

island



A Vacation on the Island of Ex-Boyfriends

In three days we have played, cried, ran, fought, laughed, danced, and built fires with them all—every man we've ever wanted. We're exhausted.

The day the ferry left us at this so-called paradise, it looked deserted, until we saw them, lined up on the beach in chronological order. Holy fuck, we said, at the same time. What the hell, we said. Tammi laughed. I didn't. I caught my breath and said, Can I vote them off, one at a time?

Why would you want to do a thing like that? Tammi said, smiling, giving her exes a Miss America wave. They waved back, in sync like line dancers, tanned, goober smiles and wide eyes. Mine looked down at their feet, kicked at the sand. Some whispered hellos. It's going to be a long day, I said. And all this time, I thought we were traveling to Nantucket.

We have to build huts for you, Ben Wexley reported. He held up a copy of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Thatched Hut Construction*. Ben had spent time on the island before—a lot of women called him ex. At Colgate, we'd called him Tammi's

Hunk of Burning Love.

Thanks, we'll build our own, I said.

Don't be ridiculous, Tammi said. Ben smiled.

Let them do it. She winked. Island rules.

So Tammi's ex-boyfriends fell over themselves that first day, flexing muscles, calling her name, fighting for attention, striving to give her shelter. Mine went about the task at a more normal pace, some of them humming, most with their eyes closed. Tammi's hut was going to look like something from a travel brochure for the Four Seasons Maldives. Mine was going to look like a Cub Scout troop experiment.

Are you sure you didn't know about this? I asked her then. An unusually cruel joke, if you did. *Helloooo*, she said, if I had known, don't you think we would have had our roots done?

At the end of that first day I see Michael and I can't believe it. He's on the beach, staring at his feet, watching sand sift between his toes. He hadn't been in the line-up when we arrived.

I march over to him, lift his chin with my forefinger. What are you doing here? His eyes sparkle. Damn his sparkling eyes. You're not an ex-boyfriend, I remind him.

Well, he says, according to the rules of the island, I am. They think I got to you, confused you. That counts.

You didn't get to me, I say. You didn't. Not at all.

Obviously I did, Michael says, a little too smug. Or I wouldn't be here.

Who makes these rules?

I'm not exactly sure, he says, reaching for my hand. According to the ferry operator, what you and I had was called *an emotional affair*.

Well, I say, pulling away. That's wrong. It was just a thing.

Yeah, a thing, he says. A total thing.

He stares and I lighten a little. He has big eyes, green

lakes. I look into them too long. It's like he's trying to hold me there, which makes me nervous.

Six months ago, the morning after I slept with Michael, I called Tammi at work. I shouldn't have had those after dinner drinks, I told her. I felt too emotional with him, too attached. He must have thought it was really freaky.

Don't worry about a thing, Tammi advised me. Guys love freaky chicks.

Later in the week, Tammi and I skip the beach and go hiking in the woods. We're still arguing about how we got here. We're never using your travel agent again, I tell her. We push foliage gently aside as we go. Our boots crunch against the path.

The hiking trail narrows so I walk ahead, palming birch barks for balance. The damp smell of moss surrounds us. It's so quiet back here, I say, so great and green.

Tammi sighs. I think she misses them, those past boys on the present beach.

Our path widens a little. We hear walking, crackling leaves up ahead.

I look hard at Tammi. Is that someone looking for you?

I didn't plan a rendezvous back here, she says. I swear. Everyone I've ever, you know, is back at the beach.

The boyfriends are at the ocean, doing the same things they've been doing for days: Tammi's hoot and cheer. They're hot, shellacked in sweat, ready to jump deep into volleyball competition. Mine sit alone on bamboo mats, scattered and silent, reading and scratching their heads. Jacob and Emil, drunk, play cards and sing fraternity songs. Timothy grips his race form, bitches about his bookie. Johnny, stoned, stands in the waves, twirling a basketball on his finger.

Really, Tammi and I only needed one hut. We leave the nightly beach parties together, a bottle of red wine in tow, and talk in one of our huts until we fall asleep. We're amused by the idea that exes out looking for one of us may find an empty hut and think we're hooking up with another ex. And if they spy us in a hut together, drinking wine while snuggled into a sleeping bag, they might wonder if we really like men at all.

Of course, every night we're talking about them. I tell Tammi that some of my exes said *rubbers* and some said *condoms*. I tended to fall harder for the ones who said *condoms*.

A quick glimpse into my chronology: Kyle was high school in Boston—two years of puppy love until the dog fell for my sister. Mitch replaced Kyle and knew a lot more. Geoff was my first college boyfriend. He washed, ironed, and lavender-misted his sheets everyday—the only guy in a Colgate dorm who owned an ironing board.

Eric studied on an ROTC scholarship—my *Officer and a Gentleman* fantasy. Johnny smoked too much, said he loved me nearly as much as weed and 'shrooms. Jacob couldn't keep it up, but could—it turned out—play naked Twister with my roommate while I took exams.

James. Well, for a long time, I was obsessed.

Emil insisted we learn golf together. He was so bad that I'd whiff the ball just to make him feel better. Then he tried cooking classes. Everything he served our friends left them in gas pain.

Marcel had two million frequent flyer miles. He said, Let's go to Australia. I said, Let's start slow. So we went to New York. After MOMA, the Met, and the Guggenheim, he stopped in Central Park, took a deep breath and said, *I like art*.

And? I said.

Huh? he said.

That's it, I said, you like art? We've spent an entire weekend viewing all kinds of exhibitions and all you have to say is, *I like art*?

Yep, he said. That's it. And it was.

Laurence and Brad were one-night stands that lingered for weeks. Timothy wanted to plan our wedding on the third date. You don't even know me, I said. He screwed up his face then, as if I'd said something out of context. Kevin always wanted us to spend weekends with his relatives Chicago. Eventually I snapped out of my lust-haze and dumped him two blocks north of Division Street.

Max didn't enjoy sex unless I agreed to keep repeating after him, Whose dick is this? Whose dick is this? I made the mistake of complaining to Tammi and her then-boyfriend, Rico. All through dinner that night, Tammi and Rico kept saying, Whose fork is this? Whose bread is this? Excuse me, whose wine glass is this?

Samuel stormed out of Einstein's Bagels one day, said, Anna, the hard truth is, you're never going to be a Libertarian. Glen wore turtlenecks and started our first two dates with a detailed defense of his decision to remain uncircumcised. I woke one morning to Anton shaking his head, holding a tape measure over my face, measuring the length and width of my nose, the space between my eyebrows.

On my birthday, Cal asked me what flowers I loved. Lilies, I said, irises, orchids. He gave me alstroemarias. They're so practical, he said. My mom likes them. They're sturdy and plain and can get by on little water.

In the woods, as we get closer to the crackling sounds, we see a man, dark curly hair, a moustache. He waits for us to catch up. It's Anna, right? he says, when we're face-to-face. Do you remember me? he asks, quiet-voiced, and it takes me a minute.

David? Oh my God, I say. He's Megan's, I tell Tammi.

David used to be engaged to Megan. He moved out of her house without a word, left behind his clothes and a note that

said he wasn't what she needed.

Where is she? I demand. I know she doesn't want to see him.

I step closer to Tammi and out of the path of a darting dragonfly.

I don't know, David says. But we're waiting. We're ready to build her hut.

And out of the trees walk Al, Carson, Jack, and Bo, each taller than I would have imagined. Al carries lumber. Carson wears a set of red curtains over his shoulder. Bo has a rifle. Jack has killed a deer.

Wow, Tammi says, puffing out her lower lip. Then she remembers about Megan.

Megan's boyfriends were so maddening that she wrote tell-all songs about them. Two of her three albums immediately hit the Top Ten. She's dating women now and happy enough that she hasn't recorded an album in years, but the old ones keep selling. Everyone loves a break-up song.

Hey, Tammi says, Megan's ex-boyfriends are hunters!

Well, most of them, Carson says, fingering the red fabric.

Rays of light sift in through trees. Megan's men look anxious. I turn from them and pull Tammi reverse on the path with me, so fast she misses her chance to smile at them, to Miss America wave. They were great looking, she says.

We should get to the dock, I say, give Megan some warning.

Sure enough, as we arrive at the dock, the ferry chugs into view. The sun disappears behind a cloud. Rain sprinkles on us. As the ferry gets closer, I see Megan on board wearing her backpack. We wave our arms at her. I scream her name as hard as I can.

Anna? she yells back, surprised.

It's the Island of Ex-Boyfriends, I scream. I saw David.

What? she yells. She's leaning over the ferry's railing, trying to hear over the chugging.

David, I scream, but my voice starts to give out.

David is here, Tammi yells. With that Megan drops her pack, runs to the front of the ferry and into the pilothouse. We see her pulling the ferry operator to the bow. Suddenly his body arcs above the railing; he goes head first into the water.

Moments later the ferry makes an about-face, turns with the speed and ease of a Porsche. The operator surfaces, screams *hey, hey*, then swims for our shore.

Thank God, I start to say, then I realize...

We're stuck here, Tammi says, but she fails to sound disappointed. What Megan couldn't have known, what we've only recently figured out—the ferry is the only way off the island. As water swells up around it, the ferry glides toward the horizon.

The rain stops and we walk back to the main beach and round up our boyfriends to tell them this so-called vacation may last a little longer than expected. Some of them don't mind—Rico, in fact, starts jumping up and down—but others look annoyed. Nice move, Anna, Emil says. Mitch, Jacob, Timothy, and Cal screw up their faces.

Ben Wexly looks at the sky, grunts. In all the times he's spent here, nothing like this has ever happened. You're still such a pain in the ass, Tammi tells Ben.

Tammi stands next to me, looks away from the crowd. Her attention divides. She's trying to decide how to get an invitation to Megan's boyfriends. She's planning a barbecue.

Thanks a lot, Johnny whines. He's the most annoyed. We don't have to look at him to know it. He's running low on weed. He coughs, says, That's just great.

Give her a break, Michael says, stepping out of the crowd. This stops everyone.

Tammi nudges me. Michael smiles; walks toward me. His hair has curled more since he has been here. His board shorts are as green as his eyes; his chest is burning.

He reaches for my hand. The other boyfriends look confused. Tammi beams.

I told you guys love freaky chicks, she whispers.

Michael leads me to the quiet part of the beach. We walk in wet sand. My hiking boots leave imprints that waves will fill with water. He squeezes my hand extra hard.

We hear Tammi and the others cheer in the background. Volleyball games continue.

An interesting bunch of guys back there, he says, and raises his left brow. He can't imagine me with any of them. And they all seem like a long time ago, even here.

I'm confused, I tell him. It is so very confusing, I think, traveling this close to his skin.

I hear Tammi's cheer again, and I think hey, she's not playing volleyball—she's cheering for me. We stop walking and Michael faces me. He hasn't shaved. I feel clunky in these hiking shorts, these boots. I have way too much clothing on my body and want it to melt away.

I wonder, he says. His words are more even now, more careful. He smells like Coppertone. What? I ask. My hands are shaking. Why in the world are my hands shaking?

I wonder if we could make it, he whispers.

Ugh. What do you mean? I say. If I'd wanted to speak in riddles for the rest of my life, I could have stayed with Cal or Mitch or Johnny.

The thing is... he begins. He squints his eyes. He puts both hands on my face.

What do you mean exactly? I want to know.

He moves toward me, in that slow way, in that soap opera way I dreamed about as a teenager, the way that says, I'm going to kiss the freaky chick before the next commercial break.

I put my hands on his chest. I don't even think about it—it's automatic. I don't know where my hands are until I feel his heartbeat in my fingers. He turns and points to the horizon. I think we could make it, he whispers. He turns back to me and

moves his lips even closer to mine. I feel his air, his breath.

I think we could make it, he says, with a slow and careful swim.



STACY BIERLEIN is the editor of the award-winning anthology, *A Stranger Among Us: Stories of Cross Cultural Collision and Connection*, and coeditor of *Men Undressed: Women Writers and the Male Sexual Experience*. She is a founding editor of the independent press Other Voices Books, and co-creator of the Morgan Street International Novel Series. Her articles about writing, publishing, and the arts appear on various websites, including TheNervousBreakdown.com. She lives in Southern California.

stacybierlein.com