

“Tides of Return”

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Louise had expected it to be easier to find a boat. She had expected all of it to be easier. She had been planning her move for months now, but planning the details from afar had been tricky. The train from Columbus had taken her as far as Boston, and then she barely caught a bus to Portland. During the winter, the bus (which was really a 12-passenger van that insisted on calling itself a bus) ran only twice a week, carrying mail, supplies, and the odd person who had business in Portland. Louise chatted with Eddy, her van/bus driver, the entire drive. When she asked him for his thoughts on Maine, he gave her a tight-lipped smile and said, “I can’t help you, honey, I only pass through.” Eddy dropped her off in an open stretch of cracked asphalt that had once been a parking lot, and Louise picked her way down empty streets and abandoned buildings to the commercial fishing dock where she now stood. Now she just needed a boat.

All her life, Louise had heard stories of the vibrant Maine coastline. When he was young, her father had held an amateur lobstering license and very occasionally, he would tell Louise and Steven stories of his life out on the water—the dinners he used to bring home, the day his GPS had broken down and he spent three hours trying to navigate home in a thick gravy fog, the happy afternoons that their mother had joined him on the boat as co-captain. It was hard to reconcile these stories with the reality she now observed. The dock was a scene of emptiness and disrepair. The buildings at the waterfront were little more than shacks and even the dock itself seemed to be of dubious stability.

The abandonment wasn't entirely surprising. Casco Bay had once been a plentiful area to fish, but the water had now warmed to a temperature inhospitable for most life. And the islands, which had once been home to many people, were now mostly ghost towns. This, she supposed, was why she had made her way to Maine in the first place.

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Louise had grown up in Columbus, Ohio. Her family had packed up and moved from Maine to the Midwest when her brother, Steven, was only a baby. Louise was born 2 years later at Ohio State East Hospital. By the time Louise was a teenager, Columbus had grown in population by tenfold.

Louise was grateful for her childhood in the city. Her father had drilled into her how lucky she was to have grown up in the shelter of Columbus. The city didn't get too hot, didn't experience massive forest fires, didn't flood, and so on. It offered safety and stability, things other cities couldn't guarantee. Her father parroted these facts over and over again, always telling her to be grateful, always telling her to stay safe. Her mother said nothing, just looked into the distance with the glazed expression of someone remembering the storm.

The storm. When the storm descended, her parents were young and residing on Monroe Island in the heart of Maine's Casco Bay. They were the parents of two young children, Rosie and Steven, who was just a baby. Meteorological forecasts had forewarned of a category 3 hurricane, a storm that would cause tremendous damage. But when the storm made landfall on the East Coast, it hit with a ferocity never seen before. Power lines were decimated, then generators, then emergency generators. The East Coast was plunged into darkness. Escape routes

were nonexistent as roads transformed into flooded and treacherous pathways. Lives were lost. Whole cities crumbled. Louise's family were among the lucky ones, the ones who made it out, who got to leave. The moment they could, they packed up and left, never slowing, never looking back, the whole way to Columbus. They haven't been back.

The U.S. Senate had passed the Heritage Resettlement Act two years ago. The plan allowed for citizens, with proof of past family ownership, to repatriate areas that their family fled from as climate refugees. When Louise first read about the plan, she heard her father's voice in her mind. "Louise, it's not safe. We took you away from all of this to give you the best chance at life. To leave is an insult to the sacrifices we've made for you." But mostly she pictured her mother's face: frozen, wide-eyed, and full of fear.

She couldn't go.

But she couldn't get Maine out of her mind. This place she couldn't remember. This place her family had lived for generations before her. And she couldn't get Rosie out of her mind. The sister she had never met. The girl who lived only in a collection of notebooks and her parents' hushed whispers.

She had to go.

So, against her family's wishes, Louise had quietly applied and been approved for the plan. She then quit her job at the bank, packed up some belongings, and, after a tearful goodbye to her parents and Steven, boarded a train East. She was going back to Monroe Island.