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The Difference Between

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The Difference Between

Two women, sisters I'm sure, wrap their mother in a midnight blue blanket where she sits a few feet from the shoreline. It's clear she's dying. She is dying in a way that is bright and brittle and glittery, like the wide smile she gives me as she catches my eye before I can safely pass.

"My girls are adorning me this morning," she calls out to me. Her girls have shrouded her until all but the woman's pale face is covered, and just a peek of her bald head.

It's cold, the wind off the water, the wet sand.

Upstairs, in the little room we've rented for the week, where I have left him after our love-making that morning, he is sleeping. He doesn't know that I am gone.

I smile at the dying woman, that fake smile I reserve for white folk, but otherwise I ignore her. I just keep walking.

Mornings come quickly here. Breaks the sky open wide and I would like to get in at least 6 miles before the sun burns away the cool and the day's heat becomes too oppressive. It happens just that fast, the change in temperature here. Something to do with the sea. The salt. The sand. Sunlight reflected off water. I don't know.

I walk until the room with him in it has disappeared and nothing is behind me except sand dunes and black craggy rock.

But the white woman is still there.

Miles later and she is still sitting right behind me, like a child, like a girl herself, letting her girls care for her the way she once cared for them, and I can see the entire landscape before me: summers spent in weathered beach houses. Suntan and calamine lotions smeared on tender white skin to fight against burns and bites and heat rash. Lunches, of ham salad and pimento cheese sandwiches, and fried pickles.

Wading the waves.

The dying woman is young, and sunburnt, and so beautiful I want to cry. In the water, she holds her daughter around the waist, first one and then, years later, the other. She is teaching them to float. She is teaching them to thrash their feet and maneuver arms still chubby with baby fat.

"Kick your feet as if you're trying to run away from me," she will tell her girls. "Kick as if you're trying to escape." But her girls will never understand this kind of desperation. They will never have a need to get away.

She would have been the kind of mother to teach her girls how to get away. First, to drive, a clutch, no doubt, the dying mother, who isn't dying yet, sitting in the passenger seat trying hard not to clench the dashboard, or press invisible brakes, smiling that bright, wide smile at her beautiful, fearless girls.

I wonder if he is still sleeping. I wonder if he is dreaming about me, about us, how this trip is supposed to keep us from becoming what we have already become, though he refuses to see it.

I could have been one of the dying woman's girls. Me, with my brown skin, my nappy hair, and little starvations, my mother-hunger. When we first met, and he found out my mother had left me

before I could make memory, I remember his hands under the gray comforter, between my thighs, pulling, constantly pulling at me. *I'll be your mother*, he'd said. *I'll be your mother and your father*. They always say that. They always believe it, too.

When I finally reach the spot that has become mine on these morning walks, the sun is a brutal ball of white heat hovering above the water. Seagulls salt the beach. Some float the drift. They sound like women, off in the distance, screaming, crying frantically for help.

I breathe in the smell of salt, of washed up, rotting shellfish and seaweed—that deep scent of sea. Decay. Above all this I can still smell him, on my skin, in my hair. In the beginning, after being with him, I would go days without bathing so his scent could be on me, in me, like a heavy secret, and I could believe he was still with me, as if he had not left me to go home to his perfect wife and his darling girls.

The dying woman would have been the kind of mother to hold her daughters' secrets. Waiting up in the kitchen of one of the summer beach houses for one of her girls to come home from a bonfire, or a first date, a first kiss, break-up, first time. The mother and daughter would have whispered late into the night, foreheads nearly touching, and the daughter would have told this mother everything.

And now the mother is dying. She's already dead. She's already memory, an embellished story passed down to granddaughters and great-granddaughters, until she's eventually forgotten. And, as soon as I think the words, I begin to cry. I don't know I'm going to cry as hard as I do until I start and can't stop.

Why are you crying? he would have asked, and I would not have been able to answer. He would hate that. He would hate the unreasonableness of my tears.

I am still crying, though not as hard, when I take my shoes off and put my bare feet into the sea. The cold burns, but I want the pain. It should hurt. He would say, *for God's sake, Glori, what are all the tears for?* No mother would ask her daughter that question. She would know what all the tears are for. She would know that her daughter's life will be measured by its innumerable griefs.

A good mother would see me standing here sobbing and she would simply open her midnight blue blanket, and pat her scrawny, inadequate lap, and she would say, "Come on here, child," and without hesitating I would climb into that space she has made for me. I would wrap myself around her fragile body and I would rest in all that ruin, that wasting away.

I'm dying

"We are all dying, baby," is what she would tell me. "We been dying since day one. It's just that we force ourselves to forget—it's part of the bargain. Only way some of us can get on with living. Get on with living, Glori."

But the gone-mother, my mother, would have said none of this. She would've told me a joke. Her favorite.

"Glori-girl, you want my advice? What's the difference between a rooster and a prostitute?" the gone-mother would've asked, and when I could not answer she would've told me the punchline. Even if I didn't think it was funny, I would've laughed.

This is what I know about my mother, the bits and scraps and crumbs flung to me by her mother:

She sure did love herself some fried clams. With the fat bellies. That's what she craved whole time carrying you, Glori. Fried clams and grape soda. I believed she craved the grape soda on account of her favorite color being purple.

And another time, this:



She loved silver over gold, except when she cleaned out my jewelry box that one time—she sure did love gold then. That was before she give you to that woman round the corner who couldn't have a child of her own, when I had to get the law involved. You was such a little bitty thing...

I know that “give me” to that woman meant selling me for enough drugs to make her forget she'd had a child, and I know, by heart, the gone-mother's favorite joke, the difference between things that do not go together.

When I get back to where the mother and her girls were sitting, they are gone. I scan the beach looking for a glimpse of the midnight blue, and I don't realize how much I needed to see her again, the mother, until she's no longer there.

I'm going to leave him.

Yeah. I am.

I am going to leave him the same way my mother left me. Not all at once. No one ever let go of a thing all at once. First, parts of you go, until there's hardly anything left and then, finally, oblivion.