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VINCENT DELECROIX

SMALL BOAT

Translated by Helen Stevenson

SMALL  AXES

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I didn't ask you to leave, I said.

It was your idea, and if you didn't want to get your feet wet, love, you shouldn't have embarked. I didn't push you into the water, I didn't fetch you from your village or field or ruin of a suburb and put you in your wretched leaky boat, and now the water's up to your ankles, I get it that you're frightened, and you want me to save you and you're impatient. You're counting on me. But I didn't ask you for any of that. So you'll just have to grin and bear it and let me get on with my job.

And apparently these thoughts were so strong that I actually spoke them out loud, the first bit, at least, certainly if the recordings are to be believed and there's no reason not to believe them. I accept that.

While I was at it I should perhaps have added things like 'I'm not God Almighty either', which must have been what was in my mind, and I could have actually said it. I could have said 'There are guys like you everywhere tonight, forty small boats supposedly sinking at the same time in the Channel and I can't see to everyone at once. So you'll have to be patient, love, or tell all the others that are sinking to calm down and get off their phones so I can just look after you; you go ahead and call all the others, since you've got a phone, all those people climbing into battered old boats with no compass or flares, thirty at once on a raft that can scarcely take the weight of five,

no instruments, nothing to steer by, no knowledge of the sea, along with their women and children.

But in the end I said to Julien, who was next to me: These guys are unbelievable, one minute they jump in the water, the next they're practically shouting at you for not throwing them the lifebuoy fast enough, cheeky, I call it. He smiled and plunged back into his book. Leaky, more like, he remarked. That's the sort of joke that raised a laugh at 3 am.

That joke didn't get recorded; it probably wouldn't have looked too good, and Julien can rest easy: no one's going to call him a monster for making a joke about inflatable dinghies springing leaks. Besides, on the phone recordings you can only hear my voice, unluckily for me.

After that I went back to my screens, my PC, my microphone, thinking surely they should be happy; they wanted to get to England, they're there now, in British waters, in a British vessel by now, wrapped up like sweeties in gold paper; they can continue their conversation in English to their hearts' content.

But in the end the currents brought their bodies back into French waters.

So now they were floating on the investigator's desk, at the Coast Guard office. There were twenty-seven of them to be exact, including a little girl, scattered among the ballpoint pens, the note blocks, folders, floating round the police inspector's computer, including also the body of the man who had called me fourteen times that night and who now, obviously, had fallen silent. The sea was calm on the surface of the desk, no wind,

no swell, and alongside the bodies only orderly piles of paper.

While she was playing me the recordings, the policewoman sometimes stared hard at me, sometimes gazed out of the window at I know not what, because from my signal station all I ever saw was the sea, and given a choice I would much rather, like today, look out at a stretch of road with a building site, some workers, Africans mostly, but at least they were alive, not wet and chilled to the bone, not women, not children, so I was ok looking at all that, while they played me the recording of the voice saying Please, please and me saying Calm down, help is coming.

The policewoman wore her hair tied back severely in a pony tail, exactly like me, I thought, and sat up straight like me, a bit like a soldier, with coat-rack shoulders as Eric used to say, the same look, if that makes sense, but ten years older, her in her blue police pullover and me in my own clothes, obviously, a ridiculous sweatshirt, and trainers, as though I'd just come back from my morning run, looking like a kid even with my severe pony tail, like some sulky, stony-faced school kid summoned before the head teacher. And I expect it was this absurd and vaguely humiliating resemblance, this caricature, this depressing, unsparing image of what I must actually look like, staring me in the face, that made it so hard for me to like her, so easy to dislike, in fact, though in any case there was no question, in this situation, of liking her.

As she showed me into her office she had said, Thank you for coming of your own accord, your boss has so far refused to give us your contact details. She added, Your colleague, apparently, the one on duty

with you that night, has not shown a similar – the same – but she hesitated over what should come next, Conscientiousness perhaps, or maybe Courage, or even Moral Scruple, or Sense of Duty, but she couldn't find quite the right words, so she corrected herself saying, 'Has not chosen to do so, as yet.'

And, fortunately, she did not ask me why I *had* chosen to take this step, as she finally put it, and why I had turned up like this of my own free will, before the judge and quite possibly the police came to my house anyway to take me away in front of my little girl and put me in the dock on a charge of failure to assist a person in danger or some such; anyway, fortunately, she did not ask me why, after dropping Léa off with my parents that morning, I had got in my car and driven to the coastguard station at Cherbourg, a four-hour drive from Boulogne, a motorway stop for an insipid coffee, on the surface of which I saw little dinghies bobbing about but actually they were biscuit crumbs, and all around me people silently pointing at me behind my back, a call to my parents to check everything was ok with my daughter, if she was upset about not going to school, another to the police to say I'm coming, I'm on the road, surprised when they don't answer in English at the other end, no voice saying Please, please, no one screaming in the background, just We will wait for *you*, as reasonable shipwrecked people should have said, sitting it out quietly, since there wasn't much else they could do anyway except pray and keep their eyes peeled for a boat. We will wait for you, they would have said calmly, instead of continuing their endless, pointless pleading, refusing to understand the difference between being

in French waters and being in British waters – instead of calling fourteen times in two hours to say they were sinking, instead of annoying me by saying it over and over again, as if it was me that didn't understand, when I did. I understood perfectly, your feet are in the water but it's English water, not French, and yes I know they're both equally cold, so set your sights in that direction if you still know your north from your south.

Lucky then that she didn't ask me why I'd finally decided to come, because I wouldn't have known what to say, though I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have used words like Moral Scruple or Sense of Duty, definitely not Courage, words like Exhaustion and Nausea more likely, and definitely Anger like Shame.

It was also that I wanted to hear myself. I mean hear and not read myself, read my words in the newspaper, hear my own voice and not the voice of the journalists repeating on the television what I said, alongside expressions like migrant drama, migrant tragedy, as though every evening at eight o' clock we were at the theatre and they were putting on the same play, and it really is the same play, with me in the front row – I never miss a performance, I show up every evening for the migrant drama; they give me a free seat and even pay me for it; some people are in boxes, some in the gallery, but they give me a look-out post in the front row so I can see clearly; that way, I'm both in the front row *and* in the dress circle looking out at the sea, and even if the title of the play varies – sometimes Migrant Drama, sometimes Migrant Tragedy, Drama in the Channel, or sometimes Drama in the Mediterranean – of course it's

always the same play, and always the same character, and at one point the character picks up a phone to address the audience. It's interactive, he calls out to them, it starts with Please, please, but he's not really addressing the audience, who meanwhile are gasping oh and ah and sometimes sighing with indignation, it's me, just me, he's talking to. It's for me to answer, and answer well, or the audience isn't happy, and the sighs of indignation are for me, and the next day the theatre critics lay into me, because my responses determine how the play unfolds, and if I do a good job the Migrant Drama is a bit less of a Migrant Drama, not to mention the fact that at the same time I have to sort out what's happening on other stages where they're showing the Drifting Yacht Drama, or the Capsized Trawler Tragedy.

To hear myself, then, hear my own voice, right here in the Coast Guard's office, to be absolutely sure of what I said instead of hearing some dolled-up journalist parroting that I'd said this, that and the next thing – including *horrible* things, *scandalous* things, or *shocking* things, and going on to say that I had done or had not done things that I should or shouldn't have.

But it was mostly him you heard on the recordings. I don't know what to call him – the Migrant, Telephone Man, Sinking Man, but I knew his voice by heart, what he was saying, too, because in reality it's always the same man calling. Every night, the same voice, the same pleas, because it doesn't matter how many times you pull this idiot out of the water, back he comes – one time, ten times, a hundred times. One night you pull him out when he's drowning and he's safe and sound, he might even thank you, and the next night he's calling

back again, because he's in the water again, as though he didn't learn his lesson and he's saying, Please, please. Every day you set him back on dry land and every night he's back again and it feels like it will go on this way till Judgement Day – the same guy, every time, back in the water, drowning in mid-Channel, waiting to be rescued, so he can do it again the next night, and eventually it's wearing.

But my voice too, though it wasn't quite my voice, not because the recording inevitably distorts the tone, but because it was my professional voice, the one that crisply handles the nightly disaster with phrases like Calm down and Send me your geolocation by WhatsApp or Help is coming. So we heard mostly phrases of this kind at 2.05, 2.36, 3.12, 4.22 right up till 4.32, after which we heard nothing more, and among these phrases there were others which I apparently should not have uttered, like when I said I didn't ask you to leave and the investigator asked me what to make of that particular phrase.

So I told the investigator that in my opinion they shouldn't attach too much importance to that particular phrase – since it was clearly a problem – even though I didn't know if they were going to send me to prison for stating the blindingly obvious – namely that it really wasn't me that asked them to leave, if that was one of the mistakes they were accusing me of, but what mistake exactly? Because after all, I might have said that to any irresponsible person out sailing, to the cretin who takes to the waves regardless of the weather conditions or doesn't know how to handle their dumb little sailboat and is gobsmacked to find themselves in trouble, and