

DEATH IN A CABAÑA

By Ann Littlewood

Lorraine turned on the room lights—dim fluorescent bulbs—and lit candles in ceramic holders with clear chimneys. Match smoke curled up, sharp in her nose. The cabaña was all curves in soft pinks and blues, with a folk-art mermaid painted on one plastered wall. White towels on the beds were folded into elephants and swans. Something chirped in the thatch ceiling.

“What the hell was that?” Roger asked.

“I think a gecko. They eat the bugs.”

Roger gave her a pained look. “Are we paying extra for lizards in the room?”

Roger had wanted an up-scale tropical resort, she’d lobbied for a jungle trek, and this eco-lodge on the Yucatan Peninsula was the compromise, although Roger seemed to think she had won. She took the first shower. “The shower water is salty,” she called to him, intrigued by the challenges to a conservation-conscious hotel.

“Don’t go tasting it! Use the bottled water. The tap water’s not treated.”

“Don’t shout at me! I’m not an idiot.” She was tired from the long flight to Cancun and the two hour drive to Tulum, tired and overreacting. Back in the bedroom, wrapped in a towel, she tried to change the tone. “The dinner was very nice, don’t you think? Tomorrow we can go see the Tulum ruins. The view from the cliff top should be spectacular.” Now she was chattering, not good either.

“Fine. Whatever.”

Together they got the mosquito netting draped over the bed, and Roger and climbed in. He rolled onto his side, facing the edge of the bed. Lorraine studied the long shape under the light blue blanket, clouded by netting. Thin body of a runner. Dark hair and bold features that let him pass for many ethnic groups, mouth in an unhappy line, eyes firmly shut. Were they drifting away from love? Was Tulum the last try before they brushed the sand of each other off their feet and walked on?

She turned out the lights, blew out the candles, and slipped under the netting. The surf sounded like wind, sliding up the beach and falling back in a rhythm both steady and irregular. The dark was absolute. She lay under the blue blanket with her back to his, facing the edge.

Screams woke them, thin, shrill, gasped out over and over. They spoke together—“What was that?” Lorraine found the light switch and they looked at one another, wide eyes glinting, and without another word fought free of the netting and climbed into their pants, slipped into

sandals. Lorraine grabbed the flashlight. Roger led the way. "Careful!" he said, "Stay behind me."

The screams were from #13, the next cabaña over and the last one in the cluster. Roger pounded on the door. A woman in a long white tee shirt opened it, long dark hair in a tangle, gasping, "I think she's dead. Get a doctor. Oh my God. I think she's dead." One light was on inside, and in the dim glow Lorraine could see that her hands were dark and wet.

Lorraine moved without thought, flicking switches, while Roger went to the double bed. "Jesus," he said softly.

Lorraine moved beside him. She recognized the light curly hair. Two women had been reading in hammocks when she and Roger arrived. Now the blond woman lay on her back, chin jutting up on the pillow, hands limp along each side of her head. The white netting gaped open from a long slash, the edges curling back. Her chest was covered with dark blood and a kitchen knife lay next to her. Blood had flowed over the edge of the bed. Lorraine had not realized a body held so much blood. She and Roger stepped back together.

"Do something, for God's sake do something. Get a doctor. Help. Please help," the woman in the tee shirt said.

"She's dead," Lorraine said softly, not really sure. The little streams of shining blood were quiet, no faithful heart still contracting. But it was important to be sure. The woman's throat was undamaged, and Lorraine found she was able to take hesitant steps forward, to reach out a shaking hand and feel for a pulse. The throat was warm, but there was no subtle movement in the arteries, no flicker of eyelid or flare of nostrils. She pulled her hand back and sat abruptly on the floor, narrowly avoiding the dark pool.

Roger plucked the flashlight from her. "I'll go find the manager." He wavered to the door, collided with the frame, and was gone into the dark.

"Jesus. Jesus. My poor Marta. I can't believe this. My God. My God," the woman in the tee shirt sobbed, her voice rising and rasping. She reached out clumsily, touching Marta's legs through the netting.

Lorraine came back to herself, but she didn't stand up. Not yet. "What your name?" She taught third-grade, and she knew well that the name is the handle. "Tell me your name."

"Ruby. I'm Ruby. What happened? How can this be? Oh, my poor Marta," she cried in a voice like broken glass.

"Ruby, tell me what happened." Lorraine stood unsteadily, not touching the bed.

"She's dead. She's dead. Somebody killed her. I didn't help her. I didn't hear it, honest to God. I didn't see anyone. How could I not notice? How could I not even know?"

"Ruby. Go sit down on the other bed."

Ruby sat at last on the unrumpled twin bed, and wept and stammered. She couldn't sleep and had gotten up to walk on the beach in the moonlight. She'd locked the door, and it was locked when she returned. When she was back inside, she'd heard a noise and thought Marta was having a nightmare, Marta had nightmares, and so she spoke to her. When Marta didn't answer, she tugged on her foot through the netting, to waken her a little so she could hear Ruby's voice

and be comforted. But Marta hadn't moved or spoken, so Ruby turned on the light thinking she might be ill, maybe turista. But instead she had a knife in her chest and blood everywhere. Ruby had pulled the knife out and started screaming for help.

Ruby's tan knees trembled and she hugged herself. Her long dark hair hung to the sides of her face, a thin shelter. She looked about 35 years old, a few years older than Lorraine. A lean woman with thoroughbred legs. Marta was smaller, a little younger. Ordinary women. Either of them could have worked at Lorraine's school.

"What do you think happened?" Lorraine asked.

Ruby looked at her, incredulous. "Someone broke in and killed her. What else?"

Lorraine looked at the latched windows, at the blood on Ruby's hands.

Ruby said, "No, no. I would never hurt her. That's crazy. Somebody broke in. I loved her. I loved her."

Roger hadn't come back. Lorraine wondered if he'd gotten lost, or couldn't find the hotel manager, or was waiting for the police. She wondered if Ruby were dangerous. If Ruby moved toward the knife, on the bed across the room next to the dead woman, Lorraine would be out the door and gone. It wasn't a good plan, she saw that right away, but it didn't really matter. Ruby didn't look dangerous. Ruby looked shattered.

Ruby fell silent, rocking herself. Her hair swung gently.

Lorraine felt her pocket for her little camera. She circled the room. Click/flash, wait for recovery, click/flash again. She shot the body from multiple angles, as she'd seen on TV, captured every window and the door, the bathroom and shower. Ruby said nothing until Lorraine pointed the camera at her and flashed.

"Go away. I don't want you here. You think I killed my friend." Her voice was sullen and groggy.

"Tell me about Marta."

Ruby's eyes narrowed and focused on Lorraine. She stopped rocking and seemed to come back from wherever she'd begun to go. "She's in a bad divorce. She needed a break. This trip was to cheer her up. Instead, a crazy person stabs her to death. My god, I can't believe this." Abruptly she stood. "I'm going to wash up and get dressed."

Lorraine didn't try to stop her.

People came at last, in a crowd jamming the room, a crush of brown men in uniforms speaking Spanish. Roger pulled her out, away from medics and police and hotel staff. "They'll find us if they need us." He pulled her back to their room through alien dawn air. She sat inside on a hard blue wooden chair. Roger sat on the edge of the bed with his hands drooping between his knees. He said, "I'm sorry. I didn't do very well."

"What do you mean?"

"Leaving you alone with a murderer. The flashlight died and I had a hard time finding the office in the dark, and then no one was there. It took forever to find anyone. The one time you actually needed me, I wasn't there."

"You did the best anyone could. Nothing happened to me."

“It could have. She looked like a crazy woman. I guess she really was one.” He cracked a thin imitation of a smile.

“I can take care of myself. And maybe she didn’t do it.”

“You are five foot two, she’s much bigger, and she did do it. Lovers’ quarrel. I saw them at dinner, knocking back margaritas and holding hands. They kissed in front of everyone. You were facing the wrong way to see them. I should not have left you with her.”

“Doesn’t sound like a quarrel.” Lorraine felt saturated with blood and grief.

“Not then. Later. Drinking, a fight, it gets out of hand. One says something terrible, the other takes revenge when she’s asleep.”

“We didn’t hear any fight. Maybe it’s not that simple.”

“Why do you always make things complicated? You saw her, blood on her hands. I’d bet a fortune they’ll find her finger prints on the knife.”

Lorraine didn’t want this conversation. “Of course they will. Ruby pulled it out of Marta’s chest.”

“Ruby? Are you best friends with her now? No, I’m sorry, I know you must be wound up from this. It’s been horrible, and I shouldn’t be making it worse. We can get in the car and just go.”

She wanted to be away from him and his stereotypes and insistence on calm and order. “I need some sleep first.” She curled on the bed under the netting and closed her eyes. He moved around the room, pacing, moving things. “You can go to breakfast without me,” she finally said, but he didn’t. After a few minutes, she gave up and got up.

The world outside showed no hint of the night’s horrors. A pickup rolled by with a load of Mexican men standing up in the bed. Unseen birds yammered in the palm trees. The light was clear and intense. “Nothing bad has ever happened here,” lied the kindly wind.

Roger walked toward the resort’s restaurant while she studied the ground, drifting toward the south side of #13. She kept back from the walls, not wanting to interfere with whatever the sand might tell her. The sand on the south side of the cabaña, the side hidden from the road, was raked. No foot prints. She photographed it anyway.

Roger called from the path, “What is this, CSI-Tulum? Please, no. Let’s just go eat.”

“I’ll be just a minute. I love this light.” As if she were photographing surf or flowers.

She used the zoom feature to shoot the south window frame of #13, the likely place to break in. She wondered if the police would send someone out to look around, or if they would go with obvious answers the way Roger did. There was a time when his simple clarity of mind had been comforting. She found the rake leaning against a palm tree and picked it up. A single thread of fishing line, two feet of clear monofilament, was snagged in the bamboo tines. She put the rake back and walked to the restaurant.

Roger’s little day pack sat next to him and he was reading the book on adhesives chemistry he’d brought as vacation reading. Adhesives chemistry was where he needed to go in his career, he’d told her. His head was down, intent, coffee and a cereal bowl in front of him. The white line of surf rolled up the beach and tangled with a line of brown seaweed and detritus.

Three elegant frigate birds soared overhead on set wings. She studied him until a young man offered her a menu and a table. She shook her head and walked through sand to join her husband.

A short, powerful man with the Mayas' lean nose and wide cheekbones brought her coffee and a bowl of fruit, granola, and yogurt. She identified the fruit chunks as papaya, pineapple, and watermelon. A dozen pelicans plunged one by one beak-first into the sea, floundered back up into the air, circled on broad wings, and dove again.

"Do you want to fly back to Chicago or move to another resort?" Roger asked.

Lorraine noted his careful, neutral tone. "The police will want to talk to us, and I'd like to look around their cabaña a little."

"You can't mean that. You aren't going to get involved in this?" He was incredulous.

"We're already involved. I want to know what happened."

"That's insane. People stabbing each other to death? Trust me, we are out of here. I'm not going through this kind of thing again, especially not in Mexico."

"Roger, since when do you make decisions for me? It's not my job to keep your life simple and tidy." She would say something irretrievable soon, something worse.

Roger said, "She looked like you. Marta looked like you."

She stalked away from the table, kicking up fine white sand, and walked down to the surf line. She spent 20 minutes shooting the pelicans, trying to capture one diving as another soared, until the camera faded. She went back to #12. Roger wasn't there. She found the spare batteries, discovered that they, too, were weak, and dug the little recharger out of a suitcase pocket. Their room had no standard outlet. She found the manager on duty at the restaurant, a man no taller than herself, not the one who had come to Ruby's room. He showed her where in the kitchen to plug in the recharger. She praised the wonderful sand and asked when it was raked at their cabaña across the road. Each afternoon. And yesterday had anyone asked what cabaña Marta and Ruby were staying in?

The manager's expressionless Mayan face became even more still, and he looked away. "A man came yesterday to see them, but they were out. It's best if we don't talk about this and upset people."

Lorraine nodded. "The man was a tourist?"

"Yes. Now if you will excuse me..."

"American."

"Yes." And he slipped away.

Ruby and Marta's cabaña drew her, and again she walked to the big window on the hidden side. She found the rake and disentangled the monofilament from its tines. She went back to her own cabaña. Roger was there and his suitcase was packed. He hadn't dared pack hers. "Let's go. We can drive back toward Cancun. I've found us another resort partway there."

"The police may want to talk to us."

"They've had hours. They can find us if they want to."

"Don't you think it's strange that they aren't here looking around? Like they don't intend to give it a second thought? Ruby is as good as convicted."

“And the problem with that is...?”

She turned away from him and from her own anger to examine the wood-framed window that opened out the side of their cabaña, pushing the pink-patterned curtain out of the way. The latch was a simple metal hook-and-eye with a sliding guard on the hook. The spring-loaded guard was intended to prevent just what she was doing, slipping the credit card up between the window and the frame to lift the hook loose. But the guard was white and crusty from salt air, and stuck open, useless. “I’ll be back in a minute,” she told Roger.

She went to the south window of #13 and broke into Ruby and Marta’s cabaña with the credit card. This hook guard was also rusted open. Getting the latch back in place with the monofilament was only a little harder. She stood outside the window on tip-toes, peering through the quarter-inch crack between the window and the frame. She slipped a loop of monofilament through the crack, above the latch, caught the dangling hook, and lifted it until it sat on its round metal screw-eye. She slid the credit card again between the window and the frame and tapped it nicely home. She let go of one end of the monofilament, pulled it out of the crack, and put it in her pocket.

“This is going to be like that little girl. Like your uncle, isn’t it?” Roger said from behind her, and her sense of triumph broke like a soap bubble. “It’s supposed to be a vacation. But you can’t leave this alone. You never can.”

His bitterness stung like sand blown hard against her skin. The little girl. Her uncle. Her mind danced away from them. “Don’t you think it matters that anyone could break in without leaving a trace, as long as they raked the sand afterward?”

“I think you should stop. This isn’t good. It’s never good. Just stop. Pack your suitcase and get in the car. Please.”

“I’m not leaving. Don’t you understand what you are seeing?”

“I understand that I need to get you out of here. This is dangerous.”

“How so? You’re convinced Ruby did it, and she’s in jail. So where’s the risk? Or is it just that simple answers are always best, and what I want doesn’t much matter.” She didn’t wait for rebuttal. “I need some time alone. I’m driving into Tulum.” She held out her hand for the keys to the rental car.

“We have to go,” Roger said. But he gave her the car keys.

She collected her charger from the restaurant, not caring that the batteries weren’t yet at full strength. She drove carefully, wary of speed bumps that materialized without warning. He’d never spoken that way before about the little girl. Better to have it out in the open, surely it was better. So why was she crying? She was done with that, it was two years now. The little girl, sullen and silent in her classroom, with the angry eyes. And the bruises that she wouldn’t, couldn’t explain. Lorraine had worked it quietly, persistently. She documented what she saw and wrote down everything the girl whispered to her at last, curled up in her lap after school. Children’s Services set up the home visit and, like rats when the lights came on, the entire family vanished. Lorraine couldn’t find them, the authorities couldn’t. She had cried for months.

The search for her father's lost brother had ended no better. It had started out fun, one frail connection leading to another, old letters and out-of-state courthouses, until she'd had the bad luck to succeed. A man with a clenched, paranoid face—her father's features gone all wrong—he'd hit them up for money and smashed their car windows when they refused. They'd had to get a restraining order when he found out where they lived. He was in jail now, after one more drunken driving conviction.

But what about the problems she worried at that turned from tangled chaos to clarity? She'd uncovered the math teacher responsible for erotic love notes to fifth grade girls and the teen-age neighbor who kidnapped cats and "found" them when a reward was posted. Not everything she pursued turned out badly. But Roger didn't remember those. He'd loved her once, but he cared more for calm and order.

The town of Tulum was scattered along the highway. She bought little yellow mangos at the fruit market and a Frida Kahlo scarf at a store. She took a picture of a bull and a pig painted on the wall of a butcher stop, which reminder her of what the camera held. At an Internet café, a shirtless man with the hair and eyes of a pirate helped her download the pictures onto a CD. She opened each picture on the computer, many times bigger than the tiny screen on her camera, unsure what she was looking for. The latch was in place on the south window next to Marta's body. Roger was right and she was a meddler. No one had broken in after all.

When she finished reviewing the dozen pictures of the murder scene, a compulsion to tidiness sent her back to the first few shots, ones she'd barely glanced at. The first one she had taken was of the torn and bloody bed. The window next to it was slightly out of focus, but she could see that the latch was angled upward. The hook was not set in the eye. She checked the date and time stamp in the lower right corner, then found the picture with the latch in focus. Less than a minute later, the latch was horizontal. She shivered in the warm, thick air of the internet café. She looked back and forth between the two pictures for a long time. Then she burned a second CD, paid her pesos and asked about the local jail.

The jail was stifling, but not as bad as she feared. Ruby, however, was in ruins. Her hair was lank, tied back in a rubber band. They were separated by five feet and heavy mesh; a sullen cop with one hand always on his pistol watched and listened. Ruby seemed confused and indifferent to Lorraine's visit. But when Lorraine explained that it was possible someone had broken into the room, her hunted eyes met Lorraine's at last. "The police said it had to be me. I thought I must have gone mad or had a seizure. I murdered her, me, stabbing and stabbing poor Marta. I'll kill myself as soon as I find a way. What are you saying to me?"

Lorraine told her again. "And I think he was still there, still setting the window latch from outside when we came in. He must have raked the sand just before police arrived."

"But who? A robber? Rapist? Why did he do this?" she asked in a child's high voice.

"You tell me. You knew Marta."

Ruby hugged herself and rocked on the plastic chair in the tiny room under the guard's eyes. At last she said in a very different voice, "I think I would want her husband to prove where

he was that night. He was very angry at her for leaving him. The divorce required that they sell the house and that infuriated him. That, and me.”

“She left him for you.”

“She would have left him in any case.”

Lorraine nodded. “Do you have an attorney?”

“Not yet. My brother will be here tomorrow. He’ll take care of that.”

Lorraine said, “I will stay in Tulum until he gets here. Then I’ll tell him what I know and give him a copy of the pictures.”

She drove back and found Roger reading his book outside the cabaña, looking uncomfortable in a wooden chair.

“Good shopping? You were gone a long time.” He looked strained, brittle.

“I brought you mangos. I want to show you these pictures.”

“Later, thanks. Our stuff is packed.” He stood up, grim now and determined.

“Roger, look at these pictures with me. This is important. That woman could spend her life in jail for murder, and I don’t think she did it.”

“It’s not our problem. She’s clearly guilty and you don’t know what you’re getting into. We’re leaving.”

Why did she succumb to tears every time he got angry? “Roger, you never back me up. Why do you reject things that are important to me?”

“Because it hurts to watch.” His voice was bleak, implacable.

“All you care about is sweeping everything unpleasant under the rug.”

She would not go without seeing Ruby’s brother and he would not leave without her. The rest of the day, Roger read his book and did not speak.

She was exhausted from strain and heat, but that night she couldn’t sleep. When Roger’s breathing steadied, she slipped out of bed and found the flashlight. The moon had grown a little and the sky was again full of stars. She sat in a lounge chair on the beach and watched the sea. Cuban music and soft voices drifted from the restaurant, where candles flickered dimly. False dawn on the highway became a car that bumped past and faded into two red dots.

The sea wind pushed the little white-caps to the shore, where they smoothed out and fell back again, back into the mother sea. Lorraine felt heavy and thick, incapable of grace, immune to comfort. It was clear Roger would leave her. Ruby would turn out to be guilty after all. A mutant Cassandra, she would spend her life’s energy on good deeds that played out badly for herself and everyone around her.

She heard her name and wearily rose from the lounge chair. “Over here, Roger.”

In the moonlight, she could barely make him out, loping through the clinging sand with his graceful stride, wearing only shorts, calling her name. “Roger, I’m here,” she said again.

He jogged up to her and put a hand to each of her shoulders, held her at arms length, panting a little. “I woke up and you were gone. I knew you were right, and the killer was still here and got you, too. I thought you were gone.” He pulled her to him, tight against his bare chest. “Don’t go,” he said. “Don’t go.”

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