

What the Bay Broke

by Khaliah Williams

It was Clay who suggested that they invite another couple for that last weekend. His college roommate Craig and his wife Lisa had recently transplanted themselves from Golden, Minnesota for the more harried pace of New York. Because the three weeks Olivia and Clay spent in Wellfleet differed little from their lives in the city—just the two of them and the alley cat they'd adopted the year before—it was without hesitation that Olivia agreed to the intruders. She said it would give her a reason to get the house in shape for the summer renters. She hadn't known Craig and Lisa long but unlike Clay's other friends they were unpretentious and uninterested in art openings and coffee appointments with moderately famous—but fading—artists like Clay or other young, promising artists with whom Olivia often shared gallery space. Even though they lived in the same city it seemed as if their worlds were still so very far apart. Craig worked a nine to five in a suit somewhere in midtown and Lisa taught long division to third graders. They reminded Olivia of people she had known growing up and Clay seemed to like the idea of having a friend around who was still impressed by his decision to take photographs of decaying urban landscapes.

Olivia looked forward to a break in the monotony. She'd already gone through a stack of books, nearly finished two cases of wine and cooked the more complicated meals in her Moroccan cookbook. They had fucked spontaneously in the house's numerous rooms and made the same tired jokes about being able to have a choice of which room to have sex in. In those slick, blissful moments they would hold each other close and contemplate a life together in the house year round just the two of them—maybe the cat. The idea of such a quiet life depressed her, and so it was with ease that she would return to their comfortable and familiar two-bedroom apartment in the city. The weeks in Wellfleet were lazy and decadent but life there felt small and was just enough of a fantasy that she

was always glad to return to New York. In the city, things could change, they could expand.

When they arrived, Craig seemed out of sorts. He had hugged her at the door, awkwardly, as if he had come to make an apology. Lisa carried herself with more confidence, pushing past her husband with arms wide open and ready to embrace, first Clay, and then Olivia.

“How was the drive?” Clay asked as he took the bottles of wine Craig offered him. Lisa pulled out of her hug with Olivia. “It was long,” she said. “I knew it would be, but that last stretch was killer. Traffic and all.”

“I should have told you to come on a Thursday,” Clay said. “Before all the Bostonians get here.” He said Bostonians with a fake Brahmin accent that made Olivia cringe. He clapped Craig on the back and led him towards the kitchen. “What do you say we get one of these bottles open and give you a tour of the house?”

This was one of the things Olivia liked best about Clay, the way he charmed people even if they didn't need to be charmed. When they first met, he had winked at her, an action that seemed dated. It should have made him look the twelve-year difference between them, but it hadn't, it had only made her pursue him with more vigor. She had married him quickly and quietly without the fanfare she once imagined for her wedding. It had only been the two of them, a judge, and a mutual friend to witness. Afterward they'd had dinner in a tiny Italian restaurant in the Village and celebrated their union with the other patrons, while the chef and the firemen from the station next door had serenaded them with melodramatic renditions of Italian love songs.

After dinner, while Lisa and Clay cleared the dishes Olivia walked out into the cool night and breathed in the salted air. Behind her, the door slid open. She turned around to find Craig struggling with two glasses of wine and the screen door. He offered her one of the glasses, as though he was again trying to make amends, the wine a peace offering, the end of a war. She thanked him and took the glass. Craig pulled the door shut and shifted his own glass to his left

hand. He walked to the edge of the patio and stood at the top of the wooden staircase that led down to the beach.

"Three weeks up here, huh? Must be a tough life." He smiled and Olivia noticed that his teeth were a little crooked.

"We manage," she said, returning the smile. When she closed her mouth, she ran her tongue over her teeth, which were also slightly crooked. She'd never had braces, and now it seemed too late.

"Shame you can't stay longer."

"We'll take what we can get. Starting a new job meant a real vacation was out of the question, so it's got to be a couple of days here and there. Lisa's got a lot of time on her hands until school starts, though. " He inhaled loudly and then exhaled quietly. "City air doesn't smell like this," then he said, "Since those two are busy with the dishes, why don't we take a walk?"

"The tide might come in soon," she said. "Besides, it's not completely safe down there in the dark." What Olivia wanted to say was that she hated the beach. She didn't like the crunch of sand and shell beneath her feet. It was always with a lot of prodding from Clay that she would venture down the rickety stairs for a swim. She spent most of her time at the house on the patio or wandering the neighborhood taking in the architecture of the houses that lined the shore. The beach always reminded her of the first time she came to the house. Clay had spent the morning convincing her to swim and though she had been hesitant, she agreed. Without thinking she ran towards the tiny breaking waves. As she entered the water and started walking towards Clay, she felt a pain in the arch of her foot. She cried out and Clay, hearing her, swam towards the shore. For an hour, a stream of red poured from her foot and when it stopped, she refused to go near the water for the rest of their trip.

That first summer at the Cape together was six years ago, when their relationship was at that crucial moment. Clay was a romantic and Olivia, at twenty-five wanted romance. They agreed that they no longer wanted to sleep with other people, that they would try to be each other's center. At thirty-seven, Clay said he felt he might be

ready to settle down, have someone to love, though maybe not start a family.

This summer they had reached their fifth anniversary, the landmark they'd dubbed the Bacchanal year. Instead of exchanging gifts made of wood, they'd bought expensive wines and champagnes and emancipated their bodies of clothing for two straight days. They buried themselves in the ideas of romance that had brought them together in the first place. For two days she forgot their flaws and indulged in the heavy flavors of the goat cheese he spread on a thin cracker. When she bit into it, she thought that it was what loved tasted like.

On the beach, Olivia and Craig stepped around the driftwood as she tried to point out the sights. Before embarking on their journey Craig had drained his glass of wine and then hers. He gave Olivia a loopy smile that made her uneasy.

"We shouldn't go too far," she said when they landed on the beach. "It's low tide now but I always get nervous after dark."

"Don't worry," he said, taking her hand in his. He turned the flashlight on with his free hand and shined the light at the water. He gave the flashlight a hostile shake in the direction of the waves. "I won't let you get carried away." Olivia pulled away from him and he jammed his free hand in pocket of his jeans. They walked in silence for some time and when Olivia looked back she could no longer see the house.

"Let's go back. I'm getting cold."

Craig aimed the flashlight at Olivia's face and she had to shield her eyes from the harshness of the light. Craig pointed the light back towards the water and then sat down in the damp sand.

He hung his head down low and then looked up at the sky.

"I think you've had too much wine tonight, Craig. Let's go back." Olivia turned towards the house, she felt cold, the wind was picking up; she was starting to shiver.

"It's been going on for a month," he blurted out. "Since right after we moved to the city—after we had that dinner at your house. They've been fucking all over New York fucking City." Craig put the

flashlight down and raised his knees up towards his chin as if he were a small boy waking up from a nightmare. He started to cry.

"Clay is your friend. He wouldn't do that to me." Olivia felt warm but the air around her was still cool, her body was still shivering. She turned her back to him as if to start walking back to the house.

"Olivia," she heard him call out, and when she turned to look at him he said, "I just thought you should know." Olivia squinted to get a better look at him in the dark. She was searching his face as if hidden in lines around his mouth was proof of the lie. But she couldn't see any detail, only the silhouette of his body in the sand. She crossed her arms across her chest and her nails involuntarily dug themselves deep into her skin through her sweater.

"We could be like them," he said and stood up and reached for her. "We could make it even."

Olivia turned her back on him again and walked down the beach alone.

Lisa and Clay were sitting together on the couch in the living room when Olivia slid the door open. There was a respectable distance between them, they were laughing.

"How was the walk?" Clay asked. Before she could answer him, he stood up and went into the kitchen.

"Where's Craig? Did he get lost or did you just get bored?" Lisa said in between sips from her wine glass.

"It was just too cold. And I'm tired. Tomorrow I'll be more fun. Promise."

Clay came back into the room and put a glass of wine in her hand and his arm around her shoulder.

"I was just telling Lisa stories about the house."

Olivia smiled tightly, "There are so many good ones. He could probably go on about them all night."

They all turned when the doors slid open again and Craig walked in. Leaving the door partially open, he stood in the open space of the dining room, wet and covered in sand with a lopsided grin on his face.

"I had to jump in. It's cold, but man what a rush!"

“Jesus. Craig, are you drunk?” Lisa's voice was shrill, but Olivia heard the embarrassment and a hint of fear.

Craig shrugged and walked towards Lisa, his arms wide open. Lisa jerked back, and Craig, tripping on himself, fell to his knees.

Clay laughed and helped Craig to his feet. “Just like college man, just like college. This bastard never could hold his liquor.” When Craig was to his feet, he pulled his arm from Clay's grip. “You all right man?”

“Fine,” Craig said softly, and then he said it again, raising his voice. He gave Clay a push. “I don't need your help.”

“I think it's time for bed,” Lisa laughed. She took Craig by the hand and led him towards the stairs that went down to the guest bedrooms.

When they were gone Clay looked at Olivia and shook his head. “I wonder what that was all about.”

Olivia hesitated. “He said that they've been having problems since the move. I'm going to bed too. All this excitement is wearing me out. Make sure you lock up and turn out all lights.”

“What kind of problems?” The lines in Clay's forehead came together in a frown.

“He didn't say.” Olivia swallowed the last of the wine in her glass.

When the house was finally dark and quiet, when they'd all gone to bed, Olivia listened to the rhythmic breathing of her sleeping husband and wondered what would happen if she could somehow cause his chest to stop rising and falling. She inched herself from under his arm and placed her head on his chest. She needed a closer listen. She wanted to see if he still had a heart beating in that cavern of bones and blood. Olivia stayed like that, her head attached to Clay's chest until he reached his arm around her shoulders again and gave her a tight squeeze before pulling away from her. For a moment she thought about pushing him out of the bed to wake him from his sleep in the most violent way possible, demand answers, even if she was unsure of what questions to ask. All night her mind would not let her body rest. As she imagined angry confrontations, her own heart beat faster and then slowed down giving her a sense

of calm she didn't feel she had a right to. Olivia spent the night reviewing every appointment Clay had over the last month, every dinner and night out he'd spent without her. She looked for holes in the stories he'd told, but she found that her memory of the previous month had faded.

Olivia woke up alone in the dark bedroom. She had slept poorly but the smell of coffee was enough to get her out of the bed. She walked over to the windows and opened the blinds letting the light pour in. Though smaller than the other rooms in the house they had made this room the master bedroom because of the view of the beach; when the tide was in, there was nothing but water as far as you could see. The first time she'd come there, it had unnerved her, how close the water seemed to be to the house, but now she liked the way the beach disappeared for a few hours each day, as if Mother Nature was reminding them that she was running the show.

She found her jeans from yesterday and slid them over her thighs. She sucked her stomach in to button them. She always gained a few pounds in Wellfleet. Sometimes, she hoped it was a signal of something else, but for now they'd agreed that babies were not part of the equation. Maybe Clay was right, she was only thirty-one; there was no reason to rush.

In the kitchen, where she expected to see her husband, she found Lisa standing over the stove and the lower half of Craig's body peeking out from the refrigerator. Lisa looked up from the pan she had been concentrating on and smiled widely. "We wanted to make breakfast for you. We didn't make too much noise, did we?" Craig shut the refrigerator door and came out holding a chunk of cheddar in one hand and a carton of orange juice in the other. He flashed a crooked grin, a sheepish acknowledgement of having drunk too much the night before.

"Sorry about last night," Craig began, handing the cheese to Lisa. He held up orange juice, another offering. Olivia shook her head no and reached for the coffee. "I guess I had more to drink than I realized." He ran his fingers through his hair. It was thinning in the front; it made him look more attractive.

Olivia shrugged, poured herself a cup a coffee and leaned against the counter. She drank it black. "Where's Clay?" she asked after that first sip of bitter goodness.

"He went for his daily run," Lisa said. Olivia snorted. Clay did not run every day. After Clay came back, sweaty and breathing heavily they sat down to breakfast of omelets, bacon and awkward silences. Craig tried half-heartedly to atone for the night before. Clay brushed it off, "Just like college, man, right?" he'd said, grinning in forgiveness. Olivia said nothing and concentrated on avoiding Craig's eyes, which were trying to connect with her, to make her acknowledge what he had said to her the night before. Instead, she studied Lisa. Was she smiling at Clay too often? Did she touch him in a way that suggested they were more than friends? *Fucking all over New York fucking City*. While her breakfast companions went on about the clear skies, the high tide, and the price of oysters, and Clay's upcoming gallery opening, Olivia relived her sleepless night over again.

When the tide receded and Mayo Beach became visible, Clay, Craig, and Lisa went for a swim while Olivia took her coffee and book and went out to watch them. They had only been in the water a short while when she saw Craig swim back to the shore. He walked the beach for a few feet before stopping to strike up a conversation with one of the oystermen checking his traps. Olivia made herself comfortable on one of the old lounge chairs on the stone patio. She sipped her cooling coffee and turned the pages of the book she had been reading, her fourth this trip. She found her place and had just begun to be lulled by the rhythm of the words on the page when she heard the laughter and footsteps of the swimmers.

"You going to waste today sitting around? It's the first real summer weather." Clay stood over her and shook the water off his body and onto hers, and fat droplets of water landed on her forehead and on the pages of her paperback. He reminded her of bulldog, wet and shaking as he moved the towel across his naked limbs. When they had first been together he was leaner, now he was thickening at the waist and his face and neck were beginning to

widen as well. She wondered what it would have been like to encounter him as a more youthful man, if it would change anything about their relationship: he the teacher and she the eager student.

"Jesus, Clay," she wiped the water from her face and blotted the wet spots on the book's pages so that the ink wouldn't run.

Clay turned to Craig and Lisa who were toweling themselves dry by the picnic table "She's the only the person I know who comes to the beach for a vacation and hates it."

Olivia shaded her eyes from the sun, "I'm just not fond of sand, and I'm not the best swimmer."

"I tried to teach her," Clay said. "Disastrous. Every time, I think she's going to drown." Olivia swatted his arm.

"I didn't grow up in the suburbs. City pools were always gross and crowded. Besides, I'm not that bad. I can doggie paddle, I can tread water."

He leaned down and pressed a wet kiss to her forehead, a strange moment of tenderness. "Lunch? What about oysters? I'm going into town." When no one disagreed, he threw his towel over his shoulder and started for the house. Olivia declared it naptime.

When she woke up, Craig was sitting at the picnic table.

"Where are Clay and Lisa?" she was taken aback by the accusatory tone of her voice.

"They went into town to pick up lunch," he said, the tone of his voice suggesting that this was undeniable proof. Craig leaned forward and put his head down on the table and stared at Olivia, his gray eyes squinting in the sunlight, then he lifted his head not dropping her from his gaze.

"Lisa's pregnant."

"Congratulations," Olivia said, as if she were on autopilot. "Isn't it a little early to be drinking?"

He laughed and shook his head. "I haven't had a drink all day. Wake up Olivia, get mad, be angry. He stopped speaking and his face softened, he looked thoughtfully at her, "Don't you worry though; she says she's not keeping it. Your husband told her he's not ready to leave you. Says you're loyal and steadfast, that you love him so

you'll take this in stride. Work it out like its nothing, like it's a knot in your back."

"Why did you come here?" It was a silly question but Olivia, steadfast, practical, and loyal, wanted to know. He laughed sadly and shook his head. Olivia thought he might break down into tears right in front of her. An unexpected wave of fear came over her. Any moment they could come back, see the state Craig was in and force a conversation she didn't feel ready to have.

"Clay invited us before I knew, before they even started. Besides, Lisa's been a little stressed out; she said she needed the vacation."

Olivia kept waiting for the anger to rise up from her belly, past her throat, into her mouth and out into the open. But it never came. Clay knew her so well, steadfast, loyal, she hated hearing those words prescribed to her personality, she had always felt more than that. The idea that Clay thought of her in those terms, so rigid, so specific, made her ill; and yet, she wondered if he was right about her? Would she take this in stride and let time massage this knot in their relationship? Shouldn't she have known that this is what happens when you marry a man like Clay, a being so used to his freedom that real commitment was never truly possible. Shouldn't she have known that eventually he would want something different?

It was Craig and Lisa's last night. Olivia volunteered to cook dinner on her own. It would give her a chance to work out her feelings. Slicing into the carcass of a chicken and chopping vegetables soothed her, the same as when she cleaned the house. She liked she see her ingredients lined up on the counter, knowing that when she combined them into one bowl they would be better off together than they had been individually. Alone in the kitchen she had time to think. There was no one to hover over her and ask a million questions. She didn't have to plaster a smile on her face and pretend that things were going well. As she started to mix her spices and vegetables, she remembered the gruesome game she and her brother had played when they were children. They called it *Kill You Dead*. They'd taken the name from a line in "The Color Purple," a movie their mother had forced them to watch in hopes that her

children would become more sensitive, grateful even, for the quality of life that they had been given even if that life wasn't always anchored in one place. But they were, as children are apt to be, insensitive, finding only humor in the suffering and the heavy southern accents that bellowed from the speakers. Their favorite line sparked a game where they speculated on how they might kill one another using various methods of torture; the winner was the one who came up with the most inventive method. When she looked at Lisa and Clay, she imagined what kind of relief she might feel were she to put small amounts of chemicals on their dinner plates. Maybe she'd add them to the sauce or vegetable sauté simmering on the stove. She wondered what she could bury deep into the cavity of the chicken that would put them all out of their misery

Dinner was a quiet affair. Craig had taken a flashlight and gone off for a walk on the beach an hour before they sat down to eat and hadn't returned. They'd ignored his absence, just as they had brushed off his drunkenness. Olivia felt his absence; Craig was taking a stand, he would not participate in the ruination of his domestic life, he had the courage to walk out. After they'd eaten, Olivia returned to the kitchen to clean up. While she scrubbed the dishes, the sudsy water up to her elbows, Clay came to her and stood so close she thought he would plunge his hands into the water and start washing dishes alongside her.

"You've been so quiet," he said, his voice low so that he couldn't be heard in the other room. "I thought you wanted them to come."

Olivia took her hands out of the water and dried them on the towel that had been hanging from her shoulder. "Lisa's pregnant." She didn't turn around to face him but she could feel him backing away from her.

Olivia turned around and said it again, "She's pregnant." This time she was louder, but still too quiet for her voice to carry over into the room where Lisa was sitting.

"It's not mine."

"Liar," Olivia whispered. Clay said nothing. She wanted to slap his face but that seemed too easy, too expected. She would let him stand

there, his face reddened with guilt, the beads of sweat at his temples making their way down his face—she hoped that a pool would form at his feet, swallow him whole, drown him in what he'd done to them. He walked towards her and reached out to her, the same way he'd done for Craig that first night. Olivia slapped his sleeveless arms away; the towel fell to the floor. He looked hurt and she wanted to tell him he had no right to that emotion, that it was hers. He reached for her again, and this time she pushed him, hard, with everything she had, all the anger she could channel into her two hands. He stumbled back looking surprised at the strength of her anger.

“Liv, it's not like that.” He started. “It was only the one time, let me—”

She raised a finger like her mother had done when she was a child committing some act of misbehavior, “You're still lying. Craig told me everything.”

Olivia picked the towel up off the floor and with her hand balled into a fist, shoved it into his chest, one last exertion of anger before walking out of the kitchen and into the living room. Her hands shook lightly and she poured herself a glass of wine, pools of red formed under the glass leaving stains on the white lace runner that had belonged to Clay's grandmother. She took her glass, left the mess behind to stain and went outside.

Olivia had always preferred the mildewed wooden chairs covered with fading cushions printed with Laura Ashley patterns from the seventies. Outside, the air felt lighter, she could breathe in and out, the thin air coursing through her nostrils and into her lungs, so unlike the air in the house. From the patio, she could survey the shoreline; she could see Mayo Beach and the bay's moving waters from a safe distance. Here she had only to do battle with the mosquitoes. Olivia liked her perch overlooking the water; it made her feel as though she were part of the scenery, just another woman with glass of red wine. If it were the eighties, she'd have a cigarette in her hand as she turned the pages on a book. She had once thought if someone were to document this stretch of shore at

precisely eight o'clock, you'd have a line of women sitting on porches in the same pose, facing the water, armed with nicotine and alcohol. They would all be avoiding something, the receding hairlines of their middle-aged husbands, shouting children, and shrill mothers-in-law. But there were no children for Olivia to avoid, and Clay's mother had an aversion to her brown skinned daughter-in-law, so they never occupied the house at the same time, and it wasn't Clay, the man, flesh and blood that she was avoiding, it was the deafening silence filled with all the things he could not say to fix what he had broken. She sat on the porch and watched as the lights went off, one after another, in all the houses along the shoreline until finally, the lights in her own house were extinguished for the night.

Olivia fell asleep on the couch and had somehow managed to sleep through the night and well into the morning. The old couch was more comfortable than she'd imagined. Sleeping on the threadbare relic reminded her of life before she married, when she often fell asleep on the couch in her tiny apartment in one of the city's outer boroughs. When she was in between relationships, she found it comforting to sleep on something that was soft in some places and hard in others. She liked the support the couch provided her, it made her feel as if any second, someone would put their arms around her, make her feel as if she weren't alone. She could get used to that again, sleeping alone, fending for herself.

When Olivia was not quite awake, she felt as though she were floating. The lightness of her body, its new-found weightlessness warmed her. She let out contented sigh and the slightest hint of a smile formed on her lips. For a moment, she thought she could hear the sound of the bay pulsating in her eardrums, the sway of the water, the rocking back and forth of the waves.

With her eyes still closed and her body loose and free, Olivia lamented all the years she had lost by staying so close to the shore. As the world around her came alive, the opening and closing of doors, objects falling to the ground, still she didn't open her eyes. And when it got too noisy, when she heard Lisa wailing and the soft

voice of the police officer, she closed her ears, she shut everything out.

The night they found Craig, Olivia helped undress Lisa, given her two Xanax and put her to bed. Lisa's sister came to get her the next day. Clay suggested they stay in the house until things could be settled but the sister insisted on a hotel, said she would take care of everything, that Craig's parents would be arriving soon. They'd take him back to Minnesota. Two days after everyone had left the Cape, Olivia and Clay began packing up their house, readying it for the tenants. During a walk down the shore Clay found that the bay had brought back the flashlight Craig had taken from the house. It was tangled in between rotting wood and rocks a mile down shore. He brought it back to the house and left it on the dining room table.

In the days after Clay and Olivia returned to their lives in the city, Craig's wallet, the leather warped from its time in the water, would be found and sent back to his and Lisa's apartment in New York which was already a sea of boxes waiting to be sent back to the Midwest. The keys he'd kept in his pocket would turn up too, but they would end up miles away from Wellfleet, in a kitchen drawer of an old house in Eastham, they were now part of someone's collection of things the bay had tossed up onto the shore. *That's what the bay does, Olivia thought when she saw the flashlight on the table it takes things and then brings them back broken.* When they left the house— ready for the summer tenants—Olivia wished they would never have to come back. That at the end of the summer the house would take it upon itself to be clean and ready for the winter visitors who wouldn't allow the house to be so still and quiet as it was now with only the two of them inside.

