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The Undertow

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

Blink, and your eyes open to the possibility of a different world. The risk of change, for better or worse, is always there; it hangs in the gap between heartbeats, tracks the second hand round the clock-face, lurks in the pause separating each breath. Life can veer off course in any given moment.

I forgot that. I grew complacent. Defy the gods, and eventually they'll punish you: sooner or later something unexpected will happen to change the familiar contours beneath you and send you spinning off the map.

My story begins with a telephone call. I was sitting in my office, staring through the wall-length window beyond my desk. Outside, February lashed at London's rooftops: dusk, rain and wind. Inside, I had just tucked my right foot behind the stem of my swivel chair, and was tapping silently at the carpet with my toe, rerunning the meeting I'd returned from as I moved the seat from side to side. The phone rang. A number I didn't recognize showed on its screen. I adjusted my headset and pressed receive. 'Wilson Taylor.'

A pause followed. I began to think the caller had hung up.

'Hello?' The speaker was a woman.

'Wilson Taylor. Can I help?'

'That's Mr Will Taylor in London, England, right?' Her

voice was tentative and she had some sort of accent. A new-business enquiry, I assumed.

'Yes. Of Taylor Blake. What can we do for you?'

Another pause. Then, 'Right. Good. I'm glad to have reached you.' The speaker did not sound glad. She hesitated again. A light came on in the office block across the street, on one of the floors beneath mine, and a tiny figure moved from left to right across the room. In the time it took whoever it was to pass into and out of frame this third pause became ominous. I suffered a premonition that the caller was about to tell me something awful. She sounded Australian, which somehow mattered. My toecap dug harder into the carpet behind me and my swivel chair stopped moving.

At the other end of the line the woman drew breath, galvanizing herself. When she spoke again it seemed she was trying to recall a script, having inadequately rehearsed what she had to say.

'I'm Jo Hoffman. Dr Jo Hoffman. I work in the emergency department at a hospital here in Byron Bay. In New South Wales, Australia. Do you know where that is?'

I found myself confusedly answering her question. 'Of course. New South Wales, yes. But no, not Byron Bay.'

She pressed on. 'I believe you have a daughter. Anna Taylor. Who has been . . . is travelling in—'

'I know where my daughter is. Sydney. She called me from there the last time we spoke.'

Another pause, more audible breathing, and then the doctor continued. She sounded young, but her voice was increasingly sure of itself, picking its way sensitively through difficult terrain. Even as the anger and fear engulfed me I experienced an odd nervousness – for the doctor – in the pit

of my stomach. It had fallen to this young woman to break news to me, and I could hear an apprehensive sympathy in the pauses between her words. I felt sorry for her. She wasn't to blame for whatever she had to tell me, and in any case I somehow already understood the situation she had to explain, ahead of her exact description. It seemed cruel to make her go through with the details. I heard 'accident, sea,' but stopped listening. The impossibility of what she was saying sat in silent opposition to the inevitability of its being true.

I say 'details', but in fact Dr Hoffman knew very little then about the disaster she was relating. It would be some time before I was able to put together a full account, longer still before I could make any sense of what had happened. But analysing the causes of catastrophes is part, at least, of what I do for a living, so even as she told me the basics, what I saw – or, more exactly, what I *felt* – was the gaps in her explanation, the room for manoeuvre, the holes in which to hope.

Picture a vast scimitar of shoreline. Boulders stand proud to the left, dividing this part of the beach, in front of the little town, from the miles beyond them around the bay. And off to the right, where the blade of sand narrows to a distant tip, a lighthouse juts from a low spur of land, marking Australia's easternmost point: Cape Byron. Ahead, in the foreground, the Pacific is cut by white wave-tops, but beyond the break the aquamarine deepens to a silvery blue, shimmering in the glare.

Though only mid-morning, the sun is brutal. It scores black shadows beneath the trees along the front, draws

outlines round the few sunbathers dotted along the beach. An incapacitating heat, with no wind to disperse it, seems to hover above the sand. Through it the sea appears distant, as if behind a translucent screen. Yet the suck and thump of waves is ever present, blotting out all other sounds, so that the holidaymakers crouching beneath their hats, dripping sun-cream, melting in the stillness, seem actors in a dumb show.

Gil and Beth Defoe, an English couple in their late thirties – my age – emerge from between the trees. Gil holds a paper bag containing two bagels away from the heat of his body, as if carrying something distasteful. He's an academic. His wife, Beth, a theatre nurse, pushes up the brim of her hat and rolls a can of cold drink across her forehead. They pause at the back of the beach, afraid of breaking the tree-line, of tackling the heat without shade. In silence they sit down at the base of a pine tree and start to eat, staring at the view.

A sea eagle slices sideways overhead, wheels, and hangs above them. They don't notice. Gil upends his drink, his face turned to the sky but with his eyes screwed shut. He starts a conversation about his geological research. While he's talking Beth spots the nick of a sail, far out to sea. Her gaze slides nearer to shore, rests on a swimmer in the shallows opposite where they are sitting. The swimmer pauses, raises an arm in mock salute, then carries on towards them. Gil lowers his drink and looks out to sea too, distracted by a jogger loping through the heat along the water's edge. He hurts for her. While he watches she comes to a halt, puts her hands on her hips and stares at the horizon.

In the other direction, Waller, one of two lifeguards monitoring the stretch of water between the flags, has already followed the jogger – Vee, an old schoolfriend – out of sight.

He leans back in his chair, extends the shade of his hat-brim with a broad hand, and takes in the sea eagle. It seems tethered in its stillness, riding an unseen updraught. Invisible, yet Waller understands about currents here, both in the water and in the air. The expanse of land at his back has been heating up since dawn; the thermal is a prelude to a westerly wind which, on its way inland, will blow the surf to a useless chop within the hour.

Waller looks back out to sea. The tide is retreating; soon the sandbar will show pale in the gaps between waves. Since eight o'clock, when he set out his flags, the nearest rip has worked its way northwards, towards him. The lifeguard doesn't tell himself this, because he doesn't have to. He sees the undertow – a flatness in the water, the point where the waves seem most reluctant to break – and knows, as he knows the sun will set at night, that it won't come any nearer before the tide turns. He reclines his chair, thinking of the iced tea he sent his colleague to fetch from the surf club, and puts his big hands behind his head.

I'm setting this scene deliberately because, in the accident's aftermath, it has preyed on my mind. I've craved definition in the picture of this beforehand state. And yet it's impossible for me to know how much of what I've described is true. I wasn't there. The details necessarily came afterwards, in my investigation, in what the witnesses said, in conversations and reported speech. Some of the colour I've probably embellished. Did the lifeguard say he'd put his hands behind his head, for example? Am I sure Gil Defoe carried the sandwich bag away from his body? Or are these specifics that

I've added myself? Perhaps it doesn't matter. All that really counts is that until this moment these people, who were later implicated in one way or another, remained oblivious to what was unfolding before them. If they'd noticed what was happening earlier, if their collective gaze had focused on the problem a minute, or even seconds beforehand, the accident might have been prevented. But the swimmer was half-way out of the water before the tourists opposite him on the beach, the jogger running along it, or the lifeguard in charge of the flags understood that he was waving for help.

Waller, the lifeguard, still leaning back in his chair, ran the sun along the curve of his hat-brim, squinting. The surf unfurled, regrouped, peeled forward again. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Vee loping back down the beach. He reached for his binoculars, raised them and looked at her for a full second. Strange. She could never have made it to the light-house and back since she passed him last. As her magnified image drew closer his unease grew. He saw that she wasn't jogging: she was in full flight, running fast above the water's edge. Her mouth was open and one of her arms was raised. She was waving and shouting at him.

The lifeguard later said he didn't remember turning the binoculars seawards, but he knows he must have done so. His next memory is of accelerating through the waves on the surf-club jet-ski, which, with his renowned diligence, he'd reversed nearer to the retreating surf a quarter of an hour beforehand. Evidently he hauled it from its stand and down the final yards of wet sand into the water without help; proof, if it were needed, of his adrenal panic in those seconds.

Back down the beach Beth Defoe had also seen the jogger waving at her friend emerging from the water. It wasn't until the runner took off in the other direction, leaving the swimmer, now on his knees in the shallows, to continue with his staccato saluting, that anything seemed wrong to either of the Defoes. Gil stood up to look more closely at what was going on. There was something odd about a grown man on his knees in the spume, waving at nobody, and yet, whoever he was, he appeared happy enough. They were some fifty yards away, through the shimmering heat; perhaps the figure was waving at *them*; maybe he had mistaken them for somebody else. It was almost tempting to wave back.

But before Gil could smile to himself both he and Beth were distracted by the lifeguard's jet-ski, glancing across unbroken wave-backs. Something orange trailed in the ski's wake. A sled, slapping the white-water, into and out of view as the machine crested and dipped behind the swell. The lifeguard was standing up above the saddle. He checked the jet-ski and turned it hard, cutting a fan of water into the air. Then he set off again on a different tangent.

'Looks like fun,' Beth said to Gil.

Gil didn't respond. By now he was certain that something was wrong. He walked a few paces nearer to the sea, squinting at the jet-ski as it tacked wildly through the sheet-metal glare. The lifeguard was looking about. Still standing up out of the saddle, he threw the machine left and right, a hundred yards from shore. The swell rose and fell. From their vantage-point up the incline of sand Gil couldn't see anything where the lifeguard was searching; there was nothing visible in the water at all.

Except the man in the shallows, who was still on his

knees, waving. The jogger had doubled back towards him again, lifting her feet high to clear the surface of the water as she ran out to the man. In the seconds before she reached his side he stopped waving and slumped on to all fours, shaking his head slowly. She bent to pull him upright, a hand under his arm, but he crumpled as she did so, sliding face down into the water. By now Beth had dropped her bagel and stepped past Gil on her way to help.

Gil stayed where he was, watching the lifeguard, who slowed into a sharp turn, dipped in the lull between waves, and seemed to stop. But only for a second. As the next surge lifted the machine Waller was driving it forwards again, aiming at the beach. It looked like he had realized that the swimmer in difficulty was already out of the sea: certainly the jet-ski and sled, a blur now cresting the shore-break, thumping through it to outrun the white-water, had not stopped for long enough to pick up a passenger. Gil breathed out in relief. Beth was half-way to the water's edge, and the jogger had already managed to help the swimmer to his feet. Perhaps he had cramp. Whatever the matter with him, it couldn't be that serious. Gil wiped his brow and retreated a step into the shade, then stopped in surprise as the lifeguard, steering with one hand, accelerated the jet-ski through the remaining yards of shallows, flat-out up on to the wet sand. The machine slewed to a halt, the sled skidding sideways. Gil saw that somebody was on it. The lifeguard's other hand, flung out behind him, was clamped round a young woman's wrist.

Waller later maintained that Anna could not have entered the water between the flags. There was no way, he said, that he would have missed her and her friend swimming south, out of the safe zone in front of him and towards the current

that took them out to sea. Of the many assumptions made in the aftermath of the accident, I found this easiest to accept. Even if it had been compulsory to swim in front of the lifeguards, which it wasn't, Anna would have considered such a rule unfounded and swum where she wanted. I taught her a healthy scepticism for authority. I don't blame Waller for what happened. If he hadn't sent his junior to buy drinks, if he had happened to train his binoculars down the coastline and out to sea before the jogger ran back to raise the alarm, then perhaps, perhaps. But he didn't, and given the vast expanse of Byron Bay he couldn't be expected to keep watch over more than his patch.

The accident wasn't Waller's fault, I accept that. Neither, of course, do I blame the jogger, or the Defoes. Beth and Gil, from Hull in East Yorkshire, had stepped off a long-haul flight into Brisbane airport just hours before they arrived at the beach, and although their failure to see that the swimmer was waving for help is appalling, it is understandable. They were still in a different world. Luckily the jogger, Vee, wasn't. A local resident – she and her boyfriend run a holistic retreat on the outskirts of town – she was alive to what a raised arm at sea meant and responded as soon as she saw it. She alerted the lifeguard: she gave Anna her chance.

No, when I learned what went on while Anna struggled in the water, I felt no venom for the players on the beach. I can accept that their involvement had to do with fate, not fault. Where I had immediate difficulty, however, was with the other swimmer and the moment of his decision, the moment when he left my daughter face down in the water and struck out for shore.

Gil Defoe was also stunned by this aspect of what had

happened. The horror of the boy's choice hit him as soon as the jet-ski slid to a halt and he saw the lifeguard dragging a girl's body sideways off the sled. It made him stop on his way down to tell Beth that she should leave Vee and the boy and offer her help to the lifeguard instead. Only the white sand above the wave-line, so hot that it burned his feet, prompted Gil forward to steer Beth to where she was needed most.

Anna was still on her side when the Defoes made it to the lifeguard. He was kneeling over her, two broad fingers pressed hard into the side of her neck, which was blue-grey despite her tan. He was muttering, to himself, to Anna, to nobody, 'Come on, now. Not now, no, come on.' After a pause he repeated, 'No, no, no,' scooped Anna up again – small across his chest – and laid her down flat on her back, a few paces up the beach.

Gil trotted after him, pointing at his wife and saying, 'Nurse.'

'Right. Righto.' Waller seemed to take this in. Sweat dripped from his unshaven chin. 'Not breathing, no pulse. Help me.' He wiped sand from Anna's lips – her face was covered with it – and hooked his thumb and forefinger into and out of her mouth. 'You start compressions.' He pointed at Anna's chest, clamped her nose shut between his thumb and forefinger, and bent down over her face. 'I'll sort out the airway.'

I see the three of them, Waller, Beth and Gil, grouped round Anna, outstretched on the foreshore. While the other two began the kiss of life, Gil stood to one side panting heavily, uncertain of what to do. The outline of his foreshortened shadow lay across Anna's legs, connecting him to her struggle. She was wearing underwear and a vest top, which had

gone see-through in the water. This detail makes it look as if she hadn't planned on going to the beach, let alone swimming. Yet Anna was keen on her swimsuits and bikinis. Given the slightest chance of a dip, she'd have worn one beneath her clothes, just in case. Nevertheless, she wasn't wearing a costume that day. While Beth, hands together, leaned into the work of pumping on Anna's chest, pressing hard – I saw the bruises later – the vest rose up, over her breasts. After a minute or so of Beth's compressions and Waller's surrogate breathing Anna's mouth and nose flooded with watery vomit.

As Waller spat, wiped his mouth on his arm, and bent over Anna again, the other lifeguard arrived in the beach pick-up. He shook the radio handset at Waller from the cab, then jumped down and strode into the circle carrying a red bag. They dragged Anna's top higher still and began sticking pads to her chest, talking in jargon. Gil Defoe stumbled backwards and sat down, out of the conversation. Looking out to sea he saw other swimmers, unaware of what had happened, carrying on regardless. He felt light-headed. Pulling himself together, he decided to go and see if he could help the boy, who was still with the jogger. As Gil said later to me, 'I thought I wanted to help him, but it was more complicated than that. He was all right. The girl wasn't. Since I couldn't do anything useful for her, I wanted to find out what had happened to put her in that state.'

The jogger had an arm across the boy's back. She looked up at Gil as he approached and shrugged her shoulders. A silent 'What now?' The boy was squatting on his heels, holding his head in his hands and rocking backwards and forwards. His back was beaded with sweat, yet he had goose-bumps and was shivering. His streaky blond hair was pasted

to his forehead. Gil bent down next to him, looked into his face, saw an open mouth, eyes wide and blank. Vee was stroking the boy's arm, whispering reassurances, but Gil asked his question.

'Are you and the girl together?'

'Boyfriend.' His voice was hoarse.

'Can you tell us what happened?'

'Kept slipping.'

'What's that?'

'Couldn't grip.' The boy licked cracked lips, continued vaguely: 'She fought me. Then she . . . I couldn't . . . I had to do it.' He slumped on to his side, gripped his knees, and shook his head.

'Do what? What happened?' Gil repeated.

Veins stood out in the boy's neck, forearms and hands. He began to moan. Vee looked at Gil again, silencing him. She bent down over the boy and said, 'It's okay.' Then, very gently, she asked, 'Is your stuff on the beach somewhere? A towel? Clothes?'

The boy nodded.

'Where? What should we look for?'

His eyes now seemed full of confusion. After a pause he said, 'Canvas bag,' and turned towards the flags, along the beach.

Vee said, 'We should go get it,' to Gil, who took the hint and set off in the direction of the boy's vacant gaze. He walked past Anna again, now wired to the machine, and deliberately didn't look. Nevertheless, he overheard chanting: 'Three, four, five, *breathe*.' The brightness and heat made Gil feel dizzy. He walked through the wave-hem, right to the lifeguard station and back, staring at the sand above the high-water

mark. A siren blared; the surf hushed it quiet. The waves seemed smaller close up than they had from beneath the pines. Though Gil searched the beach above the water-line methodically, he could find no canvas bag and returned empty-handed.

Back at the scene, he saw that a crowd had gathered. It looked like someone had pulled the jet-ski and stretcher further from the sea; in fact, the tide had retreated. He stood with the other onlookers, staring at his wife's back. She was still bent over Anna, her shoulders already pink with incipient sunburn. After a time Gil saw her glance at one of the lifeguards, and thought the look she gave him seemed optimistic. Although he didn't understand exactly what Beth meant by 'We've got an output,' he set off to tell Vee and the boyfriend this news.

They were not where he'd left them. He turned back into the circle and began looking for their faces among those in the crowd, but was distracted by the arrival of an ambulance at the back of the beach. Two paramedics broke in on the circle and took over from the lifeguards. They wrapped Anna in a foil blanket, blinding in the sun. A policeman joined them. He had a carefully tended goatee and sideburns, and began by addressing the crowd: 'Anyone here see what happened?'

Silence. Gil took a step forward.

'Then take off. If you don't have a statement to give, there's no use hanging around.'

People started to move away, leaving just the lifeguards, Beth, and, Gil now saw, Vee. Gil recognized the jogger as she approached the policeman, who stayed her with his palm. He nodded at the lifeguards.

'Wait up. I'll start by talking to these boys,' the policeman said.

This oversight, the policeman's brushing Vee aside, still angers me. The boy must have been within earshot. Though Vee tried to stop him going, he'd risen to his feet on hearing the siren and, oblivious to the burning sand, begun to stagger barefoot toward the tree-line. Why Vee wasn't more insistent with the policeman I don't know; perhaps she was intimidated, thrown by the sight of so crisp a uniform there, out of context, on a beach. She said later she thought the boy had probably gone to fetch his and Anna's belongings himself and that she imagined he would come back. Either way, she waited her turn quietly while the goateed policeman squinted from Waller to his notebook and back again, laboriously scribbling notes. Gil and Beth also waited, sheltering from the sun in the meagre shadow cast by the lifeguards' pick-up, trying to make sense of what they'd just witnessed. Where the four of them – the lifeguard, Beth, the jogger and Gil – had been united in the moment of the accident, officialdom now held them apart. One of the paramedics said, 'Good job, guys,' to Beth and Waller as they stretchered Anna off to the ambulance, but I was shocked to discover that, apart from those words and Waller's brief nod of thanks to Beth, neither of the Defoes had had anything further to do with him, the medics or Vee after the policeman's untimely interruption.

Though the boy's departure didn't concern the policeman, it has since plagued me. He left Anna in the water. Alone, at sea. Which means he saved himself at her expense. He offered no other explanation to Gil or Vee. While Beth

and Waller worked to give my daughter another chance, that boy sat on the foreshore with his head in his hands, mumbling incoherencies. Then, when the ambulance and police arrived, he stood up and walked away. Never mind the obvious inference – that he was running for a reason – the fact that he still had the strength to pick himself up, in that intolerable heat, and make his escape, told me that however hard he'd pushed himself to keep Anna afloat, to save her, he hadn't pushed hard enough.

But to begin with I didn't take in the significance of the boy's disappearance. Jo Hoffman described what had happened – her voice sorrowful in my headset – and I heard her say that Anna had not been swimming alone, that she was with a friend, a friend who had left the beach after the accident, and whom nobody had seen since, but although I understood what her words meant I could not then fathom their importance. A light on my phone display had begun pulsing. I stared at it, wondering whether the missed call might have been something important, and was otherwise unable to think. The doctor went on to say that Anna's friend had nevertheless raised the alarm, that a lifeguard, working with a passing nurse, had done his best to resuscitate her on the beach, and that although they'd managed to start her heart beating again, Anna's brain – starved of oxygen for too long – had shut down. The phone-light kept flashing, reassuringly steady. She had 'technically drowned', was reliant now on a machine to breathe for her, would deteriorate with time. Anna's life was 'no longer viable'. Blink, blink, blink. Though the doctor used different terminology, she was trying to tell me my daughter was dead.