

Senior Category Entry

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COVID-19

I held my breath. I was tucked behind a cluster of filao trees, perched precariously on a fallen tree trunk. My knees were drawn up to my chin, an attempt to make myself as inconspicuous as possible. I clamped a sweaty palm over my mouth and then, as a second thought, put the other one on top. Silence was key.

The air was sticky and simmered with heat, and I was grateful for the shade that the tree fronds offered. I longed for a tall glass of water flooded with ice cubes. Or better yet a popsicle! The thought of a frozen cherry popsicle gave me an involuntary shudder. Oh!

A slight rustling sound coming from behind me made me jump. My ears pricked up as I strained to discern if the source of the noise was friend or foe. Tentatively, I began to crawl towards the other side of the trees when I perceived a hazy nebulous shape advancing towards me. Loose sandy blonde hair streamed across its face, and it was clad in a neon pink swimsuit dotted with butterflies. Foe. Definitely foe. Just as I got up to run she saw me. Too late.

“Found you! Found you! I found you!” she jubilantly squealed. Charlie gave me a hand up, and I brushed the sand from my hands and knees. “Well it took you long enough” I grumbled. Charlie just giggled.

Then we were racing down the path towards the sea. Some others were there too. My cousins? I don't think so. Maybe Charlie's. “Last one there's a rotten egg!” I intoned tauntingly.

I ran and I ran and I ran. No time to stop for breath. The wind cooled my sweltering flesh and benignantly nudged me on. I supposed this was what it was to be free. I could feel it in my aching limbs, taste it in the fierce roaring of the wind. I stole a hasty glance behind me, and grinned when I saw that I had overtaken the rest of the herd by far. I plunged into the opaline pool of liquid before me. Fragments of light and colour danced on the surface tantalisingly, and the zestful waves bobbed up and down, moving about me, playfully pulling me to and fro. The interminable movement comforted me. The sea would never be static, and neither would I.

A splash of droplets sprayed my face as the others tumbled in. Too enervated to speak, we floated about in silence for a few moments, enjoying the sea's deliciously icy embrace.

Oh, to be in the sea again! Why, the sea was the most wonderful thing in the world. She was beguiling - all those blues! - and she knew it. She was seductive too- every time I passed her by she would call to me, her outstretched hands beckoning me in, enchanting me; to say no to her was impossible. But most of all she was kind. She would cradle me in

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her arms, and make my worries seem so small, so insignificant! "It doesn't matter", she would reassure me, and I would believe her.

Later that day, or perhaps a different day. Charlie and I were seated on that swinging chair on the porch. It was evening, the last rays of sunlight had dissolved into night hours ago, and we were now honoured with the presence of the stars. I thought they winked at me, as if they knew something I did not. The soft murmur of voices, interrupted only by an occasional hearty laugh, made me feel drowsy. It was past our bedtime, but we'd begged our mother to let us stay up for her birthday and, too preoccupied to argue with us, she complied. Holding back yawns, with my head on her shoulder, and her hand in mine, we drowsily revered about all the glories the future held. Parties, dancing, first loves. We could not wait.

These scenes flit back to me one by one, a dizzying montage of faces and places colourful and bright. But these are memories, beautiful, shining, intangible memories. Yet I am locked in the all too tangible present. I set the photo album aside.

The future looks so dreary now. And for how much longer? Oh how I long to crawl back and seek refuge in the bosom of the past - why had I taken it for granted?

I gazed out of my window. It was a warm April afternoon, spring's soft warmth called to me - "why do you not come out?" she wailed. It was all wrong. A shroud of despondency hung around the frail limbs of the country. COVID-19, like a manic mechanical hand, hovered above, ready to grab its next victim. Who would it take next?

I felt as if I were in a papiermaché parallel world, living in the shadows of reality - everything was grey and seemed to be crumbling beneath my fingers. Everything used to be vivid and busy and exciting. I felt much heavier now.

As I looked at the ghost town that lay below my window - uninhabited, unappreciated, unseen, I wondered if things would ever go back to the way they had been before.

Appreciate the little things in life. Everyone said it. I promise I will, next time. Next time I will listen.