

— BRIAN'S LATE —

SIX O'CLOCK. *Fine.*

You had your chance, Brian. Now I'm mad. But hell, never mind ol' Mom. Take a few more hours. Catch a movie, hang with your low-life friends, play computer games, do whatever.

I won't call. I'm not going to check up on you. *You* need to call *me*.

I stare at the phone. The phone stares back.

Now what?

I'll do a load of laundry. Collect the beige towels from the upstairs bathroom.

Pass Brian's room. Maybe he has something that needs washing.

The doorknob is slimy and his room is dark. I flick the switch but no lights go on. Great. My son the handyman. Can't even change a bulb. Try the mini blinds. The rod to turn them is gone. The string to pull—cut. You don't want any light in here? What don't you want to see, Brian?

Tap the computer keyboard. The screen lights up on the figure of a grotesque, muscle-bound cartoon man. Must be my son's avatar or whatever they call that. I turn away, trying not to judge. I guess Brian'd rather be a superhero than what he is—a schlubby, overweight nineteen-year-old boy with pasty skin from living in this darkness.

Lit by the computer screen, the room is a mess. Clothes everywhere. There's an energy here that creeps me out. Maybe it's knowing he's always online with some game, killing people. Maybe it's that he graduated but is still at home. Maybe it's that he's never had a girlfriend and at the rate he's trying, never will.

Look. His underwear is stretched. I'll have to order him a larger size. Again. This isn't a growth spurt like when he was thirteen. He's fat. He's nearly six feet tall, but all blubber. Rolls 'round the middle. Pringles and Cokes. I've got to stop having that crap delivered. If he gets diabetes it'll be my fault.

I gather clothes. Why am I doing this? He should do his own laundry. I don't even like touching his things. They're all sticky from god knows what. But, I'm doing a load so might as well. He's not going to. I can ask and plead 'til I'm blue in the face. Nothing works.

He wants to move into the garage. Maybe I should let him. Except then I'd be all alone in this beige carcass of a dream house.

Every house in this development is a dream house. And every dream house is beige. Dan wanted everything inside to match the beige stucco outside. Step into a sea of beige walls, pull the beige vertical blinds, turn on beige lamps... Dan even chose beige handles for the kitchen cabinets. I hate this place and I'm the one living here.

I pick up the clothes from the floor. Brian's carpet needs cleaning. It's not beige anymore. Close the door to my son's dungeon, and head downstairs to the beige washing machine.

Dump in the soap. Set dial to Extra-Dirty-Stinky-Teenager-Wash. Slam the lid, push start, turn, and there I am. Why Dan wanted mirrors all over, I don't know. Well, I guess I do. He loved his

“physique” as he called it. Paid more attention to his body than he did to his wife and son.

I’m getting as pasty-faced as Brian. This indoor skin needs some sort of spa treatment, but I can’t face going to those places. Not that I can face going anywhere. I’d step in and people would stare and snicker. Not tall enough. Not buff enough. Not anorexic enough. My beige hair, blow-dried with an under-curl, is undoubtedly out of fashion with today’s Mom-requirements. Probably need violet contacts to liven up these dull grey eyes.

Years ago, I tried to be a Southern California woman. I ate salads. Converted to soy milk and gluten-free for a while. Dabbled with yoga and grunted through one session of Pilates. Nothing stuck. Maybe that’s why I don’t go out anymore. Everyone’s more *put together* than I am. Everyone looks like they’re on television. My face could be a police drawing. Generic. Reporters asking the neighbors about me would get, “Her? Couldn’t say. Haven’t seen her in forever. She stopped going out. What I remember is—she was kinda unmemorable. Kinda beige.”

Six-twenty. Still no call.

I dial. The phone rings and then his voice, “This is Brian. Leave a message.”

“Damn it, Brian. You promised to call if you were going to be late! You’ll miss dinner. Let’s just see how you manage on your own. I’m not going to lift a finger to put something on the table—”

I hang up.

No. I *will* put something on the table. Something with vegetables. Some broccoli, cauliflower, spinach monstrosity he’ll hate. The later he is, the more pungent the overcooked slop will be.

What can I make? Not much left in the fridge. ‘Bout time to go shopping.

—*GO shopping? Ha! You don’t leave the house.*

—*It’s more convenient to order delivery.*

—*You’re terrified of the world. Haven’t made it past the front door for two years.*

—*Not true.*

—*You even looked up agoraphobic!*

The doorbell rings.

Now what? It’s too late for FedEx or UPS with any of my orders. Maybe it’s a disadvantaged youth selling magazines.

The badge tells me otherwise.

“Mrs. Ketchum? I’m afraid there’s been an accident. Your son Brian—”

Knees turn to liquid.

The bronze-skinned officer catches my elbow and steers me inside. He fits right in with his beige uniform. “Mrs. Ketchum, we don’t know anything for sure yet.”

His mouth continues to move, making sounds, and his eyes are trying to be concerned, but he’s cut off from emotion. Is he tired of bringing bad news to parents? Do his eyes warm up when he gets home, or are they always dead? No, not dead. Not dead. Brian’s not dead.

I interrupt the moving mouth. “Is he dead? Is my boy dead?”

“Ma’am, we’re still gathering information. We don’t have a lot to go on. It seems your son fell overboard and the Coast Guard is conducting a thorough aquatic search for him. We’re interviewing the participants aboard the vessel that witnessed the event.”

Where do they teach these people to talk!?

The room is darkening. Am I fainting? No, someone’s in the doorway. A Ken-doll with a badge. Ken looks uncomfortable, like he and his partner are wanted elsewhere.

I wave at Ken to go. It comes out as more of a *get the fuck away* gesture.

Ken disappears into the evening glare.

Brian fell overboard. But he can swim. He’ll be okay.

“He fell overboard. No one pulled him out?”

“Ma’am, I’m sorry, there isn’t more I can tell you.” The officer’s lips flatten to a thin scar across the bronze skin. I try to understand what that means.

“Is your husband home?”

I can’t believe he’s asking that. Like everyone’s got a big happy family.

“Is your wife home?” I ask.

“Ma’am?”

“Don’t like the question? Maybe you’re divorced? Some of us are.”

Bronze-man glances to the door, hoping for Ken-doll backup. No such luck. He returns to me, mentally flipping through his emotional playbook and settling on compassion. “Ma’am, do you have someone I can call? A friend or neighbor?”

“Who’s in charge?”

“Ma’am?”

“Who the hell do I call to find out what happened?”

The officer drops the fake concern from his eyes. He pulls a pad from his perfectly pressed breast pocket, writes a number down, and hands it to me. “This is the officer that will be your liaison on this case. He’ll have the most current information about your son.”

My son.

I think I may throw up.

The officer talks into his shoulder. “Carswell, find me a neighbor.”

My eyes fog. The carpet needs cleaning.

That Ken-doll must have darkened the doorway again or I’m...

My eyes open. I’m on my couch looking up at the cottage-cheese ceiling. What happened?

“Ann? Are you okay?” a voice whispers.

I turn to look at the perfectly coiffed woman. From what I remember the last time I went out, she’s the one that lives at the end of the block with the yapping dogs. She’s groomed like she’s heading for a celebrity brunch. Gold earrings, long fake eyelashes. I can’t remember her name. P something Pamela? Prudence?

“It’s me, Ann. Pat.”

Pat. Patty cake. Pat on the back. Pat of butter.

The lights are on in the living room. Dark outside. What happened?

Oh.

“Pat, did they say more about Brian?”

Pat pats my hand. She’s hot. Or I’m very cold.

She purses her lips to express her unease with the subject. “Ann, I’m sure—I’m sure it will work out. Don’t worry. He’ll be found.”

Something’s in my hand. I unclench, exposing the crumpled piece of paper. A number for the liaison officer whoever.

I sit up slowly, hoping the blood will stay in my head. “I need to call this number, Pa—” What was her name? Something about butter?

“Pat.” she reminds me and pushes my phone across the coffee table with a long pink nail.

I dial the number. When the officer answers, I interrupt him. “This is Ann Ketchum. Your officer said my son Brian fell overboard in a boating accident. I need you to tell me what happened and how he is.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Ketchum. We’re assessing the situation, and we’ll keep you informed when we know more.”

“Where is Brian? Is he alive? You need to tell me.”

“Mrs. Ketchum, we will get in touch with you the moment we have any—”

I hang up on him. This is completely unacceptable.

They’d tell me if he was alive. They’d want to share that. That must mean Brian’s dead.

I need to do something.

“Pat, can you go?”

Pat sputters a bit, “They said I should stay.”

“Until I was okay. I’m okay now.”

Relief spreads across her tight, tan forehead. She searches her purse and hands me a business card. She’s a realtor. It has a picture of her smiling with perfect teeth and perfect hair. She gives me the identical smile. “If you’re sure. Buttons and Bows will be needing their dinner. I can come back later if you—”

“I’m fine. You go feed Bows and—the other one. Thanks for coming.”

Pat steps backwards to the front door, nodding and fluttering her hand in apologies and explanations.

When the door clicks shut I get up, lock it, and start vacuuming.

The vacuuming will take a while. The house is large. Too large for two people, especially if one spends all his time in his room. I vacuum the family room (stupid name), the living room (no one does that here), the dining room (we eat everywhere else), the master bedroom (without the Master), and the guest room (Ha!). Every few minutes I’m positive I hear the phone ring and turn off the roaring machine and listen to the silence of no one calling. When I get the hall done, I pull the vacuum into Brian’s room, but I can’t turn it on.

Tears come up hot and fast.

If Brian’s dead—why did I wash his clothes!?

— WAY PAST DINNER TIME —

MOM’S GOING to kill me.

She’ll think I forgot to call. She’ll be worried first and then she’ll be mad and by now she’ll be back to worried.

I didn't forget, Mom! Honest. I've been trying!

I can't see. My eyes are open, but there's nothing but blackness. Ears pop again. Are we going down? Please don't. I scream and it goes nowhere, muffled by the spongy cavern. I puke salt water in the black void. Who knows where it lands.

Shaking uncontrollably, my legs are cramping. All my body's cramping. Panic bubbles up again. Hand to chest. My phone's still on the cord around my neck, safe and dry. Thank you, Mom! I lift it and the blue light shines in the darkness. I'm in a narrow, slimy place—*yuck!*—can't look.

I turn the camera and FLASH! A selfie. Wide-eyed and grimacing—I look terrified. *What a dork!* Delete. Try again. FLASH! Worse. A little half-smile. Not cool.

I dial Mom again. No service.

A moan blasts all around me, so loud it hurts! A low vibrating note that won't stop. Now a high one, like a squeaky door. Like someone making Halloween noises.

Shit! The air is leaving again. I suck in a breath and get nothing. There is no oxygen!

I'm knocked backward in a rush. Like I'm in a rocket launching into space. The momentum presses me flat against the hot, moist walls and I vomit again and gasp for any air but get nothing. The rocket slows and I'm almost floating and there's dim light above me, dusk light from a hole the size of my head, the mushy walls widen out and cold fresh air rushes in and the hole closes. Blackness. I breathe deep as we descend.

Try Mom again. Nothing. I shouldn't keep trying. I'll use up the battery. I should shut off the power, but—I want to keep the light on.

—*Lard Ass is scared of the dark.*

—*I am not!*

—*Scaredy cat. Scaredy cat.*

—*I'm not listening to you. I'm thinking of something else.*

—*I know what you're thinking. I'm in your head.*

—*I'm not scared. You don't know me.*

—*I know you better than anyone. I know you better than you. You can't ignore me now. You're stuck with me and no one else 'til we die in here.*

—*I won't die in here. I'll be found. Billy and Toke will tell.*

—*Yeah, the stoner tells what he saw. Everyone's gonna believe Toke.*

— TOKE TALKS —

THE RINGING SOUNDS far away.

Please be Brian. I race to the phone and, "Hello?"

"Mrs. Ketchum? Ann? It's Roger, Kevin's father."

"Kevin?"

"Your son's friend."

Kevin? "Oh, you mean Toke?"

A cough and pause and then the father's voice continues, "Kevin was with Brian on the boat. I thought you'd like to know what he saw."

Twenty minutes later, I've had two cups of coffee and father and son stand awkwardly in my perfectly vacuumed living room.

Toke bobs his head as if it's priming the pump to talk. It works. "Mrs. Ketchum, me and Lard Ass—"

"Lard Ass?"

"I mean Brian."

"You call my son Lard Ass?"

Toke shrugs. "Everyone does."

"Everyone?"

The twit sticks out his chin, like that's an answer.

Without meaning to, I slap his face.

Toke's father dives between us, grabbing my wrists. He looms over me, sympathy and anger tangling across his features. "Easy, Ann. No call for that." *When was the last time a man looked in my eyes? When was the last time a man touched me?* These aren't thoughts for now.

I don't hit people. The boy's face is pink on one side. "I'm sorry, Toke."

His face reddens on both sides now.

"Kevin," I correct. "Tell me what happened."

"Um, so me and La—Brian—and Billy and some girls were on the boat and it was all cool and shit—sorry."

I wave to let the boy know I've heard the word shit before and for him to keep going.

"We saw the spout and the spray flew up and Brian was at the end of the boat on that part, you know, like in Titanic, the tip? And then there was a gigantic crash like we got torpedoed and we all got off balance and Brian tried to stay on, but he fell off."

"Into the water? Didn't you try to pull him up? Throw a life jacket? A rope?"

"We couldn't pull him up. He was gone. The whale swallowed him."

Cartoon images fly into my head. Someone sitting around a campfire in the ribbed cavern of a whale. That's a Disney movie. Make believe.

After a lot of yelling and wrist grabbing, I'm staring at Toke's phone, watching the shaky video of Brian falling into a monstrous mouth and vanishing. I play it over and over and I'm sure I'll see the edits or the strings or something to show it's fake.

Only Toke doesn't act like it's fake.

Toke's father shifts his weight. "Ann, can we send the video to you? You can see it on your computer. Bigger. Play it slower maybe. I don't know how to do that, but—"

Handing the phone back to Toke, I tell him, "Send it to me."

Toke gets my phone number and sends it to my cell. I want them gone now.

"Sorry I hit you, Toke. Kevin."

"Sorry about Lard As—Brian, Mrs. Ketchum."

Roger leads his son out solemnly. When they close the door, I watch the video again, then send it to Brian's email. Up in his room, I click on his computer to watch it big. Now I'll see all their tricks.

The camera shot bobs and jiggles. The sun is shining. Waves are glittering. Brian's at the tip of the boat, alone as usual. He's got that

hang-dog look. A spout of water shoots high. Girls squeal. A jolt to the boat and Toke's voice "Shit" and shots of the deck and bare feet and then up and Brian's tipping off and the water rises as a huge mountain and it splits open on black and Brian falls in and the black closes, dropping down under the waves with screaming and Toke yelling "shit, what the fuck, shit, did you see that, fuckin' what the fuck—!"

I watch again and pause on my pale, pudgy boy falling into the mouth of a black beast.

Brian's been eaten by a whale.

There are no fairytales.

Brian's dead.

My knees land hard and my coffee lurches up and stains Brian's stained carpet.

This can't be happening. This can't be how life goes.

Wake me up.

Rewind.

Let me go back, please. Let me go back.

I stare at the frozen image on the computer. Brian's eyes are wide. He's scared. My son's last moments were of terror as he was eaten by a whale.

My gut heaves and sobs burst out.

How did this happen!?

— ON DECK —

HOW DID IT HAPPEN? Probably my fault.

It started okay. Three guys. Three girls. A boat. Beers. The California sun gleaming off the waves, somewhere off Catalina Island. I was having an okay time, considering.

The names of the girls? One was something that starts with a T. Something that has to do with jewels or money. Tiffany? Tiara? Topaz? She was the hottie, but my best bud Billy had dibs on her. The other two were a 5 or 6 at most. "Passable" in our lingo, but neither Toke or me was doing much in the way of moves. Toke might do okay with the ladies if he wasn't so blotto. Which he always is. I'm not way into the trying-to-impress thing. Do most of my action with my eyes—when the girls aren't looking. I'm not sure I'm even a 4. Too much blubber. That's why I was the only one on deck in a T-shirt.

A horn blast made me jump and jiggle fat, which the girls seemed to get a kick out of. A Coast Guard ship slowed near us. Toke slipped me his Ziploc of weed like I was supposed to get caught with it instead of him. "Hell, Toke, I ain't legal age either."

"Stash it, dude. I can't see any more of the chick."

"The chick?" I asked, shoving the baggie into the back pocket of my shorts.

"Miss Demeanor." Toke punched my shoulder.

The punch hurt. It was supposed to show I was a righteous guy, but I knew I was only a schmuck to him and the others. Comic relief.

The Coast Guard man lifted a megaphone. "You kids don't go chasing anything. One boat already got rammed. Stay smart and stay safe."

We waved like we got the message. The Coast Guard ship moved on.

I took my phone from my pocket and pretended to send an email.

Glancing up, I saw one of the girls looking at me. A woody sprang. Fuck. I turned from her and set my phone on the bench cushion so I could put my hands in my pockets and hide the bulge. An awesome wave rolled under us and the girls went *oooo* and I had to pull a hand out to hold on and the phone fell and slid as we tilted, sliding toward the open back of the boat. FUCK! I dove and scrambled after it, probably looking like a white flabby crab, sneakers squeaking on the slippery deck, reached for the phone as it hit the edge and my hand grabbed it right before it fell into the waves.

“BOIN-OIN-oin-oin,” Billy sang.

“Nice one!” Toke said, bobbing his head for emphasis.

I pulled Mom’s dorky waterproof case from my shorts, shoved the saved phone into it, and slipped the cord over my head.

“Lookin’ super cool!” Billy yelled across the boat.

I gave him the finger.

Billy grinned. “Toss me a brewski, Lard Ass!”

The girls all giggled, repeating “Lard Ass” to each other. Thanks, Billy. Thanks for that.

“Don’t mind if I do, Bro,” Toke said, holding out his hand for a beer.

I froze my fingers in the Igloo, pretending everything was fine, and tossed Coronas to Toke and Billy.

“Hell-lo-ooow,” tilted one of the girls, her head tilted just so with the unmistakable *aren’t you forgetting something?* The three girls did synchronized long-lash blinks at me.

I don’t know why I did it, but I got them all beers.

“Thanks, Lard Ass,” said the pretty one, and everyone laughed including me, and I got a beer and walked to the bow or stern or starboard-whatever—the pointy front of the boat—and glared at the flat line where blue sky meets blue sea and pretended I was alright.

The water and sky were pretty boring, so I checked for messages on my phone and, ’cept for Mom reminding me to wear sunscreen, there was nada. It was clumsy to use the phone through the clear plastic. I wanted to take it from the stupid waterproof case with the dumb neck strap, only everyone would’ve figured I was taking it off so I wouldn’t look dorky, which would’ve made me look more dorky, so I left it on. Now, I’m glad I did.

“There, there, lookit!” a girl screamed.

A little squirt of spray spouted near our boat. The back of a grayish thing spread the surface of the water and dove back down.

“Awww! Come back!” yelled another girl.

“It’s a dolphin. Too small for a whale,” Billy, the expert, explained.

The girls cheered when it rose again. Another mini geyser.

“Watch,” Billy yelled and pitched his beer bottle hard. The Corona hit the blow-hole. “Bullseye!” The grey back jerked and vanished underwater.

“Don’t do that, Billy, you’re littering!” the best-looking girl said.

A huge spray blew, skyscrapers high, showering us all and *ooo-* and *ahh-* and everyone had their cell phones, trying to get selfies

with the monstrous monster. Being at the tip, I got the best shot and started making a video. Only I didn't get a chance to say *ahoy matey* or *thar she blows* before the boat was rammed. The girls screamed and another SLAM and my video took shots of the sky and spray and my arm and I was going over the side. Over the skimpy railing, ready to belly-flop, be a laughingstock, in free-fall, I took a breath, and WHAM! I landed somewhere—not exactly water, looked at sky above, and black closed over everything.

I remember thinking, *Shit, I'm in the whale.*

I was rushed with the torrent in underwater blackness, bounced off soft walls in a tunnel, warm and undulating, faster, sliding backwards, hit squishy wall, sharp turn, and dropped to a stop.

—*I need to breathe!*

—*Don't do it, Lard Ass!*

Unable to see, I felt thick muck, bits of bones, flesh, goop—all over and around me.

In the blackness, sounds of fish flopping.

A powerful force pressed the slimy walls, crushing in from everywhere. Rhythmically, again and again. Massive muscles pulverizing me. This was the ultimate tenderizer, and I was the meat. My ankle bent sideways. I couldn't scream or I'd fill with sludge.

I thought—*I'm not dead yet, but I will be in a second.*

—*Pull your fat ass outta here!*

I pushed off with my good ankle and wriggled up, clawing at anything, battered by the slick walls. Still holding the same breath, arms shaking with effort, I climbed the throbbing walls, digging my fingers into unseen flesh, wrenched out of that torture chamber and back in the tube. Another rush of water and fishy things surged past. I heaved against the tide, feet on either side, pressing for leverage, clawing up, hit by hundreds of thrashing things. Fighting to hold the breath. A small blue light swirled closer fast, a glowing wriggling creature headed for my face and *Fuck!* whirled past. Let me outta here! A jog in the tunnel. Sharp turn. That had to be it. There should be a flap. A trap door. A secret passageway. I pressed and pulled and felt the edge of something. A rim or ridge. Got fingers under. Got them in—*I need air!*—forced the flap open, squiggling, wriggling my way in, and dropped inside—

Whoooosh. I gasped and sucked in—air. Hot air engulfed me. I'd made it to the lungs.

And here I am. Alive, for now.

—*Yeah, but not for long.*

—*I survived getting swallowed by a whale.*

—*Only a duffus gets swallowed by a whale! Billy didn't. The girls didn't. Not even stoned-out-of-his-mind Toke.*

—*I guess I shouldn't have been alone at the end of the boat.*

—*If you weren't such a Loser, you wouldn't have to be alone at the end of the boat. You brought this on yourself, as usual. It's all your fault, Lard Ass.*