

Undertow

She held the hand she kissed ever so gently as the blood pumped around my veins and sank my heart into motion faster than any grand prix I have ever known to exist. The sea air filled my lungs with a triumphant exclamation that not all air was created equal; a soaring reminder that *this* air was better than the rest, cadenced in a solemn chill to reprimand the years since I had allowed it to sustain me. The ground was tougher to walk on than I remembered, but I couldn't tell if I had the sand or the weakness in my knees to thank for that. In flashes I remembered the ease of running for hours, wind in my hair, no care in the world as my sister splashed in the waves and we squealed at the icy blue and pretended we were grownups, making margaritas out of fruit punch and using straws as cigars. We were a restless sort of youth, the kind that formed clubs and learned leadership from facilitating games of tag and how to bend and break rules with the notion of sunset versus streetlamp and what time we were to report back to our mothers for dinner. We used hoodies for goalposts and still wondered why our backs were covered in sand, or why we couldn't chase the tide to retrieve the fifteenth ball that had been kicked in the fathoms below that summer. The air filled my lungs with its very own poison yet reached my soul in places that had been hard to find without a prescription and a razor blade for a very long time.

I thought of that version of me, the young girl in my memory. She had no idea what harrowing tales awaited her future, she had no idea the mountains she had yet to climb and the forces that would beckon the worst kind of demons to strip the light from her eyes. She was worthy of so much but it would take years for her to ever come to understand that bizarre phenomenon. She still doesn't quite understand it. She still shudders when hands come into contact with her skin and tenses up when someone looks at her for too long. Her head turns every time a new face enters a crowded room and she cowers her gaze as she enters a crowd, scanning it like a little girl checking for monsters under her bed. She had no idea that one day the sandcastles she built would turn into fortresses, steadily guarding her nimble soul from turmoil and disconnect. I thought of the adventures that little girl had taken throughout her life to get to where she was now, hair blowing in that crisp wind and her jaw trembling in fear despite the absence of a real threat. The threat lived inside her skin, each cell bestowing a different memory. The cells on her arms riddled in restraint, the cells on her hips holding harsh fingernails dipped into flesh, the cells on her eye socket a walk-in wardrobe of palms, fists, cold floors and blurred vision. Now here back in this place that was so ripe with the trauma the tide hadn't washed away.

I watched the waves crash against the cliff edge, the one I would climb up and scramble down before the waters blocked off my escape to safety. I would sit there for hours and write my stories, sing handwritten songs, and

plan a future that looked a lot happier than the reality of the cards I was dealt. My fingers curled and dug into the flesh of my palms as I recalled the first time he climbed up to meet me and showed an interest in the stories I was writing. Barely a teen, far from a woman, and he steadfast turned me into a compilation of survivors guilt and a bountiful load of self hatred that the razor blade could not cut away, so with each horizontal tear in my flesh I wished for a death that I felt so deserving of I could taste it as the water of my bathtub turned pink at age thirteen. Age fourteen it was a deep red. Age fifteen I'd lost more weight that I had left on my body and the only closed doors that were allowed within my world were those of hospital rooms and classrooms. That was on the days I was able to get out of bed long enough to see the inside of one of those. He took my favourite air and turned it into a noose that took all the air out of every room I have ever walked in.

Then I was on the beach with her. She held the hand she kissed and she whispered how green my eyes were. She told me the things she loved about my smile and the dimple on my cheek. How she loved the life we were living together. The flashes of his claws scratching my hopes and dreams away were replaced with the smell of hand sanitizer from hospital wards and the scars on my wrist that have turned white itched as I remembered the feeling of the needle sewing my wounds shut. I looked around a world that I loved for so long and suffocated in the pain, the grief and the longing for death that had replaced any feelings of tenderness – and then she kissed me. I stopped breathing my own air for a single second and breathed her in, bringing me back to the then and there. That wasn't my world anymore.

This was a world we shared. Our world is not darkened by black dogs or wounds that never heal. Our world spins a little slower when we are together and comprises of my stomach hurting because of intense laughter, not pain. Stolen kisses make my heart sing and she rubs my back to soothe the knives that have landed in it on one too many occasions. She has rules that don't determine what I wear; they determine a disallowance of silent treatment or going to bed without kissing me goodnight. She fights with me over stolen bed covers, never stolen consent. On that beach, the wind blowing my hair, my knees trembling and my heart racing, my head spinning and her lips against mine. This is my new world. I call it the first world in which I have ever desired to stay alive.

Hannah Louise MacFarlane