

These Islands Could Have Any Names

It begins and ends like this: a sun-drenched Sunday on St. Thomas filled with a deep longing for steady winds and serendipitous quests to places whose names we know not yet. Whispers of placid anchorages, cotton candy sunsets and full sails on china-blue ombre waters have lured us here to these Virgin Islands, and we rest assured, that we will get what we came for- maybe, more. Perhaps we will somehow leave changed under this tender lens of the Caribbean sun, catching glimpses of ourselves in the people we meet and on the mirrored seas that carry us, and in the most pure of ways, our faith in the possibility of another reality will somehow be restored. It will be that simple.

But of course, we must first set sail.

Our crew of six – myself (Sylvia), Ewa, Stas (my parents), Galina, Jerry (family friends) and Krzys (our skipper)– abandons the deep February freeze of our home shores in New Jersey and arrives in the Charlotte Amalie airport, greeted with a much-welcomed, tropical high noon. A short drive takes us to the Charlotte Amalie harbor, where *Fantasia* awaits. The handsome 34' Jeanneau Sun Odyssey sloop that journeyed months earlier from her home base in Brooklyn, NY – a loyal vessel of the Polish Sailing Club – bobs in the afternoon light like a happy youth in warm, energized waters. If we listen closely, an undercurrent whispers her welcome. *Fan-ta-sia: unrestrained imagination and blissful visions; a formation of wondrous fancies.* Upon retrieving the dinghy and stocking up on final provisions – fuel, fresh produce, libations– we board at anchor and gradually prepare the boat for her departure. With the sun beginning its sluggish retreat, a sea turtle shows itself just feet from our boat, as if sharing a heartfelt greeting from the Caribbean deep.

Green, rolling hills with bald patches of candy-colored rooftops begin to blur, like paint streaks, as we set sail and leave the harbor behind early the next morning. The winds first guide us to St. James (still in the US Virgin Islands), where we explore beaches of strange, limb-like coral rock and revel in the small-world coincidence of meeting a couple from New York, who spend the seasons sailing the surrounding islands on their Harding ketch, and summers back on the mainland, in the same Brooklyn marina *Fantasia* calls home (naturally, such occasions call for boat tours and kielbasa and tropical drink exchanges). Onward, we head across the Windward Passage north of St. John Island to Tortola, in the British Virgin Islands, to check into customs the following day. We moor at West End, which teems with sailboats and colorful, salt-bleached flags from more countries than we can immediately recognize in our excitement. After dinghying over and with formalities complete (if we didn't already feel like we are abroad, this is our official marker), our crew strays to an unassuming adjacent café, surrounded by handfuls of handsome, wandering roosters, and shares a toast of local Caribbean beer and bush tea to nothing in particular yet everything all at once: warmer weather and fine sailing, good company, and to the adventure ahead.

Over the next days, a certain pre-calculation of tested, pleasing locales parades us to islands and bays which, although some of us have seen before, we still experience with fresh eyes. It is truth indeed, after all, that our travels – on water, on land – are constantly redefined. Norman Island, Peter Island, through the Sir Francis Drake Channel to Virgin Gorda, Beef Island, and Jost Van Dyke: these islands beckon (they

could have any names, really), and with pleasing winds and saltwater pulsating through our veins, we throw up our sails and hop amongst isles to savor each unique taste.

The days generate picture-book weather that allows for grand explorations of underwater worlds and princely formations ablaze with fable and mystery. We flirt with exotic marine meadows at The Caves at Norman Island and the surrounding “Indians”- great, stately rocks framed like Native American headdresses- where our eyes sting with curiosity. Florescent, angel-winged fish with names we’ll never know prance alongside sea urchins and delicate coral fringes that protrude, ever so elegantly, from chasms of rock and sand. We allow ourselves to float freely, space-like, through thick clusters of minute tin-silver specimens that wander hesitantly between our limbs, and in such moments, we seem to forget about the separations of land and sea. Like bowling pins tossed by supernatural beings, The Baths in Virgin Gorda strike us with their mammoth, cavernous boulders. Thousands of footprints have come before us, surely, on these grainy, dove-wing sands, but somehow still, the murky salt puddles and veins of dim light that hide here become our own, if only for an instant. These tonic moments will carry us for months to come.

When the opportunity -that is, time, light and crew consensus, the clockhands of sailors- allows for it, we explore the islands’ rocky, shrubby mounds (Biras Hill on Virgin Gorda, the exposed hilltops of Norman Island) with cacti reaching out from the soil like wild, seaglass tentacles. Songbirds and butterflies and jet-packed insects, all seeming foreign here, flutter through the dusty trails as we bring our sea-legs to the highest elevations of the terrain, taking long pauses to breathe in the landscape of the bleeding, watercolor blue sea below us. Sometimes, when we walk the busiest bands of island life – or, simply, when our mind wanders – we’ll look into a passing stranger’s eyes, like the two-toothed man with crocodile wrinkles selling conch shells off his splintered, bright blue wooden boat, and we’ll smile, wondering to ourselves if we are all so lucky to share similar fortunes. If somehow, despite the differences we are born into or that we create or that inevitability become us, we are carelessly bonded in these latitudes, under this lurid sun.

At dusk, evenings quickly draw their curtain and our crew basks in the final gasps of daylight. We watch stealthy birds dive-bombing for their last meals in the moorings’ surrounding shallows, and as we prepare our own last meals, the pale moon, growing fuller with each passing day, gently rises like a familiar rhythm. The sound of bleating goats roaming the steep hillsides mixes with drifting music from the shoreline and surrounding vessels, offering a melodic backdrop to our candlelit dinners (it must be noted, that our crew is pleasantly reluctant to indulge in our boat’s electronics.)

With full stomachs and outboard dish duty complete, spasms of tealights in emptied glass jars carry rum-laced conversations into the night, a merry-go-round of colorful anecdotes on youth and travel and the cosmos and other abstract fascinations; vibrant jigsaws of life experience exhaled, inhaled, exhaled again. One particular night, there is talk of stars, about how they are shards of history that will not belong in any world as they quite do now; how they eventually burn out and fade, just like these moments which cannot be repeated. And so our drowsy eyes stare out into the deep, velvety sky, blanketed with glimmers of distant lights, and we think different, or perhaps similar, things. Flashes of the things we left behind, or of the common things which bind us here, now, like these common stars

above us, and mostly, of these familiar yet unfamiliar moments, which we'll strap tightly into our minds and unleash when we need to be reminded of the simple pleasures which are enough to set our thoughts on fire. These moments are but footprints. *We glow with contentment here.*

But, alas, it has been said that in order to enjoy life, we should not enjoy it too much (Nabokov's words). Despite our rebellions, currents must maintain some kind of flow; one point ends and another begins, we must keep moving. And so, like wildfire, the final days signal *Fantasia's* sails. Our last loaf of bread grows mold spores and the sweetness of fresh produce has all but vanished. We begin our passage from the British Virgin Islands back to our vantage point in St. Thomas, in the US Virgin Islands, and are graced with ample wind and majestic, slow-rolling sea swells. One last flawlessly de-orchestrated ocean waltz in tropical waters.

When we return to anchor at the Charlotte Amalie harbor, where our story began, a sudden cloudburst – the only daytime rain in days – provides an excellent opportunity to take our first, and final, freshwater rinse all week. And so our crew gathers up our soap bars and unopened shampoo samples and whatever remains of our drinking water for extra rinsing fuel, and humming along to (what else) *Singing in the Rain*, we wash under the darkened clouds with the highest of spirits; a reverse baptism, perhaps, for dreamers. *These moments are but footprints.*

Days and weeks later, long after we've left *Fantasia* in her warm waters and adjusted back to our realities, people will still ask about our bronzed skin and lightened wisps of hair. They will catch mirages of full sails, underwater worlds and cobalt-blue oceans in our eyes and wonder about the cause of our daydreams and prolonged smiles. They will ask to see photographs, and to repeat anchorages' names, and to explain the beautiful things we saw in those island-hopping days at sea. And we will recall, with utmost clarity and in as few words as possible, the reasons as to why we went to cruise this corner of the world, and why we will soon return, to this land or the next, and continue chasing horizons.

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