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Ebb Tide

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Ebb Tide

Gloria lies on her back, rigid on the mattress like a bug skewered in a display case.

Jim sleeps sprawled, with his back to her. She's waiting for his breathing to even out into the rhythm of deep sleep before she moves. They've been married for twelve years; she'll know the exact moment he slips away and starts to dream.

She slides from between the sheets and moves to the door. She creeps down the upstairs hallway, past the children's bedrooms, careful and silent.

Downstairs in the laundry room she sheds her cotton nightgown and shimmies a tight, dry swimsuit up over her hips.

They both have their secrets after dark. Jim lies in their bed dreaming of someone else. Gloria swims.

The back door opens soundlessly, and even she can't hear the soft pad of her bare feet against the warm slate of the patio. The stars are out and the air is still. In the dark, she can smell the neighbor's azaleas. The fragrance is so strong that when Gloria closes her eyes she imagines fireworks of fuchsia against the backs of her black eyelids.

Two swift steps across the patio and a leap and her body flies out over the water, hanging parallel to the surface before breaking it cleanly and soundlessly. Instantly, the dry swimsuit that felt so tight and binding is transmuted into a second skin, slick and fine as a dolphin's. Gloria holds her breath and sinks to the bottom. She feels the water blocking up her ears, pressing tight against her eardrums. There is no room inside her head for anything except hollow echo quiet. And soon, there will be nothing but the purity of stretch and movement, the pull of tendon and whoosh of water and strain forward and away. She won't be Jim's wronged wife that can't bear to lie next to him in bed. She won't be Becky and Sammy's helpless mom that swims herself exhausted instead of speaking up. She'll be just lungs and eyes and fingers and calves humming with power and speed.

Gloria surfaces on her back and floats motionless. The sharpness of the chlorine cuts through the rich scent of the neighbor's summer flowers.

She's known about Jim's affair since May and hasn't said a word. She doesn't know where to start and knows even less where it will all end. What will happen to her children? To her? All the summer days have slid by, slow and hot and devoid of any friction. But Gloria won't think about that now, can't. Now, after midnight, there is only rhythm, only movement and momentum.

Gloria begins to backstroke; the muscles of her arms and legs stretch and pull. The water fills her ears and blocks out every sound except the low hum of the pool filters and the slowly accelerating beat of her own heart.

At the wall, Gloria executes a graceful flip turn, an underwater pirouette. In one impossibly smooth motion, she flips onto her belly, pulls forward, curls her long body into a tight ball, somersaults over, plants her feet against the perpendicular concrete, and surges away.

Ten minutes, twenty minutes, thirty minutes, pass and the pattern is as regular as perfectly-matched pearls strung on a necklace: lap swim, flip turn, lap swim, flip turn, lap swim, flip turn. All the time her eyes are open, watching the craters on the moon and the scattered stars.

Alone here in the dark, Gloria can feel the drag of the water all along the length of her body. The faster she goes and the deeper she pulls, the harder the water pushes back against her. All day and all night, this resistance of water on skin is the only thing she feels.

When the muscles of her arms and legs are nearly slack with exhaustion, Gloria climbs out of the pool. Inside, she sheds her wet bathing suit and puts her nightgown back on. She slides back into bed with wet hair and Jim never wakes. In the mornings, even though the metallic, chemical scent of chlorine is stuck to her skin, he never even guesses she was gone.

Gloria lets the minivan glide to a stop in the driveway and cuts the engine. The headlights stay on and throw yellow circles onto the weathered garage door of the beach house. In the rearview mirror, Gloria can see Becky and Sammy asleep in the backseat. They've been out for hours, lulled by highway noise. Now, the only sounds are the ticking of the engine and the even in and out of their breathing.

They had been at the store this morning, stocking up on school supplies. And standing there in the aisle, among the bins of crayons and number two pencils, Gloria realized that somehow the whole summer had slid away. She realized that fall could slide by this way too, the nights growing colder and her swims shorter, until the pool cover had to go on. And then she'd have to lie there next to him, every night, knowing. Gripping the handle of the shopping cart, Gloria realized that it would be easy to get stuck like this, frictionless, forever.

So they went home and while Becky and Sammy ate lunch Gloria tossed swimsuits and shorts and flip-flops into a suitcase. They had to go. Now, in the rearview, Gloria watches her children and tries not to panic, tries not to think about what will come next. But they look most like Jim when they sleep. Becky has the jut of his chin, Sammy the thick, dark fringe of his eyelashes. She doesn't even know what she's going to tell them.

So she won't wake them, not just yet. Gloria eases the car door open silently. As she steps out of the car, the heavy Carolina heat settles on her shoulders.

Gloria flexes her fingers, stiff from so many hours gripping the steering wheel, then kneads her knuckles into the small of her back. Slipping her feet out of her sandals, Gloria stands with her bare feet flat against the driveway. The blacktop is damp from evening rain showers and still warm from the heat of the day. Underneath the thick smell of asphalt after rain, she can detect the ocean's salty tang and a hint of clean hydrangea. Standing here like this is a kind of time warp; she could be eight years old, or eleven or fifteen or twenty-two.

Looking at the house, closed up and dark, Gloria decides to leave them there, sleeping peacefully, for just a few minutes more. She slips her feet back into her sandals and moves around the car, easing all the doors open to let in the air. Neither child stirs.

Gloria climbs the front porch steps, opens the screen and flips through her keys, hard to see in the dark. Finally, she fits the right one into the lock and gives the front door a bump with her hip.

She can't see a thing, but the smells inside the house are acutely familiar: sand and salt with just a hint of mildew and mothballs. These are the smells of all her summer memories.

Taking a step toward the light switch, Gloria realizes that it's even hotter inside the house than outside, the air so heavy it's hard to breathe. She flips on the light, then, she crosses the room to the thermostat and cranks it down to sixty-eight.

Nothing has changed here since she was a child. Same loud tropical-print sofa. Same pair of seashell- encrusted table lamps. Same track worn in the carpet by dozens and dozens of sandy feet.

Gloria steps into the kitchen and flips that light switch too. The fluorescent tubes in the light fixture flicker on one by one. Same ancient coffeepot and toaster oven, unplugged on the counter. Same measures against the heavy Carolina air: a dehumidifier jerry-rigged to drain into the kitchen sink, a tray of cat litter on the counter, a bag of charcoal hanging from the ceiling fan. And, as always, a dated note on the fridge from the last family member to visit: "8/4: Dominoes delivers to the island now! 910-278-9111! It's a pizza emergency! – Kimmy". Gloria smiles at her niece's note.

On her way back out the front door, Gloria can feel cool air starting to stream out of the returns.

In the van, Becky and Sammy are still out cold. Becky's bangs are sticking to her sweaty forehead. Sammy is breathing with his mouth wide open. As Gloria bends close to gently unbuckle his seatbelt, she can smell his warm breath: stale apple juice and French fries. As she reaches to unbuckle Becky too, she brushes her daughter's bangs to one side, away from her sticky skin.

They look so much like Jim, but Gloria steels herself and forces a smile onto her face as she begins to softly sing: "Waaaaaaaaaay up in the sky, the little birds fly, while down in the nest, the baby birds rest." Both children begin to stir. Her throat is tight, but she swallows and starts the next verse a little louder: "With a wing on the left, and a wing on the right," Becky sneakily raises one eyelid, then squeezes both eyes shut. Sammy starts to giggle. "They will be sleeping, all through the night."

She's woken them this way since they were babies – every morning and after every naptime. Becky, eyes still closed, knows her cue: "Shhhhh! Don't wake the birdies!"

Gloria starts her response: "The bright sun comes up, the dew falls away, 'Good morning! Good morning!' the little birds say." She does the bird voices

in falsetto, high and squeaky. By the time she finishes, Becky and Sammy have dissolved into giggles, but still keep their eyes squeezed shut.

“Come on little birdies. We’re here!”

“But we’re too sleepy!” Sammy pauses to yawn. “Daddy has to carry us.”

When he says “Daddy,” Becky’s eyes fly open. She’s only eight, but she knows this isn’t a regular vacation. She knows something is wrong. Her little eyebrows knit together.

In one quick motion, Gloria stands and scoops Sammy out of his car seat and turns toward the house. His body is warm and heavy against her chest. Without looking back she calls: “I’ll be right back for my big girl birdie!”

As she walks up the porch steps and into the house, Sammy nuzzles down into her shoulder. By the time she gets him upstairs he’s already halfway back to sleep. Gloria lowers him into a twin bed with train sheets and tells him the potty is across the hall, but he’s already out again.

Coming down the stairs, Gloria takes several deep breaths. If Becky asks more questions, if Becky starts to cry, she doesn’t now how she’ll hold it together.

All day – in the school supply aisle, packing, driving for eight hours – Gloria has kept her face blank and her eyes dry, telling herself that she could fall apart later, after they got away, after the kids were tucked into their familiar beach-house beds. Then she could fall apart.

In the car, Becky is sitting quietly with the sleeve of her toy bag wrapped around her hand. The toy bags had been a craft project – Gloria took two of Jim’s old work shirts and sewed up the bottoms. The kids decorated them with paint – Sammy drawing crude, lumpy dinosaurs and Becky making careful pink and purple curlicues and stars. On road trips, they could be filled with toys and hung from the dry-cleaning hooks next to the kids’ seats. Now, Becky is holding the sleeve of Jim’s old shirt like it’s her Daddy’s hand.

Gloria can’t even bear to slide into the seat next to her daughter and push her bangs aside, can’t bear to touch the face that looks so much like Jim’s. All she can do is turn around so Becky can’t see her face and say in a fake-bright voice: “Hop on! Big girl birdies get piggy back rides!”

Gloria sits down at the kitchen table and her thighs stick instantly to the vinyl chair. She'd tucked Becky in with fake-bright "goodnights!" She had paused to plug in the upstairs hallway and bathroom nightlights and to peel the saran wrap off of the toilet seat. (A measure against sewer gas smells creeping into the house when no one was around to flush the toilets.) Downstairs, she'd opened the utility closet and flipped on the hot water heater.

She needs a minute, just a minute, before she goes out to the car for their bags, before she goes out back to turn on the water to the house. She puts her head down on the laminate tabletop. It's the table from her house growing up and her skin sticks sweaty to it now the same way it did in the summers of her youth when she came in from playing outside for a popsicle.

He'll have called by now. Maybe a dozen times. In her purse in the car, her cell is on silent, has been all day. He'll have read the three-line note: "I know. I've known. We had to go."

She used to be able to predict Jim's emotions, his reactions to things. Now, she can't begin to imagine. Is he panicked? Angry? Sorry? Is he relieved? Is he too embarrassed to call around to her sisters, her parents, looking for them? Or has he already guessed where they are? Is he already on his way to try and win them back?

Gloria doesn't know if she can bear it either way – if he's relieved his old life is gone or if he's crushed and contrite and desperate to have them back. Just thinking about it makes it hard for her to breathe. She blinks hard and heaves herself upright. In the pantry, she finds the plain black binder on the shelf next to old boxes of cereal. She flips it open on the table, but stands as she reads.

"The following pages of the Official Curtis Beach House Manual will instruct you in the proper step-by-step start up and shut down procedures. Step one: Have a beer! You're on vacation after all!" Gloria can almost hear Uncle Frank reading his instructions aloud. And at this juncture, a beer does not sound like a terrible idea. Gloria opens the fridge. It is home to an army of condiments (ketchup, mustard, dozens and dozens of sweet and sour sauce packets) and a lonely six-pack. Gloria almost smiles. (Step seventeen of the official shut-down procedure stipulates that the last vacationer must leave at least a six-pack for the next family member down.)

Gloria wrestles a can out of its plastic ring. Milwaukee's Best. She grimaces and tries to forgive Kim for being a poor college student. She cracks it open and takes a first tentative sip. Vile, but cold.

"Step two:" she reads from the manual, "Adjust the A/C before you melt."

"Check," Gloria says aloud, taking a quick gulp from the can and trying not to taste before swallowing.

"Step three: Go out back and turn on the water." In the margin, two buggy eyes peek over a cartoon lily pad. "Watch out for frogs!" reads a handwritten note.

"Oh hell." Gloria takes three more gulps before putting the can down next to the manual and heading for the garage. From a hook on the wall, she grabs a long metal tool and exits out the back door into the yard.

She carefully flips open the plastic manhole cover next to the outdoor shower with the end of the long tool. The hole is dark. She can't see any amphibious creatures, but isn't getting any closer without being sure. She waves her arms above her head until the motion lights come on and, finding the hole creature-free, uses the metal tool to turn the valves to the on position.

Gloria hangs the tool up again and opens the garage door. All she really needs out of the car is the big suitcase (she'd thrown her clothes and the kids' in together, not even bothering to fold) and her purse. She drags the suitcase out of the back first, then gets her purse from the passenger's seat. There, in the driveway, she pulls out her cell. One missed call. Jim. No voicemail. One measly call. He couldn't even be bothered to stay on the line and leave a recorded: "Where are you?" Or maybe he was just too damn chicken. She throws the phone back into her purse and drags the suitcase through the garage and into the house. Fuck Jim.

Gloria leaves the suitcase in the middle of the kitchen floor and heads back to the kitchen table as the garage door rumbles down.

"Step four:" she reads, "Have another beer. Kick back. Relax. All the other steps can wait."

Gloria needs no further encouragement. She downs the remainder of her open beer and retrieves a second from the fridge. Before the door can even fully close, she opens it again and grabs the six-pack by the empty rings. As

she exits onto the back porch, the screen door wails like a blues singer, then snaps shut behind her.

The porch lights, dim and yellow, turn the backyard into a jungle of silhouettes: sturdy live oaks and spiky monkey grass and hydrangea bushes as big as compact cars are all black shapes against the night.

Gloria swipes the dust and grime off the seat of a white plastic lawn chair and sets the remaining four beers down on the deck. She sits, leans back, and props her bare feet up against the wood frame of the screened-in porch. She notices a frayed hole at one corner of the screen and thinks briefly about going back inside to hunt up some bug spray. Instead, she takes a long drink. Gloria's eyes begin to adjust and through the screen she can see the blooms on the closest hydrangea bushes – they are as big around as volleyballs and the exact washed-out blue of broken-in jeans. She'd always imagined herself with a yard full of hydrangeas, pictured herself using her grandmother's trick and pounding rusty nails into the roots so the iron would turn her flowers the bluest blue. She'd wanted to plant them all around the house when they moved in, but Jim thought they were too "beachy", that they wouldn't look right.

Jim. It had been so stupid how she found out. It was a Friday night and they'd ordered pizza for the kids. He had been in the shower and Gloria didn't have any cash so when the delivery boy came she grabbed Jim's wallet. When she pulled out the money, the corner of a photo peeked out too. She paid the delivery boy first, but then set the pies down on the entryway table and pulled the photo out, wondering if she'd given Jim a copy of Becky's most recent school photo. But it wasn't a school picture at all. It was a snapshot of a woman, younger than herself, posing next to Jim. His arm was around her waist and her head was on his shoulder. They were smiling like they'd just won the lottery. Like two people in love. The back was signed "Nicole," with a heart.

Gloria stood in the hallway, knowing the kids would come running any second, as soon as they smelled the pepperoni. She tried to think of any explanation besides an affair, any explanation except a mistress, but could only think of Jim's late nights at work, of the two business trips in the last six months that kept him away through the weekend, of their own waning intimacy.

She couldn't ask him. Resolved not to without proof. While the kids were eating and he was still showering, his old emails told her more than she wanted to know.

Gloria cracks open another beer. The foam bubbles out onto her fingers and she slings it onto the wood planks of the deck. She can see the fireflies coming out now, their bright little asses flashing on and off on and off.

The night she found the picture, she stayed up when Jim went to bed. She went out by the pool for a place to be alone, to be unheard, and found she couldn't cry. All she could feel was pressure, enormous crushing pressure: to say the right thing when she confronted him, to stay strong when she asked him to move out, to take care of Becky and Sammy, to shield them from it, to find a good lawyer. To find a job. To find a way to keep the house. To stay in the good school district. To not have to run to her parents for help. To not have a breakdown.

She just wanted to turn it off. The pressure and the knowing. It was that night that she went back in the house, found a still-damp bathing suit hanging in the laundry room, and started swimming. Swimming and not thinking, swimming and not knowing, swimming and substituting the drag of the water for real forward motion.

The fourth beer is lukewarm. Gloria tries to remember the last time she drank cheap shitty beer, lukewarm and straight from the can. She pictures the line of green bottles in the mini-fridge in Jim's rec room. She pictures the wrought iron wine rack on her granite kitchen counter. It's been years and years. It's been since before Becky was born. Since before she met Jim. Since college, when she was Gloria Curtis, single, childless, majoring in marine biology and minoring in French lit.

"Mommy! Mommy!" Something is tugging on Gloria's hand. Her tongue tastes like three-week old lunchmeat. "Why didn't you sleep *under* the covers?" Gloria opens her eyes and Sammy's face is inches from her own. She is sprawled, fully clothed, on top of the king-sized bed. "What's for breakfast? Becky said we'd have to drink ketchup but I don't believe her."

Gloria sits up and winces at the pain in her head. She presses on her temples with her palms and closes her eyes.

"Sammy, did you know that next door they have a *gravel* driveway? It's gravel from the *ocean* and if you look carefully you can find sharks teeth mixed in with the rocks." She opens her eyes slowly. "If you take your sister with you—" Sammy is gone before she finishes her sentence.

Gloria finds aspirin in the medicine cabinet and swallows two caplets dry. Then she stands in the shower for twenty minutes. Doesn't wash, doesn't scrub, certainly doesn't rinse and repeat. She stands, arms limp at her sides, and can just barely feel the tears – smoother and warmer on her cheeks than the shower water – slide down her face. Finally, she shuts off the water, wraps up in a towel, and walks, dripping, to the closet. It smells like mothballs and is mostly empty. A lone golf club is propped up in one corner. A plastic grocery bag full of seashells sits in another. Half a dozen faded jersey sundresses – purple and turquoise and fuchsia – hang in a group. Gloria runs a hand across the worn skirts and remembers her grandmother wearing them. It's been almost two decades since she passed away, but no one has had the heart to take them down. On the shelf above is a stack of straw hats. Gloria takes each down and selects the largest one, as wide around as her arm is long. Under the last hat, like the smallest hidden nesting doll, is a pair of pink plastic-framed sunglasses. The lenses are as big as tea saucers. She comes out of the closet and catches herself, hat, glasses, and all, in the bathroom mirror: a woman in disguise, a woman on the lam.

Hearing several sharp raps on the front door, Gloria takes off the towel and steps quickly into a stretchy cover-up. She leaves the hat and pink sunglasses on as she comes down the stairs and opens the door.

“Do *these* belong to you?” The elderly woman on the front porch has Sammy on one side and Becky on the other. She is holding their hands with just her fingertips. The woman has such a look of distaste on her face, Gloria can't decide whether she should apologize or get angry. Instead she simply says “yes” and shoos her children into the house.

“I almost ran them over backing out of *my* garage.” She points to the house next door.

“You're not Mrs. DiRenata.”

“No, I am Mrs. Martin. My husband and I purchased the house, and the *driveway* I might add, from the DiRenatas well over a year ago.”

While Gloria is debating between “I'm so sorry, the DiRenatas always let the children look for teeth, it won't happen again,” and something a little more to the point involving phrases like “pompus windbag” and “too lazy to use the rearview mirror,” the woman continues: “And *who* are you?”

“Gloria Hollen... Gloria Curtis.” It’s the first time she’s used her maiden name in years. She’s glad the sunglasses are hiding her eyes. “Julia’s daughter.”

“Well, I have spoken to Frank *and* Julia about this already, and—”

“It really has been a pleasure meeting you, but I have to feed the kids some breakfast.” Gloria shuts the door firmly in the woman’s face.

“But Mommy, there’s only ketchup for breakfast!” Sammy wails from the kitchen.

“Well, go get dressed. Swimsuits and cover-ups. We’ll go to the grocery store before the beach and get donuts.”

At the store, she lets them pick whatever they want – chocolate-frosted, sprinkles, jelly-filled – nutrition be damned. She lets them pick out most of the groceries too: Goldfish, peanut butter, popsicles, a family-sized bag of gummy bears. Gloria’s only responsible contribution to the cart is SPF 45.

After they drop off the groceries at the house, they spend the morning at the beach. There are few other vacationers this late in the summer, but Gloria refuses to think about the imminent change of seasons. It’s summer now, and she’s at the beach with her children.

For hours, Gloria hides in the shade of a beach umbrella, periodically yelling “too far!” at her children playing in the surf. Every so often, she calls them up the beach so she can smear more white lotion on their sandy bodies.

When he’s tired of playing in the water, Sammy decides to bury Gloria’s feet and they play the game endlessly – he mounds up the sand, she wiggles her toes until they break the surface. He giggles, mounds up more sand...

When they’re both off on their own, building a sand castle and leaving Gloria to herself, she refuses to think of anything, just listens to the surf and occasional shriek of seagulls. At the beach, she decides, you’re allowed to be absent from your own life, allowed to forget your big solutionless problems. Allowed to forget Jim and the woman in his wallet and one missed call no voicemail.

At first, the darkening of the sky is imperceptible. Then the wind starts to pick up and the purple-bellied clouds scud closer in to shore. Gloria can’t be

certain, but she thinks she hears the low rumble of thunder over the crash of the surf breaking on the sand.

“Becky! Sammy!” She waves them up from the moat they’ve been digging, trying to save their lopsided castle from the coming tide. They scamper up, breathless.

“We have to go, guys.”

“But Mom!” Becky starts.

“Sorry. Thunder. We’re headed home.” She realizes her mistake too late. The word “home” sets off sparks in Becky’s eyes.

“Home to the beach house I mean.” She has to look away, can’t watch her daughter’s face. Gloria occupies herself, shoving toys and sandy towels and Velcro sandals into the beach bag.

It starts to rain just as they get to the car. Becky helps her brother with his car seat buckles while Gloria tosses the beach bag in the trunk. Looking up at the sky and anticipating a rainy afternoon, Gloria turns the car left out of the beach access parking lot, toward the island’s tiny local library.

“What do you guys think about grilled cheese for lunch and then a little Rest and Read?” Gloria’s mother had invented Rest and Read: a time, usually on rainy afternoons, when children went to their rooms and Mom got her own much-needed R and R. The kids could either nap or read a book, but either way, couldn’t leave their beds until Mom called the all-clear. Usually, it meant at least an hour of peace and quiet.

“Can I get a dinosaur book?” Sammy wants to know.

“Of course you can,” Gloria reassures. “And what do you think, Becky?”

“OK,” she says, but doesn’t meet her mother’s eyes in the rearview.

Gloria pulls into the parking lot, nearly empty. They park close and dash through the downpour to the front door.

As soon as they burst into the sanctuary-quiet library, Gloria feels silly. Becky is wearing an enormous tee shirt as a cover-up over her wet suit. Sammy is barefoot. They all reek of recently-applied sunscreen. But the librarian behind

the counter smiles, reading her mind. “Don’t worry, honey. This isn’t McDonalds. No shoes, no problem.”

Gloria smiles sheepishly and leads her children farther inside. In just a few minutes, Sammy finds not one, but two dinosaur picture books. Becky picks a chapter book with a dolphin on the cover. Even Gloria picks up a paperback with sand creased between the pages.

At the checkout, Gloria has to dig, but does find her beach library card stuck between her AAA card and a coupon for kids’ mouthwash. The librarian takes the paper card and asks, “How long have you had this? We haven’t issued cards like this since...”

“I’ve been coming here my whole life, as long as I can remember. I probably got that when I was seven or eight years old.”

The librarian shakes her head, “Can you believe how much things have changed?”

“I guess I can’t,” Gloria says, but she can’t think of what has changed, not really. Sure, there’s a new putt-putt place right over the bridge, and there are three surf shops on the island now instead of just one, but really, this place has been an unchanging constant in her life. The beach is the same, the ocean is the same, the golf course is the same. The seafood restaurants must be serving the same hush puppies and fried clams. The library still smells the same, salty but musty too, like beach towels left to dry in a heap.

For Gloria, it hasn’t changed at all.

She smiles one last time at the librarian and packs the kids into the car. Back at the house, Becky takes her own shower upstairs while Gloria de-sands Sammy in the downstairs bathroom and gets started on making lunch. She figures even a juice box can’t make grilled cheese, goldfish, and gummi bears into a balanced meal, but what the hell, it’ll even out. She makes a mental note to get vegetables and milk for dinnertime.

After they eat, clean and fed and tired from their morning in the sun, the kids go off to Rest and Read, and Gloria gets her own shower. After, she thinks about calling home – Mom and Dad will surely have heard she’s MIA by now – but decides she isn’t ready. Not yet. She deserves some Rest and Read too. Gloria lies down in bed and opens up her paperback, sprinkling her pillow with sand. She dozes off before she gets to page three.

“Mommy, don’t be mad.”

Gloria is fully awake in an instant, imagining finger-painted walls or broken toys or injuries her children have inflicted on each other. Last month, Sammy bit Becky so hard it left marks on her arm for almost a week.

“I got your phone out of your purse and called Daddy because I missed him even though I think you’re mad at him and in a fight. He wants to talk to you.”

Becky holds out the phone.

“Baby, I’m not mad,” she reassures her daughter, even as she herself begins to panic. It’s coming now, like the thunderstorm, whether she’s ready or not. The confrontation with Jim, and whatever life, not the life she planned, will come after.

She takes the phone.

“Gloria, you’re at the beach? I’ve been crazy not knowing where you all are.”

She wants fling something back, like how he must’ve been crazy a long time ago, crazy and stupid to boot, to risk his family, his whole life. But Becky is still standing next to the bed, watching.

“Yes, we’re having a wonderful time,” she says instead, nodding for her daughter’s benefit.

“Gloria, what? You are at the beach right?”

“Honey, why don’t you go Rest and Read for a little bit longer?” Becky nods and walks into the hall. Gloria shuts the door behind her, but knows Becky might still listen.

“Yeah, we’re here.”

“Gloria why did you bolt like this? Are the kids OK? What do you mean, ‘I know, I’ve known’? What are you even talking about?”

“Don’t,” Gloria says. “And wait.”

She puts the phone down on the windowsill and uses both hands to open the window. It doesn't budge at first, but with all the strength in her arms from those midnight swims she inches it up slowly.

She always used to do this when she was little, when Dad would leave the window open. She'd sneak out and sit on the hot shingles, look out over all the houses and watch the ocean.

It's the same now. The view of the Atlantic Ocean is laid out in front of her, unchanged. Even from here, she can tell the surf is rough from the earlier storm. Now, though the sky is still gray, the storm clouds have departed.

Gloria sits down on the still-wet shingles and feels their imprint soak into her shorts. She picks the phone up off the sill and can hear Jim saying: "Gloria? Gloria are you still there?" as she brings it back to her ear.

"I am. But let's skip it, OK? The part where you deny and I accuse. There's no point. I don't care who she is or for how long or any of that."

"But..." Jim pauses. "You don't?"

"I don't. I don't because I don't love you now." As she says it out loud, she feels the weight of it for the first time. All those months of swimming and trying not to think or feel, and this is what it comes down to. She doesn't feel it anymore. She can remember, intellectually, that she loved him, remember how big that was, how it got into all the parts of her, all the ways she saw herself and her life. But she can't remember how it felt. Not really.

"We'll stay the week, and when we're back, well, lawyers I guess. If you could be in a hotel or something by then I think it would be better for the kids. And you can see them of course. And we'll talk to them together, that's important to me."

Jim starts to speak but and Gloria stops him. "Don't tell me you're sorry. It won't matter now. OK?"

"Gloria," he starts.

"Goodbye, Jim." She disconnects and sets her phone gently down on the roof. She hugs her knees tight to her chest, the same way she does when she flip turns, and for a long time the air is still. Gloria watches the ebb tide recede away toward the invisible horizon, toward the invisible line where the water

meets the sky. But the wind picks up again, coming in off the ocean, rushing straight into her face, making it almost hard to catch a breath.

About Jenna B. Morgan

Jenna B. Morgan currently resides in Tennessee but considers herself a native of both New Jersey and West Virginia, the state of her birth. She has an M.F.A. in Fiction from George Mason University; her work has previously appeared in *Soundings East* and is forthcoming in *Kestrel*. Jenna is hard at work on a novel titled *Road Under Construction*.