

## The Ocean is Far from Here

Maria had burned the soup again. Last time she did this, her husband had stood over the oven, chest rising and falling, anger tightening the air between them and exploding when he burst into a cacophony of scolding:

“How do you burn soup?”

“What do you do here all day while I slave away? Twiddle your thumbs, I presume?”

“Don’t you have a thing to say for yourself?”

Rarely, she did. This time, she stayed quiet, noting how his arms and jaw pulsed like the sand bugs she’d scoop up from the beach as a child sifting beneath his skin. And oh, a *child*. All of their arguments ended on the prospect, or rather the lack of prospect, of a child.

Although she’d never tell her husband, she secretly knew her womb was ice-cold. A barren wasteland. She’d done everything the doctors told her, let him have his way when he wanted, stayed out of the sun, drank honey and teas of juniper berry and liquorice and myrrh, slept a doctor-prescribed 14 hours a day, although much of it she spent staring at the darkness until it came alive around her.

She couldn’t remember the last time she’d gone to the beach.

She watched him stumble around the kitchen, his shirt unbuttoned, hair matted with sweat. He slammed a glass down on the table and poured himself a generous slosh of dark liquor.

He’d only struck her four times. Maria considered those good odds. They’d been married five years, three months, and twenty-two days. She felt old with it.

The best part of everyday was after the explosions, when the dust would settle around them and he would hold her in a drunken embrace that hurt a little, but she loved him, or had

loved him at one point, and so she buried her head in the place between his neck and collar, closing her eyes there until he pushed her away in his sleep.

Today, he tugged his jacket back over his button-up and sighed. "I'll go find something to eat at Naps," He said. Naps was his favorite place to eat but mostly drink.

Maria felt a sliver of panic rush through her. She stepped forward. "I'll go with you, then."

Her husband shook his head, narrowed his eyes down at her like a disobedient child. She felt small under his gaze. "No, sweetheart. You fix that soup recipe. I'm not coming home starving again to this nonsense." He softened his voice, smiled a little, and kissed her on the head. "It's not good for you to be out in the nighttime anyways. Bugs and things come at dusk."

She watched him leave and went into the bathroom to stare at herself in the mirror. She'd been so careful about her hair today, brushing it long and silky before braiding it in a snake down her back, and her face was free of any stray hairs, cheeks flushed with a bit of rouge, tea tree oil behind the ears, jojoba oil on the face to give it that tight glowing sheen. She'd burnt the soup for this face. Now if not for her husband, who was it for?

She walked into their bedroom aimlessly, like a ghost. She'd hung a picture of Maria Goretti on the wall. Although she never knew her mother, she liked to imagine her mother named her after the saint. Maria was stabbed fourteen times after resisting rape. She was eleven. How many women died martyrs but not saints?

She thought again of the beach. She wondered if Maria Goretti had ever seen the beach, if she ever spent a single day living for herself. She herself couldn't remember the last time she'd left this house, really. The house had seemed to grow around her like skin over bone.

Once, she saw a house fire. She was living in an orphanage then, and on the way back from their grocery trip they spotted a blue house spilling over with flames, blackening from the inside out, falling apart like rotten fruit. Her peers had tugged her away, looking down and rushing past, but she couldn't tear her eyes away, and stood in the middle of the street staring at it until someone honked at her.

She turned around out of their bedroom and froze. In front of her, against the wide windows of the dining room, was the shadow of a man. Her heart thrummed in her ears and she put her hands against her bodice but didn't move another muscle. His outline blurred a bit, as if it was materializing off into the surrounding darkness, and she cursed herself for not turning a light on before the sun set, for not locking the door behind her husband. His face seemed featureless; no light shone on or off of it, and the rest of his body was filled with the blackest black, as if he was consumed by a sucking hole of nothingness.

For some reason, this pacified her. She thought of Maria Goretti in her bedroom, half Maria's age when she died, who would rather die than give up a part of herself, and wondered what she would do here, where time ceased to exist.

"I'm pregnant," she heard herself call out. Then louder, "I'm pregnant. My husband will be home soon."

The figure said nothing. She closed her eyes and could hear the sound of waves. Perhaps this was the place beyond life calling to her, that swallowing nothingness place she'd sometimes think of and remark at how beautiful it would feel to not have a body in.

When she opened her eyes, the man had expanded like a great helium balloon, stretching across the ceiling and melting across the floor towards her, sticking to the walls in a web of darkness. She knew it would consume her. Maria surged towards it, realizing she hadn't moved

faster than a walk in months, perhaps hadn't moved at all in five years, and running towards the darkness she felt a heaviness roll off of her like dipping under an ocean wave right at the last second; she ran and ran and ran until the black seemed endless, until she saw the doorknob glinting with the same golden sheen her and her husband had loved and picked out together when they built this house years ago, yet he didn't seem to exist here, on this plane, as she reached for the doorknob.

It was locked. She burst forth into the warmth.

Here, she could hear all the tiny creatures moving about; the crickets calling, a possum rustling in trash, worms sifting in the soil. She heard someone laugh down the block, leaves shuffling in the breeze, the distant honking of a car. Here, she felt washed with youth again, buoyant and light, gasping for air. Bobbing at the surface of the night.

I was inspired by *The Yellow Wallpaper* for this story because I love the way it portrays abstract concepts within the mind, so you don't know what's real and what's not. This is also a characteristic of the Gothic genre, as it often includes an ambiguous sense of time and state of mind. I often write stories without direct time period cues, so I wanted to use that element here. I gave the protagonist a bodice and a very domestic setting that seems from before the 21st century, but I also included the presence of cars and the ocean, so the setting didn't lean too far into an 18th or 19th century agrarian society. The female Gothic trope of domestic incarceration is evident here in the fact that Maria doesn't feel like she's left the house in a really long time. She feels suffocated by the overbearing patriarchal domesticity, although that's where she feels safe, and when she is released from it she gasps for air. The villainous male figure is present here in the form of the controlling husband, who seems to care for her only in her ability to give him a child and dinner. She protests against the possible danger (threat of sexual violence) of the male figure in the dining room by proclaiming that she is pregnant even though she knows she's not, demonstrating how she is conditioned to think she's only important for her birth giving abilities. The patriarchal anxiety manifests in this male figure, which could be real or a figment of her imagination; either way, it represents this breaking-in by the patriarchy into her female, domestic space. There's also the subtext of Maria Goretti, who resisted a rape, and I feel that this parallels to the final action of Maria moving through the darkness rather than letting it consume her, although she exits the conflict not a martyr but holding a new kind of power within herself.