
Opening Extract from...

Maine

Written by Courtney Sullivan

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For Trish

Alas, a mother never is afraid,
Of speaking angrily to any child,
Since love, she knows, is justified of love.

—Elizabeth Barrett Browning,
Aurora Leigh

Just do everything we didn't do and you will be perfectly safe.

—*a letter from F. Scott Fitzgerald to his daughter, Frances*

Maine

Alice

Alice decided to take a break from packing. She lit a cigarette, leaning back in one of the wicker chairs that were always slightly damp from the sea breeze. She glanced around at the cardboard boxes filled with her family's belongings, each glass and saltshaker and picture frame wrapped carefully in newspaper. There were at least a couple of boxes in every room of the house. She needed to make sure she had taken them all to Goodwill by the time the children arrived. This had been their summer home for sixty years, and it amazed her how many objects they had accumulated. She didn't want anyone to be burdened by the mess once she was gone.

She could tell by the heavy clouds that it was about to rain. In Cape Neddick, Maine, that May, you were likely to see a thunderstorm every afternoon. This didn't bother her. She never went down to the beach anymore. After lunch she usually sat out on the screen porch for hours, reading novels that her daughter-in-law, Ann Marie, had lent her during the winter, drinking red wine, and watching the waves crash against the rocks until it was time to make supper. She never felt the urge she once did to put on a swimsuit and take a dip or muss her pedicure by walking in the sand. She preferred to watch it all from a distance, letting the scene pass through her like a ghost.

Her life here was ruled by routine. Each day, she was up by six to clean the house and tend her garden. She drank a cup of Tetley, leaving the tea bag on a dish in the fridge so she could use it once more before lunch. At nine thirty on the nose, she drove to St. Michael's by the Sea for ten o'clock Mass.

The surrounding area had changed so much since their first summer in Maine, all those years ago. Huge houses had gone up along the coast, and the towns were now full of gift shops and fashionable restaurants and gourmet grocery stores. The fishermen were still around, but back in the seventies many of them had started catering to tourists, with their breakfast cruises and their whale watches and such.

Some things remained. Ruby's Market and the pharmacy were still dark by six. Alice still left her keys in the car at all times. She never locked the house either—no one up here did. The beach had stayed untouched, and every one of the massive pine trees dotting the road from her door to the church looked as if it had been there for centuries.

The church itself was a constant. St. Michael's was an old-fashioned country chapel made of stone, with red velvet cushions in the pews and brilliant stained-glass windows that burst with color in the morning sun. It had been built at the top of a hill off Shore Road so that its rooftop cross might be visible to sailors at sea.

Alice always sat in the third row to the right of the altar. She tried to remember the best bits of wisdom from Father Donnelly's sermons to pass along to the child or grandchild who needed them most, not that they paid her any attention. She listened intently, singing out the familiar hymns, reciting the prayers she had recited since she was a girl. She closed her eyes and asked God for the same things she had asked for all those years ago: to help her be good, to make her do better. For the most part, she believed He heard.

After Mass on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, the St. Michael's Legion of Mary met in the church basement and said the rosary for ailing members of the parish, for the hungry and needy around the world, for the sanctity of life in all its stages. They recited Hail Holy Queen and drank decaf and chatted. Mary Fallon reminded them whose turn it was to bring muffins next time and who would accompany Father Donnelly on his weekly trip to the homes of the infirm, where he prayed for a recovery that usually never came. Though it was terribly sad, watching strangers her own age dying, Alice enjoyed her afternoons with

Father Donnelly. He brought such comfort to everyone he visited. He was a young man, only thirty-four, with dark hair and a warm smile that reminded her of crooners from the fifties. He had chosen a vocation from another era, and he was thoughtful in a way she didn't know young people could be anymore.

Alice felt a sense of deep dedication watching him pray over his parishioners. Most priests today didn't make time for house calls. When they were done, Father Donnelly would take her to lunch, which she knew for a fact he did not do with the other gals from the Legion. He had done so much for her. He even helped her around the house now and then—changing the high-up lightbulb on the porch, hauling away tree branches after a storm. Perhaps this special treatment was only a result of the little arrangement they had made, but she hardly cared.

Father Donnelly and the seven members of the Legion of Mary (no fewer than five of them actually named Mary) were the only people Alice interacted with on a regular basis at this time of year. She was the lone summer person in the group, their foreign exchange student, she called herself as a joke. The year-rounders were suspicious of outsiders. But they had agreed to let her join just for the season after the archdiocese shut down St. Agnes two years back.

St. Agnes was her church at home in Canton, the church where Alice's children were baptized, where her husband, Daniel, was eulogized, where she had gone to Mass every day for the past six decades and run both the Sunday school program, when her children were small, and the Legion of Mary once they had grown. She had co-chaired the campaign to save the church with a young mother of four named Abigail Curley, who had translucent skin and a soft, childlike voice. Together, they gathered five hundred signatures; they wrote dozens of letters; they petitioned the cardinal himself.

At the final Mass, Alice cried quietly into her handkerchief. These closures were becoming common practice; you read about them all the time. But you never thought they'd impact you. At St. Agnes, Abigail Curley and some of the other congregants refused to leave. Thirty months later they were still occupying the church around the clock, holding vigil even though there was no priest there anymore, no lighting or heat. Alice started going to a new church in Milton, but she felt no connection to the place or the people there. Now her summer church

was her main link to her faith and her past. The Legion members seemed to understand as much.

They were mostly widows who had let themselves go. They wore sweat suits and chunky white sneakers, and their hair was a uniform disaster. Alice was the sole one among them who had kept her figure. Only her deep, deep damn wrinkles even hinted at the horrifying fact that she was eighty-three. But like the rest of them, she was alone. Sometimes she wondered if they all took their morning prayer sessions so seriously because they each needed someone to bear witness to their presence. Otherwise, one of them might have a stroke at the kitchen table some morning, and simply go unnoticed.

Her husband, Daniel, won the property in 1945, just after the war ended, in a stupid bet with a former shipmate named Ned Barnell. Ned was a drunk, even by the standards of his fellow navy men. He had grown up in a fishing village in Maine, but now spent his time squandering his paychecks in some of Boston's finest barrooms and underground gambling clubs. He made a fifty-dollar wager with Daniel on some basketball game, which absolutely enraged Alice. They had been married two years then, and she was pregnant with Kathleen. But Daniel said the bet was a sure thing, that he never would have made it otherwise. And he won.

Ned didn't have the money to pay him.

"Surprise, surprise," Alice said when Daniel came home that night and told her the news.

He had a wild grin on his face. "You'll never guess what he gave me instead."

"A car?" Alice said sarcastically. Their twelve-year-old Ford coupe sputtered and pooped out whenever she started it. By then, they were so accustomed to gas rations that they mostly walked everywhere anyway, or took the streetcar. But the war was over now, and another New England winter was coming. Alice had no intention of being one of those mothers on the train, shushing her screaming newborn while others looked on with disapproving stares.

"Better," Daniel said.

"Better than a car?" Alice asked.

"It's land," Daniel said gleefully. "A whole big plot of land, right on the water in Maine."

She was skeptical. "You better not be joking, Daniel Kelleher."

"I kid you not, Mrs. Kelleher," he said, coming toward her. He pressed his face to her stomach.

"You hear that, jelly bean?" he said to her belt.

"Daniel!" she said, trying to push him away. She hated when he talked directly to the baby, already attached.

He ignored her.

"This time next summer we'll be making sand castles. Daddy got you your own beach." He straightened up. "Ned's grandfather gave all his grandkids some land, but Ned's got no interest in his piece. It's ours!"

"For a fifty-dollar bet?" Alice asked.

"Let's just say it was the last in a long line of fifty-dollar bets that may or may not have gone unpaid."

"Daniel!" Despite the good news, her blood boiled a bit.

"Honey, don't worry so much, you married a lucky guy," he said with a wink.

Alice didn't believe in luck, though if it existed she was fairly sure that hers was lousy. In two years of marriage, she had already miscarried three times. Her mother had lost two babies in infancy before the rest of her children came along, though Alice wouldn't dare ask her about it. All her mother ever said on the topic was that she assumed God had taken away the things she loved most as some sort of test. Alice wondered if in her case the children simply vanished because they knew they weren't quite wanted or, more to the point, that she was no mother.

She was used to the routine—no dark spots on her delicates at the usual time of the month, followed by a few weeks of nausea and vomiting and headaches, and then the sight of blood in the white china toilet, another soul gone.

She had overheard a gal in the elevator in her office building whispering to her girlfriend that a doctor in New York had fitted her for a diaphragm.

"Such a relief!" the girl had said. "Lord knows Harry's not doing anything to make sure I don't get knocked up."

"If the men had to push the babies out, then they'd take the precautions," her friend said. "Can you imagine Ronald, huffing and puffing?" She closed her mouth and filled her cheeks up with air, squinting her eyes until they both began to giggle.

Alice wished she could say something to them, find out more. But they were strangers to her, and it was a vulgar thing to be talking about in the first place. She didn't know who to ask, so she went to a priest before work one morning—someone a few parishes away from her own. Everyone acted as though penance was an anonymous process, but you could see the priest before he went into the confessional, and he could just as easily see you. This one was old, with pure white hair. FATHER DELPONTE, it said on a plaque on the outside of the box. Italian, she supposed. Everyone knew Italian girls were fast. She hoped he wouldn't mistake her for one of them. She was married, after all.

In the dim box, she kneeled down, closed her eyes, and crossed herself.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been one month since my last confession," she began, the same words she had uttered so many times before.

Her cheeks blushed a fiery red as she told him about the babies she had lost.

"I wonder if perhaps now isn't the time for me," she said. "I wonder if there's something I might do to hold off. My sister died a couple years back, and I'm still not myself. I'm afraid of being a mother. I don't think I have it in me to love another person enough, at least not yet."

She wanted to say more, but then he asked, "How old are you?"

"Twenty-four."

Alice could swear she saw him make a baffled face through the screen.

"You're more than old enough, my dear," he said softly. "God has a plan for each of us. We have to believe in it, and do nothing to put it off course."

She did not know if he had understood. Perhaps she should have been clearer.

"There are ways I've heard of to delay," she began, fumbling for the words. "I know the Church frowns on it."

"The Church forbids it," he said, and that was all.

She cried for a moment in the parking lot and then set off for work. She never told Daniel what she had done.

This pregnancy had lasted six months so far. Alice was terrified. She tiptoed everywhere, afraid to breathe. She had to drink half a glass of whiskey each night to get to sleep. She smoked twice as many cigarettes

as usual and paced around the block in the afternoons—she had been reprimanded by her boss three times now for being away from her desk when she wasn't supposed to be. Mr. Kristal was downright wretched to her, probably because he recognized her condition, and knew from experience that she'd be giving her notice soon enough.

The Saturday after Daniel won the land, they took a ride out to Cape Neddick. Alice didn't know what to expect. She had been to Maine only once before, on a day trip with her brothers and sister when she was a teenager. All six of them were jammed into their father's Pontiac, barreling along with the windows rolled down. They ate lunch at a clam shack and then drove east until they found a slip of beach to relax on. The boys skipped rocks into the water, and Alice and Mary sat in the sand, talking. Alice did a sketch of the dunes in her notebook. They didn't know what town they were in, and they didn't linger for long. They couldn't afford to stay overnight, not even at one of the cheap roadside motels that lined the highway.

Only a few years had passed since then, but it seemed like another lifetime.

Daniel drove the car through downtown Ogunquit, past a motor inn and a dance hall and Perkins Drugstore, and the Leavitt Theatre, where *Anchors Aweigh* was playing at two o'clock. They went straight, past the stone library and the Baptist church and a row of grand hotels, until they reached the tip of town, where fishermen's shacks and lobster traps stood on the land, and fishing boats bobbed up and down in the harbor. There was water on three sides: the Atlantic's rocky coastline to the left and in front of them, and to the right a small inlet with a footbridge leading to the other side. Carved into a stone at the base of the bridge were the words PERKINS COVE.

Alice raised an eyebrow. "Gosh, is everyone in this town called Perkins?"

"Just about," Daniel said, clearly excited to have a bit of inside information. "According to Ned, that family owns half the land around here. They're fishermen, like his people. Ned went with one of the Perkins cousins back in high school."

"Lucky her," Alice said.

"Now now," Daniel said. "Hey, Ned even taught me a little poem one of them wrote. You ready to hear it?"

Before she could protest, he was reciting it, almost singing, in his best James Cagney voice:

A Perkins runs the grocery store
A Perkins runs the bank
A Perkins puts the gasoline in everybody's tank.
A Perkins sells you magazines
Another sells you fish
You have to go to Perkinses for anything you wish.
You'll always find a Perkins has fingers in your purse
And when I die, I think that I
Will ride a Perkins hearse.

Alice rolled her eyes at her husband. "Okay, darling, I catch your drift."

They turned the car around and pulled onto Shore Road. Daniel drove slowly, looking this way and that. Through a long bank of pine trees on the left, you could see the ocean. Here and there, clapboard houses with American flags out front dotted green lawns. Cows grazed in fields of grass.

"It's somewhere off of this road," Daniel said.

They had brought a map, which she held unfolded in her lap. Daniel expected Alice to know how to read it, but to her it looked like a mess of veins and muscles she had seen in her high school biology textbook years earlier. She half expected him to snap, "Oh, give me that!" But Daniel wasn't the type. He only laughed and said, "I guess we'll have to follow our noses, since I clearly chose a daydreamer for a co-pilot."

That was when Alice saw them, a small assembly of women and men in smocks, sitting up on a hill, painting at easels.

"There's an artists' colony here," Daniel said. "Ned told me bohemians are buying up the lobstermen's shacks. I thought you'd like that. They have a summer school. Maybe you could take a class."

Alice nodded, though she felt her body tighten. She willed herself not to grow dark. But she could already feel her mood shifting. She stared out the window.

Off to the right was a plain wooden saltbox with a sign out front that read RUBY'S MARKET. To the left was a small green building that she

might have taken for a house were it not for the word PHARMACY inlaid on a plaque above the porch.

There was no sign for Briarwood Road. Ned had told Daniel to take Shore for two miles, until he came to a fork. Then he was to turn left onto a dirt path, and follow it all the way to the ocean.

"He says we'll think we're driving straight into the woods, but we're not," Daniel said.

Alice sighed, preparing herself for what was probably a patch of overgrown brush that Ned had decided to call his own.

They passed the entrance twice and had to turn around. But on the third try, they turned at what hardly seemed like a fork. Alice gasped. The road was from a fairy tale, a long stretch of sand inside a tunnel of lush pine trees. When they reached the end, there was the ocean, sparkling in the sun, dark blue against a small sandy beach, which was nestled between two long stretches of rocky coast.

"Welcome home," Daniel said.

"This is ours?" Alice asked.

"Well, three acres of it's ours," he said. "The best three acres, too—all this land along the water."

Alice was elated. No one she knew back home had their own beach house. She could not wait to see her best friend Rita's face when she came here and saw it.

Alice kissed Daniel smack on the lips.

He grinned. "I take it you like the place."

"I already have the curtains picked out."

"Good! I'm glad that's taken care of. Now we just need a house to hang them in."

On the way back into town, he stopped the car at the fork in the road and carved a shamrock into the soft trunk of a birch tree. He added the letters *A.H.* and said, "Now we'll never miss the turnoff again."

"A.H.?" she asked. "Who's that?"

He pointed at each letter slowly, like a teacher leading a lesson. "Alice's. House."

Daniel and his brothers built the cottage with their own hands, laid every beam, one by one. The five rooms on the first floor made a loop: The narrow stone kitchen leading into the living room with its black

piano from J. & C. Fischer New York, and the iron wood-burning stove in the corner, and the dining table that could comfortably seat ten, though they often had sixteen people crammed around it. That led straight into a small bedroom meant for a couple, which led into the sun-yellow bathroom, which led into the next bedroom, which was as big as the rest of the rooms put together, with two single beds and four bunk beds. There was a lofted space up above it all, the only private spot in the house. Off the kitchen stood a screened-in porch, and off the living room a deck. Beyond that was an outdoor shower full of cobwebs, from which you could gaze at the stars while you washed your hair. That was it. Their little piece of Paradise, where the Kelleher family had spent every summer since.

In the fifties, wealthy out-of-towners started buying up plots of land all around Ogunquit and Cape Neddick. But no one ever built on Briarwood Road, so it felt like the long stretch of glorious trees that led to their home on the beach was all theirs.

They went every June and stayed for as many weeks as possible. If Daniel couldn't get off work at the insurance company, Alice would invite Rita to come. The two of them would poke into antique shops in Kennebunkport, each with a baby slung over her shoulder, and then they would drink Manhattans on the beach in front of the cottage. On rainy days, they went to the movies or for a drive up the coast. Tallulah Bankhead did a four-week stint at the Ogunquit Playhouse, and they saw the show twice, even though it really wasn't any good. The town was a strange blend of fishermen and locals, tourists and actors and painters. Everywhere you went, someone was sketching a seascape, a sunset, a stack of lobster traps arranged just so. Alice avoided the artists when she could. In town one morning, one of them, quite handsome, had asked if he could paint her picture. She smiled, but kept walking as if she hadn't understood.

Some weekends Alice's and Daniel's families visited, and everyone would stay up late, eating and drinking and singing Irish songs while Alice played the piano. After she went to church each morning, Alice and her sisters-in-law might lie out on the sand in a row for hours while the sun beat down against their bare legs. Alice always brought a book along since they weren't the most entertaining gals; they were morally opposed to gossip and clearly jealous of her figure. She wished like crazy that her own sister, Mary, were there. Alice would almost forget

about what had passed, expecting to see Mary turn the corner at any moment.

Before dinner, the women shucked corn and boiled potatoes in the kitchen with a Dean Martin record playing in the background. Meanwhile, the men gathered outside around the grill, fanning the hot coals as if it took eight of them to get a fire going.

Later came more children—Alice and Daniel's three, and forty-two nieces and nephews between them. For years there was an army of kids in the cottage, and Alice gave up on even trying to make the place look presentable. By the time the Fourth of July arrived, all the children would be bright red and freckly from the sun, their brown hair ever-so-slightly lightened, especially the girls, who squeezed lemon juice over their heads after breakfast each morning, same as their mothers. On arrival, everyone's feet were smooth and soft, but after weeks of walking barefoot out on the stone jetties and across the dunes, their soles toughened up. Daniel joked that by summer's end, they could walk over broken glass without feeling a thing.

In Cape Neddick, Alice was distracted, surrounded by smiling people, all of them grateful for the invitation. The children ran in a pack with their cousins, demanding nothing. She watched the sky over the ocean turn pink in the evening, a reminder that God created beauty, every bit as much as He created pain. She became a different person there in summertime.

Back home in Massachusetts there were so many memories; left alone in the house with the children, she often felt like she was losing hold. Her thoughts took gloomy turns without warning, and she got terrible headaches that forced her into bed all afternoon. Her life there was by its very nature boring, and she could not stand to be bored. She never cottoned to gaily cooking dinners and folding laundry and scrubbing the kitchen floor, as if that were all the world had to offer, no matter how hard she tried. She had been meant for more. Her cottage in Maine was the only thing that set her apart from everyone else, the only unordinary thing about her.

When her older daughter, Kathleen, ever the wet blanket, turned twelve or thirteen, she declared that she hated going to Maine. The air was too buggy, she said, the water too cold. There was no television and nothing to do. From then on, from the moment they arrived each summer until the inevitable morning when they packed up the car to head

back to Massachusetts, Kathleen would complain: "Can we go now? Can we?"

"It's strange," Daniel had said once.

"Oh I don't think so," Alice replied. "She must have picked up on how much I love this place and instinctually decided to hate it."

Much later—it amazed her how time sped up more and more, the older she got—the grandkids came along. Daniel retired. Her children drove up to Maine whenever they liked, and no one bothered to call ahead. They'd just bring extra hot dogs and Heinekens, cookies, or a blueberry pie from Ruby's Market. All summer, she and Daniel were the constant. Other bodies piled into the cottage and slept wherever they happened to drop: children under blankets on the hardwood floor in the living room, teenagers on inflatable mattresses up in the loft, her grandson Ryan's playpen wedged into the narrow kitchen.

In the mornings while the rest of them slept, Alice would brew a pot of coffee, toast English muffins, and fry up a dozen eggs and bacon. She'd set a basin of warm water out on the porch for the children's sandy feet, and later, maybe help Kathleen and Ann Marie slather the kids in SPF 50, which by then they understood was essential for Irish skin. Even so, they got burns. Red, painful, blistering burns that they spent long evenings dousing in Solarcaine. The grandchildren, like the children, mostly resembled Daniel's side—a half hour in the sun and their faces were six pink little pools, covered in constellations of brown freckles.

A few years before Daniel passed, their son, Patrick, had offered them a gift. He was having a house of their own built for them on the property, he said. A real, modern house with high-end appliances and fixtures and a view of the ocean and no kids screaming, next to the cottage, but worlds better. They would have a big-screen TV with a sound system that was somehow wired through the walls. In the cottage there was only a small radio that picked up Red Sox games if you put it on the windowsill at the right angle.

"I think it'll be wonderful," Alice said to her husband after Pat told them his plan. "Our own hideaway, no squirrels in the rafters or mildew smell in the bathroom. No leaky old refrigerator."

"But that's what a summer place is," Daniel said. "If we wanted to be alone in a souped-up house, we'd have stayed home in Canton. Why do I feel like this is a way to get rid of us?"

Alice had told him not to be ridiculous, even though she partly agreed. It was extravagant, and seemed a bit beside the point of a family retreat. But Patrick had already had the plans drawn up, and he sounded so pleased when he told them the news. Plus, as he pointed out, adding another house to the property would only increase its value.

"Like in Monopoly," he had said, a comparison that made Alice laugh, though she could see through Daniel's tight smile that he found the comment patronizing.

After the house went up, Patrick had the whole place appraised. When he told her that it was now worth over two million dollars, Alice nearly fainted. Two million dollars for land that had been handed to them for free half a century earlier!

"See? Our boy is a smart one," she had said to Daniel then.

He shook his head. "It's dangerous, talking about money this way. Our home is not for sale."

She looked into his sad eyes and gave him a smile. She wanted to hold on to it all every bit as much as he did.

She put a hand on his cheek. "No one said it was."

Of their three children, Patrick, the youngest, had done the best by far. They sent him to BC High. His last year of high school he dated Sherry Burke, the daughter of the mayor of Cambridge. Sherry was a sweet girl, and her family exposed Pat to the finer things. Alice always thought those years with her might have been what motivated him to make money later on. (She still saw Sherry—a state senator in her own right—in the newspaper now and then.) Pat went on to Notre Dame, where he finished sixth in his class. He met Ann Marie, who was studying at his sister school, Saint Mary's. They were married the summer they turned twenty-two. They had a strong marriage, and three wonderful children—Fiona, Patty, and darling Little Daniel, Alice's favorite of all her grandkids. Pat was a stockbroker; Ann Marie stayed at home. They lived in an enormous house in Newton, with a swimming pool out back and matching blue Mercedes sedans.

Alice's daughters called them the Perfects. Well, by comparison, yes. Alice was always quick to point out that Ann Marie was a better daughter to her than either of them was. Ann Marie included her in weekend activities; they got their hair done together at a fancy place in town. They had long lunches and traded recipes and thick hardcover books

and fashion magazines. Alice's own two daughters could barely manage to call her once a week and update her on their lives. Clare made up for it every now and then with nice presents, but Kathleen didn't even bother trying.

Clare was Alice's middle child, born two years before Patrick. When they were young, Alice had worried the most about her. She had a shock of red hair, the color of autumn leaves; an unfortunately round face; and freckles (Daniel's side). She was a tomboy, and she was smart, perhaps too smart for her own good. In high school, Clare acted as serious as a nun, cloistered away in her bedroom, reading her textbooks by the open window, sneaking cigarettes when she thought Alice wasn't looking. She never had many friends, no more than one or two at a time, and never for longer than a few months. Daniel said it wasn't very motherly of her to say so, but Alice feared it was something Clare was doing that kept chasing people off, rather than the opposite.

After graduating from BC, Clare worked with computers, doing something Alice still didn't quite understand. She was completely devoted to her job, and never went on any dates as far as Alice knew. In her late thirties, she met Joe, through work, of course. His family business was a religious goods store in Southie that sold ornate Bibles and prayer books to true believers, and crosses and Infant of Prague statues to children making their First Communion. Joe's father gave him the company when he retired and Clare put the merchandise on the Internet somehow.

They had done well for themselves. They lived in an old Victorian house in Jamaica Plain, a neighborhood that they claimed to love for its diversity and public victory gardens. (*Those sound like the sort of traits you'd use to praise a slum,* Alice thought each time they mentioned them, though she knew the house had not come cheap.) Their neighbors on either side were black.

Until she went to work in downtown Boston at the age of nineteen, Alice had hardly ever seen a black person. Today, you couldn't drive down the street she had grown up on in Dorchester without locking the doors and holding your breath and saying ten Hail Marys. There were gang members and prostitutes on the corner where her brothers used to play baseball before dinner. But you weren't allowed to comment on such things. If you did, according to Clare and Joe, you were a bigot.

The two of them were a perfect match, so in step with all that lib-

eral hoo-haw. So in love that Joe didn't even seem to notice that Clare was downright plain and she didn't seem to care that he was embarrassingly short. Their son, Ryan, only seventeen, was a student at the Boston Arts Academy. He was a gifted little singer, a real hot ticket. A bit of a brat sometimes, but that was how he'd been raised. Alice had warned them against having just one child. When Ryan was small, he would ask her to play the piano for him and he'd belt out "Tomorrow" as pitch-perfect as any girl on Broadway. Alice and Daniel had gone to so many school plays over the years that eventually Daniel invested in earplugs so he could nap in the auditoriums. But Alice loved watching those shows. She had saved all the programs. Clare and Joe kept Ryan away from her so often now. They were always too busy with auditions and meetings and travel and *life,* as if that were any excuse.

Kathleen, her oldest, was the one with Alice's black hair and blue eyes—the prettier sister when they were young, though only by default. Kathleen's features were terribly round. When she was a teenager, her full hips and breasts hinted at the weight she would gain later.

Daniel said that Alice never really took to Kathleen, that she didn't treat her like a mother should. He, on the other hand, spoiled her rotten, making no secret of the fact that she was his favorite. It was true when Kathleen was a little girl, and true when he offered her the cottage during her divorce, even though it wasn't strictly his to offer, and it was true right at the end of his life, a fact that Alice could never forgive.

After Kathleen's divorce, she went to graduate school for social work. Her kids were still young then, they needed her. But Kathleen stayed out late studying and attending AA meetings as if they were handing out bars of gold there. Later, she started working as a school counselor and began to date all sorts of unsuitable men.

Her two kids, Maggie and Christopher, had become the kind of adults one would expect from a broken home: Chris had anger issues. As a teenager, he once punched a hole in the bathroom wall because his mother grounded him for sneaking out. In contrast, Maggie always tried too hard to make everything perfect. She was too polite, too inquisitive. It put Alice on edge.

After Daniel died, Kathleen moved to California with a loafer boyfriend named Arlo, who she had known for all of six months at the time. They had a plan (or rather, he did) to start a company making fer-

tilizer out of worm dung. It was a preposterous choice that still embarrassed Alice nine years later, especially because Kathleen had used Daniel's money to finance the whole boneheaded plan. Kathleen had borrowed plenty of money from him before he died too. Alice didn't want to know how much. She had once thought of Daniel's money as *their* money. But if it were hers as well, then she would have had some say in how he spent it, and that was certainly not the case when it came to Kathleen. Each time she made some foolish romantic mistake, there was Daniel, ready to clean it up.

Even as a teenager, Kathleen had always been popular with boys.

"Why don't you invite your sister to come to the party with you?" Alice would say to her on a Friday night. Or "Can't you find a nice fella for Clare?"

But Kathleen would only shrug, as though she couldn't hear her.

Once, they had argued about it, Alice feeling so enraged at her uncharitable offspring that she shouted, "You're lucky you even have a sister, you wretch. Do you know what I would do if I—"

"What would you do?" Kathleen had interrupted. "What? Take her out to some club and then leave her there to die?"

Alice was shocked, and instantly livid with Daniel for telling Kathleen. That was the only time in her life that she ever struck one of her children.

Usually, especially when they were young, she left the physical discipline to Daniel, for fear of what she might do out of fury or frustration. They had agreed that he would hit the children with a belt when they needed it, and Alice had never felt bad about this. She and her own siblings had endured much worse.

"Wait until your father gets home," she'd tell the kids when they acted up, and their eyes would grow wide with fear.

When he arrived, Daniel always made a big show of dragging the offending youngster to his or her room, and closing the door. Alice would hear him say sternly, "Now, you brought this upon yourself and you know it. Take it like a grown-up."

Next came the sound of his belt lashing against a soft backside, and then the child's dramatic scream. This sort of behavior was highly out of character for her husband, and it always thrilled Alice a little, for the children could be monsters and she felt like he provided the exact buffer she needed to cope.

After Daniel died, the kids told Alice that in fact he had never once struck them, only taken them upstairs and thwacked his belt against the mattress a few times, instructing them to shout as soon as they heard the sound.

Alice rose from her spot on the porch now, and went to the kitchen. She poured herself a glass of wine. Surveying all the dishes and silverware spread out on the counter, she sighed. She had wanted to get a bit of reading in before dinner, but the contents of her pantry were staring straight at her, begging to be dealt with.

There was a big roll of bubble wrap there, and she began by cutting off several thick sheets. Next, she wrapped the plates, one by one. Newspaper would have been quicker, but it seemed a shame to risk staining the china gray, even if she was giving it away. She had briefly considered asking Clare or Ann Marie if they wanted it, but she knew that would only raise their suspicions, and she didn't feel like arguing.

Lately, the one thing her three children had in common was a real love of nagging her.

They wanted her to quit smoking, and were forever citing statistics about the bad effects or pointing out that her white ceilings were tinged orange, so imagine how her lungs must look. Last spring she had somehow left a lit cigarette burning on the edge of an ashtray on her kitchen table when she went out shopping with Ann Marie. Her daughter-in-law helped her bring in her bundles afterward, and saw the still-smoldering cigarette, which had rolled onto the tabletop and left an ugly burn. The kids all went crazy over it, even though nothing bad had happened.

They thought she drank too much. Well, honestly, who gave a fig about that? She had abstained for more than thirty years for heaven's sakes, and only to appease her husband. Patrick had given her a stern lecture at Thanksgiving about driving the car after a few cocktails, which made her laugh. She wanted to say that she had driven a car after more than a few lousy cocktails throughout her twenties; when she was pregnant with him and his two sisters; when they were screaming brats in the backseat of her station wagon; and everything had worked out fine. Alice assumed they were thinking about the accident back when they were kids, even though that was a onetime slipup, ancient history. With all that was painful in the world, she wondered why on earth her

children felt a need to focus on unlikely hypothetical disasters that might or might not eventually occur.

They said she wasn't watching her diet carefully enough, monitoring her salt intake like the doctor said she should. Ann Marie called over and over with cautionary tales about her own mother's ever-worsening diabetes or an article she had read in *USA Today* on the subject. Alice had to bite her tongue to keep from saying that though Ann Marie's mother had once been pretty enough, she now looked a lot like Winston Churchill in a swimsuit, while Alice herself had never weighed an ounce over 119 pounds, other than during her pregnancies.

They said Alice should be smarter with her money, because in the wintertime, cooped up in her house with a Manhattan or a glass of cabernet, she enjoyed buying items off the television every now and then—Time Life music collections, hand blenders that promised perfectly thick soups in minutes, even a replica of Lincoln's log cabin for her granddaughter Patty's children. But she never spent much, not more than $19.99. She went to the department stores in the mall after church one Sunday a month, and made herself feel better by trying on silk scarves and lipstick or mascara at the Chanel counter. But she certainly didn't buy any of it. She just memorized the feel and the look, and then went to Marshalls and bought the closest knockoff. She followed the sales at Macy's and Filene's like a hawk. She clipped coupons every morning, and called Ann Marie to let her know about any really good deals.

Still, it was hard to keep much money in the bank just between her pension and Daniel's. A couple years back, when Patrick looked over her taxes, he frowned and said, "You're shelling out a heck of a lot more than you're bringing in. You need to reverse that situation, pronto."

Her very first thought was that perhaps she ought to sell the property in Maine. It surprised her that she would even consider it, but there it was.

Alice wasn't particularly attached to the big house, but she still felt sentimental about the cottage, with its familiar details, and stories from their past tucked inside each cupboard and under every bed. On the doorway leading to the kitchen, hundreds of dates and initials had been written in by hand, chronicling the heights of her children and grandchildren and nieces and nephews over the years. This was where Clare had learned to walk, and Patrick had broken his arm one summer, try-

ing to jump off the roof of the screen porch and fly like Superman. Where her grandchildren had first stepped in sand and had their tiny bodies dipped into the ocean. Where she and Daniel had taken countless strolls to look at the stars, hand in hand, not a word spoken.

But those were only memories. The place wasn't moving forward anymore, not for Alice. In recent years, her children had even created an asinine schedule for the cottage: One month per family each summer. Kathleen and her kids got June; Patrick, Ann Marie, and theirs got July; Clare, Joe, and Ryan got August.

It made Alice nervous, unsettled, to have to see her children one at a time like this. The joy and spontaneity of summers past were gone now. Daniel's death had ended them as a family. Each had pulled away from the others, and at some point without realizing it, Alice had gone from the matriarch—keeper of the wisdom and the order—to the old lady you had to look in on before the day's fun could begin.

She got the feeling that none of her children particularly liked one another, or worse, that they had no use for each other. So why keep the old place? And why bother coming up, year after year, when it only made her feel lonely, longing for something she'd already had?

It seemed to Alice that everyone these days was out for themselves. The sort of families she and Daniel had grown up in and tried to carry on no longer existed, not really. Her mother had had eight children, including the two babies that died. Daniel's mother had had ten. Though she had hated the noise and the chaos and the sacrifice this implied back then, now Alice saw that it gave you something, being part of a family like that. Her own children and their children would never understand it. That was why they were so comfortable splitting up their summer home, or living a few miles apart but only seeing one another every couple of weeks. Or, in Kathleen's case, moving clear across the country for no good reason. Worms, for Christ's sake.

She gently laid the plates in a cardboard box on the floor. The box already contained the second teapot they had kept around forever, and some old dish towels, and a *Kiss Me, I'm Irish* coffee mug that had once belonged to her brother Timothy. Alice took the mug out and placed it back in the cabinet.

She missed her brothers more now than she had when they died, years earlier. And lately, she was haunted by memories of her sister; of

what might have been had Mary lived. That past winter had marked the sixtieth year since Mary's death. On the twenty-eighth of November, Alice had thought to go to the grave site. She hadn't been since she could remember. Her parents were buried there, too, all three names on a single headstone, as well as the names of the two babies who were lost back in the twenties. But Alice knew that if she went, she would hope to feel some part of them floating in the air around her, and she knew just as well that they weren't there.

She tried to put it from her mind, but when she opened her copy of *The Boston Globe* that day, she found a full-page story about the anniversary of the fire in the Metro section, complete with photographs. There were recollections of all of the most famous victims: The old Western film star Buck Jones had been taken to a hospital and died minutes before his wife reached his bedside to say good-bye. The body of a young woman was found in the phone booth, where she had tried in vain to call her father to come save her; a couple married that day in Cambridge both died, along with their entire bridal party. And then there was the one they called Maiden Mary, the woman who perished without knowing that her beloved planned to propose the very next day.

Alice had read her sister's name and, remembering that night, she was gripped with the sort of guilt she had not felt in years. There was no one she could tell. None of her children would understand. Daniel was dead, and if he had been alive, she still probably wouldn't have dared to say a word.

She willed herself not to think about it, but minutes later she was sobbing uncontrollably at the kitchen sink. Her chest seized up. She wondered if she was having a heart attack.

Alice wished she could go to church—her own church, which had been the comforting backdrop to so much joy and sorrow. The fact that she couldn't made the pain all the worse. She hadn't been able to save the place, she knew that. Yet the fact of the closure still surprised her from time to time. Her priest from St. Agnes had been shipped off to a parish in Connecticut, and she had no idea how to reach him. She felt utterly alone.

She thought then of her summer priest, Father Donnelly. She called him with shaking hands, unsure of what she'd say—she had kept the secret for sixty years. She knew that confession meant telling it all, but

for now, she told him some version of the truth, the parts that Daniel knew.

He was impossibly kind to her, and said that she needed to forgive herself, the same as her husband had always said.

"Please," she said over and over. "Give me a penance. Give me some way to fix this."

She didn't know how to say to anyone, even a priest, how terrified she was of Hell. But she knew that soon it would be too late.

"Alice, we all need to focus on doing good work with the time we have left," he said. "There's no reason to dwell on the past. Just think about what you can do now."

In Alice's day, a priest would absolve you of your sins by making you pray or go without. For Lent, you should deprive yourself of candy or perfume or gin, whatever it was that you liked best in life. But nowadays, it seemed that they wanted you to do something good instead: Paint a house, or collect money for UNICEF, or volunteer with troubled children. Something.

After they hung up, she could breathe again. It felt somewhat relieving to say the words out loud. But even so, she poured herself a glass of wine and got into bed before six.

A month later, right after Christmas, Father Donnelly came to Boston to visit friends, and stopped by Alice's house for lunch. He asked if she was feeling better after their talk, and she said she was, though it wasn't really true. Thoughts of Mary had been with her ever since, and his words had lingered: *Just think about what you can do now.* There was nothing she could do to bring her sister back or to redeem herself.

She served the priest a defrosted chicken potpie she had made weeks earlier. They sat in her kitchen and spoke of other things, while outside, snow fell on the rhododendron bushes. At some point the conversation turned to St. Michael's by the Sea. Alice watched the worry lines that crinkled around Father Donnelly's eyes as he spoke. Funds were dwindling. The rectory was falling apart. The church roof was in bad shape, and there was mold all over the cellar, which filled up with water every time it rained.

"We'll be lucky if the place lasts ten more years," he said. "There just isn't any money for upkeep."

Alice couldn't bear to see it lost like St. Agnes had been. Suddenly, she knew what she ought to do—"Father, it might put you at ease to

know that my family and I have decided I should give my property in Maine to St. Michael's when I die," she said. "Between the house and the cottage, there's enough room to sleep probably ten or twelve men comfortably. Or you could sell it. It's worth over two million dollars."

Father Donnelly turned red, just as Daniel had when he got embarrassed as a young man.

"Oh Alice," he said. "I certainly wasn't asking—"

"I know," she said. "But really. We had already decided."

"I can't impose on your family like that," he said.

"I've been going to St. Michael's every summer since before you were born," she said sternly. "It's given me plenty. It's only right to give back. Besides, it's not like my children cherish the place."

Once she said it she realized that all of the kids, especially Patrick, would be furious with her for not consulting them. But why should she? It was her property, after all. They had certainly never asked her opinion about the cottage schedule. Clare and Patrick didn't need any of the money. And Kathleen had spent most of Daniel's savings already. Every time she thought of this, Alice was forced to remember the way she had cast aside her pride and asked Kathleen to help her talk sense into Daniel when he got sick. Kathleen had refused, a fact that Alice could never forgive. Daniel might still be alive today if not for his decision and Kathleen's willingness to go along with it. But Alice was powerless to change that now.

"You should take some time to think about it," Father Donnelly had said. "Talk it over with your family. It's a huge decision, Alice."

She knew it was as good as made.

"I already spoke to my family about this and we're all in agreement," she said.

Later that week, she met with the lawyer and changed her will. The three acres and two houses in Maine would go to St. Michael's.

She called Father Donnelly to tell him that it was finalized.

"Oh, thank you," he said, his voice filled with relief. "Please tell your children how incredibly grateful we are."

"I will," she lied.

Alice had decided not to tell the kids. They should be able to make their memories the same as always, without feeling the weight of an ending coming on. Plus, she didn't want to face their reaction if it was bad. They could be angry with her once she was dead and buried.