

## NANTUCKET

We didn't like to gossip; we loved to gossip.

*Did you hear?*

Most of the time, living on Nantucket comforted us; we felt like Mother Ocean was holding us in the palm of her hand. But sometimes, the island made us restless and irritable. Winter was bad, but spring was worse, because except for a few short weeks, it was indistinguishable from winter.

What had T. S. Eliot written? *April is the cruelest month.*

Gossip was always the most rampant in the spring. It ran like water in a newly thawed brook; it circulated through the air like pollen. We could no sooner refrain from repeating what we'd heard than we could keep from rubbing our swollen, itchy eyes.

We weren't mean spirited or vindictive or cruel; we were simply bored, and after the long stretch without summer visitors, summer money, summer magic, our reservoirs were dry.

Besides which, we were human beings, saddled with our own curiosities and our own insecurities. We were aware of things happening in the wider world — human genomes being decoded on the MIT campus, tectonic plates shifting in California, Putin waging war in Ukraine — but none of these events captured our interest like those taking place on the 105 square miles of our home island. We gossiped at the dentist, in the salon, in the produce section of the Stop & Shop, around the bar at the Boarding House; we gossiped over appetizers at the Anglers' Club on Friday nights, between the pews of five o'clock Mass on Saturday nights, and in line at the Hub as we waited to buy our *New York Times* on Sunday mornings.

*Did you hear?*

There was never any way to predict who would be our subject. But if someone had told us, in the frigid, steel-skied middle of April, that most of our summer would be spent whispering about Grace and Eddie Pancik . . .

. . . and Trevor Llewellyn and Madeline King . . .

. . . and about the renowned landscape architect Benton

Coe . . .

. . . our mouths might have dropped open in shock. No way.

Not possible.

They were some of the loveliest people we knew.

## APRIL

### MADELINE

The first two calls were from Marlo, Angie's assistant, but the third call was from Angie herself, and Madeline let it go straight to voice mail.

She knew what Angie was going to say because Marlo had been quite effective at hammering home the point: they needed catalog copy for the new novel by Friday, or Monday at the very latest. Theirs was a business of deadlines.

As Madeline listened to Angie's message, she held the phone several inches from her ear, as if the distance would soften the blow.

Madeline was at her kitchen counter, with her blank legal pad sitting in front of her. Her previous novel, *Islandia*, had come to her like cold syrup out of a glass bottle. The progress was slow — line by line, paragraph by paragraph — but the path it would take had always been clear to her. *Islandia* had been a dystopian tale of Nantucket four hundred years in the future; the island was being consumed by the Atlantic Ocean, thanks to global warming. Everyone was doomed except for Madeline's teenage protagonists, second cousins Jack and Diane (so named after Madeline's favorite song growing up), who survived in a dinghy until the novel's end.

Madeline credited inspiration for this novel to the seven months she had spent nursing her father-in-law, Big T, before he died. His prostate cancer had metastasized to his brain and then his liver, and though this had crushed Madeline's spirit, it had been beneficial to her imagination. Her prevailing thoughts were ones of illness, the decay of the body, the decay of mankind. She had then read a fascinating article about global warming in *The New Yorker* (which she had started subscribing to at age nineteen, in order to better herself). The article said that if humankind didn't change its

pattern of consumption, islands like Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard, and barrier islands like the Outer Banks, would be subsumed in less than four centuries.

*Islandia* was a departure from the autobiographical nature of her previous two novels, *The Easy Coast* and *Hotel Springfield*. It had been warmly welcomed by her publishing house and deemed a "bigger" book. Madeline's agent, Redd Dreyfus, had negotiated a brilliant deal, a low-six-figure advance for two books. This was such an exciting and unexpected development that it had nearly set Madeline's curly blond hair on fire.

Now, however, most of the advance was gone in an investment with Eddie, and Madeline was on the hook to deliver at least an idea for a second novel. She was supposed to come up with a hundred-word description for the catalog that would go to the sales reps.

But Madeline didn't even have that much. She was blocked.

She was disrupted from her anxiety by the rumble of the UPS truck and the thump of a package on the front porch. She hurried out, hoping to find a box containing an idea for a brilliant new novel, but she was treated instead to the school portraits of her son, Brick.

Wow, gorgeous.

Madeline sat down on the front step of the porch, even though it was freezing and she didn't have a coat on. She was mesmerized by how the portrait contained both the little boy Brick used to be — with his thick blond hair and the deep dimple in his right cheek — and the man he was rapidly becoming. He would look like Trevor and Big T, but with Madeline's blue eyes and her smile (which showed a little too much gum, she'd always self-critically believed). She carried the portraits inside and pulled all of Brick's school photos from the secretary, lining them up on the rug, from kindergarten through high school.

*Good-looking kid*, she thought. She had desperately wanted another child, but after three miscarriages, she gave up.

She wondered if Grace had gotten the twins' portraits and if she was going through this exact same ritual at her house on Wauwinet Road. Madeline grabbed her phone, thinking only briefly of the awful, soul-shrinking

message from Angie, and she called Grace.

No answer at the house. Maybe she was out with the chickens. Maybe she was in the garden. Maybe she had a migraine. Madeline used to keep track of Grace's migraines on a special calendar, until Trevor found the calendar and told Madeline that one of the reasons she might not be as productive with her writing as she wanted was that she allowed herself to worry about things like Grace's migraines. Madeline had thrown the calendar away.

Should she call Grace's cell? Grace never answered; she checked her texts every two or three weeks. Madeline would have better luck mailing Grace a letter.

She hung up without leaving a message and then collected the pictures of Brick. It was official: she could get *nothing done* in this house. The dishwasher called to her: *Empty me!* The laundry in the dryer called to her: *Fold me!* The counter-tops said: *Wipe me down!* There was always *something* — the house phone rang, the garbagemen came, there was dinner to plan, shop for, prepare — every single night! Brick needed to be dropped off or picked up; the car had to be inspected, the recycling sorted, the checkbook balanced, the bills paid. Other mothers commented on how nice it must be that Madeline was able to "work from home." But working from home was a constant battle between the work and the home.

*Friday. Monday at the very latest.*

The mudroom door opened and shut, and Madeline heard whistling, something from *Mary Poppins*. Was it that late already? Madeline's husband, Trevor, strolled in, wearing his very cute pilot's hat. "*Chim-chiminey, chim-chiminey, chim- chim-cheroo!*" Trevor fancied himself the second coming of Dick Van Dyke. "Hey," he said. He gathered Madeline up in his arms, and she rested her face against the front of his shirt and airline-issued polyester tie. Trevor was a pilot for Scout Airlines, which flew from Nantucket to Hyannis, Boston, and Providence. "How was your day?"

Madeline started to cry. She couldn't believe it was five o'clock already. How was her day? *What* day? Her day had evaporated. She had exactly nothing to show for herself.

"I'm blocked," she said. "I don't have a single idea, and the wolves are at

the door.”

“I’m telling you,” he said. “You should just . . .”

She shook her head to silence him. She knew what he was going to say. He was going to tell her to write a sequel to *Islandia*. It was a logical solution to her problem, but in her heart, Madeline felt this was a cop-out. She had ended *Islandia* with her characters heading safely into an unknown future; that, she felt, was the *right* ending. She didn’t want to tell readers what happened next. If she wrote a sequel, she would be doing so only because she couldn’t come up with new characters and a new plot.

She couldn’t come up with new characters or a new plot. So maybe Trevor was right. A sequel. Could she undo the end of the world?

She wiped her eyes and raised her face for a kiss. Trevor said, “What’s for dinner?”

“Pizza?” she said. “Thai food?”

His expression fell. She hadn’t gotten any writing done, but she hadn’t shopped for or made dinner, either. How could she explain that trying to come up with an idea to write about was even more time consuming than writing itself?

“I’m sorry,” she said.

He kissed her forehead. “It’s okay,” he said. “Let’s get pizza from Sophie T’s. Is Brick getting a ride home from practice?”

“Yes,” Madeline said. “With Calgary.”

Trevor loosened his tie and pulled a beer from the fridge. “Guess who was on my first flight this morning.”

“Who?” Madeline said. “Benton Coe,” Trevor said. “Really,” Madeline said.

Benton Coe was the owner of Coe Designs, the island’s most prestigious landscape architecture firm. He was the man who was turning Grace’s three-acre property into the most dazzling yard and gardens on Nantucket Island and possibly in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Benton Coe was back.

Well, that would explain why Grace hadn't answered the phone.