

Night Swimming

The ocean carried on in all directions and disappeared below the curve of the earth. Night had fallen many hours ago and the Pacific waters were smooth and silent, undisturbed by wind or creature. Above the stars shimmered brilliantly, undefined by human light. The moon too had risen, a thin sickle that shone with unaccustomed brightness, its unlit portion being the only truly black piece of the sky — a dark oval amongst the countless pinpoints and milky smudges of the stars. Barely noticeable amongst the emptiness of the ocean and the crowdedness of the sky there floats a man.

He is alive and conscious but he is losing these two qualities slowly and surely. His face is terribly burnt from the tropical sun and his lips are swollen and discoloured, surrounded by a halo of crystallised salt; his eyes are swollen almost shut. His tongue is so thick that he cannot breathe through his mouth.

His name is Sean, and he was a research assistant on a vessel which sank in a typhoon twenty miles to the east. He is almost certain that he is the only survivor. Around his inert form is tied a frayed and faded life jacket, the bulk of it being a large polystyrene block which is attached to his chest, and the rest of it a thick collar which just manages to keep his lolling head above the water. Attached to the main float there is a small salt-water-activated light that had ceased its glow many hours ago, and a whistle which is tied with a thin nylon cord and floats a small distance away.

Only yesterday morning he had still been calculating how much longer he could survive without water but now even that had ceased to be of interest. Everything that is real is retreating into a diffuse mist of unreality: his terrible thirst, the pain from his eyes and his blistered face, everything is getting less important somehow. He can still feel these sensations but they seem far away, belonging to another version of himself. Even his memories have grown dim: they are sterile and dusty pictures in his mind. It seems the whole course of his life is fading to black and white. Earlier he had discovered that he could no longer remember his telephone number but even that had failed to arouse any emotion in his sluggish mind.

Still, one memory alone remains clear in his head — one streak of colour amongst the shadows. It is strange that it should be this one episode in his life that is staying with him the longest, and yet in a way he knows it is inevitable too. It was one day from a summer five years ago..., no not a day, but one night.

It began with a knock on his front door (there was no bell). Sean was in the kitchen, but what he was doing before, or that afternoon he has no recollection of.

He was expecting no one and tried to catch a glimpse of his visitor from the window but all he saw was a flash of yellow material. A skirt maybe? He walked to the door and pulled it open. It was seven o'clock in the evening.

"Hi." Said the woman who stood on his doorstep.

"CHRIS!" he almost shouted it. "YOU! I wasn't expecting...I mean...I thought you were...you said..." he lapsed into silence and a lame grin which made his cheeks hurt.

"I told you I'd call on you." She leant forward and pecked him on the cheek. Her smile dazzled: all perfect teeth except for her upper right incisor which was slightly too short so that you could see her tongue. "You obviously don't take me very seriously. Look," she gestured to something at her feet, "I've got it all packed...now all I need is your contribution."

On the ground was a massive basket, packed with all manner of things. Right on top was a big bowl of glistening lettuce, chopped onions and tomatoes.

"I...er...of course." Sean lapsed into his idiot's grin again. "You want some wine, right?"

Chris nodded solemnly. "That was the agreement, remember? Me food, you wine."

"Yeah, me Tarzan, you Jane," said Sean and regretted it immediately. "I'll just get it..." He said and fled into the house. He was muttering curses under his breath as he entered the living room. On the big chest of drawers stood two bottles of wine, only there seemed to be four as they were right up against the big mirror which reached to the ceiling. They were intended for his brother's birthday that Saturday and were extremely valuable — they were from 1968, the year of his brother's birth. Sean stood before the mirror and stared himself in the eyes. Slowly his hands reached for the bottles

and a grin crept onto his face. Forgive me, dear Brother, he said to his reflection. Then he grasped the wine and ran back to the front door where Chris waited.

Triumphantly he presented her with both of the bottles. She took them and her brow creased as she read one of the faded and soiled labels.

"Monsieur," she said and her eyebrows rose slightly, "I didn't realise that I meant this much too you".

"Oh!" Sean laughed, maybe a little too loudly. "Think nothing of it, Madame. I always keep a little something around for special occasions. Now come, I am hungry." And with that he grasped the heavy basket and they both walked towards the path that led to the sea.

Sean could not remember when he had first met Chris. But he did know that he had seen her on more than five occasions before she appeared on his doorstep that summer's evening. He also remembered very clearly that she had rendered him totally speechless the first time he had laid eyes on her. She was quite simply the most beautiful woman that he had ever met.

Bizarrely, one of the first things that Sean thought about during their first encounter was what she would look like in forty years time. Her features were so strong that it seemed that old age would only touch them superficially. Nothing about her would ever sag or droop or melt or degenerate.

Sean was totally certain that she would look absolutely stunning until the day she died.

Hers was not a conventional beauty, it was a beauty that resulted from hundreds of small and complex interactions. Like the fact that all of her teeth were perfect except for that one incisor that was too small. Sean had tried on many occasions to quantify exactly why he found her so attractive but he had never managed to do so satisfactorily. She was tall and athletic yet the most striking thing about her was her broad shoulders. They were not thick or brawny shoulders, they were simply unusually wide for a woman. Her arms, like her legs, were not muscular either but seemed to disguise a supple strength and liteness. It seemed like there was no fat on her body at all. In all her whole body had a curious touch of masculinity about it, yet in some way this seemed to make her more feminine. Her mouth was wide and her nose was very long and straight. Had her nose been on any other face, Sean imagined it would have been *too* long, yet on hers it was perfect. Her eyes were two black wells in her deeply tanned face, which seemed to swallow everything they looked at.

As a personality Sean found her totally absorbing too. From the first moment he first met her he felt that they could have discussed any topic in the world without inhibition. She had that slightly cynical humour that he loved. She was passionate about music which Sean found very reassuring; he had a fundamental distrust of people who regarded music with disinterest. She could make him genuinely laugh, and he could do the same for her. During the short time that they knew each other there was never an awkward moment between.

They walked down to the water's edge, but not the sandy beach where Sean and the others usually bathed. It was around the corner of the headland where they would be totally alone. There was no sand but only smooth pebbles, some the size of eggs, others were rocks the size of wheelbarrows.

Beyond the beach young birches crowded to the water's edge.

For the whole day it had been stormy and raining heavily but now the sky was almost clear. Only far away to the north were there still dark stacks of cloud and the occasional rumble of thunder. The air was warm and but not humid and the wind had vanished totally as if nature was having a period of contemplation after the disturbances. Far away across the water, towards the silhouettes of the hills on the mainland, fog was forming and the air and sea appeared to be fusing into one.

Chris rummaged through the basket and produced a bunch of long candles which she lit and attached to some of the larger rocks around them. Sean busied himself with opening a bottle of wine; thoughts of how on earth he would acquire another one for his brother were absent from his mind.

Once everything was prepared they sat down side by side and began to eat, whilst the distant fog began to roll towards them, a few lights from the opposite shore occasionally breaking through.

In his semiconscious state Sean was aware that the straps that held him to the life-vest had been coming undone gradually over the past few hours. But there was nothing he could do; he was too weak.

At ten o'clock they finished eating. They both left the comfort of the dying candlelight and hunted for firewood along the water. It was always barkless and flat pieces of wood they found, bleached by the

sun and smoothed by the water and always bone dry. Once the flames had taken hold they sat down again – closer this time – and Sean opened the second bottle of wine.

Earlier Chris had become strangely silent when something came up in their conversation. Sean explained that in two month's time he was going to Madrid to see a friend, and he lightly suggested that she might want to come along. His imagination was becoming lubricated by the wine and already he could not envisage the shadow of another parting between them. But she did not answer, and when the silence between them grew and grew he had to look across at her. She stared into the distance and somehow it seemed that her eyes were much larger and darker than before.

"No", she said finally, and the silences that bracketed this single word made it clear that no explanation would come.

The moment passed and gradually their quiet murmuring and occasional laughter by the fire resumed.

The fog had long since disappeared and they watched as the sun sank into the black hills across the pale water. Above them a thin ribbon of cloud that stretched from north to south was dyed blood red as the day finally ended.

Half an hour later, the second bottle of wine was also drained and suddenly Chris leapt to her feet.

"Do you know what we're going to do now?" She said. Her eyes were bright with the alcohol.

"Um...no, but I dare say you're going tell me."

"We're going to swim."

"Are you mad? It'll be freezing."

"No it won't be. The water retains the heat from the day, in fact the water's warmer than the air right now. Look, it's even steaming slightly."

Sean had to concede that she had the facts on her side, and apart from that, he knew from previous experience that she was perfectly right.

"Well, I'm going, even if you're not," she said and started to undress. Sean watched in disbelief as she unashamedly pulled her dress over her head and cast off her underwear. He got up, slightly self-consciously. They stared into each other's eyes, separated by maybe two feet. Sean was making a heroic effort to prevent his eyes from wondering below her chin to where her bare skin gleamed in the fire-light. He cleared his throat but for once he could not think of a single appropriate word to say. Was it his imagination or was she breathing slightly more heavily?

"I'll be waiting for you," she smiled and turned to wade into the water. Sean was glued to the spot, still speechless.

"There's no stones out here," she called over her shoulder, "only sand." He watched as the water gradually inched up her legs, as her immaculate body rippled with the rhythm of her strides.

Sean was suddenly torn back into the present. Had he heard something? A gull? A ship's horn? No, of course not. He was alone, and the only human being in five hundred miles. For some reason he was suddenly transported back to the shipwreck. How many days ago had it been?

*It had been a reasonably large boat, 70 feet in length with a crew of forty. *Pacific Blade* had been its name and now it wallowed in the mud at some unimaginable depth below the surface. Sean had intended to enter a lifeboat like all the others once the water had begun filling the engine room. But barely had he made it onto the deck that a wave had snatched him away like a leaf in a hurricane.*

Thankfully he had put on a life jacket, but that was the last thing he contributed to his fate. Once in the sea his only aim became trying to find the next breath in a world where the boundary between air and water had been lost. The waves had tossed him around like a child's toy and each moment he expected to be crushed against the ship's hull or eviscerated on some serrated reef. Once only had he seen another shipmate, fleetingly at the crest of a wave before they were torn apart again. Neither of them had communicated a thing – they had merely stared briefly into one another's terrorised eyes and understood perfectly that human life was totally without consequence in a situation like this.

Nature did as nature pleased and man would watch and live or watch and die, with no influence on the outcome whatsoever. Sean was lucky. Somewhere in the Great Lottery of The Sky his numbers had come up and he lived.

But now he was dying again, and this time he thought it was for certain. He suddenly felt the need to urinate and was mildly surprised at how painful it was. He realised that his body had no water left to

flush his metabolic toxins into the world. Slowly he retreated back from reality again and into his thoughts.

He watched Chris walking further and further into the sea. The ground beneath her feet began to drop away more steeply and the water rose quicker up her body. Her long black hair touched the surface and began to spread out like an oil slick. Suddenly Sean sprung into life. "HANG ON!" he shouted hoarsely, "I'm coming!" He began tearing off his clothes like a man possessed and finally stumbled into the water. Chris was treading water further out, watching him. He ran into the water, eventually falling in with an undignified flop. It was amazingly exhilarating and Sean had to make an effort not to whoop like a lunatic. Suddenly the alcoholic apathy was gone and he began swimming after Chris who had turned and was moving through the water with the elegance and efficiency of a panther. She carried on swimming for a whole ten minutes and Sean was painfully aware of the gap that opened up between them. Yet his pride prevented him from calling out and he struggled on doggedly through the sea.

Eventually she stopped swimming and turned to wait for him. He was panting when he reached her and making a big effort not to think of the black abyss that must have been yawning beneath them. Slowly she swam to close the remaining gap between them.

"Stop swimming," she whispered, "I will hold you." And so he did and those long sleek arms and her warmth enclosed him and he had never felt more peaceful or secure before in his life. The last thing she said was "the sea will keep its secrets."

Sean never saw her again after that night. She said that she would leave in the morning with no explanation as to why or where.

Somewhere in the sprawling Pacific Sean knew with a sudden certainty that in the past five years he had thought about her every single day. He had sincerely thought that he had gotten over her but only now did he realise how utterly wrong he had been

Several hours later the moon sank below the horizon and a faint glow in the east was casting the stars from the sky. An empty life jacket floated on the water, trailing behind it a whistle that was bound to it with a nylon cord. The ocean was totally silent, undisturbed by wind or creature. It carried on in all directions and disappeared at the unbroken horizon. It would always keep its secrets.

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