



FISH

THE BIG SHIP bypassed the quay, going very strong, amazed the welcomers and the lounging land-admirals, hit the shore, ran through the seawall, trod, planed, skimmed – over the crab stalls, the scaly cobbles, the gasping fish on death's row – and paused briefly, very briefly, at Reception, Hôtel des Matelots – checked in and out, in its own fashion ... visited and exited brusquely the dining room, the kitchen, the bins arrayed behind. Stopped.

The hill, of course. Nature built the town on it, to stop the sea.

Ignoring decency, restraint ... making a judgement: anathema. The ship speaks: 'This place is hostile, junk: destroy it, give it to the sea, pulverise its stones, its scrabbling people, sow its stumps with salt, plant the others' fleet on it.'

'They've been invaded,' says Petronia. 'The people who lived here: – and us, just sightseers, from everywhere. How do we behave?'

'There's no one,' says Vinnie. 'Just the ship, with those big headless fish, side by side in troughs, like torpedoes.'

'Do we eat them?' asks Petronia, quite bewildered.

'I could put one on my wall,' says Vinnie. 'Just a skeleton, if you find a kettle big enough to render it.... They'll be full of poison stuff. If they had heads, they could be hunting trophies....'

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'My advisor says three years of difference is too much to guarantee a lover's constancy,' Petronia says to Vinnie. 'My romance pitted against your reason, excitement versus experience. That means we two should not get together.'

'That's advice, not a command,' Vinnie says, annoyed.

'I trust her, and I don't trust you,' she says. 'I don't know what you're up to. At school we tried each other out, there wasn't anybody there to ask about sex ... there were no teachers. Now, I don't trust other people, nor their ships....'

They laugh. They're very frightened ... in general; and this rampant ship confirms it. There'll be something in the identities of each that makes them suspect, vulnerable, to anybody, anybody on the ship. If, of course, there is a crew.... Now, there's no one you can see.

'Everyone's invaded now,' says Vinnie, trying to calm himself. 'Money, tourists, new build or sports ... smarty robots. Perhaps the ship is ours. We could use it, make it a residence. The hotel's been trashed....'

'Oh Vinnie, how you anger me,' she says. 'You're the boy with too-short legs who fucks the women, every one of them, because they think you are the norm, you must be real because you love yourself and when they split with you, they see you've made them small and silly the moment you two stepped into the bed, because it's just a procedure, a flourish, like urinating, giving blood, or throwing up. You steam off to the next love, you're a train that snorts out grit and cinders that get into everybody's eye....'

'Tack a shark's skeleton on the wall? You don't know better, that there are decent things...? You're brutal because you can't think of anything else. The evil, the malicious – they creep into your empty mind because it's cool and quiet in there....'

'Petronia,' says Fritz. 'We've been invaded! Really. The prices are exploding, and I can't get a connection.'

'I've broken with Vinnie, Fritz,' she says. 'I like you more than him, and he's always preferred Nadia to me.'

'Not now, Petronia,' says Fritz. 'Not now.'

They're not in *their* country. They don't like where they are, or where they were. Who does a country belong to? No one, probably.

'It will mean Resistance,' Vinnie says, listening in, unmoved. 'Although the invading ship was ours.'

'Yours? Mine?' asks Petronia, sounding pert. 'And "our" sailors? – they're all from somewhere else, ours and theirs. I saw no one. They've hopped it. It's called "jumping ship". That means the ship is salvage, abandoned – belonging to anyone who seized it, saved it. That's why you must resist pirates, stay on board to the death, if you believe in owner's rights.'

'It doesn't sound good law,' says Fritz, wrinkling his brow, like a comedian.... 'What concerns me is those fish. Were they protected? Or maybe you can catch some, not others, and so off with their heads....'

'You can eat reds, not blues,' says Vinnie. 'Petronia says we should contemplate becoming animals – I suspect it has been done....'

'No,' Petronia protests. 'I said, "Would we take on certain characteristics of animals, like swimming underwater for months, and beeping to our mother half a world away?"'

'That, we have recently learned to do,' says Vinnie. 'Without getting wet, just knowing her phone number.'

'If we thought that being another animal,' Petronia persists, 'might give us better chances of survival, would we take the risk? Would we change our status as top dogs? It's "against nature" if the boundaries are fixed so as to keep the species separate, however inconvenient some shapes may be.... Not being able to sweat except by lolling out our tongues. Monogamy. Cuckoos laying eggs in your baby's bed.... Eating dead flesh and howling.... Of course, some of those inconveniences we already face....'

'If you were a red fish,' says Fritz, weighing it up, 'you would be decapitated, so you'd not show what you are. If a blue one, not: unless you wanted to pass as a red.'

'I think the risk's too great,' says Vinnie. 'Not just decapitation: there's being eaten by a shark or beached.... If we transformed into big fish....'

'Oh, I'd chance it,' says Petronia. 'I can't swim, so I'd want to be furry, of middling size, run fast, and live in holes that someone else had dug. Not swim all day.'

'It's not like that,' says Vinnie, trying to hold her hand. 'You'd be modified, your body, mind – if you have one – changed: but not so as to fly, or spout, eat plankton. Nor roar. Some things come natural – others eternally out of sight.'

'It's not meant to be a fun trip,' says Fritz. 'Changing species; but it's on the cards. There'd be two subspecies – even many more – of modified people, and the ancient, primitives, living side by side. You'd be a carnivore, Petronia, exclusively. I'd dangle from a tree, eat quinces. My life would be much longer than a gorilla's, but I'd be afraid of you.'

'Listen, guys,' says Vinnie. 'If we've been invaded – where are they, the invaders? Where are we, the resisters? Where's the sailors on an empty battered ship that's knocked down the hotel?'

'A series of them, puzzles. If we were animals, we'd be the puzzled kind who gawp.'

'Sloths,' says Petronia. 'That's the word. I'm a journalist, and the first – the only – lesson we were taught, to keep our minds full but fresh, is: "take the concrete evidence, ignore the rest, the inferences, hypotheses, the background. Take what you can see and touch, and follow it, like it was a silken thread. It leads you on to more, more concrete scenes ... and ultimately, truth...."'

'It leads you down to hell then up, and then the furies turn on you, rip you apart, and you are dead,' says Fritz, and laughs uncertainly: 'Torn to bits. Your head torn off, the tongue – wagging on. Your partner's too.'

'The only real thing, apart from the empty ship gone mad and on a rampage – is the headless fish,' says Vinnie. 'They're huge. Like little submarines.'

'You're undecided, Vinnie,' says Petronia. 'About what you can see. It's the spirit of the age. Frontiers – species ... too many for the patrolling guards. We're on the cusp – maybe the brink, the teeter-totter. Think *Overkitsch*, think Galia Salimo, working the smokers' room on Sundays in the Casino, where the colonels hang out, filling the spittoons with their depleted

spermatozoa, and preparing for the omni- or the bi-sex who'll take off their kit onstage ... all fluid and in flux....

'High kicks, Vinnie: you'll love those. It's the comradeship, the promiscuity – that's what those headless fish proclaim. Eat, everybody! Together! The hugger-mugger ... enjoy!

'Combat, Vinnie! Fight for what you think is yours. Fight for what you think is theirs. Take it.'

'It's true,' says Fritz: 'All boundaries are up for grabs ... they melt and merge, like jello ... land, sea, bird and feline.... All of us, we come from mixed families. We're rain and snow, hail and drizzle, we fall to earth, we're ice and then – we're lichens, peat.... Invasions – they impale, infect, ingratiate – they are your murderer, your seducer and your administrator. They're your grandfather, they write your constitution, police your market.'

'Everything's invasion in your eyes, Fritz,' Petronia says. 'A change of season, of rhythm, of your temperature....'

'It's so,' he says. 'You sleep, hallucinate – your sex, the colour of your skin, your eyes – all seep into the shimmer. You understand what you once were, the life in trees, amid the scarlet rocks, black sand....'

'It's like the Russians; true Russians, not like us. One day they all wake up and lo! They understand – they're Mongols, every one, have always been, since when they thought they were something else. There's a revelation, liberation – new identity you might explore: yes, understanding what you were, will be – that's acknowledging invasion, undeniably and everlasting ... submit and welcome....'

'Mongolians have an unmatched sense of humour,' Vinnie says, hustling them along, 'Stick to the fish. Petronia is right – they're all we have ... since we can't board the ship....'

'We might even climb up,' Petronia says. 'There might be....'

'People. A prison hulk?' asks Fritz. 'Strange people, refugees, or pirates ... our sailors, sleeping, drugged or drunk. Bewitched – infected and incapable: "full ahead", the vessel, hoping to hit and stick....'

Fritz swarms up a rope that's dangling down. The ship is smaller, now they're near. Metal, rusty, a leaf-mould brown.

'Monkey-tricks,' says Vinnie. 'I can't climb ropes – call Nadia, she's worked in a circus, that's how they pass their time....'

'Ships full of cash,' says Vinnie, 'or just abandoned – once were full of precious things, of drugs, but those must be cut and marketed. It must be things that's easier.... Ships not worth a dime ... unusable but traced.... Seas are packed with them.'

'How do you tell the blue fish?' asks Petronia. 'Is it whiskers, or do you need a test? And if there's drugs – how do we sell them? Suppose there's corpses....'

'All these possibilities,' says Fritz, looking down. 'Have answers. There won't be drugs. If there's corpses, we'll run away and phone in from afar. As for the fish – we've eaten all the reds, the blue ones are decapitated so they're not identifiable, and we can eat them.'

'Yes,' says Vinnie. 'History never stays stuck and motionless. Everything shifts on. Remember – "and yet it moves". Remember the pictures – they were all fixed in "flat earth", one-dimensional: then science came along ... and it was round and round. Now it's the whole world in a thin black box.'

'For an empty ship, it's already full ... we're not able to deal with so many possibilities. We'll cut corners, drop bundles,' says Petronia.

'There's clothes,' Fritz shouts up, from down, in the hold: muffled, 'Lots and lots of clothes. For every kind of person, every shape – it would take me years to describe them to you – you must come up and see it – like the Titanic, but no risk: still afloat, all the luggage left....'

'If we're interested, naturally,' says Vinnie. 'Nadia wears all kinds – tutus: sand camouflage for when the elephants do their gavotte.... The circus ring requires you play everything, and no one should see what you really are.'

'Is that style?' Petronia asks. 'I've always shied away from that, but I may have misunderstood. It sounds like gloss. I like the substance. Let it shine, words trumpeting out – no matter what language people speak, or none; none properly.'

Petronia – a Roman look. A nose that's lightly squashed – said thus to be noble: a look daring, adventurous- but also vacant, knowing she's in the wrong company, but never knowing right ones ... where she'd be bored, uncomfortable. Clothes that swirl, unserviceable except for ceremonies – she's much taller, more robust than she appears. She would defer, retreat –

but can't ... a presence dominating, on the brink of an escape. A prey desirable, but impossible to carry off, unthinkable to butcher....

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