



STARDUST



*All that I know of a certain star, Is
Mine has opened its soul to me, therefore I love it.*

Robert Browning, *My Star*

IN THE MIDDLE of the ocean, our motor stopped. We stopped. The boat went to and fro, a silent roll and, we hope, no rock. The sea is all around and over us: the sky.

We're scientists. We know what happens next. And after.

'Man is what he eats,' Pietro says to me, and grins. 'So if I eat you, I'll have your wisdom – and your fear.'

The last one left will be a sage. It will take years to wear us down – the ballast is all lemon rice. A precaution for expeditions – it makes sense. We shall eat, and go higher till we scarcely touch the waves, and scud....

Our belts won't go round our plimsoll lines.

Then we heard of the catastrophe on land. Disaster for everyone but us.

We are unknown, our catastrophe belongs to us alone.

The sea – our mission was to search the coasts: the sea's indifferent, I suspect it must despise the cliffs and beaches: or ignore, reject them. Land – its antithesis and challenge.

'It's serious,' the captain, Adil, says. 'No one knows we're here. The "here" is not of import to us, we're stranded, but it would signify greatly to a rescuer.'

'And are we stranded?' Pietro asks. 'We came to look for strands – but now we're free, we're landless, ocean proletarians; we wander, wind-destined, to and fro ... like hungry gulls.'

'I suspect old Mister Noah,' Doctor Chin chimes in, 'remembered when there was all sea, no land. The flood would have brought back memories – of being birthed in tempests, mermen with fins, in swarms, pods: in shoals.... The birds came later, naturally; for fishmen, there'd be no one they must dodge, nothing with wings, at least....'

Adil's impatient. 'Everyone,' he says, 'must categorise himself. By gender and by preference: we're all scientists, so there is no preference. We have the same rules, beliefs, procedures, set the same standard – so ... there is no gender. But you,' he points at me, 'you, Hadar – you're an observer. You write it up, what happens to us. So, you must outlive us all ... and not intrude. Your doings don't come in – nor who you are, or where you've been. Observe our destinies. Pretend you are a scientist, pretend you are what you are not. Write. Don't "be". If we are rescued, we must know exactly who is who ... Though why should we concern ourselves? It's for the history. It signifies, but not right now. So, tell: what shall we enter as your category?'

'I hate the sea,' I say. 'I don't like you, not anyone, not any one of you. Except – there's Doctor Chin. If earth is left, I hope the Doctor will inherit it.'

The others press around – I'm categorised. A sceptic, ignorant, and maybe magical in my thought, my cosmology. But I accept: have your way with naming me. If there's to be cannibalism, I need friends.

'This is a prison hulk,' the captain says. 'So bonding's natural – like jealousy and sex.'

'Perhaps you're angling for another berth, Hadar,' says Pietro. 'Another, smaller boat. To do your observations in. Treachery, my friend.'

'We're not the objects,' Adil says. 'Of anything; research, experiment, hypothesis. But – what are we now? We're subjects without objects. What is our field? There is no matter but ourselves, the boat.... The rest is liquid nights. And we are lost. What is outside us, as we drift? What is our context, how does the water understand us, as we toss...? The sea's our scientist. It will find us, inspect – and then?'

'There's fish to classify,' Pietro says. 'But we shall eat all that we've angled for. They will be us. Shall we be them?'

'Easy,' says Doctor Chin. 'We came to study waves and coasts. There are no coasts, so we are free! In science, freedom is an indeterminacy. That's what we're in, and are – and Hadar too.'

'Hadar doesn't fit,' says Adil. 'Does that matter? Which of us can steer by the stars? That's what they call it, but they mean "steer and move accordingly in some direction...."'

'They left that out at school,' says Pietro. 'Stars knowing where we are. Like the zodiac. Knowing what we'll be. Now, we're in a horoscope –' and he laughs. 'We can voyage with the moon – it takes us far far away, and fast – if only ... we could hitch a tow ... harness a tide....'

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