

The Beach

The honeymoon had been planned almost as long as the wedding. Two years at least, maybe more. Rachel was adamant it had to be Indonesia. She wanted a perfect beach holiday, palm trees and the bright blue sea. Jason went along with this idea as he did with most of her suggestions.

They had met by chance, queueing for coffee at an IT conference in Munich. Rachel was the chief executive of a global insurance company and Jason a software engineer developing algorithms to evaluate risk. They started chatting. It turned out they both lived in London and they agreed to meet again. They hit it off immediately: Rachel provided the reassurance that Jason craved, and Jason's exuberance gave Rachel a new lease of life. They were the perfect match. Everyone said so.

The wedding was just as they had imagined it. Bridesmaids, flowers, church bells, confetti, the works. And now the beach. It cost a fortune, but who cares, they only planned to get married once!

Jason was equipped: flashy sunglasses, suntan oils and flowered shorts. Rachel said his shorts were Hawaiian not Indonesian, but he wasn't bothered. He checked his phone for messages and sent some pictures of the pristine beach to his colleagues back home. The hotel was a bit of a concrete block, and there were not so many people around. It was the end of the season, and there had been a few minor earthquakes recently. Nothing to worry about thought Jason. It happens all the time in this part of the world: he knew the odds.

It's true the hotel staff were a bit freaked out by the tsunami warning that had come through in the morning but Jason, an expert in risk analysis, refused to get the shuttle bus back into town. It will be fine, he told Rachel, this is the holiday of our dreams – just enjoy it. Jason stretched out on the lounger, shut his eyes and relaxed.



Somewhere in the distance he could hear a dog barking. Then it was quiet. Eerily quiet. Just the rustling of the palm leaves in the wind. Where was Rachel – his wife! – the thought that he was married still amazed him. He was just dozing off when he heard her yelling.

'Jason, Jason, run. Run for your life'. He opened his eyes and saw the huge wall of water rushing towards him. He scrambled out of the lounger and just made it to where Rachel was standing on the steps of the hotel. 'Quick, quick we must get upstairs'.

The sound of timbers and debris crashing against the lower floors of the hotel was deafening. The water gushed through what had been the dining room and the lobby. Rachel and Jason looked down aghast from the second floor. In an instant their paradise was ruined. There was no electricity and no phone signal either. Rachel could see the few struts of what had been the bridge from the mainland to the hotel peninsula. Everything else had been washed away. The hotel was completely cut off. They were on their own.

Now she knew why the staff had left in a such rush. Jason had been so confident with his optimistic predictions, but he'd been wrong. Rachel sat on the bed. Jason was in the toilet. The fresh water supply would last for a while, but what about food? One shrink-wrapped packet of biscuits from the plane. A banana saved from last night's dinner, and Jason with his flashy sunglasses and silly shorts. It was hopeless, utterly hopeless. Rachel felt the tears welling up.

Jason came out of the bathroom and sat next to her on the bed. To his amazement, Rachel was crying. He'd never seen her cry before. She was usually so practical. 'What's wrong?' he asked. 'Everything' she said. 'It's all a ghastly mistake. I'm so sorry Jason, I should have realized before. We should never have got married, never'.

'What are you talking about' said Jason. 'This is no longer a beach holiday in some tourist brochure. It's a disaster zone. I know you don't think I can cope, and we can talk about that later, but right now we need to make a plan. We need food and water and we need to boil the water. There is the risk of an aftershock and another wave, but we must find out what resources we have. We must find the kitchen.'

Rachel didn't respond. She just stared blankly out at the wreckage, the broken trees and the ruin of her life. This was it. Just she and Jason. She began to sob again.

Jason looked at her tear stained face. 'Rachel, come on, there is so much to do'. But she wouldn't budge. Jason shrugged. He had to get on.



The kitchen was on the ground floor. The place was full of debris. It would take at least a day to reach the freezers, and even then they'd need to have some means of cooking. He looked around. The upper shelves of the store room were stocked with cans of pineapple. Honestly, tinned pineapple, in this place! Jason set about sorting through the rubbish. A garden rake, a battered bucket, a smashed up bicycle. A pristine can of coke!

Who knows what damage there had been on the mainland, but at some point someone would come back to check on the hotel. If only he could find some matches, they could survive until then. He thought about Rachel. Why didn't she help? Now it was Jason's turn to have doubts: 'till death us do part'. He had said the words but did he really mean them?

What if she wasn't as reliable as he'd imagined? Maybe they'd both made a mistake? Jason pulled himself together. There was plenty of firewood. He could make a grill with the spokes of the bicycle wheel. He would reach the freezer in the end. He looked around for something to use as a lever. Never mind what Rachel thought, he was actually quite practical.

Just then he heard the sound of footsteps. He spun around and there she was. Rachel, his wife. She had stopped crying. She looked at the neat stack of wood that he'd made, and the route cleared

towards the freezer. She gave a wan smile. Jason, she said, 'I don't know what the future holds, but for now this is what we need' and she held out a tiny pack of matches stamped with the hotel crest.

Soon they were quite at home in the abandoned hotel. Neither said anything, but both knew about each other's doubts and mis-judgements: Rachel was not invincible. Jason was not incapable. Perhaps they could get along after all. Bit by bit they began to enjoy their life together. They liked the hard manual labour. They slept well. Days passed.

They mostly kept their phones switched off - why waste power when there was no connection? – but Rachel couldn't stop herself from checking to see if she could get into her office e-mail. Two, maybe three weeks after the tsunami, her Samsung sprang into life. There was a gap of few days, but she now had over a thousand new messages in her inbox. It was overwhelming. She opened one at random. It was entitled 'Adjusting our loss' and it was from the deputy director of her company. 'I've decided we should change our policy on Acts of God. Jason Knight from Riskisus has produced some new algorithms, and the results are very promising. If we incorporated them into our model we would hardly ever have to pay out to local communities or businesses affected by disaster and our profits would increase immediately. In Rachel's absence I've made the executive decision to use Knight's method forthwith.'

Rachel looked out across the devastated beach huts. So many livelihoods washed away. The locals would return, and she and Jason were doing what they could, but there was so much to repair, it would take years. How could she face her inbox with all this to do? And worse, how could she face herself: the chief executive of a company that would refuse to pay out? She called Jason over. 'Look, we have a mobile signal and a connection'. Jason took a look at the screen. 'That's terrible' he said. 'They are using my work to destroy places like this.'

As they stared at Rachel's messages they heard the stuttering sound of an outboard motor followed by the crunch of a boat on the beach. Jason's first thought was looters, but no, it was Captain Holmes from the British Consulate, come to rescue them and take them home. He was so glad to find them alive. Their families had been worried sick. He'd wait for them while they packed up. Once he'd checked their passports they'd be off in no time.

Rachel and Jason walked back to the ruined hotel they called home. 'Jason, I can't go back to my old job now. I just can't. What they are doing is wrong. It's unethical. I'm sure we can find work here. Let's give it a go.' Jason thought for a moment. He thought of London and of his friends and family. They could always visit, ...

There was a knock at the door. It was the Captain. 'Time to go'. After some negotiation, Captain Holmes left – no passengers on board. He revved the engine crossly. What a waste of time. Two silly yuppies deciding to stay in this dump. How would he explain that to his boss? To be honest he was getting sick of this job. As the boat sped out across the bay he decided that it was time to pack it in. He had always planned to go back to the UK, and this was the last straw. He'd put in his resignation as soon as he got back to the office.

On the beach the fish were sizzling on the home-made grill. Rachel and Jason had found the wine and the ashes blew towards them with the salt wind from the sea.