

## *Lucy Bucknell*

### **The Kite**

I know the boy they're talking about, though I didn't realize until now. On the news they say a pilot, a navy pilot or airforce. They might give his rank, but not his name or his hometown, not at first. I never knew this boy's name in any case, but they were just now saying he lived on Grey Lane. Lots of boys must live on Grey Lane but the one I remember had the haircut, a military haircut. And he carried himself a certain way. He might not have been a soldier at all of course, a pilot. He might have worn his hair short just for fashion, or because the summer had been hot.

He'd come out out across the dunes for a swim though it was rough and kind of cool. It wasn't September yet, but the water was getting that dark blue look, blue with black underneath; and it was afternoon so there were shadows in the troughs of the waves. It was one of those days you sometimes get in late August, like a premonition of winter: the sky hard and clear, dune grass more silver than green. And the breeze was up, a stiff breeze. You get a day like that where the sand never even gets warm, then the next day it's summer again. We were down there trying to fly Luke's kite, the three of us, and either the wind was too much or we're no good at kite-flying because the kite whipped around like a fish on a line, doing those whistling figure eights kites do. Then next thing it ripped skyward and came down way out in the water.

Gene was wearing his bathing suit but I wouldn't let him go in. When you got right down to the water line the waves looked pretty big, and wild; unpredictable, moving in all different directions at once then slamming together unexpectedly and throwing spray way up the beach. Gene said he could handle it but I was adamant. Luke wanted the kite back of course. I'd never seen him so interested in that kite as when it went into the ocean. And we couldn't count on its washing back in, with the current the way it was.

So we were standing there arguing and watching the kite appear and disappear in the foam and out across the dunes comes this boy—man I guess, though he seemed like a boy to me, a great tall handsome one, lean and tan, and strong looking in a lithe sort of way. Like I said, he had a crewcut but it became him. He looked utterly clean and economical, a long smooth muscle with a towel over his shoulder.

I said I hoped he wasn't getting in now that he'd seen the waves up close, and he laughed. But even Gene by now had stopped boasting. Another thing about those late August days, evening comes on quickly, the water gets rougher; all at once it isn't day anymore. And the ocean feels more separate from the

land somehow, more like another world that we're not designed to survive in. Probably I worry about these things more than other people; I see risk everywhere. But as I say, even Gene thought we'd better let the kite go.

But the boy, young man, said he was getting married the next day and wanted a swim before the rehearsal dinner. The rough water was just what he liked, he said. He'd grown up here, swimming in these currents, on this beach. I guess he felt he knew the ocean pretty well. So in he went, in a low dive, bursting up through the colliding waves. He held up a hand briefly and smiled, his head glistening like an otter's or a seal's. I couldn't even see the kite anymore but Luke was hopping up and down pointing and yelling and I guess the boy must have drawn a bead on it before he went in because he headed straight out and soon we saw he had it in his hand. Then he furled it up like a little sail and started back. I honestly didn't think he'd make it. The waves looked huge. They seemed to rise and crash down in place, not moving in at all. In fact almost moving out, as though willfully drawing him eastward. He stroked these long strong strokes but he just didn't budge except to go under once in a while, then emerge again, the kite now in his teeth. He never even let go of the kite. I knew Gene was thinking he'd have to go in. And I was thinking that they'd both be lost. Then all at once there he was, climbing up out of the sea just a few yards down from where we stood, laughing, with the kite in his hand.

He was indomitable that boy, as strong as could be. He just radiated vigor, and pleasure. He handed the kite to Luke who was looking at him like he was a god. So were we all I suppose. Luke actually shook his hand when he thanked him and I could see the young man was touched. And I was thinking how lucky his bride was, what a lover and husband he might be, this tall handsome boy with the crewcut, who went into such an ocean and came out again and was happy about it, happy and never afraid.

He dropped his towel back over his shoulder and went away through the dunes, still wet, not looking back once he'd said goodbye. And I suppose he got married the next day, with all his friends around him; with a hangover maybe from the rehearsal dinner, sand between his toes despite his shower.

I've thought about him now and again. Gene sometimes tells the story at a cocktail party, but he doesn't linger on the boy's beauty, just on the power of the waves, and how he thought the boy might not make it back. I linger on his beauty; it's hard not to. A picture like that of a fine body emerging from the sea stays with you. And if he *is* the one on the news, if his plane fell out of the sky and they took him from the wreckage and shot him the way they claim, that would stay with me too. The boy and the airplane, blue water with black underneath.

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