

## Such Small Islands

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They came to the summerhouse in May. There was still a bite to the salty air, and the hydrangeas clenched their fists, wary of blooming. Through the windows, the pool glinted malignantly, and at the edge of the beach, a tiny gardener moved his clipper hands down the hedge. Aura sat under the dining table in the last slab of ocean light as her mother and Phyllis, the housekeeper, spoke in the kitchen.

5 Because her mother was just coming into her glory at work – because Aura was sickly and taxing – Aura’s half-sister on her father’s side was coming to watch her all summer. Now her mother was asking the housekeeper to make sure the girl’s bedroom would be ready when she arrived in the early morning. [...]

10 In the morning, there was a strange voice downstairs when Aura slid in her socks down the stairs. She came into the kitchen to find her mother at the table in her suit, tapping at her phone with her thumbs. Beside her, a girl with lustrous black hair down to her hips was licking the sugar off the top of her split grapefruit. This was Augusta, but everyone called her Gus. Gus held out her arms, but Aura said, No, you’re a stranger.

15 Silly, of course you know me. Gus laughed. We’re sisters. We saw each other all the time before our dad and your mom got divorced. But Aura’s mother, who brooked<sup>1</sup> no fools, said that Aura had been only two then, of course she couldn’t remember, and their dad barely had time to see her. Then she smiled tightly, as if in conciliation, and said, You haven’t been out to the island before? No, Gus said, my mom wouldn’t ever let me come. That’s right, Aura’s mother said, and in her face Aura saw first dislike then a slow victory, because Gus was here; Aura’s mother had won. She loved winning.

20 Well, her mother said, standing. As they’d discussed over the phone, she would be gone a lot this summer and there would be times she probably wouldn’t make it back to the island for a few days at a time. Phyllis would take care of food and whatever else they needed. Her assistant had sent Gus the information about the jeep, Aura’s medications, the beaches they could go to with their badges<sup>2</sup>; still, for good measure, she handed Gus a thick printout. Be good, love you, she said, kissing her daughter’s head. So fast, she was out the door, in the car, gone.

25 Uncertainly, Aura looked at Gus. She was pretty, Aura saw now. Her lips were thin but she had a smile that spread so broadly it seemed to touch her tiny earlobes, and her teeth gleamed like pearls. Don’t worry, we’ll figure everything out, little sis, Gus said, and picked her up. Aura pressed her face into her neck and inhaled her marvelous smell, like apples and pine trees and the kind of candies that look like colored glass. That was when something in her began to burn.

30 The days became bright and smooth. [...] They ate strawberry ice cream, watching the sun set over the private beach. Aura refused to go to bed at night anywhere but in Gus’s bed, but woke in her own room with the rocking horse in the corner gazing at her with boggled horror. One day down on the sand, as Aura wove strange landscapes out of bladder wrack<sup>3</sup> and eelgrass, Gus sighed and said, This is heaven. She sat up and opened a beer she’d stolen from the fridge and said, You’re a lucky kid. Your whole life is what people like me pinch our pennies<sup>4</sup> to have for a single, measly week every year. Aura tried to think what this would mean but couldn’t. But you *are* people like me, Aura said. Gus looked at her and smiled a little. Maybe, she said. I will be.

40 Soon Aura’s mother’s absences went from just a few days at a time to four, then five days. Each night when she called to apologize, Aura heard the city bleating behind her, and Aura felt relieved that she, too, wasn’t in the city; that her mother was. It’s okay, Aura told her, Gus and me are perfect without you. Gus and I, Honey, her mother said but absently; she hadn’t even been listening.

By mid-June, they began to go to the beach cafe to eat dinner once or twice a week, and soon Gus had

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<sup>1</sup> tolerated

<sup>2</sup> (here) membership cards

<sup>3</sup> *bladder wrack*: water plant

<sup>4</sup> *pinch our pennies*: save up money

45 friends, the boys who had ropy muscles in their legs from carrying trays over sand, the boys who sat at the bar with their collars turned up against their sunburned necks. Gus leaned back in her chair, in her jean cutoffs and bikini top, and laughed up at those who came by to talk to her, and played with her hair and drank the beers they slipped her because she wasn't yet legal to drink in public. [...]

50 One morning as Aura slid thumping down the stairs, there was a disturbance of voices and she came into the breakfast room to find a boy in a pink shirt soft with age, an expensive constellation of holes on one shoulder, leaning close to Gus and murmuring. Phyllis put down plates of eggs before them, shooting spikes out of her eyes. Thanks! Gus said in a strange voice. The housekeeper gave a sniff and went out. The boy saw Aura, and said, What weak, writhled<sup>5</sup> shrimp is this? Because at his expensive college he was studying drama. Gus flushed and said too loudly, My little sister! And opened her arms, and Aura clutched her, hiding her face from the boy. There was a new smell to Gus's body, a swollenness to her lip that Aura wanted to pinch thin again. The boy was called Oz, short for Oscar, and when he finally walked off, Aura  
55 was relieved to have gotten rid of him. But she watched him from the front porch because Gus did, and felt outraged when he went only to the house next door, a giant gray thing with turrets. Gus said, in a low voice, Oh, I like him so much. Aura turned away to make a face. [...]

60 Now it wasn't just Gus and Aura, it was Gus and Aura and Oz. He drove the kind of car that had no walls, so their whole bodies were terrifyingly exposed to the wind. He picked Aura up and threw her in the pool, though she screamed and kicked and, when she surfaced, wept. During hide-and-seek, he didn't even try to find Aura, just pressed Gus against the pool house while, crouched in the hydrangeas, Aura ripped up handfuls of grass. He was too much, too large, too loud, something about him ate up all the air and left others gasping. [...]

65 The coolness of early summer bled out, and heat poured into the days like liquid in cups, overflowing into the nights. Aura woke in her bedroom to see a glow in the window and knew it was a bonfire down at their private beach, that Gus had left the house to be down there with Oz and his friends and their booze and music, and that Aura's mother would be angry if she knew. In the dawn, her face ugly in its puffiness, Gus went down with a trash bag that clanked when she dragged it back up to the garage. Aura watched her and saw how the pink flowers were all gone, and now the world was filled with aggressive yellow, tiger lilies and daisies and sunflowers. She heard Gus come up the stairs, her voice and Oz's murmuring, and then they slept again, long past the time that Aura was supposed to have breakfast. [...] Finally, Phyllis  
70 came up with a tray, muttering things under her breath that sounded like curses. Aura ignored the food and lay in her bed alone, her tears so hot they seared the skin of her temples as they fell.

75 At last Gus came for her, brushing her wet hair, a floral dress showing the outline of her body as she stepped through the bands of sun from the windows. Hello, sleepyhead, she said. You slept so late it's almost lunchtime. We're going on a picnic! And she leaned over Aura and dripped her wet hair on the girl's face until Aura loosened her anger and let it fly away. She reached up to Gus's face, the wide smile and teeth, the eyebrows like bird wings, and took her cheeks in her hands and squeezed them until Gus's mouth puckered fishily. The day had been reset. The hydrangeas wore great heavy blue-green globes. The  
80 sunlight was honey. Best of all, there was no Oz with them when they rode their bikes to the sandwich shop. Every part of Aura rejoiced that this would be a day like the beginning of summer, slow and clean and soft, just Gus and her, their serious talks and the long gentle silences. But there he was, Oz, waiting at the store with his bare chest and his fanny pack, his enormous feet in his flip-flops. Ahoy, pathetic nit, he said, tugging at one of Aura's braids. She felt the bitter ball rise into her throat again.

85 Inside, they picked out cut watermelon, beers, a cherry soda for Aura. Don't tell your mom, she hates sugar, Gus said, twinkling. And fun, Oz said, but Gus hushed him. Aura turned away in hatred. [...]

The ride out to the hidden cove was hot. There was a smashed cat with blood on its teeth at an intersection and it smelled like panic. Oz was impatient with how slowly Aura rode and kept shouting, Come on, Pokey, over his shoulder. Aura looked only at the blacktop<sup>6</sup> rushing by and emptied her head of

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<sup>5</sup> wrinkled

<sup>6</sup> asphalt

90 thoughts and made her legs go even slower. At last, they got off their bikes. The ocean was a strange dark  
blue, and the wind had picked up and was blowing tiny pieces of sand in their faces. They climbed down  
the cliffs to the beach, where Gus spread a blanket. At this time of day, the beach was in shadow and the  
little caves in the cliffs seemed endlessly deep. Oz kicked off his shoes and dropped the fanny pack and  
sprinted into the waves, and soon he stood shining with water and saying, Come on, Gus, my sweet. Gus  
95 flushed and bit back a laugh and told Aura to make her a giant sandcastle, then took off her dress and  
joined him, and they held hands until they were past where the breakers crashed, in the smoother waves  
beyond. Then their heads were close together. Aura knew they were doing that thing again, even though  
she was there to see them, even though they had left her all by herself on the beach, and she was still a  
little child and should never be left alone. The thing in her grew so large it blinded her. She began to dig  
100 with her metal shovel, wildly, like a dog, throwing sand everywhere, on the blanket, on the basket of  
food, on their clothes, on their shoes, on their cell phones, she dug and dug and hours or even days  
probably passed, she thought, until she was in a hole so deep her eyes were at water level and there were  
heaps of sand everywhere. At last Gus and Oz stood over her hole, panting and dripping, saying how  
incredible it was that such a tiny girl could dig so fast, and such a deep hole, too.

105 Gus shook out the blanket and unearthed the basket. Oz pulled Aura out of the hole and into the  
colder wind. She saw with satisfaction that the sand had buried everything, clothing, shoes, fanny pack,  
cell phones. Lunchtime, he said. I'm starved. Aura stood with a finger in her mouth, tasting salt and sand,  
watching Gus unpack the forks, the watermelon, the drinks. When she took the sandwiches out, Aura  
yelled, Not hungry, and ran off toward the caves in the cliffs. Gus called after her, but Oz said, If she wants  
110 to be like that, just let her go.

In Aura's cave, the stone was cold and smooth and it was chillier here, though out of the wind. There  
were seashells heaped in a corner, a pulsing black to her back. Way up the beach, Gus and Oz were tiny,  
the size of her pinky finger. She couldn't hear them or see what they were doing. She watched but only  
out of the corner of her eye. For a long time nothing happened, and the knowledge she'd held like a little  
115 flame in her dwindled and almost blew out. But then suddenly Gus leapt up. She began kicking frantically  
at the mounds of sand. She fell to her knees and dug with her hands, she ran back to Oz, she bent over  
him, she ran off. Oz slowly laid his body down. Aura closed her eyes. The cool rock cupped her, the  
seagulls screamed, the waves beat a steady time. She didn't mean to but she fell asleep.

120 When she woke, it was much later, the beach had filled with afternoon light, the blanket was empty,  
and a red light was flashing up where they had parked the bikes. Up and down the beach there were  
strangers walking along, calling her name. Aura! they called, Aura! But not one of them was Gus, not one  
wore her hair flicking in the wind, her cool face, her long smile. So Aura stayed quiet, crouched. She was  
just a tiny thing, after all, at least when measured against the weight of so much rock around her. She was  
just a little nothing beside the grasping, hissing ocean stretched all the way to the edge of the sky.

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