

Day-bag

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On the beach, there is a gelatinous tube curled in the sand. It is transparent, the sand beneath it as visible as the flecks scattered on top. It sits unshrinking in the ocean breeze. I point at it with my left hand and hold the baby with my right.

‘Moon snail,’ I say.

The baby looks at me with a confused expression. I am seven months sober and this is the first time I’ve been allowed to take the baby out by myself.

‘Moon snail,’ I repeat.

He tugs on the long black hairs sprouting from my shoulders. I let out a yelp of mock pain and he laughs. Lauren used to roll over some nights and twiddle those hairs. She’d tease me and remind me that I was getting old. I would threaten to shave them. She’d say no. She’d say they were a reminder of how far I’ve come.

‘People think these are jellyfish that have washed ashore, but they’re wrong,’ I say, still motioning to the limp cylinder in the sand. ‘Grumps used to bring me and Aunty Sue here. But, he’d never take us on nice days like this, too many people. We woke up before the sun and drove down. The water was so cold our lips turned blue. We ran down the beach throwing these at each other, like cartoon kids throw snowballs. Grumps yelled at us, he thought they were jellyfish, he thought we’d get stung.’ I say all this to the baby. He is not listening.

The baby has spotted two young women sitting on towels, closer to the coastal tea-trees that separate the foreshore from the carpark. It's warm, but nobody is swimming. The woman on the right has a black ponytail pulled through the back of a black cap. From a distance she looks like Lauren; the baby is transfixed.

I feel silly talking to the baby now that I know the women are there. I walk to our towel and place him down. Next to him is the day-bag. The seams struggle to contain our provisions. There are teethers, comforters, rattlers, num-nums and enough first-aid supplies to patch up a battalion of toddlers. When I carry the day-bag I look awkward, like a schoolboy outside a changing room holding his girlfriend's purse.

I sit behind the baby so that he is between my legs. I smell the seaweed on the breeze, and imagine the women staring at the love handles spilling over my board shorts. I am getting chubby again. But now I am the kind that prompts people to say I look healthy. Before, people whispered that I looked puffy. There was a period between these two when I was slim, when the white-knuckled sleepless nights were filled with marathons.

I only have a day-bag because Blair has a day-bag. Blair does not look awkward when he carries his day-bag. When Blair carries his day-bag he looks like he's being photographed for GQ: 10 Hot Tips for Hot Dads'.

We met Blair at baby swimming lessons. He was always early, standing around the edges of the steamy indoor pool, day-bag slung over his bare, hairless shoulder. He wandered around to the mums, offering wet wipes and teething gel to the reprehensibles who had forgotten their own. Blair has an ugly

child. I call him peanut, because of the shape of his head. Lauren does not like this. She told me that it was a metaphor for my immaturity. I told her that's not how metaphors work. She told me that I was a metaphor for an asshole.

The baby has wandered off. He is crawling towards the breaking waves. I crawl after him. He turns to look at me and then pauses, before reaching down into the yellowing sand and retrieving a jagged amber disc. He holds it up, the light reflects through it and he's awed. His mouth opens. His new toy is the base of a broken bottle.

I dive forward, snatching the glass from his fingers and knocking him over in the process. We lay in the sand and stare at each other, for a moment. Then the wailing starts. My hands are trembling, but I manage to scoop him up with one, while the other slips the shard into my pocket. We bounce together and I repeat the mantras I've learnt. Good boy. It's okay. Good boy. Shh shh. It's okay. A lifeguard carrying a large bag of styro-foam signs walks past and gives a disapproving look. I can feel all the eyes on the beach on me. The mantras do not work.

The baby is still crying when I place him back on the towel. I reach inside the day-bag and grab two deflated orange floaties. I wave one above his face and bring the other to my mouth. The tears slow. He watches the flag fly back and forth. I repeat the act with the other and then slide them on to his arms.

There is nobody in the water when the first wave licks my toes. I walk in up to my waist and with my hands under his arms, I float him on his back. He lays still, perfectly buoyant, rising and falling with the tide. I feel his muscles slowly relax, except his eyes, which stay squinted to block out the sun. He smiles for the first time today. I taste the salt water on my lips.

I see a lifeguard on the shore. I cannot see his face beneath the broad-brimmed hat and mirrored sunglasses. I only know that he has zinc painted on his cheeks. He motions me to come back with his hands. The baby has only just stopped crying, so I decide to stay where I am.

'You've gotta come in,' he yells, cupping his hands around his mouth. 'There's bluebottles'. The baby is startled by the sound. His trance is broken. He turns his head and takes in the mass of spectres floating around us. I notice them too, their ghostly chains draping behind them. My inner monologue produces a string of expletives. I am a metaphor for an arsehole.

At baby swimming lessons, they play a game where pool toys are thrown in the water and the babies swim to them, retrieve them and place them back in the toy basket. Of course, the babies can't actually swim, so the parents place one hand under their bellies and guide them towards the toys while they splash their arms and legs. There is something about our situation that reminds the baby of this game.

The lifeguard is calling louder now. He's jumping up and down and waving his hands in an exaggerated movement above his head. Anyone would think that he was drowning. The baby thrashes his arms and legs desperately, trying to reach the toys circling us. I am aware of the sea air on my skin, slowly pickling me.

The lifeguard has disappeared now. I turn to see him sprinting down the beach towards the lifeguard tower. The baby is starting to get tired. His body relaxes, one muscle at a time. I feel him melt into me, as if asking me to mind his body, for a moment, while he rests.

People who had previously been lazing on their towels, have now formed a mob on the shore. They stare at us, a few begin to yell things. I see the lifeguard returning with a paddleboard. The baby closes his eyes. The spirits swirl closer.

'Oi dickhead,' a man calls from the sand.

Blair would not be here, I think. Blair would've checked the surf reports before he came. Blair would know what to use to treat bluebottle stings, but I do not.

The baby drifts into a light sleep. When he sleeps, he pushes his lips into a pout. Lauren used to say that I did the same, she'd take photos of me while I slept to prove it. I would get mad then, but it seems silly now. Suddenly, the baby's eyes open, his body jolts, he must have caught himself falling.

I feel my arms snatch the baby upwards, lifting him over my head. His eyes widen, they survey the coastal seam; they see the tide engulf the debris littering the sand, they know that somewhere underneath the breaking waves, the muffled rhythm of the ocean is polishing it, preparing to spit it back out.

I feel my feet carry us out of the water and then sink into the cold wet sand. The crowd radiates heat, as they part for me and let me return to my towel.

'Are you right in the head mate?' A voice asks.

'I think so,' I reply.

The baby buries his face into me and I hold him for a second, before placing him down.

'You're clearly not, if you're taking a kid in there,' the voice says.

'I didn't know,' I say.

The baby is on his stomach now, hands outstretched, he's holding a mass of clear jelly.

'Moon snail,' I say, dropping to my knees and then on to my side.

'That's not a moon snail,' I hear the voice say.

I feel a sharp pain in my thigh and reach down to investigate. My hand returns caked in blood and sand.

'What the fuck,' says the voice.

I reach down again and this time I feel where the shard of glass has split my board shorts and lodged in my leg. I feel hands groping me, trying to help and I swat them away. From the day-bag, I pull out a half-melted hydralite block. I unwrap it and hand it to the baby, who gobs it greedily. I grab the water bottle and bandages. I tear the glass from the skin then wash and dress the wound.

The crowd must have protested, but all I remember is how beautiful you looked: sunkissed, half-dozing, your lips painted the colour of a candied sea.

'Moon snail,' I said to you again. 'Moon snail.'