

## Exchanging Shadows

By Brian Biunno

After another winter, the old beach house in Minot still stood. It was once the first house in a row of cottages built on the seawall, but it now stood solitary against the advancing ocean. The gray paint that covered the worn wood was peeling in many places, and the shingles under the second story picture window were gone, laying bare the Tyvex wrapping. It was damage from another winter with the punishing ocean, the nearly one hundredth the house had survived. It was a survivor, able to continue to exist where all others failed. Inside, mementos and knick-knacks covered the shelves and walls, souvenirs from generations of children and grandchildren. A family portrait hung in the den over the uneven white pullout couch. A magnet reading, "There is no place like home. Except Grandma's" clung to the fridge. To focus on the warped planks or the water damaged walls was to sell short the potential and memories that existed within.

As with any old house, time there was kept by the keeping of traditions. This was the eleventh year of such a tradition for two couples. Early every summer they met in Minot for a week of relaxation, drinking, and sleeping late. The sun was heading down beyond the marsh when the second couple arrived at the house. Andy pulled the e-brake on Denise's car and slipped out into the cooling summer air.

Their arrival was announced by the loud snap of the screen door on the back porch. The spring on the door was too strong for the flimsy wooden frame; a rock normally propped the screen door open. Andy led the way, his thin arms full of pre-packaged food and liquor, the essentials, for the week ahead. Andy's wife, Denise, trailed close behind him. She was a little taller than Andy, with short dark hair that she normally hid in a hat whenever acceptable. Although she had spent every childhood summer in the beach house, it still amazed her how it was more ship than house. It was high tide and the view from the back porch was only ocean, expanding forever beyond the seawall.

"Hey, you made it," Nora called from the living room.

"We hit some traffic. You know how The Pike is," Denise answered, embracing her childhood friend. Her memories of her childhood with Nora and the beach house saved Denise from clawing the walls during long New England winters.

“Do you want something to eat?” Nora asked. Her round cheeks were pulled into a smile.

Denise made a face. “I think I caught one of those nasty stomach bugs. I woke up nauseous this morning,” Denise answered.

“You mean ‘nauseated’.” Andy corrected his wife as he rolled their oversized suitcase into the living room.

Denise rolled her eyes. “He feels the need to correct my speech.”

“Sorry, sorry.” Andy held up his palms. “I’ll try to let it go for the next week. But, no promises.”

The contents of the car were emptied into the living room and quickly abandoned in favor of a walk on the beach. The water was receding in low tide and a sliver of sand had appeared. Denise slipped off her old worn sandals and felt the warm sand ooze between her toes. She took a deep breath. She plopped her sunglasses over her ears and pulled the faded Red Sox cap down. I’m finally back, she thought.

The sun was patiently waiting for a cloud to pass, and the soft shade combined with the ocean breeze to cool them. Denise and Nora walked together up the beach past Grasshopper Rock. They reminisced about when they were young girls and they couldn’t wait until high tide to jump from the top of the boulder into the stinging Massachusetts water; how they wore themselves out running up the beach to some of the other big rocks. Elephant Rock, named for how it resembled an elephant’s trunk, made a slide that dumped the girls into the water. At low tide even distant Bar Rock was accessible, with a path magically forming out of the depths. The rocks added a personal touch to the beach that neither Denise nor Nora had found anywhere else. The other beaches they’d visited seemed vanilla to them after Minot.

The men trailed behind; Jason complained of knee pain that kept him from keeping the brisk pace the girl’s set. Andy glanced at Jason’s powerful legs and didn’t believe anything could harm him. Jason resembled the bronze sculpture of Zeus that Andy once saw in a museum; his muscles danced as he ambled along the shore. While Andy slimmed down after college, Jason bulked up and gained pounds of muscle. He was at the point now where he looked artificial, like a child standing by a fan that inflates his shirt to inhuman proportions.

The men walked in bursts, picking out smoothed rocks on the shore that they skimmed across the water. The surface resembled a lake more than the rugged ocean Andy remembered during his trips to the New Jersey shore. The different faces of the ocean intrigued him,

especially how the same body of water changed dramatically over the course of miles. With a swift motion his wrist flicked a flattened stone across the familiar face of the ocean, and for an instant, the surface seemed made of glass, as though the stone might come to rest on the undulating table. The illusion gave way to gravity and down fell the stone.

Andy's heart followed the stone down. He was trying to listen to Jason ramble on about fishing, but his mind was preoccupied. Why had he believed that it would be easier to tell Denise at the beach house? He knew that he waited because it was easier, and he always took the easy way out. He wasn't even sure if telling her was the right thing to do. He needed time, time to think and time to reason this out. If he only had some time to himself he could work through an approach, like he always did. He was a man needing time in a house where time didn't exist.

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"It's a Pinot Noir night, folks." Jason had the bottle in one hand and the stems of the four glasses protruded from his other. He poured out four tall glasses and passed them out. They sat in plastic chairs and sipped the expensive wine.

"Do you taste the chocolate and blackberries?" Jason asked.

"This is my fourth glass. I don't taste nothing," Nora replied.

"Here we go again," Jason whispered to himself. He glanced at Denise. She wore a tight white t-shirt with a puffy flowered skirt. The t-shirt he had seen before, but he noted that the skirt was new.

"Oh, my God," Nora burst out, "I can't believe I forgot all about the lighthouse. Look, it's blinking." She moved closer to Jason. "That's the 'I love you' sign."

Jason looked away, embarrassed by his wife even in the company of his closest friends. Nora was the only reason he kept his wine consumption to a minimum. Her worst showing was during his boss's dinner party. He had to carry her out after she started knocking antiques off shelves because she thought they were stolen from their house.

Denise knew what would happen next. Now that the lighthouse was brought up in conversation Andy, the group historian, would fall into his spiel. She didn't wait long.

"You know the Minot Light is exclusive along the east coast. It's the only lighthouse that has a predetermined signal other than always on." He paused and looked around to make sure

all were listening. Satisfied, he continued, “It flashes 1-4-3 because of an old tale about the lighthouse keeper who died in a horrible storm hundreds of years ago. Lighthouses back then were built on planks of wood so that they swayed. When the storm hit the lighthouse the keeper knew the end was near so, as his last act, he wrote a note to his wife. It was found the next day, but the lighthouse and the keeper were both gone.” Andy finished and sat with a reflective look. Denise knew that was his “I’m so smart” look. Jason moved away from Nora and took the seat next to Denise. His breath danced along her arms and midsection. It gave her goose bumps.

Jason held a glass of the Pinot Noir up to the moon. “Pinot Noir is the most difficult wine to make. The grapes are very tender,” he looked down, “and delicate. Many of the grapes die on the vine or are destroyed before they’re cultivated.”

Denise stared at the glass. The plastic shimmered in the moonlight, creating an eerie glow that emanated from the body of the wine.

“They say the bottles are watered down with the winemaker’s tears,” Jason finished.

Denise looked at Andy. He was still staring out at the ocean, reflecting upon his latest intellectual conquest. Nora was busy in the kitchen. She dared to take her eyes off the glass and look at Jason. His deep eyes and strong face stared back.

He remained exactly as he was the night she gave in. They had all had too much wine and Andy and Nora were playing drunken Uno in the den. Jason had led her away and they had climbed to the top of Well Rock. For a while they just sat and stared at the ocean. It was so peaceful. The only sound was the ocean running in place. Jason slid closer. She may have said she was chilly. His hand was on her back; his hands were always so warm. He began to explore her body. His breath, sweet, washed over her neck. The wine and the ocean muddled her head and Denise melted backward, her body forming into a groove on the face of Well Rock. The thousands of stars, invisible in the city, flickered in the sky. Minot melted away and all Denise knew in life was what she saw in the stars. A weight fell on top of her and the stars disappeared. It was Jason. His mouth was pressed to hers. The wine muted her brain and only his mouth existed. Denise felt a fullness that she never experienced with Andy, like trying to open a lock with the wrong key. Denise wrapped her arms around his wide back and her legs around his waist. Jason was breathing faster now. His pace quickened and Denise focused on keeping her voice down so the others wouldn’t hear.

Denise excused herself, hurrying from the room. Nora stumbled back in, and wrapped her arms around Jason’s neck. Her breath was hot and quick and smelled of spoiled Pinot Noir.

She whispered in his ear and then led him away from the porch up to their room.

Denise came back onto the porch. She looked around for Jason and Nora, and knew where they were. She gently put her arms around Andy's neck and sat on his lap. Andy broke his gaze from the moon. He noticed that Denise always looked different in Minot, as though she were a whole different person here. For a moment he almost started to tell her. Denise was too quick for him. She brought her hands down into his lap; the wine beat harder in his veins and he realized that it could wait until morning. There was always tomorrow.

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The morning went unanswered until almost 11:00 AM. The dogs on the beach had long since returned home to wait for dusk and their eventual return to the water. Andy and Denise awoke entangled, neither wanting to move for fear of waking the other.

Andy slowly picked his head up to get a clear view of Denise's eyes. The soft blue irises were craning to see out of the open windows to the beach below. This year was their turn to take the large room over the living room. It offered an unprecedented view of the lobster boats and Bar Rock. On a clear day one could see all the way to Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

It's strange how wine thwarts the senses; the bed didn't seem to creak at all last night, but it sounded like a gutted pig this morning. All the furniture in the ancient house had been on the wrong side of the test of time and was due to be replaced. The house's owners knew that the day they spent the money to replace the decrepit furnishings would be the day the ocean would finally claim the house's timber for its own. They waited patiently, enduring lumpy chairs and wobbling tables, hoping their patience would allow them one more summer in the old house.

They joined Nora and Jason in the kitchen. The sounds of beachgoers waddling by the house, burdened with beach paraphernalia, filled the air. Children were running and yelling, anxious to get to the water. In the kitchen, each sat silently with their coffee in hand waiting for last night to subside.

It was a slow day. The wine had flowed a little faster and stronger than they had anticipated last night. Finally, the slight feelings of nausea passed and they joined the rest of the town on the sand.

The vacation routine was setting in. Andy had pulled out his old New York Giants

baseball hat, and even the old Frisbee had emerged from its hiding place in the Owner's Possessions closet. The old mainstays of their vacation week brought rushing back all the old memories the four had shared at that house. From the childhood memories of Nora and Denise, to the first time the boys had been welcomed, to the recent times when all were married. That morning everyone seemed to smile more and laugh a little longer at the old jokes that are only funny when told at the beach house. Good moods fed better moods. Even Andy was able to forget about the decision that awaited him, and spend some time being himself.

"This is what vacation is all about," Denise said, settling back into her beach chair. "God, look at that sky. It makes me wonder why I sit in a cubicle all day. I should move down to the Caribbean and give boat tours to the tourists."

"You know, I've always wanted to do that," Nora said.

"I'm just talking. I know I say this every year, but how can I go back to my little desk after spending a week in the wide-open outdoors?"

"We all think that. I bet everyone on this beach is thinking that same thing right now. It's temporary, so get used to it. We're slaves to The Man."

"Oh, I know I'm going to go back to my cube. I'm going to do it; I don't have a choice. A week from now I'll be sitting back in a temperature controlled office building waiting for my reports to run. I'll just be sitting there. So much of my job is just sitting at my desk. Uh, what a waste of time," Denise exclaimed.

"Don't talk about work. Let's go for a walk. It'll take your mind off your job, and bring it back where it belongs."

The guys stayed behind to throw the Frisbee as the girls wandered off on their own. They headed towards Grasshopper Rock, at the beginning of Glades Road. The beach curved in front of them until it disappeared around a bend miles away. Rocks glittered in the sunlight. The water temperature hadn't changed since the previous day, but the warmth of the summer sun made the water appealing.

"So, what's bothering you?" Nora asked.

Denise didn't answer for a few minutes, and Nora was beginning to get nervous.

"Don't tell me you're upset about going back to work," Nora guessed.

"I'm surprised you haven't put it together yet. Usually you read me like a book. I figured that within ten minutes of walking into the beach house you'd know."

Nora stared hard at Denise. She moved her eyebrows up and down as though she were

trying to peer directly into Denise's soul.

"Sorry, I got nothing. What is it?"

A little part of Denise was disappointed that Nora wasn't able to figure it out. She loved that Nora could see through her defenses into the true Denise that crouched in the bunker. They weren't as close as they once were, and she hoped it wasn't because of Jason.

"Honey, I'm pregnant," Denise said.

Nora broke into a hideous grin and rushed at Denise. The bear hug crushed Denise inside it and lifted her off the ground.

"You bug! Why did you wait until now to tell me?" Nora asked.

"Because you're the only one who knows. I'm waiting for the right moment to tell Andy. I think it'll happen at dinner."

"That's so sweet! So he still doesn't know?"

"No, I haven't told him yet, and you need to put on your poker face. You can't let him know."

"Don't you worry about me sister; I'm like a vault and he doesn't have the combination."

Both women laughed at the joke, not because it was funny, but because their joy manifested into laughter that ached to be free. Nora knew that Denise and Andy had been trying to get pregnant for years and had all but given up. The string of failures was adding much stress to their relationship. This was just the type of miracle they needed to get back to normal.

"I just can't believe this is finally happening for you. It's so great. This is just the type of news that will make Andy feel better about everything."

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Meanwhile, Jason and Andy were mindlessly tossing the Frisbee. Minot was the first beach Andy had visited that allowed the visitors to play sports on the beach. Past experiences had left Andy believing that lifeguards represented confiscated baseballs, footballs, and horseshoe sets.

Andy reached back and flung the disk to Jason's waiting hands. He noticed how effortlessly Jason moved to snatch it out of midair. Andy had long arms that went with his long frame. He was nearly 6'2" and moderately athletic. Andy had played first base on their college baseball team, and Jason was the shortstop.

The Frisbee cut a path from hand to hand. The heavy, industrial-grade disc gently glided through the ocean breeze, seeming to float while simultaneously gaining speed.

“So you know how women talk?” Jason asked.

“Huh?”

“Well, Nora and Denise talk a lot. Nora told me how you and Denise have been trying to get pregnant for some time now.”

Andy looked hard at Jason to try to understand his purpose. “Um, you knew that we have been trying. Don’t worry about that.” He changed the subject. “Hey, you see the Sox game the other night. Ortiz is so clutch.”

“Yeah, he is.” Jason caught the Frisbee and sent it back. “Nora also told me you two have been fighting a lot.”

“Drop it, will you? I can’t talk about this right now. Jesus, don’t think you have any idea what this is doing to either Denise or me. Because you don’t.”

Now it was Jason’s turn to stop and stare. “I was just trying to be helpful. I thought talking about it would be good for you. Never mind, I guess.”

The Frisbee continued to fly, the hard plastic stinging the skin between their thumbs and pointer fingers.

Jason started, “That Ortiz really can hit.”

Andy stared at the Frisbee, his eyes not daring to meet Jason’s. “Listen, I’m sorry. I’ve just been so caught up in this problem I have and I can’t get past it. I didn’t mean to jump down your throat.”

“It’s cool. It’s not that I don’t know what you two are going through. Nora and I have had our own problems.”

Jason sent a throw Andy’s way, but a sudden gust of wind made the Frisbee overshoot. It sailed up and up with Andy beneath. The white Frisbee was the only cloud in the sky. The gust of wind disappeared just as suddenly and the Frisbee wobbled in confusion. The Frisbee plummeted to the sand, landing on sharp rocks. It shattered. Andy jogged over and picked up a shard. He held it up for Jason to see.

“Those things never break.”

“I know. I guess everything breaks sometime.”

Andy handed Jason the broken piece.

“So I just want to make sure that you two are going to be okay,” Jason said. “You two

are the normal ones, and Nora and I are the dysfunctional ones. I won't know what to do if that switches."

Andy smiled. "You two aren't *that* dysfunctional."

"Yeah, sure. That's why Nora got blitzed off a couple glasses of wine and I sulked. Why does she always gape at the lighthouse when she's drunk?"

"I don't know," Andy said, laughing, "but she does. She loves that thing."

"It reminds her of my..." Jason looked down.

"You forget that we played ball together. There's no fooling me."

Andy bent down and picked up the pieces of the Frisbee.

"I've had this for years. Weird how it broke now?"

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In another tradition, that night the two couples had dinner together on the seawall. They moved the plastic lawn furniture out of the back porch, and set it up on the small outcrop between the house and the wall. Empty gallon milk cartons were lined up on the seawall with candles placed inside. The lobsters were boiled and the butter was melted. The tradition called for the guys to buy and prepare the lobsters while the women dolled up. Jason and Andy had been busy all afternoon cracking and removing the lobster meat, and now they were relaxing in their khakis, button-down dress shirts and bare feet.

Inwardly, Andy's anxiety was growing with each second. The week was coming to an end and he still hadn't told Denise. His propensity for rambling got the better of him. "I look out at the ocean from here and I understand why Man paints. You ever get that feeling, like you all of a sudden understand why people have been doing something for a very long time? Like you were so dense that you just plain missed it for years?"

Jason didn't answer. He wasn't listening. Instead, he was wondering what Denise would wear to dinner. He hoped it was the green strapless dress she wore two years ago.

"Did you hear what I said, Jason?"

"Oh, sorry. I was thinking about something else."

Andy gave him a disgusted look. "So much of art is based off nature," Andy said, "I've seen so many murals of trees or water, but I've never been horribly impressed by them. I find the subtlety of still-life more alluring. A simple shadow that we take for granted, say, from an

apple or pear has immense meaning to an artist.”

“Really, still-life? I always thought it was kind of boring. Give me a huge painting of an epic battle, something I can really sink my teeth in. Even better, how about one where the women are naked?”

Andy shook his head disdainfully. Sometimes he felt sad that so much of Jason’s energy went toward feeding his libido.

“You share the opinion of so many people nowadays. They want big action on bigger canvas. I prefer the subtleties in a painting. I want to know what the artist was thinking before and after each brush stroke. Someone trained by Hollywood will never understand that,” Andy said.

“Trained by Hollywood? Wow, I’m hurt. You must have missed the intricacies of the latest Lohan movie?” Jason asked.

They both laughed. For a moment Andy remembered what Minot was all about. “She does have her moments,” Andy answered.

Nora and Denise emerged from the relative gloom of the house into the soft light of the candles. Nora was dressed in a low-cut purple dress that cut through her ample bosom and clung to her everywhere. Jason wished that just once she would dress like a lady.

Denise was the opposite. Her dress was plain, blue, and clung to her only in the midsection. The cotton fabric flowed elsewhere when she moved, the way the ocean ebbs and flows. It curled around her seductively as she walked. The dress’s blue also played off the blue of her eyes to make both seem more vivid when combined than either could ever hope to be alone.

The stunning beauty of Denise sunk Andy further into despair. She was the apple in the still-life painting Andy described earlier, her shadows saying so little and meaning so much. He was disgusted that he kept such a loyal and loving woman in the dark over their future. She was always a good wife to him. He resolved to tell her tomorrow.

“You look amazing,” Jason said, stating the obvious. Nora blushed, assuming the comment was hers.

“Is someone going to get my chair for me?” Nora asked.

Jason stood and, with a flourish, pulled out her chair. He then did the same for Denise.

Denise insisted on giving a toast before the meal. She stood before them and her face turned pale. Each set of eyes she met reflected strength back to her.

“Many times over the years,” she began, “I’ve stood in this exact spot and told you all how much I love you. And don’t worry; I still love you all, more than ever. But I wanted to let everyone know that there will be a change in our lives very soon. It won’t be noticeable for some time. Soon, if you pay attention, you’ll notice the change.

“Andy and I have been married for nine years. Everyone knows the troubles we’ve had recently. The uncomfortable tests: I’ll never get used to being poked that way,” she paused as everyone laughed lightly. “Well, it seems that we finally did something right. I’m pregnant!”

Jason and Nora jumped out of their seats at the news. They rushed to Denise and wrapped her in a group hug. Andy sat in disbelief. A year ago, even six months ago, this would have been the best news he could have heard. Now, it only served as a complication, another variable for an equation that was too complex to solve. He forced a smile and said, “No more of this for a while,” taking the champagne glass from her.

Denise looked into Andy’s face and saw the pain that hid beneath the surface. Nothing could bring her down, especially not Andy and his moods. She knew he could do the math; they had only slept together twice in the last month. One time was last night. The other was shortly after her period disappeared. She hugged everyone back and talked about how excited she was to buy things for the baby, rock the baby, feed the baby, love the baby; how the baby would be the most important thing in her life. Motherhood was the journey she had waited her entire life to start, and she had done what needed to be done to make sure she didn’t miss it. In the end it doesn’t matter that it took someone besides Andy to point her in the right direction.

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Andy needed to get away. He wanted to be happy, everyone to be happy, but this new complication only made everything else that much harder for him. He needed time to think, to plan out his next move. Nora and Denise went out baby clothes hunting in town. While she was gone he snuck off to the local coffee house.

People in Minot knew that Gull’s Java was the place to go for coffee. It was within walking distance of the house, so Andy strolled over after Nora and Denise were gone. The worn out sign advertising “the best coffee around” only added to the appeal of the dive. Bar stools were behind countertops that looked out the stained windows onto the vast expanse of the Atlantic. Smoking had been allowed in the coffee joint until recently and the brown stain of

the smoke still clung to the glass. It produced a haze upon the world outside of the café, and it matched Andy's view of the world. He saw the rotating world through the cancerous haze and relished that the world inside the coffee house was serene, flat. He was himself again. He could flirt with the help and smile. It felt good to Andy to smile again.

Andy's cell phone vibrated. He flipped the clamshell open.

"Hello."

"I know you said not to call you this week, but I had to hear your voice."

"Jesus Christ. What the fuck is wrong with you?" Andy whispered into the phone. "Do you realize what you could have done if Denise had answered?"

"I know, I know. But I had to hear your voice. Have you told her yet?"

"I'll fucking tell you when it's done." His voice raised and some locals nearby glanced. "Didn't I tell you I'd tell you when it's done? It's a delicate situation and it needs to be handled with class."

"Sure, class. I get it. But you can just come over here and demand whatever you want of me, right?"

Andy smiled. He loved the spunk.

"You're right. I'm not treating you right. I promise that'll change as soon as this is over. OK?"

"Yeah, I just wanted to make sure you were still going to do it."

"Well I am," Andy said. "It's just complicated is all. I miss you."

"I miss you too. I'll wear that black thing you like when you get back."

God, he couldn't wait to get back. This stress was killing him. He hung up the phone and sat staring into his coffee. He could sound so arrogant on the phone, but he felt meek after hanging up. Now Denise was pregnant. He tried to remember if they'd even had sex this month before last night. He couldn't remember. Really, it was beside the point. He knew what he had to do.

"Check, please."

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Nora dropped Denise off back at the house while Andy was still at Gull's. She found Jason sitting in a white wicker rocker reading the Sports section of the *Boston Herald*. He put

the paper down when he saw Denise enter.

“Andy’s not here. He’s been gone for a few hours.”

“Oh. Any idea where?”

“Nope. But I’m here. What’d you buy?”

Denise rummaged through her bags, pulling out onesies and layettes in pastel colors. She held each one up to her stomach as though she were modeling the miniature clothing. Jason smiled and laughed with each new item pulled from the bags.

“Does the baby really need all those clothes?”

Denise looked shocked. “Of course it does. It needs more than just these too. I’ll have to get a whole wardrobe for the baby.” Her eyes lighted up at the mention of the wardrobe.

“I still can’t believe you’re pregnant.” Jason walked over and put his hand over her stomach. “It’s crazy that a baby is living inside of you right now.”

“Where’s Nora?” Jason asked.

“She went to pick up some groceries. She’ll be back in about an hour.”

Denise walked over to the picture window. She stared hard out the window, but her eyes never saw through the glass. She was watching Jason’s reflection.

He came up behind her and put his arms around her waist. She rested her head back against his muscular chest and allowed herself to be held.

“Are you sure it’s mine?” he asked.

“Pretty sure. Andy and I rarely have sex any more. He seems to have completely lost interest in it. I was worried for a while that it was because we weren’t getting pregnant, but now I think he’s lost interest in me.”

Jason started to rock side to side. Denise let herself be rocked.

“Do you remember the first time?”

“I was thinking about it the other night. It felt so wrong, on the rock while they were within earshot. Sometimes at night I feel so horrible over what this is doing to Nora. She’s my best friend. But I want a baby and Andy can’t give it to me. You’re sure you’re okay with no one knowing you’re the father?”

“That’s what I said.” He started to move his hands down her stomach. “I don’t want to stop helping your marriage.”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” Denise said, turning to face him.

Jason started to lead Denise slowly toward the stairs. She got it.

“Do you have anything in those bags for me?” he asked.

Denise smiled. She broke free from Jason and skipped across the room. She pulled a small bag out of her purse and held it up.

Denise came out of the bathroom in the red thing from the small bag. She sauntered across the room, shutting the door behind her.

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Andy finished his coffee and came back to the old beach house. He knew what he had to do. He would grab his suitcase and go. He wouldn't look back. He couldn't face his wife, not after all they had been through. Somehow, he knew, she'd find a way to survive.

He entered the house quietly; he didn't want to be seen. He stepped lightly from board to throw carpet until he was at the stairs. Maybe he should leave a note, he thought, but then decided it wasn't smart. It was best to just disappear. He crept up the stairs, one by one, making sure there was no sound. Years of sneaking around had taught him just where to step to keep the stairs quiet. He got to the landing and noticed that Jason and Nora's door was closed. The door could open any second and he'd be caught. Andy crept over to it and relaxed when he heard the squeaking of the bedsprings. He listened for a minute to make sure that no one heard him. The springs and quick breaths were the only sounds.

Andy crept to the room he shared with Denise. He sat on the bed and rested his head in his hands. This is it; he's leaving behind his life of the last fifteen years. How do you just get in the car and leave someone like this? “She will always have Jason and Nora,” he whispered. He knew in his heart that they would always take care of her.

He collected his things and hopped in Denise's old blue Mazda: the one they drove home in after their wedding: the one they cried in together watching *Ghost* at the drive-in: the car that delivered them safely time and again. He backed out quickly, guiding the car into gear. He gave the car some gas and pulled away from his past life. None of Denise was in the car with him. All he could think of was Bruce in that black outfit.

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Another summer passed for the old beach house. The open wound beneath the picture

window that revealed the Tyvek wrapping was healed. A new coat of gray paint was laid over the extant layer, masking the difficulties endured the previous winter. Slowly, over the course of the summer, the house began to look the way it once looked when it was one in a row of newly built cottages. A traveler from that time would look on the house and be unable to ascertain a difference between the two.

But there were differences not available to the naked eye. Below the surface, the foundation of the house was cracked. It was a small crack that started during an especially strong nor'easter and had grown through improper maintenance. A beach house is not meant to last *ad infinitum*, and the old beach house in Minot is no different. Perhaps the beach house will last another summer. Perhaps two. But one winter day, after a nasty storm, the house will be gone. It will go the way of its brothers and sisters and disappear into the surf. Visitors will find somewhere else to sleep and eat and build memories. But those who remember the old beach house, those who slept within its walls and played beneath its shadow, will never truly be the same.

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