

The Pact by Loretta Mulholland

I stared into the depths of the churning water and looked at my daughter in her shiny red mac and knew that if she were to fall into that sea she would not have a hope of survival. Nor would anyone who went in after her. My son lay sleeping in his pushchair throughout the ordeal. The rain splattered into my skin and eyes, lashes stuck to lids like weary spider's legs, and I gasped for breath as the wind sucked it out of me. I was desperate to spy land. I caught flashes of coastline through mist smeared across a heavy grey sky, but there was no way I could see us reaching it in this storm. The boat rocked violently and my daughter was sick over the side. My husband gripped her so tightly that he may have squeezed out more vomit than her little body intended.

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It was 1992 and I had just finished my teaching diploma. We hadn't intended to come to this part of the world but my husband had landed a job in Dundee and we wanted to return to Scotland from the North of England, so that the children could see their grandparents and know them as people and not just as photographs and names scrawled across birthday and Christmas cards. Being west coasters, we knew no one on this side of the country and the way of life was a revelation to us. We had both grown up in the city, surrounded by crowds of people and public transport. As a child, I had rarely seen the coast and when I did, my family would all cry out 'the watter' when we crossed over the hill that gave us our first glimpse of the sea.

When a friend from college invited me to look after her house in St Monans that summer, while she and her partner returned to London, I jumped at the chance. We had no spare cash, living as a family of four off one wage, and struggling for space in the ground floor flat of a Dundee tenement. My husband could not come with us as he was working but he would take the Stagecoach from Dundee and meet us there at weekends. We had no car in those days.

The kids loved it. They played for hours in the rock pools, discovering mussels and whelks, crabs and fishes, sand eels and sea urchins. They potted in their wellies, big sister lecturing little brother on the different kinds of seaweed as they dragged large pieces across the sand, creating beach art that I wished would never be washed away. My son's favourite visit was to the *North Carr Lightship* and my daughter's to the *Scottish Fisheries Museum*. They played at shipwrecks, she wrapped in a tartan blanket, carrying her bucket as though it were full of herring and he playing captain of the lifeboat, which rescued fishermen stuck at sea and heading straight towards the Bass Rock.

It cost £17.00 for a family to visit Captain Scott's *Discovery* in Dundee at the time and 50p for us to visit the rusty red lightship in Anstruther. The latter was the one my son would always remember. The kids clambered on board, touching everything they could, tapping out messages in Morse Code which gave them a 'secret' language that they would use for years to come, conversing with each other to decide what they wanted for tea or what homework they hadn't done. I read out the story of a tragic rescue attempt from the display of black and white photographs and etchings at the lightship, and told them the songs and legends expressed through paintings, objects and pictures at the museum. My daughter sang sea shanties, half learned, half made up, with a voice so sweet that she could have lured fishermen to the seabed, existing amongst the merfolk for eternity.

When my husband came over at weekends we ventured further afield. We took the bus to Elie and walked the cliffs, my daughter striding in her hillwalking boots, doing her best to keep up with dad, my son clinging onto me for dear life as we did that chain walk and I said secret prayers that I wouldn't slip and he wouldn't have an asthma attack. But our greatest adventure was to the Isle of May, to catch the baby puffins before they flew the coop.

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Ours was a small cohort and friendships emerged, though as the final placements and summative assessments loomed, cliques formed and people became secretive about teaching ideas and possessive of essential library books. It was an intensive course, and I struggled to find time to study with two under fives to look after but I enjoyed the time out and the chance to wear heels and trendy clothes, instead of old trainers and worn-out jeans.

Robert was the only guy on the course and he had already been told he would become a Head Teacher within five years. He was good, I admit, and was studying for his PhD in some area of biology at the same time as he was doing his diploma in primary education, so naturally he would walk it – especially in the sciences and biodiversity projects popular at the time. There was a bunch of female students every bit as good as him, who excelled in their field, but the school-kids adored this male who could make them laugh at his corny jokes while holding them spellbound with tales of coastguard rescues and shark attacks on their trip to the Sea-Life Centre at St Andrews. He stayed at my end of town and offered me a lift in the mornings so that I could drop the kids at school and nursery and get to college on time.

Sue was my other friend there. A gifted musician and natural teacher, she was a bit 'alternative' and had lived in a squat in London where she ventured with her partner who came back to Fife wearing a kaftan. I hadn't known her before college but she took to the kids and invited us to tea at St Monans several times, experimenting in vegetarian cooking, though the kids hoped against hope that they would get to the chipper in Anstruther instead, where the man in bright yellow sou'wester holding a muckle great fish would easily tempt us into buying the best fish suppers in the country. They wanted to live in the East Neuk, by the harbours and the seaside, collecting shells and watching fisherman unload their hauls, while on rainy days drawing pages and pages of lobster creels piled high on the pier and silvery fish from museum displays.

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We spent the morning getting packed and wrapping up for a day on the island, walking and bird watching. I wanted to investigate the Stevenson Lighthouse but the children and their father were intent on spotting birds all day long. We packed egg and tomato sandwiches, apple juice and crisps of their choice. My son wanted cheesy puffs while my daughter chose a packet of foul smelling pickled onion Monster Munch.

I was nervous when I saw the boat. About thirty of us were packed into its long frame and I felt particular concern for the heavily pregnant woman sitting directly in front of us, but it was a fine day and the sea was smooth as a shoal of herring. Black backed gulls circled above and my son imitated their cries while my daughter rolled her eyes but they were each beside themselves when the rope was pulled in and the boat set off.

The air felt fresh against our skin and the heat of the sun lent a magical quality to the water, sparkling on its surface, making us all smile. For once my daughter stopped speaking and simply screwed up her eyes and gazed ahead as though seeing the world for the first time. She leant over the side, carefully holding on, secure in her father's arms. It was a tranquil moment, as though there were no other passengers or crew on the boat, only our wee family, my son strapped in his buggy, holding out his chubby little fingers, hoping to catch a bird's feather or a sprinkle of light as it bounced from metal hooks that lay beside chains near the captain's cabin. He was wrapped in a snowsuit and beads of sweat formed on his forehead and mingled with sea-spray, which caught echoes of his laughter. As we approached the island we heard the cries of shags and guillemots and the children's eyes grew wide with wonder as they feasted on the sight of the largest colonies of birds they had ever seen. My husband drew me to him, his arm round my waist as I felt his stubble dig into my cheek.

We had walked for less than thirty minutes when my daughter wanted to stop for the picnic but it was far too early. We recognized that a tantrum was about to erupt so we compromised and allowed her to open her crisps. Luckily the smell was carried off into the air. Her crunching ceased as we crossed a

mound and caught sight of the puffins. A ringer was there to monitor the numbers. He held a chick in cupped hands and brought it to the children. I don't think I had ever seen them look so lovely as they stroked the little creature with such tenderness that I thought my children themselves had become something ethereal.

The rest of the afternoon was spent eating and playing and looking through binoculars until we were all tired but satisfied. My husband took my son in the buggy as my daughter and I went to explore the lighthouse. She thought it resembled a beautiful castle and I thought it was marvelous how mankind could conceive of such engineering ideas and bring them to fruition with limited tools and early nineteenth century technology.

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Yet here we were now, out in the middle of the sea, facing its wrath with no lifeboat to rescue us. The weather had changed. The crew had gathered us together an hour earlier than scheduled as the clouds darkened and the temperature fell. We were so engaged in the joy of the moment that we hadn't noticed the change in the sky nor heard the sea grow fierce. My son became sleepy, even as I pushed the buggy hastily across the uneven ground. My husband swept up my daughter and hurried to the boat. We watched as the pregnant woman was helped into the front beside the crew, a life jacket placed loosely around her swollen form.

I looked at the sea and the boat and every bone in my body screamed, 'No!'

Don't go in there! Don't do it!

But my husband was already boarding, my daughter in his arms, clutching tightly to her 'Postman Pat' lunchbox. We had no choice. There was nowhere to stay on the island and it was getting colder, bleaker and wilder by the second. Someone from behind offered to help me get my son out of the

buggy but I didn't want to wake him, so instead, he helped me hoist both onto the boat.

I had never been the religious sort. I didn't pray often but the sky was getting duller and the sea rougher. The waves were swelling and the boat was rocking from side to side. The crew did their best and I was impressed by their calmness and their obvious skills and knowledge. They turned the boat sideways, facing a different direction, hoping to get to Anstruther by a longer but safer route. No one spoke. My son slept on. My daughter went very pale. My husband's jaw was clenched.

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Robert had come to visit us the day we made seaweed sculptures on the sand. My children knew him because he had given them lifts home and they had sat in the back seat of his car. They knew he was a friend of mummy and he made them laugh just as he'd made the children at the schools laugh. He had taken my daughter out to see the horses at his girlfriend's stables and she had held his hand in photos as she stroked the gentle creatures and fed them clumps of hay. He had helped me with a language project and he'd used my son's early acquisition as an example of how thoughts connect to learning. He knew the theory but not the practice. I helped him join the dots and as we worked together on different projects he helped me laugh too, till one day we went for a walk after college, when we'd finished early and it was too soon to collect the children. He made me lie under a tree and look through the branches to the sky as a child would. We lay together on the autumn leaves that covered the floor and he told me he thought I always seemed sad. I didn't know what he meant but I felt my eyes moisten with his words.

He asked me the question while the children were exploring the rock pools and competing to complete the tasks that he'd set them. Would I be happier with him, in a new life? Me and the kids? He adored them, he said. The

memory of his dimpled smile lingered in my mind and stayed there like limpets clinging to rocks.

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The vomit reeked of pickled onion crisps and boiled eggs and it seemed like it wouldn't stop. My daughter's insides were pouring out. I lurched forward to comfort her, stop the sickness, keep her safe, clean her up and hold her to me. But I didn't have to. My husband was right there doing everything I wanted to but couldn't as I was wedged between the man who'd helped me, my baby in his buggy and the woman with the child in her belly.

That's when I made my pact:

Please God ... please ... just get them safely to that shore ... I'll do anything you ask ... anything ...

The wind died down at that point, the boat sat still in the storm, bobbing not rocking, hovering in one spot, as though on a watery island, a whirlpool suspended in time. The figures of my daughter and husband stood like frozen puppets, the tension in their strings at snapping point, waiting for the Master to pull them in whatever direction He chose. My fingers clung to the buggy's metal handle.

He's gone ... out of my life ... from this moment on ... No more stories ... tea with friends ... visits to library ... no more fishnets under jeans or secret meetings in shadows ...

My marriage was a wreck but I stuck to that pact till long after both my babies had flown the coop.