Conch Tongue

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I GRAB UP MY MICROPHONE and stroll to the front of the tour bus. The clicking cameras turn from the shanties out the window and aim at me. I tear a giant smile into my face, and one camera blinks. Nothing much to see yet. I'm just the guide, another dark woman wearing a collar and nametag. They smatter sun block on their husbands, on their wives. The bus smells like coconuts and sweat. A middle-aged couple in matching yellow Hawaiian shirts clutch their fanny packs and quiz each other with a laminated exchange rate chart. When I get to the front, the youngest couple—twenty-year-old babies and honeymooning and pretty as a pair of polished stones—tug my shirt hem, whisper-ask where they can score the ganja. I spread that smile bigger, keep moving, snap on the mike.

It's time to sing. I swallow a breath and belt out Belafonte's "Day-O." The pasty legs uncross and start tapping. Now it's time to teach their version of our language. I chant: "No problem" and "Mon" and "Irie." They shoot it all back in pinched American syllables. We put it all together: "No problem, Mon. We feelin' irie." The bus rings with hard Rs and squeaky vowels. Now they know everything, and all the pink lips smile. The cameras flash free. I'm finally fit for a picture. I'm their Jamaica. They can print me on a four-by-six glossy and fold me into their wallets.

I've been running tour buses for three years now. Sunny Side Hotels promoted me from maid service when they heard me smooth-talking the guests. They said they liked my voice, my people skills, but it's mostly because I'm

a woman, youngish and half-pretty, short and skinny, one of the few dark-skinned workers the Americans don't fear. They ask me for everything: directions, drugs, towels, where to get the best jerk chicken, where to get one of those coconuts they can drink out of, where the jellyfish swim. I am the ambassador and the money's good.

After the bus tours, I'm done for the day. But a few months ago Busha Paul ordered me into his office. If we called him Busha to his face, he'd stomp around, lecture how lucky we have it, how free we are. He wants us to call him just Paul—just everybody's friend Paul.

Busha Paul assigned me the Trumans. Big-deal guests. Busha Paul already swept the maids into a tizzy for them, changing the Royal suite sheets three times over. I find the couple sweating through their khakis in line at the front desk. They look in their thirties, have hair so blond it looks like spider webs. I worry about their scalps sizzling. But I can't stop the sun.

I snatch them from the line, palm their bony shoulders, try to ease them toward the beach sunset. I'll handle check-in. Big-deal guests don't wait, don't sweat. Not with me. Everything's easy. Trust me.

Busha Paul says they own this online dating service, Soul-Matrix. First time to Jamaica, but if things work out they'll sell honeymoons at our hotel for their matched soul-mates. Busha Paul says I'm to show them paradise, and if I do, if it all works out, the hotel will send their contractors to my house, fix it up perfect. A sheetrocked room for my sons Desmond and Isaiah. Patch the leaky roof. Maybe an air-conditioner for Grandmama Adina. No way I could ever fix it up on my own. A house that looks like a real house for my real family—that's a dream you don't want to wake from ever.

The government gave me this house of cracked mortar and frayed wires. It beats the shanties. No one is homeless in Jamaica. But no one's home is right. I'll never catch up to patch the leak dripping on Isaiah's forehead when he snores at night. Grandmama Adina's window is a gaping hole, and she wears a bug net that makes her look like a duppy bride. Not homeless, though. Oh no.

The Trumans hesitate to leave the check-in line, to leave their luggage with one of us dark strangers. So I slap leis over their necks, kiss their cheeks, send a pretty little waitress with big cups of pina coladas. They shuffle off to the beach, and I hurry to their room, double-check the bedding, direct the porter and shoo him out, fluff the hyacinths. A little blue-tailed skink hangs from their curtains,

and I slap him down to the tiles. I kick at him, try to urge him to the door, but he scurries under the bed, disappears. And I say, Okay, little man, you can stay. You watch over these big-deal sweeties from down there. I pray he'll stay hidden in the mattress springs.

When I get to the beach, the Trumans are wading into the ocean, khakis rolled to their bony kneecaps. The sun boils purple into the ocean, and it feels good and strong against my cheeks, like Grandmama's hand before it got all shaky. I can even hear the ocean-dipped sun simmer. But I know suns don't simmer. That's not real. Simmer like a hiss like a water snake. Not really a snake but just as bad. Uncle Alton's bald head rises from the ocean. His tobacco-stained cotton-ball beard emerges dripping. He's whisper-hissing to the Trumans, waving them out, coaxing them with his pearly too-big dentures. The black iron fences surrounding the hotel compound keep men like Alton out—shell hawkers, ganja-pushers, renegade hair braiders—but we can only keep the higglers so far. Nobody owns the ocean, so Alton's free to sell to anyone swimming his way.

Anyone but the Trumans. They aren't needing to meet sneaky-snaky old Uncle Alton.

I run to the beach, kicking fans of sand that fill my sneakers. The purple sun melts fiery on my neck. I stomp into the water, mud squishing in my shoes. I tap Mrs. Truman on the shoulder.

"Your room all ready, honey. Why don't you come inside to rest them tired traveling bones," I say, sweeter than syrup.

Uncle Alton's head dips back under the water, so just his yellow eyes watch me. The Trumans nod at each other and turn my way. I've saved them, won them. But Alton resurfaces, fist first, clutching a big conch shell.

"'Mericans! 'Im looka dis way see da magic shell I finding jus' fe you." Alton lifts the conch higher, as if he were a Sunny Side waiter serving filet mignon. "Pretty shell fe dis pretty white lady."

Mr. Truman wades toward Alton. His fingers skim the calm water, as if it were a bubble he might pop. Mrs. Truman sways next to me. Her plastic cup makes a popping sound.

"They aren't wanting your dirty old shells, Alton," I say. "They got a nice room waiting."

"Dis no dirty ol' shell." Alton flicks a tangle of seaweed off the conch. "Dis magic shell. Keep da secrets of Jamaica insi'. Whispa fe 'im de waves and san' and good people 'ere."

"Only thing that stinky shell keeping is a squirmy-germy mussel or something like that," I say. "They don't need your shell, unless they're wanting soup. And we have five-star chefs that can do much better for you, Mrs. Truman dear."

Mr. Truman wades to his waist, a couple yards from Alton. He wrestles his T-shirt over his shoulders and tosses it to Mrs. Truman with a smile. The water sparkles off his bleach-white chest. "How much?"

"'Im wise one 'ere. Wise mon wan' da secrets." Alton dips the shell back under the ocean. "Ten dollas 'Merican and be yours."

Just when I'm certain the Trumans are smart enough not to have money on them, Mrs. Truman produces a fold of dollars from between her breasts. She peels off a ten-dollar bill and waves it high above her head, shouts, "He said ten American dollars."

By how proud and loud Mrs. Truman says the amount, I'm pretty sure these are the first words of Alton's she's understood. He's a dirty patois speaker, like Desmond's picking up, my oldest, though he's still just a pickney. Alton speaks low and fast like machine gun fire through a pillow. No guest understands that rumble or wants to hear it. But Mrs. Truman is all smiley and money-waving now that she understood something. Price. Dollars. American cash. Everyone everywhere knows the words to that song.

Mr. Truman swishes to her and takes the bill from her fingertips, pecks her on the lips. "I bet I can get it for five. Want to see me haggle, baby?"

"Just give him ten," she says. "Look how much he needs the money. What would you do if our clients started haggling?"

"It's different commerce here. They expect it. The price he says isn't what he means."

She shakes her head until he clutches her chin and kisses her again. "Whatever you want, my love."

I'm soaking in sea brine, and all I can imagine is the pink mussel in the conch wrestling out like a swollen tongue in their luggage, sliming all over Mrs. Truman's lacy lingerie, Mr. Truman's satin ties. Then him storming into Busha Paul's office. My walls at home crumbling, a mouth erupting in the ceiling to dump water onto Isaiah's head.

"The lady says full price, my friend." Mr. Truman stretches the folded bill toward Alton, but Alton doesn't move. His woolly white beard bobs on the water.

"'Otel say no. You come fe Alton so Babylon no come fe me."

Mr. Truman stands there smiling, gives the bill a little flap. We could wait all night until the tide swoops over our noses. I want the Trumans sleeping in soft beds and I want to read my boys a story before they fall asleep. I grab the ten-bill from Mr. Truman and slosh out to Alton, up to my neck. I pass him the money, but before he gives me the shell he holds my wrist, winks. I shake free and trudge back to the Trumans. Mrs. Truman puts the conch to her lips and blows. Nothing comes out but a squish. Mr. Truman pulls a wadded ten from his shorts and offers it to me. We don't take tips, can't take tips, and I tell him. He stares at the drenched uniform clinging to my body. I might as well be talking Alton's garbled tongue. Who don't want American money? I don't, but it's easier the other way. I take it, and finally the Trumans go to their room.

The next morning, no bus for us. The hotel rents a private car, shiny and black and not a single dent. I ride up front next to the driver, the Trumans our precious cargo. They wear skin-tight short shorts and tank tops. I don't smell any coconut sunscreen, and I worry for their ghost-pale skin. We drive past the shanties, and I pour them drinks, sing them the tour-bus songs. They go zip-lining at Big Timba, and the trees and rivers blur under them like a pretty painting. I usually tell my tours about the ackee, Grandpa-tales about The Great River, but the Trumans push more sweaty dollar bills my way every time I start one of my speeches. I stop trying to talk.

The best part of the zip-line tour is the fences. Like the hotel, except these fences are taller, block out all the best parts of the forest. No ocean for the Altons to spill in from. Hundreds of acres of trees, and way up on the lines the Trumans can't spot a single shanty. The holes in my roof would look like pinpricks from here.

After the zip-line, the Trumans push dollars into the workers' palms. They swarm to unlatch the Trumans' lanyards, offer hands to guide them over rocks and back to the car. I hold the door open, and the Trumans try to push money at me. I pretend I don't see, don't say anything, but Mr. Truman stands there smiling until I take his bills.

On the way back to the hotel, the Trumans' eyelids dip heavy. Mr. Truman's head lolls onto Mrs. Truman's fire-kissed shoulder. He murmurs, "Paradise, baby." And I wish he'd say it again. Again and again to Busha Paul, and then maybe my boys and Grandmama Adina. I'll fold his words, stash them in my pocket and pull them out whenever the rain drip-drips through the roof. But there's no room in my pocket. It bulges with American dollars.

Busha Paul snatches me away from the Trumans when we return to Sunny Side. Busha Paul is a ball of muscle. He wears shorts, shows off his calves that look like fists trying to punch through his skin. His mustache pulses when he asks about the Trumans, when he asks if everything is perfect.

"Mr. Truman says it's paradise," I tell him. I slip my fingers into my pockets and yank them away when the dollars crinkle.

"They met Uncle Alton." He stretches his right foot to his hip, balances on the other. "That's no good, girl. We want them with our people. Our best people."

"Which ones are ours?" The zip-line crew, the car driver, the girls selling polished conches at the gift shop instead of live ones from the sea? They're all wanting what Alton wants. Only difference is names scribbled on forms somewhere in Paul's filing cabinets.

He drops his right foot and stomps on the tile. "You know what I mean. The ones that sound right."

"I hear you, Paul."

"Good. Because we need the Trumans, which means you need the Trumans."

His thumb and index finger press his mustache, and I wonder if the pink mussel that was in the conch has oozed out in the Trumans' hotel room yet. "Who are they with now?"

"Not me. I'm talking to you."

So Busha Paul pushes me out his door, into the lobby, and the Trumans are somewhere, pushing dollars into tired hands, forcing smiles on some bartender who's worrying about getting fired, trying to push the money back and explain the gratuity policy the Trumans refuse to hear.

I wander the bars, and no Trumans among all the sun-burned shoulders and Hawaiian shirts. Not at the jerk hut and not along the beach. I scour the resort until the sun's almost gone, just a slit over the water, and Grandmama Adina

will be fretting over some rice about now, my boys shoving through the front door from whatever trouble they've been into.

Out on the dock, I spot a mess of pink skin glowing against the dusk. Mr. Truman has stripped to red Speedos and black water shoes, the Mrs. in a string bikini. Their near-white hair flaps in the night-promising breeze. Mr. Truman is bent over, smiling at something below him in the darkening water. Mrs. Truman sits on the dock, stretching her hand to the sea. On both their backs, I see the outline of tank tops, where pink arms meet pale, untouched skin. Every time I see them, more of their skin has been claimed by our sun, but they always seem to stow a little whiteness away. I can't see what they watch in the water, though. I'm too far and it's getting too dark to know anything. The moon's no help, just a straining sliver.

When I step onto the dock boards, I feel a punch in my belly. I sense him—Uncle Alton again, creep-creeping around too close to the beach. I should go back to Busha Paul, have him call the police, teach Alton a hard lesson. I tap across the dock, listen for the low spitting bullets of Alton's nocturnal sales pitch.

"Not jus' pretty beads, dese amagic. Made of dem dreams an' wants of all Jamaicans."

He's running through his romantic dream lines again. Every piece of rubbish Alton finds stores some secret power of Jamaica. Tonight, he's close enough to shore to stand, and over his bony shoulders his skeleton fingers grip and shake the necklaces around his neck. I'm so used to seeing only his head and his white beard that I'm surprised to see a body of twigs. So skinny, I wonder how he keeps going. His flicking tongue and giant dentures are the thickest parts of his body.

"Don't you love the way he talks, Toby," Mrs. Truman says. "We should have him get a drink with us."

"How about it, friend?" Mr. Truman says. He pulls a few dollars from inside his Speedos, and I'm surprised he can fit anything else in the fabric stretched tight over his crotch. "You look like you might want a drink and a bite to eat."

Alton scratches a long fingernail against his dentures. "Fe dem beads?"

"We want you to have a drink with us," Mr. Truman says again slowly, like he's talking to a toddler. "Maybe we'll find him a date, a soul mate. We're pretty good at that, right, babe."

"Me sell beads, but cawn nyam wid yu." Alton pulls the necklaces off his neck and holds them out to Mr. Truman. "'No wan' banggarang fe ca'ar-go-bring-come lakka me."

"He wants to, right?" Mr. Truman looks my way, smiles. He aims the money at me. "You could join us, too. You're both our friends here now."

I take the money, just like Alton would. But my pockets are so stuffed it won't fit. "We're not really supposed to do that, sir, Mr. Truman." I wad the bill into a little ball about the size of one of the beads on Alton's necklace.

"Yu 'av' a twang dem get. Fe me dey sayin', 'No send, mon.'" Alton strips the necklaces from his neck, hands them over. "Tell dem ginnals me no mawga dawg. Tell dem I jus' sellin', not beggin'."

I hold the Trumans' money and Alton's necklaces. They're made of coffee beans and watermelon seeds needled through nylon. I've seen thousands of these. I'm holding everything, but no one will get what they want. Maybe Alton, if I decide to toss this tiny ball of dollars, and then he'll take the Trumans' wadded crotch money and let the sea wash away their sweat as he wanders down the shoreline. He'll drag his bones for a mile until he reaches land not owned by one hotel or another, where he can step to the sand and not worry about trespassing. If I could, I'd follow him to that no-place free beach. I'd slip into the night and forget about the Trumans waiting at the bar for me to speak without my twang. But I can't. I must join them while Busha Paul watches and the bartender pours me a drink that I won't drink. They'll talk and I won't talk about my boys and Adina. The Trumans don't need to know about Alton's callused feet or my drip-drip roof. And once they get home, open their luggage, the seeds and beans will have broken from the string. The conch's tongue will be all dried up and dead.