

New Fiction: The Sandbar

The morning of day three, Kelly decided to go out on a jet ski. She'd been resistant at first for all the usual reasons. But the accumulated effect of watching other vacationers roar around on the water, the insanely beautiful tropical backdrop, and listening to Dan complain about her unwillingness to try new things finally broke her. It was for her own good, this trip down to paradise. That's what everyone said, and what she told herself. Looking out onto the water, however, she'd felt nothing. As though the blast that had ripped open her leg had taken something besides blood.

Dan smiled when she made her wishes known and said, "told you, it'll be fun." Then they walked down to the jetty to catch the 11am trip. Kelly wore a one-piece under mesh shorts and a yellow t-shirt, Dan wore a bathing suit and a unit t-shirt from the 82nd. The shirt, which Kelly had bought with some encouragement from her first sergeant, featured a grinning metal skull with wings that said, "Death from Above."



She'd met Dan at crossfit, and she'd given him the shirt after they started dating. Dan had never served, but the shirt suited him. It brought up bad memories for her, but seeing it on her man made the shirt seem less menacing, more like an affectation.

When Dan had left her at the bar last night to chat with an older gentleman and his younger wife—but mostly the younger wife—Kelly had remembered the shirt, how it hung on his shoulders. To be so hard on the outside, so sculpted, made her feel like she couldn't trust him. He was undependable inside, soft, but, she thought, that was the point. His violations the errors of a faithful dog kept inside too long, or of a baby, helpless to avoid filling its diapers with the effluvia after a day's feasting. He had come back to her at the bar when another guy bought her a drink. She'd made sure not to return the new guy's attention, and Dan's ego (light as it was) hadn't even been bruised.

At the beach, a resort employee wearing a blue shirt with "Chris" embroidered in white thread checked the names of

guests against a list he had affixed to a clipboard. He was tall and well-built, and for some reason he reminded her of an Eastern European Staff Sergeant from the maintenance platoon. Dan introduced them, shaking Chris's hand and grabbing his elbow while looking in his eyes. "Got room for two more?" he said.

"Sure," said Chris. "Which house do you have?"

"We're in the 'Prince Eugene,' up the hill," said Dan.

Chris scanned the list he held on his clipboard, pausing halfway down the second page. "Dan Fuchs and Kelly Browksi. Know how to swim?"

"Practically born with webbed feet," said Dan, laughing.

Kelly pointed toward the lagoon's middle. "How deep does it get?"

Chris scratched his head. "Not too bad—maybe twenty feet around the middle? Thirty?" He looked at Dan. "Thinking about diving? It's much better further out, on the reef." He saw Kelly's leg, then looked away quickly. "Wouldn't recommend going into the water if you have any cuts or scrapes... you know. Can attract the wrong kind of attention. Anyway, you'll want to catch the dolphins, they should be around here somewhere."

Dan shook his head, looking down at her with an expression. "Jet skis should be plenty for us today. Maybe I'll head out to the reef tomorrow." The "by myself" was implied.

They dragged Kelly's jet ski into the water, then Dan grabbed his own and pulled while she pushed, wanting to help. Chris and the other guests were already in the water. Dan brought the engine to life with a roar and joined the larger group. Kelly mounted hers gingerly, settled into a comfortable position. She ran her hand down the scar on her right leg,

tracing its fresh, raw lines. Without thinking, she itched it, and blood welled up.

“Shit,” she said, wiping the red on her thigh. She debated bailing on the event, then imagined what Dan would say. She fired up the jet ski and sped out after them.

The lagoon was huge. Three hundred feet out from the shore the bottom had already vanished in the blue. Kelly supposed if it was as deep as Chris said, she didn’t want to see the bottom, see the life swarming beneath the waves, looking for a big shadow, graceful serpentine undulation. The logical antipode to her mantra as a paratrooper with the 82nd – “Death from Below.” Ahead of her, someone shouted—Chris was on a jet ski, pointing. A group of dorsal fins broke the surface of the water. They’d spotted the dolphin pod.

She drifted to a stop, admiring the graceful animals, their subtle rhythm. They seemed so carefree and happy. Of course, life outside civilization was more complicated than a video snapshot of photogenic mammals grinning, they were just animals. For them, life was a ruthless competition for food, sex, sleep, and safety. Maybe what looked like fun to her was a chaotic mess of anxiety and barely-contained violence. She’d heard something about infanticide and murder among dolphin pods, but Christ, at least they didn’t attack humans. Who cared what savage acts they committed against each other?

She moved to join the group, then shut down the engine. Ahead of her, Dan was talking with two college-age girls. They were pretty, which, with Kelly’s injury and the secondary effects it had had on the rest of her previously balanced system, meant they were prettier than her. He was sitting up straight on his jet ski, with his chest out, watching one of them talk—the more attractive of the two. She wondered whether he’d explained his military themed shirt—whether he’d told them he didn’t want to talk about it, or told them it belonged to his girlfriend. The attractive girl laughed and pointed at the

dolphins. Dan was laughing, too.



Kelly sat still for a moment, gave herself space to feel what to do. If she went over now, she'd arrive clumsily, she'd be jealous. In pulling up to Dan, she'd intrude, or worry about intruding, in that way she had of being intrusive in overcrowded social situations. Things would require an explanation, which Dan would furnish, introducing her as his girlfriend. The girls would greet her perfunctorily, and then stare. She'd feel awkward about her body, her legs, forced by bullshit society and their expectations to feel bad about her greatest source of pride: her service. Dan would make the appropriate qualifications. Kelly realized that she didn't want to ruin everyone's good time. She looked out at the sandbar that made the lagoon possible, and headed there instead.

Kelly had grown up in Connecticut, on a typical Long Island Sound beach. During exceptionally low tides, a sandbar connected the beach to a nearby island. This semi-permanent

bridge had a little trail of hardened sand at the very middle, a crust of safety above the mud below. Her dad had warned her to stick to the sandy part, and sink up to her ankle or worse. That if she were too heavy she'd break through, and the mud was bottomless. Clams lived in the mud—normal clams, unsafe to eat from decades of chemicals spilled into the water, and razor clams, native to Connecticut. The razor clams were so named due to their resemblance to a nineteenth century barber's straight-edge. When Kelly was eight, she had walked out to the island during summer and broken through a patch of thin sand into the mud beneath. A razor clam had cut her and she'd bled for an hour. This was one of her most vivid memories from early childhood. Panicking as her parents reacted to the sight of the cut, the red mixed with dark, rotting brown.

Nobody noticed her absence. The dolphins jumped through the water, frolicking and spinning in the hot midday sun. Kelly decided to cruise with the jet ski before succumbing to the inevitable despair of social maneuvering. She revved the engine and headed out toward the sandbar. Forced herself to enjoy the sense of mechanical power, though she knew how many ways that sword cut, forget about it, just try get a sense of the lagoon's boundaries. Kelly bounced on the waves, hesitantly at first, then with abandon. As she got closer to the sandbar she could see the bottom. It was like the shore, not deep at all. Actually pretty safe. And the sandbar was wide. Unlike the murky water of the Atlantic northeast, with its lurking threats.

Five minutes of this left her soaked with sea-spray, and although her wounds burned and tingled, the pain reminded her of childhood, and life, and her unlived future. She remembered the simple pleasure of tearing around dirt roads on a bicycle, wet from exertion and alone, blissfully independent. Kelly let the engine idle as she drifted up to the sandbar, and slumped forward on the handlebars, watching the sea beneath her. She

remembered parts of a dream from last night, and wondered if the other guys in the truck would've liked this place. Portmanteau was always talking about the water—from Mobile, Alabama, with a slow, deliberate drawl—he and Rafe, bullshitting about what they'd do when they got out. Get buried, that's what they did, that was the sum of their human potential, no more youth, no vacation. Barely worth the time it took to remember their names. And here she was, floating in warm, quiet luxury. Two feet of water, maybe less. She could feel the bottom of the craft scraping against the sand.

It was horrifying, the feeling. The lightest of touches on the sand, the machine was no longer floating but almost resting on the ground. *Fuck* that. Kelly gunned the engine and sped into deeper water. After twenty seconds her panic subsided, and she realized that she'd moved far from the rest of the group. They were 500 meters away, now, just a series of black dots, still following the dolphin pod. She hated the jet ski now, everything about the experience made her skin crawl. She turned her craft toward the group, no longer worried about the consequences of her arrival.

As she turned, the jet ski's engine sputtered and died. Kelly drifted to a stop near the middle of the lagoon, facing the group. No chance of capsizing, not with this ingenious contraption. She checked the gas meter—still nearly full. She tried starting the engine again. Nothing.

"You've gotta be *fucking* with me," Kelly muttered, like she was back on deployment. "Cheap goddamn resort piece of shit jet ski..." She beat her fists on the the plastic engine cover. Nothing. The group was so far she couldn't hear them, which meant it was doubtful whether they'd hear her even if she yelled. She stood up awkwardly and waved her arms. No reaction.

Kelly sat down again and looked around. 500 meters from shore, she'd never make that swim because she'd never leave the jet

ski. Exactly why she hated doing this type of shit. Her wound was oozing blood again, dropping her life into the water like a sacrifice to the old ones beneath the waves. Grateful for the one-piece, she took off her shirt and stood up again, waved it in a circle. Maybe a lifeguard would notice or something. After a couple minutes, a commotion among the jet ski group gave Kelly hope that they'd seen her. Three riders sped out from the main group, but cut to her left—heading further out, toward the sandbar. She sat down, quivering with anger. She couldn't wait to tell those lazy irresponsible bastards a thing or two when they got over here. Oh yeah.

Except, she wouldn't. It wasn't really their fault, they were just college kids. Maybe she'd hunt down the mechanics and give them a good razzing. Nothing to do but sit at the moment, she'd try again in a minute or two. Movement out of the corner of her eyes caught her attention, and she looked over the side of the jet ski for the first time since it lost power. The sun was hitting the waves and the tiny objects suspended below, sending shapes and shadows into the depths. Here, the water was deeper, darker—this wasn't 30 feet, it must be more like 50. She blinked. A deeper shadow among the others swam in the depths, slow, unconcerned. Or maybe it was just a trick of the light. She looked again—no way to be sure. Now it moved, now it didn't. Should she look again, confirm her worst fears, see the hammerhead or the tiger shark or the bull shark or whatever they had down here in tropical fucking heaven? A goddamn pack of sharks, a hundred of them, the big ones, twenty-footers, ready to explode up from the deep, cresting through the surface, a storm of teeth and hunger, and take her legs, everything this time, right at the torso? Dan was still too far away. He'd left her alone, just like he had at the bar last night, just like fucking Portmanteau and the rest of them had when it counted, marching off to Valhalla and leaving her adrift.

Kelly made herself a part of the jet ski, hung on to it for

dear life, melded into it, gasping for breath, squeezing. The jet ski was hot, the waves, warm. She forced herself to look down. Nothing. Just the way sun hit the water at that depth. Why keep living this way, goddamnit. Why pretend that this was any better than just *fucking doing it*. She looked again. No shark. Come on. Beneath the unhealed wounds on her leg, wounds that would never heal, fully, a deeper hurt stung now, aching, weeping.

Carefully, deliberately, she let go of the small watercraft, and slipped in. At 500 meters it would take her fifteen minutes to swim ashore, and someone would notice way before then. Her legs throbbed like mad as she began to kick toward the beach, and she imagined the tendrils of blood flowing out behind her, searching for whatever destiny awaited.