

An Island In The Adriatic

It wasn't long before we heard the sirens. Their wailing bounced off the cold stones and into our lair. I stepped outside and saw the only police car on the whole island speeding up the steep hill and out of *Stari Grad*.

Later, we found out that there had been a terrible argument between the Spaniards, Javier and Alfredo. In a fit of drunken rage Javier had not only split open Alfredo's skull with the back of a shovel, but also poured gasoline all over his body and set it on fire. When the police finally arrived they found Javier playing guitar next to the burning corpse of what was once his best friend. The official report stated that the argument was over two bottles of rum, but I knew that it was much more than that.

After the initial shock of the murder washed over me, I tried to think back to how I came to know Javier and Alfredo, and then I remembered that it all started because I wanted to take a swim. It was an unusually hot and listless day, and the cool blueness of the water called out to me. I walked to the shore and watched sun dance on its surface. Then I dove into that beautiful turquoise expanse, and swam away from the warped shore. I floated on

its languid surface with my arms stretched out wide. I breathed in and out and listened to the tiny pebbles moving back and forth in the tide. Then I swam further out, past the patches of white sand and swaying black seaweed, and out into the deep blue water. I dove down and tried to touch the sandy bottom. I kept going a little farther and a little deeper until I went too deep and something popped in my right ear. I pushed off the bottom and shot towards the surface. My right ear felt funny when I came up. I tried to shake the water out, but I could never get it all. After that, my head was permanently stuffed up and when I spoke it sounded strange.

A few days later, I was forced quit my job at the restaurant. I couldn't concentrate with that strange billowy underwater sound in my ear and I lost my ability communicate with the patrons in the same easy way that I had before. I was hired because I spoke English well and I had a good rapport with the customers, but now that was gone, and I was told that I was no longer needed.

I had to make money somehow, so I tried my luck at selling my paintings down on the quay. I may have flunked out of an expensive art school when I realized that I wasn't going to be the next Picasso or Cezanne, but I had some training and I knew I had some skills. I set out to

capture the feeling that the water and light created when they danced together. I would paint abstract impressions of this ballet. People would see my paintings and either like them or not, and to my surprise many did, and soon I made more money than I ever had waiting tables.

That's when I noticed that a few of the shady types that hustled tourists into this boat ride, or that island tour had taken more than a casual interest in me. I guess it was the desire for some easy money that caused Alfredo and Javier to approach me. I had just finished setting my paintings up when I saw two guys walking towards me. They had skinny arms and legs, but the lazy guts of alcoholics. It was only about eleven in the morning, and they were already drunk.

The one with the stringy blonde hair and backwards baseball cap asked, "What's with all the colors, man?"

"Yeah, why don't you paint a house, or a boat, or something?" the one with the brown eyes and crooked nose wanted to know.

"Anyone can paint a house or a boat."

"You sell this stuff?"

"Yeah."

"How much money you make?"

"More than I did waiting tables."

That impressed them. The one with the backwards baseball cap and stringy blonde hair fingered one of my paintings.

"What's your name?"

"Henry."

"Henry! Such a serious name."

"What are you, like, German?"

"Yes, actually, I am."

"Shouldn't it be *Heinrich*, then?"

"No, it's Henry."

"Okay, *Heinrich*. I'm Alfredo, and this asshole is Javier."

Alfredo was the one with the stringy blonde hair and the backwards baseball cap and Javier was the one with the brown eyes and crooked nose, but if you closed your eyes you couldn't tell who was talking. I knew that they must have been friends for a long time, and noticed that they could communicate with a few sideways glances.

"Don't mind Alfredo. He has no manners because he's just a little dick from Madrid."

"And Javier's just the son of fucking dishwasher."

"Shut up, dickhead."

"Cocksucker."

"Asshole."

They could go on calling each other names like that forever. That was how they were. They would keep taunting and teasing each other, until it got serious, and then suddenly one would say that they were just joking. Then they'd laugh and it was "all cool" again. But I never knew when they were kidding or not. It was a sick way of communicating, but after all the booze and disappointment that was written on their skin, I suppose it was all they had left.

Alfredo saw that the owner of the boat company was wandering on the waterfront.

"Ol' Hawkface is watching."

"Better get back to *work*."

Before they left, Alfredo asked me for a cigarette.

"I don't smoke."

"Man, what kind of artist doesn't smoke?"

"Yeah, bro. What's up with that?"

"I don't like cigarettes."

"You're a little uptight *Heinrich*, but we like you anyway."

I saw a lot of Javier and Alfredo over the next few weeks. They always seemed to be nearby whenever I sold a painting. They asked me lots of questions. Then one day the inevitable happened – they showed up with a couple of

canvasses and some paint supplies and started painting their own pictures.

I had no choice but to let them share my spot. They weren't going away and I knew they were unpredictable and potentially violent. I figured it was better to make friends with them than to incur their wrath. They had no idea how to paint, but that didn't seem to matter. Even an amateur could paint a basic picture of a white sailboat floating on blue water and sell it to one of the tourists that stumbled off the cruise ships. It was hard to go wrong. Or so I thought, but Javier couldn't sell a painting to save his life. No one wanted to buy from him. Alfredo teased him non-stop and Javier was sensitive about it, but at the end of the day, no matter what, they always pooled their money and bought as much rum as they could. And then they would jam out on their guitars, endlessly playing the same three songs until they passed out.

Alfredo and Javier lived in one of the abandoned villages on the outskirts of *Stari Grad*. The village was up a steep and rocky, thistle-lined path that was just treacherous enough to keep most tourists out. Everything in the village was covered in a tangled blanket of green and brown ivy. I saw some old stone staircases that led to nowhere. It was eerie, and I remembered that the locals

said this village was cursed. The story was that the last man who lived in the village went crazy and drowned himself in the well. It was said that if you drank from the well the old man would come and steal your soul.

In the center of the tangled ruins was an old church. Most of its roof had caved in, but a section around the altar that was still intact. Javier and Alfredo made their home in that altar. Outside, they had cleared some space and built a fire pit. They would cook their meals and get drunk and play guitar under the night sky. They said the place looked best when everything was ablaze in the pale-blue moonlight.

"Not bad, hunh?"

"Yeah, it's nice."

"It's the ivy that makes the place."

"It holds everything together."

"There used to be much more of it growing, but lately it's dying off."

"That's because you keep picking at it."

"I'm trimming it asshole."

"Shut up, dickhead."

"Shut up, yourself."

"What do you think, *Heinrich*? Is it better to pick off the dead ivy, or leave it alone?"

I looked up at the gaping hole in the roof, and saw brown ivy clinging to the charred beams. I started to trace the path of a withering vine down the wall when something in one of the cracked windows caught my attention. It was broken reflection of a lonely man.

"Well?"

"I think you should try to add some support beams to the roof. It doesn't look too sturdy."

"That's stupid."

"Yeah, *Heinrich*, that's retarded. I thought Germans were supposed to be smart. He's dumber than you Dickhead."

"Shut up, asshole."

I knew where this was going, and I looked for an excuse to leave. A thick grey cloud had crossed the sun, and a shiver ran down my spine.

"Hey guys, I'm going home. I think it might rain."

"Don't leave, man. We've got shelter."

"Yeah, and guitars and rum."

"Maybe, he's afraid of the ghost?"

"Yeah, *Heinrich* don't be such a pussy."

"*Adios amigos*," I said and walked away. As I stumbled down the rocky path, I could hear them arguing about the ivy, the money, the rum, their lost dreams, and everything else.

I stood on my balcony watching the patches of bright shimmery water dance on an otherwise dark sea. Flashes of lightening lit up the neighboring island, as thunder bombarded its harbor. Nature's fury was unleashed. I swallowed the last of my summery cocktail, went indoors, and pulled out my old wool sweater.

After a few days, I got bored and wandered down to the quay. A hush had fallen over *Stari Grad*. The fish market was closed, and the cold cement countertops were empty and the knives and scales remained untouched. Heavy water drops rolled off tiles and splattered on the ground.

I passed through the front patio of the Red Baron, where a few cold tourists were clutching Mojitos, and headed into the dark and stale interior of the inner bar. I took my place at the bar and ordered a neat whiskey. I saw all the usual suspects. There was Tasha – our saintly bartender, Marko – the fisherman, and then Ivan – who did nothing but drink, and to his left was Deniz – the big Turk, and down at the end of the bar was Javier. I figured Alfredo was nearby. I slid down the bar.

"Where's Alfredo?"

"I left that little dick back at the house." Javier took a drag off of his cigarette, "I told him to think about what *he's* done."

"What happened?"

"He collapsed the roof the other night. That's what."

"What? How'd he do that?"

"He was always pick, pick, picking at the ivy. I told him, 'don't pick at the ivy'. But he'd whine, 'my mommy taught me that you have to pick away the dead parts of the plant to help it grow.' I told that *bitch*, 'just because your fucking mother has a big diamond ring on her precious little finger, doesn't mean that she isn't a *fucking* idiot!'"

"Come on, Javier. There was just a huge rainstorm. I'm sure the roof finally just caved in."

"Like Hell it did." Javier squinted as he smoked his cigarette.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to let *him* rot up there in the rain," Javier took a shot of rum and made a sour face. "The other day I found out that *I've* had some good luck," he tapped his right front pocket. "An Auntie of mine died and she left *me* some money and I'm not going to share any of it with *him*. Now *he'll* get to see what its like."

Javier banged his glass on the bar. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a fat wad of cash.

"More rum," he demanded.

"Slow down," Tasha told him. She held up a bottle of cheap rum, "he's almost finished the whole thing already."

"I can handle it," he blew her a kiss.

"Don't get cute. I can cut you off."

"It doesn't matter, I've got some bottles stashed back at home."

"Then maybe you should go there."

"But I like being here with you," Javier winked.

"Watch it," Tasha replied.

"Sorry, baby. You know I love you."

"You should say sorry to Alfredo," Tasha shot back.

"Fuck that little cocksucker!" He spat out. "I hate that asshole. You know his whole life he's always been lording his money over me. I'm fucking sick of it."

"He's been like this all morning," Tasha told me.

Javier kept on muttering, "*I've got the money now bitch.*"

"Why don't you just shut the fuck up?" Ivan suggested.

"Yeah, you're only upset because he's a better guitarist than you," Marko taunted him.

Javier's eyes were expanding. "That little *bitch* couldn't keep a beat if his life depended on it."

"Why don't you two little *faggots* just suck each others dicks?" Deniz yelled out.

Everyone laughed.

"Fuck you, I'm no faggot." Javier threw his barstool back and charged Deniz. Deniz was about to crush Javier, when Marko and I jumped in.

"That's it! You're out of here!" Tasha pointed at Javier.

I dragged him out of the bar, and wrestled him to the ground. The sharp air and ancient stones must have knocked some sense into Javier, because he suddenly stopped fighting me. He tilted his face up towards the sky and shook his fist. "Fuck you!" he yelled out to no one in particular, as a dark mist stuck to his face.

Suddenly, he smiled and helped me up. "Sorry, my brother. I lost my head in there."

"It's alright."

"You want to come back to my place for a drink?"

"Nah. I've got some whiskey back at the bar."

"Suit yourself," Javier said, and turned and walked away.

I couldn't help but notice what a stark portrait he made, and I wanted to paint it. I memorized all the elements of the composition. I studied the right angles of the church, and the hard angles of its bell tower. I noticed how these rigid structures were made more permanent

when they were juxtaposed against the tumultuous liquid sky. In the void of an alleyway, an elongated silhouetted figure was caught swaying somewhere in between these two disparate elements. This mysterious black figure had his back to me and was walking off into some lonely destiny that was indescribable in words. A dark hollowness surrounded me, and I wished that I were a better painter.

Back in the bar, the mood had changed. It was a much happier place, and everyone was drinking peacefully. I drank and flirted with Tasha and gradually the image of Javier walking away slipped from my consciousness and I knew I'd never paint that picture.

While Javier was out at the Red Baron getting drunk, Alfredo was searching through the village for the rum. After he found it, he drank both bottles and passed out. Javier returned a little while later, and when he saw the empty bottles, he flew into a murderous rage. He grabbed the shovel that was lying next to Alfredo, and brought it down with a sharp crack. Over and over again, he beat Alfredo, until Alfredo's skull had split open. Javier, still furious, stormed away and returned with a can of gasoline and a guitar. Javier lit a match and dropped it onto Alfredo's gasoline soaked body.

A hollow laugh echoed across the orange sky, and then the loud chords of a guitar were struck. Javier started playing their favorite song. He wanted to give Alfredo a proper sendoff.

After that the island changed for me. The magical blue water didn't seem so magical anymore, and the old stones and the winding alleyways and the old cathedral all held dark secrets. I was suddenly aware of an evil presence that lurked beneath the surface. The dazzling turquoise water disguised it, but deep down inside the molten rock there was a wickedness that was brewing and one day it would boil over again. Only next time I wouldn't be there to see it.