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JOHNNY DEPP

UNCENSORED,
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UNLEASHED!

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*"There is only
one success—to be able
to spend your life in
your own way."*

—CHRISTOPHER MORLEY

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keled crown above the waterline. "A barracuda! Come look! It's the only species more frightening than a terrier dog." Who but Johnny Depp would consider it a form of sport to wade with the barracuda? I swim back to the raft feeling a touch asthmatic—and, frankly, scared.

"Nobody is going to ever ruin the Land and Sea Park," Depp later insists. "It's like a rare gem, a diamond. I look forward to my kids growing up on the island, spending months out of the year here... learning about sea life and how to protect sea life... and their kids growing up here, and so on."

One night we take the tender and head west out onto the water to witness the launch—about 300 miles away—of the space shuttle *Discovery* as it ascends into the evening from Cape Canaveral. The sky bulges with stars, which seem so finely etched that it's hard to imagine the Exumas could ever experience the pitch black of a moonless night.

We wait, eyes heavenward. We wait some more. Around us, plankton causes the water's surface to give off a gleam of eerie phosphorescence. With our flashlights aimed into the vodka-clear Caribbean, we see a school of large yellowtail jack circling around us. Suddenly, a luminous cloud rises in the sky. It is shaped like an anvil, emitting the kind of incandescent gas you'd find on some distant star. The shuttle soars, in total silence, into the bejeweled black. We are transfixed by strange light, both above and below. We feel privileged to be alive in the Caribbean Basin in the Year of Our Lord 2009.

"Theoretically," Depp says, "this place can add years to your life." Then he quotes the old adage: "Money doesn't buy you happiness. But it buys you a big enough yacht to sail right up to it."

Sometimes, when Depp creeps around the *Vajoliroja*, he reminds me of Charlie Chaplin. There is a shyness about the way he floats in and out of a room. His depth of character and his open, compassionate bearing are genuine. He has an insatiable curiosity about everything.

As our conversation turns to the Shakespeare and Company bookshop in Paris—where I clerked for a summer in my 20s—the *Sweeney Todd* side of Depp emerges and he grows a bit gruesome. He asks Keenan to cue up a macabre video on the wide-screen TV showing George Whitman, the bookstore owner, burning his hair with a candle to impress a few artsy girls. (The clip is available on YouTube under "George Whitman, Burning Head.") "And then George reads them poetry!" Depp laughs approvingly. "Poof! Look at that clump of sodden hair." I can almost smell Whitman's singed tufts through the flat-screen.

As a nightly ritual, we watch movies and YouTube clips during sumptuous meals. Because there is a chef aboard, we've eaten like

kings—kings, that is, of the Kappa Sigma frat house. The menus consist of grilled beef-and-cheese sandwiches, raw oysters, Chicago-style pepperoni pizza, and turkey-chili tacos with guacamole. There have been heaping salads with fresh seafood. And plenty of Red Bull.

For all our light boozing and clowning, we realize we're all hopeless homebodies, returning repeatedly to discussions about our kids. (The voyage has been surprisingly free of locker-room talk.) Depp, in particular, tries to spend as much time with his 36-year-old partner, Vanessa Paradis, as possible—despite his acting regimen and her busy schedule as an actress, singer, model, and mother—and says he's determined to make sure Lily Rose and Jack live like Tom Sawyers as long as they can.

Our entertainment, like the décor, exists in a sort of time warp. We sample James Brown on an old video of CNN *Sonya Live in L.A.* wearing Sly Stone glasses the size of a scuba mask. "This is as high as you can get," Depp declares, "unless you go on ether." Depp is a huge fan of the 1970s Dean Martin TV roasts with Don Rickles, so we consume them by the hour. The old comedian Foster Brooks, whose shtick was sham inebriation, can almost move Depp to tears. We also watch *A Colbert Christmas*, largely to see Willie Nelson in the Three Wise Men skit. We screen *Where Eagles Dare* (Richard Burton and Clint Eastwood) and *Tropic Thunder* (Ben Stiller, Robert Downey Jr., Tom Cruise). "That's the best I've ever seen Cruise," Depp offers, approvingly, of the actor's role as Les Grossman. I ask if Cruise's portrayal reminds Depp of any Hollywood executives. "All of them," he says. And when we aren't watching the TV, silent Lon Chaney movies run unattended.

Knowing his affinity for the stars of earlier eras, I ask him if there is any Hollywood icon he still hopes to spend time with. "I already met her," he snaps. "Elizabeth Taylor." One day actor Roddy McDowall, who knew that Depp was rather awestruck by Taylor, called him and said, "Do you want to come to dinner?" Depp attended and found Taylor to be "the best old-school dame I've ever met. A regular, wonderful person. Billy Bob Thornton and Steve Martin were also there. Boy, did I take to her. For dinner she ordered liver and onions and just smothered them with salt. I admired that. She's an astonishingly great broad."

By day, the *Vajoliroja* can feel like a floating book club. Depp (who is a habitué of L.A.'s Dragon Books and Houle Rare Books) spends the week practically memorizing *The Rum Diary*, word for word—both the novel and the script. Wyatt reads Hunter's *Hell's Angels* and a history of rare French wines. Deuters is onto Balzac's *The Girl with Golden Eyes*. Holmes is finishing Bryce Courtenay's *The Potato Factory*; and I'm onto Louise Erdrich's latest.

And whenever Depp gets bored or can't sleep, he paints—specializing in oil portraits.

"When I can focus on something like guitar or painting, I do," he says. "I started painting people I admire, like Kerouac, Bob Dylan, Nelson Algren, Marlon Brando, Patti Smith, my girl, my kids. I painted Hunter a couple of times. Keith Richards. What I love to do is paint people's faces, y'know, their eyes. Because you want to find that emotion, see what's going on behind their eyes."

Land Ho!

As we leave Bahamian waters for the open sea, the waves start to swell, changing from lapis to peacoat blue. In an instant, our noble isolation takes on an edge of dread. A lone cargo ship can be seen on the distant horizon. Whales appear from time to time, spouting off. Other than that, the yacht is all we've got. Even with our G.P.S., if we were to capsize, we would all be goners.

Nonetheless, conditions are pretty good for sailing: two feet of sea sway with a three- or four-foot swell. And we realize that, if we were to run into real trouble, we could always divert to the Turks and Caicos, where Keith Richards has a home.

At sea Depp wears a blue-and-white-striped Rasta-man cap to hold back his hair. His frayed T-shirt has cigarette burns—souvenirs of a wayward youth. This is his last chance to indulge in genuine scruff before facing the movie cameras. Throughout the passage, Depp is in his element, pleased to be waterborne, choppy or not.

After a few glorious days on the water, we approach San Juan harbor. There is no better way, I posit, to arrive in a Caribbean port city than to be flying the Jolly Roger. Especially as we crawl past Paul Allen's *Octopus*—among the world's largest privately owned yachts. Because we're entering U.S. territory, three Homeland Security officers—all friendly—come aboard. "Everybody in Puerto Rico is excited you're here," the lone female officer tells Depp. "They're busy cleaning up the marina for you." While this is certainly a fine compliment, it means the paparazzi are sure to descend like swallows.

All at once, I get that sinking feeling. Our escapist fantasy has abruptly come to an end. "I feel like I just traveled the seven seas with Sinbad," Nathan Holmes chimes in. "Let's not tell them we've been in the lap of luxury. Just talk about our rope burns."

That evening we all head for a farewell dinner with *The Rum Diary* director Bruce Robinson and his posse. The son of Serge Gainsbourg, Lulu—a student at Boston's Berklee College of Music—also joins us. Depp leads a table toast, calling for a successful shoot in honor of Thompson. "Here's to Hunter, here's to rum," Depp says, claiming he'll do anything for the Gonzo cause—props and all. "I'll even wear man boobs."

The next morning, an hour before I depart