

Waiting

Alice waited for Paul on the ferry dock. He'd left a crackly message on the answering machine saying he'd be coming in on the afternoon boat. That was like him. He couldn't say the 1:20 or the 3:55. She'd spent too long staring at the ferry schedule, trying to divine his meaning.

With some amount of self-hatred, Alice had first walked out onto the dock for the 1:20, knowing he wouldn't be on it. She'd looked only vaguely at the faces as they emerged from the boat, assuring herself she wasn't expecting anything. She'd sat with her bare feet on the bench at the periphery, her book resting on her knees so she wouldn't have to interact with anyone. *I know you're not going to be on it, so don't think I think you are*, she'd told the Paul who lived in her mind. Even there, under her presumed control, he was teasing and unpredictable.

For the 3:55, she put Vaseline on her lips and brushed her hair. The boat after that wasn't until 6:10, and though Paul could miss the so-called afternoon ferry, he couldn't call 6:10 the afternoon.

How often she did attempt to process his thoughts in her mind. She took his opinions too seriously, remembered them long after she suspected he'd forgotten them.

It was one thing, trying to think his thoughts when he was close by, his words offering clues, corrections, and confirmations by the hour. But three years of silence made for complex interpolations. It made it harder, and in another way it made it easier. She was freer with his thoughts. She made them her own, thought them to her liking.

He had missed two summers. She couldn't imagine how he could do that. Without him, they had been shadow seasons. Feelings were felt thinly, there and then gone. Memories were not made. There was nothing new in sitting on this dock, on this or that wooden bench, watching for his boat to come. In some ways, she was always waiting for him.

She couldn't picture his face when he was gone. Every summer he came back wearing his same face that she could not remember.

Absently, she saw the people on the dock who came, went, and waited. She waved to people she knew, mostly her parents' friends. She felt the wind blow the pounding sun off her shoulders. She slowly dug her thumbnail along a plank of the seat, provoking a splinter but caking up mold and disintegration instead.

When it came to waiting, Riley always had something else to do. Paul was Riley's best friend. Alice knew Riley missed him, too, but she said she didn't like waiting. Alice didn't like it. Nobody did. But Alice was a younger sister. She didn't have the idea of not doing things because you didn't like them.

She watched for the ferry, the way it started out as a little white triangle across the bay. When it wasn't there, she could hardly imagine it. It was never coming. And then it appeared. It took shape quickly. It was always coming.

She stood. She couldn't help it. She left her book on the bench with its paper cover fluttering open in the wind. Would this be him? Was he on there?

She let her hair out of its elastic. She stretched her tank top down over her hips. She wanted him to see all of her and also none of her. She wanted him to be dazzled by the bits and blinded to the whole. She wanted him to see her whole and not in pieces. She had hopes that were hard to satisfy.

Her legs bounced; her arms clutched her middle. She saw the approach of the middle-aged woman in a pink sarong who taught her mother's yoga class.

"Who are you waiting for, Alice?"

Exposed as she was, the friendly question struck Alice as a cruelty.

"No one," Alice lied awkwardly. The woman's tanned face was as familiar to Alice as the wicker sofa on the screened porch, but that did not mean that Alice knew her name. She knew the lady's poodle was named Albert and that her yoga class was heavy on the chanting. In a place like this, as a child you weren't responsible for the names of grown-ups, though the grown-ups always knew yours. If you were a child, relationships here began asymmetrically, and there rarely came a specific opportunity for reevaluation. You bore the same age relationship to people here no matter how old you got.

The woman looked at Alice's feet, which told the truth. If you were getting on the 3:55, you wore shoes.

Alice self-consciously straggled over to the freight area as though she had some purpose there. She didn't lie easily, and doing it now conferred an unwanted intimacy. She preferred to save her lies for the people whose names she knew.

She couldn't look at the boat. She sat back down on the bench, crossing her arms and her legs and bowing her head.

It was a small village on a small island with customs and rules all its own. "No keys, no wallet, no shoes" was the saying that expressed their summer way of life. There were no cars and—in the old days, at least—nobody locked their house. The single place of commerce was the Waterby market, mostly trading in candy and ice cream cones, where your name was your credit and they didn't accept cash. Shoes meant you were coming, going, or playing tennis. Even at the yacht club. Even at parties. There was a community pride in having feet tough enough to withstand the splintering boardwalks. It's not that you didn't get splinters—you always did. You just shut up about it. Every kid knew that. At the end of each summer, the bottoms and sides of Alice's feet were speckled black with old splinters. Eventually they disappeared; she was never quite sure where they went. "They are reabsorbed," a knowledgeable seven-year-old named Sawyer Boyd told her once.

Everyone's business came through this ferry dock, with rhythms and hierarchies unlike other places. You saw the people as they came and went and waited. You also saw their stuff piled on the dock until they loaded it onto their wagon and rolled it home. You knew what kind of toilet paper they bought. Alice still rated two-ply a luxury more subtle and telling than a person's bag or shoes. You knew that the people with the Fairway bags and the paper products were getting off here in Waterby or in Saltaire. The people getting off in the town of Kismet always had beer.

Cars were conveyors of privacy. Without them, you lived a lot more of your life out in the open. Where you went, who you went with. Who you waited for at the ferry dock. Who you brushed your hair for. You were exposed here, but you were also safe.

The carlessness of the place had always appealed to certain utopian types, even shallow ones. "Get rid of cars and you get rid of global warming, oil wars in the Middle East, obesity, and most crime, too," her father liked to say.

The ferry put an extra emphasis on coming and going. Adults went back and forth all the time, but there had been many summers when Alice and Riley had come and gone only once. They came with their pale skin, haircuts meant to last the summer, their tender feet, and their shyness. They left with brown, freckled, bitten skin; tangly hair; foot bottoms thick like tires; and familiarity verging on rudeness.

She remembered the hellos, and she remembered the good-byes even more. End-of-summer tradition dictated that whoever was last to leave the island saluted departing friends by jumping into the water as the good-bye ferry pulled away.

Now she heard the boat grinding up behind her. She loosened her arms and pressed her hands against the wood. She heard the slapping of the wake against the pilings as the boat came around. She untucked one leg and bounced her free heel on the plank in front of her.

Alice would have liked to do the arriving instead of the waiting. She would have rather done the leaving than the getting left, but that was never the way it happened. For some reason it was always Alice who waited and Alice who dove in.

The ferry was like a time capsule, in a way. A space capsule. It sent you and your fellow canvas-bag travelers through a wormhole, the same one every time.

Paul stood on the top deck in the wet wind as the monstrous coastal houses of Long Island's south shore gave way to dark, briny water.

The thick feeling of the air began when you stepped onto the ferry. The stickiness over every surface. His hair blew around and he thought of Alice, fishing in her backpack for an elastic. He could picture her anchoring various things in her mouth as she braided her hair. He'd had short hair then, and though he admired her skill at braiding in wind—what boy wasn't mystified by a braid?—he'd thought it was needless. Now his hair was long.

The first sighting was the Robert Moses obelisk, and second was the gangly lighthouse. Well, it wasn't gangly really. In truth, this lighthouse set his standard for all others, and the others looked stout and dumpy by comparison. You loved what you knew. You couldn't help it. He couldn't, though he did try.

She would be there. If she was still Alice, she would be there. If Riley was still Riley, she would not be. He had called, so if Alice didn't come, it would mean something. If she did come, it would mean something also. He wished he hadn't called, in a way. The old staging unnerved him, but after all this time he couldn't just sneak up on Alice.

He could imagine that she hadn't checked the messages, but he knew Alice to be heartrendingly on top of the messages. As though she was always waiting for something good and some-thing bad.

Now the sweeter, older, coast of the island emerged, coughed up by the bay in time for his arrival. He discerned the wide, curling arm of the dock. He saw the figures on it. He knew Riley would be the same. By the letters she wrote him, he could tell she would look and sound the same. But the idea of a twenty-one-year-old Alice scared him.

Would their parents be there? Could he contend with the whole bunch of them on such a narrow tatter of land stuck out here between the ocean and the bay?

Now the shapes of the houses grew and sharpened, and the faces on the dock turned toward the boat expectantly—a bunch of circles without features at first. He unstuck himself from the bench, stretched his legs. He felt the chill sweat of his fingers knitted around the handles of his duffel bag.

Without quite giving himself the go-ahead, he started scanning the faces. The older ones were most familiar. The tricky doubles player with the comb-over—what was his name? The guy with the crooked shoulders who tended to the fire trucks, the brown lady with the dog under her arm. The club pro, Don Rontano, with the starched polo shirt, collar upturned, who got on so well with the lonely ladies. The children were impossible to identify, and the bodies between old and young he feared to scrutinize. Would her hair have gotten as dark as that? Could her shape have changed into that?

No and no, obviously. At this distance, closing in at this speed, you knew a person by her posture, by certain unnameable qualities, and those weren't and couldn't be hers. Maybe she hadn't come. Maybe she wasn't even on the island. But what could make Alice not come?

There was one other figure—a girl, it seemed—half-curved on the bench, one foot tucked under her. But her back was to him, and unlike the others, she didn't turn her face to the boat.

He scanned the small cluster again, resenting the spasmodic activity of his eyeballs. What if she were different now? What if he couldn't keep his old idea of her?

As the ferry pulled around the hook of the dock, the sitting girl stood. Her hair blew around her face, obscuring it. Maybe that was the reason he continued to imagine her a stranger even after he got close enough to see.

For a few moments, both frantic and calm, he watched her carefully, feeling a tingle in the old, blocked-off passageways. He felt the neurons firing in the part of his brain responsible for present perception but also in the part devoted to memory.

Maybe that was why a strange overload took place just then, when he recognized her and didn't recognize her at the same time. Ideas and feelings rushed in that he might have rather kept out.

"Hey," he said to her.

She hugged him, putting her chin on his shoulder and her face toward the lighthouse. It wasn't the kind of thing they did. It wasn't so much intimacy that provoked it, but the need not to look at him any longer.

She couldn't really feel anything of him or focus her eyes exactly. Her body was numb and her eyes confused her. In a moment of lucidity, she feared he could feel her heart pounding and she pulled away.

She put her head down and gestured to his bag. "Is that everything?" she asked his bag.

"That's it." He sounded almost rueful. She wanted to check his face, but he was looking at her, so she didn't.

What was the matter with her? It was just him! It was the same old Paul. But it also wasn't. He was the strangest of strangers in that he was also her oldest friend.

"Is it heavy?" she found herself saying.

"No. It's fine," he said, and she thought she heard the seed of a laugh in his voice. Was he going to laugh at her? He used to do that. He teased her and laughed at her without relent. But if he did that now, she would die.

She'd intended to feel cold toward him this time. For leaving for so long and forgetting her. *Did you forget me?* She was good at being angry with him when he was away, but in his presence she never could.

She forged ahead and he followed. Mrs. McKay was unlocking her wagon, and Connie, their old swim coach, was on the fishing side. If she raised her head, she would see others. They all knew Paul. Would they recognize him with his long, clumpy hair and his bristly face?

All the things she planned to feel, the way she planned to look and seem, the appropriate things she planned to say. None of them came to pass.

“Let’s go find Riley,” he said from behind her, and her heart thrilled with relief. That was what they could do. That would make sense of it.

She offered him her mother’s bike and got on her own. He balanced his duffel bag over the basket and maneuvered up the skinny boardwalk ahead of her with the grace of a true islander. He used to ride three bikes at once. He could do a wheelie without his hands. He had been her hero of bikes.

They went directly to the ocean beach. He walked out of his shoes and peeled off his socks, barely slowing down. He stood on the stairs at the top of the dune, taking it in, and she lingered a few feet behind, breathless to see what kind of beach it was today.

As children, they had dozens of names for the beach, like Eskimos naming snow, and they were ever finding need for more. A placid, white-sand and sparkly turquoise affair was a Tortola beach after an island in the Caribbean that Paul had been dragged to with his mother. They scorned such a beach. The Riley beach, also known as Fight beach, was when the little grains of sand whipped like glass against your skin and the surf was ragged and punishing. An Alice beach was truly rare, and it involved tide pools.

Today Alice wanted the kind he used to want, the Paul beach, low-tide crunchy sand, a sharp drop-off to the water, and a close army of rough, green waves. How familiar it felt to want his wants for him. That much had not changed.

Once Paul told her that the beach was like him because it changed every day but it never made any progress. Later she remembered thinking that a normal person might have begun by saying that he was like the beach.

Alice held her hair back, acknowledging that this beach was yet another requiring a name. A Nervous beach. A Gnashing beach. The sand was smooth and gradual, but the surf was wild, the waves coming in at a diagonal pitch. She was making up her mind not to swim as Paul set off down the decrepit steps. She looked east toward the lifeguard chair, with Riley sitting in it and the red “no swimming” flag flying above her.

Paul didn’t bend his steps toward Riley but rather headed straight for the water. Alice watched in muffled surprise as he walked into the surf fully clothed. He dove into an olive-colored wall. Alice watched eagerly for his head to pop out of the irritable froth crashing all around. She looked to her sister, who was now standing up in the chair, neck forward in her pose of lifeguard alertness, hands on her hips.

Paul’s head did finally appear at least twenty yards out. He was beyond the breaking waves but bobbing and buffeted nonetheless.

Alice could see Riley muttering to another guard, who stood at the foot of the stand. She blew her whistle twice. “Get out of the water!” she bellowed, pointing at the red flag. “Asshole,” she muttered.

From far out, Paul lifted his arm and waved to her.

Alice could tell the moment Riley realized who it was. She whooped loudly enough for Alice to hear. She looked back over her shoulder and saw Alice there.

Riley’s pose relaxed. Her whistle dropped. She shrugged and Alice smiled. Riley shouted to be heard over the fresh blast of wind. “I guess Paul is back.”

“Just leave him out there,” Riley said to her backup guard. “He’ll be fine.”

She sat back down in her chair and watched Paul’s bouncing head. She wasn’t going in after him. Let him drown. He would never drown.

Paul had worked through every phase of lifeguard training alongside her, determined to best her every time. Though never to his face, she credited him with making her tough. She didn’t just pass the challenges, she had to try to beat Paul. And then the day of the actual test—a formality by that point, their victory lap—Paul didn’t show up. When she saw him later by the ferry dock, he’d just shrugged. It was the culmination of her life, and he’d acted like the thing had slipped his mind.

But on her first official day in the chair, when she'd nearly exploded with pride in her official red suit, Paul had turned up again. She didn't realize the dark-haired figure thrashing out beyond the surf was Paul. She'd leapt off the chair with all possible intensity, blowing her whistle, marshaling her equipment, shouting commands, her blood dashing with purpose.

When she got out to the deep water and saw who it was, she wanted to drown him for real. She called him a motherfucker and started to swim back to shore, her cheeks pounding red with fury. Then she saw the lineup of concerned citizens on the sand and the head guard apoplectic at the idea that she was abandoning the victim. And there was Paul out there, keeping up his act. What could she do? She went back and saved his ass. As she dragged him toward the beach, she gave a ferocious pinch on the back of his neck. It was the only time he writhed authentically.

When they were little, she and Paul were the same. She understood him without having to try. They fought sometimes. In third grade she kicked him to the ground. In fifth grade he shoved her into a doorway and she had to get six stitches in her eyebrow. They didn't fight physically after that, though she did try to provoke him. It was the scar, she thought, that made him stop. She liked the scar.

After middle school, he started making everything so complicated. He got quiet and brooding sometimes for no reason she could determine. She always thought he would have ended up happier if he'd just taken the lifeguard test. That was her true opinion. Later he joined weird political groups and tried to organize Central American fruit pickers who were too smart to take any of the crap he was trying to sell.

"I arrived with all my political ideas, but the poverty and sadness around here sort of nullifies them," he'd written to her from a farm near Bakersville. "Last night somebody stole my wallet from my pants while I slept. I am finding myself absurd."

She couldn't argue. "You should have been a lifeguard," she wrote back.

And yet, she did love him. In that way, she hated his disappointments even if she disagreed with the things he wanted.

"Can you take over the shift?" she asked Adam Pryce. He was her backup guard and her junior by six years.

He agreed, and she jumped down off the chair. With an old feeling of joy, she walked down to the waves and dove into an ocean that no sane person would swim in. She swam out to Paul with a few tough strokes.

And so they bobbed around together, skirting a riptide, taunting the waves while Alice looked on from the beach.