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Making Shore

Written by Sara Allerton

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SARA ALLERTON

MAKING SHORE

Saraband

‘Human speech is like a cracked cauldron on which
we bang out tunes that make bears dance, when
what we want is to move the stars to pity.’
Gustave Flaubert

CHAPTER 1

THE MEETING

I had imagined that she would already be there, waiting for me. She was not, and it unsettled me completely. Paralysed by the prospect of such a meeting – its most probable course, its outcome – my mind had clung to the only version of events it could afford to contemplate and that could go no further than finding her waiting there and blurting out what I would have to say. I had allowed myself to consider only what was necessary and it had not included any of the finer detail: not my reception, not her reaction and not her initial, if temporary, absence.

I sat down heavily and felt the certainty of my resolve break up and seep away. Closing my eyes, I leant my elbows on the table and covered my face. The tips of my fingers sought the sunken sockets around my eyes and began to press their way along the grainy irregularities of bone beneath the fleshless skin.

Perhaps it would not matter. Only I would ever know. I pressed my fingers hard against my eyeballs until they bulged, patterning with pain, and once again indulged the thought that I had fought so hard against, but which alone soothed and slowed the endless circular motion of my mind's distress. Perhaps I would be forgiven

for saying nothing. For seeking and admitting clemency. Had he had the chance, perhaps he would have granted that the spirit of such a promise given might be more important, after all, than the absolute adherence to the dictate of its letter.

Either way, it had made a coward out of me. I had pushed it away, staved it off. It had been weeks since her letter had arrived, too many weeks, but still it was too soon. I was not ready. I had told myself that I needed time to muster strength, but what I meant was courage. I had dreaded it. After all the horror, even after all the horror, I dreaded it.

I blamed Joe for having left me with this graceless legacy. I had been brave, everybody said so. And hadn't I learned after everything that real courage is not, after all, the absence of fear so much as the refusal to give it rein? Complacently perhaps, I told myself that I had done with fear. I had run its gauntlet, parried its every thrust. I had feared the stealth of U-boats, stalking, far out to sea. Feared the maverick ocean. Her moods and whims. The unrelenting heat in the dawn and the black lapping of the night. Inexorable thirst. Slow starvation. I had feared for my sanity, for that of the others. For my life. And for Joe's.

It hadn't killed me. I was still here, fiddling with the doily in this calm, cool café. There were normal people all about me here, and as I had gained weight and begun gingerly to bask in rudimentary relief, I saw that I might become one of them again. Fear could not touch me now. Except within my dreams.

And yet I sat in the café, waiting for her, fighting the leaden lurching of my guts every time the door swung open.

I tried not to look up too jerkily, willing my eyes and fingers to keep steady on the stiff paper lace and fell to cursing Joe for making me swear, and to remembering.

Remembering. How could I ever forget?

I felt the quiet reproach of her presence not two feet from the table long before I could bring myself to look up at her. Sweat, unexpectedly cold, prickled along my hairline and, in bringing a trembling hand up quickly to dispense with it, I sought to cover, just for one moment longer, the shame in my disarray. I watched from beneath

the slow, deliberate rhythm of my hand across my brow, the hem of her coat rising and falling almost imperceptibly at her knee.

'Mr Clarke? Cubby Clarke?' My own name, as she said it, with such eager, sharp-edged clarity, surprised me somehow and I flinched. I had not heard his name for me since I had got off the *Barneveldt* in Barrow. The fingers of my free hand clenched involuntarily around the remnants of the doily, and the fork at my elbow clanked obtrusively to the floor as I half rose, sweaty-palmed and stomachless, to greet her.

'Maggie.' I gestured towards the chair opposite mine and waited for her to sit. She edged her way onto a quarter of the seat and put her hands, which clutched and unclutched her gloves, on the table in front of her. I sat down again awkwardly and, unable still to look right at her, I watched her restless hands.

'Why did you say…'

'Tea?' My voice, overloud, jutted out across hers.

She nodded and waited quietly while I beckoned the waitress over. Clutching and unclutching. Having ordered, we sat, apparently with nothing to say. The tea came and I busied myself with the pouring and the fussing.

'Sugar?'

'No. No, thank you.'

Tea. What I wouldn't have done for a cup of tea then. It was unimaginable.

As I stirred and stirred with inordinate interest, I chanced a glance at her. She wasn't at all what I had been expecting.

The windswept desperation of the figure I had encountered so briefly on the dockside had pursued me ever since but I had taken in her mental anguish only and, crippled by my own, had been in no fit state to consider her physical presence much at all. Joe had talked to me of beauty, but then Joe had been in love.

There was a quiet earnestness in her bearing, which would make it easy for her to go unnoticed. She was older than me, by four or five years or so; but then Joe was older still. She no longer had that glow of confidence that girls my age exuded; that innate self-assurance in the invincibility of their youth.

She was dark-haired and olive-skinned. Her facial features, taken individually, could not have been described as pretty, or even sweet. Her brow was wide and her nose too flat while the large, oval shape of her face seemed overawed by the wayward waviness in her hair, strands of which refused doggedly to remain tucked behind her apparently tiny ears, wholly inadequate for the job. But these irregularities, far from undermining her personal appeal, seemed only to have added to it, for the overall impression she gave was one of a woman who, long used to viewing them as flaws, no longer saw them as important. This artless lack of vanity had imbued her with a physical ease, an ingenuousness that was mistaken, for her attributes taken as a whole made her unusually, if unobtrusively, engaging.

'Thank you for coming to meet me… um, Cub?' she tried it out, uncomfortable.

'Brian. Brian's fine,' I said, too quickly. 'Cub' was too raw, too close, and given the apparent impossibility now of avoiding that which still I might have done almost anything to avoid, I had to keep her distant.

But she had composed herself in the break for tea and her voice was now more even. I slid my eyes up to the middle distance beyond her, avoiding hers, and waited.

'You look a lot better than you did.'

'I am getting stronger… yes.' I nodded stiffly. 'It'll take a long time.'

My answer, only half-heard, faded with the smile of vague encouragement that had hovered briefly about her lips. She was already at her next question and those we both knew lay beyond it.

'Why did you say that at the docks? That you couldn't help me? When you knew?'

There was nothing that I could say to her. I could not explain it. There was no language in the world that would adequately translate the reasons for my reticence.

And so I did not answer, but like the coward I felt myself to be, I took refuge in a question, shrinking from the words I still did not actually know if, when it came to it, I would have the heart to say.

'Why were you there? When you knew he wouldn't be?'

She paused for one moment, contemplating my prevarication, but I kept my eyes away and conceded nothing. Then she said quietly, 'I just needed to see for myself. Just in case… you know.' She tutted. 'Silly, really. False hope.' Shrugging, she forced a little smile which subsided almost as soon as it had begun.

'False hope? I know a lot about that,' I said grimly. She didn't know what to say to that so she didn't say anything. She stared instead abstractedly at her hands as if they were not her own. They continued to work at the gloves.

'But how did you know? What ship we would be coming on?' I asked. 'It's classified.'

'My sister's husband is at the War Office. He is a good man.' I could feel her eyes upon me, intent, sizing me up.

And again, silence. It's curious, but people say that when two people are only interested in each other in a room, all other noise is soundless. Curious and true. The silence that fell between us was loud, weighty. I wasn't aware of the other diners, their conversations and the general clattering of crockery. It must have been going on. I was aware only that she, unsuspecting, was anxiously awaiting misinformation that I was ashamed to give.

'Billy Rawlins said you and Joe were close.'

'You know Billy?' I interrupted her, confused, but she shook her head.

'I saw him when you docked. Somebody called his name. After you… after, I remembered it. I looked him up and went to talk to him. He couldn't tell me much but he told me that I should speak to you.'

Billy Rawlins. The name sounded like one I might have heard years ago but couldn't quite place. An echo of someone. Yet not so very long ago I had been living in such close proximity with him that I could recall every single sinew on his skinny little carcass. I had come to know them all, maybe as intimately as their own mothers did. Their mothers perhaps could have forgiven them. I could not. And not least because we had been the ones who'd made it. We had survived.

Billy Rawlins was sharp-eyed, flinty. We had seen each other as men do not wish to be seen or remembered. I never wanted to see him – or any one of them – again.

'I wanted to know…' She stopped abruptly and I waited.

'You were with him when he died, weren't you? You were with him.' She repeated this last quietly, but not so quietly that I didn't hear the heightening of her voice.

It required an answer, and for the first time I looked right at her and saw in that moment all that Joe had loved.

An almost unnatural, unnerving beauty lit her up from beneath the depths of her astonishingly large, dark eyes. I saw who she was. She had been speaking of him and there it was, shining out at me: the glittering radiance that was her passion. All that she had expected was there, all that she had hoped for and all that she had left to dream, a silent charter of hopeless hope played out in the ever-darkening shades of brown. Water that had gathered but did not fall added a brittle brilliance to the strident, luminous intensity flickering within.

I could see with a clarity that physically shook me, how she had loved him. She would have loved him no matter how many days they had been afforded, she would have married him, borne his children and she would have loved him. She would have loved him into old age and she would have loved him until the day that she died. With an unflinching honesty that was almost crude, her eyes betrayed her very core. She was beautiful and I understood.

I am a terrible liar. I always have been. In fact, I am almost pathologically truthful and it got me into trouble a couple of times both on the lifeboat and in Sebikotane. Joe used to say don't ask Cub, he'll tell you. That's what he used to call me. Cubby Clarke. Cub. Because of McGrath. Because I was the youngest. It seemed like centuries ago. I used to worry that if I ever did end up being a prisoner of war, would I be able to lie convincingly enough not to give away things I shouldn't? Why then, oh why, Joe, did you leave me with this? I knew why. He knew that I would do it, that was why.

I became uncomfortably aware as I gazed at her, that she was waiting for me to say something. I looked down at my untouched tea.

'Yes,' I said. 'I was with him.' She breathed out softly and put her hands one on top of the other over her gloves.

'Was he… in pain?'

'Yes. It was painful, yes.' Her eyes, which I could feel were scanning my downturned face for the slightest scrap that might afford some insight, forbade me from trying to dissemble in this. I would stick to the truth as long as I could.

'Was he frightened?'

'Not then, no.' She drew herself up and tried to tuck some strands of thick, unruly hair away, swiftly, absently. They fell back into her face immediately. She rewrapped her coat around her, tight, and almost through gritted teeth she forced out what she had come for.

'Did he say anything? You know, for me?' The desperation in such a naked plea made me want to cry out to her.

'Say anything?' God, did I have to make her beg?

'A message. For me. Something.' Her voice was thin, alone. She too took refuge in staring at her unwanted tea, some hair still bobbing out in front of her eyes. I noticed that most of it had been mashed into a sort of makeshift bun at the back of her head, but there was far too much of it for her ever to have got it tidy. Having hurled the question into the air, I knew she was willing it with all her being to land the right side up.

I sat on my clenched fists, my legs and buttocks so tightly squeezed together that I felt the pain in my stomach.

'No.' I paused and suddenly, the strange, deeply sickening sensation of dislocation that comes with no food, dehydration and bludgeoned hope settled cold across my bowels. It is the chronic kind of fear that takes up residence inside you, quickening your mind and darkening your soul. You stop noticing it's there until the balance of your circumstance shifts again slightly, one way or another, and fear spurts out of every pore, corrupting your behaviour and drying up humanity. You are simply afraid in entirety and

nothing, nothing can allay it. My mouth went slack, saliva-less. For a second, I felt his fingers tightening again around my forearm, as if he were here, pricking my conscience, steeling my resolve. The hair on the back of my neck prickled.

'I'm sorry.' I looked up at her bowed head. Her hair really was a mess. 'No, he didn't.'

There was silence. She shook her head quickly as though shaking off my lie, as though trying not to let it in.

Then: 'He must have talked to you. About me. On ship? On the lifeboat? You were his friend,' she coaxed. Somewhere, on some other airwave, every single nerve in her body was shrieking, high-pitched and searing, 'please!'

'Look,' I said, switching her off, looking away towards the waitress, the umbrella stand, the door. 'I don't quite know what it is you want to hear but…' I put my hands up and apart, attempting careless ignorance, affecting not to understand. Hesitating, I glanced back up towards her and winced at the raw, expectant hope inscribed on every muscle in her face. I tried to lick my lips.

'But I can't tell you… Joe…' Striving to swallow, I closed my eyes and the haggard image of his face, burnt onto the backdrop of my mind, appeared before me, forcing me to look once more into his eyes. Wide and bloodied, charged with all the fixed ferocity of passionate intent, they bore into me, they willed me on.

'He talked about a lot of people. He was popular… you must know that. But I'm sorry, I don't remember that he mentioned you… or any other girl…' My voice trailed away and, putting my elbow on the table, I covered my mouth with my hand that I might hide the next words from her. I tried to clear my throat. '… In particular,' I said.

It was the best that I could do.

For a minute, we both stared dumbly at the tiny, poisonous seed of doubt I'd cast down between us, a seed that, however obliquely, implied if not casual indifference then worse, whispered infidelity. It unfurled before our eyes and took root.

She looked up at me sharply and after a moment, sat back in her chair. She stared at me and as I watched her, I saw hurt catch

fire and crackle across her features. Her mouth formed a little 'o' and, as her face flushed dark with heat, she turned it from me.

Then she laughed. A high, shallow laugh that had no truth behind it and I noticed that she shut her eyes in its delivery. 'Any other girl …? In particular? What does that mean?' She shook her head, 'What are you trying to say?'

'Look,' I said, stage quiet, trying to stifle the alarm her rising voice aroused in me. 'I can't tell you anything much more than…'

'He told me he loved me. When he left. I believed him.' Effectively her ace, she threw this across the table at me, interrupting, almost snarling. Protecting herself, protecting him.

Shrugging as carelessly as I could, I folded my arms. 'He said a lot of things. That's what I'm trying to tell you, he talked about a lot of… people.' I leaned towards her quickly. Get it said. Get it done. He said make sure. He told me to make sure.

'You know what he was like. Couldn't hardly ever shut him up most of the time. He'd been at sea a lot. And sailors… well, they get a reputation, don't they?' May God forgive me. I closed my eyes and my teeth involuntarily clenched. 'All I am saying is, don't waste your life using him as your yardstick. He wasn't worth it. Do you understand me? I haven't any message for you because… well, because from the way he talked… it just didn't seem to me that there was anyone… I just don't think that he could have been entirely…'

My gaze, which had become so assiduously preoccupied by every other minute detail of the room, the other diners and their tables, the plates of food arriving at them – everything in fact, other than that which most demanded it – inadvertently slid at that moment back towards her face, and my eyes were caught and inextricably held by the agony of understanding I saw hardening in hers.

Appalled, ashamed, disabled, I could not say it. The word, which would have unequivocally encompassed all that he had wanted me to say, started and then stalled at the back of my throat. Faithful. It would not come. I could not do it. I could not. To denounce as faithless and unworthy the man who I had found to be possibly

the most faithful of all men and to do it before this woman with her huge and faithful eyes – it was worse than base. It was a violation from which my spirit recoiled.

But she had seen my struggle, and her puckered face, already so reduced and gaunt with grief, creasing every moment further with incredulity and with pain, crumpled suddenly with comprehension. Intuitively swift, she had glimpsed at what it was that I had meant to say and innocent still, quite probably ascribed my inability to speak to some misguided attempt at chivalry. I had not said it but what I did not say had been enough. Though I had not quite done what Joe had asked of me, I had clearly forced her up against the conclusion he had wanted her to make. I did not need to say any more. Had I struck her, it would have pained her less. She stared at me, her preposterously beautiful eyes fixed upon my face, stupefied.

At last, her hands were still.

How long we might have sat there was anybody's guess. Neither one of us could quite believe the implications of my silence and each, frozen in our separate grief, seemed incapable of ending it. We must have made a desolate tableau but since neither of us moved and the café was slowly emptying, the waitress took it upon herself to crash in and clear away our plates. She was big and clumsy and she clattered across us roughly. Nobody spoke, but all the while, without moving, Maggie held me in her great, dark gaze. Finally, the waitress lumbered off.

Abruptly, Maggie looked away, as if suddenly she could no longer bear to look at me.

'I don't believe you,' she said flatly.

But there is a fundamental, nonetheless self-destructive flaw in the makeup of many of us that can brook no such close assault. For no matter what we may know to be incontrovertibly true about a person, when another casts aspersions on that truth, self-doubt will settle itself around the edges of that knowledge and begin its insidious work. Gradually, so very gradually, its whispering tendrils weave their way in and around until even the purest supposition, undermined by suggestion, time and re-hashed memory, is strangled.

Even as she said 'I don't believe you,' I heard the uncertainty in her voice and saw the imprints of fleet-footed doubt make tracks across her face.

She got up to go and as she turned away I stumbled to my feet and, reaching out my hand towards her, blurted 'You have beautiful eyes. He said that about you. I remember now.' I had to give her something. Surely he would have allowed me that. I couldn't let her go and have her think him entirely without honour.

She stopped but did not turn back.

'Thank you,' she whispered, very gently, as if she were speaking from some far-off place. 'You have been kind.' There wasn't the slightest trace of irony in her voice.

My eyes misted over. I have trouble with that these days. That and sleep. By the time I had blinked it away, she was gone.

I sat back down. Her green gloves lay listless on the table. She had left them behind.