**Slaying Monsters**

Kait Leonard

Lorna took a sip from a bottle of chocolate Yoo-hoo, an addiction since childhood. Displaced by energy drinks and fizzy waters, it was getting difficult to find. She wondered if that’s what it meant to get old, watching everything wonderful vanish as time moved forward. From her folding chair, she watched the afternoon waves uncurl over the sand. Her paperback lay unopened on her lap. She’d be fifty in less than twenty-four hours, not quite old, but the mirror already reflected a face she didn’t recognize. She dug her toes into the sand. Further up the beach, a little girl in a polka-dotted two-piece scooped wet sand into a plastic bucket. Fifty – the number sucked the air out of her.

Summer used to signal that everything needed air – blue and white striped beach balls, sunshine yellow plastic rafts that every kid tried to stand up on and big sisters used for drifting as far from the grown-ups as possible. The littlest siblings played with inflated swans and boats that bobbed on waves. She could still feel the burning sand on the soles of her feet, as adults huffed and puffed until their faces turned red. She’d shift from one foot to the other, waiting. But made of thin plastic, balls exploded, rafts sank, and toys were dragged into the sea by retreating waves. Right about then, she and the other kids would notice the sting of their sunburns and the itch of the sand in all their cracks and crevices, prompting parents to pack up and head back to the cars.

She wondered how things might be different if she’d had children. Would she be blowing up beach balls for her grandkids today? No matter. The time had never been right. Lorna took another careful taste of her drink. She watched the little girl fill her bucket and pack the sand tight. Then she hoisted her load with both hands and carried it to her castle. She upturned the bucket quickly and lifted it carefully, leaving a perfect brick. After patting it into place, she raced back to her digging spot.

Each wave inched closer to where the girl worked. A little farther out throbbing mounds of water collected, preparing to explode onto the shore. Lorna watched as one grew higher and heavier than the rest. It undulated, drawing more and more force from the sea.

The child placed another bucket of sand and then squinted out toward the horizon. She knelt beside her creation, patting her sand-bricks, as if to strengthen them so they’d withstand the onslaught.

Lorna sipped her drink. She couldn’t delay the tide, but maybe she’d offer to help rebuild the castle higher up. She remembered her own disappointment every time a favorite toy popped or got dragged out by a wave. It always seemed so unfair.

The little girl stood and walked around her fortress, a final inspection. A wave unfurled and raced up the sand, pulling back just inches from the castle walls. The highest swell had moved closer, looming, threatening. It would crest next, leaving only smooth sand, as if the magical kingdom had never existed. The little girl left her bucket and walked away.

Lorna took a sip, just enough to leave a hint of chocolate on her lips.

The child stopped and turned to face the sea. The wave was cresting, beginning its break. The little girl took off running toward her kingdom. Lorna’s breath caught in her throat. The girl ran. The wave raced her toward the castle. But a moment before its victory, she launched herself into the air, landing with both feet on the tallest spire. She stomped and laughed, as the wave crashed over her feet. She kicked into the water, sending arcs of sparkling sea into the air. Finally, the deflated wave drew back. The little girl chased it until it slid away. Then she turned and skipped toward a woman holding out a brilliant, yellow beach towel.

Lorna inspected her Yoo-hoo, still almost a third full. She breathed in the bright, salty air, as the waves rolled in. She dug her toes deeper into the sand, lifted her bottle in a toast, and then drank until it was empty. That last swallow tasted so sweet.