

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

THE BOOKSTORE KEEPERS

A SHORT STORY

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Alice Hoffman

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BOOKSTORE
KEEPERS**

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More Than a Fish Loves a River

November

Johnny Lenox awoke one cold morning from a dream in which an angel had come to him. It was a black night in his dream, but the angel was so filled with light that the distance was bright even though Johnny was in a boat in the ink-dark sea. He often dreamed of water, and of the changing tides, and of fish who spoke to him in a language he understood. It made sense for him to be at sea in his dreams, for Johnny was a ferry captain, just as his father had been. He had weathered storms and gales and hurricanes and was a man who was calm under such circumstances. A man at sea who panicked was a man who drowned. Johnny had patience, and that was one of his greatest attributes. He had waited a long time for the woman he loved to come back to him. He had waited for his father to retire so he could take over the ferry business. He had faith in himself and in the world around him, but when he woke in his own bed after his dream of heaven and of the sea, Johnny felt undone and there were tears in his eyes. He felt lost in some deep and puzzling manner, as if he were a searcher who had lost his way in the dark, without a hand to hold.

Their old dog, Hank, was sleeping at the foot of the bed, and Johnny's wife, Isabel, was right there beside him, but he might as well have been alone. He heard the tide as if it was inside him. He heard the wind out in the linden trees and the rattle of the garden gate. It was then he realized it hadn't been an angel who had visited him in his dream, but rather it had been a man. It was his father, Jack Lenox, who lived down on Shore Road in the assisted living complex. Jack Lenox was a tough, kindhearted man who had raised Johnny after his mother had died too young; he'd taught Johnny everything he knew about the sea, and about the world around them, and about patience. *Wait and she'll come back to you*, his father had said after Isabel had left for New York. Johnny and Isabel had pledged themselves to one another when they were in school; they had promised never to love anyone else, but then Isabel's mother had died, and she had said she wanted a new life; she hadn't even listened when he said he did,

too, and New York would be fine if it meant being with her. Even when she'd married someone else, even when years had passed, Johnny's father had assured him things would change. *They always do*, Jack Lenox had said. *Trust in time.*

Johnny was still in bed when Isabel woke that morning, even though he was the sort of person who rose early in order to see to his chores while the sky was still dark. He believed that the best part of the day was the first part, when the birds were waking in the marshes and everything seemed brand new. Unfortunately, today wasn't most days. This was the day when Johnny didn't want time to go forward.

Let it all stay as it was, he thought. *Let us wait until it does.*

But he had the sense that it was already too late. What was done could not be undone. What had been was no longer. He could feel it in every breath he took. Johnny had known happiness with Isabel for more than a decade, half that time as a married couple. They lived out in the marsh where the herons nested, and he wouldn't have chosen to be anywhere else. No matter the weather, they walked along the mossy bogs where the ferns grew and foxes called to one another late at night. Closer to home, they planted a garden of green tomatoes and beans, and, in the places where the light was strong enough, sunflowers that grew as tall as a man. There were hedges of lilacs, and several twisted apple trees. Johnny wanted their lives to stay exactly as they were, with no changes, but he should have known from his experiences at sea that it was impossible to gauge what the future would bring. Even if you were a logical, rational person, life didn't necessarily make sense. The deepest parts, the parts that mattered most—love and death, hope and disappointment—were a mystery that could never be explained. *Have patience*, Johnny's father would have told him. *It will all become clear.* A message can be found in a heart beating, or a bird flying by, or the sound of a siren so far away it can barely be heard.

On this dark morning in November, the sky wasn't its usual vivid blue, and there was the chime of a cold rain hitting against the windowpanes. The rain would turn to ice later if the temperature continued to drop. Johnny had recently hired two other men to captain the ferries, for there had been an increase in visitors over the past few years. He was glad he'd done so, for he already knew he wouldn't be going into work today.

"I thought there was an angel," Johnny told Isabel now that she'd woken. His voice was low and he sounded frightened. "I saw it in my

dream, clear as day.”

An angel was exactly what Johnny looked like to Isabel now in the murky morning light, even though he was unshaven, his dense black hair much too long. He was her dark angel, the love of her life, someone she had run away from and come back to. She’d been afraid of love, but Johnny had always been the one. Isabel had assumed she knew everything there was to know about him, but on this morning, she was stunned to discover that he was crying. She could not remember having ever seen him cry, not even when they were children in school together, not when his mother died the year after hers and they felt like orphans and the world was a vale of sorrows they had to walk through. As far as Isabel knew, Johnny hadn’t cried once, at least not in public, and certainly not for her to see, but now he was utterly distraught, his face wet with tears.

“Johnny.” Isabel tried to stay calm, though a panic was rising inside her. “An angel is usually a good omen.”

Johnny shook his head. “I thought it was an angel in my dream, but it wasn’t.” He gazed out the window at the drizzle, realizing what his dream had meant. “It was my father.”

They didn’t waste another moment. They dressed quickly and let the dog out, then they all got into the truck, Hank, the old Labrador retriever, included. They headed to Shore Road in a silent haze. Someone had once told Isabel that you didn’t really know a man until you divorced him and then the truth about his soul would come tumbling out, for good or for bad, but now she wondered if the real way to understand a man was to witness how he reacted to his father’s death. As they drove on, it was clear that she was married to a man who knew how to love.

Isabel didn’t say a word about Johnny speeding. She didn’t say anything at all. It was a quiet morning, and no birds were singing, and the wind that had begun before daybreak had come up from the west, the frigid, bleak wind that usually didn’t arrive until December. It was so early that a mist threaded through the tall grass as pale rain fell. This was the place where they’d grown up and fallen in love, where they’d lost each other until they had found one another again. But on this morning, the world seemed like an entirely different place from the one that they knew, more dangerous and far more unfathomable. The road was empty, and they might have been anywhere at all, and Johnny didn’t even seem to realize that he was crying.

Isabel wished he hadn't had that dream. Overnight, in a matter of hours, something had shifted. It felt as if he'd walked away from the life that they'd shared and had tumbled into a place of darkness. He hadn't bothered to grab his jacket when they left the house, even though the morning was cold, chilly enough so that Isabel found herself shivering.

"We should talk," she told him.

"I can't talk," Johnny told her. "Not now."

She felt him pushing her away, but she knew this wasn't the time to argue. There was already an ambulance parked on the lawn of the assisted living facility when they pulled up. Johnny wiped his face with his hands. "Wait for me here," he said as he got out to approach the ER workers, all of whom he knew well. The men were boys he'd been chummy with in school and the women were among those he'd dated during the years when Isabel was away. Isabel did as he asked; she stayed where she was, blinking back tears, remembering the loss of her own parents and how irrationally one might act in times of grief. There was nothing she could do to console him at this moment, for his father had died in the night and the angel who had visited him had been Jack Lenox himself, and the dream that had come to Johnny had been his father's last goodbye.

Jack Lenox had led a good, long life; everybody said so. He'd been beloved on the island, respected by all, but his passing broke something in Johnny. The funeral was held in the small cemetery on the west side of the island where both Isabel's and Johnny's mothers were buried. Johnny couldn't have said who had shown up, there had been such a crowd. The truth of it was, he didn't care who was there and he didn't really take note of anyone. He'd been so dazed he'd barely noticed Isabel. He'd blocked out his mother's death at the time of her passing, but he had been a child then, and it was only now, standing at the foot of his father's grave, that he felt the weight of being an orphan. He hadn't grieved when he should have back then, and now he felt as though he'd been punched in the chest. Ever since he'd woken from his dream, his heart beat too fast for no reason. It was beating fast now, as he watched the men lower his father's casket into the ground. He had a deeper understanding of why Isabel had left the island after high school. Back then, he'd deeply resented what she'd done; he'd

been furious and hurt, but now he suddenly felt like disappearing, and that was never a good sign.

After the funeral, Johnny took to walking at night. His mind was restless and dissatisfied. Now that his father was gone, he felt more alone, even though Isabel and Hank were in the house on the marsh, for aloneness breeds loneliness, and loneliness will come between you and your beloved before you know it and drive you apart. Johnny would go to bed with Isabel, but sometime after midnight, he'd discreetly disappear. He was sorting things out, he told himself, for he didn't understand his own feelings of dread. Life was short, that was all he knew, and he needed to start living it with that knowledge.

He left Hank behind when he wandered, which wasn't at all like him, and he went into the deepest woods, even though it could be treacherous there in the dark. The ground was swampy, thick with mud and vines. He knew he wouldn't encounter anyone else here and have to explain himself. At this time of year, the bogs were often flooded with murky ice-cold water; one year a tourist who had disappeared had later been discovered there, drowned with his backpack still over his shoulders. After midnight, the night herons called, and frogs with yellow eyes skittered through the ferns. You had to know the place to make it through, and Johnny did. He knew it better all the time.

He stopped talking at dinner and was often so quiet Isabel didn't know he was home until she all but stumbled over him. He was disappearing, that much was certain. On some nights, when he was too worn out to wander through the woods, Johnny would drive over to the west side of the island and simply stand outside the cemetery gate. Or he'd drive out to the assisted living housing where his father had lived and let his truck idle in the dark. He should have been home in bed, but sleep was a foreign country to him now, and he'd been afflicted by a dread of dreams. As he sat there in the parking lot all alone, he'd sometimes wonder if there was a point to anything at all. That wasn't like him either. Johnny had always seen meaning in every blade of grass, but he just couldn't see it anymore.

At first Isabel had gone after Johnny when he left late at night, but even before she reached him, she knew it was best to let him be, and she simply watched him from afar. She knew it when she saw him standing by the cemetery, his head bowed, clutching the iron fence. His dark hair was tied back, and he hadn't bothered to wear a coat or gloves. He didn't look

up at the stars, just into the darkness before him. She'd turned and gotten back into her car to drive home, her face wet with tears. She understood the heartache of losing a parent. When she was a girl and her mother passed away, Isabel had shut down, just as Johnny had now. For years she had concentrated on hiding from the past, and the last thing she would have wanted was for someone to come after her. Even if you loved someone with all your heart, there were times when you had to let them grieve alone and make their own mistakes and wait until they found their way back to you.

Isabel and Sophie worked together in the bookstore, except for those rare days when the sea was too rough for the ferry to make its crossing from the mainland. In some ways, the sisters' lives had been reversed. When Isabel came home after more than a dozen years in New York, Sophie moved to Hensley. She'd married David Bloom, her oncologist, whom she'd met during her treatment for breast cancer. Isabel was grateful her sister had found a kind, serious man who couldn't have loved her more. Sophie had told Isabel that she was ready for a quieter life, one in which she didn't have to take the first ferry to the island each morning, but working part time was impossible, for their business had been expanding each season. Even in winter, which had been their slowest time, visitors came to celebrate the holidays. Their bakery's cookies and muffins were mailed to customers in every state, and winter brides put in orders for their famous Marry Me, Marry Me Wedding Cake.

Isabel's niece, Violet, was graduating from college soon, and Sophie couldn't wait for her daughter to come home and run the shop. The Once Upon a Time Bookshop had outgrown its small space and spilled over into the cottage where the sisters grew up. Bookshelves had been installed in nearly every room, including the kitchen. Fiction could now be found in what had been their dining room, local history filled what had long ago been their parents' bedroom, and the bookshop was now stocked with copies of *How Much Do I Love You*, which their mother had written as a love letter to her daughters. Isabel had illustrated the letter and sent it to a publisher in New York on a whim, never truly expecting that it would be published, and she'd been shocked and delighted to discover how it touched people's hearts.

The fact that the book had been published was proof that life could surprise you in ways you would have never imagined. Their mother's letter, written in the last weeks of her life, was now a popular illustrated book bought for newborns and grandchildren, a gift given at baby showers and birthday parties. Every night there were parents who read it to their children once they were tucked into bed, so that by now five-year-olds could recite their mother's letter word for word.

I love you more than pancakes, more than ice cream, more than pickles, more than my life. I love you more than dogs or cats or diamonds or gold, more than anyone else in the world.

It was now possible to buy mugs and bowls decorated with Isabel's artwork. *A fish in a river. Two sisters walking in the woods. A peach pie. A heart held in two small hands.* Tourists had always been drawn to the island because of the beaches and the quaint main street, but now they came to show their children where *How Much Do I Love You* had been written. They would stand outside the Once Upon a Time Bookshop and recite Susan Gibson's letter before setting off to look for books in the fairy-tale room, then stopping by the bakery to pick up Never Get Lost Oatmeal Cookies. In this way, Isabel felt as if she had brought her mother back into her life. Now she knew it was impossible to go forward if you didn't mourn.

Before his death, Johnny's father could often be found in the bookshop, happy to talk to customers. He'd soon become something of a local celebrity. He was the illustrator's father-in law, after all, and he'd lived on the island when it was little more than a dot in the sea, known only to a few hardy vacationers who set up tents in the woods. After Jack's passing the bookshop was gloomy. No one wanted to sit at the table in the bakery area, for that was where he usually sat drinking coffee, and Johnny, who usually stopped by for an hour or two, did his best to avoid the place. When he came to drop off some boxes of books that had arrived via the ferry, he abruptly took off, not stopping to venture inside, or even to chat on the porch for a while. He was filled with stories about local history, and Maine weather, and the whales he'd spied out at sea, but now he was stone quiet, as if the only story he had to tell was one in which a son couldn't imagine a world without his father.

"Johnny barely sleeps with me," Isabel told her sister. "He's awake half the night, and on some nights he's not even there."

"People say they see him at the cemetery," Sophie said.

“Do you think that’s normal?”

“Do you think running away from home and not seeing your family for twelve years is normal?” Sophie said, reminding Isabel of her own reaction to the loss of their mother. “He has to go through the grieving process.” Sophie had lost her first husband, Violet’s father, in an unexpected storm, and she knew how grief could uproot you and change you. “You need to give him time,” she told Isabel.

“Mr. Lenox once told me that time was the only thing that mattered,” Isabel said.

“Mr. Lenox was right,” Sophie agreed. “And if you’re worried about Johnny leaving you, he’s not about to do that after waiting so long for you.”

That was Isabel’s worst fear; her sister had always been able to read her innermost emotions. It would be ironic if after all these years of waiting for Isabel to come back to him, Johnny turned out to be the one to leave. She wondered if she’d become too set in her ways, too sure of her good fortune. She’d forgotten how quickly life could change.

“You never know,” Isabel said in a small voice.

“Oh, yes, I do. And anyway, where would he go?”

They thought about that for a while and although they couldn’t come up with an answer, they both knew that men with no destination in mind left all the time. “He’s not the same,” Isabel said.

“No one stays the same,” Sophie said. “Come with me. Let’s get some air.”

Isabel hung a sign on the door that said they would reopen at four, a time when many local people liked to stop by for tea and see what new books had recently arrived. When the sisters stepped off the road into the woods, they found that the rivulets were frozen and icy blue, and the ferns had turned black. The trees were nearly bare, with only a few crinkled brown leaves left on the branches. Hank slowly followed behind, and every now and then the sisters waited for him to catch up. This stretch of land had been their retreat when they were girls, the place where no one could find them and they were free to do as they pleased. Isabel had always been the daring one, and Sophie was the sister who made certain they never went too far. Today they were both thinking about their mother, how young she was when she was taken from them.

I loved you girls more than a fish loves a river, more than a bird loves the sky.

Two little girls in the wild woods without a mother, whose father was too trapped in his own grief to pay attention to them, but who had each other all the same. Isabel threw her arms around her sister. She was grateful that there was someone on earth who knew her so well.

“He has to find the thing that will bring him happiness,” Sophie said. “That’s the trick of moving on. For me, it was Violet.”

“But what if he doesn’t know what that is?”

“He knows. He just needs to be honest with himself. Give him time.” Sophie took Isabel’s hand and Isabel dared to hope that her sister was right.

One morning, Johnny asked Isabel if she would take a walk with him, something they hadn’t done since Jack had passed away. He felt remorseful and foolish; keeping secrets could do that to a person. They took Hank out to Onion Beach and were on their way back to the truck, the wind at their back, when Hank suddenly flopped down in the tall grass, too tired to go on. He was an old dog, they were aware of that, but they suddenly realized just how old he was.

“He can’t make it,” Isabel said, feeling panicked.

“He’ll make it,” Johnny assured her. He picked up Hank and carried him back through the marsh. Suddenly, he’d found himself crying again.

“What is it?” Isabel asked. Isabel could see the gray in Johnny’s dark hair. He was a worrier, and now he was once again undone by his emotion, just as he’d been on the night he’d dreamed about an angel.

“I’ve been thinking about how much I meant to my father,” Johnny said.

“You meant the world to him,” Isabel agreed.

“And that I’d like that,” Johnny went on.

Isabel stared at him blankly.

“With my own son,” Johnny told her.

Isabel felt too dazed to respond. She thought they had decided against children when they got back together. Hadn’t they both agreed it was too late? She followed Johnny to the truck and watched him settle Hank in the back seat atop an old blanket.

“Maybe right now you think you’d like for us to have a child,” Isabel began.

Johnny shook his head and interrupted. "Isabel, I *know* I would."

Her first instinct was to think it was impossible. "I'm forty-two," she said.

"So am I," Johnny answered. "We do things later than most people. We always have."

Isabel thought back to the day she'd left the island. Johnny had stood on the dock calling to her, but it was too windy for her to hear him shout that he was ready to go with her.

"Let me think about it," she told him, evasive. She felt something stirring within her, just as it had when she was illustrating her mother's love letter to her daughters. Now she couldn't help but wonder if all the while she'd worked on the book, she'd been thinking of the daughter she might have had, how she might have passed down her mother's words and love.

"That makes sense," Johnny agreed. "Think."

He didn't reproach her for needing time, but a month passed, and then another, and Isabel hadn't brought up the subject again. That didn't mean she hadn't been thinking about it. She thought about it every time she sold a new mother a copy of *How Much Do I Love You*. She spent hours sorting through children's books in the fairy-tale room, remembering the ones she had loved best. She pulled out *Goodnight Moon* and *Blueberries for Sal* and all the Edward Eager books, staying up late to read *Magic by the Lake* and thinking about how books could change a child's life. She thought about it when she went to the heron's nest where she and Sophie and their mother would look for silvery fish in the river nearby, and count the birds in the sky, knowing that love never died. The world could change, but love was the only thing that lasted, if you let it, if you didn't throw it away.

Now when Johnny went off to walk at night, he'd come back to find Isabel waiting on the porch, and he'd sit down beside her. He still wasn't talking much, but as it turned out they didn't need to talk. They held hands the way they used to, and that was enough.

One night when Johnny came home, Isabel wasn't on the porch, although Hank was there, so deeply asleep he didn't even bark. Johnny had a fleeting thought that Isabel had left him again, but when he went around the house, there she was, standing in the garden, looking out at the marsh. By then it

was spring. There were already lupines in the fields, and the ferns in the woods were unfolding. Isabel had been standing in the garden for a long time. She'd been thinking about the ways in which sorrow could be turned into joy.

As Johnny approached, Isabel nodded. "Fine," she told him.

"Fine?" Johnny repeated, observing her closely.

"Let's do it."

Johnny frowned. "Don't do it for me. You'd resent me, and in the end, you'd wind up hating me. You'd probably move back to New York. Baby, if it's not what you want, I'll deal with it."

"I'm not doing it for you. I'm doing it for us," she told him. Still, a look of worry was stamped on Isabel's face. "It's just, what if I can't?"

"Then we will have tried."

All the same, Isabel insisted they keep their decision to themselves.

There was the path Johnny and his father used to take, past the tall grass, out toward Onion Beach. If he narrowed his eyes, he swore he could see his father. He could see the boy he used to be. Isabel had wrapped her arms around him. He might have changed in some ways, but inside he was still the same person he'd always been, a man who knew how to love someone.

"Do you not want anyone to know because you're not sure?" Johnny wondered.

"No, Johnny," Isabel told him, and it was the truth. "It's because I am."

More Than a Bird Loves the Sky

June

Violet didn't stop in the town of Hensley, but instead went directly to the ferry station and bought her ticket to the island. She had mailed most of her belongings from her apartment in Chelsea, where she'd lived with five other NYU students. Today she had only a backpack, the one she planned to take with her to France, a destination she hadn't yet revealed to her mother. Sophie had been waiting for Violet to return and take over the bakery at the bookstore, and had no idea that Violet had already enrolled in a small prestigious baking school in Paris. She'd already bought her plane ticket, and it was one way rather than round trip. She kept it in her top drawer beside a photograph of her father, a fisherman whose death at sea before she was born had left her grieving for someone she had never known. She'd made her plans in secret, and a secret can be the heaviest baggage of all.

On the day of her homecoming, Violet wore a black raincoat despite the warming weather, for rain in June was always a possibility on Brinkley's Island; there was a low gray mist most mornings, and at least one brief shower in the afternoons, which was why the island was so deeply and beautifully green. Purple and white lupine were in bloom; fairy flowers, they'd always called them, flowers that could bring about magic if you closed your eyes and made a wish.

With her heavy lace-up boots, Violet looked like an explorer; her hair was in one long braid and her backpack was slung over her shoulders. One young boy traveling on the ferry with his parents came over to ask, "Are you going to climb Mount Everest?"

"In a way," Violet had answered, for telling her mother the truth about her plans seemed almost as difficult, and there would be a mountain of disappointment to contend with. There would be arguments and tears. Throughout her college years, whenever Violet came home for holidays, she had camped out in the bookstore in the fairy-tale room, rather than stay at her mother and David's house on the mainland. She liked David, that

wasn't the problem, but the old sea captain's house where her mother and David lived wasn't her home. She preferred to wait for the bookstore to close for the day, and once she was alone—her mother having taken the ferry back to Hensley, and Isabel gone off to the marsh house—Violet would find her way to the tent set up for readers in the fairy-tale room and spend her nights there, as if she were ten again, the girl who lived in a bookstore but hadn't liked books. Frankly, she hadn't liked much of anything at all in those days.

Isabel was the one who had started her reading. Violet had resented the bookstore, and all the time her mother put in working there, but one day her aunt had given her *Half Magic* by Edward Eager and before she knew it, Violet had read all seven of his fabulous novels, and then she'd moved on straightaway to the P. L. Travers Mary Poppins series, and after that, she was hooked. She read voraciously all through high school, keeping novels hidden in her desk when she should have been studying math, and when her mother was in treatment for breast cancer, they shared books in the oncology room, reading aloud so that nurses and patients gathered nearby to hear passages from *Olive Kitteridge* and *The Midnight Library* and *Wuthering Heights*.

Violet was still a fanatical reader. She was currently reading *My Life in France*, by Julia Child, which she kept in her backpack so that she was never without it. She would be eternally grateful to Isabel for introducing her to books, but that didn't make up for all the years she'd missed out on having a father or the nights when she heard her mother crying behind her locked bedroom door. She remembered how lonely she'd been, so lonely she began to pretend she didn't need anyone. She was still pretending, and she was still just as lonely. On nights when she'd come back home to visit, when she looked up at the painted glowing stars, surrounded by volumes of magic and fairy tales, she decided what her fate would be. She wouldn't return to live on the island when she graduated from college. She'd be an explorer. She'd go somewhere far from here and be someone new. She'd make her own choices and her own mistakes, but the one thing she wouldn't do was live in the past.

Living in Manhattan had taught Violet how to survive on her own. She'd attended night class so that she could work at restaurants and bakeries, since she was the one in the family who seemed to have inherited her grandmother's culinary talents. In New York, Violet had a circle of

interesting friends, but she had already decided that the best men to date were ones she didn't care about. That way, it would be easier to leave.

"Don't come to graduation," she had told her mother and her aunt during her last semester at NYU. "I'll be taking the bus to Maine the next day. It will be a complete waste of your time." The truth was, she didn't want anyone applauding her or crying over her; she didn't want anyone to make her feel that she had to stay.

Violet might be a woman now, but Johnny still saw her as the girl she'd always been, argumentative and grouchy and big hearted. As soon as he spied her, he left his first mate, Jesse Hardy, in charge, and went down to the snack bar, where Violet was ordering a slice of pizza and a lemonade.

"I heard the college graduate was returning," Johnny said. "Congratulations!"

He hugged Violet, and even though she was hardly the hugging type, she hugged him in return.

"Your mom will be happy to have you back," Johnny told her. "Overjoyed as a matter of fact. Thrilled. I don't even know what the right word is for that level of happiness."

Violet laughed. "Believe me, it won't last."

They went out to stand on the deck as the ferry approached the island. It was nesting season for the egrets and when they arose from the trees the sky looked as if it was filled with clouds. By now Isabel and Johnny were making weekly visits to a specialist in Boston. They were still hopeful, but sometimes they felt a shared sort of sadness. The future seemed like a dream, something distant and impossible to foretell.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here for your father's funeral," Violet told Johnny. She'd wanted to be, but she hadn't come home much this year. She hadn't been ready to face her mother and tell her the decisions she'd already made concerning her future. "I had midterms. It's a stupid excuse, I know."

"It doesn't matter. I know you cared about him. Funerals don't mean anything. It's life that matters."

Maybe it was the wind that made her duck her head and blink back tears, but Johnny didn't think so. She was likely thinking about the loss of her own father, who hadn't a proper grave of his own.

"You're not happy to be back," he guessed.

"I promised I'd take over the bookstore, that's what everyone has always expected, but that's not what I want. I'm going to Paris instead."

She glanced up at Johnny. "Please don't say anything."

"I consider it our secret," Johnny said.

He was gazing at the shoreline, greener all the time.

"Yeah, well, keeping a secret is making me feel sick," Violet admitted.

"I'm sure it is," Johnny said evenly.

She glanced at him. "You have a secret too."

Johnny wondered how she could tell. He patted her on the back as if she was a child again. He'd watched her grow up, and although she wasn't his, he still felt proud of the way she'd turned out. "All I can say is I know how you feel. I want something too."

"I just dread my mother's reaction. She thinks she knows how I should live my life."

"Your mother will understand," Johnny assured her.

"Unlikely," Violet replied, as gloomy as she'd ever been. "Hey, you never said what you wanted," she shouted as Johnny went off to see to the docking of the ferry.

"That's why it's called a secret," he shouted back to her.

Boxes from New York had been arriving all week, and when Sophie wondered why they were being sent to the bookstore, rather than delivered to Hensley, Isabel suggested it was because the Once Upon a Time Bookshop had so much storage space in the attic. This was what she'd said, but it wasn't what she believed. Isabel had received a letter from Violet earlier in the week. Inside there was a card with only one word written.

Help.

It was the same message Violet had sent ten years earlier when she wanted Isabel to return to the island to save the failing bookstore. Violet's plea had worked then, as it now did once again. Isabel would do anything for her niece; it didn't matter if she needed money or advice, if she'd been hurt by love or simply needed someone to talk to who wouldn't judge her. Isabel hadn't even liked children until she met Violet, and now she wondered if Violet was the reason she was so ready to agree when Johnny brought up the subject of a child of their own.

Isabel was waiting at the terminal when the ferry pulled in. She waved her arms when Violet came down the ramp, then ran to embrace her on the

dock. The sky was such a vivid blue they both had to blink.

"You're here," Violet said.

"Of course I'm here." Isabel waved at Johnny, who was unloading the boat with his deckhands. People traveled with so many suitcases and here was Violet with a single backpack. "You wrote *Help*."

"Because I need it," Violet said.

They looked at each other and Isabel recognized the expression on Violet's face. Years ago, she'd had the same exact longing to be free. "You don't want to come home."

Violet looked away from her aunt's worried gaze. "Remember how you felt?"

"I thought there was nothing here for me." Isabel grinned. "But I was wrong."

"This is different. There really is nothing here for *me*."

They sat down on a bench and watched the other passengers disembarking, most in high spirits as they began their holiday.

"Are you sure?" Isabel asked. Violet had been off to college, but this was different. They might actually lose her.

"I already have my ticket. One way to Paris."

"How are you going to tell your mom?"

Violet gave Isabel a sidelong glance. "I need you to help me."

"Do I have to?"

"Of course," Violet said, looping her arm through her aunt's. "You always do."

There was Johnny up on the captain's deck, looking down at them. Isabel wondered how she had ever believed she had nothing to leave behind when everything that mattered to her was here. At first, she'd gone to see her doctor in town, and after some testing he assured her that she shouldn't have trouble conceiving, and that she had best begin to try immediately. Johnny had laughed when he heard what was expected from him. "Okay," he'd said. "No problem." But after a few months had passed with no results, they'd begun the visits with a specialist, a difficult secret to keep from Sophie.

When Johnny waved at them, they both waved back.

"He wants something," Violet said as they gazed at Johnny. "He didn't tell me what it was. But whatever it is, he wants it pretty badly."

“I know.” Isabel nodded. To want something was dangerous. It could leave you with nothing at all. “I just don’t know if I can give it to him.”

Isabel could tell that her sister was thrilled to have her daughter back. Four years away—with a few holiday visits to the island—was a very long time.

“You told Isabel when you were arriving and not me?” Sophie said as she ran out to greet them on the path to the bookshop.

“We ran into each other on the dock,” Violet said.

“Uh-huh.” Sophie gave Isabel a hard look. “Well, now that you’re back,” Sophie said to her daughter, “we’ll put an announcement in the newspaper. You’ve come back to run the bookstore.”

Isabel exchanged a glance with Violet.

“I’m still here,” Isabel said. “There’s no need for her to take over.”

“She will eventually, so we might as well let people know the plan,” Sophie said before turning to her daughter. “I would have met you over in Hensley so you didn’t have to take the ferry twice.”

“I’m going to stay here tonight,” Violet told her mother. “It’s more convenient.”

“But we have a room for you at our house,” Sophie said.

“Let her get settled in,” Isabel suggested. “She’s traveled a long way. We need to celebrate.”

They did what they always did when Violet returned: they had tea and slices of Midnight Chocolate Cake.

“This is happiness,” Sophie said.

“Mom, it’s chocolate cake,” Violet said.

“Same thing,” Isabel said. “It lasts such a short time, but you remember it.”

A Heart Held in Your Hands

August

When Johnny and Isabel got together with Violet for supper at their house in the marsh, no one mentioned France, or airplane tickets, or unhappiness. By now, Violet had taken over the bakery at the bookstore. She'd moved into her old bedroom in Red Rose Cottage, where she'd grown up.

After Violet left, Johnny and Isabel sat on the porch in the last of the shimmering heat. Hank had gone into the marsh to flop down in the tall grass where it was cooler.

"Violet seems miserable," Johnny said. "Tell her to go to Paris. You can talk to Sophie and help her understand."

"You can't tell someone what to do," Isabel said.

Johnny laughed. "You tell me often enough."

"That's different. We're married," Isabel said.

They both laughed at her remark, since Isabel had been telling him what to do ever since grammar school.

"She has to find out for herself, Johnny."

"She's a lot like you."

"I think that's a compliment," Isabel grinned.

"Oh, it is," Johnny told her. "Most of the time." He looked into the blue distance. "I wouldn't mind having a daughter if she turned out to be like you."

"I thought you wanted a son," Isabel said.

"I'll take what we get."

"Even if he's like you?"

"Is that a threat?"

"It's the opposite." Isabel had saved the pregnancy test and now she brought it out to show him. She went to sit on his lap when he started to cry.

"I never used to do this," Johnny said.

Isabel slipped her hand beneath his shirt. There was his heart, beating too fast. "I warned you. This is what happens when you love too much."

She lifted her eyes to Johnny, desperately in need of reassurance. The future would soon be upon them.

“That’s the one thing I’m certain about,” Johnny told her. “You cannot love someone too much.”

By the end of the week they had gone into town, had a positive test with the doctor at the local hospital, and set up their first appointment with a midwife. It was still their secret, too soon to share with anyone, although every time Isabel saw her sister, she wanted to blurt out the truth. Instead, she and Johnny celebrated the doctor’s visit at home, their joy shared only with one another. Isabel went inside to get some lemon iced tea, and when she returned to the porch, she saw that Johnny had gone into the marsh and was crouched down in the grass. The gulls were circling in the sky. The evening was quiet and beautiful, but something was wrong. Fate can hold out two things at the same time, joy and sorrow, the new life to come and the life that is ending.

Isabel dropped the glasses and let them roll into the grass, then ran through the ankle-deep mud. Hank wasn’t moving, even though his eyes were open. Johnny lifted the dog and carried him to the truck, and they went to the vet on Main Street. Isabel waited in the truck because she couldn’t stop crying. When Johnny returned, he was alone. He leaned into Isabel’s open window, his arms resting on the roof.

“They think there’s very little hope. His kidneys are failing, but they could keep him overnight and try an IV,” he said. “It likely won’t do anything.”

“OK,” Isabel said.

“Is it?”

They looked at each other and they both knew that it wasn’t. The dog was fifteen, maybe more, and there was no cure for old age. Johnny returned to the vet’s office and brought Hank back so that he could pass at home, cradling him in his arms as Isabel drove home.

They stayed up late, so late it wasn’t really night anymore. They hadn’t even attempted to go to bed, but instead, they sat on the living room floor and listened to Hank’s slow deep breathing. At last, Isabel fell asleep on the couch, and when she woke up the sky was filled with slanting blue

light, and she was alone. She went out to the porch. She felt cold even though the day would soon be scorching. She saw Johnny out in the woods, a shovel in hand. The dog was wrapped in a blanket, one they used on cold winter nights.

Isabel went back inside and made coffee for Johnny to have later, then waited on the porch. By now she understood that Johnny grieved alone. When he finally came back, he ran the hose and cleaned the mud off his hands and arms, then came to sit beside Isabel. That was when she wrapped herself around him.

“Hank’s out in the marsh. He’s still ours,” Johnny said.

“I’m afraid,” Isabel said.

“Of the marsh?” Johnny teased. “Do you think we’ll have a canine ghost?”

“I’m afraid that I love you too much and now I’ll love our baby too much.”

“That’s what’s supposed to happen.”

“And then they grow up and go away to Paris.” Isabel was crying and she couldn’t stop.

“Is this still about the baby?” Johnny said, confused.

“I have to tell my sister,” Isabel told him.

“Of course you do.” He held her close even though she was crying, even though she had never wanted to love him in the first place. “Tell her everything.”

Sophie was still in her nightgown the next morning when she heard the back door open. Her husband, David, was already at his office at the hospital, and so she grabbed her phone to dial 911 in case this was a break-in. But when she peered through the doorway, there was only Isabel, filling the kettle.

“What are you doing here?” Sophie came into the room, confused. “Did you take the first ferry over to town?”

“Violet doesn’t want to stay.” Isabel might as well say it out loud rather than wait until Sophie figured it out for herself. It was important to clear the air before she delivered her own news. “She’s only doing it for you.”

Sophie sat down at the table as if she'd had the wind knocked out of her. "Says who?"

"She says it every day in a thousand ways. You're just not listening. She stayed because she thinks it's the right thing to do, even though she doesn't want to work at the bookstore. She wants to go to Paris. You have to let her go."

"You think it's your right to tell me what to do!" Sophie said.

"Isn't it?" Isabel responded.

She had fixed them cups of chamomile tea and she'd brought along some You'll Feel Better in the Morning Cupcakes, but neither sister could eat.

"Why did she confide in you and not me?" Sophie asked.

"Why do you think?"

"Because she's closer to you than she is to me."

"No!" Isabel said. "It's because she loves you most of all. She doesn't want to disappoint you."

"But Paris. It's so far. She won't be part of my life anymore."

"She will be if you let her."

"Easy for you to say. You can't understand. When you have a child, you have so much to lose. She's your niece, and I know you love her, but she's my daughter."

Isabel thought about the times she and Sophie had walked into the woods together when they were girls. They had fought and made up, the way that sisters do. Even if you don't talk to your sister for a dozen years, even if it's more, you can still love her as much as you always did. You can be insulted, ignored, hurt, furious, and she will still be the one you want beside you when it matters most.

"Get dressed," Isabel said. "You're coming with me."

Isabel waited in the kitchen, and then the sisters headed down First Street. The hospital was just ahead and seeing it completely confused Sophie.

"Are you all right?" she asked Isabel. There was panic in her voice. Their mother had had cancer, and so had she, and now she was fearing the worst.

"I'm the best I've ever been." Isabel took her sister's hand. There was no one she'd rather be with at her first midwife's appointment, not even Johnny. "But from now on I'll need you to tell me what to do."

Violet found the plane ticket on the bureau in the parlor later that week, rebooking her previous flight. She was slated to leave on this very day, the last day of August, only hours away, time enough to get to the airport if she hurried.

Don't say goodbye, her mother had written in a note that accompanied the ticket. Just go and don't feel guilty. It's your turn now.

Violet packed her bag and pulled on her boots. When she went to the bookstore, she found that Isabel had locked the door and left another note. *Goodbye darling Violet, my one and only favorite niece. Go live your life.*

Violet couldn't delay and search out her mother and aunt. She had to take the next ferry in order to catch the bus to Boston if she wanted to get to Logan Airport on time for her flight. She knew that they had planned her departure this way. If they saw one another, she just might not leave. It was a warm day, but Violet was traveling to another country, and you never knew when you might need a raincoat in Paris, so she slipped it on. Once on the ferry, she went to the rear deck so that she could have a view of the island as it disappeared from sight. The canopy of green became a blue cloud in the distance, and then there was nothing but the sea.

Johnny came down from the cabin to hand over a slice of I'll Miss You Forever Cake. "From Isabel and your mom," he told her.

Violet wasn't a person who cried and had vowed that she wasn't going to start now, but she was close. Johnny patted her on the back as if she was still a kid, because for him, she always would be. "I'm glad you got what you wanted," he said.

Violet looked up at him. "Did you?"

Johnny grinned. "I did."

"Are you ever going to tell me what your secret is?"

Isabel hadn't wanted Violet to know, she feared it might have caused her niece to stay on the island longer than she really wanted to, but Johnny could tell her now. The baby was due in March, and by the time Violet returned she would surely be crawling.

"She!" Violet said.

"I thought I wanted a son, but it turns out I wanted a daughter. You never know about wanting things. You can be surprised."

Violet understood why Isabel hadn't told her. *Go and don't feel guilty. Go, but we will always love you. You can always come back home.*

Johnny knew that Violet wasn't the sort of person to cry in public, but then again neither was he, and here he was, doing it right along with her. He had cried more this year than he had in his entire life, and he had a feeling he wasn't done.

"I don't know if I want to miss everything," Violet said.

When she stepped off the ferry, she would be starting a new life, and when she came back, everything might be changed. For one thing, she'd be someone's cousin. She'd love someone without even trying.

"You got your wish," Johnny reminded her when Violet seemed to hesitate at the dock in Hensley. "Don't look back yet."

When Johnny returned at the end of the day, Isabel was waiting for him at the ferry terminal. She had been thinking about all the mistakes they'd made, and all the things they'd gotten right. She'd just have to accept that she was the sort of person who loved too much, or maybe Johnny was right, maybe she loved just the right amount.

"Violet's happy for us," Johnny said when he reached her.

"Of course she is."

"Don't cry," Johnny told her because he could see that she was about to.

"I don't cry," Isabel said. "You do."

"I do," he admitted and that was enough to make Isabel smile. She had married a man who cried and was patient and who wasn't afraid to love someone.

It was the best time of year on the island. It would be hot all day, and then the twilight would drift down slowly, and the mist would begin to rise. August was the beginning and the end. It was the time of year when daylilies were still blooming, but the leaves of the trees had already begun to turn yellow around the edges. They stopped out by the heron's tree, parked the truck, then took the path through the marsh. Nothing stayed the same, they knew that, but they were here together now. They had already decided to call the baby Suzanna, after Isabel and Sophie's mother. Some things would always be remembered because they were handed down,

things like love and memories and stories. Once upon a time they thought they had lost everything, they thought they'd lost each other, but instead they'd found a family, and they still held one another's heart in their hands.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Alice Hoffman is the *New York Times* bestselling author of more than thirty works of fiction, including the Practical Magic series, *The Dovekeepers*, *The Invisible Hour*, and *When We Flew Away: A Novel of Anne Frank Before the Diary*. Her work has been translated into more than twenty languages, nominated for multiple awards, and adapted for the screen. *Here on Earth* was named an Oprah's Book Club selection. Hoffman lives near Boston. For the latest information about the author and her work, visit her website at www.alicehoffman.com.



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