

SUNFISH

The sun was sinking and Lorie worried she might give birth in the six-foot Mary Anne and muddle the seersucker blanket from her father's house in Syracuse.

When she bent her body to oar the dinghy her stomach cramped and her legs numbed, so she rested the paddles at the far end of the boat, digging the boat forwards with her hands and feeling for vacant shells as she passed.

Lorie wasn't yet sure if her water had broken. She knew the baby would come soon. Today or tomorrow, she thought. Hopefully tomorrow.

Earlier, when the sun was roof-high in the East, Lorie had packed the blanket and satcheled it around a picnic lunch in a two-dollar wicker basket, planning to drive out to the Cape and rent a boat to Lobster Rock, where she could clear her head and plan what to do next.

Now the sun was sharp tangerine and lowering into the clouds that sat like turtle-backed islands in the distance.

Lorie thought of when her mother would complain at breakfast about nightshifts in the emergency room. She'd often aid in deliveries and Lorie wondered if her mother had ever told her what to do with the umbilical cord.

By now Lorie had grabbed at a few rough spots in the sand and plucked them onto the deck. Most of her shells got up and side-stepped for a bit and kept her company until she tossed them back with the noise of dropping change in a wishing well.

Lorie worried the ocean might be too calm. She wanted help from the wind.

When the baby first pushed, Lorie was touching her fingers to the water and looking down through her open legs at a silvery crawfish she'd been caging with an olive twig.

She saw a green flash and the earth rocked and for a moment she felt herself rock with it. Then she leveraged herself with a palm in the sand and left for the Mary Anne.

Between throes, Lorie arched back her neck and scanned the upside-down world for help. She knew none would come and wondered if she would collapse before the baby arrived.

When the wind started up, Lorie took an oar and pushed off the sand and rested her eyes, letting the wind take her. She dreamt of bearing a baby with gills and tail fins who would arrive flapping and take to the sea like a flying fish.

The baby seemed badly to want to leave Lorie and swim in the short waves. Lorie could feel her tailfins slapping.

'Good girl. You calm down, we'll find you a name. I promise. As soon as we see land, you'll have your name.'

Lorie thought for a moment she'd seen a lighthouse. It spun skyward, then flocked in a hundred directions.

Once the wind fell and the air no longer cooled Lorie's face, she thought to paddle towards where she had seen the lighthouse.

Lorie was born at the Cape, less than a mile from the nearest shore. She thought how ironic it was she was so close to giving birth near her first home. She imagined a girl of six wearing her old blue dress in her old yard with her old green and white and yellow striped ball bowling through the tall grass toward the open fence and the great willow.

But soon the throes began again and interrupted her thoughts.

'Shh...don't worry, Baby. We'll be there soon. You'll have your name, I promise. Then all this will be over.'

Lorie rubbed her chest and felt cold sweat on her lips. She was thirsty and didn't want the baby to go without water for too long. Then she worried more.

Lorie reached beneath her for food. Anything that would give her water. She found pitted olives rolling between toasted saltines and goat cheese and held one against the sun, imagining a fish eyeing her the way a one-eyed monster might.

She touched her stomach. 'If you can hear me, I'm sorry. This is the best I can do.' Then she opened her mouth and let the olive drop.

Before Lorie could pick a second olive she convulsed and could no longer eat.

The sun was now flat in the distance and the waves were dropping. Lorie wasn't wearing her watch but knew it was around seven.

Now she could nearly brush her entire arm along the sand and the feeling was joy with the hard grains at the bottom scratching up against the sunburned skin.

It would be a half hour before the waterline fell and the Mary Anne was stranded until the next set of waves. Maybe an hour after, Lorie thought.

She wanted nothing more than to give the baby everything she had.

'Alright, Olive. Hang on. It'll be soon. I promise. We can see the dunes now. It's only a matter of time.'

From where the seagulls had flown, Lorie saw an asphalt-colored mound.

Lorie felt the waves rise beneath her and knew they would soon drop away. She closed her eyes and let the water take her. She let the water make her a part of everything else.

'There'll be room service and strawberry Jell-O cups. You've never had them before. But your mom, she always loved strawberry Jell-O cups. You'll see what I mean.'

When Lorie opened her eyes the sun was a wide island, the boat's belly in the sand.

Lorie had stopped. She was no longer a part of everything else. She opened her eyes and through the red saw only distant rain clouds.

Slowly she stood.

Lorie turned to see a beached whale. The heat had flattened it into a giant sunfish and its eyes gazed open at the clouds bubbling in the distance, orange and green and turquoise like splashes of color from a candy dish. Lorie thought nothing.

She took two more steps and fell sideways onto dry land.

When Lorie opened her eyes she could not stand so she lay in the sand with the hot numb spindles running from behind.

Soon clouds covered the sky. The droplets of sweat on Lorie's forehead cooled her as they rolled up and over her nose and across her face.

Lorie tried thinking of the baby but nothing came. Then, all of a sudden, something spoke to her.

Lorie opened her legs wide and the baby slid out, slapping her tail fins into the sand.

There was no pain. There was no umbilical chord. Lorie watched the baby stumble to her feet and towards the ocean, towards the giant sunfish and past it, into the rising waves. The baby disappeared below the tide and Lorie called her name. Olive. Olive. It started to snow. Lorie cried. She wept. She felt something touch her shoulder. A lifeguard with an English accent asked if she were all right. She screamed something except she didn't know what. She asked for her baby. She called for her Olive.

In a warm voice that melted the snow the lifeguard said, 'Miss Schubert, why must you cry?'

Lorie Schubert closed her eyes and turned away. 'Olive. I've lost my Olive. The ocean took her.'

'Isn't that what you wanted?'

Then no one spoke. Lorie imagined holding her baby against her stomach. She imagined reading to her, and breastfeeding her, and giving her all she wanted.

'I can't remember what I wanted. I didn't want this.'

'Miss Schubert, I believe you are hallucinating.'

'What?'

'I believe that you are hallucinating. Look down at your stomach.'

Lorie Schubert did not look down. She felt the baby was gone, so of course she would not look pregnant. She had been abandoned.

'Miss Schubert, you are bleeding. You need medical attention. Let me help you.'

There was the sound of waves and wind and seagulls and then the briefest silence. As if entering a dream or coming out of one. Then there was the sound of waves and wind and seagulls.

Lorie watched the rain clouds separate from her. She saw into the stars and into the weaves of everything else. It would be dark soon and she would be lonely on earth.

Lorie rolled her nose to where she'd felt the hand and found no lifeguard. She looked down and saw she was still very pregnant. Her blood looked black in the sand. From inside her stomach came a noise that sounded distant and muffled.

'*Qué hora es?*' the belly said. The voice sounded like hers.

'I'm sorry. I can't be of much help to you. I just moved here. I left all my things at the old house and I don't have a watch to tell time with.'

'*Qui est toi?*'

'My name is Lorie Schubert. I am 37 years old. I used to be a ballerina, but then I broke my leg and they wouldn't let me dance for 3 months. When I came back, I was terrible... When you are old enough, I can teach you. I'd like that. It would make me feel important.'

'Your life must have been very difficult,' the belly said.

'Yes. It was a difficult life. But all lives are difficult.'

'*Mais ce n'est pas fini.*'

'What?'

'Your life. It is not over.'

'I know. I know that. Or at least I think I know that.'

'Listen. I know these things. Your life is not over and you are going to be OK.'

'Thank you.'

Then no one spoke. For a long time no one spoke and Lorie watched the gulls and pelicans fly out into gold and purple.

'Now, I need you to listen carefully,' the belly said, and Lorie tried listening carefully. 'I'm drowning, and if you want me to live you must stand up.'

'Stand up?'

'Yes. Stand up.'

Lorie stood. She felt gravity pass through her and thought it was divine.

'Now, walk up the beach, and up the driftwood steps.'

Lorie did as the voice commanded, and once she had reached the top of the steps the voice spoke again.

'There. Do you see that car?'

Lorie saw an ambulance in the parking lot.

'The men there will want to deliver me, but they will see the blood and will bring you to the hospital instead. They will keep you safe and alive. There you will be placed in a stretcher where you will fall asleep with a young man holding your hand very tight. A nice doctor who enjoys Italian Opera will deliver me unto this earth. For six days you will sleep and dream sparkling dreams, and when you awake, you will sign both our names on a state form and be presented with me, your Olive, and we will live forever after beneath the great willow and along the tall grass. Do you understand?'

'Yes,' she said, moving toward the ambulance. 'You'll have your name, I promise. As soon as we reach land, you'll have your name.'

Lorie wanted very badly to flag her arms in the air and get the driver's attention, but she could not lift them. Once she had reached the ambulance, it was empty.

Lorie realized she was not in the parking lot. She was on the beach where Olive had left her. It was snowing. Lorie's underwear was at her ankles and her skirt was at her waist. She heard crying that was not hers and felt cold and weightless. She had the feeling she would give her baby everything and she would soon have nothing left to give.