

Scene with Sea Creatures

That night they went swimming. Karen followed her mother-in-law down the deck stairs, down the dark beach toward the water. The sand was cold, the small waves lapped slightly against the jetty. In the house behind them shone a single kitchen light, and the yellow light on the porch, for the bugs. Ahead of Karen, Cee-Cee pushed into the water, and tiny sparkling green flashes shone around her legs, her long body. Karen, who was eighteen, saw Cee-Cee's long legs, distorted by the green luminous water, and thought her mother-in-law, who was forty-eight, looked old.

“Isn't this divine?” Cee-Cee said. “The red tide makes them come. It feeds them, and it only comes in August.”

The green creatures like stars, Karen thought. All around us. And because she was eighteen, the night was full of mysterious promise. The swelling water, Cee-Cee's face in the white bathing cap, turned up to the dull night sky, with no stars. The water lifting them up and down together, so you didn't know where the bottom was. The Sound with mysterious shapes that could be islands.

“I'm glad you showed me,” Karen said. Cee-Cee's hand bumped against hers, hard and cold and warm in the water. And the girl was overcome by love for her mother-in-law, who never complained even though her son was in Viet Nam.

Years later, in the kitchen of the house by the water, Karen watches Dean, her long-ago husband, riffling through some of Cee-Cee's papers in an accordion file. The memorial service

was held this morning, and they are drinking beer in the kitchen. The phone has stopped ringing, because Cee-Cee's friends and acquaintances have left them alone out of consideration, and because the memorial service in the lovely stone chapel was long enough to satisfy them.

"Didn't she ever throw anything out?" he says. Dean is Cee-Cee's only son. Karen thinks she might not recognize him if she'd seen him on the street. Beside him sits his wife, Bella, who, Dean says, is a weaver. Long hair, quiet. Weaves with sticks and silk. Went to art school.

"Didn't she ever throw anything out?" he directs it this time to Karen. He means the garage full of discarded furniture, broken aluminum beach chairs, old skis, his mother's photographs and rooms crowded with gifts from friends, the collections of pottery birds, the sailboat mobile Karen herself gave Cee-Cee long ago.

"We found some bizarre letters," Dean tells Karen. "Actually, Bella found them. From the Second World War."

"I think she wanted us to find them," Bella says.

"Don't be stupid," Dean says. "Why would she do that?"

"They were from a man," Bella says. "She wanted us to know there was someone besides Dean's father."

"Pretty racy reading," Dean says, looking at Karen. He speaks as if he's familiar. As if he still knows her.

He's forgotten his own letters to her, she thinks. That she keeps bound by a deteriorating rubber band, in an old jewelry box. Next to a beaded necklace she'd made that year, with glass beads and silk. She'd made one better than that for Cee-Cee, with blue beads, Cee-Cee's favorite color. Now she has it back. Dean has given Karen her choice of the jewelry after Bella took what she wanted. The blue bead necklace Karen has in her handbag.

“Too much crap,” Dean says cheerfully. “A world of crap. I think we should go eat.”

He’s impatient at how much sorting there is to do, Karen thinks. As if it’s Cee-Cee’s fault. Karen says she has to go upstairs and change. The high heels are hurting her feet. “You’ll be in the side bedroom,” Dean says. “You know where it is.”

*

Upstairs in the hall, she lingers, for the first time in ten years or more, in front of a wall filled with photographs. Cee-Cee and her husband Charlie on a beach with palm trees, holding drinks. Cee-Cee as a college girl, leaning against a pillar in a well-made cotton dress. A photo of Dean and Karen on their wedding day. Karen is wearing a white caftan she bought on a sweep through a head shop the day before the wedding. The sleeves were too long, so she’d rolled them up. Dean has sideburns, which she’d forgotten. At the end of the hall, a long green woven hanging with mica sparkles in it, that must be a gift from Bella. A photo of Dean’s father, Charlie, as a young man on a beach on Cape Cod, with his mother, rumored to be difficult. He squints at the sun. Another of Charlie on the deck with a barbecue grill and a spatula.

Charlie died in Barbados, in the hotel room where he and Cee-Cee were on a vacation. “Even when he died,” Cee-Cee had said, “I had to take care of everything. ‘Oh, Charlie,’ I thought. ‘Even now.’ So I got the body shipped back, and dealt with the State Department, and the airline shipping. Even dead he was a pain in the ass.”

*

Karen drops her overnight bag, blue paisley, on the bed in the side bedroom. The surf hits the jetty, outside in the twilight. The air is dry; she’d forgotten how dry. She thinks Dean seems callous about his mother because she was sick for so long. He’s gotten used to her death. He’s

already finished mourning. Karen notices four of Cee-Cee's bowling trophies, set haphazard on the bureau. Forgotten.

For some reason she recalls Charlie watching television in the family room. Eating Cheez-Puffs, his black buzz cut thinning on top. Karen had been working in the insurance office, while Dean was in the Air Force. "I think the weatherman's drunk," Charlie said. "Cee-Cee, come look at this."

Cee-Cee came in with a glass of wine in one hand. "You're right," she said. "He's completely plastered!" The weatherman was struggling to keep his eyes on the camera. He said he'd gone to the dentist. "I'll be damned," Cee-Cee said.

It was New Year's Eve, Karen remembers. They were celebrating together, and Dean was in Okinawa, typing in an office for the Medical Corps. Because, as Cee-Cee said, he managed to talk his way into it. "Thank God," she said.

The weatherman saluted the television audience. "He's shitfaced," Cee-Cee said. "I've seen everything."

This was the first Christmas, when Karen had made the blue bead necklace, which she drops now into the zipper compartment of her suitcase, because it's precious and Cee-Cee wore it.

*

At the restaurant, she sits across from Dean and Bella, and has trouble focusing on them because the oil candle at the table is too bright. Bella wears a white wool shawl with paisley in it. Subtle. She's pulled it tight across her shoulders. Karen wonders what Dean has said to Bella about her.

They've all ordered the sole, and Bella asked the waiter twice to make sure there aren't mussels in the stuffing. She's allergic to mussels, Dean explains. Hives. "It's worse when she's having her time of the month," he says. Smiling at Bella. Karen thinks they're playing some kind of Gotcha.

"That's more information than I planned to share," Bella pushes his knee, under the table, and he smiles at her.

"Don't worry, dear," he says. "Karen's practically family."

"Not really," Karen says to Bella, to make her feel better.

"I think I'll have a gin gimlet," he says to the waiter. "Dry. Make it very dry."

He asks Bella if she wants to split an appetizer. Ravioli. "Ask Karen," Bella says. "I'll get too full."

Karen declines, thinking it's too intimate to split the ravioli. Eat from the same plate. The same food that goes into his mouth.

*

When Dean was in Okinawa, where he stayed for his entire tour, Karen had worked in the insurance office. Typing. It was as if she was doing what he was doing, only halfway around the world. He'd sent Karen letters about bar girls. They'd had an agreement. Discussed it in detail together at night in their bed (a mattress on the floor in their student apartment), the nights before he'd shipped out. There would be times, they'd agreed. No one belonged to anybody. It was understood. This was the Age of Aquarius. No one owned anyone.

Months later, when she was living with his parents, he wrote that one of the bar girls pulled a snake in and out of her vagina. The air was so full of humidity, he wrote later, nothing dried. No article of clothing dried.

“Doesn’t it bother you?” one of the girls who worked at the insurance office had asked her. “When he’s over there?”

“He won’t get shot,” Karen said.

“But I mean the other things,” her friend said. She was Polish-American and had pale white skin, pale hair. “The hookers.”

“No,” Karen said. She thought it was normal. It wasn’t something to worry about. In a funny way, it was as if she was with him, in those rooms with the floor mats. The squeaking steel-frame beds. “Love,” Dean signed his letters. “Love, love, your Love.”

On the nights when Cee-Cee went bowling, Charlie used to pick Karen up after work at the insurance agency, because Cee-Cee had the other car. Some nights he picked her up he brought Jerry, a neighbor who was Karen’s age, because Jerry was bored that summer, and he liked to chat with Charlie. Jerry was going to be important, Cee-Cee said, because he was very smart, but he was also going to be a stuffed shirt. Because his father was a stuffed shirt, Cee-Cee said. He was insufferable.

Some nights Jerry and Karen used to hang out on the deck together and play poker. They listened to music and twice smoked pot that Karen got from her friend at work. Jerry was awkward (pot made him cough) and not smooth at all, but if you asked him about something like a sitar, it turned out he knew a lot about it, and could even explain the diatonic scale, and Indian musical notation.

One night Charlie and Jerry picked her up at work. They’d driven home past a new motel on Route 15, with its massive porte-cochères and hedges around the parking lot. Karen said to Jerry, “That’s where your girlfriend stayed.”

“Who? Mine?” Charlie startled, glared over at her, away from the road as he was driving, the whites of his eyes big, and Karen could tell by his embarrassed laugh, and his grimace of relief when he understood she meant Jerry, that Charlie had had a woman at the motel.

“Oh, yes, it is,” Jerry said. “She stayed here.”

Charlie’s forehead glistened, and Karen knew she’d never mention what she saw to anybody. Least of all Cee-Cee.

The next morning, Charlie was upset that the cat had cystitis. She’d been peeing blood in the bathtub. He salted the cat’s food to make her drink more.

“Oh, Charlie,” Cee-Cee laughed. She thought he was ridiculously misguided. “That won’t help.”

“It works with people,” Charlie said. “I’m not that stupid.”

“Why would you ever salt a cat’s food?” Cee-Cee asked him.

*

I could have said something, Karen thinks now. I could have said, Be careful. But eighteen, and you don’t say that. Things are bigger, and you let them play out.

When Dean was away, that summer, she had missed him terribly. Ached for him. She’d paced the back yard, the sandy grass, in the dry dark, among the dry trees, longing for him. Aching. Remembering the texture of his skin, his scent. Hearing the tide ebb over the rocks on the jetty, the wind that fluttered her hair like a hand. The tide on the rocks like a voice.

In the early days, in that college apartment, she and Dean had clung to each other like young animals, without thought, speech, or memories of anyone, just their breath and sweat. Their urgency to please each other. They had been tabula rasa, in that distant place. Where you slept and got up in the morning with the sunlight coming through the window shade, and were

caked with each other's juices. Had to find your flip-flops to go to the bathroom, because the floor was so dirty.

*

During the year she lived with Cee-Cee and Charlie, Cee-Cee had served dinner every night at seven on the dot. "You can set your watch by it," Dean had told her. Before he left her there to stay. In those early days, Karen was self-conscious about her table manners, before she got to know her in-laws, but Cee-Cee spoke openly. She talked about her abortion. "We weren't ready to have children," she told Karen the first night, passing her asparagus with yellow sauce. "It was right after the War. We were broke, living in the City."

Charlie said, "You don't need to bore the shit out of her with that story."

"Oh, let me tell it. What do you care, anyway?"

Charlie's crew cut had scalp showing through on top. "Christ, we've all heard it a hundred times," he said. He grimaced, and when he got up to clear the plates, he made a joke. "I had an idea for a cartoon," he said. "This car's pulled up at a bridge, and the sign says, 'Pay Troll Ahead.'"

"No anesthesia," Cee-Cee said. "In somebody's apartment in Philadelphia."

Listening, Karen thought how Dean could have had a brother. It wouldn't have been a sister. It would have been another Dean, just as beautiful, who would be sitting here, while Dean was watching a floor show in a girlie bar in Okinawa. Sweating in a dark room in the tropics.

Later she learned that Charlie lived to make jokes. He had many ideas for cartoons.

*

Now, telling each other they are too full with dinner from the seafood restaurant, Karen and Dean and Bella are sitting in the living room, listening to the surf through the open slider

doors onto the deck. Dean lounges on the sofa, reading a magazine. Bella is around the corner, talking on her cell to someone Karen doesn't know. Maybe a relative or a business call. Bella has left long hairs in the bathroom sink, and Karen wonders why she is always, her whole life, mopping up after herself, when she visits. As if she can't offend anyone by leaving a trace. Bella comes to Dean on the sofa, and reads the magazine over his shoulder.

“Why are you hovering?” he says. “I'm just sitting here minding my own business.”

“For a minute, I thought it was interesting. I thought it was about Seattle.”

“It's nothing to do with Seattle.”

Karen goes back to her crossword puzzle, but is really listening to the tide on the rocks. She misses her two boys, whom she hasn't thought about all afternoon. And she misses the noise of their dinner-table talk. Maybe her husband took them out for burgers, or pizza. She sees her younger boy in bed. It's too late to speak to him. She calls her husband and tells him she'll take the younger boy shopping for his wrestling gear when she gets back tomorrow. Her husband sounds preoccupied, finishing up a report for work. He's half listening to her. “Are you all right?” she says.

“Just busy.”

She tells him she'll see him tomorrow. Dean runs his hand across the back of the sofa, listening to her. An old habit she remembers. His hands are different. Thicker. She says goodnight to him and Bella and goes upstairs toward her room, past Charlie with his difficult mother, in bathing suits, squinting at the photographer. Bella's glittery, green, sagging, wall hanging. Past herself and Dean, younger than anyone in this house, smiling in a simpler life. Herself in the oversized white dress.

Outside the bedroom window, the tide is drawing down on the dark rocks. The lips of the jetty.

*

Sometimes during that summer, she and Jerry from next door had climbed West Rock in the dark with flashlights. Stood at the top and watched the lights of the city below. The headlights moving. Sometimes Jerry put his arm around her waist, which made her grateful. He was solid. His shirt smelled clean in the dark.

At night when Cee-Cee and Charlie were in the house, you felt safe. You knew Cee-Cee would take care of what needed to be done. Karen ate Oreos in bed every night, and listened to the wild parrots squawking in the trees outside the window. The faint splash of water hitting the jetty. She said, "Goodnight, Dean," as if he could hear her. Ignored the crumbs in the bed, and stared at the anchor-and-eagle pattern in the blue wallpaper. "I love you, Dean," she said. Quietly, as if he could hear her.

Karen had sex with Jerry four times that summer, but then they just stopped. Her heart wasn't in it. She knew he'd go back to school in the fall, and she'd wait out the rest of Dean's tour, in the insurance office. Jerry's fumbled interest took place in his car, the nights she worked until seven. Or going up the mountain.

A month after she stopped sleeping with him, Karen didn't get her period, and she panicked. She almost told Cee-Cee, but never quite got the courage.

That same week, Jerry's family found out they were hiking up West Rock, and parking in the car. His father accused him of courting a married woman. There was an argument, Jerry told her one night. He and his father had been out in the sailboat in the Sound. His father told him he shouldn't get involved with anyone like Karen. "He was luffing," Jerry said. "I told him I'd bring

it around. But my brilliant idea backfired, and we hit the buoy. He said I was always experimenting.”

Karen watched Jerry, resting his head on his arm in the grass. They were waiting for a partial eclipse of the moon, sitting in a pasture somewhere off Route 17. Jerry smirked, as if he thought his father’s remark should be amusing, but he didn’t think it was funny. “Sometimes I feel like I’m watching everyone have a life,” he said. “But I’m just looking. I don’t understand what they’re feeling. At all.” He seemed unutterably cold, Karen thought. He just didn’t get it. Even sex surprised him, it seemed to her. As if it was some kind of party hat he had to wear that made him look foolish.

Later in the week, Karen was relieved when the first red spot appeared on her cotton underpants. It seemed a small mercy, dark red, staring up at her from between her legs.

*

Karen lies on this same bed again, although the wallpaper has been changed, into little nosegays of red flowers. The bedspread has faded from hours and days and years of sun. She remembers when Cee-Cee ordered it through a catalogue. New, with the bright sailboats woven across the fabric. Jaunty

*

After she and Dean got divorced, she stayed close with Cee-Cee and Charlie anyway. Maybe she needed a mother. Maybe the house by the shore was so steady, and organized, that it healed Karen to come and visit. In the summers, she and Cee-Cee used to sit on the deck and drink beer from green ceramic steins, and listen to the ball games. Cee-Cee and Charlie were having problems. “I don’t know what’s going to happen,” Cee-Cee said once. “But Charlie has to

get his act together. I shouldn't have married him. He said he couldn't survive without me, and I knew it was a mistake."

"At least you've got Dean," Karen said.

"Right," Cee-Cee agreed. "And I've got you now. You're like the daughter I never had." She rocked the deck chair back and sipped her beer. She was wearing a cotton shift by Lilly Pulitzer, with big bright flowers. Later Karen was not able to recall the time of day this conversation took place. It could have been night. It could have been afternoon. She remembers the shift and a varicosity on Cee-Cee's leg, which made her want to touch it away, rippled like a map of the Nile Delta.

*

Dean and Karen had gotten a divorce two years after he came back from Okinawa. "We were too young," she used to tell people. "It never had a chance." This seems to her now to be a lie. After Dean got back, and they had returned to school, they grew away from each other. They'd had enough sex together. They went to parties and saw other people, who lured them both with promises of adventure and strangeness. She stayed out all night. He did, too. Dean brought back from the war the habit of smoking a lot of pot, and finally he moved to another apartment. The time was a whirlwind of strange beds and unfamiliar bodies. The Legal Aid Society would do a divorce for you that cost seventy-five dollars.

When Karen was getting her Master's degree, Cee-Cee called to tell her that she and Charlie had separated. They were in couples counseling. They made lists of what they liked and didn't like about each other. "I've hung them on the refrigerator," Cee-Cee said. "One side, what we like. The other side, what we don't like." Cee-Cee said she wasn't sure Charlie was taking it

seriously. "Can he change?" she asked Karen. "I have no idea. He thought I'd be strong like his mother. I never should have married him."

The list was on the refrigerator the next time Karen visited. Good side: Sense of humor. Fair-minded. Likes to cook. Generous. Hardworking. Loves family. Other side: Not interested in sex. Passive. Watches too much television. Avoids talking about what bothers him (crossed out).

"The list is on the fridge so I can remember," Cee-Cee said. "See the positive points and remember them."

Later it turned out that Charlie was dating a woman he worked with. "A lapsed Christian Scientist," Cee-Cee said. "Good God, can you believe it?" She and Charlie went back to the counselor after the woman got tired of Charlie's drinking and dumped him. "We meet for dinner and then go to the counselor," Cee-Cee said. "Maybe he'll come back home. I don't know."

One weekend when Karen went to visit Cee-Cee, a couple of years after Charlie had come back, they were sitting in the kitchen eating breakfast when Dean came by to drop something off for his father. Part of a barbecue grill. Karen was shocked to see him. She had forgotten the high curve of his forehead, the cheekbones, the hollow jaw line. The voice so familiar it seemed to come from inside her own head. He talked about a new job he had, selling imaging equipment for a big company. He was polite, and not interested. It was as if she were pulled again into him. He traveled, he said. "All over the Northeast. But I'm sure my mother has told you all that."

"Yes," Karen said. "She did."

"I have to get going," he said.

After the door closed behind him, Karen was shocked to be so sick with grief.

“For a while there,” Cee-Cee said, clearing their dirty plates, pouring coffee for them both, “I thought Dean was the one for you.”

*

In the morning, Karen is wakened by the sun across the bed, on her face. Downstairs Dean and Bella are talking in the kitchen. The smell of coffee, of burnt toast. Dean is laughing. Bella is clowning, when Karen comes downstairs. Bella wraps the shawl she had on last night around one hand, making a puppet with her fingers. “What do you think?” she asks Dean.

“It’d work.” They are in a better mood, today, Karen realizes. They have a happy relaxation to their talk that makes Karen think they made love last night. The man from the funeral home has brought by six tall, sweeping baskets of flowers, that sit in the walkway like a surprising garden. They seem perfect and out of place. Dean has bought a box of croissants at the bakery across the street, and he pours a glass of orange juice for Karen out of the carton on the table.

“Good flowers,” Karen says.

“Nothing but the best,” Dean says. He seems depressed, all of a sudden. Karen thinks he looks like his father.

“The ashes are going to be ready next week,” Bella says. “I think we’ll spread them in the Sound.”

Karen smears jam on her croissant, which flattens under the knife. There is no invitation for her to come along.

“I have to get back this morning,” she says. Dean thanks her for coming down, and offers to carry her bags downstairs. She tells him she can manage it.

But next to her car, as she's ready to leave, she hugs Bella and Dean equally. Bella's perfume flows through her long hair. Dean says, "Sorry you can't stay longer."

"No," Karen says. "I could come down and help you pack up the house. Later."

"We can manage," Bella says. She and Dean have their arms around each other's waists.

"Wait!" Bella says. "I forgot to give you something." She dashes into the house, the door slams. Dean says, "She has a suit she wants to give you. Cee-Cee's. She thinks you're the same size."

On the lawn that curves down to the shoreline, an abandoned garden hose has left a dead trail in the grass. The sun sparkles blindingly on the Sound. Karen says, "It's like we're two different people, now." She doesn't know why she rushes to say it.

Dean says, "My mother loved you."

"I remember," Karen says. "It was important. And that you did, too."

Dean laughs, without warmth. It is some terrible punctuation mark. "That's one time in my life I'm glad is over." The Sound continues to sparkle, but it seems to be frightening, and without heart. He looks over his shoulder toward the house, where Bella is about to rush through the door. They both hear her footsteps rushing in the back hallway.

*

When Karen reaches the entrance ramp to Route 84, she waits at the light. Ahead of her is a pickup truck with lawn equipment. Someone is working on Sunday, she thinks. In the back of her car is a blue suede-cloth suit belonging to Cee-Cee, which Karen will keep in her closet. Grass cuttings are stuck all over the back of the truck in front of her. Random, like fuzz or fur. She is thinking about Cee-Cee's cotton shift, with the beautiful tropical flowers. The light doesn't change, and she wonders if its computer is broken.

*

Months pass. High summer arrives, and then autumn. She understands that Dean and Bella will never call her.

Back in her own living room in New Hampshire, in a house that overlooks a snowy, fashionable valley, Karen watches for the school bus that will bring her two sons home from the high school. The older one wants his driver's license. They want money for working in the yard, when they used to do it simply to please their father. The road is empty beyond the house, and it will be another half hour before they are home. She wonders, if she wrote a list for the wall of her study, would it say what had been written on other lists she knew, or would it be that different? The same griefs of failed sex. Loneliness in the midst of conversation. Somewhere on the edge of a beach in Connecticut, a young girl trailing into the water behind an older woman. Trailing into the warm, summery water.

*

In the living room at New Harbor, Cee-Cee is watching Wimbledon, and drinking beer out of the same green steins she's had for years. "I just love it," she says. "I love watching them play!" Sometimes Karen, trying to read *Anna Karenina* on the deck, hears Cee-Cee yell at a particularly good return. Then Karen goes to sit with her, although she doesn't like tennis, but she enjoys watching Cee-Cee whoop, almost as if Cee-Cee was playing herself. The sun is going down over the ocean, causing a rising, numbing fog. It is a life of small moments, Karen thinks. Each and each and each. None more important than any other. The cookies. A bowling trophy. A picture of Charlie and his mother, who had been difficult. The click of the stein on the glass table top. Cee-Cee has a varicosity on her leg. Karen sips her own beer. There is a peace in the room she does not know anywhere else.

*

Days pass faster. It is some trick of the endocrine system, to give her less and less. The colors change in everything she remembers. Possibly the steins were blue.

*

She has been waiting for her young husband for a year. For ever. Her feet are bare, that summer, in Indian sandals. Dean returns from the war, into LaGuardia Airport, from his flight from Fort Collins in Colorado. He is thicker in the neck. His eyes are the same, she thinks, as he takes off his sunglasses. In the steaming summer heat, where the air is dense to breathe. In the brilliant light. She runs across the tarmac, arms outstretched to meet him. Where she will close in, and close in, and close in, and finally—in the banks of her memory, at least—arrive.