

## —+ TAMMY ARMSTRONG | The Shallows

JANNIE WAS STUFFING THE SEVENTH EMPTY Miller can under the back seat as the station wagon sped toward Portland's exit. It was at these exits and merges, with her belt cinched tight around her waist and her hands sunk deep in the front seat pocket, that she imagined steel hitting steel. She imagined girders streaking through what had once seemed solid, mutating into softness like a gum bubble, stretching until Jannie could see her fingers through the other side. Then the moment would break, and everything would come flying out.

Jannie imagined her family doing this. Her father, drunk now behind the wheel, passed everyone obeying the speed limit, bitching about the *goddamn Sunday drivers. Bunch of American fat asses*. He veered quickly around them, sliding back into the lane, always too close to the other cars' front bumpers. Jannie imagined a merge with an eighteen-wheeler. She wanted it to be hauling fruit, something soft that would smell sweet when it crashed, burying them beneath boysenberries. No pig shit or pig iron or smelter crap. Nothing from the pulp and paper mill that would sink into her skin before they found her body. She didn't want to be buried smelling like a fart.

"Beer me, babe."

His hand reached over the top of the headrest, hovering there as he waited for Jannie to grab another can from the cooler. She was tired though, tired of reaching her hand down into the melted ice, into the cold that stung inside her bones, freezing up into her scapula and spine. She didn't want to hear the hiss of one more beer, didn't want to know how much closer she was to the accident.

The cars full of sober vacationing families would slow to see the wreckage. Maybe she'd be buried or maybe she'd be cut all over—lying on the highway, while pig-snouted families searched for her deepest cuts. She didn't want them to find anything they could tell friends and neighbours later. *Oh my god, this girl on the highway. I mean she probably died. Clear to the bone. One eye totally missing.*

Jannie hesitated at the open cooler. Five left. Her mother glanced over from her seat and gave the one-eyebrow stare. *Give him the beer, for Christ's sake*. Not wanting to be the one who ruined this *oh-so-planned fam-damily vacation*, she handed it to him. This also avoided her mother's predictable tear-filled whimpers . . . *Could we have just maybe one vacation like a normal . . .* but she would never finish these sentences.

*The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out.* Eight lanes of traffic and Jannie's daddy was touching each one. She could hear the thunk of plastic reflectors beneath the wheels as he searched for a lane that would accommodate aggressiveness, an insane Canadian grasping at the asphalt like a gambler gathering his chips. He wanted it all. *Out your belly and in your snout.* Jannie didn't think she was scared of death anymore. Especially now, summer vacation. She thought it would be the most tragic time to die. Kids at school would remember her then, maybe put a twelve-by-twelve school photo of her up in the library right beside the queen or something. She leaned as far ahead as she could with the seatbelt on and noticed that her mother was dozing, her head against the open window, her hands in her lap like collapsed birds. Jannie kicked the seat quickly with the fat toe of her sneaker.

"That's enough." Her mother twisted around to look at the culprit—the side of her chin glistened with sleep spit, her face creased from the upholstery. "Play with your sister."

Jannie glanced over at Sophie, who was slouched down, staring quietly out at the drivers who swore, raised a fist at their father's erratic driving. She watched Sophie's head pivot from side to side like something lost at sea as their car cleared another lane. *Play with your sister.*

Jannie saw Sophie as nothing more than a house pet—three years younger and seemingly in some sort of coma for the most part. The kid never got angry, never reacted when Jannie twisted the delicate skin on the inside of her arm. Sophie would just stand there, blinking, glancing around, waiting. She always seemed to be waiting for something. It's what Jannie hated the most about her little sister: that big head of hers watching everything as though she knew it was all going to come tumbling down eventually. She'd imagined Sophie then, shrugging, maybe saying *I thought so*, as the entire family structure collapsed, combusted, imploded around them. *I thought so.*

Through the gap between the two front seats, Jannie could see the horizon. The sun was going down, turning the sky into strawberry stains behind the amber of the highway lights. It was getting difficult to see the passengers in the other cars her father passed. Earlier, she'd been able to raise her middle finger for the other kids in station wagons to see. A little boy had squashed a stuffed animal up against the window when she flipped him off somewhere outside Grand Falls. He'd contorted his face into something resembling the animal, all crooked teeth and jawbreaker-stained tongue. A purple mark left on the window.

"What's ya say about some food there?" Her father handed the empty beer can between the bucket seats, tapping Jannie on the knee with it. "Take this, hon."

Her mother's response didn't float to the back seat. She'd switched the radio earlier so that only the back speakers were on. The girls had been surrounded by Conway Twitty for the past hour. *Lay ya down and softly whisper purty love songs in your ears* . . . Sophie had sung quietly to herself, staring out the window at nothing but farmhouses, potato fields and silos all the way through Maine. Jannie noticed she turned around only once, to get a better look through the back window at some boys on dirt bikes, buzzing along paths near the highway. Their hair streamed from their helmets as they jumped tree roots, slipped in the well-worn trails. She'd wanted to say something to the kid then but could think of nothing except "Losers." Sophie had blinked at her, uncomprehending, unsure maybe how guys on bikes denoted losers. It had all made Jannie feel stupid.

"There, Bill, that one." Her mother pointed out the window, her nail-bitten finger pressing hard on the glass as the takeout stand came into view.

Hot dogs, ice cream, burgers, shakes. Daddy pulled up real hard between two cars full of families wolfing down whatever was in between those pieces of waxed paper and cardboard boats. He glanced at each car, then pulled out again, jerking the car into drive so hard both Sophie and Jannie had to hold on to the seats for support. He pulled up along the side of the A-frame, beneath a sugar maple. Jannie could feel the cold coming down from the shade and the quickly falling evening.

"Make up your minds now." Daddy curled his body around his seat to stare at them.

Sophie squinted up her eyes and leaned into his face. "Whadda they got?"

"What do you mean? They got normal shit like every other place around here."

Sophie gave an exasperated sigh, then stared out toward the hand-painted menu board, hung above the takeout window.

"Let's go see, girls." Their mother's door gave a screech of protest as she opened it. The smell of vinegar and grease swamped the back seat; it mixed with the heat of the engine and gasoline vapours, making Jannie nauseous.

"Surf and turf for ya, Bill?" Daddy nodded, lit a cigarette and gazed out toward the highway.

As her mother ordered, Jannie watched a couple of kids on a tire swing under the next tree, spinning and spinning. Their legs and heads stuck out from the tube while their arms held on high to the rope. Both of them had huge, doggy smiles on their faces.

This was the first family vacation ever planned. For months, Jannie's father

had sat at the kitchen table with New England maps spread around him like crumpled wings. He'd estimated gas prices, food, bathroom stops and sight-seeing detours. Both the girls had known then that this was not going to be a trip to Disneyland. It wasn't going to be a trip they'd talk about for years to come. She could almost smell what it'd come to: vinegar, diesel and body sweat.

Now she sat with a shoebox-size portion of french fries, onion rings and deep-fried scallops staring at her from where they rested on her lap. Her head ached and her stomach felt sour as she placed another scallop carefully between her molars, biting down until it split apart—a salty mess of batter and flesh. From time to time the girl's voice on the intercom scratched out things that sounded roughly like numbers. *Numba sixty-two, jumbo platta, jumbo platta.* Two little speakers on either side of the A-frame squeezed out "Copacabana" at just a decibel too loud: *Her name was Lola, she was a shoo-ww girl.*

Sophie, head down toward the greasy box, didn't look up when Jannie finally opened her door and headed toward the back of the restaurant looking for a bathroom. Jannie had been to places like this before; the bathrooms were always at the back.

"Jannie, honey, you want me to come with you?" her mother called from her window, fries halfway to her mouth.

Jannie shook her head, no. She wasn't certain she'd be able to speak before her supper came hurtling back up her throat. *At the Copa, Copacabana.* The door to the bathroom was heavy and took all of her weight to open. Jannie knew her mother would be standing outside when she was finished. Her mother, always so terrified of childnappers, always worried that the Moonies might show up and coerce one of her girls into a car and out to a commune. *They brainwash you, you know?* She'd told them that for years. Moonies. The lost children of middle America. All-star girls who suddenly became zombies. Jannie didn't understand it all, but she was sure those girls must have to do something without their clothes on. She'd imagined them during her mother's lectures: baby-bird chests pressed out toward the Revered as he inspected their thin bodies, looked into their Aquafresh mouths. What she didn't understand was why the Revered wanted this, why he would want her with her bowed legs and uneven suntan. She thought he'd be more interested in Bo Derek types—girls with bodies that rippled and flowed when they moved.

The bathroom was painted a cheap shade of pink. Girl Pink. Jannie found the light, then locked the door behind her before her mother could wedge a hand between Jannie and the door. She splashed some water on her face, glanced in

the mirror at the blush on the left side of her cheek. Western light. She focused in the mirror until her image blurred into a one-eyed blob of flesh, then sat down on the tiles behind the door. She was pretty sure she could hear her father bitching out there in the car, explaining to Sophie how hard he'd had to work in order to buy her that ridiculous amount of fries. She was pretty sure she could hear another can of Miller crack open, slicing through "Copacabana". And she was happy that the remaining cans bobbing around in that water-filled cooler, ka-chunk, ka-chunk, were far enough away to be imaginary.

They had to drive only another mile or so down the road to get to a motor inn. Chaz's Sleep and Doze. New credit card in her hand, Jannie's mother led them over to the office, while their father drove back onto the highway in search of a liquor store. The man Jannie assumed was Chaz oozed out from behind a chipped Formica desk. His body was so bloated the gold horseshoe ring around his finger seemed to nearly cut off the skin below his knuckle. He leaned forward in his lawn chair as they came closer.

"Two double beds, sixty-seven dollars a night."

Jannie could see her mother's face change, twitch only slightly at the price. Now she knew they didn't have a lot of money, knew she shouldn't dare ask for a souvenir T-shirt, something with a smiling lobster or fisherman on it, something she could show off at school in the fall. There'd be nothing but beach scavengery to bring back in a paper bag. Chaz glanced over at Sophie, who stood eyeballing a rack of glossy tourist pamphlets.

"You folks planning on staying around a bit?" He scraped a dollop of mayo off a piece of waxed paper where the remnants of a turkey sandwich sat. "Some like that whitewater rafting quite a bit."

"Just passing through," Jannie's mother singsonged as she looked on the credit card slip for a signature line. Chaz's big greasy finger pointed at the bottom of the paper. Jannie could see where the carbon had smudged on the heel of his palm.

"There's just fine." Still seated, he leaned back until he clutched a gold key on a large puffin key chain. "Room four. Enjoy your stay."

They all shuffled out in single file, careful not to knock over the numerous plastic ferns that lined the small hallway. Walking between Jannie and her mother, Sophie stepped only on the carpeting's black squares, avoiding the gold-coloured circles woven into the pattern.

The station wagon pulled into the parking lot just as they unlocked the room. Jannie's mother rushed out onto the balcony, waving the puffin above her head. "Yoohoo, up here, hon! Here!"

Jannie and Sophie sat down on the edge of the bed, dangling their dirty sneakers over the thick shag carpet. Jannie could see tiny bits of white tissue stuck deep in the pile. *This is not a clean place*, she thought to herself as her father huffed into the room, beer cases stacked up like bales of hay in his arms. After arranging them in the beer fridge, he cracked one of the colder ones, then sat back with the television remote. Jannie's mother bustled around the room doing something that would take someone more perceptive than any of them to determine.

"Why don't you girls head down to the pool? Nice enough night for it." Her mother was already pulling their bathing suits from a suitcase, arranging thin white motel towels beside them.

Jannie glanced out the front window toward the pool. Through the dimness, she could see three large men in leather vests and harness boots. She couldn't see any kids. As she stood watching the men, Sophie came up beside her, already in her suit. She glanced from Jannie to the men outside. "Moonies," she whispered.

They'd been told for years not to talk to such people, told to be modest, to cover up, and now they were going out there alone.

"Aren't you going to come out to supervise?" Jannie asked.

Their mother glanced from Daddy to the girls. "I can see you just fine from the window, Jan." Daddy's hand roamed over her mother's ribs and up toward her bra. They would not be watching.

The parking lot asphalt was still hot from the afternoon. Sophie and Jannie hopped their way over to the pool, trying not to let their feet rest in one place for too long. Opening the gate quietly, Jannie couldn't help but notice the sign: *Children shall be supervised*. She glanced back over to room four, but the curtains were drawn. The men barely looked up from their talk. Jannie could see Angels something written on their vests. Up close she could see that they had beards speckled like coals from a burnt-out campfire. Slowly, she and Sophie began to wade into the water. Beneath the night-lights, the pool seemed murky, taking away from the sensation of coolness. Jannie clenched her lips tightly together as she swam to prevent any chlorine seepage into her mouth. She'd heard plenty of nasty things about pools.

When she reached the centre, Jannie flipped onto her back. The men's voices were muffled. Only the pool's fan system hummed through her thoughts. Floating. Jannie opened her eyes and the stars wiggled with the water's motion, a plane scratched across the sky's surface. She was entirely alone. Finally, when her chest had dried and her arms were numb, she counted to one hundred and

paddled back toward the shallow end. She could barely see Sophie's dark head bobbing in the rings from the hot July breeze. It was unlike her to stay away for so long—her kid body had always trailed behind Jannie like a shoelace.

"Soph?" Jannie kicked harder; her body didn't seem to be moving. With the light nearly gone, she needed to be within several feet to see anything in front of her. A street lamp over the parking lot flickered to life and Sophie's body became clear.

So quiet and odd her entire life, Sophie was lying in the water, face down, her thin body stretched into a crucifix like Jesus's from Bible school. "Quit it, Soph." Jannie tried to paddle forward but now seemed to only tread water. "It's not funny." She didn't want to cry, didn't want to get that burning water into her lungs. "Sophie, move for fuck's sake."

The cursing caught the attention of one of the bikers. Setting his beer down on the deck, he made it to the edge of the pool in two steps. As he leaned down toward Sophie, Jannie could see how long his hair was as it dangled in the water. He reached over and pulled Sophie out by one stick-thin arm. Jannie was still struggling to get near the shallow end. In her panic, she'd managed to splash over to the edge and could now pull herself toward her sister.

When she finally reached the shallows, Sophie was wrapped in the thin white motel towel, sitting among those three hairy men. Climbing up the ladder, Jannie was unsure how to approach them. Would they be taking the girls away now, would a fight break out between them and her daddy? She walked quietly over, ignoring the water draining from her bathing suit and down along her crotch and legs.

"Sophie?"

At Jannie's voice, she looked up, blue eyes shining into spots of blackness. "Wanted to see what it felt to be dead."

Jannie could see a piece of pizza in one parboiled hand. A fat hand pushed a piece toward her. She could smell the pepperoni, knew the slice would taste faintly of chlorine when she brought it to her mouth. She knew her mother wouldn't be coming out anytime soon, and that was fine. This was why girls were missing all over America, and it didn't bother her so much anymore.

"Your baby sister here gave us a friggin' scare," one of the voices said. The lawn chairs were so close to each other she had difficulty determining whose voice it was.

"She does that to remind us—" But Jannie couldn't finish the sentence: the tomato and cheese and cheap scent of American smokes were all she needed. *Someday you too will die*, she hummed to herself, but not tonight.