

TO THE SEA

‘To the sea, to the sea,’ called Tom, racing ahead down the pathway with his mother in the wheelchair.

‘To the sea,’ Helen echoed, laughing - mimicking the old catchcry of their father...

‘To the sea,’ Owen always called as the family crammed into the car. Driving from Canberra down the mountain, they waited and strained for that first glimpse of ocean through the trees. ‘There it is!’ Then they argued over who saw it first, until finally Joy cried ‘Stop, or there’ll be no fish and chips.’

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Oh! I do like to be besides the seaside

I do like to be besides the sea...

Joy was born by the sea. Growing up, she spent every spare minute swimming and surfing. ‘You’ll grow gills,’ her father warned.

Once, a savage rip caught her unawares. She knew what to do...*Don’t struggle, stay calm...*but then she saw the fin.

Punch its nose. Poke its eyes. She tried to remember all the advice she had heard about shark attacks. She saw three more dark shapes and realised they were dolphins. They swam with her. All fears vanished as they played around her, guiding her to safety. Joy’s friends all rolled their eyes when she told the story, but her father believed it.

TO THE SEA

*By the sea, by the sea, by the beautiful sea,
You and I, you and I. Oh how happy we'll be.*

When she was eighteen, she met a sandy-haired, blue-eyed boy. It was a salty romance and they dived headlong into those dreamy froth and bubble days! Stolen briny kisses on the sand - plunging through the breakers, enjoying the surf and baking themselves for hours in the sun. Something Joy bitterly regretted many years later when she noticed the mole on Owen's back.

After their marriage, Owen found a job in Canberra. They made the trip down the mountain to the sea as often as they could, and the car always boiled on the way back. They slept tangled together in the little tent, Owen's sunburnt arm slung across Joy's waist. They bought a caravan and left it on-site at the coast after the twins, Helen and Tom, arrived. Later, came the little beach cottage.

Those were such happy days! Carrying salty wet bundles back from the beach...they dumped the babies in the laundry tub at the caravan park to wash sand, salt, and grime from chubby crevices. Joy loved the delicious smell of those clean little bodies after a swim and a bath. Then small hands grabbed their buckets and spades and headed back for more.

*Red sails in the sunset, way out on the sea,
I'm far from my loved one, who's waiting for me.*

Joy moved to the beach cottage after Owen died. Helen had married a coastal man and lived nearby. Tom came with his family from Canberra for holidays. Joy sat quietly and watched, listening to the banter, the laughter, the conversation. She loved the children, especially Helen's new blue-eyed granddaughter, Emma – but she sometimes felt invisible – superfluous.

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She tried to call out to them as they gathered around the hospital bed. Joy could see her children standing there - concern and horror in their eyes. She heard every word they said.

'I'm all right,' she screamed, but no one understood.

Trapped in her useless body, she was unable to communicate... unable to do anything. She lay there, day after day, in the hard, narrow, nursing home bed, completely reliant on others...helpless. *Oh, the indignity of it all!*

'Nanna, Great-gram's crying,' Emma called.

Helen wiped the tears from her mother's cheeks and dribble from her mouth. Emma climbed onto the bed. 'She wants a cuddle,' she said and promptly went to sleep, her chubby arm slung across her great-grandmother's waist.

Helen's greatest joy was caring for her granddaughter during the week. They visited Joy each afternoon. Helen hated it...hated every time she walked into the room and saw her mother's eyes.

However, Emma made it easier. Everyone in the nursing home loved the child and she did not seem to mind the ancient claw-like hands clutching out at her as she passed.

'Dance for us Emma,' the old people cried as they gathered in the recreation room for the sing-along. The child swayed and twirled to the sounds of sweet aged voices singing, *'I'm forever blowing bubbles,'* and all the bygone songs they knew so well – even if they couldn't remember what they ate for lunch minutes earlier.

Helen often pushed the wheelchair along the path of the nursing home garden to the rotunda by the cliff. Emma stood holding Joy's hand as they looked towards the sea. 'She likes it here.' It was a welcome escape from the smell of urine, decrepitude, and death *and* they often saw the dolphins.

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Tom had sped down the mountain to the nursing home from Canberra. He bent, kissing the tissue-thin skin of his mother's cheek. He took some ice, rubbing it across her dry cracked lips. 'What's wrong Mum?' He bent closer, trying to make sense of the jumbled sounds.

'She wants to see the sea,' said Emma matter-of-factly.

‘Darling, she’s too sick today,’ Helen lifted the child onto her lap.

‘Why not?’ demanded Tom.

‘Tom, she’s dying.’

‘Precisely!’

‘They won’t let us.’

‘We won’t ask!’

Tom lifted his mother from the bed, horrified at the weightlessness of her body. He remembered the strength of her arms as she supported him in the water, teaching him to swim. How she sometimes held his face between her hands and looked with love into his eyes. A sob broke from his throat.

Helen coughed and fussed, tucking Joy into the wheel chair and they rushed out the side door and down the path.

They huddled close together at the top of the cliff. Emma looked up at the reflection of blue sky and sea rippling across Joy’s glasses. She felt a tremor from the old withered hand as she asked ‘Can you see the dolphins Great-gram?’