

## Mackerel Skies and Mares Tails

Mr. Nelson Seagroves, standing in the Sun Cat's cockpit, fighting to wrench free the main halyard jammed in its block at the mast's peak. Distracted by three frigate birds stooping on a blue-footed booby, trying to force the booby to regurgitate the fish it is bringing back to its young. The booby, fleeing for the shelter of Mr. Seagroves' luffing sail, spiraling around the mast in a futile attempt to evade its pursuers. Mr. Seagroves, staring up, catching a face full of barfed-up fish as the frigates close on the booby. Mr. Seagroves falling backwards, striking his head on the gunwale, collapsing unconscious. Mr. Seagroves' catboat drifting out to sea.

A low sun. A thump against the Sun Cat's side. A long shadow stretching across him, a voice asking, "Sir? Are you OK?" Strong hands reaching down, lifting him, helping him into the bright yellow Donzi. The Donzi idling in through the cut and up to the Eagle Ray Cove pier, Sun Cat cleated to its stern. Nelson Seagroves, ice pack to his head.

\*\*

"The most amazing young gentleman, Marcia." Mr. Seagroves, yelling to his wife in the next room. "Not like these damnable squatters we have on our beach every

day. Doing God-knows-what down there!” Nelson Seagroves, shaking the sand from his calfskin slippers.

“Queen’s beach, dear. Public property.” Marcia Seagroves, leaning over her aquariums, dropping bits of cat food to her captured lionfish, measuring the week’s growth of each. “And don’t blaspheme.”

“Bold as brass! On our beach! One slapped me on the back just now and called me ‘Nelly’!”

“What of your young man?” Mrs. Seagroves, stepping onto the verandah to light a Virginia Slims cigarette. Marcia Seagroves, chair of the National Trust fundraising committee, worrying about the evening’s Trust mixer at the Seagroves home, having no time for her husband’s rants.

“A guardian angel, Mr. Barry Sennett.” Nelson Seagroves, back on track. “Took me aboard that speedboat of his, towed *Argo* in. And wouldn’t take a farthing! On Blacktip Island! Can you imagine?”

“Sounds the perfect gentleman.” Marcia Seagroves, leaving her cigarette in an ashtray outside, stepping back to her makeshift laboratory. The venomous lionfish, non-native predators overwhelming the Caribbean lately, had to be studied if they were to be eradicated. “A new arrival?”

“Friend of the Skerritts, apparently.” Nelson Seagroves, pouring a stiff gin-and-tonic. Nelson Seagroves liked to feel his gin. “He’ll be here this evening to meet the rest of island society. Perhaps he’ll hit it off with our Miranda before she skulks back to university.”

“I *won't* be subjected to your bourgeois cocktail social!” Miranda Seagroves, shuffling into the great room, rubbing her eyes, her brown curls looking for all the world like a small beaver dam. “And I’ll *not* be presented like some prize rose!”

“No one will take you for a rose, my love.”

“Daddy!”

\*\*

Tiki torches guttering at the edge of the Seagroves’ raised deck. Surf shushing faint beyond the sea grapes. A few guests wandering out, but most keeping inside, air-con making coats and gowns more comfortable, even in the Caribbean winter.

“Here we are then!” Reginald Gurnard, down from North Point, appointing himself the barman-du-soir. “A Rob Roy and a lemon squash!” Spirits and mixers sloshing into various high- and low-ball glasses and across the countertop.

Reginald Gurnard, pressing dripping glasses into the hands of Billy and Lucille Ray, giving them a quick pilot’s thumbs-up. The Rays thanking him, grabbing extra napkins before gliding across the room.

Reginald Gurnard, turning back to send lime juice and rum splashing, mixing mojitos for Mr. and Mrs. Ernesto Mojarra.

Movement by the door. A young man kicking off his flip-flops. A dark tan. Blond hair neatly trimmed. Brown cargo pants and a loose linen shirt, sleeves rolled up to his elbows.

“Welcome! Welcome!” Nelson Seagroves, wife in-arm, cutting through the crowd. “My dear, may I present my recent savior, Mr. Barry Sennet. Mr. Sennet, my wife, Marcia.”

“Saved Seagroves? From what?” Mr. Edwin Chub, perspiration dotting his bald head.

“From myself, I’m afraid.” Mr. Seagroves, his face reddening. “Knocked myself out and nearly drifted off to Honduras.”

“Mr. Seagroves handled himself like a trooper.” Barry Sennet, smiling at Marcia Seagroves.

“Knocked yourself out how?” Edwin Chub, relentless.

“Bird watching, truth be told.” Mr. Seagroves, warming to the story as an audience gathered. “Frigates chasing a booby, and the booby using my sail as cover.”

“Distracted by boobies, were you?” A small man with a peppery mustache, deploying the clichéd island joke.

“Indeed, Damsil.” Nelson Seagroves, rolling his eyes. “Mr. Barry Sennet, Sergeant Major Damsil, of Spider Bight.”

“Retired, old boy. Retired.” Sergeant Major (ret.) Damsil, thrusting his face up at Sennet’s.

More guests wandering close. Nelson Seagroves introducing Barry Sennet to Blacktip Island’s notables.

“Dr. and Mrs. Tang.” He in blue, she in yellow, smiling.

“Miss Doris Blenny.” An older woman, wide-eyed, with a surfeit of bright red lipstick.

“George and Belinda Graysby. Mr. Snapper, the schoolmaster. Reg Gurnard on drinks.” The sound of clattering glasses.

“I’m pleased to meet you.” Mr. Barry Sennet, greeting each, in turn, with a handshake and slight bow.

“I’m afraid poor Nelson took a booby-full of fish to the face, then a gunwale to the head.” Marcia Seagroves, patting Edwin Chub’s arm.

The assembled guests laughing. Nelson Seagroves turning red again, then joining in. Miranda Seagroves, hair now controlled in a tight bun, drawn by the laughter.

“You were a bit of a mess, Mr. Seagroves.” Barry Sennet, chuckling, noting Miranda at the group’s edge.

“No land in sight when I came-to.” Nelson Seagroves, suddenly more serious. “If Mr. Sennet hadn’t stopped with that exquisite boat of his, I might never have been found.”

“How frightening!” Miss Blenny, eyes bulging.

“Oh, Mr. Seagroves had things well in-hand when I arrived.” Barry Sennet, eyeing Miranda. “I shadowed him, but he was fine.”

“Nelson, my boy.” Mr. Seagroves, following Barry Sennet’s gaze. “Mr. Sennet, may I introduce my daughter, Miranda.”

“Charmed.” Sennet, extending a hand, drawing Miranda into the group. “Please call me Barry.”

“Where are you living, Mr. Sennet?” Brenda Graysby, eyelids fluttering.

“I’m in the old Skerritt pace, up at the north end.”

“Why, we’re neighbors, then.” Dr. Tang, smiling broadly. “Didn’t think Rich Skerritt would ever part with that place. Been in his family for years.”

“Oh, I’m just using it.” Barry Sennet, smiling at Miranda. “Part of the deal for running his boat over.”

A long pause as Sennet’s words sunk in.

“You . . . work for Mr. Skerritt, then?” Edwin Chub, breaking the silence.

“Doing a favour. And keeping an eye out for a place of his own.” Nelson Seagroves, smiling at his rescuer, clarifying the misunderstanding.

“Oh, I could never afford anything on Blacktip Island.” Barry Sennet laughing, head back, teeth flashing. “Not on a charter captain’s pay.”

“You’re . . . on work permit, then?” Mr. Nelson Seagroves, suddenly cold, asking the obvious question, though all his guests knew the answer as well as he.

“I work here and there. I figure I’ll give this a few months, have some fun, see how things go.” Barry Sennet, smiling at the ring of pale, silent faces surrounding him.

Miranda Seagroves, grinning at Sennet, then at her father.

“Let me show you the house . . . Barry.” Miranda, linking arms with Sennet and leading him toward the kitchen.

Nelson Seagroves, accepting a scotch from Reg Gurnard, downing it in one swallow. His newfound diamond had proved to be cheap glass. Nelson Seagroves, mortified to have it known so publicly. Mr. Seagroves’ peers, avoiding his gaze.

“You live on the island?” Sennet’s wretched American accent echoing from the kitchen.

“On holiday, I’m afraid.” Miranda’s voice, light and airy. “Though I’m here another two weeks.”

\*\*

“The nerve, Marcia! The absolute gall!” Mr. Seagroves, on the verandah after their guests had gone.

“He was perfectly delightful, dear.” Marcia Seagroves, calling out from her laboratory. The lionfish, voracious, needed constant feeding. “And if his employment status was so important, why didn’t you ask before inviting him?”

“He wasn’t forthcoming, Marcia!” Mr. Seagroves, abhorring anew the island’s freebooters, comanderers of boats and cottages and beaches and social parties in his own home. “And those clothes! Bloody hell, Marcia! He stood out like an Arsenal fan in a Tottenham crowd!”

“I thought him quite charming. As did our Miranda.”

“But a boat driver!”

“You were working class, dear.” Marcia Seagroves, stepping from her lab, glass of pinot grigio in-hand, resuming her smoke.

“But legally! What did he mean, ‘I work here and there?’” Mr. Seagroves, pacing now. “He’s not documented, Marcia. I can assure you he hasn’t a work permit. The snake!”

“He’s not a snake, dear. He’s a young man, new to the island and trying to fit in.”

“Well, there’ll be none of that with Miranda! I’ll call Jack Wrasse at Immigration, have them look into his particulars.”

“You’ll do nothing so vile, Nelson. And it would put you afoul of Rich Skerritt.”

\*\*

Barry Sennet, standing at the verandah railing, looking at the beach below. Baggy shorts, a plain blue t-shirt, flip-flops, Ray-Bans.

“Miranda will be with us in a moment.” Nelson Seagroves, joining Sennet outside, mouth tasting of bile at the young man’s indolent stance.

“How’s my boat, then?” Barry Sennet, slapping Nelson Seagroves on the back.

“Your . . . sorry?”

“My boat. Not under command? International waters? Salvage rights?” Barry Sennet flashing his bright, toothy smile, watching Seagroves’ face.

“Oh, well . . . yes.” Nelson Seagroves, suddenly lightheaded. Barry Sennet did indeed have legal claim to *Argo*. “My life for a boat . . . more than fair.”

“Nelson, I’m joking.” Barry Sennet laughing. “I wouldn’t take your boat if you gift-wrapped her for me. That’s not what I’m about.”

“Yes, well, still, if there’s anything I can do . . .”

“You’ve already done it, Nelson. Your and Marcia’s friendship . . . well, roaming like I do, it’s rare to find such good people.”

Nelson Seagroves, blushing at the compliment.



“Mr. Sennet, what a lovely thing to say!” Marcia Seagroves, joining them, rattan tray laden with a pitcher of rum punch and tall glasses.

Barry Sennet smiling broader, taking the tray from Mrs. Seagroves, hands brushing, eyes lingering on hers more than a moment. Marcia Seagroves blushing.

“Ready, Barry?” Miranda Seagroves, bursting onto the porch, hair pulled back, freckled shoulders bare in her green sundress. “No time for that, Mum.” Miranda, taking Sennet’s hand, leading him from the verandah and out the front door.

\*\*

“Live on the sea? With Barry Sennet?” Nelson Seagroves, face reddening. “On whose boat? He hasn’t one of his own, you know.”

“Oh, Barry says there’s always a boat.” Miranda Seagroves, a spiteful smile, watching her father squirm.

“For him, no doubt there is. And how will he support you on a roustabout’s wages? You have no degree, and certainly no job skills.”

“We won’t need much. We can live off my money easily.”

“You haven’t any. Your money is my money.”

“Your money is Mum’s money, you mean. And Grand-Pere’s. They’ll give me my remittance.”

“A hard-core Communist like yourself relying on an inheritance?”

“A *Ricardian*, Daddy. Communism is a political system, not an economic one.”

“And you’ve shared your financial status with Mr. Sennet, have you?”

“Daddy, it’s only money. It’s not like we’ve slept together. Yet.”

“I’ll thrash him.”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort, Daddy. It’s *my* life, you know!”

\*\*

Nelson Seagroves, searching Blacktip Island's handful of pubs for Barry Sennet. He had made a pig’s ear of his talk with Miranda. But Sennet would listen to reason. Nelson Seagroves, spying Barry Sennet at Club Scuba Doo’s horseshoe-shaped bar.

“How’s my boat, old sport?” Barry Sennet, laughing as Nelson Seagroves settles into the bar seat next to him.

The Rays gliding past, nodding to Seagroves and Sennet. Reg Gurnard raising a glass from across the bar. Barry Sennet, his feet propped on the adjacent bar stool, hands behind his head.

Mr. Nelson Seagroves, thinking the joke is wearing thin. Thinking the joke is no joke at all. “See here, Sennet. I’ve come to have a word about Miranda.”

“She’s a honey, Nelson. You outdid yourself there. Of course, she gets her looks from that pretty wife of yours.”

“Miranda’s a very impressionable young woman.” Nelson Seagroves, thinking how strange the word ‘woman’ felt on his lips when speaking of his daughter.

Wondering at Sennet’s mention of Marcia.

“She knows her mind. I like that. And Marcia thinks the world of me.” Barry Sennet, flashing his toothy smirk. “Miranda’s ditching that silly college of hers. Did she tell you? We’re going travelling.”

“I’ll not let her throw away her education! Or her prospects!” Nelson Seagroves, spitting as he speaks, surprised at his own vehemence. “And I’ll thank you not to speak of my wife in that tone.”

Barry Sennet, studying Nelson Seagroves, smile never wavering, but eyes harder now. “I never went to college, Nelson. But here I am, sitting next to you. How ‘bout that?” Barry Sennet, shaking his head, dismissive. “Like knows like, Nelson. Only I don’t take my foot off the gas.”

“By God, Sennet! Miranda says she’s in love with you!” Nelson Seagroves, slamming his fist on the bar, not giving a damn about the stares from Reg Gurnard or the newly-arrived Tangs. Nelson Seagroves, wanting to thrash this smarmy pillock! Nelson Seagroves, knowing he would lose Miranda if he did.

“Well, then, we should try to get along, shouldn’t we, Nelly?” Barry Sennet, smiling cold, teeth sharp and white. “Or should I call you ‘Dad?’”

Barry Sennet, motioning for his drinks to go on Nelson Seagroves’ account.

Barry Sennet sauntering from the bar.

Nelson Seagroves, grinding his teeth, wanting to beat young Sennet senseless.

Nelson Seagroves, hating himself for the thought: *if* he could beat young Sennet.

\*\*

“How you doing, Mister Nelson?” Jesse Conlee, leaning against the Scuba Doo bar, snapping Nelson Seagroves from his reverie.

“I’ve been better, I suppose, Jesse.” Nelson Seagroves, jaws aching, pulse racing, nauseous.

“Ought to be happy, young M’randa on-island these days.” Jesse, brick-wall sturdy, reaching across the bar, helping himself to another beer. Dhani, the Scuba Doo barmaid, not arguing the point.

“She may be on-island, but I’m not seeing much of her.”

“I do recall seeing her with that blond boy, showed up last week.” Jesse Conlee, studying Seagroves. “Seen your M’randa grow up from a little thing. Don’t seem right, taking up with someone like that.”

“She’s an adult now. Not much I can do about it.” Mr. Seagroves, staring at his untouched drink, wracking his brain to name this emotion. Despair? Self-loathing?

“Always something you can do, Mister Nelson. Or friends can do.” Jesse Conlee bull-thick and eyes bright, tapping his beer bottle on Nelson Seagroves’ glass. “Care for that girl like a sister, y’know. What fathers can’t do, brothers can.”

Nelson Seagroves, studying Jesse. Nelson Seagroves, thinking he could never, in conscience, set Jesse Conlee loose on a callow young fop like Barry Sennet, no matter how odious Sennet was. Nelson Seagroves, recalling Sennet’s smirk as he dared Seagroves to interfere with he and Miranda. Recalling Sennet’s eyes and hands lingering on Marcia’s on the verandah. Recalling Sennet’s, ‘Marcia thinks the world of me.’ Nelson Seagroves, tasting the oily wash in his stomach thinking of Miranda with that . . . thing.

“You deserve good things, Mister Nelson.” Jesse Conlee downing the rest of his beer, showing no effects of that, or any of the other beers he’s had that night. “Family come first. Got to look to that, y’know.” Jesse Conlee, ambling into the night.

Nelson Seagroves motioning to Dhani the barmaid, picking up Jesse’s prodigious bar tab.

\*\*

Deep night. Gates locked, houselights off. Marcia asleep, Miranda only-God-knew-where. Nelson Seagroves at the verandah railing, looking over the bight to the open sea beyond. Stars, a passing freighter, *Argo’s* anchor light brocading the darkness. Nelson Seagroves, hands full of Miranda’s childhood photos, instants of his little girl captured in happier days. Photos now unseen in the darkness. Nelson Seagroves knowing each of them by feel, by thought, like the back of his hand.

Nelson Seagroves, stomach in knots, realizing walls, fences, money, none of it could keep the predators from slipping in. For all his money and influence, he’s powerless to save his daughter. He could follow up with Jesse, keep his hands clean. He could have the next Sennet frightened off, too. But what of when Miranda was away at uni? And beyond? She had probably handled dozens of Barry Sennets already. It *was* her life now. Nelson Seagroves, wondering if he was concerned more for his daughter’s well-being, or his own pride.

Lights flashing on in the great room behind him. Scurrying feet. A quick glimpse of beaver-dam hair and freckled shoulders.

“Miranda?”

Silence, then more scurrying. Miranda Seagroves, tip-toeing back into the great room.

“Daddy? I didn’t know you were still up.”

“My dear . . .” Nelson Seagroves, overcome with a dozen different emotions, dropping the photos and striding to his daughter. “You . . . no matter what happens, you know I love you very much?”

“Don’t go all weepy. I need to pack!” Miranda, half-heartedly pushing him away, then hugging him back.

“Moving out already?” Nelson Seagroves, heartbroken.

“First flight in the morning. Remember?”

“You’re . . . not going with Barry Sennet, then?” Nelson Seagroves, not daring to breathe, hoping for salvation.

“Daddy! He’s an ass! Eyes Mum as much as he does me. And himself more than either of us.” Miranda Seagroves, pulling a disgusted face before spinning away to her bedroom. “I haven’t *begun* to pack!”

Nelson Seagroves, shaking, relief flooding through him. Whatever had passed between Miranda and Sennet, it was over. Miranda had inherited her mother’s looks *and* intelligence. Nelson Seagroves, blissful with the sounds of Miranda rifling through her things, talking to herself all the while, his little Socialist cramming designer clothing into Louis Vuitton luggage.

\*\*

“Barry said he would see me off.” Miranda Seagroves, standing tiptoe, scanning the clot of passengers waiting at the airstrip, looking north up the macadam road toward the old Skerritt cottage. “He promised he would come.”

Nelson Seagroves, glancing at his watch. Marcia Seagroves, downwind of the group, having a smoke. The 8:50 shuttle was late.

Jesse Conlee, seeing his mother off for a day’s shopping on Tiperon, the main island, striding to greet the Seagroves.

“Good to see you again, M’randa. Need to come back more.” Jesse Conlee, hugging Miranda. Jesse Conlee, stepping back, eyes fixing on Nelson Seagroves for a long moment, then a slight nod before rejoining Sairah Conlee.

Nelson Seagroves, ice fingers shooting through him despite the sun’s warmth. Feeling the gravel car park spin for a moment, feeling his stomach drop. What, exactly, had Jesse done?

“Daddy? Are you OK?” Miranda, a hand on his arm.

“Fine. Fine.” Nelson Seagroves, hearing his own voice from far away. Whatever had happened, Barry Sennet had it coming. But he hadn’t expected Jesse to act. No. Nelson Seagroves, silently correcting himself. He had heard the edge in Jesse’s voice the night before, had seen the steel in his eyes.

“I do wish he would get here.” Miranda, watching the north road again.

“Perhaps he won’t be coming at all.” Nelson Seagroves, speaking his thought aloud, surprised to hear his own voice.

Miranda Seagroves, down off her toes, studying her father's face. Miranda Seagroves, eyes wandering from her father to Jesse Conlee. "Daddy? What have you done?"

"I . . . nothing." Nelson Seagroves, chill shooting back through him. Miranda needn't know about any of this. "Young Sennet seemed a rather self-absorbed sort, is all. You said it yourself."

"You bastard!" Miranda Seagroves, eyes boring into her father. "You had Jesse threaten him away, didn't you?"

"I have no control over anything Jesse Conlee does." Nelson Seagroves, face hot now, driving away his chills. "And I never asked him to do anything of the sort."

"Spare me your semantics, Daddy. You let it happen, didn't you?" Miranda Seagroves, slapping her father's face. Miranda Seagroves, snatching her luggage off the baggage cart, starting toward the Land Rover.

"What in the world?" Marcia Seagroves, pushing past the waiting passengers to get to her husband and daughter.

"It's bad enough you don't trust me, that you insist on trying to *control* me!" Miranda, rounding on Nelson Seagroves, ignoring her mother. "But this . . . it's as if you'd threatened *me* with violence!" Miranda Seagroves, red-faced, not caring who heard her. "Or did you do more than threaten?"

Nelson Seagroves, rocking back on his heels, as if he's been punched, mouth open, but no words forming.

Marcia Seagroves, slapping his face, too, then helping drag Miranda's bags to the Land Rover. Marcia and Miranda speeding north up the macadam, toward the old



Skerritt cottage. Nelson Seagroves, crouching foetal in the gravel car park. The crowd retreating, staring.

The DeHavilland Twin Otter touching down, wheels seeming to clip the Land Rover in the final seconds the Otter is airborne. The Otter turning, roaring back toward the makeshift terminal.

Nelson Seagroves exploding up like a sprinter from the blocks, racing after the Land Rover, cutting across the unfenced airstrip, oblivious to the taxiing Otter. The Otter braking, veering, propellers missing Mr. Seagroves by inches, prop wash scouring him with grit and turbine exhaust. Nelson Seagroves, still oblivious, arms flailing above his head, pounding after the ever-diminishing auto and its trailing dust cloud, knowing he has to catch them. Knowing he never will.