

## *Fire Island*

A few days after Grandpa dies, the island begins to burn. I watch the flames from halfway across the country. A new sun rises from the black horizon, a beacon known only to me. I lurch up from my bed and walk to the window, fingers pressed gently against the frosted glass as my eyes trace across the crimson pillar. I stand there until dawn peeks its timid head over the tree-line.

I think it started after the memorial. A moment wrought from the timeless fog of grief. Its light shone from the mist, called me forth with the slow rumble of conversation, the chill chime of ice against a glass's edge, the warm quilt of somber laughter.

That was when I first learned of Fire Island.

Father spoke of it in vague terms, as if it were a memory all should share. My family nodded, sighed, turned their eyes to their drinks. Uncle laughed, placing a hand on his brother's shoulder. Aunt swiped a palm across her cheeks. Images of Grandpa fluttered across the screen hanging above Father's head. Holding a fish. At the helm of a boat. Aunt's graduation.

I pretended to feel alongside them. They spoke at length of Fire Island, of their summer home upon its shore, but not once did they offer a word or phrase that would serve to define its significance. In the corner of my mind, it blazed with awful light, one that obscured any detail about the thing within. I knew of its importance, but, every time that I stepped close, it pushed me away.

*Why do you get to have these memories? Why do you get to know him? Why can't I?*

After the party's end, I delved into the mystery of Fire Island.

It lies just off the coast of Long Island, a thin strip of land quivering against the raging surf. It stands shoulder-to-shoulder with its brothers, souls separated by thin stretches of sea. Salt-swept towns rise from the land like natural formations; the buildings meet the earth and vanish into the sand, a slow, easy transition. Death clings to every shingle and board, but none of the people wandering through the pictures I studied seemed to notice or care. *How can they be content with this? They see the end hanging right before their eyes. Run! Scream! Do something! Just please don't laugh.*

My thoughts lingered upon the island for days. I felt like an urchin peering just above the surface of the waves, my vision of the shore distorted by dappled sunbeams lancing through the sea's soft wrinkles. I clung to the stones, polished smooth by the passage of the waves, and clenched my teeth against the currents trying to rip me out to the far reaches of the deep.

That was when the island began to burn.

No one speaks of it. I tune into the news to find nothing about the flame. I linger silently at my parents' sides, pausing to give time for the long-awaited words to tear themselves from their tongues. Once, while walking my dog, I ask my neighbor about it. "Fire Island's burning. Have you heard of it?" They turn away, mouth curling into a frown, and vanish behind their front door. I toss a curse at their speechless step and pass on.

The time comes for me to return to my studies up north. Before I depart, Father hands me a note, a letter from Grandpa. *Why should I open it? I hardly even knew him.* I give Father a hug and Mother a kiss, and, in a daze, I soar above the city, the bass hum of the airplane grinding beneath my ears like a stone along the bed of a creek. I turn my gaze to the window, the sun's rays casting a warm puddle across my face.

From heaven, I watch the island burn. It stings my eyes, and I look away, pressing a palm across my face. The fierce contours of the flame lay etched across the newfound abyss. Beyond that, Grandpa laughs, tossing the line over his shoulder. It comes to rest in a pool of darkness. *I never knew you fished, Grandpa.*

At college, my classes come and go with the passage of the wind, silence filled by the slight words of scholars and the dim groans of their lecterns. High-arched windows of stained glass bask in the summer sun, casting their crimson haze across my books. The words melt together, depths I cannot pierce. Locke and Rousseau and Camus and Grandpa fishing. *What adventures did you undertake? Where did your wanderings bring you? Did you dine with Meursault in sunburnt Algeria? Did you sail upon the back of Ahab's fury? Did you bear witness to the shifting tides of Heathcliff and Catherine's love? What is Fire Island?*

The light of the island's flame pulses in the corner of my eye for weeks on end. The beat of my heart. I lie away at night, gaze turned to the ceiling as life drifts past my window, and grasp at the faint crackle of the distant conflagration. I lose sleep. My flesh clings tight to my bones. Darkness gathers about my brow. My eyes linger upon the letter sitting curled atop my desk. I do not open it.

A few weeks later, the fire winks out. I book a flight to Long Island.

The plane, the airport, the taxi, the barge. All pass in a moment, all caught in the smoke left behind by the banished flame. The spirits of Fire Island dance through the haze. I wish to reach out and take their hands, to let them ferry me faster to their burnt abode.

It rises from the sea like a wasteland. Scorched, shattered trees lance up from the ashen earth. Dust drifts upon the backs of howling flows, screeching across the shore like distorted

memories. The shells of broken buildings jut from the dark embers. Shaded figures pass between them. *I hate this place.*

The ship comes to rest at the dock; the passengers gaze past me as I rest a tepid foot on the aging planks. They squeal beneath my weight as I pass on. The ferry draws back, turns, ambles away towards the endless gray horizon. Back into the ash from which it came. I continue.

The town lies in shambles, but the people drift about as if nothing has changed. The sun's skeletal glow wriggles through the air. Dust gathers at my brow. Its presence fades from my mind, but, every time I raise an absent hand to brush it away, I am reminded of it once more, and my palm falls back to my side, purpose abandoned. Smiles curl the townsfolks' lips, great, friendly things like dandelions swaying at the seashore. They nod to me as they approach, gazes turned to my unfamiliar face. My eyes drift to the street. I cannot bear the burden of their notice.

I pull myself into the ruins of a restaurant, place myself down into one of the ashen seats. A woman comes to stand beside me, her apron's gleam unfazed by the flames. I ask for a coffee. When she returns with it in tow, I take it from her hand, resting my lips against the blackened porcelain. It tastes like the slow crackle of a crumbling log, the stinging scent of burning meat. I wince, return the cup to the table. The waitress comes back around, and I call her to my side.

"Do you know anyone named Ray Carver?"

"Yeah, I did. He left a long time ago. Why?"

"I'm his grandson. I think he had a summer home here?"

"Yep. Right on the beach." A pause. "What happened to him, anyways?"

"He's dead."

Her smile fades. *Finally.* "Oh. I'm so sorry."

"Where's the house?"

She shakes herself and continues. "If you head down a ways and then make a right on Brooks Street, you should find it. It's at the end, right next to the beach access."

I draw myself up. "Thanks." I approach the door.

"He was a great man. Always ready with a joke or a piece of advice." A grin languishes across her voice. "Did he ever tell you that story about the fisherman?"

I wince, turn to meet her gaze. "You know your island's burnt, right? There's nothing left. Just ash."

She offers a sad smile. I tear my eyes from hers, step out into the street beyond.

I brush past the remains of civilization and the memories of others. To my family, they gleam with a vivid reality. In the corners of my mind, they ring with a gong's dulcet tones. Burnished, desolate, fleeting. I wish to pause in my passage, to set myself down upon the stone of the street, to rest there until I am rendered nothing more than a lukewarm landmark, a thing so familiar to the island and its denizens that they feel no need to offer me a second thought. The ash will gather about my feet, and, after a time, I will fade into the earth, become one with Fire Island. The people will step across my streets, pick my flowers, swim in my waters, bask in my sun. Then, and only then, will I know. And I will sit next to Grandpa and fling the line over my shoulder and wait until a fish tugs helplessly at its hook. I will turn to him and say *I know what you've done, where you've been, who you are. I know, and I love you for it. Yours was a life well-lived.* I pass into a dream, standing there upon the street. I ask him if he is happy, satisfied. His lips curl as if to answer. Then, a tug at the line.

I continue on. Soon, the house looms before me. Immense in its emptiness, it trembles on the line of dilapidation, a foot planted at either side. Tiles drip from the drooping roof. The doorknob gleams with a strange polish. The windowsills bend beneath the burden of rot. The

grasses in the garden drift against each other, the whisper of avid life dancing through the air overhead. The door beckons with the promise of answered epiphany. I step inside.

A hollow thing gapes before me. The weight of words unspoken hangs near the ceiling, bears down upon my shoulders. I swipe a hand through the air, and dust flees off down the hall. I follow after it.

The evidence of life lingers in the corners of the room. Spirits carve themselves from the afternoon shadows. They drift about with purpose, as if they have laid curled within this sanctuary for decades, carrying out the will of the past. The cushions of the couch sink beneath their phantom weight. On the counter, the sun's fading light swirls about a dusty wine-bottle, a fissure spidering across its side. I take its neck into my palm, watch as the glow gleams within its coiled chest. My hand raises, and I slam it down onto the counter, blood racing through my veins. The bottle does not shatter.

*Oh, Grandpa. I can't find you.*

Weakness claws through my bones, the churning fog of dreams the only comfort that might quell it. My feet guide me down the hall, up the stairs, through the citadel of Fire Island. Great frescos of unknowable glory sweep about the walls; my fingers drift against them, hoping to parse their thoughts, to assimilate their knowledge into my blood. I slip through the doors of the bedroom. Thin sheets of sunlight lance across the room. I pass beneath their blades, set myself down upon the ashen, aged bed. Any trace of meaning that might once have called this place home has long since abandoned its abode.

Tears swell in my eyes. A wretched sob rips itself from my lips. I lay myself against the pillow that once called Grandpa "lover". Darkness takes me, and the day fades into dusk's oblivion. I fall, and no dream rises to catch me. Only the vision of the pale, lonely letter.

In the morning, I awake to find a man standing upon the shore. He gazes out at the roiling sea, crests of salt loping across cerulean dunes. I pull myself from the bed and walk down to greet him.

The blunt edge of frost lingers in the wind's touch. I gather my coat about myself as I come to stand by his side. He does not turn.

I recognize him from the memorial. To him, Grandpa was a friend. He spoke of Fire Island. *I hate you.* My eyes rest upon the ocean's rising back, and, for a time, we stand in brotherhood. White and gray and ashen blue. The ferry's horn booms in the distance.

"I figured you'd come here," he says. His voice lilts forth with the hunched spine of an elder. "I saw it in your eyes."

"What made you think that?"

"He loved this place. I remember there used to be a ruined old dock out here. You can still see one of its posts. It's right out there." He raises a finger at the waves. I do not follow his gesture.

"I don't care what you remember."

"One day, he told me he wanted to repair it. He said it'd be nice to fish on."

Silence.

"Don't you want to know where the story goes?"

"Why would I?"

"Isn't that what you came here for? To know more about him?"

"I want to *understand*."

"And how are you supposed to do that if you don't *know* anything?"

I do not reply.

“Well, either way, we did it. It took us months, y’know. We were out here every day after work, beating down nails, carving boards, sanding posts. The kids used to swim around in the water while we went at it. He’d always glance over at them to make sure they were doing alright before getting back to it.”

My eyes fall to the sand. “What happened when you guys finished it?”

He smiles. “We fished. Spent a whole day out here, just patting ourselves on the back. Honestly, at the end of the day, I’m not even sure if the fishing was really what mattered. It was just the fact that we actually *did it*.”

“And now it’s gone. Look. You can hardly even see it anymore.”

“So?”

“So knowing all of that means nothing.”

“What do you remember about your grandfather?”

“He was friendly. He always filled the room with laughter. He wanted to see me as much as he could.”

“Hm. But that’s not good enough for you?”

“I think it’s pretty clear that I didn’t know him. Everyone else has different stories, different memories, different reasons to love him. They’ve all got this island. I was never a part of any of that.”

“Did you love him?”

“Yes.”

“Did you know he loved you?”

I swallow. “Yes.”

“Then there’s nothing else to it.”

“But that isn’t the *real* him. It’s just my version of him. My love doesn’t matter if I gave it to someone that doesn’t exist.”

“In that case, no one knew the ‘real’ Ray. Do you really think that I’m able to understand how he felt about you? About your aunt? About your father? No. All I know is that he and I spent fifty years fishing together. All I know is that he was the best friend I ever had. All I know is that we shared something no one else in his life could comprehend.” Tears quiver down his cheeks.

“I’ll never get to know what this place meant to him.”

“Did you read the letter?”

My lips tremble. “No.”

“I remember what it says.”

“I don’t want to know.”

“It says how proud he is of you. It says that he’s sorry he won’t get to see what kind of man you become. It says that you meant more to him than you could ever know. It says he loves you.”

I rest my head in my palms. Tears drip from the darkness, slip between my fingers and flee upon the wind. My sobs fade into the sea.

“Now do you get it?”

I raise my head, turn my gaze to him once more. “I wanna put him to rest.”

He smiles. “Then let’s do it.”

I rush inside, feet pounding across the lifeless floors of Grandpa’s ancient home. Into his bedroom, to the dresser, the closet. I tear his clothes from the hangers, race back to the seashore. Already, the man is piling the gathered ash into a human form, our love cast in effigy upon the

sand. Kneeling beside him, I rest the clothes across the mound. Atop its peak I place a hat, stained and stiff with salt. The man's eyes gleam as they glance across it.

“He always wore that when we went fishing.”

After a time, it is done. We step back to admire our work. He stands before us. Grandpa and Father and friend. The man and I turn to each other and nod. We sit, cross-legged, upon the sand. Gazes turned to our idol, we wait.

Soon, the wind sweeps in. It gathers itself above our heads, the cyclone of Fire Island. It rises into the sky like the specter of the flames that once towered above the land. We cling to each other in the wake of its passage. It tears at the effigy, ash and dust corkscrewing into the sky. Grandpa's clothes go with it, dancing off through the gray dawn. The man and I smile, and laugh, and cry. We watch as the gale drifts away towards the horizon, the bright spots of Grandpa's clothes vanishing in the distance. We sit out there until the last whispers of the wind's passage fade away. Far away, the ferry's horn sounds, its call rising past the blackened sky, up, up, up, to the great blue heavens above.