

The Red Kite

by Claire Williams, 2023

The sand was warm in the afternoon sun, it sparkled as though Apollo had sent dust of his star onto land. The beach was crowded, the yells and squeals of friends splashing in the waves, and couples enjoying the few remaining rays of summer's touch. The largest group is an accumulated huddle of my peers, they are pulled and drawn towards the girl in the middle, like a magnet, they are repelled from me like a magnet too.

The beach is not soft like that the poets preach, instead it is made up of tiny pebbles, they gather in between my toes, digging and scratching like the grit that I grind my teeth on. The feeling chains my soul back into my physical body, it pounds at my rib cage.

My attention drifts on the wind soaring with the gulls and into a red kite which flies high on the wind. It's a stark difference from the crowd in front of me, 'neutrals are in' Mum had declared reading her magazine stolen from her hairdresser; not that it made a difference, we couldn't afford anything but hand-me-downs.

The kite that captures my focus, so out of place and loud it makes its surroundings fade. It's crafted from an old plastic bag taped to two sticks. On the end of the string a scrawny boy runs under trying to keep it afloat. If the wind blows too hard, he'll fly into the horizon, over the edge of the world. Then again, I'm not sure he would even notice, he's been consumed by his own universe, with just him and his kite.

In my universe, everyone exists but me.

In my own universe, the hole my feet have dug below me was a moat created by kids in order to protect the sandcastle they had built behind it. Or a hidey-hole for a dog intent on burying his stick until his next adventure to the beach, when the dogs' brain would have long since forgotten his old toy, tail wagging as he discovered the seagulls who rested in the weeds on the banks. Perhaps dogs were so happy because they not only forgot the bad things, but the good things too. If I forgot what it was like to fit in, maybe I wouldn't feel so out of place.

The notion of 'being out of place' is one of the very few sayings that perfectly describes the disjointed feeling of disconnection. In my childhood, not that the naivety of youth has really left me just buried deep, the town had a spot for me, I was a piece of the puzzle. As the years moved on something changed, and now I have been pushed into place by my parents, but my edges are squashed and my colours an awkward contrast to those around me.

The boy has let go of his kite; it tumbles on the wind with no string to tie it down. It twists, and folds as it plummets like Icarus, string wrapping around the branches of the old apple tree. Daedalus runs underneath, staring at his creation far out of its reach.

I rise to my feet, the sand is well beyond warm, my feet are filled with air as I tried to avoid placing them down for too long.

Up close, when my eyes can focus on the small scars and freckles that powder his tanned skin, I can see that he is around my age. His eyes are green, with the same flecks of gold in them that I see in the sand. His face is foreign to my brain.

"Are you here on holidays?" I am far blunter than I mean to be. I look down at my feet, the other puzzle pieces are pressing into me.

He nods, "Yeah, family holiday except my parents are fighting and I am on a beach by myself." He laughs at the irony, the box around me is gone, and I can almost feel an invisible hand reaching out and shaking his own.

"Do you want a hand?" The hoarseness in my voice is a reminder of the empty water bottle I left behind. I try to take down a mental note to pick it up on my way home, even though my brain is as reliable as an 'etch-a-sketch'. His cheeks are rosy as he follows my gaze up to the kite in the tree. I smile in return, despite the fact that my teeth are crooked and chipped, and I look years younger when I do.

The tree bark is angry against my bare knees and elbows. The branches are strong, but my weight makes them cave slightly, the green apples on the end are dusty and wax free, the type that leaves a floury residue on your tongue only to be wiped away seconds later by the fruit juice. One falls off one of the lower stems, it bounces off the boy's head before I can warn him. He looks up and grins his own toothy grin back at me.

"I guess Newton was right, the apple really doesn't fall far from the tree."

The kite is not far out of reach now. In the distance a plane flies off, soaring further away into the clouds, probably towards New York. I shield my eyes from the sun, glancing to the ground at the boy who still smiles up at me. Maybe that plane is going to my puzzle, and maybe he has the same as me.