

TWISTED
SCARBOROUGH

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For Mum, Tony and Lindi

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Where Do You Get Your Ideas From?

‘Okay, last question please,’ the host said, looking out at the audience and pointing. ‘Lady in the yellow sweater over there.’

‘Where do you get your ideas from?’ the woman asked when the microphone arrived.

It was the last of the quick-fire questions and well-humoured laughter rippled around the Futurist theatre. As a question it was tired and uninspiring - on par with *How do you deal with writer’s block?* Or, *What advice would you give an aspiring writer?* But for Michael it struck to the heart of what kept him awake most nights.

He shifted in his seat, staring into space as if mobilising his thoughts. ‘For me it’s bitty... I get lots of ideas, but the best ones just hang around, developing their own gravity over time. The key elements arriving while I’m dozing in the sun or taking a bath. Like an elaborate jigsaw that fits together across time.’ *What bullshit*, he thought. If only it was true. He turned to his host and smiled, signalling he had no more to say on the matter. It was a quick-fire question and he’d given a quick-fire answer.

‘Well, it’s been a thoroughly illuminating and entertaining night,’ the host said. ‘And I think it’s safe to say, we’ve gotten to know Michael a little bit better.’ He turned to him now. ‘Thanks for tonight and may your run of literary delights continue.’

Here's hoping, Michael thought as the crowd applauded.

He hung around afterwards, signing books and smiling for photos. Then he left by the front doors, crossing Foreshore Road and taking to the sands beneath the Grand Hotel; waving to several fans that saw past his baseball-cap disguise. He strode out to meet the sea and planted his feet beyond reach of the incoming tide, looking to the horizon and reflecting on the last three hours. The event had sold out tonight and according to the Evening News, *An Audience with Michael Arunden* was the hottest ticket of the summer.

But he was a fraud.

At one point he'd been asked what he was currently working on. He'd joked he was working on his tan, before spitting an evasive pre-prepared answer that told them nothing: a new title that explored relationships and the human condition. A vague template he could fit almost anything into. But he'd told them the truth with his first breath – as his tan *was* the only thing he was working on. All there was to work on. He had plenty of ideas for another book, but none were any good. He'd written a string of four bestsellers set in Scarborough, but the truth was, he was nothing more than a ghost writer. The words were his, but the stories were someone else's.

The next morning, he visited his mother for breakfast and offered to take her Labrador Jess for a walk. But instead of taking his normal route around Manor Road Park he put her in the boot of his car and drove to the harbour, where he fired up his shiny new bowrider and steered it out into the bay. Jess explored the deck with her nose and soon flopped down, looking up with inquiring eyes. She'd never been in a boat before and was looking puzzled. No doubt missing the nosefest that was her local park. A few miles out he turned port-side to the beach and cut the engine. He took a four pack of strong lager and a box of dog treats from his cooler and sat, slugging the first tin in

three gulps whilst feeding biscuits to Jess. And there he waited, bobbing in the waves and looking east across the sparkling water.

It was a full hour before she appeared, rising from the waves with closed eyes which opened directly on him. He hadn't been sure if he wanted her to show up, but the dread he felt gave him the answer...

He'd met Elka five years earlier in roughly the same patch of sea, whilst relaxing in a different boat - a battered old semi-dory with blistering blue paint. She appeared while he was writing in the sun and he called over, asking if she needed help. He had assumed she was a swimmer pulled out by the currents, until she flashed a mermaid's tail.

'Oh, I see,' he laughed. 'I've never seen one of those before. I guess that's how you swam out so far.'

She surface-dived and as he watched the area of water where he expected her to reappear, she rocketed out of the waves to his left, soaking his shirt. He jerked back and on clearing his eyes saw her clinging to the side of the boat with her bare breasts pressed to the gunwale and a big smile on her face.

'Take a look,' she said, tipping her head to her nether regions.

He looked over, expecting to see an elaborate prosthetic strapped to her waist. But where her waist finished, a glistening tail continued, ending in a fin that curled out of the water. He looked back at her green hair, which he'd assumed to be the product of hair dye. But up close it was indistinguishable from the stringy green seaweed that coated tidal rocks. His face must have been a picture because she let out a big laugh and with a flick of her tail dived backwards with a graceful arching of her back, disappearing beneath the surface with barely a splash. He watched for several minutes, trying to process what he'd seen - every second she was underwater adding validity to his dawning conclusion. He wasn't sure how long he stared, but when her head broke the surface, he was sure no human could match such breath holding.

She swam back with that same smile, her pale skin freckled like a mackerel's underbelly.

'You're a mermaid!'

'And you're a human!' she giggled.

'Yes,' he replied with reflexive gravitas, as if he were the spokesman for the whole of humanity.

'You're not the first human I've spoken to you know.'

'Oh yeah. Who else knows about you?'

'A few. But not many.'

'How come I've never heard about you?'

'Will *you* tell others about me?'

An image flashed up of a newspaper front page with a picture of him below the line: Michael Arunden Recounts Mermaid Encounter. 'I guess not.'

'There you go then.'

'What about photos? What's stopping me taking a photo?'

'Nothing. But no one would believe them. And those you showed would ridicule you just the same.'

'How many of you are there?' he asked, looking around as if expecting to see a whole school.

'Lots – but we're spread out. The nearest north is Alka in Whitby. The nearest south is Eeeta in Filey. We meet every full moon but keep to ourselves the rest of the time.'

'Do they speak as well as you?'

'How do you expect us to speak?' she asked. 'All squeaky high like a dolphin?' she said, following up with a series of dolphin-esque clicks. 'Or all low like a whale?' she said, following with an implausibly low and haunting moan that defied her frame.

'Impressive. You sound just like them.'

'Why wouldn't I? We talk more with whales and dolphins than we do with humans.'

'What about?'

‘Where the fish are. Where the pollution is bad. What the fishing boats are up to. Are you a fisherman?’

‘No,’ he replied, waving a hand across his modest boat. ‘I wouldn’t know the first thing about fishing. This is purely for leisure. I like to be out on the open water. It helps me think. I’m a writer... but not a very good one.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘I make a decent living as a journalist. I can put together a good news story – you know, paint a clear picture and lay out both sides. Use the right words and make sense. All that stuff. But the dream’s always been to write great fiction and to that end I’m a failure. I’ve got plenty of ideas, but no good ones.’

‘Ha,’ she said swimming away on her back and flashing her breasts. ‘It’s the other way around for me. I know loads of good stories – but I can’t write. Mermaids don’t have anything like paper and if we did, we’d get it all wet.’

‘What are your stories about?’ he asked, genuinely curious.

‘Some are about my people, but I know many more about yours. There’s so much more going on with humans. You’re so caught up in yourselves and what you get up to never ceases to fascinate us.’

‘How do you know what we get up to, when you’re way out here?’

She smiled and flicked her hair. ‘The harbour mostly. More so from the days when it was packed with ships, when it was easier to hide. You’d call what we do eavesdropping. I know tales of smugglers, criminal conspiracies and secret liaisons. Tales of forbidden love and murderous jealousy. People used to talk more back then and we can hear just as well with our heads below water.’ Her eyes lit up. ‘I’ll show you. I’ll go under and you say something without raising your voice.’

She ducked below the waves like an excited child.

‘I don’t believe this is happening,’ he said. A sentence she laughingly repeated on resurfacing, her seaweed hair clinging to her face.

‘Also impressive. I’d like to hear one of your stories if you’d tell it.’

‘Which one?’

‘How would I know? You mentioned one about smugglers.’

‘Okay,’ she said, swimming to the boat and plunging straight in.

He sat there for two hours while she regaled him with a riveting story about a smuggling ring four hundred years ago. A tale that took him bent backed through a warren of tunnels beneath Sandside and to a time when bearded men waded through churning waters beneath moonless skies, unloading tiny boats anchored beyond the rocks. Contraband they carried in a silent chain up the treacherous Devil’s Trail and hid beneath trapdoors - in a network of interconnected cellars through which it could be easily distributed. A tale of bravery, intimidation and betrayal. A tale he would translate to the page over the next three months and which would become his first best seller *The Three Mariners*, from which he made his first million. His publishers pressed him for another book, but his bestseller was a literary embarrassment of riches and his genuine and committed attempts to follow it were laughable. Manuscripts that, should they have seen the light of day, would have ended his career.

It was a year later that he went out looking for Elka and when he called her name, she appeared as if she’d been waiting for him. He told her of his success with *The Three Mariners* and asked if she would tell another story. But her easy tongue had developed a shyness.

‘I’ll tell you another story,’ she smiled, ‘but you have to give me something in return.’

‘Anything,’ he replied, desperate to repeat his success. ‘I saw this waterproof headlamp last week and thought of you. It lets you see better underwater.’

‘And why would I need that?’ she said, green eyes suddenly brightening like LEDs.’

‘Oh right. I didn’t know you could do that. What then?’

‘I know what you value. I’ve heard your music and seen your fancy screens on the pier. But that sort of thing is of no use out here. Our pleasures come mostly through taste and smell. But because of your pollution and overfishing, our diet isn’t as broad as it used to be. Tunny fish used to be our staple, but you fished them out of existence. I crave new tastes now.’

He brightened, remembering his pack up and reaching for his bag. ‘I’ve got a banana and a biscuit in here.’

‘No. We can’t stomach anything like that. It’s got to be meat.’

‘Well, you’re in luck then. I brought a ham sandwich as well.’

‘Not that either,’ she said wrinkling her nose. ‘We don’t eat dead things. That would be horrible.’

‘I see. I could get you some goldfish.’

‘Fish? You think I want fish. I was thinking something more exotic.’

‘Like what?’

‘Something I haven’t had before.’

‘Like rabbit,’ he said, saying the first thing that came into his head.

‘What’s rabbit?’

‘A rabbit’s a furry thing with big floppy ears. People used to eat them all the time but not so much these days.’

She looked thoughtful. ‘I’ve never heard of rabbit, but it sounds good.’

‘Oh.’

‘What’s wrong, can’t you get one?’

‘I could get one, but it’s just...’

‘Just what? You didn’t hesitate to offer fish. Do you value fish less than rabbits?’

‘No,’ he said in quick reply, conscious of her hidden tail.

‘Good, then rabbit’s what I want. How big are they?’

‘About this, by this,’ he said, framing a space with his hands.

‘In that case, I’ll take two. And not dead ones.’

He told the lady in the pet shop they were a present for children he didn't have and as well as a cage he bought food, sawdust and a water dispenser that would see little use. It had taken him a week to get to this point as he didn't think himself capable of feeding live rabbits to a mermaid. Rabbits were butchered all the time and as a card-carrying carnivore it shouldn't have bothered him. But Elka wanted to eat them alive – an idea that became all the more unpalatable after seeing the rabbits playing in their cage. He thought it might involve breaking some law and at the very least, he was sure the RSPCA would have something to say about it.

He took the rabbits to the harbour the very next day, a cloth tied over the cage, so no one could see them.

'Did you bring the rabbits?' Elka asked, the moment she emerged from a grey North Sea.

'I did.'

'Let's see.'

He lifted the cage onto the side of the boat and her eyes lit up. 'Take them out and throw them in!'

'The story first.'

She tore her eyes away from the rabbits to look at him. 'You took my story about smugglers and made it into a book. And as you can tell from that story, I understand humans and their greed for shiny things. Your scheming and conniving. Your tricks and betrayals.'

'We're not all like that.'

'Maybe. But if I've learnt anything, it's to protect my interests and trust no one. We agreed that if you give me rabbits, I'd give you a story.'

He smiled. He wasn't sure what he was really planning, but any chance of returning to dry land with the rabbits was gone now. 'Okay.'

He put the cage back on the deck, took the first rabbit out and held it over the side. He looked at the squirming life in his hands, it adorable

floppy ears and warm silky fur. An innocent life - unaware of its predicament.

‘What are you waiting for? Throw it in!’

He threw the rabbit, snatching the other one from the cage before he could regret what he had done and tossing it after its friend. It plunged and reappeared a second later, its ears plastered back and its limbs frantically fighting the current. But then it disappeared again, this time yanked down by something below.

Elka reappeared after what seemed like an eternity, parting seaweed from her face. ‘They were good, but I should have asked for three. I tell a better story with a full stomach.’ She swam to the boat. ‘So how about a love story this time?’

Michael didn’t answer. He was still staring after the rabbits, imagining their panicky last moments: torn apart and eaten alive in a cold and murky sea.

‘Well, do you want a story or not?’

‘Yes, go on.’

‘Years ago, packet boats transported mail and passengers between Scarborough and Newcastle. This is the story of the captain of one of those boats who fell in love with the harbour master’s daughter. It’s a story of forbidden love and blackmail...’

For the next four hours she told her story and as before he was riveted to the spot, staring up at the clouds as her words poured out. He returned to dry land and the very same day put pen to paper for what would become his second bestseller, *The Newcastle Packet*.

Michael made two more successful exchanges with Elka, giving her three guinea pigs and a gerbil for his third book and a chicken for his fourth. He became resolved to the sacrifices, each one easier than the previous one. A small price to pay for an international bestseller. And he had quieted his conscience by anonymously donating twenty

percent of his income to animal charities. Anonymously, because given his selfish motive, he couldn't bear any praise.

All was working smoothly until his last visit to Elka, when he refused to bring her a dog.

'Why don't you take one yourself?' he said. 'They're always swimming in the sea.'

'We don't hunt that close to shore for risk of being seen.'

'I can't feed you a dog. It wouldn't be right.'

'Why not?'

'Dogs and humans are close. Closer than rabbits or guinea pigs. And we don't eat them.'

'Well, a dog's what I want. No dog, no story.' And with that she swam off in a sulk...

He had no intention of speaking to Elka ever again, but now, two years later, he was back with his mother's dog, Jess. The aged Labrador who'd been just a puppy when he moved out. Sacrificing a dog to forward his writing career was not a line he'd been prepared to cross. But as the months piled up without a new book in sight, he'd allowed the idea to take space in his head. The truth was, he liked being in the limelight – giving interviews, plugging new books and rubbing shoulders with the stars. And as interest in him began to dwindle, his mood had deteriorated into depression. He tried several times to produce something of his own, but the results were worse than before – as if writing Elka's stories had degraded his creativity. And it was now clear, that the only choice before him was Elka's deal or an intolerable decent into obscurity. So, after much agonising, he had decided to take her up on her offer. His first thought was to get a stray from the RSPCA, but he decided he had no stomach for such planning. The only feasible option was his mother's Labrador. She was getting old, turning into a fireside ornament that was becoming reluctant to go for a walk. He could take her out on the boat and tell his mother there'd been an