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Between Two Seas

Novel

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Sample translation by Joel Scott

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Ever since Trude had told him about the painters, Ben saw Skagen and Grenen in a completely different way.

The light! He took it in like the fresh sea breeze. Painters must sort of like magicians, he thought, and not a day later, his mind was made up: if he couldn't swim, he wanted to at least become a painter!

And with this in mind, first he tried his hand with a piece of paper and some coloured pencils. But as hard as he tried – nothing he drew looked the way it was supposed to. In one of the books that Trude had given him, he had discovered a picture titled: *Fiskere trækker vod på Skagen Nordstrand*, which she had translated for him, and meant something like: *Fishermen Hauling in the Net on Skagen's North Beach*. It was even hung in the museum here in Skagen.

That was the kind of thing Ben wanted to paint too. But for some reason, he couldn't get it right. His fishermen looked stiff and lifeless, and the water was just a boring patch of

blue. Trude suggested that he start with something smaller. The monumental paintings could wait. Ben sighed and decided to follow Trude's advice. But he couldn't even get a toy car right.

Finally, his eye was caught by that strange, snail-shaped shell he had found on the beach the other day. He placed it on the little desk in his room and tried to draw it. But when he was done, it was all wrong. Somehow it all looked crooked and wonky, completely distorted, some bits of the shell were too thick and others were too skinny.

How was he supposed to ever become a painter if he couldn't even manage a simple old shell? And it was really a beautiful shell, much more beautiful than anything else he had ever found on the beach here. Ben would have never taken home a boring old mussel shell with him, and he sure wouldn't have tried to immortalise it in a work of art. He had to change his tack. He remembered the stranger from Grenen. Maybe he could help him? He seemed to be German, like Ben. If he wanted to learn to paint, he needed a painter, and the stranger was the only painter he knew – if that's what he really was. But maybe he hadn't even been painting, and was just counting the ships sailing through the Skagerrak. But then why would someone count ships?

He was going to ask him to paint a picture of the shell. If he could do it, then he really was a painter.

That afternoon, Ben snuck out of the little blue house on the northern edge of Skagen, and before long, he had arrived at the dunes. He walked along Nordstrandvej until he reached the end of the hills. In front of him, he saw the flat, sandy expanse stretch out in front of him, continuing all the way to the tip in the north.

Before he even got close, Ben could see that the stranger was standing on the beach again, drawing something in his sketchbook. Ben tentatively walked out from behind the

dunes. He approached as silently as he could, the man was completely absorbed in what he was doing. Ben could just about look over his shoulder.

He cleared his throat and asked: "Could you please paint this for me?"

Theo turned around with a start. But when he saw Ben, he gave him a friendly smile. Ben handed him the shell.

"I'm sure I can."

Surprised, Theo took the shell, felt its weight in his hand for a second and held it up to the light.

"You know what it is?"

"Yeah of course. A shell", replied Ben confidently.

"Yeah, sort of. It's a nautilus."

"Uh huh", said Ben, somewhat puzzled. He didn't have a clue what a nautilus was.

"Where did you get it" Theo wanted to know.

"From around here, I found it down on the beach."

"Really? That's strange, because these animals actually only live in warmer waters, down in the South Sea."

"I'm not lying!", yelled Ben with indignation, snatching back his treasure.

"No, that's not what I meant ... maybe this nautilus just got lost, that can happen. Anyway, every nautilus actually has a secret. If you listen closely, you can hear the sound of the sea inside them. Try it."



Ben held the opening of the spiral-shaped shell to his ear. He could hear the sound of waves. But suddenly his face turned stern, and he asked: “But which sea?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, over there is the North Sea”, Ben said seriously and pointed to the west, “and over there is the Baltic Sea”, and pointed in the other direction. “So which sea is inside here?”

Theo stopped and thought. Uncertainly, he said: “If the nautilus got lost, then maybe it’s the South Sea that we can hear inside it.”

Ben’s eyes widened with excitement, then he shook his head vehemently.

“No, I don’t believe that, ’cos I found three more of them. But I hid them.”

“More? Like this one?”

Ben nodded proudly.

Suddenly they heard a voice behind them. “Ben, what did I tell you?” A second later Trude was standing in front of them and recognised Theo.

“Oh, it’s you. Just so you know, he’s not supposed to just leave the house without telling me”, said Trude apologetically.

“No worries. So your name is Ben?”, said Theo, turning to the boy.

Ben nodded.

“I’m Theo.”

Then Trude saw the nautilus.

“Who does that belong to?”, she said gruffly.

“I found it!”, said Ben defensively.

Trude looked at Theo sceptically and then turned back to Ben: “All right, we’re going home right now and then you can explain to me where you got it!”

She grabbed Ben by the hand, and without properly saying goodbye, she left Theo sitting in the sand.

Ben tried to explain: “I just wanted him to show me how to paint a shell.”

“And? Did he?”

“No, he said it’s not a shell, it’s nautical or something.”

“He’s right”, she clipped, and stopped for a moment: “It’s a nautilus. Did he give you this?”

Ben’s head sunk, suddenly he felt guilty. “I found it, I swear. Down on the beach.”

Trude pulled him along with her until they reached Nordstrandvej, only then did she slow her pace a little.

Theo stayed on the beach, feeling disconcerted. He felt guilty, even though he didn’t think he’d done anything wrong. After all, the boy had come over to him. And Trude? Was the boy

her grandson, staying with her for the holidays? In any case, it was a good thing that she was keeping an eye on the boy.

Then he thought of the nautilus again. At first he'd thought the boy was lying to him when he said he had found the shell on the beach. That he didn't want to admit he'd stolen it from somewhere. But when Ben had told him he had found three more of them, Theo's ears had pricked up. How could these nautilus shells have gotten washed up on the beach all the way up in the Skagerrak? It just didn't make sense.

Theo thought about it a little more. If you had wanted to find an expert to help you get to the bottom of this mystery, you would have inevitably arrived at his name. Theo's brain started to whirl like an old mechanical calculator. Grenen grew blurry before his eyes, both seas melded together, and in his mind, an enormous map of the world unfurled, on which the currents of the world's seas moved about, the warm surface currents in red, and the cold, deep-water ones in blue.

The mechanical calculator in his head replaced figures and variables, and with each change, the currents changed too. The Gulf Stream grew slower and cooler, then quicker and warmer, smaller currents branched off, others petered out, his thoughts grew increasingly audacious, and the more audacious they became, the more he was overcome by fear and doubt. If it turned out to be true that the shell of these primordial animals had washed up here, then it could mean that not just he, but all of his colleagues as well, would have to throw out their calculations, and that disaster was already much closer than they previously thought.

Of course, it was also possible that the shell was from a new, previously undiscovered species from the Atlantic, it could also be an unknown cold-water form of the cephalopod, but there was one thing that couldn't be changed: physics. Neither the North Sea nor the Baltic were deep enough to be inhabited by nautiluses, regardless of what kind. One way or another, they had to have come from the depths of the Atlantic.

The sea lay before him, motionless. Nothing but an enormous, smooth surface all around him, not a wave in sight. *Deep silence weighs on the water*, Theo thought, thinking of the old Goethe quote. *Deadly silence*. He sat up with a start. He packed away his sketchbook. He didn't feel like sketching anymore. He had travelled deep into the depths of Danish solitude to get his mind away from marine biology and had been seized once more by his urge to investigate.

He trudged along the shoreline until he reached the parking lot. He turned the key in the ignition and hit the gas so hard that the tyres spun for a moment. He wanted to get back as quickly as possible, anything to get away from the water. Perhaps he would have to call the whole thing off and head back to the Institute. The idea made him shudder.

But as soon as he got onto the main road, he was stopped by a police car. The pregnant policewoman got out of the car as quickly as her belly would allow. She walked over to Theo's car at a leisurely pace and told him to get out. He sighed, but then complied.

"You're sure in a rush – are you trying to beat the sunset?", she asked him with a scoff.

"Well, I ..."

"You were going too fast."

"Oh no. By how much?"

"I don't know, I'm not a speed camera."

"Then how do you know I was going too fast?"

"Experience. If you're here on holiday, why are you in such a rush?"

For a moment, Theo considered giving the officer a lecture on the topic of global warming and the concomitant shifts in ocean currents, but in the same second, he realised how absurd that would be, and couldn't help but smile.

“Do you find that funny, sir?”, she asked.

But her voice sounded more tired than aggressive. Theo noticed that she looked quite pale. The policewoman brushed her blonde hair back, and her light skin made her look slightly angelic. Suddenly, Theo saw something vulnerable in her.

“Are you feeling all right? Can I help you?”

“Only if you want to deliver my child. God, why do you men always act like a pregnancy is some kind of illness? Pregnancy is not an illness, it's a physically unpleasant experience. And throwing up every now and then is just part of it.”

“My apologies, I didn't mean to offend.”

“You're not. As long as you stick to the rules in future. And now hurry up and get out of here. Or I'll have to write you up.”

Theo nodded and started up the engine. In the rearview mirror, the policewoman disappeared from Theo's sight.

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The next morning, Theo headed to the centre of town. He left his car at a public parking lot and walked into the heart of town feeling chipper.

There was something special about the atmosphere in the town, with its characteristic yellow limewashed houses, red-tiled roofs, and white window frames. The people in Skagen

had been painting their houses in this particular colour forever: “skagen-gul”, it was called, “Skagen yellow”.

It glowed against the rich blue of the sky. It’s no wonder, thought Theo, that at this tip of the European continent, an artist collective discovered the unique light here and captured what was then a small fishing community in their paintings, from all perspectives and under all weather conditions.

The light was still spectacular, but today, Skagen was one of the most popular summer spots in Denmark. Skagen was split into two parts: the Old Town was the historical centre, while the New Town was a modern neighbourhood with hotels, restaurants, and shops. The main businesses were fashion boutiques, while on the side streets, there were rows of bars and a florist.



Theo sat down in a café with a view of the sea and took in the gentle swell. He could hear various Scandinavian languages and there seemed to be plenty of German and French tourists in town as well. The sea was glittering in the morning glow, and seagulls rose and fell above the water. Squinting, Theo’s gaze followed a bird that settled on the water for a

moment, being rocked by the motion of the water. Theo thought about his encounter with Ben the day before and about the nautilus. He decided to pay Trude a visit, and asked for the bill.

The little blue house was hidden behind tall hedges and trees, and stood in stark contrast to the brand-new, elegant villas with their bright colours and their prim front yards. Theo walked through the front gate with his heart thumping in his chest. There was no doorbell at the door. He knocked. Seconds later, Trude opened the door.

“Theo? Is there something wrong with the house?”

“I wanted to apologise.”

“Well I certainly didn’t think you were here to propose to me.” She grinned. “But what do you want to apologise for? Did you trash the house or something?”

“No, about yesterday, with the boy on the beach. Ben, right? I had the feeling that you were annoyed that I had been speaking with him.”

“Right, I see. You should know that Ben is a kind of a foster child. But come inside first.”

She stepped aside and motioned the way to the kitchen. The small room was functional but cosy enough. There was a round wooden table in the middle with four chairs.

“Take a seat, won’t you?”

“Thank you. Okay, so Ben is not your grandson?”

“No. Every summer I have a child come and stay with me. I teach them to swim. The kids come from difficult backgrounds. I have to keep an eye on them. Some of them are quite ... well ... wild. Sometimes they get into arguments or even punch-ups with the local kids,

one of them even nicked something once. Nothing too dramatic, but at a holiday spot, people don't look too kindly on that kind of stuff. So I keep a pretty keen eye on the kids.

“Ben seemed like a pretty good kid to me.”

“Yeah, he's a quiet kid, not a little bruiser, I like having him here. He doesn't have it easy though. His mother is all on her own and has psychological problems. She does her best, but she often doesn't have the energy to look after Ben properly. – And you? What brings you to Skagen? You didn't really come here just to paint, did you?”

“No, I'm a scientist.”

She plonked her elbows on the table, placed her chin on her clasped hands, and waited silently.

“Well to be honest, the whole painting thing ... I'm actually just a beginner.”

“I see”, she said, offering nothing else. Theo felt uncomfortable. He felt as if he were taking an exam.

“Painting is my way of trying to ... well, it's supposed to add some balance to my life. I've been feeling a bit burned out. And here, in this oasis at the end of the world ...”

“I see. Go on, go on ...”

“I couldn't claim to be some great painter, or that I'm a painter at all, for that matter. I'm experimenting, really.”

“Why here, why not in the Alps? Why not paint a bellowing deer by a mountain lake, that's beautiful too.”

“The water.”

“The water?”

“I’m a marine biologist. Water is my element.”

“The boy ... You told him something about ships the first time you met.”

“He was so ...”

“What?”

“He was trembling.”

“You saw that?”

“Maybe I sensed it more than anything. It’s the blend of fear and fascination, I’m familiar with that. You feel attracted to this inconceivable element, and at the same time you’re afraid of it.”

“It’s the trauma”, she said tersely.

“The boy has been through something traumatic?”

“You already know that, don’t you? You knew that the moment you saw him.”

“How would I ...”

“Because you ...” Trude hesitated for a second: “Because you’ve been through something similar. Otherwise you wouldn’t have sensed it in Ben.”

“Me ...?”

“You’ve never told anybody about it?”

Theo said nothing, he dropped his head and bit his bottom lip.

“Maybe it’s time?”, she asked gently and took his left hand in her right. She cautiously rubbed the back of his hand.

“Do you not have anyone you can talk to about it?”

Theo shook his head.

“Well then tell me.”

Theo took a deep breath and began.

“It was ten months ago. I was doing research with a team in the Lombok Strait, a narrow stretch of sea between Bali and Lombok. The flora and fauna there is extraordinary. Moonfish, manta rays, they’ve got everything there. For marine biologists, it’s paradise. There were five of us. The place is infamous for its changing currents. An experienced colleague had serious concerns, but I ...”

Theo swallowed.

“I was the leader. We were all experienced divers, knew the area, and I thought we’d be fine. But as soon as we went under, I knew I’d made a terrible mistake. ...” For a brief moment, it seemed as if Theo couldn’t go on. He looked up at Trude.

“In any case, I can’t dive anymore. Whenever I try to go underwater, I start to panic. I can’t even swim.”

The two of them sat there in silence. The only thing that could be heard was the gentle ticking of the clock on the wall. Eventually, Trude inhaled and said: “I won’t tell you Ben’s story today. One trauma a day is enough. I think you need to get to grips with yourself first.”

Trude smiled.

“But as far as I’m concerned, he can absolutely come and watch you paint sometime, as long as that’s okay with you. I think he’s really curious.”

“I mean, if I can help you and Ben in any way at all ...”, said Theo uncertainly, and left the rest of the sentence hanging in the air. He furrowed his brow. “Oh, one more thing. Ben had a nautilus shell with him when I saw him last. He said he found it on the beach and

that there were more of them. But in theory, that's impossible, because they only live in the South Sea, the water here is much too cold.

Trude gave a start. She stood up abruptly.

"I'm sorry, Theo. I think we've revealed enough secrets for today. And maybe some things should never be revealed. I hope we see each other again sometime soon."

Theo stood up as well and suddenly felt awkward.

"Well, thanks ... for listening."

They both said goodbye. Theo had confided in Trude, but he didn't really know why. On the way back, Theo stopped to look at the sea, which was as smooth as a mirror. There are a lot of secrets hidden under that smooth blanket, he thought to himself.