



Into the Deep

A SHORT STORY
BY
MARGARET ELIZABETH HULSE

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Mpulse Studio | Charlotte St. Charles
A Narrative from the Adventurous Heart
Literature Collection
Dallas | San Pedro | New Orleans



Creole Dictionary

Bitch [bich] - noun:

1. Disparaging and Offensive. A sexually promiscuous woman, or a woman who behaves or dresses in an overtly sexual way.
2. A prostitute; harlot.

Chaw [choh]- interjection: *Slang*. (used to express disgust, disappointment, frustration, contempt, or the like.)

Street dog [street dawg] - noun: *Derogatory*. Someone who doesn't work and chooses to always be out on the street, often asking for money or drugs.

Take a break [teyk uh breyk]- phrase: *Slang*.

1. Take a nap
2. Fall asleep

Your love
is the ocean,
and the man for you
will dive as deep
as it takes
to reach the
undiscovered
parts of you.

-Pierre Alex Jeanty

“Stop it!” My hand stung from repeatedly slapping it against a blank sheet of rag paper that I had taped to the surface of my drafting table.

“Stop it Antoine! Listen to me!” My voice was cracking—it was almost unrecognizable. Antoine stared at me, emotion void from his coffee colored irises. He had retreated inward, to a part of him that I hated. I never knew how long an episode would last. Sometimes it was a day, but sometimes it was weeks. Regardless of how long he suffered, of how long *we* suffered, I was blocked from creative inspiration. It killed me to look at my drafting table with no new work, no new ideas, nothing but blank paper.

“Are you bi-polar?” He once asked me.

“I... I don't think so. I've never been diagnosed with any kind of disorder.”

“I am.”

“You are what?”

“Chaw. Have you lost your hearing? I just fucking told you that I’m bi polar.”

I knew he wasn’t bi-polar. It was an excuse he made for the PTSD he experienced after his mother lost her life in a boating accident that he was responsible for. He thought he could out sail a storm and the mast was struck by lightning. His mother was thrown from the boat and drown.

He never learned how to cope with his pain, so when he was triggered, he retreated into a deep, dark part of his soul where monsters lurked in the shadows.

I never got used to it. It didn’t matter how many times he went into the deep, I couldn’t figure out how to disconnect my love from his darkness. The hatred that rolled off his tongue never got easier to bear.

I never knew which Antoine I was going to get. He could be sweet and silly for weeks, and then something would trigger him and he would morph into pure evil, a master gaslighter feuling toxicity that would vibrate through the home that I

worked hard to maintain. I couldn't stop it, I couldn't change it... and it was breaking me.

“Don't you know you can be a real pest?” He snarked.

“Fuck you.” I whispered under my breath, then felt my shoulders curl forward, shrinking because maybe if he couldn't see me, he would stop putting me down.

Before I met Antoine, when I was in Dallas, single after my divorce, I existed in a realm of autonomy that I learned to realize I had taken for granted. There was a culture clash between Antoine and me. I was raised to be an independent woman—self sufficient, strong, brave.

In my relationship with Antoine, I had become a shadow of that woman.

“You know...” He said coolly. “My mom has a word for people like you.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“Street dog. You like to be out on de streets like all de street dogs.”

I worked from a studio in our home and took walks in the evening. I'd take my sketch book to a beach bar to sip on a glass of wine while I sketched out my art and designs.

“Antoine, literally all I did was drink one glass of wine at Islanders... one glass. I sat in the corner with my sketchbook and worked on some designs.”

“Me nah know who you really went to see.” He shrugged his shoulders, eyes fixed on his tablet, implying that I had a love interest on the side. It wasn't the first time, and it was exhausting, especially since infidelity wasn't new in our relationship. Antoine had a months long relationship with a woman named 'Emily.' He would accidentally call me by her name.

“I love you Emily,” he texted me once.

“I love you Emily,” he said to me once.

I thought that was the beginning of the end, but I brushed my feelings under the rug, again and again.

I could feel my shoulders pressing forward even more. I didn't have to try to shrink myself. With each insult a dark shadow pressed harder and harder on the back of my neck, making me smaller with each shallow breath.

“Chaw. I can't fucking wait til you go back to de States.”

“I live here! San Pedro is my home. This condo is my home. *You* need to leave!” I pointed to the door and yelled back. “Get out!”

I never really raised my voice until I started dating Antoine. I'd never yelled the way I yell when he criticizes me. I longed for compassion. I longed for peace. I longed for the anger to subside.

At the beginning, when he would come out of the deep, it wouldn't take long before things would grow copacetic again, but the more it happened, and the deeper he went, the dark

energy lingered longer and longer until our home became a toxic void of anything nice.

“Why don’t you yell louder so the neighbors can hear?” He taunted me, then he sat with his head cocked back, arms crossed over his chest, legs extended outward, crossed at the ankle. He wouldn’t say a word. It didn’t matter how many words I said, or how loud I said them, or how many times I slapped my hand on my drafting table, or picked up one of our nesting tables and slammed it down in front of him. He wouldn’t say a word. He wouldn’t move. I shook and my heart pounded, but I still couldn’t hold my shoulders back and stand up straight. The weight of the shadow was too heavy.

“Antoine!” I took a deep breath and extended my arm and pointed my index finger toward the door. “GO!”

He cocked his head to one side. Still silent.

“If you cannot respect me enough to talk to me, *then you need to leave.*” I calmed my voice (kind of). I was still shaking. My heart pounded and anger surged through my veins.

I stared at him as long as I could, trying to gasp for a deep, satisfying breath, but it never came. I was experiencing a full blown anxiety attack. I grabbed my purse and slammed the door behind me. I ran down our cement staircase toward the nearest pier, fell to my knees and began to sob.

I let the pain pour from my eyes. I cried and my heart pounded as I continued to gasp for air. I wanted my pain and my frustrations and my rage to go away. I wanted to feel peace, but I didn't know how to get there. I knew that Antoine was hurting and I was the person he released his pain upon, the person whom he deflected his anger upon. I was a martyr, sacrificing my self worth to ensure that he didn't fall farther than he already had.

I sat with my knees curled against my chest and my face hidden in my palms and I sobbed so hard that my shoulders shook.

☆☆☆

“You okay?” A soft hand pressed down on my shoulder.

I jerked my head to one side, wiped a tear from my eye and nodded. It was Julian, a scuba instructor. I had been sitting on the pier in front of his dive shop.

“Sorry for startling you.” He crouched down to meet me eye to eye. His lips softly curved up into an empathetic smile. Shoulder length sun bleached blond tendrils framed his golden Mayan face. He tucked a strand behind his ear. “You sure you’re okay?”

As if a spell had been cast upon me, a quiet euphoria washed away my anxiety. My breath slowed and I caught a glimpse of what peace might look like.

He was young in age, just in his early twenties, but he embodied a sage-like energy. Perhaps from his time spent under the sea, in harmony with a water world that I barely understood, he had learned that peace feels better than war.

I saw him for the first time from my balcony one day. He was pulling his boat up to the dock after a dive trip. I didn’t see him closely, or make out any of his features, but I knew at the

moment I saw him, everything I knew about San Pedro had changed. I didn't know what it was, but it eventually grew into a longing that lingered in the back of my mind, day after day. I told myself it was inspiration whispering through the island breeze, but I also feared that I needed it to be more than that.

When Antoine buried himself into the deep blackness of his pain, my infatuation with Julian was easy to justify, but when our relationship was fine and things were... copacetic—I didn't know how to justify my feelings. Still, I always kept a space in my heart, just for him.

A golden fleck in his ice tea colored irises glistened. It paralyzed me and drew me into a universe where centuries collided and stories of the past fused into a new dimension where a myriad of emotions started to make more sense. I caught a glimpse of something I'd been yearning for but I couldn't make sense of, like *deja vu*, like I could time travel through his eyes—Just a glance and I could see my soul, centuries ago, searching for my mission, my inspiration... my muse.

“Can I buy you a beer?” He nodded his head toward a nearby beach bar.

I blushed and nodded ‘yes.’ My stomach twisted into an anxious knot when I walked by his side, fearful that Antoine would catch wind of me having a drink with another man. I told myself it was harmless, but my heart knew better. Antoine had been unfaithful, and I had done my best to turn a blind eye. There was a double standard on the island that I tried to accept, but his choices had been pushing me away more than I even realized.

“If I ever find out that you’ve been cheating on me I’ll tie an anchor around your neck and throw you into the sea.” Antoine would matter of factly remind me from time to time.

But as soon as I sat down with Julian, I didn’t care about the consequences. All I wanted was to revel in his sweet energy and stare deep into his eyes.

I wasn’t more than three sips into my beer before Antoine’s text messages started coming in, one after the other—two, three in a row.

Where are you?

Hello?

Hello?

Mona!

Julian sensed my anxiety.

“Mona,” Julian smiled, understanding that it was time for me to go home. “I wanna certify you to dive. I think it would really help for you to have some quiet time away from your stress. Come see me when you’re ready.” He winked and smiled.

I sighed. I’d been offered many opportunities to dive since I’d moved to the island and I’d rejected all of them. I was scared of going so far into the deep—feeling helpless in the unknown, but there was a logic in Julian’s idea that was hard to say no to.



“Street dog.” Antoine kept his ear buds in and paused his tablet. He turned to me when I walked in the door. I didn’t respond. I pursed my lips and nodded as I made my way to the bathroom to get ready for bed.

I caught my complexion in the mirror and studied my face. I was curious what Julian had been looking at. It hadn’t felt sexy in months. Antoine’s anger exhausted me and I hadn’t had the energy to go on long runs like I used to. I’d been using beer to cope with my frustrations and my tummy felt soft. My hair was knotted and my roots were brassy and needed touching up. I had stopped taking care of myself because I didn’t want Antoine to feel threatened... because when I attracted male attention, he took his jealousy out on me.

Once a man groped me in a crowded bar and I turned toward him in shock, mouth agape. Antoine wrapped his fist around my wrist, yanked me aside and scorned me, “Why did you let him do that to you?”

I couldn’t do anything right. I had given up my identity so that Antoine wouldn’t lose his sense of control.

But something happened when I looked into Julian's eyes... like he was releasing a curse I'd been under and I was suddenly inspired to take my life back.



"I cannot stop thinking about him." I paused and tried to stop myself from smiling, and ended up blushing instead.

My best friend, Drew, shook her head and laughed.

"I saw him at the Islanders bar... he was sitting at the bar with the other dive instructor. I went there to work on some sketches, but it was too crowded. I caught a glimpse of him from across the bar and smiled but I was feeling shy... so I just smiled back and left. It's been way too long since I've even attempted to flirt with someone." I took a deep breath, stared off into space and smiled again.

"Gyal, you're funny... you're in love with him." Drew winked and smiled, then took a sip of her wine.

“I don’t know what to do... What am I supposed to do with this situation?” I shook my head.

“Are you planning to break up with Antoine?”

I sighed. “I think about it. I honestly wouldn’t even know how to, but sometimes I feel like I need to... I love him, but...”

“But are you *in* love with him?” Drew hadn’t been a fan of Antoine’s since the last time he fell into a dark episode.

A part of me knew that from the moment I breathed a word about Antoine’s PTSD to her, I was looking for my escape plan, whether or not I wanted to admit it. I wasn’t ready.

“I love him. I don’t know if I’m *in* love with him... I don’t know what love is supposed to feel like anymore... I don’t remember how it’s supposed to feel to be *in* love with someone.”

“Would you cheat on him?” Drew raised her eyebrows.

I thought about the text message I received from him by mistake.

I love you Emily.

I shuddered.

I've always told myself that the pain he'd caused me through his infidelity wasn't an excuse to do the same. I told myself that I was better than that.

That's what I told myself.

“At this point...” I paused. “I just don't know.”



I had started reading the PADI dive instruction manual that Julian gave me so I could begin open water training, and I yearned to get back in shape before he saw me in a swimsuit.

My feet grew heavy as waves pounded over the sea wall, soaking my Nike runners with each splash. I breathed deep

into my belly with each stride and powered forward against the North East wind. I was on mile five of my morning run, determined to get my body back in shape before I started diving. I longed to feel like myself again. I longed to rid my soul of all of the toxicity that had been building over the past few years.

It took me longer than it should have to recognize that Antoine's behavior had been fueled by jealousy, and infidelity. Aside from his PTSD, as a Caribbean man, he was hard wired to cheat. I turned the other cheek because I knew that he wasn't the only one—that on the island it was acceptable for a man to have multiple girlfriends. There was always the main woman, "the wifey." the one they lived with, and had children with... then there were the tourists who came to stay for a week or so. With their women at home with their children, the men go out to the bars, flirt with the tourists in their Creole accents, tempting them, daring them to indulge in a new cultural experience.

Most women who are in relationships with local men have come to accept this behavior, this way of life. I tried. I did it. I

accepted it, and I hated myself for it. It was yet one more demon that Antoine and I had to battle.

While he seduced other women, he kept me in a pseudo place of comfort. He'd open a beer and hand it to me, knowing that I'd accept it, and that it would settle into my waistline, making my once tight tummy, squishy. And he would squeeze my body and say "Oh my gosh baby, look at your belly. You're getting fat." And for some reason, that didn't make me want to slap him across the face, rather, it made me shrink into my empire-waisted maxi dresses so I could hide my belly and, hopefully, go unnoticed.

I had always found empowerment through my strong physique, and I ached for that strength again. I paused along the sea wall and took a long swig from my water bottle. It was already 11:00AM and the sun hung high overhead, beating down on my bare shoulders that I neglected to cover in sunscreen. I gazed upon the horizon line, where the heavens meet the earth and a wave of chills ran across the skin. I caught a flash of a memory from the flicker in Julian's eyes and I felt God speaking to me, assuring me that it was time to care for myself again.

I was embarrassed that I had let my body go. I was embarrassed that I was being cheated on. I was embarrassed that I had forgotten who I once was.

I glided across the seawall, day in, day out, until I settled back into a frame that I felt confident in.

And Antoine wasn't comfortable with my new found confidence.

“But baby, I don't want to date you if you're too small.”



On the morning of my first dive, my stomach tightened when Julian fitted me in my BCD. A surge of anxiety washed over me when he secured my tank and set it on the boat. Excitement soon replaced anxiety, but I still didn't feel prepared. I worried about what would happen if something went wrong with my equipment. I worried that I would

forget how to breathe. I worried about not knowing anything about what could happen deep under the water.

I didn't want to go, but something in my gut kept whispering, "*Trust Julian.*"

"It's going to be okay." He placed his hand on my shoulder and smiled his sweet, comforting smile.

Julian stayed by my side throughout the entire dive. He wrapped one hand around mine and used his other to point to a moray eel that peeked out from a deep blue barrel reef formation. He was playful—excited to show me things I'd never seen before. He gripped my hand tighter and pulled me through a tunnel. I couldn't balance myself and my tank scraped along the tunnel's ceiling. My heart started racing and my breath became short.

I couldn't catch it. I couldn't remember how to breathe. I panicked. I looked up toward the surface and all I could think about was launching myself out of the water, spitting out my regulator and gasping for air.

Julian looked back at me with joy in his eyes. He held out his hand and touched his index finger to his thumb, forming an 'O' shape, to ask if I was okay. I shook my head 'no,' and responded with my thumb down, then looked toward the surface and pointed my finger upward, asking if I could get out of the water.

He took my hand and I thought that he was going to honor my request, but instead, he pulled me to the ocean floor. He sat in front of me, and with his knees open and pulled me toward him. I kneeled in front of him. My mask was inches from his. He motioned for me to look him in the eye. He used his hand to motion calm, steady inhales and exhales. He didn't rush me. He sat patiently as I slowed my breath back to a relaxed, steady pace, and I know that he knew that he could see deep into my soul in a way that Antoine had never been able to.

It was only for a split second, but through the golden fleck in the iris of his eye, I caught a glimpse of my drafting table with the stark, white paper taped to it. My breath became short and shallow again. I motioned to Julian that I needed to relax again and he squeezed my hand tighter and with his other, he

caressed my fingers. His eyes brightened and he pointed out a parrot fish that peered out of the crevice of some mossy rocks.

I'd never seen one before, but I was entranced by its beauty. The colors—turquoise, purple, pink, orange, red, yellow, white, all splashed along the scales of this brilliant fish—it sparked something in me and I knew I had to capture it. As my fears subsided, my eyes were open to a new world of bliss, and it was pure magic. I was enveloped in peaceful inspiration.



Over the course of a few weeks Antoine had been drifting in and out of darkness and while the toxicity in the room had lifted—slightly, I still walked on eggshells... and... I couldn't stop thinking about Julian. I couldn't stop thinking about his calm, sweet energy. I couldn't stop thinking about the new world he had introduced me to.

I reminisced about the moment I first saw him, when I knew that everything had changed. I thought about the moment

when he took my hand underwater to calm me. I fantasized about what it would be like to exist in a state of placid energy.

I lifted my head from my drafting table.

“Antoine, I’m going to go to the store and grab some water.”

He wasn’t paying attention to me, or to the time, or to anything other than whatever he was watching on his tablet.

I popped into the bathroom and checked the mirror to make sure my hair wasn’t frizzy. I ran my fingers along my hips and smiled because my long runs had been paying off. I ran a soft pink gloss over my lips, threw my sketchbook into my bag and slung it over my shoulder, then slammed the door behind me.

I was being pulled by a powerful force.

I took a deep breath as I walked up the pier. Butterflies tumbled through my stomach as I approached the entrance of the tiny neighborhood beachfront bar, hoping to see Julian’s

golden tendrils falling upon his shoulders. I turned the corner and scanned the bar.

He wasn't there.

I sighed and grabbed a seat as far from anyone else as I could, unearthed a pencil and my sketchbook from my bag and started scribbling images from the things I'd seen on my dive.

I got so lost in my work that I didn't even notice that a bartender had set a bottle of beer in front of me.

"I... I didn't order this." I looked at the bartender, confused. He nodded his head to the other side of the bar, where Julian sat alone.

I turned my head toward him and smiled.

He mouthed the word, "Hi," and smiled his gentle smile and we just looked at one another for a moment until I blushed and looked away.

He placed his hands on the bar, stood up, and pushed his seat out behind him. Time stood still as he began walking toward me. Upon his approach, he placed a hand on my shoulder and we inhaled, then sighed simultaneously. Then he placed his other hand upon mine. I opened my hand to accept his and he squeezed it tight. Our eyes locked and time stood still, once again.

“You’re beautiful.” He kept his eyes locked on mine and I shuddered. I hadn’t heard those words, I don’t think ever, from Antoine.

“You know something...” He smiled at me and started to blush. He looked down and started picking at the label on his beer bottle. “I’ve had my eye on you for a while.”

My heart started pounding. I took another deep breath and looked around, as if to see if he was talking to someone else.

“So...” He paused as if he was searching for the right words, “what is your favorite color?” He blushed at the triteness of his question.

I ignored the banality of it and responded with genuine excitement that he was taking interest in me.

“My favorite color? It’s been a while since someone has asked me that.” I smiled and looked toward my beer. I wrapped and unwrapped the napkin around the bottle as I thought back to a time when Antoine had taken sincere interest in me. The truth is that I couldn’t remember.

“I’m not exactly sure what to call it.” I responded. “It’s the color of the water beyond the reef. It’s like a deep sapphire blue.”



It was 8:45pm and darkness had fallen over the island. I’d been engrossed in working through a series of watercolor sketches and Antoine was stretched out on the couch, staring at his tablet.

I couldn’t stop thinking about Julian. I was falling in love with the fact that he saw me in a way that I don’t think that Antoine ever had.

My heart beat faster and I realized that I hadn't made a mark on my paper in minutes. A natural mystic was pulling me toward the shoreline. I placed my paint brush in a cup of water.

"I'm going to go to the store to grab a few things." I murmured as I grabbed my purse from the hook by the door.

Antoine looked up and removed his ear buds.

"Wha-appned?"

"I am going to go to the store to grab some things." I repeated myself.

He shrugged and placed his ear buds back in his ears.

I ran down the cement stairs. I didn't even bother to slide my feet into the sandals that I kept by the door.

I walked apace down the beach toward the dive shop and stopped short when I saw Julian leaving the beach bar. I stood

barefoot in the coarse sand, just feet from the shoreline. The moon had risen high and cast a bright glow upon the water, bright enough to highlight his sunkissed features, even in the distance.

I walked toward him with intention. Wind whipped through the island night and swept the golden tendrils from the nape of his neck, exposing his broad shoulders and soft silhouette.

He saw me too, and as if we were drawn by a magnetic force, we met beneath the shadow of a coconut palm, hearts pounding, we embraced. He softly cupped my face with his hands and I reached up and entangled my fingers in his hair. We paused and breathed in a powerful energy.

He leaned forward and pressed his soft lips against mine and let them linger, then pulled away and looked deep in my eyes. We smiled like we were the only people on the island and I revelled in euphoria, but before I could pull his lips back toward mine again, the golden glisten in his eyes morphed into a violent wave and I stood before him watching a story from the past unfold.

It was Antoine, angrily racing through the sea, trying to beat the tempest that brewed in the near distance. Paralyzed by panic, his heart raced as he witnessed the lightning as it struck the mast—followed by grief, and anger, and self loathing. Julian’s eyes exposed everything that Antoine could never forget. They exposed everything that he lived over and over again, every time he went into the deep.

I pulled away.

“Mona.” Julian’s eyes had calmed and settled back to that iced tea hue.

“Julian, I... I’m so sorry.”

“I understand.” He frowned, then pulled me back into his arms and pressed my head against his chest and slowly swayed back and forth. “I’m here for you, Mona.”

“Thank you Julian.”

I took a deep breath and turned back toward my home, feeling both disappointed that I walked away from the kind

of peace that I deserved, and because I knew that Antoine needed much more help than I could offer him, but that I shouldn't turn my back on either.

I walked through the door and went back to my drafting table.

“What did you get at the store, Mona?” My heart sunk and I braced myself for a surge of insults about my carelessness.

“Antoine, I ran into a friend on the beach, started talking, and totally forgot what I went to buy.”

He set down his tablet, stood up from the couch and walked toward me. He raised his arm, and placed it around my shoulder, then softly pressed my head against his chest.

“It's okay lovey. I'm sorry I give you such a hard time.” He looked down at my drafting table and pointed to the juvenile angelfish I had begun painting. “That was my mom's favorite fish.” He pursed his lips together and nodded. He started thumbing through my sketches. “This is everything you've seen on your dives?”

I nodded, relieved that the darkness was fading.

“My mom and I loved diving together. These pictures remind me of those days.” He took a seat at my drafting table and just stared at the art.

“I’m glad you’re painting again, my love. These paintings make me really happy. Now that you’re certified, we can start diving together. I think it would be therapeutic for me. It’ll bring back good memories.”

I nodded, hoping he was right, hoping that he could stay in this kind of mood for a while, at least.



And that’s the thing with abuse, it’s cyclical.



Over the next few weeks Julian and I passed by one another a few times. We didn't really say much. I missed him, but I didn't know what to say to him. I wanted to be with him, but my loyalty to Antoine continued to plague me.

I missed his energy, and wondered what it would be like to be in a relationship with someone who didn't fall into fits of abusive rage. I created a space in my heart where he and I existed as one, and promised myself that when Antoine went into the deep again, I would have my memories of Julian's affection to comfort me through; to guide my inspiration, at least.

Antoine and I finally made it out to dive together and Julian was on duty to fit me for my gear.

"You'll be our dive master today?" I asked, making small talk, trying to hide my deep, deep feelings for him.

"Nah, I'll watch the shop and let my cousin take you out." He turned to me and sighed.

“Mona, let’s go if you’re gonna go!” Antoine had already boarded the boat. I looked toward him, then turned to say ‘bye’ to Julian and in the glint in his eyes I saw everything that I had ever hoped for, followed by an eruption of madness. The golden glimmer flickered like fire and I saw Antoine with a woman, red haired, voluptuous, locked in a sensual embrace.

My heart pounded then Julian’s eyes calmed. His face was stern in a way that I’d never seen it.

“Be safe on your dive.” He turned back into the dive shop and I stood alone, stunned by what he had revealed.

The dive was miserable. I entered a state of panic the moment my body hit the water. My mask kept filling with water. My weights were not heavy enough and Antoine was annoyed that he had to keep pulling me down. I was out of control. Nothing that I saw mattered. I wasn’t inspired. I didn’t care about the school of horse eye jacks, I barely noticed the reef shark that paced just meters to my side. All I wanted to do was to get out of the deep.

When we approached the dive shop I couldn't even look at Julian, fearful of what his eyes might reveal.

Antoine barely spoke a word to me, but as soon as we got home, I braced myself.

“You know, you have a tricky way of embarrassing me.” He set his mask and fins on top of a painting I was in the middle of. “You... you said you knew how to dive, but you didn't know what the hell you were doing. You're going to get yourself killed if you're not careful. I guarantee you that.”

But there was never really going to be an escape from the deep.

I felt a buzz in my purse and reached in to unearth my phone:

Hi beautiful.

Julian texted.

I placed my phone back in my purse and set it to the side before Antoine insisted on knowing who was texting me.

“You know Mona, I’m just going to take a break. You do whatever you want tonight.” Antoine slammed the bedroom door behind him.

Once I was certain that he had his ear buds in I retrieved my phone from my purse and curled up in a chair on my balcony. I had two more texts from Julian:

Just checking in on you.

You okay?

My hands started shaking... I hid my phone in my purse and paced back and forth. I couldn’t get the image out of my mind. The image of the voluptuous red haired woman, flashing through the golden fleck of his eyes and it haunted me. I ran my hands along my waist and sucked in my stomach, turned toward the window and caught my reflection and started questioning how I compared to her, in Antoine’s eyes.

I had sunk back into my insecurities and feelings of self hatred ensued. I couldn’t see myself as beautiful and I felt ashamed.

I texted Drew.

Meet me at the Reef Bar? Need to talk...

Now? She responded.

Yes, leaving now.

K, see you soon.

I knocked on our bedroom door. “I’m heading out to meet Drew at Reef Bar for a glass of wine.”

“Chaw... street dog.” He whispered under his breath.

An aching sensation started to pulse in my chest again. My skin started to crawl. I took a deep breath.

I looked him in the eye. “Antoine, I love you, I will see you in a couple of hours.” He didn’t look up. My heart sunk as I picked up my purse and locked the door behind me. I got half

a block down and picked up my phone again to reread Julian's texts.

Hi beautiful.

Just checking in on you.

You okay?

The comfort possessed in those few words made my heart yearn for more.

Hi - I responded.

Meeting Drew at Reef Bar right now if you want to join.

I closed my phone and placed it back in my purse and walked toward the bar, trying not to think about whether or not he'd show up.

By the time I arrived, Drew and Julian were seated next to one another in a lounge area overlooking the lagoon. Drew had a glass of wine waiting for me.

"We were just talking about your situation." Drew looked toward Julian and they both nodded empathetically.

“It is what it is.” I shrugged and sipped my wine. “Thank you guys for your concern, but I just want to have a good time tonight.”

The three of us joked and laughed as we passed around a bottle of wine. The island breeze evoked a sense of magic, but it was cool, and when a chill ran across my arms, Julian pulled me toward him to warm me. I pressed my head on his shoulder and breathed in the moment.

By the end of the evening I had a soft buzz. Julian nodded to Drew that he would walk me home. We walked hand in hand along the sea wall.

“I don’t understand why you’re still with Antoine.” He shook his head then asked matter of factly, “Is it possible that you’ve been put under a spell? Is that why you’re stuck in such a toxic relationship?”

I sighed. “That’s just it... the emotional abuse *is* the spell, and it’s a powerful one. I’d do anything to break it.”

Julian stopped and turned toward me.

With another sigh, my gaze settled deep into his eyes until the golden fleck in his iris flickered. He softly cupped my jawline with his hands, leaned in and pressed his lips against mine. Mouth parted, I allowed myself to surrender to the moment and as he held me in a gentle embrace, I felt the shackles of years of abuse come undone. Clinking as they fell down my back, they crumbled to the sand like a demolished skyscraper and from the dust arose a shimmering haze of calm, blissful beauty that glistened beneath the starlit sky.



I awoke later that night to a weight pressing down on my clavicle. My eyes popped open. Antoine knelt over me, my phone in one hand, his other, pressing against my neck. I gasped for air and he squeezed tighter.

“Uh huh.” He grunted and threw my phone upon our terra cotta floor. It shattered. “I always knew dat if you hung around Drew too long you would turn into a bitch.”

He tightened his grip. “Who were you wit tonight!?”

Eyes wide open I tried to shake my head loose from his grip. I began to flail my legs.

“Julian.” I mouthed.

“Julian?!” He loosened his grip and I broke out into a cold sweat, choking, gasping for air. It was 2AM and the island was asleep, but I screamed through the dull pain in my throat.

“You’re gonna start fuckin’ around wit dat kid?!” He grunted again.

He wrapped his hands around my rib cage, lifted me out of bed and threw my body against a bamboo ladder next to my bedside table. My head flew through one of the rungs and pounded against our cement wall. He cradled the back of my head and dug his fingers deep into my damp, matted, sweaty hair and tightened his grip with one and placed the other back around my neck. He pressed down on my clavicle. I tried to lift one of my knees high enough to reach his pelvic

area, but I was too short and he had his entire body weight pressed against me.

I told myself that I had enough oxygen. I fell into a trance and thought back to the moment that Julian sat with me, in the depths of the sea, until I caught my breath. He pointed to my regulator to show me that I had enough oxygen. I saw his eyes... I saw my past, present, and future in the golden flicker. I saw freedom, I saw bliss, I saw myself rising high above the sea, dancing in the sky with the twinkling stars.

My body had gone numb.

I awoke to silence when the sun began to pour into the room. Cold, my face was pressed against the cool terra cotta tile and shards of glass from my phone were embedded in the palm of my hand. I looked up toward the bed. I was alone.

I slowly peeled my aching body from the ground and massaged the back of my head to calm the searing pain that pounded against my skull. I placed my hand on my clavicle and still felt the pressure. My throat was tight, sore. As I pulled myself up I caught my reflection in a framed picture of

Antoine and me when we first met. My clavicle was black and purple.

Tears began to well up in my eyes and when I opened my mouth to let out a wail. My throat was rough, as if shards of glass lined my tonsils. I crumbled upon the bed, stale, smelling of salt from my sweat. I placed my hand on the indentation of the bed where Antoine slept and cried through the pain. I wailed. I knew I couldn't do it anymore. His anger was far darker than any depth I could conjure through my visions.

I wrapped a sarong around my waist and stumbled into the kitchen. Our balcony doors were open and I found Antoine curled up on the couch, tears streaked his cheeks. The only other time I'd seen him cry was when he told me about his mother's death.

He looked toward me, shame smeared across his face. "I'm so sorry Mona. I'm so so sorry. I don't know why I treat you so bad. I'm so sorry for what I did to you." He buried his head in his hands and wept.

I sat by his side and lifted my hair from my shoulders. “You did this to me.”

He looked up, nodded, then buried his head again.

“Antoine, you cannot undo this.” I felt a lump rise in my throat again and tears welled up in my eyes. I sat by his side and he placed his arm around me.

“I love you so much Mona. I’m so sorry I’m so bad to you. I know that I drove you to talk to Julian. I know it was my fault. Please can we be together. Please Mona. Please can we work through this?”

He pressed his head against my shoulder and I felt the warmth of his tears run down my chest. I caressed the back of his neck and we rocked back and forth. Numb, exhausted.

☆☆☆

Antoine was out running errands. My downstairs neighbor adjusted the antennae on his radio, and through a static frequency, my jaw dropped when the Prime Minister

announced that, due to COVID cases rising, the Belize borders were closing and we were going into full lockdown. We were all required to quarantine in our homes for the next 4 weeks, at a minimum. I looked at the suitcase I had just packed for Antoine. All of his belongings, at the front door, ready for him to take when he got home, so that he could leave me alone to heal.

He had heard the news when he was out and arrived home with a month worth of groceries. “I don’t know if anything will be shipped to the island, so I wanted to be prepared, so I can take care of you.” He looked down and saw his bag. “What’s this?”

I stared at him, void of expression. I swallowed a lump in my throat and fought back tears when I accepted the fact that I wouldn’t see Julian for an unforeseeable amount of time. With a heavy heart, I took a deep breath. “Antoine, I’m hurting.”

“Where am I supposed to go?” Antoine expressed a vulnerability that I’d never seen before. The police rolled down the street, ensuring that everyone was inside, off the

streets. I watched the police van leave a trail of dust settling in the island air, and as it fell to the sand, I turned back to Antoine. He pleaded to me with quiet desperation and I knew that I wasn't going to make him leave. I took a deep breath and picked up one of the grocery bags.

“We have a lot of work to do.” I moved through the living room and placed the bag on the counter, turned to Antoine, and reminded him, “You could have killed me.”

As days passed fear, and anxiety ensued. The world had been swept with a wave of uncertainty as questions about the pandemic continued to arise. Belize went into a State of Emergency, which entailed a full quarantine lockdown. Everything closed.

Boats were restricted from being in the water. Swimming was restricted. Outdoor activities were restricted.

I had accepted the fact that my connection with Julian could only exist in my memories.

Antoine and I ebbed and flowed through our attempts to rekindle passion. With no outside elements to ignite his PTSD, his abusive tendencies had subsided. He exposed a more calm, gentle demeanor. But I knew that as soon as our world began to open up again, so would that anger that is locked in his soul.

I longed for Julian. My mind wandered to the moments we shared. I avoided messaging him out of fear that Antoine may go through my phone. I let him be and surrendered to what I told myself was God's plan to help Antoine deal with his emotions, but that's just because I couldn't figure out why He would put me in a situation where I would have to endure a pandemic with someone who had hurt me so deeply.

Eventually the island began to open up again. Julian's dive shop had closed due to inability to pay rent during the lockdown. He had moved a few miles south and everything felt different. I wondered if time and distance had faded the passion that I had once felt toward him. Antoine and I had been existing in a copacetic state. It wasn't bad, but it wasn't passion filled. We were mostly in survival mode, working

together to figure out how to make ends meet while there was no work on the island.

It was a quiet evening on a day early in the week and I took a stroll along the shoreline. Lost in my thoughts, I had meandered farther south than I typically intended. The sun hung low and would soon fall behind the horizon on the lagoon and the reef waters shimmered in hues of soft violet, butter yellow, and pink reflections from the sky.

The silhouette of a familiar figure made its way from the shore, down a pier, and stopped to tend to a boat line. It was Jullian. He crouched down to loosen the line from the cleat hitch. He tied it again, more securely. As I approached the dock, a wave of anxiety washed over me, and butterflies fluttered through my stomach.

“Mona!” someone called my name from the beach. I turned my head the other direction. It was Julian’s cousin. I turned my head to look back at Julian. He had climbed on the boat and was fiddling around with the motor. I turned back to walk toward his cousin.

“Hi. How are you? It’s been so long.” I gave him a polite elbow tap.

“We’ve been okay. Things are picking up, slowly, but surely. We had to move the dive shop down here.” I looked back toward the dock and nodded.

“How’s Julian?”

“He’s okay. I think that the move was hard on him... I think that he misses Boca del Rio. It’s not the same down here, but I feel like what he’s missing doesn’t have anything to do with the Dive Shop.”

I sighed and felt my face grow flush. I smiled at his cousin.
“I’m going to go say hi to him.”

As I approached his boat, my heart raced faster and I was afraid that when I opened my mouth my voice might shake.

“Hi Julian.” I uttered then took a deep breath. He turned my way and smiled.

“You good?” He responded, somewhat passively.

“I’ve missed you... A lot.” I assured him and I watched the iris of his eyes flicker gold, once again.

“Me too.” He smiled. We didn’t say much. We just kind of stared at one another. Maybe we were both searching for words, or just enjoying one another’s energy. He jumped off the boat, onto the dock, and placed a hand on my shoulder. I wrapped both of my arms around him and pulled him toward me. We stood in an embrace as our heart beats synced together and when I could feel our breaths grow heavier, I softly pushed myself away, and gazed up into his eyes. The golden flicker had begun to morph, and I could see the two of us deep under the sea. I was following him through a cave, and into a breathtaking coral garden, illuminated by plankton. It was pure, blissful magic.

“Julian...” I wanted to ask him about his eyes, but stopped myself.

“Yes?”

“Have you been diving a lot since the island opened back up?”

“We still don’t have a lot of tourists. I’ve taken a few locals out here and there.”

I nodded, frustrated that all I could bring myself to do was make small talk.

“How’s Antoine?” Julian’s words felt like a knife in my gut. “Are y’all still together?”

I pursed my lips and nodded, embarrassed that I couldn’t say I was strong enough to leave. I could see disappointment wash over his face. He shrugged his shoulders and we stood in silence.

“Mona, why are you doing this to yourself? Do you not realize that you deserve better?”

I was torn because only I knew how he had changed during the pandemic—how loving our relationship had become, but was that enough? Does that erase the infidelity or the abuse?

Would I ever really be able to let those things go? But the bigger question was—*Do I not realize that I deserve better?* Prior to the pandemic, why did I allow so much anger in my life? That’s where I was stuck.

“Mona, I’m going to be here for you. I’m your friend no matter what you choose to do.” He placed his hand under my chin and gently lifted it so my eyes would meet his, and smiled. He pressed my head against his chest and began to rock back and forth. “But I know you’re lost. Antoine has taken so much of your energy. You always put him first. He has to be happy in order for you to be able to relax. You have to know that’s not how it’s supposed to be. You’re lost in his deep rooted trauma. You don’t have to be a martyr because you feel bad for him. You deserve so much better than that.”

My mouth went dry. I tried to swallow but a lump started building in my throat and my eyes welled with tears. I pushed my body away from his, looked him in the eyes, and nodded.



I walked home through blurry eyes, holding back tears, with that vision of bliss, that vision of Julian leading me through a cave beneath the sea reverbing through my mind. I paused along the sea wall, turned toward the reef and gazed beyond the white caps that guarded the reef, and into the deep where the ocean floor begins to descend and the water fuses into a deep glimmering sapphire blue.

Images from Julian's eyes rolled through my mind like a movie reel: the fire at sea, the infidelity, the moment of bliss.

I wondered how Antoine would survive without me in his life. Would he fall into depression and drink himself to death? I wondered how obligated I was to stay in the relationship. I wondered how I would feel about myself if something happened to him.

I returned home to Antoine, who was lying on the couch, tablet in his hand, earbuds in his ears.

“Hi lovey.” I chimed, and gazed upon him with affection.

I didn't get a response.

I turned toward my drafting table where I placed a blank sheet of cold pressed paper and began sketching a cave, deep below the surface where plankton gripped anything it could and illuminated the sea like magic.



I heard a buzz from my purse and unearthed my phone to check my text message:

Mona, will you come dive with me tomorrow?

Yes.

