

Rowan

I have hated my mother for most of my life but it is her face I see as I drown.

The face I see when I wake from drowning is different. It is rough and wind-bitten and scratchy. It is what I'm looking at when the sudden arrival of pain overcomes me, and I know the image of him will forever be as one with this pain. Whenever I see this face I will remember the burning sting of being dragged upon rocks and flayed open, left raw, I will feel the bursting pressure in my chest; the sensation will be so vivid it will be like it's happening all over again. His face, a return. A drowning.

Fen

She washes in with the storm, draped upon a tangle of driftwood. The girl sees her from among the seals. She picks her way through their fat sleeping bodies and moves to the surging waterline. Rough waves carry the lump closer, in with the tide. A shape of milky white lit by the moon. A shoulder, she thinks. And seaweed for hair. A hand draped delicately over wood.

The girl wades into the black roar. She dives under and swims out. Reaches for this bulbous thing to help steer it free. When her feet hit sand she rises, dragging the driftwood behind her. Swell slaps at her thighs and hips but she knows how to move with the water so as not to be tumbled. Preparing all the while for something terrible. Something altering. But a last wave sends the tangle onto the beach and the girl parts the curtain of snarled kelp to reveal a face, and it is not swollen or blue or nibbled; it is breathing.

The girl's name is Fen and she lives here now, on this exposed patch of coastline with the petrels and the shearwaters and the penguins and the seals. She hasn't been up the hill in a while, to where her family dwells in the lighthouse. She doesn't like to leave the sea. But tonight the storm, the woman. Lightning on the horizon and rain she can hear approaching fast. She thinks quickly, and then, rather than trying to pull the body free, she drags the entire driftwood barge up the black sand as far as she can. She allows herself another look at this face, at this creature carried in from a sea too vast to make sense of. A gift for them or something rejected? And then Fen runs.



This is a place of storms, but *this* storm, this one will be the worst they've endured since coming here. She knows it as soon as she reaches the crest of the hill and collides with the wind. It takes her off her feet. In the distance she can see the lights of the building. A white shape flies end over end through the air: a bedsheet from the clothesline. They all know not to hang things overnight; someone will be in trouble for that lost sheet. Behind it one of the tool trolleys careens through the grass, is lifted up off its wheels and dumped again, spilling its guts, and this—these precious items being left out—is even worse than the sheet.

In the end she doesn't have to struggle all the way to the house. Her dad's been watching and the second he sees her cresting the rise he is running. They meet in the dark, on the trail to the shore. Even his considerable size is nothing against this wind, and he's stooped almost double as he gathers her towards home.

"Stop!" she shouts. "Dad! We need Raff."

"I'm here," says her brother, materialising to take her other side in arms almost as big as their father's, both of them hurrying her on.

"Wait!" Fen says, knowing that time now will be divided into before and after. "There's a woman."

Dominic

You are not meant to have favourites, but my youngest is that. If only by a hair, and with a gun to my head. If I really, really had to answer. And not because we are most alike: that is my oldest and me. Not because we are least alike: that is my daughter and me. Maybe it is because he is curious and kind and so smart it can make your eyes water. Maybe it's because he whispers to the wind and hears its voice in return. Most likely I don't know why. But it may also be because, for one brief moment long ago, I wished him dead.



I leave my youngest safe and warm in bed; he is too little to be taken out into a storm, though he'd rather not be left behind. The rain has come, as I follow my two eldest to the beach. The seals have retreated below the waves. The penguins are huddled in their nests. Raff and I lift the woman between us and inch our way back up the long winding trail. No trees to give cover; there are none on the island, only mounds of silvery tussock grass and a passage that grows slower with each step into the wind. It screams in our ears. In this kind of storm there is a danger we could be tumbled off our feet and back down the hill.

"Keep going, mate," I say, and ahead of me Raff does, dogged.

My daughter is saying the woman was breathing. That somehow, she was breathing, and I know Fen is silently urging her to keep on, she is willing this body to cling to life. I have less hope, but I also suspect that to have made it so far, to have survived in an ocean so wild, she must be strong, this woman.



I've seen a body taken by the sea, and the state of it will rid a man of any hubris. We are soberingly weak under its hammer. This woman, delivered by such a sea—one more powerful than most—is clinging on with a bewildering defiance. She has been opened on one side, all down the left of her, and I can't imagine how there's not water on her lungs, but my first concern is the hypothermia; her breathing and her heart rate both seem very slow.

Back at the house, my three children and I carefully remove the woman's clothes, what's left of them. I set Orly to the shoes and socks and allow Raff and Fen to help me with the rest, leaving only the undies untouched. Fen takes her own clothes off too—"You don't have to," I say—and without a word she climbs into the bed to press her warmth around this stranger. The only way, truly, to warm her up. My boys and I pile blankets over them and monitor the woman's temperature. It rises slowly. Hours pass as we hover, watching and waiting, and I wonder what it is my daughter thinks about as she uses her body like this, to save another.

Later, when the woman seems warm enough and I don't think we can delay it any longer, Fen gets dressed. There is blood on the sheets, and on her skin. She pretends not to notice. We turn our minds to treating the wounds, using tweezers to painstakingly pluck out fragments of cloth. The woman's limbs are lean and strong, her head shaved. The face, which I have barely looked at, is clenched and angular. Her strong jaw works against her teeth. Once she is free of material and debris, I stitch the worst of the wounds, my fingers too big to be anything other than clumsy. We slather the scrapes with disinfectant and then as much gauze as we have before bandaging her body. There is fever now: she is scalding to the touch. She makes sounds that frighten all of us and I come to my senses and send my nine-year-old from the room. He makes a fuss, he wants to help, and I know he is more frightened of the storm than he is of this woman's noises. I relent, let him stay. This feels like a night to be together.



We sit with her and bear witness to the throws. Outside the storm is rabid. When the windows shake, Orly whimpers but the old stones hold together. Inside the sea is still fighting for her, it retains its hold. I think, deep in the darkest hours, that even if she survives this night that ocean will have her back one day.