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## The Sea around Us

THE DOLPHINS SWAM across the tennis courts. In the library, paper sediment stirred on subtle tides and lodged in nooks near to where a family of barracuda had settled. The sunken gardens where residents had once grown unnecessary vegetables were ruined, their weeds beaded and sporing. This is what the captain told Ruth, while she was waiting for Ben to come back from the first day's dive.

What happened to the crocodiles? she asked him.

Alligators, he corrected.

The captain was South African, and he had the look of the Dutchmen of that country: high shoulders, deep chest, large hands, and brown leathery skin. His expression was ruthless, tender, proud. His people were sheep farmers in a semiarid country, he had said. They loved red soil and scrubland. Although he said he had spent twenty-five years in Australia, Ruth couldn't hear it.

The alligators are out there, he said, waving at the expanse. They were used to the salt water. For a few weeks, there would have been a feast. Bodies bloated (he puffed up his cheeks) into manatees. After that, maybe they went northwest along the coast.

She liked Captain Gericke but she would have liked better for Ben to return so they could open a bottle of prosecco and sit in west-facing chairs to watch the sun drown before dinner. Instead, she watched the surface of the water with the captain as he smoked, his pail of fag ends, which he called stompies, mounting.

The *Coracle* was moored to a satellite dish. An archipelago of apartment blocks extended for a mile in every direction from the *Coracle*, concrete roofs edging just high enough above the water to allow for easy navigation. Gray rectangles, against which the lip of the sea slapped affectionately when the wind roughed it up.

Why are the roofs flat? she asked the captain, and he told her it was so that helicopters could land on larger roofs in hurricane season.

They must have been rich, she said.

Rich and old and dead, he said.

All of them? she said.

Or nearly all, he said, sucking on his cigarette. The old, the sick, the stupid, the faithful, and the staff. All the black ladies who couldn't get back to their own families. The bridge was cut off early, you see. The ones who survived had booked flights when they heard rumors. They went north to their children and grandchildren and filed insurance claims after the storm.

Above the *Coracle*, clouds rose in high coiffures, catching the pink of the late light. The captain described what was below the surface of the water—restaurants, a post office, a gym, an ice cream parlor, a model train shop, a church, a hospice, a cemetery, bike lanes, hundreds of abandoned cars. Ruth thought if she peered hard over the edge of the *Coracle* she could see the crest of palm trees beneath the water. The leaves of the palm rose and dipped in the pulse of the water like it had once shivered in the wind. While she stared overboard, she heard the distant whine of a motor as it steered through the archipelago.

Here he is, the captain said, stubbed out his last cigarette, and stood.

When the motorboat had drawn up alongside the *Coracle*, Ben passed his equipment to the captain and then climbed across. He looked like a crayfish in his slick black wet suit, Ruth thought, the goggles pushed back over his forehead. Thanks, Miles, Ben shouted to the driver of the motorboat over the noise of the engine. Six, yeah? He held up his hands and showed six fingers. The motorboat took off toward the horizon, where another boat like the *Coracle* was anchored.

There was a puddle beneath Ben wherever he stood. Hello, Juniper, he said to Ruth and kissed her. The taste of salt water puckered her mouth.

Good shoot? she asked, feeling the damp marks of his fingers on her arms and back.

You would not believe what we caught, he said. You would not believe it.

When Ben had come back from his shower smelling of his coconut-flavored aftersun skin cream, and while the captain busied himself below deck in the small kitchen where he prepared all their meals, they drank, watching the pelicans perch on dumb satellite dishes. Ben told her about the dolphins, his brush against an amberjack, his catching a tern in a streaking plunge. He couldn't say what he had until he reviewed the day's footage, but there were signs of it being a prizewinning first day. Lucas, as far as he could tell, had been pleased.

You pretend it's all natural, she said.

What do you mean? Of course it's natural.

Wasn't there anything left? she said. Weren't there doorknobs, and stray tools, and wedding rings, and coffee machines, and electric coils, and packets of Oreos?

Why would I film that? he said.

Because it's there, she said. Because it's not just nature. Or, if it is, we're part of that nature.

It was too soon into their honeymoon to begin the lifelong work of contradiction. She felt her own perverseness wrinkling up her mouth. The captain walked up from below deck with a tray in hand. They ate bouillabaisse, snapper, and chocolate liqueurs. The captain ate at the other end of the deck with an incurious dignity that communicated respect, privacy, deafness. He was a man who would not judge how many bottles they drank, or how late they wanted to eat. He was well paid, and perhaps beyond that he did not care.

You said you didn't mind a work honeymoon, Ben said into Ruth's neck before they turned off the lights, wet with love. You liked that Lucas was paying for it. You said you'd read a book while I was away, which you never do during term.

She'd brought three fat books to last the week: a le Carré novel, a dual-language collection of Spanish short stories, and *Madame Bovary*. She already wished she'd brought a book of Florida wildlife or natural history. The *Coracle* came bookless. Its only reading material was a stack of ten-year-old promotional pamphlets she'd found in one of the sideboards in their cabin.

The next day, once Ben had gone off with his camera, and the sun was high enough to burn, she went above deck in her wide-brimmed straw hat, her head scarf, her long-sleeved linen shirt and drawstring trousers.

You look like Lawrence of Arabia, the captain laughed when he saw her.

I'm sensitive to the sun, said Ruth.

So you came to Florida, Captain Gericke said.

I wouldn't like it to hold me back, she said.

A dive would get you out of the sun, he said. There's extra gear below.

I'm allergic to salt water, she said, apologetically.

How do you know? he frowned.

She told him about the summer trips to Cornwall when she was a girl, when she would play in the lagoons and get rashes behind her ears and on her neck. Until her mother had seen the rashes, Ruth had thought she might be a mermaid and that the prickling on her skin was a sign of the coming change.

We come from the sea, you know, he said, and he shook his head with disgust. My great-grandfather would have called you a *soutie* and a *rooinek*. He saw plenty of you people in the little war he lost. I'll leave out the first word because it's not

polite, but rooinek came from the band of skin between the English helmet and collar that burned red in the sun.

She smiled and opened the le Carré. The captain, unaffected by the act of separation leant by her book, set himself to domestic tasks. After twenty minutes, she put the le Carré aside. The London streets, the English voices, the disciplined affections, private clubs, dreariness, and solitary walks did not suit the deck of the *Coracle*, which overlooked water coursing by in ribbons of green, blue, and malt. She could not hear Smiley's voice, which was also the voice of her great-uncle Peter, while the gulls telegraphed loudly to each other overhead. It was enough to sit on the deck of the *Coracle* and feel it move with the surface of the sea. It was enough to look in all directions for the tangle of dark green which promised her that there was still a coast, even if it would be drowned in its turn.

A small boat appeared, a dinghy with a motor, ploughing up the surface of the water. When it stopped, she could see bare figures bent over the side of the dingy toward the water, unrolling, unloading. The boat began to move again, slowly now, in a determined loop.

Fishermen, the captain said when she asked. The big boats can't get in because of the debris. The job's gone back to small crews, one man and his nephew, two or three brothers, selling what they don't freeze and eat themselves.

He pointed out the birds that began to circle overhead, the skimmers, the terns, the pelicans.

I wouldn't eat the fish from here myself, he said. Leaks, oil spots. Their meat must be off. Lots of bodies stunk up this place. What the alligators didn't eat, the fish stripped. Eating them would be like cannibalism.

Ruth thought about the bouillabaisse from the previous night, and, when the captain saw her face, he assured her that the fridge and the freezer had been stocked from Tampa, where they had embarked.

You're not hungry now, are you? he asked.

She told him she couldn't eat a thing.

In the afternoon, after a nap Ruth had not intended left her feeling disoriented and peevisish, she returned to the deck of the *Coracle* with the volume of Spanish stories. She expected the captain to make a joke about how tired she looked, but he was lying down on one of the cushioned benches with a hat over his face. Her attention was snagged by the slow-moving dinghy, its engine barely above a putter.

She imagined the fishermen were hauling the catch back to wherever the coast was, to wherever they could find a mooring with a jetty, land, houses. She imagined the catch below the boat straining against the net, baffled by their constraint. Surely, if every fish understood its condition, it would join with its brothers and swim against the boat's tug. She imagined the weight of their opposition. She imagined the net tearing and fish spilling out in all directions, but not before their strength upended the dinghy and left the fishermen to flounder in the surface swells. Do it, she thought, do it.

After a dinner of marinated pork chops, and a tepid sunset that spread out into rolls of cream, Ben went downstairs to look at his day's footage and she joined him. He was usually protective of his rough work, but it was their honeymoon, after all. He plugged the camera into the laptop he had brought with him, and they sat on the green-frosted double bed, hunched over the screen.

He would have to edit out the rising column of pearly air bubbles that gave him away, Ben explained.

Ruth felt dimly claustrophobic as the camera moved through the water. It followed shoals of fish on their jagged paths, propelled by private compulsions. Sunlight filtered down through the water and struck a tail, a fretwork of scales, a glaucomic eye. The camera settled on a nest of crabs which had settled near a golf cart. Although its canvas roof was shredded, the name of the retirement village was clearly visible on the body of the cart in cursive script: Century Village. Her mind lodged there, even when the camera had moved on. She imagined her father's Honda Civic rusting underwater; she imagined Oxford underwater. The betting shops, the Costa Coffees, all those ticket machines at the railways malfunctioning and drowned. All the people who lived on houseboats, who had been considered harmlessly eccentric, victoriously alive.

The first two mornings on the *Coracle*, Ruth tried to rise when Ben did, to keep him company as he went off in the streaky dark. He went for a piss before suiting up, and she sat sleepily on the edge of the bed waiting for him to come back and talk. On the third day, she pretended to be asleep and she suspected he preferred it: playacting the satisfied young lover, ducking out before the sun rose and struck him into commitment. He was twenty-two again, jauntily leaving flats and houses he'd never see again, dressed in yesterday's clothes. She felt the pulse of his energy leave the cabin, and for a short time she was adrift, abandoned. Then the tide started

to reverse its pull. She began to collect into herself, and to feel herself expand. She severed the cord between them and consigned him to the sea. She consigned herself to the surface. She ate melon in the sun.

The fishermen came back. Ruth thought by the sound of the motor that it was the same dinghy as the previous day but she said nothing to the captain in case he told her she was wrong. She suspected he thought she and Ben were two foolish, impractical people, playing at coastal living, playing with cameras, playing with boats, treating sunsets as drapery. The captain had forgotten, or did not know, that she taught secondary school maths, that she kept clean accounts, and that she had convinced Ben against luxuries like restaurants, lattes, cinema nights, fringe comedy and music festivals in order for them to save up a deposit on a flat.

Whether it was or was not the same dinghy, the men in the boat behaved differently. There was no elaborate unspooling of the net, nor the steady loop of the boat pulling the net from a wad into a round prison. Instead, the motor was cut and the boat bobbed on the ripples of the water the wind raked and diced.

Divers, said the captain. They're going down for shellfish. If you look through my binoculars, you can see their baskets.

He passed Ruth the binoculars, which were military grade and configured for his broad face. When she looked through them, she could see nothing but blur. She adjusted the lenses, but there was nothing but watery haze. She had always been poor at looking through lenses, microscopes, binoculars, telescopes, opera glasses. The captain explained to her the methods of the illicit crab diver, illicit because the area in which the *Coracle* was moored and the divers were scouting fell under the governance of a governmental marine conservation department and permits were rare and expensive to acquire.

They don't have much kit, the captain said, looking through his binoculars again. I wouldn't want to risk it.

In her mind, Ruth traced the crabbers' descent through the water. When she asked, the captain told her he estimated the seabed lay fifty to sixty feet below them. She imagined what she had seen in Ben's footage: a thick world of water, not glabrous like the surface but dense with material—sand stirred up from the floor, spores of seaweed, microlives directed by the current into larger mouths. Among that vital debris, unused violin strings, unopened tubes of tennis balls, countersigned wills in safes, half-used inhalers, USB sticks, clip-on earrings for tender lobes. She had reached the hard limit of her imagination—a fogged and cracked window on the second floor of one of the apartment buildings—when the

water near the starboard of the *Coracle* split. The bald crabber who surfaced swore in Spanish and looked around for his friends. After his eyes cleared, he spotted his boat and began to move laboriously in its direction, trawling a great weight behind him.

That's not a crab he's got, said the captain, his binoculars out. Not lobster either. He put the binoculars to his eyes.

This is not the last we've seen of these skelms, he said. I can promise you that.

What do you do all day? Ben asked Ruth, in the first froth of their happy hour, which, after three days, had not staled. He was the sort of person who made small festivals and movable feasts. He had a knack for conjuring enthusiasm. Midnight dinners on election night; themed brunch on anniversaries or public holidays. He had been raised by women—he had three sisters—and had learned the habit of small ceremonies. It was Ben who invited guests, and Ben who set the menu and cooked. He liked to receive in his apron, and serve the first drinks while he worked. He could rescue a mood easily, but became surly when his proposals spoiled. Now he wanted to hear that she lived a kitten's life, lying drowsily in the sun, toying with her sun-yellowing hair, thinking insubstantial, blurry, erotic thoughts. He had once complained that she never relaxed, that she did not know how to do nothing. She would get up on the weekends at the same hour she did before school, and by the time he rose, she would have broken the fragile film of a Saturday or Sunday, the hours before families begin their excursions, and the tube clots up with day-trippers to the Natural History Museum, the rare hours when the mind is all play. By eleven, Ruth would have drafted the grocery list, and the first load of laundry would be hanging from the tiered clotheshorse that cluttered the kitchen. She was sorry she could not do nothing. She worried that her inability to dip in and out of sleep on the weekends implied frigidity, an efficiency which crowded out the real needs of her body.

What do I do all day? she said. Pine for you.

She made a face, and he took this for the joke it was.

They ate prosciutto and salmon and mango from the captain's bottomless fridge. Ben said he wanted a storm, which would look fantastic from the deck of the *Coracle*. Ruth saw that the captain heard Ben and it was then, she thought, his opinion of his guests turned on its heel.

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The air had thickened over the course of the evening until it felt like a mosquito net draped heavily over them. Even their cabin below deck had lost its coolness, and husband and wife slept apart, hanging a leg or an arm over the side of the double bed. The thought of touching each other even in a fond passing stroke was impossible.

We lost our honeymoon weather, said the captain when Ruth went above deck the next morning. She looked over the side of the *Coracle* into irritated gray seawater, making peaks and dimples, slapping itself across the mouth.

What do you think it's like underneath? she asked.

Couldn't say, he said. A new note of prevarication was in his voice, as though his judgment was being kept in reserve and was stronger for its reticence. Perhaps he thought she and Ben were no longer fit to hear it. She who couldn't touch the water without angering her skin. The previous day the captain had made a great effort to coax her into the water. He told her that the Cornish sea was utterly different from the Gulf Stream. She reminded him of the leaks and oil spots he had mentioned which might spoil the fish. He was unperturbed and suggested that she put on her bather—which he called a costume, as though she was to put on a disguise to trick her body out of its false inclinations—and climb over the side of the *Coracle* and stand on the ladder with her feet in the water.

I'm not a strong swimmer, she said.

He told her she'd just stand there with her feet ankle-deep in the water, as an experiment. He wouldn't let a thing happen to her. No alligator would poach her on his watch. The captain was credibly weathered, but she wouldn't touch the sea to prove his theories.

The divers came back in the afternoon while she tried to read *Madame Bovary*. Ruth thought there were more of them, six or eight sitting in the boat, looking over their shoulders to the sea. When the boat anchored, the throaty bark of a large dog cracked across the distance. The quickness with which the men in the boat eased themselves into the water, and the captain's observation the previous day that the divers were hauling neither crab nor lobster, raised her suspicions. They might be pirates for all she knew, swimming beneath the surface of the sea to surround and surprise the *Coracle* from below, boarding her for her freshwater and wine cabinet, her prime cuts and wallets. For fifteen minutes, Ruth watched the water. She imagined posing the question to her students: If six men dive eight meters below the surface of the sea from a boat four hundred and fifteen meters



away from a second boat, and each is able to swim a length of a hundred-meter pool in two minutes, how long will it take the men to reach the second boat?

When one of the divers surfaced, it was not at the *Coracle's* side, however, but nearer his own boat. The captain, who was watching the transfer from the diver to the driver through his binoculars, said they were here for the loot.

Isn't it all rubbish? Ruth said. Old printers and rusting hospital equipment, DVD cases and orthopedic shoes—

And pearls, he said, and jars of coins, and wedding rings, and the odd handgun.

In a retirement home? she said.

Do you know where you are? he said, and then added, I've got one of my own downstairs. I saw you watching them dive. There's no need to worry about your safety. I trained in Angola.

But Ben was in the soup, too, she realized, flipping around this artificial coral reef in his wet suit. Now the sharks had joined the party—she could not see the divers as anything other than desperate men with small knives strapped to their wrists or thighs—and there was no way to warn him.

The weather accumulated through the afternoon as the dinghy stayed put. The clouds thickened. The large bark came again over the water. At five o'clock the clouds split to spill out lime, peach, and tangerine, with a cummerbund of pineapple yellow over the horizon. The motion of the water didn't stop. It was in the grips of some experience and the *Coracle* was in it. In the last hour before Ben returned, the captain told her there would be a storm. Now? Ruth asked, looking at the sky.

Those are all the colors of sickness, he said. That's our forecast.

It seemed imprecise, she thought, but the captain had received a bulletin from the coastguard. There was no doubt about the storm to come. The sky was birdless, and still the water moved under the *Coracle* and around her. They had, said the captain, twelve hours.

She wondered, if the divers stayed below the surface of the water in Century Village, whether they'd feel the storm hit. Did the currents become fiercer? Or would they remain in the timeless shoal of the wreck, preserved as the palm trees were preserved, taking their rest under the eaves of a drowned thatched hut?

When Ben returned he was appalled by the captain's proposal to leave after dinner and make for harbor at Port Charlotte, should Sarasota prove too ambitious. We've still got three more days, Ben said. Look at the sky—does that look like a storm to you? You can see the sunset. Soon you'll see the stars.

Let's not be reckless, said the captain. The *Coracle* is too light for Gulf storms. We *paid* for this, Ben told the captain.

Mr. Wessler paid for it, said the captain.

Ben lost his temper and went to shower so as not to argue in the indignity of his wetsuit. When he returned from the shower he had not lost the edge of his anger. Ruth sat at his side, thinking steady, lengthening thoughts to settle her heart. She did not apologize for her husband to the captain. The week before the wedding she had promised herself she would never be his translator. Any cities he sacked he would have to atone for. There was nothing more common than a woman who failed to see her man's weaknesses. The trick of marriage would be to fuse their lives and leave their minds separate. In failing to interpret Ben to the captain, however, she was complicit with him, and she felt the captain withdraw his sympathy from her. When Ruth went below to ask for a bottle of red wine, the captain opened the cabinet and let her choose what she wanted. Rather than gallantly uncorking it, as he had done with exaggerated flourish, he handed the corkscrew and the glasses to her. There was no offer to help her upstairs. They were no longer allies of the surface.

Don't you think we'd better listen to him? Ruth asked Ben between the *frutti de mare* and the risotto.

Don't be stupid, Ben said. We've only got a few days.

We'll still be together in the harbor, she said. Who knows? It could be romantic: the two of us below deck. Maybe the heat will break and it'll be cool enough for candles.

A few days for *filming*, he said. We've got a few days to catch all these species together in one place. The next hurricane could scatter them. They might be crushed beneath crumbling buildings. The temperature of the sea will change; the bacterial or microbial content will change. Christ, Ruth. There's this incredibly fragile world at the bottom and we've got a chance to record it.

You're a cameraman, Ben, she said. You're on a job for a for-profit media outfit. Lucas will make a nice documentary, and you'll deposit the check.

Which you'll be grateful for, Ben said.

Which I'll be grateful for, she agreed. But let's not pretend you're disinterested. Your cuts will be sold to advertisers of exfoliating cream.

The captain must have smelled their bitterness when he brought out the mousse. Watch the hazelnuts, he said, as he passed it to them.

Ruth remembered his voice and the peace offering of a second bottle of red wine which followed, together with the port the captain found below deck, which he poured for the three of them, in festive rounds, to diffuse the wire of contention. She remembered his words when she woke to piss in the middle of the night, thick-headed and groggily hot, ears pounding with a queasy pulse. She lost her footing in the toilet, and she thought at first that it was on account of how drunk she was, but then she felt the *Coracle* bucking beneath her. She heard the wildcat in the sky, and the winds it travelled on. She put on her gown, a honeymoon gift from her mother whose own white lace wedding gown she'd coveted as a girl, and closed the door of the bedroom behind her. She had to move slowly across the lower deck, bracing herself against the roof, tumbling against the white leather seats lining the sitting room. She struggled with the latch on the door that opened onto the upper deck. She'd never opened it before. It had always been opened for Ben by the time he left on the morning's outing and it remained open for her to creep through after breakfast, the pretense of a book in hand. When she emerged onto the dark deck, she saw by the speed of the waves disappearing on either side of the *Coracle* how fast they were moving. Holding on to the sides of the hatch, she was in the thick stink of salt spray and wind. The captain stayed where he was, his attention on his craft. When he caught sight of her over his shoulder, she wondered if he'd order her to go back inside, to return to her bed, to her husband, to sleep. Instead, he turned his eyes away, as if he'd decided she was some siren of the bush come to test whether he had given up the red-earthed veld for the fickle sea. Overhead the stars clattered by in the last hours before they were covered over. Ruth felt the tug from below, the chains that the drowned had tried to fix to her while the *Coracle* drifted on its aerial mooring. They surrendered their pearls. They made over their wills to thieves. They shrieked at the sea, the beaches, the shell collections, the unsalted dinners. They relinquished the dolphin cruises, and the lobster pots. Give us land, they cried. Give us grass. Give us trees, shrubs, and gardens. We renounce the marina. We yield our sunsets. Still the grave kept them down while the cold-hearted *Coracle* sailed evenly north.