

*The House and the Sea*

She'd come home a thousand times in her mind, but each visit ended the same. It didn't matter when or how. She could arrive on a sun-filled morning with a baseball glove or a rainy afternoon with two cups of coffee and a stack of novels. The initial effort made no difference. The ending would come all the same – silence wrapped around them like seaweed. Anger in an airless room.

Elina stepped out of the rental car and gulped at sea air. Gulls shrieked overhead.

The cottage faced the ocean with the weary countenance of an old friend. The two had spent the last 100 years together, weathering storms and batty tenants and protracted periods of abandonment. The memories stretched deep on this patch of sand with secrets caught between them like driftwood.

“Just come for an evening,” her stepmother had pleaded with her. “He wants to see you.”

Elina slammed the car door shut and tucked short, blonde hair behind her ears. Straightening her cotton tee shirt and denim shorts, she moved up the stone walkway, taking in the stained clapboard, the navy-blue storm shutters, the dormer window at the tip top of the house. She wondered if her bedroom still existed behind that bit of glass. If he'd left her piano books and school uniforms and paintings of seascapes, or if they had been carted away to resale shops.

An untidy garden filled the yard, comprised mostly of inkberry holly and orange butterfly weed. Coral honeysuckle clung to the white fence separating yard from beach. A Sweetbay Magnolia tree sat at the edge of the side porch, its creamy blooms leaving a lemony perfume in the air.

The front door opened, and Margie hovered on the threshold wearing a ruffled apron. She held up a smile and a bottle of Merlot, the picture of domesticity. Between the two of them, she was the better actress.

“You’re just in time,” she said brightly, as if Elina had been gone for a week and not six years. “Risotto is out of the oven.”

Elina kissed the air close to her stepmother’s cheek. “Smells delectable.”

“New car?”

“Just a rental.”

She’d sold her car the same day she’d purchased the plane ticket, which meant she had returned stateside to whatever could fit inside a storage unit. What a thing to come home to.

Elina stepped inside, stomach churning. The cottage was impervious to change, as if through proximity to the sea it had captured some of the water’s timelessness. Visitors seemed to find the shabbiness charming - moody lamp light, shiplap walls, oil paintings of lighthouses.

But under the low-hanging ceilings, Elina could hear echoes of every argument screamed, every accusation hurled. She could still see a seventeen-year-old version of herself curled up on the couch like a ghost.

Her father stood in the glow of the kitchen, facing the ocean through the window, his shoulders more stooped than she remembered. He turned to greet her, but his storm gray eyes skidded across her face and to the table where Margie had already set places for three.

“Hungry?” he asked.

“Sure,” she lied.

Margie did most of the talking. "I've had the worst luck finding a reliable dry cleaner around here since Smiley's closed. Ed's shirts came home last week smelling like barfy bananas. Can you imagine?"

Elina couldn't, actually, but she nodded.

Margie refilled her wine glass for a second time, her only display of nervousness. "Do you like the risotto, Lina? Enough salt? Those scallops are from a quaint little market I discovered in Marigold."

Elina scooped dinner into a dry mouth and listened to her stepmother prattle. Futile as it might have been, she should've brought something – a book, a cigar, flowers. Her empty hands spoke volumes.

Ed finished his plate and picked up his untouched wine glass. "I'm going to sit," he said, pushing back from the table. He nodded in the direction of the porch. "Beautiful evening."

Margie smiled hopefully in Elina's direction. "I'll bring ice cream in a bit," she said.

Elina followed her father. The screened-in porch had been an addition in the last twenty years, built sideways from the house to expand the view of the ocean. It smelled faintly of damp rug and sea salt. When Elina sank into a padded rocking chair, she caught a whiff of cigar smoke. Something in its familiarity unwound the knot in her stomach and brought tears to her eyes.

Night was drawing near. The sun was a crack of orange fire against the horizon. Rolling water gathered itself into a cloak of purple. They were a beautiful pair – the house and the water - coexisting long before Elina's father had moved to Virginia. Long before she had run away.

“You liked India?” Ed asked.

“I was in Nepal. And yes.”

“You were...uh...helping kids.” His voice was subdued. He seemed so different, so careful.

“Teaching English mostly.” She took an unsteady breath, hands twisting in her lap like she was at a job interview and failing. “My visa lapsed so I had to come back, but I’m reapplying for permanency. It’s home now.”

He nodded, nothing in his body language demonstrating surprise. Margie had implied that he wanted to talk. Elina waited, expecting something predictable like a bad diagnosis – *only six weeks to live, you see*. Anything that would give them a reason not to argue.

But Ed merely patted his shirt pocket. “Mind if I smoke?”

“Please do.”

He pulled out a cigar and used a cutter to clip off the end before flicking the lighter. He coaxed forth a puff of smoke, and Elina breathed in the smell of chocolate and cedar. She found herself wishing, as she often had before, that she’d been a son instead of a daughter. Perhaps then she would be less perturbed by silence and content simply to belong. Less consumed by the need to be understood.

Ed’s eyes narrowed. “Is that...?”

Elina followed his gaze over the ocean and at first saw nothing but swells and white-capped edges. Then – *there* – a curve of white in a sea of shadows. The belly of a boat. She sat up hard.

“It capsized.”

The swells shifted again, revealing two smaller shapes, a flailing arm.

“Two overboard,” Ed said sharply, dropping the cigar against the rim of the ash tray.

“They’re struggling.”

He and Elina bolted into action like storm chasers at the cusp of a tornado.

“Marge!” Ed hollered. “Call the Coast Guard!”

“What?” Marge yelled from the kitchen sink.

“It’ll be nearly impossible to get the dinghy past the surf,” Ed told his daughter. As if by tacit agreement, they were both running to the garden shed.

“I can swim to them,” Elina said.

“It’s too far. Daylight’s over.” Even as he said it he handed her two life vests. He knew she was a strong swimmer. She’d done it before. “If you can reach them, strap on the jackets, tell them to float on their backs ‘til help can arrive.”

She looped the life jackets through her jean shorts.

Ed held out a neon green body board. “Don’t try to pull them in.”

“I won’t.”

“Steady on.” His eyes fully met hers for the first time. “You can reach them.”

Elina left her shoes in the garden. She sprinted across the sand, blood pumping in her ears, and broke into cold seawater for the first time in more than six years. She struggled on her feet past the crash of smaller waves, nearly knocked off balance as water crested just above her knees. She charged forward until it was deep enough to swim, then dropping onto the body board, she kicked.

As if in conscious betrayal, the sun slipped lower. In daylight, the ocean was a formidable expanse of sparkling, rippling power. But in darkness, it was terrifying. Fathomless, depthless, concealing predators beneath its inky surface.

Fear tightened her breathing as she imagined sharks beneath her feet. A rip current opening in front of her. It would be an easy thing to lose sight of the shore. A simple thing to panic and inhale water. She swam harder and gulped for air, suddenly awash with dizziness.

*Steady on.*

She couldn't lose focus. *Maintain a manageable pace. Calm your breathing. Take breaks.* Her mind raced backwards to the lifeguard training class she'd attended in high school. It had been held in a gymnasium on a rainy afternoon when beaches were deserted and the likelihood of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation seemed as distant as college graduation.

She paused, allowing the body board to bear her weight, and rubbed salt water out of her eyes. She'd been certified for two weeks before she'd pulled the boy out of a rip current. The local newspaper did a feature on her, even running an oversized headshot of her suntanned face squinting into the camera. The picture of innocence.

Elina's view rose and fell with the waves, and the boat loomed closer. It bobbed like an overturned bathtub, bewildered to find itself on the wrong side of water. Another dip and she heard a weakening cry for help. Adrenaline surging through her legs, she swam forward.

The woman was perhaps mid-forties. It was difficult to tell – the color had gone out of her skin. Wet hair ran down her face like cracks in a marble statue.

“My son!” she cried, voice hoarse, breath ragged from long minutes treading water. She reached for Elina, arms thrashing. “My son!”

Maintaining distance, Elina unclipped a life vest and tossed it to the woman. “Put this on.”

The woman dipped beneath the surface and returned, sputtering water. She pulled the life vest over her head. “I can’t see him anymore.” Her eyes were pink and terrified. Her teeth chattered behind purple lips.

“Are you hurt?”

“Please, he’s only ten. I can’t see him.”

“Here, on your back. You need to conserve energy. Help is coming.”

“My baby.”

“I’ll find him. I swear I’ll find him.”

It was foolish of her to promise. No one made promises when up against the ocean. The water did what it wanted. Took who it wanted. But Elina found the words of assurance coming out of her mouth regardless. She *had* to find him, and she would. How she knew defied explanation. Instead, the knowledge sat in her chest as real and as mysterious as the moon’s effect on the tides. Intangible and undeniable.

Pushing upwards on the board, Elina craned her neck for a wider view. Empty, rolling, darkening water. The boy had either been pulled out of sight or he was on the other side of the boat. How long had she been swimming? She feared it had been longer than she realized. The sun was gone. Whatever light remained was trapped in the surface of the water, glowing with an eerie green iridescence.

She charted a path around the vessel, lips moving in silent prayer. It seemed to take hours, the current pulling her away from the boat like a capricious hand. When she finally reached the other side, there was nothing but empty, silent water. Elina spun, panicking. He was going to be here. She *knew* he was going to be here.

“No!” she screamed and her voice was swallowed whole by the gargantuan expanse. “No!” She started to sob, limbs weak and trembling. “Hello? Can you hear me?” She secured the life vest over her own head. “God, please!”

“Ho!” a man’s voice shouted. A light pierced through the waves and Ed’s fishing dinghy crested and descended a wave. “Hold on, Lina! I’ve got him!”

A small boy crouched in the bow of the dinghy, pale and wet and trembling, but alive. Found.

Elina wept. The rest was a dizzy, darkening blur – Ed pulling her and the mother into the boat. Rowing to shore. The arrival of the Coast Guard and an ambulance, flashes of blue and red lights on the sand.

Elina leaned against the garden gate wrapped in a blanket, feeling seventeen again – the reluctant and terrified hero. Ed came and held out a mug of Margie’s French roast. “You could stay the night,” he said.

“Okay,” she replied.

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Dawn came in the form of periwinkle clouds and pink light and tranquil water. Elina found her father on the side porch, a book in his lap and a plate of eggs beside him.

“Mind if I sit?” she asked.

He made room on the glider. They rocked and watched the sea.



“So, you’re going back to Nepal,” he said at length.

“Yes.”

“When I heard you were back...” He busied himself with the plate of eggs. “Well, I... I just wanted to see you.” He scratched at his neck. “So, thanks. Thanks for coming by.”

“I’d nearly forgotten how much I missed this place. The house and the sea. Not to mention Margie’s risotto.”

Ed merely nodded. Elina figured he had his reasons for reaching out to her, and like so many of his thoughts, they would remain his own. She settled back in the glider.

“It was impressive yesterday,” Ed said. “The way you swam after that family. Not sure the mother would’ve made it if you hadn’t reached her when you did. You treated them like...like they belonged to you.”

Elina didn’t respond. It would be impossible to describe *why* she so desperately needed to save them. It was a choice that came to her on its own, as obvious and simple as breathing.

“Sometimes the parents send me a picture,” she blurted out, the change in subject a shock even to her. She clicked into her phone and pulled up an image of a little girl with blonde hair and almond-shaped eyes and a smile as familiar as a sunrise. “She’ll be seven in the fall. First grade.”

“Seven, my goodness. She looks like...” He took the phone, a noticeable tremor in his fingers.

“Mom.”

“God rest her soul.” He didn’t hand the phone back, just stared, lost time shimmering in his eyes. “I would’ve loved her, you know.”

Here they were, still pretending as if this were his fault. Elina had to look away. She could see the grief she felt written on his face, and she understood, as she hadn't before, that they shared this. Sorrow. The ache of loss. The forever missing of someone else.

"I'm sorry I didn't give you the chance," she whispered. "You wanted to adopt her, and I was..."

"Young. Seventeen. I was too hard on you. I should've known you weren't ready to...to be..." He shoved the phone back into her hand as if it were hot and wiped a hand over his mouth.

Elina stared at the picture of her daughter, overcome by love and hope and regret. "She looks like you, too."

Ed gave a wry smile. "Too beautiful to look anything like me." He cleared his throat. "I'm going to make coffee. Do you want to stay for pancakes?"

Elina put the phone away. The pink light was turning to gold now, the sun rising, the night fading.

"I would love to."