

# Possession

by Indy Smith

The most haunted house on the island is one I do not include on the tour. Among the cheerful pinks and yellows and blues, my childhood home crawls with ghosts, like maggots writhing upon a decaying carcass. I am at work when my phone buzzes but I ignore the call, my smile turning strained. I know it is the nurse, but I have grown tired, over the past year, of the false alarms and the endless nettling and the woman I must visit, who was once my mother but has become something unfamiliar.

Instead, I turn my attention to the woman with her hand in the air. "Yes?"

"The treasure," she says in a breath. I understand that she has been waiting to ask this, that the hour spent on my ghost tour was a means to arrive at this question. "Is it true?"

"What of it?"

"It's out there? Really out there?"

I shrug, my smile easing to something natural. "So the stories say."

"Have you seen it?"

"I was born here, after all. And I am a woman. But I don't remember much about it, only that my life was different after."

"What did it look like?"

The turn in conversation squeezes emotion from between my ribs like mud through fingers. Normally, I would shrug, endeavoring at an air of mystery, and point out the happy green building on the corner with white trim and azalea bushes blooming beneath the windows. The Turner House, where Ida Turner was said to have gone missing in 1919, two years after the Island's founding, and appeared onshore twenty years later, still six years old, with no memory of time passed. But the Treasure is special, and it loosens the heavy thoughts of my mother, so I gaze at the horizon and try to remember. "It wasn't about seeing," I say. "It was everything else."

"How can we get there?"

I shift my gaze. She is like a child, hopeful, a little greedy. "I'm sorry," I say, and I know they will swap skeptical whispers, their frustration turning the Treasure to another of my half-truths and stories. "It must call you, or you'll never find it."

I feel their disappointment like an exhale. They will ask Gloria, the hunched old woman who sells sand dollars from a wagon beside the docks, and Dottie, who owns Beach Hardware, and every other local woman they can find, but none will provide gratification. Like the others, the legend has drawn them to our Island and, like the others, it will send them away, unsated.

My mind returns frequently to the Treasure, but obscurely: a slew of emotions, a shaky reverence, a surging power running through me like electricity. The feelings are choking their potency, like trying to drink the entire Gulf in one gulp — I only have so much room in my body. Just the skin of the moment remains in memory, superficial and cheap, yet overwhelming enough on its own to trap words in my throat when I attempt to speak, to bring tears to my eyes.

When I finish the tour, I walk across the dunes, leaving behind the wide, crowded streets of Gulf Boulevard, the overlapping chatter and pastel storefronts. Contentment rises deep within

me as I sink to the warm sand and stare at the water. Somewhere, thirteen miles out, the mainland waits, expectant like a mother with a son at war. I am delivered, and I will never cross the waves. Men come and go, but the women remain. Here is home, where power rises like the tide.

I draw my phone from my pocket and flip it open to return the nurse's call.

"Camila?" she says. She is breathless.

"Sorry I missed you. I was working."

"Camila," she says again. Less of a question.

"What's happened?"

"You've got to come to the house, honey. She's having an awful episode."

I stab at the sand with my free hand, my fingers taut, a violent motion. "I've got another tour in fifteen minutes."

"Can't you cancel? I'm sorry. She's asking for you."

I sigh, and the wind echoes, flitting through my hair. I feel the familiar pull to the Island, like a string tightening. "Of course," I say. "Tell her I'm on the way."

I hurry, my head bent, skirting groups of tourists and taking the quiet, shaded residential sidewalks, but it's no use. She dies somewhere between here and there; by the time I reach the house she's gone. The nurse opens the door, her expression like wood rotted through, and a memory emerges through the haze of years, unexpected. A night soon after my father died, when my mother flipped through one of the books he'd brought for me.

"These are so spooky, Cam," she said. "Don't you have nightmares?"

"Sometimes," I said, preoccupied. Then, without pausing to think: "But none of it's real."

The obsession had begun with my father, who presented the first paperback when I was very young, despite my mother's concern over my active imagination. He'd traveled all the way to Philadelphia for work, and returned with a puzzle for my mother and a book of local stories for me. Even as I was consumed, succumbing to the dark legends in the years following his death, exploring the afterlife of others to avoid imagining the gaping hole yawning across a ruined highway in rural Alabama, the ghosts had never solidified to something real.

Now, standing before my mother's body, the quilt drawn to her chin, her forehead smooth, her hair slipping from its braid and falling upon the pillow in thin, gray strands, the dead have never felt more alive. This is a position I have witnessed many times, from mornings when I rose first, checking to be sure she was home, from midnights, startling awake from nightmares and peering in, adjusting to reality. I brush my knuckles against her cool cheek and run my fingertips across her hair. When I lean to kiss her forehead, she smells just the same, like the facial cream she's used since I was a child, fresh and floral and comforting enough that I'd supposed it the scent of Heaven during the years we attended church.

I gaze at her body, and imagine her then, life burning fiercely beneath her cheeks as she dabbed them with moisturizer. The memory is real, certainly; I can picture the way she called for me, catching sight of me as she turned, her face relaxing into a smile. But it feels like something dreamed, fleeting and flimsy as morning mist.

There is nothing to be done. The afternoon is growing late and I must meet Marina at home. I touch my mother once more, fleeting, the barest tips of my fingers at her temple, and leave, shutting the door behind me.

"I'm not sure..." I say to the nurse, trailing off. "The body. With my father, there was nothing. I don't know what to do with her."

"We can handle it."

"Can you?" I have only known one other woman to die on the Island, Doogie Smith's sister, taken years ago by a heart attack. I think of the ceremony, the ashes spread across the Gulf, the sun glinting against Doogie's tearstained cheeks, my confusion at the sight. I remember only a feeling of fullness, satisfaction, knowing his sister was where she belonged, knowing one day I'd join her. "Thank you," I say to the nurse, who is nodding. "I've got to meet my daughter, to tell her."

"Of course. We'll come get her in an hour or so, and we'll call you about the ceremony." There is concern in her eyes and I wonder at the practice she's had in the art of comforting. "I'm so sorry, Camila."

"Thanks for everything."

She touches the back of my arm as I open the front door. The sky is candy-blue, like something pretend. I walk home along the seawall of the rocky southern shore, staring into the holes between boulders, the water gurgling from unseen places, like a long line of little lungs filling and draining as the island breathes.

Marina is not yet home from school when I return, so I sit in the backyard, gazing at the water, my palm flat against the grass. I feel the Treasure like the lingering touch of a lover, even now, years after I took the Plunge and gazed upon it with my own two eyes.

I rise, my heart singing, and approach the water. Three feet below the seawall, the Gulf meets the sand, beckoning with the reckless glee of a puppy. I'm ankle deep, the waves lapping at my calves, rhythmic, like a heartbeat, when I hear Marina from inside, calling me.

"Mom?" she says, and there is some concern in her voice. I must have left my keys on the table, and she assumes I am home early to deliver bad news. I hear the backdoor open and she speaks again. "Mom?"

I turn and crane my neck to see her, towering over me on the seawall. "Hi," I say. I wave her closer and she sits so I am level with her sternum. I reach to press my hands to her thighs, my lovely, perceptive girl. "How was school?"

"Fine. Is everything okay? Why are you home already?"

I study her face, the worried dimple creasing between her eyebrows, just the same as my father, leaning over the kitchen table to study a puzzle in another life. "Grandma had a bad episode today."

"Is she okay?"

I shake my head. "I'm sorry."

Tears splatter against the back of my hands. I grab her waist and pull her down to the sand so I can hold her properly. "Oh, Marina," I say, rubbing circles on her back. I feel the hot, wet press of her cheek against my shoulder and think I have never loved anyone more.

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We go the next day to begin clearing my mother's things. The house will be put up for sale, but first we must strip my mother's marrow from its bones. Boxes of clothes placed in the yard to be

taken away. Boxes of books, boxes of cookware, boxes of photographs. She feels very much alive. I find a secret in the bottom drawer of her bedroom dresser, behind her winter pants.

A collection of puzzles, my father's special present for her after every trip. I find my ghost books of local lore from unfamiliar cities hidden beneath it all. Something grips me — spectral hands from the past, reaching through time, pulling me backward. I sit, the box in my lap. Here, from Birmingham, from Roanoke, from St. Augustine. I flip through the pages, disbelieving. Once, long ago, I was a girl who held these books in my hands, transfixed. Something flits in the corners of my mind, fading as I reach.

I find a book from Louisville, yellowed with age, crackling as I open it. I run my finger along the text, seeking. I recognize the story, a monster who haunts the train tracks of Pope Lick Park, but something is amiss. As if in a trance, I rise, the book held before me.

I am in the kitchen without knowing why, and I am sitting at the table. I am a little girl again, leaning over the linoleum, repeating interesting passages to my mother. She is pretending to listen. The memory feels sickeningly hot, like something burning alive. I squeeze my eyes shut, willing my thoughts to reach into their darkest corners, but my mind has weakened with age, gapped in memory, and I grip the book, frustrated, ill-contented.

Without warning, the screen door slams itself shut. A wind rips through the open windows, scattering papers. The floor shakes as Marina runs from a back room.

"Look at the sky!" she says. "*Look!*"

The storm has come from nowhere, gathering itself in the hour we've been inside. The palm trees bend beneath the force of it, and my mother's screens rattle. Clouds have engulfed the sun, lowering the sky in a claustrophobic sheet, brushing the rooftops.

"My God," I say. I slam shut the nearest window. "Let's close up and get home. Where did this thing come from?"

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I sleep poorly, plagued with nightmares of ghosts reaching long spindly fingers from between the pages of books, growing as I slam them shut, clawing at my eyes. The storm grows as I toss, smothering the horizon and gusting hot wind across the Island, the air heavy and stinking of rain.

When Marina leaves for school I return to my mother's, opening a book about the ghosts stalking across Galveston Island. I beat at my temple with the heel of my hand. I rip through pages, opening books at random, gritting my teeth in frustration. Some memory lurks, unattainable.

Come lunchtime, the walls of my mother's house shrink around me, teasing, brimming with memories, evaporating as I reach to grasp them. Outside is little solace, the sky threatening to sink to the earth, dark as evening. I walk to the docks, seeking the comfort of the Gulf and meet Doogie Smith, where he is tying up his boat.

He straightens as I approach and runs a hand across his brow. "Seen the sky, Camila?"

"Looks like a big storm."

"Looks nasty. Weather station ain't got nothin' to say."

"What do you mean?"

"Gloria's had the radio on when I left," says Doogie. "Weatherman says sun all week."

"Huh," I say. I turn to look at the horizon. "Nothin' sunny about that."

"Can't guess 'em all, I guess. You thinkin' about evacuating?"

I shake my head. "What a hassle."

"Too right. And I heard about your mom. Let me know what I can do."

The image of the sun sharp against his cheeks, reflecting the tears at his sister's funeral jumps to mind. "Thanks," I say.

I spend the afternoon with my hand flat against a stack of old ghost books as though clarity will emerge from the contact, my eyes tracking the movement of the minute hand on the clock above my mother's china cabinet. When I leave in the afternoon, the weather hasn't improved, the wind blowing cruel through the palm fronds, grabbing at my hair. I shiver, worried. Hurricane season isn't for months, and Marina is meant to take the Plunge soon. *Tomorrow*, I realize, the date having been buried beneath the avalanche of my mother's death. *The Island protects*, and yet a chilling feeling grips me, something like loneliness.

Marina is not home when I arrive, so I leave my shoes inside and head to the backyard to wade into the water. I await the familiar comfort, the blossoming of warmth in my chest, but I feel only cold as the current grabs at my waist, the touch cunning and strange. I cannot see my fingers beneath the surface, the water cloudy and dark as the sky. I bite my lip, hard.

"Mom?"

Marina is here, and there is some comfort. I look across the waves for a moment more, but there is nothing where there was once something. I turn to home, to my daughter.

She is waiting on the porch, staring at the place where the horizon should be, concealed behind the thick cover of clouds. I know where her mind has gone, where every young woman's mind goes, where mine finds its way, even now — the Treasure, the heart of the Island, lying in its bed of seagrass a mile offshore.

"What are you thinking?" I ask. I brush hair from her forehead where the wind has pushed it into her eyes. "Are you excited?"

"Yes." She turns to me, and her gaze is wild. "Just hours now."

"I wish this storm would clear before you go."

She nods, but I know the weather concerns her little. I remember the feeling, like a fish hook through my ribs, pulling me out into the Gulf. If the sea caught fire and the depths of hell rose to meet us, Marina would find her way to the Treasure. Once the feeling creeps into our blood, there is no escaping.

"Marina," I say. Her mind has moved away and I call it back. "Are you afraid?"

"Only a little."

I smile at her, wishing to keep this moment, where she is still a child, where my love burns almost too hot to hold. "The most natural thing in the world," I say. "I was scared for only a second, right before I jumped. As soon as I touched the water, all I felt was certain."

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Marina slips into my room before she leaves the next morning, burrowing beneath the covers and pressing her body to mine. I squeeze my eyes shut tight, trying to remember the morning of my Plunge, but it is lost to a wash of memories. I might've been a girl, once, before I was a woman,

but that child is a stranger, far less familiar than my daughter's shape against my hip, her heart beating at my shoulder, her teeth chattering.

"Nervous?" I say.

I hear her head move against the pillow as she shakes it. "No," she says. "Freezing."

I notice, then. Fearful of the nightmares, I had thrown the windows wide in the evening, allowing a spring breeze to slip through and wipe my dreams clean. But the wind was reborn overnight, into something wicked, and the curtain flails away from its jagged teeth. I have never felt anything so cold, a bitterness splintering into my bones. I'm afraid they'll snap as I move to close the window.

I pause with my hands on the sill. "Marina," I say. My breath is shallow. "Come here. Come look at this."

I hear the rustle of the quilt as she rises, the catch in her throat when she sees.

"How?" she says.

I laugh, disbelieving, and wonder if I'm dreaming. "You can't go today," I say. "Can you? You'll freeze."

"I'll go anyway," she says. She hasn't torn her gaze from the yard. "Mom, *how*?"

"I don't know," I say. "Must've been the storm. Won't you wait?"

"I couldn't." She looks at me at last, her eyes distant, and I remember that, at least, about the before: the burning in my veins, the unbearable need. "Even if I wanted to."

"Fine." I pull the window shut and look away. "Let me get our coats. I'll walk you to the dock."

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We begin slowly, uncertain. Neither of us has ever seen snow, and I am frightened for a moment, taking the first step from our porch, crunching through frozen grass. The storm has strewn branches like bodies through the street, as though a spell broke sometime in the night and they fell where they had walked. I gaze around, at everything white and silent, like one of those nightmares where the ghosts reject my skepticism and vanquish the town, carrying with them that old, eternal sleep.

The docks are empty when we arrive. Marina and I pull the tarp from the old skiff in the west corner, the same boat from my own journey into the Gulf. Ice falls from the cover, clattering to the deck. I shiver in the cold. I want to tell Marina to stay, to seek the treasure where it will be waiting tomorrow, in a week, in a year, to crawl back into bed with me and rise once it's warmer.

I watch her nimble child's hands unwind the rope from the cleat and a sharp pain blooms in my chest. Hair has fallen across her face as she works. "Marina," I say, and she looks up. There she is: my daughter, my girl, at least one last time. I have never loved anyone the way I love her. I want to tell her, but I won't. She is leaving to change, and I'd hate to worry her that she'll return to anything less. I will love her just as much, however I must. "Be careful," I say instead. "It's so cold."

"I know."

"Don't forget to anchor."

"I know, Mom."

"If you get lost, come back toward sunset."

"I know."

"Okay," I say. "Okay, I know. I love you."

She smiles, my heart aches, and then she says it once more — "I know." A pause. I want to close my eyes. "I love you too."

I reach for her, pull her towards me. She is shaking, a restless, vibrating anticipation; still, I want to cling to her, to hold her near. Her hair tickles my chin, she sighs into my shoulder, and it is with the greatest effort of my life that I let go, allow her to step into the skiff, watch her bring the motor to life. She's smiling as she backs away from dock — was I so eager to leave my girlhood behind? — lifting one hand to wave. I'm waving back, staring at her face, her eager flush, her wide, innocent eyes, fighting a rising panic in my chest. I wonder if my mother felt the same, watching me leave.

She turns around the bend. She is gone.

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The island has awakened as I walk back, stirring sleepily, preparing for the gate's opening.

"How 'bout it, Camila?" asks Doogie Smith. He is carrying a coffee and I meet him leaving the docks. "Ever seen anything like this?"

I am confused, thinking only of my daughter disappearing into the Gulf to become someone else. Doogie stomps, lifting a boot to examine the snow stuck to the sole.

"Ah," I say. "Came outta nowhere, didn't it?"

"Sure did. In March, too! Heard on the news there's flooding on the mainland."

"Flooding? But we're all fine."

"Lucky thing, ain't it? Don't seem natural. They've closed the bridge today and everything. Roads are a mess over there."

"How'd that happen? How'd it miss us?"

"Dunno. And hard to believe this snow, huh? Gloria's outta her mind. Won't leave the house. Thinks it's the devil."

Doogie grins his gap-toothed smile like piano keys, but I shiver, thinking of the ghosts from my stories coming to life to haunt us all, turning nature on its head the day my daughter leaves to become a woman.

"You ever seen snow before?" I ask, but I'm distracted, and I don't hear Doogie's answer. My mind is crowded with Marina, picturing her squinting into the waves, her heart like a foot stamping at her ribs.

"Camila," says Doogie, and my own name pulls me back to my body. "You alright?"

"Fine," I say. "Marina's taking the Plunge today."

He whistles through his teeth. "Today of all days?"

"I know."

"She left yet?"

I nod. "Early this morning."

"Might wanna keep her coat on when she goes." Doogie takes a sip of his coffee. "Always had me curious, that little tradition y'all do. No one ever says much."

"Like seeing an angel. I can't imagine trying to explain."

"S'pose I'll never know, then, huh?"

"Suppose not," I say, staring worriedly at the sky, an unrelenting sheet of gray. "Looks like rain again, don't it?"

"I wouldn't worry," says Doogie, but he doesn't look at the sky. His eyes are fixed on me, his left narrowed in concentration, cloudy since a shotgun recoiled and wrecked his vision years back. I pretend not to notice. "She'll be alright. Smart girl. Ain't never had an accident out there have we?"

"The Island protects," I murmur, and I am thinking about how I have never seen snow before today, either, or been particularly afraid of ghosts.

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The Island is closed, which means tours must be rescheduled. I send emails, look through my calendar, and glance over my script. Thoughts of Marina plague me like a mosquito and I give up before the morning has passed. I find myself reaching for a book brought from my mother's, a thin, faded paperback about the spirits of Baltimore's Inner Harbor.

The same feeling descends, like an inexplicable blur across my vision. I picture myself when I received this book, reaching up to take it from my father, my thoughts a swirl of fantasy. I try to remember the feel of his hand, his calloused palm, pocked with scars, but the memory is as impersonal as a scene from a film.

I throw the book across the couch and stand. The water will clear my thoughts. When I open the back door, however, worry grabs at me with clammy hands. Cold fog rolls heavy as smoke off the Gulf, dousing everything in white, the clouds having met the land at last. I stare at the blankness for a moment and then, as if bewitched, I step into the yard. At once, I am isolated, as though I plummeted over the edge of the world. Thick curtains of white fall around me, imprisoning, and the sound of my heavy, panting breaths echoes through my skull.

I take another step and stop, a chill uncurling itself along my spine.

Something is wrong.

I have known it for days, since I found those old books in my mother's house, since the clouds appeared on the horizon. Something is wrong. Certainty floods through me. I am sure of it the way I am sure of my place on the Island.

I stumble forward until I feel the concrete seawall underfoot. The sound of the water sneaks through the fog, muffled. I creep to the edge and drop, sinking into the sand. The waves grow louder, crashing and angry. Panic stabs at my throat. Marina is out there somewhere, alone in the fog, and home has disappeared. She will not be able to see the sunset. She will not be able to find her way back.

I must go to her. I have never felt such fear in my life, never on this Island, my home, which is supposed to protect. I take a breath, the air thick and wet, and my heart thrashes in my throat. I stumble across the sand. I will do anything to reach her.

But I trip before I make it to the water, my feet tangling with something — a piece of driftwood, maybe — and I lose my balance, sprawling across the sand. I reach down, to push



myself up, but dread washes through me, unfamiliar and demanding, as searching hands meet something solid. The world spins. My breaths are thunderous. Something is wrong.

I feel skin, but it's terrible, cold, slimy skin like spoiled meat. I shut my eyes, flinching away. I know what this is. The knowledge stalks around me like a coyote in the fog, the shape circling.

I must check. *Please not Marina.* Scrabbling fingers find a shoulder, a jaw. I can't see anything in the fog. *Please not Marina.* I take a breath and lean closer.

She emerges slowly, as if reluctant: waxy, gray skin, bloated cheeks, blue lips, and finally, as I see the whole of her, recognition chokes me. I can't breathe. In a *whoosh*, the fog evaporates, and I lift my hand to shield from the sudden brightness, gagging, crying. I am looking around wildly, at the Gulf stretching lazy and long, sparkling in the sunlight. My gaze finds its way to the ground, to the body, to my own corpse.

I have been dead many years, made clear by my fingers' missing tips, eaten away by creatures or time. Scars snake across my body, angry and red, like the lashes of whips. Disgusted, curious, I press a fingertip to my hip, to trace one of the marks.

At my touch, the corpse's eyes fly wide. A guttural sound rips out of me and I recoil, jerking backwards, landing in the sand and scrambling away.

"Camila," groans the body. The voice is deep, wheezing, and thin, as though dragged from her throat across nails. I stare, unable to move. The fingers twitch. The knee bends. The corpse rises and turns to look at me. "Camila," she says again, fixing me in her empty gaze. I cover my face, gasping in fear, wishing to unsee the burn of death in her eyes. I hear the sand shifting as she stands.

For a moment, silence, before my terror blows wide and I remove my hands, shaking. She stands over me, blurry through tears, a dark shadow against the blue sky. "Come," she says in her awful voice. "You must rise."

I moan in horror.

"Come," she says again, and I shake my head. She extends a hand, the bones peeking through ruined fingertips, the skin of her palm hanging in layers, her remaining nails ragged and covered in algae.

We stare at one another, one trembling, one still. Her eyes are lifeless and flat, but they are my own, and, despite my fear, I feel my resolve softening. I ignore her offered hand and push myself to my feet, looking at her shoulder, her throat, anything but the marred mirror of my own likeness.

"Good," she says. "Come to the water. We must hurry. My absence will soon be noticed."

"Wait." I am dizzy with confusion, disgust. "I don't understand."

"The water will help you."

"No." I hold up an arm, palm out, and shut my eyes. I have never been fearful of the Gulf, never anything but certain, but a cloak of terror engulfs me as I consider approaching. "You came from there?"

"You sent for me."

"I *sent*—?"

"You have been trying to remember. Quickly, Camila. Your storm has halted Marina, but soon she will find her way. All will be lost."

"Marina? You came for her?"

"I came for *you*," she says, her voice like the crush of a boat's bottom against a sandbar. "You have brought me ashore."

"What *are* you?"

"Many years ago, I was you," she says. She steps into the surf and turns to face the horizon. One of her calves hangs open, split down the middle, straight to the bone, and the flaps of skin wave in the current like curtains in a breeze. "Let me help you remember. Come to the water."

I am more afraid than I have been in my life, but I think of Marina, and the fear solidifies like metal cooling. I cannot help but move forward. I am staring, transfixed, at a school of greenbacks, stopped to nibble at the corpse's loose skin, when my toes reach the waves and blackness swallows the world like the sun slipping behind the horizon.

I am suffocating, my arms lashed to my sides, pressure building, squeezing my throat, my skull, my brain. I thrash, but my bonds tighten as I struggle, cutting painfully through skin. I try to scream, but there is only silence and pressing darkness and panic meeting confusion somewhere in my chest. *She has killed me*, I think. *She has drowned me and my daughter is left to die*. Thoughts move sluggishly. I lose feeling in my fingers. I close my eyes.

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I am flat on my back in the sand when I wake, the sky endless and blue.

"Quickly," the terrible voice says, and I realize she is there, standing at my feet and looking down at me with those empty eyes. "It will soon notice I'm gone."

I cough, taking great, heaving breaths. I feel as though flames licked across my body where the invisible restraints dug through my skin, but I am smooth, unmarked. "What was that?" I manage. My throat aches. "What have you done?"

"I have shown you the worst. Now you may remember the best."

"Was that *real*?"

"Memories. Come to the water."

"No," I gasp. "Never again."

"Camila, please. Soon, I will not be able to help you."

"*Help* me?" I dig the heels of my hands into my eyes and stand unsteadily. "Be gone. Leave me be."

"You doom your daughter."

"*No*." As the pain of the drowning fades, I am left shaky, emptied of adrenaline, a shell of fear. "She's fine. Soon she'll come home."

"She will not return. You must know this."

Feelings roll like waves, emotions crashing over one another in their urgency to be felt.

"She will join me where I lay, and the Island will claim another. Can't you remember? Or try to imagine? The way it must feel to possess your own body. Hold power over yourself."

I am silent. There is some hidden barb in her word, catching in my skin, drawing me in. "The Island protects," I say, because it feels like the one certainty of my life, and I can't think of anything else.

"An exchange," says the corpse. "The Island protects, and we give it something in return."

I stare at her, the seagrass knotted in her hair, the collection of barnacles at the base of her throat. Something has chewed at one of her ears, leaving it hanging from her head like a piece of fruit. "You," I say.

She stands still, her head tilted as though pondering. "Your body," she says at last. "This is the trade. Let me show you. The way things were when your body was still yours."

"But I remember," I say, though I am unsure. "The way things were. My father and my ghost stories and all sorts of things. Bedtimes and middle school."

She offers her hand, silent, and I am reaching without thinking, grasping her fingers in mine, cool and slimy. I hesitate at the water's edge, watching the waves swallow the sand, glittering and smooth as glass. The corpse is patient. When I cross the line and splash into the Gulf, the memories begin at once.

"It is like a photograph, long faded," she says, watching me with something akin to hunger as I fight to breathe beneath the new brilliance of my thoughts. I shut my eyes, overwhelmed, and double over. "You grow used to the way color has drained from life. You forget the joy of discovery, the excitement of the unknown. It takes your girlhood so you never want to leave."

Tears splash into the water and I wail like a child, devastated, astounded by the vividness of life. I cling to the corpse's hand as new sorrow rips through me, the grief of my parents' death, and new wonder, too, for what might lie beyond the horizon.

"It is too late for us," she says, "but not for Marina. You must stop her."

"How?"

"I can take you."

"She will hate me forever," I say, and step back. Uncertainty strains against my thoughts like an anchor. "If I stop her."

"You would sacrifice her freedom to spare your feelings."

I stare behind the corpse, toward the horizon. I wondered what might lay beyond once, when I was a child. I pictured the places my father must've visited, the people he must've seen, as innumerable and diverse as the ocean's species. "But I have been fine here," I say. "The Island has protected me. It brought me Marina. It made me happy."

"A happiness dependent on the Island's limitations. Beyond your control," says the corpse and I make no response. Her hands are lowered and I watch water gurgle through a hole at the base of her thumb. "The choice is yours, ultimately. But you have summoned me, Camila. You brought the storm that washed me ashore. Some part of you wonders."

I stare at my own hands, whole and clean, tinted blue and dappled as sunlight reaches them through the water. A new life for Marina, where she needn't make a choice between independence and security. A life belonging to her alone.

"Take me," I say, and realize there was never a decision. "Of course. We must help Marina."

"It will not be pleasant."

"I don't care."

Her ragged lips lifted in what might've been a smile, rotted stumps stabbing through black, shriveled gums. "Take a deep breath." She raises her arm between us. "Then, take my hand. You mustn't let go until it's time."

She turns her back to the horizon and I copy, reaching for her slimy fingers. As I take hold, she falls backward, into the surf. I close my eyes and hold my breath as she drags me behind her, the water closing over my head like a fist.

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The feeling of suffocation returns, but my limbs remain free. The ground is soft beneath my feet, pillowy and cool, tickling my ankles. I open my eyes to a world bathed in blue, the sun pouring through the water in long, powerful rays, like strokes of a paintbrush.

We stand in a meadow of seagrass, waving lazily in the current, green as Heaven, wrapped around scattered shapes in a casual embrace. The corpse's grip on my hand tightens, and I look more closely across the landscape, a scream bubbling in my chest like nausea. Bodies litter the seafloor in various states of decomposition, their limbs tangled in the grass. I feel sick. Without examining them, I know that the remains all belong to women, captives of the Island, their bodies doomed to linger eternally in this eerie, underwater graveyard, forgotten by their owners.

Without thinking, I glance toward my feet, where a lifeless face stares up at me with empty eyes, her cheek half chewed away, a gaping hole in her head, once an ear. I ball my free hand into a fist and press it to my teeth, repulsed.

"Look." The corpse's voice is jarring, sudden sound in the muted landscape, and I wish she wouldn't speak, afraid of waking the others. She points across the mess of bodies, toward a shadow hovering at the surface. The skiff, unmistakable, its anchor chain trailing into the darkness. "Marina."

"Where's the treasure?"

The corpse sweeps her arm before her. "This. The Island's heart is here, maybe buried deep within the Earth. This is where it brings us, and where it keeps us. You must help Marina, or her body will join ours."

"What will happen to you?"

"I must return."

"But I know, now. How will it keep me?"

She shakes her head. "You must save Marina, before all else. Your questions will be left to time. Look."

At the surface, the shadow is lengthening, changing shape as Marina stands and moves to the side of the skiff, preparing to jump. A moment of stillness, where my heart falters in my chest, and the Gulf's clarity explodes to white as she drops from the boat.

Immediately, long arms of seagrass extend from the bottom and reach for her, wrapping around her arms, legs, neck, reeling her in. The corpse squeezes my hand once and releases me, shoving me forward. Marina is thrashing, bubbles shooting from her mouth as she tries to

scream. Her lips are turning blue. I kick hard, desperate, and tear at the grass with my nails, scratching through the slime, ripping the leaves. The arms recoil and I pull Marina away, toward the surface, gulping air as our heads break through.

The water is flat and glassy, blue as a dream, betraying nothing of its depths. I drag Marina toward the skiff and yank at the life jacket tied to the side. She does not move as I fasten it around her, but I push concern aside and leave her floating.

Beneath the surface, grass has snaked around my corpse, her pale skin bulging in the gaps like a blister ready to pop. Her eyes are free and they catch my own, flat and lifeless. A slight inclination of her head, and I understand she is telling me to go. Another arm whips from the seabed and smothers her face. Her body jerks once, and I kick to the surface.

I clamber into the skiff, pulling Marina up behind me, and turn towards home. Miles fall away and the Island does not appear. I circle back, confused, tracking channel markers and landmarks. The sun begins to set, painting the western sky watery pink and ensuring my direction. Still, the Gulf is smooth as song, uninterrupted by land.

It is an hour later, as dusk swallows the last of the light, that I catch sight of a bump on the horizon, widening as we draw closer. Before me, where she lies in a heap at the prow, I hear Marina stirring.

I want to cry in relief. "Marina," I say.

She lifts her face. "Mom?" she says. Her brows draw together and she looks around. "Where are we?"

"We're going home."

"What about the Plunge?" She presses four fingers to her temple. "Is this part of it?"

My heart twists. "No," I say. "It was messed up."

"Is something wrong with me?"

"No. It's my fault."

"What did you do?"

"I won't let you," I say. "I..." My voice dies as I glance at the horizon, where land looms larger than our Island, larger than any mass I've ever seen.

"The mainland," says Marina. "Mom, what's going on?"

I shake my head. *It is too late for us*, the corpse had said. I turn to look at the darkness behind us. I combed the Gulf for hours. It's as if the Island had sunk into the sea.

"Oh no," I say. My heartbeat is deafening, pounding about my ears like thundering footsteps. I look at Marina, and she is angry, her gaze sharp and hard as a knife's blade.

"What have you done?" she says. "Why aren't we going home?"

My hands shake, and I grip the wheel to keep them still. "We can't," I say. There is a steel in Marina's eyes and I worry she will never forgive me, but allow resentment to gather upon her soul like dirt crusting beneath fingernails. "We'll figure it out," I say, because there is nothing to be done. "We'll live here, on the mainland. We'll go wherever we like."

"I want to go home."

"I know." I can't look at her. I stare at the horizon and consider the emotions welling inside me like a pot coming to boil. Marina will forgive me, or she won't, but the choice will be hers entirely. I tilt my gaze, find my fingers wrapped around the metal, white with tension. My body, my own body. The comfort of the Island has left me, and I feel naked without its

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*Winner of the 2024 ACM Nick Adams Short Story Contest*

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protection, but I tighten the muscles in my arms, take a gulp of air and hold it in my mouth, the salt melting on my tongue. My body, my own body. Here is home.