

## The Prodigal

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I'm not sure when I decide to go overboard. It's been so long, with the master telling me what to do; doing something for myself is hard to imagine—a kind of miracle. The life-vest keeps me afloat; I took it after the last of them was asleep. I could hear snoring on the other side of the partition, below-decks. The helmsman wouldn't hear above the engine-noise.

I stole a litre-bottle of water, also. In this latitude, the water is like tepid soup; you can expect rain, sometimes daily. I'm used to the sea, after seven years on the boat. I haven't stood on land once, in that time.

The phosphorescence in the water brings something to me, from somewhere: the festival of lights I grew up with, at home. I wonder if I'm seeing things, alone with the knife-tips of light; they're dotted high above, the pulsing points below, glowing briefly in the rising and falling waves. The sharp man-light above, in the sky, the soft woman-light below, in the sea.

Except for the hunger, there are no spirits to deal with. I can see the boat ploughing further away; I don't bid it goodbye, or good-riddance. I watch it turn into a dim, grey patch against the grey of the sea. I don't think of all the time I've spent on its decks, working against my will.

Maybe another ship will appear. I could say it was a shipwreck, and only I'm left alive. That the others have sunk to the bottom. They would take me to shore, I'd return to the town, without even stopping at the inspectors. I'm sure they were looked after, before I was even on board. They'd only put me into custody, until I paid them with something as well. And what could I pay them with? More hard labour? After seven years I have nothing to show for it.

I have no family. My brother and sisters were also sent away, to other places. After I was twelve years old, I never saw them again. I went to school for five years, I think, but then I had to work. Maybe I'm twenty-five now, I'm not sure.

I hope they drank enough to sleep long into the morning, before they see I'm not there.

After some hours, I grow a little cold; then my teeth start chattering. I hang on the waves in the life-vest, like a bluebottle. There are jellyfish that I see in the morning light, floating also, with nowhere really to go. None of us sea-creatures has a destination. Sometimes one of them suddenly pushes off, with long vigorous tentacles, pretending it has somewhere more important to be, like some of the girls in the village.

It makes me laugh—the arrogance.

I don't know how long this jellyfish life will last. I grow very hungry, with the daytime sun belting down. But I'm used to the hunger. In seven years, it was always just the midday meal—soup, usually. Sometimes it was fish,

but only the gristly kind, even if they were going bad. So they saved on provisions and didn't waste the catch.

I caught it for them, with the other workers. They said they'd deduct it, the fish we ate, from our wages, but it made little difference. We were never sure how much we were owed; our wages were in safe-keeping. If pirates attacked us, they said, our money was protected. But if the fish-sales were poor, we were told to recoup the losses.

I don't think of these things during the first, jellyfish phase. The hunger becomes a dull, almost pleasant ache. I grow very relaxed and light-headed. If it goes on like this, it would be easy to die; I feel light-hearted about the prospect. Life seems like an easy thing to give away.

I worry that if I stop kicking, something will try to eat my toes, or feet, or my genitals, bunched like ripe grapes in the water. The soft flesh would please one of the deep-sea carnivores, visiting the surface for a change of routine. I have no change of routine, myself. I imagine music, in my head, sometimes I hear it, ringing inside my skull that has become a light-weight shell. When a coconut floats past, at least once, I can do nothing with it.

Then the second miracle occurs. Around dusk, I see remnants of a container on calm water not far away. Then right by me, I don't have to stretch out, a flat piece as big as a door, with nails sticking out at one end. I lurch onto it. Lying more or less flat I hold onto the nails. But my hand is numb, almost useless.

I perch there, each arm stretched to opposite sides of the board. If it were a little wider I couldn't hold on, as it lifts up and down. If narrower, I'd soon be attacked from below.

Who do I have to thank for it? I can't come up with a good answer. I'm not going to give up my piece of floating luck. The good fortune makes me smile. Before it gets dark, I tie a cord from the life-vest around the nails and bend them over, so I can sleep without fear of falling off and losing the board. Bending them is hard, as if both thumbs will break from the effort, like bird bones.

Once, I think I might die if I don't do something. There are sometimes birds around—tropicbirds, or petrels. One of them sits on the water, nearby, glancing with its shifting, nervous eye. It seems to grow calm, and looks my way. If it could speak, I'm sure it would say something. It has the look a woman might have, before she gives herself to you.

I reach out and the bird makes no effort to move. I pull it in to me and with my other hand twist its neck. A young, tender creature. I try to eat it, even the feathers of its little, warm belly.

It's disgusting. But I don't really notice it, I'm too hungry. Afterwards, I have diarrhoea. It hardly matters, in mid-sea. It's easier chewing the legs, the small bones, the ribs and tendons; I can chew and pretend that I'm sated.

I don't know how long this goes on. Maybe I eat two or more birds, over the following week. They're not too hard to kill, in my two hands, which are like sticks, clutching stiffly to the board so many hours a day.

My whole body is like a stick—a stick-man. I've lived so long on so little, there's nothing of me to eat, even if a shark or something else tried. Small ones sniff around the blood and insides of the birds, but pass me by. So many gifts have come since I jumped off the boat. I'm grateful, and strangely happy. But I have no-one to thank for it, not that I can see.

All these things seem to agree with me—the jellyfish, the board, the birds, the sharks that let me be. They give me confidence, that I'll look up and see a ship, not too far to the horizon. That doesn't happen, though. Then something maybe even better does. The board steers itself towards an island. As soon as I see it, I realise there's no reason to die.

Sooty terns wheel noisily against its low cliff-faces, giving onto the sea. The jungle inland is dense, crowded with vine-strewn trees. A hill, a little mountain. I think of all the things I could eat. My water-bottle is empty, but that doesn't matter now.

I'm not sure if I should drag my piece of board, with myself, across the rocks. They lie between me and the sand I can see in the distance. It's become like a friend to me, the board that has saved my life. Without that bit of cast-off refuse, sea-drift or garbage to others, I would have gone under the

waves. I crawl over the sharp-edged rocks, cutting my knees and shins, pulling it after me. It takes a long time to reach the foreshore; I'm bleeding long before I get there. Night is falling, I draw up the board, and sleep on it, gratefully.

I'm so under-nourished I might not be able to eat, even if I tried to. There are some old coconuts under sparse stands of trees; I scrape out some flesh with a shell but it tastes rancid. I find part of an old dried gourd and when it rains it fills with water. I feel nauseous, and fall in and out of a half-sleep.

Where am I? In my strange half-awake state, I dream of things I haven't thought of much before: the flowering flame trees, their red blossoms shouting under the wide, blue sky over the town. The ringing tinny bells of the temples come in and out of my mind, like thieves, or flocks of girls, flashing their vivid eyes. Where is my cousin now, the one I used to meet after morning prayers, and run down to the river with? I remember things we found down there, among the reeds. What would she think of me, to see me like this? I haven't been around other people, let alone girls, for so long.

I ask myself, barely conscious, what people mean to me. While working, on the boat, there was no reason to think of them. I was surrounded by people, but they didn't mean much to me. Or maybe I didn't see them as people.

I realise that in the time since jumping, I've grown more used to thinking. I'm only half-alive, but I think now more than I ever have before—

when I was younger and full of health, or a worker, with only my thoughts to keep me company during the endless time of toil.

No—I talked with some of the other workers, but we were limited in what we could say. If we spoke of the work conditions, if we complained, we were beaten. Sometimes we were laid up for a day or more, on thin, dirty mattresses below-decks. We learnt quickly to say only what was needed.

I could have fought back, if I chose to. We could have attacked the boss-men, in their sleep, with knives. But we were weak, and would have been overpowered. There are many more like me, in the cities, who need the work. I'm not worth too much in the scheme of things.

Now there's no-one—to talk to, or not-talk to. Perhaps my whole life has been like this, and I've never really known it. I don't miss anything, much, at first. I'm too light and remote, even from myself. My thoughts aren't mine; it's as if a breeze, or the waving of the palm-fronds, the sighing of air through the canopy, were moving through my egg-shell skull, and taking occupation there.

I watch a heron fly over me and it's flying through my head. At night I think I hear creatures close by, wondering if I'm ready to eat yet. But they're also just shadows in my head; nothing threatens me, really. Ghost prey feasting on a bare wafer; it would make poor sustenance.

I'm left alone, like a daydream.

I stay close to my board-companion, until one morning I crawl to the water and start prying mussels off wet rocks. With a piece of flat stone,

narrowed at one end, I wedge them open. The flesh inside is nauseating but I try hard not to bring it up. If not, I will die. I don't eat many, knowing they'd run out the other end of me in a rush. I eat these things, over some days, and break open some old coconuts, until I'm strong enough to gather sticks and leaves into a pile on the sand. There's a lot of loose dry wood and sticks on the upper foreshore, where the sand meets the scrub.

Everything that happens afterwards, happens in a blur; I'm not sure of how long it takes to coax smoke out of two pieces of driftwood. Perhaps hours, or days. I've been taught to rub a length of pointed wood back and forth against a groove worn into a larger piece, held flat between my feet. I rub the one against the other, at an angle, until the wood grows hot between my fingers. Tiny wisps of smoke rise, embers gather in the groove. I tip them into a handful of gauzy dry palm-leaves and blow, and blow.

There is a tedium of constant effort. Every move I make—even when some hard pebble finally comes out of my body, painful and stubborn—is for a purpose, nothing is unnecessary. Most of my body I've forgotten, as if it wasn't there—my desiccated genitals, my feet and ears and whatever else. I'm drift on the beach. I feel as the kelp, or dried branches, or scattered shells, do.

I have the idea of eating the kelp, and wonder how to make it more edible. I dry some of it by the fire, until it's almost crisp. I chew on it a bit, as I had with the bird-bones, as if it were really nourishing. And then I have the idea to find a bird, a good-sized one, to put on the fire. Once I have the



thought, I see at least one moorhen cross my line of sight, and stumble after it like a crazed ancient on his weak, stick legs.

It takes a few tries but eventually I dive on one of these birds. It looks at me with its uncanny eye, before I smother it in my arms. Who do I have to thank for this? For the way these stupid but friendly creatures give themselves to me, as if they don't really care, are running around for show, before submitting to my will because they know they must?

We seem, each of us, with the wooden board, the broken gourd, the piece of flat stone, to be serving the purposes that have been allotted to us, sometime long before, or maybe always. I don't know; but it seems easy. Even the hardship seems in some way a natural task.

Here I am, thinking again: something I've never really done. Suddenly I feel, sniffing the marvellous smell of the roasting bird, something exciting, completely new: I'll be able to spend as long as I want to do this, think, or ponder, or whatever it is, without interruption. Nothing could disturb this peace of thinking—unless there's an earthquake, or a tsunami. I'm excited about my life, on the island, without any obstacle, now. Even staying alive, the most basic task, gives me worlds of things to think about. From a fisherman under the whip of dead-eyed masters, to a philosopher, a king, on his island!

It makes me smile—the audacity.

I eat my bird-friend, and wash it down with water from my gourd-friend, and sit beside my board-companion. They're ever silent, tolerant,

patient with my busy thoughts, and for the first time in perhaps my whole life, I feel like a man—whole, happy in his mind and skin. I breathe deeply and know a strange, new contentment.

Then something comes upon me, and I have another daydream, different to all the others. Of being on the boat, taking the machete and working on the boss-men, each one, until they're fit only for feeding to all the creatures of the sea. The hateful eyes, and spiteful tongues, the arms and legs, that in attacking us showed us hell, and that it can come to anybody. I watch myself, in this daydream, severing the parts of the neck, the spinal cord and tendons, until the head is free. I watch the parts float on the surface of the waves until each last one slips down into oblivion, or is pulled there by the greedy mouths of fish, dragging them under.

Maybe I'm being ambitious in my ideas about a king. There's plenty I need to do; I have no servant, here. I keep recalling that I'm alone—because I don't feel alone. I feel happily surrounded by my companions—they all have a character, of some kind (especially my old board, growing rough but soft around its edges).

I'm familiar with the wild and what it takes to survive. But I don't think of it in that way—as survival. It's far too joyful, waking in the mornings to the sound of wavelets climbing up the sand, the breakers crashing out beyond. I barely think of the time on the water, now; it's almost as if it hadn't

happened. The master with his long-handled knife, the welts on the back of the man beside me. Looking to sea, the residue of years hover, a distant band of something stained, in my sight. Eventually it will grow thin, and fade.

But I'm woken sometimes at night. I find I'm sobbing, in my hands. I look around, perhaps to be consoled. But there's only the board, leaning against the tree where I've left it. I speak to it and admit I'm frightened; then feel foolish. No-one is anywhere nearby to see me, to make me feel embarrassed, to witness my weakness. It's all in my head—everything, the memories and fears, shaking me from my sleep. The world, for itself, just goes on as before. My fantasies mean nothing to it.

The board looks at me, mutely, as if one or the other of us were dim-witted—but it's smiling, as well.

The business of the days is taken up with making a small house of palm-thatch. Just two rooms—one for sleeping and resting in, the other for food preparation and the storage of goods. I have coconuts, and edible roots, kept in a leaf-basket. Day by day I add small parts to the house, woven sections of a wall, each one put in place as it's finished. My fire is protected from wind in its alcove, and I dry the wood-fuel inside, where it won't get wet. I don't know how long it is before I have my house in order, but it takes shape without great effort.

Outside, there's a large stone in a clearing where I prepare the birds. I've chipped some stone tools, of different sizes, to serve different purposes. The stone slab is far enough away not to attract flies to the house, and is

washed by the regular rain. Sometimes I find hermit crabs under the scrub by the shore. I catch squid in rock-pools, and lobsters crouching under rock-shelves. I haven't eaten so well since I was a boy.

In my retreat, burning aromatic bark after eating, I wonder how it would be to share the nights, and the days, with someone else. I picture a woman walking in, as if she's always been there. She seems to know where everything is, and looks at me, invitingly. What can I say to her? Anything seems like it would be too much. I don't want to tell her what to do, or how to do it, she could work it out herself. If she's ready, in her own time, she'll come to me, and put her hands on my neck, and my back, where the scars are. What need is there to speak?

But I want to hear her voice—more than anything. It comes to me like a rivulet from a larger stream, or like the giant green taro leaves brushing against each other. It pre-empts, like a warm breeze, the light rain of her fingertips. I remember, in the water, the lights of the phosphorescence, the woman-lights, coming and going in the waves, secrets in a silence. Perhaps she's only waiting for me to speak, to decide if she'll stay. She expects me to woo her, in all the old ways. But I've never learnt properly what they are, or tested how they work.

She slips outside again, as she's come, but it's only a first visit. In time she comes and goes, at her own will, always the same weightless feet, the pattering of her fingertips on my face, my chest, my forehead.

Later, I remember how the men, in the town, had carved out canoes—simple dug-outs made from the trunk of a raintree. They put it on the river to see if it would float, to balance a child in, for their amusement. Without thinking too much about it, I keep a look out, on my walks through the undergrowth and along the shore, for a log that I could use.

In this way a year, or maybe two, passes without my really noticing it.

I say a year or two, but it might as well just be a period of time called Time. There's no sense in dividing it up into parts. Even day and night are not so different, they seem to last for the same duration, each just Time. Only some things don't seem so clearly to inhabit this Time—strange, special events, like the visits of the woman to my room. At other times, while I'm thinking about how I can explain to myself the event of my life, it's as if no time, or even my life itself, has passed.

At other times I have waking daydreams that seem to stretch through the cycle of nights and days, a languorous succession of events. The stories they tell have no markers, do not seem to end, or begin, do not occupy a fixed point, are only another version of Time. It's as if the crustacean I pulled from a rockpool were still there, motionless and alive, after I've already roasted and eaten it. My hair is very long but has never started growing and will always keep growing at the same length. The stars that are now spinning across the sky will take the same flight, on any and every other night. I have

a notion that when the sun seems not to rise one day, it's only because it's already risen the following day instead.

I wonder if I'm losing my mind, but I feel as normal as at any other time. I smile—if there's no time, how could anything be any different than it has always been? In this frame of mind, I make it a habit to climb the highest rise of the island, every other day—all other days, any possible day—to watch the light, as it fades, the gentle wound of the horizon, as the sun obeys its own habit.

There seems to me something so inevitable, in this wounding of the earth and the sea and the sky, that it becomes the reason for everything that has come before. Time converges so surely on this point, in its repeated rhythm, that it gives a sense to the whole series of events I've known until now—all the things that came and went, like the waves on the shoreline. I look forward to this display, engulfed in its mute, dim beauty. Watching it, I want to cry, but still more to disturb it in no way, make it feel no intrusion, even if it's only coming from a single man, on a small mountain, of no importance to anything.

Then, I think: it's offering me this spectacle so I'll submit to it, and collapse as a tired child would. It seems clear that this burning light knows everything about me, and has always. What has kept me from seeing it was only waiting for me to fall into it? It takes my hand and whispers in my ear, as if it knows all about my board, the gourd, my bachelor house and the visits

of the wordless woman—has known these things because they all finally submit to its molten embrace, as well.

After then, from morning to night I remain inside the thing I've seen in the burning at the end of the day. The more I remain inside it, the clearer it becomes that it has always been like this. If I'm going mad, I have no objection to it—it feels liberating, and I'm happy for the madness to continue, if that is what it is.

Maybe it's three years, or five, after I've come ashore, that I begin to wonder why no visitors ever appear, emerging from the horizon. From my perch on the hilltop, I expect to see something arrive, but I never do. I've chipped away at a little boat—a canoe, really. I drag it onto the lagoon and find that it stays waterborne, but rolls around quite a bit. I secure long saplings on either side, tied by twine I've made from vines, through holes bored through the raised edges of the vessel.

A funny-looking craft, but it stays afloat. On land I cover it with large pandanus leaves and weight them with stones. The time might come to test it on the shallow waves, but I'm not sure when that will be. It will surely come along as everything else has—as it always has. It isn't really up to me.

I think of the men who've beaten me on the fishing-boat; who cut off the hands of my brothers in labour, and threw their useless limbs overboard,

‘to feed the sharks’, as they said. There seems no point in returning to the world in which those men exist.

But my curiosity has grown, above all to know if it’s the same, or has changed. As I’ve changed, after all. Does the world ever change? It looks like it does, from the outside; but on the inside it seems to be another story. This is a question I ask myself, through the days and nights. If it does, I ask, why does it? And if it doesn’t, why doesn’t it?

There are no clear answers to these questions. But I know they’re all-important, and for a long time I can think of nothing else. The idea comes to me that I must leave the island. What has happened to everything I’ve left behind?

From the hilltop perch, I discover an affection, almost too great, for what I see. And what I see is just the world. The island has seemed like a place set apart, on which I can leave the world behind. But something has, invisibly, joined them together again. The island is separate, as I am, but also a part of the world, not apart from it. I even feel the island-world needs me in some way. I’ve come to the end of one thing, and reached the beginning of another.

I take the dug-out from under its leaf-covering, and in the following days test it on the water—not of the lagoon but the sea-shallows. The barefoot woman does not visit, during this time, as if she might have left the environs of the island. Perhaps she has a dug-out of her own. I clean my camp-area,



especially the flat stone and the hearth of my fire. I clear the refuse and debris, but I leave the house standing.

Looking towards me, almost forlorn in its gaze, I see my board-companion. I can't take it with me, or the broken gourd. I still have the plastic water-bottle, which I fill with water from my stores. I can't believe it's time to go, but the moment has seemed to come. All my friends of the island stand, or rest mutely, as if they know, and have been expecting my departure.

I can't bid them goodbye, or I'd never leave. I just turn my back on my thatch house, the coconut pile, the bone midden of all my moorhen consumption. And standing guardian over them, rising modestly over the scene, the piece of wooden refuse that safely brought me here. I know I've never had such a straight, true companion, and might never again. I can't say if I shed a tear, but perhaps I do.

I put some coconuts, and a few of the best tools, not too large or heavy, with a woven net-bag to keep them in, in the middle of the boat. I wear a finely-woven but sturdy hat to keep the sun off my face. I'm healthy and my body is firm and strong, more than it has ever been. I sit in the mid-section of the canoe and test its balance. I've lined its inside with some lengths of wooden poles, to replace the others if needed.

There's nothing else to do. I push away from the shore and start off slowly paddling. I'm not expecting, at that moment, to think of the men who've once been my masters. I think I'll meet the barefoot woman, or

someone like her, perhaps on an island unseen from this one, or maybe even on a boat, a larger one, from cooler places.

Out on the sea again, in the midst of unfolding waves, their rise and fall a lilting echo of the frigate bird in its flight high above me, I don't know what might happen. Perhaps I've made a mistake, in wanting to meet the world—to put my foot in step with all the others. No-one would have remembered me, after so much time, or care too much even if they had. Perhaps I should have stayed on the island. It's possible, out on the open sea, that I'll meet with no-one at all.

After some time, I'm surprised to realise, though knowing I want to see another human face, that it's the faces of my former enemies, the men I've hated the most, that I most wish to see again.

(2019)