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# THE GOD JAR

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PHILL FEATHERSTONE



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## WATER

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Cornwall, England, August last year



‘I’M FREEZING.’

Even with a wetsuit, even though it’s August, Amy is cold. That’s not surprising. After all, this is the English Channel. Besides, she’s been feeling queasy all morning, something she ate, maybe.

Jack is on the surface 50 metres away. She calls him. He shows no reaction. That means either he hasn’t heard her or he’s chosen to ignore it. He’s treading water and fiddling about with his face mask. He’s been having trouble getting it to seat properly and that always makes him tetchy. There’s another reason, too, that he’s cool. He wanted to explore farther around the headland but that meant going deep. Amy hadn’t felt up to it herself but had dug in her heels at Jack going alone.

‘You want to dive by yourself? On our honeymoon?’ she’d said.

She’d felt selfish then, so even though her stomach had been playing up and she’d been awake most of the night

she'd gone with him, and he had reluctantly agreed to stay near the shore.

They both have the end-of-the-holiday blues, resentful that the fleeting days had slipped by without them realising that the reservoirs of time in which they'd planned to do so much were running dry. This is their final swim, then it's the long journey home to be ready for work on Monday. They've been taking their dejection out on each other.

Amy looks at her watch. They've been diving for half an hour. She has plenty of air, maybe enough for another 25 minutes at these shallow depths. She knows Jack won't want to finish yet, but by now she's feeling nauseous. She's shivering. Saliva fills her mouth, and she wants to vomit.

She swims on the surface over to Jack.

'I've had enough,' she says.

Jack takes out his air regulator. 'All right,' he says. His hair plasters his forehead, and he has the expression of a little boy who's had a treat snatched away. 'Just a bit longer, though, eh? Let's go to the wreck, that'll buck you up.'

Amy doesn't tell him how bad she's feeling. Jack is passionate about diving and he won't get much chance back home in Upminster. She'll give him another ten minutes.

'Race you,' he says.

Amy is a much better swimmer than Jack, a county champion no less. Normally she can beat him easily, but not today. He swims away without looking back.

The wreck is a couple of hundred metres from the beach and ten metres down. It's an old wooden fishing

smack that years ago collided with a barely submerged rock and sank. Amy follows more slowly towards the rocky spike that had been the ship's downfall. Below her, Jack is exploring the twisted timber skeleton. It's so encrusted with barnacles and limpets, so festooned with seaweed that it's barely recognisable as a ship; so much so that when they first saw it they didn't realise what it was. Once they found out they'd been back to it several times, and now they consider it their own.

Amy dives to join Jack, and almost at once she feels worse. As well as nausea there's a tingling in her arms and legs. *Oh no, not cramp* she thinks, although she knows it isn't. This is something different. She's never had the bends, but it can't be those. She's stayed near the surface and this is the deepest she's been all day. Anyway, going down would make the bends better, not worse.

She is now feeling seriously dizzy and she looks towards Jack to signal that she can't go on, but he has his back to her.

Then something catches her eye. It's a faint glow in the shingle under the ruined stern post. As soon as she sees it the unpleasant sensations seem to fade, as if a switch has been thrown and a current turned off. She is better than she's felt all day. A sense of calm floods through her and she relaxes into the dreamy, effortless weightlessness that for her is one of the chief delights of diving. Slowly she sinks, drawn towards the thing she's seen.

*What is it? Some phosphorescent sea creature?* No, it's nothing natural. It's some sort of bottle or jar. She brushes away the sand that's half covering it. It's bulbous at one end and has a stubby neck. A faint, purplish-green light

seems to be coming from deep within it. She examines it cautiously, reluctant to touch it. *Just along the coast is Plymouth. All sorts of navy work goes on there. Perhaps this is some hi-tec contraption that's been lost. Maybe I should report it.*

Gingerly she takes hold of the neck and rocks it gently. The object seems to cling to the seabed for a moment, then comes away in a billow of sand. She waits for the water to clear and then examines it. It's about the size of a child's football, and the neck is the thickness of her wrist. The spherical end is flat at the base, so it's clearly meant to stand up. It looks to be made of ceramic or glass. Most things that she and Jack have found along this coast are damaged but this is whole and the surface is smooth, unmarked by chips or scratches. It can't have been in the sea for long. She lets it go. It's almost neutrally buoyant, and it hangs in the water before sinking slowly.

She wants to show Jack. She looks around for him but can't see him. In the few minutes her attention has been diverted visibility has got worse, and although the other end of the wreck is only a few metres away she's barely able to make it out. She takes hold of the jar and makes to kick to the surface, but feels a tug back. Something has caught hold of her leg! She has visions of octopus, squid, and the skeletal hands of drowned sailors grasping for her. She looks down and sees with relief that it's nothing; she's snagged herself in a tangle of old netting, that's all. Probably it's some gear that was on the boat when it went down. She's irritated, but also relieved.

She bends and starts to pick at the knots. She thinks that the whole mess will be rotten and slide easily off her

foot, but it's wound tight around her ankle. *Strange I didn't notice it before.* She eases out of her flipper so she can better get at the cords, but they're stubborn and she can't loosen them. She's shackled. The clutter isn't just netting, it looks as though some of it is nylon fishing line. She knows it's designed to hold fast and is virtually unbreakable. It's thin and is biting into her. *How did it get to be so tight?* The more she fumbles the worse it becomes. She's panting now, sending up streams of bubbles, and she forces herself to regulate her breathing, to slow down. She still has plenty of air, but rapid breathing will use it up more quickly, and at the back of her mind the thought is forming that she might need it.

Amy doesn't carry a knife but Jack usually has one. The water has cleared a little and she can see him now. He's facing away, and he doesn't know she's in trouble. It seems an age before he turns.

He waves but he doesn't register anything amiss and moves off. Then he realises something is wrong and swims towards her.

Amy points to her leg. Jack bends and starts to tug at the tangle. *He's making it worse.* She taps him on the shoulder and makes a cutting gesture with her fingers. Jack shakes his head and points to his belt, where his knife should have been. *It's not there!* He points back towards the land to indicate he's forgotten it. He puts a finger against his temple and makes a screwing motion. *Stupid. Yes.*

Jack goes back to trying to unravel the knots. Amy squats and elbows him aside; there isn't enough room for them both to work and Jack's efforts aren't helping. The

line is tighter than ever, cutting into her ankle and hurting badly. Jack makes a fist, with his thumb between the first two fingers, and points to her foot. It means, 'You are stuck.' Amy nods. *Thanks, Sherlock.*

She makes the cutting sign again and points towards the shore. He's going to have to go and get something to release her. It will mean being left alone, and even though Amy knows that this is the only sensible thing to do she has to fight back the fear that is starting to build.

Jack taps two fingers on the palm of his hand. He's asking how much air she has. She checks her pressure gauge. 750psi. Not full, but not in the red yet; plenty at this depth, especially if she keeps calm and remains still. She shows him and he gives a thumbs up. Then he slides his own cylinder off his shoulders and removes the regulator from his mouth. He's going to leave it with her so she'll have some air in reserve. He puts his fingers to his lips and then to her cheek and drops his weight belt. She watches him rise away.

She's on her own. Jack had held up ten fingers, meaning that he expects to be back in ten minutes. *That's ridiculous. It will take him at least five just to get across to where we left our things on the other side of the bay. Then he'll have to put his trainers on, run (he'd better!) to the cottage, find his knife, hurry back to the shore, put on his flippers and swim back here.* She can't see all that happening in less than half an hour.

She checks the gauge. It's still on 750psi. She's surprised it hasn't dropped at all, but she's also relieved. It's going to be all right. *Just sit tight and wait.*

She looks around and reaches down to yank at what's

holding her. The pain is spreading and her leg is starting to throb. The cord is interfering with her circulation. *How long before that becomes a problem?* She curses inwardly. How did she manage to get trussed up like this?

She has an idea. She can't get the cords off her ankle, but she might be able to undo them from whatever is anchoring them. She explores where they disappear under the hull of the wreck and tries to pull them free. The timbers are rotten, but they are embedded deep in the silt and are too solid to shift. The line won't give at all. *No, I'm well and truly stuck.*

She remembers reading once of a fox that gnawed through its leg to free itself from a snare. At the time she couldn't comprehend the animal's agony but now she can, and she can understand its desperation to be free.

Her stomach lurches and her heart races. Panic seizes her. Her arms jerk, her throat constricts, and blood roars in her ears. She has to get loose, to escape, to reach the surface and get to the precious air. She kicks harder, twists, thrashes. The cords bite, the pain grows. Bubbles fizz around her face mask, and that brings her to her senses. Any effort or movement, anything which raises her pulse means she uses more air. With an effort of will she forces herself to calm down, to slow her breathing, to be still.

She rests on the seabed for a few minutes to restore her calm. *It's all going to be fine. Jack will be back soon, he'll cut me free and I'll be all right.*

She rechecks the gauge. It still reads 750psi. *That's odd.* She taps the dial, and her blood freezes as the needle slides towards zero. *It must have been stuck. Oh my God!*



*For how long? How much air is left?* Even as the realisation dawns she feels resistance in her regulator.

She reaches for the cylinder Jack left her and swaps it for her own. The gauge on that one reads 500psi, on the edge of the red area. *It's not critical yet, but it soon will be. Jack had better be quick.*

She looks at her watch. He's been gone for fifteen minutes. It will be at least that long again before he's back, even if everything goes smoothly, even if he can find his knife, and doesn't get cramp swimming, and avoids the thousand other possibilities for delay that churn in her head.

*Do I have enough time? It will be close. Oh shit, I'm in trouble. I'm in serious trouble.*

She grips the air cylinder between her knees and puts the jar next to it. Her heart thumps like a marching drum. She keeps repeating to herself *Keep still, keep still*. She tries to think of something to distract her from her predicament, from the pain in her leg, from the cords binding her to the sea bed.

She examines the jar, the wretched thing that has got her into this mess, resting innocuously on the shingle beside her. A shoal of little fish nuzzle around it, exploring the disturbance she's created. What can it be? She remembers seeing something like it in a museum once, and she vaguely recalls it being Roman. This one doesn't look that old. In fact, it must be quite new, otherwise it would have been damaged by being bashed on the rocks. *It's a container. Or is it? It has no stopper.* The short tube that makes the neck is sealed, not with a cork or bung, but as if a blob of glass has been inserted and heated to fuse it in

place. *Why would anyone do that? Why would anyone make a jar you couldn't use? Unless it's been made to keep something imprisoned in there, forever.* There still seems to be a glow coming from it. *There can't be anything inside it, can there?*

She's been trying not to keep looking at her watch, but she can't stop herself. Twenty-five minutes. *Surely Jack can't be much longer. Surely he'll be back any minute now.* For each breath she's having to suck harder at the regulator. *Oh God, oh God, oh God, oh God. The air's running out. Keep calm. Shallow breaths. You're not going to die. You are not going to die.*

Inhaling now is like trying to suck air through a straw; some comes, but not enough. She lies back on the sea bed and looks towards the shimmering surface. Above her, so close, there's blue sky. Jack likes to fish, and he sometimes asks her to go with him, but she won't because she hates to see his catch writhing in the landing net, frantic in its desperation for the water. *I'm in the same plight now, trapped in an environment where I can't survive.* Only a few metres away are air, freedom, and the rest of her life; here she will perish. She'll never see Jack again.

She pulls at the regulator. Nothing comes through. Her blood chills. She hears a voice in her head from the training manual. *Keep the regulator in your mouth. It will stop you from taking in water and there may still be a little air left in your cylinder.*

The light is fading and it's becoming harder to see. The glow in the jar grows brighter. Her chest feels like it's being crushed in a vice. Her head is throbbing, her lungs are close to bursting. The pain is terrible. *I have to breathe.*

She clutches the jar to her chest, squeezing it tighter and tighter. The sea pulses. A rainbow curtain dances before her eyes. There's a rushing in her ears like a speeding train.

*Oh my God. Here, now, on my honeymoon, I am dying.*

She can hold out no longer. She opens her mouth, gulps, and her lungs fill.