

Water to Water

Father Jay Hulney was a Gemini, born in May first thing in the morning under an auspiciously clear sky. Sailing weather. It was his arrival into this world that made him intelligent and well-balanced, as well as predisposed toward summer weather and the color and taste of oranges. His older sister Isa Hulney, on the other hand, was a Virgo, born in September on a rainy day with unseasonable wind. They were ordained to be opposite by the very stars themselves, Father Jay said, and it was no less than fate that drove them apart.

From his first memory, they fought constantly. Father Jay smashed berries between the pages of her books and buried them in the sand while she napped; Isa pushed him off the tallest slide before he was ready and laughed when he stood up with swollen red patterns of mulch on his knees. He took both of the packed lunches on the counter one day and ate Isa's tuna sandwich until he felt sick and vomited on a teacher's tennis shoes. When he came home from the pre-school group's trip to the wharf, she was waiting for him with a granite rock and a handful of ruined toy trucks. He clawed at her shoulder and screamed; she bit his fleshy hand and left a ring of marks.

They didn't stop until the day Isa came home with a cut on her eyelid that took a week to heal. For seven days, she stared resentfully at Jay from the bed, one side of her face covered in gauze like a reveler's mask, watching him stumble around

the house and walk to school alone. When the bandage came off, Father Jay remembered, her eye was dilated so wide that he couldn't see any blue in it at all, just black, and he burst into tears from horror and shame.

“And do you know what happened next?” Father Jay said. His voice grew soft and he crouched down on the wooden floorboards in order to meet our eyes. This was my favorite part of catechism class - when Father forgot the lists of saints and prayers we had to learn and lost himself in a story, his double-chin wobbling like a flame. The idea that these moral reveries were intentional never occurred to me at the time. “She forgave me. Yes, she blessed me with her forgiveness for what I had done - forgave me, her brother, who had nearly blinded her with my jealousy and spite. There is no greater virtue than forgiveness.”

This was my second favorite of his lessons. My favorite was one he told after the boat came. Like the rest of us, he was talking about death that day.

“The death of the mortal body and the ascension of the immortal soul is like the distinction between the earth and the sea,” Father Jay said. He looked down at us, his face round as the moon and with the same transfixing pull. “One breaks down; the other only changes. Think of it. The soul is indestructible. Earth to earth, dust to dust. But water to water to water.”

The boat came in pieces first - I collected the refuse of the S.S. New Shoal in a jar stowed under my nightstand: bits of red plastic, slats of wood, round shingles of

metal hammered from fruit cans. It was a summer shipwreck off the coast, my father said, and there had to be good money from any cargo that washed up. Another high tide would bring everything in. This was the town's secret economy - we lived off the brutality of the sea as much as we profited from its bounty of cod and hagfish. My father and Lenny caught enough during the week to keep us all in rent, but for anything extra, we relied on what washed up.

"I hope it's peaches again," I said on Saturday. "Cans and cans of peaches."

"Radio says she was shipping out from a bead factory in China," he said. "I think you'll have to wait for those peaches, Kit-Kat."

"The store has peaches," I reminded him.

"That they do." My father sipped his coffee and extended his cigarette over the table, drooping it at an angle until the ash fell. I smushed the pile of dark dust with the toe of my flip-flop and wondered if the embers would burn if they fell on my foot.

"And I have allowance," I hinted. "Thirty-two dollars."

"No. You shouldn't spend your allowance on peaches."

"Why?"

"You spend your allowance on -- other things. Not food. Something you like. A doll. A new blouse."

"I don't like dolls anymore. Those are old. I like peaches," I sighed. My flip-flops scritchd darkly on the kitchen floor. I tried to trace my initials in the ash, but it just looked clumsy. "And it's my money to do what I want."

"Hey, hey, don't make a mess. Go get an ashtray if you're going to do that."

“Sorry.”

“Tomorrow I’ll get some peaches,” my father said. “There’s no reason for a child to buy groceries.”

“I’m not a child.”

“Okay.”

“Dad -“ I kicked him under the table. “I’m not!”

“Okay, okay.”

He finished his cigarette and I finished my cereal. We walked down to the rocks under the cliffs together, my father leading with a bucket and a pool-skimming net. Even on land, he retained the instincts of a fisherman – he moved with a quiet, furtive motion, as if he might frighten something off. The air was cold that day, and I remember wishing I had worn better shoes. Our neighbors were there, and Lenny, and a crowd of old fishermen from Lee’s Wharf who had heard about the wreck on their grainy portable radios. The gulls called us trespassers and thieves as we waited for the high tide to pull our treasure in.

“I’ll make you a necklace,” my father said. “With all those little glass beads.”

The crowd on the beach cheered when the first shadow appeared on the horizon – all but the Lee’s Wharf men, who whistled sharply as if bringing a dog to heel. My father stepped forward, bucket clenched in his hand.

“What’s that?”

A bundle of white rags rolled toward us in the rising wave.

“Go home.” My father shoved me away from the shore. “Katy, go home.”

“What is it?”

“Go home, Katy. Go. Lenny – take her.”

At Mass, Father Jay said a prayer for the captain of the S.S. New Shoal and her crew. A group of men from town gathered afterward outside the church to comb the wharf beach for more bodies, my father among them. They found torn clothes, furniture, ID cards, an infant’s pacifier. The search came to a halt when someone discovered a set of compasses and a hand-drawn map marked in Chinese.

“Completely irresponsible,” my father said. He was soaking wet up to the thighs of his trousers, but he didn’t change out of them. “No radar, no real maps. They were steering by sight and sky alone. No wonder they ran aground out there.”

“But that’s what you do,” I said. “You and Lenny don’t use maps when you take the boat out.”

“That’s different,” he said. “I know the beach. I know the shore. This was foolish. These people were desperate to get out, I guess.”

“Were they running away?”

“Yeah.”

“Why didn’t they get a passport?”

“It’s complicated,” my father said. “Sometimes there’s no choice.”

Another high tide pushed more debris out, and my father took up his bucket and net once again. I thought about following him, but he had forbid me from going near the cliffs while they were still finding bodies. Frustrated, I went upstairs to my room and looked over my collection. Sea-glass, ground cloudy and harmless by the

water. Lumps of salt-covered resin used for curing rope. Countless silver hooks. When I shook the jar, the washed-up trinkets made the sound of the offering plate at church. God was an Aquarius, I thought. This made sense to me. That was why he was so changeable and mysterious, so noble and proud that he would sink all those ships just to see what they carried inside.

Father Jay's sister Isa never believed in God, he told us. She believed only in her pagan magic, in the stars and their alignments, in the planets and their houses. She believed that she was a Virgo and he was a Gemini, and that was all. God - who hung the stars and sculpted the planets - was a myth. That was the one thing they kept fighting about, even after their days of fistfights and hairpulling was over. After Father Jay joined the seminary, the divide between them only widened. Isa said he was stupid. Father Jay said she was short-sighted. They didn't talk for a year after Father Jay announced that he was called to the priesthood. With their mother and father gone, there was nobody who could make them reconcile anymore.

But the last part of taking up the cloth, Father Jay said, meant searching for forgiveness from God. He couldn't do that until he was forgiven by his sister. So he drove from the seminary to their parents' old house in Madox and, for the second time in his life, lay down his guilt at her feet. She said the stars had predicted that he would come home.

"She was a good person," Father Jay said. "That's something that I remember every day. But we cannot live by the stars and not their Maker. We must have faith

in God – who alone protects us, who alone forgives us, who is the shepherd of our hearts. My sister was lost without that faith. She fell victim to the storm.”

What storm, someone asked. A hurricane?

I thought of the white rags and my father in his wading boots and shivered.

A month passed. The weather was getting colder and the stars were shifting subtly over us, guiding us forward. School was back in session. By then I had almost forgotten that day with the body on the beach. My collection had expanded - I searched the rocky shore by the wharf every day after catechism class, eager for a sign from my Aquarius God. In the stinging bitterness of the saltwater, the ocean gave me hints: odd coins, seashells, and once a little flat bowl painted with red leaves that I generously offered to my father as a new ashtray.

“What’s this?” he said.

“From the beach.”

He sniffed the bowl. “It doesn’t have gull crap on it, does it?”

“Nope. I washed it.”

“Nice. Thank you.” He turned it over in his hands, looking pleased. He’d been in a good mood lately - he had a kind of prideful sway to his walk, and he ironed his shirts before church now, humming at the mirror. “It’s pretty, isn’t it? You made a nice find.”

“I’ve found more,” I said. “Money and shells and things.”

“Yeah?”

“The cliffs are the best place to look,” I said. “Things always get wrecked there.”

My father frowned at his cigarette. “Those rocks are dangerous.”

“Only if you’re a boat.”

“Still...” He rubbed his fingers over the plate, circling and circling with a dry raspy sound. “Stay away from the rocks, alright?”

“I’ve been there tons before --“

“Dammit, I said stay away, Katy.”

I stared at my math book resentfully for forty minutes without actually reading any of it. Capricorns, I thought. Always volatile, always quick to argue. Easily discouraged and often negative to others.

“You have to understand,” my father said. He had no trouble picking up a fight again after any stretch of time, continuing as if nothing had happened. “It scares me. It scares me.”

Father Jay had questioned his faith once, he said to us. It was around the time his parents died, and he was driving alone by the cliffs. He felt a despairing weight settle over him and pulled over right there to call his sister. Isa never answered - she always turned her phone off when she was teaching - and in her absence Father Jay had nowhere to turn.

“My sister did not answer me, but my Heavenly Father did instead.” He nodded as he said it, as if assessing his own words and finding the argument sound. What exactly occurred between Father Jay and God, he never clarified. I imagined at the time it was a voice from the clouds, or perhaps a wave from the cliffs below, the clash of the earth and the sea giving Father Jay his new life.

Searching by the cliffs for a new piece of glass or a forgotten toy, I looked up sometimes in the hopes that God would give me a sign like Father Jay. Tell me a secret, I whispered at the rumbling sky. Tell me what happens next.

In school that year we learned about the marine biosphere, about Edgar Allen Poe, about the First World War. My first group project involved drawing and labeling a map of Canada with its most important natural landmarks. The day before it was due, I spent several hours at Gretchen DiRasio’s house, tracing a perfect web of tributaries in her new blue glitter pens and talking about the neighborhood boys. It was late when I walked home.

I remember what the ocean looked like that evening more clearly than I remember what happened next. The water was calm, low-tide, a kind of sweaty-grey topped with silver. Three sailboats in the distance, and a passenger ferry taking the island commuters home, its engine clattering away.

The house was dark. In the kitchen, my father was sitting with Rosalyn Stewart on his lap, pulling her pink underwear down as she squirmed.

“Shit,” she said. “Shit, Garret.”

“Beautiful.”

“Garret, she’s here.”

He pushed her away and scrambled up, his mouth and chin red, buttoning his shirt without looking at me. Rosalyn froze, then picked up her purse on the floor and swept past me, her shoulder hitting mine without an apology. The screen door slammed.

“Katherine,” my father said. “Kit-Kat. It’s alright.”

“No.”

“It’s okay.”

“She’s married.”

“She’s not happy,” he said quickly. “She’s not happy, and she wants to leave him. She wants to leave Lenny. Madox. Her children.”

“So?”

“She’ll be gone,” he said. “She’s staying because I’m here. Are you listening? She’s staying because I’m here. Those kids have a mother because I’m here.”

“It’s not alright. She’s a whore. You’re - you’re doing it with a slut.”

“Kit-Kat -“

“Don’t touch me.”

“You can’t tell Lenny,” he said. His voice was splinter-thin. “God, you can’t tell anyone. Please. You can’t. I’m sorry.”

The anger uncurled in me, a burst-open itch, and took hold of my mouth.

“I forgive you,” I said. The power of my cresting anger made me gasp. My father, crying himself, mistook it for a sob and grabbed me close, poking at the wounded thing that had settled under my ribs.

“I forgive you,” I repeated, just to feel it bite.

When the time came, my father led me to the front of the church, his hand trembling on my shoulder. I waited in line behind the Hull twins and the oldest Stewart boy at the front of the church to be called by our new names.

“Katherine Bridget Hanrahan.”

Large and pale as a cloud, Father Jay traced a cross in oil on my forehead, right beside the strange sore spot that became my first pimple a few days later. Then he tipped the tasteless wafer into my mouth and held out the chalice of wine.

I sipped and immediately sputtered against the bitter taste, like always. Benjamin Hull laughed. Without a word, Father Jay dabbed my mouth with his cassock sleeve.

“Haven’t acquired the taste, then,” he murmured. “You’re a good one, Katy.”

For the first time, I thought I saw a kind of sadness settle in Father Jay’s face. He chucked me under the chin once, twice. Perhaps I am misremembering it; perhaps I am confusing what I saw, given what I know now: how he died a year later in the house of Aries, same way as his sister did it – sleeping pills. The local coroner wrote on the certificate that it was a massive heart attack, out of respect for his profession. We had no idea it would happen; it was a secret Father Jay kept from all

of us, even from God. Then the moment was gone – the expression on his face folded, became smooth once again.

“You have been made His child by water and by the Holy Spirit. “

“Amen.”

“May He give you the courage to profess the true Faith.”

“Amen.”

“Peace be with you.”

“And also with you.”

Looking out into the audience, I saw my father sitting in the back row, staring up at the church ceiling, his face lit from below like a painting. Lenny’s face was turned to the side; Rosalyn was looking at my father. They made a constellation, the three of them - the four of us. Closing my eyes, I knew we were steering by sky and sight alone now, all of us together in the waves, the shifting water, waiting for the tragedy that would make us found.