

Matthew Salesses

The Last Seal Pup

That morning, before the egg shop closed—and before Sally ran across the beach and saved a seal pup from the killer whales—Dad took us out to pancakes, Loosey Goosey’s family and ours. I ate quickly and then got up to leave. When Mom asked where I was going I said Sally (the girl I loved then) wanted to see me before her mother might die. Mom looked at me like I’d suddenly changed into someone else. LG, two grades above me and half-Argentine, mouthed, why don’t you go fuck yourself instead, because I was going down the block to Sally’s house to show her she should choose me over him.

Indeed I’d been chasing Sally ever since I started choosing a person to masturbate to. She was gymnastically thin, with hollows under her cheekbones that could fit an egg (we’d tried as children). And she was tougher than most boys. A couple days ago I’d told her she was losing too much weight, and while she’d smiled and covered her stomach she hadn’t blamed it on her mother’s cancer. That denial: she was growing up, already putting her parents behind her.

Now I knocked on her door with my bruised knuckles, from building resistance to pain. She opened up only to block the way. I knew she wanted a boy as grown-up as her. I moved in close enough to kiss her. She brought her mouth down to my shoulder and bit me.

A little oval of red tinted through my shirt. In her recent habit of hurting people it was the first time she’d made me bleed. She was exacting this pain for her mother.

You owe me, I said after the shock wore off.

At first she shook her head. I rolled back my sleeve. Her teeth marks corrugated my shoulder.

I told her in return she should drive us out beyond the walls of our American community, into the rest of Argentina, someplace dangerous and more romantic.

The adults said the Argentines, who lived in shanties a half-mile from our community, believed you could see your future in nature. Our community believed in raising their kids abroad, not believing in what other people believed.

Like the bay, a wide quarter-moon of sand on the far side of a small forest, where the Argentines went to have sex.

She unlocked her mother's car without a word. She wanted escape even more than I did.

She drove wildly through the forest, almost ramming into the trees. Simian cries followed us. Monkeys lived somewhere in the forest, though I'd only ever heard their voices, sad for wilder times. The adults said the Argentines, who lived in shanties a half-mile from our community, believed you could see your future in nature. Our community believed in raising their kids abroad, not believing in what other people believed.

I didn't know until we arrived at the bay that the killer whales would be coming and going among the seals. We listened to their annual hunt from the parking lot. They sang as they murdered, vacuuming romance from the air.

I looked out onto the beach. Alan, a squat, sad boy with a transitional mustache, stood beside his father. His father was pointing out the alpha male. Alan rubbed at his lip. He was my grade in school (ninth), and I decided I would enlist him as my wingman, to help me keep LG away from Sally.

Let's go out there, I said. The bigger whales kept nudging their babies onto shore to learn how to attack.

One bite, one favor, Sally said. You used yours up. She turned on the music. The whales crashed into each other in their hurry to eat.

I walked out and told Alan to meet me later. This time, I said, whatever LG's planning isn't going to work. The seal pups kept returning to the ocean, stupidly, like

they'd forgotten what happened to their brothers, or believed it was just a test. Sally was in a mood because she didn't want to be reminded of death, of her mother's cancerous ovaries.

The whale chief pushed past the others, snapping his head back to throw the seal pups he caught into deeper water, where the rest of the pod waited. Alan slumped where he stood like a punching bag cut from the ceiling. I showed him where Sally had bit me and said I was keeping the scar as evidence she cared enough to hurt me. He said my scar wasn't a scar. Beside us his father watched through binoculars: the seals were crying like dogs and dying with exasperation.

Last summer Alan's father had gotten Dad to bring me down to the bay, and had told us that the males have the biggest fins, that they hunt by the season and know the best times to catch certain foods, and that a killer whale could catch anything it chose. I figured if you were that feared you didn't need to choose; things just offered themselves up to be eaten, like the seals.

I remembered that day and wanted to break Alan's father's nose. He was sort of the head of our community—Dad had come down to Argentina at first just to interview him—and he thought he was everyone's father. Sally hadn't been at the beach last year. Back then no one noticed her absence, or presence, but me.

Now Alan's father tried to give me the binoculars and I walked past him back to the car. I wondered when Alan would murder his father the way I understood psychology said you had to. Alan rubbed his lip and stared into the ocean.

When I opened the car door Sally pulled me in hard, leaving scratches with her bitten nails. I turned to her and rested my first three fingers on her cheek.

Your time's up, she said. I hoped she would bite me again, but she didn't. She punched me in the diaphragm. I coughed out a few professions of love.

Through the windshield I watched the whale chief re-beach and push a last seal pup out into the water, where the pod slapped it into the air with their tails, calling to each other. Then the whale chief brought the seal pup back to shore, unharmed, like some sort of offering, and the killer whales swam off.

Look at that, I said. Redemption.

Sally put the car in reverse and said we better get back before she got in trouble for taking it out, let alone escaping. The fact was she was an underage driver and I was younger, and Alan's father, when he wasn't patrolling our community, was a doctor (slash aspiring marine biologist) at the hospital where her mother was treated.

I'd missed my chance.

During the drive back Sally asked did I think we could choose whether or not

to become adults and I knew she was thinking about that seal pup after all, taken out and returned like the dying guy who sees God. She looked out the window at the denseness of nature. The monkeys chimed in with their usual pathetic dirge. I gave her a list of things we couldn't choose: shoe-sizes, rain, what time it is, where you're from, who your parents are. I didn't say death. I said she should admit she wanted to kiss me before we got to the egg shop, which took up the bottom floor of my house. I knew Mom would be hollowing out the eggs like every Sunday and I'd think of Sally's cheekbones.

Years later I would push an egg up against a girl's cheek and she would crack one over my head, misunderstanding.

When I walked into the shop Mom said someone had come in and put every egg on hold. All two thousand: fifty a shelf, ten shelves high, on each wall. She was taking down the window display with the Three Stooges, eggs she said people could better relate to—I'd helped her paint them, pasting the hair onto Curly's shell. Sally had helped with the shop until she decided the eggs were childish. A day full of rain and confessions.

Don't tell your dad, Mom said, but this man wants me to start painting eggs for a gallery. Dad was out having a cigar with some of the other community leaders.

Mom climbed up to pull A Storm's Coming down off the top shelf, and I pictured her dark-swirled egg next to a nude sculpture.

No fucking shit, I said. Who in Argentina would want a shelf full of Audrey Hepburn eggs, her favorites?

Mom sighed, came down the ladder, and gaveled my head with her fist. Do I have to tell Dad you've been swearing again? Her fingers were brittle and on the slap they hurt like five little reeds. I was surprised she could still hurt me.

As I considered revenge, LG came strolling along the sidewalk. He was bigger than me, not muscular big, but bigger like an over-sized dog: hair falling over his eyes, nose jutting out, body taking up more space than his legs or arms. He'd told me a week ago that when it came to Sally he would take what he wanted, but I knew eventually I'd figure out how to burn down the house of his plan.

Only three months earlier, during the rainy season, LG had organized a group of us to have some fun and I'd let us into the egg shop. We'd thrown Mom's labors of love at each other. Pieces stuck to our cheeks. The next morning she found shelves covered with eggshell and chipped paint, and I cried so she would believe it wasn't my fault. Dad cleaned the walls and repainted quietly, not looking at me. He'd prob-

ably known what I'd done from one of the neighborhood kids—though I was sure he hadn't told Mom.

After the break-in LG offered to help out in Sally's stead, pretending to be such an angel. We bought wax and paint and blew the yolks out of dozens of eggs. Mom let LG do the real work; I got stuck helping her do the girl things Sally had done. Dad hovered around the shop and I considered telling the truth, but maybe I'd already blown the yolks out of so many eggs that the truth was obvious. Once Dad had told me that to parents kids were a lot like clouds—when you were sad they rained, and when you were happy they took shapes and drifted across your life—he'd said this like it was advice. He liked to talk like I was about to have kids myself. He said the first time your child suffers, you know he'll end up, after all, a human being.

Now LG came in and immediately helped Mom pack up the eggs into, what else, cardboard egg cartons; they'd hit the big time. What's happening, I asked. The egg shop's closed, LG said, mouthing, the fuck do you care. She must have told him everything, like he was her real son. I wasn't going to lose to him. I said, I was asking my mom. The egg shop's closed, Mom said.

Maybe she had sold all the eggs. I didn't know what else to say so I told them both about the killer whale attack. Guess what, LG mouthed, I'm meeting Sally on the beach later. Mom said the guy from the morning had told her she could make a million dollars.

When Dad comes home, I said without conviction, he'll straighten it all out; he'll say no for sure. The man of the house. I figured selling Mom out to an Argentine gallery man would never fly. Mom said to make a relationship work you had to win a fight or two. She gave this advice more to LG than me.

I couldn't stand another minute of everyone falling for his act. Crushing an egg in my hand I felt the shell slice into my palm. I started to bleed for the second time that day. As the yolk and blood dripped onto the floor I said, I let LG into the egg shop, and he and me and the others busted all your precious eggs.

He whispered, you little shit, I'll fucking drown you.

Mom stroked the last Audrey Hepburn's yarn hair as she placed it in the carton, and said, I think you boys can go. She said it just like that. LG gave me a sick grin,

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as if he'd already told her. Then Mom said she was closing a chapter of her life. She turned to LG and said, take him with you, and his grin faded. I heard her crying as she picked up all the cartons she could and carried them into the back.

In the car LG punched messages into his cell phone, taking deep breaths and grinding his teeth—but I didn't notice, too surprised he didn't hit me or swear at me or anything. I didn't realize he was putting his plan into action. As we pulled into the bay I saw Sally's small body squatting among the seals. She started away from them and LG got out of the car and headed toward her. I watched without knowing that Sally had made him a deal—if we got in a fight and he kissed me instead of fighting back she would choose him over me—or that she would break it, moments later, after he pushed too far. The seals bobbed their heads and groaned. They had sex as if to replenish the lost bodies.

I remembered a game Sally and I used to play when we were younger, which she called "honeymoon." We would set up all the chairs in her house like rows of seats in an airplane and fly off to Hawaii because we were married. Then she would make us roll around on the floor next to each other. Sometimes I crashed the plane and we floated on a raft in an endless ocean and decided who should live and who should be eaten. She called the game "honeymoon" because she said a honeymoon was when you became an adult, and we both wanted that.

When we got older my parents often had her family over for dinner. Twice a month until the cancer diagnosis. Then they stopped coming. Only once would Sally talk about her mother in the five months between then and the killer whale attack, during a long stretch of rain. A half-drowned bee stung her as she tried to rescue it from a puddle, and as I sucked the poison from her finger she said her mother didn't act like her mother anymore, she acted like a sick person. Adults should act like adults, she said. It wasn't her job to save or condemn her mom.

That was the kind of toughness that impressed us. When she bad-mouthed death. That same beautiful girl then but different, ready for the inevitable change we all sensed.

Now, as I slammed LG's car door shut, Sally started screaming from the beach. I ran to her rescue. LG's two-years-older body loomed in front of me, and I put all of my run into my right hand. I slugged him in the gut. Hard. He doubled over. He lay on the sand like a monkey fallen from a tree, and I even thought maybe I'd killed him. Sally just laughed her recently crazy laugh, so finally I asked if he was okay. When he pulled me in close and gave me a fat kiss on the lips Sally started really

laughing. She crawled over and kissed him with tongue and everything, and said, so you really love me. He reached for her boobs. But at this she drew back, snapped in like a cobra, and bit him on the chin. He howled and pushed her into the ocean.

I ran after him, thinking I might still win. I grabbed him around the waist as he followed her. Pulled him in tighter and tighter. Sally cursed and kicked the both of us. I laughed with victory, thinking if she hurt both of us I was winning. I knew her and what violence lurked in her heart. LG fell on top of me, sinking us underwater. I tried to push back to the surface. I struggled against that wet-flour lump of my enemy, as if his big fat-for-muscle body was all made of dough. I looked around for Sally, but she was gone.

I don't know why I was so surprised, months later, after her mother's death, when she and her father returned to America—I must have known already that she was leaving us behind.

Back at the house (slash abandoned egg shop) I thought about why Sally had made LG prove his love to her by acting gay. I asked Mom if she was still angry, and she sent me straight up to the second floor, only pointing at my wet clothes. When Dad got home I heard him accuse her of chasing a pipe dream. For some reason I put my faith in Dad's maxims. I was sure that he was in charge. I stopped thinking about how I could pay LG back and listened to my parents, in the egg shop below me, my ear pressed to the floor. Mom said Dad's only reasoning seemed to be she hadn't had it hard enough to become an artist. Dad said her work didn't have enough pathos, a word I looked up later. And then Mom said what about their marriage, she'd come to Argentina because of him, because Dad had wanted to write about this experimental expatriation, because his book proposal turned into a permanent stay. Five years after that summer the Argentines would graffiti the walls in a war of propaganda that would bring about the community's end.

I stared at the Ansel Adams posters on my wall and lay down in the same bed I'd had since I was five. I spent seventeen minutes like this before Dad knocked on the door and said he'd negotiated permission for me to come to dinner. He sat beside me and said, your mom and I are not getting a divorce, in case you were worried.

I said I hadn't been worried but now I was. He sat on the edge of the mattress and I could feel his weight tilting the bed. I didn't want to lose them the way I felt I should.

How's Sally, he asked.

She bit me on the arm.

Your mom used to do that, he said. Don't worry, it's a phase.

I couldn't tell if he was joking.

As we sat down to eat our Argentine duck the intercom buzzed. Mom pushed the button and Alan's voice shimmered with static. I'd forgotten he was coming. Mom said I was grounded for losing whatever heart I was born with, but Dad stuck up for me, as if our conversation had changed something between us. He said, at least our boy admitted it: admitting your mistakes is something to be proud of. I think he just wanted to win a fight. I remembered a time when I was young and Mom said I'd hit my head if he carried me on his shoulders. He'd done it anyway, and when I got hurt he'd bought me a bicycle to make up for it.

Mom buzzed Alan in, returned to the table, and tore off a piece of duck between her teeth. Alan came up the stairs into our dining room. She said he could only stay if he helped out with the eggs, and he agreed. With his help we finished the Argentine duck, and the bacon carbonara, and the fruit salad of melon cut into little flower shapes, and the fresh-baked apple pie, and the peach sorbet, and then we went down to the shop to finish packing. Rubbing his lip like an idiot Alan helped Mom think of new ideas for eggs, like Elvis and Early Easter, which sounded like naming hurricanes. When we ran out of the things to say that avoided the things we wanted to say but couldn't it was time we said the things we meant. Do you think Sally's mom will be awake when they cut her up, I asked. Will she see what she's like inside? In a rare moment Alan said, I bet her mom will be awake all the way up to her death.

I didn't understand it when Mom cried for the second time and said to stop acting tough. I'd bled twice. Mom had cried twice. She said men were always pretending. You can't get girls by pretending, she said. I didn't point out that she was a girl and LG had fooled her easily. Tears stormed down her face. She said boys were rotten and they didn't get much better as they got older.

In the evening the killer whales attacked again—the strangest thing, everyone said, since they never went back to the same place so soon—and Alan's father called to say he didn't want his son to miss it and I could learn something too. In the end my parents agreed to drive us down there. Heading back to the bay again I felt like a guy with gangrened legs, trying to fit all his travel into the last day before they were amputated.

During the car ride Dad said we didn't have to look, but if we did we should look at the seals, like watching someone's hips to see where they'll go in soccer. Listening to the monkeys I wondered whether Sally's mother would offer Sally any

last advice in the hospital. Mom rode up front with her sketchbook of eggs, refusing to talk. Whenever she turned around she looked at me as if her eyes hurt from having to love me. Outside the window Argentina could have been anywhere; I'd never been out of the country.

The whole community had shown up by the time we got there, even Sally and her father just six days before her mother's surgery. LG and his parents and a group of other Argentines had come, too. They stood off to the side, and I imagined the gangs Dad said ran their shantytown, boys wielding the teeth of killer whales as knives. The real marine biologists came in a speeding van, with camcorders, and talked excitedly in Spanish. They ignored Alan's father, who followed them around like a puppy that didn't know it wasn't wanted. Alan tagged after him, though I tried to stop him. He was useless after all, a hurt little lizard that couldn't grow back his tail.

I pushed Dad's hand off my shoulder and made my way down to the seals. They looked as shocked as if they'd just found out they were all adopted. The other Americans from our community stood around talking about making my mother famous. I told myself I would apologize to Mom if she broke off her conversation to wave to me. I remembered how she'd started the egg shop the year Sally and I said her eggs were our favorite part of Easter. The day of the bee sting I'd finally made the connection to ovarian cancer, why Sally had quit the shop. Now I thought, how pathetic that they gathered around Mom; the only way she would become famous was if one of her eggs hatched a painted chicken. I wanted to find Sally and joke with her. To hear her old laugh, the one with music, the one she'd either abandoned or lost.

The seal pups were still in the water, fishing among the whales. I couldn't believe it: they never figured out this would get them killed. The older seals must have survived this already, but they didn't do anything to prevent the deaths of their offspring. They did nothing but moan and low like cows. The killer whales hopped up in the air in a way that made it clear they were only a type of dolphin, though by their dorsal fins they could have passed for sharks.

LG saw me walking back and joined me. He pinched me in the soft back of my arm so no one would notice. I could feel a bruise bloom under my skin, but I didn't flinch. He asked Sally to come with us before I got the chance. Her dad looked so sad he must have been eager to give her up to us, making us three. He looked too weak to be able to hold onto her. As we walked down the beach away from the seal killings Sally threw up a little. That's okay, I said, they're just seals.

The stars were coming out, and LG said it would be more romantic without me. He said he wished they had some liquor, they could toast to tricking me before. I realized he was the one, the rainy night we broke into the egg shop, who'd left a whiskey bottle on the counter as an excuse. The smell of dead animals washed up with the tide.

A breeze blew in from the water and I felt the salt on my face. I knew keeping quiet was what Sally wanted. I could see her eyes darting around. I could see her wanting to hurt something.

After a while LG said he was better than me any day of the week but still I didn't say a word. He nudged me aside to get closer to her. I stumbled a little. Finally Sally said LG would never be anything near a boyfriend, that he was just a drunk like his old man. She said she'd made him do what he did on the beach just to see if he would, and he did, and that didn't make him anything but a slave. She picked up some sand and threw it in his eyes. Then she stared off at the seals. I rubbed her back when it looked like she would be sick again.

LG wiped furiously at his eyes—I almost felt bad for him. The sea air filled my lungs like smoke, and I remembered the time Sally and I coughed through two Argentine menthols and she said she didn't get it, like it was a math problem. She seemed too gentle then even to hurt herself.

We took a few steps and Sally tipped over, resting her hands on her knees. Then she talked about the hospital for the first time since the day of the bee sting. It's not fair, she said. Mom thinks she can back out of life if the surgery doesn't work. She thinks she can warn us now and it's all okay. It's only sixty percent it will spread after the surgery. I heard them talking about it. Debulking. They think I don't know what that is.

She looked off. I wanted to say it sounded like a diet for cancer. I wanted to make her joke, or bite me again. Or anything.

I know it all, she said. I looked it up. Cutting her open. Her ovaries. The internet says they're like two tiny onion bulbs.

Seeds that will never grow.

She moved my hand up to her cheek and I felt her heat. Her sweat. In defiance of the breeze. Things were leaking out of her.

They could have been sisters, she said. Possible other lives.

I held her up by the shoulders, as she seemed like she might fall. The seals were still there yet not. LG was wiping his eyes over and over again and washing them with saltwater like an idiot. Sally stopped talking. She looked at me with our shared

childhood in her eyes. Then I leaned in and kissed her. She wasn't surprised and she didn't stop me. I got my tongue into her mouth and searched it like a cave. She tasted a bit like vomit and I could see she knew it. She didn't care.

I can't stop myself thinking, she said when I was done.

This all took a couple of minutes, no longer, and then she started running, getting her sneakers wet. The marine biologists filmed her running into the middle of the whales. Shit, I thought, she's going to kill herself. I tasted her sweat on my lips. LG yelled to stop. Her dad looked he was going to bury himself in the sand, already given up.

She dodged down and picked up the littlest seal pup, hugging it to her chest as it writhed awkwardly in her arms like a motorized doll, except slimy and brown. It was the size of a fat shih tzu. It yelped and kept trying to slip away from her. She kept holding it still. She was bringing it back to us. The whale chief let out a yawp and rested his tail on the sand, watching. The rest of the pod was nowhere in sight. She rushed back and up to the cars and all us kids followed her: LG and Alan and me and everyone else. I heard our parents give a few far-off shouts but they were nothing but the wisps of some remembered advice.

In the parking lot, cut off from the beach by our family cars, we gathered around Sally. She leaned against a telephone pole, weeping and cradling the barking seal pup. Her arms shook as it wiggled. LG bent to take it from her, his red eyes looking up at her in an eager way I'd never seen before, but she scowled back.

Please, he said.

I almost knew what he meant. He put his arms out, and she gave him a good kick. He fell on the ground. She kicked him again and again, the seal slipping up and down in her arms, struggling to get back to the water. Nobody went to help LG because they didn't want to get beaten, too, and maybe—I realized later—they'd begun to fear me and my blossoming hatred.

Then Sally turned on us. None of you is a man, she said. You're all so fucking full of yourselves but really nothing to write home about. You're stuck in your dumb lives.

LG kissed Peter today, she said. And she described the game she claimed we were all caught in. Our fake community and the fake community of our childhood.

She looked so convincing, standing there holding that seal pup and us knowing her mom was dying, that for a moment I thought it was true, none of us was a man. She was our alpha male. I stooped to help LG up before I knew what I was doing. Sally took a step back and collapsed again against the telephone pole, crying into the

seal's wet fur. I think each of us secretly wanted to leave her there, alone; she'd broken our sense of what it meant to grow up, of how we could do it. We returned from small acts of rebellions to comfortable lives—her growth was a result of a depth of emotion, a terrible realness, we might never feel. Her pain could not be practiced or imitated or known. I think that image of her must have stuck somewhere in each of our youths, LG who became a straight-A student and a diplomat, Alan who became a doctor, and I who became a veterinarian and then, like Dad, a writer. The day after the attacks the news announced the whale chief had beached himself permanently, and we all went down to the bay again to watch the rescue efforts. He dried out and died inches from the water that could have saved him.