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Tropism

He lies on the beach. His arms out. His stomach turned toward the sun. He doesn't move. Only the ocean moves. In out. Out in.

this morning a young boy was caught in an undertow at waikiki beach witnesses say the boy was learning to swim and got away from his mother when he was pulled out to sea in a

experts predict that u.s. forces will be bound to the area for at least another year if not more while control is slowly returned to the iraqi government in other news experts

kicked off of dancing with the stars in last night's round and he'll be here with his partner this morning to show al roker some of the moves that helped him to make america's most popular

Luke stood over her.

"Mama, Krissy's trying to talk to you."

"Juicemamajuice," Krissy said.

Ana awoke in the half-light that clawed through the blinds and slid her hand across the familiar weave of the rent-to-own couch. Krissy hopped up and down in her footed pajamas.

"Juicemamajuice."

She held up the dinosaur cup with both hands.

"You want orange juice?"

Ana turned off the blue INPUT screen on the TV, took the cup from her daughter, and went to the fridge in the dark military-issue kitchen. She filled the cup, returned it, and watched Krissy pad out of the room. Then she closed the refrigerator door, and its yellow light disappeared.

A helicopter buzzed overhead. Ana felt like they had her surrounded so she couldn't escape. They called the base a *camp*, reminding her of concentration camps, internment camps. She had come here on a plane, but now planes were being hijacked and crashed, incinerating in

midair. If something happened to her, if she were attacked and invaded, she wondered if anyone would ever know. People back home hadn't seen her in two years because she'd been stuck on this island. And even if the ocean receded, and they were finally able to get to her, they would find her, curled into the ground like a fossil, crushed and broken on the beach. A grain of sand.

Victor once said the sand was made of billions and billions of particles, pieces of cartilage and bone from whales and fish and people. Pieces of everything that lived and died in the water. There was nothing pristine or pure about it, nothing that should be advertised on vacation posters. The soft, white sand was just the remains of dead animals.

She wished Victor were there to have the talk with Luke.

*and my friend elmo has a
very special friend who is
a goldfish can you believe
it do you know what
a goldfish's favorite
pastimes are let's go ask
her and find out what*

*just add a little bit of
lemon zest to the
salmon and you have a
healthy meal full of
omega-3 fatty acids
which most americans
are lacking in and*

*consult your physician
before taking and do not
take if you have any
of the following
symptoms sleeplessness
drowsiness suicidal
thoughts or persistent*

"What?" Luke answered from the living room. His voice was so deep for a six-year-old, thought Ana.

"Turn off the TV," she told him.

Luke shuffled into the kitchen. Hair combed back wet. A buttoned-up shirt. The glasses a size too large for his face, magnifying the skin halfway down his cheek. Glasses were expensive and TriCare didn't cover them. And these were the correct prescription, she reminded herself. He would grow into them. She thought he looked more like Victor every day, and it was getting harder and harder to look at him.

"Sit down for a minute," she said.

And she began to tell him about Staff Sergeant Gaines and Captain Hague. As she talked, Luke kept pushing the buttons on the black watch that Victor had given him, a huge plastic disc like a flying saucer that looked funny on his skinny arm. *Click, click. Click, click.* She told him a helicopter had gone down in a lake. *Click, click. Click, click.* She answered some questions about the desert. *Click, click. Click, click.* She didn't answer the questions about death.

Click click click click click click click.

She wanted to pull the watch off his arm, but she took a deep breath. "Your sister's still taking a nap. Do you want to watch a movie?"

"No, thank you," he said, scratching his eye under the enormous lens.

"Yes, go get a movie. Get *Mary Poppins*."

"We've watched it a million times," he said.

"That's okay."

Ana loved *Mary Poppins*. Places that turned from real to cartoon. Children who could sing and dance all on their own. Floating and flying and raspberry ice and women who sailed away on umbrellas, up into the light of the clouds.

Luke slid the movie into the DVD player. It made a whirring noise, then stopped.

"Mom, it—"

"Oh, it's scratched. What did I tell you about putting the DVDs back in their case after you watch them? If you leave them out like that, they get scratched."

"But you were the last one to watch it."

Her heart was pounding. Her palms were sweating.

"Go to your room."

*a roadside bomb went off
killing two servicemen
and seven afghan
civilians a spokesman for
the military said that the
humvee was en route to a
mission in the al-anbar*

*forecast for oahu is
calling for clear skies
the rest of the week and
only a twenty percent
chance of showers over
the koolaus for the
weekend so get out the*

*younger children it's
important to keep them
stimulated it's been
proven that children
acquire knowledge at a
much more rapid pace
if exposed to outside*

"Mom, do people itch after they die?"

"What? No. You can't feel anything after you die. You need to pick up those Legos off the floor."

"And you know for sure they're dead. You have to put them in the ground because they're dead. And they're not coming back." He stared at her through the huge lenses. "Right?" His face tensed. "Right, Mom?"

"Yes, that's right. Pick up those Legos off the floor."

"I already did."

She looked over at the rug. The Legos were gone. He had pieced them all together and put

them away. Now he stood there watching her, studying her, until he finally left the living room without another word.

Outside the sun dissolved until the only light left was the light from the TV screen.

"Mama?"

"Hmm?" She looked up to see Luke's glasses peering at her over the arm of the couch.

"I'm hungry."

"You can have some of those crackers on the table."

"When are we gonna eat dinner?"

She turned over and tried to look outside, but the blinds were closed tight.

"I don't know. What time is it?"

Luke looked at his watch, held it up, adjusted his glasses, then showed the numbers to her.

"I guess it's dinner time, huh? Do you want mac and cheese again?"

"Yes."

"Okay, let me watch five more minutes of my show, and then I'll make it. Will you go set out the milk and butter for me?"

witnesses reported that they saw the young boy struggling in the water not too far from shore and a lifeguard was called over but had a hard time getting out to

will be the next survivor voted off the island in the ultimate test of life and death skills tune in for the final episode of survivor check your local listings for times

phones from the largest provider in the nation with fewer dropped calls so that you can stay in touch with friends and family members wherever they

Once the kids had eaten and gone to bed, she sat at the kitchen table to write a letter to Victor. She wrote about the weather and Luke's tooth and the clothes that turned pink in the washer. But after looking at what sounded like a laundry list of meaninglessness, she put down the pen and let it roll off the edge of the table. Writing letters to him was like sending a message in a bottle. Who knew how or if it would reach him? Or if the ink would smear and wash away as it crossed the Pacific? Or did it also cross the Atlantic? She crammed the letter into the empty box of mac and cheese and threw it in the trash. If only she could talk to him, she thought. If only he would be standing there when she turned around.

"How sure are you?" Victor had asked, only a month before he left.

"Number three," she had told him. "I have a feeling it's a girl."

But then one horrible morning it was gone. Ana had secretly thought one more would have been enough. With three children, Victor would have left the Marine Corps and they would have moved to the mainland, into a house with no fences, and the only wars they would have seen would have been in the movies they watched together on the couch.

When she was pregnant with Luke, Victor came home every day for lunch and made her peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and they would eat together in front of the TV, sharing a dented snack tray, her head on his shoulder, his arm around her, watching Jerry Springer.

"So fake," they would say together.

And when Krissy was born he promised Ana that he would get out of the Marine Corps and that they would move back home. But the war had broken the promises. Like the pie-crust promises in *Mary Poppins*. "Easily made, easily broken."

She thought of Luke and the DVD. She *had* watched it last. Sometimes it was like an actress was playing her, living in that strange cinderblock house, acting as mother to her children while she sat on the couch, the border between real and cartoon becoming harder to distinguish, like the chalk pictures on Mary Poppins' sidewalk that washed away in the rain. Sitting there she stayed very still, so still that it felt like she was attached to the ground, her heart sinking somewhere behind her ribs. And for a few seconds, she felt like her heart would stop.

*during a week when the
american casualty count
has hit its highest number
in the last three months
members of congress are
starting to ask whether or
not u.s. forces should even*

*vacation getaway
packages starting at
just one hundred
ninety nine dollars to
neighboring islands and
we also offer flights to
las vegas and san*

"Can we go to the beach today?"

It was the fifth time Luke had asked that week. Ana sighed and didn't look up, but surprised herself by saying, "Okay." He catapulted out of bed and threw on his glasses, as if he needed to see clearly to really believe that she was there, offering him the ocean.

"Yes!" He threw his arms in the air like an Olympian.

Ana hated the ocean, but she would treat them that day, she thought. She would take her

children to the beach and maybe teach them to swim, build a sandcastle with windows and stairs and bridges, show them how to look for seashells, and swing them around in the water. Before they moved to Hawaii, she had fantasized about spending every afternoon on the beach, waltzing along the shoreline in a bikini and sarong, brown and slender, Victor sliding his hand across her back and pulling her close in the surf.

But now she detested this island, its sand whipping against her body, rubbing her as dull and expressionless as sea glass. And the ocean was huge and frightening and anonymous. A person could lie down on a pink alligator raft and just disappear.

They followed her into the kitchen and watched her make pancakes, Luke yelling, "Now flip!" when each was ready to be turned. Afterward Ana was tired and leaned back in her chair at the kitchen table as she watched her children squeeze puddles of syrup onto their plates. She reached over to push back Krissy's hair before it dragged across a pancake.

"How long 'til Daddy comes home?" Luke asked, syrup glazing his forearms and fingers, the light reflecting off his glasses, reminding Ana of binoculars.

"Go look at the calendar."

He slipped off his chair and ran to the refrigerator.

"Each page is a month, right?"

People were gone in degrees, Ana thought. There were moments and hours and bedtimes and meals when Victor was gone just a little. And then there were the quiet moments when he had emptied the house and taken everything with him in an ugly green bag over his shoulder.

She felt the heaviness again, the pressure on her chest, the hitch in her breathing. In and out, she told herself. Out and in.

"When do we get to go to the beach?"

Luke was standing next to her, mouth full of pancake, syrup outlining his lips like an insect. She sighed and could tell that Luke knew what it meant.

"You said we could go to the beach."

"I know. But I think it's going to rain."

"Huh-uh!" Luke ran to the sliding glass door. Pressing his sticky hands against it, he scanned the yard and sky. "It's not. I can tell. It's not even cloudy."

"I don't think so."

"But you said—"

"I know what I said. But I don't want to drive down there. And we'll go to the aquarium this weekend. Put on your swim trunks. You can play in the sprinkler later this afternoon."

"But you said we could build sand castles." His usually deep voice went high and squeaky.

"You don't want to build a sand castle, do you? If the ocean doesn't ruin it, the rain will." She heard her own words and hated herself for saying them.

Luke returned to his pancake and finished it with his arm resting on the table, his head leaning into it. Ana could only sit in her chair, finishing her orange juice and trying not to cry as she envied the white clouds traveling outside.

There would be no swimming in the ocean that day. They would eat their breakfast and lunch and dinner and they would watch TV and they would go to bed and no one would ever know they were there.

*and scientists are
beginning to study the
properties of shark
cartilage in efforts to
understand why it seems
helpful in fighting cancer
samples taken at the*

*over one hundred
regular channels and
over fifty premium
channels plus our watch
on demand package
which can give you
access to even more*

*and now the gi bill is
making college even
more affordable to
military personnel and
their families while
giving individuals the
opportunity to go to*

Swatting at a pair of mosquitoes, Ana watched Luke and Krissy jumping like crickets in the spray of the lawn sprinkler, running across the yard and sliding on the pink alligator raft into the swampy grass. She sat at the picnic table on the patio, sifting through the small pile of mail in her lap until she found an envelope from Victor. Inside was a little packet. Maybe a necklace. She slid it under the pile and waited to open it, giving herself something to look forward to as she read the letter. He missed her. Missed the kids. He had made a couple of charges to the bank account for new boots. Hot. Doing fine. Wished she would write to him. Send pictures.

She ran her fingers over his words, wondering where he was sitting when he wrote the letter, whether he was alone in a green tent or in a white room full of people, what he thought about before he fell asleep at nights, if he showed people their picture or kept it to himself, hidden safe in a pocket of his cammies. She could tell there was much he was keeping from her.

She wrapped a towel around Krissy and pulled the little wriggling body into her lap. Krissy pointed to the packet.

"What that?"

"I don't know. It's from Dada. Let's see what it is. Wanna see what it is?"

"Yeah," Krissy whispered, stroking the envelope.

They turned it over. In Victor's black wiry handwriting it said, "A little piece of Iraq." Ana

flicked the packet against her palm, opened it, and poured the contents into her hand.

"What that?" Krissy asked again.

"It's sand," Ana told her, trying to sound as if she had expected it.

Krissy took the packet and shook it until all the sand spilled onto the porch.

"Sand, Mama, sand."

"Sand," Ana repeated. She looked up at Luke, still running through the sprinkler, and said, "Come on, Luke. Let's eat."

Luke ran a wrist across his face and reached over the splintered picnic table for the mustard. Ana eyed the snot crusted under his nose as she took a paper towel off the shriveled hot dogs.

"Wipe your nose."

The moon had already appeared in the sky, even though the sun still shone in the west. The sun and moon were lying in the same sky. Ana didn't know why this happened, but it seemed to happen a lot in Hawaii. Luke pointed.

"Look Mama! I can see a lady in the moon!"

"A lady?" she said without looking, using a paper plate to fan another mosquito away from Krissy's uneaten pineapple. "No. It's supposed to be a man in the moon. A man. But that's not real. It's just something people say."

"Why?"

"I don't know. They just do. Go close the back door. The bugs are getting in the house."

the protesters gathered at the honolulu courthouse and outside the gates of pearl harbor military base to voice their anger at u.s. policies in iraq a crowd that included a

woman was found dead in her apartment in waimanalo last night local police talked to family members but no one seemed to know what she had been

talked to said the boy's father is apparently a marine currently serving in iraq while his family waits for him at marine corps base hawaii in kaneohe but

That night as she wrangled them into their pajamas, Luke asked, "Mama, are you gonna watch a movie?"

"Shhh. I don't know. Go brush your teeth."

"How old do you have to be to die?" asked Luke.

"I don't know, honey. That's a silly question."

"It's a stupid question?"

"No, not a stupid question. Just a silly question for a little boy to ask."

"How old was Mister Gaines?"

"Juicemamajuice," said Krissy.

Luke went to the couch and turned on the news. Ana picked up the remote, changed the channel to a cartoon, and dropped the remote back onto the couch.

"Do we watch too much TV?" Luke asked. "Are kids supposed to watch this much TV?"

"Probably not. I don't know."

"Could you die from watching too much TV?"

"Luke."

"What if you watched it for three whole days and never got up?"

"No. Please quit asking me questions."

Luke flipped the channel back to the news.

News was something Ana tried to avoid watching. It was too shadowed in shades of black and blue, like a bruise. Hours of people just talking talking talking.

"He's a Marine! Look, Mom! Look! He's a Marine! Does Daddy know that guy?"

A Marine in desert-camouflage was being interviewed from Baghdad.

"I don't know," Ana said.

She turned the channel back to cartoons, but as soon as she set down the remote again, Luke grabbed it and flipped right back to the news.

"Stop it. Leave it on cartoons. You don't need to be watching this."

"Why?"

"It's not for kids."

"Mom, if somebody watched TV for, like a week, without stopping, would they die? If they didn't blink or anything?"

"Okay, that's enough for tonight. Bedtime. Lights out."

"Is tomorrow when we go to the aquarium?"

"Yes."

"Can we go to the beach too?"

"We'll see."

Ana kissed her children goodnight, and the glow of the TV screen filled the room with liquid blue.

They followed a herd of kids down into the aquarium's dark maze of fish tanks, shuffling along behind strollers, past the small neon tetras and seahorses, stingrays, jellyfish and huge

jacks that were bigger than Krissy. It reminded Ana of the blue banks of TVs behind the news anchors, walls of blue screens that they were waiting to fill with terrible things. The darkness made her nervous. Like that hole in the bottom of the sea. She was ready to cut through the crowd and get out, but Luke lingered in front of each tank. She tapped his shoulder to prod him along.

"There's people waiting on us. You're not missing anything. They're just swimming."

"Mom, I wasn't ready," Luke complained, as she steered him away from a tank of butterfly fish. He stopped again. "What's this one say?"

She stepped closer to the tank. "Semicircle angelfish." She studied the fish, black with blue and white lines across it. Luke tapped on the glass, but the fish seemed oblivious—not moving to or from the tapping, but gracefully pushing its curved, thick body back and forth through the artificial reefs.

"Stop it! Don't do that. Just let him swim in peace."

"Can he see me?"

"Probably not."

Krissy had already fallen asleep in her stroller.

"I think he's watching me," said Luke. "Maybe he thinks *we're* the ones in a fish tank."

"Maybe."

"Mama, can we go see the seals?"

They passed through another corridor walled with glowing blue rectangles, Luke tugging on Ana's wrist until finally they were back outside in the light. They found a place at the rail of an outdoor pool, where brown seals were scooting across wet pavement like fat, whiskered generals. Luke pointed to a plaque on the rail.

"What does that sign say?"

"It says monk seals are native to the Hawaiian Islands, then it talks about how they are endangered."

"Does that mean they're all going to die?" Luke was very quiet. As if he hadn't expected something so serious to present itself there in that place full of splashing and swimming.

"I don't know," she answered.

"Are people gonna help them?"

"I don't know. I don't know how they do that. Let's go. It's too hot."

Right before the park exit they passed a tall round aquarium, more like a small building than a fish tank. One side was a wall of glass for watching the fish as they swam together in the same direction, in constant motion, like they were lapping a racetrack. Around and around

they swam, and every time they passed the clear window they all turned sideways. It was like the winking glimmer from the movement of a silver necklace, thought Ana.

Krissy woke up sweating and began to cry. Luke was swinging from Ana's hand.

"What are those fish doing?"

"Hang on. Let me read this."

Tropism is the turning of an organism in response to a stimulus, either towards or away from it. In this case, the stimulus is the sun and the fish turn the tops of their bodies toward it to orient themselves under the water.

"I guess they think the window is the top of the ocean because there's light coming through it. So they turn sideways because they think they're going the right way. They just swim around and around like that because they don't know which way is up, which way is the real top of the water. See?"

Luke watched for a moment, then asked, "But what happens when it's nighttime?"

She didn't even try to answer.

"Now can we go to the beach?" he asked.

Still staring at the turning fish, Ana gave in.

"Yes."



Ana wonders when his body got so brown. Brown like a little seal. Brown like the tiny pieces of sand and shell. All brown except for the white of his neck that stretches, reaches, exposed to the sun. A little pool of water in his belly button bumps, bumps, bumps as the lifeguard presses. And she is above her son, rubbing his hand, his shoulders, his forehead. Kissing the salt from his cheeks. Holding his prunish fingertips against her palms like she did when he was an infant and his fingers wrapped around hers for the first time.

The lifeguard pushes. In and out. Out and in. Luke is still not breathing.

"Are you his mother?" asks the lifeguard. Finally. Quietly. Sitting back on his heels.

"Yes!" she tells him. She looks up at the sky, her face wide. The sand below her knees has shifted. Carefully she takes Victor's watch from Luke's wrist, rubs the red marks left by the band, and holds him against the base of her throat.

Out and in, the water moves. In and out.

