

WAVES

by Rebecca Hickey

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A shadow cast across my body alerted me to his arrival. He let go of his backpack from a height on purpose. He would often do this to tell me, without words, his general mood. Today's was more a flump than a thud, so I knew the morning hadn't been too bad.

'Howiya' he said as he lay down beside me, crossing his ankles, interlocking his fingers and sweeping his hands behind his head to form a cradle.

'Mmm' I replied. After a short time, I heard him rustling in his bag. He'd brought a speaker with him and started playing music through it from his phone. Not loudly, we would never. We didn't want to be those kind of people. He placed it between our heads to enjoy and returned to his previous position.

'How's Deefur?' He asked.

'Still hates us. The daily attempts to rid herself of the cone-of-shame are getting more elaborate.'

'Poor thing.'

'She'll be fine.' I said

'Ah yeah.' He said. We fell silent again listening to his playlist coupled with the sound of the waves crashing below.

We had taken to meeting daily at a little green above the tracks of Salthill and Monkstown dart station. We had quickly realised that being out of the house was helpful for both our family dynamics. Our first year of College had been cut drastically short and hadn't at all been the party laden affair we'd hoped for. However, we were grateful and not for the first time in our existence, that we lived within walking distance of each other. 1.96 kilometres to be precise. We were three weeks into lockdown and had a well oiled routine in place. We would do a few chores around our respective homes so as not to get into trouble for disappearing, then meet at 11:30am. If it was warm we'd lie out, if it was cool we'd walk around. We'd bring sandwiches and snacks in our bags and be back at our respective homes by evening. Although we'd usually knock into one of the houses at some point for toilet breaks. I had Carl driven demented in the first week as I generally had to go a lot more often than him. At first I stopped drinking so much water in order to

reduce the amount of trips, but after awhile I just got used to not needing to go as frequently. I was sure Carl was part camel though.

As a wisp of cool air danced across my stomach, I rolled onto my front and folded my arms underneath my head to form a pillow. I looked at him properly for the first time that day. Like me, he was dressed for the weather. He was wearing a white t-shirt, GAA shorts and tennis shoes. He'd rolled his t-shirt sleeves up, doing his best to get rid of the farmer tan he had acquired a few days prior. His backpack was lumpy and I knew it would be due to harbouring both a rain jacket and a jumper because even though the weather forecast was for sunshine all day, Carl didn't trust weather apps. He was still cradling his head, but his chin was jutting ever so slightly upwards now, like a sunflower, stretching forward to get more heat from the blazing sun. Two white discs were reflected on his rounded sunglasses and as my eyes tracked down his face I saw the beginnings of a smile creep across it.

'What?' I said.

'You.'

'What about me?'

'You love a good stare.' He said.

'I do not!' I said and he laughed his low, rumbling laugh just as a large wave crashed against seaweed slicked rocks below, causing a little family to whoop and holler. Carl rolled onto his front, his face on top of his folded arms like mine were.

'Did you enjoy school?' He said.

'Where did that come from?' I said half laughing.

'Been thinking about it for awhile.' he shrugged. I watched as he swatted a tiny fly away from his left cheek.

'Enjoy is a strong word. It was grand like.' I said.

'Yeah. Would you change anything?' He sat up on his elbows and started to pluck daisies with his thumb and forefinger, then placed them neatly between us. I sat up on my elbows then too and took up the discarded daisies, one at a time, so I could start to make a crown.

'I don't know. Maybe some things.'

'Like what?' he asked.

'Studied less.'

'Why do you say that?' He said as he stretched an arm forward to reach the furthest daisy yet.

'I got so much more than I needed for college. If I'd studied a bit less and got less points, I still would've gotten my course and it would have made time for a bit more fun.'

'You think? Maggie on the loose is it?' He said laughing as he twirled the most recently picked daisy between his fingers. I shrugged.

'Well, not much has changed Mags.' He said.

'What do you mean?' I said as I placed the small daisy chain crown on my head and grinned at him, holding my hands under my chin in a 'ta-da' kind of way.

'Gorrrrrgeous. Hold it!' he said and quickly grabbing his phone, he took my photo. Showing me the shot he said 'You look like you're right out of the seventies flower power era here.'

'Wasn't that the sixties?' I said.

'Maybe? Drugs, sex and rock'n'roll. Whenever that was.'

'I wouldn't say no to some of those things.' I said as I started pulling up individual grass strands, for no other reason than to give me something to do. I realised Carl hadn't said anything so I looked up. I was squinting slightly even though I was wearing sunglasses. They were cheap but I loved the style so wore them often.

'Which?' he said.

'Which what?'

'You said you wouldn't say no to 'some of those things'. I'm asking which.'

'Wouldn't you like to know!' I said laughing, trying very hard to ignore the definite atmospheric change that I had inadvertently caused between us.

'I wish you'd not left Mark's gaff that night.' He said. His attention still focused intently on me. Without looking, he chucked his phone on top of his bag so all he was holding now was the extra daisy.

'Em....OK.' I said needlessly because I didn't know what else to say.

'Well it's something I'd want to change.' He said.

'Right.' I nodded.

'Why did you?'

'What?' I said, buying for time.

'Leave.'

I took a breath, sighed it out and looked up at the sky. I noticed there was just one single thread of cloud in sight, everywhere else was blue skies. I turned to look at him.

'You really want to do this now? After all this time? Now?' I said.

'I do.'

Without discussing it, we both sat up in front of each other cross-legged. I cleared my throat.

'I left because I didn't want to be anyone's side piece.' I said. Carl wasn't expecting that. He looked like I'd smacked him, my words biting into him. I felt momentarily bad.

'Side piece?' he said sounding winded 'How could you ever think that you'd be a -'

'You have a girlfriend.' As I said the words out loud the back of my eyes stung traitorously.

'That's why you left?' He said.

'Yeah. Had I stayed I felt we wouldn't have been able to walk it back.'

'Who says anyone would have wanted to walk it back?' He mumbled as he stared in the vicinity of my right ankle.

'I had no intention of being a home wrecker.' I said and Carl burst out laughing. He laughed for so long in fact, that I actually started to feel really quite annoyed. I was being serious. I folded my arms protectively across my chest, matching my already crossed legs.

'A home wrecker? Maggie! We'd only been together three weeks by then.'

'So? I'd seen the pair of you the day before. Looking very cosy if memory serves.'

'Is that the only reason you walked away?' He said, his green eyes searching mine through tinted lenses. I felt like he was trawling through the recesses of my brain, turning over box after box of thoughts and feelings until he found the ones he wanted.

'Yes actually.' I said as my cheeks warmed.

'And what about now?' He said quietly. The sea sounded miles away, as did all the socially distant conversations surrounding us. My heart was hammering in my chest.

'What about now?' I tried to say nonchalantly as I watched a tiny bug climb up a blade of grass that may as well have been Everest such was the size difference between the two. 'Nicole -'

'I broke up with Nicole.' He said.

'What! When?' I said, tearing my eyes away from the adventurer and looking at Carl instead.

'Does it matter?'

'It does to me.' I said.

'November.' he said.

I couldn't believe it, why wouldn't he have told me? The amount of time we'd spent together, not just in college but throughout this crazy time. An almost unquantifiable amount I imagined.

'You didn't say.' I said.

'I'm saying it now.' He looked at his watch and standing up said 'We should get you back.'

'What?' I said checking my phone. It was twenty past two.

'You're gonna need the jacks soon.' He said. I was about to indignantly contradict him, but then I realised I did actually need to pee. Once I shoved the speaker back into his backpack he held out his hand.

'Could get into a lot of trouble for that these days.' I said, nodding at it.

'I'll risk it.' he said, proffering his hand further. I took it and he pulled me up. He held my hand just a fraction longer than he normally would have. I noticed the difference and I knew that he meant for me to notice it too.

We walked through Monkstown passing the usual melee of bikes, dogs, ice creams and continued towards my house. My hands felt massive and in the way. I didn't know what to do with them. I tried folding my arms in front of me for awhile but that felt too restrictive as I walked. My playsuit didn't have pockets so instead of being able to stash my hands out of the way, they just hung limply by my sides, making me feel awkward and a little anxious. I also didn't know what to say. Did I want this? Would such a massive change blow up our relationship? What if things didn't work out? I didn't want to lose what we had.

'Would you relax please.' He said slicing through my mangled thoughts.

'I am relaxed.' I said, a little too quickly.

'OK buddy, whatever you say.' And he gently nudged me with his elbow. The contact made me smile.

When we got to my house I took my keys from my bag and left it with him, then ran up the four steps and opened the front door which was painted my favourite shade of blue.

'I'll be quick.' I said

'I've waited this long, what's another few minutes.' He grinned.

'Smooth.' I said and as I closed the door behind me, I heard him laugh.