



Summer short story special

## Jon McGregor *We Wave And Call*

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*Jon McGregor*

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**A**nd sometimes it happens like this: a young man lying face down in the ocean, his limbs hanging loosely beneath him, a motorboat droning slowly across the bay, his body moving in long, slow ripples with each passing shallow wave, the water moving softly across his skin, muffled shouts carrying out across the water, and the electric crackle of waves sliding up against the rocks and birds in the trees and the body of a young man lying in the ocean, face down and breathlessly still.

**Y**ou open your eyes, blinking against the light which pulses through the water. You look down at the sea floor, hearing only the hollow suck and sigh of your own breath through the snorkel, seeing the broken shells, the rusting beer cans, the polished pieces of broken glass. Black-spiked sea urchins clinging to the rocks. Tiny black fish moving through the sea grass. A carrier bag tumbling in tight circles at the foot of the shoreline rocks. You hold out your hands, seeing how pale they look in the water, the skin of your fingers beginning to pucker a little. The sea feels as warm as bath water, and you're almost drifting off to sleep when you hear the sudden smack and plunge of something hitting the water nearby.

You turn your head, and see a young boy sinking through the water, his knees to his chest and his eyes squeezed shut. Above, way up in the air, another three boys are falling from a high rocky outcrop, their shorts ballooning out around their hips, their hair rising, their mouths held open in anticipatory cries. One of them flaps his hands, trying to slow his fall. The other two reach out and touch the tips of their fingers together. All three of them look down at the water with something like fear and joy.

Your friends are watching as well, sprawled across a wide concrete ledge jutting out over the sea. Claire turns and looks for you, waving, brushing the knots from her wet tangled hair. Her pale skin is shiny with sun cream and sea water.

"We're making a move now," she calls; "you coming?"

The others are already standing up, brushing bits of dirt from their skin and shaking out their towels. You lift the mask from your face and take the snorkel from your mouth and tell her you're staying in a bit longer. You'll catch them up in a minute, you say.

They pick up the sun cream and water bottles, the paperback books, the leaflets from the tourist information office in town. The girls lift up their damp hair, squeezing out the water and letting it run down their backs. Andy buttons his shirt and steps into his unlaced trainers.

"We're not waiting for you," Claire says. You wave her off and say that's fine. You'll be out in a minute or two.

The night before, sitting at a table outside one of the cafes in the old town, the girls had got up to go to the toilet together, leaving their tall glasses of beer on the table and tugging at their skirts. Andy had caught your eye, and lifted his drink in salute, and you'd both smiled broadly at your good fortune. Nothing had needed to be said. You'd left behind long months of exams and anxieties in the flat grey east of England and landed suddenly in this new world of cheap beer and sunshine, of clear blue seas and girls who wore bikinis and short skirts and slept in the room next door. It felt like something you'd both been waiting years for; something you've long been promised. It felt like adulthood. The girls have already made it clear, by their pointing out of waiters and boys on scooters, that they're more interested in the locals than in the two of you. But there's still a chance. A feeling that something could happen; that anything could happen. It seems worth thinking about, at least.

You put the mask over your eyes and lie back in the water for a while, looking up at the steep sides of the bay, kicking your legs to send yourself drifting away from the rocks. You're not sure you ever want to get out. At home, the beach is a few minutes away, and you've grown up running in and out of the sea. But you've never really swum; there, you run in, shouting against the shock of the cold, and run out again as soon as you can. Here, you could sleep in the clear warm water. You watch the others making their way up the path between the pine trees and oleander bushes. A bus drives along the road at the top of the hillside, stops near the gap in the railings, and moves off. A young couple on a scooter overtake it, the boy riding without a shirt or a helmet, the girl wearing a knee-length wraparound skirt and a bikini top, her hair flowing out behind her.

Birds hang still in the warm currents of air drifting up the side of the hill. The grasshoppers sound out their steady scraping shriek. The air is thick with the scent of crushed pine needles and scorched rosemary, heavy with heat.

Along the bay, at the bottom of a steep flight of steps cut straight from the rock, there's another small bathing jetty. A girl in a black swimming costume sits on the edge, her feet in the water, a white towel hanging over her head, reading a book.

Further along, where the bay curves round to form a long headland jutting out into the sea, there's an ugly concrete hotel with its name spelt out in white sky-line letters. Half the letters are missing, and when you look again you see that the whole building is a ruin: the windows shot to pieces, gaping holes blown in the walls, coils of barbed wire rolling across the golden sands. Shreds of curtain material hang limply from windows and patio doors, lifting and dropping in the occasional breeze.

You hear some girls screaming, and look round to see a group of boys soaking them with water bottles, laughing when the girls scramble to their feet and retaliate with flat stinging hands. The sounds carry softly across the water.

You'd seen a map, this morning, at the entrance to the city walls, marked with clusters of red dots. The red dots were to show where mortar shells had landed during the war, where fires had started, where roofs had come crashing in. It was the only sign you could see, at first, that anything had happened here. Everything in the town seemed neat and clean and smooth: the streets polished to a shine, the ancient stonework unaffected by the destruction which had so recently poured down upon it. But when you'd looked closer you'd seen that the famous handmade roof tiles had been outnumbered by replacements in a uniform orange red, and that the stonework of the historic city walls alternated between a weathered grey and the hard white gleam of something new. There were whole streets boarded off from the public, piled with rubble. There were buildings whose frontages had been cleaned and repaired but which were still gutted behind the shutters. And in a tiny courtyard workshop, under the shade of a tall lemon tree, you'd seen a fat-shouldered stonemason carving replica cornices and crests, the shattered originals laid out in fragments in front of him, glancing over his shoulder as if to be sure that no one could see. You'd wondered how long it would take for this rebuilding to be complete. How much longer it would take for the new stones to look anything like the old.

The others are halfway up the hill now, walking slowly along the pine-needled path, letting their hands trail through the sweet-smelling bushes, stopping for a drink of water and looking down at the calm shining sea. You watch them for a moment. You wave, but none of them sees. You call. If you were to get out now you might be able to catch up with them before they get on the bus. But if you wait for the next bus, they'll have cleared up by the time you get back, and got some food ready, and be waiting for you. Jo went out to the market before lunch, so the apartment's small kitchen is well stocked. You can imagine arriving back to find the others sitting on the terrace around a table loaded with food: bread and cheese and oranges, olives and pickles and jam, big packets of paprika flavoured crisps. You can imagine cracking open a beer and joining them, making plans for the night.

You turn your face into the water for one more look before you get out, sucking in warm air through the snorkel. You catch sight of a larger fish than the ones you've seen so far. Something silver-blue, twice the length of your hand, drifting slowly between the rocks. It flicks its tail and glides away, and you push back with your legs to glide after it, trying not to splash. It slows again, leaning down to nibble at the wavering tips of seaweed, and as it flicks into another glide you follow, watching from above, quietly kicking your legs to keep pace.

And you think about last night. About what might have happened with Jo. Walking between the cafe and the bus stop, the alleys crowded, the buildings still giving out the heat of the day, the dark sky overhead squeezed between window-boxes and washing lines and women leaning out to smoke and look down at the crowds below. You lost sight of the others for a while, and then Jo was there, saying something, touching two fingers against your chest, letting one finger catch in the opening of your shirt. What did she say? It could have been nothing. The whole thing might have been nothing. But there were her fingers against your chest. That smile and turn. Walking behind her, and all the side alleys and courtyards that might have been ducked into. And then catching up with the others at the bus stop, and nothing more being said.

You watch the fish flick its tail beneath you, stopping and starting through the sea grass, and you curl your body across the surface to keep pace, the sun hot and sore across your back. It happened once, last year, at a party after the exams. In the back garden, kissing against the wall of the house, and for what must have been only a few minutes there was nothing but the taste of her mouth, the movements of her hands, the press of her body. And then she'd stopped, and kissed you on the cheek, and walked unsteadily into the house, and nothing had been said about it since. It might have been nothing.

The soft wet bite of her lips, the trace of her fingers, the thin material of her skirt in your hand, the weight of her warmth against you. It was probably nothing at all.

You look up out of the water, turning to see if she's reached the top of the path. Maybe she'll hang back and wait. You're further out than you realised. It would be good to head back now, to pull yourself up on to the concrete ledge, let the sun dry the water from your back while you gather your things together and hurry along the path to join the others. You pull your arms through the water, feeling the pleasant stretch of the muscles across your shoulders and back. You kick with your legs, hard, and your feet and shins slap against the surface, and you realise how long it's been since you last swam properly like this, actually covering a distance. You should do it more often, you think, stopping for a moment to tuck the snorkel into the headband of your mask, spitting out a mouthful of sea water. You launch off again, enjoying the way your body cuts through the water, the air on your back, the sea sliding across your skin. The snorkel slips out of place, spilling water into your mouth, and you have to stop again, coughing, to clear it from your throat.

You see the others on the path, and you see a bus passing along the road, and you see the birds hanging in the warm air rising up against the side of the hill.

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📷 Photograph: Emma Critchley

You take off the snorkel and mask. They're getting in the way, and you'll get back to the steps quicker without them strapped to your face. You try swimming with them held in one hand, but they slap and splash against the surface and drag you down, and you're not getting anywhere like that so you stop and tread water for a moment. You're further out than you thought.

The afternoon's quieter now. No one's jumped from the outcrop for a while. The teenagers on the ledge have started to gather their things together and drift back up the long twisting path to the road. The girl reading a book on the other bathing jetty has gone. The back of your neck feels as though it might be starting to burn. It probably would be good, after all, to catch the bus with the others. You think about just dumping the snorkel and mask, but it seems a bit over the top. There's nothing like that happening here. There's no problem. You can't be more than 100, maybe 150 yards from the shore. You tie them to the drawstring of your swimming shorts instead, and swim on.

This morning, in the old town, ducking into an art gallery to escape the glaring heat, you'd found the city's war memorial, unmarked on the tourist maps. It had looked like another room of the gallery at first, and you'd drifted into the circular space expecting more vividly coloured paintings of wheat fields and birch woods and simple peasant-folk labouring over ploughs. But there were no paintings, only photographs. Black and white photographs from ceiling to floor. Row after row of young faces with dated haircuts, thin moustaches, leather jackets and striped tracksuit tops. The photos were blown up to more than life-size, and one or two had the inky smudge of a passport stamp circled across them. There were names, and dates, and ages: 22, 57, 15, 19, 31. There were candles burning on a table in the middle of the room, a bouquet of flowers, a ragged flag. Some of the boys in the photographs had looked the same age, and had the same features, as these teenagers jumping from rocks and squirting water at girls, boys who would have been half the age they are now when the war happened. You wonder if any of them lost older brothers, cousins, uncles, fathers. You wonder whether any of them remember much about it; if they duck into that cool, whitewashed room every now and again to remind themselves, or if they prefer instead to leap from high rocks into the warm ocean, to ride motor-scooters with the sun browning their bare chests, to lie with long-limbed girls in the scented shade of aged and twisting trees.

Perhaps when you get back no one will want to go to the trouble of laying the food out on the terrace and clearing it all away again. Perhaps you'll all go to the pizzeria down by the dockside and sit at a table on the street, picking the labels off cold bottles of beer while you watch the old women offering accommodation to the tourists coming off the boats. Perhaps Jo will catch your eye and keep you talking until the others have moved on, and shift her chair so that her leg touches yours.

Swimming with the mask and snorkel tied to your shorts is worse than holding them. They're dragging out between your legs like an anchor, pulling you back. You stop and tread water again, breathing heavily. You only paid a few pounds for them. They can go. You can always tell the others you left them behind by mistake. You unpick the knots and let them fall away. They hang in the water for a moment, lifting and turning in the current. You watch them sink out of view, and realise you can't see the bottom.

The others are at the top of the path now, and one of them leans out to look down at the ledge where your things are still gathered in a heap. You wave, but whoever it is turns away and steps through the gap in the railings, crossing the road to join the others at the bus stop, out of sight.

You take a breath and swim, fiercely, lunging through the water, blinking against the salt sting, heaving for air, and there's a feeling running up and down the backs of your legs like the muscles being stretched tight but you keep swimming because you'll be there soon, climbing out, pulling yourself back on to solid ground, and you keep swimming because there's a chance that the current has been pushing you away from the shore, and you keep swimming because this isn't the sort of thing that happens to someone like you, you're a good swimmer, you're young, and healthy, and the rocks aren't really all that far away and it shouldn't take long to get there and there isn't anything else you can do but now there's a pounding sensation in your head and a reddish blur in your eyes and a heavy pain in your chest as though the weight of all that water is pressing against your lungs and you can't take in enough air and so you stop again, for a moment, just to catch your breath.

One of the boys, in the memorial photographs, had had a look in his eyes. Startled. As though the flash of the camera had taken him by surprise. As though he had known what was coming. The plaque said he was 17. You wondered what had happened. If he really had seen it coming. You've seen pictures of an old fort on a nearby island, the walls spotted with bullet marks, the entrances surrounded by shallow craters, and you imagined that boy crouching on the roof, or in the shaded interior, holding an old rifle in his shaking hands, listening to the encircling approach of men and equipment through the trees and bushes outside. You imagined him listening to their taunts. Wiping the sweat from his eyes. Avoiding the glances of the men left with him. Wondering how they had all ended up in that place, what they could have done to avoid it, what they were going to do now. Knowing there was nothing they could do.

A bus stops on the road at the top of the hill. The others must be getting on it by now, rummaging in their pockets for change and wondering how much longer you're going to be. When you get back they'll all be sitting out on the terrace, watching the yachts gathering in the harbour for the evening, listening to children playing up and down the back streets behind the apartment. You'll take a beer from the fridge, hold the cold wet glass against the back of your sunburnt neck, and ask where the bottle opener is. No one will be able to find it at first, and then it will turn up, under a book or a leaflet, or in the sink with some dirty plates, and you'll flip the top off the bottle and take your seat with the others.

You swim some more, and there's a feeling in your arms and legs as though the muscles have been peeled out of them, as though the bones have softened from being in the water too long, and you can't find the energy to pull yourself forward at all.

You turn on to your back for a few moments. A rest is all you need. It's been a while since you swam in open water like this, that's all. A few moments' rest and you'll be able to swim to the rocks, to the steps, and climb out. You'll be able to hang a towel over your pounding head until you get your breath back, dripping water and sweat on to the sun-bleached concrete, feeling the warm solid ground beneath you. You'll be able to gather your things and make your way along the path, pulling on your shirt as you go. And the grasshoppers will still be calling out, and the air will be thick with rosemary and pine. The sandy soil of the path will still kick up into dusty clouds around your ankles. Your swimming trunks will be dry by the time you get to the top of the hill, and you won't have to wait long for a bus. And while you stand there the sea will be as calm and blue as ever when you look down over it, drifting out to the horizon, reaching around to other bays, other beaches, other villages and towns, other swimmers launching out into its warm and gentle embrace.

And this will be a story to tell when you get back home, sitting under the patio heaters at the Golf Club bar, looking out over the cold North Sea and saying it was a nice holiday but I nearly never made it home. Or later this evening, sitting at some pavement cafe in a noisy bustling square with tall glasses of cold beer, telling the story of how you'd almost swum out too far. How you'd had to dump the snorkel and mask. It was a close one, you'll tell them. I called out but you didn't hear. No one heard. Best be more careful next time, someone will probably say; even when the water looks calm there are still currents. Just because it's warmer than back home doesn't mean you can treat it like a swimming pool, they'll say, and you'll laugh and say, well, I know that now. And everyone will go quiet for a moment, thinking about it, until the waiter comes past and you order another round of drinks. And raise a silent toast to all the good things. The cold wet glass against the back of your sunburnt neck. The trace of her fingers, the soft wet bite of her lips. The juice of an orange spilling down your chin. Music, and dancing, and voices colliding in the warm night air.

You swim, and you rest. It won't take long now. It's not too far. You look up, past the headland and into the next bay along, and you swim and you rest a little more. Sometimes it happens like this..

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