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PARADISE OVERDOSE

By Brian Antoni

Simon & Schuster. 256 pp.

How long can you let the good times roll before your value system grows dizzy from the ride and dies? Chris Angostura, bitter heir to the Angostura seasoning fortune in Brian Antoni's debut novel, seems determined to find out.

Relentlessly pursuing cocaine, rum and impersonal sex wherever they lead him under the Bahamian sun, Chris tries to raise hedonism to an art form. Together with his black lifelong friend, Shark, son of his former nanny, Chris constantly cruises the reefs and bars around Freeport searching for things to snort, guzzle or provide whatever temporary relief he needs. Then, he promptly begins a new search.

But the paradox of perpetual pleasure lies in how inevitably it inspires a restless ennui, a flip-side-of-pained misery. Even Shakespeare's prodigal Prince Hal knew that "if all the year were playing holidays, to sport would be as tedious as to work."

Suddenly, as a relief from the tedium of nonstop physical rapture, into Chris's benumbed and jaded life wanders the beautiful artist Robin, oddly mysterious because, unlike all the other girls Chris knows, Robin shows no eagerness to do a few lines along an immediate path to Chris's bed; "art," she says, "is kinda like my drug." To this point, Chris seems to have known only girls whose good-night line is, "I'd love to see you again if you get more coke." Robin says insightful things like, "I knew you were heir to something. You reek of TFB ... trust-fund baby," and "Did you know flowers are genitals?"

Chris counter-woos with endearments such as, "It's not fair you look the way you do and have a brain."

Just as love—which in this book appears to be defined as: "(luv) n. constant sex without cocaine"—blooms in the tropical air, however, sobering obstacles surface.

Shark, miffed because Chris has begun to spend less time with him, has become inescapably involved with Colombian drug dealers. His life itself is soon endangered. And Robin's mysterious initial aloofness turns out to have been due to the real reason she's come to the Bahamas: to seek treatment for her terminal cancer.

But even while he wonders how to help both Shark and Robin, Chris finds himself distracted by haunting images of his childhood: his mother's enigmatic death and his father's ability to provide money but not love.

All the elements are here for an absorbing and enlightening novel: sex, crime, the drug culture, inadequate child rearing, racial divides, premature confrontations with mortality, loss of paradise and hope for redemption.

Unfortunately, Antoni, an attorney and part-time resident of both Freeport and Miami Beach, fails to blend that potential into even a fair novel here. His dismayingly puerile sense of proportion and Jay McInerney-esque early-80s values (right down to the soul-transforming power of fresh-baked bread) lead to a pretentious, pseudo-artistic prose style and a main character wallowing in self-absorption. You can see it coming as early as the acknowledgments, where Antoni credits sibling rivalry with his brother Robert (winner of the 1992 Commonwealth Prize for best first novel) as the motive for writing the book and offers to his deceased grandparents this thanks for story material: "It's your fault I wrote a book, so stop rolling around in your graves."

Antoni, however, clearly displays gifts that might produce fine work in the future, perhaps as early as his next book. He evokes a vivid Bahamas setting and colorful minor characters. His deft command of language will inspire genuine aesthetic delight, once he begins to use it in a less self-conscious, less obtrusive way.

Here, however, he hopes to make attractive a compulsive hedonist to a post-Len Bias, post-AIDS world where endless cocaine and innumerable faceless bed partners no longer provoke amused indulgence. At that, he treats sex with all the subtlety of a train wreck. His tactic of buoying a stock and sentimental plot every few pages with copious clinical details of a new sweaty sexual encounter renders lovemaking here as erotic as passing a kidney stone.

Paradise Overdose, the very name suggests surfeit, callow indulgence, a doomed satyricon of superficial sensuality and self-obsession. It proves an aptly chosen title.