

## BOUND

Sandwiched between two of the largest American cities, it is nicknamed the Garden State but should really be the Garbage State. It is the gigantic suburb of New York and Philadelphia, its claims to fame the dream-smashing Atlantic City, Bruce Springsteen and the miles of chemical laboratories and toxic waste spilling into the marshlands across from New York City. It is an expensive strip mall, densely populated, its cities reduced to crumbling buildings for the poor, surrounded by the wealthy in their suburbs, the lucky ones with yards, the newer subdivisions with cheaply-built, ultra-expensive homes. The kind of homes with two sinks in the bathrooms, a Jacuzzi, a bonus room, a living room within the kitchen and a formal living room that no one ever uses, the kind of homes with slick paint jobs covering toxic plywood walls. The kind of homes with yards the size of three parking spaces covered by cedar decks holding the requisite grills to feed the American Dream.

One thing that makes New Jersey almost redeemable is its shore, its connection to the Atlantic Ocean. But that doesn't belong just to Jersey, and often the beaches are littered with soda cans and cigarette butts and plastic of all kinds – toys, flip flops, the wrappings of substances that pass for food but which are usually made in a laboratory somewhere – probably up in the northeastern part of the state. Some of the beaches are private, but on others anyone can walk, sit, tan, play – for a fee in the summer daytime hours, for free at other times. But on this humid, cool evening one young woman, who sits on the jetty thinking about her home state, while her older sister and younger brother stand nearby. They didn't have to pay to get onto the jetty, the man-made jetty that keeps starfish and garbage tucked away in little salt-water pools

warmed by the afternoon sun, or chilled by the night's tide. It is suppertime and the beach is practically deserted. The sun sets behind them. If she were in California, the young woman, Alice, would have the luxury of watching the sun set, but all she gets is the sky darkening from light gray to darker gray, maybe a shot of pink here and there, a little purple, a little gold (like royalty), and then it will all, somehow, even as she watches she won't know how it happens, turn dark blue, then almost black and it will be night.

Alice sits on the salt-sticky rocks in her jeans and black T-shirt, her legs crossed under her, and stares out at the waves skimming up the sand hitting the sides of the jetty without much force. She feels that way: violent, lacking the energy to be so. Perched on the brink of hill above the beaches to her left, windows in huge old homes, the summer homes of the New York rich of the last turn of the century, reflect the evening sky back at her. In one house the kitchen lights are on; it looks warm and inviting, with figures moving around a table. She imagines this must be a happy family, despite their obvious wealth, and then she laughs at herself. Her family looked like a happy family, too. She puts her focus back on the low tide, the sticky rocks, and tries to stop thinking. The harder she tries, the more she thinks about Jamie and Dad and the whole shitload of events that brought her back here, where she vowed never to return, with her brother and sister.

Natalie, the oldest, stands at the edge of the jetty watching a party boat on the horizon. If the earth were flat that boat would fall off the edge in just another few minutes. Natalie shakes her head and rubs her temples, feels her long brown braids rub against her shoulders. What in hell had possessed her to wear braids today? She has a headache from all the crying of the past two weeks. Party boat! As if there aren't horrible things happening all the time, every day,

every hour, every second someone is in pain. How can people party? She inhales the salty air, tastes it, feels it running down her cheeks.

Garret is the youngest, just twenty-one. He stands near Natalie, but not close enough to touch. He wears six earrings in his left ear and three in his right, but he's straight, fuck what Dad said to him, he's straight. He can hardly believe what happened, yet it must be true or Jamie would be here with them. He wonders what his sisters think. They're all supposed to be out here to talk, the three of them, and nobody can utter a word. He expects to see Jamie floating along over the sand, leaving scarcely a footprint, her dog Mahatma leaping joyfully at her side, and her unshaven armpits as grossly unfeminine as ever. He wished he hadn't gotten angry with her about that. Just like Dad.

But down the beach there is nobody like Jamie, just a couple surfers near Asbury Park. He looks at Natalie, waiting for her to say something, and lights a cigarette. She turns, sees, and says nothing. For once. She's still mad at him. Fuck, if she's mad she needs to say so. He's not going to start it. He didn't ask for this. He runs his hand through his dyed-black, spiky gelled hair and his silver rings catch the last of the sunlight, making a sparkly little dance on a warm little pool near Alice's bare feet. She looks up at her brother. Her glasses have misted over and she takes them off. She looks much older to him, not like his sister at all. When she speaks her voice cracks. "I don't know what to do."

Only a gull responds, calling across the ocean as he swoops down to catch his dinner.

Garret throws his cigarette into the pool and Alice manages, her anger quick and sharp, catching in her throat, "Pick that up. The word isn't your ashtray."

"And you're not God." It's worst for him, don't they see that, can't they understand it's

worse for a boy?

“Haven’t we had enough fighting for today?” Natalie shouts to be heard over the waves, but since they’re small and quiet, mellow waves, she just sounds mean. She pulls her brown sweater closer to her. Some of her past makes sense a little bit now. But that doesn’t make it any easier to bear. Especially not Jamie. Finding her note, then Mahatma sleeping on her cold, unmoving body, his collie-esque face pleading with Natalie to wake Jamie up.

“I didn’t mean it,” says Garret, sitting on a rock, his back to the ocean.

“You’re always littering and you should know better.” Alice can be relentless.

“No, I mean about Dad.”

The name hangs there like his presence, the ghost of the respected businessman with the flashy teeth, the perfect wife and the four wonderful children.

“Of course you meant it. We need more therapy.” Alice hugs her knees to her chest, staring out past Natalie to the Atlantic. It must be very cold out there, and below in the depths where sunlight cannot reach and living things do not grow. Yet somehow there are creatures, odd-looking and ugly, who survive in the darkness and the mud. That is Alice’s life, she thinks, and her thoughts flit to Jamie who must have been in the same dark place, drowning. Alice has begun to drown before but she has never sunk to the bottom.

Her bones and muscles stop working and she caves in on herself, her strength all gone, the reality hitting harder than a tsunami, ready to sweep her out to sea. Garret and Natalie move forward. Natalie touches Alice’s shoulder with her fingertips, but Garret stands back, uncertain, his eyes full like the ocean. They don’t know if they should touch one another any more. They used to give sort-of hugs in brotherly and sisterly fashion on occasion, kisses on the cheeks,

nothing more, really but now even that seems weird. Alice shrugs Natalie off. Garret backs away but Natalie sits beside Alice, almost shoulder-to-shoulder, but not quite. Not touching. “We’ll get through this,” she says, thinking as she speaks that she’s a liar.

“I don’t want to,” Alice snuffles, turning her red, puffy eyes to her sister, then up to her brother. “I just want Jamie back.” She wipes her nose with the back of her hand. Natalie finds a tissue in her pocket and hands it to Alice, who uses it then clutches it like a lifesaver.

Garret takes a drag on his cigarette. “We should kill him.” He sounds completely serious. He turns toward the ocean, his gaze falling on the same party boat Natalie saw just a few minutes earlier. His sisters say nothing. The papers said that Jamie had been found dead, but the news never reported how she died or why she had killed herself. When you’re Dad you can make sure shit like that never reaches the media.

“I know a guy with a gun,” Garret continues, and through her tears Alice snorts, a sort of laughter. “We can’t kill him with a gun. They could trace that.” She knows it’s wrong to even consider such a thing and yet, after all, it seems to make a sort of logical, perfect sense. An eye for an eye. Dad for Jamie.

“We can’t kill him at all,” Natalie says.

“I could kill the motherfucker.” Garret throws the cigarette down, stomps it out, then picks up the butt and puts it in the pocket of his cargo pants. He takes another cigarette out of the same pocket.

“Don’t call him that,” Natalie snaps.

“Motherfucker. With my bare hands,” he says, lighting the new cigarette. He puts the match out in a pool of water and tucks it back into his pants, watching Alice as he does so.

They all could, when it comes to that. But they won't. The anger will dissipate and they'll be left with the pain that finally has a name, which is why it's better to hold onto the anger. The pain won't stop. They know that. It's been two weeks now and if anything the pain is more intense, made worse by a string of if-onlys: if only Natalie had been home to answer Jamie's call that night, instead of out having a good time with her boyfriend, Jamie would be fine, or at least alive. If only Alice had prodded a little more deeply after Jamie had said casually “Sometimes I'm so depressed I can't stand it, I can't get out of bed and I guess that's why I got fired. That or they didn't like the pit hair. Let's go get some falafels,” only Alice didn't feel like driving the one and a half hours back to Jersey to get falafels with Jamie, and they'd fought. If only Alice had been more sensitive. She could have seen what was coming. If only Garret had bothered to call Jamie in the past month, he thinks she would still be alive. They used to be the closest of all of them, everything Jamie and Garret, but he'd never quite forgiven her for moving out when she was eighteen and he was thirteen. And now that he was twenty-one, he had more important things to do, like hanging out with April Snowden and getting trashed.

“I still have the note,” Alice says, and Natalie and Garret look at her. A couple of gulls swoop low nearby, their cries loud and mournful.

“I threw that out,” says Natalie.

“I dumpster dived it. We could kill his career,” she says, looking at Garret, because she knows Natalie will not approve.

“We can’t,” Natalie says quietly, because she’s the oldest and she should be the voice of reason, but she agrees with her brother and sister.

“I’ll scan and email copies of the letter to the magazines and newspapers. Someone will pick it up.”

Garret shakes his head. “I don’t want to be on the front page of *The National Enquirer*.”

“I’m not going to jail for killing him and this is the only way to get back at him.”

“I’m not a homo,” says Garret, and Alice glares at him.

“There’s nothing wrong with being gay,” Natalie says, getting to her feet and looking back to the horizon, her back to Alice.

“I don’t need your half-assed defense, Natalie,” Alice says. It’s too little, too late. Only Jamie never cared who slept in Alice’s bed, maybe because Jamie slept with anyone who’d take her. “And getting raped doesn’t change your sexual orientation, Garret.”

“I don’t want to fight,” Natalie repeats.

“Me, either,” Garret says, glaring at Alice.

A man, dressed in high rubber boots, tackle vest and hat comes strutting across the jetty with the confidence of one who’s done this a million times before. His fishing pole rises high and dark against the last bits of the evening sun behind him to the west. Alice narrows her eyes at him, angry at the interruption. She hopes he catches no fish. He nods his head at the threesome, says to Garret, “There’s no smoking on the beach.” He sets his tackle box down right there, right beside Garret, right in their space.

Just like Dad. He seems to think his word is God’s. Garret doesn’t give a shit if it is because Garret doesn’t believe in God. He stares at the man and takes a long, long drag, blowing

a ring into the air just to the side of the man's head.

"I mean it, son, I'll call the cops." He removes a Blackberry from his vest.

Glaring at the man still, Garret drops his cigarette onto the jetty and stomps it out with his boot. "Happy?" Under his breath he mutters "Asshole," and Alice feels a sudden sharp twinge that Garret should suddenly feel so subdued.

"Pick it up. There's no littering."

Garret picks up his cigarette, never taking his eyes off the man, and puts it in his pocket. The man picks up his tackle box and moves on, whistling, to the part of the jetty that stretches north-south instead of straight out into the ocean.

Garret takes out another cigarette and lights up, suddenly aware of movement on the beach. He looks up, expecting to see Jamie in one of her tie-dye sundresses, but there's only a surfer in his wetsuit.

Natalie looks at the horizon and wonders where Jamie is. Is she in the sky? Is there heaven? It would seem fitting, since Earth is such hell.

"Where is he now, does anyone know?" Alice asks.

"At a press conference," says Garret. "Who knows? Who the fuck cares?" He takes a long drag and exhales in the direction of the fisherman. He smokes the whole thing while Alice and Natalie stay where they are, immobile, unable to speak, each of their brains racing like crazy with questions and problems, crazy solutions to how to deal with Dad and Mother.

Garret drops his finished cigarette to the jetty and says, "It's gonna be too dark to see before long. We should probably head back."

Alice picks up the cigarette butt. "Why do you have to be like that?"



He shrugs. "Ask Dad."

She shakes her head. "I might talk to the press."

"I don't want my name in the papers," Garret yells, the sinews in his neck standing out. The fisherman looks in their direction. Garret sticks up his middle finger and the man takes his Blackberry from his fishing vest. Alice steps back and Natalie stares at the man but speaks to Garret: "Calm down."

"Fuck you," he tells her, then he says it to Alice, then he turns and yells it to the fisherman. A thousand times he yells it until his voice is hoarse. His sisters stare, unsure what to do. He is bigger than they are, and stronger since he works out in order to look good in pants and shirts he can pour himself into. And then suddenly he crumples onto the jetty, his head on his knees, his body shaking. Natalie lowers herself beside him, her arm around his shoulder, and he leans into her, allowing her to comfort him.

Alice stands apart.

And they sit there until the darkness is complete, not speaking. The police never arrive. The fisherman passes on his way back home, giving them a wide berth. The moon rises large above them, honey gold at first then pale and luminous over the black water. The waves are getting stronger, the crashing harder. The lights in the beach houses shine brighter now, but there is no one to be seen, only the silhouettes of people, no substance. Everything is fleeting, everything but the pain. There is no going back and they don't know how to move forward. And they sit in the misty saltwater breeze, huddled together but apart now, afraid to touch, all part of the same incident and all of them, alone.