weak always gets me."

"It is the way of the wild, Big Sue."

“Yeah, I know, but it doesn’t mean I have to like it, does it.”

Thea smiles. Already she feels akin to this rough person, in ways she never knew she could. Sue’s right, Thea silently nods to herself: Nature doesn’t care about being fair.

They walk on, up to the summit, and over to the south side of Mount Diablo, where they look out onto many crowded towns, reaching as far as their eyes can see, north and south. They smoke another joint while sitting in a golden field, goofing on the late afternoon scene below, of the ant-hill human population that surrounds metropolitan San Francisco, Oakland, and Berkeley. The crush of buildings, the sinuous highways filled with shiny cars, evoking long glistening snakes that cruise this surreal, silent landscape so far below them. On the ground, towns appear as dotted and crosshatched patterns; grids are made from thick rows of winery grapes the outskirts towns grow in neat parallel lines. Thea and Big Sue bellow like crazy women at the ludicrous thought of so many people crawling around like tiny bugs, all hectically making money, making this, making that, living for ... what? To be ants, from up here! They fall over backwards laughing, zonked out of their heads. Somewhere, hidden from human sight, two anxious robber raccoons scratch themselves, looking at this bizarre human scene in front of them.

Another hour of walking and climbing. Big Sue takes a seat atop a huge smooth boulder as wide and high as a three-story house. She offers the Southern Comfort to Thea, who gulps the syrupy toe-buzzing stuff, even though she isn’t fond of the sickening sweetness. Big Sue brings out a plastic bag of wet, cow shit-encrusted mushrooms. Thea has never done them before; her eyes grow round. She knows the more plants she shoves down her throat and into her lungs, the less she’ll feel that damn Itch of hers.

“We’re here for a few days, why not enjoy ourselves?” Big Sue says.

The dog scrambles to place himself directly in the middle of them.

Thea chuckles. “What a ladies’ man he is.”

“Yeah, just look at this, will ya, M’lasses,” Big Sue says, gulping down her share of the fungi without chewing as she sweeps her hand before them, out at the startling vista of land, sea and sky. Their perch on the mountain, devoid of any other campers or hikers this chilly time of year, is a magnificent eye view of the world, atop the protected wilderness of Mount Diablo State Park.

“Who says we have to have a god to answer to,” Big Sue says, unexpectedly, “when Nature’s awesomeness is so, so....” She sits up straighter, struggling to finish her sentence. In a whisper she finally says, “It’s so real.” Big Sue’s eyes get squinty and moist as she gazes at the sight of the valley below, as if it portrayed some fairytale scene rather than life itself.

“Yeah, this is pretty cool,” Thea quietly agrees, feeling awkward at her friend’s sudden turn to the serious channel.

“Cool!” Big Sue turns to Thea. “Are you kidding? Nature’s the only thing worthwhile. It’s the holy book I read. The clouds, the wind, the waves—just look at this fucking wonderful world, will ya! Shit! Have you ever been in a storm out at sea? If anything is fucking cool, that’s it, M’lasses!”

Thea keeps quiet. She isn’t much good about things concerning supernatural forces, Nature’s or otherwise big magnificence, or of trusting anything vast, much less this transcendental stuff Big Sue is suddenly talking about. Thea has always been running, as fast, as far away as she can, from the religion of fear she’d been spoon-fed by her small-minded, bigoted parents.

The God I was taught, Thea thinks, was no fun. For me to trust in Nature, to see Mother Earth as some kind of spirit, I have to believe it’s not going to judge or hurt anybody, not me or

any other. Or be a phony fetish, like so many world religions have become, with obsessed fanatics proselytizing, waging wars, condemning others for not believing like they do. For me, religion is dangerous. I'm a skeptic, I admit.

For me to believe there's a Great Spirit, Thea nods and thinks silently, I have to feel it, not be told about it.

For a few minutes Big Sue and Thea just sit and watch the mind-stilling view. The horizon is so far off that the endless silvery reach of the Pacific Ocean can be seen to the west, while the Sierra Nevada mountains stretch on either side of them. Off in the distance where land meets sea, Thea notices the glint of super jets appearing like toys zeroing in on the Oakland Airport, like gnats buzzing around something rotten.

Big Sue speaks, this time in an easier way. "Nature is so real to me, so right, M'lasses. Nature's power is endless. Out at sea, it's sometimes terrifying and deadly, yet other times it can be as gentle as a lake, and as kind. I love Nature! This is *It*, my friend. This—this—" Big Sue's arms spread in a wide sweep to embrace the tableau before her, "this is my God, all around us, here and now."

Thea sits in silence. She doesn't mind Big Sue's drunkenly elaborating upon her trust in the inscrutable nature of Nature. Inside herself, more important things are happening: the psilocybin mushrooms are starting to kick in. Thea feels the first queasy surge of nausea. She wonders if she's going to puke. But she doesn't want to say anything, neither about her physical discomfort nor the slight confusion she has about Big Sue's adopting the ways of the Ancient Ones, her appearance being so non-native.

Thea's words, spoken or silent, have always been her enemies. Words never quite connect with how she feels. They're like muffled, handcuffed slaves, to be freed when only

absolutely necessary. For years she's trained herself not to feel. She's extremely uncomfortable speaking about things beyond making her basic needs known. Anything too deep confuses her. She holds no opinions, and proudly defends that position, as if it's a right she's earned by being so miserable for so long. It's become a habit, stuffing her feelings, ever since she discovered how well booze and drugs worked on numbing them.

Thea sits next to the awe-struck, now-silent Big Sue, and her serene formal wear dog. Thea turns to look right into Dr. Bob's sparkling eyes of wisdom. She sees in them the good humor of the dog's lively, trusting ways. She admires his non-verbal expressions, so ... eloquent. Thea gives him a warm embrace, just for the heck of it. Her stomach rumbles are growing with each passing minute. Something is definitely happening. That's what she wants, more of being outside herself. More of averting her attention from who she is, where she's come from, and what scares her the most—that irritating Itch. Thea smiles at the disrupting sensation arising from inside. She adores getting high, as shit-faced as she can get, becoming like a plane about to take off for Destination Unknown. She doesn't even care whether she makes it back or not.

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After some time passes, Big Sue stands and says, "We better get to the Trail of Time before old Mescalito shows his face around here."

"Who?"

"Mescalito, the spirit of peyote. But I call him in for every damn thing I take, peyote or San Pedro cactus, mushrooms, that weird Dragon's Blood, or the Ayahuasca vine. I only do natural when it comes to trippin', M'lasses. Ol' Mescalito is obliged to show whenever called upon for assistance from us mere mortals. Nature teaches best through her plants, I figure. The People knew; indigenous tribes everywhere, them and the animals, they're the ones that

remember most. The People have always been taking some bush, leaf, or tree bark, to find answers in their own selves. Only through the gates of the natural world do we find clues for truth and happiness.”

Big Sue turns, flashes Thea a beaut of a grin, and shouts to the air above her: “We want to touch the magic of life! That’s why we’re here!” She turns to Thea, “That’s why people like you and me, my friend, do what we can to get out of ourselves, to loosen us up from—from all the shit the world flings at us. So we can get unhuman enough to pass through the gates separating this world from the unseen world. That’s where the real power is.”

Balancing on a boulder Sue stands looking out at the silent vista of huge boulders and blue skies for a while longer.

“Get it, M’lasses?”

“Yeah, sure,” Thea struggles to her feet from her precarious perch on another rock.

“Whatever you say, I’m in.”

“I bet you are,” Big Sue chuckles. “You have to if you’re brave enough to be here with me. And Dr. Bob. You’re my kind of wonder-er, aren’t cha, boy?”

The wonder dog gives up an emphatic woof as if he understands every word his big mama caretaker has uttered.

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A few minutes later they pass the Cave of the Wind. A massive sculpted formation in a huge sandstone cliff, made from the wind of eons carving out a line of small irregular holes that resemble a mountainside’s own musical instrument. They stop. They hear whistling that sound like notes coming from a giant’s flute. Yet there is no giant around, just a steady breeze. The unique beauty of the place, and the eerie sound of the wind passing through holes in sandstone,

now resembling a muted saxophone, affects Thea. The mushrooms have already transported her to their promise of altered perceptions. Everything looks extraordinarily clear, sparkly, and cellularly interconnected. Thea begins to see web-like patterns, things making, a visible, mycorrhizal network she's never noticed before.

She stands listening to the haunting, almost sacred sound coming from the stone holes. They proceed walking noiselessly, reverentially alongside the cliffside wall. Peering in, Thea sees that the rock cliff has been hollowed out enough to make a comfortable aviary, but no birds are there right then. Suddenly—something whizzes by from one of the cave's holes, only missing their heads by inches. Big Sue and Thea stop dead in their tracks, not believing what they see. As if caught in slow motion, a glass beer bottle arcs high, and—bursts into demonic splinters of shattered light on a nearby rock. The explosion of glass shatters the deep quiet shared by the mountain and its hikers.

A litterbug's bottle, thrown unconscionably. Their idyllic vision is scissored in half. Before them, the broken bottle is a snapshot of another disheartening portrait of life on Earth with uncaring inhabitants. Thea's body goes rigid, swept away by a rush of anger that silently ambushes her. But Big Sue—that ever-ready pirate gal, bursts into a screeching, roaring tornado.

“Hey!” She yells at a half dozen teenage boys guzzling beer—seen peering out from behind the cliff's holes that were once used, long before vandals walked these trails, by birds entering their safe nests. Sue quickly makes up the distance between her and them, in the same phenomenal burst of energy displayed earlier when she rescued the rabbit from the eagle.

“What'd you assholes think you're doing here, huh?”

Before she can grab any of the gang, the punks scatter like rats, and good thing too, because Thea is sure if Big Sue got her hefty hands on any of them they'd have sorely regretted ever having been born.

“Little fuckers,” Big Sue growls. “Wouldn't you know, nasty little turds like them, ruinin' even the best place around. Some people would crap in heaven, M'lasses.”

Thea doesn't answer. She's thinking of all the times she'd done equally appalling things back in Illinois, when she'd been an irreverent, teenage drunk herself.

2

Her demented downstairs neighbor and landlord, Tim Osgood, Thea realizes, is borderline psychotic. Osgood is as driven, as obsessed as a madman who calls his fluffy cat his wife (which he often does), or stands in the road tearing his clothes off (his longtime pedigree in Haight-Ashbury warrants overlooking such trivial quirks). He'd barge in without knocking or asking permission any old time, right into Thea's affordable attic room. Never successful before in stopping the lunatic landlord from invading her privacy, but—with Big Sue often visiting when not at sea—Osgood has become triple times more neurotic.

He's really pissing Thea off now, doing crazy stunts such as the latest one. Bringing complete strangers, mostly men, up to meet "the infamous buccaneer, Big Sue and her timid cohort," he'd insanely deride right to their faces ever since Sue started showing up. He was boastful and rude, marshalling parades of gawkers into Thea's sometimes now-shared room whenever the sensationally asexual Big Sue overnighted at his boarder's hovel. He'd bring straight or gay, men or women who'd do anything, they'd tell him, to meet the *She Pirate* and

her sidekick, the whacked artist no one knew, Thea Bowman; both of them, by then, known for their wildly notorious drunken stunts in every watering hole along the bay front.

Osgood would start off each guided tour, with his hand on Thea's doorknob, whispering so the occupants wouldn't hear him about to barge in to the cantilevered-ceiling space. "Now you'll meet the incomparable fast-fighting she-devil herself, Big Sue, and her sublimely lovely, probably lesbian girlfriend—but not verifiably, yet—Thea."

Big Sue always thought this sideshow that she somehow, inadvertently, found herself party to whenever visiting Thea on Delmar Street, funnier than hell, when Raven made port in San Francisco. Both were so stoned they didn't care about privacy. Neither bothered to figure out if Osgood was really a jerk, or if this outrageous, exhibitionist habit of his was a sign of some incurable mental ailment, a brain tumor perhaps, and he was actually to be pitied. They decided over a buzz one night that he was a bit of both. Thea chocked it up to what she called "Osgood's carnival-tax," an inconvenience she figured was worth her room's, with a downstairs shared bath, economy rate. Besides, the two friends thought it hilarious when Osgood showed up with yet another entourage of squares seeking thrills in hippie haven, anxious to meet the legendary Big Sue herself, and her incongruous sidekick. Rumors of the She Pirate's exploits were seeded in every harbor Big Sue ever put in to, so it was reasonable her shady reputation made her practically a celebrity in her own homeport, the Bay Area.

After the two were hanging tight for some time, all aspects of Thea's life became unreal, not just communing with an unseen Indian guide using *spirits stuff*, meaning the *booze* mostly. "The reason I'm more an imbibor than a fungiphile or —," Big Sue affirmed when Thea asked about the bottle of Southern Comfort that accompanied her everywhere—never got answered was because she either nodded off or forgot what she was talking about. Thea and Big Sue used

bizarre combinations of drugs (plant derived, of course), chased down by shots of tequila, rum, or whatever liquid buzz-maker was available.

“To make our buzz higher, out of this world,” Big Sue the alchemist, claimed. “That’s why booze is called spirits ya know, M’lasses. It does the trick to pierce the veil.”

Through the fog of blinded consciousness, Thea obfuscated Osgood bringing a particularly intriguing young man with penetrating eyes to meet them one day. But hard as she tried to recollect what this haunting, singularly attractive visitor looked like, or what transpired during his visit, Thea could never conjure up in her muddled memory what made him stand out among all others. Did Osgood bring him up? Had this guy even existed? Try as she might, Thea couldn’t remember his face or discern anything more than a shadowy presence of goodness, like a scent of sweet familiarity, an awake-dream she yearned to meet in real life. A pair of piercing dark eyes penetrating the darkness with a lightness of surrender, hopefulness and unlimited possibilities.

Meeting this mystery was nothing more than a hashish dream, she scolded herself. Stop it! Its memory, she orders herself, is to be discarded.

Yet on another occasion, Thea thinks she has this stranger’s elusive image nearly in focus, then—poof!—it vanishes, leaving an enduring wistfulness that makes Thea swear off trying to recollect anything about intruders Osgood kept bringing around. To her, they were the freaks who peeped at her private life with Big Sue; people to whom she and her friend were just a carnival act, to be gawked and ogled over. Probably paying Osgood for it too.

No clues ever surfaced of the unknown individual’s identity when she was sober. Big Sue gruffly said, “Don’t know,” when Thea asked her friend about a particular man, whom she couldn’t describe. “I dunno, just felt he was ... special.” Thea’s only clue was the phantom’s

penetrating eyes meeting hers. But she soon gave up. Yet Thea couldn't help feeling a strong presence had floated by, like a magic-winged schooner passing her silently, in the dark of a moonless night.

The mystery man became like another fine meal one has had, strewn with unknown sense-swooning ingredients: but too much trouble to determine exactly which ones. And ... just as experiencing the finest of gourmet delights, the taste of even heavenly food dissipates ... in time.

#

Leaving Dr. Bob behind with Thea whenever she has to, Big Sue delivers boats for a living or freelances as a navigator aboard sailboats, powerboats, other tugs or cargo ships. Big Sue's next delivery is pulling away from Sausalito's dock. This time she's bound for Maui, navigating an eighty-foot ketch for a boat owned by the manager of one of the biggest-name rock groups of those LSD-laced times. During her friend's absence, as she'd always done, Thea roams from place to place never quite knowing what to do with herself. One-night stands with a rosary bead-ful of men never interests her much more than a cup of joe they share the next morning. When Big Sue isn't around Thea's life goes aground. Getting high is her wake-and-bake mandate, barely managing to get to work and wait on tables, or take Dr. Bob on his daily walks. By this time, Thea has lost her drive to make art. What's the point, she figures. The wildly exuberant, demon-haunted images she makes scares people more than anything. Nobody cares about the nightmarish work she painstakingly puts together in her tiny attic space, in between binges of trying to master forgetfulness of things past and yet to come.

She hates having to spend weeks, sometimes a month or more, waiting, listlessly passing time without her carousing partner. Without Big Sue, Thea is adrift.

Then, the pirate returns. They celebrate her long absence at sea with a big bash at the Noname. That night Big Sue says,

“M’lasses, I’m gonna treat you and me to a vacation. Somewhere different. I’m sick of Hawaii.”

The next week both of them fly across the States, then over azure seas dotted with green Bahamian islands, for an adventure in the best waters known for fabulous diving, “... other than the Red Sea,” Big Sue clarifies. “Crystal clear reefs,” she sighs, “a sight for my blurred eyes, staring at a far-off horizon for too long on those damn deliveries. Plus,” she winks at Thea, her partner-in-crime, “the tickets were pure cheap-o.”

“Cool,” Thea grunts.

In the clear, shoal waters off Cat Cay, at the southern tip of the Bahamian Exumas, Big Sue and Thea are putting on their tanks, snorkels and masks as they bob in an oversized Whaler. The sun-kissed dive shop owner, a nut-tanned princely-speaking Brit named Giles, has already dived down to the sea floor to check the set of the boat’s hook. Where Giles has anchored the seventeen-foot skiff, aways off Cat Cay, is the best spot on all the reefs, he’d proclaimed when they approached it. Big Sue is still gearing up. Thea has all hers on and is adjusting her snorkel, preparing to backward somersault off the boat’s rail, when Giles’ blond head bursts above the sea’s calm surface.

“Stay in the boat!” he shouts. “A hammerhead’s down here!”

Olympian strong though he is, Giles has no time to swim the twenty-five feet back to the Whaler. His breaking the crystalline water’s surface has sounded the alert for the beady-eyed predator below. A rogue shark is atavistically programmed to kill. In an agitated circling rush,

the animal attacks and drags the hundred and seventy-pound diver below the surface of the water.

It all happens in a breath. Where Giles' head just was is now an echo of the heart-stopping alarm he choked out moments before.

Big Sue screeches a war cry, grabs an emergency oar and violently beats the churning waters. Giles resurfaces, gasping. Startling pink spreads out from arms flailing the water wildly into foam all around his fierce face; his expression a shield that epoxies time to this moment. Above the water rises Giles' midsection. The shark's long needle teeth grip his flesh as primordial predator thrashes its weighty prey about in the air. Giles' twisted, gruesome face. His strength fighting death for life. The cut of his mouth, jagged, makes no sound as he is pulled under again.

Thea hears an urgent command clearly telling her, "Save this guy!" Without thinking, she obeys. Instantly she's in superwoman overdrive. Fully geared, Thea back-flips over the boat's rim. Big Sue calls out, "Stop, you fool!" Nothing matters to Thea but the inner command she hears. She has to obey. Thea swims with no splash right for the semi-conscious Giles—now loosened from the jaws—her snorkel raised defiantly above the perilous water. From behind goggles, her eyes dart everywhere, ready to fight the monster with her fists if she has to. Thea's only thought is to reach the man whose agonized face, contorted and ashen, is magnified in her mind as vast as the universe.

Giles, the whites of his eyes rolling backwards, floats, maybe unconscious. The full air tank has been ripped off his muscular shoulders; the rest of his dive gear is shaken loose, gone. Stealthily, Thea glides over to him, all the time regarding the shark's rushing dorsal fin circling, circling. Just as she grabs Giles the deadly fin disappears underwater.

“It’s okay, Giles. Hold onto me,” she commands.

The shark is probably diving for another attack, she knows, she’s heard Sue’s shark attack stories. Thea hears a scream from the anchored boat but doesn’t pay any attention to her friend, who’s ferociously beating the water with an oar.

Thea swims Giles, lifeguard-style, her arm wrapped over his chest, to the boat where Sue quickly gets him and her aboard. He’s semi-conscious. They see that razor teeth have ripped open Giles’ left side. Blood gushes crimson. The huge gash makes Thea queasy, but instead of gagging she binds a beach towel around Giles’ middle and applies pressure as Sue hauls up the anchor as fast as a sailor ever did. Everywhere inside the boat is covered with bright fuchsia, bloodstained seawater. Thea wonders if any is hers. Big Sue ignites the Mercury engine and whips the Whaler’s nose to Cat Cay’s main dock, so far away.

3

“You’re being asinine, M’lasses,” Big Sue says, and stomps off without another word. Thea knows her friend is right. But from the moment she slipped into the water she knew she was destined to be with this man. How could she not? She needed a change, and look, he needs her too. Giles is weak and ripped up, damn helpless, lying there stitched from left breast to groin when she brings him back to Cat Cay after a two-week stay in the Nassau Hospital.

Yet Thea feels compelled to stay with this man whose life she’s mysteriously felt tasked to save. To Thea, this shark event is nothing less than a sign, of the *big change* she’s been looking for. She wants to stay and help Giles, Thea tells Big Sue, who’s stuck around all this time trying to convince her pal otherwise. Her friend grumbles that Thea doesn’t know what she’s doing.

Giles’ vulnerability, his irresistible accent, his intellect so sensitive: how could she not help herself? Thea has never felt so drawn to a man, ever. The idea of making him her own special project, to fix Giles’ torn-up body excites Thea beyond anything she’s felt before.

Somehow, her Itch has disappeared in all this. She thinks, What else could have brought me to this nowhere chain of tiny limestone outcroppings, with hardly a tree anywhere, but to save him who needs me as much as I need him?

Harrumphing and stormy, Big Sue returns by herself to San Francisco, while Thea, the wild-child half-woman, remains on Cat Cay.

Gone are the days in which Thea does nothing but get obliterated, taking whatever Big Sue dishes out in her private search for the High and Mighty. Gone also, Thea quickly realizes, is the chemical motivation behind those freakishly surreal paintings of hers, fueled by mushrooms, rum, revenge, and recklessness. Time for a trade-in, Thea tells herself, missing nothing of her old life back in the Haight, ready for a new, healthy one in the islands.

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Thea watches over Giles as he lies helpless, determined to help him recuperate no matter how long it takes. “You’re my savior, you are, Thea,” he winces when she helps the hospital nurse turn him, watching to learn how his bandages are changed. As soon as he gained consciousness after surgery, she offered to work in his dive shop. “Until you’re on your feet,” she reasoned.

Without her help Giles would have fallen in an even deeper mess because, ex-pat par excellence that he is, he has no insurance and absolutely no savings. He has only the dive shop. His chest, arms and legs are stitched up, so he’ll be crippled for a while. Giles is as grateful for Thea’s assist as she is for him presenting a reason to feel her life is worth living.

“So, what do you do?” Giles asks Thea after he’s awoken to find her, again, sitting by his side after many consecutive days.

“Do?” Thea hesitates. She hates this question. For Giles though, she wants to make sure her answer means something.

“Do you mean ... for love or for money?”

Giles grins. “Oh, I get it. You’re an artsy sort, right?”

“It’s that obvious?”

“Sure. You look like one, for starters. The way you dress is, ah, unique. The way you don’t fancy yourself up. Natural like. Artists always do other things to pay the rent, don’t they?”

“You must know a few then. Where, here, in the Bahamas?”

“Nah, artists I know, back home, don’t like the sun much. Back in Bristol. But Thea, you know it’s no different for me, getting funds; money is always a struggle. I’m here with whatever pittance the shop makes. Sadly, no more research grants have been forthcoming my way. That’s what I do for love, study the turtles here. For years, I’ve been following hawksbills around, tagging them, observing, that sort of thing. Till I ran out of funding; ergo: the dive shop.”

“Oh, I see.”

He looks at her carefully, grunting in discomfort as he shifts his position in the bed.

“Thea, you’re a strange one, know that?”

“Why, ’cause I want to help you?”

“That, and ... well, I imagine you’re the type chased by all sorts of men, with your looks. What are you doing hanging around me, all ripped up like this?”

Thea smiles and looks at her fingertips.

“And what the bloody hell are you doing traveling with that weird bird I met you with? Blimey, she looks and smells like a modern-day Boadicea, a warrior woman if I’ve ever seen one.

“Who? Never heard of Boad-y.”

“Oh, that figures,” Giles sighs. “You Yanks wouldn’t know a first century British Queen that defied the Romans. Too hung up on Cleopatra, huh? Never mind, it’s too long a story and I’m too tired.”

“Big Sue’s my best friend—and that’s good enough for me.”

Giles grimaces, perhaps from pain. “From the moment I laid eyes on you I’ve been trying to figure what was going on between you two. It doesn’t add up. You’re about as incongruous a pair I’ve ever seen. C’mon, admit it. You’re into her, right?” he says, leeringly.

Thea breathes deeply, trying to release the pinch in her heart. She doesn’t expect anyone to understand her having a friend like butch-dike appearing Big Sue.

“What’s to figure how people click, Giles? She’s my friend, and that’s that. We enjoy each other’s company.”

“She was stinking drunk when you showed up at the shop.”

“What makes you think I wasn’t?”

Giles’ eyebrows burrow. “You didn’t look wasted. She was rank.”

Thea keeps quiet. No sense in revealing too much of her excesses. She knows that from past guys who thought hers a bit much.

Giles’ voice softens. For a moment he and she say nothing. His eyes shine as he looks right at her. “You really are a special person, Thea, staying with me. Thanks. Guess it’s at times like this, when no one else shows, you find out who your friends really are.”

Thea’s hands grow hot. She wipes them on her shorts. She’s thrilled, actually, to hear Giles recognize her sacrifice. Inside, she’s jumping with joy, but on the outside, she keeps her cool.

“No, really,” Giles continues, “don’t think I’m just being polite, either. I’ve never met anyone like you. As good inside as you look on the outside. I swear, I’m not just saying this because you saved my life. Well, yeah, that was damn bloody decent of you. But when I look at you, sitting here with me every day like you do, I see your hair, like gold in the sun, your eyes, all cockamamie greens, like clear emeralds and the frothy top of waves—and your skin shining from something inside—it’s freaky. I’ve never known a person so capable, so strong as you, either. Hell, you practically lifted me out of the water that day, even with my shredded equipment dangling on.”

“Big Sue helped,” Thea mumbles, burning up. Men are always eager to bed her with fancy words and trays of drugs, but nobody has ever praised her like this before.

A bolt unlocks her heart free. Thea knew from when she slipped into the water that day, she would be with Giles. She doesn’t say that, though. Giles’ face, when she finally turns to look at him, bursts into a pulse-quickenning grin.

“If it’s okay with you,” she stammers, “I’ll keep working the dive shop until you manage to get around.”

Giles doesn’t have to answer.

#

The seventy-seven stitches zigzagging along his left torso, and other random ones along that side of his arm and leg, soon heal, adding to the daredevil allure of the dashing Brit. His stamina and healthy regimen make his recovery swift.

If one could judge by Giles’ posh speech you’d think his was a privileged background. Perhaps once. But now, the injured man, still sun-glorious in his current sad state, becomes reliant upon Thea and a few Bahamian friends who show up with fresh fish, some coconuts,

handfuls of hard beach peas and a rare head of green lettuce. Thea has no money either, after wiring Osgood to pack up her art supplies and send them to her in one big box. But somehow the pair gets by with what they have.

Giles' classic looks are strangely enhanced in a raw, visceral way, by his cruel wound, healing well, but seasoning him with a ghastly scar. Odd though, that during his recuperation no one arrives from England to visit him, neither family nor friends. Yet, in a few days, even Big Sue is no longer a lingering regret in Thea's mind. Giles' Pan-like playfulness takes Thea over completely. His continuous stream of gratitude and compliments awaken in her a sense of needing to be appreciated only by him. She wants to soak in his refined, elegant manner and nothing else. It helps that Giles is so vocal about being grateful.

Always physically active, Giles is a man with a positive outlook, even if he's momentarily a half-invalid. His is the opposite of Thea's tendency to cultivate more than anyone's share of self-destructive habits. He barely drinks and doesn't smoke weed or tobacco, and considers studying turtles and diving his passions. Well, one more thing that he doesn't mention to Thea.

Thea convinces herself: What have I got to do that could be more important than taking care of this poor injured fellow, who's all alone? Helping him will keep me from partying myself to death. I'll be able to stop getting loaded all the time, and get away from my sorry-ass life. He needs me. Big Sue never needs anybody.

Ultimately, Thea traded in the doom-and-gloom head-trips she tended to heap upon herself, for focusing on Giles' charm and hardcore work ethic. Even after his untimely run-in with the hammerhead, his infectious optimism remains undaunted. Giles has an unquenchable

thirst for learning the sea's secrets, continuing his amphibian research, and—one other less admirable pursuit.

In the flash of a shark's fin, Thea puts down her mind-numbing crutches and leaning too much on Big Sue's amusing antics, to becoming addicted to being needed by someone. With no one asking her, she steps into Giles' life and learns everything in order to keep the dive shop afloat. Of course, Giles is overjoyed by this woman who's shown up just in time, to save not just him, but his business. Which means, the way he figures it, she's also saving his long overdue dissertation.

She dives in, learns about maneuvering the dive boat, renting out gear, maintaining everything, all under the watchful tutelage of the convalescing Giles. No longer does she feel the Itch. Since rescuing this man it has, thankfully, left her entirely free to explore her new life on a tropical island.

“Have you come to help me save the turtles?” he asks her one day after fully realizing Thea doesn't intend to return to the States.

Thea looks at him coyly and smiles.

When he recuperates well enough to walk and gently move around, Thea notices Giles never drinks more than an occasional glass of wine with dinner, and never, ever does anything illegal. But the drug of sex, ah, that soon becomes a major part of their story. When his wound mends nicely and Thea has ingratiated herself to him beyond measure, the next logical step is to abandon herself to the thrilling rapids of unlimited, satisfying sex with the recovering, suave dive master. And lucky Thea, Giles is inventive, competent, and practically insatiable in the sex category.

Once he has healed enough to maneuver some tricky, handicapped gymnastics, Giles lies next to her after making delectable love, their bodies knitted together like the mauled skin under his unsightly scars. Thea and Giles' lives are so entangled, born from similar needs and wants: both having deep inner Itches always needing to be scratched. The pair fall into each other's spell. Thea's edgy art-making, totally forgotten; and Giles' diving and turtle studies, only for the moment, as disabled as he is. From the day she dove into the bloody waters to save him—obeying that inner voice she clearly heard—their lives become interwoven in an intricate pattern.

How could Thea resist, then, when Giles asks her to marry him mere weeks after becoming passionate lovers? It seems the most natural, most romantic thing in the world for her to utter the big “I do” with this man she pities so. He has many missing pieces: a questionable and seemingly family-less past like hers, and no friends to speak of other than the simple island folk of Cat Cay. He's just like me, Thea thinks. How can she help but fall in love with someone who needs her so much? Who has saved her own life from purposelessness?