SALVAGE

He watches the tracks his fingers make, the sand hot on the surface, cool where he scrapes underneath. Sunlight beats against his shoulders, and occasional laughter reaches him from the nearest group of college kids.

Making shadow, they stand over him, his father and his father’s newest girlfriend, their faces flattened by snorkel masks, her body dripping saltwater onto his arm.

‘You should’ve come out with us,’ his father says.

‘You would have loved it.  Wouldn’t he have loved it?’ she says, something he can’t see cupped in her hands.

‘I’ll get us some drinks,’ says his father, prising off his mask and throwing it onto a lounger, striding past the college crowd up the beach towards their hotel.

A large spiky shell drops down beside him, close to his wrist. The girlfriend is twisting, removing her snorkelling gear. The shell’s pinky surface attracts the light, gritty water trickling from its insides, leaking into one of the trenches he has carved in the sand.

She flops onto her towel, leans forward, smooths sunscreen all the way down each leg.  Her movements make slight folds in her belly, pick out the ridges of her spine.  Eventually, she rolls onto her stomach, her breasts squashed out at the sides.

‘I need you,’ she says, pulling at the string of her bikini top, letting it fall open at her back.

The boy squints behind his sunglasses, looks beyond her, pretends he hasn’t heard what she said.

‘Hey, you!’ she says, lifting up onto her elbows, so that she momentarily separates herself from her clothes.  ‘Watch where you’re looking, or I’ll have something to say to your Dad about it.  I need you to rub some lotion where I can’t reach.’

Slowly, he pushes himself to standing, before crouching to hook the shell onto one hand, fingers sliding a little way inside.

‘No-one said you could have that,’ she says. He steps over her, kicking a dart of sand onto her shins as he goes.

One of the college guys, the quiet blond one, the one who hasn’t been swimming, is prying open a cooler as he approaches: he fishes out a beer, lies back down. The boy lingers, brushes something from his ankle, achieves eye contact over his shades.

Two little girls pass between them, each one licking an ice-cream, the smaller hugging a beach-ball under one arm. The snap of the beer-can cuts through the low chatter. A warm breeze travels over all of them, tipping the edge of every parasol.

His father re-appears beside him, a tall cocktail in each hand. The boy manoeuvres the shell out of view, releases his hold, lets it fall to the ground.

‘Did you want a lemonade or something?’ his father says, the outline of the snorkel mask still printed on his skin.

The boy shakes his head. The father sucks on his straw, a yellow paper umbrella tilted over the glass. Together they look at the ocean, sunlight catching on the waves. After a while, the boy pulls off his sunglasses and attaches them to the finger his father lifts away from his drink.

‘Dinner’s at eight. Don’t be late tonight. *Please*.’

All this while the guy sipping beer has been taking them in. The boy risks a second glance in the stranger’s direction, and makes his way down to the shore.

END