

The Jetsams · E. J. Graff

“FLOTSAM AND JETSAM,” Kate repeats beside me. “Flo-otsam and jetsam.”

“Ka-ate, shut up!” pleads Webb, squeezed in the back seat. “Shut the fuck up!”

The moon echoes off the steely hood, which looks as ghostly and pinegreen as the surrounding trees. Mud from three days’ rain splatters up through the rusted floorboards onto our bare feet: mine, Kate’s, her boyfriend Jo-Jo’s. Jo-Jo is staring out the window, elbow out. He’s got a bottle to himself. The three in back are sharing.

“Flo-o-o-o-tsssam,” repeats Kate, head pressing into Jo-Jo’s shoulder.

“And the Jetsams,” I say quickly, to cut off Webb, who can get weird when he’s high. “That famous TV family! That crazy 21st century bunch!” Quickly I turn the wheel to avoid a bad bump.

Kate takes a strand of my hair and runs it slowly through her fingers. The sensation hurries down my spine and burns my bare soles, pressing the clutch and the gas. The car lurches, slightly. No one can tell this lurch from the others.

“Geeeoorge Jetsam!” chants Blond Suzette in back. “Jane, his wife!” She leans over the seat. Beside me her fingers make explosions where the little flying saucers would zoom across the tube.

“Oh no,” I say. “The Jetsams. Melissa, his ex-wife. Daniel and Lizzie, his ex-children. Captain Kirk, his ex-dog. How does the rest of it go?”

“Dear Lizzie,” says Kate, stretching behind me to take the joint. “Our good Princess Elizabeta. When are you going to learn? So hung up on the nuclear family. Don’t you get it? It’s history! It’s over! Flotsam, noun: the wreckage. See also: parents. Jetsam, noun: what’s jettisoned, or thrown overboard. Nous. The people. *We’re* your family now.”

“I wasn’t thrown,” says Blond Suzette. “I jumped.” We’ve all heard how many times she ran away.

“Jetsams,” says Webb. “Hey.” He props his chin on the seat beside my shoulder. “I never realized that before. Did you ever realize that before? That we’re all divorced kids?”

“Speak for yourself,” says Jo-Jo. His mother’s dead. He thrusts himself out the window and does his “Werewolves of London” howl at the sky. His

little barks and howls are his radio trademark. He drags himself back in like a backwards chin-up.

“Les divorçois: nom, enfants des divorces,” Kate intones.

“Les enfants *divins*,” says Blond Suzette. I glance in the mirror and catch her fluffing out her long, curled tresses. That’s what actresses have, she told me once: tresses. She was serious.

“How much farther?” I ask Harriet.

“Left up here where it forks,” Harriet says, between drags on her cigarette, “then straight about half a mile.” She grew up in Athens County, and has been telling me about the quarry all quarter. She promised to take me after exams. I dragged along everyone else.

We’ve already passed so many clusters of rural mailboxes and hairpin dirt roads I haven’t a clue how far we are from campus. I hate the driving. If I go too slow we’ll get stuck. Too fast, we’ll be thrown into the swampy weeds. But I’m the only one who doesn’t drink or drug. Unlike the rest of them, I don’t like being out of control.

We turn into a clearing. The misshapen moon stares at us twice, above and in the black water. Black trees sweep the bottom of the sky.

“Lordy,” says Webb.

Doors open and slam. The car lightens and rises out of the mud. By the time I cut the engine, I’m the only one in the car.

In the quiet, bodies pale with moonlight return to the car, dropping clothes through the windows. The door opens and slams behind me, a large metallic sound. Mud oozes cool through my toes. The dark smell of algae and weeds makes me sneeze. I pull off my shirt and shorts, exposing the blubber at the edges of my swimsuit.

“Coward,” whispers Kate in my ear. Despite myself I glance at her tiny breasts, dark nipples stiffened by the breeze, and see the burnished wire between her thighs. I look at the black water, lapped by moonlight.

A hand reaches over my shoulder and grabs Kate. I startle. She closes her eyes. I look up at Jo-Jo’s stark cheekbones and skull, blue under the moon. His hair is the length of a three-days’ beard. He looks like a concentration camp survivor, even more so than in daylight. It’s his official protest against his father’s marrying a stranger, only two months after his mother died. He shaved it the day after he got the letter. Once a week he shaves it again.

“Jo-Jo, I swear to God,” I say, “you look pre-dead.”

“Aren’t we all?” Jo-Jo opens his eyes that extra width that makes him look uncanny and bare. It was seeing that look across the back of French class, Kate says, that made her fall in love. Beyond vulnerable, she says. How many men, she says, can be as nearly naked as that? Her voice wasn’t a question, it was a shiver.

“We are the hollow men,” says Kate.

“Is it like this in death’s other kingdom?” quoth Jo-Jo. You can imagine him thinking that to himself: “quoth Jo-Jo.”

He heaves a rock at the water, as if to skip it. It explodes beside Harriet’s muscular bottom.

“Hey!” she calls back over her naked shoulder, accompanied by her orange ember. “Watch out for innocent bystanders!”

“Innocent?” I call. I’m the only virgin. In January we all had a slumber party in Webb’s room. After that I decided it was safest not even to kiss.

Jo-Jo walks toward Kate. I have to look away to not see his penis. Kate wraps herself around his arm. Out of the corner of my eye I see her nipple press against his arm’s black hairs.

I splosh through the mud toward Harriet, who’s now dragging what looks like a raft, a rope pulling against her heavy breasts. Beyond her, white arms appear occasionally above the water, like sharks’ fins, or maybe like angels’ wings. A head bobs up, spouting water and a truncated laugh.

“It’s eerie out here.” My voice wavers in the dark.

Harriet’s bulldog face tightens as she drags on the rope. Even in daylight you can’t see her pale red eyelashes. “I helped build this raft. My uncles said if I did a good job, they’d let me help fix my cousin’s barn.”

“Oh, great.” I get behind the raft and push.

“Yes, great. Haven’t you noticed? I’m a civil engineering major.” After she told her major in our women’s history class—she was the only engineer—I started hanging out with her to see how she could stand being different.

“Did they let you help with the barn?”

“I got tonsillitis. But I snuck into the truck and watched from the cab.”

Under my feet the waterlogged wood is soft as a carpet. It sways slightly in the water. The cool air laps over me, a relief from the swollen heat of the three-day rains.

“Wait for me!” Kate splashes toward us, sans Jo-Jo, to my relief. I step off, and the three of us walk the raft in. I try not to think about rusty

fishhooks or snakes. The water is soft, rising up my legs. When it ripples against my pubes, I flush. As the raft clears the rocks, we climb on. We lie watching the moon drift through the haze. At a distance from its white blur a few stars waver, like uncertain messages.

Webb taught me to look closely and see they're not all white. I pick out some bluish, one winking green, one pale orange. Wood knots press my back. A fresh smell drifts above the water. Harriet and Kate pass a bottle.

The raft rocks gently, Blond Suzette's long skinny arms straining as she lifts on. When Webb follows, slight and dark, I'm relieved he's wearing trunks. He hunches at the edge, his back to Suzette, his legs trailing. The raft is so big no one has to shift to make room.

The talk is quiet, and drifts back into darkness.

The raft takes another dip, and holds still at a tilt. Near Kate's ankles rests Jo-Jo's grinning head, as if decapitated. I stare at the stars' wiggling colors.

"Above us you see mathematics," says Webb, "the first and purest language." Which means the mushrooms have hit. It's the only time Webb talks physics, his major. He deals drugs to put himself through school. "Equations swimming out from the very first equation, the one that said: Let there be light."

"What about, let there be black holes?" asks Suzette. She's propped across the raft like a sphinx, pointing her breasts at Webb.

He keeps his back to her, staring into the blurry sky. "Equations collapsing into a nothing so heavy it's something."

"The nothing that is not there and the nothing that is," says Kate.

"A whirlpool of nothing that can flush you like shit down a toilet," says Jo-Jo. He grabs the bottle.

"We're all fallout from those equations," says Webb. "Made of stars, every one of us. Even Jo-Jo."

His gentleness relieves me. It means he's not letting Suzette get to him. At his best he can distract Jo-Jo from what Kate calls his morosity: like viscosity. But sometimes Webb lies on my floor for hours, asking why Kate stays with Jo-Jo when he treats her like shit, and why Suzette flirts with Webb and drops him if he acts interested, but only gets serious about her married drama professor. He wants to know: are women insane?

Harriet takes over in her matter-of-fact voice, telling how when she was a kid, her family would come down to watch the strip mining. Her cousin operated one of the big machines; she was too little to remember its name.

She points out what we can see now, with our eyes adjusted to the dark: sheer rock that cuts into the water at the south side. The mining company got off without a slap, she says, after an explosion off that cliff killed two miners.

We drift under the influence of the blue rock for a minute.

“So we’re floating over dead people?” says Kate.

Harriet’s orange ember glows, then arcs over us through the quivering black. It sizzles as it hits.

“Maybe it wasn’t an accident,” says Jo-Jo. “Maybe they said to hell with the rest of you, I’ve fucking had it.”

“If you had a choice,” says Blond Suzette, “would you kill someone or be killed?”

“Be killed,” I say. I’ve been a vegetarian since I was ten. “*Was* it the mining company’s fault?”

Harriet snorts. “What do you think?”

“You’d stand aside and let the Nazis take over the world?” Webb says. “Pol Pot?”

“Weber!” I say. “Et tu?”

“What about Gandhi?” Kate says. “Or Martin Luther King?”

“Dead,” says Jo-Jo. “And their factions killing each other in the streets.”

“So that’s what they teach in pre-law?” I say. “That everything’s hopeless? ‘If I am for myself alone, what am I?’”

“An amoeba?” asks Webb. “A quark?”

“No, seriously, Lizzie,” says Suzette angrily. The raft rocks unpleasantly as she grabs the bottle from Webb and takes a swig. “If someone was attacking your family, coming at you and your kids with a broomhandle or a, a, a telephone ripped out of the wall, would you just lie there like mold?”

Suzette refuses to visit or call home. With her hair damp and tangled around her face, her eyes look drowned.

“I’d run away,” I say.

Harriet says, “One of the miners was my mother’s cousin.”

“So what does that mean?” asks Jo-Jo. “The big bad owners smoke cigars and plot death for profit? Join the union and sing Pete Seeger songs? A vote for Stalin is a vote for the people?” He switches from his Radio EclectoMania voice into his marble-mouthed imitation of his history prof. “The people. First invented in the late 19th century by that remarkable, remarkable comedian, first among Marx brothers, Karl. Degenerated now

to a remarkable few, jammed on a lumpen raft, doomed to disperse, or die first." He mock-salutes the stars.

"Jo-Jo," Kate says, "it was her cousin."

The raft rocks as Jo-Jo shoves away. We hear the angry splashing of his arms.

"He's just upset because tomorrow he meets his father's new wife," Kate says.

"Like anyone *likes* it," Suzette says. "Nobody says you *like* it." She tosses her hair back with both hands, not looking at me.

"The day my mother got married," I say, "she says I held up the chuppah. She has pictures of me shaking people's hands. I don't remember a thing. I can remember when Dad was in the house. Then comes the part where Mom's husband is telling me to get off the phone, he has an important call coming in. It's like the movie broke in the middle."

"Tell me about it," says Harriet. Her parents got divorced, but moved back in together.

"My dear Jetsams," says Kate, "we are gathered here today to remind ourselves to forget those foolish Flotsams."

I stick my toes in the water, hoping a fish will nibble.

Suzette stands up fast, rocking the raft. "Marco Polo!" she yells, and dives off.

Webb dives after her. Harriet's dive is a strong arc, leaving hardly a splash where her feet disappear. I swing my legs over to join them.

"Don't." Kate puts a hand on my arm.

Splashing water and voices calling "Marco Polo!" echo through the quarry.

Kate says, "I'm afraid of the water. I don't know how to swim."

"You're kidding!" I've been swimming since I was four. I lie back, looking up at the blue mists.

She turns over on her belly facing me, propping her chin in her hands. Her face looks like a heart-shaped moon.

"So what are you doing out here?"

"I wanted to be with everybody." She touches my shoulder.

Shifting my butt against the wood, I stare at the moon. Before Jo-Jo, Kate and I were inseparable. We studied together in the library. We walked home together after student government. We even binged together, although I would sneak off to eat more, and sometimes heard her vomiting

in the toilet. She was the only person I ever told about waiting up all night for my mother to come home, the year after the divorce. Kate used to wait up for hers, too, hoping she'd come home alone. When Kate had nightmares, she'd come into my room and curl up with me. I'd prop myself on my elbow, holding myself stiff so I didn't brush her skin, and watch her eyes flutter under her eyelids.

We lie together in the blurry dark. Her breath is warm on my shoulder.

"Marco Polo!" Their splashing and squealing almost drown out the peepers. I pick out heated stars behind the haze, trying to see them as equations. It's light moving at different speeds, Webb explained once, that makes the stars different colors. Scientists like to tell you they know what's happening with the stars. But most of it is a mystery: that's what he likes about it. Once, when Webb was very tripped out, he said: God speaks in mathematics. Learn the language and you know God.

Kate leans over and kisses me.

The sensation spreads through me like a star. When she lifts her head, I want to cry.

A Tarzan howl echoes over the water. We sit up.

"Oh Christ! What an idiot!" Harriet's pointing toward the blue rock.

I make out a figure poised on top. Judging by how small he looks from here, Jo-Jo is maybe fifty feet above the water. Maybe a hundred.

He dives. We watch the silent splash.

I realize I'm counting my breaths: ten, fifteen, twenty.

"Jo-Jo!" Kate's voice is so loud I wince. "Jo-Jo!" As she jumps up I spread my arms to steady the raft.

Voices join in. "Jo-Jo! Where are you!" "You! Asshole!"

Kate shrieks his name, flapping her arms like a drunken air controller. Under the moonlight, the others' white arms lap toward us, punctuated by irregular cries.

Fifty, fifty-five, sixty.

I picture the five of us under a police station's blue fluorescence. My chest feels like cement. Remember this feeling, I think, to use in drama class. Immediately I'm ashamed. "Jo-Jo!" My voice is raw.

Kate puts her hand on my head, steadying herself. "His mother didn't die of cancer last fall, like he said," she whispers. "She killed herself."

Harriet climbs on the raft. Kate grabs her wrist. "We have to swim out to save him!"

I realize how stoned they all are. “Let’s push back to shore, and turn the headlights on the water.”

“Asshole!” Webb’s shoved himself onto the raft and is hopping across, yelling through his cupped hands. “Where the fuck are you, asshole!”

“Webb,” I say, “help us kick.” Obediently he climbs down. Suzette joins us, her long body trailing the raft. Her eyes are big as frogs. We all kick or paddle toward shore, our voices banging against the half-mined cliffs. Kate weeps, quietly as hiccups.

Mud sucks at my ankles. While Harriet drags in the raft, Webb and Kate shout at the trees and clouds. Suzette holds herself, standing in mud like a rag doll.

I hurry toward the car. Without thinking, I slap a mosquito whining against my wrist. When its blood and body smear my skin, I almost start to cry.

The solidity of the car door steadies me. The plastic smell inside turns my stomach. I flick on the lights.

Light erases most of the quarry. A few spotlit trees wash back and forth in a breeze overhead. The gunning engine shuts out the world. I back up and return at a different angle. Flattening the water, light slithers out like a whistle, dissolving into the dark.

Kate screams.

I back up, grinding through mud, to shift my spotlight onto her. Jo-Jo holds up Kate’s wrist like a victory sign. Her hand dangles helplessly. He is laughing, head back. I cut the engine. Framed by the windshield, the glare turns their bodies into statues in a police lineup, unreal.

I cut the lights.

That’s when I realize I’ve seen Jo-Jo’s penis. It looks exactly like what you’d expect.

When my eyes have adjusted to the dark, two of the statues are walking toward me, becoming women. The tall stringy one is streaked with mud, arms across herself, walking like an ungainly duck. The short one strides, brushing herself off, brisk. I swing open the car door, wincing at the blue flash of light, and step back into the mud.

“Where’s Webb?” My voice sounds strange and hoarse.

Harriet squints at me, as if trying to size me up. She turns and points toward the lake. I stare along the line of her hand until I can make out blue-white arms lifting over the black water, aiming toward infinity.

A stone sinks in my stomach: How will I ever get us all home? I wrap my arms around myself, looking away from the two who keep kissing, like headless bodies trying to disappear into the dark.