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Broken Life Raft



By: Marie DeFreitas

You are always the first and last person I think of when I think of the island. I don't think of it as much anymore. You were there at nine years old, when I first got off the plane, and you are here now as a text message on my phone at 5am. You're probably getting ready for work.

We met at St. Angela's Catholic primary school and wore uniforms that looked like striped pajamas. You were much louder and braver than I was, and spoke to everyone around us. I liked your confidence. You spoke fast and coated in a Bajan accent. I was quiet and barely could understand a word anybody said. But I could always understand you.

There was a first time I came to your house. We ate chicken nuggets and drank red kool-aid and raced on scooters down your street. That was your dad's house. I could see your parents weren't together, before you told me. You told me your mom lives in St. Kitt's, and you see her once a year.

I looked around your dad's small house, with the creaky floorboards and cement walls. It was crowded with tables and shelves of family photos, many of you, your grandmother and your sisters. But there were also many photos of

couldn't be wrapped around why someone would have pictures of a dead guy in their house.

You were thin and tall. Taller than me, always have been and always will be. I hoped I'd match your height by the time we finished primary school, but I had no such luck. Your legs were long, and you had always been put in the fast races on field day, despite your horrible asthma. I hated that they made you run. I wanted to stop you. You always ran anyway, and fell to the ground afterward, gasping for breath in a sweaty red t-shirt. You were in red house at our school, and I thought that suited your personality. Your skin is milk and honey, and you burn it darker in a bikini on Acura beach. Your hair is dark brown and usually in corn-rows, or straightened slick to your shoulders as we get older.

We stayed in Catholic school five more years. And thinking back on it, would our families have let us go anywhere else? It was all girls and we were going to be taught how to be "ladies". Our uniforms upgraded from striped pajamas to Celtic-looking skirts coming to our knees, white blouses, and matching ties. We watched hair-pulling, shoe-beating fights, and snickered in the background at girls' melodramatic stupidity. We sat in the principal's office on numerous occasions for being "a disgrace to the school", mainly for our throwing bits of chalk across the room at each other, and other shenanigans that dirtied our uniforms. We hid backstage in the auditorium, skipping double periods of I.T. class, and breaking into a back room that was stocked with liquor from pantomime shows. I guess we were poor excuses for "ladies".

your dreams. Later you changed your mind to a flight attendant just so you could see the world. I thought this should make me feel better, but it didn't. I wanted to show you the world.

I once wrote sketchy letters across a notebook when I was seventeen. Words that just seemed to form when I thought of you.

Give me your hand

I can pull you up

We can get out of the water

I still think of them, and think of you. In my mind you are stuck. Stuck in rough water around an island that we were supposed to swim away from as we grew up. But the tide got you and I couldn't go back. So now we drift apart. And now I'm drowning in my ocean of guilt for slowly failing to keep your head above the water.

One day we hid in the kitchen in the food and nutrition room during lunch. We weren't supposed to be in there, but we were always somewhere we weren't supposed to be. We sat on the cold linoleum floor. You spoke quiet and honest, and it was scary because I could see your confidence shaking. You spoke about god and the church, and how you were unsure. I was unsure in a

about such serious things when we were so young. Because I was naive and oblivious, and I *never* knew what to say. So I didn't say anything. But we went to church on Sunday. And this passed.

And one day you wore bruises that took over your back and legs. Your mom moved back and you split the time between her and your dad. She beat you with a metal hanger when she found a boy in the house. You weren't allowed to have a boyfriend. You were supposed to be practicing abstinence. Because you were part of the church, and that's what you're supposed to do. I stared at your bruised skin, once golden, now plagued with grey and dark purple. You told me the story and I just stared at your body in silence and sickness in the pit of my stomach. I felt I couldn't do anything but stare. But soon enough, this passed.

And then one day there were cuts on your wrists. I ask you why and you came with a pathetic excuse of falling out of a tree. I guess I was a little mad that you felt you couldn't tell me the truth. I have never seen you in a tree, and trees don't have razor blades for branches. But I acted like it was acceptable because I didn't want to talk about it anymore. It was scary. And I didn't know what to do. And so, this too, passed.

You asked me to come with you to your church's youth group. I didn't like the sound of it, it sounded formal and boring, and I really didn't want to go. But I did anyway, because you said you hated going by yourself. And I knew not

Your family had you be an altar girl. Every Sunday you'd put on the long white gown and stand on the altar. You loved performing in pantomime shows, but I could see your face. I could see this was a show you didn't want to perform in. You begged me to stand beside you, and I did, for a while at least. But I didn't have to be there, on the altar, or even in the small sandstone church. And so soon enough, I left.

I know you don't come from a bad family. I knew them. I'd known them almost my whole life. I loved them all. But I did know sometimes they put expectations on you that you couldn't escape from, and at times they were the waves that washed over your head. They made it hard to breath. But there was no room for doubt. And I'd always wanted to give you that option. I wished I could've change their minds for you. Made them a little more understanding. There were a lot of things I wish I could've done for you.

The more things happened to you that I couldn't control, the weaker I felt. I never knew what to do or say when things got serious. I felt like you were being swallowed up by waves, and I was as helpful as a broken life raft. I could barely keep myself afloat. But you were the only one I wanted to save.

I had my questions that could never be answered and my doubts that could never be shook, so in my own time I moved away from church. And I always assumed you stayed because you wanted to. Maybe I was too oblivious or too self absorbed, but it has taken me far too long to realize that that was never your reasoning. And then one day I was really leaving. I was going back to the country I was born in, and I wanted nothing more than to take you with me. You cried in the airport.

okay. They never seem to be good. You tell me our friends are falling apart. They are either growing cold, growing up or moving away. They pick meaningless fights that seem like excuses to leave, and you tell me you are too tired to deal with it, so you let them go. I don't blame you.

You work at Disney World for six months. And I sit on a train for eighteen hours because I'm never going to miss a chance to see you. You wear me out as we walk through the parks and you show me where you work. You are proud and tired, but you seem happy. I think this is good for you.

I want to take you back to Orlando when you crawled into my bed in the hotel late at night and we were watching a Katt Williams special. You had your blanket that you've slept with since you were a baby, the same one that was at every sleepover we had as kids. The tv is lighting up your face and you laugh quietly, as if you're afraid you might wake up the empty bed beside us. I'm too aware of the moment and how soon it will slip away. But I try not to think about it, and slink down under the covers beside you and laugh at you laughing.

And now you are a text message on my phone. We talk to enough keep in touch but I know it could be more. But we are both busy. We are in school or at work, and spending time with the people around us overrides our chances for conversations over a telephone. We are older and more mature in some ways, and more lost than ever in others. Once again you tell me you are coming home from a church event and once again you are unsure. You want to take a step back. And you are too afraid to let your family know.



your family again, and in my mind I am selfishly ready to make that sacrifice. Because I think you can do better without them. You can do better somewhere else. Somewhere where you are not forced to love a god you are unsure of, somewhere where you aren't bored and wishing you were surrounded by different people, somewhere where you can be yourself and feel okay. Because I'm worried you don't feel like that enough. And I'm worried that if I say any of this to you, you will simply say I'm overreacting.

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