



Hunting Turtle

TO BELONG TO A PLACE, SOMETIMES
YOU HAVE TO CONFRONT THE DARKNESS



BY KRISTA LANGLOIS | PHOTOS BY AMI VITALE

Sometimes while Jola is out fishing, Rakki lays down on the cool floor, lights a mosquito-repelling coil, and rests flat on her back next to her children. No pillow, no blanket, just hard linoleum laid over cement. A wind blows in from the lagoon and flutters past green Hawaiian-print curtains. She falls asleep instantly.

In her sleep, she senses Jola's wooden skiff splutter into the shallow water, hull scraping against sand. It's after midnight and she gets up wordlessly, stepping over the murmuring shapes of her five children. Outside, in the open-air cookhouse, the embers from the evening fire are still glowing red.

Squatting on her heels, Rakki adds a few more dried coconut shells and blows on the coals. Flames leap. A fire made from coconuts burns differently than a fire of wood, its crackling more delicate, like glass shattering under intense heat. Soon, Jola comes up the beach in the moonlight with the night's catch on a string: butterfly fish, humphead wrasse, parrotfish—all neon scales and bulging eyes and beaks made for snapping at bits of coral.

Jola's world is on the reef. Rakki's is here on land. Innumerable humid nights she crouches on the crushed coral ground of the cookhouse, cleaning the fish her husband brings home. A lone bulb dangles from the corrugated metal roof. A rack of bananas sways heavily in the breeze. The kids sleep, and Rakki and Jola talk quietly, as parents do at night. From my own narrow cot, I hear them murmuring in a language I still don't understand. The words drift into my subconscious, and as I settle back to sleep I dream of Jola's world, the one beneath the ocean's surface, the one where sharks and turtles and grotesque giant grouper rule. That's the world I want to be a part of.

On the island of Ebon in the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the world above the water is sun-bleached and hot, the sand sprouting a few jungly plants and a fringe of coconut palms. This is the world of women and children; the world to which I've belonged since I arrived here a few months ago. But like an iceberg whose bulk lurks below the sea, the island represents only a fraction of the spectrum of life on this tropical atoll. Below the water are more colors and shapes than anyone could dream into existence, an intact reef where the only activity for the past two thousand years has been subsistence fishing.

In the morning and early afternoon, I teach school in a stifling classroom tucked into the jungle. Geckos hide behind the bookshelf and dart out onto the wall to wage battles with cockroaches. Kids clamor for my attention. From the open window, I can see the inviting coolness of

the lagoon: a bowl of turquoise water forty miles across, dropped into a ring of islands.

Most afternoons, after banging a wrench against a rusted scuba tank to announce that school is over, I change out of my muumuu and into boardshorts and a baggy t-shirt—culturally appropriate swimwear. Then I wade far into the lagoon until I reach the spot where the knee-high coral drops over a shelf into deep water.

The reef is every color there is: purple, blue, white, orange, pink. It blossoms into globes and curves into donut shapes and flows like lava. I swim languidly along its shelf, hugging the edge and diving below the surface to peek into tempting crevices or follow a particular fish. And every few days, a green sea turtle materializes out of the deeper blue beyond the reef. It peers at me with wrinkled, ancient eyes, reminding me that I'm not alone among these creatures who can breathe underwater. Then it fades back into the abyss.

As mesmerized as I am by the coral, I'm equally terrified of the abyss beyond it. The turquoise dissolves to blue, then the blue into cobalt and the cobalt to navy and the navy into black nothingness. Nothing but the occasional shadow of a shark, real or imagined. I'm not afraid of the sharks, nor of drowning or getting lost. My fear has no name—just the general unsettled feeling of being on the edge of a void, the fear of an emptiness that watches you when you turn your back.

I come here alone, because I have no one to come with. The women, if they go in the water at all, stick to the sandy shallows. The men only go to hunt for food. So I explore my aquatic neighborhood by myself and flirt with my fears and dream of what's beyond the reef until the day Rakki asks if I want to go spear-fishing with the men. They're going to hunt a sea turtle for her youngest son's *kemem*, a traditional feast to celebrate a child's first birthday. There will be pig and chicken and fried bony reef fish and taro and banana and breadfruit, all piled into a boat-shaped basket woven from palm fronds. There will be coconuts and styrofoam cups of red Kool-Aid to drink, and above all, there will be sweet, succulent turtle meat. The *kemem* is in a week, and the hunt for the turtle starts now.

I agree to go. At dusk, when I'm usually grading papers or planning a lesson, I sit by the cook-fire with the men and drink instant coffee with sugar and powdered milk. Stars appear in the sky. Wind rustles the palm fronds. I drift in and out of the conversation, picking up a few words here and there, looking toward the darkening ocean.

At nine o'clock, we climb into Jola's wooden skiff. Jola jerks the outboard motor to life and cuts it through the moonlit water, past the edge of the reef, out into the deep





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part of the lagoon.

At 9:30, Jola cuts the motor. The men speak in Marshallese. I tug my snorkeling mask over my hair and perch on the gunwale to pull on Jola's flippers, which are too big for me. The heel of the left one is tied on with string.

"Okay?" someone asks, and I nod, then follow Tommy and Alik as they slip overboard into the darkness. One of them has a flashlight, and he turns it on for a brief second so I can see where they are. Then they begin swimming away from the boat with the ease and familiarity of men who have spent half their lives in this lagoon. I suppose I'm expected to follow. Each of them are holding the end of a piece of rope, tethered to each other, and I am tethered to nothing, suspended in space behind them.

To keep up, I have to swim with my face in the water, feet kicking hard, but when I put my face in the water the darkness is absolute. I can touch my hand to the clear plastic of my mask and not see a thing. My left flipper threatens to fall off and sink, out of sight, leaving me helpless and bobbing in the waves until daylight, with unseen creatures circling below. Every little while I lift my face from the water and check to make sure Tommy and Alik's snorkels are still visible in front of me.

We've long since left Jola and the boat. I have no idea how far or how long we swim. And then, like my eyes are playing tricks on me, shadows begin to materialize. Shapes. We're swimming toward shallower water and the moonlight is filtering through, landing on globs of coral. I can see Tommy and Alik plainly now. They're skirting a reef, pausing occasionally to turn on the flashlight and sweep it over the coral. Eels waving in the current zip back into their holes.

And then—a turtle-shaped shadow floats below me. Tommy and Alik don't react. Did they not see it? Was it not the right kind of turtle? Or was there nothing at all, and my eyes are deceiving me, making me question what's real and what isn't?

We circle the reef and then, miraculously to me, meet back up with Jola and his boat. I'm awash with relief. He's been waiting for us in the tropical air, smoking cigarettes and looking at the wide-open sky. Between my broken Marshallese and Jola's fractured English, I come to understand that the turtles sleep in the reefs, and we approach through the deep, dark emptiness to surprise them. We are hunting sleeping sea

turtles, creatures that can live to be 100 years old. Once I understand this, the outcome of my venture into this world feels acutely real. As much as I want to be a part it, I can't forget the eyes that have peered at me on those glowing afternoons.

But when Tommy and Alik slip overboard to try again at another reef, I follow. This time, when I put my face into the ocean, I'm less afraid. I let the warm water cradle me, rock me into the lull of its rhythm. I focus on the sound of my breath through my snorkel. Something has shifted, and I'm beginning to understand that this is what it means to be part of this place. Fear is part of the learning. So is blood.

After we again fail to find a turtle, Jola motors to a fishing spot. I float at the surface and watch as Tommy and Alik sink forty feet to the bottom of the lagoon. Alik holds the light while Tommy cocks back his arm like an archer slowed by the density of water. For fraction of a moment his spear wavers, suspended in liquid, and then, almost imperceptibly, a fish I didn't even see is impaled just below its head. The men slowly surface, toss the fish into the hull, and descend for another one. Again and again they do this, rarely missing their mark, until the boat is filled with flopping, silvery shapes and the air is thick with the smell of dead fish.

Then it's midnight, and we're on our way to a third location. Countless stars glitter over the lagoon, and along the thin black line of land in the distance, a ribbon of cook-fires burn like jewels.

Once, I read, women were considered bad luck on fishing trips. I ask Jola if this is still true.

"No," he says. "No problem. Jab inepata." But at the third reef I stay in the boat while Tommy and Alik step overboard.

Alone, bobbing on a small boat in the vast Pacific, Jola and I give up trying to communicate in each other's languages. He smokes cigarettes and I look at the sky. It's quiet except for gentle waves slapping against the hull. In another moment the men will surface, struggling, thrashing, and suddenly there will be mad commotion as they attempt to flip a giant, ancient turtle into our flimsy boat. Later, Rakki will welcome us back and exclaim when she sees the turtle's size. She'll stoke the fire and boil water for coffee and the children will wake up and shuffle outside rubbing the sleep from their eyes and I will be shocked and forgotten in the middle of it all. But right now, the night is still peaceful, and in the darkness of the lagoon, a turtle sleeps. **A**

