

PROLOGUE

THE WIFE

Saturday, May 9, 2020

Two teenage boys burst onto the beach, skirting the *do not enter* tape through the sea grape bushes, surfboards tight under their arms. The sun beat straight down on them, casting no shadows, as if they weren't even there. Despite the closure of the beaches, despite their mother's reminders to do their schoolwork while she went to the store, they could not help themselves.

They were pretty sure the cops who patrolled occasionally would not see them either, because they never did. The police were only looking for cars illegally parked at the side of North Ocean Boulevard. This stretch of beach was grassy and hilly and the water was impossible to see from the road. The fact that the boys were breaking all rules—their parents' and the town's—made their outing all the more irresistible.

The wind was high, the waves were breaking perfectly, and this was Reef Road, famous to surfers around the world. At least, that's what the boys had been told. They had been surfing here for years now, practically since they could walk. Once, they'd gone up to Montauk where the waves, admittedly, were great. But this was their beach and they felt protective of it.

They hefted their boards and walked as fast as they could over the frying pan of sand. In their hurry, they did not notice at first the shrieking circle of seagulls down near the edge of the surf. As they got closer, they became aware of dozens of gulls hopping and skittering to and from something that had captured their attention.

Rand, the younger boy—the one whose Palm Beach Day Academy friends called California for his blond curls and speech pattern, peppered with *rads* and *bitchins*—saw it first.

“Bro.” He stopped moving, ignoring the burning sand on the soft tissue of his arches. “What the fuck is that?”

“What?” asked Colson—his actual brother and not a metaphorical *bro*—continuing his beeline for the water.

“Dude,” Rand said. “Stop!”

“Man, you’re such a wuss.” Colson paused briefly. “Never seen a dead rat before?”

“That’s not a rat, you douchebag!”

Colson ignored him and kept walking.

“*Please* look?”

When his brother sounded like the little kid he used to be, Colson stopped. There was a plaintive note that made him drop his board and approach the seagulls, waving his hands to disperse them.

The seagulls did not like it one bit. Whatever they had gotten hold of, they wanted to keep.

“Beat it!” Colson yelled, kicking sand at them. He watched as one gull almost took off, nearly lifting into the air with the object secured in his beak. But it proved to be too heavy for him and he dropped it.

Both Rand and Colson lunged forward. It was hard to tell who identified it first. Rand’s tanned face paled and he turned his head to vomit, avoiding the item on the sand. Colson did not throw up, although he confessed to his brother that he could have.

“Fuck,” Colson said, “it’s a hand.”

“Yeah,” Rand agreed, wiping his mouth. “Look,” he said, squinting at the body part—the human body part—resting in the sand on their beach. “It’s got a ring.”

Colson leaned over to peer as closely as he could without touching it. "What the fuck are we supposed to do with this?"

"I dunno, Cole. Call the police?"

"Dude, what do we say? We're not supposed to be here, but we *are* and we found a hand? A fucking *hand*?"

Rand was silent. Both boys stood motionless and stared at it. It was a man's hand, judging from the general shape of it, the short nails, the hair on the knuckles, which looked abnormally black against the blanched quality of the bloated flesh. The end of it, the part that should have been attached to somebody's arm, was roughly severed, like it had been torn off. The ring was a plain gold band.

The seagulls took the boys' stillness for permission and began their recapture maneuvers.

"Arrrggh!" screamed Colson, waving his arms and running a few short steps in all directions to ward off the scavengers.

"You think it's fake?" Rand asked. "I mean, like Halloween?"

"That's really dumb, bro."

Rand paused to pull his hair out of his mouth from the gusting wind. "You think it's real?"

"The seagulls do," said Colson.

"Yeah."

"We can't just leave it. I mean, it's probably *evidence*."

"Well, we can't bring it home," said Rand. "What're we gonna say to Mom?"

This question lightened the mood. Colson started one of his routines that always made his brother laugh: "Yo, Mama," he began, "what's for dinner? We've been out hunting and gathering."

"Can we give you a hand with dinner?" Rand chimed in, one-upping his brother.

The boys cracked up with a forced gaiety neither felt.

"Anyway," Rand said, "I'm not touching it."

"Little One," Colson called him by this diminutive more often than Rand cared for. "You're younger, you've gotta do it."

"Do not. It probably has coronavirus and fell off someone."

"It was a shark, *dummkopf*. He took a taste of this guy and hurled him up."

"You're probably right," Rand said.

"Go find an old plastic bag. They haven't cleaned the beach lately. There has to be one blowing around here somewhere."

"You do it."

"Someone needs to stay and watch the hand," Colson said and started to laugh again. "Just go."

Rand glared at his older brother then headed off to follow his orders. What else could he do? What else could they do? They couldn't very well leave a human hand on Reef Road beach for the seagulls to eat. It wasn't right. Anyway, it didn't take long for him to find one of those long, blue plastic bags that newspapers came in. He picked it up and checked it for holes. He didn't want hand guts dripping all over him.

"Here," he said to Colson when he got back. "I got the bag so you put the hand in it."

"Fine," Colson said. "Baby."

Colson slipped his own hand into the bag and prepared to pick up the appendage in the same way he would pick up poop from their golden retriever. He grabbed the hand through the thin layer of plastic and shuddered at the rubbery-ness of its texture. It gave him the weird sensation that he was actually shaking another human being's hand. Something they hadn't done since COVID.

The good news was it didn't really smell too bad, just kind of fishy.

"C'mon," he said to Rand. "Let's go."

Each boy tucked his board under his arm, cast a wistful glance at the sea, and turned to walk back across the sandy expanse, one of them carrying the day's discovery.

They passed by a woman sitting on the sand, a woman they had not seen before. A woman they did not see, even now. A nondescript woman, dressed in khakis, an oversized shirt, one of those sunblock hats for old people. The kind of woman no man ever sees, especially younger ones.

When questioned later, each boy stated with absolute certainty that no one else was on the beach that day.

A WRITER'S THOUGHTS

When I look at photographs of Noelle, I try to gauge her expression for signs of what was to come. There are two pictures of her in newspapers, though neither is dated. In one, her hair is parted slightly off center and piled atop her head in a *fräulein*-style braid. I can't tell if one or two braids were plaited to wrap across the crown of her head, but the effect suggests a little German girl in the years before the war.

Noelle's chin in this particular image is dipped down, her eyes look up to the camera, and her smile is slight, lips barely parted. Because the photos I am studying are taken from old newspapers from the weeks and months—even years—after it happened, the pictures are grainy and pixelated.

The upward regard of her gaze allows the whites of her eyes to show underneath the irises, thus lending her an expression that the Japanese—or maybe it is only the macrobiotic practitioners—would call *sanpaku*. George Ohsawa, founder of the macrobiotic movement in postwar Japan, identified this characteristic—the whites of the eyes being visible either above or below the irises from the position of a straightforward look—as a sign of extreme ill health or imbalance, which he attributed to the worsening diets of his countrymen through the influence of Western culture.

This trait, he believed, was an indicator of those marked for death and has been noted by other macrobiotics (I know this because I used to be one) in the gazes of a gamut of doomed historical figures ranging from Rasputin to Marilyn Monroe to Charles Manson. All of them, we can safely agree, qualified as marked for death, although death, in Manson's case, did not happen to be his own.

Ironically, in the photo of Noelle in question, she is looking up at the camera—not straight ahead of her—so she cannot really be called *sanpaku* at all. Though marked for death she was.

In the other photograph that was used by the papers, Noelle is also looking upward, but not in the direction of the camera. She casts her eyes up and to the side—as if to the corner of the room—to an object she sees that is invisible to the rest of us. An angel, I hope. Something good and hopeful and reassuring that her last moments on earth—as horrific as they would be—offered reprieve. Noelle's smile is bigger in this picture—I think I even see dimples in her cheeks—but she is still not fully open to us. She holds something in reserve.

This image of Noelle, however, reveals the girl my mother remembered. She—my mother—did not recognize her childhood friend in the braided girl who resembled a little Greta or Heidi, but she looked at this image and said this was the Noelle she knew. The girl with whom she rode the streetcar, went to school, walked to Frick Park, and, of course, played. They were children, after all. They had been friends since kindergarten.

At the time it happened, the girls had just graduated, my mother said, from playing with dolls to playing records. I like to think of them dancing, but my mother never mentioned it. And I never thought to ask her. Noelle's record player, in fact, featured prominently in newspaper coverage of the events of that night. It was found on a chair next to the table in the kitchen, where Noelle was baking a cake to surprise her parents. Or preparing to bake a cake. It is hard to make out exactly where she was in the process, though the cake was noted to have been chocolate.

Noelle had retrieved the record player, the newspapers said (calling it a Victrola), from the basement where it had recently been stored. A dispute arose in the papers as to who exactly had fetched the Victrola.

Was it Noelle who had lugged it into the kitchen? Or did the killer have a familiarity with the house and know where the family kept this item? Did he go down to the basement after stabbing Noelle thirty-six times, leaving her on the floor near the telephone table in the dining room where she had obviously—and unsuccessfully—fled? Was it he who retrieved the record player from its storage place where Noelle's father said he had so recently put it, and set it up in the kitchen? Her father at one point advanced this theory—that the murderer had moved the Victrola—though I am not quite sure what purpose this action would have served him. Noelle's killer, I mean.

But blood had been found on the basement stairs.

The two undated photos of Noelle must have been taken not long before her death. She was twelve years old when she was killed, and these images show a girl who is roughly that age. Spending time with these pictures, I am reminded of the words of Nancy Mitford describing a photograph of the fictitious Radlett family in her novel, *The Pursuit of Love*:

There they are, held like flies in the amber of that moment—click goes the camera and on goes life; the minutes, the days, the years, the decades, taking them further and further from the happiness and promise of youth, from the hopes Aunt Sadie must have had for them, and from the dreams they dreamed for themselves. I often think there is nothing quite so poignantly sad as old family groups.

The photos of Noelle are indisputably sad, seen through the corrective lens of hindsight. She is alone in them. She is not grouped with her family: her mother, her father, her older brother Matthew. Nor is she pictured with her friends: my mother, Jane Stores, or the others. There is one photo of her girlfriends that I can find, though my mother is strangely missing. She is not among the pallbearers, girls in their serviceable winter coats clustered around the casket, but is somewhere else in the church on the day of Noelle's funeral. Noelle is there, though, in that photo, invisible in her white, wooden coffin.

Life, for Noelle, did not go on. The camera clicked but her life soon ended. The days, the years, the decades did not take her further and

further from the happiness and promise of youth. Her promise ended on Friday, December 10, 1948, in the kitchen of her family's modest house in its row of modest houses in the Homewood-Brushton district of Pittsburgh, where she and my mother grew up, for a time, as friends.