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Opening extract from

The Tide Turner

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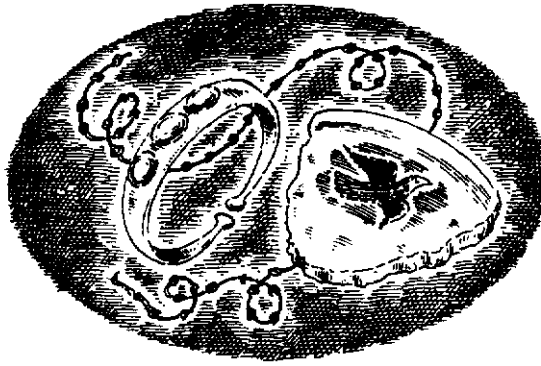
One

Cal



Cal lay awake, watching for the first light of dawn. Her heart beat furiously inside her chest like a wild thing in a cage.

All through the long night she'd tossed on restless tides of sleep and tumbled in an undertow of turbulent dreams. Now, at last, a dim light shimmered on the stone windowsill.

Night was over.



Cal rose quickly and sat on her bed. She ran her fingers through the tangles of her copper hair and peered around the room. She could see little, but Cal had always lived in the half-dark. A world of shadow she now made ready to escape.

She reached for the earthenware jug standing on the floor by the bed, tipped it carefully and thrust her arm inside, pulling out a fistful of knotted twine. Cal worried about what her father would do when he found she'd gone. The handful of twine was her message, explaining why she had to leave. But would he understand? Cal remembered his recent words, 'I love you more than breath itself, little spinner,' and she knew it was true. But how could you really love someone and keep secrets; secrets that hurt so much?

'I will come back,' Cal insisted silently to herself. 'It's not for ever, but I have to go.'

On an upturned crate beside the bed was a large shell bowl containing Cal's treasures. Her fingers found a bronze bracelet with three amber beads. Hurriedly she slipped it onto her wrist. There too was a tiny tarnished spoon and a bone comb. Her father had bargained for them with a trader. They were pretty enough but not what she was looking for. She took out a fragment of pottery. On the rim a painted bird was flying in a smudge of blue sky. Cal put her thumb on the bird's body, as she had done many times before, and felt the slight indentation of the potter's thumbprint, only a little bigger than her own. She put the wedge of broken clay into a small woven bag, surprised at how important these touchstones suddenly seemed, now that she was about to leave everything familiar behind.

Nothing will be the same again, she thought and felt a tremor of fear and excitement. Whatever she might discover in the days ahead, Cal was certain she would return changed somehow.

Last she picked out a triangular shard of mirror glass and took it to the window. Although it was badly scratched and the light still weak, Cal could make out a scrap of her reflection: a narrow green eye with red lashes, a scatter of freckles on her creamy cheek and the side of her long nose. She pursed her lips.

'No, I want to see all of me,' she said in a low voice, 'not just a part any more. I need to know who I am, where I came from. If Father won't tell me I'll find out for myself.'

Cal tightened the drawstring bag and fixed it to a plaited belt around her waist, then reached instinctively to her throat for the crystal teardrop pendant she always wore. It had belonged to her mother. She paused, curling her fingers around the pendant in the very place her mother's fingers must have held it, imagining a tiny pulse flowing from one hand to the other. Passing through the absence between them. Pulsing from heart to heart. What more did they share? Cal had to find out. Did her mother have the same russet hair with its curious glints of silver? Did she have Cal's rare skill with injured creatures? Was her mind constantly restless with questions? Cal was certain there must be somebody, somewhere, who could tell her. Someone who could remember what her father found too painful to recall.

Cal took one last look round her room. Under the bed was a plain, wooden box. This had belonged to her mother too, but it was locked and neither Cal nor Pelin, her father, had ever found a key. She sighed. If only it were smaller she would take it.

'No,' she told herself firmly, 'I won't be locked out any more. I'll find my own key.'

Turning her back on the box she began to move silently along the passage towards her father's room.

Pelin lay asleep, with his back to the doorway. Cal gazed at him. She remembered the times she'd slept there as a child, folded in his arms. On those nights, when she had cried for her mother, he'd held her close and the spell of his whispered words had comforted her. Now Cal was older, she had learnt to cry to herself. She didn't want his comfort or protection. It stifled her, imprisoned her.

Pelin muttered restlessly. Cal's eyes prickled. She chewed her lip. For all her resolve she hated to hurt him. She didn't dare go into his room to even whisper goodbye for fear of waking him. Quickly she turned away and slipped down the staircase and across the hall.

Early light dappled the flagstones. She hesitated, clutching the little bag hanging from her belt, and steadied her nerve. Suddenly Cal sensed she was not alone. She spun round . . . Pelin appeared at the top of the stairs.

'Where are you going? It's so early.' He looked confused.

Cal wasn't prepared for this. Now she would have to lie. 'I'm going to the Overbreath. I couldn't sleep.'

'But you can't go alone,' said Pelin, yawning and descending the stairs. 'Let's eat first and then I'll come with you.'

Cal moved nearer the threshold. 'I can go alone, Father, all the others my age do.'

'I don't care what the others do, Calypsia.' Pelin's voice sharpened. 'You're not like them.'

Cal sighed. How many times had she heard those words before? They were always the beginning of an exasperating

exchange that went nowhere. Still, she couldn't stop herself from asking, 'Why aren't I like the others?'

Pelin didn't answer. He reached for a stone bench, draped in sealskin, and sank down upon it. Leaning forward, he rested his head in his hands.

'What does that mean, "not like the others"?' Cal persisted.

'It's not safe for you,' said Pelin. 'I'm afraid that – that there are—'

'*What* are you afraid of?' Cal interrupted. 'You must tell me.'

'I can't say. You have to trust me. It's not safe.'

'No!' Cal snapped. 'I *am* old enough. You must trust *me* now.'

Pelin knew she was right. Cal wasn't a child any more. She needed the fingers of his hand along with her own to count the times they'd watched the Great Migration. And how long before she stopped reaching out for his hand? He'd been a fool over-protecting her. Pelin was seized with panic at the thought of letting her go. He wasn't ready.

He couldn't let her slip away like this – hadn't prepared her for what might be waiting, out there, beyond his watchful eye . . .

'I promised your mother,' he said softly.

Cal felt her throat tighten. A shaft of light slipped through the window and sliced across the hall, trembling between father and daughter. Neither spoke.

Why now? Cal thought. When I am just about to go? Then she dared hope. Maybe he is ready to speak, maybe I won't have to go at all.

When Cal was little she had often asked when her mother, Sylla, would come home. But Pelin had always

avoided answering her questions, promising to tell her one day – a day that never arrived. Cal's young mind had been unable to grasp that there might be leaving without a return. She would arrange her playthings, hoping to please Sylla when she came back, quizzing her father about when it would be. She made gifts for her mother, threading beads and collecting stones. Then, one evening, she caught Pelin wiping tears from his eyes as he watched her and, without words, she understood what he could never tell her.

Something of the darkness Cal felt inside that night had never left her. From then on she learnt not to upset her father with questions, although it hurt not to ask. But now, maybe this was a chance to coax some memory from him.

Cal moved towards her father. Gently she pulled his hands away from his face.

'What did you promise my mother?' she asked.

Pelin struggled. He had made a promise to Sylla when she told him she was dying. If he broke it he would lose faith with her. It was unthinkable. Yet if he didn't break it and tell their daughter now of the danger she might face how could he protect her? Hadn't he promised to do that too?

But that was not all that troubled him. There were other secrets – deeper secrets overheard, words he had tried to forget, knowledge so burdensome it was almost unbearable . . .

'Help me,' Pelin gasped. His voice sounded strange to Cal. She knew at once his words were not spoken to her.

Cal watched her father sink his head once more upon his hands.

'Tell me,' she shouted desperately. 'I have a right to know! Tell me something! Tell me!'

But Pelin did not look up. Cal cried out in frustration and turned away from him, towards whatever lay beyond. Her tail flashed dangerously as she passed through the rippling curtain of light. Without glancing back she swam off through the sunken village.



Two

Jake



Jake sat in his boat, staring from the sea to the humpback cliffs that rose from the water like the body of a great stone serpent. Glints of ocean light reflected in his grey-blue eyes. A breeze scuffed the water, ruffling his black corkscrew curls. Jake turned, roused by the sharp air that stung his face, and winced at the reminder of how, so recently, his cheeks had stung with tears.

He fingered a nugget of sea glass in his pocket. It had belonged to his father, Charley, who'd kept it in a battered old tobacco tin with his own mother's wedding ring and her gold locket. Charley had shown them all to Jake once, in secret.

'If anything happens to me,' he'd said, puffing as he

hurried to twist the stubborn lid off the tin before his wife, Lil, came home, 'if anything ever happens to me, you sell these, lad. Sell them for Lil.'

But Lil had never needed what little money Charley's keepsakes might have fetched. He and Jake had found her one evening, on their return from a fishing trip, sleeping all wrong in her chair with the fire cold.

'Taking the long rest,' Charley had called it.

That was a year ago. And now Charley, who'd been lost as flotsam without her, was taking the long rest too.

After Charley's funeral Jake had found the tobacco tin, but it didn't feel right to touch the ring and the locket inside – they were for blood family and Jake wasn't blood family, although Charley and Lil were the only kin he knew. He'd just taken the piece of blue glass. It must have meant something to Charley.

The boat pitched. Jake lurched forward and pulled in the oars. That boat was all he'd had when Charley and Lil took him in and all he was left with since they'd gone.

He gazed back at the shore, to the stretch of beach where Charley said he'd found Jake one morning, twelve years ago. It had been a cold, grey day. Sky and sea had dissolved into one another. The lone rowing boat lay on the winter beach. Charley had been taking his usual walk, stumbling along the water's edge, picking through the driftwood, spitting curses at the spray. He stooped to stab at the wet pebbles, picked up a scrap of twine and stuffed it in his pocket, mumbling as he straightened up against the wind.

Suddenly the familiar cry of seabirds was pierced by a shriek. Charley narrowed his eyes and listened. At first he thought it was a whistling gull playing tricks on his ears.

But the cry was followed by a desperate bleating that chilled his heart. This time Charley recognised the sound.

He clambered across the stony beach towards the boat. When he saw what was inside he stepped back and crossed himself.

No one ever knew how long the child had been crying in that boat, or how Charley managed to carry a tiny baby, wrapped inside his coat, up the steep cliff steps and along the coast path to the cottage hospital hunched like a white gull on the hillside.

Charley had wanted to leave the baby on the doorstep of the hospital and be gone. Superstition was strong in those parts. Everyone knew the saying: 'Take a child from a salty crib and cry a sea of tears.'

There were many tales about babies found abandoned at the water's edge: restless, moody children who brought tragedy to the families that took them in – most often death by drowning; sad children with unspoken longings who disappeared when a tide was unusually high; feral creatures who haunted the cliffs and caves; children who grew webbed feet . . .

Sea foundlings were feared.

But Charley couldn't leave the baby on the step because he had nothing to wrap it in. 'And I wasn't going to give up my coat,' he told Jake many times later. 'There was a chill wind up there and you were pale as death. So I took you inside. But those nurses could smell the brine on you. They guessed where you'd come from, I saw it in their eyes. Not one would take you from my arms. I had to bring you home to Lil, and she washed you and wrapped you up with a dry sprig of lavender, looked me straight in the eye and said, "That's that, then." '

Lil named the baby Jake after her father and was soon busy fussing over the child. But Charley couldn't get the sound of that baby's cry out of his head. It echoed on the wind and the roar of the waves. And it troubled him. It troubled him that Lil would give her heart to the boy.

A wave slapped the side of the boat. Jake loved the sound of that hollow smack, the hearty way the sea claimed the boat. No one had come for it after Jake was found, so Charley had kept it. When Jake was barely old enough to descend the cliff steps, half jumping, half stumbling, Charley took him down to the beach, bundled him into the old boat and began to teach him how to handle it. Jake loved those hours on the water with Charley. He soon grew confident and was keen to learn anything Charley could teach him.

'Sea born . . .' Charley would say and Jake never questioned this odd remark, but he noticed the silence that always followed, as if there was something left unsaid.

Charley lived just long enough to see Jake master his boat. The week before he died he made a bother about the way Jake was painting it.

'She'll only have one master,' said Jake, pushing the hair from his brow with a paint-smeared hand. 'Who's it going to be?'

Charley grinned and Jake grinned back.

'When the paint's dry you can climb aboard, old man,' said Jake, 'and I'll show you how to catch a crab!' He got a clip round the ear for his cheek, but the following day he and Charley had their last trip together.



Jake had grown strong and wise enough to sail alone. And alone he stood in the chapel when they blessed the coffin of old Charley, who wasn't afraid of the foundling.

Now Jake was left to brood on the sense of it all. There on the water, looking back from a distance, he could make sense of most things: of the river that flowed from the hills, cleaving the rock to the sea; of the steep town that clung to both sides of the valley, spilling its fishermen into their boats; of the harbour arms that kept safe water for their return. He understood the sense of Charley and Lil and their place in the ebb and flow of the town, of their own tides of work and rest. But the sense of himself, that was something Jake had never been able to grasp. Where did he fit in? Why didn't he understand his place, why was nothing about himself clear in his mind's eye? It was only on the boat that his restlessness ceased, dissolving into the dipping, rising rhythm of the waves. The sea always lulled his questions away.

