

A New Day

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I had passed out from exhaustion, only to awaken to a blazing, bloody sun rising over the ocean horizon, the rolling tide lapping at my lavender toenails. I crawled up the white sand beach like a fly on a sugar cookie. My mouth tasted like metal. I needed to find the sandals I had left behind when I drunkenly decided life was no longer worth living.

I had stood at that edge before, at fifteen, facing the threat of a lobotomy under a crazy conversation cult leader's thumb, but this was different. I was twenty-six. I had just broken up with my soul mate. The emptiness felt terminal. I could not imagine another day of breathing with this weight inside my chest.

I drove to a gay bar on Miami Beach near Alton Road and got shit-faced drunk. I told myself it was just another night out. But beneath the surface, in my subconscious mind, my shadow was already walking toward the water.

I drove to the gay beach on Twenty-First Street, a place layered with memory, longing, and shame. The harvest-blue moon hung low and beckoning. I kicked off my shoes and ran toward the sea, feeling the cool, wet sand under my bare feet. The water embraced me like a one-night stand.

The sand shelf dropped off, and suddenly I was swimming, outward bound toward the vast horizon, toward disappearance.

The night was calm. I wasn't thinking about jellyfish, man-of-war, or sharks. My brain wasn't thinking. I cut through the waves with mechanical precision, breaststroke after breaststroke, cupped fingers propelling me toward the edge of oblivion. Even drunk, my body remembered how to swim. Years of competitive training carried me farther and farther from shore.

Soon I was beyond the breakers, floating in darkness, the city lights pricking the Golden Mile behind me like a constellation I no longer belonged to. I swam until exhaustion wrapped around my limbs. Then I rolled onto my back, floating.

All I wanted was to stop feeling.

My body began sinking into the blanket of the sea.

And then I looked up.

A shadow crossed the moon, a great blue heron gliding silently through silver light.

The sight flipped open a memory.

I was standing alone on Marty's deck, rattling ice cubes in a gin and tonic, watching the flaming sun seep into the bay, and pelicans and gulls dove for their evening meal. The horizon glittered, then softened into lavender-gray as the pale moon rose. I was suspended in that beauty when a smooth, lilting Spanish-accented voice startled me back into my skin.

"Don't you think Florida has the most beautiful sunsets this time of year?"

I turned and found myself face-to-face with a stunning butch-Maria Rodriguez. About my height, intense black eyes framed by lashes so thick they looked painted on, a smile that warmed, a smile you felt before you understood its meaning.

"This is your first time here, isn't it?" she asked, amused by my awkwardness.

I nodded. "I've never been to an all-girls party before."

She laughed softly and offered her hand, perfectly manicured, with a steady, certain grip.

"I'm Maria."

Her handshake grounded me in a way I hadn't expected. We turned toward the water together. Sailboats slipped from the harbor. Morgana King drifted through the open door. Women's voices rose and fell like a language I hadn't realized I was starving for.

Standing beside Maria, I felt fully seen for the first time. I was a newly hatched lesbian chick, fragile, uncertain, desperately vulnerable. But with her, I felt steadied, as though her calm could quiet the tremor inside me. There was something motherly in the way she drew me close, as if instinctively shielding me from a world I was still learning to survive.

I did not yet know how much survival would matter.

A few days later, Maria invited me to join her and Kathy near the marsh. Through the torn screen of Kathy's house, her father lay passed out on a moldy couch, the sour odor of rot rising in waves. Outside, the marsh pulsed with hidden life. Kathy moved through sawgrass with the confidence of someone raised by wilderness. Maria and I trailed behind, exchanging uneasy glances.

"You can see most of the nesting birds from here," Kathy said when we reached a clearing. She adjusted the rifle slung over her shoulder and scanned the treetops with cold baby-blue eyes. Spotting a great blue heron, she thrust the gun toward me.

I scratched a chigger bite and swallowed my dread. I did not want to kill anything. But Kathy's stare allowed no refusal.

So I lifted the rifle, aimed deliberately away from the bird, and pulled the trigger. "You don't know anything about hunting, do you?" she snapped.

"I've never had to kill anything," I said quietly. "I guess I'm not very good at it."

"If you're hungry enough, you learn damn quick," she shot back, her contempt sharp as the crack of the rifle. Now, floating in the Atlantic, waiting to disappear, the memory returned with piercing clarity.

The heron.

Harbinger of good luck, Maria had once told me.

What was I doing, throwing my life away?

I was twenty-six. My lover's alcoholism was not the whole of my existence. The breakup was not a verdict on my worth. The ocean was vast, but so was the future I was about to abandon.

Some people loved me. I knew they would miss me.

The heron crossed the moon again—slow, deliberate, alive.

The universe was not hunting me.

It was calling me back.

I flipped over and began swimming toward shore. Each stroke felt like a small act of defiance. Billy Strayhorn's "Something to Live For" drifted through my fogged brain, something to live for, something to live for, the words rang through my mind like a lifeline.

By the time I stumbled exhausted onto the beach, dawn was breaking. I collapsed in the sand and passed out.

The next morning, I woke to gulls wheeling overhead and a king-sized hangover pounding behind my eyes.

The tide had erased my footprints. The sea looked innocent, as if it had never invited me in.

I sat up slowly and slipped my feet into my sandals.

One step.

Then another.

My head throbbed with every movement, but beneath the pain something more compelling pulsed: I had chosen to live.

The sun rose again, indifferent and magnificent. The same sun that had witnessed my surrender to despair now witnessed my rebirth.

It was a new day.

And a new me.