

ENGLISH TITLE

Epicentre

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WHITE SEA

Grandma asks me why it is that, once again, I want to wait for Dad before I start having breakfast. I shrug in response and try harder to hide under the blanket on the sofa. I don't dare tell her the truth. Dad always skims the milk on my hot chocolate, and he also adds more blueberry jam to each biscuit.

I'm at Peitzenea; I've been sleeping at Grandma's for a while, ever since Mum had *her thing*.

Or maybe I should say I've been *living* at Grandma's since Mum had *her thing*.

But saying that makes me pretty sad.

So if someone asks me I just tell them I sleep here.

Answering this way makes me feel closer to the time before it all happened.

Dad stays in the hospital overnight and comes home for breakfast. He takes me to school and goes back to the hospital. When I was living at home, before Mum had *her thing*, I would drive my scooter to school along with some friends and our parents, but Grandma's farm is far away, and Dad needs to give me a lift now. And, because he needs to stay with Mum, I eat lunch at school now, too; but I can't complain about that, because the food is nice and I can play with my friends at lunchtime. Once Mum is feeling better and we are back home, I might tell my parents I want to carry on having lunch at school.

There's an Italian-style coffee maker perpetually living on our stove. It starts bubbling away when I hear the main door open. Are you grumbling again,

Mum?, Dad asks Grandma jokingly; he shelters me in his arms. I'm getting old, Edu, you see, Grandma replies, as she wipes the spilled coffee with a wet cloth. You heard the coffee machine sloshing around over and over, didn't you?, she says, looking at me. I shrug my shoulders again. Yes, I heard it, but it didn't even occur to me I had to let you know. I look for Dad. He smiles at me and winks; I find it reassuring.

I don't know what's wrong with Grandma, she's always mad. Grandma and the other women weren't allowed to be angry as young girls, Mum told me once; that's why all her rage is coming out now.

In my time here I've found out I really like the smell of freshly ground coffee. Nobody drinks coffee at home. Mum used to tell me it's bad for your health: you should only have it every once in a while, just like sweets and chocolate. Back then, Dad told me Mum was right, but he's been drinking coffee every day ever since Mum had *her thing*. Dad, can I have some chocolate?, I ask Dad, as Grandma serves him a cup. Don't you even think about it!, he exclaims and laughs as if I had told some joke. It's at times like these that I really don't understand anything at all. Grandma starts speaking before I can try and explain myself; she asks Dad about his night.

I keep quiet and try to pay attention,

I look at my breakfast and pretend not to hear.

Lately, I've been noticing that adults speak about Mum more often when I'm not looking them in the face, because that way it seems I'm not paying attention.

I'm not allowed to see Mum. Dad says it's because she's sick and could pass it on to me. I'm not sure about that. When her grandpa was unwell my friend Sara couldn't visit him either, because he was sick with something contagious; but she could still speak to him on the phone. I can't call Mum, though; Dad keeps saying it's because she's also got a sore throat and can't really talk. My

gut tells me not to take the bait, because I heard Dad on the phone the other day, and he was saying that doctors don't really know what's wrong with Mum yet.

Dad always has a lot to say when he's on the phone.

Last night was good, Dad explains to Grandma; I'm afraid I won't get much more from this conversation. Grandma gets up and puts some more wood in the fireplace. After that, she places the coffee machine back on the stove. Dad stares at me and offers me another biscuit. I feel that he's forcing a smile, just like I do when someone takes my picture. How do those tests work? The ones for Mum's head, I ask him, all of a sudden. He almost drops a jam-filled biscuit when he hears my question. There's an abyss in his eyes now, and he tries to hide it. He also looked like that when grandpa died and I asked When do we start dying?

And, just like he did back then, he now answers my question with another question: Why do you ask? Whenever I do that myself, he tells me off: you shouldn't answer a question with another question! That's rude. So, whenever he answers me back with a question, I know I've asked about something that I shouldn't have.

I don't care.

I want to know what Mum will go through. You told someone on the phone yesterday that Mum needed some more tests done! I look down as I try to hold back my tears. But there's too many of them on my belly already, and they've been climbing up into my eyes for a while. When I look down I realise my pyjama bottoms are full of tiny drops. Before I know it, Dad is hugging me. I don't have any answers. But I'm safe.

Mum is not crazy, I tell Josetxo while I walk down the stairs that connect the henhouse to the main building.

Josetxo is a shepherd. He comes from Barberena, a nearby farmhouse. He uses Grandma's henhouse now; there's been no livestock in Peitzenea since Grandpa died, and Grandma says that an empty barn can only lead to a cold home. That's why, grudgingly, she lends Josetxo the place in return for a couple of lousy lambs.

I was in the kitchen when I heard his car coming, and so I ran downstairs. I almost always go down the wooden stairs inside the house, but Josetxo comes in through the main door to avoid the kitchen.

Of course she isn't, Josetxo replies, still working. There are three main areas in the henhouse: two of them are large pens for sheep, and there's a corridor as well. Josetxo tells me that lambs are being born already, and he explains that he needs to build smaller rooms within one of the bigger ones. It seems that some lambs and sheep need private rooms. He also tells me that some sheep don't love their offspring. When that happens, you've got to try and get other sheep to love those lambs; if that also fails, then they need to be bottle-fed.

My mother bottle-fed me as a baby, but I know she loves me; people and sheep are quite different in that sense. Anyway, I really like feeding the lambs from a bottle, even though Josetxo keeps saying it's a tiring job.

It's the first time I've talked to him about Mum.

Ever since Mum had *her thing*, I haven't really talked to anyone about this.

My friends say they're sure she's crazy; why would she have her head tested otherwise? Josetxo is holding a long plank of wood; he leaves it on the floor and approaches me. I really like Josetxo. Whatever I say, he's always nice to me. He leans his boot against a wooden step –there's some straw stuck to the sole of his shoe, along with some sheep's poo– and he rests his hands on his bent knee. He's staring at me. And what did you answer?, he asks me. I told them Mum is not crazy, I reply, looking at his dirty boot. Of course she's not, he repeats, and gets back to work.

I got really angry at Sara and Kaia at school today. We were playing hide-and-seek, and they couldn't find me, so they accused me of hiding somewhere out of bounds. I told them I was playing fair and hiding in a spot that was allowed. They insisted I wasn't. I said I was. And they kept saying I wasn't. And so on, for a while. I told them they were just trying to cheat because they couldn't find me. Kaia replied that I'm crazy, just like my mother. Mum is not crazy. What's wrong with her, then? she asked me over and over. I didn't know what to answer. You don't know anything, I told them. We know what we hear at home, they replied.

I got really, really angry.

I think I'm also mad at Dad.

Because he doesn't want to tell me what's wrong with Mum.

Josetxo's sheep are coming back inside. Thank goodness! I was getting cold. When the sheep are brought in, the henhouse gets warm really fast. The smell of sheep is starting to mix with the smell of dry grass inside my nose. I'm getting used to this smell; at first, I didn't think it was nice, but now I've made it my own. It feels familiar.

I don't like it, though.

I want to go back home.

Back with Mum.

I don't say goodbye to Josetxo, and I climb up the stairs two steps at a time. I go into my room and start crying.

I'm missing school today! Dad told me I can go and see Mum. Finally!

We arrive at the hospital and start playing the maze game. We need to follow the blue line on the floor until we reach a man wearing a white gown –not any

man in a white gown, but Fer. When we do find him, Dad starts talking to him in the corridor. I want to see Mum. I don't like the smell of the hospital. It's like every single corner has been covered in that liquid Grandma uses for cleaning.

I see some flowers lying on a counter, and I come closer. I want to smell the flowers and make my nose happy again. They're too high up, though. The woman behind the counter asks me if I would like a balloon. I'm not particularly excited about it, but I say that I do want one, because Dad is still chattering. She blows up a rubber glove and gives it to me, smiling. I don't like it when people talk to me like I'm a little kid. Besides, this rubber glove –it's not really a balloon, you see– smells terrible.

An old man has been brought out of a room and into the corridor. He's lying on a wheelbed. I've heard about wheelchairs, but this is the first time I see a wheelbed. Sara and Kaia will flip out when I tell them. The old man looks sad. I'm quite close to him, but he doesn't look at me; he's staring at the ceiling. He looks awake-but-asleep. Kaia told me that his brother sometimes sleeps with his eyes open. This man might well be asleep, too.

Another man starts pushing the bed now; the wheels keep screeching, just like the iron door on the range at Grandma's kitchen.

Dad keeps talking to the man. Fer. Fernando. Fermin. I don't know any other names starting with "Fer". He looks like a Fernando, not so much like a Fermin. I can't wait to see Mum. Is she in one of these rooms? I follow the blue lines, balancing my body like a tightrope walker until I reach the room the elderly man was taken out off; the door is ajar, and I look inside. There's no one there: I can see a lot of machines and screens, and there's a weird smell too, but not a single person.

My knees are shaking. I haven't seen Mum since the day it all happened, and I suddenly feel very nervous. We don't go into a bedroom but into a regular

room with two sofas and a small table. Once again, I don't understand anything at all. A woman wearing a white gown comes in and closes the door.

Where's Mum?, I ask Dad. He bends over, takes my hands and looks me in the eye before he starts to talk. I hate it when he does that, taking my hands before talking, it means he's about to say something I won't like. We'll see Mum later. Now you need to talk to these doctors, and you need to tell them what happened that evening. I shake my head. I don't want to tell these two anything. I want to see Mum. You want her to get better, don't you? You can help her now. Please.

I sit on a large couch, and I stare downwards. My legs don't reach the floor, they're just hanging. I notice that everyone is paying attention to me. Where are you, Mum, I came here to see you. The two *white-gowns* tell me their names –Virginia and Fer— and explain that they're doctors. I knew that already. They also ask me if I want some food. I say I don't, but the doctor called Virginia takes a chocolate milkshake out of her pocket and hands it to me. She then asks me how I feel.

I want to see Mum.

Dad touches my shoulder, but the doctor called Virginia continues speaking as if she hadn't heard me talk. She speaks from behind her round glasses and tells me that I'm quite tall for my age and that I have the body of a ballet dancer. I decide I like Virginia. She wants to know everything I did that day: from the moment I got up until Mum had *her thing*. I'm getting really nervous. I can't remember what I'd been doing that day, I can only think of Mum:

Mum's jacket falling on the sand, Mum getting undressed,

Mum moving forward in the sea; further and further forward.

What did you have for breakfast that day?, the doctor called Fer asks me. I know how to answer that, and it makes me feel calmer: I have milk and biscuits for breakfast every single morning. I can see the kitchen at home now, and I

sense I'm able to remember the morning it all happened. I tell the doctors we got to school and I said goodbye to Mum at the door; then, Fer asks me if Mum looked normal that morning. I answer she did. I told you, Dad adds.

Little by little, we work our way up to the moment that I don't want to remember, and I believe I need to tell them now.

I want to cry, but tears won't come out of my eyes.

Did she say something before she started undressing?, Virginia asks.

No, I reply, hunched over

After that there is silence. I break the silence myself.

Is Mum crazy?

Of course she's not! Dad is quick to respond, Mum is just sick. They still don't know exactly what's wrong with her, but she will get better.

It is Dad who's talking, but I keep staring at the doctors called Virginia and Fer. They nod their heads, and I get stuck on that gesture.

In Peitzenea, Saturdays are no different to any other day of the week. The coffee machine stands in its usual place, bubbling away, and the range door keeps screeching every time someone opens it to add some firewood. The radio sounds the way it always does: loud enough to bother me but not loud enough for me to understand what it's saying. The trees I can see from the window are the same colour as before, the leaves have not fallen and the wind moves them all around. Why would trees care if it's a Saturday or a Tuesday. Why would the concrete path care, it's always empty.

I had a nightmare last night: Mum was naked, and she was getting into the sea, and disappearing into the sea, and I was screaming at Mum. I wanted

to get up and go to her, but I couldn't move, my legs were stuck to the sand. Suddenly, a hospital bed appeared on the surface. Mum was lying on it. She was dead. I woke up crying. I managed to cool off and fell asleep again, and then the nightmare came back. Afterwards I woke up crying again. Grandma didn't come to comfort me. Our rooms are quite far apart, she might not have heard me.

Mum was sleeping when we visited her yesterday. She was lying on her back and had her arms and legs outstretched. She wasn't moving. Not an inch. She looked just like she had in my nightmare. Was she dead? Dad told me that she needs to sleep a lot in order to get better and that doctors are giving her some medication to help her sleep.

I was hoping she would wake up while we were there.

I was hoping she would notice when I kissed her on the cheek; I thought she would give me a big hug, just as she used to do back home.

Grandma says that dreams that don't come true are dog dreams.

We are having breakfast. When Grandma gets up to use the bathroom, Dad gestures at me to move closer. When he hugs me, I feel like telling him about my nightmare. I'll ask him to sleep with me tonight; Grandma's house scares me at night, and during the day too, sometimes. Doctors figured out what's wrong with Mum, he whispers in my ear. I'm not allowed to tell anyone, because it's a very strange matter, but you will keep it a secret, won't you? I nod, and I move my ear closer to his mouth. Nobody can know, not even Grandma, all right? I swear I won't tell anyone, and I pay attention while I look at Dad's big eyes. He looks around and speaks gently: Mum is a mermaid. She's been out of water for too long, that's why she's poorly now. I do not say a word, and he continues speaking.

She became a human; you know, mermaids are magical creatures. But she never went back to the sea. We met and we fell in love, and she forgot she was a mermaid.

I don't believe you, I answer against my own will.

Now look, have I ever lied to you?, asks Dad. He looks serious. The sea was summoning her the other day, and she was told she had to go back, that's why she did what she did. She was under a spell.

So she's leaving, then? She's abandoning us?, I ask, full of worry.

No, of course she's not!

I thought he was going to add something else, but he puts his finger on his mouth as soon as he hears Grandma's footsteps coming towards us, meaning I should keep silent. He smiles and continues to have breakfast.

I sit on the chair by the window and look at him: he's talking about the shopping list with Grandma, and he looks happy too. A mermaid? Mermaids aren't real. But Dad wouldn't pull my leg, not about this. Grandma wipes the table clean with a wet cloth. She turns around to throw the breadcrumbs into the bin below the sink; Dad winks at me. Mum is not crazy, she was just under a spell. When Mum had *her thing* and I grew sad, a bunch of small creatures hatched on my stomach. For a moment, I stop feeling them; but they're quick to come back.

I look through the window, and I see Josetxo approaching; I make my way to the henhouse fast. I hope that he lets me feed one of the lambs!

She's thinner than she was before.

That's the first thing that comes to my mind as soon as I see Mum walking through the door. Dad told me we would still live at Grandma's for a while, until

Mum starts feeling better. I'm sure the food at the hospital was awful. Didn't Dad tell them how much she likes roast chicken and chocolate cake? I'm sure she will get her looks back in no time. Mum has always been the most good-looking mum I've ever met, and now I know why. Josetxo told me that mermaids are extremely beautiful, and that they use their beauty and sweet voices to cast spells on sailors. Dad has always said that Mum cast a spell on him, that he fell in love with her immediately, from the moment he first saw her.

I told Josetxo. I was sure he would believe me, and he would keep the secret. I asked him if I'm a half mermaid because Mum is a mermaid and I'm her daughter. He didn't know, he told me he's not good at fish. Josetxo always looks serious when he tells a joke. I do think I'm a half mermaid, that's why I can hold my breath underwater for so long! Sara and Kaia used to accuse me of cheating, and I would get mad at them. I won't get angry anymore. I didn't cheat on purpose, but maybe they were somewhat right.

Mum walks through the door and I run to hug her, but she won't bend down. I tug at her coat, and she looks at me surprised. She bends over. I hug her tightly and notice she can't hug me tightly herself; she might have lost her strength as she got thinner. I ask her a bunch of questions about mermaids; I speak quickly, firing one question after another, so quickly that I end up short of breath. She holds my hands and looks at me in the face but doesn't answer a single one of my questions. She looks weird; she seems like a different person. But it's her, it's her hands, her chest, her eyes, her long soft hair, her nose, so I start telling her some things about school, until Dad says, "that's enough, honey". Mum needs to rest now, and we should leave her alone.

He takes her from me again, and they go inside their bedroom.

I don't understand why Dad seems to think Mum will heal better if I'm not around.

Josetxo came to pick me up from school. That's really strange. As soon as we get in the car, I glare at him as if to ask what's going on. Your dad had to take care of your mum today, he says. He notices I'm getting worried, and then he adds: Don't worry, she's alright. I don't reply because I don't feel like speaking anymore. He understands how I feel right away, and he also keeps silent on our way home. That's why I like Josetxo.

It's been two weeks since Mum came back home, and she's barely gotten out of bed. I kiss her goodbye every morning before school, and I kiss her again when I come back home, but she hardly speaks to me. And when she does say something, I can't always understand her words. I sometimes believe she doesn't even know who I am or who she is, and that makes me incredibly sad. Dad says that it's a side effect of her medicine, the one she's taking to stop being a mermaid so she's able to stay with us forever. I'm not quite sure her medicine works. Now it's not only Mum who's sad. Dad and I are, too. I suggested to Dad several times that the three of us can live underwater; every time I do, he interrupts me and explains that's impossible because there's no magical spell for that: he doesn't have any gills, just lungs, and I'm only a half mermaid.

We are about a hundred metres away from Grandma's house, and there's a gigantic white ambulance coming towards us. The track is really narrow here, so Josetxo needs to push the car to one side. He gently touches my knee; I can't take my eyes off that wicked white vehicle.

The ambulance moves past us slowly, and the driver waves his hand at Josetxo, thanking him for having moved the car. Dad is in his car following the ambulance. He sees me in the passenger's seat, and his face changes completely. I see him drying the tears that fall down his cheeks.

Just before Dad's car moves past us, I start feeling all my rage boil up inside: it wants out, out of my body, it's like a volcano. I open the door and jump out. Josetxo keeps calling my name. Dad gets out of his car and starts calling me too. But I'm already running up the hill.

You lied to me!, I scream, without looking back.

Lies, lies, lies.

I run to Grandma's, repeating that word over and over again. My inner volcano has let its lava out, and my body is now all burnt. I feel like fire will come out of my mouth anytime.

Josetxo lied to me, Dad lied to me, the doctors lied to me.

Everyone keeps lying to me.

When I reach the henhouse, I need to gasp for breath and rest both my hands on my knees in order to keep my balance. I cry and cry some more, as if I were about to run out of tears. I want to be with Mum. I don't care if she's a mermaid or a crocodile, I don't even care if she's crazy; I want us to be together, like we used to.

All at once, I sense something moving between my legs. I look down and find a little lamb biting my shoelaces; I pick it up and take it in my arms. I look inside the henhouse; what a surprise! Mum is near the door looking at the lamb that was just trying to get out. She's wearing pink striped pyjamas, and she's barefoot.

I'm very confused. I look back, Dad and Josetxo are still standing in the middle of the road.

The ambulance. Mum is not the one in the ambulance.

I run to Mum and leave the lamb on the floor. There's a hole in the fence; the lamb, a tiny cotton ball, hurries through that hole and hides within the flock. We keep our eyes on the little lamb, and I notice a hint of smile on Mum's thin face. I hear her say something. I'm already familiar with her faint, barely audible voice:

Lili.

Yes, Mum, that's me, Lili, I'm here, I answer gently.

It's the first time she's said my name since it all happened. That must be good, for sure.

She goes quiet again, she's shivering from the cold. I grab her hand, and I take her inside the henhouse, slowly. I carefully open the sheep pen. We both walk inside unhurried, until we are sheltered within the flock. I hold both her hands and look her in the eye. I tell her:

Look, Mum, this sea is beautiful, too.

I tug at her arm, and we both crouch down. We stay here, curled up, tangled up in the waves of this white, warm sea.