

THE WEATHER IN THE STREETS

By Mary Robison

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For a time I lived in Hull, on Nantasket Beach, on Massachusetts' south shore, where the winter storms sent the ocean booming up the streets and threw its lobsters onto the driveways and into the hedges; where the storms would melt your leather shoes and get you icy sopping wet and so cold that you wouldn't turn your frozen face to speak to someone, and so cold that it didn't matter anyway—you couldn't hear.

My younger daughter, Rachel, was there as well. She was different from me, and looked at things differently. She had friends in every corner of that peninsula, and she liked the storm atmosphere and always knew whom to call—who had wood, whose truck might still start. And then her friends and their parents would appear, whole Irish families in hip boots, carrying clam rakes and gargantuan buckets of clams they had dug from the sand. These were permanent residents, and they knew how to behave in a weather emergency; they possessed batteries, candles, whiskey, tobacco and cigarette papers, cocoa, and coffee.

We were living on a beach street, in a three-story house, with Rachel on the second floor, alone, with her sheepdog, Lucky Boy, always walking right behind her, zigzagging, and refusing to stay out of her space, his nails clacking on the hardwood floors, seemingly intoxicated with devotion. I'd catch him checking on her when she was asleep, and catch her talking to him even when he wasn't there. Me, I kept to the downstairs and, usually, to the same ready-to-bolt position in my chair. Way upstairs, or in and out, or mostly gone, was my some husband or other. I worked in Cambridge; commuted and worked and did what I could do. My neighbors asked for no apologies. They wandered onto their porches in pajamas and robes, or into their yards with boots pulled on and a coat thrown over. Their old, infuriating second cars were left parked beside our road, and never mind the cracked tail-light or the lack of a muffler.

Hull had once been, quite a while ago, one of the brighter spots, a resort place with splendid hotels, a bandstand, an amusement park with a famous roller coaster and a hand-carved carousel under a scalloped canopy. Folks came in on the ferry from Rowe's Wharf for the beaches, the food, the penny arcades, the orchestra and dancing at the pavilion. They went on the caterpillar ride, strolled along the seawall, sat on the great porch of the Hotel Nantasket and ate frozen vanilla custard and looked at the Atlantic sea.

The winters I was there, storms trashed the beaches, littered them horribly with mangled fish, great fish halves, and snarls of seaweed and plastic junk. Jellyfish that had seemed so graceful, glittering in the water, were now a

plop of mucus on the shore. There were castaway lobster traps spangled with dozens and dozens of starfish. Rachel brought home a little one, believing it would dry out nicely, but after a day it began to reek. Once, after an accident at Logan, the sea threw up a blue airplane passenger seat. It floated onto the beach at G Street and, looking exhausted, lay on its side in the sand.

There were lobster boats some early mornings, all different-colored—a green-and-white striped one, a cadmium-yellow. They were roped to an orange scow that towed them a little way into the ocean, and then the boats continued out and spent the day. Each speck of boat, out on the still water, had a crew of two or three bundled-up men. But if a single dark cloud appeared they would head in, instantly, all the boats, all the men, churning home as if they were on fire.

A bad snowstorm went on into the night once, and Lucky Boy was off somewhere and had skipped dinner and stayed out, and as it got later and later Rachel planted herself at the side door and alternated between calling for, cursing, and insulting him, crying, and making promises, if he would only come back. A couple of the Irish neighbors got their Jeep fired up and running, and there they went, driving into the blizzard night to find the dog, though they never did.

Paragon Carousel was restored, the Bernie King Pavilion is being reconstructed, and the Giant Coaster—a wooden out-and-back, with a ninety-eight-foot lift—was dismantled and resurrected years ago and is someplace else now, at a park in Maryland, jerking those people around.

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