

# At First Light

*by Maria Grech Ganado*

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She could see him sinking deep when she leaned over, his hands above his head still clenched like one big fist. And as he sank, he looked up at her and she saw he had no face. Where his face should have been there was only a hollow. She didn't question why the wind whistled, or how it blew her from the top of the cliff into that emptiness. She was neither surprised nor scared. But just as she began to feel she was on the brink of some momentous transformation, Jessie woke up.

By her side she could feel the clammy aura of her sister, Janey, already reeking in the air of the scirocco, but not strong enough to overcome that sweet smell of dung that came from further away in the valley, a welcome smell of manure, heavy and full as it always was in September when the fields were being prepared for the fresh season's start. She felt for the clean dress she'd laid by her bed the night before, slipped it on quickly and opened the door a chink, making sure she didn't wake Janey, who had other notions of early morning pleasure.

Yes, the day's first light was already there, warming her as did some silent client who'd stay for a mug of coffee after he'd got what he'd come for. She liked foreign men who couldn't speak her language most of all. They brought whiffs of worlds full of new smells with them. They left before she'd lost curiosity, but best of all they couldn't ask questions even if they were interested. Words tended to fill her with terror when they got the better of her, and were merely absurd when not needed. She enjoyed a generous man who was ready to give pleasure as well as take it, and wished she needn't charge when that was the case. But when she sensed contempt in a client, she charged enough to ensure he wouldn't return. No chance of a cup of coffee for such a man!

The mist was being drunk greedily by the sun rising between the hills, a bit like the sweat between her own breasts when Father Pawl finally raised that head he had sunk into them when he came. He was huffing and puffing so desperately recently, as though attempting to divine in her that vitality she still carried in her smile. She'd been fond of him ever since he'd been a lonely novice, sobbing his wet insecurities

and fears into her body, but they were both older now and she couldn't help wishing sometimes that he'd give up using this body as some sort of infant comforter.

Poor Janey seemed to be growing older even more quickly. She'd become stouter over the last couple of years, and her lassitude was becoming so oppressive that Jessie could feel it creeping into her own bones every time she lay beside her. Father Pawl's frustration with age sometimes smashed mugs to smithereens against the wall, but putting up with that was easy – it needed only a broom to set everything right. She sighed. Janey made such a fuss about her sweeping it up so tamely, without complaining – but Jessie was more peeved by anyone who expected her to waste time in futile arguments, with too many words. She was torn between her imagining the extra humiliation she would have burdened Father Pawl with by requiring him to sweep it up himself, and the amusing image of him in his cassock, sweeping a broom across their small room shortly after he'd celebrated Mass in his ceremonial vestments. Who'd have swept it up if she hadn't? Janey's lethargy was much worse.

The mist had lifted like a lake dissolving into the air, and the copse which had seemed to form on one hill was coming apart. The soldiers were dismantling after their exercise and she hoped that this meant more work again. Best make use of the minuscule shed next door, so as not to wake Janey. Poor thing! After all, she'd been working longer than she herself had been. Someone had even told her once that she wasn't Jessie's older sister at all, but her own mother. Nothing unusual she'd found out. After her initial astonishment at this staggering revelation about family relationships in those parts, she'd felt quite relieved that it might not have been her father who first fingered her. It still made a difference, somehow. And her thoughts turned to Pawl again, remembering how other teenagers had taunted him with being gay, a *puf*, because he'd been so shy, so kind and gentle, when they were first drunk on lust. She couldn't help but feel proud of how it had been she who raised him from his inhibitions and taught him to be a man.

Making his way down another hill slowly, she could see the sailor. He was coming once more along the high route overhanging the sea. Time enough for him, even if a soldier decided to come later. When he first came, the sailor had told her she was his last harbour and laughed. She liked men who laughed. Laughter was the best medicine, the Captain used to say years before, while he zipped up his trousers at the cave at Manikata. He was the one who had first praised her native intelligence, teaching her also how to read. Her grandmother had been so grateful for his generous attentiveness to her twelve-year-old granddaughter.

The sun was drying the earth fast and her arthritis wasn't as bothersome – she would be able to suppress the pain as her sailor enjoyed her. It was nothing like the pain of

fear that she would soon be too old to charge, so she shrugged off all thought of her children and concentrated on the sailor instead. No matter what they thought of her, she was as alive as the rest of nature. She closed the door on the one-roomed hovel cautiously and tried to suppress her irritation when Janey swore anyway. There'd been hardly any light in the room to check whether she was looking decent enough in the mirror – which meant, made-up enough to cheat a man. But then she smiled yet again. She solved everything with a smile.

What did it matter really, as long as she was clean? She'd always washed herself with cold water in the tin basin before coming to work in the shed, and she'd done it quickly and silently now, not to disturb Janey. September was still warm enough even first thing in the morning, but not hot enough to have made her sweat through the night. Unlike Janey, she kept herself trim, even athletic, loving to run across the fields up to the edge of that cliff which the sea washed in all its various moods. She prided herself on still being able to run fast despite her age. And sing well enough to tempt the farmers in the fields, who sometimes popped in for a fun one – free, of course. And she chuckled again when she thought of how they then went to Father Pawl to confess before returning, sober as his cassock, to their wives. They never divulged her name, of course, and he respected the secret of the confessional, but they all knew what lay behind his sour looks, till even he got used to it all.

She ought, she knew, to be ashamed of herself, as Janey often told her. If it was work, she shouldn't enjoy it. And Janey didn't know the half of it. Ever since the Captain's lessons, she had found the whole thing delectable, enjoying the laughter of the farmers when she mimicked the people in the town who looked down on her. How quickly she'd squirmed out of her teenage shotgun marriage, what a hurry she'd been in to see her children educated and watch them leave in disdain of their childhood home. She couldn't pretend to herself that she didn't still care for them terribly, or sometimes miss them badly, lost as they were in the smog of time beyond the hills, living in a totally different century altogether. Only a few kilometres away in space, but so distant from the reality she had been born into and cherished. Perhaps it was wrong to love her freedom best of all, but that's how it was.

She snapped out of her reverie as soon as she saw her sailor was closer – whistling, young, tanned, with a full head of gleaming black hair. Shielding her face from the sun's uncompromising light, she placed one hand invitingly over her cleavage and twirled her hair casually with the other, pretending she hadn't seen him approach. By the time he left, the sun would expose her unkindly to full view but she was always careful to take her leave of clients at the door, still inside, so that they wouldn't be able to see exactly how far she'd come from the first flush of youth. It was different with the farmers. They didn't much care about her looks. Some had

grown alongside her since they were children. But still, when her dress stretched across her breasts every time she hung out clothes, she knew they lusted to squeeze them. When they heard her raucous voice sing of love, her swaying buttocks exuded a sensual welcome they were not accustomed to in their wives. She had a trim waist despite her big breasts, her face was sun-burnt and mischievous, and her tongue was brimming with that wicked wit which made them roar with laughter, even as she spread her legs wide. They were incomprehensible creatures, men, but she adored basking in their attention and feeling vibrant, alive. She loved knowing it was she who had roused that hardness between their own.

She made her way in for the sailor to find her ready when he arrived. He knew she'd seen him coming now. All he had to do was push the door open on the shed without disturbing Janey in their hovel. He knew the procedure from the day before. She skipped lithely out of her dress, lay down on her solitary worn mattress and stretched contentedly. When he shut the door behind him, she was purring like a cat. 'Hello, Jezzie,' he said softly, and began to stroke her.

Janey didn't wake till a few hours later. She boiled some water on their kerosene ring to make instant coffee and mixed the rest with fresh well-water to wash. She ate some bread and cheese in her leisurely manner. The sun was hot now, but when she walked out, she could see that the sea was angry. Waves beat the cliffs, their high crests as foam from an over-worked horse. Their hovel was secure till the first heavy rains, when they returned to their small village home in Father Pawl's parish. The house they'd been born in was not very high above the depths of their valley, just enough to evade the floods which might come. Till then, the narrow stretch between the hills sheltered its inhabitants from the full force of the wind. The waves told her, however, that it was picking up. Despite her incipient deafness she could hear it lashing, moaning as though in pain. Or pleasure, for that matter. By the time the wind dropped to a whistle, she was wondering where Jessie had got to – had she gone to the market already? Perhaps it was later than she'd thought when she'd woken.

The shed door was ajar, but hardly any light got in despite the advancing day. Dark was good for work, but Janey could just make out that Jessie wasn't working. She was lying motionless on her back, fast asleep. That's what came from waking at dawn. Well, it would be too late for the market if she didn't wake her. She must have been drinking with her last client before he left. They'd spilt a lot of whatever it had been. Sticky, too, clinging to her feet. 'Jessie,' she whispered. Then, louder, 'Jessie,' and bent to shake her awake. Jessie's hair clung to her skull like a wet brown cap. There was only a dark hole where her face had been.