

*Sirena: a love story*

**By Helen Hopcroft**

**Work count: 6304**

## **Sirena: a love story**

I am pale, with long thin hands that swim in the air when I talk, slightly bulging eyes and fluid movements. I could have been a ballerina but I disliked the ruthless athleticism of it all. As age has caught up with me, my Irish ancestors have asserted themselves. A demure chin grows ever stronger, jutting out like a rock ledge over the sea; I spend much time with one hand genteelly clamped over it, trying to minimize the pugnacious curve. My eyes are now a watery blue, a sightless colour, misty with white. Rather bizarrely, my skin has erupted in mid life acne, globular and hard, completely different to the red hot welts of adolescence.

It is ironic that in this condition: protruding jaw, lumpy skin and opaque eyes, I am fighting to regain the love of my life. Like so many couples in their middle years, we found ourselves with our marriage on the rocks, trying to re-build our ship with the pieces of rotten timber and memories bumping against our legs. It was my husband's idea to come here, he'd seen photographs in a tourist magazine: an isolated chalet in the Tasmanian highlands. It's a raw landscape of snow, button grass, steely grey lakes and huge granite boulders. Every rock is speckled with dull green lichen and blood streaked with iron. When we arrive, driving in from Launceston airport and passing through far more picturesque landscapes, it seems the worst place to try and fix this. As we drive towards the cabin, the reception bars on my mobile phone drop to three, two, one, and then finally nothing. It seems as if my husband and I are alone in the world.

Despite the wind ravaged landscape, the chalet itself is luxurious. We have a large marble bath with golden swan taps, endless fluffy towels, a bed as big as a football field, exquisite chocolates, flat screen television, champagne, cotton robes and the glass bottles of shampoo that don't give you dandruff. The bathroom is all glass and white tile, everything gleams like lab equipment, and over the basin an old ship's porthole has been transformed into a mirror. At lunch time a basket stuffed with the island's delicacies is delivered: peachy slices of smoked salmon, King Island Double Brie, olives from the barren soil on the West Coast, a small jar of pitch black truffles, crusty sourdough, pearly eggs with orange yolks, ground coffee and fresh cream. In the evening we put on our city clothes and venture out into the freezing night to find dinner. A large resort is a short drive away, and if we want a more pedestrian option,

takeaway shops ring the lake. One evening we dine on pan fried Tasmanian salmon with squeaky fresh greens, baby potatoes drizzled with mint coulis; the next night it's elderly Chiko Rolls, sporting an indeterminate grey filling, swathed in neon yellow pastry, all mummified in a greasy bag.

I should tell you that my husband, David, is a marine biologist who specializes in fish diseases; the local salmon farms regularly fly him in to service their fish stocks. Millions of dollars are lost if the precious fish get sick and perish. A highly sought after professional, he travels with a wetsuit packed neatly into a suitcase and an expensive dive mask lovingly stowed in his hand luggage. After 9/11 they wouldn't let him through customs without a fight: the snaking pipes of his dive gear, the aggressive curve of the regulator, ghost up menacingly on their screens. Once, when I accompanied him on a business trip, they marched him off to a private room while I waited aimlessly by the security barrier, nervously wondering what facial expression to adopt.

Secretly, despite my husband's love of water, I have always feared the ocean. When we go to the beach I wade in up to my ankles, fearful of the sucking hiss as the tide rips at my flesh, trying to pull me under, or at least that's how it feels. Early in our courtship, when neither of us wanted any space between our minds, our lives, or even our likes and dislikes, I told him that I adored the sea. Sometimes I wonder whether this first lie has come back to haunt me, the sole cause of our present problems, the rotten apple molding at the base of the barrel. Perhaps marriage is like knitting, and if one crucial stitch is bungled early on, the whole thing can later unravel at devastating speed, leaving nothing but a tangled heap of thread.

The odd thing is that we were happily married, at least so I thought, and then one day it all fell apart. Like so many mariners, we only knew there was a problem when our boat ground to a stop, there was a loud bang and everything went black. No sudden event precipitated the collapse, no dashing third party intervened, it was merely the gradual accretion of a lifetime's worth of minor disappointments, disagreements over money and sex, the inevitable divergence in how men and women view relationships. Slowly, inexorably, this flood of small problems and petty inconveniences pushed its way upwards through rotting timbers, springing apart our hull. With sadness we realized that we no longer had anything in common and that even our communication

was more habitual than genuine. And so we came here, in lieu of a divorce, to this small chalet in the middle of nowhere, to untie an intricate series of knots, bindings swollen shut by memory and time.

On the first morning I woke early and staggered to the bathroom. Disturbed by some dream, I splashed cold water on my face then groped around for a towel. The water here is colder than anything you could imagine, rainwater thrown at the earth from massive ice clouds, biting like acid on sleep warmed skin. Rubbing swollen eyes, I encountered my reflection in the porthole mirror. My chin seemed bigger than usual, jutting from my face in a wedge, and my skin especially pale. Sniffing under my arms, I detected a strange scent: salty, like the slimy reek of rotting kelp, the smell of a beach after a storm. After vigorously spraying deodorant under my arms, and applying a layer of foundation, I thought no more about it.

We spent the day sight seeing, trying to forget our problems, clinging to shared interests. Conversation was unusually painful as we both grabbed at any common ground. “That’s a nice bird” I said, pointing up into the rain speckled sky. “A white breasted sea eagle” David replied, too quickly, eager to play his part. “Oh.... Well I like birds”. Later, as we came out of a lakeside souvenir shop, clutching a strange pair of shrunken apple ornaments, cut to look like wrinkled faces, I caught sight of myself in the glass. “Does my chin look big to you?” I asked him. He shook his head, barely listening, but later I noticed him looking at me strangely. My skin felt clammy. I remember hoping that I wasn’t coming down with something; fixing a broken marriage is hard enough, but doing so with a head cold seemed well nigh impossible. I whispered a desperate prayer to any listening deity: “Please God, do not let us fight about anything today.... and that includes fighting about not fighting. Amen”.

After lunch we returned to the chalet where we both continued to try hard. Retiring to the bedroom, we went through the usual motions, politely mimed passion and felt relief when the act was over. David got up to make a coffee and I stretched out on the clean white sheets. As I lay there, limbs akimbo, it seemed as if the salty smell was getting stronger. Later that evening I showered, scrubbing at myself with soap until my skin sting. Suddenly tired, I crept into bed still wet, spreading my hair across the pillow to dry. My husband snuggled against the curve of my spine, kissed my damp nape and went back to sleep. With his arm clamped around my midriff, I remember

thinking that perhaps it wasn't too late, and that we could fix whatever was wrong between us. I had no way of knowing that it was to be the last time we ever embraced.

We slept late the next morning. Rain buffeted the button grass, hurling itself in stinging eddies against the chalet walls. The lake disappeared behind a curtain of mist and it was impossible to see the sun. It was so dark that when David brought me my morning coffee I thought it was still night. He busied himself opening the curtains, picking up clothes and neatly depositing them on a chair. I heard him sniff, then the sound of a window in the bathroom being opened a crack, then he was back in the room. The warm feeling as he approached the bed, cradling a cup of coffee, a delicate peel of sheets away from my torso. "Wake up honey" he cooed, for mornings have never been my best time "time to rise and shine". Then he screamed, a piercing wail that shattered the bedroom gloom, and the coffee mug crashed to the floor. "Fuck!"

I searched his face as he backed away, head shaking in horror, hands clawing at the air as if seeking to erase some dreadful sight. "What's wrong?" I asked, trying to sit up. I reached out to him, amazed and uncomprehending. And that's when I noticed the change. Sitting up was no longer possible, my body rested on the bed in a solid, unbending form. 'A stroke', I thought, frantic with worry, 'I've had a stroke and my face is distorted: that's why he screamed'. I lifted a hand to my face, to feel whether the landscape of bone and skin had shifted during the night, but nothing happened. I tried again, straining my shoulder upwards, and a form flickered into view. It was a fin.

David kept bawling "no, no, no" and I hated him for his crazed panic. Who had snuck into our bed and left a large fish in it? What lunatic lived in this isolated place? What had years of inbreeding done to these island bound people? Everything they said about Tasmanians was true! Then David was back, clutching the porthole mirror, ripped from the bathroom wall, crying out "look! Look!" In the reflection, surrounded by worm spotted timber, I saw my new face. Overnight my nose had consumed my visage; my eyes were now round, unblinking and watery; sinewy lips extended across the width of my skull. Worst still, when I opened my mouth, gasping with shock, I glimpsed a row of pointed teeth. With numbed incomprehension I turned my face this way and that. In the porthole mirror, the head of a large salmon followed my every move.

A shocked silence, then I screamed too, but nothing came out, only a low pitched gurgling sound. David howled again, louder than before, dropping the mirror. It smashed on the floor right next to the coffee cup. Looking down, I saw my remaining arm rapidly shrinking, transforming into another fin, the skin losing its pinkness and becoming translucent. I could feel the holes in my nose and mouth getting smaller, stop working, pumping dry air into a body designed for fluid. My head sunk into my shoulders, the neck vanished, and suddenly, distressingly, large slits carved their way through the place where my rib cage used to be. The slits flailed in and out, setting up a steady rhythm of sucking and blowing. Inside I glimpsed a lining of rose pink blood vessels. Even in the midnight of my horror, I knew I was looking at a pair of gills.

I tried to get out of bed, swinging my body over the side of the mattress, and landed with a crash on the broken glass and china. Glancing down I saw my two legs fused into a muscular tail, now bloody with cuts. “Help me!” I cried to David, looking up at him imploringly from the floor, “for God’s sake do something”. And somehow he heard me, understood me, and recalled that the creature in front of him was his wife. His face changed, becoming serious as he clamped down on fear; I could tell the exact second his brain start working again. “You’re dehydrated” he diagnosed swiftly, speaking in his work voice, kind but firm. “If we don’t get you into water, your system will shut down”.

Everything seemed to happen at once. David ran into the bathroom and began filling the bath with cold water, rushed to the kitchen and came back clutching a plastic container. “Come into the bathroom” he shouted over his shoulder, frantically beckoning towards the doorway. I could see him inside, standing over the bath with the cold water taps turned on full, throwing handfuls of white crystals into the swirling water. “Salt”, he explained, face twisted with shock, “quick, get in”. I slipped and flipped across the bedroom floor, tail bashing feebly against the dry floor. I could hear the sound of the taps gushing and fat splashes as handfuls of salt hit the water. I can’t explain it properly, but the sound of the water gave me hope, drawing me forwards like a siren. I dragged myself towards the bath, hooked the remains of my strong hands over the edge and pulled myself up and over, into the water.

There was a feeling as if the whole world was silent. As I thrust myself deeper into the bath, water surged up around my shoulders, covering my lower limbs and torso. I

felt a profound relief. The salt water tickled against my skin; under the liquid, my scales glowed like newly minted gold. Dull pink transformed into a glowing mother of pearl blush, along my stomach appeared a band of luminous silver, and across my flanks were glossy black spots, as regular as printed fabric. The remains of my human body fell away, remnants of skin transformed into translucent scales, limbs spiked with sharp fins, two legs now a single magnificent tail. They say that water distorts things, nothing is at it appears underwater; but perhaps it is the other way around, things are real in the water, mere ghostly mirages on land. Whatever the truth of the matter, as I looked up at David through the water I knew that our marriage had encountered its most serious hurdle to date: while my husband remained human, I was now a large fish.

In the hours after my transformation a kind of crazy trauma settled over us both; it was as if the world had shrunk, and we were alone in it, abandoned by all certainty and knowledge. Despite my changed form, we quickly discovered that we could still speak, though as no-one else witnessed it, to this day I am unsure whether this was a form of psychic discourse or actual audible conversation. “Keep calm, honey” I kept repeating, looking up at his ashen face and trying to give him a reassuring smile (an expression that I must say is particularly difficult for a fish). It wasn’t long before he snapped, screaming “Stop bloody saying that!” In the hurt pause that followed (I, after all, was the one who was now a fish) he quietly added “I just need some time to think. I need to work this out. There’s got to be a logical explanation...”

In those post metamorphosis hours, those terribly painful and glorious hours, I got to know my husband better than I had in twenty five years of marriage. Raw and exposed, his life’s companion floating in a salted bathtub at his feet, he was at his most vulnerable. Though deeply affected by all that was going on, somehow I was able to accept what had happened faster than him, and watched events unfold almost as an observer would. It was the strangest feeling: lying in the bottom of a bathtub, and yet floating above the scene, looking down at David and myself, the actors in this strange drama.

David threw himself into a cycle of emotions like a cheap clothes dryer stuck on spin. Beginning with shocked disbelief, he quickly traversed numbed incomprehension, followed with a desperate search for rational explanation, sporadic explosions of hope

as a plausible hypothesis was aired, with a plunge into depression when no evidence was found to support it; and so the circle of thought and emotion continued. He doubted his sanity, crying like a baby at times, pinched himself most cruelly. Looking up at his stricken face, I mused that this cycle of testing ideas and discarding them is something that mankind has been engaged in for a very long time indeed. But for my husband it was the end of his lifelong belief in the rationality and power of Science. Any man who discovers his wife has become a fish is bound to feel shock, but for a scientist the revelation is much worse; it strikes at the very core, upends lifelong habits of thought, shatters his understanding of the world.

Of course like any married couple, we argued vehemently about what to do next. If we'd been anywhere else, I expect we would have phoned the authorities, made some hysterical appeal to police or ambulance services. But the chalet's isolated location made that impossible. Without phone coverage, we were effectively cut off from the world and David refused to take the car to seek help. "You've already turned into a fish" he snapped, sounding bitter and as if it was all my fault, "what'll happen if I leave you alone? I'll come back and find a tub full of fucking krill".

We endlessly debated reasons for the change, but found none. Seeking refuge in ingrained habits, David methodically went through any possible changes in environment, physiology, psychology or diet that may have triggered the event. "What did we eat last night?" he mused, stroking his chin. "I know we went to the resort, you were wearing your black dress, but what did we eat?" Turning to each, in a moment of shared inspiration, with one voice we cried out "the salmon!" Then there was a pause, hope faded, and he sadly noted "but we both ate the same thing". In a voice stretched thin with emotion, he asked me if I'd noticed any symptoms in the previous twenty four hours, if I'd eaten anything different, had any changes in medication, been under any unusual degree of stress, or experienced any notable changes in my environment. Despite his strained mask of disbelief, and tight little work voice, I found myself wanting to giggle. When the answer to all his questions was negative, his diagnostic tools exhausted, he resorted to increasingly outlandish hypothesis. A conservative scientist, my husband neither drinks alcohol or takes drugs, but as a college student he experimented with acid. "Perhaps that's it!" he cried, "this is some kind of hallucinogenic disturbance, a chemical aberration that has



laid dormant in the brain, waiting to be triggered by extreme stress”. I beat my tail slowly against the side of the bath, smiled sympathetically and waited for him to get a grip on himself.

However after all the soul searching and the guess work, we failed to find a single plausible reason for my transformation, so simply accepted my new condition; with surprising speed it became the norm. By the following morning David had calmed down, though was still refusing to call the police or notify authorities. “I’m a scientist” he explained, “you’ll become a specimen!” Glaring down at me, he continued “they’ll prick you full of holes taking blood samples, monitor you day and night, analyse every move, watch every breath. You’ll end up in a bloody big tank with a fucking big label on it, for all the world to see, just a piece of data”. He said ‘data’ dismissively, like some men would say ‘ass’. “It’ll be open slather for every half assed PhD student. And don’t get me started on the unnecessary biopsies; forget Ethics approval, they’ll just crucify you. You’ll have more holes than a sieve”.

When I gently suggested that we could no longer reasonably be expected to live together in a house, as man and wife, and I should be transported to the ocean, which was after all my natural environment, my husband reacted badly. “Don’t you know how many predator species are out there?” he cried, listing several. “And what about the sharks?” he pleaded, ringing his hands as he knelt by the bath. Rattling off the names of half a dozen shark species, followed by brief biographical data, he paused before his strongest card, “and then there’s the White Pointer. It’s a salmon eating machine: this thing never sleeps. It’s what they call an opportunistic predator, always searching for food sources, never indifferent to a tasty fish meal”. In his voice I heard the fear of a diver, pinned down on the ocean floor, while this torpedo of a fish gloomed overhead, blocking out the light. “I’ll be fine”, I said brightly, faking an assurance that I did not feel, “there’ll be lots of other fish for them to eat”.

As it turned out, we had more immediate problems than the dietary habits of sharks. By late afternoon on the second day the bathwater had become silty and dark. My tail felt heavy, my movements were slow, and I could barely find the energy to surface and gulp air. “Without proper filtration you will die” David said briskly, assuming his professional persona, panic surging beneath the surface like an underground river. Rushing into the nearest large town, a three hour drive away, he found a pet shop and

returned with six aquarium bubblers, which he hooked up around the sides of the bath. Fortunately the bubblers worked, the hum of their mechanism filling the room with a steady drone. The newly aerated water hummed through my blood stream and once again I felt quicksilver and light. Exhausted he sat by the side of the bath, trailing his hand in the water, while I nuzzled his palm. “My wife” I thought I heard him murmur, clutching his head in his hands “is a goddamned fish”.

But by the next morning, after a good night’s sleep and a decent meal, David’s spirit seemed to return. He told me that he had rung reception and extended our stay three nights. “But the expense!” I wailed, knowing that even one night would have strained our meager holiday budget. He lowered his tanned hand into the water, softly stroking my scales. “It’s ok: I put it on the Visa, so we get extra points. We can use them for the next holiday”. I pushed my calcifying forehead against his forearm, as loving as a newly wed. He smiled and fed me small pieces of bait, sprinkling fish food into the water as affectionately as he had strewn rose petals on our bed, just a few nights previously.

And so it was, in these peculiar circumstances, that we enjoyed a second honeymoon. Each day he would bring me some new treat: tiny prawns from the bait shop; small slices of calamari, purloined from his restaurant meal and hidden in a paper napkin; little dots of caviar bulked up with cracker crumbs. After the meal he would kneel beside the bath, dip his hand into the water and stroke my silvery belly. Running his fingers along the delicate ridges of my fins, he delicately traced the spines of my dorsal with one forefinger. Dazed at the sensuality of his touch, I would let myself rest on the bottom of the bath, tail brushing rhythmically against the marble to keep myself upright. When he traced the hard ridges of my boney jaw with his thumb, I nearly forgot to breath, so perfect was his attunement to my desire.

It was not the only bridge that sprung up between us. Simply, miraculously, language flowed back into our relationship. We talked. All night he knelt and I lay there, hand gently stroking and fins undulating in the tepid water, words flowing between us, sometimes in a trickle, at other times a great volume of language, this huge outpouring of feeling. We spoke more than we had at any other point in our marriage: during the hurried courtship, when we spent most of our time in bed, only getting up for bacon sandwiches, hastily zapped in the microwave. Certainly more than our early

years, when we tested each other's boundaries, established private hierarchies, jerked up against each other's limits like chained dogs, learned to bury the inevitable disappointment. And certainly more than when our children were young, when we lurched from one exhausted day to the next, stuck in a continual loop of daycare, school, holidays, doctor's appointments, sport, activities, birthdays, Christmas, Easter and so on.

As our children grew up, and we aged, language did come back into our lives, but it was a different form of speech to that which we had previously known. I made lists; he made plans. We learned to live with our differences and did nothing to challenge them, accepting them as known and immutable. We accepted that when we used words, we meant different things, and that men and women use language for profoundly different purposes. Although this was sensible, and the relationship strategy of many wise couples, it was the biggest mistake we ever made. It left a gap, a gaping void. Received wisdom drove us apart, the endless compromises settling over us with the quietly killing deadness of snow.

It was only when this strange occurrence flowered in our lives that we again revisited the idea of talking to each other, without expectation and intent, for the pure pleasure of sharing ideas, thoughts, dreams and plans. We explored our differences as if they were foreign lands. His words wrapped around me like velvet ribbons. He told me how he had always wanted to drive across America and have his picture taken at Elvis' tomb; that he was scared of his mother; his first girlfriend's name; what it felt like the first time he saw a White Pointer during a dive; what a blow job feels like, and how he liked to be touched. He told me secrets, the thing that men do not usually share: the silent jungle of their sex, an unwritten code of force and intimidation, the knowledge that spreads like a gas, without words, who may be handled and who must be avoided, the constant fear that curses their sex. From my position on the bottom of the bathtub, I learned that my husband sought unconditional love above all else, and oddly enough expected to be thanked for doing the washing up.

I reciprocated, words sometimes choking out of me, ugly as vomit, but sometimes pouring out smooth as melted butter. I shared my fears, my desires, my lies. I too betrayed my sex, laying bare our intricate strategies, our quivering expectation. And perhaps this is what love is, what it really is, when two people love each more than

their respective artifices, when they join together to destroy their own pretty cages. I shared my hopes, betrayals, disappointments and jealousies. I opened my imagination in a way that I had never found the courage to do when we were both human, and told him what gave me pleasure in bed and what I detested, but had been too frozen by politeness, the constant pressure to be nice, to communicate.

He knelt beside me as I spoke, cradling my fin in his warm blooded hand, face often breaking into a warm smile, but also sad, and now and then flashing with anger. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he burst out, at one point, when the reasons for my byzantine silences were suddenly made clear. “We could have fixed this years ago”. At other times he wept, large tears plopping off the end of his sunburned nose and falling salty into my bath. “I loved your breasts”, he confessed, “sometimes I would have been happy to just suck them, rather than having sex. I used to love it when you would take the head of my penis and rub it against your nipples; it was always very difficult not to come”. Longingly he looked down at my water bound form, never still, always in motion and shining with life against the static marble. “I wish that we could do it now”, he said, voice low and urgent, hands shaking with emotion, I could tell that he was hard. I nuzzled his hand with my head, there was nothing I could think of to say, but I kissed his finger tips with my razor sharp teeth, and this seemed to please him.

It was a sweet spot beyond hope and fear. In my wildest dreams I did not imagine when we arrived at the chalet we would ever feel like this again. The three extra days went all too quickly, and our talk took on an urgency for we both knew that we couldn’t stay in the chalet forever. Outside the world waited. I knew that we must both face it in our own way. But somehow the knowledge that he understood me completely, and accepted me as I was, gave me great courage. I was as fearless as if a terrible army stood behind me. I flexed my tail, blew a resolute bubble, prepared for the inevitable.

On the morning of the last day, a week after we had arrived, he came to me with his plan. Mumbling as he spoke, he told me that he would wrap me in wet towels and drive me to a coastal fish farm; for the time being I could live in one of their netted enclosures. “You’ll be safe from the sharks” he said, looking dazed and a bit ashamed, “they take good care of their fish: I work for them from time to time”. As

neither of us could think of a better plan, and the holiday budget was exhausted, that evening we set off, me packed in the boot of the car and David wearing a wetsuit beneath his tracksuit. I heard the car engine start, the heat of the exhaust vibrating through my body, then a long period of movement as he negotiated the dips and bumps of dirt roads. After about an hour, the car slowed to a stop, I heard the driver's door slam and David lifted me out of the boot. I could smell salt, hear the wind rustling through bush, there was no moon. With my body suspended in a wet towel sling, he carried me along a jetty and lowered me into the water, a netted cage dense with fish. A shock as cold seawater gushed into my gills, then a few seconds later David was in the water too, treading water by my side.

I swam around him, letting my long fins brush against the bare skin of his arms, rub against the thick rubber wetsuit that allowed him to enter my environment. Around us the other fish gaped and swam, a thousand heads, tails and dorsal fins repeated over and over again, a mesmerizing oceanic Escher. Lost for words, he reached out and cradled my head, fondling the calcifying lumps that pitted the surface of my brow. Like lovers, we stared deep into each other's eyes, my pale blue and his earthy brown, searching for every last trace of sentiment, reveling in every thought. And it was then, watching his emotions run from fear to surprise to hope to boldness to despair, that I glimpsed a new thought lurking at the base of his skull: resignation. I knew then that while my husband wrestled with this unusual dilemma, I would spend the rest of my life in a cage.

The months passed quickly and David visited me often, slipping into the water at night, his regulator gurgling like an opium pipe, his arms soothing away my frantic concern as we embraced. We continued to talk like lovers, his hands seeking my fins, our bodies pressed against one another as we floated in the watery void. Each visit passed too quickly, I grew to hate the sight of the air meter on his tank, marking the excruciatingly short amount of time he could spend with me. Away from my watery cage, he faced his own pressures. He told me the police had investigated my disappearance, and while they had found nothing suspicious, he continued to be their chief suspect. Eventually they would close the case, but for the moment the mystery of what happened to me lingered. "It made all the papers" he said, looking proud "it was a nice picture of you, but the one of me made me look like an axe murderer".

Time passed and I watched my former life recede as if it were some small thing, of no consequence, vanishing down a long tunnel. Except for David's visits, everyday was the same, featureless and predictable. I grew to hate my incarceration, the boredom of swimming in constant circles, cramped living conditions and the depressing lack of stimuli. "Do you remember me?" the other salmon asked each other, repeatedly, as we swam in our endless circles, enmeshed and defined by the net. Soon the constant boredom began to chafe, eroding my language and cognitive functions, eating away at my sense of self. Like the other fish, I held onto memory by repeating the words that we use for the small things that surround us: cage, net, float, food, pole, diver, hook. Every day, the same day, and the same words as we circled and circled. In our cage, we did our best not to forget ourselves.

One night, as David swam beside me in the enclosure, I asked him to set me free. Overhead the moon seemed to fill the sky. I felt my blood flowing around my body in strange new rhythms, and this noise, soft at first and then louder and louder until it filled my head like a roar. "What is it?" I asked him. A noise that sounds like a thousand people talking at once, or sand dunes slowly rubbing themselves into grains of silica, or a giant sucking pulse, like some great creature feeding at its mother's breast. "That, my dear" said my husband, pausing to stroke his chin, and gazing out to sea, "is the sound of the ocean". And for the first time in our ordeal, I knew that he envied me my condition.

I saw a silver tear slowly trickle down his brown cheek and I knew it was time to go. Things always happen before you are ready for them, it seems that this is the rule on both land and in water. In a single, swift movement he caught me up, lifting me beyond the confines of the fish farm net. Cradling my belly gently in his saltwater hard hands, he laid me on the surface. I ducked my head underwater and heard the ocean chanting. I thought I could see something out there in the gloom, something that flickered like a jewel, a silver mosaic that constantly changed shape, flew apart and then rejoined, eternally forming and reforming in new configurations. It was a school of fish, out there in the deep, calling to me, beckoning me into the void. I loved this man, I will always love this man, but now I long to be free; it is my destiny, and let no human stand in my way.

Looking up I saw David's face distorted by the shimmering waves crawling across the surface. The ocean's hum raised to a steady drone, increasing in volume and richness until it roared through my mind like a freight train. Love pulled me back towards land, as I lay there in his arms, tail gently beating against his muscular forearms, spotted flanks undulating across his palms. But all the while the music of the ocean built and swelled, rising in one giant crescendo after another, the steady throb of something that had always been and will always be. The first sound we hear on this planet, the thud of a heartbeat and the swoosh of water, the last time we felt peace.

The music rose and surrounded me, saturating my skin, creeping into my blood and shivering its way through my skeleton, probing my muscles and scales. It electrified me. Suddenly I felt more alive than I have ever felt, bright and quicksilver, capable of outrunning and outsmarting even the most terrible of the ocean predators. Soon the music brought pain with its pleasure. Come, it seemed to be singing, before it is too late. Come down to the deeps where the wild things play. I looked into the murky waters, my eyesight intense, everything super real and hallucinogenic, every tiny piece of kelp glowing in massively real three dimension.

Just then the music peaked and howled, breaking apart at the upper registers, snagging on the high notes and falling apart like shards of glass fracturing from a window. At the same time the school came closer, darting into my focus and back out again, nearly invisible in the darkness, but not before I had a chance to see something that I longed for more than these words can express: it was a school of wild salmon, come to set me free. In an instant I pumped my tail, one hard beat against my lover's arm, and then I was gone, black water closing over my head.