

# Route Four

by Jim Breslin

The little girl spooned strawberry yogurt into her mouth as a pleasant morning breeze swept across the balcony of the hotel. The girl lifted the cup and stuck her tongue inside to lick the yogurt off the edges.

Across the small round table, the girl's mother sat sipping her coffee and smoking a cigarette. The mother looked out over the small beach, and beyond it, the expansive blue ocean. She wore large round sunglasses which covered the purplish blue bruise which framed her left eye.

"Mommy, you look like a movie star," the girl said, "You look like you should be on TV."

"I may be, someday," the mother said. "You never know."

The morning air felt nice, but the mother understood the heat would be coming soon. The girl was anxious to go down to the beach and play, but her mother wanted to relax on the balcony.

"Mom, look!" The girl pointed at a palm tree with its fronds swaying in the breeze. "Somebody hung sparkly hanging balls!"

Her mother just nodded and sipped her coffee. Her hand shook as she lifted the cup. After placing the cup back down, she held up her hand and examined it.

"What are you going to wear today?" The mother asked. "The red suit or blue suit?"

The girl giggled. "Red suit, blue suit, one suit, two suits!"

“Go ahead and put your bathing suit on,” The mother said.

“Yay!” The girl yelled. She pushed the sliding door open and disappeared inside.

The mother picked up the newspaper that had been delivered with the morning's room service. She read that three feet of snow had fallen back home in New Hampshire, more than had been expected. She smiled and put the paper down. She was glad she and her daughter had caught a flight out before the storm. She thought the snowfall might give her and her daughter a few more days together.

The mother looked at her watch and saw it was ten thirty. She thought the in-laws would have left Christmas Mass in Concord by now. She imagined they were driving along Route Four, crossing over the Merrimack River, heading north towards her house in Grafton.

Over the past day, the scene had looped through her mind as though it were a top forty dance tune. She envisioned her father-in-law, her mother-in-law, and her mentally challenged brother-in-law standing outside of their car at the foot of her unshoveled walkway, looking up at the empty house. In her mind, it was one of those brilliantly bright and bitterly cold days that typically follows a storm. She imagined her father-in-law, in his LL Bean jacket, scratching his head. Her mother-in-law would stand in befuddlement while holding a fruitcake. The brother-in-law would repeatedly ask, “Is Charles home? Where's Charles?” He'd keep repeating his questions until his mother shushed him.

The daughter slid the door open and came out on the balcony in her red swimsuit. She twirled for her mother.

“You look beautiful,” Her mother said.

The girl stopped twirling and curtsied. She put her hands on the railing and peered out at the ocean. "Look at the birds!" The girl yelled to her mother.

Out in the blue water, just beyond the breakers, gulls swarmed around, several were diving into the ocean.

"Why are they doing that?" The girl asked.

"They're diving for food." The mother replied, "They dive down and eat the small fish."

They silently watched the growing flock of gulls over the water. The mother steadied her cup with her other hand as she sipped her coffee. More gulls flew out from the beach, it was as though a cloud of white snow hovered over the water. They could now hear the squawking of the gulls.

The girl approached her mother so that she could not be ignored.

"Can we go to the beach now?" The girl asked.

"Yes, my love," Her mother responded, "We can go to the beach."

The girl shot her fists in the air. "Yay!"

"From now, on, we can do whatever we want." The mother stood up and they both walked inside.

Out in the water, the gulls continued diving and feasting, diving and feasting.

