

A Drop

The magnetism of all things desired pinned them to the sand as the house fell slowly into the sea. They breathed their smoke at stars and the bloated air swam across them, a dampness to make sleeping impossible and kissing absurd.

Get up, McKenna told herself as the sand worked deeper into her writhing hair. *Get up and walk inside, go to bed and do not choose who you dream of.* But she did not move from between her two half-brothers, getting higher than St. Peter and waiting for anything. Two or three moths left the temptation of the porch light to get drunk off the smell of her perfume.

The wind cantered over their foreheads and knees, its sound a rebel yell of joy alone. Tomorrow, Neil thought, he'd drag them back here to go swimming. He could almost feel the water's split and peel.

Joshua tried to count the grains of sand holding the house to solid ground. He got to eighteen before the house began to dance and then he knew he'd done too much or enough for one night. He tried to drift away but the sheep he counted turned into waves that kissed the kitchen windows and encompassed everything in sight.

Nobody minded when the ember went dead at the edge of someone's lips. They were each recounting the tallies of what they had and had not, telling themselves to be grateful or be satisfied. The milk-stained moths shivered and were desperate. The house yearned one inch further from its moorings and the Atlantic held its arms out, waiting and blue.

The house hadn't been made to last so long.

It had been built in the twenties, meant not to be a fixture but another pearl on a necklace of wealth being constantly wound and unwound. It might go, it might stay, it might be sold for profit or for loss. Nothing could be meant to last when hope in the form of bigger houses would be for sale tomorrow.

When poverty retook the stage only the house survived. First because they could not sell it, and then because they could not let it go, each generation kept it up. Its four slender stories, pale and cool, still stood like the figure of a twenties coquette, the last aloof beauty at a party that had long since drained away.

When Neil and McKenna and Joshua hauled in duffel bags packed for long weekends they realized, again, how impressive the house was. The bone-white porch draped the facade like the edges of a slip and from the breakfast room on the top floor the sunset looked like some museum's prize display.

So close to the sea, the sound of waves overwhelmed the air.

They'd come, not to be reminded of this, but because Neil needed a place to stay before his new lease began, because Joshua thought he could save something, because their parents were not at all sure NYU was doing McKenna good. Because, despite what Joshua said or hoped, erosion was pulling the shoreline too close. Because soon they'd have to pack the closets, turn off the lights, and sell what they could for scrap.

As McKenna searched through kitchen cupboards she caught strands of her half-brothers' conversation. Joshua was saying something about a petition, a jetty, a

company that reshaped shores. She took out a colander and tried to ignore his earnestness.

With a pang of guilt she realized she hadn't seen one of Joshua's exhibits since she left for freshman year. Had the paintings been selling, she wondered? Had they made him happy?

He used to paint the old gods stranded in New York and Tokyo, wearing windbreakers and jeans and looking beyond you into a future in which they were even less sacred. It was hard to say how you knew them for Zeus and Aphrodite without their thunderbolts and laurel crowns. But everybody, somehow, could tell.

The boys—though by then more like men—set the last bag on the coffee table. Then they instinctively turned to McKenna. They were only stepbrothers, the product of four different parents, McKenna the hybrid little sister that formed a link between them. She felt their eyes on her and walked forward to play her part, smiling, since people otherwise thought her sad.

It was only a moment too long Neil took to reach for the bottle. But, for McKenna, sitting on the porch that night, it was enough.

She tried not to think of it as she and Neil nursed their wine, Joshua having gone inside after a text turned him pale. She'd wondered, in the half-moment that the screen door shut behind him, whether she should follow him. But she was the six-years-younger sister, the student on the receiving end of all advice, the one her brothers had learned to connect with drinking in some vaguely unfortunate way.

She let Joshua disappear and drifted back into her glass. Drinking was one of the things she'd learned at college. She'd learned how to walk in the city alone and when and where to know better. She'd learned to buy handles of vodka and smuggle them back into dorms, to go to parties and do shots till the music throbbed behind her eyes. Being a girl she learned to smile— it got her by.

Neil leaned over to light the candles permanently stationed on the porch and the flames threw bright veils over the blue eyes set shallow in his face.

“You look like you're going to tell me ghosts stories,” she said.

“You want me to tell you a ghost story?”

“I want you to tell me a story.”

“Once upon a time there was a princess whose castle fell into the sea.”

“Oh, enough about this house.”

“Y'know, I think I'll really miss it,” Neil replied, peering into the ceiling.

It was a moment before McKenna could name the wave that gripped her. Hours later, she still wondered why she should feel gratitude just then.

Soon they decided to call it a night. McKenna headed up first, Neil saying something about finding the book he'd brought with him. She lingered when she reached the landing, catching a glimpse of him as he walked to the living room, moving heavily with fatigue. Briefly, desperately, she wondered what he was thinking. Then he was out of sight, and she was sorry.

McKenna's head roared with sluggish noise, hot and overcrowded as a subway car in summer. Naked in front of her bathroom mirror, she studied herself:

the flare and tuck of her hips, the bags beneath her eyes, the flyaway curls turned electric in the damp. She tried to see herself as a stranger would, a man, but she couldn't conjure up the energy to see through the eyes of any other human being.

When the door clapped open and Neil walked in she almost fell over, she was caught so off guard. Neil's face, in the first moment she saw it, bore the same look that hers must have had: free to be tired and certain of being alone. It took them both a minute before they understood.

The house had been scrambled over the years, its rooms cut up and recombined like an unsolved puzzle with stationary parts. The bathroom attached to McKenna's room opened, at the other end, to Neil's. McKenna stood still, too old to shriek and hide herself, too tired to laugh it off. She blinked at him, pale and shaven for swimsuit season, bare as a ghost that has ended up away from home.

Neil pulled an exaggerated face and swung back across the threshold, pulling the door shut behind him. If it had been morning they might have laughed at each other from across the thin wall. As it was McKenna only smiled as she stepped into the shower. The look on his face reminded her of old stories she would've thought she'd long forgotten.

(One night over Christmas break in McKenna's freshman year she snuck home wasted, eyes unfocused, her complexion a rich gray. She did not remember how she wound up on the floor half in her room and half in the hall. But this she knew: that it was Neil, in his quiet grown-up competence, who propped her up against her bed. The warmth of his fingers, as he pulled her hair into a rubber band,

reminded her of waking to the heat of summer mornings. Or maybe it was the other way around.)

The next day they kept busy, shopping for everything they'd forgotten and visiting all their old favorite places. By degrees, they fell back on reminiscing to fill the intervals of silence: remember when Aunt Jill's dog peed in her lap in the middle of Easter dinner? Remember the old neighbors who knew perfect English but pretended not to speak a word? Remember the Fourth of July when the car broke down and it took two hours for the tow truck to come?

No one would've admitted to having started that sorry game, but they still played it as they drove back to the house after dinner.

"Remember the first year we went to Maine for Christmas," McKenna said, stretching into the back of Neil's car. "When we ended up going south instead of north because mom was reading the directions to come home?"

"You must be thinking of something else," Joshua said. "We'd been going to Maine since before you were around, kid."

"No," Neil said, not bothering to turn his eyes from the road. "She's right. We didn't start going to Maine till we were in middle school and she was, like, eight."

"No," Joshua insisted, just one notch louder than he should have been. "We always went to Maine." As he said it he flushed, pushing his glasses higher on his nose. His earnestness unsettled McKenna, and she wished Neil would let it go.

But Neil continued, in his mild way, to argue, frictions older than McKenna setting off faint smoke. Sometimes she imagined the day of her birth as a sigh of

relief, a collective turning toward something other than cold wars and old stories, her small pink self upstaging the feuds of two elementary-school boys.

“We used to just stay home for Christmas,” Neil was saying. “Don’t you remember?”

McKenna sat up, remembering a theory she’d half-proved that it was a battle against change that put the bags under Joshua’s eyes. Before her pity could breach the point of pain she intervened.

“Let’s go out tonight,” she said.

Both brothers paused, unsure of whether to allow her to take away their argument. “Come on,” she said, wishing the words did not taste scripted. “None of us has ever been to that new club on North Bishop. And as of two months ago, I don’t even have to use my fake I.D.”

Neil’s smile cracked open at that, the idea of his little sister with a clumsy out-of-state license amusing him in some private way. “Sounds good to be me,” he conceded, and reached for the radio. And McKenna realized, as she watched him, how much she really did want to go drinking with him. She wanted to watch his teeth glint in dark blue light, to hear him tell jokes that neither would remember in the morning.

McKenna was the last one ready that night, running downstairs in her heels while Joshua sat silent in the cab and Neil stood on the porch smoking one of the cigarettes he’d quit months before. When she rushed out the door she almost ran

into him and they both froze in the sudden wake of each other. For a moment, they said nothing. Then Neil said, "After you," and held the cab door open for her.

The nightclub was huge and like any other, noisy and dark to degrees that always seemed new. Without the pressures of eye contact and conversation they let their postures go, unchained their trains of thought. As they pushed toward the bar it got harder to keep together. And, as they drank, they stopped trying. Neither brother seemed to remember just then the nights McKenna'd spent in hospitals, sleeping it off with an IV in her arm.

Both times, she realized, she'd lost track of her ER wristband. She'd meant to hang onto them, as souvenirs.

When she finally accepted that they wouldn't say anything she sank into her relief with a sigh. She wasn't, as her parents quietly dreaded, addicted. Drinking didn't cross her mind when anything better was on it. It was only that so often there was nothing to do but pre-game and bar-hop, nothing to look forward to but the moment she'd sink onto her bed delirious and swollen-tongued. Once or twice she'd fallen flat to the sidewalk as whatever group she'd been with paused to smoke or track down its lost sheep. She harbored vague memories of metallic grit against her lips, a clumsy agitation at her shoulders. And she would lie there, thinking half-again too slowly, trying to summon the strength to throw up.

That was why her parents had so encouraged the visit, a respite to a house that had seen its share of alcohol and discontent. She never tried to tell them that

everything she needed she'd found on that pavement, the spinnings of days and affections too old to need a clear head to recall.

When McKenna realized she couldn't see Joshua she was already halfway there, dancing with strangers and smiling at compliments she couldn't hear. Neil, she knew, was in another corner, with a woman in a backless dress. But from a vantage point that should've showed her both brothers, McKenna could only see one.

Joshua tottered on the curb as he tried to hail a cab. Looking slantways, he caught glimpses of Bethany (or Stephanie). She wore his faux military jacket across her shoulders and, beneath it, her tank top and wrap skirt blushed for themselves, gaudy and painfully tight. If she were Leila, he could have painted her as Persephone, lush and frightened, cobbled of two worlds. But if she were Leila he would not be accusing God of making promises He wasn't going to keep. A cab pulled up in front of him, and somehow he did not feel relieved.

McKenna scanned the room again and knew that Joshua had gone. She wished she'd seen the girl but it didn't really matter. She pictured it briefly—a rainbow-painted twig hanging off his serious arm—and laughed as she finished a drink. That man was finally looking at her, she was almost sure.

Purple light turned faces pale and the speakers blared a song that had already been played twice. No one seemed to notice, and fewer seemed to care.

Neil eased a woman whose name he did not know against the wall of the club. A finger of her hair swung against his cheek and he wondered if she were

beautiful. He wondered how long it'd been since he'd loved someone enough to believe the only evil in this world is the fact that people leave it.

And he was looking back at her, McKenna could almost swear, the dark-haired man who seemed, somehow, taller than he could have been. When, a minute later, she felt two not-uncertain hands on her, it only took a glance across her shoulder to be sure it was the right him.

Unfathomable clouds danced and parted over the coast and moths with wood grain wings threw themselves ceaselessly into the light. Already Neil had almost forgotten the night— the girl— from across the liquid sleep he'd not yet begun. Meanwhile McKenna laughed gently into a different stranger's teeth. She'd done nothing she regretted until she pulled her kisses to his cheekbone and realized, in a glance, just who he reminded her of.

When Joshua got out of his third cab of the night he saw McKenna and Neil walking, as he was, back to the house. They shouted hello, waving broadly, as though he could've missed them. One of them urged a walk to the beach, an edge taken off, with somehow-unsettling urgency. He'd felt the edges of sleep in his eyes, and he knew he should've been thinking of the girl he'd just left. But still he went along, letting Neil's steadier hands roll the joint.

McKenna. It'd been McKenna who'd seemed so strangely rattled, a metallic agitation in her smile.

The sand in his shoes told him they'd gone to the beach but he couldn't remember so when he woke up on the kitchen floor. All he knew then was that he'd

dreamt of Leila, seen her posing as Persephone, heard her telling him about all the strange nightmares she'd had.

In the morning, McKenna couldn't remember why shame was pooling in her fingertips.

She tried to shake off her confusion. Last night, had she reached for Neil as they lay on the beach, getting stoned? She didn't think so. She remembered the action but thought it was a dream. She couldn't really have rolled across his elbow and kissed his collarbone, reproachless. *God forbid*, she thought. But she knew even then that God did not restrain, only guarded sadly over them.

Footsteps cascaded up the stairs and she heard Neil speaking in Joshua's door.

"All right! Nap time's over. Wake up, you lazy sonofabitch." His voice was pure muscle, full of grit and hidden springs.

McKenna made rocky progress to her doorframe and stared into the room across the hall. When Neil turned and saw her there he grinned.

"Good, you're up," he said, and tugged the sheet from Joshua's legs. "We're going to the beach."

Nothing happened, but for the rest of her life she would dream of that afternoon.

Sunlight poured through the billion windows of her skin and Neil stood waist-deep in the water, indifferent beneath a hot-blooded sky. He looked as immortal as Joshua's gods. She had never felt younger.

Shouting, they offered themselves to the waves, dizzy and reassured each time they were pummeled. When they bobbed back to the surface seawater made mosaics of devotion down their spines.

Joshua floated on his back, his sunglasses two mirrors of the sky. What's so interesting, McKenna asked, and he only smiled.

Neil dove under and grabbed McKenna's ankles, an old game long forgotten. She shrieked until the lifeguard whistled, until saltwater fizzed in her throat. She splashed Neil back and wished him well, wished him whatever it was he wanted.

Through all the years to come she left unquestioned the pull, the push, that never quite abandoned her. Though there were other men—men she married, men she loved— she'd keep the scraps of Neil's affection somewhere deeper. The only thing she couldn't forgive him was his death. She never did accept the thoughtlessness with which he left her behind.

The beach kept them long that day and they got back that night later than they'd meant to. No one tried to talk, sun-sick and clumsy with fatigue, but as they veered toward different showers Joshua returned to an old conversation with Neil. "You'll sign it later, won't you?" he said as he dropped his beach towel over a chair.

Neil stopped short, looking like he would make both answers at once.

“Joshua, don’t waste your time on it,” he finally, quietly, said.

“What?”

“The petition for the fucking jetty. Just don’t bother.”

“Why not?” Joshua said, the color rising higher beneath his new sunburn.

“It’s done, OK?” Neil said, as though he had not till that moment believed that anyone could be so naïve. “Dad already sold the property to the city. We’re packing up the furniture next month. I saw the papers. It’s done.”

In the round beat of silence that followed, McKenna remembered, out of the blue, a girl she used to see with Joshua. She recollected long hair and a distant smile, and wondered what had happened to her.

But Neil had cracked open the neat, desperate seals of Joshua’s mind and all its cold fervor was spilling down through his bones. Joshua looked for joints and fissures on Neil’s body he could break: nose, collarbone, ribs. He could feel the phantom swinging of his knuckles.

“That’s what this is,” Neil continued, his voice commanding with the lilt of Irish waves. “A last fucking hoorah. That being the case, we should probably cut the theatrics. I don’t need this.”

McKenna watched him from the foot of the stairs, the emphasis of his words sailing up her bloodstream to a part of her memory age would never touch. She understood, just then, the teeth behind Neil’s smiles.

With a suddenness that seemed to take gravity by surprise Joshua lunged at Neil. The others both saw the upward hitch of his lip as he shouted ‘fuck you,’ the

angle of his hand as he formed a hesitant fist. But then Neil had knocked him back into the diner table, his muscles barely tensed against such a clumsy assault.

“Don’t be an idiot,” Neil said, his voice quiet and dried out by the sun.

Then silence stretched on until McKenna turned away from her brothers and stumbled upstairs, searching through her phone for a name she could not recall. She wouldn’t waste her time replaying the looks on their faces. She would not think how they were less than brothers that she as much a sister as either one would ever have.

She found the name, sent her message, slipped her phone back in her shorts. The cool wall against her head, as she tilted up her face, was all she wanted from the world.

The Captain Morgan’s amber shadows somehow suited the pastel woodwork of the room. “It’s a family house,” McKenna explained. “It’s been ours since it was built. There’ve been three weddings, two deaths, and a baby born here.”

“Who are you,” the man who was not Neil softly teased, “Jackie Kennedy or Daisy Buchanan?”

Instead of answering she kissed him, drunk and overtired. She let loose her obsession for his dark hair and pale wrists, his wolfish eyes and neat crop of teeth. And when she felt the pressure of his thumbs on her hips she nodded, long past coyness and negotiation. *Hello and welcome in*, she thought as she traced the machinations of his back. *May you get everything you ever wanted.*

During the day they spent on the beach, McKenna slept for hours. Once, she woke up heavily with the sun dancing under her skin. *I am always someone to him*, she thought before falling back asleep.

Empty thunder shouted in tongues over the rioting tide in the morning. Joshua breathed curses with a bottle clamped between his knees. He couldn't save the house. He couldn't coax one more month out of its lifespan. But, it was occurring to him slowly, he could preserve it from one fate.

McKenna pressed her fingers against to her ribs, her hips, her collarbone. It was nine thirty-seven a.m. Was Neil upstairs drinking coffee already, pale sunshine falling through his skin? Was he waiting for her, grinning, ready to tease her about her late-night guest? God, it was their last morning there. She swept her feet to the floor before more time could fall away. She pulled a flannel shirt over the tank top she wore and hugged the collar tight, then— after one grain of hesitation— let it loose over her breastbone again.

The first shock of the bottle on the windowpane sent shudders up Joshua's arm. The next was easier, the next one pure momentum. When all the first-floor windows had been shattered he snapped the porch railings and kicked in the latticework, bludgeoned out the light beside the door. He well knew how foolish he would look in an hour. But he wouldn't hand time and tide their plunder whole.

"Morning," McKenna said, and "morning," Neil replied, sounding like statements instead of well wishes. He slipped her half a smile before returning to his phone, absorbing the message on the screen. And with a cup of lukewarm coffee

in her palms McKenna began to realize what she might long ago have known. That he found her beautiful, and did not care. That until they all were dead there'd be no point in telling truths. That sooner or later she'd have to start learning how to harbor what she could not have.

When he could find nothing else to break Joshua sank down among the Oriental grass. A quiet rain struck out for Earth and his mind went hazy in the gray. We are beggars in the nearer half of heaven, he thought, scrounging for what we can get.

McKenna shut her eyes and tried to swear herself back into reason. But she couldn't stop repeating what the absence in his face had told her. *Go ahead*, she heard him saying, as if they ever spoke to each other that way. *Wilt like a pale rose on display in a hotel lobby. I'll be here, a paying guest, watching you as I sit at the bar.*

Neil stood up, singing softly, and looked at his half-sister, her red-eyed tangle. When he recognized her halting sorrow he stopped, bewilderment turning into a grin. The insistent joy that simmered in him leapt at the sight of such strange melancholy.

Joshua would say that a stranger had done it, a homeless drunk, some manic teen. He sipped, and tasted his outburst on the Daniels. He wouldn't mind. He would let the house collapse and catch a plane to Boston, continue painting gods whose hungers broke his heart.

The morning waves shook themselves out, unending as they were short-lived. The salt-ridden breeze met no resistance as it drew the house deeper into

gravity, as the tide reached out, grabbed at nothing— anything— whatever was there, and then released its grip.

Neil moved toward McKenna and briefly, impulsively, caught her face between his palms. Close enough to kiss, he only smiled. Remember, she told herself, be reasonable. Remember that you can have less but no more.

After a moment his hands fell away. Even so, the motion stayed so strong with her— the bounty and denial, the bottomless drop like eternity chasing its tail— that when she finally walked downstairs she did not at first see what Joshua would always deny he had done.