



FICTION

Outside Is the Ocean

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THE MAN OFFERS HIM A DRINK. Gin and tonic? Bourbon? Cognac? Stewart isn't much of a drinker. "Whatever you're having," he says, standing in the living room, awkwardly, looking over the harbor. He can't quite remember what the guy said he does for a living—something with investments, some kind of advisor or banker. Clearly he's loaded. The apartment has floor-to-ceiling windows and a Steinway. Stewart wishes he'd paid more attention when the guy told him his name. Tizak or Tazak, something with a *z* and a *k*. Stewart was too surprised to register what he actually said. Stewart had

been checking him out from across the room for at least half an hour, until the banker disappeared in the crowd, then *bam!* he was right there, introducing himself.

He had a British accent. It threw Stewart off; he wasn't expecting him to sound like he'd gone to Oxford or Cambridge. He was ripped and had a leather band around his left bicep. Stewart wasn't sure what the band meant, but he felt himself growing aroused. "How come you're standing there all by yourself?" the banker asked, smiling. He had a killer smile. Stewart liked the contrast of his white teeth against the black skin of his face. Stewart imagined the man sticking his tongue deep in his mouth. He looked strong. He looked like he knew what he was doing.

Stewart fumbled for something to say. He felt himself turning red, though—thank God—it was too dark in the bar for the guy to see that. The man stuck out his hand, and this too made Stewart uncomfortable, because he hated shaking hands when his palms were sweaty. The banker's hand was warm and dry. He was out of Stewart's league. He could have scored with anyone in the bar.

THE DRINK IS STRONG, MAKES STEWART'S MOUTH BURN. It feels good. "What is it?" he asks.

"Rémy Martin XO," the banker says, putting his hand on Stewart's shoulder and giving it a squeeze. "You like it?"

Stewart nods, looks at the rows of small African carvings on the bookshelf next to the piano. "These are cool," he says. It's a stupid thing to say. He feels like an idiot calling what are probably valuable sculptures *cool*.

"The ones on this shelf are all from Nigeria," the guy says, pointing to the rhinoceros and the elephant and the lion. Nothing fazes him; he's a smooth operator. Stewart asks questions about the carvings, about Nigeria. The banker launches into a story about how his father was a diplomat, about growing up in a place called Victoria Island, about the beaches.

"Do you go back to visit? Do you miss it?"

"Hell no, I don't miss it. Do you know what people do to fags in Nigeria? Sissy boys get stoned to death. Does that sound like a good time? People there are ignorant. They still believe in sorcery and witchcraft and exorcisms."

Stewart remembers a documentary he saw about Pentecostal preachers in the Niger Delta, impassioned men who poured acid on kids whom they claimed were possessed by demons. He wonders whether he should bring the topic up, whether it will piss the guy off. "So your parents don't know you're gay?"

"Fuck no. My parents think I'm living with my girlfriend. They think I'm

gonna get married. What are you, the KGB?” Stewart apologizes, and the guy picks up a jade dragon with bulging eyes. “This is my favorite,” he says, handing it to Stewart. “It’s from Indonesia. My father gave it to me when I graduated business school.”

“What’s his name—Grendel?” Stewart asks, trying to be funny. He wonders whether his breath is okay, wishes he’d brought mints.

“Relax, kiddo. Come on, take your shirt off. I’ll give you a massage.”

“Don’t you want to get me drunk first?” Stewart asks. This too is a stupid thing to say, because the fact is he’s already feeling light-headed.

“I don’t need to get you drunk. You’re not going anywhere.”

Stewart says he needs to use the bathroom. The guy nods toward the hallway. “First door on the left.”

Everything in the bathroom is marble—the countertop, the tiles and floor. White marble with tiny veins. Expensive marble. The drawers are practically empty. This is obviously just the guest bathroom. Stewart opens the cabinet and finds a travel-size tube of toothpaste that hasn’t been used. He squeezes blue gel onto his finger and rubs it over his teeth and gums. Next to the toilet he sees a copy of the *Economist*. TAZIK EZE, reads the mailing label.

Stewart washes his hands and looks in the mirror. The light is soft, flattering; still, he thinks the shirt he’s wearing is ugly. It’s too tight, makes his arms look skinny. Three hours ago, when he was at home, getting dressed, he didn’t think he’d actually hook up with someone. How many times has he gone to the Ramrod and stood alone in the corner, nursing a club soda or, sometimes, if he was feeling adventurous, a beer, until it was time to shuffle back to his apartment?

He almost stayed home tonight. He owes his father a call. Two days ago he got a message from the nursing home in Colorado Springs where Raymond has been living for the past three years; a nurse said that he fell and broke his hip. Stewart was home when she called, heard her leave the message on his answering machine, but he didn’t pick up. She said that Raymond was scheduled to go in for surgery and they knew Stewart didn’t want to get involved, but they weren’t sure whom to call.

When Stewart finally returns to the living room, Tazik is sitting on the couch, petting a huge mastiff. The dog is lying next to him, drooling. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, sorry. I had a hangnail or something and I used your clippers to cut it off. I hope that doesn’t gross you out too much?”

“Yeah, I’m totally grossed out. Come over here and let me take a look. Have you met Max? Max is my partner in crime.”

At the couch, Tazik takes Stewart’s hand and examines it. “Which finger?” Stewart shows him the thumb on his left hand, and Tazik kisses it. “Better?”

Something about Tazik makes Stewart feel like a little kid. He probably isn't that much older than Stewart, but he acts like he owns the world, like he belongs in the world.

TAZIK ISN'T SHY about taking off his clothes. He's tall, a few inches taller than Stewart, and it doesn't look like there's an ounce of fat on him. Stewart feels like a pipsqueak, standing in the same room. He throws his shirt on the armchair, and, as he's about to lie on the bed, Tazik grabs him and wrestles him to the ground. "Pants? You think you're going to get away with just taking off your top? We're not at the playground, girl."

Stewart isn't sure what to say. He doesn't want to take off his pants, not yet. Sometimes, if he gets lucky, if he hooks up with a guy he thinks is really hot, someone who's built like a brick shithouse, Stewart feels overcome by shame, by self-hatred. It's not just that he's thin. It's not just that he doesn't have muscles. It's more than that—it's the fact that his essence is slight, that his bones are like toothpicks, that everything about him is inconsequential.

Even his skin, his coloring, turns his stomach. He hates the fact that he has red hair, hates his freckles and his skin that burns rather than tans. He wishes his hair were dark brown or black. Sometimes, if he stands in the bathroom at night with the light off and looks at himself, he imagines himself with dark skin. He hates the fact that, when he was a child, people made comments about how much he looked like his father. He remembers having to visit Raymond each summer when he was growing up—driving with his mother down to LAX, crying the whole way, pleading with her not make him get on the plane. He remembers the drive from Denver to Colorado Springs, to Raymond's house in the country, at the end of a dirt road, miles from the closest neighbor, having to eat tuna sandwiches with capers for lunch, day after day, sometimes also for dinner.

"I saw you staring at me in the bar," Tazik says, nuzzling Stewart's ear. "You couldn't take your eyes off me. Isn't that right, kiddo. Am I your type? You like black guys? You liked to get fucked by black cock?" Stewart smiles stupidly, sheepishly, looking away. He's studied identity politics and race theory, knows what a cliché this whole situation is—the skinny white nerd getting turned on by the ripped black guy, the other.

THE TAPE THAT TAZIK USES isn't masking tape. At least Stewart doesn't think so. It feels more like the glossy packing tape you use to seal a box at the post office. Stewart isn't sure how much time has passed. He's on the bed now, wrists fastened to the bedposts. This he was okay with. He doesn't remember resisting when Tazik took two lengths of nylon rope from the closet, or maybe the nightstand, and cinched them around Stewart's wrists.

He remembers being turned on. It was part of the game. Tazik and Stewart were role-playing. Isn't that what it's called? Isn't this what Stewart wanted? Why else would he have gone to the Ramrod and stared at a guy in a muscle shirt with a leather strap around his left arm? Why else would he have gone back to this guy's place, no questions asked?

At least the guy isn't entirely grossed out by Stewart's body. At least he didn't laugh when Stewart finally disrobed. If anything, he became more insistent. Something seemed to come over him. His fancy pedigree went out the window. His Oxford manners evaporated. In the bedroom, he told Stewart to shut up. "Like this," he ordered, when he wanted a different position.

Stewart wonders whether something is wrong with his nipples. His left nipple in particular is aching now. Stewart tried to indicate that the guy was

being too rough, but he didn't want to come right out and tell him to stop. He didn't want to draw boundaries unnecessarily. The last guy Stewart dated told him he had too many boundaries, that he was too rigid and restrained. Here he is, now, being relaxed. Here he is about to plunge into the ocean from a cliff eight hundred feet high.

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He wonders whether Tazik will at least use a condom. He wonders whether he'll end up with AIDS.

Occasionally his mother sends him newspaper articles with photos of skinny men, men with no hair, lying in hospital beds, wasting away. *Be careful!* she writes in her notes. *Don't let anyone give you something you regret.*

Stewart feels at some remove during the events that take place. He feels the weight of Tazik's body on him, feels Tazik's force, but what happens on this king-size bed, in this high-rise condominium with a doorman and a sky deck on the thirtieth floor, seems to be happening to someone else. It's as if Stewart were floating above the bodies lying on the sheets, like a ghost or a deceased version of himself.

It is not rape. There is no force beyond that to which Stewart has, in some way, granted his consent. He doesn't want the man to stop what he's doing, doesn't want it to end.

He loves Tazik, wants to spend the rest of his life with Tazik. He likes his bearing, likes the fact that he grew up in Africa and moved to England at the age of seventeen, that he has bronze statues from Malaysia and Nigeria and the Congo. He craves his lips and his penis, his masculinity. This is who Stewart wishes he could be. Someone whose palms do not sweat. Someone who drinks Rémy Martin XO. Someone who owns a mastiff.

"What did you say your name was? Stevie? Stacey? Is that it? Stacey? You

look like a Stacey. My girlfriend in upper school was named Stacey. But her titties were bigger than yours. She actually had titties. What's wrong with you? Haven't your titties started to grow yet? What's the matter? Cat got your tongue? I'm just playing around with you, kiddo. It's okay. Don't get all pouty on me. We can cuddle if that's what you want. Is that what you like? To cuddle? Don't you like it when I talk dirty to you? I get it—you're the sensitive type, right? You want a man to caress you. Okay, then. How about this? Do you like this?"

Then later: "I bet you like to wear dresses. Do you wear dresses? Did your mommy put you in a little pink tutu this morning and drop you off at school with your lunch box? I bet you were a momma's boy when you were growing up. Is that what you were, a little momma's boy?"

In the background, Stewart recognizes the music of Erik Satie. Tazik Eze has put on Satie to make love to Stewart. It is like a gift for Tazik to have chosen that CD, something Stewart cherishes, notes and chords and passages he's listened to many times on his own.

AT FIRST, THE TAPE WAS PART OF THE GAME. "I'm going to wrap you up and put you in a little suitcase and carry you with me everywhere. Wouldn't that be fun? Going everywhere together?"

Stewart wondered whether binding his mouth was punishment for having been so tongue-tied earlier in the evening, so clumsy with his words. Sometimes, when the right topic comes up, Stewart can be a decent conversationalist. Sometimes, but not always.

Better not to be able to talk, actually. Better to have tape affixed to one's mouth.

And so when Max, the mastiff, started making sounds in the hallway outside of the bedroom, retching noises in the middle of the night, when Tazik jumped out of bed to check on his partner in crime, Stewart couldn't say, "Tazik, is everything all right?"

He couldn't say, "Let me help you, my love," when Tazik exploded at the dog, cursing about the vomit on the hardwood floors.

Or, "Honey, don't worry about it, come back to bed, I'll clean it up."

All he could do was lie with his face in the pillow, because he was on his stomach with his arms above him, fastened to the bedposts with the lengths of white rope, tape across his mouth. He strained to listen to what Tazik was doing out in the hallway. He listened to the running water and the tearing of paper towels and Max's whining, because the dog was feeling contrite. Poor fellow, Stewart thought. It isn't his fault. He didn't mean to get sick.

There on the bed, facedown, Stewart remembered how, when he was in third, fourth, fifth grade, visiting his father in Colorado during the

summers, Raymond sometimes made him come outside and watch him load the gun he kept in a wooden chest that looked like it might have been owned by a sixteenth-century buccaneer. His father kept one pistol in the glove compartment of his car, in case there was trouble on the road, and one in the massive chest next to his bed, and sometimes Raymond went outside to the dirt and the gravel and bushes, and pointed the gun at a target in the distance—a piece of paper with a bull’s-eye emblazoned on it, nailed to a hulking wooden post—and pulled the trigger.

The sound was louder than anything Stewart had ever heard. It made his ears ring, made them go numb.

“Keep your eyes open now. Watch how I do this, kiddo. One day you may need to defend yourself. See how my finger pulls the trigger back gently. Look at me, son.”

For some reason this is what lodges in Stewart’s mind then, with his arms cinched to the posts: it is hot, the sun is high overhead, there are flies everywhere. He remembers the heaviness of their bodies, their frenzied buzzing. Because they were frantic: trapped in Raymond’s house, up against the windows, trying to get out. They were inside the house, and outside too, near the rattlesnake skin that Raymond had hung from one of the wooden beams above the porch. The flies were delirious with the scent of rotting flesh, because sometimes, when Raymond was driving and he came across a rattlesnake on the road, he hit the brakes and took the shovel out of his trunk and went after the creature, Stewart sitting in the car, his seatbelt still on, watching the scene unfold, afraid his father would be bitten or, more likely, that the snake would be killed—Raymond going after the coiled-up reptile, the hissing rattler Raymond lunged toward and taunted and hollered epithets at—*cocksucker* and *motherfucker* and *cocksucker* again—and then pounded with the shovel’s blade, leaving the monstrous head with its fangs on the side of the road.

Stewart remembers Raymond coiling the snake’s body up and carrying it back to the car, smiling, then handing it to him to hold on his lap, with a rag to stanch the blood where the head had been severed.

He remembers the weight of the reptile, still warm from the sun, its scales like a mosaic of scabs. He sat still in case the beast wasn’t actually dead, knowing that when they arrived back at his father’s house, Raymond would nail the snake to a beam, slit its body lengthwise with a hunting knife, peel the skin off, like cellophane from a grape popsicle. He remembers Raymond cooking chunks of the snake’s muscular body in an iron skillet and making Stewart eat the charred flesh, telling him it was a delicacy very few people would ever have the opportunity to taste. *No faces*, he demanded as Stewart chewed.

He remembers lying on his mattress on the floor of Raymond's house at night under a huge printing press—made, his father told him, in England during the reign of a king who beheaded nine men—lying under this metal beast with his eyes closed, because he didn't want Raymond to know he was still awake, lying there, listening for sounds, trying to determine where his father was, gauging his mood, thinking of his mother three states away, in California; trying not to cry, wishing he were walking on the beach with her, feeling the ocean—the edge of the waves—tickle their feet.

What occupies Stewart's mind in this hermetically sealed apartment with central air are the flies and the snakeskin drying in the sun and the sound of the snakes' rattles, which Raymond gave to Stewart as a kind of souvenir, and the memory of the time when Raymond made him come outside and hold the gun in his sweating hands. Made him steady his breathing. Told him to look at the target in the distance, to stand up straight and throw back his shoulders and stop sniffing and, once and for all, be a man.

Sometimes a thought takes hold of him and refuses to let go. Now, for example, while Tazik is in the hallway, Stewart worries that maybe he has cancer. Can one have cancer of the nipple? he wonders. A month ago he was at the doctor's office having a physical, and he saw the pamphlet in the waiting room: SEVEN WARNING SIGNS OF CANCER. The pamphlet talked about skin tags and lesions and moles with irregular borders. It described sores that didn't heal. It offered photos of a woman's arm with a horrible growth on it, something dark and grotesque that looked like it could never have taken root on a human being's arm. Three black hairs sprouted from the monstrosity. The caption said the host was a forty-six-year-old woman who'd thought the growth was nothing to worry about—until it was too late and the malignant mass had metastasized. Skin cancer travels under the surface of the skin, the brochure said. Removal of the mole, if one has waited too long, is of little use. Once the cancerous cells have spread, it is too late.

Stewart put the brochure back on the table in the waiting room, but afterward, he wished he'd taken it with him. He wanted to study it. At home, he examined himself. He wondered whether certain freckles on his body had irregular borders. He made an appointment with a dermatologist. The first available opening wasn't until Tuesday, June 2, at 9 a.m.—three days from now. He imagines lying on his back in a white room with a high ceiling and fluorescent lights while a man in scrubs uses a scalpel to remove his nipples, first the right nipple, then the left. He pictures the man suturing the wounds—quickly, expertly—while a nurse waits at his side. She hands him scissors, then pads of gauze.

Stewart sees the surgeon above him and the snake on the gravel road, coiled up, ready to strike, and his father sitting across from him—at the

Stuckey's off the interstate—drawing two little rabbits on a napkin with a pen that the waitress gave him from the pocket of her dress. The rabbits have whiskers and cotton tails and big ears. “For Sandy,” he writes beneath the drawing, smiling at Stewart. “You can bet your britches she’s a Libra, kiddo. Do you see how graceful she is when she walks? Watch how she moves.”

Stewart remembers the waitress folding the napkin, carefully, and putting it in the pocket of her dress, a blue dress that looks clean and freshly ironed, and she tells Raymond she’s going to put it up on her fridge the minute she gets home, and she nods when he guesses her sign, startled and amazed. “What time were you born?” Raymond asks, and she shakes her head and says she doesn’t know that off the top of her head, but she can call her mom and ask. “I’ll bet you have Virgo rising,” Raymond says. “Get me the time, and I can do your chart. Have you ever had your chart done?”

In the hall, Stewart hears Tazik say something he doesn’t understand, and then “It’s okay, Maxy. It’s okay, buddy. Just go back to sleep.” Stewart pictures the dog’s head resting on Tazik’s lap while the man pets his belly. Stewart wonders whether he feels jealous of the dog then, resentful that it is the dog and not he who is receiving Tazik’s affection. This is the thought that stays with him as he drifts into sleep.

WHEN HE WAKES, THE SUN IS STREAMING into the bedroom. The tape covering his mouth is gone, as is the rope. Stewart is under a down comforter, and the bedroom is empty. His need to pee is ferocious. He gets out of bed, naked, and heads down the hall. “Hello?” he calls out. “Tazik?” He goes into the bathroom, the guest bathroom, and sits on the toilet. Sometimes he likes to sit down when he pees. It seems safer than standing up. No mistakes. He examines the veins in the marble.

He flushes the toilet and walks to the kitchen. Max is lying on his cushion, looking up at him. On the counter is a note:

Hey Stewart –

Went for a run. Donuts & juice in the fridge. Last night was fun. Call me—560-7781

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He wonders whether Tazik has really left the apartment, or whether perhaps he is hiding in one of the closets, watching him, testing him. “Tazik?” he calls again. “Are you here?”

He walks down the hall to a room with a glass desk and more windows overlooking the harbor. The desk is meticulous—a single document next

to the computer, a Cross pen, nothing in the wastepaper basket, no piles of magazines, no newspapers. He sees a photo in a silver frame of Tazik and a guy with blond hair, both wearing parkas and goggles, on a snow-covered mountain. In the photo, Tazik's hair is longer, and he's wearing horn-rimmed glasses, and Stewart wonders whether the guy is Tazik's boyfriend. Perhaps it is someone Tazik used to date, because as far as Stewart can tell, Tazik is now single. Stewart saw only one toothbrush in Tazik's bathroom, one set of towels. Much could be extrapolated from this photograph, were one prone to extrapolation—Tazik pines for his ex, Tazik's heart was broken—but what purpose would such ruminations serve? So what if Tazik is single?

Bookshelves line the walls: Eliot, Keats, Longfellow. There must be a hundred volumes of poetry alone. Then fiction: *Ulysses*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the works of Saramago. The books are arranged alphabetically. Behind a glass case, he sees a display of rocks: malachite and azurite and turquoise, beryl and tourmaline.

When Stewart was a boy, his father sometimes took him to a store in Denver that sold rocks and minerals, and bought him geodes and pieces of pyrite and agate and garnets. Once, after a heavy rain, they drove to Cripple Creek and looked for pieces of turquoise on the roads that were covered with gravel from the mines. After a few hours of combing the roadsides Stewart had found just a few tiny pieces, but Raymond had found a large stone, larger than the pit of a nectarine. Stewart still remembers the moment: Raymond's disbelief as he bent down to pry the rock from the ground, his fingers working the dirt off its surface to reveal the full extent of the blue. Stewart wanted desperately to hold the treasure, to touch it, but he held back, not wanting to appear jealous or covetous.

Four weeks later, at the airport, Raymond took the rock out of his pocket. It was wrapped in white cloth, a handkerchief, and he handed it to Stewart. Raymond had been uncharacteristically quiet on their drive up to Denver. The waitress from Stuckey's, Sandy, had just broken up with him and he'd spent the entire night on the phone trying to convince her to reconsider. Stewart had kept his eyes shut, pretending to be asleep, but he heard everything: Raymond's pleading, his apologies and recriminations, the expletives when he slammed down the phone. He heard Raymond tell the woman he had no reason to live if she left him, then heard him go into the bathroom, close the door, and sob.

Stewart opens the display case's sliding glass door and takes out one of

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the pieces of turquoise. It is larger than the piece his father gave him, and Stewart wishes, more than anything, that it belonged to him. He wonders whether Tazik would miss it. There must be at least thirty specimens in the display case. The turquoise Stewart is holding is not the largest, not the most beautiful. He knows he will not see Tazik again. Tazik doesn't have Stewart's phone number, doesn't know where he lives. He doesn't even know his last name. Would it be so terrible if he put the rock in the pocket of his jacket and took it with him? To Tazik, the rock means nothing. Tazik has a Rolex and a stove that probably cost ten thousand dollars. Tazik has more of everything than Stewart will ever have. Stewart could take this rock, could get a Hefty bag and take all of the rocks. He could steal Tazik's collection of CDs and his books and his silverware—his cutlery—and Tazik would probably not miss any of it.

He considers his options. He could go into Tazik's kitchen and open an expensive bottle of red wine from France, and pour the contents onto Tazik's hand-woven rug. In some ways, the possibilities are limitless. The apartment is quiet and outside is the ocean.

STEWART DOESN'T TAKE THE TURQUOISE or the gold pen. He doesn't urinate on Tazik's mattress or smear fecal matter on his refined couch. Stewart isn't a child. He's not petulant. Instead, what he takes, after he dresses, are just a few words from the journal he finds in Tazik's desk—the diary bound in soft calfskin whose pages are covered in tiny, meticulous prose.

The last entry, from just three days ago, is quite short, but for some reason it fills Stewart with tremendous happiness:

Dr. Levy said the first year is the hardest, but the man is an idiot. The first year, you're allowed to be sad. It's okay to cry at your desk. People understand. It's month 13 that they start to think you're unbinged. Even Max is still sad, though. Sometimes, I hear him whining at night, and I know what he's feeling. We went to Martin's grave twice last week, and I told myself twice was enough, but who the fuck cares. Might go tomorrow again.

This is the page Stewart rips free from the journal and folds into quarters. For a moment, he considers taking the entire journal, but he's not that kind of person. He's eminently reasonable.

Stewart leaves Tazik's note on the kitchen table, untouched, and tucks the folded page under his shirt as he leaves the apartment, adrenaline coursing through his chest and his arms. He's not afraid. He's excited. He feels, right now, more alive—more powerful—than he's felt in some time. ●