

THE  
DISTANCE  
BETWEEN  
US

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The Distance Between Us  
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Published by HomePort Press  
PO Box 1508  
Provincetown, MA 02657  
www.HomePortPress.com  
ISBN 978-1-7340533-9-5  
eISBN 979-8-9868654-0-9

Cover Design by James Iacobelli  
Cover Painting by Pamela Parsons  
Maps by Madeline Sorel

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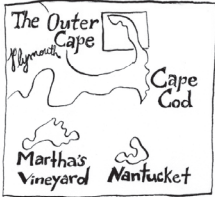
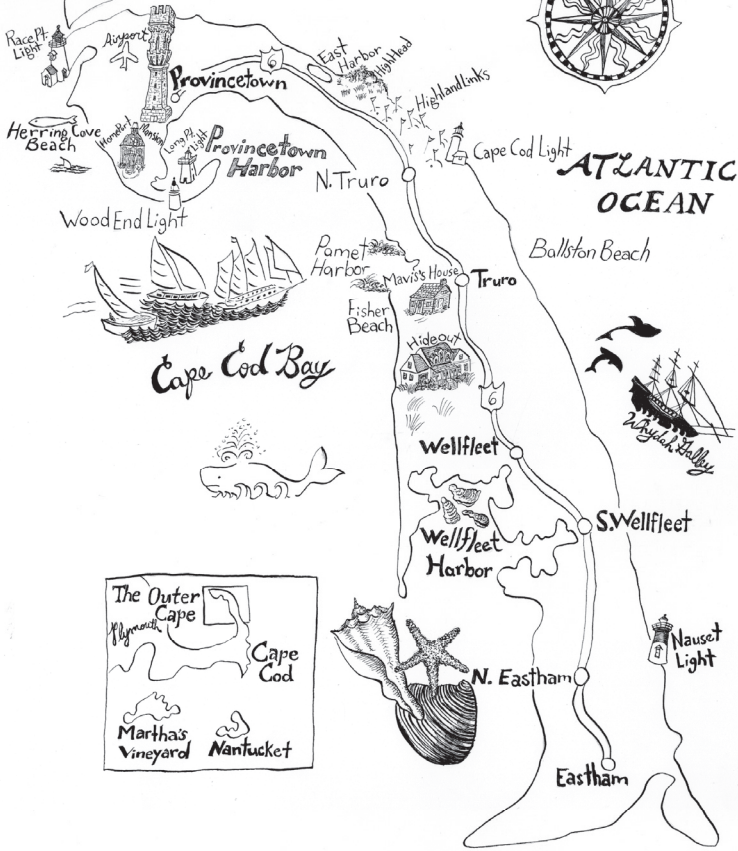
**“Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.”**

**—Oscar Wilde**

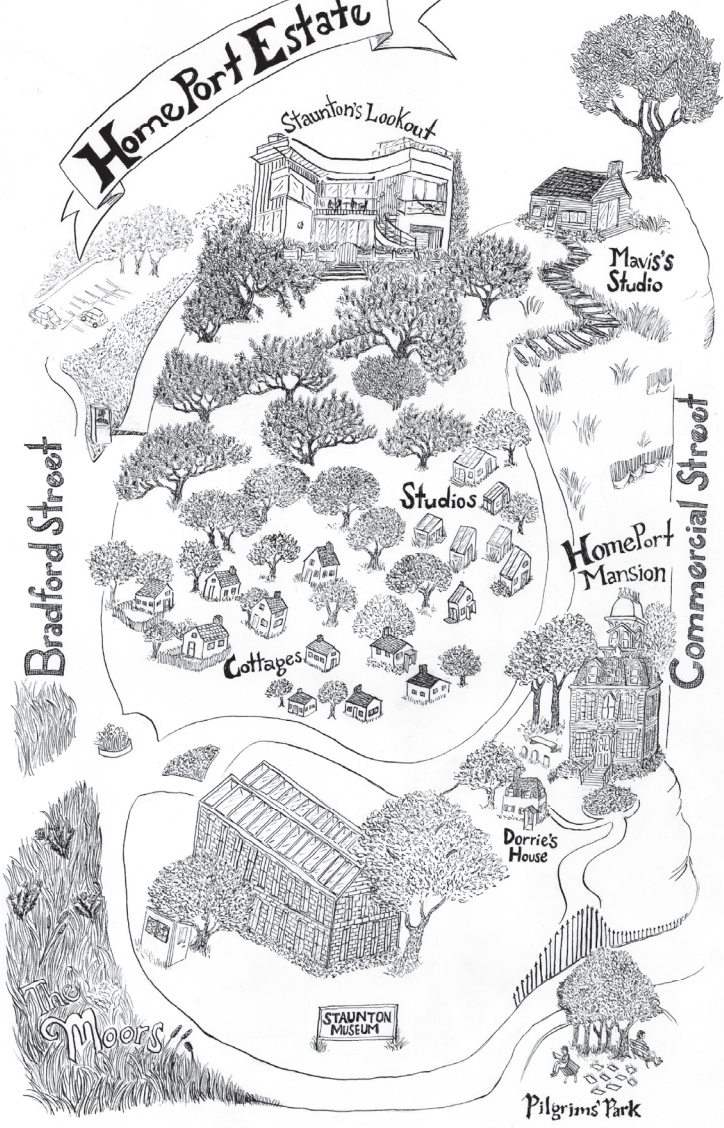
**“We’re all born naked and the rest is drag.”**

**—Rupaul Andre Charles  
(a.k.a. RuPaul)**

# The Outer Cape



# Home Port Estate



Staunton's Lookout

Mavis's Studio

Bradford Street

Studios

Cottages

Home Port Mansion

Commercial Street

Dorrie's House

STAUNTON MUSEUM

The Moors

Pilgrims Park

## A Shocking Development

Aspiring socialite Celia-Jane Strongue was not prone to hyperbole or self-pity. Nor was she a fool. When she determined her recent move to Cape Cod was “a train wreck,” she did so fully aware of the part she played in the debacle.

Her Wagnerian build and extraordinary tenacity gave most people the impression of a force of nature, which was both unfortunate and misleading. Celia-Jane was not so much intentionally bombastic as ill at ease around others. Far too eager for approval, she overcompensated, consistently missing social cues and assailing personal boundaries—often with disastrous results. She simply couldn’t help herself.

The few who knew her beyond passing acquaintance attributed her maladroit ways to forty-three years of marriage to Stanley Strongue, the self-made “Scrap Metal King of Hunts Point.” Celia-Jane knew better. She was painfully aware how her insecurities had denied her the life she desired. To her way of thinking, Stan had merely exploited her anxieties, using sarcasm and abasement to keep her under his thumb.

The day her husband died, Celia-Jane renamed herself “C.J.,” setting the stage for a transformation meant to right many wrongs. Stan’s frugality would make possible the one thing she’d longed for—a chance to escape the Bronx. Other than a dispiriting honeymoon in Wildwood, New Jersey, her life had been confined to the neighborhood she grew up in. She’d married the boy next door and attended the same church where she was baptized.

C.J. read voraciously to compensate for her cloistered existence. She'd often dreamed of leaving Stan and his scrapyards to live in a classic seaside village with grand old houses, white picket fences, and sympathetic, down-to-earth neighbors. County fairs, outdoor markets, parades, and church socials also featured in her re-imagined existence, which fell on a scale of rusticity somewhere between Miss Marple's St. Mary Mead and Jessica Fletcher's Cabot Cove.

When fortune smiled at last, C.J. chose Wellfleet, a picturesque town on Cape Cod with nearby theater, fine dining, and live entertainment—more than enough diversion for an elderly woman whose idea of bliss was a night in bed with Edith Wharton.

Primed with her new nickname, a host of self-improvement manuals, and the exquisite luxury of a past left behind, C.J. set out to create her new life. She joined potluck groups, attended charity events, and volunteered for everything from the OysterFest to handing out programs at Preservation Hall, a former Catholic church repurposed as an arts venue.

C.J. soon realized the only people she encountered were also recent transplants, who were equally confounded. Where were the kindly rural neighbors with their homespun ways?

For generations, individuals whose families had lived on the Outer Cape called themselves “townies.” Decades before, most had rebelled against the inflated egos and unrealistic demands of an ever-increasing wave of “washashores”—a longstanding term for those born elsewhere. The townies worked hard and kept a low profile. They might raise a collective eyebrow at a specious social media post or pass an incisive comment on some new brand of entitled tomfoolery, but that was the extent of their interest in the newcomers.

It was as if two different towns claimed the same physical space while their respective inhabitants never acknowledged each other. As a result, C.J.'s bucolic New England fantasy never left its white picket starting gate.

## ***Second Thoughts***

As the Town Car descended the glacial moraine known as High Head, passed East Harbor, and entered Provincetown, C.J. wondered, yet again, where she'd gone wrong.

*I wish Stan had let me learn to drive. It would have made it easier to meet people, but I'm too old and afraid to learn now.*

At last, the car arrived at the fabled HomePort Estate, with its artists' colony, lush gardens filled with native plants, acres of woodland, and magnificent mansion set high atop a dune.

After giving her driver a generous tip—she was seldom, if ever, unappreciative—C.J. thought of her puppy, a Bichon Frisé she'd named Moppet. His innate joy would have made all the difference where she was headed.

*Moppet would have loved a walk through these lovely grounds instead of being cooped up in a kennel. I feel so guilty. But as I told him, he's not welcome—which says a lot, if you ask me.*

Striding past the newly erected Staunton Museum and stopping at a cluster of small cottages to get her bearings, C.J. stared up at the HomePort Mansion, whose Victorian ebullience dominated the nearer of two large dunes. The mansion's Italianate tower was tall enough to offer stunning views of the Atlantic and all of Cape Cod Bay. Provincetown was peppered with widows' walks, turrets, and cupolas, from which Yankee merchants had once watched for their returning vessels, but there was no better vantage point than HomePort.

Like many who viewed the place through a distant lens (in her case, the *New York Times*), C.J. had dismissed P'town as a summer playground, ill-suited for the new life she sought. This misinformed decision was perhaps her most unfortunate mistake of all.

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Two weeks earlier, when an oil spill in Blackfish Creek had fouled a large sate of mallards, C.J. had met someone she really liked. Her fellow duck-cleaner had been surprisingly gentle with the traumatized



birds—and even more so with C.J., whose frustrations had overflowed with a vehemence that surprised her.

*The first person to show the slightest interest in me since I moved to the Cape. She understood how much I want to be seen for myself—not as somebody else defines me. What was her name again? Heloise? Helen? No. That’s not right. It was Helena. Yes. That’s it. Like Helena Rubinstein, she said. A bit odd and a flashy dresser, but hard-working and so kind. She told me she lived at HomePort and gave me her number. She was too old to be a student. She must work here. I should have arranged to see her to apologize for bending her ear. We could have had lunch.*

Reaching a cluster of studios, C.J. studied the terse directions she’d received the week before. After a brief search, she found the specified path. Pitch pines, stooped and scraggy, grew near a walkway that climbed a lesser dune. The trail zigzagged across fine white sand held in check by dune grass and pressure-treated timbers.

Winded by what she soon dubbed the world’s longest staircase, C.J. failed to notice the glass-fronted contemporary home at the highest point on the property. In contrast to the Victorian manse, this cedar-clad home was built to savor its surroundings. Together, the buildings, old and new, stood watch over the artists’ colony, the first landing place of the Pilgrims, and the small town built on nothing but sand.

## ***Art Isn’t Easy***

At last, C.J. reached her destination, a large, shingled studio partially nestled under one of the oldest beech trees on the Outer Cape. After catching her breath, she knocked twice. No one answered.

Dismayed, she tried a second time. “Yoo-hoo! I’m here!”

Again, no answer.

Releasing pent-up frustration, C.J. screeched “Coo-ee” in a tone better suited to hog-calling or grand opera. This unladylike outburst got a response—from a wedge of Canada geese whose incessant honks echoed across the estate like mocking laughter.

C.J. took a deep breath, pushed open the door, and entered the expansive workspace. Large canvases in varying stages of completion

covered every wall, their figures gaunt and other-worldly. Gold leaf and brilliant colors ranging from violet to bright ochre caused the images to glow like ancient stained glass as light streamed through four skylights, flooding the space with dazzling hues.

Several unfinished abstracts of wind-sculpted dunes and towering ocean waves captured the wildness of the Outer Cape. Another work, near completion, depicted rotund, naked women capering around a flickering fire. Shadows and smoke masked some revelers, while dancing flames fully illuminated others. The effect was both joyous and erotic. C.J. quickly averted her gaze.

The portrait of a nude boy contemplating his pubescent body rested on an easel in the center of the room. His lithe form stood out against a desolate background of smoldering ash. His gaze morose and discontent, the boy was oblivious to the vivid phoenix rising from the ruins behind him. By far the most exquisite of all, the painting was a study in contrast: The boy's pale complexion and sandy hair were masterfully rendered against the haunting backdrop, which eloquently conveyed his loneliness and isolation. The bird's unfolding wings blazed with color, their vibrant, multi-hued feathers depicted in meticulous detail. The work was mesmerizing—or would have been to most people.

"I hope she hasn't set *that* one aside for me!" C.J. clutched her sunhat as if it were trying to escape. "It's simply *too* Provincetown. I doubt anyone in Wellfleet will bid on a nude to begin with—and certainly not in public. I need something far less controversial, like a nice lighthouse or fishing boat. There's got to be one around here somewhere."

"She" was the world-renowned artist and local curmudgeon, Mavis Chandry, whose work sold for some of the highest prices ever paid to a living female artist. Mavis had postponed this studio visit four times. Now it seemed C.J. had been stood up. Exhausted and near tears, she feared she'd made another misstep. There had been so many since she'd launched her fundraiser just five months before.

## *Build It and They Will Come*

Though she was primed and ready for meaningful connections in her new hometown, C.J.'s efforts to ingratiate herself failed dismally. People were civil but pointedly declined her invitations. She was invisible unless a group was raising money for some cause or another. Then, she was bossed about by committee chairs who went back to acting as if she didn't exist when they no longer required her services.

C.J. vowed to turn things around. At last, she came up with a solution: she would give the town a gift—a monument immortalizing a local figure, which would favorably impress the townies and leave a lasting legacy.

After a life in her husband's shadow, she'd be recognized and appreciated for her generosity. It would be easy enough to arrange. She'd prime the pump with a significant donation, then host an auction of Outer Cape art—a *tour de force* guaranteed to draw a large crowd and raise more funds, which she'd supplement with state and local grants. After that, she'd find a sculptor and buy a plot of land.

For the first time in her adult life, C.J. would do something meaningful. Plus, she'd have the joy of spending Stan's money, which would have made him turn over in his grave if she hadn't had him cremated and scattered around his scrapyards in the Bronx. A high-volume, high-yield scrapyards, to be sure, but a scrapyards, nevertheless.

A potential bidding war on high-priced art would ensure great publicity, drawing sizable crowds and big money. C.J. had stalked Mavis Chandry for weeks, confident she could secure a small painting for the auction's featured attraction. Getting artists out here in the boondocks to donate their work couldn't be that difficult, could it?

An encounter on Fisher Beach near Mavis's Truro home had been the first indication C.J. might have underestimated the challenge. Her attempt to buttonhole the reclusive artist had backfired spectacularly when Mavis, brandishing a large piece of driftwood, had chased her off the beach.

A video of C.J.'s humiliation had gone viral, which may have prompted some residual guilt on Mavis's part. When C.J. confronted her in the frozen foods section of the Stop and Shop, the artist had agreed to discuss a donation in exchange for a solemn promise to be left in peace forever. C.J. had accepted Mavis's terms with alacrity and was to see the unfinished work during today's meeting.

*Where was Mavis?*

C.J.'s brow dripped with perspiration from the long climb. Her outfit—beige khaki shorts with a matching blouse replete with a kerchief, suspenders, and epaulets—was soaked. As she slumped into a low-slung bentwood rocker, her support hose ripped at each knee, exposing pale, white knobs of flesh. She barely heard the delicate chair as it creaked and groaned.

Fanning herself with her tattered sun hat, C.J. tried to dissipate the pungent odor of oil paint and turpentine.

*I don't see why Mavis can't be on time. She's such a diva. And I've never understood all the fuss about her work. Of course, I'd never say that in public. The two hundred thousand or more a small Mavis Chantry would command at auction, say nothing of the publicity it would bring, would turn everything around.*

Then C.J.'s dream—a statue of Goody Hallett in Wellfleet Center—would become a reality.

## ***Down With the Ship***

The bay side of the Outer Cape consists of marshes, tidal islands, and steep cliffs populated by expensive summer homes with views across the water to the Upper Cape. On the Atlantic side, the nearest landmass is Portugal, over three thousand miles away. The enormous sand dunes and long, isolated beaches of the National Seashore overlook a so-called “ocean graveyard,” where treacherous shoals run parallel to the shore.

More than a thousand shipwrecks have been documented off the coast of Truro and Wellfleet alone. The most famous is the *Whydah*

*Galby*, a former slave ship carrying pirate treasure from 53 other vessels when it foundered in April 1717.

Legend has it that before Sam Bellamy became an infamous pirate and plundered the Caribbean, he and a Wellfleet girl fell in love. Her wealthy parents opposed the match, so he left to make his fortune and win their favor. Black Sam, as he came to be known, was returning to wed Maria “Goody” Hallett when a gale forced the *Whydah* onto treacherous shoals off Wellfleet. Out of the 146-member crew, only 2 survived. Black Sam did not.

Pious villagers drove Goody Hallett into the wilderness when her pregnancy could no longer be concealed. Legend has it she either witnessed the wreck or cursed the *Whydah* from atop a dune, though there is consensus she grew more eccentric and feral once her lover’s vessel foundered.

Some locals insisted whenever there was a storm at sea, her ghost stalked the dunes near where the ship went down. Others, that she haunted a spot called the Devil’s Pasture or Lucifer Land. This sort of ambiguity is a hallmark of Outer Cape legends, where speculation runs rampant and truth can be an afterthought—if not totally irrelevant.

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If only C.J. had known. Brimming with excitement, she’d commissioned an elaborate PowerPoint presentation and gathered the necessary signatures for the town meeting to consider her proposal. It was a flawless plan. The town would benefit from a beautiful monument that preserved a piece of its history, and C.J. would be welcomed into the fold to live as she’d always wanted. What could go wrong?

The question had many answers. Though C.J. remained blissfully unaware of the growing opposition, which spread through the townie network like wildfire, all hell broke loose at the meeting. She had barely finished her presentation when a voter shouted Black Sam had left Goody pregnant to plunder the Caribbean. Another chimed in that the monument would officially sanction unwed motherhood.

C.J. responded with the first thought that came to mind. “It’s not the first time a girl has gotten herself in the family way—look at Hester Prynne.”

The unfortunate comparison to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s tragic heroine evoked raucous laughter. Anyone in Wellfleet who’d read *The Scarlet Letter* and knew the legend of Goody Hallett was aware the two women weren’t cut from the same cloth.

C.J.’s hundred-thousand-dollar request was denied by a near-unanimous show of hands. The next day, when a well-intentioned neighbor shared a rumor that Goody had killed her child the night it was born, C.J. kept her thoughts to herself. A week later, an elderly oysterman, ill-disposed toward women, newcomers, and technology, cornered her in the market. He informed her Goody’s nickname had been “The Witch of Wellfleet” until the use of PowerPoint—a known tool of the devil—had captured C.J. the title.

His diatribe proved too much to bear. C.J. wrote a letter to the editor explaining her position and calling out the oysterman’s misogyny. When her missive failed to appear in print, she wrote a second letter protesting the suppression of the first. This was published—alongside a lengthy editorial on libel laws and “the Wellfleet way,” which, to C.J.’s eye, seemed based more on provincial inclination than either legal precedent or objective reporting.

From that point on, she’d dug in her heels. If the good people of Wellfleet chose not to support her, she’d raise the money on her own. They’d come to their senses when they saw the finished product.

The monument often appeared to C.J. in cinematic clarity: the young woman atop a dune, hand to brow, her skirts billowing in the storm as she searched the raging sea for her pirate lover, whose ship was foundering just offshore.

### *Them There Eyes*

“I’d better just hunker down and wait,” C.J. muttered, pacing the expansive studio. “I won’t make this climb again if I can avoid it. The

other times, Mavis called to cancel, so she ought to be here soon enough.”

An electric teapot, a basket of exotic teas, and a small human skull rested on a nearby table. Polished to a porcelain sheen, the skull’s sole trace of color came from the amber mounted in its eye sockets, which blazed with reflected sunlight. Unearthed at an Aztec archeological site, the chalice was allegedly used in sacrificial rites. Well in keeping with her take-no-prisoners reputation, Mavis used it as a mug.

C.J. searched the studio for a more suitable alternative.

*She can't begrudge me a little self-initiative after climbing the Matterhorn to get here. I'm dying for a cup of tea.*

Finding nothing, C.J. weighed the demands of her growing thirst against the indignity of drinking from such a gruesome vessel. Thirst won. She selected a packet of organic gunpowder tea, filled the teapot from a paint-smearing tap, and plugged the pot into an outlet beside the sink.

Nothing happened.

She noticed a second outlet near the bathroom door.

*Again, nothing. What the hell?*

C.J. spied a third outlet beneath the table.

*There's an electric clock plugged into this one, and its second hand is moving. This will certainly do the trick.*

As the skull’s malevolent eyes stared back at her, C.J. was overcome with dread. The clock’s second hand made two complete rotations while she indulged in a rare moment of indecision.

“Fiddlesticks,” she declared at last. “I’m sure Mavis only uses you for the shock value.”

Bending low with a protracted groan, she plugged the kettle in for the third—and last—time. Electricity surged up her right arm, searing her skin. The smell of burning flesh permeated the room as her muscles spasmed and her fingers involuntarily contracted around the cord.

Sensing her fate, C.J.’s last thought was of her beloved Moppet.

*I hope they find him a loving home—*

Electrons tore through every part of her body, taxing, then stopping her heart. Her final contractions ripped the teapot from its socket, spilling its contents and shorting the electricity.

C.J. slumped to the floor, arms splayed, legs locked, mouth agape, her lifeless eyes staring upward in astonishment as the skull maintained its silent vigil.