

Karen Brown

Esme told him when she was twelve three things happened of notable significance: her grandfather presented her with a car, and then died in it, her grandmother had a pool installed in her basement, and her father put on his pale blue pinstripe suit, custom-made for a previous trip to the Bahamas, and left, never to be heard from again. These events meant something, finally, as Dean motored her out among the Thimble Islands. It was April, a day with the unfulfilled promise to be warm. The wind did its own kind of dance with the Sound. Dean wore a straw hat anchored under his chin with rawhide, his hair in a ponytail, and shorts. Esme avoided looking at his knees exposed to the chill. He piloted the boat between the rocks, quiet and purposeful. She almost loved him for his disinterest.

An hour ago they'd sat in the seafood restaurant lounge on Main Street, the only patrons at eleven a.m. The place was dim, the chair she sat in damp and sticky with the sloshed liquor of uncountable drunken mishaps. The light came through the front window and made her feel dissolute and pale, like someone who might, according to her grandmother, have *crawled out of the gutter*. She wore her mother's pearl earrings and a too-small T-shirt that her grandfather bought for her in a gift shop in Rio de Janeiro the fall before he died. She'd found it in a drawer in the upstairs bedroom of her grandmother's house, a shirt she'd worn and abandoned years ago as a teenager. She'd left the house early that morning, and stopped at the bank. In her bag was enough cash to create a stir, to provide five times the yearly salary of the bartender, a girl whose sharp wrist bones made her seem fragile and terrible all at once. Esme could barely look at her lifting the bottle of J&B.

Dean slid his drink alongside hers, pulled up a stool, and offered her his hand. When she mentioned his ruddy cheeks he said that there was a lot of wind on the water. “Oh, do you live on one of the Thimbles?” she asked him. He shook his head no, and stared at her.

“What are you looking at?” she said. She was drinking the whiskey with ice, and had asked the bartender, Patsy, to add a few maraschino cherries. The TV was on—a news channel showing a white car being pulled from a river.

“Are you married?” he asked her. He bit his lip, waiting for her answer. His eyes were the color of slate. Esme hated to disappoint him if he was trying to pick her up.

“Officially,” Esme said. “My marriage is in a state of limbo.”

She thought she might divorce her husband, Douglas. She’d driven the day before from Boston and the house where they lived with their three-year-old son to her grandmother’s house in Connecticut. Douglas had already tracked her down on the phone.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he’d asked her. Esme imagined him saying *young lady*, like a chastising parent. Behind him she could hear the muffled anguish of the hospital’s waxed floors, fluorescent lights, and life-support machinery. She heard him paged on the intercom.

“I want to see my Nana,” Esme said. “Why make it out to be something it isn’t.”

“I know what this isn’t,” Douglas said, suspicious.

Esme was a little surprised that he’d guessed. “This is nothing,” she said. She began to laugh, something she could never help doing when she was caught. Even as a child playing tag on the front lawn. Later, in lies with boyfriends. Douglas grew grave over the phone and said something about Robin, left behind with the nanny, and she hung up on him.

Dean set his drink on his white napkin. Patsy swiped her towel near them, the undersides of her wrists like the musculature of a dissected bird.

“Good enough,” Dean said to Esme’s admission of a dissolving marriage.

“For what?” she asked him, winking, a little ashamed.

Esme’s grandmother had left her grandfather years before he died, and she lived on dividends from stocks in one of the suburban neighborhoods built from the dissolving of the old Connecticut dairies, on pasture land and orchards and pine woods. Once, cows trod stony paths across her front lawn, through the place that was her living room. Her house was a 1950s colonial, with aluminum siding, shutters, and bay windows. Alice was an avid swimmer. As a young woman she’d swum in amateur competitions around the country, and aspired to qualify

for the 1936 Olympics. She had trophies and photographs that Esme saw each summer at the Thimble Island house—her favorite was of Nana in a white bathing cap, thin and long-limbed, diving from the island's granite outcrop with the house behind her. She swam in the Sound when the weather was warm enough, or in her backyard pool, but in the winters she missed her exercise, the buoyancy, the light and youthful feeling of moving through water. When Esme's grandfather died her grandmother received a small inheritance, and with this she commissioned a local company to install an above-ground pool in her basement. She had to call all of them in the phone book before one would comply. She had to pay extra for them to do it.

The pool was a model called the *Astura*, the sides fashioned of redwood like a barrel, eighteen feet in diameter, and fifty-two inches deep. The effect of the pool on coming down the basement stairs was one Esme would not forget. The ceiling flickered and shimmered. The smell of chlorine mixed with mildew. Her grandmother decorated the basement—strung old postcards from Hawaii and the Bahamas on a wire, draped faded leis and the hollowed-out halves of coconuts. People gave her plaques with sayings: *The Ole Swimming Hole, Swim at Your Own Risk*, and a vintage one made of tin, *The Plunge, Admission, 10 cents* that showed a bathing beauty and her boyfriend poolside, the woman dangling her feet into the water. There was a lamp on a telephone table, but also an overhead bulb at the base of the stairs, and a strand of small paper lanterns. The pool pump hummed. Children were not allowed to swim in the basement pool. Esme could only sit on the gritty stairs and look down while her grandmother swam in a circle around it, her arms long and thin, her gray hair tucked under her cap. Esme sucked on a toffee, stolen from the silver dish in the dining room. Later, her grandmother's bathing suit would hang over the upstairs shower rod—a paisley print, paled by chlorine.

In her nineties now, Esme's grandmother spent afternoons watching soap operas, and smoking cigarettes with her live-in caretaker, Caridad, whom Esme paid to stay with her. At four o'clock they had aperitifs. Recently, her grandmother had given up the basement pool—the stairs, the ladder in and out, were too hard to maneuver. Esme told Caridad to let her grandmother do whatever else she wanted. They listened to piano sonatas on the record player, the recordings scratchy, the tones of the instrument eerily magnified, its hollow sadness entering all of the rooms. Yesterday, Esme had visited a doctor and been given a startling diagnosis. The man was a respected colleague of her husband's, someone she could not doubt. Everything following this disclosure seemed different, overly vibrant: the path leading to her car littered with apple blossoms, like torn confetti, the sky filled with birds and their sharp little song. Like her mother,