

## **Fifth of Nine**

Rain pattered on the attic roof, sifting dust and muted light. I peered through murk at dolls in frayed frocks, a box of knitted caps, a tangled dolphin chime. Drowned memories floated then sank, too waterlogged to bother rising from the deep.

I sought a fragile sunbeam in the shadows of the past, while my brothers thumped over wooden floors below. They pried pictures off of walls, emptying this house of its banked treasures.

Stripping it of time.

Would there be something here for me, fifth of nine children, who had bloomed like lilies in our parent's water garden, drifting half noticed in the brine?

Lifting the corner of a stained afghan, I spied the music box. I recalled the day when Mother had set it in my hands, her features defined by pallor.

"It's full of secrets," she had whispered from her bed.

She had pasted shells round the bottom, all blue, save one of pink. The inside was lined with blue paper, crayoned with starfish—but no secrets.

Four boys later she was gone, misted into the ocean and its quietude.

I had lain for days broken as a sea urchin, dried spines brittle like my tears. But there were children to feed and clothe, and run with, racing to the sea.

I had tossed the music box on a shelf of discarded dreams, butcher-paper scraps of scribbled fish, and a whale shaped from clay—forgotten like the rest of my childhood ambitions.

Swept along in that tide and flow of life I had drifted like flotsam, away from the shore of her forgiveness.

Thirty years stormed by, and we returned to gather round my father's bed—watch him diminish, then sink away to join her.

Now, in this dim attic I opened the music box my mother gave to me when I was twelve. The mermaid twirled like an old friend, tilted to the tap of blunted notes. Still no secrets lay

within, nothing to tell me what—fifth of nine—I meant to her anymore than all the rest.

My gaze lingered on the eight blue shells around the box, and that single one of pink.

One of nine.

I pushed my thumb across it, surprised when it revealed a passage into secrets—a drawer meant just for me. Little notes, folded like boats, her words in tiny script, I read: ‘You were fifth of nine, beloved though it wasn’t spoken. I hope my simple gestures conveyed my heart to you. The extra carrots in your soup, crusts cut from your bread, and your braids pinned with red bows. Your dolls wore hand-sewn pinafores. We cut silver dolphins from tins, hanging them on twine. On winter nights I knit you caps and embroidered seahorses around the crown... ‘

More memories than could fill an ocean flooded that attic room.

Caught in glitter, mermaid’s song, and bright coral colors, I took that box away with me—filled with brilliant sunbeams.