Wintering at Montauk

by Jane Ciabattari

Montauk was the solution. He had no job, no money. He could stay for the winter at the summer place. It would be a lark.

He had come home to Great Neck after losing the last job and they were making broad hints at him to move out again when he thought of it.

"Stanley, you're thirty years old in the spring," his mother had said. "You should be on your own." It had meant nothing to him. He couldn't conceive of the next year or the next. Doing what?

He knew they couldn't deny him this place for the winter. He would be out of their hair. How cold could it get? How lonely? He had always said he liked the winter beach best, to be perverse. Why not try it? He would throw parties. Stare at the Atlantic, gray-green like his eyes, he'd been told more than once. Catch up on his reading. Rest. His friends would come out from the city.

They didn't come out. In summer they stood in line, in winter they couldn't make it. They had season tickets to the opera, the Knicks, they had dinner parties, art openings, plays to see.

In November, when he moved in, the summer folks were gone. It was already winter. His mother had provided for him well, he decided after examining her newest purchases: pre-Columbian cats in odd corners, a freezer full of steak and fish sticks, six kinds of cookies, a full pantry, a full liquor cabinet, lobster from the Point.

Later it became a challenge. The cold.

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The storm in December was monstrous--the wind howling, the house shaking, waves pounding. He stayed wrapped in blankets, long underwear, jeans and several sweaters, his father's quilted parka, shivering all night in their bed, wondering if the water could reach him. Alone on the verge of that immense ocean, terrified. The year he was nine there had been a hurricane. The shoreline had shifted to within a stone's throw of the house.

At first, going into town for food was festive. He bought more lobster, cold cuts, smoked fish and bagels. They all asked about his father. "Sid coming out this weekend? Give him our love."

"Hey, kid, read in the Times his latest is gonna run forever. He's got the Midas touch on Broadway."

He went through all the meat in the freezer, halfway through the fish sticks when he got sick of them. Then canned consomme. Pasta with olive oil and garlic. He could taste corn on the cob with butter in his sleep.

He played all the records. Billy Joel, Elton John, the Beatles, a memorial of summers past. Then his mother's musical comedy albums, from Oklahoma! on. She had been on the stage briefly before she was married, she had performed in summer theater before the kids came. That's what gave his sister Margot the bug for acting. He listened to the tunes of all the years gone by. At last he narrowed it down to his favorite, Man of La Mancha, the side with “Impossible Dream,” and sang along in his scratchy tenor. Margot had a glorious soprano. He had, they'd told him throughout his childhood, his mother's love of music, but not the talent. Just one more of those missing pieces that kept him from finding his place in the world.

He thought of his parents back in Great Neck. West Egg, it was. He used to go by Fitzgerald's house on the way to school. This

was Fitzgerald country, a Fitzgerald fucking era.

He rummaged around in his old room. Hadn't his mother stored some of his college papers here? The significance of the green light in Gatsby. “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.” He was speaking aloud. He wanted to be borne back into the past. Into the 1920s, say, or back into the womb to start over.

He should have lived back then, he would have made out like a bandit. It was clear what a man should do, in those days. Today? Women. Work, the throb, the pursuit, for what? No one quite measured up to his private explorations. No one could please him the way he pleased himself. And the way women were today. Tougher than any of the men in the grey flannel suits, with their tortoise-shell glasses and their thighs lean from roadwork. They shook your hand, these days.

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The maid stopped coming in January or February. Too cold, or the beach road was too rough. Anyway, she stopped coming. He wasn't messy, really, although the pizza boxes were hard to dispose of. Sometimes he made a bonfire on the beach.

The geography of the dunes changed each day. He searched in vain for the high dune he had jumped from as a child, giddy, panicked, forced onward by their jeers. Ben could do it. Even Margot, who was three years younger, could. He had to. It was a mountain of a dune. Then stinging pain, his ribs thrown against unyielding hardness, his teeth full of sand. Dizzy and betrayed, jumping up and running straight into the cold surf to hide his wet pants, his unmanly tears from the others.

By then he savored the memory of November, having a whole

lobster to himself, digging out the steamer, the ritual of the kill, the flesh dripping in butter. He could imagine the taste of cold beer, hot sand, peaches.

He didn't walk the beach anymore. It was stinging cold out. The ocean roared.

He found his old collection of seashells in a drawer. Jagged shells, razor sharp. He cut his feet.

After one nor'easter he was ill. The flu. Two weeks in their bed. Delirious. In the corner of his parents' bedroom he saw decayed seagull carcasses, gnats and maggots on lusterless eyes, globs of sea jelly, tangles of seaweed. The sound of the pounding waves bored into his skull. Repetition maintained into infinity.

He was so weary.

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He examined the photo albums. His father with hair. His mother before puffy middle age. In some photos they were not much older than he. A typical family—a boy and a girl, a mother and father who worked hardand pushed them from Brooklyn to the suburbs in less than a generation. The beach house was the crowning glory.

The volleyball games, organized by summer folk, drinking and easy evenings. The kids playing at sunset in the surf, the gentle roar of grown-up laughter in the background. The Atlantic stormy again, he loved it in its various moods.

The older men in shorts with gray matted chests sipping gin on the deck, watching the teenage girls with binoculars, cracking dirty jokes. He would hide under the deck and listen, trying to understand.

Photos of himself a scrawny ten. Stunted. Cousin Ben younger than he, eight then, already taller. Margie, who hadn't changed her name to Margot yet, already was a looker. She had their mother's pretty red hair and fair skin. His was curly and brown. He got the freckles.

Margie did what they told her. Puppet on a string, he called her. Now he slept in her bed. After the storm he left their bedroom alone. Crusted sheets, illness.

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Twelve weeks to go before warm weather. Or was it fifteen? He thought of buying sunglasses.

“Still here, then?” Tony the grocer had said in January. And always after that, a perplexed look on his face. “Still here, then?” He wondered what he looked like.

He took to wearing a blanket for warmth, over his jeans and flannel bathrobe. He could nest in the blanket wherever he was, whenever he got tired. Always comfortable yet presentable if someone came by.

No one came.

He had an assigned post, a director's chair in front of the picture window in the middle of the white living room with a broad view of the ocean beyond. He rarely left his post. He wrote STANLEY on the canvas back of the chair with a black marker.

He had discovered his own rhythm. Up at one or two, early afternoon, the brights part of the day in winter; to bed at five or six a.m. The bad hour with its lukewarm irritating light. Some nights,

when the roaring outside subsided, he found marvelous moments of peace. With the lights out he could catch the glimmer of the silver strip of surf along the tideline. The moon was out often. The wind, always. Rattling and shivering. The city seemed far away. Five below. Minus thirty with wind chill factor. All that white wicker.

He yearned for color.

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At first the liquor cabinet held endless surprises. Liqueurs that tasted of the summer fruits--apricots, cherries, peaches, kiwi. Good smooth single malt scotch (his father's) that brought hours of tranquil gazing. A bottle of champagne left over from Margot and Jeremy's wedding reception. His little sister had eloped to City Hall with a Chicago actor who had a Tony and a recurring role as a second-string buddy in one of the sitcoms. When they found out, his folks were upset, but they threw a party anyway. When he opened the bottle, the champagne was flat. But he drank it, iced in a silver bucket he found on one of the top shelves in the kitchen cupboard.

The champagne left him with a wicked headache. It was yeasty, bitter, as he sat listening to his dreams, the ocean, the grayness flooding him, and sandy shores treading through the center of his vision.

His mother: “Margot called.Jeremy has been invited to London to perform in a Pinter play. She's going along to study at the Royal Court.”

His father: “Margot hasn't done badly for herself. Now if my son would get settled I could rest easy.”

His father: “Margot doesn't come home often ehough to suit us. Of course, it's good she and Jeremy are so busy.”

Tidepools in the corner, water spiders, sand crabs.

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He cut up Margot's sheets with the nail scissors he found in their bathroom. It took hours, off and on. He made tiny nicks in his hands, but that didn't stop him. He wiped them on Margot's colorful quilt, leaving it flecked with brown, creating a tweedy effect. A worthy occupation, he said to himself as he snipped away, softly at first, then loud, finally shouting finding it hilarious. At last a worthy occupation.

One night he treated himself to a sixpack of Heineken. A sweet night, filled with memories of Roxanne. Near dawn, he called his friends in the city and announced he was getting married. Masterful. He turned their stunned sleepy anger into good wishes.

“Well, what do you know, who's the lucky girl?” asked Sarah, from his second to last job.

“Roxanne. I met her in London. She's flying here in June. We'll have a party out here, it will be beautiful then. You'll have to come meet her.”

“Wait till I tell Sandy.” Sarah said.

Sandy was the boss who forced him to leave. “This isn't working out,” she had said. “I'm putting a warning in your personnel file.” That meant he was supposed to leave before she fired him. To go where? Do what?

“Your parents must be thrilled,” said Jan. She had been his closest friend last summer, when his father got him a temporary job at the Museum of Modern Art gift shop. “Have you found another

job?”

“Who, me? Roxanne has money. I won't have to worry about that.”

Finally he called Alan, his college roommate, in San Francisco.

“What the fuck,” Alan said as he picked up the phone.

“It's me, Stanley.” He had to say it three times.

“Do you know it's three a.m.?” Alan sputtered. “You woke the whole family.” Alan and his wife had two sons already in grade school. Alan had all the bases covered.

He hung up without telling him about the wedding.

How much longer? They must have all been wondering about him. “I've retired,” he would tell them. “I'm withdrawing from the world. I've tried it, and it doesn't quite measure up.”

It was true. He'd tried everything after drawing a blank with teaching jobs. Law school (he couldn't keep on top of the details of the LSATs), advertising (he wasn't quick enough to meet deadlines). F in life. Flunking out in the age of ambition.

The phone rang. Persistent whoever it was. He counted to twenty-three.

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Now he left his post only for food, drink, to pee. He considered devising a chamber pot to cut down on trips.

His gray flannel robe and jeans, barefoot, the blanket. His eyes were

the same gray-green.

He arranged his dirty dishes on the carpet in orderly piles, subduing its brightness.

He dreamt of leeches, sea slugs in the hollow of his neck.

Roxanne liked the lights out. Mary liked him to use his tongue.

The wind whistled, the waves crashed relentlessly. He bared his teeth from time to time.

Something vicious.

To dream the impossible dream.
He sang along.

He cut his feet on shells. The house creaked. He made lists. Tidal waves. How often? The probability? The contributing factors? An earthquake at sea.

He went to bed after daybreak. He kept watch through the night, nocturnal as his mother's cats, sometimes in an eerie half sleep, half pleasant, floating. He couldn't control the flow of his thoughts toward frothy sea broth, burrowing sand crabs, sea anemones pulsing and throbbing, a baby eel slithering along on its snouth, jellyfish stinging his feet. The incredible sound of water.

His eyes open, he saw his hand. That's the end of me. My extremity. In my extremity I see the end of me. Fingers, tentacles. The Atlantic is gray-green, the color of my eyes. Is anybody there?

He envisioned a thirtieth birthday party. They would all cheer him, the people from everywhere in his path, filling the shorelines, a flood of people, clambering onto the deck for a closer look, half

sinking in the sand, sand, loaded down with platters of food, cold beer, gin and tonic.

Why go beyond? Nothing was ever as tasty as the anticipation.

Women. The throb, the pursuit, for what?

He had lived with a girl once, a lovely girl. She got on his nerves. At night he lay next to her, fighting the urge to slap her.

Sperm. The smell. The taste. How long did it take to dry?

“I've always loved the beach most in winter.” He said it as an opening gambit at parties, throwing out bate. No one measured up.

He sat at his post, the gray-green Atlantic spread out before him. The waves arched higher and higher. The sound was gone now. Soundlessly he cheered himself. At last he had achieved a vacuum, a black hole of the mind.

The green light would come soon.