

IMMERSION PROGRAM

It had been Dean's idea—the pact they made, at journey's outset, to do away with alarm clocks, wristwatches, anything that kept track of time. Dean was a man in his late thirties, in love with the world, who wanted to stop growing older, or at least to stop thinking about it. Jill was a woman in her mid-twenties who wanted to live with no past and no future, neither fear nor regret. She had been intrigued by his suggestion to abandon schedules, as it had seemed wild, dangerous in a frivolous sort of way, and utterly unlike herself—she was someone who, even after a year of living in the Central American rainforest, still made to-do lists. She had leaped upon Dean when he first proposed they disappear together, back in his tiny rented room over a bread bakery in San Miguel. They had made love then, on the maps he spread out across the bed.

Now: Dean is navigating the streets of Puerto Escondido with his camera clicking rapid-fire, stealing private moments from strangers. Jill is lying in a hammock on the balcony of their rented suite, fighting the urge to dig her Timex out from the depths of a backpack. With her cheek pressed into thick rope netting, she imagines his subjects—children laughing in the stream of a garden hose; tree-trimmers cracking open coconuts to drink on the roadside; fishermen sitting on overturned rowboats on the beach, smoking cigarettes.

She won't be able to gauge precisely how long he has been gone—as she doesn't know when he left—but finding her wristwatch might help make sense of the frustration poking with increasing pressure at the center of her chest. Perhaps it's nearing dinnertime. Perhaps she is hungry, and that's all. She hasn't eaten anything since a couple of shrimp quesadillas on Playa Principal, and that seems a long time ago. Now the sun is lower in the sky, the palm tree shadows stretching across the cracked, sandy tar of the road.

Instead of rising, Jill continues to lie with her cheek pressed

against the hammock, her travel journal open to a blank page on the deck wood below her, her one open eye staring out between the balcony railings to the sea. Beyond the frothy breakers on Zicatela, the water is deceptively tranquil, a sheet of blue silk stretched taut to the horizon. On the tourist beach the previous morning, she had been caught off guard and bowled over by a wave that slammed her into the sand with surprising force. Stunned and tumbling, inhaling salt water, she had opened her eyes to the whirl of bubbles and realized with sudden, odd serenity that she might die—right then, that very instant. She had been startled, but at the same time almost euphoric, thinking of Charlie, her brother, and wondering if this was how it had been for him, this soundless passage into another world.

Then she had emerged at the surface, coughing, and Dean had come splashing toward her through the shallow surf with panic smeared across his face, shouting, "Are you okay? Are you okay?"

They arrived in Puerto Escondido some days ago, in the early morning, after an interminable bus ride through the desolate flatlands of Mexico. At the beginning of the drive, Jill gazed with curious interest out the window. Along the dusty roadside, half-naked children played beside half-finished concrete bungalows, and white bedsheets hung limp on clotheslines in the summer heat. Sometimes the children paused to watch the mammoth bus as it passed; how must it have looked to them, she wondered—strange as a sleek gray whale gliding through the desert.

At first there were brief stops at solemn, solitary roadside market-stands, where local villagers who had been waiting would board and stand in the aisle for the remainder of the eight-hour ride, as all seats were reserved. Even very small children stood quietly, holding the armrests for balance, without complaint. Some women even placed sleeping babies wrapped in blankets on the aisle floor.

Somewhere along the way, the dusky excitement of the new countryside they had entered gave way to a murky stream of lonely hovels, longing faces. Emptiness. Jill had begun to wonder when they would arrive at their destination. Then the orange, sun-baked fields turned gray, and then the sun was gone and there was only blackness, thick as oil and not a star's light

