

Johnny Mercer's Pier

by Paula Ray

Hurricane Hazel chewed the end off Johnny Mercer's pier. Mama said raging waters swallowed waterfront houses and caused the shore to recede like a middle-aged hairline on the face of the coastal map. There is history in the swollen pilings and cracks between boards so large I used to fear I'd fall through, as a child, maybe even as an adult. A rickety mental film projector keeps playing the same sepia movie in my mind: Mama leaping into the obsidian sea and me reaching, always reaching.

Each summer, tourists and locals parade up and down the planks of the pier and people fish along the rail. I hate the sounds and smells created by the crowd. I hide in the dunes at night, where I have the moon to myself. This is when the music comes to me, using patches of moonlight on water as stepping stones. First the sway of grasses lulls me into a rhythm, then waves begin to sing. I press my weight into the sand. It opens just enough to bury me hipbone and ankle deep in soft, cool beige.

But there are distractions. Couples pass by holding hands. Drunken college students strum untuned strings and shout incoherent lyrics into flames of illegal campfires. Lovers moan and pant mating calls that slap the belly of the horizon. I fold myself into an origami swan and pretend I can sail away before I dissolve into illegible ink smears. Morning smiles; the sun stares down with its big white eye and I scurry home in search for a dark crevice to press my body into. I'm a water bug with wings rarely used.

On brave summer days, I walk through the maze of umbrellas, beach towels, folding chairs, coolers, flip flops, radios, and shiny bodies: glistening earth worms pierced by the barb of a fish hook. I wear sunglasses to tone down the fluorescent glow of bathing suits and flotation toys. I'm a black and white figure--out of place in a

Saturday morning cartoon. The sky is littered with bug-eyed kites and planes dragging toilet paper behind them, advertising pizza and car insurance.

In the fall, yellow school buses gather giggling children. Their parents are locked away in mirror-windowed towers, cages, and cubicles. SUV's cluster the park edge where dedicated moms and dads are plastered to bleachers along the soccer field. As the autumn leaves fall onto dying lawns, the litter on the beach begins to disappear. I pray for snow to sterilize the sand.

During the winter, I wrap myself like a wound and climb the steps onto Johnny Mercer's pier. I take my clarinet and lean into the wind, force myself to the very end where the only light visible leaks through holes in the tin sky. Mama watches; I sometimes see her winking.

With hobo gloves, I assemble my clarinet and grease each cork. I suck on a reed and remember those homemade popsicles Mama used to make in ice trays. The ocean mist sprays my face and fingertips. My skin is confused. It can't decide if it's freezing or burning. I press the mouthpiece onto my bottom lip; run my tongue along its crystal tip as my fingers strangle the ebony body, bejeweled with silver rings and buttons. One long hot breath followed by another causes clouds to seep from the bell. This is when I bite down with the pressure a bitch applies to the nape of her puppy's neck. I push notes through the instrument. Some are thin and light, others thick and dark. The textures vary, depending on speed and volume. Condensation dances inside the glass mouthpiece.

Mama raises her head from her watery grave and listens. She floats above the waves, white gown billowing and swirling on the water. I serenade her, show her I became a musician, just like she said I would. I play the second movement, the Romanza, from Poulenc's Clarinet Sonata. She comes closer. I hear a gull shriek a warning. I

turn to see a silhouette duck down behind a dune. A stranger in the darkness lurks, but I ignore him. He reminds me of my father, spying, but never making his presence known. I play louder, but Mama never stays. When I can no longer feel her, I stop playing.

Night after night, I find myself alone, sitting on the splintered edge with feet dangling above the liquid onyx mouth of a hungry ocean. I feed it music followed by the silence Mama leaves in her wake. I reach out, upturned palm, and catch empty answers that trickle through my fingers, reaching, always reaching.

