

The End's Beginning

by Vonda N. McIntyre

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Through long captivity, I learned to mimic the humans' speech, but not to understand the thoughts behind it. How could anyone learn to understand the ways of those who spend their lives seeking such desperate independence? Though they have forced me to be like them, still I cannot understand. I would have to be mad to desire such solitude, and I am not yet mad.

They have made me mute and almost blind. They left me my eyes, but eyes are less than useless in this cold dark heavy sea. I still can taste and smell. Many different particles drift among the gentle salt flavors that encircle evolution: sharp diatoms, bright edible crustacean sparks (so welcome after many seasons obscured by battered chunks of fish-flesh sharp with ice), the bitter taint of the water that seeps from the humans' land (in the sea the great ones sing fading songs that tell of unfouled oceans, but the great ones are dying, murdered; their songs will die with them and no one will remember the taste of clean sea), and the gritty sediment washed toward me from a wide rain-swollen river. The sediment is what blinds my sight. The men have muted my voice so I cannot call for help, and thus they have almost blinded my ears.

No longer can I sing against the tides. The men attached a machine to me that emits an ugly squeak. Though the metallic sound mixes and melds erratically with the din that fills the ocean, it is sufficient for navigation (they tested this quite carefully). But the beauty is gone from my home. Even the stones are opaque.

I break the surface to breathe. It is dark, and the water sparkles in the moonlight. I slow to look around, for it has been a long time since I have seen the ocean or the sky. I rest with my back and eyes above the warm caressing water. But soon the men realize I have stopped, and they send a signal that forces me onward. I cannot resist it. I do not even have the satisfaction of trying, failing, to overcome pain. There is no pain, only compulsion as inescapable as the glass and concrete walls that held me prisoner.

While I was going nearly mad from solitude, I dreamed of being freed and swimming out into the wide sweet ocean. My mate would come with our people, and we would sing and leap and copulate and rejoice in my freedom. But I cannot call, I cannot sing. There is no freedom or rejoicing.

And my mate will never find me, but will wait and search in vain near the human-built where they imprisoned me. No one could know that the men put wet smelly things all around me (I thought they were trying to cover my skin as they cover their own) and put me in a box and put the box in one of their metal creatures. (The humans have a terrible need to put things inside things, to overcome the inevitable randomness of life. People know better.) The metal creature rose up in the air and took me from the Middle Ocean to the Wide Ocean, and that is where I am now, swimming along the sun's track to reach the Sunset Land. When I reach it, I will die.

My body has stopped aching from the way the men cut it. I am healed, but I still can feel the scar. The heavy weight of metal inside me disturbs my balance. They do not understand how much it hurts that I can no longer play. I cannot sing, I cannot leap. The men must have no art at all.

I hear the faint pulses of a whale's song, nearly obliterated by the harsh scream and chatter of the men's water machines. This song is fading and distorted; it has carried perhaps halfway across the Wide Ocean. It is useless for information, but it is an illusion of companionship. For the next few hours,

whenever the cacophony becomes too painful or the single sound of my navigation devices bores me to distraction, I will be able to seek and find the low long tones of the great one's singing. In other days it could have told its stories from halfway around the world.

Now when the great ones are not singing about the taste of the sea they sing of its sounds. A hundred years ago a song sung at midnight would reach a place in full daylight, though by the time the song traveled that far the destination would be in darkness and the source in day. The natural sounds of the sea were no impediment to the songs, which slipped through choruses of grunts and bubbles, splashes and cries, even the chatter of smaller people, my own kind. The whales were never parted from each other, no matter how far they separated. Now they are solitary, lonely creatures who cannot learn fear.

I swim, I swim. The men's signal will not let me rest. There is a schedule. Schedules are for men and machines, not for people. But now I am a machine, or little better. What else is a machine but a creature with no will?

The machine inside me is cold.

If I could find my people I could tell them-- even mute, I could tell them by sight and motion-- to stop me. Perhaps if they held me back long enough the humans would abandon me.

I might still have to die... but the men will kill me with the machine when I reach the end of my journey. Nothing would keep them from destroying me if I could not finish the mission. Destroying me would be safer for the men, who would think I had been captured by their enemies. If my kind stopped me and the machine exploded, I would not be the only one to die. So I must cease hoping to find anyone to help me.

I hear the low grumble of a killer whale, a sound that is almost the only thing we ever feared. But it is not searching, simply lounging in the midnight sea. It must know I am here, but it is not hungry now. The men call it killer whale but that species has no taste for human flesh, only for small people.

I do not wish to do the men's will. If the loss were only my life I could accept it, I think, if there were any reason I could understand. But my life's end will be a signal for the men to begin killing each other. They no longer kill each other only. This time when they begin the killing they will kill the world as well.

They have been practicing destruction on small southern islands. When they stop practicing they will send their machines to explode on the earth like storms, and the dust from them will spread over land and sea alike, poisoning everything. We who die quickly will be the fortunate ones.

If I could sing, I would taunt the killer whale and it would kill me. But I cannot attract its attention and the men will not let me deviate far enough from my path to tease it, nip its flanks, provoke it to fury.

The men's command urges me on. I will tire sooner than I would have before I was imprisoned, but I have not yet reached my limits. The moon disappears behind a cloud and the sea turns black and bright in patches. The moon's light overpowered the glow of luminescent plankton, but in the darkness they stream in glimmering streaks against the water. I pass beneath them, swim up and leap through them. I fling drops of glowing spray in all directions. I come down flat, clumsily. I have forgotten my balance again.

I wonder if there are others like me, swimming toward the men's human enemies, trying to imagine the wish to kill a member of one's own species. Or am I the only one directed across the sunless sea? Have I the lonely duty of beginning the destruction?

If there are others, we all have similar fears. I wonder if any of us will be clever or lucky enough to discover a way to stop.

The clouds that covered the moon are thick and ominous. I can see the scatter of rain across the ocean's smooth swells. Now the rain is upon me, and I slow as much as I dare. I love to float just beneath the surface and feel the raindrops on my back.

Fresh and salt water mix in a delicious pattern of textures on my skin. But the effect only occurs when I stand still. The signal forces me to continue; the patterns disappear. I can feel only the seawater stroking my sides and back as I swim on.

A dull throb grows louder. It is the sound of a ship's engines, almost in my path. At first I cannot see it, but finally its lights appear on the horizon as I propel myself toward it. Could this be my destination? I thought I was being sent to a harbor, so I had hoped for a few more hours of life.

Now I can see the ship clearly. It is a fishing boat.

Perhaps it will stop me. The humans' way to hunt fishes is to find a place where people are feeding and herd us into their nets. The fish flee before us. We are a convenient marker, very useful to the humans, but when the nets close in there is no way for us to escape. We are captured and we drown. Many of us have been murdered this way; the men kill our youngest, those whose inexperience leaves them vulnerable to panic. The nets give a cruel death.

I swim straight at the trawler, staying near the surface. If the nets are out they are invisible at this distance; the men's sound-maker will not form a sensitive enough picture to show them to me.

How strange to think that men will prevent me from carrying out the task given me by other men...

I can smell and taste the cold metal hull and the hot-metal hot-oil of the propellers and engines. And now I can even hear the murky curtain of fish-nets, spread like great wings, sweeping the sea as they approach. I have avoided them so many times before .

In a few moments my life will end. My people may be safe for a short time after I die-- yet I want to live. I must give up my life, but I will not do it happily, nor even bravely. The nets will close around me and panic with them, and I will thrash and struggle and silently cry out as the ropes and wires cut into me.

The nets are just before me. I touch them, and the hard mesh scrapes my skin.

Suddenly my body wrenches away, turning too swiftly, convulsed by the signal. Unwillingly I dive and turn, circle the ship and fishing nets, and flee.

How can the men know so much about what is going on this far out in the ocean? Can they know where every ship is, and where each creature swims?

I move onward with powerful involuntary strokes of my tail, frightened to realize how close a control the men have over me, yet relieved to have even a few more minutes.

But there is no joy left in me. The men have given me a terrible gift that will be paid for in the lives of people. Even if the men do not begin to kill each other and the world because of my actions, if I finish this task all the air-breathers in the sea will be under more suspicion. Already the undersea machines kill us if we come too close. We have learned to avoid them, but we cannot avoid every human machine. There are too many of them, and our foolish young ones court pleasure and death riding their bow-waves.

The taste of land grows stronger now, and the water is much shallower. The metal sounds that guide me echo loudly, quickly. The water is thick with the waste of humans and their creatures. People never visit this bay anymore.

Driven onward, my whole body quivers with weariness and fear. I am only a presence within it, able to guide myself around the worst islands of trash and poison, but little more. If I could shut off my hearing as I can close my eyes I would, and know nothing more until the end.

I am the only living creature in a desert world.

As I round a point of land the cry and groan of machinery washes over me, a wave of sound opposing the waves of the sea. I am swimming into a harbor full of ships and other things important to men. I surface, breathe the heavy air, listen to the air-borne sounds. The lights are bright before me.

I dive again. That is another compulsion the men have put into me, to stay beneath the surface as much as possible. They would have given me gills if they could.

This maze of shapes and echoes is not a place people would come of their own free will, though with my own voice I would not be so confused. Each note would tell me something new about my surroundings.

A shape is coming toward me.

These men have discovered me. They realize I am a creature of the other men, and they are sending a weapon to kill me. I surge forward, seeking to outrun it.

Of a sudden I cease fleeing. This is what I have sought: death by some other means than the plan of the men who captured me.

The shape comes closer and I swim as slowly as I am able. I do not want to die.

The shape does not move like a machine.

And now I can see it, through the darkness and the murk. This is no man-weapon.

If I were free I could never swim so calmly onward, waiting for the shark. Its ancestors slaughtered

mine when people decided to return to the sea. We in turn learned how to kill the only creatures we ever hated.

Better the killer whale, the nets, the weapons of men. I can smell the cold beast now. It will writhe in a frenzy at the first taste of my blood. It will kill me with whatever its tiny brain grasps as joy, for it knows my people are its only challenge in the sea. Except the men. And there is no defense for people or for sharks against the men.

The shark will stop me, but I cannot stop the men from killing themselves. When they have suicided, when their poisons have murdered all the people, the shark will remain, as it has remained for millions of years, as it will remain until the end of the world.

This is the end's beginning.

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