

The house with the view of a thousand seas was our first impossible love as kids, four stone walls that we would never be able to explain our feelings for to anyone but ourselves. In a way those walls raised us, capturing the most poignant moments of our childhood. The house perched upon the highest tip of Tiny Island, its windows circling all points of the compass to give views of what seemed like a thousand seas to our eager young eyes. We ate it up. Every summer, my family and hers, filling our cars to the brim with swimming trunks and bikinis, beach towels and sun cream, buckets and spades and the few lonely coats stuffed at the bottom for the inevitable storms that were swallowed and forgotten in our memories of those hazy summer days. It's those somehow hazily clear days that seem to consume my childhood years, the other ten months blurring into forgettable moments that fall dimly behind the brightness of the memories from the island and the house. Falling into our team of four each year, ready for another summer of racing along the island that was just three miles across, catching lizards in bushes from the moment the sun rose, pale and cool, until it melted its deep buttery heat into the sea once more. Easy, cyclical days that seemed to have no end or beginning, melting into one long moment that I wrapped up and stored next to my heart. Only the lightening of our hair and darkening of our skin would mark the passing time, hers deepening into a golden honey that mine could never quite match, a dizzying shade that I fell in love with more with each year, a shade that almost bizarrely, perfectly, matched her name – Aurea. *Golden*.

“I don't know why we still call it Tiny Island.” Aurea threw a pebble out into the sea, scuffing up the ground with a frustrated kick of her heel as it bounced once, flying high and then splashing through the surface. “We're not seven anymore”

“Even though you still act it.”

“Shut up, Elijah” I watched as she collapsed back down onto the grassy bank, hair twisting into the grass in a tangle of green and brown. I reached out to stroke it, my fingers gliding naturally through the curls, tracing her skin that was yet to have its affair with the sun.

“Tiny Island. Just sounds right I guess. Saying its real name feels weird.” I said the name, *Sark*, in an exaggerated French accent, and we both choked up laughter at the absurdity of it. Some things we make up as kids just stick, their stupid simplicity finding a way to stay. Tiny Island was one of them. And now we were older – me just turned twenty, her eighteen – the name seemed more fitting than ever. The coastline failed to grow bigger

with us, almost shrinking with familiarity each year. But we still loved it of course – there was no questioning that. We came back like clockwork. That belief stuck firmly in our minds, never allowing ourselves to consider that maybe it was each other we were returning for.

“We never gave the house a stupid name.” She stared up at me then, those green eyes deep and questioning, almost accusing. I was the one who thought of Tiny Island – why couldn’t I give the house a name too? All I could do was smile and shake my head at her, because the name I’d been calling it to myself wouldn’t sound right, not now, not after almost 15 years. Maybe if I’d said it back then it would’ve become part of our language, as much as Tiny Island had. I flipped it over in my head. *The house with the view of a thousand seas*. There was no ring to it. Just a string of words I’d pulled together as a kid, trying to make sense of all those emotions I’d felt for those summers, for Aurea. Every sense heightened, feeling the prickle of the heat and fierce childhood imagination in ways deeper than I knew was ever possible. The view from the house seemed to stretch on forever, perfectly capturing those limitless thoughts, senses and possibilities, the endless time we had together. All heightened, all mixed together and fused into something deeper than we knew. Something that would be diminished if spoken aloud. A fierce childhood friendship set alight by the sun.

Was it not inevitable that we’d fall in love?

I picked up a stone, stroking the smooth flat surface and skimmed it across the sea with a practiced flick. It bounced five, six times before hitting the curve of a wave and disappearing.

“Maybe I’d be that good if you’d not refused to show me how.” Aurea mumbled with mock complaint, referring to all the times me, my brother and her brother excluded her based on the fact her hair fell ten inches longer.

“Plenty of time to still teach you.” I grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet. Our shadows lay stretched out behind us and ill-defined in the late evening sun, goose bumps prickling at limbs stretching out from our swimwear. “Dinners probably ready now... race you back!” She tightened her grip on my hand before I could slip away, pulling me in closer. I could feel the heat radiating off her despite the cool evening air, pulsing out in waves as though coming from within. She balanced up onto her toes, closing the gap in height that was only about two inches, most of hers comprising of her long, smooth legs. Her lips planted on mine with the lightest touch, the warmth spreading with intensity from my head to my toes,

and she took that vulnerable moment to chuck away my hand, leap up from the grassy bank and start running in the direction of the house

“*Loser has to clean the winners dinner plates!*” She shouted back with a laugh, already slipping away through the low hanging trees. I could have caught her, easily, but I let her sprint on, following behind with a light jog. I didn’t care if she beat me – washing her dishes was nothing. The penalties never mattered. I would have done it anyway.

There was a day, maybe seven years back, when we were starting to unknowingly discover a love beyond friendship, that we found the Infinity Swing. A piece of old rope snaked around one of the trees in the small woods, an exhausted tyre hanging limply from the end and dangling above the slow moving river. We’d been through this patch in the woods hundreds of times and never seen it, so despite its tired look we decided it must’ve been new, strung up by one of the kids during the ten months we weren’t there for. Our brothers were back at the house, claiming they were too old to be still running wild all day – especially on one this hot – so it was just me and Aurea. She’d dragged me out despite my weak protests, protests that I knew would never mean anything because back then I’d follow her right into the sun if I had to. We were both still young, but she was yet to slip into the teenage years and lose the fierce imagination that could carry her for hours on end. I think mine was drifting by then, but I tried to cling onto it for her. Not that she’d even notice – she had enough for us both. And finding this swing, in her eyes, was like finding a whole entire theme park.

“ELIJAH LOOK, oh my *God* Toby and Leo are going to be so sorry they decided to be boring today – it’s an actual *swing over the river!* We can call dibs on it!” She snapped out of her game of jungle explorers as quickly as she had started it, racing over to the tree that stood on top of the small but steep river bank. With one arm looped around the trunk she tried to reach for the rope, arm stretching as far as it would go, but she was still a good couple of feet off. Her next plan of action seemed to be sliding down the slope and right into the river, but I grabbed her shoulder before she could throw herself down.

“Wait a sec, Rea. You don’t need to get yourself wet.” I pulled her gently away and tried to reach for the rope myself, shimmying as close to the edge of the bank as I dared, but it was no use. I wasn’t much taller than her and the rope still idly hung out of reach.

“Oh please Elijah let me jump down, it’s baking out here so I don’t mind getting wet anyway.” But her pleas were half hearted as we stared down at the water, running through the

muddy riverbed at a sluggish pace. Toby had told us that it was crawling with leeches, and scorching day or not, we didn't want to risk the bloodsuckers. Even if he was telling fibs.

“Come on, let's carry on with your explorer game. I was just getting into it.” But Aurea stayed firmly where she stood, arms crossed and brow knitted into a determined frown. A bead of sweat trickled down her temple, falling past her eye and running down her cheek in imitation of a single tear.

“No need to be a cry baby about it.” I teased, but I was already on my hands and knees, rummaging through the overgrown bushes for the perfect fallen branch.

“I hate you, EJ.” She muttered back, but I could hear the smile behind the words. When I stood back up, I turned to face her and she was just stood there, staring down at me with some sort of look in her eye. I've since debated it over and come to decide it was a look of intense, confused admiration, confusion for the fact she had no idea she could feel something so strongly. Her mouth hung open, lost for words. But I don't think I even clocked it then, or somewhere deep within I chose not to.

“What you gawping at, weirdo.” I hopped around her and grabbed onto the tree trunk again, leaning out with the branch clenched in my free hand. The far end was bent into a sort of hook, and I managed to get the rope caught within it and pull it back with ease. The tyre now hung above the bank, ready for the next child to leap on and swing across the river into what felt like infinity – hence, the Infinity Swing.

“Want to have a go or not, Rea?” The look in her eye seemed to intensify before melting away completely, making you question if it was ever there at all. A small cry of joy escaped her lips and she lunged forward, giving me a tight squeeze of a hug before hoisting herself up onto the tyre.

“You're the best, EJ. Now PUUUSH!” So I did. I pushed hard enough to send her into infinity, her light body flying across over the river, twisting and turning as the tyre spun frantically around. Her screams of joy were infectious, and soon we were both almost crying with laughter as the thing swung higher and higher, her hair flying out behind her like a flag of victory.

This was *our* swing now. *We* did this.

“Higher, higher higher HIGHER!” Her words were thrown about with the wind, and my arms seemed to ache with the effort but I kept going, fuelled along by her shrieks and

giggles. I think it was those giggles that masked the creaking off the branch, because maybe then I would have stopped. But I didn't hear it, neither of us did, and as my feet flew off the ground as the tyre raised me into the air with its momentum. I gave one final push. Maybe my push was too hard, or maybe that branch was always going to snap as soon as some naïve kid hung themselves from it. But I know that second thought never crossed my mind, the blame was always on *me* as I heard the sickening snap of the branch, my stomach swallowing itself into a void as Aurea's joyful screams turned panicked. The whole damned branch was ripped off the tree, and with all that momentum I'd piled up Rea went flying, body still twisted onto the tyre as she went crashing into the opposite bank. She crumbled limply into the shallow muddy water, and the branch soon followed and made friends with her head, cutting her nauseating screams short. For that I was glad, at least.

She lay there still and I thought I'd killed her. A thin stream of dark blood ran from her head, trickling down to mix with the water and I thought *I'd* killed her. *So much for the bloodsuckers*, I remember thinking. Why was I thinking of leeches? I threw myself down the bank, wading through the water that barely reached my knees. Her body slumped half up the bank, half into the water, and I didn't even realise I was crying wretched sobs until I pulled her into my lap, fingers clutching into her blood matted hair and her hazy eyes slowly blinked open. She managed to whisper one breathy sentence before drifting off into a concussed daze.

“Who's the cry baby now, Elijah?”

That day raced through my mind in seconds as I approached the same river bank, all these years later. The tyre and branch were gone from the river, obviously, but a new swing hung safely in its place. Aurea had spent the next week trapped in the house, recovering with an bag of frozen peas strapped tightly to her head and a frown of protest built permanently into her face. I spent every evening with her, playing any stupid make believe game she wanted until sleep would finally catch up with her and she'd doze off right in the middle of whatever we were playing. But I had the days to myself. And instead of spending them with my brother and Toby, I spent them alone in the woods (much to their teasing). I needed my dad's help, only once or twice when I wasn't quite tall enough or practiced enough in the art of tying safe, secure knots, but I still give myself full credit for what I made out from the labour of love. I guess it was love, after all, that kept me sweating in the beating sun and ignoring the mosquitos that seemed to want to suck the life out of me. It kept me from giving up when my

first attempts failed, leaving me covered in cuts and bruises that I could hardly cover up. It was love for Aurea, or love for the idea of finally feeling like she'd finally accept my apology, something she claimed she did every day but I never quite believed. No – I needed to show her how sorry I was. And when the day finally came and she could escape out of the house, I led her straight to the spot where she'd taken that fall.

“But Elijah, there's nothing to *do* there now, and I don't want to play stupid explorers any more. Teach me to skim rocks or something!” But I gripped her arm tightly, dragging her along so her feet tumbled over each other as she struggled to keep up. I couldn't reply for fear I'd ruin the surprise, one I'd tiresomely kept between me and my dad for a whole week. When we were almost at the small clearing I closed one of my grubby hands over her eyes, and I knew she wanted to protest but she managed to stop herself as I guided her slowly forward.

“Now open.” I took my hand away, staring with pride at the swing I'd built. Yes, it looked shabby, but it was also *safe*, made with brand new rope and hooked around a thick branch that wouldn't even fall if an adult swung on it. I knew, because my dad had tested it. Before she could react I raced toward it, grabbing the rope that hung close to the bank with ease, propelling myself off the edge and wrapping my legs around the tyre – the same one as before, because I'd concluded there was nothing wrong with it. I swung back and forth, not a single creak or crack to be heard, whooping and laughing with the thrill of it. I landed back on the bank and turned towards her, expecting her to be racing forward to have a go. But she only stood *crying*, actually *crying* with what I first thought to be fright.

“Hey, Rea don't be scared, I made so sure it's super safe this time, not even Dad could break it.” But she only shook her head, whipping away her tears with frantic swipes.

“No, Elijah I'm not scared.” She gave a hiccupy laugh. “It's perfect – thank you thank you thank you. I love it. I – I love *you*.” The words felt so insignificant to us then, I just grinned back at her as she hopped onto the swing, full of trust and full of love. Of course we knew we loved each other, in the same way us four kids understood there was an unspeakable bond of love between us. But we'd never spoken it out loud before, and those words made it real. Me building the swing made it real, I guess, but the words confirmed it. We played on that swing until the sun went down and Rea told me over and over that she didn't think she'd ever felt so happy in all her life.

The swing still hung there as my twenty year old self approached it, not as much our little secret as it used to be, becoming property of the younger kids that found it as we grew older. But even looking at it gave me the same rush of love I felt when I was building it – the Emperor’s wife had the Taj Mahal, and Aurea had this. I don’t think anyone else would quite understand the significance of it, though. The most important things are diminished when explained to a stranger.

Dinner was finished, creamy pasta with crusty bread and wine, the rest of our families were piled together on the sofas in the midst of a game of charades and me and Rea were stumbling down to the beach. We’d stolen the last of the wine bottles off the table, tying them up in a beach towel along with Leo’s cigarettes and a mini portable speaker. The narrow streets were dimly lit in pools of yellow light and we danced down them, hand in hand, our bare feet hardly touching the road as we floated with the giddy joy of alcohol. This is how we spent our evenings now – escaping to the beach after dinner, conversations no longer fuelled by childish games of make believe but with the nerve you only find at night, an endless stream of strange ideas, things that seemed to be forgotten as false imaginations as soon as the sun came up again. But at night, with the moonlight falling down and illuminating our faces, blurring our features so we didn’t quite feel like ourselves, the words we spoke seemed to hold such daunting potential.

“Ok but imagine there was a book, everyone got given one, filled with random information about your life. Like, the day you laughed the most, your biggest regret, when you were most scared.” Aurea turned the bottle upside down, shaking the last drops above her open mouth. “I’d *so* want to read that. Cause most of those things I have no idea. I never keep track.” She threw the empty bottle back down.

“Yeah, but surely it would keep changing. It would only ever stop changing when you die.” She shot me a curious look, puzzling over my objection she hadn’t thought of.

“Then I’ll read it on my deathbed.”

“What if you never get the chance.”

Her eyes blazed with confused accusation, the cogs in her brain almost visibly turning as she tried to unpick what I meant.

“What do you mean – everyone dies, everyone has some sort of deathbed that—”

“No, I mean what if you don’t know you’re gonna die, and it’s so sudden that the idea of a deathbed never even passes by you.” Her confusion turned to sharp annoyance.

“Stop it Elijah. I wish you’d just go along with it.”

A sharp gust of wind flew past my face, putting out my cigarette in one swift breath. I twisted the end into the sand, watching as the last few embers lost their life, wondering why she cared so much about her stupid book and why I’d had to turn it so morbid.

“But what if I didn’t want to know the answers.”

“Then you wouldn’t read it.” She replied sulkily. Her fingers traced through the sand, drawing circles and swirls that seemed hypnotic under the soft fuzzy blur of the wine.

“I think I could already guess what some of the answers would be, though.” Her head snapped back up to level with mine again, the sharp annoyance already drifted from her eyes. Instead they looked sad, nostalgic. Reliving a thousand memories.

A smile teased at the corner of her mouth, mine seeming to mirror it in response.

“Half of them would be from the island.”

And all I could do was pull her into my arms, collapsing down onto the sand and burying her head close to my chest; even though I knew that was exactly what she was going to say, I didn’t want her to see the way my eyes had somehow started to shine a little too much in the moon’s cold light.

“I’m not sure we even have a life that exists outside here, Rea. Not one that matters anyway.”

“I wouldn’t even care if we didn’t.”

“Yea,” I mumbled, sinking my face into her hair. “neither would I.”

I woke to the cold bite of air against my chest, filling the space where Aurea had been lay sleeping, keeping it warm. The night must’ve grown too cold for her in a matter of hours, because the moon still hung high in the centre of the sky. My hands fumbled around in front of me, searching for my phone as my eyes adjusted to the darkness. They found it and I switched it on, the time – 2am – and one text message from Aurea glaring at me with their harsh light.

Got too cold. Back at house. Shook u but u didn't wake up. Come back when u get this

I switched it off, plunging myself back into the night. I could still feel the alcohol rushing through me, its effects seeming to have intensified after having a few hours to sink in. I pulled myself up on to my knees, my head running circles, shutting my eyes despite the dark and waiting for the spinning to pass. It refused. With a groan I rose heavily to my feet, collecting my phone and the speaker. The rest could wait until tomorrow. Rea was right – it was freezing, way too cold to be sleeping out here. We'd only managed it a couple of nights, and those were after the days where the sun had beaten down so hard we couldn't even go outside for five seconds without breaking sweat. Yesterday was hot, but not hot enough to promise warmth throughout the night. So I started back up the beach, headed for the dirt track that twisted for about 200 metres before reaching the back garden of the house

(with the view of a thousand seas)

that promised comfort and warmth. My heavy feet twisted in the sand, scuffing it up in messy kicks and frenzied footprints that perhaps had looked like some sort of altercation to whoever found them in the morning. Leaving the towel, empty bottles and few discarded bits of clothes would add to that tale – had it looked like I left in a hurry? To whoever found the scene, probably. But all they had to do was look to their left, a mere fifty metres along the beach to know that hadn't been the case.

A huddle of rocks jutted out from the beach in this space fifty metres from where I stood, their sharp angles always seeming so out of place against the soft white sand. They created a sort of pool in the centre of themselves where sea water could slowly flow in and out, a gentle rhythm that left piles of foamy scum sticking to the side of the rocks. On the highest rock above this pool was a perfectly smooth surface, worn away after years of people climbing their way up the jagged sides and resting their arses down at the top to admire the sea view. It wasn't even much of a view – you could see it perfectly well from the shore. But there was something about being that little bit higher, the feeling that just because you'd scaled a small mountain the view was automatically better. More deserved.

The only view in the middle of the night was a vast expanse of black, moving in the shimmer of the moonlight like sticky black tar. But still, I felt an impulse to climb those rocks and take in that view, to take a picture and send it to Rea with some sort of message saying how she'd wish she'd stayed longer. I don't know why. I didn't even think I wanted to be there myself anymore. But the weird combination of salty night air and a bottle of wine

convinced me that I did, and soon the dirt track was behind me and I was skipping, stumbling, over to the rocks.

I wasn't exactly making it hard for whoever found me in the morning – and I think at first something about that was the worst part. I didn't know for sure *who* found me, if they were even looking, or if they'd just followed my footprints and found me...

Found me in the tepid pool of scum? Washed up on the shore like a broken drowned ragdoll? Bloated and stinking as the sun heated my water logged body?

But everyone knew I was there. *Rea* knew I was there, and despite telling myself over and over that I'll never know for sure, part of me just understands she would have been the first to come looking when she woke and saw I wasn't asleep next to her. I've convinced myself that she would have been the first to find whatever it is she saw, because why wouldn't she? I was always full of surprises for her. If everything I did eventually boiled down to being for her, why shouldn't this? Our final parting gift. Her chance to say goodbye when I simply couldn't.

And it's exactly that thought that leaves me hot with self-hatred, bitter to the bone with anger.

But not with more anger than at the fact I climbed those rocks.

Not with more anger than at the fact I did it in pitch black, drunk, thinking I wouldn't fall.

And never with more anger than the fact I don't even know how I died.

It was just one wrong foot, one small slip and my body went flying, head smashing, body sinking. Was it the loss of blood or the loss of oxygen that finally did it? Did she find me drained of blood or still looking semi alive?

I don't know. I left that dark night by racing towards searing white light, racing towards something I couldn't comprehend and racing away from a life I'd fallen in love with without even realising, without even saying goodbye. Without even knowing exactly how I left, or why. If there even had to be a reason.

So much for a deathbed – so much for *Rea's* book. I could have given her all the answers in mine that night, if only I'd known.

But I didn't, I couldn't.

And now she will never know.

I disappeared from the island in that moment but never really left – I'm still here, the light is softer and edges of the world slightly blurred, things don't change in the same way they used to – but it's still the same island. It's corners seem to have drawn in smaller with time, time that I can't keep track of because there's no night or day, no physical changes in my body, just an infinite stretch of yellow light that's washed the world into a frozen haze. But it's still the island. Still our island.

I see people now and then, but not very often. No one tends to come here much – and why should they? We have the whole world to explore with our minds, but this island is where I find myself returning to.

I saw my grandad not long ago. He said he knew he'd find me here.

I asked him what got him – it was cancer. He looked older than I remember. Much, much older. That's the only gauge on time I ever get on the world from before.

He didn't mention anything about what happened to me, and I didn't ask. I knew enough. Afterwards he left and said he was going somewhere from his childhood, somewhere he hopes his wife will know to find him when she finally arrives. He didn't offer for me to follow and I didn't bother to ask. There'd be no meaning for me to hold onto there, and anyway, loneliness doesn't seem to exist here, not when you have a thousand memories and regrets to keep you company.

I guess him going to where his wife will find him is the same reason I'm staying here. I'm not wishing death on you, Rea, I'm just hoping that when your time comes your memories of me on the island won't have been replaced by the new life you will have no doubt discovered. I hope part of me remains with you, strong enough for you to find me.

I won't be anywhere else. There's no place else for me to go.

I hope you get to read that book and remember where your happiness was.

My feet hang off the window ledge as I stare out at the view, the expanse of seas laying gentle in their idle slumber. I will never let myself tire of this unchanging view, the blue never growing black with the nights I don't seem to miss, the perfectly smooth sand bordering it with its golden hue, empty except for the few clusters of rocks, empty expect for...

Except for new trail of footprints winding toward the house. My resting mind seems to kick back into overdrive, the suddenness of their arrival taking a moment to sink in.

There's someone else here.

I jump, practically throw myself off the window ledge, landing the twelve foot drop with perfect execution, a fall that would have hurt in a world before but not now, no – not now, not now I can race through the air without losing my breath and glide across the ground as if I wasn't there at all. Because I'm not, really.

But in some ways I am. In the ways that matter.

I'm tumbling down the dirt track before I even realise it, winding down the path I never made it back to all those days ago, the path that would have promised a life of happiness if only I'd followed it, a promised life with Aurea where we could have created a million memories to fill a thousand books.

But that's not important now, it was never important here. It's those fresh footprints I care about, or more specifically the person who made them.

The person who cared enough about this island to make a return.

The dirt turns to warm sand as I come out onto the beach, head whipping wildly from left to right as I try and locate the footsteps, try and locate the figure.

It doesn't take long.

A girl stands alone on the sand, golden skin alive in the sun, hair twisting round her shoulders as she tries to make out where she is. Deep green eyes wide with fright, intense with confusion.

They stare at me, and I know those eyes. I've seen that look. Is it not the same look she gave me right before the Infinity Swing broke and I almost killed her?

I try to take a step towards her but I'm frozen – with shock or confusion I can't quite work out, but I don't think it matters because the girl in front of me could not be more obvious. Because it's Aurea.

It has to be.

And yet it can't. This girl has the same skin, the same eyes, the same hair and the same intense expression – but she's young. Far too young. Because Aurea would be older, wouldn't she be –

“Aurea?”

The girl's eyes lose their fright, confusion changing into understanding.

Into recognition for someone she knows of, but not yet met.

Someone she admires with all the power of a thousand seas.

“No,” she breathes, almost too soft for me to hear.

But my heart seems to bulge and the shatter before she has to even speak again, because I think I've worked it out.

And in that moment my heart cries for the woman we've both left behind.

“I think – I think I'm your daughter.”