

Of Wind & the Sea

fiction by Kelly Grogan

The old man did not want to go the ocean that day. It was a long walk that made his knees ache. But the girl begged and tugged at his hand, and when he finally nodded she smiled up at him in a way that made him glad he'd agreed to go. The girl bounded out the door, calling backward, telling him she was grabbing her kite. They walked along the winding path, the girl chattering beside him while the old man stared at the cloud wisps trailing faint against the sky. The rains had fallen throughout the week and the ground was muddy to walk upon, but the grasses were dotted with the tiny dewdrop blossoms of new wildflowers. They neared the sea wall, tasting salt in the air. The girl looked up at him and when he nodded she took off running towards the water, the tail of her kite fluttering behind her as she disappeared around the bend.

Something of a dream lingered in the old man's mind, like a fog still lifting, but the more he tried to focus on the details the more they slipped away from him. It was the ocean that recalled it — in the dream, he had been by the ocean, and the air tasted like salt as it did now. The familiarity of the moment placed him back there. The way his feet carried him forward. But he could not remember where the dream path led. The image dissolved even as he thought of it.

The girl called to him from the beach and he raised his head, rounding the bend and walking down the stone steps to the shore. The girl was crouched by a shallow pool among the rocks, peering into the water.

Look, she said as he walked closer. Look in here, there's a starfish.

And so there was. Beneath the surface, its five arms sprawled red and purple over the rocks, dappled with dancing patterns of light from the surface of the water.

You can see it moving, the girl told the old man. But it takes a long time. You have to keep watching.

She crouched beside the pool with her arms wrapped around her knees, staring into the water as if she could spot the movement of the starfish if only she looked hard enough. Her kite rested on the rocks behind her, forgotten. The old man looked out at the ocean and saw that the wind was too still for flying, but he did not say anything. He thought the girl may still find a way.

The old man stepped across the rocks, testing each stone to be sure that it would not shift beneath his weight. He gently lowered himself onto the sea-worn trunk of a fallen tree and turned his face to the sun. The child stood and carried her kite to the

waterline where the sand was flat. There she set the kite on the ground and tugged at the thread, wrapping it around the handle loop by loop and checking for knots.

For a while, the old man watched the girl, the patience with which she approached the task at hand, and he wondered about the still and heavy air, if it would be enough to carry the kite skyward. His mind wandered back to the forgotten dream, the impression of the ocean and the presence of a path before him. His eyes far away, watching a place beyond the clouds and the sky that contained them, thinking without words, remembering without pictures. Drifting like that until all else had fallen away from him.

Down the beach, a family was set up with their umbrellas and towels, and the children were building sandcastles and splashing in the water. He watched as the mother wrung the water from her hair and lay upon the sand, her skin gleaming pale in the sunlight. She called to one of her children, the smallest, and as her voice carried through the air a fragment of the dream returned to him — a woman's voice calling his name through the dark, calling his name from the sea.

The old man turned his gaze back to the girl. She was standing still, the kite in her hands, staring at the family. For a long while, she did not move and the old man gripped the rock ledge as if to rise. She looked small and lonely against the endless sky.

Just as the old man started to call out to her, she turned and grabbed the last of her tangled string and walked across the rocks towards him. When the girl reached his side she climbed up onto the tree trunk and sat with the kite in her lap, her fingers wrapping the last of the line around the handle. Finished, she set the kite beside her.

There's no wind, she said, and shrugged.

No, he said. And he thought it peculiar that she'd carried the kite all this way, and stood beside the water's edge with such careful attention to preparing the string, that she'd stood so still for so long to not fly the kite after all. But then, perhaps she'd known before they'd even left the house. Perhaps the point was in untangling.

The girl swung her legs back and forth, letting her heels kick the ground, and the old man saw her eyes flicker once more at the family down the beach. Her eyebrows were knit together and she looked at the old man and she asked him if he ever felt alone.

Yes, he told her. After my wife —

He trailed off, not knowing how to finish the sentence. But the girl seemed to know the rest of the words and she nodded and looked back out at the ocean.

I like being alone, she said. I always did. My mom once made a rule that I had to keep my door open all the time. Because otherwise, I'd just sit in my room all day, by myself, and no one would even know I was home.

The old man had wondered at the way the girl never shut the door, the way she'd wake crying if he closed it while she slept. He'd thought she was afraid of the dark and needed the glow of the hallway light. And his mind again returned to the dream, and the sound of the woman's voice calling out to him through the darkness. Alone, he thought, with our ghosts. He shuddered and the girl put her hand on his arm as though to wake him. He straightened and heard the call of osprey gliding overhead, and he pointed the

birds out to the girl. But she did not take her hand from his arm and when he looked at her he saw that she was searching his face.

Where did you go? she asked him.

I'm sorry, he said. I was thinking.

What were you thinking about?

Not knowing what to say to her, he reached out and patted her hand.

It was nothing, he said.

Please, she said. Tell me.

I was thinking — I was thinking about how sometimes it feels lonelier to be around people than it feels to be by yourself.

Yes, she said. I know what you mean.

The girl kicked her heels against the tree trunk a few more times, then pulled her ankles up and crossed her legs in front of her. She picked up a pebble and dragged it along the bark, marking a path. Drawing lines, tracing the edges over and over.

Did your wife like being alone?

The old man smiled, remembering. No, he said. She couldn't stand it. She always liked to have someone to talk with.

The girl looked down at her feet and tossed the pebble to the side. She was silent for several minutes, her eyes narrowed and her hands unmoving.

Then she asked, Do you think your wife is alone, now?

The old man was taken aback by the question, unsure how to answer. He thought that he should not say what was true, or what he feared to be true in the darkest of moments. And yet he also knew that he could not lie to the girl. She was young, but she had an old soul. He only glimpsed her childlike innocence sometimes, when she ran to grab her kite or while he read to her before she fell asleep and her hand curled over the blanket by her cheek.

He chose his words carefully. Sometimes, I ask myself that very question, he told the girl. And I don't know the answer. I am afraid sometimes that she is alone. Other times, I think there is nothing of her left to feel alone, that's what it means to be gone. But then, once in awhile —

You feel like she's right next to you. The girl finished his sentence, and he nodded.

Like she never even left, he said.

They sat in silence together until the sunlight angled behind the cliffs, shadows stretching long across the beach. The family packed up their bags and towels and walked smiling back down the path. Their voices faded as they rounded the bend and the girl scooted closer to the old man.

The girl squeezed his hand and he looked down at her.

My parents died, she said.

It was the first time she'd said the words aloud to him. It may have been the first time she said the words aloud to anyone.

He looked out over the sea and so that she could read nothing in his expression

and he considered her words.

Yes, he said. They did.

They drowned, she said, her voice steady.

The old man nodded, his head low.

I'm alone.

The old man turned and he put his hands on the girl's shoulders. Her face betrayed no feeling, and he thought that her eyes looked like the dark pools at the edge of the tide, a small piece of the bottomless sea.

We both are, he told the girl.

So it's ok?

No, he said, it's not ok. But we will be ok. We will be enough for each other.

The water swelled and rushed over the rocky beachside, and when the waves pulled back the stones clattered and tumbled alongside. The old man and the girl stood to leave, climbing back up the stone steps to the seawall. As they reached the path, he glanced up at the horizon and took the girl's hand in his own. She followed his gaze to the distant towering rainclouds, the splashes of sunlight stretching through the sky like a painting that danced before them. It was enough. Somehow, something holds you together, he thought. It was enough.

They walked silently along the path and the old man gazed backward at the ocean, into the ocean, beyond, at what he knew the child could not see. When they reached the bend in the path the girl stopped and she turned to face the old man and he saw that she was smiling.

Feel that? she asked him. Wind.

And so there was. A soft wind, the beating of small wings.