

Redemption Paradise

I leaned over the ferry's railing, captivated by the deep turquoise waters of Lake Huron, as a foghorn's blast signaled our departure from the Tobermory terminal. This was the final leg of my escape from chaotic Chicago. I'd just spent the last ten hours driving the winding roads, trying to unwind how I'd messed up my life. A complete break from my toxic environment made sense. Maybe the island's tranquility would be a balm for my soul and finally silence those fanged voices of self-talk.

The last crossing to Manitoulin Island was nearly empty except for an elderly couple, grandkids in tow, returning from Toronto, and a young guy in denim shorts and a black hoodie with a matching backpack. As the ferry approached the island dock, the knots of tension in my shoulders loosened, and a pine-scented breeze filled my lungs. The island's lush forests concealed its legendary lakes, but the distant cries of seagulls above promised a week of relaxation.

I stood by my Jeep, mindlessly examining my new luggage as if it held the answers to my inner turmoil. Once offloaded, I drove across the parking lot to a small welcome center for a map and some fishing advice. I must have been the only one in need of a welcome.

Ah, but what a welcome it was. I was greeted by a dark beauty with a warm kindness radiating from her brown eyes. She looked around twenty, with smooth coffee skin marred only by a one-inch scar under her right eye. Her vague accent was neither Acadian nor English, and her long, shimmering black hair cascaded over her shoulder like a waterfall. Based on her exotic features and the cultural displays by the counter, I suspected she had First Nation lineage. Her melodic voice was soft and sincere. "Welcome to Paradise. What can I do for you?" she asked.

Searching for a witty answer, I scanned the room. On the walls hung fur gloves, hats, and other handmade items for sale. We were alone. "Did I miss the rush hour crowd?"

Her smile wilted as she lowered her gaze to the floor. "Yeah. It was shortly before the pandemic. And it never came back."

Off to a great start. "Sorry to hear that. After Covid hit Chicago, lots of great restaurants and clubs never re-opened. The others still can't seem to get enough help." I extended my hand. "I'm Daniel."

Her silky yet firm and confident handshake sent shivers down my spine. "Nice to meet you. I'm Elara. Is this your first visit?"

I tried not to stare into those eyes. "Thirty-two, and I've never left the big city. It's insanity has shuffled my brain. I'm hoping a week in this place can help me reset."

Damn. Just two minutes into our conversation, I was oversharing in Al-Anon meeting mode. My confession must have caught her off guard.

She nervously giggled. "I hope you're not one of those guys expecting to live off the grid here. We're slow-paced but have most of the modern comforts."

"Perfect. All I want is to relax, fish, and practice my mindfulness in peace."

She unfolded a map and spread it across the glass counter. Oh, solitude—that we have plenty of that. And great fishing, too. While you're here, you must check out our waterfall." She traced the bottom quarter of a single road that circled the island. "It's just a short walk from the road. Where are you staying?"

"Klemmers' Bed and Breakfast on Bass Lake."

She leaned in and turned the map a little more toward me. Her scent, a mixture of honeysuckle and musk, was almost hypnotic. "That's just seven kilometers past the waterfall on your right. The Klemmers are good people. They'll treat you like family." She pointed to the edge of a small lake on the other side of the island. "And here's a little beach that's always empty. A perfect place to meditate. This whole island has a tradition of spirituality. My family belongs to the Sheguiandah First Nation." She looked away. "I could tell you stories for hours."

Now I was hooked. "I'd love to hear them. Maybe we could get a drink sometime while I'm here."

She jotted her phone number on the back of the First Nation brochure and handed it to me. "That would be nice. I'm sure you'll have more questions on the island by then."

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I drove off, tickled at my good fortune but with a nagging dilemma. One of the main conditions of the twelve-step recovery program is NO RELATIONSHIPS for at least the first year. I rationalized this was just a bored girl doing her job, and if I didn't go there, neither would she.

As soon as I passed the wooden gates of the ferry terminal, the two-lane dirt road laced its way through dense green forests. Towering cedars formed a majestic canopy above, transforming the sunlight into dappled patterns on the road. Every so often, the trees parted, revealing glimpses of a crystal blue lake bordered by more unspoiled wilderness. This was, indeed, God's country.

In less than fifteen minutes, a hand-painted sign signaled my destination. The gravel driveway led to a pair of cabins perched on the edge of a steep grassy hill that dropped to a breathtaking lake. A knee-high rooster ran toward me with an unwelcoming crow that brought my hosts out of their cabin. Verner was a head shorter than me and built like a bull. He greeted me in an Eastern European accent. "Welcome to paradise. This is my wife, Estell. "

I nodded to Estell, a plain but pretty lady in her forties, dressed in shorts and a stretched-out tee shirt. She moved closer to Verner, took his hand, and smiled. "We have plenty of chickens, so I hope you like eggs for breakfast."

"Love 'em. I've never been much for breakfast, but I'm on vacation," I replied, gazing out over the water. "This view is magnificent. I came here for peace and quiet and hope to try my hand at fishing. I've heard this is the place for it."

Verner perked up. "I've built a dock and can rent you a small boat. I'll show you the basics and fix you up with bait," he said enthusiastically. "You'll catch all the bass and whitefish you can handle. And we'll gladly prepare it for you, native style, if you like a little spice."

I followed Verner to my cabin for a walkthrough. There were two rooms. The kitchen had an ancient cast iron stove for cooking and was the only heat source during the brutal northern Great Lakes winters. Next to the stove, a swayback butcher block counter housed a chipped white porcelain sink. A rickety table for two stood on the other side of the room. The other room held a single bed with a nightstand above, which was a small, wall-mounted steel mirror for shaving. The only accessory was a modest jute rug at the doorway. I opened a closet door to find a grossly discolored toilet and another small sink—no shower or tub. The cabin wasn't my idea of paradise, but I wouldn't be inside very much.

I took a short ride into town, where three restaurants and a few small shops were clustered. Across the road was a quaint marina with a half dozen commercial fishing boats and one tourist sailboat advertising sunset dinner cruises. Sunset was near, but the port-a-potty-sized ticket shack was closed. Beat from the trip, I gobbled up a mediocre burger, humming Jimmy Buffet's *Cheeseburger in Paradise*, and returned to my cabin.

The following morning, I slept until almost noon, wondering what that overgrown rooster did for a living. After a quick ham omelet, I set out to explore. My first stop was the waterfall Elara had marked on my map.

I heard it before I saw it—the exhilarating crackle of the fall pulled me down a footpath to a fifty-foot wall of white water. It crashed into a large pool, sending a ten-foot plume of rainbowed spray into the air. I climbed down a series of rocky steps to a recessed plateau and froze. Elara was on the other side of the pool, reading a book and dangling her feet in the water.

I yelled. "I can see why you like this place. It's amazing."

Startled, she looked up, smiled, and patted the spot next to her. "It's one of my favorite places. Join me. I'm on my lunch break."

I maneuvered around the pool and sat beside her. That haunting scent lingered over her. She scooted closer and took my hand. "I come here to sort things out when I'm upset. The white noise of the falls is relaxing. I know it will help you, too."

I peered into her troubled, dark eyes. "How can you be upset in Paradise?"

"You'd be surprised," she whispered as her full lips parted, and she pressed against me with a deep kiss. She slid my hand under her tee shirt. Her bare breasts heaved, and my head was spinning.

Things were happening way too fast. I'd read somewhere that Native American women trained to please a man well before marriage. It had been a long time since I'd been laid, and this could be epic. If ever there was a time to ignore that Al-Anon rule, this was it.

She pulled away, and her infectious smile brightened her face. "Gotta get back to the center. Go fish with Verner. Sunset is just before eight tonight. Meet me at my secret beach at seven. Bring your catch, and I'll cook it right there. Then we'll watch one of heaven's dinner shows."

Was she teasing? I had to catch my breath before answering. I tossed a small stone into the pool as if making a big decision. "What if I don't catch anything?"

She laughed. "Listen to Verner, and I'll guarantee you'll have to decide which one to bring. Visitors always rave about the whitefish."

"Deal. See you then."

She stood and nodded. "I can't miss that next ferry, just in case." She added with a wink, "You'll enjoy that sunset."

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I drove back to my cabin in disbelief. Only two days into my quest for solitude and healing, I was ready to blow it all. After a long argument with myself, I decided that, at worst (best), this would be a one-week fling. And this whole place was highly spiritual. My fellow addicts in bible boot camp would approve.

I still had time to change my mind and planned to go fishing anyway, so I called on Vernon.

As expected, I caught four good-sized fish. Two were whitefish. Vernon packed the largest on ice while I went to my cabin for a quick clean-up and a change into fresh shorts and a sweatshirt. On my way out, when I mentioned dinner with Elara, my hosts shot each other glances of concern.

Eager to get started and with zero traffic, I arrived at the secret beach fifteen minutes early and parked in a small clearing. I carried the cooler with the fish and a bottle of chilled wine to a circle of blackened campfire rocks a few yards back from the water. Having never started a campfire, I sat by a large piece of driftwood, waiting for my date.

I studied the complex patterns of holes and channels in the driftwood. *Carved by nature, a tribute to God's artistry.* As I turned the piece for a closer look, a bag of familiar pills slipped out onto the coarse sand. I knew what they were—round, orange with "OC" etched on one side and "40" on the other. Behind it came another bag with an injection kit.

Jesus fuck! Oxy. Where do I have to go to escape? I closed my eyes and saw Rita, my last girlfriend, lying lifeless on my bed, yellow foam on her chin. So much for my spiritual serenity.

Were these Elara's? This *was* "her secret place." I pushed the bags back into the driftwood and tried to decide how to handle this.

In a few minutes, she pulled up next to my car. I forced my best welcoming wave.

Elara ran over, knelt beside me, and swept her arm toward the lake. "So, what do you think?" She was dressed in a short, fringed outfit of some sort of animal skin. Her bare midriff teased. Just what I didn't need.

I stayed calm. "Beautiful. No wonder you keep it a secret." I pulled the wine from the cooler. "For our dinner show."

She picked up the bottle and examined the label. "Nice, but let's save it for next time. I've got something special for tonight." She lifted one end of the driftwood and held the bag of pills up to the light. "Ever try Oxy? You said you're here to escape and explore. That's what it's for."

I was ready to explode, then realized this wasn't her problem. She had no idea. It was time to level with her. I took a deep breath and began. "I should have told you. I'm a recovering addict, just six months out of rehab. I felt myself slipping, and I borrowed money to come here."

She shook her head and stared down at the pills. "I'm so sorry."

I wished I could help her but couldn't help myself. "How long have you been using?"

"Only a few months. After the tourist trade dried up, my friends and I had lots of free time. We experimented with drugs as a way to boost our spiritual ceremonies. Our ancestors used lots of natural enhancers, so why not? We bought some through the dark web and learned how to shoot up. You know how it feels."

My patience ran out. I yelled, "Sooner or later, this shit will only enhance death. Trust me. It killed my girlfriend and a bunch of my buddies. I came close too many times. This trip was step thirteen in my program." My hands were trembling.

She put her hand on my knee. "OK. Let's just have that wine tonight."

I brushed her arm away and stood. "I've gone through hell to get clean, and thanks to you, I'm ready to give in. I can't. Gotta go." I grabbed the cooler and walked to my car without looking back.

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All night, I lay awake, confused and disgusted, having long discussions with my imaginary Rita, wishing I could have saved her. She blamed me for her death and offered no answers. I thought about each of my overdosed friends and thanked God I wasn't with them. At seven in the morning, too early to prepare for my noon ferry, I set out for a last look at that secret beach.

I wandered to my car, hoping not to set off the rooster. A white paper-wrapped box lay on the dewdrop-covered hood. I sat behind the wheel and turned on the overhead lights. The package contained a handmade dream catcher from the welcome center. Under it was a note that read:

Dear Daniel,

I wish you'd told me about your addiction earlier. I would never have tempted you. I know you should leave. Someday, I'll be clean too. When I do, I'll call.

Until then, this dreamcatcher I made will keep you safe.

Elara

On the drive to the beach, I remembered that when we met, Elara was crafting a dreamcatcher out of wood and string.

As I walked from my car toward the beach, I saw her lying in the sand next to the circle of charred rocks. The fire pit was smokeless. I wanted to turn and leave but was drawn to her side. I owed her an apology and a civil goodbye. Her blank stare and pallid skin told the story—Rita all over again! Her arm was draped over an opened handwritten journal.

I collapsed beside her and stroked her cold cheek, longing to see that smile again. I gently slid the journal from under her arm and began reading. Halfway through, I had to stop. This girl was not looking for thrills; she'd endured years of mental and sexual abuse from her father. She was afraid to tell anyone, knowing he'd deny it and no one would believe her. It was too bad he already had died. I wanted to kill him. I slammed the journal closed and laid it next to her.

As if by magic, the journal blew open to her final entry. I had to read it. She wrote of our meeting and how she prayed I would take her away to beat our addictions together. Her last sentence ended, "...but I drove him away." With tears welling in my eyes, I closed the journal and swore to honor her memory and stay clean.

At least for one of us, this would be a paradise of redemption.