

island apart

prologue

In the southeast corner of Massachusetts, six miles off the coast of Cape Cod, lies the island of Martha's Vineyard.

At the eastern end of Martha's Vineyard lies another, much smaller island called Chappaquiddick.

The island takes its name from the Wampanoag Indian words *tcbeqi-aquidenet*, literally "a place or island apart." At various points in its history—in the wake of Hurricane Bob in 1991, for example, or after a powerful nor'easter in 2007—Chappaquiddick has been a true island.

More often than not, however, it has been a peninsula—connected to the rest of Martha's Vineyard by a long slender strip of beach called Norton Point.

This is the story of a man who suffered great hurt and came to the island to find safety, seclusion, and solace. It's

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about a woman who lost nearly everything—only to find herself.

This is the story of Claire and the Hermit of Chappaquiddick.

1

the hermit of chappaquiddick

No one knew his name. Everyone called him the Hermit. He had lived on Chappaquiddick Island for as long as most people could remember. Not that anyone could recall precisely when he had arrived. Perhaps he rode in on the tidal wave of summer folk, which swells the population of Martha's Vineyard from fifteen thousand year-round residents to more than a hundred thousand in August.

He certainly didn't look like the typical beachgoer who rode the Chappaquiddick ferry. His wild silvery-gray hair tumbled past his shoulders. A beard as wavy as eelgrass plunged halfway down his chest. The man wore a faded flannel shirt—even in summer—and his jeans had been mended so often, you couldn't make out where the denim ended and the patches began. His feet were clad in lug boots—even in July. As for the color of his eyes, no one could tell, for he always kept them downcast.

The man boarded the ferry as he always did—a few steps behind the other passengers. He placed his ticket on the binacle rather than handing it directly to the deckhand. His orange ticket identified him as a year-rounder, but no ferry captain could quite recall selling him a commuter book. The tourists gathered at the front of the boat—a pastel swirl of Lilly Pulitzer and Polo—with sunburns that turned New England flesh the electric orange of boiled lobsters. The Hermit stood at the stern, his faded clothes blown by the wind, an island unto himself.

If the Hermit had a car, the ferry captains had never seen it. Nor a bicycle or moped. Invariably, he would arrive at and depart from the ferry landing on foot, a worn backpack patched with duct tape over his shoulder. He'd walk Chappaquiddick Road—the one paved road, the only paved road on the island—in a slow loping gait, oblivious of the joggers and cyclists, unhurried as if lost in thought.

Despite his unvarying route, no one could say for certain exactly where the man lived. Not the ferry captains. Not the FedEx driver or Angie, who delivers the mail in a cherry red Jeep. Not the young woman who runs the tiny Chappy store, the island's sole retail business, open only in July and August. Not even Gerry Jeffers, rumored to be the last surviving Wampanoag Indian on Chappaquiddick.

This uncertainty as to the Hermit's domicile was remarkable on two accounts: first because Chappaquiddick is such a small community—fewer than seventy families live here year-round. And second, because everyone on Chappaquiddick obsesses about real estate—whether or not he or she would admit it. Chappaquiddickers are keenly aware of who owns each parcel of land and deeply paranoid that the wrong person will buy the acreage adjacent to theirs. After all, you don't move to an island with three-acre zoning—without a single hotel or restaurant—

unless you want to maintain a healthy distance from your neighbors.

So who first called him the Hermit of Chappaquiddick? Perhaps it was Patrick, a twenty-year veteran of the Chappy ferry. Patrick was the quietest of the captains who piloted the *On Time II* and *On Time III*—a pair of green and white barges scarcely big enough to carry three cars and assorted bicycles and foot passengers across the 527-foot channel of water that separates Chappaquiddick Island from Edgartown and the rest of Martha's Vineyard. Patrick's mild demeanor hid a wicked sense of humor. He had a nickname for everyone who took the ferry on a more or less regular basis, and no one escaped his wit.

If there was a question as to who coined the Hermit's nickname, there was no doubt as to why. He never attended Chappy Island Association meetings or ice cream socials at the Community Center. He never appeared at Cleanup Day at the Mytoi Japanese Garden or participated in the Derby—the fishing competition that paralyzes Martha's Vineyard in the waning days of September. He never showed up at the celebrity-studded Possible Dreams Auction or at the July Fourth parade down Edgartown's Main Street. The fact is, in the ten or fifteen years the Hermit had lived on the island, he had never been seen in the company of another human being.

Naturally, no one knew what the man did for a living. You might see him with a wire clam basket in Caleb's Pond from time to time, or with a fishing rod at the Gut. Or wading in the shallow waters of Drunkard's Cove—site of a Martha's Vineyard bootleg operation during Prohibition—to gather periwinkles and scungilli. He owned a skiff, which he sometimes rowed on Cape Poge Bay. Early mornings in July, you might see him picking blueberries in the meadow at Wasque Point. But he didn't seem to be a commercial fisherman, and no one had ever

seen him bring produce—either foraged or cultivated—to the local farmers’ market.

When the Hermit felt sociable—that is, when he was willing to run the risk of encountering other people—he giggered for squid off the ferry dock late at night or caught crabs with a hoop net baited with fish scraps. Most often, he kept to himself. He’d build simple weirs in Chappaquiddick’s salt marshes to catch eels that slithered liked sea snakes. He had set up a series of sluices and pans in a neglected corner of Poucha Pond, where he evaporated seawater into salt crystals. No one on the island had any inkling of the latter activity, for despite his ungainly appearance, the Hermit possessed a singular ability to blend into the landscape.

On the rare times when spoken to—“Nice weather” or “How’s it going?”—he responded in such a low voice and in such vague terms, you had the impression you were talking to yourself. Not that anyone was aware of these evasions, for the Hermit did them in such an unassuming manner, no one paid them any heed.

The truth is that the Hermit managed to achieve the ultimate goal of any recluse. Thanks to his perpetually hunched shoulders and perennially downcast gaze, even his fellow Chappaquiddickers had long since ceased noticing him.

If you’re quiet and self-effacing enough, you become invisible—perhaps even to yourself.

2

definitely served straight up

Here's to a bad hair day," said Claire.
"Ouch," said Sheila, forcing a laugh.
They clinked glasses and Claire sloshed some chardonnay on the afghan covering her legs.

The women sprawled on a Stickley couch in front of a crackling fire in a raised fireplace in the Feinblat cottage. A cold front had swept through eastern Massachusetts, and although it was mid-July, the thermometer outside the bay window showed fifty-two degrees.

Elliott had taken Annabel and Nate to see a movie at the Edgartown Theater. Sheila and Claire were having a girls' night out at home.

Sheila's bad hair day began that morning, when a cold gray fog settled over the island, turning her flamboyant red curls into a henna-hued cloud of frizz.

Claire's bad hair day began after the first round of chemotherapy in April. Her scalp was as bare as an eggshell and she kept it wrapped in a kerchief.

Sheila poured herself and Claire another glass of wine.

The "cottage"—as such structures were called when built on Martha's Vineyard at the turn of the last century—was a gray-shingled, gambrel-roofed mansion perched high on a bluff on North Neck Road. Sheila wasn't bashful about her summer home's pedigree or its cost.

Claire knew, for example, that the architectural firm of Frederick Law Olmsted designed the house for a wealthy Boston podiatrist who invented the world's first deodorizing foot powder. That Sheila and Elliott had paid three million dollars for the property, plus another million for the renovation—the latter done by a dyspeptic contractor from West Tisbury, who frowned whenever Elliott asked him for an estimate or a price.

"Around here, people usually ask 'How soon?' not 'How much?'" the contractor said.

The money, Claire was well aware, came from the royalties of Elliott's most recent book, *It's Your Responsibility*—twenty-four weeks at the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list. The Manhattan psychiatrist earned vast sums writing about responsibility and facing the consequences. Naturally, his work sparked controversy in an age when failing students blame their teachers for not educating them better and when criminals sue prisons for the discomforts of their incarceration.

Of course, his frequent appearances on *Oprah* didn't hurt either, Sheila wasn't shy to observe. Claire's friend wasn't bashful about much.

Claire thought of her own husband, a now unemployed college professor. *Well, at least one of us married well*, she thought.

The women had been college roommates at Columbia University. Claire Doheney, the Irish Catholic from South Bos-

ton, and Sheila Feinblat, the Jewish princess from the Upper East Side in New York.

Their friends called them the Rebbetzin and the Nun.

Sheila had big hair, sensuous lips, a prodigious bust, and a personality that not only filled a room, but also barged into it. In Peter Paul Rubens's day, she would have been a pinup. Her wardrobe ran to man-tailored shirts over Lycra leggings, extravagant scarves, and dangly earrings. Imagine Queen Lutfah as a white woman with a voice like Bette Midler's. If Sheila were a cocktail, it would be made in a blender and festooned with a maraschino cherry and a paper umbrella.

In healthier times, Claire had had fine chestnut hair that fell in a limp pageboy around her high cheekbones, slender nose, and delicate mouth. Her fashion tastes ran to knee-length pencil skirts and sweater sets in the pale gray green of her eyes. Claire possessed the calm of Jodie Foster and the self-deprecating charm of Diane Keaton. If she were a cocktail, it would be stirred, not shaken, and definitely served straight up.

Claire would accompany Sheila to Passover seders in the Schwartz apartment in Manhattan, where she was adopted with noisy enthusiasm. She'd read the four questions in English after one of Sheila's nephews or nieces recited them in Hebrew. She acquired a taste for gefilte fish, dosing the horseradish sauce with a heavy hand.

Sheila would spend Christmas with Claire and her mother and two sisters in their apartment in Southie, where she learned to enjoy coddle and colcannon. Sheila's mother would frown at the thought of her daughter being in the same house with a Christmas tree. "Your poor grandmother," the woman would say, "is turning over in her grave."

After college, the girls became interns at the same publishing house and roommates in an apartment in the East Village. Thirty years later, they still worked in publishing and were

still best friends—survivors between them of divorces, illness, miscarriages, and corporate mergers and downsizings.

Claire worked for Apogee Press—recently acquired by the German media giant, Humboldt. She edited a highly successful biography series called *Men of Action*. Sheila ran the children's books division at Simpson & Smythe and had written several of the company's bestselling kids books herself.

"Well, I hope after the James Tait Black Prize they gave you a raise and corner office," Sheila said. She was referring to Britain's oldest literary award—this year bestowed on *Radiant*, a book Claire edited on the life and work of Marie Curie.

Claire shrugged at the mention of the prize and the notion of a promotion. "I'm lucky they give me a key to the bathroom," she said. "And with my treatments, I need it." Her voice grew serious. "Actually, since the merger, Beidermann has been trying to push me into early retirement. It seems the bean counters in Berlin don't like granting sick leave to patients with uncertain prognoses."

Sheila shook her head and lamented how the industry was being ruined by MBAs like Beidermann.

"You, at least, should be secure after the Disney deal with *Miss Millipede*," said Claire. The latter was a children's book Sheila had written about her daughter Annabel's bug doll—recently optioned for an animated movie.

"Honey, no one is secure in publishing these days," Sheila said. She drained the straw-colored liquid from her glass. "So what's the latest with Harrison?" She forced her voice to sound casual. It was a little game they played. Claire pretended not to want to discuss her impending divorce, and Sheila pretended to be discreet about inquiring.

"Well, it's about time!" Claire laughed. "You've only been dying to ask me since we left Manhattan."

"Well, you know us Chosen People: we don't like to be nosy," said Sheila.

“You were born nosy and you’ll die nosy—and all the rhinoplasty done on Park Avenue won’t change that,” said Claire.

Sheila harrumphed.

“If you must know, Harrison’s being a perfect prick,” Claire said. “He actually threatened to sue me for alimony.”

“That bastard,” said Sheila.

“It gets better,” said Claire. “The regents at Barnard have put him on administrative leave without pay pending a sexual harassment investigation. Turns out my beloved husband has been bedding a twenty-year-old student with boobs out to here.” Claire thrust her arms out from her chest. “Her name is Jennifer—*Jennifer*, for Chrissake—and she comes from Hay Springs, Nebraska.”

Claire didn’t mention that the girl spoke with an odd clicking lisp—the result, she had learned, of a tongue stud.

“The buxom Jennifer has an equally buxom underage sister,” Claire continued. “Apparently, Harrison left voice mail messages suggesting that a little late-night remedial reading as a threesome might help improve a less-than-stellar grade. Other girls have come forward. The Faculty Ethics Committee is having a field day.” She was quiet for a minute. “How could I not have seen it?”

Love is blind, Sheila thought, but she didn’t say it out loud.

“Anyway, Casanova has no income, so he figures he’ll go after mine.”

Claire got up and walked outside to the wraparound deck, with its unobstructed 180-degree views of Edgartown, the outer harbor, and Vineyard Sound. Off in the distance she could see glimmering lights from Cape Cod. *No wonder this place cost four million dollars*. Claire shivered in the night air, but the vista brought her rare inner calm.

Sheila joined her friend on the deck and refilled their wineglasses. “So how’s Molly taking all this?” she asked.

“Oh God, Molly,” Claire said. “Where do I begin?” She

took a larger sip of chardonnay than she'd meant to. "My dear daughter has shaved the hair off the sides of her head. Dyed her Mohawk cobalt blue and driven a safety pin through her septum. You should see the guys she goes out with: each one grungier than the last. And to top it off, the assistant dean called last week to ask me if there are any problems at home—apparently she's flunking out of NYU."

"Ah, the joys of motherhood," Sheila said. Earlier that day, Nate had taken a Magic Marker to Miss Millepede. His sister had a meltdown.

"So what's Molly say about Harrison?" Sheila asked.

"He can do no wrong in her eyes," Claire said. "She blames *me* for the impending divorce. Says if I didn't have my nose in manuscripts all the time, Dad wouldn't have wandered."

"And what's Harrison say?"

"Harrison, stellar father that he is, thinks it's a good thing for a young girl to have a lot of sexual experiences. You should hear the two of them talk. It sounds like a regular Kinsey Report."

"Ouch," Sheila said.

"Ready for the best part?" Claire said. "Harrison has announced that he wants to move back into the apartment. Seems his funds are running short at the moment. Or maybe the winsome Jennifer has second thoughts about sharing a bed with the subject of a sexual harassment investigation. My lawyer says that I can't prevent him from returning without obtaining a restraining order. Both our names are on the deed—hell, legally, I can't even change the locks."

"Shit," said Sheila.

"Yeah, shit," said Claire. "Going back to all that is the last thing I need."

Sheila forced herself to sit upright. "Hey, why don't you stay here? Once school starts for the twins, I'm stuck in New York,

and Elliott is supposed to spend October on a book tour in Australia.”

“That’s very kind, Sheila, but I couldn’t,” said Claire. “You and Elliott have already been so generous—”

“No, it’s perfect,” said Sheila. “With a phone and a DSL line, you can work anywhere. Molly and I will come visit.”

“Hmm,” said Claire.

“Okay, just me,” said Sheila.

“What about my treatments?”

“Well, New York isn’t such a far drive, or if you prefer, Elliott has an oncologist friend at the Beth Israel Hospital in Boston. You could hire a car service from Woods Hole and I’d fly up to meet you.”

“I barely have a job now with all the time I’ve missed. Beidermann has threatened to fire me if I don’t finish the Reich book by January.”

“To hell with Beidermann,” said Sheila. “Imagine how much work you’d get done in a quiet place like Chappaquiddick.”

“What would Elliott say?”

“I’m sure he’d be thrilled to have someone we know watching the house.”

“Chappaquiddick off-season? That sounds about the right speed for my love life.” She thought about it some more. “Well, there’s one bright spot.”

Sheila looked at her quizzically.

“At least I don’t have to worry about finding a hairstylist,” Claire said.

When Elliott and the kids returned home, they found two empty bottles of Elliott’s prized 2001 Chassagne-Montrachet and two grown women passed out on the couch.

The next morning, nursing coffees and hangovers, Sheila informed Elliott about their fall houseguest.

As she’d suspected, he rather liked the idea of having

someone besides the caretaker to look after the cottage. He called his friend at Beth Israel. Yes, they could continue the treatment protocol in Boston. As it turned out, the oncologist had trained with Claire's doctor in Manhattan. Sheila found a car service that would take Claire to Boston and back every three weeks.

As far as Elliott was concerned, there was just one final detail to attend to. When the women went shopping in Edgartown later that week, Elliott moved the remaining bottles of Chassagne-Montrachet to a locked cupboard in the basement. He put some less pedigreed chardonnay where the women would find it for their next girls' night.

Elliott was a giving man, but there were limits to even his generosity.