

MONTEGO BAY

by Walter Cooke

The first cruise horn sounded before Joel cut the limes.

It rolled over Montego Bay like weather, over the resort roofs, over the fence topped with bougainvillea, over the narrow road where staff buses idled with their doors open. In the bar's polished counter Joel could see the sea twice: once beyond the glass, bright and blue for the guests, and once beneath his hands, broken into reflections by bottles of imported gin.

His wristband was black, STAFF ONLY. Guests wore yellow, blue, silver. Access arranged by color.

"Morning, Joel," said Marcia from housekeeping, passing behind him with a cart of folded towels.

"Morning."

"You hear they raising taxi fare again?"

"For who?"

She looked at him.

They both laughed quietly, because the answer was obvious.

**WELCOME TO MONTEGO BAY: WHERE PARADISE WORKS
FOR YOU.**

Peak-season occupancy projected at 94%.

Imported premium spirits improve guest satisfaction scores by 17%.

Local labor remains one of the island's competitive advantages.

By ten, the pool chairs were full. A woman from Minnesota asked Joel whether the rum punch was “authentic.” She was sunburned at the shoulders and apologetic each time she ordered, as if kindness could soften the transaction.

“My husband says we should try local,” she said.

Joel poured the resort rum from a bottle labeled in cursive for export. Behind him, in the storeroom, were mangoes shipped in refrigerated crates because the supplier contract required uniform size.

“This one popular,” Joel said.

She smiled, relieved. “You must love living here.”

He placed the drink on a napkin. The napkin bore the hotel logo: a white heron standing on a beach where no staff member was allowed to swim.

“It have its mornings,” he said.

She tipped him two dollars, folded small under the glass.

Money did not merely buy things. It rearranged distance. It decided which beach was a view and which was an inheritance converted into frontage. It taught the body where to stand, when to smile, how long to hold eye contact. It made welcome into labor and gratitude into policy.

Joel's grandfather had fished from that shore before the seawall. He had kept his boat beneath almond trees where the resort's western restaurant now served lobster at market price. Joel remembered him mending nets in the yard, hands moving without haste, saying the sea never belonged to a man but a man could belong to it.

Now the sea belonged to parcels, parcels to holding companies, holding companies to offices in countries Joel had never seen.

His mother still kept the old fishing hook in a biscuit tin.

"Carry it when you leave," she had told him.

He had not answered.

Leaving meant Canada, maybe hotel work in Banff, maybe construction through his cousin. Three years of cold, remittances, savings. A chance to come back with enough to buy something inland, where the price had not yet learned to look at the ocean.

But sometimes he feared that if he left, the last witness would leave with him.

INVESTMENT SUMMARY

Oceanfront villa lots now available.

Secure title. Gated entry. Staff quarters included.

Five minutes from international airport.

Own your piece of paradise.

At the service gate, Dwayne the driver waited under the security camera with a clipboard.

A couple from Toronto approached without looking at the sign that said AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL. They had missed their excursion shuttle.

“Can you take us to the waterfalls?” the man asked.

Dwayne glanced at the guard, then at the couple’s silver wristbands.

“Hotel taxi desk by the lobby.”

“But you’re a driver, right?”

The guard shifted his weight.

Dwayne smiled with the tired precision of a man protecting tomorrow’s shift. “Today I’m waiting on delivery.”

The woman lowered her voice. “We can pay cash.”

For a second no one moved. Then the cruise horn sounded again, farther off, and Dwayne lifted his clipboard like a shield.

“Lobby will sort you out.”

They walked away disappointed, not angry. That was worse somehow. They had offered money as one offers water.

In the kitchen, the cooks worked behind swinging doors no guest touched. Steam thickened the air. Crates of Spanish strawberries sat beside sacks of rice rationed by the chef because local prices had climbed again.

“Joel,” said Nadine, plating jerk chicken beneath heat lamps, “you know anybody renting?”

“Renting what?”

“Anything with a roof.”

Her landlord had sold to a company that planned “short-term luxury units.” She said the phrase in English so clean it sounded imported.

“How much time they give you?”

“Thirty days.”

Joel reached for a tray of mint. “You have family?”

She laughed once. “Everybody have family. Nobody have space.”

GOVERNMENT ADDRESS

Tourism is the engine of national growth.

Every visitor represents opportunity.

Hospitality is not merely an industry but a culture.

We must remain attractive to investors.

By afternoon the beach gleamed under combed sand. A worker in rubber boots raked away seaweed before guests woke from lunch. Beyond the fence, vendors called through gaps in the chain-link: bracelets, fruit, shells, ganja, tours. Their voices rose and fell with security patrols.

Joel's younger sister Althea came to the staff entrance carrying patties wrapped in foil. She sold them to workers on break.

"You eating?"

"Later."

"You always say later."

She handed him one anyway.

A guard watched her from the shade. "No vending on property."

"She my sister," Joel said.

"No vending."

Althea's face closed, not from surprise but from the humiliation of hearing a rule she already knew. She put the patties back in her bag.

Joel wanted to buy all of them. He wanted to tell the guard about the fishing hook, the almond trees, the way his grandfather's boat had rested exactly where the infinity pool now spilled blue water toward blue water. Instead he said, "Meet me by the road at six."

Althea nodded. "Don't forget yourself in there."

He almost smiled. "Too late."

Spectacle required maintenance. A paradise without stains demanded people trained to disappear with cloths, carts, trays, hoses, invoices, permits. The cleaner the surface, the harder the labor beneath it had to vanish. Polished marble was not the opposite of exhaustion. It was exhaustion made reflective.

Near sunset, Joel served champagne to a honeymoon couple at the seawall. The woman wore a white dress and bare feet. The man asked Joel to take their picture.

“Get the water behind us,” he said.

Joel held the phone. On the screen their bodies floated against the bay, golden, untroubled. Behind them, beyond the crop of the camera, a barge carried cement toward a new development.

“Beautiful,” Joel said, and pressed the button.

The woman looked at the photo and touched her husband’s arm. “It looks unreal.”

Joel gave back the phone.

At that moment, a wave struck the seawall and withdrew through a crack. For an instant Joel saw, caught in the water, a strip of old netting tangled with plastic ribbon from some opening ceremony. It moved like something trying to breathe.

The man handed him a bill. “Thanks, brother.”

Joel folded it into his pocket.

The cruise horn sounded once more, low and final. Guests turned toward dinner. Lights came on along the fence, bright enough to make the beach seem endless and the road beyond it disappear.

Joel stood with the empty tray against his hip, watching the water pull back from the wall and return, pull back and return, carrying the netting nowhere.