

Luanne Rice

July

WHEN WE WERE YOUNG, Olivia, Chris, and I would sit around and Olivia would say, “We came out of the same stomach.” It was true, and amazing. At two year intervals we had travelled down our mother’s birth canal and emerged sisters. Later, when all three of us would bleed at the same time, we would drink champagne on the roof outside our bedroom. It overlooked a sloping yard and an orphanage crowning a distant hill. Each glassful would command a toast; we drank to ourselves, to the asbestos on which we sat, to the orphans, to our mother. Our blood, after all, had flowed with hers before we were born, in her womb, pulsing through our placentas. We would talk of this while getting drunk on the roof. They are biological facts, but they are what made us sisters.

I am the oldest and the only one left unmarried. Neither Olivia nor Chris had bridesmaids at her wedding, but each of them whispered to me in the moments before she spoke her vows that I was her maid of honor. They married a year ago: Chris in June, Olivia in August. If I wish to make this a banner year, I must hurry; this is July. James and I have discussed marriage as though it were already upon us. We have a leisurely approach to it. “When we are married,” we say. “When we are married . . . we will move to Benefit Street . . . we will buy a platform for the futon . . . we will take a train through the Rockies.” We live on Benefit Street now, and last month we bought the platform; all that is left to accomplish is the train trip, and why would we have to be married to take it? Last summer we stood together in the yard of my mother’s beach house for two different weddings. At each I clutched his hand until it felt bloodless. I remember the constriction of my throat, the feeling of sun on my bare brow. It was hotter at Olivia’s than Chris’s. I remember smiling and crying as I

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kissed the couples and various aunts who said, “Don’t wait too long, you two.”

Summer haze veiled those weddings and made them seem distant, like dreams, but with the passing of winter they have achieved a perfect clarity. Perhaps I expected them to dissolve in time, along with the marriages they created, but now they appear, sharp in my mind, with shadows and edges. I see Chris and Morgan in their receiving line and Olivia and Donald in *their* receiving line, their smiles frozen as if in frames of film. I visualize these events and think of my father. When I saw my father dead in his hospital bed his face had a crazy grin. Of course it was pain, not happiness, preserved there, but it was permanent, and the change in our family created by my sisters’ weddings is no less permanent than the change created by my father’s death.

I said that to James last night when we arrived here, at my mother’s summer house, for a visit along with my sisters and their husbands.

“Maybe,” he said, his blue eyes lifting, “but being married is nicer than being dead.”

I scowled and swung my hair, wanting to show him I thought he had missed my point, even though I knew he hadn’t. James stood behind me before the mirror and stroked my hair with a tortoise shell brush, untangling knots the car wind had made, and my eyes watched his in the mirror. They looked amused; when it comes to me, James has patience and a sense of humor.

This morning we waken and lie in the bed that was mine as a child, letting the breeze off the Sound blow across us. My hand lies on his firm stomach, and his arms hug me. A film of sweat bonds us. We are in the midst of the summer’s first hot spell. Outside gaudy day lilies bloom along the rock ledge and insects hum in the weeds. If I close my eyes I hear the familiar noises—waves, bugs, terns, voices downstairs—and pretend I am a child. But if I am a child, whose is the male stomach I am touching? My father’s. The answer snaps to mind. It is not as sordid as it seems; just that, in this house of

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women, who else's would it be? I never touched my father's naked stomach, but I think about it for awhile, and it no longer seems sordid.

In two years the texture of our family has changed beyond recognition. Father is ash, mother a widow, sisters wives, and me. I am the same as ever. Whenever I consider marriage, I think of the disruption of familiar textures, and of all the senses, texture is the one I most value. I would choose a vista of marsh grass, spiky with flat leaves and tubed stalks, repetitive and colorless, over a lurid sunset. I enjoy the solidity of textures; I feel as though I can grasp them. The fabric I weave, for example, is coarse, hilly with wool, hemp, and rough cotton. I use colors that remind me of the beach, colors dull as sand, but when the pieces are finished I close my eyes and lean across my loom, tracing my fingers over the landscapes I have created. They feel permanent, but then, so did my family until my father died. When I think about marriage and wonder what I am waiting for, it sometimes occurs to me that I wish to preserve my family, intact, the way it always was.

Change me, I think, pressing harder on James's stomach. His arms tighten around me, and his lips kiss my neck. He is the man I love.

When we go downstairs, everyone is standing in the kitchen trying to decide what to do. My mother wants to paint, Olivia and Chris want to swim, Morgan and Donald want to play tennis.

"Want to play Canadian doubles?" Morgan asks James.

James looks at me and smiles. "Feel like going swimming?" he asks.

"Sure."

"We've already got towels," Olivia says, holding up her beach towel. It has a large goggle-eyed fish swimming on a yellow background. Bubbles float out of its mouth towards the towel's hem. "Your towel's hanging on the line."

"Girls on the beach and boys on the courts," Donald says. He is tall and blond, older than the rest of us. When Olivia married him one of our aunts told me that no one would

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guess he was a biologist because he looks too much like a surf bum.

“Well, work up good appetites because we’re having shrimp pesto for dinner,” my mother says. “I bought fresh cloves of garlic at Robbin’s Farm this morning that look exactly like fat little spacemen.”

James doubles over for an instant, clutching his stomach with one hand and her forearm with the other. “Marth—don’t mention garlic before I swallow some toast.”

Everyone laughs, but no one teases him about the scotch he drank last night. We arrived late, after the others, and James took his glass to the corner of our flagstone terrace and listened to our conversation. The gathering had the air of a reunion because we hadn’t all been together since one weekend in April. We talked about the discoveries Donald has made in the study of salamanders’ synapses, about Olivia’s recently missed period, about my mother’s newest painting spot, about Chris’s and Morgan’s jobs at the sail loft, about my weaving exhibit in the lobby of a Providence hospital. While we all talked James stood apart, smiling and listening, and it seemed to me his face wore the expression of an innkeeper on the summer’s busiest night: pleased at everyone’s merry time, but somehow separate.

Olivia, Chris, and I walk Indian-file down the cement steps to the beach. I go last, and I watch my sisters’ hips swing beneath the snug fabric of their bathing suits. People watching us descend would say we are women, and we are. We are tall, and the grace with which we move has more to do with the accumulation of certain experiences than with balance. We have walked this way during every stage of our lives. Stepping on stones, vines of honeysuckle and woodbine, fragments of acorns, my toes curl protectively. The sand seems a long way off, but then we cross the footbridge and are there. We stand still and look around, seeing who we know, but I know we all are doing the same thing: wedging our tender feet into the soft sand.

“Hi, Mrs. Montcrieff,” Olivia says in a voice too low for

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Mrs. Montcrieff, who is slipping her hand down her grandson's bathing suit and brushing sand from his bottom, to hear.

"Does she dye her hair?" Chris asks.

Olivia and I look at Mrs. Montcrieff's tight brown curls, and Olivia shoves Chris. Her fingertips make white marks that disappear instantly, like apparitions, on Chris's upper arm. "Of course she dyes it, you weirdo."

"Once I dreamed that she had long blond hair, braided, and she was wearing chaps. The kind cowboys wear," Chris says.

"You dreamed that about Mrs. *Montcrieff*?" Olivia asks.

"I swear I did. Morgan and I were at a regatta in Newport, and rain started coming through the hatch. The boat was rocking like mad—when I woke up I was trying to close the hatch cover, and I realized I had been dreaming about waiting in line at some Good Humor truck, behind Mrs. Montcrieff, and she looked the way I just said."

We all laugh because Mrs. Montcrieff is quite matronly, and the idea of her wearing blond braids and chaps is hilarious. She attended our father's funeral wearing a black veil and a black pantsuit, and she clutched each of our hands and said, simply, "Condolences" to each of us. To our mother she said "My deepest sympathy."

We walk past blankets of strangers and many people we know. We wave to the Reids, the Crawfords, the Glenneys, Mrs. Stampone and Mrs. Gronini, Margie Heckler and her boyfriend. The crowd grows sparse near the end of the beach, but we do not stop. We keep walking, up the bluff and along a path through some woods, until we reach Little Beach.

Few people know about Little Beach, and it is nearly always deserted. Our parents brought us here for picnics on weekends and on Wednesday nights, when our father would leave work early and arrive from the city in time for an early dinner. We would pack knapsacks full of food and thermoses full of juice and cocktails and have dinner on a beach so empty it seemed private. "Miranda's Beach" my father called it until my sisters were born, and then he called it "Little

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Beach.” Occasionally we have seen boys surfcasting here, but people do not come to sunbathe; the distance is too great. People on vacation do not want to walk fifteen extra minutes for privacy.

My sisters and I remove our bathing suits and walk naked into the Sound. The water shocks me when I first dive in, but I catch my breath and swim straight out from the beach. An east wind last week brought cold fog and rough waves; the bottom is still churned up. With my eyes wide open I look down into murky depths, at tendrils of kelp mysteriously emerging from clouds of silt, billowing as if from the swells of passing creatures. My breath comes sharply, and I instinctively curl my legs closer to my body. My eyes sting. I roll onto my back. Floating, I scan the clear, summer sky, and the terror washes away. Near the beach I see my sisters, their yellow heads close together above the dark water, and I swim towards them, feeling unreasonably as though I had just survived something. They watch me come. When I am close, they stroke towards shore, and we walk out of the water.

Olivia takes my towel, and I get the one with the fish.

“How long are you staying?” I ask.

“Until Tuesday. Donald has a couple of days off. He wanted to go someplace on the Cape, but I talked him out of it. Who wants to fight traffic for three hours, then wind up at some neon-y motel in the middle of some cranberry village?”

“I know.” Chris giggles. “Morgan wants to take our vacation on Block Island.”

“Block Island—more beer cans on the beach than clam shells,” Olivia says.

We dry off and spread our wet towels on the sand. I lie between my sisters. It occurs to me that this is the first time all three of us have been alone together since their weddings. Usually one of the husbands, or James, or our mother is along, but now we are isolated. A path through the woods separates us from everyone else. Little Beach looks exactly as it did when we were children, and if I do not notice the glinting gold rings on my sisters’ hands, I can pretend nothing has changed.

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Certain articles I have read and debates I have joined conclude with the idea that families of three children are not ideal. People argue that two will gang up against one, that although loyalties may shift, one will always feel left out. I agree that it is possible, but our family is different. In grammar school my sisters were my closest friends, and as we have grown older I continue to prefer their company to that of other women. We used to joke that any man who married one of us would get a package deal. "Take one, get three," we would say. Our secrets and knowledge are entwined like roots holding back eroding dunes. At night I have wakened from terrible dreams, with James beside me. I move close to him, for comfort, but greater desolation comes then, when I am awake: will I ever gain the same depth of feeling with him, or anyone, that I have with them?

I watch Olivia drizzle a stream of sand onto her stomach. The grains form a tiny pyramid on her skin, then collapse. The steady breeze has already dried our bodies; in a few minutes we will be hot enough for another swim.

"I know I'm pregnant," Olivia says. "Donald wants to wait for blood tests and certificates before he starts getting excited, but I know I am."

"I can't believe you want children already," Chris says.

"Donald's older. We should have them soon—he's nearly forty."

"Children," Chris says, her voice trailing off. "I can't imagine it, myself."

"Haven't you always wanted them?" Olivia asks. She has a talent for reducing weighty, complex choices into simple yes-or-no answers. She married Donald after knowing him for only three months. "Haven't you?" she asks again.

"I might want them some day," Chris finally answers. "But it's taking me all this time to get used to Morgan. Christmas at his parents' house, having breakfast with him, I don't know." Olivia and I laugh because we know Chris's mornings are inviolate. She hoards the last vestiges of sleep, taking the longest possible time to wake up. Even as an adolescent she would drink coffee, taking it to the darkest

corner of the living room and sipping it quietly while the rest of the family fought over sections of the newspaper in the bright kitchen. “Kids, no, I don’t want kids now,” she says.

“This is the third time,” Olivia says, “that I’ve thought I was pregnant. We’ve been trying for about nine months. Ten, actually.”

“That’s not so long,” Chris and I say at once, our too quick answer contradicting us, revealing our alarm.

“Yes it is.” Her voice is steady, but tears trail down her cheek. Turning my head to watch, I see the wet skin, the tiny blond hair glimmering in the sun.

I lie motionless, not knowing what to say. Chris’s voice drifts across me, vaguely soothing, credible because she, like Olivia, is a wife. “You might be,” she is saying. “You said it yourself—you’re pretty sure you are.”

“Positive,” Olivia says. “Not pretty sure. I feel completely different than I’ve ever felt.”

“But you shouldn’t get your hopes up too high,” I say slowly, wanting to caution, not alarm.

Olivia’s face snaps towards mine. “Does this seem stupid to you?” she asks sharply.

“Stupid? Not at all—why would it?” Stunned, I stop.

“Oh, I don’t know.” Olivia flips her head away, then looks back. “Because you and James are so different from us. The way you live together instead of getting married. You’ve lived with him longer than I’ve known Donald, and it seems strange that you won’t marry him.”

“We are getting married,” I say. Lying between my two nude sisters I hear myself make this announcement, and I feel calm, as though it has nothing to do with me and James. I close my eyes against the sun, and an image of him running on a hot tennis court flashes past my eyelids. His long, muscled legs straining the hems of his white shorts.

“When did you decide? Weren’t you going to tell us?” Olivia asks, her voice higher than usual. Chris rolls closer to kiss my cheek.

“We were going to tell you. We were going to tell you soon, maybe at dinner tonight.”

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“You won’t believe this,” Chris says, “but Morgan *guessed*. Last night he watched you and James, and he told me something was definitely going on.”

“Do you know when?” Olivia asks.

“We haven’t exactly set—”

“Summer’s a good time. Right now is the best, in fact. Then we could each have our own summer month. I already have August, and Chris has June. Miranda, I give to you July,” Olivia says, handing me a chipped oyster shell. I hold it in the palm of my hand and lightly rub its chalky edge with my thumb.

“I’ve always liked July,” Chris says, “because you really know it’s summer. By August we were thinking of school all the time, and of going back to Hartford.”

“You don’t want a big wedding, do you?” Olivia asks.

“No. Just the aunts—”

“Donald’s and mine was too big. If I could do it over, I’d elope.”

“Maybe just James’s parents and Mom and you.”

“You could get ready in a week or so, couldn’t you? What do you need for a wedding? A dress, a justice of the peace, someplace to go for your honeymoon. Can James take a week off?”

I nod my head, but I am thinking of our plans for vacation: September, a rented cottage on Monhegan Island, kerosene lamps, bottles of red wine on the far cliffs, wind blowing the warm orange moon up over the black Atlantic. Guilt strikes me, for telling my sisters that I want to marry James, and urgency, because I want to tell him before they have a chance to congratulate him. It’s true, I think, I want to marry him, but the thought and Olivia’s plan are chasing each other in dangerous circles.

“Let’s swim,” I say wildly, and I walk into the water ahead of the others. When the water is up to my neck I start to swim, enjoying the water’s resistance to my arms and legs. I swim far, far out, then, treading water, turn to face the beach. Blinking brine from my eyes, I see the three men emerge from the path. Donald leads, and James and Morgan stand

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together, shielding their eyes as they search out our three heads in the bay. James removes his shirt and has started to undo his shorts when my sisters spy them.

“Hello!” Olivia calls twenty yards from shore. “Lucky man!”

All three men wave, then step out of their clothes. They run into the waves, calling and whooping, to help them bear the shock of the cold water against their hot, sweating bodies. They swim in a line; I watch them and their wakes of white foam.

“James!” Chris calls, and Donald and Morgan veer off, splashing towards my sisters.

But James continues to come, swimming straight towards me. He moves steadily, glancing up, open-mouthed, between strokes to make sure he is heading in the right direction. He swims steadily, but slowly, with precision, as if he has all the time in the world.

“I love you,” I say when he arrives, but he doesn’t answer. His arms pull me close; we sink below the surface and smile at each other underwater. It is cool and still. We stay there for a few seconds, but then our feet start to kick, pushing us up for air. Our legs flutter, the way a baby’s must within the belly of its mother. The way mine did, the way my sisters’ did, safe in the warm fluid of our mother’s belly. Each of us lived alone there, waiting to be born, but James and I are together, treading water in the sea.