

Hide

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The water called to her again, she could feel it in her bones, in her skin, in her heart. The lake by her family's cottage was the only place she had ever felt truly herself. She would stay in the water until her lips were blue and her fingers pruned. She would stay in the water until her father and her grandfather chided her and made her get out. Only her great-grandmother Esther had ever understood her.

"When I was a girl, I would play in the ocean waves and let the kelp wrap around me. I would spend hours chasing the sand lance through the shallows. In the summer when the whales arrived, we would dance and sing such joyous songs! The ocean is where we belong, Stella."

The old woman had never liked talking about having to leave the island with her husband to search for work, and Stella knew that her grandfather had never gotten along with his mother. His mood would sour whenever Stella had spent time with Esther and there would be no talking to him for days afterwards. Her father was no help in solving the puzzle either. Any attempts to find out why, only awarded her with a sigh and a shake of the head. As much as she loved her family, Stella also didn't understand them at all. She wished that she had asked her great-grandmother more questions about her life, about why they hadn't moved back home ever, and most of all about the strange tension in the family.

When Esther passed away, she left everything to Stella. For the most part it wasn't much, some clothing and jewelry, kitchen supplies, a rocking chair,

but there was also the deed to a small property on the island. Her father insisted that it would be run down beyond repair, not even worth the trip to go check on it. He thought that maybe they could find someone local online who would be willing to go out and see if the house was even still standing. Months went by with Stella asking her father if he had looked into it, but he always put it off again.

So Stella saved what she could from her part-time job, sold some of the less fashionable jewelry that Esther had left her, and resolved to go see the property herself when the semester at college ended. She hoped that the tiny, used vehicle she had bought would survive the trip across the country. At the very least, she wanted to make it there, even if the car's engine gave out and she couldn't make it back. She could feel the pull, stronger than ever before, calling her to the water. Calling her to the ocean, she realized, remembering her great-grandmother's words from all those years ago.

The morning she left, her father stood on the porch with his cup of coffee, sighed and shook his head. He wished her a safe trip and went back inside before her car had even pulled out of the driveway. She drove eastward, with the sun shining brightly in her eyes each morning, beckoning and mocking simultaneously. The hot, dry air gave way to cool dampness as she got closer. Each night when she found somewhere to park, she felt safer and more at home. Her tiny car was cramped inside with luggage, but Stella managed to curl up and sleep regardless.

Her dream that final night before she got to the ferry terminal carried her through a world of water, where fish zipped above her like birds in the sky and the land below was distant and inconsequential. She allowed herself to drift with the currents, twisting her long body as she marvelled at the freedom she felt. She propelled herself upwards, scattering fish as she swam, nostrils flaring as she broke the surface.

She woke up to a world ensconced in fog. The air was heavy with the scent of rotting seaweed and the salt in the breeze was tangy. She reveled in the new smells, eyes closed, nose pointed to the air as she leaned against her car. She stayed like that for almost an hour before the sun had burned away most of the fog and the wind had changed direction. It was time to go. She was

nearly there.

The drive to the ferry terminal was uneventful. Stella watched the gulls play in the upwells of air coming off the ocean. She imagined that she could see the wind under their wings as they soared, the eddies swirling from their wingtips as they seemingly balanced in place high above the water. She walked to the water's edge, longing to get in. The acrid sting of the diesel fumes coming from the ferry reminded her that this was not the place for her. Not here, not yet. The crew started yelling out orders to waiting vehicles, coordinating them to safely get aboard. Stella glanced back up at the gulls in the darkening sky before returning to her own car.

The little car's engine sputtered to life, and Stella drove forward into the belly of the ship, her car coming to rest between two large pickups for the trip across the water to the island. She got out and stretched, reaching her arms up to the metal ceiling above and arching backwards. Her back cracked, releasing the tension after almost a week of driving. One more day and she would be home, she told herself. She followed the other passengers through the ship's lower deck up to the passenger area. The sun shone through the windows of the viewing deck and Stella eagerly went to a window to watch as the ferry pulled away from shore.

Stella sat in one of the little plastic chairs by the window and pulled her legs up under her. The gentle shifting of the vessel in the waves brought her such peace and she closed her eyes. Leaning against the glass, she aligned her breathing with the sway of the ship. It felt so natural to her. The tranquil movement had the perfect rhythm. She felt the corners of her lips pull into a smile.

She didn't know how long she sat like that for, but it was nearly dawn when she opened her eyes again. She startled when she noticed how few people there were now. Had she missed disembarking? A second later, she realized that most people would have rented rooms, or chosen to sleep in the more comfortable lounge chairs. The few other passengers near her leaned against each other or lay sprawled across several chairs. She stood, eager to find a bathroom and get ready for the day.

The ferry slowed and lurched awkwardly as it prepared to dock. Stella

watched the docking process, barely aware that she was needing to brace against the roll of the vessel now. She shuddered in anticipation, her skin practically crawling as she waited to head down to her car. She was so close. The only thing left now was the four-hour drive to her property. Her property! She couldn't believe that it was finally happening. She hoped that her father had been wrong and that the house would still be livable. The GPS on her phone chirped that she was only 10 kilometers away now. She wasn't even sure there would be a road all the way into the property, or if she would have to trek her things in on foot. Best to see what condition everything was in first, she decided.

She pulled off the highway onto a dirt road when her GPS chirped again. The road lead gently downhill and seemed to end at the ocean. Stella could tell that the beach was rocky, even from this distance. She drove carefully over the uneven ground, dodging holes and overgrown brush. This didn't seem like a terribly good sign. There was still nothing suggesting that a house was somewhere down this road either. Almost at the very end of the road, there appeared to be a place between two rather large trees that may have once been a driveway.

Stella stopped then and got out of the car. She knew she ought to go straight to the house and start making decisions, but the water called to her. The rocks of the beach were smooth and round from the waves washing over them. Further down where the low tide was gently lapping the land, the rocks gave way to coarse granules. Stella scooped up a handful. Certainly not quite sand, but not unpleasant to touch either. She giggled and kicked her shoes off, brushed her hand clean on her jeans, peeled her socks off and rolled her pants up to mid-calf.

There was no countdown or nerves. Stella stepped into the frigid water and kept going, instantly forgetting that she had only meant to get her feet wet. She was waist-deep when her next step landed on seaweed. She gasped at the texture and tried to grip the slick plant with her toes. A sudden snort near her made her head shoot up. Less than ten feet away were a couple of seals. They peered at her with their big dark eyes, and she peered back. The one on the right, perhaps braver than his companion, sank down under the

water and Stella felt his whiskers on her ankle a moment later.

She laughed aloud at the ticklish sensation and offered her hands to the second seal as he came to inspect her as well. The two seals played chase around her for a time, and kept turning back to look at her, almost as if inviting her to join their game. More than anything, Stella wished she could join them: forget her worries and responsibilities on land. Slip the rest of the way into the ocean, roll with the waves, chase after fish together, spend each day in a joyous celebration.

Stella looked back up the beach at her little car, packed full of all her worldly possessions, and went to turn around. She was ready to face what lay before her. The two seals barked in dismay but followed her as she went slowly back to shore. They clambered awkwardly over the rocks with her, snorting their displeasure. Her frozen muscles were uncooperative in getting back to her car and she stopped to rest. She watched the seals seemingly convene on what to do in their odd barks and head bobs. She watched them slump their way back down the beach. And she watched them disappear into the water.

Stella was alone. She felt silly for it, but she broke down in tears. It was like losing Esther all over again. She sobbed on the ground, releasing her loss and grief. Her great-grandmother should have been with her on this trip. She resented that her family had been so disinterested in helping her with this. She hated that no one had even offered to join her. Stripped of the magic of the moment before, Stella hauled herself to her feet and trudged towards the space between the trees where she suspected the house might be.

The driveway to the house was in even worse shape than the road. The overgrowth covered most of the track and there were several small, downed trees across the path ahead of her. Through the thick brush, Stella could just make out what seemed to be the house. She held her breath as she got closer. The seed of doubt that her father had planted in her started pressing on her mind. What did she know about deciding if a place was livable or not? Her wet jeans were becoming increasingly uncomfortable, and she wondered if she hadn't grazed herself on some poisonous plant. Her bare feet stung from the sharp rocks and sticks she was walking on.

The two walls of the building that she could see from where she stood

seemed fine. There was moss growing on the roof, and vines growing up the siding, but it was a house. She was almost afraid to go to the door, there had been no key with the deed, and Stella didn't want to have to get in by breaking a window. She stepped forward, reaching her trembling hand for the doorknob. It creaked and grinded as she turned it. The door groaned when she pushed, but it was unlocked. She released the breath she had forgotten she was holding and let out a big sigh of relief. She pushed harder on the door, and then pressed her shoulder against it. Slowly, the old hinges relaxed, powdered rust flaked to the ground as the door opened.

The house was small and simple. All four walls were intact, as was the ceiling above her. The floorboards creaked and each step sent up a puff of dust. There was a fireplace on one side and a small kitchenette in the corner. The opposite corner held a bed. Stella was certain it would break if she tried to sit on it. If she could get a fire started, then she would have light for the night and a way to dry her pants. She pulled out her phone and turned on the flashlight, hopeful that the chimney wouldn't be caved in or caked in debris.

She knelt and twisted around, trying to see up the flue and glad that there were no raccoons on the island. Coming face to face with a raccoon while inside a chimney made her shudder. All she could see above her was a metal plate blocking off the rest of the chimney. She frowned and pressed on it, hoping this didn't mean the fireplace was unusable. It gave under her touch, but only slightly. It felt as though there was something blocking it from moving.

Stella crawled fully into the fireplace and pried on the bit of metal. There was definitely something above it. Irritated now, she started wiggling the plate, pushing and prying, aiming to dislodge whatever it was. She absolutely did not want to go check from above. She wondered if the roof would hold her weight. She sighed, resigned to go do what she could. Wiggling out of the fireplace backwards, she bumped her head on the brick and cursed her luck.

Outside the house, she pondered how to even get up to the roof. She circled the house and decided on climbing a tree growing up against the back wall. It would have to be cut down if she wanted to make sure the foundation didn't crack, but for now it would act as her ladder. She climbed until she could see

the full roof, and then gently began putting her weight down on it. She belly crawled across the mossy tile to the chimney and gingerly got to her hands and knees. She pulled the chimney cap off roughly and shone her flashlight down.

The flue was relatively clean and at the bottom where the metal plate was, she could see folds of something that looked like short dark fur. The thought that it might be from a trapped animal made her grimace. It was clear that there was nothing that she could do about it from up here, so she jammed the chimney cap back into place and shimmied her way back across the roof.

Back on solid ground, Stella wondered if she had anything in her car that she could use to hook whatever was blocking the damper. She didn't want to burn the place down by ignoring it. There was wire on one of the picture frames she had, but it would be too flimsy to be useful. She glanced around for anything that could be used as a makeshift hook and nearly smacked herself in the forehead. She was standing in the forest, there were plenty of bent sticks around. She grabbed one that looked likely to make a good tool and trotted back inside.

Already the house was darkening inside, and Stella was eager to soon have a fire going. Her jeans were now cold, wet, salty, stiff, dirty, and smeared with moss from the roof. She fought them off herself, tired of feeling trapped in them. She shook herself with the instant relief and set about her task of removing the obstruction. She crawled back into the fireplace so that she could see what she was doing and slid the stick between the damper and the flue. She turned the stick slowly and began wiggling it until she felt it make contact. She wiggled some more until she was confident she had a hold of it, and then gently pulled.

Once the stick was almost fully out, Stella could see the tiniest bit of something peeking over the damper. Some sort of fabric perhaps, she thought, brushing it with her fingertips. It was incredibly soft, silver-grey in colour, and furry. She slowly worked it out of the chimney with her hands until it pooled onto her lap. She unfolded the material. It was a seal skin. She felt all the hair on her body raise and her breath caught in her throat. It seemed to whisper to her in a language she had never heard but knew all the same.

She wrapped it around herself and smiled. Stella suddenly knew there was no need to build a fire at all.

“The ocean is where we belong, Stella.”

* * *

Meghan Donovan came to Newfoundland as a teenager to study at Memorial University in the Marine Biology Program. The island has since brought her back for work, where her passion for the ocean has led her to a research career in the fisheries. Fiction literature allows her to combine her love of the beauty of reality with the magic of fantasy and folklore.