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The HOUSE at the END of the SEA

VICTORIA M. ADAMS

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For Faith, my child of two worlds

1
Breakwell

'There's a boy spying on us from the beach,' said Milo.

Saffi didn't turn around. She fixed her gaze on her brother seated opposite her at the picnic table, and waited. Behind him, southwards along the town's promenade, waves rushed almost to the sea wall. Milo seemed too small to her in his green shirt with a T-rex on the front, poking at the dregs of his milkshake with a straw. A picture of innocence.

Except, he was lying. She knew that.

'He's got something.' He had a worried look. 'I think it's a gun.'

She held his eye. 'Stop it, Milo.'

'Turn around. You'll miss it.'

'Just once, I'd like to sit quietly and wait for Dad.'

'It's true, I swear.'

It wasn't. Milo's tales had started right after the funeral and showed no signs of stopping. The grief counsellor said: *Your brother lies because he doesn't want to accept a reality without his mum.* Saffi wished it was that easy to change reality.

'Please.' He was squirming with frustration. 'Look!'

He sounded so desperate that she finally glanced over her shoulder. All she saw on the beach was a slim figure in a brown jacket. There was no way of knowing if he had been 'spying'. Otherwise, the shore was deserted apart from birds. There were a great many of those, wheeling and turning over the bay.

'Too late,' said Milo.

Sun, kids crying over dropped ice cream, the burnt-sugar smell of candyfloss. That was how a seaside town should be, Saffi thought. But not this one. This one couldn't even manage a summer. It was August but the breeze felt more like October. The promenade had one post office that sold crisps and cards, one tea shop named Betty's where the owner hung sad, useless sun-catchers in the window. The lines of groynes on the sand resembled grinning teeth. And they were going to live here. They had to leave London and everything they knew behind, move in with Grandma and Grandad in this nowhere place at the edge of the sea, all because Mum was gone and Dad couldn't manage Milo alone. Anger sat in a lump in Saffi's throat.

Just then, a gull landed on a nearby table with a scrabbling thud. Milo watched it jab at the wood with its yellow beak.

'Seagulls evolved from velociraptors,' he said. 'Know that?'

The gun was forgotten. He had on his serious *I read this in a book* face. Saffi fought the urge to scream.

'Careful,' said a voice from behind. 'They can be mardy, those ones.'

Saffi looked round to find a boy her own age, about

twelve or thirteen, watching them from the terrace. Freckled and blond-haired, he could have sprung up out of the grey stones for all she knew. She hadn't seen him arrive. His hands were thrust in the pockets of a leather jacket; the T-shirt underneath might once have had a Leicester City logo. His trainers were tied with nylon string, pale green. He lifted his chin to indicate the gull.

'Snatch chips right off your plate,' he said.

Saffi shrugged. 'He hasn't bothered us.'

But she wondered if the newcomer would. He was edging towards them, hands still in his pockets, an eye on the gull. The bird stared at him sideways as if it didn't think much of him, either. Then it heaved itself in the air and flapped off. The boy relaxed a little.

'Weren't you the one spying on us from the beach?' asked Milo.

It might have been. But Saffi didn't see how the boy could have reached the terrace, if so. There were no stairs. He didn't deny it but withdrew one hand, holding it out to her.

'I'm Birdy,' he said. 'Birdy Lythe. You here on holiday?'

Saffi wasn't used to talking to strangers in the street. She hesitated before getting up to shake his hand.

'I'm Saffi. This is Milo. We just moved here.'

'Oh, aye?' That surprised him. 'Where from, London?'

Saffi nodded. 'And you?'

'Breakwell, born and bred.' He pointed across the bay to a line of white bluffs. 'My dad runs a park up by Flamborough.'

That was where Grandad and Grandma lived, in a B&B

at Flamborough Head. Saffi realised that Birdy's 'park' must be nearby. She wasn't sure if she should say so.

'Sounds nice.'

'Well.' He scuffed the pavement with his foot. 'I guess. I mean, there's lots to see round these parts. Stacks, arches, smugglers' caves . . .'

'Caves?'

Milo's question was breathless. He had scrambled up from the bench to peer at the boy, hooked by the tourist pitch. Even Saffi felt a reluctant tug of interest.

'Heaps.' Birdy warmed to his theme. 'Big ones at North Landing. But you can find 'em all over. And shipwrecks.'

'Shipwrecks?' Milo's eyes grew round.

'I'll show you if you like. I know places.'

Saffi was suddenly afraid this boy with green laces would offer his tourist-guiding services, then ask for money. Or just ask for money.

'It's kind of you,' she said in her most formal London voice. 'We'll be fine.'

An instant later, she felt mean for saying it. Birdy only smiled, as if he didn't care one way or the other.

'Saf.' Milo turned to her. 'D'you think Dad'll take us to see a shipwreck?'

'You know Dad. If it was an Iron Age dig, maybe . . .'

But Milo wasn't listening. 'My grandma and grandad have a B&B in Flamborough,' he told Birdy, eager.

Saffi realised, too late, that he had spilled her secret. Birdy didn't miss it. A frown settled on his face.

'What d'you say your last name was?' He was staring hard at her.

'I didn't.' *Here we go*, she thought. 'It's True.'

Birdy must have recognised the name, for he seemed bewildered. 'True? But you don't look—' he began, before biting his tongue.

Saffi felt a familiar weariness. People always saw Mum's Iranian side in her, never Dad's English one. It annoyed her because she couldn't even speak the language. She had no idea what Mum's aunts and uncles and fleets of cousins were saying when they pinched her cheeks and cooed in Farsi. She opened her mouth to make a sharp rejoinder. But Birdy spoke first.

'Trues. Figures.'

Saffi could tell he didn't mean it as a compliment. 'Why?'

Before he could answer, she felt the air move. With a great flap and flurry of wings, a seagull – she didn't know if it was the same one – swooped down on them from above, so close that its webbed feet almost grazed Birdy's face. Instinctively, he raised his arms. There was a breathless moment as the gull hovered over him, an angry grey-white blur, yellow beak agape. Then, as quickly as it came, it went. Birdy didn't look surprised. He flicked a downy feather off his jacket.

'Told you. Mardy,' he said.

He appeared to have made up his mind about something, however. His grey eyes, which were pretty for a boy's, ringed with dark lashes, lingered on Saffi.

'Nice to meet you,' he added. 'Sorry I can't stay. Enjoy Breakwell.'

With that, he strode away along the promenade, leaving Saffi and Milo staring after him in shock.

'But what about the caves?' Milo was crestfallen.

Saffi didn't know what to think. It was strange: the way the boy spoke, the way the gull behaved, how both left so abruptly. She gazed after the receding figure, unsure whether to be relieved or disappointed he was gone. Birdy was the first person her age she had met in Breakwell, on this or any other visit. He would probably attend her new school in September. She wished she hadn't been so short with him.

That was when she noticed the birds. It wasn't just gulls patrolling the promenade. It was all sorts – sparrows, crows, magpies, a type of white bird with a yellow head she didn't remember the name of. More arrived as she watched, flapping and fluttering down to the terrace. And they were all staring at her. Fixing her with beady eyes. The whir of their wings filled the air.

It lasted for a frozen, impossible second. Saffi looked at the birds. The birds looked back. Wasn't it meant to be *birds of a feather flock together*?

The sound of her name distracted her. Dad had exited the tea shop across the road, a familiar figure in a tan jacket, waving. When she glanced back, the birds were gone. Only two gulls remained, fighting over a chip. Milo was already running to meet their father. Saffi shook off the dull trance that had come over her and followed. She must have imagined

it. Birds wouldn't do that. She was tired, half-asleep after the long drive.

'Who needs that French Riviera,' Dad remarked as they joined him. 'When we have all this.'

He was gazing out at the grey-brown sea, much as Saffi had done. Nine times out of ten, when Dad said something, it was to make a joke. She loved that about him. But today the quip fell flat. He looked grim, as if he had an unpleasant task weighing on him. From this angle, moreover, she grasped how Birdy had arrived on the promenade. There was a set of steps behind a blue bin.

'You OK?' she asked.

'Eh?' Her father tore his eyes from the view. 'Taking care of your old dad, I see. I'm fine. Been a long drive.'

Then he put one arm around Milo and one around Saffi, drawing them close.

'Listen, you two,' he said. 'I wanted a word before we arrive. Your grandparents are old and set in their ways. It'll be *stop your maunging* when you skin your knees, or *don't be such a wuss* when you're scared of the big horse.' He winked at Saffi. 'But that doesn't mean we change. We look out for each other. Wingmen?'

He held out his fist, expecting a bump back. It was something he had done since they were both tiny, but it felt strange and out of place on the chilly seafront. Milo didn't respond. After a pause, Saffi gave Dad's fist a tap with her own.

'Wingmen,' she said.

‘There’s caves in those cliffs.’ Milo pointed to the headlands. ‘Where smugglers would hide stuff. Can we go?’

‘North Landing. I’ll show you one of these days. Come on.’ Dad led them to their blue Skoda at the kerb. ‘Wouldn’t want to miss your gran’s tea.’

He was joking again. Grandma’s cooking was terrible. Saffi remembered that much from their last visit two years ago, as well as the incident with the horse. Every time she came here, something like that happened. She fell off a horse, or got stung, or met a boy who decided he didn’t like her family name. Welcome to Breakwell-by-Sea. As Dad started up the engine, she fell to mulling over their old life in London. The cramped flat in Battersea, the friends she would probably never see again. All those people who had once known Mum. Who looked at her now with faces full of sympathy.

Saffi hated that look. She wanted to tear up the past two years and stamp them in the ground.

With a movement so habitual she hardly noticed it, she reached up to touch the silver star pendant under her T-shirt collar. Mum’s gift. It was because of her name: Tara Persephone, ‘Saffi’ for short. Tara meant ‘star’ in some old language nobody spoke anymore. Another one she didn’t know.

A star for my little star, so you’ll always come home.

That had been the last gift.

Now, home was Breakwell. Grey, hostile, full of rude boys and seagulls, a place she didn’t much remember. As

far as she could tell as they drove on, the town consisted of no more than a few streets, fronted by grey terraces or ominously shuttered-up chip shops. On the outskirts, brick bungalows gave way to fields. They passed a clutch of cottages then the entrance to a stately home. After that, Dad turned onto the main Flamborough road, a dual carriageway bordered by hedges.

'Who'll call the towers?' he said to the children. 'Go!'

Saffi remembered this bit. Grandma and Grandad's house was so lonely on its wooded promontory, so engulfed by trees, that it became a game to spot the chimney stacks. Those were the 'towers'. She could see the first turn-off ahead – green on green, easy to miss. But Dad knew his way, barely slowing to swerve to the right. *No Horses*, she read on the asphalt. Why weren't horses welcome? Then they were in another world, far from chip shops and bungalows, plunging down a lane through a tunnel of trees. The setting sun shone in bursts, lighting up the trunks.

They reached the bottom of a ravine, splashed through puddles, climbed up again towards the headlands. A telltale lightness glimmered between the leaves, a glimpse of open sky. Saffi found herself holding on to the edge of her seat. Even Milo was excited, nose and palms stuck to the windowpane.

Then he crowed: 'I see them. I see the towers!'

This time, it was true. Saffi made out a smudge of white, the red of a chimney. Dad turned onto a gravel drive bordered by rhododendrons. A plaque on the gate bore the

name, *Fortune House*. Even though she had seen it all before, she had the strangest sense that nothing would be the same after this visit. They had passed some point of no return – though for good or ill, she didn't know.

The drive snaked on, grey gravel glistening with wet. A few moments later, her grandparents' home appeared: a large, double-fronted Victorian villa, painted white with a brick trim around the windows. These were dark and narrow in the evening light and had always reminded Saffi of a row of mouths. When she was smaller, she used to wonder if the house was going to eat them. But as they drew near, the place looked more like a big sandcastle with its pale walls and crenelated top. It was only when her father pulled up beside it, killing the engine, that the view from the promontory became visible.

Fortune House was flanked on three sides by woods. Oak, sycamore and beech trees stretched mossy arms up to the sky. On the fourth lay emptiness. The house sat perched on a high cliff above the open sea.

2
Fortune

'You must be famished,' said Grandma, waiting at the door to usher them in. 'Let's get you fed.'

Fortune House, Saffi knew, hadn't always been a B&B. Trues had been there from the start; it still had that air of being a Victorian gentleman's residence. Visitors first arrived in a glassed-in porch area full of coats and boots. The B&B guests, if there were any, would leave theirs on special hooks to the side. Then came the hall with its ornate floral tiles and plaster mouldings. To the right was a stairwell carpeted in green, while on the left were two doors, one to the study and one to the dining room. At the far end were double doors to the living room and a corridor to the kitchen.

Dad put down their suitcases and kissed his mother on both cheeks, while Saffi and Milo stood awkwardly by. There was an earthy smell in the house like wet leaves. Then it was their turn, one after another, to be crushed against Grandma's grey cardigan, which smelled of mothballs, and have a kiss planted on their foreheads, which smelled of talcum powder. They had been with her a few months ago

in London but she still fussed over them. Her eyes were bright as she helped Dad off with his coat. She was clearly glad to see them.

The same was not so evident of Grandad. 'Well,' said a gruff voice. 'What have we here.'

Saffi glanced up to find her grandfather standing in the living room doorway, frowning. Grandad's frown was impressive. He had huge eyebrows, at least three times as big as any ordinary person's. They were white aside from a few black hairs, and took up half of his forehead. He didn't come forward but waited there with his arms folded, glowering at Dad. He didn't fuss like Grandma.

'The prodigal returns,' he said.

'Hello, Father.'

Dad made no move to hug Grandad. Saffi waited as well, unsure. As to Milo, he had wandered off to look at the grandfather clock by the study door. Sir Henry True, Saffi recalled – the ancestor who built the house – also had some furnishings made. Grandad had told her all about it. The old clock with its illumined face was her favourite. The picture crescent above the numbers, a scene that was supposed to switch from day to night but remained stuck on night, showed a white castle by the sea, surmounted by stars. Apart from that, there were two chairs with clawed lion's feet and a mirror with a carved frame under the stairs. Milo had already moved on to inspect this last item.

'Leave it, Henry,' said Grandma, bustling past Grandad to the kitchen. 'They've had a long journey. Let's eat in peace.'

'They've et,' he growled after her. 'To avoid victuals here. Am I right, son?'

Without further warning, he strode forward and stuck out his arm at Dad. It was an instant before Saffi realised he was offering his hand in greeting. Dad shook it, as formal as if his father was a work colleague. Then it was her turn.

'You've grown since last I laid eyes on you, Tara Persephone.' Grandad pumped her arm up and down as he spoke. 'That's the spirit. No weaklings in our family.'

But when those eyebrows beetled in the direction of Milo, Saffi's heart sank. 'Won't shake hands with your old man?' he barked.

Milo looked smaller than ever, standing by the mirror. But he didn't miss a beat.

'I've been sick,' he answered, giving Grandad a smile of pure innocence. 'Hepatitis. You don't want to catch it.'

'Milo,' admonished Dad. 'Don't start.'

'No, no.' Grandad waved them both away. 'Leave him be. It's fine.'

'Grub's up,' Grandma called from the kitchen to Saffi's relief. 'Come and get it.'

The B&B kitchen at the back of the house was curiously cramped compared to the grand hall, as if it had been tacked on at the last minute by people who forgot they also needed to eat. There were red chequered curtains and a red chequered tablecloth. The yellow fridge hummed in its corner. Grandma cooked using a large, ungainly stove covered in blue enamel. Yet somehow, she managed to produce meals for her guests

here as well as the family suppers, such as they were. She was retrieving a dish that smelled of burnt sausage from the oven as they arrived.

Grub, Saffi decided as they sat down, was an appropriate word. Grandma had lived up to her reputation by cooking toad-in-the-hole. Saffi watched in some alarm as she dug through the pallid crust with a serving spoon, scooping up a ladleful of white paste and pink sausages for Dad.

'Just a little,' she said when it was her turn. The sausages came back smelling like Styrofoam in bacon sauce.

'I don't eat meat,' said Milo.

'He eats meat.' Dad handed over his son's plate. 'At least he did at lunch, when we stopped for burgers.'

'Careful. Those roadside places give you collywobbles,' said Grandma.

'Have you given thought to what we spoke of by phone?' Grandad turned to Dad, impatient with the subject of sausages.

'Maybe we should discuss that tomorrow.'

The way her father answered – in a low, dull voice, chewing methodically – made Saffi wonder what they were talking about. Dad wasn't his usual self. He hadn't made a single bad pun. Grandma meanwhile had her brows furrowed, mouth a round 'o' as if she wanted to speak. But Grandad got there first.

'We've run out of time,' he told Dad. 'They're coming.'

'You know I don't believe that.' Dad looked up sharply.

It sounded to Saffi as if Grandad expected guests at the

B&B, and Dad objected to them somehow. She doubted there was anyone in the upstairs suite right now, as there were no jackets hanging on the guest hooks.

'That's neither here nor there,' said Grandad.

Dad frowned. At that point, Milo held up his fork with a piece of pink sausage.

'Is this made of rubber?'

'Milo. Enough!'

Dad almost shouted it. Saffi stared at him in shock. She had rarely heard him use that tone, never about sausages. Whatever this business of the guests was, it made him lose patience.

Milo's cheeks blushed dark. 'I liked Mum's cooking,' he said. 'She made *tahdik*.'

There was a painful pause, before Grandma picked up the salad bowl, brandishing it like a trophy.

'Cherry toms, anyone?' she said. 'They may not be Persian, but they're from your grandad's garden.'

The conversation limped on from there. Milo didn't speak for the rest of the meal or eat the food on his plate, and no one made him. There was no more talk of guests. Afterwards, they rose and said goodnight to Grandad, who told them that he expected to see them all bright and early tomorrow, as there were no shirkers in the True family. Grandma led them to their rooms on the second floor while Dad followed behind with the suitcases.

One thing was sure, Saffi thought as she trudged after her grandmother. Trues didn't shirk family. Photos of the

clan hung all the way up the stairwell, people both known and unknown to her: pictures of Dad as a child, of her grandparents young. There were some she had never met who were True legends, like Aunt Moira who ran away to America and Cousin Jimmy who swallowed a bee. Only a few of Mum, though it couldn't be for lack of room. From time to time, empty spaces and discoloured squares showed where a frame had been taken down.

That wasn't the only mystery in the house. On the first-floor landing was a green door in a pebbled glass partition. The corridor beyond led to the guest suite. The B&B rooms were strictly off limits to the children.

'Who was Grandad talking about at dinner?' Saffi asked Grandma as they passed by the door. 'Who's arriving?'

'Foreign guests.' Her grandmother answered shortly. 'They keep funny hours. Don't worry if you hear noise late at night, love.'

She didn't offer any details. Saffi didn't press her, though she was curious. What sort of foreign? Why funny hours? But Grandma was silent and preoccupied as she showed them to their rooms. The children would take one to the right of the stairs, while Dad had another down the hall. This was new. They had slept on cots together last time.

As it turned out, the room Saffi was to share with Milo was an improvement on anything in the London flat. The large square room under the eaves had wooden beds and a rag carpet of many colours. There were shelves containing books and magazines, as well as a model *Millennium Falcon*

Dad made when he was a boy. Even sharing, they had plenty of space to themselves. Once they dragged the suitcase inside and said goodnight to Grandma, Milo marched off to flop down on one of the beds with his arms splayed out. It was past his bedtime, so it was up to Saffi to open the suitcase, find his pyjamas and coax him into them. Milo was still flushed with anger from dinner as she pulled on his pyjama bottoms.

'I hate it here,' he complained. 'Why couldn't we stay in London?'

'Because Dad can't care for us on his own.' She bit her tongue so as not to mention the lying.

'I liked London. We had friends.'

'We'll make new ones.'

The answer was mostly to convince herself. Saffi felt a stab of pointless longing, then – for everything to be how it used to be. Home. London. Mum.

Milo scowled. 'Grandad's mean. They're both stupid. Grandma thinks Mum cooked curry. They don't know anything.'

'They're old, Milo. They don't get it.'

'The house is spooky. That mirror in the hall has eyes.'

'It does not.'

'Does, too. They followed me when I was looking at the clock.'

'That's it. I'm going to go brush my teeth. You can come if you like.'

But since her brother seemed determined to sulk, she left

him behind. Just as she was crossing the landing, Dad stepped out of his room.

'How's he doing?' he whispered, meaning Milo.

'Not great,' she answered.

'I'm sorry about dinner. Shouldn't have lost my temper.'

Saffi shrugged. 'He misses home.'

'Moving is hard.' Dad was nodding. 'It's an adjustment . . .'

'It's not that,' said Saffi. 'It's Mum.'

There was a look on Dad's face that might have been sadness. Or it might have been admiration. Something, in any case, wrestled there.

'You understand a lot,' he said.

He was talking to her as if she was a grown-up – as if she might advise him. Though when it came to Milo, no one really knew what to do. Least of all Dad.

'That's all I had to say.' He sighed, pointing to the bathroom. 'Want it first?'

Then he gathered her up in his arms and gave her a tight hug.

Later, when Saffi lay awake in bed in the dark, listening to her brother do his yoga breathing – inhale, hold then exhale, an exercise Mum had taught him long ago to help him relax – she racked her brains for ways to cheer him up. It struck her that it didn't have to be boring at the B&B, now she was older.

'How about we go to the beach tomorrow?' she said. 'We can use the cliff paths.'

He was quiet before answering. 'OK.'

'You can look for fossils. You'd like that, right?'

'Yes.'

After a longer pause, he spoke again. 'Saffi?'

'Yes?'

'I love you.'

'Love you, too.'

There was a further silence. At last, she heard the sleepy voice once more.

'It does have eyes, though.'

'Goodnight, Milo.'

Sometime in the middle of the night, Saffi woke with a start. The room was full of shifting shadows. It had been cloudy earlier but now a light shone through the window. The moon was up. The shadows were tree branches, shaken in the wind. There was a noise, too, but it wasn't the branches.

It was the sound of laughter on the stairs.

People were coming up from the front hall. She could hear voices, the light tread of many feet. The memory of guests filtered through her mind. So Dad was wrong and Grandad was right. They had come, whoever they were.

The laughter sent a shiver through Saffi. She got up and tiptoed out on the landing in her pyjamas. The lights were on so she had no trouble finding her way. She crept towards the edge of the stairwell, peering down.

'My Lady,' said someone from below.

Without thinking about it, Saffi moved down a green carpeted step, drawn by the sound of those voices. There

was a musical quality to them, sweet and enchanting. She had never heard anyone speak like that – as if the speaker lived life only for the sake of pleasure and laughter, and all other experiences were unknown. These people sounded as if they had never been angry, or lost someone dear to them, or wept. Saffi longed to be like that. She moved down another step, then one more in growing confusion.

It seemed to her that there were too many steps. She could never reach the end of them. Her legs felt heavy, as if she was pushing through water. The stairwell stretched on and on like a dim green tunnel. She felt queasy and clutched at the banister.

Then, suddenly – as if an elastic had snapped back – she was at the bottom, facing the guest suite. She stopped in amazement. How had that happened? A few seconds ago, she couldn't walk down the flight. Yet here she was on the landing. The green door was open. Beyond it, she glimpsed figures, flashes of iridescent colour. Satin maybe, or feathers.

All at once, Grandma was there too, blocking her view. 'What are you doing, Saffi?' she hissed. 'Go back to bed!'

Saffi hurried up the stairs to her bedroom. But now, her curiosity was roused to fever pitch. Who were those guests? She lay in bed, listening intently, until she heard the sound of her grandparents creaking upstairs. They were talking in anxious murmurs, a strange contrast to the visitors' easy chatter.

'Answer by the seventh day,' she heard Grandad say before their bedroom door closed, and silence descended.

Who had to answer what? Saffi wondered. Across the room, Milo stirred in his sleep. She tossed and turned, questions gnawing at her. Why were her grandparents so worried? The guests had everyone in a flummox. She even speculated whether they were foreign royalty. Why else would one be called 'my Lady'?

She must have fallen asleep after that. When she opened her eyes, it was morning. Sunlight filtered through the curtains onto her bed.