

SHORT STORY

Proof of Magic

by Jowita Bydlowska



"Cocoon" by Johannes Christopher Gerard

Inside me there is a flattened, pear-shaped organ called a pancreas, and a collection of other slick, cooperating parts I barely think about unless I'm trying to distract myself. All that soft machinery — useless outside the body, miraculous inside it — keeps going while another wet organ in my skull produces thoughts like this: The absurd complexity of our design is proof of magic.

When I was a kid and couldn't sleep, I calmed myself by listing systems — circulation, digestion, neurons firing — and imagining the tiny choreography of it all. Fifteen muscles to make a laugh. Thousands of cells to make a thought. It helped then. It's what I'm doing now, outside an airport in Mexico, sweating through the brand new jumper I bought specifically for this trip, watching a stranger I didn't know existed a month ago load my suitcase into a blue convertible.

"I know, I know," Alice says, clapping once as if I've spoken out loud. Her hair is almost white, her eyes a toothpaste-commercial glacier. "We'll go to the cenotes on the way to the hotel," she says, more to herself than to me, slamming the trunk. "We *have* to go. You've never been? It's so special. It would be dumb not to stop, just an hour, I know you're tired, we'll grab a snack, don't worry — I just want you to have the best experience, I feel like throwing you into it head-first. I hope you don't mind."

Her laughter, bright and precise, punctuates the monologue. Sitcom laughter. Fifteen muscles, perfectly coordinated. I used to think you could read character in laughter; Alice's only tells me it's flawless.

Everything about her is. In her photos, hundreds of them, she looked engineered: lingerie, ropes, tight dresses, the practiced angles of a woman who has studied herself. In person she's harsher and more impossible all at once. Her pale skin looks less like skin and more like lucite kept in a freezer, something cold and manufactured and expensive.

Men slow their cars to stare. Heads and elbows hang out of windows; whistles slice through the humid pineapple-and-cigarettes air. Their eyes travel from her to me and back again. She doesn't seem to notice.

"This is not Mexico," she says suddenly, squinting at the chaos of taxis and stray dogs. "It's like a cartoon of Mexico."

She has been to Mexico many times. She has been everywhere many times. In our messages she told me how she sometimes buys a second plane ticket for her Birkin so she doesn't have to sit beside people. She owns a BMW V8, blue to match her eyes. She's in real estate, seven apartments. She runs a funeral home she bought with settlement money after putting her abusive ex in jail and suing him for millions.

Before that, she lived in Tel Aviv where she fell in love with women and krav maga and nude beaches. She described in detail how shibari knots rub against a clitoris when a submissive struggles. She wrote all of this in late-night messages so vivid I could almost feel the ropes on my own skin.

Now I'm here, in "our" rented convertible, jumper sticking to my thighs, trying to ease into what we've been calling The Adventure: this very expensive fantasy week with a woman I met on Facebook.

The first cenote is a warm blue bowl in a ring of rock. We float in rented masks, watching fish flicker below us. Sunlight funnels through the opening above like a wink from a god.

On the drive to the resort we stop for ceviche at a roadside place, and she orders for both of us. I drink the Corona she presses into my hand and think about bacteria and my immune system and my pancreas. I let her pay. I let her narrate.

The resort is small for an all-inclusive — white beach, palm trees, a few pools. Our room has a massive bed and a balcony overlooking the ocean, turquoise in a way that would look fake on film. The air feels rinsed. This is the opposite of the Toronto winter I left: washed colours, salt instead of slush, low cloud instead of sky. For a moment I'm flooded with happiness so pure it hurts. Gratitude towards her, this stranger, for inventing this week and inviting me into it.

At night, after too many drinks and a blur of unpacking, Alice slips behind me into the bed and spoons me. Her body is not cold and hard; it's soft and long, enveloping. Her arms fold under my breasts; her legs hook mine.

We talked about this beforehand — her fantasy, my boundaries. She promised she wouldn't push things, that she wouldn't make any moves unless I wanted them.

Still, the quiet pulsing between my legs arrives as if it's been waiting. My clitoris is a lighthouse. She can't possibly feel it, and yet she makes a small "mmm" sound into my shoulder at the exact moment the pulse intensifies, as if our bodies have slid onto some shared channel.

I try to distract myself by replaying the day: the fish through acrylic masks, the stray puppy that rested its head on my knees, the way she brushed hair off my face as we looked at the water, the way she pulled my favourite champagne silk dress out of my suitcase and slipped it on, and how it poured over her like liquid. I laughed too hard and said, *It's cool, you*

should wear it, over and over, instead of saying, I told you I'd need time alone. I didn't want to seem ungrateful. I didn't want to risk her disappointment.

The pulsing comes and goes. Her breath is hot on my neck. Eventually, despite everything, I fall asleep.

In the morning she brings coffee to the bed and throws the curtains open. The beach and ocean shock my sleepy-hamster Toronto eyes. She opens the balcony doors and warm, dry air rushes in, smelling of salt. For a moment it feels like the whole world is smiling directly at me.

"I could never get bored of this," she sighs. "People complain, can you believe it? They say they miss the city and the noise and all of that —" She waves vaguely. "And if I had my way, I'd give it all up and wake up like this every day."

She's saying my thoughts out loud. My happiness folds into gratitude again. Then the memory of her body around mine last night shimmers across my mind, and a shadow passes over it.

She tells me again that her *Love Language* is Acts of Service. I don't say how much the phrase irritates me, how allergic I am to Instagram therapy language. Saying so would mean mentioning I'm ten years older, from a pre-Internet generation. The unsexy generation.

A young man wheels in our breakfast on a cart. Jose. He's handsome in the way of my students. "I'm at your disposal all week, M'am" he says. He looks at Alice when he says it.

"This is Halina. And I'm Alice."

"I prepared your car for the afternoon, *Alice*," he adds, testing her name. She lights up and smiles at him. When he turns to me and says, "I hope you have a magical week at Playa Mujeres...Halina," the word *magical* lands with a small clink in my chest.

She tips him. They whisper at the door, and she laughs at something he says. I feel a ridiculous little pang of jealousy, sharp as cuticle pain.

The resort is curated, pretty, slightly unreal. Coatis, the lemur-raccoon creatures Alice names for me, dart along the paths.

"I'd love one as a pet," I say, meaning nothing by it.

“We *should* get one,” she says. “It could fetch fruit from our yard.”

Our yard. In our messages she used to spin whole futures: us in Malibu, in Italy, in Spain. Lara, my daughter, is sometimes included, invited into these scenes like a prop that proves I’m a good person, a good mother. We’d live by the sea, homeschool her, raise her to be bilingual and barefoot. I half believed them late at night. Here, they sound like lines Alice has rehearsed.

I had worried that I would disappoint her — middle-aged, shy, a mother. That she’d see me at the airport and turn away. Instead she squealed, said I was more beautiful in person, that I “still” looked so sexy. I swallowed the “still” like a pill.

In person she is touchy in the way of people who move through the world assuming their hands are always welcome. Fingers in my hair, palm on my back, casual little hugs. I’ve told her I’m wary of touch, but she keeps closing the gap, and more and more I let her. Sometimes I even take her hand first. It feels like progress. Or surrender. Or both.

We drift between pool and beach. Back in the room for a nap, she folds herself around me again, and this time I can’t sleep. I repeat the sentence I learned in the psych ward after my divorce: *I wonder what my next thought will be.* It usually empties my mind. My next thought, inevitably, is: pancreas.

In the afternoon we drive along the coast in the convertible. My hair whips my face; I resist tying it up because she once wrote that she wanted nothing more than to watch my hair blow in the wind while she drove.

Not for the first time, I feel purchased. Cast in a part.

She jokes about us running away from our lives forever. “With Lara, obviously. We’ll just have to take care of your ex-husband first.”

“Take care of him how?” I ask.

She glances over, eyes suddenly cold. “Ah, you know, sweets. Maybe just put a little hex on him?” Then she smiles, tucks my hair behind my ear as if she hasn’t just mentioned cursing the father of my child.

We stop in a tourist town to buy dolls and bracelets and sugar skulls for Lara. She pays for everything, thrusting things at me — *This looks so good on you, please take it* — and I have to physically pull her away from a stall.

“We have a whole week,” I say. “Please.”

Her face crumples a little, like I've scolded her. To fix it, I touch her wrists, mirror her earlier gesture and tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear. "Please," I say again, gently. It works. Her face softens and she brushes my cheek. Men stare as they pass, one grabbing his crotch and thrusting; two guards in bulletproof vests appear, and the show ends.

"Ahhh, I'd love to hear some gunshots right now," she sighs into my neck, then laughs. "I'm kidding, silly."

At night we eat tuna and avocado and warm tortilla chips on the patio. Jose appears, asks about our day, admires our matching silver bracelets.

"We got engaged," Alice tells him.

"Congratulations," he says.

"She's the love of my life," Alice adds. Her laughter sounds perfectly genuine. I stop trying to analyze everything she says and just perform my part. I tell my funniest stories. She laughs and laughs. The more she laughs, the funnier I become, channeling every man who ever tried to make me like him by being charming.

Later, we walk on the beach. The moon is huge and turns Alice's hair to silver. Downshore, a wedding reception roars into the night: fairy lights, a DJ, shrieking toasts. I don't want to join the crowd; I want to keep her to myself in this soft darkness. When she tugs me toward the music, I dig my heels in and pull her back hard enough that she collides with me.

We kiss.

I've kissed women before. The first one taught me what men had known and never shared: the softness. That's all I can think as I kiss Alice: softness. Her lips, her skin, her waist under my hands. I pull her closer. One of us moans. Maybe we both do. I'm not turned on yet; desire lags behind obligation. Mostly I want to give her what she clearly came for. I am afraid of her and of myself, but I worship her more than I fear either of us.

I've never grown out of believing in magic, but as an adult the evidence has shifted. Internal organs and improbable survival. Women's ability to endure pain, to sync our cycles to each other and to the moon. Our bodies bleeding and healing and building humans. The way we can make kings and then bury them. We believe in omens even if we say we don't. If there is magic, it's us.

Under the moon, kissing Alice, I think: yes, this is a spell.

She gathers my hair in her hand and pulls, increasing the pressure until it almost hurts. That's what finally sends the pulse between my legs racing, connecting it firmly to her mouth, her hands, this woman claiming me like a man might.

The air changes. A breeze nips at my ankles and I feel watched. The kiss falls apart.

A man is sitting among some rocks in the shallows, long limbs folded. He rises in one smooth motion, as if poured upright. "Hello," he simply says. "I'm Marcel."

"This is Alice," I say also simply and automatically. "Where did you come from?"

"From the moon and the sea, of course." He smiles. For a second, his teeth are neon blue light, like someone has turned on LEDs inside his mouth.

The world tilts. Alice tightens her arm around my shoulders but doesn't comment. By the time he steps closer, his mouth looks normal.

When he holds out his hand, mine shoots forward as if magnetized. His skin feels like something underwater, cool and deep. I have the sensation of drowning. He doesn't let go. Neither does she. I am pinned between them, a wishbone between gods.

"Well, we need to get going," Alice says briskly.

"Don't leave," he says. "You should come to the party. Or we can meet tomorrow. I know a place with the best tequila. Locals only."

Alice frowns. I've never seen her upset before. I've only known her for three days.

"This is silly," I say. "Let's make a plan for tomorrow." I am bargaining, like my daughter begging for five more minutes of screen time.

He brightens. "After sunset," he says. "Nine?"

"Sure," I say, before Alice can refuse.

"Sure, baby girl, whatever you like," she sighs, kissing my neck. Her voice is syrup poured over steel. When Marcel smiles again, the blue glow in his mouth is back, dimmer but unmistakable.

Alice is quiet that night, radiating frost. When she slides into bed, she stays on her side. The absence of her limbs feels like a punishment.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

“You haven’t done anything wrong, sweetie,” she says, flat. Which is exactly what you say when you’re sure someone has.

I text my ex-husband *I miss you* and regret it instantly. It might as well say *Please fuck me up*. Weeks of “gray-rocking” — Alice’s term, becoming so dull the person loses interest — obliterated with three words.

When I wake, she’s in the shower. There’s a pot of coffee on the balcony.

I sit in the sun and try to remember how I got here again, so soon after my divorce, in a situation where one person’s mood dictates my value.

A ping of a text from the bed. Before I can get to the phone, Alice, fresh from the shower, picks it up.

“He misses you too,” she says lightly, handing it to me. Then, cold: “What would it take to make you stop self-harming?”

I stare at her.

“You really need something to shock it out of you, don’t you?” she says, almost tender.

“Like slap it out of you.”

There’s a knock. Jose wheels in breakfast. They discuss the breeze and the surf. My heart thuds against my ribs.

By late afternoon, she’s sweet again — brushing hair off my face, rubbing in sunscreen, pressing drinks into my hand, telling me I have the most beautiful eyes she’s ever seen. I’m pathetically grateful. Behind a towel hut, hidden by leaves, I kiss her. Our second kiss. I initiate again. Her hand slides between my legs and pauses. Her fingers are slow and gentle, exactly the way I like it, as if she’s always known. My ex-husband used to call me “little wounded doe” and then fuck me like he was trying to kill something. Alice doesn’t. I come quickly, surprised at my own body, at the ease of it.

We meet the sea prince, Marcel, by the rocks. He hugs us both, kisses our cheeks, calls us goddesses. Alice’s dress is green; he tells her she looks like forest. He tells me I look rested. His hands are stained faintly blue with paint.

We walk down the beach, then cut inland along a narrow path to a small bar: wooden counter, a handful of tables, a tiny dance floor. Local men line the bar. The bartender, tattooed and bored, nods at Marcel.

Marcel buys a turquoise bottle of tequila and carries it to our table with limes and salt. The men watch but then two young women arrive, and the attention shifts. The world rights itself.

The tequila tastes like citrus and razors. We talk about nothing: shows, fashion, the wild dogs here. Marcel flirts with both of us; we mostly flirt with each other. Alice laughs into my shoulder. Her shoulder-laugh has become a thing I think of as ours.

By the second bottle we're on the dance floor. It feels like an R-rated movie: hair plastered to foreheads, sweat running down backs, strangers' eyes watching. Someone mouths *cachonda* at me; I can't tell if it's a warning or teasing.

A man tries to grind against Alice and I say, "Whoa, buddy," raising my arm. Marcel catches my wrist.

"We should go," he says into my ear. "Let's go."

We run down the beach, falling over each other, laughing, sand spraying our calves. We collapse in a heap. His hand finds my breast; her hand slides into my underwear with unnerving accuracy. I'm drunk and my body is ready. I don't think. I let it happen.

"Alice," he says, her name soft as silk. She says his the same way, apology threaded through it. Then his mouth is on mine, hers on my neck and then my mouth too, and there are too many tongues, too much salt and sand. They call me baby, hush me with lips and fingers. I say their names together — *MarcelAlice* — as if that's the only word left.

For a while there is no pancreas, no ex-husband, no daughter, no divorce. Just salt and skin and the moon.

I wake in our hotel bed, alone.

For a moment I lie still and do the body scan they taught us in Anger Management in the loonybin: toes, ankles, knees, pelvis, belly. Everything feels intact. My bikini lines are sharp against tanned skin. My vagina feels tender. I think, irrelevantly, of my pancreas again, humming along.

Then I see what's missing.

Her suitcase is gone. Her makeup bag. Her toothbrush. The neat row of shoes by the bed. Her clothes in the closet. All gone. The room is full of my things: my suitcase, my drying bikini, my champagne dress, our haul of dolls and bracelets for Lara. On my wrist, our

matching silver bracelet glints like a punchline.

I perform disbelief for myself. I check the bathroom, the balcony, even the closet. I tell myself she blacked out on the beach. She had a family emergency. There will be a note, a message at reception, a dramatic explanation. Later, I'll call my friend Monica and say, Yes, her stuff is gone. No, we didn't fight. No, the guy didn't seem dangerous. Yes, she paid for the ticket. No, there is no blood.

I check for blood anyway. There is none.

I know, calmly and completely, that she is gone. She has ghosted me in real life. Flew me to Mexico, undressed me, then evaporated.

I sit on the bed for a long time, feeling my organs working. Heart pounding, lungs inflating, liver doing whatever it does. It's almost soothing, the idea that my body keeps going regardless of who walks out.

I wait for Jose in the staff parking lot behind the main building, where a limp NO TRESPASSING sign tries to keep guests away. Women in hairnets smoke by the service door, glance at me, then smile automatically when I smile at them. The concrete, the dumpsters, the distant sound of dishes clattering — this backstage reality feels more like home than the manicured paths. A coati noses around in the trash; I think of Toronto raccoons.

Jose appears in jeans and a T-shirt, looking older, less like a prop in my holiday and more like a person who goes home somewhere after this shift.

We walk down to the beach. I tell him, in clumsy Spanish, that my friend is gone. That we were... together. That there was also a man, or something like one. That I don't know if this was some crime or just a very committed cruelty.

He listens, hands in pockets. "Maybe it was prank," he says finally, not in Spanish. "Or maybe it was lesson. Or maybe it was magic."

He tells me a local story about *Tlazolcoatl*, the shapeshifting serpent of desire, who rises from the surf when someone's grief is loud enough. When someone comes to the water ready to give themselves up, she appears as what they want most, makes love to them, eases their pain, then pulls them under. "It's a kindness," Jose says. "So they don't drown alone."

I force a laugh. "I don't think Alice was a goddess," I say. "I think she just ghosted me. It was a prank."

“Maybe both is true,” he says.

We sit in silence, listening to the waves and the distant shrieks from other people’s vacations. I think about my heart, how it keeps choosing the same shape of danger. Maybe my rotting insides sent up a signal flare. Maybe something came for me and found me already claimed by a snow queen with a funeral home and a Birkin.

When Jose bends to kiss the crook of my neck where Alice’s mouth rested so easily, I close my eyes and pretend it’s her. For a second it works. She is there: eerie and soft, glowing behind my eyelids. I let Jose push me gently against a palm tree. I let him take me, not because I particularly want him but because I need something solid and ordinary. His weight, his breath, the rough bark: proof that I still exist in a world where things are blunt and physical and finite.

Once we’re done, we walk up to the shore. I slip off the silver bracelet and throw it into the dark water. I don’t make a wish. Ghosts don’t listen.

My wet organs continue their thankless work. My heart beats, too loudly but reliably. My pancreas hums along. The complexity of their effort is still proof of something like magic, even if the magic people promise — the kind with love, safety, someone staying — is a trick that ends in an empty bed.

I will fly home to my angry ex-husband’s texts and my daughter’s mismatched socks and her tears over a forgotten stuffed animal.

I will tell this story badly to Monica over wine. I will check Alice’s social media obsessively for a while, then stop. I will wonder if Marcel was real, or if I invented him too to explain what can’t be explained: how you can be so wanted one minute and so thoroughly erased the next.

For a long time I’ll feel like a woman yanked out of Wonderland by the scruff of her neck and dropped back into her regular life, bruised and blinking. Sometimes I’ll wish the sea gods had finished the job and pulled me under. Mostly I’ll be grateful they didn’t. Either way, I’ve learned something about magic: it disappears, sure — it is magic after all — but in the space where it was, I finally saw myself clearly enough to walk away from the one thing that had hurt for real: the grief over my marriage ending.