

SOUS LA MER
By Carrie Richerson

This time, Carrie explores a different kind of justice. “Sous la Mer” is a beautiful and poetic tale about a woman, two men, and the sea.

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THE LAST PLANGENT CHORD of “Adrift, “ the last whisper of Suzanne’s voice, died away. She held the pose in the hush, head bent low over her guitar, her long, white-blond hair concealing her face. With her diminutive size, her white dress, the snowy blanket over her lap, she looked like a statue of a child, hammered out of white gold, shining in the silvery pool of the single spotlight.

I peeked out from my vantage in the wing of the tiny stage and saw that a few of the audience were crying. Others looked stunned. Then first one, and another, began to clap, and soon the entire house was standing and applauding. It was only a small dinner-theater venue, several miles from Mobile’s fashionable harbor district, but it was packed that night. Suzanne’s reputation had preceded her.

She let it go on for a few minutes, pressing her hands together and bowing her thanks, rewarding her admirers with a shy smile. Then she spoke into the mike, “Thank you— thank you all so much for coming. Good night, and drive carefully.”

That was my cue. I stepped to her side, bowed my own acknowledgment to the audience, checked to make sure the blanket was tightly tucked around her stumps, and wheeled her offstage. Backstage, I held her guitar case while she put the instrument away, then navigated her wheelchair down the corridor and to the side door.

“I’ll bring the car around. Will you be okay here?” I asked, taking the guitar case from her arms.

She nodded without speaking and pressed my hand. She looked tired. Singing was one of the few things that brought her joy in life, but the performances exhausted her. I wrapped my jacket around her shoulders and went for the car.

When I returned a few minutes later, a young man was kneeling beside the wheelchair and talking earnestly to Suzanne. The tired lines had vanished from her face; she was smiling and her eyes sparkled as she introduced me.

“Allan, this is my brother Merlin. Merle, this is Allan Lee.” Allan stood and shook my hand with a grip as earnest as his manner. He looked to be about twenty years old; tall, muscled, tanned, with the smell of the sea about him. He dwarfed tiny Suzanne and towered over my own slight frame.

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. D’Azora. I just wanted to tell your sister here how very much I enjoyed her singing. Her songs about the sea...they’re just so full of beauty, of longing...” He laughed. “I can’t express it the way you do, Ms. D’Azora — I just know I’ve been privileged to hear you.”

There’s one in every. crowd. Someone to whom Suzanne’s songs speak heart-to-heart. Someone who is half in love with the sea already, before he hears her sing. Someone who hears “On the Shoals of My Heart,” “Stormsails,” “Round Cape Heartbreak,” or “Adrift,” songs of love and loss and the sea, always the sea — and whose life is never the same after the experience.

Allan Lee’s dedication radiated from puppy-dog eyes as he bent to take Suzanne’s hand. I spoke up: “My sister and I appreciate your kind remarks, Mr. Lee. Unfortunately, Suzanne is a little fatigued right now. I’d better take her home.”

He stood aside with clear reluctance as I lifted Suzanne into the car, rearranged her blanket, folded the wheelchair, and placed it in the back seat. I went around to the driver’s door; our eyes locked over the top of the car. My smile was stiff. “Good night, Mr. Lee.”

He was still standing there, looking bereft, as we pulled away. Suzanne waved farewell, then turned to me. “Merlin, you are such a spoilsport.” She mimed a pout, then giggled.

“Leave him alone, Suzanne.” I steered us home down the coast highway, directed by the cold, pointing stars.

Two weeks later Suzanne played at Boudreaux’s in Biloxi, late sets Friday and Saturday nights. Allan Lee sat in the back of the house both nights; after Saturday’s performance he came backstage to bring her a white rose.

She smiled and pressed his hand, then exclaimed over her clumsiness in scratching his wrist with a thorn. Allan protested that it was nothing. Without comment, I handed over my handkerchief for Suzanne to blot the tiny beads of blood. When Allan invited us both for drinks, I declined, pleading my driving responsibilities. After an awkward moment, Suzanne also made her apologies. Allan took note of my unspoken satisfaction, but I could tell by the set of his jaw that he was far from giving up.

A month later we were in Bay St. Louis, to provide afternoon entertainment during the annual Blessing of the Shrimp Fleet Festival. Allan took one of the seats in the first row of folding chairs and waved to Suzanne like an old friend as I wheeled her into place before the microphone.

After her set he insisted on giving us a guided tour of the piers. His father was a shrimper, he told us, and he delighted in pointing out and naming each freshly

painted, flower-festooned, and holy-water-sprinkled boat. Flags and gay plastic streamers of all colors snapped in the breeze, and above our heads gray and white gulls laughed and tumbled as they snatched from midair the popcorn Suzanne threw to them — popcorn Allan had purchased for her.

I might as well have been invisible. Allan told her of his job feeding and training the performing stock at the Marine Life Oceanarium in Gulfport. He was especially fond of the dolphins, praising their quick intelligence and constant good humor. Bored and irritated, I wandered on down the pier by myself, enjoying the warmth of the sun, the smells of salt and pitch and fish guts, the rhythmic slap of waves against pilings. If I closed my eyes I could pretend that I walked on the back of some great live thing sunning itself and bobbing gently in the embrace of mother ocean.

The sight at the end of one of the side piers burst my reverie. A deep-sea fishing charter had just returned to port, and the triumphant client was posing for pictures beside his catch, a blacktip shark fully as tall as he was. The dead thing hung suspended on a huge hook through the tail muscle; a black cloud of flies buzzed about its bloody maw where the teeth had been cut out for souvenirs. The fisherman swilled beer, loudly related his prey's fierce struggle, and showed off a vicious scratch on his arm received while landing the frenzied shark.

I felt sick, and turned away. By the time I made my way back to Suzanne and Allan I had regained my composure. I leaned against a rafting and watched the two of them. It was clear that Allan thought he had made a conquest. He squatted beside Suzanne's wheelchair and helped her throw tidbits to the acrobatic gulls.

"Some of my friends go to USM — up in Hattiesburg, you know? Anyway, I told them about you, how well you sing. They said the student entertainment committee is always looking for singers to perform on campus. Why don't you give them a call? My friends sure want to hear you."

Suzanne shook her head. Pointing to the gulls overhead, she said, "Hattiesburg is too far for my friends." She and I traded a private smile. From the corner of my eye I saw frustration flicker over Allan's face. My smile grew wider.

Allan tried to recover lost ground with an invitation to dinner. I willed Suzanne to decline, but she accepted with delight. They flirted like schoolchildren throughout the meal, laughing and touching hands, matching each other glass for glass as they worked their way through two bottles of wine. When I refused a refill after my first glass, Suzanne shot me an exasperated look, but I ignored it. My hard-drinking youth ended on a patch of moon-drenched highway, to the sound of Suzanne's screams. These days I practice restraint.

At the end of the evening Allan lifted Suzanne out of her wheelchair and placed her in the car himself. For a moment she nestled her head against his chest.

Hormones tingled in the air, and I wondered if they would drive off and leave me standing on the curb.

He didn't kiss her. Not yet. I beckoned him to join me at the rear bumper after Suzanne and he had said their farewells and he had shut the car door. He was flushed, prickly with the heat of his triumph, wary of my calm.

"Stay away from my sister, Allan." There was a harsh edge to my voice, but I didn't care what he thought.

My lack of subtlety surprised him. Then the testosterone kicked in, and he leaned over me. "You don't control her, man! I'll see Suzanne if she wants me to — and she does. You can't stop us!"

The young think all of life is a soap opera. I suppose if they live long enough they learn otherwise. I slammed the car door harder than was necessary, getting in. I love my sister dearly but sometimes I don't like her very much. Suzanne and I didn't speak all the way home.

I HAD PREPARED a simple meal of ceviche and salad, accompanied by an elegant chardonnay, for dinner; Suzanne and I ate on the terrace facing the sea as the sunset. The day had been clear and hot; as the light faded a breeze began to blow in off the water, dropping the temperature to something more tolerable. While we dined a full moon rose like a bloody tear over the water. Down on the shore the waves beat slowly, in time to my pulse.

We said little to each other over dinner. After so many years together our conversation had become largely non-verbal. An eyebrow lifted at the immensity of the rising moon, a silent nod at the silhouette of some late-soaring waterbird, a fond smile, spoke volumes. Suzanne seemed more relaxed than usual, thoughtful; several times I caught her staring blankly out over the sea, humming something under her breath. When I cleared the table after supper she asked me to leave her the bottle of wine and to bring her guitar and music notebook out to her.

She played a few chords of the new song she was working on for me; the title was "Sounding Sea." I tried to read for a while, but the moonlight and the distant mutter of the surf made me restless. I put down the book and watched Suzanne, pencil gripped between her teeth, as she picked out a line of melody, frowned over it, repeated it with a slight variation, then grabbed the pencil and recorded it. I didn't want my own restlessness to interfere with her concentration.

"I think I'll take a walk down the shore. Can I get you anything before I go?"

She shook her head absently. After a moment she noticed I was still there and laughed. "Go on, take your walk, dear. I'll be fine. I've got everything I need to keep me busy for hours."

I leaned over and kissed her hairline, right where the dark streak of her widow's peak begins. My own pale locks have acquired a similar sprinkling of dark hairs as I've grown older. Someday, when Suzanne and I are ancient, perhaps we will have raven tresses and be the envy of all our acquaintances.

Our little principedom by the sea. Suzanne and I had chosen this house precisely because, in defiance of tidal surge or hurricane, it sat so close to the water. And it was isolated; my sister and I are private people. Now I picked my way across a hundred yards of sand and shingle, and all the waters of the world rolled to a stop at my feet.

The tide was coming in, bringing with it brown mats of seaweed, and, tangled in the vegetation, thousands of the jellyfish known as Portuguese men-of-war. The floats bobbed in the low swells, and as the waves retreated, the jellyfish were stranded on the sands.

The bright moonlight showed me vivid, electric blue gasbags, topped with sails of delicate pink. They ranged in size from the length of my thumb to that of a football, and the beach ahead of me was littered with their membranous bodies for as far as I could see. Tomorrow's sun would heat the air trapped inside until the bags burst like balloons, leaving only a smear of bright blue on the sand.

I made my way south down the shore, avoiding the still-dangerous stinging tentacles of the jellyfish. Between waves I would step out onto the wet sand, looking for interesting shells or odd pieces of flotsam, but as each wave curled in, I danced backward to the dryline, careful not to get my shoes wet. Once I stepped on a jellyfish by mistake and the gasbag popped with a rush of sour, briny air. I fancied that I saw a movement in the tentacles then, but it must have been my imagination, or the wind. Jellyfish are incapable of feeling pain, or so scientists say.

I stopped on a sandy spit that curved out into the waters like the prow of a ship. The breeze had an iodiney nose that I have always found intoxicating and I quested it for news. Occasionally a sharper gust of wind peppered my cheeks and the backs of my hands with stinging grains of sand. The round moon hammered a molten path across the wavetops, inviting me, and the song of the surf pulled at me like an undertow. For a long time I stared out at the junction of sky and water. Not a single light— not a ship nor a navigation buoy nor a drilling platform —showed in the darkness. I knew that I could walk out into those waves, and keep walking — forever.

My love for Suzanne, and the loyalty and guilt that have kept me by her side ever since her accident, stopped me. I turned my steps back to the house. Back to Suzanne.

I heard them before I saw them: sighs that were not the wind, moans that were not waves upon the shore. I had been gone for several hours; plenty of time for one

to call the other, for an invitation to be issued and accepted, for passion to progress to foreplay, and beyond.

Allan had wheeled her chair down the ramp from the terrace into the sands, and spread her blanket next to it. I lingered in the shadows at the corner of the house and watched them. Suzanne was on top, her skin as white as wavefoam in the moonlight, her thighs gripping Allan's hips, the rounded stumps of her legs, amputated just above the knee, digging into the blanket for purchase.

My groin tightened as I watched Allan caress my sister's small, conical breasts, with their tiny aureoles and bullet-shaped, pink nipples; the pale hollows inside her hipbones; the froth of white hair between her legs; the delicate, pink membranes beneath.

He whispered words to her that the wind tore away, but she was too far gone to hear him anyway. Her nails left strange script on his chest, and when she came, she arched her back and screamed like one of her beloved gulls.

Without pulling out of her, he turned her beneath him and began to move. Her hands closed on his buttocks and pulled him hard against her; she came again just before he emptied himself into her. For a few moments she stroked him as he lay heavily atop her. When she reached into the pouch hanging from her wheelchair, I turned away.

Allan's muffled scream brought me back. The handle of the knife stood out from his back like some strange coral encrustation. He writhed and tried to call out again, but Suzanne is ruthless and accurate; the knife had punctured his lung and his cries were little more than squeaks and bloody gurgles.

Suzanne squirmed out from under him and leaned back against the wheel of her chair to watch his throes. The look on her face, even as often as I have seen it, chilled me. Reluctantly I left my vantage point and moved to stand beside her. She glared up at me. "You took your sweet time coming back, Merlin!"

I hooked a hand under the unfortunate Allan's shoulder and flipped him over. The impact drove the knife deeper into his back. He arched and tried to scream again; a shiny red bubble, as large as an apple, burst over his lips. One hand scrabbled for purchase in the sand, the other plucked at the torturing splinter in his back. I felt sorry for him, but I have never been able to deny Suzanne anything.

I left him writhing there, with Suzanne to keep him company, while I went after the tools I needed in the house. He was still alive—and conscious—when I took his legs. Alive, because the muscle and bone must be well-nourished and fresh; conscious, because Suzanne likes it that way. My scalpels sheared effortlessly through skin and muscle just above the knees; the battery-driven bone saw made quick work of the femurs. He fainted at one point, but I brought him around to

watch as I pressed each bloody appendage home on Suzanne's stumps. The grafts took with wet sucking sounds.

I helped Suzanne to her new feet. Allan's sturdy, hairy legs looked absurd attached to her slim thighs, but they worked. Suzanne laughed at the horror and anguish on his face and skipped merrily away down the beach. For one night, until the borrowed legs withered and fell off at dawn, she was free.

I bent over Allan. "I told you to stay away from my sister. It was good advice. You should have taken it." I kissed him gently on the forehead, and broke his neck. Then I undressed, heaved his body onto my back, and started for the shore. Time enough tomorrow to clean up the evidence of his visit and make his car disappear.

On nights of the full moon a mer may take on human form and walk two-legged on the land. And on nights of the full moon a former mer, trapped in human flesh and exiled from the depths of home by staying human too long, may return to the sea. But if by misadventure a mer in human guise should lose her legs. . . Well, how then to grow a tail?

Suzanne and I had been young and curious, fearless and thrill-seeking. We had visited the land many times before the night of the accident, had grown careless in our love for drinking, dancing and gambling. The treasures of the deep seas can buy quite a lot of drink, dancing and gambling no questions asked.

Perhaps if I had not drunk so much that night, if my reactions had been faster to push her from the path of the speeding car as we staggered singing down the middle of the midnight highway. . . . I could not leave her as she lay bleeding and screaming under the car's wheels; or later, at the hospital, when they told me they would have to amputate her mangled legs — even though I felt moonset's imminence in my marrow.

Suzanne woke from the surgery screaming, and screamed until she was sedated again. When she woke a second time she made no sound at all, not even to speak, for weeks. But when the therapists tried to fit her healed stumps with artificial limbs, she began to scream again, as though the touch of those plastic and steel obscenities scalded her flesh. After a time I persuaded them to stop trying.

And I stayed with her, all these years. Mother Ocean, I stayed. Suzanne was already frolicking in the waves when I strode up with the body. She had woven herself a girdle of men-of-war jellyfish; the bright blue floats adorned her hips and a forest of tentacles twisted and waved at her crotch. I could hear the tiny snick, tic of stingers firing ineffectually against her silver scales. "Suzanne, dearest" I said fondly, "you are a monster."

"Come on, you slowpoke!" She laughed, and splashed me with her flukes.

The longed-for, electric tingle swept over my skin as legs became tail, skin became scales and fins, gill-slits flared open. I dragged Allan's body under with one webbed hand, kicked once, and felt the water cleave before me. Humans call it a dolphin kick. Bah! I despise those goody-goody porpoises. Give me the noble fierceness of the sharks our brothers, who would take care of Allan's body for us. Allan Lee, like others before him who had loved the treacherous sea too well, would disappear without a trace.

The water tasted of all the news of home, and we had hours yet before moonset. But I have learned, in my human years, to feel guilt . . . and fear. What will happen on that night when Suzanne can no longer lure a human to her sacrifice? My sister and I love with a love that is more than sibling affection. I have lain where Allan Lee lay, and taken my pleasure there . . . and felt my shoulder blades itch, even in the moment of my ecstasy, awaiting the stroke of my destiny.

But for now, tonight, I was going home.

—With apologies to Mr. E. A. Poe.

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Carrie Richerson's first appearance in F&SF (Oct/Nov, 1992) earned her a nomination for the 1993 John W. Campbell award for best new writer. She made a second appearance a year later with her popular and controversial story. "The Light at the End of the Day." Both stories were set in an America where the murdered dead have returned for justice.