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Water Scenes of Possibilities

ARNO BOHLMEIJER

With the low tide, the beach is now so wide there's a little lagoon or inlet in the middle. They can wade through to an island with ripples that feel funny under their feet.

Boldy runs and topples on his face in the water. Sparrow goes carelessly fast and hurls in too. For a second it's truly like flying.

Mom comes racing and flaps onto her chest like a flying fish.

"Together!"

With the best long run-ups, they thunder over the island and tumble for a smashing splash. People are stopping to watch, including this girl in purple, timid behind others.

"Just one more," Mom pants.

"Whacking fast!" Sparrow dares.

Here they go: run-up, flying speed, wham.

And some spectators have a go too.

"Let's float now," Mom says, moving to a quieter spot. "How blissful."

Finally she crawls ashore on all fours, to fall into her deckchair and sputter a lot of drops on Dad, who cries out, "Help, a seadog!"

After heaps of bread, wholemeal cake, and big savory snacks, they have liters of tea, juice, and water.

"Let's go explore far," Boldy suggests.

But Mom tries to warn them. "Don't go on those wave breakers: the moles. They're so slippery and treacherous! Please, keep our yellow parasol in sight."

"Treacherous?" Sparrow checks.

"Yes," Boldy says, "don't forget this wild current. If you get in it, you're dragged down into the deep with your head on the rocks."

As the tide is coming back in, considerable waves are broken on the glistening rocks.

At some distance they find precious treasure shells, pieces of glass, a rope, half a football, a pair of sunglasses, and a shoe—as if a ship has perished on the cliffs, or on the stone breakers called moles.

The inlet has turned all warmish, and in a corner, a girl is lying with her head on the edge of sand, where her purple swimsuit shines in the sunlight.

"Hi," Sparrow begins.

But there's no reply.

"What's your name?"

There's only the smallest response of her lips.

"Are you drozing?" Sparrow mixes up words—at moments of tension or intensity?

The girl blinks, but for the rest she doesn't stir.

Afraid to disturb, Sparrow sits gently beside her in the lagoon pool, then she lies and closes her eyes.

Now the girl moves.

Trying again: "Hi, I'm Sparrow."

And the silence is more open.

"What's your name?"

“Audrey.”

“Are you lying here often?”

There’s no answer.

Sparrow sits up and says, “Have you ever peed in the sea? I have, but only by accident. And not in this pool here. That would show, right?”

Audrey nods.

“I’ve been thinking,” Sparrow continues, “where are your mom and dad? Are you sad?”

Abruptly Audrey gets up and walks, not running or looking back, just ‘lost in thought,’ it seems. Maybe deeply?

Puzzled, Sparrow leaves for her yellow parasol.

When a bell sounds, Boldy states, “In a heat wave like this, we have to eat ice cream—a lot—or else we’ll dry out inside. Like...”

He clutches his stomach, pulls a horror face and collapses in the sand. “So I’ll go buy some. For you too?” (talking to could-be-future-Dad-in-law) “If you have enough cash...”

Tough Dad clutches his stomach, pulls a horror face, and smacks in the sand. “OK, hurry!”

They all turn to Mom, who says, “Do you want me to go nuts too?”

She faints and cries, “Go buy the coldest ice!”

After caramel, blackberry, and mango flavor cones, with the smacking of lips and sighs of delight, this beach day is over.

“Already?” Boldy says. “One more swim!”

“No, tomorrow. Who’s for spaghetti?”

Boldy shuts the parasol with himself in it and walks home.

On the dune path, Sparrow lags a bit and happens to bump into Audrey, who is sitting on the side, where people pass by or scrape her, saying,

“Out of the way, dummy.”

“Poor thing, are you so tired?”

“Not very smart parents.”

“Audrey?” Sparrow says. “Are you lonely?”

She sits next to her again. “Where are your mom and dad?”

Audrey laughs in a weird way, rubbing her face.

“You can come with me,” Sparrow goes on. “We’re having spaghetti. And if you don’t like that...”

A woman comes and talks to Audrey. “Ah, here you are, I’ve looked everywhere! Let’s go, sweetheart, I’ve got your things.”

This woman sounds worried and kind at the same time. She smiles to Sparrow. “Bye bye.”

Now Sparrow needs to catch up with the others. The path is winding along bushes that have a strong smell in the buzzing stillness.



Next day it’s so hot and sticky, Sparrow does not stop to think of the crabs with crooked claws. She tears head-on into a major wave and does a Boldy-dolphin-dive.

Back on her feet, she needs to wipe-spit-blow the salty water out of her eyes-mouth-nose. Next she swims with such force that the crabs or lobsters or worse will know how strong she is—may cross the ocean and reach a desert island with plenty of food.

She notices a pair of eyes fixed on her: Audrey’s. Both girls walk to the inlet, which, however, is filling up swiftly again, swallowing the island.

The mole is swarming with gulls, that screech and crash-dive, catching fish.

“Hi,” Sparrow starts in good heart, while Boldy spurts around the surf, to make fountains of sparkles: flying drops in the sunlight. “Was that your mom yesterday?”

“Yes...” Audrey falters. “I want to live with her.”

“So where are you living now?”

"With my father."

"And your mom?"

"She's moved out."

"Why?"

"Divorced," Audrey says.

"Oh. Won't she come back?"

"No."

"Why?" Sparrow asks.

"My dad is mental or mad."

"At your mom?"

"At everybody."

"Even you?"

"Sometimes," Audrey says.

"Why didn't you move with your mom?"

"He wouldn't let me. He says I'm his girl too. My brother and sister are with Mom; they're younger, and he wants at least one of us. He likes my little brother more, but he's only two."

"Sad," Sparrow says.

"Yes."

"But um, what if you join your mom anyway?"

"He'll get even angrier."

"That's not fair! What does he do?"

"Yell, bang doors, throw chairs..."

Now there's a long hush.

Sparrow wants to ask and say more, but Audrey is growing too nervous. Shyly she says, "Bye," and leaves, disappearing behind people who play beach-ball and cheer with each point.



At breakfast the curtain by an open window balloons into the room.

"Storm," says Boldy. "We have it coming."

"Why?"

"It's too hot. There will be a thunderstorm."

And Sparrow thinks: he likes the idea.

On the beach they want to put their windbreak up, but how to stop the wind for a minute and plant the flapping break? It's done with keen teamwork, and once the parasol stands as well—firmly?—the shelter is very much like a cozy tent.

But nature is getting even stranger. The sun stings, and ladybirds are borne on the wind over land, falling in the sand.

"Sorry," Sparrow tells them through a chink of her towel. "I can't save you."

Next a plastic life-belt comes whizzing by as if it were a circus act, whirling on and just missing an old man. It rams a sand castle near a very purple swimsuit: Audrey! Without thinking, Sparrow runs over past the mole, which is devoured by the tide.

They go and collect shells for presents or souvenirs to be kept on a tiny cloth in a fine little box. But waves keep washing the shells and pulling them away from under their hands. Rising and rising, the sea is turning wild, and the wind seems to draw the girls in.

Unaware, Sparrow asks, "How come you're here with your mom now?"

"Dad is away."

"For long?"

"Four days. By plane."

"Good thing he didn't take you with him."

"Yes, he took somebody else, a woman."

"If only the plane won't crash," Sparrow says. "I saw that on the News."

"If only they will crash," Audrey says. "No, that's not what I mean, that's bad."

Sparrow shivers. "I think you mean it alright!"

Small waves are growing into big ones. At the

same time, the air is so hot that the coolness of the water feels good, soothing.

"If your dad is cruel," Sparrow says, "it's normal to wish that—about the plane crash. What does your mom say?"

"She's scared of him too; I think she bites her tongue to keep him quiet."

"Do you cry when you're alone with him?"

"I could, when he's mean and loud and rough, but I don't."

"Shame."

"What?" Audrey calls out.

And Sparrow explains, "If you cry, your dad knows how bad it is."

"He knows already! That's why he gets even worse."

"So," Sparrow ponders out loud, "if he's mad because he knows how bad it is, he can really stop being mean—easy. We can tell him."

"And then?"

"Well... You can go home to your mom!"

Despite a headache from such reflections, or the sultry weather, she does have a plan. "Let's write it down, to show him on paper, in black and white."

She stands up and feels her soaking swimsuit, and sees how far the tide has come in: the inlet is gone completely. They're in the spot where the island was a while ago, and there's no trace of sand or shells anymore.

"Quick," Audrey gasps, "turn back!"

"Watch out for the mole..."

They reel in the current, which is too strong. Each time they wade a step or swim a stroke, they're pulled off balance in the water mass, and sometimes it reaches their necks.

But just when Sparrow thinks: I can move no more, I'll be dragged under... she hears a familiar horn. It's blown hard a few times.

She keeps trying to stand or hang in, holding Audrey as well, and the other way round. They press their feet on the bottom, where the water is clawing their legs like giant crabs.

The lifeguard with the horn is flailing, pointing... Maybe, if it's too late, he can't get in further himself; he can't risk his own life too!

The shrieking gulls and breaking waves are close by on the mole's end. Sparrow thinks of Mom and Dad and Boldy, who don't even know where she is. Are people shouting and signalling on the beach?

Somebody cries out, far away and yet nearby.

A person gets hold of her arm. It hurts but also feels good and strong. She's taken along. And Audrey? She can't see or ask...

What exactly has happened?

She's carried, resting on someone.

A man says, "What's your name?"

"Sparrow."

"OK, Birdie, hold tight. Where are your folks?"

Vaguely she points in some direction.

"Can you find them for me?"

There are lots of yellow parasols. Which was their windbreak again?

"Let's go," the man says, "and we'll see."

"But Audrey..."

"Is she your sister?"

"No, my er... new friend."

She looks around and sees Audrey with her mom, also safe. She wants to go over, because they just found out that life could be changed—with her dad. But now she needs to locate her own mom and dad.

"Back in a minute!" she calls over to Audrey. "I'll just let them know where I am!"

Adding to herself or anyone: where we stand with our perfect plan.