

Where Azalea Sprouts

With scents of clams and rotten fish rolling over the still ocean, the man cast out his fishing hook, carefully concealed beneath sodden bait. The clouds overhead were heavy that day, like all other days over that part of the ocean. The man thought that when they were done raining on seaside towns and forgotten valleys nearby, that was where they retreated—back to him and his boat. Then they rested there, out of sight of the masses, drizzling down on him while he fished alone. Drops of rain returned to the ocean they once rose above, falling so gracelessly from their heavenly seat that it was a wonder why the clouds cried over their losses. Then those droplets joined the whole of a much larger body, intermixed with the other fallen raindrops, lost in the collective identity of one great ocean.

The man was not aware of which ocean he fished in, for his boat had been drifting aimlessly for so long. He'd started in the Atlantic, and perhaps he still was in the Atlantic, although at times it felt colder than even the Atlantic could muster. The Pacific hardly seemed an intelligent guess. The Arctic, perhaps, somewhere on the outskirts. It did not matter where the man was, as he did not care. The reserves of fresh water he kept on hand had already lasted what felt like years and could last what felt like a great deal more years, and in that time he could drift across all the oceans that existed. His food came to him from the depths. He ate what he caught, sparing sparse pieces of meat suitable as bait to catch another meal the next time he grew hungry. His boat was spacious enough to accommodate him and all of the belongings that he had before he left for the desolate seascape that presented to him the same comforting surroundings each day: a boundless plain of navy blue water, still, always, deep as the universe itself, glittering during the nights every so often with flickering bioluminescent krill that flared with their jittering movements the color blue like distant stars.

The man, before his endless journey through the ocean, had always desired to see the aurora borealis. Many people had talked of it, how those polar lights shifted in the sky with their flourishing tails of greens and blues. At first he was disappointed that he never got to see them and that he never would, but the beauty of those krill on the occasional nights they appeared to him, in his opinion, was far superior to anything the northern lights could muster. As he fished that day, he hoped that come a few hours, they would show themselves again, for it had been weeks since they'd last appeared and he was growing restlessly unamazed with the bland waters and the eternal downpour of gentle rain.

When something tugged on his line some time later that afternoon, the man jumped up—he'd been dozing off—and attempted to reel it in. Whatever gripped the hook on the other end did not resist but did not allow him to pull in with ease. Its weight was not so irregular for a larger fish, but typically those larger fish had too much pride to be caught without a fight. Never had the man caught a fish of this magnitude who did not struggle with the expectation of escape. He'd been reeling for ten minutes by the time he could make out the silhouette of his catch. A cobalt figure, like a spectre, slithered languidly through the frigid space below the boat, drawing ever closer with each circular motion of the man's palm around the center of his reel. The water bulged for a moment before its surface ruptured. The man's catch erupted from beneath the water, but it was not a fish. No, fish flopped and struggled and writhed about in the open air as soon as they felt it. They had fins and gills. This catch had neither. It was an aberration far beyond the man's imaginative capabilities. The first thing to emerge was the full head of hair, then the forehead, and then the eyes and then the mouth and then the torso and then all those other things that come with a human.

She didn't look to be dead for long when he pulled her on board, though it was quite a struggle to do so. She'd drowned, surely. There wasn't much else for a woman that far out in the ocean to die of. The

man laid her out and looked down at her, how peacefully stricken she looked, strewn about with limp muscles around the mouth and eyes, eyelids half shut and the lips a quarter spread open. There was an expression on her face, but it could have been construed in a multitude of ways. Terror, joy, contentment, confusion? What did it matter anyways? She was dead and that was that. Focusing on how she felt when she died was useless at best. How she died, too, was simple enough to assume, surely. The only strange aspect of this woman at first glance was her lack of clothing. Her supple breasts were exposed, as was the rest of her slim torso. There wasn't a trace of a blouse or shirt or bra or anything of the sort on her person. Only a few slim strips of mangled pants were left on her leg. The waistband was intact, and from there the remaining strips trailed down her one leg—she only had one leg, though it appeared a deformity and not a case of dismemberment. No signs of bruising or cuts were on her body. She looked pristine, beautiful in her youth and fairness. Her skin was a pale ash like the clouds and her eyes were a deep blue like the ocean, her lips looking no less pink than any living person's. If the man had not checked for a pulse as soon as he'd pulled her on board his humble sailboat, he would have assumed her to be taking a nap. She looked to have been dead no more than a minute, if even that, which was strange considering just how far out in the ocean she was, how the man himself hadn't spotted a boat as far as the eye could see since his first day leaving port all those months or years or decades ago.

The next course of action was to remove the fishing hook that had snared the woman. Wishing that he could apologize for his having hooked a part of her body, the man followed his line until it led through her lips and into her throat, where it had effortlessly glided in. The man reached his cold hand into her damp mouth and pulled his hook out from the place where it had been lodged. Only, when he pulled out the hook, with it too came an azalea flower. How long it had been since the man last saw green and red like that azalea. He knew it to be azalea in this woman's mouth, because during his time in Denmark, he'd known a botanist who cultivated a grand garden full of magnificent-looking flowers and shrubs, of which azalea was proudly displayed within.

Amazed by the flower in the woman's mouth, the man began pulling it out through the gap in her lips. He was delicate around the petals so that they would not be stripped from their stem. And from there he continued pulling on the stem, but the stem continued on and on and didn't seem to have an end. The man gave up once he'd pulled out five or so feet of stem from her throat with no sign of its base, attempting then to tuck it back into her mouth so that she wouldn't look so silly, what with that flower sprouting from her insides. He didn't get much back in, and so the stem and petals draped from her mouth and all over the floorboards of his boat.

The question of what to do with this woman arose. Should he try to bring her back to the port he'd left from? Should he sail in one direction and hope that land was closest that way and then carry her half-naked body around, asking if anyone knew her or knew anyone who might know her? The more he thought of it, the more he realized that as lovely as it would be to unite this one-legged woman with her family, if she had one, that was not plausible. With no identification on herself, finding any information about her would be all the less likely. So the man decided to give the woman a name. Perhaps it was her name before he found her, perhaps not. Either way, it would be what he came to know her by, and when looking back on that day he pulled her aboard, he still remembered her by that name: Azalea. The name lacked sophisticated thought, but the man didn't have a creative fiber in his being, and the name, to him, fit rather nicely. Delicate like a flower, her lips pink like the petals, a sign of grace and love. Yes, Azalea would do.

She looked so familiar to the man. Her face was a common one, yet rare. By herself, she would have looked utterly regular, but in the midst of a crowd, she would have stood out. And what a life she could

have lived to end up there in the ocean, not in the company of a crowd but in the company of an uncaring sea and a man utterly alone. A million life choices could have saved her from that early fate, which took her life at what looked to be around twenty four, just as easily as a million life choices could have put her in the same exact situation, laying there limp on the man's boat with a living azalea plant sprouting from her mouth, petals adorned with a crown of sea salt. Yet none of those situations played out other than the exact ones that had and that caused her to end up where she did.

The man sat down next to her and ate some fish he'd caught earlier in the day, pondering what to do with this miracle of a woman, whose insides were made of nothing but plants and whose body came to him from the depths of the ocean by nothing more than chance. He wanted to find a way to coax her soul back into her body, take her down someplace south of the equator to a witch doctor he'd heard of during his times in Egypt. He'd never believed in witch doctors or magic or voodoo or any of that until he reeled the woman in that day. She must've already had some magic festering within her, because the azalea inside of her was still alive and far reaching, well beyond the length of any azalea the man had ever seen. And she was so much more than just a woman. She was hope and she was a lack thereof. She was all the man had ever dreamt of having and yet she was still nothing. Nothing more than inanimate flesh and bones that he assumed would never rot, just the same as the ocean never rotted.

Something, however, about bringing her to a witch doctor did not sit right with him. There was always a catch to things such as that, and in the stories he was told as a child by his Norwegian mother, good things never came from spells. So then he considered doing something else with her. Dumping her off the side of the boat so she could return to the ocean that claimed her first was another idea. But who would want to be forgotten in the sea? A shark or a large fish might eat away at her and then she would be nothing more than digested flesh and flower.

For hours the man pondered what to do with her, and then he knew. Hurriedly, he took off his storm coat and wrapped it around the woman to cover her bare chest from the elements. He had two storm coats, and although he'd given her his favorite one, he would manage just fine with the other coat. He set sail towards the direction he assumed land to be closest. For days he sailed with the woman by his side. She decomposed no further during those days than she already had when he found her, which was not at all. During those days, the man got to know her closer by inspecting the black space behind her eyes, through the iris, where all the hardships and happiness of a human resides. That was how he found the vague story of her life and found that it was one balanced with both hardship and happiness—how all lives are structured—but there was something more there that he was not wise enough to fully decrypt. Although he tried desperately to decipher what exactly it was that he saw behind those eyes that set her apart from all others, his attempts were in vain. When land was at last in sight, the man knew himself not to be anywhere he'd been before. Closer and closer he drew his boat to a thin strip of undiscovered beach; towering behind it were rows of cliffsides that not the most skilled of rock climbers could have successfully scaled. Entry by sea was the only way ashore.

During the multiple days it took to reach land, the man prepared. And when he saw land on the horizon, he was overjoyed to know that he was ready. His shallow boat stopped only feet from the sand. He dropped his anchor and the boat held it taut. The man picked the woman up and walked off the steps on the back of his rickety boat. The water was not deep, and so he was able to hold her above the demanding sea, only his waist down engulfed. The woman was light enough for him to hold up with ease, and when he was on dry sand with her, he placed her down, wading back to his boat to grab a shovel, scissors, and a piece of paper. With the items, he made his way back to the beach. He dug up all the sand he could to make a six foot deep hole and then dragged her body in, shoveling the sand over her so that if

anyone were to ever walk on the beach, they would not know the sand had been disturbed. Before dumping any sand on the woman's body, though, the man looked at her one last time. With his jacket on her body, she looked so peaceful, snugly tucked away. The man pulled out his scissors and snipped the azalea plant by the stem that sprouted from behind her lips. Then, she was buried.

The man made his way across the beach and to the section of dirt where the cliffs met the sand. There, he planted the azalea flower so that it could grow without the help of the woman's insides. The man grabbed the piece of paper he took from his boat out from his pocket and placed it half under the dirt, so that if the wind were to pick up, it would not be carried away, but still exposed enough so that if someone were to land on the beach, they could still read the words "Azalea's Garden" scribbled across it. With this, the man had done what he'd set out to do, and he left the abandoned cove, wading over to his boat and sailing away, back out into the middle of the ocean where he would continue to live his life that had but one interesting set of days prescribed to it.