

RANDOM ACTS OF NATURE

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JOY CAME UP FROM the beach and stood for a moment with closed eyes. “Paul says he wants a native ceremony.”

Paul was Joy’s husband and Mary’s brother. He had been dead six months, which did not deter Joy from knowing his whims. This was because she was a psychic healer and kept in regular contact with disembodied entities. She referred to her clients as “Dear Ones,” and had much to say about the disintegrating state of mankind. Joy was also an interspecies expert. This had something to do with communicating with dolphins and whales. And she was a spiritual trainer, teaching people to read auras. If people still did that. Mary thought it was a hippie thing.

“We’ll need an eagle feather,” Joy said.

When pressed, she admitted that an owl’s feather might do. If it weren’t for the smug manner in which Joy talked about these things, Mary would have asked to hear more. She happened to be an amateur expert on eagles. After discovering a nest on her headland, she studied them through the telescope in her great room and contributed to eagle cams across the world.

Paul had been a life-long bachelor, but in his last years, he’d married Joy, eighteen years his junior. When Paul died, Mary attended his funeral in Chilliwack, where Joy had clutched his ashes, contained in a jar with a prehistoric beetle etched on the side. Paul had often said he wanted his ashes to be scattered on the Pacific, and finally Mary e-mailed Joy, suggesting a small ceremony, a blessing at high tide at her house in Qualicum Beach on Vancouver Island.

“You can’t keep him in that jar forever,” she wrote. “You know he was claustrophobic.”

Mary added a smiley face to the end of this sentence, thinking that Joy was the kind of person moved by emoticons. When the communication went unanswered, her next e-mail mentioned a time when Paul had suffered an anxiety attack in a crowded elevator. That e-mail included exclamation marks—punctuation she despised.

Just as Mary became distracted with the demands of her own life, Joy called to say that Paul had contacted her from beyond and said he was finally ready to *leave*. Because of solar flares or an auspicious alignment of planets, a weekend in August had been chosen to give his spirit to the waters.

“It’s the last vestige,” Joy said. “He must go home.”

Mary hadn’t bargained that Joy would bring her brother Darren and his son, and her seven-year-old daughter. Before everyone arrived, Mary Googled Joy, not expecting to find much, but up popped a slick website, featuring pictures of Joy looking glowing-eyed. Mary spent half an hour paging through her blog, listening to something called *Satsang With Joy* on podcast, and watching video poems on the subject of Core Galactic Gnosis. All quite professionally done.

Joy was a large-boned woman with frowzy brown hair and arms and legs that were attached loosely to her body. She insisted on wearing her flip-flops in the house, although Mary encouraged guests to remove “outside” shoes. Mary herself had “inside” shoes that she changed into at the door. Joy’s wide bony feet gave Mary the willies. *Peasant feet*, she thought. Not to mention what was on the bottom of those flip-flops—disgusting goop from the ferry, men’s spit, dog pee—the works.

Mary’s guests gathered in the great room, which afforded sweeping views of the sea. She had the gas fireplace going from dawn to dusk, so that her guests would feel as if they were at a resort. She also lit candles in the hurricane lamps and tuned the TV to a spa music channel, appealing to all the senses. But such efforts were lost on these people, who slammed doors and shouted to each other across the table.

Joy’s daughter Greta stood too close to the fireplace, puzzling over the fake rocks inside. She cocked her small dark head at the marvel of Mozart issuing from hidden speakers, accompanied by ocean waves, and she seemed to appreciate the floor-to-ceiling windows—the wonder on her face mirroring the feats of engineering involved.

Mary thought of her own daughter, Jenny. She had wanted children—a child—but when one came as planned, she had not known what to do with her. It didn’t help that Jenny had emerged from the womb screaming and did not let up for her entire childhood. Jenny had a rebellious mind and was considered by one high school principal to be “an evil child.” She had been expelled from several schools, been arrested for shoplifting, and had dropped out of school in grade eleven to cross the country with her anarchist

boyfriend in a bus that ran on corn oil. Just before Jenny moved out, she and Mary had argued and almost come to blows. When Jenny ran into her room and slammed the door to call her boyfriend, Mary picked up the extension and heard Jenny say, “I should have knocked her down.”

Mary thought that if she’d had a daughter as good as Greta, she would have been a good mother. You could only work with what you were dealt.

In the morning, Mary was up early and standing with her coffee at the bank of windows facing the rocks that ran down to the sea. The neighbour’s cat—named “Kitty” out of some attempt at humour, or in the lowest common denominator of cat names—trotted across the front deck with a bird in its mouth. Even after years of living on the wild Pacific, Mary could still be caught off guard by random acts of nature. Often she would find bits of fur on the headland, where an eagle had dashed a rabbit to death on the rocks, or discover that an otter had devoured all the goldfish in her garden pond.

Joy appeared on the beach below in a hand-knit poncho, and Mary went down to meet her. They walked toward the headland through a steady wind that blew through the bracken above the high-tide mark, bringing with it the acrid smell of the sea. Bald eagles in the treetops called to each other in their shuddering cry, and Joy turned her face to the sun.

Mary said, “Greta is an unusual child.”

Joy’s expression changed—the effect of a door slamming. “Unusual?”

“Reserved for her age, which is a good thing, I think. And curious. Too many children have their noses buried in computers.” Mary hesitated, thinking of Cole, who was most likely in a corner of the house, doing just that. “It’s not healthy.” She had gone too far and was compelled to blunder on. “She must benefit from your sensitivity.”

A strong wave came up the beach, foaming at their feet before dragging back. Joy stared at her wet shoes. “Aren’t you afraid sometimes, out here?”

Mary snorted. “Afraid of what?”

“I don’t know, a woman alone.”

She said that she felt safer alone, and wondered if Joy considered it a weakness. “Are you *reading* me?”

“You’re difficult to read.”

While she disliked the idea of being read, Mary disliked the idea of being *difficult to read* even more. Perhaps Joy glimpsed her disappointment in clouds of grey, or her anger in red, or worse, no colour at all.

When they returned to the house, Joy's brother Darren was in the great room, leafing through a self-help tome that Joy had been talking to him about earlier, a book called *Deep Truth*. Darren was a thick man with a belly that he sucked in at intervals. He had just come from the hot tub and was stretched out on her sofa, his prune feet on the pillow that she sometimes rested her head on. There was a moment before he realized that they'd entered the room, and his face was bitter—wiped clean of its perpetual smile.

Mary wondered why he was here at all. Joy had obviously asked him along as a sort of mixing agent—if there was any way that oil and water could mix.

The three of them discussed the logistics of the ceremony that would take place after dinner. They would strew Paul's ashes on the ocean and release him to heaven for the spiritually aware. Because it was his last weekend in corporeal form, Joy got it in her head to bake Paul's favourite pie, and Darren was sent on a special mission to town to find blackberries, coming back instead with blueberries. This put Joy into an odd mood that wanted to be upbeat, but more resembled a barely managed depression.

It had socked in since lunch—the cloud ceiling an oppressive five hundred feet above their heads. Because Joy had insisted that the family be together, Darren's son Cole was slumped in one of Mary's antique wing-backs in the living room, his thumbs moving with terrible dexterity across his phone. Greta sat on the sofa in her pink dress, watching cartoons on the big-screen TV above the fireplace. Although Mary encouraged her to use the mute button, commercials blasted incessantly.

Joy hadn't the foresight to bring a pie recipe, so she borrowed the new iPad Mary had given herself for Christmas, on which she'd been writing poems.

Joy was one of those cooks who made an unholy mess of a kitchen. Mary turned from clearing the sink of dishes to catch her stashing the knife block in a high cupboard.

"Bad Feng Shui," said Joy by way of explanation. Mary edged her iPad out of range of the milk carton, which balanced precariously on the edge of a spoon. The screen was smeared where Joy had banged away at it with her greasy fingers in a futile attempt to keep it from going into rest mode as she read the recipe.

Darren came in to the kitchen, rubbing his hands together, saying, "A little of this, a little of that."

It was like an English play: the frazzled widow baking her dead husband his favourite pie, her oafish brother pretending this wasn't insanity, the sullen teenager texting his girlfriend, and the other-worldly child watching it all with a surreal calm.

Mary had gone out of her way in life to avoid such people, moving to the ends of the earth to be alone, living a peaceful, gluten-free life, and yet here in her kitchen these Philistines stood, as if they had rented a beach house for a week and taken it over, fantasizing that it was theirs.

Joy grew flustered in her pastry making and knocked over the milk. Mary snatched up her iPad and mopped at it, sure that it was ruined. She suspected that the whole pie scene, the spilled milk, was another way of Joy expressing some unacceptable emotion.

Taking up a dishcloth, Joy began swiping at the counter. Hair had come out of her braids and her face was flushed. The slapdash baking, the sense of danger in the kitchen, put Mary in mind of her own mother, who had been perpetually on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

Jenny had agreed to come home for Christmas a few years before and they had baked cookies. Somewhere between the mixing of dry ingredients and wet, they got on the subject of nature vs. nurture—how a child's personality could be formed by random negative emotions rinsed through her mother's womb. Jenny had wanted to know what her parents' marriage had been like at the time Mary was pregnant.

“Were you happy?”

“Of course we were happy.” She couldn't admit that Jenny's father had embezzled money from his firm and they'd had to declare bankruptcy—how she had got up in the middle of the night weeks before Jenny's birth and moaned, staring out of a dark window into nothing.

Mary caught sight of the pie before it went into the oven. Joy had plunked the pastry into the pie dish haphazardly, as if she couldn't wait to be done with it. She hadn't rolled it wide enough, and there were tears around the edges that she had patched raggedly. Her mother's pie crusts had looked like this: dough cemented on at the last minute so the filling leaked; bits jutting out at odd angles to catch the heat of the oven and burn.

Mary had driven in to Nanaimo yesterday to pick up sliced beef for the Chinese Fondue, as the butcher insisted on calling it, although there was nothing Chinese about it. After gin and tonics on the deck, it was decided that

nothing would be more perfect than dinner on the beach. Her guests had not experienced this type of free dining. Mary laughed when they laughed, enjoying the false sense of exhilaration that came from alcohol.

Greta sat primly on the sand, examining her fondue fork with an exquisite curiosity that Mary found admirable in so small a child. Joy fidgeted and twitched, watching her daughter with apprehension. Did she think a seven-year-old would stick it in her eye?

After dinner Joy and Darren wanted to get into the hot tub, so Mary went back up to the house. Cole and Greta had gone up without offering to carry their dirty dishes, Cole charged with watching Greta.

Mary wrestled with the fondue pots. Her gin euphoria was wearing off and the world had come back into focus. As she neared the stairs to the deck, Kitty shot out of the bush in front of her, yowling, then staggered up the path. Mary immediately thought of rabies, but when Kitty turned her head, she saw that her whiskers had been cut off close to her muzzle, and the cat was having trouble negotiating space.

She stopped and let out another howl. Mary approached her slowly, horrified to see that whoever had cut Kitty's whiskers had also snipped off part of her left ear. As she crouched there, the bushes parted and out stepped Greta, holding Mary's kitchen scissors. The girl looked down with her wan blue eyes. Laughter drifted up from the hot tub on the other side of the house. Kitty attempted to walk again, but became disoriented and fell over. Greta watched the cat with curiosity, as if she were conducting an experiment. Without warning, she launched into a run.

Mary followed, but the girl was too quick and she found her with Darren and Joy, who had got out of the hot tub and were reaching for towels. Mary had planned to be calm, but outrage got the better of her, and she grabbed the girl's arm directly under her armpit, twisting the fragile skin.

"Why did you hurt Kitty?"

"What's going on here?" Joy cried. Somehow Cole, in the way of teenagers, had come down from the house, just in time to involve himself.

"Your daughter," Mary said, "has cut the whiskers off Kitty. And damaged her ear."

"I was giving her a haircut," Greta said.

Mary was aware of Darren beside her, towel wrapped around his gut, toes gripping the deck like spiders.

"Kitty said it was alright," Greta said in her small, measured voice. "To do it."

Mary released her grip on Greta's arm. This was surprising. She would not need to threaten or cajole. The child was willing to admit her crime.

"I had to save Kitty from dying—like daddy did."

"Ah," said Darren.

Mary tried to remember the psychology course she'd taken during her first year at university. Was it normal for a child grieving her dead father to cut a cat's whiskers, and almost remove its ear in the process? She had a pretty good idea that it was not normal at all, yet Joy and Darren and even Cole were nodding and sighing, as if the child's explanation was enough.

"I'd like to talk to your mother and Uncle Darren," Mary said to Greta. "Go up to the house." Joy took a step forward, but didn't object. The four of them watched the girl smooth her dress and go down the stairs, dark hair cut straight across the nape of her pale neck. Cole followed her.

Mary could see now that the elegance, the gravitas she had admired earlier in Greta, was in fact a morbid coldness. Joy's assailed expression betrayed the fact that there had been incidents before this. And yet she had let the child loose without so much as a warning. Mary wondered if Joy dismissed Greta's behaviour with some incredible explanation of past lives, if she thought Greta had been Genghis Kahn and was just letting off steam.

"She should be punished," Mary said.

Joy clutched the towel to her, suddenly sober. There was a hunted look behind her eyes. When Mary said she would take Kitty to the neighbours, Joy did not volunteer to go along.

Mary turned in disgust. "You can send Paul to heaven without me."

As dusk came down, Mary carried a glass of wine to her front window and looked down at the sea. On the beach, Joy was offering the scarab urn to the sky, her wild hair thrown back like a priestess, incanting some prayer.

Mary turned on the fireplace. The music on the television suddenly turned dirge-like. Despite their fights, she had resisted her daughter Jenny leaving home. The experience was akin to reverse birth. Sitting in the car, she watched the ferry pull away with Jenny on it, and howled with agony.

She had poured out her heart to Jenny in a letter—admitted mistakes, pleaded forgiveness, fearing she'd lose her forever. She'd given the letter to Jenny days before her departure, but it had surely been thrown into the first garbage can her daughter had passed walking on to the ferry.

This child, who only twenty-five years before had been an idea with a name she'd picked from a book, was now living her own life in a city far

way, with other people who loved her. How fast water boiled if you didn't watch it, how quickly children grew up when you were just trying to get a moment to yourself.

Rain threatened from across the Strait, a gray squall darkening the waves. As Joy continued her invocations, Darren and Cole clasped their hands respectfully, as if they were praying. Greta stood a few steps outside of the circle, staring off into nowhere.

Mary was reminded of the mothers and daughters she would sometimes see on the beach in Parksville. The child playing by herself and the mother standing apart—perhaps on her cell phone—holding a pail of sea stars or rocks, the child's hat or jacket. Burdened by things not her own and with a private life unspooling in her head. Mary remembered that deadness in the chest, an inability to bridge the wide chasm. She had very much wanted to be a good mother and, at the same time, to escape to a quiet room with a book. When she saw these women, she hesitated, wanting to tell them they should try harder, they should do more. But what would she have done if an older woman with the benefit of sleep, time and books had said that to her?

After the last of Paul's ashes flew into the air, Joy broke away from the others and walked the beach with weariness in her step, as if the sand conspired to pull her under. She climbed the stairs to the front porch and looked up, startled to see Mary at the door.

"I thought you'd be in bed."

It was on the tip of Mary's tongue to retort, "I would have thought you'd *sense* I'd still be up," but she kept it back.

"Well, we did it," Joy said. "Paul is released."

Emotions crossed Joy's face like clouds threatening storm. Mary saw how much pain it caused her—the enlightened healer—to have a child such as Greta. She wondered what it was like to have faith in another side, a magical place. What it took to believe that in the face of reality.

It began to rain, and the darkness pressed in on her and the endless headland, the Garry Oaks silver against the invented horizon. Those trees had been here long before her and would exist long after she was gone. Her daughter would inherit this place and what then? All that she had sacrificed, the quiet life she had shaped for herself, might be sold in a moment, for children could not be trusted to have the same dreams, the same yearnings.

I should have knocked her down. Mary thought she would have pushed Jenny to the ground before allowing her daughter such power. But to let her do it would have fixed everything.

“Where’s Greta?” Mary asked.

“At the beach. Darren’s watching her.”

Perhaps Jenny thought of her more than she imagined. It was very likely that she had kept the letter, maybe even read it. What if children were meant to level you? What if having a difficult one earned you some kind of gold star from God?

She stood with her hand on the doorknob. Greta was coming up the stairs with Darren and Cole. Mary did not believe in God and, at that moment, she could see that Joy didn’t either.

“You’ll spend a lot of time in principals’ offices,” Mary said. “Probably already have.”

“Yes,” Joy said, her head down.

“You can plan and plan. You can become a fucking saint for all it matters, and still be asked to suffer.”

Joy stared at her, stricken.

“But she’ll somehow manage to become the love of your life.”

A moment later, Darren and Greta and Cole silently filed in, their heads wet with rain. Joy laughed. “Let’s have some of that pie,” she said, and kicked off her flip-flops at the door.