

# **BEAUTY WOULD SPROUT FROM HIS BONES**

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## I

Black rock strewn chaotically down to the very brink of the sea. In the background the high, sunburnt humps of what had long ago been active volcanoes. The black rock had once been liquid lava. It was a bleak, ragged stretch of shoreline, quite deserted in the early-morning sunlight - except for a single figure, a man, who had just drawn his car off the rutted dirt road and was now picking his way down towards the boil of the water. He was barefoot, dressed only in a swimsuit. In his hands a pair of long swimming fins and a rubber diving mask with a snorkel.

The man felt his way carefully over the rocks, which became damp and slippery as he neared the water's edge. Before his approach, a score of small black crabs, none as large as a handspan, scuttled wildly in all directions. Finally, just short of the splash of the waves, the man sat down on a flattened boulder and pulled on his fins. Then he rose again and let himself down over the edge of the rocks to another slab, this one submerged under a foot of water. This submerged slab was shaped roughly like an oversized ironing board, about eight yards in width and forty in length. Nestled, it seemed, in every conceivable cranny were countless numbers of deep purple sea urchins, bright spiny stars looking more like strange marine plant life than animal. The water rushed in across the slab rhythmically, swirling around the man's legs. The water was warm: it was always warm. At each rush of waves, he braced himself as well as he could on his awkward duck feet. The waves were not rough, but strong enough to

spill if they caught you off guard. He padded, duck-like, out across the slippery, weed-encrusted slab. When he reached the outer edge, he paused and stooped to wet his mask.

He spit on the glass and rubbed the saliva over it with his fingers. Then he dipped the mask in the water again. The close, sucking fit of the rubber hurt his upper lip as he adjusted the strap tightly to his head. Mask on, he experienced that momentarily uncomfortable feeling of being imprisoned, enclosed, un-free. He would forget it as soon as he entered the water. The rubber of the mask still smelled sweet from the protective powder which they had put on it at the factory. He had only worn it a few times. He was still trying to get used to breathing through a tube in his month.

Looking back, he discovered that he could see for a considerable distance in either direction along the shore. Far to his right, dimly discernible very low against the horizon, was the lighthouse; to his left the intermittent white glare of beaches breaking the black rock for miles. There was no one in sight this early in the morning, nor even a car. Lonely, he thought. He had never dived along this stretch before, having confined himself to the smoother, touristed areas on the north shore. But during a recent drive around the perimeter of the island, this spot had caught his eye. He had stopped the car to examine it, and it had looked ideal for skindiving.

His gaze now traveled out across the water. A transparent turquoise close to shore, it became progressively darker as it approached the unbroken, slightly curved skyline. The surface was also mottled with strange shadowy blotches, giving it somewhat the appearance of a map. These marked the larger submerged coral formations, today easily discernible because of the relative calm. One of these underwater formations ran in a nearly straight line paralleling the shore for as far as his eye could see. It was additionally marked by a fringe of white water at the surface. This was the reef. About two hundred yards out, he judged. He noticed that it was interrupted at one spot, almost directly out from his position: a channel probably wide enough for small sailing craft. He would swim for this break and then make his way along the outside of the reef, where there were likely to be most fish. On a rougher day it might be dangerous to go beyond the reef, but today was

perfect. Today it didn't matter that he was no great swimmer. Swells beyond the reef, yes; but not the huge, crashing twenty-five footers he had sometimes seen on choppy days. Today was fine.

He looked down into the turquoise at his feet: about fifteen feet deep, glass clear; a myriad of darting needles flitted in and out of crevices in the rocks. The bottom would slope up gradually towards the reef and then become deeper beyond it. He placed the awkward rubber mouthpiece of the snorkel between his teeth and clamped his lips over it. Man from Mars. Holding the mask firmly against his face, he jumped, turning in the air so that he entered the water with his face towards the shore. A warm envelopment of bubbles. He broke water almost immediately, blew out his tube, and drew himself up along the surface. The sun was hot on his exposed back. He began to kick his way out toward the reef.

Below him the other existence: that which he had fallen in love with in the last month. Possibly he was an escapist; if so, he had found his perfect escape. He felt at home. The fish did not seem to be afraid of him. Several of them fluttered up to peer curiously into his mask. Sunlight dappled the ocean floor in constantly shifting patterns. He watched his own shadow slide over rocks, weeds, pink and yellow coral, occasional patches of white sand. There was no sound except for the distant otherworldly murmur of the waves. He reached out his hand to capture a tiny speckled, queer-tailed fish which was bravely studying him. The fish eluded his fingers but did not move far away. He kicked along steadily over the coral, the flashing fish. He was happy; he was home.

As he approached the reef he became aware of an acceleration in the speed of his shadow. It was gliding over the bottom at a noticeably swifter pace than when he had started. He lay still on the surface: the shadow continued to creep over the ocean floor in the same direction. Current, he thought, slight but effective. Seemed to pull right for that break in the reef. Well, then, he could relax. Let the current do the work. Weird feeling, though, to be moving when you weren't moving. It seemed a long time that he drifted in this leisurely manner, sightseeing below through his one great elliptical eye.

Now the bottom was sloping up gradually. The coral, the arabesque plant growths were coming closer to the surface. Occasionally, from the corner of his great eye, he would spy an unusually large fish (for within the reef) coursing out of sight or whisking, tail alone visible, into the shelter of rocks or weed. To the smaller fish he might present merely an object of curiosity, but to the larger he was unquestionably the enemy: man the destroyer, the only completely wanton killer. Instinctively the larger fish knew that man meant evil.

Suddenly the bottom began to withdraw again. It sloped quickly back to much the same depth it had been near shore. He lifted his mask-face from the water and saw that he was almost to the white fringed line which marked the reef. The white crests did not look quite as gentle as they had from shore. He was headed straight for the channel. His face again underwater, he gazed ahead, waiting for the first appearance of the reef. It materialized suddenly—as things always did underwater—from the luminous greenness: steep edged, plateau-like, top just below the surface. Its sides and top were encrusted with every manner of sea life. There was something awesome about its rugged steepness, its sheer bulk. It was a big reef.

He would be carried right through the break, it now appeared. He decided that he would take a short rest before continuing along the outside of the reef. His shadow came to life, its four long projections thrashing waterbug-like beneath him. He kicked with his fins and breasted the water with his arms. It was only the distance of a few feet to a jutting point of the reef on his right. He caught hold of the rough, weeded edge and heaved himself up onto the flattened top. He was sitting on an uncomfortable seat, his thighs still in the water, periodic waves washing across the exposed part of his body. Thanks to the helpful current, he did not feel tired.

Steadying himself against the waves, he pulled himself to his feet. He removed his mask and brushed back the hair from his eyes with his forearm. Why was it that once out of water, the mask made him feel so unbearably confined, locked in? He wrinkled his face to relax the parts stiffened by the pressure of the rubber. The area above his upper lip hurt, as always. He surveyed the terrain. The reef was a good thirty feet wide. It was now wholly submerged, but at low tide it

would lay across the sea, its things were embedded like gianting stones of jewelry in close, corrugated top. Measuring the distance with his eye, he guessed that it was about six feet across with the effort, considerably larger than herbivorous fish. He lifted his head above surface and spit green; his cube not make the bottom clean. Stray bits of olive and brown wood, caught in the current, floated through on their way to the open sea. He lifted his feet and himself splashed in his way over the reef to its outer edge. The waves broke here heavily. The outside was deep as he had expected. From where he could make out nothing the coral wall below him, it seemed to be receding with life.

He would back at the reef on his side and sat down his feet hanging over the edge. His thighs in the water. A stiff shore breeze marked his life in the water. A greater distance back than he had thought. The sun was rapidly lifting above the horizon. Now get your head in the water to keep the tube teeth gone. You can hold the tube. Rare drying him off quickly. He felt good. He would float like this indefinitely. Far below

After a few minutes he got to his feet again and pulled on the mask. Adhering to it with his right hand, he dropped off the reef. He himself sink into the warm womb of bubbles. He popped back to surface, straightened out, and began to kick his way through the channel, keeping close to the reef wall on his right. He could only half distinguish the bottom reef far behind him. The reef wall was alive with fish. It passed through his line of vision as an unwinding film. They were of the Don't of his mask. No, distorted. Just Don't. But Jesus Christ, movement against that flat ahead of him. He pushed for this. You ward. There's flat water vertically against the reef, a three foot eel spiraled and flattened like a long ribbon. Only last week they'd got Brown, didn't they, subject to one Bay. Five hundred pounds. But for with all its fluttering, it didn't appear to shift a foot either way along the wall. It only needed one, one stray shark. His

He watched the eel with fascination and vague distaste. Beautiful in its shape, it had all the attraction of a deadly snake behind glass. Why did children naturally gravitate toward such creatures and not only children? Why did they push their noses against the glass? Look at the bottom,

study it, do everything possible. That's all the attention getting deadlier  
deeper and deeper. Suspended, helpless. Ridiculous.  
The bottom passed by the reef and swam out of the channel behind  
the right side of the reef. A frantic confusion of yellows,  
blacks, reds, pearls, fled at his sudden appearance. The gay  
How long? A couple of minutes by his watch in the sunlight. He  
indefinitely weary. Decided to try the surface of his drifting he  
had tried swimming, struggling, diving. Sealing off his snorkel with his  
useless: he was in a desperate hurry. He had pulled down into the azure  
below. Arms and legs working, he felt the pressure increasing  
come an amorphous grey mass, sinking on his face. Precipitous  
odically, strong enough to hold him. In a moment it became painful. He  
his murderer, and long since released. Perhaps twice freed, he guessed.  
difference. Not very good. Possibly he had overestimated his strength.  
now too tired to look through the surface from beneath. It was like  
amorphous grey mass. He had once seen a similar phenomenon since he'd  
earlier never been in a fish boat. But that was close to the surface.  
surface. It had been clear, and through the ceiling  
sandbar. It might be possible to slip through the ceiling  
be able to spray his feet high, and splash against the  
strength of his arms. He had stuck in the sand. His  
sandy bottom gurgled from a few drops of water. He  
out about twenty feet below. It had continued level for a  
short stretch, and then began to drop away. Not if he  
been his best hope. Practice, next time maybe fifteen. He no-  
ticed that while some were going on fishing, he had drifted out  
How long, then, before he would get back to the channel.  
It seemed ages since he had also drifted back towards the channel.  
The film was slowly winding backward. Must be that cur-  
cursing them, it had again occurred to him. The film continued to  
might become so important. The film might be better at being in the  
weight, center of the channel. He thought. Better swim back to the  
watched reef. He swam. Wow! he had a terrific imagination on was he  
prolonged, making little waves. A strong current he thought. He  
vital thing, and he had the bill for and pushed back the water in  
But long masking growing his cramped hands. Was it making  
from its high pressure. It was only a matter of time. He pushed harder.  
mind off it. He tried to change the water's weight. The reef looked  
casualty. He removed the mask so he was in the water. He was  
other way. Also, the current was that was the center of the  
which, refused to budge. He was in the channel.  
corners of his mask, that helped him. The current didn't be

water within his own mask. Remove the mask. Fine. How?  
Roll over on your back. All right. He did so. It felt peculiar af-  
ter floating bellydown for so long to suddenly find himself  
stretched out on his back with his face to the sky. He felt even  
more exposed, insecure. His tube was now in the water. He  
wrenched off the mask and breathed in deeply, his nose  
again free to the open air. It felt incredibly good. But he  
couldn't float this way for very long, he knew that. On his  
back, his legs had an ungovernable tendency to sink. He  
could only float for short stretches like this, but short stretches  
would be enough. Enough to relax his face, to see the other  
world for a while. To retain his contact with reality.  
The wind blew a steady salt spray across his features. The  
surface undulated rhythmically with great swells, each  
arriving precisely at a predictable interval, lifting him  
gradually high, high towards the white clouds and then  
sliding him deeply down into a cradled trough. At each swell  
the sky rolled dizzily, blue and cloud sweeping across his  
restricted field of vision. He was being rocked, lullabyed, by  
the sea. The sea was singing him a song of rest, of release. He  
almost felt as if he could fall asleep. He was so damned tired.  
The sun was now directly overhead, white and pulsating  
in the bright blue sky. The sun too seemed to be conspiring to  
lull him to sleep with its soothing heat. His eyes saw the sun-  
light in flickering rainbow prisms through his beaded eye-  
lashes.  
He was beginning to wonder if he really cared about sav-  
ing himself. He no longer felt afraid - merely exhausted.  
And did it actually matter? He felt so terribly insignificant in  
the vastness of the ocean around him - under the huge white  
ball of fire overhead. Compared to him the sun was  
omnipotent, eternal: a god. He didn't matter. Now nothing  
mattered but release. Something within him resisted total  
surrender to this thought, but it was too difficult now to do  
otherwise, to struggle, to care, when he was lying so comfort-  
ably in his cradle of gently heaving swells. Was it possible to  
feel more weary, more utterly indifferent than he felt now?  
His legs were sinking again. Enough. He lifted his arm  
heavily and pulled on the mask. Then he rotated sluggishly  
in the surface like a sack of flour and found himself once

more suspended above a green world of irresistible beauty. A mere twist of the body brought a new world. Again he was breathing through a tube like a mechanical man.

The sun was declining; its rays shot into the water diagonally, cresting the feathered swells with blinding white. The same steady breeze which had been with him all day continued to caress the badly sunburned upper part of his body. Occasional patches of brown seaweed drifted by him, sometimes tangling in his fingers or entwining itself around his legs. Halfheartedly he attempted to shake it off. It didn't really matter.

He had seen only two ships. He had seen them within minutes of one another, some hours (he judged) earlier. Both had been too far off to even attempt to signal them. Since then, exhausted, with his face beneath water most of the time, he'd given up looking for a passing boat – or hoping for one. He had relinquished this last hope easily, almost avidly. Doing so had made him feel better; it had lightened him wonderfully. To lose hope was to lose anxiety, disappointment, a gnawing ache somewhere in his brain which he couldn't quite locate spacially. To lose hope completely and perfectly was to find relief. His soul breasted the smooth swells bravely – joyfully? He was free.

It couldn't be much longer now. Some while back he'd grown too tired to risk the tricky maneuver of rolling over and removing the mask. In his present state he'd never be able to pull it on right again – he'd probably lose it. Besides, he didn't feel the pain in his face anymore. He didn't feel anything. He was numb; utterly detached in every way.

He drifted in the swells like a paralyzed insect, hands and feet hanging limply through the surface. Below him the ocean floor was far distant. He could not see it, though the water was as clear as green glass. Losing sight of the bottom had deprived him of the last bit of distraction which could have saved him from himself. Now, with nothing to see except the scattered fish which regarded him impassively, he'd been forced back into his own mind. He'd lost that battle; he didn't care.

Death in this way was not bad; it was a blessing. It was clean. No maggots crawling out of your eyesockets, no stench,

no putrefication. In a way he would win: his burial would be clean. Bright fish would peck at him gingerly – washing, polishing the white bones. The undersea currents would cradle his skeleton. He would become part of the beauty of the fish, of the ocean. In a relatively short time even his bones would be indistinguishable from the rest of the sea floor. Every kind of life would attach itself to them, nourish itself on them, become inseparable from them. He would be beautiful: beauty would sprout from him. This was much the better way to die. He had loved this subsurface world; now he would be truly part of it. The thought pleased him. Yes, it was better than he deserved. For how long he'd been tired....