

CLAIRE WAS TRYING to figure out why the seemingly endless sea never faltered. She was trying to understand the reasons behind the gulls swooping, the little plastic bags fluttering with the breeze, the waves rushing onto the shore. She was late, she was always late. She ran, one foot in front of the other, one foot after the other. Claire was only seven, she didn't know why the sun melted into the distance, or why the sea kept on churning.

She was only seven.

She will always be seven to me.

Claire was a fiery little girl, bright orange hair and a mischievous grin. She was daffodils and poesies. Her smile was the sky after a storm, the sunshine in her voice resonating, making all troubles and worry break away. Claire didn't know how the world worked yet, but she was learning slowly.

She was playing by the water that day; collecting conch shells and sea glass for her daddy. Before I knew what had happened, she was lost. I screamed out to her, my lost daughter. I searched the yard, the expanse of beach before me. The search party looked up and down the shores, they waded out into the water; but returned empty handed.

She was gone.

Claire beyond their search field, her feet carrying her further and further down the bay in the wrong direction. The sun was setting and she knew we'd be worried. She ran faster, and faster, away from the warmth of our home. Claire curled up under a giant oak tree as the night fell. She was waiting for her daddy's arm to carry her home, or my soft voice to show her the way. She waited each night, wrapped in a delicate dream of home, thinking that if she just wished hard enough she'd be there.

Claire kept fighting her way through the sun baked sand, the bracken driftwood, the gnarled trees that lined the sea shore; but each morning she awoke farther from home. On the second day, she was so hungry she tried eating tree leaves, and rotting mulberries. She was so thirsty she tried to drink the morning dew, and the salty sea water.

Claire lived seven years, forty-two days, and twenty-two hours. She was walking between the living and the rolling sea for three days, until her body succumbed to the ways of the world. Her tiny, tender, body rested behind a felled tree; only to be discovered by a

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lost hiker, found too late.

And I hung my head that day in my failure. I admitted defeat, and collapsed as my heart shattered into a fragmented heap of remnants. I had lost her. I had been the one to turn my back from the window, the one to hesitate, to call her home in vain.

Claire was seven.

A beautiful, inquisitive, child.

Sometimes I look out at the crashing waves and I swear I can see her. I see her walking down the shore, hand on her basket, smile on her lips, cheeks flushed rosen. She calls for me, but I can't reach her. I'm stuck behind a wall of glass. And I'm drowning. I'm weak, hungry, alone. I'm dying.

At night, when the cicadas sound like an orchestra, and the crickets are the overture, I can almost hear her honeysuckle voice calling me. I run outside, run towards the voice, only to find the lolling sea awaiting me. Sometimes I wish it could wash away my pain, the way it cleanses the shores at night, covering them in a blanket of dark veiled blue. But Claire was not a piece of driftwood, a discarded candy bar wrapper, a plastic wrapper; Claire was a wonderful child. As much as I wish the sea could wash this pain away, it can't.

All it does is remind me that Claire was.

I stand at the shore when the sun hangs high overhead, and I wonder why the sea never falters. I wonder why the gulls continue swooping, why the plastic bags continue dancing in the breeze, why the sea keeps rolling in and out, day after day. I wonder why the fish keep swimming, why the boats keep passing by, why the sun keeps rising, and setting, and rising again.

Claire was a fiery little girl, bright orange hair and a mischievous grin.