

# Breathing Room

by Mary Carroll Moore

Tonight the paradise dream woke him again. Mel sometimes cried out as he emerged from its depths, and Kate, who rarely slept deeply anymore, woke too.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. It's all right. Go back to sleep."

"Nightmares?" That was all she had because of the drugs she took for pain. Mel said no, his wife sighed and rustled under the blankets for a while; her shallow ragged breathing resumed.



Mel loved the nights when Kate didn't wake, when he could linger in half-sleep and reconstruct the dream in his barely wakened mind. The camera panning fields of early morning stars, faint in a slowly brightening tropical sky, then zooming across miles of ocean. Like a soundtrack fading in, voices grew louder. Mel saw himself on a boat, dressed for scuba diving, standing beside the same dark-haired woman. As the boat rocked in a swell, it threw her slightly against him, and he breathed the fragrance of her hair.

The smell haunted him, vivid and exotic, the essence of health and vigor missing since the antiseptic hospital odor took up residence in their house. The scent reminded him of the early years before their marriage, when Kate was in her twenties, getting her pilot's license, going to cooking school. She laughed loudly back then, wore her blond hair past her shoulders, a waterfall of shimmery light. He loved to stand behind her, slowly stroking the waves with a big wood-handled brush.

He thought of the fragrance of hair, how long it had been, and his eyes stung.

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The luminescent display on the bedside clock said 3:15. He knew from her breathing that Kate was still awake. Finally she spoke from the darkness.

"You said we could get away. Take a last trip. I'd like that."

Mel tried to slip back into the dream, but he was too alert. He turned toward her, reluctant.

"Someplace out of this cold and wind," she said. The Adirondacks were frozen in deep winter, the farm blanketed with snow drifts, cold cutting the land like a knife edge. "I'm always shivering. I want to bake in the heat."

"Ellen doesn't want you to travel far."

His wife reached out under the wool blankets and found his hand. "It's my life, what's left of it. I need some new memories. Something I can take with me that's not pain meds and people in white jackets."

"OK," Mel said. "Do you want to bring Molly?" Their daughter was deep into college classes.

"Just us," Kate said.

"Anything you want specially to do?"

"I want . . ." He heard her take a big breath then blow it out carefully. He thought of a child poised over a birthday cake making a wish. "To be free of all this." She paused, as if she was going to say more but couldn't.

Wind buffeted the house, and cold air leaked into the room. Mel burrowed deeper under the comforter. In the dark warmth, the dream surfaced again. He could feel the warm caress of ocean-scented air, hear sharp cries of seabirds, see the endless white sand.

"Do you want me to surprise you?" he said finally. "Find a place?"

"I'd like that. Surprise me." He heard her smile, visualizing it. "Not Australia, but maybe an island somewhere. You could dive again. You used to love that."

"And money?"

"Oh, Mel," she said. "Let's not bother with that, after all we've been through. Just once, OK?"

Mel lightly squeezed Kate's bony fingers. Thinking about diving gave him the same relaxed and limitless feeling as the dream, a sensation that began in his chest and oozed like lotion soothing parched skin. He imagined being under water, self-contained, feeling the powerful push of his fins through the ocean. As he closed his eyes and listened to his wife's breathing, he knew he could find them the perfect place.

■ ■ ■



The morning they arrived on the tiny island called Bonaire, part of a trio off the coast of Venezuela, Mel was swept by déjà vu. White beaches wove like ribbons along the shoreline, the harsh tropical light glinting pink and gold on azure water. He saw fish as colorful as flowers beneath the slow waves; he imagined the layers of green and blue that would capture their movement on paper.

The déjà vu continued when they were ushered into their suite: the view out the double glass doors was strangely familiar. Even the scent of the breeze wafting up the beach onto their sheltered stone terrace was something he had smelled before.

He settled Kate in bed with a book, her thin hairless body wrapped in the hotel's white robe, the cotton cap stretched over her bare head to keep off the chill. He opened the curtains so she could see the glimmer of blue water, then went in search of the dive shop to book for the next morning.

He walked slowly, squinting against the glare of the tropical sunlight. Mounds of hot sand on the wooden boardwalk stung the bottoms of his bare feet; his heavy mesh bag of scuba gear bumped against one leg. A couple was standing against the weathered wooden railing of the pier,

their backs to him. He studied the way the light fell on the dark-haired woman, her shiny hair against tanned shoulders. The movement of her hand, lifting slowly to brush her hair behind her ears, was familiar.

Mel felt a quick surge of envy as her carefree laugh rang out. It'd been a couple of years since he'd laughed that way. He paused, unsure now, setting down the bag which felt intolerably heavy, squinting at the shop near the end of the pier, its wooden door wide open. Perhaps he should wait to book the first dive. Practice a bit in the pool. Get stronger, more sure of his skills. He could go back to the room now, read to Kate, try again tomorrow.

The woman pivoted toward him, smiled. Her even teeth glinted in the sunlight. Mel's bag slid to the wooden boardwalk. It was Rose Stewart.

Compared to the woman in real life, her photograph had been almost colorless. Maybe why it had been such a hard painting. Impossible to capture the vibrancy of skin and hair. He had given up, never returned the photograph she had sent, never even billed her for the portrait time.

The woman's companion came over. "Need some help, mate?" The accent was unmistakably Australian. "Booking for tomorrow's dive, are you? We're on as well. The boat's supposed to be here at ten sharp. They have lockers at the shop." He hoisted Mel's gear bag onto one shoulder. "Check this lot if you'd like."

Mel nodded and began walking behind him. As the two men approached her, Rose held out her hand. "I'm Rose Stewart and that's Scotty. We're from Sydney."

"I know," Mel said.

Rose looked startled then her face cleared. "The painter. Martin?"

"Melvin Fisher."

"From Heron Island." Rose was smiling broadly now. "Two years ago. We were on the same dive boat."

"Diving's a small world, eh?" Scotty clapped Mel's shoulder with a huge tanned hand.

"You saw that reef shark we were all keen on finding. Wasn't it brilliant! Not so good here—at least while that storm's stuck over the mainland. Visibility's about ninety. Bommies all over the place."

"Coral reefs," Rose translated.

"I remember," Mel said. "This is my first time out since Heron. At least in warm water." He noticed his hand, held up to shade his eyes, was trembling. He quickly lowered it to rest in his shorts' pocket.

"Where's your dive buddy?" Scotty looked past Mel down the pier.

"Diving alone this trip. My wife . . ." He cleared his throat. There seemed to be no way to begin telling these people. "My wife's not well."

"You can buddy with us tomorrow." Rose patted Mel's arm in a friendly way, then left her hand there for a moment. "We're all experienced."

Mel looked down at the slender hand against his skin. Rose's nails were long, a pale shimmery pink color. She shone with vitality; her bare arms, tanned and freckled, glowed against the wetsuit's short sleeve, strong and ready to reach for the next experience. He thought of Kate's hands nestled safely under the wool blanket as they fell asleep at home. He would reach out and take one, holding it carefully so he wouldn't crush the tiny-boned fingers.

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The first dive was good, easier than Mel expected, a loop underwater called Marie's Run. They had virtually no current to fight at sixty feet so Rose, Scotty, and Mel floated along gently, hands clasped against their weight belts, pointing at a coral formation or school of silver barracuda flashing by. They stayed down almost an hour, Scotty's navigation bringing them up right alongside the boat. Mel felt a thrill of well-being in his torso, like he remembered feeling after

good sex. The three of them hoisted their spent tanks and fins onto the boat deck and climbed the ladder, plunking down tiredly on the benches.

"Super dive." Scotty grinned. "Perfect navigation."

"Scotty loves to come up right next to the boat." Rose pulled off her dive gloves and began to towel her dark, wet hair. "Today it was easy to stay on course. No underwater current for once."

"Only beginners lose the boat."

"It was great," Mel said, turning his face up toward the sun. He felt so light, untroubled. He unzipped his wetsuit jacket and shrugged out of it.

"Does your wife dive?" Rose asked. "I can't remember if she was at Heron too." She laughed. "It's been forever."

With a start, Mel realized that Kate had completely slipped his mind. For how long? An hour? Two? Even while he painted or met with Johnson's master class in the old man's drafty studio, she was present, along with a myriad of worries. But when he was underwater, out here in the hot blue of the Caribbean, Kate did not exist.

He wanted to tell them how he studied the light on her face during the day, watched the rise and fall of the white sheet over her chest each night, just to make sure she was alive, still breathing. But instead he just said, "Not anymore."

When all the divers were on board, they began to motor back to the pier. And when the boat hit a wave and lurched, as in the dream, Mel instinctively reached for Rose. He took a deep breath, trying to inhale the fragrance of her drying hair.

■ ■ ■

That evening they got ready for their first dinner at the resort's restaurant. Mel shaved while Kate, standing at the double mirror, lined her lashless eyes with coffee-colored pencil.

"Did you see the hawks over the cliffs today?"

Mel concentrated on the curve in his chin. "No."

"I want to come back as a hawk," Kate said. "All that swooping. Or maybe a jackrabbit. They get pretty high up in the air."

"My grandfather used to hunt them."

"Hawks?"

"Jackrabbits. I thought that new book you're reading said you can't come back as a lower life form."

Kate shrugged, edging the pencil to the corner of her lid. "Maybe not. But I decided what I want to be buried with."

Mel's hand jerked. He reached for a towel and held it to a cut in his chin.

His wife moved out to the bedroom where her journal lay open on the dressing table. "I made a list." She leaned down and tore a sheet out, brought it in to Mel.

He read through the list. "All of this is at home," he said without thinking.

"So I can't die here." She bent over the sink, coughing thickly. He glanced toward the oxygen tank that stood like a sentry by the bedroom door, but she waved him back. "It's passing."

"What brought all this on?"

"That book about Egyptian burials."

He shook his head. "You're into some weird stuff, Katie."

"It's very real to me." Her voice was serious. "I had this great dream while I was napping this afternoon. Vivid as anything. All these people were walking through a kind of way station, carrying things." Her voice got softer, and he leaned closer. "I saw Sammy. There was so much I wanted to tell him. All I could do was ask what he was carrying." Love for their son played softly across Kate's face as she fastened a long string of coral beads around her neck. "Sam wasn't a baby anymore. I'd say he was Molly's age, about nineteen. A beautiful young man." She smiled. "He still had that jackknife of yours. He showed it to me. He told me the rules: a person had to bring

the five most important things from their life. I had a hard time deciding what I wanted to take as my five things.”

He still stared at the journal. Words swam like fish in front of his eyes. “Sketches?” he asked.

Kate laughed a little. “I saved those ones you did of me, when we first got together.”

“What for?”

“A talisman. Someday you might dream of me. I’d look like that, I hope. How I used to be.” His wife sat down heavily on the padded silk bench in front of the dressing table. She leaned on her elbows, aiming with both forefingers at the face in the mirror. “Before this.”

“Don’t.” He put one hand on her shoulder. She shrugged and it fell away.

“Facts are facts. I look like an alien. The first chemo was bad enough. This one took the prize. Remember a few months ago when I was still going into town, and those teenagers gave me the once-over?”

“Too much testosterone.”

“Then the woman in the mall that time who whispered to her friend, ‘What’s the matter with *her?*’ ”

“You should be proud of what you’ve been through.” Mel thought of the unknown woman and briefly wanted to do her harm. He reached over and spread his palm over Kate’s bare scalp. It pulsed under his hand, the bulk of it so small, like a child’s.

“I just want to be normal again.”

She was looking at their reflections, raising the drawn-in lines on the naked skin of her eyebrow ridges. She played with one silver earring laying against her right cheek. He had gotten her those earrings from an art gallery in Santa Fe last year. The earrings had thin strands like tiny wind chimes and made a slight noise as she walked. He used to like the sound.

*If it was just lung cancer, we could operate, because it grows in patches, a patch here, there,* Ellen had told them, pointing to Kate's last X-ray. *The first chemo slowed things down, gave her a few years.* She had shaken her head, eyes sad behind her glasses. *Breast cancer covers the lungs like scatter shot. It's everywhere at once.*

Tiny tears were budding at the corners of his wife's eyes. The late sun glinted off them, making them sparkle. She stood up, impatiently knuckling the tears away. "I'll go redo my makeup." She steadied herself on the edge of dressing table, then walked to the bathroom, shutting the door softly behind her.

*It's the small things that break your heart,* he thought. Small things underlined despair in a way you couldn't prepare for.

■ ■ ■

Scotty and Rose suggested a dive for the next afternoon, and Mel dreamed all night about the cool weightlessness of sixty feet of water.

But only Rose was standing at the pier, sleek in a new black shortie wetsuit.



"Where's Scotty?" Mel asked as they carried their gear onto the dive boat and began attaching their regulators to the tanks.

"Took off for the day with someone he met at backgammon last night." Rose's voice was muffled, her head bent over her wetsuit zipper, then she shrugged, smiling up at Mel. "Whatever. We don't need him. We'll have fun, won't we?"

"Sure."

The steel air tanks lined the sides of the dive boat like grey metal soldiers. As he tightened his regulator, Mel heard the satisfying whoosh of air pressure. They tested their mouthpieces and their buoyancy compensators. Then Rose sat back on the wooden bench in front of her tank,

brushing a strand of hair from her face. Mel was again struck by the blue of her eyes, how the color echoed the sea around him, how light sparked off her skin in glints of white and gold.

As she stretched her arms over her head and Mel saw the rise of her chest, the healthy breasts, two of them, the normalcy hit him like a punch. He swallowed past the sudden ache in his throat and turned to look at the ocean, blinking quickly.

"I hope it's clear today," Rose said. "That storm off Caracas is starting to stir sand up." She leaned back against the tank. "You've been here two days, and we haven't met Kate, not even at dinner. Are you keeping her hidden on purpose?"

Mel stared at the ocean. Far out to sea there were swells, barely visible, the beginnings of waves miles deep, most hidden under the surface. They rose so gently that a person wouldn't even know the sea was moving until water reached rocks or shoreline. Then the effect of all that momentum became visible, a slow devouring of stone and sand.

"Kate's a pilot. Was a pilot. Before. We came down here because she's sick."

"What's she sick from?"

"Breast cancer metastasis." Mel rubbed his face with the back of a hand. "It started as a pea-sized lump." He held up his thumb and forefinger in a circle, let the hand fall limply to his lap. Rose reached over and placed hers on top, resting there like a small pink bird.

He watched Rose's hand pat and soothe, fluttering light as feathers on his skin. "She's been through chemo twice. She has a couple of months at most. Probably not even. It's pretty painful for her now."

Rose grimaced. "I'm so sorry. I think I could stand anything except pain."

The boat was filling with other divers. "The drugs turned her fingernails brown." He shook his head, as if this explained everything, and reached up to rub the back of his neck, tender from yesterday's sun.

Rose began fiddling with the regulator's mouthpiece, opening to let loose a rush of air then snapping it closed.

"Pretty soon Kate'll need one of those full time," Mel said.

"A regulator?"

"Oxygen. Her lungs are filling up."

"I can't imagine."

Mel inhaled as deep as he could, the reassuring expanse of sea air. "If it were me dying, Kate would never think of how relieved she'd be after it was all over. She's not like that." He stood up, turned away from the crowd on the boat, leaned over the railing.

"I think about starting again." Rose leaned a little against him as the boat rocked, then she rested her arms on the railing. Her voice deepened, the accent more pronounced. "Pressing rewind. A new life."

Mel closed his eyes, lifting his face to the sun. This was the dream. The swaying boat, the impossibly blue ocean around them, his bare feet anchored on the deck, the waves rolling toward them from the distance. Watching himself reach out his arms to catch Rose as she was tossed sideways. Smelling again her hair, her skin, her health. Breathing the expanse of her.

"Let's have a great dive today. It's Emerald Cove." Rose smiled. "Good for barracuda and rays. More current, though. We have to stay together, make sure we don't get pulled too far from the entry point or we'll miss our boat ride back." She grinned at him, tugged hair out of her wetsuit collar, and took a deep breath. "Isn't it beautiful out here?"

■ ■ ■

For a long time that night, Mel watched his wife sleep. He could hear the surf pounding sand on the beach. In the moonlight Kate's face looked faded, as if her body was becoming translucent, a certain residue clearing out of her being. Dark fatigue still shadowed the skin under

her eyes, but she was full of this radiance, especially now when she slept. He was fascinated by how dreams registered on a person's face when they were unconscious in sleep. He could read brief flashes of fear, peacefulness, even joy as it shifted from the inner images.

Mel found a piece of blank paper in the drawer of the desk, and in the strip of moonlight, tried to sketch the movement on his wife's face.

Frustrated, he set the paper aside, thinking of opening his box of pastels, but instead he padded to the bathroom and turned on the light. He stood by the sink, staring at his face in the ornate gilt mirror, studying for what he saw on Kate's.

But he found nothing but himself looking back.

■ ■ ■



The next morning Mel and Kate were sitting on the terrace, Kate eating an English muffin spread with thick mango jam. Mel set down the orange he was peeling when the phone rang. It was Rose. He listened to her talk and watched a crumb move in the corner of Kate's mouth as she chewed slowly, absorbed in her journal writing. She wiped her forehead and shifted in the web-backed chair Mel had pulled into a shady corner of the terrace.

The air around them steamed like bath water. In the distance, the sea lay blue and endless.

"I think it'll be fine," Mel told Rose. "See you then."

Kate's smile looked a little fixed when he turned to her. "Who was that?" Without the cotton cap, her bald head looked almost violet in the shadowed light.

Mel sat back down, took a sip of coffee. "Rose."

"Rose?" Kate frowned. "The same Rose we met when we saw the shark?"

"You still remember the shark." He looked out at the ocean. "Rose is here with her husband. I've been diving with them. I'd like to do another one this morning."

"Amazing." Kate shook her head. "What a coincidence. Her husband's here too?"

Mel nodded.

"Well, sure." His wife wiped her mouth. "Dive all you want. I'll be fine if I'm in the shade with a good book. And maybe I can say hello to Rose and her husband sometime. He was very nice. Scotty, I think his name was."

"We could have dinner together."

"Did she like her portrait? You never showed it to me."

"I never showed it to her."

"Rose here." Kate shook her head. "Life certainly is strange. Are they doing well?"

The wire seat of Mel's chair was digging into the bare skin of his legs. He looked down at his watch. "I have to be at the boat by ten. Are you sure you'll be OK?"

■ ■ ■

At dinner that night, Rose entertained them with stories of her and Scotty's trip from Australia, and the difference between Australian men and American men.

"Listen to her," Scotty said. He was drinking heavily. "If there's anything our Rose knows, it's men." The waiter brought their salads, a careful arrangement of papaya and avocado. Down the walkway the steel band played softly in the background. The palm fronds brushed against each other in the gusts of damp-smelling wind that came up the beach.

Rose tapped Scotty sharply on the knuckles but she looked pleased. "Knock it off," she said, "or I'll leave you here and find someone who will stick with me through thick and thin." She laughed a little, looking over at Kate.

Kate had been silent most of the evening. Now Mel heard her breathing change, grow audible and ragged. Rose's laughter trickled away as the group turned toward Kate.

“It’s nothing,” Kate said. Mel could see beads of sweat on her lip. She levered herself up from the poolside table, pulled a green wrap from the back of her chair. “I’m just a party pooper these days. You can’t take me anywhere.”

Scotty saluted Kate with his beer glass. “Well, it was charming to see you again, love. Holler if you get lonesome.”

Mel began to get up. “I’m coming with you.”

Kate shook her head. “I’ll be OK. You stay. Enjoy yourself.”

He felt a flash of frustration. “I’m going with you.” He stood, folding his napkin and placing it carefully on the table. But his wife shook her head fiercely, her face bent toward her handbag.

■ ■ ■

It was after midnight when he got back to the room. He undressed silently, brushed his teeth, stretched his long body on his side of the bed.



Kate had been crying. Tears streaked her face, the light from the moon making them look like traced silver against her skin. The pillow was damp where her head rested. Throughout the four years since she'd been diagnosed, he could count on one hand the number of times she'd let loose with tears.

“Are you awake?” he asked softly.

“No,” she said, her voice muffled.

■ ■ ■

Rose added sugar to her cup of Nescafé and stirred vigorously. "I think I'm coming down with something," she said.

"Do you think you should dive today?" Mel asked. He looked at his watch. It was almost nine. The sun was already fierce.

"She's fine. She's just whining because she drank too much after dinner." Scotty laid a hand on her shoulder, and Rose shook it off, inching closer to Mel. "All those big drinks with the little umbrellas."

"Parasols," Rose said. "And it was your idiocy, ordering rounds every time you lost a game of backgammon. Anyway, I can breathe fine."

Scotty snorted. "I'm going down to the dock." He slapped some coins on the table and got up abruptly.

Rose rolled her eyes at Mel. "He's a bear when he loses anything." She took a sip of coffee and grimaced. "We have better coffee in Sydney, which is really saying something." She pushed a strand of hair behind her ear. "How's Kate doing? I wish she'd been able to stay for dessert. Wasn't it a super meal?" Rose stretched, arms up. "Another gorgeous day in paradise, eh?" She paused, looked at him. "Sorry. I'm blathering on, as usual. How are *you* this morning?"

"What?"

Rose smiled; then her face grew serious. "You poor man."

"What's the matter with Scotty?" he asked. "Doesn't he want to dive today?"

Rose looked past him down the pier, where Scotty was talking to a blonde female divemaster. "Yes, but not with us." She said this slowly, as if she were tasting each word on her tongue. "I thought this trip'd help, but he's just as undependable here as he is back home."

"You were the golden couple on Heron," Mel said.

"What a memory you have. We put on a good show, don't we? But it's pretty well over." She tore a piece of croissant, put it between her lips.

Mel imagined the color he'd use for painting those red lips. Red in sunlight was hard to capture; you needed a layer of orange underneath to really convey the luminescence. He watched the lips take another sip from the china cup and shook his head.

"Still have water in your ears from yesterday?" Rose said.

"Guess so."

"You know, Mel, I was thinking." Rose looked down at their hands on the black tabletop, lying close but not touching. "We could take a day trip tomorrow, if you'd like. One of the waiters was telling me about this deserted beach on the other side of the island. We can rent a car. It's about an hour, past the flamingo sanctuary." She ran the edge of her thumb along the edge of the table, close to Mel's hand. "We could take a picnic."

"The four of us?"

"I don't think Scotty will want to come. What about Kate? Would she be up to going?"

"She's been on oxygen more lately. Needs to stay close to a phone."

Rose nodded. Her eyes were serious, questioning. "OK, just the two of us. We both need a holiday." She gave Mel a little kick under the table. "We could pretend we were in other lives for a day, be other people. No worries."

■ ■ ■

"Will you be OK today?" Mel was gathering sunscreen, a bottle of water, and oranges, stuffing them in Kate's red canvas carryall.

"Where are you going?"

"There's a hidden beach near the flamingo sanctuary. Was that Molly on the phone just now?"

"She wanted to see how I was doing." Kate was sitting in bed, propped against white pillows. She rearranged her robe to cover her legs. "I want to talk with you about Molly."

“When I come back from swimming.”

“Seems pretty hot to walk far.”

“Rose rented a car.” Mel folded a towel into the bag. At her silence, he looked up. An open book rested face down in her lap, her hands pressing the spine flat.

Mel walked over and sat on the edge of the bed. He brushed his palm lightly across her cheek. “I won’t go if you don’t want me to.”

Kate shook her head and lowered her eyes. The coughing began, slowly at first, then rising in a crescendo of spasms. Mel stared at her shaking shoulders, the pale lips stretched into a grimace. He reached for her but she waved him away. He stood, aching inside, aware to his own disgust that part of him was remembering the red of Rose’s lipstick.

Kate’s breathing calmed, and she lay back, spent. They were silent, him waiting, unsure. She turned over her book and began to read. “I’ll see you when you get back.”

■ ■ ■

The hotel packed a hamper full of sandwiches and mangoes. A blue cotton bedspread was folded next to it on the back seat of the rented Jeep. Something in the hamper rattled each time Rose went over a bump in the rut-strewn road. “Iced tea,” she said. “Two thermoses. One straight and one with something extra added.” She clapped a little, then quickly put her hands back on the wheel. “This road’s like the outback.”

“It sure is different on this side of the island.”

Rose took lip balm from her bag with one hand, applied it. “Let’s get to know each other a bit. Twenty questions. Do you Americans play that game?”

“Sometimes.”

“I’ll go first.” She thought a minute. “Tell me something you always wanted but never got.”

"Something I've never gotten?"

"Yes. But you've longed for."

"Only one thing?"

She laughed. "One for starters."

He spoke slowly. "I guess I've never really captured the exact quality of light on a person's face or a body of water the way I want to. Light changes way too fast. Like my life lately. Kate. . ." He couldn't finish. After a moment he asked, "How about you?"

"Oh, easy. A man like Ayer's Rock. You know it?" Mel shook his head. "It's a huge thing, out in the Australian desert, been there forever. I want someone who will stay with me the way you've stayed with Kate. A man who's safe and steady and devoted. I don't believe they exist. At least not for someone with my outrageous mouth." She looked over at him, pouted her lips.

"I like your honesty, Rose."

"Aussie men hate it. They like their women to be quiet and predictable. Scotty says I'm like a lethal charge he could accidentally step on and set off." She laughed but to Mel it sounded sad. "When we travel it's better. I can be a bit of an odd lot and no one cares." She took her right hand off the steering wheel and brushed her face lightly, as if wiping away tears.

Mel tried to think of something cheerful to say. He studied the scrubby landscape bouncing by, the blue sea in the distance when they curved round a point. "My life's a bit upside down too. I can't even remember what it was like before Kate got sick."

"Do you have kids?"

"One daughter. Molly. She's about to graduate from college. We had a boy, Sammy, but he died very young in a boating accident." There was the familiar tightening in his chest that the memory of Sammy always brought. Mel took off his glasses and slowly wiped the lenses with the edge of his shirt, watching the blur of treetops move above him. "It's like that quality of light I was

talking about. It changes so quickly, you think you've got it then it's completely gone. Sometimes before you even get to know it."

They were passing a grove of mango trees where overripe fruit lay on the ground in golden heaps. A rotten smell wafted into the Jeep's interior. Mel tried to swallow, his throat suddenly coated.

Rose reached across the seat and briefly squeezed his hand. She shifted into second as the road climbed. "Didn't you want to try again?"

"Kate wanted to. I didn't have the heart." He leaned his arm on the edge of door, let the breeze fan his hair. "Besides, I'm pushing fifty-five."

"You look a lot younger. How old is Kate?"

"Forty-nine."

"My God. She looks . . ." Rose glanced quickly at him. "Sorry. My big mouth again."

"It's alright. I get a shock every time I look at her."

Rose didn't say anything. After a few minutes, she pulled the Jeep onto a sandy shoulder, stopping the engine. They sat and listened for a few minutes to the breeze shuffling the reeds by the road. A thin path wound through the scrub bushes and grass to the blue ocean below them. Mel could see the white strip of beach.

"This is it," Rose said. "Paradise."

Mel got out and reached into the back for the hamper and bedspread, the bags of towels. They made their way down the narrow sand path, between dunes and tall grasses. Rose found a spot out of the wind and spread the blue cloth. She pulled a bottle of bronzing oil from her black bag. "Will you do me?"

"OK." Mel took the bottle.

Rose turned her back and in a fluid motion pulled her t-shirt off. Her back was naked.

"I hope you don't mind. I hate strap marks." She fell forward onto the towel, settling, closing her eyes.

"No," Mel said, staring at the expanse of healthy back, the thin wings of bare shoulder blades. He poured a small circle of amber oil into his palm.

Friday was the last dive. They were leaving Sunday morning, and dive regulations recommended a day of recovery at sea level between diving and flying. Kate appeared better, her face rosy from sitting on the patio. "I don't have to go out again," he told her. "I could paint instead." But Kate wanted to read her book in peace, and Rose wanted to take him to a new site, an underwater cave. And although the boat was scantily loaded that morning, only five divers, all experienced, Mel was glad he decided to come.

They rocked in the strong current, the ocean silvery grey around them. Everyone talked about the storm that had closed around the islands in the night and how much sand it stirred up beneath the waves.

"It'll still be worth it," Rose said. "Probably be some current, but we'll be fine if we stick close."

Mel nodded. He didn't mind the currents. But he was having trouble with his regulator. It didn't seem to be drawing air well, but it could be his imagination. He tested the mouthpiece and heard the satisfying whoosh. His bones ached today. Sleep hadn't come easily the night before. Kate's breathing was even more erratic, and every time he heard silence, he woke to make sure she was still alive.

He took off his glasses and rubbed his sandy eyes. *It's probably just tiredness. Worry,* he decided.

They descended to sixty feet, surrounded by an undulating school of neon-colored clownfish. Rose pointed toward the entrance of a cave and swam ahead through the opening. Mel hesitated before following her.

They flicked on their dive lights, finning through the surprisingly strong current. Mel kept bumping into the cave walls, steadying himself against the rush and ebb of water, trying to keep his balance. The regulator was pulling well enough, not great, but nowhere near the problem it'd been on the surface. Rose turned and faced him. They were in a small chamber, about twelve feet in diameter, he guessed. It was circular and lit only by a shaft of greenish light from a hole in the cave's ceiling. Rose beckoned to Mel and he swam closer, his eyes questioning. She took his hand and slowly, deliberately pressed it against her breast.

He could see she was smiling, just by her eyes, still that intense blue even underwater. The water was cooler here, the light almost dreamlike.

He shook his head at her, pulling his hand away, but she tightened her hold until he had to wrench it from her grasp. She tilted her head, and he gestured to the mouth of the cave. She grabbed his arm and tried to pull him against her body. The current swayed them like dancers. "Rose." Mel said her name through his mouthpiece, watching his own bubbles rush past his face. He weaved in the current, feeling her thighs brush him, feeling his reaction. Indigo lights streaked her face; her hair was as dark as coal. Laughter in her eyes, Rose pushed at him playfully, then turned and looked at the opposite wall.

Suddenly Mel felt dizzy. Air was coming through his regulator in spurts, instead of a smooth flow. He sucked harder, checked his gauge. Plenty left. He tried to reach over to pat Rose on the shoulder, let her know he should surface, but the current swayed suddenly between them, sweeping Rose deeper into the cave. He circled in position like an awkward whale, his breath laboring as he gulped air through the now-hissing mouthpiece.

Being trapped underwater was not a new experience for Mel. Once he had been in the brown kelp forests near San Francisco and lost his bearings. After that, he made sure to do everything by the books, to know his way around the equipment, even studied for divemaster training. He knew divers would never deliberately leave their buddies, get separated from the safety of the group, but Mel now felt it was an emergency. Rose could take care of herself; he needed to get to the surface.

He clawed his way out of the cave, moving the few feet they had traveled in, breathing as carefully as he could to keep even a little air flowing to his lungs. No time to orient himself, figure out the best place to surface. Exiting into clear ocean, he let the trail of his exhaling bubbles rise skyward, praying that he'd packed enough air into the recesses of his lungs. As he rose, he scanned the landscape below for any of the other divers. He was alone.

When he reached the surface, the fresh sea air was like a balm on his face. Storm light coursed along the water, green and eerie. He tipped back his head, taking long gasps, restoring his lungs. The current had been strong below but nothing like on top. The waves were rough and tipped with white, the sky no longer blue and serene.

Mel inflated his buoyancy vest and treaded water. Around him ran the colors of a somber palette, changing constantly, even more unwelcome than below the surface. No chance of diving again—the regulator was pulling erratically, too dangerous to try breathing through it, although swimming by compass underwater would be less of a struggle. He knew he didn't have the energy to make it on the surface. The dive boat was too far away, a red-hulled speck on the far horizon, tossing like a child's toy in the wind.

He saw a sudden image of Kate asleep, her breasts full and round like they used to be when she was nursing Sammy. He would sit beside her, just watching. Her face would shine with that quality of light he could never capture in his paintings. In the image, she woke and her hand reached out to cover his cold fingers.

He leaned his head against the collar of his vest, trying to maintain the feeling of her holding him up as he rode the waves. They were getting bigger now, splashing in his face regularly. His snorkel filled then emptied as he blew out rhythmically. But the waves were cresting over him, water filling the plastic tube too fast, and he retched up mouthfuls of salty ocean.

The colors around him seemed grey and lifeless. The ocean endless, unforgiving. A human could be swallowed up effortlessly in all this water. Had this been what it was like for his son? He prayed not. Kate believed Sammy's death had been like going to sleep or lifting off the ground in a small plane.

Death was not a dream, he thought. It was very real.

When he could no longer feel his legs and arms, he began to see Sammy, alive, hovering over him, a tender look on his small round face.

Mel closed his eyes and sank gratefully into the vision.

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The divemaster hauled him, dripping and gasping, from the water just before he passed out. Rose was there. She worried over him like a mother, helping him unhook his scuba fins and tank and loosen his wetsuit jacket.

"What happened?" she asked above the wail of the wind. "I turned around and you were gone."

"My regulator was malfunctioning," Mel said. "I tried to tell you, but I just had to give up and get to the surface as fast as I could." His body was shaking. "God, I didn't think I'd make it."

"Someone saw the yellow tip of your buoyancy vest in the water," Rose said.

Mel fought against an unaccustomed pressure on his chest, as if he was only allowed a small portions of air. He forced his lungs to expand further, feeling the freshness of each breath push against his throat. Rose held his hand all the way back.

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"Kate was sleeping," Mel said. "Peacefully. I didn't want to wake her. I'll tell her all about it in the morning." He drummed on the white-clothed restaurant table, staring beyond Rose's shoulder at the now-clear sky above the ocean. His hands fiddled with the silverware, unconsciously arranging each piece parallel to the next, the bottom edges aligned.

*It's going to be OK now*, he thought. Then he caught sight of how his hands trembled, and he stretched the palms flat on the table, stilling all movement.

"Quite a day, wasn't it? I wish you could've seen the rest of that cave." Rose toyed with a piece of fish before laying down her fork. "I'm glad the storm blew itself out. It's so calm now."

"I'm still shaky." Mel levered his hands up, palms still facing down, showing her. Tremors ran wrist to finger. Rose reached over and clasped his hands, then lowered them down to rest. Mel looked at their skin overlapping, the dark tan of her fingers against his paler ones, then slowly released himself from Rose's grasp.

He thought of Kate, lying against the white linen of the ornate bed. The curtains billowing as breezes ran across her flushed cheeks. He wedged his hands safely under his thighs, out of harm's way.

Rose pressed her palms against her dark silky hair as if she had a headache. "I'm so tired. Scotty says we're leaving soon. He wants to see Aruba before we go back to Sydney. He says there's good diving on Aruba."

"Things are going better with you two?"

Rose grimaced. "No. Not better at all. He just thinks I must be worth something, since you seem to like my company all right." She smiled a little across the table, her eyes glinting wetly in the candle glow. "Will you miss me?" She looked searchingly into Mel's eyes when he didn't

answer. "Well, at least we all survived the week. Maybe we'll run into each other again sometime. You never know how things will turn out."

Mel thought suddenly of his decision in the cave, pushing away the small round of breast under its neoprene.

Rose lowered her head. "I'm sorry we're leaving. There are so many things I could've shown you." She sighed, seemed to gather herself, smiled across the table at Mel, her white teeth reflecting the glow from the candles. "But we had fun, Mel. Didn't we?" Mel felt energy scout the air between them, then recede.

He focused his gaze just beyond Rose's face, to where the ocean lay black in the distance, still and deep. Her blue eyes, usually so mesmerizing, looked hard to him tonight. He stared down at his coffee, dark liquid reflecting fairy lights and candlelight from the terrace tables. "Kate and I are heading back home too."

The steel band was really going now, the shimmering tinny tones bouncing around them. Other diners were getting up, wandering to the bar or out on the dance floor. Mel watched a woman about Kate's age being swung by a tall tanned man with snowy hair. They were laughing at each other's steps.

The woman's dress was an iridescence he'd love painting but would struggle over, like the color of silvery ocean that first afternoon, dipped in light instead of storm shadow.

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The night before they left the island, Mel took great care with Kate before bed. He helped her into the white nightgown that was her favorite. He smoothed the soft linen sheets with his hands, preparing her pillows. By morning the sheets would be strangling her calves, twisted from her thrashing medicine-laced dreams. But for now she looked soft, like an angel, that strange peacefulness on her face that he had come to understand during the past twenty-four hours.

"What are you thinking?" he asked her gently.

"I'm gathering memories. Of you, how you look different tonight." She tilted her head a little, smiled. "Your face, maybe. Radiant almost."

"Not just shrunken from my long soak in the ocean?"

She laughed. "No, not that kind of different. Something else. Like you saw something."

He sank down on the edge of the bed, reached over to stroke her bald head. "I did. When I was out there."

"A vision?" She was smiling but her eyes were serious.

"You."

"Me?"

"I saw you. No, more like I felt you there. You kept me going while I was underwater, when I couldn't breathe. Then when I was waiting and waiting for that dive boat to come and get me, Sammy appeared too."

Kate was silent for a long moment. Her eyelids drooped and Mel thought maybe she'd fallen asleep. Then she spoke. "I've been having a recurring dream these past few days," she said. "It's so peaceful. I know what's going to happen each time." She paused. "Ever have one?"

Mel nodded.

"Well. In this dream, I'm in an enormous room, huge and sunny and spacious beyond belief. I'm dancing. Sammy's there, and you and Molly. We're all smiling. And it feels wonderful. Happy. I think it might be what it's like to die. Like you're an empty glass, and all this happiness can finally fill it." She laughed, gasping a little. "My mother said something like that. I understand it, I think. And the best part? I can breathe so well. Being completely empty, I get all the air I want."

Mel saw the mixture of relief and fear in her eyes. "It's close now, isn't it?"

Kate nodded. Her gaze turned inward, not seeing him, as if she was suddenly in that enormous room again. He thought of a clear glass of water, reflecting light. Her eyes had a certain intense focus, looking at what was really important. Like the focus he had had, surfacing then being lifted onto the boat deck, his cells sodden with ocean.

He remembered that moment, how everything telescoped down to a fine pinpoint, a few words.

He spoke them.

"I don't want to lose you."

Kate reached across and picked up his big hand in hers. The fingers were thin and light like Rose's. But tonight they held Mel's with surprising strength.

Like Rose had done, Kate placed his palm on her chest, covering the blank spot where her left breast had once been. He felt the scarred chest, as smooth as someone else's back. A feeling of great peace flooded him. It was unexpected, and so welcome.

Their hands rested there for a long time, above Kate's heart, much more accessible now that the breast was gone. He felt the smoothness of her.

The heartbeat was strong under his fingers.

