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—Meg Wolitzer, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Female Persuasion*

beyond
that,
the sea

A Novel

Laura
Spence-Ash

Beyond That,
the Sea



Laura Spence-Ash



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For M and D

The present's hardly there; the future doesn't exist. Only love matters in the bits and pieces of a person's life.

—WILLIAM TREVOR, *Two Lives*

In the beginning, there was the nursery, with windows opening on to a garden, and beyond that the sea.

—VIRGINIA WOOLF, *The Waves*

Prologue

OCTOBER 1963

Beatrix

Back then, Beatrix liked to sit next to Mr. G when he rowed them all to the mainland. She would watch the town come into focus, the buildings growing larger, the white steeple in relief against the bluest sky. This was in Maine, where the family went each summer, and it was during the war, although that was hard to remember when they were there. Mrs. G often wore a pink or yellow sundress, her pearls tight round her neck, and she squawked about getting wet as William and Gerald splashed each other with water. Mr. G would roll his eyes and half-heartedly tell the boys to stop, his glasses spotted with sea salt, his tanned arms moving the oars forward and back in a smooth rhythm. When they got close, he would hand Beatrix an oar, and they would row, together, to shore.

Once a year, they ate at the small restaurant in town that was located at the end of the dock. They sat at the same table every year, a corner table with five seats facing the water. This way, Mrs. G said, they could all watch the sunset sky change over the island, their island, the sharp spikes of the evergreens set off by the pink and orange streaks, before the trees lost their edges as the sky grew dark. Not once, in the years that Beatrix was there, did the weather on this night disappoint. She was struck, whenever she saw the island from the mainland, by how different it was when seen from afar. It was beautiful, a blurry patch of green, caught up between the ocean and the sky. It was also so small that she could hold it in the palm of her hand. When they were on the island, though, she was the one who was small; it was her whole world. It was as though nowhere else existed.

They ordered clam chowder and corn on the cob and lobster. Baked potatoes still in their tinfoil wrappers, the heat escaping from a vertical slice across the

top. The first summer Beatrix was there, the boys started to crack open the hard, red shells as soon as the plates were in front of them. Gerald was so excited that he was standing rather than sitting, and William was the first to find some meat, tipping his head back to catch the drips of butter. Beatrix slowly tied her bib, watching, and then took a swallow of water. Mr. G nodded at Mrs. G, who was seated next to her, and she patted her on the leg before she set to work on her lobster, pausing to let her see exactly what she was doing, so that she could do the same.

But that was all in the past. Tonight, alone in this seaside restaurant, Beatrix orders the lobster as the waitress lights the votive candle on the table. When the lobster arrives, she ties the bib around her neck, watching her reflection in the dark window. In August, she turned thirty-four. Twenty years have gone by. She often finds it hard to reconcile the girl she was then with the adult she is now. They seem like two separate people. For so many years she has tried to forget. She smells the cuff of her jacket; the ocean has nestled into her clothes. She can hear the waves crashing onto the shore. This place—a town on the Firth of Forth, just outside Edinburgh—is flat, the wind rough. Islands and rocky outcroppings are scattered offshore. There's a wildness to it that reminds her of Maine. If she closes her eyes, it's almost as though she's there.

She'd come back from her trip to America in early September and thrown herself into work. The new school year started in a blur, someone always needing something from her, days when she might as well have slept in her office she spent so little time in her flat. In October, when she could finally slow down, she realized she felt adrift. Unmoored. Seeing the Gregorys in America, standing with them in the graveyard, had brought everything back—the five years that she spent there, the family she called her own for that briefest of moments. The grief at losing them. The grief she had worked so hard to bury. There she was, back in that familiar house, in that kitchen that smelled of lemon and cinnamon and butter, feeling Mrs. G's arms wrapped around her neck, her whispers in her ear. Once again she hadn't wanted to leave, and once again she had. She had lost them all over again.

Mum was the one who suggested that she might take a little holiday, to break up her routine, to try something new. Maybe that would help. She recommended this town because she had come here often as a small girl, and she'd loved it. She said something about the beaches and the birds, the relaxing train ride from London. It was fine, Beatrix supposed, although probably not the

quaint Victorian town that her mother had known. She wondered whether her mother would have even seen the connection to Maine. She'd never been, after all. Beatrix wouldn't have thought of it herself.

She eats some lobster but it turns out that most of the fun was in doing it together. She feels a fool, wrestling with it alone, in this tired and empty dining room. It makes her feel worse. She pushes the plate away and orders a coffee. The beam from the lighthouse is now visible, sweeping regularly across the black sea. There were nights when she and Gerald and William would sleep in tents in the woods, never far from the house, but they felt completely on their own, as though they were stranded on an island, the only ones to survive. The darkness was almost solid. They'd use their flashlights to walk down to the water and sit on one of the big rocks, shining the beams this way and that, then turn off the lights to absorb the black night, the whole world of stars shining down on the sea. She was happiest when she sat in the middle, when she could feel them on either side.

Dinner in town was always capped off by a chocolate layer cake, made by Mrs. G and brought over earlier in the day, with cold scoops of peppermint ice cream. Three fat candles to be blown out: one for William, one for Gerald, and one for Beatrix. Their names in fanciful blue script on the vanilla icing. *My August birthday children*, Mrs. G said. *Another year gone by*. The whole restaurant would sing "Happy Birthday" when the lit cake was carried out of the kitchen. The three of them stood and bent toward the cake in the center of the table, Mrs. G holding Beatrix's hair back from the flames. The restaurant was dark by then, the sun having set, and their faces were lit by the candlelight. Gerald, with his red hair and freckles, his infectious smile. William, his curly hair bleached blond by the sun, his smile hidden from his face. What did they see when they looked at her? She doesn't know, except that she imagines her face must have reflected the joy she felt. When she thinks of the three of them, together, she remembers this, the moment before the candles were blown out, as they all drew in their breaths, deciding what to wish for, and caught one another's eyes.

That final summer, her wish was to stay. To be with them all, forever. She leans forward now, blows out the flame in the votive, and closes her eyes.

Part One

1940–1945

Reginald

That night, Reginald tells the fellows in the local pub how proud he is. He recounts the story of Beatrix leaving to everyone who comes in, telling the story again and again. They ask questions, they want to know the details. The ones whose children left before know this story, or a version of this story, already. How the morning was hot and sticky. How they stood in the ballroom at the Grosvenor Hotel and how he'd knelt on one knee when it had been time to go. How Beatrix had nodded at his last words, her face tilted to his, her chest held high. How she had been resolute and hadn't cried, even though he could see the tears forming.

But a day later, he cannot quite remember what he said to her while he was kneeling on the floor. He worries, privately, that he forgot to say what was most important. But he tells everyone in the pub that night what a trooper she'd been. My brave eleven-year-old girl. He makes up the words that they said to each other. And he doesn't explain that while he and Millie held it together for as long as possible, they turned away from Beatrix and moved through the crowds before he was truly ready to do so. He doesn't imagine that he would ever be ready to leave.

In the dream he has again and again, he walks into the ocean, fully dressed, the wet fabric a weight. He pushes the waves aside as he goes deeper and finds himself back in that ballroom, leaving as others are arriving, his shoulders brushing against them, trying not to stare at the faces of the incoming parents, knowing that his eyes must mirror theirs, shocked to find themselves in this place, having made this decision, to send their children far away. Alone, across the sea. Only outside, on the street by the Grosvenor, the air thick, the gray clouds pushing down, did Millie begin to cry, pleading with him to go back and

get their girl. He'd held her hand and pulled her away. In the dream he holds out his hands, reaching, wishing he could pick up the ship she's now on and turn it around. Wishing he could reverse its course. He extends his arms again, trying to touch the land where she will now live.

But the story that he tells the boys is only half the truth. Beatrix was crying, holding on to him, her arms wrapped around his waist. She blamed Millie for sending her away, and she refused to say goodbye to her, was angry with her for the twenty-four hours between the time they told her and the moment she left. Reginald, in fact, was the one to insist she leave, knowing that the bombs were coming closer and closer, that there was no possible way to keep her, or any of them, safe. His older brother fought in the last war, and so he knew what was coming. That war cast a long shadow over his childhood. It was how he had learned the edges of fear. He and Millie were faced with an impossible choice. Better that she go to America, he thought, where the fingers of war were less likely to touch her. But he never told her that he'd forced Millie's hand. He let her believe it was Millie's choice.

Millie

Millie can't rid herself of the fury. There was Beatrix's anger at her, for forcing her to go, and Millie's own at Reg, for not wavering when she pleaded. *Let me go with her*, she said. And then, later, in the middle of the night, neither of them sleeping, nor touching, staring up at the dark ceiling: *Let's just keep her here. We've got the shelter and the Underground. We can go to my parents in the country. I can keep her safe*, she whispered again and again. *I will keep her safe.* But Reg's mind was made up.

She has never thought of herself as an angry person. Emotional, yes. Stubborn, absolutely. But now she is overflowing with sorrow and rage. She can't imagine a time when she will forgive Reg. She knows she will never forgive herself. Over and over she revisits the ballroom, the final moments, the warmth of her daughter's cheek.

She pinned the label the man handed her onto Beatrix's chest. It was a hot day but Millie's hands were icy cold and so she rubbed them together, again and again, before tucking one inside the top of Beatrix's dress to guide the pin in and out. The label had a long number on it, in addition to the name, and Millie memorized the number, thinking she would need to know it forever. She thought that it might be the only way she could locate her girl. On the way home from the ballroom, she became frantic when she could no longer be sure whether the final number was a three or a six.

The night before, Millie had washed and cut Beatrix's hair in the small kitchen, a towel underfoot. Beatrix was in her underwear. Millie brushed the wet hair out before cutting, marveling that the thick strands almost reached Beatrix's waist. It was then, when Millie turned Beatrix around to comb out the front, that she realized that her breasts were beginning to bud and that when she

saw her again, she would have changed. She would no longer be a girl. And there was that fury again, but it was in her hands now, so without thinking, she chopped off her daughter's hair, cutting it just below the chin, locks of hair falling to the floor, the scissors slicing, the white towel turning brown, Beatrix crying. She cut the thick, dark bangs in a severe line across the middle of her forehead. It was the haircut she had given her, every three weeks, when she was a little girl.

Now she can no longer sleep. She lies in Beatrix's bed, curling her body into a ball. She tries to imagine where her girl is, in the middle of the Atlantic. Is she hungry? Is she alone? How frightened she must be by the deep water that wraps itself around the ship. The rocking waves. That vast sea. Millie smells a curl of the hair, tucked into a small glassine envelope, hidden in the middle of her book.

Beatrix

Beatrix hates her new haircut. She looks like a child. She reaches for her hair only to find her neck. All the girls in the cabin share a small handheld mirror that one of the girls brought in her trunk. Beatrix pushes her bangs off her forehead, using water and spit, and curses her mother out loud, to the delight of the youngest girls.

The days are full. They dress, helping one another to fasten the cork life preservers, and go to breakfast, where they're allowed to eat chocolate ice cream. They run, in a pack, from one end of the ship to the other, Beatrix always holding tight to the rails, staying to the inside when possible. The ship rarely follows a straight course, weaving its way through the silver icebergs that glitter in the sun. There's also a pack of boys, but they're wilder than the girls, and Beatrix mostly avoids them. There are sugar cookies bigger than their hands for tea. The vomiting isn't as much now. Those first days, they were all throwing up in the small sinks, in the garbage, in coffee cans. Sometimes at night when Beatrix can't sleep, when the littlest one is sniffing in the bed beneath her, she goes to the deck to look at the stars. She wraps herself in her blanket and lies down on a deck chair, far from the edge. It is cold and dark and yet perhaps it is one of the most beautiful things she has ever seen. She could not imagine a sky so full, so alive. Never before had she realized the depth of the sky. The air is clean. She wonders whether they will ever get to America. They feel suspended here, even as the ship moves forward. They ask one another what will happen if the war ends while they're at sea. Will they turn around and go back? How will their parents know?

At the beginning, Beatrix had been scared. The darkened train filled with children. The escort singing "There'll Always Be an England" as she waved a

small British flag. The rows of cots in the fish warehouse in Liverpool. The enormous ship covered by a black tarp. The gangway swaying with every step. They were all quiet and frightened, not sure whom to trust. Almost all the girls were crying. Beatrix refused. Dad had said she must be strong.

It has only been days, but when Beatrix thinks back to the leaving, she already only has shards. She sees herself sitting cross-legged on the floor of her bedroom, refusing to help, watching as her mother packs her small brown suitcase. Dresses folded in thirds, socks rolled into balls, and a fluttery, flowery scarf laid on top, a gift for the woman in America. Beatrix sees her father's hands, his wedding band loose on his finger, as he tucks a handful of photographs into a side pocket, as he pulls the straps to tighten around the case. The pink-and-blue floral hooked rug that was at her bedside forever, a stain on the corner that looked like a dog's head. The unfamiliar smell of pancakes, the sugar borrowed from the neighbors to make the last breakfast special.

One month before that, her mother had come home to find her, alone in the flat, sitting on the floor of the living room, playing solitaire, the gas mask covering her face. She'd begun wearing it whenever she was left alone. She hated the way it felt and the way it smelled, like tar on a summer road. The boys at school would wear them at recess, chasing one another round the playground, their oinking sounds muffled by the mask. But Beatrix knew that it could save her life. Her uncle had been burned in the first war, rivers of darker pink flesh running up his arms. Her mother had dropped the groceries when she saw her, a precious egg cracking and breaking on the wood floor. She knows it was this moment that made her mother decide that Beatrix could not stay.

Already her memories of the ballroom are fading. There are only snippets, late at night. The large letters of the alphabet posted around the room. A dark balcony full of adults peering down and waving. A woman sobbing. Strange American accents.

The backs of her parents, walking away. Her father's hand on her mother's shoulder. A run in her mother's stocking.

Beatrix

On the dock in Boston, Beatrix is alone. Everyone else has been picked up. It is already hot, even though it's early in the day, the moon etched in chalk on the pale blue sky. Beatrix is wearing her favorite dress, red wool with a white collar and piping at the cuffs. She picked it out carefully, remembering that her mother told her to look her best, but it is the wrong dress for the day, and sweat drips down her neck and back.

The woman who paired up the other children with their host families keeps checking her watch and looking at her clipboard. *The Gregorys*, she says again and again, her voice getting sharper each time. *That's the family name, is that right?* Beatrix nods. The sun moves higher, tucks behind a cloud, and Beatrix shifts her weight from one foot to the other. She touches the label that she has repinned every morning since she left London. The edges are beginning to fray.

Beatrix feels as though she left home years ago, as though the girl she was there is separate from the girl standing here. So much has transpired, although it has only been two weeks, and yet it seems like something out of a book, like it all must have happened to someone else. Docking in Canada and saying goodbye to most of her new friends. Another train and then a small ferry, rolling through the rough waves. Finally, calm water as they entered Boston Harbor. On a small island, three barefoot children on a dock, holding fishing rods, waving as the ferry passed. Welcome to America, Beatrix thought.

She looks down, making sure that her suitcase and gas mask are still at her side, and when she looks up, a boy is standing in front of her. It is almost as though she willed him to exist. He's taller than she is, with curly blond hair so long it's practically at his collar. He raises his arm to block the sun out of his eyes with his hand. This is William, she thinks, she knows. They'd had a letter,

describing the house and the family, and Beatrix read it every night on the ship. She memorized sections. Gerald is the younger boy, just turned nine, and William is thirteen. *He's too smart for his own good*, Mrs. Gregory wrote. *Wants to be a baseball player when he grows up*. Beatrix thought he'd have brown hair. She didn't think he'd be so tall or that his eyes would be green. But, still, this must be him.

Beatrix, he says, and his voice is lower than she anticipated. He is almost smiling. She nods and then another boy runs up, his face flushed, his crooked smile wide, his red-gold hair shining in the sun. This is most certainly Gerald. *You're Beatrix, aren't you*, he says. *You must be, I just know it*. *Yes*, she says, smiling, at last, because his accent is funny and his freckles are everywhere and he's a wide-open American boy.

Nancy

After the dishes are done, Nancy prepares the batter for the morning muffins, combining the sugar and butter until they are one. The house is slowly quieting down. Ethan has retired to his study. William is in his room. Even Gerald, who's already had his bath and been put to bed but has run downstairs three times since then, seems to have settled. This is usually her favorite time of the day, when everything is peaceful, when she can be by herself, to bake, to read, to have a cup of tea. To breathe.

It's the girl's turn for a bath, though. At the dock, Nancy had been shocked by the look of her, with her skin so pale, dirty white socks disappearing into heavy boots, eyes black and watchful. What on earth had they signed on for? What must this be like for her? To be sent away from home, by yourself? Nancy wonders what kind of a parent could make this choice, although she knows she has no idea what it's like to live through a war. She doesn't think she could do it, though; she can't imagine putting William or Gerald on a ship by himself. And, Lord, what will happen if the United States enters this war. She prays each night that it won't happen or, if it does, that her boys will still be too young.

The batter ready for the morning, Nancy pulls out the box she'd stored in the back hall closet. She'd brought it over from her sister's house last week when they'd returned from Maine, and it's full of girl things: dolls, books, tea sets. Some of the items had belonged to Nancy as a child; others, like these fancy china dolls, had been her nieces'. Beatrix doesn't seem like a doll girl; Nancy hadn't been one, either. Nancy pulls each item out and sets it on the kitchen table. Her mother's miniature dolls, with their Victorian dresses. A cracked teacup that Nancy remembers as once being part of a set. The Katy Did books, which had been her favorites. They're old and worn, though, with pages no

longer attached to the binding, and Nancy isn't sure they would appeal to Beatrix. Although, really, she has no idea what the girl is like. She packs up the box again and pushes it back into the closet. It all seems so childish for a person who has lived in war. Nancy has been haunted by the first letter from the parents: *In her room, we found a stash of newspaper articles about nerve gas. She had circled this line: "Victims will die within two minutes of exposure."*

Nancy walks noiselessly down the upstairs hall. The door to the spare room is opened a crack. The girl sits in the corner, her knees pulled up to her chest, talking to a framed photograph. *Dad*, she says, *I made it. I'm here*. Nancy backs against the wall, wiping her face with her apron.