

Ocean Eyes

by x_dobby

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Chapter 1 of 1

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The wind blows into my face, making my long brown hair fly up into the sky like a huge, brunette butterfly. The first day of summer is upon me, and so far I have little to do. I hug my freckled legs closer to me and rest my chin on my knees. Seventh grade ended yesterday and already I'm bored. What shall I do with myself the rest of the summer if I can't even think of anything to do now?

That doesn't mean I want to be back in school, though. Those kids, they're mean. Nasty. They make trouble for me out of spite. Why? Because I have darker skin than them. I am tanned and freckled from the sun of St. Thomas. They are all milky-pale and blond-haired, and sunburn easily. They live on the mainland. I take a ferry there every morning for school. Or, I did. Now, I have three whole months to myself. What a prospect.

The shimmering, turquoise waters of the ocean bob up and down. My mother always told me that I have ocean eyes, because my eyes and the ocean are the same color. I always liked that phrase: ocean eyes. The sun beats down on the wavy ocean, and I have a distant memory of asking my father why the ocean doesn't get sunburnt, if I do.

Not often, though. I am a St. Thomas girl born and raised. My parents and me, we live in a small but cool apartment overlooking the ocean. That's where I am now: on the white-sanded beach just a stone's throw away from the apartment where Mama is probably cooking supper and Daddy is the superintendent.

I stand, brushing the sand off my shorts. I am barefoot, as always. If it were up to me, the whole world would be barefoot. When you're without shoes, you can feel the textures of the sand and the water and the stones. Otherwise, all you can feel is the inside of your socks.

The jetty, a jutting-out of rocks squished together, hanging out into the sea, is just a few hundred feet down the coastline. The sand burns my feet, and so I walk on the dark lines where high tide has just melted away. Mama will call for dinner soon, so I want to experience as much of the beach as possible until then. I have walked this path a thousand times, but still I love it. I spend most of my free time on the beach. It, basically, is my home.

The jetty's stones are cool beneath my warm and calloused feet. It is always like this after school's ended: the soles of my feet have gone soft from little use. During school, on the ferry and during piano lessons every Thursday, I must wear them. Mama is old-fashioned and says it's not proper to expose one's feet to people not in your family. She herself wears loafers or slippers in the house and sandals or flats outside. Daddy, he doesn't care about my feet. He says I can do what I want with them: after all, they are mine. Then Mama always gets mad and brandishes whatever she's holding at him...a spatula, a book, food for our fat cat, Chumly.

But now it's summer, with no school, ferry or piano, and my feet can breathe again.

I walk along the jetty under an impossibly vast sky. No clouds, all blue except for a blinding yellow-white ball of sun...that's how the sky always is in St. Thomas. I finally reach the end of the jetty, which is just that...an end. A dead end, I've always thought it. It just stops. No signs. No special platforms to step on. Just...an ending.

I lie down under the blazing sun. I spread my arms and legs like a starfish. I am one with the jetty. I am a lion basking on a rock. I am a barnacle clinging to my home. I...

"Aliiii-aaaaaa!" Mama's voice suddenly calls.

Alia is me.

I open my eyes and stand. I can just barely make out Mama's face, tanned as mine, waving out the open kitchen window on the second floor. Dinner.

I'll return later, my jetty, I think, then giggle as I realize I sound like a soap opera star.

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It's raining.

I think this as I wake around seven a.m., safe in my cozy bed. There is a ridiculously loud drumming on the roof. My blue comforter and pillows are soft and warm and inviting, and I don't want to leave. So I don't. I let the warmth envelop me and fall back asleep to the gentle, rhythmic drumming of the rain.

I wake later...just under two hours later, I think. The sky is brighter, but the rain hasn't stopped. It's still coming down hard as ever. I spring out of bed and smooth down my crinkled, Christmas-themed pajamas. Yes, I know it's summer, but they're my favorite pj's just 'cause they're so cozy.

I open the window and let the fresh air roll in. The rain sounds increase tenfold as I do. The downpour is almost deafening. I inhale deeply, exhale, then inhale again. The earthy, wet smell of rain, sweet rain, captivates my nose and intoxicates me. Rain is my most favorite smell in the whole world.

I dress quickly in jeans and a plain white T-shirt. Mama is down in the kitchen making my favorite cheese and pepper omelet when I arrive. Daddy is sitting at the small wooden table, sipping coffee, eyes glued to the sports section of the newspaper. He's the only newspaper-reader in our house, and the sports section is the only one that ever gets read.

I eat breakfast quickly, then walk back up to my room. I'm always bored on rainy days; I mean, I go to the beach every day and when it rains I can't. For a little while, I reread part of my favorite book. Then, in the mood for reading, I check out my school's summer book list. By the end of the summer, it instructs, I have to have read at least three of these "recommended titles." I could go to the library now, I think, and get a head start on my summer work. I scan the list and groan aloud. It's chock full of those four-hundred-page texts with fat, pompous words nobody knows the meaning of like "incontrovertible" and "misandry" that sit there on the page and seem to look down their noses at you as you frantically search for a dictionary.

Maybe I'll go to the library next week.

For now, I stretch out on my bed and smell the earth-riddled scents of the rain.

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It's almost noon when I finally come downstairs, disoriented after an accidental nap. The rain has finally stopped, and my ears seemed to be filled with marshmallow, perplexed after all that pounding rain noise.

Mama is standing at the counter, preparing a sandwich. Daddy isn't here; he's probably working as the superintendent of our apartment building. Mama looks over at the sound of my footsteps and smiles in the way she does.

"Want a sandwich, hon?"

"Sure," I reply, sitting at the kitchen table. I think I'll go out to the beach after lunch. I love squishing my feet in the wet sand.

As Mama takes the packet of turkey out of the fridge, she says without looking my way, "Alia, sweetie, after lunch we have to go and meet our new neighbors. They just moved in down the hall, and we're having a welcome-to-the-apartment-building party at Mrs. Weinstock's."

Mrs. Weinstock is my elderly neighbor. She calls me "poppet" and seems to have an endless supply of apple pies.

"Wait, I was going to go to the beach after lunch," I protest as Mama sets down my sandwich in front of me.

She replies as she cleans up the counter: "Alia, we have to go. You go to the beach every day; you'll survive. They even have a girl your age."

A girl... my age? Please tell me my mother did not just say that. A girl to hog my beach? To occupy my jetty? I know I said I wanted a friend, but... well, not living so close.

"What are their names?" I ask, sighing.

"The parents are Mr. and Mrs. Smythe, and their daughter is Ellen."

Ellen? I'm glad I didn't get named Ellen. Ellen is the name for a spoiled brat who must have everything, now.

I groan and take a halfhearted bite of my sandwich. I'm not hungry anymore.

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Mrs. Weinstock's apartment has always been the same, as long as I can remember: Lavishly painted, pink-and-gold furniture, yellow wallpaper, tiny tchotchkes lining mahogany shelves, and ornate crystal tables of clear glass. Her apartment to me represents familiarity, almost as much so as my own home.

I'm walking in right now with my parents in front of me, my mother holding a ribbed lime Jell-o and a fake smile. My father is walking with his businesslike, pleased-to-meet-you gait I see so often when he goes to our apartment complex's tenants to fix a leaky shower head or a cracked wall.

I only get to see the apartment for a moment before a mothball smell encases me and a blue paisley dress engulfs me. It takes me a moment to realize it's Mrs. Weinstock. She hugs me like this every time I see her, but somehow it always comes as a surprise.

"Oh, my poppet!" she cries in her trademark English accent. "So good to see you once again!"

I nod, squirming politely away from her grip. "Hi, Mrs. Weinstock."

She continues in her booming voice that always seems too big for her old-lady physique, "Now! Everyone must meet the new neighbors! May I introduce... Mr., Mrs., and Ellen Smythe!"

She steps aside, and there is the most blond family I've ever seen. The wife is blond and petite. The husband is blond and tall. The girl, Ellen (who does look about thirteen, like me), is blond and medium height. She's standing there with this pinched little smile on her face, like, "please kill me now".

My mother nudges the plate of Jell-o into my back, and I wince. "Have some manners! Go say hello," she hisses in my ear, then goes to greet Mrs. Smythe.

I sigh and walk up to Ellen. "Hi," I say, extending my arm. "I'm Alia Reed."

She scowls at me, and I instantly recoil my arm, moving it to rub the back of my neck awkwardly.

"Your name's Ellen, right?"

Scowl, nod, scowl.

"Which is your apartment?" *Let's see if she knows how to speak* I think.

"Four-B."

"Mine is Four-H."

Scowl, grimace, scowl. Come on...am I really that hard to look at?

"Okay. Bye."

I begin to walk away, glad to be rid of her. A strangled almost-yelp comes out of her throat, and I turn back, raising one eyebrow.

"Yeah?"

Scowl, shake head, scowl.

Never mind, I guess. I walk away, and this time it's for good.

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By nightfall, the rain stops. But now it's too late to go out, and too dark besides. I'd fall off the jetty into the churning waters below. I eat hamburgers Daddy cooked and what's left of Mama's Jell-o and watch TV until I'm so tired, even with my noontime nap, that I must go to sleep.

I wake in the morning with the sun in my eyes. Yes, finally! I want to scream. My beach awaits! I throw on some clothes and rush out the door. I practically skip down the beach to the jetty, my jetty.

Oh.

Ellen is sitting on the jetty, writing in a small purple notebook. I narrow my eyes and turn to leave, but suddenly she looks up and shouts.

"Wait!"

I turn back around and walk towards her. "What?" I ask when I finally get there.

She bows her head. "I'm..." She says it as two syllables, "I... yiam".

Is she really going to say what I think she is?

"I'm sorry for the way I acted yesterday."

She is.

"I just... didn't want to move and... well, yeah."

I nod my head. Well, if I had to move I'd be depressed too. This is the only jetty in the world that's mine.

"Okay. It's okay," I reply after a long pause.

She stands and smiles, tucking the notebook under her arm. "Cool. Want to walk on the jetty with me?"

So I say sure. I mean, I walk on it every day, but this time is different. I think we both know that now.

The End

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