

# Squinting

Me and Joey didn't have air conditioning that summer so the window fans worked day and night, moving the heavy air around our shoebox apartment. I woke up one Saturday to the sound of a fan spinning on the windowsill and discovered that Joey had left our bed without disturbing me. For such a solid guy, Joey moved with great stealth when he felt like it. He could travel from one room to another without a sound, like some breed of jungle cat that wears a baseball cap. The alarm clock showed that I had only slept a half-hour longer than I generally dragged myself out of bed during the week, and I drowsily considered whether I should sleep through the rest of the morning. I guess Joey heard me stirring, because he called out from the other room. He asked if I wanted to go to the beach with him.

It took a moment for me to internally translate his words. Even though Joey took the train out to the ocean most weekends, he had long since stopped inviting me. He knew that, in my head at least, my hobbies and errands took precedence over the unproductive time-suck of sunbathing. Subsequently, my arms and legs were lightly tanned from hours of gardening while my husband had developed a deep olive complexion from head to toe. Even though his skin felt a

## R U B B E R N E C K E R S

little dry to me, I always thought he looked good. Sure, Joey had lost some hair since I met him, but I still found him handsome in a lumpy, unglamorous way. On those nights when he fell asleep before me, I would sometimes lie close to him and stare at the birthmarks on his face. I would imagine his eyelids fluttering open so I could gaze into his deep dark eyes and feel him looking at mine. He never knew I did these things. Maybe he did the same for me. We didn't talk about it, and I guess that's where this all came from.

I rarely thought much about the ocean. While I knew it was out there, of course, ten miles from where we slept every night, an active awareness of the ocean was missing. Joey, on the other hand, works for a construction company right on the docks. He eats lunch out there with the seagulls whenever the weather cooperates.

"How long has it been," he asked, standing in the bedroom door, "since we went to the beach together?" He had that crooked grin on his face, still wearing a t-shirt and boxers.

Tangled in the bedsheets and not entirely lucid, I considered my husband's question as if it was a riddle. "Could it have been last year? Maybe two years ago..." My voice trailed off.

"Do you want some coffee, Donna?"

"Would you mind getting some for me?" I asked in my little-girl-just-getting-up voice. Joey disappeared into the kitchen, and my head went down the items on my list of things to do: the laundry basket was half-empty, the plants could be re-potted tomorrow, and the cupboards were anything but bare. I rolled out of bed and absent-mindedly

stretched. I went to my underwear drawer (out of curiosity more than anything) in search of suitable beachwear. I found Joey's trunks right away.

"What are you looking for?" he asked, returning to the bedroom with a coffee mug in one hand and a dish of orange sections in the other. Thoughtful of him.

"Why can't I find my swimsuit?" I grumbled, rifling through countless pairs of socks.

"So you're gonna come with me?" Joey sounded pleased. He gave me a small kiss that tasted a little like citrus. He had already been munching on those oranges.

I sighed and closed the dresser drawer. "Do you remember the last time I wore my black one-piece?"

"What about that blue bikini?" said Joey, taking a small sip of my coffee before handing it to me. That blue bikini had not been worn since our trip to see Joey's parents at Christmastime. I had made reservations at a hotel with a hot tub, thinking that it would be a nice luxury as long as we were burning vacation time before we lost it at the end of the year. Even as I took an orange slice into my mouth, I could picture myself getting ready for the hot tub: stripping to the waist in front of the bathroom mirror, slipping the bikini straps over my arms, fastening the clasp, and finally noting the belly roll peeking over the top of my panties. I remembered turning sideways and looking at my silhouette in the mirror, puffing out my gut and sucking it back in. I adjusted the straps and slipped out of my panties, all the while feeling as if my heart were breaking, consumed by the thought *When did this happen to my body?* I'm certain that