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THE BOREDOM OF HEAVEN

BY CHRISTOPHER WOODS

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Night fog descends from the surrounding hills and cloaks the lake with ghost quilts. Even if he cannot see the night water, he smells it, hears its waves moving rhythmically at the shore where the village begins. He wades into the water, fog enclosing him like a gentle nightmare. He treads the dark water, waving his hands as if dispersing a cloud of moths. He drinks handfuls of the ebony liquid. When he laughs, no one can hear him.

Sunlight burns the fog off the water. He drinks his coffee slowly, purposefully, watches the lake return to vision. He gets dressed. It is late morning in Mexico.

He has lived in many places and he knows this town on the lake is but another stopping place, along a path he travels without apparent reason. He knows the time is coming when he will pick up and move again.

He leaves his bungalow with the red tile roof and walks to the bakery on the plaza. He exchanges greetings with the proprietor. He buys sweet pastries. He eats them while sitting on a bench in the plaza. Above him the cypress trees stir with a light wind coming from the lake. To hear the trees is enough for him. He doesn't need to look at them because he has painted these same trees many times. Now, several of the trees lie face down on the floor of his bungalow. He thinks he no longer cares for the trees because he no longer cares for his paintings. He is no longer sure where one leaves and the other begins.

He sits eating pastries, now and then waving to the village women who pass by. Dark eyed, with oval faces and very shy, they pass him beneath the trees.

The women smile at him with the timidity of doves, and not without that same kind of sadness. He knows these women by name. His hands have touched them all, caressed them mornings and afternoons in small houses while their husbands were fishing out on the lake.

The women carry pitchers and are followed by children with laundry and earthenware jars. He watches the procession and decides he is thirsty. He gets up and walks beside a young woman who smiles at him and then looks away. She stares straight ahead until they reach the stream that runs through the center of the village.

The stream is not large enough to be called a river. When the rainy season fills the lake, the stream does not grow in width or depth. He guesses the stream is fed by underground springs because the water is so cool and clear. And although he has

never followed the stream to its source, he is certain that it comes from the hills that rise beyond the village.

Those hills are not extremely high, but they are steep, with cliffs to one side. In small clearings near the summits are old and tiny shrines. All he knows of those is what he sees when he is walking down the cobblestone streets of the village and his eyes begin to wander the hillsides.

Just as soon, he looks away again. Not a religious man, he realizes that the shrines will always remain distant to him. Or perhaps they are something he cannot understand. In either case, he is not bothered by this.

The stream becomes a washing basin not far from the center of the village. As he reaches it, still walking beside the woman, he feels someone grab his shoulder. It is not a woman grabbing him this time. When he turns to look, he sees the village mayor smiling at him and laughing. Everyone in the village, even the mayor, likes him. In fact, they have adopted him as one of their own. This is because they believe he is an angel.

In the beginning, when he first arrived in the village, he found all this a comfort. But now, for a long time, he has been bored with it. Just as he has become bored by his painting, which he feels lacks vision. Before this, he had become bored with his family and friends in Chicago. It was that initial boredom, or at least the first he realized, that made him begin moving so.

He thinks he knows why he has become bored with the village. It is a different kind of boredom than those previous times. Here, living in such a state of bliss and loved by all, he still believes that something is missing. He has no idea what it is. But he has a good idea what is wrong. He thinks it is the boredom of heaven.

From the time he was old enough to consider such things, he decided that he wanted no part of an afterlife. It wasn't for him. It only offered eternal damnation or happiness. Or worse, everlasting nothingness. He imagines heaven to be a cool but stifling place where people never stop smiling and never say anything, a large place brimming with arranged mannequins.

He does not feel this way about the women here in the village, washing themselves and their children and doing laundry on flat stones in the washing basin. Rather, he likes to think of each of them as small, intricate jewels. Or, perhaps as stars passing through a universe they cannot comprehend. If he feels anything at all for the women, and he thinks he does, it is affection. And often, longing.

Someone is calling to him. He thinks it is Maria or Rosa, but he cannot be sure because of the early morning glare on the water. Soon all the women, some of them naked, call to him in a chorus of sorts.

“Angelico! Angelico!” they cry out, trying to lure him into the water with them.

And he goes to them, just as he has every morning since coming to their village. They undress him and take his white clothes to wash. He sits nude on a flat rock in the washing basin while two women shave him. One woman wades through the water to bring him a corn muffin. Another woman brings fresh mango juice. He sits on the rock and listens to the songs the women sing.

He is happy, yes. But he knows that this feeling comes from the cool water that begins in the hills and flows through his loins.

Then, without warning, the dreaded feeling of boredom comes over him. He is tired of being the village angel. They all believe he is an angel. They believed it the first

day he arrived there. He wore white that day as well. It was because that color was cool and he found the lake region warm. The women saw his white clothes, his blue eyes and blonde hair and immediately took him for an angel making a visitation. When he denied this, they had all laughed at him. They knew better. They knew the truth.

Soon after that he began sleeping with the women in the village. Pretty, ugly, young or old, it didn't matter. They all awaited their turn. They would go to his bungalow without speaking, remove their muslin dresses and climb into his bed. Other times, he went to their homes and made love to them while their children played on the floor beside the bed.

Late in the day, the husbands returned from the lake and gifted him with a prize catch or a bottle of liquor, anything to show their appreciation. The husbands were thankful that an angel had smiled on their village. They considered it good fortune, and believed their catch from the lake had improved since the angel appeared.

He stands so the women can dry him and comb his hair and beard. Weeks before this he decided that this day would be his last in the village. He will leave, and he will tell no one where he is going. His life here, no matter how easy, is stifling to him. He is bored, and he does not wish to grow old here watching the children he has fathered grow up all around him.

He leaves the village and the lake region at night, taking only essential things. In his bungalow the cypress trees remain face down. He knows the villagers will think he has returned to heaven. But instead he plans to go to Veracruz. There, he hopes, his vision will return.

Once in Veracruz, he rents a two room apartment in the dock district. His street is poor and dirty, and children play outside all hours while their parents quarrel.

He lives in one room and makes his studio in the other. But after several weeks, he has not painted a thing. He walks into the studio and is confronted by dirt and dust from the previous tenant. No one befriends him, but he feels certain that the women he passes in the streets are taken with him and his good looks.

A few doors down lives a newly married woman named Gloria. She is sixteen and her husband, like the other men in the district, is a stevedore. He is away most of the time and Gloria, unused to being a wife, spends most of her time outside visiting with the other wives on the street.

The angel begins the habit of passing her house frequently. At night, he can see Gloria fighting with her husband. If the husband is drunk, he beats Gloria. If the husband is away, the angel lingers to catch a glimpse of Gloria when she passes a window.

When he sees her in the market he smiles at her and she returns it. This happens many times before they finally speak. One day, as Gloria walks home, he offers to carry her bags. She doesn't say anything, but her eyes brighten. She hands the angel her things.

In a few minutes they are standing in Gloria's kitchen. He sets the packages down on the table and takes her in his arms. He has not been with a woman since the village on the lake. Gloria does not try to break free of him. The angel guides her slowly to her bedroom, his arm around her waist.

It is strange to him that Gloria never tells him that he looks like an angel. In the village, everyone was always telling him this. But in Veracruz it is not the same. All

Gloria tells him how much she dislikes being married, how much she hates living with her new husband.

The angel goes to her house every afternoon for a month. Gloria says that her husband doesn't suspect a thing. This seems odd to the angel, but he says nothing. But he does wonder why the stevedore husband has not yet brought him a gift of some kind.

The women that Gloria meets in the street all compliment her on her complexion. They all blush when they say this. She does not know how they talk behind her back. She does not know what they tell their husbands when they come home from the docks.

One night Gloria's husband comes home and they have a big fight, even though he isn't drunk. They eat dinner in silence, and afterwards he pushes her roughly into the bedroom to have sex. When they finish, the husband gets up and goes to the kitchen. Gloria thinks this is unusual. Always after sex her husband rolls over and goes to sleep.

Shortly he comes back in the bedroom and stands beside the bed. He begins screaming at Gloria, calling her a whore. Before she can say anything she feels a strong blow to the side of her face. She reels in pain and panic. She sees what he is doing.

Her husband brings down a machete on her head over and over. Each time she struggles to get up, to try to break free, he strikes her down again. When he is finished, the house is very still.

The angel is standing in his studio, looking for his vision, when he hears voices in the street outside. There is a rap on the door. When he opens it, he sees a group of men, maybe a dozen of them and all stevedores, standing there. Without speaking, they push their way inside. He immediately recognizes their leader, who stands in the middle of the room with a bloody machete in his hand. It is Gloria's husband.

The angel knows why they have come. He now realizes that Veracruz and its people are very different from the village on the lake. He stands still as they close in around him. He can smell

their sweat and the liquor on their breath. Gloria's husband orders him to kneel, and when he does the husband puts the sharp end of the machete to the angel's lips and cuts deeply. Blood flows freely.

The other men in the room voice their approval. They are so close to him that the room steams with body heat. Kneeling, the angel studies the husband's face. He sees not hate as much as power. The angel knows that power comes from the long knife and from the other drunken men who have now begun chanting. They want more blood.

The husband holds the machete in one hand and unfastens his pants with the other. He pulls out his member, already stiffening. He gestures to the angel, telling him to take the thing in his mouth. The angel raises his hand defensively. The husband sneers at this, striking down with the machete so that two of the angel's fingers are sliced off. The other men cheer and tighten the circle. The husband smiles as the angel's bloody lips enclose him.

When he has satisfied the husband, two of the other men grab the angel and pin his arms behind his back. He feels the long blade of the machete plunge into his throat and begin a slow, circular motion.

The pain is more than he can tolerate. When the machete is pulled free, he can see his teeth and gums in pools of dark blood on the dusty floor. The husband laughs, then stands back as the other men move in to take their turns with the angel's lips.

Each time the angel passes out, then revive him again. It is much later in the night when he realizes that they do not plan to kill him outright.

It is near dawn when they finally leave. They laugh among themselves and do not bother to close the door. The angel collapses again on the floor. Consciousness comes and goes like a black velvet tide.

Christopher Woods is the author of a prose collection, *Under a Riverbed Sky*. His play, *Moonbirds*, about doomed census takers at work in an uninhabited desert country, was produced in New York by Personal Space Theatrics. *The Boredom of Heaven* is from an unpublished story collection, *THE BEE HARP*. He lives in Texas.

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