

A DAY IN FUJAIRAH

Sam Grieve

The night before the trip to Fujairah, Marcie dreams she is a child again, about eleven years old with scabs on her knees. In the dream, she climbs a willow tree, her toes delving into crevices in the bark. She pulls herself up onto a branch using only the strength in her arms.

The next morning, as she brushes her teeth, the dream comes back to her. She spits, rinses her toothbrush. Her face, a bespectacled moon, hangs in the dark night of the mirror; Francesca's guest bathroom is fully tiled in polished onyx. Without glasses, Marcie thinks she looks OK. She is still in possession of the general shape of her earlier figure, and the general palette of her youth. But the second those lenses are back on, all is transformed. Before her stands an interloper, crêpe-eyed, big-breasted, a dowager's hump starting its inexorable rise at the nape of her neck.

She summons the willow bark again beneath her fingers, knows that if she

just focuses, she could swing her leg up so that her knee is almost level with her ear.

“What the heck are you doing?”

She lowers her foot. She had forgotten the door was open and Jacob is on the bed, answering emails.

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They leave by 8:00 a.m., Jacob and the boys in the back, she up front—a mistake, she soon decides, for Francesca drives like a maniac, flinging the Range Rover from one lane to another and never bothering with the indicator. Within ten minutes, though, the highway opens up, and Marcie is able to exhale. Scrubland extends in every direction, punctuated by the skeletons of cranes. Dust turns the sky a jaundiced blue. Dubai is a building site. Everywhere she looks something is being made: It is a demented, horizontal Babel, and it freaks her out.

Her cousin, on the other hand, could not be more comfortable. She has lived here for a decade now, remaining defiantly herself as around her the city has been reinvented.

“It’s incredible,” she tells Marcie, “the money they throw at it. It’s a never-ending work-in-progress. They’ll build some enormous spaghetti junction one

month, then pull it down the next. My GPS can't keep up. And look at the skyline! I've got photos from when we first arrived, and I don't even recognize the place."

Marcie stares out at the half-built skyscrapers, a veritable army.

"And the housing estates..." Fran continues. "You'd think the whole world was moving here. See that development there, to the right, with those mansions? Went up last year, and all empty as far as I know. And look how close together they build them. And right next to the highway. That's curb appeal, Dubai style. You pay more for them." She winks at Marcie.

They drive on, past shopping malls, and schools, and a residential community surrounded by a hedge, startling and garishly green against the gray and beige. And mosques, Marcie's favorite thing about this place, rising from the chaos every few minutes with their fairytale minarets and domes.

Thirty minutes into the journey, Marcie spots a road sign warning of camels. Francesca gallantly screeches to a halt mid-freeway so Marcie can take a photo. The scrubland has seceded to proper desert out here, with windblown trees that stand on multiple crooked legs. "The dunes have moved on," Fran explains. "The roots are exposed."

Marcie finds this fact sadder than it should be, and for a little while doesn't

say anything because her throat hurts.

Soon they are into Sharjah. “The drivers are nuts,” warns Fran, accelerating to 160 kph. In the back, the boys are spell-cast by their phones, Ryan photographing his nostrils every few seconds (for Snapchat, Mom!), as Jacob types on his laptop. *Clackety clack clack*. Like a ravenous bird pecking at seeds. Sometimes she wishes he would just be, but that is not Jacob’s style. Partners in New York City law firms never stop, for time literally is money for Jacob. He would bill every hour of the day, if he could. Anyway, he is off the hook socially, for Fran’s husband, Felix, has been delayed on a flight from Nairobi. And Jacob doesn’t really talk to Fran. He finds her *out there*, he’s told Marcie. A whackadoodle.

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As children, Marcie and Fran were close. Their mothers were sisters, and every summer the two families and the girls’ grandparents, Sukie and Pop-Pop, would spend six weeks at Squam Lake in New Hampshire. The family cabin sat on six acres, and the kids were given the run of the place. They swam in the cold water, built fires on the beach, camped, and canoed out to the small archipelago of islands. The days merged into a paradise of pancakes and syrup, pine needles underfoot, hot dogs charred and splitting, palms sore from the

rope swing or the oars, the yawning night sky splattered with stars. There, beneath the birch and pine, they shed their suburban identities and became explorers in the Amazon, inhabitants of a different planet, or marooned on a Pacific island.

“You kids are marvels,” Pop-Pop would say. “All your schemes.” And it was true, but what nobody liked to admit in the glow of his admiration was that it was Fran who thought up everything, Fran who suggested the bear hunt, Fran who invented an imaginary world, Fran who suggested they climb Mount Everest.

And then, when they were fourteen, Fran’s parents split up. Fran’s dad insisted the kids spend the summer with his parents, and Marcie found herself at the lake with only her younger brother for company. She felt like a puppet with no strings. She strapped her Walkman to her ears and tuned out. The next spring, Sukie died of pancreatic cancer, and before anyone could blink, Pop-Pop sold the cabin. “I cannot imagine being there without her,” he told everyone. And after that, Marcie only saw Francesca occasionally, at a family wedding or sometimes at Christmas at Pop-Pop’s, where she would blast in and take Marcie by surprise again with the sheer effervescence of her being.

Both the boys are now asleep, Ryan snoring through an open mouth. He has grown a small goatee this vacation, tufty and dark. She can't bear it. Fran, ever the tour guide, points out sights: five camels picking their way across the slip edge of a sand dune, an enormous cement factory from which trucks are pouring like interstellar bees from some spacecraft, a flock of depressed sheep congregating behind a fence, and ahead, the painted outlines of the mountains, inhaling color as they approach.

They are going scuba diving. Or at least Fran and the boys are. Jacob, she assumes, will be on a call. And Marcie, well, she plans to hold the towels and fret about sunscreen. She can't even imagine it. Being underwater. Breathing.

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They stop for fuel in Ras Al-Khaimah. The gas station is a gleaming temple at odds with the few roadside stores they have passed. While Fran oversees the filling of the car, and Jacob yells with belligerence into his phone, Marcie goes in search of the ladies' room. Public toilets are not her thing, but nature is calling with insistence. To her relief, the facility is spotless, with ample paper and an impressive scent of bleach. She still hovers over the toilet seat (*They are simply covered in germs, honey*, warns her dead mother from inside her head), and to distract herself from her burning, quivering thighs, she examines

the yellow rubber shower hose attached to the wall. A sudden, disgraceful thought shoos her mother away: Wouldn't it just be lovely to spray that cool water on her nether regions?

Back at the car, Fran hands the boys a camel-milk chocolate drink. Ryan looks repulsed, but Kurt slurps his down with gusto. Kurt, younger than Ryan by two years, is irritatingly confident. Marcie heard him speak to the petrol attendant in Arabic, and when Ryan was having difficulty with his seatbelt, Kurt even extracted it from between the seats for him before Marcie could lean over to help.

“Restrooms OK?” Fran has pinned her red hair up into an effulgent bun. Her sunglasses are a brand Marcie has never heard of, but she suspects are in a different league than her own. She and Jacob have quite a lot of money from what she can deduce from the occasional statement she sees. *But there is no point in being frivolous*, he often reminds her. *We need to pay for college*. And yet sometimes she wonders if this tight budget also extends to Jacob himself. He often comes back from business trips with new shoes, leather-soled and gleaming, or shirts with monograms stitched into the cuffs.

Fran peels out of the gas station so fast even Jacob looks up from his work. “I’m in a rush,” Fran explains. “I told Mustafa we’d be there at ten.”

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“Just beautiful, isn’t it?” By now they have reached the mountains. Marcie stares out of the window. She has never seen a landscape like this, so raw. Black, jagged rocks tumbled upon each other, without a single plant, or tree. It’s biblical, the place where a prophet might live, amongst the scorpions and snakes.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you,” Fran continues, “about what you are going to do now that Ryan is off to college in September.”

“I haven’t actually put much thought into it,” says Marcie. This is both true and not true. She cannot stop thinking about it. Not about what she will do, but about what she won’t. Making Ryan’s breakfast, and going to his Ultimate Frisbee games, and driving him to the dentist, and changing his sheets. Cutting his hair. Sending out the class parent emails. Organizing the pre-prom. Her whole existence is predicated on Ryan, has been since the moment he slithered into her life eighteen years ago.

“Well,” says Fran, “I’m going to travel. Maybe Mozambique. Great diving there. You can see dugongs.”

“Mom can’t wait for me to leave,” interrupts Kurt from the backseat. Marcie’s face reddens, but her cousin is not remotely fazed. “Bags already packed,”

she cackles, then she sticks out her tongue at her son in the rearview mirror.

They are on the descent now. Fran accelerates through a bend, almost skimming the paintwork of a palatial mansion wedged between a slope of gray scree and the road, and then the sea appears in the distance, a silvery ribbon in the haze.

“Voilà!” yelps Fran. “The Gulf of Oman. A mere hop, skip, and a jump to Iran.”

“Really?” Marcie squints out over the bright line of water. She’s vague on the geography out here. At one point during the flight over, she woke up to find the interior of the plane twilit, Ryan’s head on her shoulder. She had turned on the screen in front of her. The moving map appeared, and she had tried to make sense of the unfamiliar topography, the dotted cities named in Arabic. After a few minutes, the writing switched to English, and she saw with rising horror that they were above Raqqa. Below her was a town ruled by ISIS. Women in burkas; men, bearded, zealous, brandishing machine guns. Black flags fluttering among ruins. The illusory comfort of the plane vanished; there was nothing really separating her from them, she saw with hideous clarity—the aircraft was as fragile as a soap bubble floating in empty leagues of air. Luckily, Ryan had woken up at that exact moment with a dry throat, so she

had thwarted her impending existential crisis by fetching him a glass of water.

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They pull into the hotel at 10:00 a.m., sharp. Fran, for all her waywardness, is a stickler for punctuality. The hotel is attractive, with a big portico and palm trees. They all haul the beach bags from the trunk, except for Jacob, who is on another call and gesticulates at her with fury when she tries to get him to help. Fran leads the way through the interior, Jacob executing a rapid escape when he spots a concierge, and out into the gardens beyond. Marcie blinks into the brightness. A large pool takes up most of the foreground; beyond is the beach. There is a joyful din in the air. Small children splash about, accompanied by pasty fathers sporting tiny Speedos.

“Russians,” Fran enlightens her with a smirk. They bypass a poolside restaurant, where several ladies in headscarves are sipping juice, and then pick their way down a narrow path to the dive shop. The sun is warm on her head. A gigantic plastic swan floats in cerulean waves. Marcie feels her heart expanding against her ribs.

The divemaster, Mustafa, is sitting behind his desk, drinking a Pepsi. His face splits into a delighted grin when Fran appears at the door. He is Kojak-

bald, his skin the color of polished olive wood, a tight white T-shirt emphasizing both the power in his arms and the impressive girth of his belly. “Francesca,” he says, “you come.”

Fran introduces them. Apparently, they have to watch a video, but it takes a while for Mustafa’s assistant to set it up. Marcie wonders why they couldn’t have done this before. In fact, everything seems to take a long time, as though they are all waiting for something, but nobody is quite sure what it is.

Fran chats to the boys, telling them what they might see: turtles, boxfish, angelfish, eels.

“Sharks?” asks Ryan.

“Some...” begins Kurt, but Fran shuts him up with a glance. She asks Mustafa about water temperatures, and dive sites further down the coast, and how she would just love to do a night dive. Marcie tunes out and examines the merchandise. Here she is, a quarter of a way around the world, and the shop seems no different to one she might find at the Jersey Shore. Hats made from faux straw, rash guards, goggles, fins, sunscreen, bathing suits, inflatable toys—the depressing effluent of Chinese factories democratizing the world. Then something catches her eye—ah, something you would not find in New Jersey—a selection of burkinis! She spends a good while browsing through them.

Some are simply one-pieces with a hood, while others are more like thin yoga pants with a hooded tunic. Many are black, but there are also some pretty floral designs in pink and purple. It would be quite a relief to put one on, she thinks. Bye-bye, batwings and bulges.

“Mom!” Ryan and Kurt are sitting in front of the computer. Fran and Mustafa have vanished. She pulls up a chair next to Ryan. The computer is an old model, the screensaver a picture of her cousin, underwater, red hair swirling around her head like Ariel, the Little Mermaid. Ryan nudges Kurt, who snickers. Marcie frowns.

Before she can think more of it, Mustafa bustles back in and starts clicking on icons. The movie begins, and for the next twenty minutes, she and Ryan learn the basics of scuba diving. Or at least she hopes Ryan does, for she never really knows how much he takes in.

“Remember to breathe out when you are coming up,” she reiterates to him, every time the film makes this point. “Otherwise, your lungs might burst.” *The elastic limit of the alveoli*. The thought makes her feel sick. Was she right to let Ryan do this?

“Time to put wetsuit on,” calls Mustafa when the video comes to an end. His English appears resistant to articles. They head outside. Fran, in a navy

one-piece, is forcing a milky-white leg into a sausage skin of neoprene. A rusted weight belt lies on the table behind her, beside neon-yellow flippers. Her hair hangs down to her waist. Her face is luminous with excitement. “Marcie! Last chance! You sure you don’t want to come in?”

Marcie shakes her head. Once, when she was small, she had dived off the side of the boat in the lake. She had become disorientated in the murky darkness and come up under the keel. She had sunk, resurfaced, and there again was the boat. The whole incident must have only taken a few seconds, but to Marcie it seemed eternal. She had panicked, sucking in water, until her father, noticing her thrashing legs, grabbed the back of her swimsuit and yanked her out. Since then, she cannot bear it, being under. Even in the shower, she keeps her face out of the spray, instead splashing the water onto her cheeks with cupped hands.

It takes ages to gear up, as Fran calls it, but at last the boys are ready. Full-length wetsuits, masks, weight belts, tanks, respirators. Sweat is bubbling along Ryan’s hairline. Is he enjoying himself? Ryan has never been one for discomfort. Marcie was always the mother with the biggest bag on the soccer sidelines, ready to appease his every gripe, from thirst, to low sugar levels, to cold, to hot. Why, if only she had that bag with her now. That portable fan was in

it—she could blow some cool air on him. But before she can inquire, or placate, Mustafa sets off like some plump Bond villain past a group of football-playing Russian boys with gulag haircuts. There is a moment of laughter when Ryan is spotted waddling over the sand, already wearing his flippers.

“Why don’t you grab a coffee while we practice in the pool?” Fran suggests. “And tell Jacob we are going to be a while.”

“Good idea,” says Marcie. They have been here for five days, and her jet lag was still lingering. Every now and again, the ground lurches, and a wave of tiredness engulfs her. “You’ll keep an eye on Ryan?” She says it with as little inflection as she can; she has noticed Fran’s glances when she is tending to her son, her little moue of displeasure.

“He’ll be fine.” Fran ties her hair into a pre-Raphaelite ponytail. “Come back in forty minutes.”

Marcie heads up to the hotel. It is getting hotter. In a few weeks, Fran has told her, it will be intolerable. Rubber shoes melt on the sidewalk. But now it is pleasant, the sky behind the mountains a washed-out denim blue. A ringing sound suddenly begins, the beautiful, enchanting call of the muezzin from a mosque tucked into the lee of the hill. God is so woven into people’s lives here, Marcie thinks. Like a thread. The weft and warp. She herself is not particularly

religious. Or maybe she should say spiritual, for of course they go to church. But does she really think about God? She crosses a small bridge over a decorative pond. The air smells of sea salt and jasmine. The call to prayer wraps around her like a cloth. She feels something give inside herself, an almost imperceptible unraveling.

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Jacob lounges in the lobby, an ear pressed to his phone.

When he dies, I will bury it with him, tucked into the silk of his casket.

The thought floats into her mind, unbidden, and shocking, but also sends a tingle into the marrow of her bones. She had never thought about it before. That she might be left alone.

She buys a coffee, disappointed by the cakes on offer, chocolate rather than the rosewater sweetmeats and flaky baklavas she would have expected. She could almost be in America. But then little things jar against her sense of familiarity. The sinuous curve of an archway. A smoking bowl of oud, sending musky, fragrant spools of smoke into the air. Frangipani flowers floating waxen in a pool. The impeccable cleanliness.

Steam shoots into the milk; the coffee is placed in a disposable cup on the counter in front of her. She thanks the woman, then wanders back outside.

Jacob has vanished from his seat. Ah, well, he can sort himself out, she thinks.

She meanders through the garden. Bougainvillea tumbles in a vermilion cascade down a wall. The sea is a glinting ribbon, its brilliance broken here and there by some small fishing boats. Behind the hotel and extending as far she can see are stony mountains, like the rubble of a Titan's palace, now in ruins.

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The divers are back on the beach when she returns. Mustafa hails her as she approaches. "You come on boat, right? You snorkel."

Oh, God, all these suggestions. The thought is nightmarish. She shakes her head.

"Come on boat for picture," he says, grinning. She finds herself grinning back.

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"Ryan did really well." Her cousin appears at her side, snorkel and goggles dangling from her fingers.

"Really?" She finds this almost extraordinary. That the child who came out of her could be immune to her greatest fear, did not have it seep into his bones as he rocked for nine months inside her.

“Lady!” Mustafa is now standing ankle-deep in the sea. A motorboat, battered, blue, bobs several yards out. Mustafa gesticulates toward it.

The sea is crystal clear, spangled sand below. No waves. She steps out of her Keds, rolls up her pedal pushers, conscious of the varicosities that bulge from her calves. The water sucks and swirls around her ankles. She throws her shoes into the boat and clammers up the ladder. The boys are already onboard, discussing a video game. Ryan’s face is animated, his eyes squinting with laughter. She never sees him like this. It fills her with a sudden surge of hope. Perhaps he will survive after all. Not end up as one of those sad, overweight men in their mother’s basements, living out their days caught up in an imaginary screen world.

Mustafa is now helping Fran onto the boat. The heroine to his Bond, thinks Marcie. Despite being the same age, Fran has matured tastefully into her years, her weight accumulating erotically on her haunches, her breasts. Her legs still seem as long as ever, her hair almost inappropriately luxurious for a woman of fifty. A blob of white sunscreen is caught in the interstices of her nose and cheek. It makes her look young, insouciant.

Marcie sits down on one of the seats. The wind has dropped, the sea a burnished silver under the noonday sun. A young, dark-skinned man fiddles

with the engine at the back of the boat. He smiles at her, and she lifts a hand.

“Adarsh! We go!” Captain Mustafa stands triumphant over Fran, his left foot raised and resting on the bench. The prow of the boat wheels around, and they head out toward an island a quarter of a mile away. Along the shoreline, two new hotels are under construction, all ribs and concrete, overshadowed by the long necks of cranes. They roar past some fisherman in colored wooden boats, long nets draped from their hands. The sky is a dome of limitless blue.

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Adarsh is the same age as her son. Eighteen. She learns this surprising fact after the divers have rolled off the boat into the sea. Ryan’s nonchalance from earlier had vanished; he had been almost fretful, admonishing her to help with his belt, his tank, and she could feel her anxiety rising. Once in the water, he seemed calmer; the four divers bobbed facing each other, before sinking beneath the surface. Marcie moved to a sunny bench, opened her book, tried to forget the knot in her belly.

After ten minutes, she looks up. Mustafa’s assistant is fishing from the back of the boat, casting a simple line and withdrawing it. There is no bait, merely a hook and weight. The boat spins; she is in shadow again. She changes seats. Despite the heat of the day, there is a chilly wind coming off the water. Adarsh

smiles at her. The silence between them seems to grow. She turns a page in her book. Another splash, another grin from him. And then suddenly he exclaims, “He, he,” and a fish, a tiny curlicue of platinum light, jerks from the end of the hook.

“Wow,” she says. She is impressed. It is the first time she has been on a fishing trip where someone has caught something. She watches as Adarsh maneuvers the hook out of the fish’s mouth and tosses his catch back into the water. The fish floats on its side, and her breath stalls in sympathy. But then, as though rising to consciousness, it jackknifes into the depths.

“You like fishing?” she asks.

Adarsh nods.

“You from the UAE?”

He laughs. “I’m from India.”

India? She tries to picture where it is in relation to Dubai, fails. “How long have you been here?”

“Three years. Since I am fifteen.” He bends his head, fiddles with the hook.

He’s eighteen! She looks at him afresh. She had assumed he was older. The way he had driven the boat. Taken instruction from Mustafa.

“You like your job?”

His narrow fingers now unravel a knot in the fishing line. “Job is good here,” he says shortly. “My mother is old. Alone. Fifty years. I must stay and work for her.”

Another silence. She feels a bit like that fish, stunned. She examines him more closely; she can see the boy in him now, the narrow bone structure, the way his flesh clings taut to his bones, but also the man, alert, purposeful. Somewhere beneath them is her own son—hopefully remembering to breathe.

She forces her gaze away, to the distant mountains, their hideous bleakness. “It is not very beautiful here,” she hears herself saying.

Adarsh waves a hand at the wall of rock. “In India that all green,” he says. “And monkeys. India is very beautiful.”

“I have heard so.” Behind him the island looms up; they seem to be spinning; the sun is hot on her legs again. “Are we on anchor?” The thought had not occurred to her before, but the island seems much further away. It really is ugly, a black scramble of rock and mussel shell.

He looks confused.

“Anchor?” She says with more force, “Are we on anchor?”

More confusion, and then his face contorts. She suspects he is holding back a laugh. “We float in sea.”

She looks back at the island. It is even further now, maybe three football fields. They have swung around the side of it, engine off. She feels a wary loosening in her bones as what he has said sinks in. She is on a boat with a perfect stranger. She is on a boat adrift in a sea, surrounded by inhospitable countries. She can't speak the language; for goodness sake, she can't even recall what the hell this place is called. Her son has vanished beneath the waves. She forgot to mention to her husband where they were going. And T-Mobile has obviously failed to enter into a cellular roaming agreement with Iran, because she has absolutely no damned cell coverage on her iPhone. The realization is absurd and funny and terrifying, and it makes her want to burst out laughing, and possibly be sick at the same time.

But then Adarsh turns the engine on. "Time to meet divers," he says. "Hold tight."

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They pull into a sheltered area on the far side of the island. Again, the boat drifts; the fishing hook is cast. Adarsh points to some rocks about thirty feet away. "There," he says.

Sure enough, a neon-yellow flipper breaks the surface. Marcie moves to the prow and watches the trails of billowing bubbles. She gets the towel ready

for Ryan, lays it over her lap. The sun dapples the water with white stars; when she peers into the depths, she can make out columns of light, a shimmering aquatic temple teeming with fish. Adarsh pulls in his line, inspects the end, recasts. The divers' bubbles are getting closer; they are only about thirty feet away now, but is the furthest, she realizes with a start, that she has been from Ryan in a long time. The thought is not distressing. Rather the opposite, she feels an old lightness.

As the boys grab the ladder, a turtle breaks the surface on the far side of the boat. Marcie photographs it while Ryan removes his tank all by himself.

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Later, after dinner on the beach, they head back to Dubai. The boys fall asleep within minutes, and even Jacob dozes off. It feels as though it's just her and Fran, two adventurers, passing through this strange land. The moon comes up as they head over the mountain pass, casting the landscape in pewter softness.

"We'll take the scenic route," says Fran, so they drive through unpronounceable towns, one after the other. It is like a dream, the mosques with their luminous domes, either lit up colorfully or white, the crowds of men out shopping, the warehouses now open like Aladdin's caves with their wares on

display, carpets and pots and pans and plastic swing sets. Sidewalk barbershops. A town that seems to sell only honey. Costermongers, with their tented displays of fruits, piles of different dates.

“I loved today,” Marcie says.

“Really?” Fran glances at her. “You didn’t do much—just watched.”

Marcie smiles, shrugs.

“But Ryan was great.” Another sideways look. “He’s more capable than you think.”

“I know.” Marcie’s eyes prick with sudden tears. She thinks of Adarsh; of that light-filled sea. Of being utterly untethered to her life. The road ahead rises into blowsy darkness. She kicks off her Keds. The cool breeze circles her bare toes.

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