

Reef City

By Jack Larson

The morning started before the sun came up; like a lot of vacations seem to do. I never understood how something that is meant to be so relaxing, could be so stressful. The sounds of last minute packing pull me out of my deep sleep. The covers are a warm refuge from the bitter late-winters bite. My room becomes lightly illuminated, a glow from below my door. The inevitable: my door creaks open. I can't escape the bright wake up call.

"Jack, time to wake up. Bring your bag downstairs. The car is waiting." My dad said gently.

I reluctantly got out of bed, got ready and went downstairs. Carrying my bag out the door, it hit me. The bitter cold, the bare trees, the 5 inches of icy snow. Thank goodness I am getting out of here. It is spring break and my sister, brother and I were getting used to our parent's divorce. There are a lot of difficult things about a divorce: like fighting and having to live in two houses. I am a glass half-full kind of guy though, so I see is twice as many Christmas presents and two spring breaks. Can you blame me?

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Chicago O'Hare to Miami international airport.

Walking out of the jet bridge into Miami is a culture shock, coming from the Midwest. The smell of Cuban sandwiches and colorful tiled murals of sailfish jumping out of a sea of blue stone was a change. The terminal filled with romantic language like I haven't heard before. A place that bleeds Cuban culture. Unfortunately though Miami is not our last stop. We move through the terminal, tall glass ceilings fill the building with the warm South Florida sun. Reaching our gate, we must take a bus to board our plane. American Airlines 3511 service from Miami to North Eleuthera Airport. *Looks like we are riding in a small one. Makes sense, just a short flight to the Bahamas.*

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We're on our approach into the island. Looking out the window: white clouds, glimpses of the clear light blue water littered with green islands. Strips of land bordered with bright white beaches. Touching down the wheels abruptly return to the ground. The Props spin slows, and the plane comes to a halt. We de-board the aircraft and head to a white cinderblock building with a

metal roof. There is a long table with an awning stretching its length. Behind the table are several Bahamian officials to check bags and clear us into the country. Opening the double glass doors, the lively sound escapes a relatively small terminal. Airline counters line the room with seating in the middle. A few TV screens informed passengers about the few upcoming flights and one entertained them. A bit of a downsize from where I was coming from. Their security consisted of a large Bahamian women with a metal detector wand, and a quick manual bag search. Walking out of the “airport” into the arid island we caught a taxi to the dock.

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The taxi boat was loaded and ready to take us across a small stretch of protected water to Harbour Island. The warmth surrounded me, the beauty astonished. Cruising through the crystal turquoise water, dark green patches reveal reefs hiding below. The boat slows as we approach. A crew of Bahamian men smoking cigarettes, wait for the call to dock up a boat and carry luggage. We pull up to the big square cement dock jutting out 50 yards into the water. Before long we loaded up in one of the few cars on the island to head to the house. Looking at the town, I see old New England style homes, painted all the colors you could imagine. Pink, yellow, blue. A small road separates them from the water. A fleet of 40 or so small fishing boats rest on the sand in low tide. We turn the other direction. Driving through the slender streets, there is life. People smiling, eating and walking about. We pass an outdoor basketball court, with tall chain-link fences around it. The road on the other side of the court is about 15 feet higher in elevation with bleachers spanning the wall. We reach a curve in the road. To our left: a large abandoned barge run aground, rusting. Ahead of us: the famous lone tree. A beautiful piece of driftwood that rests in the shallow blue water and bleach white sand. We follow the road to the right and up the hill. At the top we turn to the left. A small wood sign reads “*The narrows*”. The road turns from asphalt to dirt and we soon find ourselves crawling down a steep hill, riddled with potholes and loose asphalt. A canopy shades us over head. To our right and left thick lush forest prohibits visibility past 15 yards. Finally we approach the house. The Hidden Mango on our left and the main home to the right. We settle in and get into the island mindset.

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After a quick lunch we dart for the beach, snorkeling gear and all. The back of the home has a large covered porch and a patio. A fertile green lawn descends down into a dune fostering palmettos and shrubs. A wooden staircase, only 15 steps or so cuts through the dune and bridges

the lawn to the beach. Stepping into the cool sand, the pink and white grains swallow your toes. The sand is hot under my feet so I rush to the cool white foam waves, dissipating into the sand and then back into the ocean. I sit down to put on my flippers, goggles, and snorkel. The refreshing water ebbs and flows. Crashing at my feet and rapidly climbing my legs, then back down again. I struggle to my feet and slowly waddle forward, catching a wave on my flippers and nearly taking a spill. I turn around and try it backwards. Into the blue.

The underwater world is so foreign. Fish scattered as I approached. Giant reef skyscrapers stretch 10 feet from the sea floor. Navigating my way through this underwater city, I meet all of its residents. There's Zoey the Zebra Fish, Robbie the Rock Lobster, Ernie the Eel, Gary the Grouper and we can't forget about Tony the Tiger Shark. I had the "pleasure" of meeting them all.

I surface for air, and look back to see where I have gone. Fortunately I haven't drifted much, and I am about 50 yards from the beach. I turn around and make my way back to shore. Every block of reef I pass I look down the corridor of empty water. The view disappearing into a blue nothingness. Only the bare sand on the ocean floor for reference. I look down the next corridor and freeze. About 30 yards away a shark slowly swims away, tail fin and head swinging side to side inversely. I almost forget to breath. Slowly I start to swim towards shore. I pass a reef, the predator is out of sight. I swim faster. Faster and faster. Just barely getting away. Racing towards the beach, I keep paddling even though I could stand. My momentum and the energy of a wave propel me onto the beach. Pink sand filling my goggles and trunks. My heart racing, I rip off my goggles and plop myself down looking out into the ocean. I peel off my flippers and think to myself. *Well I am never doing that again.*