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Centre Island Baby

Jamison Murcott
SUNY Purchase College

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Centre Island Bay

It is early, the sun brushing the tip of the horizon, the town still slumbering in their hazy homes. Down the beach, there is an AA meeting, the group's beach chairs firmly planted in the sand. The wind carries the sound of their hands clapping together to me. I gaze at them through the sunlight as I sit in my own beach chair, feeling the heat blanket my skin.

I often wonder about the stories they tell. Every Saturday morning, I find them at the far end of the beach, gripping their Styrofoam cups of coffee, and I think that one day I will walk over there. One day, I will sit in their circle and listen to their tales and memories. But not this time.

This time I am staring at them from a distance, hoping that if I listen hard enough, I will catch bits of their conversation on the breeze. I am perched just outside of the lifeguard room, a garage for the maintenance crew, with a golf cart to the left and a grimy picnic bench to the right.

The land wraps around the bay so that the tide pulls the water westward, following the contour of the shore before letting out into the Long Island Sound in the north. It is small and forgotten, a rocky little beach that faces the vast fields and looming mansions of the gated community across the water. It is often empty, save for the elderly couples and young families who sometimes remember the calmness of the bay. The water is never very deep, the depth only about eight feet during high tide. I shift in my beach chair and look back over at the meeting. Maybe they are forgotten too.

I look out over the water, the voices of the clambers resonating from their boats. The water is still, almost solid, as though it is only a picture of the bay. I listen to the clambers for just a moment longer, hearing the bellowing voice of the captain. Then I am in the garage, standing in front of a whirring fan.

There is the scent of sweat and sunblock. A familiar smell. Gabe is lying on a cot in the corner of the room, the metal legs bending under his weight.

He is snoring slightly, his body shuddering as he breathes and moans. "Have a little too much fun last night?" Ryder asks from the table, where he and Zach are playing cards. Gabe just moans again and rolls over on the cot. "Drunk bastard," Ryder says under his breath, and he and Zach chuckle. Then they are silent, focusing on their game as they throw cards onto other cards. There is the occasional cursing under their breath when one of them gains the advantage, but other than that, it is just the whirring of the fan and the sound of the cards hitting the table.

This is my world. Or part of it. But sometimes, most of the time, it feels like my whole world. This little beach, this tiled room, it closes in on you, engulfs you. And the people and places outside of this beach seem so far away, so unreal and dreamlike. As though it was all part of a different life, a different world.

I am on the stand when everybody else gets to the beach. First there is Monica, headphones in, lip-gloss perfect. She breezes into the room, drawing discreet stares from the guys. Then there is Leo, zipping up on his moped. He leans it against the side of the garage and slings his backpack over one shoulder, sauntering into the room. Addison arrives last, her car screeching to a halt, slamming the door shut with her foot as she grips her coffees in her hands.

The picnic bench trembles under Addison's body as she squeezes herself between Monica and Zach. There is the awkward exchange of:

"What's up?"

"Nothing, you?"

"Good actually, last night I went out and—"

"Oh, that's cool."

From the stand, I can hear the conversation stall, then die. There is the collective exhale of exasperation, the uncomfortable shifting in seats and the slow, but certain, exiting of the room. Without hesitation, they solemnly shuffle towards the stand, steadily gripping the painted wooden planks and pulling themselves up the tower. Leo slumps onto the bench next to me and Monica and Ryder stand on the platform slightly below us, all looking up at me with tired eyes.

As though born of slush and grime, Addison reeks of ignorant comments and tasteless jokes. Her skin secretes an odor, which could only be described as self-entitlement. Her hair is dark and greasy, her beady eyes unwavering in their stare; her nose rests on her face like a beak, always pointing at whomever she is judging. Sometimes I watch her shift in her seat or slightly adjust her shorts so the fat of her thighs spreads in the most flattering way. I study the way her lips twitch when she is preparing to interrupt someone or how she tugs at her limp hair when somebody teases her. I know that beneath the

grotesque smell of knock-off perfume and clinical beauty creams, there is a sad understanding that this is her life. At the good old age of twenty-four, Addison has settled into the mundane lifestyle of tiny accomplishments and average goals. It doesn't matter that she lives at home or that her parents fund her life, or that she believes that the world should hand her its most beautiful attainments. For Addison, life will forever be a summer job that pays well but dies when the weather changes.

Ryder's whistling reaches the room before he does. Swinging the lanyard of his keys, he whistles the tune to some nameless country song and aimlessly strolls into the garage. He places his hands on my bare shoulders, slowly rubbing my tanned skin as he leans in close and breathes in my ear. "Sup?"

I shrug him off me, and he steps aside, smiling as he takes the seat next to me on the bench. "Ryder, don't touch me. It's too hot to be touching people." I dramatically wave my hands to fan my face, then return to reading my book. Ryder reaches over and pulls the book from my hands, closing it and putting it aside.

"It's never too hot if I touch you in the right places." He winks at me and smirks.

I stare at him with pursed lips, unimpressed by his joke. "Ha ha," I say, reaching out to grab my book. "Funny. Now go away." Without giving me the book, Ryder stands and steps back.

"No," he says, walking around the table. "Let's play cards." He places my book out of reach and pulls out a deck of cards, already shuffling them before I can answer. I roll my eyes and nod, knowing that he won't leave me alone until I agree to play. Ryder focuses on the shuffling; I see his brows furrow and his forehead crease as his fingers maneuver the cards. Without pause, Ryder deals me my hand and wordlessly begins playing.

Outside of this beach, Ryder and I were strangers. Are strangers. Passing each other in the crowded halls of our high school, I am just a nameless face, simply a body he bumps into without apologizing. Here, we play cards and tell stupid stories about our friends, but once we wash the sand off our skin and change out of our lifeguard uniforms, it is as though the other one does not exist. When he slings his arm around his girlfriend and gets drunk at bonfires, when he sets off fireworks with his friends and runs from the cops, I am not real. I look at him now, studying the birthmarks on his arms, the way his blonde hair falls over his eyes, how his pouting lips are chapped from dehydration. I look at him now so I can remember him when I leave.

The boy that exists on Facebook and Instagram, who tweets nasty things to people he doesn't like, who sends snapchats of guns and cigars; he is not the same boy that sits across from me now, smiling at the cards he's dealt himself.

When Ryder leaves the beach, he leaves part of himself with it. As do I. As do all of us.

With careful footsteps, I walk out into the water, Zach gliding past me on the surfboard with Monica struggling to balance at the front. The glittering water cools my skin as I walk farther out, Ryder and Leo besides me. Perched on the stand is Addison, staring down at us as we retreat to the bay, stranding her on the empty beach.

When the water tickles my waist, I submerge myself completely, feeling the molecules of the water part for my body as I swim below the surface. I come up for air, letting the sweet summer fill my lungs, and swim towards the surfboard. Tommy, our boss, doesn't mind when we go swimming, he likes to think we're practicing for our lifeguard drills. The current of the water pulls us out of the swimming area until we are drifting in the middle of the bay, the occasional wave methodically rocking us as we rest our heads on the board and our legs dangle beneath us.

Under the water, Leo's leg brushes against mine. He looks at me through his sunglasses, the hint of a smile curling the corners of his lips. I hold his stare for a second before I am thrust underwater. I feel thick fingers grip my shoulders as they propel me downward, the water filling my mouth before I get the chance to hold my breath. The hands push me down until I reach the bottom, brown muck squishing between my toes. The pressure from above subsides as I am released. I crouch under the water, grabbing a handful of mud before my legs push against the ground and I glide back up to the surface.

I come up gasping for air, the salt water burning my lungs. The sounds of the surface world come back to me as I catch my breath: the rippling water lapping against the surfboard, the ringing bell of a buoy somewhere across the water, Zach's laughter as he throws back his head and opens his mouth, the sound shaking his limbs before escaping his body.

"What's the matter, Lila?" Zach says between his laughter. "Can't handle a little fun?"

It's a game we like to play, called Deep Sea Diver. You push somebody down, down until they reach the bottom. And if one person cannot push someone all the way down, a second person joins in so that you have two people pushing you instead of one. It's fun when you know to hold your breath, not so much when you almost drown.

Still coughing, I reach over to Zach and smash my palm onto the top of his head, the muck from below spreading over his hair and oozing down onto his face. Zach's laughter immediately halts, a faint echo softly bounces off the water then quickly floats away. Zach's face contorts with disgust—eyes

squeezed shut, lips puckered and nostrils flared—as he wipes the mud away with the back of his hand.

“Pretty funny, huh?” I spit at him once my lungs are void of water. Zach glares at me then ducks under the water, running his fingers through his tangled curls to wash the mud out of his pale blonde hair.

From the mouth of the garage, Gabe sticks his fingers between his lips and whistles, the high-pitched sound filling the bay. We all turn to look as Gabe sticks his hand in the air, gesturing for our return. “Squirt! Ryder! Let’s go!” He calls from the shore. Like eager pets, Zach and Ryder race towards the beach.

The boys emerge from the water, wet hair stuck to their cheeks and dripping bathing suits clinging to their thighs. They rush into the garage to grab their towels and sandals then hurry off to the parking lot, where Gabe has already lit a joint, the wispy smoke of marijuana escaping out a cracked window. I watch as Ryder throws himself into the front passenger seat, sucking on the joint like it is candy. Zach climbs into the back of the car and Gabe is driving away before the door is even closed.

At 5'11", Gabe is 240 pounds of beer and sausage links. He was a high school football player who didn’t know what kind of fish he was until he went to college, where the only way he could make himself feel bigger was by filling his chest with smoke. Zach and Ryder idolize Gabe’s blatant unwillingness to look any further into the future than his plans for that weekend, but laugh at the mediocrity of his life as if their same actions will have different results. The three of them take their lunch break together, disappearing for an hour, then slowly returning with glassy eyes and big stomachs. The rest of us exchange glances, but no one ever mentions the scent that lurks on their clothes.

“Monica,” Leo, the three of us still floating on the surfboard, says, “switch sits with me. Please.”

“And sit with Addison for half an hour? Yeah, I don’t think so,” she says without hesitation.

“Oh, come on, you know how long she stays up there. I’d rather just sit in silence for two hours than deal with her for even fifteen minutes.” Leo pauses, waiting for Monica to comply. She doesn’t. “Don’t make me pull the ‘boss’ card.”

Monica and I both laugh at this. “Please, Leo, you get an extra two dollars an hour. You don’t have any real power.” I say.

“Hey, I make the sitting schedule, so technically I have the power to make you sit with Addison all day long,” he replies.

“Well, maybe if you had taken the early shift instead of the late shift and had actually *made* the sitting schedule today, that would be true. But that’s just not the case here, is it?” Monica says decisively. Leo huffs and pushes off the board, swimming towards the beach.

There is a pause as we watch him splash his way to shore. Then Monica turns to me, saying, "He looks at you a lot."

"Excuse me?"

"Haven't you noticed? He's always looking at you."

"Oh. No, I guess I haven't." I have.

"I don't think it's like a creepy kind of staring. He's just...into you." Monica waits for me to say something. I just shrug, my blushing cheeks easily mistaken for too much sun and too little sunblock. "Would you, you know, get with him?" Monica asks, leaning into my answer.

I glance back towards the beach, where Leo is now slouched on the life-guard stand next to Addison. And he is looking at me, I swear, he is looking at me. "So you would?!" Monica concludes, noting the slight curl of my lips as I hold his gaze from across the water.

"No. No," I say. "I mean, probably not. I haven't really thought about it," I lie.

"Sure, okay," Monica says, thinking for a moment. "You can do better, anyway."

"Yeah, totally," I say, quietly, still thinking about Leo's leg brushing mine under the water.

Monica quietly eats her spring salad as she thumbs her way through a fashion magazine. I look over my book at her as she pauses to run her finger over the image of something she likes. Next to the magazine is her phone, which constantly buzzes with text messages. Addison sits across from Monica, her curious eyes falling on the open pages of the magazine.

Gasping dramatically, Addison snatches the magazine from Monica's hands and brings it up to her face, staring at the model on the paper. "Oh my god," she says excitedly, dragging out her words. "I love Victoria Beckham. She's honestly just the best," Addison squeals as she crinkles the magazine in her grip before giving it back to Monica. "I just love her."

"Addison," Monica says as she smooths the magazine, "that's not even Victoria Beckham."

"Sure it is," Addison says.

"No... Look," Monica holds out the magazine to show us the model, a tall brunette that most certainly is not Victoria Beckham.

"Oh, would you look at that. My bad." Addison shrugs her shoulders. Monica rolls her eyes and goes back to flipping through the magazine.

"Monica, have you heard anything new about Zach and Vinny?" I ask from my beach chair.

"Oh yeah, did they ever have, like, a confrontation?" Addison adds.

Monica looks over at Addison slowly then turns to me before she speaks. “Well, I only know what Ryder told me. You know about the whole cheating thing, right?”

“Yeah,” I reply, “Vinny hooked up with Priscilla.”

“Vinny is Zach’s friend. And Zach is dating Priscilla. And Vinny works at the beach on the other side of the street,” Addison says as though we don’t already know this.

“Yes, thank you, Addison, for clarifying,” Monica says. “So apparently Vinny finally met up with Zach yesterday, which is why Zach was late for work. And Zach beat the shit out of Vinny, like, no mercy, and he had to go to the hospital.”

“Is anything going to happen to Zach? Isn’t Vinny’s dad, like, a lawyer or something?”

“Yeah, I think he has his own law firm. I think Vinny’s pressing charges. I mean, if you ask me, I think it’s stupid, like, you did a shitty thing, so deal with it. Don’t go running to your mommy and daddy.”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” Addison interjects. “Cheating with someone isn’t illegal. Jumping someone is.”

I nod my head slowly, enjoying every little word that comes out of Monica’s mouth. I crave these stories, the insane “no way” kind of stories that you can’t believe actually happened. Monica tells me what she knows, a quick run down of the cheating, the fight, the aftermath, dragged out by Addison’s persistent side comments.

I crawl out of my beach chair and walk out of the garage, squinting my eyes as I scan the beach. To the left of the lifeguard stand is a young family, their sand toys scattered and half buried, Styrofoam boogie boards left just at the water’s edge. The mother and father corral their three children, all still in swim diapers, and plant them on sandy towels, wiping their hands before giving them sandwiches.

The sand crunches and shifts under my feet as I walk to the tower. Leo is stretched out on the wide seat of the stand, his limbs sprawled out and eagerly absorbing the sun. He sits up straighter and makes room for me on the bench. We sit in silence for a moment, taking in the shrieking laughter of the kids as they gobble up their lunch.

“So, when you gonna ask Addison out?” I ask, poking him in his side. He squirms away from my touch and swats at my hand.

“Ew, don’t say things like that.”

“What? Afraid she’s too good for you?” I tease, smiling as his face grows red.

He scoffs, sitting up even straighter. “Please, she’s not good for anything.” As if on cue, Addison’s shrill voice rings throughout the garage, ping-pong off the cement walls and finding its way to the stand, where goosebumps prickle

my skin. We turn to look at the garage, then glance at each other, shuddering simultaneously.

“Thank God she won’t be here next year,” I say to him, relishing the idea of an Addison-free summer.

“Doesn’t make a difference to me, I won’t be here anyway,” Leo says.

“Good thing too, you’re becoming too old to be a lifeguard. You’re so frail,” I say jokingly.

“Please, this is only your second year here. Once you’ve been here for five or six years like me and Gabe, you’ll get it. This job becomes tiresome.”

“What could be so tiresome about hanging out at a beach all day?”

“Trust me, you’ll see. It’s all fun and games right now, but once you’re done with college, like me... It’s time to move on.” I smile sadly and look over at the small family, the kids now strapped into their life vests and floating in the water.

Leo sighs deeply, the salty air filling his chest before he slowly exhales, his body seemingly collapsing in on itself. Before he breathes in, I count his exposed ribs, thinly covered by tan skin. Leo’s the type of guy who could eat fast food every day for the rest of his life and not put on a single pound. The drawstring to his bathing suit desperately clings to his hips as he ties it tightly, but I pretend not to notice the excess fabric scrunched around his waist. Instead, I notice the gentle curl of his lips. Instead, I notice his sunburnt cheeks and his calloused hands, and I smell his fading cologne mixed with sunblock. Instead of his bony torso and his lanky limbs, I notice that he is looking at me, through his sunglasses, and he is looking at my lips, just like I am looking at his.

“What are you looking at?” he asks, playfully. I hold his stare for just a moment longer, trying to see past the dark shades of his glasses.

“Nothing,” I say, smiling as I turn away. Leo is finite. He is not like Ryder or Monica, who lead opposite, glamorous lives. There is no secret persona, no mask, no mystery or enigma or charade. He is what he seems to be. I take comfort in knowing that my Leo is *the* Leo, that when he leaves this beach, he takes all of himself. He doesn’t leave pieces behind with the sunblock and whistles, he doesn’t lose himself when he loses the uniform to the washing machine. The Leo that clasps his hands at church, the Leo that bumps into me at the grocery store, he will have the same eyes that look at me now, he will have the same silvery voice that now fills my ears. He is real. And he is next to me. And all of him is next to me, every atom, every face, every voice, it is all right here, right on this tower.

I catch myself staring at him again, smiling at the beauty that is his simplicity. “You got something to say?” he says jokingly, but I just smile and shake my head slowly, knowing that the things I want to say are not meant to be heard on the stand.

We sit in silence together, feeling the sun beat down on our skin as we watch the small family eventually pack up their things and leave. Inside the garage, Gabe's low voice calls out the time: 4:00 p.m.

"Time to go?" Leo asks without looking at me.

"Yeah..." I reply.

"Well, see you tomorrow."

I get up slowly. Carefully climbing down the ladder, I look up at him just one more time. The sunlight frames his face. He waves his hand at me and I wave back, then wordlessly turn and walk to the garage.

The five-minute car ride home is peaceful. Transformative. I buckle my seat-belt, roll down the windows, and play the radio. The running wind courses throughout my car and washes the beach from my skin, pulling away the scent of sunblock and salt water. By the time I pull into my driveway, it is as though the bathing suit that hugs my body is the only thing that has followed me home from the beach.

Walking up to the front door, some faces become blurry as others come into focus. Names that I didn't remember at lunch time fill my head when I sit down for dinner. Jokes and stories that made me laugh as I lounged in the sun no longer make sense to me once I fall into my bed at night.

My mother hugs me when I walk in the door, her shirt stained with the tomato sauce that is now simmering on the stove. She holds my face in her hands, stroking my dark skin and asking me if I put sunblock on throughout the day. I nod but don't really remember.

"How was your day?" she asks, but when I start to answer, my mind draws a blank.

The pieces of stories that I have don't taste right in my mouth so, instead, I say, "Nothing."

"Nothing? You're telling me that you spent the entire day at the beach and yet you don't have a single story to tell?"

I shrug. "What do you want me to say? Nobody ever goes to the beach; there's not much to do when there isn't anyone to guard."

She sighs. "Well, what about those kids you work with? What are they up to?"

I think back to the card game with Ryder, to Zach playing Deep Sea Diver, and to sitting on the stand with Leo. But when I look at my mother and open my mouth to speak, I know she wouldn't understand. The reputations we have earned in this small town don't match up with the people I spend my day with. The names she associates with certain adjectives are also the names that find ways to keep us all entertained during the long days at the empty beach. Neither she nor my friends can comprehend the complexity of

the beach, the complexity of each individual lifeguard who sits on that tower and watches over the water.

So when my mother asks about my day, there is nothing to say, no tale to tell. Those stories belong to a different me, from a different world, made up of a rocky beach and a tiled garage.