

Invisible line

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A walk through ankle-deep froth spun from tumbled bubbles. Young women jog. Their breasts jiggle and bounce: Jacques thinks how that sight must hurt his mother, and instead of staring at the young exciting women he gazes out at the ocean. They've come so far to Massachusetts from home in Canada where the word ocean is foreign, like bikinis here in February. He and his mother stop and hold hands, waves beating out an uneven rhythm, cacophonous.

Mother and son, black hair, sharp noses, full lips, alike in profile, contrasted by age; white foam against white ankles.

"Oh, where does time go?" she asks, her gravelly voice barely audible above the ocean wash.

He thinks, I'll get there soon, Momma. I'll get there soon.

A big-breasted redhead chases a white frisbee into the surf. He cannot ignore her.

"You should walk today's sunset with her," Momma says.

"I will, some other time."

The redhead splashes near them; freckles magnified by water droplets glisten in the sun. Deep heavy breasts. Close enough that Jacques smells a windswept whiff of coconut oil sweat.

Jacques' mother turns a pirouette in the sand. "I once had a great figure," she says, then pats her cheeks and tom-toms her stomach.

"Everyone ages differently, Momma." All the action around them seeps in and out and Jacques asks, "Are you finished walking?"

She stares at the wave-washed sand, then lifts her head and

points straight out. "This way is closer to France." Crooked forefinger wavering. "You said."

"Yes." Jacques steps closer to her, their shoulders just touching.

She moves her hand straight across the horizon. "It rests just beyond that invisible line, you said."

"Yes, Momma, and a few more after that one." He stares at the raised wave marks near the very edge of the surf's reach, no more than a thirty-second of an inch tall; each wave's telltale indication of its last shoreward approach.

They walk the beach every day and she often stares at the horizon as if its deep perspective signifies death. Or at least that's how Jacques interprets what has quickly become her near-obsession with that invisible line.

She has triggered meaning in things he has never considered before, like the fact he is half his mother's age, thirty. He imagines the tiny wrinkles around his eyes, like hers, in exactly the same locations. Age the only difference. Time and cancer and death. Every day he listens closely to the ocean's consoling voice for clues to life questions.

On one of their walks she points to that imaginary line between sky and ocean and wants to know if he's sure they would reach France if they traveled in a straight line.

"I'll show you on the map," he says. "We'll buy a compass and I'll prove it to you."

"Oh," she says. "I believe you. The country of my ancestors." She pauses. "Your ancestors."

She picks up bits and pieces of shell, seaweed, anything that's shiny and wet, and later laments their dried dullness, complains of their dank smell. Jacques buys her a fancy canning jar at a flea market up the coast at a place called Bear's Neck and they fill it with sea water. She arranges the shells, seaweed, and small stones in the jar and says she likes their appearance that way much better. "Like a fish tank without fish," she says. Then, "Oh, but the fish that lived in these shells are dead." She stares at Jacques, then at the jar, and places a hand on his shoulder. "Thank you for bringing me. I wish your father were alive."

He can see bits of her reflection on the side of the glass jar

and tells her the shellfish haven't died — they've moved to better homes, then asks if she minds him taking a jog.

"No, no, I'll sit on the warm sand and rest."

Soon the cancer will take her. Jacques trots for a hundred yards, then sprints, quickly out of breath. He pushes back the thin hair on top of his head, family inherited baldness; he hates it, and stares hungrily as a teenaged girl trots past, splashing, tight and firm. Momma's last operation lasted five hours. They cut and cut while Jacques and his brother, Willie, sat in the Montreal hospital cafeteria drinking coffee, asking each other unanswerable questions, arguing, about what in hell cancer researchers had been doing for all the years, with all the money. Willie said, "All they do is find a problem, go in and cut it out and wait — maybe give a little chemo or radiation. I wonder if she'd get better treatment in the states."

"It's a lot of shit wherever you go," Jacques said. "All the money will probably go for AIDS now. This is Momma's third cancer operation in fifteen years and you're right, Willie, they've always done the same thing. Cut it out and tell the family they think they got it all."

Jacques sees a flock of sea gulls flying toward him, almost over him. He veers into the water and dives under a small wave. I won't let the bastards shit on me, he thinks, blood pounding. He comes up gasping for air. This last time the doctor had given her a year to live. No bullshit, that guy. Willie persuaded Jacques she had a right to know. When they told her, she said she already knew, then agreed to take this trip to Gloucester, Massachusetts. Jacques told her it was as close to the France of her childhood, her birthplace, that he and Willie could manage. Her trip over to Canada in 1930, a faded memory to her. She'd said, "I want to smell ocean water clean, like when I was a small girl splashing in the cold sea. Remove the hospital stink forever."

Jacques jogs back to where Momma sits on the sand and she asks if he wants to go back to their blanket. He helps her up, hands tightly gripping wrists, his heels dug in at an angle.

Momma says, "As I was sitting on the sand I thought that even though we might travel in a straight line, we'd be moving over the roundness of the earth."

"I guess."

"Then it isn't a straight line."

"It is if you are high enough above it. I think of it that way."

"I want to be close to the water. It's much more . . . I don't know. Alive I guess."

Jacques thinks she's trying to say she wants to go to France, but he's not sure. She knows he couldn't afford it on the money he makes as a stone mason, his father's trade, who learned from his father. "What are you trying to say, Momma?"

"Nothing. It just occurred to me. That's all. Now I'll think of it as curved flatness."

Back at their blanket Jacques lies down, his face in the blanket, tired from the run. Momma reads a Herriot book she bought at the flea market, but ends up staring out at the ocean. "That invisible line," she whispers. "Maybe no one ever dies if they reach there."

Jacques feigns sleep. Then she rests her head near his and he hears the sand shift and crunch as she moves to find a comfortable spot. "Jacques?"

He nods.

She asks if he thinks cancer makes a noise as it grows. He opens his eyes and looks at her oddly.

She doesn't see and goes on and tells him she thinks it's devouring her liver.

He doesn't know the answer, so many answers, and tells her to try and stop thinking about it.

"You've always been there when no one else understood. Three operations, Jacques. Three promises the stuff was gone." She moves her head, shifts, and sits up. Jacques does, too.

Couples walk hand in hand and the sunset casts long mingling shadows. She takes a pill, a tranquilizer, swallows it with iced tea from the thermos.

A dog comes near, sniffs the air. She reaches out to it and looks for the owner. "Come on dog," she whispers, and they walk down the wave-ribbed mud of low tide. The dog scampers and leaps as if urging her to go faster. Jacques rubs a hand through his hair and watches as she bends down and ruffles its fur. It bares sharp teeth and growls. Jacques stands. Momma

steps back, then walks away, up the beach. She squares her shoulders, picks each foot higher, and Jacques imagines she's practicing a straight walk to the first invisible line.

"Momma, where are you going?" Jacques calls from the blanket.

She stares toward the blanket and has to shade her eyes against the sun.

Jacques trots down to the water, splashes his face and walks up to her and says, "Let's go back. I'm hungry for lobster, and let's get a few shrimp."

She tells him the valium lessens the anxiety. She's hungry, too. "I want a couple ears of corn with gobs of butter. That's one thing. I don't have to worry about cholesterol anymore."

They stop at the fish market in town, then head back to the private campsite the Chamber of Commerce had recommended to Jacques two weeks before. He'd called and reserved a small camper trailer for a week. He could barely understand, or make himself understood to the man on the phone. When he had hung up Jacques thought, dialect versus dialect, and wondered if the whole trip was such a good idea. What if they don't want Canadians down there?

After dinner she sits under the awning attached to the camper while inside Jacques does the dishes. He watches her stare at the bright pine fire he's kept going since before dinner. A moth flies into the flames. She asks him to bring a blanket. For over a month now she's told him that anything that even hints of death, or is death, causes images of cold: cemeteries, coffins, and wilted flowers. She's convinced it will be hot on the day they bury her, but isn't sure why.

"Here, Momma. But it must be seventy." He hands her a scotch plaid lap robe, remembers her helping her mother so many years ago when he was young. Jacques sits on a fallen log near her, remembers his father, dead now two years. They'd worked side by side for ten years as masons, building fireplaces, stone walls, everything always in stone. The fingerprint erasing trade, his father called it. Papa swore he had never touched a single cinder block in his life, even laughed about that while Jacques and Willie sat next to him, a bitter north wind flapping the shutters, several days before he died.

"Old bones get cold," Momma says, staring into the fire, holding one hand out, as if to push away cold, death — all unpleasantness. "Sixty-year-old bones that finally received a retirement check." She laughs at that and the tears roll down her face. "I worked so hard cooking and cleaning in that school cafeteria all those years and I can't even live long enough to enjoy their security. How I looked forward to that."

"I know you did, Momma. Tomorrow's the first of July. Even though we haven't got the check in our hands let's blow every nickel of it." He's spent a good deal of the money he and Willie pooled for the trip, and thinks of Willie laying up a cinder block foundation alone. No one will pay for stone because of high labor cost. Sometimes betrayal sneaks behind Jacques the way his father's shadow did when he was a child on the way to the bedroom at night.

"I'll buy you that picture you liked," Momma says.

"No. Spend it on you."

"You've done so much. Rented this camper, given up time from your work. I want to buy that photograph at the artist's colony in Bear's Neck."

"All right. If that's what you want, if it will make you happy."

"Not much does. Then everything does. The taste of lobster, the gorgeous sunset today. Being here with you."

"Thanks." Jacques doesn't know what else to say. She's happy like a kid, then sad, or nervous, and he doesn't know any more if he should be the son that he is, act like his father, or console her, like she and grandmama used to console him when he was a little boy and sick. He stands up. "Want to go inside?"

"God, I feel old. Cold and old." She laughs, then rises slowly from the chair. "Let's not talk about dying tomorrow. Live it like life meant all happiness."

"Good deal. And if I snore tonight hit me with a shoe or something." He wants their last three days here to be the best.

She rests her head on the down-filled pillow, and asks Jacques how many ducks died for a soft place to rest her head, remembers and covers her mouth, then sees Jacques smile at the little table where he is reading.

The next morning at the artist's colony in Bear's Neck, a town that crookedly weaves along the shoreline, its claim to fame a pier with a fishing boat alongside and lobster pots hung on a shed wall which a plaque proclaims as the most painted scene on the eastern seaboard. The tourists are so thick they have to wait in line to snap a picture of it. Thick like a bear's fur, Jacques thinks.

Jacques charges the framed photograph on his MasterCard. In the photo a small apple-red racing sloop runs before the wind, several plumes of white spray from the bow and a bubble wake shine in moonlight, all the rest dark blues and dim starlight. Jacques thinks of the old box camera his grandpapa gave him, upside-down images through the overhead viewer.

He tells her how much he likes it, and that he plans to put it in a sunny place. She'd told him two days before when they visited the shop that she thought it a gloomy picture.

"You still have a hundred and eighty to spend," he says, once they are back on the crowded sidewalk. "Go Momma go," he says, then laughs and pats her shoulder.

"I don't know if it's such a good idea. I've never spent that much money for fun in my life."

"C'mon. We agreed. No backing out."

Like two children they look in the shops, and she wants to buy something for anyone but herself. A seashell and onyx necklace for a friend, a heavy-knit fisherman's sweater for Willie.

"No. Something for you. We'll stay here all day and fight this crowd until you do," Jacques says, and they smile at each other.

At a shop near the end of a narrow piece of land that juts out into the bay, called Bear Neck's reach, she picks out a pair of leather sandals. On their way back, she stops and says, "I want to get it."

He doesn't know at all what she's talking about. Momma leads him by the hand into a fairly large shop that sells kites, games, and other paraphernalia for the beach. She walks to a display of the largest beach umbrellas he has ever seen. He hasn't seen her eyes sparkle like this in years. She picks one up, all shades of purple, from a royal hue that's almost black to a

lavender close to white. She tells Jacques she imagines the sun shining through and can't wait to try it. "I saw it when we were here the other day, but thought, What would we use this for at home?"

"It is beautiful. Buy it," Jacques says. She carries it up front and he charges it on his card. Fifty-five dollars. "You still have money left," he says.

"No. No more will I spend today. Let's go to the beach."

They spread their blanket on the sand and Jacques drives the center pole deep. It's so big, at least eight feet in diameter, that two elastic guy wires attached to long slender pegs are included. He pushes them in at sharp angles to hold the canopy stiff against the morning's offshore breeze. Momma stands next to the umbrella, moves the tips of her fingers along its taut nylon surface, then turns to the ocean. Jacques knows, as every other day, that she is focusing on the invisible line, although today she says nothing about it and enters the shade under her umbrella.

"Wonderful," Momma says, once underneath, a rolled-up towel under her head. Bright warm colors shift above her head and noisy gull cries echo up and down the beach. The breeze carries a cleaner salt freshness than on the other days.

"Thank you retirement," she says, closing her eyes, then opening them the least tiny bit, she describes how the colors blend into a spectrum of purples, and how, when she closes her eyes tight, thousands of purple spots swim before them. She says she can't tell if the purples are real or imagined or which color matches with any on the cloth above her.

Jacques says, "I'll leave you with your new toy, Momma," and he heads for the water. A hundred feet away he turns and sees her watching him. She points up at the colors, then out to sea.

After a short swim and quick jog Jacques comes back. Momma seems almost a different person today.

She tells him in a low voice that just before she drifted off to sleep she thought that if she died right at that instant she'd go to heaven, pursuing a perfectly straight line and crossing an infinite number of horizontal lines to reach there, and her husband and parents.

Jacques dries off and listens. She's told him all this with her eyes closed, and he half thinks she's dream talking.

She sits up and tells him she wants to be dead, has dreamed, somehow, that she would be dead when she woke up.

"I thought we weren't talking about that today." Jacques joins her under the soft colors, sits near. "I'm listening," he says.

"In my dream I was dead, living in a purple world, and knew when I woke up I'd still be dead."

Jacques rubs his belly, scratched red by the sand from body surfing. "You can't be both dead and alive." He stares at a scantily clad woman jogging up the beach. "Except if you're in heaven. Then you would be considered dead here, but alive up there." He turns toward Momma, guilty for his staring, not paying attention. "It's all in the definition, Momma."

"It's beauty of form," she says and nods toward the woman, quite a ways up the beach now. "They cut my breasts off after they had served their purpose."

"Oh, Momma."

"All right then. My dream. Even if dreams don't usually make sense. Maybe I am dead, and if I believe that, I can go on living and not worry about dying."

"Do you feel all right?"

"Better than I have in a long time. Want to wrestle?"

She hasn't said that to him in fifteen years, at least, and he can't believe she said it now, or even thought of saying it.

"Let's take a walk instead," Jacques says.

They walk a long ways up the beach, further than ever before, toward an island surrounded by shallow water at low tide. She tells him details of his childhood that he could never have remembered without her triggering them. The small white sand beach at the river where she taught him to swim. She reminds him that he preferred to swim underwater instead of on top. She says, "Invisible lines were there, too. Neither of us saw them, though. Lines to the north and the Arctic, the North Pole. A line at each end of the long stretches of the St. Lawrence River where we used to picnic on holidays." She pauses. "I have them all in my head, better than any map could show."

She even skips a little to illustrate how he often walked to the school bus. And then she points to that imaginary line and says, "I can go there and live forever if I want to. I don't. I want to stay right where I'm loved and wanted. Maybe this dream has changed me, even if only for a little bit." She stops. "It's a sign the end is closer."

"C'mon, Momma. The doctor says you have more time."

"Yes, and it matters how the rest is spent." She kicks inch-deep water up into the air and points to the rainbow. "My color, my favorite royal purple is," she kicks again, "just there."

"Maybe this is your second childhood."

"I've decided to love every minute, no every second of life left in me." She turns, and in the bright high sun she stares at him, then tells him she sees herself more in him each day, the strong nose and deep brown eyes particularly, and that it doesn't matter they've cut so much away. He doesn't need them any more. No. She weaves it all into a part of the dying living dead dream, too, that she so badly wants to keep forever.

Jacques shakes his head, fascinated, puzzled.

"Imagine," she says, "to be alive in heaven and here on earth, too. The best of both worlds is what I'm living, Jacques."

He stops and she keeps on going. He doesn't remember telling it that way when she first asked him what the dream could mean. He catches up, grips her arm, and she stops. Small waves lap at their feet, eroding the sand beneath. This trip has been so good for her. He wishes he could build a small stone house on the shore, constructed of the smooth-rolled river rocks from Canada's clean, cold streams. Jacques imagines the rounded stones jutting from the walls facing the ocean, small windows framing his and Momma's faces inside.

They continue out to the island and collect shells. In a tidal pool they watch crabs skitter into hiding spots as soon as shadows touch them. They walk around the lichen-encrusted boulders and bend to pick up pretty sea shells. Jacques sees the redness on Momma's shoulders and they start back. After a swim in the choppy surf Jacques runs ahead, and then back past her. When he stops at her side, all out of breath, she holds out her hand and they walk like that, hands lightly gripping, all the way to the purple umbrella. She lies down underneath and

closes her eyes. Jacques imagines it might be for the last time. He sits and watches her chest rise and fall, rise and fall, then after a long sigh, there is a too-long pause. He grips her hand. She opens her eyes and points to her favorite color, just there, directly above her head. 🍷