

Pat Skinner

WATERMARKS

Aunt Marina returned from the city to live with us when I was eight years old. She'd been gone nearly fifteen years. Inevitable, said my father, with a frivolous name like that and a foolish romantic nature into the bargain, that Marina headed towards the sea to discover if she had the sort of primal connection with it she'd fondly imagined when she was a child; inevitable, said my mother, who was Marina's sister, that she'd find her way back again, sooner or later. Once the land's in your blood, it doesn't let you go. A pity it had to be like this, her coming back, my mother said.

My mother may have thought the land in Marina's blood had exerted some sort of magnetic pull, drawing her back to the wide plains of her youth, but I soon discovered that Aunt Marina felt differently.

I saw her soon after her arrival, gazing across the fields of ripening wheat. It was late in the day, the sun giving the last of its light to the earth, and it seemed that all the gold of the world was there, spreading down the sky to the wheat, and onto my Aunt Marina's hair.

She held out her hand to me. "Hello Rose. It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"You must have really missed the country," I said. "Why did you wait so long to come home?"

She frowned a bit. "I had to escape," she told me.

"Escape?"

"From the sea."

"I don't understand."

"There was something—someone—I loved more than the sea, and the sea had its revenge. It would have taken me too, but I ran away, I came back here."

"Are you safe now?"

"For the moment." Then Aunt Marina shivered. "But the sea won't forget. It will get me in the end."

"Out here? We're so far away."

"It will get me in the end," she repeated.

Right then I could see why Dad said that Aunt Marina was a few sandwiches short of a picnic. I watched her walking back towards the house and wondered if I should tell Mum, or at least ask her what Aunt Marina meant about revenge, but even at eight I had begun to realise that there were some things you did not share with your parents. Besides, I kind of liked Aunt Marina.

She didn't look much like my Mum. They both had fairish hair, but Mum's was sort of brown-gold, lighter in summer when she forgot to wear her hat, and Aunt Marina's was much paler, with a curious, almost greenish tinge to it. Like a mermaid's, I said to myself. Mum had brown eyes, Aunt Marina's were blue, and I heard Mum tell Dad that they were darker than she remembered. I knew that the sea must have got into them, a little part of the sea had travelled with her and was watching her every move. One slip and it would get her.

Aunt Marina soon settled into the swing of things on the farm, and I think Dad was pleased with the way she pitched in and helped Mum. A few months after her arrival, Mum told us she was going to have another baby, and she was especially glad to have Aunt Marina supervise my lessons while she rested. It was a long, hot autumn, and I liked to sit with Aunt Marina on the verandah and get her to tell me stories about her life in the city, and especially about the sea.

"How did you know you had to go to the sea?" I asked her.

"Oh, it was something I'd always known, from when I was very, very young. I used to stand and watch the wheat with a breeze running through it. It would ripple and ripple and sigh like waves, and I would sway with it, feel like I was in a little row-boat. And then I discovered watermarks."

"What's a watermark?"

"It's a secret mark that water can make on paper. I'll show you, but you must promise to keep it a secret."

"I promise."

Aunt Marina fetched a sheet of my father's special writing-paper and a sheet of my mother's. She held one up to the light. "See?"

I looked. And there, very faintly, was the outline of a word. "B-O-N-D," I spelled out. "Bond."

Aunt Marina nodded. "A bond is a special connection, like mine with the sea. Now this one."

I stared at my mother's pale blue paper. "It's a rose!" I cried in disbelief. "A rose, just like me! It's magic!"

"Yes," said Aunt Marina. "Water is like that. But it has a bad magic too."

"What does that mean?"

"It can use its magic to both save and destroy. It can save farmers when there's a drought, but too much water can drown." She blinked, and I thought I saw a tear shining on her eyelashes. "Anyway, after I'd seen the watermarks I knew I was destined to leave the land and travel to the sea. When I was eighteen, I did. I went to Sydney and caught the bus out to Bronte, and I fell into the sea's embrace as a child into the arms of its mother."

Aunt Marina told me, another time, about the other kinds of watermarks she discovered near the sea; tidemarks on rocks and cliffs, high tide and low tide, and the tiny creatures, crabs and limpets, eking out their living between the two extremes. I had never been to the sea and I was wild to go after hearing these stories. I asked Aunt Marina if she'd take me, and she smiled, but she looked a bit sad, so I didn't ask her again.

Months passed. It was a dry winter and my father anxiously scanned the horizon every morning and evening for signs of rain. No need to panic yet, he said to us at dinner, he was sure it would come in spring. But I noticed the furrows in his forehead. They were his worry lines.

My mother's stomach swelled, and she spent more afternoons lying on her bed, so I spent more time with Aunt Marina.

I gazed into her sea-blue eyes and dared to ask her what I knew would be a dangerous question.

"Are you still sort of bonded with the sea?"

"I will always be close to the sea."

"Dad says it's a primal connection."

"Does he? Well, he's right in a way."

"And all water goes to the sea, doesn't it?"

"Eventually. We get rain, which flows into creeks, they become rivers, rivers flow into other rivers, and some of those rivers reach the sea."

"So, if you're bonded with the sea, couldn't you ask it to make rain? Then we'd get some water and so would the sea—e-eventu-ally, and everyone would be happy."

For a second Aunt Marina looked really terrified. She had turned very pale, and I thought she might even pass out on the floor. Then she jumped up from her chair and ran from the room. I heard her bedroom door close. I knew I shouldn't have asked.

It did rain, finally, in early October, three weeks before my mother's baby was due. It rained solidly for seven days, filling all the dams to the brim, and I looked forward to going swimming when the weather cleared.

Mum and Dad were happy and spoke of a bumper crop and what we would do with the extra money. Only Aunt Marina did not seem to share in the general optimism and muttered something about a feeling of impending doom.

"Too good to last," said Dad after she had left the room, saying she needed an early night. "Always thought she was a fish out of water here."

"Oh Jack!" said Mum "Do be tolerant. You know what she's been through."

"I know," said Dad.

"What has she been through?" I asked.

"Never you mind," said Mum.

Dad's happiness soon turned to alarm a few days later, when the evening news told of river levels rising. It soon became all hands on deck to fill and pile up sandbags in the nearby town and around all the houses and outbuildings on low-lying properties.

The rivers kept rising and Dad told Mum she'd have to go and stay in town, he didn't want her stranded out here when her waters broke. I wondered what that meant—I'm sure Dad said *her* waters, but didn't he mean the river? Did you call the river "she" like you did with ships? Then I heard Aunt Marina say that if anyone was to go it should be her, as it was her fault anyway.

"What *are* you babbling about?" Dad asked.

"It's my fault. I've caused the flood."

"Oh saints preserve us, Marina!" Dad stamped out of the kitchen and went to see about more sandbags.

The river nearest us burst its banks at two o'clock next morning, and by dawn the town was surrounded by brown swirling waters, the nearby fields awash. We were still busy with sandbags, but at ten o'clock Dad heard that the next farm to ours was under water, and said we were in for it. He packed Mum, Aunt Marina, the dogs and me into our ute, with some food and water and eiderdowns, and we drove to the highest point on our property. From there we watched the flood slowly creeping across our land, drowning our beautiful growing wheat, flowing ever nearer to our house, making it an island.

Aunt Marina sat with her back against a tree, her pale hair hanging down like seaweed. She must be feeling awful, I thought, knowing it was that strange but powerful mixture of water and earth in her blood that had caused this catastrophe, my Aunt Marina's secret watermark.

It was not until several years later, when Aunt Marina had left us again, this time to live in cool and mossy mountains, that I learned of the tragedy that had brought her back to the land, the death of her husband as he was fishing from rocks near Sydney's treacherous Rosa Gully. Snatched away by a jealous sea and drowned. When I heard that, I grieved that it must have been like a thorn in her heart whenever Aunt Marina spoke my name.

We returned to our home when the waters receded. The flood had swept through the house, soaking the carpets and flinging the furniture in untidy heaps against the walls. We'd had just enough time to pile our treasures on high shelves in cupboards, and most of these were saved.

Mum was pretty upset, though. She heaved her bulk onto the only chair that remained upright and reasonably dry, and her face twitched in that way she had when she was trying not to cry.

Then she noticed Aunt Marina standing against one of the walls, tracing her finger along a pale, wavering line that ran the length of the walls, just one shade darker than the creamy paint.

Aunt Marina turned towards us, and I saw that the sea had drained away from her eyes.

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