

~Trouble in Paradise: Roatan Island~



I have repeatedly put myself into tenuous situations knowing, *really* knowing that I would come out safe and sound regardless of what you've read about presidential riots or climbing volcanoes. I have always been in control and I think there are plenty other arrogant travelers out there, like me that feel this way too. Let's get this straight: a traveler is not a tourist. There is no itinerary and the hotels we stay in are not ranked by stars. As a traveler you volunteer to interact with people, you intentionally immerse yourself in the culture, and you give up some comforts to bring you closer to the "real experience," but you always watch your back. There are times where I feel too comfortable with my Spanish and with the people that I forget that until I open my mouth, I'm a tourist, and a gringo tourist for that matter. When does comfortable become careless? When does the real experience become too real? And when does trust become naivety?

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Right before he went to sleep, Simon and I had a disagreement about leaving the window open during the night. It was hot as hell in our small hotel room despite the fact of being located on the breezy front of Flowers Bay, Roatan. Outside, a guard half asleep, sat in a plastic lawn chair gripping a pump gun and looking past the gravel drive towards the ocean. I felt safe enough, but then again my idea of "safe" is somewhat relative. Simon, an African-born German citizen, with reason has come to distrust most forms of authority. He would rather sweat himself to sleep than open a window letting any passerby see what or who was in the room. English was his first language in Nigeria and he has mastered the versatility of some strong words.

"Dude, I don't understand what you're so worried about, we're in Roatan. Plus we're in a good part of the island." This was me reasoning that everyone was too sunburned and chilled-out to actually lift a finger to steal something.

"Hey man if some guy wants to look inside and fuck me up, I can't do shit! Mac, these



people here are fucked up on drugs and they don't care. They're everywhere Mac, all over this island."

I can always tell when Simon is really frustrated because he'll say my name in a conversation between only him and me. His paranoia won and I gave in quickly thinking that I'd be able to fall asleep faster than him anyway. That was two hours ago. Sometimes Simon has impressive foresight.

It was hot and I was thirsty. I didn't want to risk getting sick from the tap water that dripped out of the rusty bathroom faucet so instead I took two cold showers hoping that I could quench my thirst through some form of osmosis. I tried lying diagonal without the covers then horizontal with the covers. I flipped around and put my head closer to the fan which only pushed hot air over my body for a brief moment on the last leg of its oscillation. I was miserable so I went to find water.

With a plastic pitcher in hand I tiptoed past the guard and tried to step on only the big rocks not wanting to startle a man holding a firearm. There was nothing left in the 5 gallon courtesy bottle and defeated, I snuck back down to my room. On approaching my door there was an unfamiliar figure leaning over the rail looking into the bushes watching the giant land crabs. His posture was less than threatening so I walked past without changing my stride. Before opening the door I turned to him hoping he was the one who emptied the water bottle. I bashfully asked for some water and nodding, he turned around to his room cracking the door just enough to slip in saying "Yeah my girlfriend is naked so just hold on a second," only to come out with an apologetic shrug. Not too apologetic, however, because instead of water in his free hand he held a cold beer conveniently named Salva Vida (Life Saver). I was so thirsty. The saliva in my mouth was dry, almost chalky, the kind that's difficult to spit out. Really, a beer was the last thing I needed, but I saw the condensation beads dangle on the bottom lip of the can falling wastefully onto the dry sandy pavement. Without further hesitation I obliged and we sat outside in half-



whispers talking about my job in Roatan. After 10 minutes he told me we should go into his place so as to not wake the guard. You don't eat and run, it's just not polite and for some reason, maybe him listening to me rant about GUARUMA, maybe his enthusiasm about being a teacher, or maybe the free beer, whatever it was I felt I owed him more conversation. The door opened, closed, and then was locked by a guy jumping down from the bed perpendicular to the window; definitely not his girlfriend.

Big surprise; there was no girlfriend. Instead I saw four young men scattered around the room each looking as if they have been marinating in their own smoke and sweat for quite some time. The first one that I saw was tall and lanky as he was, sprawled out lying on the floor by the bathroom. He wore clunky workers' boots that almost disappeared under an extra foot of cargo khaki, above a stained wife-beater tucked into... shit, a dull metal gun buried above his crotch.

Swallowing the "fuck" barreling its way out of my mouth with a gulp of beer, I looked over to my left to see the second unknown. Shirtless and revealing crooked homemade tattoos he clenched a dented beer between his knees. A cigarette hung onto his bottom lip leaving his hands free to check the clip he ejected from the silver glock resting on the bed. I began nervously twisting the tab off my beer can. I instinctively checked to see if I had my wallet on me, no. Good. I had nothing they could want. My mind wondered from gringo bashing to Russian roulette and my eyes continued around the room. I could hear my heart beating and they could see it on my face.

There were five total. Three, as far as I could see had guns within reach. The fifth rested in the shadows of the far corner, only propped up by his elbow which sunk into the loose mattress. Laying flat next to him was a large dusty mirror. The only thing holding me in that room was obligation of finishing the beer. I chugged the last half with undergrad steadfastness and put my hands on my knees as the international sign for "I'm leaving now", but before my board shorts left



the chair I was thrown another *Salva Vida*; how ironic.

I thought about the old adage of grabbing a wolf by the ears. Do you let go and run or do you hold on until it's calmed down? These guys weren't angry or aggressive, but they were young, seemingly uneducated, and were loaded with guns and beer: a caustic combination. I stayed, and opened the beer which echoed in the smoky room. I let one beer turn into two and social obligation eclipsed better judgment. I think they taught us about avoiding these kinds of situations in middle school but they failed to mention how to act when guns were being loaded, unloaded, and then tossed from bed to bed in a room the size of a kitchen. I acted cool, as if it were a normal Tuesday night for me too. Then they brought out the drugs.

These guys had not been skiing bunny runs in North Carolina. By the time I got to the room they had already licked The Devil's Crotch double black diamond in the Swiss Alps. I preferred the guns and beer combination. However, now I was dealing with coked-out, stoned, and drunk adolescents playing cowboy.

Bouncing their heads to music that wasn't even playing they would just sit back and through a glossy gaze let their raising eyebrows force a smile from a joke they didn't even hear. The one in the corner that was half-dead from Hoovering a small mountain didn't really worry me, neither did tatty sitting on the edge of the bed blankly staring at his gun. The one that I made sure to keep in my peripheral was the guy who's movements came in staccato jerks and twitches, running his fingers feverously along on his gums. Calm, but exploding inside he sat in half-squat at the corner of the bed vigilantly peering out between the slit where the two curtains met, resting his gun against his cheekbone. He neurotically shifted his eyes back and forth without blinking and moved his head in small bobbing motions finding the best view without making himself visible from the outside. The shaft of light from outside scanned across his face as he moved. It was as if he was waiting for something or someone; either of which I didn't want to be around to see.

"What are you looking for?" I said through a fake laugh acting as if I was more curious



than worried.

"Jus guddah be redy ma." He replied with conviction in a deep voice without taking his eyes off the window.

I sat back silenced by his uncertain expectation.

I don't remember the conversations we had, partly because half of the time I didn't understand a damn thing of what they were saying. They spoke Creole, a variation of English. I forced random smiles and laughs agreeing to whatever they said, saying, "Yeah man."

I planned my exit perfectly. Not too early, not too late, and not too noteworthy. I watched two of them exchange money talking about getting more drugs. I started drinking fast. Tattoo Guy loaded his gun and shoved it into his belt as he stood up for the first time in 20 minutes. I finished my beer crushing the aluminum in my hand to let everyone know again that I was done. As the one in the corner still resting on his elbow shifted his weight to find another beer for me, I stood up. The crazed guy in the window shot a look hitting me in the chest. He told me to sit down and chill and just wait till his friend got back. I was not planning on staying any longer so I turned to the one who originally brought me into this damn situation and I told him I had to get up early to teach. He thought about what I said as if they didn't plan on letting me leave. He exchanged looks with the guy in the window and nodded. I followed Tattoo Guy out of the door then turned left and walked to my room five feet away. I could feel two eyes watching me from the window.

I quietly opened the door, closed, and locked it. Simon breathed quietly, adrift in dreamland. I could hear their muted movements through the wall - a foot-thick divider separating two laptops, 10 cameras, \$500 dollars cash, and two children deeply missed by their parents from four adolescents, 1 bag of weed, 12 beers, 30 lines of cocaine, and three loaded handguns. I have now since wiped the fake-stoned and nonchalant daze from my eyes and am thinking of ways to renege on my promises to hang out with these guys the following night.



I've stopped breathing hard, my heart has stopped pounding at my ribs, and I'm no longer thirsty; I'm just tired. Tomorrow I have class with 10 kids. It's 4:40 in the morning, and in two hours I'll get out of bed, take a cold shower, put on my clothes, grab 10 cameras, and walk across the street to teach a new batch of children from Flowers Bay, Roatan.

