

## Terrarium

by Jamey Bradbury

There are two of them. He came to the island first. He knows it's an island, he says, because there are borders, a solid edge met by a liquid blue that laps at their naked feet when they stand on the beach. The weather is always good, at least so far, and the sun never really sets. The forest is lush with moss that grows up the trunks of trees and hangs from limbs and makes for a soft bed when they decide to sleep. There are bugs, but then, aren't there always?

She arrived some time after he did. When she asks how he got there, he gives her a different answer each time. There was a sinking ship, and he paddled a lifeboat to shore, the only survivor of a cruise gone bad. ("Where is the lifeboat? The paddle?" she asks.) He was kayaking and got lost. ("What happened to your kayak?") He fell from the sky, a parachute billowing behind him. ("But where is the—" "The wind took it, okay?") She makes up her own answer to the unasked question: She swam here, borne by the strength of her own stroke, seeking to leave behind another, different life. ("A worse life?" he asks. "What could be worse than this?") The truth is, neither of them knows. How they got here. What could be worse.

There are no other creatures living on the island, not that they've seen, but he tells her about his first night here—the crashing and snarling of something deep in the trees. It's too dangerous, he says, to stray far from the beach and the nearby cave they've made their home.

They spend most of each day scavenging for food and water. Fishing is poor—they scan the clear sea for something silvery slipping by, but all they ever see is their own distorted reflections. He is wrinklier than he remembers. She has sad eyes. They sample strange fruits and get sick, then hesitantly sample others and feel fine. They gather the latter strange fruits into piles and peel and seed and eat until they get sick again, but it's a relief to finally feel full.

The air seems to constantly hum.

Pretty soon, she's pregnant. Listen, it happens. What else is there to do when you're stranded on an island, in the middle of nowhere, pretty certain no one is coming to save you? They had sex the first night they met, drawn to each other instinctively. (It helps that they are always naked.) She decides to keep it to herself, the pregnancy, at least for now. It's something she knows that he doesn't, and she likes having one secret.

She doubles her foraging efforts (she's eating for two now) and discovers a sort of spongy mushroom that doesn't taste too bad and hasn't made her sick yet. She gathers and hordes them, hides them in the cave, in a dank corner where he never goes because she pretends to do her morning pee there, even though he says it's disgusting to pee in the

place where you sleep, and she should do like him and only pee in the water, which *has* been looking cloudier lately.

To find more mushrooms, she strays farther and farther from the home cave, until she finds herself clear on the other side of the island, the width of which took her only the bulk of one day to walk across. She stands on the shore and squints into the blazing sun. There's nothing to see. No point of land across the water. She can barely see the water, the sun is so dazzling on this side of the island.

He is nearly hysterical when she returns. "Where have you been?" he shouts. "You could have gotten lost."

"The island isn't that large, it turns out," she reports, happy to have made this discovery on her own.

"It's too dangerous for you to go off like that," he tells her. "I told you, there's something out there."

"But I didn't see anything," she protests. "I didn't hear anything."

"Well, I did," he says. "I heard it, and it sounded vicious. Huge. It's not worth the risk."

It's too dangerous for one of them to explore alone, but what if they both go? It takes days to convince him, and she's nearly out of mushrooms by the time he agrees. *Fine*. They head toward the other side of the island, taking a different route than she did on her own. She sneaks the mushrooms into a little satchel she's made for herself by braiding together lengths of vine.

Their exploration is fruitful. They find three small ponds where they greedily drink, and a grove of the good strange fruits, and the body of an adventurer of some kind. She gasps when they stumble across him, a faceless man inside a his own personal container. She pokes at him then tries to pry off the helmet on his head. She tries to search the pockets on his suit, but they're all glued or sewn shut. She pulls at his gloved hands, his booted feet, and meanwhile her companion says maybe it's best they leave the body undisturbed, who knows how long he's been here, how he arrived. He might have brought some sickness with him, that's why he's hiding inside the suit and helmet.

She knocks on the helmet and shouts, "Hello?"

"Come on," he says, and she follows him reluctantly, disappointed. She was certain the adventurer would have answers.

Back at their home cave, they watch as the sky becomes almost thick with haze over the next week or so. (She thinks it's a week. She keeps track of the days by scratching lines into

the wall of the cave with a rock, but one day she found him playing Tic-Tac-Toe with the lines, and now she can't be sure how accurate they are.) She tries not to touch her own belly too much because she doesn't want to draw his attention to the way it has ripened, like one of the good strange fruits. She feels fruitful. But also concerned: Where is this haze coming from? Why does the air seem thicker? Where has the humming sound gone?

She peppers him with questions.

"What did you do before I arrived?"

"No, I mean, how did you pass the time?"

"How long were you here before I came?"

"What did you eat before we discovered the good strange fruits?"

He tries to be romantic and says, "There was no time before you." But they are not a romantic couple. They are barely a couple at all. A couple by default. He says, "I don't know. The days are all a blur. What did you do yesterday? Gather strange fruits, eat them, walk on the beach, have sex. It's the same every day."

"But *before* I got here. You didn't eat the strange fruits. You didn't have sex."

He waggles his eyebrows. "Didn't I?"

Later, when he goes off to do whatever it is he does before they go to sleep, she sneaks bites of the mushrooms she discovered. It occurs to her that she discovered them. They could be a new species for all she knows, native to this island, impossible to find elsewhere. She should name them. *Brakepads*, she thinks. *Beanpole*. *Anteater*. *Extravaganza*. The words mean nothing to her, but she likes the sound of them. She calls the mushrooms Candlewick. "These Candlewick are delicious," she murmurs to herself as she wipes her mouth with the back of her wrist.

"We should give each other names," she suggests that night as they lie next to each other and absorb the heat emanating from the other's body. "I'll give you a name. Wait, do you already have one? I can't believe we've never discussed this before."

"Why?" he says, half asleep. "What's the point? There are only two of us. If you want me, just yell, 'Hey!' and I'll be the only one who responds."

"Until one day you're not. Eventually, there will be someone else on this island," she says, then adds, so he won't get suspicious, "Don't you think?"

She feels him shrug.

“So it’s settled,” she says. “I think I’ll call you—” She tries to conjure the most beautiful word she can recall, not because he’s particularly beautiful (she thinks, honestly, that he’s a little oddly shaped, and she wishes he weren’t quite so large) but because she will say the word daily and wants something pleasant to say, something melodious to hear. “I think I’ll call you Kaleidoscope. No, wait—Panoply. No, *Kaleidoscope*. That’s definitely the one.”

He doesn’t respond and at first she thinks he’s displeased with her choice. Then a snore erupts from him and echoes against the cave walls.

She shoves him. “Kaleidoscope. What do you think?”

“Sure,” he says. “Let’s have sex.”

“We just did,” she reminds him. “Aren’t you going to give me a name?”

“Angie,” he says without pausing to think.

“*Angie?*” She thinks of herself more as a *Waterwheel* or a *Cardigan*.

“I knew an Angie once,” he says.

She will name the baby, she decides, when the time comes.

She wakes before he does and goes down to the beach. She amuses herself by tossing rocks into the water, which is thicker-looking than ever and muddled with something like scum or dirt. She can no longer see her reflection. She breaks up the scum with her rocks, which go *plonk* when they hit the surface of the water. She giggles at the sound at first. *Plonk. Plonk.* It echoes against the trees, against the water and whatever else might be out there. *Plonk.* Her good mood slides away, and she can’t quite say why, but soon enough she feels something hot rise inside her chest. She scowls at what would be the horizon if the sun weren’t so blinding, if the air weren’t so smoggy. She picks up another rock and hurls it, as hard as she can.

*Clunk.*

“There’s something out there,” she tells him when he wakes.

“Did you go wandering off again?” he says. “I told you. That creature—”

“No, listen.” She flings another rock into then distance. *Clunk.*

She looks at him expectantly. He frowns.

“Don’t you see? It’s hitting something. There’s something out there we can’t see.”

“Probably just a—”

But there’s no *just* about it. Just a boat? They’re saved! *Just* another island? Maybe there’s help there! She yammers at him excitedly, the intensity her own desire (need) to get off this island surprising her. She feels the baby inside her. It’s the first time, and she clutches her hands together to keep herself from placing them on her belly. She doesn’t want him to know, not yet.

He takes the clutching as a gesture of begging.

“Fine,” he says. “I will go look for something.”

“For what? Where?”

“Something to help us—get onto the water, I guess. Something that will let us see what’s out there. If that’s what you want.”

“Thank you,” she says. “I’ll go with you.”

“No!” he shouts, then reaches for her. Holds her tight. “If anything happened to you—”

He dillydallies before finally leaving, gathering little things she doesn’t think he’ll need (a handful of twigs, some rocks) and borrowing her satchel to carry them. He drinks from the pool and eats a few good strange fruit, and sighs a lot. Then he disappears into the trees.

Back at the cave, there are rinds from the good strange fruit all over the cave floor, which he hasn’t bothered to clean. He has discovered the mushrooms, too; she can tell her store has been depleted. The bed of moss they share is shredded from the way he rolls and squirms in his sleep. She frowns, then begins to clean up.

It’s a long time before he returns, and while she waits, she imagines what he might bring back. Something that will help them. New food, something different. A tool of some sort that will point them in the right direction, show them that there’s more to the world than this island and the murky water that surrounds it.

But when he comes back, he’s bleeding.

“I saw it,” he gasps as she dabs his wounds—three long, shallow marks, it turns out, across his torso. “The creature. It’s huge. It came at me—I barely got away. We can’t go back out there. Not even for the fruit.”

She tries not to annoy him with questions as he recovers. But she can't help herself. *How* huge? What did it look like? Did it snarl, or bark, or chirp? Did it seem territorial? Maybe they could find a way around it—

“I told you,” he said. “We can't wander off. It's not safe. We have to stay here.”

But their stores of strange good fruit are nearly depleted. She nibbles on a mushroom, then declares that she will go into the trees to find more.

“No!” he shouts. His wounds are nearly healed, but he struggles to stand up. “I told you—”

“We can't starve,” she points out.

“What's wrong?”

“Well, if we don't eat—”

“No, what's wrong with you,” he asks and his face is concerned and his hands are on her. “You're sick.”

“No, I—”

He feels her head for fever, even though she insists she's not hot. She has been out in the sun all day, he reminds her; she has sun sickness. Or—how many of these mushrooms has she eaten? He discovered them long ago, he tells her, before she ever arrived, and learned for himself how delicious but dangerous they are. He should have warned her. How is her stomach? Does she feel nauseous?

Now that he mentions it—

She runs from the cave and vomits into the sea.

The next day, he insists that she stay inside the cave and rest, even though she feels better. She's never noticed before how dank the cave is. How clammy. Alone, she tries to entertain herself by watching the shadows on the cave walls. But three days into her convalescence the shadows seem to stretch themselves and grow eyes, they are staring at her, and she feels suddenly awkward in her nakedness, in the way her stomach has grown. She gets up and searches her corner, but he has taken all the mushrooms. *Candlewick*, she murmurs, and even though he says they're poisonous, she misses them. She's sad that she didn't discover them, after all.

“I'm feeling much better now,” she says when he comes back later with an armful of fruit.

*Limbo*, she thinks. They never named the fruit. *Tissue paper. Bubblegum.*

“Are you sure?” he says. “You look awfully pale.”

“Nothing a little sun won’t fix.”

“You can’t,” he says, then scurries outside. He’s holding a tree limb when he returns.

“What?” she says.

“*Look.*” He points at the bark. She squints and sees faint marks. Teeth marks, he tells her. The creature has gnawed at this piece of wood, which he found just this morning, just outside the cave. It’s getting closer. It’s no longer safe for her to leave the cave.

She frowns. “What about you? You have about as much protection as I do. It’s not like either of us has a weapon, or fighting skills. Or pants.”

“But I’m not responsible for two lives when I go out.”

Her heart skips a beat. She hadn’t known it could do that without killing her. When it starts up again, she asks, “How did you know?”

“You just lay back and relax,” he says, then rushes out and returns with armfuls of soft moss to make their bed even more comfortable. “Just take it easy, Mom, and keep that baby safe.”

She doesn’t like being called *Mom*. Not by him. “My name,” she says, “is Angie. Remember?”

For the next days (or weeks? She tells him to stop messing with her lines but he’s moved onto Dots-and-Boxes) she watches the shadows on the cave walls and works at braiding more vines, then knitting herself a sweater, a skirt, from the braids. She eats the fruit and watches her stomach grow. She doesn’t feel sick. The baby moves, and something else moves in her too. At first it’s small—she mistakes it for a second baby, a twin. But it’s higher up, something inside her chest, like a small bird trapped there and fluttering under her breastbone.

Meanwhile, he is excited. The baby is a boy, he’s certain. They will call him Steve. (No, they won’t, she thinks.) He’s going to search the island for a ball-shaped rock and a good piece of wood, something he can fusion into a bat so they can play games.

“I thought it was too dangerous to go wandering around,” she says.

“You’re right,” he says but she can tell he’s only half-listening as he finishes his box. “I win again!” He only ever plays against himself.

“What’s it look like?” she asks. “This creature?”

“Hmm?”

“You saw it. When it scratched you.”

“It was terrifying. You wouldn’t want to hear.”

“Oh.”

She watches him bite into a fruit, the sweet juice dribbling down his chin.

“What about the mushrooms?” she asks.

“What about them?”

“Why didn’t you tell me they were poisonous? Instead of letting me think I discovered them. I ate so many.”

“I know. I’m sorry,” he says and kisses the top of her head. “I just didn’t want to scare you.”

“I ate so many,” she repeats, and the thing inside her flutters. “And I never got sick until you said I would.”

He finishes his fruit, wipes his sticky hands on his naked thighs. “Funny how that works. You want to have sex?”

“Not particularly,” she tells him.

They go to sleep as they always do, with the sun still blazing away outside. Her skin, which has grown gray over the last few weeks, buzzes with anticipation. The thing in her chest is leaping; the baby in her stomach rolls with its own tide. She is (she searches for a word) scared. No—anxious. Alert. She is electric with anticipation. She is leaving.

She is leaving the cave, clothed in her moss, tip-toeing toward the mouth and praying he won’t wake.

Outside, the sun is dazzling. It’s a miracle on her skin. She sheds her moss, happy to be naked again, grateful to be warm. She washes her face in the water even though it is dank—she wonders how they could have ever expected fish to live in such muck. The sky is

so hazy, it looks like milk. The air tastes musty. She thinks back on the day she arrived, how she woke on the beach of what looked like a paradise. Was it? Or was it always this way, already ruined, waiting for her to open her eyes?

There's no more time to waste. She cuts a path across the island, her ears straining for sounds of a beast crashing through the trees, even though she is certain (almost certain) that there is no creature. When she comes to its supposed home, the other cave, she slows her pace. There's nothing inside, she tells herself. His wounds were self-inflicted, etched into his skin by his own hand holding a shell or a jagged rock; the teeth marks on the limb were faint, they barely dented the bark. Still, she pauses at the mouth of the cave and wishes the trees here weren't so dense, that the sun was positioned so it would shine deeper into the cave. She wishes she could take a piece of the sun with her inside. She listens, hard. All she hears is her baby, churning away inside her, and the thing in her chest, which sounds like a bell, an alarm.

She grits her teeth and moves forward, into the dark. She feels the ground with her feet, scoots them along the wet floor of the cave. Her ears create growls and snarls. Or do they? There is something here. She sees its haunches, the way its back bristles with fur, in the shadows. She holds her breath, waits for her eyes to grow used to the dark. They are the shadows, the bristles and fur, and there is nothing in this cave except moss and lichen and water dripping and something large and hulking at the back of the cave. She waits for it to move, to hiss. But the shape is still, and after long minutes of lungs aching from held breath and skin prickling and fear spiking inside her, she grows calmer. Squints. Holds out her hand.

Touches the smooth surface of the thing before her.

Her eyes grow more accustomed to the dark. She narrows her eyes, stares at the side of this shape. Makes out words in the dark.

*S. S. Angie.*

Now she can see the shape of the boat, the scrapes along the floor of the cave that show how it was pushed and pulled into the cave. Hidden. Now she can see the moss thrown over the boat in an effort to conceal it further. She can see him as he was, how long ago, leaving her in their home cave after that first night and scrambling to hide the boat she would ask about. To hide their only escape.

She grabs the hull of the small rowboat and heaves, but it won't move. She kicks at it, trying to loose it from the moss that has begun to grow over its sides, then heaves again. She is catching her breath, building up steam to try once more, when she hears a branch snap outside. "Dammit," she hears him grumble.

Her breath catches.

Even in her front-heavy state, she can move with more grace than he does. She stays as quiet as she can, edging toward the mouth of the cave, and when she doesn't see him, she slips into the brush then begins to run, moving lightly over soft moss, toward the beach on this side of the island. She pants and hopes he can't hear.

"Hey!" he shouts, and he's closer than she expected, too close, he's not fast but he's steady, pushing limbs and bushes out of his way, blazing a trail through the forest.

At the water's edge, she hesitates. If only she had found the boat sooner. Given enough time, she could have kicked it free; she could have ridden it to freedom.

"Angie!" he yells, and he is behind her, so close, nearly to the beach.

She wades into the water, ankle-deep. Knee-deep, thigh. When the water laps at her waist, she keeps going, expecting at any moment to lose her footing and be swallowed by the sea.

It doesn't happen.

She carries on, one foot in front of the other, and the water stays waist-level. It is murky, but it feels warm and almost soft against her skin.

"Hey!" he shouts again, and she turns. He's only a dot on the shore.

"Where are we?" she shouts.

He doesn't follow her into the water. His voice comes to her, faint and small. "We're where we've always been!"

She turns away. He's right, or he's wrong. Either way, she can't stay.

She moves toward the blazing sunlight, blinded by it, the water deliciously warm on her cave-gray skin. The baby flips and swims inside her. She doesn't look back; she knows he won't follow her.

She keeps going until—*thunk*—she hits something, nose-first. She bumps against some kind of barrier, gently, then rubs her nose, frowning. Puts out her hands. They touch something solid, invisible, smooth. One hand on the barrier, she moves to her right. Then retraces her steps, back the way she came, past the place where she was, the invisible wall always under her hand, and she thinks if she circumnavigated the island, she would discover the wall never ends.

The baby has grown still. Waiting to see, maybe. In a few weeks, little Cauliflower or Dandelion will make his or her entrance and everything will change. She's not afraid. She's only afraid that things *won't* change, that there will always be an island, or a cave, a monster that's not really there.

She draws back one fist, then hammers it at the wall. Does it again. It doesn't take long for the bones in her hands to feel crushed, for the bleeding to start. But she won't stop. She pounds at an obstacle she can't see, until something cracks, and the world begins to shatter.