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DIVE

Lydia O'Donnell

He was the one worrying. The role-reversal didn't make me feel better.

"I have to be vigilant—we need to be vigilant. I took the emergency stash out of the safe, I'm keeping it on me tonight. If they board, you go hide under the bed. Be quiet. Don't try to help me." He shook his hair out of his eyes as he talked.

"Are we really going there?"

He ignored me.

A tanker ship glided over the horizon. The wind was strange today, soft and heavy. I couldn't resist another jab.

"You're worrying too much."

He fiddled with a piece of rope, turning it over faster and faster in his hand.

"You don't really know anything about this. I've met a lot of people who've done this passage. Almost all of them had close calls. Sailing yachts are the easiest targets."

"Then why are we doing it?" I asked. "We can just turn around. It's not like I'm begging you to sail this exact passage."

He walked away from me to fiddle with the radar.

I was worried about countless things. Pirates were not one of them. It was in keeping for us. The only thing that didn't get to me scared him into a frenzy.

That's not to say I hadn't thought about hijackings. Before stepping foot on his boat, I obsessed over real-time maps of maritime piracy. It was true that every year incidents happened in this area. It was also true that this part of the south pacific had some of the heaviest shipping traffic in the world.

The number of pirating incidents were negligible.

I reminded him of that.

"Most of it doesn't get reported."

"And the ones that do get reported are just attempts. No ships boarded, no violence, no successful hijackings." I retorted. He gave me an annoyed look that was usually reserved for the opposite situation: my paranoia, his dismissal.

"It's worrying up. Just go get some rest now. You'll need it to be on watch tonight." I laughed. He was distracting himself, picking about pirates, of all things.

The sky and water were murky. Opaque and ugly. The humidity was a physical presence surrounding us, pressing in. The sunlight was too heavy. It crippled me; my head lowered; my shoulders hunched.

The sun rotted everything. The day before, a few flying fish jumped onto the deck while I was sleeping. He couldn't be bothered to toss them overboard. The smell woke me up.

I glanced at the little fish-rot stains on the deck. The smell dissipated from the boat but it lingered in my nose. I didn't want to think about those stains. I didn't want to see the ocean.

I stepped down into the cabin.

Alone and out of sight, I faded into the stuffiness. I stripped my clothes off and left them in a heap on the floor. I looked down at my skin to map out today's horrors. My body had dehydrated into something new and ugly. Flakes of dead skin floated off me when I moved.

At first I couldn't handle the sunburn, the crunch and grease of my hair, the sharp smell. Everything hurt. My body was rancid. But pain fades and scents blend together. After a few weeks, I was physically at ease in my dehydrated state.

I tried not to look at my diving supplies in the corner of the cabin. The reason I came on this trip, untouched. I was supposed to be celebrating my master diver certification. I told everyone I knew. I saw the dives in my sleep. I brought a book of maps, speckled with blobs of highlighter: dive here, wreck here, rare jellyfish sightings here.

Since my first dive over a decade ago, I craved the feeling of being submerged in stillness. Cold surrounding my body like a weighted blanket. The echoes from deep within the Earth, rippling over total silence. The air felt too thin on land. All the noise irritated me. I kept a countdown app on my phone. When I got to a dive day it rained digital confetti.

The first day of our trip, a horrible switch flipped in my brain. The thought of going underwater sickened me. I put on my wetsuit and my stomach roiled. I looked into the waves and my head ached. It wasn't all mental. I heard the reactions in my body, the gurgling and creaking.

We were on the other side of the planet. Every morning I woke up next to him and rotted. Trapped in the humid bubble of the ship. Months more of this were in store.

I obsessed over my body to kill time in the cabin. I picked at ingrown hairs then worried that they would get infected. I split the blisters on my hands and squeezed out the pus.

I stopped my inspection at my waist. The humidity and sweat congregated into a nasty yeast infection. I couldn't think about it. Everywhere he touched, my body stung. This added a new unspoken layer of tension to our fights.

I nagged him about his drinking. I couldn't get the picture out of my head: him, falling head-first off the boat, me: alone in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. I told him. He laughed at me. He grabbed my waist and tried to pour me a glass of beer, or whiskey, or whatever it was he was drinking then.

I begged him to wear a safety harness when he climbed on top of the cabin to take down the sails. A small wave could have bumped him into the ocean. He waved me off, busy, stop worrying so much.

I asked him to lay off the cigars. Partly because I was worried about the boat going up in flames. Also, because the sight of him, drunk, sprawled across the deck puffing on them made me want to jump in the ocean. I couldn't. I felt sick. I went into the cabin and screamed into the stale-smelling pillow. Then we docked at a nearby island and got into a fight.

And now he was afraid of pirates.

I curled up on the bed. I remembered the happy buzz in my chest when I picked out these sheets for him. They were covered with dancing mermaids and coral.

The sea creatures drowned in our yellow and gray sweat stains.

I set an alarm and clipped the clock onto the bed. He wouldn't stop what he was doing to wake me up.

It took a while to fall asleep. I couldn't get comfortable.

Waking up used to be a reset. On the boat, it made me feel worse. Coming into my body: the dry mouth, chafing skin, and realization that I was floating in the middle of the ocean with him.

My face and hands were swollen. My stomach was bubbling. I pulled my clothes on and swished mouthwash. Even if my nose had adjusted, I knew we both stunk.

It was getting dark. This was usually my favorite time of the day. Tonight, the sky was ugly. Beautiful evenings were rare on this trip. He was facing forward, monitor in his hands.

"There's another ship heading on an exact collision course towards us."

I felt tense, but not worried.

"What kind?"

"Container ship," I exhaled. He had wanted me to be afraid for a moment. A container ship wasn't coming to attack us. It probably didn't realize we were here.

"That's nothing. Send them a message."

"I already did. An hour ago." He stared in the direction that the ship would appear. I slid a hand on his upper arm. He shrugged it off.

I wasn't worried yet. This was a busy passage. It would be stranger if we didn't see any ships. I sat next to him.

The ship appeared, a pinprick on the horizon. We were tense. It was a gigantic magnet, pulling on our tension. Our bodies leaned in its direction.

I wanted to break this moment. I stood up and went to play music on our speaker. He stopped me. His head was tilted towards the radio. The ship wasn't responding. It wasn't changing its course. We listened to intervals of silence and static.

I don't know how long we sat like this.

The sky was black now. The water was choppy. I could see the container ship's sidelights. Lonely flashes of green and red against the ocean.

A memory from childhood passed through my mind. An elaborate fantasy book, illustrations of will of the wisps leading lost young men into bogs. Men choking and decaying into the peat. The ship lights were worse. They were so artificial. And the object behind them is too massive for me to imagine.

I felt my body tightening, the beginning of stress. I drummed my fingers on my sticky neck in tune with my heartbeat. He was panicking now, sending messages nonstop to the ship. It was too close. These gargantuan ships took miles to change their course. We needed to run from it.

A wave sprayed us with salt.

"Turn the lights on." He ordered me. I uncoiled myself and hurried to it. Earlier, we had argued about the lights. I thought they should always be on. He was worried we would be a target.

The container ship would steamroll us because he was too busy worrying about pirates.

I attached a rope around my waist and climbed up to every light on the boat. Sitting under the glow at night was one of the few things I enjoyed. Our private pavilion in the middle of the ocean. I still wanted to find romance.

Tonight, the lights illuminated the stress on his face, my tangled hair, the disarray of the cabin.

He finished yelling a message into his radio.

"I'm putting a reef in." I nodded. He heaved himself across the boat to the sail. His steps were unsteady, slipping on the water and his own nerves. As usual, no harness.

I watched him struggle with the sail. He taught me about reefing on one of our earlier dates. I'd never cared about sailing. I always thought it was a hobby for rich men who wanted to feel like they were tougher than mother nature. He was rambling on about it, not explaining any of the lingo. I was forcing myself to be interested in the technicalities. He kept mentioning reefs. The struggle of putting them in on windy days. I asked him why he would sail in shallow water filled with coral reefs. That was very funny to him.

You're a diver who doesn't know anything about boats, he laughed.

Back then I was coy.

I don't need a boat, my body is a submersible, I joked back.

We laughed again when I first saw his little sailboat. He called it a sailing yacht. A twenty-five-foot sailboat from the 90s was not what I was expecting. Then, it was better.

The container ship lights blinked behind his unsteady frame. I wanted to be alone.

He was larger than me. There was an itch in my chest. One well-aimed shove and he would fall under. That would be it. His death would reinvent me. The container ship was too far for witnesses. I would be hysterical. They would find alcohol in his corpse. A clean and tragic start. Maybe I could finally dive again.

I shuddered. I could never do it. I was scared. I hated myself; I was more worried about being alone on this sailboat than his life.

Too long—too long on this boat, with him, in the sun, the heat, I was thinking crazy things, it was getting to me. It was too dark even for a passing intrusive thought.

I scurried into the safe mugginess of the cabin. I wanted a reason to sit alone, even for just a minute. I poured a handful of trail mix into my hand. I pressed my lips to my palm and ate it sloppily, the waves rocking any elegance out of me.

When I came out, he was finishing putting in the reef.

"Can I fix you something to eat?" I asked.

"How can I eat right now?" He was pulling his hair again. The container ship seemed to wink at us.

"Right." I said. "We just need to avoid it."

"What do you think I've been doing?" I frowned at his tone.

"I've seen you sail around container ships before. Just avoid it." I watched his face and realized, "you think pirates are running a container ship."

"We don't know."

"We do know."

"I'm telling you."

"Seriously? What would that take, like, a whole militia of pirates? And how long could they even control the ship before whatever country sent in its military? Long enough to poach sailing yachts for fun?"

"It's happened before in this area." I thought of his habit of watching violent videos before falling asleep. Shootouts on freighter ships, military ops, reruns of The Terminator. I assumed it all soothed him somehow. But it seems his subconscious was tainted after all.

"The workers probably don't bother to check the radio. Anyway, other boats would normally get out of their path. Or everyone's sleeping now. I read that these giant boats usually only have like ten crew members." I said.

"You're talking like this is the normal world. But this," He gestured all around us, "is not the normal world anymore. There are no rules. No one's going to enforce anything."

And that was what he really liked about sailing. The hostility of it.

I put on my windbreaker and sat down. I listened to the different frequencies on my pocket radio. I kept my head down and tried to think about the different shades of static rather than the lights ahead of us.

The water was choppy. It ran down my face. It felt like crying.

I didn't bother to take off my harness. It comforted me. I cleaned my head on my knees and tried to relax. Salt water was splashing off my windbreaker. Sometimes when I was bored, I could hear musical rhythms in the water.

The splashing was discordant. I was too anxious. The sky and the sea melted into the same emptiness.

He laughed in a way that predicted bad things.

"They're aiming for us."

"Come on."

"I changed our course. And then they did. They changed their course. They're coming directly at us."

I wanted to say it was a coincidence. But I was feeling strange.

"Give me the radio." I needed to do something.

"No."

"Why?"

"They don't need to know I have a woman on my yacht."

Despite my stress, I had to laugh at that. He scowled.

"I'm your bad luck charm, huh?"

"Come on, you know that's not what I mean." He replied. I did know.

Fighting was not the distraction I hoped it would be.

I focused on the container ship. I wanted to will it away from us.

If it wasn't so dark, I could have seen its boxes, could have told him witty stories about their contents.

The disembodied sidelights told their own stories.

He alternated between steering and pacing the deck. The waves weren't relenting. We were both dripping saltwater.

"Can we contact someone?" I asked.

"Contact who? Babe, we're in the middle of the ocean." His words were acid.

I thought about getting on my gear and diving away. Irrational. I was making myself sick again.

The monitor beeped every few minutes, closer and closer.

I shut my eyes. I saw the sidelights through my lids. No. They were still too far. But I saw them. I heard him pacing, kicking up the water on the deck. I focused on the waves. They sounded musical again.

"Oh, Christ. Thank God." I opened my eyes. He was kneeling on the ground. He held the little radar screen over his heart. "They're finally changing course."

I looked at the lights. It took a while, but their angle did shift. They ghosted over to the left of us. We watched them together.

We sat like that for a long time. Silent, our exhalations sending the tension out of our bodies and up into the void of the sky.

I relaxed. Everything softened. I reached out for his hand. I think he was going to take mine back.

Then we crashed.

I was in a car accident once as a little girl. It didn't compare to this. The noise, the hulls of two ships shattering, smashing into one another. The waves, only worsening things. The miles of nothingness beneath us that didn't care.

I screamed before water smashed into my face. A piece of debris grazed my thigh. Blood sprang up to meet it.

My body was tossed across the deck and slammed against the other side. The only thing that kept it from going overboard was the rope around my waist. My arm blocked my head from cracking open on the side of the deck.

The water retreated. I couldn't look up. I was afraid. My ears rang. Salt stung my lips. I wanted to spit out the taste of iron.

I heard a hoarse voice calling my name. I looked up.

He was draped over the edge of the deck. I don't know how he held on without a rope.

This time real tears flowed down my cheeks. I scrambled over to him, ignoring my bleeding thigh. I pulled him onto the deck. He grunted. His left arm was twisted into an unnatural angle and his left cheek was covered in blood.

"You hit your head." I asked.

He wiped at the blood.

"Are your ears ringing? Did you black out? Do you feel nauseous? Sluggish?" He didn't answer.

"The ship. The ship is—what hit us?" Something twitched in my chest. I looked to the right. A dark shape was floating next to us.

"A fishing trawler, it looks empty. No lights on." I whispered. The trawler was at least forty years old. Paint was flaking off of it in colors I couldn't make out. The barnacled wood was rotting.

"No." He shook his head. Blood splattered onto me. I knew what he was thinking.

"It really looks empty." I repeated.

"It can't be."

"It is."

I looked at the ship. The collision.

"Our ship. Is it damaged? We have to check, we have to—"

"Stay down." He hissed at me. I wanted to laugh and cry.

"If there are people, they know we're here by now. They've seen and heard us." I told him. My body was shaking. He grabbed my arm to keep me down. I stood and went to check over our boat.

Miraculously, everything appeared shaken but functional. I peaked around the cabin. I was nervous to see it clearly. Our plastic dishes were rolling around the floor, the pillows were knocked off the bed, but my diving gear was still in a neat pile.

It all seemed fine. Did I miss something? No way our boat was unscathed. He was the expert. He could notice a problem. He couldn't stand up. His head was bleeding. I grabbed the first aid kit.

"It seems ok." I told him. I put my hand on his good shoulder, unsure which of us I was trying to comfort.

He stared at the trawler. I soaked a gauze pad with alcohol and began cleaning up his face. His pupils were dilated. A concussion.

He didn't say anything.

"I don't know what to do." I continued. "It seems like that trawler is traveling parallel to us. Like our boats are somehow stuck together." I wanted to chew my nails.

To the left, I saw the distant lights of the container ship. I cursed at them.

He slowly turned his head towards the trawler. I inched across the deck. It was close enough that I could step over onto it.

There was no sign of life.

I didn't know the proper action. If we left it adrift, it could crash into another ship. But could we really drag it all the way to the nearest port? What if there was damage to our yacht that we couldn't see? Would anyone hear an emergency radio message?

I didn't know how bad his concussion was. Probably bad enough that he couldn't make a good decision.

"We should message the container ship. A distress call."

He shook his head wildly.

"Don't shake your head like that! You'll make it worse."

"They're together. They're doing this together." I sighed and stepped away from him. Old, tangled fishing nets covered the deck of the trawler. There was something underneath them. I stepped closer. There were hundreds of fish skeletons.

Not only the fish, the boat itself seemed like it had been alive once. Looking at the warped wood, I felt connected to it. Maybe that was why I did it. But I didn't know.

I ignored his protests and reached over the deck. I laid my palm against the side of the trawler. The grain of the wood was pleasant. Where had it been, who had it taken?

I heard a crackling noise.

"Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?" His eyes were wild. He limped towards me.

My hand curled up against the wood. Crackling, static, music was adjusting itself. Old music, maybe older than the trawler.

It seemed to be coming from inside the cabin.

"There's music."

"No, there's not. I don't hear anything."

"There is." I heard the voice of a male singer now. A heartbroken voice.

"Don't say that. And if you really hear something, stop listening to it." I released my hand. My palm was freezing.

He was talking at me. I was staring at the cabin, holding my hand. It wasn't warming up. This was not a good impulse. I wanted to know where it's coming from." He said something to me. I ignored it.

"I hung ropes around, attaching the two ships. He was yelling now.

I finally turned to him.

"They already hit us! If they're pirates, they've got us, you're banged up and I'm a helpless woman. They would be out by now, waving guns in our faces. But they're not because this ship is empty."

I didn't say the rest. I've worried about you this whole trip and this is the first time you've ever worried about me and somehow I still think you're not actually worried for me, but worried for yourself because you can't actually handle these bizarre violent fantasies you've been enacting in your head.

Looking at a dive bar. It didn't know what to feel.

I first met him in a face. I wasn't some cute chance meeting. We started talking on an app, the type that would mortify my parents. I hoped that he would invite me to a coffee shop, a museum, a place where we could have a sweet start. Instead, our schedules clashed. I sensed his irritation through text messages. I wanted him to like me. I panicked. He finally suggested that corner bar.

I showed up early. He showed up late. At the beginning of the date, he was charming. Hours went by, and I watched him through the dirt, the murky light, the fumes of beer. It set in. This was how it really was. How he was. And I knew then that I would stick around. It was inevitable.

Now, I retreated away from him. I undid the rope from around my waist. I almost withered the trawler. It seemed attached to the side of our boat by invisible velcro. The music was louder now. My hand was warm again. I hoisted myself over and onto the other side.

The moist wood sank under my feet. I waited. It held and I took a step forward. The ropes and fish bones crunched.

My skull shook, the music was rolling around inside of it.

I felt that I should call out. Announce my presence. But I could see into the empty cabin. There was no one there. Still, I wanted to say something. My voice was gone. My throat throbbled with the music.

I reached down and picked up one of the fish skeletons.

Something was off. I couldn't see anything different about it. It looked like a normal fish. How was it different? It just was.

The music was easing up. I calmed myself down, stood up, and set my sights on the cabin. With my head quieter, I noticed a smell.

A few years ago, a possum fell down my father's storm drain. That summer we couldn't go down into the basement without gagging. This smell was similar, but sweeter. Sweet, sweet that made me sick. Sweet that wasn't the smell of rotting fish. I could see it, sinking into my hair and my skin. It amplified the music, a sugary synesthesia.

I paused at the door. Like that night, all those months ago at the dive bar, I could see the future in front of me. I opened the door.

The headlamp glared into the cabin. My head spun. It took me a moment to put it together.

There were five bloated shapes in front of me. Colors and textures smeared together into that awful scent, that nostalgic music.

I always thought that finding a dead body would terrify me. I'd throw up or pass out.

Now, I felt good, better. Looking at the crew of the trawler was easier than looking in. I didn't know when they died or what they looked like when they were alive. But I'd watched myself rot like the past eighteen months were a century.

I saw myself there next to them. Melting, bubbling into something different. A new form. The pitch of the singing lowered. The sweet smell of rot tickled my nose. It was coming from inside of them and inside of me.

I wrapped my arms around myself. My body was swaying to the song. I wondered about the color of the fishermen's eyes. Did they fight with their lovers? Had they picked apart those fish skeletons with their hands?

I was like that for some time.

I didn't want to leave them. But something scratched at the music, mingled with the scent. Something I'd forgotten. I hated it. I couldn't get it out of the corner of my mind. My diving gear, unused.

I left the cabin. His yelling started. Begging me to come back, what did I see, there's an emergency.

I stepped back on our boat. The smell, the music, it was only coming from me now.

"There was nothing on the trawler," I heard myself say, "just some fish skeletons and ropes. I don't know how it ended up like that."

He muttered something crude. His face wasn't bleeding but in the light of the headlamp his arm looked worse. I stepped closer. His smell was terrible. He repeated himself a few times before I understood.

"There's a leak. Fuck. That trawler punctured the hull. Look at this." He was shooting across the deck.

I was very calm.

"Then I need to fix it." He looked over the edge of the deck. It was my expertise, after all, open-water, nighttime, exotic location. Solo diving.

The music tuned him out again. I went into the cabin to put on my gear. It slipped across my body, almost sensual in how good it felt. My stomach didn't convulse. My head was filled with sweet clouds and music. I walked out and leaned over, caressing the tops of the waves with my hands.

The water calked to me in my back. I hadn't heard since starting this trip. But I knew I still wouldn't be able to jump in yet. I strapped the tank tighter on my way. Signed with relief, anticipation. Twirled my goggles around my fingers. Grabbed the repair supplies. I didn't tether myself to the boat. There was no need. I knew the currents would carry me along.

The water and sky around us blended into soft, romantic depths.

He grabbed my arm. I turned to him. Disgusting scent, grating voice. I didn't shake him off.

"There's one more thing I need to do."

I was falling backwards into the water. I wanted to watch the boats. The trawler was drifting away from our yacht. The container ship was long gone. The water reached up and pulled me under. Salt water blotted out my eyes. I let myself drift down to feel that there were over two miles of nothingness beneath me. I had no senses.