

In Memoriam

Molly Tucker was thirteen years old and had never quite learned how to cry or make her face match the way her heart was feeling, so she wore an inscrutable little frown as she stood in the jellybean-colored driftwood of Mr. Healey's house and watched her father splintering the man's ribs with frantic chest compressions. She had only ever seen dead people who were already painted up and pumped full of formaldehyde, so the grey of his face, the flaccid loll of his head made him look completely hollow. His easel was in pieces, a half-finished painting of the sun setting over the bay punched through by a branch the size of her arm. The cushion of his rocking chair had burst, and clumps of wet feathers the color of ash clung to the debris that was once his porch, the shattered glass of his windows, the walls beaten to shreds by the encroaching tide. The rain had only just subsided, and the air was still heavy and stinking of mildew.

Barely a week ago she had been sitting in that rocking chair drinking tea and watching him work. His Parkinson's had been acting up that day; he always said he didn't mind the shakes because they gave his paintings more movement, but Molly could see the intensity flaring in his eyes with every brush stroke as he willed his hand not to wobble. She knew how hard he always tried to keep calm for her, but sometimes the frustration would flicker through and he'd lash out at something silly: the bees were too loud, his shirt was too polyester, the clouds were the wrong shape. That day there were three boats out on the bay, which he'd said was too many.

"There's a hurricane comin', Mr. Healey," she'd tried to explain. "Everybody's gettin' outta town."

"And you and your old man, you's runnin' scared from a little gale-wind too?"

“No, Dad says he’s got to stay here and help out so long’s there’s anyone else left. But we’s way high up by the lighthouse, so the floods and all never gets to us. Not like you down here in the rocks.”

“This is a right strong old house here, m’love. The last dozen hurricanes couldn’t take her down, and this’n won’t neither. Don’t you go worryin’ about me now.”

Then he’d tousled her hair with a wry smile and gone back to his painting. Molly had stayed until nightfall, watching her friend dot in the sparkling lights of windows on the horizon as he told story after story. She knew all the right things to say to start the old man off on one of his meandering tales about the island of Little Brigid before all the young folks got old or left for the mainland, before the storms got so bad and the fish got so scarce and the coastline started closing in. The old cove by Mr. Healey’s house was full of shadows now, a crumbling road and the half-submerged corpse of what was once piers, seaside pubs, marinas, caked in a decade of barnacles and algae. He remembered the days when tourists to the historic outport of Brigidstown would take boats out down the bay to Little Brigid and eat buttery cod cakes and lobster rolls from the fish fry and sit out on the docks under string lights singing along with whichever local folk singer had thought to bring their guitar round that day. That last evening he’d told her all the ghost stories he could remember from his days chatting people up at the harbor after a shift at the storehouse: golden jacky-lanterns dancing on the water and leading sailors astray, the ghost of Miss Annie who a hundred years ago jumped to her death off Coverley Cliff when the lighthouse keeper wouldn’t love her back, the stormy days back in the time of cod-fishing when boats would come back with nothing but a netful of strangely human bones. There used to be something special about this place, he’d said, but there’s not many left who remember.

Now there was one less. And soon what was left of him, the paintings and the porch and maybe even the body he used to live in, would be washed away with the piers and the pubs and all the other ghosts.

Gotta get out. Need something. What do I need? Can't stay here. Can't breathe.

Molly's father, drenched with sweat after twenty minutes of CPR, turned to look at his daughter. But she was already gone.

The girl scrambled away through a bramble of half-shredded pines. Branches clawed painfully at her clothes and skin, and the momentary distraction from the thing she had just seen gave her a chance to catch her breath, but then the image of her friend lying empty over the heap of his house drove back into her skull like a spike, and she dropped to her knees and vomited into the earth. Then she was back up and running again, moving on instinct alone. *Gotta get out. Gotta get out. Where am I gonna go? Can't stay here.* Brigidstown and the bay were at her back now, nothing but endless ocean up ahead. *Can't stay, can't stay,* pounding with every footfall.

Now trees gave way to patchy grasses, lost shingles, and finally the jagged rocks of Little Brigid's half-sunk peninsula. The craggy outcrop was barely ten feet wide, but long enough that from its tip everything back on the island just looked like shapes, and dangerous enough that none of the older and wiser adults in town would dare follow her out. Molly was the only child born on Little Brigid in decades, so she had about a dozen thinking spots on the dying island that were hers and hers alone, but this was her favorite. The hypnotic crash of the waves sounded like the whole world shattering apart again and again as she crawled out onto the rocks. She couldn't hear her thoughts anymore, and her breath began to settle as the familiar grey of the sea and sky folded itself around her, over her, into her.

A flash of blue. Molly thought she had imagined it, but when she looked back, it was still there. She cocked her head, crept a little closer, and it didn't budge. Something glimmering in the water, something caught in the crook of a rock where foam had gathered in a thick white clot. The thoughts of Mr. Healey she had tried to drown came pounding back to the surface as she thought of his jacky-lanterns and will-o'-the-wisps and milky seas, the ghost-lights that appeared to lost mariners in their darkest hours. Did they come from another world, wherever Mr. Healey was? He would have loved to come back as something that glowed. They were his favorite things to paint: stars, fires, lights on the water. Could it be him? A small sound escaped from her mouth, and she was off, racing catlike across the outcrop towards the blue. The closer she got, the more lights she could see: dozens of little nodes clustered together in an area the size of a dinner plate. They undulated with the tide, buffeted closer and closer to the surface with every wave. Tiny balls of light just the size of eyes. Molly bent over the water, hoping against all reason that some of them were *his* eyes, and before she knew it her mind was spiraling off into its own ghost story where the folks who died on Little Brigid before their time stuck around for a little while in the sea to make sure their old friends were okay. She knew it wasn't true, but maybe she could squeeze out a few more moments of pretending before logic caught up to her.

"How's ya gettin' on down there?" she asked the water.

The tide peeled back from the crook in the rocks, uncovering an eye. A real one.

Molly gasped and almost lost her grip on the edge of the outcrop. The eye was almost human, but bulging unnaturally from the white flesh around it, its cloudy black pupil wide and swollen. There was no spark of life behind it. Human or not, this was Molly's second corpse of the day now. Her stomach churned, but she couldn't bring herself to look away as another blue shimmer bloomed just inches from the eye and the remainder of the face bobbed to the surface.

Ghost-white. Bloated, fleshy collagen slick with slime. Round black eyes, a pair of slits for a nose, puffed-up lips just like Deidra from town who went to the mainland and got hers injected full of her own stomach fat, but the proportions were perfectly human. No hair to speak of, not even eyebrows or eyelashes. And clinging to the the center of the creature's forehead like a third eye, nestled into a perfectly-shaped dent in the skull, a thick blue worm coiled into a glowing curlicue, writhing slightly as it crested the water.

Another wave hit, wedging the head against the rock and propping it up slightly. Not just the forehead - the entire crown and back of the head were speckled with worms. Worms with no dents to nest in, so they appeared to have mercilessly burrowed into the flesh of their host. The ones closer to the forehead had only marred the skin with faint bruising, but as the rows upon rows continued down the scalp the wounds got more vicious and raw. Blue-black ooze trickled down the creature's neck from the worms at the base of its skull. And oh, god, the smell. Like a whole house full of dirty underwear, old fish, and the stuff from under Mr. Healey's sink she'd used to clean his oven that time he was posted up in bed with a broken hip and she'd tried to make dinner and almost lit the whole kitchen on fire. "You got so many brains in that head o' yours," he'd said to her when she presented him with the driest chicken either of them had ever seen, "but you got to start listenin' to 'em."

So what were all her brains saying, then? You don't touch the washed-up fish because they got germs, you don't touch anything rotting or covered in bugs. You don't touch anything dead, not a fish or a friend or an island sinking into the bay. You don't follow ghosts out to sea, or you might get lost in the fog forever. You turn and you run the other way and you stop trying to bring everything back to life all on your own.

That's what her mother would have said, before she packed a bag and spent half her savings on a boat and a train and two planes and a cab to Edmonton and never came back. That's what her father would have said, and then he'd be right back to work splinting the broken bones of another person half-crushed under their own roof because everyone else with any medical training had left to find a town with a real hospital, the irony utterly lost on him.

For barely a second, the sun peeked between the thick clouds overhead, and the sea rippled with jewels of emerald and gold. Molly watched her shadow sprawl out before her, swallowing all the light in its path save for the little blue worms. She didn't know quite how a parasite worked, but maybe if the worms were still alive, the creature was too. Maybe the worms were killing it.

The wet twig she found jammed between two nearby rocks wasn't much of a tool, but it would have to do, and she got to work prying the worms from the creature's head. At first she was careful not to touch it, but five or six in she threw caution to the wind and used her left hand to brace the skull against the rocks as she worked. It was squishy, more like the head of an octopus than a human. The uprooted worms left oozing round sucker marks in their place, and their glow dwindled as they sank into the sea, wriggling. When the twig broke, as soggy wood tends to do, Molly told herself to stop, but her hands wouldn't listen and she started reaching into the creature's soft scalp with her bare fingers and pinching the worms out like splinters.

The worm in the center of the forehead was last of all, when Molly's hands were already stained with dark slime. But something was different about this one. It was as if the creature's skin had healed over it partly, assimilating it as a part of its own body. Molly struggled to find a space to squeeze her finger in, even just her fingernail, but nothing, nothing. She stroked the worm and felt the pulsing of muscle up and down its length. It could move if it wanted to, it just didn't.

“What’s it you want?” she murmured. “You’s after eatin’ this thing’s blood, huh? That what makes you go all glowy?”

No response, of course. Molly wasn’t sure if she had expected one. She hoped not.

“I got blood, if you like. Probably better, too, since it’s alive.” She pressed the inside of her wrist to the worm. It unwound just slightly, and she swore she could feel it pressing back. If she could just get it to latch, she’d yank it out before it got a good strong grip on her, and then she’d go straight home for a wash.

“Yeah, that’s right.” She smacked the inside of her arm to make the vein stand out just like she’d seen a lady do on TV before her dad made her change the channel. The worm twitched again, visibly retracting from the creature’s scalp. “Come on, b’y, come on.”

A wave caught her straight in the eye and she swore, then apologized to the worm, then saw that the worm had burrowed straight back into the creature’s head, then swore three more times. Hunching low over the water, she squinted at the damn thing through bleary sea-stung eyes barely an inch away. “What in the *hell* -”

Like a pouncing cobra, the worm sprung straight for her face, and Molly tumbled headfirst into the sea.

Primordial darkness like time before time. We all would have frozen, but we fell into each other. They light our way, and we keep them warm. We feed them our memories, and they feed them back to us. And so the cycle continues, and no one is forgotten.

We are Leviathan, many-armed and deep, destined to hatch, live, love, and die without ever once seeing the sun. We tell stories of such a beast to our young, how it sears and bloats the flesh.

They have no reason to ascend from our sunken cities. They know what unknown lights mean: anglerfish, jellyfish, eels. The sun is not much better.

We are singers. We entwine our countless arms into blossoming whirlpools and keen from the trenches until faraway whales sang back. We write songs about shipwrecks together. We bejewel sailors' bones with gold and pearls and living baubles of luminous sea-green, and rearrange them to look like one another and laugh and laugh and laugh. We dance around hydrothermic vents, then we use them to power our finest autoships so we might visit our beloved in Mariana and Galathea and Ferradura. We sleep together on beds of shimmering blue.

But something has gone wrong. We cannot breathe to sing. Our cities are starving. The first of my beloved to go is Zhaima'a, lifeless on the fading ocean floor with a heart too weak to beat any longer. The light on Zhaima'a's forehead still shines. I press the top of my head to Zhaima'a's light and gently draw it away. It breaks my flesh, pierces my skull, and tendrils of Zhaima'a unravel into me. Dreams, moments, songs. I will keep these memories safe.

Another beloved falls the next day, and the next. We take their lights when we can and keep them safe and fed as best we're able, as word comes that Mariana, Galathea, Ferradura have fallen, one after the other. For centuries it was rare to see one of us nursing more than four or five lights. Now those of us left behind are haloed in a ghostly blue glow as we bear the weight of dozens of lives upon our shoulders. The water is sickly warm, and we move sluggishly, every breath shallow. Our minds are too weak to dream, our bodies too weak to dance.

When I see the last of my beloved go to sleep and never wake, I flee the city with what's left of my strength. But there is nowhere to go. Every inch of the deep is as desolate as the last. Every city is dead.

The lights of those I have loved are radiant in the endless night. Their voices entwine deep in my mind, weaving like arms clinging to arms.

With a final push, I propel myself out of the deep and the dark. As sunlight breaches the abyss, I let go.

Molly's head crashed through the surface of the water as she choked on fresh air. Her fingers scrabbled at her forehead, the two minds inside of her writhing. Two consciousnesses looking through the same eyes. In the seconds before she managed to wrench the worm from her head and fling it far away into the waves, Molly was fractured. She remembered frigid seawater caressing tentacles in place of legs, shallow breathing through a gilled neck. A whole world of mermaids on the ocean floor. Mermaids who were all gone now, starved and smothered out of their homes just like the fish that used to feed all of Little Brigid. Mermaids with no one left to remember them.

No one left to remember them, save for the worm she had just thrown into the ocean. What had she done? She frantically dove underwater again, scanning for any hint of blue, but the light had already sunk out of sight. It was okay. It was okay, because she would remember, or else she would remember remembering. She clutched at the images that drifted past her in her mind. A mandala of lithe squid-like arms like beads in a kaleidoscope, dancing to a song with a haunting melody - what was the melody? It had felt like sitting on the beach and imagining the waves were the ocean breathing just like her. It had felt like falling asleep in a rowboat as a little girl and trusting that she'd wake up in bed with her mother kissing her good night. But she'd already forgotten the melody. She'd already forgotten the faces of everyone the last mermaid had loved.

Like trying to hold onto a dream she'd woken up from, details were vanishing faster than she could register them.

Mr. Healey called this "the slips". On foggy days when his thoughts were slow, he'd throw out words in the middle of a story that didn't seem to connect to anything just so they'd be outside his head and the slips wouldn't get 'em. Molly would try to puzzle out the word's connection to the rest of the story before he got to the part he was saving it for. If she was clever, she could fill in the ends of his sentences: "...And now the lad's got to wear..." "...A glass eye!" He'd beam with pride and say, "Here I gets meself all worked up about me mind goin', but with a right good listener like yourself around, who needs a mind, eh?"

How long had she been out here? It was half-dark already. She'd floated away from the peninsula, but the lighthouse high on Coverley Cliff had come on, so she'd find her way home. So she swam, and in between strokes she cried out words into the darkness to hold off the slips. *City. Bones. Shimmer. Frozen. Darkness. Light. Beloved.*

These days Little Brigid has all but sunk beneath the waves. Decades ago the rising waters swallowed the peninsula, the rock beaches, the hiking trails and neighborhoods and church and storehouse and shops. All but one thing.

Coverley Lighthouse is situated at the highest point on Little Brigid. By night it beams across the bay, a beacon left over from the days when ships moored in Brigidstown. By day it's the last bastion of an island that refuses to die. There's a small house at its foot, and in that house lives an old woman. When adventurous folk take their little boats out across the bay to visit the sunken ghost town, they find her sitting on her porch, perhaps dotting sparkling window-lights

into a painting of the Brigidstown horizon. If they're lucky, she'll show them what she *swears* are the bones of a mermaid, or catch sight of an unexplained glow on the water and explain how those who've died on this island always seem to stick around. But most of the time, she just tells them about a time before all the young folks got old or left for the mainland, before the storms got so bad and the fish got so scarce and the coastline started closing in. And for the rest of their days, the eternal light of Little Brigid glimmering miles out in the bay will remind them of her words.

We were here.