

## “Shipwreck is Everywhere”

I came to explore the wreck.

...

the thing I came for:  
the wreck and not the story of the wreck  
the thing itself and not the myth  
- Adrienne Rich, “Diving into the Wreck”

### Chapter One

There was nothing different about tonight’s outing at the queer bar. As always, I watched wallets, jackets, and drinks at the table. Occasionally, I watched my co-workers on the dance floor. Occasionally, an attractive stranger would watch me back.

I saw one of my friends, Andrew, making his way over to me. Even in a room full of sequins and silver tassels, he stood out. The bar was just under a half decibel quieter than the dance floor, yet he leaned closer than he needed to shout in my ear.

“Robin, did you just see me leave it all at the door out there,” he crowed.

“I did,” I said and smiled widely. “You ate everyone up.” I slid a waiting shot glass over to his hands.

Andrew reached out with one hand. With the other, he held up a finger. “Robin, I don’t eat, I devour.” He gave an elegant shake of his head, then swiped his shot glass from the table. “I don’t drink, I...” he paused for a heartbeat, pursing his lips, “...I partake!” He tossed it back. Sweat and glitter caught the purple lighting, giving his face and hair a dreamlike sheen. He came up from the shot with a joyous grimace, his tongue pinched between his teeth and rouged cheeks scrunched with the burn.

“I get it,” I said. I knew what came next, especially after a drink. I gestured toward the dance floor. “Go eat, go devour, go consume... go masticate.”

“Girl, didn’t they confiscate your thesaurus at the door?” Instead of sitting, Andrew planted his folded arms on the back of the chair and leaned over. “Or are you just making words up now?”

“Masticate means to chew.”

“And that I did. And you,” he grabbed my arm, “can masticate with me.” He pursed his lips again in an exaggerated expression of distress. “Ooh, that sounds wrong. Not at all what I intended.”

“Awful,” I said. I withdrew my arm, and as our hands touched, Andrew winced.

“Why are your hands freezing? It feels like you’ve been juggling ice cubes back here all night. And I’d believe it, too!”

“When are they not?” I crossed my arms. “You’re not getting a dance out of me tonight. “Besides,” I gave a slight nod to the corner of the bar, “she’s been watching me

all night. Your presence here, as blessed as it is, is simply another interruption to the optical rapport we've been building all night long."

"I know you did not just refer to 'eye-fucking' as 'optical rapport,'" Andrew said.

He rolled his eyes, then shot a look at the aforementioned woman. He raised one eyebrow in approval but quickly lowered it as he returned his gaze to me. The approval quickly evaporated.

"You say that *every time*." Andrew rolled his head around to the last two words. "And every time? It's de-lus-ion-al," he continued, each roll more aggressive as the syllables plopped from his tongue. "The day you start taking girls home more than once a month, I'll kiss your boots. 30 is too old to still be single!"

"Keep dreaming," I said. I raised a leg, pointing my toe, but he didn't laugh.

"I'm serious," Andrew said, lowering his voice. "You always come out with us, but you never dance. And these past few months, you've just seemed tired."

"Maybe it's the best-selling novel and the crazy deadlines that come with it," I said, brushing his concerns away. "Insane deadlines. Lunatic. Incongruous."

I knew more words would frighten him away, and, along with him, the sense of discomfort that always lurked beneath my surface when this topic arose.

"Fine, fine," Andrew responded. He began to back away, letting the music re-enter his body with a series of sways and twists. He couldn't resist one final jab: "But don't think your big girl words make you into Hemingway!"

"My big girl paycheck covering our tab does," I called back, waving him away. "I won't be seeing *you* on the New York Times' bestseller list!"

Andrew threw his head back and cackled. He turned the movement into a spin and was absorbed once more by the mass of pulsing bodies. I followed his progress, but a different sight pulled my eyes away. A circle had opened within the dance floor, and one of the drag kings from tonight's earlier performance strutted in the middle, gathering cheers and woops in her swinging arms. She boasted a curly mullet and a full beard, and as she danced, I caught sight of a bedazzled cane in her hand. She used it to support her weight as she kicked her feet and jumped to the side.

The drag king oozed masculinity and confidence from her body in an exciting, unapologetic display. I felt envy as I observed her body- she made no attempt to contour her belly or chest, to hide the features that made her performance obvious. It wasn't the body I wanted, but the ability to showcase it alongside everyone else without shyness or shame. In a way that had never made sense to me, this somehow made her performance all the more convincing.

My short, dark hair, angular face, and dark eyebrows claimed masculinity, but my body did not. Hidden beneath a baggy sweater was a skinny body that held fat in my stomach and hips- typically feminine in all the ways I disliked. It was this discrepancy that kept my feet firmly planted away from the dance floor and most of my nights lonely. I was too old to hide, I knew this, and too young to resign myself to hiding, but I had never been able to throw shame away so unapologetically.

I told my co-workers I preferred not to dance, and, most nights, this was true. But there were many times when I wanted to. Tonight, I wished I could take Andrew's hand and join him. I wished I could somehow unlock the secret I knew he, that drag king, and everyone else on the dance floor had somehow discovered themselves.

I turned my face back to the woman at the corner of the bar, but I couldn't meet her gaze the same way. I went home alone that night.

## Chapter Two

Once again, writing was a challenge. Usually, by this time in the morning, I would be in the double digits of pages written. But now, two hours until noon, the page at the typewriter stood white, blank, and frustrating. After my last novel's success, I was on another series of tight deadlines. If I couldn't scrape together several chapters by midnight, I would miss another submission. It would be my second in two months.

My last novel had been published almost a year ago, and with its popularity had come countless obligations. The stress had led to sleepless nights, anxiety, and an absence of passion for my work. This novel was not my first; I had enjoyed popularity as an author of thriller and mystery novels for several years now, but my last release stood out as a marker of these troubles.

A sense of movement tore my eyes away from the black keys, and my eyes shot to the doorway. I felt the sense that someone had just left the room, but I had always lived alone. I shook my head and rose from the desk. I needed sleep, but sleep refused to come. I told myself that finishing this manuscript would be the key to banishing this stress- didn't all artists worry they had spent their talent?

A diagnosis of depression and work-related stress had been the only result of my issues, and I was three months into a course of new medication. The night out with Andrew and my other co-workers had been an attempt to convince myself it was working, but another missed deadline would prove they weren't.

I resigned from my work for the day, just as I had yesterday. There were too many ideas to fight through, isolate, and put onto the page, but today, there was nothing at all. Besides, I had other obligations tonight.

I belonged to a local literature club, a group that advertised itself as a meeting space for queer book-lovers. We met weekly, always about a novel, author, or book of poems considered to be queer, and, often, I was the only member present under the age of 60. I had been attending for almost a year, and these meetings made up the other half of my rare outings. It was, as Andrew had said, an odd duality.

Despite the effort it took to finish this month's book, *Giovanni's Room*, I attended the meeting Tuesday night. The anti-depressants had not been helpful. It had been a struggle to make it through the novel. Often, I found that I had read several chapters yet couldn't remember what had occurred. I had been told that apathy was

common due to work-related stress and depression, but it felt not as if I couldn't engage with the novel, but as if something was completely missing from my mind.

Meetings rotated between members' homes, always small, cozy houses or apartments that boasted tea and snacks. We sat in the living room discussing what we had read, and I always participated heartily alongside my fellow literature fans. Last year, they had all attended my book signing, and, in turn, I had also attended a number of potlucks, dinners, and, far too often, funerals.

At tonight's meeting, I found myself distracted, frustrated. I was used to sleepless nights, but today had been a battle against fatigue. The discussion took place around me, but different words stuck in my throat, wanting to exit. *I* wanted them to exit. I wanted to complain about the uncertainty of the medication. I wanted to throw my hands up with the burning exasperation I felt inside. I was tired of the guessing. The discomfort and frustration rolled, bubbled, boiled inside, but the cold force of habit prevented anything from escaping. Besides, I'd had the diagnosis for almost a year now, and I had never told a soul. I didn't know how to put my issues into words, much less the reason I had kept it secret.

Instead, my hands only trembled slightly as I turned the novel over. I looked up to see expectant faces. I realized I must have been talking, but the only words in recent memory were the ones I ached to say.

"I'm sorry," I said, blinking. My eyes darted to the doorway, where I thought I saw the swish of someone's coat as they left the room. I swallowed thickly. "I seem to have lost my train of thought." My gaze lingered on the doorway before Violet's voice called them back.

"About the darkness in Giovanni's room, dear," she said gently. Her thin voice shook less than mine. "The clutter, the shadows."

"Oh, yes..." I responded. I waited for my words to return, but they remained out of reach, and silence grew heavy in the room. It was dull, a harsh contrast to the sharp analyses I usually brought to our meetings.

It was Doyle who saved me. He tapped the glossy cover of his copy.

"I think what Robin was teasing at is the shame David feels throughout the novel. When he enters Giovanni's room, the lack of lighting, the size, the sense of being trapped serve to physically represent what was already there. I think sex in a dark room is something all of us can relate to... even if it was 50 years ago for me!"

His chuckle drew the silence from the room, and it was joined by nods and laughter from the rest of the club. I shot him a grateful glance with a small smile, but the look he returned held only concern.

After the meeting, as the rest of the members filed out with warm thanks and friendly goodbyes, Doyle and Violet approached me. I heard the shuffling behind me as I gathered my coat from the back of the armchair. I braced myself and turned. Just as I had expected, two faces full of concern greeted mine.

“Robin,” Doyle began. He stopped and sighed, crossing his hands over the handle of his cane. “We’ve noticed you haven’t been looking well.”

“When do I look well,” I joked. I gestured to my pale skin and thin body, trademark features that had never fit in perfectly with Californian weather.

Doyle shook his head firmly. He turned to Violet. They both seemed to be thinking too hard about what to say and how to say it. My hands felt cold.

“You’re just too young for it, Robin,” Violet said finally, and, now, her small voice did break. She shook her head, and Doyle laid a hand on her shoulder. The sorrow in her voice was far too confident. It was knowing.

“It just reminds of, dear,” he took over, “of too many of our friends... Oh, most recently, Tally. She left us a few months before you joined, last year. No one would expect it in you, but we’ve seen it to many times. The perks of being old and having old friends...” It was a statement that should have brought a chuckle, but he trailed off. His eyes met mine as he struggled to continue.

Violet brought a hand to her shoulder, where Doyle’s lay, and for a moment, I saw their two wedding rings glint in the quiet evening light. Hers was gold, thick and simple, while his was a thin, silver band with a curly inscription I’d never asked about. I knew they both matched the rings of partners long since gone.

Suddenly, the discomfort was too much to bear, and I swung my coat onto my shoulders. The thick material felt like a barrier between our bodies.

“I appreciate the concern,” I said, making for the door, “and, rest assured, I’m on top of it.” I shoved a hand into the coat’s pocket and shook it. The sound of a pill bottle’s rattle sounded.

“Robin,” Doyle called after me. “That’s not going to help. I’m sure you’ve got doctors running in circles, yes?”

I stopped, shoulders hunched against the cold outside and the friends inside. I didn’t want to know this, didn’t want it coming from anyone I knew.

“It’s being handled,” I said. “I’m fine.”

“I doubt anyone will guess what it is for a while,” Doyle said. “You haven’t been fine since we’ve met, and I’m sorry it took me this long to put the pieces together.”

“She’s just too young for it,” Violet said again. It wasn’t a statement of denial but resignation.

There was another moment of silence. The three of us stood still, stuck in our places. Doyle finally broke the pause with a quavering voice.

“To us, it looks like dementia. I’m sorry... as Violet said, you’re far too young, so it wouldn’t cross anyone’s mind. But us,” he smiled sadly, “we’re old, Robin. We’ve seen it a hundred times in our friends, in ourselves. We just can’t help but make the connection. I’m no doctor, God, I hope I’m wrong, but I couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t say something.”

I didn’t know what to say. I muttered a low thanks, shook my head, and pushed myself out through the door.

### Chapter Three

A series of memory tests, brain scans, and other procedures revealed that Doyle and Violet had pointed in the right direction. The illness was tentatively labeled as Lewy Body Dementia, a type of dementia that would continue to impact my body and mind. Symptoms I had ignored or assumed to be normal lapses of judgment or distraction suddenly made sense. The feeling that someone had just left a room was a common visual hallucination. The inability to concentrate was not writer's block, depression, or stress, but the start of my slow cognitive decline.

It was rare, I had been told, for someone as young as me to show symptoms. A doctor had mentioned to me that dementia hadn't even been on the radar. It was puzzling, but I accepted the grim reality without argument. It was the process of breaking the news to everyone I knew felt more daunting than the illness itself- the knowledge that most patients died within five to eight years. I couldn't visualize myself telling Violet, Doyle, Andrew, or anyone else. I shuddered at the idea of condolences, hugs, sadness on my behalf. I could not escape this diagnosis, nor the eventual result, but I could escape the notion of anyone knowing.

This escape came in the form of the selling of my apartment, the buying of a new home, and the subsequent drive to New England.

*I came here to be miserable*, I wrote in my journal on the first day, *because I feel miserable*.

I looked out the small window, from this cottage made of the same dull, gray rocks that dotted the beach, and I saw an ocean that could have been made of blue-black ink. The grayness felt affirming in a way I knew was self-destructive.

*The self is already being destroyed*, I wrote, *by itself. And I, being the master, must get ahead of myself in the race*.

Tiny white slashes of seabirds broke up the sky. Mirrored below on the waves, whitecaps echoed their dives and circles with a sharper urgency. It all looked cold. It *was* cold. Even inside. My mind wandered to the old notion that moving to warmer coasts would cure illness. If that idea held any weight, and imagined it did- who wouldn't live longer and happier in a tropical paradise- then the move here was the exact opposite of that practice. And this was the intention. I had come here to write and be alone. I had come here to be miserable. And eventually, to die.

Two months later, I was staring at a small pill in the palm of my hand. There was no single treatment for my illness, but its symptoms could be addressed with medication. I looked from the pill to the mirror in my bathroom, taking in my dark eyes and pale skin.

“I am a writer,” I said. My voice, rough with disuse, made me flinch. I hadn’t spoken to anyone but my doctor. This was the first time the walls of this house had heard me speak.

It was a mantra I had been repeating to myself several times a day. It was a truth that stood in stark contradiction to the reality of my illness. I was a writer who would lose the ability to write. My hands and my mind would fail me. The matter of which would worsen first was the subject of many arguments with my doctor.

My physical symptoms were the most present. My hands trembled, I felt unsteady on my feet, and my reflexes had worsened. Medicine to address this, however, often had the side effect of worsening confusion and mental alertness. It was a trade I could not make myself agree to. I continued to have trouble sleeping, but medications to treat that worsened memory. I would take the relentless fatigue over the absence of my memory.

“I am a writer,” I said again, more forcefully. If I could not do that, then I was not myself.

This specific medication treated the mental decline I knew would soon worsen. Its side effects made no difference to me. I was alone here, and I would continue to be alone. All I wanted to do was write, even if it took the form of speaking into a recorder. There was no one to help me, no one who I would ask for help.

I grimaced and took the pill.

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The sight of Doyle Gray at my door was both unexpected and unwelcome. He swayed in the icy wind, and it was guilt, not joy at an old friend, that prompted me to open the door with such power. As usual, wisps of white hair sprung out from beneath a plaid newsboy cap. Today’s color matched the navy of the sea, which matched his slacks and shoes. This was also not an unusual sight, as Doyle Gray would have rather be caught dead than caught without a coherent color scheme to his outfit.

“Robin, my dear,” he said, shuffling inside with a sniff, “I know what you’re doing here.”

I sighed and shut the door behind him. The cold had already brought new aches to my joints. I turned to see him already sitting by the unlit fireplace. He had already made himself at home, had already cemented his presence here with the type of righteous confidence that can only come from being both old and queer.

“And what do you think you know,” I asked, settling in the chair beside his. The cracked leather creaked.

He shook a finger at me. “I don’t think nothing, and I know everything. No one from home has heard from you in months, and young and spiteful as you may be, you aren’t the type to cut us all off. You left your people behind, Robin, to be alone during the time when you need them the most.”

I had nothing to say to that, so instead I said, “You could have called.”

“And given you a chance to batten down the hatches, lock your door, and turn off the lights? Certainly not!”

I opened my mouth to speak, bitter and indignant, but I was interrupted as Doyle began to cough. He produced a navy handkerchief from the breast pocket of his vest. It took several moments for him to catch his breath, but his eyes were bright and sharp as they met mine.

“During the 80s, if we had all laid down and died by ourselves,” he wheezed, “in our shabby apartments above our shabby bars and clubs, we would have been betraying each other. We would have lived loudly but died quietly. We would have spent our lifetimes forging communities only to forget it on our deathbeds. We died by the thousands, yes, but we died out in the open with each other.”

He reached over the arm of his chair, and I offered my hand in return. His skin was cold and smooth, dotted with sunspots and wrinkles.

“My partner died holding two hands,” Doyle continued. “One, mine, the one he had held all this life. The other, a bulldyke from Chicago who he’d met only two days before. Her name was Natalie. She spent those two days changing his bedpans, wiping his brow, and holding his hand with me.”

I almost pulled my own hand back at the thought. The idea of such intimacy with a stranger... it turned something familiar in my stomach. This was the same feeling that had held me back from most bars and clubs in the city.

Doyle tightened his grip. “Yes, two days, Robin. He died grasping her hand like he’d known her all his life. It’s not that our stories aren’t unique. It’s that the stories that seek to beat ours down are present for all of us. When you share pain, when you break bread with it, you aren’t taking any power from it. You can’t change the suffering.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, and I stayed silent as he once again paused.

“You can’t change the suffering,” he repeated, “but you can make it easier to bear. Right now, you’re shouldering the burden of the pain itself and the burden of doing it alone. When you allow others in, you lose the latter. You drop it.”

I pursed my lips, unsure of what to say. My skin prickled with unease. His hand was warm against mine, but there was a barrier between the comfort it should have brought.

“I’m just here to write, Doyle,” I said finally. “It’s a solitary activity. I can handle it myself. I appreciate you coming, and I appreciate the worry from everyone back home, but I’m fine here.”

Doyle sighed and shook his head. “If you reject intimacy at the precipice of vulnerability, then you never had room for it in the first place. It’s food for thought, Robin, food for thought.”

He seemed to realize that nothing more would come from this conversation and rose from the chair, hunching his shoulders in preparation for the cold outside. He grasped the door handle, then turned.

“You’ve got to consider yourself someone who’s worthy enough to need others. Believe me when I say, you’ll find yourself there eventually.”

With that, Doyle opened the door. I watched him hobble down the rocky pathway, bitterness and indecision mixing in my heart.

#### Chapter 4

Six months into my official diagnosis, I fancied myself a diver, like in Adrienne Rich’s “Diving into the Wreck,” only I was not exploring the illness of living as a woman in a man’s world, or as a queer living among heteronormativity, but the counter-culture identity of being ill in a world where health was considered a given.

The only issue with this notion was arriving at its conclusion.

*I resent the narrative that suffering can be made worth it. I wrote. That’s the pessimist in me. I embrace the pain that makes a profound story. That’s the no-good artist in me.*

But try as I might, I could not reconcile the two ideas. I could not reconcile my illness with the grand idea that something could be pried out of its suffering. I became increasingly aware of the sensation that I was trying to cross the finish line of a journey I had not yet completed.

*I want to skip the struggling, I wrote, and arrive at the final product, which will be my eventual death and the lesson I learned from reaching it. I suppose I will call it something like ‘The Next Great Mystery,’ and when I die, it will sell millions of copies, and it will make healthy people feel good about themselves and ill people feel as if their suffering could also be packaged so neatly.”*

I sighed and looked down at the recorder. My thumb shook as I pressed the button. In the last two months, I had been forced to switch from handwriting and typewriting to speaking into a hand-held recorder. My hands refused to cooperate enough to type fast enough for my mind to follow. It had been increasingly frustrating. Now, my pens and journals remained in the corner where I had thrown them away in a moment of rage. I realized I could not remember how long they had been there.

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The sound of the line ringing made me purse my lips with discomfort. I wanted to throw the phone away, but I gripped it tighter. My hand shook. A heartbeat later, the ringing cut off. A familiar voice, firm and aged, greeted me.

“Doyle,” I began, but my words failed me. There was a moment of silence. I wasn’t yet sure how to ask for help, not out loud.

He seemed to understand, despite the fact that it had been almost five months since we had spoken.

“I’m here, Robin,” he said. His voice was kind and firm.

“Here for me,” I finished, the words awkward in my mouth.

“Yes,” Doyle answered. “I’m here for you in spirit and in person.”

“What? You’re here, in town?”

“I never left, my dear. I never left.”

A sigh escaped my lips, and I bit my tongue to keep emotion from my voice.

“You stayed?”

“I knew you’d be calling, Robin. I had faith in you. I knew you’d be ready to come home eventually. We all figure it out. I’ll pick you up within the hour.”

It took me two hours to pack my bags in between shaking hands, weakness, and unsteadiness, but I finally stood by the door with my duffle in hand. I gazed out the window as rain pattered on the glass, searching the winding pathway for Doyle’s small, yellow car.

In one hand, I held the recorder. My fingers struggled to keep a tight grip on the small device as I turned it over and over. It was light and weighed almost nothing. I could barely feel the small holes that made its speaker. The tiny, black buttons shone dimly.

I sighted Doyle’s car on horizon, and my heart skipped a beat. Apprehension prickled my skin at the thought of seeing him, of him seeing not just me, but my struggles, my body, my fear. But I had begun to believe that it was a conscious choice to overcome this feeling. I could not control the decline of my body or mind, but I could control the way I accepted help in making my way through it. It would not just come to me, not like writing came so easily to me.

I set the recorder down on the windowsill. Perhaps I would return for it later. Now, however, there was a story to live before it could be written.