

Without Country

Two men wait in the shallows of a new country, unable to cross the last yards to shore.

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The rigger coiled the line of wet rope around his hand, reeling in the sea crate they were using as a makeshift raft. 'Look up,' he said, pushing down on one edge of the crate, seesawing the man lying on top.

'Where are we?'

'Look up.'

The man, a journalist, sank lower into the boards of the raft, tightening his grip on the stupor he had resigned himself to. 'Why don't you just tell me?'

Ahead, across the last stretch of marbled ocean, a wall of cliff signalled their destination. Beneath it stretched a long line of beach sand, pale in the morning light. 'I can see the beach,' the rigger said.

The journalist turned over, revealing his mask of sunburn. 'How far is it now?'

The rigger counted back from the shore in sets of waves. From the cliff top a litter of grey angles shot into the sky: seabirds scattering across the noisy water like loose change. A fragment of the flock landed in the nearby swell.

'Are they birds?' asked the journalist, edging to his elbows.

'Yes.' The rigger stared into the thin bead of the nearest bird's eye. 'Seagulls.'

'A good sign.' The journalist reached over his head and separated his shirt from his poached skin. He lay back down and, moments later, sat up. 'Is it empty,' he asked quietly, 'the beach?'

The rigger looked along the coast. A single bone-white tree stuck out against the dry brush marking the escarpment, its featureless limbs needling upwards like a hand signalling stop or hello – he couldn't tell which. An unremarkable coastline, he thought. Dry, aching sand interrupted by confusions of limestone rock and flotsam. 'It looks empty,' he said, eyes fixed on the leafless tree. The tug of the rope brought him back into the water. 'We're close now,' he said, easing two fingers between the rope and his ringbarked flesh. 'We don't need the crate.'

'Just a bit further,' said the other, as he touched the pulpy mess of his eyes.

'Anyway, I'm not sure I would know which direction to swim in.'

The rigger glanced again at the man's face. 'It's not so bad,' he said. He could

smell the ripening stink of diesel on their skin. 'Your eyes, I mean.'

'Are you a doctor?'

'No.' The rigger looked at his shrivelled hands.

A wave passed through looking for the shore, the crate lazy on its back. The birds moved off towards the tip of the beach, where lines of surf gathered to pound the scrap yard of jagged reef. In the opposite direction, the coast softened into emerald shallows and immature belts of reef and weed. The sands of a new country moving between the rigger's toes. He dug in his heels, gathered up the slack, and headed towards the weed.

The rigger pulled the raft between the mats of weed that pricked the surface of the water. 'Do you think they'll look for us?' asked the rigger.

'Not for a while,' said the journalist as he retrieved his shirt from the water and covered his face, letting the wet fabric seal around his mouth like substitute skin. 'There'll be plenty of others to deal with. We need to move off the coast, though. They'll watch the beach.'

Each drag of the ocean current rearranged the mossy continents around them. The rigger waited for the weed to shift its weight away from his legs. 'Are you worried?' he asked.

'Worried about what?'

'About the boat.'

'What about it?'

'The rest of them. What'll happen to them.'

'Don't take on other people's pain. You can't fix it.'

'I guess so,' said the rigger, starting to move forward again. He came up against a perimeter of reef running parallel with the shore and pulled the crate along it, trailing his hand until he found the grip to lift himself clear. But once he was up out of the weed, the weight on his feet forced a barb of rock through his skin and he dropped back down, the salt tingling the wound. Through the glassy water the slit was as pure and neat as a petal. His blood pillowed out in a fine

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mist. 'There's a reef here,' he said. 'It goes between us and the shore.'

The journalist sat up, not aware that he faced the opposite direction. 'Did you try to climb it?'

'Yes.' He gazed down the shelf of reef to where it tapered off into a clear run of water, the shore maddeningly close. 'We can go around.'

'Good.' The journalist leaned over the edge of the raft and passed his hand through the water, cupping it. 'You said we were close, though?' He spooned the seawater over his face.

'Very. I can see where the wet sand dries.'

'You can? That's good.'

As the rigger walked them alongside the reef, he called out the details to the other man: the ivory sand netted with charcoaled weed; driftwood piled near the point – more than enough for a small fire. There were glimmering pools where the tide had come and gone and left part of itself behind. And back against the cliff face, a dark fissure where they might seek shelter.

'And there,' said the rigger pointing, 'part of the cliff has come away and there is a slope. It is steep, sure, but I should be able to climb it.' As he talked, the reef beside them broke away and now only a short stretch of shallow water led up to the dry sand. 'I'll start a fire,' he started to say, before another detail drew his gaze. Near the point, some distance from the shattered crest of the scarp, a sharp finger of shadow that he had somehow missed. Clear now against the jet blue sky, a black mark rearranged itself in minute detail. The triangle of an arm shading an unseen face, looking out across the ocean.

The rigger surfaced behind the crate.

'What is it?' the journalist cried. 'Are we there?' The crate took a sharp turn in an unfamiliar direction.

'Quiet!' said the rigger, doubling his grip on the rope. 'There's someone there.'

'There is? Are you sure?'

'Yes,' said the rigger and put his hand on the other's shoulder, forcing him back

down. He moved to the edge of the crate and peered beyond at the shore. The silhouette had gone from the crest. Relief broke over him. And then he caught a flicker of movement closer to the shore: the sharp lines of a figure coming towards the water.

'Have they seen us?'

'Yes.'

'How far are we?'

'Too close.' The rigger dragged the crate up the face of an oncoming wave, forcing the journalist to grab hold to stay on.

'What are you doing?'

The rigger blew out his cheeks as he urged the crate over the lip. 'We have to go,' he said, and a moment later they fell into the dead air behind the wave, landing heavily.

'Stop!' the other man shouted. 'We can't go back.' The next wave broke over them, the journalist stunned by the unexpected drenching. 'Where are they now?'

'Him,' the rigger corrected, glancing over his shoulder. 'He's waiting.'

'Waiting? Just one?'

'Yes.'

'Can you see what he's wearing?'

'A hat.'

'What kind?'

'Square. With a wide brim.'

'Does he have boots?'

'Yes.'

'Trousers?'

The rigger squinted against the nickel flashes jumping off the waves. 'Yes.'

'A uniform, then.' The water seemed to close shut around them. 'How could

they have found us so fast?' Another wave, larger than the rest, rolled forward, its foamy lip gleaming under the sun. 'What is he doing?'

'He's just standing there,' said the rigger, as he dug out a clump of weed and flung it away.

'He hasn't come into the water?'

'No.'

'He won't come in the water. He doesn't have to.'

The ocean threw another wave at them. 'What should we do?' asked the rigger.

'Nothing.'

'Is that possible?'

'We're safe as long as we don't go to shore,' said the journalist slowly.

'How do we know?'

'When it is dark...'

The rigger glanced up at the sun and shivered. 'But it's only just finished morning.'

'When it is dark,' the other continued. 'We have a chance.'

As the day edged forward, a steady wind built beyond the point and eased itself across the calm bay where the two men waited. The rigger removed his shirt and covered his face as the sun stood over them. 'Do you think...' he started, before the other man cut him off.

'Maybe.' The journalist touched his face. 'There were a lot of us. Who knows. Somebody would have come. Eventually.'

'There was a woman. I saw her go down into the galley. Did you see her?'

'No.'

'I saw her go down there. Just before it happened. I didn't see her come up.'

'Don't,' said the journalist, putting away his fingers. He sat up. 'Tell me what our friend is doing now.'

The figure on the shore had sat down and placed his boots beside him in the sand. 'He's getting comfortable,' the rigger said as the figure uncapped what looked like a bottle and poured a small amount of clear liquid onto the sand, gesturing towards them. 'It's cruel,' he said. 'To wait like that. I wish he would just come in and be done with it.'

'Do you?'

'I don't know...' The rigger felt the weight of the sun bearing down on his poached skin. Above on the cliff, the limbless tree flared white in the noon sunshine. 'Do you think there will be others?' he asked.

The journalist took the shirt off his face to answer. 'Can you see a radio?'

'No.'

'Then no. If there was a radio, he wouldn't stay. He would just push a button and...' He snapped his fingers.

'Maybe.' The rigger crossed his arms on the side of the crate and lay his head down. 'I don't think I will ever sleep again,' he said, wiping his eyes.

'It will pass.'

The rigger looked across at the other man's face. 'Maybe.'

The seagulls loosed themselves from the panicked surf and rallied above the two men, motionless on the strengthening wind. 'We need to move,' the journalist called out over the jumpy sea.

The rigger looked ahead down endless reflections of the beach. The figure was still on shore, his face lost in the deep shadow cut by his hat. 'Where to? Where do we go now?'

'Further down the coast. As far as you can go. Maybe he will tire and give up.'

But as the rigger dragged them along the bleary shoreline, the figure effortlessly matched their pace. There's only one of him, the rigger thought as he glanced behind him. The journalist rocked back and forth with the swell, his head tilted like a bird listening for the next point of attack. The burden of the crate tugged at the rigger's mind and he picked absently at the knot securing the rope to his

wrist. 'I'm sick of being a dog,' he said, and bit down on the knot, trying to pry it loose. 'The water is shallow. I can guide you.'

'Yes, of course,' said the other, 'if only my leg...'

'Your leg?'

'I was afraid to mention it earlier. I think it's broken.'

The rigger waded to the side of the crate and, as if sensing the need for inspection, the journalist carefully rolled up his trouser leg. A mast of bone struck through the skin. 'Is it bad?' he asked, turning his face away. 'I thought you would leave if you knew.'

The rigger stared down at the gleaming bone in disbelief. 'It's not good,' he said softly.

'I could try standing.'

'No. You can't walk,' he said, and shuffled the man's trouser leg back down. On the shoreline the figure had paused to watch the exchange. 'We should keep going,' he said. On the beach the figure kicked the dry sand from the soles of his boots and walked on.

'**He's moving ahead** of us,' shouted the rigger, his voice quavering in the deep afternoon chill.

'He's impatient. He'll tire soon, I'm sure.'

The word released a wave of exhaustion over the rigger. 'He will?' With each new set of movements the rigger witnessed another line of skin stripped from around his wrist. Further up the beach the figure stopped and was peering out at the water ahead of them. Now he stops, the rigger thought. The figure looked at the surf and back at the men, then took off his hat and waved.

'I think he's signalling us.'

'A trick,' the journalist said angrily. 'I told you. He's reached his limit. Not long now and he'll go off and get help and then...' He put out his hand and felt for the other man's shoulder to squeeze it. But the space between them was too great and instead he groped a passing wave. 'We'll have our chance,' he finished.

A thin voice bounced towards them from the shore. 'He's shouting now,' said the rigger, trying to make out the stray vowels.

'Good,' the journalist replied, 'let him shout all he wants.'

As the men walked forward the figure waved with more urgency. 'He really looks bothered about something,' said the rigger, nervously coiling the rope around his hand. He looked about him in the water. 'I wish we could hear what he's on about.'

'It's a trick. He wants us to go closer.' The journalist tugged lightly on the rope, hoping to snap the rigger out of the lure.

'He's pointing at the water now,' said the rigger.

'Is he?' They both peered out ahead of them.

'Maybe we should stop for a while.'

'And let him rest? No, I don't think so.' The journalist edged forward. 'Can you see anything?'

The rigger stood on his toes, but the way ahead was locked beneath the sea. 'It all looks the same now.'

'Nothing, then?'

'Nothing.' The rigger stepped forward and, save for a tightening of the ocean current, there was no change in the water. He reeled in more slack on the rope, bringing the crate close beside him in case he needed to board it quickly. A few steps on and the seabed dropped sharply, the water edging up above his shoulders. He loosed himself from the ocean floor and swam on.

'What's happening?' the journalist called out. The current doubled its pull. More shouts ricocheted off the waves.

'It's okay. The water is just deep here,' said the rigger as he fumbled through the frenzied swell, surprised at the weariness of his limbs. 'I'll have to swim us across.' He looked towards the shore where the figure had suddenly shrunk. 'I think we are drifting,' he shouted over the din of the surf. His wrist called out sharply as the journalist grabbed hold of the rope and tried to reel him in.

'Are you there?' shouted the journalist into the space between them.

'Yes,' he called back. The shore thinned out as they drifted further away. 'The current,' he gasped, struggling to stay above the chop, 'it's so strong.' He rolled onto his back and used his legs to kick them back in the direction of the beach. But the power in his limbs quickly gave out, his muscles cramping. He decided to rest for a moment and sank under water. When he kicked back towards the surface he came up against the underside of the crate, the journalist's shadow sprawled atop. The rope became tangled on a snag in one of the boards and the rigger tried again to loosen the knot, his numb fingers refusing to follow instructions.

'I can't see you,' the journalist shouted above. The air in the rigger's lungs ran out. A whine filled his ears as he fought back the impulse to breathe. 'I can't see you!' screamed the journalist again, his voice as dim and pointless as the choke of a dying engine.

The figure on the beach waded into the knee-deep water and called to the body lying across the raft. There was no movement. He went in further and dragged the crate back to the shore, up to where the sand was dry, and turned the body over and stood back. There was breath, light and ragged. 'Water,' the journalist said. But it was in a language the figure couldn't understand. 'The other one,' he said, 'my friend.' He reached out and grabbed a clump of dry sand, rubbing it between his fingers. His hand touched the firm bind of the rope that was fixed to the boards still and he reeled it in, the end of it frayed and loose.