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# Aubade

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## AUBADE

by Karen Brown Gonzalez

I said I would go and now I have. I am in the dinghy, rowing away from him. I have my cigarettes and my lighter. It is night, and I am swallowed up in it. I feel the force of the sea and its swelling under me. There is a little water now, sloshing about my bare feet, and yet my arms row, strong and fueled by fury. I do not hate him. I only row away because I love him. The sea is the force of my love, pushing me with its tide. I watch the palm shadows wave at me from the moonless shore. Tonight, we drank rum with the couple from *The Sharon*. They were from England and as drunk as we were. He was quiet, sifting the sand through his hands. I could not ask him, What? I was too afraid to hear it.

We are on Tobago, in the Lesser Antilles. His boat, *The Pearl* is tacked off of Charlotteville, and we have been here for two days. I know only a little about sailing. I have been brought along as company for the trip, a woman he met in a bar in New Haven, who had a look, he said, that made him weak. That was all he would say when I asked why he wanted me. Oh Darling, he said. Let's not worry. The sailing is rough, and then it is beautiful. We follow other cruising yachts, friends of his, along these islands. We stop and stay in anchorages he knows, Castara Bay and Parlatuvier, buy food from Miss Esme in the little shack—crab and dumplings, Bake and Fish. Her arms are round and black, her hands soft-palmed. She took my hand in hers to say *hello*, smiling at me, her brown eyes keen. He dives most days, with his friends. I stay on the beach, or on

*The Pearl*, reading, thinking about him returning. In bad weather I am told to stay under, a nuisance.

Now, I row on in darkness. The current yanks me along, swift and indifferent. I listen to the sea thunk against the dinghy, the clank of the oarlocks, the dip of the oars. My hair, my skin, are damp and sticky with salt. I think about each day with him. I remember everything we said to each other. We did not say much, or enough, I see. We let our bodies answer the question of love, lying in warm sun on the deck, lazy with Martinis. Swimming without clothes, the water pale and green and tepid, the little fish darting between our legs. Our bodies are close and knowledgeable of each other. His hands are eager and expert. My mouth understands him. That is all. Tonight, drinking rum by the driftwood fire, he kept his eyes on me, narrowed, intent, his body separate.

“This will be it,” he said. “Once we head back.”

I knew not to laugh, and question him, to pretend I was confused. He would lie, absently, to put me off. “Of course,” I said, accepting this condition of parting as if I had once agreed to it.

The sea came onto the beach, rushing and churning. The fire popped. I looked across at him and he had looked away. His profile in the firelight was beautiful. His hair has grown in the weeks on the water. I smelled the wood burning and the rum on my breath and I felt calm and dead. *Look at you*, I wanted to say. *Hiding your face from me*. Out on the water, rowing, I hear my own breathing, my anger replaced now by inexplicable sorrow. The water in the dinghy is warm on my feet. I stop rowing, and see nothing, not the shore and the

torn palms waving, not the bonfire where we sat and drank the rum. I feel the sea tug and pull the boat. I realize, with something like the sea's sad indifference, that the current must have taken me past *The Pearl*. I am adrift now, with the water sloshing over the sides, and the waves tossing me. I am caught in the current that empties into the Caribbean Sea.

The only water I've known has been the Atlantic, cold and gray, creased with age. I went out into Long Island Sound with my grandfather in his wooden Chris Craft, out beyond the mouth of the river, the rock of the jetty and the white lighthouse at Fenwick, a stark sight, even on a day with sun. The rocks are granite blocks, striated, impervious. The boat skipped over the little waves. Once, we stopped beyond Old Saybrook, and looked at the rows of beach cottages, dropped anchor and ate sandwiches on white bread. I was seven, and I fished with a drop line. My life jacket was orange and heavy with spray. I chewed on the white strap to taste the salt. My grandfather sold lightning rods, traversed the New England countryside in a shiny Cadillac, quoting prices for barns stacked with freshly mown hay, for clapboard houses with mourning doors. As a young man my father climbed the old slanted roofs, nailed the copper wiring and the bracketed rods to sides of silos, to widow's watches, their boot heels slipping on slate and loose asbestos shingles.

The Sound rocked and slapped the boat, benevolent. The sun slipped in and out of banks of piled clouds. I sat, lulled and pleased with my sandwich. When the sun came out I closed my eyes and felt it on my eyelids. Now, here, on this unknown Caribbean, I try to find the sea's kindness. But I cannot stop

rowing for fear of capsizing, and I must bail the water that rises up beyond my ankles. The sky remains black, without stars. The water is a roiling presence, invisible, nearly, in the darkness. Before I left, the couple from England rose from the fire to head back to the bar for something to eat, and he began to walk with them, away from me. I lingered behind in the sand, finally adamant. He glanced back at me. I heard him sigh.

“Don’t,” he said.

I told him I was leaving, and he laughed. He came toward me and took my hand, and I pulled it from him. “Darling,” he said.

I am so sad, I thought, but I said nothing. I regretted ripping my hand away. I could not place it back when his own hands dangled uncooperative at his side. He left me then. We were all drunk and foolish. I cannot imagine what he thought, that I would sit there stubbornly waiting for him to return. I launched the dinghy myself. I am broad-shouldered and strong for my size. The sea drenched me, but the night was warm, and I wanted to row away from him, his pursed mouth, his eyes and their finality, his heart shut like a door. The sea sends the dinghy up on a swell. I feel a new, fresh kind of panic. I am afraid of drowning. I admitted this to my grandfather once, and he glared at me, sternly.

“Never fear the water,” he said. “The water is like the face of God.”

My grandfather wasn’t a religious man at all. Sometimes, he went to the Presbyterian Church on the town green. My mother took me regularly to the Latin Mass in the old Sacred Heart Church, where the pews smelled of polished pine, and the statuary of Joseph and Mary gazed smooth-faced and pitying. We

dipped the tips of our fingers into the holy water. *In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti.* The priest came swinging the censer. The little bells rang and ushered in a deep, encompassing silence. No one breathed during the consecration. *In mei memoriam facietis.* Later, they tore down the old church and built a newer one, in a modern style, and we did not go anymore. This had nothing to do with the old church being torn down, as I once thought as a child, but with my parents falling out, and their hangovers acquired from Saturday's cocktail parties.

That afternoon on the Sound my grandfather sang a hymn. *Launch out, into the deep, oh let the shoreline go. Launch out, launch out in the ocean divine, out where the full tides flow.* He drew the anchor up, singing, his voice a resonant baritone. I imagined the ant-like people in front of the beach cottages stilling their busy movements, their splashes and dabbings in the shallows, their magazine-flipping under umbrellas. I saw their faces all turn up, listening. *Oh let us be lost in the mercy of God, till the depths of His fullness we know.* The boat's motor idled, like an accompaniment. My grandfather's singing made me giddy with laughter. He winked at me, and kissed my forehead. I smile and row now, remembering the press of his dry lips.

I have lost track of time. Surely, it should be daybreak. I row toward what I believe is the leeward side of the island, against the current. I do not know if I make any headway. My cigarettes and lighter are useless, bobbing now in the water inside the dinghy. It is still night, and I am sober and repentant. I see I am not in a good position. By the driftwood fire he had asked me if I needed any

money, he would give me some, and I shook my head and smiled at him, uncomprehending. But yes, now I think that I will take his money, and the thought mortifies me. I have not found any reason to live, yet I keep rowing. My blistered palms sting. I feel the muscles in my back tense and sharp, like want. I hear helicopters, and sense them stirring up the water, but their beacons are far off, searching elsewhere. The sea is vast, and I am very small on its face, nodding and disappearing under its waves.