Opening extract from

Wreckers

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Published by

Oxford University Press

Cornwall, England, 1732

The box was nothing special. No carvings. No swirlings of gold. And so light compared to, say, a barrel of rum or a sea-sodden roll of tapestry, that the wrecker who claimed it would have left it for driftwood had a half-drowned sailor man not risen from the waves and fought for it with surprising strength and fury.

'No you don't,' the wrecker had scolded, raising high a chunk of rock already slimed with sailor-gore.

'Please . . . ' The sailor man had fallen, his torn shirt dripping and flailing, his fingers still clutching for the box. His face, upturned, had been as dark as the storm and unmistakably foreign—the easiest kind to smash in. 'I beg you . . . '

The howling wind had taken his words just as surely as the next wave to crash would take his body, but the wrecker had heard them clearly enough as he brought the rock hard down.

'DON'T OPEN IT!'

When it was over . . . when the wreckers were certain that no one from the broken ship had lived to tattle tales . . . that only their God could see them now . . . they hurled away their murderous rocks and bent their heads in prayer.

'Have mercy' . . . 'Forgive me' . . . 'You know how hard these winters are for those who fish the sea' . . . 'You have seen our empty nets . . . heard our children squabble and cry over scraps fit only for gulls.'

The storm had eased. Soon dawn would break and others would come hurrying down to the cove: men with sacks, wheelbarrows, empty pots and scuttles—anything in which to carry away whatever might remain for the taking. Women with hunger and greed etched deep in their faces as they raced one another into the boiling surf. Children hoping for treasure this time; for Spanish doubloons littering the tideline like golden crabs; for oranges and lemons bobbing towards them on the waves.

The ship was groaning, like something mortally hurt. She had never stood a chance, that ship, so fierce had been the gale that blew her too close to the Cornish coast and smack onto rocks that rimmed the cliffs in a perilous, toothy curve.

She was a wounded thing, a ripped up thing, spilling cargo from her guts into waves no longer mountainous but rough, still, and relentless in the way they crashed through rigging no man would ever climb again, and slathered the tilting deck in foam.

Prayers over, the wreckers set to work, roping and reeling, rolling and hauling. And they cheered, hoarsely, as two barrels from the ship's shattered hold arrived at their feet like gifts hurled there by Neptune.

'His lordship'll be wanting his cut this night. Joe? Joe Tonkin? Ride out to the manor. They two barrels'll be enough to keep him sweet, I reckon.'

'It's late, Perran. Too late, I'd say, to be bothering his lordship.'

'No mouthing back at me, Joe. Do you not see the lights, up there in the windows? 'Tis her ladyship's twenty-first birthday. They'll be making merry fools of theyselves for a good while yet, and expecting their share of the spoils whatever the hour. Go now. Take the cart. Michael Killick? Lend a hand up the beach with the barrels. No—wait—what's in that box?'

Joe Tonkin did not look down, only kept one foot on the plain wooden box that a man's last breath had begged him not to open.

'French lavender,' he lied. 'All waterlogged.'

Perran Carthew owned most of the port's fishing boats. He was leader, of sorts, on nights such as this, and had yet to encounter trickery from a man wanting more than his due.

Had Joe Tonkin been a stranger, and the box just a shade more ornate, Perran might have insisted on looking for himself. But the box was plain. And Joe was a neighbour. And it was share and share alike when it came to the spoils of wrecking, always had been, always would be, and young Joe knew that just as surely as he knew the timing of the tides and the colour of his baby daughter's eyes.

'French lavender eh?' Perran's voice was pleasant. 'Then take that as well, up to the manor. A birthday gift for her ladyship. Dried out, she can use it to sweeten her drawers—and I'm thinking linen, not mahogany, eh, lads?'

The wreckers laughed, muckily. Laughter was good—necessary—at the close of such a sorry night's work. Sniggering like schoolboys at the mention of women's underthings would help them feel normal again. Normal and almost innocent.

The road to the manor wound giddily upwards, curving away from the cliff edge and then back again. Twice Joe Tonkin hauled on the reins, bringing horse and cart to a halt in the drizzly pre-dawn light.

The first time he stopped he gave the box a tentative shake (aware, as he did so, that a pounding from the sea might have smashed the contents already, to unmendable smithereens).

Nothing.

Holding his breath, and pressing one ear flat against the

sodden wood, Joe shook again, a bit harder this time.

Still nothing.

No clatter of coins. No rattle of gems. No chinking of china, broken or otherwise. Whatever was inside, Joe realized, was clearly fantastically light. Certain butterflies, so he'd heard, fetched high sums for their colour and rarity, but wouldn't air holes have been made for things that were—or had been—alive? There were no holes in this box that Joe could see, not even a big one for a key. And butterflies, even dead ones, would have rustled, he was sure, like petticoats or leaves.

What about gold dust? That had to be almost weightless. He imagined it so, as light as air shot through by sunbeams; although, on second thoughts, a box crammed full of the stuff would more likely be as heavy as a cube of wet sand . . . wouldn't it?

The second time Joe Tonkin stopped he tried to raise the lid, but it was sealed so tight that after a few minutes' struggle he gave up.

That sailor man was raving, he decided, crossly. Or lying through the stumps of his rum-rotten teeth. For anything worth having, either to keep or sell on, would definitely rattle or roll around—show some sign, however slight, of its existence.

Face it, Joe, he told himself. This box is empty. My guess is it held rations once, enough for a week, and now the most it contains is stale air and the husk of a weevil. Her ladyship is welcome to it. I will say I smelt lavender, down in the cove, but must have been mistaken. A trick of the storm . . . the whiff of a sailor man's soul flying by on the wind. No one will doubt me, for a wrecker's mind will play what tricks it must to ease the torment of all he does, and all he bears witness to, on nights when a tall ship is broken.

And so Joe Tonkin made his delivery to the manor house above Port Zannon—two barrels of rum and a box he no longer wanted—and returned to the cove with a clear conscience. And a footman in a powdered wig carried the box through to the drawing room where her ladyship clapped her little hands and demanded it be placed dead centre of the room and opened straightaway.

'The person who brought it, my lady, was in two minds as to its contents,' the footman said, as he set the box down. 'He asked me to tell you that, on hauling it from the ocean, he caught the unmistakable scent of . . . '

'Stop, Rogerson—not another word!' Her ladyship leaned forward, her face flushed in the candlelight, her wig a towering shadow on the wall. 'A box with a smell from a faraway land? My dears, what can be in it? No, no, Henry dear. Don't open it yet. Let's try and guess.'

'A monkey!' whooped a middle-aged man with a claret-coloured nose. 'A stinky little beastie from some jungle or other.'

'Dear George, pray not. The very idea . . . '

'Honeycomb,' guessed a woman with white roses clotting her wig, like big spoonfuls of cream.

'Tea,' guessed her neighbour after a few hearty sniffs. 'Enough to last a year.'

'A dead monkey,' George guffawed. 'Dead this past fortnight and smelling to high Heaven.'

'George—please!' Her ladyship wrinkled her pretty nose. 'I, personally, cannot smell a thing—apart from candle wax and camellias, and those scents have been with us all evening. Henry? Pray open the box before I die of curiosity.'

His lordship tried, but fared no better than Joe Tonkin had done, out in the rain and the mire. 'Lid's stuck,' he grunted.

'Rogerson—fetch a crowbar.'

A crowbar was dutifully fetched. Her ladyship leaned even further forward and her guests leaned with her. They had heard, every one of them, the tall ship running aground; had thrilled to the crack of timbers against rock; the sound as loud as cannon fire booming up from the cove.

Each guest had known, at once, the significance of that noise. And each had thought it the most marvellous entertainment; almost as good as fireworks, only not quite, as it had been too dark to see the stricken ship or any goings-on in the cove.

Through all eight courses of a truly excellent dinner they had wondered aloud what goodies might be tossed to the sea this time and swept ashore by the obliging waves. And if his lordship and Sir George had licked their lips while laying odds on how many of the crew would drown, and how many make it to dry land, it was surely in anticipation of the lemon sorbet, and not the murder of innocents.

His lordship positioned the crowbar. The young footman hovered, preparing to hold the box steady, but his lordship waved him away.

'Be careful, Henry,' her ladyship warned. 'Pray mind your fingers.'

'Nearly . . . got it.' His lordship adjusted his grip on the bar and hunkered lower on his heels. He was already panting and sweating from the strain. 'Not easy . . . feels as if it's been . . . shut fast . . . for a thousand . . . years.'

The lid gave, eventually, with surprisingly little noise. Nothing splintered. Nothing broke. No hinges flew, or even creaked, and for a second or two nothing happened at all.

His lordship turned aside, to mop his brow on his sleeve. 'Nothing in there, I'm afraid,' he said, raising the lid a little

higher and then turning back to check. 'Although . . . what in the name of all . . . '

Her ladyship was the first to scream. It blew out a candle, that scream, and brought servants running from all over the house.

'Shut the lid!' she cried out, above the babble and shriek of her guests . . . the clatter of dainty chairs, knocked flying in a panic . . . the shattering of glasses as the butler dropped a tray.

'For the love of God, Henry . . . SHUT THE LID!'

DILLY

It was Danzel's idea. The best ones always are. At baby school, which is where we all met, it was his idea to liven up toilet training by sticking a potty on his head and peeing into his hat.

That was clever. For a fifteen-month-old boy-child that was pure genius. I mean, potty on head: vaguely amusing and kind of cute, right? Something any smart baby might do, to get attention. But to use your sunhat to pee in; to go one step further than anyone else would have done, at that age, in that situation. Well, that's Danzel for you.

He got a smack. I remember that. A whole handprint on his bottom, like a strawberry birthmark. *Bad boy!* If you ask me, it was his cleverness that rattled the baby instructors. More than his disobedience, or the puddle on the floor (it was a very small hat and Dan's aim, back then, was poor) it was the sheer maturity of the joke that earned him that wallop.

Most adults, in my experience, are at best wary and at worst driven crazy around too much smartness in the very young. And even as a toddler, Danzel Killick was as clever as a trick and as sharp as a crab claw. He dumbs it down now, which is a cleverness learned with age.

We are all fifteen. That's me, Dilly Tonkin, Danzel, Jenna, Gurnet, and Maude. We are The Gang, which sounds sing-song but actually isn't, because we know one another inside out and back to front. We know one another so well that we can finish each other's sentences off, like psychics or quintuplets.

Being so jam-sandwich-close ought to have all kinds of good points, but in our case it doesn't. It's dull. It's boring. It's an endless yawn knowing that nothing any of your friends will ever say or do is going to surprise you in the slightest.

Having said that, I didn't see Danzel's brilliant idea coming. None of us did. We were sitting in The Crazy Mermaid (that's my mum's café), moaning into our milk-shots over having nothing exciting to do on Hallowe'en when he came right out with it:

'Let's spend the night at the old manor house.'

Nobody replied straightaway, although I could guess, easily enough, what the others were thinking:

Jenna: *Danzel, you are soooo amazing. I adore you. I want to marry you and have lots of clever babies.*

Maude: *Ooh no. Let's not. We'd get into terrible trouble.*

Gurnet: *Bags I first to smash a window.*

And I, for what it's worth, thought: *Whoah! I had a dream about this. Last week—or was it the week before?—I dreamt I was in the old manor house, exploring it room by room. There was sunlight and dust and things from a very long time ago. A doll in a blue coat—velvet, I think. A wheezy old clock. A high bed with a slippery eiderdown. And it was like I belonged in that house, and never wanted to leave. Waking up felt like being kicked out of Heaven. I nearly cried.*

'Just an option,' Danzel said, grinning round the table. 'Just something a bit more daring than hanging around here all night, eating pie.'

Maude's face had gone as white as her milk-shot.

'Although if Maudie's going to have a sissy-fit over it, or Gurn's planning to trash the place . . . '

No, no, insisted Maude and Gurnet, both together, while Jenna placed one hand on Danzel's shoulder and said, 'Let's do it.'

'Dils?'

I was looking at Jenna's hand, which still rested on Danzel's shirt, like it had been stitched on. And I was thinking how only Jenna could make those words 'Let's do it' sound smutty, even out of context.

'Hey, Dilso? Dilly Daydream? Are you with me, or not?'

'What? Yeah . . . yes. I'm with you. Only . . . don't they have cameras up there? Or a live-in guard, or something?'

Maude gave a little shriek, then clapped her fingers over her mouth and looked, apologetically, all around, even though the café was empty apart from us and about two hundred flipping mermaids.

'I'm *sure* there's a guard up there,' I insisted. 'An armed one. Day and night. I thought it was common knowledge.'

Danzel leaned back in his chair. An antique mermaid, with a tail made out of the silver tops that used to go on milk bottles about a hundred years ago got caught in his hair, and we all watched as he untangled her and set her free.

'It's time your mum opened a museum, Dils,' he said, laughing. 'You can't move in here any more. And the ones dangling from the ceiling are *weird,* my friends. Like a load of hanged women.'

Gurnet snorted. He's into all of that. Hangings and so on. Whenever there's a beheading on the inter-telly, he'll watch it, and if the king ever goes in for public executions, instead of private ones in the gaols, Gurn will be right there, at the foot of the block, hoping to get splattered.

'There's no guard at the house,' Danzel told us. 'Hasn't been for ages. Not since the Council had all the precious stuff put into lock-ups. And the cameras got so snarled over by twigs and things that they switched them all off. No one will pay, any more, to keep the garden from going wild. It's a jungle up there.'

My mum came in just then, saying everyone should shunt along home for their teas because the café was about to close. We close early from October through to April, partly to save on electricity, but mostly because the locals aren't big eaters-out and no one else comes to Port Zannon out of season. The fishermen call in for breakfast, and we—The Gang—always have our milkshots after school, but that's about it.

It was all very different, according to Mum, before The Attack. Just about everyone over the age of seventeen drove a car then and could go anywhere, at any time: to remote seaside resorts like ours, on a whim; to enormous shops that sold everything; even away from England, if they felt like it, on boats that took cars, as well as people, to all kinds of foreign lands.

I don't know anyone with a car. None of us do. Not a car that goes anywhere, anyway. Grandpa Tonkin has one which, for some obscure reason, he calls a four by four. He says he never got round to getting rid of it after The Attack even though he could have used his garage as a stable, or rented the space out, easily enough, as a shelter for displaced and traumatized Londoners.

It's falling apart, that car, and no good to man nor beast. But the little kids like it, for playing in (pretend driving being the only kind they'll ever get to do, unless they end up in Emergency Services, or working for the National Summer Bus Corporation, like Danzel's cousin John).

'Scoot, young people,' Mum chivvied. 'I'm closing.'

It was already dark when we got outside, with clouds scudding over the moon.

'Yeeeooooooow!' howled Gurnet, throwing back his head. 'Yeow, yeow, yeooooooooow!' It's his werewolf act. He's been doing it since he was three, on cloud-scuddy moonlit nights. He's been doing it for so long that the rest of us no longer jump out of our skins when he starts, or tell him to put a brick in it.

The tide was high and all the boats were in. *The Dolphin. The Daydream. The Merry Maid. The Sunray* . . . I noted each one silently to myself: her name and her place at the ropes. There's not much to be had out at sea right now. *Fish are fickle*, Mum says. *Like spinsters and cats. They'll come back when they're good and ready*.

Gurnet's dad, though, says it's odd, this scarcity; that it shouldn't be happening any more. For three nights in a row, apparently, he's been ranting in the tavern that

other countries must still be messing up the eco system, only we don't know about it, because nobody tells us anything in this part of the world and the inter-telly's one big fix.

Gurnet's dad drinks too much. The mackerel probably smell his breath, from half a mile off and four fathoms down, and scarper.

We sat in a row on the harbour wall: girl (me), boy (Danzel), girl (Jenna), boy (Gurnet), girl (Maude), just like at school and even—yes, you've guessed it—at potty training. Even though it was dark, with no instructors around to chivvy us into line, we slotted into place naturally and easily, like the boats below our dangling feet.

'So,' said Danzel, 'shall we vote?'

But we didn't need to do that. We didn't even need to bat the idea around, or ask important questions like: How does anyone without a scythe and a spare couple of months actually get to the manor house through the nettles and briars and whatever else is tangled all around it? Or how, exactly, are we going to go in without raising an alarm somewhere?

Because for all that Maude is scared out of her boots, and I am still dubious about the practicalities, and Jenna hasn't thought it through at all, and Gurnet hasn't promised, yet, not to trash the place, we all know we are going to do it.

We—The Gang—are spending Hallowe'en night in the old manor house. We'll get in somehow. There'll be a way. Because Danzel is our smart one, our razzle-dazzle boy, and what he says goes. It always has.