


The
Language
of Seabirds



WILL TAYLOR

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ISBN 978-1-338-75374-5

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 24 25 26 27 28

Printed in the U.S.A. 40

This edition first printing 2024

Book design by Christopher Stengel





One

They say living through an Oregon winter is the closest most people there ever come to drowning. As autumn dies, a ceiling of gravestone cloud settles over the land, pressing heavier week after dreary week. Sooner or later, everyone under that sky feels the pressure, the creeping sense of being trapped. For Jeremy Ryden, it arrived over breakfast on the first day of winter break, which also happened to be his first day of being twelve.

It was Uncle Becker's birthday card that sparked it, the shiny picture of a lifeguard girl on a tropical beach sliding out of the envelope like a bad joke told too loud. Jeremy's mom looked up from her phone long enough to frown, but his dad whistled and laughed, clapping him on the back. So Jeremy, panicking, pretended to like the picture, forcing a smile and counting down the seconds while pressure built over his heart. As soon as he dared, he extracted his twenty-dollar bill and flipped the card over, relieved to find a sweep of empty sand and waves and electric-blue sky decorating the back.

He stared, for real this time, then caught himself and yanked his

gaze away, landing instead on the steady drizzle filling their small kitchen window. And just like that, the weight of the Oregon winter hit home, filling his lungs. He felt his dad's eyes on him and turned back to the picture with its beach and sky and impossible freedom, a question jumping to his lips.

“Why haven't we ever been to the ocean?”

His dad choked on his bacon, and his mom set down her coffee with an offended clack. In a moment of rare agreement, they both insisted he certainly *had* been to the ocean, naming a summer when the three of them had trooped the ninety miles west from Corvallis to the coast.

From what they reported, Jeremy hadn't even reached kindergarten at the time, and he could say truthfully that he didn't remember. His mom retrieved the family photo albums for evidence, but when no one was able to find any pictures, suddenly the exact year was up for debate. Apparently knowing the exact year of things was important in a marriage, and it wasn't long before Jeremy was slipping back to his room, leaving his parents bickering over the remains of his birthday breakfast.

The gray December rain pattered sullenly against his window, doing nothing to cover the sound of his parents' increasingly loud disagreement as Jeremy flopped onto his bed. He had woken that morning tight with nerves, thinking this of all days might be the day to let his parents in on what he had recently realized about himself: that when it came to love and romance, his feelings were aimed at other guys. He had hoped to get the telling over and done with, with his mom on hand in case the news

disappointed his dad. But that wasn't going to happen now.

Winter surrounded the house, and the house surrounded his room, and Jeremy curled up alone in the middle of it, turning to his hidden stash of fashion magazines for company. Gratefully, he sank into the unchanging glamour of their glossy pages, holding all his secrets in, wondering when he would ever find the words and the courage to let them out.



Six months later, in the clean sunlight of late June, Jeremy rolled down the passenger window of his dad's car and looked out over the Pacific. It was just the two of them now—one half of the divided family that Jeremy was somehow expected to learn to bridge.

“Remember it, Jer?” his dad asked, breaking fifty miles of silence.

Jeremy, his eyes full of white-capped, rolling blue, shook his head.

His dad made a sound through his nose, the short, dismissive grunt that had become part of his regular vocabulary that spring as the divorce ground its way to completion.

Jeremy leaned against his seat belt strap, listening to the wind whiffle past. He wondered if some part of him actually did remember this, if some recognition left over from childhood was why shivers were tapping along his shoulders, why deep down he almost felt like crying.

The road dropped at the next turn, hiding the heaving ocean and sending them past houses with pin-striped lawns, trailer parks with plastic flowers, and small churches with giant signs. Finally, a painted driftwood log announced they had reached Rosemont.

Jeremy read out the directions Uncle Becker had sent, and five minutes later they were pulling up alongside a red pickup in the gravel driveway of the house that would be their home for the next two weeks.

The house was on the beach—or as close to the beach as a house could get, set back from the sand on a shelf of earth flecked with pine cones from the two wind-bent trees standing over it. It was a small house, painted brown, with a ground floor, a gabled attic, and a covered porch facing the water. Someone had left two white shells on the porch railing. A pair of rocking chairs sat to the right of the door.

Jeremy hadn't smiled yet that day, but he did then. Their closest neighbor was the Pacific Ocean. He would be living on the edge of the world.

The porch door opened, and Becker appeared. He was a skinny, handsome man in his mid-thirties, with the same Irish-pale coloring as Jeremy and his father, as well as the same wavy brown hair.

"Big brother!" Becker hollered, leaping the railing as they got out of the car. "Baby nephew!"

"Hey, Becks," called Jeremy's dad. Jeremy fixed his hair while the brothers hugged and punched each other, then had it messed up again as Becker pounced on him.

"Look at this kid!" Becker pulled Jeremy into a one-armed hug, pressing a fist against his ribs. "Not a baby now! Tall like his uncle, freckles like his mom—guess who's gonna break the heart of every girl in Rosemont? You know life doesn't start until you have a girlfriend!"

Jeremy pinched out a smile, earning a barked laugh and a slap on the stomach. His dad was already on the porch, heading inside with the first of their bags, and Becker's hand rose to squeeze Jeremy's shoulder as he disappeared.

"Okay, but how's the old man doing?" he asked, pitching his voice low. "I know things were officially final a couple weeks ago, but man, *today*. This has really gotta make it real for Mike."

Jeremy fought the urge to duck out from under his uncle's arm and run for the house. It had been three whole years since he'd seen Becker, and he'd forgotten how quickly he could leap from noisy joking to buddy-buddy affection. It all made Jeremy nervous.

"Dad's been kind of quiet," Jeremy managed. "I think he's, um, thinking, or something?"

It was honestly as much as he knew.

"Got it," Becker said. "Guess it can be hard to say what you're really feeling, especially when it's something big like this. Well, I'm gonna do what I can to get his spirits up." His fingers dug into Jeremy's neck. "And you gotta work with me, okay, bud? Your dad needs both of us in his corner right now."

"Jer!"

Jeremy looked up in time to miss catching an airborne house key. It bounced into the sandy dirt.

"You've got the room upstairs," his dad called from the porch. "Get your stuff in."

Becker gave him a conspiratorial wink and let him go. Jeremy, relieved, retrieved the key, grabbed the first of his bags, and headed inside.

The house wasn't too bad. The door off the porch led to a wallpapered dining room with a wooden table and chairs, separated from a small kitchen by a counter set with stools. Past that was a living room with a sofa, an easy chair, a shelf of paperbacks, and a decent-looking TV. Three doors opened onto a compact yellow bathroom, a bedroom—Jeremy's father's now—with a quilted bed taking up most of the space, and, in the far back corner, a set of stairs leading up.

Becker clomped inside as Jeremy began climbing.

"Careful when you get up in the night to pee, Jer!" his dad called from his bedroom. "I can hear you squeaking on every step."

Becker said something with a snorted laugh, and Jeremy took the rest of the stairs two at a time, pushing past a white wooden door into the first new room he'd ever had.

He decided immediately that he liked it. The walls stopped half-way up to angle in with the slope of the roof, making the room feel cozy. There was a twin bed covered in blue sheets near the window, a bedside table with a lamp, and a narrow empty closet standing open.

Jeremy dropped his bags and went straight to the window.

Back home, his bedroom view was nothing but an old, overgrown rhododendron bush. Not that he minded. Every summer when it flowered pink and cream, the bees would come, and he'd spend long hours watching them work. It was incredibly comforting, sitting safe and protected, watching the world through glass.

Somewhere in the construction-paper and long-division years of elementary school, he'd found himself carrying that feeling with

him—first to the school bus and classroom, then to the family dinner table—until his invisible pane of glass went everywhere: a secret shield and barrier. He barely remembered it was there anymore. He stayed behind it without thinking.

This new window, with its view out over the porch roof to the sand and sky and the whole entire ocean . . . this was something else entirely, from some other kind of life. And for the next two weeks, it would be his.

He let out a silent breath, telling himself he could relax now. He should be safe here. Safe enough to get through their stay with the secret of his heart still locked up tight. There had never been a chance to share it while the divorce was unfolding, not after his mom had turned out to have some big secrets of her own. Not while his dad was reeling from the collapse of his own expectations for love and romance. Jeremy had seen it all, no matter how much his parents had tried to keep from him, and it had been impossible to imagine dragging them back together to share his own nervous revelation, to make them act like a family again just for his sake.

Now they were divorced, the family split, and what would be the point in telling? How would it help, or make anything better? It was best to keep himself to himself. He might tell them, someday, maybe, if a lot of things changed. But for now, he would lie low and keep his heart quiet and be fine enough with this cozy room, and this house, and the sea.

He gazed out, running his fingers over the dusty window, tracing tiny ripples in the glass. They almost looked like waves.

“Hey, dreamer boy, I see you up there!”

Jeremy blinked awake as Becker leaned on the car horn, sending a patch of seagulls flapping and hopping. A raised beer bottle glinted up at him. “There’s work to do!”

Jeremy waved and turned for the stairs, realizing as a bird flashed past the glass that his attic room meant he’d be living up between the earth and sky, just like the house sat between the water and the land.

He almost smiled. Everything about this trip was in between. In between the family before and the family after. In between one school year and the next. In between his last year as a kid and his first year as a teenager.

That thought made him stumble, tripping down the steps. He wasn’t sure how he felt about becoming a teenager yet. He wasn’t sure at all.



Settling in took well under an hour, but Jeremy’s father and uncle had still lined up a row of empty bottles on the porch by the time they were done. Jeremy sat with them, listening from his perch on the railing with his arms around his knees.

“So, Mikey,” Becker said expansively, waving a fresh beer from his chair, “the bachelor life tasting like you remember it? You ready for this break?”

Jeremy’s dad shook his head. “Too soon, Becks.” His chair creaked as he rocked. “And this isn’t a *break*. I have recommendations to write, all of next year’s grant applications, two course proposals that need reworking—I’ve got plenty to do.”

Becker choked out a laugh. “Okay, Mr. College Professor, do your thing,” he said. “But don’t let that stuff get in your way. This is *your* time out here. You get to decide how you want to use it.”

Jeremy’s father tilted his head back to finish his beer, then settled the bottle beside the others with a clink. “I know that.”

“Tomorrow I’ll show you the town,” Becker went on. “There’s all the touristy stuff on Main Street, the grocery store, that one donut place . . . and, oh, you know, Sandy’s Grill.” He nudged his brother with his foot, showing all his teeth.

“What about the beach?” Jeremy asked. His voice sounded high in his ears.

The men looked over.

“What *about* the beach?” His dad pointed with his chin. “It’s right there. It goes left and right for the entire state of Oregon. Enjoy.”

“Gotta watch out if you go too far left, though,” Becker said. “Marbletop Cliffs are a few miles south, and the ocean fills the cove right up to the wall. You get stuck out there when the tide comes in, you better either be a real strong swimmer or else know how to fly.”

“Why’re they called Marbletop?” asked Jeremy.

Becker shrugged. “Why’s anything called anything?”

“That’s not what you said about Sandy’s,” said Jeremy’s father. Becker grinned.

The brothers turned back to each other, talking in their clipped, lazy style about plans and houses and summer and women. It looked like Uncle Becker had succeeded in cheering Jeremy’s dad up, at least. But it made Jeremy feel strange. You’d think his father’s marriage hadn’t just ended at all. You’d think this really was a vacation.

He pulled deeper into himself, tuning out their voices to listen to the sea wind and the hiss of the waves, watching the birds and families and dogs scattered across the beach. Plans for how he might fill his own time here drifted through his brain: long walks, beach-combing, sleeping in, reading. Maybe his dad would let him build a few driftwood fires at night. Maybe there would be a store or two worth visiting in town.

He shifted, turning to scratch his back against the house, and suddenly stopped, his fingers clenching tight around his knees.

A boy was running toward him, following the last line of sand just before the rocks and dirt. He was around Jeremy's age, with a flare of dark hair and white skin taking on an early summer tan. He ran with his whole body, his hands and feet moving in perfect unison. His shoulders floated above his waist. His face was open, his head held high, his red shorts and gray shirt whipping around him like flags.

Jeremy kept perfectly still, his eyes following every footfall.

What would it feel like to run like that? To look like that while running?

The boy was going to pass right by their deck, and Jeremy couldn't help it. Against all his care, against all his agonizing self-control, he turned his head to keep watching, breathless, until the running boy passed out of sight and was gone.

Instantly, cold fear crashed in. What was he doing? Had his dad seen him looking? Or Uncle Becker?

But a glance told him the men hadn't seen a thing. They were still talking and rocking. They'd missed the beautiful runner and Jeremy

noticing that he was beautiful. They'd missed the turn of Jeremy's head and the wideness of his eyes.

It was okay; he was still safe. And for that one, gleaming moment, the glass between him and the world had disappeared.

Jeremy shook himself. He was being ridiculous. Nothing had changed. Nothing here could really be different.

Could it?

Unprompted, Becker's advice to his father slid across his mind: *This is your time out here. You get to decide how you want to use it.*

If that was true, then . . . what if?

His dad had said he'd be busy, so Jeremy would probably have lots of time alone. Nobody else in Rosemont even knew who he was, and he'd leave it all behind in two weeks anyway.

What if, in the in-between, he had a chance to be himself?

Just the thought made Jeremy's head spin, made him want to curl up inside the familiar nest of shelter and safety. But he could already feel it: the warmth of possibility tugging irresistibly at his skin, sinking into his bones, tangling itself into his summer.