

House-Beach

As Bea yanks the door open, an avalanche of sand falls at her feet. It's the first time she's been back—the place is so full of another life that walking the floor would have been like treading on glass shards.

In the sunlight that streams through the back door, she sees sand blowing into the back of the house. Years before, she stood at that door looking out towards the beach, waiting for him to come home. To be a fisherman's wife—Fish Missus, Tom called her—was all Bea wanted then, that and a child perhaps. Sand smothers that life now. Sand. Swelling against the walls. Pushing up under the kitchen table. Reaching to the windowsills.

The walls are the colour of a milky sea. They make the house almost disappear into the ocean that lies beyond the back door. Only the tops of their furniture and lights hanging from a white ceiling define the perimeters of the house and make it seem real. Hand to the door jamb, Bea bends to remove her sandals. She steps up onto the sand, sinking, sliding down, finding her feet again, and then she moves into the lounge room.

Beneath the sand, a memory stirs.

'I'm only half alive.' This is Tom, sitting on the carpet that day as she comes in laden with celery and breadsticks and cheese. Juggling parcels, a handbag, and bread that is sliding from its tissue-paper sheath, she edges through the doorway. 'I've only been gone an hour.'

'Kiss me,' he says, rising to take parcels from her arms, bundling her into an embrace that is as tender and passionate as it is ungainly.

'Let me get this lot through to the kitchen. Then you can tell me all about this half-life of yours. Okay? Tom? Okay?'

Much as they had thrived in the shack while he fished and she painted driftwood and half-buried fences, Tom was like a trapped bird in these stormy months when he couldn't

take the boat out. Their life by the sea, which offered up its fruit as if they were gods, was less stable even than the sand.

‘What I mean,’ Tom says, salt spilling from his eyes, ‘is, when you’re gone, it feels like I’m drifting, when you’re out, when I can’t—’

Dropping the parcels, Bea covers his mouth with her fingers. ‘I know.’ She pushes into his arms. ‘It’s this weather Tom, it’d get to anyone, you’ll be right when you can take the boat out again, you’ll see.’ Quivering as a chill runs down her thighs, she holds him hard. ‘Don’t try to take her out when it’s like this, will you. Promise me Tom. Promise!’

He whispers the name of the boat. *Bea-utiful*.

Wind slams the door as they slide to the floorboards, each lost in the other’s mouth, celery and cheese and bread forgotten. Their lovemaking is desperate. As the waves pump against the shore beyond the dunes, he gives her all that is left of him.

Bea shoulders the memory aside—the child they made that day would be in school now had its tiny life not trickled through her fingers in the whiteness of a hospital ward. She walks across the lounge-beach and down the hallway to the door at the back of the house. The sand is deepest here. Ducking outside, she steps into a vista of azure water that glints like fish scales, like the laughter of children.

Sage-green stalks of coastal vegetation peer in at the window, and under the sill, somewhere beneath the bank of sand, the Xerophytes she planted will still be alive. Tom’s lantern hangs by the door. It’s rusting.

When they bore his body home, they laid him inside for a while, on the table. Later, when they wrenched him from her arms, she followed their wet footprints out through the front, leaving the back of the house gaping open. Zephyrs ushered in waves of sand behind her, sweetly, as if breathed by babies. She never went back and now the weatherboard house is disappearing into the beach.

Yielding to tears, she turns back to the room that was once their kitchen. There they made a boychild. There Tom's body lay like a pale god. Bea understands now what love hid from them then, the awful truth that all happiness is illusion.

As she walks back through the house-beach, a glint of light flashes. There is a man at the front door. His watch catches the sunlight.

'Is this your house?' He is squatting so he can see her beneath the lintel.

'It was. It is. Yes, it's my house.'

He points. 'I'm a little way down the beach.'

'Er, you better come in.'

The man ducks inside and when he stands the top of his head knocks the ceiling. He bends a little.

'I'd ask you to sit but we'd have to dig out the chairs.'

The sound of his laughter reminds her of seagulls calling in the blue. 'That's fine,' he says. 'I like it like this.'

The man's skin is like chamois leather. His eyes are dove-grey. Although she hasn't opened a tube of paint since leaving the house, Bea finds herself imagining how she would mix that colour. His boardshorts make him look as if he is standing in seawater. The white shirt is crumpled and undone, and it sits askew on his broad shoulders as if thrown on at the last minute. She knows he'll remove it when he goes.

Watching him move around the walls, studying her paintings, Bea finds that she was smiling. She's not used to that.

She left the city at 5 am and drove up to the beach, determined that an estate agent would put the house on the market. She is ready to move on. She's finished with making beds and cleaning bathrooms in hospital wards too. Wanting to prepare herself for what she would find after all this time, she had come by the house first.

‘I like the paintings.’

Bea sits on the sand and leans against the top of a faded armchair. From there she can see the ocean winking like a jewel box filled with diamond necklaces, marcasite chokers and sapphire earrings. ‘People have helped themselves to some of the paintings, but I’d say the old fellow in the shack by the rocks has kept an eye on the place. It’s a while since I’ve been here.’

‘Santiago, I call him. Every time I ask, he says he hasn’t caught a fish for months, when I know he has. Afraid I’ll hit him up for a fillet or ten.’

A muscle in her throat twitches. ‘You’re not a fisherman, are you?’ She doesn’t want him to be a fisherman.

The man sits. ‘God no. I’d starve if I had to catch my own food. I restore furniture. Sorry, I’m Josiah Wells,’ he says, stretching across to take her hand. ‘Everyone calls me Joe. Except my mother.’

‘Beatrix Gordon.’ His hand is rough and hard, his grip strong. ‘We moved here about ten years ago.’

‘You painted these?’

She smiles.

‘They’re bloody good. I rent a house just along the dunes but I wouldn’t mind setting up permanently. There work around here.’

The sand is the proverbial elephant in the room. Bea wonders that she feels no need to explain it to the man, Joe, who’s at ease on her house-beach. He seems at ease with everything. Except that shirt. He’s itching to shrug that off. She is smiling again.

‘Always wondered about this house. Never seen anyone about.’

‘No. I’ve been away.’

‘The reason I came—I saw your car, and wondered, would you think of selling?’

Bea picks up a fistful of sand. Under there, under the sand, are floorboards and a Turkish kilim—trappings of the life she shared with Tom. As she lets the sand fall through her fingers, an afternoon breeze carries it towards the man.

‘No,’ she says, ‘I’m going to move back.’ Bea is surprised to learn this.

‘Ahh good, that’s good.’ There’s a pause, then he says, ‘Gunna leave it like this?’

And they’re laughing.

‘Maybe. Housework is overrated.’

They talk like this until the jewel box turns to gold. They talk of bentwood chairs and getting paint out of the grooves in silky oak furniture. She mentions Tom, not the long months of depression, not their son. And she explains about the beach.

He understands. ‘The waves will heal the weary soul.’ He lifts his chin towards the side window. ‘You should come for a drink. How’s Saturday?’ And then he goes.

Her fingers dig into the sand. Memories whisper up and ripple out towards the beach, and as the sun moves towards the horizon, the bling on the ocean surface is blinding. Bea would close the back door, but for that she’d need a shovel and half an hour. She imagines Joe’s shirt slung over one shoulder, and she smiles.