

THE SAND GAME

At five thirty-six in the morning on the first Sunday of every July, Elaina and Michael Gerson try to bury each other alive.

Armed with faded lemon-yellow plastic mini-shovels and fueled by the insatiable need to win no matter how ridiculous the contest, they lie down on the beach outside their parents' summer house and cover each other with billion year-old silica. They start with the toes. They slowly work their way up, taking care not to throw the sand at each other lest they violate the cardinal rule of the game: Any sand in the mouth or other bodily orifice of your opponent and you're disqualified.

They take their time, lovingly placing the sand on top of each other's shins, thighs, hips, abdomens, and so on until all that remains uncovered is the hand closest to each other and, of course, their heads. Like a pair of Trappist monks, they wait in silence for dawn to break. Only after the first rays have slithered across the blue-

settles for “Yeah,” and breaks free of his temporary tomb. Whooping and hollering, he runs down the beach for a victory dunk in the chilly Atlantic.

This theater of the absurd has been running without interruption for twenty-five years. And every single one of those years, Rachel has sat bored out of her mind up on the deck, wondering if this will be The Sand Game in which Laine’s bladder will be able to withstand the pressures, competitive and otherwise, and secure her a win.

Year after year, however, the drama unfolds the same way. Laine concedes, Michael rejoices, and Rachel asks her big sister the same question: “Couldn’t you hold it in?”

Laine never answers. She simply hurls Rachel a look of ironic triumph and heads straight toward what Rachel and Michael always assumed was the bathroom.

This July was different. Not very different. Just a little different. This July Laine didn’t say, “Gotta go.” She said, “I’ve had enough.” This July she didn’t trot to the deck. She merely walked. This July Rachel didn’t say, “Couldn’t you hold it in?” She said, “Maybe it’s time for Depends?”

Laine didn’t think that was funny. The look she threw Rachel on the first Sunday of this July was one of testy ire, not triumphant irony.

And so the twenty-fifth running of The Sand Game taught Rachel Gerson two valuable lessons. One. Never tease a sister nearing forty about needing a bladder diaper. And two. The Sand Game was never about sand.