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The Salt of the Air

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The Salt of the Air

Overgrown grass, untamed weeds and windblown broken twigs covered the estate. The rose bushes needed to be trimmed, the shrubs needed to be shaped. Tanner Clayton slowly drove up the gravel drive noting all that had to be done before the weekend. The tennis courts needed to be swept, the hammock needed to be hung.

The Clayton Estate still stands on a grass carpeted cliff above a small private beach. For forty-five years, the gray, weathered-wood mansion has been a summer escape for the thirty-some Claytons who travel far to catch the Cape Cod sun. From Memorial Day to Labor Day the Clayton dunes in Chatham, Massachusetts fill with family and friends.

He parked his car beneath the torn basketball hoop. No one used to park near the hoop, let alone right under it. It was some unwritten Clayton family law. That hoop had more wear and tear from long summer nights of two-on-one. For Kate, Brian and Tanner, the oldest kids in the neighborhood, it was an after dinner ritual that would go on until the sun came up.

Tanner got out of the car and stretched his legs, breathing in the ocean air. He walked across the lawn to the cliff peeking off to the Atlantic. The waves crashed against the jetties, the sea gulls flocked overhead, the porch chimes echoed. He loved the Cape in May, things were so peaceful before the seasonal tourist rush.

He turned his back on the ocean to confront the home. The red shutters were peeling, revealing green paint from ten years ago. When Tanner was fifteen his Uncle Tom paid him fifty dollars to paint them red. Brian and Tanner spent that whole summer painting forty shutters red.

"Tanner, what do you think Uncle Tom would do if we chose to um... paint these purple, say a nice violet?" Brian stood there in ripped Levi shorts holding his red paint brush like a weapon. His curly, summer blonde hair was tucked beneath his sun-bleached Red Sox cap. Brian had a devilish grin that was tempting.

"Yeah, he would shit in his tailored shorts. I was actually thinking of a nice fluorescent aqua-marine to match Aunt Betty's new car."

"Tanner, is that Kate coming up the drive? She looks nice."

As Tanner looked to the empty drive Brian poured the bucket of paint over his cousin's head. That's what started the paint war of Seventy-nine. By the end of that summer, every piece of clothing they owned was red.

Tanner walked to the house traipsing through high grass that itched his ankles. The screens of the porch sported holes that had to be patched before the weekend. He walked into the porch dodging the winter homes of thousands of spiders. A layer of dust and dead insects served as a welcome mat on the clapboard floor. He pulled a house key from the pocket of his madras shorts. As he turned the key and opened the door, a small bird flew out just missing Tanner's head. The house looked haunted. The furniture was protected by dusty sheets while masking tape crossed the window panes to guard against off-season storms.

Tanner walked around the house, up the creaking staircases, and through the bedrooms. Not knowing where to begin, he stopped at the door to his bedroom. Pushing the oak door ajar, he stepped inside. The first floor board chirred as Tanner took a seat on the bed. He still spent his summers sleeping on the top bunk. Tanner and Brian had the bunk beds built in when they were six and seven. It was Brian's idea.

"Tanner, so you want the top or the bottom? I really should have first choice since I'm seven. I'm also the one who convinced Grandpa to build them but you can have firsts because you're my favorite cousin. What do you want?"

"I don't know, I guess the bottom."

"Scaredy cat, Tanner Clayton, you're a scaredy cat. Why don't you want the top?"

"I'm not a scaredy cat. I'll sleep on the top."

"Alright, but the top is the best. I'll make a deal with you, you can have the top bunk if you give me your Carl Yastremski baseball card. Deal?"

"O.k., deal." Tanner handed his best card over to Brian and took to the top bunk.

The nautical flag bedspreads still carried that musty aroma. The bedspreads as well as the pale blue walls lightened each year with help from the sun. Three tic-tac-toe games were etched in the walls from years ago. "I LOVE KATE" was stenciled on the window sill. Tanner didn't know who wrote it. It could of been either of them, they both loved Kate. Ever since they were little Kate Lewis had been their third amigo. One summer she would be Tanner's girlfriend and the next summer she'd be Brian's girlfriend. It didn't really matter who she was with because they were all the best of friends.

Tanner walked downstairs to the kitchen. He figured it was the best place to start. Ammonia, Ajax, sponges and brooms were all piled in a corner by the leaking sink. He took the broom and began to sweep the floor finding crumbs of Wheaties from last August. When the entire white linoleum floor was clean, Tanner began to scrub the counters. He opened all of the windows to let the salt of the air inside. He ripped the masking tape off the windows and took off all of the sheets. The place was beginning to look less haunted.

Last summer Brian stayed after Labor day with Tanner to clean. They'd clean for an hour in the morning then devote the rest of the day to sailing. They would take the seven-year-old Sunfish out for hours and reminisce about all of their summers in Chatham.

"Hey Brian, remember when we stole that bottle of rum from Kate's dad." Tanner dipped his feet into the water.

"Yeah, we poured half of it into Grandma Rose's cocktail. And she got on the patio and started break dancing with us. Do you remember the look on Grandpa's face when her skirt started to slip off?"

"No one ever suspected us, we were cool."

"What the hell are you talking about, Tan? You were hiding out in Kate's tool

shed because you were so scared. I was the cool one. I convinced them that it was probably a reaction to her medication."

"What about the time you cut Kelly's six inch braids off. You were mean."

"We were more than mean, we were evil. I'm still amazed that she believed me."

"Brian, I think she still believes you. Kelly has her hair checked for lice three times a year." Tanner splashed Brian, "I'm glad we've matured." They sailed all the way from Provincetown to Marblehead laughing about old times.

Tanner dusted the living room, the dining room, the parlor, Grandpa Mickey's library and the den. After vacuuming, the first floor was finished. Tanner had two more days to get to the second and third floors. The house would look perfect before everyone came for the annual Clayton summer kick-off.

He jumped in his car and drove into town to pick up dinner. The town was desolate. The tree lined streets were empty, Tanner got a prime parking space right in front of Mulane's Pizza and Sub Shop. There is nothing in the world better than a tuna melt from Mulane's. These tuna melts served as the staple of Tanner's diet for years. Mulane's is a family run business that flourishes in the summer and hardly stays afloat in the winter. As he opened the door, bells sounded announcing a customer. Tanner grinned at the smell of the old shop and the sight of Mr. Mulane.

"Well, well, well, look what we have here, it's the first sign of summer." Mr. Mulane came from behind the counter. He reached out his freckled hand to greet Tanner. "How have you been?"

"Not bad, not bad at all. The family is coming up on Friday and I'm just getting things ready. I have been waiting all winter for a real tuna melt."

"Well, I should hope so, you Claytons keep me going." Mr. Mulane headed into the kitchen to prepare his magical creation. "So, where are your sidekicks these days. I haven't seen Kate or Brian since last forth of July," he said as he worked the tuna into a patty with his aged hands.

Tanner stood there in silence, staring at the ground. He shuffled his feet and dug his hands deep into his pockets searching for an easy answer. "Umm... I guess you didn't hear, Brian was killed in a car accident in Philadelphia right after Christmas." It had been a while since Tanner had to account for Brian. He continued to stare at the tiles on the ground.

"Oh, Tanner. No, I didn't hear. I'm so sorry. How are you doing? This must be so hard for you." The cheeriness in the old man's voice quickly disappeared. He reached for the bottom of his apron and wiped his hands. The two men stood in silence.

"Well, yeah, it has been hard. And I know this summer will be too but Brian wouldn't want me to mourn for too long. I just gotta keep reminding myself of that."

"Oh Tanner, I am so sorry. But you're right, Brian loved you more than anything. He would want you to try and have a fun summer. I bet he is up in Heaven right now looking down on us just waiting to grab that tuna melt from you."

Tanner headed for the door with the tuna melt in hand. "Goodbye Mr. Mulane, I'm sure I'll see a lot of you this weekend." Mr. Mulane stood there still wiping one hand while waving goodbye with the other.

He drove back up to the estate with a pit in his stomach. Tanner no longer craved the tuna melt. He put the sandwich in the refrigerator and walked out to the cliff. He took off his shoes and walked down the cement steps to the dunes. Grandma's wooden lounge chair was planted in the sand, it never moved. Tanner took a seat allowing the sand to seep between his toes. Letting his head fall back, he gazed into the sky trying to identify all of the constellations that Brian taught him on the night of Grandpa Mickey's funeral six winters ago.

"O.k., Tanner see that bright star," Brian pointed into the huge sky, "that's Polaris, the north star. And see that over there, those three stars in a row, that's Orion's belt. Now if you follow the belt down, you've got that bright star, Sirius. That one is easy to remember, you go below the belt and you get serious." That night they spent hours on the roof of Brian's house. "You know people say that every time someone dies a new star appears."

The sky was covered with unsettled clouds that continued to move around. The beach was dark because there weren't any house lights reflecting off the sand. As Tanner looked around the beach, he noticed that the only detectable light came from the light house in the distance. The starless sky left him feeling alone. There was no sense of life on the Cape, everything seemed to be in mourning.

—Kristin Padden '93