



MARA



ADAM BILES



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When the Nüwa puts into port, I count off what she unloads and count on what she picks up. I tip the customs official whatever he asks and record the amount in the ship's ledger. It is of no interest to me what cargo we carry, nor do I care which city of which country we are in. With my duties carried out I return to my chair on the upper deck. From there I fix upon the horizon as we crisscross endlessly from one coast to another of the South China Sea.

My days pass as if in a trance. Thoughts are rare, ducking into and out of my mind like the occasional sea birds that sweep across my view. I dwell little on the past, less on the future. For years my destiny has been in the hands of another. I eat when I remember, and piss and shit when my body demands. Otherwise I sit and watch... not even the horizon, just the space in between, the void that reaches out before me.

I am writing now only because of the growing feeling that my time is short. This has awakened within me the desire to transmit, to leave something small behind. I thought these desires had been extinguished long ago. A worthy testament, no doubt, to the flame of human endurance.

May this document serve as a warning.

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I wasn't born to the sea. For the first twenty five years of my life home was B-----, a town in the south of England. I was married – perhaps I still am – and had a little boy who'd inherited my eyes. I worked as an accountant for a local firm with which my father-in-law had connections. I suppose I was happy, although I have journeyed too far from the man I was to be able to say for sure.

Mara lived at the rich end of town. Everyone knew her house as 'The Carters' – the name of the family that owned it before her. The Carters left under a cloud: the father throwing himself from the suspension bridge, leaving the family to be swallowed by the web of debts he'd spun before his escape. The townspeople were sympathetic, but there was nothing to be done. The remaining Carters vanished and the house was sold. Mara was young when she took possession of that grand old residence. She arrived alone and was rarely seen, so it was assumed she was a wealthy widow and everyone kept their timorous distance. There was talk, and rumours flowered, but with nothing to feed on they soon withered away.

I had inherited the file of a company with extensive offshore holdings. It was as thick as the Domesday book and dated from soon after the establishment of the firm. It was remarkable for its size, the number of my predecessors who had handled it through the years, and the intriguing legal exemptions that had been negotiated on the company's behalf. The names of twenty seven accountants were pencilled on the cardboard folder, starting with the old man, long retired, who had given his name to the firm. Otherwise the

accounts were impeccable, better kept than any I had seen. It was only when I arrived at the address on the folder that I realised the company was run out of the Carters' former home.

I wasn't perturbed. The job was interesting because of the value of the business and the peculiarities of the case, but was otherwise just the tedious number shuffling I was used to. As a young man I'd dreamt of making a living from writing – nothing high-brow or important, just the kind of swashbuckling boys adventure stories I had adored as a child. Then I met my wife. Mesmerised by her angular Nordic beauty I had allowed her family to shepherd me into a more conventionally gainful existence. At work, therefore, I fought to sustain myself by focussing on the anomalous cases. I devoted myself to the files in which I thought I could sniff out a story, living vicariously through the evasions and petty risks taken by my clients, hoping that behind the irregularities lay an adventure story worthy of the Boy's Own Paper. The case of this offshore holdings company intrigued me from the start and when I found myself standing outside the Carter house my expectations somersaulted into a whole new realm.

How to describe a woman to whom I have never been anything more than a slave? How also to think myself back into the mind of a man in whose corpse I have been sailing this unforgiving continent for seven long years? How to see things again through his dead eyes? Impossible! I can only recall my thoughts as they developed during that first encounter and commit them to paper as they come.

Whenever I'd heard talk of that mysterious widow I had imagined a fragile creature, bird like, her delicate frame quivering beneath its sentimental burden. I have no

idea whether Mara was a widow, although I doubt it. There was nothing of death about her. She was short and heavily built. Her body, visible through her black silk dress as she approached the front door, was a congregation of ample cupolas and deeply arcing crescents. She wasn't one of Rubens' women. Her curves were too bestial and hard for any Baroque ogress. Her ropey muscles twitched and gnarled beneath the dress as she moved. Not that she was trained to lift weights or run laps – nothing so manufactured as that. She was built only, like a lioness, for the hunt.

With the door open I saw that her skin was nut brown and leatherish, and her limbs were covered in a thin layer of black down. Her hair, black too and long, was twisted into a crude plait which she wore over her shoulder and fondled like a snake handler. Errant tongues fell forward framing her heavy, porcine features within which two black, bead like eyes were deeply set. She was of no “people” I knew. Not Mediterranean, nor from any nomadic nation. She was, however, unmistakably Southern, from somewhere far nearer the spring of original life than any of my pallid fellows. She was at once deeply ugly and yet oddly, carnally enticing. I had never felt this about any woman I had met before and, I can now assuredly say, would never feel so about any woman again.

She spoke only to tell me her name, pronounced with a thick rolling “r”, and to ask me to follow her down the long hallway into the dining room. The house was sparsely furnished for its size. Apart from the basic furniture the only adornments were five humanoid figurines on the mantelpiece, hewn with heavy chisel blows from ash-black wood. I thought they could have been African or Polynesian, but didn't know enough to be certain. With me seated Mara repaired to the kitchen.

The dining room overlooked the Carters' old garden. During her years in the house Mara had paid little attention to the extensive grounds. The grass had reached thigh height, the long coarsened blades bowing under their own weight. A climber had consumed the rusted frame of what was once a child's swing and ivy had prised apart fissures in the concrete garage, caving in the roof. The garden was bordered by giant conifer trees. Untended, some had grown as high as forty feet. Mara returned from the kitchen carrying a tray with a large teapot, two ornate glasses and an antique tobacco tin. Then, in a very matter of fact, almost curt, voice she suggested we get down to business.

When I left the house I tried, with all my strength, to laugh about what had happened. I understood, without exactly thinking thus, that I needed to ground the experience before it was able to spirit me away. Everything had gone to plan, professionally speaking. We had sat at the table and worked through her company's accounts. She had been polite and cooperative. We drank the tea, the perfume of which was bitter and unfamiliar to me. I briefed her on all the activity in her case, all the incomings that had been filed by her different agents stationed at various corners of the planet. She listened to me talk for an hour, a passive expression on her face, smoking thick cigarettes that she rolled herself with great lumps of rough tobacco pinched from the tin.

I finished what I had to say, closed the file and was about to make my excuses and leave. When I tried to stand, however, my body was dragged down with an intense lassitude and nausea and I dropped back the few inches I had prised myself from the chair. I couldn't understand what had possessed me and hoped that Mara hadn't noticed. Then, silently, she stubbed her cigarette

on the table top, lifted her eyes to mine and, fixing me, smiled.

If words exist to describe that smile, they do not exist for me. But I must try with those I have left. Immune to all scorn that may be heaped upon me, I say that with that smile, and that dark aqueous regard, Mara, that fiend, hailing from God-knows-where and made of God-knows-what clay, reached across the table, reached into the very core of my being, and sowed something hideous therein. Feeling drained back into my legs and without a word I made for the door.

Since my wedding almost two years earlier, it wasn't unusual for me to take long walks in the middle of the night. My wife was an early sleeper, and slept heavily through until woken by the alarm. I'd always had difficulty shutting down, and on that day knew it was futile even to try. Some men claim that walking aids their thinking. It wasn't so for me. Walking was my thinking. Unless I was walking my mind was treading water, merely keeping afloat on the choppy sea of brute quotidian existence. That evening I set out earlier than usual, barely waiting for my wife to fall asleep before leaving the house. My route was never planned, because my walks were geared to no particular end. My feet always led and I followed, until the first wink of dawn shook me from my reverie and set my course for home. It was only upon turning the final corner that night that I realised, with fast mounting horror, that my feet had led me straight back to the gates I had bolted through a few hours earlier. The house was in darkness. As I stood staring at the building, struggling to make sense of the forces that had drawn me back there against my will (or so I thought then) a light in one of the upstairs windows flickered on. It was only there

for a moment, and it was very faint, but etched on the burgundy curtains I recognised at once Mara's orbicular silhouette. The light disappeared and, shaken to my roots, I turned and rushed home to the cocoon of my martial bed.

Weeks later I had word that the proprietress of a certain offshore holdings company wished to see her accountant. Since that day I had tried, in vain, to take the edge off the experience by repeated denial of what I knew to have passed between us. On receiving her summons I told myself, though remaining unconvinced, that there was my opportunity to lay this nascent demon to rest.

She welcomed me with more warmth than on our first meeting, keeping hold of the hand I extended to her and leading me by it to the dining room. There was something more human about her then, although the goblinish air that before had so impressed me still simmered perceptibly just below the surface. She was wearing the same black silk dress as the last time. On any other woman such an ephemeral garment would have been an obvious stab at seduction. On her it felt like an extraneous frill, a paper dart on the nose of a charging hippopotamus. As I made to open her file she checked me with a wave and crossing over to the mantelpiece, lifted one of the figurines:

“I saw you admiring this last time,” she said, turning the chunky black figure about in her hands before setting it down on the table. “I'd like you to have it.” I couldn't recall having paid particular attention to any of the pieces, but seeing what she had chosen for me, I felt a sudden, jealous desire to possess it. I thanked her and bundled it into my bag. Then I tried again to open her file. Again she stopped me.

“A position has come up on one of my ships, sailing from Amsterdam in two weeks time. I thought you could be keen to fill it.” Her proposal startled me and for a moment I couldn't raise a response. I had to reassure myself that she knew nothing of my personal life, of my wife and my son, before mumbling something about my lack of sea legs.

“That's a shame,” she said sounding suddenly disinterested in the whole affair. “I think the life would suit you.” I restated my reasons, adding something about family ties, regretting it at once. At this she smiled again. It was a normal smile and had little in common with the one that had affected me so profoundly several weeks earlier. For me, however, it stood as simple confirmation that the damage wrought on me was irreversible. The seed she had planted had taken root inside me, I could feel it now, a pendulous presence, somewhere between my heart and my gut. All she was doing now was watering it.

I had forgotten my second wedding anniversary the previous day and, as compensation, had booked a table at the town's most expensive restaurant that evening. Despite my nervous condition the meal went well. My wife had sensed something was wrong and her attitude was sympathetic, considering the hurt I had caused her. We had left our son with her parents for the night so that after the restaurant we could return to an empty house.

Our love making had always been sporadic. My wife, a stickler for hygiene, had difficulty accepting that sex was not the sterile affair Hollywood had prepared her for as an adolescent. She hated the primal, mossy scent, and the dampness, and didn't disguise the fact that she saw it as a service performed by her as a sacrifice to me. That evening, however, she had readied herself for this

sacrifice, and when we arrived home she stripped in front of me and climbed onto the bed like a virgin mounting an altar. Cast in the moonlight that crept beneath the curtain she looked divine, like a statue carved from a flawless block of white marble. When I had undressed she held out her hand and pulled me slowly on top of her.

At what moment during the event the metamorphosis occurred I cannot say, but as I drove my hips against hers, charging her with my member, I knew that it was no longer my wife convulsing beneath me, but Mara. My wife's long agile limbs had contracted, filled out with dense muscular tissue and her soft skin had coarsened, sprouting a coat of fine fur. The passive recipient I knew had also vanished, ceding her place to an aggressive, brawling creature, whose violence, dolled out with strong limbs and claw-like nails, I returned in ravenous kind. We fought each other beneath the sheets, biting and kicking, tearing at skin in the most sensitive regions. She howled and I howled. She hit me and I hit back, wanting to hit her harder, all the time jabbing at her with my pelvis, sinking myself into her up to the hilt. And then, with a guttural roar, I discharged into her, the jism dragged out of me, surging up my urethra like a string of heavy pearls.

When I came to, Mara was nowhere. There was only my wife. Huddled in the corner of the room, wrapped in the bloodstained sheet she had pulled from the bed. She was weeping. Without even looking at me she asked me, softly, to leave.

A taxi was to take me to Harwich, from where, the following morning, I was to board a ferry for the Hook of Holland. A new courage, born from the ashes of absolute defeat, compelled me to ask a question of Mara. For the

only time in our three meetings a look of vulnerability filled her face and she laid her hand on my shoulder before answering.

“It's not what you think. Money, sex or power. None of those trifles interest me.” She paused and for an instant seemed transported by her thoughts. Then she sighed and said: “Doesn't everything in this world seem just so incredibly tedious?”

The taxi pulled up, and without a word Mara closed the door. As a final act of defiance on the way to the harbour I wound the window down and hurled through it a small black statuette.

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My first six months on the Nüwa, I tried to make the best of my fate. I mixed with the crew, participated in their drinking bouts and, when we put into port, joined them on their expeditions to the brothels of Southern Asia. The result was always the same. What had happened that final night with my wife happened again with the girls I paid for hoping to forget Mara in their arms. I broke the wrist of one girl in Singapore and the crew decided that from then on I wasn't to make any visits with them.

Confined to the ship I took to spending my days in the library. For a while I was able to lose myself in the books but not for long. Increasingly every book I opened spoke of Mara. Long before I knew her she was for the Buddhists, I read, the demon of temptation. To the Hindus she was the goddess of death. The sons of David knew her first as Naomi, who took the name Mara, meaning “bitterness”, after Yahweh robbed her of her husband. In Latvia she was worshipped as the goddess of feminine virtue and in Scandinavia dreaded as a cruel

wraith who induced nightmares in sleeping victims. Her accursed name was everywhere. In every epoch of almost every culture. What could I do with all this knowledge except destroy it, before it destroyed me? One by one I consigned the books to the depths.

Sometimes I found solace in the belief that I was not alone. What could those twenty seven names on her folder mean except twenty seven men who had suffered the same fate as I? How were those legal exemptions arranged without her exerting influence in the higher reaches of government? How was she able to inherit the house of dependable Mr. Carter except by using her witching to orchestrate his demise? How is the Nüwa able to cut endlessly across these seas, ferrying suspect cargo and paying only the most token bribes? How, unless the influence of this bored, malign woman, stretches even as far as here?

It was after this realisation that I took to sitting on deck, gazing at the void, the small black statuette perched in my lap. What else was to be done? Sit still long enough and eventually, like sediment in a glass of water, all thoughts settle to the lower reaches of the mind. I suffer no regrets. Not for my wife. Not for my son. I wasn't suited to that life any more than to this one.

When I first took to spending my days on deck the crew told me that my predecessor had done likewise, until he was washed into the sea by a freak typhoon. They thought it was suicide, but I know it wasn't. Men like us don't have the courage for that. Like molluscs we float, unwittingly, waiting to be scooped up by a gull, stripped clean and have our shells discarded in distant waters. There we bob about in the currents until nature sees fit to smash us into sand against the rocks. If the last fellow was washed from the deck by a typhoon it was luck, nothing more.

The one happy thought I'll take with me when it's my time is this: One day Mara too will die. Then perhaps her web will disintegrate, and the captives who outlast her might once again be able to build, for their final days, the semblance of a human life.

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