

Undertow

by Judy B. Goss

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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 afternoon at a cottage on North Carolina's coast. Sounds of surf and occasional cries of gulls. Steps lead from the deck to a boardwalk to the beach. A living area opening onto the deck has two doors to rooms, Off, and an archway to the hall and kitchen, Off. Beneath the deck is open storage for beach umbrellas and chairs. Empty, the place is a large shell cast on the sand. Lou enters through the arch, drops her bag to open a sliding glass door, walks onto the deck and surveys the beach. Kate enters through the arch and paces the size of the living area. A cell phone rings.)

LOU

Shit. Where is it?

(It rings again. Kate carries Lou's bag onto the deck.)

KATE

Here.

LOU

(Taking her bag.)

Thanks!

(Phone rings, and Lou sees caller ID, retrieving it from bag.)

LOU (Cont'd)

And here goes my mind.

(Answering.)

Hi! Yeah, I can--wait! There you are. Spotty reception. Well, I'm on a day trip. That's right, out of town, but home tonight.

(Kate goes down steps to the boardwalk.)

LOU (Cont'd)

I agree, throw it out, ten days past the sell date's too long. I'm glad you still have a sharp sense of smell, Mother. Good, eat that one. We'll get some more tomorrow.

KATE

Just look at those effing fabulous waves!

LOU

Yeah, Kate sneaked away with me. She's waving, "Hello!" No, I'll call you when I get home. 'Bye!

KATE

Sis, I love this place!

LOU

Thanks.

(Getting a carpenter's tape measure from bag.)

Let's plan some deck furniture.

KATE

(Hurrying up stairs.)

The sooner the better!

LOU

I want to squeeze in more than table and chairs.

KATE

Measure from the door's edge to that end.

(Kate exits into living area as Lou measures; Kate enters with her purse.)

LOU

Grab that end. It keeps jumping around.

(Kate holds the tape.)

LOU (Cont'd)

Thanks. Thirteen feet.

KATE

(Taking a pad and pen from her purse.)

Okay. Now, across the doors to the other corner. I'll hold this end.

LOU

(Measuring.)

Six. And add five.

KATE

(Writing.)

Thirteen. Six and five makes eleven. Room for a table and chairs over there.

LOU
Maybe a chaise on this side?

KATE
I doubt it. Check the depth.

LOU
(Measuring.)
Eight. Eight by five in the corner. Smallish.

KATE
Intimate. Dreamy place for a glider.

LOU
We could look out—

KATE
To the edge of the world.

LOU
Farther. Where the edge disappears.

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

LOU
Actually, I found it. And signed a year's lease before springing it on him.

KATE
That works, too. Bowl him over with beach magic, and it's a keeper.

LOU
And if Johnny stays for a while, he'll come, kick back with us, too.

KATE
Hell, leave him home! And don't pay him to house sit!

LOU
Come on, he's exhausted working late nights at Pesto's.

KATE
He's found his groove! Pesto's is a happening place, Lou.

LOU

He wakes me up crashing in his old bedroom at one or two in the morning.

KATE

There's a solution: his paychecks for renting his own place. Which he'll love—like you love a good night's sleep. A beautiful balance between child and parent.

LOU

Balance, not love?

KATE

I want both, don't you? We're destined to separate from our kids—through miles, marriage, or dysfunction. I tell Mothers of the Brides, those M.O.B.s, "Give your daughter a fabulous wedding with gorgeous dresses and elegant details. Pose for the artsy photographer. It's damned hard pulling everybody out of the stress and party together with a decent amount of joy. You'll be happy, toasting as she sails into a new life. And she'll be happy, too, embarking: a perfect shared moment." If Mom's cool, I add, "If she falls or jumps overboard on the marriage cruise, resist rescue! She'll learn to swim choppy waters. Like we all do, right?" That spiel stops them in their tracks, and I can relax for a minute or two. Helps us both, and, besides, it's the truth, swear to God.

LOU

Shit! I want to be one of your M.O.B.s! And I'd never agree with your theme, Kate.

KATE

You'd rather have Phoebe skip over for dinner than work in a London art gallery? Give her time. Jesus! Give yourself time, sis.

(Surveying the deck.)

And don't crowd your space. Definitely drop the chaise.

LOU

For the glider.

KATE

Definitely. Comfy with a round table and two chairs.

LOU

Four chairs.

KATE

Okay. I can see Bob and me at sunset with you and Frank. Sweet.

LOU

You're right: it will be like a dream, once it's spiffed up.

KATE

Guess what's still in storage? The sofa and chair Phoebe borrowed for her college apartment.

LOU

Perfect in the den.

KATE

(Adding notes to the pad.)

They'll fit the space, even if you add a couple of side tables. You need two stools for the breakfast bar.

LOU

At Home has tons of styles.

KATE

Wood, not plastic. Please.

LOU

Of course. Plumbing and electrical's been checked, and painters come next week.

KATE

Then Bob and I could slip in for a weekend—you know, to check everything out. Bring our wine and air mattress!

LOU

(Laughing.)

You'd do that for me?

(Kate drops the pad in her purse. She goes quickly down the steps again.)

KATE

Absolutely! Come on! I'd forgotten how fast wind and waves can whisk the crap right out of your mind.

(Shouting.)

Effing dunes, here come the sexy dames!

(Kate descends steps to boardwalk, followed by Lou.)

LOU

(Laughing.)

SShhhhh!

KATE

Who's listening, the gulls? Come on—shout like when we were kids. Louder than the surf!

(They improvise shouts and roars.)

LOU

I always loved the beach.

KATE

Me, too. God, can you believe we squeezed into one inner tube and rode waves like those?

LOU

Yeah! I remember. I did all the work: pushing you out, against the tide. It was almost impossible to jump up through the hole and grab on, with you sliding around like a giggling eel.

KATE

Hell, slipping was half the fun!

LOU

Just watching the waves makes me feel jiggly, like a kid.

KATE

Then why stand so damn still?

(Improvising a childhood frolic in the sand.)

Everything moves 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. And those sand castles—we made lots of shit.

KATE

With super shovels and buckets! Lots of curves, turrets, shell décor all over!

LOU

True, your design talents emerged early.

KATE

I felt free and safe shaping that sand, after you totally terrified me about the “Under Toad.”

LOU

What? I warned you about the undertow!

KATE

You most certainly did not. You said the “Under Toad” would suck me into its big jaws! And that’s why I let you win all those races to the water. If the Under Toad didn’t snatch you, I could jump in.

LOU

Bull shit! Last one up’s a loser now!

(Lou takes steps two at a time. Kate strolls up.)

KATE

I don’t care. You could fall on your wacky ass again, or break a wrist or ankle. The beach is for letting go: in a beach chair, with some shades and a daiquiri.

LOU

Okay, yeah. This will be a soothing place. A good place to bring Mother, while she can–

KATE

Did your brain fall out and into the sand down there?

LOU

She loves the beach.

KATE

So do you! Did we just agree that this will be heaven?

LOU

Kate, really. Listen.

KATE

You were clever not to tell her where we are. How many times a day do you talk to her?

LOU

I don’t know. It varies.

KATE

Zero, when you're here. Promise. As you say, "swear to God."

LOU

We should get Mother here.

KATE

We? Show her pictures.

LOU

Just once. She can still travel. But she's shrinking before our eyes.

KATE

I can fix a house, not Mom.

LOU

Help shore her up. You think someday we won't have aches, shakes, weight loss and swoons—precursors to cancer or stroke?

KATE

Spit and grit will keep her going for years.

LOU

She's more easily confused lately—more easily agitated, making mountains out of mole hills.

KATE

Nothing new there.

LOU

What if she's slips into dementia like Mimi Doll?

KATE

How would we know? We can't examine her!

LOU

Watch for evidence. She may need home healthcare. We should plan ahead, Kate.

KATE

Stop the drama. Give me facts. Did she get lost?

LOU

No.

KATE

Fall? Crack her collarbone? No, you'd have called me—you hate the E. R.

(Lou stuffs tape measure into her bag.)

LOU

Don't tell me what I hate.

KATE

Okay.

LOU

When Daddy went downhill, you were a huge help.

KATE

Thanks, Madame Captain of the Ship.

LOU

Sorry.

KATE

Oh hell, Lou. Don't be so damned nice. When the time comes, I'll share the spills and messes. I'll run errands—do anything, except listen to her carping. Duty's tolerable. Don't strangle yourself with sainthood.

LOU

But I wish.

KATE

That I'd love her like you do?

LOU

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

KATE

And?

LOU

He said, "Honey, I miss you."

KATE

Please, tell me they screwed.

LOU

Katie.

KATE

When I'm demented, I want ecstatic dreams.

LOU

Standing near his dresser, he saw his wedding band, slipped it on and smiled.

KATE

Get her harmless hallucinations out of your head. Lou, she goes out, shops, sees people. She still chats up friends who are still alive. Damn, that would be fun: if she shared Daddy's visitation with a friend.

LOU

Maybe so, because living alone can make confusion or dementia worse. That's why we'd better think ahead and plan how to help her.

KATE

She refused moving to Meadows Manor, which was lovely.

LOU

Impossible: way too expensive.

KATE

You never said it to me. What happened to her damn money?

LOU

Nothing yet.

KATE

Thank God. Ms. Accounting Wizard: crunch the numbers. When disaster's on the horizon, we move her into an affordable nursing home.

LOU

That easy.

KATE

Right. Heaven's here. Don't borrow trouble.

*(Lou goes down the steps into the storage area under the deck.
Kate follows her.)*

KATE (Cont'd)

Damn it, Lou! What the hell are you doing?

(Lou returns carrying an old folded up beach umbrella, and she swings it like a baseball bat at Kate. Kate shrieks and ducks, moving in circles to avoid Lou.)

LOU (Cont'd)

Who's a damn worry wart?

KATE

Not you!

LOU

Who can get you cut out of the will?

KATE

Better not be you!

LOU

(Laughing as she swings the umbrella again.)

And who am I?

KATE

The damn devil! Please, stop!

LOU

(Ready to swing the umbrella.)

Do better than that, sister!

KATE

Queen of the hard-ass accountants.

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

KATE (Cont'd)

Way to blow off steam, Lou!

LOU

Thanks, Katie.

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

KATE

Hell, getting me in line stiffens your spine.

LOU

Well, I guess. You're something to contend with.

KATE

So give me orders. 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 travelled over forty miles, anywhere, nor slept a night outside her house in the last ten years.

LOU

Your idea's good: I'll show her photos of the place. We'll make her comfortable. And Juanita's coming along. That'll ease things.

KATE

Juanita?

LOU

The social worker for Dad, when he was in the hospital.

KATE

Oh, yeah.

LOU

I've done her books, and we're friends. She offered to assess Mother's strengths, informally, for us.

KATE

Can she get her to a shrink?

LOU

Joke all you want, but jump in the car. I think we could do it early in May.

KATE

What? I'll be in the middle of wedding whirls!

LOU

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

KATE

There is that.

LOU

Georgia can hold down the shop.

KATE

Okay then. Now, put Mom on the back burner. Let's check patio furniture at Sam's on the way home.

LOU

Good deal, sister.

KATE

(With a last look at the waves.)

You picked well, Lou. Fabulous breakers!

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

Scene 2

(Late April. A glider and table are on the deck. Johnny enters through archway with a chair and places it at table. He takes in the view. His cell phone signals a text message, he checks it, smiles. He scurries down steps to the boardwalk, unbuttons his shirt, strikes a pose and takes a selfie.)

LOU, Off

Johnny!

(He returns to deck. Lou and Kate enter to meet him, each carrying a chair.)

LOU

What do you think?

JOHNNY

Awesome, Mom!

LOU

Better than a dream. I'll get the other chair.

(Lou exits.)

KATE

That's one super woman. Come on, we can get the sofa.

(They exit. Lou enters with 4th chair and table's umbrella. Johnny and Kate enter with sofa for living area. Lou arranges the dining set.)

LOU

Perfect.

KATE

Almost done. Come on, nephew.

(Kate and Johnny exit. Lou installs the umbrella in table and opens, shuts it. Kate and Johnny enter with furniture. Kate arranges pieces in living area. Johnny sits on deck glider.)

JOHNNY

Cool.

LOU
(Sitting beside him.)

Very.

KATE
Snap out of that sweet stupor! The trailer's not empty.

JOHNNY
Hold up. I'm mentally preparing to lug a beach chair down those shaky stairs.

LOU
(Leading their exit.)
They're not shaky, and we'll use the path around the house. This way.

(Lou and Kate exit. Johnny's cell phone rings.)

JOHNNY
(Speaking to them, *Off.*)
Coming—got a phone call.
(Answering.)
What up? Can't help you, man—moving stuff for my mom. Out of town, dude. Later.

(He hangs up as Lou and Kate enter with chairs to below deck. Johnny's cell phone rings again. Lou mounts steps to deck, as Johnny turns off phone.)

LOU
Uh-oh. Was that Pesto's?

JOHNNY
No worries: wrong number.

LOU
I hate for you to miss work tonight. We can be home by 5:30—drive through Wendy's—

(He invites her to sit with him. Kate climbs stairs.)

JOHNNY (Cont'd)
Relax. It's all cool. No rush to leave this paradise.

KATE
(To Johnny.)
One chair left, with your name on it.

(He rises quickly and exits.)

LOU

Movers bring the rest next weekend. I'll unpack the basics then, too.

KATE

Good. I charge by the hour, and, if we don't hit the road, you're looking at overtime today.

(Lou removes cushions from glider. Johnny appears below deck with chair.)

LOU

Let's go, Johnny.

KATE

We'll grab McDonald's on the way.

JOHNNY

Man, pizza's the only decent fast food.

LOU

Find a place on that smart phone of yours.

JOHNNY

Give me one more beach moment. Y'all good with a veggie supreme?

KATE

It has cheese, right?

LOU

That's fine, honey. And unsweet tea for me. Be sure to lock up!

JOHNNY

No problem.

(Lou exits.)

JOHNNY (Cont'd)

What drink for you, Aunt Kate?

KATE

I'd love a Bud Lite. Or tea, sweet.

JOHNNY

Got it.

(She exits. He sets a "selfie," but his phone rings.)

JOHNNY (Cont'd)

For real, Dude. "No." Fuck off.

(He dials a pizza restaurant number and exits through arch.)