

Sana and Tas have journeyed to the beach at sunrise every morning since Dad died in August. They swim for over an hour. You imagine Sana holds her fingers stiff and straight, cutting through the water like the bow of an arctic ship, and Tas dives occasionally, reaching forward with her hands cupped; relaxed, enjoying it all. It's now late April, and the first new year without him. The water must be cold by now.

You ask over dinner if they would consider buying wetsuits.

“We relish the burn,” Sana said, “and besides, the salt cures us.”

Tas nods along, her eyes bright and mouth full of pasta.

They speak like it's a religion, ocean swimming, and not an exercise in grief. Like, if they let enough water into the torn skin bracketing the nails that they both pick, and brine the tops of their burnt shoulders, which they never cover, then they will become a meat capable of being preserved. Safe against rot. Each morning, they arrive back home, crusted in salt and carrying towels that smell of mildew, and smile at you with pity.

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You suppose you shouldn't blame them for dealing with Dad's death this way. They were taught that water heals. Everyone in your family goes to wash themselves in the ocean after a death, after a birth, after a marriage. Those who marry in are taken to the beach at dawn after their wedding. You were once part of the side that cheered as the new addition waded in, and you enjoyed clapping slowly, arrogantly and carried a weighty, liquid pride that sloshed side to side.

You thought that if they wanted to impress your family, if their delight rose to meet yours, then life would be good to them. Like it was to you.

After these celebrations, Sana would creep between each of your rooms and you'd meet in the backyard, under the eucalyptus tree. You would hold a torch under your soft, freckled chins and tell each other of land-locked countries, of cities where you had to drive hours to get to the water. Where everyone had built up a tolerance to the muddy, sour feeling that you got without an ocean nearby. You said it was worse than never brushing your teeth, and moaned about how the air was heavy.

None of you had ever left the coast, and now, it feels like Sana and Tas never will.

If you'd known how your family would treat you, would you have been kinder then? Probably not. It was easy to enjoy how the different wives and husbands would enter the water and emerge, usually smiling wetly, at the ease with which they'd gained their new family's respect.

Naturally, your mother used these events as a chance to indoctrinate you girls. Because in those days, ‘you’ meant three. The three Marling girls.

During the drive home, after a wedding, but never a funeral, she told you about her husband’s first dawn swim. She would smile at the road, one hand resting on the back of the passenger chair.

“Girls, have I ever told you how my new husband spent the first day of marriage to me?”

And you’d say no, without fail.

“Ah, well, he spent it bleeding, of course.”

She’d pause while you giggled and gasped.

“That morning at dawn he rolled out of bed smelling of what I assumed was the expensive whiskey that my parents had bought us as our wedding gift, and which we weren’t to open until an important anniversary. And when I asked why the bottle was half empty, he said there wasn’t any day that could be more important than our wedding.”

From time to time, she’d add that your births were, obviously. More often, she’d revel in the romance of it all and you wouldn’t doubt her. Besides, your parents drank around you often as children, but always rose early and washed away any hint of a lingering spirit. As children, you hadn’t known that whiskey dug deep into your body, and escaped slowly, making itself known in your sweat.

Now, you, and you alone, imagine Dad woke up smelling like the bitter end of a fire. Your sisters probably can’t smell past the water clogging their noses, which spills out at random points in the day. Drips on the dinner table and stains the wood.

Mum referred to him only as ‘her husband’ in these stories, a title that feigned some separation from the man next to her. But Dad kept his hand on her thigh while she drove and spoke. A constant, effortless warmth.

“He said that we’d tied ourselves together, not with contract or anything so easily damaged as paper, but in front of people who’d recall our vows. He said that if I wanted out, I’d have to leave the country under a fake name and that I’d be reminded of him by everyone I knew.”

She’d look over at Dad and shake her head, laughing.

“And I agreed with him, of course, because I knew what my family were like. Then I told him we had to meet my parents outside, they were going to drive us to the closest stretch of water, which was Knights, with its surfer’s corridor and rocks jutting through the shore, cliffs casting a long, un-broken shade where you could sit for hours on a hot day.”

She would glance at you in the rear-view mirror and make faces, until the three of you giggled, one after the other, ready for more of the story.

It never struck you as strange that they both assumed there was no escaping each other, until now, when you're in the fallout. They embraced inevitability to the point that they told you any suffering you experienced was unavoidable. Said that finding success was like stubbing your toe on a submerged rock, you could know it was there and still hurt yourself.

You, who has finally become an I, singular, through all this, believe that you can control yourself and little else. Dad often said you were a fool, and to trust your sisters' heads more than your own.

“When we arrived at the beach, this man I'd apparently sworn myself to, walked toward the water's edge and turned back to my family gathered there. All the cousins, my brother and his family, my mother leaning against my dad, and my dad leaning on his stick, and told us about the wedding again, a second groom's speech, this time after the fact.”

She'd wipe under her eyes, here. “With all the bits that made him cry, and laugh, and about me, how beautiful he thought I was, even though I'd fallen asleep in my dress.”

“Finally, he turned to the water – which he should've never had his back to – took two steps and dived in, at knee height, his arms flailing around, all wild in the white wash.”

Dad would imitate himself, windmilling his arms and wailing.

“But he came up, with a bloody lip where he'd nearly knocked his two front teeth out.”

By this point, you'd usually be sitting in the drive way, waiting for the ending that never changed.

“Uncle Dylan leaned over to me then, and told me that the tides had washed us together, two waves meeting from across the globe, and that your dad would be with me forever.”

The Dylan she's referring to is her only brother. He drowned last year.

It was early May, a Sunday morning, when he'd called Mum, telling her that he'd done something worth a cleansing and she'd readily encouraged him to go, despite the leftover swell from a tropical storm making itself known along the coast.

A dog-walker came across his body several days later, purple and swollen. The police asked if he was well, if he'd been a strong swimmer.

Mum said the ocean must have been stronger.

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You're still learning to speak of yourself without including Sana and Tas. Mum says that you have all taken Dad's death very differently.

Does a parent realise that though they may believe they have raised each of their children ‘the same,’ each of you will turn out slightly different? That there was no chance all three of us would be care-free, trust in the universe to deliver us and all that bullshit? That his insane certainty in life would lead you to desperately desire closure? Or, at least an explanation. A justification.

How would a man that believed in predictability, in getting what you deserve, explain his early death?

There were treatments and surgeries. Bulk-billed payment plans and drug trials.

You delayed a semester of university in preparation for hospital visits. Not planning a funeral.

You cannot understand why he’d refuse to treat the cancer.

He declined to tell you.

And then he died.

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So, the girls go swimming an hour after his heart stops. Sana and Tas.

And they keep going, keep saying that they will eventually be clean and the hurt will leave. Instead, they get sick less as their bodies acclimatise to the cold. Their hair changes, curling like his once did. They seem stronger than anything.

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People still say ‘you’ when they mean you three until several months after his death. Except Mum is no longer part of her own you. Hey, you two – no more of that.

She is newly alone and shivers constantly. She has shrunk since your father died, as if they shared the cancer between them. He got to ease out of the pain and she was ushered into a new version of it.

Tas sleeps in your Mum’s bed, on your father’s side, so she feels someone near her. Maybe Mum can pretend it’s him in her sleep.

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Before your father’s funeral you refuse to swim with them.

You tell them that it's too soon, that you can't be rid of Dad yet, that there is no washing him off you. They know you are afraid and know you are lying. They take it as a betrayal. Of them, of your entire family. You aren't worried about what Dad thinks.

You'd been with Dylan when he drowned.

You thought that it was important someone witnessed the swim that you both referred to as a 'cleansing,' and you didn't understand he was struggling at first.

He never called out, never raised a hand for help. You tried to swim out to him and were pushed onto the rocks. You had to dig your fingers into sharp crevices while the water relentless scraped you against the rock and then pulled at you, trying to carry you out. A break in the waves allowed you to crawl to safety. By then Dylan was gone.

You haven't gone near a beach since. An ocean breeze turns your stomach and you can only shower in brief spurts, keeping the nozzle below your head, so you can breathe.

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On the day of your father's funeral Sana lays out black clothes for all of you and includes something blue, like it's a wedding.

You wear a teal ribbon in your hair and pin a sea glass brooch onto your mother's chest. Over her heart.

Mum reads the eulogy. She tells you it would be shameful to have a stranger read about his life. Imagine paying someone to pretend they know your dad, she says. She tells the wedding story for what you would guess is the last time and then invites Sana up to speak. You look at Tas, but she seems unsurprised.

"My Dad didn't grow up around the water, not like Mum and her family, but he's the reason I love it," Sana begins.

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The day after your father's funeral you go with them to the water.

You suppose that if you stay close to them you won't tear the fragile scab linking you three any further.

You say that you'll wait on the beach and dry heave into the sand as they run into the surf. You try and fail to walk past the shoreline, shuddering when your feet break the wet sand and water runs between your toes.

They call you and walk slowly out the water upon seeing you balk.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," Tas says.

“The water’s lovely,” Sana tells you.

You try to fend them off and plead.

They drag you at first, then carry you. Their arms strong from paddling; your body weak. They say that you won’t be the one to break tradition.

“We’ve been in already. Sana and me. Tas and me. You’re the third. You, Ines.”

Their words flow and complete each other. You, Ines, they say. You don’t hear them at the time, bucking like you are, eyes rolling.

They can’t see past their love to your fear.

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From the shore, a woman sees three girls playing in the water. Wrestling each other.

After some time, the three stand, two with their hands on the shoulders of the one in the middle. It looks as if they’re comforting her.

They remain still for some time until finally, finally, they push the middle girl under.

Hold her head down for a count of five and pull her up roughly.

Embrace her.