

Body Surfing

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Extract

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Three o'clock, the dead hour. The faint irritation of sand grit between bare foot and floorboards. Wet towels hanging from bedposts and porch railings. A door, caught in a gust, slams, and someone near it emits the expected cry of surprise. A southwest wind, not the norm even in August, sends stifling air into the many rooms of the old summerhouse. The hope is for an east wind off the water, and periodically someone says it.

An east wind now would be a godsend.

The energy of the morning has dissipated itself in fast walks and private lessons, in vigorous reading and lazy tennis. Even in a brief expedition to a showroom in Portsmouth to look at Audi Quattros. Mrs. Edwards, Sydney has been told, will need a new car in the fall.

There are guests in the house who must be attended to. One hopes for visitors with initiative, like a refreshing east wind. They are not Sydney's concern. Her afternoons are free. Her entire life, but for a few hours each day of overpaid tutoring, is disconcertingly free.

She changes into a black tank suit, the elastic sprung in the legs. She is twenty-nine and fit enough. Her hair is no color she has ever been able to describe. She is not a blonde or a brunette, but something in between that washes out in January, comes to life in August. Gold highlights on translucence.

* * *

Sydney has been married twice: once divorced and once widowed. Others, hearing this information for the first time, find it surprising, as if this fact might be the most interesting thing about her.

On the porch, red geraniums are artfully arranged against the lime-green of the dune grass, the blue of the water. Not quite primary colors, hues seen only in nature.

Knife blades of grass pierce the wooden slats of the boardwalk. Sweet pea overtakes the thatch. Unwanted fists of thistle push upward from the sand. On the small deck at the end of the boardwalk are two white Adirondack chairs, difficult to get out of, and a faded umbrella lying behind them. Two rusted and immensely heavy iron bases for the umbrella sit in a corner, neither of which, Sydney guesses, will ever leave the deck.

Wooden steps with no railing lead to a crescent-shaped beach to the left, a rocky coastline to the right. Sydney runs across the hot sand to the edge of the water. The surf is a series of sinuous rolls, and when she closes her eyes, she can hear the spray. She prepares herself for the cold. Better than electroshock therapy, Mr. Edwards always says, for clearing the head.

A seizure of frigid water, a roiling of white bubbles. The sting of salt in the sinuses as she surfaces. She stands and stumbles and stands again and shakes herself like a dog. She hugs her hands to her chest and relaxes only when her feet begin to numb. She dives once more, and when she comes up for air she turns onto her back, letting the waves, stronger and taller than they appear from shore, carry her up and over the crest and down again into the trough. She is buoyant flotsam, shocked into sensibility.

* * *

She body surfs in the ocean, getting sand down the neckline of her suit. As a child, when she took off her bathing suit, she would find handfuls of sand in the crotch. She lowers herself into the ocean to wash away the mottled clumps against her stomach, but then she sees a good wave coming. She stands and turns her back to it and springs onto the crest. The trick always is to catch the crest. Hands pointed, eyes shut, she is a bullet through the white surge. She scrapes her naked hip and thigh against the bottom.

She crawls onto the sand, the undertow carving hollows beneath her shins. A wave she hasn't braced for hits her back and neck. She wipes the tangle of hair from her face, the water from her eyes. She sees a shape on the beach that wasn't there before. A tanned chest, a splotch of red. A man in bathing trunks is holding a pink cloth, wide and lurid, before her.

'I've been sent with a towel. You're Sydney, right?'

How extraordinary if she weren't. Not another body in the water for a thousand yards.



Inside the house, the furniture is white, a good idea in theory, not in practice. The slipcovers on the two sofas are marked with faint smudges and worried stains, navy lint from a woolen sweater. Fine grains of sand have repeatedly scratched the surface of the maple floor as if it had been lightly scoured.

On the stairs down to the basement sits a basket of old newspapers, a wicker catchall for objects that are not part of the neutral decor but might prove useful. A sparkling purple leash.

A neon pink pad of Post-it Notes. A Day-Glo orange life vest. Practicality and sports rife with unnatural color.

Although Mrs. Edwards gives the impression of having inhabited the cottage for decades, perhaps even generations (already there are family rituals, oft-repeated memories, old canning jars full of sea glass used as doorstops), they have owned the house only since 1997. Before then, Mr. Edwards confided, they simply rented other cottages nearby. In contrast to his wife, he seems a man incapable of deceit.

Sydney shares a bathroom with the guests, a couple from New York who have come in search of antiques. In the mornings, there are aqua spills of toothpaste in the sink, pink spots of makeup on the mirror. Used tissues are tucked behind the spigots. Sydney routinely washes out the sink with a hand towel before she uses it. She stuffs the towel into the hamper in the hallway on her way back to her room.

It was obvious immediately to Sydney that the Edwardses' eighteen-year-old daughter, Julie, was slow, that no amount of tutoring would adequately prepare her for the stellar senior year of high school Mrs. Edwards hopes for, a year that is almost certain, in Sydney's opinion, to defeat the girl. Mrs. Edwards speaks knowledgeably of Mount Holyoke and Swarthmore. Skidmore as a safety. Sydney can only blink with wonder. Julie is pliant, eager to please, and extraordinarily beautiful, her skin clear and pink, her eyes a sea-glass blue. Sydney can see that the girl, who seems willing to study all the hours of the day, will disappoint her mother and break her father's heart, the latter not because she won't get into the colleges Mrs. Edwards seems so knowledgeable about, but because she will try so hard and fail.

Salt encrusts the windows of the house on the diagonal, as if water had been thrown against the glass. The windows out to the porch have to be washed twice a week to provide any appreciation of the view, which is spectacular.

Sydney sometimes senses that her presence has upset the family equilibrium. She tries to be available when needed, present but silent when not.

The brothers will sleep in a room called the 'boys' dorm.' Julie has a room on the ocean side of the house. Mr. and Mrs. Edwards's bedroom looks out over the marshes. The guests, like Sydney, have been relegated to a room with twin beds.

Mr. and Mrs. Edwards have invited Sydney to call them by their first names. When she tries to say *Anna* or *Mark*, however, the words stick in her throat. She finds other ways to refer to the couple, such as *your husband* and *he* and *your dad*.

Sydney's first husband was an air racer. He flew through trees at 250 miles an hour and performed aerobatic stunts over a one-mile course. If he were to graze a gate or become momentarily disoriented by the Gs, he would hurtle to the ground and crash. When she could, Sydney went with Andrew to these races — to Scotland and Vienna and San Francisco — and watched him twist his plane in the air at 420 degrees per second. At air shows, Andrew was a star and signed autographs. He wore fireproof clothing and a crash helmet and was equipped with a parachute — not that a parachute would have been at all helpful thirty feet off the ground. For a year, Sydney found the air races exotic and thrilling. During the second year, she began to be afraid. Contemplating a third year and the possibility of a child, she pictured Andrew's fiery death and said, *Enough*. Her aviator, who seemed genuinely sad to see

the marriage end, could not, however, be expected to give up flying.

Sydney met her second husband when she was twenty-six. Her right front tire blew on the Massachusetts Turnpike, and she pulled to the side of the road. A minute later, her Honda Civic was hit from behind. Because she had been standing at the front of the car and looking down at the tire, she was hit and briefly dragged along the pavement. Daniel Feldman, who had to cut the clothes off her body in the emergency room of Newton-Wellesley Hospital, chided her for pulling to a stop on a bridge. A week later, he took her to Biba in Boston.

Eight months into their marriage, and during his residency at Beth Israel, Daniel suffered a burst aneurysm in his brain. Receiving the news by telephone, Sydney was stunned, bewildered, wide-eyed with shock.

Most people, mindful of the sensitivities, do not point out to Sydney the irony of having divorced a man she was afraid would die only to marry a man who perished in the very place he ought to have been saved. But she can tell that Mr. Edwards is eager to discuss the situation. Despite his kindness and his affability, he cannot help but flirt with the details.

‘Is the aviator still flying?’ he asks one night as they are washing dishes. ‘Did you say your husband interned at the B.I.?’

Mrs. Edwards, by contrast, is not afraid of the blunt question.

‘Are you Jewish?’ she asked as she was showing Sydney to her room.

It wasn’t clear to Sydney which answer Mrs. Edwards would have preferred: Jewish being more interesting; not Jewish being more acceptable.

* * *

The doctor was Jewish. The aviator was not.

Sydney is both, having a Jewish father and his cheekbones but a Unitarian mother, from whom she has inherited her blue eyes. Even Sydney's hair seems equal parts father and mother — the wayward curl, the nearly colorless blond. Sydney became Bat Mitzvah before her parents separated but then was strenuously raised to be a WASP during her teenage years. She thinks of both phases of her life as episodes of childhood having little to do with the world as she now encounters it, neither religion at all helpful during the divorce and death.

Not unlike a parachute at thirty feet.

For a week last summer, Sydney went to stay with Daniel's parents in Truro. The experiment was a noble one. Mrs. Feldman, whom she had briefly called *Mom*, had had the idea that Sydney's presence would be comforting. In fact the opposite was true, the sight of Sydney sending Mrs. Feldman into contagious fits of weeping.

For days following Daniel's death, Sydney's own mother refused to believe in the simple fact of the event, causing Sydney to have to say, over and over again, that Daniel had died of a brain aneurysm.

'But how?' her mother repeatedly asked.

Sydney's father came up from New York by train for the funeral. He wore a taupe trench coat, put on a yarmulke for the service, and, astonishingly, he wept. Afterwards, at dinner, he tried to reassure her.

'I think of you as resilient,' he said over steak and baked potato.

* * *

The double blow of the divorce and death left Sydney in a state of emotional paralysis, during which she was unable to finish her thesis in developmental psychology and had to withdraw from her graduate program at Brandeis. Since then, she has taken odd jobs created by friends and family, jobs for which she has been almost ludicrously overqualified or completely out of her depth: a secretary in the microbiology department at Harvard Medical School (overqualified); a dealer's assistant at an art gallery on Newbury Street (out of her depth). She has been grateful for these jobs, for the opportunity to drift and heal, but recently she has begun to wonder if this strange and unproductive period of her life might be coming to an end.

'You must be the tutor.'

'And you are?'

'Ben. That's Jeff on the porch.'

'Thank you for the towel.'

'You're quite the body surfer.'

Sydney discovers that she minds the loss of her mourning. When she grieved, she felt herself to be intimately connected to Daniel. But with each passing day, he floats away from her. When she thinks about him now, it is more as a lost possibility than as a man. She has forgotten his breath, his musculature.

'So you answered the ad?'

'I did.'

Sydney wraps herself in the bubble-gum-pink towel. In the distance, she can see another man rising from a chair on the porch. He puts his hands on the railing.

'Are you a teacher?'

‘No. I’m not much of anything at the moment.’

‘Really.’

Sydney cannot read the *really*. Dismissive? Disappointed? Intrigued?

Sydney has an impression of lighter hair, a slighter body. The man who is Jeff shuffles down the first set of stairs from the porch to the boardwalk, and, for a few seconds, he is out of sight. When he emerges onto the deck, she can see that he has on bathing trunks and a navy polo shirt.

Jeff waits for them at the head of the stairs. Sydney greets his feet first (in weathered boat shoes), his legs next (lightly tanned with golden hairs), and, finally, the faded bathing trunks (grayish with purple blotches; she guesses navy originally, an unfortunate wash with bleach). He steps back to make way for the two of them, and there’s an awkward introduction in a small space. Sydney’s nose begins to run with salt water. She shakes Jeff’s hand. Hers, she knows, must feel icy.

‘We’ve heard a lot about you,’ Jeff says.

Sydney is dismayed. She expected more.

Jeff’s face is loose and open, the green eyes guileless. Sydney thinks it is probably not possible to be his age and guileless, but there it is. The family dog, Tullus (short for Catullus?), trots down the boardwalk and plants himself directly below Jeff’s hands. This confirms her impression. Animals can always tell.

‘Hey,’ Jeff says, bending to the golden retriever and ruffling him affectionately.

Mr. and Mrs. Edwards and Julie come out onto the porch, a nucleus intact. Ben wraps his arms around Julie and rocks his sister from side to side. Six glasses of iced tea have been set upon

a teak table. Jeff picks up a glass and hands it to Sydney, smiling as he does so. She notices that he, like his brother and sister, has remarkably even teeth, and she imagines many thousands in orthodontia. Sydney, whose mother could barely remember to schedule regular checkups, has an imperfect smile, a slightly misaligned eyetooth its distinctive feature.

Ben has brown eyes like his mother. Jeff, Sydney can see, takes after his father.

Sydney leans against the railing and tugs the towel tighter. Her hair, she guesses, must be a horror of Gorgonlike dreads from the salt water.

Mrs. Edwards, who has previously seemed cold, is animated with her sons. On the porch, she is possessive, never still, touching them often, making it easy for them to touch her. She wants to be seen as the perfect mother. No, Sydney decides, she wants Sydney to understand that her sons love their mother best.

Sydney knows these facts about the brothers. Ben, who is thirty-five, works in corporate real estate in Boston. Jeff, thirty-one, is a professor of political science at MIT. Sydney half expects this information to be repeated on the porch, but Mrs. Edwards exercises unusual restraint in front of her sons.

Mrs. Edwards wears khaki culottes and a white polo shirt that reveals an intractable swell between her midriff and her waist. Sydney would advise tailored white shirts left untucked over longer pants — but it is not for her to say. Mr. Edwards dresses like a man who never thinks about his clothes: baggy khakis and even looser golf shirts that droop from his shoulders.

Sometimes he puts his hands flat against the stomach that hangs like an adjunct on his tall frame as he lightly bemoans the doughnut he had at breakfast or the piece of coconut pie he gave into at dinner. One senses, however, that he enjoyed these treats, that he is not a man to forgo a fleeting pleasure in favor of vanity. Unlike Mrs. Edwards, who counts her carbs religiously and seems to be hastening herself to an early death with the eggs and meats and cheeses she eats in quantity. Even the low-carb ice-cream bars she snacks on at night seem, with their slick, viscous shine, to be depositing cholesterol molecules directly into her bloodstream.

Mrs. Edwards wears her blond hair below her chin line and often pulls it back in a banana clip that ought to be pretty but instead accentuates the square shape of her head and the half inch of gray roots at the scalp. Sydney would advise a haircut in the same way she might mention the tailored white shirts, but then again, it is not within her job description.

Jeff leans against the porch railing a few feet from Sydney. His slighter frame and its concavities suggest exposure, whereas Ben's body, comfortably on display, seems fully covered.

There is talk about the backup at the Hampton tolls, idle joking about resorting to civil disobedience to get the state to adopt an E-ZPass system: of finding seven guys to drive into the toll-booths, park their cars, and walk away. Ben releases Julie and picks up a glass of iced tea. He drains it in one go, the ice cubes slamming against his upper lip. His engine operates at higher revolutions than his brother's: he seems anxious to be on the move. He laces his fingers behind his neck and flexes his elbows. He asks his father about his golf game.

'Worse and worser,' Mr. Edwards replies, though no one

believes the man. One expects self-deprecation from the gentle patriarch.

Mrs. Edwards is queried about the guests, who have gone off to Portsmouth in search of antiques. A fourth for golf is promised for the morning.

The brothers mention dinner. Sydney guesses lobster, steamers, triple-berry pie. This is the first visit Jeff and Ben have made to the cottage since she arrived in early July. It is, in fact, their first visit since mid-June, work and other commitments having kept them from the summerhouse — a situation that will soon be rectified, Ben promises. When they come next, it will be for a week. Mrs. Edwards's eyes focus and unfocus. One can see her planning dinners, counting linens.

Jeff laughs easily, but Sydney notices that he stands with his arms crossed over his chest. She wonders what he thinks about when he is not actively listening. Cost-benefit analyses of regime changes in Sudan? Complex algorithms involving terrorists and the relative price of oil?

Sydney can easily picture Ben at his job. In his shirtsleeves and tie, he would make a stolid, handsome presence, the dark eyes suggesting gravity, the smile a light touch. Perhaps he makes the same gestures at work as he does at home: lacing the fingers behind his neck, flexing the elbows.

The nucleus drinks its tea, clinking the ice cubes. The Stewarts and a couple named Morrison are mentioned. There is talk about a sail to Gloucester and back. Sydney has a sense of trying to put together an accurate history of the family with half the relevant sentences in the text blacked out, the accessible sentences referring to a chapter she hasn't yet read. A woman named Victoria

is coming Saturday. There are to be, Sydney gradually comes to understand, a number of people present for the weekend.

A strange couple approach the house from the beach and point. Perhaps they have walked from the public parking lot at the crescent's other end. Sydney knows precisely what they are saying. *Remember the Vision crash? The one in Ireland?*

Sydney wonders if Mr. and Mrs. Edwards mind the mild celebrity of having bought the house from the culpable pilot's widow. She wonders if they got it for a song.

Ben rubs his hands together. 'Have you had the grand tour?' he asks.

Sydney is confused. 'Of?'

'We'll leave the harbor, swing around the point. I'm told you haven't been on the boat yet.'

'No, I haven't.'

Ben addresses his sister, who is standing close to her father. 'Julie, want to come with us?'

But no one is surprised when the girl says *no*. It is a well-known fact that she is afraid of the water.

'Julie's going to help me with the roses,' Mr. Edwards says.

A sweatshirt and a fresh towel are produced. Sydney finds her sneakers by the back door. The two brothers and she climb up into Ben's Land Rover. Sydney sits in front. Jeff asks her questions, easy enough to answer.

'What were you studying at Brandeis?'

'The emotional and sexual development of adolescent girls.'

'Not a moment too soon,' Ben says and chuckles to himself.

Neither brother, surely briefed, mentions the aviator or the doctor.

* * *

Ben drives along a sandy road to the center of the beach community, too small to be called a village. There's a lobster pound and a general store. Carrying life preservers, the three make their way down a gravel drive to the end of a wooden pier. Jeff speaks to a young man in shorts and T-shirt who shakes his hand and smiles. Sydney, the brothers, and the young man ride in a small boat through the harbor. They are deposited at a Boston Whaler.

Once inside the Whaler, Sydney sits on a small bait box. Ben takes the wheel, while Jeff stands near Sydney, one hand on the console railing. There is a low-throated rumble of an engine and an instant breeze. She puts on the sweatshirt, which covers her tank suit but leaves her legs bare. She feels more naked than she did with just the suit on.

The Whaler fights the incoming tide, and for a time the boat seems to stand motionless in the water. Ben says they've timed it exactly wrong. But Sydney likes the sensation of suspension: the motor straining, the water insistent. She thinks of gulls just outside her window. Of the aviator in a deliberate stall.

Close quarters in the boat produce a kind of intimacy. For moments, Sydney's face is inches from Jeff's bare thigh. Were they lovers, she would lean forward and kiss it. It would be expected.

This is simply an observation Sydney makes and not a desire. But it occurs to her that it is an observation she might not have made a month ago.

As they cross the harbor, Ben obligingly points out the massive cottages along the shore and tells an anecdote with each. The Whaler rounds the point and runs parallel to the long beach.

Jeff indicates the family cottage at its end. Sydney contemplates the drive in the car, the walk to the dock, the ferry out to the boat, the struggle against the tide, the rounding of the point, and the motoring along the beach. She thinks it a long way to go a short distance.

‘Whose girlfriend is coming for the weekend?’ she asks as they idle in the gentle swells.

‘Mine,’ Jeff says.