

Becoming Flotsam

Chapter 1

Beryl Bolger's Journal

21st March 5.15pm

She calls herself Mariana. It isn't her real name, which sounds like a cat being tortured, but I can't say I care enough to try and be learning it. Honestly, the sooner I see the back of her the better. A right madam, so she is. It's all get me this, gather me that, like I haven't been running after her all day already.

First, I had to get her home. And sharpish, she said, in case someone who was more efficient at murder showed up. She can't swim in the state she's in, and it was pitiful watching her try to drag herself up the beach with no legs and only one working arm in a slow caterpillar-like shuffle, but it was unrealistic for her to expect me to carry her and insulting to say I was lazy for not doing so. I'm a small, 72 year old woman - and she's built like a seal. There were words exchanged, I can tell you.

Luckily, for her anyway, I've that old rubber dinghy but she might have made more effort to haul herself in after I'd practically run home to get it. And rowed all the way back with the oars nearly having the shoulders off me in the surf. Eoin keeps offering to get me a little motor for my fishing trips, but I'd never felt the need before. 'Course I'd normally get to choose when and where I go out. So you can imagine how I took her having a go at me for taking the time to change out of my wet clothes. The cheeky mare.

I'd brought a few blankets to wrap around her for the journey which she grumbled about even when I explained that there could be fishermen about and she'd be drawing attention to herself without them. Apparently, the wool was itchy. Probably not that surprising if you're always going around the place naked, but it still got annoying to be keeping on having to ask her to cover up. Made me feel like a right prude and what self-

respecting old hippy wants that? I know she was tired, but for someone demanding secrecy she wasn't being too cute about it. Around here, you need an awful lot of caution not to be advertising your business, and sure enough Joe was heading in as we rounded the rocks. Not that Joe is likely to be talking to anyone about anything much, but she wouldn't know that.

Still, once she was settled in and the blankets arranged, she nodded off and became much better company. The wind slipped around behind us and even the waves seemed to relax. I'd been fretting about how to put her up with the kitchen open to the living room and the bathroom upstairs. I don't know how the likes of her views a shower, but I'm pretty certain she'd be needing a toilet and I couldn't imagine her balancing on a chamber pot let alone emptying it. Looking at her head resting against the soft stern gave me the perfect solution – she could have her very own waterbed.

She's in it right now resting up. At least, I hope so... Guess I better go check.

8.30pm

She was in the pond treating my goldfish like a snack pack. So there went another hour with me having to bribe her off them with handfuls of freshly picked sea lettuce before delivering a stern lecture on house rules to my ungrateful guest. Not that she listened, mind. Even told me off for keeping them in captivity. Like that was somehow worse than biting their heads off. In the end, there was nothing for it but to lock her in the shed. Give us both some peace for the night.

Now that sounds worse than it is. I had to bolt the door for her own safety and it's not like I could get her bed into the house. Thing is though that once she was hidden away, I began to doubt she was real at all and had to go undoing the padlock again with only the downing of a quick whiskey in the meanwhile. Found her stretched out and snoring. Comfy

as. But the doubts are creeping back in so, like my Gerry used to say, I'd better tell my story before my story tells me.

I guess on first sight I figured it only another lost surfboard. It's not as easy to walk on water as the young ones think and I've enough collected to build a fibreglass version of Stonehenge. Besides, it was draped in seaweed, and I wasn't wearing my glasses. Sure, I can thread a needle before it knows what's happening and you wouldn't catch me out on the small print of anything, but when it's at a distance... Lordy. Blind as love. And I should know. Followed Gerry to the ends of the earth, so I did. Any further and we'd have been swimming. And that was him with his great, hairy ears and yellowing teeth going every which way like old tombstones.

But I'm straying from the point. Used to wreck poor Gerry's head me doing that. I'd be talking round the edges and he'd be waiting for me to take a breath so he could rest his hands on his knees and lean on in. Beryl, he'd say, just say what needs saying. And then I'd be coming out with it and there'd be a relief in the telling as though all those extra words had been trapping the truth inside like a bad dose of wind. It was rare for it to explode as much as I feared. And only once was it worse. Whatever his faults, and Gerry had his fair share mind, he did stop me coddling myself.

And that'd be why I bought this journal in the first place. It's easy to lose the run of yourself when thoughts are all cooped up squawking at each other with nowhere to spread their wings. And out here, with my pension paid into the bank and a freezer to keep me in dinners, many a day can go by without me saying two words to anyone. Well, anyone living. Now don't get me wrong, I'm not saying I mind, there's no shortage of folk who use the chat like dogs sniffing a behind then cocking a leg all over the village, but I can get a bit lonesome at times. Few glasses of whiskey on my own when the melancholy is settling in and, well, it's easy to wonder about the point of things.

Not that I'm going soft or anything, but you wouldn't want to take those whispering voices too serious like and I figured writing them down might show them up. It's been harder than I expected. The few times I've tried my thoughts got muddled soon as I picked up a pen and all I managed to express were doodles. Well, the proof is right there in that daisy chain running down these pages. Easy enough to draw a daisy, but all that fancy dot-work patterning took some doing.

Today, though, it's well clear what needs to be said. And if it turns out to be all in my head then tomorrow's me needs to know how much I believed in it. Maybe talk to a doctor. It's not like Ruth's chemtrails or Helmut's illnesses, this could be the start of something serious... It's a rare old wan who doesn't fear losing their mind. So, a full and honest record. That's a promise to myself. Sure, it's not writing it down that will get me in trouble. It's telling people that I need to watch.

This morning started as it usually does with my bladder at me to get up before I was ready. Once it was Gerry's hand, or an early appointment, or even a simple want to be getting on with things - now it's urine. There's often a bit of grumpiness with that, I've not been sleeping well of late, but with it being the equinox I didn't mind the early rise so much. My mother used to say there was magic about when night meets day as equals, and I always feel her with me in those half-lit hours. It's a good thing it's only twice a year though because she wasn't an easy woman.

So, this morning, when I slipper-stumbled towards the bathroom and saw a pink sky streaked with golden wisps beckoning through the window, there was nothing for it but to swap my dressing gown for a woolen coat and pull waterproof trousers over my pyjama bottoms. Hands in gloves and head in bobbed hat, I went to greet the dawn.

My old bones feel the cold these days and clothes are all about keeping out the elements. I'd wear a bin liner if I couldn't find my raincoat. Hard to imagine now the me in her twenties who flittered about London wearing knee-high, white boots and a tartan mini. But nobody in these parts pays much attention to appearances and with Gerry gone there's little point in fussing over mine.

Most of us are blow-ins out here, and you wouldn't be choosing this far tip of a peninsula if you liked company. We help each other out when needed, and everyone's friendly enough, but it'd be taking a liberty to be calling in to say hello. Respecting each other's space is the key to us getting along. Not that there aren't times when the rules get broken. Took some push back with a few of them after Gerry died, I can tell you. Makes you wonder if the power of a widow's curse comes from having to ward off the well-meaning.

My cottage is the last one along this narrow boreen that features many a dip and a curve before joining the quiet road that links to Kilmockteera, the closest village a few miles on. From my back gate I can walk straight through the dunes to the cove beyond. Seeing as I could find the path in my sleep, I don't need to be bothering with glasses anyway but, truth is, my new lenses bring the world into too sharp a focus for my liking. A hazy horizon suits me, always has. Stops me being distracted by what's in the distance and missing what's right there in front of me. Though these days that horizon seems a lot closer.

Cullagh Bay, as the cove is known, is not a bad old stretch of coast. At low tide there's a nice bit of sand with rocky pools at the cliff end. But it's stayed a secret from most. If you were taking an idle spin down the boreen, you wouldn't know how far this thin wedge of land juts out into the Atlantic. The tarmac stops long before our final cluster of houses and, even when a visitor braves the potholes, they'll only get a glimpse of rickety wooden jetties and stony shores unless they climb the stile at the road's end. Few do that, and why would

they with no sign to show them the way? The council puts one up every few years. Doesn't take long for it to join the others in my shed. I'm thinking of using them for cladding.

We need extra protection around here. This side of the peninsula has nothing to stop a moody wind and we can get the sort of wild weather that whips up a surf only a fool would brave. Nobody swims in the cove anymore. Not after what happened. To be fair, I was never one for going out of my depth even before that. My imagination would get the better of me picturing what might be lurking beneath and I'd be arm-wheeling back to shore in a dignity-defying panic. These days the most I do is roll up my trousers to get my feet wet. One of life's great pleasures I reckon, sand between your toes in the warmth of the shallows.

But it was far too nippy this morning to be taking my boots off, I'll admit I was barely out of the dunes before I was considering turning back. The sky was shedding its rosy tinge and the tide was sneaking out. A few terns moseyed about but even the breeze was taking it easy and only the odd gull's caw disturbed the lazy rhythm of snoozy waves. There were seaweed clumps forming thick lines along the shore and I was thinking I ought to come back after my porridge, gather some up for the garden. I saw the mound long before I neared it, but I was away with the fertilisers and it wasn't until I was well close that it grabbed my attention in a surprise attack.

My mind went blank. A body. A person-sized body. I was running toward it before thought caught up. A tailfin registered. I stopped, let out the breath I didn't know I was holding. Now I'm probably fonder of animals than people but there was a big relief in it not being human and, I'll be honest here, that relief came more from selfishness than sentiment.

Don't get me wrong, I'm sorry for any loss of life, but there's a lot of upset over folk washing up on beaches even when they're alive, and not for the sort of reasons that'd make you proud. If this was a person there'd be news reports and cameras and all manner of intrusions going on. Before you know it, we'd have wannabe politicians making speeches and

an angry mob down here going on about foreigners stopping honest-to-God Irish families from putting bread on their table. Best to keep well away from all that sort of thing if you want to keep some faith in humanity.

As I got closer to the body, I could see scrapes and gouges and long deep wounds still oozing blood. The tail was in tatters with one of the flukes almost all gone. I couldn't recognise the species. There were no scales, but a skin so pale I thought it might be an albino dolphin, possibly a whale calf of some kind, although the tail was so deeply divided it resembled the finned feet of a sea lion. Whatever this poor creature was, it looked like it had been savaged. It was lying belly down with the upper half beneath such a thick mass of assorted seaweed that I couldn't make out if it still had any dorsal or side fins left.

I neared it warily. Many years ago now, a minke whale stranded herself the next bay over. It was horrible watching her die, her weight crushing her organs without the water to hold her. As we locals rushed about uselessly with our buckets, she went into her death throes. I'll never forget those cries. Or how she beat herself against the rocky shore as though desperate to end her agony. I came home with her blood in my hair and her screams in my ears. I'll not be letting that happen again.

But I'm not so brave that I didn't use a long stick to prod this body from a safe distance. No reaction. Not a flicker of life. I'll admit relief. I don't enjoy being an angel of mercy and it's not like a run-over hare I could hit with a shovel. A critter of this size would take some killing and I've no bullets left for the shotgun. Must do something about that. There's folk that think a little old lady living out here on her own makes for an easy target. I like to teach them otherwise.

Still crouched down, I had a quick word with Gerry. He always helps me put manners on the voices in my head. Now I'm not saying he was that predictable, not at all, but we were together for over forty years and I can still hear him talking even with his ashes feeding the

rowan outside our front door. Makes me wonder sometimes whether he said what I thought he said when he had a tongue. But sense he was speaking now because, dead or alive, a stranded whale needs to go back out to sea. And it wouldn't be any different no matter what kind of oddball whale this might be.

Three gulls landed a few feet away and were giving the body the hungry eye. That got me moving and, after shooing them away, soon enough I was dragging over a driftwood plank that could have hefted a truck. The gulls watched from a little further off as I wedged it beneath the mound's centre and started pushing at it like a seesaw with a very fat man on the end. I kept at it until the body began to rock. Finally it teetered on its side, fell, and rolled onto its back. And then there was me letting out such a yell that the gulls took off altogether. For flopping out from the tangle of seaweed was a muscular forearm with a very human hand on the end.

My stomach heaved as I tried to see whether it was attached to something. The arm was bruised and battered but the cuts looked fresh. I don't know whether it was the shock that kept me from running for help straight away, but I'd swapped the plank for the stick and was clearing away the seaweed before I thought it through. Above the forearm I unveiled a knobbly elbow followed by a mighty bicep. Fearing I was about to expose the severed end, I stopped, delaying that horror by taking a better look at what was lying there. The hand lay open with a skyward-facing palm. I saw the thin stretches of flesh linking the long, slender fingers from knuckle to knuckle, noticed the curved claw-like nails. Sure, it wasn't so human after all.

Reassured, I pushed back the kelp to reveal a square shoulder, a squat neck, a receding chin. And then a face emerged unlike any I had known. It was the bulging forehead that first stood out, the rounded brow like a swelling. Then I spotted the almost circular ears,

the long-lashed lids over wide-set eyes, the nose so flat it wasn't much more than nostrils. Pale, plump lips hung open showing jagged sharp teeth.

The seaweed appeared to have attached itself to the top of the creature's head and I pulled it back like hair until the whole body was exposed. Aside from the cuts and bruises and the damaged fluke, it appeared intact with two arms and pancake breasts on a rounded torso that tapered into the tail. I winced at seeing the whelk on one of the large, brown nipples. Where it hadn't been battered, the hairless skin was almost glossily white and curved around the transparent tailfin like a cuticle. I tried not to look at the fleshy opening beneath what I took to be a belly button. I guess it was female, though with male seahorses getting pregnant I wouldn't rush to be judging gender. But it wasn't the sex that was bothering me. Sure, me and sex stopped bothering each other years back.

I told myself to stop fooling. There might not be as many fish in the sea as there should be, but I still wouldn't be knowing the half of them. Why even those who study them say there's plenty we have no idea about. There could be all sorts of strange-looking beasts lurking in the depths that nobody is aware of until someone happens to dive straight into one or a freak tide washes it ashore. And even then you'd be needing someone more report-minded than me to be passing... But I wasn't convincing myself.

My great-aunt Gemma's husband used to call her his selkie bride. Said marrying a seal woman made him a chosen man, though one day she'd find her pelt and leave him. A drunken farmer drove over her in his tractor before she got the chance, but she was always a fine swimmer. Even when I got old enough to know I didn't really have a living legend in the family, when she bobbed up between the waves with her hair slicked back you could well believe it. I still greet seals in Aunt Gemma's honour.

But I haven't believed in selkies since I was a child, and nobody has ever mentioned a mermaid that looks like a cross between a human and a pygmy beluga. Besides, I told myself,

we don't get that whale around here. Then I wondered why that would matter. Beluga may be unknown in these parts, but I imagine merfolk are rarer.

As I stood there gawking, a bubble of spit gathered at the side of its mouth. Now I've seen enough death to know gases keep rising, but if there was any possibility of life I was not going to stand around idle. Whatever it was. The plank returned to beneath its centre, I levered it onto its belly. I'd be lying if I said I didn't impress myself no end as I huffed and flipped. Back. Belly. Back. The tide splashed up my trousers, swished the seaweed still clinging to the body's skull.

And then something grabbed my ankle. Tugged the leg right from under me. And there I was landing hard on my behind in the shallows and looking into a pair of round, dark eyes. The creature raised itself onto one arm, spat out a mouthful of sand, and as I scrambled backwards, it hissed: "Back off, you murdering crabstomper, or I'll fin you."

I'm still not recovered from the shock. Just writing that had me needing to go fix myself another drink. I don't think there's enough whiskey in Ireland to make me feel relaxed about today. But after she spoke, I'll admit I lost the run of myself for a moment. There was a bit of screaming alright, which I'm not too proud of, but the thwack of her tail in the water right next to me was as good as a slap to shut me up fast. It's not every day that a marine creature tells you off in your mother tongue and I'll excuse myself for being silenced for some while. Not that she was easy to interrupt. I don't mind a bit of a vent, but even in the fright of it all I soon tired of being compared to an eel's sphincter or a mouthful of squid ink.

"Now hang on a minute," I said as she warmed to the theme of my plankton-like intelligence, "I was trying to save you."

"By tossing me back into the sea? When I'm injured and bleeding?"

"But you live there."

“Since when did that make a place safe? Surely even a clam-brained land-dweller like you would know predators target the weak? Do you not understand what it’s like to have your skin chewed by conger eel? Your flesh stripped by a lobster?” She was sitting up, left arm cradled to her chest, teeth bared. “Why would you do that to me? Why would you want me to die in such pain?”

When she said she needed somewhere safe to rest up in secret, well, I couldn’t be turning her away.

So now I’ve a mermaid staying with me. Her waterbed is a blessing as I’ll be able to cart the dinghy into the shed at night and leave it out under the apple tree during the day. Sling up an old tarp if she wants some shelter. Though I doubt she minds a bit of rain. And, aside from her getting out of it to roll into the pond and decapitate my goldfish, it’s been a fine solution so far. Not that madam hasn’t found fault. I tell you my favourite part of the day was padlocking the shed with her inside.

She has explained, at length, about her dietary needs. Her food must be fresh. She spat out the tinned tuna I gave her and threw up the fish finger. Fair enough maybe. But even that nice bit of hake I was saving for my dinner was frowned upon for being a few days old. She ate it all, mind. Then whinged about it having no head or organs. The eyeballs, she claims, are particularly nutritious. Most of my afternoon was spent running back and forth to the apple tree with buckets of foraged seaweed and mixed bags of molluscs I’d gathered from beneath the jetty. She’d some appetite on her alright, and that’s when she’s tired and poorly. Lord knows what she’ll be like when she’s herself again.

First there were the complaints about my lack of palm trees. Apparently, coconuts are always rolling down the beaches where she comes from and floating about in the shallows. Then it was the strange taste of the mussels. After the command I go diving for prawns, I told

her she'd have to put up with whatever seafood Eoin brings in from the market. When I explained that not only did I pay someone else for fish but got my neighbour to collect it she got a big judgey head on her. Apparently, merfolk never outsource their food supply. She sniffed with those weirdly unhooded nostrils as she lectured me. Now I do grow my own vegetables and cast the odd line, but listening to her made me want to order a pizza. Not that they'll deliver out here anymore without charging me a hefty fee. I'll bet it was Noreen who suggested the extra. That woman doesn't miss a trick.

The whiskey bottle is half empty. Definitely not half full. I rang Eoin earlier to triple my fish order, had a story all ready to go, but he wasn't even curious as to why and couldn't get off the phone quick enough. Could be I've invented a mermaid houseguest for company. No, I wouldn't do that to myself. Mariana is too annoying. What would be the point of an imaginary friend you wanted rid of? Funny thing though, now that I think of it, I haven't heard from Gerry since she grabbed my ankle.