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Jack, Now Gone

He left the day the tide receded, three years ago today. Kate remembered it well, the way the seaweed was left on the bare shores, writhing strands of green mermaid hair shed across the rocks. It had begun to rot in the sun, releasing a stench that permeated every area of the house.

The day was hot; Kate remembered that also. Scorching even, one of those summer highs which radio commentators enthused about, their voices crackling with excitement. A day to ‘kick off your shoes and head down to the beach with a six pack and a picnic’, as one of the announcers claimed.

She had stood in the front door and watched the tide reveal lengths of slimy rocks and she marvelled at the way the sea seemed to fold in on itself, the way it drew itself back and back and back.

Today was colder, with a slight dew shed across the front lawn. Kate could see the toetoe nodding their fair heads in the breeze, and a tui was calling. She sat on the front steps and watched as the early sun stained the clouds all shades of apricot and violet and curdled milk.

“Nice sunrise,” Alex commented, coming to stand above her. He smelled familiar, like soap and leather, that warm smell of hard work. Kate noticed he had bitten his fingernails down to the quick.

“Can you hear the tui?” she asked. It was their daily morning patter. A comment on the weather. A question about the birdlife. Careful silence, like treading water.

There is a photo that sits in their narrow hallway, where the polished floors greedily catch every glance of sunshine. He is sitting at the kitchen table, one arm stretched in front of him, the other propping his head up. It is a mundane scene, and Alex never understood why Kate had framed it, but every time she saw it Kate was taken by how present he was, how aware.

He held the gaze of the lens without a smile, with a face full of grace and innocence, on the cusp of eleven years old and racing towards adolescence. His hair fell across his face, backlit by the sunshine streaming into the kitchen, giving him a buttery halo. He was all brightness, her son, all bright light and calm.

Kate ran a damp rag over the frame, collecting the light layer of dust. Alex stopped to watch her as he

left for work, gripping his leather briefcase with a sweaty hand.

“It’s good you keep that so clean,” he said.

“It gets dusty in here. We really need to fix that doorstep. All the dirt blows in.” She pointed at the bottom of the front door, cracked and peeling like the heel of a foot. Alex sighed and nodded. He snaked an arm around Kate’s shoulders and squeezed her briefly, then stepped out the front door. Kate shut it quietly behind him.

There’s always the matter of Jack, the non-person, the man with the trick of disappearing without the magician’s smoke and glitter. Kate sat at the kitchen table, an uneaten lunch of dry toast and tea in front of her, peering at the jagged rocks of Island Bay from her window. Jack had now consumed nearly twenty of her fifty-odd years, so that his face was the last thing she thought of at night and the first thing that came to mind in the morning.

He was not here, he was not with her, but her memory and instincts insisted he must be, that if she were to just open his bedroom door he would be asleep, and would never have left – she just hadn’t been looking properly. She closed her eyes and let her imagination wander, so she was walking down the hall and opening his bedroom door. He is asleep, and it is early morning, hot, summer it must be. He hadn’t closed his curtains properly so sun is streaming onto his bed, but it hasn’t woken him yet.

Kate sits down on the bed, careful not to wake him, and pushes his sweaty hair back from his head. It’s so fair, sandy, unlike either of his parents. She has no idea where it came from. Thirteen years, that’s how old he must be.

She’s not imagining anymore; she remembers this morning. It was the morning she stopped coming into his room before he woke, because this time he caught her. She saw him stirring but wasn’t quick enough to get up, and he caught her with those dark eyes, surprised then suspicious.

“Whaddya doing?” Jack mumbled, pushing his duvet away to let some heat escape.

“Nothing. Good morning. Do you want breakfast?” Kate doesn’t know why she’s embarrassed. She realises, for the first time, her son was now too old for her morning vigils.

“No. I need to sleep.” He threw an arm over his forehead and looked at her with clearer eyes. “Can you leave, please?”

It was a polite enough request, but Kate was devastated. She spent the rest of the morning in the garden, setting driftwood statues among the flowers and avoiding Jack. She couldn’t stand this sense of shame, as if she had intruded on him during a private moment, as if he was drawing the edges of himself away from her. It wasn’t the average teenage angst, she felt, it was something more, something very deliberate and controlled.

Late in the morning he came to stand in the frame of the back door, arms crossed, watching her. When she looked up at him her heart caught for a moment.

“I’m going to Gareth’s house. Can I borrow \$10?” She knew he didn’t remember this morning, or, if he did, it didn’t bother him, and Kate wasn’t going to show she was upset.

“You can take \$5 from my wallet. I know how much is in there so don’t take any more,” she said. “Be home in time for dinner.” She checked her wallet later that afternoon, and he had taken \$20.

Kate looked out of the bay windows again, Jack’s voice echoing in her ears. Afternoons were the hardest. She picked up the phone to call Alex, clutching its plastic frame tightly.

“Hello, Alex Wright speaking.”

“Alex. It’s me.”

“Everything ok?”

“Yes.” Kate paused. “It’s hard today.”

“I know, I’m thinking of him too.” Alex breathed out deeply. “We’ll have dinner at the beach tonight. Can we talk more then?”

“Are you busy now?”

“I’ve got lots of paperwork to catch up on.”

“OK.” Neither of them hung up. “Alex? I love you.”

“See you when I get home.”

The dial tone sounded oddly like the flat lining of a heart rate monitor.

Kate found that the ‘isn’t’ of Jack was really the most overpowering aspect of her son. Was there someone to blame in these situations? She’d always wondered when she’d heard stories like this before, but now it’s her, and she didn’t want to be the cause. She didn’t want the blame.

She began to consider, she began to look back, thinking about the twists and turns that knotted her hands behind her back and caused her to hang her head in despair now.

Memory seemed arbitrary and nonsensical to

her – why some memories are so powerful, so that she seemed to live more of her life in relation to them than the concurrent outside world, and why she struggled to remember other things that she felt should be more important, more crucial.

There are the memories that she couldn’t imagine living without. The first time she held Jack, Joe, watching his little pink hands curl out towards her like a blossoming rose, the way her body responded to his needs quicker than her conscious mind could keep up with – how she began to pick up on the different cries he made, like finding her feet on the rungs of a ladder, a breathless relief as she knew when he was hungry, or tired, or teething. The day she married Alex, the heat of that day, the way her wedding dress stuck to her sweaty lower back, and, in the same place, the feeling of Alex’s firm hand as he led her in their first dance. The family picnic the three of them went on for Jack’s fifth birthday, a spread of chips and fizzy drink and cake on the cliff tops across the bay from them. Moving house. Jack’s first day at school. Her tenth wedding anniversary. Her mother’s death. Countless more just floating like spurs blown from a dandelion in the back of her mind.

Then there were the ones she appeared to have misplaced, and she railed against herself, wishing she had treasured them more, somehow imprinted them in her mind so she could bring them forth again at will now. She couldn’t, for example, remember the exact day she met Alex. She had always known of him, through her workplace, both of them writing for the Evening Post. One day she wasn’t particularly aware of him, and the next day she sat next to him in the cafeteria and they shared a sandwich since she had forgotten her lunch.

He took her out for dinner the next night, and made her laugh at the table by pretending to read her palm (‘good life lines – and a good marriage line!’), and then took her by surprise by raising her hand to his lips and kissing her fingertips. She remembered all this, but the exact moment she first saw him, or the first words they exchanged, escaped her.

Then there was the morning Jack went. She remembered the weather, the smell of the seaweed, her surprise when she saw his shoes weren’t by the front door and his backpack was gone. She remembered she hadn’t known, she hadn’t suspected. After the great shrill ring of the telephone that afternoon, she remembered little. The words spoken to her – forgotten. Something else she should remember.

The beach was wind-stripped and stark. They stood in the car park and spread fish and chips over the bonnet of the Jeep. They stood in silence, habitual in their eating habits, Alex sandwiching his fish with chips and Kate pecking at the crumbs, not hungry.

“Do you want the fish?” Alex asked. Kate shook her head. Alex shrugged and ate it himself.

“Should we take a walk?” Kate asked, after the food was finished and the newspaper wrapping had been thrown away. Alex checked his watch.

“I have some work to do at home.” He hesitated when he saw Kate’s face. “Just a quick one?”

They walked side by side but separately. The wind was sharp and strong, a typical Wellington autumn day, the sand rising and sprinkling itself through their clothes. Alex hugged his duffel coat to himself, pulling his hood up. Kate allowed her coat to fly open and spread out behind her like a cape. She sped up, pitching her strength against the wind, feeling like a child again as she flung her arms out.

“I miss him.” She just caught the words, and turned around. Alex was bent over, hands on his knees, shaking his head. “I miss him so much,” he cried.

“I know,” Kate agreed. She approached him and cradled his head in against her neck, one hand resting on his temple. They stood like that for several moments, until Alex recovered his breath and stood up.

“He ruined our lives. You know that, don’t you?” It was the thought they had an unspoken agreement never to mention. “He’s left us nothing. We have nothing.”

“We have each other. We were something before him, right?” Kate stared at Alex, imploring him to agree. “We are something now, together, right?”

Alex simply took her hand and led her back to the car.

She came to him in bed that night, fresh from the shower with her wet hair loose, like he always used to love. It was the first time in months they had touched each other meaningfully, and he pulled her to him. He was almost apologetic in his movements, careful and considerate, and afterwards he was so still Kate could hear his heart, and every creak in his bones. She waited until he fell asleep, his rhythmic breathing like waves against the stern of a ship, and then she got up.

She stepped out of the house, bundled in Alex’s duffel coat and gumboots, and walked along the shoreline until she reached the red telephone box. She stood inside and picked up the broken phone, no dial tone, and began putting in Jack’s old cellphone number. Her fingers were numb and slipped against the plastic buttons. She imagined the phone was ringing, and Jack was answering. Over and over again she did it, imploring the phone to ring.

When she put the receiver back in the cradle she could see the cliffs across the bay, smudged outlines against the night sky. She remembered again Jack’s fifth birthday held in the park that crowned the cliff top.

“I should have let you have more cake,” she said aloud to herself, to the darkness. She took the crunch of rocks beneath the waves as a reply and turned to go home.