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Same in the Sea and Other Stories

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Same in the Sea and Other Stories

By

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Advisory Committee

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Abstract

This thesis is comprised of five novel chapters and two short stories that explore individuals' interactions with their families and with the world around them. These interactions are not limited to physical interactions and verbal exchanges; they also include meditations on how the individual fits within the family and within the world at large. These stories also include interactions with the quirky, strange, and borderline fantastical as a way of displaying and relating to the individual's feeling of personal strangeness by finding a similar strangeness in the outside world.

Same in the Sea

“Whatever’s on land, there’s the same in the sea, and between the islands of Aran they can often see the horses galloping about at the bottom.” – A Galway Bay Lobster-Seller,

Lady Gregory’s Visions & Beliefs in the West of Ireland

Chapter 1

All the way from Rossaveal, Nate leaned over the ferry’s railing and watched Inishmor grow out of the horizon like a turtle bobbing for air. The sea spray filled his nose as the winds tried to push him into Galway Bay. The railing sat low, which allowed him to hunch his six-foot-six frame forward and duck away from the winds’ blasts. So he stood there clutching the railing, turning his face to the wind so that he didn’t have to face people’s stares. Nate knew that they stared because he’d grown taller than any sixteen-year-old had a right to grow. He thought they could tell other things about him, too, but maybe he was just being paranoid.

He focused on the island ahead and thought about how bare it might be. The rest of Ireland looked like a collection of gaping swaths of rocky land punctuated by tiny clusters of trees here and there. Where had the forests gone? There had to have been forests at some point. Wasn’t everything forest in the beginning? How few trees did a country have to have before someone declared it an environmental emergency?

The landscape’s problems only began with the lack of trees. Rocks cluttered the grass so densely that Nate wondered if they grew here like plants did in the rest of the world. The country was crosshatched with square after square of intersecting rock walls, to hold in all the livestock, especially the cows. Ireland had an odd fondness for cows.

The fields were peppered with them. Nate felt thankful that he couldn't see any cows from the ferry. They were starting to weird him out.

Just then, something flashed out in the ocean. It shone away from the approaching island, out in the opening expanse of the Atlantic. Nate had learned from years of visits to the nearby Florida beaches back home how to tell the difference between the shine of waves crashing against each other in the drink and the flash of a tail emerging from the water. He squinted and saw another flash out in the widening sea. Most likely a tail. It looked too large to be a trick of the waves, even from such distance.

Twenty minutes later, he stood on the docks and wondered if that creature wanted to reach its destination. It was just an animal, so what did it matter? Then again, Nate could technically be classified as animal, so maybe his wants and needs didn't matter either. He felt a small hand tug on the leg of his jeans.

His little brother Jude scowled up at him.

"Why did you run ahead?" Jude asked with all the gravitas a six-year-old could muster.

"I didn't run ahead. I got off first," Nate told him.

"Same difference, so you're in trouble."

Nate leaned so that his shadow loomed over his brother. Jude pursed his lips shut as the dark shape wafted over him, but his glared grew more intense.

"God, Jude! Do you want to get lost in a foreign country?" their Aunt Lisa's voice called to them from farther down the docks.

Jude laughed, but he didn't leave the confinement of Nate's shadow.

Nate turned to see his mother and aunt approaching.

“I can handle my kid, Lisa,” he heard his mother say. His aunt said nothing, but contorted her face into a doubtful expression.

“So where’s the house?” Nate asked.

His mother and aunt both looked up at him like he’d suddenly appeared.

“It’s about a half hour’s ride away. That’s what Carol said, right?” His mother glanced at Lisa as she spoke.

“Wait, a half hour’s drive, right?” Nate corrected.

“Nope, we’re riding bikes to Mairead’s place,” Lisa told them.

Jude poked his head out from behind Nate’s legs. “We didn’t bring mine.”

Nate ignored his brother and wiggled his way around to face the town. It had a name, something lilting and Irish but actually intelligible, but he couldn’t remember it. The town was a cluster of shops running down a large paved street that split off into smaller streets, and two bike rental shops were positioned the corners of the main street and two of its tributaries.

“So which one? Rental shop, I mean?” Nate asked.

“Carol said to turn right and choose the one on the right said of the road,” his mother told him.

Lisa shrugged. “That one has better prices, supposedly.”

All of the bikes were too small. Nate could tell that from a quick glance. Then again, his own bike at home was too small for his frame, even with the seat yanked up to its highest setting, so Nate figured he was just doomed when it came to bikes. He and Jude stood next to the endless rows of bikes while their mother and aunt negotiated the various rental plans. Groups of European schoolchildren swarmed the racks of available bikes. The younger ones looked at Nate with a sense of wonder. He could ignore their stares easily enough, but the older schoolchildren gave him a different sort of look. He'd begun to get similar stares at school back home, but they'd seemed less intense then, maybe because the looks came from people he'd known since kindergarten. These stares seemed to go straight through him and out the back of his head.

The girls in these groups looked from him to each other with knowing smiles playing around their lips. The boys offered more challenging gazes, as though they wanted to fight him for being so large, but didn't have the guts to say so. One boy, however, looked at Nate with a stare that look like the boys' stares and the girls' mixed together. The boy was neither small nor tall, and Nate tried not to hate him for that. Nate decided he couldn't hate the guy because he was so very pretty, even though he had an uneven bleach-blond dye job. The guy almost looked like he might say something, but then Jude began to whine.

"Where are the training wheels?" Jude asked.

Nate looked around. "I don't think they have those here."

"But I need them!"

"You can try riding a two wheeler, you know."

Jude shook his head. "I'll fall."

Nate shut his eyes for a moment. Even in a foreign country, he couldn't escape Jude's bike-related fears. His little brother had been the last boy in his kindergarten class to use training wheels, and he had no plans to change his mind about it. Jude seemed to think that he could just use bigger and bigger training wheels as he grew larger.

"Jude, sweetie, you can ride with me," their mother said, pulling a bike out from underneath the rental hut's shadow.

"Is it one of those two-seater things?" Jude asked, eyes wide with excitement.

Nate looked past the front of the bike and glimpsed the second seat. It wasn't part of a tandem. "God, Mom, you can't do that him!"

Jude grabbed a piece of Nate's jeans. "Do what?"

"They're going to put you in a toddler seat."

"No!"

Their mother put the kickstand down and picked Jude up. He squirmed all the way. "Don't be dramatic, you two. We're just making do."

"I hate making do!" Jude proclaimed as their mother strapped him in.

Nate knew better than to back his brother up at this point, so he turned to the rows of bikes and scanned them for a large one. He couldn't see one, though, so he grabbed a blue one because he liked the color, and he raised the seat to its highest notch. Then he grabbed a too-small helmet from a nearby bin to protect his head from the rocks.

His aunt and mother declared themselves ready, so they set off down the main road, then down one of its hilly offshoots. His legs banged up against the handle bars, so he had to stand up and pedal, which he was used to doing back home in Florida. The

pungent sea smell that wafted across the shore reminded him of Florida. It snaked into his nose the same way it did there. Neither Jude nor their older brother Leo ever noticed it, but Nate could never shake it. The Gulf of Mexico at home smelled the same as Galway Bay did here—was that because they both bled into the Atlantic Ocean or because all seas, gulfs, and bays smelled the same?

A few small fields lay between the bay and the right side of the road, peppered with cows and horses watching Nate steadily until the green fields withered away into muddy, rock-littered shoreline. The fields on the left side of the road wore on as the land behind them rose upward and jutted outward in weathered steppes and slopes of rock, grass, and flowers. These fields contained cows for the most part, with the odd horse thrown in there for some sort of effect that Nate couldn't work out. The animals seemed to watch him as intensely as humans did, but maybe the cows and horses did that to everyone. He hoped they did.

Nate pedaled and pedaled up and down the hilly road until it seemed that his mother and aunt were going to pedal themselves, Jude, and himself right off the farther edge of the island. The rocky coastline had ebbed to reveal a beach fully of off-white sand. Nate found himself hating this beach for its whiteness and the bay's blue-green hue because he'd only ever seen green-brown seawater at home. He began to think obscenities at it, but Lisa's voice interrupted him.

“We turn right up here! It's that white house on the ledge!”

Nate missed the turn because a group of cows lying on a grassy ledge above a patch of sand had distracted him. He flipped a U and wobbled behind his mother and aunt.

His family reached the house without anyone falling over the ledge above the beach. That had to be some sort of success. Lisa seemed to think so, since she whoop-whooped the moment she got off her bike.

“Sssh! We’re here to visit a dying woman, for God’s sake,” his mother said as she held her bike upright while Nate unstrapped Jude.

Lisa threw her hands up in some sort of mini-victory dance. “Right now, I don’t care. I’m just happy I’m not dead.”

Jude dragged Nate to the front door of the little house and wrapped his fist around the doorknob, twisted, and pushed, but the door stayed put. Jude tried again. The door stood still.

“Come on! Don’t be stupid!” Jude wailed, leaning his shoulder into the door as he pushed.

Nate stepped forward onto the tiny porch and gave the doorknob a twist. Nothing happened. So he knocked on the door.

“Hey, anybody there? Hello?” he asked between each series of knocks. A soft moan eked out of the house.

“Is she dying in there?” Jude whispered.

“Yeah,” Nate answered. “That’s why we’re here.”

Jude wrapped himself around Nate’s left leg.

“Guys, it’s okay,” their mother told them. “We’re calling Carol now.”

Nate glanced back to the spot where the bikes stood. His mother dialed her phone while Lisa raised hers upward in an attempt to get better reception.

“She was supposed to be here,” Lisa said to no one in particular. “God, why would anyone leave a dying woman locked in her own house?”

Nate didn’t know. So he just stood there on the porch with his brother latched to his leg and he took a long, slow breath.

Nate got tired of waiting for Carol, his mother’s cousin, so he walked back down the rocky path to the main road. Neither his mother nor Lisa stopped him, but his mother did call after him to stay safe, and she might have adding something about making good choices, but he’d stopped listening by that point.

He walked a concrete ramp to the beach below. The ramp connected to a concrete wall that held the land above the beach in place. The sand on the half of the beach nearest the wall had turned steel gray. Nate walked up to the spot—more like a line—where the sand grew pale, with streaks of gray littered through the first few feet of white. The swath of sand felt packed down beneath his feet almost all of the way to the middle of the beach, where the white sand began and it only felt dense. He decided not to imagine the tide rolling up across the beach, nearly meeting the wall, since he’d probably see it soon enough.

The waves rolled in green and blue, and Nate wondered about Leo, stuck in Florida. He might have enjoyed the island more if Leo had come along. His older brother had stayed back because, at twenty, he had a job to go to and tuition to think about, even though he was just at community college. He’d always been more into exploring and running around, while Nate had always preferred to stay where he was.

Leo would have gotten Nate climbing all over the rocks, though. He was good at bringing out that side of people. So how was Nate supposed to enjoy all this without him?

A flash appeared out in the waves, like the one he'd seen on the ferry. It appeared just close enough that he could make out its shape. It looked like a dolphin's tail, but this one looked lopsided, like it had lost a fight with a speedboat. Nate thought it might be blue and green, but that could have been a reflection from the water.

The tail bobbed up and down, and Nate thought he caught a glimpse of the creature who owned it. It wasn't a dolphin—it looked flesh-colored, but he was too far away from it to know for sure.

The tail still bobbed and arced through the waves and air when Nate heard what he thought was a car. He turned around and saw a small car chugging down the road and turning onto the road to the little white house. The ledge didn't seem so high from here, and he could see now that the house didn't sit on a sheer cliff, like Aunt Lisa had told them on the flight over—the land graded down toward the bay in a steppe-like slope. He could see his family perched atop the ledge, more focused on the approaching car than anything else around them. Jude ran forth alongside their mother while Lisa hung back closer to the house.

He heard "NATE! NATE!" over the rush of the waves. His aunt was calling for him, while his brother waved from the ledge. His mother was talking to the small blonde woman who'd stepped out of the newly parked car, whom he guessed was Carol. Nate watched them talk from the beach, and he noticed how his family seem larger to him from down below than they did when he stood right next to them. He let Aunt Lisa call

for him a few more times before she gave up and everyone went into the house. Then he trudged back up the beach to the concrete ramp.

Nate was halfway back to the house when he remembered the tail. He looked back out at the waves as he wandered down the path, but saw no sign of it.

The door he'd tried to open before was now unlocked, and it opened to the back of the house, not the front. He noticed just before he stepped inside that a small path of pebbles lead to the house's front. As soon as he stepped into the kitchen, he became a teddy bear in a dollhouse. What disturbed him was how close together everything seemed. He'd never seen a table located so close to a kitchen counter that a person couldn't fit between them. The walls were the worst part, though. Someone had painted them a sallow yellow that made his insides crawl.

Voices emanated through the walls. He recognized his family members' voices in the next room, but he also heard a sharp, accented voice. The ceiling creaked with what he thought were footsteps. This house wasn't big, so how could it have an upstairs? He pushed the kitchen door open and decided not to overthink the house's floor plan.

Nate didn't see Mairead at first. He detected her presence when the scents of death and old woman entered his nose. The sharp, accented voice cried "Finbar!" as soon as he entered the rooms. Everyone else's voices fell silent. Then he saw her, his great-grandmother, all rumped and shrunken, lying on a bed in the corner of what had once been a living room.

"Finbar!" Mairead said again.

"What's a Finbar?" Jude asked. He sat with their mother near the bed.

“You finally came back to wish your old nan goodbye, is that it?” the old woman asked as she gaped at Nate.

“No, no, Mairead,” his mother began, “this is my second son, Nate. He’s one of mine.”

“Don’t be stupid, girl, Fineen’s not one of yours!” Mairead said, looking at Nate’s mother like she was crazy.

“Mairead…” his mother’s voice trailed off.

“Jen, don’t correct her—it’s not worth it,” Lisa said as she entered the room behind Nate.

“Who’s Finbar?” Nate asked.

“He’s relative, a cousin maybe,” his mother said. “Was he the son of one of Mom’s older brothers?”

“Yeah, I think so.” Lisa put her hand on Nate’s back as she stepped around him. “I think we met him, you know, when we came here as kids.”

“Wait, was Finbar the giant?” His mother asked.

“Your cousin was a giant?” Jude asked.

“Well, I’m not sure if it was Finbar or not, but one of our Irish cousins was definitely as big as Nate, if not bigger. Your Aunt Lisa hid under a table and cried that the giant was going to eat her.”

“I did not! I don’t remember that!” Lisa said with a laugh.

“Glad to know you think I’m a giant, Mom,” Nate said, rolling his eyes.

“Sweetheart, you just got the tall genes from my mom’s side,” his mother told him. Her expression told him that this wasn’t the time for complaining.

“Sit with me, Fineen,” Mairead said, looking straight at Nate. Her stare and confusion made him feel like dying of embarrassment, but he didn’t want his mother to have to deal with more corpses than was absolutely necessary.

So Nate sat down, and his aunt stepped forward to take his hand and Mairead’s and bring them together. He knew he was supposed to feel something like love or at least affection, but all he felt was Mairead’s papery skin on his and the buzz of her voice in his ears as she mumbled something unintelligible. Her face morphed into an expression of serenity, or at least the closest thing to serenity Nate had ever seen. He had no clue why absurdly tall people made his great-grandmother calm, but he decided to go with it. It seemed to make his mother and Lisa happy, and even Jude seemed content to watch the weirdness.

In the middle of this bizarre reunion, a pair of feet squeaked down the stairs, which were hewn out of the corner opposite Mairead’s bed. Nate looked back to see the blonde woman from outside descending the stairs casually. She paused on the second-to-last step to stare at Nate.

“What’re you...but we...” The blonde woman’s expression hardened as her voice trailed off.

“Carol, this is Nate, my middle son,” his mother said.

“Really,” Carol said, still looking at Nate. “I just...Everything’s ready for you all upstairs if you want to have a look.”

“That sounds great,” his mother told her. Then she turned to Jude. “Would you like to see your room?”

Jude shrugged.

Nate watched all of this while Mairead held his hand. He thought she might have fallen asleep or just decided to call it quits altogether until he heard her say, “What’s wrong with all of you? Carleen, give your brother a hug! He’s been a long time away.”

Carol opened her mouth, then shut it before she could get any words out. She hurried out of the room without another glance at anyone.

“What happened to her?” Jude asked. Their mother shushed him.

“You know how she gets,” Mairead said, primarily to Nate. “Why not have a word with her after she cools her head?”

“I’m not talking to her,” Nate said.

“I’ll see what’s up with her,” his mother said. She got up and left the room with the kitchen door swinging behind her.

Lisa watched her sister leave, then turned to Nate. “Why don’t you take Jude upstairs? I’ll sit with Mairead.”

“I’m not going up there,” Jude said.

Nate stared at the staircase, dark and narrow and leading to God knows where. “Me, neither. Jude, wanna go outside?”

“Yup!” Jude jumped up and dashed to the front door between the bed and the staircase.

“Wait—I have to go with you,” Nate said. He slipped his hand out of Mairead’s as gently as he could.

Jude was already halfway out the door by the time Nate stood up. When he stepped outside, he heard his younger brother breathe deeply, like he’d just dropped a bag of large rocks. How much of the sense of impending death had Jude picked up on? Nate figured his brother was too happy a kid to understand that sort of thing. Now Jude hummed tunelessly—he loved humming and singing songs, especially old songs—and Nate heard a new weight to the notes.

“What’s dying like?” Jude asked as he turned to face the bay.

Nate sat down on the edge of the steppe’s highest level. “The opposite of being born, I guess.”

“Yeah, but what’s it feel like?”

Nate shrugged. “Painful.”

Jude’s expression grew pinched. One-word answers were clearly no good. Then his face relaxed as he pointed out to a spot in the bay. “Is that a dolphin?”

The tail had resurfaced, this time twisting around and arcing back and forth, like it was performing aquatic semaphore. Nate wanted to think the tail’s creature was waving at them.

“What do you want it to be?” Nate asked.

Jude sat down next to Nate on the steppe and thought. “A magic dolphin with laser eyes.”

“Then that’s what it is.”

Chapter 2

Nate lay awake, unlike the rest of the house. He tossed and twisted in this little bed in this little room with a slanting ceiling. He flopped on his back and stared at the slanted ceiling. Its nicks and cracks shone in the slivers of moonlight peeking through the window. He wiggled his feet in the air and rolled over onto his side. Sleep came, but didn't stay.

Sunlight gleamed outside the bedroom window when he woke up. The sun rose earlier in Ireland and stayed up longer than usual. He'd known that in a strictly theoretical sense until this week, when he discovered that the sun could set at ten o'clock at night.

Nate climbed out of bed on achy legs and hunched his way out the bedroom to the stairwell. The stairs squeaked beneath his feet, but no one stirred. Not until he was three steps from the bottom.

"Fineen?" Mairead's tiny head tilted upward above her blankets.

"Uh..." Nate blurted out.

Mairead said a string of Irish words in a scolding tone.

"What?"

"Say words, Fineen, not sounds!"

"Okay." Nate took a deep breath and waited for his family member to storm down into the stairwell with scowls and bedheads.

"Stupid word! Did the sidhe take your tongue away when you went with them?"

Nate wanted to ask who “she” was, but he didn’t want to be called stupid so early in the morning. He walked over to the bed and sat on the edge, staring at his half-crazy great-grandmother. He didn’t know if he should correct her. Every time she said “Fineen,” he felt like she’d draped a too-big coat on him. But if she’d be dead soon anyway, was it better if she died thinking he was someone she cared about, and not some random relative dragged across an ocean against his will?

Mairead’s voice grew softer. “She hasn’t wailed yet. I wish she would. Then I could just go.”

The air around Nate felt colder than before. “Who?”

“Wailed for my father, she did. My mother, my husband. What if she never wails? Can I go if she doesn’t?”

“Um, probably. I mean...I don’t know who she is, but it’s like...I don’t know what it’s like.” Nate shut his mouth.

Mairead’s pale eyes glinted sharp in the early sunlight. “They made you right stupid.”

Nate nodded. “Yeah, they did.”

He stood up and went to the window at the far corner of the room. It faced the beach, which lay empty, save for one figure sprawled out at the edge of the waves. First he saw the tail, and thought a dolphin or a baby whale had beached itself. Then he saw the head. It was a man’s head on a man’s neck with a man’s chest and arms. Nate glanced back at the tail, waiting for legs to appear, but the figure kicked his tail up instead. It shone blue and green in the morning light. Its right side looked like it had lost a fight with a speedboat.

“Fineen, you well? Are they calling to you?” Mairead asked.

“Are who calling?”

“You know who,” she replied.

He didn't know, so he didn't answer. He took another look at the figure out on the beach, who was pushing himself closer to the waves. It looked exhausted. Or maybe Nate was projecting his own exhaustion onto the person. His whole body felt heavy, so he picked up a blanket that Mairead had thrown off, and he curled up on the floor, where he slept until the sun had risen higher.

Nate woke up to the weight of Jude sitting on his legs. He rustled his legs beneath his brother's small body, but Jude refused to move.

“Go away,” Nate said, struggling to pull the blanket over his head. It refused to budge beneath his brother.

“Nope. You have to get up with the sun. Mom said,” Jude replied, wiggling above Nate's legs.

Mairead's voice burst out from her collection of pillows and blankets. “Get away, little beast! We want none of your kind here!” She added something in Gaelic that Nate thought might be a string of expletives.

Jude ignored her and continued to pull on Nate's legs until his mother came in.

“Stop that, Jude. Don't be obnoxious,” his mother said. As soon as she spoke, the blanket peeled away from Nate's face. His mother's face hovered above his own.

“And you will get up. It’s eleven-thirty. We let you sleep because you’re still adjusting, but you’re not going to lie around all day.”

“Fineen can lie there if he wants, and I will not be getting up, to be sure,” Mairead told her.

His mother froze for a moment. Nate couldn’t tell if she was scared or angry, and he didn’t want to know. “He is Nate and he is my kid. And he’s getting up.”

“Keep saying that, dear. One day, it might be true,” Mairead answered.

Nate watched his mother shuffle Jude into the kitchen. An overstretched feeling settled into his arms and legs, as though someone had just tried to play tug o’ war with his body. He let himself lie there for several minutes, feeling that sensation, until he finally decided to get up.

Shortly after breakfast, Nate found himself thrown out of the house with Jude for the rest of the afternoon. His mother claimed they needed to enjoy the sunshine because rain might swoop in and force them inside of the rest of the trip. Nate figured she and Aunt Lisa really wanted Jude to stop bothering Mairead.

More tourist groups had arrived, and they had claimed the beach for their own, so Nate shied away from it, leading Jude up the hill by the main road, which ran parallel to the little white house. Before heading that way, Nate glanced back at the beach, but found no trace of the fish-man he’d seen at daybreak. Maybe he’d dreamed that part.

They found a tiny cemetery just a short walk up the hill. Nate had glimpsed it when they first arrived at the house, but he’d forgotten it in the barrage things that were

thrown at him the day before. Now he had a clear view of it, fenced in by mortar-less rock walls and a dark gate with two swinging doors to it. Jude pushed on the locked gate.

“We can’t go in?” he moaned.

Nate looked around and spied a gap in the wall to the right of the gate. It was just wide enough for a person to fit through, with a raised stone step at its bottom.

“Look here,” Nate said. He picked his brother up and lifted him over the gap’s step. Jude beamed. Nate stepped over the gap’s step and followed Jude through the rows of graves.

Many of the headstones bore Celtic cross statues on top, but others were plain rectangles. Most of them bore death dates and the person’s age at death, but no birth dates. Nate found that strange at first, but after a while, it made its own sort of sense.

“What’s better: being alive or being dead?” Jude asked as he stood in front of one of the largest graves.

“Uh...” Nate was used to his brother coming up with weird questions, but this might have reached a new level. “Being alive because...then at least you’re somewhere.”

“But you’re somewhere when you’re dead, too!” Jude said.

“Yeah, you’re in a box. Or in ashes.”

Jude sat cross-legged in front of the tall grave. “Mairead said she’s going somewhere. To the other place.”

“No, she didn’t.”

“Yes, she did. You were asleep.”

Nate crouched down next to his brother. “She probably meant heaven.”

“No, she said it wasn’t heaven, and it wasn’t hell. It’s just not here. But sometimes it is. The stories are all mixed-up—that’s what she said.”

“What stories?” Nate asked.

“The ones that talk about where she’s going. They’re old, and most people don’t believe ‘em anymore, but she likes to, even if they’re not true.”

“Okay.” Nate paused. “I thought Mairead hated you.”

“I don’t know. Old people are weird. She mostly said that stuff to Aunt Lisa, but I was there.” Jude looked rather smug, like he’d just learned all of the answers to the universe. Then he stood up and ran toward the left end of the graveyard, where another large Celtic cross grave sat in front of a sheer drop-off. Nate followed because he didn’t want his brother falling off a cliff.

Jude pointed to the cross. “Why’s that one alone?”

“Maybe that person was super important?”

Jude shrugged and edged his way toward the drop-off. He pointed to the land below the cliff. “There’s more down there!”

Nate pulled Jude back from the edge, but managed to glimpse three new-ish graves in the grassy land below.

“Why are those down there?” Jude asked.

Nate shrugged and pulled his brother back from the edge.

Nate and Jude moved away from the lone grave and sat in the grassy space between it and the rest of the cemetery. They faced the sea, watching the waves roll up and gently ebb. The ground gave beneath Nate. He dug his fingers into a fistful of grass and listened to the faint ripping of the blades.

The phrase “other place” jostled around in his head as he tore the grass, and he wondered what that kind of place might look like. Water came to mind first, water sloshing back and forth like it did in the bathtub when he was a child. Then dust and sand floating through the water—or maybe ashes. Ashes floating on water, like his father’s did when he was four. That was all he remembered of that event, though Leo had told him more about it over the years. Ashes on water was the only real reminder he had that Jude was his half-brother. Now Jude flung his arms around Nate and grinned up at him. The half-remembered stranger who’d given their mother this surprise had left little trace of himself in Jude. Nate had always assumed Jude’s pale blue eyes belonged to that stranger, since no one else in his immediate family had blue eyes, but now he saw they were Mairead’s, light and fierce and persistently darting around.

Jude leaned his head on Nate’s arm and turned back to face the bay. “Do you think the dolphin’s alright?”

“The one with laser eyes?”

“Yeah, and the sparkly tail.”

Nate ruffled his brother’s hair. “Betcha he is.”

Jude’s voice fell oddly flat. “What if he’s not?”

Nate didn’t answer.

They fell back into silent, watching tour groups of various sizes come and go from the beach.

“I wish they’d all leave,” Jude murmured, his voice still flat. “Then we could go wading.”

“Too cold to go wading here,” Nate told him. “We’re stuck in jeans forever here.”

“So? The pool at school was super-cold when we did swimming in gym. The other kids complained, but I didn’t.”

They both stood up and maneuvered back through the graves onto the main road.

Nate led his brother down the levels of the steppe that lay in front of the little white house. He had to lift Jude down between the last two levels above the water because they were a bit too steep for a six-year-old to manage. They both pulled their shoes and sock off and rolled up their jeans when they reached the bottom level of the steppe.

Jude stuck his feet in first. He initially smirked, but then he let out a high-pitched howl.

“I thought cold water didn’t bother you,” Nate said, sitting down beside his brother.

“This isn’t swimming pool water!” Jude squealed as he jerked his legs out of the bay water.

Nate stuck his right foot in, then his left. Jude was right—the water had none of the energetic coldness of a swimming pool. This coldness crept up through his legs,

muting any feelings of excitement or daring. He counted to thirty, just to see if he could make it, and then he pulled his legs out.

“Don’t splash!” Jude told him.

“Sorry,” Nate said, shaking his feet dry.

A man’s head burst out of the water, and he began to laugh. “Done so soon?”

Jude nodded. “Why aren’t you cold?”

“Because this is just brisk. I’m not cold until I see glaciers,” the man said in an accent Nate didn’t recognize.

“But cold water could kill you,” Nate said.

The man grinned. A few of his teeth were chipped. “And cold air could kill you, couldn’t it?”

Nate shrugged.

The stranger continued to smile. He looked up at Nate with a challenge in his eyes, which were a silvery gray and stood out against the man’s brown skin. Nate’s eyes were drawn to three slits on each side of the man’s neck. They sat just below his chin length hair, and they bobbed up and down in time with a ragged sound that Nate guessed was the man’s breathing.

“But you can’t *like* that water, not that cold,” Jude said.

“And who are you to say so?” The stranger ducked his head below the water. He rose again, spitting an arc of water that reminded Nate of a whale clearing out its blowhole.

“Jude.”

“A good name for someone you size.” The man looked up at Nate again. “I can’t imagine how long your father’s name is.”

“I’m his brother,” Nate said.

Jude laughed. “He’s just ten years bigger. And he’s—“

“Fineen,” Nate blurted out. “So who are you?”

“My mother called me Jesskar,” the man replied, backing away from the edge of the steppe. “Some people call me other things, of various pleasantness.” Jesskar moved his hands back and forth just beneath the water’s surface in a fluid motion that seemed impossible to copy. Nate imagined he’d have to practice every day to get that good at treading water. “It’s not all that cold, thought, is it?”

Jude crouched down and jammed his hand into the water. He held it there and stared at Jesskar the way he looked at Nate and Leo when he tried to prove how long he could hold his breath.

“Jude, don’t—“ Nate said, bending over to help his brother.

“It’s not that cold!” Jude refused to lift his hand up, even as Nate grabbed his small wrist. He struggled against Nate’s grip, shoving him away with his free hand. Nate didn’t budge from the shove, but he leaned farther over Jude.

Then water surrounded Nate, swallowing him headfirst. His momentum flipped him right-side up beneath the water, and he sank until his feet touched the ground. It wasn’t so deep here, maybe eight or ten feet. He kicked to propel himself upward, but the weight of his clothes kept him planted on the shallow ocean floor. After another

attempt at moving upward, Nate felt two arms grip his torso and pull him up until his head burst through the water's surface. He dogpaddled over to the step, which was about three feet away, and snorted out seawater.

“Damn high center of gravity,” he coughed.

Jude hugged Nate's head, but said nothing.

When Nate dragged himself back up onto the steppe, he turned around to thank his rescuer, but he found no trace of Jesskar. The water had settled down and now lay undisturbed.

Chapter 3

“Dear Christ, Finbar!” Mairead said when Nate entered the house. “Did a wave try to swallow you?”

Nate peeled off his sweatshirt and dropped it on the floor. It fell into a crumpled heap, like an abandoned snakeskin. “More or less.”

“Well, God knows you’ve looked worse.” Her prune-like face wrinkled into a small smile that never reached her eyes. Mairead’s gaze grew more distant the longer she looked at Nate. What memories would a sopping wet boy-giant have dredged up in her fading mind? Did Fineen have a habit of falling in the drink, too?

His mother and aunt stepped into the room not long after Mairead made her comments, and they fussed like mothers and aunts often do. “How did you fall in?” Nate said he was leaning over because he thought he saw something flicker beneath the waves. It was only sort of a lie. “Did you hit your head?” No. “Are you sure?” Positive. “Eight feet? Fully dressed? Dear God!” Nate stated that he could swim, leaving out the part where he kicked his way up in tandem with a stranger.

After he’d put their confusion and fears to rest, his mother and Aunt Lisa encouraged him to go upstairs and take a shower, which Nate did in hopes of encountering hot water. The hot water was technically there, but it came and went in intermittent intervals, so that he was boiling one moment and freezing as much as he had in the bay the next. He threw on his extra pair of jeans, two shirts, and his zippered hoodie just so he would feel like a warm-blooded mammal again.

Nate couldn't shake Jude off once he got out of the shower. His little brother unleashed a barrage questions when they sat in their room that night and watched as the sun refused to set.

“Why did you lie?”

“Do you really think Mom'd get it if I said, ‘Yeah, I'm still breathing because some dude obsessed with cold water helped me out?’” Nate said, staring at the slanted ceiling.

“No—why'd you say ‘Fineen’? Fineen's a weird name and it's not yours, anyway.”

“I don't know. It's just what came out.”

Nate went downstairs after his brother fell asleep. Dusky sunlight still streamed through the house's western-facing windows, even though it was past nine-thirty. Carol was tucking Mairead into her mess of blankets and pillows when Nate reached the bottom of the stairs. He glimpsed swill sloshing around in a bedpan at Carol's feet.

“Oh,” Carol said when she noticed Nate. She gave him a dark look.

“Be nice,” Mairead told her.

“Why? Because he looks like your favorite or because he's tourist in disguise?”

“Carleen—“

Carol stared at the blanket she was straightening. “His mam and aunt talk about their concerns, ask how you're doing, how I'm doing, but in the same breath they start

talking about all they want to see on the island—Dun Aenghus, the Black Fort, all that. We're part of an extended zoo visit, when it comes down it."

"You don't have to say all of that in front of him," Mairead replied.

"Maybe I do."

They both looked at Nate, who couldn't find anything useful to say. He just nodded and went over to the window.

"I'm sorry," he muttered as he looked out at the beach. "That I'm not your brother, I mean."

"Don't be," Carol told him. "She'd just like to see him one last time."

"And I have!" Mairead said. "Why do keep pretending people aren't in the room, Carol?"

Carol didn't answer.

"Don't listen to her, Fineen," Mairead continued. "The ladies are fine. The little one they brought is troublesome, but no more than most children are."

"You don't like kids?" Nate asked, looking away from the window.

"I like them when they're tiny. But they grow obnoxious as they get older—it sets in earlier for boys than for girls. They grow slightly more civilized at about sixteen or so."

"I'm sixteen," Nate said. "Am I civilized?"

"You were never annoying, Fineen. That's why I like you best."

“Okay.” Nate glanced around and realized that Carol had left the room. Then he went over to the door. “I’m going out.”

“Do as you please, Finbar.”

The air outside felt no colder at dusk than it had when the sun stood high in the sky, or so Nate thought. The wind still blew as sharply as it had earlier—the only real difference was the angle of the sunlight fading behind the cliffs on the island’s western side. Nate zipped up his hoodie and sat down cross-legged at a spot where he had a perfect view of the black-haired man sitting in the waves below.

He notice that the man had pushed himself back slightly, so that the waves did not obscure his lower half anymore. When the waves rolled back, Nate could the place on the man’s body where legs should have been. A long tail lay in their place, its scale shimmering in the last rays of daylight. The man lay back on the sand and kicked his tail up, flicking it back and forth in a waving motion. Was he waving at Nate or just acclimating to the feeling of air on his scales? Nate found himself walking to the ramp down to the beach, as if pulling by a thread of curiosity.

Everything felt hushed as he approached the fish-man. The man lowered his tail onto the sand as Nate approached, but he never moved to reenter the water. Instead, he rolled over onto his stomach and smiled up at Nate, showcasing his chipped teeth. His smile reached his silver eyes, but strands of his chin-length hair kept falling in front of them.

Jesskar laughed. “You came for a visit.”

Nate nodded and shrugged. He kept his mouth shut because he didn't know what kinds of words would come out. Then he sat down next to Jesskar and just looked at him. The first time, his eyes and mouth jumped out at Nate, but now he could notice the rest of the man's features, including a collection of small scars littered about his face and neck. He had a handsome features, despite his scars and chipped teeth. The largest scar crawled up his neck and curled up the edge of his chin, pointing up to his lips like an arrow.

"You think this is pretty?" Jesskar said, tracing his finger down a scar above his right eyebrow. "This is better." He wiggled his tail, angling the damaged right side upward. The jagged ends hung limp like frayed blanket tassels. "They all loved it—said it was beautiful. Then they made a mess of it."

The tail glittered in the fading light, but Jesskar's words dulled its sheen. Nate thought about the power it took to rip through the tailfin—more or less power than it would take to slash a human leg?

Jesskar closed his eyes. "I'll never get used to air. It feels too light—I don't know how you people stand it."

"How do you stand being wet all the time?" Nate asked.

"I hate this conversation. And I always swim into it." Jesskar muttered something that might have been an obscenity or maybe a name.

Nate raised his eyebrows. "Uh, so..."

Jesskar propped himself up on his elbows. "So humans are hopelessly unimaginative. And I'm just dull." He pushed his hair out of his eyes. "Swim around the world once or twice, and you'll find out just how boring you are."

“Okay.”

They sat in silence for a while. The late-night sun sank lower behind the cliffs on the island’s western side. Jesskar’s eyes remained luminously silver as the light disappeared. As they shone in the encroaching darkness, Nate began to realize that those silver eyes were as practical as they were pretty. They reminded him of the pale bodies of deep-sea fish he’d once seen on a nature documentary.

“Do you come up a lot?” Nate heard himself ask.

Jesskar began tracing his fingers in the sand, drawing a symbol almost like a figure-eight. “Sometimes. I used to surface only way out, far from land. Except for that one time, and that was on a dare.”

“Did you get in trouble? That one time, I mean.”

“A little bit, yeah. Not enough to feel too bad. It’s not like anyone saw me then. They acted like I burst onto a crowded beach, though.” Jesskar tilted his head up and smirked. His chipped front teeth poked out just below his upper lip.

“Will you get in trouble—uh, arrested now?”

“They have too many problems down there now to worry about me,” Jesskar said. “As it is, I’m safer near the shore than I would be in the deep.”

“So how long will you have to stay up here?”

“Until they forget. A few turns, at least.”

Nate pressed his hands into the sand. “A turn?”

“Yes, a turn. Probably two or three.”

“So like a day?” Nate doubted even people living underwater would forget about an exile in such a short amount of time.

Jesskar looked astonished at Nate’s confusion. “The earth turns around the sun. The sun rolls around the moon. The earth spins as it turns. I’ve lived through twenty-two turns.”

“Oh, years.”

“Humans come up with the most abstract names for things. Say what something does and life becomes so much simpler.”

Nate nodded and shrugged.

They fell into silence again as the last rays of light flickered over the cliffs.

Nate turned around and walked back to the ramp. When he had climbed halfway up the concrete slope, he looked back at Jesskar, whose luminous eyes were still staring at him.

When Nate reached the cliff above the beach, he stopped and sat cross-legged near the edge. He watched Jesskar gaze up at him one last time, and then scoot his way back into the water.

Chapter 4

Nate was still outside when the sun dipped below the cliffs. Everything he felt was too big to fit inside the little white house, so he walked back down the path and turned right on the paved road. He passed the graveyard, where the moonlight gave the headstones a pearly glow, and he remembered that word that Mairead said the night before—*sidhe*. She said they took people away—did they take them here? To the afterlife? He looked away and pushed forward up the hill.

He eventually turned away from the main road, following a narrow gravel path until he lost it amid slabs of pale rock that seemed to sprout out of the ground like a useless set of crops. The slabs ran from the spot where Nate stood to the cliffs, which weren't so far away now. The waves rustled and roared down below, and the rock slabs shone oddly bright beneath the full moon.

“This is the best sort of night for a visit, isn't it?” a woman's voice asked behind him.

Nate turned around to find a young woman staring at him. She looked maybe Leo's age—early twenties—and she wore a wide, tasseled cotton scarf around her shoulders. It look like the fashion scarves girls wore in winter back home because it was never cold enough for wool ones. The way she wore it, Nate couldn't decide if it wanted to be a scarf or a shawl.

“Yeah,” Nate said.

The woman nodded and gave him a knowing smile. Her skin looked as pale and pearly as the slabs beneath her feet, and as far as Nate could see, she had no blemishes or

freckles. She was beautiful, in a way that startled Nate even though he'd never been into girls, and her perfection frightened him. If a knife cut her skin open, would she bleed?

He watched the woman pace in a small circle for a few minutes. She hunched her shoulders forward and clutched her scarf in an agitated manner.

“What’s wrong?” he heard himself ask.

She paused. “Have you ever lost the nerve to do something?”

“I guess. Doesn’t everyone?”

“Not me.” She went over and sat by the edge of the cliffs. “Things don’t scare me. They didn’t used to, anyway.”

“Why not?” Nate asked, walking over to sit with her.

She traced her finger long the edge of one of the slabs and said nothing. As she ignored him, a large rock edifice on the highest cliff drew Nate’s eye. It looked like a rough sketch of a castle, with rock walls and buttresses. It sat up on the ledge in defiance of erosion and gravity, and Nate admired it for that. The woman noticed his gaze.

“Isn’t it pretty?” she asked. “That’s the fort.”

“The fort?”

“They call it Dun Aenghus now, but it’s always been the fort,” she said, loosening her grip on her scarf. “It’s just a lonely shell, but people lived there once—you’d probably not imagine how many souls they could fit within those walls.”

“But that was a long time ago, right?” Nate said.

She shrugged. “I suppose.”

“And like, how long ago? Like the eighteen-hundreds or Romans times?”

“Can’t really say, now that you mention it. It all sort of runs together after a while, doesn’t it?”

Nate didn’t answer.

The woman took his hand and smiled the way she had before. “Call me Aoife.”

“Ee-fah?” Nate repeated. He hadn’t asked for her name. “Okay.”

Sometime after that, Aoife left. Nate supposed she made her way down the hill, but he never saw her walk away.

Sunrise looked better from the cliffs than it did from the little white house. Nate guessed he slept at some point the night before, but he didn’t remember waking up. He must have fallen asleep though, because he was sprawled out on the rock slabs, lying on his stomach. The sea breeze wafted over Nate’s body, but he didn’t feel cold. His head lay dangerously close to the cliffs’ edge, with the swirl of the waves roaring in his ears. Nate poked his head over the edge and watched the foam wash up against the cliffs.

Then he realized what he was doing and jerked his head back.

Nate sat up and scooted away from the edge, and found himself wobbling off the rock slabs onto a patch of grass. More than a patch, he noticed. This place was less a garden of rocks than he thought—more like a grassy field interrupted by various slabs and chunks of stone. The fort still sat on the highest ledge, still looking like a half-finished castle built in the wrong place. A staircase of stone on the edge of the field led up to the fort, snaking its way up the various levels.

His whole body ached with exhaustion as he climbed the stony path. Had he slept at all last night? Nate would have remembered if he had stayed up all night. Wouldn't he? The back of his right hand also itched as if from the worst mosquito bite. He looked down and saw a dark blue splotch on the back of his hand. It was shaped like a thumbprint, one far too small to be his own, and it continued to itch.

There were at least two layers of circular walls outside the fort's buttressed inner section, each space a good distance from each other. Nate supposed that might have been for protection, but would people have lived in these spaces, too, or did they just cram everyone into the buttressed area? He wandered around between the middle wall and the buttressed part, and he noticed sections of tall, jagged rocks, splayed out in every direction like deliberately placed thorns. Had they fallen into that position over the centuries, or was that some long-dead person's way of saying "keep out?"

The area within the buttressed walls looked sparser than Nate had imagined as he walked up the hill. It was just a grassy space surrounded by high, circular walls. He did notice a small opening on the north side of the fort, which might have been a tomb or a sealed doorway. A raised chunk of land sat some feet away from the tomb-door, on the northeast edge, of the area. Space? Room? Nate wasn't sure what to call it. The raised chunk looked like an altar, maybe the space where they'd sacrifice the virgins, if the fort-dwellers had been into that sort of thing. Nate sat down on the edge of the altar and took a deep breath. His right hand still itched. The skin around the blue spot was growing red from his scratching, but the splotch itself wasn't raised, like a bug bite would be. He rubbed the back of his hand against the altar's rocky edge, but that didn't help.

"Wanted to get an early visit in, did you?" a voice asked. An old man stood in the inner section's threshold, staring at Nate.

“Uh...” Nate continued to itch his hand.

“I don’t suppose you paid your fee now.”

Nate sat on his hands. “Fee?”

The old man came closer. “Did you really think a place like this would be free? We’d have people climbing all over the place, and not just frolickers like yourself.”

“Frolickers?”

The man’s face contorted into an expression of annoyance and curiosity. “Every so often, usually at the full moon, we get some New Age frolickers who want to pay homage to the Goddess or Cu Cuchlainn or some other nonsense. Cu Cuchlainn was from Ulster, not Connacht, to begin with.”

“Okay. I just went for a walk and ended up here,” Nate said. “I don’t remember any moon worshipping.”

“That’s good.” The man’s expression was more curious than annoyed now.

“God, you look almost like—“

“Finbar?” Nate replied.

“Is that one of them? Perhaps. Is your grandmother’s named Mairead?” the man asked.

“Great-grandmother.”

“Great-grandmother? Jesus. Last I saw her, she didn’t seem that old.”

Nate wondered how long ago that was—ten months or ten years? There was no mistaking that the prune-like woman in the little white house was ancient.

“You look like her husband,” the man continued. “He wasn’t so big as you, but you have his features. He’s been gone for ages, though.”

“Yeah, I figured.” Nate shrugged. “I’m Nate, by the way.”

The old man nodded. “Sean.”

Nate stood up. “I should probably go.”

“That you should. I’ll let you go this once because of Mairead, but next time, remember that the path starts at the visitors’ center.” Sean paused and stared at Nate’s right hand. “You’ll want someone to take a look at that.”

“Okay,” Nate said as he walked past Sean toward the fort’s threshold. Then he went back down the makeshift staircase and cut cross the field to go back the way he came.

Nate got back to the house just as Carol’s car pulled up. She greeted him with a stern glare.

“You’re up early,” she said.

“Yeah, it’s becoming a habit here,” he told her. “You’re out early, too, you know.”

“I have to be. She needs me.” Carol kept her eyes focused on everything around her but Nate.

“My mom and Lisa can help.”

She brushed past him, bumping her shoulder into his arm in a way that felt almost intentional. “That’s not why they’re here.”

Nate followed her. “So why are they here?”

“To watch an old lady die like she’s a zoo exhibit. And to see the Ireland their mother probably told them about in all her little stories,” she said as she walked around to the house’s front door.

Her worded sounded callous and hollow to Nate. Lisa and his mother weren’t like that, were they?

“They just want to pay their respect.” The words fell flat as soon as Nate uttered them.

“I’m sure that’s what they told you.”

Nate stopped following her. “They sit with her. They comfort her. And we haven’t been here that long.”

“I don’t care what they do. There are too many people in this house, and who has to deal with all of that, do you think?” Carol said, just before she entered the house.

Nate leaned on the house’s white slats, wondering why he wouldn’t look at her. He looked like her brother—so what? People looked like other people. Her tone bothered him, too. He wasn’t trying to be a nuisance, and his mother and aunt weren’t, either. At least, he didn’t think so, but they could be bothersome without meaning to be. Nate thought about that for a few minutes and then turned to enter the house through the back door.

“Why are we here?” Nate asked as his mother served up breakfast.

“Why are any of us here?” Lisa said with a knowing smile.

“No, like why are we on this island?”

“To pay our last respects,” his mother answered, dishing up some scrambled eggs.

Nate reached for the plate his mother offered. “But we could have just flown over for the funeral.”

“Yes, but we wanted to see her before she goes. One last time,” Lisa said as she pulled out her cell phone.

“I get that, for you guys. But me and Jude—we’ve never seen her before and she doesn’t know us, so why are we here?”

His mother sat down with her own plate of eggs. “Is this about the Fineen business?”

“No.”

“Sweetheart, she’s near the end—this happens to a lot of people. It’s not her fault she’s confused, and it’s not your fault she thinks you’re someone else.”

Nate pushed his fork in a circle through the yellow mush of eggs. “I know that. It’s weird, but old people are always weird, I guess. I just...do you know if Carol even wants us here?”

“Carol’s fine with it—she’s taking good care of us,” his mother replied.

“Yeah, but does she want to?”

Lisa put her cell phone away and stared at Nate. “Okay, Mr. Twenty Questions, let me ask you one: where did you go last night?”

“What?” Nate felt oddly numb.

“I saw you out the window last night,” Lisa told him. “You were with someone on the beach, climbed back up this way, and then you just wandered off.”

“So? I can do that. Wandering’s probably safer here than it is back home.”

“They don’t have cliffs like these back home,” his mother said, gesturing toward the window.

Nate shut his mouth, determined not to mention where he woke up this morning.

“Who was that person, anyway?” Lisa asked.

“Who?” Nate kept his eyes focused on his aunt, though he wanted to glance down at the floor.

“The one on the beach—I couldn’t tell if it was a man or a woman.”

“That’s Jess. He’s a...just visiting. From somewhere else. Not here,” Nate said.

“So how did you meet him?” his mother asked, spearing a piece of egg.

“Yesterday, I was out with Jude, and Jess was swimming—“

“When you fell in,” Lisa finished.

“Well, yeah, he helped me back up.”

Lisa’s eyes darkened. “Did he pull you in?”

“No!”

“Lisa, he’s my kid, not yours,” his mother said. “We just want to make sure you’re safe.”

Nate put his hand on his forehead. “God, I’m not Jude, you know!”

“We know,” his mother said, rubbing his back in a circular motion. “We still worry.”

“Yeah. I kind of hate that.” Nate took two large bites of his lukewarm eggs and stood up to leave the room. Lisa grabbed his right hand as he passed her.

“God, what is that?” she asked, tracing the dark blue splotch with her forefinger.

“Nothing.” Nate snatched his hand away and strode out of the room.

Chapter 5

Clouds wafted over Inishmor, passing across the sun so that the island was covered in sharp smatterings of sunlight and shadow. He found Jude sitting on the steppe's lowest level, talking to Jesskar, and both of them were bathed half in dimness and half in light. Nate went down to join them, but he sat on the level above his brother, keeping his distance from the fish-man.

"But where do you live?" Jude asked. The light and shadow fell in a diagonal split on his head, so that half of his blond hair appeared golden and the other half looked dull.

"We live in cities, or some of us do, at least. That life's not for everyone, of course," Jesskar said. The left tip of his tailfin poked just above the surface as he spoke.

"But you lived in one?"

Jesskar's chipped teeth looked sharper now as he smiled than they had the day before. "I lived in the brightest, most glorious city in all of the oceans. All of the buildings are made from coral with gold inlay taken from shipwrecks. Except for the temples—those are obsidian. You can't help but feel spiritual when you enter those halls, all dark and gleaming. All manner of sea creatures live in my city. Everyone gets along."

"They do?" Jude leaned forward, closer to the edge.

"Yes. Of course, there are certain laws to make sure that happens, but you can swim down a lane with the fiercest shark on one side of you and the largest whale on the other, and you'll never feel safer."

“Bullshit,” Nate said, moving down to the steppe’s lowest level.

“Excuse me?” Jesskar refused to look at Nate.

“I call bullshit.” Nate touched Jude’s shoulder and beckoned his brother to move back.

Jesskar looked confused. “Oh, eelshit.”

“It is not!” Jude said, resisting Nate’s attempts to move him backward.

Nate stopped beckoning his brother and sat down beside him. “It is, though. Sharks don’t like people. Any kind of people. They don’t even like the way people taste, so they’re probably not going to move into a city full of them, even if the people have fishtails.”

“And how would you know?” Jesskar asked, finally glancing at Nate.

“I just do. Also, do you guys know how big the world’s largest whale is? It’s multiple football fields long—it doesn’t swim down the street; it *is* the street.” Nate shifted to sit cross-legged. “And if everyone gets along there, where’d you get those scars?”

Jesskar did not answer.

“He could have left the city and got them,” Jude answered. He turned back to face Jesskar. “Did you get hit by a speedboat? That happens a lot back home. A lady came to our class last year and showed us pictures of manatees that got hit by boats.”

The clouds had moved since Nate began speaking, so that Jesskar’s face was now fully in the light. He pursed his lips, trying to hide his sadness, but his eyes gave it away.

“It wasn’t a speedboat.” He ran a hand through his wet, wavy hair and looked up at Nate.

“No one’s allowed to tell a story when you’re around, are they?”

“I just don’t like it when someone feeds people lies,” Nate told him.

“It’s probably not all a lie,” Jude said.

“It probably isn’t,” Jesskar agreed. His expression now looked sullen. He turned away from Nate and Jude, and looked like he was ready to dive under the water.

Nate chose to act like he was already gone. He raised his right hand to show Jude the splotch. “Do you think this is magic marker?”

“Maybe?” Jude poked the splotch. “The ink is dry.”

A wet hand grabbed Nate’s. Jesskar started whispering words in a strange language over the splotch.

Nate yanked his hand away. “What was that?”

“My grandmother used to tell me to pray over anything you can’t explain. And I can’t explain a blue splotch on a human.” He smirked.

“Who marked you?” Jude asked. His voice sounded innocent, but he wrinkled his forehead the way an adult would.

“Nobody!” Nate replied. “I mean, it happened last night. I can’t remember how.”

Jesskar’s smirk morphed into a concerned scowl. “That sounds perfectly understandable.”

Jude peered at the splotch. “Does Mom know?”

“Kind of. She was in the room when Lisa noticed—“

“*Aunt Lisa*,” Jude corrected.

“I’m too old for that. Mom saw, but didn’t say anything. Lisa’s a bit freaked out, though,” Nate explained. He looked over to Jesskar. “Is this dot from you?”

Jesskar looked appalled. “I never touched you last night.”

“You saw him last night?” Jude asked. Nate felt his face grow warm. Jude’s face reflected a special sort of confusion, the kind that a child experienced when something beyond his ken was going on, the sort of thing he wouldn’t understand until years later, when the whole situation had faded into an odd memory that colored certain corners of his consciousness.

“I couldn’t sleep,” Nate said.

“Do you sleep?” Jude asked Jesskar.

“No, we don’t need to sleep,” Jesskar answered, talking more to Nate than to Jude. “Our gills take both air and energy from the water around us.”

Jude grinned. “Cool.”

“He’s just teasing you,” Nate said.

“Do you say anything that’s true?” Jude asked Jesskar.

“You want truth?” Jesskar said. “Here are two truths: First, that spot is strange, no matter where it came from. Second, my people don’t always get along, especially in recent years. That’s why I have these scars.” He gave Nate and Jude a sad smile and then disappeared beneath the waves.

Jude batted Nate on the arm. “You suck!”

They sat there for a little while longer, waiting for Jesskar to come back. He didn't.

Nate went back to his room when he got back to the house. He sat down on his bed and stared at the back of his right hand. The blue splotch hadn't grown any larger, but its texture had changed. It now felt hard and looked shiny, like a paint swatch. He felt like he was engaging in a staring contest as he looked down at his hand, as though the splotch was daring him to look away. The splotch did not win—Nate looked up at the window, where he could see more clouds gathering outside. These looked angrier than the earlier tuft of clouds did. Maybe these clouds would bring storms.

What did Jesskar do in a storm? Did he swim down to the sea bottom, where the water might not toss so hard? Or did he ride out the currents and tides and unpredictable swirls of water?

Maybe he was being too harsh. Leo used to tell him stories like the one Jesskar told Jude. Nate's favorite was the one Leo told about his visit to the North Pole—he told Nate about it three Christmases in a row—the second and third times because Nate had requested it. He loved the details about reindeer and elves and Santa's workshop—Nate had never told anyone, but he'd a bit crushed when he'd learned the truth about Santa not because it meant his mother had been buying their presents all along, but because it meant that Leo's story was a lie. Maybe that's why he'd come down so hard on Jesskar. Maybe.

He did like the fish-man. Jesskar was nice to look at, even with the tail. Being pretty could make a person tolerable for only so long, though. Why did Jesskar have to

act like he knew everything? It seemed like every time he spoke, he made Nate's humanity seem lesser than his...mermanity? Was there a word for that sort of thing?

Nate began to think that maybe frustration had more to do with himself than anything Jesskar had said or done. This whole predicament was just further proof that he would never fit anywhere. He couldn't like the right people, apparently—he didn't even need them to be human—was that wrong? Or did Jesskar count as mostly human—half-human, maybe? Nate flopped on his bed and decided not to think about it too deeply.

As he was trying to forget about it, Lisa peered at Nate over the threshold. “Hey, can we talk?”

Nate shrugged.

“Okay, we're going to talk,” she said, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

“Why?”

She turned to face the window and tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “Look, I know I'm not your mom, but I think it's pretty cool that you're willing to look after Jude.”

“You're welcome.”

“I get that this whole thing is weird for both of you, but could you try not to freak him out too much?”

Nate raised his head from the pillow. “What? I'm not freaking him out.”

Lisa picked up a corner of the bed's top blanket and ran her fingers along it. “Well, you did something. He's been sulking, saying you embarrass him and that you drive all the cool people away.”

“I do not.”

“Really? He was telling me about how you made your friend Jess go away.”

“Can we not talk about this? Like you said, you’re not my mom.”

“Yeah, but...did you need to upset a five-year-old?” Lisa pinched the blanket’s fabric between her thumb and ring finger.

Nate stretched his legs out in the open space behind Lisa. “He’s six, and no, I didn’t need to upset him. I just didn’t like what Jess was saying.”

Concern flickered across his aunt’s face. “What was he saying?”

“Nothing bad. Just bullshit stories that only little kids could believe.”

“Then why not let Jude believe them?”

Nate groaned and flopped onto his stomach, burying his face in the pillow. Then he raised his head. “Look, I just don’t think we should have to listen to bullshit, okay?” He let his head fall back onto the pillow with his facing turned toward the wall.

“Okay,” Lisa said. Nate listened to her footsteps leaving the room.

Elephant Girl

The woman first showed up in Spider Gulch on her elephant right before 10:30 church services let out. Oceana O'Brien noticed the elephant first as she glanced up from her hymnal. She didn't really need to look at the words since she knew them all and she was only mouthing along—she hadn't actually sung since her mother left the previous April. So she looked over through the stain-glass image of St. Stephen's stoning to see four thick legs swaying down the street towards the church. As it swayed closer, Oceana noticed that the elephant wasn't as tall as the ones she'd seen in pictures or during that fourth-grade field trip to a zoo two counties over. It wasn't a baby or an adult, but it was big enough to carry its rider.

Oceana didn't say anything about it until the song had finished and her family began to shuffle out of the pew. She pointed to the stoning window, but the elephant had moved past it, so her father just shook his head and gave her one of his sad smiles. By the time her family reached the church's front steps, the elephant had stopped right in front of St. Stephen Protomartyr. The entire congregation stopped on the steps, out of either reverence or fear, and so had the Lutheran congregation across the street. Each group stared at the elephant, but not at each other.

On Sundays in Spider Gulch, the Catholics forgot about the Lutherans and the Lutherans forgot about them, too. No matter how much a Catholic interacted with any of the Lutherans during the rest of the week, he or she kept to his or her own kind on the Sabbath simply because that's what everyone did. Oceana didn't talk to her Lutheran friends from school on Sundays, and she didn't really want to. She kind of forgot about them one day a week, but she didn't know why. Perhaps no one wanted to argue about transubstantiation on the Lord's day. Perhaps they were all afraid someone might

mention Luther's ninety-five theses, which would lead to another person bringing up some old town grudge, which might lead to a fistfight right in front of two houses of worship. So no one in town ever made eye contact with anyone on the opposite side of the street until the elephant girl barreled into town.

The elephant's rider wore only a yellow sundress and a smile as she sat atop her half-grown elephant with her three-month-old baby on her lap. Oceana saw one of her Lutheran classmates, Macy Wilkerson, looking away from the elephant so she could stare at her, like she had the magical answer to why some lady brought her elephant to town. Oceana swore Macy's wolfish blue eyes could see into her soul. The elephant girl just smiled down at them. Church ladies on both sides would later titter about how her enjoyment was both sinful and embarrassing, especially with that baby cooing and clutching her arms.

No one spoke to her until Mrs. Everett Johnson stepped forward and ask, "Do you have safety belts on that thing?"

"Should I have some?" the elephant girl asked. Her waist-length hair swayed as she laughed. "Is there a mechanic here who can install some?"

Oceana started staring at the Lutheran kids now, and they stared right back.

"Then how do you stay on your mount if he breaks into a run when you're riding bareback with no reins?" Mrs. Everett Johnson had been an expert equestrian in her youth, and she liked to remind everyone of that every so often.

"I just grab Ulysses' ears and that usually slows him down," the girl answered.

“But what about the baby?” Oceana heard herself ask. Her voice didn’t sound like her own—it came out higher, more like a five-year-old than a twelve-year-old.

“What about him?” The girl smiled down at her.

Everyone’s eyes seemed to zoom in on Oceana. “How do you hold on to him when Ulysses starts running?”

“Oh, he hasn’t had a good run since Theodore was born, so I don’t know yet. I guess I’d have to hold on to him and to Ulysses’ ears.”

“Okay.” Oceana shrugged and waited for everyone to stop staring at her. All of the eyes still fixed on her, and her skinny knees began to knock together. Someone else had to say something. She waited to hear Mrs. Everett Johnson chirp about proper riding form, but she’d sunk back into the crowd. One of Lutherans should have started talking now, but they all just blinked at her, like they all forgot how to form sentences. So Oceana took a deep breath. “Why did you bring them here, ma’am?”

“We’re just passing through. I want Theo and Ulysses to see all they can see.” The woman wiggled her toes and her baby cooed. “So what should we see around here?”

As she asked, the crowd inhaled and spewed suggestions as soon as she spoke. Voices from both sides of the street called up to the woman to let her know that she should visit Malone’s ice cream shop, that she should take her baby to see Mr. Wilkerson’s pumpkin patch if she stayed through the fall, and that the Catholic church picnic would be held in three weeks and the Lutheran one the week after that. Oceana wanted to tell her about the art showcase for the middle school art camp, but she knew all the adults would just drown her out. So she just watched the woman’s smile grow as she basked in the attention. It reminded Oceana of her mother’s smile—her mother didn’t

smile often, but when she did, it would grow bit by bit across her face as she thought about whatever made her smile.

After a little while, Oceana heard herself speak up. “What’s your name?”

The woman ran her hand across Ulysses’ head as she looked back down at Oceana. “Roxanne.”

“Of course it is,” Mrs. Everett Johnson murmured.

“Roxanne. I like that,” Oceana said. Every eye in the crowd focused back on her.

The woman, Roxanne, just smiled again and dug her bare heels into Ulysses’ sides. The elephant lumbered forward, and Oceana liked how Baby Theodore bounced on his mother’s lap with each plodding stride.

Mrs. Everett Johnson stepped out of the crowd again. “Where in hell does she think she’s going?”

Everyone in each crowd turned to look at each other and shrugged. Oceana glanced back at the priest, her Uncle Patrick, to see if he’d say anything to Mrs. Everett Johnson about saying “hell” on the Protomartyr’s steps. If he had noticed, Oceana guessed he didn’t care because he looked too busy watching Ulysses lumber away.

“Where’d she get the elephant?” Oceana’s younger brother, Zephyr, asked that night at dinner. Zephyr was nine, and he’d long ago figured out how to say just the right thing so no one would notice him shoving steamed broccoli into his napkin.

“Where do you think she got it, Zeph?” her father asked.

“Stole it from the circus,” Zephyr said as he jabbed his fork into a piece of steak.

“That’s boring,” Oceana told him. “Maybe she bought it from a shah in India.”

“Iran had shahs. I think you mean a rajah,” her father said, reaching for the salt but grabbing the pepper.

“Whatever. I still think she bought it.” Oceana raked her fork over her steak and her broccoli.

“Stole it!” Zephyr insisted.

“You’re so weird,” Oceana told him.

It turned out lots of people had decided where Roxanne got her elephant.

“You know a ringmaster sent her away on that thing as soon as she got pregnant, right? He didn’t want his wife to know what he’d been doing on the side, and he couldn’t afford to keep another elephant,” Ms. Louisa Price, the choir director, told Grandma Nay at the grocery store while Oceana pretended to read the ingredients on two different canned corn labels.

“Who got pregnant? You mean that elephant girl? I haven’t seen her, but Shawnie here told me about that ruckus she caused at the Protomartyr. I would have loved to see that.” Grandma Nay only left her house to go grocery shopping ever since her husband died. She didn’t even go to church anymore, and her own son was the priest. “Did she tell you all that on the steps?”

“Of course not,” Ms. Louisa said. She straightened her cart out and pushed it past Oceana. “Evie swears that’s what the girl said when she asked who the father was after that big entrance. She was on her way home and she saw the girl wandering with that animal and that baby out near the Gulch, so she asked her.”

Evie was what some of the ladies called Mrs. Everett Johnson, but never to her face.

“Really?” Grandma Nay asked. “I’d expect Evie to ask her right in front of the church.”

Oceana stared at the baked bean cans and wondered what sodium erythorbate was. Sodium was in salt, but what was an erythorbate? Why would anyone spell it like that? She thought erythorbate sounded more like an icky blue sports drink than something in baked beans. And shouldn’t beans be the only thing in baked beans?

Grandma Nay’s hand rested on Oceana’s shoulder. “Shawnie, what are you doing? Just pick one.”

“I’m thinking about sodium erythorbate.” Oceana placed the can in her right hand back on the shelf.

Grandma Nay clicked her tongue. “Dear God, you’re starting to sound like your mother. She was always saying things like that in my kitchen when your father first brought her ‘round. She always worried about the little things. No wonder she ran off—all that thinking and worrying must’ve driven her crazy.”

Oceana bit her lip. She didn’t need Grandma Nay to say that in front of Ms. Louisa Price. Next Tuesday night, at rehearsal for the children’s chorus, Ms. Louisa

wouldn't pick her because Grandma Nay reminded her that Oceana was the runaway woman's daughter. Maybe it didn't matter, since Ms. Louisa never picked her anyway. But she could have this time.

Oceana whirled around to face her grandmother and Ms. Louisa. "I'm not crazy. I just want to know what sodium erythorbate is. Do *you* know what it is?"

Grandma Nay bid goodbye to Ms. Louisa and clutched Oceana's upper arm as they walked down the aisle. "What did I tell you about sassing?"

Oceana didn't answer.

Her grandmother's unclipped nails dug into her arm. "You know what I told you, Oceana. And you can tell me."

Oceana took a deep breath. "Ladies don't sass. In private or in public. It makes the world end."

"See, now you're giving me sass-mouth again. You sass in front of people, and they're going to remember. I'll bet you Ms. Louisa remembers at your next practice. And what was that thing you wanted so badly? A descant?"

"A solo," Oceana said, placing the canned corn into the cart. Grandma Nay had never had any music education at all, so she always got the terms mixed up. She once asked if adagio meant 'very fast.'

"Sassing won't get you any of that stuff, and you know it, Shawnie. You keep acting like that, and you'll end up wandering the world like that poor elephant girl." Grandma Nay let go of Oceana's arm and glanced at her shopping list. "Now we got to get a bag of peanut M&M's before we go."

Oceana nodded and pushed the cart down the aisle.

That night, Oceana pulled out her colored pencils and her book of mandalas and flipped to a page she hadn't colored yet. Grandma Nay and her father both told her she was getting too old for coloring books, but the mandala book wasn't just a coloring book. The introductory blurb inside the front cover said that mandalas were circular geometric symbols that helped Hindus and Buddhists meditate, and coloring them helped people relieve stress. Her father thought that they were probably created by some goofball in an East Coast think-tank, but Oceana didn't care where they came from. She just liked the way they looked—some had sharp-edged squares and triangles inside the circle, and others had smaller circles or smooth shapes that reminded her of flowers. Tonight, she chose one of the flower-ish mandalas and thought about colors. First, she grabbed a navy blue pencil for the biggest shapes that looked almost like petals. As she pressed the pencil back and forth on the page, the dark blue looked hard and soft at the same time, and then she thought of how Grandma Nay's voice was like that, too. When she finished the navy blue petals, Zephyr walked in with a bowl of cheese curls.

“Do green,” he said. Her brother pointed at the page with his orange-stained fingers. “Blue and green always go together.”

“Whatever,” Oceana said.

When he left, she pulled out all of her green colored pencils. Her parents had given her the forty-eight pencil box for Christmas last year, so she had a lot of shades to choose from. She chose the one called jade green. A bright green just wouldn't look right with the navy blue, but jade green was a quiet kind of shade. Once she colored in

the slivers between the petals, Oceana decided Zephyr had been right. Now she had to color the center of the mandala.

She picked sand. It reminded her of the ash blonde hair dye her mother used before she left. When she finished the center, only the space between the petals and the circle remained white. Sometimes, Oceana left that part white, but this needed color.

Purple clashed, orange was too loud, pink was too pink, so she had no idea what to do. Black would make the whole thing too sad. But then she saw the gray pencil. Gray like the Ulysses the elephant, swaying down the street. Yes, gray would work. She pushed the pencil forward, down, and around on the page, letting the soft gray fill up the white space. When she was done, Oceana heard her father's voice over her shoulder.

“That looks nice, Shawnie. Those are very...grown-up colors. I thought you might pink and orange or something. I don't know why.” Then her father left the room.

Oceana grit her teeth and scowled.

On Thursday, Oceana had to walk to Grandma Nay's house after summer art camp. She liked art camp, but she knew that it mainly existed because everyone's parents got sick of looking at their children after a week and a half of summer vacation. So every Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday, her dad dropped her off at Spider Gulch Junior High and she and fifteen other kids spent the next few hours making whatever artistic thing the elementary school art teacher, Mrs. Watkins, thought up for them to do.

This week, when class ended, she stood on the steps with the class's latest project, a painted plaster tennis shoe. Everyone had to bring in an old tennis shoe, and Mrs.

Watkins had mounted them on pieces of wood. Then they covered them with plaster and painted the shoe's new hardened white shell. Some of her classmates painted rainbow stripes on their shoes, but Oceana decided to paint purple over the top and red on the sides. When that dried, she dabbed orange dots on top of the purple and blobby blue flowers over the red.

Now she stood on the top step, clutching her plaster tennis shoe against her chest, when Macy Wilkerson stopped and stared at her. Oceana felt like Macy's gaze moved her from the school steps to the Protomartyr, replaying the scene from last Sunday.

“Why'd you paint it like that?” Macy asked.

“Because I wanted to,” Oceana answered. She could see Macy's rainbow shoe poking out of her pink-and-black backpack.

“Well, I guess it's okay, but rainbows are just nice and even.” Macy's green stripe was a lot thicker than the yellow stripe next to it.

“Polka dots are just as happy as rainbows.” Oceana stomped down the stairs and didn't look back.

Oceana walked through the heat to Grandma Nay's house. Grandma Nay could have picked her up, but she didn't because she just wouldn't leave her house. Oceana's father didn't like being disturbed when he was working, and since he worked from home, Oceana had to wander on foot through humidity so thick someone could slice it with a cake knife. She knew she should have put her hair in a ponytail, but she didn't. Now it stuck to the back of her neck like a leech on a dying man as the sun beat down on her

head. So she trudged down the road, quietly sure that she'd tumble into the Gulch when she passed it.

The Spider Gulch wasn't really a Gulch, Oceana learned last year in social studies. Gulches were like narrows canyons with rivers in them. The Spider Gulch was just a ditch full of arachnids, but her teacher said that the town founders probably decided that the word "gulch" sounded more dramatic. Everyone swore that the spiders that inhabited the Gulch could grow to be the size of a goat, but also that most only grew to be the size of a man's palm, even though hardly anyone ever saw these spiders. Kids often dared each other to go into the Gulch and bring back one of the spiders, but they would grumble with disappointment when their friends brought back only a daddy-long-legs or nothing at all. On some days, Oceana believed in the Giant Spiders of the Gulch, but on other days, she didn't. She believed in them today.

When she reached the Gulch, Oceana peered over to see if she could see any spindly legs poking out of the large holes in its sides. She thought she saw a few beady eyes staring out through those holes, but she told herself it was nothing. Fourth graders like Zephyr believed in the spiders. She'd be a seventh grader in the fall, and she was not scared. She did not believe in giant spiders.

Just as she got past the Gulch, a giant gray something drooped onto her shoulder. It wiggled back and forth across her chest, all thick, heavy, and alive, like an enormous gray worm. Oceana screamed, shoved the gray worm off her shoulder, and whirled around to face the creature.

Ulysses raised his trunk in the air and stumbled back. Oceana expected him to charge at her, but the elephant just wiggled his trunk again when he regained his balance.

Oceana turned away and began walking down the road again, but she could hear those big feet thudding behind her. When she looked back, Ulysses seemed happy, almost pleased with himself.

“Go away,” Oceana blurted out. She wasn’t sure if she really wanted him to go away, but she didn’t know what else to say.

Ulysses didn’t go away. He lumbered behind her as she wilted her way toward Grandma Nay’s house. Every time Oceana glanced back, he was there with his trunk swaying back and forth when he walked. Ulysses tagged along like Zephyr used to when he was a wobbling two-year-old with an ever-present juice box. Oceana decided she didn’t mind the elephant until his trunk snaked around her waist.

Her legs began to kick as soon as they left the ground while Oceana tried to shove the trunk away, but Ulysses’ grip only grew firmer. When she was about five feet off the ground, the elephant twisted his trunk, and Oceana could feel her hair draping down below while her feet pointed skyward. She opened her mouth to scream, but no noise came out, just like when she tried to sing hymns in church. She waited for Ulysses to drop her or take her back to the Gulch and toss her to the Spiders, but he just stood there, hoisting her in the air. Then she heard a voice.

“Ulysses, make up your mind. Either put her down or give her a ride,” Roxanne said.

The half-grown elephant obeyed and lifted Oceana onto his head.

Roxanne smiled. “You—you’re the girl from one of the churches. I can’t remember which church, but you were on the same side as that Mrs. Johnson.”

Oceana scrunched her shoulders up to her neck. Mrs. Johnson's house was just a few hundred feet down the road. "Yeah. I was at the Protomartyr. My uncle's the priest."

"Protomartyr," Roxanne repeated as she ran her hand up Ulysses' trunk. "What does that word mean? I never even heard it before we came here."

Oceana began to wobble, so she pressed her hands on the elephant's back. "Ask the adults next week. They come up with good answers for that stuff."

"But what's your answer?"

Oceana knew the answer. She'd known it since kindergarten. She knew it even more after she read in her Book of Saints, when she pored over the picture of St. Stephen with blood trickling down his brow. She used to read a different saint's story with her mother a couple of times a week, but Oceana hadn't opened the book since her mother left.

"I can tell you, but I've got to be somewhere." Oceana wiped a few strands of sweaty hair off her face.

Roxanne stared up at her in silence for a few moments. She looked thoughtful, and Oceana realized she couldn't tell how old the woman was. At the church, Roxanne seemed like she was twenty-five, but without her baby, she seemed like she was sixteen. She smiled the way the high school girls did when they got out of school and walked past the middle school on their way home—open and happy, but full of a secret something that Oceana couldn't understand. Finally, Roxanne said, "You're that Naomi's granddaughter, aren't you?"

Oceana raised her eyebrows. Hardly anyone used Grandma Nay's full first name.

"Yeah. How did you know?"

"I came from her house." Roxanne traced her thumbs along the edges of her sundress. "She asked me to look for a skinny, strawberry blonde girl headed towards the house, and I guess Ulysses decided he had to find you."

Then Roxanne picked the plaster shoe off the ground and lifted it up to Oceana.

"Is this yours?"

"Yeah. Thanks." Oceana grabbed the shoe and put it in her lap. She felt exposed as she sat on the elephant's back, like a piece of overcooked meat that a dog might sniff at, but wouldn't eat. All she wanted was to be out of the sun and out of the humid air that was puffing her hair up.

Roxanne patted Ulysses' trunk and he lurched forward, swaying down the road. Oceana pressed her hands on the elephants back to steady herself. She'd ridden horses, though not very well, but Ulysses walked with a slower, bigger gait that felt like a giant set of drum beats beneath her body. He never stopped or changed his pace, and Oceana eventually grew used to the motion. When she glanced to the side, she realized that she was maybe six feet off the ground since he wasn't fully grown. He wasn't a calf, but he wasn't a big bull elephant yet, either. Did animals have any phase between baby and adult?

"What was your name again? Did you tell me at the church?" Roxanne asked as she ran her hand across Ulysses' right side.

"No. I'm Oceana. Spelled like 'ocean' with an 'a'," Oceana answered.

“O-shawna,” Roxanne repeated slowly. “That’s pretty. Do you love the ocean?”

“I’ve never seen it. Not in real life. My mom named me.”

“So she loved the ocean?”

Oceana shrugged. “She never saw it for real, either. But she said it looked pretty in the movies.”

Neither of them spoke after that. Now Oceana could only think of the morning her mother left. She woke up when the door slammed, but by the time she got downstairs, her mother’s Accord had already reached the cross-street. The turn signal began to blink, and Oceana wanted to run out into the street and scream, but her feet felt like they’d sunk into the floor, planting her permanently next to the front door. She swore she’d tasted a salty tang in the living room’s air that day. That was probably what the ocean air tasted like. Maybe her mother left a piece of where she was going behind her when she took off.

The worst part was when she never found a note. Oceana thought that people who took off sometimes left notes, but maybe she was wrong. Her mother must’ve left a note—she check in all the rooms, under the furniture, even between the couch cushions. But her mother had left no trace of a reason for her departure. She just vanished, like she’d stepped into a separate dimension. Maybe that dimension had an ocean.

Ulysses stepped into a divot in the dirt road, jostling Oceana so that she had to grab his ears to steady herself. She jolted out of her memories when he trumpeted his discomfort.

“Don’t grab his ears like that!” Roxanne chided. “He hates that.”

“I had to! He was going to throw me off,” Oceana protested.

Roxanne looked up at Oceana like she was an anxious three-year-old. “He’s never thrown anybody. Ever. So you don’t have anything to worry about.”

“Just ‘cause he hasn’t done it doesn’t mean he won’t!” Her mother had never taken off before, but she did it.

“He won’t. You don’t throw people, do you, Uly?” Roxanne patted his side. He snaked his trunk back to pat her on the head. “Just don’t touch his ears.”

“But you told Mrs. Johnson that you always grab his ears to make him stop when she asked about it.”

Roxanne grinned and shook her head. “I told her what she wanted to hear. She’s the kind of person who’s always looking for an answer, so sometimes you just have to give it to them.”

“So how do you get him to stop and go?” Oceana asked.

“He’s knows when I want him to stop or go. We trust each other.”

Ulysses trumpeted in agreement.

“Oh.” Oceana wondered what it would be like to know someone so closely.

Now she could see Grandma Nay’s house on the horizon, growing larger like an image in a zooming camera lens. As Ulysses plodded forward, a feeble breeze began to blow the thick summer air and stir Oceana’s frizzy hair. She looked over at the cornfields on her left and watched their stalks wave gently in the wind. She wanted to pretend they were ocean waves, rustling forward until they slapped on the shore, like the

kind that her mother was probably watching at that moment in some other place with a name that Oceana probably couldn't spell. But Oceana could not pretend. She was not, would never be on an ocean, and she was not, would never be with her mother again. She was plodding to her grandmother's on a half-grown elephant with a lady she didn't even know. Oceana wanted to forget all that, just for a moment, but between Ulysses' gait on the dirt road and Roxanne's perpetual smiles and the unending heat, she just couldn't.

When they finally reached Grandma Nay's house, Mrs. Everett Johnson stepped out onto the porch. She peered down at them through her thick-rimmed glasses like a factory worker looking for flaws in a new product's design. Oceana wrinkled her nose—she wondered if she'd walked over to see Grandma Nay at the same time, watching them and thinking of new things to tell the ladies at Church about Roxanne.

“Looks like your friends found little Seaside for you,” Mrs. Johnson said. Her mouth curled into a tight smile that held no hint of happiness.

Grandma Nay stepped out onto the porch now carrying a bag of M&M's in her left hand and Roxanne's baby on her right hip. “You know their names, Evie. You best use ‘em.”

“Maybe one day I will,” Mrs. Johnson answered. She pushed her red-rimmed glasses up her nose and stepped down off the porch. Her yellow dress stuck to her stubby legs in the heat when she walked toward the dirt road. Between Mrs. Everett Johnson's waddling, hunch form, her bobbing neck, and her dry, wrinkled skin, Oceana thought she looked like a turtle.

She refused to look at Roxanne, who rolled her eyes when the old woman passed. When she passed Ulysses, she looked straight up at Oceana. “You’re just the skinniest thing God ever made, aren’t you?”

Oceana nodded. “Yep. Thanks for noticing, Evie.”

Mrs. Johnson’s eyes bulged behind her glasses, but she said nothing. She just waddled past the elephant without looking back.

Grandma Nay grinned. “What’d I tell you about sassing, Shawnie?”

“Don’t.”

“That’s right. I’ll let that one slide, but you don’t want her spreading stories about you, do you?”

“No.”

“Good. Now get inside or this heat will melt your hair off.” Grandma Nay set the bag of M&M’s out and held the baby out in front of her body. “Roxie, your baby wants you.”

Roxanne took Baby Theodore from Grandma Nay. She took the baby and looked at him like Oceana looked at her old stuffed dog—like she knew she loved it, but she had no idea what to do with it anymore. As soon as he was in his mother’s arms, Theodore began to bawl.

“I just never know what he wants. I try, but I just can’t tell,” Roxanne said. She swayed back and forth, but Theodore continued wailing. “I wish he was easygoing, like Ulysses. And...I wish he was her size already.” Roxanne looked back at Oceana.

Oceana felt more exposed at that moment than she had on the church steps. She knew nothing would come out if she opened her mouth.

“He’ll get there,” Grandma Nay told Roxanne. “You gotta grow with him.”

Roxanne nodded silently, but Theodore just wailed louder. Oceana was sure the whole town could hear it by now.

“Now you all better come inside ‘cause you don’t want to melt.” With that, Grandma turned around and went inside. The screen door’s slam echoed out into the humid air.

Ulysses grabbed Oceana with his trunk and set her down. She didn’t struggle this time. When she didn’t struggle, being lifted by a trunk was a pretty pleasant experience.

Oceana hurried up the steps and flung the door open. Then she turned back to Roxanne. “Aren’t you coming?”

“Yes.” Roxanne followed her inside. Theodore quieted as they entered the house.

Oceana slid her backpack off, set her plaster shoe down, and pulled out her mandala book and pencils and listened to the hum of all of Grandma Nay’s fans whirring to keep the heat at bay.

Daylights

She was twelve years old, but not too old to hold her father's hand. She was twelve years old, and not too old to hold her father's hand. Jennifer repeated the words to herself as she walked down the street with her father. The streetlights glowed brighter tonight in the November air than they usually did. Each one followed Jennifer like a pale eye, examining the way she pinches her coat's felt fabric between her fingers. She could feel the lights gazing at her when she reaches the front door, memorizing every inch of her body. They followed her inside the house, staying with her even when she was alone.

She had ten brothers and sisters, but she found ways to be alone. In the bathroom, in her bed, watching tennis on Wide World of Sports when it was in season. But she couldn't be alone. Not anymore. Her father let go of her hand when they stepped inside the house. Jennifer wanted to grab it again, but that was what Hattie would do, and Hattie was four. Jennifer had to be strong now. She'd already sat on his lap at the Allens' house, and he had probably wondered when she'd start being grown-up about this. Now he looked at her like she stood a hundred feet from him. He was probably embarrassed that she couldn't pull herself together. It took all her strength not to cry.

Her father rested his hand on her shoulder. "Mrs. Allen is sitting at the Sullivans' house until they come back. She'll give us a call when they get back and I'll go tell them about it. That sound good?"

She nodded.

He kissed her on the head. "You're my brave girl."

Jennifer shrugged and climbed the stairs. The hallway lights' glow enveloped her like a blanket, giving her just enough warmth to let her breath. She could trust these lights. They didn't judge or mock her like the streetlights did.

She could hear some of her siblings gathered in her oldest brothers' bedroom. Bruce's voice spilled out of the doorway, asserting that he knew best about everything, though he was the second son. Bobby's voice followed, calling his younger siblings by numbers in the birth order instead of names. Jennifer could hear Donna, too, sounding worldly as ever. Donna didn't get scared. Donna knew how to do things right, and she'd say as much, too. So Jennifer finished climbing the stairs and went to sit among the voices that knew so much better than her.

"Jen, what happened to you?" Bruce asked.

"Number Five looks like she lost it," Bobby said.

Donna stood up and ran her hand down Jennifer's back. "Why aren't you at the Sullivans'? Did they come home early?"

Jennifer shook her head and crumpled onto the green carpet next to Bruce. She couldn't find the words to explain herself.

The Sullivans thought she was Donna or Sheila. They called her by her older sisters' names as they explained when to feed the kids dinner and how to put one-year-old David to bed and hour before three-year-old Michael. Jennifer didn't blame them—she and her sisters all had the same dishwater hair and brown eyes, similar patterns of freckles sprayed across their cheeks. She stared up at the front stairs as she listened to Mrs. Sullivan's instruction. They lay right in the middle of the foyer and climb straight

up until they turned right at the top. The mahogany bannister shined in the mid-afternoon sun, almost begging Jennifer to climb the stairs.

After Mrs. Sullivan explained everything, Jennifer joined David and Michael in the living room. They sat on the brown shag carpet, watching an episode of *Batman*.

“Hey, Donna,” Michael said when she sat down.

“I’m Jennifer,” she told him.

Michael turned back to the television without comment. His brother toddled into Jennifer’s lap.

“Who’s better: the Joker or the Penguin?” Michael asked as the Penguin stepped out of the shadows to taunt Batman and Robin.

“The Joker,” Jennifer answered. The Joker was funny. The Penguin made her insides squirm every time he showed up. Maybe she hated his voice. Maybe she hated his nose. Jennifer didn’t know why.

“Sheila, we’re going,” Mr. Sullivan called from the front door.

“Okay,” Jennifer said.

She thought she heard two small thumps from the floor above just before the door closed, but Michael distracted her with more questions.

“Are you Donna or Sheila?” he asked.

“I’m Jennifer. Their sister. They’re both older than me and they’re busy,” she explained.

“You look like them but not.”

“Okay.”

Michael stood up and grabbed some of his a cars and trucks from the toy chest in the room opposite the living room, to the left of the stairs.

“Let’s race. You want blue or red?”

“Blue,” Jennifer said, “but the cars won’t race on the carpet.”

“Yes, they will,” Michael said, setting the cars on the carpet’s tendrils. He gave them each a push, and the cars moved about two inches. “See?”

Jennifer looked to the living room’s other opening. The fuzzy brown carpet ended at the threshold, where dark wood panels—mahogany, like the bannister—ran the length of the dining room. “Let’s try it over here, on this floor.”

“Okay!” Michael grabbed his cars and ran into the dining room. A few thumps came through the ceiling as he switched places.

“Hey, Michael, just sit on the edge with me, okay?” Jennifer sat at the edge of the carpet with her back against the wooden threshold. She put David down next to her, where he rested his hand on her knees. “You can sit on the other end and we’ll push them back and forth.”

“Okay.” Michael did what she described. He was frighteningly agreeable, compared to her own siblings. Hattie would have protested, while Dominic and Christina, numbers eight and nine, would have wandered away silently. Maybe little kids listened more when the house wasn’t so crowded.

They pushed the cars back and forth for some time while Michael just talked. He told her about his neighborhood friends and his parents and his grandmother, but Jennifer

stopped listened after a while. She looked past the dining room table with its stepped edges and the radiator beside it to a mint green curtain blowing back and forth. Michael pushed the blue car back to her, and she handed it to David. David pushed the blue car out into the dining room, where it flew past the table and hit the radiator in front of the green curtain.

Jennifer got up and grabbed the blue car from the dining room, but she lingered to watch the curtain. Another thump emanated through the ceiling. She stepped directly in front of the curtain and pulled it back. A small air conditioner peered out at her from the window sill. November air blew in through the foot-and-a-half gap next to it. She could have climbed through it if she wanted to. Why hadn't the Sullivans boarded this gap up? Her dad did it several times at her family's house with plywood or cardboard.

“Jennifer, can we keep playing?” Michael asked.

“Sure, but you'll need to eat soon.”

They pushed the cars back and forth for several more minutes. Then Jennifer took the boys into the kitchen and heated their dinner up in the oven. She ran her hand along the edge of kitchen table, marveling at how a family could fit around such a small surface. Her family had never been so small as long as she'd been alive—the only dinners she remembered involved everyone eating at their rectangular dining room table, dark and ornate like the Sullivans', sometimes with an extra table butted up against it if they had guests. Michael and David would never wonder who their new dinner mates would be—they only had each other, so their parents never had to reorganize them according to who got along with whom. The Sullivans' kitchen table looked spacious, yet lonely.

The boys ate their dinner peacefully, with no pinching or slapping. Michael talked through most of it, though. Jennifer listened to him because she was used to listening to little kids babble. He talked a lot, but not as much as Number Ten, Hattie. Hattie starting talking early and had never shut up since. Michael wasn't quite so bad—he babbled, but he also paid attention to David, trying to brush food off of his brother's mouth and telling him to eat his peas. Hattie had never been so nice to Jane, Number Eleven. Watching Michael attend to David felt strange, but nice.

After they ate, Jennifer picked David up and took him up to bed. She climbed the steps awkwardly beneath David's weight on her hip, even though he wasn't that heavy. A shuffling sound drifted down the staircase when she reached the middle steps. She paused. Air from the open window whistled through the first floor rooms.

The shuffling stopped, so she began climbing again. The staircase turned at the top of the stairs, so she couldn't see if someone was up there until she reached the top. Empty air hung at the top of the staircase when Jennifer turned to face it. She pushed past it and stepped into the hallway, craning her neck to see which room might be the boys' bedroom. Their parents should have shown her this. They didn't. Because Donna knew where it was, and Sheila did, too, so of course Jennifer would know because their brains were interchangeable, just like their faces were.

Heaving air trickled out of the second door on her right. That door was mostly shut, with a sliver of light poking out. The air behind it heaved, again and again, like breathing. Jennifer lingered in front of the mostly closed door and imagined what sort of person would breath like that. A big person. Someone too big to fit through the gap in the dining room window? Jennifer stepped forward and continued to glance around for the boys' room. She found it and lay David down in his crib. He cooed as he laid down,

and Jennifer ran her hand in a circle on his back. His eyes fluttered after a few minutes, and he went down far faster than any of Jennifer's younger siblings ever had.

The breathing still leaked out of the ajar door, which was second on her left now. Jennifer swore she heard a footstep. Then a second one. Swish swish across the floor. The breathing continued. She bolted for the stairs and ran down them without even grabbing the banister.

There was nothing up there. Nothing. They would have told her if there was something up there. She knew that. She did. Goosebumps still rose on her arms and legs.

Jennifer went back to the kitchen and took Michael back into the living room. He brought his toys in from the room across the hall and dropped them on the shag carpet for her to examine. She told herself that she hadn't heard anything upstairs. She should have gone into the room with its door ajar. Maybe she should have checked that room—it probably had an air conditioning unit in it, like the one in the dining room, with a gap beside it. Then she picked up one of up Michael's cars and she heard another thump through the ceiling. She decided to ignore any thumps she heard after that one.

The next hour whirled by. She didn't hear any footsteps through the floor. Maybe she'd gotten good at ignoring. Or maybe they'd never been there at all. No, they'd never been there, she decided. She and Michael and David were the only ones in the house. She felt sure of that now. She told herself that as she and Michael played with his various toys.

“Okay, time for bed now,” she said at 7:30.

“Aw...” Michael whined. He protested a bit more as she led him up the stairs.

Soft thumps emanated down from the second floor, just feet above their heads. Jennifer paused and waited for the sound to stop. The sound of feet inched closer to the top of the stairs. She swallowed and led Michael up anyway.

Jennifer turned the final steps and saw a face staring down at her from the top of the staircase. A man's face, square with a flat jaw and no curves to his cheeks. His mouth hung open, and he moaned. His hands bent forward from arms that jutted out from his body at odd angles. The man moaned again.

She couldn't scream. Her voice had buried itself in a deep corner of her throat. So she picked Michael up and ran down the stairs. She ran out of the house. Her breaths were shallow. He didn't get her. He didn't get Michael. They were safe. Safe and cold and without a house to return to. She could take Michael home. It wasn't that far a walk. She could definitely get there. If only her legs would move.

“Donna! Donna! Sweetheart, what's wrong?”

Jennifer turned around to see Mrs. Allen, the Sullivans' next door neighbor to the right barreling down her front porch. She was still in her nurse's uniform, which looked like a tent draped over her large body. Her big hand planted itself square between Jennifer's shoulder blades.

“Donna, come with me,” Mrs. Allen. “Wait, are you Donna? No, you're...oh, there are so many of you. Jennifer? Is that it?”

Jennifer nodded. Michael jumped out of her arms and took Mrs. Allen's hand.

Mrs. Allen took them both inside her house, where she called Jennifer's parents. Jennifer sat at the kitchen table while knobby-headed, balding Mr. Allen sat across from her, exchanging looks of confusion and empathy.

“You’ll want to come get her. Something gave her a nasty shock,” Mrs. Allen said into the telephone receiver. “What was it? It was a...what did you say it was, Jennifer, dear?”

Jennifer hadn’t said. She just shrugged and whispered, “I didn’t know.”

“Didn’t know what?” Mr. Allen asked.

“Um. A man,” she said.

“A man scared you?” he asked.

She answered with a gesture somewhere between a nod and a shrug.

“Wait.” Mrs. Allen put her hand over the phone’s receiver. “Michael, is Uncle Earl visiting this weekend?”

“Yeah,” Michael answered.

“They didn’t tell you about that?” she asked Jennifer.

Jennifer shook her head.

“God, and he’s—well, he’s the gentlest man, but he’s never been quite right—physically, you know.” Mrs. Allen explained the issue to the person on the other end—one of Jennifer’s parents, she hoped. If it were a sibling, they might make sure she never lived it down.

Jennifer sat at the Allen’s kitchen table until her father rang the front door. Mrs. Allen had gone to get David from the Sullivan’s house, so Mr. Allen brought Jennifer to the door. She just stood there, staring up at him, until her father took her into the Allen’s living room and let her sit on his lap in a big, red chair. She sat there and thought about a world full of odd uncles hidden within sight and other things grown-ups forgot to tell her

about. Maybe she sat for a few minutes, maybe a few hours—time didn't make sense anymore. After however long she sat there, her father led her out to the street, where all the lights knew her secrets.