

Big School

Chikodi Emeluma

Your father has come in the night, and now you must go.

Puckered right thumb, resting on the pillow. I blow into your face, and you slip it back into your mouth, speaking around it, 'Is it today?', with eyes closed. For the first time, the answer you want:

'Yes.'

Your lashes flutter, sliver of white eyeball, flash of brown iris. You are awake, bolt upright.

'It's today?'

'Yes, my lovely girl.'

Soft, warm hug. Heavy, grown so big the past year. Your elbow impales my left breast and the pain travels past the thin tissue and bracing ribcage into my heart.

Breakfast is creamy porridge. You want dark chocolate chips. Bitterness is sweet to you. You want the unicorn swimsuit too, pink all over, covered in sequins.

You are pink and purple, unicorns and rainbows. You are magic and the sea.

'Can I take Pony Lai?' you ask, Peppa Pig bag bursting, the stuffed unicorn horn sticking out. I shake my head.

'I don't think Pony Lai will like getting wet,' I say. You think about it, seriously, your eyes black from the effort.

'Okay. You look after her then,' and into my bed she goes, duvet pulled up to her neck.

In the bus we play 'I spy'. I look for orange cars, you, purple. You win. I never thought this small coastal village in which I have kept you safe all this time would have three purple cars. We watch for bunnies at the cliffs. The sky feels forcibly ripened, the sea overly blue. You hold my hand.

'At least it's sunny,' you say, big wide smile. 'Nice and warm.'

I pull a piece of lint from your hair and put it in my pocket. Tracts of scalp glisten with oil, the hair soft with avocado butter. I took my time with it three days ago, tiny twists latticed over the hole in your head. Your hair bounces off your shoulder with the movement of the bus.

'Mama, will they like me?'

'Everyone likes you, my darling,' I say. 'And papa will be there.' The distrust sticks in my throat.

Here now, the walk to the water filled with your chatter, part instruction, part anticipation. The sea is afire, incandescent with sunlight. I slip on my sunglasses.

'A sea of glitter!' you yell. I am taking your clothes off and you shiver, eyes transfixed by the journey ahead. Already, you are forgetting me.

'Remember...'

'Legs straight, kick, kick.' Your muscles are your father's, the steps sure and fluid as the dancing which swept me off my feet and into the sea. But I am forest and mud, stone and blood. The sea eats the land, the sea is not my home.

I kiss your head. My sunglasses cup my tears.

'Can I go now?'

One day you will return, and I will explain that love cannot survive trickery. It should only be given freely.

I squeeze your shoulder twice. That is the signal. You clip the Peppa Pig bag around your chest and launch yourself into the water.

In the distance, a frothing and churning, a fountain airborne. The rest are waiting. How small you look; how brave you are! I watch you dip your head under the water and in lieu of goodbye, give a little blow of your own.

Chikodili Emelumadu

Chikodili Emelumadu was born in Worksop, Nottinghamshire and raised in Awka, Nigeria. Her work has been shortlisted for the Shirley Jackson Awards (2015), a Nommo Award (2020) and the Caine Prize for African Literature (2017 & 2020). In 2019, she emerged winner of the inaugural Curtis Brown First Novel Prize with her first novel *Dazzling*, to be published by Wildfire in 2023.

A recording of this story can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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