

## Red Plastic Boat

Dwindling stars pierced the sky. Thin threads of dawn teased themselves out along the dark horizon. Abby pulled a torch from a pouch on her backpack and flicked the light across the path like a blind man using his cane. Will leaned against the car, watching, his bag in his hand. Abby spun around, the light tracing a wide circle across the brush. Will hesitated, then raised the bag to his shoulder and trailed along the path she cut through the dark. Beneath his feet, the stones and twigs and weeds gave way to the sands of the wide, moonlit beach.

Torchlight danced as Abby removed her shoes. The smell of seaweed pulsed around them in time with the cold wind blowing in over the waves. Abby moved quickly and Will followed her shrinking silhouette, falling further behind as his footsteps sank beneath him and he focused on the dim ground, trying to see if the next step he took would be coarse and wet, or dry and loose and whispering.

Light flashed across his eyes. He stopped and looked up.

Abby stood beneath the highest point of the natural archway and shone the torch across it. Shadows stretched and shivered across the surface, limestone white, black lines winding around the base, tufts of patchwork green higher up. She cast the light out to sea, birthing a shimmering, twisting moon in the shallower waves as they drew in and receded, drew in and receded.

The sun crept up, coaxing a thin rainbow out of the sky. Abby clicked off the torch, unzipped her bag, hesitated, then pulled out a long, wide, red plastic boat. Shadows slipped across the pockmarked walls of the arch. Abby worked the top of the boat away from the bottom, breaking it in two. A wave broke against the edge of the arch. Will finally caught up to her and opened his bag.

Inside, was a small box with a loose lid. Abby smiled and shrugged and held out the bottom half of the boat for him. He stared at it for a moment then pulled out the box and held the lip against the bow of the boat and poured. Thin grey ash slid out. Strands wisped away into the morning air. Water washed around their feet as the sun burned against the sea. Abby pressed the two halves of the boat back together.

'You want to say something?'

Will shook his head.

'I have to.'

Will nodded as she turned towards the water, bringing the front of the boat up to her mouth. Her voice drifted in and out with the waves.

'You bastard. You total bastard. You didn't listen and you didn't care. And now we're here, like this, and I hate that you did this to us. You knew we'd put things back together. You knew we'd do what you asked us. You knew when you wrote that oh-so-sorry for yourself note.'

She knelt down, her wrists turned towards the sky, the boat cradled in her hands, the red plastic reflecting in the lapping water.

'You don't deserve this. Us, out here, with this 'one last thing' for you. You should have been burnt and buried. You selfish shit.'

She turned her head slightly, her face stained with barely visible tears. 'You need to say something. He was your friend too.'

Will joined her at the edge of the water and put his hands around hers. Their fingers slowly warmed.

'I miss you,' he said.

Abby's shoulder's dropped. Her heavy head fell. The front of the boat tipped towards the water. Together, they knelt down and set it floating. She put her arms around his waist as she stood back up. He put his around her shoulder.

A wave came in and lifted the boat out then back, dropping it in the sand. Another wave came in and the boat wobbled where it was. Will stretched out and nudged it with his foot. It tilted awkwardly, but the water creeping around the arch finally held it. They watched it drift out to the ocean, disappearing beneath wave after wave after breaking wave.

Afterwards, together, they followed their footsteps back across the sand.