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excerpt from "Sand"

first published in *Salamander* 17.2 (June 2012)

I met Billy Aitch's sister again when she needed help burying a man. He lay as quiet as a plank. She was putting in heavy work, hodding sand in two black buckets. Back and forth she stomped. She was bent-backed like an old man carrying netted fish on some telly I saw about Thailand. Twenty trips, more than, taking sand from the high pile dumped by the quarry. It had been out there since Christmas, left by the owners who'd moved to Benidorm and put number eleven up for rent. Rained through for months, made dense and dark under its crust. Sand that would set like a cake around him.

The roof was my spot that summer. It held the garage onto the house. Its tar-grit carpet was hot under my legs, but I had shade from the old ash tree my parents were forever threatening to chop off at the knees because it darkened their bedroom. Their bed bulked like a boat in the gloaming. From the roof I presided over them trying to enjoy the shockingly hot August. As much outdoors as could be lived. Like most people in our town, they didn't know what to do with the gift of good weather. People scurried in the late afternoons, having rushed home from work to try to gather sun enough for a tan. They brought out limbs like the pale plants we left in a dark closet at school. They carried kitchen tables as heavy as coffins onto the lawns and freighted them with salads and salsa and juice in a jug. Every second evening was a failed barbecue. Curses rose in feeble smoke.

My mother had some cop-on, though. She emulsified herself in Coppertone. She was on high alert about cancer. A woman she knew at work had a dark pip scooped out of her forehead.

I watched my father skim the orange buttery leftovers from her shoulders and rub it onto himself. Top of one ear, chin, knee, and half a foot. Places where he was already burned from summer work. He said he'd even things out, look less like a piebald pony, but my mother caught him on the word. "Piebald is for black with white patches, or I suppose white with black patches. Either way, you're not a black man, so it's skewbald in your case. Brown and white." She turned onto her stomach, yielding an orange back dappled like a Dorito. "Skewbald." She argued with her mouth suctioned to her arm. "I gosh it righsh in the crosshword." My father responded with something along the lines of, "Well if you did, then it must be the last word on the matter." He might as easily have said, "Oh I suppose you'd prefer a black man now, is that it?" He'd been ribbing her for a week about the way her voice swooped up like a swallow when she talked to the Nigerian grocer. A lot of their talk ran along those lines that summer. Faked annoyance, affection wrapped in snappiness. There was always a last word to be had. Swiping like cats. It must have been the heat. I was sick of the two of them.

Billy Aitch's sister's skin was still pale, though. Either she was Coppertoning too, or she hadn't been outside all that much since she returned and installed in number eleven. My father humphed that he couldn't understand why someone would come back from America "to rent a house like a building site." My mother said "things mustn't have worked out for the poor girl." In other circumstances, other returns, I'd suspect them of secret delight. It always looked better for the town, for the people sticking it out, when someone came back. Better still was a tail quavering between legs. I'd heard the malicious satisfaction when Kevin Patterson's brother came back from England and had to make a flat for himself in the garage. "He got ahead of himself over there. Building all those houses. He's sleeping inside with the washing machine

now.” But we knew why Alison had gone to America, and nobody would have wished her back. Stranger than her return, though, was the long thin man she brought with her.

Even though I primed myself to meet her on the street, a fortnight went by with no proper sighting. I wanted to see her outdoors, ahead of me, coming towards. I needed warning. Not a collision in the bread aisle at the supermarket. And definitely not catching my eye from inside a bright upstairs window. I half-thought of walking up the broken brick path to the front of eleven and ringing the doorbell, just to get it over with. “Nobody knocks over anymore,” my father had grumbled when his sister telephoned twice to plan a visit, and a third time to cancel it. “A fleet of phone-calls before anyone can drop around.” But the windows next door forbade a visit. Their lace curtains hung clagged and grey like cerements.

The man was American. My mother had called him a “brusque kind of a fellow” after she had been cut off in conversation for the third or fourth time. “Brusque and, well, I’m reluctant to say it...” – she never was, but demurrals were good for the soul – “... hiding something. I suppose that sounds strange.” My father assured her that it didn’t. He had offered the man a hand moving concrete blocks from where I’d seen them piled like a bombed-out ziggurat near the back door, and he too got the brush-off. “Like a shot, he said no. Like. A. Shot. He didn’t even *brook* the idea.” He seemed pleased to press on the word awhile. I asked him if he got it in a book, and he said yes, it was in the biography of Margaret Thatcher. “She would brook no dissent from miners. The rule of law must prevail over the rule of the mob, said she. Bitch.” I thought about those concrete blocks and made the most obvious joke in the world: bodies under the patio. My mother yelped that that wasn’t the slightest bit funny. Not when every month it seemed there was a story like that in the newspaper. “At least in England, anyhow.” Which made my father laugh good-oh.

I did a good deal of reading that summer myself, in the breaks between carting crates and pallets at the hardware shop. The rest of the crew working there was older, men and women, and though they tried to involve me in their chats about the boss and the HR person Hitler and details of the new energy-efficient houses being built on the outskirts of town I just wasn't interested in throwing my lot in with their state of the world. I would be out of there at the end of the summer. I would be arranging my stuff in a bedroom of some shared house and hoping my classes weren't too early in the morning. College was ahead of me, Biomedical Science at UCC. I hadn't much interest in the profession. But it was thought a safe bet. Maybe after that a master's, because they said you wouldn't go far these high-skill days without one. College girls were ahead of me, girls wheeling into the quad, helming bicycles with baskets, girls with sure laughs, shaking their feathers to be asked out. I'd spend the bright green afternoons reading novels and simmering evenings at the pub. A man could still enjoy himself when he was training up to read slivers of the human body. Except none of it was ahead of me. At least not for another year. When the exam results arrived in the middle of the month I knew in a flash of white-hot maths I hadn't made the cut. Suddenly UCC became faraway unfriendly University College Cork. Spiked spires, as forbidding as Gormenghast. The place I wasn't good enough for. At least for another year. And that was the real piss. If I wanted it badly enough I would repeat the final year, take the exams again, wait one more time for the right quotient of As and Bs.