

## To the Water's Edge

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For the woman, the day begins at a time when, for most, it may as well be over. She has a man to tend to; and so, for the simple reason that she must, for him, she sets about preparing a pot-au-feu or something similar, cutting the various vegetables, adding the sausages and the consommé. In truth, there is nothing taxing about dishes like pot-au-feu; she is capable of preparing something more suited to her talents, something that might satisfy her own desires even—but think this though she may, it is the food the man demands, that leaves her own desires unfulfilled, that she prepares.

Staring fixedly at the broiling concoction inside the pot, the woman realises that she recognises it from somewhere. It is the same turmoil she has felt since childhood, appearing to her now as déjà vu. As a child, she felt alienated by the other girls' gossiping, by their boastful talk, by their strange, febrile excitement born of excessive self-consciousness. Thus detached, the woman played the part of the young girl matter-of-factly, albeit in a vague fug of loneliness and depression. Her memory of her school days is that of slithering through them like a snake, feeling like she might choke on the classroom air that lay thick with the smell of madeleines, hair mousse and anti-perspirant spray; and yet, such was her inner tumult and anguish at being in the midst of it all, even this memory she is unable to vouch for.

*That young teacher keeps leering at me, but I couldn't fancy him any less if I tried ... There's this singer I used to like, I was a fan back before he was even popular. But now that he's made it, I'm thinking I might not bother anymore ... Everyone always goes on about how cute she is, but her face doesn't do anything for me. Like, she's supposed to be more a girl-next-door type than a beauty, but that's just another way of saying she isn't all that pretty, if you ask me.*

Conversations about nothing in particular, as quick to dissipate as freshly risen meringues. And yet, light on substance and, yes, meringue-like though they were, for the young girls engaged in them, these conversations represented a matter of utmost importance: namely, the extent to which they were able to give vent to their surplus of physiological sensations. As for the woman, she gobbled up these adolescent emissions like a goldfish gulping for oxygen, her stomach swelling like that of a pregnant woman until she feared she might burst.

She remembers a remark one of her teachers once made to her: about how she was looking pale and under the weather, but was everything okay? *It's just, even looking unwell as you do*, the teacher went on, *you appear almost to be in some sort of daze, as if you were enthralled by something. What on earth are you thinking about? Are you managing to concentrate?*

But the woman already knew. She was aware already of the trance she was in, of how it was the prelude to some imminent seizure. It was in that same rapturous state that she would go on to become an adult, and in which she later met a man. Thinking how nice it would be not having to listen to those meringue-like grievances and complaints of her childhood any longer, she met a man, and before she knew whether she was in love with him or not, they were together.

But then one day the man turned to her and said, "There's no thread of logic running through anything you say. Listening to you speak is like watching bubbles float off into nothingness, or like grasping at clouds."

*Bubbles and clouds.* At the man's comment, the woman felt something click into place. *That's it*, she thought, recognising them immediately. For what else could he be referring to but those same meringues of her youth, those empty emissions of pent-up adolescence? The observation terrified her. The thought of those swollen air globules that had once so tormented and perturbed her, expanding inside her this whole time, and now she was vomiting them up...

She apologised immediately, ashen-faced the way she had been in front of her teacher. She didn't know what it was she was apologising for exactly, but she did it all the same, offering up her excuses lest the man who kept her concealed should leave her: "Sorry, I suppose I'm just, well, a little off today. But you're right: good speech ought to be logical, and of sound construction like a stone monastery. Do forgive me. I'm just feeling a little out of sorts, that's all."

In truth, the woman has been feeling out of sorts ever since was a child, but she acted as though it were a momentary lapse, nonetheless. *Whatever it takes for him not to leave me*, she thought. Whatever it took to keep her concealed.

At her utterance of the words 'stone monastery', the woman had felt a pang of guilt; for in fact, she'd long thought of the man as resembling a stone edifice of some description. Large, yes, but devoid of warmth. Cold even. She had hitched herself to him for the security he

provided; and yet, even in his presence, she couldn't let go of the nagging sense that she was afraid of something. Just who *was* this person? she wondered. And what to make of this vague anxiety despite his buttress-like presence at her side?

She was dimly aware of them: those dark clouds looming ominously over the stone monastery below. Sooner or later, they would pelt it with cold rain, or scorch it with lightning. *And when they do*, she thought, *who's to say the monastery won't collapse, leaving me exposed to the full brunt of the storm?* The thought chilled the woman to her bones. *Yes, he puts me on edge, and there's something undeniably cold about him. But what other choice do I have? To depend on him is all I know. At this point, he is my addiction.*

It had all the hallmarks of a crime of passion. A woman laced the drink of the man she loved with poison, to lethal effect. It would appear she had intended on joining him, for afterwards she threw herself into the sea, only to be spotted before she'd had time to finish the job. The impulse seems to have announced itself unexpectedly one day. By all accounts, the couple had been close, the woman generally speaking the nervous sort, hardly the kind you'd peg capable of murder-suicide. She discharged household tasks with a conscientiousness bordering on the dutiful—the man's shirts unfailingly crisp and white; the saccharine smell of soy sauce wafting from the kitchen ventilation fan.

She had always seemed the picture of happiness: timid, yes, but never short of a smile, not even in the early mornings when she came to put the rubbish out, the lavender print apron her man had gifted her for her birthday tied neatly about her waist. "He bought me this apron as a gift, you know," she often said, as if by force of habit. "I was over the moon. I've treasured it ever since."

She seems to have had a soft spot for melodramas and breezy bestsellers. During conversations with the neighbours, she'd often ask, "Do you think something so sad and moving could ever happen in real life?" and she would come over all misty-eyed as she said it, on occasion even shedding actual tears, the indulgence in a world of fantasy invariably loosening the reins on her emotions.

*And to think she always seemed so calm and sweet-natured*, the neighbours said. *She loved that man with all her heart—what could possibly have possessed her to do such a thing? It just goes to show, you can never really know someone...* It was the talk of the

neighbourhood, a topic returned to again and again as if mere mention of it were somehow pleasurable. Over and over. Like the waves that had lashed repeatedly at the woman after she threw herself into the sea.

“Isn’t it strange how the sea manages to remain so shapeless?” she’d once commented to a neighbour. “What makes the waves so restless, I wonder? All that jostling back and forth, and never any change to show for it. It’s quite bizarre if you think about it.” No doubt the neighbours must have wondered why she’d started talking about the sea all of a sudden.

“In and out the waves go, over and over, and to what end? Nothing ever changes. I suppose it’s a lot like our lives in that respect,” the woman went on. “I mean, there we are making dinner, doing the washing, every day it’s the same old thing. Day after day, going through the motions, and what does it ever amount to? Time passes and that’s it. I couldn’t tell you the last time I learnt something new. It’s like I don’t make discoveries anymore, or expand my horizons from one day to the next. My mind just stays the same, never growing. It’s enough to make you wonder whether, well, whether there shouldn’t be *more* to life.

“Still,” she said with a sigh, “I shouldn’t complain, not when there are people out there with real problems. Just look at men, for instance—now they’ve *really* got their work cut out. I dare say for them, every day must be like living through a revolution, that’s how I ought to think of it. In which case, I suppose I really should consider myself rather lucky, getting to live each day as it comes, free of all that revolution and upheaval.

“Though I have to admit, the sight of the sea does make me a little anxious,” the woman continued. “The thought of all those waves shifting endlessly back and forth, as if on a loop... Sometimes I wonder if that isn’t precisely what makes them so cold and drained of colour. Sure, it may *look* like nothing’s changing, but what if something’s actually stalking its way ever closer, little by little? Until one day, just like that, the entire sea suddenly buckles and collapses in on itself?”

To her neighbours, the woman’s ramblings were little more than idle fantasies. She had too much time on her hands, they thought, had seen one too many melodramas for her own good—it was no wonder she was imagining things. Besides, having husbands and children of their own, they were too preoccupied with their own grievances to give the woman’s nightmares much in the way of thought.

If at times she indulged in egregious fantasies, then it was also true that she always returned to everyday life. In this sense, she was just like the waves, breaking only to retreat

moments later. Not that any of the neighbours made the connection.

None of them knew; not the neighbours, not even the woman herself. Nobody noticed it stalking ever closer, little by little, something as large as it was undefined. Something on a scale comparable to the revolutions experienced by men every day at work. And not a single person noticed.

This was what lay behind the woman's crime: a set of circumstances so ordinary as to be perfectly banal. People could try to get at the truth all they liked, but it wasn't likely to come out any time soon. It was the same as asking what makes the waves so restless, after all.

The woman wasn't the slightest bit different to any of the other women in the neighbourhood. They all carried within them the same sense of foreboding, in spite of which they kept themselves busy so as to get on with life. Every day, upon bumping into one other when taking out the rubbish or collecting the newspaper, they would say: *Good morning. Another lovely day by the looks of it.* If anything was different about the woman, it was the way she would say: *Another lovely day to be thankful for.* Thankful. But to whom, exactly? She couldn't say. She knew only that, whatever she felt grateful towards, it was something as large as the ocean. If nothing else, she had a vague awareness of the existence of something unfathomable.

The woman learns about the murder—the attempted murder-suicide—from the newspaper. “What's that you're looking at?” the man demands. “You've never taken so much as the slightest bit of interest in society or the world around you. What on earth could someone like you have to read about in a newspaper?” The woman, perhaps out of a sense of guilt, folds the paper hurriedly before concealing it from his gaze. “It's nothing,” she demurs. “There was an article about knitting so I thought I might take a look for once, that's all. What do you fancy for dinner?”

She is still clutching the newspaper. She can't explain it, but she feels like she is being drained of her body heat, as if it were being siphoned out from her by the newspaper in her grip. It's as though, in her agitation, all the blood had rushed to her head—albeit only momentarily—before suddenly and inexplicably draining away, sending her temperature plummeting along with it. *How curious*, she thinks to herself, *I've never experienced anything like that before.* As if in sympathy, the couple's black cat rubs itself up against the

woman's legs. Just then, the pressure cooker comes to the boil.

The woman lets out an audible gasp and rushes to turn off the stove. "Forgive me, I was a million miles away," she says. "I'm so sorry."

*Sorry, I'm so sorry.* She is forever apologising to the man like this. She apologises even when she hasn't done anything wrong. *After all, she thinks, if ever he were to leave me, that would spell the end of me. And if I come to an end, well, that's the same thing as the whole world going kaput. Of course, people say the world will continue without them, but I've never been one to buy it myself. As far as I'm concerned, the world begins and ends with me, which means that when I end, the world ends too. That's why I make my apologies: so that I can go on taking refuge beneath his wings. So that I can keep the end of the world at bay.*

Her grip tightens on the newspaper she is still holding. *It's no wonder this woman in the paper did what she did, she tells herself. Killing her husband, throwing herself into the sea: I can understand it all too well. Why, the idea of having to keep him in my thoughts for as long as I live, it hardly bears thinking about. So much so that I find myself wanting to put an end to it all. To my relationship with him, to the world, everything.*

*I know full well I can't make his every concern my own. So instead, I'm destined to remain addicted to him, while suffering withdrawal from that which I crave the most. In which case, perhaps I'd be better off killing him, and taking my own life, too. Better that than the agony of withdrawal.*

From that day on, the woman takes to carrying a clipping of the newspaper article around with her. Every day she thinks about the woman's crime, mulling it over as she stares down at the pressure cooker's seething contents. What kind of poison did the woman use? she wonders. How did she get her hands on it? And in what way did she go about serving him the drink once she'd poisoned it?

She thinks about other things too: like what it must have felt like when the woman plunged herself into the water. What made her choose to do it that way instead of any other method she could have used? Is the sea really as cold as it looks? How painful is it not being able to breathe underwater? How cruel and merciless will death feel when it comes?

"What's taking so long with dinner?"

The man's voice jolts her from her train of thought. He is speaking to her. She puts her musings on hold, listens as he talks: about his colleagues from the office, about how work is going, about the state of the economy. Later, as they sit eating the food that she has prepared

for them, she murmurs noncommittally every now and then as if to show she is listening. But at the back of her mind, it is the woman's crime of which she is still thinking. A basso continuo running ceaselessly beneath everything else.

Then, one evening, the woman suggests that the two of them take a trip to the sea. "At this time of the year?" the man says, taken aback. "To do what? Stand around in the cold looking at the grey ocean, watching white waves break against the rocks? Because that's all there'll be to do, you know."

"That's fine by me," the woman replies. "I'm aware it's not the season for it, but I want to go all the same. Besides, it's not like I'm planning on swimming anyway, so a little cold doesn't bother me. I just want to go to the sea, that's all. To stand face to face with it."

If there is anything ominous in the woman's suggestion, the man doesn't notice. Instead, he simply tilts his glass of chilled sake at an angle and, peering through its patterned surface, ventures to remark, "Well, I never. Look, the moon is reflected inside the glass. It's a beautiful night out." "So it is," the woman replies, then continues: "The world always seems so beautiful and serene come night-time." *It is during the days*, she thinks privately to herself, *that I find myself wanting to scream.*

"Darling," the woman says, her complexion ashen. "Do you really love me?" The man reels in surprise. "What sort of stupid question is that? I'd hardly be living with you if I didn't, now, would I?" "That's not what I mean," the woman mutters, before falling silent. That's not love, she thinks; at least, it's not the kind of love she's looking for. *I don't want you to love me the way you would any other woman. I want your love for me to be different somehow.*

Deep down, she realises, it isn't even the woman she has become that she wants him to be interested in, not really. No, what she wants is for him to look past her as she is now, back to who she was *before* she became a woman, to those suffocating years of her youth; to put the muddled, turbid thoughts of her younger self in order, to love the young girl she once was, to keep the child in her safe from harm. Oh, how happy she would be if only his love for her would extend back into her past!

"You don't love me, not really," she mutters under her breath, but the man doesn't hear her.

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Today like every other day, women in their multitudes will offer themselves up before mirrors: combing their hair, applying lipstick, spraying themselves with perfume. Not for anyone in particular, least of all for a man, but rather for themselves. Enchanted by what they see, they gaze upon their reflections in full awareness that, should ever a young girl appear before them identical to the one in the mirror, they would surely eat her up, devouring her whole. How satisfying it would be, they imagine, to get to be the sole and total consumers of their own projection, to complete themselves without being defiled in the eyes of a man or anyone else!

Dressed in flowing, silk-like attire, these women bound and frolic about, sharing in laughter. They are at the height of bliss; it is as if they have never had cause to know pain or disappointment, and never will. They share pastel-coloured macarons and knowing glances, contemplating what mischief to get up to next. Like that little band of girls along the seafront at Balbec, so uncanny is their resemblance to one another that they exist only as a girlish cluster, with no individual personalities to call their own.

This is how they will stay: as anonymous, frolicking little girls, never to decay. And if at times they are pawed at by hands filthy enough to turn their stomachs, they will respond to such provocations, and the men behind them, in the cruellest way they know how: by ignoring them and erasing all trace of them from memory. Then continuing on as if they were never defiled in the first place.

Only a pure and sacred frigidity can violate them. Against everything else, even decay, they are impervious, for there is nothing *to* decay: they are unbearably inorganic, hard and unyielding as mineral. Untouchable, they float where life takes them as the shackles of some future portent, similarly adrift, gradually close around them. A melancholic, pitch-black shadow stalking its way ever closer. A passionless insanity rendering them something other than flesh.

Once, long before she was driven to do what she did, the woman from the newspaper used to be one such little girl too, frolicking beneath the sun. Never in her wildest dreams did she imagine she'd one day end up throwing herself in the sea—but it came for her nonetheless, steady and unrelenting in its pace. The other woman senses it too: that's why, continuing in her own ambiguous relationship with a man who may or may not love her, the whole sordid affair from the newspaper feels, well, familiar somehow. She can imagine herself being driven to something similar: one last, violent gasp like the scream from her pressure cooker,



so quick to start seething after she sets it on the stove.

To actually go through with it, though... Most lack the nerve it takes to purchase the poison, the firmness of hand to take up the knife. And so, though filled with a sense of foreboding, most women will live out their lives regardless, never knowing peace of mind.

Today then, again, the woman will set her pressure cooker on the stove and fantasise about the woman's crime. As if the very thought of it brings her pleasure. Peering down into the cloudy, opaque mixture. Like something straight out of a melodrama. Nothing captivates her more; it occupies nearly all her waking thoughts, yet she knows she lacks the vigour to go through with it. So she settles for imagining it instead, only immediately to chide herself for being so macabre; tells herself she might actually go through with it someday, before shuddering at the thought, then stops herself thinking about it altogether.

Once, when she was putting out the rubbish, she spotted a family she recognised getting ready to leave for a trip. The couple were lugging suitcases, and their young son was shouldering a backpack. "We're off to the seaside," the wife called out. "Hardly the season for it, I know—it's already chilly out—but try telling that to His Little Majesty here. He's got it in his head he wants a picnic at the beach, and we can't get him to listen to reason. So we decided we'd drive to the coast, just the three of us."

"Fancy that," the woman replied. "I'd have thought it was too brisk out, if not positively cold already. You will take care of yourselves, won't you? The last thing you want is to get swept away by the waves at this time of year."

"Is everything okay?" the husband chimed in. "You're looking a little worse for wear there. Your lips are purple. Are you sure you're eating properly? Are you getting enough sleep?"

"Not really," the woman confessed. "I've been a little off-colour lately. One minute I'll be oddly flushed, then the next thing I know I'm practically shivering."

"Use a little tact, would you?" the wife said, chiding her husband. "A woman's body goes through changes when you get to be our age. Honestly, I can't believe the things you come out with sometimes." Then, turning to the woman: "Excuse him, would you?" As if to say: *You don't need to explain yourself to me.*

"Come on, let's go already," the boy said, pulling on his mother's skirt. "I want to go to the beach!"

"Listen to this spoiled little prince of ours! I don't know what to do with him sometimes.

Right, we'd better be off."

"Have a safe trip," the woman said. And with that, the family bundled themselves into the car and they were off.

"Look after yourselves," she muttered after them as the car pulled away.