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ENGH 396

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March 14, 2016

Learning to Jump

“Why are we stopping here,” I thought to myself. I had learned in my few days in Jamaica that if I just let go and trust my driver that I probably wasn’t going to die. Probably. I met Siebert when I skirted through customs and muscled my way through the throng of vendors and taxi drivers to find him standing there flashing his two teeth while perspiring in his Sunday best holding a bit of cardboard with my name written in bold black ink. That instant connection was enough to send the small crowd I had gathered as a single woman traveler skittering off to find another customer upon whom to prey; affording me a much needed respite.

I held my breath as I hauled myself up with embarrassing ineptitude into his rusted out old van, sighing with relief once settled despite the fact that I could see the road whizzing by through the floorboards and see even less of it through the cracked and muddied windshield. We were both visibly uncomfortable, but he was clearly more experienced at this than I, so he kept up the friendly chatter while we drove the often harrowing ninety minutes or so to the inn. I had eschewed the big all-inclusive resorts in favor of the relative safety and tranquility of a small inn set on 7-mile beach in Negril. I wanted to experience Jamaica, not a resort with water slides and hot dogs.

Siebert always opened the car door for me. He did so now, and I readily jumped down from my perch not really knowing why. Siebert was taking me to see the waterfalls on this day, but all I could see was a beautifully decorated house colorfully set into the lush green of the mountainside. Soon, a giant man with a wide smile stepped out through the jungle overgrowth and onto the pitted gravel road to greet Siebert like an old friend, which, as it turns out they were. They exchanged greetings in the pigeon language I had yet to grasp, and I was introduced with a warm handshake and an inquisitive gaze. He wanted to know why I was in Jamaica alone. Most people I met wanted to know the answer to that question, and the truth was that I didn’t really know. I booked the trip on a lark, figuring that I could always chicken out later if I wanted to, but I never did. Siebert and his friend took a long time exchanging gifts and goods and even cracking open a coconut for me to drink from – Siebert had kindly thought to bring me a straw from the kitchen which he presented to me with care. I hated every sip of the warm liquid, but smiled and nodded as I chugged it down like I was dying of thirst.

Eventually, out came a battered pair of water shoes. That is the reason we stopped. I had sandals, but Siebert did not approve, so we stopped at his friend’s house to get water shoes for me to wear when we went to see the waterfalls. They were plastic clogs with a strap across the top, sweaty but not uncomfortable. I certainly did not see the need, but I had done well enough so far without questioning our every move, so I agreed and squeaked along, uncharacteristically silent on the matter, but quite happily back to the van. We wound our way further up the mountain respectfully greeting each of the Rastas tending their steeply sloping gardens as we rolled with the rutted road and navigated one wheel at a time over the portions completely swept away. Children played on the foundations of houses set on steep embankments where red tiled floors met with air and several thousands of feet free fall to the canopy of trees below. Goats and cows dotted the side of the road. Women with baskets and babies walked along and waved as we passed. Tiny bars marked easy stop-offs to sip a lukewarm beer in the humid air of the jungle before continuing along our journey.

When we finally made it to the waterfalls, I could see no sign of these majestic natural wonders. Well, I could see a small wooden sign that pointed to an uneven and unending set of wood lined earthen stairs that descended into the jungle. “Seriously? What was I doing here in this place with this man and these stairs so steep that there are resting areas along the way,” asked my inner angsty, overweight, over air conditioned and iphoned, comfortable American self. As a way of answering, I took Siebert’s offered hand and the first step down. We did rest along the way and I tried not to think of making the return trip. Siebert’s education had been in agriculture, so he delighted in pulling things from the trees and putting them to my lips or to my nose whenever we stopped. I was drenched in sweat by the final step and a Rasta kindly called out to me, “Hello pretty lady!” I returned his greeting with a polite, “Hello Rasta!” He smiled and leaned on his rake taking leisurely pleasure in watching us walk away until he could no longer see us.

The owner of the land was resting near the entrance to the large grass covered reception building; an ancient man who spoke with Siebert at length but did not look at me directly. I paid the modest fee and turned to Siebert thinking we were going to go see the waterfalls, but he simply smiled his nearly toothless grin and introduced me to my young guide and told me he would be here when I returned. Returned? From where people? I am not getting any of this at all. The guide took me to a semi-open, but covered hut and told me I could change there if I liked, but I already had my bathing suit on under my shorts and tank, so a quick shimmy out of them and I was ready to see the waterfalls, if indeed I was to get wet.

So, I squeaked down the narrow dirt path in my rented shoes and swirly purple swimsuit, clumsily following the guides’ carefully placed steps and when we stopped, I looked up from watching his nimble bare feet navigate the tricky earth to find myself enclosed in a jungle amphitheater filled with the sound of rushing water. Large smooth gray rock, some as big as small cars, on one side and slanted squared rock on the other. The large smooth slabs of stone stepped their way up and away from a large inky black pool of water just a little larger than a huge hot tub, but with unknowable depth, and up into the jungle canopy so high that I couldn’t see the origination of the fast moving water. The white water shot over the smooth stones and into the inky black pool causing the water to swirl ominously. Well, this was a truly beautiful and lush tropical sight, but not the grand stories-tall waterfalls I have seen and even anticipated; however, I was glad I had the opportunity to climb down and see the pretty view and enjoy the nice and unexpectedly manicured rolling lawns in the middle of the jungle, and wait, what? “Did you say jump,” I asked. “Yeah, mon! Jump!”

“The fuck?” No. No. And absolutely no way was I just jumping some twenty feet or so into that pool of swirling black water.

So, I did. I felt my toes slice into the cold water first and instantly my whole sweaty, irritated and quaveringly terrified body was engulfed by the refreshingly cold and effervescent water churning and pushing me toward the relative safety of a low set stone slab. My guide grinned at me, water dripping from his nose and eyelashes – his own jump having followed mine. I grinned back. He held out his hand and hauled me out of the water to make our way to edge around the side of the falls where I, once again, balked. How could I trust my feet in those pools of white water? How did I know I wasn’t going to step off into a hole or off a ledge? I didn’t. I couldn’t. I only knew that if I wanted to see more of these beautifully terraced falls set deep into the jungle mountainside, I was going to have to have a little faith. I had, after all, already jumped.

For the next three hours, I put my life in the hands of a surefooted, smooth faced teenager who literally pulled me up and over and through fall after fall after fall, until I sat shaking and cold, despite the tropical humid warmth of the land, against a smooth boulder with water shooting over my head laughing so hard I felt the hot sting of my tears sear their way down my cheeks. We moved on after my many rests and I continued to place every foot exactly where he told me to and when I simply could not lift myself, he did it for me. Another group soon overtook us and one of the guides shouted down to me as I floated on my back resting in a pool of water, “You are an angel sent down to us from heaven!” I felt like it too. I felt strong and beautiful and powerful. Because when I went to Jamaica, I learned how to jump.