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Revelation in the Garden of Gomorra

The only journey worth taking is the journey within.

—William Yeats

I heard whispers of the infamous paradise for years.

Located only an hour and a half from New York City, off the southern coast of Long Island, Fire Island was nothing more than a sandbar, twenty miles long and less than a half mile wide. Distinct ports of call, such as the blue-blood and Jewish communities, and lesbian-land—known as Cherry Grove—appealed to pleasure seekers of various persuasions. Then there was The Pines, the cloistered playground for gay urban men with cash to burn or youth, beauty, and/or drugs to peddle. With shamelessly overpriced accommodations in only a moldy, cinder block excuse-for-a-hotel, The Pines even discouraged casual weekend guests. To be there, you had to belong. This meant either owning, or having access to the exorbitant seasonal house rentals.

Steve, a new acquaintance, invited me to share a house with six other Manhattanites. As I usually sought the comfortable company of my two best friends Candi and Jane, agreeing to spend a long weekend with a houseful of gay male strangers was, for me, exciting yet vulnerable new territory.

It was Independence Day, 1996. Strewn across the ferry floor a headline in a gossip rag trumpeted the Pamela Anderson/Tommy Lee X-rated home movie scandal. I glanced at it and thought wearily, of my newly minted job as Vice President of the Entertainment Division at a prestigious midtown PR agency. The heat was on and the demand always the same: *We want you to get us on Oprah.* Here I learned the agency's fine art of charging tenfold the monthly fee I had once charged my freelance clients, while delivering only half the results.

In the city, I had become one of the 'beautiful people,' and pitied all the average Joes toiling away in suburban oblivion, restricted by social convention, who

did not know that more was better. But beneath the shiny surface, my innermost self-perceptions were haunted and shadowed with doubts. Ambivalent over my sexuality, I remained perennially single, investing most of my time climbing the city's social and professional ladders while gorging the insatiable appetites that served to conceal me from me.

So long as I numbed my feelings with booze, drugs, nicotine, caffeine, sex, bodybuilding, and night-clubbing, everything seemed terrific—except on those rare occasions when that monster called intimacy would rear its ugly head. I avoided the beast at all costs, afraid that if anyone got to know the real me beneath the confident facade, they would surely be repulsed and reject me. Besides, I could never envision taking a male partner to an Italian family wedding back home. Although this alone was enough to keep me single, I pushed away all suitors, convincing myself that none of them were good enough. Instead, I pursued those like me, the emotionally anorexic. And whenever my unconscious desires for abandonment were fulfilled, I felt licensed to beat myself up.

The ferry approached shore and homes of splendor sharpened into focus. With tales of debauchery stoking my imagination, I wondered what 'fantasy island' held in store. The dock teemed with gym-pumped men and a few token women—affectionately coined 'fag hags'—awaiting their weekend guests. The excitement was so palpable I could form it in my hands.

Stepping ashore into this exotic new world, I strolled past a small cluster of deck-terraced businesses, which aligned the right flank of the marina that was nestled into the island like a kidney bean. These included a handful of restaurants, a liquor store, flower shop, hardware store, a gourmet food market—called The Pantry, with cheeses as expensive as caviar and, of course, a pet grooming boutique. A pool-side gym; the Sip & Twirl dance bar and billiards; and The Pavilion nightclub that raged until mid-morning on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday completed the scene.

Following Steve's directions toward the house, I passed a procession of buffed, bare-chested revelers, the scent of sex following in their wake. Since cars were not allowed, not a single inch of pavement spoiled the natural beauty. A thicket of stunted trees with gnarled limbs protruded from a carpet of sand, shaped into a rounded helmet of a roof by winter winds. Wobbly, narrow boardwalks disappeared like roller coaster tracks into hilly thickets, or stretched out toward the bay that glimmered in the distance. Nestled among the vegetation were homes with walls of windows, and sparkling swimming pools reflected hues of blue. With front doors of glass, most homes said, "Welcome, come in," as opposed to the

gated homes I had known in the Hamptons that distinctly said, “Private, keep out.” It was magical, and I wondered what took me so long to visit.

I arrived at the contemporary, two-story party pad. A sweeping ramp ascended from the boardwalk into a wood-decked pool area that served as the home’s front yard. Dance music blared as an over-animated crowd preened about; their gym-tortured muscles swollen beneath waxed, bronzed, and oiled skin. Hiding behind my new Alain Mikli shades, I summoned the bravado to plunge into the arena. Heading toward the entrance gate, I heard a commanding voice rise above the rest.

“Thirteen is not an unlucky number. It’s the opposite; it’s a divine number. There were twelve disciples plus Jesus.” The orator was wrapped in an orange sarong, trimmed with blue and gold. Silver, glitter-encrusted sunglasses framed his face along with a close-cropped moustache and goatee. A vintage straw hat, brimmed with a fresh-cut, long-stemmed orange calla lily completed the ensemble.

The action froze as I came into their view, while the weight of twenty ravenous eyes bore down on me.

“Weeelll, who’s this?” said a blond Ken doll look-alike.

“Hellllloo,” said another buffed, brunette mannequin as he strode through the sliding glass door, while a burly construction worker-type wearing bathing trunks and combat boots said, “Whatcha’ lookin’ for?”

While scanning the crowd for my friend Steve, the guy debating the number thirteen slid over. “Hi, you must be Greg,” he said with a disarming nod. “Steve’s working out, so he told me to watch out for you. I’m Spiros.” He was not handsome in the stereotypically plucked and shiny way. The only one still sporting his natural, dark body hair, he had a distinct, ethnic look that suited him.

“There’s plenty o’ room in my bed, baby,” said yet another reveler, this one wearing a silk, powder blue bikini.

The construction worker-type puffed out his chest like a peacock. “Oh, pulee-aze. If you wanna man instead of Auntie Mame, put your bag in my room.”

Spiros raised his arm like a shield. “Back off, you baboons.” Turning to wink at me, he continued, “I’ll put your bag in my room—where it, and you, will be safe.”

Spiros led me inside and got me settled; assuring me the crowd was harmless, if a little juvenile. After I changed into a swimsuit, he grabbed us each a beer and explained the tangled web of relationships among the housemates. Since the pool-side banter had degenerated to the gay mundane—sex, drugs and innu-

endo-laced insults—Spiros suggested we head off to the ocean, which shimmered in the distance.

“Spiros is an unusual name,” I said as we settled on sugar-white sand I could not believe existed so close to New York City.

“It means ‘Spirit’ in Greek. Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?”

“Um, I’m not really sure.” I fidgeted and started picking at a cuticle. “I mean...I was brought up Catholic, but the only person who ever mentioned it was my father’s sister, so I guess I’ve never thought much about it.”

Spiros drew back and raised both his palms to the sky. “Well, you are what you believe. If you don’t know what you believe, then how can you know who you are?”

As I shrugged, intrigued as much as annoyed, Spiros leaned in closer. “Do you know what channeling is?”

“Sure.” I lied in an effort to redeem myself.

“Well, I saw a channeler last week.” He removed his sunglasses for effect. “Her name was Elmarilla.”

I raised an eyebrow in jest. “Elmarilla?”

“It’s a great name, isn’t it?” Spiros picked up a handful of sand and let it slide back through his fingers as if spreading glitter over paper. “Anyway, among other ‘frequencies’ that were present during the channeling, I was told that a man in India was also present—apparently in hologram form.” He looked up to catch my eye. “When I asked her what this meant, I was told that an entity named Sai Baba was at that moment sitting in meditation. Supposedly, as an *avatar*, he had the ability to be present.”

I cocked my head. “What’s an *avatar*?”

“An *avatar* is a fully enlightened being, basically what Christians believe Jesus was. It literally means the descent of Divinity into flesh.” Spiros smoothed the wrinkled edge of his sarong. “I was told that this Sai Baba was beckoning me to visit him. Apparently he was saying, ‘Come see for your self.’ I did some research, and I’m thinking about going to find him.”

As I stammered, fumbling for a response, Spiros’ eyes lit up like a slot machine jackpot. “Yes, I think I see it. You’re the one who’s gonna’ travel with me to visit him.”

I darted my eyes, looking for an escape. “Yeah, right.”

“I was told in the channeling that I’d play a role in helping people to awaken.” Spiros straightened his posture and tilted his head back. “She also said that I’d meet a man who’d play the role of the harbinger—or the herald—in helping me become who I’m supposed to be.”

“What a freak,” I thought, averting my eyes from his.

Spiros then gazed out to sea. “But it’s strange, because I was told this man’s name would be John—not Gregory; and that he’d be from an island.”

My breath evaporated. “Well...my middle name is John.”

“Hhhmmm.” He squinted and leaned in closer. “And what about the island?”

“This is weird.” I shot my hand out in protest. “I was brought up on an island named Jamestown...in Rhode Island.”

Spiros clapped his hands in delight. “Oh my God. Not only are you named John, but you’re also from several islands! I mean, you live on the island of Manhattan...and we’re even sitting now on Fire Island.”

Not only did the bizarre coincidences pique my curiosity, but also I found Spiros’ enthusiasm entertaining.

“What do you do for a living?” he then asked. “Public relations?” he repeated as his eyebrows jumped. “Interesting.”

“Oh?”

He nodded his head. “Yup, you’re the herald.”

Although my cynical side insisted he was an insane egomaniac with a messiah complex, my more adventurous side found him compelling. I dug my feet into the sand and thought of Joyce and Coleman, my parents’ globe-trotting friends who captured my imagination with their tales of adventure. Coleman’s voice rang in my mind’s ear: *You must go to India...it’ll change your life forever.*

With that thought my posture softened. “It’s interesting, because even though I just got promoted to a VP at this fancy mid-town PR firm, I feel like all I do is work just for the sake of financial gain—and then I just ingest it all anyway. I always wonder what the point is.”

Spiros’ finger shot upwards. “Aha—isn’t that the ultimate question?”

“I suppose it is.” I turned away and started playing with the sand. “I’ve been taking stock since turning thirty a few months ago. After all, I spend my days publicizing Piaget’s million-dollar diamond watches, Hugo Boss’ new golf collection, and trying to enhance QVC’s fashion credibility. But there must be more to life besides business and money and pleasure.”

Spiros lowered his eyelids and nodded his head again. “Yup, you’re the one.”

Spiros seemed to experience the world differently from any one I had ever met before. I found him fun and strangely absorbing, if a bit eccentric. When the sky began to cloud over we returned to the house, where I finally saw Steve.

“I can see you and Spiros hit it off,” he said.

I blushed and started rubbing my thigh. “I guess so. He’s definitely an...interesting character.”

“You really think so?” asked Spiros, who suddenly appeared from behind me. “Why don’t you take a walk with me to the market to buy some stuff for dinner?”

I shrugged my shoulders and stammered. “Uh, well...I really haven’t caught up with Steve yet.”

“Oh, go on,” said Steve, shooing us away with a wink. “We have all weekend to hang out.”

Although there was only the faintest of drizzle, Spiros unfurled a gargantuan umbrella and wrapped his arm tight around my waist, as if protecting us from a raging nor’easter. I smiled over his clever little ploy. “Boy, I wouldn’t want to melt from a little mist.”

“Just wait until you get to know me better.” Spiros stared straight ahead with a mischievous grin. “More than just your defenses are gonna’ melt away.”

I pursed my lips in jest and shot him a flirtatious glance. “We’ll see about that.”

Later, while Spiros and Steve prepared dinner, I slipped away from the house that rocked like New Year’s Eve and ambled along the shore. *The messenger? The herald?* Of what, I could not imagine.