

# Seaside



JUNE CALLED ME TO say that coffee was ready. A few minutes later, when I came into the kitchen I saw coffee spilled on the floor and our favourite cups broken. I hadn't heard a thing. That she was lying there didn't make sense to me. I knelt down and took her arm, held her limp hand. I felt for a pulse but couldn't find it. I couldn't find her life. I was frantic, shockingly helpless. I heard an inhuman cry, and it was a moment before I realized that it was my own. How could I have been upset about those old cups of ours that we had kept forever? It didn't matter. Nothing mattered. There was only the harsh recognition of something lost and irretrievable. She was gone, and the steam from the pool of coffee lingered, then vanished. As if it were her last breath, and I had wasted even that.

The mind will have its way after the immediate shock of death — the numb and mechanical carrying-on of self-preservation. I remained in a loop of that morning for three months, unwilling, unable to move beyond it. I kept remembering, as if there were something I had missed,

## 2 *my June*

that I had failed to do. But one day life will pitch you out like a dog in the rain. You will feel the full force of your loss, the hard loneliness. There will be no avenue that will save you from it, no remedy in a bottle or book. So I did the only thing I could think of, I walked.

I put on my coat and Tilley hat, the one she had picked out for me, to match her own still hanging on a peg in the laundry room, and went downtown. I walked without much vigour, I'm afraid, a sort of aimless stroll along the sidewalk. Then I turned and looked behind me, down Main Street through the thinly falling rain. It was as if someone were calling me. Perhaps it was June or the wind or nothing at all. But I noticed I did that often now, staring like that. And then I remembered the summer and the tourists. They were enchanted with the town and its boldly coloured buildings, a whimsical palette. Some structures had remained for over a hundred years. They loved the streetscape of hanging baskets, banners for all the seasons, benches to rest on, decorative street lights, a charm the world longed for, a safe place, somewhere that seemed immune to the frenetic expansion of cities where growth had become a societal imperative.

It was that very charm that had brought us to Seaside on the Sunshine Coast when our own retirement came striding over the hill. The first brochure arrived like salvation, and we were quick to decide to move. Oh, June was excited. Why wouldn't she be? You can feel it in her letter to the girls after we were settled in the little town:

Dear Lori and Mandy,

Hope all is well at school. No more school for me. Staff gave me a wonderful send off. And your father was speechless when his department gave him a set of golf clubs. (I guess they didn't know he vowed never to golf again after he drove a golf cart into a pond at Shaughnessy and crippled one of the resident swans. Thankfully it survived to duck another ball.) But the reception at city hall was nice. Even the mayor was there. I was so proud of your father. Well, girls, you're going to love this town. There's something for everyone in Seaside. Main Street rules.

There are hairstylists (big demand for those snowy perms — I'll be there soon, I'm sure), a hardware store for the handy (hope for your dad, ha, ha), gift shops and art galleries to die for and a post office with its essential flags and brick. Can you believe it, Barnacle Bob's Fish and Chips? Then there's the Sand Dollar Café, Salty Dog Used Books (your dad's favourite store), dollar store for the miserly and five churches (for those who think God is on their team — sorry about that, it's just me), a grocery store (because we have to eat after all, and you'll love the organic produce).

Seaside has all the small town comforts for the many retirees. And there are a lot. All those lodges and orders. The marina is just below Main Street. There are seagulls dropping clams from rooftops and always the salted air. It seems to remind you of your place in the world. And those street names: Clipper and Yacht and Frigate and Ketch. We'll live on Dory Avenue, adorable, don't you think? Well, lots of hugs from us both. We'll call when we get settled.

Love,  
Mom and Dad

She had written that letter in the summer. Now in the fall, clouds rolled in off the Salish Sea. Life had slowed, street trees turned a sunny yellow, an illumined moment in the dull and grey hiatus. I continued on with my walk down the street and across an intersection. The rain picked up. I could hear it thrumming on the parked cars. It bounced from the pavement, leaping bullets, a flood from the rent and brooding bellies of clouds. I drew up the collar on my raincoat and looked down the hill to the marina. I wanted to go there, to look at the name painted aft and stern, touch it with my hands — to see her face with my fingertips. But such images were cruel just then, a savage remembering.

I stopped in the middle of the street and lifted my face and raised my hands like a survivor from some horrible wreckage. It seemed the rain wanted something from me, perhaps to punish me, castigate me for my many imperfections. It dared and taunted and tempted. It fell in translucent sheets over me. It ran down my neck, and I wanted to die, to be

washed away. I could not think of a way out, only the depths of emptiness everywhere, her absence, all meaning cored out of me, hollow and destroyed.

And in the street with drivers slowing to look at an old fool, they might have seen the glaze of death in my eyes that I willed in the remorseless and urgent rain. But I couldn't stay there forever and wait for the end of my miserable affliction, my life. I lowered my head and turned to the looks of strangers as they passed, aghast they seemed, to have come upon something mad in their midst. Then I turned and crossed the street. I would go there, damn it all, to Seaside Marina. Under the cover of an awning I removed a handkerchief from my pocket and wiped the tears from my face. I removed my hat and dried my neck. I felt old just then. I knew my face would be pink, with my blood pressure showing through my thin white hair.

I came up to a shop with pottery in the window. A sign read: "Lessons." I stopped to have a look and stood there dazed, uncertain of everything. There was a bowl and vase — a deep Mediterranean blue. That colour distracted me now, the colour she had loved; the flowerpots on the front steps and the canopy and mainsail cover brilliant under a noon sun. Then I stepped up to the window and cupped my eyes to peer inside. There was a group gathered around a woman at a potter's wheel, red muck slick on her hands, shaping a spinning lump of clay. They all seemed to be enjoying themselves. I had to turn away because joy was impossible. I felt heartsick to see it now, to see it in others, as if life had abandoned me, removed me, exiled from the shores of paradise that we landed on such a short time ago. She was the potter and the captain and the setting sun. And I was something in her hands.