

## Polaris

I rise at four a.m. and pull on fishing trousers. So does Pai. I tell him to return to bed, I'll be home in the afternoon, soon enough. He still messes with his trousers, muck boots, Sou'wester hat—everything he needs at sea. I fix him a bowl of cereal with a Seroquel tablet. By the time I'm ready to leave, he's sleepy again, crawling into bed, listening to the marine weather on a portable radio that calls out swells and gusts in a computerized, monotone voice. I imagine when he finally sleeps, he'll dream about the *MarElie*. He'll be in the wheelhouse, Donny and I in the pit, reeling in, laughing our heads off. Truth is, I have no idea if he dreams or even remembers that Donny's dead.

I kiss him goodbye. We'll eat a nice dinner. He grabs my hand and starts a prayer, the one his own father used to say in Portuguese: *The sea is our mother—*

—No, Pai. We wait for dinner.

July is hard. Your body doesn't expect chill, but fog gusts are whipping the trees, stinging my face like ocean spray. I wish the sea was someone else's problem.

I drive to the marina.

Elie, my sister, says we should scrap the boat. Junkyards by the bay are full of trollers, all on their sides. No one's making money. Wild king once swam in schools a million strong, but now they've been fished off, poisoned, breeding grounds destroyed. Everyone's eating musty fish farmed in Chile or Nevada—franken-salmon. She says to put Pai in a nursing home. I should head back to school, learn something new. She'll cover the tuition. But you don't just wake up and be someone else. I fish salmon. She thinks I'm a nuclear physicist.

Jonathan, her fiancée, will be coming on board today. He offered to help after they heard I let my deckie go. It's probably a one off. Jonathan manages high-tech websites, earns major money. He'll be more trouble than he's worth, but my sister says he used to line fish with his dad, whatever that means. I'll take him out for a day. We usually laugh. Besides, even with a seasoned deckie you can't break even when they're no fish to be had.

The marina parking lot is nearly empty. There are a few rusty trucks, and then there's Jonathan's Mini Cooper, shiny red and white, British flag on top. I hear the pounding bass of his stereo as I drive up. He sends me songs from time to time, bands I've never heard of. Electronic dance music. He rolls down the window as I come over, hands me a doobie.

I take a drag. You up for this? I ask, sucking in, sounding a bit like Mickey Mouse.

He tells me to hop in. There's a basket of muffins on the front seat, Elie's gift. He pours coffee from a thermos—stainless-steel, top of the line. No need to suffer, he says, right?

I scarf three muffins. The coffee burns my throat. Through the windshield, I see boats bucking in the sheltered cove of the marina. I heard the report on Pai's radio. Fourteen-foot swells, plus wind waves nine to ten feet. We shouldn't put out. I pour myself another cup.

Jonathan's in a pink shirt, black jeans, brown shoes with pointed tips—disco wear, not fishing gear.

Leave the threads behind, I say. There's gear on board.

Seriously?

I give him a look. It's going to be stink out there.

Yes captain, he salutes, stripping down to long johns.

We run to the slip.

Usually, there are crews everywhere, loading ice, fueling, setting hooks and lures, but the only boat shoving out—besides us—is an eighty-foot, steel-hulled giant. Smaller boats are staying in on account of the sea. I turn to Jonathan before we hop on the *MarElie*, which is forty feet, solid wood. I tell him this day's going to be rough.

It's nothing, he says. I make bigger waves with a kickboard.

The weed's still strong: I can't stop laughing. From a hamper in the wheelhouse, I draw out a wool sweater, work pants, yellow fishing bib, boots, gloves. No one's worn this stuff in years. I think it all belonged to Donny.

Jonathan suits up.

I show him the pit. Nothing's complicated. The gurdy winches have three gears—back, forward, pause. I show how to hook leaders to the main, how to hand-line the leader, how to spike or gaff the fish above the gill. Then I bring out the steel bat. Swatting the air, I say, You strike between the eyes. If the eyes cloud, the fish is dead. End of story.

Jonathan doesn't flinch.

I start to describe gut and gill, but that's when he turns gray. I'll hold the lesson until we're out at sea with a real fish. I think he's going to puke. I've seen the look.

I'm not a pussy, you know. He jabs me in the ribs.

Hell you're not.

For a moment, we play punch, duck and dodge. I think, no more weed. It's hard enough rolling on the sea, sober. We fuel up, load ice, head into the channel.

It's mostly smooth motoring to the breakwater. Jonathan sits on a hatch, playing with chipped ice. I stand in the wheelhouse. How 'bout the Beastie Boys, he asks. Cool, eh?

Pretty cool. I can only name one song, though. *Brass Monkey*. I put on the weather channel, wondering if Pai's listening too. The robot voice issues a small-craft warning.

Jonathan says, Your sister and I have been thinking—

I knew there was a catch. He wasn't here to just fish. Elie must have coached him, word for word. The life speech. But they care. That's the point. I'm not resentful.

—that we want to make a sizable investment in your future.

I'm only half listening now. My eye's drawn to froth spouting beyond the breakwater. It's been years since water scared me.

Seriously, he says. Elie says you were accepted at Berkeley. We'll help you pay for it.

Sure, I think, two years ago I was accepted. Now I'm here, rolling.

She says you were planning to study nuclear physics.

I correct him: astrophysics. I'm not interested in blowing things up. I used to stargaze. I read about celestial navigation, named my dog Sagan, bought my first telescope with my confirmation money. It seems pointless now. I tell him to work the starboard gurdy. That was Donny's station. I was port. Pai had the wheelhouse—all of us buzzed on coffee and whiskey with molasses thrown in.

We churn through the harbor.

Know how I got my start? Jonathan asks. Porn. Lesbian, shemale, straight, fetish. I wrote for dozens of magazines. It paid my way through college. Why was I so good? Guess. C'mon.

I won't.

He enters the wheelhouse. Research, he says, mussing my hair, like in *The Three Stooges*.

I hand him the wheel. See those two buoys? I point to the opening through the breakwater. Steer right between them.

I head aft to check the lines, remembering days when we scored three thousand pounds. Now we're lucky to hook a hundred. We pass the buoys. The bay is agitated. I take the wheel and navigate out to sea. The closer we get, the more the water heaves.

Elie's kinda concerned, Jonathan says. She's talking about how you're in that old house with your pop. We can help. Move to the city. Live nearby.

Elie was seventeen when she ran off, two years after Donny's death. The more Pai refused to talk about what happened, the more she blamed him. I didn't hear from her for nearly four years. She called me the night of my high-school graduation but wouldn't talk to Pai, and as far as I know they haven't talked since she left—though she stays in touch with me now. Pai says she'll return home any moment. He said the same about Donny. After the funeral, the flowers, the inquest, it was always *Let's see what Donny thinks*, like my brother was about to come through the door, suspender straps down, ready to rip the cereal box from my hands.

I light a cigarette and offer the pack to Jonathan.

Unfiltered Camels, he says. Going to an early grave, Gale? I've got one word: vape.

The radio's still turned to the NOAA weather station, the flat voice saying what we already know: the sea's angry. I switch to a music station. It's Tom Jones, then the Bee Gees.

Jonathan leans over the gunwale, olive green.

You okay? I ask, handing him a bottle of Dramamine. Music that bad?

We pass Bodega Head, with the lighthouse and foghorn. Jonathan's words rattle in my head: *early grave*.

He looks up, puke dripping down his shirt. Don't laugh, he says. Don't fucking laugh.

I laugh anyway.

The swells are deep as we reach the ocean. I tack as best I can, but the *MarElie's* struggling. I lock the wheel and rush aft to lower the outriggers, unspool main lines, drop cannonball weights. We lay in six lines and a hundred and twenty hooks. I return to the wheelhouse and slow the boat to a trolling speed.

Jonathan's looking better. Dramamine works fast. He takes pictures on his iPhone. Elie's not going to believe this shit, he says.

Oh, she will.

The sun's rising higher, the air warming. Maybe we'll hit a school. Six to seven dollars a pound, ten pounds per fish, say two hundred fish, that's fourteen thousand bucks. I've always been good with numbers: algebra, calculus—you name it.

I tell Jonathan to head to the pit. We're about to reel in.

He's blowing perfect smoke rings from a cigarette, seasickness practically gone. He says that Elie contacted a realtor. From the sale of the old house, we could afford to send Pai to a nursing home. I'd have enough left for a down payment on a condo. He and Elie will help with the mortgage. He tells me about vacant units in their building.

I visited their place once—downtown San Francisco, thirty-third floor, fifth tallest building in the city. Views of the bay, Oakland, Mount Diablo. There was an oriental carpet and a lap dog that nibbled my socks. Bose stereo system. Leather furniture. I didn't want to guess what it all cost, but Elie caught my look. Anything's possible, she said, wide eyed: You're twenty-one. There was a photo of Donny and me on the wall, when I was six.

Gulls now hover above the boat. I'm not superstitious, but they're a sign we're about to strike a school. I tell Jonathan to watch. I start reeling in.

Sure enough, there's a thirty-inch salmon on the first hook. With one arm, I gaff and swing it onto the cutting table, and with the other I unlatch the leader and pause the gurdy. I strike with a single blow, slice off the head while the heart still pumps, cut lengthwise and scrape out the guts, then lay the pink flesh on ice. We handle one fish at a time, I say. The flesh doesn't have blood vessels because the blood drains, and they're no bruises because the fish dies before flapping. It's what you'd call restaurant grade.

Jonathan's taking pictures the whole time, saying, You fucking rock, man. He starts his own gurdy, unlatching empty leaders, hanging lures and spinners on the stern bar. Oh daddy, he yells, we got one.

I see his first fish spiraling to the hull. Before he can gaff it, a wave hits broadside and the *MarElie* pitches hard. Jonathan's legs sweep out. He manages to hold onto the cutting bench, shrugging off the near fall with a laugh.

I rush to his side and pause the gurdy before it grinds up the leader and the fish. Never lose sight of your line, bro, I snap, a bit too sharp.

Jonathan spikes the fish in the belly, then strikes it five times, no aim at all. The fish is a bloody mess and we have to waste it.

Don't worry, I say. It took me years to get things right. I notice swells peak and fold, crosschecked by steep wind waves.

Jonathan's hanging over the side, enjoying the ride like a roller coaster.

My chest is tight as it all flashes back—nine years ago. I shake my head, but the movie won't stop. I was twelve at the time.

I'd just left the pit to grab my lunchbox. The boat heaved on a rogue wave, the starboard rail dipping water. I looked back and Donny was gone. I kept screaming, *Donny's gone*, like a siren. Pai rushed back. He shot side to side, looking for any sign in the water. He cut the engine and ran aft, our lines still out and running. There was no body, no yellow bib, nothing—just boiling surf. He radioed the Coast Guard and soon helicopters flew above. My brother was never found. They suspended our fishing license during the investigation, but we were cleared. No citation. The authorities wanted to know if I was a deckie—I should have been in school—but I said no: we were fishing recreationally, on the family boat. After that, Pai hired two deckies and kept me in school till I was old enough to work legally.

I never asked why we didn't swing around. I knew what Pai would have said: *Donny's boots filled up and he sank like lead*. No reason to turn hard, which would have meant wasting the lines. We reeled in, went home.

No doctor ever said Pai's dementia happened because of Donny, but I knew his death ate at his brain, like a seaworm. Maybe if we'd just circled back, even if the odds were against Donny making it, Pai could have saved himself, cleared his mind of commotion, guilt, whatever you want to call it. You never know what's possible unless you try. But Pai lived by the odds. He knew the rules of the sea better than anyone, the sharpest captain in the fleet. Everyone turned to him for help. If there was a school to be found, he found it, just like his father who used to pole-fish albacore in the Azores, and like his father's father who netted sardines in Portugal. What they all knew was a blessing and a curse. The sea gives and takes. You carry on.

After Donny died, it all went to hell. The doctors called it vascular dementia, early onset. By the time I graduated high school, Pai was climbing onto other boats, thinking the crews were all his sons.

From the wheelhouse, I now see the bow plunging beneath swells. We're taking on water, more than we should. The bilge will fail. I switch the radio back to NOAA. There's an order for small craft to head home. No exceptions. Jonathan, I yell, throwing him a life jacket and safety rope: button up, strap in. We're headed back.

He doesn't know what to do with the rope and his life jacket's unbuttoned. I'm an idiot for not training him, a captain's responsibility, but with Pai we never wore life vests either.

Jonathan continues to reel in.

Seriously man, I yell, strap yourself down.

He shouts, We got another, oh baby. He leans over to gaff the fish, and that's when it hits.

A monster swell slams portside. The boat nearly keels. Jonathan goes over without a sound. I see everything, each detail, as if in slow motion.

Ten feet out, Jonathan bobbles in the foam, life jacket floating beyond reach. Can you swim? I shout. The wind blows my words back.

The water's cold. Muscles freeze. Hypothermia sets in.

I fling out a life saver, but it falls short.

Jonathan looks at me, shame on his face, as if he should have known better.

I run to the wheelhouse and find wire cutters. Back in the pit, I cut all six gurdy lines. Lures, spinners, weights, main lines—everything sinks. I throttle open, turning the boat as sharp as she'll go. The *MarElie* lunges, punished by waves. I swing away from Jonathan, because if I swing in, the waves could fling the boat over him. I navigate as close as I can, lock the wheel, then perch on the bow. I see a flash of yellow fishing bib. The current's drawing him away. I think about his boots filling up, then I tell myself to shut up. There are no odds—just what I need to do.

I loop rope around my waist, tie it to the deck, shed shoes and sweater, and dive. The cold shocks my chest. I don't panic. I swim.

Jonathan's slapping water with both arms.

Grab me, I yell.

He reaches out and clutches my shirt, then clings to my back.

I pull on the rope, drawing us back to the *MarElie*. Somehow, we make it to the hull. Hang on, I say.

With the deck five feet above and no ladders or handles, climbing onboard seems impossible. We're battered against the boat. With each swell, the *MarElie* rolls, the deck dipping down, a bit closer to reach. With one extra-low dip, I loop my arms over the gunwale. As the boat rights, then shifts opposite, we're hoisted up. My arms feel like they're about to be pulled from their sockets, but I don't let go.

We land in the pit, Jonathan still clinging to my back. I turn to him. I ask if he's okay.

He fumbles with his sweater, babbling.

I drag him to the wheelhouse, strip off wet clothes, pull out a thermal blanket, and plug in an electric heater. He's too cold to shiver.

Sailing with the wind, we make record time back to port. The movie's playing again. There's Pai navigating, looking straight ahead, his face chiseled granite—mine, a wet sponge. It's just the two of us—Pai and me. *Donny's gone*.

No, this is different.

I look down at Jonathan, bundled up. We lost the ringing, and we have one fish to show for our day, but no one died. The odds don't matter. All I know is that it had to be. I feel high and it's not the weed. I'm soaked and freezing, but I savor the salt on my lips. My hands embrace the wheel.

At the wharf, Jonathan leans on me. We disembark. He crawls into my truck. I run the heater full blast. He's in no condition to drive back to the city. At least he's shivering, his body fighting hypothermia. I retrieve the salmon from the hold, and we drive home.

Jonathan mumbles, Sorry man, sorry.

Shush, I say, don't talk. Want me to sing *Brass Monkey*?

His smile is shaky, a little crooked, but it's a smile.

We arrive. Pai's out front, smoking, watering a dead bush in a bathrobe, bare feet. All I can think about is getting Jonathan inside, into a warm bath. I help him from the truck, still wrapped in the blanket.

Pai calls out, Donny!

Jonathan turns around. Yes, sir.

Did you boys get milk?

Inside, I draw the bath. Jonathan sits on the toilet, hunched over, still shivering. Warm mist fills the bathroom. I ask him why he said yes to Pai just now.

I thought he called Jonny. That's what my dad used to call me. Jonny.

Clean the wax out, I say, gently boxing his ear. He sinks into the bath. I change into fresh clothes and head to the kitchen. Pai's there, picking lint off his robe. I offer him tea and crackers.

He says, Donny's teacher called: he flunked everything. *Everything*. Unless he gets his grades up, he's grounded.

Sure, Pai.

It's pointless to correct him. I leave to bring tea to Jonathan. He's still in the bath, leaning back against the tiles, eyes closed.

You okay? I ask, helping him from the water. Wrapped in towels, I show him Donny's room. On the nightstand, there's an old Sports Illustrated, bathing-suit edition, circa 2005. On the wall, a team photo of the SF Giants, circa 2003, the year they won the West.

Can you call Elie? Jonathan asks. I lost my phone. Tell her everything's okay. He paws into bed and drinks tea with little sips. I think he's still in shock.

I return to the kitchen. Pai asks about dinner. I offer him more crackers, then cut fat filets from the salmon, preparing them for the oven with potatoes. Once everything's in, I walk outside and phone my sister.

Elie answers immediately, worried she hadn't heard from us.

I explain that Jonathan lost his phone and that he became Donny, sort of.

Come again?

Jonny-Donny. Pai thinks Jonathan's Donny. And now he's in Donny's bed, sleeping like a baby. They don't look alike, but—

—Cut the crap.

I tell Elie what happened at sea. She's silent. Everything's fine, I say. Nothing bad happened.

No, she says. It's not fine. The line clicks dead.

I return inside to the aroma of baking food. I fetch Pai's portable radio and plug it into a kitchen socket. We listen to classical music while the food cooks. I make Pai more tea and slip in a Seroquel in case he agitates. I want to tell him about the day. I could lie or say nothing, but I've told Elie. He needs to hear too. Maybe they'll have something to talk about.

Pai looks up. How many? he asks. No matter how confused, he always remembers to ask the question.

One.

You can't catch *one*, boy.

We caught one, Pai.

I explain the incident about cutting the lines to avoid tangling up the screw when we swung around. We lost the rigging, but better that than the entire boat. Better that than losing Donny. The name rolls off my lips without me realizing it.

Pai grabs my arm. I want to see Donny, now.

No, it's not Donny. I meant Jonathan.

I should never have sent you boys out. You're too young.

We're fine, Pai. I meant Jonathan, that's all.

He starts to cry. Maybe it's best for him to stay confused.

Jonathan enters the kitchen in Donny's 49er sweatshirt and baggy muscle pants. He sees Pai in tears. What's going on? he asks.

Donny, come, sit, Pai says. He pats the chair to his right. And you, Gale, sit, he pats to the left.

Jonathan holds up his hands and I shrug my shoulders.

We take our seats, starboard and port.

Pai puts his arms around both of us. Where's Elie? he asks. We need her too.

My heart's beating fast. I want to whisper to Jonathan, *Go with the flow—be Donny a bit longer.*

We all sit, listening to music.

I hear a car pull up, then footsteps outside. There's a knock. I go to the door. Elie glares at me. Where the hell's Jonathan? She asks.

In the kitchen. It's helping.

What's helping?

I look her in the eyes. Pai believing that Donny's here, I say. You know how Pai gets. I think to myself, maybe she doesn't. The pacing and raging when the sun sets, the sleeplessness at night, mumbling in Portuguese, mixing nightcaps with milk and ketchup. She hasn't seen him for seven years.

Donny's dead, Elie says, or maybe you can't talk. No one talks, right? She pushes past me and goes to the kitchen. I follow.

Pai's eyes light up.

Hello, she says to Pai, casually, as though they just talked yesterday. And then to Jonathan, We're leaving, unless you want to die a real death.

Pai waves to a vacant spot at the table.

Elie shakes her head. No way. We're not staying.

I pull out the fish and potatoes.

Pai orders us to all hold hands.

Elie turns to Jonathan and says, You almost drowned. Her voice quivers. She's also looking at the food.

Jonathan winks at me. I didn't come close. Just a dip. Ask Gale. He had things under control.

Your sister's got boy problems, Pai chuckles, glancing at Jonathan, then at me.

Elie throws up her hands. Am I going crazy? Is this the *Twilight Zone*?

Jonathan says, I'm not leaving till I taste today's catch. Salmon, sushi grade. He rubs his hands. Besides, he side-eyes me, Gale's got a big announcement.

What? I ask.

Pai starts the blessing before the meal: *The sea is our mother*—. He looks around the table, finger raised like a baton.

I quickly say, *Her depths guard the souls of those who shan't return. Amen.* We start eating. What announcement? I repeat, mouth full.

That you're headed to college, Jonathan smiles. He turns to Elie. Did you know Gale's studying astrophysics, not nuclear physics? We got it wrong.

Pai raises his eyebrows. Gale, where's that thing you used to look at the stars?

I'm surprised Pai remembers my little telescope. I haven't used it since before Donny died. Sometimes the dementia parts, like a fading storm, and there's clear blue sky—what the doctors call a lucid interval.

Telescope's in the closet, Pai, I say.

Get it the hell out. Why the closet?

Elie nibbles the salmon. Not bad, she murmurs, carving off a bigger bite. Glancing at Pai, she says, Gale will need to live closer to Berkeley. We thought, near us, in the city.

Pai nods, chewing.

I look down at my plate and say, I don't know if I can still get in. They accepted me a couple years ago. I'll have to reapply.

You'll get in, Elie wipes her mouth. Lord knows where you got your brain. And don't worry about tuition. We have that covered.

I have it covered, Pai interjects.

We all stop eating. The room's quiet, except for the radio.

Pai points at Jonathan, then at me. I raised fishermen. And what? They come back with one fish. One keeps falling in, the other looks at stars. We'll sell the *MarElie*. That's that.

Elie leans over the table, eyebrows raised. Pai, you serious?

Pai raises a glass. Where's the wine? Gale, you forgot the goddamn wine.

I pour glasses. We continue eating. Pai's like a different person, his face bright, his eyes sharp. I know this can't be an effect of the Seroquel or the wine. And it's more than a lucid interval. Something has taken his brain elsewhere, away from the seaworm. It's as if he's in a parallel universe. Anything's possible. Donny's back. We're all together.

After dinner, Jonathan and Elie clean up. Pai continues drinking. I should take the wine away but he's at peace. Most days, by this time, he'd be yelling at faces outside the window. I rummage for my telescope, which I purchased in '08 through mail order from the Smithsonian Institution.

It's still in the original box.

I set it up in the front yard. Polaris is easy to locate in the twilight sky, the North Star, used by sailors for centuries to navigate the open sea.

Pai stumbles out of the house, pees on the dead bush, then heads my way. I tell him to look.

He peers into the telescope, saying, You got it right, son. He starts to shiver. I lead him back inside.

Darkness settles. Crickets chatter. Fog descends.

Stay here tonight, I say to Elie and Jonathan. Let's give Pai one night, all of us together, even if it's a dream.

She hugs me. Just so you know, she whispers, Jonathan is not Donny.

But for one night. All of us under one roof.

Pai climbs into bed. I kiss him. He grabs my arm. Tell Donny we'll buy new lines in the morning, head to Drake's Bay, anchor overnight.

Sleep tight, I say. I plug in his radio and turn it back to the NOAA channel. The robot voice now says the sea's calm.

We all settle in our rooms.

I picture peaceful water, small waves lapping our hull, the *MarElie* sailing proud. I fall sound asleep.

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In the morning, I rise to make breakfast. It's ten. We've slept in. I look outside. The truck's not there. I nudge Elie and Jonathan awake. Pai's nowhere to be found.

Elie calls the police to report a missing person.

I have a hunch.

We drive to the marina in Elie's car, and sure enough, my truck's parked and the *MarElie*'s gone. At least Jonathan's Mini Cooper is where we left it.

The water's still, the breeze easterly. There was enough fuel in the boat to travel a hundred miles.

We call the Coast Guard.

After about an hour word arrives that the *MarElie*'s been located a few miles off coast, adrift and quiet. No one aboard.

We sit quietly in Elie's car.

Something tells me that Pai slipped over the side, perhaps to run a final errand: retrieve our sunken lines. Or maybe it was his way to make the night last, diving into the darkness. Or to swim with the last great school of wild king. Either way, he didn't fall in by accident. I'm sure of it.

I try not to think about the sea filling his lungs. I try not to think about anything. I want to float adrift, too.

We walk to the slip as if there might be some remnant of Pai, something to remember him by—a dropped Kleenex, coin, cigarette butt. But there's nothing—just a clean dock, empty berth, smooth water.

Elie invites me to stay with them. You should not be alone, she says. Not after this. Her arm sweeps out to sea.

I'm expected home. Pai needs breakfast and maybe another Seroquel to catch up on all the missed sleep. I check myself.

My father's gone.

Yes, I say, embracing them. Pai would have wanted it this way—all of us, together.