

### **The Hour Glass**

His hand feels warm; tiny grains of sand grind between their palms. "Look," he says, gesturing along the beach, "sand dunes. They've been here for ever." For ever, she thinks, marvelling. "They change shape and re-form every day with the sea," he says, "but they'll never disappear. They keep us safe." He squeezes her hand tight. "Come on, pumpkin, time we got back. Mummy'll be getting anxious."

She's anxious too. She looks across the sunflower-patterned cloth on the veranda table, the too-tight hugs, the silences. She fills the air with chatter, nonsense, questions, pushes books under their noses, climbs on to laps that feel cold despite the sun. Her chubby fingers trace unfamiliar lines beside mouths and eyes.

Sometimes, distracted, they flick her hand away; sometimes they seize it and press it to their lips. When they do that, she snatches her hand back.

Later, in the strange bedroom, she hears their voices through the thin walls, spikes of anger breaking through the whispers. Someone is crying, muffled noises smothered by a pillow or a shoulder. Slipping from her bed, she creeps into the corridor and stands outside their door: the noises cease. Minutes pass. She pads back to her room.

The next morning, their faces are gaunt, their smiles painted on. "One last walk along the dunes," he says. Her mother turns away, fumbling for a tissue.

He strides ahead of her, oblivious to her little legs pumping to keep up. "Wait for me!" she cries, but he's too far ahead. Wind whips the words away. He stops on the shoreline, eyes fixed on the horizon. She tugs at his flapping shirt.

"Lie down, Daddy," she cries and desperately shovels sand over him. To keep him safe. To keep him there. Panicking as the grains slip through her little fingers.