

NOW

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You can't turn around once you're in the tunnel. There's no U-turn, no off-ramp. You're literally stuck under the East River. This fact exhilarated me as a kid. *Next stop, Long Island.* At the first sight of sunlight at the end of the tunnel, I felt the city melt away. I cracked the window, popped a juice box, kicked off my shoes, and stretched my legs across the backseat. As an adult, entering the Midtown Tunnel makes me feel sort of trapped.

The traffic slows to a standstill as we merge onto the Long Island Expressway. "And this is why we don't come to Long Island," I say, swatting the steering wheel like it's responsible. I'm not sure what I was expecting on a Friday afternoon in August.

"We both know that's not why," says Jack, scrolling through his phone.

I can handle Long Island once a summer for a long weekend, never a week. Three days at the beach is enough to warm you up but not enough to turn you into mush. For three days in a row, my sister, Gracie, drags me into the

ocean, and for three days in a row, I swim. I count my strokes as I cut through the water and long for the constraints of the YMCA pool, where you can track how far you've gone based on how many times you've turned around. The ocean is a full mile long on the stretch of beach between the jetty and the wooded cove in front of our house. There's just too much room for error.

It's been fourteen years since I've spent a whole summer at the beach—since Wyatt and I broke up, and I broke apart. Putting a person back together isn't easy, but if you're smart about it you can reassemble yourself in a totally different, better way. Turn carefree into careful; bandage up your heart and double-check the adhesive. Bit by bit, I have left my childhood behind, replacing my impulsiveness with deliberate decisions and plans. Jack calls it being buttoned up, and I don't know why anyone would want to walk around unbuttoned. I know what each day is going to look like even before I open my eyes, and there's so much strength in that knowing. If I stay at the beach for too long, I get pulled back. My old self is there and she wants to drag me out through the rusty chinks in my armor. I blame the salt air.

This is the first time I've brought Jack with me in the entire four years we've been together. Travis likes to say that I've been protecting him from our parents, which is ridiculous because we see them in Manhattan all the time. Part of me has wanted to show Jack the front-yard hydrangea explosion and the delicate way the dunes blow in parallel to the ocean. To show him where the sand and the salt and the sun conspired to make me into a strong swimmer and a

happy teenager. I just don't know if he can handle the summer version of my parents.

Traffic picks up when we're on Sunrise Highway, and Jack puts down his phone. "It's pretty here," he says as if looking out the window for the first time. "I found a gym ten minutes from your parents' house and got a week's membership."

"There's no way we're staying a whole week." I've packed exactly three pairs of underwear to make sure of it.

"Well you told your mom a week. Anyway, I took next week off, just in case. It's going to be a hundred degrees in the city by Thursday." He takes my hand, and I feel myself settle. Jack is the opposite of the ocean. He's more like a lake, one that's crystal clear and protected by a mountain range. With Jack, I am in no danger of being washed away. "This might be really fun."

He's scrolling through his phone again. "Oh, here's a good one. A listing for an in-house HR associate at an accounting firm in midtown."

"They're not going to fire me," I say. They're probably going to fire me. I'm in the firing business, and I can't imagine how this ends any other way. Frankly, I'd fire me, but I'm so sick of talking about this and the tight, defensive way it makes my body feel.

"They might, Sam." He puts his hand on my shoulder. "Eleanor's way of doing things is tried and true."

"I said what I said, and I apologized. It's out of my hands."

"If you're going to go off the rails, you kind of need a backup plan," Jack says.

“I’ll remember that for next time. So are you ready for what you’re walking into? Hippies gone wild?” My smile is a question mark. “There’s no Wi-Fi or air-conditioning, but if you’re looking to see a statue of David made out of pipe cleaners, this is the place for you.”

Jack laughs, presumably because he thinks I’m exaggerating. “I’ve been wanting to see this for years, I’m ready as hell.”

Jack knows my parents in the city, between the months of September and May, where they live in the same Lower East Side two-bedroom, rent-controlled apartment that Travis and I and then Gracie grew up in. After thirty-two years in that apartment, they practically live for free. My dad teaches art history at NYU, and my mom teaches modern poetry at the New School. They are like squirrels in reverse—from September to May they toil and save so that they can spend the summer at the beach doing whatever they want. Jack likes the school-year version of my parents. He thinks they seem like people in a Woody Allen movie, real New Yorkers.

In October we’ll be married. Jack’s parents have put down a small deposit for an October 28 wedding at their country club in Connecticut, but we haven’t fully committed. The venue is beautiful and easy—they literally have three wedding options: A, B, and C. They all seem pretty much the same to me, but Jack likes B. I wanted to get married on the lawn outside the boathouse in Central Park underneath the beech trees, but apparently that gets booked up years in advance, which I find fascinating, like brides are booking venues before they’ve even met the guy. I don’t know how I missed this.

We were ready to press go on Jack's B wedding when my mom put her foot down. She loves Jack and is definitely relieved to see me so happy, but as the wedding gets closer she's starting to feel left out of the planning. She feels like the spirit of my family isn't being represented. When she called to lay this on me, I held my ground.

"Please come have a look at the Old Sloop Inn out here. Come get reacquainted with this place and yourself. Show Jack who we are." I said no.

But when Gracie asked me to come, I caved. Unless it's been something directly related to her safety, I don't think I've ever said no to Gracie. "Please come, Sammy," she'd said. "Just so Mom feels better. Jack will love it. It'll be perfect."

As far as Jack's concerned, things have been pretty perfect. We met getting into opposite sides of a cab and then shared a ride to where I was visiting a client two blocks from his dermatology practice (perfect). It happened to be right after I'd gotten a haircut and a blowout, so I looked like the most aspirational version of myself (perfect). A year later we moved into an apartment over our favorite sushi place (perfect). He proposed to me with a one-carat solitaire diamond ring that belonged to his grandmother, who happened to also have a size six ring finger (perfect).

When we're finally off the highway, Jack puts down his window and takes a showy whiff of the salt air. Jack bought this convertible BMW in a moment of madness I can't quite put a context to, though he's never once taken the top off on account of the sun. Every time I get in, I wonder if his alter ego appeared one day and bought it, a Bizarro World version

of Superman, one who welcomes sun on his face and tolerates unkempt hair. It both delights and terrifies me to think that he could also go totally off the rails for a minute.

I turn left onto West Main Street, past the Episcopal church, the deli, Chippy's Diner, and the library. I haven't been to Oak Shore since last summer when Jack went on a golf trip with his brothers. I have the sensation that the town is going to notice a disturbance in the force. *Hey, Sam, who's the new guy? Well done.*

I finally turn right toward the beach and onto Saltaire Lane. We pass Wyatt's house, a stately brick thing with black shutters to match the high-gloss front door. There's a light on in the front room. I haven't been inside the Popes' house since the summer I was sixteen, but I could walk into that house blindfolded and get myself a glass of water. They rent it to strangers now.

There's a tall hedge between Wyatt's house and ours. I slow down to take it in. It's technically on the property line, so both of our families are responsible for maintaining it. Wyatt's dad, Frank, always wanted to hire someone to deal with it and split the cost, but my dad wouldn't have it. The hedge, or "privet" as he calls it, using air quotes, is an honor to maintain. He trims it with small clippers and no measuring stick. Some years it's wavy on top, some years it reaches a high peak in the middle. It's never, ever straight, and this year it leans toward the ocean.

The beach house and every tree and bush on the property are a great source of pride to my dad. He bought the house and eventually paid off the mortgage during a decade when he had epic success as an abstract artist. It started with

a painting called *Current*, which is basically swirls of black and white on a sky-blue background. Galleries all over the country sold versions of this painting as quickly as he could produce them. I was just a kid, but I loved seeing him emerge from his studio with canvas after canvas. I thought it would go on forever. But when the zeitgeist changed and the demand for swirly dried up, he was never able to come up with the next thing. He's now fifteen years into a dry spell, and this property is what he has left.

To my eye, the hedge is approximately the eight feet tall that it's always been, but it seems denser from years of branches comingling. Throughout my childhood, Frank thanked my dad for doing the hedges with a nice bottle of scotch at the end of the summer. I assume the scotch stopped coming after Marion and Frank divorced. The real barrier between our houses is now as much psychic as physical anyway.

"Are we here?" Jack asks.

"No, that next one."

The sound of tires on gravel welcomes us into our driveway. People say it's hard to tell if our house is a house with a porch or a porch with a house. The porch wraps around the entire ground floor and is comparable in square footage. Wisteria lines the railing, climbing up the posts and running along the gutters like delicately placed lavender frosting. The smell of the wisteria welcomes you in from the street and then lures you around corners to the ocean view.

Jack's already gotten out of the car, and I take a deep breath. I look out over the steering wheel and feel like I'm about to watch a home movie. I'm not sure I want to press

play, but I get out of the car anyway. Gracie barrels out the front door, all limbs and dark braids waving in the air. “Sammy!” she calls, racing past Jack to get to me. I bury my nose in the top of her head and am transported back to when the weight of her infant body in my arms felt like the only thing that was keeping me alive. The sweet smell of her hair and the fierce energy of her hug have kept me tethered to the earth for a long time. My twelve-year-old sister is a walking, singing, laughing silver lining.

“Hey, kiddo,” I say. “Did you say hi to Jack?” This is rhetorical, as we both know she did not.

“Hi.” She gives a quick wave.

“You want to fill us in on what we’re walking into?”

“Granny and Gramps are here. They seem older than at Christmas. Travis and Hugh are coming for dinner. There’s lots of talk about where you two are sleeping, like before you’re married.” Gracie blushes and I try to remember what it was like to be twelve.

“Eew,” I say. “In the same room with him?”

“Right? So gross. So I think he’s staying in the garage apartment.”

Jack doesn’t seem to mind. “Water view?”

Gracie gives him a *yikes* face. “Looks over where we keep the garbage cans. And the garage is where Dad paints so it kind of smells like poison.”

“Is he painting?” I ask.

“I don’t think so. Last week I could smell paint, but he was just opening cans. All his brushes are clean.”

“Well, it sounds like a good spot for me. My own bachelor pad,” Jack says.

“Sam, sweetheart!” It’s my mom. She’s in a lavender caftan to match the wisteria, her dark hair swept back off her face as if she got out of the ocean and just let it dry like that. No makeup, no shoes. She’s painted her toenails silver.

I give her a hug. “Hi, Mom.”

She beams. “Jack! Welcome. We’re thrilled you’re finally here.” She takes his face in her hands as she says this, and I see him wince. Jack has a thing about foreign oils (on my mom I’m guessing Coppertone and canola) mixing with his Serum Hydrée.

“Hello, Laurel,” he says, and kisses her cheek.

Gracie locks her arm in mine and leads me up the stairs to the porch. “Mom put flowers in your room and changed your sheets twice.” I feel briefly guilty that I haven’t been here all summer.

When I have the door halfway open, the smell surrounds me. Old Bay seasoning, sourdough bread. And something fishy I can’t identify. This is what summer smelled like.

Jack steps in beside me. “It’s a lot of stuff,” he says.

I look around. It is, truly, a lot of stuff. This is how our beach house has always looked, sort of like a preschool classroom before they sing the cleanup song. A low table in the entry hall is covered in mason jars filled with shells, sea glass, and self-adhesive googly eyes. A large jar overflows with seaweed, which explains the fishy smell. My dad collects seaweed to use as paintbrushes, which I’m not ready to explain to Jack.

Right past that collection is a wide hallway where the

dining room table has been shoved against the wall. On it are piles of sticks and larger pieces of driftwood. There are vats of water and a drying rack. This is my mom's pet project, making a single sheet of paper and then printing the first copy of a new poem on it. She says it's a ritual of gratitude. I can't even describe what a mess it is to make paper.

"What's all this?" Jack says, almost to himself. It alarms me to see our house through his eyes. Their apartment in the city is packed with papers and books, but it's small and efficient in a way that Jack appreciates. This place, with its endless collections of what he must consider garbage, is a whole other story.

"Makes her own paper," is all I can get out.

"Sam!" My dad comes in from the back porch, letting the screen door snap behind him. He's tan and his silver hair almost touches his shoulders. He looks like an ad for expensive beer. "Well if it isn't Sam Holloway's annual visit to the beach! Nothing makes me happier than seeing you out here." I give him a one-armed hug. There was a time when I would run up to my dad and hug him so fiercely that my feet would lift right off the ground. I love my dad, but I don't worship him anymore. As I've gotten older, I've learned that it's totally possible to love someone from a safe distance.

"Bill. You have a beautiful home," Jack says with as much conviction as he can muster.

"Thanks. We've got a lot going on, that's for sure. Now come out back. We have a slew of old people with serious opinions about how close you should be sleeping to my daughter."

MY GRANDPARENTS ARE the best, hands down. They're straightforward and familiar and not at all afraid to tell you what's up. When they came from Pennsylvania to visit us the first Christmas after Jack and I moved in together, Granny was quick to criticize our muted, minimalist apartment: "I've seen prisons with more personality." My parents gasped, and Granny and Gramps laughed and laughed. That's how it is with both of them, machine-gun fire of thoughts and opinions and then a big laugh that tells you none of it mattered at all.

We find them on the porch, and they cry out, "The bride!" in unison. Someone has given Granny a kazoo, and she blows it.

My mom pours mai tais, which seem out of place but, I admit, are delicious. Each one is adorned with a handmade cocktail umbrella, found sticks glued to scraps of homemade paper. Jack immediately plucks his out and checks his glass for debris. I don't know how to tell him that there's a little bit of sand in everything at the beach. Also, glue.

There's a toast and a lot of small talk, and I take in the welcome beauty of the Atlantic Ocean. Just beyond the porch, the thick run of dunes leads to a stretch of beach that leads to the shore. The sun is low and casts speckled light on the water. The gulls soar and dive as the waves roll in, one after another, reaching out and pulling back in an infinite loop. The endlessness of it all overwhelms me. I feel like the ocean should have stopped and changed when I did.

"Your boyfriend is here," Granny is saying.

"Mother!" my mom scolds, and looks at me. The words

register first in my chest, which is suddenly tight and hot. She can't mean Wyatt.

Gracie sits up straight.

Granny smiles over her nearly empty mai tai. "Oh, you know what I mean. Your old flame, Wyatt." Then to Jack, "She lost her mind over that one."

I am staring at a spot on the table, just beyond my hands, where my mom has placed a citronella candle in the shape of a conch shell. I'm afraid the heat from my chest and the panic in my eyes might melt it into a puddle of wax. "What do you mean 'here'?" I ask without looking up. "Like on the East Coast? Or at the house?"

My mother briefly looks guilty. "Well, I meant to tell you. Right there at the house. I guess Marion didn't rent it this summer, because he's been there for a while." She stirs the pitcher of mai tais and refills Jack's glass.

"You know Wyatt?" Gracie asks me. Gracie's asking me about Wyatt, and it throws me like a wave after a hurricane. Everyone is looking at me for a response. There is a loud ringing in my ears and the heat in my chest has spread to my face. Jack knows the story. And he knows how incendiary all of this is.

"Well, I've heard all about Wyatt," Jack says. "The whole reason I became a doctor was so that I could compete with a guy with a guitar." Nervous laughter titters over empty mai tais.

"I see him all the time," says Gracie. "He lets me watch him surf. And he's teaching me to play 'Leaving on a Jet Plane' on the guitar. He has a bunch of guitars up there."

"Up where?" asks Jack.

“In the treehouse,” says Gracie. This makes Jack laugh, and I try to make sense of it. There is not one funny thing about that treehouse. Or Wyatt. Or the fact that I’m thirty years old and feeling panicked about seeing the guy who broke my heart when I was a teenager.

Wyatt’s dad helped his brother, Michael, and him build that treehouse in the oak tree between their pool and the dunes when they were ten and twelve years old, spending days at junkyards and shipyards all over Long Island. While I can remember falling in love in small moments all over the beach and while floating on the ocean, I lost my virginity specifically in that treehouse. At night, after my house went quiet, I would sneak downstairs and out the back door and through the dunes to the rope ladder that led to Wyatt. He’d say, “Hey, Sam-I-am,” and he’d kiss me, and I’d wonder if there were any two people in the world who were more right together.

The treehouse would last forever, Wyatt once told me, because there were no walls in the front or back. A storm would blow right through it. The tree itself grew to form a bit of a back wall, giving us privacy in case Marion and Frank happened to be peering out their bedroom window with binoculars. But the front was wide open to the ocean view, Wyatt’s beach chair next to mine. Eventually, just a jumble of bodies and blankets.

My chest is still tight, and I cannot wrestle my face into neutral. I study my drink and use my handmade umbrella to try to fish a tiny piece of pineapple out of my mai tai. I haven’t seen Wyatt since I was sixteen, haven’t spoken to him since I was eighteen. It was teenage infatuation, and

Dr. Judy even went so far as to call it addiction, but it's been a long time and I'm a rebuilt grown-up person with a real live fiancé and a career. I recently contributed to a 401(k), for God's sake. I can't imagine seeing Wyatt now, introducing him to Jack and asking about life in Los Angeles. *So hey, how'd that all work out?* Wyatt is a locked-away memory of a time I don't want to go back to and a person I can barely remember being. And somehow he's thirty feet away, right next door. I'm not sure I would have come if they'd told me he was here. Which probably explains why they didn't tell me.

"You know Wyatt," I say to Gracie. Just to confirm. Just to nail down one single fact that will keep everything I know from blowing away with the next breeze off the ocean.

"Yep," she says. "He knew who I was right away."

TRAVIS AND HUGH are late for dinner, but we've all had enough mai tais and cashews not to care. "Nice slacks," is the first thing Travis says to me. I haven't seen him since Easter, when he commented that I was dressed like a Delta flight attendant.

I hug Hugh before I say, "They're called chinos in the catalog. I think they're even called 'favorite chinos.' They're what people who don't surf all day wear."

"Ah, I didn't know they made catalogs just for tax accountants," Travis says.

"Cute. How far did you have to chase the Hawaiian Punch guy to get that shirt?" I ask, and toss another cashew into my mouth. This is our love language, but Jack

thinks Travis is threatened by how much I've made of my career when all he does is surf and pick out fabrics all day. Jack's being overly loyal, because Travis and Hugh actually do really well. They have a booming architecture and design business in town, Travis being the aesthetic director and Hugh being the actual architect. My parents have expected their engagement for longer than they'd been expecting mine.

My dad barbecues sausages, and my mom's made a salad and scalloped potatoes. We eat at the long table on the back porch, as usual, as the sun puts on a dramatic show of setting. I can do this for three days. As long as I can avoid Wyatt. He's not going to just walk up onto our deck, and I could put Gracie on lookout and let her run interference for me. I take in my immediate family, my grandparents, and my handsome fiancé. We've sat like this dozens of times since Jack and I met, mostly in my parents' cramped dining room in the city. But it's different here, like a step back in time to who my family used to be.

"So have they started selling you on the Old Sloop Inn yet?" Hugh asks. "The garden can accommodate two hundred people and the food's great."

"That's what we're here for. To check out all our options," Jack says, and gives my hand a squeeze. My mom smiles at the sight of our hands together.

"I think you're going to love it. And it has thirty guest rooms for out-of-towners," says my mom. And then, "Of course your parents would be welcome to stay here," which stops my heart. Jack's mom does not make her own paper. In fact, her paper comes in a lovely box with her initials

printed in navy blue in the upper left-hand corner. Like a normal person.

Travis shakes his head. “I think it’s unbelievable that you haven’t nailed this down yet. I figured you would have laid all this out in a spreadsheet the day you got engaged.”

I shrug. It is planned, of course. Jack picked B. It’s not the beach wedding I imagined as a kid or the Central Park wedding I imagined the day Jack proposed to me, but it’s easy, and I’m sure it will be beautiful.

A few guitar notes come from the treehouse. Everyone’s quiet, and I wonder if they can hear my heart beat. I notice I am holding my breath. The same notes come again, then again with a few more added on. He’s writing a song in there and I can picture him doing it, his legs dangling over the edge, his brow furrowed. It’s like I went out into the world and grew up, and he’s still right here. Right where I left him.