



Combatives

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LEAST INHABITED ISLAND II

by *Leigh Stein*

WHEN THE TIME COMES, AND IT'S COMING

When I said, I'm moving to the desert to write a book,
I meant, I'm moving to the desert so things will happen to me,
bad things mostly, and then, just as Werner Herzog can
make a movie about making a movie about a giant boat
atop a hill, I can write a book about writing a book
about a giant boat atop a hill. The first book will be called
Least Inhabited Island. The second book will be called
Least Inhabited Island II. Thanks to Kindle, readers
will feel like they are actually there with me.

When I see three prairie dogs alongside the road,
readers will see them, too, except more vividly, which
may frighten new Kindle users, but by the time
I'm at the balloon fiesta, and we're all in the grass together,
no one will feel frightened; we'll all be in awe
of the majestic flight of rainbows; how safe
they look once launched. And on my national book tour
when asked, How did you come up with that ending?,
How did the character end up back home, opening
the front door to those two women and that baby?,
I'll say, I'll tell you something, Charlie. I can't
speak for everyone, but I can speak for someone
who has been defeated and confused, who ends
up in her childhood bedroom and one Saturday
morning has to answer a knock at the door
because someone has come to take her away
to the Kingdom of God. Charlie, I'll say,
I've said it before and I'll say it again:
the book has sixteen different endings
because that's how many we'd all want
if we had it our way: to be taken,
to stay, to slam doors, to fall to our knees,

to practice our assertiveness training
on someone who's weak, and to
stand still in the doorway until
the spirit moves us otherwise. I can't imagine
I'm the only one here tonight who's waiting
for the skies to darken, for the rivers
to turn to blood. When the time comes
for them to enslave an ethnic minority
and build new monuments in the desert,
I'll make my final decision
on what God is and where He lives.

**A CHRISTMAS CAROL: THE NEW MUSICAL
STARRING CHRISTINA APPLGATE**

I was going to buy my niece My Girlfriend Just Loves to Fight
Barbie for Christmas, but my sister said she already has that one.

She has New Mexico Meth Addict Midge, too.

Why don't you just get her day of the week underwear?,
my sister said, and I was all, I don't think you can give

underwear at Christmas anymore without everyone thinking

you're sexually deviant. That's true, she said. And I don't
even know if I'll get to come visit you guys, I said, because

I still have to ask my parole officer if I can leave the state.

After I hung up the phone I went through all my boyfriend's
socks and threw away the ones without matches. He

was at work. He'd never know I'd done it. Then

I took some quarters out of the jar of change
we're saving to eventually move out of the desert

and walked to Walgreens to buy a pregnancy test.

Some day I'll look back on this time in my life
and invent a completely different story.

Some day I'll look back on this time in my life
and I will feel as if I am looking back at a time
in my life when I knew I would one day look back
at it. When my boyfriend called my cell phone
and said, Hey, what are you doing?, I lied.
I said I was on an airplane. He freaked out.
Stop freaking out, I said. I'm at Walgreens,
buying a pregnancy test. For your niece?,
he said. And then we lost the connection.

Some day I'll look back on this time in my life
and only remember one night, tonight, the night
my boyfriend came home with a box of wine
and a miniature schnauzer and for a few hours
we forgot we didn't have health insurance or
a car with a functioning clutch. Some day
I'll look back and think, I wish I was as happy
now as I was then, when I hopped fences
and lived in a state where I had no friends,
when I got pregnant and we stopped having sex.

MYSTERY AT THE LAKE

The first rule of conflict avoidance is
don't go to the lake with ten members
of your family and high expectations.

Only one of us saw Louise leave the group.

Wisconsin isn't any more or less beautiful
than elsewhere, but there's something
about being from somewhere that draws

a person back to a place they would otherwise

never visit; this also means said person's
children are required to go until they are old
and smart enough to make other plans. Louise

said she just wanted to stop for an ice cream.

But Louise had also made a comment, the night
before, to the effect of that she wouldn't
be surprised if a deer ran into the path of her car.

In the aftermath, we talked about it.

We talked about why the Germans settled
here: the trees. We learned the definition
of polecat, and then forgot it. We didn't

think it made an awful lot of sense for you

to lock the door at night, thinking
how would Louise get back in?, but
you appeared equally concerned another

one of us would leave. We were all

old enough to handle a deadbolt that
summer, but with Louise gone we were
careful about the jokes we made and

for the next six months we didn't watch
any domestic dramas on DVD. Only
one of us saw Louise leave the group,

and I wasn't what you'd call a suspect, but

I was what you'd call responsible,

since I didn't take hold of her arm,
tell her we were all just as unhappy
as she was, so why not stay.

After she disappeared the newspapers said

someone who knew a lot about Anthrax
may have killed himself because he was involved
with something having to do with Anthrax.

The newspapers said Americans were refusing

free upgrades from rental car companies.
It had something to do with the war.
I looked for a secret message from Louise,

something like, I haven't killed myself,

I'm OK, I take the best car there is, but
meanwhile we got the mail with gloves on,
in case a Hallmark card came, a deadly one.

UPON THE ONE YEAR ANNIVERSARY OF OUR DEPARTURE

What we thought things would be like before they happened. Mainly, that the entire state would resemble the stretch of highway between Tularosa and Alamogordo: golden and desolate, the perfect place to crash an airplane if you didn't want to be found, and we didn't. For months, we talked about joining Costco, but I think we both knew our relationship wouldn't last the winter, and if you ever want to really surprise your parents, don't join Costco. Take up cigars, get arrested for enabling underage drinking, convert to Catholicism, the sooner the better: the older you become, the harder it is to run away. Running away begins to look legitimate, like moving. You will have to invent wilder and wilder circumstances. Maybe your job becomes too much, so you leave a sticky note on your desk and take the emergency exit stairs. The alarm will sound, the police will come, but once you're on the street you can run and no one will be able to find you because you are living in your fourth apartment in three months and your drivers license still says 323 N Charlotte Street. This number, this cardinal direction, this woman's name will hold you emotionally hostage for years. Every time you find an old letter from your Belgian pen pal, you will wonder if it was your fault that you lost touch. What we thought things would be like before they happened: that you would take my hand in Vegas and lead me to a chapel in the smallest hours of morning, that the road through the Hoover Dam would be our honeymoon, and the state of Arizona a bright indication of some future, any really. Mainly, that we would never end up like your father,

beholden to his fourth marriage and the third colonial-style house
in the cul de sac. You thought you could call me up
one day to say, Guess who's your new intern,
and I'd go outside to find you on the concrete stoop, but
I have to admit most days I'm glad to have all these miles,
even if it means no more barbecues on the patio, interrupted
only by monsoons and our neighbor Jeff, offering us cocaine;
even if it means that now at night there is no one
to make me believe in creatures I have never seen.

THANK YOU FOR COMING AND I APOLOGIZE FOR THE BEDBUGS

I can't wait to see this film you mentioned and then feel bad about myself for not understanding it, the woman said, as a joke,

to a room full of part-time art handlers and their part-time

girlfriends, but no one laughed. You have to see it in the theater, someone told her, and it hasn't played in like twenty-two

years, so good luck. The accordionist across the street

was playing the only song he knew, the moon hung low above the button factory, if the woman's anxiety level had been

any higher it would have been considered a national security threat

by the Defense Department. And by woman I mean Jessica Alba. And by moon I mean Roe v. Wade.

All the stars are aligned for tonight's coming attraction.

All the stars have their answers ready for the Q & A. You might think that miscarrying a baby at twenty-

three would save a lot of money. You might think that,

but ask Jessica Alba, and she'll tell you she knew someone who knew someone who had a cousin

who rented a truck and moved to Albuquerque for six months,

thinking there she could really disappear from her familiars, but instead she carried the pregnancy to term and now she just lives

in the desert. In the desert the strip mall miles are interrupted only

by the mountains where the government hides their missiles.
When the world ends, Albuquerque will gladly be the first to go.

When the world ends, Jessica Alba will probably be dangling

like a gold earring in front of a green screen, pretending
to fly between tall buildings on some gruesome night,

much like this one, much like tonight, where all you can think

about is what he said to you last October, when the two of you
sat as close as motherless children in the damp dawn grass,

waiting for the balloons to launch. He said, Let's just be

in an open relationship for now, but in six years I'll marry
you to death, and you wondered if that was worth waiting six years

for. And now you'll never know. All the stars were right.

The rapture is coming and it won't be in any form we recognize.
It'll be kind of like a free stress test, and kind of like el chupacabra.

If you're someone who thinks that miscarrying at twenty-three

would save anybody anything, then you have probably never
felt this deep regret, this unquiet, uncertain longing.

CLOSE YET FAR OUT FEELING

A few of us decided to get together and start a war.
Julian brought the beard, the state of Oregon, and Camille,
someone we'd never met but took on his good word.

(He said she could bake. Super, we said, in French,
just in case the place was bugged, we need someone
like that.) I brought Brooklyn, allergy medication,

and the new Babysitters Club graphic novels for
our bunker. Our future bunker. I knew everyone
would thank me mid-winter, after we'd all finished

the single copy of Lolita, the book about the guy
who read the entire encyclopedia, and
my epic novel. But wait, Hattie said,

wearing all her scarves beneath her clothes,
if Julian gets to bring Camille do I get to bring
the foreign exchange student? Is she useful,

I said. She's good at skiing, Hattie said.
Okay, but take off all those scarves. The reason
Anne Frank had to do that was because

of Nazis. We walked six miles to the crest
of the land and laid out our provisions.
Below us, a thin river wove its way

through the canyon like smoke from a match
in the hands of someone who has no intention
of starting a fire. Before any of us could get homesick

we pitched a tent to go home to. And
along our march a heel had broken
off Talia's leather boot, so Camille

suggested we boil it and eat it
as part of basic training.
I don't have to tell you it made us wonder

whose side she was really on.
I love the air here, someone said.
The air here's great. But then we were out

of safe things to say. Time to go,
I said, try to look more ferocious. And
as I put on my boots I welcomed them to Narnia.

ELEGY FOR GASOLINE

Now all the wild are idle. Without our cars we quit
our jobs and buy farms we're unskilled to manage,
trade our farms for a lifetime supply of survival guides,
and move into pop-up campers at the edge of deserted
racetracks. There are hundreds of us. We paint our faces.
On Sundays we leave at dawn, you and I, hike to the mountains,
and reminisce about the time we drove to Joplin, Missouri
like there was something there worth crossing Oklahoma
for. For all our children know, there was. For all
we know, our children know everything, including
how to build a ship inside a bottle and sail
to Care Paravel. Give me a five-letter word
for lion and I will give you the reason I came
here tonight, not to number the stars and say
I'm glad I never have to live through that again,
but isn't it surprising how the things we say
we'll never miss are the things that are most
worth missing? Roadside jewelry depots,
an expanse of white sand, our neighbor
Ken hitting his wife a little and then
coming over to borrow twenty bucks and
ask if we want to fly kites with his kids.
In Joplin, Missouri we stayed at a Microtel.
We brought our own pillowcases.
It was supposed to be our last night ever
together, and I wanted you to do something
about that, but when you didn't I decided I could
just hold it against you for the next six hundred miles.

When we tell our children the story of our lives,
we will have to explain what made us fall in love,
quit our jobs, and spend thousands of dollars
renting a twenty-two foot truck so we could drive
everything we owned to a city we'd never seen.
We will have to explain gasoline. I say children
because we'll have to have at least two, maybe three,
in case one is ever taken from us in the night
while we're out fighting the new war.

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