

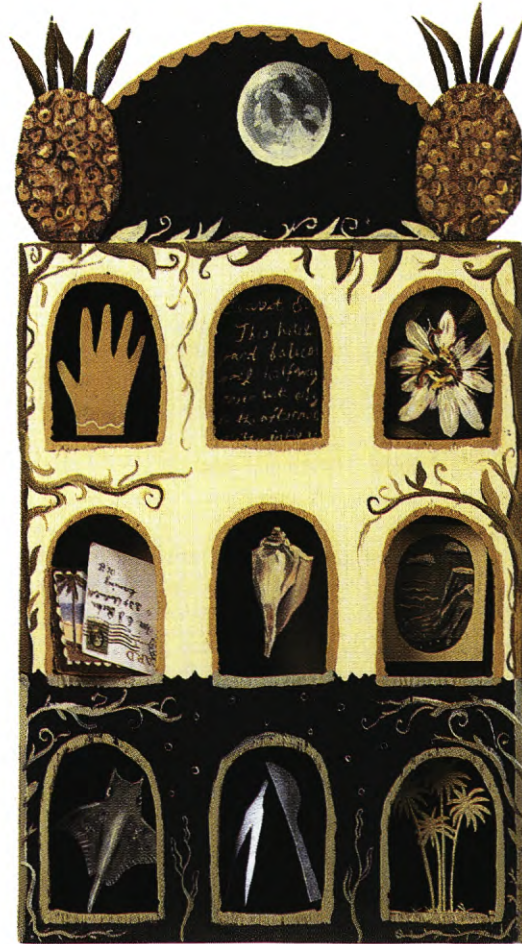
TWILIGHT

By Lynn Freed

Coming to an island like this was Alice's idea. "We should spend our old age together," she said, "you and me and Eva and who else?" I had several suggestions. And soon there was a whole network of us talking across the phone lines of America—my friends, their friends, like a tree full of birds. We'd buy a place somewhere without winter, we said, and we'd each live in a separate house, and write our novels, because who isn't writing a novel these days? And the men would come and visit, but they'd go away again, ha ha, the children as well.

I joined in. But the idea never really appealed. Living among women seems like a dangerous thing to do. Sooner or later, we'd be getting on each other's nerves. Eva's laugh, for instance, like a strangling chicken, which is what I'd find myself saying to Alice: *Don't say anything, but—*

Lynn Freed is the author of four novels. Her last story for Harper's Magazine, "The Mirror," appeared in the October 1994 issue.



Anyway, the life would be barren without men. And with men we'd be back where we started, talking on the phone when the men were out of earshot. In all the talk, we never admitted that we were one way with each other and another with our men. But that's how we are, every one of us.

And now here I am without them, without my man either. He was becoming a shadow, robe and slippers

in the spare-room closet, and the TV remote next to his chair. My chair. One day, I walked in as he was watching the news, and decided to sell both chairs and the couch that went with them. After that it was easy—piano, clocks, pictures, the house itself. It was a kind of intoxication, selling my life like that, and all the friends watching, holding their breath as I jumped.

"Perhaps," says Dr. Weimann, "it takes a shock to shake one free of one's fears?"

He is guessing, but he is wrong. The shock only came the day I arrived on this island. That night, and every night since, I've been shaken out of sleep by the old questions coming to the surface. What will become of me? Who will I find to love?

Weimann lives in the annex at the back of the hotel. He has two rooms there, one of which is his office. Every morning, we go down to the water together. He swims straight out, stroke after stroke, right

up to the reef, and then back again. I float just beyond the waves, and even then I look down to see what might be swimming below me.

"The sharks have quite enough to eat without considering you," he says. But still, I don't venture any farther.

Every evening at six, he comes down to the bar, which is really an old veranda, glassed in. The new veranda has been built around it like a fan, and doubles as the dining room. The whole hotel is built like that, rooms beyond rooms. It must once have been a house, plain and modest. The guest rooms themselves are plain and modest. They are spread along the front road like barracks, with each door opening onto a narrow veranda.

Before I came here, I thought I'd find a cottage on the beach to live in, two rooms with tiled floors, perhaps, a hammock slung across one corner of the veranda. There would be morning trips to the local market, fish just caught, island spices. And sometimes I might stroll over to the hotel for dinner. I might meet someone there or I might not. It wouldn't matter. It has always been easy to see things this way before seeing them, easy to write them too.

But now three months have passed, and I'm still here in my little room at the end of the barracks. Except for the hotel beach, the coast on this side of the island is wild and steep and rough. Most of the locals live in squalid little shacks up in the hills. There are no cottages to rent.

"Shall we dine together tonight?" Weimann says.

People stand around us, a few of the more affluent natives, a couple of expats and their wives, who run a yacht for hire. It sits out in the bay like a castle. No doubt Weimann has slept with one of the wives. I can see from the way she avoids catching his eye and then listens as he asks me about dinner.

When I thought up this idyll, I might have considered dinners, and the long nights afterwards. All I had to do was remember Crete, or Mauritius, or Papeete: sitting at a table for one, my bottle of wine corked for tomorrow, waiters offering themselves

with a wink. But I never remember loneliness. From a distance, it always seems like peace.

The first week here, I sat in the hotel dining room with a book, or I walked down to the Harbour Café and ordered curried chicken. I thought I might walk along the beach afterwards, have a swim, perhaps, or sit out on the veranda to watch the last of the sun. But who could have imagined the evenings here? Half an hour of twilight, and then the dark comes right in.

Dearest E—

This hotel must once have been very grand, with its foyer and ballroom and balustrades and nymphs around the pool. I love that pool, halfway down the cliff, cracked, green with algae, overgrown. I go down there in the afternoons, when the wind picks up on the beach. This afternoon I saw a snake slither into the vines, brighter green than anything around it. I watched the vine, hoping it would come out again, and wind itself around my wrist or my ankle, and bite. This isn't morbid, it's languid. It's content with the present at last. Which is what I am.

Weimann's skin is hairless, even the backs of his hands. And the fingernails are strangely convex, strangely purple. When he makes love to me, I have to shut my eyes against him. I try not to hear the moans he makes. He is moaning for me, not for himself. They are moans of encouragement, sound effects. And they revolt me.

So why go through with it? Alice would be the first to ask this. "What's in it for you?" she'd say.

I've never been able to answer Alice's questions. She wouldn't understand the sight of an old woman with a basket at the market this morning. Even as a young girl, I saw that old woman everywhere before me. She stood beside every man who raised a glass to me across a restaurant, beside Weimann himself, sending the waiter over with his card.

Eva would be easier. She'd say, "It makes one feel alive." And I'd be grateful for that. Eva is too beautiful to survive among women without

such generosity. And anyway, she loves a daring act, she who is still one foot in and one foot out of marriage. Not that sleeping with a man like Weimann is daring, but that the trip itself delights her. She counts on me for daring.

Dearest E—

The boatman came from the mainland about twenty years ago, they tell me, using his hands to say that he wanted work. To me, his hands are his beauty—large-boned, lovelier than a face. I watch them smoothing and smoothing the satin edge of the blanket, as if he's finding the words to say he has to leave me, leave the island for good. He could play that part, Odysseus the Wanderer. Without speech, he could play any part I give him. His voice would be buoyant and lyrical, like all the others on this island. Weimann says it's unusual, being able to hear but not to speak. He seems to pose this as a question, leaning across the bar. "These people are clever with words," he says, "and also without them." He thinks I'll tire of the mute and come over to him. But I have a dull time with words when I talk to Weimann. I need to go looking for them, and, when I do, they hide.

At dinner, Weimann does the ordering, but he makes sure that the waiter charges the orders to our separate accounts. Even if he did pay for me, would this tiny act of gallantry have me walking to his room with a lighter heart? I don't think so. It would take some level of deceit to pull me along that corridor, quick and sharp, like that woman at the bar. I have been that woman, I know the appeal of rooms darkened in the afternoon, a man to leave behind and another to go back to.

"Weimann," I say, "I find your moaning in bed revolting."

He arches an eyebrow, continues shelling his prawns with his knife and fork, laying the shells neatly around the edge of the plate.

"What is appealing in a man is real desire," I say.

He looks up.

"Animal desire."

"And in a woman too," he says.

Alice was right. She was the one

who came up with the quote I pinned above my desk: "The less you invest emotionally, the more you stand to lose."

I turn to look out at the last of the light over the sea. Down on the beach, a family is pulling in their catch. The father stands in the surf, the mother at the water's edge with a boy on either side.

"They seem happy," I say to Weimann. What I mean is that everything from which I've constructed a life seems like the baggage of nomads. Men, children, house, work. And yet, had I started out here, like those boys in the water, I'd have gone north as soon as I could. As they will too.

"You feel at home with this sort of happiness?" Weimann asks. He knows the answer, the old Nazi. Leave home long enough, and you find it again only in moments.

The dining room has the slightly sickish smell of seafood and sweet island fruits. Except for us and a Brazilian couple on honeymoon, the hotel is empty. Only the bar seems to keep it alive.

The main port is on the other side of the island. Cruise ships stop there, and there are shops and nightclubs and petty criminals. You have to take a boat to reach this town, or drive for eight hours over rough mountain roads. I chose it for this reason. I wanted to replenish, I said. Only Alice rolled her eyes. "Languish is more like it," she said. And even then I knew I should have chosen the port, and stayed in the grand hotel, and gone down to the shops in the afternoons.

But if I were to pack up now and take the boat back around, I'd fly out for good. And if I flew out, where would I go, unreplenished? These are the questions I ask myself every morning after a night with Weimann.

Eva—

Weimann knows that the boatman comes up to my room by the back stairs. Everyone here knows, I suppose. There was never a question of his coming in through the front door, wiping his feet on the mat, smoothing down his hair. He arrives like a cat, like a leopard.

ard. I hardly hear the door handle, and then there he is, smelling of a day in the boat. He's older than I thought, probably forty-five or so, the body thick with muscle. Unless he's taking the boat out, he never hangs around the dock. There must be a woman in the hills, children too, probably. The delightful thing is, he's not interested in leaving the island. That's not what he's after.

Tonight, Weimann doesn't undress, nor does he invite me to take my own clothes off. He sits in his armchair, smoking, and I am grateful for this. His room gives nothing away. Double bed, wardrobe, two armchairs, stereo, TV, VCR. Only his medical instruments seem specific to him. Clean, spare, misshapen to a purpose. When he removed the sea-urchin spine from my foot, his face lost all its mockery, its boredom, its lust.

"I have a surprise," he says. He gets up to pour us each a whiskey, stands waiting as I drink mine down like medicine, refills the glass. Suddenly I suspect he's been reading my e-mail, that he has the boatman hidden somewhere. That the boatman is to be my punishment. I begin to stand, but no, he's slipping a cassette into the VCR, switching off the lamps, coming back to his chair with the remote.

The show starts with a woman, facedown on a lawn, naked. At first she looks dead, but really she's sunbathing, she's sleeping. Weimann has the sound turned off. All I can hear is the buzz of the TV, the surf outside.

A Great Dane comes up to her and starts licking her buttocks, licking and licking until she wakes up. She turns, annoyed, a hopeless actress. But then she opens her legs a little, and the licking continues. She raises herself in the air, rises on all fours, and he mounts her, trying to find the way in, ducking and thrusting the way dogs do. The camera is underneath them now, you can see the pinkness of the dog, and of her too.

Weimann cannot know how I go about making his smooth, womanish skin desirable, the dead weight of his flesh on top of me. And yet here it

is, this dog ducking and thrusting, this baboon, this donkey, this beast of desire. Helpless with it, blind, deaf, mute.

But now I have seen the dog, and it is as sad as a circus lion. When I saw the hotel for the first time, when the boatman carried in my suitcases, and stared at me in that way of his until I gave him a tip, when I stood at the front desk, wondering what I would do in the heat of the afternoon, and all the afternoons that lay ahead—I lost the peace of those two rooms with tiled floors, and the hammock, and the little desk in one corner with a view out over the water, even of the water itself, the way it has always seemed to stretch one life into another.

"Weimann," I say, standing up, "I'm not your woman for this."

Alicia Preciosa—

Would you remind me what was so boring about Peter? He made me laugh, didn't he? I need you on this, my dear, don't let me down. And don't worry about the boatman. It was safe. And it's over.

The day after the Great Dane, a woman arrives at the hotel. She is thick and gray and spectacled, and her clothes are too heavy for the climate: socks and lace-up shoes, slacks, a jacket. I watch the boatman stand behind her, waiting for his tip. But there's an argument with the manager. She won't abandon her passport, not even overnight.

The manager looks at me for help. And so I step up and tell her that it's all right, it's the law, she'll get her passport back tomorrow. That I was worried too, but it was all right.

She hands it over then, and turns to me, and says, "I don't know why I came here."

"Tip the boatman," I whisper.

"What? Ah! Yes! Here—"

"Would you like to come down to the beach this afternoon?" I say.

"Ah. Well. I work in the afternoons. See you later, then?"

But I don't see her again for six days. Even though it is impossible to disappear in this place, she has done it. She is not in the dining

room in the evenings, nor is she at the Harbour Café, nor on the beach. At one point I think Weimann must have her roped to his bed. At least, this is what I write to Eva. The arrival and disappearance of this woman has cheered me up somehow. Why don't we all meet at the port in April? I suggest to Eva. I'll book us into the hotel there. It'll be like a trial run.

By the time I see the new woman walking along the hotel front one afternoon, I've found out from the manager that she has her meals sent to her room, and that she moved to the annex because of the noise along the front. "Always, always," he says, making typing motions with his fingers.

I hurry to catch up to her. She is storming along in a pair of native sandals and a lurid muslin beach dress she must have bought at the market. "Hello!" I say.

She stops dead. "Oh! You! Hi!" She holds out a hand. "Letty," she says. "Hi."

She's wearing a baseball cap with green sequins on it, and there's a little moustache, wide nostrils, sallow skin.

"Want something cold to drink?" I walk ahead to the cold-drink stand before she can answer. "Let's go out onto the jetty."

But she stops at the bottom of the steps, staring into the surf. "I can't swim," she says.

"You won't have to. You'll be safe. Come on."

And she does. She climbs the steps and walks close behind, obedient, like a child. I find a place for us to sit, and she takes the Fanta, drinks it greedily. The sun on the water is blinding. No one except the boatman is out, and even he is trawling about lazily in the dinghy.

"What do you write, Letty?"

"Gothic. Like my name: Letitia. Mysteries mostly. You?"

"Me?"

"Oh. I saw you with the laptop, and I thought, oh, you know, you must be at it too, and I can't talk about it, specially when I'm in the middle. Anytime, really."

"I've been writing e-mail," I say. "I plug it in at the office."

"Oh. E-mail. Can't cope with any of that."

I'd planned the e-mails even before I came here. Calypso on her island. Or Scylla and Charybdis, both as men. Or Persephone. Or something. Every day I print them out, thinking that sooner or later I'll be ready, I'll want to start. Every night a story seems possible, and every morning I go down to the beach for a swim. And then, when I come back, the words are nothing, they are less than nothing. They cheat and they lie. And now, sitting here with Letty, I don't want anything to do with them anymore.

"Met our Goebbels yet?" I ask.

She stares at me.

"The doctor. Weimann."

She throws her head back in a roaring laugh. "Oh! Dr. Weimann!" She swings her legs over the water, peers to one side, then to the other, as if she's having a conversation with herself. "Keep a secret? I'm putting him into the novel. Well, not him so much as that glove collection."

"Glove collection?" I am back at school now, laughter at the far end of the hockey field that stops when I walk up. "What sort of gloves?" I say.

"Haven't you seen? *Dozens* of them, all wrapped in blue tissue! Beautiful ones with fur, and lace ones, and lots of long kid gloves. Oh, and a tiny pair of children's gloves with the fingertips cut off. And a gauntlet with the blood marks still on it. And one with no thumb on one hand. Wouldn't you say Göring? Rather than Goebbels?" Another roar.

Weimann and I still dine together, though I don't go back to his room anymore and he's never on the beach when I am. When I asked him about the new woman, he shrugged. "Perhaps she's at home with her own happiness?" he said.

I throw my straw into the water and watch it float in, up, over. "What about the boatman?" I say.

"Huh?"

"For the novel. The mute. Out there in the dinghy. He carried your bags up?"

She seems to consider this for a moment, sucking in the last of her Fanta. "Na. No blacks, no Jews, no

Germans. I had to make the doctor Danish, a Danish count."

"Has he shown you his porn?"

"Pornography? Really? Oh, goody!"

"Letty," I say, "wouldn't you like to come to the dining room tonight?"

She cocks her head. "Would I not, no? Or would I not, yes? Yes, I think I would, yes. Why not? I can take a little break now."

That evening, she arrives at the bar in a dirndl with a frilly white blouse underneath. She has parted her hair in the middle and tied it into a ponytail. People turn to watch her, to watch us as I lead her out to the dining room. I have chosen a table next to the window, far from Weimann's. When the waiter comes to take our orders, I tell him to charge them both to my account. I glance quickly at Weimann, who is still at the bar. The yacht people have brought in some tourists, and they are all drinking together. I order a bottle of claret and, when it arrives, send a glass over to him.

She tells me that she came here because she was stuck, and she had read an article—warm places where you won't find tourists. "Everything in it was wrong," she says, "except about the tourists. But so what, hey? Here I am. Unstuck." She lifts her glass and slugs back the wine.

I don't tell her that it was I who wrote that article, wrote it without even coming here. That I often did that, and no one seemed to know the difference.

"Let's go swimming after dinner," I say. "I'll teach you." A full moon hangs low over the water. The night is bright with it, the water is brilliant.

But she shakes her head.

"We can stay in the shallows."

"No, it's hopeless. It's like horses. I'm terrified of them too, doesn't matter how many times I try. I write about them, but I can't go near them."

"In the e-mail, I write about an affair I'm not having," I say. "I write

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STORY

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about a hotel I'm not staying at too. And about happiness I'm not feeling. It's easier than the other way around."

"You see," she says. "I knew we'd be talking about it sooner or later."

There are no waves, just swells, the way I love it. And the water is warm, black as ink under the moon, perfect. With her on the beach to watch, I plunge straight in, swim out without stopping. With her shouting "Careful!" I swim farther than I've ever been before. I dive under and stay there for a while. When I come up, she is at the water's edge, waving both arms. I wave back. I start to sing. The water makes me happy, it has always made me happy. "That's because you're a water sign," Alice would say, she holds with that sort of thing.

But this is more than just the water. An old happiness is lifting my heart and voice and spirit all at once, all with the lovely water, with the lovely hymn I begin to sing. "Praise my soul the King of Heaven, to His feet thy tribute bring." I am singing for a future still to be had, and glorious things that will happen, places to go, and, oh, people to come back to.

I am out near the reef now, I can hear the water breaking there. And something is swimming with me, it brushes against my arm, light, almost liquid, a jellyfish perhaps, a ripple in the water. I stop singing and watch the water, but it is full of shapes, silver and black, a few ripples beginning to crest with the tide coming in. Whatever it is—even finned, even toothed—it feels like a lover. And if it came and took me down with it, down and down right to the bottom, that would be perfect too. I would be happy.

But then it is gone, and the tide is carrying me in, easy. There is Letty, still waving. I'd forgotten her for a moment. I swim in, swell after swell. And that's when I see Weimann on the sand with her,

waving too. Both of them are still in their shoes. Standing side by side, they look like one of those odd German couples who take bus tours around Europe, and sleep in cubbyholes under the bus, and live out of a backpack.

As I come out of the water, she runs at me, flaps her arms. She wants to embrace me, perhaps, but I'm wet.

"Did you not notice that no one has been swimming all day?" Weimann says. His voice is shrill, insistent. It has lost its slippery edge, the dip and rise over a question.

I prance a little before him, before her too, and go off to find my towel so that they have to follow.

"Are you not aware of the manta ray out there?" he demands. "Are you quite mad?" He considers my body as if he's never seen it, his eyes very pale in the light. "Your boatman has been trying to spear it all day."

"My boatman?"

"Oh," says Letty. "I told him. You know. Your idea for the novel."

Alice of my heart—

Goebbels collects gloves! He invited me to see them this afternoon. And so off I went, thinking, "Etchings," but no, my dear, nothing of the sort. His room is separate from the hotel, right at the back, and Gothic has a room there too. Coming down the passage, I heard a sort of moaning, man or woman, hard to tell which, and I stopped, but just then his door opened, and Gothic tripped out, all dainty in her size 10s, down to her own door and slipped in.

They are coming in April, Alice and Eva and a few of the others too. We will meet at the port and stay in the big hotel. Until then, I'll stay on here, it's not long. And afterwards, we'll all go back together. Already, they're looking out for a condominium for me, one bedroom, with a gardening service included and a lovely view of the water. There'll be lunches just for us, with asparagus and salmon and laughing. And, on the weekends, we'll be with our men as usual, men out on the patio with drinks in the long summer evenings. Men watching us laugh. Watching for danger. ■