

Bianca Bell - *The Lake*

1. The Egg Stage

Nami is dripping with sweat. He clutches his Grandma's chubby, greasy hands. The waves of the lake slap rhythmically against the concrete jetty. A cry, more a shriek, carries across to them from the municipal beach. It must have been a Sunday, as both Grandma and Grandpa had been there with him on the rug. Someone else is there too. Nami recalls three red blotches of swimwear, the three triangles of a bikini. Above them, dark hair is combed into a tail like horses have, and there are two little tufts of dark hair under the arms. The three triangles shift languidly in the sun, turn over and become one. Just off the shore a catfish lazily whips its tail.

'That water level looks lower than it was to me,' says Grandma, and loudly swats a fly that has settled on her belly. She chomps on toasted sunflower seeds from the beach kiosk and spits the husks out onto the concrete in front of her.

'What are you on about?' Grandpa laughs. 'Women's logic ... the only thing worse is an 'angover.'

He laughs again, swaying backwards and forwards with his hands resting on his thighs. Between the dirt-ingrained fingers of one hand he holds a filterless cigarette.

The three triangles pick up the thermos, move over to Nami and give him some mint tea.

'Drink up, poppet.' Ah, the three triangles have a voice. It is pleasantly deep, just like the old well behind their house. Nami drinks. The tea is sweetened with honey and tastes delicious. It slips easily down his throat.

'Come on then, lad,' says Grandpa, in the tone of one who wants to restore peace. 'Time to make sure no one's going to call you a sissy. Three-year old boys round here oughta know how to swim.'

Grandpa runs his hands over his round belly and drops his cigarette end into the water where it makes a hiss. Nami does not want to go in the water. He wants to stay on the rug, leaning against Grandma's soft belly and watching the three red triangles. He tries to lift an arm but it drops lazily back into his lap.

'Go on, Nami,' Grandma encourages. 'I'll get you a lolly.'

The lollies always come stuck to the cellophane. Sometimes they are so stuck that it is impossible to unwrap them. It is not often that Nami gets one; only on Peace Day and when the three triangles come. They taste of burnt sugar and violet. Nami doesn't like them much, but they are so rare that he looks forward to them all the same and will do whatever he is asked to do to get one.

Nami starts to get up, but even before he is on his feet he feels himself flying through the air.

'Swim, my little sturgeon!' cries Grandpa after him, and bursts out laughing. The three triangles cry out, as does Grandma. Nami lands painfully flank first, shatters the surface of the lake and descends down through the dark water. Above him he sees the sun's rays stream through the swarm of bubbles in his wake. The breath has been knocked out of him and his lungs hurt. The water gets colder the deeper he goes. Nami falls like a dead weight and his arms flap about alongside his body. Soon, he thinks, he'll meet the Spirit of the lake, who dwells on its bed. The pressure on his lungs increases and his ears are exploding. Instinctively he gasps for breath and starts to gulp water. He can no longer see. In a frenzy he waves his arms and legs and this brings him to the surface. Everything is black and flecked with sparks.

'You stupid old fool!' Grandma is relieved when, at last, Nami starts to breathe and furiously cough up dirty water. 'Blimey, what an old ass you are! I couldn't even trust you with a can of bait.'

‘What?! Well, that’s just great, that is. Didn’t you see him swim hisself to the surface?’ Grandpa’s voice had trembled a bit as he replied. ‘What a warrior!’

‘Come to me, poppet,’ call the three triangles from way down on the ground, and they cuddle him to themselves. One pounding chest against another. Nami calms down and stops coughing. Underneath the triangles is sweet-smelling, warm, bronze skin. The three triangles squeeze him tightly, kiss his hair and whisper something. Nami feels calm as the woman’s hair tickles his face and she starts to sing.

‘Stop singin’ to him,’ Grandma snaps. Nami wriggles about a bit but then lies peacefully. He is playing dead, pretending not to be there at all. His breathing gets steadily quieter until his every out breath just makes a little satisfied sound, like the vibrations of a trembling bell after the clapper has stopped beating against it. Nami wants to remain like this forever. He squints discreetly up at the woman’s face but all he can see are the tip of her nose and her protruding cheek bones. On the walk home Nami passes out and Grandpa has to carry him.

Rather than crossing the square, where the statue of the Statesman stands and the Russians are digging a huge rubbish pit, they go round the back, behind the housing complex.

‘What a lump you are, lad.’ Grandpa grumbles and stiffens as his foot skids and he barely succeeds in keeping his balance. At home Nami is given a lolly. He licks it out of duty more than anything else. Out of the corner of his eye he observes the three triangles, which have meanwhile transformed into a greeny-blue flowery dress. When it is close enough he touches it, and a wonderful smell wafts over him.

In the evening Nami starts to be violently sick. His tummy contracts uncontrollably and litres of dirty water, mint tea and sheep’s cheese bliny come shooting out of him. The greeny-blue flowery dress strokes his forehead, holds his head while he is sick, wipes his mouth and soothes him. ‘Hush poppet, you’ll feel better now,’ it whispers.

When Nami wakes up in the morning the greeny-blue dress has already gone. He drinks down some black Russian tea and is throwing it all back up again in no time.

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Nami has grown up in a haze of fish, so he has never really noticed the smell. There is a sturgeon hatchery in the little town of Boros and a fish processing factory right next door to it. Their neighbour, Alea, works at the fish factory. She sometimes comes to sit awhile in their porch and brings them a tub of caviar in return for a sack of potatoes. Then Nami has to eat caviar for breakfast and dinner, sitting with the tub and caressingly scooping the stuff out until he can't stomach any more.

'All gone?' Grandma enquires. Nami lowers his eyes and stares at the floor.

'Good,' she says. 'Best thing on earth for you, caviar. After ginseng, that is!'

'And after a good fuck,' adds Grandpa, grinning from the corner of the room. He is rubbing the crook of his eye and holding a filterless cigarette between his index and malformed middle fingers.

'Shame on you, Grandpa!' Grandma chides, but she is smiling. She is frying bliny and slathering them with oil. She laughs as she hands them to Nami. 'You eat like a king!' Nami likes caviar but senses there might be something else to follow and hopes it will be a bit more substantial. At four years old, however, he is not yet quite able to express this. He pops the tiny black blobs between his teeth and absentmindedly picks a scab off his knee.

Grandma has a big lump on her lower back, wide bony hips and a soft tummy, on which Nami is nodding off. Her hardened, dry hands stroke his hair and she tells him old tales about the Lake Spirit and the warriors of the Golden Horde, who sleep in the crags on the Giant's Rock and wait for the Great Warrior to come and wake them.

'Is that going to be me?' asks Nami.

'Yeh, that'll be you, my boy.' Grandma smiles.

‘How am I going to find ‘em?’

‘Providence’ll show you the way, love,’ replies Grandma, and Nami drifts into a peaceful sleep.

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It is Fishermen’s Day, the biggest holiday of the year. The whole town gathers on the square around the statue of the Statesman. The children are clad in snow-white shirts. The boys wear brightly-coloured neckties and the girls have bows in their hair. Akel’s stall, which normally only has herring and sunflower seeds, is selling candyfloss and scrumptious doughnuts fried in burnt, slightly overused oil. It is a day when none of the fishermen head out onto the lake because everyone is busy partying, and by 11 o’clock in the morning most people can hardly stand. They are obliged to pay homage to the Lake Spirit and do so on a grand scale.

The chairman of the fish processing factory makes a long speech, during which his eyes peer in turn at the lake and at the skies. He sings the praises of Progress and Collectivisation. A boy dances round the statue of the Statesman. He is wearing a shaman headdress but no one mentions it, almost as if it were not there at all. In the front row, the Russian engineers and their wives are all dressed up, big-city style. The women are in high heels, carry leather handbags and sport high up-dos. The local women talk contemptuously about them and some even spit at them. One of the little Russian boys becomes an object of admiration, despite his look of general dim-wittedness, because he pedals a squeaky model car across the square right in the middle of the address. Nami can’t take his eyes off it. He is holding Grandma’s sweaty hand and has his legs crossed, as he has needed to pee for quite some time. In the other hand he clutches a parade stick in the shape of a fish. Grandpa is standing on this side of him, swaying a bit and drowsily nodding his head. Every now and then he makes his presence known by noisily smacking his lips. There is a sudden crack of thunder, or perhaps it is the sound of a gunshot from the Russian barracks. The Russian engineers and their wives look around and shake their heads in disgust.

For a while now no one has been listening to the chairman's oration. The women chat under their voices, but no one actually goes out of earshot of the speech. Everyone's mind is on the glorious spread laid out inside the fish factory: bliny with caviar, herring coated in mayonnaise, onion pies, bramble wine for the women, and litres and litres of spirits for their menfolk. Nami never stops watching the squeaky green pedal car, which rides the bumps and potholes of the square like a tank. He tries unsuccessfully to tear his gaze away but the car is always in his sight, even when he closes his eyes. His insides constrict painfully with envy.

'Can we go yet, Grandma?'

'Soon. Be patient.'

'How soon?'

'In a bit.'

When you are five, 'a bit' sounds like eternity.

'Grandma...'

'Now what?'

Nami does not answer.

'You've pissed yerself.'

Grandpa wakes up from his snooze and looks around uncertainly.

'Boy's pissed hisself,' whispers Grandma, nudging Grandpa.

'Idiot,' he croaks.

A stain is spreading over the front of Nami's shorts and streams of wee trickle down both of his thighs. There is another clap of thunder and this time it is accompanied by a flash of lightning. The factory chairman still has several pages of his oration to go, and the wind is flapping them about in his hands. Without further warning the heavens open, like when Grandma empties the wash tub. The women's hair-dos come unravelled, their dark blue make-up draws hydrological maps down their faces and their high heels sink into the sludge that has sprung up

from nowhere on the square, but the chairman of the fish factory never draws breath. Silently, the statue of the Statesman raises its arms to the skies. Nami is suddenly completely drenched. All that remains of his red parade stick is the wooden stick itself and the rivulets of red dye running down his arms. The square has been transformed into a newly ploughed field. People are up to their ankles in mud and their shoes remove themselves when they try to lift their feet. The boy in the squeaky car is mired in the sludge and has burst into tears. Grandpa tips his head back and lets the rain fall on his face. The square is built on a slight slope and it is not long before the boys discover that the mud affords fantastic sliding opportunities. Akel tries desperately to halt his stall in its tracks as it sets off, unstoppably, down the slope. Doughnuts tumble over the tilting countertop and off into the mud.

‘It’s the apocalypse,’ mumbles Grandpa. Slowly but surely, he is beginning to sober up.

Water continues to pour relentlessly from the clouds and slowly fills up the little car. With a certain finality the microphone gives up the ghost, but the chairman speaks on. It is like a silent slapstick, except for the drone of the rain and the intermittent claps of thunder, which now sound quite close by. At each clap Grandma jumps and looks, in terror, out towards the lake. The shaman clutches his headdress to his head and walks slowly off. Only at this point do the crowds of people begin, trancelike, to make slow movements. The chairman of the factory slowly lowers the hand holding the microphone. Water is running down under his jacket collar and soaking into his shirt. Reproachfully, he looks up at the cloud. Nami can’t help himself descending into an uncontrollable fit of the giggles. He is hooting with laughter as if he has gone insane. Grandma glares at him, but Nami is far too hysterical to get himself under control, even when he finds himself taken by the hand and dragged home.

Nami only stops laughing when they cross the threshold of the house. Grandma smacks him across his damp thighs and he finally shuts up. Even so, he continues to hiccough long into the night.

That year was an especially rich one for fish.

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At times Nami wakes to find the sun shining through the window and directly onto his bed. It must be the holidays because otherwise Grandma would have woken him up in the morning, and it is probably already warmer outside than in. Nami can hear Grandpa's smokers' cough coming from the kitchen and the honking of a tugboat in the distance. He spreads his arms and legs out over the bed and gazes fixedly up at the ceiling, where thyme and lady's mantle have been hung up to dry. He could spend the rest of his life like this, he thinks. When he sits up in bed he can see all the way out to the lake. He stretches and gets dressed. Grandma has fried doughnuts for breakfast. They are waiting for him on the kitchen table, covered with a plate, and are only just still warm. He runs outside, determined this time to succeed in building himself a treehouse. It won't be like his last attempt, when the whole construction collapsed and he scraped the skin off his back.

The only tree for miles around is a cherry with a reddish-brown lightning-struck trunk and half its branches all shrivelled. Nami hauls a selection of variously-sized wooden planks up into it. The planks slide around and fall out, and he has to attach them to the tree with rope. He sets about nailing the planks together with Grandpa's sledgehammer, which weighs a good five kilos. The tree groans, its branches shake, and the planks slip and slide about and refuse to do as they are told. Nami manages to get a nail through one of them, but in vain.

'For fuck's sake!' Nami screams furiously and lobs the sledgehammer down onto the ground.

'What are you up to over there?' bellows Grandpa, who is just at that moment emerging from the shed. 'You rotten brat! You're lucky you ain't got no father or you'd get a thrashing.'

Nami considers this and tries to picture what it would be like to be thrashed by a father. He rather likes the image he sees.

‘He’s destroying the only tree we’ve got. As if it hadn’t suffered enough already,’ yells Grandpa in Grandma’s direction. With one hand resting on her hip and the other shading her eyes, she is searching for Nami.

Nami is sitting on the ground behind the outhouse and breaking stones. He lifts the heavy hammer up above his head and releases it from on high, his eyes closed. He repeats this again and again, until streams of sweat run down his forehead and the stones have turned to dust. It calms him. Surprised, he examines his palms, which have sprung huge blisters. He chucks the hammer away into the grass and runs down to the lake to wash the dust off himself.

‘I’ll thrash you with my cock, you little scoundrel!’ cries Grandpa after him. Nami takes to his heels. He knows Grandpa will never be able to catch him up.

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‘I dunno, but it seems odd to me to have that fish factory right next door to the hatchery.’ Alea, their neighbour, is in a philosophical mood. ‘I mean, I know those fish have only got tiny brains ‘n all, but still. It’s like someone’s built you a cemetery right next to the maternity home. D’you know what I mean?’

‘Pour us some shard’nay, love,’ says Grandma, and Nami tips potato brandy into their shot glasses. Then Grandma wipes her hands over the plastic tablecloth, heaves a sigh and gazes out into the distance.

‘I mean, there’s so few of ‘em, and then they just cop it,’ Alea continues, still deep in thought.

‘What do?’ Grandma asks, absentmindedly. Today she and Alea are making filo pastry for burek. Over and over again they brush one sheet of pastry with oil and then layer another on top of it. Instead of a rolling pin they are using a metre-long wooden pole, just like the ones you see in a school gym. Grandma is bent over, puffing and panting, with her arms gripped to her sides.

‘The sturgeon, of course!’ Alea is offended.

The house is painted a dark blue and the roof is white. The doors are made of sturdy robinia wood and there is a hole in the roof, which lets in the sun’s rays when the weather is fine and torrents of water when it is not. Little snakes live between the old floorboards, but they are harmless. As soon as they hear footsteps they scuttle back down through the cracks. Grandma says they bring luck to the house so she leaves little bowls of milk out for them.

The house is perched on a hillock and has a good view of the lake, so it is easy to watch the boats as they come back into harbour. A single step leads up to the small railed off porch, where Grandma often sits when she is watching the men come in. She leans her back against a little table and knits, embroiders, chops vegetables for supper, peels potatoes, stones cherries with a hairpin, and receives visitors.

‘I don’t like the look of that,’ she says, wearily. On the horizon there are thick clouds gathering over the lake, of the sort that usually foretell a storm.

‘Oh, don’t be such a doom-monger, woman!’ Alea cries. ‘Pour us some more shard’nay, Nami. We get clouds like those from the east every April.’

Grandma sighs as she crumbles lumps of sheep’s cheese over the pastry. ‘No, look, it’s the Spirit scowling. He’s still angry. Even now...’

‘Oh, hush.’

‘It still hasn’t been enough.’

‘Gimme strength...’

‘He’s always wantin’ more from us!’

The clouds over the lake are now as heavy as lead. They crush the horizon with their ton weight, like a fat, old man his new bride on their wedding night. Nami is collecting snails in the garden and gathering them together into a small heap. This is his snail school. He sits them two

to a bench, and, with a frown, reprimands them when they give the wrong answer. Sometimes he even brings the cane into play.

‘I’m scared, Alea.’ Grandma speaks quietly, wringing her hands.

‘Me too a bit, if I’m honest, goosey.’ Alea puts her arms around her. The women form a sort of sculptural group, hanging off each other, squeezing each other with all their strength, shaking and asking each other non-stop, ‘What’s the time now?’ One day someone will carve a sculpture of a fisherman’s wife, her eyes shielded and peering out at the horizon: one of whole flocks of women with right hands that are just that little bit more muscular as a result of keeping their ceaseless watch.

‘Run for the shaman, Nami!’ calls Grandma.

‘You stay where you are, Nami. Your Grandma’s just ‘ad a few too many,’ shouts Alea. Nami runs his hands up and down his thighs and awaits further instruction.

‘You silly billy. He’ll come back, like he always does. Enough with the hysterics!’ Clumsily, Alea strokes Grandma’s wrist.

When Grandma takes the burek out of the oven the first drops are already falling. Together the women chew the greasy pastry and stare out of the window through the pouring torrents of water. Neither says a word.

Upstairs, Nami is lying on his bedroom floor and drawing in a notepad with Grandpa’s purple indelible pen. The rain hammers against the window panes and the loose tarpaulin on the shed smacks in the wind. Nami has his transistor radio on and is listening to the same programme that he listens to every evening. A gentle female voice is giving the shipping forecast for the next twenty-four hours. Her attractive rich alto relates the anticipated wind speed, rainfall and visibility for the different areas of the lake. She is speaking of the gale – a force ten on the Beaufort scale – in the same serene tones as she uses for a light breeze that rustles the leaves of the trees, and this makes Nami feel calmer. He lays his head on the floor and falls asleep. When

he wakes up in the morning it is as if someone has swept the clouds away, and the sun is blazing. Shattered and hungry, Nami goes downstairs for breakfast. When he looks at his hands he sees that they are all purple from the indelible pen. On the kitchen table a candle is burning, and in the corner of the room Grandma is sitting with her back up against the wall. Wide-eyed, she is staring straight ahead.

Grandpa, Alea's husband and six other fishermen are missing.

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At the bus stop, Nami is sitting on the pavement with his feet sticking out into the road.

'What you up to?' asks Alex. Alex is Alea's son. His father perished in the lake along with Nami's Grandpa. Like his mother, Alex is a redhead and covered in freckles.

'Shootin' Russians.' Nami replies without enthusiasm and wipes his nose on his sleeve.

An army jeep is coming down the road and raising clouds of dust. The Russian at the wheel is smoking and glowering. As the jeep passes him, Nami raises an imaginary machine gun and sprays it from left to right and back again with a storm of bullets.

'Fuckin' awesome!' Alex nods and sits down by Nami's side. 'Nice work!'

Work is scarce, since the road is unnecessarily well-proportioned and carries very little traffic, except on Peace Day and Fishermen's Day. Every now and then a truck passes along it on its way to the fish processing plant, or some heavy machinery on its way to the port; a couple of army jeeps, two or three buses a day. A flock of sheep heads east in the morning and comes back again in the other direction in the afternoon.

The boys are now working together. Nami mans the machine gun and Alex lobs hand grenades. They crouch down to escape the explosions and high five each other when they cause a particularly spectacular one that sends chunks of human body and shrapnel flying through the air. Nami spits contentedly. The gob rolls around on the ground and collects a layer of dust before it comes to a halt by his trainers.

'If you shoot Russian cars you'll get a slap in the face and they'll shoot your parents,' says a head from somewhere above the trainers. It belongs to a girl. She is from the new girls' school on the square and is about their age, nine or ten. In her hair she is wearing a gigantic yellow ribbon.

'Haven't got any parents.' Nami narrows his eyes.

The girl stares for a moment then shrugs and continues on her way.

'I'd screw her,' says Alex, nodding.

'You'd screw your own grandma.' Nami spits again into the dust.

They watch as a half-full container ship leaves the port.

'My tummy kept me up all night last night,' says Alex. His tone is one of worldly wisdom.

'Been swimmin' in the lake?' asks Nami.

'Yeh, all afternoon.'

'I always chuck after I've been swimmin' too.'

The ribbon girl is already out of sight. The clouds give a roar and, a moment later, three fighter planes come zooming out of them. Both boys take aim with their imaginary weapons and blast the planes out of the sky. Then they spit appreciatively into the dust.

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Both sides of the dusty road on the hill above the port are lined with fishermen's houses. At the end of the road are two stalls. One sells herring and the other sunflower seeds. In the summer, a young candyfloss seller pitches up too and rents the whole of the disused tavern at the end of the street. The little houses are sturdy stone buildings, and the majority are bungalows. Only a couple of them, including the one where Nami lives with his Grandma, have an upstairs. They call this Fishers and it is the unofficial heart of the town.

To the west of Fishers lie the municipal buildings: the doctor's surgery, the house of culture, the post office and the school, and the houses where the other locals live. Everything is

laid out without any sign of there having been a rational town plan. New streets are never designed. Instead they just emerge out of the ground haphazardly and often take people completely by surprise. In the east is the housing complex where the Russian engineers live, with its imposing square and Statesman statue. Still further out towards the forest, which has had to beat a gradual retreat to make way for all the building, are the military barracks.

The sounds of a harmonica and a drunken shriek carry over from the housing complex. The development was built for the Russians and is made up of a number of high-rise apartment blocks set at right angles one to another. The flats have built-in drinks cabinets for vodka (at least, that's the story in Boros), and the development has its own shopping centre and cinema, and a hotel with a private swimming pool. A pool! The statue of the Statesman stands on the concrete square. Between the blocks metal poles have been concreted askew into the ground and are connected together by lines of cable, on which a colourful array of washing is drying. There are enormous bras and military jackets of indeterminate colour. The uniforms on the lines flap in the wind, but at certain moments they pause in mid-flight and respectfully salute the Statesman's statue.

'The Russians are enjoying themselves. There'll be a racket again tonight,' sighs Grandma, massaging camel fat into her chapped heels. 'Here's hoping they won't start shootin' at least.'

'They won't,' says Nami. 'That's the engineers over on the complex, not the numbskulls at the barracks.'

'Makes no difference. Pour us some shard'nay, love.'

'Grandma?'

'What?'

'My bones hurt. In the night normally, and it wakes me up.'

'Which bones, poppet?'

Nami rubs his hands over his shins. 'Here.'

‘Have you been naughty? Under the quilt, maybe? You sure? ‘Cause if you have, then this pain’s for sin.’

‘Gra’ma...’

‘I’m only sayin’ *if..*’

‘You’re being so embarrassing...’

‘Don’t care if I am. I’m not havin’ you bein’ naughty like that under my roof. Grab the comfrey ointment off the shelf and try rubbin’ that in.’

Nami gets up and pours Grandma some liquor. Then he searches among the pots on the shelf.

‘This one?’

‘That’s axle grease, you halfwit. The one next to... that purple pot maybe... open it up?’

‘It stinks like a sore foot.’

‘That’ll be the one.’

Nami slowly smears the smelly stuff onto his shins and rubs it in thoroughly all over.

‘You sure this is going to make it better?’

‘You’ve got your Grandpa’s cheek alright.’ Grandma bows her head and goes quiet. ‘They never warn you about this bit beforehand. How sad you’ll be when they’re gone.’ After a moment she sighs dramatically.

Nami’s expression turns to a glower. The smell of the ointment is paralyzing. ‘He was always mean to you, and he thumped you, and in the end he knocked your tooth out. Don’t you remember?’

Grandma waves her hand. ‘If he walked up to that door right now I’d happily offer him my face again for him to knock out another.’

Nami shakes his head but says nothing. He has noticed that Grandma has started to weep quietly and is wiping tears from her face with her dirty fingers.

‘Bein’ on your own’s the worst thing in the world,’ she sobs on.

Grandma often wallows in self-pity and gets enjoyment out of it, so Nami no longer tries to help. Besides, he is at his happiest when he is on his own.

‘Poor wretch. At least he’s restin’ in the lake and not out in the desert somewhere.’

‘Grandma, where are my parents? Why don’t I have a normal mum and dad?’

Grandma does not hear him.

‘Grandma! Where’s that woman who came to the lake with us that time when Grandpa threw me in and taught me to swim? She had a red bikini and held my head when I was sick.’

When he had asked that, Grandma had defiantly tossed her head, just as Nami had sometimes done himself when he had had to explain to his teacher why he didn’t have his homework. She had examined the backs of her hands as she did so. They were speckled with tiny rosettes of eczema.

‘You must’ve dreamt that up. Maybe it was Alea. She sometimes came swimmin’ with us.’

‘But it can’t have been.’ Nami had shaken his head vigorously. ‘Alea’s fat and ginger and smells of fish.’

‘Time for you to get some sleep,’ says Grandma. ‘Make sure you put that ointment on before you get into bed so’s you don’t miss school. There was no way of wakin’ you this morning.’

Nami sighs, gets up, and bends over to roll his trouser legs back down. Grandma notices that they are too short for him; they barely reach to his ankles. But she says nothing.

‘And wash your mouth out with soap, you foul-mouthed brat,’ she calls after him.

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