

Sitting on the edge of his bed, using his middle finger Jed slowly pushed apart one by one the photographs in the shoe box on his lap. Many were yellowed with age or had the remnants of Scotch tape on their corners from when they had been in photo albums. After going through them all and not finding the one he was looking for, he put the lid on the box and bent over and shoved it under the bed. Standing, he inhaled the aromas of the ocean being blown in through the open window. He put on his favorite cardigan he had laid on the end of his bed and left his room. Going down the stairs he heard Mrs. Jessup in the living room running the vacuum. As he opened the front door, the hinges creaked.

"You going somewhere, Jed?" Mrs. Jessup called out.

"Just for a walk," Jed said, thinking she had the ears of a bat.

"Be back in time for lunch," she said.

"I will," he said, then went out the door and closed it behind him.

He stood on the porch for a moment and reached into a pocket in the sweater and took out a pack of chewing gum. He pulled out a piece and put the pack back in the pocket, then removed the paper wrapping and foil from the gum then put the stick of gum in his mouth. He put the pack back in the pocket then balled up the gum wrappers and tossed it into Mrs. Jessup's flower garden along the bottom of the porch as he went down the porch steps.

Going down the walkway from the house to the sidewalk, Nero, the next door neighbor's Golden Retriever came up behind him and shoved its cold nose in Jed's hand. Jed patted the dog on the top of its head.

"No one looking after you again boy?" Jed said. "Come on, I'll take you for a walk."

Wagging its tail, the dog fell in place beside Jed's left leg. At the end of the walkway, Jed paused momentarily, trying to decide which way he would go, then turned right on the sidewalk headed toward the 101, the main street and part of the coastal highway that ran through Newport.

A few houses down, Lark Maybury was standing at his hedges, a pair of clippers in his hands.

"Where ya headed, Jed?" Lark said. Though retired from his position as a grocery store manager, Lark still wore a white shirt and tie no matter what he was doing. The tie he was wearing was being whipped about by the breeze.

"Nowhere in particular," Jed said. "Just taking a walk."

"Good morning for one if it weren't for the wind," Lark said.

"It'll die down soon enough," Jed said. As he continued on he said over his shoulder, "Don't accidentally cut off that tie."

"Got plenty more if I do," Lark said.

Reaching the 101 Jed turned right and walked south. In front of him the green arch of the Yaquina Bay Bridge rose into the air from the bridge's middle.

"You up for a walk across the bridge?" Jed said to Nero.

Nero affectionately shoved its body against Jed's leg.

Within a hundred yards of the bridge's walkway, Marris Hofstein pulled up beside him in his pickup truck and called out through the open passenger seat window, "You need a ride across the bridge, Jed?"

"No thanks," Jed said. "Walking it for the fun of it."

Marris pushed his straw hat back on his head. "You going to be at the Sea Net later?"

"Probably so," Jed said. "As long as that busybody Mrs. Jessup doesn't raise a fuss about it beforehand."

Marris cackled. "Just don't tell her," he said.

"She knows what's on my mind even before I do," Jed said.

"If you make it you still owe me a beer," Marris said before pulling back onto the road and heading across the bridge.

Jed stepped onto the bridge's walkway and looked at the dark blue water below the bridge then out to where the Yaquina River flowed into the ocean, just a short distance away. The breeze had calmed but feeling a little chilled, Jed slid his hands into the sweater's pockets, and hugged his arms to his

sides and walked to the middle of the bridge, under the arch. At the railing as Nero stood on his hind legs and put his front paws on the railing, Jed watched the seagulls soaring above the gentle ocean waves.

He pulled the pack of gum from his pocket and removed a stick. After unwrapping it he rolled the wrapping in a ball and leaned against the railing. He put the stick of gum in his mouth and began to chew.

"Don't tell anyone I'm throwing litter in the ocean," he said to Nero.

He flicked the wad of wrapper out into the air and watched it slowly drift toward the water. Just before it would have landed on the surface, a hand reached up and grabbed it, and pulled it under. This was followed by a large blue-green fish tail rising above the water then disappearing beneath it. Mouth agape, Jed stared at the water for several moments.

"I didn't see what I think I did, did I Nero?" he said. "I must be losing my marbles."

He hooked his hand into Nero's leather collar and pulled him away from the railing, then turned toward home. He walked all the way back as rapidly as he could.

# # #

At the table, Jed peeled and tore apart the crust from the bread of his tuna salad sandwich. He had built a small mound of it and placed it on the table next to his plate without taking a bite of the sandwich.

"I thought you liked tuna salad," Mrs. Jessup seated across from him asked.

"Can't be," Jed mumbled.

"It's tuna salad alright," Mrs. Jessup said. "I should know I opened the can of tuna and mixed in the mayonnaise, celery and onion myself, didn't I?"

Jed looked up from his plate and saw her gazing at him with her usual expression of annoyance mixed with bewilderment. "Did you say something?" he said.

"Is there something wrong with your sandwich?" she said.

He picked it up and took a bite, chewed and swallowed. "Nah, tastes just like a tuna salad sandwich should."

She took a sip of tea from a cup and staring at him, said, "Is there something bothering you? You've been acting strange ever since you got back from taking that walk."

"I'm fine," he said. "I was going to ask you, though, did you get into the shoebox with my photos? I can't find the picture of Louise that I like so much."

"Now, why should I get into your photographs?" she said defensively. "I have better things to do than get into your things."

"I know," he said. "I apologize for asking, but I can't think for the life of me what I might have done with that picture. It was taken right before we found out she was pregnant with our son."

"Oh, speaking of Randy, he called while you were out. He said he won't be able to make it this weekend as he planned," she said.

Jed took another bite of his sandwich. "I'm almost forgetting what he looks like."

# # #

Getting up from the overstuffed chair, Jed stretched and held back from yawning, not wanting to wake up Mrs. Jessup who had fallen asleep in her rocking chair. He tiptoed across the room and up the stairs to his room. While putting on the cardigan he glanced around the room, thinking he had placed the photograph of Louise somewhere just to look at it and had forgotten. Not seeing it, he grabbed his wallet from the top of the dresser and got his shoes out of the closet and carried them down the steps. As he opened the front door, the hinges squeaked.

"You going somewhere, Jed?" Mrs. Jessup called out.

"Damn that woman's ears," he mumbled. "Just going for a walk," he said.

"Another walk and at this time of night?" she said.

"As far as I know I can go out whenever I'd like to," he said as he went out the door.

On the top step of the porch he put on his shoes. While lacing them, Nero bounded into the yard and ran up to Jed.

Jed rubbed the top of the dog's head. "Sorry, boy. Not now." He looked over at the neighbor's yard and thought again that it was a shame that they weren't spending more time with Nero. As he walked out of the yard he smiled as Nero peed on Mrs. Jessup's flowers.

It was the first night of a full moon and it shone brightly in the middle of the black, starless sky. He pulled the collar of the sweater up around his neck and stuck a stick of gum in his mouth. He put the gum wrapper in his pants pocket and strolled to the 101. Before turning north, he looked at the bridge's arch illuminated by the moonlight and let out an involuntary sigh. The moment made him miss Louise even more than usual.

A few blocks up, he entered the Sea Net Saloon. Sailing ships' wheels, anchors, fishing nets, oars, life preservers, glass buoys, and a variety of fishing spears lined the walls. Old whale oil barrels topped with round sheets of plywood served as the six tables with wood casks as chairs. The floor was littered with peanut shells. Met with the aromas of beer and whiskey, Jed went straight to the bar where Marris was seated.

"Looks crowded in here tonight," Jed said looking around at the two dozen people seated around the tables or in the rear of the saloon playing pool.

"I didn't think Mrs. Jessup would let you out of the house," Marris said.

"Me neither," Jed said with a laugh. "She forgets I'm just a boarder and not her prisoner."

Don, the bartender, was busy filling glasses of beer from the tap. Jed raised two fingers and shook them so that Don would notice. Don nodded.

"Where did you get the dog I saw you with today?" Marris said.

"He's not mine. He belongs to the neighbors. He's a great dog, but I think no one pays any attention to him but me," Jed said.

"He looks a lot like my dog Rascal," Marris said. "I sure do miss that dog."

Jed took a peanut from the bowl on the bar and broke it open. "You ever see things that you know can't be real?"

"Happened all the time when I was working on the boats," Marris said. "The light on the water and things swimming around out there plays tricks on your eyes. You must of experienced that during all the years you were on the fishing boats."

"This seemed a little different, but yeah I guess that's what happened when I was on the bridge this morning," Jed said.

Don placed two glasses of beer on the bar in front of Marris and Jed. "Who's paying tonight?" he said.

"That'd be me," Jed said as he took his wallet out of his back pocket and pulled out a twenty dollar bill and handed it to Don. "Keep 'em coming," he said.

# # #

Jed had his hands in his pants pockets and tried to steady his gait. He wasn't drunk, but he definitely felt tipsy. He stopped momentarily at the end of the street he lived on, then continued on toward the bridge. With the street lights and bright moonlight it was nearly as bright as dusk. The air was calm and filled with the scents of saltwater and fish. Sea lions were barking in the distance. As he stepped onto the bridge walkway he put his hand on the bridge railing and slid it along the rail as he walked to under the middle of the arch.

Looking down at the glassy surface of the water he took the package of gum from his cardigan pocket and took out a stick and unwrapped it. He put the gum in his mouth then rolled the wrapping into a ball and reached his hand out over the railing and let the ball drop. Just before the ball would have hit the water, a hand reached up and grabbed it, and pulled it under the water. This was followed by the loud splash of a tail fin; the same tail fin he had seen earlier.

Jed shook his head in disbelief. "Who's down there?" he called out.

Getting no response, he leaned on the railing and looked out toward the ocean. It shimmered in the moonlight.

He took another piece of gum from the package and this time dropped the stick of gum. Out of the water rose a mermaid with long golden hair and with seaweed draped across her breasts. While in

mid-air she grabbed the falling gum and put it in her mouth, then did a flip and dove head first into the water, pulling her long slender scale covered lower body and fins into the water with her. "I'm not imagining this," Jed said aloud gleefully. "My name is Jed," he yelled down toward the water.

A fountain of water sprung up as high as the railing. Balanced on the top of it were the two balled gum wrappers.

# # #

Mrs. Jessup was standing at the bottom of the stairs when Jed walked through the front door. "I was about to call the police to go looking for you," she said.

Jed grinned sheepishly. "I'm not allowed to go out?" he said.

"You've been drinking. I can smell it from here," she said.

"And enjoyed every drop," he said.

"I'm going to call your son and complain. He signed your lease to stay here and I made it very clear that I wouldn't put up with drinking," she said.

"Let me know what my son says since he never talks to me," Jed said.

He walked past Mrs. Jessup and climbed the stairs and went into his room and turned on the light.

He removed his cardigan and hung it on a hook on the closet door, then took off his shoes and placed them next to the bed. Sitting on the edge of his bed he pulled out the shoebox and removed the lid and placed it on the bed. Going through the photographs he pulled out the ones he had taken while on the fishing boat. He looked very closely at the ones taken of the ocean. The last one showed what he vaguely recalled seeing, a fin exactly like the mermaid's jutting up from the water.

He put the lid on the box and put the box under the bed. He laid back on the bed and stared at the photograph. "I wish you were still here to talk to about this, Louise," he said. He drifted off to sleep as the breeze through the open window carried in the aroma of the sea.

# # #

"Keep an eye out for you know who," Jed said to Nero who was sitting at the bottom of the porch steps. Jed clipped the last of the carnations in Mrs. Jessup's garden and tied the stem to the rest of the flowers.

"That should do it," he said, turning the bouquet around admiringly. "C'mon boy."

Walking at a fast pace with Nero at his side, Jed quickly reached the middle of the bridge. Leaning on the railing he looked at the calm waters under the bridge. "You down there?" he yelled.

The mermaid rose head first from under the water, then brought her entire body up and lay on the water slowly waving her arms and fin, creating concentric currents around her. Her hair spread out on the surface and glistened in the sunlight. She smiled broadly and let out a small squeak of delight.

"We've been seeing each other for a couple weeks now," Jed said. "I don't think my dear departed Louise would mind if I gave you her name. Do you like the name Louise?"

The mermaid splashed the water with her fin.

"I brought you something Louise and it's not gum this time," he said.

The mermaid rolled over in the water, then dived under and sent up a spray of water.

Jed laid the bouquet on the top of the spray and watched it slowly descend. As the bouquet touched the water the mermaid surfaced and took hold of the bouquet and put it to her nose. She spun around in the water several times then did a flip and went under. A moment later a spray of water shot up with a multicolored shell in its center.

Jed reached out and grabbed it. "Thank you Louise," he said.

The mermaid surfaced and squeaked several times, pointed at Jed, then pointed toward the ocean.

"You want me to go with you out there, Lousie?" he said.

The mermaid squeaked several times and splashed the water with her fin.

"If only I could," Jed said. "If only I could."

# # #

Jed sat on the edge of his bed with the shoebox in his lap. He looked at the pictures of him when he

was a young boy flying a kite with his father, those of him when he played baseball in high school, the ones of him aboard the fishing boat, his wedding pictures, and pictures of his son. He put the lid on the box and sat the box in the middle of his bed. He turned out the light and left the room and went down the stairs and into the living room.

Mrs. Jessup looked up from the magazine she had in her hands. "So, have you come to finally apologize for cutting down my flowers?"

"I'm going out," he said.

"If you go drinking don't bother coming back," she said.

"Have a good night, Mrs. Jessup," he said.

He left the house and went to the neighbor's house and knocked on their front door. The man who opened the door was dressed in a terrycloth robe and white sports socks.

"You got the money?" he said.

Jed pulled two one hundred dollar bills from his sweater pocket and handed it to him.

The man went into the house and came back a few minutes later with Nero on a leash. He handed the leash to Jed.

"He's all yours," the man said, then closed the door.

As Jed walked toward the 101, he saw Lark Maybury was in his front yard and looking up at the starry sky with a telescope. He had on a white shirt and was wearing a tie.

"Fine night for star gazing," Lark said upon seeing Jed.

Jed looked up at the sky. "Sure is Lark," he said.

"Where you headed with the dog?" Lark asked.

"To see a friend," Jed said. "Before I go can I borrow your hedge clippers for a minute?"

"Oh, sure, they're in the shed. Hold on a minute and I'll go get them for you," Lark said handing the telescope to Jed.

Jed looked at the constellations while Lark walked to the back of his house then returned a few minutes later.

He handed the clippers to Jed. "Kinda late to be clipping hedges."

"But not too late to do this," Jed said as he clipped Lark's tie in half. He handed the clippers back to a speechless Lark and walked away.

On the 101 he turned north. In the parking lot of the Sea Net he met Marris who was standing by his truck.

"This is for you, my friend," Jed said as he handed Nero's leash to Marris.

"You giving me this dog?" Marris said, rubbing Nero's head.

Nero's entire body was in movement as he wagged his tail.

"He needs someone who will appreciate him," Jed said.

"Thanks, Jed. This is quite a gift," Marris said. "How about a beer?"

"Not tonight. I have to be somewhere," he said.

"You want a ride?" Marris asked.

"No thanks," Jed said. "I feel like walking."

As he left the parking lot he looked back. Using a work glove, Marris was playing tug of war with Nero. His friend was laughing and Nero's tail was wagging.

Walking onto the bridge walkway he looked up first at the night sky then at the bridge's arch. At the railing he leaned over and called out. "You down there Louise?"

The mermaid broke through the black glassy surface of the water and did a spin and squeaked several times. She laid on her back on the water and doing back strokes circled about sending out small waves.

Jed took off his shoes and socks and placed them on the railing. Before taking off his cardigan he reached into the pockets and in one found the photo of Louise he thought was lost. In it she was sitting on a rock looking out at the sea, her long hair being blown by the wind. Jed kissed the picture and placed it by his shoes. He placed his cardigan on the railing then climbed over. Just before he leaped the mermaid send up a spray of water that caught him in mid-air and gently lowered him to

the water.

Together, Jed and Louise swam out to sea.

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