

IMMERSION PROGRAM

It had been Dean's idea—the pact they made, at journey's outset, to do away with alarm clocks, wristwatches, anything that kept track of time. Dean was a man in his late thirties, in love with the world, who wanted to stop growing older, or at least to stop thinking about it. Jill was a woman in her mid-twenties who wanted to live with no past and no future, neither fear nor regret. She had been intrigued by his suggestion to abandon schedules, as it had seemed wild, dangerous in a frivolous sort of way, and utterly unlike herself—she was someone who, even after a year of living in the Central American rainforest, still made to-do lists. She had leaped upon Dean when he first proposed they disappear together, back in his tiny rented room over a bread bakery in San Miguel. They had made love then, on the maps he spread out across the bed.

Now: Dean is navigating the streets of Puerto Escondido with his camera clicking rapid-fire, stealing private moments from strangers. Jill is lying in a hammock on the balcony of their rented suite, fighting the urge to dig her Timex out from the depths of a backpack. With her cheek pressed into thick rope netting, she imagines his subjects—children laughing in the stream of a garden hose; tree-trimmers cracking open coconuts to drink on the roadside; fishermen sitting on overturned rowboats on the beach, smoking cigarettes.

She won't be able to gauge precisely how long he has been gone—as she doesn't know when he left—but finding her wristwatch might help make sense of the frustration poking with increasing pressure at the center of her chest. Perhaps it's nearing dinnertime. Perhaps she is hungry, and that's all. She hasn't eaten anything since a couple of shrimp quesadillas on Playa Principal, and that seems a long time ago. Now the sun is lower in the sky, the palm tree shadows stretching across the cracked, sandy tar of the road.

Instead of rising, Jill continues to lie with her cheek pressed

against the hammock, her travel journal open to a blank page on the deck wood below her, her one open eye staring out between the balcony railings to the sea. Beyond the frothy breakers on Zicatela, the water is deceptively tranquil, a sheet of blue silk stretched taut to the horizon. On the tourist beach the previous morning, she had been caught off guard and bowled over by a wave that slammed her into the sand with surprising force. Stunned and tumbling, inhaling salt water, she had opened her eyes to the whirl of bubbles and realized with sudden, odd serenity that she might die—right then, that very instant. She had been startled, but at the same time almost euphoric, thinking of Charlie, her brother, and wondering if this was how it had been for him, this soundless passage into another world.

Then she had emerged at the surface, coughing, and Dean had come splashing toward her through the shallow surf with panic smeared across his face, shouting, "Are you okay? Are you okay?"

They arrived in Puerto Escondido some days ago, in the early morning, after an interminable bus ride through the desolate flatlands of Mexico. At the beginning of the drive, Jill gazed with curious interest out the window. Along the dusty roadside, half-naked children played beside half-finished concrete bungalows, and white bedsheets hung limp on clotheslines in the summer heat. Sometimes the children paused to watch the mammoth bus as it passed; how must it have looked to them, she wondered—strange as a sleek gray whale gliding through the desert.

At first there were brief stops at solemn, solitary roadside market-stands, where local villagers who had been waiting would board and stand in the aisle for the remainder of the eight-hour ride, as all seats were reserved. Even very small children stood quietly, holding the armrests for balance, without complaint. Some women even placed sleeping babies wrapped in blankets on the aisle floor.

Somewhere along the way, the dusky excitement of the new countryside they had entered gave way to a murky stream of lonely hovels, longing faces. Emptiness. Jill had begun to wonder when they would arrive at their destination. Then the orange, sun-baked fields turned gray, and then the sun was gone and there was only blackness, thick as oil and not a star's light

anywhere, just the feel of motion and the grind of wheels turning beneath them. It was as though the windows had been covered in black paper—better they not see, Jill thought, the lack of anything worth seeing.

Then the bus stopped. The rest area loomed out of nowhere—a glaring, brightly lit oasis surrounded by dark abyss. It was very late, very quiet. The paved lot was empty except for a rust-flecked refreshment stand that had apparently been abandoned long ago, and the giant bus. Emanating heat, its idling engine gave off low hums and huffy sighs as though impatient to get back on the night trail. Jill had pushed her way down the aisle with the other passengers, only to be accosted upon exiting the bus by a horde of small children, their little arms raised with offerings of empanadas, tortas, churros, hard-boiled eggs nestled in Styrofoam bowls filled with rice.

In spite of his recurring intestinal ailments, Dean, as usual, was unable to resist street food, and he paid a coy-looking girl for two homemade empanadas while Jill staggered off to find the ladies' room.

It had occurred to her, as she fumbled with her zipper in the bathroom stall, that if the bus should leave without her she would be utterly abandoned, dropped off the face of the earth. This prospect was, ironically, what had brought her there in the first place—far from the stone walls and yellowing fields of Massachusetts, drawn by the idea of losing herself completely.

She thought of Charlie then, as she did in weak moments, and the last phone conversation they'd had. His words haunted, even after this much time had passed. He had mentioned feeling out of place, said he was tired. The memory was an odd-shaped pill that stuck in her throat.

Now she hears the rattle of keys and Dean's confident steps thumping across the wooden floor.

"Hey, you," he says, standing in the balcony doorway.

She hoists herself onto her elbows, lifts her head to look at him.

He wears a short-sleeved white linen shirt spotted with coffee stains and unbuttoned halfway down his chest, cutoff khaki shorts, and leather sandals. He is so darkly tanned that his eyes seem illuminated from within, glowing beneath cavernous black brows. His brows are, in fact, just a touch too large for

his face, giving him a perpetual look of serious contemplation. But the skin around his eyes is marked, no matter how grave his expression may be, by creases that grow deeper when he smiles. His goal is to shoot for *National Geographic*, and today he especially looks the part of intrepid photojournalist—Canon hanging from his neck like some outrageous amulet, stubble shadowing his gaunt cheeks.

Jill is learning that Dean is in his element on the road, happiest to be traveling through foreign places where he will linger only long enough to maintain a carefully crafted air of mystery and adventure before heading off again. She has known him for only a couple of months now, and is still partly taken with this rugged façade. But she has also watched this man sleep beside her, the thin buzz of a snore escaping his slack mouth; she has seen him naked, plucking stray hairs; she has tended to him when they thought he had malaria, when he actually wept with his head against the toilet bowl. In the same way that Dean captures his subjects on film, she secretly owns these parts of him—the weak, dark, solitary moments that he wouldn't want the world to know about.

"I went to Zipolite," he says, sitting in a deck chair beside her and squinting out at the town. The dilapidated storefronts and high-rise hotels are washed in orange light.

"The nude beach?" she asks. Her voice comes out sounding sharper than she intended.

"Yeah." He shrugs. "I thought it might be interesting. But there were just a handful of stoned Australians hanging out. I hitched a ride in the back of a truck with somebody's goat. I'd like to head down to Zicatela pretty soon, before sunset, and get some more of the surfing." Dean is working on a freelance article about the Mexican Pipeline.

"I want to come." Jill sits upright, swinging her legs off the hammock and onto the wood. She picks a crumpled orange sundress up off the floor and pulls it on over her bikini.

Soon they are sitting together at a palapa bar on the beach. Bobbing on swells, stretching along what seems to be the entire length of the gray horizon, are hundreds of surfers waiting for the next ride. Coming from around the world, they seem as predictable a fixture on Zicatela as the giant breakers themselves.

The bartender wears a white guayabera shirt and his thin-

