

## Refresh

Mark James McDonough

The pitch was a "technology free getaway". A twisted, neo-luddite fever-dream. A week away from the electronic restraints of the modern world. The resort and the surrounding area were breathtaking and, yes, the trip was entirely paid for by her work, but Alison still didn't want to go. She didn't like that her boss was dictating how she would spend her holiday. It was like someone chewing your steak for you. She sat on the plane bickering with him internally. At some point in the argument she fell asleep.

*Unable to connect.*

Just before landing her neck snapped downwards and the whiplash woke her up. A puddle of drool had formed all the way down on her knee. She grabbed a rumpled cocktail napkin from the mesh net in front of her and mopped it up. Before collecting her bag from the overhead bin, she scrolled to find the airport WiFi. No dice. When she got to the baggage return, there was no service there either. She grabbed her suitcase and hurried outside.

The taxi stand felt like the rotating dish at the center of a microwave. It was over one-hundred degrees out and she was sure she would melt if she didn't get in a cab soon. With this in mind, she cut in front of some lanky bastard in front of her. There was no verbal protest from her victim but she could see his long, defeated body shrug in the distance as the car pulled away. Alison laughed at how rude she had just been and then accidentally rested her hand on the metal of the seat belt next to her. It was hot enough to brand her. She yelped.

"That wake you up," said the driver, smiling. The cab rumbled towards her hotel through dilapidated buildings and makeshift huts that crouched inside of magnificent wildlife. Everything lay at the feet of the mountains in the distance, two gorgeous green gods that sat casting judgment.

"This may have been my screen saver at one point," she said.

"You need ATM?"

"No, I was just saying... Hey, do you take card?"

"No. We go ATM," said the driver pulling next to a gas station that didn't have any pumps. "You go there no one bother you." There was a picture of the driver and Scooby-Doo taped to the sun visor above his steering wheel. "That's Scooby-Doo," he said, poking it lightly. "I also Scooby-Doo."

Despite the innocent photo, the fact that he made a point to say that the station was safe made her more nervous. Who would even know if someone came and stuffed her into the back of a van? She took her cell phone out and pretended to make a call. After she grabbed the money from the slot, she rushed back to the cab.

"You get service here?"

"Oh, I guess so," she said. "Do you?"

“Yeah, I do. But I live here. I’m just surprise you get it,” he said. “You need WiFi, you go to cafe this way okay? Good WiFi I show you.”

“That’s good. The place I’m going to doesn’t allow any phones or computers,” she said.

“I know. You go crazy place. Rich people pretend to be poor.”

They passed the cafe and kept going through winding roads lined with slumping trees until the hulking structure appeared in the distance above them. She found it difficult to stay angry in the understory of this analog cathedral of a hotel. It was everything the website had described and more, jetting out and sloping implausibly over a diamond ocean. The taxi rumbled to a stop as an employee from the hotel proceeded to her car door. At that moment, an identical cab pulled up next to them and a familiar sickness spread in her stomach. She had only one guess as to who the passenger was.

A pale, elongated leg uncoiled from the backseat. The man from the taxi stand.

"Hello. Sorry about earlier," she said, exiting the cab.

"You know, I think I just became lifelong friends with the driver," he said, laughing heartily. "So, actually, I should thank you."

"Follow me please," said the worker. They trailed the luggage through automatic doors into the lobby. It was good to see that the "technology free" gimmick didn't mean there wasn't any electricity all together. A banner behind a grand wooden counter read "Reconnect and Refresh". She considered smuggling her phone in by way of an unholy place, but decided not to at the last moment. If only she had thought of bringing a dummy cell phone to check in. "*No laptops, phones, pads, or pods!*" warned a laminated decree on the counter. The clerk, a professional stick-up artist, shook her down for any "smart" paraphernalia. She handed the thug her devices and that was that.

The employee that brought their suitcases in instructed her to follow him up the stairs to her room, each of his fingers was gripped tightly around the handles as his muscles rippled through his sleeves. More of a bag man than boy, she couldn't help but stare as he moved in front of her down the third floor hallway. The trail was longer than expected and only stopped when there was no carpet left to walk. Her room, the last one in the building, sat perpendicular to the other doors and faced back out at them. He opened the door and brought her bags inside as she idled in the door frame.

"This is your room, mam. Welcome to your getaway," he said. "Mam? This is your room."

She felt the blood return to her body, if only out of embarrassment, and entered the threshold.

"Thank you," she said, walking past him, managing not to fall.

"There is no phone, so in case of emergency please find the cord next to the sink in your wash room. My name is Jason, and if you need anything I'll be around." He closed the door behind him as she realized she had not offered a tip. She scurried to the peep hole and peered out. There he stood, still, sideways. Her hand reached for the knob but then she paused. During her

moment of hesitation, she watched him as he threw a punch at the wall, stopping right before his knuckle met plaster. With a huff, he abruptly turned his huge frame and continued out of sight.

Confused, she scanned the remainder of her suite and caught the sunlight trying to fight its way through the drapes. She tugged excitedly at the pull-string to unwrap a balcony drenched in color.

2

Alison escaped a treacherous nap and knew that she better find a bar before a headache set in. Her target was down on the first floor past the front desk and at the rear of the resort.. The patio beckoned phoneless guests with fairy lights streaming across the railings. They reflected faintly on the wine bottles mounted behind the bartender. As the matron moved under them, the evening was gradually ringing blue out of the sky, leaving a pink orange canvas in its place. The only people present were grouped together around a table directly in the center of the deck. Alison held them steady in her peripherals as she found a spot on a stool far away from them. Before she could order...

"Join us, wouldn't you?"

The words rang out from a bulbous face in the middle of the small gathering. His flesh was tomato, but not the ruddy tomato red reared from fertile soil and a gardener's care. It was the red of a mistake that struggled itself through into being in the shade, forgotten. She reluctantly walked over to them and as she drew nearer she could see the blood in his cheeks swirling in blotches of white, glowing like a lava lamp. To the left of the rotting vegetable was a gorgeous woman in her early 30s. The neckline of her dress plunged and dared. To his right sat two men, one of which was her lanky, star-crossed acquaintance from the plane. To his left, completing the semi-circle, a considerably more fashionable man around the same age. As they introduced themselves she blurted-

"Well, I already know him. I stole his cab earlier."

"So that's you!" said the well-dressed man named Lucas.

"I was going to let you remain anonymous," said Ben, the victim of her earlier abuse.

They all seemed nice enough, except maybe for the older lava lamp man, Ralph. His wife Ashley was pleasant enough (or drunk) but there was something unsettling about him. It was as if two lit dynamite sticks sat in the folds of his neck. Ralph got up to pull out a chair for her and complimented himself for being a gentleman. Alison sat down next to Ashley and realized she was stuck with these people until it was socially acceptable to leave. Luckily the time moved quickly and empty glasses materialized in front of them each time the hand on the clock moved.

During a lull in the conversation in which Ralph and Lucas spoke in excruciating nuance about the landscaping around their houses, it became evident that the night was approaching its conclusion. Ben mimed blowing his brains out as Ralph entered a diatribe about one of his favorite plants. It really sounded like he wanted to fuck the thing. The girls laughed and it caught the attention of the other two men. Ralph turned in an effort to confront Ben but was interrupted

by the bartender coming over to retrieve some of the glasses. She carried a manufactured smile along with her.

"You have such lovely eyes," said Ralph as his head slithered towards her.

"Oh, I know. Aren't they perfect," said the bartender, who had met a thousand Ralphs. She walked away, and the men watched each leg as they moved.

"That might be the lady for you, Lucas," said Ralph.

"Engaged, actually. So I'll regretfully have to decline," said Lucas.

"Ah, a man of high morals, well that's a shame," said Ralph.

"Well what about you Ben?" said Ashley.

"Oh, no thank you I'd probably faint if I tried to talk to her," said Ben, the unofficial balancing beam of the group, a teddy bear with most of the stuffing removed.

"I could put in a word for you, Ben," said Ralph.

"Oh, yeah. Ralph has had three wives. He must be an expert at talking to women by now," said Ashley as the conversation teetered.

"Yeah I don't even know this one's name," said Ralph, pointing at Ashley.

"Hey, hunny, do you think you could put in a word for me with the bellboy?" said Ashley.

"What I'm not enough for you?" said Ralph in a decidedly different tone.

"Well, you're going to be useless tonight," said Ashley.

"That's enough!" said Ralph, his fist slamming the table.

The briefest of silent moments was then broken by his glass rolling off the edge and smashing against the ground. Lucas and Ben stood up, hands stretched out trying to calm Ralph like dog catchers trying to reel in a hound. Ben stepped closer and received a shove in the chest which caused him to trip over an errant chair.

"I'm fine!" Ralph shouted as he stormed away. Lucas followed him into the resort.

"I think I'll call it a night," said Ben, almost laughing.

Ashley invited him to stay with them but he said it'd probably be better if he went to bed. The bartender casually walked towards the shards of glass with a broom, brushing past Alison and Ashley without sound. Lifeless, they watched the bartender clean until Ashley suggested that they themselves exit. It didn't seem to make much sense to go where Ralph was, so the two of them wandered through the hallways and stairs to the other side of the hotel.

When they reached Alison's room she turned and whispered to Ashley to be quiet. Ashley asked why they needed to be quiet. The two of them burst into laughter and raided the mini-fridge. After comments from both about how much they missed their phones, Ashley told her that she thought she had seen one in the bathroom. She stood up and then returned with a bar of soap pretending to make phone calls with it. They knew it shouldn't be that funny but it didn't matter. They held their stomachs as they bent over, hilarious. Each took turns arguing with a make-believe person on the other end of the soap before resorting to mimicking taking pictures of themselves with it.

"Does he do that a lot?" said Alison.

"What?"

"Ralph. Does he act like that a lot?"

"Oh, yeah. He's a piece of shit," said Ashley laying back on top of the bed

"Is it ever worse than that?"

Ashley flopped back her dress to reveal bruises on her thigh.

"Does he hit you?"

Ashley laid comatose.

"Ashley?"

At first, Alison thought she was pretending to be asleep but then came the snores. Alison rested her head for just a moment and then they were both out.

3

When she woke, Ashley was gone but the inevitable headache was still there. She looked around her scattered room and realized she didn't have anything to do. No TV, computer, phone, radio, record player, or even telegraph. The thought of just lying there made her fidget. She kicked the sheets as if they were the ones to blame and then rose and cleaned herself up. It was best to head down to the lobby to find some form of distraction.

Jason, the muscular helper from the day before, was standing near the front desk and told her that her friends were already back on the patio. Embarrassment struck as it was obvious she had been linked to the riff-raff from the night before. She thanked him and continued to the back. There, with a Bloody Mary a piece, was Ralph, Lucas, and Ashley.

"There she is," said Ashley, no worse for wear.

"Just a little something to take the edge off," said Lucas, with not a single hair out of place on his head.

Ralph said nothing.

"No Ben?"

"Probably still sleeping. Don't think he can handle his alcohol," said Ralph taking a sip of his drink. It wasn't clear if the irony was intentional and everyone giggled disconcertedly. She didn't look forward to spending the day with any of them, especially Ralph, the crimson slob wife-beater maniac, but inhibitions were hard to maintain once her own Bloody Mary arrived. Ashley interrupted asking the waitress to turn on some music but her request was denied.

Alison prayed Ben might walk through the doors and restore some semblance of normalcy. Before long they were back in the momentum of the night before. Ashley asked her to go to the ladies' room with her. On the way back to the table she suggested to Ashley that they go find Ben.

"Shit you like Ben? Girl, I figured you for Lucas," said Ashley.

She didn't like Ben, at least not in that way. She just wanted him there. In lieu of explaining that, she went on letting Ashley assume it was sexual attraction. They asked for Ben's room number at the front desk. The staff refused to give it to them so Ashley told them she had left her peanut allergy medication in his room and needed it immediately. The whole thing was such a ridiculous lie it was hard not to break cover. They wouldn't give them his room number

but did offer to send someone up to the room to check on him. The clerk tasked Jason with the recognizance mission, just as they tasked him with every other chore. He returned to report Ben's door was open and that his bags were in there but that he wasn't.

"He must have gone to the beach or into town," said Jason.

It made sense that he didn't want to be stuck at that back table all weekend. Alison was ripe with envy and, Ben-less, the duo returned to the revelry. The sun-soaked table sat waiting to go nowhere. Music rose from somewhere below, perhaps one of the local's cabins. Instead of melody there was a static, thumping beat and it was tiring, awfully tiring.

"I want to eat," said Alison before standing up and journeying to her room.

The alcohol and the dizzying hallway handicapped her attempt at putting the key into its hole. After a struggle she managed to get inside and plop on her bed. Some time later she heard a hand turning the knob in the hallway. Whoever it was couldn't get the door open.

"What time is it?" said Alison.

The hand at the door began knocking. She looked over at the curtains and could tell there was no light on the other side of them. Alison went silent hoping her visitor would go away. The hand alternated between knocks and twists.

"Let me in please," said a slurred voice.

Alison recognized it despite its impediment. She crept over to the peephole. It was Lucas, his hair now disheveled. He had vomit on the lapel of his shirt. She slowly retreated from the door and decided to wait him out, but he didn't stop. If she told him to leave it might only confirm that she was awake and inside. She instinctively reached for her phone over and over again, constantly reminded it wasn't there. There was the emergency cord in the bathroom but she wanted to avoid causing a scene.

Time was an increasingly complex issue. There was a clock on the wall but she had just noticed it. When did this start? When would it end? How was it possible that he hadn't given up yet? Finally, the noise changed. There were two voices coming from behind the door arguing. She inched again towards the hole and looked out. Lucas stood facing a frame larger than his as they both violently motioned towards each other. Jason was telling Lucas to go to his room. To stop making so much noise. To leave her alone.

Lucas left after a prolonged debate. Jason stayed for a moment, only quickly glancing at Alison's door before following Lucas into the void. The immediate threat was over but her fear still lingered- the fear of not knowing if Lucas would come back, of not knowing what to do for the rest of the night, of not having contact with anyone other than a group of drunk psychopaths. It was too late to go anywhere. It was too scary to sleep. She sat rocking back and forth next to the cord in the bathroom until the panic passed. The next time she opened her eyes she was staring at the bottom of her toilet.

4

Despite the events of the last two days, Alison was determined to make something of the vacation. There was a boat tour advertised in a hotel pamphlet that looked like it could fulfill her

desire for change. According to the schedule, a guide would be leaving with a group from the lobby in twenty minutes. After hurrying to get herself together, she made it to the shuttle just in time. She walked up the rusted steps into the vehicle. The only people seated inside were Ralph and Ashley.

“Look what the cat dragged in,” said Ralph and his abysmal mouth.

“No sign of anyone else?” said Alison.

“Nope! I think we’re scaring them off,” said Ashley.

The van’s engine boomed and the vehicle bounced back and forth down a rough road into the wilderness. They zoomed through the primal tunnel of trees then shot out the other side onto a vanishing beach trail. Ten minutes later, they reached their destination.

The water remained clear and motionless as what was to be their boat swayed gently on top of it. Their guide opened the van’s doors and instructed them to get out. They all walked on a sandy dock to the entrance of the dingy. The guide shouted inside and rang a bell that was dangling from its roof.

No one answered. Their guide suggested that the captain may be out and that they should come back later. Ralph suggested the guide take them out on the boat but he rightly refused. With this, Ralph redirected his anger at Ashley, blaming her for making him come on the excursion in the first place. The driver, knowing his audience, suggested that he could bring them into town to find a bar.

“So, there’s really been no word from Ben? Or Lucas?” said Alison.

“No word from either. I thought we already established that,” said Ralph, now having two conversations at once. He agreed to let the driver take them to town.

“I’m going to just walk the beach for a while, you guys go ahead,” said Alison.

“Are you fucking nuts? You don’t want to be walking alone in this country,” said Ralph.

“There are more dangerous things than foreigners,” said Alison.

“Suit yourself,” said Ralph. He and Ashley climbed back into the shuttle. The driver didn’t care enough to offer his input. They sputtered off and soon the only thing left was the fumes. Alison spent the day swimming with storybook creatures under the alien sun, not another soul for miles. Not another soul for the rest of the day. The air above the water was a lover’s warm breath and when she closed her eyes she could feel it comforting her, letting her know it was by her side as she rested. When she had her fill, she ventured back to the hotel on foot through the rocky roads and the shaft of trees.

The resort was a sight for sore toes but the lobby was empty aside from the woman at the front desk. Alison asked her if she had seen the couple that she was with earlier. She hadn’t. After a trip to her room and a shower, Alison came back and went out to the patio. One drink turned into three as that was the way things went out there, but this time she was at the table alone. She repeatedly turned to the patio doors and no one was coming through them. Courage soon arrived and she walked into the lobby to ask for Jason.

“Jason isn’t working today,” said the woman behind the desk.

“Poor guy finally got a day off huh?”

The clerk didn't respond.

"Can you send someone up to my friend Ben's room to check on him?"

"Ben is gone."

"Ralph and Ashley?"

"No Ralph and Ashley either."

"Lucas?"

"Mam, they're not here."

She asked the clerk if she could have her phone back but the woman refused. Alison spent the rest of the night spinning out of control, unassisted. In the morning she repeated her questions and received the same responses. She journeyed into town and found no one. She checked the patio when she returned and it was empty aside from the bartender and her glimmering bottles. She spun again. She demanded her phone but it wasn't given to her.

The next day she decided, with two nights remaining on her stay, that she would check out early and pay for her own flight home. The clerk begrudgingly obliged to return her belongings and called Alison a taxi. Because she still had no service and couldn't check the flight schedules, Alison asked the driver to drop her off at the internet cafe her first driver had recommended a few days before.

The cafe was in a group of stores that looked like they had fallen together like *Tetris* blocks. There was a jewelry store, a butcher shop, and a few other businesses that she couldn't make out. The bottom middle store had a big sign outfront that had "WiFi" sandwiched between drawings of fireworks and a giraffe for whatever reason. The only lights radiating from inside were those of the computer screens, decade old desktops nearly all taken except for one with a recently extinguished cigarette on the seat. It was so hot out she thought the butt might reignite. Avoiding the dirty seat, she stood with her luggage halfway in the doorway and recklessly connected to the WiFi, begging the green mountain gods in the distance to protect her data. She booked her flight in a panic. It left in one hour. No cabs were driving by and so she tried to hail local cars down to no avail. She asked the person at the desk in the internet cafe to call her a cab, but the person kept saying "no english" and shaking their head. None of the clientele offered to help. None of them even turned to look.

"Scooby!" she blurted. "Do you know the Scooby-Doo guy?"

The person behind the counter thought for a moment and then nodded their head, conceding that they did indeed know Scooby. When he showed up a few minutes later, Alison was so excited that she hugged him.

"I know, I know," he said. "I'm nice guy."

Scooby dropped her off at the vacant airport. She would make her flight with plenty of time to spare after all. When she got through the security line with ease, she broke down crying. It felt so good to be on the way out. She checked the WiFi but her phone still wasn't connecting and then the dim lights above her then went completely out.

*We're sorry to announce that we are experiencing a power outage. Flights may be delayed as a result. We apologize in advance for any inconvenience.*



Rain started to come down outside, at first a spittle, and then a downpour. The water streaked down the glass so furiously she couldn't see out of it any longer. She tugged futilely on her phone screen in an attempt to refresh it.

*We should have another update shortly, but if possible, we recommend that you try and find somewhere else to stay tonight. It's likely all flights will be canceled.*

Alison yanked her phone screen down repeatedly. She kept hitting the refresh button, but nothing was happening. There was no one else at her gate, but she could swear she heard the seats next to her creaking. She turned her phone light to try and pinpoint where the noise was coming from but there was no one there. Footsteps started behind her, at first softly, discreetly and then pounding, stomping. She looked back to her screen and hit refresh. Refresh. Refresh.

The End