



Refuge

BY JANE DELURY

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVE HARP

Standing in Molly and Riordan's bathtub, waiting for Lucas to leave, Tess thought of the Delmarva squirrel that she had found one afternoon, suspended by its paws from a lower branch of a loblolly pine. She was 10 or 11 years old, on her way to catch the school bus and had, as usual, cut through the patch of woods behind her house. She knelt in the dead needles and watched the muscles strain in the squirrel's shoulders—she had never thought of squirrels as having shoulders before. To hang from a branch like this was not usual squirrel behavior, and when an animal acted strangely, Tess, like all of the island children, knew not to approach. Later, coming home from school, she hoped to see the squirrel still hanging on, but instead she found it stiff on its back, its paws clutched around the absent branch.

She had been in the tub long enough for her skin to dry and break out in goose bumps. Long enough to notice the constellations of mildew on the hem of the shower curtain and the rings along the rim of the tub, rings, she supposed, from the products Molly had put away before Tess and her family

arrived for their week on the island, replacing them with a dollar-store soap, still in its wrapper, and a half-used bottle of salts. Did Molly expect her to soak in the tub? Or did she want Tess to think that she herself had time for such things? The house seemed this visit, more than the others, to be set-decorated: black-eyed Susans in the vase on the kitchen table, the carpets cut through with lines from a vacuum cleaner. Molly had made apple fritters and hot chocolate for their arrival the night before, and Tess could smell the breakfast cooking downstairs.

She peeled back the shower curtain. Lucas, Riordan and Molly's 4-year-old son, still crouched under the bathroom sink, tracing the pattern on the linoleum with his thumb. He had been there when Tess had turned off the shower and first pulled back the curtain—completely, as one does. She had asked him several times to leave, firmly, then cajolingly. Now, as before, when she said his name, he glanced at her, then went back to his tracing.

"Okay, have it your way," she said. "I'm getting out. You put your hands over your eyes."

Downstairs, she found her daughters at the kitchen counter, eating pancakes with blueberry eyes and banana-slice noses. Her husband, Glen, and Molly's husband, Riordan, sat on opposite sides of the table, reading different sections of the newspaper: Glen, business; Riordan, sports. She leaned between the girls to kiss them before heading to the coffee pot.

"Thanks for braiding their hair," she said to Molly, who was wiping the stovetop. "Glen lets it pouf up all over the place." She took a sip of coffee, then stirred in two spoonfuls of sugar. "And look at that breakfast. You'll spoil them rotten."

"They're sugar pies," Molly said. "I could eat them alive." She swiped a smear of bacon grease off a burner. "Everything's cold. You can nuke it if you like."

"No thanks," Tess said. "I'll stick to coffee."

"Right." Molly tossed the sponge into the sink. "How else would you keep that figure?"

Tess took her mug to the table. She wished Molly would stop playing the fat girl. Back in high school, Tess *had* been skinny while Molly already had the start of a double chin and thick legs she hid under skirts as long as those worn by the Mennonite tourist girls. Tess recalled Riordan telling her, as they sorted oysters on the boat their fathers co-owned, that Molly was the type who would look like her mother before she was 25. Their bodies, though, were not so contradictory anymore. They just stored their extra pounds in different places, Tess in her hips and Molly in her upper arms.

"Thought you weren't going to wake up," Glen said to Tess when she sat down.

"It's the sea air. I sleep better here." She took a piece of bacon from his plate. "Did you get up early?"

"The girls did. Molly and I took them out to see the sun rise."

"It was beautiful," Molly said. "Even Lucas thought so, didn't you honey?" Tess had not noticed Lucas, cross-legged under the table. Molly reached down and patted his head. "I asked him, Isn't it pretty, and he said yes, didn't he Glen?"

"Sure did," Glen said, without looking up from the paper.

"If we're going, we should go." Riordan pushed his chair from the table. He was wearing what Molly called his uniform: a pair of blue jeans and a white T-shirt. It had been Molly's idea that Riordan take the day off from fishing so that they all go together to the beach. Tess took his lack of bathing suit as a sign of resistance.

"Afraid of catching a cold?" she asked as he walked by.

"He's got his trunks on underneath," Molly said. She cleared the table, clinking the dishes one on top of the other. Tess followed with Glen's plate and scraped it clean into the trash.

Tess and Riordan had grown up a short stretch of dunes apart on the windy side of the island. Their fathers co-captained a fishing boat; the Roving Jack hauled in oysters from the Pocomoke Sound and when those started to dry up, bass and tuna from deeper waters. Their mothers used to joke that Tess and Riordan were refuge animals because they spent all of their free time on the barrier island connected to their own by a bridge built by the park service. One summer afternoon, the year they entered high school, they found a snowy egret tangled in fishing wire at the edge of a marsh. Tess would always think of her friendship with Riordan as before the egret and after, not because together they had freed the bird, but because, as they walked home over the bridge, Riordan put his hand on the small of her back.

Molly had lived in a lilac Victorian on the edge of town, where her parents owned the hardware store. By junior high, she was working afternoons behind the counter and had the pale skin to show for it. When, two years after Tess left for college, her mother called to share the rumors circling town, Tess had said, "Of course, he isn't. Not Molly." Leave well enough alone, her mother told her, but when Tess's father took up the phone he ended the conversation by saying, "There's still time."

On their third date, at a pizzeria just off the College Park campus, Tess

told Glen about Molly and Riordan. By then Riordan had called Tess in her dorm to tell her himself. "I feel sorry for him," she said to Glen. "She won't understand a thing about his wanting a life on the ocean."

"Like you, then," Glen said, for Tess had told him about her and Riordan ending things the previous summer when it became clear that he would not leave their fathers' fishing boat for the green lawns and shady streets of College Park.

Soon after Tess and Glen married, Riordan and Molly followed suit, the former a small ceremony under the pagoda of Baltimore's Patterson Park, the latter an elaborate affair in the Island Methodist church with Molly in a bell-shaped white dress, net bags of birdseed on the tables and pink balloons lost in the rafters of the church hall.

"Riordan would much rather have gotten married on his boat," Tess told her mother when they walked into the church. "He once told me so." She was pregnant with the twins and bursting out of the bridesmaid dress that Molly had mailed to her with a note saying that Riordan wanted her to be part of the ceremony. Tess's mother sat down in a pew. "You'd see they were happy if you ever came home," she said, and Tess wondered what exactly her mother wanted since she was the one who had encouraged Tess to leave the island in the first place.

The next time Tess stepped into the church was for her mother's funeral, followed several years later by her father's. At her father's wake, Molly, herself now pregnant, told Tess that she and Riordan would like to offer her room in their house during the summers, now that Tess was selling her parents' home to pay off their debts. "You'll want to come back now and again," she said. Later that night, Riordan told her with tears in his eyes—only the second time that she had seen tears in his eyes—that the ocean would never look the same without her father on it, and she started to cry and let him put his arm around her. Riordan didn't say everything would be all right because he, unlike Glen, didn't say that kind of thing, had never said much of anything at all, a trait she had once held against him, along with his not wanting to go to college, or travel, or live on dry land.

By four o'clock the sun had retreated behind swarming gray clouds and the beach was losing the few visitors who came to the island this early in the season. The girls had dug up mole crabs and flown their kite and were putting the last turrets on a sandcastle. Tess and Glen lay on towels, he with the crossword from the newspaper and she with a mystery. Molly sat a towel away from Tess, keeping her eyes on Lucas, who knelt between them and the water, dragging a plastic rake in a circle around himself. In the barbed waves bordering the surf, Riordan swam toward the horizon.

"He'll catch his death out there," Tess said.

"He knows what he's doing," Molly said. "He won't go by drowning. Fishermen die of cancer and heart attacks now."

Molly was the one who had encouraged Riordan to swim. She said that he wouldn't get a chance like that for a while. But she had been watching him from behind her sunglasses, from under the brim of a wide straw hat.

"I think I should tell you," Tess said, "this morning, when I was in the shower, Lucas came in."

"He does that. He likes the sound of the water."

"He sort of caught me off guard."

"Don't worry about it." Molly let out a short laugh. "You don't have anything he hasn't already seen."

"Next time prop a chair against the door," Glen said. "That's what I do." He rolled the newspaper into a tube and added it to the bag of soda cans and water bottles that he would drop off at the recycling center in town. "Pack out what you pack in," he'd say if Riordan noted that half of the plastics didn't get recycled anyway.

The ocean slipped higher up the silt, curling around the base of a tower. The girls jumped on the sandcastle as if to preempt the waves.

"We should take the girls back," Glen said.

"They're fine," Tess said.

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"They're getting tired." He stood up. "You don't have to come."

"I'll go with you," Molly said. "I need to get that roast in the oven."

Glen curled his hands into a megaphone and yelled that anyone who could get to the car in the next five minutes would have ice cream on the way home. The girls pummeled the sand on their way past Tess.

"Thanks," Tess called to Glen as he set off after them. "I can finally finish this book."

Molly took the rake from Lucas' hand. He hooked his fingers into a claw and combed the sand. She pulled him to his feet. His knees were scraped pink. After brushing them off, she knelt in front of him and turned his chin with her index finger so that his eyes lined up with hers.

"We're going home now," she said. "Back to our house."

"I'm still making cobbler for dessert," Tess said as they walked by, Lucas stumbling behind his mother. "Don't you bother."

"I won't," Molly said. She tugged at Lucas's hand. "Tell Riordan I put his keys in the pocket of his jeans."

Tess looked out at Riordan. He was swimming to shore. The skin of her inner thighs tightened. Behind her, the car kicked up oyster shells and sand. She watched it disappear, too fast, from the lot, leaving behind a swarm of dust.

Riordan staggered up the beach and sprawled out on Glen's towel.

"Who wanted to go back?"

"The girls were having a meltdown. They decide everything now."

"Their mother's daughters." He started to towel off his chest. Tess could see the glint of a bald spot on the top of his head. She reached out and covered it with her palm. He put his hand over hers.

"Come on," he said. "Let's go to the lighthouse." They loaded the truck quickly before driving off the sand onto the road that split the marshes. Riordan kept to the twenty miles indicated on the park signs. His truck let out a low rumble that blocked out the sounds of the birds, so Tess opened her window to hear their distant chitters and high calls. Under the low-hanging sun, the water was turning to slate, all the blue soaked out, but the green grasses were still bright. Snow geese floated in the distance. A cormorant threaded the water with its beak.

"I never come out here anymore," Riordan said. "Just when you guys come to visit."

"You should," Tess said. "I would. I would every day."

"Looks better than it is. The crap from Ocean City floats all the way down here now." He looked past Tess, out her window, then back at the road. "Molly thinks she ate too much tuna when she was pregnant with Lucas."

"That's silly," Tess said. "I ate tuna salad all the time with the girls."

"Well she's got it in her head. And there's nothing for Lucas here. Look how long it took to get him diagnosed. Doctor didn't know au-

tism from an ear infection." He laughed, but his knuckles were pale on the wheel. "Molly wants us to move to Pittsburgh near her sister. There are therapists there, people who could help him."

"Pittsburgh?" Tess turned to look at him.

"What would you fish? River trout?"

"I might go back to school. Do something with computers."

"You couldn't. You can't be away from the water."

He shrugged. "You don't know what you can't do until you try."

This would be the last time then, Tess thought. There would be no meetings in motels halfway between their separate suburbs. They weren't those kinds of people, cheating people, capable of complex arrangements and drawn-out deception. Sex with Riordan wasn't like anything she would have thought of as a girl: adultery, love, passion. It was more like finding an old coat at the back of a closet and feeling grateful that it still fit. She hadn't missed seeing him naked—the wide spread of his shoulders, the clotted hair on his chest—until the night that he took her out in his new boat while Glen went bike riding with the

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girls and Molly cleaned crab for dinner. They were well into their second visit to Riordan and Molly's house. When Riordan asked if she wanted to see the hold she knew what he meant and had not hesitated. They had found other places the next summer, the lighthouse her favorite, because it seemed so brazen to pay the two-dollar entrance fee as if for a cheap motel room, and up there she could see the whole town and everyone in it, but none of them could see her.

As they turned a corner into the forest, Riordan slammed down on the brakes. The seatbelt caught Tess, burned the side of her neck. A fox lay on the double-yellow line in the middle of the road. A trail of blood ran over the asphalt to the embankment. Tess and Riordan got out of the truck. The fox raised its head and studied them with its gold eyes.

"Poor thing," Tess said. She had never been this close to a fox before, although she had spotted them often in the woods. A streak of burnished fur, a flicker of a bushy tail and they would disappear.

"Some tourist asshole," Riordan said. "They never follow the limit."

He moved closer. The fox pushed itself up, and took a wobbly step. Blood matted its left haunch. The skin hung down over its paw.

"Get a towel," Riordan said. As Tess walked to the truck, a van drove by, the driver slowing down

so that his family could peer out. Tess waved them away. Riordan crouched down in front of the fox and cocooned its body in the towel.

"I'll hold it," he said. "You'll have to drive."

"Where are we going?" Tess asked. Would they leave the fox with the old woman at the bottom of the lighthouse? Or would they carry it up the two hundred metal steps and let it limp around the walkway as they fucked against the glass?

"Where do you think?" Riordan said with the first smile he'd broken all day. "To the station."

He shifted with his free hand while Tess pressed down on the clutch. On his lap, the fox squirmed but Riordan kept its muzzle clamped shut.

"It might be all right," Tess said as she turned the truck onto the main drive. "It might look worse than it is." Riordan tapped the back of her hand and he shifted into fourth gear. "I should have taught you to drive stick way back when," he said.

"I'll hold it," she said once they'd parked in front of the station. "You go ahead and let Matt know."

"He moved away a couple of years back." Riordan kicked open his door. "This is some new guy, commutes from Berlin."

The ranger was a tall, stooped man with fading hair and a potbelly. He looked wrong to Tess, as if he should be in a suit behind a desk like one of the men at Glen's office. He laid the fox on a metal table in a back room and unwrapped the bloodied towel. Riordan stayed in the doorway, but Tess moved up close. She could see the sharp gleam of the fox's teeth in the dark cave of its mouth. She tried to make her face look reassuring as she did with the girls when they were at the doctor's office waiting for the nurse to give them a shot.

"Leg's broken, isn't it?" Riordan said.

"It's hemorrhaging from somewhere." The ranger held the towel out to Tess. "You want this back?"

Tess shook her head. She felt as if she might vomit. She could see the gray, wormy insides of the fox behind the curtain of skin.

"The animal biologist will be here in the morning," the ranger said. "But I'll take care of it now."

"No," Tess said.

The men looked at her; their faces shared an indulgent, tired expression. She was conscious that she was about to create a scene. She turned to the door. "I'll wait outside."

The afternoon had drained away. The air smelled swampy and old. After a few minutes, Riordan came down the steps. "Why didn't we just leave it?" Tess asked him. "Or help it into the forest so it could die there?"

"Then it wouldn't be counted," Riordan said. He opened the truck door. "It's a refuge. They need to keep track of these things." As he started the engine, Tess noticed the blood that had crusted on his lap where he'd held the fox.

"We should get back," she said. "It's late." "Lighthouse closes at five anyways."

They drove in silence out of the forest, over

the bridge and on through the town, past the row of flickering motel vacancy signs, and the diner where they had sat Friday nights in the booth by the window years ago trying to figure out how to make things work with her off at school and him at sea. The buildings changed to houses, the distance between the streetlights grew and between them rose the cannery, where Tess had worked summers alongside Riordan, sorting oysters and mussels, vowing to get away from that slimy, stinking place. If she had stayed, she told herself as Riordan pulled onto the byway, she would be

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like Molly, cooking macaroni and cheese with breadcrumbs on top, making the beds with military corners. If she had stayed, she would have wound up meaning nothing to Riordan. And he would mean nothing to her. She knew that when she got back home, she would grieve, just as she grieved every summer when she returned from the island. This time would even, perhaps, be sweeter because it was a true end, not one of the phantom endings of before.

At the start of the road leading to his house, Riordan pulled over. He reached behind his seat and took out a duffel bag.

"You moonlighting as a traveling salesman?" Tess asked when he unfolded a clean pair of jeans and a pair of boxers.

Riordan unbuttoned his fly. "Molly doesn't like me to come home stinking of fish." He bucked up to slide the jeans down his legs. "I don't want her to see the blood. She cries over the smallest things now."

"I wouldn't know about that."

When Riordan started the truck again, Tess pulled his face towards hers and gave his mouth a dry kiss.

"It wasn't right anyway," he said.

"What's right?" Tess said. "What's fair?"

They drove up to the house. Shadows pooled in the gables, and in the lattice above the porch, where Molly and Glen sat in wicker chairs. Glen had been drinking. Tess could tell by the squint to his eyes. Molly had changed into a black sundress that fell to her ankles. Lucas was on the other end of the porch, moving back and forth on a swing.

“You finish that book?” Molly asked Tess.

“Yes,” Tess said. “Where are the girls?”

“They conked out in the car,” Glen said. He looked over at Riordan, who had lit a cigarette and was leaning against the porch rail. Tess felt as she used to feel before a storm on the island, when the air went thick and metallic, a smell she’d thought as a child came from the clouds but knew, at this moment, was the smell of her own fear.

“I’ll go kiss the girls goodnight,” she said.

In the guestroom, the girls were asleep in their bed, still in their bathing suits, curled up against each other as if trying to stay warm. One at a time, Tess peeled the suits off their shoulders and down their legs and fished two T-shirts and underwear out of the suitcase. Their eyes still closed, the girls raised their arms to her, then one rolled onto her stomach, the other onto her back. Tess leaned over and watched them breathe, feeling, as she felt sometimes when they were outside playing on the swing set, or when they climbed into her and Glen’s bed in the mornings, that really, this should be enough.

Glen said her name from the doorway. When she turned, he was gone. She tucked the covers tight over the girls and crossed the hall to Riordan and Molly’s bedroom. Piles of sea glass had been pushed to one corner of a shelf filled with books on autism. The sea compass collection that had belonged to Riordan’s father hung over the bed. Glen sat at the foot of the mattress. He was holding his hands together as he did in church, as if he were crushing something.

“I hit a fox,” he said. “Back there at the refuge. I kept going so the girls wouldn’t see.”

Tess wanted to run from the room. She sat down next to him. “It happens,” she said. “My dad hit a deer once. Those forest animals get too used to cars.”

Glen kept his eyes straight ahead. “I can’t stop thinking about it. What’s a fox anyway? More like a squirrel than a dog. I wouldn’t think twice about hitting a squirrel.”

“You couldn’t have done anything,” she said, putting her hand on his knee. “You shouldn’t feel bad.”

Glen looked down at her hand, his jaw pulled so tight that she could almost hear his teeth crack. Then he unclasped his hands and plucked her hand off, held it suspended for a moment as if he didn’t know what to do with it before dropping it onto the bed.

“Nothing happened,” she said.

“He changed his jeans,” he said. “That’s what Molly told me to look for. That’s how she can always tell.”

Tess closed her eyes and opened them again. She had imagined this conversation happening, but not here on the island, rather back in their living room on the couch under the window that looked out on the swimming pool. Glen would cry at some point. He would not look like this, resigned and tired. And she would feel relief, not this numbness. She remembered how, that morning in the bathroom, Lucas had watched her step out of the shower, how his gaze felt on her naked body—a breeze, a shadow, unsubstantial and indifferent.

“How long have you known?” she said.

“Since sunrise. Molly walked us out to the meadow, sent the girls looking for dew bugs. She’s been on to it since last summer. Said she couldn’t stand the smell of you on him anymore.”

He smiled then, a tight, mean smile that flickered on his face then disappeared.

Tess stood up and tugged out the crease her body had made in the bedspread.

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moving away,” she said. “We’ll have to find somewhere else to stay when we come back.”

She walked to the door, but stopped on the threshold and turned back. “What do you mean she can *always* tell?”

In the dim light, she couldn’t see if he was going to cry or laugh; his face appeared split between the two.

“He’s a sailor, Tess. What do you think all those songs are about?”

“Don’t say that. My people were sailors.”

“Your people are gone,” Glen said. “You have new people now.”

Tess took the stairs slowly, her hand on the banister. In the living room, Lucas was turning a toy car around in a circle. Tess walked right through it, but he didn’t look up. ■

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