

J. P. RODRIGUEZ

## THE SHOALS

WE DRIVE DOWN INTERSTATE 95, wind whipping around, tearing down the weight of the city. The pavement's perfectly smooth but for the odd older stretch riddled with tar-vein scars that hardly alter the drone of the rented Jeep's tires. Heidi points out another sign, this one humorous at least:

FORGIVE YOUR ENEMIES—IT MESSES WITH THEIR HEADS

She keeps pointing out these bilious billboards, bullhorning the bullshit logic of ordained, infantile thought—lurid verses of the sermon of the U.S. interstate:

GAY OR LESBIAN? THERE IS HOPE FOR CHANGE

GLOBAL WARMING IS A HOAX—UNLIKE HELL

THE MOST DANGEROUS PLACE FOR AN AFRICAN AMERICAN IS IN  
THE WOMB

"I can't believe I'm going to meet your *parents*," she says now. "What two people could have made you?"

I look to the mirror to change lanes and see her hand out, fingers splayed, dredging the air. "Just remember . . ." I try, still not convinced this is a good idea, but it's the only one I've got.

"What?"

"No, it's nothing," I say, aiming for the offramp. "We'll be fine."

"How do two people stay together for so long?"

Who would believe this?

More like, who wouldn't?

"I think they call it love."

"Well, my dear Heidi," Emi's father, Grant, says to me with a comic grimace. "For a woman who claims to rarely play this game—something certainly evidenced by the way you leave triples open for my wife—you played admirably. Again, a mere nineteen points for it, but 'bezoar'? Is that how you say it?"

I nod and look to Emi, who's smiling a hundred different things to me, an inviting touch of red to her face from the day's sun and wine.

"As of now," he continues, "I am instituting a tradition of awarding the player who, though perhaps not well-versed in the dynamics of the game, clearly shows heart and raw talent such that it could be reasonably extrapolated that, if she knew at least to be careful around triples . . ."

"*My Love!* No one's looking to be sobered up," groans Emi's enigmatic mother, April.

"... she would surely emerge victorious. And I vote for you!"

April holds up her glass gamely, offering a "Hear! Hear!"

"So your prize," Grant says, feigning looking around the room for something, "shall be an all-expenses-paid trip to the tallest warning light in the Americas!"

"Running lights on the POTUS chopper?" says Emi, and I don't get it, but every word from her makes me want her more.

"Hatteras lighthouse! You English appreciate heady nautical symbology like that, right?"

"I'd rather something else, actually," is what I say, and Emi's eyes light up with a flare of pleased surprise.

"Oh?" says Grant. "I don't know that these prizes are exchangeable."

"I'd like to hear him play his violin," I say, my voice annoying me as always with its tone that seems to be asking permission.

It seems weightless in his hands, yet the instrument adds a gravity to his presence that I feel through to my core—the hot-iron centre of the earth suddenly more interested in him. There's a surprising note of self-consciousness as he asks, "Sure you ladies are in the mood?"

April notices it as well, and a decrepit circuit of excitement is fired up within me.

He dives right in and drags the bow slow and heavy, like a glacier over stone, his fingers pulling an ominously wide vibrato, sumptuous forevers. I revel in his singularly focused intent to make the sound as true and impact-

ful as it has to be.

I look to April, her eyes closed now, lost in the depths of the sonic magnificence her husband is creating. Or maybe she's fallen asleep, having heard it all before.

"These are the days I live for," she says, this mother of mine, mawkishly present as the wind tears at the Jeep's fabric top. "So invigorating."

Did no one, over who knows how many years of therapy, ever get the message through to her that good communication is facilitated most readily by avoiding "I" statements and just fucking listening—even if only to silence?

"Shall we stop and walk?" I ask because I just want to get the fuck out of here. What was I thinking? I long for the reckless security of Heidi, who is currently claiming her Scrabble prize with dad, but for some reason the version of me that was me this morning, when the day's plan was decided, thought I needed this time alone with this person.

"Not in this wind. Remember your scratched cornea?"

Like I could forget wearing an eye patch the whole first week of Grade 11. "It might have determined my whole life."

"You're picking up her English inflection."

"Three months. It's been *three* months."

"But you really like this girl."

I give it some gas.

"Why don't you just tell me what's upsetting you?"

I picture driving the Jeep straight into the ocean, accelerator to the floor, until dear mother's eyes express surprise, terror, and whatever comes after that.

*So hard done to.*

"You're supposed to lower the tire pressure to drive on this."

I turn toward the surf and come to a stop just where the lumpy sand smoothes toward the wet, the wind's roar rent with the calls of seagulls swooping and circling in the emptiness above the waves crashing two hundred feet out.

"You seem to make a good couple . . . but so did you and Desmond."

The waves scrub, relentless. Obsessed.

"Des and I . . ." I say, then hear more saying from myself, and even more still somehow, I after I, until somehow the word falls out like Little Boy from

its bay. Pugnaciously repugnant. Just ugly: *abortion*.

"Oh, Emi, I knew there was something," my mother, my progenitor, says impassively.

Atop a three-hundred-foot lighthouse with the wind pulling in all directions, I revel in the noble competence of nature.

"Look out there," says Grant, pointing south. "Just off the land. See those waves piling on one another?"

Beyond the shrub-marred sand, a mile or so south, the beach comes to a point, then veers west. Beyond the point waves meet in the offing and reverberations of their union hit land and come to nothing.

"That's the farthest point. The island makes a ninety-degree cut back to the continent right there. Straight off it are the Diamond Shoals, where hot and cold currents converge. Fast waters where a captain could save a lot of time if he was brave enough to steer in so close to danger. Many had time to regret it as they went down with their ships. So many salt-scoured bones of men . . ."

The comfort of my fear collapses like a probability wave. "Lots of slave trade traffic, too."

"I suppose, yes."

"So lots of women's bones salt-scoured, too."

"Right, of course."

Silence now, which I leave it to him to break.

"Usually it's lined with people fishing. But the last few years they've been closing it to protect the endangered birds' eggs on the beach. Plovers and terns. So the locals're angry, sayin' the gub'mint's tryin' ta take the beach from 'em. Imagine."

"Come here, Emi," she says to me, and I lean in awkwardly for a forced embrace.

Have I told her? Like, *really*? It was not my intention in coming here. This was supposed to be for and about Heidi.

"You were right to do it," she adds. "We want to imagine sex is about love—deep spiritual connection—but that's just one of its dimensions . . ."

"Fuck, mom, please. Just stop. Just don't . . ."

"You did the right thing," she says again and then looks away, her sharp jawline cutting imperiously into the maelstrom of wind-ravaged sea and

sand. “And so did I.”

I heard that wrong, of course. No way a mother . . . Not even mine . . . I haven’t heard what I’ve heard and will not risk hearing anything of its kind. I will press the accelerator and make for Atlantis. I will . . . “*What?*”

“Your father and I, from the outset, agreed that we wouldn’t let ourselves be pulled apart by trying to limit one another. Sexually, I mean.”

“Oh, good god.”

“An *open* marriage is the modern term for it,” she says. “Though *diluted* might be better.”

“Maybe there are some things best *not told* to one’s fucking child!” I can’t help but look at her, way over there.

“One time, I wasn’t, well . . . It’s a killing, fine, sure, we accept, we do, we admit, but what can a clump of cells . . .”

I get out of the car, the wind takes me, and I wonder if I will ever have anything worth saying ever again.

A truck comes from behind, passes, and then swerves aggressively back into the lane to avoid the oncoming car.

“Look,” he says. “Rear window.”

Even without my glasses I can make out the red scrawl of *Give us back our beach!* One gargantuan truck after another throbs past in the other lane, most with long black fishing poles sticking straight up and bent back by the wind, like cockroach antennae or whips.

He pulls into the gravel lot of a wind-blown wood-sided building plastered with pronouncements regarding the quality and freshness of the seafood pulled out of this very day’s unsettled waters.

“They go out even in weather like this?”

“Because the most enjoyable thing to consume is the thing that’s closest to being alive,” he says in a tone that belies any sense of irony.

We walk through the near-empty restaurant, grains of sand scratching the wood under our feet, three middle-aged men sitting at the bar watching us. I cringe, knowing what they think they know about me. Grant guides me to a table at a window rendered opaque by a cloudy film, and I sit facing him and a wall of framed nautical maps and faded photos of sailors, ships, and wrecks.

“You’re right about the slave ships,” he says. “The women.”

“Yeah?”

He looks away, recalibrating, and I look to the thick wooden table between us, the shallow sentiments carved deep into it—true love always and the like.

“You’re safe with us, Heidi.”

He’s looking too hard at me, and his tone is too needy. It rips through the last tatters of my sense of fit, like coming down on a broken bone.

“I can imagine, after what you’ve been through, that . . .”

“She told you?”

Now he looks nervous. “No. Not in so many . . .”

“Words?”

“I’m sorry.”

“The degree to which I feel safe is determined by the distance I’m able to maintain from it. Every kind of distance.” I hope that will do, but I know it won’t.

“I want you to know that . . .”

How they love saving themselves from you.

Lying in bed, watching the sea, I think of Grant’s story about Hurricane Isabel taking out a bridge and the army putting it back together again. With sea levels rising, it won’t be long before all this is abandoned to and consumed by the sea. Right now, though, the Atlantic’s nailing an oceanic impersonation of glass. As I look out over the elegiac waters waving unwaveringly at no one, I’m filled with a sense of unease. I think again of the halibut April served for dinner and Emi’s explanation of their migrating eye, lives spent flat on the ocean floor, hiding in plain sight and waiting to strike out at prey. Who would believe it? But Grant Googled it, and there it was. Now, in that ultimate moment when my life flashes before my eyes, one of the images will be a hideous, Picasso-eyed flank of muscle and fins pulled from the depths of beauty and hanging from a hook with a supremely satisfied fisherman standing next to it. Such impossible things are out there, below the surface. There’s also something somehow comforting about it, though I can’t decide whether it’s the presence, the hiding, or something else entirely.

Up to speed on the highway, things feel better again. I look at Heidi, her head angled away to look out the window, perhaps at the houses behind the

dunes, perhaps thinking they look as if they've been half buried in shallow graves, the heavy blue sky pressing down on everything, trying to pound it all into the sand.

"Let's go to the point," I say.

"The point? Really?"

"It's just twenty minutes from here."

*"So many salt-scoured bones of men."*

"Huh?"

"Your dad said it's closed."

"All the more reason to go."

I follow Emi under a phalanx of fishing poles jammed at angles into the sand and bowing down to the sea, owners settled into camping chairs, wielding raking gazes. At the end of the line, no fishing gear in sight, sits an older black couple, reading. I want to pull up a chair.

"Excuse me," Emi says to them.

They both fold their books closed on their index fingers and give us their full attention. I don't look at the covers.

"You're allowed to walk in there as long as you stay in the surf, right?"

"Don't honestly know myself," the man says, "but a man went in there about half-hour ago, said the same. Must be well in there by now."

"I asked a ranger once. They don't like to make it public, though."

"Well, you won't catch me in there," he replies, and his wife nods in silent ascent.

Something in their demeanour, their fingers pressed into their books, their muted congruence, is immensely poignant.

A couple hundred feet past the first line of markers we come to another. A sign says *Area Closed. Bird Use Area*. Under outline drawings of Black Skimmers, Terns, and Piping Plovers it reads: *Disturbing may cause loss of eggs and young or loss of migrating adults. Entering area violation of state and federal law.*

"Not exactly drowning in ambiguity," I say.

"Trust me. We just leave no footprints. . . . It's even low-tide."

This feels wrong, but I keep going, feeling a distinct rush, some sort of communion.

Now we come to the man making his way out. As he and Emi reassure

one another that their presence is most definitely permitted, all I can look at is his bulbous gut and the crop of silver hair on his deeply tanned chest, which looks like tangled fishing line.

I take Emi's hand, and we carry on. There are lines of markers every couple hundred feet or so but no more signs of birds. When we reach the point, the ocean is relatively calm, in marked contrast to the previous day of blustery flamboyance. Off the point, though, waves are still crashing against one another, converging at the shoals. Here, at the edge of land, the sea coming from all directions, greens and whites and greys and blues, we're alone, one, together—adamantly, dangerously, on a tiny swathe of sand barely above sea level. A slight breeze animates the warm air.

"Isn't it *just* . . ." says Emi.

"Yes," I reply as I step farther into the wet sand and stand. The ground beneath my feet collapses with each lapping wave, and I sink deeper and deeper into it until I settle. I force my voice to say I want to go swimming.

Emi does not respond, so I turn to her, and her expression says everything and nothing.

She reaches for me, I take her hand, and she helps me out of my hole. We embrace, kiss, and then she lets go.

"Come on, then," she says.

"All right," I say with a kind of laugh—an attempt to erase all the dirt and fear on my mind.

She steps farther and farther into the surf as I watch, feeling fear for both of us, as if the bluff I've been posing all my life has finally been called. Perhaps it's just what I've been waiting for.

She keeps on going, assiduously into the forever sea, then dives and disappears gracefully into a wave coming at her.

I look back and can see only the narrow stretch of sand and brush leading back.

She's waving me in now. Emi, the only living thing to be seen in the ocean world surrounding her.

A sort of elation sweeps over me, and I launch into a run and holler.

As waves crash and swell and tell all about us.