

Always

I

The car pulls to a stop. Gold light shining through tall trees. We're here. I want to get out. You tell me to wait. After forever I'm free, bursting into cool air.

But we're not there yet. You pull our things out of the car, I stand on my tippy toes, trying to catch sight of the ocean. I can't find it. You reach down with big hands full of sunscreen. My face feels funny as you wipe it on.

With me on your back you carry everything down endless steps, large, strong. Tall mangroves stretch high, blocking the sky. It darkens, I hold tightly. Finally, we break onto the beach. Birds soar. I run, my legs taking me to the water's edge fast as they can.

Waves are coming, they try to take me with them, sucking at my feet. The foamy water shines. You're standing there, we go in together.

You hold my hand, waves push against me. Up and down goes the water. I start to feel unsure, I look at you, you're smiling, it's okay. You're proud I am brave. The rolling tide will do nothing to you. We take another step. An enormous wave pushes me so hard I'm not touching the sand, swept up in a rush of fear. The wave tries to push me down, both your arms are folding around me, pulling me up. I'm out of the water, heart hammering, tears falling. Scared. You brush them away, bring your face close. It's okay, everything's okay. When I look at you there's no trace of fear, just happiness and reassuring calm. A still lake in the blue of your eyes that I let myself drift on. Push up next time you say, jump to meet it.

Back on the shore, we make a castle, then sit watching the sunset. A pearl sinking through brilliant orange, pink, purple.

I climb on your lap, there's a star in the sky, and I wish for years of this, as long as the water laps the shore, me and you. Never let go.

II

Following you down, beach chair over my shoulder, I tower over you on the step behind. Would you just hurry up? Typical, you're always in my way, always bringing me here, down these rickety steps. Overgrown saltbushes and spinifex crowd the way. With my sunglasses on I can hardly see, I ditch them. Just like I'd ditch you.

Through the opening I see the beach, hot, busy with people, it's like I'm cursed. The sky is cloudy, it feels wrong. I plant myself in my chair. There are too many families around me. I couldn't feel further from them. You tell me you're going in. Sure, whatever. No, I don't want to. I'm left here. Sitting. Watching.

The clouds fly overhead in the wind, moving as if they were on fast-forward, slipping over the hills. They're gone. Why did I come? I hate it.

Having reached the marker, you swim back. You swim slower, you used to beat me back when we'd race. You're getting old, I ignore the grey flecks I see in your hair. I don't want to think, it's all faded like you. The thought clenches my gut. I feel angry at you, I try to push it down. It's stupid.

You're back so I get up. Wading through the water it's clear as glass, I see a sandy bottom. My feet create a storm. I swim on my back, floating, wishing I could float away, back to when feelings weren't anything; or float away from this hell.

Dripping, I grab my towel, the beach is mostly empty. Still, I'm crowded, suffocated by turmoil. You suggest fish and chips; wouldn't that be nice? You're so wrong. I shrug. Up to you. You ask if I want to go back home. There's no home anywhere right now. You say my name, it brings my eyes to yours. I'm held with that look. The one you always have now, like you are looking for happiness, that's long gone.

My eyes burn, my throat tightens.

I look away, yeah, whatever.

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I leave my ring in the glovebox, I can't lose it in the sand or water. Grateful for this day, I quickly get out, grabbing what I need. You're ready, smiling, wind blowing through your silver hair. I offer to take your things, you refuse. Together, down the fragile weathered steps, past coarse unkept bush, to the place we love. Sand between my feet and the sight of the sun and sea. We find an empty spot for the umbrella, setting our chairs down.

We trade news. Not much has changed for you. You pull out a book and I lapse into thinking, gazing over the water, gulls flying across a perfect sky. What I notice is that your hair is a shade lighter than last summer. Grey was always an unpleasant colour. Such a small detail but it brings mixed feelings, whisked back to old memories. My thoughts turn to you. You stayed constant, even through my limbo and the pain it brought us both. You're here today, the same as ever. I am struck with a sense of emotion; thankfulness, sadness. You always let me be, always stood by me -not too close, not too far away, always with that wisdom and knowing in your eyes. Perpetual like our beach. I wonder how much time is left – with this place, with you. My gut clenches. As much as I changed, you have never left me. Maybe you never will. Is that the secret message there in your eyes? A well of feeling stirs, there is no pain. One day I might look at my own son with those eyes.

We still have time. I feel raw but when I turn to you, I know that our bond is forever, just like this place.

Smiling, like you understand everything, you ask if I want to go for a swim.

Yes. Always.