

By the Shore

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The woman's day begins when she wishes it would end. She has a man, and he must be fed. So she cuts up vegetables and sausage, throws them in a pot, and pours in stock to make a *pot-au-feu*. *Pot-au-feu* is really quite simple. She figures she could have made something more difficult, something that would have satisfied her desires. But she is making what *he* asked her to make. And that will not satisfy her desires.

The woman stares at the chaos in the pot. Oh, she says, I've seen this before. It is a *déjà vu* of the chaos she has felt ever since she was a young girl; that strange exuberance brought on by the secret, prideful and self-conscious behavior of other young girls. Unable to comprehend it, she dispassionately played her part through a vague mist of solitude and depression. She recalls the suffocating stench of her classroom, its air heady with antiperspirant, hair gel and madeleines, how it made her feel like a snake crawling round on its belly. But her recollection is imperfect owing to the chaos and anguish of those days...

You know that young teacher? He keeps ogling me. But I don't like him at all!

I was a fan of that singer before they were big. Now everybody likes them, so I don't listen to them anymore.

Yeah, yeah, everyone says she's cute, but I don't care for her looks. She's not beautiful. She's cute, which is to say: she's not pretty.

Mindless chatter, all of it. And frothy like meringue. No, *it really was meringue*—light and frivolous, yet of the utmost importance to young girls. A means of seeing to what extent they could expend their excess of hormones. The woman recalls swallowing this excess like a goldfish sucking in oxygen, her belly swelling up as though she were becoming pregnant, and the subsequent crisis of her body about to burst.

She recalls a teacher's words. *Is everything all right? You look pale. Are you in pain? Then again, you also seem distant, distracted even. Tell me, what's on your mind? Are you having trouble concentrating?*

The woman knew. She knew that what she was feeling was a sort of rapture that comes before the body revolts. It was in this enraptured state that she came of age and met the man. Thinking that she would no longer have to listen, as she had in her girlhood, to that bitching and moaning that was so much like meringue, she befriended him. And without stopping to consider whether or not she loved him, she made her life with him.

But one day the man says to her, Nothing you say makes any sense. It just vanishes like foam. Honestly, I feel like I'm grabbing at clouds when I listen to you talk.

Foam. Clouds. She thinks, That's what I used to call "meringue," back when I was in school. That empty hormonal release. She listens to the man and begins to fear that the swelling ball of oxygen that had once caused her such pain and anxiety is now swelling inside of her again, and is making her nauseous.

So she apologizes, her face as pale as it was that day she stood before her teacher. But what she is apologizing for, she cannot say. Only she is apologizing to keep this man who had given her shelter from leaving. To defend herself.

I'm sorry, she says. I suppose I'm feeling off today. But you're right. When a person says something, it should make sense. It should be architecturally sound. Like a monastery. Anyways, I'm sorry. I'm just feeling off, that's all.

To be sure, the woman had been feeling *off* ever since she was a young girl, but she acted like the feeling was momentary. I have to, she reasoned, or this person who has given me shelter will leave.

A monastery. She feels guilty for having said it. But she has long thought of the man in this way: as a stone structure. Large and impressive, yet lacking warmth—cold, really. She had come to him to gain a sense of security, but there was something about him that still made her feel afraid. Who is he, she wonders, and what is this vague uncertainty I feel in his large presence?

She senses it dimly. A dark cloud brooding over a stone monastery, throwing down cold rain and sparks. Growing fearful, she thinks, It's all going to crumble, and I'm going to be swept away. He makes me uneasy. He's cold and unfeeling. But I have no one else. I depend on him. I am an addict. He is my drug.

There was a crime. An act of passion. A woman loved a man, and murdered him. Laced his drink with poison. She would have killed herself too, by leaping into the sea, had she not been caught in the act. The idea must have come to her suddenly, for everyone had only good things to say about her and the man. Nobody thought her the kind of woman who'd plot a murder-suicide. They claimed she was much too shy. Besides, she kept house with what could only be described as great integrity: the man's shirts were always crisp and white, and the kitchen ventilator gave off the sweet smell of soy sauce.

Indeed, the woman seemed happy. True, she was shy, but she always smiled. She would take out the garbage first thing in the morning, in the lavender apron the man had bought her for her birthday. I am really glad he bought it for me, she would say. I will cherish it forever. These words were a habit with her.

She loved soap operas and popular fiction. She apparently talked about them all the time with her neighbors. Don't you wonder if such sad and beautiful things happen to real people, she'd ask them, and her eyes would be red or watery, as if every time she visited those fictional worlds, she'd been able to find some sort of emotional release.

Such a quiet one, her neighbors said, and such a loving wife. How could she have done such a thing? But I suppose you never can tell. Trading gossip, they brought up the woman again and again, as if it pleased them. Again and again, like the waves that had crashed against her body on that day she had leapt into the sea.

One day the woman had asked her neighbors, Why is the ocean formless? Why does it ebb and flow, yet remain unchanged? It's strange. Her neighbors must have wondered why she had brought up the ocean all of a sudden.

Waves repeat the same motions, but for what? It's like us. We cook and clean, day after day. But no matter how many times we repeat this, we're left with nothing, only time passing. You know, I've come to feel that I haven't really learned anything, haven't discovered anything, or come to any realizations. It's like I haven't grown up emotionally. In fact, I'm starting to doubt this kind of life is healthy.

She let out a sigh.

Then again, do I really have it so bad? After all, men have to work so hard. And I should consider that everyday is something of a revolution for them. Yes, when I think of things that way, I suppose I should be grateful for my peaceful life.

But the sea makes me so uneasy, the woman went on, what with its waves coming and going, day after day. Maybe it's this repetition that makes it seem so cold and pale. Actually, I wonder if there isn't something there that is making a slow and stealthy approach. If the sea itself is not going to suddenly collapse one day.

Her neighbors figured this was merely her fancy, that she had too much time on her hands, and was spending it all on her soaps. That's what made her imagine such things, they reasoned. Captive to the discontent which they felt towards their own children and husbands, they paid the woman's dark vision no mind.

So every time the woman finished one of these flights of fancy, she'd return to normal life as if she were a wave, rolling in and out, without her neighbors taking notice.

For none of them saw it coming, that indescribably large thing making its slow and stealthy approach. Not even the woman saw it. No, none of them took notice of that thing equal in scale to the "revolution" that their men faced everyday at work.

Such was the unremarkable lead-up to the murder-suicide. And no matter how hard people tried to dig up the facts, it seemed they would stay buried for some time. The mystery was like asking the question, *Why do waves ebb and flow?*

The woman was no different from her neighbors. Pregnant with anxiety, they all drudged from one day to the next. And whenever they came upon each other throwing out the trash or bringing in the papers, they called out, Good morning! My, what lovely weather we're having. Only if there was something different about the woman, it was that she'd say, I'm grateful for this lovely weather we're having. *Grateful*. To whom? Perhaps to something as large as the ocean, though she was only vaguely conscious of its enormity.

The woman reads about the incident in the newspaper. What's that, asks the man. I thought you didn't care for news. The woman folds up the paper as if she's done something

wrong. It's nothing really, she says. Only there's an article about knitting that caught my eye. Anyways, what do you want for dinner?

She is clutching the folded newspaper. She feels it robbing her of her warmth, and as if there'd been a momentary and inexplicable rush of blood to her head, followed by a sudden retreat, her body begins to cool down. What could it be, she wonders, I've never felt this way before. Her two black cats brush up against her legs, as if to sympathize with her. Just then, the pressure-cooker boils over.

Oh dear, says the woman, turning off the element. I must have been dreaming. Sorry sorry sorry. She is always apologizing to the man, even when she has done nothing wrong. She thinks, I would fall apart if he left me. And that would be like the end of the world. Of course, they say it keeps turning after you're gone, but I don't believe it. For my number one priority is myself. So when I come to an end, so does the world. That's why I apologize to him. Because I want him to keep sheltering me under his wings. I don't want the world to end.

But I get it, the woman says to herself, clenching the newspaper tightly, why the person in this article killed her husband and threw herself into the sea. She was suffering from having to think about him all the time. That's why she wanted to end it: to cut off all ties with him, with the world, with everything.

I can see that all his priorities can't be my own. Which is why I'm addicted to him, why I suffer from withdrawal. And because this withdrawal is so painful, I feel I should kill him and myself right now!

Days pass. The woman begins carrying a clipping of the newspaper article around with her, her mind frequently returning to its contents. She watches the red-hot pressure cooker, thinking to herself: I wonder what poison she used? How did she get her hands on it? How was she able to sneak it into his drink?

I wonder, she goes on, how she felt when she threw herself into the sea? Why did she choose to end things that way? How cold was the water? How painful was it to choke on the water? How awful, really, is it to die?

The man speaks. Dinner ready yet? And the woman stops thinking. She listens to him as he tells her about his colleagues, about his work, about global finance. Eating the meal she has prepared, she nods or makes utterances to indicate that she is listening. But in her head, she is thinking about the murder-suicide incident, her inner voice speaking in *basso continuo*.

One day she says, Let's go to the beach. What, now? says the man. It's too cold. You'll only see gray water and white waves crashing on the rocks.

I don't mind, says the woman. I still want to go. Even if it's cold. Besides, it's not like I'm planning on swimming. I just want to see the ocean.

The man does not register the ominous proposal. Look, he says, tipping his glass of cold sake towards her, the moon in my cup. What a beautiful night. Yes, says the woman, it really is. Nights are always beautiful and calm. But in her head she goes on, Because I always want to scream during the day.

The woman turns pale. Tell me something, she says. Do you love me? The man looks at her, surprised. What are you going on about? If I didn't love you, we wouldn't be together, right? That's not what I meant, says the woman. And she falls silent and thinks, That ordinary love won't satisfy me. I don't want you love me the way you'd love an ordinary woman. I want you to love me some other way.

She thinks, I don't even want you to want my womanly parts. I want you to look back to before I became a woman, to my girlhood, to that time when I was suffocating. I want you to bring order to my thoughts, to love me and make me feel secure. Oh, how wonderful it would have been had you been able to love all of me, including my past.

You don't love me, do you, she says in a low voice. But the man is not listening. Her words do not reach him.

Women everywhere are reflecting themselves in mirrors. Combing their hair, applying lipstick, spritzing on perfume. Not for somebody else's sake, not even for the men in their lives, but for themselves only. Each woman delights to see herself reflected in her own mirror, knowing full well that if the image of her girlhood self were to suddenly

appear there, she would gobble it up entirely. She imagines how satisfying it would be to consume her own image without it ever being sullied by a man.

Soft and light, in thin summer dresses, the women frolic and laugh and play. They are at the height of pleasure, as if there were no pain, no past and no future. Divvying up their pastel-colored macarons, they throw mischievous glances at each other as if to say, What shall we get up to next? Like those young girls on the beach at Balbec, each bears a remarkable resemblance to the other. A group of girls without individuality.

These girls will never age or decay. Having lost all individual qualities, they will probably go on playing forever. And should they be touched by some nauseatingly unclean hand, they would likely retaliate with the supreme cruelty of oblivion and disregard, acting as though they had never been sullied in the first place.

For the only thing that can touch them is the holy affliction of frigidity. And the reason they will not decay is that they are composed of some incredibly inorganic substance. Even still, as they float here and there, they are seized by the ominous signs that float about them, to which they also belong: creeping black shadows of melancholy; a dispassionate hysteria transmuting their bodies into something other than flesh.

Even the woman who attempted the murder-suicide was once one of these virgin girls of the sun. And though she never imagined that she would throw herself into the sea, she danced towards her future at a steady pace. And whether or not she was loved by her husband, the act that she committed seemed to her, a woman carrying on a tenuous relationship, something familiar, as if she had been driven to act, as if her pressure cooker had boiled and screamed as soon as the element was lit.

But for many women, too much determination is required to purchase poison; and a knife feels too heavy in the hand. So they must live out their entire lives being rocked by the waves of anxiety and ominous premonition.

That is why the woman heats up the pressure cooker and dreams about the murder-suicide with a feeling of pleasure, peering into the cloudy water as if she were watching a soap opera. That is her number one priority. No longer having the drive to turn her thoughts

into action, she imagines them. Terrible, she says. And to herself, To think I might do that someday. But she cuts her imagination short. *Terrible.*

One day the woman is taking out the trash, and notices her neighbors, a family of three, heading towards their car. The mother and father are carrying duffle bags. The child is shouldering a backpack. We're going to the beach, says the wife. Of course, it's too cold to go swimming, but our son—our little prince—is dead set on having a picnic.

I see, says the woman. But it really is cold—freezing even. So take care. If you were to get caught in the waves this time of year, you'd be in trouble.

The husband interrupts. You all right? You don't look so well. Your lips are blue. Not eating? Trouble sleeping?

Why yes, actually, says the woman. I haven't been feeling well recently. One minute I'm hot, and the next I'm cold.

The wife turns to her husband. How can you be so dense, she says. We're not spring chickens, you know. Our bodies are going through all sorts of changes. Really, I can't believe you said that!

She apologizes to the woman. Sorry about him. I know how it is.

Come on, whines the boy, pulling at his mother's dress, the beach!

Oh dear! What am I going to do about our little prince? Well, have a nice day.

You too, says the woman.

The family gets into their car and drives off.

Take care, murmurs the woman as she watches them go.