

Close to the Water's Edge

BY CLAIRE KEEGAN

Tonight he is out on the balcony, his dark tan stunning against the white of his dress shirt. Many days have passed since he left Cambridge, Massachusetts, to spend time at his mother's penthouse on the coast. He does not care for these rooms, with vicious swordfish mounted on the walls and all these mirrors that make it impossible to do even the simplest thing without seeing his reflection.

He stays out on the beach and through his shades watches the bathers, the procession of young men with washboard bellies walking the strand. Women turn over on their deck chairs browning themselves evenly on all sides. They come here with their summer books and sunhats, reaching into their coolers for beer and Coppertone. In the afternoons when the heat becomes unbearable, he swims out to the sandbar, a good half mile from the shore. He can see it now, the strip of angry waves breaking in the shallows. Now the tide is advancing, erasing the white, well-trodden sands. A brown pelican, a small piece of the past, floats by on the Texas wind. Joggers stay close to the water's edge, their shadows fastened like guardians at their sides.

Inside, his mother is arguing with his stepfather, the millionaire who owns these condominiums. After his parents divorced, his mother said that people have no control over who they fall in love with, and soon afterward married the millionaire. Now he can hear them talking, their enraged whispers gathering speed on the slope of their argument. It is an old story.

"I'm warning you, Richard, don't bring it up!"

"Who brought it up? Who?"

"It's his birthday, for Christ's sake!"

"Who said anything?"

The young man looks down. At the hot tub, a mother braces herself and enters the steamy waters. Screams from racing children pierce the air. He feels the same trepidation he always feels at these family occasions, and wonders why he came back here when he could be in Cambridge in his T-shirt and shorts, drinking his Australian beer, playing chess on the computer. He takes the cufflinks from his pocket, a gift his grandmother gave him shortly before she died. They are gold-plated cufflinks whose gold is slowly wearing off, revealing the steel underneath.

When his grandmother first married, she begged her husband to take her to the ocean. They were country people, pig farmers from Tennessee. His grandmother said she had never laid eyes on the Atlantic. She said if she saw the ocean, she could settle down. It wasn't anything she could explain. But each time she asked her husband, his response was the same.

"Who'll feed the pigs?"

"We could ask the neighbors—"

"You can't trust anybody. That's our livelihood out there."

Months passed; she grew heavy with child and finally gave up asking to see the ocean. Then one Sunday her husband shook her awake.

"Pack a bag, Marcie," he said, "we're going to the coast."

It wasn't yet light when they got into the car. They drove all that day, across the hills of Tennessee toward Florida. The landscape changed from green, hilly farmland to dry acres with tall palms and pampas grass. The sun was going down when they arrived. She got out and gasped at the Atlantic, whose end she could not see. It looked green in the evening sun. It wasn't what she expected. It seemed a lonely, infertile place to her, with the stink of seaweed and the gulls fighting for leftovers in the sand.

Then her husband took out his pocket watch.

"One hour, Marcie. I'll give you one hour," he said. "If you're not back by then, you can find your own way home."

She walked for half an hour with her bare feet in the frothy edge of the sea, then turned back along the cliff path, and from the shelter of some trees, watched her husband, at five minutes past the appointed hour, slam the car door and turn the ignition. Just as he was gathering speed, she jumped into the road and stopped the car.

Then she climbed in and spent the rest of her life with a man who would have gone home without her.

His nineteenth birthday is marked by a dinner at Leonardo's, the fancy seafood restaurant overlooking the bay. His mother, dressed in a white pants suit with a rhinestone belt, joins him on the balcony.

"I'm so proud of you, honey."

"Mom," he says and embraces her. She's a small woman with a hot temper. She gazes out at the water.

"Will you fix my tie?" he asks. "I never could do this right."

She knots the silk into an unnecessarily tight bow.

"There," she says. "You'll be the belle of the ball. How many mothers can say, 'My boy's going to Harvard University?' I'm a pig farmer's daughter from Tennessee, and my boy is going to Harvard. When I'm low, I always remember that, and it cheers me up no end."

"Mom!"

"You play your cards right and this could all be yours someday," she says. "He's got no kids. You wonder why I married him, but I was thinking of you all along."

Just then the millionaire comes out with a lighted cigar and blows a mouthful of smoke into the night. He's an ordinary-looking man with the whitest teeth money can buy.

"You-all ready? I could eat a small child," he says.

The restaurant owner greets the millionaire, escorts them to the table. A wooden board of crab claws is brought out. The millionaire eats them with his bare hands and clicks his fingers for the waiter, who pops a champagne cork. He always drinks champagne.

"Did you hear about this guy Clinton? Says if he's

elected president, he's gonna let queers into the military," he says. "What do you think of that, Harvard?"

"Richard," his mother says.

"It's okay, Mom. Well, I don't think—"

"What's next? Lesbians coaching the swim team, running for the Senate?"

"Richard!"

"What kind of defense would that be? A bunch of queers! We didn't win two world wars that way. I don't know what this country is turning into."

Smells of horseradish and dill spill out from the kitchen. A lobster has got loose in the tank, but the waiter dips a net into the water and traps him.

"No more politics," his mother says. "It's my boy's night. He got a 3.75 grade point average last semester. Now what do you think of that, Richard?"

"3.75? Not bad."

"Not bad? Well, I should say not! He's top of his class at Harvard!"

"Mom."

"No, I won't be hushed up this time! He's top of the class, and he's nineteen years old today! A grown man, almost. Let's have a toast."

"Now, there's an idea," says the millionaire. He refills the champagne flutes. "Here's to the brightest young man in the whole state of Florida," he says. (They are smiling now, suddenly at ease. There is a chance that this dinner will not be like the others.) "... and to not having queers in the military!"

The mother's smile capsizes. "Goddamn, Richard!"

"What's the matter? It's just a little joke. Doesn't anybody around here know how to take a joke anymore?"

The waiter arrives with a steel tray and the entrées. Turbot for the lady, salmon for the young man, and lobster for the millionaire. The millionaire wants more champagne.

"There must be some fine women up there at Harvard," he says. "Some real knockouts."

"They accept us on the basis of intelligence, not looks."

"Even so. The best and the brightest. How come you never bring a girl down?" The millionaire ties a napkin around his neck, takes the pincers and breaks a claw open, picks out the meat. "They must be all around you like flies," he says, "a young man like you. Why, when I was your age I had a different woman every weekend."

"These olives!" the mother says. "Taste these olives!"

They eat in silence for the rest of the meal, as the millionaire likes to concentrate on his food. Afterward, the maitre d' comes by and whispers a few words into the millionaire's ear. The lights around their table are doused, and a lighted cake is carried from the kitchen by a nervous, Mexican waiter singing "Happy Birthday". It is a pink cake, the pinkest cake the young man has ever seen, like a cake you'd have at a christening party for twin girls. The millionaire is grinning.

"Make a wish, honey!" his mother says.

The young man closes his eyes and makes a wish, then blows hard, extinguishing the candles. The millionaire takes the knife and carves it into uneven pieces, like a pie chart. The young man stuffs a piece into his mouth, licks

the frosting. The millionaire reaches for his mother's hand, clasps her jeweled fingers.

"Happy birthday, son," the mother says and kisses him on the mouth. He tastes lipstick, stands, and he hears himself thanking them for a pleasant birthday. He hears his mother calling his name, the waiter saying, "Good evening, sir," at the doorway. He is crossing the highway now, finding a space between the speeding cars. Other college kids are drinking beer on the promenade, watching the bungee jumpers throwing themselves into midair, screaming.

Down at the deserted beach, the tide has reclaimed the strand. The water is rough in the night wind. He loosens the knot at his throat and walks on and on, losing track of time. Up at the pier, yachts with roped-in sails stand trembling on the water. He thinks of his grandmother coming to the ocean. She said if she had her life to live again, she would never have climbed back into that car. She'd have stayed behind and turned into a streetwalker sooner than go home. Nine children she bore him. When her grandson asked what made her get back in, her answer was, "Those were the times I lived in. That's what I believed. I thought I didn't have a choice."

His grandmother, with whom he lived while his parents broke up, the woman who embraced him so tight she bruised him, is dead now. Not a day has passed when he has not felt her absence. She is dead, but he is nineteen years old, and alive and inhabiting space on the earth, getting As at Harvard, walking on a beach in the moonlight without any time constriction. He will never marry; he

knows that now. The water looks like liquid pewter. He kicks his shoes off and, barefooted, enters the salty waters. The white waves that mark the sandbar are clearly visible in the darkness. He feels dirty, smells the cigar smoke on his clothes. He strips naked, placing the cufflinks safely in his pants pocket, and leaves his clothes on the strand. When he wades into the big white-fringed waves, the water is a cold surprise. He swims, feels clean again. Perhaps he will leave tomorrow, call the airline, change his flight, go back to Cambridge.

When he reaches the white waves, he is relieved. The water is deeper, the waves angrier now that it is night. He can rest here before the return swim to the shore. He lowers his feet to feel the sand. Waves thrash over his head, knocking him back into the deep water. He cannot find solid ground. His heart is beating fast, he swallows water, goes farther out to find the shallowest place. He never meant to drink all that champagne. He never meant to go swimming in the first place. All he wanted was to wash the evening off him. He struggles for the longest time, goes underwater, believing it will be easier if he comes up only for air. He sees the lighted condominiums on the shore. Out of nowhere comes the thought of his grandmother, who after coming all the way, and with only an hour to spend, would not get into the water, even though she was a strong, river swimmer. When he asked her why, she said she just didn't know how deep it was. Where the deep started, or where it ended. The young man floats on the surface, then slowly makes his way back to the lighted condominiums on the shore. It is a long way

off, but the penthouse lights are clear against the sky. When he reaches the shallow water, he crawls on his belly and collapses on the sand. He is breathing hard and looking around for his clothes, but the tide has taken them away. He imagines the first species that crawled out of the sea, the amount of courage it took to sustain life on land. He thinks of the young men in Cambridge, his stepfather saying Harvard, like Harvard is his name, his mother's diamonds winking like fake stars, and his wish for an ordinary life.