

HOLDFAST

by Siân Melangell Dafydd

Beth comes here to get away from the world, to her mother's seaside cottage with a yellow door. Daylight Saving Time has just begun, or Summer Time as it's known. It starts on the last Sunday of March. This year, it landed only six days after the Equinox and the first day of spring. She is annoyed by this squeezed spring as well as the hour she loses. She always is, every year, and fails to laugh at herself until she returns to the cottage and sees Tilly, who tilts Beth's world back to balance, just as the tilt of the world rules tides and seasons.

You wouldn't say it's spring, looking at the sand-pit back garden. There are no fat balls on the birdfeeder and it's raining horizontally out there. No, she doesn't fancy going out. When, finally, she does, she also decides it's the nicest thing she's done all week. The backdoor slate doorstep looks just like the slabs they use to serve steak in the city these days. She leaves wads of mud on it in diamonds and half-moons from the tread of her wellies. And from there, she looks up at the swaying ash, at the bare branches and the glistening tips. The tree spits at her in drops larger than raindrops and all she can do is laugh. Only one week back and she is loosening.

The sky is as grey as her jumper and this means she belongs.

"Would you like a slice of seaweed chocolate caramel cake?" she hears from the other side of the fence. There's only one answer to that: No. No, that sounds vile. Who would bake such a thing? Who, but Tilly of course.

"I'd love some," Beth replies with the same enthusiasm she used to have for Cian's stone-moss pizzas and daisy-mud soups.

This is why she returns here. And for reminders of her mother and her grandmother. Her Mam's autobiographies of dancers squeezed in around the fireplace. A children's silver knife and fork set that belonged Beth comes here to get away from the world, to her mother's seaside cottage with a yellow door. Daylight Saving Time has just begun, or Summer Time as it's known. It starts on the last Sunday of March. This year, it landed only six days after the Equinox and the first day of spring. She is annoyed by this squeezed spring as well as the hour she loses. She always is, every year, and fails to laugh at herself until she returns to the cottage and sees Tilly, who tilts Beth's world back to balance, just as the tilt of the world rules tides and seasons.

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This is why she returns here. And for reminders of her mother and her grandmother. Her Mam's autobiographies of dancers squeezed in around the fireplace. A children's silver knife and fork set that belonged to her Nain. But especially for Tilly, who sings, "if you're fond of sand dunes and salty air," as she takes down her washing. Clouds dump all they've got on her and her basket of socks and linen dresses.

Rain and sea rhythms have the same power on people as darkness and candlelight. Beth had noticed this, ever since her undergraduate years. In the daytime, people speak about stuff: food, work, clothes, plans. Given a little darkness, they talk about invisible things like fears and confessions. People find confidence to sing, to strip off. And the howl of the sea does the same. Caution to the wind. Tilly lives in this permanent state of stargazing, waves vibrating in her bone marrow, ‘will you look at that!’ And Tilly is a terrible singer. She stops singing and says, ‘No quibbling! I can pass you over a plate. Give it back later!’

“But I said yes, Tilly,”

“I saw your screwed-up face What-What,”

And so, Beth stays where she is on the doorstep, holding herself against the weather, warmed by the sound of her old nickname. She counts the number of creeks from Tilly’s back door. She knows exactly when to look for a hand from the other side.

“Quick, now,” Tilly says. “Before it gets soggy.”

Beth is already inside when she takes the time to look at her gift properly. It doesn’t look as though it could have seaweed in it. Maybe Tilly is testing her. Nor does it smell like anything other than dark, dark chocolate. She looks and smells it from all sides. Normal, she decides.

The cake makes her feel a little more alive. She gets Nain’s Christening fork and eats it with a tiny cup of coffee. There couldn’t be a better pairing. And still, even though her teeth marks are in the cake, there’s no sign of green slime, or red for that matter. Some seaweeds are shades of clotted blood or even rusty tractor, right? None of that.

She would have to do better. Tilly was getting creative with her seaweed creations. You could put kelp powder in anything; it must be that. But damn it, Beth would never have thought of it.

Since returning, Tilly had provided her with five surprise dishes.

“I don’t need fattening, Tilly, as you can see,” she had said. “I’m not hungry right now” was met with guffaw and ‘give me the plate later.’ But Beth had this idea that she didn’t want neighbours at the moment. She wanted a place where she could wake up without needing to

get up. Somewhere where she could make do with baked beans. She could feel the pastel colours of the seaside houses somehow entering the house like rainbows and that was enough. She didn't need to go and see them, not every day. Knowing they were there was enough.

As it turns out, Beth was wrong. Tilly had known her since birth but Beth felt that she was as safe as a stranger. Tilly even had a new trick: a dish on the doorstep. She left a binbag of seaweed one day with a note: "Already rinsed. Won't leave sand all over your bath. Take a soak in this for at least 20mins, dear. TX."

Yesterday, Beth spent hours making a Vietnamese Pho soup with seaweed stock powder she found at an expensive organic shop back home. She'd even used local mushrooms and dried dulse and last year's ramsons to garnish. Tilly's love language was the sea. There was no other way to explain it. But Tilly had replied with seaweed crisps, somehow deep-fried, stuck to rice paper until they puffed.

Still, the cake wins the seaweed exchange, Beth thinks. It looks worthy of photographing, especially on Tilly's Cornish Blue plate.

"Take it," Beth says, mimicking Tilly's little headbutt that punctuates everything, and then giggled. No choice. Decision made. Tilly must have always been this generous and this much of a bully. But she had been her mother's friend, not hers. Beth just remembers how her mother would return from Tilly's smelling of bonfires, no matter what time of year. How Tilly wore feathers in her hair. How she demanded attention by just smiling.

Looking at Tilly's empty plate, Beth thinks: I have gained a new mother. Then, no. No. Nothing like her mother.

She then falls into a black hole. From empty plate to empty house. For a minute, she runs her fingers across the spines of books she hasn't read, reaches Margot Fontayne's autobiography. Gold capital letters. She pulls it out and thinks that she sees her mother, not the famous dancer, holding a clutch of yellow roses and smiling at someone off the edge of the book.

She must not let Mam's roses down. So, Beth googles, "can I repot roses once they are no longer dormant and have leaves?" She has already killed her mother's John Ystymlyn rose and just can't go through that again. While she ponders that, a friend sends her a

photograph of Joan Collins relaxing on a pale pink bed with her barbie pink poodle. She thinks: really, two seconds of my life to this? She checks for messages from Cian. None. A news article draws her attention. Apparently, they've found a shark which is more than five hundred years old. A shark, alive at the same time as Shakespeare. And the interview ends, quoting a researcher who says, "I'm just the messenger on this." That was worth her seconds more than Joan Collins' poodle. She is still standing in her cold socks, by the bookshelves. She remembers Cian in that same room, asking,

"In the daytime, is the sea very confused?"

It took a few ticks of her slow sleep-deprived brain to catch up and understand how the sea would miss the moon in daytime.

"Yes, it must be," she had said, planning to think of a better explanation later.

By now, she is sitting at the foot of the bookshelf, phone in hand, plate on the tiled floor. She promises herself to do better tomorrow; her switch-off from the world might work if only she could be brave enough to switch off the phone.

"Seaweed quiche," Tilly says. "Take it for later. I had to buy it for you from someone who had already bought it! It's coming back into fashion you know—I've convinced the cafes all around here." Paper plate this time, with a paper bag in a tent above it. Before Beth has the chance to thank her, Tilly has launched into speech that seems to come from her entire body. There will be more rain. The tide is low now. This will not last. And so, we will swim. Tilly has everything. Everything!

"It's raining, Tilly," Beth said.

"No, that's just your gutter dripping, come, come," she says and shoos and nudges.

The beach has the resinous stench of dance or exposed aquatic snails. Tilly always dances to prepare for a swim. That was no shock. She had been the same with Beth's mother. It only seemed strange to Beth to be in her place.

Movements shake hesitation right out of her, Tilly says. And shame—it shakes that right out of her, too. Beth dances with her, first letting her arms follow the same circular motions. She feels silly and then loves feeling silly.

Tilly's body whips itself: arms against her chest and then her back as she swings skin against skin, the soles of her feet against the salt-smoothed rock and old limpet scars. Beth's body in movement makes less noise. She is taller, but there is less of her. Leaner. In need of more suet in her potatoes, according to Tilly. But she doesn't think of her body, she feels it. Calloused heels sore when she stamps. Stiff left hip, very stiff, but she hadn't noticed until now. It feels as if the stuff holding her together is fraying. Each limb might swing free if she shakes enough.

“Now!” Tilly hollers to the wind after her last swirl and tiptoes in a zig-zag line over the sand and towards the sea. Beth catches up with her and is first in, flinging herself against approaching waves. No holding back, just more hollering, together, short, sharp breaths and a smash of cold. Once the water is at nipple height, Beth ducks her head like an otter and emerges again.

“Don't tell me it's cold, I bloody love it,” Tilly says and does the same. She vanishes. She re-emerges. Beth swims with more control, watching her hands push away and form semicircles. Her fingers get redder, redder. The cold reverses itself inside her and becomes fierce heat, a burn. She doesn't understand it. She not sure if she likes it, but here she is and she doesn't want to come out.

How much longer is safe before the trembling sets in and she can't get into her own clothes for fumbling? Just a bit. There, she stills while Tilly crashes into the waves and spits right back. “We are gorgeous, just look at us!” And she is right. Gorgeous as they heave themselves out of the waves, gorgeous as they strut back to their clothes, gorgeous as they stretch their creased skin and make star shapes among the rock pools, just because there's no rush. They are just bone cold.

It isn't even in them to be bashful once their joints are full of fumble and salt. No changing room awkwardness now. Beth chucks two large plastic bottles of tepid tap water over her hair and shoulders and “Ahhs” before shaking it all off. Stamps on her patch of rock.

She had imagined her body younger. At least, the sea made her feel younger. Peeling off neoprene to reveal scars and lumps; naked and wet, they talk about the sea and the houses and the space between them. There is a new, expensive, barrier and it's useless.

“Will you sell?” Tilly asks.

“Who would want it?”

“You're not thinking of keeping it for his inheritance, are you?”

“He might...” Beth starts. She was going to say that Cian might appreciate it one day. He might enjoy returning. We all do eventually. But she waits before saying so, and Tilly interrupts.

“He might outlive the house. No. *You'll* outlive this house, What-What.”

Beth never liked to think of that. Nain's cutlery. The shells she picked as a girl. The seawater is saturated with that suffering, that dread, and Beth had felt freed of it after swimming, until Tilly. But free to what? Grab a seaweed quiche? Go second-hand shopping on the Highstreet? First: hot, strong tea in chipped enamel cups. Tilly's head of hair fluffed like lamplight, her eyes so liquid. Steam burning upper lips.

The contents of Beth's coat tips into a rock pool. Two oak galls, some broken crockery from the potato patch—pink painted roses, colds and blues in lines, one with the letters D and U and in Welsh, that means “BLACK,” one cracked conker, some pretty stones.

“You'd think I was a mother of a toddler, just look at me,” she says and puts her bent knuckles to her eyes. There's one real tear there. Not seawater. She really likes the toddler-mother in her and misses that version of herself as much as she misses him, her son, that mop-head, gleaming, loud child. She can't ever claim that the nature finds in her pockets are his. She has always been that way. She counts six stones of various sizes, shades and patterns. Six! In one pocket. She almost tutted. Tilly was gathering them out of the seaweed and handed her an extra limpet. One of the stones looks like a miniature liver, especially when it's wet, and she remembers picking it up on Dinas Dinlle beach a few months ago when her mother couldn't go much further than the car park.

“It doesn’t look like it’s going to settle, does it?” Tilly says. About the weather? Beth isn’t sure of anything anymore. “Take this, What-What,” she says, offering her a ripped piece of weed. Tiny, stout brown. “This is pepper dulse. You picked the best pool on the beach.” And the last thing Beth wants to do is to digest anything.

Tilly chews. She says, “truffle.” She is not even here any longer, Beth thinks, but in her own little safe haven. Her hand is in the rock pool. Beth is deep-cold, shivering in a huge towel. Tilly must surely also be deep-cold. The pool is probably nothing to her now. Some seaweeds look fuchsia and translucent with Tilly’s pale hand behind them. She feathers about for more of the delicious stuff. “I only found this the other day. Go on. Will you eat with me?”

Beth considers tearing into it, but it is too small, smaller than communion.

It’s fruit-succulent, sweet and salty. She takes a little more. So small, she pinches it into her mouth, and the sea somehow whispers, “this body, that body, these bodies, this, this body, this,” to her, and the wind brings tears. Yes, it’s the wind; her eyes now brimming.

“So, what do you think?”

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Tilly doesn’t return home with her. She has business of the kind she can do in a dry robe, wellies and bobble hat on a gloomy spring day.

“What-What, I have things to do here,” she says as though Beth might forget that some people live in this town all year round. Dressed as she is, set against the Highstreet, Tilly looks older than ever. She uses that nickname to make Beth a child again, maybe. It came about one day years and years ago, because “beth” in Welsh means “what?” She was a girl made up of questions, Beth. For the first time, hearing it doesn’t please her. She goes home to sit in her borrowed towel in the back garden.

She doesn’t live here. She’ll never live here. Only an idiot would do that. But she returns for the memories, her own memories. Not for Tilly. Those when Cian was five or six, using the back garden as a sand pit and refusing to go to the beach. He had his private pit. It

was true wealth. Diggers and plastic spades, sandwich breaks and cries of “look what I found!” He danced around the Gnome with a Broken Toe, he danced around his own hard work and sang, “I am mother earth and mother earth is me.” This was years before he moved to Italy and took up a profession that meant he saw no daylight. Such a cliché, she thinks, the words of a five-year-old, now that she thinks of them. But of course, nothing is a cliché for a five-year-old, just new.

She looks for him in the flat rain-smacked sand-pit garden and tries to conjure up his small body, giving his full attention to the earth. No, he is a bus, plane, train, taxi ride away and, yes, she comes here for the memories. Somehow even the Gnome with a Broken Toe helps.

In one of his letters, he wrote to tell her about an Italian expression he had found. *Dove mi trovo*. Where I find myself. He called it a reflexive verb. She had to look that up. All she could find was an example: “I wash myself” as opposed to “I wash someone else”—an action you do to yourself. He is geographically in Florence and finds that he is, in fact, there. Yes. He wrote that it also means an emotional pinning in place, that he finds that he is well and in his *right* place.

Beth is still seeking a place *dove mi ti trovo* and she wants it so much to be this place. She realizes, now, that Cian was trying to tell her that he might have found his, he might have found home.

She wants to explain this to Tilly or to someone, and as if Tilly knew, she appears on the other side of the fence again. But she is full of business. Full of other stories.

“Kelp have no roots,” she says.

“What?” Beth replies. Not enquiring about the nature of kelp, but more about the relevance of kelp right now, in her thoughts about Cian.

“They make whole forests, but they attach to rocks with tough little things called—wait for it—holdfasts. Don’t you just love that?” Then she waves one at her, a whole kelp.

Does she keep that sort of thing up her sleeve? She would. But, she has Beth's attention. Over the back fence, she shows this holdfast. They look at the nook and crannies in it. And she keeps listing species, seventy of them at least, she says, all of them living in that holdfast like old fogies and weirdoes, just like people in their street right here. Worms, brittlestars, amphipods, molluscs, anemones and sea squirts. Small fish like clingfish and butterflyfish. Eggs of larger fish like scorpionfish and lumpsuckers.

The sea seems to silence for this list.

They both peer at it as though it might cling from Tilly's world to Beth's—strong again, connected.

“Sometimes you can see perfectly round little holes on them. They're made by blue-rayed little limpets. They eat themselves out of house and home—literally. Oh, there's one. They'll start eating the holdfast and then a storm hits,' she says and gestures all around her. And then, that kelp will wash off.”

As she says “wash off,” they both hear bucket-loads of water swooshing past their respective houses. They leave the conversation and meet at their front windows. Both lean out. Both say, ‘shit,’ at the height of a crashing wave. Tilly is the one who stops swearing first. “You *are* like your mum,” she says. Beth is sure that sometimes, Tilly forgets who she is talking to and when her trance-state of listing sea creatures takes hold of her, it is her mother Tilly is talking to, not Beth. Her mother who would be so interested, her mother who would have something to say. All Beth wants to say is that Cian's holdfast has washed away, her holdfast is washing away too, and all she has left is this house, which is also about to be washed away. She says nothing. She just fears her own little round holes.

“Your seaweed quiche—I had to buy it from someone who had already bought it, you know...” Tilly says.

“Yes, I know, you said, you said.”

By night, the sea comes alive and almost engulfs the cottage with the yellow door. Sometimes, the waves are so high that shrimps are deposited on the upstairs windowsills. Tilly had once

told Beth about the arrival of shrimp in the bedroom, but she hadn't been sure whether to believe all that. Tilly is Tilly after all. And crayfish, she said, hiding in the beetroot patch once. Gave her the fright of her life. Beth *had* believed it, at least with more heart than she believes newspapers. But being in the middle of it while water crashes on her house has bought her back to her child-self. She believes, alright. She believes with the part of her that believes in monsters and ghosts.

She's sitting on her bed, her back to the wall she shared with Tilly's. Ear to the wall, too. The faded little brown flowers favoured by her grandmother when she decorated this space, all of them so uniform, so faded on that wallpaper. Right then, the storm was too loud for their chatter. They give up shouting and rely on just knowing they are each there. Beth imagines Tilly underneath a dreamcatcher or something made of driftwood. The approaching water makes a jagged line after jagged line in the frame of the window facing the seafront. Sparks caught in the streetlight. Like watching a foetal heart monitor, she thinks. Always waiting for the next line.

In the distance, she can just make out two skittish ghosts advancing down their street, edging the waves, shoulders and the crown of their heads first, pushing against hurling waters. Their feet invisible. Nobody else is fool enough. Who are they? If only Tilly was here, she'd know, and then they'd point together, giggle together, and Tilly would tell their life story. Fill time.

At least she'd had the sense to park uphill last night. The street had been lined with celandine flowers, still open in the lengthening light of the evening, hopeful for spring. They'd be under water by now. But spring isn't something that arrives in a linear way. That's what her own mother and Tilly would say and in the silence of the storm, Beth keeps telling herself too, the same thing.

She thinks of those ghosts. Maybe she knows them.

Then, through the wall, she hears Tilly say, 'What if I need help over here? Would you climb from your bedroom window to mine?'

"You're joking! Do you remember who you're taking to? Mam might have!"

"One hell of a woman."

Beth wishes she hadn't said that. She doesn't remember anything but the weight of her mother's tiny, old body. How her own body hadn't learned to carry that sort of weight. How she did it anyway. Hell of a woman.

"I know this is new to you, but you're not over there blaming the sea are you, Beth?"

"What?"

"Why do people hate the sea so much? Your Mam wouldn't have."

"And I shouldn't either, Tilly?" Beth asked, quickly followed by "No, no, I don't, I'm not hating on the sea, I'm not," because even if she has no idea what level of blame she attributes to the sea, she doesn't want to argue.

"They used seaweed to drag all those Welsh standing stones to their place." Beth doesn't reply. "You know?! Slippery seaweed," she says. "And local kids used to miss school after every single storm—it was *the* time to collect seaweed for fertilizer," she says, "loads of it everywhere after storms, always. We just need to remember how to live with the sea again." But Beth doesn't need any more convincing. Another day, she might laugh at this. Two women, squatting as they had been on the beach over seaweed, now squatting again, trapped by the sea and talking to each other through a wall. Then, Tilly adds, "You might not be able to leave for some time you know? Are you there? Don't worry. Everything always leads to this."

How much longer is safe before the trembling sets in and she can't get into her own clothes for fumbling? Just a bit. There, she stills while Tilly crashes into the waves and spits right back. "We are gorgeous, just look at us!" And she is right. Gorgeous as they heave themselves out of the waves, gorgeous as they strut back to their clothes, gorgeous as they stretch their creased skin and make star shapes among the rock pools, just because there's no rush. They are just bone cold.

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They both peer at it as though it might cling from Tilly’s world to Beth’s—strong again, connected.

“Sometimes you can see perfectly round little holes on them. They’re made by blue-rayed little limpets. They eat themselves out of house and home—literally. Oh, there’s one. They’ll start eating the holdfast and then a storm hits,’ she says and gestures all around her. And then, that kelp will wash off.”

As she says “wash off,” they both hear bucket-loads of water swooshing past their respective houses. They leave the conversation and meet at their front windows. Both lean out. Both say, ‘shit,’ at the height of a crashing wave. Tilly is the one who stops swearing first. “You *are* like your mum,” she says. Beth is sure that sometimes, Tilly forgets who she is talking to and when her trance-state of listing sea creatures takes hold of her, it is her mother Tilly is talking to, not Beth. Her mother who would be so interested, her mother who would have something to say. All Beth wants to say is that Cian’s holdfast has washed away, her holdfast is washing away too, and all she has left is this house, which is also about to be washed away. She says nothing. She just fears her own little round holes.

“Your seaweed quiche—I had to buy it from someone who had already bought it, you know...” Tilly says.

“Yes, I know, you said, you said.”

By night, the sea comes alive and almost engulfs the cottage with the yellow door. Sometimes, the waves are so high that shrimps are deposited on the upstairs windowsills. Tilly had once told Beth about the arrival of shrimp in the bedroom, but she hadn't been sure whether to believe all that. Tilly is Tilly after all. And crayfish, she said, hiding in the beetroot patch once. Gave her the fright of her life. Beth *had* believed it, at least with more heart than she believes newspapers. But being in the middle of it while water crashes on her house has bought her back to her child-self. She believes, alright. She believes with the part of her that believes in monsters and ghosts.

She's sitting on her bed, her back to the wall she shared with Tilly's. Ear to the wall, too. The faded little brown flowers favoured by her grandmother when she decorated this space, all of them so uniform, so faded on that wallpaper. Right then, the storm was too loud for their chatter. They give up shouting and rely on just knowing they are each there. Beth imagines Tilly underneath a dreamcatcher or something made of driftwood. The approaching water makes a jagged line after jagged line in the frame of the window facing the seafront. Sparks caught in the streetlight. Like watching a foetal heart monitor, she thinks. Always waiting for the next line.

In the distance, she can just make out two skittish ghosts advancing down their street, edging the waves, shoulders and the crown of their heads first, pushing against hurling waters. Their feet invisible. Nobody else is fool enough. Who are they? If only Tilly was here, she'd know, and then they'd point together, giggle together, and Tilly would tell their life story. Fill time.

At least she'd had the sense to park uphill last night. The street had been lined with celandine flowers, still open in the lengthening light of the evening, hopeful for spring. They'd be under water by now. But spring isn't something that arrives in a linear way. That's what her own mother and Tilly would say and in the silence of the storm, Beth keeps telling herself too, the same thing.

She thinks of those ghosts. Maybe she knows them.

Then, through the wall, she hears Tilly say, 'What if I need help over here? Would you climb from your bedroom window to mine?'

"You're joking! Do you remember who you're taking to? Mam might have!"

"One hell of a woman."

Beth wishes she hadn't said that. She doesn't remember anything but the weight of her mother's tiny, old body. How her own body hadn't learned to carry that sort of weight. How she did it anyway. Hell of a woman.

"I know this is new to you, but you're not over there blaming the sea are you, Beth?"

"What?"

"Why do people hate the sea so much? Your Mam wouldn't have."

"And I shouldn't either, Tilly?" Beth asked, quickly followed by "No, no, I don't, I'm not hating on the sea, I'm not," because even if she has no idea what level of blame she attributes to the sea, she doesn't want to argue.

"They used seaweed to drag all those Welsh standing stones to their place." Beth doesn't reply. "You know?! Slippery seaweed," she says. "And local kids used to miss school after every single storm—it was *the* time to collect seaweed for fertilizer," she says, "loads of it everywhere after storms, always. We just need to remember how to live with the sea again." But Beth doesn't need any more convincing. Another day, she might laugh at this. Two women, squatting as they had been on the beach over seaweed, now

squatting again, trapped by the sea and talking to each other through a wall. Then, Tilly adds, “You might not be able to leave for some time you know? Are you there? Don’t worry. Everything always leads to this.”