

Harold

Little Sebascodegan Point had started off a tranquil spit of land in the Atlantic, but slowly the shadow of Bowdoin College had crept in. It had begun with the polar bear rug Harold had bought for the living room--a flight of fancy he had always wanted since his freshmen year--but then he had won a polar bear comforter at a faculty auction, and soon all his clothes were stamped with the mascot of the college. In fact, by his seventh year on the payroll, he realized he had hardly anything that wasn't from the school. The quality Bowdoin gave him was very good, and Harold was a very practical man, but he saw his ever-present Bowdoin drapes and linens as a sign that he was in a rut. Yes, there was something very depressing, Harold decided, about going home each day to a tiny island and sleeping in the sheets of his employer. The separation between his work and his outside life (which wasn't much to be fair) had blurred too close for comfort.

It was with great joy then that Harold heard through the grapevine that Finnia (or Finny as they called her) and Gene had returned to Maine. His two best friends from college had been spotted back in Bowdoin, staying at the Little Island Motel and sunbathing at Lowell's Cove. They were living reminders of his past as a fly-away youth that gave him a sparkle of hope--mixed with agitation. Finny and Gene had gone on to

marry each other after Bowdoin (and although Harold had been invited to the wedding, he had never gone).

Their arrival was something to break through the normal. And it was with great expectations that he dropped an invitation for dinner off at the Motel on his way to work. His mindwanderings only seemed to grow when it was returned to him with an emphatic affirmative. They were coming, he would have to order pizza.

The tea Harold brewed on the morning of his comrades' return tasted too strong. And when he spilled it on his polo, staining Bowdoin's crest with a red smudge, he did a whole load of laundry just for the one shirt. Then, he sat down in the alcove in his bedroom watching the grey Maine waves crashing against the rocks and his now-foreboding driveway. By four o'clock, he began to wish that his friends would not come at all and was thoroughly disappointed when they showed up exactly on time at six in a black Cadillac Escalade.

Bracing for anything, he made his way downstairs and out the front door.

"Harry!" They were waiting for him on the porch, his two best friends in the world, and suddenly they were on him in a bear hug. Dazed, Harold stumbled back, trying to take in who was standing before him.

A great change had come to Gene and Finny. They had both grown very wealthy in their time away from Maine. Their clothes and bright accessories looked straight from Fifth Avenue. Harold shivered in the cold.

“Harry!” said Gene again, “It is good to see you. How are you?”

Harold looked the man up and down.

“You’re fatter now, Gene,” he said. Finny and Gene laughed. It was the first time he had heard their laugh in years, Harold shuffled back inside the front door, holding it open. “Come in. Make yourself at home. It’s not much. The bathroom’s on your left.”

“I can’t believe you stayed in Maine this whole time, Harry,” said Finny as he led them through his entrance hall. Her voice was sweet and rich and lovely. Harold didn’t turn around to look at her.

“I did leave,” said Harold, “I went to my brother’s down in Orlando for a year, but I came back when my stepdad died and left me this place. It’s small.” He shrugged his shoulders.

“Can I put my bag down somewhere?” asked Finny, softly.

Again, Harold couldn’t look at her, so he spoke to Gene instead.

“Just put it on the couch Finny or on a door handle. Doesn’t matter. Nothing formal. We’re all friends.” Harold led them through the spare kitchen and the connected

dining room, out onto the back patio. Here, wire chairs surrounded a glass table.

“Figured we could sit here and chat.”

There was the sound of metal grinding on the concrete and then the trio sat down together. Harold laced his fingers together on the table and then stared up at his newly-cosmopolitan friends.

“What brings you back here?” he asked. He tried this time to look at Finny, but when she met his eyes, he flinched and turned to Gene.

“Well,” said Gene, he had grey hairs now, “Maine’s lovely, Harry. And our children—”

“We needed a vacation,” said Finny, “A break from Durham and DC. Somewhere that felt like home,” she smiled at him.

Gene nodded in agreement. Harold nodded too.

“It’s a very nice place you have,” said Gene. He pointed to the panoramic of the seaside, “Almost near Jaquish Island and the Cribstone Bridge. Remember when we swam from Land’s End to Jaquish our freshman year?”

Harold smiled. “I do. I do remember,” said Harold. That had been a long night. They had needed to call the coast guard to motor them back to Bowdoin. “We were all so skinny.”

Gene laughed.

“These cliffs are steeped in memory,” said Finny, suddenly. Harold frowned at her. She was still so pretty, even in her forties with her pale skin and her red rosy cheeks. She was light and lovely.

“We ought to take a drive,” said Gene, “The three of us. Up to Damriscotta. Have a lake day. Like we used to do—”

“We should take the children,” cut in Finny.

“Yes,” said Gene, “I want you to meet our kids. Little Ian and our eldest, Bylash. You’ll love them, Harry. They’re very silly.”

Children. Harold had not known they had made children together. They hadn’t sent a card.

“What’s kids like?” Harold asked. His voice had grown an octave deeper. “What’s it like to have little ones?”

“They’re so rambunctious,” said Finny. She leaned across the table towards him, gazing into his eyes. “Ian’s always stealing cookie dough and ice cream and By’s always so moody.”

“Bylash is like you, Harry,” said Gene, “You’ll like him. Loves music. Loves sailing.”

Harold snorted. He did not want to talk to their son. It annoyed him that his friends had gone on with their life without him.

“We’ve missed you,” said Finny, “It’s been lots of years.”

Gene nodded.

Harold sighed. “I’m a Mainah,” he said, “Atlantic is in my blood. Couldn’t leave. I owed it to Bowdoin to stay.” His words sounded a lot like those he had spoken to himself at night, or on the toilet, or when he ate a solitary dinner with his phone propped against a beer bottle.”

“You always were the most righteous of us,” said Gene. He ran his hand through his greying hair and sat back, staring at Harold. “But are you sure you aren’t stuck?” Harold bit his lip. The truth was that he was stuck, but he would never admit it. His damned pride... Why had they married each other? “If you ever had an inkling of desire to learn computer programming, now is that time. They’re paying six figures out in Silicon Valley.”

“I don’t,” said Harold shaking his head, “I don’t. Admissions is my passion. Has been for seven years. I help young students fall in love with Bowdoin. It’s what I do. No better work.” He was happy that his words rang true.

“You should show By around Bowdoin,” Finny said, “He’s nineteen this year. He’s the right age for this place. You should show him.”

“I’d be happy too,” said Harold. “What’s his name?”

“Bylash,” said Finny, “Bylash Phillips. He changed his last name from ours.”

Suddenly, Harold felt the hair on the back of his neck stand on end.

“I recognize that name,” he said, “ ‘Bylash Phillips’ you said? He applied to Bowdoin last year. I read his essays. They were... subpar.”

Finny turned pink.

“Did he?” Finny asked. “Did you know that Gene?”

Gene shook his head.

Harold squinted his eyes, staring at the pair.

“You didn’t know that your own son applied to Bowdoin?” he asked.

“Well,” said Gene, “Well. We’re coming at this all wrong. We did know. He’s a good kid, By, but he needs a little help. We were actually hoping you could write us a recommendation or put in a good word or something of the sort. Work some magic? If possible. He’s going to community this year, but he deserves better.”

Harold looked at his two *best* friends in the world. “What am I supposed to say to that?” he said.



“If you’re not too busy,” said Finny. She had started talking quickly, “We know you’re probably very busy, but By *really* is a special kid. We’ll take him to meet you. Come meet him.”

“I don’t mean this to be rude,” said Harold, “But I really don’t want to talk to your son.”

Finny and Gene looked at each other.

“That’s okay,” said Gene, “It was just a suggestion.” But suddenly, cold air, like an unseen frost, had descended on the little table. A divider that separated Harold once again from his friends. Harold decided to change the subject.

“I’m sorry I didn’t go to your wedding,” he said.

“It’s no problem at all,” said Finny, “We heard that your stepfather was having lung problems. It’s okay.”

Harold stared at the woman. Was he to tell her that his stepfather had died months before the wedding? He didn’t know. He wanted to tell them so many things, but everything he came up with sounded too corny, or angsty, or weak for a forty-six-year-old man. Again, he changed the subject.

“I cheated,” Harold said, “Didn’t want to cook tonight. Thought we could celebrate.”

“Oh?” said Finny.

“I picked up pizzas from the Portland Pie on my way home from work yesterday. They’re still in the warmer. They still smell good.”

“Nice touch,” said Gene. The trio had gone to the shop’s opening their senior year--the day Harold had turned 22.

Harold nodded and stood up. There was the sound of grinding metal on stone. He made for the sliding door back inside.

He was halfway across the kitchen when he smelled Finny. A light touch of floral on the air. He turned around and found that she had followed him inside.

“I’m here to help carry,” she said. He looked her up and down, then led her into the butler's room. The pizzas sat in a warmer Harold had built into the wall. There were four of them.

“I didn’t know what you liked,” he said, “I got a Balsamic. A Moosehead. A Mount Katahdin. And a normal-”

“Perfect,” said Finny. She touched his arm. “Perfect, Harry.” She opened up the door and the smell of dough and cheese filled their noses.

“Good stuff,” Harold said. He stared at Finny standing in his house. Had she ever told Gene about the Night? When she had told him that she loved him? Had that ever come up when they were off buying their fancy things and making their children?

“I’ll get the first two,” Finny was saying, all business. Harold nodded. The moment had passed. She was carrying the pizzas out of the room.

Gene was typing away on his Blackberry, but he looked up at Finny when the pair returned.

“Finnia,” he said, “Dave just got back to me—” Harold watched a look pass between the husband and wife, “He says he’ll talk to us for By, but he’s leaving for Nova Scotia tonight on the ferry.”

“Camden’s two hours from here,” Finny said, “It’s too late.”

Harold absorbed himself in the smells of the pizzas he was carrying, sensing that this conversation was not for him. He counted each of the sausage pieces on the Moosehead. When he finished, he moved on to the mushrooms. The couple had come to a silent understanding.

“Harry,” said Gene. Harold looked up. “I’m so sorry. But, we need to leave.”

Harold nodded. Of course, they did. Above all, Gene had always been a practical man -- just like him. Maybe that’s why they had become friends in the first place.

“But we’ll be back,” said Finny, “Can we do a raincheck?” She had set her pies on the table and was groping in her purse. “Let us pay you for the pizzas. And the gas. And your time. Oh Harold I’m so sorry.” Harold had stopped listening.

“You know I don’t want your money, Finny,” Harold said, staring at the ocean, “But I appreciate the gesture all the same.” Finny stopped. She looked sheepish. “Go on,” he said, motioning to the sliding glass door, “Go take care of your son.”

“Well, maybe we should stay,” Finny said.

“Go on!” Harold said. And then they did. Hastily. Awkwardly. All their wealthy bravado evaporated. He heard the screech of their Cadillac as it cleared out of the driveway and back down the road.

Harold stared out at the open ocean. At the banquet laid out before him. He had too much food, and he had never been a fan of pizza anyway.

Harold stood up and closed the boxes, protecting the pies from the wind. Then, he stacked them on top of each other and carried them out to the trunk of his car, nestling them in moving blankets so they wouldn’t jostle. Satisfied, he went around to the driver’s seat and got in. He would drive them to the dorms. College kids were never not searching for a free meal. And maybe, their smiles would be real.