

The Stinger

by Erika Byrne-Ludwig

Having once had a holiday misadventure as a teenager I've become cautious. Overcautious perhaps, timid, but that's me now at twenty left with persistent scars. You might want me to elaborate on my experience but I prefer not to. It's become part of my personal domain, hidden under fabric like a large birthmark, where it rests, a bad memory I try to forget and never talk about, hoping, if never blown upon, it will eventually die out like a flame. All I can say is that its unpleasantness has affected me in many ways and has covered my eyes with a rough cotton rather than a soft silk.

I recall my reading then, at eighteen, my eyes set on alluring pictures, glossy, almost ethereal: eternal skies of tender lacy blues spotted with crystal sparks, merging into pristine, twinkly lakes and oceans. I was running my finger along the infinitely long beaches, dingo-coloured sand, untainted gold, calling for my imprint, with a radiant sun to bronze my pale, indoor body. Splashes of descriptions were tempting me, words with exquisite assonance — a dessert of my choice. Take it, the glaze seemed to say, try it.

Less gullible now, more realistic, I know that no matter where I travel, there would be few crystals. Feet under canvas, legs under denim, I roam on the sandy dunes, watch the bathers stir the water, stare through the various bright yellows and blues, while I wonder about the greys, imagine what's on the left, on the right, turn round, stare behind, beyond and in-between, make my own warning signs held up by pebbles, shells and palish hands.

It's perfectly safe, I've been told, and yet I know that there are creatures looking for blood, flesh, remains. And bluebottles. On a tidal wave I can still visualise the ray pointing its stinger at me.

