

WATCHER OF THE SEA

by

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The shrill beep-beep of a flatbed truck in reverse. The clang of metal ramps on pavement. The throaty roar of a diesel engine. The grinding of metal tracks on concrete.

Carl had grown used to the dull roar of the ocean and the constant cackle of seagulls, but he couldn't tune out this new interruption. He pushed back from his writing desk and crossed the room to the window. Already the backhoe dug into the wet earth, opened a gaping hole in the vacant lot between his house and the ocean. He imagined the bearded men who would follow, how they would bend low and push soupy concrete into a square foundation, the cracks of their asses flashing white between flannel shirts and dirty jeans. He threw the window open to the cold ocean air and, with blood rushing into his neck, yelled at the backhoe driver to keep it down, Goddammit, and that some people were trying to get some work done.

Max jerked awake from his place curled up by the door and labored to his feet. He hobbled over to Carl, his claws clicking on the cold tile, and nosed at Carl's hand. The backhoe swung around for another mouthful of earth, its operator oblivious to the salt-and-pepper-haired man glaring from the window. Carl pulled his robe tight against the cold. He reached down to scratch the old German wirehaired pointer behind the ears. "Rich sons of bitches," he said. He stomped back over to his desk where it faced the wall, slumped into his chair, ripped the page from his typewriter and threw it into the wastebasket.

By the third week of construction, he knew the house going up across the street wasn't going to be a squat single-level house like the other eyesores across from his neighbors' houses. Where they should have installed roof trusses, the workers instead hammered in wide floorboards for a second story that would, as Carl figured it, block his view of the bay and most of the ocean beyond. He roused Max from his place by the door, clicked a long leash around his collar, and stepped out into the wet air toward the raucous construction site.

"How big is this thing going to get?" he asked a heavysset man who shouldered two-by-fours off of a flatbed. He pulled bright orange earplugs from his ears.

"Say what?"

"How big is this damned thing going to get?"

"Two and a half," answered the man. He hitched his jeans higher onto his waist.

"Two and a half what?"

"Floors," answered the man.

Carl turned this over in his mind. "What's a half a floor?" he asked, but the man had stuffed his earplugs back in and was stepping over construction debris toward the house.

Carl turned to look at his dog. "What's a half a floor?" he asked him. Max ambled over to a mailbox waiting to be planted in the ground, lifted his leg to it, and pissed. Steam rose from the ground and Carl smiled.

"You dogs have it all figured out, don't you." He scratched the dog's greying beard as the acidic smell of the dog's urine soaked into the fresh wood of the mailbox post.

He marched home to his writing room and wrestled the heavy wooden desk from its place facing the wall. He pushed and wrenched and swore it over to the window looking out over the ocean, then went to his closet and dug around until he found an old pair of binoculars. For the rest of

the day he counted the ships as they bounced out from the bay into the roiling waves, made little marks in a notebook each time he saw the little heart-shaped puff of mist from a migrating gray whale, and compared the movement of the tide against a tide chart he tacked on the wall. He tried to ignore each long two-by-four as it grew in front of him like a thin reed between his window and the ocean.

The owners of the new house—Carl called them *the intruders* when ranting to Max—came to see the growing house after the builders closed in the first floor. A round woman in a thin jacket held the hand of an older man with a ring of grey hair around his age-spotted bald head. They had two teenagers in tow—one sulking boy with a mop of jet black hair and one girl wearing too little for a day on the Oregon Coast. Carl narrowed his eyes at them. They were just what he expected. The older man—rich, no doubt—with the younger wife. A big-city lawyer, probably.

The little family appeared on the skeleton of the second floor and stood together at the framed-in hole for the wide window that would overlook the ocean. Carl's ocean. The boy pulled ear buds from his ears and snapped a picture with his phone. The girl pulled at her shirt, trying to cover her midriff against the cold. The evening light reflected off the ocean and silhouetted them against a horizon of swirling red and orange clouds. The man put an arm around the woman who cradled her head on his shoulder. Carl thought it looked like the airbrushed brochure that the real estate agent must have sent them to entice them to build their second home here—or maybe their third, or fourth.

He shuffled across the room to where his stereo whispered Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" and turned the dial until he found the classic rock station. "Welcome to the Jungle." Guns n' Roses. Perfect. He cranked the volume to the right and the room exploded with wailing guitars

and the shrill voice of Axl Rose. He went to the window, opened it wide, hid himself behind the thick curtains and jammed his fingers in his ears. When he peeked out, the little family had turned and craned their necks toward his window, the ocean glinting and sparkling behind them. The boy, looking out from underneath his mop of hair, opened his jacket to reveal an AC/DC concert t-shirt, raised his hand in devil horns, and grinned. Carl glared back at him through the curtain. The woman slapped the boy's hand down and shook her head. The bald-headed man ushered the family back into the enclosed first floor. Carl let the radio blare on through "Comfortably Numb" and "You Can't Always Get What You Want." As the first strains of "Blinded by the Light" throbbed out into the crisp air, they fled out to their Volvo and lurched out of town. Carl poured his anger into his typewriter and pounded out a scene that he had struggled with for days.

He was working on his fourth book, and it wasn't going well. His first book had been an immediate success—a glowing *New York Times* review, a brief appearance on the Best Sellers List, and a National Book Award nomination. It had allowed him to transform from an angst-ridden, starving writer in a tiny New York apartment into the respected novelist and owner of a comfortable coastal home that he was. He divorced his wife while writing his second book; she never understood that he needed peace and quiet—a stress-free environment. It sold less than a thousand copies and was panned by the critics. His third book, written in his finally peaceful oasis on the Pacific, fared no better. The reviews were consistent—his writing had become trite, predictable, lacking in passion. He could never recapture the same energy of his original protagonist, a small-town fireman who set fire to—and arrived in the nick of time to save—the community's most beloved buildings. This book—the one he tried to bang out on a typewriter while bearded men hammered together a home outside his window—needed to break

the formulas, take big risks, break new ground. If only he could silence the noise from the ever-growing shadow rising in his window.

He thought about filing a lawsuit. Get an injunction. A stay. Something. It must be illegal. No one else built a home that blocked his neighbors' views. He met with a lawyer who informed him—for a hefty price—that he had no basis for a lawsuit. The other home owners had bought the lots across from them and resold them with the restriction that their views of the ocean would be preserved. Carl refused to remember that his real estate agent had suggested the same.

He thought about how the police used loud music and annoying noises to drive people out of buildings. He imagined installing huge speakers on the outside of his house and pointing them at the new house like cannons leaning out of a man-o-war.

He daydreamed about his new book being so successful that he could afford to buy the damned thing and raze it to the ground. In his darker moments, he imagined doing it in front of the little family, making them watch from the street while the wrecking ball smashed glass, wood, and furniture to a pulp.

Late at night, after the noise stopped and he'd downed a few drinks, he even found himself thinking about the protagonist of his first book. He imagined sneaking over in the darkness, stuffing the crawlspace full of newspaper, raising a glowing match to the eager fuel, and walking off into the darkness while flames licked up the side of the house and melted the cheap aluminum siding.

A few nights later, tipsy from a bottle of wine, he found himself walking around and around the rising new house in the dark. The thing was almost complete. Shingles covered the roof. A gabled window peeked out from the half-floor attic space above the second floor. A

brilliant red door stood where the temporary front door had hung and gave the place the look of a pale woman after an amateurish makeover. The mailbox and post now stood upright in a square front yard of new green sod. Max sniffed at it and marked it again. A Dumpster mounded with construction debris lurked in the dark street. Carl eyed the giant wads of cardboard that propped the lid open and wondered how quick they'd burn if he touched his lighter to them. He walked to the front door and kicked at a large stone set into the earth next to the steps. The words etched into it were sharp and new, not yet covered in moss as they would be in a few months. It read: *THE JOHNSONS* in big block letters and, underneath, in cursive: *When your here, your home!* He rolled his eyes at the misspelling. He stooped over the fresh sod, dug his finger through to the mud, and glopped the missing apostrophes and "e's" onto the stone. Max drooped his head and sniffed at it. He raised his leg to it but failed to mark it. Carl's eyes went wide with an idea. The roof blocked what little moonlight cut through the fog. All the lights were off in the house. Darkness concealed him.

"What's the matter, boy?" said Carl in a low voice. "All used up?" The dog looked up at him with wet eyes. He unzipped his fly, looked again over his shoulder, and took aim at the etched stone. "Welcome home, Johnsons," he said.

Then everything went bright. His sharp shadow moved across the front of the house from a light sweeping in from the street. A car pulled into the driveway. Carl almost caught himself in the zipper. The woman stepped out of her Volvo on thick legs and narrowed her eyes at him. The two teens stepped out behind her with heavy Home Depot bags in their arms.

"Can I—help you?" the woman stammered.

He looked at the woman, at each of the kids, and then at Max. "I just came over to welcome you to the neighborhood," he blurted, wondering if he'd succeeded in getting his fly all the way closed. "I was just about to knock."

The woman looked hard at him for a moment, then her mouth curled into an unsure smile.

"How nice," she said and approached him with her hand extended. "It's nice to meet a neighbor."

Carl shook her hand. Her skin felt softer than he expected. And warm, too. She put her other hand over the top of his and squeezed.

Her two children shuffled into the house, the boy giving him a hard look from under his tangle of hair as he passed. Light blazed from the windows.

"We're moving in this weekend," she said, still holding his hand in hers. "You'll have to come by and say hello once we're settled."

He found it hard to look her in the face and looked at his feet instead. Max laid there on his side, biting at the blades of new grass.

"I—I don't know about that," he answered.

The woman sniffed at the air and looked at the glistening stone. She wrinkled her brow at Carl.

"Sorry," he muttered under his breath. "My dog—"

He gave a sharp pull on the leash and brought Max to his feet. He turned to leave but, before he reached the sidewalk, the woman called after him.

“Could I trouble you for a moment?” she asked. He stopped and shook his head at the question. “It’s just that I can’t seem to get the furnace to come on and I wondered if you happened to know anything about—”

“You’ve already troubled me,” he said through a tight mouth.

“Excuse me?”

He swung around to face her, the blood throbbing into his neck again. “I said you’ve already troubled me, lady.” Her eyes widened in surprise. Carl took a determined step closer. “So you can get that rich husband of yours to fix your damned furnace.” His face felt hot and he kneaded his fingers in a fist. She stared at him, dumbfounded, and he turned to leave. As his footsteps echoed into the night, he thought he heard the tight click of the front door closing behind him.

He went home to his typewriter with her words ringing in his head. *Could I trouble you for a moment? Could I trouble you for a moment?* He realized the phrase was the perfect piece of introductory dialogue for the female character he had written into his novel a few days earlier—the love interest. He’d been stuck on it for hours. He punched the letters onto the page and found the words that followed coming easily. From then on, every time he wrote about her, he pictured the woman in the house across the street in his mind, even though he tried not to.

He was at his typewriter again when the noisy moving truck lumbered up to the house a few days later. It rocked on its axles under the weight of couches, mattresses, a small upright piano, and mountains of heavy brown boxes, and drove away riding high on its wheels after a few hours. With the movers gone, the woman and her children started unpacking. He observed it all in his binoculars through the curtain in his window. He watched as the woman sorted

through her clothes with her busy, soft hands. It surprised him how nimble she appeared with a box on her hip, how her skin glowed a pleasant red as she broke down boxes and piled them on the patio. He jotted a few notes that came to his mind for the novel.

The mother and daughter sometimes met in the hall, stopped and hugged each other for long moments, wiped at their eyes, and went on with their work. The boy hung a heavy black curtain over his window and disappeared. It made Carl angry at the absent husband—a rich prick who made his wife and children settle a new house on their own while he ate at expensive restaurants in the city with business associates. And mistresses, he figured. Or maybe this woman, with her curvy body and eager smile, *was* one of his mistresses. Maybe he'd hidden her away in this house on the coast for his weekend trysts. Carl could imagine her that way now—the secret lover. Now that he had touched her hand, felt its warmth.

Over the next week, whenever his writing stalled, he pulled a chair close to the curtained window and watched the house. The woman—Sarah—washed long carrots and sliced them into a salad. She dipped a wooden spoon into a crockpot and flicked her tongue to it. She stretched herself up for plates in her cabinets and laid them on the table. He thought she seemed anxious—something about how she stopped often to stare out the window, tuck her hair back behind her ear, and bite at her lip a little. The character in his book—whose name he had now changed to Sarah—began to adopt her namesake's mannerisms too. But whenever it came to writing her dialogue, he found himself blocked. He wished that he had heard more of the way she spoke. Had he caught a hint of a Southern accent or just imagined it?

Carl dropped a few extra treats into Max's bowl on top of the ones he hadn't eaten the day before. Max lolled his eyes at him from the couch where he laid stretched out on his back with his legs spread wide.

"Don't wait up," Carl said to him, hesitated, and clicked the door shut.

He thought he might press himself up against the aluminum siding under the kitchen window and listen. If he could just capture the way she spoke to her children—after all, the Sarah in his novel now had children, too—and the way she constructed her sentences. Did she drop her “g”s from words like *fixin’* and *eatin’* like he imagined she would? Did she use words like *ever-lovin’* and expressions like *well ah’ll be*? But as he peered into the backyard from the side street, it was clear that his neighbors, if watching the house from their own windows, would see him there. He decided instead to walk by the front of the house and hope to catch a sentence or two as they floated out from an open window.

They were there, sitting together in the front room. Even the boy. But their tones were somber and the breeze swept them away as soon as they spilled out through the window screen. He passed by once, then twice, but caught nothing. He stopped in front of the house, wishing Max had felt up to going with him so that he could pretend he was checking his paw for a thorn, and acted like his shoe had come untied. Still nothing. Just a mumble buried under the noise around him. He untied and retied his shoes—twice—while angling his head toward the window, trying to tune out everything but the sound coming from the house.

He sat alone on the couch while the woman leaned into her daughter in the loveseat. The boy came out of his room long enough to tick his head at Carl, fill a bowl from the crockpot, and disappear again. A massive portrait hung on the wall. It showed a tall man with a sharp jaw in full dress uniform against the backdrop of an American flag. Beneath it, a picture of the little

family on vacation amongst the red arches of southern Utah, the man from the portrait dressed in shorts and a t-shirt with his arm around a small-waisted and younger Sarah. Hanging to its right, a picture of the boy—much younger—at Scout camp in his blue shirt and yellow neckerchief, his hair short and his eyes shining. On the other side, a photo of the girl in a blue and white cheer leader's uniform, her chin resting on pom-poms in her hands. The smell of chicken drifted in from the steaming crockpot in the kitchen. The table, set with mismatched cups and a blue plastic tablecloth, waited in the next room.

Sarah broke the awkward silence by telling Carl how she'd grown up in Nevada but had since lived all over the world—Germany, Japan, Italy—but the Oregon Coast was her favorite place on earth. The boy and the girl were Peter—after his father—and Mary. Their father's name had been Captain Peter Lewis Johnson. That's how Sarah said it: *Captain* Peter Lewis Johnson, with a kind of reverence in her voice that made Mary bow her head.

Carl cleared his throat and cracked at his knuckles. “And the older man who came with you that first day?”

“My father,” Sarah said, “came out from Florida for my birthday.”

He listened over warm chicken-and-broccoli soup about how the little family had always dreamed of a place on the ocean—an impossibility for a military family. Never enough money. Never staying in one place. He sat in silence with his hands in his lap as she described how the little family—now even smaller without a father—decided to use the life insurance money to make their dream come true.

“Our little place on the ocean,” Sarah said.

“A place that reminds us of him,” Mary added.

Sarah sighed and pulled at her ear. “I’m so sorry about blocking your view,” she said. “I don’t know why I never thought about it. I guess I just—”

Carl raised his hand to stop her.

“I haven’t thought of the ocean as beautiful for a long time,” he said. “I thought it would be, but it’s just noisy. Birds and tourists and dogs. And it’s always windy. I moved here thinking it would be peaceful. But it’s not.” He looked at his shoes and added, “I don’t think you’ll like it here.”

“But that’s exactly why we love it so much,” Sarah replied. “It’s the violence of the storms and the waves that make the rock formations so beautiful to look at. It’s the noise of the tourists and all the clatter that makes the silent moments—just the ocean and air—so wonderful. If it weren’t for the storms and wind, well, we wouldn’t even notice the sunny, warm days.”

Mary, her eyes wet, pushed back from the table and padded to her room.

He thanked Sarah for the meal and promised to visit again soon, but couldn’t bring himself to look at the etched stone as he stepped from the red front door and trudged home. Max still laid stretched out on the couch, his eyes open and fixed, his wiry grey chest unmoving. Carl stood in the doorway and pronounced Max’s name. Said it again, louder. Shouted it. He stared at the dog’s still body for a long time. The lights in the windows of the house across the street blinked out, except for one dull light struggling out from behind a black curtain. He sat at his typewriter and hovered his fingers over the keys. The silence closed in around his ears and started them ringing. He reached out, threw open the window, and let in the sounds of the passing cars and the crashing waves, felt the chill air seep into his bones, and wrote like he hadn’t in years. The words came furiously and seemed to vibrate there on the page as he read

them. He wrote without stopping until sunrise. The next morning, he buried Max in the backyard and placed a smooth stone over the mound of earth.

Carl no longer writes at the large wooden desk in his writing room. He can't see the ocean from there. A two and a half story home blocks the view, its brown aluminum siding turning white in the salty winds from off the ocean. Instead he carries a floppy green folding chair to the beach where it sinks into the sand while he writes in notebooks from the Dollar Store. He brushes away the sand as it blows into the crease between the pages and uses heavy paper clips to keep the pages from flapping in the wind. The words come fast and sometimes make him angry, but he stops often to close his eyes and listen to the sound of waves as they hurl themselves against the ancient rock formations. He notices how the seagulls hang motionless in the air around him by finding the perfect balance between the angle of their wings and the speed of the cold wind. He watches Sarah, Mary and Peter walk together on the beach in the evenings, huddled together against the frigid mist blowing off the ocean. Sometimes he even sets his writing aside and joins them.

END