

From The Diaz Complex

Immersion

We went home the next day. Our last jump together. Me and Mum. I was still young enough to see her as my Sun. To think I'd always be in her orbit.

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An old graveyard ran to the edge of a sheer seawall. From there, the little Planet and the big Sun looked out over a small and narrow beach, hemmed on either side by dark faces of steep slate. Overhead, gulls as big as planes hung in an ashen sky.

On the far side of the cove, the rocks were worn down to ankle height. Nearby, they stood angry and exposed, two sharp stretches of ragged slate on the slant. Between them pebbles and patches of sand. These rocks followed the line of the cliffs behind, with their streaked maroon crevices. That was where teenage boys climbed, where they dared each other over cut-throat edges.

It was where the little Planet wanted to be too.

'Aw, no, the sea's all the way out.' Her shoulders slumped. 'When can we jump?'

'Later love, there's plenty of fun things to do first,' the big Sun smiled.

The little Planet remembered how much they loved the cove. How it was their favourite holiday place. Behind them a path led to where the church door had been. It went nowhere else. The Planet swooped through

the small lopsided arch. Dusty earth puffed up as she scuffed her flip-flops. It wasn't a normal church. There was no roof, and, other than the one she'd just zoomed through, there were no walls.

Why call it a church? It was a wall that triangled up to the tiniest bell tower. Its odd-shaped stones were pieced together, crazy-paving style. A mishmash of greys, creams, reds and browns that felt rough and grainy against the Planet's hand. At one point the gritty texture disappeared. A central hollow where gunmetal stone became glass smooth. The Planet imagined that every person who visited the churchyard ran their hands across this smooth spot. They wore it down, but polished it too. The hollow was where everyone let their fingertips linger.

'About a hundred and twenty years ago' – the big Sun pushed strands of hair from her face – 'In a massive storm, the church fell into the sea.'

The end wall was the only thing left, it stood near the concrete sea defences, and where the church would've been, there was nothing. A big drop down to the beach. Inland, behind the graveyard, there was a boat club. A woodland of masts and cowbells. In the wind they let out a noisy, insistent chorus. Behind them the car park, a caravan site and the valley. At the other end, a pub, and then again the sea.

'It's called a peninsula.' The Sun scratched her long straight nose. 'A glacier would've cut the valley in the last ice age.'

These time periods fascinated the little Planet. She darted back and forth. Counting them. Imagining the differences. First the ice made the valley. Then the church stood on the shore. And now, the sea wall had been built. What if they hadn't erected the enormous concrete slabs? Would the ocean stretch all the way up the valley? And why had that last church wall been kept?

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Today, when I look back. When I remember my Sun, I think I understand. Why solitary walls are saved, and why people leave roadside flower shrines. For me, it's to do with the way this world juts into and rasps against our skin. To do with the way our memories get snagged and snared.

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That afternoon the Sun and the Planet orbited the rock pools, scrabbling over smooth, slippery seaweed. Moody clumps of pockmarked purple and long strips of luminous green. Their hands and knees got wet and muddy. Sand got in their ears and up their noses. The Sun laughed and spoke about the creatures and the life that they found. Crabs, sea stars and anemones.

When they realised that the beach had disappeared, that the waves were smashing into the sea wall, there was no need to speak. They circled one another up the slipway that ran alongside the graveyard. They went around the car park and looped back to the secret path. The Sun poked through a gap in the hedge. She took quick, short steps down the grass verge. Careful not to overrun the smooth exposed stones. As always, the Planet followed. They were inseparable. They jumped over a gurgling stream. They edged along a brick sea wall and finally they reached the big, jagged rocks.

On that side of the cove, in between the rocks, two concrete barriers stopped the sea from coming all the way in. They were smaller than the rocks, but taller than the little Planet, with flat lunar tops and a splatter of miniature craters. The Planet imagined they were exploring the moon, from the brick wall to the first slanted rock, and then, across a second moonscape on to the far rock. Here, set into the slate, was a smaller concrete ledge with a rusted iron bar.

‘For mooring boats,’ the Sun grinned.

Below, the sea was the same dark grey as the rocks. Only the spraying and cresting waves made it streaked and marbled. The big waves let out deafening roars and crashes, but the Planet liked the rhythmic undertone more. In between the bigger waves, a lapping and slip-slapping. She could count on that undertow. It would always be there in the background.

From her bag, the Sun pulled out a beach towel. Hidden in its folds the Planet shed her spring skirt and pants and stepped into her summer swimming costume. Carefully. One foot at a time. Then it was her turn to hold the towel. The Sun was quicker and her khaki shirt and shorts were soon folded up. Placed on top of her brown leather hiking boots.

The little Planet looked at the Sun. She was brilliant in every way.

‘More practice,’ the Sun laughed.

The Planet put the towel on their pile. The Sun offered a hand. The Planet smiled and took it. They walked to the ledge, stood on their tiptoes and looked out at the lashing, charcoal sea. The peak of a wave caught on the wind. They were covered in a fine mist. It made the little Planet shiver. In the distance a chorus clanged and tinkled. The Planet's stomach tingled. She both did and didn't want to jump.

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When you love someone and they die, shouldn't you preserve all the fragments you have left? That's how I see myself when I remember our last jump. Every detail I can recall. Each one brings her closer. Another misshapen stone in a solitary wall.

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'Ready?' the Sun said.

The Planet pulled on her goggles and clamped her mouth shut. She pinched a thumb and forefinger over her nose. Her nails dug in. They held hands again. The little Planet nodded and on the count of three they leapt.

Water took hold of the Planet and she wanted to escape. Instead she clutched at the Sun's hand. Across her surface, pores shrieked and puckered. Volcanoes erupted. Inside she howled. A dull ache of protest as the lava was drawn back to her core. But there was also a beam of light. It shot up from her south pole and burst right through the crown of her north.

They plunged down and all around the water was dark and swirling. The coal-black depths of the universe. They were locked in their dance. The Planet could feel the Sun's pull. Her weight. The strength of her grasp. She hoped the Sun would never let go.

For a moment, all was weightless and still. The Planet was perfectly quiet. Then the Sun pushed herself up. The Planet couldn't stay with her. She was left on her own. Panic exploded inside. Earthquakes and tsunamis followed. Everything wild and unbounded.

Cold squeezed out the air from her lungs. It numbed the Planet, like an ice age. She could feel herself shrinking inwards. Trying to disappear.

She felt her south pole smack against the sand. Something inside told her to bounce. To push off. It was the first time she'd touched the bottom.

The light came back. It wasn't quick enough. The Planet was going to burst. A surge caught hold of her. The current was strong. An asteroid pushing her off course. And then a flash of cliff and sky. A huge gulp of air, like being woken from hibernation. A slug of sharp seawater. Something slimy on her lips. She heaved and spat and wiped. Still the taste clung to her mouth. Then the Sun pulled her back into orbit. The Sun shouted and laughed. She kissed the Planet. The Sun was blistering. And the Planet felt safe.