

The Taste of Sand

I.

According to their mother, it was a special day. She wouldn't say why, but told them only it was special, and they were going to have a party.

She was a woman who invented holidays. She was a woman who laughed with her mouth open and sometimes stayed awake for days, playing Gilbert O'Sullivan records and re-arranging her borrowed furniture around her rented house.

She was also a lonely woman: the sort of woman who kept on having children so as never to be by herself. And her children loved her the way children love lonely people: tentatively, fearfully, as sinners before a capricious God.

They loved her most when she was happy. She let them stay up late and watch *Law and Order: SVU*. She made caramelized popcorn and sometimes cookies too, and even let them eat the dough when their father wasn't around. She took them on adventures: to the park, to the zoo, to race bumper cars and play mini-golf. She would catch them as they ran down the cool marble hallways of that empty house, and hold them very tightly, her chipped acrylic nails digging into the wings of their shoulders.

"My angels," she would say, "my sweet babies."

And the world opened up like a flower.

And then: "let's have a party!"

The children cheered.

It was childhood as it was meant to be, replete with endless possibilities.

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She always got to pick the theme: Hawaiian Luau, Black and White Ball, glow-in-the-dark. They made costumes. She painted their faces.

Everyone was assigned a chore. The kids cooked and cleaned. She made decorations and poured drinks. Sometimes they invited people: neighbors, friends. Sometimes people came. For a while it was fun-- especially when the adults first began to drink.

And then, as the drinks began to spill, as the adults began to raise their voices and the dense Arabian night crept in on quiet haunches, just as suddenly as she had blossomed, their mother would fade and crumple like a fallen leaf, bled of color.

Six months ago when they first landed abruptly on the blazing tarmac- the heat so loud it warbled in their ears- Darcy was excited. He was still a kid then. He'd never left the country before, never left rural Alabama. He was eleven years old, and the rest of the world was still a place that existed only in their grandfather's wild stories, in the dim, liminal space between dusk and sleep.

Because he was the eldest, he stepped out of the plane first. He breathed deeply of the hot, saturated smells of the desert, the thick sunlight that rippled out over roiling, simmering ribbons of sand. He was Indiana Jones on a new adventure. Robinson Crusoe washed up on a new land. He was Darcy Sayer in Saudi Arabia, and here, his mother had assured them, they could be anything they wanted to be.

Darcy's paternal grandfather, a navy captain, awaited their arrival in Riyadh. He'd rented an entire compound for his family to live in while he swept through the Persian Gulf, looking, Darcy imagined, for Somalian pirates with skin black as envy and teeth gold as the glaring sand.

The compound was not far from the National Air Base, and nestled behind a thick, yellow adobe wall, laced with wrinkles and beaten by the bleaching sun. There were three houses reigning over each corner of the triangular property, all two-stories high and made of burnt, sun-dried bricks of mud and sand. Each house embraced a sheltered courtyard, ornately paved with glass tiles

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depicting flowers and animals, and little fountains in which goldfish glittered like jewels. They were surrounded by thirty acres of charcoal trees and desert roses, thick brush that hummed with the silken sounds of alien insects. A clothesline hung between two acacia trees, draped with white linen sheets that cracked in the sharp wind. Beneath it was a small stone birdbath, at the center of which two stone turtle doves groomed one another. The water was dark and grizzled with dust, but pigeons and sandgrouses still came to bathe there. Darcy loved the birdbath most of all. It reminded him of something from long ago, though he could not remember what.

Darcy remembered everything. This was his gift. His mother had told them everyone got a gift from God when they were born. These were mostly practical gifts. Children, of course, were meant to be of service. His sister Michaela had a knack for interior decorating. His brother Junior knew his way around cars and other machines. The twins were too young to really do much, but they tended to the animals, and animals have a way of speaking with small children.

Darcy swore he remembered being born. It happened in a small abandoned cabin, deep in the wild, lonesome swamps of Southern Louisiana, when his mother was seventeen years old and fresh to disappointment. He remembered the spiced smell of the pine trees and the still lake outside, the wailing of warblers mourning the dawn. He remembered that first searing shard of light embedding itself into his blinking, bleary eyes. But he wasn't supposed to remember such things. He wasn't supposed to know things his mother didn't.

His mother's gift was that people loved her. Before she'd been a mother, she was a pageant girl, a prom queen. She glittered against the backdrop of her small, dusty Alabama town. She was beautiful: thick, blonde hair the color of country wheat that gathered in curls at her hips, eyes like clean water: placid and sweet. She had a smile like the sunlight and was slim in those early pictures, before she had him.

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All her children looked just like her except for Darcy, whose features sharply echoed his father's: the darkness in his eyes and sleek black hair, the rich depth of his warm, brown skin. None of the other children resembled his father, who was often offshore, toiling relentlessly on the dangerous Arabian oil rigs when the telltale swell of their mother's belly betrayed the arrival of another child.

For this reason, Darcy often stood behind the camera.

"Get one of us," his mother would say, casting a smile that would make the birds sing.

Though he saw few photographs of himself around the house, he paid no mind to it until much later, long after his mother was gone. He didn't mind taking pictures. He had an eye for stillness and beautiful things. Also, he heard that Australian Aborigines refused to have their pictures taken, because they believed the shutter would suck out their souls, and Darcy knew there was truth to every tale.

On the day of the party, he was taking pictures. He went to the neighbor's pool with his siblings and his grandmother's old 35 mm Canon hanging around his neck, which was so heavy it drew his head down and Ms. O'Leary called him "Quasimodo," which he didn't understand, but laughed at anyway because he was polite.

The O'Leary's pool was a haunting relic of a bygone era, built of pearlescent marble tiles featuring strange, nightmarish animals and the poisonous petals of foreign flowers. The water attracted all sorts of alien animals, particularly at night. The children would arrive in the morning to find lizards of every conceivable color in the pool filter, insects as bright and big as their own blue eyes, and the occasional unfortunate Cape hare, its rigid body bumping softly against the plastic shutter.

They spent their summer days there, lulled by the soft purr of cicadas, floating in the water half asleep, until the setting sun dragged the luminous azure blanket of sky down over the horizon,

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exposing the vast and empty basin of space beneath, and the air was chill with moisture, sweet and milky with the scent of sleeping lavender fields. At last, fearful of the animals darkness would bring, they ran home, chasing each other through the fragrant brush, hissing like snakes and cackling to the hyenas calling to them from the distant mountains.

All day Darcy sat under the diving board, two feet from the edge of the chemical blue water, photographing his siblings as they posed in mid-air. The rattling of the board was deafening above him; the polyrhythmic pounding of wet foot-steps compounding the battering sound of blood in his ears. He imagined he was being hunted by some mythic chimera-- half-man, half-monster-- and sat as still as he possibly could, holding his breath, until he could see the little toes curled around the gritty edge of the diving board, and finally gasped a sigh of relief. His little siblings would then come tumbling down into the water, splashing cool water on his face and freckled arms.

Tom and Martha O'Leary, an Irish couple (both of whom worked in the foreign service and spoke in telltale gentle, diplomatic voices), were stretched out in their lawn chairs by the side of the pool, clapping as each of the children performed their tricks. They were both so pale they looked translucent in the sun: like two salamanders, their eyes glowing bright green. They had no children, which everyone thought (but would never say) was a grave disappointment in their otherwise happy marriage.

The Sayer siblings knew, in the dim way children do, that in spending time at the O'Leary's, they were meeting an unnamed need. And it was nice over there in the small house with the exotic pool. Martha made sweet tea lemonades just the way it was done in the American South. Sometimes she cooked for them (though her skills were regrettably lacking.) Tom picked up their clothes while they swam in the pool and put them in the laundry with bleach to get the black mold out. All their shirts and dresses came out looking like Easter Eggs, pastel pink and blue. But it was good to feel clean. And it was good to feel loved too.

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“Darcy, do a jump, will you?” Martha’s excitement was palpable, childlike. She clapped her hands together. “We’ll count down for you!”

Darcy shook his head and held the camera up.

“I can’t.”

“Yes you can. I can hold your camera for you, honey. Go on!”

Darcy stood up and picked at his bathing suit where it clung to his lean brown legs. He placed the camera on the edge of Martha’s chair and climbed up the ladder to the diving board, counting the steps, holding his breath.

“What sort of jump should I do?”

“Anything you want! Show us your best.”

He could feel their eyes on him: expectant, questioning. They were searching his face for a smile. Searching for some evidence that he was still a child. He felt suddenly very far away from everyone, the diving board a thousand miles off the ground-- a stairway to heaven, like in the song his mother listened to when she was sad.

He took a deep, shuddering breath and looked out over the edge into the cerulean water below. The bright, chemical smell of chlorine burned his throat. Threads of sunlight shot through his body. He closed his eyes and imagined standing on a cloud, peering out at the deep blue sky and the little people below: people he loved. People who loved him back. They smiled and waved. He smiled and waved back.

“Jump!” Junior’s jangly pre-pubescent voice pierced him like a draft through a warm blanket.

He leapt out into the open air. For a moment, he was unattached, boundless. He was a part of the Earth: the dusky red mountains on the horizon, the warm, stirring sea just beyond. He was the rising rapture of sand in the wind. He was the sun-stroked stone and the silt and loam over deep,

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subterranean aquifers-- the vaporous promise of a mirage in the deep desert. He was one with the strange, fearful landscape, and far away from his own fragile body hurtling through the air.

He felt his toes break the cool filmy surface of the water, and then the rest of him- all at once. He lingered there beneath the surface a long time, imagining he was in the womb- not his mother's womb, but whatever had come before that.

“Darcy!”

The shrill voice shot through the water like a harpoon. Though the voice was faint it was urgent, pained.

“Darcy!”

He surfaced and opened his eyes to his mother's face inches from his, the upper half of her body leaning precariously over the water. Her eyes were wide and strangely bright.

“Hi angel. What happened to watching your siblings?”

Her voice was taunt, quivering, threaded through with unusual enthusiasm.

“I was.”

“He was!” Mrs. O’Leary held up the camera. “I told him to have a go himself!”

He watched a thousand familiar shadows pass over his mother's blue eyes.

“Okay.” She stood up straight and smoothed out her skirt. “Well we’re having a party. So I need you guys to help me. Do you know what today is?”

Junior looked at Darcy, his eyes narrowed in confusion. Michaela clenched her jaw, appearing to think very hard of an answer. Darcy looked out across the pool at the barren clothesline, buoyed by the gentle, sandy breeze and the sad stillness of the empty bird bath below. Through narrowed eyes he could pretend the stone doves were real birds, resting momentarily from some great migration to distant and stranger lands.

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“Do we have to?” This from Michaela, though all five children were already out of the pool, shivering despite the thick, dense heat.

Their mother glanced at Mrs. O’Leary, who carefully examined her cuticle beds.

“It’s a special day, guys. Come on! I’ll tell you all about it later. Get out of the pool.”

They were accustomed to their mother’s strange holidays and ever-evolving customs. She had recently become involved in a Kabbalistic “prayer group:” a self-proclaimed coven of mostly middle-aged American expats who met on Wednesdays to read ancient scripture and play with Tarot cards. Before that, it had been the Hare Krishnas. Before that, she was a Christian. She often said, with her Alabama accent wrapping itself around each word, that the name you gave to God didn’t matter so long as you believed in Him.

She snapped her fingers impatiently. “Chop chop.”

The kids scrambled out the pool, tumbling over one another like weeds. Her words conjured in their minds images of frosted white cupcakes and balloons full and shiny as berries, staying up late to watch their father set off fireworks on the roof.

But Darcy was skeptical. He always tried to remain skeptical- for his brothers and sisters. He was twelve years old now, and, as his mother often reminded him, the man of the family (at least when his father was offshore). He was responsible for the expectations of his siblings, their disappointment when things fell through. He was responsible for their joy in dull moments, their faith in the future.

The last time they had a party, their mother drank too much rum and insisted on driving to a friend’s house on the outskirts of Riyadh. Darcy, determined to ensure she returned safely, sat in the backseat as she wove in and out of traffic, attracting the attention of the mostly male Arab drivers that surrounded them. And when they’d returned home, he’d had to undress his own mother and put her to sleep. The shame: seeing his mother’s naked body sprawled out before him, flesh pooling

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out underneath her heavy limbs, freckled skin pink and raw-looking like a skinned chicken. It was the most afraid of her he'd ever been, and he'd had nightmares about it ever since. The kind he couldn't share with anyone.

She wrapped each of her children up in warm, dry towels. They snuggled up to her, their shimmering eyes adoring and hopeful. They knew the look on her face; it was the sprinkles-on-toast look, the ice-cream-for-breakfast look. And because they were only children, and time was, to them, still a figment of fairy tales, they believed their mother would remain this way forever.

It was easy to believe on nights when they fell asleep to the sounds of their parents whispering on the porch, drinking tea and listening to the creatures of the desert. It was easy to believe when their mother sat beside them and sang Celtic lullabies, holding their hands in her slim, cold, aristocratic fingers. Or when, on rare occasions, she read aloud her favorite bedtime story, *Goodnight Moon*, over and over again, as she had when Darcy was little. This he remembered too: his eighteen year-old mother, filling the room with the smell of peaches and vanilla, her purple lips leaving marks like bruises on his little hands and feet.

She herded her children out the gate. "In case I don't see you Martha- goodbye!"

Mrs. O'Leary waved weakly.

"So tell me what today is," she said as they barrelled through the backyard, kicking up a cloud of dust like a herd of elephants.

"The 21st of December," Darcy replied.

"What year?"

"2012."

"Precisely. And do you know what's supposed to happen today?"

She opened the door and a gale of cool air engulfed them like water. There was a collective shiver.

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“What is it Mommy?” Michaela’s skinny limbs were covered in goosebumps and her lips already blue from the cold.

“It’s the last day of the Mayan calendar, my babies.”

She was whispering now, though there was no one else in the house.

Michaela giggled and her little body shook like a reed in the water.

“The Maya what?!”

The woman clamped both her hands down on Michaela’s shoulders and pressed down hard. The child’s feet squealed against the marble floor and she lost her footing. Darcy caught her arm and she righted herself.

““The Mayan calendar. It’s a special calendar that tells us how the world works. Today is the last day! Which means we are going to have a big celebration.”

She turned to look at herself in the gilded mirror that hung in the entry hallway, an ancient relic, they’d been told, of an earlier time when a sultan had lived in their home. They watched her watching herself. They waited.

“You guys think I look ok?”

“Beautiful,” the twins said in unison.

“Good. Because Daddy’s coming home today.”

There was a collective screech as the children dropped their towels and pranced around her.

“You guys have to help me set up and decorate, okay?”

Darcy sighed, crouching to pick up the towels. He’d planned to spend the afternoon taking pictures by the pool. Adults were always trying to trick him into doing chores. And of course he always complied. But he had reached the age at which children know they are being lied to.

“ I already went to the store to pick up decorations. You boys can put them up and Michaela can do the food. I’m going to clean up some.”

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The children sprang at once, clambering up the stairs. Their mother watched after them with a self-satisfied smile. *I made this*, it seemed to say. Darcy lingered.

“What time is Dad coming?”

“He said today sometime.”

There was no telling when their father would show up or what kind of mood he would be in. He worked hard, and the work was hot and dangerous. Living on a ship changed a man, he said; it made him quiet and reflective. It made him humble.

As Darcy followed his siblings up the stairs, he could feel his mother’s chilling gaze on the back of his sunburnt neck. Miss America, with her flaxen hair and crystal-blue eyes. He knew she looked at him and saw evidence of something in her life gone awry, a glitch in the seamless trajectory of her success. He was everything strange and alien that had crept into her life when she wasn’t looking, and dragged her away to this distant, hostile, desert land.

He took off his swim trunks and stood before the medicine cabinet, examining himself meticulously for any additional evidence of his impending adulthood: the long black hairs crawling down from his bellybutton like insects, the thick, knitted eyebrows, the stern curl of his upper lip, the depth of his dark eyes, set back in the sharp architecture of his face.

In the violent Saudi sun, he looked right at home. Though they discouraged tourists (white people) from walking alone down the streets of Riyadh, no one looked twice when he passed them by. No one suspected him. It was only here, in the glacial halls of marble and ice, among his blonde and blue-eyed siblings, that he seemed never able to escape notice.

“Darcy! I need you!”

Her voice had dimmed, the words mangled and slow, as though tumbling from her mouth, letter by letter. He could hear the chattering of ice cubes in a cold glass, the cotton softness of her heavy tongue.

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“Darcy, come down here!”

“I’m coming Mom.”

He cast a furtive glance at the door and rummaged beneath his mattress, where he had hidden one of his mother’s cigarettes, now crushed and misshapen but not beyond salvation. He tucked the cigarette into the waistband of his boxers and plodded down the stairs.

She placed both hands over his shoulders and bent over to speak to him, so close he could smell the richness of rum on her breath. “You’re still wet!”

He shrugged.

“I’m putting you in charge honey. I gotta to the market for party stuff. I need everything to be ready when I get back. Put those kids to work.”

“Alright Mom.”

“How do I look?” She twirled, casting up a cloud of cloying, metallic perfume and menthol cigarettes. She wore a blue floral print dress and her eyes were heavily made up. Her hair had been carefully arranged to frame her face, a blue silk scarf draped over it . Sometimes he could see her beauty-- as though she were not his mother-- and he wished she would forget she had ever been beautiful at all.

“You look pretty Mom.”

“That’s my boy.” She cupped his head in her palms. “Behave yourself. It’s especially important today.”

“Okay Mom.”

A horn wailed from beyond the gate.

“That’s my ride!”

But she did not move. Her eyes were damp and chlorine blue. She cupped his face between her hands, cool as water.

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“Listen, you’re a good kid, okay?”

He nodded, looking over her shoulder at the laundry, rusted with sand, billowing in the breeze; at two grouses splashing in the warm water.

As the door shut it sent a sweeping gust of wind through the house. The smaller children came running out. But she was gone.

II.

All that afternoon they scrubbed the house clean and scoured the floors. They dusted the courtyard furniture and mowed the lawn. They put away their mother’s clothing and lined up her shoes. They hung fairy lights and paper garlands and home-made banners that read “Happy Mayan!” and “December 21!” The twins drew pictures of the family with crayons and tacked them around the house.

In the evening, they gathered in the kitchen and cooked. Darcy baked sweet potatoes and peach pie. Michaela made a lamb just the way their mother liked it: nearly raw on the inside. Junior knew only how to make Saudi dishes- he didn’t remember much from before the move- and mixed yogurt and sauces the way the housekeeper had taught him. The twins dumped nearly the entire jar of sugar into a pitcher and squeezed lemons with their little hands, the bitter milky juice streaming over their strained knuckles. Michaela put a BeeGees record onto the old Victrola and they danced around the kitchen.

It wasn’t until seven o’clock that somebody said: “Hey, where’s Mom?”

They all paused, contemplating this. Their mother had been gone a few hours, and their father was not yet home. The record ended abruptly, and the silence was suddenly stifling: an awful weight that hung over them like the heavy, humming darkness of Arabian nights. The sounds outside were unfamiliar: the croaking of strange creatures, the hoots of midnight birds, the occasional car

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passing by their isolated compound. For the first time, they could hear neither the melodic, percussive sounds of the city nor the discordant, clumsy sounds of their parents milling about the house. It was quiet. They were alone.

“She’ll be home soon I bet,” Michaela said, peering through the kitchen window into the awful, gaping darkness. There was the eerie sound of something splashing outside, the smell of smoke and spices curdling in the wind.

They hung in uncertain silence, tension that crackled like sparks. Darcy felt suddenly like he was standing on the diving board, looking down at his worried siblings and at his own dejected figure, fragile and helpless as a paper doll.

“We can start without them,” he heard himself say, “and that way when they get here, it’ll be like a surprise party.”

Michaela slapped her hands together. A diaphanous mist of flour and sugar cascaded to the ground.

“Good idea. Junior, go put the music back on.”

The child clambered up and scurried over to the record player. Darcy watched himself reach for Gabe’s hand. It was cold and sticky with sugar.

The record scratched painfully. And then, the voices of Carole and Louise- so familiar to them- strained and warbling, wandered through the room and filled their hearts with something like peace. The soft, resonant sound of the piano broke the ugly silence and Darcy felt his body begin to move. He took his sister’s hands and they danced like they had seen their parents dance: carelessly, kicking their feet up in the air and swinging their arms around.

At first, the younger children watched them with uncertainty. The twins were busy picking snowflakes of sugar out of each other’s hair and eating them. Darcy picked his sister up and swung

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her over his shoulder, moving exaggeratedly from side to side such that she swung precariously close to the ground. Her laughter, clear and bright as running water, set the rest of them loose.

Each sibling, determined not to dampen the joy of the others, put on a smile and danced. They danced and danced until the record was over. Then they played it a second time, and then a third until, exhausted, they held each other and swayed slowly together, like a tangle of seaweed deep in the ocean.

At last they collapsed on the living room carpet, hungry and content.

“I’m sure they won’t mind if we eat first,” Michaela said, and no one disagreed.

They ate the pie first. They only meant to taste it, but they were famished and it was warm and sweet. Then they roasted marshmallows on the stove until they were blackened and wrinkled like burnt paper and melted soft on the inside. They drank all the lemonade, chewing contentedly at the big chunks of sugar at the bottom. The boys ate Michaela’s nearly raw lamb, daring each other to swallow the bloodiest bits. And when they were all done, they toppled over one another on the tattered living room couch and fell asleep. They slept deeply, dreaming of recent memories that seem so distant in the minds of the young. They dreamt of their parents swimming in the pool, and the cousins they had never met. And they dreamt of America, a land they missed deeply and hardly knew- homesick for a world they didn’t remember.

At one-sixteen in the morning, Darcy woke abruptly. There was that awful curdling feeling in the pit of his stomach, the sour taste of adrenaline in his mouth. A feeling like falling. He listened for the sounds of his parents stirring in their bedroom above. Nothing but the crackling chill of silence. He crept out from beneath his siblings and reached for the television remote that hung precariously over the edge of their mother’s settee.

The bright, colorful sounds of the television lulled him back into a daze. And then, just as he was falling asleep again, he heard those same words his mother had used that afternoon. *Mayan*

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Calendar. He opened his heavy eyes. Dimly, dreamily, he read on a colorful banner at the bottom of the screen: “World population survives Mayan prophecy.” The news anchor, a pretty young Asian woman, was laughing with her head tossed back and her mouth open. It reminded him of something their mother had said once about tempting God. Darcy narrowed his eyes and pulled the crumpled cigarette from his pocket. He held up an imaginary lighter and flicked it.

“Well Scott, it seems like the end of the Mayan calendar was not meant to be the end of the world after all. People everywhere are celebrating their survival in fun and creative ways. We turn to Myesha from Times Square.”

He took a deep, shuddering pull of his cigarette and muted the television.

The end of the world?

He curled up on the cold marble floor and closed his eyes, the cigarette hanging from his mouth.

Had his mother and father really believed it was the end of the world?

As he fell asleep, he dreamt fleetingly of his mother dancing in a dark room, flitting in and out of the shadows like a pale, fragile moth. He dreamt of stone birds coming to life, and of real birds turning to stone. He dreamt of a fine mist of sugar and flour, wrapping the world up in its soft embrace. He wove in and out of sleep for hours until his sister crept out from beneath her siblings and stretched out next to him, grasping his fingers in her own warm, damp hand, and at last he slipped into the deep, dark embrace of sleep, and dreamt he was underwater.