

THE STUART HADOW SHORT STORY COMPETITION 2019

BETWEEN TWO ETERNITIES

A short story

by Erika Buchinsky

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I like the way he dries himself with big sweeps of his towel, without taking his eyes off me. He's wearing a half-smile too, as if he's pleased by what he sees. I shake my hair out and pat it with my towel. To be admired can hardly be the sin Sister Sharon makes it out to be. He just happens to like looking at me, and that makes me feel good. There's nothing wrong with that. He's a nice guy, and so it actually *means* something when he looks at me and smiles. Sister Sharon says we women can lead men astray with our vanity. Yet I feel she still likes to be admired for her piety.

"This is a great beach," I say, suddenly realising *I* haven't taken my eyes off *him* since we got out of the water. I look away along the sweeping crescent that ends somewhere in the misty junction between water and soft, purple hills. "There's only us and that group up the other end."

He nods. "Yeah, worth the walk. Most people only go to a beach if it's near a road. I'm glad you could come."

"It was a bit of a battle. Mum just thinks that if she doesn't keep watch on me all the time, I'll do something stupid. As if I would. I'm eighteen, not eight, but she doesn't seem to've noticed."

I lay my towel on the crisp, yellow sand and stretch out on it. He does the same. The sand and the sun pour their warmth into my skin, which is still cool from the water. It feels good. I wonder whether Sister Sharon would say this was a sin too. If I enjoy the warmth of God's sun, will it lead God astray?

No. God can look after God's self. So must we all. I'm not going to throw my life to the wind because the sun shines on me or because a friend likes the look of me. This life might only be a short flicker between two eternities, but it's where I am right now.

He's still looking at me, and I soak it up along with the sunshine. What does it matter?

"You look pretty good in a swimming costume," he says.

"Thanks."

I don't tell him how new it is, or how mum forbade me from wearing it anywhere but the public baths. She insisted I bring the old black one out here, so I did, but this one

was hidden inside it. “You can’t trust him,” she warned, “no matter how nice he seems. Men are all the same. There’s only one thing they want, and they don’t care if it ruins your life or puts your soul in jeopardy.” So I distracted her with talk about how he was planning to make a killing in the building trade. I wasn’t worried. This guy is definitely one you can trust.

“You look pretty good too,” I tell him, because he *does*, with water still dripping from his curly black hair, and the sea in his eyes. He smiles and I’m glad I told him.

I’d touch his lips with mine, but in the back of my mind a crowd of sour faces seem to be looking over my shoulder, telling me I’m dirty and sinful. A flock of parents, grandparents, aunts, priests and sisters, are all nagging me, warning he’ll lead me to fornication and adultery. He cocks his head to one side as if listening, then clasps my hand, leans forward and kisses me gently.

Aaaaaah, the softness of his lips on mine. I’d like to press myself against him, but push the thought away. I let my lips slide away too, but put my hand in his. It’s time to be careful, because if I *did* completely misjudge him and he’s just been acting the part of a nice guy, he *could* overpower me if he wanted to.

But he really doesn’t seem the type. I would never have come here with him if he did.

“Have you ever been in a fight?” I ask him.

“No,” he says, and then looks looks worried. “Why? Do I look like I have?”

“Oh no, not at all. It’s just that men *do* fight, and boys. But you don’t seem like other men. I wonder what other differences there are.”

“And you’re different too,” he says. “One of a kind. There’s no one else like you.”

“How would you know? You haven’t met them all.”

“How would you know?” he smiles back at me.

I laugh and look away, back to the placid sea. How *would* I know? I’ve only known him a week.

“How about lunch?” I suggest, to change the subject.

“Yes, I’m hungry,” he replies and nods towards a low hill behind the beach. “We could go and sit up there, so we don’t get sand in the salad.”

“Good idea.”

We put our shirts on, pick up our bags, and start walking, over soft sand, then crusty sand, coarse grass, leaf litter and twigs. Soon he’s leading the way uphill through dense, lime-green bushes which scratch our legs in passing. Short scrubby trees lean away from the wind, casting a meagre shade. There’s nowhere to sit among them so we keep going. At the crest of the dune we wave goodbye to the sea and start down the other side. The murmur of the waves recedes and a soft tinkling comes to greet us.

“Hey, there’s a creek,” he says, and steps down a bank.

I follow. The rounded pebbles are smooth beneath my feet, then my knees and hands. The water trickles like a thin stream of molten glass, alive with shifting reflections of blue and green. It feels like wine in my mouth, but tastes like fresh air.

“Looks like a good spot,” he says, pointing to a patch of soft green forest grass growing in the shade of the taller trees on the other side of the creek.

“Excellent.”

It certainly is a beautiful place, but should I have come so far from the beach? I could be wrong. It’s possible that mum and Aunt Jude and Sister Sharon are right, and all men really *are* the same.

But no. I don’t believe them.

We form a patchwork of mingled colours over the green, with our towels and spare clothes. He takes a crusty loaf from his bag, some cheese and olives, and places them between us. I add lettuce, cucumber, sweet onions and some herbs to the feast. We start to eat. The wind sighs and the water whispers. Birds whistle, and insects buzz. My eyes are filled with the green of grass and trees, the blue of the sky.

“We could almost be in another world,” he says between mouthfuls, as if reading my mind. “Just the two of us. Here, alone.”

“Yes, just you and me and the insects.” I stretch out and prop myself on one elbow. “Even the wind hardly finds its way in here. Perhaps if we kept walking we’d find a whole new country that no one’s ever found before.”

He laughs, then says, “I like the things you say.”

“I probably wouldn’t dare say them to most people.”

“You’re safe with me.”

“Well how about this then,” I say, and swallow. “Maybe this world has no past and no future. There’s just us here, and that’s all there ever has been or will be.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” he says. “And maybe there’s no past and no future in the other world too – the one we just left – but no one realises it.” He takes my hand in his, raises it to his lips and kisses the back of my fingers. His lips are warm and moist, like a new-born lamb nuzzling its mother’s teat. A crop of goose-bumps spring up along my arm. I inhale air and sunlight, breathe it out, then in again.

“And if that’s the case, I’d like to stay here,” he says.

Misunderstanding my silence, he lowers my hand to the towel, picks up the bread and says, “Sorry. I was just admiring the shape of your hands.”

“Don’t be sorry. Do it again. It feels nice. What’s wrong with that?”

He answers with his hand and his lips. When each finger’s had a turn he shifts his weight onto his other side. The skin on his arm is the same creamy brown as the bark on some of the trees, but instead of being hard and fixed in place like a tree, it moves and ripples, soft and warm and supple like the skinks among the dead leaves. I stroke his bare shoulder. He runs his fingers down my side, across my hip and along my leg.

“Your skin feels nice,” he says.

“Yes, it *does* feel nice when you touch it,” I tell him. “Your skin feels good too. I’ve never felt anything like it.”

I wriggle sideways towards a bush and he runs his fingers over my feet and massages my toes. The leaves on the bush sport sparse crops of fine hairs, like the soft down on his shoulder. I pick one and stroke it gently, and though it feels very similar to his skin, my fingers can tell the difference.

“That feels really good,” I say as he kneads my feet and ankles with his strong fingers. “No one’s ever touched me there before, not that I remember anyway.”

“And I’ve never touched anyone there.”

His smile is a gentle curve, its form no different from one of the twigs overhead, but its colours are borrowed from flowers and the wet pebbles in the creek we crossed. His hands move up my calves and....

Wooo. To that ticklish spot behind my knee.

“I’m ticklish just there.”

I slide back alongside him. He looks at the leaf, and I hold it to my cheek. “The hairs on your arm feels like this,” I say, and lean over to touch his shoulder with my cheek. “Only you feel better.”

His hand is on my hip again, moving around the contours. Looking into his eyes is like diving into a deep pool. He can feel what I feel. The circle of our bodies seems as large as the world. This sunny glade is the universe. There is no room for anything else.

And although we’ve only just discovered this place, it seems like we’ve been here forever. The colours and shapes of our bodies were here before us, in the bark of trees, a pigeon’s feathers, the stones and dirt. It’s already full of gentle caresses between insects and flowers, leaves and grass stalks. Between us. The creek always shimmers in the sunlight. All this is here, and more.

The skin of my belly sings like a polished stone as his fingers dance across it like a spider.

“No past, no present,” I smile. “A world made just for us, or else why bother to make it? The trees can’t feel it or hear it. The birds can see it, but can’t understand it. It’d be a sin for us to ignore it. How would God feel then?”

“You’ve got it. I knew you were different.”

He slips closer, a ripple on an advancing tide. My eyes are locked with his, and I dare to speak his family name, choosing to forget the warnings that it’s suggestive of intimacy.

But the way he moves and talks, the salty smell, the rich browns and black, the small but oh so significant patches of pink and white, all add up to only one person.

“Joseph,” I whisper, and he touches my lips with his, as gently as a moth’s wings against a leaf, but unlike the leaf, I can feel it, enjoy it and thirst for more.

Unlike the leaf, I can return his touch, and watch the light sparkle in his eyes like the sun on water, a flicker between two eternities.

“I like this world, Mary” he says.