

KELLI DEETH

Ari

IT WAS AS IF THEY HAD FOUND themselves on another planet. The sky was brighter, the sun humming. Voices carried, words lost their shape. Peter carried the picnic basket and Jana carried the orange blanket. She held it against her chest and squinted out at the Pacific, her hand on the blue-and-white sun hat Peter had bought for her; far out on the water, sailboats glided, dipped. It had been Jana's idea to come to the ocean—she wanted to get away from something by going toward something.

They spread out the blanket—it billowed up—then laid it flat on the sand. They both sat and stared as the water tucked itself into the shore. The beach was full of families, but the shore was so vast, it wasn't crowded. Children ran back and forth to the water, their feet kicking up sand behind them. Some dug tunnels or packed towers; others shivered in drooping towels. The sky hung over everyone, a softer yet somehow hurtful, brighter blue; its purity, intense. Under the rim of her hat, Jana felt pleasantly removed, disguised, the stranger she was. She unbuckled her sandals, pulled the sunscreen from her knapsack. Peter took off his shirt, balled it up into a pillow, then lay back with his arms behind his head.

"Everything okay?" he said.

She unbuttoned her blouse to reveal a black bikini top; "Yup," she said, then she slipped off her shorts. It felt good to expose her skin to the sun; she felt like something crawling out of a cave.

He turned and smiled up at her, his hand over his eyes. Then he reached over and hooked his finger into the bottom bikini tie. "I like this," he said. "All I have to do is pull."

"I know," she said. She had bought the bikini for that very reason, when she had been feeling hopeful, as she had been these last few weeks. Some greyness was lifting. Jana had told Peter that she wanted to go to the ocean, and that she might, after all, want to try again to have a child.

She squeezed sunscreen into her hand. She started on her shoulders. It was strange to touch herself in this gentle, slow way. She didn't like do-

ing her face. For some reason, it reminded her of her mother, smoothing moisturizer onto Jana's cheeks when Jana was small. She did her belly.

"I'm ready to have my back done," she said, and she rested the sun-screen bottle on his stomach. He sat up, squirted the lotion into his hand, and rubbed it into her back, missing nothing. The strength of his hand caused her to move forward slightly.

When he was finished, she lay back with her knees up. Peter leaned back on his elbows, and he looked out at the water.

She closed her eyes. Children's voices reached her, but unevenly, scattered, riding the wind currents. They sounded dimly like goats bleating.

Peter's sister, Patricia, had a daughter, Ari, and the other night, when they had visited Patricia, Ari called Peter Mr. Bean, and he watched a movie with her, and asked her questions about what was happening, as if he didn't understand. Ari seemed wary of Jana, and Jana was just as wary of her.

"You're sure you're okay?" Peter said.

"Me?" she said. "I was just so tired suddenly."

"You can tell me," Peter said.

"I know," she said, and she opened her eyes. It always felt deceitful to speak with her eyes closed.

He peered at her, as if to emphasize his declaration, and she allowed her eyes to close and her head to flop in the opposite direction, as if she couldn't stay awake.

Then he said, "You need to take care of your feet."

He leaned forward, put his hand on her left ankle. "I want you to get a pedicure. You know you deserve that?"

"Yup."

For a while, he didn't say anything.

"I love the ocean," she said. "I could never not live near it."

"That's what I love about you," Peter said, and she liked the words so much, she did not ask him what he meant.

The waves slapped and hissed against the shore—the wind was picking up. One of her relaxation techniques was to imagine a long, white, riffing wave pouring over her body, receding, pouring over her body, receding again. Usually, she would fall into a deep sleep on her living-room floor. When she woke up, the anxiety increased as the hours passed. She was helpless, Peter was helpless, everyone was helpless, but no one else seemed bothered.

He turned to her, staring at her carefully, closely; the look was an examination, an investigation; she smiled at him, and he turned to the water.



Later, they ate the lunch that Peter had packed the night before; he had fixed them roast beef sandwiches with mustard and mayonnaise; there were peaches and chocolate for dessert. Peter liked to take care of her, and she did her best to take care of him. She had taken the bus downtown yesterday and bought them a blanket; she had wanted to contribute something to the picnic, to show Peter that she really was feeling better, and that she was going to continue to feel better.

“I want to get you out on a boat,” he said. “I think you’d like it once you were out there.”

“I’m sure I would,” she said. She cupped her hands over her eyes. The small sailboats dipped forward into the wind, yet resisted it at the same time.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of,” he said.

She hesitated, then she said what she always said, “I know there isn’t.”

“You’re afraid of everything,” Peter said.

“I just told you I knew there was nothing to be afraid of.”

“We could go today,” he said.

She paused, then said, “But I don’t know how.”

“There’s only one way to learn.”

“I should take a lesson or something.”

“What are you afraid of?” Peter said. “Drowning?”

“I’m not afraid of that,” Jana said.

“Then what?”

“I told you I’m not afraid.”

“How about next weekend, then?”

“Fine,” Jana said.

“We’ll need to get you the proper shoes.”

“We will.”

Then he said, “This guy I worked with once, his whole family lived on a boat. His daughter had never lived in a house, that she could remember anyway. I thought that was really cool.”

“It is,” Jana said.

“I think I’d like to have a girl,” Peter said. “I could teach her how to do things. How to sail. Hike. I was thinking it would be fun to go on a big camping trip up north. You could teach a kid a lot up there.”

“Yup,” Jana said.

“Don’t you think so?”

“I said yes.”

“All I know is that you need to snap out of it.”

“I’m trying,” she said.

He didn’t say anything. He just shook his head.

The other night, after Peter and Ari finished the movie, Peter and Jana and Patricia had sat out on her porch, the monkey puzzles stretching up, the cicadas penetrating Jana’s skin. Ari had been swinging on the swing set, causing it to jiggle, as if it would come out of the ground, and her mother kept warning her. Ari had an intensity about her that Jana was envious of—she stared ahead as she swung, then she finally, without any warning at all, when the swing was high in the air, jumped off, landing steadily on her feet; she looked angry at something. She asked her mother if she could watch another movie, and her mother said no, and then Ari had gone and stood beside Peter and pet the hair on his arm; then she had hugged him and said she wanted to live with him and her mother told her to go inside. She had to pry Ari’s arms from around his neck. She had gone inside and stood on the other side of the screen and peered out with curiosity and contempt—then she had stuck her tongue out at Jana. Peter had seen, but said nothing, and then Ari had disappeared in the house; everyone was careful with her because before she was old enough to realize, her father had passed away.

On the drive home from seeing his sister—they had been crossing Burrard Street Bridge, the windows rolled down—Peter had said that he felt something missing between him and Jana; he said he felt lonely. It was always just the two of them, and they never did anything special because there was no reason to. They were going to die alone, he said, and Jana put her face to the wind coming in the car off the water.

A group of children had gathered at the shore in front of them to dig a tunnel.

Everything—the water, the sky, the air—was an even more radiant blue, holding light.

“I just think you’re being ridiculous,” he said.

“What’s ridiculous about me?”

Peter tilted his head, as if he had to think about it.

“You give me all this bullshit about how much you love me, but it’s all about you.”

Jana didn’t want to talk anymore.

He lay back, and he put his arm over his face.

“I told you I wanted to try again anyway.”

“I feel like I’m forcing you.”

“You’re not forcing me,” Jana said. “I want it for my own sake.”

Peter lay stiffly, then he said, into his arm, “We’ll see about that.”

After a minute of quiet in the sun, he said, “I just wish I knew what was happening to you.”

“I wish I did, too.”

“I don’t know how long I can put up with it.”

“No one’s asking you to put up with it,” Jana said. “I’d be fine on my own.”

“The other night, you really embarrassed me.”

“I’m sorry I embarrassed you.”

“You don’t even try. She can sense you don’t want to have anything to do with her.”

“She doesn’t want to have anything to do with me.”

“She likes you.”

“She stuck her tongue out at me.”

“Yeah, she can be a weird kid.”

“She’s jealous because we’re together.”

“That’s crazy,” Peter said. He sat up, and he stared out at the water. Then he took Jana’s hand and kissed it.

“We’ll get through this.”

“I know I don’t want you to leave me.” He had a day’s growth. Wherever they went, women were drawn to him; something leapt into their eyes; Jana could see them in Peter’s arms with full bellies—smiling bravely, with no knowledge of their imminent obliteration; Peter had fallen for what was inside her in the way he had fallen for her; the child became, the instant he knew of it, his reason for living. Then it had died in darkness. Peter had cried himself to sleep for a week—it was a grief she had not known he was capable of, a grief that made her weary, lying next to him. All of it—Peter, the evacuation of the child—caused Jana to feel like a tree that had been picked up by the wind and blown to a desolate place.

Those women also didn’t know how Peter said that if something happened to Jana, he would die, too. They didn’t know how he could sit for days in front of the television, and that he would spend the last of their money on a case of wine and hardcovers. He had always said that Jana had saved him, and she always told him that he had saved her—what had they saved each other from?

She didn’t say anything more, so he wouldn’t, and he didn’t. Jana watched the water; the light was hitting it so that it looked like millions of silver fishes had come to the surface, to have their backs warmed.

“I’ll never leave you,” Peter said. “That I know for sure.” He grabbed her knee and held it.

“I’m getting chilly,” Jana said.

He took his balled up shirt and shook it out and gave it to Jana.

“You’re not cold?”

“You’re more important,” he said.

“Why am I, though?” She pulled the shirt over her head, breathing in the sweet, rancid scent of his underarms.

He said, “Because that’s the kind of man I am. I think of you first.”



In the car, she held her sun hat in her lap. She had worn it all day, but the sun and wind had still intoxicated her. She had sand in her toes. It made her feel that she had really been at the beach all day, that she had done something a woman her age was supposed to do. She had soaked up a fine day, and the sand on her feet was evidence.

Peter had sailed since he was a child; for their first date, they had met for a beer on a cold, dry night (rare for Vancouver), and when he told her he sailed, she had decided that he was the man she wanted. Maybe it made him seem stronger and more masculine than she had initially thought he was, someone who might leave her, someone she would have to try to hold onto. He was tall and thin, and he had a way of dipping forward, of choosing his words very carefully, of speaking very gently. The sailing, the adventurousness it implied, frightened her, and being frightened of being left alone was her definition of love.

At the end of the night at his sister’s, Jana had been relieved to be finally in the car, the engine running. The good-byes had gone on too long, and it was Peter who had kept pursuing new lines of conversation—offering to check Patricia’s roof, the basement for mold, suggesting outings with Ari. Even Patricia had struck Jana as exhausted, her arms crossed, her orange fleece pullover fading her. She had finally said, “Goodnight, guys,” and moved towards the door behind them, opening it out onto the much colder evening.

But then just before Peter and Jana turned, Ari, who was taking gymnastics, said, “I have something to show Uncle Peter.” She had straightened her spine, pushed back her shoulders, then worked herself into the splits. As she did them, she looked down at her front leg, her blond hair falling in her eyes, and Jana had felt almost physical pain for Ari’s longing for Peter, her need for his attention, to have it wrapped around her. Her small, pale body had trembled—with fear? excitement? strain?—under his watch. When she had finished to applause, crossing her legs and holding her ribs tightly, she had looked up and away, grinning crookedly and dazedly at the ceiling, in

some kind of ecstasy. It had made Jana scared for Ari, scared for herself.

Jana squeezed the sun hat in her lap. The windows were rolled down, but she could no longer smell the ocean in the wind.

“I just don’t know what I would do without you,” Peter said.

“I know,” Jana said.

As they drove, Jana made a list of all the things she might buy for the child’s room. She imagined red and yellow and blue paint, a dresser with three drawers, pictures of sheep and horses on the wall, blankets and small, soft clothes.

“I’ve got some ideas for the room,” Peter said.

“I think plants would be nice,” she said. She saw a big fern hanging in the window.

“Yeah,” he said, and Jana tried to see the fern, the brightness of the green. She would buy it tomorrow.

“Whatever it is,” Peter said. “You’re going to have to try to get over it.”

“I want to get over it,” Jana said, and she looked up and ahead. They were on the highway now. The white lines flashed briefly before disappearing beneath the car. There was a rhythm almost, seen, and then not seen, seen again.

She could hardly keep her eyes open. She had the sensation, as she had since the miscarriage, that she was outside her own skin, that it was somehow necessary to be; and yet this condition filled her with the exquisite, almost excruciating sensation of being tapped all over—continuously.

Every morning, she reached for Peter’s body. The solidity of it, his voice breaking the air. It did save her.

Often, in the middle of the night, he woke Jana by reaching for her, holding her as if she was the spar he’d been tossed.