

Jonah and the Whale

Andre's eyelids blink at the darkness, unsure if he is awakening from sleep or death. He struggles out of the chaise lounge and holds to the balcony rail for equilibrium as he floats amid the Milky Way. Between Ursula Major and its quivering reflection on the placid bay, the lights on the shoreline of Anguilla twenty miles away twinkle like a strand of Christmas lights. The beacon at the airport swishes bright and then fades as it rotates.

The shape of Anguilla materializes as the gray twilight separates from the blacker ocean. When the lip of the sun emerges, fringes of the purple clouds floating above catch fire and Anguilla turns the green of its namesake lizard. Andre's world is created this way each sunrise and then dissolves in reverse order at sunset. Always the same, yet always different.

Below, in Grand Case Harbor, something seems out of place. Their red jon boat, usually tied to a mooring directly in front of their cottage, is missing. He spots it further out in the harbor twisting and bucking as the ebb tide pulls it further from shore. Ropes must have worked free during the night. If it reaches the reef a hundred meters further out while the tide is still low, it will be splintered and sink.

Underneath the balcony, his uncle is loading fishing gear into his wheelbarrow. If he were to yell down about the boat, Jonah would immediately dive in and swim after it. He wouldn't think that the boat is moving away faster than he can swim. Even if he were able to catch up to the boat, he wouldn't know what to do next. He could put the bowline in his mouth and swim it back to shore, but he wouldn't think of that. He would heave himself over the stern and without paddles just sit there in confusion until the boat crashed onto the reef. The boat isn't worth that risk.

His uncle uses the tethered boat as a weather vane so he will see it is missing in a few minutes anyway. By then the boat will be too far out to reach by swimming. Andre sinks back onto the chaise lounge to wait.

“Whoop!” his uncle yells up to him.

Andre struggles back to the handrail looking in the direction his uncle is pointing. He covers his face with his hands appearing to cry. When Jonah moves his arms as if swimming, Andre hold up crossed pointer fingers and shakes his head. They both quietly watch the boat until Jonah becomes resigned to it being lost and begins to fish from shore.

Jonah sails a slice of stale loaf bread just beyond where the surf begins to curl. He collapses into a squat with his buttock resting against his heels, his lower arms propped between his knees and jaw. This transition into a crouch is as natural for him as a gull folding its wings after landing. His canvas trousers are a lighter shade of the same color as his sunbaked chest. Except for the gentle lap of the waves, the beach is quiet and deserted. Jonah waits as patiently as the blue boulders protruding from the sand beside him. His tongue darts in and out of his toothless mouth, tasting the air like an iguana.

The bread begins to twitch as if coming alive. Little by little, the slice dwindles to crumbs as the water swirls. He breaks apart another slice into stamp-size pieces and throws these to the same spot. Immediately the water churns. The water is as clear as tap water, but because of the glare, Andre cannot see anything except the bread.

His uncle stands and gathers his nylon cast net onto his arm, carefully adjusting the tiny edge weights to dangle uniformly. With arms and legs perfectly coordinated, he pirouettes like a ballet dancer ending in an arabesque. The net spirals into a perfect circle as it hits the water. With short jerks, he cinches the net before pulling it onto the beach. Dozens of finger-size fish flash

silver as they flop in the mesh.

The fish of the right species and size are sorted into a gallon pickle jar of water. The rest are flicked to the waiting gulls swarming overhead. He wades in knee deep and rinses the net clean of shells and sea grass before returning it to his wheelbarrow and exchanging it for a liter plastic bottle with thin wire wrapped around it. The sharpness of the hook is tested against his thumb as he walks back to the shore. The wire is carefully uncoiled to full-length at the water's edge and then he walks back with the hook end so that wire lies doubled and untwisted. A baitfish is impaled just below a lead weight. The wire whines as it is twirled like a shepherd's sling. When released, the line arcs out beyond the breakers. Jonah tightens the line so he can feel a bite and again slumps into his crouch.

The first morning breeze cools Andre's sweaty forehead as he watches. The sand bottom seems to undulate as the swell of waves pass over. Tentacles of sea grass stretch first toward shore and then, as a wave ebbs, out to the ocean, as if unsure to which world they belong. One of these patches of sea grass keeps Andre's attention and he doesn't immediately know why. But then it definitely moves, slowly like the shadow of a cloud passing over. With it lying still again, the shark cannot be distinguished from the dark splotches of rocks and seaweed.

Andre's legs feel rubbery and he lies back on the daybed and pulls a patchwork quilt up to his neck. The front door slams. The floorboards creak and a shiver stiffens his body as Brad approaches from behind.

“Are you having a chill?”

Andre doesn't look at him or answer. Brad reaches to Andre's forehead to feel for a fever but Andre shrinks away from his hand.

“Stop that. I can't catch anything from just touching you.” Brad goes to the rail and

watches Jonah below folded into his squat with the wire taut between his fingers.

“Tell me,” Andre says.

“No. The fever will pass in a moment and it will be too late. I’ll fix coffee.”

“Tell me.” Andre insists. He remains quiet while Brad decides.

“Snow is like—”

“No. Start with the river. Start with the fishing.”

“I’ll make coffee first. I could use a cup myself. Give me a minute.”

The coffee pot and cups clink from behind. The breeze is pushing the boat faster now toward the white froth of the reef.

Brad returns with two pottery cups. Andre uncovers his arms and cradles his cup in shaky hands. Brad goes back for another blanket to cover Andre and a kitchen chair to sit beside him.

Waves thrash below as Brad reorients in time and place. “The Hiawassee River is like liquid ice in the winter. It runs too fast to freeze, but the rocks along the shoreline shimmer with glaze. Behind the rocks are the steep cliffs of the gorge with tall white pines and cedars on top. Against an overcast sky, the cedars are like black dinghies with their bows pointed into the sky.”

“Tell about the other trees—the ones with no leaves.”

“And there are oaks and maples that lose all their leaves in the winter and look like skeletons. But they are still alive, down below ground in their roots, and in the spring, they put on leaves and become beautiful again.”

“Deciduous. They’re called deciduous.”

“That’s right. And I thought you didn’t really listen.”

“It’s a miracle, don’t you think? We don’t have that kind of trees here.”

Brad looks out to Anguilla again. “Yes, I guess it is. I’ve never thought about it, but if I’d

never seen it before, it would be a miracle.”

“Tell about the water—how the water feels.”

“The only reason to get in the water is to fish for trout. My dad took me once when it was still snowing and made me wade out so he could teach me to cast. Even in the insulated waders, my feet began to throb and then went numb. It’s stupid to go through all that for tiny fish.”

“I wish I could do it. I’ve never been cold before. When I get the chills, I think I know what it would feel like. Is it like that, do you think?”

“Yes, it makes you shake and your teeth chatter. It feels just the same.”

“Tell about the snow now.”

“You’ve already heard everything about snow. Don’t make me tell it again.”

They are quiet watching the old man below crouching like a bird.

“Did you see that!?” Brad jumps to the rail and points down at the water.

“Yes, I saw it earlier. It’s a whale shark. Keep your voice down and stop pointing or you’ll kill it.”

Brad turns with a puzzled face.

“If Uncle Jonah sees you pointing, he’ll stand up and see it too. He’ll wade out, sit on its back, and stab it to death with his knife. It will just lie there and let him do it. Whale sharks are too big and dumb to be afraid of anything.”

“He wouldn’t do that.”

“Call to him then. It will be quite a show. But in the end the fish will die.”

“Would he eat it?”

“That’s not why he would kill it. I don’t think he would know why either, but he would have to do it.”

They watch waiting for the shape to move again. When Jonah looks up at them, Brad turns his head away and sits back down.

“Whoop!” Jonah yells.

Brad jumps back to the rail in panic.

Jonah is pulling the wire hand over hand as it jerks. “Whoop,” he yells again as he glances at the balcony to see if they are watching. A glistening tube the size of Jonah’s arm is pulled onto the sand. Its body doubles back on itself as it flops. Jonah kicks sand on it to make it easier to grip before picking it up and breaking its spine across his knee. The limp fish is held above his head for them to see before being washed in the surf.

“*Beau poisson*,” Andre yells down to him through the balusters of the handrail.

Jonah’s toothless mouth gapes wide with his silent laugh. His arms wave about and his hands bounce off each other.

“It’s a needlefish and he wants to cook it right now for breakfast.”

“He said all that?”

Andre smiles for the first time. “Yes, and more. The fish fought bravely and the wire cut his hands.” Andre chuckles. “You’ve never seen him talk before, have you? Only my grandmother and I can understand him. *Grand-mère* is a deaf-mute and Uncle Jonah is simple minded so I guess they kept to themselves when he was growing up. Uncle Jonah never learned to talk like other kids. Those two worked out their own sign language. When I was twelve, when mother found out I was different, she brought me here for *Grand-mère* to raise. I learned how to read their signs.”

Jonah dumps the rest of the baitfish on the sand. They sparkle as they flip around. Gulls circle above waiting for him to leave before swarming in. Jonah disappears under the deck and

they listen to him clean the fish.

“Does he know how to cook?”

“Of course. He will cut it into steaks, rub on his special seasoning and pan-fry it. You’re in for a treat.”

“Is your chill over? Can I get you anything?”

Andre turns his head on the pillow and frowns up at Brad. “You shouldn’t stay. I’m not so helpless that Jonah and *Grand-mère* can’t care for me. I don’t want you here at the end.”

“You’re getting better, don’t you think? We’ll go to the States together—to the mountains. We’ll go this winter when the snow—”

“*Merde!* Stop it!” Andre throws back the covers and reaches for the balcony rail to pull himself to his feet. The sudden exertion makes him swimmy-headed so he holds tight to the rail to keep from swaying. “I’m not a child. You should leave.”

Brad stands at the rail beside him, his face toward Anguilla. “I won’t go.”

“There is nothing you can do here. Your visa is expired. The gendarmes will come looking for you. You have to go. What we had together is over.”

“Is that what you expect from me—just catch a plane and bail out? Well, it’s not over for me, Andre.”

“Why do you have to be such an...,” Andre tries to recall the English word, “...*imbécile*? Don’t you understand I don’t want you here? When I see pity in your eyes, it hurts double. If this were turned around, would you want me to watch? I wouldn’t do it, you know. If I had any place to go, I’d leave you and never look back.”

Andre follows Brad’s gaze into the turquoise water below. If the shark is still there, it is resting on the bottom. “It’s safe now,” Andre says. “I saw it swimming out.”

“You’re lying.” Brad turns a scowl to Andre. “You’d stay.”

“No, I wouldn’t. How do you know what I would do?”

“You’re right, I don’t know—and you don’t know either, so stop all this bluster.”

They stand together at the rail watching the gulls dive at the entrails Jonah throws into the water, neither wanting to talk more. Andre searches out the red dot bobbing at the horizon.

“Whoop!” he yells. When Jonah walks out from under the deck, Andre points. Jonah shields his eyes with a hand as he looks out to sea.

When Jonah turns, his arms wave above his head and his legs dance wildly. “Whoop,” he yells back jubilantly. His tongue darts around in his laughing mouth. Somehow their boat had made it through the reef. Soon it would be out of sight and gone forever. The boat might drift into the open ocean or wind up against Anguilla’s rocky shore, but for now it is safe.