The Sea-Wave
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a flash novel

Rolli

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for anyone who has ever drowned
When the old man stole me I remember thinking: At least I have my memorandum book. It was in the hanging pouch on the left side of my wheelchair, with some pens and raisins. In the right pouch was my new copy of *David Copperfield*. My old copy got ripped apart by shitheads.

My memorandum book is two hundred unruled pages. I filled up most of them before I was stolen, so I’m fitting things in where I can, writing everything down that I can.

The old man ... The first time he talked was along the road with the roses. He bent over and his beard brushed the top of my head. I reached up to shoo the fly but felt his dry beard.

He could be talking about himself, his own life. Or remembering something. Sometimes I mix up things that happened to me and things that happened to David Copperfield. It’ll be hard, writing my autobiography.

I’m not sure he’s talking to *me* but I’m writing the words down. I’m a slow writer but he speaks slowly.
I’m the old man’s biographer, too.
I’m scared to death.
He’s coming back.

I hear the sea. In the deep of night, I hear it. As I lie awake, and often in ... my dreaming.

It was a prison. A kind of prison. A cell, of stone. One could hear the sea. It shattered on, the walls. Beading them with water. I could feel this, in the darkness, sliding my hand. My terror was always that the walls would truly shatter. That I would drown, on wet stone.

The brothers. They came and went freely. Brother Ulgoth was a dark man. His skin, an African’s. When he moved through the halls — I soon knew this moving — it was ... the moving grass. His robes. I would close my eyes. I would imagine grass, beneath his black feet. I would listen, to the rushing of grass, and then his voice at the grille of the door.

“Are you comfortable?” he would ask me.

I was so seldom comfortable. I would seldom say anything but: “Yes, I am comfortable.” Our ritual.

“I am so pleased,” he would say.

And he would move away. I would stand there, listening. To the grass. In the wind. Imagining.
And there was brother Godslee. He came instantly and without sound. Delivering food, water. I talked with him, sometimes. We talked often. Though never ... for any length. I would be speaking to him, about some small thing. About food, perhaps. And then I would ask him: “Where is this place?” Or: “What is the name, of this place?” And then he would change. His openness, would close. A curtain. He would say not a word, but turn away. He would pass me my bread, and turn away. He would slide down the hall like the crust of bread, down my throat. He would go. And I would remain. Wondering.

I was one evening, sleeping. I did not often sleep. The waves kept me awake. Sometimes I slept, for I woke one evening. There was something. The sliding, of something. A familiar something. It was ... the grass.

“Are you comfortable?”

I sat up. It was not the time. It was the customary voice. It was the question. But it was not the time.

I could not answer, I did not. When a man wakes in the night, when he is suddenly woken, he feels ... he is hanging. From his feet.

I said nothing. I listened, but heard nothing. It was silent. I lay down. My imagining.

I attempted, again, to sleep. I was nearly sleeping.

But I was again arrested, by a sound. It was the moving grass. Then a breathing, at the door. The grille. And the voice said:

“The sea-wave comes and goes forever. It rushes against everything forever. Nothing, not iron, survives it. For the sea-wave flows forever. It takes away everything, forever. All crumbs, and the phantoms of all things. Until they’re nothing. Everything, we have. The good things of earth. The miserable things. All suffering. All, is salt. Your bones. They will wash away. It will take them, the wave, away. The Earth, itself, is salt, and will wash away. In the wave. For it comes and goes, forever.”

I closed my eyes. I close them again, remembering.
When she said that I shut the door and cried for a long time. When I opened it again I could just hear leaves.

Another time, Mom said how hard her life was and wondered why god was punishing her. I’m not just a wheelchair kid: I double as a kind of holy wrath.

Listening to her, overhearing her ...

It’s listening to acid rain.

When Tay-Lin comes over, just before, I take the elevator to my room and hide. I’m not afraid of Tay-Lin, she’s pretty and shy. I just don’t like being around people much. I go to my room and shut the door loudly, then open it a crack and listen.

Mom must value Tay-Lin as a listener because she never shuts up in front of her. Only sometimes do I hear this leafy sound which means Tay-Lin is speaking. When Mom asks her over I know it’s because she’s got something on her mind and she wants to dump it onto someone else’s mind. She talks about things she probably wouldn’t talk about if she thought I was listening. Or if Dad was around. One time she told Tay-Lin she didn’t care much for milk in tea and she never really loved my dad. She married him because it was something to do. It was an uncertain time in her life because she was having seizures. She wasn’t supposed to conceive on seizure meds but god’s an eccentric and she’s proud she was gifted with such a beautiful child.
I had the Chatter for almost a year. It sounds like a disease; I guess it was. It was a computer. It clamped onto my armrest like a feeding tray. I pressed letters on a screen and the Chatter said them out loud in a loud voice. The voice was called Circuit Sam, a deep male voice with zero expression. Which is just how I imagined my voice sounding.

My parents loved the Chatter because it made their lives easier. It made my life a bit easier, but ...

In a bookstore, if I pressed the bathroom icon, there were icons that saved time, Circuit Sam would shout “Bathroom,” and everyone would turn their heads then turn them back and pick up the book they’d just put down. Sometimes the button would stick, and Sam would just keep saying something over and over until I felt like dying.

I stopped using the Chatter. I got sick. I felt like a sick machine. My parents wanted me to keep using it, but I’d only mash the keyboard or type profanity. So they took it away. They never really got rid of it, just packed it away, like a wedding dress, hopeful.

I write notes now. It’s slower, but I like it better. When you read a note in your mind, you read it — you think of it as being in a human voice, the voice of whoever wrote it. I hope that when my parents read my notes they hear the voice of a sad, bright kid who’s at least trying.

They might just hear Circuit Sam.
trading happy for not being the wrecking ball and the house it’s wrecking. I can do that for people, at least.

It’s not much.

It’s something.

I like being alone but not really. Every day I wake up and think: What if Mom’s dead, what if she just dropped dead? If she doesn’t get me up by 7:35, I’m sure she’s dead. I lie there under a thought bubble of her on the floor with a broken jam jar and a broken head. A closet shutting means she’s collapsing. Then she comes in the door, and it’s okay to hate her again.

I’m a loner. It’s just easy. It protects me. It’s safe in my room. I read books, I’m a bookmark. You don’t get loved but you don’t get hurt either by people you love, which hurts more than anything. It’s easier to hate people the way they hate millionaires, they’ll never be one. I’m alive, I have a skeleton, but I’ll just never be a real kid or feel like a real human being.

When people see me they feel sad. They might smile sadly. I shake up their moral centres. I wreck their shopping day. There are people who do that even to me.

I hate being one of those people. I can’t just hide all day though I sometimes want to. I sometimes do. I’m
Writing

My memorandum book was a gift from my cousin the writer. At first I thought it was cheap because I’d’ve rather had a real book. But then I thought it probably would’ve been one of her books, so I was lucky. I threw the memorandum book in my desk drawer. But one time when I was just so angry I couldn’t read I took it back out and started writing in it. Writing is hard for me, it takes a long time, but I’m getting better. It helps with my anger. My sadness.

My cousin said all kinds of family drama winds up in her books, and since no one reads them, no one finds out. She still gets invited to the BBQs, and gets handshakes from the people she said were bullshitters. Writing is a kind of minor revenge, like stealing the left slipper of someone who stabbed you in the neck, which I guess to her makes it worthwhile. Personally . . .

I haven’t decided yet.

I didn’t see who stole me, not for hours. Not till we were out of the city.

I pictured—in the bubble above my head was a pudgy guy with glasses and acne, floating in sweat, who filled the whole bubble.

The guy who walked in front of me when my chair stopped moving and climbed down the riverbank and knelt down ...

He was just a frail old man. A stick man, who pricked the bubble.

The old man knelt down and looked at the water, at his reflection in the water, I’m guessing. Like Narcissus only old and puzzled. He didn’t drink at all, just stared.

When he got up, I closed my eyes. I’m not sure why. I didn’t open them until he was back behind me, and we were moving again.

I think if he was going to murder me or hurt me ... He’d’ve done it a long time ago.

Right?
went to Hell but it was Disneyland.

At a school assembly, the principal called me forward. Someone pushed me forward. Someone in a Mickey Mouse suit came out of the bathroom. As he put his arms around me — I am terrified of mascots, the principal said I’d love it at Disneyland. Then he hugged me, too.

My parents appeared. They put their arms on the pile. They looked so happy. When a sick kid wins a prize ... I wondered if I was dying.

When we finally got to Disneyland, my parents fought the whole way, I couldn’t go on most of the rides because they weren’t “equipped for my needs.”

We ate corn dogs and took pictures.

Before I could stop him, Donald Duck squeezed me and as I screamed inside, Dad snapped a photo. It hung on the living room wall for years until I knocked it down with a broom and pushed it deep in the trash. There’s still a blank space on the wall. No one’s said anything.

We haven’t been on vacation since.

We were in a dried up pasture. My legs were getting scratched up pretty bad by cactuses. I saw a brick building in the distance. The old man must’ve noticed it too because he turned me towards it and pushed me as fast as he could.

It was a house — once. It had three walls and no roof, like a diorama. Teenagers had partied in it. “François’ Cathedral” was spray-painted on the one wall. “Becky is a whore” was spray-painted on the other.

The old man walked through the door hole, there was no door, and around the house.

The floor was rotten in places. I was afraid — I thought he might fall through the floor. But instead, he went batshit.

He picked up a part of a bedframe and hit the walls with it. He kicked them. Whatever he could get his hands on, he threw it. He threw bricks. He threw himself. He knocked down the one wall just by ramming into it.

The old man didn’t calm down until the last wall
had fallen. Then he sat in a rotten armchair with his head in his hands, panting.
   I remember thinking: What the fuck is wrong with this guy?

My fat aunt Coral is a riot and a lousy person. She is just so pink and fat. She laughs too much, and wears too much enormous jewellery. She’s like a pig on a pearl leash sniffing out gossip then trotting up to your table and vomiting. I like her gossip because it’s malicious and it’s nice to know who’s dying. She is shallow and destructive.

My dad and Coral are siblings but don’t talk much. When she comes over he likes to say hi then take a nap or run errands. Then Coral will put her feet up and talk to my mom for hours.

I typically avoid my family but with Aunt Coral I don’t mind hanging around and listening. It’s great listening to people gossip because it’s the one time they mean what they’re saying. It has to be a huge relief to people. Aunt Coral likes to kick off her tight shoes — it probably feels like that. She gets so comfortable, it’s like she’s lounging on her skeleton. And then she says the most shocking things about everyone I ever heard of, and never stops smiling.
I like Aunt Coral. She talks to me without changing her voice, like I’m an everyday person. She even talks to me when other people have left the room. That’s a small thing, but it means a lot.

One time she told just me that her one daughter wasn’t even her husband’s daughter, but just from some fling with the butcher. I thought: Why are you telling me this? But I guess she needed to tell someone and figured I was a pretty safe bet for discretion.

The last time I saw Coral she was fifty pounds heavier than the time before. She wheezed just coming up the front steps, and right away sat down. She doesn’t leave her house much now but sits in her armchair with the phone in her hand. “I tell people the truth,” she told my mom once, “but I tell my telephone everything.” All day she sits there soaking up gossip and getting fatter and fatter. She needs a cane now from the knee strain, and will probably be in a wheelchair one day. I’m kind of looking forward to it.

The day I fell down the stairs...

Mom asked me if I was okay staying home by myself for an hour or two while she went to the dentist, and I of course said yes. I was initially supposed to go along but she was running behind. She took me to the bathroom then took off.

I thought I’d watch a movie. So I wheeled towards the elevator, which is right at the top of the stairs. I pressed down hard on the forward button on the directional pad. Pressing harder doesn’t make me go any faster, it’s just impertinence. Once in a while, though, pressing too hard makes the button stick. Which is just what happened. Sometimes I can unstick the button, but there wasn’t time, there’s maybe two feet between the elevator and the staircase. I didn’t have time to panic even, just to brace myself as that top step got closer and I shot over it.

I didn’t instantly fly out of my chair or anything, I bumped violently but held on tight. For a while I thought I’d be okay, I’d just thump on down in my chair then
cruise across the floor till I stopped. Another possibility: I might stop half-way down on the landing and have to wait there like it was an ice floe till someone rescued me.

Neither of those things happened. Just before I got to the landing, I flew out of my chair, I couldn’t hold on. I did a hard somersault where my neck almost snapped before my body flew over top of it. Then I slid down on my back, hit my butt hard and became airborne. I landed with a loud click on my face on the hardwood floor. My glasses broke in half. Then my wheelchair landed on my back.

I lay there in a pile waiting for my mom to come home and put me together again. I could see the clock on the cable box. An hour passed. Two. Three. I held on as long as I could. Then I shit my pants.

It got dark. Still no Mom. At six, Dad came home from work. He put his coat on the coat rack, and flicked on the light. When he saw me lying there, he said: “Shit.”

He was right.

The old man has dandruff. When he wheels me over a rough patch, it snows. My glasses are blanketed with skin cells.

“To scratch an itch,” said the narrator of a nature documentary, “is one of nature’s greatest pleasures.” Well, I might feel an itch, a wicked itch on my leg or something, my back, but there’s nothing I can do. When you ignore an itch it only gets more powerful. Like North Korea. Or it floats all over me, this lilypad of itchiness, up and down my body and I scream internally. When it finally passes there’s a kind of mild relief which is probably not even close to as good as you’d feel from scratching.

I don’t have dandruff. It would be worth having dandruff, though, if I could only scratch it. I can touch my head, but ... 

Life is quite a bit worse than a nature documentary.
Mom has major depression. “I have major depression today,” she’ll say, like it’s a headache, and take Aspirin. She goes to Dr. Blignaut twice a week but she goes to me two or three times a day to complain about her major depression. She has no energy, she says, it’s a labour of Hercules to even make toast. “I wish I was dead,” she’ll say, but I have difficulty believing this because if she was dead she’d have no one to complain to.

Dad works twelve hours a day and when he’s not working he’s running long errands. He could be having an affair. When he is home, he opens a newspaper and holds still for two or three hours. Mom looks for him but it’s too late because his skin has changed to the colour of newsprint. So she hunts me down, instead.

It’s depressing.

The only kid I ever identified with was Bacon Bones. His head was too big. He went from being a shy, big-headed kid to a total shithead. He got bullied so much about his big head that he hurt too much for just one kid and needed to hurt other kids. But he never hurt me. He even once defended me from people. I guess I was the one kid he identified with.

Too bad he’s in prison.
It was not a dream.

The wave came in. I was sleeping. I leaped up. My hands. I felt the cold water, pouring.

I felt on the wall, for the hole. It was only very small. I thought to grab something ... but there was nothing. So cold, the water, on my throat.


I could hold no more.

I cried out.

Someone opened the door.

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I miss the smell of people. The old man has a smell but it’s just the one smell and not a good one. If you put maybe ten people together, there’s just instantly this smell, sort of like how whatever’s in garbage smells like garbage. I miss that people smell where there’s sweat and perfume and whatever and it gets painted on your skin and taken with you like an odour coat. I tried smelling my sleeve to see if I still smelled like my house, like *people*, but I didn’t. I smelled cold, and strange. Which is pretty much how I felt.
About the Author

Rolli is a writer, illustrator and cartoonist from Regina, SK, Canada. He’s the author of two short story collections (I Am Currently Working On a Novel and God’s Autobio), two collections of poems (Mavor’s Bones and Plum Stuff) and two children’s titles (Kabungo and Dr. Franklin’s Staticy Cat). His cartoons appear regularly in The Wall Street Journal, Reader’s Digest, Harvard Business Review, The Walrus, Adbusters and other popular outlets. Visit Rolli’s website (rollistuff.com) and follow him on Twitter @rolliwrites.