

Undertow

By Judy B. Goss

Contact:
Judy B. Goss
Little Rock, AR
info@judybgoss.com
www.judybgoss.com

© All rights reserved, 2010
(revised draft, 2014)

Characters

Lou	Accountant, mid-fifties
Kate	Lou's sister, bridal boutique owner, fifty
Vivian	Mother of Lou and Kate, eighty-plus
Juanita	Social worker, forty-five
Johnny	Lou's son, line cook, late-twenties

Setting

Time:	Recent past.
Place:	A seaside cottage on the North Carolina coast.

*“How grief runs
through me like a pack of eels. Silver and colloidal,
the tides have seen us coming and turn back.
Like them, our work is breakage. To plunder to from fro. Inside us
something pliant, soiled. Bearing the dent of thumbs.”*

from “Hymn,” by Anne Shaw

Scene 1

(Early March, overcast midday, on North Carolina's coast. Steady sounds of surf punctuated by occasional cries of gulls. Minimal structure represents a modern beach cottage with a deck. Steps lead down to a boardwalk to the beach. Behind sliding doors to the deck is the living area, with doors to three small bedrooms and an archway to kitchen (Off). Beneath the deck (R), lattice masks parking space, entered from unseen cottage front. Beneath the deck (L) is open storage for beach gear: umbrellas and chairs. Uncluttered by personal items, the place evokes change, everydayness vanished. Someone departed. Someone's arriving. From the kitchen archway, Lou enters onto deck, dropping her large bag by the glass doors and surveying the beach and surf, momentarily lost in thought. A cell phone rings. She peers quickly into audience.)

LOU

I'm losing my mind.

(It rings again. She hurries to purse and digs for her phone. Sees caller ID.)

LOU (Cont'd)

Hi, Juanita. Yes, May 16th through 18th, the weekend after Mother's Day. Good! We'll sun and surf for your help. We can get Mother on board, absolutely. Okay, details later. Thanks, 'bye!

(Kate enters from a bedroom, Off, and is seen pacing the size of living area. Lou puts phone on deck rail and goes downstairs to assess storage space. Her phone rings again, and she dashes to answer.)

LOU (Cont'd)

Now what?

(Answering.)

Hello, Mother. No, I can talk. Yuck. And the date was good? That's right: take it back. Oh. The assistant manager's so young! Where would she have heard "Pee-ew?" Well, I'm glad they gave you fresh meat. I know: afternoon traffic's awful and making two trips was exhausting. Sorry, I can't run by and cook your meatloaf; I'm out of town. Just a day trip. Our beach cottage. It was going to be a surprise. The beach is beautiful!

(Kate enters.)

LOU (Cont'd)

The waves look plenty big to me. Can you hear them?

KATE

Effing fabulous waves!

LOU

Who? Oh, it's the agent. Loud, lots of lipstick. I didn't mean heavy lipstick's common. Look, Pesto's makes a beef dish. Pesto's: where Johnny works. Call Frank, he can order. He's not always up to his ass in conferences. Don't bother Katie. Her customers are obsessing over spring weddings. So, you want beef: call Pesto's. They deliver, too. You're welcome. 'Bye.

KATE

Hey, do I need more damn lipstick? How many times a day do you talk to her?

LOU

It varies.

KATE

Promise me zero on days you spend here.

LOU

No tax files, PR award galas, or anything else, will block our escape. Thanks for helping me spiff it up.

KATE

I'll pitch in a sofa and chair from storage, if you'll let me and Bob slip in some romantic weekend.

LOU

Absolutely!

KATE

Wind and waves whisk the crap right out of your mind. Boardwalk!

(Kate hurries down steps; Lou follows.)

KATE (Cont'd)

And dunes! We'll need blankets!

LOU

(Laughing.)

SShhhhh!

KATE

Who's listening?

(Lou follows Kate to the boardwalk's end.)

KATE (Cont'd)

How long since we've been on a beach together?

LOU

Decades.

KATE

God, we were little enough to squeeze into one inner tube and ride the waves!

LOU

(Laughing.)

After I'd pushed you out—against the tide! When I could barely touch bottom, I'd jump up through the hole and grab on, which was tough with you giggling and sliding around like an eel.

KATE

Shit, slipping was half the fun!

LOU

Daddy would bounce Mother's inner tube floating by, and she always laughed when he flipped her over.

KATE

It was the only way he ever surprised her.

LOU

The roar makes me feel like a kid.

KATE

Then why stand so damn still?

(Improvising childhood frolic.)

Everything's moving on the beach!

(Lou joins the dance. She turns in a circle, loses balance and sinks to the sand.)

LOU

Ooops!

KATE

(Giving a hand up.)

Well danced, Sandy Pants!

LOU

Oh, Katie. Those sand castles—

KATE

We made super shit with shovels and buckets.

LOU

If I sat on my haunches now, I'd get stuck.

KATE

And I'd leave you there: for scaring me so bad about the "Under Toad" hiding behind big waves, ready to suck me in for dinner!

LOU

I had to protect baby sister.

KATE

All those races to the water? I let you win.

LOU

Really?

KATE

If the Under Toad didn't snatch you, I could jump in.

LOU

Last one up's a rotten egg!

(Lou runs up steps two at a time. Kate follows closely.)

KATE

Don't fall on your wacky ass again!

LOU

(Winning.)

Thank God for boot camp.

KATE

Now that's scarier than the Under Toad.

(Lou crosses deck for a carpenter's tape measure in her bag.)

LOU

How much furniture will fit out here?

KATE

Measure from the door's edge to the end of the deck.

(Kate exits into living area to get pad and pencil. Lou measures. Kate enters.)

LOU

Thirteen feet.

KATE

Now, across the doors to the other corner.

LOU

(Measuring.)

Door's six. Add five. That's eleven feet. Room for a table and chairs to one side. Maybe a chaise over here?

KATE

I doubt it. Check the depth.

LOU

(Measuring.)

Eight. Eight by five in the corner. Smallish.

KATE

Intimate. Nice for a glider.

LOU

We could look out—

KATE

To the edge of the world.

LOU

Farther. Where the edge disappears.

KATE

Where there are no more birthdays, because Frank gave you the ultimate gift.

LOU

I chose it, leased for a year.

KATE

That works, too. You'll bowl him over with beach magic.

LOU

We'll bring Johnny for some good times, too.

KATE

You know I'm thrilled he's back, but hell, leave him in town to house sit—he can clean it, too.

LOU

He's found his niche.

KATE

There's lots of buzz for Pesto's menu.

LOU

We only see him late, crashing in his old bedroom.

KATE

Good! He's not returning to your womb.

LOU

Your kids stayed close.

KATE

It's a hell of a handicap! As I say to the M.O.B., "Give your daughter a great farewell party. Invest in dresses and beautiful traditions. Play your parts for the best photographer." An ornate scrapbook appears permanent. It can be damned hard getting everybody to party together on the dock, but, finally, we toast a departure into a new life.

LOU

Phoebe left without a wedding.

KATE

To work in a London art gallery.

(Surveying the deck.)

Don't crowd your space. Definitely drop the chaise.

LOU

For a glider.

KATE

Yes. Inside, one guest bedroom is enough. Make the other a cozy study.

LOU

Or yoga-slash-workout room?

KATE

Sure. Johnny doesn't need a room. We separate from our kids—by miles, marriage, or dysfunction.

LOU

That relieves you?

KATE

We still love them. Johnny's the most damn lovable, wherever he is.

LOU

Rehab got his big heart pumping again. We're thrilled.

KATE

I am, too. So, leave him alone.

LOU

I try.

KATE

Don't we all? Get a round table and two chairs for the deck.

LOU

We'll need four chairs.

KATE

Sweet thought: Bob and I dining at sunset with y'all—after you and Frank have settled in.

LOU

I want to bring Mother here, while she can still travel. You know how she loves the beach.

KATE

Shit.

LOU

She's shrinking before our eyes, Katie.

KATE

We can fix up houses, not people.

LOU

House repairs cause insomnia, and she feels dead by morning. Daily aches, shakiness, shortness of breath become certain signals of cancer, stroke, or heart attack and paralyze her with panic.

KATE

Lou, it'll last years, you know.

LOU

Maybe not. She's getting more easily confused.

KATE

She's worn out! Hell I'm worn out hearing about it.

LOU

What if she's slipping into dementia or having small strokes? I can't broach those directly.

KATE

Are you asking me to? Since I make her mad anyhow.

LOU

Help me figure it out.

KATE

What will be, will be. If you want me to drop in, check on her see if she's making sense, tell me when, and I'll do that. When Grandmother went batty, Mom played along.

LOU

And arranged home healthcare and asked us to do errands.

KATE

Just spit out the facts. Did she get lost? Fall and crack her collarbone? No, you'd have called me—you hate the E. R.

(Beat.)

LOU

Don't tell me what I hate.

KATE

Okay. She could slip, have a wreck, start a fire, go nuts. We did pretty well when Daddy went down hill.

LOU

You were a huge help.

KATE

Thanks, Madame Captain of the Ship.

LOU

Sorry.

KATE

Oh hell, Lou. Relax; stop being so damned nice. When the time comes, I'll share the mess: blood, IVs, vomit, dirty sheets, run errands out the wazoo.

LOU

Thank God. I can't—

KATE

I'll do anything, except listen to her. Duty's tolerable. No strings attached. You, however, could strangle yourself with sainthood. Hear?

LOU

Yes. I wish.

That I'd love her, like you do?
KATE

At her age, she's dying.
LOU

Who isn't?
KATE

She's our mother.
LOU

To the max. She doesn't care if we fall in midstream, as long as we pull her ass out of the water. She demands smooth sailing. Come on, Lou, what distress signal put you on high alert?
KATE

She told me that Daddy came into her bedroom, one night last week.
LOU

And?
KATE

He said, "Honey, I miss you."
LOU

I hope they screwed.
KATE

Kate.
LOU

When I'm demented, I want ecstatic dreams. Were they in bed?
KATE

He stood inside the doorway, near his dresser. He found his wedding band, put in back on and smiled before he spoke.
LOU

Don't let her hallucinations get under your skin.
KATE

Living alone can make her more confused.
LOU

Now that's a different story. She wouldn't move to Meadows Manor, which was lovely.
KATE

LOU

And I agreed with her.

KATE

You knew better than to argue about the odors and clientele.

LOU

Actually, it was too expensive.

KATE

Shit, what happened to her money?

LOU

Nothing yet.

KATE

Is there enough to last?

LOU

Until when, and through what? Cancer gives us warning. And there's insurance. But catastrophe? We can't be caught off guard.

KATE

You're the accounting wizard, tell me what the hell can we do?

(Lou goes down the steps.)

KATE (Cont'd)

Lou!

(Lou disappears in the storage area under the deck.)

KATE (Cont'd)

(Following her.)

Damn it! What the fuck are you doing?

LOU

(Entering with a folded up beach umbrella in her hands.)

Whipping your ass!

(Lou crosses to Kate, swinging the umbrella as a baseball bat. Kate shrieks and ducks, then runs in circles to avoid Lou.)

LOU (Cont'd)

Who's a damn weakling?

Not you! KATE

Who watches Mother's money? LOU

You! KATE

Who can get you cut out of the will? LOU

Better not be you! KATE

Who am I? LOU
(Laughing as she swings the umbrella once again.)

The damn devil! Please! KATE

Do better than that, sister! LOU
(Holding the umbrella, ready to swing.)

Queen of the hard-asses. KATE

(Kate collapses in giggles. Lou drops the umbrella and sits next to her.)

Way to blow off steam, Lou! KATE (Cont'd)

Thanks, Katie. LOU

(Lou jumps up, gets umbrella, runs and swings it into the storage. Lou plops down again, next to Kate.)

Hell, getting me in line stiffens your spine. KATE

Well, I guess. LOU

KATE

Tell me what to do. It's getting chilly.

LOU

We'll bring Mother for a beach weekend.

KATE

Bonk her on the head, stuff her in the car, and tell her she's dreaming when she comes to?

LOU

It'll take some doing, I know.

KATE

The woman hasn't slept a night outside her house in the last ten years.

LOU

I'll take some photos and tell her about the place.

KATE

Nor travelled over forty miles, anywhere.

LOU

Juanita's coming along, to assess Mother's stamina and social interactions.

KATE

Juanita?

LOU

You know, my friend, the social worker. When Dad was in the hospital, she helped us with paperwork.

KATE

I remember her.

LOU

She met Mother then, too, and can evaluate Mother's psychological state.

KATE

Which has been obvious and consistent for a lifetime. Can she persuade Mom into shrink sessions?

LOU

She said that, at the least, sharing a pleasant family experience could put us on better ground for future adjustments.

KATE

Maybe, for a split second.

LOU

Joke all you want! But jump in the car when the time comes—in May.

KATE

When tax season's over for you. I'll be in the middle of wedding whirls?

LOU

By then you'll crave a couple of days' sun and sand.

KATE

Next to brides and their crazy M.O.B.s, Mom could look almost normal.

LOU

There you go.

KATE

Just keep my damn part clear.

LOU

Of course! So, scoot.

KATE

Let's stop at Sam's and look at patio furniture.

LOU

Great idea. Thanks for everything.

KATE

You picked a wonderful spot, Lou. Fabulous breakers!

(They laugh, and exit through living area and arch to kitchen, Off.)