

The Mourners

For as long as I can remember the sea was a place of comfort. My grandma used to say that the salt washes all of your pain away. We had so many walks on the beach. We dipped our toes in the cold water. We shrieked every time even though we knew it was never warmer than the last time. Our sandcastles were works of art until we jumped on top of them. We danced with the seagulls, intricate patterns we could never recreate. It was healing, a comfort to the soul. It was kindness wrapped in silliness.

When she passed away, that's where I went. I imagined she'd be reborn into a beautiful coloured fish or a magnificent whale. She'd be a mermaid and she'd come find me to tell me that she loved me. I spent a lot of that time blaming the wind for my wet cheeks. I could always rely on the waves to take all of my tears and accept them as their own.

Now, the beach doesn't take your heartbreak, it causes it.

The dread and sadness that hangs around cemeteries has moved there. Children don't come to play anymore, they're kept inside by their parents. Piers have become ghosts of empty shops and tourist attractions. Instead there are flowers left behind, inspiring graffiti, posters with hotlines for support groups.

Every morning a group of volunteers who live in the area go there to pick up clothing left behind by the Mourners. They carry buckets, a mimicry of kids who used to pick up seashells and proudly present them to their parents. The buckets get filled with wet clothes, almost like an Easter hunt. I joined them a couple of times. Any jewellery and wallets were given to the police so they could return it to the families of the Mourners. The clothing itself went to charities after a run in the washing machine. Just like that the life of the previous owner was washed away.

Scientists have been trying to discover how and why for the last decade. They haven't found any answers. They set up cameras at one point but because of public outrage they had to stop. People didn't like to see their loved ones melt into water and join the sea. It hurt enough to lose them.

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One morning, before sunrise, a couple of days after a classmate's mother became a Mourner, I went to the beach. Maybe it was morbid, but I was thirteen and I was curious. It was the first time that someone I knew passed like that. I wanted to see what happened with my own eyes. We'd only ever talked about it in class. Teachers didn't dare use any footage, afraid of what our young impressionable minds would make of it.

I remember feeling the cold sand between my toes, the coarseness in a strange way comforting while I was waiting for the night to end. Every day without fault the first sunrays change the Mourners from normal people, made of flesh and bone to nothing else than water. There's no flash, no bang, no dramatic ending. It resembles the smoke that comes from a freshly blown out candle. Its presence is there for a couple of seconds and then, a fade out of existence.

There were only a dozen people lying at the shore. Some were in pyjamas, others dressed to the nines. There was one thing they had in common. At least the scientists had figured that out. All of the people lying there quietly, they were sad. They went through something and were left with their hearts in shambles. They were suffering, mourning a love that died, a dream that slipped through their fingers, a life not well spent, an interaction that went wrong. The sea started taking more and more until eventually it took everything else as well.

If they were wailing before, the Mourners went silent as soon as they touched the sand. Almost like a switch was suddenly flipped. A calm washes over them and their eyes change. What once was a milky white bleeds into a soft grey, like a calm day on the Northern Sea. If there'd been any blood involved it would have looked gruesome, but there wasn't. It wasn't frightening at all, not even for the thirteen year old me.

When there was a little bit of pink at the horizon, I walked between the Mourners. They were spread out at random, all lying on their back with the hand closest to the water reaching out to it. It almost seemed as if the waves were caressing, caring, comforting.

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Every time taking hold before letting back go. The only things I could hear were the seagulls who knew better than to get too close, the wind rushing around everything, teasing and very faintly the breathing.

Then, when the sun finally rose to greet the world, the Mourners melted away, like clear water slipping through your fingers. Soundless, in just a couple of seconds, a life snuffed out. The empty clothing looked like ghosts, imprinted on the sand.

That day, my mother met me halfway while I was walking back home. Her eyes wide, tears running down her face, panic coming off of her in waves.

Her nails dug into my skin when she hugged me to her. I told her a million times that I was okay, that I was still there, in one piece. Mom whispered my name like it was air she needed to breathe. She opened my eyes so wide I thought they were going to fall out, checking for any sign of grey.

For the rest of the day mom didn't let me out of her sight. That night I slept between my mom and dad, safe in that little nest of love. Warmth seeping into every particle of my flesh. Three hearts beating, thrumming in chests, reminding us that we were alive, alive, alive.

That was five years ago. Growing up in that kind of environment leaves traces on people. We learned that hope is scary because with hope comes expectations. If those aren't met, then there's a chance that sadness will come into you and carry you away.

There's a daily register where you check the new list of Mourners to see if you know any of them.

Mom, dad and I spend as much time together as we can. We're constantly checking how the others feel. Everything was going well, or as well as it could be when my uncle, my dad's twin brother passed away. He died of natural causes. He had a heart attack. It's a death like one in a dozen.

Something normal in this abnormal world.

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A dark cloud started growing in my dad. If I stood next to him, I could practically smell the rain, feel the pitter patter on my skin. But instead of going through the emotions, he got stuck somewhere and kept the storm within him.

Life became worried looks between my mom and I. It became sitting close to my dad, always within reach more for my sake than for his. Anxiety growing like weeds, until it was all that was left.

Dad just slipped deeper and deeper, stuck on a sinking ship called despair.

One evening while I was braiding my hair before bed, he came into my bedroom. Without saying a word he took the hairbrush and very carefully, as if my hair was spun from glass, started brushing. We didn't speak, we hardly dared to breathe. I could feel the warmth from his hands but there was an entire ocean of distance between us. There was no meeting in the middle.

When the braid was finished, he rested his hand on my shoulder. All of the words I wanted to say were stuck under my collarbones. They were left there, discarded, a book you have fond memories of but never touch.

I spent that night in front of the staircase, wide awake, guarding. He didn't get out of bed.

Two weeks later, I'd been sleeping in my own room, when the familiar creaking of the front door woke me up. I knew. The moment I had been hoping would not come, but at the same time expected, finally came.

I shouted for my mother, told her to get up. We didn't bother putting on shoes or a jumper even though the night chill had a bite to it. Together we ran after him.

Finally I realized how my mom must have felt that morning. I met the fear that took hold and ran hand in hand with me.

We saw him standing with his bare feet already in the water. My mother immediately sprinted towards him, for one moment more wife than parent. I joined them slowly, a little bit behind.

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Because I was scared to see the haunting grey eyes instead of his always reassuring brown ones. I saw in the distance the other Mourners, their bodies spread around. There were even other family members trying to stop them, trying so hard to bring them back from the brink. There was no going back.

Before I reached them, my dad laid down, my mom in tears. Her hands were floating around him, not quite touching, unsure what to do or how to act. I knew there was nothing to be done. All we could do was wait, say goodbye and feel how the heart breaks. Just like everyone else on that beach.

Mom and I laid down on each side, nestled in his embrace, a mockery of a hug. His body was still warm, but it felt like his essence had already left. Our hands met on top of his chest, fingers intertwined. Each inhale lifting them up, only to go down with each exhale, a lot like the waves that would soon take my father away. Where he would melt into until he was so diluted, there'd be nothing left of him. There was wet sand on my cheeks, in my hair, the clingy clothes freezing me to the core.

Then the abrupt absence of my mother's crying, made me look up, only to meet a second pair of ocean eyes.

It took me a couple of seconds to realize that the sound of anguish was my own. If I would have had any strength in me left, I would have cut out my heart and thrown it away. It was in bits anyway. How could I live life on my own? My parents had been my refuge, my safe space. My entire body trembled with pain too horrible to feel. I realised my life had been built on a house of cards, foundations easily swept away by this horrible reality. I could feel my grasp on the world slip, too overwhelmed by the grip of loss to think rationally. I felt like I was drowning. My mother rolled a little bit away from my father. That gap, I immediately invaded. I held both their hands and let the wave of despair fill me up until it was all I could feel.

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Suddenly the scent of the sea invaded all of my senses. I blinked and the view of my parents, the beach, the stars, everything went hazy. Then a calmness washed over me. My body felt heavy, unsteady, every shift threatening to spill me out of myself. I nestled closer to my dad, I squeezed my mother's hand a last time and I exhaled.

In the horizon, the blues got lighter, the pink took over for a bit until the sun finally laid eyes on the beach where the salt washed all the pain away.