



COURAGEOUS

A NOVEL OF DUNKIRK

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ONE

Aidan looks up. The sky that had been blue and cloudless only minutes ago is now dark and menacing. If it starts to rain, and it looks like it will, he'll be soaked because his yellow mackintosh is at home, on the hook by the door, and not here in the dory with him.

The wind picks up, rocking the small boat from side to side and blowing a fine, cold spray in his face. Aidan holds on tightly, but the angry, churning sea and its foam-capped waves are tossing the poor little dory mercilessly. A big wave smacks up and over the side, and in an instant, Aidan is soaked. Water pools on the dory's deck, making the boat even less seaworthy than it had been.

With a rush, the rain that has been threatening suddenly floods from the sky. The waves grow stronger

and Aidan's stomach lurches as the next big swell capsizes the small vessel and he is plunged, sputtering and kicking, into the cold gray sea. He tries to reach for the overturned dory but another wave yanks it away. He is alone here in the dark, roiling ocean. He tries to scream, to cry for help, but the words seem jammed in his throat and when he opens his mouth nothing comes out. With horror, he looks up to a wall of water, a wave larger and more ferocious than any that have come before. In seconds it will break, and when it does, it will engulf him completely, and pull him down, down, down—

With a start, Aidan bolts upright in bed. His pajama top is soaked in sweat, and his heart is throbbing. It was the dream—again. He takes three deep breaths, exhaling slowly after each one. He's found that counting the breaths helps him calm down. Then he hears a thud and he jumps a little before he realizes that it's just Maude, the ginger cat, landing on the floor. She seems to sense his distress, because she leaps up onto the bed, plants herself under Aidan's outstretched hand, and begins to purr.

“Good kitty,” he murmurs. His heart slows and he settles back into bed, glancing at the window. The sky is still dark and he wonders if he’ll be able to get back to sleep. The cat’s continued purring calms him though, and he settles back into the pillow. He prays the dream won’t come again—at least not tonight.

Several hours later, Aidan wakes again. The cottage is quiet, so he decides he’s probably the first one up. He dresses quickly, then reaches for his cap, his jacket, and his fishing rod. He eases the door open, careful not to let the hinges squeak. Once he’s outside the cottage, he sets out down the road, toward the dock. It’s early on a morning in late May and the sky is just beginning to lighten. He can hear the birds gently chattering in the trees, and he sees a streak of brown—a small brown rabbit darting across his path.

Aidan’s been taking this walk since he was a little kid. He can remember walking hand in hand with his dad through the dawn, the smell of the sea so fresh, so

bracing, and growing stronger as they approached the water. His older brothers, Trevor and George, would be walking up ahead, chasing each other and laughing as they went. Dad would tell them to settle down, but he was always smiling when he said it. He smiled a lot back then. But that was before the war. Before Trevor's navy boat exploded and he was drowned in the Atlantic Ocean. Before George went off to fight in France.

Aidan tries not to think about the day the telegram came, but he knows he'll never be able to forget it either. Mum went white even before she read it; she thrust it into Dad's hands, as if she were unable to be the first to know. Dad's eyes filled with tears and he made strange, huffing sounds like he was having trouble breathing. Aidan knew something terrible had happened even before the awful details were revealed. Trevor's boat had been struck by a U-boat one night while most of the men were sleeping. They'd been caught by surprise, and later Aidan's parents learned that all but one of the crew had been killed. Now, Dad walks around with a tight, grim expression all the time, and

Mum's eyes look haunted, even when she smiles, which is hardly ever. And Aidan is haunted each night in his dreams.

Soon, Aidan reaches the dock, where he can see his family's wooden dory bobbing gently on the waves alongside a couple of rowboats, the blue-and-white boat owned by Mr. Potts, and the smart yellow boat that belongs to Mr. Aspern, who hardly ever takes it out. The dory is eighteen feet long, painted red, and has the name *Margaret* in white script along the side. Margaret's his mum's name, though Dad always calls her Peggy.

No one else is here at the water yet. Aidan gets into the dory, unties the rope, lifts the anchor, and turns on the engine. He's shivering a little—even for England, it's been an unusually wet, cold spring—and he wishes he'd put a sweater on under his light jacket. As he guides the wheel, the heaviness in his chest begins to ease. The ocean's always been his friend. The pull of the tides, the cries of the gulls overhead, the sunlight glinting on the foam-tipped waves—all these things have been a part of him forever.

But ever since Trevor was killed, Aidan's felt afraid of the ocean. Afraid of its depth. Its power. The ocean is his brother's grave—his body was never recovered. And though Aidan doesn't like to admit his fear, he's been secretly afraid that the ocean will claim him too. He thinks that must be why he has those terrible dreams—because of his fear.

He has to stop thinking like this. He continues to steer the boat and when he's out far enough, he turns off the engine, picks up the rod, and reaches into the bait barrel. It's nearly empty. Usually, Dad sees to getting it filled but clearly he's forgotten, so Aidan reminds himself to take care of refilling the barrel once he's back on shore. When he's baited the hook, he casts his line out into the sea. Dad usually uses nets to catch fish, but Aidan's not planning to be out here for very long and he doesn't want to bother.

For a long while, there is nothing—not a tug, not a pull, not a nibble. Aidan's not worried though. His father taught him that a good fisherman needs patience. “The ocean has its own rhythms,” he said. “The fish

bite when they bite.” Only, Dad’s not doing much fishing these days. Instead, he’s spending time at the local pub, hunched over a glass of ale that he nurses for hours. Last night he didn’t even come home for dinner, and Aidan sat across from Mum in sorrowful silence, the empty chairs at the table a reproach and a wound.

Still, Aidan is out here today, even if his father isn’t. *Someone* in this family needs to catch some fish, and it looks like he’s the one. When he feels the line go taut, his instincts, honed from years of experience, instantly kick in. He knows just when to let the line go slack, and just when to pull. And he’s rewarded, a few minutes later, with a flat white flounder flopping around the bottom of the boat. Gutted and deboned, it would make a delicious meal of Dover sole. But Aidan knows Mum’s not likely to make such a meal anytime soon. Ever since Trevor died, Mum seems like a sleepwalker. She spends hours in front of the window, just looking out. He thinks regretfully of the fish dinners she used to prepare. Then there were the scones, the jam tarts,

and, on special occasions, the trifles piled high with custard, cream, and berries. His stomach rumbles just thinking about it, and he realizes that he forgot to take any breakfast before he left.

Aidan remains on the water for another hour or so, but the fish are sluggish, and he only manages to catch three more. One is so puny that he tosses it back in disgust. If Trevor had caught a fish this small, he'd make a big show of pretending he was going to take it home and turn it into a pet. That was Trevor, all right—he could make a joke of anything. George was always the serious, studious one. Before the war, their parents had talked of his going to university, where he wanted to pursue chemistry. Not so for Trevor, who didn't care much for studying, books, or classrooms. But he was always so merry, so good-natured and full of fun that his teachers loved him anyway. Everyone did.

Trevor honed his skills for doing card tricks and juggling. He rode his bicycle on a single wheel, whirled their mum around the kitchen in a silly dance, sang loudly at any chance he got, always had the lead in

the school play and the Christmas pageant. And now he's gone, his energy, wit, and spirit extinguished like a blown-out candle. Some days, Aidan believes he'll be able to accept his brother's death. Other days, he fears he never will.

Dejected and hungry, Aidan decides to head back to shore. He looks at the first flounder he caught, the largest of the catch, and thinks again of the tasty meal it would make. But if he brings it home, it may well go to waste—best not to bother.

At the dock, Aidan stops at the shack run by Mr. Deards. “Not biting today, are they, lad?” says Mr. Deards.

“No, sir,” replies Aidan.

“That's all right. Tomorrow will be better.”

Will it? Aidan wants to say. But he keeps quiet while Mr. Deards weighs his catch and hands him a few coins in exchange. Aidan uses one of them to buy bait for the barrel. Then he deposits the slimy, smelly fish heads in the bait bucket and heads back down the road, coins jingling softly in his pocket. The sun is

higher in the sky now and the day is actually warm, so he takes off his jacket and ties it around his waist. Soon he's back home again. But the cottage looks dark and unwelcoming, and he continues on beyond it, down the road to the cottage of his best friend, Sally.

The door to the Sparks cottage is wide open when he arrives, and out front he sees Sally's mum, beating a rug with a wire beater in the spring sunshine.

"Morning, Aidan!" she calls out. "Have you eaten yet?"

"No, ma'am," he says.

"You must be starved. Go inside and help yourself to a bun. Or two. And some tea."

Tea and buns sound just about right, and he's thinking about how good those buns will taste as he walks in the cottage door. Stepping inside, he nearly collides with Sally. She's almost a head taller than he is, with a friendly, freckled face and wild golden hair that resists any attempt to tame it. They were born within a week of each other and have been friends forever.