

Rockpool

by Stephanie Falk

Despite being late morning, a thick layer of fog has settled on the jagged rocks leading out to sea. I take a seat on the newly erected bench where the grass of the park meets the sand of the beach. Balancing my cane across my lap, shaky fingers struggle to remove all of the foggy marks from my glasses with a polka-dotted handkerchief. Glasses back on, my eyes adjust to take in the familiar landscape; my strongest reminder of you.

Perhaps it is naïve of me in my old age to return here, clinging to memories which fade slightly each visit. We started coming down here in the summer of '57, we were only young boys then. Bored with the monotony of riding our bikes around the neighbourhood after school, we decided to investigate rumours of a small sandy beach on the other side of town, with reports of tiny sand crabs hiding in plain sight. We would walk barefoot across those moss-covered rocks, spindly limbs struggling with the slippery surface. I remember us out there, sunlight prickling my reddening skin, making your olive complexion glow. We scoured those rocks for signs of life, your face beaming at every sighting of a snail or sea urchin bathing in a feeble excuse for a rockpool. I may have misled you, Grant, as you took my own smile for adoration of these tiny creatures. The truth was, when I saw you smiling, so incredibly happy in those quiet moments, I couldn't stop my face from twisting into that goofy, love-struck grin.

As we grew older and our beach trips became more frequent, our infatuation for each other made our heads giddy and our actions foolish. We became oblivious to how others perceived our connection and there's no denying that it made us careless. Over the months, and even years of our early adolescence, subtle touches, accidental brushes of my arm against your back became purposeful, meaningful. I guided you across those slippery rocks, and you pulled me closer by the wrist in return. I can't pinpoint the exact moment people started questioning our 'friendship.' All I know is that when we were together, we were fearless, the strongest we could be. Still deaf to chatter from those whose opinions shouldn't have mattered, we grew even bolder. I remember the first time you held my hand instead of my wrist to steady me as I followed behind you on our routine path. That afternoon, I asked you to stay with me and watch the sun sink below the horizon, a vibrant orange plunging into deep blue. I held your hand in mine and my heart had never felt so full.

I wish I had cherished that final walk home from the beach with you. Your mother was waiting for you to usher you inside with a sense of urgency. She couldn't even look at me. Your absence the next day at school did not go

unnoticed. It turned the air heavy. I wish I could say I was mature, even understanding when you left for boarding the following week but anger surged throughout my whole body and it sat in my veins, stagnant for weeks. I still don't know why I blamed you. It didn't matter that the days passed, I refused to let you be just a memory.

I needed something to ground me. I needed you. So, I painted rockpools. Thick strokes on loose canvas resembling memories we shared became my pastime, which some began to consider an obsession. I painted those striped snails you loved so dearly, spiky purple urchins and clear water creating soft ripples. I couldn't return to our place of course, not for many years, and so the paintings became looser, abstract even. Twisting, curving forms spilling from one canvas to another. When dry, I stacked each one methodically out of sight. Linen cupboards, the attic, even a kitchen cabinet became home to these strange little creations, these pieces of you. Your recent passing struck something buried inside my heart, lungs, throat. That anger I felt so strongly once has long since subsided, flowed out into the paint through those brushes. As I sit here, my body and mind so calm and peaceful, I still see us, Grant, out there along the water together. We were quite the daring pair, weren't we?