

Coming Home

Insomnia ran in their family, or so this was the running story that Charlotte's brothers told her. She remembered waking as a child in the still, dark hours of the morning to the aroma of brewing coffee and fried eggs. Charlotte would roll over to discover the green phosphorescence of the clock dial reading some blurry hour between midnight and dawn. Leaving the warmth of her bed, she staggered downstairs to find her father fully dressed in a flurry of activity. He always had a plate ready for her, heaped full of French toast, eggs benedict, fruit crepes or some other made-from-scratch dish he'd whipped up. She snuck sips of his coffee when he wasn't looking. Catching her, he would smile and let her take a few more swallows, then cut her off. She attributed a lifelong addiction to caffeine to this back and forth between them. Charlotte didn't come down every morning, but on the mornings she did her place was set. It was their time together, just the two of them, while her mother and brothers slept upstairs oblivious to the ritual that was playing out below. She always returned to bed after they finished and slept soundly until the alarm rang out. Dozing in study hall several hours later, she would remember the breakfast as if recalling a dream. Lying awake now, decades later, she wondered if her father had been sad on the mornings she didn't come down, as he ate alone with an empty place setting on the table next to him. He had died suddenly four years ago, and this was one of the many thoughts that haunted Charlotte's mind as the nighttime hours ticked slowly by.

Frustrated, and giving up on any possibility of sleep, Charlotte opened her eyes as the faint blue morning light began to fill the room. So far north, the days began much earlier than in Florida where she'd grown up. When Robert had still been there, lying next to her as she laid awake, he'd sometimes roll over to hold her and whisper her back to sleep. Later over coffee, he argued that insomnia ran in her family because it was a learned behavior. She and her brothers, he insisted, learned the sleeplessness from their father, as he had learned it from his mother or father, like a child learns any number of bad

behaviors along the way. It was not, he said, biologically determined. At the time she thought it was perhaps a bit of both, that she “learned” the insomnia because her body was biologically hard-wired to do so. Thoughts of Robert brought Charlotte’s eyes to a painting that hung over the mantelpiece at the foot of her bed. As the room distinguished itself in the growing light, the painting remained somewhat obscure, as if viewed under shallow water or through a window dripping with rain. Robert’s mother had willed it to him along with her entire estate, but the painting was all he kept, selling off everything, it seemed to Charlotte, as a way of sloughing off the past. He’d asked Charlotte to keep it on the day he left. Too cumbersome to travel with, he’d said. That had been almost a year ago. She received occasional postcards, the last being from some faraway place, showing an ancient walled city overlooking an ocean the color of lapis lazuli. The jagged, rock-strewn shore was similar, she thought, to the Cranberry Isles off the coast of Maine where she’d come after her father died and where she later met Robert while he was settling his mother’s estate. She was drawn to the remoteness of the islands, their isolation, and found a small cottage to rent on Great Cranberry, the largest of the five islands. Charlotte came seeking solitude and yet, without a second thought, had thrown herself into an ill-fated affair. Now with Robert gone she wondered if solitude was really what she needed after all. To make money she spent her days cleaning the houses of wealthy summer residents. But the rest of her time was spent swimming in the frigid waters and exploring the edge of the sea, an otherworldly realm of elegant sea life, suspended at low tide in the hollowed-out craters of volcanic boulders stacked precariously before the limitless sea. The seaside also held remnants of the islands shipbuilding past, with half submerged pieces of rusted-out machinery jutting from the sand and ocean, and colonized by an entire universe of barnacles. How, she wondered, could Robert have left a place so utterly beautiful; could he not look a bit deeper, through the past, into this mysterious oceanic world.

The painting showed Robert’s mother seated at the kitchen table of a Cape Cod that had been in her family for generations, her grandfather a wizened sea captain and her grandmother a master

navigator. They had sailed together, her grandmother charting courses from the Caribbean to Spain. A family of seafaring people that went back generations. They were treated as royalty on the small island. In the painting, Robert is standing behind his mother, his left hand resting on her shoulder as if holding her in place. Behind mother and son is an enormous window overlooking a vast tidal pool on the eastern rim of the island. There were other paintings done by the artist while he sojourned on Great Cranberry Island, most of Robert's mother, now housed in galleries all over the world. She had left Robert and his father shortly after Robert turned twelve, following the artist to New York and living in Greenwich Village until her death many years later. Her body was brought back to the island and reunited in death with her husband in the family cemetery. He died after a long illness brought on, many long-time islanders gossiped, by his wife so irrevocably deserting him. Robert took over the running of his father's ferry business and nursed him through his final years.

On the day of his mother's return, a flotilla of boats sailed slowly across the pool, sounding mournful horns as they followed the funeral boat carrying her body. Sea birds swooped silently above the procession, others perched in stillness atop smoothed boulders. The leaves of Eastern cottonwoods that grew beyond the shore trembled with the sound of hushed applause in the brackish breeze. From a distance Robert and Charlotte watched as the boats passed, their white sails billowing. Together they left their clothes on the rocks, and slipped slowly into the icy water, where undulating fronds of bladderwrack wrapped like tentacles around their legs. Across the pool the sun was a luminous disc in the eastern sky, yet the early morning mist lingered in grey shrouds on the surface of the water. Despite the growing heat of the late summer day the water was glacial. Robert swam out, seemingly immune to the frigid water, as Charlotte stood waist-deep unable to go deeper. He swam a diagonal towards his mother's boat, his gleaming arms a continuous rhythm of stokes, so smooth and fluid they gave the impression of swinging pendulums. Charlotte watched as mother and son came together again after so many years of separation.

Unwrapping from the tangle of sheets spread across her bed, Charlotte caught the pungent scent of iodine blowing in from the sea through an open window. She understood why Robert had left, that it was never about her. After losing her father, Charlotte had sensed a vital connection being severed, an anchor cut loose and the ship unmoored. Her sense of home and the security it offered were gone. So, like Robert, she ran. The island had seemed like a refuge, far away from her home and the past, but Charlotte knew now that she would carry it with her always. Her father was everywhere and nowhere- in the dark liquid eyes of the sea lion pups sunning themselves on the seaside boulders, in the hushed silence of the maritime forest, in the squalls that suddenly blew in from the sea and ravaged the island. Lost in thought, Charlotte pulled on a pair of jeans and walked onto the small, ramshackle porch that looked out on an overgrown fruit orchard. A lone buck stood at the edge of the woods, plucking apples from a gnarled tree. She sat on the steps, lacing up her shoes, and watched as he slowly disappeared through a dense copse of spruce trees. As if following his lead, Charlotte trudged through the tall grass to a narrow path that meandered along a velvet-like carpet of moss on its way to the sea. Overhead a canopy of evergreens stitched together like intricate lacework. Hearing the echoing crash of waves amplify through the forest, Charlotte headed for the sea, and marveled at this exquisite world she was lucky enough to call home.