

SWEET PARADISE by Gene Desrochers

EXCERPT

The first coat was drying. More droplets of sweat rivered between my shoulder blades as I slugged water and Guinness alternately. Two in the afternoon was no time to be painting in the October heat, but I didn't know what else to do and sitting around worrying about my looming penury seemed pointless.

The used old-timey clock radio I'd picked up at Bob's Store babbled on about hurricane warnings as reception fizzled in and out. It was the latter part of hurricane season and we'd seen minimal storm damage in the region. We might dodge hurricanes for one or two years running, but it was never long enough to truly get complacent about them the way places like New Orleans had.

The overhead fan whirred. Outside my door sunlight filtered thinly through a cloud, illuminating the traffic circle a faint ocher. As I considered the faded lines denoting parking spaces and the cracked pavement, a young man bobbed into my line of sight. He was one of those people who walked on his toes at all times, like the tendons in his calves were so tight his heels couldn't touch the ground for more than an instant before popping up again. He squinted at the building, turning his head back and forth, then perusing a sheet of paper clutched in both hands. A green Osprey backpack hung loosely off his shoulders. People in California used them for hiking. He tugged at the built-in sippy straw and sucked. The bubbly slurping of the last drops of water in his pouch filtered up to me. Disappointment clouded his face.

His attention snagged on my door. I grinned and gave myself a mental pat on the back. He shifted one hand to his hip and gave a slight lean. I wasn't sure whether I should let him see me in my ratty painting outfit, but figured that could be explained by the wet door. A spooge of cantaloupe paint dominated the center of my gray t-shirt. I eased the door open a couple more feet.

"Help you?" I asked. "You look lost."

"Nice door." He pointed at his forehead and swirled his finger around. "You got some."

He was college-aged and his face was sunburned, as were his arms. He wore a Hawaiian shirt and khaki pants, a classic tourist outfit.

He continued to stand in the same spot, squinting and considering the sheet of paper. I returned to my inner office, needing another sip of water and the breeze from the fan. Out my open doorway, I could barely make out the top of his Caesar-style haircut.

“You should get a hat!” I hollered out.

His head rose up from the paper and he pushed up on tip-toes so I could see his eyes. “The sun’s doing a number on you,” I said. “Want a drink of water?”

He stared at me a while with a strange stillness, like he was in no hurry as he weighed every option. This boy was a local and he would pull me into events that would rock one of the largest industries in the Virgin Islands.

“Do you have Perrier?”