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## Clutch of the Sea

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# CLUTCH OF THE SEA

REILLY MAHAN

The evening sun  
Golden, hazy, and sweet  
Often, as a child, I would imagine travelling on my cardboard rocket ship  
Right up to its rays,  
Just to plunge in my favorite curly straw and suck out all of the molten  
honey from its core.  
So sweet.  
I'd always remember to pack a peanut butter sandwich and a thermos of  
cool milk.

For a moment, I fully submerge myself under the currents and remain suspended in my salty cobalt graveyard. This is no time to daydream of food and drink and innocence past. My lips sting, singed by the salt on each crack and blister. First degree became second degree a few hours hence; now second lingers about third.

The temptation to drink the water around me is no longer out of thirst, but rather to deliver me into the blissful arms of Hades sooner.

Night is coming quickly, my last champion leaving only faded magenta hues on the horizon. My choices are limited—yet even so, if I do not decide quickly, it will be decided for me. I must get out of the water, or else drink of the briny poison until the ocean consumes me from the inside. *Poetic, really. To take what traps me externally and consciously let it in, to be a part of my final essence.* I am losing my mind.

To my left, I hear a bird squawk, sitting on the edge of a small rowboat as they both drift slowly away from me. I want to shout, shoo the bird away. But my voice is as dust, and the mere effort sends me into a coughing fit. Luckily, that does the trick and I watch as the bird flies into the sun. “Good fucking riddance, you sick piece of shit,” I imagine saying.

Oh how I wish the boat were a mirage, a twisted, cruel trick of

the mind. For then, there would be no hope, no decision to make, and I could give myself the ending I deserve. But no—my selfish survival instinct lingers...and tries to convince me to continue on, get back in the boat, keep trying to live.

Instead, I think of my sister. I imagine her waking up from an afternoon nap about now, after hitting the snooze button repeatedly. She has a big event to go to tonight, and large crowds of extroverts wear her out more quickly than most. Fifty bucks says she'll wear her simple black dress, with tasteful yet eye-catching earrings. Fifty bucks also says she'll have a plaid shirt and jeans stored in her car that she changed out of at the last possible moment. "A modern wonder in the making," they all say. I've always known she was extraordinary. That glimmer of some "otherness," a slumbering ingenuity was ever-present in her gaze. As an adolescent, I would challenge her, my younger by seven years, to staring contests after reading her bedtime story. Initially, I thought maybe it would make her eyes so tired that she would fall asleep immediately. Instead, I became unnerved by how long she could hold my gaze, and that somehow, she seemed much older than I, more knowing of what the world was really like.

I find myself floating on top of the waves, snapped back into consciousness as one rises too high and rolls over my face, causing me to sputter and cough again. Each gasp feels like nails along the inner lining of my esophagus. As I begin to tread water again, my hand hits something hard and I jolt back, startled and fearful of the sea creatures in the looming night. My floating has taken me back to the boat.

Eventually, I muster the strength of both muscle and will to pull up on the edge of the boat. It rocks and, for a moment, I am afraid I'll flip it. Instead, the rowboat steadies itself and I am able to throw my left leg over the side and pull myself over. My whole body gives way, having used its very last stores of energy, and falls helplessly into the boat. Instead of the solid *thunk* onto the wooden planks as I expected, it is more of a *thud*, a cushioned *thud* provided by the sunburnt, bloated, lifeless body I find myself on top of. At first, I hold my breath, half from fear and half from the horrendous stench. Feeling guilty, I breathe out again and try to get used to the smell. Instead, I snuggle up against her and decide to rest my eyes. "I'm sorry sis, I know it's not your fault you smell so bad." We laugh together like it's the first joke we've ever heard...just like old times.