

Phosphorescence

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By Rowena Macdonald

The White Sands Beach Resort was so beautiful it was painful: peach hibiscus, hot pink bougainvillea, yellow orchids, white sand, turquoise infinity pool merging into turquoise sea which melted further into azure sky, glimpsed between cartoonish silhouettes of palm trees. Trying to absorb its beauty gave Andy visual indigestion. It was too much: a hyper-real, Disney version of paradise. He could barely believe he was allowed to be there, that such a place continued to exist while he was in his office in Swindon. For the resort workers this was their Swindon.

He downed his margarita and placed the empty glass on the edge of the pool. A waitress in a neat green uniform immediately scooped it onto a tray and asked if he would like another.

“No, I’m fine, thank you. That was lovely.” Andy smiled into the woman’s eyes. He tried to convey with sincere scrupulous politeness that he was different from the other guests; that he empathised with the workers’ plight, but it was hard to tell if they understood because they treated him with the same charming deference as everyone else.

“I’ll have another,” shouted Kate, who was teaching Louis to swim at the other end of the pool.

“Same, same?” said the waitress.

“Same, same...and what do you want, boys?”

“Mango smoothie,” spluttered Louie.

“Same, same,” shouted Theo from the back of his blow-up plastic crocodile and all of them, including the waitress, laughed. Her professionalism was such that she continued laughing even after she’d turned away to fetch the drinks.

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“Shall we go down to the beach after?” said Andy. “I want to show you the fish.”

Kate screwed up her nose. “I’m not sure it’s a good idea for Louis to go out in the sea—”

“He can wear his water wings.”

“I don’t want to wear water wings.”

“—and Theo’s still not that confident in the water—”

“I am. I can swim two widths now.”

“Come on, Kate. We can hold onto them. The fish are amazing. And the coral.”

Four days into their holiday and only Andy had ventured beyond the pristine heaven of the resort. His sons’ lack of curiosity and adventurousness was disappointing. As a kid he would have explored the whole island by now, not that he had ever been anywhere so exotic at their age.

He couldn’t entirely blame Louis and Theo for their tameness. Kate was an anxious mother; perhaps because her pregnancies were so hard-won, perhaps because she was following the pattern of her parents, whose careful supervision of their offspring was entirely different from Andy’s.

Andy’s mother had been eighteen when she had him. Motherhood was something she casually expected to happen, as did all her friends, and she and his dad had been very hands-off, leaving him outside the pub in the car for hours with only a bottle of orangeade and a packet of crisps, dumping him with various “aunties” when their marriage got too fraught.

This had never happened to Kate: “My parents didn’t go to pubs.” Andy could believe it: the few times he’d gone for a pint with Kate’s father, the old man was self-conscious, embarrassingly hearty towards the bar staff, and only ever drank one pint of whatever was “least chemical”.

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From the age of nine Andy had disappeared for whole days on his bike, often cycling forty or fifty miles from his village.

Kate was appalled by this neglect. “Didn’t your parents wonder where you were?”

“Don’t think they even noticed I’d gone.”

“God, my parents always knew exactly where we were.”

Those days spent drifting around the countryside had given him the love and knowledge of wildlife that had eventually led to his ecology degree, then his job with the National Trust and his ability to afford holidays such as this. He often wondered if Louis and Theo wouldn’t be better off on camping holidays in England, learning to appreciate the more subtle beauty of their own country. Though this resort was stunning, it seemed denatured, as insubstantial as a dream. Louis and Theo would learn nothing from its luxury.

Kate was finally persuaded down to the beach when a family of loud Italians invaded the pool. Two workers, who had been sweeping the already immaculate path, stepped aside as they passed, holding their broom handles like rifles against their chests in what were almost salutes. “Thank you very much,” murmured Andy. Kate marched ahead, worrying aloud that they hadn’t enough sun-cream left, having just slathered herself and the boys with yet another thick coat of it, as if the sun, like everything else, was more dangerous beyond the perimeter of the resort. Her tender rosy complexion, which had been part of her beauty when they first met, now occasionally annoyed Andy.

“Ugh. Poos!” Louis recoiled as they stepped into the warm shallows.

“They’re not poos,” said Andy, “They’re just sea cucumbers.” Dozens of them lay on the sea floor. Andy had to admit they did look somewhat off-putting.

“What if we step on them?”

“They won’t hurt you. You’re more likely to hurt them.”

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“But the feel of them...they’ll be all squishy...I really don’t want to feel them.”

“We’ll hold you up so your feet don’t touch the bottom.”

After fitting the snorkels over the boys’ faces he and Kate held them by their waists face-down in the water.

For quite a time the boys were transfixed by the pulsating, flickering world beneath the waves. It was as luridly stunning as the resort—moonscapes of purple coral that snapped shut if you got too close; powder puff anemones in green, yellow and pink that sucked into themselves at the slightest touch; fish with leopard-spots and zebra stripes and iridescent shot silk skin in every colour of the rainbow; some the size of dinner plates, others just tiny darts of neon blue—Louis particularly loved these. “Can we catch some? Not to eat, just to look at.” “You can look at them here.” “I want to look at them when we’re home.” “We wouldn’t be able to take them on the plane.” “No, not home home. Here home.”

Theo struggled out of his mother’s grip and demanded to swim alone. Kate made him promise not to go out of his depth and picked her way through the sea cucumbers back to the shore where she sat watching them. Her sunglasses turned her eyes into inscrutably blank TV screens but several times Andy thought he detected a benevolent smile beneath them. Then Theo sucked up a stomachful of seawater through his snorkel and his head disappeared beneath the surface. While Andy let go of Louis and thrashed towards Theo, Louis stepped on a sea cucumber and also slipped underwater.

“What are you doing? I told you to hold on to him!” Kate stormed to the rescue. Soon both sons had been returned coughing and choking to safety.

“It was all squishy.” Tears were running down Louis’ cheeks. “I can still feel the way it felt on my feet!”

The same two broom-wielding workers parted before them as they trailed back to the resort.

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Night slammed down like a guillotine in this part of the world. By seven it was dark as midnight, so they could put the boys to bed earlier than at home. The potential for long child-free, sex-filled evenings swayed before them but for the past three nights they had sat on their verandah, while Kate read about places in the *Rough Guide* that they were unlikely to visit, judging by how little they'd explored so far. That evening Andy felt his restlessness had reached a fever pitch.

“Shall we go for a swim?”

“What, in the pool?”

“No, the sea.”

“The sea?”

“Yeah, come on—like in Greece—it'll be lovely.”

Travelling through Greece ten years before, they had swum naked off the coast of Naxos one night. Kate had wrapped her legs around his hips and lain back with her head half submerged. The soft black glitter of the sea and sky had encircled them and as he slid into her she'd told him she was drowning in stars.

“What about the sea cucumbers? We won't be able to see them. I really don't want to tread on one.”

Andy leaned on the balcony and stared into the night for a long time. Bats flitted from tree to tree. A gecko croaked. Kate's nose remained buried in her book. Eventually he said, “Why don't we go into town?” The town was a strip of girlie bars and t-shirt shops, half an hour walk along the coast path through what seemed like a small jungle. He didn't particularly want to go there but it was better than nothing. Really he wanted to do something soulful. Like having sex in the night sea.

“We can't leave the boys!”

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“They’ll be fine...Nothing’s going to happen to them.”

“What about Madeleine McCann?”

There was no comeback to this.

“Why don’t you go though, if you want a walk? I’m happy to stay here.” Kate’s tone was now loftily sympathetic as if he was a dog that needed to run off his excess energy.

Instead of heading towards the town, Andy went the opposite way, his path lit by the yellow glow from the other bungalows.

“May I help you, sir?” asked a green-uniformed young man, as he passed the reception.

Andy shook his head, “No.” Then, remembering his manners: “Thank you.” He had a dim sense of the angst suffered by royalty.

At the edge of the resort, he caught the pungent, vegetal smell of weed threading from the open window of a concrete block. At its entrance was a small spirit house, draped with frazzled garlands of jasmine and marigold. He heard laughter, animated Thai chatter, glimpsed the smouldering tip of a joint and a flash of thin limbs lolling in the blue light from a TV. The staff quarters. Workers at the end of a long day, freed from their green uniforms and their masks of professional politeness. Their private laughter was completely different from the way they laughed with guests. He inhaled deeply and had a sudden craving for loose stoned serenity. It’d be great to join them but he knew his presence would cast a pall. They’d start bowing and scraping, laughing in a fake way. Vain to imagine they thought of him as any different from the other guests.

Maybe he could just buy some weed off them. But, then, whoever sold it to him was bound to end up serving them breakfast. Best to remain aloof, a wholesome family guy.

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White Sands bordered onto Charm Churee Villas, which bordered onto Coral View Resort, then Happy Life Bungalows. A narrow path, perfectly swept by each resort's workers, linked them. He passed polished mahogany dining terraces, shiny bars tended by young men in waistcoats, couples drinking cocktails decorated with orchids and levering food into their mouths with chopsticks. The surrounding jungle had its own dark beat of strange chirrups and squawks if you stopped to listen but was kept at bay by fairy lights and pop music.

A firefly passed him, then another. He stopped, hoping for one he could catch. When he was very young his mother had woken him after a night down the village pub with a glow-worm in a glass. She'd found it in the beer garden and had brought it home for him. He had lain watching the tiny green blaze until he couldn't keep his eyes open. Next morning it was dead, drowned in the gin dregs at the bottom of the glass. He had been inconsolable but mum said it wouldn't have lived much longer: "They use that glow to attract a mate and as soon as they've mated, they lay their eggs and die." Laughing, she'd shouted out to dad, "Hear that, Jack? Soon as they've had a bit of the other it's all over."

Three more fireflies passed but they were too quick for him. Beyond Happy Life the resorts ended, the jungle thickened, and he had to use his phone as a torch. In the distance he could hear a lolling reggae beat.

The beat grew louder as he edged onwards. The path widened into a small cove with light at the far end coming from an open-sided hut perched on stilts above a rocky outcrop: a ramshackle bar built of driftwood. At the foot of the bar a man—young, white, barefoot—was spinning fire poi—drawing flaming figures-of-eight in the darkness. Andy crossed the sand and climbed the steps up to the bar, giving a wide berth to the poi guy, whose face was dazed with absorption.

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Inside, a few backpackers sprawled on low cushions and in hammocks. The air was dense with ganja smoke. A bare-chested Thai boy lounged behind the bar beneath the lacy light of a coconut shell lampshade drilled with tiny holes.

“Sawàt dii,” said Andy.

“Sawàt dii.” The boy smiled shyly. He was disturbingly effeminate: a waist you could span with two hands, huge kohl-rimmed eyes, like a Hindu god, and a mass of curly black hair pulled into a ponytail. Intricate tattoos of tropical flowers twined up his arms and he wore silver bangles on both wrists and a long string of amber beads around his neck.

“A Chang, please.”

“Yes.” The boy opened the bottle and placed it on the counter, his bangles tinkling as he moved. “You like anything else?” His voice was soft and light and, in the usual Thai way, he missed off the final consonants of English words.

“Any chance of a bit of that, mate?” Andy indicated the people smoking on the floor.

The boy pulled out a wrap of newspaper from his jeans and unfolded it daintily to reveal a small lump of weed. “Five hundred baht? Very nice. You drink, you smoke, you have nice time.”

Five hundred baht. Ten pounds. Seemed like a good deal even if it was a tourist price. Andy laid five hundred baht notes on the counter and, smiling all the while, the boy counted them into the cash tin. He slid a packet of blue Rizla towards Andy and a lighter decorated with a picture of a Thai girl in a bikini. His movements were slow and his manner was girlishly flirtatious.

“Where you from?”

“England.”

“London?”

“No, Swindon.”

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“Swindon. I don’t know. Is nice?”

“Is quite boring.”

“I like to go London. London, fun city?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Very busy. Very different from here.”

“It boring here. Like Swindon.”

Andy laughed. “Swindon is way more boring than Koh Tao.”

“Hey Lek, another Chang please?” A girl in harem trousers with mouse-coloured dreadlocks appeared at the bar and, while Lek dealt with her, Andy slipped away to an alcove overlooking the sea.

The first drag made his head reel, but then his muscles slackened and the buzz of irritation about Kate died down. By the fifth drag he felt pleasantly languid.

Andy had met Kate after giving up drugs. Not that he’d been a massive drug fiend but his late teens and early twenties had been pretty hedonistic. Kate claimed she’d only ever got stoned once, at university, and it had made her sick so she’d never done it again. Life with Kate had drawn him away from his druggie mates. At the time he’d been relieved, as he wanted to get on, make something of himself. Now he often looked back on those slack, aimless times with nostalgia; they might not have been productive but they had been a laugh. Still, you couldn’t have a laugh forever. Those that tried ended up sad. The other year he’d bumped into his old schoolmate, Steve. Last time he’d seen him they’d taken acid and walked to the top of Chanctonbury Ring by the light of a full moon. Steve now looked raddled and down-at-heel and had been ever so slightly belligerent: “Heard through the grapevine that you’ve done well for yourself.”

It was true: the first and only person in his family to go into further education, he had risen way beyond anyone’s, except his parents’, expectations of him. His parents had no expectations although they were proud of his cleverness. “He’s got a good brain,” his dad

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told Kate, the first time they'd met. As if Kate cared about his brain back then. He took another drag and focussed on the shifting flecks of lamplight reflected in the waves. When he'd finished he would go for a swim. If he had to be soulful alone, so be it.

The water was swathes of warm silk. Andy gave himself up to it, like sleep. Lying back, feeling as weightless as you ever could on earth, he could hear nothing but his own breathing and the swish of the waves. The world melted away and he was a simply a body suspended in hushed liquid space. He'd always felt at his most relaxed when swimming: primeval memories of floating in amniotic fluid, perhaps. Swimming naked, you were more absorbed into the water. Tiny sparkling beads trickled through his fingers as he pushed through the black sea; pearls of light spun out from him. At first he thought it was the lamplight from the bar but looking down he saw he was outlined in glitter. Phosphorescence. He was surrounded by phosphorescence. A flick of his arm could cast a twinkling spell. He rolled through the glitter, awe-struck. If only the boys could see this, if only Kate...perhaps, instead of a firefly, he could collect some phosphorescence to show them and tomorrow night they could all come back and swim. The boys could stay up late for a treat. He turned towards the beach where the guy with the poi was still spinning fiery circles.

“Same same?” smiled the boy at the bar, when Andy padded back in.

“Can I borrow a glass? I'll bring it back. I just want to show my wife something.”

The phosphorescence continued to glow as he carried the glass of seawater back through the jungle. As with the neon fish, it was hard to believe that such a radioactive-looking substance existed in nature—it was as chemically vivid as a Blue Curaçao cocktail or a floodlit swimming pool—but, then again, radioactivity was nature,

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chemicals were nature. Everything was nature. Even the green light of his mobile phone was nature. He pictured his sons' delight, how he would explain what the phosphorescence was—"tiny, tiny microscopic little animals; whale food"—how they would be fascinated.

The TV in the staff quarters was still chattering away as he passed. Their own bungalow was dark and silent. Kate was a hump, gently rising and falling under the sheet in their room. In the other room, the boys flung backwards with their arms above their heads. Andy placed the glass on the table between them.

"Louis...Theo." He jostled them a little.

Theo rolled over. Stickily, Louis opened his eyes.

"Look at this."

"Dad?"

"Look."

"What is it?" Theo was now sitting up.

Andy wiggled his fingers in the water to activate the plankton. Only a few dim sparkles remained. "Look!"

The overhead light flicked on. Kate was in the doorway, wrapped in the sheet.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm just showing the boys..."

"Where've you been?"

"For a swim."

"For *two* hours?"

"And a drink. There's this great bar—"

"—are you drunk? What are you doing?"

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“No, look.” Andy held up the glass. “Phosphorescence. Look. There’s loads of it. In the sea. I was swimming in it. It was amazing.”

But, of course, in the dull light of electricity it just looked like a glass of water.