

## CAPE ANN

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By Adrian Spratt

Rain had fallen all the way from New York, through Connecticut and into Massachusetts, and the latest forecasts promised more of the same throughout the Memorial Day weekend.

Anne's Civic was loaded down with her camping gear.

“Cape Ann's coming up,” she said, turning off the cassette of the mystery novel we were listening to. I noticed she'd waited until the narrator had finished a sentence.

“Named after you,” I said. “Is that an omen?”

“It's spelled without an 'e'.”

The idea came into my mind that we might turn off and take a hotel break from the rain. I was apprehensive, never having been camping in my life.

“You haven't?” she'd said one day early in our relationship. She was sitting cross-legged on the floor of her living room and I resting against the front of the low armchair I gravitated to.

“What do you like about camping?”

“We used to go when I was a kid, my sister and I. Our one break every year from the city. And from mom and dad. Camping was freedom. We'd hike and look out for animals and birds and try to be first to point out some new flower. At night I'd lie gazing up at the stars.”

“Living in the suburbs,” I said, “all I wanted was to get into the city. It seemed there was always so much more going on.”

“There was.”

“But it's good to get away,” I said.

Actually, I'd lately been thinking this notion of getting away was one of those contemporary herd instincts, along with sweating sessions in the health club, re-runs of the Seinfeld show, daily catharsis with Dilbert and knocking down walls between kitchens and living rooms. Getting away for some people meant being rushed all Friday at the office, coordinating with spouses, schools and baby sitters, piling half an apartment into a city-sized car and then unpacking, all in one day. It also meant settling in. I always took a day to settle in, so a getaway home in the country would have killed my Saturday out there and Monday back in New York. I liked my castle in one place.

“It is good,” she said. “Being outside all day, you feel different about yourself.”

“I think you need to be very young to start.”

“I don't see why.”

“I find the idea a little scary. There'd be nothing to do.”

“There's lots to do, but there's also lots of time to think. You think all the time.”

“I need things to think about when I think.”

“There's plenty going on in nature. Maybe you'll write poems again.”

“I've been a lawyer for too long. I'm too old for poems.”

“Too old to start out in the country, too old to go back to poetry, huh?”

“Some things you need to get into early, some you grow into late and others you grow out of. To everything there is a season, know what I mean?”

There was no way around it. I dreaded the prospect of nothing to do but think. When I'd lost my vision, I'd felt there'd be nothing for me to do: no way to play with friends, to read, to get around. Those feelings of futility were long behind, and yet contemplating this camping trip I

projected nights under stars I couldn't see and days of listening to songs of birds I couldn't identify. All the old anxieties would flood back. They'd already started.

Had I told her all this? She knew the facts, for sure. But perhaps I'd kept back some of their feel. Instead of bringing the demons out onto her living room floor, I'd gone on to brood and complain about other things and, one way or the other, communicated that this vacation was one big concession to her.

"Cape Ann," she said, returning me to the Civic. "Can't say I know anything about it."

"I've never been there either," I said, "but I think of it as the less traveled Cape Cod."

"Sand dunes?"

"I don't think so."

"Shall we find out? I guess we should be thinking about somewhere dry for the night."

A warm hotel, I thought: clean sheets and indoor plumbing, people sitting around the bar downstairs. All safe harbors from the demons. "I think you're right."

Stopping for gas, we got a brochure and some local insight, then found our way to a small hotel. We left the camping equipment in the Civic and threw our overnight things in the room before going out in search of dinner. You could tell right away it wasn't New York because it was hard to find a place that was open. You could also tell because someone on the street gave us good directions. The restaurant was pasta a la Campbell's, and the waitress had more important things on her mind.

The rain let up as we walked back along the road in the ocean air. "I could be in outer space," I said. "The capsule's lost its connection with planet earth and there's no up or down."

"Disoriented. That's how I feel when I go camping, at the beginning. This is just another paved road between buildings."

“A very quiet paved road.”

“More desolate than any place in nature.”

So she was feeling it, too.

“Shall we go to the beach?” I said.

“We can do that.”

We’d been closing in on the hotel. Now we veered around and walked through the parking lot. The cement underfoot gave way to looser stones and we headed down a steep slope.

“There’s a pier over here,” she said, her voice caught by the ocean breeze.

My feet slid and turned and I concentrated on my balance. When we reached the pier, our footsteps thudded on wood. “How high off the beach are we?” The wind brought out a note of jubilation in my voice.

“A few feet.” She had to shout to be heard. “We can get down here and keep walking along the beach or walk to the end of the pier and climb down.”

Until then, content to take Anne’s arm, I’d been carrying my cane in its compact fold. I shook out the six sections, pulled the connecting cable tight and probed with the tip for the pier’s edge. I walked with the cane bumping along the planks. “Tell me when we’re near the end.”

Just a few steps farther she said, “Here. Hold on to the side and lower yourself on to the beach. The distance down is a little less than your height.”

I rested my palms on the pier’s edge, secured the cane between two fingers and lowered my feet. Just when I thought my arms could extend no farther, I touched the ground. I gave the cane something like a twirl. Anne jumped down at my side.

The beach was an even rougher stone surface than we’d encountered on leaving the parking lot. “I guess this is why everyone’s heard of Cape Cod and not Cape Ann,” I said.

“It’s more like Maine.”

It was deserted. We walked separately but not far apart. I stepped on a large stone to find one foot pointing up and the other down. I steadied myself with the cane.

“Don't count on your stick for support. It's too fragile.”

This was a thing with her, the way I used the cane for more than just tapping the ground. Any instructor in cane technique would agree.

“I'm just using it for balance.”

“Whatever.”

We approached the waves. It wasn't high surf, but far more intense than a lapping lake. An incessant roar accompanied the waves as they heaved toward us, relented, heaved forward again. I thought how they'd been launched all the way from the Arctic, or was it the Antarctic, to northeast Massachusetts. Either way it was a long journey to keep up that foamy hump and steady drive, only to meet their end as waves and fall back as mere water.

“Are you going to get your feet wet?” I shouted.

“Not me.”

“I am.”

“Hold on.” She gave me her arm as I hopped around and removed my loafers and socks.

“I'll carry them,” she said.

“Uh-uh.” I set off, cane in my right hand and footwear in my left. Closer to the waves, the beach became sandier and flatter. The first wave touched my foot, and I yelped.

“Are you okay?” Anne shouted, sounding far away.

“The water's freezing.”

“You had to go in to figure that out?”

I pressed on. As my feet submerged in the water and numbness took over, I reverted to boyhood adventure book terrors of the ocean. German Condor bombers were flying at me on the bridge of an escort destroyer in a World War II convoy to Russia's Murmansk. There was an explosion. My ship broke up and icy water rose to engulf me. I turned and walked parallel to the waves. I refused to retreat, but was too spooked to venture farther into the night sea.

"Anne?" I called.

No answer. I went on, one ear blasted by the ocean, the other reaching out toward the silent land. I felt unmoored, not knowing where she was, but I must be careful how I reacted or she'd interpret it as panic. I headed away from the waves. When the roar subsided, I again called out, "Hey, Anne."

"Yes?" She spoke close by.

"Ah, I didn't know where you'd gone."

"We don't have anything to dry your feet with."

"That's all right. I'm going back in. You really won't try?"

"I don't like the ocean,"

"How can a nature lover not like the ocean?"

"Easy."

I was going to her campground, but she wouldn't come to my ocean.

"Give me your hand," I said. I carried the cane and footwear with one arm, and we walked on. Cold feet made negotiating the stones painful. "I thought cold anesthetized."

"Why don't we sit down so you can dry them and put on your shoes?"

"Nope. In a minute I'm going back to the waves."

We stumbled along. Well, I stumbled. Although Anne called herself a "klutz," she picked

her way nimbly.

“I'd love to live by the ocean,” I said. “I think I'd write poems again.”

“You'd need to do a lot of maintenance on your house.”

“So if we ever move in together, it won't be to an ocean front villa?”

“Damn straight.”

A little later she said, “If you wrote poems again, would you set them to music?”

“I don't know if the poems I used to write would go with the melodies I make up.”

I tripped on a tall rock, but recovered. “You're right. Forget the ocean villa. Anyway an acoustic guitar doesn't go with the ocean.”

“I think of country streams when you play. Too bad we couldn't bring it with us.”

“Next time, when we've moved up to an Accord and there's more room in the car.”

“An Accord wouldn't last an hour on the streets of Brooklyn.” Then she said, “I wonder if I'll ever leave Brooklyn. The country has always been such a draw for me.”

“It would be hard to start over.” We were both lawyers and had put years into building up our New York Rolodexes.

“I got one career off the ground,” she said. “That was practice. No reason why I can't do it again.”

I shrugged, though it would be too dark for her to see.

She said, “You're right, it would be a bitch to start over. But in the city it's hard to tell if you've made a difference to your clients. In the country, they'd be neighbors.”

Caught up in conversation, I'd neglected the logistics of walking. A pointed rock stabbed my foot. “Christ.” I bent down to massage it.

“Are you okay?”

I stood and we walked on. "Don't lose your thought."

"I didn't really have a thought. I was just saying..."

"You were saying you wished you felt a connection between effort and results."

"Was I? I guess so."

She didn't want to pursue it. Just as well, because I felt a lecture coming upon me. "I'm going back to the ocean."

"You'll freeze to death."

"That's what warm hotel rooms are for -- to help you recover from the elements."

I walked along the ocean's edge, my feet tongued by water. This time I pictured a vessel, maybe the Mayflower, with the crew seeing land at last and anticipating their first steps on firm ground. I wondered why my mind kept reaching back for events in a history book. Couldn't I experience things for themselves?

I turned to leave the waves. Anne called, "Over here." When I drew nearer, she said, "Now will you dry your feet?" We went back to the pier, which she leapt onto with that agility I envied. I held out my footwear to her and hoisted myself up.

Sitting on the side, I waved my feet around. "In this wind," I said, "they'll dry in no time." I brushed off the sand and pulled on my socks and shoes. Standing up, I reveled in the flatness of the wooden platform. "Thank God for manmade things."

She said nothing. I imagined her asking herself if I was making a statement about our camping trip, then the question ebbing like a depleted wave.

I slid my cane back along the pier's side. "It's amazing we're an hour north of Boston and there's no one around."

"Yes."



Distracted, monosyllabic reply. Maybe I was in the doghouse. Maybe she was thinking. Maybe she wasn't even thinking. I listened back for the ocean, now just a dull sound like the fountain in a hotel plaza.

We stepped off the pier and slogged up the rough stone hill. When we reached the parking lot, I shook my feet again. Blood flowed back.

“Is that what they call the 'hornpipe?’” Anne said.

A car purred into the parking lot and circled around. It registered on me as if I were looking back through time and both time and the vehicle were steering toward me through a tube. The car stopped some yards ahead of us. A man called out.

“What did he say?” I asked under my breath.

“What's that?” Anne shouted, walking toward the car.

“How are you tonight?” the man said.

“We're fine,” Anne replied.

Coming up beside her, I stood tall, chin thrust forward, my cane held out of view in the hand I threw behind my back as if I were a military man in a photograph. I wanted the stranger to see me as able to defend her.

“You look real good,” he said.

Anne said nothing.

“We're having a party.”

“Great,” Anne said, her tone neutral.

“And you, you look great, too.” He must be speaking to me.

“Have a great time,” I said, picking up on Anne's lead.

“Care to join us?”

“It's late for us,” Anne said.

“Thanks for the invitation,” I said.

“Have a nice night.” The man spoke as if he'd been asking directions. The car glided away, a Condor on reconnaissance.

“Had a woman with him,” Anne said.

“Nice looking?”

“Blonde. I think her hair was long. You'd have liked her.”

I couldn't let go. “What do you think they're up to?”

“Don't know.”

We walked to the hotel. Behind was the great ocean and somewhere in town a couple looking for another couple. It would have been an experience, I thought, idly. The hotel obliged us to honor the outward tranquility of the other guests. I practically tiptoed down the hall and locked us in for the night. The room was musty.

Anne got ready for bed and lay front-down as she turned the pages of a magazine. On my side of the bed, I put on earphones and plugged myself into a talking book, but the sentences went by without catching hold of my imagination. I stayed with it to give Anne the time she seemed to need to herself. At last, under the sonorous voice of the narrator in my earphones, I heard Anne close the magazine. The mattress shifted as she stretched to turn off the lamp. I stopped the recorder, eased off the earphones and placed them on the floor. Turning, I found her lying on her back and stretched my arm over her abdomen. She placed her hand on my wrist and stayed still. The night drifted on. I settled into sleep.

Rain was falling again when we got up for breakfast. We talked to the guests in the dining room, then walked in the drizzle.

Over lunch at a rickety wooden table in last night's restaurant, dregs in our coffee cups, she said, "Let's go back to New York."

"What about all this camping stuff? What a waste."

"Next time. The forecast says it's going to rain the rest of today and all tomorrow. It won't be a good experience and you'll never go camping with me."

I felt as if I'd arranged for the rain. It was the notion that if you prayed hard enough, God would grant your wish. I could handle camping, especially now it would be for only one night.

"This makes me sad," I said.

"Rain does that."

On the road again, I fought through an urge to lean into the door and succumb to sleep. Instead, I asked if she wanted to listen to more of the novel.

"Why not?"

She might as well have said, "Why?" But it wasn't, "No." I pressed the play button. After a while, I got into the story. The windshield wipers metronomed at the rain. I pictured Anne intent on the road with an expression that would have been lost to me even if I could see. I stopped the tape.

"What's wrong?" she said.

"I want to say how sorry I am."

"You didn't make it rain."

She lapsed back into silence, and I had to decide all over again whether to press play.