

Falling, falling, falling.

Her cold face pierces the back of my mind, and a shiver slips up my back. I jolt upright in bed, breathing heavy, sweating. I sit there for a moment, gathering my senses, and I long for her. Her soft voice, her warm touch, her steady gaze. I put a hand to my head and wonder where she is now, and why I can't shake her. She's haunting me. In my dreams she's persistent in asking me why I let her go. Well? I ask myself. How could you have lost her?

I lower my head back onto the pillow, but sleep doesn't come. It's been almost four months to the day now since she left, and it hasn't gotten much easier. I lie still, try to close my eyes. But all I can see is Mary.

In the morning Mother's baking bread and the sweet smell makes its way to my nose as I come down over the stairs. I wander into the kitchen, and she looks up at me when she sees me. She smiles, but there's pity in her eyes. She knows I haven't been sleeping again. Raising me has taken a lot out of her, aged her a bit, but she's doing pretty good. She's got a young face, and a thin figure. The bread's in the oven now, and mom leans back against the counter and lights a cigarette. She's wearing a cotton dress that she's had forever.

"Good morning John, honey", she says softly, and by her sweet voice you'd never say she's been smoking since I was a youngster.

"Morning Mother", I reply. The kettle's on, and I pour myself a cup of tea from the stovetop before sitting down at the kitchen table. Mom stands there watching me, smoking away.

"It's Saturday. Are you going out with Owen?" she asks me, and I nod. It used to

be the three of us who went on together. “Don’t come home too late. Your father needs a hand with the wood.”

Winter’s coming on fast, it’s getting colder every day. Mom’s got the woodstove roaring in the corner, and given the warmth of it I don’t really want to go out. But I told Owen I’d meet him.

I finish my tea and step out into the porch. I reach for my boots and start lacing them, then grab my coat. Before I leave Mom buttons it up for me, won’t let me out the door until she does. She looks up at me, I’ve been taller than her for about a year now. Mary loved her, they hit it right off, and it’s not hard to see why.

“Alright, go on now.” She says, sending me out the door. “Don’t be too late.” I wave to her as I run down over the back steps. She stands in the doorway and watches me trek up the dirt road.

I make my way toward the cliffside. It’s beautiful out this way, even in the grey overcast. Mom and Dad have both lived here their entire lives, and haven’t seen much else. I never tell them that I plan on getting out of here as soon as I’m old enough. As nice as it is, it’s no spot for the young man I’m going to be in a couple of years. The place is haunting me, too. No matter where I go, all I can see is the girl. We used to walk up this way, all three of us, Mary and Owen and I. We’d be standing on the edge of the world. She’d make me feel warm, even if it was freezing cold out.

The wind whistles and I pull my coat up around my neck. I reach the cliffside and see Owen waiting for me on the beach. I run down to meet him.

The waves are crashing over the rocks, and they're making me nervous. I don't like the look of them, the black, icy water. We're safe here on the beach, but it still troubles me to watch the tide coming in.

Owen smiles at me. He's throwing little rocks in the water, in high spirits, happy as a lark. Maybe it's been easier for him to forget. He wasn't there. Didn't I ever tell him the water has a tendency to set me off a bit? He should know.

But he doesn't gather it from my uneasy expression, either. He just keeps on tossing them in. I walk over towards him, bitter wind in my face. It used to be the three of us together, all the time. Now there's just me and him.

"Hey John, buddy." He says good-naturedly. A bit of my nervousness slips away. He's such a good guy, really he is. One of my best friends since we were only children. When Mary was around the three of us did everything together, always running around exploring, laughing. And even when Mary was gone, he never pressed the issue, but I knew he was listening if I needed him. It must have been hard for him. He's a real friend.

"Hey," I bend down and pick up a rock of my own. I fire it into the water, leaning back and swinging my arm, watching it fly and hit the darkness a good ways away.

"So where've you been?" Owen asks me, "You missed a tough game the other night, we could've really used you."

I feel a pang of guilt in my chest and pick up another rock. I didn't mean to let the team down, but I really didn't feel up to going out. I was tired, I wasn't myself. I shrug.

"Wasn't feeling too good." I reply, "I wish I could've been there." I do, too. But I

wouldn't have been much good to them, the state I was in.

“Brian did something to his ankle, busted it up,” Owen tells me, “won’t be able to play for a while.”

“Jesus.” Brian’s one of our best players. It’ll be rough without him.

I’ve got a handful of rocks now, so has Owen. For a moment I’m distracted and I don’t notice the tide coming in. It licks at the toes of my boots, and I take a step back, not just annoyed by the water in my shoes, but unnerved by the touch of the ocean. I drop the rocks from my fist. My fear must be visible in my face, because Owen lets go of his handful and looks at me, concerned.

“Let’s get out of here.” He says, turning to leave. But I stop him.

“No, it’s fine.” I take a couple steps back and sit down on the rocky beach. Owen follows and kneels down next to me. He reaches into his pocket and hauls out two cigarettes, lights them both and hands one to me. I put it to my lips and inhale, calming my nerves a little. We sit in silence for a moment, and I’m glad for his company. The sky is the same troubling grey as the water, same as the smoke coming from my lips, and the beach rocks around me. It’s the same colour as Mary’s skin after she went under.

“I miss her too, John.” Owen says warmly, and I nod. He pauses. “Do you want to tell me what happened out there?” He’s heard the story before, so has everyone around here, but I realize with a bit of a shock that he’s never heard it from me. It’s hard to speak, the guilt is pushing its way up into my throat, but he deserves to know.

“It was the weather, Owen,” I tell him, “We didn’t know it was coming.”

“Your father’s boat, wasn’t it.” I nod in confirmation.

“The waves were getting high, we were a fair ways from shore. We tipped

over, and I just couldn't find her. For a moment I thought I saw her, her face falling down under the water." I remember the day they did find her, washing in on the beach. I often forget how hard it was on Owen.

I desperately need his forgiveness. I lost her. I loved her. She was his friend. I look over at him. He's staring out into the ocean, still smoking his cigarette. For a minute I think I see a tear in his eye, but I can't tell if it's just from the wind in his face.

"It's not your fault, John. No one blames you. I don't blame you." I nod slowly, and I remember why his forgiveness is so important to me. The three of us were all best of friends for a long while. We both fell in love with her, I remember now. I knew Owen was hurt. He'd never say so, but still...

We thought about Owen the day we went out, the day I lost her, but we wanted to be alone, just the two of us. Does this make him the lucky one?

I look up at my friend again, and this time he returns my stare. He reaches out and hugs me, and I hug back.

"I'm sorry," I tell him.

"Jesus, John." He squeezes me tight, then pulls away gently. We sit in silence for a moment. The cliffside brushes up against the beach. Wherever I turn I see Mary, and I see her falling under.

"I've got to be heading home," I say finally, "Dad needs a hand." We stand and head up to the main road.

I look back. I never thought I could live away from the ocean. Now I'm not so sure.