

## **Tidemarked**

*Ren Wednesday*

My family is not safe around water.

My dad was last seen at the edge of a weir, wearing an orange poncho and swaying to the big band jazz on his cassette player. He was barefoot, those long toes of his gripping the grass. On the CCTV footage he plays air sax, and when the camera swings back he's gone. My mum was spotted cross-legged on a canal towpath, eating kumquats from a paper bag. She was wearing a velvet patchwork jacket and dangling earrings. They found the earrings at the bottom of the canal, but not her body.

Our family tree is a mangrove, rooted in water. We've had Cornish fishermen and Glaswegian shipbuilders, canal navvies and icemen, deckhands and water caddies. These are risky jobs and accidents happen. But then there's my granny's younger sister, the long-lost 'water baby.' The kayaking cousins in Ottawa. The great-uncle in the pleasure boat sunk on the Seine and the way-back aunt dragged under washing clothes in the River Tay.

My sister Jenny and I are the end of the line. I became her guardian, nineteen years old to her seven and uprooted us to Coventry, right in the middle of England. I rented a flat without a bath.

No paddling parties in the park for Jenny, no swimming lessons, no trips to the seaside. When she caught me hovering outside the bathroom door while she showered, I realised I was losing the plot. As I couldn't keep us away from water, I decided to confront it: I filled the kitchen sink and demanded answers. An oily yellow film sat on the surface of the water, rebuking me for my poor washing-up, but there was no message I could understand in the gurgle of the drain. I put notes in the pockets of our clothes before washing: 'What do you want?' when I was bold. 'Please leave us alone,' when afraid. Jenny couldn't understand why her jeans were speckled with dissolved paper.

When the back court of our building flooded in freak storms, Jenny fretted about her marigolds until I went to their rescue. The opaque rainwater swirled around my wellies, and I clenched my teeth til my jaw ached. I found the flowerpot caught against the bin shed, the orange

flowers crushed and muddy. The flood had tipped the bins over and rubbish floated by: curled strings of floss, eggshells, one false eyelash that winked from the tide.

Back inside, I found a torn page of an A-Z plastered to my boots. It showed a corner of North Devon, a beach on the Bristol Channel. I dried the scrap of paper on the radiator and that weekend we went to the seaside.

It was low tide, the sea so far out that the water met the horizon in pale blue and yellow stripes. Jenny ran whooping towards the water's edge, giddy after the long car ride. I chased after her, caught between fear and exhilaration and we ran in circles in the damp sand, joined by a Border Collie who bounced with tongue-out exuberance.

'Look,' said Jenny. The dog was sniffing at a set of footprints that emerged from the ocean. They were fresh, and long-toed. I took Jenny's hand, touched the crinkled map in my pocket and followed the trail across the strand, through a sandstone arch and into a cove.

Our dad stood tall at the water's edge. His orange poncho was tattered and his hair and beard long. Jenny gripped my hand as seagulls cried overhead.

'My girls,' he said. The tug of the familiar voice pulled me close, but he had changed — his skin was smoother and his features rounder, like a piece of glass polished by the ocean. Behind him, dripping figures rose from the water, long-haired and sea-scoured. Our mum, in the remains of a patchwork jacket. Women with my hips and men with dad's jaw.

Dad held out his hands, one for each of us. He smelt of seaweed, sharp and vegetal. The figures in the surf opened their arms. I took his hand, the skin soft as a child's, and —

'No,' said Jenny. She tugged hard, her nails sharp in my palm. She pulled me back along the beach, our feet slapping on wet sand. In the backseat of the car, we cried together for what we had lost.

After that, we began the ritual. In Weston-Super-Mare, I knelt on the splintered boards of an old jetty and cut Jenny's nails, then my own. We collected the clippings in an envelope and posted it through a gap in the boards. I imagined it drifting out to sea, a white flag on a dark, distant planet.

The tooth fairy has to go without Jenny's baby teeth. I collect them, along with our hair clippings and balled-up tissues from her nosebleeds. Once a month we make the trip, bodies of water up and down the country. There are bits of us in the Sherbourne, the Stour, the Trent and

the Thames. We're in Lake Windemere and Loch Lomond, the English Channel and the Atlantic Ocean.

They're still out there, our waterlogged family. Sometimes I see them, their familiar shapes resolving to buoys or seals if I look too close. I don't tell Jenny.

I don't take her with me, either, to the places where our parents disappeared. There, on the bank of the canal, the edge of the weir, I eat sharp kumquats from a paper bag and play big band jazz on my phone. I test myself against the water, feeling the full pull of it in my bones. I think about the streams and rivers carrying pieces of us to the mouth of the sea, and the sea swallowing us up. I wait.

Eventually, the tug of the water ebbs.

**Ren Wednesday** is a queer writer and zine-maker living in Glasgow, Scotland whose work is concerned with feelings, textures, peculiarities and reality-slips. Their short fiction has been published by On The Premises and is forthcoming in *Archive of the Odd*.