

fat peanut

by

Nancy Nau Sullivan

Ann raked through the dresses on sale. A blue dress with a chain link pattern. A Pucci. Pucci's back.

Most of the good stuff was gone. She remembered when this shop was a wood hut where the islanders---the real islanders---bought cheap beer, cigarettes and salami. Now Pine Avenue was turquoise and pink, with a designer donut shop and shop after shop of this stuff. Her hand dropped down the polyester sleeve of a yellow and pink top with swirls from neck to hem. *My sister could carry this one off. I couldn't.*

The grizzled old Floridians were gone. The island was peopled with fat rich white northerners who smelled of expensive soap and talked, loudly, about nothing.

The woman standing next to Ann pulled a short white dress off the rack "I like it but I'd have to iron it," she said.

"No one irons anything any more. They like to look wrinkled."

The woman was wrinkled and stylish with shiny blond-grey hair and liquid-blue eyes, so light they almost disappeared into the whites. She had diamonds in her ears the size of cocktail peanuts.

The woman twirled the dress back and forth. She hung it up and then took it out again. "I really like it" She mostly talked to herself like Ann wasn't there. The woman seemed to be used to an audience.

Ann decided to be nice. Sometimes she had to make the conscious decision. "A good cut on you. Jag." It was more of a beach top with breast pockets and pearl buttons. Ann liked it, too. If the woman didn't want it, well, maybe..

The sun was bright and warm on the porch of the shop where all the sales hung on metal racks. Forty percent off.

"It's 87 dollars," the woman said.

She was a snowbird flown in from the cold, landing on this island off the coast of Sarasota. Ann couldn't place the accent. Boston? Maine?

The woman suddenly dropped the dress to her side, as if reading Ann's mind. "Where are *you* from?"

"Chicago," Ann said. "Originally."

"My daughter's in Indiana. At Butler. She's there because she's a professor," the woman said. As if the daughter needed a legitimate reason to be in Indiana, which by the way, Ann was about to point out, *is not Chicago*.

Ann let it pass. Snowbirds were one thing, one irritation in life's island cycle. As soon as the first Easter egg came out of the basket, they would all be gone up north to their lilacs and tulips. Ann couldn't wait. She wanted the roads and grocery stores and beaches back. But she couldn't have it all back.

"Where are you from? Can't quite place the accent," Ann said.

"Ohio. Hubby's in cardio."

"Oh?" Ann felt like a snowball had been stuffed down her back.

"Yes. We just love this island."

Ohio. Maybe Cleveland. Cardiologist.

The Cottage.

Ann had lost the beloved cottage to a cardiologist from Cleveland. He'd swooped in with more money than God and bought it out from under them. Ann's uncle had been the instrument of destruction. He'd taken the matter to court, and under the laws of partition, he forced the sale of the cottage. He took 840,000 in the deal, making the most of real estate before the Crash of '08. Ann and her brothers had tried to buy him out, but he wouldn't budge. He worked on the cardiologist from Cleveland who hung in there with a slew of lawyers, pushing for the deal until it was done. Ann had looked over at her uncle in court, his bald head bent and shining, the orb of evil. She could not look Uncle Neil in the eye after that. She didn't have to because he died. She used her share of the sale—130,000 of Judas money—to pay off debts. She'd wanted to throw it in the Gulf. It would have made as much sense. But the money was gone, and so was the cottage. To someone like this

woman, someone from Cleveland. She remembered the name. Hunter, or Huntley. Something like that.

The woman took the white dress out again. “I’m going to try it on,” she announced brightly.

The first thing the cardiologist from Cleveland did was tear down the cottage. He built a tan McMansion with orange shutters and a green barrel-tile roof and filigreed balconies, leaded glass coach lamps and Tiffany glass in the front door. Hideous. The cottage had stood on two gulf-front lots, so there was plenty of room for the grand mansion, finished off with a trucked-in Disney-esque garden of hibiscus and palms. They called it The Condo, it was so big, towering over that little house on the corner next door—completely cut off from a view of the gulf and sunshine, due to the full-blown king palms..

Ann’s grandmother had found the cottage on a sunny day in 1956. She’d been reading *The Bradenton Herald*, crinkling and tapping the want ads with a pencil. “Ha! Let’s go out there and have a look.” Ann didn’t know what she was talking about, but she was excited. In her six-year-old brain, she knew this had to be something special. “Out there” meant the beach. On the island.

They drove out to Anna Maria Island in her grandfather’s new hunter green Cadillac, the bulbous version with the pokey little fins. Ann had her bathing suit wadded up under the front seat, just in case. Off they went, her grandfather with the cigar in his mouth and her grandmother with a frill of white hair blowing in the humidity, clacking over the wooden drawbridge, past the sable palms and the mangroves, the Brazilian berries and the Australian pines, out to the white beach and turquoise water. Burning pitch wafted from the

fireplaces in the new little stucco ranch houses at Key Royale, Sand Dollar Haven, Coquina Corners.

The cottage stood on the edge of the Gulf of Mexico on stilts, slightly crooked on the white sand. The logs were interspersed with swaths of white stucco, it was a striped house with a rusty-red shingled roof. The white framed windows on either side of the faded green door, like two great eyes, saw right into Ann's soul.

Ann's grandfather laughed when they pulled up to it and got out. "Liz, the gulf is right up to the house!" She just laughed. She was falling in love, and so was Ann standing next to her, the two of them looking out at the wáter, while Ann held her silky fingers. She squinted up at the sun, yellow, soft, golden sun. She opened her eyes, and the turquoise wáter dazzled her from that minute on. Her grandfather chomped the cigar, paced the short street of crushed shel, grinning. Her grandmother raised the edge of her floral housedress and waded into the foamy surf. Ann flopped into the waves beside her, bathing suit forgotten.

Her grandmother had saved "egg money," tucked in her rubber stocking. She made the downpayment on the cottage and four surrounding lots---most of them under wáter---for \$5,000. The seller was glad to get rid of it.

Over the years, they piled in and drove out to the cottage. The beach changed, receding and advancing, until finally they ended up with a football-field-sized playground of sand like white sugar. They jumped into the fierce winter waves and rolled in the sand until they were sugar cookies. They hid in the sea oats and ran out in shrieks of laughter, they buried each other up to their necks, dug for coquinas and made horrible soup with

shellfish (from an Old Cortez recipe). They scoured the beach for sand dollars and periwinkles. They watched dolphins and fed lettuce to the manatees and stale bread and cereal to the sea gulls. .

All day they were on the beach, and at night they watched the white edge of the gulf from the window. The wind creaked and sang through the cracks between the logs. Ann went to sleep, listening to the waves that rolled up close to the window, some nights, lapping against the cottage. The splash was thrilling. Her grandfather said the pilings under the cottage went down seventeen feet into the sand, and that they would be safe in the best place on earth.

It was magic, winter after winter, into March for St. Patrick's Day and Dad's birthday in the sun and under the moon, until it stopped. The time was gone, but Ann held on to it. It was there in the burning pitch, the musty sea, the sound of gulls. It all brought her back there instantly to the cottage. As long as there was memory, it would always be there.

Ann stood in line behind the woman, the blue dress looped over her arm. She saw the woman write Hurley on the charge slip. Hurley from Somewhere, Ohio. *Had to be Cleveland. Had to be the one.*

Ann felt sharp twisting in her soul.

She wanted to strangle the woman, follow her out to her Mercedes, probably, and key the side of its impeccable paint job, maybe even trip the woman on her way out—before she strangled her.

The woman turned. “Well, you have a wonderful day. Enjoy your dress. That is a fabulous color for you.”

Ann’s lips worked at a fake smile. She wanted out of there. “You, too. Have a great day, and a safe trip. Back to Cleveland.”

“Cleveland? Why would I go to Cleveland?”

“You said you were from Cleveland,” Ann said. “I think.”

“Lord, no. I can’t imagine why I said that. Ohio, yes, Cleveland, *never*.” The woman juggled the white shopping bag with the Jag dress in it. She shifted her Fendi to the other arm. “Didn’t you say you’re from Chicago? No, we’re not from Cleveland. We’re from Chicago. Just like you.”

“fat peanut” was a Baker’s Pick in *Toasted Cheese Literary Journal*, June 1, 2015