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Migrations

Once There Were Wolves

WILD DARK SHORE

CHARLOTTE
McCONAGHY



CANONGATE

LBRIS

We know
books

**WILD DARK
SHORE**

Rowan

I have hated my mother for most of my life but it is her face I see as I drown.

The face I see when I wake from drowning is different. It is rough and wind-bitten and scratchy. It is what I'm looking at when the sudden arrival of pain overcomes me, and I know the image of him will forever be as one with this pain. Whenever I see this face I will remember the burning sting of being dragged upon rocks and flayed open, left raw, I will feel the bursting pressure in my chest; the sensation will be so vivid it will be like it's happening all over again. His face, a return. A drowning.

Fen

She washes in with the storm, draped upon a tangle of driftwood. The girl sees her from among the seals. She picks her way through their fat sleeping bodies and moves to the surging waterline. Rough waves carry the lump closer, in with the tide. A shape of milky white lit by the moon. A shoulder, she thinks. And seaweed for hair. A hand draped delicately over wood.

The girl wades into the black roar. She dives under and swims out. Reaches for this bulbous thing to help steer it free. When her feet hit sand she rises, dragging the driftwood behind her. Swell slaps at her thighs and hips but she knows how to move with the water so as not to be tumbled. Preparing all the while for something terrible. Something altering. But a last wave sends the tangle onto the beach and the girl parts the curtain of snarled kelp to reveal a face, and it is not swollen or blue or nibbled; it is breathing.

The girl's name is Fen and she lives here now, on this exposed patch of coastline with the petrels and the shearwaters and the penguins and the seals. She hasn't been up the hill in a while, to where her family dwells in the lighthouse. She doesn't like to leave the sea. But tonight the storm, the woman. Lightning on the horizon and rain she can hear approaching fast. She thinks quickly, and then, rather than trying to pull the body free, she drags the entire driftwood barge up the black sand as far as she can. She allows herself another look at this face, at this creature carried in from a sea too vast to make sense of. A gift for them or something rejected? And then Fen runs.

This is a place of storms, but *this* storm, this one will be the worst they've endured since coming here. She knows it as soon as she reaches the crest of the hill and collides with the wind. It takes her off her feet. In the distance she can see the lights of the building. A white shape flies end over end through the air: a bedsheet from the clothesline. They all know not to hang things overnight; someone will be in trouble for that lost sheet. Behind it one of the tool trolleys careens through the grass, is lifted up off its wheels and dumped again, spilling its guts, and this—these precious items being left out—is even worse than the sheet.

In the end she doesn't have to struggle all the way to the house. Her dad's been watching and the second he sees her cresting the rise he is running. They meet in the dark, on the trail to the shore. Even his considerable size is nothing against this wind, and he's stooped almost double as he gathers her toward home.

"Stop!" she shouts. "Dad! We need Raff."

"I'm here," says her brother, materializing to take her other side in arms almost as big as their father's, both of them hurrying her on.

"Wait!" Fen says, knowing that time now will be divided into before and after. "There's a woman."

Dominic

You are not meant to have favorites, but my youngest is that. If only by a hair, and with a gun to my head. If I really, really had to answer. And not because we are most alike: that is my oldest and me. Not because we are least alike: that is my daughter and me. Maybe it is because he is curious and kind and so smart it can make your eyes water. Maybe it's because he whispers to the wind and hears its voice in return. Most likely I don't know why. But it may also be because, for one brief moment long ago, I wished him dead.

I leave my youngest safe and warm in bed; he is too little to be taken out into a storm, though he'd rather not be left behind. The rain has come, as I follow my two eldest to the beach. The seals have retreated below the waves. The penguins are huddled in their nests. Raff and I lift the woman between us and inch our way back up the long winding trail. No trees to give cover; there are none on the island, only mounds of silvery tussock grass and a passage that grows slower with each step into the wind. It screams in our ears. In this kind of storm there is a danger we could be tumbled off our feet and back down the hill.

"Keep going, mate," I say, and ahead of me Raff does, dogged.

My daughter is saying the woman was breathing. That somehow, she was breathing, and I know Fen is silently urging her to keep on, she is willing this body to cling to life. I have less hope, but I also suspect that to have made it so far, to have survived in an ocean so wild, she must be strong, this woman.

I've seen a body taken by the sea, and the state of it will rid a man of any hubris. We are soberingly weak under its hammer. This woman, delivered by such a sea—one more powerful than most—is clinging on with a bewildering defiance. She has been opened on one side, all down the left of her, and I can't imagine how there's not water on her lungs, but my first concern is the hypothermia; her breathing and her heart rate both seem very slow.

Back at the house, my three children and I carefully remove the woman's clothes, what's left of them. I set Orly to the shoes and socks and allow Raff and Fen to help me with the rest, leaving only the undies untouched. Fen takes her own clothes off too—"You don't have to," I say—and without a word she climbs into the bed to press her warmth around this stranger. The only way, truly, to warm her up. My boys and I pile blankets over them and monitor the woman's temperature. It rises slowly. Hours pass as we hover, watching and waiting, and I wonder what it is my daughter thinks about as she uses her body like this, to save another.

Later, when the woman seems warm enough and I don't think we can delay it any longer, Fen gets dressed. There is blood on the sheets, and on her skin. She pretends not to notice. We turn our minds to treating the wounds, using tweezers to painstakingly pluck out fragments of cloth. The woman's limbs are lean and strong, her head shaved. The face, which I have barely looked at, is clenched and angular. Her strong jaw works against her teeth. Once she is free of material and debris, I stitch the worst of the wounds, my fingers too big to be anything other than clumsy. We slather the scrapes with disinfectant and then as much gauze as we have before bandaging her body. There is fever now: she is scalding to the touch. She makes sounds that frighten all of us and I come to my senses and send my nine-year-old from the room. He makes a fuss, he wants to help, and I know he is more frightened of the storm than he is of this woman's noises. I relent, let him stay. This feels like a night to be together.

We sit with her and bear witness to the throws. Outside the storm is rabid. When the windows shake, Orly whimpers but the old stones hold together. Inside the sea is still fighting for her, it retains its hold. I think, deep in the darkest hours, that even if she survives this night that ocean will have her back one day.

Dominic

I brought my children to Shearwater Island eight years ago. I was not expecting the island to feel so haunted, but for hundreds of years the lighthouse we live in was a beacon to men who built their lives upon the blood of the world's creatures. The refuse of those sealers and whalers remains to this day, discarded along the lonely stretches of black coast and in the silver shimmering hills. The first time Orly admitted he could hear the voices, all the whispers of the animals killed on this ground—including, for good measure, an entire *species* of seal bashed on the head and wiped out entirely—I thought seriously about taking my children away from here. But it was my ghost who told me they might be a gift, these voices. A way to remember, that surely *someone* ought to remember. I don't know if that burden should fall to a child, but here we are, we have stayed, and I think that actually my wife was right, I think the beasts bring my boy comfort.

Mostly it is quiet here. A life of simple tasks, of day-to-day routines, of grass and hills and sea and sky. A life of wind and rain and fog and of smiles huddled around a heater and of books read each evening. Of hands clasping a hot cup of chocolate or the bend of a head against the weather, of wet clothes flung off at the door and trying to pick out the difference between a giant petrel and an albatross at distance. Of frozen food and sometimes downloaded movies and schoolwork and training and music. Of the gurgling roar of an elephant seal or the banana pose of a fur, of the flamboyant orange eyebrows of the last royal penguin colony in the world. Of seeds. Of parenting. Of grappling constantly with what to tell them about the world we left behind.

Ships come every so often to bring supplies and scientists. Despite its wonders, Shearwater is not a tourist island: it's too remote, too difficult to reach. Mostly no one comes here but a handful of researchers studying the wildlife, the weather, the tides. Certainly people don't wash in from the sea. I am having trouble making sense of how she's alive—the ocean around us is perilous and so cold, and there is no land for many thousands of kilometers. She must have come off a boat, but it doesn't make sense that there should be a boat close enough to our shores. The supply ship isn't due for weeks and the only ships that pass by are way out at sea, following the passage south to Antarctica, and to come off one of those would mean certain death. Unless of course this boat of hers was coming here, to Shearwater.

In the morning Raff and I assess the damage. Gutters are down and water has come under the doors, but our lighthouse has held strong even in the face of such a battering. The power sources can't say the same. My son and I walk up the hill to see that both wind turbines have come clean off their shafts. One of them is face down hundreds of meters away—it has flown—while the other is protruding up out of the ground in a salute to its own demise. The solar cells are scratched, and the roof of the shed has been lifted up and off, leaving the batteries within to take an absolute beating. I'll need to replace that roof but for now we set up a tarp to try to protect the remaining batteries—too complex to move and rewire all the cabling. Half of them are dead, anyway. The other half have some power stored in them, and this will have to stretch a long way.

Surviving in remote places is all about setting up contingencies. If one thing goes, there's another option to take its place. It's never occurred to me that all the solar cells, half the batteries, and both the wind turbines could go at the same time.

"We've still got the diesel," Raff says as we walk home. I can't hear any fear in him, just a focused kind of concern.

One thing we can't do without is heating. I don't know if we'd survive the kind of cold it will be without heating. Normally we'd be

straight on the radio to the mainland, calling for help. Repairmen, new parts, more gas, more diesel. Alas.

Raff and I walk home along the headland. There is no real reason to do this, but I am letting him guide the way and his feet often lead him here. Shearwater is long and skinny and divided into two parts, its northern side mountainous and mostly unexplored, its southern side smaller, more inviting. This is where the various buildings have been placed, including our lighthouse, the field huts, the communications station, and the seed vault. There is a finger of land that joins the two sides, an isthmus, narrow in shape and low in altitude. We call it the pinch, and it's where the research base sits. The base is several long white shipping containers made of aluminum so as not to rust in the salty air, as well as several wooden cabins. A hodgepodge of seventeen little buildings built over many decades. A dining hall and kitchen. The labs. A hospital. The storage unit. Sleeping quarters. Until recently a buzzing community of people, the pinch now holds a collection of empty buildings. And just as well because there is water lapping at walls and doors. The research base looks like it's floating on a pond.

"Bloody hell," Raff says.

High tide has never been this high before.

I am shaken but I'm not about to let him know that.

We still have some gas for cooking and manually heating water, and diesel for the generator to keep the freezer running so our remaining food stores don't spoil, but everything else is getting turned off. No more lights, no computers or phone chargers or stereo, no washing machine or vacuum cleaner, no power tools. The kids don't complain when I tell them; keeping this place running is a never-ending exercise in problem solving, and they understand that. What I am concerned about is the power to the seed vault down at South Beach, and whether it's gone too. I get Raff started on repairing the damaged gutters and pack myself an overnight bag. It's a ten-kilometer hike south to the vault so I'll stay the night in one of the field research huts down there.

First I look in on the woman. Orly is perched on the end of her bed, reading to her from a book on botanicals that his astounding mind has no doubt memorized. He has barely left her side since she arrived.

"How's she doing?" I sink into the chair by the window.

He shrugs. "Seems okay? She's breathing."

"You don't have to stay in here."

"I know." He fiddles with a corner of a page, dog-earing it and then smoothing it out. "Just seems like someone should be here when she wakes up."

I consider how much to tell him about my fears for the vault. In the end I just say, "I'm headed south for the night."

"Can I come?"

"Not on this one, mate."

The woman mutters something under her breath and even though she is not dead, there is something unnatural about it. A corpse reanimated. Her hand, the long fingers of it, clench once into a fist, then relax.

"Don't get too tied up in it," I tell Orly.

"In what?"

"In her surviving. She might not. Do you understand?"

"Yeah." He studies her face, I study his. "It's just . . . why isn't she waking up?"

"I don't know, mate. She swam a long way. She might still be swimming."

The Shearwater Global Seed Vault was built to withstand anything the world could throw at it; it was meant to outlast humanity, to live on into the future in the event that people should one day need to regrow from scratch the food supply that sustains us. Specks, most of them. Tiny little black dots. That's all they are. These treasures we keep buried in boxes below ground, down here in the arse-end of the world. The last hope of their kinds, but also of our kind.

The idea is a big one: to save humankind. But in all honesty that's not why we came here. I needed a job, and I needed it to be far away.

The purpose of it came later; in truth it came when my youngest recognized its magnitude.

While the seed vault is owned by the United Nations, the management of it has been allocated to the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service, which also manages the nature reserve on the island as well as the research station—Shearwater Island belonging to Australia by virtue of its location. I was hired as caretaker of every building on this island, including the enormous frozen vault at its far south, and so in the beginning, when we first arrived, I was making the trip across island often. Because he was so little, I had no option but to take Orly with me, and I resented these regular hikes, when I could have been attending to the maintenance of the research base or the lighthouse. But as Orly got older, he would explore as we walked, touching and smelling and picking, and as he learned to talk he spoke the names of the plants we saw, and then the seeds we were there to visit, and I began to see, through his eyes, that in fact this job was *important*. I started imagining the use of these seeds, I imagined the world that would require them. I felt better about being here, on the island that was protecting this last floundering hope, rather than back on a mainland that would need rescuing. And with every danger that came upon Shearwater, every struggle, I would think, at least we're not back there, dealing with fires and floods and food scarcity and all the rest of it.

At least we are here, in a place that seems hostile until you look more closely. Until you begin to see its beauty and its tenderness. Until you see the hidden abundance of it.

I never loved a place before we came here.

And now it's over. The seed vault is closing. It was meant to last forever, and now we are sorting and packing the seeds for transport, and in just under two months we, too, will be leaving, with all the lucky little specks important enough to be chosen for relocation.

The tunnel is dry, always. It must be: it's part of the design. Except that today, when I step into the mouth of the long descent, my boots splash.

I stop and peer into the darkness. The wrongness of it stands the hairs on my arms. The impossibility of it.

I splash down into the earth, to the underground chamber, to its vacuum-sealed door. Like the door of a fridge. If the water has gone beneath it, we will be in real trouble, but it hasn't, and I remember to breathe. Just the tunnel then, that's alright. It will be alright. Within the vault it's still dry. But as I check the temperature gauge my fears are confirmed. The lights are working but the cooling system has shorted out. It's already a degree warmer than it should be in here.

It has been made very clear to us that keeping the seeds safe is more important than keeping ourselves safe. Quietly, down in the corners of me, I consider whether I could let thousands of species go extinct in order to save the lives of my three children. If I were to reroute the energy we use for heating the lighthouse I might buy the seeds a little extra time. But the answer is easy, and I don't think they should have sent a man out here who has kids. That man would never make the choice they want him to.

I set up a pump in the tunnel, uncoiling the long dark tube until it snakes out the opening into daylight. If the water level reaches a certain height, the pump will turn on automatically. Next I walk each of the thirty aisles of the vault. They are dry, so I don't hang around. Despite it all, despite the importance of this place and these specks, I don't enjoy being down here. I'm not sure why, really, it's a mystery even to myself. Something, maybe, about the pre-life-ness of it, which in a way is death, though Orly would tell me I'm mad, that this place is the opposite of death. Maybe it's the stasis of it then, the way that life is being kept dormant. Maybe it has nothing to do with the seeds at all, and is simply the underground of it, or the deep, deep cold. Whatever the reason, the place unnerves me, so I let my boots splash their way back up to the surface.

I climb to the crest of the hill, where the shrubs give way to the long tussock grass, and I turn and look out at the horizon. It is like gazing off the edge of the world. Way down there sits Antarctica but mostly

what lies before me is a boundless ocean and this edge is sharp. If I take one step in the wrong direction I will fall, and I am never, for a single moment, able to forget it.

The field huts sit among mossy hills on the shoreline, accessible only via a crooked set of metal steps built into the rocks. It takes me the rest of the day to reach them. I will sleep here tonight; we don't travel after dark and usually we don't travel at all unless in pairs. I am breaking a rule, but I can't bring my children to see what's waiting. The huts are pods, delivered here fully furnished on the back of a freight ship many years ago. The blue hut (so named because of its blue door) is closest, while the red hut is a little farther along and closer to the water. Once there were four scientists living within them. Now the huts sit empty. Once there was a third, its door green.

The blue hut is the last place I want to set foot inside. The unconscious woman isn't going anywhere fast, but if she wakes she could eventually find her way down here, which means I can't put this off any longer. I push inside. It takes my eyes a moment to adjust to the dark. The smell is a shuddering kind of bad.

There are two single bedrooms, and I move past them to the kitchen.

It's not as grim as I remember it, but it is pretty grim.

In the backpack I've brought a scrubbing brush, cloths and towels, and bleach. I get to my hands and knees and start cleaning up the blood.