

Experiment with the Air Pump (excerpt)

The next morning Emily wanted to go for a walk with me on the beach. We tossed sticks, strands of seaweed, and the odd shell into the ocean. She explained that Puerto Rico had been populated by a series of Native American peoples. From Venezuela, in the centuries before Christ, the Igneri, known for canoe-building and pottery, had settled the island. Igneri calendar stones had emerged from excavations just outside the city—the stones align with the sun during the equinox and solstice—evidence of primitive scientific effort.

As she walked, the clear imprint of her foot, shallow and 12 centimeters long, softened and was made smooth as the surf rose and fell over the impression. Behind us, side by side in the sand, our footprints looked the same. They might have belonged to anyone.

“Have you learned about evolution, Emily?” I asked.

“Well, I haven’t learned about it, but I know what evolution is.”

We walked further toward a fish that lay in the sand. When we neared the fish she called to me.

“Adam?” she said.

“Yes?”

“Adam... come here, Adam. Look at this.” She knelt down and elevated the head of the rotting fish with a small stick.

“That’s a black durgon, Emily. It’s called a *Melichthys niger*. It’s a type of triggerfish. They’re called triggerfish because of these spines in the fin. They’ve developed them for protection. They hide in rocks, and eat algae, mostly.”

Emily looked closer at the fish. Its spiny dorsal fin lay dry and extended. She crunched her nose and let the fish fall to the ground. “Don’t touch the spines!” she warned. “They’re poison!”

“No, not poison, but they may be sharp. The spines probably didn’t used to be this big, but the fish that had them lived longer than the fish that didn’t, so they passed the spines to their offspring, who then gradually developed longer and longer spines. It’s called natural selection.”

“I don’t want to eat this fish, and I don’t want to eat algae!” She threw her stick in the water and crouching in the surf rinsed her hands. As she stood she brushed sand from her thighs and fussed with her bathing suit—it had shifted and clung to her uncomfortably. “Adam,” she said my name again looking at the ground.

“Yes, Emily?”

“Do you live in New York?”

“Yes, I do. Have you been there?”

“Of course I have, we used to live there.”

“That’s right. I’d forgotten you were born when your parents lived there.”

"Of course I was born, so was my brother."

"Sorry."

Emily continued to stare at the ground, and had begun to drag her feet in the sand. I imagined she was thinking of her mother. We walked further.

"Are you tired, Emily?"

"No."

"My mom said we might visit."

"She did? When did she say that?"

"A week ago, or a month ago."

"Before I came?"

"Yes. I don't think we'll go now."

"Why not? We could go to the zoo."

"Michael doesn't like zoos."

"He doesn't? Why not?"

"Michael doesn't like animals. He's afraid of them."

"He seemed to like the monkey you saw yesterday."

"That was a baby monkey."

"It's mother was nearby." Emily paused at this, I wondered if she were thinking about Marion. The traits they shared became increasingly apparent to me: their directness and intelligence, unexpected moments of natural expression. And they shared their eyes, their mouth, their smooth skin. I hadn't realized Marion would have grown into the woman she was so early in life.

"Well, what kind of animals do they have?"

"There are two different zoos. One has more animals, but they're both good. The smaller one has a polar bear."

"But the other one doesn't?"

"Actually I think it has a few. Do you like bears and things like that?"

"Not particularly. Do they have monkeys?"

"Yes, I think both of them do, different species."

"We have a monkey in our class. It's Ms. Tristani's monkey, but he lives in our room. He's a macaque."

"A rhesus macaque?"

"Yes."

"Is he friendly?"

"He doesn't bite unless you pester him, but he lives in a cage."

"I see."

"Miss Tristani doesn't like keeping him in a cage because macaques are social animals, but he was saved from experiments."

I wondered if it were true.

"I don't want to go to New York. I don't like it."

Ethan and Marion had asked me not to smoke in front of their children, but I took my cigarettes from my pocket and lit one—my first in front of her. Emily ignored it at first, but then told me smoking wasn't good for me.

“I shared a cigarette with your mother last night, Emily.” After that she said nothing, and a few minutes later walked back to the house on her own.