Anything Goes

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Does anyone have any questions?" Mr. Becker made the statement sound like a dare. The executive producer searched the faces of his staff, looking for the slightest hint of uncertainty. Leanne's eyes locked with his, as if to say, I knew it. The corners of her lips tilted slightly upwards, just enough to suggest that she agreed with the results of this meeting, without looking smug. It was easy now, it was almost pathetic."

Cover Page Footnote
Appeared in the issue: April 1998.

This prose is available in The Angle: https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/angle/vol1998/iss4/26
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Leanne knew what Mr. Becker liked and wondered what was keeping her co-workers from catching on. As production assistants on the longest running day-time drama, the five of them had the opportunity to suggest location shots for episodes shown during ratings sweeps. The assistant whose suggestion won Becker's approval was rewarded with a week out of the office visiting the location. For the past two years, Mr. Becker went with Leanne's choices. She knew where high profile men could discreetly let their hair down. Sun and water were easy to find, and her colleagues tripped over themselves presenting itineraries of the usual spots. Leanne added the sin and spice the others overlooked. It was harder for her to travel these days, though, now that she had Meredith.

"We'll go with your suggestion, Leanne. Good work. Take some time to scout out the island and if it looks as good as it sounds, I'll join you in a few days. We'll make the production and taping arrangements when I get there."

The decision was final.

Leanne's plane lowered itself through air as clean and warm as New York's was filthy and cold. At the hotel, the man at the desk looked over as if she were on display.

"There must be some mistake, madam, we have no reservation made under your name. A 'Mr. Becker' does have a reservation for two, but not until tomorrow night."

"You bet there's been a mistake; but Mr. Becker
made it. I’ll try someplace else.” Old Richard was getting bolder, Leanne thought to herself. Well, screw him, I’ll provide him with his entertainment, but it’s not going to be me.

As she considered her next move, Leanne decided to stretch her legs with a short walk. A motel several blocks away from the strip looked inviting. The privacy of individual bungalows appealed to her. A coffee shop was attached to the motel lobby and after reserving a room, she headed for a seat at the counter.

Leanne lit up a cigarette and watched the waitress approach her. I’m probably in the “No Smoking” section, Leanne thought. “Listen, Miss, I’ll just have this one cigarette, and then I’ll order dinner.”

“They’ll kill you, you know,” the waitress said, looking directly at Leanne.

“I beg your pardon?” asked Leanne, a little confused.

“The cigarettes. I used to smoke, too, but I quit. I got tired of needing them.” The waitress gave Leanne a knowing look.

“I’ve tried to quit, a dozen times, at least. I guess I need something dramatic to happen before I give them up.” Leanne liked the woman’s easy manner.

“Too late, by then. Well, anyway, don’t worry about smoking here. Anything goes on this island, more or less. You must be American. I hear you have rules for everything,” she said with a laugh.

“We have rules, all right,” Leanne said, smiling, “Our national pastime is trying to figure out ways to get around them, though. I’ve heard about your ‘anything goes’ reputation. Is that for real?”

“I’d say so, but you want to make sure you’re the one deciding what it is that’s going on,” Leanne wasn’t sure the waitress meant.

“Well, I need to make a few more arrangements for my boss. He’ll be here tomorrow, he’s looking for some action, I guess you’d say, and he wants his privacy. I’ve already talked with one of your locals, and she suggested the Royale, which is where my boss is staying.”
"Good choice. As a matter of fact, I used to work there myself, as an escort to visiting businessmen. It's good money. For a woman on this island, it's about the highest paying work you can get."

"So why are you working here?" Leanne asked as she looked around the tidy but aging restaurant.

The waitress bent over and brought her purse out from beneath the counter. She opened her wallet and pulled out a picture of a young girl.

"My daughter, Tamara. Once an escort has a child, well, job opportunities are pretty limited. Her father is one of my former British clients, and my choices now are either serving food or servicing the local men. I don't want my daughter to have a whore for a mother."

Leanne thought about the woman as she undressed for bed later that night. She wondered what would make her change how she lived her life. The phone interrupted her thoughts.

"Miss Clarke, this is Rose, from the coffee shop. We talked earlier? You left your wallet here. My shift ends in about an hour and I'd be happy to bring it by your room if you'd like."

"Are you sure, Rose? You must be tired after a long day. And what about getting home to your daughter?" Leanne didn't want to impose on the woman.

"Five minutes this way or that won't make a difference. It's no big deal, really. Which bungalow are you staying in?" Rose asked.

"Nineteen, my lucky number. I'll leave the porch light on for you. Gee, Rose, that's great. I'm in bed now, catching up on some reading. If I fall asleep and don't hear you, just pound on the door. Thanks a lot, Rose." Leanne put the phone down and lay back on the pillow.

Tropical leaves slashed her face, arms and legs. Pounding footsteps chased her as she ran panting through the jungle. Leanne sat up in bed, sweat running down her temples. She heard a scream, half-human, half-animal. Revolving lights sliced through her bamboo blinds. When
she moved them to get a better view of the street, she cut her finger.

A policeman was bent over a woman. In the dark, Leanne could make out her wild hair, alternating between a brassy gold and bloody red color in the reflection of the police car lights. Thank God, she thought, someone to help the woman. She must have been the one screaming. Leanne let go of the blinds and sucked on her finger to stop the blood. She opened the door and was about to step onto the porch when she looked out at the street.

She watched the cop take a club off of his hip, then unbuckle his belt. As his pants fell around his ankles, the woman started to scream again. A gagging reflex churned up from Leanne’s stomach as she saw the cop grab the woman by her hair and bash her head. The limp body fell backwards, while the predator crawled on top of it. He started to rape her. There was a group of men standing nearby, watching and laughing. When the cop finished, they each took a turn, six of them.

Leanne couldn’t seem to take her eyes off of the nightmarish scene. Instinct told her to close the door and the last thing she saw was the woman lying motionless on the pavement. Leanne’s body crumpled to the floor. She sat with her arms around her knees and her back against the door. Tears burned her cheeks and blood seeped from her finger onto her nightshirt.

As light started to filter through the blinds, she heard footsteps outside her bungalow. There was a knock on her door.

“Miss Clarke, this is the police. We’ve found your wallet.” Her breathing sounded unnaturally loud.

“We caught the woman who stole it from you. She’s in police custody. Let me in and I’ll give you your wallet.”

Leanne’s eyes shot to the locks of her door. Were the deadbolt and chain fastened? The doorknob turned slightly from outside, then stopped. After a few minutes, a note slipped under her door and she heard the sound of footsteps moving away from her porch.

“We have your wallet. Drop by the police station to
pick it up.”

Leanne wadded the paper into a ball and let it fall to the floor. She took a long shower, scrubbing her arms and thighs almost raw. Her fingers rifled through her suitcase tearing through shorts and T-shirts in search of her passport, airline ticket and spare cash. She picked up the phone.

“I need a cab, now. I need to get to the airport.”

The plane felt as though the island air was pushing it down instead of lifting it away from the runway. She watched the buildings, pools and cars become miniature toys. Before dozing off, she thought about a little girl whose mother would never be the same.

--Anne Steger

--Judy Martin