

# THE OFF-SEASON

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It was a lemon, to be honest. A damn *lemon*. Not only because it looked like one, but because it acted like one, too. And despite my father's best efforts, wouldn't leave. No matter how hard he tried. Every night for years on end he'd cut it down and roll it into the ocean, drunk and screaming at the top of his lungs. Yet, without a doubt it'd be back in the morning—just hanging there, a little closer to the house every time.

My father wasn't a fisherman. Nor did he own some kitschy restaurant like the ones they have on the boardwalk. He was nothing, really. A retired actor living off royalty cheques from a show he was on a million years ago. I'd never seen it, my mother always said that I had to wait until I was older—it was too violent, apparently. Too *crass*.

And although I was older—seventeen, at the time—I still hadn't seen it. I didn't mind, though – my father was just my father to me. Nothing else had to be explained. I always felt sorry for the kids who could only define their parents by their occupations. Jessie's dad was a *firefighter*. Sam's was a *property manager*. Alesha's was a *bartender*. It was all too simple. Reductive, really.

We, of course still had *something*. It was hard not to in a little beach town like ours. Everyone had their quirks—things people would talk about behind your back. Only ours was different—more unidentifiable—more alien. Not that we could help the situation, there was nothing we could do about it. And believe me, we tried everything.

Mostly, people just asked us what it was—what was going on. This wasn't out of malice or anything—it was out of confusion, which was completely understandable. My friends would always pester me about it at school. Cashiers would give me these long, strange looks. Boys at parties would say *oh you're the girl with that thing in front of her house* and then avoid me for the rest of the night.

It wasn't the worst thing ever, obviously—it was just a reoccurring topic of conversation. And it had the right to be—ever since it showed up.

On the last day of school that year I came home to my father sitting out on the back porch, staring out at the ocean. His view was obstructed, as usual. He had his drink in his hand. He didn't hear me come in and jumped at the sound of the screen door, spilling all over himself and saying *oh Marie, come on! You know I hate that*. I laughed and he shot up in an attempt to wipe everything off before it seeped into his pants. He gave me a little nudge and went inside to get another drink, stumbling as he walked.

He always *bumbled*. That's the best way I can describe it. He was always hunched over, arms waving around, talking some nonsense under his breath. It was kind of cute to me. And I know my mother thought so too. He was always on edge, firing on all cylinders. Never mad—just always had all of the lights on upstairs. My friends always thought he was funny, which was fine with me. It was better than everyone thinking your dad was hot like they did with Jessie's. Or scary like Alesha's. Both of those would have been far worse.

When he came back he said he'd cracked the code once and for all, which he'd claim about three times a week. It was *devilish*, apparently, *vampiric*. *Wooden scissors*, he said. *That's the key. Just have to make them. I'll pick up supplies tomorrow*.

I always enjoyed hearing these little plans of his, ever since I was a girl. He needed something to keep himself occupied, something other than drinking, at least.

We'd sit out there most afternoons after school. That was around the time he had started pouring me a single glass of white wine before dinner. I didn't like wine much but it was nice to sit there with him. We'd sit and watch the sun gently slide its way down the sky—breathing in the wind until the sound of the waves took over everything. They were always so much louder at night.

We'd finished making dinner by the time my mother came home. She worked most days. When I was younger I'd asked her what she did but she always said that it was *kind of hard to explain* and it was all very *technical*. I eventually just stopped asking. It didn't really matter, she was my mother and that was that. That was all I needed. She never really liked her job much anyway—she didn't even *have* to have it. She just needed something to do. She couldn't wander around in circles all day—she couldn't pace back and forth for hours on end—not like my father could.

I liked the way they sat outside on the porch at night. I'd watch TV in the living room and listen to them sometimes. They always had their whiskey sours—smiling and giggling. They were in love. Often at sleepovers I'd hear parents yelling at each other. Lamps breaking. Not here. They just sit. They kiss a lot, which I like. It's not often you see people in love these days. It's strange what people can convince themselves of.

I woke up that night to the familiar sounds of frustration and heavy breathing. My father was on the beach. I couldn't really see him in the dark. He never left the porch light on.



The summer was the off-season. It was too hot for the tourists. They'd come in droves in the winter though, particularly January and February.

They'd all arrive heaving and sweating with their obnoxiously loose Hawaiian shirts, looking at fold-out maps, driving around in golf carts. They always had these massive hats and expensive designer sunglasses—fanny packs and money belts wedged under their stomachs.

But the summer was different. It was hot, but it was calm and beautiful. There was nobody trying to sell you something plastic on the boardwalk, nobody asking for directions, nobody rollerblading. It was the first year Jessie could drive, too. So, we went to the beach on our own—the one further west, of course. Not the one by my house—people generally stayed clear of that one. It felt dark—it was too quiet.

Everyone we knew went to this beach. Everyone from school and everyone from soccer practise and all of the older guys who were back from college. We'd swim and talk and tan and sneak little drops of liquor into soda cans—maybe smoke a cigarette or two. There was no one around

but us. Just the sounds of waves talking over everything. Nothing else mattered. We could scream as loud as we wanted to.

When I got home that night my parents were in the living room. As soon as I closed the front door behind me I heard them shuffle around like teenagers trying to hide the fact that they were making out. It made me blush. They were so cute. But when I took off my shoes and went over to say goodnight there was something odd about them. Their cheeks were swollen. Their legs were crossed. My father's eyes kept darting towards the back window. Out towards the stone.

I head up to bed pretty quickly after that. I was tired. I was confused. I was tipsy and I needed a shower. I wondered if they'd been fighting. They never fought. Not once. Not when I was around, at least. They'd make jabs at each other every once in a while, but it was all in good fun. They'd laugh it off. I guess you never know what happens when you're not around.

That night I left my window open and heard him outside again, grunting, breathing, rolling as he normally did. But I also heard my mother. She never did that. She knew it was his thing. She closed the screen door and I heard her shoes on the deck and she said *it's okay, no one's coming, honey*. And he cried into her shoulder. *You're okay*.

I wish I could have seen their faces. They sounded comfortable with each other. I wonder if they knew that. I wonder if they knew how lucky they were.



It wasn't the booze that did it, but it definitely didn't help. When I came downstairs the next morning I saw that my father had been leaving notes to himself again. The amount he'd drank, the calls he'd received (none), the number of people outside (none), the exact distance the stone was from the house, day by day—*June 8th: 10.63 m, June 11th: 10.61 m, June 15th: 10.56 m*. He hadn't done this in a while. Not since it first arrived. I remember when it hung out over the ocean. It was so much closer now. The water used to be up to your knees before you could touch it, reaching out to push it ever so gently—watching it sway on its string.

My mother was already gone and my father was still asleep so I made breakfast and sat out on the back porch. The weather wasn't as calm as

the day before and the stone moved back and forth like an indifferent wrecking ball—steering everyone clear of our house.

I hadn't touched it in a long time. Not in years. Everyone had kind of given up on that. They used to treat like a monument, like a Stonehenge, like a sign from God. They'd come to feel it—kiss it. They'd come to light candles and rub strange oils on it—trying to keep it *pleased*, apparently

They were like pilgrims—like pagans—they brought bowls of fruit and colourful flowers and stood them up on top of it—getting on their knees and praying. These days you'd occasionally get some drunk teenagers trying to climb up its endless string, but that was it. My father had scared them all off.

When I was young, sometimes I'd climb up there, too. Just to lie on top of it. It never spoke to you or anything—no matter how much people claimed it did—it just felt warm some days. Like something was filling up your skin—colouring you in—pouring a little sunlight in your bloodstream.

When my father came outside he was still in his robe—frantic and asking if I'd moved any of his notes. I hadn't. *It wasn't your mother*, he said. *Was anyone else here?* No. *Did anyone call?* No, nobody called. *Good. Okay, I think we're good, then.* He was barefoot and began to wander off the porch to look down both ends of the beach. There was no one there, obviously. Not a soul. I saw him straighten his back, let out a deep breath. Then give the stone a little nudge before going back in. I don't know what he expected. It would drown in the ocean and return the next day, a few inches closer to home. Easy as that. The same as ever.

He spent the day wandering around in circles—planning, watching the phone—leaving himself his notes. He kept coming to my room and asking me when my mother typically came home. I said before dinner, not for a while. And then he'd run back downstairs. It was odd, it wasn't really funny or cute. It was *weird*. It wasn't like this last summer. He was still off then, but not like this. He smiled back then. He could sit still. His eyes weren't wide and bloodshot.

Jessie had called and asked me if I wanted to go to the beach again, but I wasn't sure. I could still hear my father pacing downstairs. I didn't want to leave him. She said *oh come on, he's always like that. Isn't he?* And I didn't know.

I did go in the end, regretfully. I told him on my way out and he said that was alright, *just be back for dinner—and if you need something call your mother. I unplugged the phone.*

I said alright, and I left. Jessie was outside in her mom's car with a t-shirt and bathing suit. Smiling—sunglasses over her eyes.



If you squint you can see it from anywhere in town. Not the stone, just its string—going all the way up. Through the clouds and everything, piercing the sky. Just this clear thin line cast against the blue. It even looks a little luminescent at night. It feels like a beacon, or something. A spotlight.

When I got home that night I was louder. Stomping my feet up the driveway. Forcing the door open. I wanted them to hear me. I wanted them to be prepared. But they weren't downstairs. I looked at the clock—it was way later than I thought, they must have already been in bed.

But they weren't there either, they were outside. Whiskey sours, talking. I went upstairs and opened my bedroom window before I noticed that they were quiet. They weren't giggling. They weren't kissing. They were whispering. I could hear my father saying *they'll find us, it's leading them right to us, loo—* and the wind slammed my bedroom door behind me. It was horribly loud and they went quiet. *Honey?* My mother said. And I called out saying that it was nothing and that I was just opening my window, I was going to sleep.



They stayed out there that night. The both of them—I don't know if they knew that they left the light on. But I saw it all. For the first time. They were nude. Using massive scissors. Cutting the string. Rolling it down towards the deep. Yelling.

They'd roll it east. And then west. And on to its side. Pushed it as far out in to the water as they could. They even tried to bury it in the sand—different places along the beach. They were drunk, scurrying, they looked like ants—trying not to wake the neighbours up with their screams. They were looking over their shoulders. Looking up at the sky. I didn't sleep.



When I came downstairs the next day it was silent and the stone was closer than ever. It was floating on our back porch, the string feeding up through the roof of the terrace. There were notes reminding them what they'd done stuck to all of the windows—there were empty bottles all over the counter. The phones were unplugged. The blinds were shut. My mother must have called in sick to work because her shoes were by the door. They were still asleep upstairs.

They didn't mention it when they came down. Who knows how many times they tried to make it disappear. They just made coffee. Sat down at the kitchen table. Opened the morning paper. The stone cast this big, wide shadow across the living room. Blacking out their eyes. I didn't say anything. I couldn't.

And I stayed that way. For that whole summer I'd watch them go out, different tools each time—looking wearily at the night sky. Over and over again until it was in our house. Floating just above the kitchen table. I couldn't even see them at dinner anymore. I only heard the clinking of their cutlery—the sipping on their drinks. But that was it. No one said a word.

Everyone had begun to ask what happened to the stone. They didn't know that if you looked hard enough you could still see its string coming up through the top of our house. It even went through the middle of my bedroom at one point. Slowly, inching its way across every night. Everyone was surprised it was gone, more than anything. And I went along with it, acting as confused as them. I just kept saying that it had left as mysteriously as it came! And then I'd run home, scared of what they might be doing.

They'd do all sorts. They'd cut it into three pieces and bury the pieces miles apart from each other. They'd chisel it down to a fine sand and scatter it all over the beach. They'd yell at it until it broke down. They'd torch it until it was soot. Still nothing. It just kept moving inland. As slowly and as inconsequential as ever. The *lemon*. The massive stone *lemon* in my house.

It tore all the way through eventually. Crushed the bathroom, the front hall, the office. They'd had to tear down walls and have the back door widened so that they could get it out. They still tried to be quiet about it, for some reason. Acted like it wasn't happening. Waited until I went to bed. I don't know why but I couldn't bring myself to ask why they were doing it. Their eyes had gone black and nervous. They were adding locks

to all of the doors. My mother had quit her job months ago. My father had gone quiet.

They worked all night and slept all day. When I went to sleep over at Jessie's I waited up to hear her parents fighting. But their house was still. There was no moving machinery like mine. There were no sounds of rock scraping at the hardwood floor. No lamps crashing. They didn't even yell at each other. Maybe they never did.

The night that I finally racked up the courage to confront my parents it was late and when I came downstairs it was muffled and soft. They were sitting on the floor. Talking to the stone. Slowly. Quietly. I don't know if they were praying but it was by the front door now. Ageless. Alien. It would be out on in the street soon. Any day now. For everyone to see. I started to cry and asked them what they were doing and they said *oh nothing sweetie, don't worry*—they were whispering. Their backs to me. It was dark but I could see that they were wrapped in blankets and sheets. *Let's just go back to bed, okay?* And they turned and came in close to hold me.

I don't know why, but their breath smelt of salt. Their shoulders were weighing me down. I looked up to see that they were wearing masks that they'd carved out of the stone. They had no mouths anymore. They had little slits for eyes. Their hands weren't hands. They were mountains. Carving me. Shaking.