

# WARNING'S WANE

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Jaclyn Little

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*Sweet coupled airs we sing.  
No lonely seafarer  
Holds clear of entering  
Our green mirror.*

—BOOK XII, THE ODYSSEY, HOMER

*Yes, there were times when I forgot not only who I was, but that I was,  
forgot to be.*

—MOLLOY, SAMUEL BECKETT



The last time that I touched my wife was the night we arrived at Praxia Island.

The remnants of a southern hurricane had washed over the upper east coast, and we were trapped on the only ferry that made a weekly trek from Maine to the island. The captain refused to dock, insisting the boat would be pummeled into the rocky terrain. Colleen was relieved; she had latched onto my jacket as soon as she caught sight of the waves crashing into the cliffs, the sea foam a ghostly white against the black boulders.

I, on the other hand, was extremely annoyed. The continuous sway triggered a disquieting nausea, and if the storm was going to take the ferry, I'd prefer it to do so close enough to the island that I may have a chance to pull myself – and of course Colleen – to safety. Out here, a mile away from shore, I would have no chance against the tide's pull.

At the top of the cliff, a lighthouse sent spears of gold into the night. From the window, I watched as it wound itself again and again, spiraling through the darkness. Colleen had rested her head on my shoulder, undoubtedly fast asleep – she'd always been able to slumber in the most unfavorable of moments. Envious, I wished that I could join her, there, in the space between.

While I waited for the storm to pass, I considered my present situation. I'd

known that Colleen was perturbed by the way her mother had been acting since she'd relocated to a nursing home there. I'd attributed the worry to a failure of control – her mother had transferred without our consent, without even a discussion. We'd received notice first from our insurance, and then, upon visiting the home the three of us had agreed would be where she lived out the remainder of her days, her doctor had confirmed that yes, she requested the move, and no, there was nothing to be done.

He was unfamiliar with Praxia – in fact, everyone was. Even Google. There were no government websites, no press or news clippings, no coordinates...and so we had been forced to wait for Denise, Colleen's mother, to contact us directly.

When the first letter appeared a few weeks later, the content arrived in vague and disoriented riddles, references to pasts of which Colleen had no recollection. They maintained correspondence, but it became increasingly difficult for Colleen to respond, her mother's sentences more fractured with each delivery. Every time Colleen asked to visit, Denise denied her; and so, as the weeks began to bleed into months, I'd assumed my wife's agitation was a direct result of rejection, though I personally didn't care that we couldn't see her – in fact, for me, it was a relief.

I turned a deaf ear to Colleen's grievances, so much so that I had no idea the severity of the matter, the dire state into which her mother was diminishing, until she rushed into my office in a state of hysterics, crying that Denise had fallen into a coma.

When she suggested that we stay on the island, just long enough to see her mother from this world, I obliged, but only as a loyal – albeit obligated – husband, and not, in any manner, as a concerned son-in-law. I placed my professorship on hold and forced myself to restrain from any notion of complaint, often gritting my teeth or clenching my jaw in acts of desperate self-inflicted silence.

Now, with Colleen asleep on my shoulder and the waves increasingly turbu-

lent, I began to wonder whether I had made a wise decision. For me, mortality was a necessary part of life; I had never understood those who feared it, or – worse – paused their own lives to help ease the passing of another's. It all seemed like nonsense, a waste of restricted time. And yet here I was, sacrificing my existence to support a person for whom I had never really cared; without mention that Denise was, in fact, comatose, and therefore our presence would go wholly unnoted.

I snapped forward from my thoughts to find an older man suddenly across from us. I hadn't noticed him during the voyage – but then, I had spent the majority of it in a half-aware daze, mulling over distant memories. The man's face was patched in wrinkles and his eyes were dark and hard. He stared fixedly and rudely, his gaze unwavering even when I attempted to stare just as rudely back. When he refused to look away, I disregarded him; I was accustomed to stares wherever we went. Colleen was a stunning and curious woman, and I, an underwhelming and mediocre man. The uninvited judgment of our relationship was a frequent occurrence.

It was her eyes that typically stirred the attention; they were an unusual gray – not the ash shade that one occasionally sees, but a light gray, a periwinkle that pierced through any who met it. The intensity changed with her moods, and at times it felt as though one looked into the very expanse of the universe, like the solar system had been absorbed into her iris and now orbited her pupil. I'd always viewed her as a creature not quite of the human genome, possibly not even of Earth. My mother had gasped at those eyes, constantly reminding me of the rare bird that I had somehow managed to tame. My friends and colleagues had been in awe of her, and it took years for my brother to stop joking about stealing her from me.

Because I, in truth, was nothing worth noting. Brown hair, brown eyes, and a round face. A casual sense of style based entirely on comfort and an occasional beard – a result of laziness, not preference. When I would ask Colleen how I had been so lucky, she would return the question playfully, as if the answer would

forever remain known to her and her alone.

Three hours passed, and the storm finally calmed. The rain still beat upon the pane, but the lightning had ceased and the rocking lulled to a gentle sway. The staring man rose carefully as the boat lurched forward. He kept his eyes on mine and stuck a gnarled index finger towards me. I glanced at it and felt a new type of nausea well within; it looked as if the flesh had been chewed to the bone, only recently beginning to grow back. The fingernail had been completely consumed. The sound of his voice was not a voice at all but more of a snarl, as if rarely used; it came in menacing, broken growls.

“You be warned, there ain’t none o’ that on Praxia Island! None o’ it!”

“Excuse me?” I asked it as politely as I could.

“That touchin’!” His gnawed finger pointed at Colleen; he was wildly upset.

The weight of my wife’s head suddenly seemed much heavier on my shoulder. “You’re...not allowed to touch?”

“It’s the law! You been warned!”

With a final bark, he stormed out of the room and into the rain, taking stance at the ferry’s bow, watching as the captain navigated the boat towards the solitary dock.

I watched him for a moment, still digesting his warning, then gently shook Colleen. She sat up in a daze; a film of drool had gathered around the corner of her mouth, and a single strand of hair was stuck to it, a black snake against her pale skin.

“What happened?” She squinted through the window and half-mindfully wiped the drool with a sleeve. “Did the storm stop?”

“The worst of it.” I kissed Colleen’s forehead. It was a gesture I had performed infinite times, an affection that was habit, like breathing – just something I did. But there, as the ferry neared the island and the old man stared from the bow, the kiss was like a shock; it sparked an electric current that burned in the pit of my intestines, then coiled through my chest and into my skull. My vision blurred, and a piercing drone rang in my ears. I cried out, pressing my palms to



my head.

Next to me, Colleen shouted, but her voice was distant, and as I attempted to look in her direction, a black cloud rolled in, enveloping me in its mass. The tension in my brain lightened, my muscles weakened, my body fell backwards, and then the ringing stopped, and I folded fully into the darkness.

∞

I am standing in the lighthouse, at the top, behind the rail. The sky is emerald. The sun set long ago but something glows in the distance, at the horizon, a faint yellow that flickers, a cyclone of fire. The ocean is calm, the waves slumber, and the moon peeks from behind a green cloud, only a wink, a fraction of a moment.

I see you swimming beneath me, under me. Your body is white, an ivory specter, it hovers above the black void. I watch you for many minutes, many moons and many lives. I am stunned by your beauty, and at first I want nothing more than to leap down and be with you, there, in the dark waters, in the quiet, away from the earth.

But time passes, and the moon becomes many, and the many rotate and fall and rise and swing, and the cyclone burns at a steady coil, and suddenly I am filled with terror – a dread that cracks through me like a shot in the air, sudden, without notice. The sky turns blue, a deep shade, an admonition, and the ocean begins to wake, and you turn your face to me, I can see your expression, even up above, it is playful and perplexed. You wave to me, you beckon to me, you shout to me, but your voice is an echo, it is lost in the labyrinth.

I begin to climb the rail. On the top prong I teeter, my arms spread wide, and I am ready to fly, to sail to the cyclone, to the fire. *There* is where I belong. *There* is where I must go.

And I jump. Without fear. I leap. I know that I will fly. And I do. I do fly. I soar for minutes, for eons, my body weightless, free, the air scooping me from beneath and carrying me to the cyclone, to my home.

But then a shadow passes me – it is fast and it is angry, it wants to harm me, it wants to destroy me, and I am immediately afraid. It circles. It veers. It comes back for me. It collides with my right arm.

My bones shatter.

Crystals of collagen shimmer down to the ocean.

Down to you.

They fall upon your face.

The full weight of my mass returns and bears right, and I begin to spiral, at first horizontally, then vertically, down

down

down

towards the abyss.

I see your face. It glimmers in my bones. You are smiling.

I crash into the water. My skeleton splinters. I fracture in half. The water spills over and under and through me. I am paralyzed. I panic. I can see the moon, the moons, and the navy sky, and the cyclone far in the distance – it reaches beneath the water, towards the ocean bed...but in this world I am aware – the bed does not exist. The water does not have an end. My body sinks down, an anchor, flesh of lead, and I know that I will sink forever. I return my gaze to the moon, watch as the clouds whip past it. I let myself fall. I no longer struggle.

And then you appear.

You swim down, to me, your arms stretched forward. Your black hair orbits your head like hovering snakes and the collagen of my bones illuminates your face in ripples of pearls.

You are still smiling, but your lips are terse, and your eyes are black orbs. Colorless. Vacant.

And I realize this is not you.

This is someone else.

This is *something* else.

And if it touches me, something terrible will happen.

I cry out – cry for help – cry for rescue – from you – from the ocean – from the moon – from anyone.

But water fills my lungs. And I am helpless. And I watch as it reaches me, witness in frozen horror as cold and rubbery hands grab my arms, as talons – daggers of the bird – sink into my flesh.

I scream – an empty scream, a silent shout – and my body turns to fire.

I burn, my flesh as embers.

I disintegrate into the void.

∞

I sat forward with a gasp, disoriented, the terror from my nightmare leaking into reality. I slid backwards, intuitively, away from the shadow kneeling beside me, and frantically rubbed my hands over my arms, the sensation of dissolve prickling against my skin, lingering. But they were there, my arms; they were solid, flesh and bone and in tact.

When I gathered my bearings – when I realized it was only a dream and I was alive and well and within the safety of the ferry's cabin – I looked before me to find Colleen squatting on the ground, cup in hand, her eyes light and chaotic.

“Paul!” She cried, smiling. “Oh, thank God.” I relaxed, holding my head, still shaking my dream from consciousness. “Drink water,” she said, placing the cup next to me, and I drank, and the water filtered through me in a different way, in a healthy way, waking each molecule and calling my basic motor skills into function.

“Are you all right?” Colleen moved her hand to place it on mine, and I instinctively jerked it away. Surprised by my reaction, I rubbed my head, pretending my slight had not been intentional.

“What happened?”

“Well, you fainted...” she said, then, lowering her voice, “that odd man told

me to throw water on you, so I did,” I looked down at my shirt, realizing I was drenched, “and then he gave a weird lecture about not touching. Said it was against the law, that we’ll disappear if we do...” I sank heavily at this, remembering the kiss that had triggered the darkness and coinciding dream. She watched me closely, then shrugged, standing to her feet. “Can’t expect them to be all that normal, living way out here, right?”

I smiled and pulled myself upwards, pretending not to see the hand that reached towards me. “Let’s get off this damn boat.”

She nodded, oblivious to or ignoring my distance, and moved towards the front of the ferry, gracefully balancing herself against its sway. I looked for the man, scanning the room and finding him outside again, near the ferry’s bow.

He was turned, looking directly at me; his face was puckered into a scowl, and his eyes – his eyes – they were the eyes of my dream, black orbs without a pit, and they seemed to smile at me knowingly, as if registering that I had recognized them. His gaze moved to my arm, to where the talons had punctured me, and with the sudden attention called upon it, I realized that I had not stopped rubbing the flesh since I’d come to. I stopped, embarrassed and – in spite of myself – afraid. He smiled at me fully then, a vicious leer that quivered across thin lips.

I looked away quickly, a swell of paranoia droning in the back of my mind.