Marele Day is the award-winning author of internationally acclaimed *Lambs of God* as well as *Mrs Cook: The Real and Imagined Life of the Captain's Wife*. She has travelled extensively, lived in Italy, France and Ireland, and survived near-shipwreck in the Java Sea. Earlier works include the Claudia Valentine mystery series—*The Life and Crimes of Harry Lavender*, *The Case of the Chinese Boxes*, *The Last Tango of Dolores Delgado* and *The Disappearances of Madalena Grimaldi*. She is the editor of *How to Write Crime* and co-editor of *Making Waves: 10 years of the Byron Bay Writers Festival*. Marele lives in northern New South Wales.

Also by Marele Day

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Short stories
Mavis Levack, P.I.

the Sea Bed

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Australia
Phone: (61 2) 8425 0100
Fax: (61 2) 9906 2218
Email: info@allenandunwin.com
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The Sound of Waves by Yukio Mishima
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the Sea Bed

MARELE DAY

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The night air lifts softly, then settles on their skin. They are sitting on the small island of rock at the end of the beach, arms close together, her hand a warm shell on his. In front of them the sea glints darkly.

Her attention shifts. She separates from him, moves forward. Silently she eases herself in, disappears.

She resurfaces, in a long steady sigh of outgoing breath, her head dark and sleek.

He is still hovering on the edge. It is her world, her element.

'Are you waiting for an introduction?' she teases. 'The sea isn't polite. Just come in.'

He takes a breath, steps into the shock of liquid cold. The sea swarms all over him. It is alive. He can feel it sliding through his hair, his ears, pressing for entry into his nose and mouth. It leaves no part of him unexamined. Then, release. He closes his eyes, succumbs to the gentle rhythms. He has dreamed of this.

'Did you see?'

'What?'

'The sea lanterns. Move your arms.'

From beneath the surface come thousands of pinpoints of light, showers of fireflies.

He is laughing, euphoric, invigorated. He is here with her, in the sea. They make patterns with their limbs, playing with streams of phosphorescence, bringing it into being. Every time their bodies move, light follows them. He wants it never to end.

1

Into the wild

He stepped off the pebbled path and entered the density of trees, heading for the single dead tree that marked the peak of the mountain. He could see the beginnings of the track, a soft tunnel into greenness. From the mountain behind him, on the other side of the ravine, came the reverberation of gunshots. There were clusters of them, and after each the echoing *ark, ark* of crows.

Here at the threshold were low-growing plants with leaves of different shapes—broad tripartite, fern-like, some perfectly round, others with serrated edges—all intermingling. His robe brushed them as he walked. A butterfly the colour of morning sun paced him for a while. Sometimes the spirits of

ancestors take the form of insects and land on you, seeking connection.

Another shot. The monk stopped, listening for whether the hunters were coming closer or moving away. A mat of webbing on a section of hydrangea bush. Not the delicate weave of a spider's web nor its symmetrical shape. Nevertheless it was home to something, a creature quietly metamorphosing.

A crow flew overhead, along the line of the path, the monk heard the sound of its wings beating the air. He came upon a fleshy-leafed plant that was broken, revealing the fibres of its stem. Perhaps the boar had crashed through here. A few steps on was another broken stem, this time a wild raspberry, its four-petalled white flower drooping, still intact.

Further into the woods, the green path became brown with dead leaves, some the shape that the monk had seen earlier. There were pine needles, dead branches. If a branch fell now he would feel its impact.

Another gunshot.

The monk walked parallel to a small gully that would be flush with water when the rains came. Kidney-shaped leaves grew lushly on the dappled path. A solid trunk of pine lay beside it. The even mark of a chainsaw along the cut, the lip where it splintered under its own weight. There were more felled trunks along the path.

The monk climbed higher. Near a red arrow pointing the way were deep green, almost blue, tufts of grass beside a pool of black water shimmering with a breeze the monk could barely

feel. Here the dank earthy smell of the forest became richer, sweeter, like rotting fruit. Occasionally a creature too fast for his eye—a frog, an insect—dived into the water, and he saw only the aftermath, the concentric circles of ripples fracturing the reflection of overhanging vines, branches, trunks. The pool resumed its placid surface and he heard a muffled sound like someone quietly shuffling cards or flipping through the pages of a book.

The undergrowth became less dense as he entered the grove of bamboo. The tall straight segmented stems narrowed at the top giving an even greater illusion of depth. High above was the sunlit foliage that made the canopy. The monk felt as if he were in the presence of a giant pipe organ. The older creamy-coloured trunks had a deep hollow resonance, the younger steely green ones a duller sound. It was soft underfoot, the track matted with dead bamboo leaves the colour of straw. He would be quite comfortable spending the entire day here, lying on this soft mattress, looking up through the shifting branches to the play of leaves and sky.

There were holes and mounds of earth where bamboo shoots had been dug up. On the key ring of a hunter the monk had seen the tusk that did this work, the curved scimitar of it, the sharp point, the flattened top edge, all perfectly suited to the tusk's purpose.

When he stopped again, to be in the confluence of the moment, he heard a tap-tapping. Perhaps a wood-pecking bird.

As he moved ever so slightly in the direction it was coming from, the sound stopped.

The path took a sharp turn, leading the monk back into familiar terrain. He recognised the pool of black water but now he was above it. Out of the bamboo grove his footsteps were louder, crunching crisper leaves and forest debris. He stood still to listen to a tiny sound, barely in his range of hearing. It resembled distant wind chimes, but could have been the close-up whirring of insect wings.

The more he climbed, the sparser became the canopy. Through the spray of sun-dappled leaves he could see the grey-blue of distant mountains. More clusters of gunshot. It seemed that there were several hunters, in several different places. Men walking in the forest, standing still and listening like the monk. Men stalking prey.

The monk had never seen the boar in the woods, only signs of it. In the middle of the path he came across droppings, although that was not the right word. Droppings were from darting creatures, mice, who did not stay long in one place. This dark brown pile was like coiled rope. Though still moist and fresh it had no smell, or rather it smelled of the forest, of the forest things the boar ate then excreted.

Another shot. How did the boar react? Did any noise cause it to be alert—the creak of bamboo, the crunch of leaves underfoot, the flurry of crows—or had it learned to single out this one sound? Did the wild creature know the significance of the cleared path?

the Sea Bed

The monk would like to meet the boar face to face, to wait in the forest day and night if necessary, till it showed itself.

He had to press on. He must have been quite close to the peak because there were increasingly clear views of the surrounding mountains. Beyond the treetops was a thin line of road like the parting in hair. Near it was a huddle of red roofs surrounded by dark green.

The path took another turn, in the opposite direction, zigzagging up the mountain. The monk found the next red-banded tree marking the way. Outspread on a large green leaf was a black and white butterfly, its wings pulsing, gently fanning the air. Steeper and steeper the path rose. He had to climb over rocks, wary of the slipperiness of leaves, conscious of what he was carrying in his backpack.

He arrived at a small stone shrine just off the path in a patch of wild azalea. It was no bigger than a letterbox, and housed a Buddha. There were a few coins placed as offerings in front of the statue, coins dark with rain and age. The monk bowed, laid before it his wishes for a safe journey. The sound of an unseen plane overhead, followed by the chattering of birds.

The monk continued on, climbing the last rocky outcrop, the peak of the mountain. He was up here, higher than birds. He breathed in the invigorating aroma of pine, quenched his thirst with a single mandarin, felt the juice become part of him. Now he had an unimpeded view of the road. He watched a tiny red van crawling along, saw it disappear in the folds of the land. Beyond them lay his destination.

The gunshots had stopped, or if not, they were too far away for the monk to hear. He opened his backpack and took out the parcel, held it lightly between his hands, letting the mountain air settle on it, a gesture of farewell.

He stood up, breathed in the fragrance of pine once more and began his descent.

2

The train to the coast

The bus dropped the monk off in front of the main city station in the full blast of evening peak hour. The city roads were wider than rivers. He stood at the edge of them in the press of pedestrians, watching the traffic lights, waiting for the green walking man, the staccato clatter that accompanied him. When the cars growled to a halt, people crossed in one fast rush, trying to get to the other side before the red man appeared.

Even in the quiet side street where the backpacker hostel was, the monk could hear the stop and start of traffic, the hovering weight of the city booming in his ears.

He slid open the door of the Blue House to be greeted by a crowd of shoes. They seemed to rush at him, like hungry

carp in a pond, all of them at once, each vying for the best position. How different from the orderly row of sandals at the monastery. Some of these shoes weren't even in pairs or facing the same direction. There was footwear from all over the world, all sizes, all types. Big sturdy hiking boots with hard toes and thick soles, some bearing muddy traces of the places they had been, others clean and polished. Flat thongs in red, green, blue and yellow. Nikes, Reeboks, Hina, Slam, La Spiga, Alligators, Blastmaster. Streaks of colour down the sides. Soles with cushions of air. Laces undone. No laces at all. Plaited leather decorated with blue beads.

Where to put his own shoes? Sturdy monastery sandals belonged with hiking boots but the only shoes that had space around them were a pair of high heels with thin black straps.

When he set his sandals down beside them they nudged one of the precariously balanced heels, knocking the shoe over.

He was in the process of righting it when a couple approached the vestibule area. The young woman looked at him. Perhaps he was in the way. He stood up to let the couple through. The man slid his feet into a pair of thongs and the young woman scooped up the high heels. She went outside to put them on, frowning back at the monk. Now he understood. He'd been touching her shoes. He wanted to apologise, to explain, but as he made a gesture towards the door the couple walked away.

the Sea Bed

The monk stood in the vestibule looking at his sandals. It was not a good beginning.

He slept on a bed for the first time, a bunk bed. There were four, two up two down, with a ladder to climb into the top ones. Although no-one else was in the small white room when the monk entered, he could see signs of occupancy—three of the beds were a swirl of sheets and towels, a discarded red T-shirt on one. A pair of jeans hung limply from a ladder. On the floor beside the bunk closest to the door were a dark green sock and a drink carton with a straw poking out of it.

The monk climbed up to the bed that was vacant, a tight flat rectangle of blue and black checks with a pillow at one end. He tried to sit for evening meditation but his head pressed against the ceiling. He lay down. The bed dipped in the middle. The monk had the impression of being in a hammock. He focused on the breath coming in and out of his nose, the soft moisture beneath it. Conversations and laughter seeped into the room. The monk was still awake at 4.30 am, the time the monastery day normally started. Shortly after, the door opened and three young men fell into the room, fumbling around, oblivious to the monk's presence.

He must have fallen asleep because the next thing that penetrated his consciousness was a volley of snores punching into the stark morning.

•

The train to the coast. The monk made it with only seconds to spare. It set off slowly, as if waiting for him to catch his breath, before gathering speed. It was only when the train reached the city outskirts, where houses and fields coexisted harmoniously, that the monk's composure returned.

He had gone into the emporium to purchase an umbrella.

He chose a plain black one then waited for the lift to take him back to the ground floor. But instead of going down the lift took him up. The only other passenger was a young woman. The monk felt vaguely uncomfortable about being in this intimate space with her. On TV people sometimes had sex in lifts. It was always rushed and hungry as if there would never be another time and place for it. Afterwards, they came out adjusting their clothing, smoothing their hair.

The monk tried to focus on the directory—ground floor: jewellery and cosmetics; first floor: ceramics; second floor: clothing; third floor: carpentry; fourth floor: books and magazines; fifth floor: prints and artworks.

The small cube of the lift pressed them together. The monk kept looking straight ahead. Even though he and the young woman were standing far enough apart to fit another person between them the monk could feel the warmth radiating from her, imagined the blood coursing along the veins beneath the placid surface of skin, all the great machinations of her body—the articulation of joints, the subtle tensing and relaxing of muscles as she shifted her weight from the balls of her feet to the heels. The monk smelled apples, and some other

subtle aroma, deodorant perhaps, or moisturiser, then he felt a thickening sensation in his loins and the lazy surprise of his body being lifted through space with no exertion of its own.

There was a small pleasant sound like a tuning fork. The lift stopped and the doors opened with a sigh of relief. He released his breath, unaware that he'd been holding it in. An apple-scented breeze brushed his cheek as the young woman moved past him.

Fifth floor: prints and artworks. The monk remained still, as he did in the forest, listening, absorbing, being in the place. On the walls were large landscapes, studies of nature—two cranes on a snowy pine, tiger lilies. There were folding screens decorated with bushy knolls and a sprinkling of leaves. Scrolls weighted with a stick of bamboo through the bottom of them. At the far end of the room the young woman was poring over a large rectangular book.

The woman behind the counter welcomed the monk, and asked if she could be of assistance. The lift had brought him here; it would be rude to leave so suddenly. 'Thank you,' said the monk. 'I am browsing.'

He gazed at a print, *Young Woman in a Sudden Shower.* The streaks of rain were active, full of movement. The monk could almost feel the wind blowing the young woman's gown. She was looking back over her shoulder; in her haste to bring in the washing, she had stepped out of her shoe.

The monk heard the tuning fork sound and looked up to find his lift companion gone. He went over to her book, curious.

At first the monk could see only patterns of red and white, then he realised what he was gazing at—a tangle of bodies and clothing, penises as long as thighs, frilly vaginas surrounded by tendrils of hair. He quickly turned the page but his mind had already photographed it. The next page was the same, and the next and the next.

•

Through the wide glass of his window the monk saw people waiting at railway crossings, farmers working in fields. Mainly they were rice fields, so intensely verdant that they seemed to be the source of greenness itself, the surrounding countryside watered-down in comparison.

In villages, fat squat onions hung under the eaves of houses. Washing dried on lines—small boys' pants, men's shirts, brightly coloured socks, pink or lime green, hanging from brightly coloured pegs.

As the train rose to the mountains, it travelled through pockets of forest, pines with light grey trunks in the darkness of the foliage. They flicked by so fast it almost hurt to look.

Faint drifts of conversation from fellow passengers came to the monk on the steady whoosh of the train. He heard plastic bags and lunch boxes being opened, smelled the food inside. The aromas stayed in the air-conditioned space of the carriage, and all the passengers shared them—soy sauce, pickled ginger, smoked eel, potato crisps, hard-boiled eggs. It made the monk

feel hungry, and though he did not have to respond to hunger by eating, he took out a rice ball—his lunch—and held it in his mouth for a moment, breathing in so that the rice took on all the flavours in the air.

The little boy across the aisle was watching him. The monk swallowed the rest of the rice ball but still the child continued staring. Eventually his grandfather noticed and diverted the boy by lifting him up to the window. The soles of the boy's shoes were clean and white, with small ridges on them shaped like coils of rope.

Behind the man and his grandson was a well-fed businessman working on a computer balanced on the tray table that slid out of the armrest. He was sitting in a relaxed, assured position, scrolling through information, some kind of chart, like a feudal lord surveying his lands.

Further along, four garrulous women had turned the seats around so that they were facing each other, two by two. In their conversations were the names of people they all knew, who needed no introduction or prefacing.

At the monastery the community of monks also enjoyed such amicable familiarity but with much less need for conversation. There was nothing one did that the others did not know about. At night, all rolled up in their individual quilts with only faces exposed, they became part of the rhythm of each other's sleep breath. The monk even wondered if his dreams were entirely his own, whether they circulated freely and were shared, the

way the outward breath of one monk diffused into the air and was breathed in by another.

He turned his attention back to the countryside, wondered what it was like to be the train driver, the first to see the bridge, the town, mountains, the green fields and vegetable patches, the only one who could clearly see the track ahead. How comforting to have the way marked out for you.

The boy was staring again. It didn't matter if the monk turned to look out the window, picked a fleck of dust off his robes or sat completely still, the boy continued gazing. He was only a child but it made the monk uneasy. When the monk gave him a smile he became shy and hid under Grandfather's arm.

Grandfather shrugged an apology to the monk then opened the boy's little backpack. He took out a book and a set of felt-tip pens, inviting the boy to colour in. The monk relaxed, closed his eyes and imagined what else the boy's backpack might contain—a soft toy, an electronic game, toothbrush, change of underwear?

He brought into his mind the rest of the luggage in the carriage—the businessman's briefcase, the women's shopping bags, all the suitcases and backpacks. He wondered if, like his, any of them contained human remains.

3

Temple lodgings

The monk moved along in the pocket of air provided by his umbrella, only minimally better than nothing at all with the rain dripping and splashing off its perimeter. His robes clung to his legs, the footpath was slippery in places and he had to tread carefully. The walk from the station was taking so long that the monk thought he might be lost, but the wet weather meant that there was no-one around from whom he might seek directions. The map the station attendant had drawn was blurred with rain, the ink drizzling down the page like a watercolour.

He was relieved when he finally came to a sign pointing to the temple, on a steep knoll overlooking the village.

The door was opened by a priest in white socks, a tall man in his mid-thirties, not much older than the monk himself. His face was not calm. The monk mentioned his telephone booking. 'Ah yes,' said the priest. 'Please come in.' The monk placed his wet sandals beside the other shoes in the vestibule, footwear that was modest, neatly arranged. 'If you don't mind, please wait in the office. Very busy today. A funeral. Family and friends are now eating lunch.'

The monk sat on a chair with horsehair stuffing coming out of it. He could feel hard circles, probably springs. This was nothing like the pristine neat office of the monastery where the abbot carried out his administrative duties.

There was a computer on the desk but it had a cover over it as if it hadn't been used for a long time. It was the most up-to-date item in the office, and seemed anachronistic. Beside it was a ledger with handwriting in it, dates down one column. There was a solid old-fashioned black telephone with a dial, and a cradle on top for the handpiece. In bundles secured by elastic bands were tourist brochures of the local area. The monk saw photos of Sea Breeze Shopping Plaza, Married Rocks, Frog Shrine.

The priest came to and from the office, walking quickly enough to create a breeze which lifted the hems of his robes. He was often followed by an older woman badgering him and giving him instructions. His mother. As the priest slid the screens of the hall open and closed, the monk caught a glimpse of the funeral party and their noisy feasting.

the Sea Bed

The monk recalled the funeral so recently held at the monastery. He saw the white lilies and chrysanthemums surrounding the coffin, Soshin's body inside. Beside the body was Soshin's beloved baseball bat, and on his chest was a small prayer bag with a star and cross-hatching embroidered on it. The monks chanted, one continuous sound, each monk listening to the others, taking care that pauses for breath did not leave gaps. Afterwards, they all shouted to Soshin that he was dead now and must leave. When his charred bones were returned to the monastery they came in two urns.

The phone started ringing very loudly. It rang for a long time before the harried priest came to answer it. He used the pen attached to the ledger to write something down. When the priest replaced the receiver he looked at the monk, as if only now remembering that he'd been left waiting. 'Come,' said the priest.

The monk followed the priest past the hall, down a long corridor that seemed to wave up and down like a mountain path, following some natural topography. 'Your room,' said the priest, then promptly returned to his funeral party.

The room opened onto an interior garden, overgrown and lush. It had once been tended, structured, but now grew wild. A makeshift clothesline was rigged up to form the hypotenuse of a triangle with a corner of the building. A spider had webbed a home for itself in the triangle. The web too looked abandoned. At one end of the line, under the eaves, dangled a lone sock, the same dark grey as the timbers. It was cocooned

in cobwebs, soggy with rain. Decay and the passing of time hung in a delicate balance.

As the monk settled in he wondered whether the priest was happy in his position here. It was no doubt a temple inherited from his father, the family business. Perhaps it would have suited him more to be a scholar studying the scriptures the monk had seen high on a shelf in the office, but the priest had been born into the world of the temple with its parish duties. He could not easily sever himself from his situation.

The monk listened to the drip and trickle of rain, his eyes focused on a single leaf. Occasionally, but not every time, a raindrop hit it directly. The leaf bowed, let the rain slide off, then regained its shape. This individual drop would have made a sound but in the water symphony was indistinguishable. Some drops formed on the tips of leaves and lingered there.

•

The monk went along one corridor and the next looking for the bathroom, opening doors only to find cupboards full of bedding, boxes, old ledgers. He closed such doors gently, as if in a nursing home, so that the draught of fresh air he brought with him wasn't too much of a shock to the twilight inhabitants.

Behind another door were belongings in similar disarray to those in his room at the Blue House. A pair of frayed jeans lying on the floor, a checked shirt crumpled on one of

the mattresses, towels, a couple of backpacks, camping gear, bike magazines and helmets. The monk wondered where the occupants of the room were. Perhaps they were already bathing. He closed the door and moved on, looking forward to the company of fellow travellers.

Eventually he found the bathroom, in an alcove off a secondary corridor. He left his clothes neatly folded up on a shelf in the changing room and stepped naked onto the tiled floor of the bathing area. Though it was a communal bathroom, the monk had it to himself. Perhaps he'd come at the wrong time. He sat on one of the little stools and filled a basin with water. How strange to be bathing alone. It gave him the odd feeling that he was being watched.

•

He found his fellow guests—two young men—in the kitchen watching the baseball, commenting on the players, urging them on, calling out, punching their fists into the air. When the monk came in to prepare his evening meal, they went quiet. One of them picked up the remote control and turned the volume down. 'Sorry,' he said. 'Please continue,' the monk replied. He hadn't meant it to sound like he was giving permission. The baseball channel was a favourite at the monastery. The monks also made comments, shouted encouragement and approval.

The monk watched the pitcher prepare himself, tip the shield of his cap with his index finger.

The camera pulled away for the long shot as the pitcher lifted his leg and finally threw the ball. The batter then started running. A sound of exultation rose from the onlookers like a great bird taking to the sky. 'A home run!' the monk observed. He expected his companions to be overjoyed but they merely smiled politely. When the quarter came to an end and the ads started, they bowed and left the room. They hadn't even waited for the final score.

The monk turned the volume up to entice the young men back, and looked for a saucepan in which to cook his rice. He found an urn, cups, saucers, bowls, but no cooking pots or utensils. The funeral party food must have been brought in from outside.

He would not be eating rice tonight. At the monastery it was the staple; each meal began with setting aside a small portion for hungry ghosts. The monk opened the kitchen window and scattered a few grains outside. It wouldn't go to waste. If there were no ghosts here birds would eat them.

He made do with a cup of hot water from the urn, and sat in the abandoned kitchen listening to the clock tick. At one-minute intervals the hand would spurt forward to the next position. The three, six, nine and twelve were Roman numerals and the rest of the hours lozenge-shaped, all joined up by a circle of minutes—double lines with divisions across them like a set of railway tracks. When the hands pointed to nine thirty, the regular bedtime at the monastery, the monk walked back along the wavy corridor to his room.

The rain had abated. He could hear crickets outside—not a whole chorus, just one or two late-nighters. The temple lodgings were quiet. He wondered whether his fellow guests had gone to bed yet. Perhaps he could find their room again. Let them know how the game ended.

He had not been sent into the world to seek out companions or discuss baseball. Already the monk's mind was wandering from his task.

The monk sat meditating. He sent out loving kindness to his fellow guests, to the priest and his mother, to the funeral party. Then he projected it further, to the people in the village, to the flowers and trees in the temple grounds, the budding plums, to the fish in the unseen sea, molluscs, krill, plankton, everything that was alive, as far as his imagination took him. He finished his meditation by bringing his loving kindness back to Soshin.

The monk took out the urn, fondly touched the black cloth it was wrapped in, and the white cord which tied it. When he had entered the monastery as a little boy, it was Soshin who looked after him, told him stories, pulled funny faces and made him laugh. If the monk became drowsy during meditation, Soshin was the one who came along and struck him on the back. The old man had been at the monastery for as long as anyone could remember, a grandfather to them all.

The monk could barely recall his own grandfather, a man in an old-fashioned suit that smelled of camphor and dust. He wore it the day he brought the monk to the monastery.

He seemed uncomfortable in it and walked in an odd way, as if the suit impeded his movements.

Sometimes during meditation, especially in the monk's early years, this man appeared like a ghost made of mist. He was a farmer, there were fresh green shoots of rice in a large square pond. The rice shoots were arranged in rows, and the dark evening light cast shadows of rice on the water. There were shadows of shadows, each a paler version of itself, exuberant reflections striking the water. Here the man wore gumboots and light grey farm clothes, trousers of a sturdy material.

There were women in the fields too, bending over, in big sunhats made from bamboo, and padded leggings. The old women remained bent like this even when they weren't tending the rice. When young they were straight as trees but the wind of their lives had blown them over.

Dragonflies hovered or took short journeys across the pond. The monk also saw the insects called water boatmen breast-stroking across the surface. Occasionally a perched crane would lift its great wings and take to the air. The monk and the crane saw fat carp greedily munching at water-plant roots, heard the sound, saw their orange, white or black bodies, greedy mouths coming up and sucking at the dryness of air, testing all possible sources of food.

The monk let the images dissolve. Soshin became his grandfather, the monastery his family.

He gently placed the urn beside his mattress. While the larger urn was ceremoniously consigned to the monastery

burial ground this one remained. The abbot announced to the assembly of monks that Soshin had asked that part of his remains be cast into the sea.

The next morning, after breakfast, came the second announcement. Yugen would be the one to carry out Soshin's last request.

Yugen. So rarely did the monk hear his own name, he'd almost forgotten he had one.

4

A sortie

While Yugen felt honoured to be the one to carry out Soshin's last request, the abbot had not told him why he had been chosen. He'd never even seen the sea, had little experience of the world outside the monastery. Perhaps it was a kind of test. Monks had koans to ponder: the goose in the bottle, or what did your face look like before your father was born. Perhaps this task was a koan in action.

Yugen hoped that the choice had been made by Soshin himself.

He headed seawards, in the direction the priest had indicated, along the grassy edge of a road through the fields, thinking about how to proceed. The abbot had given no

specific instructions. Yugen didn't know whether he should cast the remains into the water from the shore, or hire a boat to take them into the deep.

By the time he reached the highway, the early-morning sunlight had disappeared behind a bank of cloud. Yugen waited for a break in the traffic, then crossed to the large building blocking the view of the sea. WELCOME TO SEA BREEZE SHOPPING PLAZA proclaimed the sign on the arched entrance. In the car park tourists were piling out of a bus, looking around, blinking, as if they'd just been released from a long time in a dark cavern.

Yugen skirted the plaza and followed the sign pointing to the Married Rocks and Frog Shrine. When he climbed the steps up to the path he had his first uninterrupted view of the sea.

The monk had imagined blue, with ripples of refracted luminosity, as it was in the brochures at the temple. Or huge curved waves in restless undulation. He did not expect this mute greyness. How small it was, no bigger than a lake, flattened by the weight of an oceanic sky. Why did Soshin want this to be his last resting place? Yugen could not recall him mentioning any special connection to the sea.

He continued along the path, skirting the side of a mountain separating the highway from the sea. The swish of traffic dissipated and was replaced by intermittent voices. Yugen turned to see the tourists in clumps behind him.

He was closer to the sea now, could see its small oscillations, the movement passing through it. The next curve of the path brought him directly to the water's edge. And to the Married Rocks. He was able to identify them, one slightly larger than the other, by the plait of sacred straw which joined them.

Yugen stood gazing at the pair of rocks; again, much smaller than he had imagined. In the brochures they seemed to have the magnitude of islands, but the wife would barely have her head above water at high tide. Neither were they alone—there was a whole family of little rocks scattered around them, the water covering most of them, enhancing their colours, rich brown, green.

The tourists crowded in, jostling, vying for the best vantage points. They stood in front of the Married Rocks and had their photos taken, barely giving the sacred couple a second glance. Yugen moved on to the relative sanctuary of the Frog Shrine.

When he closed his eyes, the water pumping out of the frogs' mouths became the natural cascades of the mountains. Yugen saw the chutes of white water that gushed after rain, imagined it pounding down on him as he sat in the waterfall pool. That water was icy, crispened his skin while his insides melted with the spread of warmth which emanated from the core of his body in response to the surface coldness.

Specks of rain were falling. A few of them landed directly on the monk's eyelids, not hard and sharp as if they had come a great distance from the sky but shyly, soothingly,

as if someone was holding a cloth close to his forehead and squeezing it out.

He opened his eyes and saw a large red umbrella coming along the path. As the umbrella approached, beneath it two young women took shape—pure white jackets and full skirts the rich colour of sun-ripened tomatoes. Shrine maidens. They seemed to be gliding along, on the few centimetres of space between their voluminous skirts and the ground. A slight breeze tilted the rain and the maidens adjusted their umbrellas accordingly. Now the monk could see their perfect faces, with lips the colour of their skirts, as if kiss-shaped pieces of the fabric had detached themselves and come to rest on their mouths.

The vision of the two maidens approaching brought the monk the same sudden joy as the sight of a crane taking to the air. When they walked past him, the monk averted his gaze, as if looking too intensely would cause the vision to dissolve.

They exchanged places with two identically dressed maidens at a stall selling paper prayers and good-luck charms. Their foreheads were bare and trusting with no wisps of hair escaping the neatness of the coiffure.

The maidens remained very still, as if in meditation. Despite the tourists photographing them, they maintained their composure and serenity. They would quietly watch over Soshin, as the sentinel frogs watched over the shrine. A few straggling tourists made purchases while the rest started back along the path.

MARELE DAY

Everyone had gone. The monk looked into the water. An urn would be conspicuous in that family of rocks. Better to dispose of the contents only, let them disperse, drift away. The abbot had said nothing about a ceremony but it didn't seem right to simply empty out the urn as if throwing a bucket of scraps onto a compost heap.

The monk began murmuring funerary sutras. He had barely completed the first when he heard voices. More streams of tourists, cameras at the ready. It would be like this all the time here; Soshin would have no rest. There had to be a better place.

5

The end of the line

Yugen walked up the steps from the platform, past the fishing-net display decorated with shells.

The end of the line; end of the land as well. It had disappeared into the sea, leaving only the high points—islands and a peninsula—visible. Here people described mountains as solidified waves. The bay looked the way mountains did on misty mornings, their bluish heads above a basin of mist the colour of a dove's breast. If the sea were to evaporate like mist, the valleys in the sea would be visible and the lie of the land revealed. Though the sea was water, it looked altogether more solid than mist. Creatures lived in it, which the transience of mist did not allow. All around the bay the land rose up steep

and green. Roosting in the greenery were hotels, perched like herons in treetops, at the best vantage points for spotting prey.

To exit the station there was an escalator or a flight of stairs. The most singular thing Yugen had noticed about the world so far was choice. At the monastery he was a particle travelling along a path of routine free of choices. In his meditation he did not choose one thought or another. They lapped around him and eventually, tiring of his equanimity, moved on or melted away. But—stairs or escalator, when both seemed of equal value, when both led to the same destination?

Yugen looked up to the hovering of small birds near the ceiling of the portico—swallows, swifts, he wasn't sure. Dark, almost black bodies with white underbellies, beautiful forked tails, spreading the stripy webbing between the prongs of the tail when the bird was in flight. Their wings fluttered as fast as hummingbirds, their tiny cheeps reverberating in this space. They settled on the ledges of high windows.

He took the stairs.

At the end of the street was a ferry, and a couple of men leaning against a railing, chatting. They straightened when they saw the monk, a potential customer perhaps. Yugen nodded but kept going. The ferrymen resumed their stance, voices lower now. One made a comment and the others laughed.

Yugen wondered if they were talking about him. Even at a distance, along an arm of the U-shaped bay, he could still hear their voices. Then came the barking of a lone dog, the

keening of a seabird, the slap of water against the small fishing boats, the sound of an outboard motor.

It was not like the forest where, if you listened, the air was full of tiny sounds all of the time. There you couldn't tell when one left off and the next started. Here each sound was distinct and separate, amplified by the water, each cutting through the quiet stillness, the moist salty air, like scissors through silk.

The sea had a tang to it, an almost vegetative pungency, cucumber in brine, which relaxed open the nostrils. It came into Yugen's nose all at once, unlike mountain air that was best breathed thinly, as if through a straw, letting it warm in the corridors of the nostrils before entering the body proper. He could taste the sea at the back of his throat. Was it something specific or the composition of several things?

Yugen found a path leading down to the water's edge. He passed an open shed where a woman sat on a crate, making net bags or baskets. She wore a pink apron over a striped shirt, beige trousers and pink gumboots. On her forearms were clear plastic sleeve protectors. She had a strong pleasant face, and hair that was cut short. He nodded a greeting but she appeared not to have seen him.

The monk made his way to a pile of shell-encrusted tyres. They were old and perishing, collapsing when he sat on them. He was so close to the edge he could see the muddy bottom of the bay, the discarded oyster shells embedded in it.

On the train down here Yugen had discovered that the sea was more widespread than his initial view of it had suggested.

It curved into bays and inlets, around islands, then expanded out to the horizon. The abbot had not specified a time to be back at the monastery, Yugen did not have to rush. He could explore a little more before choosing. What would be best for Soshin—a quiet little inlet like this or the unfettered ocean?

How could the monk make such an important decision when he had difficulty choosing between escalators and stairs?

He held his mindfulness on parallel planes, alert to the discussion going on in his head, aware of the old rubber tyre on which he sat, the presence of Soshin's urn in his backpack.

He let go of these sensations and focused on his surroundings.

Rafts made of thick bamboo poles extended into the bay. The poles that once stood tall and green in forests had found their way to the sea, to this protected little pocket of it, just as the monk had. His heart expanded, grateful for the company of bamboo.

On one of the rafts was a small hut. Three women, in gumboots, aprons and brimmed hats tied under the chin, were cleaning oysters, scraping seaweed and barnacles from the shells with forked instruments that looked like small garden tools. The scraping resembled the raspy croaky call of a seabird.

On another raft a man was lowering a net bag back into the water. Yugen imagined the many baskets hanging silently, invisibly, below the waterline.

It came on him like soft rain—he was in a pearl farm.

He felt a shadow pass over him and looked up to see a young man dressed in smart office clothes.

'Excuse me, sir. This is private property.'

The women scraping the shells, the man with the net bags, carried on working. They seemed oblivious to the monk's presence yet someone must have told the young man. The woman in the shed?

'I am so sorry,' said Yugen. 'I did not realise.'

The young man then returned the apology, as if it were all his fault. The monk rose to his feet. Standing in front of the shed was an older man in a suit. The monk extended his apologies to him. The older man accepted with a brief nod of his head.

Yugen left by the same winding path and returned to the train station, this time choosing the escalator.

He was examining the display of nets and shells when he realised that on the other side of the station was another way out.

6

The other side of the station

Here were different signs of life entirely. Taxis, and shiny new buses. But apart from the drivers, no people. One of the taxi drivers had reclined his seat so that he was almost lying horizontally, reading a newspaper that covered him like a bed sheet.

Yugen began walking. Perhaps on this side of the station he would find a different part of the sea, one which wasn't private property.

The moisture in the air formed into droplets and sprinkled down as warm thin rain, barely distinguishable from the beads of perspiration on Yugen's forehead and the back of his neck. He ran his hand across the top of his head and felt the stubble

growing there. At the monastery the monks shaved each others' heads every five days, on the fourth and the ninth of the month, the fourteenth and nineteenth, and so on. When was the next shaving due? Yugen had been away only a couple of days, yet already it felt like weeks.

He hadn't gone far along the road when he came across a huge billboard: OCEANWORLD—1ST LEFT 200M. Surely there'd be sea at Oceanworld.

Around the next corner the road opened to a parking area, white lines on black bitumen. Three large buses were lined up, one next to the other. There were a few cars in spaces by themselves. At the end of the car park was a cylindrical building with asymmetrical wings. Oceanworld.

At the entrance was a turnstile, similar to the ones at the station. It made the monk feel as if he were about to embark on a journey, but before he could go any further, the woman behind the small glass window gently reminded him that a ticket was required. He bought one, then passed into a foyer with a large mural of gaily painted fish. It was very nice but it wasn't the sea.

At the far end of the foyer was a white spiral staircase. Perhaps it led to a viewing platform. The monk ascended the stairs and found himself surrounded by live fish. They were swimming in the huge glass ring which circled this upper floor.

Schoolchildren milled around, following the fish, their faces as close to the glass as they could be, voices echoing

in the space. Could the fish hear them, or was their world silenced by the glass?

Eventually the school party left, and for a while Yugen was the only human present. He came to the glass and observed the fish more closely. They ranged from silvery grey to dark brown, swimming in the stream created by their own movement, although the odd one stayed still or swam against the flow of the others. It was like watching TV except these were real fish. If the glass broke the fish and the water would all come tumbling out and he would be inundated.

Yugen felt slightly nauseous watching them, as if he himself were turning, spinning around and around. Some fish were tight-lipped, others had mouths open to catch what they will. On their circular journeying, did the fish recognise particular places or was it all the same to them? Yugen wondered whether this was their pattern in the wild ocean. He imagined the monks as these fish, all moving in the same stream.

Though monastic life was rigorous, frugal, what might be called 'close to nature', it was not wild. Inherent in wildness was the unpredictable. With gongs marking the hour when the monks arose, when they ate, meditated, with a calendar marked by specific days of the month and seasons of the year when ceremonies were carried out, there was no room for unpredictability.

A few notes of music wafted into the room then an amplified woman's voice: 'At twelve-thirty there will be a sea-woman demonstration. Come and hear the haunting whistle

described as the "elegy of the sea". It nostalgically evokes the ocean, much as the song of a nightingale evokes mountains, or the chirp of crickets signals summer.'

A high reedy sound resembling a dolphin call emanated from the speakers. 'The demonstration will commence in five minutes.'

The monk expected the school group to return but it didn't, although other visitors started trickling into the room in response to the call. He wondered where the best vantage point might be. There was no clustering of people at any specific location so he stayed where he was and continued watching the fish who continued on their circular journeying unperturbed.

Another waft of music then a commentary began. 'For almost two thousand years along this coastline and on offshore islands, sea women have dived for abalone and other shellfish, with only the air in their lungs to sustain them. When they emerge from the depths that air is released in a slow steady stream.' Once again the monk heard the high reedy whistle.

A sea woman appeared. Yugen had not seen her entry into the water; it had happened somewhere behind him. She was dressed completely in white—white hat tied under her chin, long-sleeved shirt, thick knitted gloves, and a white skirt that reached to her knees. Beneath that, her legs and feet were bare, with a small bruise above the right ankle. You could just make out her eyes and nose through the facemask. The water pressed her lips into a smile. One arm was raised, the hand disappearing

above the water, presumably holding onto something to keep her in place. With the other hand she reached into the wicker basket suspended from her shoulder, and scattered meal.

The fish packed so densely around her that she was obscured, with only a glimpse of white here and there like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. One fish, a groper with blubbery lips, tried to dive into the basket but she biffed him away before his large head got stuck in the small opening.

Occasionally, when she raised herself up, head disappearing above the waterline, the cloud of fish dispersed a little. Between these trips to the surface, the sea woman stayed submerged for remarkably long periods of time. It was only when she rose to the surface that Yugen was reminded that this sea creature needed to breathe.

With a renewed supply of air she dived down then swam a few metres, legs making frilly movements in the water, propelling herself with just the lower parts, the knees together holding the skirt modestly in place. Nevertheless the shadowy form of the body beneath the clothes was revealed. As she moved around the circular tube, repeating the pattern—feeding the fish, going up for air—so did Yugen. He did not want to lose sight of her. A couple of times when she was vertical and treading water, she waved to her audience. Finally, she swam behind an artificial rock and disappeared.

Yugen waited but she did not reappear. The performance was over. The fish went back to their habitual circling, and the spaces that the sea woman had occupied filled with water.

The monk wondered if, in the semi-darkness of the room, he had dreamed her pale presence, a ghost swimming by like the ephemeral thoughts that arose from his own watery places.

He sat on a bench, a multitude of feelings thronging inside him like the fish at her feed basket. He couldn't tell if he wanted to be her, be the fish fed by her, or the water in which she swam. What he did know was that he wanted to be on the wet side of the glass. What did it feel like to be in that liquidity, to be brushed by fish, have them clamouring?

The monk was barely aware that another hour had gone by till he heard the announcement again. While that time passed almost without notice, the next five minutes seemed an eternity. He was like a porcupine with all his quills up, and in every quill a nerve ending ready to receive. He was buzzing with anticipation and expectancy.

When he could no longer sit still he stood up, turning slowly on the spot, making a small tight circle in the centre of the big one around which the fish were swimming. They showed no signs of anticipation or expectancy, yet this was their regular feeding time. Yugen had learned after only one prod.

Surely those five minutes must have passed but still the sea woman did not appear. He closed his eyes and slowly counted to ten, playing a delicious game with himself, piling onto anticipation the possibility of missing her entrance altogether, as he had the first time.

She appeared from behind the rock where he had lost sight of her, as if no time had passed, and her swim had been

uninterrupted. She waved again, and the monk found his hand automatically rising to return the greeting. She did all the same things—holding onto something above the water with one hand and dispensing meal with the other.

Before the fish frenzied once again, cutting the view of her into jigsaw pieces, Yugen saw that the small fisherman's basket was tied to her waist by a rope, not slung over her shoulder. The bruise on the ankle was gone. Had he been mistaken the first time? The same smile pressed into her lips. The monk followed her around the room unashamedly. Then it was over, all too quickly.

Yugen stayed the whole afternoon, waiting out the hours for the five minutes when she appeared. He hovered around the artificial rock trying to catch a glimpse of the passageway that led from the water to the air.

There was a final announcement—Oceanworld was closing in ten minutes. Visitors were asked to please make their way to the exit, ensuring that they took all belongings with them and retrieved any items stored in the lockers.

The other spectators began making their way down the staircase obediently, leaving Yugen alone. He ducked under the railing and pressed his face against the glass, trying to see beyond the rock.

Where did she go during the fifty-five minutes between performances? The glass was cold. It left wetness on his nose. A fish approached him head on. Yugen could see far into its grey mouth, but not into the dark recesses of the rock. There

was no apparent beginning or end to the circular tube of water.

He scanned the room looking for access beyond the glass. No doors, not even those with signs saying STAFF ONLY. If she came in and out of the tube, he could too. Did she return here after closing time when all the people had gone, and take up her place among the fish?

Yugen swam in the narrow space between the railing and the glass, a hooked fish being trailed through the water. A rogue thought lifted him on a wave of exhilaration. What if he didn't make his way to the exit like the others, but spent the night in this silent sea?

Footsteps. Someone coming up the stairs. The monk returned to the right side of the railing, lay down under one of the benches, and waited.

7

Under the bench

It was two young women, laughing and chatting. Yugen saw the pairs of feet, one in blue thongs, the other in dark green, coming his way. The women sat down on the very bench under which he lay. The cushion sighed as their bodies squeezed it flat, a small break in the surface through which air escaped. The feet were so close to the monk that they were almost touching him. He tightened himself even further under the bench, skeining in his energy.

A bag was placed on the floor, a large cloth one, blue with white birds, and two large rings of bamboo for handles. It bulged with soft and malleable things.

'Do you want to try them on?'

'Sure, why not?'

Yugen heard the rustling of tissue paper. A shoe box was placed on the ground. 'You want me to put them on your feet, like the prince in *Cinderella*?'

'I don't think he did that job himself. He would have had servants.'

Although the monk had made himself unremarkable, drawn himself in so that he had no more presence than a sheet of paper, he was intensely aware of the women, as if springing from every pore of his skin was a feeler sensing them out. His eyes hovered around their feet. He recognised the bruise above the ankle of the one in blue thongs. The sea woman. Her bruise seemed to have faded out here in the dry air, less bright than it had appeared underwater. He narrowed his focus so that he could see only the mark of the bruise and the immediate surrounding of unblemished skin. It became a cloud, a rock, a lake, a patch of moss.

The feet stepped out of the blue thongs. A hand came down holding a shoe—black patent-leather strap across the front, a pearly white button in the middle of it. The heel was a shiny black spike, like the one he'd touched at the Blue House. The right foot arched as the hands slipped the shoe on and crisscrossed laces around the ankle, finishing in a bow. The same movements were repeated with the left foot.

'Hmm, quite comfortable—while I'm sitting down.'

'But great to walk in, too. There's padding under the ball of the foot. It's this little transparent thing called a jellyfish. Have a go.'

She stood up. 'So far so good.'

'Walk over to the railing, Chicken.'

'You make it sound like I'm a paraplegic.' Chicken began, one tentative foot after the other, and made it all the way to the railing. 'Keri, I'm walking, it's a miracle. Hey, fish, look.'

Yugen imagined the fish thronging, the way they did at the feed basket. He heard Keri clapping her hands, saw her feet slapping the green thongs up and down, keeping rhythm.

Chicken made her way back to the bench, exaggerating her movements, threatening to fall. When she undid the laces the monk could see the marks they left in her flesh. He wanted to touch it, soothe the marks away.

'Chicken, these aren't just any shoes.'

'I know, they cured me.' Chicken laughed but her friend remained silent.

Yugen felt the weight of the pause.

'Can you keep a secret?'

Chicken's feet slid back into their own blue thongs. 'Of course.'

'These are my shoes for going to the city.'

'Well, there aren't a lot of places round here you could wear them.'

'No, I mean going and maybe not coming back. I've been accepted into beauty school.'

Everything about Chicken's feet stopped still. 'That's great, really good. When?'

'It doesn't start till autumn. So I'll be able to finish the summer with Oceanworld.'

'You haven't told them yet?'

'No, I said it was a secret.'

'Am I the only one who knows?'

'You and my mum.'

'What does she think?'

'That it's for the best. Things aren't like they used to be when she was young. The diving season is so short now.' Keri laughed. 'I can't see myself swimming round in this ring forever, can you?'

Chicken didn't answer. A deeper space opened, as if the earlier conversation about shoes had only been the idle skipping of stones across the surface. Whereas the silences before seemed comfortable, now it was thick with unnamed things.

Chicken rubbed her ankle. Yugen withdrew even further, in case it was the breeze from his breath that she felt as a soft moist disturbance. He should meditate, try to detach himself from what was being said, but he was riveted. It was as if the sea women had become naked before him.

'Hey, you can come and visit me. We can go and see your sister.'

Chicken raised her heel off the ground. Her water-washed toes were poised delicately. They were long toes with short

clipped nails. There was a line on the sole of her foot, a scar. The monk saw her calf muscle clench.

'She's always off travelling—in the Kalahari, the Amazon, the Great Barrier Reef.'

'What a dream life! Aren't you tempted?'

For a moment both of Chicken's calf muscles clenched then relaxed. 'And who would be left to feed the fish? I'm staying put. Somebody has to show the tourists what we do, especially now that you're going.' She nudged her friend playfully.

The two women laughed. They had returned to the surface, skipping stones.

'Hey, do you want some of this?' Chicken opened the blue and white bag and pulled out a snack bar. In so doing she dislodged a small cloth item, perhaps the bonnet she wore underwater. The monk saw a purple star drawn on the white cloth.

'Yum,' said Keri, crunching into the bar. 'Do you need a lift to Boat Harbour? My cousin is picking me up.'

'Thanks, but I'm meeting Mum.'

Yugen watched their feet walking over to the ring of fish. Keri and Chicken swung their legs over the railing. 'Good night, girls and boys,' they said. 'Sweet dreams.' The sea women kissed the glass several times, soft little lip prints, like kisses on a child's head. 'And look, here's Mr Groper. A special slobbery kiss for you, big boy.' They placed moist pouting lips on the glass, and sighed as if in the embrace of a lover.

A final wave, then they were gone.

the Sea Bed

•

The monk needed air. He was about to come out from under the bench when he heard yet more footsteps, a lighter then heavier tread, the weight on one side, like a bird with an injured leg. A vacuum cleaner came into view, followed by feet in comfortable slippers, and stockings that ended at the knee.

The vacuum cleaner started its drone. The woman pushing it mechanically backwards and forwards was quite small and thin. Her whole body hung loosely from her shoulders. She passed in and out of the line of Yugen's vision, going around the room in ever-decreasing circles, towards the centre.

The mouth of the vacuum cleaner came towards him, a hammerhead shark prowling for food. It made contact two or three times, bumped up against him as if trying to provoke a fight, but Yugen did not respond. He thought of coming out from under the bench, of leaving, but it had gone on too long now and the cleaning woman would get a fright.

Eventually the droning stopped. Other sounds became audible—a creak, a soft nestling, then the scratchy shuffling of the cleaner going back down the stairs.

The steady whirr of a fan, the general hum of electricity, the stream of air bubbling into the water, these settled into the silence. Everyone had gone.

Yugen rolled out from under the bench onto the freshly vacuumed floor. His body lay inert, stretched out like a starfish, his busy mind siphoning off all the energy. No longer did it

let thoughts arise and pass on, it wanted to hold onto them, even though those thoughts were as slippery as fish. They would not stay still. He had listened in on women's private conversation, been the silent partner to their intimacy, sensed obscure yearnings, hopes and disappointments that they had not even shared with each other.

He saw the dull gleam of the chrome railing, the concavity of glass enclosing the fish, his companions for the night.

He stood up, felt his body adjust itself to the vertical plane after being horizontal for so long, his parts coming together in a different arrangement. He went over to the kisses. He could see the impression of lips on the glass, the small pursed traces and the soft open ones. The monk closed his eyes, placed his lips on the kisses, fixing his mouth to the traces of the sea women, to the particles of their DNA.

The coldness of the glass yielded under his living warmth and became the same temperature, reached equilibrium. It was as if the glass was melting into water. He saw women swimming naked, the movement of their breasts, their frilly bivalves.

'Ah.' A sigh from his own body. Yugen opened his eyes. Mouths were clamouring for his, a confluence of fish. He suddenly felt embarrassed, pulled away, and resumed his position under the bench.

Normally the monk's sleep was light, a feather over the eyelids, but tonight he was sinking into oceanic depths, to come to rest on the seabed. He imagined the whole space filled with water, the domed ceiling the night sky. The words

of the sea women floated down like fish meal and settled on him. He breathed easily on the floor of this watery yin world, tiny breaths, warm rhythmic moisture around the edges of his nostrils, the soft imperceptible opening and closing of gills.

8

To the island

Chicken sat in the station staring down at the display of ropy old fishing net scattered with knobbly starfish and shells made of plastic. Through the mesh she could see the beginning of the railway track that went all the way to the city.

So now Keri was going. One more. Chicken felt the emptiness inside her expand, push tautly against her skin.

'Have a good day?' Violet, her mother. Chicken knew she'd arrived before she even spoke, recognised the rhythm of her footfall.

'Yes, really good.' Chicken picked up her bag with the happy blue and white pattern and slung it over her shoulder.

Mother and daughter started to walk down the stairs to the platform.

'What's that on your ankles?' asked Violet.

Chicken's foot hovered over the next step. The strap marks were still faintly visible. If she told her mother about Keri's shoes, the gentle push and prod of Violet's questioning might find their way to the secret. 'Maybe old age is creeping up on me,' she joked.

Chicken and Violet took the train back to Boat Harbour and walked quickly in the rain to the ferry wharf, both of them under Violet's pink umbrella.

Chisako was there with little Kimi in the stroller. Also, the twin grandfathers. All the islanders reckoned they could tell the difference between them but no-one was really sure. With their small heads on long necks the old men resembled meerkats, and always seemed to be staring into the distance. Today they were dressed in brown trousers and pale blue shirts. Each carried a plastic bag full of shopping. As they were shy, people greeted them by nodding so that they didn't feel obliged to talk.

Although islanders usually stepped directly from the wharf onto the ferry, even senior grandmothers and grandfathers, this time the attendant insisted on putting the gangplank down for the baby in the stroller. While the passengers waited for him to haul it out, Chicken tapped her finger on the tip of her nose till she got Kimi to laugh and do the same.

When all were safely on board, the gangplank withdrawn and the mooring rope wound into a neat coil on the deck, the ferry set off in a churning of water and made its way across the rain-filled bay.

•

Island-side, at the port, were parked mopeds, apparently identical yet sufficiently different to be recognised immediately by their owners, like parent penguins instantly identifying the cry of their young and waddling towards it.

There weren't many left now; most of the islanders who worked on the mainland had already returned. The grandfathers found theirs, put the shopping in the wire basket on the back and set off towards the cluster of houses and one or two shops that made up the village. They waved grandly, arms as high as they could reach, to nobody in particular.

Yano, Chisako's husband, opened the back of the car while his young wife released the child from the stroller which he then folded and put away. Chisako passed Kimi to his father, the baby's trusting little arms already outstretched to him. The father nuzzled the top of his head into the child's soft chubby neck.

Violet folded up the pink umbrella and exchanged comments about the weather with the couple. The rain had eased now, slow and intermittent as the soft fall of petals. When Kimi was securely fastened into his car seat, Violet and Chicken got

on their moped. Violet drove, her feet neatly placed together, with Chicken on the back letting her legs dangle loosely. Her ankles were in exact alignment with the mound of the rear hub cap, the source of her bruise.

Chicken scanned the grandmothers' bench. It was practically dark now and they would have gone home, but she looked anyway. Just in case. Violet kept her eyes straight ahead, body stiffening as they passed the bench, increasing speed, zooming up the hill to the house, rising higher and higher till the quiet lights of the mainland came into view.

She stopped outside the house, a large one by island standards. In the tourist season, during the festival, and on other holidays, it became a bed and breakfast, and they rented out rooms.

The pamphlets, in the stand at the front desk with the folded maps of the island, showed the panoramic views from the guesthouse, the interior of a room with the light from the window spilling onto the rice-straw matting. There was also a picture of a sumptuous meal—a large handsome crayfish, oysters and other seafood laid out on a platter. Four smiling people—two men, two women—sat at the table ready to enjoy this holiday abundance. After the photo had been taken the crayfish, whose name was Charley, was put back into the freezer. He had appeared in many photos and had been thawed and refrozen so many times that he was beyond eating.

There was also a photo of the communal bathroom, with a woman smiling and reclining her head on the lip of the bath.

That was Violet, a younger Violet than the one now entering the vestibule with Chicken, taking off her shoes and calling out: 'We're home!'

Her husband, Nori, knew this already, had seen the ferry cutting through the panoramic view, heard the puttering of the moped. It had given him time to turn the TV off and set the table.

'Any sign of her?' Violet whispered her question, as if saying it loudly might break something. Nori shook his head. Violet sighed, then went into the bathroom.

Chicken hung up her diving uniform. Who would Oceanworld get to replace Keri? Chicken found her primary-school photo among the others on the wall. She looked at her classmates. Only in the photo were they still all together. Some had gone to the city, others had moved to Boat Harbour. Some, like Chicken, worked there and caught the ferry backwards and forwards. Except for the festival, hardly any of them dived anymore.

Beside the photos of friends and classmates was the gracious tree of family photos beginning with Great-grandfather Norbu and Great-grandmother Iris, young and gazing into the future, into the eyes of Chicken, of the generations to come. The family tree was drawn on a large piece of white paper, the trunk outlined in black, with carefully shaped evergreen leaves which never left the tree. The photos hung from the branches like lanterns. The tree had started as a school project but Chicken continued cultivating and tending it. The photo of

the Sea Bed

Norbu and Iris sat in the fertility of an abalone shell to which Chicken had added twigs and downy feathers to make a nest. Directly beneath Norbu and Iris were their daughters, Cedar and Pearlie.

On the tree's most recent branch were the other sisters, Chicken and Lilli. In the bloodline they were cousins but they had grown up together in this house and loved each other like sisters. The photo of Lilli and Chicken was taken at New Year, when Chicken was three and Lilli was nine. They were both in their New Year coats, Lilli's a smart black-and-white check and Chicken's bright blue with red buttons. They were wearing black shoes, and white socks that came up to their knees. For years Chicken hated this photo, hated it being taken, hated looking at it. She did not want to stand still and be photographed, she remembered trying to pull away from Lilli who held her hand tightly and said through her unwavering smile, 'Just stay here, OK? It won't take a minute.'

'Chicken?' Violet's voice marching up the stairs. 'Your dinner's on the table.'

Chicken traced her finger around the torn edge of the photo then went to join Violet and Nori.

Even though they were only three, the table was set for four. On each plate was a savoury summer custard, perfect little creamy egg mounds filled with mushrooms, prawns and parsley, that Violet had bought in the supermarket. In the centre of the table were cups containing pickled vegetables, and a larger plate with crispy pieces of deep-fried whitebait.

Nori, Violet and Chicken ate all their meals in the kitchen. Now that they were taking in guests, the family had become squatters in their own home, containing themselves to a few rooms while the rest of the house remained vacant. The dining room, in which the sumptuous seafood platter was photographed, had a table long enough to comfortably accommodate twelve people, along with all the bowls, plates and presentation that were required. Violet kept the dining room clean, dusted the flowers and swept the straw matting, wiped a soft cloth over the chest of drawers, but they didn't eat in there, as if doing so might mess it up. Violet said tourists preferred neutral spaces, not ones that echoed with family use.

She did on occasion allow festival committee meetings to take place around the large table, but she insisted on putting down a cloth to keep the coffee and tea, notepads and pens, elbows and hands from direct contact with the table. Afterwards, when the meeting had finished and Nori was seeing everyone out, Violet removed the cloth, bringing the corners of it together in the middle so that any traces left behind were captured.

Nori's chopsticks were coming to terms with the last few grains remaining in his bowl.

'Get your father some more rice,' Violet said.

Chicken thought: Why? Is there something wrong with his legs? She went over to the bench where the automatic rice cooker was, felt the warmth emanating from it. Violet was used to it now but when they first got the cooker it was nothing short of miraculous. What a boon for the working woman! It

was so easy to operate even Nori could do it. In the morning you poured in rice and the required amount of water, then when the rice was steamed to perfection, soft and fluffy, the cooker went into stand-by mode and kept it warm all day.

'Thank you, sweetheart,' said Nori when Chicken came back with another bowlful. He turned his attention to Violet. 'You know, we could buy her a motorised wheelchair if she's having trouble getting up the hill. Kobo's mother had one. I bet he's still got it. She'd drive right down to the water's edge then tip herself in, do you remember, Violet? Like milk coming out of a carton.'

'Nori, honestly!' Chicken watched a frown furrow its way into the space between her mother's eyebrows. In a quieter voice Violet said: 'She can still manage the hill, I don't think it's that.'

'What, then?'

'I don't really want to discuss this at the moment, OK? Not while we're eating. It's making my stomach cramp.'

Nori knew when to leave well enough alone. He changed the subject, told Violet that the festival planning committee meeting had been moved to Thursday because this month it clashed with the volunteer fire brigade drill. Violet said she'd been asked to work an extra day next week because they were cleaning the oyster baskets. Chicken dawdled at the edges of the conversation, looking at the fourth savoury custard with its slick supermarket finish. Pearlie probably wouldn't have eaten it anyway.

•

Chicken quietly slid open the door to the dining room, letting in moonbeams and the sigh of the sea. Despite Violet's efforts, there were still traces, ones that she could not pick up in a cloth, or with a vacuum cleaner.

In this room was the house's most substantial piece of furniture, a chest of drawers made of cedar which still imparted a faint but pleasant fragrance, the suggestion of forests, sweetened by the not-unpleasant odour of fermentation that the rice-straw matting took on during the hot wet rainy season. If you sat in this room and closed your eyes the blend of aromas took you to a small mountain hut dwarfed by the great trunks of cedars rising from the pale matting of undergrowth like statues of warriors. In this hut lived a man who made rice wine using the water from the pure mountain stream. The man was young and darkly beautiful, with long silky hair. He had felled the cedar tree which was destined for the island.

Great-grandfather Norbu made the cabinet for Great-grandmother Iris when they were young and first married. Chicken rested her fingers lightly on the surface of it, bringing the story it contained back to life.

Norbu and Iris's marriage was a true love match, famous on the island, but every joy had sadness stalking it, and their sadness was that for seven years there were no children. They went on pilgrimages to the Married Rocks, made love in the spring moonlight, lay on the beach all night when the moon

was full and let the sea lap them. They fed each other raw abalone, shaped like a woman's secret parts, to enhance both fertility and virility.

In the sixth year, and still childless, Great-grandfather began making the cabinet with special wood that he ordered from the mainland. It came by boat, planks of cedar tied together and kept in place by rope. He treated that timber lovingly, planed and sanded it to bring out the grain till it was smooth as a baby.

The making of the cabinet, with drawers for baby clothes, brought Great-grandmother to the edge of despair and hope. She dared not hope, yet if she was in despair hope would not find her.

Out on the boat, in the relaxation after the dive, with the weight stone brought up, the rope coiled and stowed, and Great-grandmother's tub full of abalone or turban shell or whatever she had harvested, she sometimes spoke her anxieties.

'But isn't it tempting fate?' she asked in a soft voice so as not to offend the sea. 'Defying the deities?'

Great-grandfather looked at his dear wife, at the wide blue all around her. 'It shows them that we continue to live in the fullness of life and haven't closed ourselves into a smaller one,' he replied.

Shortly after the chest of drawers was finished a tsunami came. It was too big a thing to blame on one person, even a couple. The islanders had heeded the signs and taken to the high ground, many of them sheltering in this very house.

When the wave subsided the rocky coastline had once again been rearranged; a few boats that couldn't be moved in time were reduced to planks, but no lives had been lost.

In fact, one was added—a baby in a seaworthy little cradle, gurgling quietly to herself. She was wedged between rocks above the beach where Norbu and Iris had lain. The cradle was made of cedar, like the chest of drawers—at least, that's what it became in the story that was handed down. The islanders felt blessed. Tsunamis sometimes washed ashore surprises—once a small Buddha statue, another time a carton of beer—but never before had it brought a live baby.

No-one came to claim her, and after enquiries to neighbouring islands revealed no missing babies, everyone decided that Great-grandfather and Great-grandmother should adopt the baby that came with the wave. They called her Cedar. Their lives filled with joy once again. And then, even with so much joy in the house that there couldn't possibly be room for any more, three years after finding Cedar Great-grandmother became pregnant and a little sister, Pearlie, was born.

Chicken's fingers lifted, hovered over the cabinet. She imagined it full of bonnets and booties, table napkins and linen for big family dinners. She opened all the drawers, letting the ghosts out.

Then Chicken lay on the floor, letting the sound of the sea wash over her, feeling the heartbeat of the Great Ones pulse in her blood.

9

A rude awakening

Yugen's throat was as dry as parchment. Where had all the water gone? A small face peered at him, a small boy's face. 'Mama . . .' the boy began.

'Stand up, little one, you'll get your knees dirty,' his mother said. 'Let's go and see the penguins, shall we?' She ushered him away. 'Hold Mama's hand while we go down the stairs.' The woman glared back at the monk.

He was lying on the backpack, something hard pressing against his cheek. The urn. He'd been using Soshin's urn as a pillow for his watery dreams. Yugen gathered up his belongings, descended the stairs, and fled out the back exit.

If only Soshin were here to strike him, bring him back to mindfulness.

When he was finally out of the Oceanworld precinct he begged for Soshin's forgiveness. Once more he had lost sight of his task. It would not happen again.

Yugen made his way to the station and crossed to the other side. He did not stop to think about whether to take the escalator or the stairs, did not gaze at the hovering of birds in the portico. There was sea on this side of the station, and ferries.

He walked down the street. The ferry was gone but the same men were there. This time they did not straighten up as the monk approached but continued slouching. He thought he detected suppressed grins. Was it like the monastery where everyone knew what the other was doing? Did the men know he'd spent the night under the bench at Oceanworld, even what he'd been dreaming?

'I would like to take a ferry ride,' Yugen announced with confidence.

One of the men put on an official-looking cap and stepped into a small ticket booth. 'Where to?' The others watched with veiled interest.

'I don't know,' the monk faltered. A part of the sea without tourists, that wasn't private property.

'Finger Peninsula?' the ticket seller suggested.

'Is it beyond the pearl farm?'

The man nodded. 'It's way over on the other side of the bay. If you walk through Finger Peninsula town, you'll come to the Pacific Ocean. The next ferry leaves in one hour.'

The Pacific Ocean would be perfect.

Yugen purchased a ticket. One hour. He must not anticipate, attach himself to the ferry by his desire for it to arrive.

He strolled by some timber jetties. At the end of one sat a woman with a small portable easel. She was sketching the bay, the broad sweeps of shoreline topography, strokes that marked the glimpsed horizon, the curves of land that drifted into each other so you couldn't tell if they were separate islands or more contours of the mainland. In the foreground was the outline of a man fishing.

Yugen looked from the drawing to the bay. There was no fisherman. The woman continued the pencil line from the slightly curved rod down to the water. Her bay was gridded with lines marking something under the water, buoys, round and black, delineating the area. She was sketching with such speed, as if the bay was posing for her, a subject that might become impatient under her pencil strokes, and shift, rearrange itself. She stopped, looked at the sketch. The monk saw her shoulders rise and fall. She turned the page and began afresh. Perhaps he had disturbed her.

No sign of the ferry. Yugen came back to the waterfront shops. In the centre of the row was an old timber building with sliding doors, the vertical slats of different lengths creating a pleasing pattern. The once dark timbers above the facade were

bleached almost white by sea air. The building had a colonial tropical feel about it, a faded grandeur.

Yugen entered the cool dark atmosphere of the past. The floorboards had the same satiny sheen as those in the monastery, polished by centuries of softly slippered feet walking across them. The monk loved the feel of such floorboards. In the smooth sheen he saw reflected all the monks who had gone before him, and how his footsteps also contributed to the sheen, subtly changing it, so that the floor itself was always in a process of becoming. Many feet had walked across the floor of the shop. It was uneven, dipping slightly at the main entrance.

Yugen heard the steady whirr of the electric fan on the counter, an old-fashioned fan, blades like clover leaves enclosed in a disc-shaped cage. The girl behind the counter gave a faint smile and busied herself with dusting, then rearranging a display of earrings and necklaces.

On the walls were faded photos of men in tight suits and fixed smiles. A framed collection of different kinds of pearls, and the oysters that produced them. One of an abalone pearl. Photos of blister pearls, gold-lipped oyster pearls, curiously shaped wild ones, before cultivation brought regularity.

The shopgirl worked on the display using only the tips of her fingers, as if too much touching would spoil it. She had delicately pencilled eyebrows, curled eyelashes, lips the colour of plums.

Had she applied her make-up on the train, as Yugen had seen young women do, so expert at transforming their faces that they were able to carry on a conversation at the same time?

'Looking for something in particular?'

Yugen realised that he'd been staring. A prickling sensation rose into his face. He looked out across the bay; still no ferry. He was in the shop, he should buy something. 'What is this?' he asked, indicating two imperfectly shaped pearls on the end of a small silver chain.

'A cell phone accessory.'

Yugen did not have a cell phone. He stood for a moment contemplating the pearls then moved on to a basket of discounted items—key rings, brooches, little purses made of silk. Something caught his eye. A star on a white background. He picked it up—an ornamental disc attached to a key ring. He had seen this star before, only last night—at Oceanworld, in the sea woman's bag. But the memory was older than that. Perhaps something in the city, at the Blue House. While Yugen's mind busied itself trying to locate the memory, his fingers idly turned the disc over. On the other side was a pattern of lines—five vertical crossed by four horizontal. This too looked familiar. It could have been anything—netting, checked cloth. Yugen seemed to remember a man on the train wearing shorts with checks on them. He continued turning the disc—star and cross-hatching alternately coming into view.

Now he knew where he had seen this, the two of them together: in Soshin's coffin, on the little prayer bag. How did

Soshin happen to have a prayer bag with this design? Had he been here, to this shop?

'What are these markings?' he asked the girl.

'The talisman of diving women.' The girl picked up another key ring from the basket. 'The star is drawn with one line, to find the way back. And the cross-hatching represents a net to trap dangers.'

'Where are they?'

'Usually on their bonnets.'

'No,' the monk said urgently, 'where are the women?'

She was still smiling but something had changed. He was showing too much interest. 'Would you like to purchase the key ring?'

'Thank you.'

The girl spread a sheet of pale green wrapping paper onto the counter, and placed the key ring in the centre of it. She was folding the corners in when Yugen heard a juddering. He looked up and caught sight of churning white water. Not only was the ferry at the pier but it was preparing to leave.

The shopgirl was still in the process of wrapping, a length of silver ribbon in her hand. 'It's fine as it is.' Yugen grabbed the key ring, put money on the counter and raced towards the pier. He did not even wait for his change.

10

Taming

Chicken had taken the photo off the family tree and brought it with her. She squeezed past the sign which said: SEAL PERFORMANCE—11.30, and entered the auditorium, her footsteps echoing in the big empty space as she made her way to the top. The room was as large as a basketball court, with tiered seating that rose steeply enough for everyone to be able to see, even those at the very back.

Beyond the seating was a covered walkway connecting the auditorium to other areas of the aquarium. There was a view of the water, even though it was only the sludge of Boat Harbour. Sometimes rainbow patterns of oil spill marbled the surface, but

mostly the harbour water was grey and insipid. The big ships, moorings and piers stood over it like playground bullies.

Chicken sat in the middle of the back row and stretched out her arms. She felt powerful up here, the whole auditorium in front of her, like the conductor of an orchestra—she only had to point a baton at someone and they would do whatever she asked. She closed her eyes, imagined herself at the top of the family tree, all the seats filled with the generations to come.

Chicken slid the photo out from between the pages of the writing pad. She smiled fondly at the missing corner, the raggedy edges left behind, which made it look as if a bite had been taken out of it. With ease Chicken slipped back into the photo, located the feeling, how she was sick of standing still and wanted to get away, the strong grip Lilli had on her.

She no longer remembered the reason she was being difficult or why they were dressed up in their good winter coats, whether they were going out or had put them on especially for the photograph. Violet held the camera, made them stand against the white wall of the house and smile.

Chicken wasn't sure when she first saw the photo but she recalled vividly the day it got torn. Lilli had the photo box on her lap and was selecting pictures to show Chicken.

'Look at this naughty, grumpy baby,' Lilli teased.

Chicken laughed till she realised who that naughty grumpy baby was. She tried to grab the photo from Lilli.

The tussle persisted till Lilli finally yanked the photo away—minus a corner, which Chicken held between thumb

and forefinger. They both sat there staring at what they had done. When the shock waves settled, Chicken offered the piece to Lilli.

'Glue?'

Lilli shook her head. 'They'll know. It's probably best if it simply goes missing.' Lilli put the photo down the front of her dress.

When Chicken asked where it was Lilli said the photo had disappeared. Eventually Chicken forgot about it.

She didn't see it again till the morning Lilli went away. Chicken had woken to find a shadow moving around the room. 'Who's there?' Chicken growled into the darkness. If it wasn't Lilli, if it was a ghost, the gruffness of her voice would make it disappear.

The figure froze for a second, then turned around. 'Shh. Go back to sleep.'

On Lilli's bed was Cedar's old suitcase, the one that did up with straps. Lilli was filling it with clothes.

'What are you doing?'

'Packing.' Packing? 'I'm going to the city.' No-one had said anything about a trip to the city.

'Is it a secret?' Chicken asked.

'It won't be in a few hours when they find I'm not here.'

'But you can't just go like that, without telling anyone. What about Mum and Aunt Pearlie?'

'Trust me, they won't mind. No-one will.'

Chicken watched Lilli walk briskly from the cupboard to the case and back again. 'I'll mind,' she piped up.

Lilli stopped, turned her head away. Then she said in a bright voice, 'Do you want to help?' Lilli handed Chicken a dress. 'Hey, which shoes should I take—the black or the brown?'

'Black.' Chicken started folding the dress. Something wasn't right. 'Were you going to keep it a secret from me as well?' she asked.

Lilli stopped again, her hand on the cupboard door. 'Of course not,' she said.

It was starting to get light. Chicken could now see clearly what was happening. 'You weren't going to say anything, were you? If I hadn't woken up you would have just gone!' Instead of putting the dress in the suitcase Chicken threw it at Lilli. It landed at her feet, sleeves outstretched. Both sisters looked at the dress lying there like a war casualty. Lilli started to smile, biting her lip, trying not to. Eventually, Chicken was grinning too.

When the bag was fully packed, the straps done up, Lilli combed her hair and secured it with a clip.

'You look nice,' offered Chicken.

Lilli went over to her bedside table and pulled something out from beneath the doily. 'I was going to leave you this,' she said, handing her sister the torn photo. Chicken stared at it. 'I wrote something on the back.'

Chicken turned the photo over. *Just because things disappear doesn't mean you won't see them again.* She kept her eyes wide open, afraid that if she blinked it would push tears out.

Lilli's arms came around her. Chicken could feel her sister's body trembling. 'Are you afraid?' she asked.

'Of course not.' Then Lilli squeezed Chicken so tightly it pushed the breath out of her. Finally Lilli stood up. 'Take good care of those girls.' Then she left, shutting the door behind her.

Chicken slipped the photo back into the writing pad and sat in the auditorium with pen poised, waiting for the powerful thoughts trapped in her head to come streaming down her arm.

Confronted by the blank page they had become shy, none of them wanting to go first. Chicken looked at the faint shadow the pen made on the page, at the straightness of it between her lightly curved fingers. Nothing would change unless she started making marks on the paper.

How are you? Every year around this time Chicken wrote to remind Lilli of the approaching festival. The letters were usually full of sunny days, stories about former classmates, anything of interest that had happened at work, how beautiful the island was in summer. Chicken picked out the good bits to use as a lure.

When they first started writing Chicken used to ask Lilli when she was coming home. She said how much she missed her, that she was lonely without her big sister and would Lilli

please come back, even if it was just for the weekend. Chicken could meet her in Boat Harbour if Lilli didn't want to come all the way to the island. Or maybe Chicken could visit her in the city, she once suggested boldly.

Lilli ignored all her requests. When she responded it was happy postcard stuff, and so eventually Chicken followed her lead. In the letters the real sisters disappeared and were replaced by two bright cheery girls who never felt sad or lonely, whose lives were perfect in every way.

How are you? Chicken continued by saying she was sitting in the aquarium. Ry was working here now; it was much better than her previous job at Sea Breeze. She didn't have to travel so far to work, just a ferry ride to Boat Harbour then a short walk.

Chicken put her pen down. The letter was turning into a story about Ry. She began again. *How are you?* The pen remained inert, waiting for the next bit to come. Why was it so difficult? There had been shoals of ideas when she composed the letter in her mind.

Alertness in the auditorium, a springing to attention. The doors had been opened. People started filing in, taking up their seats. Music squeezed through the speakers like extruded metal. Chicken put the pen and paper away.

Ry strode onto the stage in yellow gumboots, royal blue pants and aqua shirt. She stood in the middle of the performance area against a blue painted sea and sky that matched her outfit. Variegated brown fibreglass rocks broke up the blue. The stage

props were a basketball ring, a small set of portable steps, a stack of hoops. A large trough of water separated the stage from the audience.

Ry held a microphone in one hand and a bucket of food in the other. She greeted the audience, shouting into the microphone as if she were mustering troops. At school she'd been so quiet and shy you couldn't even remember if she was there some days.

The seal made its entrance, lolloping on its flippers. Everyone applauded.

The show began. The seal caught hoops around its neck, followed when Ry called. It made its way up the portable staircase then slid into the water with a splash. The front row gasped at the possibility of getting wet. When the seal came sleekly out of the water it balanced a ball on its nose and tossed it through the basketball ring, getting it right the first time. Impressive.

Every time it completed a trick Ry threw it a piece of fish from the bucket. Sometimes she patted the seal on the head. The performance lasted half an hour, maybe forty minutes. There was a final round of applause then the audience stood up and filed out.

'Ry.' Chicken thought she'd said it quietly but it boomed into the space.

'Hi, Chicken. I'll be another half-hour. Can you wait?'

'I've got a few things to do anyway. Meet you at the noodle shop.'

'OK.'

As Chicken was about to leave, a young man walked onto the stage from the same direction the seal had entered. He was wearing white rubber boots and a loose grey shirt with the sleeves rolled up. He was tanned, like a fisherman, the sun and sea baked into him. Tall, with spiky hair, easy in his body, yet hanging back, as if he didn't know what to do with himself. Quite endearing.

Ry was teaching him to be a trainer. Chicken recognised the pattern—give the seal some food from the bucket, then pat it, holding the other hand just above its nose so it can smell the fish. Repeat the instructions, so that the seal associates food with performance. When the seal gets up on the bench and slaps its flippers together it gets fed. When it balances the baseball bat on its nose it gets fed. Rewarded with food. This was a seal who knew the routine well, waited to be fed, showed the young man what to do.

You would never get a fish to balance a baseball bat on its nose or catch a hoop around its neck. All that fish learned was to recognise the feed basket. No matter how many times Chicken pushed the big old groper at Oceanworld away she couldn't train him not to stick his head in.

Chicken left the auditorium, quietly closing the doors behind her. It looked like Ry and the seal were doing a good job of training the new guy. Would he stay or was it just a job for the summer? Perhaps he was a student of marine biology. At lunch she'd ask Ry, try and find out a little about him.

Taming was a long slow waiting, best done in small but firm steps. Sometimes you just had to stand still and keep your heart open. Seals were fairly fast learners but even they took time. Birds varied. Some you could coax to eat out of your hand little by little, while others never really took to taming and always struggled to be free.

There had been a birdcage in the house when Chicken was a child; a gift, according to the family stories, from Great-grandfather to Great-grandmother. It was made of thin metal rods with wider strips of air in between, and shaped like a dome. The door was hardly distinguishable from the rest of the cage, but when you found it you could slide it up and down to your heart's content. Inside were little swings and perches at different levels. It was majestic, a cathedral for birds. The bars were far enough apart for the birds to see everything—trees, the tops of roofs, all the good bird places—but close enough to keep them captive. The original occupants—a pair of green finches—were bred for this, did not know the wild. Outside the security of the cage such birds rarely survived.

As Chicken walked along the wide corridor she wondered how all the fish in the aquarium would survive if they were returned to the sea. Perhaps the fact that fish were so difficult to tame meant that they had not lost their wild ways.

The second birdcage Chicken remembered was a wooden one, square and squat. A group of boys had found it one day after school in a section of the harbour where rubbish gathered. It was old and had no bottom to it, but the boys turned this to

their advantage. The classmates tied a long piece of string to a clothes peg which propped up one side of the cage. Then they sprinkled sesame seeds underneath—until the mothers found out and said sesame seeds shouldn't be wasted in this way, after which they used grains of rice instead. (The children also tried small orange berries that grew on the island trees but they didn't prove as successful. Why, if you were a bird, would you go to that particular spot for berries that you could get almost anywhere?) The rice proved to be a perfect lure.

The birds could see the children setting up the trap. If they understood what tying string to a peg, propping up the cage with it, sprinkling grains of rice then hiding behind bushes meant, they didn't seem to learn from it. The birds approached the food on the ground the way they always did—landing nearby, cocking their heads and looking around, darting a few steps closer, grabbing the food in their beaks then flying off to a safe place to eat it.

With the trap, the usual chain of events was interrupted. Once the bird got to the food the string was pulled, the cage came down and the bird was trapped. It was usually a sparrow or something like that. The bigger birds, seagulls and kites, never seemed that interested. Though it was only a small bird, trapping it was as exhilarating as catching a lion, a tiger, but without the danger.

The hardest part of catching birds was the waiting. You'd think doing nothing would be easy, but someone always wanted

to scratch their nose, sneeze, make a comment, a movement that would frighten the bird away.

There was an art to knowing precisely when to pull the string. The bird had to be right inside the cage area, going for the grain and not looking around. The exact timing of the pull was often a matter for dispute, with someone hissing 'Now!' or grabbing the string and pulling it themselves. Often the bird was lost during the kerfuffle.

When the children did catch one they ran over to the trap and got down on the ground so that they could have a really close look at their reluctant guest. Then they let it go.

Chicken left the aquarium, crossed the busy main road then walked along a quiet tree-lined street to the post office. It was a red-brick building, with the important demeanour of a bank, yet the large window composed of many small panes of glass made it feel airy and cheerful. When the sun was in a certain position, squares of light appeared on the floor.

Chicken went in and stood at the bench beneath the window. The trees outside were in pots, leaves and branches trimmed to a perfectly round ball. There was a pen attached to the bench by a piece of string but Chicken used her own.

Dear Lilli, how are you? Things are not all right here. Once that was on the page the rest tumbled out. Chicken told her sister that this festival she had to come. Pearlie was behaving strangely and they were terribly worried. Chicken found herself writing about rubbish in the water, wilting seaweed, the hollows under the rock shelf where abalone used to be now filling

with sand. She named all the old ones who had died, and the young who had left. She wrote urgently, as if this were the last chance she'd ever have, opening a vein into the unsaid things, whispering them onto the page.

When she had finished writing she held up the photo and looked into the face of her sister, willing her home. Chicken folded the letter into the envelope, pressed the photo to her chest then placed it into the envelope as well. Sealed it.

Chicken joined the queue. There were only two people ahead of her but it took a long time to get to the counter. The old lady being served was filling in a form of some kind and needed help. Other customers started lining up behind Chicken. The post office got quite busy at lunchtime. Eventually the girl helping the old lady called to one of her co-workers to come to the counter.

Chicken looked at the clock on the back wall, a big old-fashioned clock with Roman numerals. She watched two minutes tick by. She scanned the cards and knick-knacks on display—key rings, fancy pens and coloured pencils.

Eventually her turn came. She bought the stamp and left the queue.

Chicken was outside, about to post the letter before she noticed. She had forgotten the heart on the back of the envelope. She took out her pen but instead of the curve of a heart the pen made a straight line, crossing back on itself enough times to form a star. For good measure Chicken drew the other part

of the talisman—five vertical lines crossed by four horizontal. Lilli would remember.

Chicken posted the letter. It made a soft, barely discernible sound, like a leaf falling to the ground. She stood there beside the red postbox, a waiting room for departing letters. It was cleared daily, except for Sundays, at four thirty. Chicken wanted to stay to make sure the letter was transferred safely into the postal van, began its journey and didn't get left behind.

'Excuse me.' It was a man with a clutch of letters to post.

Chicken stepped away.

11

A rare sighting

By the time Yugen alighted at Finger Peninsula his mind had calmed. At the edge of the snug little harbour a group of children gathered around an older boy attaching bait to a fishing hook. They stood back while he threw the line. Generous, the boy let everyone have a go.

Yugen began walking through the town, towards the Pacific Ocean. It was a town for the people who lived here—no Oceanworld, no displays for tourists. Instead there were shops that sold clothes, a pharmacy, stalls with fresh produce—fish, plums, mandarins, bunches of green leaves, radishes and cucumbers.

the Sea Bed

The monk entered a convenience store and bathed in the sensation of being surrounded by innumerable things—suntan lotion, pins, toilet paper, rubber gloves, tomatoes, frozen fish, elastic bands, batteries, vitamin supplements, bottles of sauce, tins of mushrooms, bars of chocolate, bags of rice, noodles, sandwiches in triangular plastic containers. He still felt a lingering regret for what had happened in the pearl shop, for offending the girl with his ill manners and impulsiveness, for having improperly terminated the purchase of the key ring. In an attempt to re-establish equilibrium, he bought a notebook in the convenience store and waited while the lady at the cash register put it into a white paper bag, gave him change and a receipt. He did not ask any probing questions, merely thanked her when the transaction was completed, and left.

From such small beginnings in the quiet bay, the town grew incrementally, expanded into a place as busy as the city. The long straight road Yugen was on came to an end but there was no sight of the ocean. Instead, he found himself at the intersection of a major thoroughfare lined with buildings three or four storeys high, tightly packed together. He could not be lost. Apart from entering the convenience store, he had made no diversion.

Yugen crossed the busy highway when the traffic lights permitted, imagined a straight line heading east and tried to keep to it as best he could, dog-legging his way through the maze of smaller streets. The quality of the air was changing.

Beneath the smell of diesel was the salty tang of the sea. Around the next corner he found the port.

At one end was a row of corrugated-iron sheds, white with green roofs. From the chimneys rose drifts of smoke. The doors were closed and the windows had grilles over them. Bicycles and mopeds were parked out front. The most prominent feature of the port was right on the water's edge—a large roof supported by steel poles. Under the roof were stacks of plastic tanks. Yugen waited for a truck to pass then made his way across. In the tanks were live fish. One container was full of barnacle-encrusted abalone.

He walked along a seawall harbouring large fishing boats. Beyond the concrete was the great blue-ruffled expanse of the Pacific Ocean. Yugen gazed into the distance, into the elemental vigour of water and air. This was the sea of his imagination, sunlit, endless, profound. He was surrounded by it, saw the whorls and vortices on its surface, patterns created by movement without rest, heard the water slapping up against him. This ocean stretched to the other side of the world.

Yugen brought the key ring out of his pocket. The pad of his thumb and forefinger felt the star and netting etched into the pearly white disc. The prayer bag with these markings had been one of Soshin's treasured possessions. Perhaps he was from a family of sea women—his mother, grandmother, sisters.

Perhaps before coming to the monastery Soshin had had a sea wife.

Another truck entered the port, its brakes wheezing to a halt. When the monk looked more closely at the water immediately below him, he saw rainbow patterns of oil. It was the Pacific Ocean but he could not cast Soshin's remains into this polluted edge of it.

Yugen retraced his footsteps back along the seawall and crossed to the other side of the port. As he approached the row of corrugated-iron sheds he heard boisterous conversation punctuated by bursts of throaty laughter. Was this private property? Instead of walking past, he went closer.

At the back of the sheds was a washing machine, and a hose feeding water into plastic buckets. Pairs of flippers were leaning against the wall. Hanging on clotheslines were thermal underwear, knitted gloves, and what appeared to be human shadows—wetsuits, twenty or thirty of them. Sea women.

Yugen stood at the corner not moving, his breath suspended, as if he had come across the habitat of a rare species. The back doors of the sheds were open. He could look in if he wanted.

He strode boldly along, with purpose, passing through the pockets of warmth emanating from the interiors. He glanced in, very briefly, his eyes taking snapshots he would examine more closely at leisure. He did not want to pause, to risk being asked to leave.

When he got to the end of the row the monk savoured what he had seen. In the centre of each room was a square fireplace, flames rising up from a thick bed of ash. Suspended

overhead were several sturdy hooks for the pots that were now sitting on the bricks surrounding the fireplace. Around the hearth sat three or four women and sometimes a man, eating lunch, heads bent over bowls of fish and rice.

They were not at all like the young performers at Oceanworld. These sea women had time-and-weather-wrinkled faces, sensible short-cropped hair, the well-worn feet of old mountain monks. They were dressed in tracksuit pants and tops, robust women, comfortable in their bodies. They held their bowls close to their faces, shovelling the food in.

His first sighting of sea women in the wild. If Yugen cast a shadow as he passed by the sheds, none of the occupants seemed to notice.

He hesitated. Perhaps he should reconsider his decision. Leave Soshin here. At least there were sea women. But they were in corrugated-iron sheds surrounded by concrete.

Perhaps others could be found somewhere less industrial. Words from the Oceanworld commentary drifted back—sea women along this coastline and on offshore islands. Islands.

An island with sea women would be ideal.

12

Pearlie leaves the big house

Chicken stood on the corner, waiting for the lights to turn green, thinking about Pearlie. In the letter she'd summarised Pearlie's departure, but it had been brewing for a couple of years now, ever since Violet's decision to take in tourists. 'It'll just be for the summer, the odd weekend and public holiday,' Chicken recalled her mother saying. Pearlie had remained silent. Violet's dimpled lips flickered and twitched. 'To supplement our income. What we get from the sea is simply not enough anymore.'

'That's because they've taken everything out and put it in that glorified fish tank,' Pearlie scoffed. Chicken crossed the road. The new aquarium had been a big topic of conversation

on the island before it was built, even among the grandmothers. When they weren't diving they sat on the bench outside the corner store, like seagulls on a wall, listening to the ocean, watching the sky. Gossiping. The aquarium was going to be so colossal, they'd heard, that you'd be able to see it from the island. It would have millions of fish in it, from all over the world—Arctic and tropical varieties, fresh and saltwater, all in the same place. Chicken glanced back at the aquarium. It was huge, but from the island it was no bigger than a speck.

She turned into the side street where the noodle shop was. Violet had ignored Pearlie's comment. 'Nori and I have decided to give it a try,' she announced. Although they had all sat round the table in what would become the tourists' dining room—Violet, Nori, Chicken and Pearlie—it was not for a discussion but to receive a decision that had already been made.

Pearlie didn't leave during the first season of tourists. She was as curious as any of them to see who would turn up. The first was a family with two children, the younger still a toddler. Pearlie didn't behave well. When the guests were having their dinner, she stood in the corridor and made rude faces at the toddler. When the little one started crying, Pearlie scurried away. Another time Violet and Chicken saw Pearlie coming out of the visitors' room while they were away at the beach.

'Mother, what are you doing?' Violet asked in a strangled voice.

'Having a look,' Pearlie said, shrugging Violet's hand off her arm.

'Don't go into guests' rooms at any time. Even if they aren't there.' A new rule that Pearlie had no interest in learning.

'They've got lotions and potions in a square bag with a zip. Dental floss. A tongue scraper.'

Violet raised her eyes to the ceiling, looking for a source of patience. 'You didn't touch anything, did you?'

'I put it all back in exactly the same place. They won't know.'

'That's hardly the point.'

Those first few seasons Pearlie was like a cat who thinks the house is hers and only tolerates the humans because they provide food. She would get snooty if she couldn't go wherever she liked, and with the arrival of the tourists she wanted to go everywhere. She was especially peeved that the room in which generations of her family had eaten their meals, the room that housed the cedar chest of drawers, was now for the use of guests only. Even when there weren't any you weren't allowed in. Another rule. Violet was lucky Pearlie didn't poo on the floor like cats do when they are annoyed with you. Try getting that off the rice-straw matting.

She started staying away. She left early in the morning with her fins and mask, even on days when the sea wasn't open for diving, and didn't come back till it was nearly dark. This summer, she began taking other things with her, loaded up her trolley with them—her favourite teapot, pyjamas, bedding.

'I'm moving into the shack,' she had declared a few weeks ago as she put her pyjamas into a carry bag. 'I prefer the company.'

'There's no-one down there,' countered Violet.

'There might be.'

'Mother, the shack is deserted.'

'I might take in tourists,' replied Pearlie evenly.

Violet always used to be so placid, unruffable. She made you feel safe, as if she understood everything and would never get annoyed or shout. The way Violet's lips were shaped, with the dimply bits at the corners, it seemed like she was smiling all the time. Sometimes Chicken watched her mother working, mending oyster baskets, her hands repeating the same actions over and over, her expression serene. Did she have secret thoughts and yearnings, things that she told no-one?

'What makes you smile, Mum?' Chicken had asked her one day after work.

'What? Oh, nothing.'

'Is it a joke? Are you thinking of something funny?'

'Nothing in particular,' Violet said reassuringly.

The removal of the pyjamas proved to be Violet's tipping point. She took them out of the bag and tried to put them back in the cupboard. A small tug-of-war ensued. Pearlie's grip was remarkably strong. Violet let go. 'It's a disgrace,' she shouted at Pearlie all the way to the door. 'A disgrace, do you hear?'

That night Violet brought the argument to Nori, even though you could see he didn't want any part of it. 'She's

shaming the family,' Violet said when she was putting the plates away. She had not referred to it during dinner; that was the time to contemplate the food, to be grateful for it and appreciate what it took to get it to the table—a single salted pod of soy beans, a perfect little fish. 'What must everyone think? That we are neglecting her? Nori, I'm speaking to you.' Nori brought his head out of the sports section of the newspaper. 'She might have an accident,' Violet said anxiously. 'It's so run down at the shack, anything could happen.'

'What about the home for old people?' suggested Nori.

'Of course not.' Violet dismissed the idea. There were rules on the island that the women held in their custody; to everyone else they remained invisible. They weren't written down or taught at school. You only knew they were there when you crashed into one of them, as Nori had just done. You don't send the grandmothers to the old people's home, you look after them in the family. Well, yes. But Pearlie didn't need special care. She hadn't grown confused, wandered off and got lost. She was wilfully choosing to leave the comfortable family home and live in a shack. With Cedar now gone Pearlie was the most senior grandmother. She knew the rules, even better than Violet did, but was snapping them in half like dry twigs for kindling.

Violet paced up and down, a U-shaped frown set into her forehead.

'The sea levels are rising a metre every decade,' said Nori, folding up the newspaper and turning on the TV. 'She'll be

back. Unless she wants to wade around in rubber boots all the time.'

'She might not have another decade,' Violet commented. 'There will come a time when she won't be here at all. Why is she doing this, deliberately staying away, like she was already dead!' It came out in a rush. There was a short sharp intake of breath but it was too late. The words reverberated, puncturing holes in the silence.

Chicken hated even to think about Pearlie not being here, existing only in photographs and stories. Chicken couldn't bring herself to use the word that Violet blurted out. Pearlie was her grandmother, Chicken loved her even when she was being difficult. She was funny and made jokes. When Chicken was little, Pearlie always had a sweet for her if she fell over and grazed her knee. (Sometimes the sweets were stale.) Pearlie was her friend, she let Chicken do things that Violet wouldn't allow. Once when Chicken snuck down to the dining room she found Pearlie there. Pearlie put her finger to her lips. Chicken tiptoed in and they both sat in the forbidden place, saying nothing, silently enjoying their audacity.

Chicken wanted to have the dining room opened again, to have them all sitting around the table as they did once upon a time—grandmothers and grandfathers, aunties and sisters. The Great Ones. Why did there have to be a once upon a time, and never again? Why couldn't people be like the tide, which went away but came back?

the Sea Bed

Chicken had arrived at the noodle shop. She looked for Ry but she wasn't here yet. Chicken found an empty table near the door, sat down and waited.

A few days after Pearlie left with her pyjamas, Chicken and Violet set off on the scooter, taking with them a big bag of rice. Violet smiled and waved when they drove past the grandmothers' bench. 'How's your mother?' one of them called. 'Very well, thank you,' said Violet without stopping. Chicken thought she heard the grandmothers laughing. She saw the back of her mother's neck stiffen, knew what she'd been thinking—what was wrong with taking in tourists from time to time? Other people did it. At least they're coming to the island; everyone else is going away.

The scooter turned down one of the lanes leading to the sea. 'Stop, Mum,' Chicken shouted into her mother's ear, when they were about halfway along. It was all so overgrown that Violet had almost driven straight past. They dismounted, peeled open the gate and pushed the scooter through. If left on the steep laneway it might roll into the sea.

You couldn't see the shack from the gate, just the rickety bridge across the trickling creek. The bridge had planks missing, and those that remained looked as if they would break like crisp biscuits if you trod on them.

Chicken carried the rice because Violet was less sure of her footing and needed both hands free to maintain her balance. Chicken took her thongs off before stepping onto the timber

planks, despite her mother's admonitions. 'You'll get splinters,' Violet warned.

'I can get a better grip without shoes.' Chicken looked at her long toes. When she was a child she would stretch out her foot and curl her toes under like a bird on a perch. 'C'mon, Chicken. Do it, do it,' Lilli encouraged. 'No,' Chicken would say. 'Come on, just once. Please do it for me, Chicken, please.' 'You won't tell Mum?' 'No.' 'Promise?' 'I said I wouldn't. Please do it, Chicken, please.' Chicken would do it. Then Lilli would call out: 'Aunty Violet, Chicken's doing that thing with her foot.'

Violet knocked softly at the back door. 'Mother?'

'Grandmother?' Only on special occasions did Chicken call her Grandmother. Lilli called her Aunt Pearlie so Chicken did too. Even after Lilli left.

It was dark inside but neater than expected, the bedding folded and stacked on a shelf off the floor. A tea towel was spread out with a down-turned bowl on it—the washing-up. There was a big iron pot on an old gas ring. The serrations looked like teeth. A few were missing, like Pearlie's. Violet touched the pot and pulled her hand away immediately. It was hot. Pearlie couldn't be too far away. 'Mother?' Still no answer. 'We brought some rice.' They waited.

'Perhaps she's diving,' suggested Chicken.

'She's just boiled the kettle,' Violet pointed out.

Was Pearlie deliberately hiding, watching from the bushes, playing a joke on them? Chicken looked into the slow winking

smoulders of the fireplace. You could hear the wash of the sea, the high twitter of birds.

'We should go,' said Violet moving decisively towards the door. 'Leave the rice near the washing-up.'

Chicken hesitated. 'I'll wait.' The words were out of her mouth before she was aware of thinking them.

'You'll wait?' Chicken nodded, settling into the idea, like nestling into warm sand. Violet's dimpled mouth stretched out and she looked at her daughter as if she were rereading a book and had come to something she'd missed the first time. Though it was through Violet that the blood flowed from Pearlie to Chicken, grandmother and granddaughter had their own connection. Chicken held the bag of rice to her chest. It was heavy, but she hadn't once put it down. 'All right then.'

Chicken watched her mother pick her way across the bridge of planks, placing her feet carefully, the way diving women did when they were climbing over rocks. When she got to the other side she gave a little wave then disappeared into the foliage.

A few minutes later Chicken heard the thrust of the scooter as it changed through the gears and went up the hill. It became an easy *putt-putt* on the flat road running parallel to the sea, tapered off then disappeared altogether as the road dipped back to the village. Then came the backwash of bird sounds and the rustling of trees returning as if a wind had passed through them.

If she were hiding nearby Pearlie would have heard the sounds of the departing moped too. Perhaps she'd come back now, make herself a cup of tea from the kettle. It was black with age, accumulated usage.

The birds had quietened, no longer warning each other of a disturbance, and the trees were still.

Chicken waited in the silence, looking up at the sky. She wondered where it started, just over her head or up where the clouds were? How far into the sky could you see. One kilometre, ten? It must have been millions, billions, as far into the sky as the sun and stars. Chicken couldn't see them in the daytime emptiness but they were still there.

Into the twittering of birds, the soft beat of an insect, the creak of timber and the other familiar sounds of the island came a whistling breath. It carried across the sea like a sigh. Chicken was sure it was Aunt Pearlie.

Chicken tried to reply but the sound she made was flat and raspy, stumbling over her lips and falling onto the ground. She should practise, even when she wasn't in the water. Some divers did it as a matter of course—walking up hills, doing their chores. Some nights Chicken heard the whistling breath coming from Violet and Nori's room.

She waited a little longer, but Pearlie did not show. 'I'm going now, Grandmother. I'm leaving something for you in the letterbox.' Her voice went out like a wave, pushing through the air.

The whistling breath came again. Pearlie's answer. How Chicken loved that melancholic sound full of sea and salt, the flow of tides, of everything about them.

Chicken walked back over the timber planks, through the undergrowth to the wire gate. Near the gate was the faded pink plastic container that had been fashioned into a letterbox. Long ago someone had drawn a cat's face on it. When Chicken put the packet of rice into the box she found herself bowing, hands coming together in prayer position, as if leaving an offering at a shrine.

13

An abundance of life forms

It was dark and blue. Deep blue. The whole of the marine world was gathered in this place. Not only the fish and sea mammals—seals, beluga whales, dolphins—but also crabs, shellfish and tiny microscopic organisms. Soshin's remains would become part of the waters in which such creatures swam. The monk wanted to bear witness to the plenitude of Soshin's life after death.

He was in the aquarium at Boat Harbour, sitting in the semi-dark of the great display rooms. Yugen now had a plan—visit the main offshore islands then decide. He felt more focused with a plan. The monk had slipped out of the familiar monastery routine that organised his days. No gongs announcing when to

arise, eat, bathe, meditate. A plan contained him; was a track to determine his movements.

All around him was movement, great sweeping swims, flickerings, mouths opening and closing. Tails, gills, flippers, eyes. The weedy sea dragon's gossamer-thin gills fluttered like rapid eye movements. Occasionally they blinked. The balletic moon jellyfish—*Aurelia aurita*, Yugen read on the signage—were translucent little lampshades. Blue jellyfish, *Catostylus sp.*, pulsing champignons.

Was one of those old women in the sheds Soshin's sea wife, or his sister? Yugen could have asked, but it was unlikely they would have known who he was talking about. Soshin was his monastery name. Yugen didn't know who he had been before. Monks sometimes talked about their former lives but Soshin never did. He had been at the monastery for so long that everyone assumed he had always been there.

The monk observed his mind raking through early memories of Soshin, looking for clues. He knew that he should not give energy to who Soshin had been in the past. More important for Soshin now was the process of dissolving.

Baikal seals, *Phoca sibirica*, swam gracefully up and down, looking at the people on the other side of the glass, ghostly in the semi-darkness.

Sea otters lay on their backs, short arms resting on their chests as if they were snoozing. There was a pod of small but elegant Commerson's dolphins, mainly white bodies, with black heads, fins and tail. Three of them in the tank, two

swimming together. Yugen thought he saw a black squiggly protrusion, a penis perhaps.

Not only were the great oceans represented here, an Olympic Games of fish, but also freshwater species—archerfish, perch, clown loach, silver-flecked piranha, arapaimas the size of canoes. Pig-nose turtles, their flippers moving up and down like birds' wings.

The creatures seemed to be surviving in this replicated environment, artificially lit, artificially filtered, artificially everything. Each detail had to be carefully considered, the replication so complete that it provided the perfect conditions the creatures would never have in the wild. Instead of unpredictability there was routine in these safe crowded pastures. The exhibits didn't eat each other; they no longer had to stay alert and wary. Mindful.

Every so often in this replicated Amazon it started raining on the fish. There were simulated birdcalls, the big-throated voice of the toucan, lilting twittery small bird sounds thronging. The rain stopped momentarily then started again. A rainbow appeared on the backdrop, and then it too faded. In this Amazon were huge lobsters so red and robust that they too looked simulated, even though they were real.

There was spirit in everything, every tree, animal, plant, rock. In the water, earth, the sky. A waterfall had a spirit. Rain. Did this replicated rain have less spirit than rain that fell naturally? It was still the falling of water from above, the

moist drip of leaves. Everything in the aquarium was animate. Replications took on the spirit of the real.

Yugen left the rich dark Amazon and came to a room of open-sea fish—long-spine porcupine fish, red sea bream, crescent sweetlips, painted sweetlips, red stingray, sharpbeak terapon, greater amberjack, cobia, banded houndshark, star snapper, longtooth groper.

Spiny lobster. How perfectly well its mottled grey, browns and ochres matched the gravelly seabed.

In another room, in a simulation of wharves and piers, barnacle-encrusted posts, slimy seaweed and an old anchor, were gold-eye rockfish, dark-banded rockfish, cloudy catshark, blotchy swell shark. These fish did not look well. They were listless, lying on top of each other, some vertical, heads towards the surface.

The monk was the only human here with them, the crowds drawn to the more colourful displays. He sat on the bench in the middle of the room and gathered his compassion, let the fish swim in and out of his eyes, in and out of his breathing. He thought of the death that would inevitably come to them as it would to him, as it had already come to Soshin.

The individual fish that swam in the waters, the individual people who passed through these rooms, all were transient. If Yugen stayed here long enough he would see each of these fishes die. Everything was movement and change, but some changes were so slow—the birth and death of planets, the formation of rocks, the wearing down of mountains and the filling of

valleys—that they were not perceptible in an individual lifetime. Even as he sat here Yugen knew that cells of his body were dying, some to be replaced, others not. Even as he sat here species were dying. How many were as bounteous in the wild ocean as they in the aquarium?

Giant Pacific octopus, fringed blenny, joyner stingfish, brocade perch, codling, snowy rockfish, longspine snipefish, blueberry roughy, orange roughy. Bastard halibut, Schlegel's red bass, bar-tailed flathead, striped jewfish, armourhead, slipper lobster, red crayfish, humpbacked shovel-nose lobster, striated hermit crab.

Bluefin tuna, great white shark, Patagonian toothfish, Murray cod, green turtle, humpback whale.

14

Hunter gatherers

Lilli stood at the beginning, at the moment of transformation, watching the steel river become a cascade of stairs. There was a glimpse of green fluorescence and then it disappeared. Lilli stepped on and began the descent.

She enjoyed the smooth glide of the escalator, imagined a bird in flight, finding the current of air, the hard work of wing-flapping over. All it has to do is not resist.

The escalator delivered her into a forest of abundance. The food hall. Pasta in all shapes and sizes—long straight strands, spirals, tubes, short ones tweaked into bowties. White rice noodles as delicate as spun sugar. Tins of peeled tomatoes. Packets of seaweed—arame, wakame, kombu. Squat jars of

mustard, bearnaise sauce, horseradish cream. Large bottles, small bottles. Extra-virgin olive oil, sesame, macadamia, peanut, sunflower. Bottles of oil in which were suspended a bay leaf, a single red chilli, curved like a scimitar.

Lilli hovered in front of a melon display, each cantaloupe in a membrane of netting stretched over it like caul on a baby's head. It allowed the fruit to breathe yet protected them from bruising when packed for transportation. Three cantaloupes were balanced on each other to make a pyramid. Lilli imagined the raspy texture of the skin with its higgledy snail-trail patterns, the flesh inside soft and fragrant, the colour of sun-kissed cheeks.

The display was on top of a stack of white boxes, one opened to show the fruit nestled into pink tissue paper if you wanted to offer it as a gift. Nearby were watermelons bigger than footballs, hanging together like a bunch of grapes. In contrast to the cantaloupes, the skins of these were smooth and shiny, deep green with lightning strikes of black like lines of longitude on a globe. They could have been dragons' eggs; Lilli wouldn't have been surprised to see one split open and a baby Godzilla emerge. The melons were the centrepiece of the fruit and vegetable section, this display cordoned off with a golden rope. If you wanted to purchase one you had to see an attendant.

The rest of the fruit and vegetables was positioned in front of mirrored walls so that the cornucopia appeared infinite. Tubs of tiny tomatoes, white radishes the size of pandanus roots,

bunches of bok choy, tatsoi, spinach, basil, coriander. Bulbs of fennel with feathery green tips, smooth yellow button squash, perfect onions, careless snow peas, plaits of garlic, bunches of baby carrots as slim as fingers. Bags of salad mix—leaves of dark green cos, mizuma, white-veined radicchio, sunbursts of nasturtium flowers. Apples as large as hearts, mandarins squatting on their tray like miniature sumo wrestlers, cherries the deep red of a lacquered box. Lilli moved on. This was not her day for buying fruit.

She touched a cucumber, her thumb and middle finger gently squeezing each end of it. A fresh cucumber should be uniformly hard along its entire length. She tried three more before finding one that was just right, then put it into her wire basket and passed into the dairy section—frosty bottles of milk, cartons, tubs of yoghurt, custard, double cream, tofu and cheese.

These sections of the food hall, in which customers served themselves—hovering over this onion or that or, if they were in a hurry, as many were at this time of day, methodically whisking items into the wire basket and moving on—were relatively quiet compared to the aisles of prepared food which were alive with monkey chatter. Even the smells were high volume, enticing shoppers to try—tubs of fiery pickled cabbage, pork buns, skewers of grilled meat, dumplings filled with spinach and prawns, water chestnuts, sea scallops and ginger. Saucy dishes simmered in large trays—teriyaki beef, bolognaise, buttery chicken in creamy red curry.

On the top of glass counters were samples with toothpicks and a fan of paper napkins. Sometimes backpackers ate entire meals in the food hall, grazing from one counter to another, a sliver of pastry here, a meatball there. Croutons dipped into rich green olive oil, extra-virgin cold-pressed, walnut oil, macadamia, each oil leaving lingering memories of its origins. The backpackers moved around like hunter gatherers, careful not to exhaust the supply of goodwill at any one spot, always nodding and saying 'delicious' or 'very good' or 'we'll come back later'.

The cacophony of smells mingled with invitations to try, to buy. Please, excuse me, welcome, what would you like, sir, madam, anything else, thank you. Next. It was a parade of giant billowing multi-coloured banners of voices and aromas.

Lilli looked at her shopping basket, at the lone cucumber that had already become a kind of companion, and moved onto the world of seafood. Her eyes rippled over the multitude of fish on their bed of ice. Other shoppers, women who prepared family meals, worked briskly, pointing out to the attendant which fish they wanted. A small fish for each family member, perhaps two for the father, bowls of rice from the cooker which was keeping warm its contents even as the woman shopped. There were trays of sushi—tuna, salmon, king fish, mackerel, scallops, prawns—attendants bringing out new ones to replace those purchased.

Lilli picked up a tray of salmon roe, glistening sea amber, and placed it beside the cucumber. She then proceeded to one

of the checkout points, standing in line behind a long-stemmed young woman with a bunch of spring onions in her basket, a small bottle of sesame oil, an apple and a tub of yoghurt.

Sometimes while waiting in the queue Lilli envisaged whole lives from what was in a shopping basket. Customers buying breakfast cereal with gift offers had small children. Their baskets were packed to overflowing with large boxes and bags of staples—rice, noodles, tins of tomatoes, instant soup. The young children were being minded by their grandmother. The eldest, a girl of ten, came to Grandmother's house after school and the mother picked them up from there. It was much easier than bringing them shopping with so many easy-to-reach treats to divert them. The ten-year-old was the only one to see her father at night; the twins were already in bed by then, though he always went in, once he'd eaten the dinner his wife kept warm for him, and kissed them in their dreams. Sometimes they stirred, whispered *Papa* with soft puffs of sleepy breath.

The long-stemmed woman lived alone. She had a boyfriend and saw him on Tuesdays and Thursdays. They ate a light broth with spring onions, and cold omelette rolled up and cut into slices. It was already made and resting in the refrigerator. When he went home to his wife and family she cut an apple into pieces, sat in front of the television and ate the entire fruit, spearing each piece with a toothpick.

It was Lilli's turn. She put her cucumber and salmon roe on the counter. The checkout girl moved them along, placing the salmon roe in a bag with a sachet of ice to keep it cool.

•

When Lilli entered her room heat rushed to greet her like a pet that had been cooped up all day. She turned the air-conditioning on and removed her shoes, felt the smoothness of the vinyl flooring. The bed was neatly made, the wastepaper bin empty. Everything was as she'd left it except for a pile of mail on the floor. Three advertising pamphlets and a proper letter—from Chicken. Lilli threw the junk mail into the bin and held the letter in her hand, ran her fingers over the carefully written address, the wavy lines of the postmark. She gently placed the letter on the desk, for later.

Lilli stowed her purchases in the fridge, took off her office clothes and flopped onto the bed. Home. The moment rippled through her body, everything coming to rest. This dry cubicle contained her, the life of the city outside on hold, the only sound the whisper of cool air being pushed into the room.

Lilli gazed steadily at K1 and K2, watched the evening light shift through them, yellow with pools of red near their foreheads. K1 had a spot of white on the top of his. They both bore a suggestion of black along the backbone. Each gill was a single brushstroke, a sweeping movement that briefly skimmed the surface of the paper then rose into the air again. The brace of koi were curved forward towards each other, like loving arms, their tails trailing away, connected by white space. Their mouths were open filtering the air, the little whiskers upturned in smiling joy.

the Sea Bed

If you turned the painting ninety degrees the koi swimming to the surface could be meeting underneath, their backs becoming bellies. Whichever way they were turned they made a circle and did not lose their continuity. The koi's eyes were flakes of orange with black teardrop centres. These were painted in the white area, near but not in the colour. Though there was no outline, you could not help but imagine that whiteness adjacent to the yellow to be part of the body, painting it in as you looked, the mind filling the gaps. What the artist started, Lilli completed. She nurtured the fish, brought them to life. K1 and K2 were her pets.

Lili took a plate from the rack above the sink, peeled the cucumber and cut it in half lengthways, scraping out the seeds. Through the window she could see the evening sky dusty orange from the city lights. Close by were other squares of windows like her own, some of them illuminated, others in darkness, waiting for their people to come home. Lilli broke open the plastic covering the pearls of salmon roe. Dinner was ready.

She paused for a moment, in appreciation of the food she was about to receive, then started with the roe, holding six or seven of the little eggs in her mouth and bursting these capsules of life-giving nutrients one by one on her tongue. She spread the next spoonful along the ditch of the scraped-out cucumber half, the intense tang of the sea in perfect counterpoint to the crisp crunch of cucumber. From time to time Lilli glanced at the letter, her dinner companion.

She tried not to think about what it had taken to bring the roe here, whether their mothers were farmed or wild-caught, about fishermen, co-ops, transportation, packaging. She stayed in the moment of receiving this bounty. No-one loved roe the way she did. It was as if there was a little creature held captive inside her, something small yet powerful as a gene, a strand of DNA, the blood that had come to her through the generations, that hungered for this food, for the remembrance of sea things.

When she had finished eating, washed up the single plate and left it to dry, Lilli opened the letter.

•

There was a noise, as brown and wavy as the clamour of kelp. It started as a drowsy lull but gathered momentum so rapidly that Lilli became alarmed. The strands of brown slid over her, fat slimy tongues licking, lolling, cocooning her in their moist stink.

Lilli's eyes flew open. She was trapped inside her body, entombed in cement. Her heart banged against the bars of her ribcage, her mouth was dry, face wet, hair sticking to her forehead, the back of her neck. It was a long time since she'd had the seaweed dream. She kept her eyes open, unblinking, filling them with the sight of K1 and K2, the sachets of green tea, the wastepaper bin, lamp, all the steadfast familiar things.

the Sea Bed

She could still hear the brown wavy sound, fading in and out, going round in a circle. It was the bikes, that was all. Lilli got out of bed, opened the window and felt the full blast of the squadron. The streets below were empty, but the motorbikes were close, tearing around the city blocks, ignoring traffic lights. It usually lasted twenty minutes. They always disappeared before the police arrived to disperse them.

Lilli poured boiling water into the waiting cup. The teabag loitered below the surface, bloated, sluggish. She manoeuvred a spoon underneath it and dropped the bag into the bin. The tea was perfect now, pale green, clear all the way to the bottom.

•

Lilli stood under the shower sloughing off particles of dead skin with the scrubbing glove. She always noticed the scent of roe the next day—in her armpits, when she urinated, in the crooks of her elbows, even on her fingertips—rich, aromatic, heady. It was her day off. The smell would have passed by the time she returned to work. A travel agent should be efficient at making arrangements, have a friendly and helpful manner, be knowledgeable about a client's destination and the best way of getting to it. Clients should not be able to sense any personal idiosyncrasies, not even the subtlest perfume let alone more animal odours.

Lilli turned off the tap. The fan sucked the humidity the shower had created out of the tiny bathroom. She dried herself

where she stood, careful not to make pools of water on the floor. Then she went to the wardrobe and chose a freshly laundered dark green T-shirt and her favourite pair of blue jeans. Most of what hung in the wardrobe was work clothes—slim black skirts and white shirts. They were like a group of friends, patient, loyal, and they never criticised her.

Once dressed, Lilli opened the window a fraction. It was hot, even this early, and the city rumbled with activity. The lane down below was choked with delivery vans—a laundry service slamming its doors and pulling out, a young man in a white apron delivering a tray of pastries to the restaurant downstairs. The toasty, warm, just-out-of-the-oven aroma wafted up with the rising heat. Doors slammed, men shouted instructions to each other. They echoed and boomed, amplified in this tunnel of buildings.

At the mouth of the laneway was the intersection which returned the vans to the stream of traffic. Lilli could make out the obsessive tapping of the signal which let pedestrians know that the light was green and they could cross the road.

To the left was the bus terminus. Buses serving fourteen different routes lined up here. Scattered around the city were other termini but this one in front of the train station was the biggest. Lilli knew the number of each bus, its destination and the route it took.

The city was laid out on a grid, major roads running north–south or east–west—it was very easy to follow the map. As well as bus routes, the map showed the major subway stations.

If sightseers wished to visit a temple or shrine, zoo, museum, art gallery, handicrafts centre, botanical garden, concert hall, cinema, palace, castle or a shopping precinct for electrical goods, fashion or homewares, Lilli could show them the way with the tip of her pen, even mark the destination with an X.

On the map the terminus was a mustard-yellow rectangle with numbers in fourteen different-coloured squares, like a board game. Lilli could tell tourists how many stops to their destination, how many major intersections they would encounter. With the appropriate map she could do this for any city in the world.

Lilli shut the window. The activity of the lane, of the city, continued in mime—buses coming and going, bicycles weaving through moving columns of pedestrians, the lights orchestrating the traffic.

The letter waited starkly on the desk. There seemed to be a slow ticking in the room, of time passing, though everything was stationary, silent. Even the air-conditioner was sleeping. Lilli wondered what the room was like when she wasn't in it, whether things rearranged themselves. Perhaps simply opening the door was the mechanism that shifted it all back into place. When she went to the wardrobe, sleeves undulated in the breeze of the opening door then settled again into sleep. The only thing that didn't move was the wetsuit, a heavier more substantial shadow in the darker recesses. Dust settled, fabric wore thin. K1 and K2 would fade, and even now seemed less

bright than when Lilli had first brought them home. Perhaps looking at them wore them out.

Usually Lilli replied in a friendly yet restrained tone, the kind of letter you might send to a penpal, to someone you had never met or knew only briefly. She was really pleased to hear from Chicken and hoped everyone was in good health. Things were going very well here, she would try and go down but summer was a busy time for her. Perhaps next year. Lilli was always well in her letters, happy and successful. She accompanied the return letter with a gift: confectionery made into colourful shapes—dolls, animals, last year a box of miniature aubergines, dark purple fruit with lime green elf hats.

The talisman rather than a heart on the back of the envelope should have alerted Lilli, allowed her to somehow prepare herself for its contents.

The photo caught her completely off-guard. The shock of recognition was immediate. What Lilli thought she had left behind on the island was now here in her room. Beneath the torn corner was her childhood. There they stood, she and Chicken, the two of them together. Lilli had forgotten that they were wearing coats. When she turned the photo over, her own words came back at her. It was like seeing a ghost.

Lilli picked up the letter, reread the news about Pearlie. Then she made herself continue with the rest of it. When Lilli got to the list of those who had left the island the room filled with silent reprimand.

the Sea Bed

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Lilli bought a bottle of water from the vending machine in the foyer then went up the stairs to cinema six, the neon number shiny as a loop of silver ribbon. She had not come with any movie in mind, but just to be out, to stop things crowding in. She chose an aisle seat and put her jacket on the seat beside her, as if that place were taken.

Just as the lights went down a mob of noisy office workers, six or seven of them, squeezed past Lilli and sat down in her row. The last one stumbled, put his hand on her knee. Marking her. Lilli could feel the impression of the hand long after the man had settled and the movie begun.

She brushed it off. In the darkness Lilli became part of the community of watchers, everyone sharing the same vision, imprinted with the same story; attentive, eyes shiny with reflected light, like children gazing at the night sky, witnessing a small human drama played out in celestial proportions.

Afterwards, Lilli went to a nearby bar and ordered a beer in a slim frosty glass. The first mouthful was always the best, the fizz of tiny bubbles bursting on the tongue. Lilli looked past couples holding hands across small tables. She did not feel lonely.

The office men had their ties and tongues loosened. They became increasingly drunk and slapped each other on the back. Sometimes Lilli went with such men to hotels that charged by the hour.

She would pick out the alpha male in the group. Ideally he was wearing an expensive suit, his hair flecked with grey. She singled him out with her eyes, tilting her chin slightly upwards, showing him her interest. The man would send a drink to her table. If he wanted to impress his colleagues it would be whisky. She raised the glass in his direction and inclined her head. Consent. The man came over and Lilli gave him a little geisha conversation. Then they left the bar and walked along the street. This part was always full of promise.

The hotel offered a choice of rooms, with beds shaped like hearts, torture chambers, sports cars, or space shuttles. For some reason Lilli's men always chose the car bed, complete with chrome fins and tail-lights.

On entering the room Lilli suggested that now would be a good time for the man to give her a little gift. When this transaction was completed she helped him out of his jacket and hung it neatly in the tiny cupboard. Lilli discouraged the man from taking the rest of his clothes off. She was not particularly interested in seeing his body. When she did things to him or allowed him to do things to her, she kept her eyes closed and pretended they were in a luxury hotel, on holidays, with champagne in an ice bucket and caviar canapes. She listened to the man approaching the height of his pleasure, heard his grunts and noises, the quickening breath. She felt powerful, the one making this happen.

In the bar Lilli gazed at the far wall where fish swam silently, moving on the invisible conveyer belts of currents.

the Sea Bed

Damselfish, angelfish, a kaleidoscope of tropical species, patterns of yellow and black stripes, red and blue. Coral as vibrant as all the colours of the bus routes. Every so often a large fish, a thick-lipped groper, swam by, its mouth open, filter feeding. Tiny silver specks of fish in groups, together making one body. You could not see the water through which they moved, it had become blue air. An eagle ray came into view in black and white dotted elegance, its fins pushing up and down like the wings of a bird. The camera must have been in an unobtrusive place under the water, well hidden. No fish swam towards it, they just kept circling around in the same direction. When the eagle ray appeared for the third time Lilli left, the beer hardly touched.

•

K1 and K2 were swimming in their eternal circle, mouths open, fins outstretched. Lilli stroked the air along the koi's backs, patted their painted heads. The letter was still on the desk, waiting for a reply. She turned it over and stared at the markings, the star and cross-hatching, on the back of the envelope. She could see them even with her eyes closed.

What did Chicken think—that if Lilli came back everyone else would? The rubbish would disappear from the water and the sea life recover? Of course Lilli was concerned for Pearlie but Pearlie wouldn't want to see her, be reminded of the dead. Chicken didn't understand. Lilli doubted she even knew.

Lilli opened the drawer, took out notepaper. *Dear Chicken, sorry I can't . . .* What she could not do was write this letter. Every pen mark on the paper scratched into her own skin. She could not get the image of the sisters out of her mind.

•

Lilli sat in the lounge area of the backpackers' hostel watching a yellow-haired girl make a phone call on her laptop computer. Lilli often came here when her room got too small, to sit in the company of strangers. In the hostel she could be friendly without giving away pieces of herself. She would listen to the story of one backpacker—where the person came from, where they were going—and present it as her own to the next. The name of the yellow-haired girl was Miranda and the person she was phoning was Jack. She was going to stay at a spa resort for a few days. She missed him. Lots.

The backpackers were never the same ones twice, yet they always did the same things—read from the library of books left behind, conferred in groups about the best place to get sushi or hamburgers, cheap flights, massages. Smoked in the courtyard. Some checked for emails at the bank of computer terminals near the reception desk, others sat by themselves writing letters home.

Writing home. What had Lilli said when she gave Chicken the photo? *Look after those girls*. Now Chicken had sent them to

her. A cheery letter and a box of confectionery wasn't going to do it this time.

The yellow-haired girl clicked her laptop shut. 'See you,' she smiled as she left. Lilli gave her a wave.

Lilli knew the one thing that Chicken wanted; it was the same every time. Lilli looked around the room, everyone friendly, mingling. The festival would be just like this. There'd be lots of tourists and visitors, no-one would take any particular notice of her. She wouldn't write a letter at all—she'd just turn up. A surprise. It only had to be for a day or two. Of course she could go back. Lilli could do anything.

15

Sleepless

Chicken was lying on the bottom of the ocean, eyes open, breathing freely. The surface of the water was a long way above. There were strands of seaweed all around her, and on her body, yet all she could feel were waves of air.

She was awake, the dream slowly seeping out of her, shadows of it vanishing into the night air. Moonlight strained through the thin slats of bamboo. The blind moved in the breeze from the air-conditioner, shifting the light languidly around the room.

Why was she dreaming about Urashima Taro? Was it the new boy at the aquarium? Hiro.

the Sea Bed

Ry had told Chicken his name at lunch. He was a student from the city. 'Marine biology?' Chicken asked, slurping up her noodles. They were fat wheat noodles, soft and slippery, in miso broth with spring onions. 'Uh-huh,' said Ry, slurping hers.

So, thought Chicken, only here for the summer. Perhaps he could be persuaded to stay. There was plenty for a marine biologist to do at the aquarium, or Oceanworld, even in the real ocean. Ry was getting married in a few months and, although she was determined to keep working, sooner or later she'd have a baby. The aquarium would need a new trainer. Hiro. After a couple of years he'd have saved enough money to buy a boat. Then he would make Chicken a chest of drawers, or buy her a magnificent birdcage. Together Chicken and Hiro would go to the deep sea, the two of them alone in their boat on the vast ocean, she diving and he tending the lines. Afterwards they'd drink hot tea from the thermos. Lie on the sand and be lapped by the sea. In the fullness of time they would have children. One might even be a boy.

'Well, are you?' Ry was waiting for an answer, chopsticks poised.

'Am I what?'

'Interested.'

'I don't know.' Chicken lifted more noodles out of the broth. Ry was still waiting. 'He's a new face,' Chicken shrugged.

'I could talk to him, see if he's interested,' Ry offered.

Chicken couldn't think of anything worse. It had just been idle lunch conversation, but now that Ry had started pushing the ball Chicken could see it gathering momentum, blundering out of control. She didn't want it going beyond this table. She certainly didn't want Ry to say anything to the boy. How could she act normally if he knew she was 'interested'? Most of all, she did not want her mother catching wind of it.

When they had left the noodle shop and were walking along the narrow footpath Chicken said: 'Does he know about the festival?'

'Who? That old guy on the bench over there? Maybe. The kid on the skateboard? Maybe not.' Ry was enjoying this immensely. 'He knows,' she said finally.

'Is he coming?'

'Maybe.'

Chicken had no idea what time it was or how long she'd been awake. Her body was still but her mind was overflowing. She looked at the family tree of photos, everyone striped, peering through bars of light and dark. Chicken got out of bed, pulled up the blind, letting the moon flood the room.

She looked out the window, at the sheen of moon on the sea. Did the Great Ones know the first time they saw each other or did the love inch in gradually?

Chicken returned to her bed, lay on top of it, her limbs stretched out. Moonlight fell on the photo of Cedar and Pearlie, making the sisters sleek and glossy.

the Sea Bed

Everyone knew the story of Urashima Taro but it was never one that either Cedar or Pearlie told without prompting. They much preferred stories about girls in the woods—either visiting a grandmother, or discovering a house where bears lived. When she could be persuaded to tell the story of the fisher lad, Cedar's version was cursory. Her princess did not even have a name. Pearlie at least went into more detail—the princess's name was Otohime. Urashima Taro became her husband instead of just being a guest in the sea palace. The colour of the smoke in the magic box was purple. Cedar said it was white.

'Don't they like that story?' Chicken asked Lilli one night, their small voices whispering into the dark.

'Maybe they don't want little girls to go looking down under the seaweed. Instead of a princess it might be the smiling lady you see.'

Chicken looked at the space beside her. She could almost see the slight depression where Lilli's futon used to be. Chicken had the room to herself now, she could move her bed to wherever she wanted, to a different place every day. But she didn't. It stayed here, in the place it had always been.

Perhaps some of Lilli's dreams were still there, caught in the weave of the matting. Chicken got off her bed and lay down in the space. Her fingertips touched the smooth fibres, their pleasant vegetal smell entering her nostrils.

Lilli told Chicken all about the smiling woman, keen to show off her knowledge of sea lore. She turned on her bedside

torch and held up a mirror to her sister's face. 'Smile,' she said. Chicken smiled. 'It looks like you, doesn't it?'

'Exactly like me.'

'In the mirror it's your reflection, but if you see a face like that down in the water, beware. It's the smiling woman. She assumes the appearance of whoever she meets. She offers an abalone to you but if you take it she grabs your hand and leads you away.'

'Where to?' Chicken whispered.

Lilli was holding the torch under her chin. She looked like a ghost. 'No-one knows. No-one has ever come back.'

'Does she take you to the sea kingdom?'

'The princess would never let her in. The smiling woman leaves you in the seaweed. OK, now go to sleep.' Lilli turned the torch off, smothering Chicken in darkness.

'Lilli?' She could barely get it out, her mouth dry and dusty.

'Yes?'

'Would you like to sleep in my bed?'

'Why don't you come over here. My bed's bigger.'

Chicken lay there, unable to move.

'Well, are you coming?' she heard Lilli say.

'Turn on the torch.'

'Don't be a baby. It's only a little way.'

'But if I tread on a crack a ghost might get me.'

Lilli sighed and shone the torch on the matting. 'No cracks, OK?'

Chicken got up and scrambled quickly across the floor, worried that Lilli might turn the torch off before she'd reached the bed. Chicken climbed in, and big sister Lilli pulled the covers up over both of them, making it nice and warm.

Lilli started to draw soothing little circles on Chicken's arm. 'Do you want me to tell you the Urashima Taro story?'

'Can we have our heads out?'

'OK,' said Lilli, folding the cover down. 'Once upon a time there was a kind handsome fisher lad called Urashima Taro who rode on a turtle's back to the palace under the sea.'

'You forgot the boys on the beach.'

'It's not important.'

'It is. That's the reason the turtle takes him.'

'Would you prefer to tell the story, Miss Smarty Pants?'

'No.'

'Promise you'll be quiet the whole time.'

'Yes.'

'Say it.'

'I promise.'

Lilli started again, at the beginning, with Urashima Taro freeing a turtle from the boys who were tormenting it. 'A few days later, when the fisher lad was out in his boat, he heard his name being called, but there was no-one about, just the blue sea and the sky. Presently a turtle, the very same one that the boy had saved, popped up. "Greetings, Urashima," said the turtle. "Thank you for saving my life. As a reward for your

kindness and bravery the sea princess invites you to the palace as her special guest. Hop on my back and I will take you."

'So Urashima got on his back. The turtle dived down and swam and swam until they reached the palace.' Chicken was bursting to ask what happened to the boat, how long Urashima could hold his breath, but she remembered her promise. 'How beautiful the sea palace was, built of coral and decorated with pearls—lions made of pearl, birds and dragonflies. In the palace gardens it was spring, summer, autumn, winter, all at the same time. In the spring section were avenues of cherry blossoms, in summer big ripe tomatoes and plums. Autumn had maple leaves of every colour, and in winter there was bamboo laden with snow.

'But by far the most beautiful thing of all was the princess. Her hair streamed over her shoulders, her gown shimmered with gold and silver. When she spoke it sounded like water music.

'Urashima immediately fell in love with her and she with him. It was all so perfect that Urashima thought he must be dreaming. "No," said the princess. "You are in the land of eternal youth. We shall get married and live happily forever, as young as we are this day."

'And so they married. After three days Urashima Taro remembered his family in the village near the beach where the turtle first appeared. He had grandmothers and a mother and father who were waiting for him. I think he had a little sister too. He asked the princess for permission to go back. The

princess was very sorry to see him go, but she didn't get cross. In the sea palace no-one ever got cross. She gave Urashima a parting gift, a magic box tied with a red silk cord and red silk tassels. He had to promise never to open it.

'Once again the fisher lad climbed on the turtle's back, and before he knew it he was home. But it was all so changed. He couldn't find his house, though he searched and searched, and his family had disappeared too. Finally, he stopped a fisherman on the beach and said: "My name is Urashima Taro. Do you know where my family is?"

'The fisherman looked at him strangely. "Is this a joke?"

'"A joke? No."

'Then the fisherman said: "There was a boy called Urashima Taro who used to live here but he vanished three hundred years ago. His family is all dead."

'Poor Urashima was cast adrift. How had three hundred years passed when it had only seemed like a few days?

'His family was gone. The beautiful princess was all he had in the world. He stood looking at the sea, waiting for turtles, but none came for him. Then he remembered the box. Surely if the princess knew how grief-stricken he was she would forgive him for opening it. The box was his only link to her.

'He undid the red silk cords, took off the lid, releasing wispy clouds of smoke. Urashima Taro's hair immediately turned grey, his skin wrinkled and he fell down, never to get up again. The smoke in the box was his mortality.'

Chicken waited but Lilli had finished. Both Pearlie and Cedar ended with: 'And then he woke up from his dream.'

'What's mortality?' asked Chicken.

'It means he died.'

'That's a bit sad.'

'It wouldn't have happened if he'd stayed with the princess.'

'Or not opened the box. As he promised.'

'Exactly.'

Lilli and Chicken lay there, eyes open in the dark. Then Chicken felt her sister's breath tickling her ear. 'I know a secret about the princess,' she whispered.

'What is it?' Chicken whispered back.

'You mustn't tell anyone. Ever. Otherwise the person will die of shock.'

'I promise.' Lilli found Chicken's hand. 'Wrap your little finger around mine and pull, hard as you can.' Chicken did as she was told. 'Good. Now promise again.' Chicken promised again. 'OK, this is the secret. The sea princess's real name is Mitsi. She used to live in this house and play with me.'

'The sea princess lived here?'

'Yes.'

'Will she come again?'

'No. She sent you to play with me instead.'

It wasn't till a long time after, when Chicken noticed gaps in her family tree, that she found out who Lilli's sea princess really was.

Chicken looked at the space where the photo of her and Lilli used to be. Her sister would have the letter by now. If she was there to get it, not in the Sahara or the Andes or some other faraway place. Chicken felt her heart squeeze. Lilli travelled all over the world—what was so hard about coming home?

16

Ticket holders only

Waiting Room: ticket holders only. Lilli sat on one of the moulded plastic chairs welded together to make a bench, twelve seats in all, two rows of six back to back. The man sitting directly behind her was wearing a hat. She could not lean back without coming into contact with the brim. Lilli was on the end of the row, her suitcase tucked in close beside her like a well-trained dog.

She had walked it along the concourse festooned with posters of travel advertising—palm trees framing white-sand beaches, laughing young women in aqua blue swimming pools sipping colourful drinks in wide martini glasses. Another one, a steaming bubbling spring in front of a snow-capped mountain,

sported a caption which read: *If you want to be really cool this summer, try this*. They flicked by as she passed. Near the end of the concourse Lilli turned left and took the escalator down to the platform, passing through a portal into an older, forgotten part of the station.

The super-fast trains that travelled between the major cities left from sleek modern platforms whose turnstiles you could see from the lofty main entrance. A continuous stream of people passed through them, under the main display board on which destinations rolled over like numbers on a slot machine.

The main part of the station echoed with announcements of imminent departures. It was the hub from which tracks spoked out in all directions. The station complex housed a theatre with a shiny black granite foyer and red sashes, a hotel with seven hundred rooms, an underground shopping mall, office space and an art gallery. It was more than fifteen storeys high with a total floor area of 218 000 square metres. This had been Lilli's first taste of the city. When she disembarked from the train that had brought her here, she stepped into the promise of a bright and gleaming future.

She never tired of coming in through the grand main entrance, looking up at the city sky through the steel-ribbed plate-glass ceiling. Lilli could gaze for hours into the loftiness echoing with pigeons, listen to the shuffle of the display board rearranging itself, destinations disappearing when their trains had departed, new ones joining the queue.

Beside the station was a staircase as wide as Lilli's laneway which allowed access from the north, where the grand entrance was, to the more modest south side without having to go through the labyrinth of the station itself. Office girls ate their lunch on these steps, couples met and sat quietly, joggers included this terraced hill on their fitness route. In the early mornings, before even the delivery vans arrived, Lilli ran up and down the steps. When she first started, she would pause at the top, catch her breath at the sight of the city stretching into the mountains, wait for the arrival of the dove-grey dawn when the streetlights finished their night shift.

•

The train was already waiting, its doors still closed. Through the carriage windows Lilli could see pairs of cleaners searching for scraps of rubbish, adjusting the seats to face the right direction, putting away tray tables.

A man in driver's uniform, black with gold trim, stood chatting to two other men, the three of them breaking into laughter every so often. From time to time he looked at the large digital clock above the turnstiles, at his own watch, then resumed the conversation.

In this room provided specially for the purpose, waiting became a focused activity. Some ticket holders were superficially engaged in looking at maps, sending text messages, reading the newspaper, studying their fingernails, but the main activity

was waiting. Everyone was alert to the presence of the train, to changes on the platform, listening for the announcement, ready to gather belongings and move at a moment's notice. Lilli sat upright, her body in the shape of the chair. She felt as if she might be called upon to make a speech or undergo an operation. She could easily leave, right now—go back up the escalator, past the travel posters—no-one would notice.

The man opposite was looking at Lilli's feet. The strappy shoes, painted toenails? Was she overdressed? Lilli shifted her feet into the darkness under her chair. The man looked away, flicked an invisible speck of something off his trousers.

Lilli guessed he'd been visiting the city and was now returning home. Though neat and clean, his garments did not have the style or cut of city dwellers. The trousers were a particular shade of brown, the shirt lemon yellow with short sleeves. She pictured the tiny island shop that sold such clothes and a few household goods. Outside, on a piece of string under the striped awning, hung the blue jackets and trousers with elastic waistbands that the grandmothers wore. Inside the shop, which smelled of old paper, men's shirts wrapped in cellophane were laid out on shelves according to size. There were hats, too, more formal ones of a material that felt like suede, stacked one on top of the other. The wide-brimmed hats for outdoor work were arranged on a stand with many branches. All year round the hat tree was in flower. Rubber boots stood to attention under the shelves on one side like a

row of soldiers. These were the items of clothing with the biggest turnover.

The driver entered his compartment and pressed the button that slid open the carriage doors. Departure was announced. Passengers started boarding. Lilli could see them looking for their seats. A couple of backpackers were in the carriage directly in front. The girl held the tickets in her hand like a pair of playing cards, while the boy checked the numbers above the seats. He pointed, turned his head back to his companion. They took their backpacks off and the boy, the taller of the two, squashed them into the overhead rack. The girl said something to him. He reached up and retrieved a bottle of water from a side pocket, then they settled into their seats and all that was visible were their heads.

Lilli continued to sit in the emptied waiting room. The brightness of the light no longer seemed cheerful but stark. It cast no shadows. The seats seemed to carry the imprint of those who had so recently sat here. A folded newspaper had been left on one of them.

A guard standing near the driver's compartment looked down the length of the platform. He was about to signal all-clear when he noticed Lilli. She glanced unnecessarily at her watch, stood up and pulled her suitcase towards the train. She stepped on board, the last passenger, and the train began its slow slide out of the station.

It passed through suburban stations without stopping, the people on platforms framed in the window like snapshots—a

man with a briefcase on the ground in front of him, feet either side. A woman rubbing her elbow. They stared straight ahead, appearing not even to see the train.

Lilli sat back and studied the timetable. There were four departures a day for Boat Harbour, the first at 7.15, the last at 18.15, the schedule altered slightly on weekends and public holidays. Lilli collected timetables—trains, buses, planes, ferries.

She also collected place names, spending hours leafing through the ponderous atlas that Cedar had given her. The spine of the book was worn, and many of the countries had changed names, rearranged their borders. Some of the natural features had disappeared but most were still there. Lilli made lists, arranging the names alphabetically, or according to how many syllables they had; whether they were jungles, deserts, oceans, valleys, mountains. Deserts: Tanami, Mojave, Gobi, Kalahari. Mountains: Annapurna, Rakaposhi, Ojos del Salado, Mercedario, Fuji, Everest. Rivers: Nile, Amazon, Hwang Ho, Murray-Darling, Mekong, Volga, Yukon, Euphrates. Principal Oceans and Seas: Pacific, Atlantic, Indian, Arctic, Mediterranean, South China, North, Red, Black, Yellow.

The atlas included a map which showed the great migrations of birds (subtitled *a mystery of endurance and navigation*). Sandwich tern, lesser cuckoo, Arctic warbler, sooty shearwater, wandering albatross, bobolink, golden plover, snow goose. Lilli knew the names of the great oceanic currents, warm and cold. Cold: West Wind Drift, Labrador, Canaries, Benguela. Warm: North

Equatorial, South Equatorial, Kuro Shio, Gulf Stream. The deepest part of the ocean was the Marianas trench. Continental shelves were the submerged edges of continents. Continental slopes dropped 4000 metres to the true ocean bed. Kilometres below the surface were mountains higher than Everest.

Lilli took one name out at a time and savoured it, let it rest in her mouth like chocolate. Everest was crisp and minty, the Kalahari dry, full of air, a sunset the colour of bronze. The Gobi was made of rocks.

When Lilli took out the name Boat Harbour she saw a pretty curve, an arc of deep blue water speckled with white yachts. The boats rocked gently from time to time, ropes clinking against masts, lazy slow-paced wind chimes. There were a few whitewashed houses, a little restaurant that served fish straight from the sea, abalone, sea urchin, oysters shucked while you waited. A friendly haven with unpolluted waters. The tourist brochures described it as a 'thriving port' from which could be seen 'numerous fantastically shaped islands'.

The train gathered speed, the landscape widening into flat fields. Passengers were settled in, reading, doing puzzles, some chatting. Children had colouring-in books and pencils, computer games. The quiet murmurings of everyday life in this tube snaking its way across the countryside. The sky was big and bore down on the earth. It was mostly grey, verging on blue where it touched the green fields.

It was winter when Lilli had left. There were patches of snow on the ground, the landscape blurred. Gaunt leafless trees

scratched into the sky. Somewhere she had seen squat orange persimmons hanging onto branches long after their leaves had gone, a tree decorated with Christmas baubles. Now it was full summer. She did not remember where the persimmon tree was, whether they had already passed it or not yet gone that far. Nothing looked familiar. Occasionally Lilli saw farm workers bending to their tasks. Sometimes one of them waved.

A service station, an asphalted yard selling farm machinery, a scatter of dwellings, then the road running alongside the railway track became thick with houses, every so often a side street. Billboards advertising cars, health insurance. The train entered a tunnel then emerged at a station. A few people got off and more got on.

Lilli saw the two backpackers on the platform. She was surprised that they were getting off so soon. They were standing in front of the name of the station having their photo taken by a girl with hair dyed russet-brown. She handed the camera back to them and walked up the exit stairs. Then the couple got back on the train, the image safely in the camera. Proof.

Lilli found images of famous landmarks—the Eiffel Tower, Statue of Liberty, Mount Fuji, Sydney Harbour Bridge—and photoshopped herself into them. She also pasted herself into groups. She was the one holding the little yellow flag, the tour guide. For more adventurous 'travels' she went to theme parks, kayaked down the Amazon (a bright blue and yellow macaw perched on an overhanging branch), rode on a camel, an elephant, stood beside a cowboy. She printed these out on

photographic paper and included them in the letters back to Chicken.

As well as timetables and names, Lilli also collected travel posters. One, from the art deco period, depicted a great ocean liner, a steamship with an imposing black funnel. The ship was so big that only half of it could be accommodated in the poster. Nevertheless, there was enough to see rows of round portholes in decks of pale green, cream, black. The ship towered above a street of houses with small balconies and window boxes full of geraniums. The glimpse of grey-green sea in one corner was barely noticeable. There were passengers in the foreground, a couple, leaning into each other. The man had glossy black hair combed straight back from his forehead, and a thin moustache that resembled a pair of pencilled eyebrows. He wore a black bowtie around a starched white collar which stood up and was folded down into triangles at each end. The woman wore a tight-fitting cloche fringed in beads. Her head was tilted back and she was laughing. They were having the time of their lives. Between two elegant fingers was a long slim cigarette holder. There were no other people in the poster, not even passengers on the ship, as if it were for their pleasure alone, to take them wherever they wanted.

Such a large ship appeared to be indestructible but the sea could wreck it, rear up, submerge it. Or put something in its path. Even on calm innocuous days the sea claimed lives.

Lilli thought she might have dozed, she couldn't be sure. The regular rhythm of the train was mesmerising. Now, instead

of flat fields, the ground was wavy, with more trees, generous broad-leafed foliage. Occasionally far away on a hillside was an old-style timber dwelling. Just before the train entered the dark mouth of a tunnel, Lilli saw a car parked right near the railway track, for no apparent reason. They came out of the tunnel into rain. It tapped silently on the windowpane, lines of it angling off as the train sped through it.

The aroma of other people's lunches made Lilli feel hungry. She took out her egg sandwich and box of potato straws. The bread of the sandwich was white and fluffy, crusts cut off. She'd bought it at the station just before departure. It was like biting into a freshly laundered towel. Then came the smooth creaminess of the egg mayonnaise enlivened with a sprinkling of black pepper.

When she had eaten the first half of the sandwich, Lilli opened the box of potato straws and pulled one of them out of the crowd. It was crisp and crunchy, tangy with salt, a delicious complement to the egg sandwich. She continued her lunch, alternating one taste with the other till the sandwich was finished.

Some herd instinct had overtaken the carriage, because now everyone was eating lunch, having a picnic on the train. By coincidence, or perhaps by design, a young woman wearing a waitress cap, blue shirt and white apron entered through the automatic doors wheeling a trolley, with snacks underneath and cans of drinks on top.

Lilli purchased a can of carbonated drink. When she removed the ring-pull the drink fizzed like beer but was the colour of black coffee and far too sweet. Having opened the can and taken a mouthful, Lilli felt committed. She could not put the top back on as she had with the potato straws and save it for later. Nor did she feel she could deposit an almost full can, all that liquid, in the recycle bin on the other side of the automatic doors. If she rested it in the net pocket on the back of the seat in front, it would spill. So she sat there drinking it, her hand wet with condensation.

Lilli would have been content to continue like this forever, never arriving, never having to encounter anyone who knew her, living her life entirely in transit, always passing through, never attached. She had the company of strangers, and thoughts as big as the sky. The train moved at just the right speed to take in images—a car turning a corner, a crow on a fence, a persimmon tree—yet not long enough to have to dwell on them. Lilli was calm and protected in the train, anonymous. There were no artefacts of her life on view, no reminders. In her room, sparsely furnished though it was, her life stared back at her. Here everything was neatly packed away, zipped shut.

The train emerged from another tunnel into more familiar-looking territory, although there was nothing Lilli could identify specifically. She looked at her watch. A half-hour to go. Saliva filled her mouth, some creature inside her was waking up, lifting her stomach.

It was a child who saw it first. 'Mama, the sea!'

Lilli did not look up.

The track curved and the train entered a tunnel of trees obliterating the view. Twenty minutes to go. The track curved again, bringing the train out of the trees and closer to the edge. For several hundred metres the train ran parallel to the sea, separated from it only by the highway. There were no houses here, just a high seawall keeping all that water at bay. Five minutes. Another curve, another tunnel.

Boat Harbour. The train was travelling so slowly now that Lilli could not help but take everything in. Grey and white buildings covered the hillside like a flock of seagulls. She saw the walkway leading over to the pearl museum, the esplanade that hemmed the port, the grand squareness of the aquarium, the tall office block with WELCOME TO BOAT HARBOUR painted in bright blue and pink.

They passed over a small railway bridge, over a finger of sea that had snuck into the town, lethargic, hardly moving. The train inched its way steadily forward, along a crisscross of tracks, before coming to a halt.

Arrival.

Lilli had to stand up; the lady beside her was waiting to get out. Someone handed down Lilli's suitcase. The doors whooshed open and passengers started moving. Lilli was caught in their current, carried along the platform, up the escalator. Only when they had passed through the turnstiles, dispersed and left the station could she stop to breathe.

The old snack bar was still there. Lilli sat down at one of the tables. The same aroma of soy sauce, fried food, pickled ginger. The old newsstand had disappeared and there was now a brightly lit shop with not only racks of magazines and newspapers but souvenirs and gifts—everything from vacuum-packed shellfish to jewellery and toys. One entire section was devoted to the boxed lunches Lilli could not eat—chicken and rice, fish and rice, curry rice.

Such lunches were for sale in stations all over the country. They came from factories of women working on an assembly line. The rice was extruded from a dispenser into the lunch box, a worker packing it down so that it was flat and evenly spread. The box moved along to receive its piece of crumbed chicken, fish or vegetables. Further along a container of sauce was added, a small cup of pickles. When the meal was fully assembled, a lid was fitted, spoon taped on, then the lunch pack sealed. A quality controller made sure that each was exactly the same in weight, ingredients and appearance.

The women wore paper hats and clear plastic aprons. Before commencing they had to scrub and disinfect their hands, then have them examined by the health inspector. It was always cold in the factory. The chill rose from the concrete floor, even through the work boots, and made your legs ache. It was this temperature for the food. You had to stand there for the entire shift. If you wanted to go to the toilet, you were required to tell the foreman and wait for a replacement before leaving the

line. Although it was a break from the work it was not worth the publicity. Lilli lasted six weeks in this job.

Through the expanse of glass Lilli watched the silent world outside. Across the bay was her island. From here it had the shape of a beached whale. The little harbour, the school and houses weren't visible. From here you couldn't see the people. You couldn't see what had happened. It was just a bump on the horizon.

Immediately outside the station traffic flowed smoothly by, like schools of fish shaped by the currents, rivers in the sea. The sea roads were invisible but you knew they were there. You could tell by the way the fish moved, the colour of the water, by the transparent wavy squiggles coming from it, like waves of heat rising from a fire.

On the day she had left Lilli sat here looking at the rain pattering on the large picture windows, dissolving everything—the road, the offices and hotels. The sea.

She had arrived in Boat Harbour a long time before the train was due to depart, had caught the first ferry over, to avoid peak hour and the questions about where she was going, why she was carrying the suitcase. Everyone at the house would know by now that she had left. Lilli hoped Chicken was all right, that Violet wasn't quizzing her. It would have been better if she'd stayed asleep. Cleaner.

Lilli sat and waited, watched the turnover of passengers, saw them come and go from the snack-bar area. They had a beer, an ice-cream, a sandwich, noodle soup, tempura vegetables, some

of them sitting on stools at the counter, others, like herself, at the chairs and tables, luggage held close.

She had seen a car, as long and black as an eel, peel off from the traffic into the parking area below the station. Beside the road, beyond the brick pathway for pedestrians and the row of decorative bushes trimmed into a neat hedge, the railway lines crisscrossed a few times then settled into distinctive tracks, one going to the end of the line, the other to the city.

The city would be like Boat Harbour only much bigger, grander. There'd be streets and cars and buildings as far as the eye could see. Shops where you could buy anything you wanted. Clothes like the ones in magazines.

A well-dressed couple entered the snack bar area. Lilli assumed that the long black car had delivered them. They had no luggage. Perhaps someone else was taking care of it. The man pulled the chair a little away from the table so that the woman could sit down. Lilli had never seen that before. On the island people mainly sat on the floor, on the ground, on a rock. The woman positioned herself side-on to the picture windows, to the silent town outside. The man bent towards her, Lilli thought he was bowing, but he was asking her a question. She smiled and gave her answer. He walked to the snack bar.

The woman waited alone at the table. Her skin was the whitest Lilli had ever seen, with not the slightest blemish. Her lips had a mulberry-coloured sheen, the determined set to them softened by their fullness. Her eyelids fanned down then up

again, a movement isolated from the stillness of the rest of the face. Her black hair was swept up and seemed to stay there of its own accord. She wore a coat of soft grey, with matching trousers. And gloves. Not thick knitted diving gloves but ones so fine they looked like a second skin. She did not look at the view, she appeared not to be looking at anything, just the air directly in front of her. Rather, she was a woman used to being looked at, admired, and she bore it patiently, with grace.

Lilli turned away, the picture of the woman etching itself into her mind. Lilli was dressed in her best clothes, her smart coat, but it seemed dowdy and old-fashioned by comparison. She looked at her hands, at her rough nails.

The man came back and placed a small tub of green tea ice-cream in front of his companion. She smiled enough for Lilli to see perfectly aligned teeth. She began to eat the ice-cream with a miniature spoon, without taking off her gloves. The man was handsome, a fleshy outdoor face, black hair sprinkled with grey, the sleek pelt of a forest animal, an ocelot, a mink.

He was wearing a charcoal suit and open-necked shirt. His hands were clean, the nails buffed. He poured beer from a small bottle into a glass. Though it was food and beverage from the snack bar, the same served to everyone, in the hands of these two it became a great delicacy. Their movements were careful and considered, as if this was the first time he had drunk beer, she had eaten ice-cream. He asked her how it was and she nodded yes, it was good.

Lilli kept stealing glances at them. They seemed unaware of her, unaware of anyone else, even of their surroundings. When the woman finished her ice-cream she dabbed at the corners of her lips with the paper napkin the man had brought for her. She was ready to leave. The man let her walk in front of him, his hand lightly at her elbow ushering her through the maze of tables and chairs.

Lilli watched them gliding down the escalator to the platform where the train for the city waited. She stood up. It was time to go. Lilli could be that woman, she could become whatever she wanted.

17

The sound of waves

Yugen was travelling in an ocean of mist. He breathed it in with the salt-tanged air, the smell of diesel, the booming of the engines as the ferry ploughed through this delicate landscape.

It was only the ferry out of Boat Harbour but he felt as if he were going to another country. He stood on the solidity of the deck, constantly reminded of the fluidity beneath. Yugen had to stand squarely, like a wrestler, his knees slightly bent, shock absorbers. There were subtle internal adjustments, his body constantly realigning, responding.

Five other passengers were on board—an elderly couple wearing small-brimmed holiday hats who were sitting inside,

and three men were standing on the deck with the monk. Not actually with him. They made a group of their own. Two of them reminded Yugen of the young men at the temple lodgings—hair longer than usual, leather jackets. One was smoking. The third had short-cropped office hair, and although he wore a lightweight windcheater, the knot of a tie was visible. What joined them together was the photographic equipment at their feet, which they guarded like a hen with a clutch of eggs. There were aluminium boxes, a camera with an enormous lens. They nodded to Yugen then closed in on themselves.

'Supposed to clear later.'

'We can use the Polaroid lens with a blue filter.'

The smoking man flicked his spent cigarette butt into the mist.

By the time they reached the island it had cleared enough for Yugen to see the village—a cluster of small houses wedged into a steep rise above the harbour where the ferry released its passengers. The driver stayed at the helm while waiting locals loaded boxes with FISHING COOPERATIVE stamped on the sides and lids, unaccompanied baggage for the return journey.

When they disembarked, the elderly couple walked straight to a large map of the island. As Yugen stood watching the couple discussing which path to take, what to see first, whether to go clockwise or anticlockwise, around the island or up and over, the camera crew walked past. He began to follow them, intrigued to see what they had come to the island to film.

They led him up a narrow street, past a white cat that arched its back as if being lifted by an invisible hoist. It settled down on a mat—its mat—in a doorway. The camera crew entered a house two doors further up, and were greeted by a man who was obviously expecting them.

Yugen could not very well go into the house without some explanation, so he went on decisively, as if to a particular destination of his own. He continued winding past cramped houses, having to skirt around front doorsteps, through narrow streets and alleys wide enough only for bicycles. The way was so steep it would be difficult to ride a bicycle anyway. Occasionally Yugen passed an old lady pushing a cart, in a bent position that had become permanent. He arrived at the other side of the village, marked by a low stone wall that contained the density of dwellings.

Yugen stepped over the waist-high barrier onto a road wide enough to take cars but empty of traffic. He followed the road out of the built-up area and into a forest. After a few metres he came to the gateway of a shrine. He bowed then entered, and sat on a stone in the relative cool of cypress. It was still the forest but here it had the appearance of a garden. Pine needles had been swept off the path, shrubs pruned. There was a subtle order to things.

He took the notebook out of his backpack, a random purchase that may equally have been batteries or rubber gloves. The choice was fortuitous. A notebook would be of more use to Yugen than batteries or rubber gloves. He could document

his journey, describe the place he finally chose for Soshin, a record to take back to the monastery. His fingers rested lightly on the cover, which was marbled blue like a brooding storm and was firm enough to use as a support when writing. So far the pages of the notebook remained blank.

The monk watched the spiral fall of a leaf, listened to the tiny twitter of unseen birds. Despite the day being overcast, it was hot and humid. His forehead was beaded with sweat. He felt tiny droplets join together and begin the slide down his cheek. He wiped his face with a handkerchief to prevent sweat dropping onto the notebook.

Mid-morning. At the monastery his brother monks would be working in the garden, perhaps making tofu. Yugen tried to remember whether it was a tofu-making day. He'd lost track of the monastic calendar. He no longer even noticed the absence of gongs.

A murmur of voices through the trees then the tourist couple from the ferry appeared. They stopped when they saw the monk. The man was out of breath but his wife had enough to say: 'Ah, so sorry to disturb you.'

'You are not disturbing me,' Yugen assured them. He had not realised how glad he would be to have company. 'Very hot, isn't it?'

'Yes,' they agreed, 'very hot.' Then there was only the twitter of birds. It was Yugen's turn but he did not know what to say next. He very much wanted them to stay, to continue conversing. He looked at the ground, searching for words among

the scattering of leaves. The couple smiled and nodded, then moved out of the clearing. The monk stood up. Perhaps he could simply walk with them, without conversation.

The woman unzipped one of the pockets of her husband's daypack and drew out a bottle of water from which they both drank. Yugen looked away, felt as if he were trespassing.

When they were out of sight Yugen too left the shrine, along a path of crunchy white sand. He came to a fork and followed a sign which said LIGHTHOUSE 350M.

It was a steep path, with steps built into it. Yugen took the steps two at a time, rediscovering his familiar mountain stride, and before long found himself at the clearing where the lighthouse stood.

In the grey sky a hawk with fingered wings soared on invisible wind currents. It dipped and dived, like a bike rider weaving in and out of traffic, then soared upwards again. Its legs were feathered, like a pair of woolly trousers.

Proximity to the wild bird was itself worth the climb. Yugen saw clearly the arrangement of feathers on the underside of the wings. They resembled the ripples in water, fixed solidly. Perhaps if he were high above the world, he would see these patterns laid out on the land as well. He watched the bird sail out of view.

The white lighthouse was shorter than Yugen imagined a lighthouse should be, perhaps only ten metres high. Behind it was a concrete house. Like the lighthouse it was closed up, no longer used. Along the edge of the cliff was a post-and-rail

fence made of some sort of durable synthetic material, painted to look like timber.

Yugen had almost passed out of the clearing before he saw a panel with a page of text unobtrusively attached to the fence, and beside it, an old black and white photo—of the lighthouse, and the house behind, with a neat little garden that was no longer there.

The text named the landmarks that could be seen across the water, described the way the wind whipped whirlpools in the straits connecting the gulf to the ocean.

It was part of a story, 'The Sound of Waves', about a young fisherman and a diving girl. Separately, both the boy and the girl came to visit the lighthouse keeper and his wife, up the 'dangerously steep and winding' path past Woman's Slope. There was no mention of the steps, or the post-and-rail fence. The lighthouse keeper kept records of vessels passing through the channel, large cargo carriers travelling to major ports. Through his telescope he read the ship's name, then recorded the time of sighting and direction headed so that those waiting on the cargo aboard could make preparations. A steamship company calendar hung on the wall; there were ashes in the sunken hearth of the sitting-room, a desk in the corner of the parlour.

Yugen walked back to the house. Its windows were shuttered so he couldn't see in to know whether these things were still there—if they ever had been. Perhaps it had been furnished entirely out of the writer's own imagination. Yugen

tried to gain access to the back of the house but the way was blocked by a high wire fence.

He smelled the acrid smoke of a cigarette, heard men's voices. The camera crew from the boat, discussing the angle of the shot.

Yugen came back into the middle of the clearing and said hello. They nodded then continued their conversation.

'We'll start with the lighthouse, then pan across to the peninsula.' The director's hand curved through the air like the flight path of a bird, demonstrating what the camera should do. The sky had brightened a little.

Yugen stood nearby, curious, wishing to be included. One of the men hauled the big camera up onto his shoulder.

'Shoot the bird, shoot the bird,' cried the director as the trousered eagle returned. It swooped and soared again, then its trajectory was hidden by a fuzz of foliage. 'Did you get it?'

'Too fast.'

'Damn.'

All this went on as if Yugen had become invisible. The cameraman did the panning shot and a few other angles, including a long caress of the lighthouse itself from bottom to top. Then they packed up.

'Are you making a documentary?' the monk asked.

The crew seemed a bit more relaxed now that they had finished.

'It's a segment for *Saturday Travel Corner*.'

'Oh yes,' said Yugen as if he were familiar with the program.

'We're doing a story about this island.'

'"The Sound Of Waves"?'

'Yeah, you'll hear waves crashing against rocks, a few seagulls squawking.'

The men seemed not to understand. 'No, no, the fisherman and the sea woman. Over there, on the fence.'

The monk had meant his conversation to sound casual, light, but the men looked at him oddly. Embarrassment prickled his skin, oozed out of his pores. He could feel his composure drizzling away.

The television crew started down the stairs, back towards the village. Yugen set off briskly in the opposite direction, if for no other reason than to avoid them. He walked quickly, plunging through the undergrowth, but the embarrassment kept up with him. He had no idea where he was. In places the path was so overgrown that he lost sight of it altogether.

He was prickling all over—head, hands and feet—but it was no longer just with embarrassment. The monk had walked into a swarm of mosquitoes. They fell upon him, thronging as frenetically as the fish at the sea woman's feed basket, jabbing their little spears into him.

He slapped at them but two hands weren't enough to keep them away. His feet seemed to be their favourite hunting ground, especially the tender top part and his ankles. The monk crouched so that his robes covered his feet and put his

arms across his head, trying to cover himself with the ample sleeves. Now they dive-bombed his hands and wrists. He wriggled his fingers trying to keep them away, his eyes and mouth squeezed shut. If only he could climb into the backpack with Soshin, zip it up tight.

How far he had come from the monastery, from the still point. There, if a mosquito buzzed around his head, he did not swipe at it. If its proboscis pierced his skin he did not resist. He was aware of it but detached. His mind was still.

He had to keep moving, that was his best protection. Up ahead the path forked. If Yugen took the descent and it led nowhere he'd have to climb back up again. At least on the ascending path the way back would be easier. Also, if it rose above the tree line the monk would have a panoramic view, be able to locate himself. He thought nostalgically of the dead tree on top of his mountain, the steadfast comfort of it.

Up he went. The sun had come out and was beating down on him. He was parched, but continued on, holding the notebook over his head, using it as a hat. If he was going to carry something it should have been water, like the couple at the shrine, not the stupid notebook. However it did provide a little shade.

Was his tiredness imagining the increasing steepness underfoot? No clear way ahead, just dense foliage—trees, shrubs and the parasitic vines covering them. The path was so overgrown that sometimes he had to move foliage aside to find it. Yugen did not feel optimistic.

Eventually he arrived at the path's destination. He stared in disbelief. DANGER. KEEP OUT. POWER TRANSMITTER. He had made a pilgrimage to a power transmitter.

There was no view from here unless the monk climbed to the top of the metal structure that rose into the sky. A fence prevented entry into the enclosure. The tower was so prominent that Yugen couldn't understand how he'd not seen it sooner.

A power transmitter.

Spasms of laughter rose up from his stomach, batch after batch that shook his body and set off a squawk of birds. Somehow he couldn't stop the laughter from hurtling out of his mouth.

Eventually it subsided, giving way to comforting little sobs. Yugen found himself crouched on the ground, arms around the backpack, hanging onto it like it was a lifebuoy, exhausted.

Instead of transmitting power the looming tower seemed to be siphoning it off. How its metallic elegance mocked the gnarled imperfection of the dead tree on the monastery mountain. How the monk wished he were there.

When he walked along those mountain tracks, listened to the soft orchestra of the bamboo grove, spread out into the piped woody solitude, he knew that if he lingered too long, did not return for supper, was not present at morning sutras, he would be missed. Someone would come looking for him.

Here he was alone. No-one would miss him. No-one would come.

The monk tried to return to equanimity, taking in long draughts of air to make up for all the breath the laughter had pushed out of him.

He got up and walked around the fenced area. Perhaps on the other side there was a better view. No. Just more trees and foliage. He was not lost, he kept telling himself. He knew where he was—at the power transmitter. He went back to the path. It had gone. How could it have disappeared like that? He should have left something—his notebook, his backpack—to mark the place. Everything looked the same, the bushes and shrubbery all identical. How could he find his way without a path? He tried to visualise the map of the island. How stupid of him to have followed the men instead of looking more closely at the map like the old couple had done. DANGER. KEEP OUT. The bold red letters came at him like hungry carp, big-mouthed, intent on devouring him.

Then they turned into his brother monks, mouths open chanting, but instead of sutras they were shouting that he was dead, telling him to leave, that he was no longer part of their community.

They had cast him out.

The monk was stranded. He saw himself on the threshold of the Blue House, marooned in the disarray of shoes. Why hadn't the abbot prepared him for the world, told him what it was like, that he would be stared at, viewed with suspicion? He was a sentient being, like the birds, the mosquitoes, the fish

in the aquarium, the camera crew. Why was he made to feel different, shied away from, shunned, as if he were a ghost?

Perhaps it was Yugen who had died, the remains in the urn his own.

His mind was fracturing, disintegrating. He couldn't stay here, the power transmitter was sending him mad. He started crashing through the bushes.

He heard the high-pitched call of an eagle and saw the feathered legs swooping, claws open. Was the creature going to attack him? Did it think he was prey? He crouched low, hands protecting his head, remaining in this huddle even after the eagle had passed by. Is this how the wild boar felt when it heard the sound of the hunters' guns? Yugen looked behind him, at the trail of broken vines and flattened bushes he'd made.

He stood up, willing the hungry carp thoughts to the bottom of his mind. Perhaps the eagle was a hopeful sign, meant that he was nearing the lighthouse. How far did an eagle's territory extend?

It was beginning to get dark. Yugen trod more carefully now, stepped over tree roots, lifted vines so as not to get tangled up in them. He did not want to miss his footing.

Something shiny caught the monk's attention. An empty drink can! It did not get here by itself. Surely he couldn't be far from the path now.

A ridge underfoot, not the irregularity of a tree branch, but straight and sharp. The edge of a step. Three more steps, then . . .

A path.

Yugen was so grateful to see it that he bowed, touching the compacted dirt with his hands.

He could smell the sea again, strode along with renewed vigour, almost running.

Then he stopped. He had no idea where he was going—why was he hurrying? It was almost dark now, he should find somewhere to stay for the night. A flat piece of ground.

The incline started levelling off, then the path widened into a clearing. Ahead was a building, a concrete cylinder. He had found the lighthouse again. The monk made his way towards it. Not the lighthouse. Even in the dark its stark whiteness would have stood out. Besides, this building was not closed up. There wasn't even a door.

He heard the stir of leaves as he entered, smelled a faint ashy odour. Yugen took off his pack, sat with his back against the curve of the wall. It was like being in a deep empty well. He tried to meditate but the carp crowded in. There was no-one to strike him, to make them disappear. He tried to get rid of them himself but they would not dissolve. Sitting was pointless; he could no longer meditate. The monk had lost his practice. He lay down on the floor, watching the carp circling, listening to the sound of waves.

18

The gift of a sister

Lilli crossed the gleaming white marble foyer, stepped into a waiting lift, and pressed the button for the fourteenth floor. Her reflection was everywhere in the ascending mirrored cube, even on the ceiling. In those mirrors Lilli also saw the transparent ghost faces of past passengers—a couple beginning their honeymoon, the lonely travelling salesman, the company executive and his mistress. Lilli felt the swirl of them around her. She looked at the floor to steady herself, the tips of her toes.

At her room Lilli swiped the key card and heard the door click open. Inside it was cool and dark, waiting for her to bring in the light.

She went to the window and opened the curtains. The day was ending, the blue leaving the sky. Darker wisps floated across it, wind-pushed. A formation of slow-flying geese, or fish lazily streaming with the current.

To one side she could see trees, make out individual leaves silhouetted against the sky. They were black in the receding light, as if night had come to them already. She looked across the bay to the dark smudge on the horizon that held her past. Time was not a continuum. You could not simply turn around and retrace your steps. You could reverse the hands of a clock and tick off the minutes, but the time that was as invisible as air still moved inexorably onwards. For Lilli there had been a distinct severance, a rupture. Her past lay across the bay, separated by water.

She was surprised how ordinary, how innocuous it looked; unthreatening, inconsequential.

Lilli started to unpack, hanging clothes in the wardrobe, placing shoes neatly beneath them, side by side in pairs. The last item was the wetsuit. She fingered the tear in the sleeve, stroked her hand over the body of it. Sometimes she put the wetsuit on, to feel what it was like. Lilli slid the wardrobe door closed, let the clothes loosen up and relax after being cooped up in the suitcase for so long.

Above the bed was a woodblock print of a willowy young woman holding an abalone as big as her hand. She had no goggles, no fins, no basket for her catch. A dark pink sarong was wrapped around her waist, her legs coming out of the folds.

It looked as if she were climbing a steep set of stairs, one leg bent up high, pushing the water down, the other dangling, almost touching a rock patched in greens and browns, three abalone still attached to it. Strands of seaweed floated in the same direction as the woman's long black hair.

Sea Woman with Abalone. Lilli wondered if she was reproduced in all of the rooms. Reproductions were all that remained. The original artwork was destroyed, sacrificed in the making of the woodblock. With repeated printing, gradually that too deteriorated, wore out.

Lilli took the photograph out of the envelope. It was easier here in the hotel room where everything was impersonal. The photo no longer took her by surprise, pointed at her. Perhaps repeated looking had worn it away too, faded its impact. Just two little girls, one pulling away, the other standing firm.

Years after it had 'disappeared' Lilli had found the photo beneath the rose-patterned liner of her underwear drawer without remembering having put it there.

Lilli would not have left without telling Chicken. At the last minute, packed and ready, she was going to put the photo beside Chicken's pillow, whisper goodbye.

Lilli laid the photo on the bed and took out the letter. Aunt Pearlie was older now than Cedar had been when she'd gone for her last dive. Did Pearlie's strange behaviour mean she was getting ready for death? After a certain age, when the life force grew weaker, could you just sink into it? In olden days grandmothers and grandfathers sometimes stopped still

and didn't continue, like reindeer that couldn't make it across the river to winter pastures. Perhaps if the life you knew was disappearing you disappeared too.

You didn't have to be old to die, you could be young, you could even die before you were born. Sometimes you died without anyone noticing, not even yourself. A trauma, setback, disappointment, a gradual petering out. You kept on going through the motions, catching the train, going to the office.

The sky had become deep indigo. There were specks of light scattered across the bay—on moored boats, in houses on the nearer islands. Lilli's island was no longer visible. In the near curve of the bay were squares of light marking the windows of other hotels. Occasionally Lilli saw a silhouetted figure move across the light but no-one stood there steadfastly looking out as she was.

She pulled the curtains over the view and switched on the floor lamp. Its soft emanation brought out the rich burgundy of the lounge chair in the style of a French antique, faux Louis XIV. In front of it was a matching stool.

Lilli saw a man with a pipe in the chair. He was wearing a lightly quilted dressing-gown—a smoking jacket—and reading a newspaper, sitting in a manly position, feet apart, parallel to each other. She could smell the pipe tobacco. It reminded her of a stable. She turned all the lights on and the room returned to neutrality. She sniffed the air; the smell of tobacco was still there, a lingering trace. Perhaps it had come through the air-conditioning from another floor.

Lilli took off her earrings, tiny freshwater pearl studs, and put them in their small drawstring bag. Then she sat in the lounge chair where the man had been, picked up the phone and ordered room service—a club sandwich and a single glass of wine. She could have opened the half-bottle in the bar fridge but she wanted to be served, to have it delivered to her on a silver platter.

When she had placed her order she idly started writing a list of names on the hotel notepad. *Room Service. Pink Panthers. Pamper.* She liked that. She said it over to herself a few times but it started to sound like a grassy plain. She was personally fond of *Styrofoam*, such a dry fluffy word, but not at all appropriate. Gentlemen Callers. Lilli picked up the phone and said, 'Gentlemen Callers. How may I help you?' That was more like it. *Geisha Guys*. Beautiful. It rolled off the tongue with a natural grace. Geisha Guys Agency? Service? School? Parlour. She would have to find premises, perhaps a room in a bath house or beauty salon. She might have to start in private houses and apartments where women gathered in parties to buy the latest in kitchen gadgets or lingerie when their husbands were at work.

A woman's every whim would be catered for, men engaged to give pleasure, whether it be worshipping at the lower temple, finding the pearl in the shell, allowing their churning stick to be played with, or simply being attentive to a woman's conversation, pouring a glass of wine for her, pulling out her chair.

For a woman with a sense of adventure there would be other treats. Sea anemones could be brought into play. Fish. Baby octopuses, one on each breast and one at the lower temple. Koi introduced into bathwater. Lilli imagined the shivery pleasure of feathery tails on the insides of her thighs. If she sprinkled meal they might be encouraged to come right up to the temple door. Then she would draw up her pelvic floor muscles and suck one all the way inside. Ah.

Lilli heard an insistent knocking. She brought her knees together. Room service. 'Come in,' she called, transferring herself to the upright chair at the glass-topped table. A young man entered, dressed in a burgundy uniform and holding a tray. Lilli waited while he set the glass of wine down, long-stemmed as she'd requested, still frosty. With a flourish he removed the cover to reveal a club sandwich, thin slices of chicken layered with salad greens and semi-dried tomatoes, the whole speared with a large toothpick to keep it in place.

He put a knife and fork either side of the plate, carefully adjusting the placement, lingering over each detail. Lilli thought he might even be so bold as to lay the napkin in her lap, brush his hand over it. Touch her.

He did not make eye contact but his lips seemed to curl into an insolent smirk. Could he tell? Did he know that she went with men? This was a hotel room, she had let him in.

Lilli watched a drop of moisture slide down the side of the wineglass. The table was set but he hadn't left. Lilli could sense his presence behind her. He was fiddling, doing something.

Was he reading the list she had written, the names on the notepad? Taking off his jacket in expectation?

She turned around sharply, ready to tell him he should leave. 'Sign here, please.' The room-service invoice. Lilli let go of her breath. She was imagining things. Just a waiter doing his job. She signed. He put the pen away with a flourish. 'Enjoy your meal.' He bowed briskly and left.

Lilli walked softly towards the door, looked through the fish-eye lens to see if he was hovering about. The corridor was empty. She relaxed, returned to the table and prepared to enjoy her meal in perfect solitude.

She took the first fruity sip of wine. Peaches and lemons. Delicious. She could be anywhere in the world, snow-capped mountains outside, or palm trees. The Eiffel Tower, Statue of Liberty.

Lilli began eating the sandwich, cutting off slices with the knife and fork, bringing the colourful layers to her mouth, chewing slowly, savouring. Perhaps her pleasure parlour could have themed rooms designed to please women. Instead of cars and space shuttles, a bed shaped like an abalone shell. What else would appeal? Shoes. Definitely a room featuring shoes.

The wineglass was almost empty, the sandwich finished. All that remained on the plate were the discarded toothpick and a sprig of parsley. There was no pleasure parlour. None of Lilli's grand plans ever amounted to anything. It was only ever ideas. She was a travel agent who never went anywhere. She'd left the island, her past; what was the point? Imagined journeys

were enough. This was the furthest she'd actually travelled and it was to come back to where she'd started. Planning and pretending were so much easier than carrying anything through. Lilli looked at the suitcase that she wheeled behind her like a compact little poodle. This was all the life she had. She felt the soft melancholy of night creeping in.

Lilli finished the wine, wiped the smear of lipstick off the rim of the glass.

Though the island was a smudge, in her mind she could clearly see the house. As you came up the hill, past the small square of public garden, past the ruins of old timber sheds to where the bigger, more substantial houses were, you saw it, perched there like a seagull: the white house with the blue-tiled roof. Chicken wrote to her that when they started taking in guests Violet always said to them: 'You can't miss it—the white house with the blue-tiled roof.' Perhaps in the off season the house could be turned into a pleasure parlour for women. Lilli smiled at the thought of Violet as the madam of such an establishment.

It was built facing the sea but approaching by road you first saw the side of it. It looked enormous from below but was in fact only two storeys. Even so, it was a large house by island standards. There were four windows along one side and four along the other.

Lilli had already left by the time they got air-conditioning but Chicken had sent her a photo of the new installations. Lilli remembered receiving the letter, Chicken's neat schoolgirl

writing. Those air-conditioning units in no way enhanced the appearance of the building but, for some reason, the fact that Chicken should take a photo of them and send it to her had filled Lilli with waves of inexplicable longing.

Where the road curved near the crest of the hill you came to the entrance. From the front the house was quite narrow so it was good that guests saw the long impressive expanse of the side first. There was a short paved driveway from the road and, usually, a couple of bicycles leaning against the wall.

Then there was the view. From the house you could see so much horizon that it curved. Lilli didn't believe Grandfather when he said that the line so clearly visible did not exist, that it was a shifting illusion, always out of reach. If you kept going towards it you ended up in the place you started.

Just inside the front door was the vestibule where you took off your outside shoes and put on house slippers. Cedar and Pearlie and Violet rinsed their fins under the tap in the yard, left them propped up to dry near the back door, fish who took off their tails to come into the house.

Inside it was brown and yellowish, the colour of the smell of the matting. You stepped up from the vestibule into the main part of the building. When everyone was at home the vestibule was full of shoes. Thongs, sandals, sneakers. The shoes for best were kept in cupboards in the rooms and carried in your hand till you got to the front door.

Lilli's first pair of best shoes was shiny black with a pattern of tiny holes at the front and thin straps across the top. It was

often difficult to get that strap through the buckle and find the even smaller hole the little prong of the buckle fitted into. To begin with, Cedar had to help her. Cedar was her mama then.

Chicken's first pair of best shoes was also black with a strap but with Velcro instead of a buckle, much easier for small children to manage. More strongly Lilli remembered Chicken's favourite thongs—blue with a yellow flower where the thonging came together.

It gladdened Lilli's heart seeing this little pair of shoes at the door when she came home from school. Inevitably Chicken's thongs would be facing inwards, even though the older women told her to point the shoes towards the door, so that when you left the house they would be ready for you. Sometimes when she came home from school, after she had taken off her own shoes, Lilli would turn Chicken's around to face the right direction. Chicken never seemed to notice which way they faced.

Lilli loved her little sister even before she was born. Though it was Violet and Nori who brought her back from Boat Harbour, Lilli knew that really Chicken was a gift from the sea princess. She couldn't come back herself so she sent this little one, a sister for Lilli to play with. In the family records Chicken wasn't officially a sister but a cousin, but that didn't matter. They all lived in the same house, one big family.

At mealtimes Lilli helped Chicken with her food, even feeding the little one delicate morsels from her own chopsticks.

The family sat around the big table in the dining room where the cedar chest of drawers was. The bottom drawer had been taken out and was being used as a crib for baby Chicken. Darkness swirled in the space left behind. Lilli saw a wisp of cobweb in the far corner.

'This is where we all started,' said Aunt Pearlie. Lilli imagined the drawers full of babies, wrapped tightly in swaddling, dolls with no arms or legs, just a head poking out.

It was a family of women: sisters, wives and daughters; there were no brothers or sons. The husbands—the grandfathers, fathers and uncles—were all adopted into the family.

The kitchen with the stove, fridge and, later, the microwave was diagonally opposite the dining room. The corner room downstairs was the bathroom. It had a different colour to the other rooms, though it was difficult to say exactly what that colour was. Neither brown and yellow, nor blue and white. It was a darker, more muted room than the others, yet once your eyes became accustomed to it, quite light.

It reminded Lilli of being underwater—greyish, greenish, bluish. The bathroom had its own particular sound, too, an echoey amplification of tiles and water. Splash and drip, the slurp of pouring, a hand waving through water, the fullness of laughter. Thoughts barely voiced became palpable, travelled around the walls, moving from tile to tile like whispered secrets.

There were two rectangular windows high up in a corner, one on each adjacent wall, with frosted glass to let the light

in and, if you opened them, the steam out. When Lilli was a child this was her favourite room. She was going to live in a bathroom when she grew up, have her meals in it, sleep in it too, in the actual bath, her head resting on a small inflatable cushion.

She loved everything about the bathroom—the echoey sound, the dull sheen of tiles, the feel of them when you stepped out of the tub. She loved the soaking bathwater even though it was so hot it forced the breath out of her and made her skin go the colour of mountain crabs. She loved the sprinkling of the shower. She could make it pelt down like a monsoon or reduce it to the light drips from the roof after the heavy rain stopped.

When Chicken was old enough, she and Lilli had water fights with the shower nozzles. They had to be careful not to enjoy it too much and squeal because that would bring one of the adults to the door telling them to behave themselves, or enquiring whether they had washed thoroughly, in all the nooks and crannies.

Nooks and crannies meant behind the ears, the back of the neck, under the arms, and front bottom and back bottom. Lilli and Chicken found back bottoms hilarious. They seemed to have a life of their own, wobbling like fat baby cheeks. Lilli used to tell Chicken that when she was a baby her face looked just like a back bottom. Lilli wondered if Pearlie and Cedar, who were also sisters and had grown up in this house, played in the bathroom when they were supposed to be washing.

They wouldn't have had showers then, just basins of water they could tip over themselves like a waterfall.

The front bottom wasn't funny, it was serious and poised. It was like a face but not a jolly baby face, more like the face of a small furtive forest animal, one that you rarely saw. Grown-up women like Violet had trim little beards covering their front bottoms. Once Lilli saw this exact little black beard on TV, on a man with a small stick in his hand conducting an orchestra.

The first time Lilli held Chicken was in the bath. The baby squealed and wrinkled her face, her little arms and legs pawing the air. Pearlie was there, Cedar too, and of course the new mother, Violet. Lilli cradled Chicken's head in the crook of her arm. A baby's head is very heavy compared to the rest of it, and if the head lolls back they might injure their neck, their soft little baby bones. That wouldn't happen here, not in the gentle, supporting bathwater.

Lilli scooped some of it up in her free hand and poured it onto the baby's tummy. Chicken fluttered her arms then gurgled and smiled. It felt like a blessing, a benediction, that little smile with no teeth in it. Pearlie said that their eyes didn't focus properly at that age but Lilli knew that Chicken was gazing straight at her. She would never leave her like the sea princess had left Lilli. She'd look after this little one all her life and see that no harm came to her.

19

Shelter

A cylindrical space, fish circling. Oceanworld. But this was much smaller, the bare concrete walls devoid of sea life. Even the menacing mind-carp had disappeared with the night. A block of daylight came in through the doorway, illuminating the unevenly stained floor strewn with leaves and a few scurrying insects, the debris of abandoned places. For a moment Yugen lay perfectly still, supremely comfortable, his mind gently trying to decipher a faded piece of graffiti on the wall.

Only when attempting to move did he become aware of his body. His back resisted, as if the vertebrae were fused. When he lifted his head, waves of pain bumped into each

other, the way they sometimes did after festival days and too much rice wine.

He crawled to the doorway, let the sun warm his body, relax and loosen it. Whitecaps whirled and danced below him, leaping high before collapsing back into rivulets on the rocks below. Beyond, the milky blue stretched all the way to the horizon. Yugen felt as if he had been in a tunnel and suddenly emerged into glittering light. He yawned and blinked, brought himself fully awake.

The concrete cylinder had an upper level. When Yugen went to investigate his attention was caught by something on a post at the base of the staircase. Another page of text together with a black and white photo, this time of a boy and girl gazing at each other, fire reflected in their eyes. Their figures were shadowy, silhouettes against the flames.

It was the story that had begun at the lighthouse. The place in which the monk had taken refuge was an old military observation tower.

The girl came here because she had lost her way and was seeking shelter from the rain; the boy because his mother sent him to fetch a bundle of the firewood—dried pine needles and twigs—that the women of the island stored in the building.

They talked to each other for the first time. A bird flew overhead and the boy took that to be a good omen. When the rain stopped he offered to show her the path back to the lighthouse.

Though the encounter was innocent, the boy knew that all it took for the destructive fire of village gossip to spread was one small spark. He asked her not to mention it, and so it became their secret, cradled between the two of them. Before they parted, the boy and girl arranged a second meeting at the observation tower—the next time a storm prevented the fishing boats from going out.

The much-awaited storm came. The boy made his way through it, soaked to the skin. He managed to light a match and make a fire. Then he sat down and waited. He was an optimistic boy—the diving girl had said she would come and so she would.

By the warmth of the fire inside, and the encompassing comfort of the storm outside, the boy soon became drowsy. His head dropped to his knees.

A haze of orange light filtered through the membrane of his eyelids. His body was fixed in position, as if in a dream, but he was able to open his eyes. The fire was burning so brightly that he thought he must have been asleep for only a minute or two. Then he saw the girl, naked, holding her blouse out to dry.

The boy kept his eyelids sleepy, open only the fraction required to see the shape of her sea-washed body, her two shy breasts, muted by the fringe of his eyelashes. He blinked and 'for an instant the shadow of his lashes, magnified by the firelight, moved across his cheeks'.

The girl tried to cover herself. 'Keep your eyes shut!' At first the boy obeyed but then he opened his eyes fully, presenting them to her. She was a diving girl, used to drying herself by a fire after coming out of the water, and he was a fisherman, accustomed to seeing diving women naked. He could not understand why her nakedness should be a matter for concern here.

The girl retreated, hid herself. 'What would make you stop being ashamed?' the boy asked. The girl gave an unexpected answer. 'If you take your clothes off too.'

The page ended but the monk was not ready to stop. He was still with the lovers, their urgency, soft firelight caressing their bodies, the crashing storm outside. The boy and the girl had become his friends, they revealed their bodies, their private thoughts, allowed him to share their most intimate moments. He wanted to know what happened to them. Yugen looked around for more pages, but found none.

The story gradually settled back into itself. A military observation tower seemed a sad and lonely place for lovers. Yugen wondered whether the writer might not have found somewhere more suitable. Did he have the events worked out first then look for places to stage them, or did the island itself suggest the story?

Perhaps he had stood on this very spot making notes, trying to pin everything down, capture the island in words like an entomologist captures an insect, a botanist a plant.

Though now abandoned, like the dried-up casing of a cicada or a snake's shed skin, the observation tower held the memory of other stories. Yugen imagined three or four soldiers telling jokes, rubbing their hands over a fire, throwing spent cigarette butts into it. In the uneven tones of grey on the walls, in the faded graffiti, he saw soldiers' names, those of their sweethearts.

He climbed the stairs to the second level. Here was a window, much wider than it was high: the lookout point. He pictured soldiers with heavy binoculars looking out to sea.

Yugen descended the stairs and stood in the empty space, not wanting to leave. Despite the concrete coldness, the air of abandonment, the little room had become cosy. He picked up the backpack, hoisting it over his shoulders, the way Soshin had lifted Yugen when he was a little boy and carried him through the forest, so that he could see everything. He felt the straps of the pack, remembered his arms around Soshin's neck, and the old man telling him that he didn't have to squeeze so tightly, that Soshin had hold of him and wouldn't let him fall.

The monk bowed before leaving, grateful for the shelter this place had provided. Now it held part of his story too. He wondered if, in the years to come, anyone would imagine the night he'd spent here, ponder what might have become of him.

He continued skirting the coast, flat patches alternating with steep descent, past clumps of ribbony green leaves edged in creamy yellow. The same parasitic vines grew over shrubs

but, instead of being a menace, now they suggested a pleasing lushness.

Yugen heard drumming. It became louder as he walked, more insistent. Then crashing symbols joined in, a musical storm.

Around the next curve he came to a large playing field with an ochre-coloured building on the far side. A school. The windows were closed as if the school were sleeping, the noise and life going on inside merely a dream. The drums softened, marking time, allowing a space for tinkling wind chimes to be heard. The beginning of rain. Perhaps inside the building children were dancing, their raindrop fingers shimmying in the air. It seemed a long way for the village children to come to school but there was probably a quicker route than the one Yugen had taken. Perhaps the lovers had married, their children's children in school right at this moment.

The whiteness of the rocky outcrop around the next curve was sudden and stark. Yugen had seen no other rocks like them. They hovered over a shallow beach upon which waves dumped loads of seaweed. A man received the deliveries, collecting armfuls of seaweed which he draped over rocks. Further along the beach a woman did the same. The breath caught in the monk's throat. Surely these were the lovers long after the story had finished. Elderly now, fossicking on the beach like a pair of seabirds.

the Sea Bed

The monk had come to the tail end of the island. He skirted the perimeter of the school grounds till he was on the other side.

At the edge of a field he asked an old farm woman for directions. The woman looked up, started grabbing handfuls of her hair, pulling it away from her head, grinning. Perhaps she was mad. 'The way to the village,' Yugen said. 'The ferry,' he added, in case there was more than one village on the island.

'See where those two paths meet?' she said, pointing a bony finger. 'Take the one to the left.'

Yugen could feel her watching him. When he got to the intersection he turned and waved. She waved back, then started pulling at her hair once again. Perhaps it was some form of greeting.

At the village he checked the ferry times. A half-hour wait. He bought a banana and slowly ate. It tasted like sunshine.

A lady in a bonnet made her way up a set of stairs leading to a grassy rise. She leaned heavily on a walking stick, tackling one step at a time. At the top of the rise was a bench on which an old couple was sitting. The couple from the ferry? Had they stayed overnight? Perhaps it was still the same day. Instead of passing the night in the concrete cylinder perhaps Yugen had taken a short nap.

The couple gazed out to sea, watching huge container vessels plough steadily along the shipping channel. The husband and wife sat close together, shoulders touching, the air between

them shaped like a vase. Perhaps they had managed to overcome great odds, family disapproval, gossip. It was hard to start a new life when all they knew was fishing and diving but they did. The boy got a job on a container vessel, worked hard and improved himself. The couple bought a small house in a town close to the sea but far enough away from the island that no-one knew them. They started a family. One son became a pilot, the other a monk.

It was many years since the couple had made their first trip back to the island, but since then they returned every year, like migratory birds.

The day was blue, tranquil, pretty. The container vessels carved swathes in the ocean, a vast yet temporary disturbance. Did the water hold the memory of such disturbance? Did the landscape of the island hold traces of Yugen's passage through it? Would the bushes, the undergrowth, be nourished by his sweat? The mosquitoes at least had been nourished by him. There were tiny pinpricks of red on the monk's skin but he could no longer feel those bites. There was no itch.

The ferry was approaching. On his way to the pier the monk stopped to look at the map. The island was greener here than it was in reality, and the houses were missing. It was shaped like a stingray with a tapering tail. There were two mountain peaks with a marshy area in the middle. At the bottom of the map was a red square inscribed: *You are here*.

You are here. Yugen repeated the words silently to himself. The shrine and lighthouse, the observation tower and school,

were all marked on the map. He searched for the power transmitter but there was no sign of it.

Near the stingray tail of the island Yugen found the beach where the old couple had been harvesting seaweed. The beach faced the Pacific Ocean. It was quiet, there was no industry. Yugen had walked the circumference of the island and, although he hadn't encountered any sea women, he found a sea-woman story. They must have been here at one time. This would be a good place for Soshin.

Yugen studied the map closely, closed his eyes and saw the track leading to the beach. He didn't have to catch the ferry now docked at the pier; there would be another late in the afternoon. Plenty of time to return to the beach, release Soshin's remains.

The ferryman waited for the monk to come aboard. Yugen could easily shake his head, let the ferry go. But he had to stick to his plan. Only one more island to visit. Then he would decide.

20

The company of grandmothers

The food had to be chosen with care, nothing fancy otherwise Pearlie would scoff. On the other hand, if it were too plain she would think it showed disrespect.

After the initial bag of rice, Violet said that they shouldn't take anything at all. How are we going to lure her out of there if we keep bringing her food? If she wants to be a hermit, let her. It's not as if she's a monk who can fast for days. Make her come up to the house when she gets hungry.

Chicken had other ideas. The well-chosen offerings would melt Pearlie's heart and eventually she would return to the loving embrace of her family.

'Just popping down to see how things are going at the shack, Mum,' said Chicken, setting off with a basket covered with a cloth. Inside were some smoked eel and pickled aubergine.

Violet had finished applying her lipstick and was pressing her lips together to blend the colour in. She checked her teeth to make sure they were free of smudges. 'Not working this morning?' she asked without turning around, talking to Chicken's reflection in the mirror. Violet could easily see the basket that Chicken was holding, but refrained from commenting on it.

'I start at eleven. Keri's doing the early shift.'

Violet popped the tube of lipstick into her handbag. 'I saw her mother yesterday. She tells me Keri's going to the city, to beauty school.'

'Hmm.'

'Hmm? Is that all?' Violet turned around and looked directly at her daughter. 'Did you know already?'

'Yes,' Chicken admitted.

'Why didn't you say something?'

'It was a secret.'

'Well, yes, but you can share secrets with your mother. Do you want a lift as far as the port?'

'No thanks, I prefer to walk.' It came out sharply, but Chicken didn't care. She didn't even say goodbye as she marched out of the house. She kept her head down, looking at the road, so she wouldn't have to talk to anyone. Her skin felt sticky,

as if she'd walked into a spider's web. It was Keri's secret, she should be the one who tells it, not the mothers.

Chicken was annoyed with Violet in particular. She made Chicken feel as if she'd done something wrong by not telling her about Keri.

Chicken could hear the *putt-putt* of the moped behind her. It slowed as it drew level.

'Sure you don't want a lift? I can take you all the way to the shack.'

'I said I'll walk.'

'No need to bite my head off,' said Violet as she zoomed past, chin held high.

With secrets there were no exemptions. If you give your word, it is absolute, you don't tell anyone, not even your mother. Not even under torture.

The basket was getting heavy; Chicken changed to the other hand. It wasn't as if Violet told Chicken everything. There were plenty of family secrets she knew and didn't pass on. Sometimes Chicken tried the very same probing her mother was so good at but Violet was too smart. 'I don't know,' she'd reply airily, or 'That was a long time ago, I've forgotten.' It was Pearlie who eventually explained the gaps in the family tree.

Chicken walked on. The lap of the sea on the sand, the way it danced with the early-morning light, the fresh dewy air, soon everything resumed its proper proportions. By the time Chicken reached the cobbled pathway Violet had well and truly been left behind.

There was a little bundle of dried seaweed inside the cat-face letterbox. Chicken smiled. Dear Pearlie. She always left some small token in exchange for the gifts Chicken brought—seaweed, strips of dried abalone, a couple of cherry tomatoes. Once Chicken found a banana.

The last time Chicken had come she brought Pearlie bean-paste cakes sprinkled with sesame seeds, her favourite. She'd bought them at the supermarket then taken them out of their packaging and wrapped them in a cloth so that they looked more homemade. She imagined Pearlie savouring them, eking them out, one a day with a cup of tea.

'Aunt Pearlie, it's Chicken,' she called. No reply of course. Pearlie would get sick of this game soon, give up hiding. If she was being a hermit, shouldn't she stay in the shack all the time? Chicken often waited inside for Pearlie, making herself a cup of pale green tea, enjoying the liquid sound of it as she poured, watching the plume of steam rise from it. The shack did not seem so mouldy and damp once you were properly inside and used to it. It merely smelled of the earth and soil and plants.

'Aunt Pearlie,' Chicken called again when she arrived at the door. No reply. Chicken crossed the threshold, entering the cool shadiness of the shack. Pink petals were strewn all over the floor. How sweet of Pearlie, how thoughtful. Chicken picked one up. It didn't feel like a petal. There were sesame seeds stuck to it. It was one of the paper patty pans from the bean-paste cakes. They were all over the place.

What was the story here? Surely Pearlie couldn't have eaten all the cakes so quickly. Did she have visitors? Maybe tourists had stumbled across the shack, come in and helped themselves. It was a mad idea. Who would ever find the place?

'Aunt Pearlie, it's Chicken.' This time Chicken added her whistling breath. No reply. Perhaps Pearlie had grown sick of being by herself, pretended she had guests, devoured all the cakes on their behalf.

The cloth in which Chicken had so carefully wrapped the cakes was crumpled up in a corner. On the bench were several small cups, and an almost empty bottle of rice wine. Where had that come from? Chicken smelled the cups, caught the whiff of wine. They hadn't been washed up. There were ants in a couple of them.

Chicken had done her best to ignore it but the explanation stared her in the face. A real party, with real guests. Pearlie had not only been here to receive them but had probably invited them.

•

There was only a small space left on the end of the grandmothers' bench but Chicken squeezed herself onto it. 'Hello,' she greeted them brightly. The grandmothers didn't know what to do with themselves. Chicken could almost see them flapping. They were waiting for her to go away, at least stand up. They were accustomed to people stopping for a chat, exchanging

pleasantries or gossip, but no-one apart from other grandmothers was brazen enough to actually sit on the bench.

Chicken took the cloth off the basket, let them have a good look. They couldn't ignore the aroma of smoked eel, a grandmother favourite. 'Hmm, time for breakfast,' announced Chicken. 'Could I interest you in some of this tasty smoked eel?' No-one said anything. Chicken broke a piece off and popped it into her mouth. It was rich and oily, she almost gagged on it. 'Mmm, delicious.'

'I'll have a piece,' Cobia said, capitulating.

'Me too,' said Pomfret.

'And me,' added Bonito.

Chicken handed the containers of eel and aubergine along the bench. Silvertail, the most senior of the grandmothers after Pearlie, held out the longest, but eventually she caved in too. When they'd finished the eel, they wiped their oily fingers on the back of their hands and started on the aubergine.

Perhaps it was a mistake letting them have the lot at once. Chicken was on her own now, no more bait. 'Did you have a nice time at Grandmother Pearlie's? Enjoy the cakes?' Chicken queried.

'Lovely, thank you,' said Pomfret. 'It was my birthday.'

Silvertail cleared her throat in a growly kind of disapproval and Pomfret shut up.

Had she meant 'thank you for asking' or 'thank you for the cakes'? Either way, Chicken's suspicions were confirmed. She pretended to herself that it was 'thank you for the cakes',

that Pearlie had at least told the grandmothers they were a gift from Chicken. 'Such a good girl', she might have said, and all of them agreed, nodding their heads while shovelling cakes into their mouths, leaving the papers wherever they landed.

'What do you make of this?' said Cobia. 'It washed up a few days ago.' She held out a silver beer can with bold red letters—*Habana*. 'That's somewhere on the other side of the world, isn't it?'

'Yes,' said Chicken. She didn't mention the fact that this brand of beer was on sale in the Boat Harbour supermarket.

Cobia patted Chicken's hand. 'You don't have to go anywhere, dear. If you wait long enough the world comes to you. Look what the tide's brought now.'

The twin grandfathers putted by on their scooter. They couldn't help staring—a young person on the old ladies' bench—but of course they were too shy to say anything. When they had passed, they waved grandly, pushing the air down with their hands.

'Think how quiet it would be married to one of them. Either one.'

'Or both.'

The grandmothers chuckled.

'It would be like having the house to yourself.'

They seemed to have forgotten there was an intruder in their midst.

'They weren't so quiet when they were boys,' Silvertail reminded her companions.

'You never know how things will turn out,' Pomfret said.

'You just never know,' Cobia echoed.

The grandmothers nodded sagely.

Seagulls landed on the low wall opposite, tucked their wings in and took up a position of expectancy.

'Remember their tricks, the one pretending to be the other?'

The grandmothers were back in that time, when the twins were more outgoing, when they played tricks. What had happened to make them shy? Was it one thing, or had they entered shyness gradually, found it soothing and not wanted to leave?

'That New Year party,' said Bonito, 'I still don't know which twin it was.'

'Me neither,' said Pomfret.

The company was hypnotic. The grandmothers had forgotten about Chicken but instead of feeling ignored as she did at home, it was a privilege.

The ferry was coming. She still had to take the basket back to the house and collect her clothes for work. She stood up, breaking the drift of the grandmothers' reminiscences.

'Ah, Chicken,' said Silvertail, as if she'd only just arrived.

She'd waited as long as she could but had heard nothing about Pearlie. What sort of hermit holds a party for her friends? How come she's there for you but never for me? Chicken wanted to know but felt too humiliated to ask. Pearlie was

her grandmother, Chicken shouldn't have to ask her friends where she was and what she was doing.

As far as Chicken was concerned it was over. If Pearlie wanted to be a hermit, let her. No more offerings in the cat-face letterbox. If Pearlie got hungry she could come back to the house. Violet was right. As usual.

21

Implanted

Lilli remembered the feeling of being held aloft, damp air on her face, the wavy rhythm as the sea princess carried her through the night. She had her coat on over her pyjamas, but her feet were cold. The princess had forgotten Lilli's shoes.

All the way down the hill, past the houses and the school, the sea princess whispered into her ear. Lilli felt the soft warm tickling feathers of her breath. She was whispering because it was a secret. If anyone else knew where they were going they would want to join them. 'The turtle will only come if it's just us two.'

The sea palace was so big and grand that you couldn't see the end of it. Large trees grew inside and stars twinkled on

the ceiling. There were moving stairways going up to them. You didn't have to walk, you just stepped on and the stairway took you.

'There are so many rooms I've lost count of them, and in each are my jewels. In one room is a white lion with pearls on his paws, and a blue bird with pearl eyes. In another room, a pearl dragonfly. If you wind a little key on his back his golden wings move to and fro.'

Lilli felt the soothing comfort of the sea princess's hand making tiny circles on her back.

'The largest room in the palace is where the pearls are made. Beautiful maidens implant the seed and the mother oysters grow them. When the pearls are ready, my turtles travel the oceans, hiding them in secret places all over the world.'

They came to an inlet. Lilli could see the dark gleam of night on the water, the black shapes of rocks. The princess put Lilli down. The sand felt coarse and cold under her toes. Why had the princess forgotten the shoes? The princess crouched, her eyes shining, and touched Lilli on the tip of her nose. 'OK, now we are going to fill our pockets with sand.'

Lilli wasn't sure whether this should be allowed. 'Won't it make our coats dirty?'

'It's sand, silly, not dirt.'

Lilli started picking up sand but most of it stuck to her fingers.

'Not a little dribble like that, Lilli. Use both hands.' The princess showed her how. 'That's better.'

Lilli filled her pockets, all the way to the top.

The princess picked Lilli up again. 'Ooh,' she said. 'You're heavy.' Nevertheless she carried Lilli over the rocks, treading carefully so as not to lose her footing in the dark.

Lilli's legs dangled against the bulges of wet sand in the princess's coat pockets. She rested her head on the princess's shoulder, felt the soft velvet of the collar. Despite the excitement of the adventure, Lilli felt drowsy. She nestled into the princess's warmth. It didn't matter if Lilli went to sleep; the princess would wake her when the turtle came.

They reached the edge. Lilli could hear the sea slapping against the rocks. Her nose quivered in the salty air. They stood there looking into the darkness.

'Is he coming?'

'Very soon.'

Lilli could feel the princess's chest going up and down, the pounding of her heart.

The princess took a final breath of air, pushed it out through her mouth, and jumped with Lilli into the starry night.

•

From her hotel window Lilli watched a party of schoolchildren file innocently across the pedestrian bridge and disappear into the pearl museum. They were about the same age Lilli had been when her class had gone there on an excursion.

The pearl museum guide told them that inserting the nucleus into the oyster was a tricky, finicky job. Almost half of the mother oysters died after implantation. The tiny nucleus was a piece of mantle from a freshwater mussel found in the Mississippi River. In that long and mighty word, Lilli saw the long and mighty shape of the river. Green water pooled around reeds and bulrushes. Near the banks men in shabby straw hats worked on rafts.

The whole class watched while a young woman inserted a nucleus into the oyster. She wore a simple black dress, long sleeves with a thin white trim at the wrists. Her face was as soft as a peach. It looked like her skin had never been touched by the sun, that she had grown delicately indoors, out of the sunlight, in a constant controlled environment.

Her work surface was extremely neat and hygienic. There were glass bowls full of white nuclei that resembled mint drops, a couple of blocks of wood, a round blue sponge, and a blue tray of young mother-to-be oysters covered in water.

The instruments were set out in front of her. Very thin ones with a tiny cup at either end for holding the nucleus, the middle section thicker for easy handling. There were pliers of different shapes and sizes, and elongated metal pegs. In the centre of the work bench was something that looked a little like a microscope, whose length could be adjusted by a wing nut. On top of it was clamped the oyster. The woman worked with three instruments at the one time. With her left hand she used a spatula and pliers to keep the oyster flesh open for the

long thin instrument she held in her right hand to correctly position the nucleus.

The guide explained that a small incision was made with the scalpel then very gently a path was created through the incision into the area suitable for implantation. Then a 'piece' was implanted, which must adhere to the nucleus. These pieces—tiny squares of mantle—were lined up in rows. Great care needed to be taken throughout the operation to keep trauma and injury to the oyster to a minimum. The nucleus had to be placed just right—if it were not far enough into the flesh the oyster could push it out, and if it were in too far it would kill the oyster.

Lilli watched the implanter's clean white hands balance and manoeuvre the instruments. The fingernails were cut short with just a thin rim of white at the top. The nails had a pearly sheen to them, the hands themselves luminous, perhaps an effect of the lights which shone clarity onto her work.

Lilli looked up. The lights did not hang down like the ones in her house but were embedded in the ceiling, like stars in the sky. Lilli kept staring at them till the teacher nudged her. The class was moving on.

They took the escalator to the next level, passing photos of pearl jewellery. Lilli saw the white lion with pearls on his paws, and the bird with pearl eyes.

Memories of that night had fractured and dissolved. Pieces drifted back like pungent puffs of smoke. The sea palace only reassembled itself years later, when the pearl museum excursion

revealed Mitsi's source of inspiration. Lilli never found the pearl dragonfly with wind-up wings; that had been solely Mitsi's invention.

What never left Lilli were the memories implanted in her body—the sharpness of the stars, the liquid velvet of the sea. The feeling of the princess's arms around her, of her letting go. Then the torchlight, the clamouring voices and the gasping wrench of being pulled from water back to air.

Sometime Lilli wondered whether it had happened at all, if what was implanted in her body was the memory of birth.

•

Lilli was being minded by Groper and other grandmothers who were pickling cucumbers—scraping out the seeds with the end of a spoon and cutting them into long strips before immersing them in brine. Lilli sat on the floor making a hat for Groper's cat from an old pair of goggles. A conversation was taking place somewhere over Lilli's head but the usual jokes and banter, the rolls of hearty laughter, were missing. This was more like a phrase here or there surrounded by thick silence. No-one seemed to be taking any notice of Lilli yet she couldn't help feeling that she was the centre of attention.

She was just trying to think of a way to make herself invisible when Groper said, 'Lilli, would you like to put the cucumber peelings on the compost heap? There's a good little helper.'

Groper gave the scraps to Lilli then rinsed her hands under the tap and patted them dry on her apron. Lilli dawdled just outside the doorway. The cat wound its tail around her legs and meowed, hoping for some morsels. Normally, its soft furry tail tickled, but today it was irritating. Lilli could feel the hard bone beneath the soft fur, its insistence.

The wind flapped the clothes on the line—pillowcases, men's work trousers, thick knitted diving gloves. Down the hill were other lines in other backyards, all with similar clothes.

'The time to get rid of it would have been at birth, or even before. Not when they're up and walking.' Were they talking about a kitten? 'In the old days they used to moisten a piece of paper and put it over the nose and mouth. Stopped the breath in no time.'

One of the cucumber peelings fell to the ground. Lilli bent to pick it up and lost two more. Her hands just weren't big enough to carry them all.

'Maybe that's what should have been done to Miss Fancy Pants.'

'Well, she did the right thing in the end.'

'She shouldn't have tried to take the child with her, though. Who knows how she'll turn out after that?'

Lilli ran to the compost pile feeling hot and prickly, even to the tips of her ears. She did not want to go back into the house with such mean grandmothers. If she could find that rock again and wait, maybe the princess would send another

turtle. Lilli was halfway down the hill before she felt Groper lift her up and carry her back to the house.

•

Night had fallen and Lilli had still not left the hotel. She sat in the dark on the Louis XIV chair worrying about her blood. As Lilli grew older the enchantment Mitsi created had gradually begun to lose its strength. If they had the sea princess living in the house, why didn't everyone bring gifts and pay their respects? How come Cedar and Pearlie, even Violet sometimes, grew cross when Mitsi didn't put the bedding away or left her clothes lying about?

If she wasn't the sea princess who was she—a cousin, an aunt, a big sister? It even occurred to Lilli that Mitsi had never existed at all, that she conjured her up herself, a figment, an imaginary friend.

'She was your mother, of course,' said Cedar, when Lilli finally asked. It didn't make sense.

'But you're my mother.' When Lilli said this Cedar hugged her so tightly that Lilli thought she would pass through Cedar's skin into her body.

'Mitsi is the mother who gave birth to you. I'm your grandmother,' Cedar said, releasing her. She touched Lilli's hair, gently ran her hands down her arms, putting her back together again.

the Sea Bed

Lilli stroked the fabric on the arm of the chair. When her hand travelled in one direction the fabric felt smooth. In the other it ruffled. She wondered if the man in the smoking jacket would visit this evening. The identity of Lilli's father remained a mystery. Cedar doubted it was a local boy—too commonplace. More likely a museum official or a pearl dealer. 'Someone who didn't mind the school uniform,' she muttered.

Lilli stood up, went to the window again. In the surrounding darkness the pearl museum resembled a lit-up luxury ocean liner. The only island blood Lilli had came from Grandfather. Cedar had none at all. It didn't seem to bother her. 'The sea runs in my veins,' she proclaimed. 'It's the life-stream of all of us. Water is the blood of the earth.' What Cedar lacked in blood she made up for in prowess. She became a sea samurai, developed long breath. Even as a girl, so the family stories went, Cedar was finding almost as many shellfish as a seasoned grandmother diver.

But the bloodline bothered Lilli. So much was unknown. Sometimes genes skipped a generation. It was possible that a blood imbalance that had bypassed Cedar manifested in Mitsi. Perhaps Cedar's mother also thought she was the sea princess. Put her baby in a crib and set her adrift.

Not long after the episode with Groper, Lilli tried again to find that rock and wait for the turtle. She put her coat on over her pyjamas and went with no shoes, just like the first time. The ground was hard and cold, there were sharp things

in it that hurt her feet. It was much nicer when the sea princess carried her.

'What are you doing?' It was Cedar, coming after her. She sounded strange, whispering and shouting at the same time. She grabbed Lilli's hand and turned her around. Cedar was big in the night shadows; her face like a pumpkin. 'Answer me! Where do you think you're going?'

'To the palace. I'd be there already if you'd let me go with the sea princess.' Lilli tried to pull her hand away.

She felt the sharp sting of a slap on the back of her leg. 'Don't you understand? She was trying to kill you.' Then Cedar shrank into a huddle on the ground, hands over her face. 'I'm so sorry,' she kept repeating.

Lilli walked through the space between them, touched her grandmother.

Cedar came back to her normal size. She put her arms around Lilli, held her close and spoke softly into her ear. It was like being with the sea princess but without the turtle or jewels. Cedar explained that the princess and the palace weren't real, just a story. It was not right what Mitsi did and Lilli must never again try to follow her. Real people can't live under the sea. 'Much as we love it, we are only ever visitors. Even divers come up for air.'

As she had done for herself, Cedar determined any inadequacies in Lilli's blood would be similarly compensated for by prowess.

Cedar threw a shell, or a stone, and Lilli dived for it. She didn't always find it, or even see where it had gone, before she ran out of breath. Lilli scrambled up to the surface, held onto Cedar's bucket, and gulped mouthfuls of air as if she were eating it.

When Lilli's breath had settled, Cedar picked up another shell. 'Watch carefully. Mark the place where it enters the water.' Lilli followed the trajectory of the shell, imagined it had fishing line attached and her hands could follow it.

At first they trained where there was no seaweed, where the seabed was sandy and finding the shell was easier. Sometimes Lilli spotted it but did not have enough breath to swim down and retrieve it. She came to the surface again, gushed her air out.

'Do it in a stream so it doesn't hurt your lungs,' said Cedar. 'Like this.' Cedar did the whistling breath, made the air sing. It sounded like a stone skipped across the surface of water. Pearlie's whistle reminded Lilli of a string of paper dolls, and Groper could do 'O Sole Mio'. Lilli's attempt was thin and high, like the squawk of a baby bird. 'Excellent!' Cedar laughed.

Cedar taught Lilli to read the seabed, and observe how it changed with the winter and summer currents. She showed her how to use the prising tool to slice the muscle keeping the abalone attached to the rock, taught her which ones to harvest.

'No smaller than this,' Cedar said, stretching out her thumb and forefinger. 'Leave something for the next season. For your daughters. Your granddaughters.'

As Lilli grew in confidence and began exploring further from the shore, Cedar told her about the smiling woman who lives in the deep sea. She takes on your appearance, reaches for your hand and offers you an abalone. If you follow her you get lost and never find your way back. You become a sea ghost, always searching for your home.

Lilli never told Cedar what happened the first time she dived into seaweed. All the way in the boat Cedar kept saying how wonderful it was, like walking upside down in a gently waving forest. 'You might even find abalone,' Cedar told her. 'They love hiding in seaweed.' Cedar attached the lifeline to her. As Lilli eased herself into the water she heard Cedar say, 'Give us a tug when you're ready to come up.'

It was strange and eerie, even the water around the seaweed felt different—gelatinous. Slippery fronds stroked her skin as she descended. A gently waving forest, Lilli kept telling herself. As she parted the fronds she saw something round and solid. The first thing she thought of was the sea princess's turtle. Down she went but the seaweed grew thickly and Lilli kept losing sight of the turtle. Perhaps it was moving, leading her to the palace. As she kicked down something wrapped around her wrist, grabbed hold of her. Lilli struggled to break free but it made things worse. She was running out of breath, surrounded by seaweed, big slobbery tongues of it. Lilli felt for her lifeline,

gave it a good hard tug. Then she was lifted, up through the lolling weed to the surface.

Everything was streaming—Lilli's eyes, her nose and mouth. She vomited sea water.

Cedar waited till she had settled, then gave her some tea from the thermos. 'Did something happen down there?' Cedar asked quietly. The day was bright and shiny, the sea placid all the way to the horizon.

'No, nothing happened.'

A few days later, when they were walking back from a shore dive, Lilli asked Cedar if she'd ever seen the smiling woman. 'Is she real or just a story, like the sea princess?' Cedar continued walking, as if she hadn't heard. Lilli kept pestering her but Cedar took no notice.

Finally, when they were in the house, Cedar said sternly: 'Too many questions, Lilli. Some things can't be explained, it's better to simply believe. Be careful down there. Keep your mind alert. The sea is not tame. She can always take you by surprise.'

22

Hope tricks you every time

It was only two days before the festival and still no word from Lilli. No letter, no parcel of sweets. Chicken checked the letterbox morning and evening, looked in the pigeonholes in the office, the drawers, in the stand which held the pamphlets. A letter had usually arrived by now. Perhaps it was lost; perhaps the one Chicken sent had gone astray. Or worse—Lilli was ignoring the letter because Chicken had stopped being cheery and happy. Lilli could at least have given some sign of recognition, like a postcard, or returned the torn photo. Chicken regretted sending it now. It was probably the last she'd ever see of it. What did Lilli say? Just because something disappears doesn't mean you'll never see it again? Yeah, right.

Hope was a smiling woman who led you along with promises then left you stranded in disappointment. It would be better not to care about anything, to never have had a sister than one who doesn't come to see you. It was better not to hope because hope tricks you every time.

'C'mon, Chicken, get a move on,' said Violet. They were upstairs folding quilt covers, preparing for guests. Chicken could see the ferry from Boat Harbour, still small and far away, but it wouldn't be long before it reached the island and there'd be another call on the loudspeaker. Not only was the afternoon ferry bringing Violet's guests, but also extra supplies. In the days leading up to the festival the women were busy making dough for fried pastries, threading squid on skewers, making fish patties and soup. On the morning of the festival, the ferry delivered bags of ice so that the drinks sold at the food stalls would be nice and cold. There was lots to do, the rhythm of the days punctuated by announcements over the island's public address system for helpers. Everyone turned up and did their bit.

Nori was at the beach with a couple of the other men. They were pruning, clearing unruly vegetation away from the shrine, setting up benches in the VIP pavilion where the mayor of Boat Harbour and other special guests would watch the festivities and be served refreshments of sea urchin and cold beer.

'Any letters for me, Mum?' asked Chicken. She tried to make it sound as if it was a thought that had just come to her, not one she'd been gnawing at for days.

'No. Why?' Violet was holding two corners of the cover, one in each hand. Chicken was standing opposite her mother doing the same, the fabric stretched taut between them.

Chicken knew Violet would already have said if a letter had arrived but she had to ask. 'Oh, nothing in particular.' Chicken walked decisively up to her mother and handed her the two corners. They had made the first fold.

'Are you expecting something?' Violet asked with an indulgent sort of smile.

Chicken looked at her now empty hands. 'No.' She rummaged in the clothes basket while Violet placed the neatly folded cover in the cupboard for the guests.

The ferry was so close now you could see the little squares of windows. Chicken scanned each one.

'She's probably just forgotten,' Violet said. Chicken hated it when her mother knew what she was thinking about.

'She's never forgotten before,' Chicken replied.

'She might be in the Amazon, perhaps some place where there's no mail service.'

'No matter where she is, she always sends something.'

'Well, there's still a couple of days to go,' Violet reminded her daughter. 'I wonder where your father is?'

'At the beach.'

Violet already knew that. Hopefully he had spotted the ferry further out. When it got closer and headed for the harbour, you couldn't see it from the beach. Violet had assumed he'd come home first and change before picking up the tourists in his van. He was representing the household and first impressions counted. She didn't want him looking like he'd just come off a building site.

The whole island was caught up in preparations but the festival wasn't real anymore, just a re-enactment. It was supposed to be for the gods, to express gratitude to the sea, but it had become entertainment for tourists. There were no longer any abalone to be found off the beach, so early on festival morning a boat dumped farmed ones into the water which the divers retrieved to be returned to the co-op. It was possible that they weren't even abalone, just the shells. The 'diver of the year', the woman who on festival day was the first to find a pair of abalone, male and female, had already been picked out—a photogenic young high-school girl. On the day of the festival she didn't go anywhere near the water.

Chicken remembered what she'd said to Keri: 'Someone has to show the tourists what we do.' It was all for show, for the cameramen and tourists. And now Chicken was folding their futon covers.

Bloody tourists. Chicken's breath huffed out of her. It wasn't the soulful whistling of diving women, more like the steamy snort of a bull. She left the clothes basket and headed off.

'Chicken,' her mother called after her, 'where are you going? The guests will be here any minute.'

'Out.'

Chicken stormed down the hill with no particular destination in mind, simply to get away. She kept on going, past the port parking area and the people waiting for the ferry which was entering the harbour. She found herself at the tsunami warning sign near the seawall. Perfect. A big angry wave looming over a little boy and a white-spotted dog who were trying to run from it, their fishing line and bucket abandoned. Even the worm used for bait was trying to escape. The wave was dark blue with glaring white eyes and an angry red jagged mouth. Over the face of the wave was a white fringe of foam that extended into fat clutching fingers. Urgent little white drops were coming off everything in the poster—the wave, the boy, dog and worm.

Chicken sat down beneath the imminence of the wave, her forehead and the back of her neck beading with sweat. She glared up at the wave, fixed at its crest. This was one wave that wasn't going to come crashing down on her.

Something sharp was sticking into her bottom. A shell. She was sitting in debris—shells, bottle tops, broken plastic cups, a flattened cigarette packet that had once been blue. No doubt this would be all swept away before the festival. Must have the island looking spick and span for the tourists. A couple of seagulls landed on top of the tsunami billboard,

then swooped down in front of her, sensing a possible source of food. Chicken shooed them away.

A folk tune snaked its way out of the school grounds—Ry rehearsing the festival dancers. Chicken pictured them going around in a circle, holding decorative sticks, waving them about. And now, yes, when the music changed, they would go back the other way.

Chicken started scraping a shell along the ground, making an unpleasant grinding sound against the concrete. The ferry passengers were disembarking. Chicken didn't even bother looking for Lilli, or the possibility of a letter. It wasn't the mail ferry anyway.

Chicken wondered which were Violet's guests. Ah yes, there they were—two couples about the same age as Violet and Nori, making their way to the van with *Island House* emblazoned on the side. Nori had the back doors open ready to put their luggage in.

Chicken felt like calling out: 'Hey, Dad, how's it going?' Even though she was on the other side of the harbour her voice would carry. Nori wouldn't mind but Chicken imagined the look on Violet's face if the guests knew that their hostess's daughter was sitting in a pile of rubbish.

She watched the van make its way up the hill. Violet would be doing a last-minute check of her make-up, giving the vestibule an extra squirt of room freshener.

The one or two passengers going back to Boat Harbour were now embarking. Chicken could get on the ferry, disappear

somewhere. Forget the festival, forget her family. Forget she was a sea woman. Leaving was easy. You just pack your bags in the middle of the night and go.

23

The apparent dragon

There were shrines so unobtrusive they could easily be overlooked—along seldom used forest tracks, in the hollow of a tree, beneath outcrops of rocks, by the side of the road. It was Soshin who had first shown Yugen the one in the forest where he stopped on his day of departure. Yugen loved coming across them in unexpected places, simple reminders that the sacred was everywhere.

He was exploring the last island, had discovered this shrine on a knoll behind the beach. He was glad that the beach was deserted; he felt less isolated when he was by himself. People continued to behave oddly towards him, it was not his imagination. On the ferry over here he'd said good morning

to two old men who looked exactly like each other. They bent their heads, shuffled their feet on the deck and did not look up again till the monk had moved away.

Perhaps it was something invisible. Even though the urn was hidden in the backpack, perhaps people instinctively knew that the monk was carrying with him the vestiges of death.

He must continue till he had completed his task. It did not matter what people thought of him, how he was regarded or made to feel.

This shrine was larger than the one in the forest but equally unobtrusive. The monk would not have noticed it at all had he not seen the staircase. He counted the steps—there were seventy-three—as he ascended, not sure what he'd find at the top.

A low wall left the shrine open to receive the bounty of the elements. There was a small pathway of smooth round pebbles to purify the feet of visitors to the shrine. The shrubs growing alongside it, including the bushes with the small white flowers, had recently been trimmed back—not in a mechanical straight cutting line, but carefully, each branch and twig. Sometimes half a leaf was missing.

The dwelling for the god was white concrete, its small timber doors bolted with an ornate engraved brass fitting that joined the two. The doors were subdued with age but the brass fitting had been polished so that it looked like new. On the weathered surface of the altar were small mounds of white rice with a scattering of mahogany-coloured adzuki beans.

the Sea Bed

Yugen had saved this island for last because at the ferry terminal he'd discovered that there was to be a diving women's festival and had delayed his visit to coincide with it. Soshin had loved festivals.

Yugen remembered winter solstice celebrations at the monastery, with sweet cakes and generous quantities of rice wine. Soshin would fill the monks' cups and say, 'Drink up, my boys, this will protect your health in old age.' After several cups, someone suggested a game of baseball. Even the abbot joined in, not always running to the makeshift bases in a straight line. Once Soshin hit a ball so far into the forest that it was never seen again. Sometimes monks drank so much wine that they'd suddenly lie down on the ground, even in the middle of a game, the warmth of their bodies melting the snow around them.

Yugen had forgotten the needle-cold chill of winter solstice. He'd become another creature. Now his body felt only moist sea air.

In the hazy distance was the beehive village of the island he'd visited a few days before. It appeared to be shrouded in sleep, its love story resting between tellings. In his mind Yugen saw the distinctive white rocky outcrop above the beach where the couple were harvesting seaweed, the path on the map which led to it.

The beach below the shrine where he now stood was curved, with crunchy grey sand and a smattering of broken shells. Midway along the stretch of sand, tables had been

arranged corner to corner so that they made a square with open space in the middle. At the back of the beach was a long trestle table with chairs spaced evenly behind it. It already seemed as if a row of straight-backed people were sitting in them. Although the beach was empty it was strewn with footsteps. They skirted the tables, came up to the concrete path and disappeared on its hard surface.

Tomorrow the beach would be full of people eating and drinking, celebrating. Perhaps in a big festive crowd Yugen wouldn't be noticed, he could mingle in the general camaraderie.

At the far end of the beach something odd, out of place, caught the monk's attention. It appeared to be a dragon, a gigantic lizard, reared up on its tail, pale underbelly exposed, short forelimbs bent at the elbows, the sharp-clawed fingers of the paws outstretched, head up, mouth extending down to its shoulders.

What Yugen thought he saw could not possibly be. He tried not to dwell on it. His mind was still in recovery, pieces of it missing. After the appearance of carp at the power transmitter, he could no longer trust his powers of observation. How could he know for certain that the things he thought he saw were actually there?

When in harmony the mind's several layers did not separate and distinguish themselves. At those moments the mind was at one with its surroundings. Like water it flowed everywhere, settling into the shapes of the spaces it found along the way.

The monk tried not to think about the mind that was thinking about the mind, because behind that was another and another.

It was too late, he'd dwelled too long. The carp had come back. Now instead of circling they sat in a row, dressed in abbot's robes. In front of them stood a small boy. The biggest, most senior carp asked the boy a question.

'Dragon,' the boy replied.

This sent the whole congregation of carp into a flurry.

'Did others happen to see it?' asked one.

'Were people pointing and staring?' demanded another.

There was no-one else on the beach, no source of second opinion. Another objection the carp-abbots had was the creature's inertness. Did it not tire of being in that reared-up position?

'Reptiles can stay still for long periods of time,' the little boy responded bravely. This did not sway the carp, however.

They ordered the boy to review the data, examine the parts once again and see if a different whole could be assembled from them. 'Do not bring a dragon back here a second time,' the head carp said sternly.

The boy set off once again. Out here on his own, away from the critical eye of the carp, he could play and be fanciful. He could even let the mission drop. But the boy wouldn't let go till he'd exhausted all possibilities. If he couldn't convince the carp of the dragon he'd put the creature in his own private

cupboard where things that didn't fit anywhere else were thrown in higgledy-piggledy.

The boy focused on the parts that he'd assembled into a dragon. He had a strange feeling that the carp were watching, waiting for him to make a mistake.

Yugen stopped, caught hold of himself. Imaginary carp were discussing an imaginary dragon. He picked up a grain of rice from the shrine altar, pressed his fingertips against its hardness, placed it in his mouth and tasted it. Rice. All his senses confirmed it.

The monk looked at the dragon again. It hadn't gone away. It even appeared to have moved a little.

24

Sea folk

Lilli sat at the back of the bus, creating a long stretch of space between herself and the driver, as if he were her personal chauffeur. It was a new touring-style vehicle with panoramic windows. The wipers made fans of clarity on the rain-speckled windscreen.

The humidity of Boat Harbour had turned into a fine misting drizzle. The wet season was usually finished by now, leaving the summer days hot, dry and stifling. The moistness pervaded everything, only air-conditioning kept it at bay. On the air-conditioned bus it was cool and quiet.

As the built-up area thinned out, so did the traffic. Occasionally on the dark ribbon of road a truck passed, spraying

the side of the bus with rain. The buses heading south departed on the hour from Boat Harbour. It was a thirty-five-minute ride, then a ten-minute walk to the Sea Folk Museum.

Lilli had a new set of timetables and studied them as if she were a quiz contestant and this was her special subject. Some of the Boat Harbour transport information was available on the internet. Lilli had printed this out and brought it with her. She loved the tiny print, the orderliness of columns, the neat efficiency of timetables, their assurance and beautiful certainty. The local ferry timetables were available only in hard copy, from the terminal itself. The one for her island was on a single sheet of paper.

Another truck went past, its wheels churning water. Lilli longed for a full-blown storm. The smell of ozone, the boom of thunder, cuts of lightning. She loved to be woken by the sound of it pelting on the roof. This misty drizzle did not wake her. It was insipid, tired, had no energy. In the sea the sound of it disappeared.

Lilli checked her watch. Three minutes to go. She moved closer to the front door. Up ahead she could see a bus shelter. There was nothing else around except for roads cutting into neat green countryside.

'Sea Folk Museum next stop,' the driver announced through his microphone. He pulled over and opened the doors.

Lilli nodded and said 'Thank you' as she alighted.

'Down there to the left.'

When his passenger was safely on the ground the driver continued on his way.

Lilli put up her umbrella. The air was damp and salty. She took the side road that wound through grassland and copses to arrive at the Sea Folk Museum. It was built on the edge of a plateau, a hedge of dense dark foliage providing protection from the drop to the ocean below. On a sunny day you'd be able to see for miles.

Lilli wondered when the need for such a museum had become apparent. There had been nothing like this when she left. Still, she was grateful for its existence, a way of easing herself back in.

When she had paid the entrance fee and stepped into the exhibition area, the first thing Lilli noticed was the dryness. In this museum that celebrated fishing men and diving women, there was no water, no ocean.

Lilli used to imagine what it would be like if the entire ocean drained away and you could see everything at a glance—the mountains of rocks, forests of seaweed, sandy plains, the shallow cradles where stingrays lay. It would be so much easier for the divers; they could just walk along and pick up all the abalone and shellfish. You might even be able to see the sea palace.

Perhaps you could ladle the water out of the ocean the same way Cedar ladled soup out of the big pot. If everyone brought a bucket it could easily be done. Lilli decided to discuss the matter with Cedar one day on the way back to the house.

'Well,' said Cedar, 'the pot empties but the bowls get full.'

Hmm. Lilli was carrying Cedar's big fins, holding them in her arms as if they were a pair of dolls.

'We could pour the water onto the garden.'

Lilli loved these walking conversations with Cedar. Walking together, talking together. They would pass the ball of conversation backwards and forwards till they reached the house. Lilli's legs never noticed the steep climb up the hill, nor did her arms complain about the heavy fins when she and Cedar were talking about Big Things.

Cedar considered the proposition. When they were almost at the house she said: 'What about the fish? Where would they live if there was no ocean?'

Ah, the fish. Lilli hadn't thought about them. A shellfish could last for a while out of water. You didn't see it die, it just started to smell after a day or two. A fish, on the other hand, you did see. It lay on its side, mouth open. Every so often it leapt into the air, sometimes even did a somersault, coming back down on its other side. Grandfather hit the fish at the base of its head, to stop it dancing.

'And what about us?' Cedar asked Lilli as she took the fins and rinsed them under the tap with fresh water. 'What would the divers do with no ocean?'

Here in the museum was the divers' life with no ocean. Everything else but—the tools they used, the talisman,

baskets, buckets, clothes, and artificial replicas of the divers themselves.

The ceiling was made of curved timbers coming together like fingertips touching. It resembled the upturned hull of a large fishing boat. The wood was a rich warm brown like the cedar chest of drawers in the house on the island. Suspended from the ceiling was a real boat with fibreglass models of fishermen.

They were standing up in the boat, wearing skirts of bamboo fibre. The man in the middle had a bamboo hat while the rest of them wore headbands. Some held long rods. Their eyes were fixed, looking into a sea of air. The one with the hat had a short manicured beard. He was looking straight at Lilli. She couldn't help returning the eye contact. He was well-built, like all the fishermen, broad shoulders, narrow waist. Toned.

Lilli caught hold of her foolishness and turned her attention elsewhere.

She gazed at the timber ribbing once again, remembered looking up through blue for the bottom of the boat, lungs screaming for air, climbing through the water to its shark-like shape. Cedar said that it got easier, that your lungs learned, your body and mind learned. But it was never as beautiful as that first time with the sea princess. Her ears didn't hurt then, her lungs weren't hungry. She was safe and warm, and the sea was studded with stars.

On the mezzanine level, above the exhibits, was a glassed-in office area. A man was sitting at a computer. Lilli could see his head and shoulders, the top of the screen. Behind him stood a man in a suit. The two of them had been looking at Lilli, she could tell by the suddenness with which they averted their eyes.

Lilli began making her way around the exhibits, the replicas and inanimate objects, starting with a perspex box in which lay a polished abalone shell and what looked like a finger of limestone wedged under it. The first primitive diving tool. In the next box was a whole array of instruments. Lilli recognised the large prising tool, a combination of crowbar and knife.

Cedar called the prising tool her samurai sword. Unlike the fins, she never let Lilli carry it. With this tool Cedar probed the narrow crevices in rocks, deftly sliding it under an abalone and slicing through the muscle keeping the creature attached to the rock. Then she tucked the samurai sword back into her belt and carried the abalone up to her floating tub.

Beside the display of tools was a chart showing the distribution of diving women. Silhouettes of heads marked the few remaining outposts, the last refuges of an endangered species. In Lilli's own lifetime, the number of active divers had decreased by 70 per cent, with mostly only grandmothers left. The decline in population was due to 'a reduction in sea resources, and more attractive job opportunities for the younger generation'.

How dismissive was that simple sentence, bland, impersonal, diminishing.

Lilli turned to the inverted figure of a deep-water woman, who brought back a sense of the individual lives that the commentary glossed over. The boat from which she dived was on a metal frame suspended from the ceiling high above, to give a perspective of how far she had to swim to reach the seabed. The diving woman carried a stone weight attached to a pulley to allow her to descend swiftly. Around her waist was a lifeline.

The man in the boat was her tender, usually her husband, the one who watched out for her. He was attuned to his wife's diving habits, with how long she stayed underwater, ready to respond to her signal when she needed to be pulled up.

In the museum this harmonious union was forever captured in fibreglass. Great-grandmother and Great-grandfather had been such a pair. In the stories they never fought or argued. 'If she made him angry he might leave her down there,' joked Cedar. When she was skilled enough Cedar became a deep-water woman too, with Grandfather tending her.

It was always this way, the man in the boat and the woman in the water. It never occurred to Lilli that there were diving men till she saw one on TV. She asked Cedar why on the island all the divers were women.

'We don't feel the cold so much,' Cedar explained.

'The men could wear something warm,' suggested Lilli.

'They could,' replied Cedar, 'but there is another thing. We are much more careful in the sea. The men are prone to accidents.'

When Lilli asked Grandfather she got a slightly different story. His grandfather had told him that men went out fishing in their boats and the women stayed near the shore collecting seaweed and shellfish. In ancient times both men and women dived. For island people the sea was their source of food. Not only did they eat what it provided but they traded fish, abalone, bêche-de-mer. Some of the sea folk were itinerant, travelling in small boats, gathering shellfish, drying them then selling them to merchants. Male divers joined deep-ocean fishing fleets. Or they went far away and dived for pearls. Many of them died.

'Were they not being careful?' asked Lilli.

Grandfather looked towards the horizon. 'Their tenders weren't always,' he said finally.

Lilli moved to the last exhibition, a life-size fibreglass figure in full dress—white bonnet tied around her chin, skirt, blouse, thick white gloves. She was one of the shore divers who worked in groups. Her gloved hands were holding onto a wooden bucket. You could just see her prising tool, its weight resting on the lip of the bucket. Rope was wound around the bucket, one end of it tucked into a band around the diving woman's waist. Her bare legs looked vulnerable. On the floor in front of her was strewn brown and red synthetic seaweed,

a few shells. You could see the edge of silver foil upon which the seaweed was mounted, keeping it in a neat hedge.

The white uniform seemed to be wet. It clung to the fibreglass body, following the contours of the heavy old breasts, the stoutness of arms and legs. The woman's face was sunburnt and shiny, her cheeks like autumn apples. From the diver's waist hung a net bag for her catch. It spread out over the curve of her stomach.

The diving woman was not smiling. She looked both annoyed and stiff, as if being disturbed at her work. She was standing apart from the two-dimensional divers behind her. Why had she been singled out? Some of the women in the background print were gathered around a fire on the beach, a few bending over, drying their long hair. Others already had land clothes on, their hair dressed, coiled up. A few divers were still in the water on the other side of the charcoal rocks. Their backs were pink in the pale blue sea. They wore small white scarves to keep their hair back but were otherwise naked.

'You don't want your hair getting in the way,' said Cedar, tucking hers under a bonnet. 'You don't want creatures mistaking it for seaweed, or for anything else they can grab hold of.'

In very early times divers covered their bodies in striking tattoos, to protect them from sea monsters. Lilli wondered whether they were stripes that resembled ribbons of seaweed, perhaps big circles of fish mouths, eyes. Camouflage, protection. The illusion of being bigger, bolder, more frightening. Or blending in with the surroundings, hiding in the ordinary.

Keeping predators away would have been of vital importance in the days before goggles, when divers could see only blurred shapes. They could be bitten by big fish, accidentally tread on stingrays and other bottom-dwelling creatures. In the old photos the feet of diving women were scarred with cuts and other injuries.

Goggles, fins. Each innovation made the hard work of diving easier. The women had stopped short of air tanks when they saw how quickly the abalone stocks could be depleted. If they were able to stay down for that long at a time all the abalone would be gone in one summer. The furthest they had come was the wetsuit. Not only did it offer protection and warmth but it extended the season so that the divers could work in colder water.

There were no wetsuits in the Sea Folk Museum.

Lilli could just remember them arriving on the island, the last in the bay to adopt them. Discussion as to whether to allow wetsuits had gone on for months. The reason for and against was the same: it would make the work more efficient.

In an effort to satisfy both sides, wetsuits were limited to one per household. Some of the most senior grandmothers refused to wear something that resembled the headless shadow of a person. It showed a lack of respect for the sea.

It was so exciting the day the wetsuits came. In boxes, on a special boat. All the divers, even the husbands, were down at the port. There was a special ceremony to bless them, with the priest waving branches of sacred leaves.

Lilli was wary of Cedar's wetsuit to begin with, it looked so menacing. Cedar encouraged her to touch the suit, get to know it. Cedar said that when she put it on it felt like an all-over corset holding everything in, but in the water the suit became surprisingly flexible.

'What would my mother think of this?' Cedar said, walking around in it. Cedar became young again when she remembered the Great Ones. Her eyes brighter and her voice playful.

Sometimes when Cedar was reminiscing she seemed to forget Lilli was there or what they were doing. She could be in the middle of taking washing off the line and she'd stop, with a pair of half-folded trousers hugged to her chest. The old days came filing out of her mouth as if they had been cooped up for years and were finally allowed to go for a run. Then the words stopped and Cedar would stare into space, her mind off somewhere in the past. The photo of Cedar and Pearlie as young divers always made Cedar's mind wander off. 'The happiest time of my life,' she said. But her voice drifted into sadness. Lilli had to bring her back by wiggling her fingers in front of Cedar's face.

When there were just the two of them Lilli asked Cedar about Mitsi. 'Was it my fault?'

'Of course not,' Cedar reassured her. 'It was no-one's fault. Mitsi was different, that's all, right from the beginning. She was fragile, delicate; not robust like island babies usually are.' Cedar recalled giving birth to her. 'It happened when I was diving. I felt the contractions and swam into shallow water.

I couldn't believe it at first, she was coming far too early. Pearlie ran to the village to fetch the midwife but Mitsi slipped out before they even got back. Such a tiny little thing she was. My water baby.' Cedar smiled fondly. 'My little sea princess.' Then Cedar's face crumpled. 'Despite her early arrival she decided she didn't want to be here after all.' She looked down at her lap, perhaps remembering when the baby was safe and sound inside her. Somehow Lilli knew to let Cedar be.

No-one else talked about Mitsi. It was as if she had never existed. Lilli couldn't even find any photos of her. What did Mitsi look like? Lilli wanted to know.

'Like you. Slender and pretty. Exactly the same,' Cedar replied.

'Is that why people pretend I'm not there?' asked Lilli.

'Oh Lilli, that's not true. You're just imagining it.'

But she wasn't. Now Lilli knew—it was because she reminded them of a ghost.

Cedar, on the other hand, was glorified after she died, became a legend. She was the best diver of her generation. She had long breath, spent more time under than resting on the surface, gathered lots of seaweed and knew where to find abalone. In her head she carried a map of the seabed and made adjustments for its seasonal changes. She was not afraid of reaching into potentially dangerous crevices.

Cedar's last dive was also Lilli's. They were with a group of divers in a boat used to provide better access to offshore reefs and difficult-to-reach places. When the boat anchored,

the women headed for their own favourite spots, their lifelines connected to buoys. Lilli remained on the boat as lookout.

Although Cedar had long breath she usually didn't stay under for more than a minute. If only Grandfather had still been alive. He would have known after ninety seconds that something was wrong. Lilli counted to a hundred and eighty, watching the buoy, looking all around to see if Cedar surfaced.

Finally she left the boat unattended and dived in. She swam towards the buoy, found the lifeline. It disappeared into seaweed. Lilli had to go down there, into those slimy fronds.

Lilli took a breath and dived, followed the lifeline, pushing away the lolling tongues. She could just make out the shape of the wetsuit but did not have enough breath to keep going. Lilli resurfaced, called for help.

Down she went again, this time reaching the body. Cedar's arm was caught under a rock. Lilli tried to drag it free but couldn't. The rubbery fabric of the wetsuit was wedged into a crevice. Lilli came up for breath, and saw Pearlie swimming towards her. Lilli dived again. This time the crevice released its catch, gouging out a piece of the wetsuit as it did. Together Lilli and Pearlie carried Cedar to the surface.

Lilli gazed at the fibreglass grandmother. Her expression was hard, set. Hers was not the idyllic life of the women in the print, sitting by the warming fire after swimming weightless in the limpid waters. She seemed angry that it had all come to this, that she should end up as a museum exhibit. It had solidified

in her, taken her over, pressed her mouth into a thin hard line, pushed her elbows out, curled her fingers into fists.

If Lilli hadn't stayed in the boat so long. If she hadn't been afraid of the seaweed. If.

Lilli reached out and touched the old diver's smooth hard shoulder, felt the stiff ridges in the folds of her sleeve.

'Would you like a tour of the museum?' A clammy male voice. Lilli pulled her hand back. Beside her stood the man from the office, the one in the suit.

Perhaps he'd come down because he'd seen her touching the model. He didn't mention it nor did he say who he was or what qualified him to conduct a tour. He must have also seen from his vantage point that she had already spent some time looking at the exhibits and was not in need of a guide.

'I'm about to leave,' Lilli said.

'Perhaps you will permit me to drive you to the bus stop. It's raining quite heavily outside.' A silence rippled through the whole museum, an alertness, as if all the fibreglass models were waiting to hear what she would say.

'No, thank you,' she said politely but firmly. 'I have an umbrella.'

The man moved away, stood admiring the deep-water woman.

Lilli entered the cafe and gift shop section, started examining the souvenirs—glass dolphins, snow domes with underwater scenes, a small diver suspended. She turned one upside down, felt the coldness of the glass. Silvery flakes floated down like

grains of salt while the plastic seaweed and diver remained stationary. One section of the table had key rings with the divers' talisman hanging from it.

The man in the suit placed himself at the other end of the table. He picked up a snow dome, slowly turned it upside down, just as Lilli had.

She grabbed one of the key rings and took it to the girl behind the counter. She waited while the assistant put the key ring into a gift envelope then tied it with shiny dark pink ribbon. Lilli let things take their natural time. He surely wouldn't be brazen enough to come to the counter. The gift-shop girl popped the parcel and the docket into a thin white paper bag and secured it with a sliver of sticky tape. It was done. Lilli moved briskly towards the exit.

She was almost there when she heard his voice again, his moist breath settling on her cheek. 'It doesn't have to be to the bus stop, it can be anywhere you like. I'll make it worth your while.'

'I said, no thank you!' The loudness of her voice took them both by surprise.

The man jerked back, as if she'd slapped him across the face. 'Sorry,' he murmured, walking quickly out the door.

Lilli glared after him. How dare he proposition her in here, in front of her people. She heard the sound of a car start up, then slink away.

25

The lost place

Had Yugen left the shrine by way of the beach instead of taking the cobbled path he would never have made his discovery. Branches with broad, water-polished leaves overhung the path. He passed nerines and tiger lilies in bloom, saw a feral grapefruit tree with one lone yellow fruit on it.

The foliage was interrupted by a thick curtain of fishing net draped over bamboo. Above the netting was a pole with old green or blue pegs, secured upside down to the pole by cord. Beside it was a gate of some sort, camouflaged or unattended for so long that it was seeping into its surroundings. Nearby was a trolley, the sort that old women used, either trailing it

behind them or pushing it in front, leaning on it for support, a utilitarian walking frame.

There was a blue plastic crate on the trolley, with rows of small slits on the sides and bottom to allow air or water to flow through. The wheels of the trolley were small and poignant, like a toy a child had outgrown, a scooter or a cart from another time. Little spokes curved out from the central hub like a cross-section of a nautilus or similar sea creature.

In the crate was a loosely folded tarpaulin, and on top a plastic mesh shopping basket. Poking out of it were handles, perhaps of a gardening tool—hedge clippers—with bright pink adhesive tape wound around them. The shopping basket was inside a looser, more flexible net basket designed for marine use. A few strips of faded cloth hung over the edge of the blue crate.

Another net was draped over the handle of the trolley itself. It was a deep reddish brown, the colour of certain seaweeds. Faded red rods the size of pen-knives were woven through it. A dead leaf was caught in the net, blanched and still. Large fleshy vines grew over the trolley and trailed along the ground to a pair of blue rubber boots, fallen on their sides, one loosely over the other, the position of sleeping feet.

Yugen distinguished the mesh of a wire fence through the shroud of leaves. Slumped over one part of the fence was a wetsuit, old, almost threadbare, either from use or being out in the weather.

He knew where the cobbled path had brought him, it was all around, even in the transpiration of leaves. A pair of black fins, the nets, wetsuit, the trolley. This was the place of an old sea woman. Yugen had entered the remote territories of the vanishing.

A turquoise canvas bag was tied to the frame of a second trolley that leaned at an angle, as if a couple of its wheels were missing. Yugen couldn't verify this unless he examined the trolley, but he did not want to touch or disturb anything.

Despite the appearance of refuse, of abandonment, there was a discernible orderliness, items stacked to take up as little space as possible, to be unobtrusive. Nothing infringed upon the cobblestones of the path.

The place felt inhabited by the unseen presences of the past. The day was quiet, not even the sound of birds rippled the stillness of the air. On the other side of the path, tied to a fence post, were three upright poles of bamboo which came together at the top like a tepee. Parallel to the fence was a line of bleached timber, old nails sticking out, their rust bleeding into the wood. For hanging seaweed.

The pathway led to the sea, in big steps descending like the vertebrae of an ancient backbone. It tapered off at water level, and was replaced by a black rock shelf.

Beyond the rocks and into the luminous haze, the horizon was faintly visible, a pencil line beneath a layer of wash.

On the ground near the tripod of bamboo poles lay a mound covered with a black tarpaulin, cord wrapped around

it like a parcel, and weighted here and there around the edges with plastic bottles filled with water. Yugen turned his head to the side and peered in through a fold. Dried seaweed as black as the tarpaulin, streaked white with a residue of salt.

He went back to the camouflaged gate. On the high side of it was enough of a gap to see what lay beyond—a crude walkway, perhaps a bridge, leading into a clearing. It was made from planks of old wood so frail they wouldn't hold anything heavier than a raccoon. The bridge had been fixed many times, a patchwork of repairs, with struts across each plank to prevent slipping.

Lush verdant plants threatened to overgrow the manmade structure. Small coral-coloured nerines spotted the greenery. Beneath the lowest point of the bridge was darkness, a depth under the planks, a small stream perhaps. The bridge rose up again into the lightness of the clearing.

Yugen took a few more steps back up the cobblestone path, trying for a better view. The clearing was, or had been, a garden of sorts—a framework of thin bamboo poles with the same fine red mesh netting thrown over it. There were trailing vines underneath, tomatoes or beans, he was too far away to tell.

Everything but a house was here. Yugen strained to see further in through the crowd of leaves, and thought he caught the shine of a metal roof, but it could equally have been the reflection off water. Behind, where he had come from, the land rose up steeply.

He stepped down the vertebrae, towards the sea, trying to get another glimpse of what lay beyond the fence. He found another section of stream gurgling its way out of the foliage. It disappeared under the path.

Yugen stood on the edge of the land, on the verge of stepping stones that grew smaller the further into the distance they went, till finally they disappeared from view, submerged. The path led so naturally into the sea that he felt he could continue walking from one world into the other, pass from air into water.

The monk took the urn out of his backpack, held it up to show Soshin that he had found the place.

A sound, barely perceptible. A small rusty noise like the creaking of a gate. Yugen turned, looked back up the path. There was nothing but shadows.

26

An outing

Festival day. Lilli stood in the flickering rain, under her blue umbrella, her piece of summer sky, gazing at the statue of the diving woman. The bonnet, instead of being tied under her chin, had been left open by the sculptor, the right side of it draped regally across to the left shoulder. The cement woman's eyes were closed, allowing herself to be contemplated. There was a suggestion of breath around her mouth, as if she were about to whistle softly. Her left arm was bent so that the hand came into alignment with the central axis of the body. Three fingers were outstretched, with the thumb and forefinger curved into a circle, like the hands of a monk in meditation. Her strong right arm lifted skywards, holding a torch with

a frosted globe. She stood steadfast, torch raised, heart open, impervious to the weather she endured, unwavering in rain, wind or sun.

Lilli stood in the rain, absorbing the diving woman's strength. She could do it, she reminded herself. Lilli would be just another tourist. She'd find a quiet spot and watch. Everyone would be too busy to notice her. Walk down to the terminal, purchase a ticket, get on the ferry.

Lilli crossed the highway and made her way along the esplanade, past the row of shrubs alternating with benches for sitting and enjoying the view, the pearl museum walkway, the large blue and white aquarium bordered with palm trees and planter boxes of salt-tolerant flowers.

A few metres further on she took a side street and came to the local ferry terminal. She folded her umbrella, shaking drops of rain off it, then waited at the entrance for a moment before realising that the glass door did not open automatically. The louvres of the windows under the eaves were angled for ventilation but still it was fuggy in the terminal, the air damp and stale, a smell of wet fur and coffee.

The terminal was as crowded as a busy railway station. Apart from a few old men sitting on the benches against the wall, it seemed to be full of tourists—small-brimmed hats, cameras and daypacks. A couple of small children were on the floor moving toy dinosaurs around.

Lilli went to the ticket booth. 'Coming back today?' asked the woman without looking up. She seemed familiar, from the island, one of the mothers from Violet's generation.

'Ah, I'm not sure.'

'It's full fare if you don't return on the same day.'

'Yes, all right. Full fare.' Lilli slid the correct change under the glass. She didn't have to decide now how long she wanted to stay.

The woman scooped the money up and replaced it with two tickets.

Lilli bought a bottle of iced tea from the vending machine and went outside into fresher air. Across the street, on the water's edge, were the covered walkways leading onto the pontoons which served as piers for the local island ferries. She could see a boat approaching but it was still too far away to tell if it was heading for these piers.

A car pulled up beside the terminal. Two men emerged from the back seat, and one from the front. The driver remained at the wheel. The men were all wearing crisp black trousers and shirts with no ties. Two of the shirts buttoned up at the wrist while the third, a tasteful white with a thin black check that looked as if it might have been purchased in the city, had sleeves rolled up to just below the elbows. The owner of this shirt said something to the driver then waved him off. The three started walking towards the pier.

The boat was getting closer, turning into this part of the bay. Lilli looked at her watch. Another twelve minutes before

the island ferry was due. Perhaps this was an extra one, to cope with the festival visitors. As Lilli crossed the street towards the pier the same car returned. This time the driver got out, held an umbrella over his two passengers and accompanied them to the covered walkway.

Lilli was caught between the two packs of men, and worse, when the driver walked back to the car with the umbrella, she was able to see that in the second group of passengers was the man in the suit.

He recognised Lilli immediately but quickly looked away. She stepped back, found herself pushed up against the railing, as the men converged. The man in the suit's companion introduced him to the others. The man with the checked shirt was the mayor of Boat Harbour.

Their attention was diverted by the arrival of the ferry. Lilli looked towards the terminal but no-one came out. Something was wrong. 'Is this the ferry for the festival?' she asked the attendant putting the gangway into position. When he lifted his head Lilli could see that it was the same boy, grown into a man and dressed today in a smart nautical cap and white uniform, who had been on the ferry that had taken Lilli away.

He stood there looking at Lilli, trying to place her. 'Special service,' he said eventually, his eyes lingering.

The mayor came forward. 'I'm sure there is room for one more.' He stood aside to let her on first. Lilli remained pressed against the railing. A special ferry taking a party of VIPs to the festival. Lilli couldn't go with them. It wasn't only because

of the man in the suit. She couldn't arrive on the island with VIPs, be swept up in all that fanfare.

'Thank you. I am waiting for someone,' she managed to say.

They filed on board. The attendant pulled up the gangway, released the rope from the mooring. The engines started revving, churning white water.

The men stood on deck, with the mayor pointing out features of the bay. As the ferry edged away from the jetty the man in the suit turned back, showed his triumphant, grinning face to Lilli.

She could feel herself unravelling. Lilli left the dockside area, hurried back past the aquarium and the pearl museum. She did not even glance at the diving woman statue but kept going till she was back in the safe haven of the hotel.

27

Writing on the mind

The sea women arrived in small boats, wearing layers of clothes—wetsuit, diver's uniform and warm quilted jacket. They brought with them fins, masks, belts, ropes, tubs and firewood.

Each group set about making a fire on the beach, huddling in on it, encouraging it, till eventually slim flames appeared. Most of the women were young. Yugen saw few the age of the grandmothers from the corrugated-iron sheds at Finger Peninsula.

In other boats came media men, large cameras carried ashore on their shoulders. Some had the same silvery metal

cases as the crew Yugen encountered on The Sound of Waves island.

Arriving on foot from the direction of the port were tourists, heads down, looking where they walked, the regularity of their steps thrown askew by the sand.

As people crowded onto the beach, so did the rain. What had started early this morning as a thin piping here or there was now a bold chorus. Nobody seemed unduly perturbed by it, except the media men who started putting plastic hoods over the cameras. Tourists positioned themselves on outcrops of rocks or stood near the waterline.

Yugen sat under glistening wet foliage, giving himself up to this rain that they all shared, sea woman and visitor alike. Even the VIPs were part of the community of rain. Only Soshin, nestled snugly in the backpack, remained rain-proof.

At the square of tables, food was being unloaded from boxes. The monk saw a giant pot of soup, a barbecue being fired up.

Some of the VIPs, dressed in pressed trousers and shirts, stood in small groups talking to each other. Others were already at the bench drinking beer and eating fresh sea urchins. Behind the VIP stand were colourful flags and pennants which started at the sacred gate and ascended the staircase to the shrine.

Yugen was making note of everything. Like the media men he could do a broad panoramic sweep and take in the entire beach from one end to the other. His eye followed the flags

up the steps. The flags disappeared into greenery but Yugen's mind continued up to where he knew the shrine to be.

When he turned towards the sea, he could see the boats that had transported the sea women gathering in a semicircle offshore. Most of them also bore coloured flags and pennants which fluttered intermittently in the limp breeze like an old man snoring.

Yugen found the dragon. Today it looked like a tree. The pale underbelly had become a trunk, the bent arms and grasping claws dead branches. Its roots gripped the rock like splayed feet. The ridge above it fell steeply, then levelled out parallel to the water. Between the dragon tree and the sea was a sharp V-shaped gap, as if a chunk had been bitten out of the landscape, leaving a small pyramid by the water's edge. In the weathering of time it would become an islet. It was bushy at the top and bare underneath, like a military haircut.

The monk was reluctant to let his mind once again conjure fantasies out of the landscape yet he could not help staring at an odd-shaped rock in the hollow of the gap. He was certain it had not been there yesterday. It curved forward and, near the base, spread outwards. At the top was a small round protuberance, the size of a buoy. It looked like an old woman, sitting at the edges of the festival, head bent, her features indistinct, clouded by distance.

She moved. Her hand came up and waved. Yugen raised his then brought it down again, feeling foolish. Waving at rocks.

One of the divers peeled off from her companions around the fire and knelt in front of the sea, hands cupped. She threw a stream of rice grains into the water, placed her palms together, bowed, then came back to the group.

One by one, all of the diving women left their fire circles and offered rice to the sea.

A priest appeared in blue robes and a tall black hat. The sea women knelt before him, near a bench upon which lay a profusion of sacred branches. Behind the priest was the crowd of photographers, and reporters taking notes. Yugen could see the soles of the women's diving shoes. Most were black but one pair was yellow. Another pink. A girl leaned forward and removed something from the cheek of her friend, who turned and smiled. The priest bowed. He began intoning, picked up the branches and waved them over the bent heads.

After the blessing the girls began to ready themselves for the dive. They came down to the water's edge, rinsed their masks, attached net bags to their weight belts, then put on their fins. Occasionally there was a pink or turquoise pair but most of the fins were orange. The black wetsuit and white sea-woman's dress combined with the large orange fins gave the impression of a flock of seabirds, ungainly on land.

From behind the beach came a troupe of dancers dressed in black trousers and red coats with white patterns on them. A yellow band tied around the waist. They carried in each hand a red-and-white-striped stick, with a red tassel on its end. The dancers formed a circle, swaying from side to side, lifting their

arms and waving the candy sticks. When they had finished they retired to a pavilion.

An announcement rumbled over the beach. The women waded into the water carrying their wooden tubs.

They began diving and for a minute or two all you could see were the wooden tubs bobbing about on the surface. One by one, heads as sleek as seals reappeared and the women placed abalone and strands of accompanying seaweed into the tubs. Every few dives they tipped out accumulated water then disappeared again.

The most important part of the festival took part in the unseen depths. There was no well-lit annulus of glass through which viewers could observe; Yugen had to imagine himself down there with the sea women as they felt their way into the seaweed, rocky crevices and hard-to-reach places where abalone took up residence. With the thick gloves to protect their hands from cuts and scratches they would lose some of the sensitivity of fingers, not quite know what they might be touching.

A small wave rolled in, lifting the wooden tubs and chasing a cameraman out of the water. He steadied himself, edged back into the water, more mindful now of the ebb and flow.

The loudspeaker boomed again, announcing the diver of the year. The sound filled the beach, seemed to be coming from everywhere.

Yugen waited, assuming the diving would stop, the winner emerging with arms in the air to wave at the crowds, be

presented with flowers, a trophy. No-one came out of the water. The women kept bringing up abalone, putting them into the tubs.

Eventually they returned their gear to the boats and began coming ashore. Which one was diver of the year? Perhaps she was already at the shrine offering her abalone. Yugen joined the onlookers walking up the steps.

A roof had been added—white tarpaulin stretched over thin aluminium tubing. The sacred pebbles were covered with matting. Kneeling on it were the VIPs, now dressed in traditional robes—loose grey pants, loose-sleeved black jacket open to reveal a white shawl tied at the waist. Beneath the ceremonial clothes you could see the men's wristwatches, thick silvery metal bands and, in one case, black leather.

The priest knelt in front of the altar. Cameramen formed a hedge at the side of the shrine. The doors with the brass locks were open, revealing the sacred space inside. The altar held a veritable feast compared to the rice and adzuki beans of Yugen's previous visit. On the top tier was a large silvery-grey fish, a bunch of yellow bananas, rice wine, a large bottle of mineral water and two small jugs.

Directly in front of the altar, on a plain wooden board, the grain of the timber as long and even as raked sand, was a pair of abalone.

The only woman sitting with the VIPs was wearing the diver's dress but no wetsuit underneath. She had a white scarf wrapped around her head, its ends tucked under her chin. On

the front of it, which came down almost to the level of her beautifully made-up eyes, was the star and cross-hatching. She was even younger than the sea women at Oceanworld, perhaps still at high school. She appeared to be dry. Had she been in the water at all? Surely this couldn't be diver of the year.

A couple of times she glanced nervously at the white-clad attendant beside her, and asked him a question. He had a strong steady face beneath grey hair, a demeanour of grace and gravitas.

The priest finished chanting then sat back in line with the VIPs. A second attendant handed out branches of sacred leaves. One by one the dignitaries came forward, bowed before the shrine and offered back the branches with their prayers.

When it was her turn, the girl placed her branch with the others, all trace of nervousness gone.

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By the time Yugen came back to the beach, the rain had eased and the sky had brightened. As the consumption of beer increased so did the noise levels. It was as if the warm air of human voices, the laughter and shouting, was keeping the rain from falling. Everything was loose and relaxed. People ate squid on sticks, fried pastries. Children in the water jumped up as the waves came to get them. Others ran around on the sand blowing whistles. Adults played with the small children,

teenage boys lifted teenage girls and threw them squealing into the water.

A diving woman called out to a little girl playing on the sand, trying to coax her into the water. The woman's costume clung to her body. A grain of water dropped from her chin.

She called again, her voice playful. The little girl looked up to the woman standing behind her who encouraged her to go. Off she went, trundling across the uneven sand. The sea woman threw a pebble into the shallow water and the little girl attempted to dive for it, ducking her head under, legs in the air, going through the motions of swimming. When she couldn't reach the pebble, the woman retrieved it and placed it in her hand. The little girl proudly held it up for the woman on the shore to see.

The festival was coming to a close. Yugen bought a beer before the food stall packed up. The can was icy cold, smooth and wet. He pulled the ring on the top and it opened with a satisfying fizz.

A few of the young people lingered in their horseplay, pushing each other into the water, but most of the visitors started making their way back to the harbour to catch the ferry.

By late afternoon, the beach had been cleaned and tidied, everything removed. Apart from the overlap of footprints, it was as if nothing had ever taken place here.

28

The return of Urashima Taro

Chicken had promised herself never to hope again but here she was, her heart large with it. 'See you there,' she called as Ry and the others headed back to the harbour. Chicken started making her way to the shack. They were all meeting up at the noodle shop later, including the boy from the aquarium. Hiro. They had stood on the beach together and eaten squid sticks, he grinning at her from under his spiky hair. It wasn't only Hiro who made Chicken's heart swell. There was Pearlie.

She had come to the festival. Not down on the beach with everyone else but sitting underneath the dragon tree. She had even waved.

the Sea Bed

When Chicken got to the shack she was feeling so buoyant that she decided not to bother negotiating the rickety old planks but leap straight over the stream. Instead of landing on the other side she slipped on the reedy bank and slid back into the water. She knocked her knee. Another bruise, another grey imperfection she would have to try and hide from Oceanworld. She didn't care. She retrieved her thong before it sailed out of reach.

The shack was neat and tidy, welcoming. All the patty pans had been swept up, the cups and saucers put away. There was even a tablecloth on the table. It wouldn't be like the other times when Chicken sat in the solitude and waited. This time Pearlie would appear. It had not been a general windscreen wiper wave, but a come-here one, her hand beckoning.

The kettle was warm. A good sign. In the centre of the table Chicken noticed a picture in an old wooden frame. She picked it up, a similar photo to one on the family tree. Chicken recognised the cheerful young faces of Cedar and Pearlie. How shiny and new they were. Each had an arm draped casually around the shoulder of the other. Scarves tied their hair back. Their breasts were bare. On the lower half of their bodies they wore a triangle of folded cloth with cord knotted to the corners of it to form a g-string.

A shadow passed over the photo.

'Is he here yet?'

It was Pearlie. Chicken hardly dared believe it. She turned around. There was her grandmother. Dressed in pyjamas. In

the daytime. They weren't the old flannel ones which had been the cause of dispute when she left the house but a pair of red silk ones. They looked brand-new, still had folds in them as if they'd come straight out of their packaging.

'Let's sit at the table and wait for him,' Pearlie suggested.

Pearlie had been hiding from Chicken for weeks and now she breezed in as if everything was normal. No apology, not even a proper greeting. Chicken wasn't even sure if Pearlie realised who she was. The hope in Chicken's heart started leaking out. Everything tidy, new tablecloth—this wasn't for Chicken. Pearlie was expecting someone else. The grandmothers? But she'd said 'him'.

'Grandmother . . .' Chicken began, trying to get her attention.

Pearlie's hands disappeared into her pyjama pockets and pulled out cherry tomatoes. 'It's surprising what you find in the garden if you dig around,' she commented, spilling them onto the table. 'He'll like these.'

Pearlie began the process of sitting, leaning her weight on the table and gradually easing herself down to the cushion. She sat there for a moment, recovering, then leaned forward and arranged the plump little red fruit, some still on the stem, around the photograph.

'Who?' asked Chicken, breaking away from the movement of her grandmother's hands.

'Urashima Taro.'

Chicken let the name settle on her.

'He has returned.'

Clearly Pearlie's mind was roaming free. It may not have wandered arbitrarily into the folk tale, but been triggered by a tourist, a festival guest.

Perhaps if Chicken entered the story she could lead Pearlie out of it. 'I'm sure he will be here soon. What about if I make a cup of tea for the three of us?'

Chicken found matches. They were damp but eventually one held the flame long enough for her to light the gas burner under the kettle. When she came back to the table, Pearlie had picked up the photo. 'He had the magic box with him,' she said.

'Yes,' said Chicken. 'He was taking it up to the house.' Chicken thought of adding, 'He's waiting for you there,' but the lie refused to come out of her mouth.

'No. He was standing at the end of the rock shelf, ready to drop it into the sea. It was the same spot, where we stood that day.' She smiled fondly at the photo. 'Me and my sister,' she said. 'Our costumes were blue and white spots. All the girls were wearing spots that year.'

Chicken could see steam coming out of the kettle but she didn't want to interrupt by getting up and turning it off. At least now Pearlie was back in her own life, even if it was the past.

'The photo was taken on festival day. One photographer came that first time, plus . . .' Pearlie noticed the kettle, heaved herself up and turned it off. 'They came from far away and

sought permission from the head grandfather to stay for a few weeks. They brought gifts. A portable wireless for the head grandfather, the blue and white spots for us.

'When we knew he had come to photograph us we dressed up in our Sunday best but he wanted us with clothes off, ready for work. The head grandfather offered him the most expert divers, but the photographer preferred the young pretty ones.' Pearlie made a sound as if sucking her teeth, emphasising the absurdity of it. 'He photographed us putting on our goggles, tying on the weight belts. We had to stop midway and be very still while he did it. When Cedar and I got sick of posing, other girls took our place.

'The most comical was underwater photography. The camera was in a big metal box with a clear window.' Pearlie paused, as if somewhere in her mind she was waiting for the next image to appear.

Chicken wished she could go into the photo, a portal back to the glory days, to the world when Pearlie was young.

'Everything had to be just right—flat sea, no clouds. The sun shining directly into the water. We had to do the same thing over and over, diving in the same way, in exactly the same position. Then, when we finally did it right, he would run out of breath and have to go up top!' Pearlie cackled, bending so far over that her nose almost touched the table.

'Breasts.' Pearlie spoke so abruptly Chicken wondered if she was cursing. 'That photographer took photos of all us divers—in the sea, on the rocks, on the boat, in front of our

houses, but you know what's in all of them? Breasts. Breasts, breasts, breasts. They stare back at you as if those nipples are eyes.' Pearlie started chortling again. 'Had he never seen breasts before? Sometimes I thought that camera was just an excuse to stare at them.' Pearlie paused. 'I'm ready for tea now.'

Chicken got up, put some leaves in the pot and poured in the water. She brought the teapot to the table. Two cups or three? Chicken decided on three. She served her grandmother then poured tea for herself. If Pearlie noticed that the third cup remained empty she did not say anything.

Pearlie turned the photograph towards Chicken. 'You can't see Urashima Taro, can you?' Chicken stared at the photo, thinking that there might be a trick, an optical illusion, something in the background perhaps. A cloud shaped like a face. 'But he was there that day. The photo blocks out everything around it.'

Outside the shack the light was changing. Some of it had entered the doorway, long golden strands of afternoon.

'He was the young assistant, standing behind the photographer. He used to pull funny faces, to make us laugh. The photographer didn't even know it was Urashima Taro's doing but he liked our smiles. "Yes, girls, that's it," he said.' Pearlie looked into the golden haze with such a beaming smile that Chicken turned to see whether anyone was there.

'He was Cedar's first love. I had a teenage crush on him too, but he loved only Cedar. We called him Urashima Taro so that we could talk about him without anyone knowing

who we meant.' Pearlie touched the photo, stroked her sister's face. 'He wanted to marry her but our father wouldn't permit it. He said Cedar had to marry an island boy, that Urashima Taro had no skills that would be useful here.'

Everything shifted for Chicken. Cedar had a first love. In the photo on the family tree her smile was for him, standing there just beyond the frame. How much more lay quietly sleeping in the vast reservoir that Pearlie had opened up?

Surely Pearlie had got the part about Great-grandfather wrong. The young husband who had made a cedar chest for his wife, lain with her in the moonlight, couldn't have become such a stern father.

'Norbu said that?'

Pearlie nodded slowly. Chicken saw the red silk pyjamas shining in the light, Pearlie's hair in short grey tufts around her face.

'They had waited so long for her to come along. Perhaps he feared losing her.' Pearlie sighed. 'Cedar is dead now and I've grown old.'

Chicken got up off her cushion, came around to the other side of the table and put her arms around her grandmother, tentatively at first, then closer and closer till she sank into the embrace, into Pearlie's broad shoulders, her salty skin. Pearlie smelled of the sea, of everything that lived in it.

Pearlie patted Chicken's back then took a deep breath, the expansion of her chest gently pushing Chicken away. 'He came back. About five years later. I saw him at the port. He had

travelled the world, gone to the pearl-diving places, learned to be a tender. He had saved enough money to buy a fishing boat. But Cedar was married. She had just given birth to the baby.'

'Mitsi.' Chicken spoke the name softly, aware of the great silence that surrounded it.

'Yes.' Pearlie picked up the unused cup, stared into its emptiness.

'Does anyone else know about Urashima Taro? Does Violet?'

Pearlie shook her head. 'Even Cedar didn't know that he came back. She was so taken up with the new baby it didn't seem right to tell her, and then . . . somehow, the right time never came.' Pearlie slowly put the cup down again, straightened the tablecloth around it.

Chicken watched a thread of spider's web detach itself from a rafter and drift into the mellow afternoon. How sad and beautiful the story was.

'What became of him?' she asked her grandmother.

Pearlie paused for a moment. 'I don't know. I can't even remember his real name. For us he was always Urashima Taro.'

Did Cedar's first love eventually marry and have a family, carry a photo of Cedar in a secret place of his heart? There was so much Chicken wanted to know. Did Pearlie have a secret love also? Did Violet?

Chicken sat there waiting for more but Pearlie had gone quiet. Chicken gazed at her grandmother, took in every small detail—the curve of her earlobes, the two tiny brushes of eyebrows, the mole on her cheek, dark creases of her neck, the veins in her hands resting placidly on the table. Chicken had the impression that Pearlie was tired now, as if bringing the story out had unravelled her. But Chicken stayed, reluctant to move. Should she give Pearlie a story in exchange, tell her she'd met a boy, that he had smooth brown skin with the sea baked into it, that when he stood next to her she tingled and melted both at the same time? It was all still too young, just beginning.

'You're a good girl, Chicken,' Pearlie said, taking her granddaughter's hand. 'Thank you for all the treats.' She slowly released Chicken's hand.

Was Pearlie dismissing her? Perhaps she still expected Urashima Taro to turn up. Why was Pearlie never here when Chicken visited?

Her grandmother's penetrating gaze went straight through Chicken, into the intensity of light beyond the doorway. 'You have to let me go,' Pearlie said quietly.

Go where? Chicken didn't want to hear Pearlie talk like this, as if she were fading away. 'This shack belongs to the past, it's not the place for a young girl like you. You should be out with your friends.' Pearlie picked up the photo once again. 'There were lots of turtles when Urashima Taro was

here. You never see them anymore.' Pearlie sounded as if she were talking into mist.

'More tea?' Chicken asked, to keep her here.

Pearlie stared into her empty teacup. 'They'll be gone by tomorrow, won't they?'

Chicken didn't know how to answer. Was she still talking about the turtles? Perhaps she should go and get Violet. 'Are you feeling all right, Grandmother?'

Pearlie scratched the back of her neck, rubbed her arm. 'Actually, I'm a bit stiff and salty. I would like to soak in the bath. They'll be gone by tomorrow, won't they? Those tourists?'

Chicken hardly dared breathe. Pearlie was talking about coming back to the house! She didn't want to rush her grandmother but she did want to keep her mind on this path. 'All gone. It'll be just us.'

'Mmm, a hot bath,' said Pearlie, relishing the thought of it.

'Do . . . do you want me to come and fetch you?' Chicken ventured. 'Take you up the hill?'

'No thank you. If I can't manage the hill by myself then it's time for me to stay here.' Pearlie sighed, her shoulders lifting then settling back into place. She lined up the cushions and lay her body down on them. 'I need to have a little rest. Bye bye.'

Pearlie *was* dismissing her, but she had given her hope. Chicken lightly kissed her grandmother's forehead. 'Tomorrow,' Chicken said, reminding her.

Sometimes you just have to trust and keep your heart open.

Chicken stopped when she got to the little makeshift bridge. Was Pearlie all right? Should she go back, watch over her? No, Pearlie was tired and wanted to be alone, that was all. The afternoon was eking out. Chicken had better get a move on. Just a little peek, that was all, to make sure Pearlie was OK.

Chicken was about to go back when she heard grunting. She stood still, all her senses alert. A wild animal? The sound came in regular waves. From the direction of the shack. Chicken smiled to herself. Relaxed. It was Pearlie snoring. She crossed the creek in a faultless bound and ran up to the gate.

Something down on the rock shelf caught her eye. A man. He was sitting very still, with legs crossed, a backpack beside him. Was this the man Pearlie had seen, Urashima Taro? Could it be remotely possible that Cedar's first love had returned? He'd have to be at least as old as Pearlie. Older. The man down there was young. Was he a relative, perhaps, should she go and ask? 'Excuse me, did you or your father or grandfather used to be in love with my grandmother's sister?' Ridiculous. The further Chicken moved away from the shack the crazier it all became.

She did not doubt that Pearlie's story was true. But that Urashima Taro had returned? Unlikely. The guy down there was just a straggler from the festival. Perhaps Pearlie had seen him throw something into the water. Chicken thought of

the Habana beer can the grandmothers had dredged up. She felt like going down there and telling him the sea was not a garbage tip—hadn't he seen the recycling bins on the beach for rubbish?

And what if he didn't throw anything? What if Pearlie had been mistaken? She would feel such an idiot.

She could go down there, walk past him, and dive in. If she did happen to see a beer can or something she'd fetch it up and say, 'Excuse me, I think you might have dropped this.'

Her diving gear had gone back with the boat.

No doubt the man would be gone by tomorrow, but if he had chucked something in the water Chicken could at least retrieve it, dispose of it more responsibly.

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Chicken sat on the bench watching the tide, waiting for the ferry that would take her to Boat Harbour and her friends. Apart from herself, the bench was empty. All the grandmothers were doing as Pearlie was—having a little rest. Few of them had come onto the main beach—their silent protest against the tourists—but they had dived from other little coves and inlets, had their own celebration.

When Chicken, Ry and Keri reached the age of grandmothers, would they be sitting on this bench, watching the tide? How would the world be then?

The ferry was approaching, Chicken could see the white line of its wake. What if she did marry Hiro, and he got a job in another place? Chicken did not know where her life would take her but she would always return to the island. Perhaps that was the point of the festival, to gather the sea women together, bring them home.

Even if you were only a part-time diver, as most of them now were, you had to keep the skills alive. Chicken kept thinking about what Pearlie had said. It wasn't that she wanted to dwell in the past, but take it with her into the future, pass the sea lore and knowledge on to her daughters and granddaughters, as Pearlie and Violet had done for Chicken. Otherwise it would all be forgotten and the sea women with it.

And the knowledge that Cedar passed on to Lilli? What had happened to that?

29

Nothing ventured

Lilli spent the day in the hotel room, shutting herself down. It wasn't just the man in the suit and the way he looked at her. It was how everyone would look. They didn't want a ghost at their festival. The best thing Lilli could do for the island was what she was doing already—stay away. She didn't have the right blood. The island was where she had grown up but it was not her home.

She was going home now, suitcase beside her, waiting for the train. The snack bar ice-cream was hard and icy, resisted intrusion. How had the lady managed to eat it with such a fragile little spoon? Lilli had thought of staying another day, going to see Chicken at Oceanworld, but Chicken wouldn't

understand why, if Lilli had come all this way, she couldn't take the final step.

Lilli's eyes sought out the island but it had disappeared into the indigo night. It was all right, she told herself, she had tried. Just hadn't worked out. Chicken wouldn't be disappointed because she hadn't known Lilli was coming.

When she got home Lilli would send a really big present, and a letter. *Sorry, I've only just returned from Everest.* No, Antarctica sounded better. Wherever. *Have only now received your letter. Did you get my postcard? Sorry to have missed the festival. Perhaps next year.*

Was she going to spend the rest of her life sending Chicken letters like that?

The ice-cream had melted into a pale green pond. Lilli hadn't eaten any of it. She moved the spoon backwards and forwards, an oar through water. For how long was she going to keep on pretending?

Chicken deserved better. Perhaps Lilli could invite Chicken to the city. Chicken wouldn't have to see how tiny Lilli's room was; they could stay at the backpackers' hostel. Visit temples and handicraft centres. The food hall. They could go wherever they liked, it didn't have to be only the city. Perhaps a trip somewhere. To another place. What would appeal to Chicken—the Mississippi? Gobi?

The Great Barrier Reef. Of course. It was perfect. Lilli had organised a honeymoon package for a couple just last week.

In the brochures there was beautiful coral, tropical fish. You could dive.

Dear Chicken, sorry I couldn't make it this time but would you like to come away with me? I'll look after everything.

She'd start making arrangements immediately she returned, send Chicken the brochures. She'd really do this trip, it wouldn't be just something she thought about.

There was still plenty of time before the train departed but Lilli wanted to get going. The planned trip gave her purpose.

On the way to the platforms she stopped at the newsstand, browsed the shelves and selected a travel magazine. *Summer Destinations*. Perhaps there might even be something in it about the Great Barrier Reef. Lilli took the magazine to the counter. Some girls were chatting to the shop assistant. 'And then he said, "This one's so shy I'm going to have to tickle it to bring it out of its shell".' A balloon of twittering laughter rose up from the group.

When the shop assistant saw that she had a proper customer, she straightened up, became more formal. The girls turned around.

One of them was Chicken.

Here she was, in the train station, so close that Lilli could reach out and touch her.

Now that it had happened, the surprise wasn't that their paths had crossed but that they hadn't crossed earlier. Somehow in Lilli's mind Chicken was forever on the island, but of course

she came and went. She had probably even walked past the hotel while Lilli was inside, perhaps even today.

'Lilli! You're here?' Chicken finally said.

'Yes.' Lilli was never so aware of being here. She felt as if she were at the very centre of here. For that long moment the two sisters gazed at each other. Everything else washed away and all Lilli could see was Chicken. She still had the same gangly arms and legs but her sister had grown from a child into a young woman wearing make-up and earrings. 'Look at you! All grown up.' Lilli had not been here, she could not rewind those years to see it happen step by step.

'You look nice,' Chicken managed to reply. It was what she said when Lilli left.

Of all the ways she had imagined it, longed for this reunion, how she was feeling now was the last thing Chicken had anticipated. She wanted to throw something at Lilli, shake her. Did she think she could just turn up like this, unannounced, and everything would be all right? She was too late for the festival; did she even remember it was today?

'Hi, I'm Ry, and this is Keri,' Chicken's friends introduced themselves.

Lilli nodded and gave them a smile.

She didn't even look like Lilli. She had become a city girl, city clothes, city shoes; her face was city pale, taut.

'You girls been out on the town?'

'The noodle shop,' said Keri.

'With Chicken's new boyfriend,' Ry revealed, nudging her friend.

'He's not my boyfriend,' said Chicken, in a huff. 'I hardly even know him.'

'Great shoes,' said Keri, admiring Lilli's footwear. 'And nail polish,' she added when she discovered Lilli's toes. 'What's that?' she leaned forward for a closer look. 'Amazing,' she exclaimed, 'they're fish!'

Lilli had forgotten about the nail decoration. 'It's the summer fashion,' she explained. 'Little stick-ons. Fish, flowers, birds.' She wished she'd brought some with her, to give as presents.

As if Lilli had granted them silent permission, Ry and Keri started admiring everything about her—the sheen of her lip gloss, cut of the jeans, the designer logo on her T-shirt. *Be cool. Get FCUK.*

They were treating her like a movie star, some kind of pop idol. She started to feel hemmed in, but at least they weren't turning away as if she were a ghost.

Chicken sensed Lilli's unease, recognised the way her mouth tightened, the look in her eyes. Ry and Keri were crowding her. Other people were starting to look, trying to see who was at the centre of the fuss. 'We'd better go,' Chicken said softly, moving towards her. 'It's the last ferry.'

'Oh. OK.' Lilli looked at the big clock above the turnstiles. She had to go too. The train to the city was due to depart in seven minutes. She found it difficult to move. She tightened

her grip on the suitcase, felt its weight, resistance. 'Do you want to go to the Great Barrier Reef?' she said suddenly.

'What, now?' Chicken laughed.

'When you have holidays. Let me know.'

'Sure,' said Chicken, not quite believing it. 'Let's talk about it later.'

'Yes. Later.' Lilli started to walk away.

What was she doing? That wasn't the way. Had she forgotten? Chicken started running after her. 'The ferry terminal's in that direction. We have to go along the concourse. Remember? It's only a ten-minute walk. I'll wheel your bag, or we can catch a taxi.' It all came tumbling out. She couldn't bear it if Lilli disappeared again.

Lilli stopped at the turnstile. Now she understood. Chicken didn't realise Lilli was on the verge of leaving, she thought Lilli was going home with her. To the island.

A couple stood behind Lilli, waiting for her to pass through.

'Chicken,' Ry and Keri called, 'we're going to miss the ferry.'

'C'mon, Lilli.' Chicken reached out for her sister's hand. It was how they were in the photo but now the other way around.

What would Chicken's friends think if Lilli turned her back and went down to the train? What excuse would Chicken have to give? What excuse did she have to give every time?

the Sea Bed

•

Lilli felt the soft thud of fenders coming into contact with the wharf. They had arrived. All the way across the night sea the girls asked questions, despite Chicken's hints that Lilli might be tired. She had come a long way. Ry and Keri wanted to know what the city was like. Where did you get those little nail stick-ons, what jeans were the most fashionable, light or dark blue? Lilli told them everything.

The ground felt wavy, as if she were still on the ferry. Lilli had expected a committee of mean grandmothers telling her to go back, that she was not welcome here. Instead she was carried up the hill on the warm air of the girls' youthful chatter.

They waved goodbye when they got to the house.

'Your friends are nice,' remarked Lilli.

'And they really like *you*,' Chicken said as she opened the door. 'I didn't know I had such a celebrity for a sister.'

Lilli couldn't help grinning. 'I do my best.'

They left their shoes in the vestibule and stepped up into the house proper. It smelled the same, the slight fermentation given off by the matting, other odours that were familiar but nameless, the air of Lilli's childhood.

'How's Aunt Pearlie?' Lilli asked.

'A bit strange, but OK. I think. She's coming back to the house tomorrow. So she says. Perhaps we could all go for a dive. Do you want to?'

Lilli wasn't ready for that, she hadn't been in the water for years.

'We'll see,' she said.

The foyer seemed larger, perhaps a wall had been removed. There was a black leather couch, a low table in front of it with a neat stack of magazines. A curved reception counter. A night-light on it revealed a display of pamphlets—*Welcome to Island House*—maps, other tourist information. At the end of the counter was an old-fashioned service bell, with a sign underneath—*If unattended please ring.*

'You want me to check you in?' asked Chicken when she saw Lilli gazing at the counter.

Lilli laughed. 'I haven't made a reservation.'

'Well, in that case,' said Chicken, 'you might have to share.'

'I might,' Lilli agreed.

They walked to the foot of the stairs. Lilli heard little ticks and sighs, the creaking of timber, the sounds of the house subtly rearranging itself.

'Can you manage the stairs in the dark? I don't want to wake Mum and Dad. Sleeping off the festival cheer,' Chicken whispered.

'I'm fine,' Lilli whispered back.

They made their way up.

'Chicken? Is that you?'

Chicken rolled her eyes. *She knows everything*, she mouthed to Lilli. 'Yes, Mum.'

'Are you with someone?' Violet asked sleepily.

Chicken paused for a minute, grinning. 'I'm with Lilli.'

There was silence on the other side of the door. Lilli could feel it bristling. She felt as if she'd tricked Chicken. She should have said something before they got to the house, warned her sister that perhaps not everyone would be pleased to see her.

The door opened and there stood Violet in her nightgown and dimples. 'Our Lilli?' she said, still sleepy, not fully comprehending. Our Lilli.

'Hello, Violet.'

'It's really you.'

'Yes.'

Lilli stood in the darkness, trying to decipher Violet's expression, waiting for a verdict.

She felt the warmth of Violet's hand on her arm. 'Do you want a cup of tea?' Lilli couldn't answer. Such a simple, everyday request, yet it brought tears to her eyes.

'She's tired, Mum,' said Chicken. 'We'll see you later.'

Chicken moved across the corridor to her own bedroom. 'And Mum? The tourists have gone—what about dinner in the dining room tomorrow?'

30

Farewell dear friend

Yugen had untied the white cord, unwrapped the black cloth. He sat in lengthening shadow on the rock shelf, gazing at the sea rippling towards him. Should he hurl the urn as far as he could, arc it into the sea like the baseball Soshin was so fond of, gently launch it like a little boat, or take the lid off and sprinkle the remains?

In the end he wrapped the urn up and put it away again. One more night.

He watched a flotilla of clouds cross the sky as slowly as the turning of the world. Small wispy edges broke off from the main body but continued in the same stream of high wind.

He sat there looking at the sky, thinking about Soshin, till the clouds were replaced with stars.

Yugen lay down, his body curved around the backpack, around the urn. The night air was balmy, brought the smell of the sea. He heard it gently lapping the edges of the rock shelf.

He drifted into sleep and dreaming, his mind blending images. A shimmer of red became the fire described in 'The Sound of Waves' story, but instead of being in the observation tower it was here on the rock shelf. The boy was Soshin, sitting by the fire roasting a fish for the girl. She shook sea water from her hair and presented the boy with a fresh abalone. They ate their offerings to each other hungrily, with gusto, like the old sea women in the sheds.

•

Yugen awoke to a sea tinged pink with morning. It was time.

He cradled the urn, whispered his goodbyes. He held it just under the surface of the water, loosening the lid so that the sea could seep in and gradually work the remains free.

Something was wedged in the neck of the urn. A piece of cloth, possibly put there to keep the lid secure. Yugen lifted it out, let it unfurl. It was not the sombre black the urn had been wrapped in but blue with white spots. Yugen had never seen such cloth at the monastery. Soshin must have brought it in with him, a personal belonging. His treasured possessions—a

baseball bat, a prayer bag, and now this. It seemed so fresh and bright.

Yugen fingered the cottony texture of the cloth. It did not need to go back in the urn, it had served its purpose there. He would keep it with him, a farewell gift from Soshin. An inheritance.

The monk placed the urn in the water, cradling it in his hand. Then he let it drift away.

31

Something gained

It was quiet and airy. Light. The bedding smelled different. Lavender. There was no traffic, no van doors slamming or voices wafting up from the street. Lilli could hear seagulls, and someone padding around the room. She opened her eyes.

'Morning,' said Chicken.

'Mmm,' replied Lilli.

Chicken came over and knelt down beside the bed. 'I have to go to work,' she said softly. 'Will . . . will you be here this afternoon when I get home?'

'Yes,' murmured Lilli.

'Promise?' asked Chicken.

'I promise,' replied Lilli. She held up her little finger, so did Chicken, both of them remembering the childhood ritual but shy of doing it now that they were grown up. They slowly put their hands down.

'Mum's working over in the pearl farm and Dad's fishing, so you'll have the place to yourself. If you want a cup of tea the kitchen is . . .'

'It's OK, Chicken, I know where everything is. And I'll be here when you get back. Promise.'

•

Lilli sat up in bed, gazing at the magnificence of the family tree. It started on a large sheet of paper but spilled far beyond. Green leaves were painted on the wall, ornate frames around each of the photos, some in the form of vines with red and blue flowers threaded through them, others were scalloped with shells.

Here was the whole of Lilli's family—the Great Ones, Cedar and Pearlie, their husbands, Violet and Nori, Violet and Nori beaming over new baby Chicken. How carefully her sister had worked to keep the connections between them all. As Lilli gazed, they gazed back, every one of them smiling. Some even had a hand raised, waving. There was no reprimand, no blame, just happy smiling faces.

The images started to blur, as if underwater. Tears were running freely down Lilli's cheeks. She found all of the photos

she'd sent Chicken. Beneath the composition of herself in front of the Sydney Harbour Bridge were miniature pouched animals. Surrounding the Statue of Liberty—toy guns. The Eiffel Tower had plastic croissants. She'd have to tell Chicken she'd never been to any of those places. Eventually.

On the branch where Lilli's mother should have been Chicken had drawn the sea princess, hair flowing over her shoulders, dressed in a golden gown shimmering with silvery fish scales. It was the way Lilli had always imagined Mitsi. She wondered when Chicken had given her a place on the tree, what she knew of the things that had happened before she was born.

Beside the drawing was a photo of Violet as a young girl. This pair of sisters. How hard it must have been for Violet, too, when Mitsi became a ghost. Her way of coping was to gloss over what she called 'unpleasantness', keep smiling and pretend it never happened. Perhaps now, after all this time, if Lilli asked carefully, Violet might be ready to talk; she and Lilli could share their memories.

Cedar and Pearlie, Mitsi and Violet. The only sisters missing from the tree were Lilli and Chicken. Lilli found the empty space surrounded by hearts. She took out the photo she'd carried back to the island, and placed it there. A perfect fit. The family tree was complete.

Lilli picked up the folded towel Chicken had thoughtfully placed at the foot of the bed, and went downstairs.

Against the bathroom wall were the shower nozzles, each with a basin and stool. In a corner the familiar tub, now with a cover over it, keeping the water hot.

Lilli turned on the shower, let the water slide over her hair, run down her body. The room did not gush with memories but let Lilli find them—Cedar washing Lilli's hair, her eyes squeezed tightly shut so that shampoo didn't get in; Lilli cupping water and trickling it over baby Chicken's head. Back bottoms and front bottoms; Chicken and Lilli flicking each other with towels. A frog they discovered on the windowsill, its pale chest puffing in and out. A cricket perched on the ceiling above the bath which fell in when the rising steam loosened its grip. Lilli turned off the shower, patted herself dry.

Back upstairs she packed the bold designer T-shirt away, and put on a plain green one. Lilli looked out the window. Hardly anyone about. A couple of workmen down at the port but that was all. Lilli remembered that it was always quiet like this the day after the festival, as if the island had exhausted itself.

The service bell rang. Lilli hadn't heard anyone come in. Should she go and see what they wanted? Would it be presumptuous? She waited till the bell faded into silence. Whoever it was would be gone now. She started down the stairs.

A man was standing at the counter, a monk. He seemed somehow familiar yet Lilli was sure they had never met. He looked at her with quiet loving-kindness, seeing everything, not just the one thing about Lilli that other men saw. In his

eyes was reflected the face she had before she was born, while she was still taking shape, before anything had ever happened to her. She walked slowly towards him.

He was not the preened pampered monks Lilli was used to in the city. Perhaps he was on some sort of pilgrimage. His hair was growing at odd angles, he was dishevelled, as if he'd been sleeping in the wild, under a bush. There were even a few twigs caught in the folds of his robes.

'Good morning. Do you have a vacancy?' He was holding a *Welcome to Island House* pamphlet in his hand.

Lilli and the monk were still metres away from each other yet she could feel his human warmth. It came to her like a wave gently rolling onto the shore.

'Just for one night. I need to freshen up.'

She imagined bathing him, soaping his long limbs, patting him dry.

'Yes.' It sounded as if it had not come from her but the house itself. It echoed from room to room, up to the rafters and back down again. *Yes.*

'That is, I don't know. I am a guest. If you'd like to wait, I'm sure someone will be along soon to help you,' she said in her travel agent voice. 'Perhaps I'll see you later.'

Lilli opened the door.

'I'm Yugen,' the monk called before she slipped away.

'Lilli.'

•

He had given her his name. And she had given hers. She had smiled as she left; Lilli smiled at him.

The fragrance of apples and the high clear tuning-fork pitch of the bell. Although at the end of his journey, he found his mind wandering back to the beginning, to the intimacy of the lift at the city emporium. It was the same woman. When he saw the way she walked he was sure of it. Lilli. Yugen watched her all the way down the hill.

He wished he hadn't said 'freshen up'. On its way out of his mouth he was already regretting it. It was too personal, drew attention to his body. Even asking if she had a vacancy now felt like overstepping the boundaries of politeness. Standing in the same room as her.

There she was again, crossing the port. She turned and looked back up to the house. The words were dissolved into air; regret served no purpose. He wished he was more adept at conversation. Wishing also served no purpose.

The monk wanted more than to freshen up. He needed to shave, soak in a bath, prepare himself for the monastery. He should leave now, before she returned. Pick up his backpack and go. It was still early. A ferry ride to Boat Harbour, train to the city, Blue House tonight then back to equanimity and choice-free routine.

Yugen knew that he would not go. 'See you later,' she'd said. He wanted to be here when she returned. He sat down on the black leather couch. It sighed like the bench at Oceanworld. Yugen felt the same tingling sense of anticipation

he'd experienced while waiting for the reappearance of the sea woman, except this time there was no glass separating them. He and Lilli had exchanged names. They shared the same element, her fragrance was still here with him.

Welcome to Island House. He opened the pamphlet to find a sumptuous seafood platter, a mountain of prawns, shellfish, crab pieces and squid arranged with architectural precision. Carefully placed around the perimeter were fresh abalone, facing upwards, revealing the folded complexity of their fleshy parts. Pieces of ferny greenery completed the display. Special orders taken. Minimum of two persons.

Himself and Lilli. When he had freshened up, Yugen would invite her to dine with him. A cool drink before dinner, free-flowing conversation. Witty, entertaining, with no cause for regrets. She would feel so much at ease with him that she would say, 'You seem familiar. Have we met before?' and he would reply sagely, 'Perhaps in another life.'

Yugen heard a scooter coming up the hill. He stood at the reception counter, but the scooter drove straight by.

He listened to the quiet breathing of the house. A family lived here. Perhaps they wouldn't mind if he helped himself to a drink of water. Yugen walked along the downstairs corridor till he found the kitchen. There was a rice cooker on the bench, plates and glasses neatly arranged on shelves. He cupped his hand under the tap and drank a few mouthfuls of water.

His foot came into contact with something under the sink. A basket. What drew Yugen's attention was not the basket itself

but the cloth covering it. He returned to the reception area, took the cloth from the urn out of his backpack. The one in the kitchen was faded but it was the same material—blue with white spots.

A coincidence, nothing more. He might never have seen the cloth in the urn, or come to this house. Yugen could have disposed of Soshin's remains back at the Married Rocks, returned straight away to the monastery. He had made the choices, it was his own decisions that had brought him all this way. Nevertheless, he couldn't shake off the feeling that somehow he had been guided here, that this house was part of Soshin's story. Yugen remembered the sea women's talisman, the star drawn with one line to find the way back. Had Yugen retraced Soshin's footsteps, brought him back?

Yugen held the blue-and-white-spotted cloth in his hands, contemplating the thousands of threads in the weave of it. Perhaps his story was part of its fabric too. He looked down the road for Lilli and saw an old lady dressed in shiny red pyjamas slowly making her way up the hill.

Yugen sat on the soft sighing couch, alert, hopeful, ready to begin.

32

A body of water

She had told him her name. It swam out of her mouth without hindrance, like fish in the flow of a current. At the bar she always gave a false one—Elvira or Miranda. But he was not like those men. He wasn't even wearing a suit! Dishevelled, untidy, in need of a good scrub, and she didn't mind. Lilli looked up towards the house. Yugen. She hoped he would be there when she returned.

Lilli traversed the port and walked along the road until she arrived at the inlet. She took off her shoes and stepped down, felt aeons of finely ground shells under her feet.

The sea came towards her, all of it at once, ripple upon ripple. It slid onto the sand, fizzing like champagne. It washed

over her toes, made its way around her feet, hollowing out the sand beneath her when it retreated. She picked up some of the gritty sand. Was this the same handful she'd put in her pocket? Or this one, or that? Surely there must be traces left. She dug further. How could she tell which grains she and the sea princess had touched?

The day was bright blue, feathered by gulls and wisps of clouds. Lilli could only recall the jump into night when she closed her eyes. How much more deeply embedded in her mind it was than here, the place where it happened. So many tides had ebbed and flowed over it since.

Lilli let her handful of sand trickle into the water and came back to the road, barefoot, carrying her shoes. The road rose up into the greenery, flattened, then became a downward slope to the beach. She walked along the shoreline, felt the sea air moving around her face, the salty freshness of the breeze.

The dragon tree looked paler, more weathered, its limbs wind-pitted. But its grip on the rocks was still firm. The dead tree was Cedar's marker, her point of reference.

Lilli climbed the pyramid of rock, sat on the peak, knees to her chest, feet poised. The reef was out there somewhere, in a straight line left of the dragon's claw. Cedar could tell when the boat was near it, could smell the seaweed. Reef, seaweed, fish, tides, currents. This was the language Cedar had taught her. The sea's distant humming, its bubbly shore chatter.

This was Lilli's blood. It held the memories of her mother and her grandmother. Lilli imagined them sea-changed,

travelling the world, waves reaching to the farthest shores and circling back again. Curving the bodies of dolphins, shooting up through the blowholes of whales, inundating coastlines, crashing against cliffs, changing colour—green, blue, grey. Black. Drifting westwards, eastwards, north and south, streaming into gulfs, going everywhere it was possible to go, then sleeping deep in the Marianas Trench.

Sleep your way down to the bottom, conserve your energy. Relax. Stay alert. Be respectful of the sea. Don't turn your back on her.

The beach was deserted. Lilli shed her clothes and eased herself down to the edge of the water. Then she plunged in, the tangy chill rushing to meet her, licking, nibbling, flooding her body.

Bubbles filled her ears with sea whisperings; she felt her hair lifted, free, waving like seaweed. She became an aquatic creature, shaped by the water. Her movements became long and graceful, it was impossible to hurry. Though her eyes were blurred with sea she saw a school of fish turning in unison at her approach, their tiny bodies like specks of silver. She released some air, watched the bubbles rise, streams of sunlight catching them. All around her were tiny particles of life.

Lilli's lungs were signalling. Time to go back. She burst through the surface into the air. Light, buoyant, washed.

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