

La Manche

I see him through my binoculars.

I like first every morning to look out at the sea. This morning the sea she is calm, like taking a breath. Last night she was angry, but this happens much now; she is angry for what we have done. Today there is pale light coming through high clouds, and the wind blows sand up from the dunes. I smell the seaweed and the salt. They say the dunes will last maybe fifty years, and then the sea comes to take my house. But by then I will be gone a long time.

When the tide is low, beyond the dunes there is a lagoon that is made by the old harbour wall. This the sea has not yet devoured, although seaweed and barnacles cover it. And there, on the old wall, is a black shape. At first I think it is cloth, or perhaps a large bag. I turn my binoculars to the gulls, wheeling white against the grey. But when I see him again the thing moves, and I see it is a man. He tries to stand but falls down.

I think. The clock says me that there is time. Low tide is not yet. So I hurry down to my boat. This I keep safe – towards the land there is an inlet made by the sea, now she has come up the river. I can push the boat into the water and row around the old harbour walls. I have time.

It takes many minutes to reach him. La Manche she is still heavy, but I am strong and I know her ways. I bring the boat near the man, and call to him. ‘Hey!’ I shout. ‘You cannot stay in this place. The tide, she comes back and takes you.’

He has been lying on his face. He pushes himself up, and I see he trembles. His skin is swarthy but is washed pale by the sea. His dark eyes are on me.

‘I help you,’ I say. ‘But you must come to the boat.’

Now he speaks, and his voice is raw. ‘French?’ he says.

‘Please,’ I say. ‘You must come, or the sea takes you.’

He struggles to his hands and knees then crawls to the edge. I have to give him my hand and my boat cracks into the wall. He drags himself in and I pull at his belt until he is mostly in the boat, and then I push off and turn to go back. Waves come into the boat.

‘No-one else?’ he says, pulling at me.

I shrug him off. ‘I have seen no-one.’ I row hard until we pass the headland and into the estuary. Now it is easier. ‘You were with others?’ I say to him.

‘Yes,’ he says. ‘My son, my daughter. My wife. Please,’ he goes on, ‘please – we are in France?’

‘But of course,’ I say.

He covers his face with his hands and weeps much.

He has much grief. When I beach the boat and drag it to the dunes, the man sits on the sand and weeps. I work hard to coax him up the hill to my house. I have no men’s clothes but I have big size sweater and towels. I give him hot drink and make fire. I do not let him talk until he is warm and dry. Then I go on the terrace and watch again with my binoculars. The tide she comes in and the harbour wall only can be seen with breakers. There are no more people.

He comes to stand by me. I give him the binoculars, and he looks, and he looks, but there is nothing. He weeps again.

Later I bring coffee and bread rolls. I also need to eat. We sit on the terrace so that he can keep picking up the binoculars to watch. I look at him: he has maybe forty years, his stubble

is deep black but he has grey in his hair. He stops to wipe his eyes and I must remind him to eat and to drink. He is thin. At last he puts the binoculars down and swallows coffee.

‘I am still in France,’ he says.

The wind is blowing my hair. I tie it back. ‘Yes,’ I say.

He shakes his head and is quiet.

‘You were trying for England?’ I ask. But I know the answer. It is the same story.

Always.

He nods. ‘We take boat. Is much money. Adali, my wife –’ He stops and wipes his eyes. ‘Oh, my children!’ he says.

I wait until he is able to listen again. ‘I am so sorry,’ I say. ‘You went from Calais?’

He shakes his head. ‘Many people at Calais. We go from Boulogne. A man, he lets us buy boat. Is, how you say, fishing boat. Also he can sell us fuel.’

‘He charged you much money?’

He looks in his coffee cup and drains the last of it. ‘Yes. Many euro. But we travel together. Families, friends. All from my village. We can afford. All the way we have come,’ he says. ‘From Algérie.’ He shakes his head. ‘There we have no food, because no rain. Then there is war, and soldiers come and burn villages. We leave. We come to France, but there are fires, and no rain, and people are scared. We keep moving. We go further, people do not like us, we are beaten. Then we hear is better in England.’

‘This boat,’ I say. ‘Many people have to go on it, I think?’

‘Was forty-three of us,’ he says. ‘Boat is small, but the man say the engine is good.’

I nod. ‘But he did not tell you of La Manche, I think?’

He looks at me.

‘Many years since,’ I tell him, ‘La Manche was – ah, she was sometimes beautiful and sometimes ugly. I had a little sailing boat and on good days, I could go far out on the sea and hear the birds and feel the sun on my back. My partner, she was here then. On bad days, the winds blew and the waves came, and only big ships can go on the water. Please, look now, see the wall where I fetch you from?’

He picks up the binoculars.

‘The harbour, it is gone under the waves. In that time there was a wide sandy beach also. But now, the harbour is gone, half of the town is in the sea and my little hill will soon be an island. This is all the work of La Manche. She is never quiet. Always the waves are big, so big. Many times bigger than this house. When storms come, even big ships must hide.’

He says nothing.

‘And England,’ I say. ‘It is no better there. The sea has taken much from them, and the crops they are thin. There is war. Yes, even in a small island. We hear this when sometimes big ships come.’

Still he says nothing.

‘The man who sell you the boat,’ I say. ‘He has killed you all. What happened?’

‘It is as you say,’ he replies. ‘The waves, they are too big. It is dark. The man who steers, he tries so hard, but then boat goes over. I am thrown out. I look for my children, they have life vests.’ His voice is shaking much. ‘I see them, I try to swim. But something hits me, I black out. When I wake I am holding to a piece of wood. Is many hours, morning comes . . .’ He weeps again.

He does not know what to do, so I make him sleep. I tell him use my bed, is daytime now.

He wakes when the afternoon is half gone. The winds are back and the waves sound on the shore like shots of guns. One or two gulls battle the air but the rest hide among the dunes and the hissing sands. Rain pocks the sand. In my house the boards creak and the shutters rattle.

He walks into the living-room and drops himself onto the sofa. He puts his head in his hands again. 'I have lost all,' he says.

I offer him calvados but he asks for coffee instead.

'What will you do?' I say. 'You can stay here, but I have little money so it will be hard.'

'No,' he says firmly. 'You have helped. I thank you, very much. But I will go, now.'

'Where? Where will you go?'

'I go back to Boulogne. I kill the man who sell us the boat. I owe this to my family. I kill him, then after this, Allah take me.'

I do not know what to say. I know I cannot stop him. But maybe if I give him time, he will think.

'It is too far. In two hours it is dark, and the roads they are not lit any more. You must wait until morning.'

He is quiet for a long time. Then he says, 'I sleep here, on this couch?'

I nod. 'You have not told me your name,' I say.

'I am Joza,' he says, and holds out a hand.

'Eloise,' I say, shaking it.

I pour more coffee, then put on my coat. 'I will stand outside and feel the wind,' I say. 'This I like to do.' In truth, I want to clear my head. I hold the door tightly as the wind tries to take it from my hands, then shut it hard. I take the binoculars. Beyond the dunes, La Manche is a swelling, bursting grey, and white waves fling their spray many metres in the air, and the clouds almost stoop to meet them. There is much roaring, and the gulls cry. I stop to clean the binoculars. Then, down the dunes I see a patch of bright red. It is the colour of a life vest.

I bang on the door. 'Joza!' I call.