

The Floating Life

fiction by Sarah Cornwell

We cluster around the radio in the teachers' berth. I twist the dial to 16, the hailing and distress channel, and Dave holds a hand up for silence, even though nobody's talking. Most of the message is static, but it sounds bad. Ports are closed all along the northern coast of Puerto Rico, Haiti, the Virgin Islands. The throaty, Spanish-inflected voice of the Coast Guard broadcaster tells us to switch to 22A, and we do, straining for specifics of the attack, or whatever it is. I can make out snatches only: *stay at sea . . . hazards . . . we don't know . . . repeat stay . . . as it comes in*. The distant sound of hip-hop drifts from the dormitory berths; the students are enjoying a normal afternoon belowdecks, unaware. The satellites are down. The computers and the handheld devices search endlessly for signals.

Dave is trembling. He clamps one meaty hand over the other on the tabletop. "Do we tell the kids?" he asks. Dave is our history guy, but his graduate degree was in ethics.

"Tell them what?" I ask. "That we don't know what's going on?"

There are four of us down here, the core teachers: Dave, me and the two women, Beth and Audrey, who huddle together tearfully. Beth is a Catholic, and she stares out a porthole at the dark reddish line of the horizon, racked no doubt by fictional horrors—the four horsemen bearing down from the cloud cover. Captain Ho and the crew are above, engaged, I assume, in some immediately useful work. As a biologist, I can say that Captain Ho is a good example of evolved human behavior; he navigates, he adapts, he survives. His wife is the cook. He has everything he needs onboard the *Demeter*, our 140-foot steel-hull brigantine.

We four are lesser examples, lonely men and

women who for various reasons have chosen to live life afloat, teaching spoiled, wealthy children, none of whom we will know for more than one semester. This is our summer trip, a ninety-day southern odyssey. We leave in May from San Francisco straight for the Great Barrier Reef, head north to the Indian Ocean and then down the coast of East Africa, around the tip and across the South Atlantic to Argentina, then shoot back up toward home base in the Florida Keys in August. Most of us missed a mark somewhere: career, family, dream.

The hatch opens with a wet squeak, and Captain Ho appears on the stairs—his socks, his boat shoes and the cuffs of his jeans. He climbs down, looking tired already, a sheen of sweat on his forehead, ham radio clutched in his hand. "Nothing," he says. "Nothing on VHF, nothing on single sideband or satellite, and this thing—" He smacks the radio down with a force that speaks of tightly lidded pressure, "Even this [. . .] thing. Nothing."

"So what do we do?" I ask him.

"What can we do?"

"Right."

Our situation seems to me like an ethics test question, a hypothetical dilemma. If you were stranded on a boat full of high school students during some kind of catastrophe—say, terrorist attack, nuclear detonation, apocalypse—would you a, b, c or d? Would that Dave could offer us multiple choice. The unlimited field of options for response feels, right now, like no options at all.

At dinner, I watch the kids—thirty of them—shoveling canned peas into their mouths, cutting fat off the thick steaks we've been eating ever

Rio. I can see in their easy conversation that of-semester shipmate bond, a weathered good nature that will surprise their parents when they tramp down the gangway at Key West.

If they tramp down the gangway at Key West.

Stop it, I tell myself. This is dangerous and weak-minded thinking, and I should stop. But [. . .], what if we have to start a new race on an island somewhere, out of view of the aliens or al-Qaeda or whoever? I can't help darting a glance at Lisa, who is demonstrating something for the boy next to her with a piece of bread she holds in the air, then slowly tilts. She looks at him as if to say, *Understand?*

Lisa is my best student, maybe ever. She is a junior. She comes to all my study sessions and extra-credit dives, and her fascination with the systems of the world reminds me of my purpose. She will be very beautiful, though for now she chews the ends of her sandy hair, and constellations of pimples shift like the turning sky on her forehead and the places to either side of her chin. I would like her for a daughter-in-law instead of the [. . .] my sons are sure to pick.

Dave, beside me, spills a glass of water down the front of his shirt, I help him mop the plastic table. He spears his steak and holds it up to drip-dry. "Nolan," he says, "how can you eat?"

I shrug. Actually, I'm really hungry. Should I lose my appetite in the face of the looming unknown? I have been more afraid of saltwater crocodiles and box jellyfish. At least with those guys, I know the danger is real. A few years ago, in Australia, I was bitten through my wetsuit by a venomous blue-ringed octopus. They massaged my heart until it worked again. That's about what it takes for me to lose my appetite.

The truth is, very little could divert my attention from tomorrow's dive. Right now, we are twenty-four hours from the offshore bank reef where I will take the kids down to see massive coral spawning. There is only about a half-hour window of time, annually, when the elkhorn coral releases its infant polyps into the ocean. Year after year I have seen the kids' eyes widen inside their masks as the water around them fills with bright, tiny planulae that rush toward the light. A vast night snowstorm of life.

The planulae—little packages of egg and sperm—will gestate as they float on the ocean's surface, and then they will drift back down to reattach and start new colonies. Elkhorn coral is on the endangered list, and each year I catch thousands of planulae and ferry them north to a lab on Key West, where I am helping to build a coral nursery. The conservationists there will nurse my polyps into adulthood and then release them back into the Atlantic to rebuild the dying reefs. Coral polyps—the tiny animals that twine together to form what you'd recognize as coral—are all stomach, mouth and tentacle. Instead of a brain, they have a nerve net. They are beings of appetite and sensation. I admire them.

I clap Dave on the back as I get up to bus my dishes. He scowls at me. He doesn't want reassurance; he'd rather wallow. Lisa has left the dining hall, I pass her on deck on the way to the teachers' berth. She is pressed against the railing, watching the horizon through binoculars. When she lowers them, I see circular impressions around her eyes.

"What do you think it is?" she asks. "The red stuff?"

I am honest. "No idea."

"Could it be some kind of aurora?"

"Sure."

When I squint, the horizon looks like a slack, fuzzy length of maroon yarn looped around the world. Clouds hang low and bright, and the sun, almost set, casts light across the water in glancing horizontals. I put my hand out, and Lisa lays the binoculars in it. Magnified, the red horizon is alarming. I can see striations in the color—dark, light, dark—as if the redness in some places is rolling toward us.

"Can we still go on the dive?" Lisa asks.

"Absolutely."

"Mr. Harrity?" she asks. I hand the binoculars back. "When we get to Key West—" My breath catches in my throat. I think of a place I know that has the best soft-shell crab and margaritas.

"Do you think you could write me a recommendation? For college?"

I tell Lisa of course I will, and I hurry past her and down to my berth, where I lie in bed for a

while, trying to straighten myself out. My feelings for Lisa are purely professorial. Someday maybe I will eat soft-shell crab with her parents to celebrate her college admission, and she will still not be old enough to order a drink. Actually, I'm sure I would hate her parents. They're New Yorkers, probably rich and overprogrammed. I bet the mother wears a fur coat.

Maybe the redness is an atmospheric illusion. How could it appear the same in the west—where Puerto Rico lies just thirty-some miles off—as it does in the east, where the ocean stretches to distant Africa?

Later, in the teachers' berth, I play scrabble with Audrey. She keeps spelling out things like *doom* now on her tile rack and flipping it around to show me, giggling. *No moon g. Go x soon.*

"You just keep picking up O's," I commiserate.

Dave lies on the padded fold-out bench we call the sofa, pretending to read a biography of Eisenhower. "Ten bucks says Beth can't keep a secret." Beth is on babysitting duty tonight, supervising the girls' dormitory. I think Dave's wrong, though; if anyone can put on a happy face for the kids, it will be studious little Beth, our Classics teacher. If she can convince kids that Latin will serve them well, she can convince them of anything.

Audrey grows serious, watching me. "Are you thinking of your kids?"

"Oh, they're fine. They have no idea."

"No, I mean, *your* kids."

"I'm sure they're fine, too," I say. I'm sure everyone is fine.

It's no use thinking about my sons. They're both installed at state universities, but even if the radio worked, I couldn't reach them. My sons were eight and ten when my wife and I split, and they chose to live with her full-time. I will never understand it. When we offered them the decision, I thought it would mean summers or winters, weekends or weeks. Their defection is the hinge on which my life swung away from ordinary concerns. I lasted a year alone in that landlocked city where we'd lived together, and then I found this dream of

a job. I see the boys for holidays, but they are barely recognizable as the children they were—they drive SUVs; they like action movies; I have heard them use the word [. . .].

Audrey rearranges her letters thoughtfully. She says, "I keep thinking of my ex-boyfriend. I guess that means something, right? I guess I'm having an epiphany." Audrey isn't even thirty yet. I don't know exactly what she's doing on this boat; she talks every now and again about library school, and she seems like the kind of sweet, smart woman who would enjoy marriage and a good job in a real town somewhere. I don't mean that in a sexist way; she's welcome to the floating life if it suits her. I just think she's a little bit stalled, as I was at her age, stuck in dead-end lab jobs where the only biological phenomena that crossed my path were in drops of blood squished between glass slides.

Dave is fiddling with the radio, but now it's nothing but static on every channel. We're on our own.

I wake up thinking of the reef, damselfish lurking in recesses in the coral, reef sharks soaring above like happy kites. I have three teaching blocks to get through before I can prepare for tonight's dive. We will hit the water at nine o'clock so we can reach our depth by nine-fifteen and watch through the half-hour window for spawning.

Captain Ho is on deck, showing some freshmen the best way to coil line. They should know this by now. A few older boys shuffle past and yell the old joke, "Heave, Ho!" He smiles and waves them off. It is hot already. The red horizon encircles us, exhausting to consider, like a practical joke gone on too long.

"Any news?" I ask him.

"No," he says. "No change." My reflection looms fisheyed on his sunglasses. He guides me a few steps away from the kids. "I'm thinking about heading back to where we picked up the last transmission."

An anxious muscle flutters in my chest. "What? You think we'll get radio there?"

Captain Ho chews his lip, and it strikes me: this

is not a safety measure—this is some psychological thing. He wants to feel like he's doing something. "Hmm," I say, and pretend to consider this option seriously. "Staying on course seems like the best bet. When the radio comes on, they'll know where to find us."

"I just thought . . ." Captain Ho takes his sunglasses off, wipes them methodically with the hem of his T-shirt, doesn't finish the sentence.

"You're doing all the right things, John," I tell him, and I turn and make for my classroom. If he needs my permission to change course, I'll make it my business to lie low until it stops mattering, until I'm sitting tight with my tanks full of planulae.

Lisa is in my third block. She is still distracted by the red horizon, which is ever-so-slightly thicker this afternoon, and she watches it bob through the portholes of our lab classroom. Most of the kids seem oblivious, but a few, like Lisa, are on edge. For a moment I am alert to a bright screen under a desk—news!—but it is only a battery-powered game. "Put it away," I tell the kid, and she scowls.

I am teaching them about the ecosystem of the reef. If we had Internet access, today I would show them streaming video of coral masses releasing planulae. But this might be even better: to let them come to the dive with blank minds and be amazed. Each student has prepared a brief report on a species we could see on tonight's reef dive. We've had manatee, angelfish, moray eel, barracuda. When it's Lisa's turn, she punches up a PowerPoint presentation, and I hear a few groans. She clears her throat. I wouldn't have liked her when I was her age. I would have missed out.

She says, "The *Hippocampus*, or seahorse, is one of the few genera on earth in which the male releases young. The female seahorse deposits its eggs into a brood pouch on the male, and he fertilizes and carries the eggs. If we see a seahorse tonight, it is most likely to be of the species *zosteræ*: a dwarf seahorse. But remember, kids," he says, hamming it up unsuccessfully, "size doesn't matter."

I love her.

One of the greatest mysteries of my life is how the coral know so precisely when to spawn. Bleached and broken and ravaged by human interference, they still know, down to the half hour, when their infant polyps will have the best shot at life. And it is the same year in, year out, despite the ceaseless change of the world.

At eight o'clock I am ready to go. The plastic funnels I use to gather planulae, the cameras, gear and suits for ten kids and a couple of teachers are all laid out on the stern deck. Since I can't bring thirty kids with me on each dive, usually we rotate. But I set up the coral dive as our finale—an end-of-semester reward for the top GPAs from each class. Certain kids have clawed their way up from B to A averages just to get a spot.

I make my way through the narrow hallway from my classroom to the teachers' berth to find some coffee. I like to dive caffeinated—not something I recommend to my kids. As soon as I step inside, I am sorry I did. Dave is laid out on the sofa, breathing hard and fast, Audrey perched beside him. I have no time for this.

Audrey looks up at me. "Panic attack," she whispers. "He keeled over on deck."

"Were there kids around?"

Audrey nods.

"[. . .]." Mass hysteria is something I *do* know how to fear. "Hey, buddy," I say to Dave as I turn on the one-cup percolator. "You okay?"

He nods once and goes on gasping. Audrey leans across him to lift the sweaty brown curls from his forehead, and her T-shirt gaps at the neck. Dave shuts his eyes, ever the gentleman.

I beckon to Audrey, and she gets up. I whisper, "Are you still coming tonight?"

"Something came up," she says, rolling her eyes toward Dave.

"Okay," I say, ignoring her tone. "And if any of the kids ask, we'll say he has low blood sugar." If I were free tonight, I'd sit with Dave and help him collect himself, too, but even then, it would only be an exercise. Dave doesn't need me. If I were asked to choose between my reef and Dave, and I guess I *am* being asked to choose, I'd choose my reef.

So I do; I choose my reef.

I join the kids as they suit up on the stern deck. In the darkness, the horizon looks as blue-black as ever. Beth is in her wetsuit, doing pressure checks on all the tanks. I am surprised to see her here. I thought Audrey would be the hardy one.

"I couldn't keep on doing nothing," Beth says, a new brassiness to her voice. "So why not?" She works her long brown hair into a ponytail in a few expert moves. "Where are the girls?"

Only the boys have shown up—seven of them. My three girls are missing. I tell Beth I'll be right back, and I dash belowdecks. I can spend minutes only on this. The girls are in their dormitory berth, where I am not supposed to go. I climb down the ladder, and girls in boxer shorts recoil into their bunks like mollusks. I ask for Lisa, and they point me toward a bottom bunk with a drawn canvas curtain, behind which I hear whimpering. I've never heard such a little-girlish sound come out of Lisa. I squat by the curtain.

"Lisa?"

A hand pulls the curtain back, and there is Lisa with my other two missing divers, who have been comforting her. I am in the inner sanctum. Lisa sits up and lets out a long breath, composing herself. There's my girl.

"Something is really, really wrong, isn't it?" she asks me. Tears have left delicate marks like dried-up rivers on her cheeks. "Satellites don't just all stop working at once. Radios don't go dead."

One of the other girls, a Tanya, picks up the thread: "And Mr. Sheehan fainted."

We all sit for a moment, paralyzed by not knowing. But I am the adult, and I have to offer them *something*. "If it were anything serious," I lie, "we'd know by now."

Tanya sucks her teeth. "Really? You don't know anything? We're so [. . .]."

"Please don't tell the other kids you think so, Tanya."

Lisa is watching me closely. "What if something happens while we're on the dive?"

"Nothing's going to happen." Below us, the coral is ripening. These few moments of delay could ruin everything, and as they tick by, I realize how badly I need Lisa down there with me. I fix my disciplinarian eye on her, and it works its magic;

she drops her gaze to my collar. "If you miss this, you're going to be sorry for the rest of your life." I widen my focus to include the other girls. "About you."

They squirm, but I still haven't won them over. I am desperate. I say, "I don't know how I could write a recommendation for a student who would pass this up." I reach out and tug on Lisa's arm. "Up."

She wipes her eyes on the shoulder of her T-shirt and swings her feet out onto the ground, one and then the other. "I was just worried about my parents, you know. In New York. If it's, like, a terrorist thing."

She's using the past tense. This is good. "I'm sure they're just fine, Lisa. We have to get going," I say. The girls communicate in a female language of glances, and then they get up and follow me.

I slip into the warm ocean, and it is as soothing as sleep after the hardest day. The moon is gibbous, and from beneath, the surface of the ocean glows. Around me in the dark, bright shafts of bubbles appear where my students' headlamps illuminate the areas of disturbance caused by their less graceful entries into the water. Beth floats beside me. She turns the spotlight toward the kids, and I count them: ten. We descend.

Halfway down we stop for a bubble check, scanning each other's tanks for leaks. There is a sense, as we continue down, of infinity: endless depth on all sides. Some divers find that feeling of space uncomfortable, but I love it. I am weightless in the womb of the earth. I am part of an endlessly beautiful system.

Particles drift in the silver beams of our headlights. A school of gray snappers darts below me. I have gone ahead, and I trust that Beth is bringing up the rear, counting our kids again and again. My eardrums pop. The ocean here is twenty-five meters deep, and it is not long before I make out the dark topography of the reef: the hulk of a brain coral, the jutting shapes of the elkhorns. It is a fantastic night city: spires high-rises and caves full of sleeping things. Small fish lurk in bending grasses. I feel an impulse to

announce myself: I am here! I have missed you!

I pass over the reef, looking for the best view. I find a concentration of elkhorn coral and get set about preparing my funnels as the kids join me, swinging their headlamps around in search of action. We have about fifty minutes of air. My regulator mouthpiece tastes vaguely sulfurous, and I wonder what was used to clean it, or if the whole atmosphere is full of the horizon's toxic red dust, settling invisibly on all surfaces. I spit it out and swish it around in the sea, and the taste is gone.

We wait. Lisa floats at my side, her blond ponytail fanning out like something alive. Whenever we see a fish, she looks at me as if I could somehow signal her the species name. I just nod. It is so dark and so quiet. Anemones bend in the sea breeze. From down here, everything feels improbable: the red horizon, Dave breathing into a paper bag, our little bobbing ship. Land itself begins to feel improbable. When I think of my sons, they are five and seven, playing in a sandbox, not the disappointing young men I know are out there somewhere, making do. We swim in lazy circles around the elkhorns. I beckon the kids over to see a nudibranch—a tiny, neon purple sea slug—clinging to the coral. A huge moray eel ribbons by. But the coral holds out.

I watch the passage of time on my dive watch, and I start to worry. *Come on*, I think at the coral. *Now*. When my ex-wife used to dive with me, she could never stay down for more than half an hour. Pressure headaches. I check in with Beth and the kids, exchanging A-OK hand signals. They grin around their regulator mouthpieces to show me they are still feeling gung ho. They are not disappointed; they see stoplight parrotfish and blue tang. They swim a few meters off after a shadow stingray and then come back. They don't know what the coral spawning would look like. They don't know what they're missing.

Maybe it already happened. Is it possible that the coral know more than I do about the situation on land, that they've decided to hold on to their eggs? Have I simply miscalculated? Or is this the way living things change—threatened again and again by God only knows what? I feel a little sick

from the coffee and the pressure and the dropping weight in my gut: it's not going to happen.

I've missed the spawning. [. . .] it.

Beth swims beneath me, and I am blinded for a moment by her spotlight. She gives me a thumbs-up to say *time to go up*. She's right; we have only enough air left for ascent and decompression. This year, my reef will die faster than it can grow. I am heartbroken for my polyps.

We ascend at the rate of our spent breath, the carbon dioxide rising from our regulators like slow silver balloons. A few meters beneath the surface, we stop for decompression. We can see the shadow of the ship. Some of the kids have mastered neutral buoyancy; others sink and twist, trying to keep their bodies level. I watch them and feel a different pang; at least I should have succeeded here, as a teacher. We surface into cool air and sound. A handful of students are waiting for us on deck, playing cards and sipping tea. "Hey!" someone shouts, "There they are!"

We climb the ladder up to them, and I hear kids saying, "Did you see the eel? Oh my God, that thing was [. . .] huge!" Beth wrings saltwater out of her ponytail.

I slide my mask up onto my forehead and look around for Lisa, who will understand the depth of my disappointment. In their suits in the moonlight, my divers glimmer wet and black like seals. They stumble and hold each other up, peeling off flippers. I can't tell which one is Lisa.

"Lisa?" Everyone looks at me and blinks.

"Oh my God," says Tanya, and then all the kids are saying it. Beth takes frantic headcounts: *Onetwothreefourfivesixseveneightnine. Onetwothreefourfivesixseveneight-nine.*

I unscrew my regulator and slip my rig onto a fresh tank as fast as I possibly can. Thank God there are fresh tanks. Mine is an octopus rig, with a spare hose and demand valve for a second diver. I've never had to use it before. I slide down the ladder. Above me, the kids' faces appear dark over the rail.

"Nolan!" Beth is shouting. "Wait!"

I know she's trying to come with me, but she's taking too long. Lisa doesn't have the air for this. I dive.

My legs burn, my breath thunders in my head. I'm going too fast and there is nobody to check my gear. If I get the bends, I'll deserve them. I forced Lisa on the dive. She was distraught, and I did not listen. Anything that happens to her will be my fault.

I'm about fifteen meters down when I see the snowstorm coming.

I feel a lump in my throat and bite down on my regulator mouthpiece. It's happening after all. Planulae shine in the beam of my headlamp. Little fragments of light, little diamonds. I left my funnels on deck. I swim down, down, down, and they are all around me, flying upward toward the vague moonlight. If I had pockets, I would fill them. If I could point these baby polyps toward safety, God knows I would do it. Most will be eaten by fish. Those that mature in these waters and drift back down to form new reef will be bleached and poisoned by our heat and our chemical runoff, or choked out by sewagefied algae. *I'm sorry*, I think to them. *I'm so sorry*. I only have time for Lisa.

I push down against the upward traffic, pressing my lips together so as not to swallow planulae. I retrace our swim. I can see only a few meters ahead in the dense, spawning rush. Minutes pass. I am not sure exactly when Lisa would, or will, or, God forbid, *has*, run out of air; exact timing depends on a set of variables: breath and pressure and so on. I swim as close to the reef as I can. Something big catches my eye, but it is only a dark, swaying sea fan. I see angelfish gulping planulae. I find that brain coral we first saw, and then I make my way to the elkhorns.

Something takes shape in the darkness ahead, and as I get closer, I swim for it with all my might. It is Lisa, floating like an empty suit in the storm. Even before I check her vitals, I find her tank gauge and see that she is out of air. I rip the regulator off her, and a tiny flower of blood blooms from her mouth into the water; I have torn her lip. I shove my secondary mouthpiece into her mouth. Only now do I put my finger to her slender neck. I feel a pulse. Her throat trembles. Her lungs hiccup, and then she looks at me through the swarming life.

All around us the world is dark. If you had no lights, you would feel the spawning only as

a gentle current buoying you up. I hold Lisa by both arms. We stare at each other, each in the spotlight of the other's headlamp, as she shudders and flails, searching for the pattern of her breath. Planulae rise through the light between us. She has cried inside her mask; water pools in the curved plastic below her eyes. She bears it out; she finds her breath. She grows calm. I know what she is feeling because I have felt it myself: she has been returned to life. She is astonished.

We float together as the spawning slows, and though I am looking at Lisa, I see all my children. I see every kid I ever taught, unaging, crowded on the stern deck of our old ship, suiting up to follow me into the dark. I pass my hands over dead reef, and it comes back to life, the polyps strong and hungry. I see my sons, my beautiful boys, lying prone amidst the rubble of a destroyed America. I nestle regulators between their lips, and I watch as they, too, open their eyes, find their breath.

I give a thumbs-up sign to Lisa, and she shakes her head no and holds out a finger, the signal for *just a second*. We stare at each other in perfect understanding. We both want to stay here as long as we can. We are afraid to go up.

We are afraid of everything.

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