

HISTOGRAM

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

She felt each slap. Did not flinch at the sharp sting across her cheek as spray spiralled with each upward beat of the boat into on-coming waves. It felt almost natural now, this shifting of weight from side to side, a gentle sway to find her centre of gravity like lifting a baby from hip to hip, switching it over, over and over. Rhythmic rocking, weak sun a halo on her hair, almost enough to let her close her eyes, lift her face to the sky, relax. But white-knuckled, tight-lipped, she dared not tear her grip from the handrail or her eyes from the grey-green sea boiling below. Her cheeks, long-numbed by needles of knife-sharp wind, burned with a rosy glow, belied the cold.

It was not the wind or the wet but the nip of salt-water drying on skin that finally made her turn, sink back to her seat, head throbbing with the thrum of the engine. She studied the sky, had spent the day searching for signs. This morning's moon, full-round and silver, had lifted her, saw her reach for her camera to catch moon-shadows spreading from trees until the lunar halo brought her grandmother's voice *"there's a change coming little one, stormy weather ahead"*.

She had stopped twice on the way to the pier, caught short by signs. First-seen; a black cat. Her mother would have said *"bad luck"* and shivered but she knew the sailors would have seen safe passage as they let it pass. Today she would be a sailor. Second-sight was the birds, there was no need to stop but she wanted to count again, be sure it was seven, watch them preen as she wondered which secret she'd never share.

The unexpected emptiness of the quay was her, alone, forever, until missed messages confirmed a later departure. Skimming stones into a seemingly endless sea she had been sure there should be strength in solitude, but a solitary hour was a long time to see signs of alone; one gull, bobbing aimlessly, silhouette of a far distant ship silent on the barely-there horizon, a magpie, noisy in the tree behind her, his harsh, ascending alarm call sign of a fox nearby. She was still whispering *"Good Morrow"* as the boat crew arrived.

The white foam of the wake weaving through dark seas was surely a sign. But was this a silvered path to a brighter future or a rope that bound her back to the mainland, back to before. The sunrise was behind them, a soft, rosy glow too benign to scream warning, too pale for photographs, lacking a point of reference. She turned instead to the horizon, hoped for better shots to come, visual interest, a sense of perspective.

Sea-birds shrieked as they circled closer, hurling guttural profanities. She gathered in the missing children, fingers out-stretched as if to cover ears that were not here to hear the screaming, not this time. And she saw the woman watching her gathering air with empty fingers. So she smiled and it was returned. A sign?

She saw seals, mothers, outstretched fearlessly on an out-crop, young ones playing like puppies at the sea-edge. And she watched them play, unaware she was smiling. She remembered the stories her grandmother had told; the selkies who shed their seal-skin, danced in the moonlight on sheltered beaches, slipped back to the sea before sunrise. She wondered if maybe she shared selkie-blood then caught herself, unclipped the lens cap and caught them, barely time to adjust the focus before they slid out of frame.

Lunch was an island. A break in the journey on a different island between the one she had left and the one she was heading towards. Less than an hour in a place she had not been to since childhood, haunted by ghosts of bygone summers and the guilt of this childhood summer not shared. Half-remembered and unchanged. Surely a good sign. Some things stay certain, stay sure, stay true. Except the conversation with lunch was cornered by a stranger's misery, an uncanny echo. Did this sign cancel out the other sign? Uncomfortable, she excused herself and sat by the jetty facing back the way she had come, sharing her sandwich with a white dog that seemed to belong to no one.

Back on the boat and past the shelter of the islands the realisation came with such suddenness that it tore a sound from her. Self-mocking screech of laughter, as guttural as the gulls, drowned by the thud of the first real Atlantic breaker.

She turned, face drawn with salt-nip and self-regret, head throbbing with the thrum of the engine, accepting there were no signs. This break from life between the old life and the new, this short, organised, grown-up trip would teach shutter speeds, apertures and histograms, practical skills that would let her adjust the tonal values of her own images, teach her which filter to apply when the light changed. She would remove the element of chance from her photographs, put herself back in control. She would not see signs in shafts of sunlight, instead she would simply adjust the histogram until the luminance levels were exactly as she wanted them.

She was so busy not looking for signs as they sailed into the bay that she almost missed the sun burst through cloud, the rainbow over the headland, the two birds on the roof of the harbour-masters house. She almost missed the hand outstretched as she leapt for the jetty. Almost missed the lightening of shoulders as she lay down her bags.

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