



Seaside Hauntings

Jack Richardson

By mid-afternoon their boat (*raft*, Momma murmurs, spectral in the background- *Hush*, *Momma, you're spoiling our moment*) is ready. Nothing fancy – four big barrels in a frame of Tim's finest driftwood, lashed together with second-hand Boy Scout knots Mel learnt off Mack before he went away.

("I'll be expectin' it back when I rotate home," Mack winked, pressing the little Guidebook into her hand. Mel smiled but it didn't reach her eyes. He touched her chin. "I'm comin' back for it, y'hear?")

They jog Momma into helping them lift and slot the mast into the gap in the raft's center, where the four barrels meet but don't quite touch. The pole weighs tons and scrapes sluggishly around the hole like it's already seasick, until Mel shoves it through with a grunt. She ties it in place with another magic knot and then they're ship-shape and seaworthy.

"What you callin' it?" Momma's done herself up to see them off, and though her eyes look bruised and her mouth bloodied, it's the thought that counts.

She's even put on her Poster Perfect dress, the one she saw Mack off in, with the ruffles and summer colours.

"Ma, it's *fine*," Mack sighed.

"It could be a little straighter."

"Ma."

Mack let her fuss with his collar a little longer before pulling her hands away.

“Sorry,” she bit her lip. “Got your hat?”

If the Cap Fits You, Join the Army To-Day!

“Yes, Ma.”

“And you’ve packed your bag?”

“Yes, Ma.”

“And you’re sure you have enough layers, because you know how cold your Father said it got in his letters-“

“Ma,” Mack squeezed her hands. “Stop worryin’. Please. It’s gonna be fine.”

Momma nodded and put on her Brave Face and didn’t look back as she left the room. Or spot Tim hiding behind the doorframe.

Women at Home Say GO!

Mack stayed in front of the mirror. There were one, two, three photos of Pa sitting pride of place on the mantle. Mack studied the photos and Tim studied Mack. His eyes glinted; with pride, Tim decided. Imagining his face beside their father’s. Atop the pinnacle of heroes.

Mack looked from the photographs to his reflection in the mirror, the picture of

I’m Doing My Bit!

and

“WAIT! I’ll Go Too!”

His buttons twinkled like brass stars.

Mack spots Tim staring at him in the mirror. *Abort-*

“There’s the man of the house.” Mack smiled.

Tim went all warm and bashful, and stepped out from behind the doorway.

“Pa’ll be so proud when he sees you.”

Something flickered behind Mack’s eyes. Hope, Tim thought.

“Sure will, Scout.”

Momma clattered down the hall.

HELP THE WAR ON THE KITCHEN FRONT

Mack winced.

“She’ll be proud too,” Tim said. “When you write, she’ll see how well you’re doing.”

“She just wants to keep me close. Reckons there’s still use for me here at the Cove. But-”

“But.”

It Is Nice in the Surf BUT What About the Men in the Trenches? GO AND HELP

Mack ruffled Tim’s hair the way Pa did.

“That’s where you come in, Scout. She just don’t trust you the way I do. Not yet. You gotta prove it to her, that’s all. Prove you can be the man of the house.”

BE PATRIOTIC- Lend a Hand at Home!

“A summer project.”

“How’d you mean?”

“It’ll be my project.” Tim repeated. ‘For the summer.’ He forgot he had to treat Mack like a grown-up now he wore the uniform, and grown-ups got lost sometimes- Tim supposed after so long they had too much in their heads. It wasn’t Mack’s fault he got jumbled. “Cos it’s not like you’ll be gone forever. You’ll be rotating home after the summer, right?”

Mack’s eyes flickered again. See? All he needed was the right words to inspire him.

Is YOUR Home Worth Fighting For? It’ll be Too Late to Fight When the ENEMY Is At

Your Door

'Right.' Mack smiled. 'I'm gonna go find him for us, Scout. But you've gotta do your part for me. Hold down the fort. Take care of your sister, hear?'

Tim nodded solemn as he could and saluted, like Pa at the top of the garden path. Mack smiled and ruffled his hair again.

Tim pats their raft like a proud skipper.

"We'll call it the Mack," he says. "The *SS Mack*."

Momma's grip on the mast slips and she hisses: A splinter, a bead of red sliding down her finger. Mel rushes over but Momma waves her away.

"You should be castin' off now." She meets their eyes for the first time in days, maybe weeks. "Remember. Don't get caught in the current. Don't let yourself be taken."

They nod because it seems to be what she needs, and Momma even manages one of those Poster Perfect smiles she used to be so good at. She hands Tim a wicker picnic basket for the voyage. The basket is molding on the corner. Mel hasn't the money to buy a new one.

Now he and Mel take their places and shove; the *SS Mack* judders over pebbles and into the water. Tim hops along to miss the frigid surf and swears as it numbs his toes anyway. They clamber on and Tim uses the special oar he selected- bleached white and nobbiy at the end like a femur- to paddle them past the shallows.

He took his time choosing the right driftwood, because on the beach the world was simple blocks of colour and the sounds were soft and soothing. Inside, the silence from Mack's room had seeped out under the bolted door. Inside, it was all shadows. Momma kept the lights off these days, like she could hide.

Tim turns back to wave goodbye. Momma's fancy dress flares in the wind like a gossamer sail, like it'll carry her up and away into the clouds. She turns to flicker back up the path

without waving back. Tim doesn't think she really saw them.

Mel swats his ear.

"What?" he hisses.

"The *SS Mack*?"

"Yeah. Made it for him, didn't we?"

She scowls and snatches the oar and starts paddling, alternating either side to stop them going in circles.

Their mission is to paddle along the shore and round the headland, past where the cliff juts out like a Neanderthal's spear. There they'll find Dinosaur Country.

It was Pa who read Tim stories about the Dinosaurs, back when he was small enough to fit in Pa's lap- whole skeletons frozen into the cliff like a 3-D picture book. In the days after Pa went, Mack would come camp out in his room and they'd plot expeditions down the coast to see the famous dig sites.

The dig sites were always the most interesting bit; reverse-graveyards where ghosts were made tangible, into something you could reach out and touch.

They sail into deeper waters. The sea might be icy but the sun sears his back. Soon they're both sweating, Mel straining against the current. Tim rifles through the picnic basket for something to do. Momma forgot to fill the sandwiches again, and the bread is already damp and salty where the sea has lapped through the basket.

"D'you reckon we'll be able to exvacate something?" he asks. "I want a raptor claw. Or maybe a tooth."

"No time." Mel doesn't look at him. "Got to cook when we get back."

"But-"

"Hush."

He scowls. They weren't meant to bring Momma's silence out here with them.

A breeze curls off the water and he raises his face to it. He shouldn't let Mel bring him down. Things are going well, and this is just their maiden voyage! Completing this mission is just the start. Next they'll do up the raft- fashion a sail from Mack's bedsheets, get proper oars, maybe even a rudder- until they can take on the deep ocean. Until they can follow Mack and Pa over the horizon.

What Are YOU Prepared To Do??

He could find them and guide them home. Or! If they've been captured, mount a daring rescue, sneaking into enemy territory under the cover of darkness. The Enemy would never suspect the *SS Mack*, probably mistake them for flotsam, or jetsam, or whichever one went in the water. Tim can never remember.

He closes his eyes against the breeze. The future flickers like the movie reels Momma stopped him watching in town- a fleet of noble craft cutting through foreign waters, flagships for freedom, and there! Do you see it? The *SS Mack* with its bedsheet sail will bob over the horizon to meet them, returning from enemy waters with Pa and the real Mack safely aboard.

A cheer will go up from the fleet; a rope thrown down, the *SS Mack* hoisted up. There'll be hugging for Pa and back-clapping for Mack, and Tim will be lifted onto the jolly sailors' shoulders.

Step Into YOUR Place

The fleet will make a splendid vanguard to guide them home to their little Cove, where the girls will be waiting.

Mel will splash into the surf to meet them, Momma a picture of beauty in her Poster Perfect dress. Pa will sweep her up and kiss her, *ick*, but Tim will allow it because it will make Mack laugh, and Mel will give him one of those wonderful smiles only he can get from her. Tim will

even save the I-told-you-sos for later.

The fleet will have to leave soon after, there'll still be the Enemy to beat after all, but not before Momma cooks them a marvellous feast to see them on their way. Tim will wave them off from the clifftop until they disappear back over the rim of the world, their words ringing in his ears.

Fine lad ... natural born sailor ... sea's in their blood, don't you know ... need more recruits like you ...

JOIN Together TRAIN Together EMBARK Together FIGHT Together

"I wouldn't mind bein' in the Navy," Tim muses. "The Army's all marching and trenches and dying. But sun and sea air? The Navy wouldn't be so bad."

Melody stares at her brother. She thinks of the letter hiding in their mother's dresser, Mack's name printed in block capitals. Of another letter, this one with their father's name, yellowing by now but still lurking in there somewhere, buried far underneath but not far enough.

She thinks of the night she realised Pa couldn't find his way back, the same age Tim is now, and she dreamt of becoming a mermaid, of the urge to dive *down down down* and never looking back.

Now the raft is the best she can manage. The current sucks greedily against the oar but Melody heeds Mother's warning and ploughs on against it. Tonight, she will dream of rainbow shoals and shedding her skin for scales like iridescent chainmail, but for now... if Mother can carry on then so will she.

They're making good time, with the cliffs on their left and the open ocean yawning to their right. The breeze picks up again and the cliffs moan. That noise kept her awake at night as a child, until her parents led her to its source

Melody traces the path they took up the dunes to the clifftop as she rows.

Mother knew the way blindfolded, as had her mother, and her mother before her. It was punishing for the uninitiated, but she waited for Melody and Pa to slip-slide up the salt-slicked dunes, using tufts of heather as handholds. Melody reached the top- *caught you-* but Mother danced away, out to where the warning signs cut an invisible line through the heather.

Pa made a noise low in his throat, but Mother just laughed.

“Come here, Pearl,” she offered a hand. Melody stumbled to take it; up on the clifftop the wind cut through her, though she is colder now, ankle dipped in a sea like liquid needles.

Melody heaves the oar and cranes her neck; they’re still too far off to spy the cliff-tip from here.

From so high up the Cove was a primal streak of white against a sea glutted with black weed. The urge danced dangerous in Melody’s belly. The wind whipped her hair and snatched at her clothes and the cliff under their feet howled with it.

“I don’t like it,” she pulled away but Mother’s grip was a vice. “The screaming. The ghosts.”

“Don’t be silly, Mels,” Pa put a hand on her shoulder. “It’s just the wind. The cliffs are hollowed out, see?” He poked her belly and Melody giggled. “Think of a sponge or the bones of a bird. That’s the scientific reason for it. No ghosts.”

“No bad ones, anyway.” Mother hummed. Pa squinted against the wind.

“We’re meant to be calmin’ her down. Don’t fill her head with all that.”

“All what?” Melody asked. Mother smiled, and back then her smiles still lit her eyes like sparklers.

“All nothin,” Pa said, but he still let Mother pull her in close.

“All *everything*, Pearl.” She slipped a hand over Melody’s eyes. “Listen,” she whispered in

her ear. "Can you hear them singing?"

All Melody heard was the gale and the sea; in the darkness they melded into one and the whole world thrummed with them. She gripped Mother's hand against the ocean swell as it rolled up through the chalk, through her boots and into her toes and shivered up her spine.

Mother squeezed her hand. "Breathe, Pearl. Breathe with the land."

Melody can still taste that first lungful of sea-salt and spring. Still hear the whistling, wailing, breathing, beating vortex of sea and sky and land.

Her feet carried her forward. One step. The urge coiled in her gut. Two steps, past the warning signs. The wind swept her smooth like a tide, leaving nothing but foaming breakers and untouched depths and the urge to dive over and *down, down, down-*

Pa tugged her back. Melody's eyes shot open.

"Sorry! I'm sorry, Pa. I didn't mean to-" her vision blurred as he pulled her close. "I'm sorry."

"You're alright, Mels." Melody tried to breathe him in, tobacco smoke and soap, but the wind stole him away.

Mother stroked her hair.

"Hush, Pearl. Don't be ashamed."

"I think that's enough, don't you?" Pa said.

"But she hears the choir. Don't you hear them, Pearl?" Mother asked that way grown-ups do when they don't want an answer.

Pa pulled Melody away and back down the path, but she looked back to where Mother still stood, arms flung out, gossamer in the gale.

Melody lifts the oar again, left, right, left... A blister smarts on her thumb but she is grateful for the anchor.

Pa didn't understand, Ma explained later, a bedtime-story whisper over hot cocoa. His roots were inland. He was born in the hills.

"But our family, *your* family, Pearl, has come and loved and gone on this spot for generations. It's Ours, and no matter how far we roam, when we go to the bones we'll find our way back here again. And our voices will join the choir in the cliffside. Not a haunting," she tweaked Melody's nose. "A reunion."

Now Melody is a girl still but a child no longer, and ghosts do not disturb her. Haunting is not for the dead but for the living, who shuffle between rooms, veiled in cooking steam, turning the photo-frames on the mantle face-down.

A cloud of gulls is forming over the raft: Tim is pulling Mother's empty sandwiches apart and leaving a Hansel and Gretel trail in the water behind them. A gull swoops down and scoops some crumbs out of the water.

Melody studies Tim, his back to her as he works.

For a moment she entertains his quest for Dinosaur Country. She can't escape under the waves herself, but maybe she'll find the deep-dwellers' ghosts calcified in the cliffside. She felt them too, that day on the cliff-tip, slumbering skeletal beneath her feet: Mesosaurs, liopleurodon, jomungandr and kraken all landlocked like her, compressed into their sedimentary layers like the pages of a book.

Melody concentrates on her form; back straight, grip tight on the oar, blister rubbing raw. She could escape back up to the cliff top tonight, after she fixes Tim dinner. But the urge to dive will be waiting for her, to dangle a foot over the edge and dare the wind to take her.

This time Pa will not be there to stop it: the chalk will shear away in great sheets under Melody's feet and she will fall, she is falling, *down down down-*

"The headland!" Tim cheers. Melody follows his finger: Along the shore the cliffs curve like the inside of a fused ribcage, but further up where Mother took her it spikes out suddenly like

a dagger or a dorsal fin.

After Mack left and Mother took to haunting, Melody found comfort in their seashell graveyard. No matter how wide Pa's absence stretches or how deep the house's silence, eventually the family will come to rest together, among the evacuated shells and ammonites pressed like thumbprints into the chalk.

Maybe Pa is already waiting for them now, dreamless under the waves. Maybe Mack-

"Is that Momma?" Tim asks, craning over the prow. Melody frowns. Of course it isn't Mother, she's back home. They'll find her when they return, slumped at the table or fetal on Pa's side of their bed. "It is!" Tim insists, "It's Momma, she's climbed the dunes to meet us!"

Melody squints against the glare of the sun. There *is* a figure, perched way up on the tip of where the land cuts into the sea. A girl? No. Someone in a long dress that flares in the wind like a butterfly spreading its wings.

"Momma!" Tim waves his arms, though surely they're too far away for the person to hear. But she- *calm, Melody, you can't be sure who it is-* turns to peer down at the raft.

Mother waves like she forgot to when they cast off. Like she did when Pa went off with a pack over his shoulder, and years later when Mack followed. She wavers on the cliff edge, candle flame in a gale, one-legged and tip-toed like a ballet dancer. From this distance Melody must be imagining the peace on her face.

Melody feels outside herself; she is a child again teetering on the edge of the world. The urge riptides in her gut.

Not the urge to dive, but the urge to fall.

She feels the drop in her stomach before Mother takes the step.

Melody tackles Tim to the deck; he cries out and the raft lurches like a drunken thing but she's got her hands over his eyes; don't let him see, can't let him-

Melody does. Mother's dress billows around her like a cloud as she plummets *down down down-*

Gone. Tim wrestles her off him, screaming.

"Momma Momma don't- why did you- *Momma-*"

Melody lets him go. The sea foams rabid where Mother slipped into the water. Melody pictures her sinking, diving, her dress plumed above her like a final sigh. Jealousy pangs in her chest. Tim's sobbing mixes with the cries of the seagulls wheeling overhead.

There is a long moment of nothing at all.

Her brother clings to the raft, sniffing but otherwise numb. Melody has heard stories of the boys who lasted long enough to rotate home, who would stare right through you and wish they had not.

She sees that look in Tim now and is in some way grateful she never saw it in Mack.

Melody realises the raft is drifting- the oar, she dropped the oar: She scans the water but there's nothing white floating nearby. She sticks her arm into the freezing water instead and tries to steer them, scooping handfuls of water out of the sea. No use. The current has them

"Where are you going?" Tim asks, face still pressed to the deck.

Melody opens her mouth. And closes it. She withdraws her arm and sits cross-legged in the middle of the raft. She reaches out a hand to him. Wavers. Lets it drop.

The wind picks up, wailing through the bleached honeycomb cliff like whale song. A funeral choir that spins them out into the cold, open water.