

Intracoastal

There's a moment over the water, before the industrial barrens give way to the shabby-friendly markers of Surfside Beach, when it seems everything could be stopped in time. Shivers of clarity run up the southbound traveler's neck. If it lasted a quarter of a second longer, every car headed down for a peaceful beach weekend at sub-Galveston rates would hang a U-turn and steer for home again.

Texas State Highway 332 terminates at the foot of the Intracoastal Waterway Bridge, bending sharply onto the Blue Water Highway north toward San Luis Pass and Jamaica Beach. Flanking 332's final miles are scenic views of East Union Bayou and a nerve-cluster of barge canals that serve the sprawling chemical plants churning out the good stuff day and night from Freeport to Brazosport proper.

I still believe we had noble motives in wanting to celebrate Aunt Judy's life this way. We fled not from the tragedy of her death but toward memories of what she meant to us. For a dozen years running, since before you and I met, she rented cozy beachcomber shacks for family reunions nobody else had the time or inclination to plan. She did it for pure stubborn love of our contrary tribe. Judy hosted, cooked, organized games, entertained small kids so their young parents could cut loose, and managed to have a fine time doing it. When a family loses a member of that sacred order, the heartbreaking chore of reviving their traditions falls on the unwilling, and it shows.

We wanted the baby to share some shred of the joy and easy good times we'd experienced before his arrival. He'd have been a swaddled newborn at last year's gathering, a central object of adoration rivaling Aunt Judy's hummingbird cake or my dad's world-class

Bloody Mary pitchers. But when the time came to plan that trip, my parents had already moved Aunt Judy into their guest room with hospice nurses calling twice a week.

I tried to make it like the old days, but my arrangements came out a few degrees off. Going through my miserable share of Aunt Judy's private papers, I failed to turn up a receipt or confirmation for any of her previous beach rentals. Her honest, obliging manner might have made her the last person on earth who could cut through the bureaucratic headache of beach rentals with a single polite phone call. The handful of house names I could recall - Driftaway Cottage and Patti's Place being memorable favorites - all were either booked or delisted. I spent hours online, trying in vain to reclaim someplace where a cheerful wisp of Judy might linger and lighten the air for us.

I ended up with "Seaside Comfort," and doesn't that have a glum utilitarian ring? I bet the owner was under pressure to name the property something whimsical and beachy when they published the listing. I'm trying to summon a glib comment about it, a little false doom to bounce off you as a joke, and from the passenger seat you give me a pleading look not to start right now. My lover, my life, bearer of my child, you look destroyed.

I should have aborted the trip when my parents declined our invitation - an early spring weekend of sunshine and sea breeze with their only grandbaby in tow. I heard the shudder and shrug in my dad's voice as he told me over the phone that they weren't up to coming out here yet. "Maybe next fall," he offered in the airless tone of a man who expected another of us might be dead by then. Had I spent the past year as he had, guiding my younger sister beyond recognizable form into premature death, I might have the same outlook. For once grandma and grandpa might be too morose to watch the little one while we take a romantic seaside stroll.

You and I were hoping for some relief on this all-to-brief getaway. Now we're merely moving our sleepless, ramshackle domestic sideshow-without-a-net to an unfamiliar venue, paying good money to try and rest in a strange bed with a new selection of strange night noises.

Worry about maintaining ideal sleep and feeding schedules has eroded under the need to get out and away from our tiny townhouse, by any means, for more than the few hours dictated by work, errands and doctor checkups. If we can't sleep, we might as well not sleep somewhere that smells like vacation. For all we know it's our last chance for a while. Public health notices are circulating again, along with unchecked rumors of what's coming next. The new strain is supposed to be a doozy, and the drug conglomerates are too busy pissing out each other's fires to produce a new miracle booster. The spouting heads and public-facing bullshitters are predicting mass commercial shutdowns. What might this already dwindling industrial/service hybrid community look like in six months? Will new quarantines make a visible difference? Cardstock lawn signs in one of two primary colors, and badly soaped slogans in small business windows, express differing opinions on the topic.

After a restless night and groggy morning, our appetites are lackluster. The baby caught a twitchy, sweaty snooze all through packing and the first hour down 288. Somewhere between Angleton and Lake Jackson he rises in a fuss we can't soothe away. The remaining forty-five minutes of our drive last forever. I have to pee and I suspect you do too, and although the little scrapper needs a change as well, we sense it wouldn't be appeasement enough to settle him down. We drive on, obsessed with our destination, feeling lousy and blue as farm acres recede into brackish wetlands.

Yesterday, you mentioned stopping at the family diner on Mammoth Lake where we met Aunt Judy for a handful of breakfasts. I'm glad now that desperation to be off the road spare us

from debating a pause for mournful slices of pie in her honor. I remember eating there the spring before Judy got sick. She told such a funny story about my grandfather, I was afraid my mom would wet the booth. It's the last time I remember hearing my mother laugh.

Navigating the deserted beachfront lanes, I spy our beloved Driftaway Cottage over my shoulder. A hand-painted sign on the door proclaims "RENT ME." Acid percolates in my empty gut. I'm certain it wasn't available when I checked weeks ago.

I hope you won't notice it, but with impeccable perception you break from your doze to ask why I didn't book there. The Driftaway Cottage party was a sensation. Close family recounted it for months. It was the best and (so far) last of the gatherings. It's possible we conceived our kid in that house.

I sigh instead of answering you, and dial the number posted on the RENT ME sign. The voicemail recording is garbled robotic nonsense, and though a tone sounds I'm sure the mailbox will be full. I hang up, shrugging to imply that the call didn't go through. I swear I looked for that cottage first, eager to snag it, and found it either booked or withdrawn. I can't remember which, but I haven't fully lost my mind yet.

There's nothing exactly wrong with Seaside Comfort when we arrive minutes later. It needs new paint and siding. A leaning porch rail should be shored up before some rowdy kid gets impaled on it. The inside is bare, seeming smaller inside than outside, but more than adequate shelter for two haggard city kids and their sniffing tyke.

The tiny house refuses to welcome us, that's all. Despite new fixtures and appliances, it has a shut-up feel we can't shift. The approach of evening cool can't agitate the air to freshness. After the baby gets a fresh diaper and a quick tub rinse, to atone for the time he spent self-brining in the car, you and he collapse on the bedspread together. I snuggle against you for a minute, still

needing to unload the bags, and we all drop off to sleep - jetlagged by a trip that's literally two hours door to door. That's how reduced we are.

It's dark when we stir, too late for dinner but what's the alternative? We can't last until morning on nothing. I get the kitchenette going for the potatoes we should have baked two hours ago. I leave them in as close to the right amount of time as I can stand, but although I set the oven hotter there's a problem with the temperature sensor. An underbaked russet with cold pats of butter is about as cheery as a cold boiled egg. We'd planned to mash up some nice potato to test on the kiddo; instead we carve into tomorrow's supply of pureed beets and formula.

The little fellow remains listless with food in front of him. He's also scratching at the beginning of a rash on his cheek. When you bend to inspect it, I see you've got the same faint hives on your neck. I seem to be spared, but it's clear you both picked something up from the comforter. We watch it for a while and it doesn't spread, but we change into pajamas and bed down again in uneasy silence. If packing the whole excursion up and going home crosses your thoughts - never mind that the weekend is nonrefundable - you defer to the certainty that neither of us would survive two more hours behind the wheel.

How can we be this uncomfortable, two streets away from Patti's Place and all the other old spots we remember fondly? Seaside Comfort may be cheaper, may lack some quaint nautical décor to make it friendly, but we're in the same place as always. It doesn't follow that this whole stretch of coastline, our designated family haven for ten days a year, could sour overnight with the death of the perennial hostess who made our happy memories from scratch. Aunt Judy had eagerness and ease in every word or expression - qualities lost in her sickbed struggles. How could the fact of her demise have drifted over this community and blighted our future attempts to hold it dear? But also, how could the feeling of dread gnawing my heart mean anything else?

Given time, every mutation takes visible form.

Our son stays halfway comatose through the night, though he grows feverish. He's too quiet, giving us another fretful ride on sleep's edge. All new parents must doubt their ability to overcome the crippling sense of children's fragility. This, I think as I stare at a brown water stain around the ceiling fan, is the part of the weekend my parents weren't up for. Answering midnight cries of pain and mopping up adult bodily fluids for weeks, unable to vent revulsion or frustration, has burned them temporarily against the commonplace demands of infant care. I feel an overwhelming urge to point this out, but I won't risk waking you because I'd throttle you in this bed if you did the same to me.

An hour before pre-dawn birds begin talking, a large animal paws at the crack under the front door, and at the hole where a lopsided window unit pokes through the south-facing wall. I can hear it prowling around the thin-walled bungalow perimeter, looking for access. As I contemplate kicking the drywall to scare it away, it scampers off into the drone of wind and surf.

You wake me as daylight's first wink finds the window. We left our little pouch with the thermometer and the eye dropper and the infant-grade Tylenol at home. I see the contents of the diaper bag and your overnight duffel strewn across the floor and the pillows. They look as if the critter from outside got into them, and I bite my tongue before asking whether you've looked everywhere.

I take my shoes to the front porch, watching the red horizon glow to reveal the beach. My sole comes down on what feels like a shard of cockle or scallop shell. Bending to look, I see a fan of small bones across the porch planks. They once belonged to a medium-sized bird, probably a gull or skimmer. There isn't enough beak to confirm. These remains weren't on the porch of Seaside Comfort when we arrived yesterday.

Driving into the town of Freeport just after sunrise, looking for the first open drugstore, I forget the mild eeriness of a skeletal seabird. I've never been so sure in my life that I've discovered a haunted place. Why are no truckers or plant workers milling about? The only moving figure is faceless, cloaked in coveralls with polarized shades and a woolen hat, directing a diesel locomotive back and forth on a switching track. They're building a train to receive loads of local chemical product, or possibly byproduct, from one the chugging refineries and run them up to points north and west. The continent's untainted water tables await.

I wait at the crossing for ten minutes before the flagger notices me and waves me on. Until I'm fully clear I suspect a trap, keeping myself braced for tons of steel to pinch me and my little sedan flat as punishment for trespassing.

Across the old town canal, marked for posterity but replaced by wider and more sophisticated throughways, not even air seems to move. Lone Star and "Don't Tread On Me" flags hang inert. A gray haze resists oncoming sunlight from the Gulf. If Texas wanted its own little Silent Hill, I'd nominate Freeport first thing on an off-season morning.

An ancient Walgreen's has its illuminated sign switched off but its doors unlocked. After some rooting I find something for hives and feverish babies, an old-school mercury thermometer and a flimsy corkscrew (another amenity that Seaside Comfort lacks). With luck we'll only need these items once. My shoddy video game inventory sustains my creepy feeling all the way back to the beach.

Our patient's downy head is warm, but falling toward normal. His fever broke while I was gone. I doubt it will return. I'm torn between opening the wine and going back to bed, but you suggest that since we're all up we should walk to breakfast. There's a cute place on the beach, probably half a mile, but we should move our blood if we mean to rally.

The pancakes at the Sand Dollar Café are perfect – fluffy, not over-whisked, and done through the center without any char on the outside. Sugar and salt balance to mask the baking powder. A careful whiff of cinnamon stokes our dull senses.

The syrup soaking every square inch is cloying bottom-shelf convenience store brand, practically corn syrup. The homestyle touch of warming it up came by microwaving the bottle, not for the first time. An after-tang of cheap porous plastic brings carcinogenic anxieties forward in the mind.

Is it in me? In the air? Can it reach me? Will we end up like she did, or is the danger still outside us? When and why did they start poisoning the syrup at the Sand Dollar Café?

How does a kind and vital woman who never smoked in her life (except, surely, a few strategic joints in wholesome fellowship) turn jaundiced and frail-boned as a crystal ornament nobody wants? How could her compassionate heart shift aside as cancer cells tunneled like termites through her breasts and belly?

We shovel hotcakes glazed with microplastic menace down our throats - into our offspring - when by rights everyone who lives and dies in the toxic sulfur haze of these chemical plants just over the waterway should be hobbling on tumorous joints like Easter hams, every esophagus blocked with adenocarcinoma. Once the first masses appear on the baby's neck, like marbles under the skin, we can leave him for the local mutants to raise. They keep out of sight but they can't be far away.

I blink, realizing I've been having a nightmare on my feet. I nearly turn my ankle on the steps from the restaurant porch down to the beach. There's an incongruous old-school newspaper vending machine at the bottom. Salt breeze has caked the glass to near-obscurity, and eaten rust

holes in the side almost big enough to reach through, but I can read murky headlines on the *Brazosport Clarion*.

BRAZORIA COUPLE IN CUSTODY AFTER "HOUSE OF HORRORS" RAID

Surviving Children Rushed to Critical Care

I consider switching channels back to my dream. I don't want to meet the sick person who would change a dollar to read the rest of that story, yet I fear I won't be able to get it off my mind until I've tracked it down online to digest in full. I'm a sick person too, in my way.

Aunt Judy didn't look sick. It was a horrible movie makeup effect. She looked like the dead Templar knight that Indiana Jones met. I won't claim I was her favorite nephew, but I held one of her hands as she died. Nobody but us two knew the truth: what I wanted to do was wail and shriek until she was gone and her eyelids could be closed or sewn shut. I remember begging for her attention throughout my childhood, while at the end of her life I'd have done awful things to make her take those pitiful yellow eyes off me. I can't have been alone. In my own mother and father I recognized the exhaustion of round-the-clock caregivers, battling to stay awake through her memorial service. What the minds of those amateur palliative angels must have pondered in her declining weeks, with heavy pillows and easy overdoses at hand.

Meanwhile, a nominally healthy infant with monthly chest colds, erratic feeding and precociously elaborate night terrors can do just as thorough a number on parents desperate to relax their nightly vigils. "Take this child before I throw it against the wall." Which of us had said that on one of our worst all-nighters? Too desperate to be one of the grim jokes we harmlessly traded in spousal solidarity, after cycles of bathtime, towel snuggles, jammies and songs, book time and more songs, gentle night-nights and shushing, late-night diapers and bottles, hasty songs and pacing, re-swaddling, secondary burping, spit-ups, toweling off, more

pacing and bounces not quite violent enough to pass for shaking, true tears and night wails had failed for a bleary week. Sleep deprivation brings light psychosis quicker than anything, and so we glimpse the bare truth of the harm we'd consider doing for an hour's rest. Any parent, who has been a parent with some degree of presence and involvement, knows the unspeakable dreams reserved for that sensory twilight. Parents who end up on the news are those who chose not to wake up.

We planned this early March trip for three reasons: easy time to take off work, last chance before the noise and hassle of spring break, and the soonest we could come without a virtual guarantee of sleet or frozen pipes. The time of year alone could account for the desolate atmosphere. The beach has only birds and sand crabs on it, a welcome open space for the youngster to practice crawling (he'll be running any day now), but this quiet is more than seasonal hibernation. I think of a hunting ground where the prey species have gone silent. Something bigger, or stranger, seems to lurk just out of view. I could turn my head faster, had eyes on either side like a lizard or hawk, I'd catch the sand between us and the houses crawling with camouflaged activity beneath a rashy skin of calm.

You drop onto a bench. "Just a few minutes," you murmur. I leave you to recover as our intrepid leader scoots on. The chilly wind has revived him. He's following a set of footprints, and I notice a striking detail. Some person has jogged along the water's edge barefoot, unmindful of the cold. There's no pledge for the local Polar Bears chapter crashing around in the breakers, though. The prints continue straight on.

The beach tapers to a wall of high dunes forming a barrier to the next residential section. Indentations pit the sand every few feet, suggesting sheltered burrows larger than a nesting shorebird would need.

When I look back at the kid, I'm shocked to see him standing wobbly but. He points with glee at the tracks up ahead, shouting "Wuh, wuh! Wuh!" It's one of his first intelligible sounds – a barking dog. I regard the naked human footmarks and smile. No doggies here, but I clap my hands with a triumphant hoot for his observation. He claps back, an endearing snot bubble swelling from one nostril. I'm amazed how steady he is on his feet.

You can't miss a milestone like this. I turn to call you. To my surprise you haven't merely spaced out. You're dead asleep on the bench, head lolling. Our snatched moments of rest couldn't restore what you've lost over months. However wiped out I am, it goes double for you. The sympathetic guilt of a dad doing his inadequate best only keeps me so alert. I don't carry the razor of pure maternal fear against my chest, the one that cuts you each time you let your eyes fall shut. I've got to wake you just this once, to witness this wholesome thing we've grown.

As I call, I stride along to intercept the baby before he starts climbing. No telling how many pull tabs and broken bottles litter the sand below the dunes. He's kept up his delighted woofing, and I glance again at the tracks we've been following.

Here I can see how the leftmost of the two broad human feet begins to change. The heel impression lightens with every step until it seems to vanish, the contours of the instep narrowing and the ball of the foot separating into multiple clawed toes. A dozen paces along, the foot resembles an elongated paw - not quite a dog's, but something accustomed to canine movement on a crisp seaside day, with flocks of fat shorebirds for chasing and occasional devouring.

I turn your way and holler. You barely stir from your interrupted catnap. I can't run back to you. At my feet, the tracks between my child's tiny shoeprints have completed their metamorphosis to sleek pad-footed appendages.

It's too crazy. Some joker must have carried his (not quite) dog out to the beach to fuck with hapless families of saps wandering the shoreline. But how could human and animal, their prank finished, have crossed over those flimsy dunes without obvious traces? The tracks don't veer up toward the highway or down to the water. They lead straight on to the only place their makers could have ended up - one of the holes vanishing into the dune, and under.

Struggling to get your attention, reeling from what the beach tracks tell me, I've lost track of the boy. He's made remarkable progress with his newfound skill for walking. Hell, he's practically trotting to cover the remaining distance to the dunes.

I hear you behind me, first questioning then moaning in dismay as you find your feet. Crashing waves and flocking gulls rob your words of intelligible meaning, but I don't have to hear them. I've begun to sprint without your prompting, and I have no way of knowing whether you can see what I see. Our boy, suddenly so big and brave, peers into a shadowed cleft in the sand. He holds out a fat fist, grinning, one finger extended to point. For the span of a second my cries for our son are as loud as yours but lost in the scream of seabirds and the Gulf's thunder. I discern the gnarled shape of what crouches in that hole, reaching for him.