

Katherine Hester

Clue

The beach house has a terrible name, half pun, half innuendo — hearing it, you can't help but roll your eyes. *Do Me Good*. A name like that should've warned them away in the first place. So says Lauren, who noticed more than she should've when she and John dropped their suitcases in their bedroom.

"Do Me Good." She gives a mock shiver. "What does that mean?"

She acts like the whole week's a joke, an opportunity for more caustic stand-up. But the truth is, John's future really might ride on this. On being here. He shuts the door. It wouldn't do for Armistead, the most senior of the partners, who extended the invitation and picked this beach house, crappy name or no crappy name, to overhear.

Army's minivan, laden with bikes and boogie boards and top carrier, is already nudged between the cement stilts that separate house and Gulf. John and Lauren are too late, and John is too junior, for first bedroom pick. They've been allotted—not the best room with its deck and view of ocean—but this one isn't half-bad, not for second-best, and not considering (John won't say this to Lauren) Army originally hinted they should choose the one off the open-concept living room downstairs.

Just how badly would it suck to be Ezra Swenson and his wife, who won't get here until Tuesday? Who will have to share the bathroom downstairs with all the kids? John and Lauren are lucky with their king-sized bed and blotched tropical-print spread. He opens the bathroom door.

"Awful things could've happened here," says Lauren, behind him.

"Awful things could've happened everywhere." He stops. "Have happened everywhere."

The shared bathroom goes a long way to explaining why each couple's portion of the rent is so low, why John and Lauren were invited so late in the game, and why the house was available the week of the Fourth in the first place. *Five bedrooms*, the listing with blurry photographs and probably false reviews had crowed. *Three and a half baths*.

Does Lauren really not get how much worse this could be?

"How many kids are there?"

No, she doesn't. She really doesn't understand how much he stuck his neck out to save her from having to share a bathroom.

He ticks off kids on his fingers. Girls, two of them, around thirteen or fourteen. Three boys who've hooked their game console to the sole flat-

screen with the single-mindedness of the firm's IT techs. "Five, maybe? And I think the Swensons are bringing some."

"What were we thinking? We don't fit in here."

He wishes he knew a way to smooth the furrow pinched between her brows, but when the person who just hired you invites you to share a beach house, you can't say no.

—*Yes, you can*, she'd countered when he came home with the invitation. *You can say not just no, but fuck no.*

"Please?" he says now. *Please.* His ace in the hole! "Try not to notice so much." He pats the bed, inviting her beside him.

What else can this place be but a cliché, with its dumb name and its impermanence and its nautical décor? The commandments painted onto bits of wood and hung on the walls shouldn't surprise Lauren.

Rule #1: What happens at the beach house stays at the beach house. (Their bedroom.)

Life is just a beach! (In the dining area, where she currently sits.)

There are apparently other rules, as well, devised before she and John came along, back when Dennis and Armistead were roommates wet behind the ears, fresh out of law school. When there were no kids yet, and Trina and Sarah, the wives, were just girlfriends.

"Day Two, we go to the beach. To get it out of the kids' systems. Then we'll head into town," Trina explains after all three cars have been unloaded, when the six adults sit down to pick at what's left of a frozen pizza from the convenience store at the turn onto the Cape. "To stock up and browse the cute shops and have lunch."

Day Three, they boil shrimp.

Day Four, they rent bikes and ride from one end of the Cape to the other.

Day Five, Army's arranged for sea kayaks to be dropped off at the house.

"I just lie in the sun and read," Sarah, Armistead's wife, interrupts. "This is the only time all year I get to read anything from cover to cover, so Army cuts me some slack."

Day Six is—

"The bonfire," one of the teenaged girls supplies. She and the other one have draped themselves over stools at the breakfast bar. Their mothers ignore them.

The girls are braiding each other's hair. Or maybe the spray bottles and hairbrushes in front of them on the counter are a cover story. "Can we go into town another day, too?" the girl asks around the hair-tie clenched

between her teeth. “To that place that does hair-wraps?”

They make margaritas the night they boil shrimp, Trina continues.

Unless. Unless someone who didn't know any better—*i.e.*, Lauren—brought dayglo yellow margarita mix and the bottle of tequila she just set on the counter.

“Why not?” Armistead says over the music spilling from his laptop set on the bar. “Why not? Let's break out that blender!” He slams open cabinet doors. “Got to be one somewhere.”

I'd like a hair-wrap, Lauren thinks. That she feels more sympatico with the teenaged girls than she does with their mothers might not be a good sign. Particularly since her affinity's obviously a one-way street. Every overture she has made, from offering the girls her *Rolling Stone* to complimenting their braids, has been greeted with suspicion.

Armistead stands, blender in hand. “Triple sec?” He looks at Lauren. According to Sarah, he spent the past two weekends making the playlist they're listening to. This song—what is it? A synthesized itch to be scratched between her shoulder blades, phantom but familiar.

She hasn't heard it since high school. And just like that, she's got Armistead's number. He's one of those guys. One of those guys whose life demands a soundtrack, who takes his music seriously. The sort who takes it with him wherever he goes. The sort who loves the Cloud—along with those state-of-the-art, portable speakers.

Although right now, he's saying, “Don't tell me you forgot triple sec!”
“I forgot triple sec.”

She wishes she brought her phone down. Since she didn't, she looks at the room, using the strategy that's become more and more useful to her lately, where she examines wherever she happens to find herself and rearranges it, piece by piece.

On one side of the large room, windows face what must be the ocean. Two sofas are positioned perpendicular to the fireplace. The dining table seats ten, the kitchen is floor-to-ceiling cabinets. The room is three rooms rolled into one, a space that multitasks. The walls are the same neutral greige as the ones in Dr. Berman's waiting room, a shade meant to be innocuous that comes across as dingy.

In Dr. Berman's waiting room, a little sand table sits next to a stack of Princeton alumni magazines, a contorted bonsai tree and special wooden-tined rake beside it. A shorthand: The couples waiting should practice zen. But does Dr. Berman really expect Lauren and John to inhabit *this* present moment?

“Divorce.” Armistead hands around margaritas. “Here’s to it!”

The two girls raise their heads from the laptop. They’re changed by their newly-braided hair, long-necked and haughty.

To start with, Lauren thinks, I’d throw the cushions on these chairs in the washer.

To start with, I’d clean the carpets.

To start with, I’d throw away everything hanging on the walls.

“Divorce. Like throwing all your money into a big pot and watching it burn,” John says, gamely clinking glasses with Armistead. A fetlock of hair falls across his eyes, making him younger, the college boyfriend she tends to forget she ever had.

The past couple of years have aged him.

—*They’ve been hard on both of you*, Dr. Berman said the last time they saw her, the sort of noncommittal nothing that will allow them to find her more annoying than they find each other, permitting themselves to stop seeing her.

Lauren takes a sip of her drink.

On Day Two, Daniel’s mother thinks he’s asleep, because he’s lying so still on his stomach on his striped beach towel. But he already figured out that if he narrows his eyes, he can count the grains of sand in front of him. So that’s what he’s doing. He started yesterday, the first time they came down to the beach. This morning he had to start over, of course, but that’s fine. The sand sparkles so much it would keep anybody from sleeping. His mother hardly ever sleeps, so there’s no way she could know this.

She thinks she’s whispering.

She thinks he doesn’t hear her.

—*Camp’s out of the question*, she’s telling Josiah and Logan’s mother in a low voice—*until he’s able to remember to take his meds every morning*.

Daniel rolls off his towel and out from under the scalloped ripples of shade cast by the umbrella. He runs down the beach to let the water kiss his feet. He can see Josiah and Logan out past the foam of the breakers. Last year, his dad forced him to go out that far— but out there the waves lull you into thinking they’re friendly. Then they backhand you. Before you know it, the world’s murky and greenish and you’re not breathing.

Fact: If you learn to swim, your dad will force you to go kayaking with him.

Josiah and Logan are so far out their bobbing heads could be anything. Pelicans riding the waves, surfacing dolphins, floating garbage. He looks

back over his shoulder. The wet silver slick of sand stretches back to his mother, a tiny figure sitting in the same chair she hauls to the sidelines of his sister Fee's swim meets. Right now, the black yoga pants and rash guard covering her arms make her look like an astronaut.

The sun worries her. More than it seems to bother the woman who came with the guy who works for his dad, who lies to one side of her. Or Josiah and Logan's mother, who lies on the other. Light slants across Josiah's mother's white thighs, the bright splash of a *Better Homes and Gardens* shields her face.

Sunscreen, his mother shouts down the beach. The magazine slides off Josiah's mother's face as she rears up, startled. *How many times do I have to ask you things like this? Do you have on sunscreen?*

He hates it when she calls them *meds*. He scoops up a handful of wet sand, ignoring her. It drops from his hand like a live thing. It is a live thing, it's full of live things, little shelly nubs that open and close as he watches them, allowing him translucent glimpses of their vulnerable parts, feet and feelers and frills.

Lauren lies on her stomach, chin propped against her hands, *observing* the girls. The expanse of sand between her and them is powdered sugar pinked by her half-lowered eyelids.

The girls are out of the water, lying lizard-like on towels they've arranged just out of earshot of their mothers. Now they're back in the water, emitting little self-conscious squeals. The shorter one gives a funny, less self-conscious half-hop as she wades further out into the tug of the tide. The waves slap their chests.

And then they're back out, splashing water on the burning sand so they can dig at it with their hands.

The girls are named Ophelia and Ruby. Constructing the firepit for the bonfire on the last night is their job. It takes all week, Armistead explains, to dig a proper hole, to find enough driftwood. Lauren lets her eyelids fall closed. What on earth were those girls' parents thinking, saddling them with such beautiful, ridiculous names?

On the third day, by what Army calls the *cocktail hour*, it's raining. Great sheets slanting sideways, obscuring the view of dunes from the wide picture window. Not that the rain stops Trina. Every year, she walks—before anyone else in the house is awake, when she can watch the pearly sky. In the late afternoons, after that same sun swings far enough to the west to cast its first

blue shadows, before she and Sarah fix supper for the kids.

This afternoon, the rain has blown in earlier than usual, and white-capped swells mass at the shoreline. Rain hits her face. She turns back without making it far down the beach, and now she stands just inside the door of the beach house, shaking water from her hair. At the table, Fee and Ruby hunch over the board game they found in a cabinet. She pulls out a chair.

“How’s it working out to play with just two people?”

Ruby shrugs. One bra strap slips off her shoulder.

Back when Fee and Ruby were just eight or nine and the twins and Daniel weren’t more than toddlers, back when there still wasn’t any cell coverage on the Cape, as soon as they unpacked, Trina would search the cabinets for the stash of board games she knew she’d find. After supper, she and Ruby would play Scrabble against Armistead and Fee while Sarah sat knitting. As is still the case, Dennis would drink a little more than he’s used to and head to bed early.

The thing about Armistead is that he likes to win. The girls are old enough now to know that. They wouldn’t dream of playing Scrabble because that might catch his interest.

Trina studies the board. “This doesn’t look anything like what we played when I was a kid.”

“You *always* say that!” Ruby rolls her eyes. “No matter what the game is.”

Fee studies the board. “Was it Miss Scarlett, in the pool house with the wrench?”

“Nope. You are just plain wronger than wrong.” Ruby opens her hand. Tokens—wrench, pipe, rope, gun—clatter onto the table.

After dinner on Day Four, Sarah pulls out her knitting. Lauren looks up from her *New Yorker*, watching Sarah’s fingers, the warp and the woof of the yarn, the glinting needles. The yarn is pretty: Heathy gray, close in color to the clouds that blow in every afternoon, keeping them housebound.

“What’re you making?” she asks.

Every night, after she and John say *good night*, after they leave Armistead sitting at the dining room table nursing his third, fourth, or fifth beer, after they get settled in bed, John hisses: *Lauren, would it really be any skin off your back? To just make an effort?*

So—here it is, her effort. Apparently wasted, because tonight John’s too wasted to notice, he’s sitting at the table with Armistead and Dennis and Ezra Swenson, who finally showed up. They’re talking about—what else—work.

“Baby blanket.” Sarah loops the yarn over the needles. Lauren

practically feels its scratchy wool tighten against her throat.

This year, everything has changed.

On Day Four, Fee offers this thought up to see if Ruby shares it. She can't see her in the dark.

"Of course everything's changed." Ruby's furred voice is seconds away from sleep. "It's a totally different beach house."

They're lying on the twin beds in the little room on the third level of the house, the one their parents have started calling the crow's nest.

Their parents! The sound of their voices winds its way up the stairs and Fee hears her mother's laugh, more evidence of how things have changed. Last year, Fee's mother was just her mother. This year, her laugh has the power to curdle something inside Fee, she can't exactly pinpoint *where*. Her stomach? Her heart?

"Your soul?" Ruby suggests, but Fee can tell by the way she turns over and punches her pillow into a better shape that she's just agreeing to be nice.

Ruby doesn't feel the same way Fee does, about anything. That division between them is just another way everything is different this year. Last summer, they were a unit, as much twins as Josiah and Logan, and the week they spent at the beach was such an orgy of wave-jumping that at night the bed they shared bucked like a raft.

Fee can feel her pulse jumping against the blue-veined underside of her wrist. She touches her lips to it in the dark. What does that surge of blood mean? That she's alive? Or that she's another day closer to dying?

She might not wake up in the morning.

Her mother might not.

Even Daniel, who never gets in the ocean and accidentally on purpose forgets his medicine, might not: Maybe this is the last night for any of them.

The idea tugs at her like the riptide their mothers discuss every morning. This side of the causeway there's a Coast Guard station, but this beach house is farther up the Cape than they've ever stayed. There's no way to know which flag—green, yellow or red—runs up the flagpole in front of the station every morning.

"It's always a riptide," Fee's mother always says. "Or we might as well act as if it is. To be on the safe side."

The safe side. The tide wants to suck you out to sea. You have to fight it, otherwise you'll get knocked off your feet and spit back out, sand-scoured, eyes stinging.

In the dark, she and Ruby have already gone over the most important

things. School; the intricacies of their days; the lunchroom; the noise in the hall between classes. The swim team, which Ruby claims she's quitting.

"Your dad won't let you."

"Naw, he's okay with it. He says *all good things come to an end*. Says..." Fee can tell Ruby's a hair's-breath from sleep. "Says it was *a good run*."

"Easy for him to say," Fee scoffs. "He's got the twins. He can go to *their* meets. Their practices. Daniel'll never make swim team. He'll never make anything."

But sleep has carried Ruby away on its tide.

Tomorrow, the two of them will sleep later than anybody else. They'll creep down to the kitchen in their t-shirts and panties and heat up veggie burgers in the microwave. They'll eat peanut butter straight from the jar. By the time they find their towels and stroll toward the water, their mothers and the boys will be trudging back to the house, the first shift.

The other stilted houses on either side of the sandy path are bigger than this one. They have their own pools. No cars are parked underneath the one on the left; there aren't any towels flung over the deck railing.

Ruby says, who needs a pool when the whole ocean's right here for the taking? But the water in the pool gleams against its tile bottom whenever they walk past. Fee can taste the plunge that'll sluice her hair clean of salt. She wants it—oh, the way she wants things she knows she ought not to give in to. Biting her nails. Chewing ice. Boys.

"Ruby?" she whispers. Moonlight slides through the crack in the crooked miniblinds. She can hear the ocean, even though her dad waited so long before he put down a deposit this year that they ended up with a house that was second tier from the beach instead of right on the water.

By the fifth night, whenever Fee's dad heads for the blender, he stops in front of his laptop and turns up the volume.

The truth is: The grown-ups are wasted.

"God, Dad."

Fee and Ruby haven't budged from the breakfast bar, even though their dads are talking cases. Or maybe they haven't moved *because* their dads are talking cases. There's plenty to discuss in the crow's nest later. Handcuffs brought to the office by a plaintiff as evidence? And what exactly is a pre-nup? "Can't we play any music beside old guys or dead guys?" Fee asks her father.

"Or dead old guys." Ruby wants to back her up. "I mean, Prince? David Bowie? REM?"

“REM’s not dead,” Fee’s dad says. “And Prince—what an innovator. That was a sad day.”

Ruby and Fee exchange looks. “Almost dead,” Fee says about REM, but under her breath.

“All right then. Be my guest! Let’s hear *your* music.”

The blonder of the two teenaged girl gives John a shy smile, clearly self-conscious about the silver grill of her grin.

“See!” Army says to him. “Can you believe they listen to this garbage? So auto-tuned it’s not even *music*.”

John always tells Lauren he’s not a bad boss, not as bosses go, mostly hands-off. An excellent litigator. But if John were Army, he’d drop it.

But what does John know about having kids?

The first few years he and Lauren were together, his mom gave it her best shot. Hinting, then more than hinting. Was there something wrong? He shrugged her off; he was good at shrugging things off. Even though Lauren brings it up whenever they meet with Dr. Berman. Why hadn’t he just told his mother to mind her own business?

Some things shouldn’t be a choice, his mother said.

“It just doesn’t work with our lifestyle,” he told her. What lifestyle? Well, travel for one. Besides, California was going to fall into the ocean any day, and Florida, flood. The temperature rise twenty degrees and the ice caps melt—it was practically a responsibility, not to have children.

Some things just shouldn’t be a choice, his mother insisted. Unstoppable force; unmovable object. She’d be happy to talk to Lauren.

“No. Please don’t.”

What he didn’t say: Changing their minds this late in the game would cost them. And the game was? IUI, IVF, an expensive alphabet soup of diminishing returns, said Lauren.

But all that’s behind them: Now they spend admittedly smaller quantities of money at Dr. Berman’s office, where he sits on the comfortable sofa opposite his wife and wonders—How many places can you go? How many meals can you have? How many pieces of furniture can you buy after comparison-shopping, after you whittle down your options until the only sofa left to decide on is the one that’s you, the essence of you, the personification of the *two of you* in sofa form...

“Listen.” Army’s daughter steps back from the laptop. “The singer’s so good! I love her.”

Army cocks his head, a connoisseur. It’s hard to hear the music over the

tipsy voices of the women at the other end of the table. “I told you.” He waggles his eyebrows at John. “Can you believe this crap?”

The fact is, John only punched another guy once, when he was about the same age as the boys on the sofa playing Minecraft. The only thing he got out of that was a broken thumb. So he *knows*.

You have to remember not to fold your thumb into your fist.

You have to learn to pick your battles.

Tomorrow, they’ll leave for Atlanta, boiled and sandy, pink with sunburn. But for now, Lauren lies on her stomach in the island of shade cast by the umbrella. Sleeping.

Not really. But pretending, she hears things.

Ezra Swenson and his wife are a second marriage. They left the kids at home with their ex-spouses. They’ve hardly left their bedroom since they got here.

—*Must be nice*, murmurs Trina.

Sarah is worried about Ophelia.

Not *Daniel*?

Lauren startles, realizing she has been asleep.

“What’re you reading?” Sarah asks Trina after a while.

“Beach reading. See, it’s even got a beach on the cover, in case you can’t figure it out.” Lauren opens her eyes. Trina shows the cover: Sand whiter than theirs.

The water is so much bluer.

Inside the house, Josiah and Logan won’t take their hands off the controls. “A sec,” Logan says when Daniel begs him for the billionth time.

“Hang on, hang on,” says Josiah, without ungluing his eyes from the screen.

Daniel’s mother says when Josiah and Logan were little they had their own language, a back-and-forth babble, words but not words, that held all their secrets. There’s nothing Daniel can do about it, and now there’s *Splatoon*, their favorite game, an extension of that same language. He could take classes in it for a million years and still not know what’s going on.

“Do it! Do it!” Logan urges his twin. Daniel edges closer, so they’ll be reminded that they’ve been saying he can have a turn.

“I can’t see, I can’t see!” Josiah slaps the top of the coffee table. “You made me die, Daniel, you dumbass.”

What do you do with a girl named Ophelia?

In the beginning, when she was a swaddled package slid into your arms (your package, perfect and gifted expressly for you, for all that she wouldn't stop crying), you sang her a song you made up off the top of your head as you walked her up and down the sidewalk in front of the house because being outside calmed her down.

What do you do with a girl named Ophelia?

Put her in your pocket and carry her along.

Ophelia, Ophelia, here comes sleep to meet you,

Ophelia, Ophelia, sleep says hello.

It was a silly song, Armistead knew. Almost every song he's ever come up with has been silly, the main reason he sold all his guitars during his senior year at UVA and used the money to pay for applications to law school.

But what to do with his daughter *now*? Armistead doesn't have a clue. "Who wants to pull the wagon?" he asks, checking to see that he has everything. More firewood, in case Fee and Ruby haven't collected enough. Paper plates and napkins because it's part of the ritual to burn as much as they can, so there'll be less stuff to pack. The bottle of scotch he saved just for tonight. The bright seedy packets of the fireworks. "Fee?"

She looks up from the game of Clue she and Ruby have been playing all week. "We'll come down later."

Summers before, she was the first one down to the beach, the one who cried loudest at the thought of dousing the bonfire with seawater once it burned down to embers. "You snooze, you lose." He starts for the stairs, a tote bag in each hand. "How about it, Danny Boy? You coming?"

Daniel stops beside the table to watch Fee and Ruby, listing things in his head.

baseball bat

ax

knife

gun

rope

candlestick

statuette

dumbbell.

"No," says Fee, noticing him. "Read the box. You can't play. It says it right there: *nine and up*. Go on down to the beach. Dad needs you."

"I'm ten."

"A young ten." Fee sounds like their mother. "Beat it."

Everybody else is at the other beach. The better one, the one where they made the creepy movie back before Fee and Ruby were born, where the houses cost five times what they cost here. Fee knows this beach house didn't cost as much as the ones at the other, better beach. For one thing, there's no elevator, like they had last year.

Ruby says she can tell everybody else is at the better beach because of Tobias' spam account, the one that tells the real story, where he throws gang signs and pictures of bags of weed. A bottle snuck, while the parents aren't looking. A picture of a boardwalk, so fast Ruby could've missed it. Emmaline and Mary Kate are there, staying two houses down from Tobias who, judging from his Instagram story, has forgotten he's Ruby's boyfriend.

"How many miles is it?" Ruby looks up from her phone. "How long do you think it would take to walk there?"

Is she asking because Fee's her best friend, who swapped spit and blood with her last summer, or because Fee's good at math?

"Ninety miles. Figure you can walk three miles an hour for twelve hours. It'd take three days. Hey." She looks up from her phone. "I got an idea. Bring your phone so you can take pictures. Emmaline and Mary Kate will be so jealous."

No matter how hard Armistead works at it, his braggadocio won't build the fire. Or maybe it *can*—it just won't get it to burn. It's too windy, too wet, too something. "Why don't we just grill up at the house?" Sarah suggests. Lauren watches him ignore her and go through a box of matches. "And come back down here later, after we eat."

"Damn it." He rocks back on his heels. "This is going to take the big guns."

It's only when he pulls a roman candle from the wagon that she realizes what he intends. "*Twenty Ball Flower Shot.*" He reads the label. "Hold it while I light it?"

John shakes his head.

Army swings around to Ezra. "You?"

Ezra backs away. "You could put out an eye with that thing, man."

"I will." Lauren stands up and takes the paper cylinder. "I'll do it."

The thing about the game nobody else seems to get is that if you set it on *creative mode*, it really is creative. All Logan and Josiah ever want is to get points. Daniel tries to explain that if you play in creative mode, you can make a house out of glass. A house in the trees. A house with secret rooms

that nobody except you knows how to get into.

Thinking about secret rooms gives him an idea.

Or maybe it's because Josiah and Logan still won't let him play.

Or maybe it's the plan his sister and Ruby are making. They've forgotten that he's listening to them, but he is.

Nobody *ever* knows he's listening.

"Climb the fence?" repeats Ruby. "No way. Somebody'll see us."

"Easy peasy," says Fee. "Go grab your suit."

Ruby and Fee want the pool at the house next door. Daniel's interested in what's inside. Every single house in the world's got a TV set. And every TV's got a console.

It turns out to be like his sister says. Easy peasy. The sand burns the soles of his feet. The sun has slipped into the crack between sky and water. There and then gone. Gulp, as if swallowed up. He doesn't even have to climb the fence. He looks back the way he came. Their own beach house blazes with light, like a beautiful spaceship. There's the sound of the ocean behind him, pulled in and then out, hissing.

He pushes open the gate.

The water boils with phosphorescence. Armistead rummages through the tote bag, while Lauren stands there with the roman candle.

Instead of the lighter she expected, he straightens with a bottle of scotch. Circling the firepit, he doles out red plastic cups.

"Divorce," he says, pouring. To John. To Dennis. To Ezra. "Here's to it."

Why not me? Lauren wonders. Why not Trina? Why not give your wife some?

Finally, he fumbles the lighter alight. She extends the roman candle toward him, thinking *William Tell shot an apple off his wife's head. William Burroughs, that old asshole, killed his wife trying the same trick.* All she's got to do is aim the roman candle at the firepit. But as soon as it's lit, she swings it in an arc past water, sand, lawn chairs.

She has Armistead in her sights.

"Bam," she says quietly.

"Jesus!" He jumps back.

Only then does she point the spitting tube toward the bull's-eye of the firepit. The first ball of fire wavers in the air. Just like that, it catches in the wood, a momentary sparking, and then its beauty is swallowed, greedily, by flames.