

# 1

EVERY SUMMER RUTHIE gave away her house by the sea. During the month of May, she packed and polished. Sneakers were scooped up from their kicked-off positions. Earrings, loose change, buttons were swept off the tops of bureaus. Post-its with phone numbers marooned from their meaning had been thrown away, anything threadbare or worn dumped into one of the summer boxes and sealed with squealing tape. T-shirts had been whisked off the hooks on the backs of bathroom doors, and fragrant chunks of Provençal soaps nestled in blue-and-white bowls by the sinks.

Ruthie knew how to create a house that looked lived-in, but lightly. When her summer tenants walked through the door, they breathed in peace and lemons. In this house no one ever had a sleepless night. No child slammed a door, screaming of injustice. No one was ever sick, or sorrowful, or more than pleasantly tired. Summer was a forever season, and held no pain.

With a fistful of yesterday's news, she polished the picture window, spotless enough to slam into and raise a bruise. Now she had a better view of her daughter slacking off. In the yard Jem was

doing what teenagers do, texting while doing a chore in a half-hearted fashion, loading gear into the truck bed with one hand while her thumb jitterbugged on a screen.

It was the first big weekend of summer, and winter's trap had sprung. All along the hundred miles of Long Island, from Manhattan to the East End, skeins of highway were traffic-snarled by eight in the morning. On the North Fork families were spilling out, stretching and inhaling after the dawn ride from Manhattan, parents having bawled at their children, still thickheaded with dreams, to pull on shorts and get the hell in the car. Barbecues were rolled out from the garage, convertible tops folded down, beach chairs snapped to.

High above the creeping cars, helicopter blades purred the air as they carried the rich and the lucky to the Hamptons on the South Fork. At the airport drivers waited by dark-windowed SUVs, patiently sipping coffee. Shopkeepers checked inventory on summer-weight cashmere. House managers reviewed details of schedules and flower deliveries to the vast homes behind the hedges.

Ruthie's renter would arrive at noon. Adeline Clay had paid like a rich person, taking the Beamish-Dutton house for the entire season, and the whopping check was sitting in the bank. By Thanksgiving the money would have disappeared, distributed to various wheezing accounts: the college fund, the taxes due, the unseen needed repairs. But right now Ruthie felt pleasantly, if temporarily, solvent, her feet on a wide-planked floor rubbed with beeswax, the sky bouncing light off the sea. There were a few details left to take care of: one more swipe of the counters, local honey and flowers from the garden to welcome the tenant, a final sweep, and then skedaddling off into their own summer in a rented guesthouse.

"The summer bummer," Jem called it, because giving up the house in the best months of the year was the only way to keep it.

Ruthie's phone vibrated in her pocket. A text from her board president, Mindy Flicker. Mindy had left her Park Avenue apart-

ment earlier in the week to beat the traffic. Ruthie's phone had been pinging with texts for days. Mindy might not have known what she was talking about, but she was firmly committed to conveying it as often as possible.

IDEA! A bouquet would be super to welcome Adeline Clay

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W a card saying it's from the Belfry. Do you have a card? I could drop one off.

I buy them in bulk.

Mike came up behind her as she texted *All taken care of*. As the director of the Belfry Museum, she knew that wealthy board ladies were part of the job. Cosseted as children, driven hard as young women, married off to suitably successful and politically like-minded men, tightly surgeried and whittled down to bone, they could be fierce and admirable or simply awful. Mindy was the latter. She had joined the board three years ago with an excess of sebum and verbiage, and with a combination of big money and a perfect attendance record at meetings, she'd taken over as board president only a year before. Since then, Ruthie's once pleasant and busy job had turned into a constant battle to deflect Mindy's more idiotic ideas while flattering her verve. It would be a summer of too many meetings, of texts and surprise visits and hair twirls accompanied by *Wouldn't it be interesting if we . . .*

"Mindy," she said to Mike.

"Can't you just ignore her?"

"Would you be able to ignore a hyena gnawing on a kidney?"

"Ow." He put his hands on her shoulders. Once, she would have leaned back against him. "Hey. You did it. The place looks great."

"World's perfect," Ruthie agreed. "Wait. The porch. Did you fix the second step?"

"Ruthie." The hands dropped.

Even in his weariness, in his mustard-colored T-shirt with the hole near the collar, he had allure. Forty-eight and he looked like a surfer. She was three years younger and looked like his grandmother. Teenage carelessness regarding sunscreen had taken its toll. Skin elasticity was beginning to break down. Middle age had settled into her laugh lines. Any moment now she'd be initiated into the feminine mysteries of the chin wax.

"Do we have time for coffee?"

"We can't make coffee. The kitchen is clean."

"She won't be here for three hours."

"Don't bother, Daddy," Jem said, stuffing shirts into a duffel as she walked. "God forbid we do some actual living in this house. For the past month I've had to eat my muffin on the porch."

"What say we finish loading the truck!" Ruthie suggested in what Jem called her "me-hearties" voice.

Jem settled the duffel on one shoulder and picked up a canvas tote stuffed with last-minute items—books, soap, sandals, a rolled-up pair of shorts, a box of linguine. She'd worn the same aggrieved expression all morning. It was an old fight; at fifteen, Jem had long passed the age where Mike and Ruthie could make a game out of packing up her room to make way for strangers who would eat off her plates and swim off her beach. It was no longer an adventure to stay in a borrowed trailer at a campground, or flop in a garage apartment. Jem was old enough now to realize that a sofa bed was no lark to sleep on.

They watched her go, blond braid swishing, flip-flops snapping a rebuke.

"We had a fight this morning over the bleach," Ruthie said as soon as the screen door banged. "She promised me she'd help me do the last-minute clean, and she tried to wriggle out of it. Meret wanted her to get a hot wax pedicure."

"What's that?"

"Seventy-five dollars."

"Meret," Mike muttered. "A fur cup of trouble."

“A fur cup with toenails.” Jem’s lovely best friend Olivia had moved away a year ago, and Ruthie still bemoaned the day Meret Bell had stopped by Jem’s table in the cafeteria and said, “I like your hair that way.”

“She’ll be okay,” Mike said, watching through the screen as Jem leaned against his pickup, texting furiously. Boxes and suitcases and a broken chair surrounded her in Joad-like fashion. “She’s going through a girly stage.”

“She’s not going through a girly stage, she’s a *girl*. She’s a girl who thinks she’s a woman.”

“Didn’t Gary Puckett and the Union Gap sing that?”

“You know, it would make me so happy if you’d worry with me.”

Mike sock-skated across the wood floor, heading for his shoes on the porch.

“Sweetie, give me something worthy to worry about, and I can worry with the best of them. I can’t worry about a pedicure. Whereas you like to exist in a fog of general anxiety. Probably why we’re incompatible. Irreconcilable worry patterns.”

“Reason number three hundred and thirty-seven,” Ruthie said, following him to the door. It was an old joke. “Can you pick up Jem after work today? I’ve got Spork prep, and it’s going to be crazy.”

“Sure.”

“And you’re not allowed to call me sweetie, remember?”

“Ah, Rules for a Good Divorce. Thank God you remember them or we’d be in worse trouble.”

“Hey. They were just suggestions.”

“You emailed me a list. There were *asterisks*.” Mike stood at the screen door. Dodge, the artist who lived down the road in the summers, honked and waved from his yellow convertible, yelling something as he went by, most likely “Cocktails!” All summer they would promise to have cocktails together and never do it. Dodge was the new breed of summer renter in Orient; he had a social calendar.

“Every year we watch them come back,” Mike continued, waving at Dodge. “Every year we give up our house. How long can we do this, anyway?”

“Do what?”

“This,” Mike said. “Live next to things we can never have. It gets worse every year. Did you see the house they’re renovating over on Orchard? Dave said there’s a home gym and a lap pool. A home gym! It’s a death knell, I’m telling you.”

He gazed out at the bay, a powdery blue today, with a scattering of white sails skittering toward Bug Light. A rainstorm the night before had failed to clear the humidity, and the world had summery blurred edges. “We wouldn’t have to uproot Jem every summer if we sold it. And we’d have money. We’ve got to be at the top of the market right now.”

When they’d sat down to discuss the divorce three years before, child custody had been decided in an exchange of less than ten words (*And Jem? We just have to . . . Of course.*)—but the house, ah, the house. Marital vows they could abandon, but a shingled house with a water view in an escalating market? They had put everything into the house, they had borrowed and scraped in order to renovate it. It was their version of a hedge fund, held against disaster and college tuition. If everything fell apart, they said, *they could sell the house.*

Divorce papers were inevitable, but it became an item on an ever-growing to-do list that could have been titled “Things to Ignore for Now.” Divorce needed attorneys and turned amicable separations into expensive fights. They decided, for now, to treat divorce as a state of mind rather than polity. Yes, they were divorced. No, the state of New York didn’t know it yet.

So Ruthie stayed in the house with Jem. Mike had moved into an apartment in the bigger village of Greenport, a few blocks from the hardware store, which was at least handy for a carpenter.

Her phone vibrated again. Mindy, no doubt. She ignored it.

“We should move to Vermont, or Nova Scotia,” Mike said.

“To the real country. Where hot wax is on a candle where it belongs, not on your daughter’s toes. Where people think Pilates is next to the Big Dipper. Where they’ve never heard of kale chips.”

“Are we moving to Vermont or 1910?”

“Our town is a barnyard full of hammers and nails,” Mike said. “You can’t walk down a block without hearing a buzz saw. And the storms get worse every year—another Hurricane Sandy moves a degree to the east and we’re finished. How can you time a last chance except by taking it? This could be the moment to cash out.”

“We don’t have enough equity yet,” Ruthie said. “We’re still paying off the loan for the master suite.”

He pressed his lips together the way he always did when she brought up financial reality. He’d grown up as a Dutton, with streets named after his family in Connecticut towns. The fact that his father had run through the money by the time he was twenty should have made him practical, but it only made him less inclined to hear facts.

“She has two years of high school left,” she said. “After that . . .” After that, what? The ellipsis defined the sentence. She didn’t know.

The problem was, she thought they were lucky, and he did not. For Mike, losing the house for three months canceled out having it for nine. For her, it guaranteed it.

This was what she’d never had and what she always craved. *Home*, she thought. *This*. Even if she had to leave it in order to afford it, it was hers. This lovely, perfect village, neighbors who knew her, the bluest hydrangeas, the best view on the North Fork. *This!*

The only thing she missed, she thought, gazing at Mike’s profile, was *that*.

“Now Jem’s in that rotten crowd, with the pedicures and the purses and you have to wear pajama pants on Thursdays or you can’t sit at the table at lunch . . .” Mike shook his head. “Remem-

ber that argument when you bought her the wrong slippers? Like you'd *stabbed* her. We're losing her."

"Of course we're losing her. She's a teenager. And we broke up. Don't you think it's sort of ludicrous for us to leave town together?"

Mike grinned. "Hey. We're divorced, but we're family."

A spark ignited in that tinderbox that was Ruthie's heart. It continually infuriated her that Mike was so adept at disarming her.

Which could be reason number two for why they were apart.

Reason number one? He'd decided that he wasn't in love anymore. ("I don't need a *pal*," he'd said to her. "I need a *destiny*.")

"We struggle so much just to keep it all going," Mike said. "We're still not happy."

"That's why you left, so that we'd all be happy. Remember?"

"Yeah," said Mike. "Look . . ."

A helicopter passed overhead, not loud enough to drown his voice, but he stopped.

So she obeyed him. She looked. The way he stood, half turned toward her, his hand flat against the screen door, ready to push. A man always half on his way out a door.

"Have dinner with me tomorrow? So we can talk?"

"Talk about . . ."

"I don't know, a rethink. Really talk."

The world shut down into quiet. There was something in his face she hadn't seen in a long time. He was really looking at her, for one thing. So much of the end of a marriage was exchanging information without eye contact. "I've got Spork tomorrow."

"It's over at five. After we can go to the Drift."

The Spindrifft was the place they jokingly referred to as "the bad news bar," a local dive where once they had commiserated about disasters over drafts of beer and free hard-boiled eggs and peanuts. Sometimes that was dinner. Tim would slide the jar of mustard down the length of the bar and Mike would catch it in one hand. Outside light would be falling, Jem would be at a



friend's, the twilight would last forever, their kisses would taste of hops and yolk.

“Sure.” *The bar is not a signifier*, she told herself. *It's just a bar.*

Sound rushed in. Tires crunching over gravel. Adeline Clay swung down the driveway in her Range Rover, three hours early.

## 2

IF ONE END of Long Island was a fish mouth ready to chomp on the barb of Manhattan, the tail fin was the East End, split down the middle with Shelter Island between the two. Let the billionaires have the Hamptons on the South Fork, with the shops and restaurants and parties that re-created what made them so exquisitely comfy in Manhattan. The North Fork was two ferry rides away, and it showed. It was farm stands on actual farms. It was pies and parades and stony beaches that hurt your feet, banging screen doors and peaches eaten over the sink. Orient was the morsel at the end of the fork, the village clinging to the narrowest ribbon of land, where light bounced from bay to sound and the air was seasoned with salt.

Summer was the crucial season, when the population bloomed and the streets came to life with bikes and dogs and city cars. There were no famous faces in Orient, only famous résumés. There was one country store with world-class baked goods, the yacht club was a former potato shack on a wharf, the dress code was old sneakers. Transportation was bicycles, no helmets needed, just like the old days. But all that shabby hid a secret life of the

moneyed, serious cultural class. In the summers there were writers and publishers, artists and gallerists; there was a sizable-for-a-hamlet lesbian population and a smattering of architects. When a lesbian architect rented their house for two weeks last August, Mike had called it the Orient Apotheosis.

Ruthie had been surprised last November when Dodge had called from the city, saying that Adeline Clay was looking to rent in Orient for the season. Usually they cobbled together summer rentals in two-week increments. It seemed a watershed kind of change, someone that glam leaving the Hamptons for the North Fork. Not only was Adeline rich, she was *visible*, well known as one of New York's most stylish older women, photographed at openings and benefits, all the places rich and famous people posed in front of logo-scattered backdrops together.

Ruthie and Mike had speculated endlessly about why Adeline would be interested in the amount of downscale their house represented—money problems? facelift recovery?—but in the end when the check came they celebrated with bottles of beer on the deck. Bundled up in down jackets and scarves, they clicked their Rolling Rock bottle necks to toast summer and another year of solvency. Inch by inch, they would pay back the bank loans and launch Jem into the world. Adeline Clay was the gateway to the now impossible American dream: a college education without debt, a comfortable retirement, an edge.

ADELINE WORE A delicate blue-and-white-striped shirt with rippling oversized ruffles down the front, white jeans, sandals, and enormous sunglasses. Impossibly thin, she resembled a well-tailored dragonfly. A purse the size of a small suitcase hung on her forearm. Her highlighted hair was short and cut cleverly around her head. Her outfit whispered, *I am rich, and this is appropriate summer attire, because this is as beachy as I am willing to get.*

From the passenger side a young man slithered out, one tennis-shoed foot at a time. He dislodged a paper napkin from the seat,

and it pirouetted prettily on the breeze, fluttering like a heraldic flag. He did not stoop to pick it up.

Ruthie thought of two words she never used. The first was *lithe*. The second was *louche*. This must be Adeline's stepson, Lucas Clay. She'd last seen him when he was a toddler, when she'd worked for his father. He must be about twenty-two or -three now. And every inch beautiful: wheat-colored hair, broad chest, narrow waist. Even from here she could tell he'd inherited his father's startling light-blue eyes, the ones that photographed almost white.

Jem looked up from her phone, then down again quickly, her cheeks flushing, as Lucas shot her a tilted, lazy smile.

Ruthie noticed she was still clutching the bag of garbage. She dropped it off the side of the porch in what she hoped was a surreptitious move.

"I'm at the end of the world!" Adeline called.

Ruthie had met Adeline twenty years before, when Ruthie had been studio manager for the legendary artist Peter Clay, one of a few male painters whose work was often described by (mostly male) critics as "seminal." One night in Tribeca the studio assistants had all gone out for drinks with Peter and the blonde who had broken up his marriage. At first Ruthie hadn't thought Adeline was beautiful, but by the end of the evening she'd realized that none of them could stop staring at her face.

Adeline had been in her thirties then, Ruthie knew. Peter was in his sixties, into his second marriage, and with a toddler. As his studio assistant Ruthie knew firsthand that he'd never been faithful to his first wife, or his second—the breadth of his cheating had been legendary—but he had fallen hard for Adeline and they had stayed married until his death on 9/11. Not in the towers or on a plane, but in an emergency room, of cardiac arrest. For a famous person, it was not a good day to die. For the next year, people would say, "Oh, he's dead?" No one had time to mourn the passing of the merely famous on that day. It was the one day in America that only ordinary lives counted.

It could be said that Adeline Clay had been unlucky in marriage (if being married to a world-famous narcissistic genius could be classified as unlucky), but lucky in widowhood. Peter had left her wealthy, but as his reputation continued to increase (cited as one of the top five influences on young artists, even now) and her own management skills improved, she had grown even richer, forming the Peter Clay Foundation and becoming a powerful force in the art world.

Most people are awkward when approaching someone from a distance. They quicken their pace, or pretend to check their watch or their phone. Adeline took her time, her gaze roaming over the façade of the house, most likely noting every flaw.

Ruthie imagined how she would have handled the same maneuver. Most likely she would have waved when she got out of the car, then immediately regretted it and felt foolishly overeager. She would have quickened her step, then tripped on a flagstone. She would have made a funny face. By the time she'd reached the porch, she would have defined herself as an overly apologetic, frantic lunatic.

Ruthie knew that Adeline, like her, must have inhaled paint fumes in downtown lofts, drunk too much wine, gulped down truck exhaust on Canal Street. She was at least ten years older; how did she manage to look younger than Ruthie? As a museum director Ruthie spent most of her time knocking on the doors of the privileged, looking for funding. She was familiar with various forms of surgical help. But Adeline's face didn't look yanked and manipulated to approximate a younger human. The work had been done skillfully, as though with nail scissors. She resembled a twig-sized ballerina twirling in a jewelry box, lit by soft light and pink satin, breasts little plastic bumps.

"Sorry about arriving so early. We hitchhiked a ride on a bird to East Hampton with a friend. I had the car brought there, and I just hopped over on those two adorable little ferries. It reminded me of Greece!"

"It's not a problem," Ruthie lied. "We were just leaving." Sum-

mer renters usually didn't want the whiff of owner around, let alone coffee. A note explaining about garbage and recycling, beach chairs and parking permits, a drawer full of restaurant menus—that was all the greeting renters desired.

“Would you have time to show me the house before you go?” Adeline pushed her sunglasses up into her hair. Her eyes were an unclouded green, her eyebrows perfect. “Lucas, do you want to see the house?”

Texting, he waved a hand that must have meant, *No, go ahead*, because Adeline lifted her shoulders and started up the stairs. She tripped over the loose board on the second step, then frowned down at the chipped polish on a toenail. Ruthie felt the mood tilt into frost.

“Don't panic. Lucky for you, I'm a carpenter.” Mike crouched down and inspected the board. “Needs to be fixed.” Then he looked up and smiled.

“Ah,” Adeline said, “so you're one of those astute carpenters I hear about.”

“That's right,” Mike said, standing. “And if you wait a sec, I'll identify a hammer and a nail.”

They smiled at each other, and, just like that, Adeline's ice melted away. Mike had that effect on women. There might as well be a puddle on the floor, but Ruthie would be the one to clean it up.

“Won't take long,” he said. “I can come out later today, or I can let you have the long weekend to settle in and come out on Tuesday.”

She waved in the general direction of her Range Rover. “I was so happy to avoid the expressway. I get so nervous in traffic. I grew up in California, you'd think I wouldn't be intimidated by a few cars. But I've lived in New York so long I've forgotten how to drive.”

That night in the bar—Peter had called Adeline *my farmer's daughter*. His arm slung around her neck, his face telegraphing the fact that he was besotted. Ruthie had been in her mid-twenties then, and had thought, *Ew*. She'd been repelled by the sight of

Peter's paint-stained, veiny hand on the smooth skin of Adeline's shoulder. She'd assumed that Adeline didn't love him, that she was playing the Manhattan game of advancement by seducing a rich and famous man. Adeline had been a waitress at Lucky Strike in SoHo, one of the beautiful young women who took your order in thin T-shirts with the sleeves rolled to reveal their tiny, tight biceps. That night Ruthie had wished Peter's morning breath on Adeline; she'd smelled it often enough.

But Adeline was talking, and Mike was listening. "All this week I've been dreaming of the Long Island Expressway. You know those landscaping trucks with a chain on the back that's supposed to hold all that lawn equipment in? I kept seeing a lawnmower crash through my windshield."

"I know how it is," Mike said, even though Ruthie knew he didn't. Only women were afraid of highways and lawnmowers. He stood like a doorman, holding the screen door ajar, and smiling at Adeline.

"I hate driving to Manhattan," Ruthie volunteered. "Once I ended up in New Jersey by mistake. Went right over the George Washington Bridge."

That was usually the signal for Mike to complete the story, how she'd called him in tears from Hackensack. It had been a dinner party staple for years. "Well, you made it," Mike said to Adeline.

"It feels like you're at the very edge of things here," Adeline said. She stopped short as they walked inside. "Yes," she murmured. She toured the room, trailing her hand on a sofa, stopping at the view. "You can't see another house. And the plantings!"

"Catnip," Mike said. "Yarrow."

"I knew when I saw the photos. I knew I could live here. I love your taste. It's just the right mix of sophistication and quirk."

Adeline Clay, whose Manhattan apartment had been showcased in *Architectural Digest*, was a fan of her quirk.

"The house was built in stages," Mike explained as they toured the kitchen with nods from Adeline and "Only four burners?"

when she saw the stove. “The original structure was built in, we think, the 1780s. That little office off the kitchen was once a birthing room.”

“Really.”

“I inherited it from my great-aunt Laurel.”

Ruthie felt a slight sting. Mike had always said *we* inherited it. When did it become *I*? At this point, the house was so leveraged and mortgaged that it was joint property.

“Let’s just say it was in a state of extravagant deterioration. We did most of the work ourselves. Put in the laundry room, all new bathrooms, bumped out the back.”

“You should see me with a sledgehammer,” Ruthie said.

Adeline approved of the guest suite downstairs, perfect for Lucas, who had just graduated from Brown and was working at the Clay Foundation that summer. He’d be coming out on weekends. Upstairs she poked her head into the smaller of the guest bedrooms. “If you knocked down this wall, this could be a dressing room for the master.”

“Terrific idea,” Ruthie said, thinking, *A dressing room?*

Adeline stopped in front of one of Mike’s paintings, hung in the hallway, a black-and-white abstract not typical of his work. Mike was a colorist. “Oh, I like this very much. Who’s the artist?”

“That would be me,” Mike said.

Adeline swiveled and regarded him, then looked at the painting again, as though comparing the two. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize you were a painter.”

“Seems like the rest of the world feels the same,” Mike said.

“Let me show you the laundry.” Ruthie turned the corner into the stairwell. She waited for them on the stairs, trying to follow the murmured conversation, but the overheard word “transactional” propelled her the rest of the way downstairs to check her emails. It was going to be a long day. Spork was the first summer fundraiser for the museum, and she had a million details to take care of.



A text twinkled in from the vice president of the board, Carole Berlinger. *Can you come out later this afternoon? Deets for the house plus a chat. 3pm?* Carole would also be her landlord for the summer. She'd offered her guesthouse to Ruthie for a discounted rent. For once, Ruthie and Jem would have a luxe summer rental. The "plus a chat" was mildly worrying. Chats, for Carole, always seemed to involve the latest Mindy maneuver.

She texted back *Sure* just as Mike and Adeline came downstairs. "Lucas is a bit put out that I didn't take a place in the Hamptons," Adeline was saying. "That's where his crowd is. Orient is a little too slow for him."

"We pride ourselves on that particular quality," Mike said. "We take our time."

"Well, that's what I prefer, but . . . I think it will be good for him. He likes a scene. He's decided he wants to be an actor." Adeline gave a little laugh. "Don't they all."

"We can give you quiet if you want it," Ruthie said. "But there are some events you might enjoy. Lots of artists, dealers, architects . . . of course you know Dodge. He's right down the road. Everyone basically is right down the road. The Belfry picnic is tomorrow, everybody goes. The official name is Summer Fork, but we all just call it Spork."

"The Belfry . . ."

"The Belfry Museum—I'm the director. You drove by it on Main Road, right before the turnoff into the village. The white building with the barn in back."

"Oh! I think you told me, didn't you. Must be fun to run a little museum."

"We're small but scrappy."

"Frankly I came out here to avoid as much as I can," Adeline said.

"Well, if you change your mind, just drop in. I left a couple of tickets for you in the kitchen." As the director of a nonprofit, Ruthie knew how to go a half step beyond politesse without ven-

turing into pushiness. “Is there anything else you’d like to know?” she asked. “My brain is a colander. I forget everything. I tell myself it’s either hormones or a tumor.”

Adeline didn’t smile; she looked concerned, as though she were casting about for the name of a good specialist. *Please like me*, Ruthie thought desperately.

Adeline crossed to the window and looked out at the sea. “It’s like I’ve stowed away on a ship. I can be myself here. In the Hamptons, *summer vacation* is an oxymoron.”

Ruthie was confused for a moment. Her hesitation was part surprise that Adeline had made a joke, and part relief that Adeline had not just called her a moron. Then Ruthie was afraid that Adeline thought she didn’t get her joke. She wondered how she could work *oxymoron* into a sentence again, just to prove she knew what it meant.

Adeline moved a bowl just a quarter inch to the right, then placed her hand on a chair in a proprietary way, her fingers stroking the back. Ruthie felt a sudden, sharp irritation. *Stop caressing my wood*, she wanted to say.

“It’s just adorable,” Adeline said. “This is such a delightful surprise.”

“In my life, that’s always an oxymoron,” Ruthie said, and wanted to kick herself.