

Charlene and the Fountain of Youth  
by Sarah Thomas

When Charlene decided to seek the fountain of youth, she was still what plenty of folks would describe as young. Or “youngish,” anyway. Charlene was only 38, but that summer, she found herself having these strange urges, for example, while driving along Highway 321, wondering if her little Rav-4 would make it over the barrier of the bridge that ran across the top of Fort Loudon dam. She wondered if, for example, as her lungs filled up with water and her blonde hair spread out around her like a mermaid, she would think of her son’s face?

Would she escape, and lie to the eager news reporters, telling them that she fell asleep? Would her life feel different afterwards, were she to brush her lips against the watery tomb of death, or would she regret not going down with her faithful blue Toyota? Thoughts like that.

She traced this particular breed of macabre daydreaming to an incident this spring, at Richie Kreme Donuts out East Broadway one Sunday after church. She was in a navy blue wrap dress with little white birds on it, that evoked a certain time and romance and framed her cleavage in an appealing “V.” She felt this made up for the fact that she was wearing her glasses, and she hadn’t dyed her hair in a few weeks, resulting in silver wisps declaring themselves amid the blonde, giving her head the color of cheap champagne.

The attendant at the donut window was a moonfaced teenager with a wide berth. Charlene, a dietician, noticed he already had a crescent of flesh on which his face rested, and she was distracted by his fat, round nipples that shone through the white Richie Kreme shirt. She picked up little Aurie, four at the time, to let him order. It was good to make him learn how to talk to adults, even a minor one.

“Go ahead, honey,” she said, holding Aurie aloft, pleased with the boy’s significant heft and the power it required from her muscular arms.

Aurie hesitated.

“Whaddaya want, little feller?” The boy yawned.

“Um, I’d like two glazed donuts, and um, a strawberry jelly donut, and um,”—here he turned to Charlene nervously, and she whispered *two coffees*, “and um, two coffees, and...” Charlene squeezed his leg, “and um, thank you. Sir.”

He wriggled in Charlene’s arms, and she put him down.

“Good job, sweetie.”

“Can I go sit with Daddy?”

“Sure, go head.”

Charlene straightened up, and the teenager was smiling, charmed.

“Sure is a cute little feller you got there.”

“Well thank you, honey. I sure think so.”

“Are you mama or grandmamma?”

“Pardon me?” Charlene laughed.

“Are you ma, or grandma?”

“Do I look like a grandma to you?” Charlene tried to smooth the rough edges off her tone as she sensed the customer behind her draw nearer. She laughed girlishly and leaned in: “You oughta think before you speak to ladies.”

“Sorry, ma’am,” he said.

Charlene had to concentrate intensely to will her shaking fingers to open the delicate clasps of her change purse, feeling for the bills, reaching across the eternity of the red plastic counter to drop the money in his chubby white paw.

“Thanks—and hey, I think you still look real nice for your age, ma’am” he said and winked.

She managed a tight smile as she walked toward her husband, Ricky, and Aurie, where they sat at one of the picnic tables on the neat lawn of AstroTurf.

Charlene decided to never repeat the episode, and in the act of not repeating it, effectively blot it from existence. If she never went back to Richie Kreme, and never saw that boy again, it would be like the proverbial tree in the forest, and cease to exist.

But in truth, the boy’s comment verbalized an increasing silence: silence in the ceasing of car horns, silence in place of whistles, silence in place of men asking her to dance or for a drink or for directions. She was so used to other people calling her beautiful that she didn’t know what she might call herself when that word no longer applied.

One night, after dinner, as she washed the dishes and listened to the laughter of her husband and son in the living room, she found herself staring at the discarded vegetal detritus in the garbage can: carrot peelings, zucchini tops, decaying lettuce and soft pale late winter tomatoes, the stench of organic rot.

“This is my life,” Charlene said to the garbage can.

Charlene learned about the fountain of youth on a Tuesday. She was talking to a woman with a stud piercing in the hollow of her cheek—*like a pair of blue jeans*, Charlene thought—at a store called “Blue Moon Books,” which her husband called, simply, “the queer bookstore.” Charlene was there looking at gardening books, and the studded woman asked her if she had any upcoming travel plans outside of Pickney.

“No, not any time soon,” Charlene said, “well, my husband and I had been talking about going on a cruise around the Caribbean, but we aren’t sure if we’re going to be able to fit it in this year. There’s so many places to see...” she said, shaking her head.

“Well, if you go on a cruise, where would you want the cruise to take you?”  
(As though Charlene were an empress who might dictate the boat’s path.)

“I’m not sure—maybe Jamaica?” Charlene said. Then, wanting to sound more sophisticated, she added, “or Belize?”

“Well, if you’re in the Caribbean, perhaps you and your husband would enjoy the Bay Islands of Honduras.”

“That sounds lovely, hon, but I honestly don’t know if my husband is even going to be able to get off work for the cruise. He’s a very busy man,” she said, thinking of Ricky standing in the side yard, watering the grass in his boxers. And then she added: “But perhaps I’ll just go by myself.”

The girl smiled distinctly then. “If you’re alone, you might actually enjoy another place that comes to mind,” she said, “Boca del Fuente.”

The girl pulled out a small, rectangular booklet that appeared to have been produced at least twenty years ago—it had the look of old Florida postcards: too bright, idyllic, and staged. Beautiful brown people in very little clothing smiled in the images.

The girl handed the brochure to Charlene, and her finger lingered on Charlene’s for just a moment longer than what was comfortable, and Charlene felt the girl stroke the tuft of blonde hairs on her forefinger, moving her finger along lightly like the wing of a moth. Charlene pulled her hand away. The brochure had “*Boca del Fuente*” emblazoned across the front in yellow letters. It brought Charlene back to the rest centers in the sprawling Midwest, when she’d ridden on the back of Ricky’s motorcycle across America, stopping to collect brochures about waterparks and caverns they’d never set foot into. Charlene wondered at her urge to tell the young woman that she had studied abroad in Paris twenty years ago.

“Boca day el foo-entay,” Charlene heard herself say, regretting trying. “What does that mean?”

“Mouth of the fountain,” the girl said. “It’s sort of like a fountain of youth. Of course, you’re too young to need a fountain of youth, but it’s really just a beautiful place that beautiful people go to reenergize their auras, realign their chakras, and commune.”

This all made perfect sense to Charlene, though if pressed, she would have had a hard time describing exactly what activities would constitute such things, but she was stuck on phrases like “too young” and “beautiful people” and she recalled tweezing a dark hair out of the periphery of her areola that morning, and she said: “Yes, exactly. That’s exactly what I need.”

Charlene told her husband the Honduras trip had been suggested by the hospital, to research the fibrous native diets. Charlene told her son: “I am going to a faraway land to look for something that I lost,” and when Aureliano was being taken by sleep, nodding his shaggy brown hair like a drunken bear cub, nuzzling her breast, she counted this as offering her son the truth.

By the time the plane had landed, Charlene had consumed three Bacardi and Diet Cokes and felt loose and open to possibility, like her toe had begun to slip into the cool water of the fountain. Charlene pressed through the bodies and the heat of the Honduran airport as if possessed, which was filled with words and odors

Charlene didn't recognize. She took a taxi to her motel, a beachside white building called Las Palmas. A pretty young woman with shiny black hair helped Charlene up to her room, which was spare and dated, with a coral bedspread and a window AC unit.

"This is perfect," Charlene proclaimed, and the girl smiled shyly.

"Perfecto."

She offered the girl five dollars and the girl accepted it with wide eyes.

"Thank you," the girl said, the words sharp in her mouth.

"Oh and one question," Charlene said casually. "Have you heard of 'Boca del Fuente?'" she asked. She made the motion of a fountain. The girl looked confused. "Or Fuente de la Juventud?" Charlene pressed on.

"La Juventud?" the girl asked.

"Si, la juventud?"

"Si," the girl said, grinning, "In West End."

"Muchas gracias," Charlene said, giving her another five dollars, which seemed to embarrass the girl, though she accepted it too.

Charlene turned on the old radio in the windowsill, which played a scratchy song in Spanish. She used the bathroom, and showered, and dressed, and when she left she deliberately locked the door behind her. As she exited the lobby, an agitated manager in a tropical patterned shirt approached her.

"Did you flush toilet paper, M'am?" he asked.

"I'm sorry?"

"*Hablas Ingles?* Did you flush paper down the toilet? *Si?*"

"I—yes, but nothing, nothing else," Charlene whispered, eyeing the other people milling around the small lobby.

"Didn't you read the sign? No paper in the toilets in this country. Now I have a clog, on a Friday night, and I have to call the plumber."

"I'm—I'm sorry," Charlene said. "Can I do anything to--?"

"*Esta bien,*" he said, and held his hand up as he walked away.

The pretty girl, who had walked up behind him whispered "*Lo siento,*" to Charlene and followed at his heels.

Charlene walked away with the heat of embarrassment on her face, already feeling quite out of place and if not young, certainly foolish. And then she thought of the girl trailing the manager, the apology from her lips, and she thought of how young women are trained to apologize for the brutish nature of men, the world over it seemed, and she resolved to not apologize for men anymore. It felt so easy in that moment: *I am finished with that*, she thought, imagining moments that Ricky got a little drunk and made racist comments at restaurants. *I am finished*. And with this decision made, she felt lighter—so much lighter, in fact, that by the time she had gotten into the cab, she had forgotten about the toilet.

In West End, the sun was low, and the sky shone pink behind the white stucco shops and bars that flanked the beach, and young people with dreadlocks sat in the sand, selling jewelry and paintings on pieces of driftwood. Passing boys young enough to be her sons whispered things to her in a tone she identified as

obscene, and she was glad they were in a tongue unknown to her, so that she might smile back innocently. Charlene thought of Aurie and if he already had thoughts like this, if when he grabbed her breast now it wasn't a memory of nursing, but something like a divination of the future, a memory he hadn't had yet, of a woman. As she watched the teenage boys careen into the alleyways on skateboards, she thought of what Aurie would look like at sixteen. And she smiled, thinking that she could bring him here, and show him this place, and then, with gravel in her stomach, she realized that when Aurie was sixteen, she would be fifty.

Charlene wandered into a bar where people were dancing. She ordered a beer and considered asking the bartender about Boca del Fuente, but she thought it best to surrender for the evening. She felt someone touch her shoulder and she turned to look into the unlined face of a tall, handsome boy with green eyes and a dragon tattoo creeping up the side of his neck.

"What is a beautiful girl like you doing here alone?"

Charlene thought to say: *I could be your mother or I haven't been a girl in twenty years or You remind me of my son.* Instead she said:

"I don't mind being alone," she said, realizing it was true.

"Ah," he laughed, "well then we have that in common."

"That's why you're here alone?"

"Well, I should change that," he said, "I like being alone until I see someone that looks like you."

She felt her hand go to her chest instinctively, and then she dropped it. He laughed.

"What's your name?"

"Char," she said.

"Char, like Cher? Just one name?" he smiled, and she saw that he had a red jewel embedded in one of his teeth.

"Just like Cher," she said, and shook her hair off her shoulders.

"What are you looking for, my Cherie amour?"

*Nothing*, she almost said, *Nothing you have*, and then instead said: "A friend of mine told me about a fountain here—or a spring. I'm not really sure."

"She must have been talking about West Bay," he said, "you have to take a boat to get there."

"Oh," Charlene said.

"But lucky for you, I am a water taxi driver. I can take you."

Charlene looked at her phone and was surprised that it was nearly ten pm. The sun had just set, it seemed, and all of the sudden she was talking to this man—*boy, really, he couldn't be more than twenty*—it felt insane and *foolish* was the word that came to mind.

"It's too late," she said, "I've got to be up—" and before she could conjure a lie, the boy put up his hands and backed away, smiling, reentering the crowd. She stood for a moment, and feeling awkward, began to back away from the bar toward the door. The bartender called to her.

"Miss! You have another beer. The gentleman bought one for you."

“Me?” Charlene asked, looking around.

“Yes.”

“The boy?” She asked, craning her neck to see if he was somewhere in the crowd, but he had disappeared.

“El Brujo.”

“El Brujo? That’s his name?”

“That’s what he’s called.”

“What does that mean?”

The bartender adopted an affect of belabored discretion, and Charlene felt perhaps this boy wasn’t just a boy, but something dangerous. “Well, it’s like a witch, but a male witch. In English, they call him The Dragon.”

“He drives a water taxi?”

The bartender laughed. “Sure. Why not?” He handed her the beer.

“Thank you,” she said, and offered him a few dollars, but he wouldn’t take it.

“He has been staying the last month at the Waldorf’s Presidential Suite, with a very hospitable German lady.” He winked.

“Oh,” Charlene said, nodding sagely.

“As you say in America, just *FYI*.” The bartender smiled.

“Gotcha,” Charlene said.

Charlene drained the beer. It was cold and bitter and good, and when she emerged from the bar it was cool outside. She walked back toward where the taxis congregated, and she noticed a few white women walking with younger local men, holding hands or sharing cigarettes. Charlene wondered, angrily, if this is what the girl meant by the fountain of youth. Charlene took a sweater out of her purse and pulled it tightly around her shoulders as the wind whipped off the ocean, and resolved to get to the bottom of it the next day.

Charlene woke up in her small room feeling energized, and she wondered why she didn’t have the pounding hangover that she deserved. She had a coffee at the outdoor café by the small, kidney shaped pool set into the cement patio. When she saw the girl from yesterday, Charlene stopped her.

“Hola!” Charlene said.

“Buenas,” the girl responded, and Charlene made a mental note to amend her greeting to that: *Buenas*, because she had heard it a number of times now, and it was their way of saying hello, but it meant “Good,” which she liked.

Charlene offered the brochure to the girl, who turned it around and flipped through it with puzzlement, and then she held up her finger—“*un momento*,”—and disappeared with it. When she returned, she said, “La Ceiba.”

“La Ceiba?” Charlene asked. She had been sure the girl at the bookstore told her to fly into Roatan, and La Ceiba was on the mainland. Charlene remembered from studying her atlas on the plane.

“Si, las cascadas de La Ceiba.”

Charlene looked up “las cascadas” on her phone, and found that it meant “waterfalls.” She made arrangements with the front desk to travel to La Ceiba by

biplane the next morning. She packed her small bag carefully and deliberately that night. She put the wrinkled brochure in her purse, and she woke at 6 am for her taxi.

Back at the airport, Charlene was disoriented. The kiosk for the airline they had told her to visit was dark and unmanned. Charlene sat there for two hours—unsuccessfully querying official-seeming passers-by—and finally began to cry. Then, there was the shrill crack of a whistle. A man had materialized at the gate. He held a sign that read “La Ceiba.” The people that were sleeping awakened. Charlene followed them, and they boarded a tiny plane—the smallest plane she had ever set foot on, which made a putting noise like the rusted out moped she used to get around Paris all those years ago. As they ascended into the hot bright sky, Charlene saw that the water below her was that impossible shade of blue she had imagined in her dreams, and she was terrified of careening into it. She gripped onto the plastic arm rests with her tight white fingers, and she prayed to a God that she hadn’t spoken to in years that she might survive this flight to see her son again.

The taxi in La Ceiba drove Charlene from the airport through an area that couldn’t truly be described as a town. It seemed like miles of dirt parking lot, filled with barefoot people and skinny dogs and goats and trash fires. She saw a woman squatting by the side of the road, urinating, and Charlene turned away, embarrassed. When they stopped for gas, she reached for the handle of the door and the driver turned, shook his head, and said simply, “No.” He locked the doors to the car while he pumped gas. He drove her up into the mountains on a road that seemed accidental, snaking around trees and boulders into places a road shouldn’t be, until a series of unmatched wooden chalets appeared ahead of them. It was still early. Charlene was directed to her mountainside shack by a boy that didn’t speak English.

She assessed the spare, wooden room with a cot and a fan and no mirror, and thought *it must be what it was like to live a monastic existence, and what a blessing it must be to never look at yourself*. Charlene changed and went to produce the brochure to show to the proprietors, and she found that it wasn’t in her bag. She couldn’t accept that she had left it back at the hotel in Roatan—this having been the purpose of the whole trip—and thought of how strange and out of character it was for her to be lose things.

Since becoming a mother, she was always prepared: her purse contained snacks and wet wipes and band-aids. But here, she had already begun to lose things, and she thought of a poem she’d once read containing the line: *The art of losing isn’t hard to master*, and she smiled that she had managed, if not to find the brochure in her purse, a line of that poem in the recesses of her brain. When she said “Las Cascadas” to a uniformed young woman, she replied “Pico Bonito,” and a nearby white couple, who were scrutinizing a map, said:

“Are you going to the waterfalls at Pico Bonito?”

“I—I suppose I am,” said Charlene.

They looked young, but she estimated they were around her age, and she couldn't tell if her estimation was because of anything other than the sophistication of their (potentially) British accents.

"We were going to make the hike before sundown," the man said, "Would you like to join us?"

"Sure," Charlene said. "Do you know the way?"

They smiled conspiratorially. "We think we've got it pretty well figured."

"I'm Lucien," the man said, extending his hand.

"Meg," the woman said, smiling.

"Cher," Charlene said.

Charlene followed the couple down a gravel road, to a sign that read "Pico Bonito National Park," and she felt satisfied that she was somewhere safe. There was a wooden shack that a man sat inside, and Charlene observed that his arms were like a tree's: brown and lined and mottled with moles that looked textured like bark. She saw that the trail they were embarking on said "13 kilometres," and that seemed like a lot, but she wasn't completely confident with metric conversion, and she felt very confident in the strength of her legs and—let's be serious—looked to be in better shape than Meg and Lucien, who seemed soft and freckled—so she didn't say anything about the distance, but merely followed them.

Once out of sight of the entrance, Lucien produced three wrapped candies in his hand. He said, "Do you partake?"

"In chocolate?" Charlene asked.

"In special chocolate?" he said, winking at Meg.

"Not normally," Charlene said, thinking of her calorie counter, "but I'm on vacation. Charlene took one and unwrapped it in her hand.

"Great," Meg said, "Let's party."

Charlene laughed, thinking that desserts must constitute a party to Brits, as buttoned up and glum as they could be in her limited experience, and she put the chocolate in her mouth, which tasted sweet and dark of cocoa, but also dusty, and earthy—like dirt. Charlene wondered how long they had stored these chocolates in a travel bag, but she didn't want to be rude, so she swallowed politely.

They wound around the base of the mountain, and after about an hour, they came to a massive ravine, at the bottom of which thundered a river, crashing over boulders and foliage. There was only a wood and rope footbridge stretching the expanse, and Charlene anticipated the kind of panic she felt on the plane, but she felt none such thing, as the breeze fluttered through her hair and between her legs, and she looked down and saw white water crashing against boulders. She had the thought: *It feels like the wind is licking me with its tongue*, and it was such a strange thought to have, that she laughed. Lucien and Meg didn't ask her what was funny, but rather began to laugh too, and they held hands as they crossed the bridge. Charlene watched them walk over the great ravine on what looked like a tiny brown ribbon, hand in hand, and she thought: *People think that being in a couple will save them, but if one of them fell, both would fall.*

The trail became thin and reedy and the vegetation denser and greener, obscenely alive in neon.

The sounds of birds seemed to be in stereo, singing through speakers implanted in her brain.

The veins along the undersides of the leaves were a map of whole worlds unto themselves.

The blue green veins on the back of Meg's pale white calves were very much like the maps on the leaves.

The bugs mining in and out of the ground seemed to be birthed from the earth, and consumed again, eternally, like the Ouroboros.

Charlene seemed to be soaring above this mountain and country and earth, and also back in East Pickney, and to be both imagining the future and fully grounded in the past, in Paris, in Pickney, in a past she didn't even know she had lived. The idea of a fixed "youth" seemed so *foolish*, that word again, she thought, and laughed.

When they came to the waterfall, it was a surprise, and it towered out of the dense jungle. Looking up at it, blinded by the sun; it seemed to defy natural laws, and it seemed terrifying and divine. When Charlene looked back down, Meg and Lucien had taken their clothes off, and they were plunging into the pool at the foot of the waterfall, looking like amorphous beige wads of gooseflesh to Charlene. Charlene stripped off her clothes, too, not thinking to be embarrassed, and plunged into the water, which was cold, and deep (she couldn't reach the bottom with her toes), and she wondered at what unknown monsters must lurk under the surface. Yet she was unafraid. She dove under and opened her eyes in the dark, and swam under great boulders that seemed to be shaped like shoulders and breasts and human skulls. When she broke the surface in a small pool, she heard the strange moaning of some dying beast, and she followed the sound to some nearby rocks, anticipating seeing a scene of blood and viscera. But it was Meg and Lucien making love, and they looked like one thing, one creature that was dying or being born, pink and wet and pulsing, and Charlene lost all mental context of what she was watching, feeling entirely unlike a voyeur.

Finally, Charlene swam away. She put her clothes back on. She did not see Meg and Lucien. She began to follow the path again, as though she were in a trance, winding through the mushroomy smell of the jungle, picking up her pace and jogging, skipping over roots and stones like she was in one of Ricky's video games, racing to beat the setting sun that was hanging low in the sky. When she reached the ravine and the bridge again, she raced over it, like she was flying, unfettered by her earlier awareness, and she followed the gravel road toward the lodge.

By the time she had reached her shack, the sky was full of stars, which appeared to Charlene like holes punched out of the universe, the bright eyes of God looking back through a million holes. *As if God were an insect and insects were God.* She entered her cabin and felt claustrophobic. She took her thin mattress and pillow outside and slept on the dirt, under the stars.

Charlene awoke under a brutal beating sun, covered in mosquito bites. She stumbled to the outdoor shower and stood under the water for as long as it ran cold. She wondered what psychedelics the Brits had given her, and with no experience for comparison, nor any way of finding out barring asking them, she decided that it was nothing. It was chocolate. It was simply the jungle unfolding around her. She wasn't the type to do drugs. She was satisfied with this. She ate her breakfast hastily, avoiding Lucien and Meg, scrubbing the memory of watching their lovemaking from her brain, like it was a particularly awful scene she had watched in a movie and desired to forget. *But it wasn't awful.*

She thought that: *but it wasn't awful* as she rode back through the poor, dusty countryside, and as she boarded the small plane, unafraid, and as she returned to Las Palmas, and as she turned on the radio, and showered, and took a taxi downtown, speaking broken Spanish to the driver, and she thought it as she walked along the beach at West End, and she thought it as she spotted El Brujo smoking on his tiny boat, and she gave him money, and he took her out of the Bay—*putputput*—the sound of that Parisian moped all of those years in the past or future, and he took her to another island many *kilometres* away, and when she said "Boca del Fuente" to him, he opened his mouth, and put it on hers, and she tasted cigarettes and didn't mind it for the first time in her life. And they stopped on a beach somewhere, one with young people and bonfires, and rum that she drank in a steady stream. The night soared above them. The insect God looked down through a million eyes.

Charlene woke up on the beach, before the sun rose. Her cash and phone had been stolen. Her shoes were gone too. She stood on the sand as if emerging from a sarcophagus. She had nothing. She felt *foolish*, that word again, but it was accompanied by another one: *young*. *Young and foolish*. Like an idiot eighteen-year-old on spring break, she thought hotly, but the heat dissipated with each step, and she began to laugh. Her back hurt, and she laughed at that, and she laughed each moment she felt in her pocket for her phantom phone. She walked, barefoot, her hair whipping around her shoulders, her toes squishing into the sand, her pockets empty, to twinkling lights along the beach, which took shape in the dark as a hotel. Charlene had no idea what time it was, and she was grateful to hear voices. Someone was there in the darkness. She found a water taxi, promising to pay the man when she reached the shore, and apologizing when she had no money to produce.

He said: "*Lo siento*. I am sorry you lost everything, Ma'am."  
And Charlene said: "The art of losing isn't hard to master."

When Charlene finally made it back to her room, she located her passport, and her backup credit card. She put on a plain white dress—*monastic*—she had thought, with piety, when she'd packed it, but now it had no such connotation for her. It was only clean. She sat down on the bed and opened her atlas to the page on Honduras. She drew a star in the middle of the ocean and wrote "Boca del Fuente," and she put the atlas in the drawer of the bedside table. She tucked her credit card and passport in her bra. She threw the rest of her things in the garbage. And, feeling impossibly light, Charlene flagged a taxi back to the airport.

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