

welcome

Easy Does It

I am sitting in my car, parked at the beach, on a brooding day in early spring. It is so cold that I am wrapped in several sweaters, a scarf, and a hat. There is a storm coming up, and the ocean is rough, choppy, frothing. The waves come churning in so quickly that four or five are breaking on the shore simultaneously. The sky is leaden; last night was a full moon, and the debris left behind by the high tide reaches to the parking strip; since the last time I saw it, the beach has been rearranged; none of the boulders I sat on last summer are in the same place. Most of them have disappeared under new rocks thrown up from the watery depths. We have had a month of violent storms, and it looks like another one is on the way.

My 16-year-old son is on a surfboard in the middle of the jagged waves. He is out so far that he is a tiny dot; I can see him in his black wet suit—covered head to toe—bobbling on the surface, then disappearing under a crashing wave. A few more paddles to get beyond the crests to try and ride one in, but of course it is impossible to catch a decent wave. My heart stops every time he is in a trough. I know he isn't really in danger—the tide is so low he can stand in the water, even way out there, and we are in a long cove. Things just appear awful, but he is undeterred; he has been looking forward to getting into the water all winter. After a while, a few more surfers drive up, so that my son is no longer alone at sea. I can pick him out from the other surfers because he has a habit of crooking a foot in the air when he is paddling on his stomach, so that it looks as if his little craft had a stiff, black flag unfurled at its stern.

I have agreed to drive him to the beach because he does not yet have a license. I am all too aware that this may be the last time he is dependent on me for an adventure, even if it is only because I can drive him. As it is, I have insisted on staying at the beach as a lifeguard; he has insisted that I be discreet. It is a good bet that no other surfer in that roiling mess has his mom along. I suppose I will drive discreetly into the ocean if I need to rescue him. Anyway, it is warm in the car.

I relax as I watch over the black-hooded flock, so vulnerable and brave. In order to keep my anxious fantasies

at bay, I begin to redesign my garden. This moving around of trees and furniture is a sweet, old daydreaming habit. I cannot remember when it started—perhaps when I was installing my family in our first house. Perhaps when my first son was born, and I was beset with dark imaginings of all the ways in which happiness might be forever snatched away. These sorts of melodramatic thoughts arise in full costume in the middle of the night, of course, and that is when all new mothers begin the lifelong habit of broken sleep. Everyone knows it isn't good to dwell on such anxieties—and so I began to move around the rooms of my house, or garden, or friends' houses, chasing away nightmares with new curtains, or carpets, or paint colors.

While my son is thrashing through the waves, I stave off apocalyptic thoughts by imagining a new room in my garden. First, a few more trees, to make a snug enclosure. While I'm at it, I consider the problem of blocking from view an enormous new house that has sprung up almost overnight. I wander through my mental catalog of outdoor furniture; my brain has become so stuffed with merchandise that I can shop inside my head. My garden room needs a chaise, I decide; I am very much in favor of outdoor rooms that are as comfortable and organized as the ones inside. I'm in the process of choosing an especially plush ivory fabric covered with a pattern of bright red coral branches when the absurdity of what I am doing strikes me. My son is in the ocean, terrifying me. I am comforting myself with a garden. I very much wish that I were sitting next to a fragrant clump of peonies just now, with my child sleeping in a basket under a tent of mosquito netting. Do gardens come from such feelings of frailty? I want the natural world ordered, responsive to my whims. More to the point, I want my children with me in the garden. Too bad. They don't need it anymore—and they don't yet need it again. They will, and when they do, I'll be there waiting.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Brigitte Lacombe'.