

The Leather Jacket

By Molly Griesbach

The boy tossed a stone into the still, shallow water and watched it sink to the sandy floor of the lake. He frowned. He didn't understand why he couldn't make it run along the surface, bouncing on for several meters, the way his father used to do.

"Rowan, come play!" The boy turned to see his younger sister prancing towards him, her white dress flowing behind her in the wind. "Mommy says we can swim! In our clothes!" she giggled, kicking off her green sandals and stepping into the water. The boy didn't respond, but stood looking outwards towards the horizon. He could see the outline of dark, jagged cliffs in the distance. He ran his eyes along towards the east, watching as the rock face faded into a mist.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up into his mother's narrowed eyes. He saw creased lines on her forehead. "You gonna get in the water, bud?"

"I don't know." He pulled away and sat down in the sand, which was cool from the evening air. He shivered, and his mother placed a worn brown leather jacket around his shoulders.

The boy examined the garment, then shrugged it off. "This is dad's jacket."

His mother's thin smile faded a bit. "That's right. It's nice and warm." She looked out towards her daughter, who was trying to catch water bugs in her hands, then turned towards her son with a grin.

"Would you like to take a walk down the shore, look for stones? I know you used to love doing that."

The boy looked up and examined his mother's face. She was smiling, but her brows were wrinkled. He noticed something under her eyes, dark and smudged.

"Why didn't dad come with us today?"

His mother furrowed her brows and looked out at the lake, her eyes glazed. She spoke slowly. "Dad is very busy today. But it doesn't matter. We can have fun on our own, can't we?"

The boy nodded. He turned his head to look at his sister. Small waves had now formed, and she was hopping over them, humming some made-up song to herself. She noticed her brother's gaze, and called

out to him. “Come *on*, Rowan. I want to play water tag. Pleeeeease?” The boy looked outwards and noticed some grey clouds moving in from the distance. “Not now. It’s too cold.”

Although the sun was still well above the horizon, the sky was darkening quickly. He felt a cool breeze. The boy turned to his mother. ‘Is it going to rain?’

“Looks like it. I guess we should be leaving soon.” She began to pack up the bag. The boy stood.

“Will dad be home when we get there?”

“I expect so.”

The boy didn’t respond. He took a step towards the water and stuck his toe in. The lake was cool, and he drew his foot back. “Can we stay here?”

His mother walked up beside him and gave him a weak smile. “I wish I could say yes.” She tousled his hair. “You sure you don’t want to play in the water for a few minutes, before we... before we go home? It looks like your sister is having a lot of fun.”

The boy shook his head. He heard thunder rumble in the distance, and his mother called out to the little girl. “Two more minutes, Elsie, and then we’ve got to get going.”

The boy was holding a smooth rock that he had picked up a few moments earlier. As he turned it over in his fingers, he felt his mother’s gaze. “Maybe when we’re driving home, we can stop for frozen yogurt. I know it’s your favourite.” The boy felt a drop of rain on his neck. He shrugged.

His mother looked up and her eyes darted around the horizon. “Alright Elsie, time to get out. It’s about to storm, I think.” The girl pretended not to hear.

The boy dropped the stone, and leaned over to pick it up. That very moment, a gust of wind came along, knocking him to the ground and into his mother’s leg. “Ouch,” she yelped.

He stood. “Sorry, mom.” He watched as she rubbed her leg.

The rain began to fall more steadily, and there was another, closer, rumble of thunder. “Now, Elsie.”

The boy looked closer at his mother’s leg, seeing a large, purple bruise, nearly the size of an orange. “Did I do that just now?”

His mother glanced at her leg. “Oh, no, sweetie. I already had that bruise before.”

The sky lit up, and Elsie ran back to shore. “Okay mommy, let’s go.” Her mother wrapped her in a towel and grabbed onto the little girl’s hand.

The three headed towards their worn yellow car which sat just beyond the dunes.

“How did you get the bruise, mom? Was it...”

“Don’t worry about it, Rowan.” Her voice was stern, and the boy knew when to stop. He understood well enough, anyhow. Anger boiled inside of him.

The rain was now pouring, and the wind began to gust. As the trio hurried to the car, lightning flashed overhead, and thunder clapped.

Just as they reached the dunes, the boy became aware that he was still holding the faded leather jacket. He halted, studying the garment. He felt a sudden, intense hatred towards it. He could barely stand to look at it. Scowling, he turned abruptly and ran back towards the shore.

“Rowan! What are you doing? Get back here this instant!”

The boy ignored her and kept running. Pushing against the wind, he braced himself against the showers. When he reached the shore, he stood still for a moment. Then, he lifted the jacket above his head, and used all of his strength to toss it far away from his body. He watched as it was pulled beneath the now-wild waves.

Without glancing back, he turned and sprinted towards his mother and sister, who were almost at the car.

As he ran, the rain began to slow.

His mother called out. “Why did you do that? What were you thinking?”

The boy kept running. By the time he reached his family, the wind had died down. He slowed, panting.

“Because. Because of your...” he glanced down at his sister, who was shivering beneath her mother. “I don’t know why.”

By now, the sky was only spitting once again.

The boy locked eyes with his mother, who searched his face. Abruptly, she cracked a tight smile.

“Looks like that downpour is over. You two wait by the car, I’ll be there in a moment.”

The boy watched as his mother turned silently and headed back towards the lake. She moved strangely, sort of like a robot. He tore his eyes away, and led his sister back to the vehicle.

When his mother returned, she was carrying a worn brown leather jacket. It was dripping wet.

She swung open the car door, draping the jacket over the back of her seat. “We’ll stop for ice cream on the way home, okay? Alright, hop in.”