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The Year of Fog

Written by Michelle Richmond

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The Year of Fog

a novel

MICHELLE RICHMOND



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1

HERE IS the truth, this is what I know: we were walking on Ocean Beach, hand in hand. It was a summer morning, cold, July in San Francisco. The fog lay white and dense over the sand and ocean—an enveloping mist so thick I could see only a few feet in front of me.

Emma was searching for sand dollars. Sometimes they wash up by the dozens, whole and dazzling white, but that day the beach was littered with broken halves and quarters. Emma was disappointed. She is a child who prefers things in a state of perfection: sand dollars must be complete, schoolbooks must be pristine, her father's hair must be neatly trimmed, falling just above his collar.

I was thinking of her father's hair, the soft dark fringe where it touches his neck, when Emma tugged at my hand. "Hurry," she said.

"What's the rush?"

"The waves might wash them away."

Despite our bad luck so far, Emma believed that on the beach ahead lay a treasure of perfect sand dollars.

"Want to go to Louis's Diner instead?" I said. "I'm hungry."

"I'm not."

She tried to extract her fingers and pull away. I often thought, though I never said it, that her father spoiled her. I understood why: she was a child without a mother, and he was trying to compensate.

“Let me go,” she said, twisting her hand in my own, surprisingly strong.

I leaned down and looked into her face. Her green eyes stared back at me, resolute. I knew I was the adult. I was bigger, stronger, more clever. But I also knew that in a test of will, Emma would outlast me every time. “Will you stay close by?”

“Yes.” She smiled, knowing she had won.

“Find me a pretty sand dollar.”

“I’ll find you the biggest,” she said, stretching her arms wide.

She skipped ahead, that small, six-year-old mystery, that brilliant feminine replica of her father. She was humming some song that had been on the radio minutes earlier. Watching her, I felt a surge of joy and fear. In three months, I would marry her father. We hadn’t yet explained to her that I would be moving in permanently. That I would make her breakfast, take her to school, and attend her ballet recitals, the way her mother used to do. No, the way her mother should have done.

“You’re good for Emma,” Jake liked to say. “You’ll be a much better mother than my ex-wife ever was.”

And I thought, every time, how do you know? What makes you so sure? I watched Emma with her yellow bucket, her blue cloth shoes, her black ponytail whipping in the wind as she raced away from me, and wondered, how can I do it? How can I become a mother to this girl?

I lifted the Holga to my eye, aware as the shutter clicked—once, softly, like a toy—that Emma would be reduced to a blurry 6×6 in black and white. She was moving too fast, the light was insufficient. I turned the winding knob, clicked, advanced again. By the time I pressed the shutter release a final time, she was nearly gone.

2

HERE THEN is the error, my moment of greatest failure. If everyone has a decision she would give anything to retract, this is mine: a shape in the sand caught my eye. At first it looked like something discarded—a child's shirt, perhaps, or a tiny blanket. By instinct I brought the camera to my eye, because this is what I do—I take pictures for a living, I record the things I see. As I moved closer, the furry head came into focus, the arched back, black spots on white fur. The small form was dusted with sand, its head pointing in my direction, its flippers resting delicately at its sides.

I knelt beside the seal pup, reaching out to touch it, but something stopped me. The wet black eyes, open and staring, did not blink. Spiky whiskers fanned out from the face, and three long lashes above each eye moved with the breeze. Then I saw the gash along its belly, mostly hidden by sand, and felt some maternal urge bumping around inside me. How long did I spend with the seal pup—thirty seconds? A minute? More?

A tiny sand crab scuttled over the sand by my toe. The sight of it reminded me of those miniature creatures that littered the beach at Gulf Shores when I was a child. My sister Annabel would capture them in mason jars and marvel at their pink underbellies

as they tried to climb out, legs ticking against the glass. This crab kicked up a pocket of sand, then disappeared; at most, another ten seconds passed.

I glanced eastward toward the park, where the fog abruptly ended, butting up against startling blue. As a transplant to this city from the bright and sultry South, I had come to love the fog, its dramatic presence, the way it deadens sound. The way it simply stops, rather than fading, opaque whiteness suddenly giving way to clarity. Crossing from fog into sunlight, one has the feeling of having emerged. Traveling in the other direction is like sinking into a mysterious, fairy-tale abyss.

Just beyond the beach, along the Great Highway, a hearse led a line of cars south toward Pacifica. I remembered the last funeral I attended, a healthy guy in his late twenties who broke his neck in a rock-climbing accident; he was a friend of a friend, not someone I knew well, but because I'd talked with him at a dinner party two weeks before the accident, it seemed appropriate to go to the funeral. This recollection took another five seconds.

I looked ahead, where Emma should be, but did not see her. I began walking. Everything was saturated a cool white, and distance was impossible to measure. I clutched the plastic Holga, imagining the great images I'd get, the deep black of Emma's hair against the cold white beach.

I couldn't help thinking of the dead seal pup, how I would explain it to Emma. I believed this was something mothers instinctively knew how to do. This would be a test, the first of many; at that moment I was not thinking entirely of Emma. I walked faster, anxious to know if she had seen the seal; it was a good thing for her to see that day, alone on the beach with me. I wanted her to be frightened by the dead seal pup so I could step delicately into the role of stepmother.

I don't know exactly when I realized something was wrong. I kept walking and did not see her. I pushed my hands in front of me, aware even as I did so of the absurdity of the gesture, as if a pair of hands could part the fog.

"Emma!" I called.

The panic did not strike immediately. No, that would take several seconds, a full minute almost. At first it was only a gradual slipping, a sense of vertigo, like the feeling I used to get as a child when I would stand knee-deep in the warm water of the Gulf of Mexico, close my eyes against the white-hot Alabama sun, and let the waves erode the platform under my feet. First the sand beneath the arches would go, then the toes, and finally I would lose my balance and tumble forward into the surf, mouth filling with seawater, eyes snapping open to meet the bright spinning world.

“Emma!”

I yelled louder, feeling the shifting, unreliable sand beneath my feet. I ran forward, then back, retracing my steps. She’s hiding, I thought. She must be hiding. A few yards from the dead seal pup stood a concrete drainage wall covered with graffiti. I ran toward the wall. In my mind I pictured her crouched there, giggling, the pail propped on her knees. This vision was so clear, had such the ring of truth, I almost believed I had seen it. But when I reached the wall, she wasn’t there. I leaned against it, felt my insides convulse, and vomited into the sand.

From where I stood, I could make out the shape of the public restrooms down the beach. Racing toward them, I felt a sense of dread. I knew, already, that the search had somehow shifted. I crossed the highway and checked the women’s room, which was dark and empty. Then I circled around to the men’s side. The windows were made of frosted glass, dim light spilling onto the tile floor. I plunged my hand into the trash bin, looking for her clothes, her shoes. I got down on hands and knees and looked behind the urinals, holding my breath against the stench. Nothing.

As I crossed back to the beach, I was shaking. My fingers felt numb, my throat dry. I climbed to the top of a sand dune and turned in circles, seeing nothing but the impenetrable white fog, hearing nothing but the soft hum of cars along the Great Highway. For a moment I stood still. “Think,” I said out loud. “Don’t panic.”

Up ahead, more fog, a half mile or so of beach, then the hill leading to the Cliff House, the Camera Obscura, the ruins of the

Sutro Baths, Louis's Diner. To the right, there was the long sidewalk, the highway, and beyond it, Golden Gate Park. Behind me, miles of beach. To my left, the Pacific Ocean, gray and frothing. I stood at the center of a fog-bound maze with invisible walls and infinite possibilities. I thought: a child disappears on a beach. Where does that child go?