

Siren Call

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2014(?)

For Dad

The birds flew low, skimming the tips of the waves. I floated on my back, my head almost swallowed by the sea. Eyes fixed to the sky. Ears softened with water. I was moments from shore, from my life. Here, though, was calm and still. It was the absence of noise I had craved most. I gave way, unravelling. I floated and I felt on the edge of toppling, on the edge of splashing and spluttering back to life, upended and spitting out the salt. But I didn't.

When I was a girl, I jumped the waves. I laughed and I shrieked, stumbling through the spray. Waiting for the next one - oh, it's going to be a big one. Crashing down, I would stagger on the ridged sand, my dad grabbing my arm, stopping me slipping under. My hair was long then, tied back in a plait, and it dripped a constant stream down my back as I danced through the water. My goggles tangled in the strands that had come loose, tugging and pinching. Dad was almost bald in those days. Once he'd had long hair too - a singer in a band - but he said it fell out after my sister and I were born because we made him so tired. He couldn't swim, my dad. But he loved to play with us in the sea. He said he wasn't frightened because the salt helped him to stay afloat. I played jump the waves with him for hours. I don't remember it being cold. I played the same game with my boys, their smooth hands clutching mine. They clung to me when the swell was too much. I was solid and soft and they told me I felt warm. We laughed and snorted when the sea went up our noses and burned our throats. They buried their faces in my chest to soothe their stinging eyes. The big waves made us jump extra high. I tried to lift the little one clear out of the water, the way I remember my dad doing to me, but my boy had grown too tall. He bent his knees as much as he could to make himself smaller. One, two, three, jump, we sang together. They giggled to see me play like them.

When the birds swooped again, I saw their pale bellies and curled claws so close. They dipped and dived around me. I was the selkie slipping through the water, sleek and watchful. My breathing slowed. The cold threatened but I stayed steady. I trusted the water to hold me. I could have stood then, dripping, and disturbed the air. The watery veil slipping from my face, I could have waved to the shore, wiping salt from my eyes. I could have broken the water, made the ripples, scared the birds, become human again. But the pull was strong and the silence kept me anchored. Just a bit longer.

They say it only hurts when you move. Stay still and you won't feel a thing.

My dad was the first person we called when our youngest son was born. He had given up the drink by then. It was early in the morning. The baby was premature so had been taken away to special care. At the moment of his birth I looked down between my legs and I saw him waxy and purple and furious and I claimed him as mine. I had torn badly. The midwife sewed a hundred neat little stitches, laughing at my commentary and pain threshold, while my dad and I chatted on the phone.

'A boy?'

'Yes another boy. He's very tiny.' My voice caught.

'He'll be strong, don't be scared. He'll play football for Scotland. Win the World Cup for us. Maybe he'll be left-footed like his grandpa?'

'Aye alright Dad' I laughed, 'maybe he'll be left-handed like his mum.'

Dad laughed too. He was used to being told off. The baby took my dad's name. He loved that.

Dad had two daughters but called us boys our whole lives. We didn't care, it was better than the daft nicknames he gave everyone else. He was silly and he was stubborn and he broke our hearts many times, but we were always his boys.

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Now my boys were safely back on the land, tempted out of the water by hopes of poking crabs and finding bright stones. 'A little longer' I called to my husband on the shore and he laughed. He mimed a shiver. I shrugged. He turned away smiling. I floated on and gazed at the sky. I felt the cold and thought of my dad. His body was so cold, a strange hard cold when I laid my hand on his back. Goodbye, thank you, we loved you. At the memory, I wiggled my arms in the water, feeling small bubbles shooting across my skin. Then my legs, kicking gently, always under the water, never breaking the surface.

'Am I allowed in there?'

'You are but it's probably best not to. It's not the way you'll want to remember your dad.'

'I'd like to. Please. I'll be okay.'

The police officer looked at my husband. They were both tall, with me a full foot smaller, stepping past them in my dad's narrow hallway. I caught the glance between them but pretended not to notice. Dad was face down on the bathroom floor. I don't know if his eyes were closed. I was too scared to look. Someone, the police or paramedics, had laid a papery green blanket that I didn't recognise over his lower half. Dad had a grey t-shirt on and his elbow was dry and wrinkled and familiar. I stroked his arm. I eased the creases and folds of his elbow between my fingertips. His skin was soft but felt cold and strange and it turns out the young policeman was right.

After my dad was gone I avoided the place where his body had fallen. Little by little, I forced myself back into that room. I packed away his soft slippers, set gently to the side by the undertaker. I placed a photograph of my children in the room, smiling out from the colourful frame. Eventually I found myself lying where he had lain. Like a chalk man on the floor, I arranged myself.

When the undertaker handed me the cardboard box of dad's ashes, I nearly dropped it.

'It's so heavy.' I cradled my hands under the folds of the box.

He smiled and nodded 'That's what everyone says.' He eyed me for moment then asked about my plan for the ashes. 'It's just - check the weather, some people don't want to think about it, but be careful with the wind direction.' I laughed and he did too. I wanted to ask him if he had any good stories, but stopped myself.

'We're doing it tomorrow. I can't take the pressure, I'm worried about spilling the box and having to Hoover him up. In with the dog hair and breakfast crumbs. Can you imagine? Dad would come back and haunt us.'

My dad went in the Clyde. We didn't ask permission and I was worried, but there was no one around. There was only the dull hum of cars streaming over the Erskine Bridge and a dog barking in the distance. Our small group huddled on the shore around the white cardboard box. The box had his name, date of birth and date and place of cremation printed on a label in Times New Roman with an identification number listed underneath. I picked at the sticker with my fingernails as we stood there. The Clyde isn't really the sea and the place we chose didn't really have waves. I hadn't thought of that, so the white cloudiness of his ashes just hung on the brown water. The effect looked like fat molecules from a spoiled dinner in a blocked sink and not at all what I expected.

'Should we just leave him like that?'

'Not much else we can do. Why won't it move?'

'Look' I said, pointing to my feet 'I've got wellies on, I could sort of kick it out to that deeper bit?'

'Yeah, give it a try.'

'Sorry Dad!' I laughed and cried to the sky.

I called my boys over and the three of us, sensible in our wellies, held hands as we kicked and scuffed him out a little more, the water lapping over the sides of our boots and spreading across the toes. There were no waves to jump. We all stood, watching the white ash do nothing and then gave up and went home. I scrubbed our boots under the tap later.

It was a comfort knowing the river runs to the sea, runs to this sea. But when I thought of all the rivers and all the ashes and all that loss, the mums and dads, and grannies and grandpas, and, god help us, the babies and the siblings, it caught me again. The sea rippled around me and I focused on my steady breath, in and out. Gentle and calm. The cold tapped at me, insistent, like the children with their questions.

They say the trick is not to panic, not to let go, but not to hold too tightly. If you breathe too fast, the cold will make your chest fold.

Then you'll sink, salt or no salt.

The Ted K Archive

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