

THE QUARRY

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The Wave that Breaks

The beach curves away from us, limber and inviting. But you don't want to walk.

If I was alone now, I would wander and remember the times of beaches. The people. Their scents slotted into the salt, the crushed shells and tea trees.

'Let's make a pattern,' you say. 'Then we can look at it from up there.'

You try to engineer wavy lines, like sets of sound waves that surge and cross, but the sand spills, gets chopped up, and you give up. You ask what we can play.

The first time we came here you were five months old - you slept for a full half an hour and I felt a shard of myself, my old self, cut through. And I loved you; soft, pink, breathing so deeply. The rest of us, the three of us, tried to be a family, but the shoreline was garlanded with a slew of bluebottles, a string of whimsical blue, and your sister refused to swim and your dad sulked in his usual humid cloud of anger.

He proposed to me on a beach in Cornwall, which sounds just as I would like my life to sound, but it was only the location that was right. I had told him I didn't love him, and he had cried, and held me more tightly, refused to let me go. So I said I would be proud to be his wife, which was true.

I grew up beside the beach – a world-away beach in a town of wind and rain, an ancient town that's now spoiled and shamed by its crumbled stone and muddy tides. Cold walks on the promenade on Sundays. Water lashing the sea wall every November, throwing bricks into the road.

It was a beach for windy walks with dogs, tangled hair, gloves and woolly hats; a muddy ocean with a tide that receded right out to France, or hurled itself at the sea wall, spraying onto the road. In all those years we only sat on the sand twice, in swimsuits, sun on our pale skin. Some friends came to visit from London, and we ran down to the shoreline where my brother flung a scoop of wet sand at me, plastering my eyes shut with sodden grit, and I howled as my mum hauled me to the first aid tent, ashamed that he had embarrassed us once again.

When I was older I lay beneath the pier, on that hard sand and fucked a man I thought I loved, desperately digging for my identity and coming up empty.

On the honeymoon we went back to Cornwall. I had forgotten my shoes and had to course the cliff side in your dad's too-large slippers and I forced myself to laugh as I slipped and slid. I thought of falling, the marital metaphor of not knowing where I would land, and the wind bit into my cheeks. But no man had taken me away before, even to a freezing windswept shoreline. I'd only been to Brighton with a boyfriend, which of course I had paid for. And only then a day trip on the train. Fish and chips, and making your sister into a sand mermaid, then back on the train into Hackney – to the kitchen sink drama and window envelopes - before bedtime.

Apparently, some people like the mountains or the rainforest or lakes. I suppose that must be fair, true, though I can't think what pulls them there. Perhaps it's the peaks that reach closer to the sky, or the canopy closing in like a blanket that protects them from people.

I could say I like to stand at the intersection of land and sea but I think I just like the noise, the hard vibrations, the infinite shine of mirrors on the water, or, like now, the noiseless crackle of raindrops pricking the blue skin.

We weave along beside the water. The weather is awful but I shouldn't be surprised, it's only September.

'You know, Christian and I used to watch a TV show when we were really young. Grandma would always sleep in late on Saturdays, and we'd watch these

weird Saturday morning programmes. There was one about beachcombers. They collected driftwood and shells and bones and things off the beach, and then I think they sold them or something. I can't really remember.'

It was some American thing at the end of the seventies. A schmaltzy theme tune, probably. I dreamed of picture book idylls, strips of colour torn from paradise, bone-coloured beaches, peridot bays. I would be a beachcomber, collecting washed up treasures.

You are just months from puberty. You smile at me, still interested in my stories. 'Did you want to be a beachcomber?'

'I did.'

'What did Dad want to be?' Although you've asked before, of course.

'He wanted to be a superhero. Fighting baddies.' I can't say that he wanted to be a bank robber and an assassin. This is why I tell you about me, because I have to lie about him. Sorts of lies, anyway.

'We can walk a bit more if you want to,' you say.

But I know you're not impressed with the rhythmic and relentless pushing and breaking of the waves, the wait and watch for the swell, the small disappointment of the feint, the satisfaction of the grand roaring break, collapse.

You're not impressed by the scale, the depth, the improbable way the land drops away and is filled with a bowl of salted water that urges, clamours, crammed with the odd and uncanny, in colours whose names cry out to be stated: cerulean, cyan, bioluminescent.

The rain is coming down harder, and the wind slobes my breath about in my throat. Your dad would have loved it today, with the flat grey sky bottling above us and the rain crackling. He'd say it reminded him of Cornwall, when we ran into the sea and ran out frozen-numb and grinning.

Your friends are growing taller, their voices scraping and gravelling, and their skin becoming shiny.

'No, I'm okay. I can walk anytime. What do you want to play?' I get the soccer ball out and begin creating a set of rules, trying to just talk rather than think. If you hit my legs I have to run to the steps, if you hit my torso I have to run to the steps and up and down them twice, and if you hit me above the neck you get tickled, so you'd better run! This seems to please you, so we begin. I'll add in new things as the fears, memories, regrets, fade. As I run, with the cold salt air in my throat. As I hit

upon another thing that might make you laugh, keep you talking to me, keep you looking at me, before you grow another inch or two, shifting, moving, and I lose you too.