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AT NEWPORT BEACH

by

Emma Richey Natter

In November the water at Newport Beach is pretty cold, but I still swim for a good half hour before the waves wear me out and my arms and legs start to chill and I walk-hop to my towel while the waves push me from behind. When I sit down I watch my aunt Chari, who's still swimming in the ocean, while I grab handfuls of sand, the grains sieving through my fingers. When a smooth-faced wave rises up, I can see Chari's body shadowing the top layers of ocean before the pile of water comes crashing down and her body jolts to the sandy bottom. She stands up, shakes her head, slicks her hair back, spits a couple of times, and then dives back under the next wave to do it again. I watch Chari get pummeled to the ground again and again.

My dad told me that when they'd go fishing, Chari was the one who'd stay next to the river afterward, slitting open the fish from the tail to the throat and rinsing out their guts in the river to bleed swirling ribbons. I like to picture her, sliding two fingers between the flaps of skin and pecking in, like checking a patient's chart before flipping it open. She counts the pulse of her patients, taking their blood pressure, and the muscles and

blood and other organs slide down her fingers, back into the cool river.

When she grew up and she and her boyfriend, Steve, got pregnant and they got married and moved away from my dad's family to Kansas City and had four children, Steve would spend all of their money and blame Chari for their problems because she hadn't gone to college. Then he'd threaten to kill himself if she ever left him. But one day when he went to work, she packed up everything in their house into black garbage bags and buckled the four kids into their seat belts while they sucked on fruit snacks and she drove to her sister's house in Utah. Steve was surprised when he came home and no one was there, so he kicked a few things and broke a few pictures and shouted and then he turned on the TV while he waited for her to call. But she never did. Instead, she went to college, got a nursing degree, they got divorced, and she married a kind man.

I think about this while I watch her because of, well, because of a recent break up. I felt I had learned how to compromise and to please and to give and what I got in return was an unexpected avalanche of white, salty water in my sinuses and kelp in my swimsuit. And the whole experience has been getting retrospectively worse. But as I watch Chari fall to the sand again, her skin slick and shimmering, she flops first like a beached fish and then stands, strong enough.