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# JUSTIN CRONIN

# THE FERRYMAN

A NOVEL



THE  
**FERRYMAN**



A NOVEL

**JUSTIN CRONIN**



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He pass'd the flaming bounds of Place and Time:  
The living throne, the sapphire blaze,  
Where angels tremble, while they gaze,  
He saw; but, blasted with excess of light,  
Clos'd his eyes in endless night.

—THOMAS GRAY, "THE PROGRESS OF POESY"

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## PROLOGUE

**D**awn is breaking when she creeps from the house. The air is cool and fresh; birds are singing in the trees. Everywhere, the sound of the sea, the world's great metronome, beating beneath a velvety sky of diminishing stars. In her pale nightdress, she moves through the garden. Her pace is not hesitant, merely unhurried, almost fond. How like a ghost she must look, this solitary figure floating among the flower beds, the burbling fountains, the hedges trimmed with creases sharp enough to draw blood. Behind her, the house is dark as a monolith, though soon its seaward-facing windows will swell with light.

It is not an easy thing, to leave a life, a home. The details dig trenches within one—scents, sounds, associations, rhythms. The creaking floorboard in the upstairs hall. The smell that greets one in the entryway at the end of a day. The light switch that meets the hand without thought in a darkened room. She could have stepped safely among the furniture wearing a blindfold. Twenty years. She would have twenty more if she could.

It was after dinner that she'd told Malcolm the news. A fine meal, one he loved: broiled lamb chops, risotto with cheese, asparagus grilled in a film of oil; good wine. Coffee and small crè<sup>m</sup>e pastries for dessert. They had decided to eat outside; it was such a beautiful night. A riot of flowers on the table, the tick-tock of the sea, candlelight glazing their faces. You will not know when it happens, she told him. I will simply be gone. Powerless, she watched him as he absorbed the blow, his face in his hands. *So soon? Does it have to be now?* Come to bed with me, she commanded—her body would



say to him the things that words could not—and after, she held him as he wept. The dark hours passed. At last the lassitude of grief engulfed him. Wrapped in her arms, he slept.

*Farewell, gardens, she thinks, farewell, house. Farewell, birds and trees and long, unhurried days, and while I'm at it, farewell to all the lies I've had to tell.*

She is growing older. All the things a woman can do, she has done. The creams and extracts. The hours of exercise and meticulously observed diet. The small, discreet surgeries that even Malcolm does not know about. She has applied every resource to the slowing of the years, but that is at its end. She had decided to wait until someone remarked on it, and then, out of the blue, it happened.

“Are you taking care of yourself, Cynthia?”

They had just played tennis, the usual Tuesday group, a dozen women, all good; afterward, glasses of iced tea and salads everybody just picked at, no matter how hungry they were. She hadn't played well. She had played, in fact, quite badly. Her knees were sore and slow; the sun felt too strong, sapping her strength. It was time she felt in her limbs, its inexorable march, while all around her, in the bodies and faces of her friends, it moved at a genteel crawl.

But, the question. Her friend was waiting for an answer. Her name was Lauralai Swan. She was close to sixty but looked thirty: skin taut; limbs lean with yoga-sculpted muscle; glorious, bountiful hair. Even her hands looked good. Was the question an expression of genuine concern or something darker? Cynthia had known this day would come, and yet she'd been caught by surprise, no answer at the ready. Her mind was sorting rapidly; just in time, it came to her. What she needed was a joke.

—Believe me, she said, if you were married to Malcolm, you'd look tired, too. The man won't take no for an answer.

She laughed, hoping Lauralai would laugh, too, and after a fraught moment, she did; everyone did; and soon they were all talking about their husbands, each woman raising the bet with every story that passed around the table, even comparing their men to former lovers and ex-husbands. Who

was better, more considerate in bed. Who left his soggy jogging shorts on the bathroom floor. Who squeezed the toothpaste from the middle of the tube.

It was, in sum, a pleasant afternoon in the sunshine, all of them talking the way women liked to do. But inside herself, Cynthia felt something drop. *Are you taking care of yourself?* The thing that dropped: it was a blade.

*Farewell to all of this and all of you, who gave me what passed for a life.*

And yet: it is not the parties and concerts she will miss; not the good leather of her luggage and shoes; not the long dinners with beautiful food and good wine and sparkling talk until all hours—none of these. What she will miss is the boy. She thinks of two days, one a beginning, one an end. The first was the day he had come to her. She had expected to feel nothing; adopting a ward was simply one more thing a person in her position would do. The boy was, in that sense, a form of décor, like the couch in her living room or the art upon her walls. *Oh, you've taken a ward!* people would say. *You must be so thrilled!* They had seen a picture of him, of course. One did not choose blindly. Yet the moment Cynthia caught sight of him, standing at the rail of the ferry, something changed. He was taller than she had anticipated, at least six feet, his height amplified by his neutral, poorly fitting clothing, rather like pajamas or a doctor's scrubs. Though the wards were staring over the rail with a kind of unfocused blankness, he alone was looking about, taking in the sight of the crowd and the buildings of the city and even the sky, tipping his head upward to feel the sun on his face. His haircut, she saw, was awful. It looked like a blind man had done it. That was something she'd have to see to right away, getting the boy a proper haircut.

“Do you think that's him?” her husband said to her, and when she failed to answer, he addressed the adoption agent who had accompanied them to the ferry: “Is that our son?”

But Cynthia absorbed this conversation only vaguely. Her husband's voice; the buzz of the crowd; the sun and sky and sea: all seemed to pale by comparison to the sudden, vivid reality of the boy. Questions rose in her

mind. What food would he like to eat, what clothes to wear? What music to listen to, what books to read? And what was this sudden impulse to wonder about these things? He was a presence produced entirely by paperwork. So why did she feel a rush of sudden tenderness toward this arbitrary being? The ferry completed its last maneuvers; the wards assembled at the top of the gangplank. Confined by a rope barrier, none of the guardians was permitted to approach. The boy—*her* boy—was first in line. (“Her” boy? Had it happened that fast?) He kept his eyes forward as he descended to the pier, his steps measured, his hands gripping the rail. He might have been stepping from a spacecraft onto the surface of an alien world, so methodical was each motion of his body. At the base of the gangplank, he was met by a man in a dark suit with a clipboard and a woman in a lab coat, holding a reader. The man in the suit did not speak to the boy; instead, he bared the boy’s arm and held it out while his associate, presumably a doctor, inserted the wires into the ports on his monitor. A pause followed as the doctor examined the data; an anticipatory hush had settled over the crowd. At last she looked up, lifting her voice to the crowd:

“Will the guardians please come forward?”

The agent unhooked the rope, allowing Cynthia and Malcolm to advance; the boy did the same. The three of them met in the empty space between the crowd and the gangplank. The boy was the first to speak.

“How do you do?” he said, and smiled warmly. “I am Proctor, your ward.”

He offered his hand. The gesture was something he had obviously been coached to do.

“Well, there you are, son,” her husband said. Beaming, he shook the boy’s hand keenly. “It’s nice to finally meet you.”

“Hello, Father,” the boy replied, and turned to Cynthia, hand similarly extended. “And you must be my mother. I am very happy to make your acquaintance.”

Your acquaintance! She wanted to laugh, and nearly did. Not a laugh of derision, but one of pure delight. How polite he was! How eager to be good, to please them, to make them a family! And his name. Proctor, from the

Latin *procurator* (she was later to learn; her husband knew such things): a steward or manager, one who attends to the affairs of others. How perfect! She did not shake the boy's hand but, rather, wrapped it in both of hers and held it, feeling its warmth, its pulse of life. She looked into his eyes. Yes, there was something there, something different. Something...soulful. She wondered about the kind of man he'd been before. What had he done for a living? Who had his friends been? Had he had many wives?

Had he been happy?

"Cynthia, you can let the boy go now."

She laughed then, releasing him. *You must be my mother.* He was just a boy, newly reborn in the world—six feet tall but a boy nonetheless—and that's what she would be. She would be his mother.

It's true, she thinks now, making her way down the sloping lawn to the pathway. The sky is softening; the stars have washed away; at the horizon, a glowing margin of light has appeared. That was the day when she had taken the boy into her heart. And not just the boy, but Malcolm as well. This austere, moral creature, this lover of codes and protocols—it was as if a wand had been waved over his life, as if he were an adult-sized Pinocchio turned by sudden love into a person. The virile grin on his face as he'd shaken the boy's hand; the light of joy in his eyes when he'd shown the boy his room, with its matching teakwood bed and bureau and paintings of ships on the walls and the old telescope positioned on its tripod, facing the sea; how, at dinner, he'd fussed over everything, wanting the boy to feel welcome, and patiently guided him in the application of his knife and fork and napkin; and finally, at day's end, the muffled snap when Malcolm closed the boy's bedroom door, saw her standing in the hall, and held an upright finger over his lips: *Shhhhh*. How could she not feel something for such a man?

And the second day, years later. She had heard something once, long in the past, about love and letting go. She did not recall the words, only the idea: that loss was love's accounting, its unit of measure, as a foot was made of inches, a yard was made of feet. It was the boy's first year at university: a year of triumph, when a special gift emerged. He had told her

not to come that day—it would make him nervous, he said, to know she was there—but still she had done it, taking a seat high on the natatorium bleachers where she could go unnoticed. The air was warm and wet, the acoustics disorienting. Far below her, the pool formed a neat rectangle of otherworldly blue. She watched with vague interest and a slow tightening in her chest as the various races came and went, until the boy's turn arrived. The 100-meter freestyle. He looked like all the other contestants—in their snug suits and goggles and silver caps, they were virtually indistinguishable—yet he alone was hers, his presence as particular as the day when she'd seen him at the rail of the ferry. He was standing by the pool, shaking his arms, rolling his neck. Watching him, she experienced a feeling of enlargement, as if he were an extension of herself, a colony or outpost. He made a little skipping motion and, with puffed cheeks, expelled a nervous breath of air. He was going into himself, she understood, like a man putting himself into a trance.

The signal was given; the swimmers mounted the blocks. As one, they bent at the waist, fingertips skimming their toes. The crowd tensed. For an interminable second they froze, and then the horn sounded, a sheen of noise, and ten hale young bodies launched through the air and were swallowed by the water.

Her heart leapt.

Her boy was in the third lane. A long subsurface glide and he emerged. She was on her feet now, shouting like a madwoman. “Go, go!” His strokes, impossibly long, propelled him through the water as if it were nothing. It was all happening so quickly, mere seconds, yet in those seconds she felt something infinite. He made his flip turn, pushed off, and surfaced once more, popping into second place. Two strokes and he pulled into the lead. What had seemed impossible was now about to happen. She was crying out, her heart flying with adrenaline. It was unfolding before her eyes: the greatest moment of his life.

The race was over before she knew it. One moment he was reaching out to touch the wall; in the next he was spinning in the water to look up at the clock, where his name shone beside his winning time. He raised a fist in

triumph, his face glowing with impossible joy. She did not know it then, but he hadn't merely won the race; he had shattered the record by two-tenths of a second. The boy in the next lane slapped his upraised palm.

He broke away and looked up to scan the crowd. Suddenly Cynthia knew. His protestations had been a ruse. He had known all along that she would be there. It was as if his victory were a gift he had given her. But as she was rising to call out to him, a girl went tearing down from the stands to the pool deck. The boy hoisted himself quickly from the water. He stripped off his goggles and cap as the girl flew toward him, and then she was in his arms. Her feet actually lifted off the ground, so elated was their embrace. Without embarrassment he locked his mouth to hers in a long, deep kiss. The crowd cheered raucously; some in the stands began to whistle.

There had been girls, of course. He was a boy, after all, broad-shouldered and tall, with an easy smile and a way of looking at you when you spoke that said he took you seriously, that he was actually listening, not just waiting for his turn to talk, the way most boys would do. In other words, all the things girls loved.

But this girl was different. It was the kiss that told her so. Why had he never mentioned her? The answer was obvious. He hadn't mentioned her because the thought had never occurred to him.

She left the natatorium in a hurry, badly shaken. She felt banished, erased. Her boy was a boy no longer; he had taken his place at the table of life. As she exited the building, the afternoon sunshine hit her like a spotlight, all bright pain; she reached into her purse for her sunglasses and slid them onto her face. A portion of her had always held itself apart—the end had been ordained in the beginning, the way the final chord was built into the first measure of a symphony—yet nothing had prepared her for what she was experiencing now. How love had made a liar out of her! This was the thought that at last brought tears to her eyes, and she hurried down the steps and across the parking lot and onward, into the busy afternoon, alone.

All of it gone now; all of it lost.

At the end of the pier, the dinghy awaits. She lowers herself into it, sets the oars into their locks, and casts off. The sun has risen, shooting tendrils of pink into the sky above the placid sea. There is no wind at all. She permits herself a quiet moment, just drifting, then takes the oars into her fists and strokes away from shore.

The pier, the beach, the dunes, the house where she has lived for two decades: all grow smaller. The images blur into generalities, then are gone. Past the point, the ocean changes, becoming dark and wild. The sun has grown warm on her neck. Waves jostle her as the boat rises and falls into the troughs between them.

She's waiting for a witness.

She hears it before she sees it—a quiet, breathy buzzing, like a sustained “v” pushed through closed lips. The drone comes in low over the water on its dragonfly wings, decelerates, and moves into position above her. Made to resemble an insect but inarguably mechanical, it manages to look simultaneously natural and man-made and therefore neither. She lifts her face to look directly at it. From its shiny chrome underbelly, a glass dome bulges, holding the camera.

Who is watching her? She imagines a man, in the basement at the Ministry of Public Safety, sitting before a wall of monitors. He has been up all night; his eyes are tired and dry, his chin covered with stubble, his breath sour in his mouth. With his boots propped on the counter, he is penning in a crossword from a book of them. Something causes him to glance up. What have we here? A woman, alone in a rowboat. Odd, to see someone out at this hour, and is that a nightgown she's wearing? He punches a few keys. On a second screen, which shows the outline of the coast, a red dot appears to indicate the position of the drone. The woman in the nightgown is three miles from shore.

More keystrokes. Via the computer's facial-recognition system, the man gleans more data: her name, her husband's name, her address, and that she is fifty-one years old. Further, he learns that she is a former employee of the Board of Overseers' Department of Legal Affairs; that she is a member in

good standing of the Harbor Club, the Union League, and the Opera Circle; and that she has received, in the last two years, six parking tickets, all paid. He learns the names of the charities to which she's given, the news organs she consumes, the contents of her bank account, her dress and shoe sizes (6, 8½), and the name of her favorite restaurant (Il Forno, on Prosperity Square; according to her credit card records, she eats there once a week). He learns, in other words, a very great deal about her, yet nothing that tells him why she's in a rowboat three miles from shore at 6:42 (he checks the time) on a Tuesday morning in July. Wearing a nightgown. By herself.

And what's she doing now?

Rubbing his eyes, he pushes his face closer to the monitor. From under the bench the woman has retrieved a small satchel. She pulls the knot loose with her fingertips and removes the contents, three items, setting each one on the bench beside her. A stick or dowel, about a foot long. A pair of wire cutters. And, sheathed in old leather, a knife.

The man at the monitor picks up the phone.

Indeed, it is only by viewing events through this imaginary man's eyes that Cynthia is able to do what comes next. While he watches with gathering anxiety, waiting for his superior to answer, she places the dowel into her mouth and pulls up the sleeve of her nightgown to expose her monitor port, a small rectangle embedded halfway between her left elbow and her wrist. She takes the knife in her hand. It is six inches long with a curved tip, of the type used to scale and gut fish. Three long breaths follow, her grip tightening on the knife. She places the tip of the knife into the small groove of flesh at the edge of the monitor, waits for the boat to still, and when it does, she shoves the blade into her arm.

The pain is astonishing, as is the volume of blood that erupts. The image on the man's screen has no audio; what he would hear is a series of strangled screams as she carves around the monitor's perimeter. The silence is, for him, a blessing, and Cynthia feels a twinge of pity for this unknown person, chosen by chance to endure this horrific scene. By the time she's done, her nightgown, the bench, the floor of the rowboat—all are drenched with blood. Her head is afloat in agony; she thinks she might have cracked a



tooth. With a final plunge, she wedges the tip of the knife under the monitor. A ripping sound and a wet, hollow pop, and at last the device comes free.

*Pick up, goddamnit*, the man breathes into his phone. *Pick up, pick up, pick up.*

Two snips with the wire cutter, and she drops the monitor over the side. She removes the dowel from her mouth and tosses this into the sea as well. Specks of light, like fireflies, dance in her vision; she has begun to pant. A moment to gather the last of her strength and Cynthia reaches to the bow to free the anchor from its holder.

She begins to loop the anchor line around her ankle.

And this is when the man's superior finally answers the phone. Yes? he says curtly. What the hell is it? Why are you calling at this hour?

But the man at the monitor doesn't answer. He cannot answer. He can speak no words at all.

Cynthia rises. Her blood-soaked nightgown clings to her flesh. The boat jostles beneath her; she very nearly falls. Her limbs feel disconnected; her head is made of air, impossibly light. Still, she finds the strength to lift the anchor and hold it against her chest.

She tilts her face upward. Above her, against a blue morning sky, the drone hovers.

What is she thinking? But the man at the monitor cannot know; he couldn't even imagine. She is thinking of the boy and the man and their unlikely life together, too brief. *Goodbye*, she whispers. *Goodbye, my darlings, I never should have loved you but I did, I did.* And hugging the anchor to her chest—tenderly, like a mother with her child—she closes her eyes, rocks backward, and is swallowed by the water.

I

# THE LAST BEAUTIFUL DAY



**T**he dream was always the same.

I am swimming in the sea. Below the surface, breath held, I push my way forward through a liquid, blue-green world. My limbs feel clean and strong, my strokes effortlessly powerful; sunlight shimmers on the surface, far above.

On a trail of exhaled bubbles, I ascend. The sun is setting, making ribbons of color against a purpling dome of sky. Drawn by an unknown influence—my actions are neither voluntary nor involuntary, they simply *are*—I swim away from shore. Night falls slowly, then all at once, whereupon I experience a terrible sense of error. This is all a grand mistake. I pivot toward shore to find no lights anywhere; the land has disappeared. Panicked, I spin wildly in the water, all sense of direction obliterated. I am alone in an infinite sea.

“You don’t have to be afraid, Proctor.”

A woman is swimming next to me with a smooth breaststroke, her head held erect above the surface, like a seal’s. I cannot make out her face; her voice isn’t one I know. Yet there is something about her presence that fills me with a great calm. It is as if I have been waiting for her; at last she is here.

“It won’t be long now,” she says gently. “I’ll show you the way.”

“Where are we going?”

But she doesn't answer. As she glides away, I follow. There is no wind, no current. The surface of the sea is as motionless as stone, the only sound the gentle swish of water passing through our cupped hands.

She gestures skyward. "Can you see it?"

A single brilliant star has appeared. It's different from the others—brighter, more distinct, with a bluish tint.

"Do you remember the star, Proctor?"

Do I? My thoughts are diffuse, drifting like chips of straw in a current. They skip from point to point. The ocean, its impersonal, inky vastness. The star, piercing the sky like a beacon. All is known and unknown; all familiar, all strange.

"You're cold," she says.

I am. My limbs tremble, my teeth are chattering. She moves beside me.

"Take my hand."

I have, it appears, already done so. Her skin is warm; it seems to pulsate with life. It is a rich sensation, powerful as a tide. It flows through my body in a wave of softness. A feeling of homecoming, of home.

"Are you ready?"

She pivots toward me. For a moment her face is revealed, but the image is too quick, unable to be retained, and then she is kissing me, pressing her mouth to mine. A torrent of sensation barrels through me. It is as if my mind and body have suddenly been linked to infinite forces. I think: *This is how it feels to love. How have we forgotten how to love?* The woman's arms have coiled around me, pinning my hands to my chest. Simultaneously, I become aware that the character of the water is altering. It is becoming less dense.

"Time to wake up, Proctor."

I wave my legs frantically to hold myself afloat. But this is useless. It's as if I'm kicking air. I am held fast, barely able to move; the sea is dissolving, opening like a maw. Terror squeezes my throat, I cannot cry out...

Her voice is a whisper, close to my ear: "Look down."

I do, and with that, I plunge. *We* plunge, down into an infinite black abyss, and the last thing I think is this:

*The sea is full of stars.*

---

My name is Proctor Bennett. Here is what I've called my life.

I am a citizen of the archipelago state called Prospera. Located far from any landmass, Prospera exists in splendid isolation, hidden from the world. Its climate, like all things about it, is entirely beneficent: warming sunshine, cooling ocean breezes, and frequent, gentle rains. Island one, known as Prospera proper, is roughly circular, covering 482 square miles. It is here that all Prosperans reside. With its shorelines of crystalline white sand, interior forests abundant with wildlife, and inland valleys of the most fertile soil, it might be mistaken for a mythological paradise. Island two, known as the Annex, is home to the support staff—men and women of lesser biological and social endowments who nevertheless are, in my experience, wholly pleasant to be around. Roughly a quarter the size, it is connected to Prospera by a floating causeway, over which these helpful citizens travel daily to perform their various duties.

The last of the three islands is different from the others, in that we know very little about what occurs there, only that it does. This is known as Nursery Isle, or, more simply, the Nursery. Protected by dangerous shoals and towering cliffs, it might be likened to a floating fortress. There is only one way in, an opening on the eastern flank of the island, through which the ferry passes—a journey that each Prosperan takes twice per iteration, once at the beginning, once at the end. I cannot say who lives on Nursery Isle, though doubtless someone must. Some people say that the Designer himself resides there, overseeing the regenerative process that serves as the foundation for our exceptional way of life.

In this lush land, free of all want and distraction, Prosperans devote themselves to the highest aspirations. Creative expression and the pursuit of personal excellence: these are the cornerstones of our civilization. We are a society of musicians and painters, poets and scholars, artisans of every type. The clothes we wear, the food we eat, the social gatherings we attend, the

spaces in which we work and rest and recreate—each facet of daily life is subject to the most scrutinizing curatorial eye. One might say that Prospera itself is a work of art, a canvas upon which each of our citizens brings to bear a single, exquisitely rendered brushstroke.

What is our history? How did we come to be? To these questions I haven't much to offer; even the year has become difficult to know. And what we know of the rest of the world's present state is, in a word, nothing. Protected by the Veil—an electromagnetic barrier that hides us from the world, and the world from us—we are spared this dismal tale. Yet one can easily imagine. War, pestilence, famine, environmental collapse; vast migrations and fanaticism of every stripe; a world de-civilized as the earth's peoples, sworn to competing gods, turned upon one another: such were the convulsions that inspired the Designer to build our hidden sanctuary in ages past. Rarely, if ever, do we speak of these matters, known collectively as “the horrors,” because there is no profit in it. Which is, one might say, the heart of the Designer's genius and the whole point of Prospera: to shelter the best of humanity from the worst of it.

To leave Prospera is, naturally, forbidden. Word of our existence would threaten everything. But who could desire to leave such a place? From time to time one hears of someone—always a member of the support staff—who has foolishly attempted to journey beyond the Veil. But since none has returned, and our secret existence has remained intact, one can safely assume that these troublemakers have met with failure. Perhaps the seas have swallowed them. Perhaps they have found no world to receive them, civilization having finally consumed itself utterly. Perhaps, as in a tale widely told, they have simply sailed off the edge of the earth into oblivion.

As for myself: In my present iteration, I am forty-two years old. (Prosperans start the clock at sixteen, the approximate biological age of new iterants freshly off the ferry.) My current social arrangement, my first, is a fifteen-year contract of heterosexual marriage, renewable. After eight years together, I would say that Elise and I are generally happy. We are not the ardent lovers we once were, practically unable to keep our hands off each other. But these things soften over time, yielding at their best to an easier,

more comfortable kind of partnership, and that is where we find ourselves. Our home, which Elise's guardians paid for—given my relatively modest salary as a civil servant, I could never afford such a thing on my own—sits atop a rocky promontory on Prospera's southern coast. Never have I seen Elise so blissfully in her element as during the two years of its construction. For hours every day, she huddled with the army of architects, artisans, and craftspeople, guaranteeing that her fingerprints lay upon even the smallest detail. I admit, my own interest was more tepid; I lack Elise's eye for these things and would have been content to take quarters closer to town. I was also concerned about her guardians' influence on our newly joined lives, her mother's in particular. But the house makes her happy, and therefore makes me happy, and it's there that Elise and I conduct our lives, all to the sound of wind in the palm fronds and the gnashing of white-toothed waves upon the beach below.

My job, as managing director for District Six of the Department of Social Contracts, Enforcement Division, is one that some people find unsettling, even a bit macabre. But the name "ferryman" is one I'm proud to wear. Sometimes the gears of emotion need grease to run smoothly, and I'm there to provide it—when, for instance, an elderly citizen, suffering the mental disturbances that often accompany the final years of iteration, cannot bring themselves to move on. These can be tricky situations. But most people, even when they resist the idea of change, can be brought around to see the wisdom of it. To embark upon a voyage to a wholly new existence; to put down the accumulated weight of life and wipe the slate of memory clean; to be reborn as a fresh-faced, bright-eyed teenager in perfect health. Who could fail to desire these things?

And yet.

There are times when the mind cannot help but wonder, to look askance at life. One thinks of the support staff. How different their lives must seem to them. To be born in the old-fashioned manner, shot into existence as a wet, squealing nugget, bathed in perfect innocence. To live one life and one life only, hemmed by swift time. To give one's days to earnest work of measurable results (the freshness of the mown lawn, the surgical

spotlessness of the well-scrubbed kitchen, the farm field sown and reaped and sown again). To bear children of one's own and watch them stand, then walk, then grow into their lives. To pass fifty, sixty, seventy years upon the earth and then sail into thoughtless oblivion.

To believe in a god when there is no God.

In the abstract, their lives can make ours seem arid by comparison. I cannot help but feel a twinge of envy. But then I consider the heaviness and sorrows of such permanent entanglements. Love can fail. Children can precede their parents to the grave. The body collapses in a swift cascade of biological humiliations, a parade of pain. For the support staff, deprived of the blessings of reiteration, there are no do-overs, no escapes from the shocks and regrets of life. And so the envy dims.

Leaving what? An infinitude of perfect days, and a dream in which, pinned in the arms of love, I am plunging into stars.

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A certain Wednesday, not so very long ago. A Wednesday in June, not because the date is important but because that's the day it was. The twisted, sweat-dampened sheets; the night's imagined terrors (sea, stars) dispersing; the morning's seaborne light, filling the bedroom like a golden gas; I, Proctor Bennett—Prosperan, husband, ferryman—open my eyes and know at once that the house is empty. I rise, stretch, don my robe and slippers; in the kitchen Elise has left a pot of coffee. Fresh ocean air washes through the house from the open patio doors. I pour myself a cup, add a dollop of milk, and step outside.

For some period of time I simply stand there, watching the sea. It has long been my habit to begin my days like this, allowing my mind to clear at its own pace. Sometimes my dream departs instantly, like a popping soap bubble. On such mornings I often wonder if I have dreamed at all and am simply remembering other nights of other dreams. Then there are mornings when the dream lingers in my mind as a kind of overlying, second reality, and I know that its images will color my emotions long into the day.



This is such a morning.

I have always been a dreamer—that is to say, a person who has dreams. As a general rule, citizens of our world do not dream. This is widely thought to be a by-product of the industrial poisons that once blanketed the planet, although a not-entirely unwelcome one. Why, when our waking lives are so satisfying, should we feel the need for such tortuous flights of storytelling? I say Prosperans do not dream, but that is not entirely correct. It is the oldest among us who do. In my line of work, I have seen the consequences many times. The restless nights and strange visions; the gradual disordering of thought; the final plunge into lunacy that is so painful to witness. Speaking for my profession, we try not to let things get that far, but that doesn't mean it never happens.

I've managed to downplay this part of my life for the most part—but this has not always been so. As a young ward, I was beset by nighttime visitations of such power that they often propelled me from bed to wander the house in a state of dazed unawareness, performing the most incomprehensible acts. Turning on all the taps. Mangling a light fixture. Making a butter-and-jelly sandwich and, perplexingly, hurling it out the window. (This was directly observed by my father; by that time, my guardians' practice was to leave me alone unless I was in danger of hurting myself.)

The thought may amuse now, but it didn't at the time. Eventually the situation so unnerved my guardians that my mother took me to a doctor. At the time I was just a year or two off the ferry. The world was still a new place to me, and apart from my daily ride to the Academy of Early Learning, I had yet to see much of the island. The shuttle took us inland, following a winding country lane through farm fields and orchards before letting us off at a nondescript office building in the middle of nowhere. By this time we were the only passengers. The structure was little more than a concrete cube, though pleasantly landscaped with flowering shrubs and a soft green lawn still wicked with moisture from the overnight rains. In the office, a woman took our names and told us to wait, though the room was otherwise empty. As the minutes ticked by, my waning excitement allowed