

A Short Dance

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This is how I met him.

I was filming on an island where it was summer in January. The tourists had returned to their countries, and the stands that sold to them were closed.

We were the only strangers on the island. It was odd being there so long. We filmed eight weeks, and all that time we got no news. There weren't any papers. The director had a portable radio, but it received nothing we could understand. Once the BBC came in faintly and we heard there was a war over the Suez. A month later we heard a second broadcast. The war was not mentioned. We supposed that it was over.

The people of the island were fishermen, and the film was taken from their life.

Their island was rocky and small, large enough to support a few crops and the village. Another place with such intensity of light I've never known. Often I got up alone, while the sky was still without color, and walked down to the harbor. There you could see the whole village—white houses climbing the hillside, olive trees and small gardens, everything in a half light. Out to sea the sun pressed between water and sky and rose and poured down on the island so the shadows moved like living things; trapped and concentrated, set off, fired, like the colors of the island; everything burning with white light, and beautiful, in a glare so great we moved through the days as if we had been deafened.

The ocean was rough off the island. When storms came up men of the village were often caught out in their boats and sometimes lost at sea. The women knit heavy sweaters for their men, weaving into the breast the sign of each family, designs of leaves and chains, cables and vines, torches; so that if the men were drowned and found much later, their sweaters would identify them. But these deaths do not happen so often as they once did; the villagers make money from the tourists and don't fish in rough weather.

In the winter cruise ships go by, two miles out. The fishermen go to meet them. They stand precariously in motor launches holding up silk scarves that struggle with the wind. When a scarf breaks free the wind supports it briefly; then it touches the water and sinks in the swell.

The fishermen shout up to the tourists on the deck. Their voices are lost in the wind. They hold up their hands. Unidentifiable objects darken the sun. The fishermen number coins with their fingers and throw lines to the tourists

who pull the things up in baskets and lower the baskets, lined with coins, to the launches. It is their only purposeful exercise.

Those who buy nothing often throw coins to the launches, and sometimes the coins drop into the sea. All the while beside the ship the motor launches waver as if they might be drawn under its hull.

But our film was about the island as it used to be, when men were lost at sea, when after a storm the women came down to the water to wait.

There were nine of us on the island. We lived in three prefabricated barracks set up in the stubble of a hayfield. The buildings were mostly screening—there was no electricity on the island, and nothing could be air conditioned. A boy was hired to bring us water. His sister was to cook for us.

The director had made all the arrangements in a day and a half of discussion with the mayor, a discussion translated into French by the village priest, then into English by Harold, the director's assistant just out of Yale. They sat in the priest's dim and dusty parlor, the mayor perspiring in his suit; the priest had skin as dry as a lizard's. The mayor was embarrassed and distressed, for he had encouraged the director to make the film on the island, had offered his house for the filming. But the villagers were not so pleased as he to have a film made on their island; and he hoped that they would be compensated well, so that they would be more sympathetic; and he wished to know how much the village would be paid, how much each fisherman would be paid to take out his boat, how much he himself would be paid for the use of his house. The priest added that he hoped a contribution to the Church would be made in appreciation of his services.

When all this was handsomely arranged, the mayor reached a matter of personal concern. He wanted the director to know that he was a man who had traveled, who had seen films, both black and white and color; and it was his opinion that the film should be in color. His dream was that the island might become the site of a Hilton Hotel; if the Hilton owners saw a color film they would surely perceive the beauties of the island and wish to develop them. Otherwise—

“ALL my films are color,” said the director. They understood each other.

So we arrived on an afternoon in midsummer and settled in our quarters, and then went looking for a bar. “*The bar*,” somebody predicted, and seemed to be right: a block up from the harbor was a general store and beside it a low stone building without a sign, but with an open door. A dozen fishermen were drinking inside. When they saw us they rose in their chairs; the owner of the place left the bar, shouting, his arms shooting out to bar our way. Halfway to us he collected himself enough to recall a phrase of English: No Ladies! No Ladies!

We backed into the street. Harold went in alone to inquire if there was another place to go.

There was, and it turned out that it was the place to which we went each night—to the one small bar where the tourists went in season, a place with an air of being used only by people on day excursions, the abandoned quality of the tops of monuments visited by elevator.

The village was on the low side of the island and the tourist bar was on the upper side—a square room with small high windows, perched on rocks that dropped to the ocean; and out the side door a narrow exitless terrace where an old coin-operated telescope waited blindly for a view of the ocean.

We spent each night there, bored and indifferent, our bodies fastened to their chairs by gravity, by the heat, by the absence of alternatives.

The director sat usually with Harold at his right hand, pouring the director's fresh drinks with mocking care—I do not know whether he mocked the director or himself. Maybe he viewed them both as a single entity, like a team of boys in a sack race: it was necessary that the director empty his glass so that Harold could fill it; likewise it was necessary that Harold fill the glass, so that the director . . .

Thank you, Harold, the director would respond unfailingly, showing the size of directorship, that he was not embarrassed by the attitudes that Harold assumed—which were, after all, appropriate to Harold's position. The director had had assistants before.

The actress who was his old friend, who in the film played my mother, usually sat at his table too. She had been out of work for a long time, she was too thin; she smiled occasionally at the director, she kept her fingers around her drink; her eyes narrowed into her glass as if she looked there for enemies.

As for me, I too sat at that table and looked at her and on bad nights, because I was a woman, saw my future in her face.

The director, who did not mind chairs of any kind, rooms of any kind, cities of any kind, people of any kind, was the least comfortable of any of us. He was unhappy. The film was the first he had made that was not his from the beginning, the first that was not made in America. His previous films, those that made his fame, had burst with love and trainwrecks, breaks in levees in small midwestern towns, leaps from flaming bridges for drowning women's sake, occasional mental breakdowns in Hollywood, where people got divorces and innocent girls became stars.

His movies were for people who expected things to happen. In the Thirties and early Forties everyone went to see anything he directed, but during the war his films seemed unnecessary, and after the war they didn't mean what they'd meant before.

In the little bar on the island the director sat silently, occasionally reporting from the world of his thoughts: the film had great prospects, he said. Money was going to be made in small films. Then he was silent again, thinking I suppose of how he disliked small films.

A generation is on the earth like an army; scarcely conceived it springs up with its weapons. The director had reached the end of the war. He did not know the faces any more.

The actors offered for conversation what they always offer, stories, and more stories. The lead, who played my husband, repeated to me as often as he could the difficulties made for him by his former wife, who, he said, phoned him night after night to argue points she had not made before. When he was not home

she would call his restaurants, where the head waiters had instructions to say he was not in. The actor looked to me to be the witness of his wife's unreason and his pains. Their judge, because I was 24 and single, and single women are of another species than those married. But I would not judge, and the conversation would turn to old stories of those more famous than ourselves, or to personal anecdotes in which each teller pretended enormous satisfaction, as if hoping to abandon life altogether and live in his stories.

I had become an actress because I thought it would be a way of being real.

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Or through a series of accidents.

My father was in the Senate before I was born, not exactly for reasons of public spirit. There are far easier places to become rich than the Senate, but for a man with no capital it is a good place to start. When I was small a stream of strangers flowed singly through the house, uneasy until they were closeted with my father in his study. They never stayed to dinner.

My mother, fortunately for her composure, was a good Southern woman, above the complexities of business. She died backing a car from the driveway onto the highway. I was then six.

My father used to take me around to campaign dinners. He explained to me matters of political technique—for example, that one should spend the last week of a campaign solely on one-minute radio advertisements—spot announcements. In that minute the candidate's name should occur at least ten times, so that in the voting booth there would be something for the undecided citizen to remember.

My father had a name in the South by the time I was grown. His election was automatic. I think he forgot he was in politics and not in business—which, it turned out, was a mistake.

He sent me to a private school in Geneva when I was nine, and I stayed there until the war broke out.

In Geneva I liked only the mountains and the French master. I knew that I was not interesting in myself, but I had learned to say things that were interesting; and so I had long conversations with the French master who had brown eyes and wavy hair, and, my eyes, suddenly saw, fine black hairs on the back of his hands and undoubtedly also under his shirtcuffs, and on his arms . . .

He was in love with the art mistress, the older girls said.

He and she escorted us to Paris on a school holiday when I was eleven. We went to the Louvre and behind them clattered through the galleries in our brown oxfords. When we emerged I thought of something to say to the French master—one thing, two things, three things.

"You must be very careful not to make a nuisance of yourself," he said, and smiled very kindly. I never talked to him again.

When I left Geneva I went to a boarding school in New Hampshire, then to my mother's college, a fine Southern women's college, as my father described it. Like most schools intended for fine Southern women, it was not a fine college.

I don't know if my father was moved to send me there by the memory of my mother or because he thought it would appeal to his constituency. It was too late for that, anyway—the Internal Revenue Service was at his heels, and the spring after I began college the Senate started its own investigation of his income, his interests, his use of Senate funds. The newspapers followed his plight daily, as only newspapers can do; the magazines ran long analyses of the power of the South in the Senate. The Associated Press even sent a reporter to unearth my comments—since the Senator did not have a wife.

At college I was cordially hated both on my father's account and on my own: my father was a low schemer, but I was worse: a reader of dirty books and a Communist.

During the hearing the AP reporter waited to catch me if I stepped out of the dormitory. I stayed in, and a cabal of girls arranged to relay to the AP man news of how I looked, what I had said, how I was feeling. Girls who had never spoken to me struck up conversations at the ironing boards.

My father sent me a note—uncommon circumstances require uncommon measures—and told me not to worry and not to say anything. I listened to his voice on the radio newsbroadcasts. He declared he believed none of his activities in conflict with his duties as a Senator. He embraced his shady dealings because he had to. But I thought there was relief, even pleasure, hidden in his voice; that for twenty years or more these were the days he had been preparing for.

The fourth day of the hearing I had a telephone call (the senior at the switchboard listened in) from an editor at LIFE. LIFE would pay me \$2,000 for a photo interview. I agreed to it.

The reporter and the photographer drove up the next day in a rented car. The countryside was very green that day, and on the way to dinner the smell of woods and new flowers rushed in the windows of the car. The reporter brought me three drinks (for which the school would gladly have expelled me had they known), and I told them how it felt to be the daughter of my father, and said that the country was too big, so big it was no longer a country, that it would have been better if the South had won the war, still better if there had been other and separate secessions.

You seldom have to worry what you say if you are a woman.

The article was usual, the photos very good. The college was furious. My father apparently did not know about the article until some time later. He was, I think, negotiating to purchase his house in the Virgin Islands. The next week he resigned his Senate seat.

By then I had had a call from California. A producer had seen the LIFE photos. He wanted to know if I wanted to act.

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In the daytime, sweat colonizing his brow, the director watched us and shouted "More emotion, more emotion!" writing in the air with his black cigar.

He would take me aside and lecture me. "You have to cry!" He believed childbirth and weeping were functions women performed for the race. I had not

cried in seven years. If one can choose either to weep or not to weep, what honesty is there in tears? I cried before cameras, thinking of nothing at all.

In the new film I was playing a young woman who marries a man much older, the owner of the largest house in the village and three fishing boats. I did not love him, but performed the duties of a wife.

He adored me. From a rocky promontory I watched his boat go out to sea, I walked along the sea's edge, clambering over rocks, watching sea weed and shells born toward land, the swift water sliding out. The cameraman preceded me, moving backward, occasionally stumbling, pulling the camera along its track. For a moment two women of the village watched, their faces like most faces of those islanders, cut with lines that were severe, archaic—blind, as if the land had dictated their expressions, and human life and speech could make no impression on them.

In the summer heat the adults kept to their houses, the men reading detective magazines they bought on the mailboat, their wives and daughters working in the kitchens. Only the little children stayed outside, at first following us everywhere, then returning to games whose formations were ancient and impersonal, perfect as crystals.

The girl who cooked for us was the Mayor's niece. She had studied piano in the nuns' school, and the nuns had taken her back with them to the mother-house as a postulant; but she became homesick and would not stay. For the first five days with us she was modest and efficient. On the sixth day she did not appear. The director and Harold went to speak to the Mayor, since they did not know where the girl lived. The Mayor accompanied them down the hot streets to the house of his sister, who confronted them at the door with threats and litanies: her daughter was not to cook in a house where men and women lived together like the beasts; why had her brother not told her that the American actresses shared the house with the men? She did not want such women giving scandal to her daughter, her daughter, only just returned from the convent, and most pure.

It was arranged that the director's old friend and I should move our quarters to the other building, so that the girl would return to the kitchen.

Yet despite such excitements, the days passed more and more slowly, and the nights grew enormous. We sat in the despised bar, learning all the things the waiter was out of, learning that what he did have he was unable to find. We learned to sit.

Like my father we lived to take care of our names, which fed us and maintained us; and we sat on the island taking care of our names.

At home in a single week I got five love letters from men I had never met, never seen. 'Just one date. I'll be a good boy . . .' 'If I was your lover I'd tear open your lovely luscious throat . . .' 'I know you don't know how sincere I am. I really would do everything you like . . .'

The gardener lived in the house so that I wasn't afraid. The police cruised through the neighborhood when residents were away. Nothing was ever taken.

Sometimes I saw myself where I stood in Minneapolis one Saturday afternoon

in winter, signing autographs. I wrote my name on photographs and scraps of paper over and over again, looking out at a ring of cheap shoes.

Teenage girls in slacks, curlers under their scarves, blocked the sidewalk. Working women, Saturday shoppers, went by with their heads bent, to avoid the crowd stepping off the curb into the February slush.

Some of the girls left with their autographs, moving down the street together in a brief gust of noise—Do yah think she REALLY looks like the pictures? But the rest stood, some waiting, some just standing, nearly suspended. I still wonder what they were staying for: I was only an occasion.

They would have liked to stand long after the car pulled up and I was driven away. They would have stood forever, would have preferred that to walking again.

I thought of them, sitting in the little bar halfway across the earth from that time and place, thought of them while we all sat lost in the unforgettable history of being no one, which we could not act out; thought of them while the time slid by us like country seen from the windows of night trains.

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One morning on the way to film the other actress collapsed from the heat. The next day she tried to go on with her part and failed. The men helped her into a launch, and a fisherman, concerned for once, took her to the mainland.

The director was beside himself. Harold wrote her death into the film. The priest tactfully requested Harold's views on how the Church might be compensated for the filming of a false funeral. Word came that the actress had died getting off a plane in England. "My God!" the director said, "I'm the only one left."

He wanted to mourn, and so drank in his room that night and asked me to drink with him. He drank as much as he could. Every quarter of an hour he would remember me and fill my glass.

Several hours passed and he was unable to get drunk. He looked at me finally for a long time and shook his head and then began to caress me. He wanted to make love, but when we were in his bed, he was impotent. I got into his bed, but he was not able to make love. He got up at last and began to dress. He told me then that he had had a severe heart attack: he was terrified of his erections.

For two days he stayed away from the filming while Harold saw to it that the funeral was properly performed. He had the priest tell the villagers that the mass was in honor of the American lady who had actually died. It did not seem to affect them, or their performance.

For a week the filming was delayed because the weather was not right. Some nights I stayed away from the bar and walked around the village in the half dark. In the open doorway men gathered to play dice. When I passed they looked at me; a few phrases, brief laughter; they returned to their game. Their daughters were married at sixteen, lest girls learn to follow their natures.

At last nothing remained of the filming but the final scene, in which my husband drowned in a storm and I realized after all I had loved him.

We waited for the beginning of the rainy season and the first rough weather, which came finally, huge clouds building out at sea. The fishermen were summoned and came down, carrying oilskins, to take out the boats.

At one side of the harbor a small yacht was anchored. It had come in, the fishermen said, early in the morning, with only one man on board. While the filming was being done on the water, this man appeared, sharp and lean, with the look of belonging with the rough weather, the first drops of rain. He didn't speak to us, but stood leaning against a wall, watching the shooting with binoculars.

When I saw him I despaired of doing the final scene. He was the last insupportable outsider.

He put down his binoculars and gave me a long stare. I turned my back to him. Sometimes among friends I suddenly feel a knife may be slipped between my shoulder blades.

The boats began returning, rocked by heavy swells. They landed, the crews with grave faces, and I went toward them looking for my husband. Behind me women and children ran from their houses into the rain.

I was to sob and cry my husband's name, penetrated by the illusion that someone was missing.

"No," I said, my voice hoarse and loud in my ears. "No." And I covered my face with my hands.

At the bar that night the man with binoculars appeared and sat with us. He said he was a businessman. He dressed well. He didn't talk.

After awhile he put coins into the jukebox that occupied a corner of the room. It began to play "Always," and he asked me to dance.

We did dance, very slowly, between the tables and out onto the terrace. He wanted to operate the telescope and dropped a coin into it.

Nothing was visible but a vast expanse of water, and the pale sky looking like a sea. There was a small snap as darkness closed over the lens.

I went with him to his yacht and we spent the night together. As a lover he excited me because he was indifferent—an indifference amounting to hatred. I felt his breathing drawn around me like a net.

"Come with me," he said in the morning, his mouth open in a smile, darkness inside his mouth.

I didn't know where he was sailing. On the horizon, the island sank.