

# DERELICT

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THE ITALIAN HARBOURMAN on the phone tells Allison her father's boat is docked in Civitavecchia, outside Rome. She shakes her head, almost laughs. Dad has a boat? In Italy? She closes her office door and sits down. The room spins.

“Did you speak to him?” She imagines what her father might look like twenty-five years on. Inky hair gone grey; the leather jacket she remembers now foolish on a body slouched with age.

The harbourman says no, her father left the boat key and a credit card number for moorage with the night clerk. The card was later declined. He searched the boat and found no one aboard.

Dad could be anywhere, Allison thinks. In the shade of a café awning. Exploring the dark tunnels of the Roman catacombs. Could he be dead? The possibility triggers a new kind of panic—until now he has remained an eight-year-old girl's idea of the invincible father.

The harbourman continues: the boat has been abandoned there two months, it cannot stay. Will Allison make the outstanding payment or let it be seized?

The boat is something of her father's she can save, like the ring he left on the dresser when he disappeared. She tells the man she'll fly there and see it, then asks, “How did you find me?”

He says he searched for her father's contact details online and instead found Allison's phone number on a website she'd created years ago: a page with his name and photo, along with a plea to call. She hangs up before the harbourman can ask any questions.

Allison takes a taxi to her mother in North Vancouver. She walks up the front yard where she ran through the sprinkler as a girl. Her mother is slicing a melon in the kitchen. Allison recounts the phone call, whispering as if her father were still downstairs in his den, a room with dark walls and high bookcases. A room he'd spent more time in than any other.

Allison's mother drops the knife clattering into the sink. "Alan left us for a boat? Another woman would be one thing. But a boat?"

And yet he'd always been taken with the sea. She tells Allison about the boat shows they'd gone to. Walking past wood-panelled yachts, he read out the five-figure prices as if they were nothing, describing the summers they would spend sailing the Pacific. He'd wanted to see the craggy rockfaces along the Juan de Fuca Strait, sail under the Golden Gate Bridge. The closest he'd come, he reminded her, was as a child, when his father took him up Howe Sound in a rented motorboat. That Christmas she gave him a model yacht after she told him she was pregnant with Allison. He assembled it in a weekend and kept it on a shelf in his den, where it stayed throughout the midnight bottle feedings, stretches of unemployment, repairs on the roof. Then, on a Tuesday afternoon when Allison was eight, he borrowed against the mortgage, packed up his clothes and, it now seems, sailed away on a boat he bought himself.

Allison tells her mother, "I'm going to find Dad."

Where was he when doctors attended to her broken bones after a car crash? When she first cradled her daughter, Leticia? In twenty-five years he'd sent only a handful of letters postmarked along the West Coast. At first *Dad* was written in the corner of the envelope, later *Dad (Alan)*, as if Allison needed the reminder. Inside were American bills or crumpled pesos, never a return address or note. Never an explanation.

"That man doesn't deserve to see you," says her mother.

"I didn't say I'd be nice to him."

Her mother has answered Allison's questions about her father since he left: What was his favourite TV show? Do you remember what he smells like? Why hasn't he come back yet? Now she tells Allison, "If you do find him, tell him to sail that damn boat straight to hell."

Allison spends the evening alone at home, drinking wine and watching barges cross English Bay from twenty-two floors up. She calls her ex-husband, James. When he answers, Leticia is giggling in the background. Allison tells him about her father's boat.

"In Italy? Really?" he says.

Allison can hear the edge in James's voice. All those ancient ruins, the cavernous rooms of Uffizi Gallery. James had wanted to be a curator in one of the world's great museums; shortly after they married he'd been accepted into an MA program in London. He'd decided against it: "The travelling I'd

have to do, I'd be just like your father." Instead he took a job at the Vancouver Art Gallery and Allison got pregnant. She would meet him for lunch and watch him hand out headsets to indifferent students and direct the homeless to the washroom with a face of such misery that Allison feared the inevitable day when he would leave her. Soon after Leticia was born, Allison promised the sleeping child in her arms she would never be abandoned, and called a divorce lawyer the next morning.

Allison tells James she will go looking for her father. Leticia will stay with Allison's mother. One week, no longer.

James says, "That bastard ruined our lives. Let him go."

"No, it was your own unhappiness," she says. "Please put Leticia on the phone."

Leticia's cheery hello shakes Allison free from tangled memories.

"Dad and I are about to watch some dumb movie," the twelve-year-old says.

"Next week, you'll have to stay with Grandma Collins." Allison falters. "I'm going to meet up with Grandpa in Italy."

"Grandpa Collins? Why?" Leticia says.

Although Allison has been careful not to badmouth her father to Leticia, she seems to have learned to hate him anyway. "It's hard for you to understand, I know."

"And Italy is a million miles away. How can we phone you? Do you have any idea what you're going to do?"

"Excuse me?"

"I'm only saying what you always do."

It's true. When Leticia stays with Allison, she is barraged with questions and cautions. Leticia can look up from the school yard and see her mother's office window; Allison is likely standing there, watching her daughter, as if she believes Leticia would disappear if she looked away.

"Dad told me Grandpa Collins is a deadbeat who didn't deserve to have you as his kid."

So easy for him to say, Allison thinks. The son of parents who called with loving words every night. "My dad was a good father, once." She remembers summer days on Salt Spring Island, skipping rocks into Ganges Harbour, holding hands ice-skating in Robson Square.

The sound of the TV grows louder; Leticia must be back in the living room with James. She tells Allison, "If you wanted to spend time with a great dad, you shouldn't have divorced mine."

Allison's condo is dark now, just a lamp glowing on a desk cluttered with work files. She pulls pictures of her father out of a family album, remembering him much like he is in the photos: still, silent, gaze turned away. In the last one they are sitting on a floating dock with their feet in the water. It's the summer he taught her to swim. He is thirty-five, the same age as she is now. I could never separate from Leticia, she thinks, then remembers her daughter is across the city.

Allison packs her things in a suitcase borrowed from her mother. Since Leticia was born, Allison has found excuses to avoid going away. She couldn't bear to hear her daughter ask how many sleeps until she got back or, worse, take her along and have her fall spellbound with travel. The last time Allison left Vancouver was for her honeymoon in Hawaii, when she kept leaving James on the beach to call her mother. "I miss you. I'll be back soon," Allison said, wanting to prove that she was not like her father, even as she longed to be back on the warm sand, nuzzled beside James.

Allison lands at Fiumicino Airport on a grey afternoon. She is both tired and wound up from drinking coffee. A guard checks her passport and asks in broken English her reason for coming to Italy.

"*Famiglia*," she says. She practised the word the whole flight over.

As she waits for her luggage, she notices the men around her. One hollers into his phone. Others argue, hands flailing in each other's faces. Her father would stick out in this country where emotion bristles at the surface. He would be skulking past, staring downward with a face as blank as a button. Here are only loud men, grabbing for her suitcase and insisting, "Taxi! Taxi!"

Clouds the size of warships release rain just as Allison arrives at her hotel. In her room framed photos of the Coliseum hang crooked on peeling wallpaper. The only window overlooks a street with bootleg fashion stores and rundown newsstands. Shopkeepers are already pulling down shutters; there is not much time to seek information about her father today. She calls the Canadian Embassy in Rome, hospitals, a police station. Sharp Italian voices leave her on hold, transfer her between departments until someone can brush her off with a few words of English: "We have no record of your father."

Allison curls under the bedsheets and calls her mother, who is just waking up. Even when all she has said is hello, the sound of her mother's voice makes Allison ache.

"You feel so far away," Allison says. "Does being here make me like him?"

“Of course not. You’re coming back,” her mother says. “You better be. Leticia’s already called me twice to ask if I’ve heard from you.”

“Really? She’s been so mad at me.”

“It’s just her age. Do what you need to do and hurry home.”

Allison tells her about the calls she’s made, how no one knows anything. “The embassy will only tell me something if he turns up dead.”

“He is to me,” her mother says.

“I’m not letting him off the hook that easily.” Allison says she will go to Civitavecchia in the morning. “He’s got to go back to his boat eventually.”

“You know, Alan wanted to go to Venice for our honeymoon. We were broke. Our parents loaned us enough to get to Victoria instead and bought us a camera for the memories. We spent four days eating at hotel buffets, waiting out the rain. Alan was miserable. On the ferry home he dropped the camera into the Georgia Strait. An accident, he said.”

“It’s like he hated us,” Allison says.

“No, he loved you. In his own sick, selfish way.”

Allison has never been certain. Even as a stubborn teenager, she kept his picture with her, creased from being held, ripped and re-taped.

Allison wakes when dawn floods her hotel room with red. She fills a glass with tap water and calls her mother again, this time to speak with Leticia.

Her daughter sounds tired: “It’s tomorrow in Italy already, Mom. You’re like a time traveller.”

She asks if her mother has seen the Coliseum, the Sistine Chapel.

“I’m not here for fun, honey.”

“It’s not fair. Grandpa probably is,” Leticia says. “I wish you could have taken me with you.”

“Don’t let Grandma hear you say that. Home is the best place.”

“Then why aren’t you here?”

Allison takes the late-morning train to Civitavecchia. Her rail car is crowded with vacationers, their bags stuffed under the seats. Allison finds an empty spot beside an older couple and their daughter. The father wears a cardigan, his hair combed to the side.

The daughter is a chubby girl Leticia’s age with neon bracelets up her arm. Her name is Cinzia. She introduces her mother, who says hello. The father keeps looking out the window.

“Papà doesn’t speak English,” Cinzia says.

Allison smiles at the girl and feels the distance from Leticia, a tightness like a stretched cord.

“My father is taking us to Barcelona.”

“Lucky you,” Allison responds.

“Going somewhere for work?” the mother asks Allison.

Even outside the office, Allison wears wire-framed glasses and her hair pulled taut behind her ears. “No, my father’s in Italy. He’s been travelling the world in his boat. Just docked at Civitavecchia this week to meet me.” She speaks like she did as a child, spinning stories to excuse his absence.

The train slows, passing between graffitied brick buildings and high-rises as it arrives at Civitavecchia station.

Cinzia’s mother says, “Enjoy Italy with your father.”

Cinzia pulls Allison down to kiss her cheek. The father collects their bags. Allison looks for Cinzia to play translator and tell him how wonderful his family is, but she is already at the exit. Allison tries talking to him herself, stumbling on a couple words of Italian, nonsense strung together. He shakes his head, smiling.

“*Vieni, papà,*” Cinzia calls out.

“*Ciao,*” he says to Allison, squeezing her shoulder.

She watches him do the same to Cinzia as father and daughter step down to the platform together.

Inside Civitavecchia station, Allison buys a map and walks along a tree-lined street toward the port. The harbourman, Luca, had given her his office address. Allison passes buildings with high fences. In front of hotels, doormen stand still as statues. Already she has booked a room with a balcony overlooking the wharf, so she can call out her father’s name to the men who pass beneath her.

The sounds of the city swell: the stereo from a café patio, the sputter of an accelerating Vespa. Glass and concrete give way to a stretch of sea. Allison can feel its spray, warmer than the Pacific back home. A group of teenagers with beach towels in their arms bump into her as they hurry by. Beyond the stone walls of Forte Michelangelo, the cruise ships appear on the water, dozens of them, decorated with colourful swirls. The smaller boats rock gently at the wharf, their masts bare.

The harbour office is one street over from the waterfront. Inside, sailors linger in line, sunglasses hanging in their chest pockets. Behind the wickets,

young men with navy epaulets collect money and stamp forms, all the while shouting at one another.

Allison asks for Luca and he emerges quickly from the back. In his thirties, he is older than the other men. He has a sun-bronzed face and his sleeves are rolled up over tattooed arms.

“Allison, you’ve arrived.”

Hearing his voice sets her stomach churning, as it did when she first heard it.

“Your timing is good,” he says. “I was ordered to put the boat into dry storage Monday if no payment was made.”

“I’ll pay, with one condition.” Allison gives him an envelope of Euros along with her hotel and cell phone numbers. “The boat is not to be released to him until he calls me.”

“Has he not contacted you during his travels?”

“No,” she says.

Luca’s face sinks into the pitying look Allison remembers from the teachers and neighbours after her father left.

She tells Luca, “What I mean is, not in a long while. Please take me to his boat.”

He leads her across the street and they walk down the boardwalk along the wharf. When he turns up a pier, Allison’s heart races. Is it this boat, she wonders, this one? She sees a black fisherman bunching up a net on one boat, a young couple drinking grappa on another. She wants to be able to sense this possession of her father’s, but her instinct is always wrong.

Further ahead, Luca says, “This one is mine.” It is a hardtop power boat, the bow shaped to an aerodynamic point that could cut through headwinds and bound across the water.

“You have a boat?” There is anger in her question.

He nods. “Two weeks and I’m off to Sardegna, then Corsica.”

“Why?” she asks. “Aren’t you happy here? Don’t you have family?”

“My girlfriend wants to start one. This trip will be my last adventure.”

Near the end of the pier, Luca stops Allison at a thirty-five-foot yacht. Its hull is chipped and yellowed. The dark windows show no signs of life inside. The boat bobs on the water, pulling at its dock lines.

Luca holds out a hand to help Allison board. On the upper deck, two chairs and a padded bench face one another. A half-dozen people could lounge here, but the man she remembers would have stayed under the stars alone.

She ducks into the wheelhouse and Luca sits on a torn leather seat near her. The control panel is rusted, the windshield covered in bird shit.

Luca asks Allison where else her father has travelled.

“Everywhere. When I was younger, he wanted me to see the world on this boat. I’d wake up in the morning a little further from home, never knowing where we were going next.” Something about the lie sickens her; maybe that it was true, except for the part about her.

Allison takes hold of the steering wheel, turning it left, right, surprised it spins so freely. She thinks how easy it would have been for her father, at any point in his travels, to just turn around and come home.

“In a boat like this, you could go almost anywhere you wanted,” Luca says.

The open sea lies before them, stretched to the horizon.

“Which way to Vancouver?” she says.

Luca points in the distance. “Months that way. You would need someone to take you.”

“I’d take a plane,” she says. “I have a daughter waiting at home.”

Sunset begins to tint the sky when Allison and Luca go down into the cabin. The passageways are narrow, with faux-mahogany walls and pastel plastic trim. Another ship sounds its horn and the silence that follows makes her father’s boat seem stranded at sea.

In the master bedroom Allison finds an unmade bed and a pair of jeans on the floor. She feels the childlike unease of being in her parents’ room, as if at any moment her father will come in and send her out. Luca’s footsteps creak behind her. The closet is filled with shirts loud with neon patterns. Her father’s clothes used to be grey, black, beige. She brings a shirt to her face to smell the spice of him, but there is only the sea.

Allison’s breath catches. Further back in the closet are women’s clothes, slinky material half-fallen off the hangers. She holds up a spaghetti-strap sundress that rounds at the chest and hips.

Luca smiles. “Your mother must be a beautiful woman.”

“This woman is not my mother.” Allison throws the dress on the bed. Is this what they did? she wonders. Toss clothes into a suitcase and say, “Let’s get married in Venice.”

Luca leaves Allison to explore, and she picks up travel guides for Spain and Portugal, notices a box of scuba gear. She tries to imagine her father flipper-kicking in some bay, but can only conjure memories of him motionless on the couch.

Luca calls out, "Is this your old bedroom?"

Allison can't manage an answer. She braces herself for a possibility she's long feared. She goes down the hall and passes Luca at the doorway. Bright pink gleams on the walls and bedsheets. The bedside lamp is patterned with butterflies. The familiarity of it makes Allison feel lightheaded. It's a reproduction of her childhood bedroom. A few furnishings are misplaced, some patterns not quite right. Still she feels pulled back to a time when her mother was outside the door, calling her for dinner, and her father was downstairs in his den.

When Allison looks more closely, she notices that the bookcase is empty. There is no dresser for clothes. The closet is filled with boxes of spare boat parts and waterlogged binders. No child could have grown up here.

Allison sits on the bed and wonders if she should wait for her father's return, let him find the missing piece to the monument he's built. She can smell the peaty smoke of his cigars. Does he come to this room to make up stories like she does? Does he tell his girlfriend, *My daughter once sailed with me. I took her anywhere she wanted. I'll introduce you to her one day.*

"Luca," she says, and he comes to attention in the doorway. "My father took this boat and left my mom and me twenty-five years ago." She feels so small, slouching on her fake childhood bed. This is how he left her.

Luca lowers his head and nods.

Allison says, "He doesn't deserve this." This room, this boat, this happy, travelling life.

"There's a word to describe men like your father," Luca says as he helps her up. He spits out a phrase and then returns the envelope of money she gave him. A yacht transport, he says, will arrive in a few days to take away derelict boats deemed unfit. They end up in India and are broken down for scrap. He will file the papers for her father's boat himself. When her father returns, some obscure law will be quoted. Allison's visit will not be mentioned.

When they return to the upper deck, Allison breathes in the fresh night air. Only for a moment does she imagine her father's face—a week from now, a month—strolling happily down the pier with the woman, then struck with confusion and distress at finding his boat gone.

That face is too familiar for Allison to enjoy any pleasure of vengeance. She recognizes the face as Leticia's. She sees it at home every time her daughter asks a question or sits beside her and senses that Allison's thoughts are as far away as this boat will soon be. Allison will return home and bring her

daughter close to her, ask about her day at school as they take turns combing each other's hair. These are the moments Allison will enjoy.