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Category: Short Story

Waves

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The last person to occupy the 3-4 A.M. spot had only been able to withstand it for a month and a half, and barely that. The building seemed to slide into a time rift during that hour— so late that it was early— and became soundless and soulless, giving the impression of static and decay. The man, whose last name was Anderson and who possessed no first name to anyone's knowledge, felt that this was something akin to solitary confinement. When his voice came over the radio waves, it sounded shell-shocked and was so unpleasant to listen to that he resorted to playing *The Beatles' Greatest Hits* over and over until it became torturous, and then quit with no warning and without turning in his SUN radio lanyard, the SUN radio identification badge it contained, or his SUN radio athletic coat. This became a station legend, and there were occasional sightings, impossible to confirm, of Anderson in the coat, which was a shade of orange that had the unique characteristic of making any wearer, regardless of complexion, take on the grayish pallor of a tuberculosis patient.

After this debacle, the night technician performed some miracle of programming on the sound board that enabled it to function without human intervention and departed to more gainful employment. The station manager began to receive letters from varied sources expressing displeasure, unrest, and outright rage with regard to the continued reign of the Beatles. One of the more polite stated fairly, "I don't mind the Beatles within reason, but this is quite without reason. Reason is several miles back in the rearview mirror, and I am forced to inform you that this is beyond what any human being could be expected to withstand." Another letter was composed with significantly more force, and asserted, among other things, that the writer would rather trim his nose hair with a weed whacker than hear "Let It Be" one more time.

"Well, won't that put a hem in your dress," said the station manager, and without asking for any references he hired Melinda.

Melinda's interview had begun and ended when she entered the station manager's office, seated herself on the edge of his desk, and told him what would be in the 3-4 A.M. spot. The station manager, unable to deny the wishes of a woman possessing any measure of charm or beauty, acquiesced immediately, and that night Melinda took her place in front of the sound board, now generally referred to as having been hot-wired, and spoke the fatal words that required as their due the attention of all listeners.

"The witching hour is over," she said, "And from the shadows comes one who has not been granted power, one who does not raise her fist but raises her eyes and her head. She is as sharp and bright as a knife, made in the image of the first guiding star of the morning, and her name is Orla."

In that moment, the listeners of the night knew precisely the girl of whom Melinda spoke; they had all known someone unquestionable, inimitable, and incandescent. Keeping this knowledge in mind and rolling it over thoughtfully as Melinda spoke, they listened.

"Through a combination of accident and choice," Melinda continued, "Orla came to live in a desert. It is known that most deserts are of exceedingly high temperatures, but Orla's desert was not. It was vast and flat, the sand pearly grey, and did not indulge the luxury of wind. At night, it was as slick and featureless as oil. Its constant temperature was just cold enough to be uncomfortable. Though the light came and went, there was no visible sun. The sky was an unbroken, dull white. Orla was not unhappy here; that is, she was no less happy than she would have been elsewhere. She decided to build a home and quickly discovered a preventative shortage of necessary materials, so she settled for simply building a place in which to live. It was fashioned from hollow wood and flat, smooth rocks, and consisted of a large base with a sloping bottom and a small cabin with a pointed roof. She slept inside the cabin, curled tightly underneath her coat."

The listeners were familiar with this harsh inertia; they knew how quickly one could go from building a home

to sleeping on the floor. They listened to Melinda's descriptions of the way Orla provided food for herself (cactus milk and the occasional bird shot down with a carefully constructed crossbow), her ongoing efforts and eventual triumph in regard to the manufacturing of a functioning wood-burning fireplace, and her nightly ritual of studying the stars whose names she did not know, and they did not resent this excess of detail; it fascinated them the same way that they imagined the minutia of their own lives fascinated others. They listened with equal absorption the next night when Orla saw the ocean in the distance, as if they themselves were seeing the ocean for the first time.

"From the horizon," said Melinda, "Came the faint blue of the sea, so far away that the feeling of blue was greater than what was visible. It inched closer, day by day, and as it did it lost its brightness. By the time it began to seep under the foundation of Orla's house, it was the same unsaturated grey as the rest of the desert. The bottom of the house lifted from the sand and just as it drifted upwards, the most improbable direction for a stationary object to drift, it occurred to Orla that her house was a boat. In the days before, she had lashed the wood together with braided reeds and stuffed grass into the cracks, as a moth weaves a cocoon entirely ignorant to its purpose. The hull was impermeable, and Orla floated away."

It was at this point that listeners began to refer to Melinda's tale as "Orla's Ark". Commentators called it a modern deluge myth, a dig at the listener's unironic reverence for what amounted, they protested, to a child's bedtime story. But the listeners, riding down dark roads in pursuit of their own headlights, felt the rocking of the waves and prepared themselves to board any ship and brave any journey.

"The surface of the ocean was almost entirely flat, an unvarying blue," said Melinda, "But the tiny ripples of imperceptible waves made it resemble tissue paper and determined the direction of Orla's travels. She did not have oars or a sail or, though this would have been beyond conception, an engine, but there was nowhere in particular she would have preferred to go. She had enough food and drink stored in woven baskets to last for two weeks. As the weather got colder, her layers of clothing became less effective in protecting her from the elements. She did not think about it consciously, but she was waiting to die."

This was how Melinda ended the show on this night, and the listeners feared it was the end, the final installment of Orla's story. They could not conceive of any favorable outcome for Orla. Even if the waters receded, there was still the matter of her banishment, which, whether self-imposed or otherwise, seemed permanent and bleak.

Meanwhile, the station manager became aware that more people now listened to the radio at three in the morning than at any other time. He made no outright demands, afraid that the success would disappear like cotton candy as he closed his mouth around it, but he fluttered moth-like around the periphery of Melinda's office, making faint suggestions. She might tell the listeners her own name, or at least a bit about herself, her history and character and the way she looked, he ventured. The answer was a resounding no, and Melinda's office, being papered as it was with pages torn from illustrated encyclopedias, postcards, blueprints, and photographs, seemed to shrink to claustrophobic proportions, forcing him to flee.

Melinda had no intention of killing Orla before her time, for this was how she viewed it— a murder, bloodless and hypothetical, but ending nonetheless in loss of life. The listeners felt the same way; they could not bear to listen, powerless, as the Orlas they had known starved or froze or drowned. It was worse that she was faceless, because they provided the face. They tuned in with much trepidation.

"Orla floated through a maze of jutting spires," said Melinda. "It never occurred to her that they may puncture her boat, these points and corners that were all that remained of profoundly familiar places; there was the place where she had endured her first haircut, an unpleasant ritual in which her hair was woven into a hip-length braid and then, appallingly, cut off, to be stored in an enamel box by her mother and subsequently burned on the night before her wedding. Visible beneath the surface of the water was the top of the tall building where Orla had been taught to walk in straight lines and to light short candles, wave them slowly in intricate patterns, and toss them into shallow bowls of water before the flame reached her fingertips. It was here that she first discovered that people knew what she looked like." This seemed like a deliberate tease to her listeners, who found great distress in the fact that Orla's appearance had not been described, but it could not have been; Melinda had no knowledge of anyone's thoughts or opinions regarding her show. There was deliberation: did she mean that Orla had discovered, as was the popular opinion, her own beauty and its effect on others? Or was she hideously deformed, living only among those of equal oddity until this point and suffering the revelation that it was she, not her peers, who appeared different? This debate overshadowed the broader mystery, the alien society in which Orla seemed to have resided, with its strange customs and rituals and lessons. Her surroundings were beside the point; Orla must not be allowed to be ugly.

But Melinda persisted in unwanted description. "Orla passed a collection of marble statues," she said, "That she knew had to be from the Queen's Garden. No other statues had such intricately carved faces, gently sloping noses, tiny scars and freckles ornamenting their chins. They were draped with navy blue lace that was now entirely saturated with water, tangled in hollow chunks of paper-mache decoration and dragged to the surface. Orla briefly considered catching hold of a particular statue, a girl about her own height with a thoughtlessly furrowed brow and

thick tufts of stone hair reaching just below her jawbone. She remembered this statue from previous walks in the garden; she had enjoyed such walks for many years before she came on a class trip and, associating guiltily with models of youthful irreverence, noticed for the first time that the statue's hair length indicated that she had just had her first haircut and therefore come of age, which was shameful in the same way that having to use the bathroom was shameful— everyone did it out of necessity, but any reminder of it, especially with regard to someone else, was hilariously disgusting. Orla was unable to bear visiting the garden again until the statues were rotated, as they were twice a season, and the statue was replaced with another depicting a chubby woman kneeling to pick flowers.

Though her boat could not have supported the weight of the statue, Orla spent nearly an hour making a long stick with a hook on the end. By the time it was finished, she remembered that she was in a boat made of little more than grass and watched sadly as it disappeared into the depths. Her spirits lifted when she had the thought to use the hook to salvage flotsam and jetsam, continued to increase steadily as she collected some of the statues' lace wraps, which she knotted together into a shawl roughly the size of a quilt, and plundered the entire contents of a raft that held a great number of canned goods, and dropped sharply when she noticed the myriad of makeshift rafts, canoes, and other boats, all of which were devoid of human life, and all of which she had looted gleefully moments before."

The listeners considered the possibility that Orla may have been the last living person on the planet as soon as Orla herself considered it. Alongside Orla, they retreated to the dark, leafy enclosure of the boat's cabin; they listened sympathetically as she lay on the ground, hiding her head beneath her shawl and weeping quietly. Their patience ran thin when an hour was spent in following Orla's disjointed thought process as she stared emotionlessly at one woven wall and tried to resign herself to her fate, but they were rewarded by a tiny, revealing detail— Orla's hair was shoulder length. At first, listeners were further irritated by the ambiguity, but eventually the meaning was revealed. In Orla's society, careful listeners remembered, one's hair was shorn when one came of age, which meant that Orla had come of age only a few years previously. The general assumption had already been that she was young, but it made listeners happy to have their biases confirmed, to feel as if they had worked to unravel a mystery. They continued to tune in.

The station manager was the only one who knew Melinda's identity. He knew, in the most basic sense, that her story had value, because others said that it did. He would not have exposed her as the teller of Orla's tale, but he sensed that he was witness to an event of great importance— not in national or even radio history, but in his own history. He bought a pocket-sized notebook with a speckled cover and recorded details about Melinda, supposing that after this was all over— he never dared to hope that she would continue indefinitely in his employ— the mystery would dissipate and it would not be a great betrayal to sell it to newspapers, boast about it in taverns, or, at the very least, discuss it with other station employees.

He began with what was surely most important. "Melinda had red hair," he wrote, "Ostentatiously red, the color of tomatoes, almost orange. It was real, and so long that she sometimes sat on it by mistake. She was soft and round, perhaps overweight, but nobody, least of all herself, wished for her to shrink. Her shoulders were perpetually sunburned and were heavily freckled, along with the rest of her. Her eyes were the color of the froth at the tops of waves, and her eyelashes were golden. She blushed easily but was never embarrassed. The natural turn of her mouth was upwards, but a smile from her was no indication of approval, though it always reached her eyes."

With this out of the way, he moved on to more substantial matters. "On first introduction, she directs everyone to call her Mellie, but no one does and she never brings it up again. She does not look like a Mellie, or, for that matter, a Melinda; she looks like a sophisticated and delicate actress inserted into the background of a soda commercial and playing the role, without pretension, to the best of her considerable ability. She looks like the angel that young soldiers see on the battlefield." Perhaps the station manager was a little in love with her, but this was not important.

The station manager went on to describe Melinda's proclivity for coconut sunblock, which she applied so frequently that even when she was not wearing it, her skin and hair gave off the ghost of its scent. He made note of the fact that Melinda's resume, which he had only thought to ask for after agreeing to hire her, listed no previous places of employment or references. She had opted instead to list a series of skills, such as self-motivation, communication, and long-term planning. Written in the margins in a variety of handwritings and inks were additional skills, such as artistic taste, charm, and a word that appeared to be 'phlegmatism'. This resume was in the station manager's possession only long enough for him to copy down this information into his notebook, after which Melinda asked for it back, claiming that it was the only copy she had.

"Melinda maneuvers herself with great precision and purpose of direction," wrote the station manager. "When she goes into her office and shuts the door, heat waves pass through the building. She is the nucleus of all feeling and reason."

"A half-broken, shambling boat topped the horizon," said Melinda. "Something inside moved. It was too far away to see with any clarity, and Orla guessed that it was an unsecured tarp. She took to lying on top of her cabin and making up names and mythologies for the stars."

“Though any work done by Melinda is of a significantly higher quality than work done by others, the focus of those around her is utterly destroyed. Things even out. People look at her like a blind man looks at the sun; they will never be able to fully experience the magnitude of her beauty, but their faces turn instinctively towards her living warmth,” wrote the station manager.

“When Orla woke up the next morning,” said Melinda, “She discovered that she had fallen asleep on the roof. The waves had carried the other boat closer to hers as she slept, and sitting inside was an object discernable, with difficulty, as a living human being. Its arms waved and its mouth opened to emit shouts that Orla was still too far away to hear. She was aware, suddenly, of her overlarge and ragged clothes, and wondered if her hair was tangled. She looked down into the water and saw the reflection of her own face.”