

THE ROYAL PALMS by MATTHEW KLAM

MATTHEW KLAM (b. 1964) received an O. Henry Award for the mordantly humorous “The Royal Palms,” in which the disappointments of a foundering marriage are played out against the backdrop of a Caribbean paradise. The story was first published in *The New Yorker* in 1999 and later in Klam’s first collection of short stories, *Sam the Cat*. Klam was the recipient of a Whiting Award in 2001.

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LAST WINTER, we went on vacation to the Caribbean. When the plane landed, we were so exhausted we could barely lift our bags. We checked in at the hotel, and got rid of the suitcases, and without unpacking went out the gate to look at the casino. A guard pointed us in the opposite direction from the beach, down a little dirt road, a five-minute walk from the hotel gate.

The casino was a small white stucco building, with bars on the windows and a brown wooden sign. There were some German tourists in there, and I overheard a couple of Americans talking, but the rest of the faces in the room were either friendly employees or locals—whatever, black people, people from there. I played blackjack, and I was on a roll. Winning relaxes me; at some point in the night I was up two thousand dollars. Diane played the slot machines, going all night without a hit, waiting for me to finish. I cashed out because the place was closing. It was just after one in the

morning. We were practically the last ones in there, definitely the last white ones in the place. They paid my winnings and I followed Diane to the door.

I had a buzz on. I put my money in the belly of my shirt, because I couldn’t carry it all in my pockets. It was half the cost of the trip, although that wasn’t an issue. Two guys came out of the casino behind us, local guys, and we nodded to them and they went to their car. They pulled it around in our direction. Diane looked back and saw the car; she looked at me—there was that funny moment—and then she started running down the road.

The car came up behind us. It took me a second to figure out what was going on. Diane had a ten- or twenty-yard lead on me—she’s a fast runner, she was a gymnast in high school—and I started running with all this goddamn money bouncing around, but I couldn’t keep up. I was telling her to wait for me, and yelling at her not to run, because it would only make things worse, incriminate us or attract their attention, although she did have a point. The car kept slowing down, because the road was in terrible shape. I was running as fast as possible, Diane’s white pants disappearing in the dark in front of me, the money bouncing around everywhere in my shirt. Lights from the hotel loomed in front of us now, the car bounding into those barrel-size humps and potholes, its headlights leaping across us and up into the trees. I could hear the thumping of the engine—it was an old jeep and it sounded like a washing machine—but the noise came both from right behind me and from far away, echoing through the woods. I was chugging now, gaining on Diane. I could see the hotel guard, asleep in his shack.

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We got to the gate and the guard sat up. The car pulled up