

Wishful Thinking

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Beginning life again at the expense of the one you love

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Jump in, she says, it will renew you. I dive into the blue water. It's cold. English seawater is always cold. It is dark down here, I can't see, but I can feel. I feel her splashing beside me, reaching for my hand. Her fingers are so small. Make a wish, she says. I like her, but I'm scared. Wouldn't you be scared diving from a cliff into this floating world of darkness? I have to pull away. Her fingers slip from mine. Don't let go! The words are faint, a cry, a scream. I'm soaring for the surface, lungs bursting, legs kicking. The water breaks over my head and I laugh; that boyish laugh she doesn't like. She says it doesn't suit me. Her fingers. So small. Where is she? I let go, now she is gone. Where is she? I never promised to hold on to her, we never agreed. She said jump in, I jumped. Now I can't see her. Can no longer feel her. She has vanished. I know I will never see her again. The funeral is a black affair, so I go in jeans and a red sweatshirt. August can be awful cold. I sit at the back as someone reads out a poem and an empty coffin perches at the front. Jump in, she said. She never told me what would happen next. The family glare at me, like it is my fault, like I made her into a carefree spirit. I'm just a boy on holiday down here. Not a boy, she says, a man. Why can I still feel her hands on me, those bony fingers? They were cold like death before she slipped from my grasp. She was already dead, I'll tell them, not my fault. She was dead when I let go. Is that better? When it's over only one person will look me in the eye. An uncle perhaps, he is old enough, balding, crooked teeth, a grin close to a leer. Here, he throws something to me. I catch warily like it's a grenade. She's got no use for it now, might as well give it to you. We always said it would be the death of her. It isn't a friendly gesture; he looks like a man who has thrown me a knife or a bottle of poison. He seems to be saying take it, die from it. What will it matter now she is gone? I open my hand and see a set of keys, but he is already walking away and I can't ask where they lead to. Slowly, like my brain is finally waking up from a watery coma I realise there is a label on them. I know the place. She never took me there but she talked about it. Her haven, her solace. You have to have a place for peace, she says, her blue eyes twinkling and that soft dimple forming in the corner of the mouth, you have to know where you belong. What you running from anyway? Life, I say, life in general. I ran to the edge of the world, or at least as far as I could get. She had found me on the edge of the cliffs, but on that occasion I had not intended to surface when I dived in. I wasn't scared then. I was numb. Renewal, she says, never heard of it? Means starting afresh. Change your life, change who you are, start now,

this instant, I'll help. Who is she? I ask. I don't know, she laughs, haven't decided yet. I stepped back from the cliffs that day. The beach hut is not huge, none of them are. Today is bleak grey, like the winter that is coming soon. Seagulls are grounded, glaring at the few walkers for morsels of food. The beach hut is blue, but it looks black in the dim light. I can see where the paint work needs repairing. I'll do that, I say, voicing my intentions to no one but a yellow-eyed seagull that wanders past. The door unlocks easily. A raw scent of seaweed and salt. Hate salt, she says, messes up all my mechanics. Huh? I say. Don't pull that face, you look half-witted. Mechanics, my bike. I have a bike, oh but you are thinking chains and shopping baskets and a bell that goes like this. She makes a sound like, ding-a-ling. No I mean a real bike, with an engine. I roar, man, I roar. Maybe that's who I am, a lion. Lioness, I say. The bike is right before me, shrouded in one of those storage cloths. Makes it look like it is in mourning to. I pull back a corner. Touch a shiny strip of metal with the lightest of caresses. Don't be scared. She isn't coming back, but I'll look after you. Renewal is like when a bird takes flight, she says stretching out her arms like wings, ever took flight? No, I say, too grounded. Take flight, she purrs, time to start again, time to be someone new. Who are you, she asks? Don't know, I say, haven't decided. She laughs. I pull the bike from the hut, out onto the concrete of the beach path. People glare. Who is he to have that thing down here? Go away, I think, leave me and her in peace. I pull off the cloth and stare at the black and chrome monster before me. Shiny curves, silky leather. Its front wheel tilting towards me coyly. She named it Heaven Sent. I think you are an angel, I tell her shyly. Nah, just a girl. See, I'm all bone. She takes my hand and grips it hard. She is so cold to the touch. Dead already, I think. I only stopped you because you were good-looking, you know, she smirks. Ever swum naked? In that? I point at the frosty ocean. She laughs, makes you come alive, I'll show you one day, the day you want to start again. What about today? I say. Nah, you aren't ready yet. I tinker with the bike in a haphazard manner. I don't drive, you see, I don't do anything much. Since my Renewal I've tried harder, even got a job, but without her I feel lost again. Did she die to save me? I shudder at the thought. Sacrifices are not my cup of tea. Primitive. Nasty. Burning bonfires of bones. There is stuff for the bike in the beach hut; petrol, spanners, oily rags, polish, leather cleaner and a jar of metal parts. I look at them uncomprehending. I'll have to get a book out from the library, I think. Amongst it all are bits of her. My life is there. Where? My beach hut. You live there? Don't be daft, just go there for peace, you know, can't get no peace at home. I don't know. You're lucky then. Sifting through the debris of her life I find old snapshots. Some are framed, nice ones of her and her mother, or as a child on swings and a big one of her on Heaven Sent. But there are others scattered on the floor. Her with a man, but his face is scribbled over in black biro. She is a child smiling, now a teenager scowling, a meaty hand on her shoulder. Father, grandfather, uncle? I put the pictures away, mean to destroy them. I don't think I was supposed to see them. I search the hut for something else from her. Perhaps, I think, she has left me a message. Wishful thinking. Make a wish, she says. I don't think I let go. I think she did. I go over and over it in my mind until I am certain. She let go. The shout, the cry, don't let go! That was me. I have spent nights convincing myself of this. It wasn't my fault. She didn't die so I could rise again, it was just an accident. I put Heaven Sent back in the hut. Wrap it like a baby in the cloth, wish it goodnight. Lock

the door, kick away a curious seagull pecking at my laces. Don't you want a new beginning? She says. Haven't thought about it, I lie. Tomorrow, she says, tomorrow you start again. Renewal? I ask. Don't be afraid, it won't hurt. But it did hurt. It hurt real bad. Don't let go! Small fingers. A cry. That was a seagull, I'm sure now. A scream. My voice, my roar to life. I came back, she didn't. I stand on the cliffs as the sun sets. They never found the body, so how do I know she is really dead? Maybe she floated away, under water, like a mermaid. Floated out to sea to find some place new, to find some peace. I can see her now, skimming though the cresting water. Don't cry, she says, I ain't worth it. I miss you, I say. Don't be silly, she giggles, you barely know me. The tide is coming in, battering the base of the cliffs. I'll never swim again. She said you can start again as much as you like, but she was wrong, you only get one chance at Renewal. Down there, beneath the waves, she is trying to become a new person. Who are you? I shout out across the water, but only an echo comes back. Who are you?