



Ruth Neuwald Falcon

Ocean Madness

Standing alone on the deck, I waited for the man on the motorcycle. I sniffed the sea air, searching its purity for the faint smell of exhaust. *He should be here by now.*

All week, he had appeared at the same time every evening, the time when the puffy clouds and the smoky mist that began to close in over the shore created their sandwich with the sea, the light of the sun a thin golden sliver in between.

“The sun’s shining out there somewhere,” I murmured as I walked into the living room and picked up the binoculars thoughtfully left, along with *Peterson’s Birds of the West*, a fully-equipped kitchen and a selection of fluffy towels, by the owners of our vacation home-for-a-week. “I wonder how far you’d have to go to find it.”

“Find what?” My husband didn’t look away from the computer screen in front of him. “You lose something?”

“Just the sun, Sweetie,” I said. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll see if I can find it outside.”

“Okay,” he replied. “Let me know if I can help.”

Two hundred feet below where I stood, the beach was criss-crossed with tire tracks. More had materialized each day of our stay, as pick-up trucks laden with screaming kids did loop-de-

loops in the sand. The dry, still nights and sunny days layered the trail of their joyrides one over the other, until it looked like some mad troupe of aliens had used the beach as their landing strip.

“Oh help!” came a joyful girlish shriek as the wheels of the last day-tripper’s red truck spun and slithered onto the road. “I’m going to die!”

The man on the motorcycle definitely should have been here by now. I held the binoculars up to my eyes.

The first few nights, I thought I was looking at him with the same pleasantly melancholy but detached curiosity with which I watched the screaming, spinning teenagers. But tonight, as the sky grew darker and he still didn’t come, I grew increasingly aware of excited anticipation distilling into the sour taste of disappointment.

My ears strained to hear the drone of an engine, my eyes to see the light of a single headlamp. I waited for the familiar bike to pick its way along the dirt road curving down from Highway 1, move across the beach to the edge of the ocean, and begin its game of tag with the sea.

He played chicken with it. When the waves moved out, sucked into the endless expanse that contained, dissolved and recreated them, he drove as close to the water line as possible, zooming straight along the shore before sliding into a turn that whisked his tires out of the surf just as the waves returned to claim one more inch of beach.

By the time of his nightly arrival, it was too dark to see details, but I knew what he looked like, what he was wearing, could see the outline of strong shoulders in a faded denim jacket, long legs in heavy leather boots. Frye boots. *Do young men still wear Frye boots?* (Oh the absurdity of aging. Such obsessions are foolish but not unattractive in the young. In a woman approaching fifty, they surpass foolishness. I didn’t want to think about it.)

For he, of course, was young. Not teenager-young, with the need to strut and swagger. Not twenty-odd, still at the notch-gathering stage. He was, I had decided over the course of the week, in his thirties, not a boy any longer but young enough to believe that a single night can hold magic. Young enough to know, with a sureness that could challenge the ocean, that his was an exceptional existence.

I could see the thick darkness of his hair when he’d stop at the edge of the water and gaze out at the strip of light to the west. He’d stare at the rocks that pitched out of the ocean in front of him, and I’d look down through my binoculars at the hair growing long on his neck.

My husband and I had been married long enough to go through a few in and out of love cycles, but each time the out-part happened, I was afraid the in-part was gone forever. Like now. For in spite of the week alone, our vacation hadn’t brought the magical rekindling I had hoped it would. Instead, it brought this nearly-young man and his bike.

I wasn’t sure about his eyes. Brown, I sometimes thought, dark with warmth and intelligence. Or maybe blue, perhaps even that rare deep blue referred to in bad fiction as “liquid pools.” I went to high school with a girl with liquid pools, becoming paralyzed in her presence, terrified that she would turn those compelling eyes on me and expect a response. Christina did

talk to me once, asking me about the English assignment. My response was so garbled that she just rolled those magnificent orbs and said not to worry, her friend probably had it. She never spoke to or turned those eyes on me again.

But I had never known a man with eyes like that, not before this one. For I *did* know this man, knew what was most important about him. After only a few days, I knew when he'd arrive and what he would do when he got there. I knew about his secret game with the sea.

But this night, it got later and later, the fog rolled further and further in, and still he did not come.

Walking in from the deck, I grabbed my own denim jacket and the car keys. "I'm going down to the beach," I said. "Want to come?"

Even now, as we neared the end of our vacation, the face that finally looked up from the computer screen was tired. The eyes I didn't want to meet were gray. As I forced myself to look at them, I saw the sky reflected there, deepening and saddening them with the loneliness of a solitary evening. *It's only a trick of the light*, I thought. *He's okay*. Turning, I tossed him the keys.

The house, perched high on a cliff, had no direct access to the sea. The only way down was out a long driveway, onto the main road, then a quick unmarked turn-off to the dirt road that led to the beach. Once there, I urged him to drive onto the sand.

"Come on," I said. "You've got four-wheel drive, what's the big deal." I ached to be on the open apron of a pick-up truck making figure eights on the shore. Or on the back of an old dirt bike, playing touch-me with the ocean.

We walked the last fifty yards through the thick heavy sand.

"Walking on the beach always looks better than it is," he grumbled. In response, I took off my shoes and ran ahead, delighting in the cold grainy dampness between my toes.

I felt him stopping behind me then, putting him out of my mind, I became absorbed in watching the last light gleaming from the west. There was something raw and unfinished about this western coast to which something inside of me responded, as it did to the man on the big bike.

As the sky grew darker, the remaining light seemed to glow more brightly and fiercely, flashing on the foam spraying over the rocks that erupted from the water. I could feel the sea reaching up toward the light and as I did, felt something inside me reaching out to it as well.

My body began to sway in rhythm with the waves. Coming to the edge of the ocean, I followed a large wave as it broke and ebbed. I moved out onto the glistening expanse of sand left in the wake of the receding water.

I began to dance with the ocean.

Back and forth I moved, in and out, following its ebb and flow. I teased my toes with the cold water, scampering back as it threatened to wet my ankles. I darted lightly up the beach, out of the ocean's wet reach, then raced down again, daring it to catch me if it could. My body shed its years and its caution; I felt as if the woman who danced in the dying light and the frothing

spray had the grace and lightness of a bright-haired girl who might herself have eyes like liquid pools.

Suddenly, the roar of its engine drowned by the sound of the surf, the bike appeared out of the darkness. Its single eye caught me and my husband in its yellow light: the middle-aged woman dancing in the surf; the middle-aged man silhouetted on the shore.

I froze in its beam, my back to it, seeing its reflection in the ocean in front of me. The driver turned off the engine and climbed off the bike.

“Nice evening.” As I knew it would be, his voice was deep and rich.

“Beautiful,” my husband agreed.

For a long moment, the two men stood side by side, with me, as if mesmerized by the sea, locked in place in front of them. Then my husband spoke. “Hey, Sweetie. Come out of there. You’re getting soaked.”

I was surprised by the sound of his voice. I had felt only the man’s eyes on me, tracing my form in the dying light, discovering me as I had him. But maybe—and with this new thought, in spite of my wet feet and the cool chill of the evening air, I felt a wave of heat pass through my body—he had seen me watching him. Maybe he knew, had seen my binoculars trained on him, even at that distance able to sense my absorbed attention.

And now? Standing ten feet behind me? The power between us was palpable. High tide was coming, and his proximity was like that of the moon to the sea, drawing it ever up, higher and yet deeper too, to tumble in on itself as it met the shore.

“Come on, Sweetie. Let’s go.” My husband’s impatient concern bored a hole through the protective warmth of my feelings. My feet were suddenly icy, the water swirling around them no longer welcoming but cold.

I backed out of the ocean. The last light was made of shades of gray now, the rock a black mass, the foam invisible.

I backed straight into his arms.

I stood there for an instant, resting in their inevitability, before they pushed me gently away. My husband was gone; I heard some words shouted over his shoulder about bringing the car closer.

“That water’s mighty cold at night, ma’am.” His deep voice rolled like the Mississippi. The breath on my neck was warm; a strong odor of beer and cigarettes drifted around my head. I inhaled, then coughed.

“Get off the wet sand,” he said. His hand guided my elbow to the still warm, dry shore. “Better put your shoes on.”

I sat obediently on the sand and looked around for my sandals. He chuckled at my confusion, and brought them from where I had kicked them off higher up on the beach.

“Ocean madness. That’s what you’ve got,” he said. “Nothin’ to worry about for you though. You’re one of the lucky ones. Got someone to keep an eye on you who seems pretty much immune. Trouble comes when you’re both in it at the same time. No one to keep an eye on

the ground, make sure it's still under your feet where it belongs. Somebody's got to keep an eye on things."

I stared at my feet as I dusted them off and slid on my sandals. I heard the car start in the distance. His boots (they *are* Frye boots, I saw with a flash of pleasure) appeared in front of me. A large brown hand, with oil-blackened knuckles and fingernails, reached down for me. *I've got to look at him*, I thought. *Now. Before my husband gets here. Before he's gone.*

I put my hand into his and, as I swung to my feet, I looked up. The man looking down at me did indeed have eyes like pools, but they were deep black pools, ringed by skin gnarled and ridged by years of sun and sea. He had shaved sometime in the last week, and hadn't seen a dentist for a good long time. His skin was the color of aged mahogany, permanently weathered. It was the face of a man old before his time, a face I had seen at a distance on men stumbling out of bars in neighborhoods entered only by alternate routes used because of traffic tie-ups. It took all of my self-control not to pull my hand out of his with an exclamation of disgust.

But when I looked into his eyes, I saw what I was looking for. The young man I had watched playing tag with the sea was here too, and that young man gazed out at the girl who danced with the ocean. Our hands remained clasped, my soft ringed one no longer resisting the touch of his rough palm.

The lights of the car reached us and we moved slowly apart.

"Better go have a cup of hot cocoa." His voice surrounded and held me. "Maybe put in a marshmallow or two."

He helped me climb into the car.

"Can't turn around here," my husband muttered after a futile spin or two of his wheels. "I'll have to back up."

The man sat on his bike facing the sea. Opening my window, I leaned out as far as I could, breathing the night air, watching the man and the ocean move slowly away from me. Then I turned and looked at my husband, at his hands on the steering wheel.

"Hey," I said, slipping off my sandals and rubbing my toes. "My feet are cold."

"Put them here," he replied, and he raised his right leg off the seat. I slid my bare feet beneath his thigh where they nestled familiarly.

As the car reached the solid ground, I looked back out the window just as the man, with one smooth move, jumped his engine, flicked on the light, and raised one hand over his head for a brief moment. Then he was off, down to the water's edge, the light of his bike sliding sensuously over its surface.

"You looked beautiful down there," my husband said, taking one hand off the wheel to cradle my feet.

I smiled. "I know," I said, and curling my feet beneath me and leaning back into the curve of my husband's arm, I watched the man begin his solitary dance with the sea.

Ruth Neuwald Falcon is coauthor of [The Elderwise Way: A Different Approach to Dementia](#). The Cobalt Review has published two pieces of her creative nonfiction, "[Artifacts](#)" and "[Everything Wants to Live](#)." In 2020, she started the [Corona Support Blog](#) as a vehicle for developing virtual community and continues to blog while working on a family Holocaust memoir, "Get Us Out of Here," built around letters from her grandparents trapped in Nazi Germany. In an earlier life, she won an Emmy Award for her work as editor of a CBS Reports.

Image by the author