

gills

He had hoped the holiday would be a getaway. But after four days the air still felt tight and, well, airless. The sand seemed airless too, not the texture of real sand. He still had a headache and still felt short of sleep and always always he was both desperate for a coffee and reeling from the last one. The beer tasted warm even with ice, the blue sky looked like a poorly painted ceiling. She was as annoyingly intelligent and as annoyingly obtuse as ever, and none of their problems felt any less awkward. This place was a waste of time and money. The photos online had showed a sweet little village with a covered market and a picturesque old church, but the market was full of traders just as foreign as they were, selling junk from all around the world, and the tower of the church had fallen in an earthquake, leaving rubble across the road into the sea, where the roof of the tower with its bell had lain for several years, since no one had bothered to recover it or dispose of the wreckage.

Sleeping late, strong coffee, walk on the beach, getting hot so into the water. Too many damn people and particularly too many damn children, so he swum out for a way, a solid breast-stroke into the waves rather than the elegant crawl he had imagined for the holiday, and then on impulse he turned left, south, past the little sandy spit and into the cove on the other side. There were fish here, not bothered by crowds of beach people, swimming with slow comfortable swishes of their tails showing their gills open as they turned. It was deeper than the bay he had swum from, and did not slope to a sandy beach but ended with a stone wall which rose to the surface near a road. On the bottom of the bay there were boulders from the church tower, covered in long strands of seaweed that twisted and swayed in the regular slight swell and its reflection from the wall. The swell and its echoes from the wall and the swaying seaweed made a pulse in the underwater light, slow, regular, and turning gently from lighter to darker at its extremes. He brought his head out for a deep breath of the tight

unsatisfying air and dived down towards the boulders.

Seen from underwater they looked enormous, like whole buildings arranged randomly in a tree-lined hillside town. The boulder buildings themselves seemed to be humming and booming, as if there was a crowd behind them slowly chanting some ritual slogan. As he kicked towards the boulders there was another sound, a resonant underwater ringing with a sort of a whoosh at the beginning of each peal. He turned around, underwater, to link hearing and sight, searching for the source. To the right, near the wall, was the top of the tower, right way up. Just above and beside it, with the waves reflecting of the wall swirling around it, was something large and dark. He surfaced and swam over to the swirl of water, took a deep breath, and dived again.

It was the bell. It was as large as a man, submerged except for the very top, which protruded a foot or so onto the air. As he swam down beside it he could feel the deep ringing as a wave of pressure surrounding his body, delayed by several seconds from each wave reaching the wall. Alarmed by his own courage he swam under the lip of the bell and up again inside it. The pressure waves were gentler inside, though more abrupt, and were accompanied by bubbles of air. There were more bubbles as he rose within the bell, becoming frothy at the top.

Panic seized him; he was horrified at what he had done: he had swum to the end of his air into a closed trap from which he would have to work downwards to escape. He gasped, releasing bubbles of stale breath and then stopped himself. He must not let water in. But he had inhaled through his nose, desperate for air, and it was not filling his lungs with water but refreshing him. The top of the bell was an opening to the sky and waves were alternately tumbling water into the opening and uncovering it, so that alternate pulses of air and water surged down the bell, merging with one another until they made the resonant pressure he had felt. Cautiously, he

parted his lips and breathed. Air, very wet air. After a few breaths he felt calm again and could plan his descent.

A few feet further down it was all bubbles. Bubbles of air in water, of water in air, foam. Cautiously he opened his mouth and sucked in foam. He found he could breathe it, breathe from it. He swam downwards through the dark. It seemed a long way down, much further than it had been upwards. He found the lip and emerged into the clear water outside.

He swam for a few feet along the sandy bottom. A fish swam lazily in front of him, a large flat fish flapping its whole wide body wing. It seemed to him that he could remain down there, breathing like the fish. Like jellyfish he had seen in an aquarium, sinking and rising in a vertical tank as their slowly and steadily pulsing mantles grasped and held even quantities of water. His body forced him to the surface. His mouth opened wide as if to gasp for air but he needed only a breath. He swam back around the point and to the beach. He walked out of the water.

He walked across the sand and along the tree-lined avenue towards the hotel, among throngs of jubilant children and beside stalls on trestle tables selling dangerous food and appalling gifts. He breathed in, he breathed out. His breath came as if from his neck or some bell rising and falling above his head. His breath was not within him but all around him. The sky was blue, and calm. The air smelt like water as he moved through it. He didn't look back.