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## Scarce Lit Sea

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## SCARCE LIT SEA

ELIZABETH BENJAMIN

A year after he said *See you soon* out the window of his truck, he returned to me, in the night as he had always come, either by water, his boat striking the sharp brown rocks, or on foot, whistling bird calls from the trail. This time he walked in from the woods and I was sleeping, slept through his whistles, woke to a figure in the cabin, a familiar voice whispering, Don't get up. *See you soon*, a year ago and I had waved and waved because soon meant soon then, meant tomorrow, or next week, then any day now, any day, sitting alone on the rocks thinking any day, listening to the old wind, someone whistling. *Soon* became waiting, waiting, then grief, then apparitions, then kindly returned to grief.

I put on my glasses and lit the oil lamp. He squinted, released a handful of little blue and red berries on the table. The lamplight found new lines around his eyes and a big beard, a toothbrush in the breast pocket of the same flannel shirt. Those eyes, dark and tired, and I saw *soon* had not been soon for him either. He took off his clothes, blew out the light, and climbed into my bed. He had grown thin.

I said, Where did you go? and he said he needed to sleep. There were coyotes yapping somewhere close. At night here it's always coyotes or loons or wind. It's always waves on rocks. I thought he was asleep and he said, There's a deer in my truck. All right, I said. In the morning, he said.

All that night I breathed in his scent, the same as before except now mixed with cigarettes. Salt and deep earth, hay, pinesap, chainsaw exhaust. I have a wool sweater that after a year still smelled like him. My mother advised me that when somebody leaves you you must refrain from smelling his old clothes and from writing him letters. But I kept returning to that sweater. Sometimes, sitting out in the dark to name stars, I smelled him so strongly I thought he was there. I would sit still, waiting for him to reach out, then realize the smell was coming from me, dirt in my hair, sweat dusty on my limbs, grass rolled up

in my pant cuffs, the sea. I would tell myself, Anyone can smell this way. It's the smell of anyone who moves through the world at a certain pace. Anybody, I said aloud. Sounds don't echo over the sea, they carry.

The early blue light came soon. Around his head the pillow was littered with pine needles. I went to let the chickens out. The five of them whirred and clacked as I lifted the latch. The hen with the crooked beak walked across the barren to the wrack line to pick bugs from the rotting rockweed. She'll probably get snatched by a seal some high tide. The others stayed near the coop waiting for vegetable scraps. Then I went to the shore, jumped from rock to rock to see if anything new washed up. I found a big shiny scallop shell and a nice two-by-four, which I dragged up to the side of the cabin.

4 He was up making breakfast. I kicked my rubber boots off by the door and went to the sink to set the scallop shell under the bar of soap. He handed me a cup of coffee, said, We have to get going soon, then gathered the scattered berries up from the table and put them into the pancake batter. I sat in the rocker to watch him. His hair was wild and yellow from the sun. He licked the spoon after he stirred the batter and put the spoon in his pocket, where he found a little knife, flipped it open, and diced some cold ham, which he also put into the batter. He took the spoon out again to stir that in, licked it, pocket. He was nervous. He wasn't going to tell me where he'd been. I thought, Does it matter? Thought, By the time I finish this coffee I will decide if it matters. Thought, If he touches me before I finish this coffee it won't matter. He refilled my cup. Maybe that counts.

I asked him where he got a deer out of season and he said, Road kill. You hit it? I said. Nope but it was still warm and loose. I asked how long ago, he said ten maybe twelve hours ago. The pancakes tasted smoky and we ate fast. Bunchberries have glassy centers that shatter when you chew. He hardly looked at me.

Outside it was clear and cool, early summer. As we walked the half mile through the woods to his truck I found myself skipping a little,

hopping over fallen branches, jumping to touch high branches. He kept a steady stride, but he smiled. I started to run, he used to love a footrace, and I ran all the way to the truck, my limbs singing and light, sun poking through the trees, the place in the woods where the salty air draws up wet green smells, matted leaves and puddles, moss and black mud, and the trail opens into meadow, the salt filtered completely out, yellow grass and green grass and pond and mourning doves. The deer was sleek and distended, lying on a truckload of old horse manure. It was a young buck, pretty big though it still had the faint white markings of a fawn. Little velvet antler nubs. Its legs were long and stiff, its neck arched back, eyes open, dry blood rimming its mouth. I lifted the gums, stiff already, to see its teeth. I couldn't pry its jaws open. I wanted to see if it still had grass in its mouth.

He walked out of the woods a minute later. Where are you going to dump all this shit? I said. He said he didn't know yet and got in the truck. So did I. I asked if I could have some of the manure for my garden and he said he might need all of it, maybe I could have a little. I didn't know where we were going, or why we couldn't carry the deer back to my cabin and deal with it there, but I didn't want to have any more of my questions not answered. He took the toothbrush out of his pocket and started slowly brushing. It looked more like a gum massage than brushing. He does this when he's thinking. I rolled down my window and looked for animals in the trees.

He turned off my road and we drove maybe ten miles, past all the familiar farms, all my neighbors, their dogs chasing the truck, and onto a narrow muddy road that went back to a few acres he bought years ago. There's a great old barn there, falling apart, a little clearing and a rough road down to a cove. He parked by the barn. I went inside to see how it was holding up and noticed a few tools that hadn't been there before, some old fencing, a bicycle I didn't recognize. I pressed my eyelids with my fingers. They were cold. How had he been back here, when, how had I loved him, how do people love and why, what is the use of striking each other, of speaking this sadness, of leveling this

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building or waiting for weather to act for us. He called to me to help him outside. His warm deep voice I knew. I caught my breath, opened my eyes. Dust floating around inside the barn caught light, the beautiful old rafters glowed, a bird perched up there, some small bird I didn't know the name of. My old white ice skates still hung on the wall by their laces. I lifted them off the nail, took them outside with me and set them on the hood of the truck. Then I took the deer's hind legs, he took the front, and we carried it to a patch of shorter grass.

6 I held the deer up by the head as he scored its belly with his little knife. He ran the blade down the cut a few times until the skin separated and guts pushed out. I asked if he'd ever done this before. He said not really. Neither of us were hunters, though I'd killed and cleaned meat birds. He'd skinned a few porcupines when he was a boy. He said someone told him you're supposed to cut off the deer's balls first if you can. I held the deer up higher as he worked, reaching in and trying to loosen some of the membranes inside to get the guts to spill out cleanly. Everything in there was bloated and when I saw green bile start to run I said, We need to get this down to the water. He reached in all the way on both sides and pulled everything out, just to get it off the meat. It was probably a mess in there already from getting run over.

The sea was far enough that we decided to drive. With the deer cut open we didn't want to put it right on the horse shit, so we got an old plastic sled from the barn and nestled it down into the truck bed. I sat on that and he lifted the deer up onto me. He drove too fast down the bumpy road to the water. Branches hit the back of my head and scraped my neck, and the deer and I slid around in the truck bed. I dug my heels into the manure. Jesus, I said when he stopped the truck. He took two legs and I took two and we carried it down a little path to the water. Low tide. We crossed the wet rocks, dropped the deer into the icy sea then we waded in after it. The blood bloomed hot orange around the body, then faded to red. I tore some seaweed off the rocks and started scrubbing the cavity, working to get the bile and shit out.

He held the deer steady. We switched off a few times, stopped, smelled the inside of the deer, then kept scrubbing. I was finally able to pry the jaws open and pulled out wads of wet green grass. As I leaned in to work, I felt his hand on my neck, running his fingers over the cuts from the branches, and my whole body shivered. I became aware of my limbs, a numbness, and I waded to shore to warm up.

The deer stopped bleeding and the water was clear again. The tide was moving in. This man, I thought. The deer underwater looked weirdly alive, its limbs swaying with the current, like it inhabited some place I couldn't go, and this man, half submerged, covered in blood, this great bearded man, was even farther away, the muscles and veins of his arms cut so precisely, so sharply, that he could not exist here either, his smooth movements, this animal beneath him, its head nodding, its great display of rib and flesh, the water that divided them suddenly matching the graying sky, and I, apart.

He pulled the deer out of the sea and onto his shoulders, grasping the front hooves in one hand, the back in the other, and walked up toward the truck. I climbed into the back again and held the wet deer in my lap. He drove slower this time, back up to the barn. I said we should string up the deer in the apple tree to bleed it, but he said he wanted to get it skinned first. He told me to bury the guts. I got a shovel from the barn and dug a hole next to the gut pile. I pulled out the heart and cut that off, then pushed the rest of the pile into the hole, covered it. It didn't feel right to bury the heart with all those busted intestines. I set it on top.

The skinning took longer since he was determined to get the whole thing off clean, all the way around the eyes, even peeled up over the ears. The muscle of the animal was tight under stretched silver membrane. Flies found us, and wasps. I really just wanted to bleed the thing and be done with it, but he kept tearing the skin off each leg, as close as he could get to the hooves before cutting a ring around the ankle and peeling it off over the foot. He looked feral, kneeling in the flattened grass, his bloody shirt removed by now, blood and fur stuck to

his arms and chest. I said, Who are you? and he stopped, sat back on his heels to catch his breath. I took the knife and worked for a while. The skin held to flesh with a strength almost greater than mine and I made little progress. The deer began to smell more and more like old meat. The sun came back out. Flies continued descending. When he finally got the whole hide off, he flapped it out like a big wet towel onto the grass to dry. The empty face had grass poking through the eyeholes. We bound the hind legs with rope and hoisted the deer up into the apple tree. I built a little smoky fire below it to keep the flies away. He slit its throat and we sat in the grass for a long time watching the blood drip off the deer's nose. It looked like a goat without its skin, not something wild and graceful. It spun slowly, the rope creaking. I threw green grass on the fire to keep it smoking. He scraped blood off his arm with his thumbnail. I said, We really botched this job, didn't we. He laughed and I said, Let's go swimming.

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The water here is so cold you lose your mind when you're in it. We jumped off rocks and splashed around and screamed and scrubbed ourselves with seaweed. We challenged each other to jump off higher rocks and higher. We'd jumped from them all before. When our bodies were clean and salty we washed our clothes, wrung the blood out and hung them over tree branches to dry. We sat on a big flat rock in the sunshine. He leaned in and bit my ear, he kissed me. I said, This isn't how you treat a person. He said, Maybe I don't want to be a person, maybe it's the animal part of us and forget about the rest.

There was a deer strung up in the apple tree, slowly spinning in the breeze, dripping blood from its stripped face. He said again, to himself this time, The animal part of us. I thought, I am a person. A person who pees on the ground and talks to chickens. I said, I want us to be people. He looked at me finally and I kissed him. He would be gone soon, either way. Soon, soon. What matters is he's here now and he will not be back again. And after that I would be alone, even more alone than before because then I at least had *soon* as my companion, however grave. His body felt strange and taut to me. He moved differently.

The sound of seabirds calling and their wings, his scent, his breathing, the crunching of thin shells. When I finally opened my eyes the water was black under the sheet white sky. I covered my face and licked salt from my wrists. I became aware that I had nearly starved, felt the hunger of coming out of it. And then the worst part, a small hope lit, I touched his arm lightly, so light he didn't seem to feel it.

Days with him were always dense. We had left our deer too long. The fire had gone out and flies crawled all over the carcass. We waved them off and they came back around. I wondered for the first time why we were doing this. It seemed so natural up to this point. I said we needed to butcher it and get the meat cool. I didn't even know what we'd do with all that meat. It smelled like intestines again. He got a newspaper from his truck to wrap the meat up in and I started cutting. I likened the parts to that of a goose and tried to get at joints. There were already larvae in the membranes. I said, I don't know if we should eat this. Flies everywhere. He took over for a minute then stepped back. He said, Let's just get the back strap and call it a day.

I built the fire back up and we cooked the meat on sticks. I was starving but it tasted exactly like the deer's mouth had smelled to me that morning and I couldn't stomach it. He gathered the leftovers into a plastic bag and put it in his glove compartment. He rolled up the hide, wrapped it in paper and put it behind the seat. Then we took the carcass down from the tree and dragged it way into the woods where coyotes would find it before the game warden. Before we got back in the truck, he picked up the heart and threw it as hard as he could at the side of the barn. That scared me and I said, Let's go. The sun was finally dropping. He stared down at the water, which was now brighter than the sky.

On the drive back to my place he brushed his teeth again, even slower this time. That brushing sounded so dry and lonely. I turned on the radio and he immediately turned it off. I thought this meant he might say something, but he kept brushing. I had my white ice skates on my lap and fingered the blade. It was comforting to hold some-

thing old and mine. We pulled into my meadow as the sun dropped below the tree line, and I invited him back for scrambled eggs. He put his head down on the steering wheel. I clutched my skates and waited. He switched the dome light on, off again, on. I said, Do you need to be alone? He put his head back down, his sunburned neck bright under the little bulb. Will you come with me? I said. Or should I leave you? I waited. Open your eyes, come with me. Come on, I said. I thought, I know the danger, mine, now come with me, open your hand. I pried at his fist.

Little light off. We got out and he leaned on me. I dropped my skates at the edge of the trail. Come on. And we walked, I lined his steps, the weight of his strong body at my side, his arm in mine, held firmly that arm, those arms I knew could lift me and had, curled in my chair, hand on a book, had lifted me so many times though I am tall he lifted me, and now I led him through my woods, this great man, through this dark place. I could feel him shaking and I was afraid. What happened to you? I said. Can I help? Can I kill someone? Walk with me. He was slowing down. His hands, though cold, felt so familiar. Remember me, I said. An owl nearby. Bat flicker. What happened in a year? And as we walked I found myself thinking, Save me from this.

He said, I didn't want to come back here, not ever. I stopped. Through the dusk blue I could see his eyes were closed. Then go, I said. Once he woke me in the night to tell me I reminded him of a silver tree. He stood still, around him many shades of blue darkened to deeper blue and violet. I heard loons through the woods calling from the water. This day, this day. I waited for him to release my hand, to turn and walk through the dark back wherever he came from. I waited a long time after that for the woods to turn black. I called out, Hello! What if we are punished for our most hopeful utterances.

We used to play this game we called Hummock and Hollow, where one person closes their eyes while the other leads them through the hummocky barren, directing them only with shouts of Hummock! or

Hollow! The aim being not to trip or fall into the sea. But other obstacles like blueberries grow wild among the many low scrubby plants in the barren, and bunchberries and checkerberries, too. Goldenrod, asters, alders, wild roses, mountain cranberry, many kinds of grass and fern. Blackberries, raspberries, silvery mosses, dried paintbrush waving in a rotten wind. In this new life, I fall all over the place.