

RIMA

He wants something. I see it. The way he looks at me. The way he looked at all of us. From his boat. Circling us every day. Coming close. Leaning. As if to reach out. As if he would step onto the rocks and join us.

He intrigued me. He made me wonder. About me.

Many times I swam to him. Looked into his face.

Their eyes are so unshielded. So open and exposed. They cannot hide their thoughts the way we can. The light shines into them. Like these windows around me. And makes every corner bright. They do not have dark places I think. His kind. Maybe they are unable... to face them.

Now he sits there. With me. All day. He speaks. Some I understand. Some I don't. He is a lover of my kind. He says. He has spent his life learning about us. He knows us better than anyone else. He says.

How *could* he? In his boat. On the surface. At a distance. He knows what we *do* perhaps.

What he can see. He does not know what we *are*.

Sometimes he looks at me the way the bulls look at us. Us young ones. Who are newly ready. But I think he's not big enough. Not strong enough. To interest me. Besides, this body of mine... I'm not certain what to do with it. It delights me. The way it looks, the way it feels. But it is *not* me.

I think I am ready to return to the water. It's too warm here. Too dry. Moving about requires so much work. I must depend on him to hunt for me. I must remain in this place. Day after day.

(with mounting anxiety?)

I've heard of seals caught in fishing nets. Trapped. Caged. Brought on board. This is how I feel. Now.

Sometimes I think I must attack him. Fight back. Use my teeth. Tear at him until he lets me go.

(runs her finger over her teeth)

But they are so blunt. So useless. What could they do to him?

I wonder when he will give back to me what is mine. I wonder what he will ask in return.

JILLIAN

It was a road-side ice cream stand, not far from home, with a walk-up window and a big umbrella. Some cars had pulled over. Other people had walked or ridden their bikes, like us. Lily and I sat in the grass under a tree, eating our vanilla cones. One scoop each. That's all we could afford.

Then it was time to go. I wonder if we'd sat there another five minutes... Two minutes... Watching the people. Enjoying the shade. I wonder if I might have saved her.

The ride home is where it gets murky. Where I lose details. I know it started well. The breeze on our faces again. The tires murmuring along the pavement. Lily. Laughing. I looked back at her. I remember that so clearly. Her mouth open. Drinking the wind.

Then. The ditch. I must have lost consciousness. Because suddenly I was pulling myself up on my elbows. My shoulder was on fire. Something was wrong with my nose. A stabbing pain in the middle of my face. My eyes trying to focus. Looking for. Looking for.

I saw her lying far away. *She* was not on her elbows. She was not looking for *me*.

I think I got sick once, when I tried to stand up. So I went on hands and knees instead, and that hurt too. One of my knees was badly cut and scraped, it turns out. I didn't know that until later.

But oh none of it amounted to anything. Compared to what I found.

Lily's eyes were open. I don't think they saw me though. It was as if they were marbles. Colored glass. Set in empty holes. I remember thinking that. And throwing up. Again.

Her helmet. Was split nearly in half. And her scalp beneath it... Her skull... So much blood. But she was breathing.

I said her name over and over. I screamed in her face. I begged her to see me. To respond. Anything. I could feel her heart beating through her chest. Very fast. I could hear her breath. Quick. Shallow. Like a cat panting. Like *her* cat. Smoky. Who slept in her bed. Who ate from her hand. Who curled in her lap.

I didn't know what to do. I took Lily in my arms. I did not remove the helmet. I was too afraid of what might happen. What might... come loose.

I told her, you'll be okay. You'll be okay. Chanting it. Until I... almost believed it.

I don't know exactly when it happened. When Lily went from breathing. Her head on my lap. To... not. There was no sign. No sound. Just a slipping away, I guess. And then.

I didn't have a sister anymore. And I wished more than anything that I had gone with her.

When the people found us, I wouldn't let them take Lily away. I clawed at them.

I bit their hands. I don't remember how they finally separated us.

BEN

(Bam!!)

He slams against me so suddenly, it practically jars the regulator loose from my teeth. Let me tell you. They may look soft and blubbery. But 500 pounds of seal feels like rock when it collides with you. I'm upside down in a cloud of bubbles, *my* bubbles. Blind in the roiling water. A jolt of pain in my right arm and shoulder.

When I can see again, there he is. Only feet away. Swimming beside me. Massive. Blocking what little sunlight filters down to this depth. His mouth open.

If he chooses to attack with his teeth, I'm done for. The muscles in his neck and shoulders? The size and power of his jaws? He'd make short work of me.

He swings around again, and veers into me, like a Mack truck sideswiping a Smart car. And I go tumbling. Even deeper. Away from the sun. This time my regulator comes out and I gulp a mouthful of seawater before realizing I have no air.

A wild thought comes to me. If it's going to end here... well... maybe that's for the best. Maybe it was inevitable. What a dreary prospect to die in a bed, old and sick. Staring at four white walls. So much better to go out here. This close. This... alive.

I manage to find my regulator hose. Back behind my head. And when I clamp down on the mouthpiece again, I notice something. The seals are... moving in.

Now I feel the adrenaline in my legs, in my pulse, in the buzz in my brain. And the cold fear in my belly. What chance do I have against the pack? What if they have made a decision? Together? That giant bull. Brutus. Who'd lolled on those rocks in the sun. Lazy and fat and slow. Brutus and the sea around him... explode. In a storm. Of seals. The blows to my body are so great, I know they have landed on me full force. I believe I hear screams. They may be my own.

I am certain, for an instant, that they have attacked in earnest. That there will be blood in the water. And all that will remain is for the shock-delayed nerve impulses to reach my brain.

I can't see. My mask is wrenched to the side of my head. The regulator is gone again, torn loose when I was punched in the face. By the bull? By one of the others? By more than one? I'm pretty sure some teeth are broken. I *know* my nose is.

The pain is blinding me. Disorienting me. And I can't breathe. My instincts tell me to get to the surface. But I don't know which direction that is.

And then... oh god. Directly in front of me. Rima. Her eyes black and cold. Like dead moons. Her teeth white and bared. And lethal. At that instant, I can't conjure the other Rima, the one in the cabin. I can't remember... any of it.

(groggy, heavy, slow; losing consciousness)

The pressure in my chest. My head. I need to find that hose. But where am I?

Everyone's gone. I'm tired. I know, within moments, I will instinctively gulp for air. And I will fill my lungs with the Atlantic Ocean.