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The Crossing

Written by Andrew Miller

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Andrew Miller

The Crossing



SCEPTRE

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To the memory of my mother and my step-father.
Those we love travel with us always.

ONE

To be serious only about sex
Is perhaps one way, but the sands are hissing
As they approach the beginning of the big slide
Into what happened.

John Ashbery

1

Early spring, the new millennium, a young woman walks backwards along the deck of a boat. She goes slowly, is bent almost double, holds in her left hand a ladle and in her right a pot of hot pitch. From the spout of the ladle she pours a thin ribbon of pitch into the seams where all yesterday she tapped in lengths of oakum with a mallet and bosun's chisel.

So it begins, simply, with work.

The boat is raised on wooden stilts, the deck twenty feet above the ground, that hard standing of rubbled concrete and brick where the warmth of the new season has brought out unlikely patches of pale flowers, their roots in shallow veins of earth. Around the boat is the yard, a place where ships were once built – ferries, coal-lighters, trawlers, a wooden minesweeper during the war – but now given over to the servicing and maintenance of pleasure craft, some on their stilts, others tied up at the pontoons. There is a sound of power tools, radios, the now-and-then rapping of a hammer.

She is alone on the deck. For the work, for ease of movement and access, the mast has been unstepped, and all the rigging, together with stanchions and guard rails, has been removed and stowed away. When she finishes one seam she immediately begins the next. In the pot, the pitch is cooling. As it cools it thickens. She will have to stop at some point soon to light the gas-burner in the galley and heat it again, but not yet.

Below her, standing in the shadow of the boat's steel hull, a young man is dipping bolts into white lead and softly singing to himself. He is tall, blue-eyed, patrician. His fair hair, luxurious at a distance, is already starting to thin. His name is Henley but he is known and prefers to be known as Tim. There is some question, still unresolved, as to whether he and the girl on deck will sleep together.

He pauses, a bolt in his gloved fingers, calls up, 'Maud! Maud! Where art thou?' and getting no answer, grins and goes back to his work. He does not know her well but knows she does not do banter, does not in fact seem to understand what it is. This he finds funny and endearing, a trick of character, a benign absence, to be numbered among those things he most likes about her, such as the bluntness of her blunt brown stare, the curls of her hair that are flicks and half-curls because she cuts her hair short as a boy's; the inked lettering on her arm (the underside of her left forearm), a surprise the first time you see it that makes you wonder what other surprises there might be. The hint of Wiltshire in her voice, the way she sucks on a cut but does not mention it, the way her breasts are not much larger than peaches and hard, he thinks, as peaches. Yesterday, when she pulled off her jumper, he saw for the first time two inches of bare belly above the waistband of her jeans and felt an entirely unexpected seriousness.

They are both members of the university sailing club. The two

others who came down with them have driven back to Bristol, perhaps, thinks Tim, to give them a bit of space, a bit of privacy. Is that what Maud thinks too? That the scene is set?

He can smell the pitch she's using. Also the faint sweet rotten smell of the river, the old piles, the mud, the amphibious vegetation. This is a drowned valley, a place broken to the sea, salt water heaving in and out twice a day under banks of dense woodland, at high tide lapping the roots of the trees, at low tide leaving little creeks of thigh-deep mud bare and glittering. In places, further up river, old boats have been scuttled and left to find their way back to nothing – blackened staves, blackened freeboard, some so old and rotten they might have carried Vikings, Argonauts, the first men and women of the world. There are herring gulls, egrets, cormorants, a resident seal that rises without warning at the side of boats, eyes like a Labrador. The sea itself is not in view but it's not distant. Two curves of the river bank, then the harbour, the town, the castles on the headlands. Open water.

Outside the boat shed a figure in red overalls and welder's goggles is standing like a boxer under a fountain of blue sparks. By the offices, a man in a suit is leaning against an iron pillar, smoking. Tim stretches – a luxurious feeling – but as he turns back to his work, to the boat, there is a movement through the air, a blink of feathered shadow, that is also a movement across the surface of his eye like a thorn scratch. There must have been a noise too – no such thing as silent impact – but whatever it was, it was lost in the hissing of his own blood and left no trace of itself.

He is staring at the ladle, which has come to rest by one of the patches of white flowers, pitch drizzling from the scoop. Maud herself is further off, face up, her arms flung above her head, her head tilted to the side, her eyes shut. It takes an immense effort to keep looking at her, this girl newly dead on the rubbled brick,

one shoe on, one shoe off. He is very afraid of her. He holds his head between his gloved hands. He is going to be sick. He whispers her name. He whispers other things like fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck . . .

Then she opens her eyes and sits up. She's looking, if she's looking anywhere, straight ahead to the old boat shed. She gets to her feet. It does not appear difficult or painful though somehow she gives the impression she is reassembling herself out of the bricks and flowers around her, rising out of her own dust. She starts walking – bare foot, dressed foot, bare foot, dressed foot – twelve or fifteen steps until, without warning, she crumples to the ground, face down this time.

The welder has been watching it all through the tint of his goggles. He shuts the valves on the tank, pushes up his goggles and starts to run. The other man, the one smoking outside the office, is also running, though more awkwardly, as if running was not really his thing or as if he did not want to be the first to arrive. The welder kneels beside Maud's head. He puts his lips close to the ground. He whispers to her, rests two fingers on her neck. The man in the suit crouches, Arab style, on the other side of her, the cloth of his trousers tight over his thighs. From somewhere a bell has started to sound, high-pitched and continuous. Others are coming now, more yardsmen in red overalls, the woman from the marina office, somebody in salopettes who must have just come off one of the boats on the pontoon. 'Don't crowd her!' says the welder. Someone, breathless, passes forward a green box. Three or four times the woman from the office says she has called the emergency services. She says emergency services rather than ambulance.

At some point they all notice Tim, the way he is standing there fifteen feet away as if nailed to the air. They notice him, frown, then look back at Maud.

2

No stanchions, no guard rail. And she was, perhaps, affected by the fumes from the pitch. The ambulance could be heard coming from a long way off. It had, among other things, to cross the river. When they arrived, the paramedics put a neck brace on Maud then turned her like some precious archaeological find, a bog girl old as Christ, fragile as ashes. Once she was stabilized, one of the paramedics sat Tim on the back step of the ambulance and explained to him that he was suffering from shock but that he wasn't to worry because his girlfriend was doing pretty well, all things considered. They were going to drive up to the top of the valley to meet the helicopter. The helicopter would fly her to the hospital in Plymouth. She would be there in about half an hour.

When Tim wakes to himself, when the shivering stops and his head begins to work again in a way he can recognize, he is sitting in the marina office with a tartan blanket round his shoulders. Pot plants, filing cabinets, maps of the river. A poster, sun-faded, of a

sailing boat, one of the old kind of racing yacht, low, over-canvassed, a dozen crew sitting along the windward side, legs dangling. The woman who called the ambulance is talking in a low voice to the man in the suit. She brings Tim a mug of tea. It's scalding hot and undrinkably sweet. He sips at it then stands and folds the blanket. It takes him a moment to shrug off the idea that he too has been injured, that there is an injury he should find and look at. He thanks the man and the woman (he is nothing if not polite – those schools!) then goes out to where his old Lancia is parked and drives to Plymouth.

It's nearly dark when he arrives. The hospital seems among the most terrible places he has ever been. He cannot find A&E. He stands for a time in the lit doorway of the genito-urinary unit until a porter asks him if he is all right and points out his way – a path between bushes that leads to a forecourt where ambulances are clustered around wide, rubber-fringed doors.

At reception the woman behind the glass wants to know what he is to Maud and after a pause he says he's a friend. She won't tell him Maud's condition, her status. He thinks she probably doesn't know. He sits in the waiting room on a worn red bench. An elderly couple is sitting near him. They have the look of people who have recently escaped from a bombed city – or what he imagines such people would look like. A half-hour passes. He goes back to the desk. The woman has been replaced by another woman. This one is friendlier.

'Hold on,' she says. She calls the nurses' station, somewhere on the far side of the swing doors. 'Stamp,' she says. 'Came in on the helicopter this afternoon?' She listens, she nods. 'Yes,' she says, 'OK . . . Yes . . . Yes . . . A friend . . . yes . . . right . . . Thanks.' She puts the phone down. She looks at Tim and smiles.

Maud is in the hospital for three nights. Her first night is on ICU, then they move her to an assessment ward in an older part of the hospital. From the windows of the ward you cannot see the sea but you can see the light from the sea. Ten women either side of the room, one behind screens with a voice like a child's, so obese she cannot bear to be looked at.

Maud's parents, alerted by the hospital, visit from Swindon. They're both schoolteachers, busy people. They have brought a bag of Maltesers with them and some magazines from which certain pictures have been carefully cut out and already, perhaps, laminated on the machine in the kitchen, images of the physical world or pictures illustrative of the human condition, those aspects most readily taught to schoolchildren. Her mother calls her Maudy, her father polishes his glasses. In the middle of speaking to them Maud falls asleep. Her parents look at her, the wax-white face on the pillow, the bandages on her head like a skull cap. They look round to see if there is anyone calm and medical who might take charge of things.

When she leaves she has a cast on her leg and a pair of crutches. Tim drives her back to Bristol. He has spent the last three nights in a hotel near the docks where Chinese seamen wandered the overheated corridors in their underwear, a wide-hipped strolling from room to room, every room with its door open, parties of men strewn on the beds, smoking and watching television.

He stows her crutches in the back of the car. She is very quiet. He asks if she wants the radio on and she says she doesn't mind. He wants to know if she is in pain. He asks if she remembers anything. He says he is sorry, and when she asks why he says he doesn't know. He's sorry anyway. Sorry she's hurt.

Her flat is on Woodland Road, not far from the university biology department where she is doing her master's degree. She

has lived there for at least six months but to Tim, when he has followed her up the stairs, the place has an oddly uninhabited air. He has sisters – the twins – and certain ideas about the spaces girls live in, the scented candles on the mantlepiece, dresses on hangers hanging from the backs of doors, throws, wraps, photographs in heart-shaped frames. He can see nothing of this at Maud's. There are two pairs of trainers and a pair of walking boots lined up in the little hallway. In the living room the furniture is three types of brown. There are no pictures on the walls. Light from the street drains inwards through a big window and falls onto a carpet of the kind intended to endure all insult. Everything is tidy. If there's a smell it's just the smell of the building itself.

She sits in one of the armchairs, her crutches on the floor beside her. He makes tea for her though there is no milk in the fridge. She is pale. She looks exhausted. He says he thinks he should stay the night on the sofa, unless of course there was someone else she could call. 'You're not supposed to be alone,' he says. 'Not for the first twenty-four hours. It's in the notes from the hospital.'

'I'm OK,' she says, and he says, 'Yes, well, you're probably not. Not yet.' Her cupboards are bare. He hurries out to do some shopping. In the supermarket he wonders if he is taking advantage of her, that far from being just a helpful friend he is in fact a manipulative scheming shit. This thought does not go deep. He fills the basket, pays and strides back to the flat, city wind in his face.

He cooks a cheese soufflé. He's a good cook and the soufflé is light and appetizing. She thanks him, eats three forkfuls. She sleeps upright in the chair. It's slightly boring, slightly worrying. When she comes to, they watch television for an hour then she goes through the door to her bedroom. He cleans up, lies awake

on the sofa under his coat. He would like to find a secret diary and read her secret thoughts. Her sex fantasies, her fear of loneliness, her plans. Does she have a diary? His sisters have diaries, volumes of them, mostly with little locks on them, but he's pretty certain Maud does not and that if she did she would not be recording her sex fantasies, her fear of loneliness. Through the netting over the window he sees a smudge of moon and when he shuts his eyes he sees Chinamen drifting like cigarette smoke.

He is woken by the noise of Maud throwing up. She has made it to the bathroom; the door is open, the light on, a hard light. He has a back view of her in her nightshirt, bent over the pink sink. She doesn't have much to bring up. He hovers by the door waiting to catch her but she has wrapped her fingers round the taps, has braced herself.

The Infirmary is a five-minute drive, certainly at this time of night. They admit her straight away, wheel her off in a wheelchair. He doesn't get to say goodbye or good luck.

When he returns the next morning he is told she is on Elizabeth Fry, a ward on the fifth floor at the front. He goes up flights of stairs, broad green steps, a window at every turn, the city opening out as he ascends, revealing itself as several cities, dozens perhaps, each wrapped around the bones of what it grew from. He cannot find Maud at first. The patients in their beds, in their gowns, are all strangely similar. He walks slowly past the ends of beds until he finds her in an annex with five others, her name and date of admission written on the whiteboard above her head.

She already has a visitor, a woman with long grey hair worn free, a pair of leopard-print kitten heels on her big feet. She is gently holding one of Maud's hands and keeps her hold as she turns to look up at Tim.

'She's asleep,' says the woman. 'She's been asleep since I got here.'

'But she's OK?'

'As far as I know.'

'It's probably what she needs.'

'Sleep?'

'Yes.'

'It's certainly,' says the woman, 'the sort of thing people say.' She has a northern accent – Midlands, north Midlands, somewhere like that. He doesn't really know the Midlands.

'I'm Tim,' he says, 'Tim Rathbone.'

'Susan Kimber,' says the woman. 'Maud's professor at the university. She called me this morning. She had a tutorial scheduled for this afternoon.'

'She called you?'

'She's conscientious. And they have a sort of phone on wheels, somewhere.'

'I brought her in last night,' says Tim. 'She was being sick.'

'It was lucky you were there.'

'Yes. I suppose it was.'

'You're a friend.'

'Yes.'

'Are you at the university?'

'I finished the year before last. I did English.'

'So you read novels for three years.'

'Actually, a lot of it was reading *about* novels,' says Tim. 'But it must seem a bit thin compared to what you do, you and Maud.'

'Not really,' says the professor. 'Or if it is that might be the point.'

'I would rather have done music. I should have.'

'You play something?'

'The guitar. Some piano. Mostly guitar.'

'Ah,' says the professor, her expression softening a little. 'You're the guitar player.'

'Yes. She's mentioned me?'

'I quiz all my students relentlessly, particularly about their private lives. Maud of course I had first to teach that she had a private life. I mean something between work and sleep. Something discussable.'

For a moment they both glance over at the bed, the sleeping girl.

'How well do you know her?' asks the professor.

'We've sailed a couple of times on the university boat. And once she came to a concert I put on. A lunchtime thing at the church at the bottom of Park Street.'

'You like her.'

'Yes.'

'You want to help her.'

'Help her?'

'Rescue her. You're not alone, I'm afraid. They flit around her like moths, though as far as I can tell she does nothing obvious to encourage it. Boys and girls. It's her pheromones perhaps.'

He nods. He is not sure what to say to this. She has started to remind him of his mother, though the professor is clearly sober.

'On the phone,' says the professor, 'she told me she had fallen from the deck of a boat. Presumably not into the sea.'

'The boat was in the yard. She fell onto brick. About twenty feet.'

'And then?'

'Then?'

'You were there, weren't you? What happened next?'

Tim frowns. For some reason – for several reasons – he has

failed to play it back to himself, the half-minute that followed. After a while, in which he seems to see pictures, like portraits hanging in a gallery – the welder under his shower of sparks, the man in the suit smoking, and some white bird, a gull or even an egret, wings spread in emblematic flight over the curled green heads of the trees – he says, 'She got up. She started walking.'

The professor smiles. 'Yes,' she says. 'Yes. That sounds like our Maud.'

For a second time he leads her from the doors of a hospital. He has a fresh set of guidance notes. She swings on her crutches at his side. The sky is tufted with small, perfectly white clouds.

He goes shopping again then cooks her a herb omelette with a side salad of imported leaves. She finishes her food, wipes her plate clean with a slice of bread.

He says he will play for her if she wants and when she agrees or does not tell him she does not want it, he drives the Lancia to his flat in one of the tall white houses overlooking the river, views of the suspension bridge on one side, the old bonded warehouses on the other. He rents the place with a Spaniard who works all hours at a restaurant, at two restaurants, at least two. Tim's share is paid from the family money stream, those trusts, the echo of old work, set up by his grandparents, and which provide him with an income never much more than modest but enough for this, the flat in the white building, the airy views.

The Spaniard's Spanish girlfriend is asleep on the window seat. She has a nose like a shark's fin and blue-black hair so thick you would have to cut it with gardening shears. He goes softly past her to his room, chooses a guitar, settles it into its case, clips the case shut and drives back to Maud.

She has showered, changed. Her hair is still damp. He asks if

she is feeling better and she says she is. They drink tea (he has bought some milk). She reads for half an hour a volume entitled *Medical Physiology (2nd Edition)*, though her eyes are sometimes shut and the book teeters in her grip. As evening comes on he takes out the guitar and shows it to her. He tells her it's a reproduction of a René Lacôte and that Lacôte was a celebrated nineteenth-century guitar-maker. This is maple, and on the top, this is spruce. He draws her attention to the abalone rosette, the diamonds and moons on the headstock. He says, in fact, he has an original Lacôte, one that he bought at auction a couple of years ago. He keeps it at his parents' place. His parents have an elaborate security system. He laughs, then turns on the only lamp in the room and sits under its light.

He plays, she listens. He might imagine this a model of their future together. One piece, a short study by Fernando Sor, she asks to hear again. The guitar has a light sound compared to a modern guitar. It is clear and sweet and seems an instrument designed to play children to sleep.

At ten she rocks herself onto her good foot, readies herself for bed. When she comes out of the bathroom she has a nightshirt on and hangs between the crutches. He is thinking what to say to her – another quote from the hospital guidance notes perhaps – but it's Maud who speaks first. 'You can stay in my room,' she says.

'OK,' he says. 'With you?'

'Not to have sex,' she says.

'Of course,' he says. Then, more gravely, 'Of course not.'

In her bedroom the bed is not particularly large, not a full-size double. She gets under the covers, he quickly strips down to T-shirt and boxers. He gets in beside her. She smells – despite the shower – of the hospital, and when she reaches to put off the lamp

he sees she still has the hospital ID bracelet on her wrist. She lies with her back to him. She has a small patch of shaved scalp around the wound on her head. They don't talk. He has an erection he knows will not subside for hours and he keeps his hips back a little so she will not feel it press against her. He listens to her breathing, thinks he hears the moment it settles into the rhythm of her sleep. He wants to stay awake all night and imagines that he will, that he will have no choice, but her warmth enters him like a drug and when he opens his eyes again there's a fine silt of dawn in the room. She is still there, the broken girl, the miraculous girl. All night they have lain like two stones in the road. He rests a hand on her shoulder. She stirs but sleeps on. In sleep, her nightshirt has ridden up a little and his right knee is touching the back of her left thigh, skin on skin. Under the window the occasional car drones past.

This was their courtship.