

*BEFORE
WE GO
EXTINCT*

Karen Rivers

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Farrar, Straus and Giroux
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For Peter Benchley, who changed my life with his book.

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MY FOOT IS STUCK IN THE TOILET BOWL IN THE CLOSET-
sized bathroom in the two-bedroom walk-up I live in with my mom
on the corner above Alf's Bodega.

I fell in hard, footfirst. I was trying to see the roof of the For
Reel Fish Market, checking for shark fins drying out there in the
hotter-than-it-should-be June sun.

It's not that I don't like the owner, Mrs. Stein, I do. I just
thought maybe she was cashing in so she could move to Florida.
There's more money in shark fins, pound for pound, than anything
else in the sea. Somewhere along the line I stopped trusting every-
one, even the lady who gives me free shrimp when I walk by, calls
me "boychick" and cried when I broke my arm trying to take off
from the fire hydrant out front when I was five.

Spoiler: people can't fly.

Mrs. S. has an old yellowed photo of Key West taped to the
peeling wall over the cash register. She talks about how she'd do
anything she could to get there, to have that life, to smell those

flowers and the sunscreen and sea salt. In the Keys, it's all sand and rusty bikes and tropical drinks and music. She won't take her troubles with her. There will be no Mr. S. scratching his eczema-encrusted arms and grunting and no customers shouting about the price of crab these days. It will be so perfect, empty, free, and blue that she maybe wouldn't feel guilty about her part in destroying the ocean's balance and depleting the atmosphere of oxygen, killing us all.

The truth is, that's what's happening and no one cares. The sharks will be all fished out sooner than you think, the balance of the food chain will be tipped. You think it doesn't matter, but it does. Most of our oxygen comes from plankton in the sea. If there isn't enough oxygen, our lungs will fill up with carbon dioxide. The end. The failure of the species.

The failure of us.

Not tomorrow, not next week, but soon enough that we *should* be panicking. We should be doing everything we can to stop it. But we aren't. We're going to let it happen. We'll just sit here and slowly die, pacified by our own dumb existences that don't even matter. Not really. Not to the whole big world.

As it happens, there aren't any shark fins on the Steins' roof, and now my foot is wedged into the bowl at an angle that looks like a joke picture someone should post on social media. But it sure doesn't feel like a joke, and I don't post stuff like that and LOL. Not anymore. *#becausenothingisfunnynow*

If there had been even one triangular hunk of flesh up there, I could have been a hero, shutting down another illegal finning operation, just like the guy who made that movie *Sharkwater*. That

movie changed my life. The movie that turned me into Sharkboy, which turned into Sharky. The movie that I happened to see before my first day at the Richer-Than-You Academy for Famous People's Kids and One Charity Case—guess which one I am?—so that when they put me on the spot and told me that I had to introduce myself to the school by doing an impromptu speech about something I cared about, the sharks were right there, still sinking, bleeding, finless, in my mind and it was all I could think to talk about. I didn't think I'd *cry*. People don't forget stuff like that, as it turns out: the new guy, six feet tall, sweating into his hair, nervous, then bursting into real, actual tears at the podium on their fancy stage.

Because we're all going to die!

Yeah? Sissy.

But if you think about it, what better thing is there to cry about? People? You want to cry about *people*, dying? Why?

It happens.

People die. No one is immortal. We're just a bunch of organs stuffed into a skin sack, waiting for something to fail.

Waiting to fall.

After that, the sharks and I were forever linked. I was Sharkboy to most people; Great White to The King, which was kind of two types of jokes: one about my race, and one about the shark of the same name. There were ruder things to be called. They could have gone with Crybaby, or worse. And me, well, I *like* being lumped in with the sharks. Sharks have always been my favorite things. Think about it. They are amazing in a hundred different ways. A thousand.

Besides, the ocean is my kind of place, full of silence and

mysteries and species people haven't even discovered yet. Things that have never been seen, never been co-opted by humans, never been destroyed by greed. We always kill the stuff that matters. Who needs outer space when we have so much we don't understand yet right here, our own secret universe that we mostly ignore, take for granted, and throw plastic garbage into, destroying everything?

Not me. I don't take anything for granted.

I flip my cell phone around and around in my hand, slapping it against my palm over and over. My sweaty fingers leave marks on the screen. I can feel my pulse in my foot, thrumming like the music I can sometimes feel coming up through the floor from 3B. Not today though. Today, it's quiet.

I'd call someone to help me out here, but I stopped talking a while back and I can't think when or why I'll ever start again. *My foot is stuck in the toilet* doesn't seem like reason enough to break this impenetrable barrier that I've made by being silent for so long that it's gelled like that and no one can reach all the way through. It's a lot like being underwater and there's a reason why fish don't make sounds.

Besides, there's always texting.

Help, I type with my greasy finger. *I've fallen and I can't get up*. I take a picture of my foot down there, a million miles away, white sock in blue water. *#footinthebowl #awkward #helpme* Then I run it through a filter that makes it look like Mrs. Stein's Florida snapshot: white border, water turned aquamarine. She doesn't just want to go to Florida, she wants to go to Florida in 1960, through a time travel machine that erases all the crappy big box stores that make every city in America virtually the same as every other one. Not

that I'd ever tell her that. What does it hurt that she believes that *that* Florida still exists? She'll never get there. Most people spend their whole lives dreaming of a future that never comes.

There's nothing wrong with dreaming. I'd like to do a little time traveling myself. I'd like to go back exactly twenty-four days, give or take an hour or two. I'd like to do something completely different on that day. I'd like to change everything.

I tap Send. The phone makes that sound that makes me think of carrier pigeons, swooping between buildings with my message strapped to their leg. They'll have a long way to fly to get it to The King, who is buried in a graveyard in Connecticut, where his dad and wife Number Seven have a summer place that they go to on hot long weekends to drink their pompous sparkling drinks, clattering with ice cubes. It's what counts as hobbies to those people: congratulating themselves for being rich, smugly offering each other handshakes and air kisses like they are blessings from the pope, and drinking, always sipping something from a goblet held in their manicured hands.

I think they buried The King's phone with him. I bet it's buzzing right now, down there in the marble box where he is lying.

#LOL, I type, even though nothing is funny.

Swoop, swoop.

I finally yank my stupid foot out of the bowl—which is harder than you'd think it would be, a crunching and popping comes from the joint and I feel it in my stomach—and push the handle, wishing I could flush my whole self. I'd disappear and be gone for good, spat out into the sea where I'd swim away from shore instead of toward it, swim and swim and swim until finally a fin would surface

beside me, then another, and there I'd be, surrounded. And for some reason, they would be saying, *Thanks, Sharkboy, thanks*. And I'd be like, *Think nothing of it, friends*. (This is a fantasy, so obviously being able to speak to sharks is totally a given.) And that would be that, me floating there on my back, ears filled up with water, muffling everything. Me, in the gray waves, staring up at the sky, and the sharks swimming around and around and around, slipping through the water like something too graceful to exist on land, something too beautiful. All of us out there together, away from this, so far away that somehow we'd be saved.

LET'S GET THIS PART STRAIGHT:

No matter what you might have heard or read on the Internet, falling was not in The King's plan when he fell from the steel beam jutting out of the forty-second floor of his dad's newest building, which was under construction on Eleventh and Fifty-Third, three Tuesdays ago at 4:27 in the afternoon. What the media hacks didn't mention was we did that all the time. Not the falling, you understand. Obviously. But it was where we hung out. The husks of incomplete skyscrapers were our playground. We skateboarded on the huge, empty floors. We balanced on the steel beams. We ran up the walls, leaving dusty footprints higher than you'd think would be possible, backflipping off. We taught ourselves parkour because the buildings were there and we had the keys and why not? It felt just dangerous enough. Sometimes we didn't make it, we'd lie in the dust bleeding but high from it all the same. We flew from one side of the building to another, careering off piles of tiles, toolboxes, scrap metal, or Sheetrock. Then, when we got tired of that, we'd get

daring. Like superheroes who never actually did anything heroic, we'd stand above the city, above everyone. We'd look down, fighting the part of our brain that wanted us to get away from the edge, to stay away from all the edges. We clawed it back, that's what it felt like, like you were actually tearing your sanity away to force yourself to stand there, looking down. There was adrenaline in our knees and our guts but doing it felt like *winning*. Nothing would happen but also everything could. Anything.

It felt like absolute power, if you want to know the truth. Being able to get past that part of you that says *stop*. Pushing through and past. It felt like infinity would feel if it could be a feeling. It was everything.

The King would stand out there and yell down to the street, "YOU WALK IN OUR SHADOWS, PEASANTS." He wasn't being a jerk. Not really. He was just being a voice, a huge voice that was like weather, like anything immutable and imperfect and enormous. He was this tiny little guy, but his voice was the voice of a giant. Anyway, no one could hear him, not from that far away. Afterward, we'd lie back on the concrete floors, howling like wolves, dust in our mouths, in our lungs, the bruises pressed into our skin like victory scars. After a while, it became a normal thing.

Our normal.

It might be a different normal from most people's but that doesn't make it any less true.

After a while, it was *normal* the way sometimes it felt like you were falling, even when you weren't, the street pulsing up toward you and then away, the yellow cabs like rows of bright plastic ants, swirling in the sweet chaos of your vertigo.

It was *normal* to force yourself to sit down, legs dangling, your shoes looking like seagulls flying miles above the ground.

That's how I know what happened that day was an accident.

Which means that Daff is a liar.

It's been twenty-one days since I spoke to Daffodil Blue of "He died because of *love!*" *Gawker* fame. She was an instant Internet darling, with her red lips puffed up like shiny new Volkswagen Beetles, glistening on the screen, all those fake tears spilling from her overly madeup eyes. It helps that her dad is so famous: Big Doc, a rap producer ("crap producer," as she'd say). She was born to this, born famous, like The King, just waiting for her chance to appear on your screens, biting her lip, looking up through her lashes, daring you to comment on her ridiculously puffy head of hair.

And instantly, she became one of *them*, one of the people we hated, layers of fake nothingness concealing an empty bubble. She became someone who wasn't Daff. She became *Daffodil Blue*: the quirky beautiful rich kid that the weird ugly rich kid had killed himself over.

For love, don't you know?

But that's a *lie*.

It was an *accident*.

I know it was.

I was there.

"*Je suis désolé*," was the last thing that I said to her, right before I sidestepped away from her fake take-pictures-of-me hug and walked out the church door where the sun outside was burning the pigeons' feet on the sidewalk and people wilted downward to subways that might take them away from the heat. I walked only a few yards

before my knees started to liquefy and I knelt right there on those famous stone steps and fought the urge to press my face into the filthy pavement, to push through it to the other side.

There were media vans parked up and down the road, reporters hanging around with microphones and cameras so maybe they could get a sound bite from The King's dad afterward, maybe a glimpse of a real tear on the great man's famous, chiseled African face or the equally famous faces of his plastic, soulless friends. And yeah, they might get a tear from this actress or that model, but it's not like *he'd* cry. As if.

To cry, he'd have to be human.

A few of them stared at me, too hot to bother raising their lenses for the most part, but a couple of cameras caught me. You probably saw that shot, too. I guess some jackass won an award for that image of me bent over on my knees on the steps of the church, looking at the gray hard stone that my black rubber-soled school shoes were melting on.

My knees burned.

What I was thinking then, at that exact moment, were the words *pink mist*.

Pink mist.

Pink. Mist.

See, I did this paper on 9/11 last year for my Social History class. I had to read all the news stories, eyewitness accounts, details. The *details* are what get to you when you start to look closely at things like that. One guy said that when people jumped out of the Twin Towers, they fell so hard onto the pavement that a pink mist was coming up off the ground.

Pink mist.

I threw up all over the church stairs, my puke running in rivulets between the stones. It surprised me as much as any of the gawking journalists. I haven't vomited since I was a little kid. It hurt, acid in my nose, the whole bit. Someone's cigarette butt moved along in my river of steaming puke, which made little tributaries around a piece of chewed gum. A candy wrapper. Cigarette butts ground into two-dimensional images of themselves. When I finally got up and walked past the reporters, no one looked me in the eye. My kind of mourning wasn't camera-ready, I guess.

I wasn't famous.

I was nobody.

The King has now been gone for twenty-four days. He was more than just the strange-looking kid of an obnoxiously rich real estate tycoon. He was The King. He was complicated, funny, smart, crazy, kind, brilliant, and sometimes a total jerk. He was my best friend. And no one knew him like I did.

But now he's nothing.

He's dead. A body in a box underground.

Well, what's left of a body.

Pink mist.

Dead is a word like a smooth marble you've put in your mouth to see what it was like and then inhaled by mistake leaving your windpipe suddenly and perfectly blocked. I wonder if the dead try to breathe right after they die, not knowing yet that they can't, that they won't. Not ever again. I wonder what that must feel like, knowing that the air isn't coming in to fill you up, not this time.

I wonder when The King stopped breathing.

If he thought, What happened?

When he fell, there was a *whoomp* as the wind filled his white school shirt. It billowed so big, a cleanly laundered sheet against the clouds, like a parachute in cartoons. For a split second, I thought he might be lifted back up into the sky.

For a split second, he looked beautiful.

But that thin white shirt didn't even slow him down. He was gone so fast, he couldn't have really thought anything. He probably didn't even hear me screaming. He probably couldn't even see me standing there, helpless, doing nothing.

He didn't know there wasn't anything I could do to save him.



THE PHONE IN MY HAND VIBRATES.

Daff: *R U there?*

I squeeze my eyes shut like you do when you're a kid and you don't want anyone to see you. I half wish I had a blanket fort to crawl into, to hide away in for good. Maybe with a glass of milk and some cookies and some Lego guys and a video game and a life that is not this life.

Not *my* life.

Non, I type. *Je ne suis pas ici maintenant.*

French seems to be the only way I can type back to her without saying anything, the only way I can answer without being myself.

I put the phone in the sink and turn on the tap, hard, water splashing off it and onto the mirror, onto me. But it's one of those phones that are waterproof, which, as it happens, The King gave me for my birthday. He said my old flip phone was embarrassing to everyone. "Seriously," he said. "No one needs to see that." Like my flip phone was actually insulting people's eyes. I'd taken it, but the

gift stung. Did my phone matter? What else mattered? That I didn't have anything and that he was as rich as Trump? How soon was it going to be that money mattered more than all the other stuff we had, all the other stuff we did? Our dusty footprints that were twin shadows up on the brick walls, the jokes that no one else got, the way we moved through the school like it was ours, and so, we owned it. We got each other. That was a pretty big thing. Not everyone gets you in life. Not everyone understands. But we were tight and we were untouchable: me, Daff, and The King. Undisputed royalty of the School of the Sons and Daughters of Rich Pricks (and me).

I wonder who is going to pay the monthly phone bill now that he's gone, how long it will take his dad's accountant to realize that The King couldn't possibly be using it anymore. The water sluices off the screen, leaving the greasy path of my fingerprints behind.

The gulls on the Steins' roof laugh cruelly. Someone on the street yells in hard-edged language and there's the sound of something heavy and metallic falling, a silence, then a barking laugh. Then a honk and a squeal of tires. The roar of a bus going by. More laughter. (How dare you *laugh*, I think. How dare you. The King is dead. Are you stupid? Don't you *know*?) That's how I feel about all of it, like the whole world should stop laughing, even the seagulls. Don't they get it? We are all on our way out.

Music with too much bass reverberates from the window across the gap. I read once somewhere that so much bass eventually does something to the muscles in your colon and people who listen that way will end up in adult diapers sooner or later. I make

a mental note to stick some coupons for Depends on the guy's front door. Jerk. He deserves it.

I turn the water off and pick up my phone and wipe it on my pant leg. I like the heft of it in my hand. That stupid phone makes me feel connected to everything and everyone, even to the people it can't connect me to anymore.

It makes me feel safe.

There are footsteps in the hall, then Mom knocks. I shove the phone into my pocket, quick, like she can see through walls and doors, like she knows I'm texting a dead guy like someone who is too stupid to understand that dead is dead is a marble is choking you to death.

I gag and spit in the sink. *Pink mist.*

"I need to talk to you about something important, JC," she says. "I wish you'd come out of there. I have to go to work in an hour. One hour, do you hear me? One. I can't miss this train. And I want to . . . I have to . . . Well, just come out, would you?"

Her voice wobbles a bit, which bugs me. It makes me mad. I'm still *me*. Why can't she see that? I'm so angry with her for treating me like I'm broken, even if I am.

Ahem, ahem, Mom coughs. *Ribbit ribbit.*

"Sharky?" Mom leans on the door and I can tell the full weight of her is there, pressing. The door is wood. Brown. Wood makes me think of coffins. The idea of coffins makes me feel like I am breathing through a straw with holes, nothing is filling up my lungs. I inhale and inhale and inhale until I'm dizzy, dizzier, the dizziest. The King's coffin isn't even wood, it's marble. There are stones inlaid across the top that look like actual jewels. I don't know what

they are. Diamonds? Crystals? His coffin is worth more than everything I've ever owned in my life.

“Sweetheart?”

I shove the window open farther and gulp in the garbagey, fishy, hot-pavement scent of the alley. My lungs drown in the humid stench, that damp stink that seems to have stuck around long after they cleaned up Hurricane Sandy, like everything went moldy and now can never really be cleaned.

My mom sighs so loud I can practically feel it. “JC . . .,” she starts again. She rattles the knob. “What are you doing in there? Do I need to *do* something?” She delivers a solid kick to the door, which rattles but doesn't break. “Ouch,” she says. “Shit. I mean, sugar.”

I take my phone out of my pocket and type, *Am OK. Sorry*, and send it to her. The *swoop swoop* of those invisible birds carries it right through the door into her pocket and I hear her phone buzz and then I can hear her reading it. I know you shouldn't be able to hear someone read, but somehow, now, I can. Sharks can read the electrical impulses in the water; I can read the electrical impulses in the air.

Everything vibrates.

The last thing I said to The King was, “Hey, Chief Not Scared of Heights, you're going to fall.” I was sort of laughing, sort of not. I took a picture. *#dontlookdown* He was too far out for it to be funny, maybe five or six feet from safety. That's not much when you're two feet off the ground, but when you are on the forty-second floor, trust me: it's a lot. He bounced a little on the balls of his feet, like he was going to start jogging. Then he wobbled, sat down. “HEY!” I yelled. “Seriously.”

He was looking at his phone. Typing.

“Don’t text and drive!” I said, which was a joke because of this campaign at school about texting and driving that we all made fun of because we were kids in New York: none of us could *drive*.

Then my phone buzzed. I pulled it out of my pocket while I was yelling, “Come *on*. You’re going to get blown off, dude.”

I angled my phone to cut the glare on the screen and read it. It said *srry*. It was from The King. “What?” I said. “Dude. WHAT?”

The distance between me and The King stretched like melting plastic and then there was that forever second, my WHAT? hanging in the air between us, becoming as thin as a thread, breaking in the sky, long strings of it dangling down toward the ground like a jungle of plastic vines.

The King didn’t hear me because of the wind and because he was already tipping backward, scuba diver–style. His face like the weather, all jumbled up: storm clouds, rain, lightning, and the sun.

I saw him raise his eyebrows and

It was really gusty by then, the wind was

Anyway he was already

Some things are too hard to

Screw this. I mean, seriously.

“Please,” Mom says, from the other side of the door. “Please, Sharky.”

OK ok ok, I type. I hesitate. I stare myself down in the mirror. Suck it up, Buttercup, I think. My cold dead eyes glare back at my cold dead eyes. My lips curl in a sneer. My face has forgotten how to arrange itself properly. I allow it to fall back into flat nothingness, expression free. When did I get so skinny? I can see the bones in my face, the skeleton of me pushing to get through.

I touch Send.

I peel my now-blue sock off and slop it, dripping blueness all over the clean tile, into the garbage can. Underneath, the skin of my foot is blue, too, and puckered. My ankle is starting to swell.

The phone vibrates.

Daff: *I need 2 talk 2 you.*

I type: *Je suis indisponible.*

I hear Mom move away from the door, her footsteps slapping the floor toward the kitchen. When I put weight on my ankle, it hurts like something separate from me, with a life of its own. I take a picture of it. *#bluefootedbooby* It's almost a funny thing to type right now. LOL LOL LOL.

My phone buzzes again. *Need 2 talk 2 you srsly <3 Daff. I have something from him. U have to c it. Its 4u.*

I almost send her the blue-foot pic. But then I don't. I hit Delete. I reply to her with my standard, *Non merci*. No thank you. No mercy. Whichever you prefer, m'lady. I love her so hard it hurts, like all my organs are curling over inside me. But I can't. Not now. Not ever.

I put my hand on the door and open it, dizzy, dizzy, dizzy. At any moment, I might just faint dead away, like one of those too-skinny girls in my class, folding up against the hall wall like a piece of beautiful paper. The light grays and thins. I pinch the skin of my wrist hard. The feeling passes.

It always passes.

I'm okay.

I'm fine.

I go into the kitchen and sit down.

"HE PROBABLY FAINTED IN THE AIR," THE FAT COP HAD

said. "I learned that back on September 11, you know, 2001. I was there, like . . . I was *there*. All those people, jumping, remember? Falling. Well, you're too young to remember. But all those *people*. It was unbelievable. Holding hands. That one woman holding down her skirt. Anyway, they said they all fainted, passed right out, didn't know what it was like to . . . Oh, I shouldn't be saying this, I guess. Shit. I'm sorry. Kid, I'm sorry."

He looked surprised, like I had made him say those things, like my friend *dying* had forced these words out of him against his will. I scowled. I wanted him to stop but I couldn't find the words. I couldn't find any words. Words were a school of fish flashing in the sun and then vanishing all at once, a hundred thousand bodies departing in one smooth motion.

He leaned so close to me I could smell that he ate a meatball sub for lunch, washed it down with a coffee and a piece of too-weak gum. He had a gold filling in the side of his front tooth with a hunk

of dark food stuck beside it. I wanted to punch him hard, so hard his nose would burst, a cartoon balloon.

“It’s something like two hundred miles an hour when you fall like that,” the skinny cop interrupted, his face all creased up like rotten fruit. He sounded excited. “What McRory there means is that he didn’t feel anything, ya know.”

A word burned on the end of my tongue. I opened my mouth. Nothing happened. I tried again. “Screw you,” I croaked, real quiet. And then, just like that my voice was drained out of me, like blood pooling on the ground. I could feel it go, heavy like syrup. I expected to look down and see under my chair a puddle of words I’d never say.

The fat cop squinted at me. Then, his eyes on my eyes, he reached over and touched my face. His fingertip was soft and terrible. I froze, every part of me clenched up, wanting to fight or to flee. My throat snapped tight shut in a way that made me think of gulls, swallowing. I started to gag. He pulled his hand back, looked at it like it wasn’t anything to do with him, operating without permission. He shook his head again, hard. Like an Etch A Sketch he was trying to erase.

That one woman holding down her skirt. Holding hands. Fainted in the air.

Mom took me home from the station in a cab that cost forty-two dollars.

The forty-twos were everywhere. I couldn’t get away from them.

I Googled the thing about fainting first thing when I got into my room and I found out that it’s just an urban legend. You don’t pass out when you fall from high up. People want to think that

because it makes the trip down to the ground seem more palatable
to the witnesses. And cops are liars, like everyone else.

I guess The King was awake right until he wasn't.

File that under: Things I Don't Want to Know.

It's right there in my brain, next to my other ever-growing file:
Things I Can't Stop Seeing.

His shirt billowing against the backdrop of the sky.

The crowd on the sidewalk when I finally got there.

Pink mist.

My own face in the mirror, staring back at me.



MOM'S EYES ARE TIRED BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN THEY

aren't perfectly lined and shadowed, each eyelid like a tiny art canvas, a black mole that looks like cancer perfectly drawn on her powdered, death-white cheek. The table is bright yellow. She painted it last year when she wasn't tired yet, when she was still reinventing the apartment as often as she reinvented herself.

I am why she is so tired.

The bright yellow paint is bubbling. I stick my fingernail under the edge and start to peel it, which I know drives her crazy, but that yellow is offensively cheerful. Underneath the yellow is a flat gray-brown that seems a lot more like real life. She turns off the music and the silence is sudden, like jumping into the sea and having your ears fill up.

Last summer, I took diving classes at the Y. We learned to breathe through regulators. We swam around the swimming pool, looking at each other's legs, picking up coins from the faded blue tiles. On the one day when we actually dove in Long Island Sound,

a storm came up and we had to come in. We only got fifteen minutes down there. It was the worst, best fifteen minutes of my life. The seaweed was covered with slime that looked like sewage. The one fish I saw was dead, trapped in a roll of wire someone had dumped off the side of their boat. The water was the kind of filthy that made me think I'd see corpses: suited men with ties flapping, feet encased in concrete.

Or bull sharks, hungry for a meal.

Saltwater crocs, rising from the murk.

Everything was gray-brown. Like life. Like the table. Like everything we are pretending not to be.

It scared me: the way the ocean was struggling to be alive but failing, the way a rusty oil can lay under litter and old tires. I hated it mostly for not being what I expected, for not looking like a National Geographic special, or like footage from the *Shark Week* episodes that I watched over and over again.

I wasn't expecting coral reefs, I'm not a total idiot. But I was expecting something else.

Something beautiful.

Something *other*.

At least something more colorful.

I couldn't explain it after, to Mom, so I said it was great. The best. Everything I wanted. Luckily, scuba diving is something I can't really afford to do and we live in *Brooklyn*. It's not exactly the Great Barrier Reef.

One day, when I have enough saved up, I'll fly somewhere where the diving is amazing. I'll go to Australia. I'll sign up for a dive. I'll step into that water and swim as far away from the reef as I can.

I'll look down into the deep and see the answer to some question that I haven't thought up yet. I'll see the heft of the shadows gliding through the water below me and I'll know exactly what they are. And what they are doing.

I'll understand them.

And they'll understand me.

That's when it will make sense.

Mom takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly, like someone in pain. In, out. In, out. A third time. Giving birth to a sentence. I kind of know how she feels, but it's also annoying. Pant, pant, pant.

Then finally she blurts, "I know the timing is rotten but the show is filming on location for the summer to try to boost ratings by, you know, spicing it up with 'world travel' . . . I—I'm going. I just, well, I have to tell you. I'm going to go. I have to go. It's a thing I have to do." It comes out as one long word that sounds like a different language. I nod. *Yes, Mom. I understand.* She exhales so long that I can smell the toothpaste on her breath, laced with green tea and something stale.

Mom does makeup for a reality TV show about love that has nothing to do with reality. Or love. She paints contour marks on the main guy's abs. I forget his name this season, but it doesn't much matter. They are all the same, these guys. Gleefully smacking their lips at the sight of the women they get to pick from. This one guy licked his lips so often that he chapped the skin all the way up to his nose. Mom said it was gross to cover it up and he kept licking off the makeup. *Literally* licking his lips. Mankind is just so obvious, you know?

She makes shadows on the hopeful girls' cleavage. Like, what

are they hoping for? A chance to be with this jerk? I don't get it, but it's basically the most popular show in the world, so what do I know? She hides their faces with the same thick mask of makeup. No one is real.

The saddest part is that those girls? They remind me of the new Daff. Painted on. Fake. Pretending.

It's the worst. I don't even watch it anymore. I used to watch it with Daff and we'd laugh our butts off about how gross it was, and how pathetic those people were. Now she's practically one of them. It's just a matter of time. Probably she'll be on it one day, fake crying about true love to the camera.

Mom pauses. Clears her throat, *ribbit ribbit*.

"I have to tell you that you are going to go stay with your dad, which will probably be good for you actually, to get away from here after, you know, everything that's happened and besides it might be . . . an experience. Different, at least, from anything you ever . . . you can just take some time . . . and . . . well. You know. And . . . and you and your dad need to reconnect and the show says I can't bring you with me and I'm sorry, Sharky, but your dad is your dad no matter what and he loves you and maybe this trip is going to be the best thing to happen to you after all."

It's like she thinks that if she stops to take any more breaths, I'll be able to stop her from saying what she's saying. I'll somehow be able to change her mind.

I'm super aware of my own breathing now. In, out. In, out. In, out. Pant, pant, pant. It just keeps going, a person's inhalations and exhalations, while all around them their life might be completely changing. In and out, like you can't stop yourself. Something

metallic is in my mouth that tastes like blood or hate. I work up some saliva and swallow it down. I go over to the sink and spit. I fill a glass with water. The pipes belch.

“I’ve sublet the apartment to that girl Blaire who answers the phones at the studio,” she adds. “She has cats. She’s too young to have that many cats. But I know her, so I thought it would be better than—well. I hope they don’t scratch all the furniture but I guess it doesn’t . . . we can just lock your room and I’ll pile some other stuff in there and . . . I rented it, anyway, as a one bed. I couldn’t tell you, I didn’t know how to tell you, I know you’re upset, you should be upset, I am upset. This has all been very upsetting . . .” Her voice trails off. Her eyes are on the wall behind me, which is bare except for the one painting she did when she decided to go to art school when I was five, a painting of a kid in bright red boots standing ankle deep in the waves at the beach, staring out to sea. The sea has highlights of purple and green and red, it’s hardly blue at all. Mom can never see things as they are. The kid is me, I guess, but I never had red boots.

“It’s just that,” she says, “I’m not sure how to do this, JC. I’m not sure how to be a parent to you right now. I don’t know what you need or how to do it. I’ve run out of—I just don’t . . . I don’t know, Sharky. I love you, but I don’t know how to do this. You need someone. Something. Someone else.”

I am shaking my head slowly side to side. No way. My heart is thumping out something that I can’t explain, which is Daff, Daff, Daff, Daff.

No.

“Sharky,” she says. “Sharkboy. JC, sweetie. Come on. Don’t

make it harder. I'm only—it's that I can't lose this job, and you know, I think . . .”

And suddenly, instantly, I am drowning. I am de-finned and sinking all the way to the bottom. I see stars. I am going to pass out and I am going to . . . and then suddenly my throat opens. I gulp in air, thirsty. She stares at me. “You okay?” she says. “It's just—I'm sorry. I'm late. I have to—well, I have to go. I can't get fired. Not now. Sh—I mean, sugar. I'm so late. *Sharky, I cannot be late.*”

Her temper starts bubbling up. Mom has some issues with anger.

“I HAVE TO GO,” she shouts, as though I'm the one who has been keeping her here.

I shrug and listen to my pulse pick up speed and start galloping. When I was a kid and this happened, I used to faint. Mom would get mad about spilled milk or how I took too long to put on my shoes and I'd fade out to the tune of the horse hooves of my heart, cantering. I went to therapy.

Now I just listen to her and pretend her voice is waves, pouring over me. I'm a rock. I'm a reef. I'm the land.

I acknowledge that her anger isn't anything to do with me.

I keep breathing.

Stay in the moment.

“ARGH,” she yells. “I'M SORRY, OKAY? I don't know why I'm so *mad!*”

I nod. I know she doesn't.

“Anyway,” she says. “He's your *father*, okay? You can live with him for a couple of months. He's *your* dad.”

But I hate him, is what I'd say if I talked.

No, I can't.

No way.

Not him.

No.

Please.

What about Daff?

I don't say anything. I flip my phone in my hand over and over and over. The sun shines on the screen and makes it a mirror. I stumble to the table and sit.

Mom pushes her chair back, gets up.

She walks away.

She says, "I'm sorry, sweetie. You know I love you. I hope I don't miss the bus because then I'll miss the stupid train again—I . . ."

I hear her pick up her keys, but I don't turn around.

I hear her fast-walking down the hall.

I flip my phone.

And just like that, it buzzes.

Daff. *If u wrnt there, u wldn't ansr, jrkfce.*

Daff has a vowel problem. Vowels have a Daff problem.

Non, I type. *Au revoir. Je ne regrette rien. Je regrette tout.*

I can't even explain to myself why I can't talk to her. There's nothing I want more than to talk to her. I love her. I hate her. I can't. I just can't.

The sun comes out and filters through the window, making a patch of shadows on the table that takes the glare off all that yellow. There is a bowl of apples in the middle of the table that are Mom-level clean, probably bleached. I watch my hand reach out for one and I take it and bite into it and the flesh of it crisps against

my teeth. It tastes like school lunches in third grade before anything bad happened. I put it back in the bowl, one bite missing. A bite I can't seem to swallow. I chew and chew. Tears are looming somewhere behind my eyes, threatening to struggle to the surface. A fly buzzes from over near the sink, settling on the drain board. I raise my hand, like I'm saying goodbye. Goodbye, fly. Goodbye, Mom. Goodbye, New York. Goodbye, The King. Goodbye, Daff. Goodbye goodbye goodbye.

"You have a few more weeks here," she'd said as she left the room. "You can get through them. I know it's hard. I know it's really *so* hard. But then it's summer and . . ." She'd spread her hands, expanding them as far as she could, like summer will be this thing that is big, big enough to make me forget.

The King died in the spring.

I look up at the ceiling. I don't know what I'm looking for. Bubbles to follow to the surface?

Or maybe for the light.