

ONE

Jules, 18 years | August, 1979
WITHENSEA, MASSACHUSETTS

SOMETIMES IN ORDER to tell a story well, so it's truly understood, you have to tell it out of order.

My story tells like this. It unravels . . . and ravel's up again.

My name is Julianne, but everybody calls me Jules. I was named after my Great-Uncle Jules on my father's side. That's what my father, Howard, told me. My mother, Wendy, told me I'm named after a dead racehorse trainer.

It's hard to know what to believe.

For now, I live here in Withensea, a seacoast town north of Cape Cod, an island that thrives on summer tourism. In two weeks I will leave for college and never come back.

Many people I went to school with will stay, however. A kind of Withensea tradition. They'll move down the road with their high school sweethearts, who'll become their spouses, and settle close to the homes they were raised in.

Sometimes a place can be as much a part of you as the people you grew up with. I won't miss most of the people here, but I'll miss this place. The ocean, for me, holds the power to turn a moment mystical. Accompanying my memories of childhood there are always ocean sounds—sometimes faint, sometimes louder, the waves crashing and beating their own score. When I

picture the breathtaking beauty of our cliff, the ocean, it almost masks the memories of the things that were not picturesque. I've spent eighteen years soaking up every beautiful part of Withensea, hoping to crowd out the memories of the painful parts of my life—of guns, of violence, and of loss. A kind of glass-housed chaos, tolerated by the community in order to feed the starving brains bred in small towns.

My life, so far, has also been an existence filled with secrets. Two kinds of secrets. First: the kind that need lies to keep them hidden. Second: the kind our brains create to cope with sorrow.

Still, perspective offers me solace enough to not measure my own sorrow against another. What I understand now about survival is that something in you dies. You don't become a survivor intact. Survival's cost is always loss. This is my mourning book.

What follows is a collection of memories I've saved. I've learned memories are lost more often than objects. I will keep whole parts intact in my telling, where I feel it's important. In a way, I think it will keep me intact to tell the truth of it this way. It's my evidence—a way of documenting to keep the truth in my sight line. There are parts of my life I've been absent from. These I will tell from where I am now along the bend of truth. I will call these parts belief.

It's all left me with this weird love for the moments after something good happens. I call it *delayed joy*. I hear an aching beautiful song, and when it's over I enjoy the immediate moment, the quiet, more than I did the sounds of the song playing. I taste a buttery lick of Butter Crunch ice cream, and after the flavor is gone I savor the loss of the deliciousness in my mouth.

It's like I'm wired backwards inside my head.

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Withensea harbors a scrabble of townies who live in salt-beaten homes scattered among swanky summer estates. Winters on this island are brutal to homes, cars, skin—anything exposed to the elements. But in the spring, after the last of the gray-brown clumps of snow have melted, and before the tourists hit town, everything enjoys a fresh coat of paint and not much more. Rather than shoulder the emotional and physical cost and energy of upkeep, all things considered non-essential are left to deteriorate or grow wild. Deferred maintenance is a practice applied to most everything in the town, including the people.

My brothers, David and Moses, and I are kind of like the town. We started out sturdy, with a semblance of familial structure to support us and a new coat every September when we started school. But, eventually, with neglect, we were left as straggly as those other non-essential elements.

In the long run, this may turn out to have been a blessing.

From the turn of the century until about twenty years ago, Withensea was gorgeous. It used to be a summer vacation destination for Rose Kennedy's family. But the Kennedy family seems to have forgotten about their ancestral home, which sits, in its dilapidated glory, across from a seawall by the ocean, close to where I live.

Townies call the people who come to live in the estates along the beach "*the summer people*" and have a general disdain for those who can't or don't have to brave the winter by our ocean. The ones who can, the ones who stay, manage to eke out a living working a year-round business, make their money off summer tourists, or travel inland toward Boston—sometimes by ferry—to find work.

Many of them take a nine-month detour to the bottom of a bottle. Alcoholism in this

mostly Irish/Italian Catholic town is more a winter industry than an embarrassment.

When I was six, my father— a short, Irish, orange-haired, pink, and doughy-faced man— owned a bar called the Little Corporal. It did a booming business in the summer months, and the winter industry provided enough support to warrant staying open year-round.

From outside, in the summer months, the Little Corporal's vivid green doors separated long, tall panels of clear glass windows through which you could see several pool tables. The glass panels continued on the south side of the building, turning two sides of the bar into a pool table terrarium. The tables floated, lily pad-green felted over a gray concrete pond. In winter, all the windows were covered in cheap, shamrock green-painted plywood to protect the glass.

The building squatted at the intersection of a small interstate highway and the boulevard that flows into Withensea's one main avenue. The boulevard flows in the other direction onto a land bridge that grips it to the mainland, tight as a choke hold. This intersection is the only way to enter or exit Withensea without a boat. All the cars slow to a crawl to navigate the sharply curved, signage-laden rotary, which spits them out again in either direction, going in or coming out.

In the summertime, pedestrians paraded from the surrounding parking lots down the wide sidewalk with their whiny, strollered babies and cotton-candied children, headed for the public beaches or Aragon, the amusement park anchoring the southern tip of the town. The day trippers and the townies who worked the other bars, restaurants, and amusement park arcades, all pushed in or passed by the wide doors and terrarium windows of the Little Corporal.

In the winter, people parked their cars right on the snowy sidewalks that wound around

the Little Corporal to avoid the icy winds that whipped up over the seawall and across the avenue.

Inside the bar, a long expanse of intricately carved dark oak ran the length of the back of the room; an ornate gold-leaf mirror hung on the wall behind it. Above the mirror, a late-eighteenth-century, crudely-carved, wooden ship figurehead thrust herself from the wall, her peacock-blue robe draped under the curve of her bare breasts. Serene and anachronistic in the space, she gazed with detachment out beyond the walls of the bar, beyond the cars, beyond the imprisoned stroller babies and the ladder heights of the roller coaster to the sea.

To the landlocked fishermen, the career drunks in their thiamine-deficient stupors, solitary and stranded on the stools at closing, she was a familiar meditation. For me, she served as promise of another, better, life out there, beyond Withensea. A beginning to a life that had, thus far, been mostly about endings.

TWO

Jules, 6 years / Late August, 1967

THE LITTLE CORPORAL

“I’M PLAYING THE winner!” I shout to my brothers over the song on the old jukebox.

It’s “Wild Thing,” and David has pitched ten nickels in the old jukebox to play it over and over. Every time it gets to the part where they sing “groovy,” he yells it out and wiggles his butt. They’re ignoring me. David’s got Moses doing it now, too.

While my father and Grandfather Samuel have an *important* talk in the office behind the bar, I sit on a barstool in the Little Corporal drinking a Shirley Temple I made. It’s mixed the same way I always do it, with ginger ale, orange juice, a bit of grenadine, and four maraschino cherries. I know tons of drinks by heart, and I can make any drink out of the *mixerology* book behind the bar. My father showed me. I mix Rob Roys for my brothers while they play pool.

It’s eight in the morning on a Saturday, and school starts in a week. It’s one of the last big weekends of the season. Early this morning, my father packed us in the car.

Last night my father gave us all horsey rides to bed and read us fairy tales, but afterwards

he and my mother screamed at each other again.

“Crooks go to jail!” I heard my mother scream.

“Idiots go to jail!” my father shouted back, and my mother agreed. But he got even angrier when she did.

“Don’t you lay a hand on me, you coward. You bully.”

I got scared the police might come again. When they fight like that, my stomach hurts.

The wind came out, so I listened to the bell buoy noises until I fell asleep. They sound kind of like St. Joseph’s bells except it’s not the same song every time. I like that the song’s always different. When the wind’s not out, I count the seconds between the light beams that slide across my wall. They shine from the lighthouse in the ocean and come after ten seconds if I count slow.

“Your mother’s asleep and you kids make too much noise,” my father said to us this morning. “If you behave yourselves, you can come down to the bar and play pool all day.”

We all screeched like monkeys.

“Behave!” my father bellowed, and we calmed right down.

“You all need to be good today. Your grandfather is meeting me down at the bar for a talk. A really important talk.”

I figured it must be, because my grandfather never drives out to Withensea.

“*Meshugeners* drive the Boston Freeway,” he always says.

That means crazy.

The bar doesn’t open for an hour, so me and my brothers have the place to ourselves. My brothers pretend to play a fair game of pool, but David’s on a run, socking the balls in with regular *pock-pocks* and saying weird things to himself. Pool games with David are never fair.

He's the only one tall enough to hold the pool stick level with the balls. Moses is almost four, but he can barely see over the edge of the table without standing on his toes.

"Winner. Winner!" David shouts every time he sinks another one.

We can all hear my father's voice slam through the door; we can hear it over the music, angry like a fist.

"They're gonna kill me if I don't give them the money. Do you understand, old man?"

I stare up at the huge wooden woman with the naked breasts hanging above the bar.

I know you listen. If I don't tell anyone, maybe you'll tell me what to do? You're the most beautiful lady in the world. I think your eyes are much prettier than the statue of the Virgin Mary at St. Joseph's.

The Virgin Mary's just a statue. Even Father Donald ignores her.

He prays to the naked Jesus.

My grandfather's talking, but he's too quiet to hear. He doesn't want us to hear what they're talking about. He thinks we're all still babies.

If I tell about the fights and the police he'll take us with him to Boston for sure. But if they find out I told . . .

I know what my father wants. He wants more money. It's always the same. My grandfather is a tailor who owns a few shops in Boston. My father thinks my grandfather is made of money.

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My grandfather smells like butterscotch and lemons. My grandmother smells like chicken. They live in an apartment in Boston, and we visit them once a month. My mother drives us, although she hates to go. She screams at us practically the entire way.

“Shut up and sit back in your seats. If I have to pull this car over you’re going to get a smack. For Christ’s sake, whatever you do, don’t throw up in the car or I’ll kill you!”

My mother zigzags in and out of the traffic lanes on the freeway; she doesn’t use the silver signal stick, but she yells at my father when he doesn’t do it. We like to kneel on the back seats and stick out our tongues at the people who honk at us. We watch to see if anyone crashes when she cuts them off because once she made two cars crash in the same day. She kept driving both times.

When she isn’t screaming, my mother sings along to the radio songs, except she doesn’t get the words right. She makes up her own words, which never make sense.

My mother barely talks to my grandparents once we’re there. She’s always real mad at them, although once I asked and she wouldn’t tell me why. She goes because my grandfather gives her money after dinner. I like to go. I love my grandparents and they love us. I wish we could live with them.

It’s the same dinner every time. Chopped liver with lettuce and egg on rye bread, matzoh ball soup with chicken and rice. I get the *poopick*. Grandma says it’s the chicken’s belly button, but I know it’s something else because all the grown-ups laugh when they say it. We always have the same dessert, too. Fruit cocktail from a can.

The money to buy the bar, to pay for everything, comes from my grandfather. My father spends most of the money my grandfather gives him on things my mother gets mad about.

Scotch, horseraces, and poker games.

My grandfather doesn’t spend much money on himself, though. He never goes on airplanes like my parents. He sews all the clothing he and my grandmother wear. He lives in a Jewish neighborhood in Boston in an apartment. It has a scary monster made of cement on

the roof. It watches us when we go in. He has a *doessowtoe* he parks on his street, but he doesn't drive it much anymore except on Sunday.

My mother says he has lots of money. She says he's a millionaire. I think she makes this part up, because my grandparents never buy new stuff for the apartment. They replace the plastic coverings on everything when they turn yellow. My grandfather says they never buy new stuff at all because almost everything can be used forever if it's man-made, except the TV tubes in his old Zenith.

Our grandmother's name is Yetta. She never says anything in English because English isn't easy for her. She speaks Yiddish and Russian, and my mother translates for us kids. When Yetta doesn't want any of us to understand what she's saying, she speaks Polish to my grandfather.

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After I finish my Shirley Temple I watch Moses and David play another game. Moses bites his lip and concentrates hard on David's shots.

One of these days, when he can lift the stick high enough to practice, I bet he's gonna wipe David's butt. David hardly talks to anyone, and when he does it's like he's sure no one cares what he says because he repeats himself or speaks nonsense. He's nine now, and he's got *hyperaction*.

I know he's the one who broke the crystal plate the other day. Moses would of told when they said we were all gonna be in trouble if someone didn't tell who did it. David let us all get the horsewhip. He didn't even care. I wish he'd show he's mad or do something when Dad hits Mom, but he pretends he can't hear it.

I pull my glass to the edge of the bar and lower myself off the stool. I stretch up to lift the

glass off the edge when one of the Little Corporal's green doors flies open and bangs against the wall. The noise makes me drop the glass.

"Where the ginger-haired midget?" a huge man with a weather-puckered face yells at me. He stands in the door making fists.

"Ah . . . I-I think he's outside t-t-talking with my grandfather." I try not to wince at the angry roughness of his words.

Sometimes when you don't act afraid of them they calm down.

He throws me a dirty look. I frown at the broken pieces of glass scattered on the waxed wooden floor. It's all mixed up with the leftover ice cubes, and it sparkles in the light that floods in from the sidewalk.

You can blame it on the man.

I glance over to the other side of the bar. My brothers have stopped playing. Moses and David stand frozen, pool cues braced against their chests like fishing spears.

"Who's tending bar?" The man growls and stomps over to me. He's standing right in front of me now.

Turpentine and poop.

I decide not to tell him the bar is still closed.

Breathe. Say it like Mary Poppins. Breathe.

"I can make a hundred different drinks."

The man smiles a nasty thin line of lip, and I can see he's missing teeth between the brown, beany ones he's got left.

"You wanna be a barmaid? You wanna job? I'm the one who owns this joint now." He shouts this loud enough for the people passing by on the sidewalk to hear.

My father comes out of his office and shouts back at the man. "Shut up, Pratt. These're my kids you're screaming at. If you wanna have a civilized conversation, come back in the office. If you wanna act like an animal, go do it where there aren't any youngsters around."

"I don't give a damn who's listening. This is my bar now," the man, Pratt, shouts back.

"I can pay you what I owe. I'm not giving you the bar."

I step behind the bar and duck. Then I peek over the edge where the sink and the silver mixing glasses are.

"What? Who do you think you're dealing with? I'm not some pansy you can two-bit hustle. I won last night. You owe me, you bastard, and if you don't pay up I'll . . ." He stops when the door to the office swings open.

Both men stop shouting and scowl over at my grandfather, who ignores them and marches over to where my brothers are. He drags them back into the office. He's looking around, but can't see me peeking over the edge of the bar, and I'm afraid to run out.

"Don't be an ass, Pratt. I'll pay you what I owe, but I'm keeping the bar."

My grandfather closes the door to the office with my brothers inside. He doesn't know I'm out here. He must think I'm outside playing. My hands start to shake so bad I make the glasses on the bar counter rattle. I duck down so they don't see me, but I can't help peeking my head over the edge again. I want to see what's going to happen next.

"I don't want your money. I want the bar. You shouldn't have put it up if you didn't have the 50K. You're gonna give me the keys or I'm gonna blow your damn head off."

I watch as he reaches into his coat, pulls out a gun, and aims at my father.

"Put that thing away." My father takes a few steps away and puts his hands out in front of him. Like his hands could stop bullets.

Holding my breath, my body goes numb and my stomach goes hollow.

I don't know why, but I start to sing: "Raindrops on roses and whiskers on . . ."

Two things happen.

One: both men stop shouting and turn to see me behind the bar. Two: the gun goes off.

I think it must've scared the man when I started to sing because he swung the gun away from my father's head and toward me, then pulled the trigger.

The bullet hits the mirror behind the bar, followed by a thousand crashes of glass. The next second my neck is stinging like someone stabbed me. I put my hand up to touch it. Something warm and sticky is oozing on my skin and down across my chest. I glance down. My blouse, which is powder blue, turns a deep, magenta-purple.

My father stands in front of me. "Oh Christ! You shot my kid! You shot her! Somebody call an ambulance!"

The man, Pratt, is standing next to him.

"Oh Hell No! Oh Sweet Jesus!" he repeats over and over.

I can barely hear them. I see their mouths moving, but the sound is muffled like they've got pillows over their mouths or something. Everything around their heads looks swimmy and my eyes narrow down to just them. Like a camera's eye, only all blurry like on *Star Trek* when they use the transporter.

I'm feeling awfully dizzy.

The only thing I see is the wooden woman. I'm lying on the floor behind the bar right under her. She turns her head and stares right at me and says,

Think of me as an angel.

Everything will be all right.

You are loved and I'll always be with you.

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I wake up in an ambulance, my father lying on a bench on the other side of the truck.

“Is—is my father dead?” I ask the ambulance guy, who sits on my bench and wraps up my arm where he stuck a needle in. “Did he get shot too?”

The ambulance guy smiles down at me. “Nobody got shot, hon. Your dad passed out is all. I guess he don’t like the sight of blood much.”

“I didn’t get shot?”

“Nope. You got a piece of glass cuttin’ your neck, though. We’re taking you in so’s the doc can take a peek at you.”

“Am I gonna die?”

“Nope. A few stitches is what you’ll need. You’re gonna be fine.”

I wonder how long my father will be asleep and if he’ll be mad at me when he wakes up.

The ambulance guy sticks a plastic cup on my face and tells me it will help me breathe easier. It smells like new Barbies.

“Did you clean her up?” my father asks from his bench across from me.

I look over at him. He has his head turned away from me.

“Hi Dad.”

“Is she wrapped up?”

The ambulance guy winks at me and says, “We have a bandage on her wound, Mr. Finn. How’s your dizzy?”

My father turns his head to me. He smiles. I figure he’s not mad at me.

“It wasn’t a bullet, Dad. Just glass.”

He smiles a weak smile at me, frowns at my neck and down at my arm where the needle is. He makes a long sigh, "Oooooohhhhh."

"You doin' all right, Mr. Finn? Don't you be passin' out on us again."

"I don't think I'm gonna pass out. I think I'm gonna be sick."

"Here you go." The ambulance guy hands him a plastic bowl. He holds it on his stomach until we get to the hospital.

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At the hospital they take me to a chilly room and give me stitches, which hurt a lot. They put a big bandage on my neck. They wrap up the piece of glass that got stuck in my neck in a wad of gauze and give it to me as a souvenir.

While the doctor stitches me up my father sits in a chair across the room. He won't look at the stitches 'cause they make him sick to his stomach. When the doctor asks me what happened, my father tells him that someone threw a rock at the mirror behind the bar and that's how it got broken and hurt me. I guess he doesn't want to tell the truth about the gun.

The nurse asks if I'm hungry and brings me a bowl of Sugar Pops, which is neat because we never get good cereal at our house. My mother only lets us eat Wheaties. She says the other stuff rots your teeth.

"Okay, time to go home," my father says as the doctor leaves, pushing through the double doors of my hospital room. He seems better and doesn't look the same sick greenish color he looked in the ambulance.

"Can you bring her another blouse?" he asks the nurse.

I try to wolf down the Sugar Pops.

She gives him a glare and says, "I'm sorry, we don't store clothing here. If you like we can

send her home in a gown?”

“Whatever.”

The nurse grabs a peach-colored thingy. Way big for me. She pins and ties it so I can walk around in it. She gives me my bloody blouse in a paper bag that says Children’s Hospital. I didn’t know they took me to a hospital just for children. No wonder they had the Sugar Pops.

When I jump in the car my father tells me I shouldn’t have been hiding behind the bar and it serves me right I got cut. I’m mad he doesn’t see he could’ve gotten killed from a gun. I probably saved his life better than Mighty Mouse.

“Are you gonna lose the bar?” I ask.

“None of your business. It’s not polite to eavesdrop on other people’s conversations.”

“You were yelling. Everybody could hear you,” I say, not meaning to be sassy.

He raises his fist and I flinch over against the door.

“Do you need a smack? Because I’d be happy to smack you if you do. This ER visit is gonna cost us. You better hope your grandfather will pay for it.”

My father looks at me with the dead eyes. Sometimes his eyes go dead like the cat we found in the shed, and I know I better not say anything else or I’ll get a beating.

I don’t say one word the whole way back.

I remember the wooden woman at the bar and how she spoke to me and how it made me real peaceful inside.

But I worry. If someone else ran the bar they might take the woman away. Where would she end up if they did? Would she still be able to protect me?

THREE

Jules, 6 years | Late August, 1967
THE HOUSE AT 18 ALETHEA ROAD

“I’VE BEEN TALKING with a developer and he says we can earn a fortune for the land. His company is planning more building in this neighborhood. We could sell the land around the house to pay it off.”

I hear my father say this to my grandfather in his oily voice. He always uses this voice when he talks to my grandfather and the neighbors.

My father and I got back from the hospital about an hour ago and I got sent up to my room. I’m supposed to be resting, but I’m not tired. I’m sitting on my floor by the heat register; painting watercolors with the new Paint Rite set I got for my birthday. I’m listening to my father and my grandfather downstairs in the den. The den is filled with turquoise Naugahyde furniture. My father always takes people there to talk private. I can eavesdrop ‘cause the sound comes up real clear through the holes in my radiator.

My grandfather’s upset because of the stitches and stuff that happened at the bar and

because my mother's not here and my father won't say where she is. She's probably at her friend Natasha's place. My father doesn't like Natasha. He says she's a bad *influencer* and calls her a bitch. My mother smokes smelly herb cigarettes when she hangs out at Natasha's. I like to go there because I like to play the drum set in the garage and my brothers don't know about it yet.

"You should count your blessings the *kind* will heal from this. Almost killed by a crazy man with a gun. Still you want to ask me for more money. This home is my wedding gift."

"If it's a gift why don't you transfer the title to us? It should be ours to do whatever we want with."

"This way it never becomes lost in maybe a poker game."

My father doesn't say anything, but I'm thinking he's real mad. He doesn't like it when he doesn't get his way. I imagine my grandfather sitting in the den. He probably thinks it looks silly because my father lets the people who come to visit him write their names on the walls with black magic markers, even though we're not allowed. Plus there's a moose head stuck over the TV and he put a pair of sunglasses on its eyes so it looks like Miles Davis. That's my father's favorite singer.

"We could make more money on the land than you paid for the entire house. It's a temporary situation though. This man could change his mind about where he wants to build and pay someone else if we wait too long," my father finally says.