

## Shorebirds

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REBECCA RELEASES AGAINST AN ONCOMING GUST OF WIND, her net barely clearing the breakers and plunging awkwardly into the churning water. The bantering screeches of shorebirds sound like laughter in the breeze as pelicans and osprey circle low in the early morning sky.

“Becca—over here.”

She nods her head in acknowledgement and pulls in the net, its emptiness ignored. Next to her are a pair of white plastic buckets that once contained deck oil, but now serve for holding the catch of the day. She grabs the wire handles, runs across the glistening sand and stops short of her father’s side.

“Just like when you were little. Never could throw against a heavy wind.” The back of Walter Collins’ neck is a maze of thin chasms that crisscross over the surface of his skin, a pattern of consistently opposing angles. His beer-forged stomach protrudes over the tight waistband of the drysuit, defying the strength of the material’s elasticity. Completing a powerful arc, he lets loose of the net and it sails through the air in a controlled flat trajectory, then descends openly into the water.

“Perfect. You can help me get ‘em in the buckets.”

Rebecca pulls the sweatshirt hood over her head and ties the drawstring tight against her throat. She had failed to read the charts in the newspaper, overlooking the fact that high tide came at daybreak this weekend. But refusing to go surf fishing with him no matter how early in the morning would be like breaking a covenant made long ago. It had been over two years since she last saw her father—St. Ann’s Cathedral, her mother’s funeral—and the guilt pulled Rebecca to her father the same way it had so many times before.

There was also the need to escape the weight of responsibilities that plummeted down on her, the all too familiar drowning feeling caused by gale-force tensions at work. Yesterday’s squall just about put her over the edge.

“But Rebec—Miss Collins. I need this job.”

“I’m sorry Quinn, but I’ve made my decision. We can’t keep the both of you.”

“But I’ve been here longer than Susan and what about all the clients I’ve brought in? How can she possibly be more valuable to this agency than me?”

“The advertising business is a tough gig. You know the reality. Sometimes good people don’t make it.”

“It’s a personality issue, isn’t it?”

“Personality has nothing to do with success at this company.”

“Of course. You’re a perfect example of that philosophy.”

“Sorry Quinn. Goodbye.”

Emptying her net, Rebecca relents to dumping the few small fish she has caught into her father’s bucket. Several yards from shore, an anxious flock of gulls and loons drift closer to follow schools of fish that dart through the rolling surf. The pelicans dive down, hanging jowls flopping spasmodically as their bills pierce the water and grab on to whatever they can manage to pick up. Cormorants join the fray, water spraying into the air in a fine mist as they attack the surface.

“Yoo-wee—feeding frenzy. Help me with these Becca.”

Her father empties his net into the bucket, the small fish shimmering in the early morning sun, flopping against the sides of the container in a vain attempt to escape. One manages to slip out of the netting and rolls across the sand. A seagull swoops down and plucks it up as Rebecca’s father swats futilely at the bird.

“Keep those mangy sea-rats away from my fish.”

Rebecca walks over to a small bloated lump that has washed onto shore and pokes at it with a numb toe; a dead seagull wrapped in fishing line. Its eyes are open wide, black holes peering between frayed strands of monofilament. She walks away and a group of gulls descend from the grey sky and tear at the ballooned body of their fallen comrade. Her father shakes his head in disgust.

“Look at that, they’ll even eat their own. Fuckin’ scavengers.”

Walking to the truck, they load all the gear and freshly caught fish, exchanging small talk in their customary way—him talking, her listening. Her father doesn’t have anyone else except for a few

remaining cronies down at Tony’s, a down and dirty watering hole inhabited by a handful of colorful locals. It was a stark contrast to

Le Marché, the after work establishment that Rebecca had visited after Thursday’s bloodletting. She sat limply in the comfort of the perfectly padded barstool, dreading the thought of squeezing through the sardine-packed suit and tie crowd. But she came to the conclusion that her latest boyfriend would not be showing up as promised.

“nother vodka and tonic?”

“Yes, maybe one more for the road.” She swirled the ice cubes in the bottom of the glass like a couple of dice about to be thrown.

“I guess your partner’s not showin’ up.”

“Appears not.” She stared at the ash tray crammed with crushed cigarette butts. “He isn’t the most reliable man ever born.”

“I know you’ve been very successful Miss Collins,” the voice behind her slurred, “but there’s more to life than hard work and relentless sacrifice to a—company. Success isn’t always measured by a healthy bottom line.”

“Quinn. I didn’t think you’d be here. This really isn’t the time or place to talk.”

“There’s also loyalty to your staff, and understanding. You should learn to lighten up, let people see a little more of you as you, not you as the ultimate ‘man hating corporate bitch’ that everyone says you are.”

“Do yourself a favor Quinn. Go home to your family,” she said grabbing her purse and coat.

“Miss, don’t you want this?” the bartender asked as he returned with her drink.

“So Miss Collins, who or what are you going home to?” Quinn swept up the cocktail from the bar.

After cleaning the fish and rinsing the blood from her hands, Rebecca strips free of her damp clothes and turns on the shower. She hunches under the sharp spray of hot water, attempting to drive the coldness of the ocean from her thin frame.

“You got everything you need in there Becca?”

“I’m fine,” she shouts over the rushing water.

“Sure?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” From a gap in the shower curtain, she watches the worn brass doorknob, the air too thick with steam to tell if it is being turned.

“All right. I’m going down to Tony’s—be back in a coupla’ hours.”

“I’ll start the fish around three. Try to be back by then.”

When the water becomes lukewarm she steps out of the shower, her reflection staring back from the fogged mirror above the washbasin. Beads of water slowly drip down revealing a distorted clarity of semblance, black eyes peering through the mist.

The aroma of garlic and butter fills the confines of the house as each of the small fish is dropped into the skillet where they land with a sizzle. Rebecca and her father will probably eat

about four or five each, but she decides to cook the entire catch all at once, making for some easy meals during the week. She cuts the onions with a finely honed knife, the one he has religiously kept sharpened over the years. Admiring the fine edge of the utensil, she wipes it slowly with a damp cloth then sets it down.

With the fish lying on a layer of paper towels, a teapot is filled with water and placed on top of the wood burning stove. Rebecca opens the sliding door to the back deck and puts a cigarette to her mouth. Over the roofs of the houses below, seagulls swiftly descend toward the side alley of a neighborhood market at the end of Harbor Street. A tattered gull lands on an open garbage container and proceeds to probe the contents. Pulling out a foil potato chip bag and tossing it aside, it grabs a circular wafer of bread. It gulps the morsel then takes flight, catching a current that carries it over the cramped rows of seaside shanties.

Last night with cocktail in hand, Rebecca had looked over the edge of her apartment balcony at the San Francisco cityscape, the fabric of meandering streets twelve floors below, people walking to destinations with friends or family awaiting, unaware of her distant observation.

The slam of the door jolts Rebecca back to her father's world.

"Smells like dinner," he says shuffling into the kitchen, stumbling into a chair. "Son-a-bitch, I'm hungry."

Rebecca hustles back inside as her father takes a seat behind the kitchen table.

"Christ, it's hard to believe. Hanson Yeats died last week."

"Hanson? Was he sick?"

"Yeah, cancer. But that's not what killed him."

"Had he been in the hospital?"

"Hell no, he'd never step foot in that place unless dragged in kickin' and screamin'. He was out by himself fishing near Patrick's Point—last Tuesday. His skiff capsized or hit the rocks. Must've been a rogue wave or maybe he got too close to shore. It was windy as shit that day. Anyway, they found pieces of the boat in the cove, wedged up against some rocks—along with his body. Get me a beer out of the fridge."

"What was he doing out there by himself on such a windy day?"

"He knew what he was doing," he says popping the can of beer open.

A whistle from the teapot overpowers the crackling fire within the woodstove. Rebecca lifts the pot and pours the bubbling water into a mug decorated with a black line illustration of a grounded ship in a storm. A caption above the scene declares "The Captain Is Always Right!"

"I'm heading back home in the morning."

Her father takes a swallow of beer then rubs a finger around the edge of the can, rivulets of condensation running down its sides.

"Always on the run, aren't ya? Even as a kid, you never could keep still. I remember when you used to sleep with your mother and I. You would get up in the middle of the night and walk all through the house. I began wrapping a strand of your hair 'round my finger so that when you got restless, it'd wake me up and I could keep you in bed."

"I remember."

She also remembered the nights spent aboard her father's boat, being tossed between rising swells, the straining hum of a generator, faint light flickering within the cabin. She was always afraid when out at sea, especially when it was just the two of them. But her father told her not to worry; everything would be all right, just relax and enjoy the

journey. He assured her that they would soon be back on shore, and it

was best not to tell her mother about being frightened. She just as well keep quiet. Then he would lie down with her, whispering in her ear, caressing her hair.

After packing the Audi, Rebecca writes a note for her father who is still sleeping off last night's drunk, the sound of snoring carrying throughout the house like a distress signal in the aftermath of a storm. She did not have to worry about waking him, he would probably sleep until noon. She knew him all too well.

Sundays are hated. It is no longer like it was when she was a little girl, putting on her best dress and retreating to the warm confines of St. Ann's Catholic Church. Now, an approaching workweek always fills her with angst—deadlines, creative direction, analysis and strategy reports; it all swims in her head and pulls her closer to the seas of "Nervous Breakdown." She knows the staff considers her an obsessed control freak but she has to keep a tight ship, even if that means all but abandoning any thought of holding on to their respect.

With a cup of bitter coffee she heads south on Highway 1, a ball of muted orange sunlight pulsating behind the thick fog bank hanging near the coast. Turning the headlights off, she comes to Patrick's Point and a sharp expanse of rock that points towards the open sea. Pulling the car to the side of the road and setting the coffee into the holder, she reaches for a cigarette. The shorebirds bounce up and down behind the vantage point of the cliff as if they are dancing marionettes, long strings being pulled from somewhere high above the clouds.

With the engine left running, Rebecca steps out of the car, lights her cigarette and walks up the narrow trail to the top of the overlook. She reaches the edge and stands unsteadily upon a protruding rock. The expanse of the ocean, its surface crowned with swelling waves, stretches out until disappearing into the fog. The cove below is a frothing caldron of whitewater. Thinking of Hanson Yeats, she hears her father's words. He knew what he was doing.