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Sympathy For Zombies
by John Gregory Betancourt

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Heat rose off the glistening white sand in shimmering waves. In the sparkling blue "Pirate's Lagoon," as the Cote D'Argent Hotel proclaimed it, swimmers frolicked; farther out, jetskis and sailboards cut white-frothed paths across the water.

"Take another drink, Miss."

Julie Novelle turned her head. A cabana boy, maybe eleven or twelve, dressed in the hotel uniform of khaki shorts and shirt, offered her a fresh strawberry daiquiri. She accepted the glass.

"Drink it, Miss," the boy said.

Julie sipped the cool, soothing daiquiri.

Heat shimmered across the beautiful white sand.

Far off, happy couples laughed and frolicked in the low surf.

She hadn't been wild about a vacation in the Caribbean at first. But she'd just come through a rather messy divorce -- thank God there weren't any kids -- and after the judge had awarded her custody of their house in the Hamptons, both Jaguars, and most of the money in their accounts, Tom had walked up with a pasty smile on his face and handed her a white envelope.

"Just to show there aren't any hard feelings," he said. "I need a vacation, and I want to make sure we don't bump into each other. Let's get on with our lives, okay?" Then he'd walked away.

Julie looked inside the envelope. It held a plane ticket to a Caribbean singles resort, plus other receipts. Everything had been paid for in advance, she realized.

He'd always been like that. Generous at the wrong times. She felt her heart soften, as it often had during their separation, but then she remembered his moodiness, his childlike tantrums, and everything else that had driven a wedge between them. Then she'd steeled herself. But she'd tucked the ticket into her purse. She could always cash it in, she told herself.

But somehow, she'd decided to go. They had always talked about a vacation in the Caribbean, after all. It had been a personal fantasy. And with the trip paid for ... why not?

Julie sipped her drink and stared across the ocean. The water here was so blue, you could lose yourself in its depths. She'd gone swimming the first few days, and dancing, and partying. She'd joined other singles for the Recreational Director's planned jaunts. It had been fun. Everything here had been fun.

The best part had been the trip out to see Queen Jamarah, the Voodoo Priestess. They had gone late at night in a tour bus. Queen Jamarah lived in a shack in the middle of dense jungle.

One by one the other tourists pushed aside a bead curtain and ventured in. A few minutes later they emerged with knowing smirks or nervous grins.

Julie went last. When her eyes grew accustomed to the near darkness, she saw an old, wrinkled woman holding a rooster's claw and wearing a feathered headdress.

"You are called Julie," the old woman intoned.

"That's right," Julie said.

"I have a message," she said, "from one who is dead to you."

This was getting interesting, Julie thought. She leaned forward. "Yes?" she whispered, intrigued.

With a quick motion of her hand, the old woman threw something dry and dusty in Julie's face. It burned Julie's eyes and stung her throat; coughing and wheezing, she reeled back.

"Revenge," said the old woman, "has been paid for."

The floor turned beneath her. Julie felt herself falling and was unable to stop. Darkness came.

Julie awakened in her hotel room. For the longest time she lay in bed staring at the ceiling.

Finally the Recreation Director showed up. She took Julie's arm and helped her out to the beach. As the day went on, cabana boys brought her food and strawberry daiquiris, instructing her to "Eat this, Miss," or "Drink this, Miss."

The days passed, the crowds changed, and Julie drifted. Usually the cabana boys remembered to bring her inside for the night, and when they didn't she lost herself in the slowly changing constellations overhead.

"Look at me," a man's voice said.

Julie tilted her head back and saw her ex husband. Tom wore blue Bermuda shorts, a white polo shirt, and designer sunglasses.

Queen Jamarah stood next to him, looking respectable in a bright floral muumuu. She peered at Julie and gave a nod.

"As you can see," she said in her thick accent, "she is a zombie, not a living person. She will obey your every command. She is your _slave_. Only remember one thing: she must finish every task she begins before she starts the next. She has no mind or will of her own."

"Check," Tom said, smiling. "Got it." He passed her a thick white envelope. "The final payment."

"I wish you luck," Queen Jamarah said. She hurried away.

Tom knelt. "I wanted to make up," he said, taking Julie's hand. "Say you've changed your mind about us."

"I've changed my mind about us," Julie felt herself saying. A tiny spark or rage flared inside her.

Tom grinned. "Good. Tell me you love me."

"I love you," she echoed.

"That's all I ever wanted," he said. "Follow me. I have a plane waiting. We'll get married tonight in Las Vegas."

Julie found herself rising to follow. The sea -- the sand -- the sky and the stars -- she was going to lose them. For a second she hesitated.

"Follow me, Julie," Tom said again.

She walked after him. Inside, she felt something tighten around her heart. She tried to speak, to protest, but all that emerged was a soft, sad sigh.

"A whirlwind re-courtship," he murmured. "A break was all we needed, dear Julie. Our love _is_ forever. Tell me that, Julie. Tell me

you'll love me forever."

Julie's screams echoed in her mind. She opened her mouth.

"I'll love you," she said. "I'll love you ... I'll love you ... I'll love you..."

On and on she droned, like a broken record, repeating that phrase even when he told her to stop, because she hadn't finished carrying out his command. Forever, some distant part of herself noted, was a very long time indeed. And she would go on telling him she would love him forever.

"I'll love you," she said. "I'll love you. I'll love _you_."

After five minutes, when nothing he could say or do would shut her up, Tom's nervous twitchy smile turned frightened. And when he began to run, Julie followed.

"I'll love you," she called. "I'll love you -- I'll love you -- I'll love you -- "

And she kept right on saying it, even when he began to scream.

THE END