

FINAL SUMMER.

By dadio

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You remember those summers as a child; the summers by the sea, the salt air, the gulls, the incoming tide, the wet feet. Mother holding hands of the youngest, her eyes staring out to sea, the breeze untidying her hair. Father away from London was still stiff, formal, and barking orders and finding the sea air disturbing and untameable. Not too close to the sea's edge he would say, mind your feet do not get wet, see those waves, men drown out there. You breathe the air now remembering, sitting on a chair looking out at the large horizon, feeling the breeze on your face, the chair moving on the balcony with the breeze. You put one hand on top of the other, pretending it's Mother, imagining she's still there beside you watching talking. Thomas loved to fly his kite out there, the wind taking it high, he laughing, Harriet following, clapping her hands, Richard standing beside Father frowning unimpressed. You move in the chair, sensing your legs going numb. You rub them, bring life back. The servants have gone now: Sally, Polly, Broadbridge, Mrs Dunn and the others that came and went. Just you now and Margaret. She fusses over you, tidies the room, your clothes, makes the bed, prepares you still. You are tired, slightly ill. The sea air will be good for you, Margaret says. How Father moaned being far from London. Like being dead, he would say. And off he would go with Richard his favourite child, explore the beach and rocks, and stand staring at the sea like some frustrated Canute. You smile, but smiling hurts. You rub your hands. Margaret puts her arms around your shoulders and kisses your cheek, then goes back inside to prepare a hot drink, return, sit, and talk and gaze at you lovingly as she does. The breeze touches you, fingers into your flesh and bones. Mother watched Harriet die a few years later. Her youngest daughter taken suddenly; the sickbed hot, sticky, and full of approaching death. You look at the gulls in the air, swooping, gliding and flying there. You walked in the sea in bare feet back then, your small toes feeling the coldness biting them like tiny fishes were snapping. Thomas made sandcastles in the sand with Harriet helping fetching small pails of water, sand, and sticks. Richard would stare and icily bark words of derision. Father and Mother sometimes went for walks along the beach until they were small figures in the distance far away, out of reach. Margaret returns with a tray with two cups and saucers, teapot, sugar bowl, spoons, milk jug, places it down on the small table and plays mother. She has prepared your cup, sugar, milk, tea and lifts it to you. The cup and saucer shake. Here, let me, she says and puts it down beside you. Just take the cup and hold it with both hands, she softly suggests. You lift the cup and bring it to your lips. Not too hot, not wet and warm; just right, as you like it and she knows. She sits beside you drinking her own tea, looking at you, her eyes wanting to embrace you, wanting to push illness and waiting death away. Thomas drowned himself a year ago. The Thames, not the sea, took him down. You miss him; miss his warmth and thoughtful ways. Only you, Richard, Margaret and a few old friends attended his funeral. Father too ill, Mother dead. Margaret cuts you a slice of cake and puts it on the plate. You must eat, she whispers, rubbing your hand, gazing into your eyes. You nibble, feel it stick in your throat. Father never approved of Margaret; sat and glared at her when you took her back with you to the old family home on the occasional visit. You swallow the cake. You want to feel Margaret's arms about you, to sense her lips on your neck, want her beside you in the bed again, to hold you close, whisper soft words, listening to the rain. Too ill now for that. No more lovemaking beneath the sheets, no more

satisfying sex, just approaching death, Motherâ€™s ghostly images and hardness of breath.
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