



Tortola Means

Nadria Tucker

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TOURISTS THINK I'M LYING when I say I can't swim, so I tell them I've already experienced enough ocean for a lifetime—that, growing up on Tortola, I've seen every type of coral, every kind of fish, swam in every inch of water surrounding the little island—but the truth is I never learned how. I was too busy learning to cook and clean.

I squeeze water from the mop and head inside, careful not to dirty the tile patio I just finished. My last job of the day is dinner. I'll cook for the father and son, set the table, clear the table, and wash dishes. I'll go home, pocketbook full of cash, and eat plain noodles with broth, easy, cheap. I dig through the cabinets and drawers, sort through the dishes, tossing rusted pots and splintered wooden spoons in the trash. How could they let everything rot?

“You need new things.”

I walk down from the big house to the rocky shore, stand near the edge of the dock. The son swims over, his strokes so perfect I can tell he's had lessons.

“We got all new last winter.”

“Nothing lasts forever.”

“Is that a bit of island wisdom?” He straps on a snorkeling mask and ducks his face under the water. “You snorkel?”

“I don't swim.”

“You don't have to. Hold onto the dock and stick your face under water.”

“I don't know . . .”

“If you're scared, hold on to me.”

You get used to tourists telling you what to do, but this is different—like he's asking. Without hardly thinking whether I should (I shouldn't), I strip down to my underwear and sit on the edge of the slimy dock. It could use a good scrub. I let him help me into the water and I suck in air as the cool wet hits my thighs, stomach, chest. He shows me how to breathe through the snorkel mask and when I grab on to him, some of the scared tension releases from my body, but not all of it. He's too close. I breathe in deep and dip my face under the surface to look below. Coral. This close to shore, its dead, each piece a bone white hunk broken off from large formations farther out to sea. Still, there's beauty in the chalky forms, and I want to dive under, grab hold of one, pull it up to the surface, clean it off, a trophy, my reward for overcoming fear of water, of him.

I go inside to dry off. Family pictures and island crafts, mostly roosters, cover every wall and table in sight, like in every other house on the island, tourist or not. But roosters look different in a one-room apartment in a run-down, whitewashed building. Family pictures look different on my walls.

He leads me over to an alcove, accessible through a screen door and open to the sky. Inside, a fishpond, potted palms, and a hanging birdcage. Ponds are normal in the houses I work—a kind of do-it-yourself-if-you-have-the-money pest control. The fish eat mosquito eggs. But I've never seen a bird used this way. Blue and brown with a black tail, it pecks at whatever insects foolishly make their way into its gilded home.

“Turtle Dove. It's what ‘Tortola’ means.”

“Can I kiss you?”

Maybe we’ll fall in love, get married, have beautiful mixed-race babies who’ll never have to worry about money, never have to scrub a stranger’s toilet or even their own.

“I’ve got to get back to work.”

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About the author:

Nadria Tucker was born in Atmore, Alabama and grew up living the small town Southern life, which had a great influence on her work. She received an English degree from Auburn University before getting her master's in creative writing at UAB. Her work has appeared in several literary magazines. Her story "The Last Parade" was a finalist in the *New Southerner's* 2010 literary awards, and other stories have won *THE2NDHAND's* 2007 and 2008 short story competitions. Her work is featured in *THE2NDHAND's* best-of anthology, *All Hands On: THE2NDHAND After 10*, available online.

Tucker's collection of short fiction, [*The Heaviest Corner on Earth*](#) is available now on Amazon.com.

An excerpt:

Perfect Enough

I MESSED UP IN REHEARSAL, but I tried. All the white girls got it right.

The choreographer, a white man maybe Mamma's age, called for a five-minute break. I walked off the stage, down into the pit to talk to him.

"You got me up front, and I'm not the best dancer. Put me in the back. Please."

"You'll be fine, Miss Ebony. You got rhythm. It's in your blood, honey."

He winked and held his hand up for a high five. I gave it to him.

After rehearsal, I jogged home, sweat soaking through my tracksuit. The overstuffed book bag strapped to my back weighed me down, making the workout harder, like a soldier in full gear. I had to drop another five pounds before the pageant—in a perfect world, I'd drop ten.

Past a sign: "Welcome to Irondale."

318 sat next to a field full of cows and the bones of old or burnt-out trailers. In the morning, the air smelled like shit. Our single-wide—green with white stripes—had nearly overgrown with wisteria that wrapped snake-like around the whole thing, creeping in between the seams, making the whole place drafty inside.

I ran up onto the too-small porch and stood for a while, stretching and shivering. The tracksuit didn't keep out the cold.

A large print of black nude bodies hung above the second-hand kitchen table.

I sat under that print at the small table eating a salad and re-reading *Win!*. Mamma sat across from me, picking at a plate of ribs and half-staring at the TV in the living room. She had long braids in her hair today, fresh fake nails, too much makeup, and her nametag—on her way to work.

"Just don't be disappointed if you don't win," Mamma said.

“What?”

“Don’t be surprised if a white girl wins.”

“If a black man can get elected president, I can win a beauty pageant.”

“Don’t forget to call Aunt Sandra today and thank her. Don’t know why she wasted her money paying for that pageant. Should’ve given it to me to pay some bills around here.”

“I already thanked her. I call her all the time. How come ya’ll don’t talk?”

Mamma threw on a slouchy coat and left. I did the dishes, like always.

I went into the bathroom and started the after-dinner beauty routine: tooth whitening strips and skin bleaching cream. The strips burned my gums and the cream burned my face, but the pain was worth it. I swore I could see tiny little difference, a shade or two, and that made me smile—a perfect, white smile.

With the strips on my teeth and the cream on my face, I looked at myself in the mirror and practiced: “What’s the biggest problem facing teenagers today? Ourselves. We’re a generation of lazy underachievers who need to learn that hard work pays off. What’s your town known for? Cow manure! Hold for laughs . . . Actually Irondale is the setting of Fannie Flagg’s famous novel *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*. Why’d you enter the Junior Miss Birmingham pageant? To win . . . to go to State . . . then Nationals . . . maybe get the hell out of Alabama.”

I smiled, fake.

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