

ASCENT

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LUANNE RICE

The Rocks at High Tide

Claire lay on the bed and listened to her family rattle dishes in the kitchen below. She could smell the lobsters steaming. Her father was humming a dirge for the lobsters, which he had caught that morning in his own pots, and her mother was telling him to knock it off. Claire turned away from the window. The room looked west, and the declining sun cast orange light on the varnished tongue-and-groove panelling her father had installed, along with the picture window, bookshelves, and skylights, when he had designed the sharply angled room to accommodate his three daughters.

The dinner was supposed to be a celebration. Tomorrow, Charlotte, Claire's middle sister, was leaving to study sculpture at the Rhode Island School of Design. Charlotte had spent her freshman year living at home, working for a local welder, and studying with her mother, who taught part time at a nearby college. But now she was taking off while Claire was home, as she had been since March, when she left college in the middle of the spring semester. Lying on her bed and listening to the noise downstairs, Claire recalled her own celebration. Two years earlier, her parents had served lobster the night before she set off for college.

Claire reached for a book on the floor but changed her mind and lay on her back again, listening to someone climb the stairs. "Come in," she called after the knock.

"Nobody here but us chickens," Bridey, entering, relied on one of her old jokes.

The sisters were silent. Bridey plucked some fuzz from a tuft on the bedspread and tickled her upper lip. Watching her, Claire noticed how frizzy Bridey's blond hair had become during the winter.

"I'm supposed to tell you dinner's ready," Bridey said.

"I figured."

Bridey paused, staring at Claire. "Why aren't you helping? Everyone's having fun."

"I know." Claire sat up straight, then swung her legs off the bed and stood. "Let's go."

On clear summer evenings, the Phelans ate dinner on the terrace overlooking the bay. The solid rock coast slanted from the water's edge to the foundation of the house. Great fissures scoring the rock were clogged with vines, bayberry bushes, and dried seaweed left by storm tides. The western sky had gone lavender. Claire had to squint to see everyone clearly, but then her mother struck a match and lit three candles in deep crystal holders. Charlotte twisted a lobster claw at its joint and brought it to her mouth.

"I'll miss lobster at college," she said. She sucked out the meat and blew into the hollow claw. Then she heaved it into the wind. Claire watched it land in a clumb of honeysuckle vines.

"Yesterday we found thirteen lobsters in one pot," Jack said. "Your mother made me throw back seven for being undersized. Plus one eggbearing female."

Claire loved the way her father said "eggbearing female" with such authority, as though he were a lobsterman or scientist instead of an architect on vacation.

"You'll miss more than lobster," Bridey said to Charlotte. "You'll get homesick."

"I doubt it. I can't wait to go."

"We're not that bad, are we?" Jack asked, dipping a chunk of lobster into the communal dish of melted butter. "After all, Claire decided to come back to us."

"Temporarily," Agnes amended. Her gaze slid to her oldest daughter, and everyone looked away except Bridey.

"Wait till you come home for Thanksgiving," Bridey said, "and we've rearranged our room."

"Rearrange it all you want. After tomorrow, it won't be my room anymore," Charlotte said.

"It will always be your room," Agnes said, peering at Charlotte through the greying bangs that fringed her pale blue eyes. "Whether you're living at home or not."

"At least she'll have a TV in her dorm," Bridey said. "I can't believe we can't get one."

Claire tried to block the image of herself every morning, every afternoon, for one month? two months? staring at the static-

coated screen of the huge television in her dorm basement, beneath the heating pipes decorated with fading black and orange streamers and deflated balloons, withered as spinach, left over from the Halloween party.

"TV is not the most important part of college, believe it or not, young Bridey," her father said. "You are so young."

"Bull," Bridey said.

"*Bull* is vulgar" Agnes said, pinching her cigarette between long fingers. "Say *horsefeathers*."

Everyone laughed to think of Agnes saying anything as unsophisticated as horsefeathers. She glanced at Claire to make sure she was laughing. Satisfied, she blew a smoke ring that diffused into her bangs.

"Forget the TV," Charlotte said. "I just want to sculpt."

"Working for a welder was excellent experience," Agnes said. "I wish I'd done it during college. Maybe if I had, I'd be more willing to work in metal, instead of clay all the time. More courageous. I'm mired in clay."

"Feet of clay," Jack said.

"Still," Agnes went on. "By the time I was a junior, I had finished one or two pieces that I still consider valid."

"They're damn fine," Jack agreed.

"Those ducks?" Bridey asked.

"Ducks?" Agnes asked, amused. She flicked her cigarette into the vines and watched to make sure nothing ignited. "They're abstract, you know that."

"They remind me of ducks, with necks and bills. And webbed feet tucked onto their backs."

"Necks and bills, yes. I can see that," Jack said, nodding. "They remind you of ducks. Interesting. Mallards or teals, anything particular?"

"Don't make fun of me, Dad. Just ducks."

"That's quite interesting, Bridey." Jack regarded her with admiration.

"You don't always have to see something in art," Agnes said. "It's not always meant to suggest objects."

"As a matter of fact," Bridey said, "I cannot see a dinosaur when I look at that Calder sculpture outside the Wadsworth Athanaeum. And that's what it's supposed to be, isn't it?"

"Oh, Calder!" Charlotte exploded. "I'm so sick of him.

Whenever anyone hears I sculpt in metal, they all ask what I think of Calder's *Circus* at the Whitney and that damn *Stegosaurus* in Hartford. Calder's such a cliché."

Claire felt laughter rumbling in her throat, and she was too late to stop it.

"What's funny, sweetie?" Agnes asked, leaning forward.

"I don't know, that bit about Calder being a cliché." Claire caught herself ruffling her eyebrows with the knuckles of her left hand and clasped her hands in her lap. "Just because everyone knows who he is doesn't automatically make him a cliché. Even the way you said his name, Charlotte. Not 'Alexander Calder,' just 'Calder,' as if it were a brand name. You used to love his work."

"Oh sure. Picasso, Rembrandt." Charlotte paused. "Matisse. *Un-ree* Matisse. How often do you use the first name? Besides, I wasn't criticizing Calder. I just said I was sick of him."

"Naturally people's favorites do change, Claire," Agnes said, frowning. "That's what causes styles."

"Styles do come and go," Jack said.

The family faced each other at the circular table. Behind Jack and Bridey the sky was dark, with a feather of plum-colored cloud at the horizon holding the sunset's last traces.

Agnes lit another cigarette. "Honey? Can you go on?"

Claire laughed again, taking air violently into her nose. "It reminds me of college. People in the music department had to follow composers no one had ever heard of. They'd laugh if you said you liked Hayden. Or Mozart. And philosophy majors! I once mentioned to a philosophy major that I had read something by Camus in high school, and she looked really embarrassed. As though I had farted."

"What's wrong with Camus?" Jack asked.

"Nothing, except that he's overrated and popular. She gave me a list of the philosophers I should be reading because they were unrecognized and brilliant. She had heard one of them speak at a YMCA in Boston."

"So what are you saying, anyway?" Charlotte asked, squeezing lemon onto her fingertips. "I thought you were defending Calder."

"Oh, forget it," Claire said. She touched a curved lobster tail section, rocking it like a cradle with her index finger. "Styles, I

guess. Like Mom said—once something becomes really familiar, or comfortable, people drop it and go on to something else.”

“Well, it’s human to desire a challenge,” Agnes said. “Like that paper you did on Virginia Woolf after years of reading practically nothing but Fitzgerald. When I showed it to Sam Kellerman, he said it showed excellent insight.”

“Wasn’t Liz Taylor in that?” Bridey asked.

“Smart apple,” Jack said. “Virginia Woolf was the name of a writer before they put her into the title of a play.”

“Claire?” Agnes asked. “Didn’t you hear what I just said?”

“I’m not going back to college,” Claire said, just loudly enough for everyone to hear.

Lying on her bed in the dark, Claire listened to the sounds downstairs. The dishes had been dried, and her family was beginning to move from the kitchen into the living room. Soon her parents would leave for their nightly walk along the rocks.

Fifty yards away waves broke on rock ledge. From the sound Claire knew it was high tide. The sounds of waves at high tide and low tide were as distinct to her as the sounds of a knife tapping a glass full of water and a glass nearly empty. Years before she had tested herself most mornings upon waking: high tide or low? Her favorite times were when several days had passed without her playing the game, when she was totally unaware of the tide’s schedule and had to listen, almost painfully, for the clues: the slurp of seaweed at low, the short, soft slaps of water against the glacial moraine at high. The sense of knowing, of being correct, satisfied her, and so did the feeling of intimacy with everything, even the contours of rock and the sound of the Atlantic lapping it, around her house.

Bridey entered without knocking. “Did you mean what you said about not going back to college?” Bridey asked.

“Yes.”

Bridey sat on the bed. “Everyone was so surprised when you first came home. Remember when you called that morning? Mom was sure you were sick, or that you had gotten yourself into debt. No one thought you were quitting for good.”

“Well, I am quitting.” Claire sat up straight, crossing her legs in the lotus position and facing her sister. “Don’t you think it’s idiotic, the way we’re all supposed to give everything up, go to

college, make all new friends, maybe get married, and have a new family?”

Bridey looked shocked, then pleased. “You know, I’ve thought that myself. Ever since you left for college. Everything seemed disturbed.”

“Disturbed?”

“Well, kind of. Even when you came home for vacations, we knew you’d have to go right back. Nothing seemed the same.”

“Because it wasn’t. I was just a visitor then.”

“I know! That’s how it seemed. I was glad when you came home, even though it was strange to see you in the middle of the term.”

Claire felt tired. A steady breeze lifted the edge of the ruffled white curtain. She lay down, her head on the quilt folded at the foot of her bed. Bridey lifted a clump of Claire’s hair and started braiding it.

“I hate my hair,” Bridey said.

“It’ll straighten out. Maybe it’s just the salt air.”

“Great. The salt air’s always here—what am I supposed to do? Move to Kansas?”

“You’ll outgrow it.”

“God, if I hear one more person say that—” Bridey tugged the braid she had just done, then untangled it with her index finger. “I can barely see what I’m doing.”

“It’s September. The days are getting shorter.” Claire shut her eyes, listening to music coming through the floorboards. Someone was playing a Terje Rypdal record on the stereo. Not Charlotte, she was sure, which meant that her parents hadn’t gone for their walk. She heard metal rattling and knew that her father was building a fire. Concentrating intently, she listened for and heard two female voices, her mother’s and Charlotte’s, talking at one end of the living room. She visualized the room with all its textures: the high ceilings and tall windows facing the bay, the cool red tile floor, curved white wicker furniture, several of her mother’s sculptures, smooth and pale, on the bookshelf and one on a pedestal at the room’s north end, the stone fireplace and mantle, the sepia-toned Goya woodcut by the stairs. A sculpture by Charlotte would stand at the end of the room opposite her mother’s, as soon as it was cast. Claire looked up at Bridey. “We should go downstairs.”

"What for?"

Claire didn't answer. She lay on her side facing Bridget, her face about six inches from Bridget's white sharkskin shorts. They smelled faintly of lobster juice. She heard the music go louder.

"Let's go downstairs," she said.

"Whoohoo," Agnes sang along with the record. She was stretched out on the sofa, her head on Jack's lap. Her hand lay upon her stomach, holding a cigarette. The night breeze had turned chilly, and her bare feet were tucked beneath a rough-loomed pillow. Claire sat in an armchair watching her sisters play backgammon on the floor. Outside crickets rasped in the vines and waves pounded the rocks.

"Darling, you leave me pale," Agnes sang. Claire loved the way her mother would create words to go along with the music. They melted into the tunes as if both parts had been written by the same person. Claire relaxed, pressing her cheek into her hand. Her gaze roamed the room, over all the members of her family: her mother crooning on the sofa, her father dozing upright, her sisters' blond heads bending towards each other over the game board. Leaning back in her chair, Claire closed her eyes, content, knowing that when she opened them, everybody would be right where she had left them.