

Feather/Stone

Else Fitzgerald

YOU CAN remember the feeling of being underneath. The pier boards black above you against the sun, the light slicing down into the water. It's all green wash, nothing is still. Your body lifts with each swell, and you hang off the cross beams to stop your limbs hitting the pylons. Thick with mussels and barnacles, each touch will leave a cut, a stinging slice in the salt water. There's seaweed down there too, the slime of it brushing against you as the waves dip.

A few old men drop handlines off the far end, sometimes snagging one of the small lunderick that flit around the wooden pier, and you hear them yelling at the boys doing cannon balls off the unused ship crane. The old wood smells warm and salty in the sun, and up above the gulls are fighting over left over chips and vinegary scraps of paper. Down here, everyone becomes only the echo of feet on the hot wood, the occasional shadow through the cracks. No one can see you; it's just the long corridor underneath the pier and the green water and your body hanging lightly in the waves.

There are fireworks. Your mother drags you, because it's too daggy to actually want to go to the festival ceremony. Now you're here looking, you're kind of taken in by how beautiful it is. Your mother points proudly and you see her animals, the papier-mâché zebras and giraffes she constructed over the summer, something she'd hoped you do together but didn't. It's low tide and the smooth sand stretches a long way to the water's edge where the animals stand, the beach wet and reflective. It's just past dusk and they're lighting the candles inside; the animals come to life, glowing from within, mirrored below in the shallow water. They look incredible and you make

a little ‘oh’ sound; you can’t help it. Your mother takes your hand and squeezes, but you don’t mind at all that she’s touching you, even though you’re fourteen and normally you’d die. For a minute, you don’t even care.

You’re not a local but you come and camp every year around Easter when the festival is on. Your mother is busy this year; she’s on the arts committee, so it’s harder for her to keep tabs on you, as much as she tries to get you involved in the activities. Tilly says it’s lame, so you make excuses while she stands behind you, one leg hitched, hand on hip, eyes cut away. You’ve got your own tent for the first time this year—you and Tilly. You’d had to fight your mother on that one, in private where Tilly couldn’t hear; her parents let her do whatever she wants.

Every night there are parties down on the beach. Most years, you’re kind of nobody, but this year you’ve brought Tilly and things are going to be different. Tilly makes you flutter inside; it isn’t really pleasant but it sure is something. All day at the beach, you see the boys looking at her. Sean calls to you: ‘Hey, Skinny, who’s your friend?’, and the other boys slap his salty brown back and nudge each other. You lie on your belly on the hot sand, feeling your chest inflate beneath you, expanding with every breath. Tilly is propped on her elbows, all slender limbs, one foot waving carelessly in the air above the dip and curve of her back, bronze as an old two cent coin. You rest your chin on your freckly forearms and shut your eyes.

The campsite at night is nylon and guy ropes that snag your bare legs. The domes of the tents bulging in the gloom. The light is erratic and anchorless; everyone has a torch and the beams wave wildly through the trees. You can smell sausages frying, and underneath that the muddy stink of the estuary. Every camp has a small ring of canvas chairs around a lantern, grownups sitting drinking and, further back, mostly in the shadows, the eskies sit like blue toads, their white lids helping you to spot them in the dark. You slither up to them on your tummy and ease off the lids, reaching your hand down into the melted ice water. It feels gross, cold and a little bit thicker than water should be, but better than backing down in front of Tilly. You grab what you can and come away running, the bottles dripping cold water down your bare legs. Most times it’s only milk or flat Solo but between the two of you, you end up with a couple of beers and a chunky glass bottle of Bombay. Tilly pours a few heavy slugs of it into a half full bottle of avocado juice. You didn’t even know you could get juice from an avocado. The thickness of it looks yuck to you, but Tilly tips her head back and gulps. She pushes the bottle at you, and you don’t want to but she’s watching you with those eyes, and so you tilt back. The juice feels horrible, slimy, and you can feel the burn of the gin on your tongue. You close your lips against it and pretend.

Down on the beach you stumble across the grey sand, hooked arm in arm with Tilly. The curve of the shore arcs away all the way to the bluff, dotted with orange stacks of fire. The moon's out, turning the sea wash almost incandescent, the foam fizzing on your bare feet.

'Let's swim!'

She's already out of her t-shirt, her belly a flat groove in the moonlight.

'No Tilly, don't...'

You have your father's voice in your head: *Never swim where you can't see rips, sharks become more active at night...* You trail off but you watch her from the shore anyway, flinging her hair in the waves. She comes out dripping, nearly phosphorescent in the pearl light, all white teeth and long legs.

'God, you're a wuss.'

Around the bonfire, people are only shadows, black scrapes against the light. You know most of them are older and it makes you feel like a stupid kid, so you hang back outside the circle. Tilly is fearless though, she's there with a beer bottle cocked back against her teeth, the creases under her breasts shadowy in the firelight. You feel fluid and shapeless out there in the dark, feather light. Sean has his hand around her waist. She's pushing him away but from the lean of her body you can see it's just a game, and you know what's coming. You turn away.

'You want a beer, kid?'

You are facing the waves and don't hear him at all until he's right there beside you in the dark. You're burning with it now though, and you're not even afraid.

'I'm not a kid.'

You gulp the beer down. It's warm and awful, but you are doing it and he's watching you do it and you feel good. His face is mostly hidden in the dark, but you recognise him anyway, Paul, Sean's older brother. He's eighteen or thereabouts, nut brown and hair all ropey from surfing, part of that crowd you'd give anything to belong to. You can feel the skin of his arm brushing yours in the dark. The briny smell of the ocean blows straight into your face.

And you lie because you're fourteen, and your best friend is Tilly and you hate how you are always the one who hasn't, who doesn't, who just isn't. And when you lie, it comes out easy, it makes things easier, and you can see that he is looking at you differently. And right then, with the slimy taste of the avocado juice behind your teeth, that's what you want more than anything. You feel like you did when the swell came up and your body weighed nothing in the water. That is you, that weightlessness. For once, you want to come down heavy, you want to hit the shore and explode. So you lie and you say it isn't the first time.

You come to with the light, coin grey and barely beginning. The tide is up, nearing your bare body, your clothes piled on the sand. Those beach hoppers, sand fleas your mother calls them, are flicking against your legs. There's only the dent of Sean's body pressed in the sand beside you and you pick yourself up and drag your shorts and t-shirt on over your sandy skin, clamping your teeth against the tears. There are people down on the beach even this early: a few fishermen angling their lines out into the early morning swell, a girl running right on the water line, her feet flicking up plumes of spray. There are a couple of teenagers from last night left lying around the charred hump of the bonfire. You look for Tilly, but she's not there, which means she's left you, and somehow you're not even surprised.

You will have to face your mother back at the campsite, but you don't have enough of yourself yet. You look to the blue water and wade out. You surrender to the swell, wanting your body to just hang weightlessly with the waves.