

The Beach

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A mother, walking slowly along the shore, with her hand on her child's shoulder, broke the seated woman's view of her son bobbing on the waves. The woman's eyes followed the strolling pair wistfully, and by the time she looked back at the sea, he had swum out too far.

"No use making a fuss," she muttered to herself, rising and sweeping sand off her middle as she waded out into the water, "He's too young to judge distances. Anyway, I should be out there with him."

Jumping together over the waves, she felt herself slowly warming to his enjoyment - after so long finally back in his own element. No wonder he chose the sea for their last day together. With his father he would probably spend the rest of his vacation in museums and educational institutions, places he'd pretend to be impressed by to please his parent. Here he was appreciating the experience for its own sake.

She'd rather have taken him to a museum herself, she reflected, pulling up the bottom of her worn bikini. The mere thought of sand and sun was alien to her new citified self-image. Since the divorce she had cultivated the sense of control made possible only by limiting variables to a specific knowable urban area. The custody battle, the fear of further desertion, the uncertainty and competitiveness of the job market, had all exhausted her. The sea, with its changing surface, its hidden currents, made her nervous now.

They were both out too deep. The black flag was up and the muffled voice on the loudspeaker was probably telling them to get out of the water. She wasn't sure, though, and hadn't the heart to pull him out all at once. Instead she moved toward the shore with each leap over the waves, and he followed, unaware of or unconcerned with her ruse.

Finally the boy had had enough and ran out laughing to the blanket. Relieved, she followed him, anticipating a rest, a chance to read the paper, to escape from his world to hers. But he turned from the basket with the paddles and the challenging voice she couldn't resist today. "Aren't you going to play with me now?"

"Let's see what kind of ball you've got," a man's voice said. Without turning around, she knew. Part of taking a boy to the beach - she sighed - sand, salt, and the pick up.

The particular man must have been fifty, with white hair on a good brown chest and no paunch. He looked like the old man and the sea, wise and wily.

"That ball's no good," he said, "Come down with me to the station, and I'll get you a hard black one." Then, "Let me introduce myself, I'm Amos, the lifeguard."

They shook hands. "Come!" he said, and turned to go. She followed them, listening vaguely as her son answered the lifeguard's ques-

tions: What's your name, where do you live, do you come here often, have you got brothers and sisters, what do you mean step-sisters, is your father remarried, your mother, what does she do.

The boy was entranced, and answered each question deliberately. Had any of his friends ever spoken to a lifeguard? Especially one who showed such an interest in his private life! And here was his mother walking along - silent, insignificant - the way he had so many times walked behind her and her friends.

And then there was the tower! "Do you take sugar in your coffee?" Amos turned to her as they ascended the stairs. "I guess." He seated them on the porch of the guard tower as he went inside. The other guard extended his binoculars. "Want to see?" The black binoculars were held up to the wide eyes. The guards worked together on deals like this.

Coffee and ices came as they sat on the deck chairs on the cool windy porch. Amos said he'd like to take the boy out in the lifeboat, but the waves were too strong now. "When you come back, tomorrow."

"I'm flying this afternoon, with my father. Two weeks!"

"Giving your mother a vacation, eh? She won't have anything to do while you're gone. She'll have to swim alone."

"What about the paddleball?" The boy answered.

As Amos and the boy volleyed the ball back and forth, she went back to collect the blanket and the basket. She walked slowly, noting that except for the teenagers farther off waiting for the surf, there were no men. Only women and their charges. When she came back, Amos said, "Now you take a break and I'll play with your mother."

She said she didn't know how, would rather not, but took up the paddle, listlessly. They volleyed for a while, then he said, "Trouble with your back, right?"

"How'd you know?"

"I'm a physiotherapist. I can see."

"Well, I've lived with it for more than thirty years, I'll do all right from here on too."

"What you really need is to have your shoulders loosened, those back muscles."

"A massage."

"A few sessions ought to do it. Some exercise, a little swimming, and you'll be as good as new."

"Uh-huh."

"I've got a place in the back room here where it could be done - of course you should be relaxed, free of all obligations, like kids..."

"I'm in a rush today. He has to catch a plane—"

He called the boy from the water where the other lifeguards had occupied him, and they gathered their things.

"Come back soon."

"We sure will!"

"I'll teach you the lifesaver stroke." Amos called after them as they walked the path up to the car. The boy turned and waved.

"That was the best day I ever had!" he sighed aloud as they drove off. "You're so good to me."