

## **Flip Side**

**2450 words**

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Brent got the travel bug from one of those special-guest bookstore authors where they set up the folding chairs and a small cluster of mostly old but enthusiastic folks shows up.

Brent was in the store not for the presentation but to kill a little time browsing, and he was checking out the latest Bob Woodward Trump book, which was slashed to half-price. He was thinking probably nah, since the book would be dated already for sure, but he did enjoy quality reporting.

Tonight's speaker starts in. He has a power-point ready, makes a couple cheap jokes, and then lets loose the thrust of the book--he made a decision 20 years ago to live in 30 international places, for a minimum of 3 months each.

Dang.

So Brent sits down. The guy explains he finished number 23, Istanbul, and next up at 24 is Selangor. The guy doesn't tell you what country, which is obnoxious, but Brent is pretty sure it's Malaysia.

He has to admit, a fascinating hour from the guy, and he buys the book, which the guy autographs, though Brent doesn't care about that.

Brent tells the guy he did a little math and at 3 months per venue though you should have finished them off in 8 years. The guy says absolutely right, but in several cases he's enjoyed his stay so much that he extended it beyond that. Visa requirements permitting of course. The guy adds that if you demonstrate sufficient net worth it can help, and you learn other tricks.

Brent says, 'I'm sure you go into this in the book, but which one so far topped 'em all?'

'Oh, *such* a difficult question,' the guy says. 'So many factors in play, I'm afraid I can't narrow it down.'

'Fair enough,' Brent says, 'how about more specific: Which city--or town, whatever--is the best for bringing a chick?'

'Pardon?'

'A babe. Like a holiday excursion type deal.' Brent hadn't thought of it, but this guy's probably gay, or otherwise a confirmed bachelor. Likely a requirement for a 30 places agenda, unless you had a *real* accommodating female on board.

‘Ah,’ the guy says. ‘Well, Santorini is special for its sheer beauty--that’s the Greek Isles. Of course your Bruges is fairy tale-grand. The Isle of Skye obviously, with the castles and lighthouses to explore, one of the Harry Potter locations.’

‘Scotland?’ Brent says.

‘Distinctively so,’ the guy says. ‘Your Venice canals, your Saint-Tropez’s, highly romantic venues. All that said--my recommendation would be Bora Bora.’

‘Oh?’

‘Enjoy yourself my friend,’ the guy said, and he got back to signing the remaining books that people handed him.

Brent thought he remembered Bora Bora from a war movie, couldn’t place it, looked it up later. Colorful coral reefs, it said, deep blue water. Dream honeymoon destination. French Polynesia.

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In the end Brent went with his original plan, Maui.

Bora Bora and Saint-Tropez and those Greek Isles sounded incredible--they were all three on his bucket list for sure now--but he ran them by a travel person and it was too complicated. For Maui, alls you had to do was

get your ass to the Oakland Airport, and even Southwest flew non-stop twice a day there now.

The decision was how to pull it off with Sylvia.

You could tell her the truth, you were heading over there for a week, but for what purpose?

Brent wondered if that basketball tournament they had, the Maui Classic, was going on again post-Covid. You had a bunch of college teams come over from the mainland. Some decent early-season ball. Brent caught pieces of it on TV.

Looks like it was, right before Thanksgiving.

Hmm.

The first thing, he ran it by Sylvia that night. ‘Hon, how’s about we go out of the comfort zone this year, just you and I, we get on a plane, we politely tell both families to shove it.’

‘You’re being a clown,’ she said. ‘I’m not *even* going to dignify that with a response.’

The *both families* part was amusing. They’d been having Thanksgiving dinner, as many years back as Brent could remember, with her family, down in Ojai.

‘Put it to you this way,’ he said, ‘who would die if we weren’t on hand this time?’

‘Not the point, never the point. But fine. You need to go to your mom’s so badly? Be my guest.’

‘If I’m following you,’ Brent said, ‘you’re still going to yours.’

‘Obviously. Easy enough to make an excuse for you. If anyone even asks.’

Brent said, ‘See this is what the pop psychologists are always digging into. The holidays fucks everyone.’

‘And you express yourself so estutely,’ she said. ‘The private school education.’

So that took care of the one hurdle. Sylvia wouldn’t be interested in an island getaway Thanksgiving week. If she’d shocked him by being open to it, well then it’d be a little awkward and you’d have to backtrack, but you’re good.

He went downstairs to his basement office and texted Frances the basics. She said now’s not great but to meet her same time same place tomorrow.

Frances was an attorney, had her own practice, often worked at night. She was single. She rented space in one of those We Work deals, a receptionist on hand during the day, barely anyone around after hours, which she and Brent had been taking advantage of the last couple months.

Frances was fine with Thanksgiving week and Brent bought her a ticket.

Brent's idea was tell Sylvia when he gets back that he met someone in Hawaii. Not sure why that'd be better than telling her he met someone here. But it seemed cleaner, and Brent felt better having them fly separate, at least on the outbound.

He kept it simple, the Marriott at Wailea Beach--no screwing around with condos or Airbnbs--and when he got there Frances was on the balcony in her swimsuit with a Mai Tai, big spear of mint sticking out of it.

'You smell like salt,' Brent said.

'I went in,' Frances said, 'I'm sorry I didn't wait for you. A man lent me a pair of fins.'

'Gee,' Brent said, 'you need fins to go in?'

'You don't,' she said, 'but it's safer.'

Brent said well it's good to see you, and she said the same, and he ordered more beverages and they agreed it was quite glorious here.

They had dinner at a local joint. He wasn't feeling great when they got back to the room, stomach a little topsy turvy, one of the dishes Frances wanted was spicy octopus with kimchi and he should have trusted his instincts.

Frances said she felt like going downstairs for a while, and is he is sure some air wouldn't help?

Brent said please go ahead, I'll be good as new tomorrow, and he flipped on the Maui Classic basketball thing. Might as well at least check it out, since that's what you told Sylvia was part of your deal coming over here.

They had a nice buffet spread at breakfast, but when Frances got up for seconds Brent noticed her saying hi to some guy, a little too familiar.

'Who was that?' he said when she sat back down.

'That gentleman?' she said. 'He lent me the swim fins. He and his wife are here from Newport.'

'Oh. She go in too?'

'The ocean? No, I didn't see her until last night. I met them both in the lounge. A pity you couldn't come down, there was an acoustic luau group.'

'You said that already, the music.'

'I did?'

'When you came back at like 2 in the morning.'

'Well pardon me then. *Someone* got up on the wrong side of bed.'

That night Brent went to the lounge with Frances. A different group was playing, R & B cover songs, all

Hawaiian-looking guys but the vocals weren't bad, you closed your eyes they sounded like black dudes.

The other couple was there again and Frances introduced Brent, and when she got a little sloshed Frances tried to pull Brent onto the dance floor, but he waved her off.

So she pulled the other guy, Richard, out there, and a few songs went by and they were laughing and smiling, like they were just getting started.

Brent said to the wife, Miriam, 'Nothing to do with it--probably--but how's your marriage these days? Good?'

'How's yours?' Miriam said.

Definitely a curveball, Brent not sure how to manage it.

'Are you going to answer it for me?' he said.

'I wasn't planning to,' she said.

'But you figured it out,' he said, 'courtesy of my mistress over there.'

'C'est la vie,' Miriam said.

'Terrible expression,' Brent said. 'I had a situation once, guy I played racquetball with. He was cheating on his wife bad, multiple women. She was a sweetheart. I



ran into her in the produce aisle at Safeway, I decided I couldn't take it.'

'Let me guess,' Miriam said. 'You ultimately engaged with her.'

Frances and Richard were slow-dancing a ballad, barely moving.

Brent said, 'You know something . . . you sort of have a dirty mind, I'm thinking.'

'Finish the story.'

'So I tell her. Not in Safeway but later. She's in shock but thanks me, says she needed to know. Next thing the husband, he sics a guy on me, guy starts following me around.'

'For real?'

'Oh yeah. I'm assuming it's just for show, but the guy steps it up. Little guy wearing a tracksuit, has a foreign accent.'

'And this little person steps it up how?'

'Main way, he starts shadowing me on my morning run. I finally had to drown him in San Francisco Bay.'

'Really. Well that would put an end to it.'

'You can believe me or not. You asked how it played out.'

Miriam said, 'What happened to your relations with the wife going forward? Since you didn't get arrested, obviously.'

'It was a lucky thing, there was a heavy westerly swell that week, big surf. Where a body floating around could get reversed outside the Golden Gate and never come back. At least that's what some surfer told me.'

'But the wife?'

'What I heard was they tried to work it out. So who knows, me exposing the jerkell might have helped. Course this is a while back.'

'They always are,' Miriam said.

'What's that now?'

'A while back.'

'Okay let's don't be going all heavy on me. A tropical vacation, after all . . . Newport, Rhode Island, or the LA one?'

'Why?'

'I don't know, if it's the LA one, maybe we get a drink sometime. I draw the line at flying back east.'

'We're doing that now,' she said.

'Fine. Where would you live for a year? What foreign place?'

'Ooh. You certainly produced *that* out of thin air.'

‘Whatever. Where would you?’

‘I’m not sure I’ve traveled enough, honestly, to sift one through.’

‘Same here. I did the backpack thing in Europe, summer after high school. I figured that was just a sampling, I’d be all over the place.’

‘But life got in the way.’

‘You need to get more creative with your expressions. But I guess.’

Richard and Frances were coming off the dance floor, done for now apparently, both sweating quite a bit. Frances motioned toward the bar. ‘Would either of you like anything?’ she said.

‘A-o-k for now,’ Brent said. Frances nodded and she and Richard headed over there and grabbed a couple stools. It was an indoor-outdoor setup, the bartender outside and the patrons in, big leafy stuff hanging from the makeshift roof, water trickling down one of the walls.

Miriam said, ‘I had this piano teacher? He loved to speak about Vienna. He even composed a short string quartet, *Sketches of Vienna* in the title. I adored that piece of music. He made me a tape.’

‘Adored it because you admired him?’

‘See I don’t know. It may *not* have been any good, had I come to it objectively.’

‘Bottom line, you wanted to go to Vienna. Or you did.’

‘Never did. My teacher hadn’t been there either.’

‘I think I’d like Bolivia,’ Brent said. ‘Y’ever see *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*?’

‘Missed that one.’

‘Doesn’t matter. They go to Bolivia. From Utah, to change it up.’

‘My brother lives in Montreal,’ she said. ‘The vibe is nice.’

‘Okay now if we’re talking eastern Canada,’ he said, ‘I like Cape Breton Island personally.’

‘That’s interesting, when were you there?’

Brent gave her a look. ‘There’s a couple of their radio stations you can pick up. On those all-channel internet deals? They set the tone for you.’

‘How?’

‘Depending on the host. You get lucky, you get one with the local accent, the intonations.’

‘Is it a Gaelic influence then?’

‘Not sure. Let’s go and find out.’

‘You’re amusing.’

‘I find I like places best I can drive to.’

‘One can drive to Cape Breton? Don’t you ferry over from New Brunswick?’

‘Maybe you can but you don’t have to. You cut across, top of Maine, you drop down to Nova Scotia. Then they got a mile-long causeway they filled in with rocks that connects you.’

‘I see,’ she said.

‘That’ll stop me from going to Bolivia,’ he said. ‘The driving.’

‘But it’s feasible? Or no?’

‘If you ship the vehicle part way, so yeah but nah this is better.’

Miriam was fiddling with the macadamia nuts they gave you. Not eating any.

‘I mean realistically, how would that work?’ she said.

‘How would it? We rent a car--I do--nice big comfy one. Then you get in.’

‘You really are a bit of a crackpot. You know that?’

‘Cause I make it sound simple?’

‘Cause you make it sound laughingly complicated.’

‘So you couldn’t possibly.’

‘I didn’t quite say that . . . I mean in a hypothetical world.’

Brent said, ‘They got an Indian trading post before you hit the causeway. Next to it, a fronton court. You know what one of those is?’

‘No.’

Frances and Richard finished at the bar, said they needed a little fresh air, and would be back in a bit.

Brent and Miriam watched them go.

Brent said, ‘See the Basques came over to fish, traded with the Mi'kmaq's. Now they got it combined, the Basque sport court with the native wares. You can do a little shopping, then hit some balls around.’

‘Oh my God.’

‘Only one way to prove me wrong.’

‘Is that right.’

‘Unh.’

She said she might come with him under a couple of conditions. Brent wasn't a fan of conditions. You could ask her to dance, but not really his thing.