**Interloper**

Jared Povanda

How to explain it, that night on the *Bennigan.* The sea, frothing and terrible. The night sky reversed: world of light, lightning struck, fanged danger churning dark and inscrutable. I held Darla’s hair back below deck. Her neck burned against my knuckles. She vomited as the waves broke, and I could hear her pearls rolling across the floorboards. Earlier, her necklace fell from her like a tern diving for fish. Quicksilver slipperiness, both of us on our hands and knees, grasping for beauty. The red clung to my cheek from her slap. My busted lip still stung. Darla sat up, and she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

“Awful,” she said, shoes on the other side of the sink. It was a dance to get them, to hook the straps around our fingers, and then haul them, and us, out of the tiny bathroom and into the cabin proper, the ocean roaring, rocking, tossing white-tipped.

“Are you okay?”

Darla nodded.

“Why don’t you sit down?” I stared at her, white dress blooming, and then down at my hands. Scratches on pale skin. I saw Sinclair behind every blink. How he disappeared over the ship’s deck.

“You hit me,” I said, but I didn’t know why I said it. I deserved it. I wasn’t asking for forgiveness.

“You pushed Max over the railing, Theo. You killed him.” Her eyes were green, mossy, out of place here. “You killed him.”

I did kill him. He needed to die. Beyond that I only had more questions. I felt faint when I looked away.

Later that night, I swore I heard Sinclair thud below the floorboards and the pearls.

I thought of prayer, my Catholic education, nuns rapping knuckles, and I thought of hell for killers. I thought of Darla holding my hand as fires burned me. Watching as the electric chair torched me. Or did they do something else now? Swallowing poison until it felt like falling, sliding down drunk, descending into a goat’s mouth. They used to torture people with goats. Saltwater on the feet, saltwater from the sea, and then the goat would lick until the foot turned raw. Until ticklish laughter turned into unbearable screaming. Darla somehow slept beside me, even as she harbored a killer, and her chest rose and fell, rose and fell, flowered nightgown breathing like perfume in the markets of Marrakech.

Sinclair forced us onto the ship. To buy the tickets, to pose as his relatives—he said we were cousins on my mother’s side—a gun pressed to my ribs. Darla almost screamed when she saw the manic look in his eyes. I felt akin to Humphrey Bogart. Dead men and dead waves, everything black and white.

“You’re moving too much, Theo. I can’t sleep.”

I met Darla’s gaze, that wash of green, wash of lightning through the cabin. The ship rocked.

Sinclair’s gun was in my mouth.

“Are you seasick again?” I touched her face. She still let me touch her face.

“No. Not now.”

Another pearl rolled somewhere beneath us. I could hear the rush of its body as it came closer, closer, and then its fading echo as it traveled on to some dark corner. The words were out before I could stop them: “Why did you call him Max?”

“What?”

Gut plunging with the ship, I repeated myself: “Why did you call him Max? Earlier. You said I pushed *Max* over the railing. Not Sinclair.”

“That’s his name, Theo.” She didn’t pause. Rain brutalized the hull.

“But why are you so familiar with him?” My voice hardened. “We don’t know anything, Darla. He was a killer. A robber. He held us at gunpoint. Forced us, for some reason—"

“We’ll never know,” she said, cupped my cheek, and I wanted desperately to sink into the simplicity of it.

I sighed, took her hands between mine, pressed them between mine, and I knew we were in love once but couldn’t quite remember its shape.

“Why are you—” Thunder boomed. Obscured the rest of my accusation. I blinked away Sinclair falling, arms windmilling, darkness a throat. Did stories mean anything without tidy endings? Did God ever peer down and think about how He was going to smooth all our puny tangles?

“What’s done is done,” Darla said. She didn’t extricate her hands. She was warm. “We’re going to get off this ship and back to our lives.”

I didn’t believe her. I couldn’t figure out what to do with the fact that I didn’t believe her. I tried again. I had to try again. “What if they ask questions? Everyone will know we came on together. They’ll find evidence in his room. His gun. We’ll be accessories, I’ll—”

She silenced me with a kiss.

I remembered, then, how pearls were made: with an interloper, a tiny parasite, a microscopic disturbance, held bright inside the body of a mollusk. A heart that is not a heart lost in the living, writhing darkness below the sea.