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Mother Superior

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Mother Superior

Cora looked up from the rocky shore to see a freighter looming on the horizon. The sun had just set, and twilight clarified the haze which had defined Lake Superior's outer reaches for much of the day. She'd been on the beach about an hour searching for sea glass—or, more accurately, lake glass—to make jewelry. She'd even stopped watching the sunset, which was glorious as usual, to comb through the coarse rocks and pebbles in hopes of finding more colorful pieces that she could use.

It was harder than one might think, finding beach glass along this particular shore. This was the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, and the waters that sustained the sparsely inhabited mining towns were largely unpolluted. A blessing, of course, but not while trying to find fragments of garbage that the lake had transformed into polished gems. So far, she had gathered into her skirt pockets a collection both small and unvaried. The pieces were almost entirely clear and opal, with a single pale yellow one that had shined out at her from the water near the shore. Where were the turquoise pieces, not to mention aqua, forest green, orange, brown, maroon? If hidden farther out in the water, they would have to wait. Although the late-June breeze was mild and warm, her fingers ached after plucking that one golden miracle from an inch of frigid water. Normally, the year's first touch of Superior water felt clean and pure, like how Cora imagined baptismal water must feel to those old enough to process its sacramental meaning. But this year, the water just felt...numbing.

They'd had a rougher winter than usual, and the ice on the lake had only finished melting a few weeks ago. Back in May when the slush piles had finally disappeared and the trees started budding, the joy was palpable everywhere. By now, however, the novelty had worn off, and people were beginning to settle into the pattern of summer.

That was all right, she supposed. Routine kept her busy. That was mostly why she'd decided to spend the evening collecting pieces for her jewelry. She would sell the necklaces, bracelets, and anklets on the website she'd

set up for that purpose—an enterprise which had yet to yield a substantial profit. The main thing, though, was the resolution she'd made last week on her fortieth birthday, a promise to herself that she would perform at least one creative act per day. Simply put, every day she would take at least one step toward producing something. It had occurred to her that she spent too much time consuming the products of others: books, movies, music, food, even hiking trails. Enjoyable, certainly, but the inherent passivity of all this consumption exhausted her. She was tired of appreciating things.

So, she had begun to spend more time working in her vegetable garden, writing embarrassing nature poems in the journal she hadn't touched in years, and making her custom jewelry. She didn't even wear jewelry, but she liked making it. She had steady hands and a talent for design that she'd never suspected before. She'd gotten the idea a few years ago when she'd started working at the craft shop, work that didn't count toward her tally of creative acts, since she was just a middle-man (or woman) selling items to customers. Hers was a pleasant job that paid better than many other places in town, but it was still just work.

And then there was her husband, Ray, a middle-school science teacher obsessed with insects. Although Cora loathed bugs, she loved when Ray would lecture about moths and crickets while they rocked together in the back-porch swing on summer nights, the tide a constant, rhythmic presence on the shore below. She only half-listened to what he was saying, but he would become so animated and flushed and huggable, so much himself, as he described wing spans and eating habits. They'd been married for twelve years. Still, nothing they did together—biking, talking, sharing meals, watching movies—could be considered creative. Not even sex, since they'd given up on having kids a few years ago. They were medically able to have children, as far as she knew, but they'd kept putting it off for one reason or another until they both felt too old for the challenge. Well, not too old exactly, but too settled in. By the time it finally made sense to try, when they had steady jobs and had saved enough to buy a house, Cora was past the point of caring, and Ray already had his fill of kids at work.

Even so, in the weeks approaching her fortieth, she had expected the old regrets over their childlessness to resurface. This hadn't happened, though; if she thought of kids at all, it was with indifference. And no matter what the psycho-babblers might say, this urge to do creative acts was not

about an unfulfilled need to procreate. When she'd had that desire before, it had been powerful and straightforward, not cloaked in symbolism. No, something else had been bothering her, a longing that rose up again in her chest at the sight of that freighter far out on the lake.

Cora gave up her search among the rocks and sat back on the damp sand, arms hugging her shins and skirt puddling around her ankles. The sun was gone, but the light would linger for some time. Today was the solstice, though she hadn't thought of it until just now, noticing the celebratory bonfires dotted along the beach in both directions, flaring orange in the dusk. At the nearest one, a man and woman giggled drunkenly and dared each other to go in the water. The woman ran down to the shoreline and waded in up to her knees, then yowled and raced back, wild with laughter. From their vocabulary and the quality of their voices Cora could tell they were young, probably mid-twenties—about the same age as she'd been when she first moved up here.

She had been out of college for a few years and was alternately crashing at her parents' place in the suburbs of Cincinnati and working her way around the United States. She picked oranges in Florida, served cocktails and crawfish on Bourbon Street in New Orleans, cleaned hotels at Yellowstone. She never stayed more than a few months in one place. Her parents thought she was crazy. Why didn't she just look for a job in Cincinnati, save up for an apartment, pay off her student loans? She couldn't explain it to them, or even to herself. All she knew was that her life up until then had been so sheltered, so structured. She wanted to prove something to herself, though she wasn't sure what. So she would pick a city she'd always been curious about, drive there in her little hatchback, check into a cheap motel, and roam around looking for Help Wanted signs. This would have been a poor strategy in today's busted economy, with its outdated job postings as empty as the Internet's other promises, but back then it worked just fine.

This was a time in her life that, as the years piled up after it, would gradually leave the province of memory and enter into that of imagination; there, it would expand and glow with the red-gold hue of romantic adventure. But whenever she would read through her old journals from those years, she was freshly surprised at the restlessness, frustration, and loneliness oozing from every page. Then the veil of myth would lift to

reveal the truth that her post-college odyssey had been a big, fat failure. Whatever she was looking for, she hadn't found it.

Perhaps she was already beginning to understand this when she first came here that August, driving north from Detroit and stopping to stretch her legs in Mackinac City. Just like her other trips, this one was a whim, the brain-child of passing remark or a glance at a map of Michigan. She honestly could not remember.

She did remember the trip, though. It was already dark when she arrived in Mackinac, a tourist town full of stores that sold fudge, candy, and souvenirs. The main attraction was Mackinac Island, which didn't allow cars and could only be reached by taking a ferry from the mainland. Once she crossed the Mackinac Bridge, she would be in the U.P. of Michigan. But it was still three hours to Marquette, her destination, so she parked in the lot of a beach-front hotel and walked out onto a long concrete break wall extending into the dark, choppy waters of Lake Huron. She stood at the tip of the structure, leaning over the iron railing and breathing in moisture from the lake. Bats fluttered near the floodlight above, preying on mosquitoes and casting quick, swooping shadows on the water. Pink-tinged clouds filled the sky above the lake and obscured the moon and stars. Though this was just one of the many places she'd passed through recently, a new kind of tremor buzzed through her body. This wasn't the familiar twinge of excitement and dread that came with arriving in a new place; this felt different, like her life was just now beginning. The air vibrated with possibility. For the first time in her travels, she felt truly independent, truly free. Anything could happen now.

This feeling grew stronger as she drove across the Mackinac Bridge, its lights reflecting on the water and its wires twanging in the wind. And the feeling stayed with her as she drove the winding, pitch-black roads all the way to Marquette. Most of the time, hers was the only car in sight, so she kept her brights on and prayed that a deer wouldn't dart out of the woods in front of her. For some stretches, she could sense rather than see the black expanse of Lake Michigan on one side, the towering forest on the other. The farther north she drove, the more she felt like she was traveling back in time to some primeval place.

The first indication of Marquette came with a widening of the highway and the lights of chain stores and restaurants. She checked into the first

hotel she saw and woke up around noon the next day. The first thing she did was drive around the small college town until she came to a beach, which took all of five minutes. She took off her shoes and waded out into water that shocked her with its cold, though she'd since come to understand how warm the lake had actually been that day. It was so shallow here that, when she was finally in up to her thighs, she glanced back and saw the shore far behind her. She stood there alone and looked out over water so clear that it intensified the warm brown color of the slick sandstone beneath her feet. This was Lake Superior, gleaming silver in the August sunlight. No breeze stirred that day, and the water lay flat, barely rippling. And vast. So vast it defied imagination. That feeling she'd had since Mackinac City reached a crescendo, and something clicked inside her. This wasn't what she'd been searching for, no, but it was something better.

And here she was, all these years later, with a husband and a house right on the lake about ten miles east of Marquette, a fixer-upper foreclosure they'd been lucky enough to snag. She hadn't meant to stay, not consciously, but then she met Ray, who was here from downstate working on his master's in Biology. Just a few months after she'd arrived, she was working at a gas station and sharing a run-down house with four slovenly undergraduates. Her housemates threw a party, and Ray showed up with some people they knew. Emboldened by alcohol, he came right up to her and started talking about bugs. She liked him immediately. He was quirky without being annoying, and they hated all the same things. They shared a pot brownie in the kitchen and told each other dirty jokes. Then they went out to the back porch, where a light snow, the first of the year, flaked their eyelashes. His kisses warmed her collarbone, ears, cheeks, and finally her lips. At her suggestion, they ran to a large oak in the backyard and began to climb. Ray stopped about halfway up and started back down, but she made it nearly to the top, so high up that she could see the lake, an endless plane of negative space in the distance. She threw her head back and howled up at the waning moon. She couldn't be sure how she found herself standing on solid ground beside Ray, but she would always remember how he grinned at her and said, "You're a force of nature, you know that?"

As Cora sat on the beach and watched the freighter glide almost imperceptibly further from the ore dock toward some unknown destination, she wondered if that were still true. Had it ever been true, or did Ray just

say that because he was stoned and drunk with falling in love? And what did that even mean, “force of nature”? Maybe it had something to do with taking risks, but when was the last time she’d done that? Had she ever taken one, a real one? Even her travels all those years ago didn’t seem to count, somehow.

The nearby couple was leaving, kicking sand over the dying embers of their bonfire and gathering their towels. They waved in her direction as they tromped away, although they’d ignored her up until now. Waving at strangers was a custom around here, so she half-lifted a hand at their retreating backs. Now the closest fire was about a quarter of a mile away. Off to the west the residue of sunset had almost disappeared, and the lights of Marquette glimmered in the growing darkness. She should go back up to the house, wait for Ray to return from the errands he’d been running in town. But something was keeping her there, planted in the sand.

She loved this place, she really did. But sometimes, she would have a ridiculous urge to “borrow” a speedboat, drive it out to one of the freighters and somehow hitch a ride to wherever the ship was headed. There was actually a cell phone app that told you the names and destinations of these ships, many of which hauled iron ore between here and Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, but she preferred not to know. She’d rather imagine that she could just hop a freighter and end up in Chicago or Cleveland or any number of Great Lakes cities, not caring about directions, maybe not even recognizing the city until she saw the skyline or got off the boat and glanced at a billboard or a newspaper. She missed cities sometimes: the diverse people that minded their own business instead of staring or waving at you, the anonymity, the concrete, the powerful mixture of odors both pleasant and less so. The stupid thing was that many city dwellers would kill to live in a place like this, or would at least pay good money to rent a summer home here. Also, with a little planning and saving, she and Ray could take a vacation and go to any of these cities whenever they wanted. But that would be nowhere near as satisfying as traveling by lake, not knowing where she was headed until she got there.

Although the freighter was nearly gone from her sight, a solitary figure materialized out of the grayness to the east—an upright paddle boarder, rowing parallel to the shore in her direction. Standup boarding had become popular in the last year or two, and since then Cora had thought

about trying it out as a test of her resolve and focus. Still, this person must have been crazy, balancing in the near-dark above forty-degree water, who knows how deep all the way out there. And alone. What if he fell and knocked himself unconscious on his board? Those things were hard, made of fiberglass, weren't they? As the figure paddled nearer, now almost directly across from where she sat on the beach, Cora could make out that she—definitely a woman, based on size and build—was at least wearing a wetsuit, complete with hood, gloves, and boots. Even so, this woman was foolish. Cora felt a twinge of what might have been envy, but which she soon recognized as something else—loss.

Then, almost as if Cora's thoughts had caused it to happen, the woman lost her footing. As she flung out her arms to steady herself, her oar plopped into the calm water, where it drifted out behind the board. The woman's arms pinwheeled for what seemed like eternity, and just when Cora thought she had finally regained her balance, the woman fell backward and disappeared into the lake.

Cora jumped to her feet and scrambled over rough stones to the water's edge. She squinted hard at the paddle board, the oar, and the disturbed spot where the woman's body had broken the water. She thought she saw a ripple, maybe the tip of a reaching finger, then—nothing.

Cora stripped down to her underwear, flinging blouse and skirt behind her on the beach. Knowing that she would lose her nerve if she tried to wade out, she belly-flopped into the lake and gasped as its glacial cold pierced her chest. She crawled along the muddy bottom until the water became deep enough to swim. Keeping her head above water and her eyes on the paddle board, the outlines of which were growing fuzzy in the darkness, she concentrated on kicking her feet and reaching forward with her arms.

Keep moving. Don't look back at the shore. Don't think. Don't think about how that board is much further out than it looks. Don't think about how you're not even halfway there yet. Don't think about how much higher the lake's been this year, how deep the water might be getting, or how you'll find her in all of it. Don't think about how you'll get her back to shore—you can use the board. But now you're thinking. Don't. Don't think about hypothermia, or drowning. Don't think about the Edmund Fitzgerald.

She realized that her strokes were keeping time with the “ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum” of the familiar Gordon Lightfoot song, steady as a

metronome. She opened her mouth to laugh and swallowed Lake Superior in all its danger and glory. Now it was almost fully dark. She'd forgotten how quickly that could happen. She had lost sight of the board awhile ago—a lifetime ago—and no longer felt the cold. She had no idea how long she'd been swimming, or how far she'd made it. Bad signs, but she didn't care. No turning back now. She thought of her clothes on the shore, probably being pecked at or carried away by gulls, and laughed again. She wouldn't need them anymore. Poor Ray.

Then her reaching arm struck something solid—the oar, gleaming neon yellow and attached to a black, wet-suited arm. The mouth of the woman straddling the paddle-board was open, but the roaring in Cora's ears blocked out her voice. Cora clutched the oar with a shaking hand, treading water, confused. Then she realized that this woman must have been calling to her for some time, probably since Cora had begun to swim. The woman couldn't possibly have been under water for very long and still survived; she must have surfaced awhile ago and begun paddling toward her.

Her adrenaline draining, Cora began to hear the woman's voice ringing clear over water that magnified sound just as it did everything else. The voice crystallized, became words. "It's not deep here. You can probably stand with your head above water. But you should get up on the board in any case. This water is bone-chilling."

Feeling foolish, Cora stopped treading and stood in water up to her neck.

The woman removed her gloves and held out her hand. "Here, come up on the board. I'll row us back to shore." Cora stared at the blue-veined, liver-spotted hand, then looked up at the woman's face. She was old, at least seventy.

"Damn," Cora said.

The woman frowned. "Well, come on. We need to get back on shore and get you dry." She grabbed Cora's hand and held it in a firm grip. With some effort, Cora managed to climb onto the board and straddle it in front of the old woman, practically sitting in her lap. Only then did she discover the numbness in her legs and posterior, which couldn't feel the board beneath her. Her torso felt disembodied, floating, all clacking teeth and heaving chest.

“I can’t feel anything below my waist.” Panic buzzed her forehead and began to close her throat, until pain came like hot needles, pricking her thighs. She looked down and saw the woman’s strong, beautiful hands massaging her bare flesh.

“Thank you,” Cora said. The woman continued down Cora’s legs to her feet, not seeming to hear. That was all right. Cora wasn’t even sure to whom, or to what, she was giving thanks: the woman, the lake, the night, whatever Creator might be listening. Maybe all of these.

“How does it feel now?” the woman said.

“Hurts.” Cora couldn’t talk much for shivering.

“Good. Pain is good.”

“I know.”

The old woman lifted the oar. “Shall we?”

“Yes. Definitely.”

The woman began to paddle. Cora could make out the rocky shoreline, which wasn’t that far, after all. Past the dunes and up the hill, her kitchen light was on, dwarfing the stars that flecked the sky above her house. Ray was home, probably making popcorn in preparation for watching a movie together. She would be glad to see him, but first there was this moment, which found her suspended, afloat in this liquid void with a kind stranger. She wasn’t exactly sure what to name this state of being, but some people might call it grace.