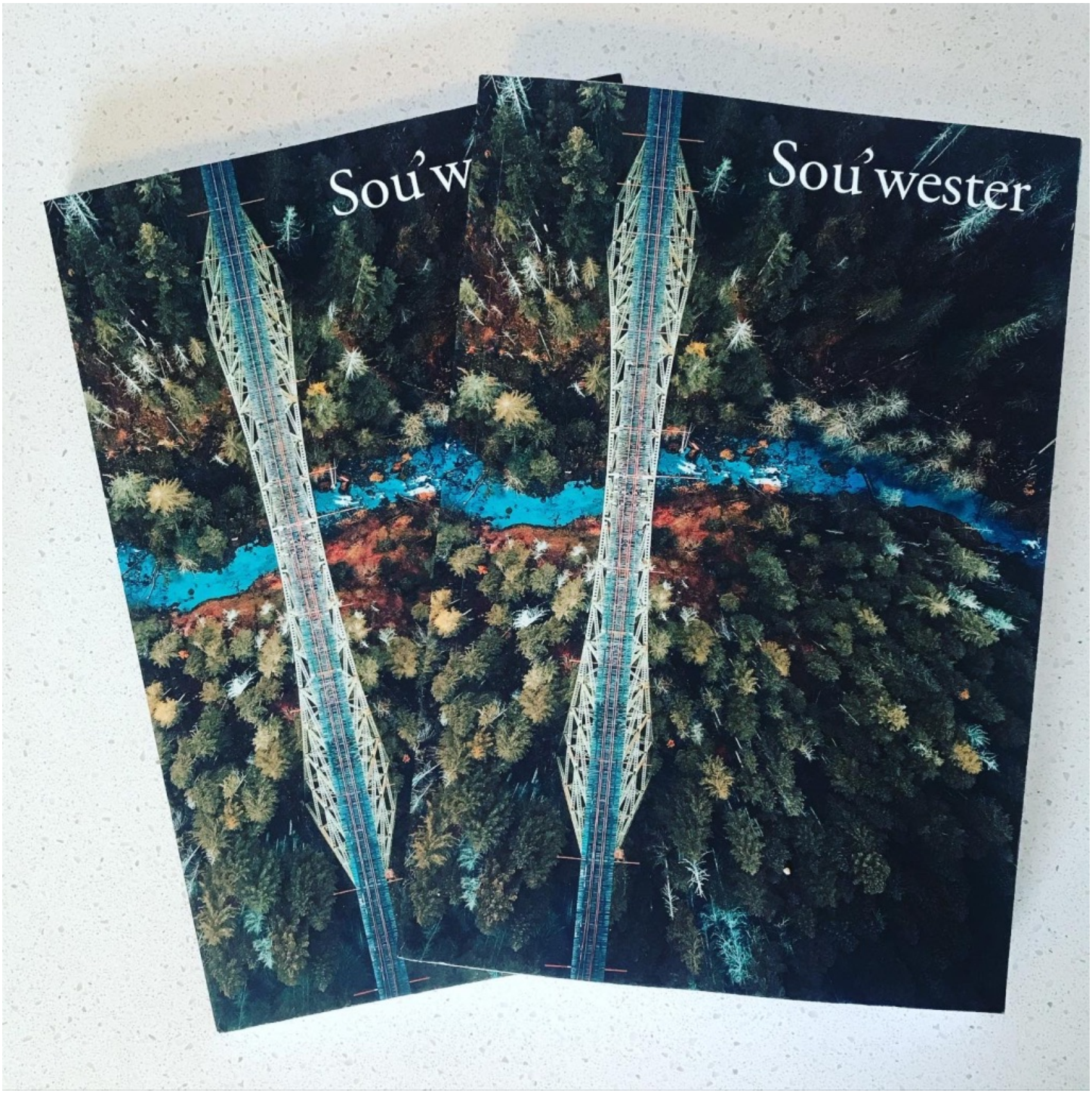

Sou'w
Sou'wester

Matthew Sullivan

Pixel Beach

We were taking a selfie with the Golden Gate bridge in the background, Laura leaning into me and doing her best not to hate having her photo taken, when the burrito guy ran across the beach and offered to take the picture for us.

I called him the burrito guy because at the time I didn't know his name was Gregory, and a few minutes before the photo, I'd bought a brown rice burrito wrapped in foil from him. He'd been selling them out of a cooler that he'd hidden behind a wall where the beach met the sidewalk, and when he sold it to me he looked around as if it were a drug deal, then reached into the cooler and slipped it into my hand. The burrito had been warm when I dropped it into my coat pocket and freezing cold when I ate it ten hours later, in the middle of the night, all alone.

He made us a bit nervous at first, like at any second he might split with my phone, but as he was taking the picture, he kept joking around, telling us to scoot a mile to the left, which would have been a mile out to sea, and pretending he'd never seen a phone that had a camera in it.

"So this thing is a phone *and* a camera? No way!"

The photo turned out well: Laura and I on a dusky beach in our black winter jackets, and from the ease of our lean you could tell that we were on vacation. We'd spent three full days together, eating out and drinking too much, not paying any attention to political news for once, not venting about how overwhelming work could sometimes be, and mending ourselves a bit without the kids around. We had hours before we needed to board the plane home to Seattle. Our smiles were genuine. We could not see the future.

The burrito guy handed back my phone and did that hand-clasped, yoga-bow thing that they always do on the Oscars anymore, which is enough to make everyone hate it, and he ended up being the last person on the planet to take a photo of Laura, unless the coroner or someone else took one later that night.

It wasn't anything horrific or suspicious, the way she'd died. She wasn't stabbed at a bus stop. She didn't get caught up in a liquor store shoot-out. She didn't get plowed over by an Uber driver or get ripped apart in a plane crash.

She'd known she was allergic to shellfish since being a kid on the Puget Sound, and she was always careful to avoid it, so much so that we'd even wondered if she'd maybe outgrown it. But that night before our flight—cutting it close, in fact, so we could squeeze in one last meal before returning to grocery lists and kids—we went out for

Chinese. This sweet old man wheeled a cart through the restaurant with these perfect plates of dumplings, little precious mounds on fine white plates, and we didn't bother asking him if there was any shrimp inside because he just kept saying *You'll like it, it's good*, and he was right. We held them to our mouths and they even smelled good.

We never found out if it was shellfish—*All I taste is pork*, was about the last thing I ever said to Laura in our lives—imagine—but within minutes of finishing the dumplings she was embarrassed because of the hives rising on her face and the old man was taking forever refilling her water, so she grabbed her purse and disappeared into one of those shitty bathrooms with empty paper towel rolls and cleaning products stockpiled on the shelves. She locked herself inside and basically never came out. Eventually I grew agitated from staring across the restaurant at the closed bathroom door, thinking *Where are you*, *Where are you*, and I decided to be proactive and grabbed the pitcher of ice water from the cart by the register. I filled up Laura's glass at the table, thinking it might miraculously wash away her allergic reaction when she returned from the bathroom, and meanwhile, she was on the toilet seat, shoving her pants down and stabbing her thigh with an epi-pen. A group of strangers waiting for tables clogged up the entry way, staring at their menus. They only looked up when I finally lost it and began to slap at the bathroom door, calling her name.

Laura? Laura?

Later, in the silence of the restaurant, while people were scraping their food into to-go containers and the EMT was trying to steer the gurney between tables, the sheet came loose and a crying woman who worked there stopped us and pulled it over Laura's head, tucking it gently beneath her hair. The EMT thanked her and said to no one in particular that sometimes you need two epi-pens, sometimes even three, and this guy who was sitting at a nearby table said, "Maybe the fucking drug companies should supersize those motherfuckers."

He had food in his mouth as he spoke.

Laura loved San Francisco because of people like him. I didn't really like to think of her dying in such a foul bathroom, but I did like the idea, all things considered, of her dying in San Francisco. We met there in our twenties, dated, got engaged, then moved north to Seattle, marriage, suburbs, kids. This was our first time going back for a visit.

For a long time, it refused to feel real.

All I taste is pork. *All I taste is pork*. *All I taste is pork*.

What a dumbass. She was the love of my life.

Months passed. By then my mother-in-law had moved in and was sleeping in my daughter's room, reading her mystery novels under a flower-fairy lamp, driving Laura's minivan and basically raising my kids. She wasn't a shrew or anything, though she

sometimes favored the twins—my seven-year-old boys, Max and Barry, the shortstop and the bruiser—over my ten-year-old daughter, Aubrey, who was quiet and sweet and read more books than any human I'd ever met. My mother-in-law and I had meandering discussions involving take-out menus, but otherwise there wasn't a lot to say. She patted my hand often and once or twice hugged me from behind as I stared out the window. Her moving in was supposed to be temporary, but I was in no shape to be a father. They say you rise to the occasion, but I just didn't. Sometimes when I had insomnia, instead of counting sheep I would picture myself as a stained rug at the base of a waterbed, or a wad of gum covered in hair and stuck to the side of a trash can at the barbershop. I felt tired and incomplete. I didn't even have it in me to scoop ice cream, which pretty much said it all.

I made myself go to work and everyone there pretty much left me alone. But without any oversight I found myself, for many hours each day, sitting in my office with a framed photograph—*the* framed photograph—resting face-up on the desk before me. I'd arranged my monitor so that when people walked past my door I could stare at my blank screen and finger tap the edge of the photo's frame as if I were typing on a keyboard, but I never thought anyone was fooled.

They were just being nice. That had been happening to me a lot around then, people being nice.

Of course it was the photo of the two of us on the beach: The Last Photo of Laura Alive.

I spent so much time looking at her in the photo that sometimes a soft pressure would build against my shoulder and my side would begin to warm as if she were leaning into me again. Then the warmth would go away, and the rest of the photo would rise against its glass.

The dappled sand. The gray sky. The rolling waves at dusk.

A woman tossing a tennis ball, her golden retriever sailing through the air.

And of course, stretching through the background of it all, that iconic red bridge lined with lights, so vibrant it could have been flowing with blood.

One day at work I was surprised to see a pair of figures emerge, quite suddenly, near the edge of the frame, far down the beach, as if they'd just strolled into the photograph by accident.

It was weird how I'd never really focused on them the first 3,000 times I'd stared at the image, but Laura had that kind of power over me. In the photo they were tiny but distinct, like people created out of 3-point type (*x*), and once I noticed them, I wasn't able to notice anything else. I had a magnifying glass in a leather case in my top desk drawer, and for the first time in my life, I really used it.

The guy—one of them was a guy—was kneeling in the sand, wearing a royal blue blazer, looking up at a woman who was wearing a neon-pink dress. She may have

had a yellow belt around her middle, or that may have been a diffusion of the bridge lights beyond. Both had dark black hair and, if I had to guess, I would've said they were young.

Sitting at my desk, studying them through the glass, I tried to remember whether I had seen them on the beach that day.

It wasn't easy, like looking for a pearl in a pile of dirt, but something emerged: after the burrito guy had taken the photo and cracked his bad jokes, Laura and I left the beach and sat on a wall in the adjacent neighborhood to shake the sand out of our shoes. It was nearly dark by then, but we'd found a spot beneath a misty yellow streetlight. The air was moist, our socks sticky, and the couple—the pair in the photo, I was certain—walked past us and continued down the sidewalk, heading in the direction of some shops and restaurants. I'd hardly noticed them and probably wouldn't have even remembered the moment except Laura had stopped brushing sand off of her soles and elbowed my elbow.

"That woman was crying," she whispered.

I looked up, and she gestured toward them: the woman in her sharp pink, the man in his royal blue.

"Crying like hurt?"

"I don't know," she said. "She was wiping her eyes."

We leaned forward but by then they were a distant shape far up the sidewalk. They were about half our age, I surmised, the age we used to be, the age of ourselves when we met, and they were holding hands. But the main thing I noticed was that she was taller than him, and that from far away, she didn't appear to be in danger.

"Nosey," I said, and Laura wagged an eyebrow.

I had no reason to remember that, but there it was, brining inside.

And once I remembered the couple, I looked more closely at the photo and my entire world suddenly seemed to exist within it, as if that beach was the only place on earth.

I understood what I was seeing, and what I needed to do.

When I flew back to San Francisco, leaving my kids with their grandmother once again, I went straight to the beach, but the burrito guy wasn't there with his cooler behind the wall, and the couple of course was nowhere in sight. I found the place where Laura and I had our photo taken and stood in the sand with cold bare feet, staring at the bridge for a long time, taking deep breaths of the ocean air. I felt invisible there, as if Laura's absence had somehow reached out to include me within it. Then I checked into a hotel nearby.

For two days, I wandered up and down the shoreline, staring into the face of everyone who passed. People probably thought I was creepy, but they didn't know

me. The third day was pouring rain and hardly anyone was on the beach, and on the fourth day I thought I saw the burrito guy in the window of a passing bus, but convinced myself that his image was false, a by-product of my own desperation. But then, on the fifth day, he was there, sitting on his wall, feet on his yellow cooler, selling his warm burritos wrapped in foil. He'd either recently lost a few teeth up front or I hadn't noticed them missing before.

He recognized me right away.

"Photo guy!" he said, pointing at me and hopping off the wall.

This was so unexpected that I gave him a hug. After standing there taut for a few seconds, clearly stunned by my response, his whole body loosened and he hugged me right back, like we were old friends. He smelled horrific, like dead smeared fish, and I ended up with a bunch of his long hair in my mouth, but I still held on.

There on the wall, I told him what had happened to Laura, and that he'd taken the last photo of her alive, and it seemed to him the most natural thing in the world, me flying 800 miles to be there.

His name was Gregory, I learned, and he liked to talk. He was a recovering heroin addict from Nebraska who lived in a one-bedroom apartment with nine kind people. For a while, he'd made enough money selling burritos that he didn't need another job and was even saving up to buy a little food truck. But twice now he'd been busted for selling food without a permit, and the next time he got caught, he'd probably be blacklisted by the Health Department. He still sold burritos, but when the beach was busy he wore a hairnet and plastic gloves in case his next customer turned out to be an undercover Food Inspector.

"It's starting to get to me," he said, scanning all around. His left ear was one giant scab.

I told Gregory the reason I'd come back. When I first showed him the photo he seemed distracted, and I could tell he thought I was messing with him, like I was some kind of undercover Food Spy, trying to get him to come clean about his salmonella-tainted cilantro. I'd had the photo cropped and enlarged back home, so you could still see part of Laura and me standing there, but the couple was now the focus.

"Is that really happening?" he said, pointing at the man in the sand.

"I'd really like to find them."

"Yeah, I bet. Well, shit then. I guess I'll help."

I offered to pay him for his time, but I didn't tell him that if it worked out I'd give him a little money to help with a down payment on a food truck, courtesy of Laura's life insurance. Gregory then did something that made me glad I'd flown 800 miles to ask for his help: he began walking down the beach, veering this way and that as his sneakers sunk into the sand. His soles were flappy and trashed and one of his shoes didn't even have a lace. He held the photo before him and shifted it around his line

of sight, as if comparing the bridge in the photo to the bridge in real life. When he reached the exact spot where Laura and I had been standing he stopped and squinted down the shore.

"See there?" he said, pointing. "Recognize her?"

Near the water's edge, a woman was throwing a tennis ball for her golden retriever. I'd swear she was the same woman in the photo, just in a different spot, closer to the shoreline. The dog was the same too, sailing through the air, sand falling in clumps from his paws.

"That's a really good sign," I said.

The day felt so promising that I bought Gregory's whole cooler of burritos as a gesture of goodwill. Then we carried it between us all the way down the beach, in the direction of the bridge. We offered the burritos, weighty and warm, to anyone who wanted one.

Almost everyone declined, and one asshole took one and fed it to his dog. But those who accepted the gift seemed genuinely thankful, and once we'd given them all away, Gregory sat down on the cooler and looked out at the misty waves.

"We'll find the couple you're looking for," he said. "It's just a matter of time."

***

A few months passed. I was back home and still hadn't heard from Gregory, though I checked my phone for his messages every single time I went to the bathroom—which, with my sad foamy stomach, was a lot—and honestly, I had a difficult time thinking about anything besides that stretch of chilly beach. When I had insomnia, instead of imagining myself as a cracked asphalt shingle hammered into the roof of an abandoned shack somewhere in Kentucky, I imagined that I was resting my cheek in the beach's dimpled sand, feeling the breeze blow under the bridge and across my face. Back in San Francisco, Gregory and I had agreed that he wouldn't contact me until he found the couple, which made sense at the time because I was worried he might start calling my kids, or pestering my mother-in-law for money. I liked the guy, but he was a drug addict. Now I was regretting not getting his contact details.

One afternoon, after months more of no word from Gregory, , I left work early without telling anyone and found myself sitting in Aubrey's bedroom, on Aubrey's bed. She and the twins were still at school and my mother-in-law was back living at her place, so I was the only one in the house. My dog had run off to hide in the laundry room, which was what he did whenever I came home and caught him sleeping on the couch, even though he *had* to know I didn't have the energy to care, and he probably could've gotten away with rubbing his furred penis across my toothbrush without raising my blood pressure. I knew what my grief looked like—skipping out of work, avoiding restaurants and libraries and other human places, spending too much time

learning about pixel ratios in photography forums—but I was there in Aubrey's room because I wanted to see what my kids' grief looked like.

I studied her teacups full of make-up tubes and the mysterious posters that had sprouted on her walls and felt as if I'd landed on a distant planet. A cheap frilly ribbon, *Math Team Fourth Place*, had somehow ended up in her trash can. A stack of YA novels, recommended by an optimistic bookseller last holiday season, sat on the bottom shelf of her nightstand, their spines creased and re-creased with my daughter's attempts at escape.

Holding a plastic pony in my hand, on the verge of tears, the alienation of the moment felt monumental. As did the conviction that raising these kids to become adults was among the purest gifts life could offer, but also the hardest, and one that was impossible for me to do alone.

I decided then and there that things would be different. I decided *Enough*.

I stopped waiting for Gregory to call, which was a good thing, because he didn't call, and I focused instead on making pizza with my kids, watching the summer Olympics, leaving my fucking phone in a basket by the door. I started going to restaurants again.

I really thought that I'd put that moment on the beach behind me. Then, on the one-year anniversary of Laura's death, as I was cleaning up from a pastry party my mother-in-law had thrown in Laura's honor, my phone buzzed. All day, well-wishers from afar had been adding brightness to my gloom. The pastries had given me heartburn, and I reached the point where I couldn't handle any more brightness—but the area code was 415, so I answered.

It was Gregory. It made some sense, I thought, that he'd remembered the date of Laura's death. I wrongly assumed he was calling to express his sympathy.

"They thought I was crazy," he said, practically shouting. "They wouldn't listen to me but I tried, man. I tried!"

"What are you saying? Who thought you were crazy?"

"The *couple*, man!"

He said he'd recognized them on the beach that morning. The young man was wearing the same blue blazer, but the woman was wearing a bright orange dress this time, not pink. They had a picnic basket.

"I know exactly when to find them," he said.

At first I thought I'd misheard him. "You mean *where*," I said.

"Naw, man. I mean *when*!"

***

A full year passed. As the second anniversary of Laura's death approached, I declined my mother-in-law's offer of a memorial barbecue and loaded my kids onto a plane. Barry and Max packed the same bow ties that they'd worn to their mother's

funeral—they barely fit around their necks anymore—and Aubrey had brought a nice dress, and a hair-straightener, and a Ziploc bag full of make-up. The TSA guy at the airport made her dump out a giant bottle of saline solution for her contact lenses. She had no idea it had to be under two ounces, but she was too old for me to be helping her pack.

Gregory met us at the beach around noon. We embraced, and he shook my kids' hands politely. He'd cut his hair off and apparently tried to shave, but he had also lost a lot of weight. I wondered if he'd been using.

"I don't come here anymore," he said, looking around.

"Unless it's a special occasion?" my daughter said.

"Bingo," he said, smiling widely. My kids looked at the sand.

He told us he'd been busted again by the Health Department last year, but he didn't want to talk about it. He lived in Oakland now and worked at a restaurant.

"Busting suds," he said, "but soon I'll be line cook."

No, he hadn't given up on the Food Truck plan, he told me, but he'd recently learned that he'd have to get a driver's license, which added a *whole new level of bullshit*. I had a check for him folded in half in my back pocket, and I decided then and there that it wasn't up to me to worry about how he'd spend it. It wasn't much, but it wasn't nothing, and I liked the fact that he wasn't expecting it.

I was glad I brought my kids, glad that they could meet Gregory, though standing on the shore with him was awkward as hell. He kept slapping the back of his neck with his palm, as if something were crawling there, and spitting in the sand right next to my feet. I thought about how someday, when my kids told this story to their kids, they might wonder about my mental health, or hold up my friendship with Gregory as an example of what grief does to people. Or maybe they'll understand.

Gregory pointed up the beach. "We better hit it," he said.

When I saw the couple in the distance, sitting on a green wool blanket, facing each other with a picnic basket off to the side, I felt my body go tight. Of course, seeing the red bridge inlaid into the blue sky behind them was part of it, but even more than that was the certainty that this really was the couple from the photo, no question. The recognition I felt was intimate and familiar, like when Laura and I would see a movie together—my palm on the inside of her thigh, her palm on the inside of mine—and suddenly I would feel myself getting caught up in a scene, usually one with overflowing music and fine acting, and my whole body would stiffen, and in that moment Laura's fingertips would press into my thigh as if to acknowledge what I was feeling. It was a small gesture, one we never talked about, but I always treasured it, this small secret in the dark.

I walked slowly, feeling the salty breeze on my cheeks, and my kids and Gregory followed. All five of us stared straight ahead. We must have been quite a sight. Aubrey

was holding a brown paper parcel tied with twine, and Barry and Max had split a bundle of flowers they'd bought at a convenience store and wrapped each half in newspaper. Gregory had his hands at his sides, and he kept clenching them into fists.

As we approached their blanket, I could see the couple eating sliced pears out of a Tupperware bowl. There were other storage bowls around them, and a bottle of wine, and a thermos lid filled with orange tea sitting atop a paperback novel. The guy was wearing his royal blue blazer and gray jeans. He had a thick, well-trimmed moustache, and a pair of polished loafers was sitting on the corner of the blanket, his socks folded neatly inside. The woman was tall and had coppery skin and short black hair. She wore pink lipstick and a yellow dress with small white circles that rippled in the breeze.

"Excuse me?" I said. "Hi. Can I talk to you?"

Seeing us, they seemed open but puzzled. The kids and I were all dressed up, and the twins' hair was still damp from the shower at the hotel, and it's possible the couple thought we were part of a church or cult. The woman smiled at my kids and the guy raised his brow to listen—until he recognized Gregory. I wasn't sure what had happened in this very spot a year ago today between the two of them, but it was pretty clear the guy remembered it well, and that he had zero interest in spending another two seconds of his life with Gregory. He stood up and stepped between us and his wife. I ignored the tension and introduced us.

"These are my kids, Barry and Max and Aubrey. I'm Leonard, and I take it you've met Gregory there on the end."

"Yeah," he said, looking surly, "we've met. What is this? We're trying to have lunch."

"It's hard to explain," I said, and then self-doubt got the better of me, and I froze. All I could hear was seagull chatter and the lapping of distant waves.

The woman knelt up on the blanket. "We're not interested," she said politely.

"Come *on*," Aubrey said, stepping forward in the sand and holding out the wrapped parcel. She'd spent an hour this morning braiding her hair, and I could see that it was crooked, and strands had loosened from the weave, and I realized for the millionth time that she didn't have anyone good to help her with stuff like that. "It's a gift," she said. "Just take it."

She's always been a really good kid, but I'd never seen her this self-assured. I think if I'd have been alone, or if it was just me and Gregory, this is where it probably would have turned out very differently.

The woman took the parcel and sat back on her heels on the blanket.

"Open it," the twins said, proudly and in unison, restless with their fists of flowers. When they weren't on screens, they'd spent part of their time on the plane tying the twine around the parcel, pinning down the knots with their fingers.

"Please," I said.

"Please," they said.

The woman arranged the parcel in her lap and, after looking at me, began to untie the twine. The way it was wrapped in brown paper seemed old fashioned, as if excelsior might fall out.

I'd spent a lot of time talking to people who knew about photography, and the general opinion was that, because the couple was so small in the original image, to have the photo enlarged beyond 5 x 7 would make them appear too blurry, the pixels of their presence too big and blocky. It wasn't a great photo even then, but the kids and I did our best to make it look nice and had even splurged on the frame.

"Is that *us*?" she said, looking at the photo, but it didn't sound like a question. Her hand covered her mouth, and her other hand gripped the frame tightly.

I could see her engagement ring with its tiny diamond on her finger—the same ring that her husband, kneeling in this sand two years ago today, had held up as an offering of his love. He was just her boyfriend then, and their future probably looked as if it would go on forever. Maybe it still looked like that.

He was on his knees again, only this time looking over her shoulder at the photo, blink-blink-blinking. He seemed confused, intruded upon. She kept looking at the row of us, then back at the photo, then up at us again.

I got out my phone and showed them the original photo of Laura leaning into me, and pointed at the two of them, those tiny pinpoints way in the back, between us and the bridge. When I explained that this was the last photo ever taken of Laura alive, the woman listened, and asked questions about her death, and looked at the kids, and finally stood up and sort-of half-hugged me. She didn't say anything to try to make us feel better because there wasn't anything to say. I didn't tell her that her husband was the one she should be hugging. He was holding the frame now, studying the image closely, and I could tell that he was thinking, *Why do we need a photo of this? That's what we have our memories for.*

But he was young, so such ignorance was easily forgiven.

"*I* took the photo," Gregory said, raising his voice and surprising us all. "Which is what I was *trying* to tell you assholes last *year* when you chased me off and accused me of *spying* on you—"

"Let's not," I said, "please?"

"Okay, but I was not *stalking* you," he said to the guy. "I was not *spying*."

"Just an accident," I added, and I believed that.

By now the woman had stepped back from me, and her husband had wrapped his arm around her waist. The twins said yes when the woman offered them pears and chocolate, but the truth was, it got really awkward, really fast, so I was relieved when they dumped the flowers on the blanket and began running down the beach. Aubrey held her shoes in her hands and ran after them.

When the woman offered us some wine, Gregory sat cross-legged on the blanket and sloppily poured some into an empty paper coffee cup.

I'd never heard a more reluctant *Cheers*.

In the distance, a plane carved through the sky and a dog played in the waves. My three kids ran up the beach in the direction of the bridge. I thought about sitting with Gregory and the couple, being polite, sipping wine, but the sadness moving through me was as heavy as any I'd ever experienced, so I twisted away without a word and began sprinting after them, my kids, the sand grainy and enormous underfoot.



