

Sands In Time by Julie Noble

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As surreptitious as the crab creeping sideways under your patient observation, the sun has inched its way round the sky, echoing exactly the rugged curve of the Bay, and is now preparing itself for the evening slide. In its rich, golden light I try to catch one final, memorable snap. You, the youngest of my blonde trio of sons, glow like a gilded cupid as you crouch alongside your older brothers, three sun-bleached, wind tousled heads bending over the glittering surface of a perfect pool. It has been a blissful day for our northern coastline, but the chilly breeze blanketing our backs reminds us that no matter how much the silver dazzles on the wave crests, or the cool water is clear with the flash of tiny fish life, this is not quite the Med. Though the sand is smooth and luxuriant from the changing tides, surrounding my precious threesome are sharp grey rocks, the volcanic edges pushing up in crumpled ramparts. As you all watch the glassy liquid with tight, silent concentration that your brothers' teachers would envy, I frame the picture through my camera lens, hoping to catch a breaking smile, your cherubic beauty brimming between your siblings' school-boy seriousness. Later your whitened curls will come out radiating like a halo.

I press the button, tilt forwards and my knees sink deeply into the wet sand. The sensation is much colder and far more unpleasant than I thought it would be, prompting a comment that I wouldn't want your mother to hear. While your brothers laugh aloud you turn and give me a perfect, adorable grin,

"Soggy Daddy," I smile, lift the camera once more and lean towards you, but then there is that brisk breeze again that goes right between us, sliding across our chests like hands parting people.

"Brr," I shiver, and you mimic, shuddering your small shoulders, but the shake overtakes you and your little frame rocks in a tremor which I put down to the cold. Blaming myself for not realising how the temperature has fallen, I grab the biggest beach towel and lift your thin limbs into its huge wrapping. I envelope you, leaving just your sandy feet peeping out, and for a few minutes I have you snuggled right in against my chest. To warm your clammy toes I cup them in my palms. They are still small enough to be enclosed, unlike your brothers, and for a moment I sink into the knowledge that soon you will be beyond me. In the meantime I have your sand sprinkled hair right under my nose and I bend forward to breathe in your wonderful, sun-baked scent, the salty smell much tempered by a sweetly heated caramel softness.

Your trembling settles and you wriggle again, I edge you off my knees and onto a dry bit of rock and we start the weary process of gathering you all to go home.

"Come on Oliver, come on Jack, time to get along, Freddie's cold,"

They're good boys but they're absorbed, they don't want to leave just now. As far as they're concerned they're not hungry yet so it's not even close. I rumble at them all the time I'm rubbing your short legs, and it becomes a growling grumble when I lean over them to fill a bucket of water from the fascinating pool,

"*Now* please, he's tired. Come *on*. He's smaller than you." While they mutter but start to move reluctantly away I try to prise a smile from your wan face, though it's harder than trying to get a limpet from a rock. I adopt my oft-repeated routine: splashing the water towards you in a flashing spray as I pretend to drop it all over the place. It usually has you in fits of giggles but today your eyes are round and silent so I just dash the liquid quickly over your browned feet and tell myself you will get a proper bath when you get home.

You are uncharacteristically whiny when I struggle with the stubborn, slightly damp sock over the still gritty toes, the shrunken cotton just doesn't want to budge and you whimper as I slough some sand from your ankle. It is easier to do the shoes, your feet not fidgeting, just hanging as I slip on your Clarks and slide the strap

through the buckle. The leather is scuffed, you need some new ones, so we didn't worry that they were spoiling as we trailed them over the beach. Pull, catch, and you are safely strapped. My fingers pat the completion, your signal to run.

"All done."

I grin at you, catch at your feather soft curls with my open palm as my hand glides your head. I'm expecting your usual swift reaction and gleeful face, but your expression is patient and tired. You look at me with the inevitability of an ocean returning to the shore, wisdom lapping at the lightly moulded ridges above your eyebrows, as though I am the youngster and you are the sage. Still I don't understand, don't see how much farther you have travelled than your father.

It's a slow journey across the sand, but then the ones turned for home always are, so I don't suspect. Your brothers weave their dawdling pathway like wool wefting a loom, drifting from pool to pool. A crab's leg at the edge of one, the curling crest of a lobster's tail, bold blue and orange, catching their eye under the surface of another. They call to us to come and see and even then you have no energy left to crouch, you can only curve your head downwards, a man on a cliff top gazing at the ocean crashing harmlessly at the land beneath his feet.

Of course your mother notices instantly. As I guide you along the path, your brothers bounce ahead to open the door, cheerily shouting and showing the scraps of seashore souvenirs, while you have to be helped up the steps.

"What have you given him?" she asks, immediately brimming concern and anger. I'm automatically defensive. Divorce does that to you.

"Nothing, well, just the usual,"

"Huh?"

"You know, chips, ice-cream,"

"A big ice-cream?" She stares at me critically, I falter — fatal mistake.

"The same as the others."

"He's two, for goodness sake!"

"I don't like to treat him differently, anyway, they're not sick!"

"His tummy is much smaller!"

Of course it wasn't the ice-cream that made you unwell but we didn't know that then. You want to go to bed so she carries you upstairs, limply lying over her shoulder, your still sandy feet simply hanging. As she gets to the top and turns she shoots one of her looks at me, her eyes wide, her mouth tightly silent but her expression complaining about everything: the state I have brought you home in, the fact that you are so unhappy and ill, the late nap that will no doubt interfere with your precious routine. It is like getting a sudden soaking in very cold water to see my once passionate wife so angry at me. Sheepishly I turn to your brothers and see about getting their beach stuff cleared up before I go. All the mad bravado of our afternoon adventure washes away like sand rinsed from feet in the wake of your mother's bad temper.

In the early hours the phone breaks into my sleep like a wave slapping against a cliff-face. The initial recognition crashes me awake, and then the continuing ring keeps recurring with the regularity of a tide bringing water forwards again and again, Groggily I raise the handset.

"What's up?"

"Mike? Mike? Is that you?"

"Of course it's me," I say foggily. Some part of the defensive ex wants to retort rudely and angrily ask her if she is checking up on me, but when she speaks again I realise it is not like that at all.

"It's Freddie, Mike, he's really sick,"

A pause, a skipping silence, then I can hear the rising panic, a wave of anxiety coming to a crest. She starts to utter other concerns, but I tell myself common sense must dictate she's overreacting, and that's nothing new. As though I am wind blowing over a sea I try to abate her with words that I think make a suitable suggestion,

"Why don't you call the doctor in the morning?"

"She's here now; she's already rung for an ambulance." This smashes me out of my sleepy calmness, our doctor would *never* call an ambulance for nothing.

"What? Why?"

The questions are too much, her voice shatters and gushes in a rush. Like a wave breaking over stone, the force is gone and she is blubbing so much I can hardly make out the words but I get 'hospital' and 'tests' though the rest is obliterated in the messy torrent of her tense emotion.

By the time I reach the clean, clinical ward you no longer belong to me or your mother but to the gaggle of neat white coats and plastic tubes that surround you. I try to peer over a shoulder, show my face so that you know I am here, but your lilac lidded eyes are closed in sleep. I ask what they have given you but your mother doesn't know. She manages to say that you have been sick twice in the ambulance, and though she doesn't mention it, we both know that it is hours since you ate. We perch on plastic benches, huddled closer than we have done in years, and we watch and wait.

And we wait, and wait. We wait as though trapped by the sea, staring hopelessly before us, desperate for some sign of change, and when finally the wall of white separates and disperses, as if the tide has at last turned, we rush to stand each side of you, both grasping a hand, although you are still fast asleep. You have been asleep for hours now, since just after I dropped you off, and it is only your mother's vigilance that brings you here from your vomit-soaked sheets, her anxiety when she was unable to rouse you. If I'd have still been there, I'd have told her to let you sleep. I ponder this while they glide your white bed away to bombard your tiny brain cells with beams of light, as though your skull is a limpet shell, battered by the tide.

Again we wait, monitoring the time by the black inscrutability of my watch. Twenty four hours after I took that last photograph they bring you back to the ward. While nurses hover like eager sea birds, we keep our vigil by your heart. Towards evening, two surgeons approach, clutching clipboards with ominously thick sheaves of

notes. They keep their distance, pause by your feet. A brain tumour they say, they will operate that night.

We follow you like lost children as you are wheeled to be prepped. They let us stand in the room while your blonde curls are shorn, your mother picks up every strand from the perfect white sheet, holding them to her as she did your precious head when you were born. The nurse, eyes liquid with sympathy, hands her an envelope. I wait, bowed over your feet, not daring to move any further away. I'm so desperate to rescue you from this, I want to carry you away and run. Instead I lift your feet, cradle them in my dry palms, cupping them as I did yesterday, and as they count down the minutes until they slide you away, I rub the last few grains of sands from the gaps between your toes. The tiny fragments that once were rocks sprinkle into my hand, tickling, then falling. They disappear from my sight like moments in time.

