

BELOW THE SURFACE

By Amanda Roberts

It's like flying. When the buoyancy is just right and every slight movement in your hands and fins makes you glide through the endless blue. Weightless, you no longer have a body to drag around and hold you back, just a soul that can flow wherever it wants. Everywhere you turn is something marvelous. Even though color fades when you're under the water, starting with the reds and following the childhood classic ROYGBIV, the vibrancy is remarkably overwhelming. Every turn is teeming with life. Barracuda, trumpetfish, puffer fish, parrot fish, lionfish, eels, crabs, rays, sea cucumbers, flounder, sea urchins, sharks and many more whose names I don't even know and could never hope to commit to memory. And of all those beautiful creatures, the most magnificent of them is the coral. Staghorn, elkhorn, boulder brain and sea fans, each with unique qualities, textures and colors that give them the allure to capture the attention of every human who is lucky enough to see them firsthand. The joys of scuba diving are limitless, especially in the Caribbean, when the crystal clear water lets you see for miles around just to show you how small and insignificant you really are, and how little you understand about so much. It's the feeling of looking up at the sky and remembering you're a speck on a rock hurtling through space, except now you're a speck in a watery abyss full of things that have never been discovered. Terrifying? Absolutely. And yet it's calming to know that nothing I do will ever matter.

I know it's an incredible privilege to experience scuba diving, especially as many times as I have, and the beauty of the ocean is truly indescribable. But human nature makes me compare the underwater experiences, which unveils unsettling disparities. When I reminisce on the times I submerged in Jamaica in 2016, Turks and Caicos in 2018, and Jamaica in 2019, I

can't help but notice the differences in the reefs. Each time, the colors were less shocking than I remembered. Faded, as if a wave had washed over them and stripped away a layer of their vibrance and beauty. Each time, more broken coral could be seen lying hopelessly across the sandy bottom. Bits and pieces of a living creature smashed with no hope for reassembly. The fish paddled around, without the bright colored corals to blend into or hide inside. Although this meant some got an easier meal, others got a shorter life. With so much of the ocean unexplored, how much of it will be gone before we get there? How much of its beauty will be lost before we know to mourn it? Most people don't even realize that coral are living, an ignorance that helps them ignore one of the saddest truths we must face.

The reefs are dying, much to the dismay of their inhabitants, all because we won't flip a lightswitch when we leave a room. We won't stop chopping the beautiful towers of green and brown that provide shade, food, oxygen, and a home to many creatures. We won't stop raising livestock inhumanely just to slaughter it anyway. We won't stop burning sedimentary rocks and murky liquids we stole from our Earth. We won't do anything except what helps us the most in the moment, even if it destroys us in the end.

And it's not just the reefs that are suffering. Onota Lake, in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, is not the Caribbean by any stretch of the imagination. No coral, only small fish, and the dark, cloudy water is far from blue. And it's cold. Even in a full wetsuit, hood and gloves, the icy water creeps down your spine and seeps into every crevice until you are surrounded by a chill that won't leave you for days. There's nothing much to see— if you stay near the surface there are no fish, and too much silt is kicked up at the bottom if you venture deeper. But worse than the cold and the poor visibility is the litter. Beer cans, bottles, plastic cups and more. At the very

least, this is a problem we can attempt to undo. My parents and I braved the cold and submerged ourselves time and time again, each time resurfacing with handfuls of trash.

Cleaning out the lake is an annual project, and it's heart-breaking to see that people don't change. Perhaps with the reefs, some can heal their conscience by ignoring the issue. Or maybe they just don't realize the harm they cause because they can't see it first hand. But the people who throw their empty Solo cups into a lake? That's a special kind of evil, and to say they don't know the damage they've done would be a lie.

Those coral cannot be revived. Those fish cannot be brought back. What's broken is broken, but we can rescue what is not yet lost. Some things are too far gone, but others still have a chance. Even though we're only specks on a rock hurtling through space, it's calming to know that the things we do can really matter.