



# MIGRATIONS

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FLATIRON  
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The animals are dying. Soon we will be alone here.

Once, my husband found a colony of storm petrels on the rocky coast of the untamed Atlantic. The night he took me there, I didn't know they were some of the last of their kind. I knew only that they were fierce in their night caves and bold as they dove through moonlit waters. We stayed a time with them, and for those few dark hours we were able to pretend we were the same, as wild and free.

Once, when the animals were going, really and truly and not just in warnings of dark futures but now, right now, in mass extinctions we could see and feel, I decided to follow a bird over an ocean. Maybe I was hoping it would lead me to where they'd all fled, all those of its kind, all the creatures we thought we'd killed. Maybe I thought I'd discover whatever cruel thing drove me to leave people and places and everything, always. Or maybe I was just hoping the bird's final migration would show me a place to belong.

Once, it was birds who gave birth to a fiercer me.

GREENLAND

NESTING SEASON

It's only luck that I'm watching when it happens. Her wing clips the hair-thin wire and the basket closes gently over her.

I sit up straighter.

She doesn't react at first. But she knows somehow that she is no longer free. The world around her has changed just a little, or a lot.

I approach slowly, reluctant to scare her. Wind screams, biting at my cheeks and nose. There are others of her kind all over the icy rocks and circling the air, but they're quick to avoid me. My boots crunch and I see a ruffle of her feathers, that hesitant first flap, the will-I-try-to-break-free moment. The nest she has built with her mate is rudimentary, a scattering of grass and twigs wedged into a crevice in the rocks. She doesn't need it anymore—her fledglings are already diving for their own food—but she returns to it like all mothers unable to let go. I stop breathing as my hand moves to lift the basket. She flaps only once, a sudden burst of defiance before my cold hand closes over her body and ceases her wings' movement.

I have to be quick now. But I've been practicing and so I am, my fingers swiftly looping the band over her leg, shifting it over the joint to the upper stretch beneath her feathers. She makes a sound I know too well, one I make in my dreams most nights.

"I'm sorry, we're nearly there, nearly there."

I start to tremble but keep going, it's too late now, you have touched her, branded her, pressed your human self upon her. What a hateful thing.

The plastic tightens firmly on her leg, keeping the tracker in place. It blinks once to tell me it's working. And just as I am about to let her go she turns very still so that I can feel her heartbeat pounding inside my palm.

It stops me, that *pat pat pat*. It's so fast and so fragile.

Her beak is red like she's dipped it in blood. It turns her strong in my mind. I place her back in the nest and edge away, taking the cage with me. I want her to explode free, I want there to be fury in her wings and there is, she is glorious as she surges. Feet red to match her beak. A velvet cap of black. Twin blades of a tail and those wings, the sharpness of their edges, the elegance.

I watch her circle the air, trying to understand this new piece of her. The tracker doesn't hinder her—it's as small as my little fingernail and very lightweight—but she doesn't like it. She swoops at me suddenly, giving a shrill cry. I grin, thrilled, and duck to protect my face but she doesn't swoop

again. She returns to her nest and settles over it as though there is still an egg that she must protect. For her, the last five minutes never happened.

I've been out here on my own for six days. My tent was blown into the sea last night, as wind and rain lashed it from around my body. I've been pecked on the skull and hands more than a dozen times by birds who have been named the most protective in the sky. But I have three banded Arctic terns to show for my efforts. And veins filled with salt.

I pause on the crest of the hill to look once more, and the wind calms a moment. The ice spreads wide and dazzling, edged by a black-and-white ocean and a distant gray horizon. Great shards of cerulean ice float languidly by, even now within the heart of summer. And dozens of Arctic terns fill the white of sky and earth. The last of them, perhaps in the world. If I were capable of staying any place, it might be here. But the birds won't stay, and neither will I.

My rental car is blessedly warm with the heating on full blast. I hold my frozen hands over the vent and feel my skin prickle. A folder of papers sits on the passenger seat and I fumble through them, looking for the name. Ennis Malone. Captain of the *Saghani*.

I have tried seven captains of seven boats and I think maybe the persistently mad part of me wanted them to fail the second I saw the name of this last boat. The *Saghani*: an Inuit word for raven.

I scan the facts I've managed to learn. Malone was born in Alaska forty-nine years ago. He's married to Saoirse and they have two young children. His vessel is one of the last legally certified to fish for Atlantic herring, and he does so with a crew of seven. According to the marina schedule the *Saghani* should be docked in Tasiilaq for the next two nights.

I put Tasiilaq into my GPS and set off slowly on the cold road. The town will take all day to reach. I leave the Arctic Circle and head south, pondering my approach. Each of the captains I have asked has refused me. They don't abide untrained strangers on board. Nor do they like their routines disrupted, routes shifted—sailors are superstitious folk, I have learned. Creatures of pattern. Especially now, with their way of life under threat. Just

as we have been steadily killing off the animals of land and sky, the fishermen have fished the sea almost to extinction.

The thought of being aboard one of these merciless vessels with people who lay waste to the ocean makes my skin crawl, but I'm out of options, and I'm running out of time.

A field of green stretches to my right, punctured with a thousand white smudges I think at first are stalks of cotton, but it's only the speed of the car blurring everything; in fact they are ivory wildflowers. To my left, a dark sea crashes. A world apart. I could forget the mission, try to swallow the compulsion. Find some rustic hut and hunker down. Garden and walk and watch the birds slowly vanish. The thought darts through my mind, inconstant. Sweetness would turn sour and even a sky as big as this one would soon feel a cage. I won't be staying; even if I were capable of it, Niall would never forgive me.

I book a cheap hotel room and dump my pack on the bed. The floor is covered with ugly yellow carpet but there's a view of the fjord lapping at the hill's foot. Across the stretch of water rear gray mountains, cut through with veins of snow. Less snow than there once was. A warmer world. While my laptop powers on, I wash my salty face and brush my furred teeth. The shower calls, but first I need to log my activity.

I write up the tagging of the three terns and then open the tracking software with a lungful of air I'm too nervous to let out. The sight of the blinking red lights melts me with relief. I've had no idea if this would work, but here they are, three little birds that will fly south for the winter and, if everything goes to plan, take me with them.

Once I'm showered, scrubbed, and warmly dressed, I shove a few papers in my backpack and head out, pausing briefly at the front desk to ask the young receptionist where the best pub is. She considers me, probably deciding which age bracket of entertainment she should recommend, and then tells me to try the bar on the harbor. "There is also *Klubben*, but I think it will be too . . . fast for you." She adds a giggle to this.

I smile, and feel ancient.

The walk through Tasiilaq is hilly and lovely. Colorful houses perch on the uneven terrain, red and blue and yellow, and such a contrast to the wintry world beyond. They're like cheerful toys dotting the hills; everything feels smaller under the gaze of those imperious mountains. A sky is a sky is a sky, and yet here, somehow, it's more. It's bigger. I sit and watch the icebergs floating through the fjord awhile, and I can't stop thinking about the tern and her heart beating inside my palm. I can still feel the thrumming *pat pat pat* and when I press my hand to my chest I imagine our pulses in time. What I *can't* feel is my nose, so I head to the bar. I'd be willing to bet everything I own (which at this point isn't much) on the fact that if there's a fishing boat docked in town, its sailors will spend every one of their waking moments on the lash.

The sun is still bright despite how late in the evening it is—it won't go down at all this deep in the season. Along with a dozen snoozing dogs tied to pipes outside the bar, there is also an old man leaning against the wall. A local, given he isn't wearing a jacket over his T-shirt. It makes me cold just looking at him. As I approach I spot something on the ground and stoop to pick up a wallet.

"This yours?"

Some of the dogs wake and peer at me inscrutably. The man does the same, and I realize he's not as old as I thought, and also very drunk. "Uteq-qissinnaaviuk?"

"Uh . . . Sorry. I just . . ." I hold up the wallet again.

He sees it and breaks into a smile. The warmth is startling. "English, then?"

I nod.

He takes the wallet and slips it into his pocket. "Thanks, love." He is American, his voice a deep and distant rumble, a growing thing.

"Don't call me love," I say mildly as I steal a better look at him. Beneath his salt-and-pepper hair and thick black beard he is probably late forties, not the sixty he appeared at a glance. Creases line his pale eyes. He's tall, and stooped as though he's spent a lifetime trying not to be.

There is a largeness to him. A largeness of hands and feet, shoulders and chest and nose and gut.

He sways a little.

“Do you need help getting somewhere?”

It makes him smile again. He holds the door open for me and then closes it between us.

In the little entry room, I shrug off my coat, scarf, hat, and gloves, hanging them ready for when I leave. In these snow countries there’s a ritual to the removal of warm gear. Inside the bustle of the bar there’s a woman playing lounge music on the piano, and a fireplace crackling in a central pit. Men and women are scattered at tables and on couches under the high ceiling and heavy wooden beams, and several lads are playing pool in the corner. It’s more modern than most of the undeniably charming pubs I’ve been to since I arrived in Greenland. I order a glass of red and wander over to the high stools at the window. From here I can once more see the fjord, which makes it easier to be indoors. I’m not good at being indoors.

My eyes scan the patrons, looking for a group of men that could be the *Saghani*’s crew. I don’t spot any who particularly stand out—the only group big enough has both men and women playing Trivial Pursuit and drinking stout.

I have barely taken a sip of my overpriced wine when I see him again, the man from outside. He’s down on the water’s edge now, wind whipping through his beard and against his bare arms. I watch him curiously until he walks straight into the fjord and disappears beneath the surface.

My wine nearly tips over as I slide off the stool. There’s no sign of him returning to the surface. Not now, or now, or now. God—he’s really not coming back up. My mouth opens to shout and then closes with a snap. Instead I’m running. Through the door to the deck, down the wooden steps so slippery with ice I nearly land on my butt, onto the cold muddy sludge of the bank. Somewhere near a dog is barking with high, panicked yelps.

How long does it take to freeze to death? Not long, in water like that. And he still hasn’t resurfaced.

I plunge into the fjord and—

Oh.

Out flies my soul, sucked through my pores.

The cold is familiar and savage. For a moment it grips me and forces me into a cell, the painted stone cell I know like a lover, for I spent four years inside it, and because the cold sends me back I spend too many precious seconds wanting to be dead, just for it all to be over, right now, I can't wait any longer, there is no part of me that isn't finished—

Clarity returns with a punch to the lungs. Move, I order myself. I've always been good at cold—I used to swim in it twice a day, but it's been so long that I've forgotten, I've become soft to it. I kick my waterlogged layers toward the large body below. His eyes are closed and he's sitting on the floor of the fjord, and he is unnervingly still.

My hands reach slowly to encircle his armpits. I press off the floor and drag him up to the surface with a mighty gasp. He is moving now, taking a great breath and wading free with me in his arms, like he is the one who has rescued me and not the other way around and how the hell did that happen?

“What are you *doing*?” he pants.

There are no words for a moment; I'm so cold it hurts. “You were drowning.”

“I was just taking a dip to sober up!”

“What? No, you . . .” I drag myself farther up onto the bank. Reality sinks in slowly. My teeth are chattering so hard that when I start laughing I must seem like a lunatic. “I thought you needed help.”

I can't quite recall the logic that brought me to this moment. How long did I wait before I ran? How long was he under?

“For the second time tonight,” he says. Then, “Sorry. You should get yourself warm, love.”

More people have emerged from the bar to see what the commotion is about. They are crowded on the balcony, looking puzzled. Oh, the humiliation. I laugh again, but it's more of a wheeze.

“You right, boss?” someone shouts in an Australian accent.

“Fine,” the man says. “Misunderstanding.”

He helps me to my feet. The cold is inside me and—shit, the pain. I have felt this cold before, but not for a long time. How is he standing it so well?



“Where are you staying?”

“You were under so long.”

“Good lungs.”

I stumble up the bank. “I’ll get warm.”

“Do you need—”

“No.”

“Hey!”

I pause and glance over my shoulder.

His arms and lips are blue, but he doesn’t seem bothered. Our eyes meet.

“Thanks for the rescue.”

I salute him. “Anytime.”

Even with the shower on as hot as it will go, I’m still cold. My skin is red raw, scalded, but I can’t feel it. It’s the two toes on my right foot that I can feel tingling as though with the return of heat; strange because they were cut off some years ago. But then I often feel those phantom toes and right now I’m disturbed by something else, by how easily my mind went back to the cell. I’m frightened of how simple it was to dive into the water instead of shouting for help.

My drowning instinct.

When I’m wearing every item of clothing I own, I find my pen and paper, sit down at the crooked table, and write a clumsy letter to my husband.

*Well, it’s happened. I’ve embarrassed myself so thoroughly that there’s no coming back from it. An entire village of people saw a strange foreign woman fling herself into an icy fjord to inexplicably harass a man who was minding his own business. At least it’ll make a good story.*

*And don’t even try to use this as another excuse to tell me to come home.*

*I tagged my third bird this morning and I’ve left the nesting grounds. Lost my tent, nearly lost my mind. But the trackers are working, and I’ve found a man with a vessel big enough to make the journey so I’m staying in Tasiilaq while I convince him to carry me. I’m not sure I’ll get another chance and I don’t know how to force the world into a shape I can manage.*

*Nobody ever seems to do what I want them to. This is a place that makes you very aware of your powerlessness. I never had any power over you, I sure as hell don't have any over the birds, and I have even less over my own feet.*

*I wish you were here. You can convince anyone of anything.*

I pause and stare at the scribbled words. They feel silly, sitting there on the page like that. After twelve years I'm somehow worse at expressing how I feel, and it shouldn't be like this—not with the person I love best.

*The water was so cold, Niall. I thought it would kill me. For a moment I wanted it to.*

*How did we get here?*

*I miss you. That's what I know best. Will write tomorrow.*

*F x*

I put the letter in an envelope and address it, then place it with the others I haven't yet sent. The sensation is coming back into my limbs and there is an erratic pulse in my veins that I recognize as the marriage between excitement and desperation. I wish there were a word for this feeling. I know it so well, perhaps I ought to name it myself.

In any case the night is early and I've a job to do.

I'm not sure when I first started dreaming of the passage, or when it became as much a part of me as the instinct for breath. It's been a long time, or feels it. I haven't cultivated this myself; it swallowed me whole. At first an impossible, foolish fantasy: the notion of securing a place on a fishing vessel and having its captain carry me as far south as he is able; the idea of following the migration of a bird, the longest natural migration of any living creature. But a will is a powerful thing, and mine has been called terrible.

I was born Franny Stone. My Irish mother gave birth to me in a small Australian town where she'd been left, broke and alone. She nearly died in the birthing, too far from the nearest hospital. But live she did, a survivor to her core. I don't know how she found the money, but not long after we moved back to Galway, and there I spent the first decade of my life in a wooden house so close to the sea I was able to tune my swift child's pulse to the *shhh shhh* of the neap and spring tides. I thought we were called Stone because we lived in a town surrounded by low stone walls that snaked silver through the hilly yellow fields. The second I was able to walk I wandered along those curving walls and I ran my fingers over their rough edges and I knew they must lead to the place from where I truly came.

Because one thing was clear to me from the start: I didn't belong.

I wandered. Through cobbled streets or into paddocks, where long grass whispered *hish* as I passed between. Neighbors would find me exploring the flowers in their gardens, or out in the far hills climbing one of the trees so bent by the wind that its brittle fingers now reached sideways along the earth. They'd say, "Watch this one, Iris, she's got itchy feet and that's a tragedy." Mam hated me being critiqued like that, but she was honest about having been abandoned by my dad. She wore the wound of it like a badge of honor. It had happened all her life: people left her, and the only way to bear it was

proudly. But she would say to me most mornings that if I ever left her that would be it, the final curse, and she would give up.

So I stayed and stayed, until one day I couldn't stay any longer. I was made of a different kind of thing.

We had no money, but we went often to the library. According to Mam, inside the pages of a novel lived the only beauty offered up by the world. Mam would set the table with plate, cup, and book. We'd read through meals, while she bathed me, while we lay shivering in our beds, listening to the scream of wind through the cracked windows. We'd read while we balanced on the low rock walls that Seamus Heaney made famous in his poetry. A way to leave without really leaving.

Then one day, just outside Galway where the changing light leaches the blue from the water and drapes it over the long grass, I met a boy and he told me a story. There was a lady, long ago, who spent her life coughing up feathers, and one day when she was gnarled and gray she stretched from a woman into a black bird. From then on dusk held her in its thrall, and night's great yawning mouth swallowed her whole.

He told me this and then the boy kissed me with vinegar lips from the chips he was eating, and I decided that this was my favorite story of all, and that I wanted to be a bird when I was gray.

After that, how could I not run away with him? I was ten years old; I packed a satchel filled only with books and I heaved it over my shoulder and set off, just briefly, just for a nose about, a wee adventure, nothing more. We rolled out with the storm that very same afternoon, and wound our way up the West Coast of Ireland until his great sprawling family decided to turn their cars and caravans inland. I didn't want to leave the sea, so I snuck away without anyone noticing and spent two days on the stormy shore. This was where I belonged, where all the silver walls led. To salt and sea and wind pockets that could carry you away.

But in the night I slept, and I dreamed of feathers in my lungs, so many I choked on them. I woke coughing and frightened and knew I had made a mistake. How could I have left her?

The walk to a village was longer than any I'd tried, and the books grew so heavy. I started leaving them on the road, a trail of words in my wake. I

hoped they would help someone else find their way. A kind fat lady in the bakery fed me soda bread, then paid for my bus ticket and waited with me until it arrived. She hummed instead of talking and the tune got stuck in my head so that even after I'd left her at the station I kept hearing her deep voice in my ears.

When I arrived home my mother was gone.

And that was that.

Perhaps the feathers had come for her, like they whispered they would in my dream. Perhaps my father had returned for her. Or the strength of her sadness had turned her invisible. Either way, my wandering feet had abandoned her, like she'd warned me they would.

I was taken from my mother's home and sent back to Australia to live with my paternal grandmother. I didn't see the point in staying in any one place after that. I only ever tried once more, many years later when I met a man called Niall Lynch and we loved each other with brands to our names and bodies and souls. I tried for Niall, like I did for my mother. I really did. But the rhythms of the sea's tides are the only things we humans have not yet destroyed.

#### TASIILAQ, GREENLAND

#### NESTING SEASON

Take two. There are no men outside the bar this time, only the dogs, who look at me sleepily and then lose interest when I stride past without offerings.

As I enter, an odd rustle of sound moves through the patrons and then, almost in unison, they erupt into applause. I see him at one of the tables, smiling broadly and clapping along with everyone else. People thump me on the back as I head for the bar, and it makes me laugh.

Someone meets me there with a grin. He's maybe thirty, handsome, with long dark hair in a bun. His bottom teeth are noticeably crooked. "The lady's drinks are on us tonight," he tells the barman, and he's either a different Australian or the one who called out from the balcony earlier.

"No need—"

"You saved his life." He smiles again, and I don't know if he's taking

the piss, or if he actually thinks that's what happened. I decide it doesn't matter—a free drink's a free drink. I order another glass of red and then shake his hand.

“I'm Basil Leese.”

“Franny Lynch.”

“I like the name Franny.”

“I like the name Basil.”

“You feeling all right now, Franny?”

I never like this question. Even if I were dying of plague I would dislike this question. “It's just cold water, right?”

“Yeah, but there's cold and there's cold.”

Basil takes my drink and carries it back to his table without asking, so I follow. He's with the “drowning man”—who has also managed to change into dry clothes—and a few others. I'm introduced to Samuel, a portly man in his late sixties with a luscious head of red locks, then Anik, a slender Inuit man. Next Basil points out a younger trio playing pool. “Those two idiots are Malachai and Daeshim. Newest and dumbest members of the crew. And the chick is Lea.”

There is a scruffy Korean guy, and a gangly black guy. The woman—Lea—is black, too, and taller than both the men. All three are in the middle of a heated argument about pool rules, so I turn to the drowning man last, expecting to be introduced, but Basil has already launched into a detailed complaint of the dinner he's been presented with.

“It's overcooked, heavy-handed on the oregano, and way too buttery. Not to mention the pitiful bloody garnish. And look—look at the piss-poor presentation!”

“You asked for bangers and mash,” Anik reminds him, sounding bored.

Samuel hasn't taken his merry eyes off me. “Where are you from, Franny? I can't place your accent.”

In Australia I sound Irish. In Ireland everyone thinks I'm Australian. Since the very beginning I've been flickering between, unable to hold fast to either.

I swallow my mouthful and grimace at the sweetness of the wine. “If you want you can call me Irish Australian.”

“Knew it,” Basil says.

“What brings an Irishwoman to Greenland, Franny?” Samuel presses.  
“Are you a poet?”

“A poet?”

“Aren’t all the Irish poets?”

I smile. “I suppose we like to think so. I’m studying the last of the Arctic terns. They nest along the coast but they’ll fly south soon, all the way to the Antarctic.”

“Then you *are* a poet,” Samuel says.

“You’re fishermen?” I ask.

“Herring.”

“Then you must be used to disappointment.”

“Well, now, I suppose that’s true.”

“Dying trade,” I comment. They were warned, time and again. We all were. The fish will run out. The ocean is nearly empty. You have taken and taken and now there is nothing left.

“Not yet,” the drowning man speaks for the first time. He’s been listening quietly and now I turn to him.

“Very few fish left in the wild.”

He inclines his head.

“So why do it?” I ask.

“S’the only thing we know. And life’s no fun without a challenge.”

I smile, but it feels wooden on my face. My insides are churning and I think of what this conversation would do to my husband, who has fought for conservation. His scorn, his disgust, would know no bounds.

“Skipper’s got his heart set on finding the Golden Catch,” Samuel tells me with a wink.

“What’s that?”

“The white whale,” Samuel says. “The Holy Grail, the Fountain of Youth.” He gives such an expansive gesture that some of his beer slops onto his fingers. I think he’s drunk.

Basil gives the older man an impatient glance and then explains, “It’s a huge haul. Like they used to catch. Enough to fill the boat, and make us all rich.”

I peer at the drowning man. “Then it’s money you’re hunting.”

“It’s not money,” he says, and I almost believe him.

As an afterthought, I ask, “What’s your boat called?”

And he says, “The *Saghani*.”

I can’t help laughing.

“I’m Ennis Malone,” he adds, offering me his hand. It’s the largest hand I’ve ever shaken. Weather-bitten, like his cheeks and lips, and there is a lifetime’s worth of dirt tattooed under the fingernails.

“She saves your life and you don’t even tell her your name?” Basil says.

“I didn’t save his life.”

“You meant to,” Ennis says. “Same thing.”

“You shoulda left him in there to drown,” Samuel says. “Serve him right.”

“You could tie stones to his feet—that would drown him quicker,” Anik offers, and I stare at him.

“Don’t mind him,” Samuel says. “Macabre sense of humor.”

Anik’s expression suggests there is no humor about him whatsoever. He excuses himself.

“He also doesn’t like to be on land too long,” Ennis explains as we watch the Inuit’s elegant passage through the pub.

Malachai, Daeshim, and Lea join us. The men look annoyed, sitting with identical frowns and folded arms. Lea is amused until she sees me, and then something wary chases its way through her brown eyes.

“What now?” Samuel asks the boys.

“Dae likes to pick and choose the rules he obeys,” Malachai says with a broad London accent. “And when he’s feeling really poorly he’ll make up his own.”

“Boring otherwise,” Daeshim says in an American accent.

“Boredom’s for people without imaginations,” Malachai says.

“Nah, boredom’s useful—it makes you innovative.”

They look sideways at each other and I see them both fight not to smile. Their fingers entwine, argument concluded.

“Who’s this then?” Lea asks. Her accent is French, I think.

“This is Franny Lynch,” Basil says.



I shake their hands and the boys seem to brighten.

“The selkie, huh?” Lea asks. Her hand is strong and stained with grease.

I pause, surprised by the reference and all the echoes in a life.

“Seal people who take to the water, only they don’t rescue folk like you did, they drown them.”

“I know what they are,” I murmur. “But I’ve never heard of a selkie drowning anyone.”

Lea shrugs, letting my hand go and sitting back. “That’s ’cause they’re tricky and subtle, no?”

She’s wrong, but I smile a little, and my own wariness is kindled.

“Enough about that,” Daeshim says. “A question for you, Franny. Do you obey rules?”

Expectant eyes rest on me.

The question seems sort of silly, and I could almost laugh. Instead I take a mouthful of wine and then say, “I’ve always tried to.”

At one point Ennis goes to the bar for another round, Samuel disappears to the toilet for the fourteenth time (“When you get to my age, you won’t find it so funny”), and Daeshim and Lea go out onto the cold deck to have a cigarette, so I find myself cornered on the couch next to Malachai, even though I’d prefer to be outside smoking. The bar has thinned out a bit—the piano player has knocked off for the evening.

“How long you been here?” Malachai asks me in his deep voice. He has an erratic quality about him, like an excited puppy, and dark brown eyes, and fingers that tap along to music even when there’s nothing playing.

“Only a week. You?”

“We berthed two days ago. Be leaving again in the morning.”

“How long have you been with the *Saghani*?”

“Two years, Dae and me.”

“Do you . . . like it?”

He flashes me the white of his teeth. “Ah, you know. It’s hard and it hurts and some nights you just wanna cry ’cause you’re so sore and there’s no way off and it feels really small, fuckin’ small. But you love it anyway. It’s home.

We met on a trawler a few years back, Dae and me, but it didn't go down too good when we hooked up. This crew don't mind a bit, they're family." Malachai pauses and then his smile turns amused. "I'm telling you, it's an insane asylum."

"How's that?"

"Samuel didn't settle down 'til he'd had a child in every port from here to Maine, and he recites poetry because he wants people to know he can. Basil was on some cooking show in Australia but he got kicked out 'cause he couldn't make anything normal—just that weird micro stuff you get in fancy restaurants, you know?"

I grin. "Does he cook for you?"

"He's banned everyone else from the galley."

"At least you must eat well."

"We eat at midnight 'cause he spends hours stuffing around in there and then it's usually a plate of something that looks like sand covered in flower petals and there's only enough of it to leave a foul taste in your mouth. He can be a right prick, too. Then there's Anik, Christ, don't even get me started on him. He's our first mate—did you meet him? Yeah, well, he's, like, a reincarnation of a wolf. Except if you ask him on a different day he's an eagle, or a snake, depending on how shitty he's feeling. Took me ages to figure out he was making fun of me. He doesn't like anything or anyone. Like, for real. But that's what skiff men are like, you know? They're outsiders, every one of them."

I file skiff men away to ask about later. "And Dae?"

"God love him, he gets so seasick. I shouldn't laugh, it's not funny. But it's part of his daily routine now—wake up, have a puke, finish the day, have a puke, and go to sleep. Wake up and do it again."

I think Malachai might be making all of this up, but I'm certainly enjoying it. I can hear it in his voice, how much he loves them. "Lea?"

"She has a foul temper and she's the most superstitious of us all. You can hardly burp without her spouting some warning and last week we were two days late to depart 'cause she wouldn't set foot on the boat 'til the moon was right."

"What about Ennis?"

Malachai shrugs. “He’s just Ennis.”

“What’s just Ennis?”

“Well, I dunno. He’s our captain.”

“But not part of the asylum?”

“Nah, not really.” Malachai considers, looking awkward. “He’s got his shit like everyone.”

I can believe this, since I found the man sitting in a fjord. I wait for Malachai to go on. His fingers are drumming furiously.

“He’s a wagering man, for one.”

“Aren’t all men?”

“Nah, not like this.”

“Huh. Sports? Racing? Blackjack?”

“Anything. I’ve seen him lose himself completely. His reasoning—it just goes.” Malachai stops speaking and I can tell he feels guilty for having said as much.

I ease off Ennis. “So why do you do it?” I ask instead.

“Do what?”

“Spend your life at sea.”

He considers. “I guess it just feels like really living.” He smiles shyly. “Plus what else am I gonna do?”

“The protesting doesn’t bother you?” Lately I feel like all I see on the news is violent protest rallies at fishing ports around the world—*save the fish, save the oceans!*

Malachai looks away from me. “Sure it does.”

Ennis returns with the drinks and hands me another glass of wine.

“Thanks.”

“So what does your man think of you being out here?” Malachai asks, nodding to my wedding ring.

I scratch my arm absently. “He works in a similar field so he gets it.”

“Science, right?”

I nod.

“What’s the bird one called?”

“Ornithology. He’s teaching at the moment, and I’m doing the field-work.”

“I know which sounds more fun,” Malachai says.

“Mal, you’re the biggest pussy this side of the equator,” Basil says, sitting down. “Bet you’d love to be holed up in some safe little classroom somewhere. Although that’d require you to be able to read . . .”

Malachai gives him the finger, making Basil grin.

“What does he really think?” Ennis asks me.

“Who?”

“Your husband.”

My mouth opens but nothing comes out. I sigh. “He hates it. I’m always leaving him behind.”

Later Ennis and I sit at the window and watch the stretch of fjord that swallowed us. Behind us his crew members are getting steadily drunker and have taken over the set of Trivial Pursuit, which has incited numerous arguments. Lea doesn’t participate in the ribbing, but smugly wins most of the rounds. Samuel is reading by the fire. Any other night I’d be playing with them, and I’d be pushing and prodding to see the make of them. But tonight, the task. I need to get myself onto their boat.

The midnight sun has turned the world indigo and something about the quality of the light reminds me of the land where I was raised, that special Galway blue. I’ve seen a fair helping of the world and what strikes me most is that there are no two qualities of light the same, no matter where you go. Australia is bright and hard. Galway has a *smudgeness* to it, a tender haze. Here the edges of everything are crisp and cold.

“What would you say if I told you I could find you fish?”

Ennis’s eyebrows arch. He’s quiet awhile, and then, “I’d reckon you’re talking about your birds, and I’d say that’s illegal.”

“It only became illegal because of the trawling methods huge liners used to use, which would capture and kill all the surrounding marine life and birds. You don’t use those anymore, not with a smaller vessel. The birds would be safe. Otherwise I wouldn’t suggest it.”

“You’ve done your homework.”

I nod.

“So what are we really talking about, Franny Lynch?”

I retrieve the papers from my bag, then return to the stool beside Ennis. I place the papers between us and try to smooth out some of the wrinkles. “I’m studying the migratory patterns of the Arctic tern, looking specifically at what climate change has done to their flight habits. You know all about this, I’d say—it’s what’s killing the fish.”

“And the rest,” he says.

“And the rest.”

He is peering at the papers but I don’t blame him for not interpreting their meaning—they’re dense journal articles with the university’s stamp on them.

“Do you know of the Arctic tern, Ennis?”

“I’ve seen them up this way. Nesting season now, isn’t it?”

“That’s right. The Arctic tern has the longest migration of any animal. It flies from the Arctic all the way to the Antarctic, and then back again within a year. This is an extraordinarily long flight for a bird its size. And because the terns live to be thirty or so, the distance they will travel over the course of their lives is the equivalent of flying to the moon and back three times.”

He looks up at me.

We share a silence filled with the beauty of delicate white wings that carry a creature so far. I think of the courage of this and I could cry with it, and maybe there’s something in his eyes that suggests he understands a little of that.

“I want to follow them.”

“To the moon?”

“To the Antarctic. Through the North Atlantic Sea, along the coast of America, north to south, and then down into the glacial waters of the Weddell Sea, where the birds will rest.”

He studies my face. “And you need a vessel.”

“I do.”

“Why not a research vessel? Who’s funding the study?”

“National University of Ireland, in Galway. But they’ve pulled my funding. I don’t even have a team anymore.”

“Why?”

I choose my words carefully. “The colony you’ve seen here, along the coast. It’s reported to be the last in the world.”

He breathes out heavily, and with no surprise. Nobody needs to be told of the extinction of the animals; for years now we’ve been watching news bulletins about habitat destruction and species after species being declared first endangered and then officially extinct. There are no more monkeys in the wild, no chimps or apes or gorillas, nor indeed *any* animal that once lived in rain forests. The big cats of the savannas haven’t been seen in years, nor have any of the exotic creatures we once went on safari to glimpse. There are no bears in the once-frozen north, or reptiles in the too-hot south, and the last known wolf in the world died in captivity last winter. There is hardly anything wild left, and this is a fate we are, all of us, intimately aware of.

“Most of the funding bodies have given up on the birds,” I say. “They’re focusing their research elsewhere, in places they think they can actually make a difference. This is predicted to be the last migration the terns will attempt. It’s expected they won’t survive it.”

“But you think they will,” Ennis says.

I nod. “I’ve put trackers on three, but they’ll only pinpoint where the birds fly. They aren’t cameras, and won’t allow us to see the birds’ behavior. Someone needs to witness how they survive so we can learn from it and help them. I don’t believe we have to lose these birds. I know we don’t.”

He doesn’t say anything, peering at the NUI stamp on the papers.

“If there are any fish left in this whole ocean, the birds will damn well find them. They seek out hot spots. Take me south and we can follow them.”

“We don’t go that far south. Greenland to Maine and back. That’s it.”

“But you could go farther, couldn’t you? What about just to Brazil—”

“*Just* to Brazil? You know how far that is? I can’t go wherever I please.”

“Why?”

He looks at me patiently. “There are protocols to fishing. Territories and methods, tides I know, ports I have to deliver to, to get paid. Crew whose livelihoods depend on the catch and delivery. I’ve already had to shift my route to take into account all the closing ports. I change it any more and I might as well lose every buyer I have left.”

“When was the last time you fulfilled your quota?”

He doesn't reply.

"I can help you find the fish, I swear it. You just have to be brave enough to go farther than you have before."

He stands up. There is something hard in his expression now. I have hit a nerve. "I can't afford to take on another mouth. I can't pay you, feed you, bed you."

"I'll work for free—"

"You don't know the first thing about working a seine. You're not trained. I'd be agreeing to pass you straight into the afterlife if I brought you aboard so green."

I shake my head, unsure how to convince him, flailing. "I'll sign a waiver so you aren't responsible for my safety."

"Can't be done, love. It's too much to ask for naught in return. I'm sorry—it's a romantic idea to follow birds, but life at sea is harder than that, and I got mouths to feed." Ennis touches my shoulder briefly, apologetically, and returns to his crew.

I sit by the window and finish my glass of wine. My chest is aching and aching and if I move I will shatter.

If you were here, Niall, what would you say, how would you do this?

Niall would say that I tried asking, so now I will have to find a way to take.

My eyes home in on Samuel. I go to the bar and order two glasses of whiskey and take one to his seat by the fire.

"You looked thirsty."

He smiles, chuffed. "It's been a long time since I've been bought a drink by a young woman."

I ask him about the book he's reading and listen to him tell me its story, and then I buy him another whiskey and we talk more about books, and poetry, and I buy him yet another whiskey, and I watch him get steadily drunker and listen to his tongue grow steadily looser. I can feel Ennis's eyes; now that he knows my intent I think he's suspicious of me. But I focus my attention on Samuel and when his cheeks are rosy and his eyes glassy, I steer the conversation to his captain.

"How long have you been working on the *Saghani*, Samuel?"

“Nearly a decade now, I’d say, or close enough to.”

“Wow. Then you and Ennis must be close.”

“He’s my king and I his Lancelot.”

I smile. “Is he as romantic as you are?”

Samuel chuckles. “My wife would say that’s impossible. But there’s a little romance in all us sailors.”

“Is that why you do it?”

He nods slowly. “It’s in our blood.”

I shift in my seat, as intrigued by this as I am appalled. How can it be in their blood to kill unreservedly? How can they ignore what’s happening to the world?

“What will you do when you can’t fish anymore?”

“I’ll be all right—I’ve got my girls waiting for me at home. And the others are all kids, they’ll bounce back, find something else to love. But I don’t know about Ennis.”

“He doesn’t have family?” I ask, even though I know otherwise.

Samuel sighs mournfully and takes a huge mouthful of his drink. “He does, he does. Very sad tale, though. He’s lost his kids. Been trying to earn enough money to give up this life and get them back.”

“What do you mean? He’s lost custody of them?”

Samuel nods.

I sit back in my armchair and watch the flames crackle and spit.

I’m startled by the low rumble of a voice, and realize that Samuel has begun to sing a forlorn ballad about life at sea. Jesus, I’ve really tipped the poor guy over the edge. I try not to laugh as I realize half the pub is staring. With a signal to Ennis, I struggle to drag the big man to his feet.

“I think it’s time for bed, Samuel. Can you stand?”

Samuel’s voice grows louder, operatic in its intensity.

Ennis arrives to help me with the old man’s considerable weight. I remember to grab my backpack, and then we drape an arm around each of our shoulders and help Samuel, still wailing, out of the bar.

Outside I can’t help it. I start laughing.

A few moments later I hear Ennis’s soft chuckle join mine.

“Where are you moored?” I ask.



“I can take him from here, love.”

“Happy to help,” I say, and he nods.

It’s not yet dawn, but the light is disorienting. Gray and blue, with a pale sun hanging on the horizon.

We walk along the fjord to the village port. The sea opens up before us, dissolving into the distance. A gull squawks and caterwauls above; they’re rare enough now that I watch it for long moments until it disappears from view.

“That’s her,” Ennis tells me, and I see it. A sleek fishing vessel, maybe thirty meters long, its hull painted black and scrawled with the word *Saghani*.

I knew it the second I read the name. That this was the boat meant for me. Raven.

We help Samuel stumble on board and guide him below deck. The corridors are narrow, and we have to duck to get through the doorways into Samuel’s cabin. Small and sparse, with a bed on either side. He wavers and then crashes like a lopped tree onto his mattress. I wrestle with his shoes while Ennis goes to get him a glass of water. By the time it’s next to his bed Samuel is already snoring.

Ennis and I glance at each other.

“I’ll leave you to it,” I say softly. He leads me back up onto the main deck. The smell of the ocean fills me as always and I stop, unable to walk away.

Ennis peers at me. “You all right, love?”

I take a deep breath of salt and seaweed and I think of the distance between here and there, I think of their flight and mine, and I see in the captain something different, something I couldn’t recognize in him before I knew about the children.

I reach into my pack for the map and go to sit by the railing. Ennis follows me and I spread the map between us.

With an invisible dawn approaching I quietly show him how the birds have always set out on separate paths, and where they come back together, each of them following a different route to the fish but always winding up in the same places, always knowing exactly where to meet.

“The spots are a little different each year,” I say. “But I know what I’m doing. I have the tech. I can take you to them. I promise.”

Ennis peers at the map, at the lines carving their paths through the Atlantic.

Then I say, "I know how important this is to you. Your children are at stake. So we go for one last haul."

He looks up. I can't tell what color his eyes are in the light. He seems very tired.

"You're drowning, Ennis."

We sit for a while in silence, but for the gentle lapping of the waves against the hull. Somewhere distant the gull cries out.

"You're true to your word?" Ennis asks.

I nod once.

He stands and walks below deck, not bothering to pause as he says, "We depart in two hours."

I fold up the map with shaking fingers. A wave of such deep relief hits me that I could almost throw up. My footsteps sound softly on the wooden plank. When I reach land I turn to look back at the boat and its scrawled name.

Mam used to tell me to look for the clues.

"The clues to what?" I asked the first time.

"To life. They're hidden everywhere."

I've been looking for them ever since, and they have led me here, to the boat I will spend the rest of my life aboard. Because one way or another, when I reach Antarctica and my migration is finished, I have decided to die.

#### GARDA STATION, GALWAY

#### FOUR YEARS AGO

The floor is cheap linoleum, and very cold. I lost my shoes somewhere, before walking three miles through the snow carrying a bag of football uniforms. I can't remember how I lost them. I told the police, and they put me in this room to wait, and they have not returned to tell me.

But I know.

I pass the minutes and then hours by reciting passages of Tóibín in my head, remembering it as well as I can and trying to find comfort in his story

of a woman who loved the sea, only it becomes too hard to try for prose, so I reach instead for poetry, for Mary Oliver and her wild geese and her animal bodies loving what they love, and even that is difficult to clutch at. The effort of compartmentalizing is a steady scraping away at my mind. The long snaking curl of an orange being peeled in one skillful piece: that is my brain. What about Byron, *the heart will break*—no, maybe Shelley, *what are all these kissings worth*—no, Poe, then, *I lie down by the side of my darling, my darling*—

The door opens and saves me from myself. I am trembling all over and there is a puddle of vomit beside my chair that I don't remember supplying. The detective is a little older than I am, impeccably groomed, her blond hair tied into a neat twist, charcoal suit cut to fit all the right lines of her and shoes that make that *clop clop* sound that always reminds me of a horse. I notice these details with strange precision. She sees the mess and manages not to grimace as she sends for someone to deal with it, and then she sits opposite me.

"I'm Detective Lara Roberts. And you're Franny Stone."

I swallow. "Franny Lynch."

"Of course, sorry. Franny Lynch. I remember you from school. You were a couple of years below me. Always in and out, never staying put. Until you moved away for good. Back to Australia, wasn't it?"

I stare at her numbly.

A man arrives with a mop and bucket and we wait while he painstakingly cleans the vomit. He leaves with his tools and then returns a couple of minutes later with a cup of hot tea for me. I clutch at it with my frozen hands but don't drink—I think it might make me throw up again.

When Detective Roberts still won't speak, I clear my throat. "So?"

I see it then: the horror she has been working to hide from me. It slides over her eyes like a veil.

"They're dead, Franny."

But I already know that.