



Those left behind

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On his first walk around the island that morning, Pieter picked up three pieces of wood, sixteen plastic bottles, twelve tin cans and, miraculously, a single book, swollen up with water like a ripe fruit. The wood would go on the fire, and he could pull the nails out: nails were always useful. He'd find something to do with the tins and bottles. As for the book — he wasn't sure. The cover was rough under his fingers. He left it on a rock to dry in the sun.

He walked around the island three times a day, as per his orders. If he walked at his normal pace it took him ten minutes to round the longer side of the crescent-shaped island and seven minutes to come back along the shorter one. If he dragged it out he could get it up to nearly half an hour, or more. He took as long as he could. The island was almost exactly in the middle of the channel, between a brown land mass looming up on one side and a grey cliff on the other. One of them was home. He had been ordered to report anything he saw that was unusual, any kind of threat at all. It had been three years. He hadn't reported anything.

Throughout the day, he fixed nets and cleaned the water pump. He checked the boats he kept in the bay created by the smaller curve of the island. He counted down until he could do his official walk of the island again.

At night, he went back into the tall lighthouse where he slept. The light had probably worked during the war. There was nothing in there now, just rust marks on the floor where the old iron fitting where the bottom of the light had once been. He was supposed to sleep on the lowest level — those were his orders — but the sea spray crept in through holes in the window panes, no matter how many times he stuffed them with dry grass or bleached bits of old newspaper. He would wake in the middle of the night feeling the wet sting of the salt on his skin. So, every night he moved all his bedding up to the big, empty room on the top floor, slept until the sky purpled with dawn, and then painstakingly carried everything back down again. It wouldn't do to show that he had been disobeying orders. You never knew when there would be an inspection. There hadn't been an inspection in three years.

On his first walk around the island the next morning Pieter found two empty bottles, seven tins, five odd bits of plastic, several large, splintered bits of wood, a couple of scraps of newspaper too blurred to read, and a girl.

He had seen something big on the sand from the other side of the island but he hadn't realised what it was. In his head she had turned into a collection of objects, with hands that were white crabs, a seaweed-tangle of hair. He knelt to look at her. She wasn't moving. The waves kept coming and coming, the sound of crashing water pouring into his head.

Then the white hands twitched, and the girl rolled to one side and vomited seawater. She was shaking. Pieter's hands were shaking too.

'Where are you from?' he asked. Instead of words, an odd creaking sound came out of his mouth. He cleared his throat and tried again.

She didn't answer. He tried to help her to her feet, and when that didn't work, he hoisted her up against his shoulder instead, half-carrying, half-dragging her back to his lighthouse. By the time they got to the door there was a cold ache in his shoulder, right down to the bone. He paused. No-one was supposed to go in there. Only military.

There were four beds there, as if there had been more people stationed here, long ago. There was spare bedding too. Pieter carried blankets out to the girl. He helped to wrap her up in them. Her face was grey and clammy, the colour of slimy things that hid under rocks to avoid the sun.

He left her out in a warm spot, went into the lighthouse and carefully locked the door. He found what he was looking for in one of the rooms halfway up the winding concrete stairs. The radio set was old. Pieter flipped a few switches until he was rewarded with the soft hiss of static. He thought he remembered the right frequency.

'This is Officer Velizy. Sir.' He was sounding almost human again now. 'Stationed on the island. There's, there's a girl here, possibly foreign ...'

He said as much as he could, feeling the words start to flow out naturally, one after the other, like music. When he had finished there was no response. He packed the radio up again. He sat inside the lighthouse, fiddling with nets and restacking his ration packs until it was time for his second walk of the day.

The girl was sitting up. He walked across to her, slowly, feeling the little rocks in the sand sending jolts up through the thin soles of his boots.

'Thank you,' she said. Her voice was flat. If she had a trace of an accent, he couldn't tell.

'Where are you from?' he asked.

She looked back at him. She was less pale than she had been.

‘Where are you from?’ he said again, a little desperately.

Her eyes were black. He couldn’t see the line between the pupil and the iris. They were two dark holes pulling him down.

‘If you just said, just told me you were from home ...’

‘Then what?’ she said.

‘Then you could stay on the island,’ he told her.

‘You could let me stay anyway.’

‘I can’t,’ he said. ‘This is a military base. I couldn’t let a foreigner stay here. It’s not allowed.’

Her black eyes stared up at him.

‘I’m not going to go,’ she said.

He spent the night in the bottom of the tower instead of the warm room at the top, listening to the waves rushing up on to the beach outside. The girl was outside. He had orders, after all. And if she wouldn’t tell him she was from the mainland — if she wouldn’t help herself ...

He lay there with his eyes open.

On his walk around island the next morning, Pieter couldn’t find the girl. Maybe she had gone back into the sea. Maybe he wouldn’t have to stay up another night, worrying about the right thing to do. Maybe this was for the best.

When he was on the smaller curve of the island, doing the walk twice as fast as usual, he saw a head pop up over the side of one of the anchored boats and blink at him.

He splashed down into the water. The girl had moved all her blankets into the boat and was lying there, bobbing up and down serenely.

‘You can’t stay there.’

‘But I’m not on the island,’ she said. ‘You can’t make me leave.’

Pieter paused. Something was happening, something that he couldn't quite articulate. She was waiting for a response.

He said, 'I'll get you some food,' and left. Surely that, at least, would be allowed.

She didn't stay on the boat all day. She came onto shore to walk around, picking the dry grass and looking up at the big grey block of a lighthouse. But when night came again, she went back out into the sea. From the old light room, Pieter could see her slim form folded up insect-like in the wooden boat.

He slept downstairs again. He closed the door, hesitated, and then left it ajar.

Noise. Pieter woke suddenly, trying to make out shapes in the soft darkness. Someone was next to his bed. They had come while he was sleeping. They had come while he was unprepared.

Then he saw the tangle of black hair.

'Please,' the girl said. 'Please come.'

He didn't know what time it was. In the moonlight, the world was monochrome, the silver of the sand running straight down into the dark sea. There was something on the beach. A boy. Not moving. The girl gestured wordlessly to his legs. There was black, sticky blood on the white skin.

Together they carried him up to the room at the top of the lighthouse, where it was warm. Pieter made a bed for him on the floor. In the light from the lamps he had brought up he saw that the boy's injury wasn't too bad — barely more than a cut. He was in a better state than the girl had been. Together they cleaned him up.

'Who is he?'

'A friend,' the girl said. 'We were on the boat together.'

Pieter didn't press her. He helped her carry blankets up to the room so she could curl up next to him. In his bed on the bottom floor he slept well for once, despite the cold wind, and despite the occasional mouse-like scratchings from the rooms above.

When Pieter walked around the island the next morning, he found the footprints left from last night, bits and pieces of rubbish and wood, and, in the distance, slowly approaching over the waves, a ship.

It took hours to come in. All three of them watched it silently from the shore. The boy hadn't said anything. The girl was beside him, supporting his weight.

The ship arrived, slotting in next to the little wooden boats. A door clicked open, a ramp slowly descended, and a man in uniform stepped carefully down. He moved unsteadily when he got on to the rocks, the soles of his big black boots sliding around. In the sun, he was a sweaty, shiny pink. Pieter saluted. He held his arm up until the man was standing in front of him. He had his official cap on. It was made of some kind of plastic, and he was sweating under it.

'Officer Velizy,' the man said, saluting back. Pieter let his own arm drop.

'Sir,' he said stiffly.

'We got your message over the radio,' the man said. 'You called for assistance.' Pieter swallowed. 'That's right, sir.'

The man turned to the side to look at the girl and her friend. His collar was sharp, and when he moved his head his chin, fat bulged out alarmingly.

'They're foreigners,' he said. 'I hope you didn't let them into the base, officer.'

'No, sir.'

‘They could be working for the enemy. You never can be too careful.’

Pieter watched as the girl and her friend were led up the gangplank, two soldiers behind them. The boy didn’t look back. The girl did.

‘Sir?’

The pink man turned to face him. ‘Yes, soldier?’

‘What are my orders?’ Pieter asked.

‘Your orders, soldier,’ the man said, ‘are the same as they have always been.’ Gradually, the boat moved away.

It was midday by then, time for his second walk, so Pieter went around slowly, taking as long as he could. When he finished he went again, and again, walking until the sun went down.

Back in the lighthouse, he tidied up the bedding in the lamp room. He moved his own blankets up there. Perhaps it would be easier to leave his things there; it would save time. Not that he needed to save time. He had all the time in the world.

At night, going through the various stacks of things in the lighthouse, he found the book again. This time it opened easily. The ink had melted away in the sea. The pages were blank.

There were lots of things in his head. He was starting to get the shape of them now, all the thoughts that had been hidden behind the order and the routines, something behind the sound of the rushing waves.

He picked up a pen and started to write.