

START OF THE SEASON

William Auten

Something about a tattoo he had and wanted to talk to her about while they stayed on the cape. Not wanting to make a big deal about it, but he wanted her to know. From his youth, he said, smiling when he mentioned this feature, which she had not yet seen, somewhere on his body, Tom mentioning this as casually as someone saying that clouds were starting to roll in on the horizon or that the temperature had changed. Around the thirtieth minute into the excursion, he brought it up—between the middle of the ocean, with its sunset-laced waves, and the dock where they boarded with their luggage and fellow hotel guests, this point of departure that had sunk in the distance with the oncoming night.

He didn't offer anything else and returned to watching the ocean landscape roll past them in reds and pinks underneath descending bands of blue-black. Strings of lights brightened here and there in front of them as the boat

neared the resort's dock, which was well-lit with large lamps and staff wearing reflective vests and holding glowing batons. Sheila didn't ask for anything else, smiled with a reply of "Sure, of course," and remained close to Tom's hip, their fingers interlocked, as he leaned on the guardrail, and yet she couldn't help but weigh the timing of his revelation and hesitation to open it further until later during their first get-away together as a couple.

The water, sun, and wind ensconced them as the boat's speakers squawked when one of the crewmembers reminded everyone, even though it was near dusk, to keep their eyes open for bottlenose dolphins playing in the engine's wake. Tom pointed out several of them popping up and down, like ink squirting through water, trying to keep up with the boat's speed, and showing off for an enraptured audience.

"They know we're still watching this late," he said. Waves splashing against the side of the boat and obscuring the bright blue letters of the resort's name, Sheila laughed with him and tried finding an image, a symbol, or one word or a string of words inside his dress shirt, at the base of his neck, or parts of his arms that she had, for some reason, never noticed before. She squinted at the white fabric, assuming that something heavily inked (if it was heavily inked) would emerge like colors through fog.

She could see the island and the blocks of hotel properties silhouetted by the late-evening sun. In one of those blocks, one of those buildings would be theirs for the next week. A room with a view of paradise, the online description pitched, perfect for lovers old and young, first time or long time. The crowd gathered by the boat's railing, and she struggled remembering which property—perhaps the one with colonial Spanish features and its red-tile roof and arcades; perhaps the tropical one with palm trees stair-casing up toward the lobby entrance; perhaps the ultra-sleek, modern one with its onyx-like glass that, hours ago, had reflected the bright day and now reflected the end-of-day spectrum. She hoped to see animals (baby goats, donkeys, beach-combing horses) and colorful bursts of flora and fauna native to the area, but she couldn't remember which room or which property, shining in the dark, awaited them. Tom's tattoo was all she could think about.

With a few blasts on the horn acknowledging its arrival, the boat rocked into the dock. The gangplank lowered; a thin line of passengers wearing backpacks or carrying few items disembarked first. Tom kissed her on the cheek before departing for the space where they had stowed their bags. The sun was low enough that its cooling residue slid across the ocean's surface. Sheila could see the outlines of the buildings, but this time, they were more pronounced

and more developed than when they were far away; patches of darkness filled areas of the property where footlights, the cabanas, and the rooms' lights fell short. *Listen, while we're here*—his opening words echoed in her head.

She helped Tom with their bags, and as he did before they boarded the boat, he commented on how beautiful she looked in her dress with its lime-green accents in the shapes of flowers scattered over a white background, her skin contrasting with the latter. She had ditched the broad-brimmed hat after sunset. He had told her that her hat reminded him of Derby Day, an adventure that they should take this coming May, especially because it was so close to them in Louisville and something that all good Kentuckians should do in their lives. She had blushed then and, now, clipped the hat to her suitcase by the brown ribbon that matched her eyes. Tom wiped remaining sunscreen off his upper lip before he kissed her, and they walked with some of their fellow travelers toward the hotel.

She didn't know what else to make of his on-the-way-here comment. She hadn't been on an excursion like this one—with anyone, ever, and certainly not anyone like Tom who had drawn her in and, he had told her, she to him. The trips that she had been on were work-related, rambled up and down the mid-Atlantic states (D.C. her northernmost point, Miami her southernmost),

and required her to be professionally dressed and exact and never fumble over her presentations or the materials that she pitched; money, culture, and history were at stake. She watched his pace as they passed an open-pit BBQ. Smells of coconut and grilled fish and chicken wafted, drinks clinking and people cavorting—all of this unfolding in soft light and the moon starting to appear. Tom’s pace was precise and direct. She could tell that he wanted to reach an endpoint, and he wanted to reach it without stopping. When he is ready, she told herself and entered the lobby through the large wooden doors and crossed the terra-cotta tile floor upon which rested the main desk where the maître d’ signed them in.

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In the fall, the museum had started ramping up efforts to promote an exhibition opening in January about African-American abstract painters and modernism. Sheila was the curator and an expert in that field; the exhibition—its research and organization—was a massive achievement as well as a personal and professional goal for her. One of the marketing assistants suggested hiring a jazz band for the show’s Friday night opening, and being in the South, plenty of candidates would be available; she knew a band from one of the well-estab-

lished, classy restaurants in Louisville. Tom was part of the band—the drummer with a knack for timing, individual flair when it was needed, and soft touches on the slow ballads that brought couples dancing at the front of the stage after their dinners had settled, some drinks had kicked in, and connections electrified the night air. Sheila and the marketing assistant went to check out the band. Tom and Sheila made eye contact right away. He had a flattened face, one that could have been a boxer's or a wrestler's; his left earlobe dropped lower than his right; his pale blue eyes were square, save for the ends that curled down like fine fishing line toward his uneven cheeks. He had full lips, as though their swelling never receded; the top lip's scar zigzagged up toward the bottom of his nose; and he spoke with a slight stutter that Sheila could tell came on when he was nervous, but it did not when he stood next to her. He introduced himself after the first half, and after the full set was over, he sat with her and had one beer and then water; she kept to red wine and stopped after a few glasses and shared his water.

She said that she was Methodist; he said that he was Catholic, new to it, having been confirmed not too long ago, learning and growing, which was very much the opposite of what he was back in his twenties and teens. Not just

agnostic, he said. *A nihilist* were the words he used. “Nothing at all,” he admitted and shook the hands of some patrons on their way out. The athletic tape wrapped around the fleshy parts of his thumbs had loosened from sweat and playing all night. He had rough hands and palms that looked as though they had been dragged over rocks and then dried in chalk; he rubbed them together as he sat near the door that let in cool night air every time it opened.

They talked about music. His first love had been country and old-timey folk songs; he had found and fallen for other styles and genres on his own. She wanted to know how he became part of the group. “Friend of a friend,” he said, mentioning that Rachel, one of the flautists from the Philharmonic, used to play in a jazz band that often shared the stage with his band but had no more time for it, given her private tutoring commitments and her time in the studio to record an album. She knew that he was interested in all kinds of music, wanted to challenge his chops, and wouldn’t mind an extra gig or two on the side. He told Sheila that he was excited to play that style of music, having listened to it like it was once contraband, and loved every minute of the band’s ribbing him in a good-hearted way until he was a member. “Part-time,” he said. “I still got my day job at the Phil. Speaking of,” he said, smiling at her, “we should swap.”

“Swap?” she chuckled.

“You show me the museum, and I’ll show you practice in the Big Hall...that’s what we call it. Plus, I’d like to know you a little more. I’d really like to see you again.” He helped her with her coat and contacted her the next day.

At the museum, he wandered the galleries and stopped when something caught his eyes or when she pointed out certain things, highlights of the collection, or items on loan.

“On loan,” he teased.

“That’s right.”

“Swap.”

“Swap,” she echoed, laughing with him.

“I love that you know all this. I wasn’t really good at this kind of stuff, but I like it. I like someone showing it to me.” He bent at the waist to look closer at a painting. His left hip jutted like a rock as he did, and he was slow to pick himself up and continue on, grimacing as though he needed a cane to help him up. He noticed the brush strokes (or lack thereof—sometimes only stains and palette-knife sculpting and scraping); the energy thrown into the paint—the whole body and mind at work; and the tension between the messages of the

artists as they lived in one world and created in another but never, he understood, leaving one for the other—or that they were ever fully able to or welcomed in. “I get that,” he said to her.

During the rehearsal she attended, he wasn’t where he said he would be. She looked around and couldn’t find him. He eventually emerged from the back in a starched dress shirt and placed himself in the percussion pit. They saw each other, and he bobbed his head toward her as she sat in the shadows of the seats facing the middle of the stage. He saw her smile; she shook her head and then, as discreetly as she could, pointed *Pay attention, you!* The conductor picked up his baton, looked over the players, and motioned *And one, two.* On his third tap, flutes, oboes, and violins flurried through the air like stars succeeding one another in a night sky. Tom’s march-like accents on the timpani deepened these sounds and accompanied the choir’s verse of the first cantata. Afterwards, he said to Sheila that the opening bars made him feel as though the notes circled around him like points on a celestial globe. The sounds ran across his jaw and found a way inside to buoy him—that this sensation never failed to emerge no matter how many times they had practiced, no matter what notes he knew lay ahead. He slid his drumsticks into a leather

bag cushioned with soft fabric, said goodnight to his colleagues, walked her to her car, and kissed her for the first time.

They went on several more dates. Most of the leaves on the trees had reached their autumn peak, and some had started dropping. The sky was cloudless blue; the air was crisp. They hiked; they found local eateries that had avoided hype; they visited the distilleries; they talked on the phone and in person until he joked that he was too tired to play from all their talking, which was OK by him because if the Phil were to fire him or the E Tones were to kick him out, he could spend more time with her. He told her that they were turning into a typical Boy Meets Girl story—head over heels, smitten from day one; that their time together was building something that he could not deny or let go.

He told her that he loved her and that he really meant that—not a thing that he would say to get her into bed or something out of desperation—but that he truly loved her and that if she didn’t love him or couldn’t return love in any capacity other than friendship that he would be OK with that and that he would love her no matter what she chose. She told him that she was growing to love him. They had only kissed, held hands, snuggled on couches, watched movies in bed; they took their time with it all and saved something

with gravity until an anniversary of some sort arrived, and when it did, he thought that they should find some time to get away and celebrate. The Phil had a short break after Thanksgiving and before final rehearsals for the Holiday show. She could use a break from prepping for her show, and she saw that her calendar would allow her to sneak off for at least five days, and upon returning, she would have to crank up the effort for the last leg.

It would be worth it, he said. He would meet her family before Christmas and she would meet his after New Year; hers would sit in the best seats that he could get for them at the *Oratorio* and they could watch him play; she would reserve tickets for the first Saturday afternoon that his parents were free. But before any potential family drama or holiday stress, they decided to get away—just the two of them. Baja, he suggested—whales migrating south this time of year, the start of the season for them. She loved the destination and the reason and that she would be with him, these promises that he made in an amount of time that was theirs; these promises, he pointed out, made indoors—he and Sheila being with each other indoors more times than not; that they should be outdoors and outside of what they had and what they knew.

They walked into the room, and as they placed their toiletries on the stone counter, the reasons why she and Tom had picked it together that night they spent in front of her laptop looking over search results, prices, and amenities rushed back to her—the bright tile, the spa tub, the timber beams plastered into the ceiling, the adobe walls, the back patio with a view of the ocean, and the skylight that framed the night sky. Room service had left mints and chocolates on a silver tray and, on the wooden bathroom door, had hung two bathrobes that smelled like lavender. A bottle of champagne on ice and two glasses with ribbons wrapped around the stems (Tom and Sheila's names printed on the ribbons) waited on a nightstand.

She suggested strolling along the beach before dinner; the extra hours that they gained flying west had energized her in one way, but feeling low on food and water, she also wanted to eat. “It’s a beautiful night, and I’m starving,” she said, grabbing a lightweight sweater from the suitcase. She opened a water bottle from the fridge and drank half of it. Tom agreed, but before they stepped out, he wanted to talk to her about what he mentioned on the way here—now, if she didn’t mind because it was important to him. “To us,” he added. She placed the sweater over her lap, folded her hands, and waited. He sat next to her on the bed; his posture curved like a question mark. Less than two hours

had passed since the boat ride, and it felt much longer to her. The sun had fully set; scraps of moonlight lay across parts of the beach and slivers of it inside the ocean. Part of her wanted to save talking for the morning.

His eyes flickered between her face and the ocean rolling onto the beach in the distance behind them. “So, this tattoo I have,” he said, unbuttoning his dress shirt. His hands shook. One arm pulled itself from a sleeve, the other shortly behind, and he moved as though chronic injuries plagued his shoulders. Both arms out, he stood in the room’s soft amber light. The rocky coast off to the right of the beach had turned into layers of shadows. No visible tattoo. She had never seen him shirtless before. One of these nights during their getaway she knew that she would see and be with him in a different way—but she did not anticipate seeing or being with him within this circumstance.

He peeled off his t-shirt. Nothing on his chest or stomach or shoulders, save for blemishes. His jaw tensed as he grimaced; his tongue stuck between his teeth as though he tasted something sticky and invisible in the air that made him unable to answer and that made movement and memory his only words, if not an imperfect answer, for her. He put both hands on his knees after he adjusted his feet, slid his hips over the blanket, and pivoted toward her as much as his body could.

The tattoo wasn't very large; it covered one hand-width of his middle back; and it looked like it could have been bigger, more aggressive, but it had been stopped. It looked like propeller blades frozen in their rotation and had once been red, white, and black. A section of his spine stuck out slightly below the tattoo's center point and enhanced the imperfection of his body and the impermanence of the tattoo; he had very little fat or muscle there, akin to someone having once wasted away or having carried something on their back for a long period of time. Even though the colors had started to disappear and one-third of the outline had been erased until the skin it once held looked like peeled sunburn, she knew the symbol immediately and what it and others like it stood for—its connotations, its denotation—and it divided her from him until she felt that she was in another time and another place but that she was the same person who had to face a gap between what she had hoped and experienced as hope and a past that could eclipse hope. She knew that the image on his back, more than halfway up, near the scarred plane of skin between his shoulder blades and base of his neck, was no longer what she had wondered about on the boat ride and returned to during their time on land, a worry that she wanted to dismiss quickly—and did, but could not stop recurring—because of fear and deceit that it had pulled from obscurity, but there now on his

back was no longer a general worry for her to place on a general image but a specific image that pierced her with precision without him having to say anything as the day settled.

“You were part of this?” she asked him, and before he could answer, she continued, “You must have been. Why else would you have it?”

“I was...yes, for a couple of years.” His lips trembled. “I got it when I was seventeen. Twenty-five years ago. I was a stupid kid and a very different person, and I’m not that anymore. I wasn’t ever really. I mean...wasn’t really that way. I didn’t know what I was doing at that age. I needed something to belong to, and that’s all that I had at the time.”

“The things we all know and read about...they did them...my grandparents, their parents, families *they* knew. They still do things.”

“I know.”

“We are all part of that...and you’re part of it.”

“No.”

“Yes...in a way, yes, with *that*.” Her eyes flickered toward his back, as though they wanted to see a ghost but not linger where it loomed.

“That wasn’t me...and it’s *not* me. It may have been but not anymore. I got out...all of it. I had no education to speak of. I had nothing before I was in

and nothing when I got out. But I had music. I changed. I understood. I got out and moved away...eventually, after some scrap jobs here and there. Those auditions were the most important things...until now." He wrapped his t-shirt into a ball and wiped his eyes. "I just wanted you to know."

She rolled in her lips; several seconds passed before she spoke again. "I believe that you're out. I believe that you're not that person anymore. It's just..."

"I know." He inhaled and exhaled deeply. "When I'm done at the gym, I don't change shirts. I can't. There are showers there, but no way. No way. So, then I go to practice because I can't go home to change because of traffic and driving back to the other side of town. But I get to this place where I am accepted for what I can do and for who I am *now*, but I can't change clothes there. I have to wait for every guy in there to leave or do something else while I change. So there I am, waiting as long as possible...drinking more and more coffee, watching the little TV that we have, messing around on my phone, making small talk. Do you really think I want to be on my phone that much or talk about whatever?"

He rubbed excess sweat from his hands into his pants. "Bruce, one of the trumpets, teased me about doing double duty and being a liaison for our social

media. A live, real-time feed. ‘Live from the pit,’ he said. It’s all in fun, I know, but... I change in a bathroom stall when no one watches. I walk out with a clean t-shirt and a sweaty gym shirt in my hand. Either no one notices or no one cares. I finish getting ready, and I’m always the last one to practice.”

“This isn’t a thing that you get for initiation, for doing something. Is it?”

“No, it’s not.”

“You didn’t do anything to anyone...ever?”

“No.”

“Never laid hands on anybody?”

“No.”

“What did you do?”

“Had meetings. Talked about whatever they were angry about. That’s it. Just a lot of talk. Flags and signs and...horrible, loud music. It was all talk. Nothing more, nothing less. And...yes...I said things at the time...with them...the typical things. I regret that...all of it.” He, again, wiped the palms of his hands on his pants. “I’m done with it. I have been. I got out before I got in too deep. They didn’t like it when I left. But they’re a long ways away now.”

She looked at his face when he said this—its contours and disproportions, the imbalances and the scars carved across his body.

“I’d be covered in ink if I hadn’t. I’d be making this dermatologist I’ve been going to a whole lot richer.”

She chortled with him.

“I love you,” he said. “I didn’t want to keep it from you. Besides, how was I going to?” He motioned his hand throughout the room and slipped on his t-shirt. “I understand if you want to stop...what we have. I understand if you tell someone...your sister or brother or friends, and that this could stop. But I don’t want it to.”

After several seconds, she nodded, kissed him on his forehead, and suggested that they skip the restaurant and order in; the restaurant and its celebrated chef would still be there tomorrow and for the rest of their time here. “I’ll have to wait for that flan later,” she broke another build-up of silence, smiling with him as he pushed himself off the bed, grabbed the remote, and dialed room service.

The large flat-screen TV clicked on to the peninsula’s promotional channel. Daytime activities and epicurean revelry brightened in front of them. He offered a glass of champagne, which she took and clinked with his glass. He flopped down next to her, and they started talking about all that they would do—that there was so much to do; that the images and the happy faces on the

screen had unlimited access to joys. Within the first few hours of being here, they joked that they hadn't been anywhere else or done anything but unpack and talk in the room.

To hold her over until room service arrived, he offered one of the chocolates and a napkin from the silver tray between them on the bed, and she remembered one of their earlier dates at the restaurant overlooking the river. He had glanced around after he uncapped an ink pen that he had inside his blazer. She watched him draw on the back of the copy of the check; he slid it toward her.

"I get this weekly email from this self-improvement-making-better-decisions website, and this one talked about choice and responsibility. And, I bet you know it. I never did until the other day. Maybe you came across it in college. The guy who wrote it said it's popular in ethics classes."

He had drawn a set of train tracks that cut right to left across the back of the check, and at the end, the tracks crumbled from a cliff. A set of tracks branched off from this main set and wound their way to the top at a stop sign that he colored in. Off to the side of this branch, he had drawn a stick figure and, after looking at Sheila while he drew, added a dress and her hair, earrings, and glasses. She rolled her eyes at him while looking over the rim of her drink.

The stick figure held a switch bolted into the imaginary ground. A different stick figure stood on the tracks leading to the stop sign. A trolley rambled one-quarter of the way over the main tracks.

“So, this trolley has lost its brakes, and it can continue its current path.”

He pointed to the tracks falling off the cliff’s edge. “And everyone aboard will die, but you don’t know any of the passengers.” He then tapped the stick figure wearing the dress and said, “Or, if you pull the switch, it will stop safely up here but doing so will kill the one person you know best and love.”

He tapped the stick figure on the tracks leading to the stop sign. “Do you intervene? The many over the one, or the one over the many? But here’s a kicker. The writer said, ‘What if no one but you and whoever you pick are the only ones to know about this? No one else knows or will ever find out. Does that make a difference in your choice now?’”

Room service knocked on the door and wheeled in their food—salmon and wild rice for him, chicken tamales for her, wrapped, the menu said, *in husks from corn grown in our garden*. As Tom served her, they picked back up talking about what they would see on their outings. Probably a stunning sunrise. Eat authentic huevos rancheros. Drink real Mexican coffee—not the imported-frozen-and-transported kind that they bought at grocery stores. Of

all his promises, getting to the cape and, then, getting off it in order to explore the ocean was the one that she wanted him to keep. They talked about whale watching on Wednesday, as scheduled, another promise that he would very much like for them to keep, another thing outside and in the daylight.

They finished eating; had a few more chocolates and emptied the champagne; held each other in bed; and returned to the whales: gray whales rolling their backs, coming up for air, pursuing a path south toward warmer water—through which the cape rose, on top of which the hotel was built, inside of which the bodies inside the room floated on this warmer water and shelf of hard rock and soft coastlines; the whales floating in their motion; the ocean moving everything; the whales and the ocean following each other independent of whether anything or anyone was around to ever see it happen throughout the day or, now, in the middle of the night.

William Auten is the author of the novels *In Another Sun* (2020, Tortoise Books) and *Pepper's Ghost* (2016). Recent work has appeared in *Barely South Review* as the recipient of the 2019 Norton Girault Literary Prize in Fiction, *McNeese Review*, and *Tupelo Quarterly* and is forthcoming in the *Dead Mule School of Southern Literature* and *Illuminations*.