


## Beach Days

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## Beach Days

"So did you have a good time?" my mother asks. This is a question she has asked me for close to forty years. I guess she wants me to have a good time. I'm not sure.

"Yeah, it was OK, except for the company."

My husband and I had recently returned from Martha's Vineyard. We love the Vineyard. We've been separated for four years, almost as long as we were married. But we have been trying to reconcile. It's weird, switching from I to we then back to I then back to we. We separated because we had begun making each other more miserable than when we had been single. It's a disease, the way couples make each other's lives rotten. We have our ways, men and women, of destroying each other that rival demolition techniques.

"Do you go in the water?" my mother asks.

"Sometimes. This time I did, it was so hot."

"Oh, I'm so jealous," she says. "I used to love the ocean."

I remember her loving the sea. She was the reason the lifeguards stood up on their lifeguard stands and started whistling. They'd whistle in loud shrieks as she used her arms like paddles, going further and further out past the breakers. I think she thought she could actually make it to Spain.

"You know how you used to say your mink coat came with a curse," I said, meaning my father. "Well, my diet of lobsters for four days came with a curse."

"But he's so nice, he's such a good person."

"You're right, but it doesn't mean I should be married to him. You wouldn't have stayed married to him for twenty seconds. He has to have his underwear drawer as ordered as the surgical instruments on his Mayo tray and he washes himself after sex."

"All I wanted was a friend. All that other shit you could keep."

All that other shit is her way of saying sex, humor, personality, intellect.

"If a friend was what you wanted, then why did you choose him?"

"He asked me to marry him. And since I was no beauty, and that's what you did back then, I married him."

I am sitting on the beach on the bayside in Montauk looking out over the water, sifting my feet between discarded crab claws and lobster pieces. The sky is clear but there is impending gray moving in quickly. I am contemplating my toes, the skin on my thighs, the freckles on my arms and it occurs to me that this would be the first summer my mother would not have been to the beach. It is July and my father died in January. Their marriage made *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* look like *Romeo and Juliet*.

My sisters and I, who have married men quieter, less muscular, less unpredictable than our father (and in so doing, he has remained out of reach), thought our mother would flourish after he was dead. She'd have peace, we'd hoped. No screaming fights at four in the morning after he returned from the "office." No begging him for money to fix the roof. A roof he'd attempted to renovate into a skylight but which had been left unfinished, open to the sky. Huge tarps kept the elements out, though birds and woodland (and less savory) creatures did get in. But she didn't flourish. They had those things they shared between themselves, like going to the beach—and now, she no longer had even those moments.

And I think, it would be nice to take Mom to the beach. Then I think again. About logistics, money, aggravation. I take a swig of bottled water and continue reading an essay in *Notes of a Hangin' Judge*. I am trying to expand my mind beyond, "I think the pinstripe shirt looks better on you," or "The green olives are better than the black with lamb," typical conversation between my husband and myself.

My mother uses a walker to get around. She's 69 and has been talking about old age for 25 years. I have friends close

to her age and I don't consider them old. I take aerobics with women older than my mother. The line "it can happen to you" keeps going through my mind. And so I put on my running shoes and my knee brace and jog.

A recent conversation with my mother went something like this.

"How's your health?" she asks.

"My knee's on the blink."

"Oh, what kind?" she asks.

"What, Ma?" I ask, exasperated. "Did you hear what I said?"

"Something about cheese?"

"No," I try to contain myself. "No, my *knee*, I think I'm going to have the surgery."

"Oh," she says. "I wish that weren't the case."

She has a hearing aid, but doesn't wear it. This is not uncommon among people with hearing aids. Particularly old people. It's an issue of denial. My husband's grandfather wears his but refuses to put in batteries because he says they're too expensive (despite his considerable savings).

My mother carries her appliance around with her, the way she carries her dentures. Either they're lying around on the bottom of an Ann Taylor shopping bag beneath pantyhose that need washing, or they're in her beige or red Anne Klein handbag that she hangs knotted on her walker, like all the other women with walkers. Where else would they put them?

"How's your stomach?" she asks.

My stomach went on the blink after my father died. It just decided to stop working, creating a serious bloating problem. Despite running every test on me, the gastroenterologist couldn't find anything wrong. I sought out an alternative healer and was feeling considerably better within a week.

"It comes and goes," I tell her. "I don't want to dwell on it."

"Oh," she says.

"Hey, Ma, how would you like to go to the beach?" The words spring forth with no forethought.

"Oh," she says, almost like a child. "I'd love to."

I would have to postpone my visit to the cemetery. I hadn't been there since we buried him. And I think of what my father might say if he were alive: "Take your mother to the beach, she loves the beach."

I call my husband. He loves family outings. Anything having to do with births, deaths, marriages, brisses, bar mitzvahs, graduations.

"How would you feel about taking my mother to the beach?"

"Why should I mind?"

If Jews had saints, this man would be a saint.

"It will be a trek, first to Philly, then to the beach and then back to Philly and back to New York."

"So? It's a lot of driving."

"Can you get a wheelchair from the hospital?" I ask.

"No. They're short on wheelchairs."

"I can't believe you work in a hospital and you can't get a wheelchair for one day."

"I'll see what I can do."

That same night I get a call. My husband has been pulled over by the hospital guards for stealing a wheelchair. He has been reported to the hospital administrator and director.

"Jesus, I didn't mean for you to get into trouble."

"They're morons," he says.

We leave New York at nine in the morning. This is a trip I've made for thirty years. When my sister first moved to New York City to go to art school, I'd visit her whenever I could. I know that road like a truck driver.

We get lost. It is my fault. I keep trying to remember the directions to my mother's retirement home. It's near the Main Line, but I have a block.

"You really should write down the directions," my husband says.

"But it's so easy, I can't believe I get it screwed up. When it's right it's so direct," I say, and then take out my notebook to write down the gas station attendant's direc-

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tions, which we follow. We're on our way up to the Adam's Mark Hotel, the landmark that means we're almost there. It's the corner where we turn. I tell my husband to cut through the shopping center to avoid the light. He does it, annoyed.

We arrive at B'rith Shalom a little late, but my mother is used to my father being hours late, minutes don't count in her book.

I haven't stopped getting depressed when I walk into the lobby. The living waiting for their time to die, or the dinner bell to ring despite lunch having just finished. Or staring; a lot of them stare. I can't believe my mother lives in such a place. This woman who would answer the door of her middle-class (though messy) home on Halloween night wearing cat's whiskers, a one-piece black leotard and ballet shoes.

My mother is reclining in her bed. The front door is open a crack. She has a problem opening it. She says the lock sticks. I have not found it to stick, but she says it sticks and keeps it ajar.

The apartment is stuffy. This is the first thing I notice. The white carnations are fresh. My brother must have visited recently. I glance around, but decide not to look too deep at all the paper cups and plastic forks and packets of Sweet & Low she's collected on the table. I won't look in the demi fridge to see the things she's growing there.

She is wearing a pastel floral sundress. V-back dipping almost to the waistline.

"Hi, Mom," I say, walking over to the bed.

She raises herself on her elbows, almost to a seated position. This takes a lot of effort. Then she slowly moves her legs around. They're dangling almost to the floor. Then she pushes herself up to a standing position.

My mother has a good dose of vanity. She loves her jewelry. She loves her clothes, hand-me-downs or not. As clearly as I recall her swimming to Spain, I remember her saying, "I feel naked walking out of the house without my eyebrows." But today she doesn't have any make-up on, including penciled-in eyebrows. She is slipping.

"Zip me up," she commands.

I try to zip her up but the dress is tight.

"Ma, I don't want you to bust the zipper at lunch."

"Just zip me up," another command. She's always been excellent with commands. "That doctor might help my condition but I'll weigh six hundred pounds."

My husband stands looking on. He doesn't take a chair, he doesn't go to the bathroom, he just stands.

"Why will you weigh six hundred pounds?" he asks.

"He's got me eating more when I take the medicine. He thinks I wasn't eating enough and that's the reason I was having the bad side effects."

"Could be," says my husband the doctor.

My mother is more excited than I've seen her in years. She has packed her beach towel with the Aztec design and some shoes (just in case she needs a proper pair). She wears slippers, usually pastel floral cotton slip-ons. It's her feet, they're swollen and tender. She's an insulin-dependent diabetic and has to be very careful of her feet.

"Ma, do you have a sweater in case it gets chilly at the beach?"

"Oh, I didn't think about that. You're probably right."

I go to her closet; it's in terrible disorder. Dirty towels under winter boots co-exist side by side. But there is a logic to this. "What difference does it make that the boots are on top of the towels? They're dirty anyway and need to be washed." This would be her reasoning. Or the bags of photographs on top of the boxes filled with underwear from my grandmother's vanity. The logic: "The underwear belongs to the person in those photos," and so on. As usual, she knows exactly where everything is and we find a black sweater in a pile of socks and pantyhose on the floor.

We're almost ready to leave. I go to the bathroom and lay the new peach bathmat on the floor. She asked me to buy it for her. I hope the peach is the correct shade. "It's pretty," she says. Success! She likes it. I don't feel like an imbecile, which is how I frequently feel when she finds fault, which is often. "I can't believe you would do such a thing," "buy such a thing," "say such a thing." She knows how to make me shrink.

"Oh," she says. "Go under the sink." She wants me to throw out the bag of garbage. It is the first time she has ever asked me to throw something away. She is a saver; a hoarder. The only item I ever recall her throwing away was the roof to my vintage 1963 Morgan roadster that I cherished. "I thought it was the roof to daddy's car and I wanted to stick it to him—for something, I can't remember."

We are driving south on the Atlantic City Expressway. Headed towards Sea Isle; none of us have been there before. When I come out from the gas station after asking directions, I enter at the end of a story my mother has been telling my husband. She has been recounting memories the entire trip. About her childhood, her retarded brother, her mother, her uncle she adored, her father, my father. She has also been searching for two speeches in *Romeo and Juliet*, sitting in the back seat with my Complete William Shakespeare. My mother knows Shakespeare by heart and is disturbed she cannot find where exactly these two speeches fall.

"What is so funny?" I ask, getting back in the car.

"I was telling your husband about the time Daddy had finished..."

And I interrupted, "Had finished what?" sort of knowing, but having to clarify since my mother has always, with a few exceptions, been a white-glove kind of person.

"You know what I'm talking about..." and she continues. "And he asked me how it was, but your father didn't know Shakespeare and didn't think it was funny. I said, 'Well 'tis not as deep as a well nor so wide as a church door, but it will do.'"

My mother had orgasms! Nuclear fission goes off in my head. My entire life she had berated my father for his sexual appetite. She had said that sex was less important than it was cracked up to be; and here she is rating her orgasms.

"How's the Lobster Loft for lunch?" my husband asks, driving into Sea Isle.

"Great," I say. My mother didn't hear the question.

While my husband parks the car, I help my mother up



the steps with the walker. She is stubborn and doesn't want to use the ramp, which would be easier for both of us.

"Mom, did you always climax?" I ask, holding onto her and letting her use me as support.

"Not at first. In the beginning I didn't know anything. It was fun, but I just was servicing your father, but after about six years..." and then my husband arrives.

We split clams for an appetizer, I eat crab, my husband has shrimp, and my mother orders a whole lobster dinner, which includes cole slaw and corn on the cob. She has no teeth, is not wearing her dentures, but manages to clean every kernel off of the cob.

"I feel like I've died and gone to heaven. I love this place," she says looking out at the fishing boats. "Look down, we're over water."

And we all look through the slats of the floor of the restaurant.

For dessert she orders lemon mousse cake and splits it with my husband. She's not supposed to eat sweets since she's diabetic, and he doesn't need the calories since he's on Weight Watchers, but they order it anyway. I can't eat much of anything since my stomach's still not right.

After lunch my husband drops us off at the ramp entrance to the beach and goes to look for a parking space.

"So after six years, what? Did you make it happen? Did you work at it? How did you know it happened?"

"No, I didn't make it happen. Sometimes it didn't happen together, it would happen to me before or after..."

"Ma! You had simultaneous orgasms with Daddy?"

"Well, half to two-thirds of the time."

"Ma! That doesn't happen to everybody. That's never happened to me."

"Never?" she asks, a little surprised. "Not to you? Never?"

"No. And I don't know too many women it's happened to. That's not typical."

"Oh, but you're missing the full experience otherwise."

And then my husband returns.

We walk with my mother along the boardwalk to the opening onto the beach. The sky is blue and the wretched part of the summer heat has vanished. There is a slight breeze and the waves are wild enough that even though we don't walk close to the water (since that would take her two days with the walker) she can see the waves break.

I spread out a blanket and set up the sand chair for her. She doesn't want help getting down, and in her own manner she drops to her knees and twists around until she is sitting on the chair.

"Get my sweater," she commands.

I put the sweater around her shoulders.

"Now I know I died and went to heaven," she says.

My husband and I lie next to each other on the beach blanket that we've taken with us on so many beach-based trips; one place we usually got along.

"Daddy and I used to go to the beach in the winter. It's so beautiful on those dreary days."

Now I understand a little better why they stayed together through my father's affairs, through my mother's days of near catatonia, through the insanity of my father's alcohol and my mother's inability to clean the house or keep herself clean. I'd always known that they could talk about art and politics for hours without getting bored. Or laugh together at a Jack Lemmon movie like romantic teenagers, but there was a spirit thing too and now this immense physical passion between them. And I am so envious, my stomach clenches up into a state it hasn't seen since the day we buried him.

We stay on the beach for about an hour and then prepare to leave. My husband takes the beach bag and goes to pull the car around, while my mother and I walk and talk. We have finally found a neutral subject on which to connect, after so many years of fighting. And once again, she has won.

"Your father was a hazza," she says.

"Ma, he had a healthy appetite and was hot for you."

"He prided himself in his athletic ability, so he could stay for a while."

"With you-know-who (referring to my husband, who is rearranging the trunk to make space for her walker) he's on top and then it's over."

"Oh, that's terrible," she says and then, "I need to get some more carbohydrates in, maybe an ice cream."

We stop for ice cream. "I'd like peach and if they don't have that then half and half," she says. I know she means vanilla and chocolate. But they have peach.

The drive home is slow since we get caught in beach traffic back to Philadelphia. She is quiet. I keep looking at her in the visor mirror. What is she feeling? She'd never say. She never talked about her feelings, so why should she begin now? But then, she's been changing. She seems perkier. She is recalling nice things about my father, his broad shoulders, his sense of humor, their lovemaking.

As I walk her to her apartment, my husband waits at the elevator. I say, "Mom, we have to continue this conversation."

"OK," she says.

"I love you," I say.

"I love you too," she says, and I leave her standing in her studio holding onto her walker alone. It is the saddest sight. I want to bring her back to her feisty self, like I wanted to bring my father back.

That night in bed I turned to the pages she marked for me to Xerox: "No, 'tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door, but 'tis enough."

And then there was the second piece of text she marked: "Give me my Romeo; and when he shall die, take him and cut him out in little stars, and he will make the face of heaven so fine, that all the world will be in love with night."