

About the Author

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THE MEN UNDER THE SEA

GENA ELLETT

 Jared tells me that it's springtime in Leeds, and that I should bring a pair of shorts to wear. The same time last year, Jared had left the hospital and walked three miles back to his flat on Turnstall road wearing nothing but a hospital gown, his bare ass visible the whole way. His toes were blue when he'd finally knocked on his own front door and politely asked his flatmate where the fuck he was. Electric shock will do that to you, he says. I wanted to ask him if that was a real thing, spring in Northern England.

I'd been in Paris for six months and had been stir crazy for four of them. I told everyone I was going to learn French but I couldn't have cared less about the language. There was a guy there who ended up being more boring than disappointing and in the end all I really got out of it was a pack a day habit. And then Jared appeared.

We met at a hostel in Montmartre that was steadily draining my money and my serotonin levels, but was constantly filtering in new travelers who all marveled at the length of time I'd been living there. I'd even purchased a little cactus that sat on the heater near my bed. It began steadily slouching to the side from the heat, as if to remind me that I wasn't prepared for the distance from the ocean or for the stubborn decay that Paris displayed from the veins of its metros to the peak of Sacré Coeur. I spent a lot of time up there, watching the panhandlers climb to

terrifying heights to balance soccer balls on their heads or else I went inside and sat below Mary because she was the only kind eyed woman for miles and I don't think she minded that I never gave money for the candles I lit. Anyway, I was annoyed that what they said was true—wherever you go, there you—and so when Jared arrived for a weekend trip with a friend, I'd just known from the minute he walked in and had immediately forgotten my name that he was going to be something for me.

A month later, he picks me up from the airport in Bradford. I wore shorts, as directed, and was met with a fog that immediately chilled me to the bone.

"My mom says I should ask if you like surprises," he says. He's driving stick, shifting between gears and my thigh.

"Why? What's the surprise?"

"I can't tell you. So you like them, then?"

At the stoplight he leans in and kisses me too deeply and too meaningfully, and I'm embarrassed. At the green light, I roll my window down and let the cold air in.



I hadn't spoken to my brother, Chris, in six months. Not more than a sentence or two, at least. Sometime in October he'd sent me the first message that started the silence. Over Skype, Hey sis, can you let me know when you have some time to talk? Maybe next Thursday?

It's strange how much you can tell from a couple lines like that when they're from someone you know so inextricably well. Those lines scared the shit out of me. So I told him my Internet was down and he'd have to write me, instead, which I knew he'd hate. We were so different—Chris with his engineering pinky ring and bright faced optimism, me with my empty notebooks and anxiety. But we were both stubborn assholes. He wouldn't write and I wouldn't talk. Well, he'd written something. What kind of idiot leaves Paris for Northern England?



The day after I arrive in Leeds, Jared takes me on a trip up to Edinburgh where a friend of his just moved with his wife and baby. We listen to Ragga Jungle CDs that he's burned just for the occasion and I ask him questions about sheep and we stop for dark and flat beer at pubs with names like The Pig and Whistle and The Dirty Habit. He pays for my food without asking and rolls me cigarettes at the table. It never occurred to me that he might be nervous at having a near stranger come to live with him. At some point, night falls. We keep driving. I'd worn a polka dot dress to keep up the appearances of the tidy Canadian girlfriend and he's delighted at the ease of this—he runs his hand up my thigh between shifting gears and I massage his neck with my right hand. Eventually, we pull off into a graveyard.

“That one over there,” he points to a weathered angel in the distance, visible only partially in faraway headlights, “she must be older than your country.”

He opens his door and comes around and I climb out and let him sit down on the passenger side, then I swing my leg over his lap and sit facing him. He grips for me, fingers pressing and pulling into my thighs and ass. I reach down and unbuckle him and ask whether he has a condom.

“No,” he mumbles into my mouth. He smiles a stoned smile.

No headlights passed for a long time. The windows fog and when my bare shoulder presses against the glass it's like brushing against the inside of a tent. He says What now? I say Come inside me.

We had created our own atmosphere with the warmth of our breath and the desperation of our limbs. But what kind of photosynthesis could happen there? I wanted to laugh. It was just us in the dark.



We fall into an easy pattern. We sleep all day on the weekends. During the week, Jared wakes up at five am to work at a call center, and I sleep until he comes home. We take turns making each other food and sometimes he runs the water for my baths. The heat's never on and so I walk around trailing blankets along the floor, teasing the cats with stray pieces of wool. We have loud sex before his flatmates return from work and then we watch documentaries about the horrors of the world until it's nighttime again. We curl against each other under the blankets until I

hear him start to snore. Then I roll onto my stomach and think about the unexplored parts of the deep sea or about white people becoming gurus in India or about my sugar intake. Horrors. I wait for morning.

I still haven't found a time to call Chris.

I put it on my to-do list every morning, only to forget.

We grew up on a rocky west coast beach that was, for so many years, heaven. We'd pry mussels off the bottom of the dock and smash them open with rocks and fish out the hearts to use as bait. The heart of a mussel is tiny and black. If you wipe the yellow foamy guts away from it and manage to string just the heart onto your hook, you've got a catch, no question. I'm not sure who told us that that was the heart, or if it even is. Maybe we were just too young to grasp the names of other organs. Maybe the heart is easy. But where was its liver, its pancreas, its brain?

When we were little, we had this game called Don't you Dare. Whenever the fish stopped biting or we got bored, we'd get this little fabric Frisbee that we'd sent away for off the side of a cereal box. It was bright yellow and weighted down around the edges so that when it hit the water, it sank. We'd take turns throwing it with our skinny arms and then diving to find it caught between the rocks and seaweed. The catch was you weren't supposed to come up until you found it—don't you dare come back without it—perish first, give up later.

After two months in Leeds, I woke up to my phone buzzing with a message from Chris. It said Okay, you won, you held out longest. I'll write. But that was the end of the message.



Jared says when he told his mom about the ECT, she didn't try to dissuade him.

We're sitting in his kitchen drinking tea. The room is large and untidy. The floors are a worn stone, the counters a sturdy wood, the ceilings are high enough to brag about. But of the four people that share the house, none are bothered with mess, and so every spare inch is covered with dishes that the cats spend lazy days licking. He speaks so softly as he continues, that sometimes I'm not sure whether he's speaking to me or the four cats that rule the house: Samwise, Rat, Congee, and Spike.

"The doctor just sat me down, said here's your options, and I sat on it for oh, maybe a week, and then decided."

“Just the words electric shock would have sent me running,” I say, and I immediately want to eat my words.

“They don’t call it that anymore,” he bends down and playfully nudges one of the cats out of a frying pan that’s somehow ended up on the floor.

“Are you better now?” I stroke Spike with my toes.

“Loads. It’s quite funny, in hindsight.” But he doesn’t elaborate, instead bending to pick up the frying pan,

Spike bites my big toe. I wince and draw it away. I should have anticipated that, Spike being the most feral of the bunch, and I scold myself for not expecting it.



I always won Don’t You Dare, which didn’t make much sense. Not only was Chris fourteen-years-old to my eight, he was athletic and competitive. I was scrawny and my lungs were probably half the size of his and I quit playing sports when kids started really playing to win—I just couldn’t get my head around that.

The only reason for winning that I can think of is that I was terrified down there and couldn’t wait to be back above water. The temperature seemed to drop ten degrees after the first couple meters. The rocks I’d seen millions of times when the tide was low became menacing and the seaweed grew thicker by the second. When you’re at the bottom of the sea, the world just gets further and further away until all that’s left is your pulse. The reminder of blood and something beating out your time.



Jared wakes me up on a Sunday morning. He says the car’s packed and he has a surprise.

Somewhere on my listless travels I’d passed through Liverpool, and so I recognize it when we arrive. He drives us out to Crosby beach and parks along a stretch of sidewalk. Because it’s Sunday and springtime, everyone is out with their dogs and children. The wind is so strong and cold that I’m reminded of being a kid again, of forgetting my coat on a fieldtrip to Tofino and being faced with the reality of being cold and unprepared.

Jared opens his trunk and carefully changes from his sneakers into rubber boots. He puts his jacket over my shoulders, and then we walk down towards the beach. I don't notice the statues until we're standing on the forever surface of the sand.

The men at Crosby beach are spaced out over two miles. They're made of iron. They stand with their arms at their sides and their legs shoulder width apart. They all face the sea. Some stand tall, peering out, their unobtrusive penises angering or delighting the locals. Some figures are sunken down to their waist. No legs, no dick, fingers touching down into the sand. Jared says the artist, Antony Gormley, made the 100 men in his own reflection.

"I guess that's what we all want, hey," but the wind takes my words.

"One hundred yous, under the sea at Liverpool," Jared sings as he points his camera at me and snaps. "Do you like the surprise?"

"Yes," I say, but he can't hear me again.

We walk separately among the men. I touch a statue, and the skin of it feels like an anchor. It's weather worn, and I try not to imagine it under feet of water at night. I try not to imagine all of the things that glide past it and slither through its parted legs. Even a legacy made of iron must wear away with the weight of things.

I stay until Jared is ready to go, and then I walk several paces ahead of him to the car. We crank the heat and I turn the music high enough and he drives fast enough that we have nothing to think about for long the drive home.



That night we peel off our damp clothes and fall into each other just long enough to exhaust ourselves into sleep.

I wake up at midnight to Jared's arm, heavy across my chest, and his snoring in my ear. I check my phone and see that Chris has sent me something. I don't open the e-mail but the subject reads What's in the News. I turn my phone off and put my head back against the pillow.

The air is humid from the plants and it is darker tonight than it's been for a long time.

When our Dad got sick, he kept it from us until that wasn't an option anymore. And once everyone knew, I saw it, the shift. They looked from him to us, us to him. Tried to trace the reflection.

The game finally stopped between us because we lost our toy. Even I couldn't find it. But I imagine it now, having somehow made the trip to Crosby beach, carried by tides and in the clasp of different sea birds and maybe caught in fisher's nets or dragged up with anchors until it was finally exhaled slowly upon the beach at night with the far reaching hand of high tide. I see it there, caught on the rusting face of the statue I'd touched. I see Chris staring at a blank screen. The more I push it from my mind the louder it becomes: The reminder of blood, the pounding in my ear.

