

## ANDREA KOWCH

*Light Keepers*, 2014  
Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 72 in.



COURTESY RJD GALLERY

## CHRISTIE COCHRELL

### Sea Stars

Lainey knew something was up. This was the third day Tobias hadn't showed up at the marine exploration center, and he wasn't answering his phone. Her friend had always been the most dependable docent, even at eighty-two. Arriving well ahead of opening, each day, with thermos and Greek-salad sandwich in the basket of his turquoise tricycle, ready to share his stories of the sea stars and the stars above.

Marine creatures and constellations had mirrored each other since stories began. He'd mention the crab (Cancer), dolphin ("set in the sky by Poseidon"), sea goat, and sea monster . . . keel, sail, and poop deck (the kids giggled) of the Argonauts' ship . . . fishes and flying fish . . . and some he set up there himself—the octopus, the bloody-belly comb jelly, the otter twins. He'd let them know that a group of sea stars was called a galaxy, too.

The creature who'd moved in with him over the summer, though once a marine, was another story entirely. Dennis was bad news. Was the full catastrophe, as Tobias would say, quoting the film version of his beloved *Zorba the Greek*—the ultimate expression of misfortune or failure. Lainey called him the Menace, and she blamed all of Tobias's recent decline on him. (Likely true, the family law facilitator would agree.)

In remarkable health until then, Tobias had been getting noticeably slower since his son had returned from Yucca Valley and moved into the spare bedroom, where before he'd kept his aquarium and jellyfish lamp. He'd been fragile and creaky over the winter months, hunkered while making his tentative way among the tide pools and treacherous knobby kelp strands. Slower to answer, too, and not saying a word when Dennis yammered and bossed him around—this scholar and poet, defending his sea stars ("Please, *kori*, not 'starfish'!—That name is wrong for them.") with the panache of *Cyrano*, the visionary passion of *Zorba*.

"Reclusive creatures. Like Greta Garbo—you know?—telling her friends, even, 'I want to be alone.'"

Or other times, more factual, "Nineteen hundred species of stars, going back to the Paleozoic era, 450 million years ago. And from there, all the way to Pleasure Point, just down the street from you. Imagine what an awesome journey they've been on."

Lainey loved Tobias's stories, loved the clam-and-fish chowder he made with fresh sage and oregano, and

a smidgen of ouzo, loved the way his gnarly hands like those old olive trees you see in pictures peeled russet potatoes, loved how he gazed into tide pools as into Merlin's mirror—used to alert the sorcerer to any secret plots against the kingdom, though apparently not those against Merlin himself. Tobias was the grandfather Lainey had never had, as the youngest child of an older couple whose parents were all already gone. Add in his being Greek, embodying all of the things Greece meant to a hopelessly starry-eyed student of ancient history, classical studies, myths.

So when she realized he was in harm's way, she rushed to his defense.

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The sea star—*Asteroidea*, derived from the Greek *aster* (star) and *eidōs* (form, likeness, appearance)—is magic. Able to regenerate lost arms, able to shed them in defense. It seemed odd that Tobias Ariti had no analogous magic, no means of defense or regeneration, though he was *the* authority on sea stars and their trusty friend, regularly haunting intertidal realms. He had been a respected advocate for the critically endangered species, and his emeritus status gave him time now to reach out to less scientific audiences.

It was in Greece, where Tobias grew up, that he'd first seen sea stars, beside urchins and shells, heaped high for sale to tourists. When he'd later been taught to dive, he'd watched the live ones shimmying across the floor of the Aegean. Grace incarnate. Five is the number of grace in the Bible; in life, the typical number of sea star arms. No coincidence, Tobias knew. And then he'd learned that *Stella Maris*—Our Lady, Star of the Sea—was one of the names for the Virgin Mary, and by coincidence the name of the church in Brindisi, Italy, where, his first Sunday there, he met his wife-to-be, gentle Giustina. Only five days after having been conveyed across the strait by ferry from Igoumenitsa one gray morning in his twenty-first winter, a paperback of Kazantzakis in his overcoat pocket—both handed down.

But he'd been slacking his devotions since his wife had gotten sick and died in hospice care, and Stella seemed to be holding a grudge. Dennis was all he had, the only family left besides a few remote cousins back in Palaia Epidaurus, the ancestral home, and Tobias ("my true and honorable love") had promised Giustina to take him in whenever he lost yet another job, when his drinking or drug abuse left

him on disability again. Dennis was, sadly, as different from his parents as night and day. As everlasting darkness, the old marine biologist sorrowed on the bad days, now quickly adding up—days when he held himself perfectly still against mysterious bruises and injuries, bruised by bafflement too: What went wrong, why? How in the world had he and Giustina between them engendered someone so bitter, so thoroughly rancid with resentment?

Lainey Nichols was a godsend—the other gods prevailing in this instance over the aggrieved Stella. Lainey worked in the gift shop of the marine exploration center where Tobias was a volunteer docent. They hung out together a lot, and she claimed they looked after each other, though he knew that if they'd been keeping score she'd beaten him long since. Her brawny young arm, his hard-won wisdom.

"And," as Giustina teased him once, "that silver tongue rivaling that of Demosthenes, Calliope, and even Peitho—the goddess of persuasion."

No contest at all, now. He needed help walking, and getting up, though he was loath to admit it; he'd been too proud to ask for help with anything but more and more had to give in to it, especially with the spells of dizziness that had started besetting him, making even local tricycle rides a little treacherous. Dennis just said, "You're old, man—what do you expect?" when he dared bring it up.

Giustina's sister, Ninetta, had told him long-distance in no uncertain terms that his real problem was that Giustina had for fifty-one years coddled him shamefully and not let on to him how dependent he was in all practical ways. He couldn't deny it—he'd never actually had to fend for himself outside of academia, writing the "five-part arm-ony" of his sea stars. With his wife's constant, inconspicuous support taken away, and her kind heart, he had been left exceptionally vulnerable.

But over the last month or two he'd felt himself failing in every way—not only limb, but life and limb. His spirits, which had been so buoyant once.

For instance. Despite his falling out with God, he still felt very much part of the church community and especially enjoyed the Blessing of the Waters at Rio del Mar each January. Not swimming anymore, not diving for the cross, not since the January he turned seventy, but cheering the new swimmers on, sharing in the picnic with all his friends. Until this year, when he was kept away.

He'd felt a little woozy after his shower and went to lie down for a little while. When he woke up, it was well past the time they were supposed to leave—and Dennis's pal Huey, who was coming down from Felton to give them a lift, hadn't turned up, Dennis told him. Or did he really say, had Tobias only imagined the malicious pleasure in his words, "Or maybe I forgot to ask him? Yeh, maybe that was it." Too late to get a ride from any of the congregation, though he'd intended to do that all along. Nor had his neighbors Brody and Leonard been home.

"I kept trying to find my phone," Tobias told Lainey afterward, "but I don't think he heard what I was asking, with the TV up so high. I didn't like to bother him . . . he gets so angry when I 'fuss.'"

Since Dennis had lost his Uber job sometime in November, thanks to a DUI, he'd started drinking to excess and getting angrier and meaner every day. His cruel streak had evolved with him, though even as a kid it had simmered close to the surface.

"You should have asked me for a ride," Lainey protested. "You know I'm always happy to oblige."

"I hate to bother anyone," Tobias said sadly. "I hate not being able to transport myself. I've never liked that Uber. And the Triceratops"—as he'd named the old-timey tricycle—"will only go so far."

And then he murmured to himself, "Why can't he see how little I ask of this life, really? Like in *Zorba*—I felt once more how simple and frugal a thing is happiness: a glass of wine, a roast chestnut, a wretched little brazier, the sound of the sea. Nothing else."

That had devastated Lainey. Seriously worried about her old friend, she'd summoned a task force—"a tusk force," she called it, envisioning the war elephants of Hannibal, Pyrrhus of Epirus (king at thirteen), and the Persian king Shapur—forces of good to keep an eye on Tobias and stand by ready for quick action when needed. Neighbor Brody Bell, an actor and middle-school drama teacher. His partner, Leonard Cisneros (vintner). Leonard's shar-pei's groomer, Valeria Aguilar. Scooby himself, though hardly a credible guard dog. And of course Lainey's sprightly Greek conversation teacher, Agnes Kass, an asset to any cause, who wore curvy Greek snake earrings of hammered gold, made tacos with char-grilled octopus and pasilla peppers, and doted on three strapping sons, all firemen. Lainey consecutively

hatched a plan to make a match between Tobias and Agnes—a perfect fit, she thought. Agnes was two years older than he was, but her girlish energy was boundless.

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When Tobias disappeared for those three days without letting anyone know, Lainey drove to his house as soon as work was done and knocked repeatedly until the door opened. Dennis, drinking a Socks & Sandals IPA out of the can and dressed only in drawstring shorts, shrugged his fleshy shoulders, each with a Semper Fi tattoo.

"I guess he must have forgotten again. His memory's garbage these days."

Behind him, still in his bathrobe, looking small, her old friend said nothing, just murmured vaguely that he hadn't had a ride.

"I tried to tell him he needed to get a move on, but he wasn't paying me any attention, as per usual."

"Where's your phone, Tobias?" Lainey asked gently. "I've been trying to call."

"I can't find it," the old Greek said, sounding embarrassed.

"You can't find *anything*, can you, old man?" his son sneered.

"Sometimes . . . things do seem to get lost."

Lainey spotted the phone (a light-blue case with beige sea stars she'd given him) on a shelf above Tobias's restricted reach and said tightly, "Isn't this it?"

She guessed Dennis had put it there deliberately, from spite. How could she keep him from hiding it again as soon as she had left? Or even throwing it away? She'd have to figure something out.

"And is your tricycle okay?"

"There's something wrong with the front wheel."

"Someone can check it out. But just for now, I tell you what—I'll come by tomorrow and pick you up. See you at eight, okay?"

She'd alert the others. Brody and Leonard wouldn't mind dropping him off sometimes in their Alfa Romeo Giulia Quadrifoglio (Montreal green). He always loved to ride in the "snazzy" Alfa. And the young cycling nerd across the street from them could surely take a look at the trike one day soon.

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No one had guessed the full dimensions of the Menace's rancor and greed. How he was systematically ridding his father of everything, deliberately, however he could, to make him miserable—resenting his success, his wide-ranging admirers. With his walker and phone taken away, Tobias couldn't move around, visit his favorite haunts, see or contact his support group. A little damage (whether to his arm or fingers or to the trike wheel) undid him further.

As occupant and subsequently chief bouncer of the spare room, Dennis had started selling off the collection of rare, valuable books housed there (more than a few in ancient Greek), as well as rare sea star and brittle star fossils, and pocketing or misusing the cash.

Things came to a crisis the Monday before Orthodox Easter.

SOS, Lainey texted Agnes, with a horror-stricken emoji.

LOL, Agnes texted back, showing off her knowledge of text talk—no mean feat at eighty-two, though not surprising since she was also the webmaster for the Orthodox church.

No laughing matter, Lainey retorted. It's time. We've got to get Tobias out of there.

She'd had a call that morning from Brody, who'd sounded deeply concerned.

"Dennis was bragging to Valeria—who he imagines fancies him—that he gets his driver's license back on Wednesday." After the DUI he'd been grounded for six months, mooching lifts (and Rittenhouse Straight Rye) from Huey whenever he could. "So Friday he's planning to 'haul his old man' down to Yucca Valley in the camper van, 'and get all of the nosybodies off my case.'"

"He's *what*?" Lainey exclaimed, horrified.

"Exactly. Apparently he's got an ancient Winnebago hooked up to water and electric somewhere just outside Joshua Tree. An ex 'with ex-tra acreage' lets him park on her five or ten acres, just as long as he keeps out of her sight. Before the Uber job that fizzled out, he was working down there at one of the casinos. He claims he's anxious to do that again."

"But why take Tobias with him?"

"So I can sell the house and get what's due to me," he said. "No more dinky spare room and all that miserable fog." He went on to complain that he's been down and out too long, "while His Nibs lives high and mighty on the ocean-front—among other fat cats way past their sell-by date."

Brody, the actor, mimicked Dennis all too well.

No matter that Tobias lived frugally in a two-bedroom bungalow, if graced by books, aquarium, and rare fossil sea stars, with a view from his workroom window of the near tide pools. No matter that Tobias wanted nothing more than just a little happiness—a *wretched little brazier, the sound of the sea*—and had been looking forward to Easter, to joining his friends for the annual spring celebration at the church.

"Out of his mind," the Menace growled in Brody's voice, though the two friends knew that was down to him.

"Valeria is sure he's giving his father Xanax or Valium, whose side effects are what we've been seeing."

"I'll call senior services. But first we have to get him out of there—before Friday."

Agnes called each of her three sons, the firemen, got them on board. On Thursday morning they appeared massively en masse at Tobias's front door, talking about gas leaks and prevention and asking to see oven and furnace and meter. They handily distracted Dennis while Lainey and Brody—who by chance had a spare key—got Tobias out the back into her car (a nondescript Toyota, like every second car in the county). Leonard meanwhile made off with the aquarium, conveying it into their house next door with just a little spillage, even with Scooby treacherously underfoot.

"The full catastrophe?" Tobias asked, vaguely, while he was being buckled into the front seat, aloof from the general panic.

Lainey had grabbed what she could of clothes—and at the last minute the statue of Stella Maris from her place of honor on the old dresser in the bedroom, with sea stars at her feet. Wrapping her in Giustina's sky-blue scarf, packing her gently in his horseshoe crab daypack, not taking any chances of upsetting her.

As they drove, bats out of hell, down and around the bay, headed for Leonard's mother's forest hideaway near Pebble Beach, Tobias was still. Half stunned. Lainey talked to him, less emotionally than she felt, partly to calm herself down. She started by reciting the menu of the Easter dinner Agnes was planning, down at his borrowed residence, since they should keep him out of sight, out of Dennis's reach, until they got some legal protections in place.

"Slow-roasted lamb shoulder, roasted potatoes with oregano, dolmas. Spinach pie, cheese pie, one of those huge salads. Easter bread, of course, with red eggs—*tsourekis*,

is that how you say it? And chocolate-pistachio baklava with orange glaze, the recipe she stole from her youngest sister."

Then, when he didn't react, she recounted some of his favorite references to sea stars. The ancient Hawaiian prayer that included the starfish ("*Wrong name*") among the uncreated gods. The *Histoire des Antilles*, from the 1600s, describing how sea stars, when thunderstorms approach, "grab hold of many small stones with their little legs, looking to . . . hold themselves down as if with anchors."

"My favorite is that myth of Poseidon extinguishing the stars in the heavens to help the Cretan fisherman woo the woman he loved. They fell into the sea, all of the stars . . ." She waited for him to chime in and finish, but he stayed quiet. ". . . and he gathered them up in his hands to offer her—a gift she couldn't possibly refuse."

He still didn't respond, just sat all hunkered up inside himself, looking out at the forest through the side window as if he'd heard nothing.

He slept for hours once she'd gotten him into the house, into a cozy yellow room with fog outside and kindly evergreens standing sentry.

Later, well after normal suppertime, he woke, uncomprehending, in the foreign yellow room, the soft yellow throw blanket over him, but when he saw Lainey, he smiled tentatively at her, the way a baby or a child might. Practicing. Following her lead. She brought him warm potato soup and bread with unsalted butter, and he ate a little before sleeping again. She followed Leonard's directions to the linen closet and found herself sheets and a comforter for the daybed in the front room.

The next day Agnes came, with doctor, Brody, Leonard and his mother (a high-end reflexologist), Scooby, and lots of hampers full of everybody's favorite foods. Some blackberry ice cream from Marianne's. And then they went away again, and it was just the trees, the silence, peace, healing. No loud TV, no yammering, not even any silent resentment tainting the air.

Tobias still hadn't said anything, which was entirely unlike him, and Lainey worried, despite the reassurance of the others. She sat in a butterfly-print wing chair and talked to him again. She told him his aquarium was safe, the fish fed, his fellow docents missing him, his stars aligned. She remembered something she had learned that morning, looking out at fog and trees, drinking the good Vienna-roast

coffee she'd found in the kitchen. She'd been searching for stories he might not already know, somehow imagining that only those stories—like gathering stars in both hands, a gift of love from the sea god—could save him. The old stories, the myths, had all been so transformative for her, she couldn't help believing in their curative power.

"It's something wonderful, I think, if I can tell it right. One of my favorite artists, Modigliani, was inspired by ancient Cycladic figurines, from your islands in Greece, when painting his distinctive elongated heads. He was in love with poet Anna Akhmatova, they say, a hopeless love, and carved a head of her from limestone—maybe from the Cyclades?—but anyway, rock formed from shell fragments and fossils of ancient sea creatures. On one of its cheeks is a tiny starfish, which he apparently positioned there on purpose, for 'a beauty mark,' the art history guy says, 'or kiss.'"

She thought she hadn't told it properly, that he didn't see the wonder she found in the placement of that little star—a love equivalent to his for his Giustina. But after a long minute of reflection, two, his face transforming from within, Tobias reached out for her hand and squeezed it, with returning strength.

"Thank you," he smiled, almost in that old way of his she loved.

He slept. He woke. And waking, saw Stella on the pine dresser, in a halo of lamplight, resting her tired feet on Giustina's blue scarf.

"Funny old thing," he called over to her. Pretending indifference, she'd been, but "Keeping an eye on me after all." And all those arms he felt around him, lifting him gently, bearing him onward, bestowing grace. Holding him close.

He chuckled with unwonted happiness and slept again.

**Christie Cochrell's** work has been published by *Catamaran Literary Reader*, *Lowestoft Chronicle*, *The Cumberland River Review*, *Tin House*, and a variety of others, receiving several awards and Pushcart Prize nominations. Chosen as New Mexico Young Poet of the Year while growing up in Santa Fe, she's more recently published a volume of collected poems, *Contagious Magic* (Indy Pub, 2020). She lives by the ocean in Santa Cruz, California—too often lured away from her writing by otters, pelicans, and seaside walks.