

BREAKWATER

By: Liz Hull

KATE

Hey there. I know it's not that safe or smart to send you this, and I definitely don't expect for you to send me one back. In fact, let me go ahead and say right now: do not send me a message back. That'd just be stupid.

KATE

But I miss you, ya know? And I can't always send you cryptic messages when I'm filling in for the traffic report, hoping you'll not only hear them but understand them. Also, stupid. But, by the way, speaking of stupid, I mentioned you on the air a few weeks ago and I've wondered ever since if you heard it. Not by your real name, obviously, but I was talking about how I used to tell you stories you hated. Like that one about the faithful girl and the skeptic. I've been thinking: which one do you think I am? The faithful or the skeptic. Oh and you can go ahead and wipe that smug look off your face because I'm not asking who wouldn't push who into the ocean to meet her doom. We both know the answer to that.

KATE

I can practically hear your cackle echoing in this little room. Anyway, while I'm talking about stories, there's one I've never told anyone, least of all you. And while I've got you here listening, I think I'm ready to tell it.

[INTRO THEME]

KATE

Remember that breakwater off the eastern shore where we spent a few summers? Where there were those cabins and that campsite my dads would take us to? I'm sure you do. The beach faced the Chesapeake Bay and they had half-sunken old concrete ships a ways off the beach to protect the shore during storms. They built that fleet to transport goods and whatnot during World War II -- concrete is cheaper than steel I guess. And it's just as tough. Maybe even more adaptable. I've always thought it was so romantic -- that these huge, broken-down ships that no one really knew about got second chance at finding their purpose in this world. That sunken graveyard helped keep others alive.

KATE

Well, you know how obsessive I could be as a kid. One night I went out there all alone and waded into the water to look at those ships silhouetted in the moonlight. My eyes and skin were all dry from swimming in the salt water all day. I don't think my hair had ever been frizzier. I miss that feeling.

KATE

That night I was staring out on the water and a ship caught my eye, silently skimming across the surface really close to the breakwater. It was weirdly quiet -- like Prius quiet. Ships didn't run on renewable energy in those days, either. That wouldn't be weird on it's own, I guess. But it was the feeling I got when I saw it, like when you accidentally make eye contact with a stranger on the bus. Like I'd been caught looking at something I wasn't supposed to look at. And I couldn't move. A cloud passed over the moon, but the ship still shone out there on the black water under that black sky. Even the lights on the bay bridge flickered, which looked huge then but now seems so tiny and insignificant. Seaweed, or . . . something else started to curl around my feet and tangle in my hands. It wasn't moving with the current, it was sliding up my calves completely independent of the tide. I tried to kick it off, to run back to the shore, but I couldn't move, and I couldn't take my eyes off that ship. That's when the sand underneath me started to cave in, quick. It pulled me down to my knees and sent me splashing face-down into the water.

Even though I was in the bay it felt like wave over wave was crashing on top of me. I kept getting thrashed onto the shells and sand at the bottom right as I thought I was going to make it above the surface. I tried screaming, but the water just rushed into my throat and into my lungs. The back of my throat actually burns, still, when I think about it.

I heard a lot of things in the water, then. A lot of things I didn't understand then and still don't now. There were voices, and one familiar one that I latched on to. I still hear it sometimes, just a few seconds after I fall asleep. The voice said one thing on repeat: "stay out of the water or you'll stay in forever."

After that I think I blacked out for a minute, because the next thing I remember I was on my hands and knees on the beach choking and spitting out salt water. No ship in sight. "Stay out of the water or you'll stay in forever."

Now you know I'm not the superstitious kind. I'm not going to let some disembodied voice run my life.

I am, however, really into risk management. I don't know if you ever noticed that I never swam in the ocean after that, but it's surprisingly easy to do without ever having to explain why. Even if I wasn't going to go IN the water, though, nothing could keep me from being out on it.

I looked for anything I can find on that ship -- a name, a port of origin -- that was the first research I got really into. Like, okay, did you know that there was an abandoned cruise ship floating out on the Atlantic at one point with cannibal rats on it? Because that's 100% true. Look it up.

[SIGH] I wish everything I found was like that. I could have lit up that cruise ship like a blowtorch at a gas station and been done with it.

I also wish that had been the last I ever saw of that ship. It wasn't. It would have been a lot easier to convince myself I'd hallucinated the whole thing. I hadn't. Maybe I could have tried therapy.

Instead, I spiralled a little. [LAUGHS DARKLY] Or, more than a little to be fair. Each time I saw it, I heard the voice again and felt the saltwater in my lungs. "Stay out of the water or you'll stay in forever."

I can see it so clearly now, but in my obsession to not let this one recurring episode run any part of my life, it consumed it quietly in the kind of way that now that you know, it might make sense of some of the things I've done. I saw it four times before graduation. Six before deciding to join the coast guard. I thought I might have a better chance of reaching it out on the water. Meeting it face to face.

We're getting into murky supernatural territory here but I swear I started to think it didn't want to be found, it just wanted to make itself known and heard. It wanted me to hear that warning -- or threat -- and so it kept luring me out farther and farther onto the ocean. It's like the mystery was perfectly crafted for me. My own

siren song. I had to solve it or defy it, whichever came first, so I could be in control.

I saw it nine times before becoming a Bridge travel agent, though obviously that decision was a little more complicated. You were there, actually. It was that night we broke into Aqualand, for, you know . . . reasons. We hadn't even waited for it to be completely dark because the only people we were at risk of running into was teenagers who decided this was the most manic-pixie-dream-place to make out. [SOFTENS] But no one was there -- it was just us and the electric blue night and all those ruined rides. We even found that generator that powered up the carousel and that drop tower ride that had some awful name: Shoal Survivor or Prawn Sacrifice... it was the worst.

You hopped on the eel on the outside row of the carousel, laughing at your own lewd joke, and I criss-crossed my way to the inner-most row so I could ride the giant squid -- obviously. And under those yellow, flickering lights and that frenzied out of tune music, I looked at you and saw it. Immediately. The ship was out there on the ocean just gliding along in the dark. With every rotation we'd end up in the same place, with the ship just beyond your left shoulder, looming there. I remember you said something but I'm not sure what, because all I heard was "stay out of the water or you'll stay in forever."

The generator cut and you said something clever, as usual. The ship was gone, then, and we went about our business but I knew then I'd come back to the bridge.

And even once I got out here, in all of my research, through basically the entire internet, through old archives and catalogues -- nothing. I was going about it all wrong. The ship I was looking for didn't match any ghost ship records.

I know now that it did, however, match the description of a sunken ship -- one that went down right around the time those concrete ships were in their prime during the war. And it wasn't sunken by enemy ships, but by its own crew. They deliberately sacrificed it as a blockship, basically just an obstacle to keep a channel from being used.

I know it probably sounds like I'm reading WAY into this because they're inanimate objects and all, but I'm starting to realize that

the breakwater I'd always thought of as so romantic -- the ships that were getting a second chance at finding their purpose in this world -- they're not finding that purpose at all. It was forced on them. Someone decided they were more useful like that. More useful dead than alive.

I don't know, I just never really thought it was worth telling. But I had to tell someone -- really, I had to tell you: as I was standing out on the balcony here on Watchtower 10 last night, for the tenth time in my life, I saw that ship.

CREDITS:

Thank you so much for listening to The Bridge. This mini-episode of The Bridge was written by Liz Hull. It was edited by Alex Brown. It features Liz Hull as KATE. The music playing under today's episode was composed by my very own husband and Shoal Survivor, Jake Hull. Want to ride Prawn Sacrifice? Well, you can't, but you can find transcripts, character bios, and all more Bridge-related content on our website, thebridgepod.com. You can also find us on Facebook, Twitter, or Tumblr, or you could send us an e-mail at watchtower10reports@gmail.com. And as always, please rate and review us on iTunes, or the podcasting app of your choosing!

Thank you, once again, for listening to The Bridge. Today's outtake is dedicated to our downstairs neighbor's dog, Windsor.