

The Dark Boy
by Marta Randall

A year or two have passed since Marta Randall's fiction last appeared in our pages. Actually more than two decades have passed since we ran "The View from Endless Scarp" (but who's counting?), so it behooves us to say a word or two about Ms. Randall's career. Her debut novel, Islands, was published in 1976 and she has since published seven more, including Journey, Those Who Favor Fire, and the mystery Growing Light. She served as president of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America and for most of the current century, she has been teaching writing classes for the Gotham Writer's Workshop—check out www.writingclasses.com/ for more info on the course.

Her new story sticks to charted waters, but it plumbs the depths oh so nicely.

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Nancy stood at the unmarked bus stop on the *carretera* in front of the resort. She zipped up her windbreaker against the cool dawn air and peered down the road, worried that she had misunderstood the concierge's directions, that the bus had changed its route and nobody knew, that she had been misled. But of course she hadn't. The bus rattled up. Chattering Mexican hotel maids and gardeners swung off and, passing her, politely nodded. When she climbed aboard, the driver and remaining passengers looked surprised. Tourists didn't ride the local bus, at least not middle-aged lady tourists, but there was no other way to reach town this early. She smiled nervously and paid her fare; two men jumped up and offered her the front bench seat. Cheeks flaming, she took it and stared out the window, and tangled her fingers together.

She could do this.

The land along the road into Cabo San Lucas reminded her of a checkerboard: lush tropical plantings interrupted, as though by a knife, by the real landscape, yellow and dry: cacti and strange parched trees and sawtoothed mountains in the distance, formed of gigantic bouldery rubble like the leftovers of some geological building site. Signs in Spanish flashed by. Huge, gated resorts, the concrete block skeletons of still more resorts, small businesses, occasional wildflowers to remind her that January is spring in Baja. The bus discharged passengers at other resorts. Pemex gas stations. Golf courses. Restaurants. A dilapidated bull ring, buildings pressing closer to each other, and the bus entered the town. Or, at least, the tourist part of town.

The driver pulled over in front of a *supermercado*. Nancy sat still for a moment before stepping down to the sidewalk. She watched the bus pull away.

She stood blinking in the Mexican sunlight, trying to get her bearings. It was already getting warm. Boulevard Marina curved away to the right, bordered on the harbor side by hotels and on this side by storefronts and tiny real estate offices and restaurants and curio shops and bars, pressed together in a jumble of pinks and yellows and blues. Grills rattled as merchants pulled them aside or rolled them up, preparing for the day; a few cars chugged past. There were no Americans visible. She took another calming breath. She could do this. A week spent hiding in her room, huddled behind sunglasses or newspapers on the resort's beach, calling for room service so as not to face anyone ... it was ridiculous. Ginny would have laughed at her.

She had her money and papers in a Ziploc bag in the pocket of her jeans, and a rolled-up five-dollar bill for tips. She took out the ticket she had bought for the dawn whale-watching tour. The back of the ticket showed a map of downtown Cabo San Lucas. She looked at it, oriented herself, and started walking the five blocks to the marina. Except for the shopkeepers she was alone on the sidewalk; a few of them gestured toward their shops, but smiled and shrugged when she shook her head.

The shopkeepers' interest was practical and commercial, unlike the tourists back at the resort. There, she felt exposed and in jeopardy, a woman alone amid the couples, families, groups of friends. Ginny's kids had insisted that a week off would do her good, a chance to relax, to regroup, as though the week in Cabo was some consolation prize for the loss of their mother, her partner for twenty years. The tourists kept looking beyond her for the missing other, husband or child or friend, before turning their gazes back to her. She hated it. She felt as though she were on show. But Ginny's kids couldn't have known it would be like this, they with their snug families. She loved them. They loved her. They thought it would help. They had grown away into their own lives as she and Ginny had grown into each other's lives, and now Ginny was dead and she felt as though her leg had been amputated and her balance become perilous, and the people around her waited for her to fall.

She pulled her shoulders in and crossed a slanting street, up two steps to the next sidewalk, past a verandah restaurant with chairs upside down on the oilclothed tables. She slowed to peer at the menu painted above the bar.

In the next minute she was surrounded by children, so close that she almost tripped. They gathered and scattered around her, crying "Chiclets!" in high voices, holding out tiny bright boxes of gum. She caught her balance, pushing her palms out to ward them off, appalled at the attention. They jittered and bobbed and chattered like small, hungry birds.

"No, *por favor*," she said in her broad American accent. "No, please, *no quiero*, no."

An older boy appeared among them, almond-eyed over broad, dark Indio cheekbones. The other children fell back as he thrust a handful of bright pottery

marlins at her, each one no bigger than his thumb.

“Ver’ cheap,” he said, unsmiling. He was perhaps eleven or twelve, and almost as tall as she. She shook her head and tried to walk around him. The marlins disappeared, replaced by four small crystal dolphins on silver chains. He held them so close that she had to pull her head back to avoid them. The children giggled.

“*Delfines*,” he said, shaking the necklaces a little. “You like.” But she didn’t like, Ginny was the one who had loved the sea.

“No, please.” She felt spotlighted; the heat of embarrassment rose toward her face.

Again his goods vanished and now he held small wooden sharks painted magenta and lemon and turquoise, the words “Cabo San Lucas” lettered on their fins.

“No!” She looked toward the shopkeepers but they ignored her, busy dragging displays onto the sidewalks. “*Nada!*”

The children tittered. “*Un dlar!*” he said.

Ahead she saw the sign for the Hotel Plaza Las Glorias. The expedition office would be around its other side, fronting the marina.

This time he had tiny ocarinas, shaped like turtles. He put one to his lips and blew a thin, three-note melody. “*Muy bonito*,” he said. “You kids they like. You like. *Un dlar*. Ver’ cheap.”

She ducked around him and ran the remaining block to and then through the hotel’s interconnected buildings, to the broad stone quay. The chirping laughter faded; the boy didn’t follow. She put her hands to the metal guardrail and gasped, waiting to cool down, while gulls and pelicans swooped over the fishing boats returning from the night’s work. The operators of parasails, jet skis, and party boats prepared their equipment on the wharfs or stood talking and laughing in casual groups. She breathed in the harbor’s aroma of salt and fish and cigarette smoke.

Ginny wouldn’t have run, or let an insistent boy rattle her; Ginny wouldn’t have been frightened by the staring, inquisitive tourists of the resort. The heat retreated from her cheeks and neck. Nancy took another, deeper breath, and straightened away from the guardrail. She flew home tomorrow; she had promised herself that she would see this one adventure through. She could do this. This, at least, Ginny could not take with her.

She didn’t see the dark boy anywhere along the quay. After a moment she went to find the expedition office.

The hallway was noisy, crowded with young Americans barely out of their teens, so intent on themselves that they paid no attention as they let her pass. At the counter a short, bearded man and the clerk talked in a hodgepodge of English and Spanish. Apparently satisfied, the man gathered up a handful of papers and disappeared into the crowd.

“Students from California,” the clerk told her. “They come to cruise *el Golfo de California*, to study, but before they go they whale-watch with us. You do not mind? We had to find another boat.” The clerk cocked her head. “It is okay for you, yes? There is still much room.”

To them, she was just another piece of adult furniture. It was okay for her, she realized. She nodded.

The clerk thanked her, stamped her ticket, and gave it back together with a brochure. Nancy put them both in her Ziploc bag and went out to the hallway. The crowd had thinned. She stood against a wall while the bearded man herded kids toward the quay. He followed the last one out and paused beside her.

“You on this trip? Come on then, before the damned tourists get here.” One leg dragged a bit when he walked; he winnowed through a chaos of papers in his hands.

“This is a school trip?”

“Yeah. Study abroad. Two months.” He looked at her, eyebrow raised, so obviously waiting for the next question that she asked it: “Oceanography? Marine bio—”

“English,” he said. “Steinbeck. *Voyage of the Sea of Cortez*. We retrace the trip every winter. Costs a shitload. Kids love it, Regents love the money, I get the hassles.” He stopped at the door, freed his right hand, and thrust it at her. “Al Scott.”

“Nancy Auletta.”

On the marina the kids, in everything from pony tails to face studs and spiky hair, crowded before a gate. When Scott showed up, the man guarding the gate let them through and they poured down stone steps to the wharf, jostling and shouting. Nancy hung back while Scott dealt the kids into two big Zodiac inflatables and the guides helped them in. When the kids were seated and struggling with their life jackets, Scott gestured her into a raft and climbed in after her.

“They flew in yesterday,” he said, stowing papers in a shiny waterproof bag. “Now I find out who gets seasick. You want a life jacket? You’re not with the

group—you don't have to."

But of course she did want one and busied herself with the tangle of straps and carabiners. The boats' outboard motors jumped to life, roaring; they moved away from the dock. She buckled the last strap into place and looked up to see the quay and hotel falling away behind them. The insistent dark boy of the street sat beside the guide. He stared at her, expressionless.

She pulled her shoulders in until the life jacket nipped her armpits. She should insist that they take her back, or transfer her to the other boat. She should complain to the guide. Warn the boy away from her. What was the Spanish for "stay away from me?" *Atrs?* No, that couldn't be right. Not *afuera* either. Her stomach felt cold.

In the end she did nothing except turn away from the boy. She stared across the water toward the Pedregal, the spine of red rock running down the very end of Baja California. He wouldn't bother her here, not with all these other people around. She didn't want to make a spectacle of herself. It would be all right. The Zodiacs sped through the harbor, past early dive boats.

"El Arco," Al Scott shouted over the outboard's bellow, pointing to a tremendous arch carved in the tip of the narrowing peninsula, the Pacific's dark waters visible through it. The image was on almost every postcard she had seen. Ahead, two great gray spires rose from the water. "Lover's Beach," Scott shouted, pointing toward a strip of sand. The kids laughed and elbowed each other.

Sea lions basked on rocks, pelicans swooped after the fishing boats. When she had flown in, the thinning peninsula and the rocks had made Nancy think of reddish paint splattered over the blue sea, a trailing line and drips. The Zodiacs rounded the point. Waves kicked up and the ride roughened. They turned north a little and west, until the land was a smudged line on the horizon. The color of the sky was different here. The Zodiacs neared each other and the guides shouted, boat to boat. The boats slowed.

"Now we wait," the guide said. "We wait and watch." The outboards muttered, idling. The kids had been subdued since they reached the Pacific; now they stared at the sea on all sides. Water lifted the boats and dropped them again, an unsteady rhythm. From the corner of her eye, Nancy saw Al Scott's head move as he watched the students, not the water. It felt peaceful here, between two shades of blue.

"*All*," the dark boy said. In the distance a whale's tail reared into the sky and slid away. The kids gasped. Another tail followed the first. The motors idled and the kids described the tails to each other: they were black, no they were gray, no they had white on them, big white stripes. No they didn't.

"No barfing so far," Scott said with satisfaction. "That's one thing gone right

at least. Goddamned cook quit, one set of luggage lost, government permissions aren't here yet." He spat over the Zodiac's side. "Goddamned cook."

The kids' chatter fell into silence. Nancy leaned against the side of the boat. The water rose and fell and rose, all the way out of sight beyond the curve of the world. Just water, rising and falling and rising again since time began and out until time ended. At the boat's side the water glittered. Ginny would have liked this.

On the other boat, a boy and girl shouted at each other. Nancy sat up. She couldn't make out the words. Scott cursed and said something in rapid Spanish to the guide; the outboard roared and they moved toward the other boat.

"I told her he's a dick," a girl near Nancy said. The wind had flattened her spiked orange hair.

"Don't you make trouble," Scott said to her. "I have enough of that."

They butted against the other boat. The guides held them together while Scott clambered across the sides, fired off questions, and sent the boy of the couple back to Nancy's boat, while Scott took his place. The boats pulled apart.

"Pig," the same girl muttered.

"Bitch," the boy muttered back.

They glared at each other and Nancy turned away, distressed. Was she supposed to do something?

"Bastard," the girl whispered.

"Gutter slut."

"That's enough, both of you," Scott shouted across the water. The kids looked at each other, startled, and back at him. He laughed.

The dark boy stood abruptly and waved his arms to signal Scott's boat, then pointed south. The boats moved, but Scott's boat drew farther ahead.

"Why aren't we keeping up?" the new boy demanded "They'll see all the whales."

"Enough *ballenas* for ever'body," the guide said. The outboard dropped another octave; they were stopping. She risked a glance back. The dark boy gazed west and they all gazed with him. Small waves slapped against the Zodiac's hull. Scott's boat was almost out of sight.

“*Mira,*” the boy said, and not more than thirty feet away a plume of spray broke the surface, followed by a whale’s broad, mottled back. The kids gasped. Within two heartbeats another appeared. They curved back under the sea, like the humps of a descending sea serpent.

“Did you see that, did you see?” a kid whispered.

“Can we get closer?” another said, but neither the guide nor the dark boy answered. Nancy looked toward them. The guide scanned the sea, his hand tight on the rudder. The outboard muttered and died.

The dark boy met her eyes as though he had been waiting for her. His right hand stretched out over the water, palm up, fingers taut and spread. The kids, oblivious, disagreed over the whales, the colors of their backs, their spouts.

“*La seora quiere mas?*” the boy said, moving his hand a little as though presenting the sea to her.

She narrowed her eyes at him, outraged that he would take credit for the whales. He turned his hand. Water shifted and murmured and the great mammals surfaced, so close that the raft bobbed. The kids shrieked and went silent, awestruck. The whales blew and the stench of it filled the air. Waves slapped against the boat.

Nancy clutched the ropes along the Zodiac’s side. “You didn’t do that,” she whispered.

He shifted around the guide to sit on the same side as Nancy, and leaned over the water away from the whales. He stretched out his left arm, palm down. For a breath nothing happened, then an immense dark back rose through the clear water, coming up and up like the ocean’s floor rising to touch them. Nancy couldn’t breathe. The whale hovered just below the surface, each scar and barnacle distinct. The dark boy slowly turned his palm up and the whale sank. She stared at the boy, astonished beyond thought. He stared back and turned his palm down, and again the great back rose. After a moment the boy withdrew his arm and the whale sank out of sight.

It couldn’t have taken more than a minute. The guide and students remained riveted to the show on the other side; the second Zodiac was out of sight.

The boy’s hand lay atop the raft’s side. She put out her right hand, hesitated, and touched it. He raised his hand and turned it, back to palm to back, under her fingertips. His nails were dirty and ragged; calluses ridged his palms.

After a moment he pulled his hand away and moved his attention beyond her. The raft had floated away from the two whales. Now their tails rose one after the

other and they slid under the water.

The boy grinned at the students. "You like," he said.

Yes, they told him. Yes, it was rad, it was the bomb, could he find them again?

The boy shrugged. "Today no more." The kids protested but the guide busied himself with the outboard. He told the students to watch for dolphins on the way back and they settled in the raft's bow. The engines sputtered, caught, died, sputtered, died.

She laid her right hand in her lap and stared at the water. It seemed a moving sameness of color, but at the raft's side, where the boy had held his hand, the surface was a million tinier surfaces, small flat planes rising, shifting, growing, replacing each other, tilting away, an unimagined complexity. She felt her breath begin to steady. Tentatively, she reached her arm over the side and opened her hand, palm down. Nothing happened. She looked up to see the dark boy looking at her. He nodded and turned away.

The outboard caught and roared. The Zodiac's nose lifted as they headed back and the kids yelled, happy with the speed. They caught up with Scott's boat and raced it around Finisterra, Land's End, toward the harbor. As they entered it their pace slowed and they moved through the flotsam of the harbor, among yachts and empty tequila bottles and plastic grocery bags floating like strange jellyfish, and seagulls fighting over guts dumped from fishing boats. They had been gone longer than Nancy thought. On one boat, a drunken tourist pulled his shorts down and mooned them. The kids jeered.

When they reached the dock she came slowly out of the boat. The dark boy's glance swept by her, as it swept by the kids, bright and impersonal. From one moment to the next he had become another scruffy street kid, jumping to tie lines, working for tips. Scott swung onto the wharf, bright bag in hand. She fumbled in her pocket and, as she passed him, she gave him her rolled-up tip money and nodded at the boy, and Scott nodded back. She climbed the stone steps to where the students were shedding their life jackets and added hers to the pile. The kids from Scott's boat didn't believe the others had seen whales so near, and when they did they complained about it. The kids from Nancy's boat laughed at them.

"That was da bomb!" one of them said to her, and she agreed that indeed, it was the bomb.

"Fly," another said.

"Way fly!"

“Way *trez* fly.”

“The ginchiest,” a fourth kid said, solemnly, before they fell over themselves, laughing and repeating the word.

Last of all, having tipped the boatmen, Al Scott came up, his limp more pronounced on the steps. Nancy looked beyond him to the boats but the dark boy was gone. A few of the students had wandered off amid the blanket and curio vendors who now worked the quay and Scott shouted at them until they came back and gathered up their life jackets. Tourists strolled past or sat in the open-air cafes, pointing and talking and shading their eyes. Nancy looked away from them, toward El Arco and the sea beyond.

Her flight left tomorrow morning. Back to her own language and people, back to the home she and Ginny had shared for so many years; back to Ginny’s kids, whom she loved and who loved her in return. Back to her own safe place. She raised her arm a little and, palm down, spread her fingers above the pale warm stones. As she expected, nothing happened.

When Al Scott walked by, herding the kids toward their bus, she put out her hand to stop him.

“I can cook,” she said.

—*for Peg, with love*