

Quellón. Chiloé. A night years ago. Sometime after ten. No sky, no vegetation, no ocean. Only the wind, the hand that grabs at everything. There must be a dozen of us. A dozen souls. In a place like this, at a time like now, you can call a person a soul. The wharf is small and sloped. The island surrenders to the water in concrete blocks with a number of cleats bolted to them in a row. They look like the deformed heads of the colossal nails that pin the dock to the seabed. That's all. I'm amazed at the islanders' stillness. They sit scattered under the rain beside large objects the size of trunks. Swaddled in windproof plastic, they eat in silence with thermoses locked between their thighs. They wait. The rain pounds down as though cursing at them, runs along their hunched backs and forms rivulets that flow into the sea, the enormous mouth that never tires of swallowing, receiving. The cold feels peculiar. It's possible I've drunk some of it myself, since I can feel it thrashing and bucking under my skin, and also deeper inside, in the arches between each organ. Impenetrable islanders. I've been here for three months, working as a cook at a couple of summer camps for teenagers. In the evenings I would cycle to town and drink aguardiente at the hostel bar. There were barely any women.

It was a workers' ritual. Stained teeth bared in greeting. The jet-black eyes of every family tree that's managed to grow on this salty rock speak to me from their tables. They speak to me for all of the dead.

I'm not a chef, I'm just a mess-hall cook, capable and self-taught. The thing I most enjoy about my job is handling food while it's still whole, when some part of it still speaks of its place in the world, its point of origin, the zone of exclusion that all creatures need in order to thrive. Water, earth, lungs. The perfect conditions for silence. Food comes to us wrapped in skin, and to prepare it you need a knife. If I've got one skill in the kitchen, it's carving things up. The rest is hardly an art. Seasoning, tossing things together, applying heat . . . Your hands end up doing it all on their own. I've worked at schools, nursing homes, in a prison. Each job only lasts a few weeks, they slip away from me, spots of grease that I gradually scrub off. The last boss I had before coming to Chiloé tried to give me an explanation: the problem isn't the food, it's you. Kitchens require team effort. I'd have to find a really small one if I wanted to work on my own and still make a living.

The ship arrives at midnight. It barrels toward us at an alarming speed. Or at least that's how it looks, because of the light glaring in the downpour, making us blink. There's movement



behind us too; someone's pulled up in a jeep and left the engine running. He calls us. The islanders rise. They look like enormous turtles hatched from a large egg. They plod through the rain, and as they pass me I feel like an insignificant foreigner, disease-white and sopping wet under my dark blue rain jacket. You'd need two of me to make one body as tough as theirs. But I was like them once, despite everything. I'd dug into the island with my nails and learned that the pulp of your fingers can harden, that the heart governs the body and shapes it according to its highest mandate: the will. We huddle around the driver's door. I use my hood as a visor, rub my eyes and try to make sense of what's happening. Hands exchange coins, bills. From the car radio comes the sound of string music, as though in honor of the storm. I buy a ticket with pesos from my belt bag. The rest of my three months' salary is wrapped in plastic, tucked between my undershirt and my skin.



It's as if the sea itself has held out the gangway, as if the ocean has come to collect us. My backpack has me walking at an angle. I've got ropes in each fist and I let them lead the way. The yelling keeps us moving. As I board the ship I think it's not actually that big, and then – silence. Human sounds are virtually imperceptible, here, beyond the reach of the elements. We walk sideways, with cautious steps, down a metal staircase. Behind a door is an empty hold. This is a freighter, not a cruise ship. We let ourselves fall inside as though we'd been adrift for years, and some of



us exchange looks, possibly for the first time. The man next to me pulls out a bottle of pisco and takes a long swig. Then he passes it around. A pipe ceremony: we'll see how it ends. I shrug off the rain jacket and my drenched sweater, then throw on a dry, dirty one I find after rooting blindly through my pack. I don't know when we set sail. The hold rises and falls nonstop. Now and then we all slide to one side and the lightbulb flickers until the sea surges again, sending us back to where we were before. An old woman passes me the bottle with a smile in each eye and a toothless grin. I take it and drink. I love this place, these narrow black eyes that neither desire me nor reject me, this fabulous freedom.



It's what I came here looking for, true zero. I was tired of inventing résumés, of having to pretend life had a structure, as though there were a metal rod inside me keeping me upright and steady. The destination always kills the journey, and if we have to reduce life to a story, it can only be a bad one. What was I thinking, dropping everything for a three-month contract on the other side of the world? I'd just been fired from a restaurant in an industrial park. I used to hitchhike there every morning. Most of the time I was late, even though I gave myself two hours to make the trip. The best part of my day was when a car or van stopped on the side of the road, a hundred and fifty meters or so ahead, and summoned me with its blinkers. I'd run toward it like a lunatic, backpack on and jacket open, blowing out clouds

of breath and cigarette smoke into the cold air. Some drivers were surprised when they saw I was a woman. Others didn't even notice. Fifteen kilometers of peace, of being nowhere, of intruding on the commutes of kind people who had to suffer through them every single day. I often wished I could've jumped out of those cars while they were still moving, instead of having to say a polite goodbye and close their doors the way you might close the casket of a good friend, an inanimate body. What was I thinking, dropping everything? The devastating possibility of the same old job, of a tiny room in a suburban apartment, of lovers as fleeting as shooting stars, hot to the touch one day, a distant dream the next. The days came and went, unchanging, and every night I tossed them back one swig at a time, stretched out on my narrow bed with headphones in my ears and an ashtray on my chest. I'd gone through life fixated on an intangible conviction, tied down by the handful of things that kept me from becoming penniless, an outcast. I needed to face the emptiness, an emptiness I had dreamed of so often I'd turned it into a mast, a center of gravity to hold onto when life fell to pieces around me. I'd come from nothing, polluted, and yearned for windswept lands.

A hard floor and a bag for a pillow. Quiet companions. Me inside the hold, the hold inside the storm, an envelope of cash next to my stomach. This night I've won.

I stick around for a few years. The captain has a gambler's face, patient and smart. They call him *patrón*. His skin is fine and red and rises out of his shirt collar like a second shirt clinging to his tiny features: chin, mouth, moustache, nose, forehead, all in a line, one after the other, with two hole-like eyes that drive home his every decision and order. He offered me the job because I didn't ask for money, just room and board. I think I've discovered what happiness is: whistling the moment you wake up, not getting in anyone's way, owing no explanations, and falling into bed at daybreak, body addled from exhaustion and mind free of every last trace of bitterness and dust. Everyone on board thinks I'm certifiable, that I'm the black sheep of an aristocratic family, that someone murdered my parents and siblings and I'm here lying low with an anonymous crew so that I can plan out every detail of a slow, cold-blooded revenge. I let them believe it because they're friendly and because at the end of the day we're more like family than if we'd shared the same mother. We all incubate here in the boat's amniotic fluid; the boat loves and nurtures us, it invites us to take another look at ourselves. I let myself be strung along; life develops without overwhelming me, it squeezes into every minute, it implodes; I hold it in my hands. I can give anything up, because nothing is essential when you refuse to imprison life in a narrative.

We sail back up the coast of Chile. All the way to Talcahuano, Valparaíso, Antofagasta, Iquique. I don't usually disembark,



even though now and then I get the urge – in Valparaíso, for example, a night port under the cover of gleaming *cerros*. I want to keep a lover there. I sit on deck, drink, smoke half a pack of cigarettes and feel stupid. It's been over a year since I held a woman in my arms. My body rails at me, it demands another body to touch and stimulate and use to satisfy its own monstrous hunger – until that person, her purity, her charms are used up and spat out. I'm dying to open and close a door, to pull another mouth to bed with my mouth, to parcel out desire. It was easy in Barcelona. Here, I don't even bother. Better to just retreat to my bunk and recall everything to that concrete point between my legs while the saliva on my fingers fills me with tobacco and solitude.



This is the best job I've ever had. The galley is small and rusted. One oven, four burners, a countertop. The pots look like they were salvaged from the bottom of the sea. It's a good thing I brought my own knives. I don't even take my eyes off them at night. If I left them in a drawer, the next day I'd have to fetch them from the engine room. Still, no one steps foot in the galley when I'm there. The door stays open, and every now and then someone pokes their head in to ask for coffee. They can brew it themselves. I've got water on the boil around the clock, a jar of instant coffee and another of white sugar. Sometimes they sit on the stool in the corner. They relax and watch me work and tell me about their grandmothers – all experts in the kitchen, all queens of humitas and empanadas. The second mate reads



out the recipe to me. Humitas are out of the question, but I develop an interest in empanadas. They're practical and everyone likes them, even though the meat I use is tinned and the olives need more brine. I start the dough in the evenings and let it rise all night. I like to get under the covers knowing that out there another covered body lies awake, working on my behalf. In the morning I'm amazed by how much it's risen, as if the whole thing – the soft, perfect dome of wheat and its nest-bowl of warmth – were a distant nephew who's grown up, effortlessly and all of a sudden, in the silence of my absence. I knead the bread, dust it with flour, shape it and take its shape, and imagine I am a simpleminded god about to beget a new tribe. Anything not to feel the hips, the ass, the breasts, the perfect flesh of a woman beneath my hands.



We spend whole weeks in the Sea of Chiloé. It's an uncomfortable body of water, like it doesn't feel at home caught between the continent and the archipelago. The worst storms, no comparison to my first time on board. The waters get so rough we have to seek shelter in a bay. Hours of waiting, most often at night. If we're carrying passengers, I have someone take down some sandwiches for them. The locals are thrilled. Each bite seems to enrich and fortify them, to give them more life and the strength to live it. The few tourists on board, on the other hand, are disappointed in everything. Strange, given that they'd made a point of shunning the comforts of ocean liners. They'd left home ready to turn their holiday





into an expedition, a quest for some kind of inner truth. After researching freighters with room for passengers, they'd bought tickets on a stormy night, feeling more alive than ever and loving their sense of adventure more than they loved the children they already had or might go on to have. Three hours in and they're livid; they need the bathroom. Theirs is on deck. Two staircases up from the hold, then another to the annex. The wind spits in their faces, blinding them with pellets from this austral downpour. The waves roar, they'd swallow everything if they could. I don't understand how these people manage to keep alive. They pant violently and cling to nonexistent handrails as they make their way up. They empty themselves in the toilet. The waves are in there too, like a sea monster that surges up and slams them to the wall, then consumes them neck-first. If I ever turn out like them, I swear to god I'll shoot myself.



I'm not sure why I start earning a salary. Nothing out of this world, except it changes my relationship with work, which doesn't feel like it's mine anymore but instead belongs to someone who values it and deigns to give it to me. I feel a sense of loss, though I'd been in the red for a while and needed the money. I still make the best food I can, my new owner's invisible leash slack but present. In Chaitén, I stock up on tobacco, tampons, deodorant, and socks. Funny how socks go missing. I buy red ones so I'll know which ones are mine. Chaitén is a regular stop and I almost always disembark, if only for a couple of hours. The streets are long

and empty, as wide as airstrips. A full-bodied woman serves coffee and cake in the dining room of her small house. The best lemon cake in the world. It's always packed in there, despite the floral drapes, the ornate dinnerware, and the rugs. She also has rooms available. Whenever we dock for more than twenty-four hours, I reserve one so that I can have a hot shower and sleep in a real bed with a wooden frame that can support my every thought and moan. On days when it rains, I feel like I've just come home after conquering the world. That's where I met Samsa and where, for a few moments, I became conscious of the magma seething beneath the miracle of our oceans and continents.

Five in the evening. It's already dark out. I order coffee, drop my bag on the floor, and make my way to one of the few seats available, next to a pair of townies and a boy busy dunking his fingers in the tea. She's at a table in the back with five or six other people. White-blond hair, swimmer's shoulders. There are corporate logos on their knapsacks and jackets, which hang from their chairs. They speak in hushed voices, like Scandinavians abroad, or like people who've just struck oil. I can't not look at her, like when you peer over the edge of a boat and come face-to-face with a shark. I forget to add sugar to my coffee, I burn my tongue. I feel the hardness of the rock in which desire has become lodged, as if for all time. I look at her and feel woozy, even though she's Scandinavian and makes her living from a multinational with blood on its hands. I look at her and she fills every corner of me. My

gaze is a rope that catches her and draws her in. She looks up, sees me. She knows.

We spend the night together. I don't fuck her, I whet myself on her. I drink her like I'd been raised wandering the desert. I swallow her as if she were a sword, little by little and with enormous care. The hours layer over one another, blanketing us. I wake up at half past five with just enough time to make it back to the ship. I don't know how to leave her, it's like the waxy parts of my body have hardened to her shape. I kiss her and kiss her. I kiss the hair that falls over her eyes and casts them in a weird golden light. I kiss her tensed neck and her exquisite back, her nipples flat and unfeeling after so many hours of night. I close her eyes and kiss their blue color by kissing the skin it shows through. I suck on her unfamiliar, exhausted tongue. My kisses are landmines. I set them mindlessly, easy as humming, knowing that when I come back they'll explode, dismember, unearth bodies and quarries. We exchange numbers. I cling to her the way lunatics embrace new beliefs or dangle from trees. I leave. We'll see each other in less than three moons. Three moons. Those are the words that leave my mouth.

I think about her all the time. My body is like a lab where a circle of alchemists is working on developing the ultimate rock, her light one of a million possibilities that I am



obsessed by. It takes every bit of focus I have to make food. I buy a Greek cookbook from a secondhand bookstore in Puerto Montt. Spices, fresh vegetables, cheese, lamb. Tiny anchors that fasten my mind to solid ground. I cook with the door closed, like I'm a genius for whose work the audience must learn to wait with patience. The truth is I'm intoxicated. Samsa courses through my veins. My fingers enter her as I gut the lamb. Three months, in which we steer into Peruvian waters. We sail farther than ever before, and it feels like we're on the run. Not a single phone call or text message. Nothing. Hummus, moussaka, and a very challenging baklava recipe sprinkled with pisco and honey. The captain sings my praises. I don't know what else to do with my hands.



We start seeing each other. I call her before we dock in Chaitén, and she jumps into her pickup truck and drives the eight hours there. We meet at the inn. She rolls up, parks, switches off the engine. My body is nervy as I open the door and dump all of her toxins onto the immaculate bed inside me. I've never felt so merciless, so inhuman. I kiss her as if I could dissolve the skin of desire that coats her lips and teeth. We shut ourselves in the room. Sometimes we can meet up every ten days, sometimes after a month or two. I've ordered a strapless strap-on that arrives by airmail from the United States. I pick it up from a P.O. box in Ancud. It's beautiful, the electric-blue color of the water where wrasses live among corals. Fucking her with a strap-on is like waking up summer and drowning it in its own swelter, it's tossing her



way up high and fighting the undertow that pulls me under before I give in to the quiet. For hours and hours. Time drips off our bodies, trickles between our legs, we tack it to the walls. I kiss her like I never knew I could kiss anyone like that, giving her everything I've held back for her while we're apart, when she's not with me.



She doesn't like my name, and gives me a new one. She says I'm like those large, solitary rocks in southern Patagonia, pieces of world left over after creation, isolated and exposed to every element. No one knows where they came from. Not even they understand how they're still standing and why they never break down. I tell her I've seen rocks like those in the middle of the ocean. The ships skirt them in silence, as though some mythological creature could awaken and attack them. They're not always by themselves. Sometimes there are more just a short distance away. Sometimes they form labyrinths you would be wise to avoid. Samsa lets her hair down and tickles my forehead, my eyelashes, my neck. She calls me Boulder and I don't know why we laugh. Maybe love is unfurling above us like an enormous branch that bends and touches all the most sensitive, reticent parts of us.



I have never felt so strange, on board. I've lost something that used to belong to me alone – to me and this ship. We sail and everything feels the same. The coast of Chile is



black, and it shrouds every last hint of humanity in a way that's almost romantic, moving. Wooden piers whose piles are constantly soaking, like the swollen legs of someone with gout. Crevices where life is a teeming kingdom of mollusks. The dark oxide that the ocean breathes out and that crawls upland like fungus – the simplest, most expansive creature on earth. My breath catches when we drop anchor. I feel like I'm following it down into an ocean-deep silence where everything dies. The galley is too small, my bunk bed's a joke, the few common spaces on board are unbearable. In the evenings I sit on deck and look out at the lights of the houses in the distance. Now and then one of them quivers as if struck by a rod. I smoke more than ever, but smoking alone at night is just another way to heighten the magic, to conjure up the desired body and coax it in little by little – until it's reached my oxygen reserves, until it's made it to my most tender memories, trapped in the solid box of my chest.



I've done a lot of thinking. A Uruguayan therapist said on the radio that travel promotes mental activity; in other words, living on a ship is about as good as it gets. I think in order to plaster over my feelings. I picture my thoughts as a herd of buffalo or zebu crossing the predator-infested waters of my peace of mind, of everything I've managed to build up on this ship, one plate at a time. I can't stand herds, that mad and singular desire, that vastness in their gaze – almost panicked, virtually sacrificial. I try to steer clear of them. I don't study myself; I think. Actually, I take myself apart.

Thinking loosens me up, as if I were a longbow. I learn to play chess from a sailor with something of an obsession. He always beats me, though it takes him longer every day. I also pick up a couple of mindless hobbies that demand my full attention, like French patisserie and distilling quinces into brandy. I have a lot of fun getting the crew drunk and fat. I don't even notice life carrying me away. I've found the perfect wave and I ride it as if I'd tamed it, as if everything hinged on the luck that I hand out, driven by the appetites of generosity.

Months pass, perfect and luminous, then one day she tells me she's leaving. She says it with tears in her eyes, trembling and hesitant like a kid who doesn't want to jump in the water. We're sitting in bed, facing each other. It's midafternoon and looks like rain, it could've been a phenomenal night. I gaze down at her hands. She's fiddling with one of my rings. They don't fit her, though now and then she likes to slip them down to her knuckles and make fun of me. She says things that are dirtier than anything I've heard on board and digs them into my skin. I stop her with my hand and stroke her belly in a steady motion, like the critical moment in a concert when the conductor invites the other instruments to join. I wipe her tears with my thumbs. I look down at my chest, smooth and bare except for a fresh bite mark and a tattoo of Chiloé. How can this intense locus of pain not be bleeding? She's accepted a position in Reykjavík. A good opportunity, she says. The room spins as if on stilts, the dramatic scene

inside making it dance. I love her. I can think of only one person I'd kill for her. She looks at me without asking and I nod. Then I hold her like I want to get her drunk and make her forget love and all the coins in her newfound treasure. Rain begins to fall. Life tears open like a wound that rots and bubbles. If anyone talks to me about happiness, I swear to god I'll break their face.