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HANNAH MCSORLEY

We Went to the Ocean to Forget

We return to the ocean to watch the gulls, to listen to the crashing waves hit the rocky shore, to feel its spit against our faces.

Our middle sister, Aila, descends the boat launch. She only wades into the water up to her knees today, and even though she's in the shallows, she turns, glances at us over her shoulder, as if looking for reassurance. She reaches her spread fingers to the surface to let the ocean nibble on her fingertips as an offering. I step down the boat launch just enough for the water to soak through the sides of my shoes, until I feel the water rise between my toes, and I place my hands in the water too. Take the dead skin, the hangnails, take what has already passed, I say—I hope—and maybe the water won't take anymore of us.

I look at both my sisters. As Aila tries to reconcile her love of the water with what it has taken, Adele stands staring at the sea defiant, angry that something so simple, so integral to life, could upend what she thought she knew. A week has separated the family of nine that we were from the family of eight we've become; the loss of our little brother Noah still raw enough to turn our stomachs.

We've always come to the ocean to forget; met here beside the boat launch—the fire pit—thrown photos of old boyfriends and papers with poor grades circled in red pen into the flames, which we then used to light our cigarettes

and exhale the day from our lungs. Today, though, I can't help but feel certain moments bombard me from behind.

A memory: waves kissing the tips of my tiny shoes. Papa is nearby talking to our two older brothers, Liam and Finn, about erosion, how water can cut through rock. My heart races as I look towards the rocky breakwater, protecting our shores from the rage of the sea. Images of waves, curling open into jaws, chomping through earth, race through my mind. Each time the waves lap against the shore in the nights that follow, I turn towards the window convinced that the ocean will have crept closer to our little red house, baring its teeth.

We were told of the curse from an age before our mouths knew words. Papa would lean forward in his burgundy chair in front of the fireplace, and remove his hat in respect for our drowned ancestors. His eyes would grow almost three times in size, and we'd suddenly notice the crazed chaos of his eyebrows. With my sisters and brothers gathered at his feet, he'd delve into the tales of the oak tree from which all life sprang, tales of an otherworld, of magic from his boyhood in Ireland. But he'd end his stories by rattling off a sequence of names once claimed by the lungs of our ancestors and send us off to bed with a warning. I'd imagine those names leaving their lungs in giant bubbles, as everything they were collapsed under the weight of water. At night our dreams would fill with faces that resembled our own, floating amongst cones of light.

Once all three of us had assembled between Ma and Papa in the middle of the night, with shaking hands and terrified hearts, Ma would sit up on the edge of her bed, take our hands in hers, and say, "Don't worry. It's a fib. It's a lie, an old story that no longer has power." But when Papa looked at the sea each morning, before he'd head to the docks and raise the sails, we could see a glint of fear, of focus, that he could shake no better than we could.

Adele was the only one brave enough to ask Papa about it. She was twelve at the time, Aila nine, myself five. He told us the sea simply craves the salt in our blood, that she whispers our family's name, searching for us. He said our husbands will be safe, but children must be watched carefully. He said the ocean has been swelling, churning and crashing with ever more power each year; that the sea was getting hungry.

When Papa's brother, Michael, drowned, Papa stopped telling the stories. We gradually forgot the names of the ocean's early victims and felt the details of their deaths slip further into history. With a little more than a decade separating our generation from the tragedy of the last, we all grew apathetic,

negligent. Whenever I touch the water, an ember in the back of my mind catches the wind, brightens to the shade of a spark. Because of it, I don't dare step into water any deeper than my knees.

I step off the boat launch and sit on the rocks separating the land from the sea. I look at my sisters, and I wonder if they're remembering the curse for the first time in a decade. My feet dangle above the water as I light a cigarette and guard the flame from the wind.

"Leah, you really shouldn't smoke, you know."

I turn back towards Adele, the eldest of the three of us, see her folding her arms in front of her chest as she paces.

"Says the person who handed me my first cigarette."

"You should stop. That's all I mean."

She stopped, so I should stop, is what she means.

I hear grass shifting as she approaches to sit beside me. She reaches for the cigarette between my fingers.

"I just want it for a second."

I smirk as she puts the cigarette to her lips and inhales; this is her first cigarette in four years, maybe five, as far as I know.

"Fuck...I forgot how that feels."

Aila turns around and glances at Adele from the water.

Adele lowers her head, cradles her face in her hands. "Aila, will you please get out of there."

"Yeah, or the kraken is gonna get ya," I sigh.

"Don't even start." Adele stands, walks back towards the table. "How can you joke about that today?"

She shakes her head and snatches her jacket off the table. I look at our black dresses and skirts, inhale another puff from my cigarette.

This town is filled with tongues that love to spin tales, a quality that fills Adele with rage. Some were beginning to speculate that our family would know loss again soon, but when news of Noah's death rolled through town with the fog, their guilt swept them like dirt up the aisle of the church to kneel in prayer before the tiny coffin.

Aila climbs up the boat launch, lets her dress fall from her grasp above the water.

"Adele, we're all thinking about it."

"Our family isn't cursed." Adele snaps. "We're surrounded by water—everyone knows someone who's drowned."

I shrug. "Sure, but our family has lost like twenty people."

Adele glances at me, but turns to Aila.

"What time is it?" She says.

Aila turns her wrist around and checks her watch. "Quarter to six."

I scan the growing fog and spot a familiar boat racing the clouds home.

"Papa's back." I stand, brushing dirt from my skirt. "We should head home."

"Well, let's go meet him." Adele pushes a rogue blond curl behind her ear.

"Why? We'll see him at home." I protest.

"Leah, you cannot be a bitch right now."

Before I can respond, Aila steps between us.

"The docks are on the way." She stares at me as she starts walking away from the water. Adele follows her in a huff, but I stay a second, take a long drag. I feel the smoke fill up the space behind my nose before the relaxation sets in, takes the edge off.

As scared as it makes me, I love to watch the gathering, surging water as it rolls towards the shore. Each time the waves finally break, I can hope that my silence has not been for nothing, that my siblings can see Papa in the ways that I can't. I can hope that one day I will collapse, gather, regroup, and get as far away as I can from where I started. The waves splash my shoes, as if the ocean is saying, "Go on now, go on." I spit into the sea, and take one more drag from my cigarette.

"Don't tell me what to do."

The smell of rotting fish is worst at the docks, though it fills the air all over town. Our shoes click against the wood beneath our steps as Papa's boat rams into his spot in the marina.

"Oh, geez." Adele runs ahead.

Papa jumps onto the dock, nearly falls onto John O'Reilly's boat on the other side, and lifts his arms up in the air when he spots us walking towards him.

Adele rips the bowline from his hand and ties it to the cleat on the dock so the boat can't drift away. As she stands Papa wraps his arms around her, rubs her head with his rough palm. I jump down into his boat, but I have to make my way through a sea of bottles, rolling from one side of the boat to the other to reach the main sail atop the boom.

Adele steps back from his embrace and watches him with worry.

"How're you doing, Papa?"

"I found some dolphins!"

He pushes Aila out of his way, so that she has to put one foot on the boat to avoid falling in the water, as he runs to the edge of the dock, pointing into the fog.

"Pulled up right alongside the hull here."

“Maybe that was Noah.” Adele smiles, but we all enter a moment of stillness, of reflection.

Noah was twelve—five years, nearly six, younger than myself. He’d gone to work with Papa on his fishing boat at the beginning of last week, but he fell in the water and was carried away in a riptide. Papa, our brothers, Liam and Finn, and all the fishermen, even the coast guard, searched the rest of the week, but they never found him. He had Ma’s big blue eyes and freckles crossing the bridge of his nose. After he’d play baseball with his friends and his socks would get all sweaty, he’d stick them under Papa’s pillow. I told him to do it once—he was the one to make a habit out of it. Papa would yell for him, chase him through the house with the dirty socks, and then throw Noah over his shoulder when he caught him.

I watch Papa now as he stares at the horizon. His black shirt is buttoned askew, half of his shirt isn’t tucked into his pants, and his yellow sailing jacket is falling from his shoulders. At the memorial this morning his hair had been combed neatly, but now the wind tugs bits and pieces of his greying hair in all directions.

Aila grabs Papa’s arm. “It’ll be getting dark soon. We should get back for dinner.”

Papa nods, points at the sails, and steps down onto the boat to begin de-rigging.

As we turn onto our street, we see Ma handing coins to the paperboy on the porch.

I shake my head. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

The boy rushes past me with his messenger bag clutched tight to his chest, his hat pulled down to hide his eyes. I don’t have the energy to chase after him today, but I turn to Ma who holds the paper, lifts her chin in triumph. I wonder what craft the classifieds and the apartment listings will be turned into today.

“You’ve been paying him to avoid giving me the newspaper, haven’t you?”

She stares at me with dark circles under her eyes.

“I knew you wouldn’t rest, not even today.”

With that, I stop on the driveway and watch my sisters and Papa follow Ma into the house. I feel my nostrils flaring until I fear my nose will tear.

There are two boxes on the porch with Adele written on the side. At the age of twenty-seven, with one failed marriage behind her, she’s moving back in with her eleven month old son, William. Once again, three beds have been squeezed into our tiny bedroom, but today they also crammed a crib between Adele’s bed and the wall. There never was enough room before, but now we’ll be lucky if our lungs can inflate.

The house is quiet when I finally step inside. Low voices susurrate through the halls. Liam, the eldest, is standing at the dinner table, talking to Aila. Finn, the brother between Liam and Adele, is shaking Papa's hand. Our remaining younger brother, Aidan, hands Papa an opened beer and sits on the floor beside the fireplace as Papa plops in his chair. In the quiet, I almost feel Noah slip into the room, as if he's observing us all from the steps like he used to, his big blue eyes sparkling.

Liam lifts his bottle in the air and says, "Dinner is served."

As we sit at the table I look at the freckles splattered over all of our faces, as if we were a single canvas receiving flecks of paint. Liam and I are the only ones with red hair. I hope to leave like he did: without ties to anyone or anything. But Ma didn't have any issues when Liam left; she said he had to go find a wife. With me it's different, I'm just supposed to be found apparently—I can't do any of the seeking.

I turn to my right and look at the empty chair between Ma and myself. Ma stares at the table where a plate should be, and curses as she stands and stomps to the cupboard. We all glance between Papa and Ma, as she sets up Noah's place setting. When she's done, we're all silent; no one dares move.

"Well, grace—let's say it, come on."

Ma holds up her hands, but puts one hand on the back of Noah's chair instead of grabbing mine when I reach towards her. I follow suit and place my hand on the back of Noah's chair as well, but look at my siblings as we lower our heads in prayer.

Papa whispers the "Our Father," and we all say "Amen" before dragging our fingers from our heads to our hearts and across our shoulders.

Liam begins to serve the chicken, mashed potatoes, and green bean casserole that he brought as our lips struggle to make conversation.

"Liam, how's Eilis?" Adele looks across the table at him, asking about his wife.

"She's doing well, she's enjoying the kids now that they're a bit older." He nods. "Aila, still swimming?" He turns towards her.

"Yeah, always swimming." She smiles beside me. She's training to get on a national swim team.

We start eating, but freeze once again as Ma stands up with Noah's plate, and gives him a serving of the food. Aila's eyes well up, and I watch Adele grab her hand.

"I don't want him to be hungry." Ma snarls, as she realizes we're watching her.

"Come now, Margaret." Papa shakes his head. "That's a waste of food."

"I will not send him to heaven without a proper meal, Owen." Ma snaps back.

Papa stands and puts his hands on his head.

"Pops, it's fine." Liam sits up in his chair. "There's plenty—really, it's not a problem."

Papa puts his hands at the top of his chair, shakes his head once more, before lifting the chair and slamming it back on the ground. We all jump as he stomps down the hall, grabs his jacket, and leaves out the front door.

With the plates back in the cupboards and the food wrapped up in the fridge, Ma kisses us all on the cheek, says goodnight, but pulls Adele upstairs with her. When Adele returns, Aila stares at her.

"What the hell was that about?" She finally asks.

"Ma asked if the baby could sleep in their room...she just wants to hold him for a while."

We nod, our hearts sinking. Liam pulls a bottle of whiskey out of a bag, sets it on the table.

"Anyone need a drink?"

We sigh collectively, relaxing our shoulders.

My sisters and I collapse at the top of the stairs in a heap. Aila lays on the floor in front of the door to our room as Adele and I lean against the wall, giggling.

"God, I haven't been drunk in so long." Adele laughs.

I kick off my heels and rest my head against the wall behind me.

"Tyler never took you to bars?" Aila looks up at Adele.

"No, not since the baby came. We went all the time when we were dating, we'd go dancing, and we did that a few times after we got married, but..."

She shakes her head, and looks down at her fingers now free of rings.

Aila stares at the ceiling, but whispers, "What are you gonna do?"

"I don't know, Aila." Adele sighs. "Stay here, get a job and save up for a while, I guess."

Aila rolls onto her stomach, rests her chin atop her hands, with her eyes nearly closed. Adele rolls the fabric of her skirt between her fingers, her brow furrowed in thought.

"Ma's excited to have a baby around again," I add.

"Yeah..." Adele chuckles, brushes her hair behind her ears. "He's pretty fun..."

We're quiet a moment. In the silence we hear the house breathing, and then the tapping of the radiator at the other end of the hall.

"Goodnight sir," Aila whispers.

A chuckle bursts from my tired chest, as Adele smiles beside me, and we remember the story Papa used to tell to quell our fear of that very tapping: he said an old man played spoons within the pipes, that the old man grew

lonely in the winter, so when we heard the tapping we were to say hello, or say goodnight, offer him a word or two to stave off his loneliness. We used to lay awake at night in our room, waiting for the sound of spoons, so we could try to talk to him, ask his name, how he got trapped in the pipes, whether he was safe, happy. Papa was never as concerned as we were.

Aila drops her arms to the floor in front of her and rests her forehead atop them, exhausted. When her breathing slows, I look at my oldest sister, and my curiosity and the whiskey on my tongue draw the questions from my mind into the air.

“What happened with Tyler?”

She rubs her eye, and her mascara darkens her eyelid and the side of her nose.

“It’s late. We should go to bed.”

“Adele, come on.”

She studies me for a moment before beginning.

“It’s—we took Will to the beach a few weeks ago...we took him to Seal Point, where we used to meet Papa.”

I nod, remembering wind in our hair, as all seven of us raced to the beach to meet Papa for lunch during the summers, while all of his fishing buddies went to the pub.

“And we were way up on the beach like way up by the road where you park. The water was at least two hundred feet away, if not more. I set Will’s carrier on the sand beside me to help Tyler lay out a blanket...”

“It was a sound like thunder—the waves came rushing all around us, lifting everything up, the buckets, the blanket, Will...it dragged him towards the ocean, but Tyler grabbed him, so he’s fine. Tyler wanted to just go home after that, but I had to stay, and watch...the waves didn’t come that far up the beach again, but I sort of hoped they would so we could say it was high tide or that the breakwater was damaged or something...”

“What did Tyler say?”

“Once we were back in the car, he started laughing and was about to drive home, but that’s when I stopped him, told him we needed to stay. I was terrified. I told him about the curse.”

I watch her eyes well up, and she folds her arms in front of her chest.

“He told me I was crazy; I told him everything I could remember from Papa’s stories, all the names...but he just started yelling, and told me I was never to speak of it again, but then Noah...he started attacking you guys, Ma, Papa...so I grabbed my favorite clothes and my baby and came back home.”

I nod. We’re silent a moment. The radiator taps and pings.

“So you believe in it now?”

Adele turns her head, catches my eye, and says, “I don’t know.”

She's whispering now, as if the house, and the old man in the pipes, are listening.

"I just know that when everything rose up, and the sound of it; it scared the shit out of me. And I was helpless—if Tyler hadn't been there..."

The day that Papa returned from the docks without Noah I learned what it looks like when a heart crumbles. Aila and I caught Ma before she reached the floor and guided her down the rest of the way. Papa leaned against the frame of the front door with Noah's soaked sailing jacket, bought especially for this day and future sailing endeavors, dangling from his fingers, dripping into a puddle around Papa's feet.

Guilt dries my throat.

"He was so young," I whisper. Adele grabs my hand and squeezes it.

"Why do you want to get out of here so bad? I mean I know it's small, but..." Adele shakes her head.

I pause, consider my answer. "I just need to start over somewhere new, maybe head to New York City."

"Does the new place have to be so far away? Couldn't you start with Portland?"

"I'll have to start there. I don't have enough to get all the way to New York yet. But I need to get away from these trees, from the sea, as far away as I can. New York City is the exact opposite of this." I point out the window to the Maine landscape: the granite, the pine trees, the cold beaches.

"We'll miss you." Adele looks at me, as if she's just realizing this herself.

I'm struck by her sincerity, moved almost, but change is the only way to reconcile the memories that have shaped me. I can't be the only one of us that feels her regrets outweighing everything else.

I look out at the sun over the water from our bedroom window as I lift my head from my pillow and hear Aila and Adele chatting in the kitchen. Will giggles, coos. I dress and step down the stairs, listening for Ma's booming steps. When I round the corner into the kitchen though, it's just the three of them.

"Where's Ma?"

"Walsh's Diner," Aila turns.

"Again?"

She shrugs. "Says the coffee's her favorite."

I know better than that: she hates coffee. I grab my jacket from the foyer closet, step into a pair of boots by the door, and walk out into the foggy morning.

Ma is curled around a mug in a booth beside the window. I slide into the seat across from her, and she lifts her eyes to meet mine. She's tired. We're all tired.

"Ma, you all right?"

"I can mind myself, thank you." She nods, leans back in her seat.

"Ma..."

"Don't you give me a bit of trouble, Leah."

"I'm not giving you trouble. I'm asking if you're okay, Jesus."

Ma glares at the way Christ's name comes from my lips.

"I'm sorry...I just thought you might enjoy some company."

Her eyes skip from the coffee to me, to something behind me. I turn to see the doors to the kitchen swinging open and closed; where Ma was looking before.

"Good coffee?" I point at her mug.

"Yes, it's great coffee." She nods, folds her arms in front of her chest, raises her eyebrows.

"I don't mean to hurt you...by looking for apartments. You know that, right?"

"You always keep yourself so separate from us."

I nod, look at the table in front of me.

"I don't mean to."

She stares beyond me again towards the swinging kitchen doors. I know who Ma's looking for—the woman doesn't work on Mondays, but Ma can't know that I'm aware of that, even though it might help her understand why I want to leave. When I turn back, Ma is staring out at the docks, at all the boats.

"Truth be told, I want to get away from the sound of it. I don't quite blame you." She nods towards the ocean, her face still, but her eyes daggers.

I touch her wrist, watch her eyes narrowing at my touch. She's kept herself pretty separate from all of us this week, as if she's scared to recognize that it could have easily been any of her children.

"How 'bout we head home?"

She looks at me a moment, her eyes softening, before she nods.

I sit in the bay window in the dining room beneath the moonlight, with the window ajar, a cigarette between my fingers. Everyone else is asleep. On my lap, a local history book balances atop my knees. I've had the page flagged and dog-eared for years. I can't even imagine the overdue fee it's accumulated. I stare at the names, begin to remember them again, as if they were people I once knew.

The front door squeaks open, and I recognize the sound of Papa's steps interacting with hardwood. He steps down the hallway, opens the door to the closet to pull out his toolbox for his boat. When he turns around, his eyes meet mine for a moment. He turns, sets the toolbox on the floor. I hear the kiss of the refrigerator door opening a moment after he enters the kitchen. He returns to sit at the table, facing me. We sit, self-medicate in silence.

He lifts his eyes from the table to look at me again, and—when he gains the courage—lifts a finger from his curled hand rested on the table.

"Remember when you was little, and I'd spin you round this room by yer arms?"

"Yeah, I remember."

Papa nods, taps the table with his finger. When he looks up again he looks beyond me into the world outside the window.

"Fun to remember what we used to be," I whisper.

There's fear in his eyes. The same fear that fills him up before he steps aboard his boat, and I feel a sudden strength because I share a pronoun with that great expanse of waves. I blow a puff of smoke into the room. I remember when he got that old boat from John O'Reilly, and after fixing it up, he had us all crowd around him to reveal what he was going to name his vessel. He named it after me, waited for me to smile. I didn't.

"We have to keep movin' forward," he whispers. "Try to be better than we were."

He taps the table again, his temples roiling on either side of his head.

"I didn't tell Noah the stories...I couldn't bear them after Michael died, but I should've warned him. He should've known," he admits.

The guilt wells up in my chest, and I inhale another drag in an attempt to squelch it. This is why I have to leave: he says things like this, and my insides shiver against the cold breath of the past. I think of things Noah will never have, and I feel courage building in my bones. He won't look around the kitchen and see the faces of his siblings, and recognize how we all share the same eyes. He won't reach an age in which he'll get to see the ocean's strength in a woman's arms. He was so young, taken so easily.

Tonight, I breathe in the cold air and let some truth escape my chest. "I told him." Papa stares at me. "I told him and it scared the shit out of him, just like it scared the shit out of all of us."

As soon as we heard, I imagined Noah's fear, how it must've felt like an immutable weight in his chest as the surface eluded his reach. He must've known his name would be added to the already exhaustive list.

"Please, don't leave." Papa's whisper is nearly inaudible.

"Why? So I can stay here and watch every moment you lie to Ma, every moment you try to cover everything up?"

Papa shakes his head. "You can fix it."

"None of this was my responsibility, or my fault, but I've lived my life as if it was so our family wouldn't fall apart."

He looks wounded for a moment. I wonder what it must be like to see your own anger mirrored back to you.

"We both need change, don't we?" He nods.

My eyes well up, reflect the moon in their own saltwater. Papa notices and rubs his chin like he does when dealing with tough news.

"Papa, Ma knows. She's been at the diner every day for a week, watching her...she knows something. This was all for nothing."

He nods, takes a few big swigs from his bottle. I watch him stand up, stare at me for a moment, smile softly, and then take his beer and his toolbox out into the night.

A memory: I am eight years old, standing in a mud puddle, feeling water rise between my toes. I shout, "Papa!" He jumps back from a blonde woman leaning against her car, and I spot a bruise on her neck where his mouth had been. He rushes to my side, grabs my arm, drags me home swearing. He threw his glass bottle on the pavement so that it shattered at our feet. I danced through the broken shards, cutting my feet through my slippers, as he lifted my arm high above my head.

When I wake in the morning, a strange buzzing seems to fill the house, traveling through all the heating registers, white noise filling each and every room like smoke. Aila and Adele aren't in their beds, and Will isn't in his crib either. I rise to my feet, and realize a newspaper has been set on the floor next to my nightstand. Inside the classifieds are intact and up to date. I stuff them into my pillowcase, and rush down the stairs where the buzzing grows louder. When I enter the kitchen I see Ma sitting at her chair, Adele and Aila on either side of the table, with a walkie-talkie in the center of the three of them with its volume all the way up.

"What's going on?"

Adele looks up at me. "Papa didn't come home last night."

"When he is within range, he will radio." Ma whispers, but I see fear piercing the whites of her eyes in red crooked needles.

"John O'Reilly said his boat isn't moored, so he's just strayed a bit far from the usual places," Ma rationalizes.

Either Papa took to the sea, or the sea took him.

I feel a kind of pulse in the classifieds, which sit solid in my pocket. I turn from the crashing, spitting waves, and head for the payphone in front of the library. With all the change on me, I make four calls for apartments in Portland. I feel as if my insides are shaking, surging.

Papa used to say that you could find wisdom at the edge of the sea, but now, as I step back out on the rocks, I think that's bullshit too. I imagine the underside of the waves before me, the forceful twisting and curling of water as it thunders toward the land; the way it can erode rock, turn it to dust. I wish the ocean had a face, something I could smack hard until she was forced to explain what it has all meant.

I see the fog rolling toward the shore, rolling to envelop me like the big world awaiting my graduation. Maybe I'll lose my way inside of it, but maybe in its arms I'll find connection, warmth, freedom from the past.

At the far end of the beach there's a woman standing, waiting. Her straight light brown hair billows in the wind like a curtain. We both stare out at the ocean, looking for wisdom. I hear her squeal, shaking me from contemplation, and a man with black hair in a yellow sailing jacket wraps his arms around her, threatening to throw her in the sea before he kisses her. The shaking in my stomach intensifies, and I light a cigarette to calm it. I turn away from the lovers, but each wave hits the shore with the force of all the waves it's been in the past.

When I get home, I sit down beside Ma amid the buzzing, and their eyes scan my face. I shake my head. Papa had said we both needed things to change—admitted things were surging, gathering, and I can't wait to collapse anymore.

"I don't know anything for sure..."

I look at Ma then, and she leans back in her chair, exasperated, as if I've told her everything already, her cheeks reddening with fury.

"I think he left with her..."

Ma takes my hand in hers, starts to nod as she processes what he might have done. Adele and Aila look between us. "What do you mean? Who did he leave with?"

Ma pats my hand. "How long have you known?"

I feel the ocean swelling inside of me, and before I can try to stop it, I'm crying, collapsing like a wave.

"What did he do?" Aila's face is bright red, her eyes three times their normal size.

"I was eight," I respond to Ma. She squeezes my hand.

"He's just lost!" Adele stands as she yells, leans toward us for answers.

"He had an affair, Adele!" I scream back at her. The words flow from my mouth, into the air, and I can finally breathe after a decade underwater.

Adele is stunned back into her chair, looks to Ma who nods to confirm. Ma fights tears seeing the betrayal in our eyes, grabs all of our hands, gathers us in the stretch of her arms, and explains the words that have choked me.

We take the rest of his beer to the boat launch. Adele says, “I want to forget everything he ever touched, take everything that was always his.” We drink our fill of the beer, and dump the rest in the sea to watch it mix with the sand and the salt.

Adele shakes her head. “I don’t think I can stay on the peninsula—surrounded by the ocean like this.”

She runs her thumb over the label of her bottle.

Aila nods. “I agree...I might leave too.”

There have always been sisters and brothers, parents and children, lovers and strangers. But I look at my sisters and feel the specifics of my life taking up more meaning, imbuing those words, those titles, with tones and shades. With nothing to hide, no wedges between my siblings and myself, I could finally return to them, but only if we retain the meaning of these titles, and the last name we share, amidst all the pain.

Adele lifts the bottle over her shoulder, and smashes it on the rocks in front of us. As the pieces fly in all directions, I see the true threat of shattered glass, feel our splintered future surging toward us. Eventually the edges would smooth, soften after years in the sea and the sand, but the pieces would never fit back together again. I can’t imagine the resolve of our ancestors to stretch a string across the Atlantic, from Ireland to Maine, to keep their ties to home even somewhat intact.

I wonder about the names and dates we know, about the people behind the letters and numbers. I wonder about their dinner table conversations, whether Sionnon Brennan and her sister Eileen slept in the same room, giggled till midnight, whether they lied to their parents for their older brother John when he snuck out to meet a girl.

“Do you think Eileen and Sionnon Brennan were close?”

Aila and Adele turn.

“What?” Aila stares.

“I just wonder what they were like, that’s all.”

“I bet Eileen stole Sionnan’s clothes a lot.” Adele tugs on the sleeve of Aila’s shirt.

“Yeah,” Aila adds. “Maybe Sionnan could threaten to tickle Eileen well into their twenties.” She curls her fingers towards me and I jump away instinctively.

We laugh, but then we begin saying, “maybe, maybe, maybe,” spinning the thread of life with our tongues, reminding me of the memorial service for

Noah. When the mass had ended, everyone stayed seated. Men and women and children stood up to tell tales of moments Noah had made them laugh, had gotten away with a bit of mischief, had embarrassed himself so that his ears turned red. The stories came flowing out of the pews like water, whether motivated by guilt or grief. They were not a remedy to the tragedy, but at least we left the church with the remnants of a chuckle beneath our breaths, a feeling of tenderness between us all.

My siblings and I collapse against each other, gather together and regroup, as the waves have taught us. But instead of throwing myself far from where I started, I allow myself to melt into what I've resisted, but always been a part of. We continue saying, "maybe, maybe, maybe," building lives out of the dashes on our ancestors' gravestones.

I skip viewings for apartments in Portland, and my sisters and I stay on the peninsula for a few more years. Adele and I enroll at the local university together. Each night, the three of us sit in front of the fire, teach the stories to Will and Aidan, and welcome them into the process of creation so that the stories will never end.

We hold our family close with these stories, assuring that distance cannot be a threat. We grow old, tell the stories to our children, and when our grandkids visit the spot with their own children, where we took the stories into our own hands, we sit just beneath the ocean's surface, in the calm currents from the other side of this world. And there we listen to how our stories have grown in the mouths of our descendants, how they have turned from material for nightmares into the stuff of warm milk.