

The Lovers Under the Sea

The house fell off the cliff because it had been raining, heavily, for three days. First, the ground on which the house stood started to become saturated with water, then small clumps of earth fell away, then an entire tree; and, eventually, the house itself, which fell – and crashed into the sea.

Cathy and her boyfriend were asleep at the time, and didn't wake up, even as the house flew down through the air, collided with the surface of the water with a force like rocks slapping on concrete, and then continued to sink, at an accelerating pace, until it landed, in a shuddering halt, hundreds of metres down on the sea floor.

The couple woke up feeling drowsy, and sweating, a state which clouded their judgement and did little to help them make sense of what was going on.

In a slightly delirious state, he crawled across the bed, leant over Cathy and reached out to open the curtains. Only, when he tugged the curtain across, no light entered the room. He didn't have the energy to question it, assumed that it was still night time, and flopped back to his side of the bed, falling back to sleep.

Cathy was sweating but felt cold. She noticed a sensitivity in her arms, like pins and needles. She clutched her palms to warm her hands up, delicately, as if holding a baby bird in each one.

She reached out for her phone which was attached to a charger on the floor, and tapped the screen, but the battery was dead. She rolled over, and she saw that the curtain was open and the sky was dark. He was lying on his back, snoring lightly.

Cathy pulled back the covers, shivered, and moved her body towards her phone to see why it wasn't charging. The cable was plugged in. The bedside light wouldn't turn on either. *Power cut*, Cathy said to herself.

She tried to nudge him awake, but he was in a deep sleep. She lay there for a moment, then pulled herself out of bed. As she stood up, she felt more clearly how the whole room was fixed with a chill, and the floor was cold, as if the wooden panelling had turned to stone.

Their hallway was quiet, and no light glowed in from the street lights, as it usually did. Cathy padded to the front door and tried to pull it open, but it wouldn't budge.

When what was morning had long gone, the couple eventually realised they couldn't sleep any longer. They clung to each other for warmth.

Cathy whispered in his ear about the door being jammed shut, and how it was dark.

Something's not right, she told him. He pulled her towards him and kissed her.

Cathy unpicked herself from the embrace and got back out of bed. Along the corridor, past the kitchen, and to the front door.

She turned the handle, but the door still wouldn't open. She tugged and tugged and tugged, but the handle wouldn't turn. She sat on the floor, knees pulled up to her face, and tried to sob, but nothing came out.

Cathy stood in the hall, hesitated, then returned to their bedroom, climbed into their bed, pressed herself back against him.

He threw on a t shirt shortly afterwards. He looked a little pale. He went to the kitchen, from where she could hear him turning the light switches on and off. The light in their room flickered feebly. Then she heard him move into the hall.

He acknowledged that it was dark outside even though it really shouldn't be. He couldn't open the front door, either. But he didn't know what to do about it.

So, they decided to leave it for a few days, and come back to the problem once they'd had some time to figure out what was going on.

The next few days didn't really start or end. It was hard to track time, so they just stayed in bed. They both felt light headed, and a little nauseous. They piled blankets on top of the duvet and hid underneath.

It took a while, but eventually, the nausea subsided, and they were both able to get up as normal.

As the time passed, the routine they'd had before, when the sun rose in the morning, started to slip away. Cathy started forgetting things. She wrote paper lists of things she was certain of.

1. It is dark outside, and it wasn't before.
2. We have electricity, and enough food.
3. There are seven houses on our side of the street.

Each time Cathy returned the list, the ink on the paper had smudged. She couldn't read what she had written, so she'd write it out again.

She always put the notebook carefully behind some other books on the shelf.

They were lying on the sofa together when Cathy heard a tapping sound. She followed it out of the kitchen, and along the hall. It was coming from outside the front door.

She tried the handle, assuming it would be held tight, but with some difficulty, she was able to budge it.

The door fell open.

Something fell into the hallway. It shivered, and then lay there, static.

Cathy looked up. She saw water, piled up high, like snow.

Water.

Something felt frightening and fell into place at the same time. See, I told you, she said to herself.

The something in the hallway was a fish. Cathy picked it up. It felt warmer than anything she'd felt in a while. *Alive*, she thought to herself.

Cathy found a jar in the kitchen and poured the fish in. Apparently revived, the fish started to swim around in circles. He came to see what she was doing.

He looked at the jar, back at her, back at the jar, and when he looked at her again. Come on, Cathy.

He picked up the jar and started taking it to the sink.

No! Cathy shouted and moved to grab the jar back. He held it up, high, out of her reach. The water in the jar splashed out and over the floor.

He was holding her down with one hand, twisting her arm, and it hurt. Cathy tried to unpick his grip, and couldn't. She hesitated, then sunk her teeth into his hand.

Ow, Cathy what the fuck! He shouted. Out of shock, he let go of her and the jar. Fish and glass smashed and water spread across the floor. Cathy grabbed the fish. She ran across the kitchen towards the hallway, and he lunged after her.

The front door handle opened with ease and she hurled the fish back into the ocean. They stood there, frozen, staring at the ocean which refused to enter the house.

What the fuck, he said.

He looked at her, realised he was holding her wrist, and let go, without an apology.

The discovery of the water marked a shift. Noises, previously unexplained, became clearly the sounds of the ocean – water churning, knocking against the house, sand from the ocean floor pattering against the walls. The moisture in the air was now explainable, and everything in the house seemed to be getting more and more damp.

Cathy had forgotten her list. She couldn't remember a single thing that she'd been writing down. She started again.

1. The ocean doesn't want to enter the house.
2. There was a fish, but now it's back in the ocean.

Not long after this, the nightmares started. When Cathy lay down to sleep, her mind was filled with shoals of fish entering the house. He was often there, but with a vacant expression on his face. When he came close to her, she'd look at his skin. She'd realise that it was covered in scales. When they touched, the scales started coming off, and they both bled.

Cathy poured herself a glass of water, sat in the kitchen. Why are we here, she asked the glass of water. She stuck her finger inside it. *I'm a fish*, she said to herself.

As her finger distorted underneath the water, she was caught with the flash of a memory.

Her mum and herself, sitting in a town square. Somewhere, far away, a sunny square. It was warm, and the straw in her glass distorted under the water. She spun the straw round with her fingers, and then drank in the fizzy lemonade.

When her mind came back to the room, she realised he was standing in front of her. What are you doing, Cathy, he said. He pulled her fingers out of the water.

I miss how things used to be, he said.

Cathy almost forgot the memory about the town square and the sunlight, but managed to write it down. The next morning, it was smudged, but she could make out the word 'sun' and that was enough to remind her to write it down again.

She would dream of the fish, but now the dreams were warmer, and sometimes sunlight trickled into them. He would appear occasionally, but more often, Cathy was alone, or her mother appeared in the dreams too. Then, the dreams would turn and the fish were bleeding, numerous, and angry.

Don't talk to me, the ocean whispered in her dreams.

Cathy woke up in a fit, a cold sweat. She couldn't sleep. She went to the front door.

She opened the door and walked straight into the water. It was freezing, elating. She wanted to scream, but out of catharsis.

Her heart was beating out her chest and the water pressure ached every bone in her body. But she felt vividly, alive. She started swimming, like she had always known this was what she had to do, and the ocean started to carry her.

She felt something unwelcome on her leg. It was it was his hand, attached to her ankle. Cathy, he mouthed through the water, don't leave me. His head was sodden, he was silhouetted by the light of the candles and the lamp in the house, and she couldn't tell if he was crying, but his eyes were bloodshot.

She tried to shake him off, but he held on.

Let me go! She wanted to shout, but knew she had to conserve her breath, and she tried to keep swimming. He was pulling her down. But the ocean had had enough of this. The current pulled them apart. She watched him fall back into the house.

As the ocean carried her upwards, she looked down and thought, absurdly, what a little boy.

The ocean was urgent. Cathy's lungs were close to bursting. She had no idea how long she'd been holding her breath, or how little oxygen she had left. She wanted to scream. When she felt she'd reached her limit, she saw a sight that was strange, but one that she knew.

It was sunlight.

The sunlight trickled into the ocean, warming her cheeks and shoulders.

Cathy started swimming again, arm stroke, breaststroke, anything she could do to help her journey upwards.

And eventually, eventually, the ocean current led her to the lip of the water, and she broke through the surface.

It was a warm, summer day on the beach. A family had brought a cooler with beers with them. They called out in alarm at this strange girl who had apparently just survived a drowning, and rushed into the water to pull her out.

On the beach, they wrapped Cathy in towels, and tried to ask her what had happened. She couldn't explain it, spitting out water and eventually smiling, laughing, hysterically, but more sure of herself than she'd felt in months. Cathy was nearly ready to explain what had happened. First, she looked down at the beach and then out to the sea, then back down at the pebbles on the beach, glistening in the sun. Hello, she said to the pebbles. And they whispered back, we shine.