

To all who drink this wine.

It's been a hot day and there is a subdued briny scent on the air as Pat wheels his bike across the bridge home. Halfway across he sees the silver brown flash of a tail emerging from the still, moss green water in the centre of the dock. This is the third day in a row that Pat has seen the tail now, but he hasn't been able to get a good look at the rest of the creature. Pat thinks it could be a grey seal, but there's something about the tail that's maybe not quite right. He shields his eyes against the sun and stares hard into the centre of the pool. On a high tide it is possible for large creatures to come into the dock. There's been the odd dolphin and porpoise. They're in for a day, then gone again. It's not usual to see the same thing three days in a row..

The ripples from the tail disappear and Pat checks his watch. He'll have time for a swift pint before tea which his youngest daughter Josie will have made for him. She's a good little housekeeper but Pat worries that she isn't making a life for herself. Since his wife died Josie has been adamant that he needs someone to look after him. His other children and just about everyone else are in agreement with this so Pat lets her do it though it makes him uneasy. At the door to the Ship Inn Pat stops and takes a comb from his back pocket and pushes it through his hair. Still black, which he's proud of. Maybe thinning a little but blokes half his age are twice as bald. A couple of dockers fall out of the door and Pat grabs it before it closes. A swift pint he promises himself again, then home to tea and a night of radio and quiet smokes.

Later, at throwing out time, Pat, held up on either side by a couple of young dockers, is explaining the difference between grey seals and harbour seals and intersperses these explanations with small sobs and declarations that Sylvie had been the love of his life. The dockers laugh and sympathise and cadge ciggies and manage to get him into his kitchen where they leave him slumped at the table and scarper before Josie gets downstairs.

The next morning Pat sits on the seawall, his head hurts and he's dry mouthed but his rod is in its stand and his line is cast far out. He is feeling guilty about Josie, who had to help him up the stairs to bed when he got back. She had left his tea in the oven and it had dried out and had to be thrown away. Josie said nothing about it this morning, but Pat knows she is upset, and he also knows that he doesn't know how to make it right. A breeze picks up, and Pat realises the tide is turning. The water slaps and sucks at the wall below him, just beneath the line of velvet green seaweed that marks the tideline. The nitrogenous smell of the seaweed and the salt spray, combined with the odour from his bait bucket, makes Pat bilious. He peels his eyes away from the swell of the water – probably best to focus on the line of the port opposite – that's straight at least. He pours tea from the flask and pushes his cap down hard on his head. The Sun in his eyes makes him realise how much they're hurting. He starts to roll a ciggie just as Jean Castle pulls up alongside him. She's pushing a big pram and inside it is her granddaughter. Pat feels sorry for her. There are plenty of people who say spiteful things and Jean has to bear it all because the daughter cleared off to go and work in an office down south and left her holding the baby. The daughter couldn't stand the talking – a baby out of wedlock and with a coloured man at that. Pat doesn't mind, there's a few fellas on the docks

and they seem decent enough. Pat's friendly with one or two of them, maybe not so friendly as have a baby by your daughter friendly but, each to his own Pat thinks.

He and Jean had a fling when they were young and before the war was even a possibility and now and then they still spark with each other. Not today though.

Jean eyes him as he jumps down from the seawall, 'Rough night?'

Pat smiles slightly, 'Could've done with going home a pint or two earlier.'

Jean takes a cigarette from her bag and Pat lights it for her, 'Anythin yet?'

Pat shakes his head, 'No, not even a sniff but the tide's on the turn now so I might get lucky.'

'Don't know how you stand here for hours like you do I'd be bored out of my mind.'

Pat shrugs, 'It's better than being at home with Josie, she's making a stew...'

Jean laughs, 'You in her bad books then?'

'She doesn't like the drinking.'

'What's wrong with having a drink now and then?'

Pat takes a mouthful of tea, 'Oh, it's not the drink -it's that I talk about Sylvie when I've had a few and Josie doesn't like it.'

Jean takes a long drag on her cigarette and stares hard at Pat, 'Josie needs to move on from that now, and it wouldn't do you any harm to consider your options neither.'

'I've got enough to keep me occupied Jean.'

To change the subject Pat tells Jean about the creature in the docks, 'It's not something I'd expect to see in the docks this regularly,, but I reckon it's a grey seal.'

Jean looks dubious, 'What about it's head?'

Pat frowns, 'What about it's head?'

'Seal's are always looking about; you always see their heads don't you?'

Pat laughs and admits he hasn't seen a head.

The baby starts to wail so Jean says her goodbyes and she and the pram push off down the prom and Pat focuses on his rod. Suddenly the line is tight and, forgetting his nausea and the throbbing behind his eyes Pat jumps down, throwing his cigarette to the ground. He grabs the rod and braces his legs wide, one foot a little in front of the other. Taking the weight at the end of the rod on his thigh he starts reeling in with serious attention. This is a big one and now and then Pat thinks his line is going to break. He keeps going till his wrists ache and his feet have gone dead. Abruptly the line eases and Pat thinks he's lost the catch. He reels in more slowly but knows the game is up when the line goes completely slack. Just as it does so a tail, long finned and silvery blue in the late morning light rises in the water, plump and fleshy where it meets the swell and tapering to a slender point where the two fins part at the top. The tail submerges, with a slap on the water that sends out a cascade of seafoam. Almost straight away the fins appear again, closer in to shore now and then the whole tail appears once more. Pat tells himself that this is the grey seal and strains every muscle in his body to try and get a better view. He looks quickly to either side of him at the other fishermen who are leaning idly against the seawall. He wants to shout to them but he worries that the creature will be scared off if he does. He can't believe that they haven't seen it. Their eyes are peeled for fish and here is the biggest one they're ever likely to see and not a murmur from any of them.

The tail appears again, below Pat and next to the steps down to the beach that are cut into the seawall. Pat secures his rod back on its stand and climbs down the top two steps. He holds firmly onto the rail; the mossy seaweed is still wet and slimy, and he doesn't fancy a swim this morning. He waits, gripping the rail hard, and, sure enough the tail appears again. The creature seems to be swimming back

and forth next to the steps, always stopping at the point where Pat knows the steps end. At the last step there is a drop of a couple of feet which gets you onto the beach at low tide. Right now Pat can see from the marker that the water there is around five feet deep.

For a long while Pat doesn't see the tail anymore. He thinks he can see the shape of something moving in the water, a vague shadow that drifts along, back and forth, beneath the last step. The breeze makes ridges on the water which make it hard to see anything and eventually Pat gives up on the idea of seeing anything more. His hands are cold, the tide is receding, and he needs to get his line in.

He turns to go back up to the prom but stops dead as a hand appears just below his foot, on the highest step that is still in water. The hand is small and slender and milky pale. Pat holds his breath and watches as the owner of the hand places another hand on the step above and pulls herself slightly out of the water. Resting her head on one arm she stares straight at Pat who has pinned himself against the wet and salty seawall. Her face is as pale as her arms, except for her eyes which are almost black. Her long black hair is slicked back from her head and clings to her neck and shoulders. A strand of it lies against one high boned cheek as well as across her pale blue lips which are closed in a small pout. Behind her the fins flip occasionally in the water. She continues to stare at Pat, her dark eyes holding him. He stares back, unable to look away. Edging forward gradually he lowers himself down a step. The woman in the sea doesn't move so Pat crouches down and slowly, gently, strokes her hand. Her eyes flash and with a small smile she lifts most of her tail and curves it to one side where she grasps it with both arms and hugs it to her chest. She pulls her hair over the front of her shoulders and swimming back slightly she squeezes her right shoulder to her chin and takes a strand of hair between her

small pearly teeth. She turns her back and looks over one shoulder at Pat, her eyes half close slowly and, still smiling, her lips part as she continues to look at him. He is almost sitting in the water, unable to move.

There is a squeaking of wheels nearby and the dark eyed woman turns and swims backwards away from the steps, her hair fanned out around her small sweet face. Her thin arms cross her front and, just before she arcs back into a dive she spreads her arms wide revealing her breasts, small and pale and hardly there at all, evident only because of her pale brown nipples. Pat gasps and steps down another step, his arms reaching out for her as she disappears with a flick of her tail. He is soaked up to the thighs and at the top of the step Jean castle is looking at him strangely and bouncing the pram hard, 'Little madam think she doesn't need to sleep,' she says. 'You're soaked, did you drop a pound note in there or something?'

Pat doesn't answer and he is unwilling to climb the steps, but Jean remains standing there looking at him, her head cocked to one side,

'Looks like you could do with that drink you know, hair of the dog and all that.'

Pat just nods and can't look at her. The baby blows a raspberry and Jean, who comes across as a tough old bird nowadays, softens and looks almost like she did in her dance hall heyday when Pat first knew her. She coos at the baby and Pat feels sad and wants her to go. Seeing that Pat is going to remain mute Jean shrugs and says her goodbyes, heading back in the direction she had come. Pat watches her careworn shoulders heaving at the pram handle as she tries to bounce the baby into submission. 'Going to give her a head injury,' Pat thinks. He wonders if he's had one himself. After packing up his rod and emptying the bait bucket into the sea Pat watches the receding tide for a while. She will be in the middle of the channel now if

she is still there. Pat fights an urge to jump into the sea and, feeling more terrified than he ever had even during the worst battles of the war, he decides to go and talk to someone about this. Grabbing his stuff he jumps on his bike and heads to the rectory.

In Father Gerald's living room Pat sits on a dog blanket to save the chair from his sea-soaked trousers.

'I'm in love,' he announces to the priest.

Father Gerald is surprised. There has been no hint of Pat seeing another woman.

'That's not a sin Pat, Sylvie's been gone for six years now.'

'She's not from round here,' Pat rubs both hands up and down his wet trouser legs

'Well, that's okay,' Father Gerald smiled. 'That's not a sin either. And the women round here – well – they're either married, or had enough of it all, so it's a very small pool to fish from.'

Pat smiles at the priest's unintended metaphor, 'She's foreign.'

Father Gerald raises an eyebrow. That might explain the secrecy he thinks. 'What kind of foreign?' he asks.

'Japanese kind of foreign,' Pat is deadpan when he says this and keeps his eyes locked onto Father Gerald's to read his reaction. The priest pauses for a long while, absorbing this unwelcome news. A few of his parishioners suffered horribly at the hands of Japanese soldiers, and the commonly held sentiment was that they had been especially cruel. He is astonished that Pat has even met somebody Japanese.

'You don't see many of them round these parts. How did the two of you meet?'

Pat isn't sure how to explain, 'I was out fishing and she just, you know, she was just there.'

'On the prom you mean Pat?'

'No in the water.'

Father Gerald is struggling to make sense of what Pat is saying. 'On a boat?' he asks.

Pat doesn't answer him

'Do you mean on a boat? What's a Jap, Japanese woman, doing on a boat down here?' Father Gerald's voice is rising slightly and, seeing that Pat can only stare at his boots, he makes a conscious effort to calm down. He heaves himself out of his chair and pours some red wine from a decanter into two glasses, passing Pat one and muttering as he does so, 'Grant to all who drink this wine the attainment of spiritual joy and everlasting life.' It's a terrible joke for the priest to make but he and Pat find it funny every time. Pat doesn't even like wine, but he does like Father Gerald and his comfortable chairs. They clink glasses and Father Gerald's years of experience tell him that Pat doesn't want to talk about how he met the Japanese woman so he asks after Josie and the two of them drift into general chat.

A few too many glasses later Pat wheels his bike and fishing gear home. He nears his house and can smell the stew that Josie has probably been cooking all day. The evening has become close and thundery and the back door is open. Pat can hear Josie singing along to 'You belong to me' on the radio. Father Gerald has set him straight on the impossibility of a relationship with the 'stranger to our shores' as he called her. Pat knows in his heart that this relationship isn't possible, it would be seen as a serious wrongdoing that his family and friends would find hard to forgive, and he needs to put the woman out of his mind now. Josie, in particular, would have a lot to say about it.

As he unlatches the back-yard door Pat looks at his watch and sees that the tide will now be high again. He pauses, watching Josie moving about in the kitchen,



and knows that he can no longer go home. Dumping his fishing gear against the wall he runs to the end of the alley, swinging onto his bike as he does so. The dynamo whirrs loudly as Pat pedals like a maniac towards the docks and he's grinning so hard his ears hurt. This makes him laugh. He almost collides with a wobbly group fresh out of the pub and he rings the bell and whoops at them. They whoop back and throw in a few drunken insults for fun. Pat laughs and rings the bell harder. He rides with no hands for a few brief seconds and feels like he's flying. He bounces along the cobbled road near the bridge which wipes the smile off his face for a bit. Just as he enters the docks the front wheel of his bike hits one of the rail tracks and he flies onto the ground with a wallop, scraping a hole in his trousers and knee as he lands. Leaving the bike where it is Pat runs, with a limp, to the main dock. A flash of lightning lights up the warehouse buildings and the water as thunder cracks nearby. Pat scans the dock but can't see her. He drops to his knees, which sting with the salt water, and squints hard into the pool. He doesn't have to wait long before her tail slaps onto the paving next to where he kneels, and her face appears in front of him. As the downpour erupts Pat leans into her lips and kisses her, stopping only to catch his breath. He is now soaked to the skin and shivering slightly. As he bends forward to kiss her again she shakes her head and moves a little away from him. Then, smiling, she takes his hands in hers and pulls him gently off the edge of the dock into the water, as another flash of lightning illuminates them. She dives down into the deep sea-green, Pat clinging to her as they head out of the dock and into open water.

At home Josie scrapes peelings into the bin in the back yard and sees her dad's fishing rod and gear leaning against the wall. She is puzzled and wonders when he put them there, and where he is now. Then, tight lipped, she decides his

whereabouts aren't worth worrying over. She brings them in out of the rain, leaning them against the kitchen table. She plates up some stew and stands at the back door for a while watching the lightning flashes. Wherever her dad is he'll be getting soaked and she'll have to deal with it if he gets a chill. She shuts the door and shoves the stew into the oven. Then switching off the radio and the lights she climbs the stairs, alone, to bed.