

The Last of Something

by Susan Kelly (<http://www.susanskelly.com>)

Chapter 1

Wednesday, August 27

“Why not just rent a house?” Bess had said.

And normally this is what we do, so that no one person bears the brunt of preparations or cleaning, but — “Not this time,” I answered.

Claire thought we should rent as well. “Remember my china,” she warned. “If something’s going to get ruined, let it be someone else’s.” All of us were there the night her husband Wes had pushed through their swinging dining room door and accidentally dropped a tray stacked with china cups and saucers that had belonged to Claire’s mother, who’d died when Claire was only eight. Every piece had shattered so irrevocably that Claire swears porcelain shards are still embedded in the hardwood floor. Hardwood that Claire and Wes had left behind when they had to downscale to an apartment.

“There isn’t much to ruin at Mother’s beach house anyway,” I reassured Claire. She has to watch every penny, so she’s keenly conscious of owing--of favors, however small, that she feels obligated to reciprocate.

Our gatherings began twenty years ago with a Beach Week trip after college graduation--if standing in a football stadium with six thousand other seniors wearing disposable plastic robes counts as graduation--when anyone with gasoline and guts caravanned to a couple of rode-hard-and-put-up-wet Ocean Drive condos so stripped of furnishings that the only available object to drink from was a bucket in the cleaning closet.

Then, we played a drinking game called sloppy sixties, which involved gulping shot glasses of beer every sixty seconds (until John Harris threw up so violently from a second-story window that his upper plate had fallen out and we’d sobered up to search for his teeth through the sand at four a.m.). Then, some of the females were looking forward to (temporarily) higher salaries than what our male classmates would be commanding in entry-level stockbroking or manufacturing or bank trainee positions. Then, job desirability included a WATS line, free long distance at the office. Bess and Claire and Lillian and I spent hours on the phone, on other people’s bills. “Long distance jags,” we called these conversations, related to eating jags, spending jags, crying jags.

Then, we got married. We gave each other cookbooks for wedding gifts because cookbooks were all we could afford and seemed to be the ultimate symbol of desired

domesticity. We decorated our tables with spicy, stalky branches of dried eucalyptus and papered our walls with grass cloth because both, then, epitomized sophistication.

Our last couple reunions weren't wholly satisfying because everyone couldn't come. Four years ago Bess and Laurence no-showed because their son Grant was swimming in a state meet. And for the mountain trip planned to coincide with the leaf-turning peak two years ago, Claire and Wes were absent because their daughter Emily had a part in *Annie Get Your Gun* at school.

But this year everyone's able to come, and though I'm pleased, I also suspect something sadly final about the weekend. I've a prescience of loss. Summer's end melancholy, I suppose; August angst. Or sheer sentiment. I'm prone to sentimentality; can place a particular day, a specific season, the contents of a room, even the way I felt about someone or something, by a song on the radio. "Jimmy Mack" conjures up an eighth-grade January day when, noses running, unwieldy skis dangling, a friend and I screamed out the song's satisfying lyrics all the way up the slope in the chairlift. "Abraham, Martin, and John" evokes a gloomy Sunday afternoon in high school, when Dion's mournful croon embodied not specific assassinations but nonspecific adolescent anguish. "With This Ring" raises visions of my husband Eric's fraternity house--dimly lit, tiled floor slippery with beer--when we were secretly engaged, and before I discovered I was pregnant.

No danger of that now. Unlike my fifteen-year-old son Kent, I have no hormones coursing through me other than artificially manufactured ones. I touch my shorts to feel the clear, oval patch that's busily, magically, transferring estrogen through my skin. I have an urge to take off the plastic patch and examine it the way I'd press a piece of clear tape to my forehead then pull it away when I was a child, at once fascinated and disgusted by the smeary blur of flesh cells stuck to its surface. Didn't I read something in the hysterectomy literature about "heightened emotions," some ironic counterpart to postpartum blues? Maybe the hysterectomy is responsible for my nostalgia. "Best asset equals worst liability," Claire and Bess and I often say. We've discovered this in our forty-two years: Someone's best asset--efficiency, gregariousness, intellect, tenacity--is also usually her worst liability. "Eric can fall asleep anywhere," I might say. "Talent or affliction?" Bess will answer.

Eric. Maybe it isn't sheer sentiment gnawing me. Maybe it's sheer rage.

"Can I drive now?" Kent asks as soon as his sister's waving hand and trembling chin disappears in the rearview mirror. We've left Bay, my seven-year-old, at Yaupon Beach, another stretch of shore an hour's distance from Mother's cottage at Dune Ridge. Bay's visiting her best friend Nancy for several days. Bay for baby girl, who suffers homesick stomachaches but determined to ride out her fear, said yes to the invitation.

"What if they have foam rubber pillows?" she'd worried aloud in the car. "Or casseroles?"

"You brought your own pillow," I reminded her. "And I talked to Nancy's mother about the food."

"Nancy knows I like the bedroom door closed at night," Bay reassured herself. She reasons that boogey men can't find her if the door is shut; that it's preferable to be closeted in the dark than exposed to gaping hallways filled with danger. I don't argue with her logic: Bad men come in varied guises.

“After we get gas,” I tell Kent, who’s newly endowed with a driver’s license. His middle sister, Milly, is on a church youth-group mission trip this weekend. Kent is grounded, and grounded means he comes with us. Instead, I should have postponed his driving license as punishment.

Behind the Minit Mart counter, visible to anyone buying a pack of Lifesavers, is an astonishing selection of skin magazines surpassed only by the astonishing cover poses: two fingers over the pubic area in a come-on gesture, spread legs with a black whip curled at the crotch, three women straddling each other like circus contortionists. Five *Penthouse* issues are bound in a discount multipack; you can purchase crotch shots in bulk nowadays.

Incredibly, though, Kent is more interested in a large glass jar filled with colored capsules that crackle feebly and lurch sporadically. “Mexican jumping beans,” Kent says, “Rad. How much?”

“Three dollars,” answers the cashier, snapping her gum as rhythmlessly as the beans.

“They’re a gyp, Kent,” I tell him, “like mood rings and Ouija boards and . . . ant farms.” *We are working on impulse control*, Kent’s advisor wrote on his final school report. “We?” Daddy would have joked. “Who’s this guy We?” And then would have quoted Mark Twain: “Only presidents, editors, and people with tapeworms have the right to use the editorial ‘we.’”

“They gotta be warm to jump,” the cashier says. “That’s why we keep ‘em by the register.” As proof, she flattens four ring-choked fingers against the electronic warmth of the register, then returns to her Game Boy, its PAUSE light an impatient red dot.

Deaf to my advice, Kent buys three irregularly shaped peas and declares them “Phat,” current superlative slang as doomed to extinction as the extinct equivalents of my day: *groovy*, *outtasight*, *what a rush*. He presses the radio’s SEEK button, and when “Magic Carpet Ride” bursts forth, I flashback to a dorm room filled with bunk beds at tennis camp and to a frizzy-haired juking girl from Spartanburg. As though congratulating my memory, Sarah McLaughlin’s “I Will Remember You” comes on next.

Kent instantly changes the station. “No Lillith Fair songs.”

“What’s Lillith Fair?”

“Femmes. Bees.”

“What are ‘bees’?”

“Lesbeeeans,” he replies, and rattles his purchase like castanets. “Like that Lillian.”

“Lillian’s not a lesbian. She’s divorced.”

He shrugs, as if the terms are interchangeable. “How do you know? When’s the last time you saw her?”

Well.

In parking lots of highway emporiums, Confederate flag towels flap from clotheslines beside white towers of stacked Styrofoam coolers and inflated canvas rafts fading in the sun. Hand-lettered signs advertise supposedly fresh shrimp sold from battered pickup tailgates.

“Watch the road,” I say automatically when a car cuts too closely in front of us. I make a mental note of its license tag for my middle daughter Milly’s collection of vanity plates. ABLUECAR. NOFEAR. 2SMUV4YA. KLIMAX. N2FTNS! ABADZ4ME.

And ILUVMUFF. I have to hope MUFF is a person or pet, not a thing. PERIL, the tag in front of us reads, and my stomach contracts a little.

The same cottages that have always lined the straightaway to Mother's house line it still. The stand in tacky contrast to the burgeoning development of Shoreside seven miles north. Shoreside is a gated planned community with pricey, palatial, building-coded homes outfitted with Jacuzzis, solar panels, sprinkler systems, and third-story kitchens. At Shoreside even contractor port-o-lets are enclosed in outhouse hideouts to avoid offending the eyes of homeowners.

Shoreside is gated and guarded. "Lexus Land" Eric calls it, and the expensive cars that pass through its portals bear windshield decals granting entry and exclusivity. But once it was only dunes and sea grass, ideal for bonfires and beach parties and losing your virginity to a boy you'd known only an hour. But as the twenty-five year old male TA informed my college creative writing class, no one cares about how anybody lost their virginity.

The houses at Dune Ridge are products of another era: simple, and in comparison to Shoreside, a trifle shabby. Few, though, are as shabby as my mother's. Hurricane Nell selectively battered this short section of coast four Septembers ago, ripping away stairs and shingles, snapping pilings and piers on the inlets, flinging walkways over dunes that themselves were nearly flattened. Some cottages had first stories washed away entirely by the storm surge, which left the bulks of water heaters and commodes standing high and dry on the road and second stories wobbling upon support stalks. Beneath them dangled defunct electrical wires and accordioned tubes of heating or air-conditioning ductwork. Loosened, flapping strips of black tarpaper left the cottages looking like bird-legged old women with their skirts hiked up, their private parts exposed for all the world to see. I'd felt embarrassed for them. Yet Hurricane Nell and nature's arbitrary destruction had left Shoreside swimming pools and putting greens pristine.

Most Dune Ridge houses have now been restored to their stilts and redressed in louvered or latticed skirts. But homeowners remain jittery and gun-shy. Hurricane season begins in June and lasts through October, and specific storms become legend. People cherish their horrendous and/or wondrous personal lore of Hurricane Laura or Kevin or whomever. The close calls, the narrow escapes, what was lost, ruined, saved, spared.

Repairs to Mother's house have been haphazard and stopgap. After Hurricane Nell, when Mother was still *compos mentis*, she'd decided to "weather" another season rather than submit to the supply-and-demand, brutal whatever-the-market-will-bear prices of local contractors. It's been four years now, and in June of this summer I drove her to the cottage and suggested either repairs or an appraisal for possible sale. Something, some form of closure. I've wondered whether I could wrest legal control from Mother. Eric is a lawyer, after all. He could guide me through such a process if he isn't put in jail for violating legal ethics. Or as the newspaper termed it, "criminal activities."

At a traffic light on our way out I'd pulled the car beside a pickup in the other lane. A bronzed, bare-shouldered, cigarette-smoking carpenter had stared mildly at Mother in the passenger seat. "Quit looking at me," Mother had loudly directed, "you, you . . . *workerman*."

An odd snobbery, since workmen were once her lovers of choice. And that laughable command, as if the carpenter would be wounded by her scorn, the way Bess

and Claire and Lillian and I used to respond to any perceived insult by rolling our eyes and sarcastically saying, “Oh *hurt* me.” So brave, we were then; so beyond being hurt.

And Mother’s “workerman,” instead of “workman,” like Bay’s charming, and not-so-charming, malapropisms. “It’s the twenty-twoth time she’s invited me,” she’d said of Nancy. “My mommy’s having a lobotomy,” Bay told her teacher when I was in the hospital, for the hysterectomy.

The cottage driveway is cracked and tilting because Hurricane Nell flushed sand from beneath the concrete. But the flagpole is still erect, and — no rest for the tattered weary — a snow-white American flag atop it snaps in the breeze. Abused by year after year of wind and sun, seam stitches are the only remaining evidence of stripes on the flag. The banner’s edge is raveled as evenly as hair bangs.

One foot still inside the car, I stand and stare as I battle a sense of place both comforting and smothering. Each time I arrive at the cottage a mixture of apprehension and happiness claims me. For it’s only that: a decades-old, unpainted, unadorned cottage, about which I veer from a fierce determination to preserve, like the Corps of Engineers beach erosion guardians, to a perverse longing for its destruction by an act of God or force of nature. Such as a hurricane. Yet . . . palpable as the salt film glazing windows and walls and furniture, a sense of the indestructible clings to the cottage. As I’d told Claire, it can’t be ruined because it already is.

The ground floor is little more than a barracks sleeping quarters now, with mildewed foldout futons, beanbag chairs spitting Styrofoam specks, two bedrooms lined with bunk beds. But I remember a kind of grandeur during the cottage’s glory days, my childhood. Then, seated lunches were served by Thelma, who lived on the bottom floor and wore her tennis shoes mashed at the heels like slippers, with the canvas sliced to accommodate her bunions. Then, the cottage grew quiet between two and three every afternoon for a mandatory rest period. Then, while towels and linens thrashed in the dryer, I’d sit at the kitchen table with Thelma and watch *Days of Our Lives* on a countertop black and white portable TV.

Then, when I was seven and eight and nine, Mother dressed for evenings in flowy flowered skirts and loose pants in tropical hues, with matching sandals and earrings, and an air of expectancy suffused the cottage as distinctively as her perfume. Then, Mother was a different woman from the bitter adulteress she became. And now--with what is surely Alzheimer’s--so different from the vivacious, laughing, teasing mother that Bess and Claire and Lillian had admired and envied when she’d sneak downstairs to smoke cigarettes along with us and tap ashes into the ashtray that Bess and Claire and Lillian had loved too. White ceramic with pink glaze. USE ME, its bottom coyly read. Mother had been the favorite of parents among us, for condoning our mischief without insinuating herself into our intimacy. Her zest and vibrancy had ebbed, though, gone rotten and sour when she was . . . when she was about my age, come to think of it.

Even if I could remember how long I’m supposed to wait before lifting heavy items, I’m stuck with the bags. Kent has already bolted for the beach. It’s been five weeks since “my surgery,” as I term it to kindly well-wishers because I’m unable somehow to say “my hysterectomy.” So prim, the term *surgery*. So user-friendly and benign, like the uterine fibroids themselves. I haven’t told Bess and Claire because I always disliked the way classmates complained of cramps while clutching their stomachs

and bottles of Darvon like badges of menstrual merit and talking of “Aunt Martha” and “my friend” as if they were members of some exclusive club of female suffering.

Laden with bags, I climb the flight of outside stairs to the main floor. Inside, in a muted half-light peopled with ghosts and the ghost Mother is becoming, there’s no wafting aroma of her perfume, only an elderly, used-up scent of dust and demise. This squared floor houses the kitchen and a middle “great room” between four corner bedrooms that share baths.

A faded list taped to the refrigerator flutters to the floor when I open the door. Normal people have hurricane-tracking maps--of Cuba and the East Coast set in a grid of latitudes and longitudes--stuck to their refrigerators with shell magnets. What I hold, though, is a list of shut-down procedures and commands.

*Bring in porch chairs
Empty ashes in grill
Shut off hot water
No shrimp shells in the disposal!*

The final dictate on Mother’s list concerns food, staples enough, supposedly, until one could get to the market: *one loaf of bread and one stick of butter in the freezer, one six pack of beer in the cabinet.*

“And thou,” should complete the romantic quote. Except that they were “thou”’s. Because after the glory days came the gradual deterioration, the need for maintenance like that of any house or marriage or friendship. “Patch, patch, patch,” Mother gaily complained (the same phrase someone recently remarked to me as some kind of hormone replacement humor) and drove here to oversee the repairs and carry on affairs with blue-collared, wiry-limbed, T-shirted workmen with tattooed arms and burnished backs. Painters, plumbers, welders, roofers, carpenters, even exterminators. No wonder Mother’s addled brain remembers them as *workermen*.

In the early years of my marriage Mother would press food on me as we cleaned up the cottage. Vacation remnants, tired dregs of meals, whatever was left in cabinets and drawers: celery, hot dog buns, half jars of jelly; she’d stop just short of leftovers in plastic crabmeat containers. Now nothing softens the glaring brightness inside the refrigerator but a squat jar of horseradish and a bottle of Solarcaine. Imperishables only; not so much as an orange fuzzed with gray mold, a single egg age-spotted in beige.

The cottage is stuffy, and I strain to open windows glued shut both by humidity and the slapdash efforts of painters anxious, no doubt, to return to the task at hand — Mother. The windows jerk open in a fluttering of chips and shards of dried paint. Gauzy hammocks of cobwebs sling from sill to pane.

Above a long pine table a mounted marlin permanently sails upward on the wall and sheds flakes of its gray-blue hide. On the table, outdated boating and fishing magazines keep company with a leatherette volume bearing a shiny gold-leaf imprint on its cover: GUESTS. I flip through pages bearing handwriting of summer visitors who felt moved enough or compelled by politeness to pen an entry. Some scribblings are merely names and dates, some have sly or wry or exclamation-pointed enthusiasms: “*Marvelous!*” “*A good time was had by all!*” “*Can’t wait for our next invitation!*” As a child I was fascinated by this ledger of personal history and checked for new names and

comments each time I arrived at the cottage. Along the way, along the years, gaps of time amazed and disappointed and worried me: How had five years elapsed without a single entry? Now I'm not surprised at all.

A wicker settee and two matching chairs hold flattened cushions whose stuffing is as dense and matted as kapok in waterlogged life jackets of yesteryear. But the inscriptions applied on the pillows are still legible, still perky, and still pertinent: I MARRIED YOU FOR BETTER OR WORSE BUT NOT FOR LUNCH reads one. WANTIN' AIN'T GETTIN' reads its neighbor. FAMILIARITY BREEDS CONTEMPT — AND CHILDREN, and DON'T WORRY, IT NEVER HAPPENS and PEOPLE WHO SOW WILD OATS HAD BETTER PRAY FOR A CROP FAILURE.

The coffee table between them bears only a tide table clock whose batteries have long since expired. I begin a grocery list--*newspaper* — because Bess and Claire and I will need to know the tide times. Storms have so eroded the shore that you can only take a walk at low tide.

Inside a cheap particle board cabinet are rainy day diversions: puzzles, cards, a backgammon board. And books, paperback page-turners left behind by visitors. *The Official Scrabble Dictionary*, full of unknown but Scrabble-legal words such as *att*, *clag*, and *gid*, has found its way here because Eric and I don't play Scrabble. Ian gave the dictionary to me years ago to commemorate our regular Sunday afternoon games and to remind me of a particular close and cozy winter day when we'd sparred for fifteen minutes over whether his *zit* was a permissible word. Eventually I'd let him have it, all triple-word thirty-six points. Ian's earnest imploring and childish sulk had made me want to both kiss his fair head and knuckle his hard skull.

After Daddy died ten years ago, I took the only hardback from the cottage for my bedroom bookshelf in Raleigh. "Required summer reading," Daddy called Sloan Wilson's *A Summer Place*, and reread it himself every July. The book's spine is supported with masking tape, and its corners, threadbare from handling, have eroded themselves into dog-eared cardboard.

When I encountered actual summer reading requirements in high school, I finally read *A Summer Place* to escape from *The Good Earth* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. Stashed within the pages I found two of my father's Winstons. The whole, flattened cigarettes — bookmarks and coffin nails both — had leaked tobacco specks into the binding seam.

I open the clacking plastic vertical strips that serve as curtains, unlock the glass sliding door giving on to the deck, and wander outside into the clean, salt breath of the ocean. The waves are huge and elegant, coming one after the other, slamming down their spray. To the left of the cottage is an empty lot, for which we always considered ourselves lucky. Likely it will never be developed now, as the sea creeps closer to the houses. Though the shoreline has changed, construction setback and sewage requirements haven't.

I lean over to look down the side of the house, a no-man's-land of sandspurs and browned reeds like drinking straws come to rest. The deck pilings bear high-water marks like the pencil slashes on our kitchen door charting Kent's and Milly's and Bay's heights. Black boxes are the only distinct shapes in the undergrowth: pesticide for a rat population that survived and thrived after Hurricane Nell along with a plague of intermittently noisy crickets. Below me lie a stranded beer can, a Frisbee so ancient that its Day-Glo

fluorescence has been bleached white as porcelain, and a single sock. Of course: There's always one sock.

The cottage to the right is apparently empty this week of late summer, just before Labor Day. I heard the owner lost a child — or was it a grandchild? — in a boating accident and intends never to return to the beach. A sad story. But all the houses bear some sad tale. Even at privileged, protected Shoreside I know which mansion was built by the Brazilian who took revenge against a former employer by building a larger, uglier house right next door to his nemesis. I know which house was sold fully furnished — from measuring spoons in the kitchen drawer to seahorse-shaped soaps in the powder room — in a hurry-up, get-shed divorce settlement. This cottage harbors its sad tales too, stories of loss: of my mother's infidelities, her unhappiness with something. Of my father's heart attack as he rode a bike on the packed sand of low tide at dawn. Renters with early-rising toddlers had found waves lapping at the tangle of bicycle and his sandy, lifeless body.

On my way indoors I yank at a sea grape vine that has raped its way through the walls. Interior deterioration as opposed to interior decoration. The gritty crunch of sand in the sliding door's metal runner mars its glide. I can't recall a time when the door slid smoothly shut.

"Mother," I'd tried in June, "isn't the cottage worth repairing to you?"

"Who are you," she snapped, "Scarlett O'Hara?" Then muttered, "Let it fall the hell in the ocean."

From a closet I take flattened stacks of sheets worn soft as powder with repeated washings, their faded patterns bespeaking other eras, other trends. *Alice in Wonderland* characters parade across the margin of one top sheet; geometric designs of the sixties decorate another.

YOU ARE ALWAYS TWENTY IN SOME CORNER OF YOUR HEART reads the slogan on the needlepoint pillow in the room I choose for Eric and myself.

Eric.

I look in the mirror. "Snow White and Eric the Red," Ian has always called us, because of my pale skin and chin-length black hair, Eric's Viking name and pinky complexion. When Claire and Bess arrive, they'll see only solid, stable, secure, serene me: Shotsie the rational, Shotsie the reliable, Shotsie the rock. "You're like Churchill's description of Russia," Claire once told me, "'an enigma inside a mystery within a riddle.'" Bess was more to the point: "I hope I'm around when you crack, Shotsie." She was drinking gin at the time. Gin makes Bess mean.

What Claire and Bess won't see is the spirochete of tension coiled like a snake inside me, the freighted air of fury between Eric and me. I look into the mirror again and try this on for size: *My husband is a common criminal*.

I distribute the linens and unfold them on the beds: eight singles, no doubles. Time to get on with things. They'll be here soon.

Synopsis of THE LAST OF SOMETHING

As Shotsie Brooks prepares her mother's beach cottage for a weekend of guests, close friends since college twenty years earlier, she senses something sadly final about their gathering. Perhaps it's summer's end, or melancholy brought on by her recent hysterectomy. Perhaps it's her husband's incomprehensible white collar crime, or her mother's increasing senility, or memories of Ian — loveable, incorrigible Ian — that the setting evokes for Shotsie. Perhaps it's the sad shape of the cottage itself, past its prime and suffering the weatherbeaten effects of a previous hurricane. And nearly as soon as the women arrive -- before the men, of course, to make the beds and buy the groceries-- comes the news of a hurricane growing and blowing somewhere off the coast of Cuba.

But the approaching storm barely affects Shotsie and Bess and Claire. They walk and they talk and they sun and they shop. They know each other intimately, traits and faults, assets and liabilities, histories and personalities. They know each other's children and husbands and sex lives and clothing and regrets. They're forty; a hurricane doesn't strike fear into them. What strikes fear into them are falling knees and bank balances, alcoholism and exclusion, *non compos mentis* parents, and children who are over-developed or suffering from low self-confidence and worms.

They wait too for their husbands' arrivals, for the hurricane's arrival, and—without openly admitting it—for Ian. Because just as Bess and Shotsie and Claire share ailments and hypocrisies and histories, they share Ian. Funny, charming, handsome Ian who's been a significant figure in each of their lives, and played some role in their history. The same Ian who has somehow betrayed them with marriage to Nina, pregnant with Ian's child. But even that is forgivable if only Ian will come. He's the sidekick, the pal, the old boyfriend whom they dote on and indulge and amuse. But their attachment and affection for Ian is more than that. It's unhealthy and obsessive, and each woman is privately, silently aware of this fact too. Yet they don't tell everything.

By Sunday every guest will be in some way injured physically and mentally. One woman will leave her husband, one will hurt and humiliate hers, another will commit even more deeply to hers. And a single brutal remark during one of the lengthy congenial dinners they've all so anticipated will break them apart forever even as it draws them closer. Shotsie and Claire and Bess will re-evaluate their devotion to Ian and abandon him.

Perhaps.

Over the long beach weekend, the sweet sad last of something unnameable, the three women come to terms with past loves, present marriages, and the essential nature of their friendship. *The Last of Something* is a witty meditation, a sophisticated elegy, and a tender love song. It's concerned with memory, the dependencies and vulnerability and ambivalence of marriage and children, the comradeship of women. The novel's enduring lesson is the bittersweet necessity of holding fast while letting go.

Questions for Susan

What prompted you to write THE LAST OF SOMETHING?

As with all my novels, THE LAST OF SOMETHING represents a confluence of inspirations. Someone I'd known since college got divorced, and in the aftermath I watched as several folks—including myself—had him to dinner, included him at social gatherings, and commiserated in general, as though each of us had a particular claim to him. Why did we behave like that?

I'd was also re-organizing my photograph albums and had come across many pictures from once-upon-a-time houseparties at the beach, or (in fact) tubing down the Nantahala River. One picture in particular held me, of six or seven of us sitting on a porch with our legs hoisted up to the railing, and I thought, What's become of us? How are we different now—married, children, older—from the smiling, innocent twenty-somethings we were then? It was a sobering thought.

I'd also reached that point in life where Shotsie, Claire and Bess have found themselves: on the brink of middle age, where you comprehend that *This is my life. For better or worse, this is it, warts and all.* It's not a sudden, shocking realization, but an *awareness*. A dawning. The realization isn't depressing, but it's nevertheless tinged with melancholy.

Above all, I wanted to write about things—events, people, places, memories, objects—we can't let go of, and why.

Out of Shotsie, Claire, and Bess, who are you?

None and all. Like Claire I'm a Type A organizer who occasionally, and probably annoyingly, spouts quotes from literature. Like Shotsie I'm sentimental, and can instantly connect a song lyric with a time in my life, even a certain afternoon. I'm the least like Bess, but I did go to boarding school, and know whereof she came! (It was a boarding school roommate whose mother sent the letters full of advice, including "A girl's best friend is a good reputation," which my old roommate and I still laugh about today.)

Like Bess and Claire and Shotsie, I lived in a sorority house during college, and the room I describe is precisely how my five-girl room at the Pi Phi house looked. Their traits and tics, expressions and attitudes, flaws and assets-- the anorexia mindset, refusing to fly with their husband, wearing the "geezer shoes advertised in *The New Yorker*," breaking men's starched shirt pockets, reading *The National Enquirer*--all originated with women friends I know and love.

(WARNING! Spoiler alert!)

Did you know from the beginning that Ian would never arrive?

Yes. How could he? No matter how I might have portrayed him, Ian the character could never have lived up to the Ian in Shotsie and Claire and Bess's mind and memories. Or the reader's vision of him, either. At one point in the writing, I nearly had the women glimpse Ian on the other side of the interstate median as he's finally driving toward the beach and they're fleeing the hurricane's arrival. . . but no. It's not necessary for either Ian or the hurricane to arrive: he women and the couples and the tradition of their gatherings are forever altered regardless.

Did the novel flow along, or were there changes?

Even through five and six revisions, *THE LAST OF SOMETHING*'s essential story and single weekend setting remained the same. The novel was initially much longer, however. Each couple brought their children, and there were scenes of a restaurant dinner and an amusement park visit, but I was afraid all those names and ages might be hard for a reader to keep track of.

The first drafts of the novel featured an omniscient narrator instead of Shotsie's first person voice, as though God was looking down on these foolish humans and making the occasional wry comment about their behavior. I eventually decided that a reader feels closer to characters when she's one of them, through a first person voice.

I've heard you say *THE LAST OF SOMETHING* is your favorite of the books you've written. Why?

I love its tone, which is partly nostalgia and partly a comprehension of what has already taken place--what's been lost or forfeited both intentionally and unconsciously. By the end of the weekend, Shotsie and Claire and Bess have lost a kind of innocence--relinquished a reverence for their youth, when all things seemed possible--and they've lost and relinquished Ian, who they knew, deep down, they never had anyway. In the grand scheme of marriage and children and their futures the hurts are, like the injuries the characters sustain during the weekend, minor, not life-threatening.

And I love the book's bittersweet message, the elements of gentle regret, acceptance, and the essential unity of the women. Because even if Ian has been tarnished, Shotsie and Claire and Bess have each other. No matter what has been lost or destroyed or eroded, a current continues to run beneath the histories and the memories and the hurts and the disillusiones and everyday banalities of domesticity. That current is what they have together: their friendship.

Questions for readers

What does “something” in the novel’s title refer to?

Do you believe, as Shotsie states, that women “lie like rugs” when the topic turns to how they lost their virginity? If so, do you think that modesty, or secrecy, still holds for the current generation of young women? If not, do you agree with the TA’s statement, “No one cares how anyone loses their virginity”?

Shotise muses that each of the three women experienced a situation where Ian saved or loved or ruined her. It’s no accident that each woman also has a fantasy, an issue with her mother, an issue with her husband, and an issue with a child. Do you remember these?

Do you think Ian remembered or realized that it was Shotsie with whom he had sex on the beach long ago?

What do you think about Shotsie’s utter cruelty to Eric when he wades out of the water without his bathing trunks, an intentional humiliation that makes even her friends gasp?

Though Laurence becomes the villain by uttering the words that destroy the weekend’s dynamics, he’s also a victim. How? Nina as well is both victim and villain. How?

What does Shotsie’s thought at the story’s conclusion—“And me, I’m--” signify?

What’s in *your* bookshelf or closet or jewelry box that correlates to Shotsie’s leather choker and white linen knife-pleated skirt and *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*; an object that represents a time now vanished? Don’t lie to me, I know it’s there.