

Issue 0: The Pilot Edition

February 2024

GLYPH.

The literary magazine for the casual writer



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FOREWORD.

Writing often feels like a solitary task. It makes sense. Just you and a boundless page; pen hovering, cursor blinking. Those worlds and characters, those plot twists and cutting dialogues, all buzzing around in your head. Spending hours and hours perfecting each sentence. They say writing is taking a part of yourself and putting it onto a page. Only you could have thought of that particular string of words. Only you could have put them together in that particular way, to say that particular thing. These stories you tell, they can only come from you. Would it work in any other way?

A few years ago, for reasons we're all aware of, everything became a solitary task. It's been hard to come out of that, even now. During that isolated time, a group of strangers came together on Zoom while undertaking their master's degrees in Creative Writing. They found it hard to form bonds with each other's tiny pixelated faces. Found it hard to know when to speak between the long awkward pauses from internet lag. No one knew how to make the first move when they only had to meet two or three times a week. Faint suggestions were made to meet in person *once all of this was over* – with no one actually believing it would do anything other than fall through, like those types of plans always did.

Yet, somehow, it happened. And then it happened again. And that group of strangers slowly started to become something more. They wrote alone, then sometimes together. They shared their work, talked about ideas, the books they'd read and loved (and hated). They had the idea to start a writing group. And then a lit mag.

It turns out, writing doesn't *have* to be a solitary task. In fact, it's always better when it isn't. There is value in hearing what people think of your writing (we all know how easy it is to get carried away). There is value in sharing a sentence that makes your heart expand, or your breath stop. Believe it or not, there's value in the harsh criticism too. And of course, for a writer, is there a better feeling than someone telling you they loved your story? That it made them feel exactly how you were hoping it would?

And so came Issue 0 of *Glyph. Magazine*. In some ways, the stories in this issue carry through them this feeling of isolation that was felt by the editors at the time they all met. Whether that's feeling alone in a room full of people, like Kirsten in *When Will You Take Notice?* or just trying to survive (or not survive) in the remote seaside towns in *The Selkie's Child* and *Banshee*.

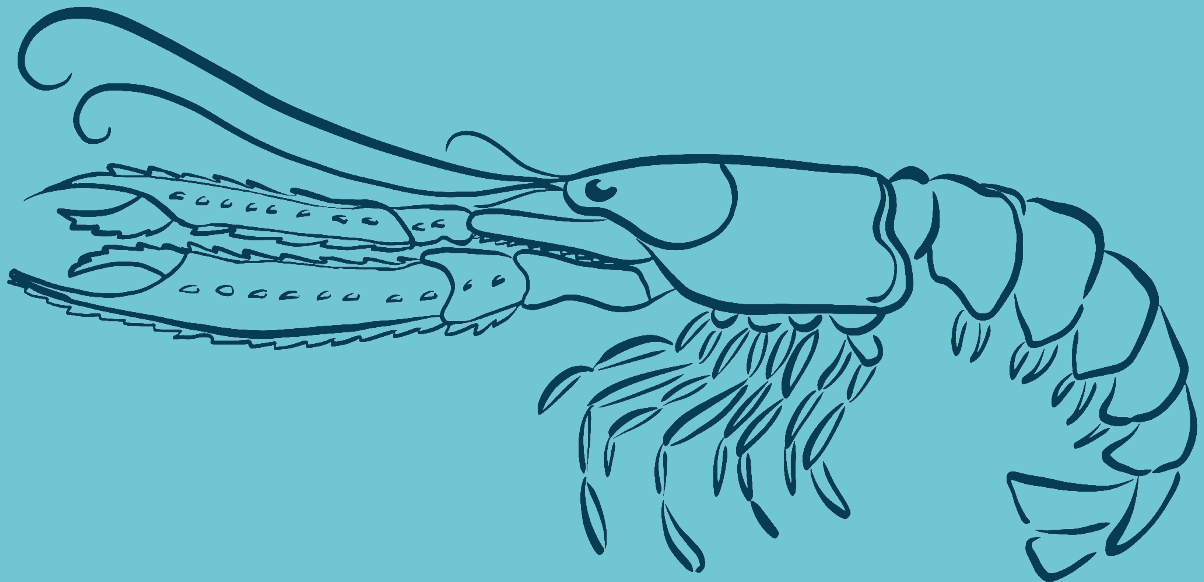
Despite the isolation, there's also the feeling of coming together. From a marriage falling apart in *Irresponsible Adults* to one that's just beginning in *The Proposal*, these stories seem to find and bring forward the comfort and unity felt in being completely alone, together. We hope you, the reader, can feel this too. Whether these stories bring you a sense of belonging, dread, make you laugh or make you cry, we hope you find something of value in them.

Team Glyph.

(Rach, Nic, El, Gio & Soph)

THE SELKIE'S CHILD

Rach Macpherson



He must get back to the sea.

It's what her father used to tell her when she was a child. In the warmer than usual Autumns, when the fish became sparse and the storms grew in strength on the horizon. His thick hands were tight on her shoulders, her jacket growing damp under his wet grip, salt in her lungs as he stared down at her with wild human eyes.

Father is gone now. Left her with a handful of seashells and a hastily written note and disappeared into the night. The other fishermen saw him with Ma Brown heading for the beach that stood on the outskirts of the village. One said they even saw them go into the sea. Mother never spoke of it, never spoke of him, as if he had never existed. Like the foam that sits on cresting waves in the bright light of morning and then sinks, dissolving into dark depths. Gone.

They found Ma Brown the next day. Or parts of her.

Everyone knew then, who Father was. The deal Mother had made. Who Moira would inevitably become when the golden Autumns rolled around and the fish grew scarce.

In a village like theirs, everyone is as much a part of the sea as the fish that come from it, the seals that live by it and the salt that fills it; they all have their part to play.

Sometimes, when she stares hard enough at the waves from the clifftop, she can see him. A slick dark head bobbing softly above the waves, staring back with dark eyes. Watching. Waiting.

Then she blinks, and he is gone.

*

It is to be the coldest winter of the decade this year, but that's not surprising news to Moira. Storms have been brewing out over the sea for weeks, the sky as dark as the churning waves.

Yet, day after day, Mother returns her boat to the water. She moves steadily from port to starboard hauling creels. The rhythm in her movements matches the slap of the waves against the boat, steady as a pulse. She hauls, opens, empties, rebaits, and stacks.

Moira tucks herself deeper into cold leather, tucking the thick warm towel around her tightly. Her hair is still wet, and it curls around her collarbone, brushing against the itchy, dry skin there. She scratches it, watching passively as it peels away in flakes, like confetti, littering the floor of the wheelhouse.

Mother tried to teach Moira how to fish when she was a child. She enjoyed the push and pull of muscles as she worked, the burn in the shoulders making her feel weak and so very human. But she couldn't touch the langoustine. Its soft pink shell caught the light like a spring sky, legs working as if it was dancing in the air. Its beady eyes set on her, watchful and knowing.

She wasn't born to be a fisherman. Even now, a thrill of unease worms through her, and she can feel the weight of the langoustines' eyes—small, round and glittering.

She turns to the sea. The wind is so bitter and heavy with sea salt, she can taste it in her lungs. The cries of the seagulls in the distance are urgent and frantic. They soar over the waves, dipping down low before rising back up to the looming clouds. Thunder rumbles in the distance. The storms are coming closer.

A sudden rush of desire flickers through her as she stares at the roiling water. She wishes

she could slip out from under her peeling, dry skin and back into the icy water.

There's a thump as Mother enters the wheelhouse. Her grizzled face is set in a deep grimace, water clinging to her vibrant waterproofs. She starts up the engine, the *mrrr-rrr-hbrrr* of the motor signalling the start of the return. She takes to the wheel, sparing a moment to squeeze her shoulder with a coarse hand. It is the only comfort she gives.

Moira smiles at Mother, and her lips upturn in response. There is no need for words. There never has been.

The boat begins to turn against the sea and back towards the shore. Mother remains still as a rock, the storms on the horizon and her back open to the waves. She is what anchors Moira to the land.

Still, she risks a glance behind. The sea churns, the wind howls and, in the distance, a small dark head bobs above the waves, dark eyes watching. It calls to her.

Moira turns away. She ignores the fat lolling seals, whose dark curious eyes follow the boat as it passes, the piercing cry of the gulls overhead, the heavy gaze of the langoustines about to meet their end.

Setting foot on land again makes her step unsteady. Mother heads straight to the market, and Moira follows close behind. It is bursting with people and loud, a world away from the peaceful silence at sea. Vendors shout and customers haggle as a rush of bodies crush into her. Wary gazes follow them. The smell of rot pervades everything there, clinging to clothes and hair.

Mother sets up the stall, exchanging a few quiet words with Old John, who is perched beside their usual spot. The man tips his hat and Moira shares a small smile with him.

Old John has kind, wise eyes that are a deep rich colour. Villagers are wary of his gaze. They whisper about how it pierces through the mind allowing him to peer inside.

'Ye alright there, Mo?'

She hums in response, lifting a crate Mother staggers under the weight of, before glancing up. Old John's gaze is focused on a point behind her.

She follows his line of sight, eyes landing on a young man. He stands in the shade of his uncle's stall, his eyes dark and intense as they meet hers across the marketplace.

She turns away.

'I see you've caught young Alexander's eye.' His smile is grim, despite the jovial note in his voice. Alexander McGill arrived at the start of the summer to a flurry of wistful sighs and swooning. Strong, broad and stinking of big city life, he was honey to the helpless bees of the village - irresistible.

Moira never liked him, giving the lad a wide berth every time she saw him. Until that night-

She tries not to think of that moment. Tried to forget what she saw behind the bar, between him and Father Pierce, what she swore to never tell another living soul.

Not that she could. Moira's voice belonged solely to the sea—and to her father.

Maybe that was why he marked Alexander out. Or maybe even he could smell the fear that had crept in through the boy's shadow from beneath the waves.

She shivers, a cruel anticipation curling in her stomach. Either way, her path was set.

'Speaking of seeing,' Old John continues, turning to glance at Mother. His voice is gravelly, like pebbles shifting on the beach. 'Anything of interest out there this morn?'

Moira thinks of the buttery pink sky that greeted Mother's boat as they set off this morning, the dark swirling clouds that arrived on a bitter wind to eat the sun whole, the glisten of the soft langoustine in the spitting rain, the grace of the gull as it swooped down to meet the churning waves.

'Just shellfish,' Mother replies quietly.

Old John turns his knowing gaze on her with a raised eyebrow. The wrinkles in his tanned leathery skin move with his brow.

'No seal?'

Mother shakes her head, settles another crate down to pry it open. Her hands move deftly, following the familiar rhythm of her work, but there is a stiffness creeping into her shoulders. Moira looks away abruptly.

There's a small stain on her sleeve. She rubs at it with her finger and thumb. It must be blood - she thought she washed herself clean this morning but she must have missed a spot. She brings the sleeve to her nose, sniffs.

Adult. Male.

Ah, Moira thinks, Father Pierce.

'Well, hullo there Alexander!'

Moira forces herself not to stiffen at the sudden warmth at her back. She looks up. Alexander has moved closer and now lingers at the edge of Mother's stall, his broad form effectively blocking the path to the rest of the market. His cheeks are flushed, and the heady scent of alcohol stings Moira's nose.

'Hullo, John. Alright, Mo?'

She nods quickly, averting her gaze.

'Can I help you, Alex?'

Alexander turns to Mother, who is looking at him with a raised eyebrow. He meets her gaze evenly, 'Did you hear about Finlay?'

The closest vendor tuts and shakes his head, 'Shame about what happened to the poor man.'

Moira meets his gaze and he freezes. She wipes a hand across her mouth, and the vendor pales and turns back to his stall, his jaw closing with a loud click.

'Folk are saying he was *lured* to the beach.'

'Aye, he was lured,' Old John scoffs, 'by his dick.'

Alexander snorts, settling his hip against the crates and crossing large arms. Veins protrude, muscle spilling out from underneath the tightly rolled sleeve cuff, faintly veiled strength wrapped in soft skin. She wonders how much power it would take to snap the delicate bone underneath; one swipe, two?

Alexander's eyes drift over Mother's stall, the large fat fish that are spread across the ice. 'Looks like you got the catch of the day again.'

'Hm.' Mother nods.

‘Did ye know,’ Old John starts, drawing their attention back, ‘there was a time, Alexander, when this market used to smell like fresh sea salt and smoked fish?’

‘Really?’ Alexander is not convinced. She is not surprised, ‘This place?’

‘Almost unbelievable, I know,’ Old John says. ‘But the Sea Folk made much of the impossible possible back in the day.’

Alexander’s brow furrows. ‘Sea Folk?’

Moira’s spine straightens, as those nearby still. She shoots Old John a warning look, but the man ignores it.

‘Yer uncle never tell ye about the Sea Folk? Och, poor show,’ Old John shakes his head.

The stall is ready, just in time for the first trickle of villagers. They approach warily. They don’t like her or Mother much, but they can’t deny their catch is usually the best of all the fishermen. In fact, it is often the only catch these days.

Mother steps forward to greet the customers, deftly handling each order with worn hands.

‘Ye won’t remember this. A little before yer time, it was,’ Old John continues. Moira’s gaze slides back towards him, as he settles in his little stained camping chair like a king on a throne holding court. Alexander looms over her, a dark shadow blocking out the sun. She grits her teeth, forcing her attention towards Old John. ‘This village used to have a treaty with a clan of Sea Folk.

‘Not a lot known about ‘em, other than that they were mighty fine fishermen. They would appear on that beach yonder and walk up to the market, exchanging their catch of the day for stories, booze, revels, lovers, whatever took their fancy that day,’ Old John inhales his pipe, letting his words settle.

‘Then when dawn came, they would be gone.’

Moira pulls at a loose piece of skin at her nail, watches as it unwinds revealing a thin layer of fat and blood underneath.

The stall is starting to pick up now, but the low hum of chatting customers, conversations between customers and vendors, is a dim sound over the thudding of her heart. She risks a glance at Alexander, wondering briefly if he has caught on, if he has realised what Old John is trying to spell out for him—but his attention has already wandered.

His cold, clear gaze now lingers on Poppy Malcolm at the next stall over. There’s a gleam in his eyes, and something dark curls in her gut. As if sensing his stare, Poppy glances up and immediately blanches, pulling her sleeves down over purpling bruises. She scuttles away into the shadows of the stall and out of sight.

‘But ye see, some villagers started to get greedy. Didn’t want to trade with strangers - and the Sea Folk weren’t happy about that.’ The old man’s smile grows a little sharper. ‘They took their price and left, disappeared back into the sea, and took most of the fish with them too.’

Briefly, Moira’s thoughts turn to Father. The hastily written note, worn and yellowed with age, tucked away in Mother’s back pocket. She thinks of Mother’s strong back against the roaring waves, the steady influx of fish that she hauls in, how the number of fish never satisfies her; her worn hands against hers as she pulls her from the sea and back onto the steady wooden planks of the boat. She thinks of slipping through the cold waves, to swim amongst the fish in the dark depths of the waves, the things she has to do to keep that freedom.

'Now, yer lucky if ye even catch a glimpse of one of the Sea Folk,' Old John says. 'But they say that if ye stand on the beaches for long enough, ye can see them out in the sea watching ye with their dark eyes, waiting for those desperate enough to cut a deal for their fish.'

Moira tries to imagine the market smelling of fresh salt and smoked fish instead of the sickly sweet scent that now lingers, the fresh fat fish the Sea Folk would have brought instead of the thin, dull creatures that lie across her Mother's stall. The only fresh fish in the market.

'It's a good tale, aye?' Old John says after a minute.

Alexander shrugs. 'I guess.'

She nods. Skin moults onto the floor.

'It's why the seals on our beaches are protected,' Old John adds. 'You cannae go near 'em.'

'Tell that to poor Faye O'Donnell,' Alexander says, his grin a touch too sharp. His eyes stray back to her, and an uncomfortable warmth crawls up her neck.

'I did,' says Old John. 'Told her da no to go anywhere near 'em too. Now she's a hand short.'

Moira looks down at her hands, the cracked skin on her knuckles, the taste of iron lingering on her tongue. Neither of them mention how O'Donnell's stall was overflowing with fish the next day; it is one of those things that is never spoken of, like the starving children begging for coppers on the market corners, the sea level that rises a little higher every year, and what her father did the day he returned to the sea.

'Mrs Logan.'

Mother casts a furtive glance as Alexander speaks abruptly and grunts.

'I was going to ask if Mo here was free for a stroll down the beach?' Alexander is smiling and Moira's chest constricts. Mother's eyes linger. The boy is fit and broad, taller than most of the villagers, and he's only supposed to be here for the summer. And yet—

'Don't be out too late.'

Old John puffs on his pipe, knowing eyes watching.

'We'll be back before curfew.'

They won't.

Alexander reaches out to grasp her hand in his warm one; the grip is gentle, soft—a lie. He starts to tug her away from the crowds, the adults who pretend not to stare and the children who watch with curious eyes and Poppy whose fists clench so tightly the knuckles turn white, out towards the beaches. She ignores their gazes; she grew thicker skin long ago.

The dark clouds are bruised purple with the warmth of the sunset, the storms that earlier threatened seem to have calmed and instead linger on the horizon. In the distance, the seals that watch over the village roll on sharp grey rocks as Mother's boat bobs gently on the water. Moira inhales deeply, gathering the salt in her lungs.

'I was sure your Ma was going to chase me off there.'

Alexander is looking at her with an easy smile. He must think it charming, the perfect compliment to his golden hair and piercing eyes, his jaw cut like sharp glass. She wonders if he believes that he is the most beautiful thing she has ever seen.

He doesn't know about the beauty that lies in the depths of the sea. The bright spindly

coral, the gently dancing seaweed that reaches towards the bright light of the sky, the shimmering shoals of fish that have never been seen by the naked human eye.

Alexander is not the most beautiful thing she has ever seen. He never will be.

She shrugs.

‘You don’t say much, do you?’

Moira smiles at him, lips clamped tightly shut. She wanders closer to the edge of the sea, watching as the waves heave themselves onto the shore. She’s aware of her bones rubbing as if their intended slots are slipping in the wrong direction. Moira savours each step, the movement of her long, too narrow limbs, the nip of the wind against her bare arms.

Alexander follows a step or two behind, the sound of his footsteps seem to echo in her ears. He is bigger than Father Pierce was, broader—but more gullible. Father Pierce was wary of her—for good reason.

She closes her eyes. The water crashes upon the beach with an almighty *whoosh!* Birds cry as seals warble to each other. The sea moves as steady as her heartbeat, *ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum.* It’s hypnotic, the rhythmic push and pulls of the tide.

When she opens her eyes, Alexander is staring.

In a village like this, everyone is as much a part of the sea as the fish that come from it, the seals that live by it and the salt that fills it—but the sea is as changing as a storm gale and just as unforgiving.

Everyone knows there is a price to be paid for fishing in these waters. Thanks to Father, the blood that runs through her veins, the deal her Mother made to sustain the village, Moira is inevitably the one forced to pay it.

Alexander doesn’t know this. But he will.

Behind him, the sun starts to set and a golden glow is cast across the tiny fishing huts that rest on the sandy banks. The heady scent of alcohol mingling with salt brands her lungs.

She turns to the sea and—there he is. A slick dark head bobbing softly above the waves, staring with dark eyes. It is time.

Moira pulls away slowly, a dull ache settling in her chest.

A strong grip stops her, long fingers branding her upper arm. She stares down at those fingers, knowing they would be an exact match for the purple and blue bands around Poppy’s arms, remembering the cage they formed around the girl outside the bar while Father Pierce watched.

‘Where are you going?’

Away, she wishes to say. But the sound is jammed in her narrow throat.

She tries to hold his gaze, knowing these are the same eyes that ignored Poppy’s pleading, that savoured the cries of no doubt countless other people. This is a man who takes what he wants with no fear of reproach.

And they call her a monster.

He stares down at her, his neck wide open, veins pulsing as fast as her heart.

More cracked, dry skin sheds as her hands clench; some falls away in chunks, others in small flakes that rain down on the patchy sand, revealing the true creature that lurks underneath.

He never saw her coming.

*

Moira steps through the water until she is deep enough to float on top of the waves. He approaches, nudges her with his silky head while swimming a few laps around her.

She sighs in relief as the water surrounds her. Behind her, the tide crashes upon the shore, lapping at the blood-stained sands, and pulling the body out to sea.

On the edge of the white horse waves, she can see the slick hides of the Sea Folk slicing through the dark waters, arriving in just enough time for their next meal.

Behind her, the villagers linger on the beach, watching as the remains of Alexander McGill sink beneath the dark waves. She meets their gazes, some disgusted while others are relieved. Poppy pushes through the crowd until she's at the front, wringing those too pale wrists. The two girls stare at each other - until finally, Poppy nods. Moira releases the breath she didn't realise she was holding.

The deed is done.

The seal bumps her, drawing her attention away from her neighbours, urging her to swim out further.

She dives down into the dark depths of the sea, feeling the icy embrace turn warm and her bones shift and break and her skin crack open painfully.

When she breaks the surface again, she opens her mouth and sings. ■

IRRESPONSIBLE ADULTS

Sofía Artola Díaz



I know I said we had to be responsible adults, that the cycle of getting drunk, fighting and fucking isn't what grown-ups do. You said it's what grown-ups wished they could do. I guess you were right.

I really don't know if I should do anything or not, because it's not a big deal. I mean, it is. It should be a big deal. There's so much unsaid now between these walls that I'm unsure where to even rest my sight. I want to ask but I don't want to hear the answers; he wants to say something (I know he does), but doesn't dare to. What could he say, anyway? He never actually did it, he already said that; he wasn't thinking, he's said that too. He can't remember texting her—well, that's even worse. How many things has he done he doesn't remember? How many things is he hiding only because he doesn't know that they happened?

We did crazy stuff, you and I, but I don't remember ever forgetting anything. At least nothing important. I remember every fight, every time I left the pub in the pouring rain without an umbrella just because I was mad at something you said, or something you didn't say. I remember that one time we had promised we would never see each other again, and I went out with someone else, you went out with someone else, but you still ended up at my door, yelling from the street at a 10th floor window because calling me on my phone wasn't dramatic enough for you. I remember you talking at me for hours about things I didn't care about, people I had never met before, then me talking to Heather over a glass of gin and sixteen shots about how stupid I felt for listening to you every single time.

But did we have a partner back then? Nope, we didn't. We did stupid stuff when we were single (probably *because* we were single), and we were still never drunk enough or high enough to forget how stupid we had been the night before. And how fun it all had been.

And now here I am. A responsible adult who no longer drinks like there's no tomorrow because I know very well that there is a tomorrow—with children to feed and dogs to walk. But even if there wasn't I wouldn't like to lie in bed all morning with a headache and the ominous sensation that death surely can't be worse than the world spinning and the certainty that you need to stop it just so you can throw up. It would feel like a waste of a day, you know? And how I did like to waste my days a few years ago after performing the walk of shame home with the sensation that I should've stayed wasting the day or the week with you instead. I wonder why I never did. That one thing I do seem to have forgotten, but I doubt that my oblivion has anything to do with a bottle of vodka.

Maybe, just like I can't recall exactly why I always left after breakfast, maybe I will also forget the silence that fell over me this morning when I had just started to think that life was good and I had finally done something right.

Would you have done this to me? Promised me eternal love and then forget I exist when I turn around for longer than you expected? You were always clear about that, at least. Not that I appreciated it back then; I would've rather you pretended we had something special than watched you flirt with other women in front of me. But at least you were honest.

To think now that honesty was one of your virtues says a lot about how downhill things have gone in just a couple of hours.

He is taking the children to his mum's, he says, poking his head inside the kitchen. I don't answer, although I think that must be the best idea he has had all month. Maybe all year, if we're going to be mean. And we are. I deserve to be mean at least once, even just inside my head.

He must be able to tell I'm not ready for his presence even if he can't see my face from the doorway, because he asks whether I think he should stay there too, at least for a few hours, until I calm down.

Until I calm down. I haven't even started to get mad yet. I'm processing. I haven't screamed. I haven't thrown his shit away. Maybe I should. Maybe I should go to the shop, buy a huge tub of pink paint and splatter it all over his precious artwork and the rooms he has so proudly decorated. Maybe I should cut holes in all the pockets of his trousers, or tighten them with a bit of sewing instead so nothing fits him anymore and he starts thinking he is getting fat and has to go on a diet again.

That would be fun, but would I be here to see it? I don't know. I don't know if it should be me packing my things and going to see my mother.

What the fuck do you do when your husband has tried to cheat on you and hasn't achieved such purpose due to circumstances out of his power?

He hasn't done it, but would he have done it if it had worked out his way?

Is it worth staying here knowing that he felt he could, and wanted to?

'Do whatever you want,' I answer.

'Honey, I...'

'What?'

He keeps quiet for a moment, I guess he is trying to find something intelligent to say, something that I can't twist against him when I have the willpower to do so.

'I'll be back as soon as I can.'

I really wish he wouldn't, but then again, where will he go? Would he really stay at his mum's with our children, or will he end up going out with the guys *to chill* and come back home not even knowing that we're fighting... if that's what you can call this. I'm not entirely sure that's the word.

I never wanted to be reliable or appropriate or careful, I think when I hear the main door close, barks and excited screams fading away on the other side. It happened, though, because it had to happen. You meet a nice enough guy, who you like as if hormones were controlling your life once again, and end up loving him so much you could leave everything behind for him. And then you kind of do. And it looks like a good thing, because this is *growth*: moving in together is growing, getting married is building a home, having children is giving birth to a physical manifestation of your love.

But this? No one said this came with it: this feeling of doom once it's broken. That I can't escape now because of all the nice things that we built together that he didn't give a fuck about when he thought it would be great to try and see if he could get into someone else's pants.

Is it broken, though? I don't know yet. But will I ever know? Can it be fixed? Do I even want it to be? Or should I go back to being a child and smash it until it can't be saved?

What would you do? I think you would demolish it completely, but I've been wrong about

you before.

My phone rings in another room, the instrumental version of 'Summercat'. I never got to see Billie the Vision in person when I was younger, and now I'm too old to be skipping family dinner for a concert, anyway. I take the phone but don't answer. It's Heather, and I'm sure she'll want to take me out for a coffee or lunch, and I honestly can't think of anything worse right now than having to explain to my best friend that she was right all along and all men suck. Or, rather, that everyone sucks because, after all, I'm a woman and I feel like I could do a lot worse to him in return. I hate it when she's right, but I hate it more when I wanted to keep my hopes high and her cynicism keeps winning over and over.

I'm not answering, she is not the person I should be talking to right now. She will never forgive him, even if I ever do.

I mute my phone, put it in my purse, grab the car keys from the bowl at the entrance and I'm about to leave when I have a better idea.

I run upstairs, shoes on and everything (I know I'm the one obsessed with not staining the carpets, but how is that important right now?). I burst into the bedroom in a haze, ignoring how clean, how tidy, how Architectural-Digest picture-perfect it looks today that he has taken on the housekeeping. It irks me that he is able to do this so perfectly, so neatly, and yet constantly chooses not to. It's not the time to hyperfocus on this, though. I throw the wardrobe door open, jump onto the step and manage to reach one of the boxes on the top shelf. The yellow one is mine, the red one is his. We haven't touched them in years; the layer of dust on the lid, however, is quite thin. Has he...? No. He wouldn't do that.

But then again, maybe he would.

I push the thought away for a minute and I leave the box on the step as I come down to open it. My beautiful helmet is as shiny as ever. I take it out, return the empty box to its place (away from the curious hands of my little monsters) and make my way back to the kitchen, yellow helmet under my arm.

There is a bottle of 30-year-old rum he has been saving for a special occasion. You're going to love it.

I grab the bottle and put it in my purse. Then I finally leave the house, lock the door behind me and open the garage gate with the remote.

We stopped riding my bike when we discovered I was pregnant and we never got back to it. It seemed immature and dangerous to go around in a beautiful, loud, fast motorcycle, now that we weren't going to be alone in the world anymore. We were married grown-ups with children at home, and there was nothing a bike could do for us that a car wouldn't give us. As long as we ignored the feeling of freedom brought on by the wind in our faces and the risk of every curve, that is.

We became used to missing that feeling. But even with the bike covered by a thick sheet for the past seven years, the keys have always dangled in his keyring as in mine.

I never told him that I learned to ride with you. What would have been the point? I wanted to look like the type of girl who could do the boyish action stuff whilst still looking girly enough. It never really worked on you (you probably knew me too well), but with him it worked

wonders. He used to make me feel like one of Charlie's Angels, rather than a try-hard. I had to enjoy it while it lasted.

If the reason why the boxes were *that* clean is that he's taken someone else out for a ride on my bike...

No. Don't even think about it.

The kids have never really bothered asking what's underneath the dirty sheet. After all, it has always been hidden from them, since before they came into the world—they might even think there is nothing underneath its cover. I want to believe they haven't tried to sneak a peek because they are just too young to be that curious, but a part of me wonders whether they should be asking more questions about everything, be more inquisitive about the world. Maybe we're raising idiots. I know for a fact that I have always been one—I was a fucking idiot when I was with you and I'm a fucking idiot now that I'm with him. Despite never really being officially with you, and despite all signs pointing to not being with him by the end of this.

I uncover Tiger letting the sheet fall to the floor to avoid stirring up too much dust. You laughed when I said I would give it a name and that that name would be Tiger. I remember someone (I can't tell if it was you, or him, or maybe both), however, changing their mind about it immediately and whistling in admiration, as the roar of this machine could challenge a feline in fierceness. I remember myself smiling proudly for doing something worthy of that admiration.

I push her out of the garage after stroking her lines for a minute. She's still perfect and oh, how much I missed her. I wouldn't be able to say whether he has ridden her lately or not, and I reckon that is a good sign—probably. I pass my leg over Tiger and I fasten my helmet before starting the engine. It takes a few attempts, but then we're gone, once again fast, free, young, and possibly irresponsible.

He won't like it, of that I'm sure. He'll say I could have hurt myself. He'll say we are a family now, that we are a team and we ought to look for each other so we can look after everyone else. I know exactly what the words will be.

If he were you, I'd probably reply something awful, something hurtful. You'd call me crazy and childish, and come back hours later with a bottle of liquor to apologise for whatever you thought you might have done. And I wouldn't care, I wouldn't feel bad about it—I can't say I was a good person back then, but were any of us, at the tender age of 21? Were we all not insane, trying to figure out how to navigate life without the wise, annoying as hell advice of our not-always-so-loving parents?

Remember that time when you saw me almost crash taking the turn to your street? You were so mad I thought you only cared about your stupid motorbike I'd borrow sometimes before I could afford Tiger. I yelled back at you that if I died you would not even notice, and that made you cry.

That was us, in a nutshell. We cried, we laughed, we watched bad movies, we played stupid games and won stupid prizes.

I haven't laughed that hard in a long, long time, but my shelves are certainly full of ridiculous trophies.

I would never say anything that horrible to him. It would break him—and I might want

him broken in the same way he's shattered me this morning, but I'm not sure it makes sense to break *him*. We've never done the whole thing either, him and I. The screams, the swears, the tears in the street, the fights in bars were all gone with you. I thought also gone was the fear of losing it all, of emptiness and worthlessness, but apparently that stayed with me. Hidden somewhere between good memories and new habits that make me feel like every day I'm further from that twenty-one-year-old who fucked up all the time and still had fun like no one was watching.

Was I constantly in pain? Yes. And I enjoyed that it felt real. But why did it feel so much harder, so much more painful that you (you, who were so clear about where we stood) made a move on someone and told me about it, than my husband, the father of the children that I made with my own blood, trying to score with a random woman who doesn't know I exist?

Did I love you more? Or did time and routine, laundry-Saturdays and frozen fish sticks just put me in a dormant state in which the only possible reaction to betrayal is silence treatment and quiet plot for revenge?

The city is buzzing today. With the holidays round the corner, and the game in a couple of hours, everyone and their dog seems to be out in the street today. If I had taken the car as I planned, I'd be stuck in the city centre for God knows how long. From time to time, I feel the vibration of my phone inside my purse. I could have left it at home, but what kind of psycho would do that? I'll mute it when I reach my destination, but for now, I don't even want to take it out. I'm scared to see who's leaving all these messages. If it's my mother-in-law, I think I'll have a fit of rage. If it's Heather, I'll have to give her some kind of excuse eventually, won't I? I don't know how to tell her about this yet.

If it's him, well. He can think a little longer about what he's done.

What has he done, though? a whiny voice in my head asks as I see couples and prams and little children and attractive men crossing in front of me whenever I stop at red traffic lights. *He's barely exchanged a few texts with a stranger, but he loves you. He does love you, and that's much more than what you can say about that person you are on your way to see. Did you forget that?*

And no, believe me: I have not forgotten how out of your way you went more than once, more than twice, to let me know that we were just friends and you only loved me as such—no matter how many nights we spent together, how many trips we took to the beach just the two of us, how many times we made out at the movies. But at least you never lied to me. All that time we were *not* dating, you never hid anything from me, you never treated me like a clown. You knew you weren't good and you didn't try to conceal it. And even though the truth hurt, at least I was treated with that respect.

That should be the bare minimum, shouldn't it?

Meanwhile, the so-called love of my life finds me so dull and unaware that he...

This must be what people call *spiralling*. But it will be over soon; I'm not far now. In the next roundabout, I'll take the third exit and cross the river, and that's where this ride, that I haven't been able to enjoy as I would have liked, will end.

I dismount Tiger at the entrance parking and I don't bother putting my helmet away in the chest; I lost the key long ago, anyway. It's not as cold as I thought it would be, although I'm not sure why I thought it wouldn't be warm in the first place—it's a beautiful day to be outside. I

wave at the guard by the gate, who greets me with a little nod. I wonder what his job really is. It's impossible for him to know every single person who comes here, is it not? So what's the point of him watching the gates?

I walk the path I haven't walked in a long while. The wet grass shining under the sun is proof of a recent watering. I find myself disappointed by the lack of a little rainbow reflected by the droplets hanging from the grass leaves. The path is almost dry, though, and I'm thankful for that. These shoes might not be the most appropriate for this excursion, come to think of it.

There are some people walking around, as usual. Older people, in particular, which doesn't surprise me at all, although it is somewhat sad. It only makes this place feel lonelier. Thankfully, none of them come closer, and so I can watch them in silence from the safety of distance.

'There you are,' I say when I finally find you. Someone must have been visiting recently; the stone is pristine and polished, and there are fresh flowers in a vase with clean water. I kneel down in front of you; I'll deal with the green stains later. 'I'm sorry I didn't bring flowers today. I was in a rush... kind of.'

My voice breaks a little, and that's the cue for the tears to finally start flowing, one by one, slowly.

'I have the next best thing with me, instead.' I try to force a smile as I take out the bottle of rum and leave it next to the flowers. 'I thought you'd appreciate it. But I hope no one takes this the wrong way. And I hope you come back to haunt them if they try to steal it.'

I sit in silence for a minute, taking in the songs of the birds, the movement of the breeze, the voices of the other visitors. The sun on my skin. Then, the buzz of my phone interrupts the quietness one more time. I forgot to mute it. I wipe my tears with a hand, apologise, and take it out of my bag, only so I am able to turn it off. But I can't help seeing his last text on the notification bar.

'Please talk to me...'

I clear my throat with the intention of getting rid of the lump so I can swallow my mistakes, my hopes, my sadness. That feeling of loss, once again.

But when has that worked for me?

'I just really miss you today...' ■

WHEN WILL YOU TAKE NOTICE?

Nicola Rose



I was surprised we managed to find seats together on the 2 o'clock train from Edinburgh Waverly to Lenzie, especially on a Friday when people were normally rushing home early from work to spend the afternoon with their families. Michael, who had officially labelled himself as my boyfriend two weeks ago today, took my hand in his lap and sighed. I glanced at the business man sat across from us, expecting to see him perving us up like every other old man seemed to do, but he was too busy tap-tap-tapping away at his shiny laptop, ignorant to our P.D.A and my knees digging into his fat, squishy legs.

I hated P.D.A. I hated trains too. It wasn't the anxious rush to nab a seat, or the oniony smell of sweaty bodies pushed together, or the fact they were constantly running ten minutes behind schedule. It was having to sit for over an hour with hundreds of strangers in a cramped compartment, feeling their eyes lingering on my face, trying to suss out if they recognised me, and if they did, where they recognised me from. Worse than the curious gaze of strangers were the times I'd see a wave of strawberry blonde hair out of the corner of my eye or hear a familiar musical laugh and for a second my brain would trick my heart into thinking it was Emma, and I'd have to spend the rest of the journey trying to convince myself it wasn't.

My phone buzzed on the plastic table separating us from the tapping man, interrupting Michael's story of this morning's coffee machine disaster that I was only half listening to. My mum's name flashed onto the screen for the third time today. She was probably phoning to make sure we hadn't died on the journey from the house to the train station.

'Shouldn't you answer that?' said Michael, loosening his grip on my hand.

'No,' the words came out more as a scoff than I intended. 'My mum's a nightmare on the phone.'

He rolled his eyes and smirked. 'Anyway, as I was saying—'

And he continued with how he had to buy three different types of filters before his coffee finally came out properly. The irritation appeared like someone had punted a football in my stomach. I remembered why I hadn't wanted to be Michael's girlfriend in the first place; he was like an annoying dog.

'Look at that,' he barked suddenly, nodding towards the platform outside the window. I craned my neck to look around him and through the multi-coloured crowd walking briskly through the station I met the large, glossy, brown eyes of a young girl poking through flicks of a blonde fringe plastered onto a poster on the wall. Her face was enlarged so that it covered most of the page, and was so pale she almost blended into the white bricks behind her. Written in big black letters above her were the words: 30,000 CHILDREN ARE REPORTED MISSING EVERY YEAR. WHEN WILL YOU TAKE NOTICE?

'Huh, you'd never think it was that many,' said Michael. 'I wonder where they all go.'

*

When we walked through the door of my mum's house just after 3 o'clock I was greeted by the familiar smell of old, damp furniture and the citrusy air freshener my mum used in a failed attempt to cover it up. I hated coming back to this house. Nothing had changed in fifteen years.

It was like whenever there was no one there to witness her, my mother just pressed pause on her life, only starting up again when someone knocked on the door. She still had the same worn-out, peach coloured settee set, and the 1980's-esque mahogany fireplace covered in a thick layer of dust, littered with old pictures of when we were still a family of four. A newspaper lay sprawled open on the coffee table at the obituary page, with a tea stained mug sat over the list of names. I called out for my mum, and a few seconds later she came rushing out of the bubbling kitchen with a plastic spoon in her hand, holding it like a baton.

'Oh, Kirsten!' She threw her arms around me, cooing into my eardrum about how she missed me so much. It had only been a few months. I patted her back and forced a grin, throwing her attention in the direction of Michael as I introduced him.

'Och, it's so nice to finally meet one of Kirsten's boyfriends!' my mum said, and Michael looked at me with one eyebrow arched over her shoulder as she squeezed the life out of him too. Before she could say much else, the hissing from an over-boiled pot hitting the stove sent her rushing back through to the kitchen. I stood awkwardly with my arms folded across my chest as Michael walked in long strides around the living room, unusually quiet as he took in the decor. He stopped at the fireplace and pointed to one of the framed pictures.

'I didn't know you had a sister,' Michael said. He had that tone of voice that he used whenever he was about to try and be funny. It was a photo of Emma and me in Blackpool when we were younger. Our arms stretched above our heads, our fingers lightly touching with the Tower perfectly aligned in the background, so it looked like we were pinching the top. Our other hands were squeezed together, a bundle of stubby, sticky fingers. I was too young to remember the day, but I remembered the feeling of her hand in mine; the sweaty security of it, the warmth.

'I don't,' I said.

'A cousin then?' he said. When he turned around he was smirking. He opened his mouth to say something else and then, meeting my eye, closed it again. I glowered across the room at my boyfriend and decided I was going to break up with him. His charming and refreshing southern accent and bubblyness had been appealing at first. I was attracted to people and places that felt far away from Lenzie. Men with accents different to mine, my flat with the floor to ceiling windows that overlooked the glittering city, spin classes, book clubs, international flights. But now every time Michael spoke my stomach churned and I had to bite my tongue as a precaution. He was so easy to insult. He cared about fast cars and going bald and how much money he made. I'd known him just over a month, but I knew where his insecurities were. Men like him were all the same.

'I'll tell you later,' I said.

I went into the kitchen, hoping Michael would take the hint not to follow me. My mum was setting the table. She'd left the cupboard door open, and behind the wine glasses I saw an old plastic cup. It was worn and scratched, but I recognised it straight away. It was once decorated with daisies and a picture of a tabby cat. It was our favourite cup. When the matching one cracked in the dishwasher and was chucked out, Emma and I would fight over who got to use the remaining one, and I knew if I cried she would give it to me. I smiled at the memory, then felt the threat of tears. I didn't want to cry in front of Mum, so to distract myself I started scrubbing the pots in the sink with a deformed, worn out sponge.

'You don't have to do that, darling. Go have a seat,' Mum said.

'It's fine,' I said. The water was cold and brown. The floating pieces of carrot and potato made me cringe, but it was a good enough distraction. Mum pushed her shoulder gently into my own, the scourer already in her hand.

'Honestly, Kirsten, I can manage it.'

'It's fine, Mum,' I snapped. She looked up at me; a look I knew all too well. I'd hurt her feelings. The front door opened then followed by the sound of boots scuffing on the welcome mat.

All the tension I didn't realise I'd been holding, in my jaw, in my shoulders, suddenly subsided as I let out a shaky breath. My dad, still as broad and as bald as the last time I saw him, came into the kitchen. Although not much else had changed, he looked tired and old, the skin around his eyes and mouth sagging like some sad 70s cartoon character. It startled me, the sadness of it.

'Who's that English fella in the living room?' he said. I laughed, drying my hands on the ragged dishcloth beside the sink. I hugged him tightly, the smell of peppermint and cigarettes from his knitted pullover the same as it was twenty years ago, when I was a child and I'd cry into his shoulder in the morning before going to school, and then again when I came home from school, every day for weeks on end. My eyes started to sting.

'Good to see you, Aileen,' he said over my head, addressing Mum. In the living room I heard Michael talking to someone. He was using a voice I'd never heard him use before, like he was talking to a baby. I looked up at Dad.

'I got a pup,' he said. 'Bit of company in my old age.' I didn't have to look at Mum to know that she was staring at my dad in horror. I felt the muscles in his arms shift. 'Hope that's alright, Aileen,' he added quickly. 'He isn't any trouble.'

'I guess it'll have to be alright, won't it?'

I was grateful then that my dad had learned when not to respond to my mother. When they got divorced when I was sixteen it felt like the worst thing in the world, like I was grieving all over again. But soon, after a few nights of falling asleep without listening to screaming or doors slamming or waiting up for my dad to come home, I learned that it was probably the best thing that could have happened for all of us.

My mum began plating the dinner—chicken and boiled potatoes with a few pale stems of broccoli—and we took our seats around the small round table in the kitchen. Dad and Mum exchanged some brief pleasantries across the table, apparently relieved that the dreaded task of interacting with each other was over for another month or two. Dad's pup, a golden retriever called Bailey, lay under his feet, occasionally standing up to rest his chin on dad's knee. I didn't say much over dinner. Neither did Dad; it was, unsurprisingly, Michael and my mum that did most of the talking. She was impressed at his high-end banking job and studio flat that he never shut up about and I imagined how disappointed she would be in a few days when I told her I'd broken up with him. After all the plates were empty, Michael asked if he could help clean up and I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes.

'Don't be silly!' Mum said, shooing her hand.

'I'll take Bailey out for a run in the park, so he can do his business and burn off some energy,' Dad said, already pulling his packet of cigarettes out from his back pocket.

'Can we come?' I said, almost too quickly. I avoided my mum's eye, but I could feel her looking at me from the corner of my eye.

'Aye,' Dad said. 'We can show Michael all the great sights of Lenzie.'

He winked. I knew he'd rather not be left alone in the house with my mum, and neither would I.

Michael threw a ball for Bailey on the wide pitch of grassy land beyond the swings, the two of them kindred spirits. I sat with Dad in silence on the same green bench he'd sit and watch us play from when we were younger. The swings were even more rusted now than they were back then, and the spots on their poles where I'd pick at the red paint were still there, like a black bruise. I used to stand and watch Emma play on the swings, jealous of how high she could make the seat go. '*Watch me fly, Kirsten!*' she would say as she let go of the chains and leapt out of the seat. I used to swear one day she would swing so high she'd fly as high as the clouds and never come back.

'I see her, sometimes,' Dad said, taking a long draw of his stick thin cigarette and blowing the smoke away from me. I inhaled the smell. Even though he'd smoked for as long as I could remember, he always warned us off them, but right now all I wanted was the lightness of a nicotine buzz.

'In ridiculous places, where she'd never be,' he said, staring out in front of him. 'Like when I'm driving down Cathedral Street in town, past all the students. Or last week on the news when the reporter was covering that shooting in Florida. One of the girls getting interviewed looked like her,' he scoffed and took another draw. 'Imagine Emma, in America all this time, crying over people she doesn't even know. But I'll see someone with the same hair or hear her voice and for a second, I'll get that jolt in my belly again... Y'know, like she's come back.'

'Me too,' I said, picking at a hangnail on my thumb. A tiny wound opened and started oozing red. I pressed down on it with my finger to stop the blood, ignoring the sting.

'I sound like a madman,' he laughed, pressing his finger into his eye.

How could you not be? I thought. In the distance, Michael launched the ball for Bailey, then turned around and waved at us like a little kid.

'He's no bad, y'know,' Dad said, nodding towards Michael.

'I think I'm going to dump him after this,' I said. The blood was appearing around my finger now.

My dad threw his head back and laughed.

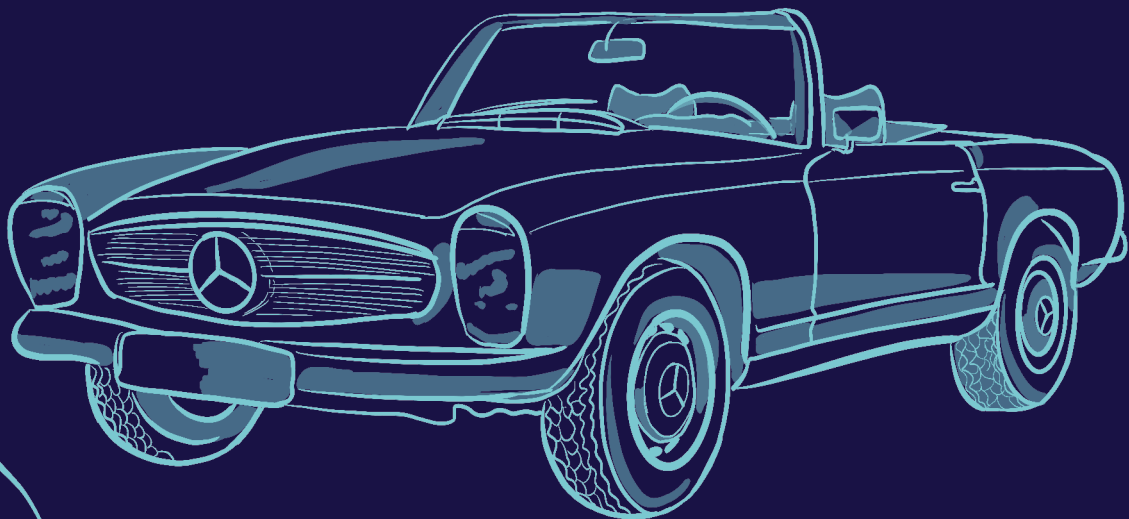
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A police car was parked outside Mum's house when we got back and I already knew what was coming; another body, an unknown 33 year old female with strawberry blonde hair, had been found just outside of Kirkintilloch, or Kilsyth, or somewhere nearby, and the policeman - who was just eager to finish his shift - wanted my mum to come down to the police station and identify

the body. I already knew that my mum would be sitting in the living room, crying hopeful tears and waiting for our arrival so she could jump into our arms and tell us that Emma had finally been found. Something happened inside my chest; an extra thump causing a flutter in my heart: it was hope, but it didn't last for long. I pushed it down to the bottom of my stomach like I always did, and braced myself for the same old fight with my mum after it would be discovered that the body wasn't Emma, and she was in fact still missing, and would be for the rest of our lives. Of course, she had to be somewhere—dead or alive—and of course I would wonder where she was, but I also knew that there would never be closure, not after all these years. There would never be mourning or moving on; she would always be gone. ■

BANSHEE

Eleanor Grace



Sadie wakes where her body was found; washed up on the shores of a private beach, with seaweed tangled in her hair and damp, grey sand imprinted on her skin.

She doesn't feel the cold or the sharp sea breeze hitting the back of her lungs. Her chest no longer rises and falls.

She just...is.

Lifting her head, she sees the house up on the hill. The house with the sprawling ivy and the turrets, the gardens that bloom with bright rhododendrons and yellow broom in the summer. It must be one of the colder, darker months that bookend the year, for the garden has shrunk in on itself as if recoiling from the harsh elements. The lack of green exposes ugly, twisted branches and barren flowerbeds and the monstrous house itself. She can see all the way to the bay window with the cushioned seat on the sill, where she used to spend afternoons reading or watching the boats out on the water. That room glows warmly. Invitingly. It's at odds with the swirling aura of death that she can see flowing off the roof tiles and drifting through cracks in the stone.

Seawater spatters onto soft sand as she hauls herself to her feet and adjusts the torn, sodden clothes that hang off her body. Inside her very core, she can feel a strange force pulling her towards the house and the people she knows will be inside.

Towards Rory, who will soon find out that this day is going to be his last.

*

She doesn't know how long exactly she's been gone for, but she thinks it's long enough that things should have changed within the house. They haven't. It's as if everything has been preserved in an ornate, sprawling snow globe, waiting for her to return. The stairs carpeted in that garish green and blue tartan. The lingering smell of wood polish and smoke, with an underlying hint of dampness. The godawful stag head mounted in the entrance hall—though one ear looks significantly more moth-eaten than the last time she saw it.

The floorboards creak beneath her bare feet. Nobody comes running. It was never unusual to hear the stairs groan or a door click shut despite everyone being in the same room. When Rory first brought her up here, he told her it was the ghost of his great-aunt who drowned further along the coast. Sadie made him keep the bedside light on for several nights, until she convinced herself he was winding her up. Now, she isn't so sure.

She leaves a trail of wet footprints in her wake. They don't dry.

Rory's room is on the second floor, three doors down. She collapses on the familiar dark silk sheets and lets her hair soak the pillow, sliding her palms across the material that should feel cool against her skin. She always imagined this is how it would feel to lie in a cloud; softly cocooned and weightless. It was a far cry from the cheap sheets in the council house she grew up in with her mother. She used to love waking up here, not necessarily next to Rory, but knowing that summer days would be spent drinking champagne on the boat or having picnics on the beach at the bottom of the garden. Winter brought with it extravagant Christmas parties with overflowing banquets and cigars smoked out of windows. Because she didn't own anything suitable enough herself, she'd wear dresses from Rory's mother's wardrobe. The weight of them always surprised

her the most. Some had layers of chiffon and gauzy sleeves, others sparkled with real crystals.

She doesn't remember who she was before she came here. She doesn't want to remember who she was before she came here.

She lies stretched out on the bed until the door opens. She pushes her hair, still knotted with pieces of seaweed, out of her face as she looks up at the person in the doorway.

Time has added laughter lines to the corners of his eyes and pushed his hairline further back. She recognises the blue shirt he wears; she might have even picked it out for him herself. The buttons seem to be straining a little more than they did when he first wore it, however many years ago that was. It couldn't be more than five or six. He is almost entirely unchanged like the house itself, which—had she still been alive and with him—she would have found unfortunate.

He never was the handsome brother though.

Surprise captures his features momentarily before ebbing out to something more neutral. She expected him to run screaming from the room, but he waits, as if challenging her to react.

Rory, her boyfriend of ten years, and the last face she ever saw.

Her lifeless body suddenly feels as if it's taken a punch to the gut. A torrent of emotion cascades like water and drenches her from head to toe. The sight of him in the doorway has knocked everything loose.

Everything.

She wants to grab him by the collar and shake him until his brain rattles in his skull. She wants to shove him down all of the three staircases in the house and watch him tumble like a slightly overweight rag doll.

She wants to unleash hell upon him for what he did. Curse him in this life, and the next, and the next.

Sadie waits for flames to burst out from under her skin, or any tangible sign of the fury that rages within her.

Nothing happens. Instead, she feels herself slump forward as the anger leaves her body as quickly as it arrived, and she bursts into tears.

*

Rory doesn't seem fazed when Sadie sits herself down at the breakfast table and watches him eat his toast and scrambled eggs. She has composed herself now, choosing to focus solely on the anger simmering away within her. It's giving her some comfort knowing that at some point today death will come for Rory too, though in what shape or form she doesn't know. She is only an observer, unable to interfere.

If she could breathe she would be holding her breath, waiting for an overly optimistic mouthful of toast to lodge itself in his gullet. The more intently she watches, the more carefully he chews. She wonders if she should tell him what her presence means, but she decides she does not want to give him the satisfaction of an advance warning.

He finishes his breakfast unscathed.

She follows him from room to room, tracking every movement, pausing when his shoe

catches on the edge of a Persian rug and he trips. Then steadies himself. She isn't surprised that she's back here only a few years after she died. She never expected Rory to reach old age. He's always been frighteningly impulsive. Or just stupid.

In the garage, she sits in the passenger seat of his beloved Mercedes Pagoda as he polishes it with a rag.

Rory always insisted on driving them into town for a drink, even though the pub was well within walking distance. Sadie hated those journeys. The music would be too loud, the roof down and the wind tugging at the hair she'd carefully blow-dried. Their hands would be too cold to hold their rolled cigarettes. The seaside town consisted of ice cream shops and tartan souvenirs and the pale blue vintage car stuck out exactly as you'd expect.

'People are laughing,' she said once.

'Let them,' Rory replied. She glanced behind at Rory's older brother Ali, a picture of effortless nonchalance in the back even with his knees squashed under his chin. The breeze was kinder to him than it was to her, toying playfully with his golden brown curls as he smoked his cigarette. He seemed entirely unbothered, so Sadie tried to be too.

It was difficult to keep up the charade of indifference on the way back, when Rory would try to drive them home after consuming copious amounts of wine and unashamedly flirting with the pretty blonde behind the bar. They would all fight, and then Sadie would storm off to the bus stop with Ali at her heels. The two of them would sit and wait on the last bus of the evening, listening out for the sound of sirens in the distance that thankfully never came. Sadie would cry a little, and Ali would put his arm around her. Sometimes he'd cup her face with his broad hands and gently kiss away her tears.

She watches Rory shine the car with a more delicate touch than he ever used on her. Disappointment swells within her when none of the tools hanging from the garage wall fall and splice him open, nor does he find himself crushed beneath the car wheels in a terrible accident. The anaemic winter sunshine has all but gone, and Rory, somehow, is still alive.

*

Upstairs, he runs a bath. When he sinks into the steaming water, Sadie slides in at the opposite end. He flinches violently as her toes brush his, hands flying up to grip the edge of the roll-top tub, and she's pleased that he's *finally* showing some kind of visceral reaction to her presence. Rather than his cheeks turning pink from the heat of the bath water, Rory starts to pale. Swathes of death eddy around him, growing more opaque as the minutes tick by.

'Why are you not scared of me?' she asks eventually. She isn't sure he's heard her at first, or if she can be heard at all. He leans back against the bathtub, sweat beading on his forehead.

'Because you're everywhere,' he says. Now that he's naked, stripped bare of his expensive clothes, his possessions, Sadie sees the shadows circling like bruises beneath bloodshot eyes. She can smell the alcohol on his breath. Stale, as if he had a whisky instead of a morning coffee.

'You're in the ice cream shop on the seafront. Or on the beach, sitting on that flat rock you liked. Ali says he sees you too. Sometimes I'm so convinced you're still here that I get your

mug out when I'm making tea.

'I smell you too,' he continues, his voice low as if he's afraid of being overheard. 'On my pillow. On my scarf. But I've never felt you before. Why can I feel you today?'

Sadie stares him down. His efforts to win her over with nostalgia do nothing to dampen the swirling anger in her bloodless veins. 'Admit what you did and I'll tell you.'

'I did nothing,' he says loudly, swiftly, and with such conviction that she almost questions herself—almost.

There's a knock at the bathroom door and someone calls Rory's name. Sadie's own heart leaps; it sounds like Ali. Without hesitating, Rory lunges forward and pushes Sadie under the water.

And just like that, she's pulled back to the day she fell out of the boat.

That day came a few weeks after one of their nights out at the pub. The last one they would ever have, actually. Sadie and Ali had made it back to the house before Rory, and the lack of his car in the driveway had sent Sadie into a frenzy. Ali tried everything to calm her down.

It took his mouth on hers to snap her out of it.

They hadn't heard the car engine purr up the driveway, or the crunching gravel as Rory made his way up to the house.

During those painful weeks after, in which Rory didn't acknowledge his brother once, Sadie began to question whether they had in fact heard Rory approaching, and had chosen to ignore it, just as she had chosen to ignore the floral perfume on the collars of his shirts that wasn't hers.

The boat trip was an olive branch. It was to be the three of them, a bottle of champagne and a couple hours of grovelling. She never imagined it would end with her falling overboard.

This time, it doesn't matter when water floods into her mouth and lungs; there is no life to lose. Still, a familiar panic rises within her as the memory of a wave closing over her head returns, and she begins to thrash helplessly against Rory's iron grip.

Her fingernails find skin that isn't hers, and dig in, forcing him to release her shoulders. She surfaces, furiously wiping bubbles out of her eyes, noting the thin streams of scarlet trickling from Rory's forearms and splashing into the bath water. Ali is already gone.

There's only one reason why the brothers see her everywhere, she realises, and it's all over Rory's shiny, doughy face as he launches himself from the bathtub, flinging soap suds across the room.

Guilt.

*

Sadie stands before the mirror in Rory's mother's bedroom, admiring the glittering black dress she'd pulled from the wardrobe. The gauzy material sticks to her skin, still damp from the sea, and there are some strands of seaweed she can't seem to unravel from her hair, as if they are part of her now. The same way she has become part of the foundations of this house and its very bones; she is the ivy that has begun to smother the house's once-pristine exterior, wildly and

unapologetically, forcing herself into every crack and crevice until she can be felt everywhere.

There are only a handful of hours in the day left. She is starting to feel restless with anticipation. Guests are gathering downstairs. Something has already smashed; a champagne flute, a bottle, a priceless ornament—she isn't sure. She makes her way down one flight of stairs and finds the house below full of young people. The lavish decorations and generous bar would suggest a celebration of some kind, but Sadie knows this is just a typical weekend here.

She descends down the second staircase, enjoying the familiar swish of the dress against her legs, pushing her way through the already sweating bodies of the guests. She walks right into a man's chest, and out of habit mutters an apology. The man doesn't move and Sadie looks up, finding herself staring into Ali's eyes as he takes a generous sip of his champagne. The recognition only takes a fraction of a second. He coughs, alcohol spilling out of his mouth and running down his chin. He wipes his face with the back of his hand, a rather sloppy movement for someone who she once thought elicited an unnatural grace.

An invisible force twists and squeezes her insides. The sight of Rory summoned a deep, unrelenting fury that had her clenching her fists. She wanted to hurt him, beat him to a pulp.

But with Ali...she feels pain. As if her internal organs are slowly splintering into fragments as she takes in his wide blue eyes, the laughter within them eclipsed by fear.

They watch each other, unmoving, whilst the party carries on around them. She always longed for his undivided attention in a room full of people. She didn't think she'd have to be dead to earn it.

The last time they'd regarded each other like this, she realises, she was in the water.

Drowning.

The memory fills her with unease as it starts to form, bit by bit in her mind. She remembers looking at Ali as always, who knelt in the boat behind Rory. Arms hanging uselessly by his sides. Handsome, even whilst paralysed by panic.

He looked instead to the brother who he'd barely spoken to in weeks. And even though the current kept tugging Sadie under, salt stinging her eyes and nostrils, she caught a fleeting moment of silent understanding between the siblings. Seconds later, Rory was reaching for her, ready to pull her to safety. The relief she'd felt was palpable.

He pushed her under instead. Handing her straight into the arms of the current that kept trying to snatch her from the life and the house and the boys she never wanted to leave.

Ali had just watched.

She hates that she doesn't want to hurt him. Her traitorous heart still wants him to lift her into his arms and kiss her.

Ali starts to back away step by step, running a hand through his curls with a tense hand. He shouts something to Rory, who leans heavily against a door frame, slurping Dom Pérignon from the bottle. When Rory doesn't move, his brother grabs him and yanks him towards the front door.

They leave. She wants to follow, but she can't. She is an observer, she reminds herself. She cannot interfere.

Death pursues them instead.

Over the sound of some ancient jazz song selected purely for ostentation, an old car engine roars to life.

*

The harbour is lit up in undulating flashes of neon blue. A section of the railing separating the road from the beach is missing, the metal either side of the gap gnarled and twisted out of shape. On the beach below lies the crumpled remains of a vintage car. A Mercedes Pagoda, light blue, with the roof down.

A young man stands with a police officer. His dinner jacket is torn at the sleeve and a thin stream of blood runs from his temple, but he's practically unscathed as always. He stares, unblinking, at a body lying on the pebbles. Someone has covered it with a tartan travel blanket, but a mess of golden brown curls pokes out from one end.

Sadie stands on the flat rock she always liked, the one that Rory said he always sees her sitting on. He's already glanced over a couple of times from his position next to the police officer, his face a horrible, chalky white.

What did you do? She wants to yell at him, but her own shock has left her unable to form words. She had felt death all around the house, had seen it swirling around Rory, had been so sure that his time was up. It was never meant to be Ali.

But now that he knows what she is, he'll look for her. He'll listen for her voice echoing through the empty halls of that great big house on the beach. He'll flinch at the sight of someone's reflection in those old, draughty bay windows. And when he eventually sees her again—in the tangible form he's seen her in today—he'll know.

He'll know that she's come back for him too. ■

THE PROPOSAL

Giovanni Sebastian Cardillo



The night was mild and humid, salty air and darkening shades of blue began closing in above us. I spotted the waitress approaching from inside the restaurant. She moved between the tables as though she knew them by heart, not really looking at the chairs and chattering patrons around her but wafting across the floor of the dining area. In her left hand she held a dinner tray, her right hand elegantly hidden behind the small of her back. As she stepped outside, passing the tall columns that separated the restaurant's interior from the terrace, I noticed a bottle of champagne and two glasses on the tray.

I looked back at Liz whose eyes rested on a point behind my left shoulder. A faint smile pursed her lips. She snapped back to reality when the waitress put down the glasses in front of us, opened the bottle of Moët and started pouring. Liz and I exchanged a brief look of amusement. I could sense her excitement – or maybe it was just my own that I projected on her. Or both. She slightly bit her lip and avoided any eye contact with the server.

'Uhm, merci,' I said as the waitress placed the bottle on the table, gave us a polite nod and hurried away.

'So here we are, huh?'

'I guess we are,' I replied. 'Let's drink.'

'What are we drinking to?'

I hesitated for a moment.

'To an unexpectedly eventful week in French Polynesia.'

'Well said.'

We touched glasses looking in each other's eyes and took a sip of champagne. I slowly lowered the fine flute, gently placing it next to my plate. The slender stem felt cold on my fingers, condensed water already running down the elongated bowl. Tiny droplets were racing each other on their way to the bottom. They absorbed more water, grew bigger and faster until they met my clammy fingertips. I tightened my grip feeling like I needed to hold on to something. Anything. Even if it was just a fragile piece of glassware.

When I looked up from my glass I saw Liz examining me. Her rose lips seemed to hide a moony smirk. The soft evening breeze had blown a strand of her sun bleached hair into her face. I tried to read her but only got lost in the azure infinity that was staring back at me, back into my soul. I felt naked. Vulnerable like prey. Liz's clear blue eyes had trapped me, and I wasn't able to avert my gaze. My mouth was dry and I could still taste the sweet aroma of ridiculously expensive French champagne at the back of my throat. The soft light coming from the torches on the patio flickered around us. My shirt was sticking to my back, damp and heavy, resting on my sweating body.

Without thinking about what was about to happen I retracted my hand and reached into my right pocket. My fingers fumbled around for a brief moment. Then found what they were looking for. There it was, embraced by the fabric of my beige linen shorts, a slim ring with a single white pearl on its top.

Suddenly I was very aware of my tongue. It felt awkward and misplaced. My hand was still hidden in my pocket clenching the delicate piece of Tahitian jewellery. Words started to form in my mind but were not yet able to cross the threshold to my vocal cords. A giant lump in my throat

left no room for any sounds to escape from my mouth. I swallowed several times.

I tried to focus on the fact that all of this wasn't real. That this was in fact a staged proposal we had agreed on earlier that day, that had the sole purpose of scoring some free drinks for us. Which had worked, apparently. But this thought didn't calm me down, not as much as I had hoped. I heard my heartbeat hammering in my ears, blurring out the noises coming from the people eating and talking at the other tables, the sound of the ocean next to us, the music playing on speakers well hidden under the palm trees behind me. It even started to drown out the words I so desperately tried to remember. Those few sentences that I had scribbled down in a little cocktail napkin at the bar a few hours earlier.

My stomach started to cramp and the pressure on my eardrums became deafening. Before I knew what I was doing, I found myself kneeling next to the table. Liz looked just as surprised as I was feeling, but the spark of curious anticipation was still shining from her face. I reached for her left hand with my own while my right one kept clinging to the ring.

As I pulled it out and held it in front of me I opened my mouth—lips still dry and chapped, tongue still heavy—and cleared my throat. Whatever I had written, whatever I had prepared for this moment, it didn't occur to me. My mind was blank, a white canvas. But I knew what I had to say, what I wanted to say. It was so clear to me. I felt profoundly stressed for the first time in a long while, but somehow also mindful and calm. I was confident, even though I didn't know why.

'Liz, I have known you for a while now. Five days, to be precise,' I laughed. 'And I have thought about this a lot. Really, all day long. You complete me in a way I could have never predicted. You are the person I was looking for without knowing that I was looking. And there is something that I have to ask you. Will you marry me?'

Silence followed. The kind of all-consuming quietness that squeezes your chest and suffocates you with no mercy. I did not dare to take a breath, trying to avoid any unnecessary movements and noises. I felt the other diners turning their heads and staring at me kneeling there on the surprisingly warm marble floor. The laughter and chatter at the tables around us subsided.

My heart was still beating rapidly as I urged myself to stay calm, to listen to my brain telling me that nothing about this situation was serious at all. That this was in no way dramatic. That we were in the middle of a—so far—quite successful prank that had no further meaning. Or did it? What had started out as a charming joke, an innocent notion, had somehow escalated and brought us here. Literally brought me to my knees. And all of a sudden it was not a joke anymore. I remember now how real it felt to me, more so than anything I had done, seen or experienced during my many months traveling around the globe.

The ring felt heavy in my hand and the stares of everyone around us burned into the back of my neck like the scalding Pacific sun had done during the day. I had never fainted in my life but I was sure it was about to happen then. My own words echoed in my mind. *Will you marry me?*

A drop of sweat ran across my eyebrow and made me squint comically. The pearl on the ring shone brightly in the torches' fire but I was much more mesmerised by the spark in Liz's eyes. I noticed the corners of her mouth twitching, her head slowly moving down and back up. Then again, and more determined, she nodded as a smile started to show on her face. She finally broke

the silence that was beginning to pull me down toward the marble.

‘Yes. Of course. Oh, my god. Yes!’

I sensed a warmth flowing through my entire body. I felt my aching knee pressed onto the ground, my fingers numbly holding the ring, my ears steadily adjusting to the cacophony that began to whirl around me. Someone was applauding very close to us but it sounded distant and surreal, a man across the terrace started chanting loudly. I couldn’t hear what he was saying.

In a swift but cautious movement I slipped the ring on Liz’s finger. It didn’t really fit all that well and kept wobbling up and down. I was relieved to notice that her hand was as damp as mine, though. She extended it and looked at the ring. Then she got up from her chair and pulled me up to my feet. Her hands were resting on the back of my head while I grasped her by the waist. Liz pushed her face close to mine, her lips were only inches away now. I closed my eyes, carefully pulled her toward me, and kissed her.

It wasn’t our first kiss, but somehow, it was the best. Her lips tasted of champagne, and vaguely salty. Because of the ocean air, or tears? Liz’s thumbs were placed behind my ears, her fingers wandering through my hair. There it was. A moment of serenity that belonged only to us. Everybody else was nothing but a mere dot in the background of a beautifully composed expressionistic painting. We were weightless, floating, ascending. The lights around us faded into our periphery, leaving us the glowing centre of this scene. ■

GLYPH. RECOMMENDS



House of Earth and Blood, Sarah J. Maas

Yellowface, R. F. Kuang

Five Tuesdays in Winter, Lily King

Lapvona, Ottessa Moshfegh

Rebecca, Daphne Du Maurier

The Emotional Craft of Fiction, Donald Maass

Todas esas cosas que te diré mañana, Elisabet Benavent

Book Lovers, Emily Henry



Stick Season (We'll All Be Here Forever), Noah Kahan

Good Riddance, Gracie Abrams

The Good Witch, Maisie Peters

Prelude to Ecstasy, The Last Dinner Party

evermore, Taylor Swift

Unreal Unearth, Hozier



The Fall of the House of Usher

Gilmore Girls

What We Do in the Shadows

True Detective

Killers of the Flower Moon

Oppenheimer

Howl's Moving Castle

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