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Antarctica

Many years ago, sitting in my fifth grade classroom, I would watch as my teacher, Mr. Slatner, covered himself with chalk dust. The lips of his pockets, his chin, his hips, all through his stiff, granite-gray hair, everywhere he put his hands became white with chalk. As his skin got chalky, he began to scratch. And during each day, as time wore on and as Mr. Slatner got whiter and whiter, itchier and itchier with chalk, I would find myself falling away again into daydreams. One daydream in particular I went back to time after time, filling in details, changing particulars, refining images. But the situation, the outcome and the girl never changed. They came as inevitably as Mr. Slatner's fingernails came for his chalky skin.

The girl was Farrah Fawcett. Her limo always pulled right up to the front of Cobalt St. Elementary. She poked her head into the classroom and with a toss of her hair asked for me, shattering the drowsy trance Mr. Slatner and his multiplication tables and spelling rules had cast over the classroom. Sometimes I stood up and followed her out the door. But other times I went to the back of the room for a chair to set by my own, saying, "Have a seat, Farrah. It will only be a few minutes more until recess."

She liked that. She liked to stay and watch me play kickball at recess. The bench around her was always crowded with kids asking for autographs. Farrah was polite to most of them, except for a few like Mitchell Millman. I told her about how he hit me once on the back of the head for no good reason. He hit me so hard that I became

dizzy and fell over. I hated him.

But eventually, Farrah got sick of all the people. She wanted to be alone with me.

“You know, William,” she would say. “I’ve got this quiet place on the north-east coast of Australia, and a boat waiting at the Marina to get us there.”

Sometimes we drove to the Marina in the limo, sipping drinks, watching T.V. and playing cards on the way. But other times we were just as quickly drifting on the South Pacific, already tan and drinking tea on the deck, already gazing around us at the perfect blue Pacific. But it wasn’t perfect. I pointed it out to Farrah. Her forehead wrinkled. A tiny dot of blankness interrupted the northern horizon. It was disturbing, I couldn’t take my eyes from it. It was like a lapse in my imagination, like a memory that can’t be completely recalled, left blank at an important part. But it was small, only a fraction of the world around us. “Come on,” Farrah said. “Let’s go swimming.” And we dove in.

The water was warm. Farrah liked to splash around the boat, playing with the dolphins. She had such a way with dolphins. I liked to swim deep, trying to touch the bottom. I pointed my head straight down, and swam with my right hand extended in front of me, anticipating the bottom. I swam that way for miles, until the water got cool and dark, until I gave up. I let my limbs go soft and I hurtled further down a few feet from momentum, before the water slowly turned me over and started pushing me to the surface. I rose for miles, until I could no longer feel the water rushing past my face. The light above me slowly got brighter and brighter. I had been so used to the darkness of the deep, that at the top, it seemed as if the water was bursting with light, as if each drop of water were a star. And then I would see the bottom of the boat and through the underwater observation bubble, Farrah, already dry. She waved at me before setting her cocktail down and reaching over to change cassettes on the stereo.

Standing on the deck, dripping water, I stared at the blank spot. It had grown. I feared then that it wouldn’t stop until it had devoured my Pacific, Farrah, and the boat, leaving me only a dream of blankness.

"Come," Farrah said. "I've made you some iced tea." I turned and watched Farrah walk from the cabin door to a towel she had laid out on the deck. She was wearing the very swimsuit she had worn in one of her posters. I followed her and sat down on a lawnchair next to where she lay. I took the iced tea. The sun was bright and Farrah closed her eyes. I leaned my head back and let the sun's fingers penetrate my eyes. They lingered a moment on my tired retinas before moving on to my brain, which was as tight as a knot, maybe even tighter.

Hours passed, though it's silly to call them hours. There were no hours really, only the rise and fall of the ripples on the sea. They formed a chess board sort of pattern; white rose, black fell, black rose, white fell, in a rhythm as precise as a clock. And after a long time of staring I realized that that was exactly what I was looking at, a clock. After even longer staring, I realized that it was no more a clock than light is a star. It was time itself. After still longer, Farrah screamed, I yelled and we jumped overboard. We watched from below as a big, black, oily hull devoured Farrah's little boat. By the time we resurfaced her boat was scraps and the blank spot now interrupted the southern horizon.

We climbed onto a floating plank, ten square feet that had been the roof of the cabin. With our weight on it, the plank sunk a few inches so that water ran over the top of it. If you had seen us from a little ways off, you might have thought we were standing on the water.

Weary from seeing her boat destroyed, Farrah lay down.

"I'm sorry," she said, falling asleep. "I'm sorry."

"It wasn't your fault," I said, lying down, resting my head on her stomach. I watched the sunset. Every time Farrah took a breath my head rose and fell and the water tickled the back of my neck. Later I fell asleep, though it wasn't sleep really, just not thinking.

The next morning—though it wasn't morning really, there were no more mornings or noons or nights, only a sunset—the next sunset I awoke. The sky was orange with streaks of red. The sea in every direction reflected orange with streaks of red. And the sea was very calm. You would have had to run bounding hemisphere by hemisphere to catch a single ripple on that calm sea. As I stood

the raft tilted, sending a little crest of water racing from the raised edge of the raft to the lowered edge, where I stood. As it splashed Farrah, she opened her eyes. Moments later it splashed my ankles, then it disappeared over the edge of the raft, into the deep, warm Pacific.

"I'm sorry," Farrah said, the night before seeming to come back to her.

I walked to the edge of the raft and looked into the water. Looking straight down, the surface wasn't orange, but a transparent black. Deep down I could see thick-lipped fish, darting from spot to spot, leaving from each spot they had been a brilliant chain of bubbles rising to the surface. Far to the south I thought I could make out the icy cliffs of Antarctica.

Behind me, Farrah was mumbling something.

"...It's always been you, William. It's you. I've always been fondest of you..."

I wanted her to stop. I pointed South, to the Antarctic.

"You know," I said. "I've always wanted to carve a home out of an iceberg."

"Oh no!" she said. "An iceberg is no place for a home."

"Why not?" I said, realizing just as suddenly that there was nothing I wanted more than to dry my feet.

"They're dangerous, always melting and freezing and crashing into ships."

"You don't know. If you don't know about something you should just keep your mouth shut."

I turned to face her. She was sitting down, hugging her legs and resting her forehead on her knees. I watched as slowly her shoulder blades began to quiver. Soon she was sobbing out loud. Trying to console her, I put my hand on her shoulder and looked into her face. Her lips wrinkled and her eyelids clenched shut. Her sobbing became louder. I walked to the other side of the raft, trying to ignore her. But I couldn't. Her sobbing was the only sound I could hear. It was probably the only sound anyone could hear. It probably ruined an otherwise perfectly wonderful sunset for many people, from Anchorage to New Delhi to Perth. I walked back to Farrah. I could no longer feel my feet they were so soggy from the water.

I watched Farrah's head quiver a while, then I hit it. I didn't hit her hard, just so she would stop. And she did. She turned around and looked at me with the very betrayed look I had been expecting. She swayed a little to each side, then slowly tipped forward into the water. She sank away, into the transparent black, past the thick-lipped fish, glowing as she went.

Alone and in silence then, I drifted on that orange sea. Time, the slow southern current below me moved imperceptibly. And I drifted on it forever, until the jarring bell of recess rang, when Mr. Slatner suddenly glanced down at his chalky clothes. Flustered, he walked slowly to the side of the room, where he patted himself off while looking at the trees out the window. And then he uttered softly, as if he had been betrayed, "Dismissed."