Sand Seven

When she woke in the early morning the brother was asleep on the ground. He had arranged the plastic sheet over his head in a rudimentary tent, weighted with rocks at the bottom. He lay shrunken inside, the sheet misted with his breath.

The sister moved her lower jaw and grit ground against her teeth. She spat out thick saliva and looked to see if the brother was alive. Her tired eyes were sore with the sand. They had left the house three days ago when it came again, but now it was time to go home. The father had been left behind – he was a difficult man and refused to travel, but the brother and sister knew it was best. They could not have brought him up here, he would have slowed them down.

"I think it's turning now."

The wind that blew the sand in was warm and predictable, a zephyr carrying memories of childhood games played outside on long grassy evenings. But now it was different; when the wind started each month, people knew to take shelter from it. She had been alive for eighteen years and he for sixteen, but any signs of his growing into a man were disguised behind dependence and questioning and reliance on her. She suspected that without her help he would die out here, in the sand, and this thought annoyed her.

The brother was always initially surprised by it, then he assured the sister it would be the last time, but she knew this was bullshit. He spoke a lot of bullshit. She had been looking forward to him leaving home, but of course that was before. He would not leave now.

"Get up."

The sister kicked the brother in the back with the toe of her boot and he uncurled like a crab, stretching the plastic. She looked out across the valley. They had walked up the steep side and found a place near the top, in the lee of a warmed stone embankment. To the left was an indentation in the sandstone rock, a hollowed out small cave perfect for protection, but she had

told the brother they would not shelter inside. It had a single opening and stank of piss, only offering defence from the weather.

As a child she could remember long summers playing here. Julia would dare her to go into the darkness, and the sister rubbed her forearms as her fine blonde hairs stood on end, feeling the sudden chill in the shadow. Once they had found a charred space in the dirt, in the centre of a circle of black feathers. Between each feather was a single gleaming bone, porcelain pale, like fingers on piano keys without the flesh. As their eyes adjusted and they bent to look something moved in the dark of the cave and they turned and ran, heaving on desperate legs until they reached Julia's lawn, and lay under the sprinkler on a thousand tiny green swords, laughing at their breathlessness. They did not visit the cave again.

There was no other movement on the hillsides. She could not see much through her glasses - they were scratched almost opaque – but the valley floor was still concealed beneath clouds of crimson sand. A scarf wound over her ears and around the lenses, binding them to her head and allowing no entry points for tiny grains. She wore a white face mask over her nose and mouth; it was stained blood red where she breathed.

The brother had scrabbled in his bag for coverings and was trying to fix them around his head. He was still under the plastic, but it was lifting at one corner and she knew the sand would already be inside.

"Come on."

The sister kicked him again and took a few steps away, looking down the valley to their home. She saw the road back, uncoiling down the hillside like a moving snake, and tried to work out how far they would get by walking quickly.

"Pick up your stuff, then."

The sister had already hefted her pack onto her back, wrapped in its plastic, and started off with her head down. The brother was scrambling around trying to stuff things into his pack and he followed with staccato steps, hurrying to keep up.

"Will it be safe to go back?" he asked.

"How do I know?"

"Will he still be there? Will he be okay?"

The sister walked more quickly and didn't answer. She heard his question but didn't have anything to say.

When they were a third of the way from the bottom of the valley, the black tarmac began to disappear under the shifting grains. At first it was just blowing in light drifts across the road surface, but after a few minutes more all black was gone.

"We're too early," said the sister. "We'll have to wait."

"But what about him?" asked the brother.

"What about him?" said the sister, without expression.

She turned off the road towards a house with a porch. At the side of the house was a shed and she went over to it. Sand on the floor blocked the door from opening and she had to scrape it away with her boot. The gap grew wide enough for her to slide in sideways without her pack, which she pulled in after her.

"Come on," she said to the brother. The brother took off his pack and slid through the narrow space. It was easier for him, without breasts.

Inside the gloom of the shed were two garden chairs, crouched on top of each other, and a folded black bat of a parasol. She set the two chairs out and sat in one, her pack on the floor.

"How long do we wait?" asked the brother.

"Until we can see the houses at the bottom of the valley," she replied. "We'll listen." They sat without speaking but the noise was maddening. The warm wind blew sand relentlessly against every surface; it hissed against the metal roof sheets and spattered on the boarded-up window. The sister thought of a high-school trip to Niagara Falls, and how she could not hear Julia over the roar of the water. This was a nightmarish version of that, the sand a dry, gritted, painful substitute for water. This was hell.

The sister sat briefly with her eyes closed but this magnified the sound. Opening them, she looked at the brother staring fixedly at the door of the shed. Even through his sandglasses she could see the run of tears, although she could not tell if they were from emotion or the sand. It did not matter – weeping was not cleansing now. Tears were choked with salt and caused painful welts on delicate cheeks. The brother's face was already scoured red. He did not need to rub for them to hurt.

They sat for at least three hours, maybe more. The sister could not tell how long but it seemed to be about that. She looked at her watch all the same. Some habits remained. She had needed her watch before this.

It was from the high-end jeweller in the city, a present from herself to herself, bought with her entire first months' pay packet, from a shop with a doorbell and a fake glass entrance where you had to wait whilst the door behind you locked and the door in front of you unlocked. It was to stop robbers, but the sister felt exposed whilst waiting in the glass cube, as though she were in an x-ray machine and everyone could see inside her. Her face was flushed when the inner door opened, and as she stepped into the shop it had taken her a moment to gain her senses.

The watches were oversized and heavy on her birdbone wrist, but she did not care. She had felt alarmingly adult in her first week at work and needed something weighty to hold her

down. The steel bracelet showed her adulthood in the way her eighteenth birthday cake had not. The salesman instructed her – if she tightened the little wheel properly the watch was proofed for 100m below the ocean's surface – there was no way in for water, the tiny seals kept all moisture out.

They had not known then about the sand.

When the early grains began to blow in the air, one of the very first had slipped under the crown and settled in, waiting for her to wind it. As she loosened the little wheel the grain slid into place, holding the metal apart like an open door. More grains came on in, more and more of them until there were enough to stop the watch movement from scraping its way around the dial, and time was stopped one evening at eight forty-three. There was no significance to this, but there was to the watch, and the sister felt the sharp edges of the bezel under her fingertips whilst she considered time passed.

"Let's go, then," she said, standing up and brushing sand from her thighs. She spat again onto the floor, but there was no moisture in her mouth, so the glob clung to her lips, refusing to move.

"There must be a tap."

She pushed at the door, but it did not move. Outside, the sand had piled up and she could not open it. The brother stood up and gave it a hard shove with the side of his body and it moved an inch or two. The light outside was reddening and the sister knew they would have to walk quickly.

"Do it again," she said, "harder."

The brother gave the door a few more shoves until there was about a six-inch gap.

"You go, you're skinnier," said the sister. The brother went sideways through the slit and she heard the scraping sound of the sand outside. In a moment or two, the door was pulled

a little wider and she pushed quickly through the opening, her left shoulder catching painfully on the wooden edge of the door, but she did not make a sound.

"Tap," said the brother, pointing.

They walked over to the side of the house and adjusted the packs on their backs. The girl cracked a plastic bottle in her left hand as she turned the tap with her right. With an empty grinding sound dirty water dripped from the lip. She bent and covered the spout with her mouth, catching the muddied drops on her tongue and rolling them around before spitting into the empty flowerbed. It was warm but she did not care. She watched the drops fill the bottle an inch before screwing on the lid.

"Your turn."

The brother gave her room to step back before bending. He was taller than she and steadied himself with his hand on the tap whilst he wet his mouth. He did not fill his bottle, and she did not remind him. He was old enough to remember these things by himself, and she was not his parent.

As he straightened, she was already at the roadside, looking down the now black strip winding to the bottom of the valley.

"Come on," she said. "There's not much time." And they set off together along the road.

It was difficult to walk on the fine moving sand underfoot. They passed no other travellers – there was barely anyone left on this side of the country now, most of them had moved to the other coast. They still had the sand over there too, but the offshore wind was stronger and the sand seemed less severe. People said it was to do with the turbines in the farm, but the sister did not know how they would know that.

They did not hold hands. It had been a few years since they had touched each other at all, and the thought of it was too strange. They had not been particularly close as children, even when the mother was here, but when the sand started, and the mother gone, their differences were starkly evident. They grew further apart.

The brother walked behind the sister. He copied her rhythm and moved at her pace. She knew that whilst she was leading, he would not look up or around. She checked her bag was closed. Hanging from the zip was a yellow pineapple keyring made from glass beads. She had had it since school, a holiday present from Julia three years ago. She missed Julia. They made friends the very same day her family moved in down the street, and talked almost every day for the next fourteen years until the sands started. Julia's family left after the second sand, unlike hers, who thought they knew better, thought they could wait it out. Julia's mum had invited her to go too, but she had said she would follow. She had something to do, first.

The sister stopped and turned, the pineapple swinging.

"We'll go this way and along the back fence. We'll be able to see from there."

The brother nodded under his coverings, but he needn't have bothered. She wasn't asking him. Already she had changed direction and was off along the path.

At the house she went through the gate and up to the door at the back. Her hand slipped on the brass door knob and she wiped the sand from her palm onto her jeans and tried again. The door grated open; it was stiff and did not move freely.

"Father?"

The sister called out into the silence. She stepped on the razor edges of the cracked lino as she went into the kitchen. The brother could not see her, and he felt alone. He quickened his pace to be close enough to touch her hair in its bindings.

"We're home."

She was not questioning now; she had already taken the pack from her shoulder. It was difficult to see in the room - the sand had etched the window glass and created a red fog. The brother hated it, he felt as though he were inside a mouth, suffocating. He pushed the living room door too hard and it banged into the wall, surprising her.

"Jesus," said the sister. "What the fuck are you doing? Be useful, for Christ's sake."

The brother knew the routine. There had been seven sands now, each longer than the one before, and they were more used to dealing with it. They knew it came with the fullest moon and they knew it would leave when the tides called. They did not know where it came from – no one did. Initially, the grains disrupted the satellite messages and wrapped the radio signals in rolling red clouds until they were silenced. After sand two, the bloodied sky retreated from the surface but continued to roll above the earth, bouncing communications out into deep space and rendering the satellites useless. No one had expected that, to be made silent by blowing sand, to have to return to the old ways of communication. People were having to learn how to live again.

The sister watched the brother as he crouched on the tiles, emptying his pack in a pile on the floor. He looked up at her, a motherless boy.

"What's for dinner?"

"What about father?" she asked.

The brother looked guilty and rose to his feet. He had pulled the wrappings from around his face and they lay untidily around his neck like sticky bandages from fetid wounds.

"He'll be all right, he always is."

"Let's see to him first."

They climbed the stairs together to the bedrooms. All the doors were closed, and plastic sheeting was taped to each frame. The covered door at the far end was the father's room. Plastic

hung down to the floor and the sister bent down to peel it away. She opened the door and went in, holding her breath against the sour male smell. The curtains were closed but she knew the geography of the room well enough to take five paces to the foot of the bed. Over the bed was another tented canopy made from plastic sheet, a rustling Bedouin tent. The brother was at the window, opening the curtains, but there was little light at this end of the day, made less by the sand etched glass and the plastic taped over the frame.

"Father?"

The sister moved around the bed to the side table. It lay cluttered with medicines and pill bottles, some on their side, some pills spilled out onto the wooden top. There was an empty glass, several lidless water bottles and a pair of scratched spectacles.

"Father."

She reached out, her fingers touching the plastic. It moved under her touch like thin skin. Pulling her hand back, she rested it at her throat. The figure in the bed was silent and still in a manner that told her life had left it a while ago. He was fifty-eight.

The brother was still at the window, cursing the stiff sash. The sister turned and walked out of the room, along the hallway, down the stairs and out of the front door. She only stopped walking when she reached the middle of the street, where she crouched, her back to the house. From the window the brother saw her and did not dare to turn around.

"Father?" he said, tremulously, but he already knew. Then he was running down the stairs on child's legs, down the path to his sister huddled in the street. He was crying noisily, mucus blowing in silver snail bubbles from his nostrils as he reached down for his sister on the ground.

"He's dead, it's Father, oh God, what are we going to do, he's dead, he's dead. Do something, something, oh God."

The sister was still whilst he wailed. On the road in front of her a line of ants was making its way from underneath the kerbstone to a clump of grass. Each following the other, the ants moved single-mindedly with a purpose she recognised. She was a leader; she had tolerated her high-school friends who talked incessantly about proms and weddings and babies. She could think of nothing worse than to belong to someone who would slow her down and stop her moving. She had plans to leave. She had not decided where – she trusted she would know she was at the place when she reached it – but she knew that to leave was to lead and that was all she wanted. Now there were fewer choices of place to live, after the sands. But she would head for the coast, and Julia. And then see.

She leaned forward and put a big stone in the path of the ants, crushing them dead. Those behind in the line moved uncaringly around the broken bodies and continued onwards. She stood up and flexed her ankles, tipped up and back on her toes. The brother was still weeping on his knees in the road. She looked down at him and shook her head. She could not help him now.

The sister had known this time would come. Each time the sands came, she left more of the father's medicine within his reach, hoping. At this seventh sand she had left less water too; when the brother was already on the road, she pretended she needed to pee and had gone back upstairs. The father had been lying in the plastic tent, and as she entered the room, he turned his face away. He had not spoken to her in the five months since the mother and little sister left.

"Goodbye, Father," she had said at the beginning of this seventh sand, but made no attempt to touch him or look him in the eye. She felt nothing. She had checked the window tape, closed the door, sealed the plastic and put the towel across the gap at the bottom. It was a method they had all used at the start, but the thickening darkness was too much for her and she had decided to move out to higher ground each time it came. At their house in the bottom of

the valley the sand had blown against the sealed doors and windows until they were entombed inside, buried alive inside a family coffin. She knew after the first sand that she could not survive this with them again, and when she returned home after the second sand the mother and the little sister were gone, and the father silent.

Back in the house she found her pack where she had left it. She filled four water bottles, collected six small discs of tinned fish and biscuits from the cupboard and rolled a blanket from the sofa, tying it with the curtain cord. Whilst she was doing this the brother came in and sat at the table with his head in his hands. Neither spoke. The brother could feel her.

"Don't leave me with him," he started, but didn't say anymore. The sister didn't reply.

She checked her watch. Eight forty-three. It could have been eight forty-three. Dusk was creeping around the edges of the garden. She would need a torch. The brother had not closed the back door when he came in, and as she walked out, she did not touch it. The sister left the air standing in the house, she left the brother sitting at the table, and she set off up the empty black road.

She took a different route to usual, following the fairy path she and Julia had used each summer on their way up the valley side to the cave at the top. She walked doggedly onwards, comforted in the gloaming, her fingers pressing the gold necklace charm in her pocket. The charm had been her mother's - she had arrived back from the circus one summer night with it around her neck and nobody mentioned it. The sister grimaced as she thought of her mother's tawdry satin blouses, buttons gaping at her breasts when she leaned forward, of her laughing wetly and redly into the cheap whisky breath of the sweating man in front of her. Her mother had taken the children to the circus the next night, but as soon as they were sitting on a narrow wooden bench, splinters digging into the backs of their knees, her mother had disappeared, returning at the end of the show smelling of crushed grass and diesel fumes. Shame burned the

sister's face as she strode on. She pressed the meagre gilded bird between her finger and thumb until it marked the pad of her skin. It had always watched, mocking the rest of them with a single garnet eye. Everyone saw it and no one spoke of it, and the mother wore it around her neck for the rest of her life.

The sister had found it on the ground outside the cave. She had seen it gleaming in the sunlight – half buried in the sand, the garnet eye glinting like a drop of blood. The chain had been broken in the struggle and was missing, but the resilient, cheap golden bird remained, dented yet intact. She hated it. She had picked it from the sand and held it so tightly in her fist that the jagged beak pierced her palm, and when she opened her hand to see blood resting with the garnet eye, she did not feel anything. Her mother had fought harder than she expected, in the end.

She was almost at the top of the hill. Reaching into her jeans pocket, she took out the bird and swung her pack from her back. Her beaded pineapple had a keyring fitting, and she slid the hook of the gilt charm alongside the cheap glass until both hung side by side. For a moment, she looked at them, until she was sure, and then she put her pack on her back and began to walk. When she passed the cave, she did not look inside. She knew that the cave held only darkness, and she had enough of that. She was ready to learn to live again.