



# MARINE DEBRIS

by Olivia Wolfgang-Smith

**THE** woman comes up in the seine net during a Thursday marine debris collection and it's like any time something goes wrong during a lesson—like when my co-captain smashed a finger rigging a mainsail, or when we tacked in front of a city barge and the pilot radioed, “do you idiots want to die?” With each disaster, my brain misfires and adrenaline rots immediately into embarrassment.

“It's okay, it's okay,” I dither, spreading my arms wide to try to block the kids' view of the woman. They're craning around me, though, ducking to look at her through the gaps. They've seen the news, about the reef people. The kids assigned to our afterschool program don't

come from households in which children are shooed out of the room for troubling stories.

All I can think is that we're well clear of the danger zone. The flat-topped research vessel, the police floats marking the boundaries of the subway reef are almost clear across the river. This shouldn't be happening. It isn't *fair*.

The woman doesn't seem hurt—in fact, at first I can't even see how she's caught. She's sitting upright among the cans and syringes and river-sludge and silvery, radioactive minnows. She looks put-together and *polite*, feet gathered under her and elbows tucked close to her sides. As if we'd interrupted her mid-commute, her train still functional.

But then I see it where the net has caught on something and ripped, lashed itself around one leg and behind to her opposite arm, spun and cinched her at the elbow. She's caught almost primly, twisted face-forward. Like being stuck in a department-store fitting room, zipper jammed halfway, panicked sweat dampening too-tight armpits. No, I'm probably imagining her embarrassment. Projecting it. There isn't much of an expression on her face—she blinks in the same wet, dazed way they always do on the news. Occasionally she clears her throat as if getting ready to

speaking, which I didn't know they did, but she doesn't seem to have trouble breathing. No gills, at least not where you'd expect—I check. I can't help it. I've never seen one in person. She's a little older than me—maybe aged up a few years by the long bob sticking to her with streaming river water. A longish skirt and sweater. No shoes. Besides her feet she's dressed for work, for what my mother would call “a real job.”

You wouldn't know, is what I mean. You really wouldn't know she wasn't a regular person except—well, for everything.

“Get it!” One of the kids yells from behind me—hysterical with fear or glee, I can't tell—and this spurs me into action, because I don't know if any of them have had family defect to the reef colony. We're putting it on the registration questionnaire for next school year, but it happened too fast for us to plan for it this time.

“Hey,” I snap. “That's enough.” I give them the look that means they aren't passing for adults—their worst fear in the shadowy nightmare landscape of being fourteen. For now, it quiets them. I snap my multi-tool together and crouch over the deck, pull the netting away from the woman's skin to see at it.

I can feel the kids behind me, watching, muttering, outlining their gossip. What they'll tell their friends, their parents, my boss. "*Shit shit shit,*" I breathe. I'm being so careful not to touch her skin with my knife that I almost nick myself. It becomes the tune of a tiny, whispered song. "*Shit shit shit.*" There's a strange wet huffing sound, and I look up to see the woman is—laughing, I guess. Laughing at me. She does it again, and I can study the mechanics—a sniff, an exhalation, crinkling eyes and a twisted half-smile.

I hadn't heard they laughed, either.

I feel a nervous blush spread over my neck like hives, the splotchy red that has prompted countless teachers and bosses and students and dates to think I'm having an allergic reaction to something I've eaten. She raises her free hand—slowly, but I flinch anyway—and presses it to my shoulder. I hear one of the kids gasp-laugh, disgusted, but the rest of the world goes white. Her hand is wet, of course; it cools the flush from my skin. She presses harder—she's steadying herself. Leveraging herself upright as I saw at the net. Of course.

As if she can read my logic and wants to argue, she circles her thumb gently against the skin of my shoulder.

I slice the seine net open, jerk back, shake it out desperately. I shoo at her like she's a raccoon, but she stands slowly—ignoring me, which makes the kids laugh. She steps gracefully out of the net as if it's a skirt she's dropped to the ground. I wait with dread for one of the kids to cat-call, and when none of them do, I feel as ashamed as if I'd done it myself. The woman lets me herd her toward the edge of the deck, looking vaguely amused. She reaches to still one of my fluttering hands—another shriek of disgust and delight from the kids—and palms something into it. A bottle cap. I twitch, but the moment to drop it passes and it's still cradled in my hand. I pocket it, casually as I can, a prickle against my hip.

The woman stands on the gunwale for a moment, settling her shoulders, gripping with her bare toes. She turns back and fixes me with a look. Dips her head, presses fingertips quickly to her own shoulder. And then she's gone. Not a dive or jump, just stepping overboard, sucked down fast as a dropped phone.

“Show's over, folks,” I stutter after a moment, blush still mottling my chest and face, and we go back to marine debris, as if any of us cares.



Back at the boathouse, by the time I get in from derigging, my boss has already heard the kids' version of what happened. She is professional until the last of them goes home but clearly giddy with the news, eyes flashing. My boss loves scandal. Her old workplace had more of it. Here, she usually has to make her own. "We have to log this," she says, flirty-officious, when we are alone. "This is *serious*." She grills me, filling out the city website's sighting report form based on my dazed answers. How would I describe the woman's appearance and behavior? Did she pose a threat, accidentally or by design? Did she attempt to recruit or abduct any land-dwelling human to the reef colony? Did she speak or otherwise attempt to communicate? No, I say again and again. Nothing, I don't know, I don't remember. The woman is clear as a spring-fed lake in my mind, but the words are missing. My neck is hot. If the kids haven't gossiped already about the bottle cap, the press and stroke against my shoulder—if I managed not to give away my lightning-cooked brain on the boat, I won't do it now.

"She laughed," I say finally, to give her something.

“Laughed?” My boss leans forward, excited. This hasn’t been in the news yet. A scoop. “Laughed at what?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “I was—cutting her free, I was talking to myself.”

“What were you saying?”

“Nothing,” I say. “Just—I don’t know. Nothing.”

My boss knows me well enough to imagine it. “Uh-huh,” she says. Her fingers hover over the keyboard. She squints at me, choosing her words. I study my cuticles as she types, blushing again as I guess at her phrasing. How she’ll describe me clinically for the public good. To know what makes a reef-person laugh.

I’m dreading the question I know is coming. “Did the reef colonist distribute any tokens? If so, please elaborate,” my boss reads.

I don’t want to admit it. It feels embarrassing, somehow. Too personal for this form, for my boss. But the kids might have seen. “Bottle cap,” I mumble, finally. She has to snap at me to repeat it. Typing one-handed, she holds out an expectant palm. “It got lost,” I say, hoping the scalloped outline isn’t visible in my pocket.

I have a feeling that thinking of me this way, in bureaucratic-scandalous passive voice, will make tonight one of the nights my boss decides we are dating. I am right. She adds our sailing school's name to the top and bottom of the form, then submits it and grabs my hand, starts across the boathouse floor so fast I'm dragged behind her in my wheeled chair for a few feet before I can stand. "Come on," she whines, smiling. "You just put this place on the map. Let me buy you dinner." But we go straight to her apartment, and I'm home by 7:00.



My roommate, watching TV and eating noodles at the coffee table that dwarfs our living room—the scent of pot heavy in the air—doesn't ask where I've been and I don't ask about her day in return. It's a system I at first treasured and now don't know how to change. Preheating the oven for my own dinner, I call each of my parents. Another system: they don't pick up; I leave no message. They won't call back. I'd have no inclination to talk if they did. But I send the weekly sonar ping of a missed call to make myself feel better. Martyred.

They're talking about the reef colony on the news, of course. My roommate slides down the couch to make room for me, silently offers her pipe. It's mostly the same footage we've been seeing for months, cell phone videos that were thrilling centerpieces in their first news cycles and now rote, relegated to B-roll. The panic of the early days, before we understood even the little we do now. People diving from bridges or stepping delicately over ferry railings. Later sightings—some of the same people, singly and in groups, surprised in the shallows or dredged up living in the macabre search for their bodies. Living but changed. There was tear-jerker footage of their land-bound loved ones' attempts to converse. Everything else aside—the science, whatever was actually happening—these were different people entirely. “My son is gone,” one woman wailed, watching his hazy, beatific blink as he slipped back from the police-boat dinghy into the river. She clutched a rounded stone he'd handed her, holding it close to her throat. You can still see this clip ten or fifteen times an hour if you channel-surf.

It's been almost a month since the city finally sent an unmanned submersible down to the artificial reef. The footage they came back with was bad, silt-blurred and green and anticlimactic. Can't hold a candle to the alien city we'd all had time to imagine. So, in addition to the radio-

melodrama narration from the anchors, they always intercut it with showier surface-level footage from the day—over a year ago now—the subway cars went into the water. It was a puff-piece at the time, human interest. Empty trains still stamped with their line numbers, pushed off barges with a forklift. Whenever a car from your regular commute went over you felt a pulse of terror, grabbed whatever solid thing was nearest. I remember that. I'm guessing that was part of it, for the reef people. That momentary clench that the rest of us felt, it didn't let go of them for some reason. That's my theory. Was my theory. Until today got me all mixed up.

I shovel my dinner and watch the footage with new eyes, looking for my woman. It's turbid water and the dull green glow of the train cars, lined up on the bottom like an uncanny wreck, already cauliflowered with coral and barnacles and algae. Which, after all, was the point. We all know the beats of this video by heart. A knot of four people, conversing or communing or just floating near one another by the door to one of the cars, startles at the approach of the submersible. They watch it benignly, with some curiosity. One of them reaches out and gently pushes it away as it nears. In the next car, one woman stands—floats—stands with her hand on a pole, as if riding the train, toes brushing the floor as she bobs. She

watches the submersible approach her and blinks into it, hair streaming, pupils blown green-black in the robot's light. Watches it pass.

It goes on this way. Enough to extrapolate a population, at the time, of about eighty individuals. Growing slowly, though hard to map. It had been an exploratory mission, the mayor and chief of police defended themselves afterward. *Of course* they hadn't engaged the colonists. "We need to know what we're dealing with here, first," they had said, each claiming to be quoting the other.

The woman I saw today isn't in the submersible video. Deep down, I knew this before it began. I would have remembered her.

"Nothing new," my roommate says, flipping channels. Her lighter clicks.

I consider telling her what happened—the woman's laugh, the feel of her hand, the bottle cap. But our system does not allow for this. Besides which, I already feel a pot-sticky flip of regret in my stomach over the afternoon's conversation with my boss. Over the form she submitted to the hotline—vague guilt at reporting the woman to the authorities, even via half-truths—the acidic fun my boss made of me as she stripped her bedspread. Her insistence, until she grew bored of insisting and hinted I

should go, that I mimic the reef woman's laugh. I said I couldn't remember. I do. But the memory is muddied; it's darker somehow than it was this afternoon. I've invited too many people into it already.

I crane awkwardly to look at my shoulder, checking for—some sign of contagion? A slick of river-water? It looks normal. It looks just as if nothing ever happened. When I realize how ridiculous I'm being, the laugh in my head is the reef woman's. It is not unkind.

*Again*, the new station's anchor is saying, over the same differently-montaged footage of reef colony and bereaved surface-dwellers and government officials. *If you have any information, please come forward.*

I balance the bottle cap on my bedpost. I pocket it again for the new workday.



All week I worry that someone from the city will turn up at the boathouse with follow-up questions. I can see my boss is hoping for it. She takes extra care, snaps nervously at me and the other instructors. Those of us with

captain's licenses find as many excuses as we can to be out on the river. Group trips, private lessons.

But nobody comes, and soon anxious predictions of the authorities' questions eddy into questions of my own.

I wonder what she did in the city, before. If we ever passed each other. What her life is like in the subway reef. What she does all day. If she has friends there. Family. A partner. I wonder what she'll do in winter, when the river ices over in great groaning blocks and the ferries have to punch their way through. I wonder what her name is, if she still has one.

I tack boats against the tides, fighting the wind and current and teaching the students bad habits, in order to float nearer to the spot where we found her. I hallucinate, think I see a dark head bobbing like a seal. "Ready to jibe?" a kid says. "Bearing away," another answers. Their voices brassy and performative, for me. "Jibe-ho," the first one says—panic breaking his grand tone halfway through, as the boom swings across the center line and clocks me in one distracted ear.



I'm out two weeks for concussion recovery. I let my boss think it was the kids' fault. I let the kids think so, too. I rest a few days before I can't stand the thought of myself and call my sometimes-boyfriend. We meet at a bar, because it's the only way he ever agrees to see me. But he also never refuses. He's dependable. I don't intend to drink, but then he slides me a beer and I'm drinking it. I try to monitor myself—no woozier, I think, than I should be. The world tilted and nauseating only in expected measures.

My sometimes-boyfriend and I know each other from high school. We don't really know each other, anymore. But we still have this. However many beers it takes, conversation minimal but increasingly jovial, then one or the other of our apartments.

“Are you okay?” he asks. “You look tired.”

This is not about my concussion. This is one of his strategies. I have long since decided to find it flattering, that he thinks he still needs to use his bag of tricks.

Four beers in, I tell him. He is on his sixth, always faster, and hoots with scandalized joy at the news of the woman—leaning in, breath hot, fascinated by what I'm saying in a way he never is. I flush with it. “I can't

believe you saw this,” he keeps saying, jealous. “I can’t believe you saw one.”

I am drunk and it feels good to talk about the woman, like I am telling myself about her. “Want to see something?” I hear myself say. I uncurl my fingers, revealing the bottle cap. He reaches, and his laugh curdles to a sneer when I pocket it again before he can touch it. I feel it mirrored in my face—the laugh, the poison.

“That’s cool,” he says, blurred and wandering in my gaze, and orders another round. Like we’re both having a great time.

I talk and talk and forget, almost, that my sometimes-boyfriend is listening. But then he gets an idea, and asks to close our tab, and there’s a blink in the universe and suddenly we’re standing by the river’s edge, three piers down from work’s boathouse.

“Hello!” my sometimes-boyfriend is yelling down at the water, laughing as it slops against the pilings. “Here, fishy fishy.”

I’m embarrassed—deeper than usual, the blush hooking into the meat beneath my skin. This isn’t right. I’ve done something awful. Betrayed the woman. My boss; my sometimes-boyfriend; the city information hotline. I

can't keep from sharing things, no matter how sickly-sad it feels to give them up. I can't say the things I want to, either. I'm always—

My sometimes-boyfriend has shimmied through a gate and is wobbling near the edge of a dock. I grab the back of his shirt and tug him back. “Get off,” he says, petulant. “I wanna see one.” I hook an arm around his waist—I'm stronger than he is, but hobbled by dizziness, and he knows me well enough to ignore me. “Hey fish, I hear you're giving out presents.” I pull and he pulls back, half-yelling until one of us splashes vomit on the other's shoes and we get to go home. I hope there is nobody watching us from the water below.



I stay home and watch the news, scanning for—dreading—a report from the boathouse, a gleeful-ruthless interview with my boss. I worry more and more that I've betrayed the woman. But there is nothing, nothing yet, and I realize that this means the gap between what the city knows and what we see on television may be vast.

There is coverage of legal and logistical debate, and interviews with experts who might know more than the rest of us or might not. The occasional unrelated story from the wider world, the thought of the country continuing to function beyond the reef shocking anchors and reporters as much as the rest of us. There are marches. Protests. A body washes up in the Navy Yard and there's a scramble to identify it—a reef colonist? A failed attempt to join them? Or something else—a drowning, a suicide, a murder. Nobody knows, or nobody is telling.

I scan the footage for my woman's face, her shape, the suggestion of her. The anchors give the hotline number and web address again and again, urge us to come forward and tell them what we know.



I begin to have dreams.

In one I am riding the subway at night, my car empty and clattering. In one fluorescent flicker she appears across from me on the scarred orange bench, sitting as calm and gathered as when I first saw her. I don't know where we're going, which train we're on—there's a scrolling stop-readout

but I can't make sense of it; announcements garble over the PA system. The woman sits quietly, her attention somewhere else, and I watch her without shame or self-awareness until her gaze flicks to mine and my breath catches, my cheeks flame. She smiles at me. She laughs.

I wake gasping for air, tangled in my sheets. Calming down, hand pressed flat to my heart, I think I see the shape of a person in my room. A figure silhouetted in the deeper darkness. The glint of wet footprints trailing from the door. I spring up and snap on the light, but it's nothing. There's absolutely nothing.



I don't know if this is how it happened for the others. I don't know for sure that I'm right that it's happening to me. It feels right, though. Not in a grand way, not in a way I can label or even say out loud. But here I am.

I let myself into the boathouse just past two in the morning. It is never truly quiet in the city, but this is the nothing-time of the nocturnal commute, when weariness and expertise are the only credentials you need in the minds of passers-by.

All our boats can technically be sailed single-handed, in case something goes wrong.

At first I consider heading out to the reef coordinates. But I can see, even from the boathouse moorings, the glow of the police boats and the research station. Let them meet me when I'm settled, when they can look at me and realize how little they know.

There's not much wind scudding over the river, but it's still hard to hold position with one sailor. I tack in a wide, sloppy circle around the spot where our torn seine net brought up the woman.

I watch the wavelets for movement. Nothing breaks the surface.

I look up, around me—bridges arching like musculature, the spires of the skyline on one shore and twinkling industrial-complex lights mottled with tree cover on the other. The night-traffic hulks of barges slip by in the distance, taking no notice of me. I hold the idea of the surface in my head, to be sure. Boss. Roommate. Parents. Sometimes-boyfriend. I release it and hold the idea of someone new. The idea of myself, slippery.

I understand now what has been happening. I believe I understand what everyone on the news and on the police research boats has been trying to. I tie off my lines, release the tiller. I stand on the edge of the

deck. I can already feel the boat panicking. They'll pick it up, eventually. Or else it'll be smashed to kindling under a ferry. Maybe it'll be on the news.

I palm the bottle cap, for luck or whatever magic masquerades as luck. I take a deep breath, though I know I won't need to hold it. I sight straight down past my toes and step forward, laughing.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Olivia Wolfgang-Smith's writing has appeared in *Ninth Letter*, *Little Fiction*, *Flyway*, *The Common*, and elsewhere. Her work has been longlisted for Glimmer Train's Short Story Award for New Writers and DIAGRAM's innovative fiction contest, and nominated for the Pushcart Prize and the Best of the Net Anthology. She earned an MFA in Fiction from Florida State University. She lives in Brooklyn and is at work on a novel. [@OWolfgangSmith](#)

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