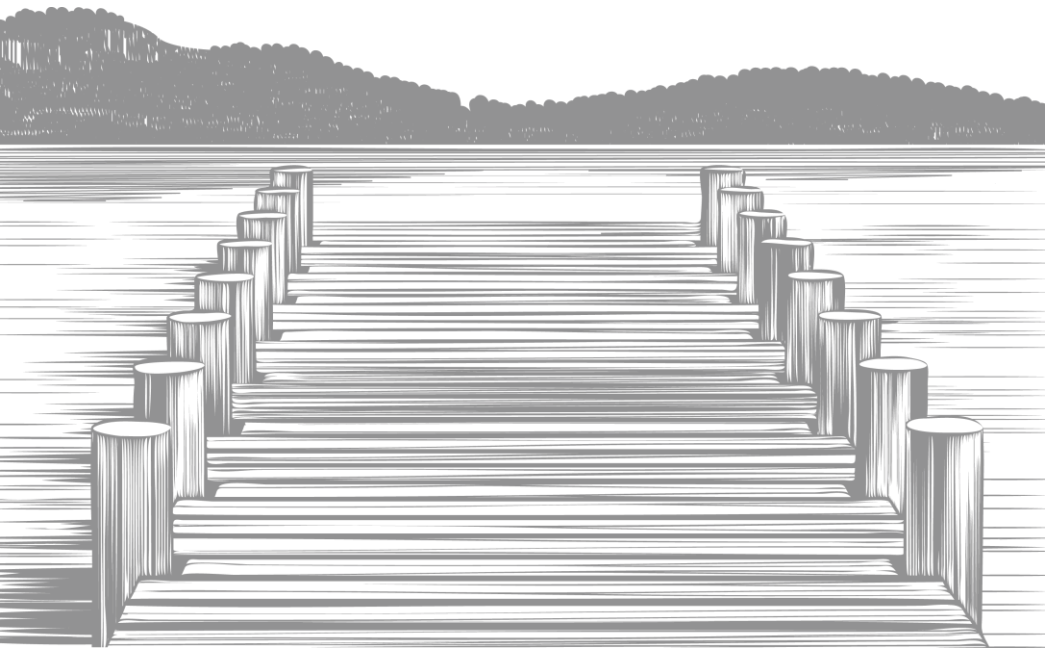


kit-hale





I woke up with a start what felt like days later, hot and stuffy and absolutely disoriented. I had no idea where I was. I flailed around in bed until I found my phone. It was noon, I'd slept for about two hours, and I was gradually remembering everything – the airplane, the car ride, the breakfast, the cottage. I groaned and stretched and sluggishly pulled myself out of bed, opening the curtains to let a little light into the room.

I peeked my head into Mom's room, but her bed was empty. The cottage was quiet and still; I thought she might be outside reading or running errands. I went into the tiny bathroom and turned on the shower. The tub was wet already, so she must have showered not too long ago.

It felt absolutely amazing under the water, washing off the filth of the airplane and the clingy heat of the morning. I kept the shower as cool as I could stand it, and when I was done, I stood dripping on the bath mat. I towel-dried my hair, put a

tampon in, and threw on some shorts and a T-shirt. My hair was already curling, so I scrunched it some more and decided to let it air-dry. That was one thing about Jennica that always bugged me. She had *great* hair. My hair was unruly and impossible to do anything with. Jennica could roll around in a dumpster and come out looking like she'd just had a professional blowout.

Okay. Enough thinking about Jennica.

I went downstairs. Mom wasn't in the living room or on the front porch or the back porch, and then I realized the rental car wasn't there, so she must have gone out somewhere. I paused in front of the fan in the living room and wondered what I should do. Probably get a head start on those summer reading books. But that meant I would have to read. So. No.

Mom had opened up the windows in the enclosed porch, and the result was actually nice: A cross breeze ran through the house, keeping it pretty cool. Which was good, because I hadn't actually seen any air conditioners.

I let myself onto the front porch, where Mom had left an almost empty coffee mug and a copy of today's *Boston Herald* on the small coffee table. She must have napped for only twenty minutes or so — that was her signature move. She often said there wasn't much that couldn't be cured by a nice twenty-minute nap. I sat down on the porch swing and picked up the paper, leafing absentmindedly through it until I reached an interesting article about ten pages in.

## ***MAKESURE TO LOOK UP THIS SUMMER!***

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**The New England skies are set to provide an action-packed stage for us this summer, thanks to the reappearance of the Kit-Hale comet. Starting tonight, you'll be able to see this bright comet for just about two months. The last time the Kit-Hale comet lit up our skies was twenty-eight years ago, also during the summer months. Its appearance will be marked by an increase in meteor activity. Get ready to make plenty of wishes, because you'll see these "shooting stars" all summer long.**

I'd never seen a comet before! And I knew it was silly, but it felt kind of nice, like New England was welcoming me to its shores with my own private sky show.

I dropped the paper onto the porch swing and then, because I couldn't think of anything else to do, went back upstairs and unpacked my suitcase. I might as well get comfy since the cottage was going to be my home for the next two months. I folded all my shirts and shorts and placed them into the empty dresser, then I sorted my underwear and socks and bathing suits into the other drawers. When I was done, I slid my suitcase under the bed, arranged my toiletries on the top of the dresser, and tossed the summer reading books onto

the comforter. Curious, I took the first one off the stack and unwrapped it.

*The Great Gatsby.*

It looked like a really old copy, with a tattered dust jacket and yellowed pages. I knew it was one of Miriam's favorite books; this one had probably been hers. I opened to the title page, but there was no inscription. I brought it up to my nose and inhaled deeply. The sweet smell of old books. Even I had to admit, there was nothing quite like it.

I tossed the book onto the bed and moved to one of the bedroom's three windows. It overlooked the front yard, and if I looked across the water, I could see Motif No. 1. It really was kind of a cool building—something about it felt old-fashioned, like it had been cut and pasted from a distant time. It was weird to think that my parents had actually met here, twenty-eight years ago, against the same exact backdrop. The water, the houses, Motif No. 1 . . . I doubted much had changed about Rockport in those twenty-eight years. It was one of those towns that felt like time had just kind of stood still. . . .

Wait. Twenty-eight years . . .

Was there any chance my parents had seen the same astronomical phenomenon I was about to witness? I'd have to ask Miriam when she returned.

I went back downstairs with *The Great Gatsby* and settled myself on the back porch to read it.

Miriam got home about an hour later, letting herself in the

front door and pouring a glass of water in the kitchen before joining me.

“Hope you weren’t nervous,” she said, collapsing on the love seat. “I just wanted to drop off the rental car. I took a cab back. Next step is to see if the station wagon actually runs.”

“Maybe that should have been your *first* step,” I pointed out.

“Oh,” she said with a laugh. “You’re probably right.”

“I’ve just been reading,” I said, holding up *The Great Gatsby* as evidence. “I’m beginning to think the green light is a metaphor for something.”

Mom smiled. “That was my copy,” she said, taking a great gulp of water. “You better be nice to it.”

“I’m always nice to books,” I said. “Oh, hey—I saw that thing in the paper, about the comet and the meteors.”

“Kit-Hale!” Mom said excitedly. “You know, the summer I met your father, that comet was all anyone could talk about.”

“That’s what I was going to ask you! If you saw it.”

“You couldn’t miss it. It lit up the sky every night. And the meteors were out of this world.” She winked. “Pardon the pun.”

“That’s really cool that it’s happening again.”

“I can’t wait to see it. Don’t tell your father, okay? I want it to be a surprise when he gets here.”

I didn’t say anything right away. Mom leaned back on the couch and closed her eyes, resting the glass of water on her forehead.

It just made me wonder, that was all — why did she want to surprise Dad? If they were getting a divorce, why did she care about things like surprising him?

After a moment, Mom took the glass away from her forehead, put it down on the coffee table, and went outside to see if the station wagon would start. I followed her, having nothing else to do, and as I stood on the porch, jokingly crossing my fingers as the car groaned sickly and eventually turned over, I realized that this was it — this was my summer. No Jennica, no Josh, no Cecilia, no Dad, no Los Angeles, no bookstore, just Mom and me and this cottage and the comet and this town I didn't really know the first thing about. It felt a little scary, and for the first time since Mom had mentioned this trip, I felt an unpleasant feeling tightening around my chest....

I was trapped.

I was trapped here.

The car coughed out a great gust of black smoke, then it seemed to settle down into an almost steady purr. I watched Mom poke around in the glove compartment for the registration or something, then she got out and walked over to me. "Needs an oil change," she said. "Want to come for a ride? It will be boring."

"No, I think I'll explore a little," I said.

"Here," she said, handing me a fairly crumpled and ancient-looking twenty-dollar bill. "Take this. Found it in the dash. Probably the oldest currency in circulation. Buy yourself some candy. Oh, and there's a set of spare keys on the counter."



Bearskin Neck is that way. Don't go *too* far. Keep your phone on you. Be safe. Etcetera, etcetera."

"I will, Mom."

"Love you," she said, and kissed me on the cheek before getting back into the car. I waved as she backed it out of the driveway.

I stared after her for a few moments, my fingers finding the moonstone ring; the surface was impossibly cool in this heat, and outside, in direct sunlight, the stone was anything but white. It was made up of a hundred different colors. I rubbed it, feeling how smooth it was, then went inside to find the keys and a purse.

A few minutes later I was on the road, wondering what the heck Bearskin Neck was and whether I wanted to go somewhere with such a sinister name, but as it turned out, I was basically already there. A three-minute walk and I was standing in front of a weathered old sign explaining how the area got its name:

named from a bear caught by the tide and killed in 1700.

1700. That was a *long* time ago.

Poor bear.

I started walking down the road, which was surprisingly crowded with people. It was a narrow street, with no cars on it, flanked by rows of gift stores and art galleries. I passed a general store, a couple of T-shirt stores, and a place called the Fudgery, where I made a mental note to stop in some time.

There were also little restaurants, small seafood places that looked like they couldn't hold more than ten or fifteen people at a time. I passed a toy store, a crystal shop, an old-fashioned place called the Country Store, and a store called China Gifts International. Every place looked like it had been there for ages, giving the whole street a sort of timeless, vintage feel—just like Motif No. 1.

I walked all the way to the end of the road, where a long jetty began. It was made up of huge rocks, and people were walking out to the very end of it. The harbor was to my right, and beyond that, the cottage. To my left, the rest of Rockport, and right in front of me, past the jetty, was the open ocean.

I took a deep breath, filling my lungs with the salty air, and let it out slowly.

Two months to go.

You could survive two months of anything, really.

Especially if you didn't have a choice.