

Froth

In the north of Patagonia there is a stretch of coastline called *Digger Bay*. For eleven months of the year it is a nondescript corner of the world; bland-shaped rocks and patchy sand dunes, but in early February, and sometimes as late as mid March the soulless environment is spectacularly transformed by the arrival of thousands upon thousands of seals, migrating from the colder climates south of Cape Horn. They saturate the landscape as far as the eye can see. The larger fatter adults lounge around on rock ledges whilst their young frolic and splash by the shore.

At the height of the day huge breakers hit the rocks with awesome ferocity. They glide in as apparently harmless waves before opening in a swirling mass of churning white foam that threaten to gather up the pups in their watery arms, suck them back, and obliterate them against the ocean floor. The pups revel in the excitement, edging out a little further each time before racing back up the sands when the spray crashes down around them.

Out in deeper water killer whales congregate. They use the waves to approach the coastline unseen; their jet black bodies hidden beneath the rising white peaks. It is only when the waves break that they emerge from the froth and snatch their unsuspecting victims.

'Froth' – The moment of confusion before a sense of clarity that arrives too late.

Angelo Fabricio stood on the shore with his back to the sea. It was November, and the seals had long since vacated the rocks of Digger Bay for friendlier climates. A strong wind was coming in across the water, blowing Angelo's hair into his eyes. Ahead of him his breath turned to mist in the frigid air.

He cleared the obstruction from his face.

Up across the sand-flats the beach met a sliver of patchy turf that lined the base of the cliffs. From here the ground rose sharply in a vertical shaft that led to a high plane somewhere in the heavens. At the very top, just within view, stood a single, solitary house.

From so far a distance it was not possible to take in all the contours of the building, or ascertain what colour it was. The jagged quality of the roof meant that it blended almost seamlessly with the natural landscape around it, but there was nothing scruffy or haphazard about the design. Every angle had been marked with obsessive precision, every length measured and then re-measured, all by Angelo's skilled hands.

He was an architect by trade, born in Palermo thirty six years previous, training in Boston, and cutting his teeth in New York before moving to South America.

The house belonged to his brother Marco – a wedding present.

Angelo's face was stern. The coolness touched his skin but he felt nothing. The morning was too miserable to mark the sun's rise. Instead it remained subdued and overcast.

The waves were coming up the beach in adventurous swells. Angelo took off his shoes and rolled up his trouser legs. As he stepped into the flow he kept the sea to his rear at all times. Salt-water ran between his toes, disturbing the sand, displacing the indentations of his footprints, erasing all evidence of his presence.

If only it were always that simple.

There was a great glut of emotion at work in him that morning. Old feelings churned over and re-ignited, new ones evolving, mixing, polluting, and forming a bitter-sweet concoction in his mind. He had come out to gain distance from the whole sordid mess, but quickly realised that unraveling events only made them worse. Perhaps ignorant deception was best? He remained facing away from the sea, up to the house and his pulsating conscience.

He had been sitting at home when the phone rang. It had only been the previous evening, but already an ocean had crept between then and now. The old world was foreign and unreachable:

'Angelo?'

A tearful voice on the other end of the line.

'Speaking.'

'...It's Stephanie.'

'What's wrong?'

'...Marco's gone.'

'What do you mean 'gone'?''

'We had a fight, things got said, *he* left.'

'*Left*, left where?'

'I'm not sure...on business I think...London or Frankfurt...Can you come over? I wouldn't normally ask.'

He had already put on his coat.

'Don't be silly. Of course I can.'

Driving through the woods that night the stillness of an empty road had exposed the dark desires prowling around his heart. He turned on the radio. It seemed only to heighten the feelings of sobriety.

Are you to be the comforter or the stealthy lover?

I am...

His mind had refused to be honest.

Marco was his *little brother*, younger by two years, the baby of the family, and apple of his mother's eye. As the eldest son Angelo had won favour by being the natural heir, but Marco was not a jealous sort, and excelled in other ways. He was smart, good-looking, popular, a creative thinker. As siblings they complimented each other well and were the best of friends.

That more than anything was what made his actions unforgivable.

The front door opened to a mixture of expressions on her face; sadness, tension, confidence, lust and coldness.

Always coldness.

'Thanks for coming Angelo,' she greeted, giving him a hug that was more like an embrace. Slender hands reached up to the back of his neck and momentarily ran through his hair.

'It's the least I can do' he mumbled; his lips buried into her shoulder.

Stephanie moved away from him in a single, graceful, fluid motion. As she did so Angelo noticed her head tilt slightly to the left, hiding that side of her face. Flecks of fine powder masked a crimson mark beneath. He considered commenting but thought better of it.

She led him along the dimly lit corridor that he had designed to her tastes – minimalist, black and white; expansive. It didn't look like the sort of house Marco would own.

From the doorway Angelo could see a shattered vase on the floor, and tulips scattered clumsily around the broken pottery. It seemed strange to him that Stephanie hadn't cleaned up before his arrival. She'd never appeared the type to air her dirty linen in public.

'Can I get you a drink?' she asked, as if the carnage were invisible.

'Please.'

'What would you like?'

'Whatever you're having.'

'I'm having a brandy.'

'That's fine.'

She turned with a faint smile and sauntered into the next room; her long sleek black dress accentuating every curve on her body. Angelo couldn't help thinking that it was a little inappropriate under the circumstances.

The room was a secondary lounge, smaller and more homely than the main one, set further back in the house. Stephanie had lit a fire. Its flames caused shadows to dance up the walls and across Angelo's face. He stared into its fierce heart and was enchanted.

The marks on her face?

It's probably nothing. Forget about it.

But the thoughts wouldn't stay hidden.

Why is she acting so seductive? Her husband has just left.

Look at this with a little perspective. Steph has never been easy to interpret or predict. This is just her way of coping – putting on her best clothes and reaching for comfort from the one who knows Marco best.

He felt embarrassed at having judged her so harshly.

Your gut feelings are almost always right. Why didn't you go with them? WHY?

The endless ocean offered no answer, only the steady surge and subsidence of water.

'Would you like another?'

He noticed that the phone was off the hook.

There was a moment where his conscience told him he should leave.

He's your brother. Make your apologies and leave.

'Please.'

His guilty hand had offered the empty glass.

Not guilty of action, only of intent.

What if the opportunity presents itself?

She left him alone once more, staring into the flames, feeling extremes of both hot and cold.

The sound of the waves stirred him from his waking dream. The sea looked lifeless, as dead as the hills and the sand beneath his feet.

Where was the courage of your convictions?

Everything felt wrong; compromised. He had taken a wrong turn, made a decision that he desperately wanted to reverse. But that was impossible now, forever beyond his reach.

He had coveted his brother's wife. Not just in mind but in body also. Like forbidden fruit what had seemed sweet and desirable revealed itself as a sour illusion, bursting as a bubble when it reaches the surface, pungent with a claustrophobic odor.

She had returned with the second drink. A button on the front of her dress had popped open making an already plunging neckline even more so. He thought to tell her but resisted, choosing lustfulness over her modesty. Later he wondered if the gesture had been deliberate on her part, a stage in the seduction.

'Here you are An-gelo.'

She lowered herself down next to him, brushing against his skin, invading his personal space without apology.

This is wrong. Stop this madness.

'Marco,' he blurted out. She backed away. 'Do you have any idea where he went?'

Stephanie looked perturbed that he should spoil the moment. 'He...he does this from time to time.'

Her voice had changed. The distress and sorrow had turned to an uncertain tremble, like there was something to be feared in his brother's name. Once again Angelo found it difficult to believe that Marco would ever do anything to harm her. He recalled vividly the day when Marco had arrived on his doorstep, a bottle of champagne in each hand. Angelo had known what was coming. He'd felt a knot in his stomach tighten.

'I love her Andy,' Marco had beamed as they toasted the news of his impending marriage. *Andy* was a nickname between brothers. They clinked glasses.

I love her too Marco.

Why hadn't he said those words? Why hadn't he been up front about it from the beginning? They were close, they were brothers, he would have understood. At the time it had felt callous to spoil the moment. Looking back it would have been honest, a gesture of honour between kin. Anything was better than what had followed.

Again she moved a little closer.

This is your brother's wife.

I know, I know.

The scent of her perfume touched his senses; the intoxicating aroma of orchids. Angelo fidgeted nervously.

'I think...I think.'

Stephanie's slender fingers moved over the surface of his thighs, up his torso, one around the back of his neck, the other removing the glass from his hand.

'You think too much Angelo.'

Her face came closer. It was all he saw. He looked away, down into her cleavage, then away again; flustered and in disarray. She was pulling him with her hands, enticing with the eyes.

Marco...

His feet went numb as the ice cold waves once again glided across his skin. He felt inclined to step forward out of its uncomfortable grasp, but instead stayed where he was and accepted the mild discomfort. In his own mind it was the least he deserved.

The house on the hill stood as a menacing black spot on the horizon, a once proud creation that was now the scene of a great debauchery. He wanted to hide, but from its lofty position the house was all seeing. No part of the beach was beyond its hawkish eye.

Marco would return, maybe soon? Today? Perhaps in the next instance? He could almost envisage the car traveling along the cliff tops.

Stephanie would hide it from her husband of course. She would be good at that. It was a moment of insanity, a blot on an otherwise seamless page. That's what he'd meant to her. That was all it was, just a pair of arms to help her through the night.

But Angelo wouldn't be able to hide it, not from his brother. Marco would see it in his eyes even before they spoke, and then it would be worse than dying.

For a moment he considered suicide. Just for a moment he resolved to fall back into the brake, let the ocean flood over him, and carry him away in her bosom. But it was only a foolish notion. It wasn't death he sought, only an end to these feelings of guilt that would surely never go.

In his mind's eye they were there once more, lying naked and exhausted by the fire. There had been a danger to the love making, a fear that Marco could return at any minute and discover their treachery. To Angelo it had been everything he had ever desired and everything he loathed most in life, a simultaneous fulfilling and dashing of hopes.

Stephanie had remained silent. She had neither sighed nor screamed out in pleasure, but merely continued her vigil of remorseless quiet. To Angelo it was both disturbing and deeply erotic.

'Stoke the fire my love,' she had whispered in his ear.

'*My love?*' It didn't seem right after such a short time together. Surely it was a phrase reserved for Marco alone?

She handed him the poker. It felt cold and heavy. There were rusty markings along the shaft. The embers glowed into life as he disturbed them, forcing fresh oxygen over the coals. He handed it back, but she gestured to the fireplace. He laid it down on the slate.

That night he hadn't slept a wink. Far too much was going through his mind for it to be at rest. He'd tried to concentrate on the sounds of the ocean, to banish the voices, but they would not be silenced. They whispered and taunted until the sanctuary of daylight:

You chose poorly. We will not be denied our torment.

The bed grew to epic proportions, enveloping him as a minute spec, filling the room he had crafted for Marco.

For Marco...for Marco.

I gave and now I have taken back.

Oh God, what have I done?

Next to him Stephanie slept with the stillness of the dead. She had not moved since pulling the covers across her shoulders some hours ago. There had been no smile and no, 'goodnight.'

How can she find such peace? This is her husband's bed; his unique privilege.

Why had she asked him to stay? Was it not enough to have committed such an offence? Why then did she insist on having him languish in their infidelity? And why had he agreed to the proposal?

He felt weak, as if under some unwelcome spell, or trapped in the grip of a whirlpool, sending him back around the same mistake again and again. He had meant to leave, but had stayed, wanted to refuse the second drink, but had felt it slide down his throat, meant to make his apologies, but had instead found himself removing her clothes, and allowing her to remove his.

Laying there in the dark it struck him how little he knew about her. Stephanie was a woman of few words, a private person who, whilst far from shy, liked to portray this impression to her wider audience. He had no idea where she came from or what she had done in the years leading up to meeting his brother. He didn't even know her age. He guessed at somewhere between twenty-eight and thirty-two, but she well may have been younger or older.

He could have asked of course, but then he never discussed her with Marco for fear of being exposed as the voyeur. He chose instead to bide his time, waiting until his brother mentioned her in conversation, making little asides, building small pockets of knowledge.

Equally he could have asked Stephanie herself, but then he got the distinct impression that her private life was strictly out of bounds.

Finally the night had given way to the clouds of morning. Stephanie opened her eyes and rose from the bed. As she did so the scent of orchids escaped from the covers, wrapping around her like a sensual signature.

The satin sheets slipped effortlessly from her body leaving her naked before his watching eyes – long dark hair cascading over lightly tanned shoulders. Angelo took in every curve; every shade of skin, and the torturous night was instantly forgotten. She was utterly consuming. The fact that she was unattainable in the long run only made her more desirable. He was lost.

She put on a robe and left the room without a word.

He thought of Marco, waking up alone in some nameless hotel, thinking how he could heal the wounds between them, contemplating what gifts to buy her, what words to utter upon his return. Little did he know.

It could never be the same again.

Never.

She returned with two cups of richly aromatic coffee.

'Would you like to join me on the balcony?'

'Sure. Do you have something I could wear?'

'There should be a dressing gown in the wardrobe.'

Marco's clothes.

'I don't think that would be appropri...'

He stopped mid-sentence realising how foolish his words were. Could it really matter after they had come so far from acceptability? What difference would this minor offence make? He took the gown from the wardrobe and put it on.

'It looks cold outside,' she said. 'Put on your shoes.'

Angelo laughed. 'I hardly think they'll go with my morning attire.'

'That's not important,' she answered. 'No one will see you. Put them on.'

'You'll see them. Have you got any slippers?'

Her face turned cold. 'No I have not. *Put on your shoes.*'

The comment took all the humour out of the room. Angelo's smile died on his face.

He had designed the house with deceptive angles. From the balcony it looked as if you were suspended directly above a long vertical drop into the ocean when in reality the banister was set ever so slightly back from it.

He felt obliged to join her out on the ledge, but also felt slightly puzzled as to why her demands should be so specific. He was even more perplexed when he followed her onto the platform to find that one of the panels in the railings was broken.

‘What happened? Isn’t it a little dangerous to be out here?’

‘You’re a big boy,’ Stephanie replied showing rare warmth. ‘We had an accident a while back. Marco’s been meaning to fix that.’

She shuddered.

It looked to be a clean break, like it had been struck with considerably force.

‘Stephanie. What’s going on?’

The directness of his questions cracked her hardened exterior and caused her to weep.

‘Oh *Angelo*.’ She flung herself at him and clung to his gown in a desperate embrace. ‘He gets so...angry.’

Angelo held her tight, not knowing whether to feel blessed or cursed.

‘I love her Andy.’

Marco would never do anything to harm her?

It just went to show that you could never know someone well enough. Certainly Marco considered his brother to be a man of principle and morality. How wrong could you be!

It had been forty minutes since that moment. Stephanie had gone for a shower, no doubt convinced that she could wash away the stains of her iniquity. Angelo knew different. No amount of cleansing could erase this smear against his brother. The very least he could do now was be honest with himself.

He had gone down to the beach unwashed.

The site of the house disgusted him.

He knew that the longer he stayed the worse it would become. He should get in the car and go looking for Marco. He knew his brother’s haunts, where he was most likely to find him.

No, what would you say to him if you found him?

I’d tell him the truth.

What on earth would that achieve?

I’d confront him with the whole thing, come clean. Sure, he wouldn’t take it too well, but at least by being honest I’d go some way towards making amends.

What are you saying? It would take away his reason for living.

What good is happiness when it’s only a charade?

No, he’ll kill you, or worse still he’ll kill himself.

‘I love her Andy. You know she means everything to me.’

I can’t keep this a secret. I’ll drive myself insane.

He was spared from his thoughts by a faint ringing in his coat pocket.

‘Hello.’

‘Angelo, it’s your mother.’

‘Oh hi mum. How are you?’

‘I’m fine thank you son. You?’

‘Good,’ he lied. ‘What can I do for you?’

‘Can’t your mother just phone you up every once in a while for a chat?’

Angelo laughed. ‘You? Never!’

‘It’s your brother.’

Marco! What now?

‘What’s up?’

‘His work has just called. He was supposed to be in London this morning for a meeting but hasn’t shown up.’

‘Don’t worry mum. I’m sure there’s a perfectly reasonable explanation. Maybe the plane...’

‘He wasn’t on the flight,’ his mother interrupted, ‘and he didn’t check into his hotel last night.’

Angelo envisaged his brother sitting on a bar stool somewhere, drinking till he fell off, getting dragged out at closing time, walking the streets dazed.

God how he loves that woman.

Even so it struck him as odd. Marco was in the middle of negotiating a big contract. Whatever his personal problems with Stephanie he could sort them out later. A binge like this could cost him his job. It wasn’t Marco’s style to act so recklessly, even in this extreme of circumstances.

‘I’ve tried phoning him at home but it’s permanently engaged.’

Angelo almost blurted out, ‘That’s because it’s off the hook,’ but then how could he know that?

‘I’ll drive out and see what’s going on.’

‘Oh would you? That would put my mind at rest.’

‘No problem mum.’

‘And if he’s there will you tell him to pick his car up? Your father’s getting sick of parking on the street, and is threatened to have it towed away.’

‘What’s it doing at your place?’

‘He left it here at the weekend. Paulo got the whisky out and they were both too drunk to drive. Stephanie had to come and pick him up. I was so embarrassed.’

‘If his car’s at your place, how did he get to work?’ he asked more to himself than to her.

‘This is why I’m ringing you! Honestly, are you still in bed? You sound half soaked.’

‘No I’m fine mum.’

‘OK. Thanks Angelo, speak to you soon.’

‘Bye.’

He ended the call, his mind racing. All that could be heard was the lapping of the tide.

Stephanie had said that Marco drove away after a row. She’d *explicitly* mentioned the car. If it was sitting on his parent’s driveway at this precise moment then how could he have done? Why would she lie about something like that?

Out to sea the waves had become choppy, stirring up gusts of spray. Angelo stared once more at the house, taking in its isolated character before turning with attention to the ocean.

And how did he get anywhere without a car? It’s miles to the nearest amenities.

A dark mass traveled into his mind, moving slowly just below the surface, using the waves as a distraction, coming closer now, moment by moment.

Closer.

A sudden chill ran through Angelo’s body.

Unless he never left?

The predator stood still, listening carefully as the thoughts of its prey unraveled.

Back at the house there had been signs of a struggle, the broken vase, the torn wallpaper. What if it wasn’t the debris left behind by a violent husband? What if he’d made those marks as he stumbled backwards, trying to shield himself against his attacker?

No, he turned from such thoughts. They were too horrific to contemplate, too fantastical in their assumptions to be true, but they would not be denied. They came to rest on the marks on his sister-in-law’s face, the latch removed from the balcony, the cold, calculated way in which she had seduced him in her husband’s bed, signs of a struggle.

Why had she been so insistent on him wearing shoes? Why had she led him out onto the cold and treacherous balcony when the room had offered warmth? Why had she waited till the evening to call him when Marco had left hours before?

The shoes, the balcony, the seduction, signs of a struggle, the shoes, the balcony, the seduction, signs of a struggle, signs of a struggle, signs of a struggle, signs of a struggle.

The thoughts came too fast for him to focus.

How could she have slept so peacefully?

The answer sailed in on the breeze.

Because she knew her husband wasn't coming home.

'Stoke the fire my love.'

Wasn't that what she had said as she calmly sealed his fate, handed him the implement of his brother's demise, embossing his fingerprints around the handle?

The waves began to break in front of him, the blue turning white, calm turning to froth.

He could envisage his incriminating shoe prints on the balcony where she had...she had.

Oh my God.

There was a noise behind him, the patter of nimble feet over sand, then another noise, louder, like a whip cracking, echoing around the bay. Angelo tried to turn, but he was falling, falling heavily towards the ground. He knew now, knew the truth, but it had come too late.

His body crashed down hard into the retracting waves, dragging him into the ocean depths. His final senses were of the taste of seawater in his mouth, mixed with the unmistakable aroma of orchids.