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NEW YORK, Sunday, October 28, 2012

The bright green leaves of the chili plant on my windowsill catch the sunlight, and its tiny bloodred fingers reach toward the ceiling. A breeze comes through the open window, making the leaves cast dancing shadows on the wall. The morning light exposes the spidery cracks in the paint and I trace the largest one with the nail of my index finger. When my downstairs neighbor slams his front door, the neat square of sunshine on the wall shakes slightly then settles. I pluck the biggest chili from the top of the plant, squeeze it hard between my finger and thumb until it splits and the tiny egg-white seeds burst out. I put the broken fruit into my mouth so I can suck on it slowly, and then I rub my lips and

neck and chest with my stained fingertips. The chilis remind me of home.

When I wake from the nightmares, I start the day like this. As always, it doesn't take long. My mouth lights up with heat, my skin prickles then burns, my flesh on fire. My face grows hot, my temperature rises, and sweat builds on my forehead and temples and starts to trickle onto my cheeks. Soon, my bottom lip is tingling, a thousand tiny needles pricking the soft flesh until it feels hot and full. My nose begins to run and I start to breathe faster. I have to suck in air to cool my tongue.

Mayans have a word for what I am doing: *huuyub*, to draw breath with a puckered mouth after eating a chili. I close my eyes and try to recruit my parasympathetic nervous system. Long controlled inhale, one, two, three; even longer controlled exhale, one, two, three, four. I focus on the smallest leaf on the plant and let everything else fall out of focus until I feel my heart rate slow.

I learned how to use my breath to control my heart rate as a young child swimming in the shallow waters of the island where I grew up. *Breathing is the most important part of swimming*, Anurak told me once. *You must know how to breathe before you can swim*. Anurak could swim, without breathing, for eight minutes. I could do three on a good day. Arielle did four once.

The chilis of the Americas (genus: *Capsicum*) and the pep-

pers of Asia (genus: *Piper*) are unrelated. Chili pepper is a misnomer bequeathed to us by Christopher Columbus. Above everything but gold, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella wanted black pepper. When Columbus didn't find India, he didn't find the coveted spice, but he did find the spicy fruit native to the land he stumbled upon. He called them chili peppers to soften the blow.

Arielle and I spent our childhood collecting facts like this from the men and women—botanists, geologists, marine biologists, lepidopterists, conservationists—who came to visit our island in the Andaman Sea. After dinner one night, a Swedish journalist told us about huuyub. A graduate student from Rhode Island, eager to compete, told us about Columbus and his adventures. *Thai food*, he said smugly, helping himself to another heaping serving of white rice, *wouldn't have chilis if it hadn't been for him*. He looked around as if he expected applause, or gratitude. Arielle rolled her eyes at me and I tried not to laugh.

I let my tongue hang out of my mouth to maximize the surface area for the cool air. When that doesn't work, I clamp down on it with my thumb and forefinger to see if the pressure will relieve the burning sensation. I don't know why I bother when I know none of it will make any difference. All

the pain I'm feeling is a result of a neurological hiccup. The capsaicin in the chili binds to the same receptors that the body uses to register heat. My brain thinks my mouth is literally hot, as if I have swallowed fire. I try telling my brain it is making a mistake, and for a few seconds I seem to have taken back control of my body, but then I have to curl my tongue again to suck in more air. The chili plant warns us of a danger that doesn't exist and launches our bodies into unnecessary overdrive. All systems fire to protect us from the heat that is not there.

We learned about capsaicin from a Dutch paleobotanist. He drew little pictures in the margins of a newspaper to explain how the receptors worked.

Arielle and I used to have chili competitions. We would sit across from each other at a table and eat whole chilis, one at a time. The only rule: the first person to drink or eat anything else lost. We jumped up and down, stuck out our tongues, shouted, screamed, swore. I used to torture her by slowly pouring a glass of cold milk and then setting it down beside her. I usually won.

When I've had enough, I strip out of the oversize T-shirt I wore to bed and get in the shower. I twist on the cold tap and step into water so frigid it makes me gasp. I let the water flow straight into my mouth and swallow large gulps even though I know this will not help. Afterward, I lie naked and wet on the

living room floor and press a tea towel full of ice to my bare chest. I slip a single cube away from the rest and use it to slowly numb my swollen lips.

I have only two visible scars from that day. The one on my left thigh is dark and round, a perfect small coin imprinted just below my hip bone, and it is easy to mistake it for a birthmark. But the scar on my stomach is nine inches long and a white so pure and bright it leaps off my brown skin—it looks like someone took a butcher knife and tried to open me up along the curve of my rib cage. The sun falling through the window is cutting my stomach scar in half so that the bottom few inches are in shadow. I lift my hips off the floor so I can see all of it in the light.

I knew her body as if it were mine—the three tiny moles on her forearm, the peach-shaped birthmark on her left shoulder that she hated, the tattoo of a sea turtle on her right ankle that matched the one on my left—but she will never see this version of me.

Last weekend, I undressed in front of a man I had met a few hours earlier and he gasped. When he collected himself, he asked, *What happened?*

I fell over, I replied.

When we had sex, he was very careful not to touch my stomach, as if he worried he might accidentally split me open again with a stray hand.

Several men I've slept with have reacted like he did, with gasps, raised eyebrows, mute shock. Some, like him, ask me directly about it, but many don't. Some even pretend not to notice it, and then we both pretend I didn't notice their reaction. I used to ask to turn the lights off before I took off my clothes, to spare them the distress, but recently I've stopped asking. Let them see. They will never know about all the marks that have disappeared. In the days after, when I couldn't sleep at night, I counted every cut and scrape and bruise on my body. I got to one hundred and seventeen.

My back is starting to ache from lying on the hard wood. I flip over onto my stomach and use the last ice cube to draw small circles on the dusty floor. I hear the high-pitched ping of an email arriving on my phone, and then another, and another, and I get up to check it. As I expect, each email has a document attached and a single word in the subject line, three orders from my editor: *fact-check*, *proofread*, *fact-check*. There is no text in the body of any of the emails.

I work at a travel magazine for the super wealthy. It's called *Cortés*. (I know.) My official title is editorial assistant, which

means that the most intellectually stimulating thing I do is write unattributed copy to accompany photographs in our Top Five series. *Top Five Wildlife Destinations in South America*. *Top Five Resort Hotels in Switzerland*. *Top Five Island Retreats to Decolonize Your Yoga Practice*. I don't get to choose the top five. Instead, every week, I receive an email containing five photographs accompanied by bullet points. My job is to transform these ungrammatical fragments into dreamy prose.

Your readers should be able to close their eyes and be there, my editor told me on my first day, as he showed me to my desk and handed me a blue coffee mug, a lime-green Post-it note, and a packet of materials from HR. The mug was imprinted with a map of the world showing seventeenth-century shipping routes. The note said: SIGHTS, SOUNDS, SMELLS, TASTES, FEELS. The welcome letter on the top of the packet warned, in three different ways, that romantic relationships between employees were strongly discouraged and must be reported immediately.

Conjuring florid sentences to lure London bankers and Manhattan lawyers away from their luxury homes to the greater comforts of luxury hotels comes easily to me. I grew up around those people. At my desk at work, I have filled the welcome mug with adjectives scribbled on scraps of paper: *isolated*, *secluded*, *pristine*, *untouched*, *gleaming*, *wild*, *cinematic*, *sparkling*, *glorious*, *rugged*, *unblemished*, *spotless*, *deserted*, *spell-*

binding, *magical*, *crystalline*, *tranquil*. For each photograph, I pluck out three at random and arrange them into clichés. I spend my days writing sentences like: *With pristine sand and spellbinding blue water, this cinematic beach is worth the hike.*

In my second week at work, I made the mistake of writing about some fishermen in Goa. A few minutes after I submitted the copy, I was summoned to my editor's office, where I was swiftly set straight. *We go on holiday to escape people*, he informed me.

I did not repeat my mistake, but in the past few months, I've started writing alternate copy about each destination that makes the weekly Top Five list. I scour the internet for photographs for these B-sides—a young boy working at a construction site in Sri Lanka (*Top Five Eco-Resorts in South Asia*), an old lady butchering chickens in the Philippines (*Top Five Wreck Diving Sites in the World*), a group of teenage sex workers dancing at a bar in Mexico (*Top Five Quick Getaways from New York City*): *In a bar crowded with American tourists downing tequila shots, girls in halter tops and heels move to the music as they wait to be selected*. I print these photographs on the color printer, staple them to my typed-up paragraph, and hide them in my desk drawer. When I do this, I think: SIGHTS, SOUNDS, SMELLS, TASTES, FEELS. The calloused hands of working children, the sound of clinking of beer bottles and drunken

laughter, the sweet saltiness of grilled marinated chicken, the thick stretches of plastic bottles floating in the ocean.

A fourth email arrives. The subject line reads: *Top Five Beaches in Africa*. I open it and see that there are five attachments and a single line of text in the body this time—*send back by end of day tomorrow*. I wrap myself in a towel and open the email on my laptop. There are five photographs of beaches, each labeled by name and country: Trou aux Biches, Mauritius; Diani Beach, Kenya; Ifaty, Madagascar; Bazaruto, Mozambique; Skeleton Coast, Namibia.

I am not going to the office today—I told my editor that I had a doctor's appointment uptown that would take all afternoon. He wasn't pleased but he gave me permission not to come in as long as I got all my work done from home.

I click the photo of Trou aux Biches so it fills the screen. The sand is a soft ivory, the aquamarine sky outdone by the turquoise water. Empty wooden deck chairs, shaded by huge hot-pink umbrellas, lie in front of a row of palm trees. There isn't a human or an animal in sight. From Wikipedia, I learn that the town began as a fishing village in the nineteenth century;

that the beach was named the World's Leading Beach Destination at the World Travel Awards last year; that it is the most famous beach in the country for sunset watching. This last assertion has not been verified; it has no citations.

I flip to a booking website to read reviews of the nearby hotels, which are either ecstatic or scathing: *Simply paradise. Appalling service! Incredible staff who all knew us by name. Moldy rooms. Slice of heaven!!* I abandon a review about an English couple's unsatisfying honeymoon at a five-star golf resort and start reading an article about the island's flora and fauna.

Mauritius was once the only home of the dodo. When Dutch sailors first sighted the birds at the end of the sixteenth century, they showed no fear of humans. Their fearlessness made them easy targets; I can't imagine their flightlessness helped. Some sailors complained about the taste. Nevertheless, the last sightings of the dodo came less than one hundred years later.

I open the Notes application in my phone and start writing: *Located in the district of Pamplemousse, Trou aux Biches is the most spectacular beach in Mauritius. Come for the blissful afternoon swims, stay for the breathtaking sunsets.* I flick through photos of a temple online until I'm ready for my next sentence: *Take a break from the sheltered stretches of pristine ivory sand and turquoise water to visit the island's largest Hindu temple, built in 1888.*

Soon, I'm on a roll; I don't even need my mug. Diani: *breathtaking*, *flawless*, *sparkling*. Bazaruto Island: *pristine*, *magical*, *gleaming*. Ifaty: *wild*, *tranquil*, *astonishing*. I write the paragraphs for the first four beaches in twenty minutes, but none of the usual adjectives capture the terrifying beauty of the Skeleton Coast. I open a new tab and read more. The stretch of Namibian coastline where the rough swell of the Benguela Current meets the desolate Namib desert was named by an Englishman documenting a famous shipwreck. The remains of whales, seals, and more than a thousand ships are scattered across the sand. San people, indigenous hunter-gatherers of southern Africa, called this area the Land God Made in Anger; Portuguese soldiers called it the Gates of Hell. Today, the gates to the Skeleton Coast National Park are decorated with painted skulls and real whale bones. This is not a beach for the readers of *Cortés*.

Once I am dressed, I pick two small chilis from the plant and carefully wrap them in a piece of tissue paper. I put them in my coat pocket and leave for the day.