

Leg and the Tripod

By Jackie Bateman

I didn't mean to photograph her. It couldn't be avoided, the daft woman slipped right into my sunset shot. My tripod was set up halfway between the shoreline and the trees, so she must have been aware of the camera - or at least of my neon trunks. I was the only one on the beach, for goodness sake, standing in multi-colour glory amongst the logs and seaweed. The stereotypical 'Brit Abroad'.

It was a classic West Coast crimson sky, its light hitting the tips of an impressive line of Arbutus trees. They glowed bright red. I didn't make a habit of photographing scenic clichés, but Pender Island was too inspiring to resist. The southern tip had an amazing view of Mount Baker. It was a lovely spot to sit and ponder my abysmal single life, before forgetting about it all again to focus on capturing this cinematic backdrop on film.

I had been waiting for the sun to dip behind a tiny cloud, knowing that when it did, the colours would be striking. There would be a minute, maybe two, of perfection. I positioned myself behind the camera, legs

straddled, hat pulled down to shade my eyes. The sun dipped and the sky went wild.

Click.

A tanned leg had appeared right of frame, followed by a half-naked woman. She teetered to the water's edge and dipped her toes in the icy Pacific. She made a big show of the cold. I straightened, hands on hips, disbelieving. The woman was alone. There was no one to hold my hands out to, to make that 'what the Dickens is this' gesture at her ridiculous display. She piled her hair on top of her head and ventured further into the ocean as my crimson and burnt orange sky dissipated to plain pink. I plunged in after her.

'Hello? What do you think you're doing?'

She turned back and splashed at me. 'I thought I'd make your photo a little more interesting.'

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I was a woman with hippy tendencies and a love of clean living. Believe me, the two don't always go together. I ended up on Pender Island to find 'inner peace', away from crowds and pollution. I also knew that the folk on Pender were the kind of islanders who washed and didn't feel the need to have pseudo-dreadlocks. It was like the Marbella of the Pacific West Coast, minus the glitzy bay and Botox.

Mom was pleased with the move. It meant she could visit at weekends and make macramé owls on my deck. She did this without a trace of irony. My vegetable patch thrived with her very presence. 'My darling Virgo,' she would announce with theatrics, 'this is beautifully wild.'

The sunset man, Joe, was attractive in a lost-soul kind of way, even with those garish clothes. I admit I also had a thing for British accents. I'd overheard him at the market the day before, as he inspected Jocelyn's cabbages and haggled over the price of chutney. I found out where he was staying. Now he was taking a photo of the sun going down. Not very original, but it displayed a sensitive side that I found endearing. I jumped into the water right in front of him, just for the hell of it, and I was thrilled when he splashed in after me.

'What are you doing?' He stared through my wet bathing suit and waded a little closer. 'I've now got a photograph of your leg, Madam.'

'Well, that has to be a good thing.' I pulled myself out of the water and ran to get my towel, hoping the cold had tightened the right body parts. When I turned, he hadn't moved, standing up to his waist in the ocean. The sun behind was so bright that he was in silhouette. I couldn't see his eyes, but I could feel them on my skin.

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This woman on the beach was flirting with me, but I was so distracted about the missed photo opportunity, I didn't do anything about it. My feet turning blue in the water, I stayed put as she sashayed up the beach.

She pulled on some kind of hemp dress, then waved and disappeared into the trees just as the sun dipped behind one of the other gulf islands. A cold blanket of air swept over me. I packed up and sat on a log, swigged at my flask until I felt the whisky in my bones. Then I drove back to my rented cabin, slowly, the buzz of alcohol making me wish I'd had the courage to follow her.

There was a figure standing on my front step. It was her, brazenly waiting for me. I pulled up and stared, couldn't believe it.

'Aren't you going to invite me in?' She leaned against my front door.

'What for?' *Idiot. What do you think?*

'Wine would be a good start.'

There was a reason I was on holiday by myself: I had always been backward in coming forward. But here she was, on a plate, with wet hair. I held up my hands. 'You can come in. But only if I can photograph the other leg.'

She smiled and pulled me towards her.

Now, the picture sits inside a wood frame above our fireplace. The colours are as spectacular as I had predicted long ago, Virgo's leg creating an interesting addition on one side. If prompted, I'll tell the story of our encounter on the beach. Friends like to hear about me as a pompous tourist, splashing around in loud shorts. The story ends with Virgo disappearing into the forest, because I'm still a bit of a prude at heart. The truth is, I kissed her right there on the doorstep before she changed her mind. Up close, I could see my reflection in her eyes, as if I was lost in them. Perhaps it was where I'd been all along.