

Lora Hilty

Thirty Years in the Hole

Tess' children, Justin and Joe, are just ten and four years old when we suffer a crisis. Tess is living with us, Craig and me, and we're raising the boys together, as a family, or so we had planned. The problem has crept between us, the chains built link by link as Craig and I took an unfortunate path and slowly became parents to our grandchildren.

Tess takes away our lives and plans the next twenty as she seeks out copious amounts of male attention since her divorce from baby-daddy number two. My biggest fear, the one that eats a whole in the pit of me, is that she will have another baby out of wedlock, another child that Craig and I are to raise. My daughter busies herself with suffocating the dim light that I can still somehow see around me, and Craig, like a lobster settling peacefully into a vat of boiling water, neither says nor does anything to stop her. Our daughter has skillfully hijacked everything and everyone, and we have become nothing more to her than a convenience. I have been such a fool; and everything that I believed is now proven a lie.

Tess has forgotten to be a mother to her children, and Craig has forgotten to be my husband, the romance stripped from our marriage in this simmering, rude way. I've questioned what I had once known so completely, my deepest love and respect for my husband. It hurt to remember the way things had once been.

We'd been talking, Richard and I—Facebooking—since my thirty year high school reunion. We'd spoken at the football game and the subsequent party, had spent some time remembering old things. His little sister, Kacey, a friend of mine since elementary school, brought Richard, her older brother, because he said that he wanted to see me one more time. I wondered if I had meant something to him or if he was sick and needed to touch base before he passed. I wondered all kinds of things, but the two nights I'd spent talking with him had left me guarded. He had been inappropriate, placing a hand on my back and bringing

up a forgotten intimacy. He held something sinister behind his eyes, something that etched itself in my mind that made me uneasy. I'd been too much of a coward to address it at the time.

After the reunion, Richard had suddenly shown up on my FaceBook chat. I'd simply stated, "Well, there you are again," a sentence that could be read with any number of inflections. Some months pass before I find myself making plans for a writing retreat at the Cape, a place I've never been and as far away from Ohio as I can get. Cape Cod, just a few hours south of Richard's life without me, is my writing destination.

When I post my plans on my profile page, Richard messages me within hours. *When are you coming, Tori? How long will you be here? Do you want to see me?*

I stare into the blank world inside my computer screen, my future waiting to be written, and I begin to type. I create, sculpt, and *invent* my life for him. I tell myself that ten days of writing is exactly what I need as my fiftieth birthday looms and my life in Ohio slowly implodes. Tess, my lost Tess, uses me up while Craig watches, hands in the air. I wring my own while I try to write some kind of hope. And then there's Richard, haunting me with familiar whispers, confusing me by reviving old hurts, paths not taken.

Craig and I own a split-level house with small windows and faded green curtains. It is three decades old, nothing remarkable, but we've replaced the brown shag carpets with veneered wood and floating tile floors—neutral tones, of course. Craig, my husband of 25 years, replaced the crumbling blacktopped driveway with concrete and the small windows with stylish new easy-cleans. He did the work, had the concrete and windows delivered, but the prep-work belonged to him. I planted lilies and bleeding-hearts, lilacs, crabapples and smoke bushes on these grounds while he seeded the lawn and weeded the dandelions. He's built brick walls and flowerbeds, swing-sets and firewood bins while I wallpapered and painted. We've raised children and dogs, and phoned our mothers and fathers on a land-line that we still pay for, even though we have cell phones. We've seen our son go to war and our daughter's family bloom, our hair turn gray and our bellies expand. We are blessed with grandkids and diapers—arthritis and daycare— and our daughter hasn't gone a day in our house without letting us know how little she loves us.

I leave home on a Thursday. I drive my car, a practical blue Sonata that reeks of suburbia, because I like to feel grounded to something. Stacks of CDs fill the glove-box, oldies like Rod Stewart, an artist

appropriate for the occasion since Richard made love to me for the first time to his music—not the first time we fucked in the cemetery—but the first time that we really made love.

As soon as I hit the highway, I turn Rod up and roll down the windows, block everything out. The air in my lungs slides out like a balloon with a slow leak as green mile after mile slide past my window, and within each roll of the speedometer, I leave my soul behind without as much as a glance into my rear-view mirror.

I call Richard at six thirty. I had told him of my plans to go to a reading in Cambridge, and he'd genuinely sounded disappointed, but now I waffle, curious to begin our getting-to-know-you-again time. He seems skittish, balks when I suggest skipping it. Richard's telling me that he has to work. He can't make it down to the Cape to see me until the following weekend.

"That's disappointing," I say.

"Nothing I can do about it," he says.

I pride myself on my ability to discern when someone is lying, and I suspect he isn't telling me everything. Though he never guesses, I hang up a little angry, and he seems more than relieved that I buy it, his excuse. I chew on this for the next several hundred miles, replay conversations we'd had since reconnecting. "I've been looking for you for thirty years," he'd said. "Why couldn't I have been the one?"

I dislike pining over anything or anyone, and I'm not quite sure if this is an accurate description of what I'm feeling. His sudden cold feet make me feel foolish. I calculate the next call; flip it over in my mind until I know just how it'll go. The next morning, I leave a message. "I'm thinking of stopping in a little town called Weymouth," I say. "Ever heard of it?" He doesn't know I scammed hometown information from his daughter's Facebook page.

He calls within minutes. "That's my town," he says.

"No way," I say. "Now, that's a coincidence."

"You know I have to work," he says.

"So, work."

"I'm not going to put you up in a hotel," he says.

"I didn't ask you to do anything."

“You’re a pain in my ass.”

“I like it that way.”

“Well, now I have to pay my daughter two hundred dollars to clean my house,” he says.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I say.

“God, damn it.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I say. “I do have a son. Men are messy.”

“I’ll call her and get her over,” he says. “It needs cleaned anyway.”

I’m confident that I’ve ruined his weekend, and I wonder why he doesn’t he just tell me the truth. We’re both married, technically anyway. We have history, and that’s enough for me, but Richard’s trying to make me the fool, a dance we’ve been doing since I can’t remember. It feels like I’m chasing a shadow, and Richard enjoys this, I know. I want to show him who’s got the power over who this time around. I punch the gas, determined to get there too soon, trip him up and find out who he’s become.

In the car, hurtling toward Richard, I think of Craig. The night before I left, we made a desperate kind of love together—something we both paid for the next morning when the grandchildren were up early and peeking round, kitten eyes into our room. Why couldn’t we be together like this all of the time? Why does he have to sense a void before he acts to fill it? I almost cancelled the trip, but held onto my sense of self like a drowning puppy would wrap frantic paws around a floating log, a desperate and loathsome act of selfishness.

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I get into town at two-thirty, a gritty, worn little place with old, empty storefronts and cracked sidewalks. Miles from the ocean, the entire wind-wrecked village seems polished dirty smooth; the blunt edges, frayed but rounded down. Small brick houses scream late 60s architecture and though refurbished, are out-dated with paved drive-ways and bushes under the identical bay windows. These cloned abodes line both sides of the one-way street, the vehicles covered in powdered yellow silt. I stop for a soda at a small carry-out with large plated-glass windows on Main Street.

The clerk, a Latino, is a plump, happy girl with smiling eyes and a pocked fly-swatter in her tight fist. She seems worldly, her knowing eyes barely moving when she smiles. A small fan buzzes on the counter and

smear windows sweat in the afternoon sun. I head for the cooler, three steps across yellowed, white and black checked tile, and grab something sealed.

Two gulp-sized plastic Dr. Pepper bottles drip condensation into the crook of my arm as I fight with my purse. The packaged foods leave little room in the short aisle, and I rake a rack with my side. Dark eyes on my back, I wonder if the clerk knows Richard. The air presses around me, stifles me. The buzzing fan dances against the blue Formica counter, and giving up and giving in, I order two packs of Marlboro and a lighter. I haven't smoked a cigarette in five years.

Once outside, the air freshens. I walk to my car and call Richard for an address. He gives me the street and number and tells me his daughter's still at the house. I ask if I should stop somewhere and wait until she leaves. The clerk presses her nose against the pane. Unabashed, she watches me from the confines of her own life choices. Richard doesn't think it's necessary for me to stay away, but he seems nervous and tight.

When I pull in the drive, I can see that the place needs some work. The house had been built in the 1700s and is old and interesting, but the shingles are damaged and hanging from the roof. White siding turns a sad, muddy brown when aged in this climate, and the wooden steps leading to a side door hump broken and dry. Everything screams disrepair and desolation.

The lot is large for a place so inhabited, but the lawn needs mowing. The gardens spill scraps of dry grass that strangle the weeds. A rotting barn leans next to the house, the foundation crumbling almost as fast as I can take it in, and I imagine creatures lurking in the tangle of brush and dead leaves, a raccoon or opossum. Plastic lawn chairs, once white, are now varied shades of corroded beige and grouped on top of the hill in the back yard. I mount the hill in need of some air, my heart a softening mass in the middle of my chest. A hard life is lived on these grounds. Richard, a broken man, lost life's promise a long time ago. I sense that I need to tread carefully here.

At the top of the hill next to the chairs, a large green trash can brims with Miller Light cans. I can picture him, Richard, sitting in the stiff, cheap chairs with his steel-toed boots propped up on the edge. He stares out over the small lake across the street while downing beer after beer, and in my mind, he is lonely, picking over remnants of happier times, longing to reconnect with something he'd lost, a palpable regret. I follow a worn path to the house and try the door. I'm ready to fully embrace what could have been.

Inside Richard's house, it's dark in the entry-way, a pall, and my eyes take some time to adjust. The house smells old; a musty layer of creak and groan that only old houses possess lingers just under the smart sting of Lysol. I move to the right, the dining room. The floor slants, and with each step over the hardwood planks, my body drifts to the left.

There was a crooked man.

I hold onto the back of a chair, a heavy monstrosity draped in red, crushed-velvet 70s chic, and try to find my center before proceeding into the small kitchen.

The sink has a slow drain, and dirty dish-water sitting in the bottom tells me that Richard's daughter has only recently left. I blow the air from my lungs, relieved that I won't meet her in this awkward way. I'm impressed that Richard's daughter turned out to be helpful to him and livid that my daughter is not.

The hard truth: my child has abandoned her children and heaped the responsibility of raising her boys squarely on my shoulders. It's ironic that here, in Richard's kitchen, admiring his offspring's helpful nature, I'm rejecting twenty more years of child-rearing because it's a repeat of what I'd already done poorly. I want to do things my way now, as selfishly and spoiled as the thirty-something living in my basement, and I tell myself that I don't care, that I can live with giving up on my family. I can't help but wonder what happened to Richard's.

Richard claims living alone for seven years—not a legal separation from his wife, but a separation all the same. He'd spoken about a girlfriend, a pretty serious girlfriend, who lived with him for a time. I checked her out on Facebook, and much to my disappointment, she's breathtaking, her body, small, thin and disturbingly childlike. Deep brown eyes and skin highlight full lips and bright, cheerful eyes. Small breasts and hips far too narrow to have birthed children make up a sprite frame. I suspect this marvelous looking woman sucked all of Richard's money away before she dumped him, and I think that it serves him right if this is the truth.

I make my way into the bathroom, and there, in the shower, there is evidence of this woman. A pink, lady-shaver hangs on the shower wall next to coconut shampoo, propped upside down, on the shower shelf. Frizz Away claims space on the resin counter, and two towels limply hang on small, white hooks next to a sadly stacked and scratched Maytag set.

Who walked a crooked mile.

I have him in the lie, but I can't understand how he had gotten rid of her without losing her, and this amuses me in a mean way. And now that I know, I'm reminded of what Richard had been thirty years ago—how I'd suspected he'd had other girlfriends, even then, and I wonder if my husband had gotten the same kind of vibe from me the day I left home.

I wait for Richard on the hill in the back of the house. It will be hours before he arrives, and I crack the bottle of Private Stock I'd brought with me, sip it down with the Dr. Pepper I'd bought at the store. Large trees, maples and evergreens, form a private space for me to wallow. The reservoir across the street consumes me. From where I sit, I have an excellent view of the road. As I drink, I ask myself why I stay.

I think I want to know about Richard's wife—who she is and why they separated. I was fourteen years old when he left Ohio; Richard is five years my senior. He'd promised to come back for me, and in the back of my mind, I'd kept him, until I heard of his marriage. Kacey had made sure that I knew when it happened, and it had felt like a chapter closed that I hadn't finished reading. Why did he marry her instead of coming back for me after his four years in the Navy? After all of the time that has passed, my reaction to seeing him—the disturbing affect he has on me—is as much of a surprise to me as it is to him. I'd thought I'd never see him again, and I'd thought that a perfect thing.

The truth is that Richard has always had some kind of Vulcan mind-control affect on me, something torn and bitter-sweet. It's just like him to slip into my life again just as it spirals. Since that day, the what-ifs and how-comes steadily thrummed their way past my reason, and a dark thing crept out of me, a wild and bothersome dark thing, something I'd put on hold for too long, something that needs to be set straight.

When Richard pulls into the driveway, he heads straight for the house. He's dressed in a blue uniform, white patch on his shirt. I pretend I don't see him; feign surprise when he walks up the hill. One hand plunges into his pocket, the other fists a can of beer. He smiles, white teeth. I move to hug him, but he keeps me at a distance, a peck on the lips, my only reward for finding him.

Admittedly, in the bright light cast by the sun, I see that Richard hasn't aged well. He's still a semi-handsome man, but far leaner than I remembered from our youth, and far more life-worn than I'd noticed in the dim light months prior. His long, skinny neck boasts mounds of wrinkling skin that reminds me of a turkey vulture. And he's hairier than I remember – nose hair, ear hair, arm hair, and, most certainly,

abundant back hair. The hair on his head, very thick and white, sticks up at all angles, a hazard caused by a cap, now removed.

Yet, in spite of all the changes, I can still see him as he was when we were young. It is his eyes. He has remarkably handsome and earnest blue eyes that I want to believe even when I don't. We sit there drinking, and the silences seem long and awkward until the neighbors come up the hill to say hello. Richard is happy and talkative with them. When he starts to introduce me, he turns to me and says, "Hell. I don't even know what to call you."

I take him to dinner and pay for our meal, and then, I make haste, eager to finish my drive. He's confused and a little angry, but I'd purchased enough booze to keep him compliant. As I hurry away from him, I'm sure that I'll never hear from him again.

I stay in a musty motel off the highway, lucky to have found a place and relieved to be alone with my thoughts. I try hard to ignore the nagging feeling that I'd lost the opportunity to understand myself and put a period on the end of the Richard sentence.

My rental's a cute little studio in a line of twenty-five other studios that once served as an artist colony. New soft yellow siding and windows accented in white trim brightened number fourteen, my place for the next seven days. The owners had added a deck, sliding glass door, and a skylight to the original structure. Some of the units hadn't been updated, and I'm glad for the sliding door during this, the heat of the day.

The owner, a short, chubby man with a receding hairline and glasses explains that I'm the only one in the row who can catch an ocean breeze. I imagine him asleep in the bed that I'll occupy later, and my neck tenses, but the quaint space is homey, surprisingly outfitted with the smallest kitchen and bathroom that I've ever seen outside an R.V. I smell the salt laden air rush through the small space and admire the sea-foam green and ocean-mist blue on the walls. A poorly mounted swordfish stares blankly toward the far wall, which boasts several hooks laden with white lacquer—for hanging wet towels and clothing.

Outside, off the deck, the white-sand beach is out-fitted with thick, wooden chairs lined in plump cushions. I walk toward the ocean, the heat baking my white skin warm.

The bay is almost still; small waves lap the beach like lonely wings beating air, a lullaby. Kites fly soundlessly over the water, an orange and black running tiger with legs pumping, a navy-blue box-kite, and a large green and brown turtle with little ones following behind.

The kite-master stands melting on the beach next to a red cooler. He wears a swim-suit, strings untied, too low on his bare, flabby belly. He's an older man, amusing to watch, and I guess his age to be late fifties, early sixties. He raises his hand, calls me 'neighbor', and I walk the space between our cottages to say hello. He introduces me to his better half, Marcy. I share mimosas and shrimp with Tom and Marcy on the beach as the sun disappears, convinced that I've found the perfect place to think and get some writing done.

Long hours are spent looking out over the green, frothy waves shredding my stress with alcohol. Tom and Marcy remind me of old hippies because they love swapping stories over a joint. Liberated by the distance between my home and this place, I speak freely about my troubled life and take an interest in what they think. I tell them everything, spill my guts.

Marcy says that I'm suffering from shock and just need a good rest, some perspective.

They tell me that they were once husband and wife, but only found each other again after the divorce. "Look at us now," they say. "We could have saved a lot of heart-ache."

Tom worries about my safety with Richard, thinks I've stepped in it good. "The world is a dangerous place," he says. "And good girls like you need to stay close to home."

I shuddered at the last of this but appreciate his earnest nature. In fact, I enjoy the attention, enclosed in this bubble of new-found kinship that I somehow trust, and the truth is that I'm relieved to be rid of Richard. I don't answer my phone. He leaves a message about going to a christening for his boss' baby on Saturday night.

I call Richard back on Sunday, have every intention of ridding my conscience of him, but when he answers, he doesn't really answer. Thinking he's silenced his phone, he's actually hit the wrong button and made me privy to his conversation. I hear all about the wild party he attended Saturday night. I spend the next two days happily working on my tan while watching Tom launch kites. I revise and read, even start a new short story.

Tuesday evening around eight, Richard calls again. I don't answer. When my cell rings at nine-thirty, I realized that I'm going to have to deal with him.

"How come you haven't answered your phone in two days?"

"Listen," I say, "things were awkward. You seemed angry that I stopped at the house. You have things to do. I understand. If you don't have time to see me, it's really okay, Richard. You don't owe me a damn thing."

"Why would you say that? I don't know why you would say that. I just had things to do. You know I had to work."

"Listen," I say. "I did return your call on Sunday, but you already know that. Unfortunately, when you thought you silenced the phone, you actually answered it, and I heard your entire conversation."

I can almost feel the wheels turning in his head.

"What did you hear?"

"Everything" I say, feeling the jilted woman, a ridiculous, but true, emotion. "I heard everything about Saturday night. How you weren't working and attended the 'christening' only to have gotten arrested."

"Yes, that's true," he says.

"Well, what kind of a 'christening' party lasts into the night and has drunk people starting fights resulting in the arrival of the police? You must think I'm a fool," I say. "I'm glad you were arrested."

"I don't have to explain myself to you," he says.

"No you don't," I say, "but I would have appreciated a little honesty."

More silence.

"Hey, I'm not angry that you went out" I say, "I'm angry that you lied to me about it. Besides, you're not the only one having a little fun."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I went for a walk on the beach and met the nicest fellow," I say.

"Yeah?"

My mind scrambles for a story before landing on a line from a book of short stories I'm reading by Joan Silber. "Yes. He walked right up to me and said, 'I think I have found the most precious American flower.' Well, naturally I just had to talk to him."

“Who’s this guy? Where’s he from?”

I follow the book. “St. Malta,” I say. “I think that’s in France, but I’m really not sure.”

“So you’ve already stepped in it,” he says.

“I think I have. A couple of times.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I’ve also met Steven, a painter. He’s asked me to dinner, too. I guess that’s what I get for taking a walk on the beach without a bra.”

“What?”

“Well, I guess I must be still perky, if you get my meaning.”

“Oh, I get your meaning.”

“Marcus cooked for me.”

“So that’s his name. And what’s the other one? Oh, yeah, Steven. I get it,” he says. “Did you sleep with him?”

If phones still had phone cords, I’d be twirling it around my fingers, coiling it the way I’m coiling Richard. “Oh, no, Richard. No one that young is ever going to see me nude.”

“What?”

“I’d say he’s in his early thirties. No way is a man that young the one for me.”

“You did it, didn’t you.” It was more of a statement than a question.

I’d turned the tables in my favor, love twisting him up even though my story is fiction, tit-for-tat. “I promise you,” I say, “no one but my husband has seen me without clothes in twenty-five years.”

I bathe in my triumph. He has nothing to say.

“Well, I just don’t care.”

“You must care because you’re asking too many questions not to care.”

Now, this really made an impact, and he said, “Tori, you are a grown woman and if you want to be with someone, you will. As long as you’re having fun, I’m glad.”

“Well, I’m glad that you’re glad,” I say. “That *is* what’s important in life, having fun.”

The wind had picked up outside, and I carry the phone with me onto the deck to watch the surf break against the beach. We stay this way a long while, him breathing into the phone, me surfing the waves into that beautiful horizon darkening before my very eyes. A storm advances; the view softens in the wall of rain.

“Is the surf rough? I can hear it,” he says.

“You could have been here instead of getting arrested.”

“I wasn’t arrested. I was placed in protective custody.”

“So you pissed someone off, did you? Imagine that. Richard, were you fighting over a woman, or what?”

“Carmella had already left before I got there.”

Carmella was the ex-girlfriend. I soak this in, not quite jealous, but more like angry that he blew me off after I’d come all that way. “That didn’t stop you from causing a fight over her,” I say. He’s still a rough and raw man, and for some reason, this makes him more attractive to me.

“Oh my God. You are maddening.”

“Yes, I am,” I say.

“Well, I’m coming down on Thursday. And you’d better tell Marcus and Steven to shove off.”

“Well, come on down then,” I say, unsure of whether I’ll let him come or not. For the moment, I’m enjoying the game. Richard never wants anything unless he thinks he can’t have it, but I know just how to work him to make him feel special, make him feel like he’s worked hard.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” he says. “Will you answer?”

“I’ll be here,” I say.

Wednesday comes, and I wake to the sound of gulls and surf, a sweet warm symphony of dreamy sound. Sunlight beams through the crack between the shade and glass, the window beside the bed, and I bathe in a brilliant spray of light that warms my face. I twist in the sheets; my skin, a crunchy, burnt mass threatening to slough. I make a mental note to lather up with some Gold Bond after my shower, but first, I need coffee.

I open my eyes and remember the night before, let it creep into my mind like mist over calm seas. Richard thinks a lot of himself; this is obvious. Why do I want to go there with him?

I dial my husband. My daughter has flown the coop, the typical loose cannon. My hopes had been that she'd step in when I stepped out, but it isn't going well. My husband bucked up under the circumstance and took some time off from work.

"We'll lose our jobs if we keep depending on her," I say.

"I know that's what it's coming to."

"The bus has already left the station," I say. "It's long past time to give her the ultimatum, and you know it. I won't do it anymore. Not even for her. I just won't. Craig. If you don't make her leave, I'm not going to stay." There, I said it. "I don't think there is any other way."

"I know that. I can feel that. I need more time, Tori. Give me until the fall, until you start teaching."

"She'll leave the kids with us if she goes," I say.

"That's for the best," he says.

"How will we pull it off?"

"Daycare," he says.

"And when they're sick? What then?"

"It's my turn to do it."

I don't fully believe him, but there is some hope. He's always traveled with work; the luxury of a home office, a new development. Craig has resigned himself to a life of sacrifice. Craig has given himself over to our daughter's will, and I had pushed him to go there.

"Do it," I say, a desperate and selfish thing to say. "Make her go. I think that's the only way to make her realize what she is losing."

"You'll give me until fall?"

I breathe into the phone. Two more months is little to give after twenty-five years, but I'm afraid not to tow the hard line. "I won't promise any more than I'll think about it," I say. "I need to see some progress, some change, before I get back. She doesn't respect me anymore, Craig. I say "no" you say "maybe," and maybe always wins. It has to come from you this time."

"Agreed," he says.

He sounds so happy and relieved that it makes me tear. I can imagine him sitting there, chin set and his chest puffed, earnestly ready to do what needs to be done. This man loves me unlike anything I've ever

known. He's promised to help me to get Tess in line, and we will go on with our lives as if nothing like this had ever happened. But deep in my core, I know things are not that easy, and I cry again for the loss of the way things should have been. I miss him, the way we were before this. I miss the grandkids. I want my life back the way it's supposed to be: me and Craig and weekend visits with the grandchildren. I want Tess back, for her to be a mother to her children, and in the next moment, I want to strangle her. We are a mess. I am a mess. I've always been a mess.

A storm blows into the bay and brings thunder, lightning, and some soaking rain. It looks worse on radar than it actually is, but in the midst of running to close the windows and doors and stripping the linens on the bed that had gotten damp, my cell rings. When I have the situation under control, I check my missed calls, and sure enough, it was Richard. I sit in the darkened space watching the remnants of the storm through the sliding glass door; the birds return from wherever they go during bad weather. I hear emergency vehicles in the distance. I hope nothing is serious. I decide to wait and see if he calls back.

At eight thirty, he does just that. He asks about the weather, and if I was worried through it. He's calm and controlled; none of the Richard I'd argued with is left in him. The storm left a sky filled with purples and pinks, and as the clouds clear and the fog lifts, the most glorious calm fills me. Richard wants every detail, seems nervous and sweet. He has me on speaker and his ninety-six year old neighbor, Al, flirts with me. Before the call ends, I weakly agree he should drive down Thursday afternoon.

It's late, but I can't sleep. I turn on the television, my cottage one of the only ones equipped with cable, and watch one of those haunted places shows. It's creepy—about girls in old schools terrorized by spirits roaming the halls. I flip the television off and stare out into the dark, imagining a dark shadow through the screen door, then the closet, then the bathroom door. Something creaks in the wind.

Someone wears a head-lamp and scours the beach, pawing through the dunes at the edge of my rental. I lie still; worry that if I move, the figure will know I've seen him. It is a man, about the same size as Tom. Is that where Tom keeps his weed? I turn on the light, determined to scare the man away from the back of my cottage. I watch him skitter before I close the slider, turn the lock and pull the curtain.

Closed in the little space, I begin to examine every physical flaw, my peeling face in the mirror, the end of my nose almost bleeding. I convince myself that tops with extra material in the front will help hide my pooch-belly. From a side view, cellulite creeps under my buttocks and my arms flab next to saggy

breasts. *Dear God, what am I doing? I'm a fifty-six year old woman trying to be single and thirty.* I doubt if Richard's stressing like this, and I don't know why I suddenly care so much what Richard thinks. I want to call it off but know it's too late. I decide to get tipsy before he arrives—take the edge off. I tell myself that I'd made no promises, that he can be turned away just as easily as the fictitious Marcus.

Richard arrives late Thursday afternoon. The music blares—Adele—and I'm out by the water watching a lone seal bobbing in the calm bay. Someone once told me that seals in the bay means that sharks are close behind.

I feel him on the beach, a shadow behind me. I turn and force a smile, wave before heading up to the cottage. He stands on the deck, bowed-legs locked and reeling from toe to heel as he takes me in. He's grinning, dimples and sharp chin melting my reservations. A beer, popped and cold, already in his hand, he pulls long and hard before jumping from the deck. His socks and shoes are already a memory. I slowly advance; awkward trunk legs plunging through the sugar-sand; it's far too late to turn back now.

Out of breath and heart pounding, I'm the one who holds him at a distance this time. I turn my head and allow a peck on my cheek, smile when he searches my eyes for meaning.

“How was the drive down?”

“Long,” he says. “I just hope it was worth the effort.”

“And what's that supposed to mean?”

“Ah, nothing.” He takes another long pull from his beer.

I follow his eyes. A young girl plays with her brother at the edge of the surf. She's around twelve years old, all brown skinny legs and teeth. She jumps when her brother splashes, and Richard chuckles. “So, where's Marcus and Steven?” Richard asks.

I've lost my center and I'm feeling foolish. “Gone,” I whisper. All things are a lie.

“Better be gone,” he says, bravado spilling from his jutting chest like some cartoon character. His eyes move from top to bottom; the girl, oblivious to him watching her bends and picks up a white shell.

“Why do they do that?” Richard asks.

“What?”

“Collect the shells.” He’s smiling, eyes riveted on the child, and I swear he is shaking. He licks his lips and takes a long drink from his can, holds it on his tongue before swallowing. “She’s so small,” he says.

I study him, hungry eyes devouring the young girl, and I instantly know everything I need to know about Richard, what was real about us then, when I was fourteen, and I feel like a tunnel has opened beneath me, sucking me into a sickening pit. He gloats, openly leering at the child in front of me, and I desperately want to go back to a thought, a what-if. I think of his daughter, his sister— my childhood friend—and I am determined to protect this child, call him out for what I know that he is.

“What are you looking at?” I say. My voice is loud.

He starts with the sharpness in my voice, but is reluctant to drag his eyes from the girl.

My heart beats loud in my ears. “I want to know what you find so very interesting there,” I say.

Our eyes meet, and I am sure that he’s aware that I know his secret. I am certain that I understand what I was to him thirty years ago, and I feel conditioned and defiled all over again, like a naïve, hairless, rail-legged fourteen year old. The last mystery in my troubled life is known to me, and I’m in awe that it took these thirty years before I got it. Every guy that I dated before twenty was probably a pedophile.

“I think you’ve become accustomed to being around stupid women,” I say, disgusted that I’m to be included in this group.

His face opens, surprised. I walk away, certain that he’ll run and anxious to make him another bad memory.

Instead, Richard dismisses me by showering in the rental, and I cannot imagine being in the cottage as he does this. I spend the time drowning my fevered thoughts in alcohol. I walk circles around the cottage; his car, a faded, black ’97 Corolla has a space-saver tire on the rear right side. Inside, between the front and back seats, empty Miller Light cans are openly displayed for any passer-by. He is drunk, and so am I, but I am not afraid. I decide to let him continue drinking and make him leave in the morning.

Dinner is non-existent. He can’t drive, and thanks to my sudden binge, I can’t either. He passes out sprawled on top of a picnic table on Tom and Marcy’s lot, between the cottage and ocean. I leave him there. He stumbles in and lands in a heap on the futon around five in the morning.

*

Richard sleeps until eleven. I'm on the beach with Tom and Marcy when he comes weaving out of the sliding glass door. Tom passes me a joint on the sly, and I take it. "You going to be okay?" He asks. He's looking Richard over, shakes his head.

"I really don't know," I say.

"Just stay here for a minute," he says. "Let him take a swim and shake it off."

Marcy places a protective hand on my arm, and we watch Richard slide toward the surf, crack sneaking out from his unbuttoned trousers like an ancient, hairy spider slipping out from a thirty year hiding hole. Richard drops his pants; dives in. I hide my red face in my hands, and reluctantly, I move to intervene, to stop the embarrassing display. Marcy pets my arm, keeps me there.

"You can't stay in there with him," she says. "He isn't who you remember him to be. Can you see that now?"

I'm thinking that young Tori had somehow infiltrated Tess, rubbed off on her in this destructive way. Or perhaps it's old and confused Tori. Either way, a therapist would delight in our dysfunctional dilemma. It's all up to me to heal this painful sore, to set the example, to demonstrate what it is to be a mature and thoughtful woman and know what the word "courage" describes. But Tom beats me to it.

"I've got this," he says.

Tom stands, all six feet five of him, and our eyes lock. I look away before he walks down the beach, giving him permission to take the lead. He corners Richard in the surf, now throat-deep to Tom's shoulder in the water. Richard's head snaps in my direction before Tom hauls him out by the arm, and I know that Richard's figured me out now, too. Richard, looking like a scolded teenager, takes it when Tom stuffs his pants roughly into his gut. I marvel about the kindness of these strangers, and I hide my shame behind dark sunglasses.

*

Alone, I'm locked in my cottage as the sun sets over the bay. My phone rings. It's Richard, and I don't answer. He slurs, says something intelligible that he thinks passes as a message. The only clear word sounds like "cunt".

Throughout the rest of the night, I think intensely about home, the security found in the chaos I live there. I allow my mind to turn to Craig, the realization that he's my rock, the only man that is real, the only man that has ever truly loved me.

The truth is that my husband has always been kind to a fault. He gives a person rope, lots of room to reveal who and what they are about, and he'd given that rope to me this time.

As I hurdle toward home, I pray for the first time in the long and angry years since Tess' failed marriage, before she fell off the end of the world. I'm praying that it's not too late for us; I'm hoping that I'm strong enough to get all of us to the other side of this suffering. I yearn for Craig. I yearn for Tess and the boys. I yearn for home.