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"Like Smoke" from Burning Green Sun

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FOUR DAYS BEFORE THE FESTIVAL OF RIVER DOLPHINS, as dawn was drawing darkness from the sky, Casey Torrance sat in a motorized sampan watching the edge of town disappear into melaleuca forest. Fiddling with the camera strap around his neck, he glanced at Cerise and noticed her eyes were puffy and red. Her constant yawning made him yawn, too, and feel sleepier than he actually was.

She turned and caught him gazing at her.

“I’ve never seen anyone sweat like you so early in the morning,” she said. On her breath, a scent of rotting flowers recalled the sodden seduction of last night.

“My pores are rebelling,” he said. “They don’t have to work this hard normally.”

“Sweating’s good for you,” Totter broke in from the stern. “But yes, the Delta heat’s relentless.” The sampan was his: long and narrow, fitted with an outboard motor, two oars on the floor, a sealed jar of gasoline, a bucket, and an unlabeled bottle of black alcohol. The craft moved jarringly through the river, its nose purling the surface and splashing warm water over the prow. He nodded at Cerise. “I bet you’ll sweat, too, once the sun gets higher.”

Ahead of them the bend opened onto greenness. Along the irregular shoreline and in the flat rice fields behind it, water buffalo rested like boulders in the mud and canals shot straight toward the horizon. It was quieter here than in Co Tan, though there was still a lot of noise: their motor sputtered and coughed; chatter drifted off the vessels they overtook; water hissed in both its natural running course and in the wake of the churning motor. Casey heard none of these things, such was the clamor in his head as he relived the night before.

He watched Cerise, who now shielded her eyes and looked skyward. The climbing sun had not yet reached the clouds, nor had it attained an intensity that would force her to turn away. Squinting, she kept her attention fixed on the dull white ball slowly rising.

“Did you forget you’re wearing sunglasses?” he said.
“What?”
“On your head. You should push them down instead of shielding your eyes like that.”

She turned away, ignoring his advice.

“You both look like hell,” Totter said. “Like you got in some kind of fight.”

“Last night’s kind of a blur,” Cerise admitted, “but I don’t recall any fights.”

Totter steered around a boat in the middle of the water. Longer and wider than his sampan, the boat had two eyes painted on it. Several children stood beneath a tarpaulin roof while a man and woman pulled bow-shaped traps from the river. When Casey waved at the children they shrieked with laughter and ran naked to the side of the boat. He turned to find Cerise staring at a black-green confusion of trees along the shore. He was thinking how beautiful she was with the morning sun on her face, how in the part of her hair it made the coppery red turn gold. He leaned toward her.

“What’s the matter?”

“It’s this damn throbbing behind my eyes. I never get hangovers this bad.” Stretching, groaning, making shaky fists above her head, she twisted her torso so that the joints in her back cracked.

The aim of his eyes drifted to the contour of her breasts against her shirt; her slim arms almost hairless; her collarbone dipping in the center, v-shaped, like a bird gliding beneath her flesh.

She sighed and reached to muss up his hair. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?” he laughed, surprised that he looked like anything at this hour, and again because she was finally paying him attention. It was the first time since last night that she’d touched him.

“Like my husband looks at me,” she stammered, turning to the river. She finally lowered her sunglasses. “With a kind of... disgust in your eyes.”

“Why would I be disgusted?” Even though her husband was in Cambodia, it felt awkward hearing her mention him. He didn’t like being reminded that she was married.

As she slowly faced him he could see his reflection, in startling miniature, in each of her dark round lenses. Behind her glasses she blinked, and her eyelids closed mouth-like over his twin images. He grew smaller as she leaned backward against the side of the sampan, both arms laid out like wings and her feet stretched across the floorboards and pushing into his thigh.

“It doesn’t matter. It’s there — how you look at me — even if you
think it’s not. It’s been there since last night.”

“You were drunk last night. Besides, how could last night have happened if I’d been disgusted?”

Totter broke into short laughter. “Sorry,” he said when they turned to him. “Don’t mind me.” He pulled his conical hat beneath the line of his eyes so that the most visible feature was his teeth, perfectly white behind thin sunburned lips. His laughter was enough to end their conversation. “I need to stop at a market on the river and drop this off” — he raised the black bottle and tilted it in the still-dim light — “then haggle a friend for some fish.”

“Can I see that?” Cerise said.

Casey, nearer, reached for the bottle and passed it to her. When she had it, he moved to her side and hesitantly rested his forearm on her shoulder. Dozens of stiff beetles wheeled through the murky alcohol, knocking into each other and bumping into the glass like pebbles. Tiny bubbles clung to their jagged legs and shells as they settled, finally, in a packed mound of black and blue bodies.

Cerise wrestled the cork from its throat and waved it under her nose. “God,” she gasped, sliding out from beneath Casey’s arm. “It’s not the hair of the dog that bit me, but I’ll bet it’s the same breed. Here’s to regret,” she said, turning to Casey. He smiled at her uncertainly. She hoisted the bottle to her lips. Her cheeks filled quickly, and the quickness seemed to surprise her. Her face twisted as though something sour had spouted in her mouth. She cried out.

Totter swiped the bottle from her and recorked it. “It’s medicinal wine. I thought you knew better.”

Cerise leaned over the side of the sampan, vomiting into the river. Casey sat rigidly and kept this posture while he threw himself into a remembrance of last night: pressing his face into her hair, tasting the skin along her neck and shoulders down to the backs of her legs; turning her over and finding the even stronger taste of her up to her throat, then a coolness of breath; moonlight slanting through a bamboo curtain and pushing through the mesh of their mosquito screen; fine squares of light settling over her body so that her skin was a pool of water with nets cast beneath its surface; raising the bamboo curtain, the sweat on her body reflecting the moonlight pouring in, each drop a shining circle that made her skin seem punctured and welling with inner light.

A wave struck the boat and broke overboard in a shattered umbrella of droplets. They fell on his skin and he flinched. Cerise had moved to the prow to sit with one arm gripping the nose of the sampan and her
other steeped in the river. The angle of her body as she leaned over made her appear to be reaching to pull something out. Casey stared at the back of her head, at a ridge of bone beneath her coral colored hair, and he clenched both his fists until they were nothing more than stumps, the long fingers buried and locked by crossing thumbs. He'd just detected the lone asymmetry of her body, this soft glimmering wave at the back of her head. Before he could ask what she was doing with her arm plunged so long in the river, she straightened and shook her arm dry in the sunshine. She pushed her sunglasses onto her head. The blue of her eyes was abyssal, her eyes so open and wide he was almost afraid of getting lost in them.

"Why do you keep looking at me?"

"I'm not," he said, alarmed by the irritation in her voice. He scooted closer, stretched an arm across her shoulder, but she glared at him and he removed it and let it hang at his side like before. "Feel better now?" he asked.

"Maybe vomiting was all I needed," she said and took a shaky breath. "Maybe I just needed to get it out of my system..."

Already she looked less blanched, the ruddiness in her cheeks starting to spread more evenly across her face. She closed her eyes as a cool spray leaped from the river.

"If there's anything I can do —"

She shook her head. "No," she said. "I'm better now."

A quarter-mile ahead, sampans passed between floating markets along both banks. Homes built of corrugated tin and weather-worn wood extended downriver, shaded by banyan and calpeputa trees and bushy figs and water palms. On porches marred by stripped-away planks, homemade signs advertised mullet and crab and shrimp, which were raised in the water beneath. These homes, and many of the small businesses around them, were supported by stilts jutting out of the river.

"How likely are we to find any dolphins?" Casey asked Totter. "Cerise tells me they're nearly extinct."

"Not likely at all. Yesterday I got a tip from some fishermen and a barge driver. They told me they saw three to five dolphins around a cove near here. I thought it sounded promising."

"Are they migrating?"

"I suspect it's from the Cambodians blowing up their side of the Mekong, but that's just a theory."

"Blowing up?"
"To catch fish. They’ve been doing it since the war."
"That’s one hell of a way to fish."
"I already told you about that," Cerise snapped. "Yesterday afternoon, when you followed me to the aquaculture farm."

Casey didn’t argue with her, though she hadn’t told him anything. All she’d said was that here in Co Tan little research could be done on a dolphin population so low it was nearly impossible to measure. Wars had killed them, or driven them away, and the remaining numbers left to make a go of it in the Delta had been wiped out by gill nets and upriver damming. Only in Laos and Cambodia did anyone hold out hope for them. She’d gone on to say that her husband was researching the dolphins’ deep pool habitats, which were silting up as a consequence of development along the Mekong. When Casey had asked why she wasn’t with him, she explained how he’d pressured her to stay in Vietnam, all alone for half a year, to undertake research she was convinced would never bear fruit. Two weeks ago, she continued, her smile not at all in the natural order of things, she’d discovered her husband was having an affair with a French hydrographer in Kratie. That night she’d asked Casey if he could stay longer than his assignment required. He didn’t hesitate to answer yes. He’d stay as long as she wanted him to.

Totter guided them to a crowded dock attached to a thatched house. People walked from boat to boat, bartering their colorful goods. As Totter drew close, several faces lit up. They called to him by name ("Ta-ta! Ong Ta-Ta!") and waved his sampan to their group. He killed the engine and jumped onto the dock. "I’ll have someone bring you breakfast," he said before heading off. "They owe me as it is."

"Breakfast," Cerise moaned, looking into the river where a clump of sunburned reeds raced by.

On the surrounding boats were basketfuls of fruit, pale sweets wrapped in banana leaf, women selling bread, and raw meats laid upon smooth tops of bloody wood. Totter maneuvered from craft to craft, grasping the hands that reached toward him. A girl appeared at the open back of the house. In a yellow sleeveless shirt, she came only up to Totter’s shoulder, her long hair fluttering beneath a ceiling fan. The clamor on the dock muted her, and when Totter responded she raised a hand to hide her laughter. He disappeared with her into the rearward shadows.

Casey watched a boy in tattered clothing gather plates and glasses on a tray. "I guess we’re supposed to eat whatever he brings us."

But Cerise wasn’t listening. She had her camera to her eye, shooting
images around the dock. Her arms and wrists twisted gracefully
behind the camera and a geography of lithe muscles flexed as she
bent forward. The base of her neck shined, and her thin shirt showed
through to her sinuous back. When she turned around grinning he
couldn’t help but reach for her and pull her into himself.
“Stop it.” She pushed him back.
“Come on,” he laughed, but she was adamant. He yielded upon
seeing pain or hatred, he couldn’t tell which, flash across her face.
“Look, I feel bad about what’s happened. I betrayed someone with
you, and for all I know —”
“But last night . . .” he interrupted, amazed by what she was saying.
She sucked on her teeth, watching him. “You’re just out of school,
you freelance for a living, you’ve got nothing to lose. But I’ve got a
career. And I’m married, for god’s sake.”
Something caught in Casey’s throat and he couldn’t respond. After
last night he thought things were sealed between them, that there was
nothing more to worry about.
“I guess you’re too young to understand,” she added.
“I wasn’t too young last night.”
She paused, as if it was all she could do to keep her calm. “I’ve
made a bad mistake with you.”
He felt his stomach turn, more deeply in his gut than hunger. “So,
I’m a mistake?”
“I still love him.”
“It didn’t seem like that when you jumped on me.”
She paused again, remembering. “That’s not how it happened.”
She started to go on, but the boy with the tray shouted at them and
distracted her. Squatting before the boy, an old woman stirred a pair
of long chopsticks in a bowl.
“What happened last night is over. I don’t expect you to
understand what my loneliness does to me here, what it’s like to live in
isolation for so long without my husband, but I think you understand
what I’m saying to you now.”
Casey swallowed hard. He was as taken aback by the hurt this
causd him as by the sudden change in her behavior. He heard himself
say, “I know what it’s like to be lonely . . . But if it makes you happy
saying it’s over . . .” A terrible sickness rose inside him and silenced
him. He glared at her, a slight buzz in his ears, as she nodded. He
saw the indentation her fingers made in his pants above his knee, but
she didn’t press down hard enough for him to feel it. Or she might
have and he simply felt nothing. “Too much booze was all, right?” he
managed to say.

“That’s right,” she said, more gently now. “Booze, close quarters, a foreign place. This kind of thing just happens sometimes.”

The boy with the tray shouted again.

“Stay here,” Casey said, breathing hard. Struggling for footing, he raised his arms to his sides to balance himself. He lurched forward and a man nearby had to catch him and help him to his feet. Cerise was tossing her hair, lifting her face toward the now-oppressive sunshine, as if the hurt she’d inflicted on him was no more to bother over than a bee sting, or a nicking fall in front of strangers. He hurried over to the old woman.

Where heaviest traffic glided past, a series of shouts punched the air. Several boats had stopped and people aboard were leaning over and waving their oars in excitement. A pair of dolphins broke the surface, followed by a smaller one that managed barely to be seen at all.

“Casey! Look over there!”

Again, the three dolphins shot from the murky water, ducked beneath its surface and disappeared. Cerise yelled for him to take pictures.

But just as quickly as the creatures had appeared they were gone, and the boats were steered back to their former course. The pilots of the boats, while so excited and clamorous before, had immediately re-involved themselves in the untangling and repair of their fishing nets. The dolphins had disappeared. The river had grown calm.

Casey returned to Cerise laden with a full tray. “I was caught back there,” he said, climbing back into the sampan.

“At least now I’m more confident in Totter’s guidance,” she said, unaccountably happy. She scanned the tray. “What horrors have you brought me?”

He set the tray on a floorboard, steadying it until the sampan stopped rocking. The tray was loaded with two glasses of coffee, wisps of steam rising off them and condensed milk a full inch along their bottoms; plates of fried eggs, heavily peppered, and French rolls, stale, which tore like old fabric; strips of dried fish, black with burnt skin — all of it garnished with wilted sprigs of cilantro. They ate slowly, quietly attentive to the commotion in the river and to the transformation from dawn to daybreak. When the food was gone Casey set down his chopsticks and eyed Cerise over the rim of his coffee glass.

A familiar laugh rose over the din around them. Totter had reappeared in the open back of the house, with the girl who’d led him away standing beside him. She’d changed clothes and now
wore traditional dress: an ao dai — white, flowing, patterned across the breast with a single budding tree branch, and slit up the sides to expose a band of flesh. Totter called to someone inside as he lowered himself onto the dock. He returned to the sampan burdened with a heavy bucket.

Inside the bucket a pile of fish lay on their sides with eyes astonished, their narrow faces marveling upward into the sky.

"We saw three dolphins while you were gone," Cerise told him, grinning broadly.

"Really?" He seemed almost furious he hadn't seen them himself. "What direction did they go?"

"That way," she said, pointing downriver.

Totter was silent a long time. The sky above him was finally bluing, and the sun, rising behind his conical hat, had become a burning egg. Its brightness blurred his face. "How was breakfast?" he finally asked.

"Just what the doctor ordered," Cerise said. "I feel brand new."

It occurred to Casey that after this trip, he'd no longer be welcome to stay with her at her research station. He'd have to gather his belongings and find a hotel in town, then hope they had a room available. But what had he done? Hadn't he only surrendered to her need?

Totter started the motor. Through the haze of exhaust, the Vietnamese girl, in her long white dress, appeared ghostlike above the dock. Her arm, rigid as she waved, looked like the pendulum of a clock that had been flipped upside down. Casey raised his camera and aimed at her, waiting for the wind to blow her hair back off of her face. Before he could take the photo, though, Cerise kicked him.

"What was that for?"

But she only smirked and stared at him in a flickering, fiery sort of way, then dropped her eyes and rubbed her sandals in the sampan's clay-colored dust. She started to say something but seemed to think better of it. Shifting in her seat, she left him to contemplate the ridge of bone at the back of her head.

Totter steered across the river. The current had been pummeling them, but their diagonal movement sliced through it. Churning foam merged from each side of the wake and trailed them, whispering along the water's surface.

As they converged on the shoreline, the river hushed and grew calm. Tall reeds, colorless as weathered wood, walled a narrow tributary.
As Totter cut back the motor, a hissing rose around them. He went around one bend and the next. Mosquitoes, gnats and flies hovered in the air like a haze. As the sampan passed through, the insects stuck to their skin and clothes. And when quickly wiped away they dropped dead to the bottom of the sampan.

Rotting stilts and caved-in homes strewed the shore. An occasional fishing boat, or threshing basket, and the empty husks of fallen coconuts, floated among the reeds. The wind rose and fell, bringing on its back the aroma of sunbaked citrus. In the distance, the waterway opened into a primordial cove, its surface wavering beneath the heat and wide sky.

“Here we are,” Totter said, killing the motor. “You can see the visibility here’s surprisingly good.”

“Less sedimentation,” Cerise observed, “which could mean we’re above a deep pool.”

Totter picked up a pair of oars and hooked them onto two fixed poles at the stern, then casually tossed several fish into the water. They drifted down like feathers before darkness swallowed them whole. He rowed forward, letting go an oar to toss over more fish. “There’s one!” he cried, grabbing another handful of fish and heaving it overboard.

Speeding toward them, a gray fin cleaved the water. A pair of oblong shapes shot beneath the sampan, from one side to the other, and swallowed the falling fish. Several more followed: links in the chain beneath the sampan.

Cerise shrieked as a pair stuck their heads out of the water then disappeared. “How many are there?” She shot Totter a thrilled, confused look. “This doesn’t make sense.” Distracted by the flurry around them she fumbled with the lens of her camera. “Tell me I’m dreaming!” she laughed, bouncing up and down and jarring the boat. She caught Casey staring at her.

“Don’t just sit there, you idiot! We got what we came for.”

He swung around as a terrible pain filled his lungs so he could hardly breathe. Tears stung his eyes, and he raised his camera to hide them. He let its surprising weight multiply in his hands until he could sustain its heaviness no longer. Swinging on its strap, the camera crashed numbly against his chest. He raised it to his eye once more and aimed — not at the dolphins, but at Cerise as she dipped into the bucket of fish. She seemed so wildly happy, entirely free, that to capture her on film like this was, in his mind, a necessary proof of something.
A powerful blow struck the sampan and knocked them from their seats.

"I've never seen so many dolphins!" Totter shouted. "There must be twenty out there, and they all act like they're famished. We'd better keep tight until they calm down."

Casey aimed again at Cerise, who'd resumed her photography of the dolphins.

She turned to face him. "What the hell are you doing?" Beads of perspiration rolled down her face.

He finished his roll of film and reloaded.

Cerise stood up. "Shoot the dolphins! What's wrong with you?"

He reached to pull her down beside him, but she kicked her leg easily from his sweaty hand.

"The dolphins, Casey. Shoot the damn... Oh! I never should have trusted you!" Turning back to the water, she kneeled and gripped the camera with both hands to steady her shot. "My husband will be on the first flight back when he sees these photos."

"Watch out," Totter said. "On the left, one's coming pretty fast."

Cerise turned at the instant a dolphin struck the sampan. With both hands holding her camera, she had no means to balance her lurching body. She spun as she hit the side of the boat and fell overboard. The bucket followed at an arm's length to her side.

The back of her head hit water. She let out a cry, but water quickly stifled it. Her shoulders went under. Her back disappeared, then her outstretched feet and hands. She twisted beneath the surface as a gray snout slammed against her back. She pushed her head above water but choked on wet hair that covered her mouth. "Oh God!" she yelled, flailing her arms. Another dolphin sent her pitching headfirst underwater again. All around her, the spilled fish started to sink.

"Grab this," Totter shouted, holding out an oar. But the dolphins had pushed her away from the sampan. No matter how far he leaned, her outstretched hand remained several feet away. He jumped to the motor and yanked the cord. "That should scare them off." The motor sputtered to life, then burst into staccato roar. Behind him a curtain of water rose and fell.

A dolphin, small, no larger than a child, dove from the water and struck her. She yelled again and dipped below the surface. Clutching her shoulder, she struggled to stay afloat. The dolphins sped back and forth, churning the water.

Totter quickly cut the motor and turned to Casey. "We'll have to wait until they stop feeding," he said, a look of helplessness on his face.
Between Cerise and the sampan, at a depth of around six feet, the
dim outline of something massive and white floated past. It was twice
the size of their craft, barely discernible, and rippled as it moved.
Arcing back toward the sampan, it disappeared beneath a new flurry
of activity near the surface.

“What was that?” Casey said. “Did you see that thing?”

Totter peered into the water. “It’s a fishing net. Must’ve gotten
captured on a dolphin.”

Casey glanced nervously at Cerise.

“Lie on your back!” Totter shouted.

She leaned back, moaning, coughing up water, and managed to
float where she was. “Ahh!” she cried, and reached her arm to the
opposite shoulder. The movement tilted her to the side and she went
under once more.

“This is crazy,” Casey yelled. He raised his hands overhead and dove
into the water. The river roared in his ears as gray missiles darted by,
black eyes like onyx balls. All around him, fish from the bucket were
being greedily caught and eaten. Treading water, he found himself
kicking the dolphins below him. He stuck his head above the surface
and took a breath.

“Swim around them,” Totter told him, pointing vaguely in the
distance. “Get to her from the side.”

“But there is no side... they’re everywhere... she’s right in the
middle of it all...”

For a moment there was no direction he could swim. Eventually,
the frenzy lapsed and he paddled around the gray circle. Looking
down a few feet, to where it disappeared into murky blackness, again
he spotted the ghostlike mass. Ducking his head underwater, which
was calmer here on the boundary of activity, he saw it more clearly. A
white net, as mysterious and graceful as a cloud fallen out of the sky,
was wrapped round the tail of a dolphin. The spaces in the net not
torn were filled with branches and peat. Near its far edge, a rat floated
on its back with its tail like a broken rudder. Hearing a scream Casey
yanked his head from the water.

“Twist your body!” Totter shouted, nearly losing his footing. “Keep
your chest up and tilt your head back out of the water!”

“I can’t anymore!” Wet hair plastered her cheeks and eyes. Blood
ran from her nose and over her mouth and chin.

“Stay up until I reach you!” Casey called out. Treading at the pod’s
outer limit, he couldn’t help wonder if by rescuing her she might want
him again like before. He waited for a breach in the mass of bodies.
But there was no breach. He paddled toward Cerise, assuming the space left behind by every dolphin that shot past. Something broadsided him in the ribs and he groaned, struggling to keep above water until he could manage to start breathing again. From the corner of his eye he noticed the mouth of the cove was filling with boats. Fishermen slowly entered it, watching but not advancing, their motors sputtering loudly.

“They’re going to scare the dolphins,” Casey gasped. “Make them... cut their engines...”

Totter signaled them from the sampan, pulling a finger across his throat. He shouted in Vietnamese, but they only laughed at his apparent antics.

Casey tightened his stomach muscles in anticipation of getting pummeled. Inch by inch he made his way toward Cerise, relieved to see that she, too, was trying desperately to reach him. But then she stopped swimming and began smacking her arms on the water, her head dipping below and reappearing above the surface. Her eyes were huge and he could hear her half-sobbing as he worked his way closer. He grabbed the tips of her fingers, then reeled her in until she clutched him around the neck.

“Hold tightly,” he said. “Don’t let go of me.”

“Caught,” she breathed. “I’m caught.”

“What?”

“My foot.” She grabbed him tighter around his neck as her body lurched downward. “I can’t get it loose.”

He felt along her leg, but with her holding onto him he couldn’t reach her foot. “I’m going to dive down.”

“Hurry.”

He took as much air into his lungs as possible and forced himself beneath the surface. Sediment drifted through the water, reducing his visibility. But the dolphins seemed to have grown calmer. When he got to Cerise’s ankle he found it wrapped with cord. He grabbed the cord a few inches below her foot and tried to rip it in two with his hands. On his fifth attempt to free her, the white fishing net wavered upward from the dark bottom.

Cerise’s foot struck his hand. Surprised as much by the reappearance of the net as by the sudden forcefulness of her movement, he let go.

There was no time to react. Her legs passed by his eyes, then her waist. Before he could move toward her, before anything could enter his mind but an overwhelming sense of horror, her stomach and chest plunged through the water. Her face flew past. Her eyes, wide with
shock, became obscured by an effervescence of bubbles pouring out of her mouth. She was yelling, flailing at him, but there was nothing he could do to stop her. Her red hair waved like a giant flame. Her camera, twisted around her neck and pointing up to where the sky was fragmented like shards of mirror in light, flashed continuously. Casey’s hands reached her too late. The tips of her fingers immediately slid away and vanished into the depths.

Something bumped his head from behind and he heard the screech of a dolphin. He clambered to the surface and was overcome by the brightness of sky. Sucking in air he saw Totter pulling futilely at the motor, his gaze fixed on the pod as it traveled into the mouth of the cove. The fishermen stood as if in silent ovation, mesmerized by the mass moving toward them.

“They followed the one in the net,” Totter stammered.

Back in the boat an intense agony shot through Casey. It dissipated, but endured — like smoke in a breeze, like smoke you can smell even after the breeze has passed. He could feel it leaving a black mark on his memory that he’d never be able to erase: the image of Cerise grabbing at him through the water, being pulled into darkness right before him. He’d merely watched, helpless, not knowing what to do. He hadn’t reached for her until she was already gone. He felt a chill, then cringed as if some terrifying creature had surged from the river and loomed over him.

Where the cove met the tributary, the fishermen had turned and fallen to their knees and were looking across the water. Beyond the dark treeline, fireworks arced through the sky only to fizzle away below lingering wisps of smoke.

Seconds later the explosions reached him, drumlike on the hot wind.