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## Jon Fotch Beatrice

Hector slept with my wife. It was going on for some time. Nights out got later and later. She came home happier and happier. Laughing. Stumbling in with rumpled clothes. One time missing a shoe. A sudden fondness for tequila, everything like that.

I woke to a note taped to the bathroom mirror. I needed to be out by the time she got home, and if I wasn't, Hector would help me. She said I could keep the boat.

I anchor off the coast far enough so the telescopes in the living rooms of those big houses on the cliffs can't see me. I can see him standing there in a fresh, clean robe. Bare feet on Spanish tile. Squinting through the eyepiece. A shaky-handed brandy. Viagra blush in his cheeks.

"Jesus Christ, he's out there again. Come look, hon."

The breeze stirs an onion smell in the boat. When you've been naked long enough, you stop noticing your nakedness. I can remember modesty.

For the record, this is not a suicide note.

Down below, half a tank of propane fires the beans. A bag of dry tortillas hangs over the sink. I'll get a fish sometimes or a seabird. Seagulls taste like wild, dry jerky. Once I traded a handful of shotgun shells for five pounds of salt. I'll never get through so much salt. I put as much as I can in the beans.

The deck holds the heat after sundown. At dusk, the houses on the cliffs flicker alive. I notice my toenails have taken on the look and personalities of Fritos. I imagine how I look from their Spanish tile balcony. I'm a single bobbing light. Hardly a shape. I see the man shaving painfully close in the morning. Scanning headlines in the newspaper. Eating breakfast standing up. Pacing. Feeling he should have left already. A clean-shaven rat late for the maze.

A beautiful seagull came one morning after a rain. All night the rain. Tossing and turning, I had given up on the leaks. Pans sitting everywhere collecting water. The drips made a sound like a windup music box. Last of the towels slopped on the floor. The sky above as gray as a field animal. She circled. I watched her glide. She dove and passed very close. I had nothing to give her. She stayed close a long time. I stood still and dried myself in the breeze.

It was six-thirty and I was calling the hospitals when I saw her through the front window of our apartment. Cupping her eyes, peeking through, shoes dangling from her fingers by their thin straps. Looking to see if I was up.

But I finally believed her. She had fallen asleep at a girlfriend's house. That night, we watched a movie on the couch. I tried to share my popcorn. She kept her socks on under the blanket. The next morning, the note on the mirror. That's how it happened.

For the record, it was her idea.

Now the seagull's here again. Black webbed feet around the chrome rail. Becoming bolder. The way she turns her head to look. She sees me. Looks me directly in my eyes. I try to blink a message. I try to ask her name. She's large for a seagull, but moves with a light nobility. Some kind of body language I have trouble understanding with my mind, but speaks to my soul. The boat rolls softly, and I sit very still at my plate of beans.

Her name is Beatrice. I know it now. Those yellow eyes. Her scratches on the woodwork belowdecks. The feathers she leaves. She's here every morning now. We meet for breakfast, but she won't stay for the afternoon or night. I told her yesterday I'd go into port soon and get something besides beans and tortillas. I think she's asking me for crackers. I'll bring them for her, but I'm low on fuel and the wind has been down so long. Maybe tomorrow will be better luck.

If I had known it was the last night with my wife, I would have taken her dancing. Or for drinks. Anything. But I didn't know. And I had work in the morning. Wanted to be fresh. To think two extra hours of sleep cost me everything.

And now I'm here. On a boat just off the coast. Stomach full of beans and tortillas. And I'm in a love affair with a seagull.

There, I said it.

I made dinner for us tonight. Very romantic. Even candles. I made french fries from a few potatoes I'd been saving. She ate them exactly like a wild bird eats fries. I decided to tell her. Open my heart. I'd go dancing if she wanted. It didn't matter to me that we were so different. Not at all. She feels the same way. I could tell by the way she fluttered around the cabin and left her droppings on the kitchenette. Her greasy white-and-yellow perfume on my pillow. Love truly knows no boundaries.

After my wife, I thought hope was a lie. Just something we use. A tool that opens a kind of escape hatch. But I've found a new world. Beatrice has gone to collect her things. What that might be I have no idea, but I'm cleaning the boat like mad. Scrub the bookcase where she leaves her droppings. Shake out the blanket. Wash the frying pan and my coffee cup. I even put on a

towel. Today is a new day. Bright as a revealed religion. The sun today looks like an everlasting promise. Tonight, when my bride returns, it will be forever. We will live everlasting on the ocean; two souls become one, two small lights to ignite the one noble torch that could burn the world to ashes forever.

By 2:30 a.m. I'm beginning to worry. The candle burned down to a red wax button. The distant winking lights of those houses on the hills so full of comfort. Their closets full of clean, ironed shirts. A city of hangers. I can only imagine their pillows. Sometimes it seems that I'm the one who's stationary, and they're the ones floating lost and unmoored. Or maybe we're just becoming smaller and smaller as the world moves away from us all. And always the moon high above any of these concerns. I'm glad it's up so high; otherwise, the people in those houses on the cliffs would find a way to own and not share it. Find a way to iron it and keep it in their closets. Rent a garage to park it in.

My heart jumped when I heard the scratching. Finally. She had come. There was the fluttering of wings too, but it didn't seem quite right. It seemed to be coming from everywhere. Beatrice made her call to me. Her sweet violin voice. Our life can begin. I am home.

Rushing to the cabin hatch, my heart thumping like shoes in a dryer. My feet had never touched the earth, only floated above by some strange magnetic force. My breath could be a lion. Soaring. My eyes can see in the darkness. Magic is real.

Putting my head out the hatch, I see Beatrice—and at least six other seagulls. Most are small, but one of them is very obviously male and scolding what must be their children. Stand up straight. Spit that out. That kind of thing. Beatrice has a family. Beatrice brought her family here. Beatrice has betrayed me. For french fries. I can't help but think of Hector.

The sails are full. In the wind, the fabric pops and snaps like the sound of your mother folding clothes. The bow cuts the eternal blue, and just above the horizon, the sun is as happy as a warm dolphin. I don't need to steer her much. She runs pretty true. I'd prove it if I had a compass. The important thing is, I have plenty of tortillas and beans and now a load of wild, dry jerky. Actually, I think I'll have jerky tacos tonight. If I'm right, I should make Catalina by tomorrow evening. I wonder if they have houses on the cliffs there.

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*Jon Fotch is a member of the Writers' League of Texas and dreams of a world where cowards are shamed, art is rewarded, and jobs are optional. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in Avatar Review, BoomerLitMag, Carbon Culture Review, The Conglomerate, Courtship of Winds, Evening Street Review, Euphony Journal, Green Hills Literary Lantern, The Hungry Chimera, Menda City Review, Mudlark, and Whistling Shade.*