



“Sandwich is joy in book form. I laughed continuously, except for the parts that made me cry. Catherine Newman does a miraculous job reminding us of all the wonder there is to be found in life.”

—ANN PATCHETT

SANDWICH

A NOVEL BY

CATHERINE NEWMAN

AUTHOR OF *We All Want Impossible Things*

SANDWICH

A Novel

CATHERINE NEWMAN



HARPER

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Dedication

This one is for my parents, whom I love so immoderately.

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Prologue

Picture this: a shorelined peninsula jutting into the Atlantic Ocean. Zoom in a little closer. It's a Cape Cod beach town. It's midsummer. The narrow highway is thick with lobster dinners and mini-golf windmills and inflatable bagel pool floats. But turn off the main drag in either direction and find yourself quickly at the sea: sandy cliffs and windswept grasses; tumbling pink roses and vast blue skies and a tideline hemmed with stones and mussels and bright green ruffles of seaweed. Beneath the waves: shivers of great white sharks, stuffed to the gills—or so one imagines—with surfers.

In the passenger seat of one slightly rusting silver Subaru station wagon: a woman in her fifties. She is halfway in age between her young adult children and her elderly parents. She is long married to a beautiful man who understands between twenty and sixty-five percent of everything she says. Her body is a wonderland. Or maybe her body is a satchel full of scars and secrets and menopause. They've been coming here for so many years that there's a watercolor wash over all of it now: Everything hard has been smeared out into pleasant, pastel memories of taffy, clam strips, and beachcombing. Sunglasses and sunscreen and sandy feet pressed against her thighs and stomach. Little children running across the sand with their little pails. Her own parents laughing in their beach chairs, shrinking inside their clothes as the years pass. Grief bright in the periphery, like a light flashing just out of view.

The woman and her husband have fetched the grown children from the train station. They're headed to the small house they rent for this one week every year. She's so happy to have the kids with her that she doesn't know

what to do with herself besides crane around to look at them and smile. It's the one moment of the trip when she won't complain about the traffic.

"And we are put on earth a little space, that we may learn to bear the beams of love," she says, unprompted.

"Is that a poem?" her twenty-year-old daughter asks. It is.

"Who?" the daughter asks.

"William Blake."

"What's it called?"

The woman grimaces. "I think it might be called 'The Little Black Boy.'"

"Ugh, Mom!"

"I know, I know. But I think it's okay?"

"I seriously doubt it."

"I think he was an abolitionist?"

"One of the abolitionists who enslaved people?"

"Good question," the mother says.

"Is it beams like wood?" the daughter asks. "Or beams like light in your eyes?"

"I don't know." She has always pictured it both ways: squinting against the unbearable lightness of loving while simultaneously crouched under the heavy cross of it. "It's so crushingly beautiful, being human," the mother sighs, and the daughter rolls her eyes and says, "But also so terrible and ridiculous."

And maybe it's all three.

This one week.

Saturday

1

“Oh my god! Oh my god! Oh my god!” I’m laughing. I’m screaming and also crying. The water is rising, rising, rising up to the rim of the toilet. “Nick! Nick! Nicky!” Yelling is my only contribution to this situation, it seems. My husband has the plunger in his hands but he’s watching the water as if in a trance. In a cartoon, the swirl in the bowl would be mirrored in his hypnotized eyes. “Nicky! Nick!”

Nick appears to come to. He bends over the toilet, twists something near the floor, and there’s a clanking sound, a gasp from the pipes. The water stills. “Jesus,” I say. “Phew.”

Then something appears in the toilet. Something like a large silver jellyfish. What even is that? An air bubble? A giant air bubble! It pushes the contents of the toilet bowl up and over, all of it sloshing onto the floor like a waterfall. A waterfall, if a waterfall were inside the house and had disintegrating toilet paper in it and worse. I leap up onto the edge of the tub, the better to hear myself screaming, it would seem.

“How bad is it in there?” Our daughter is yelling through the closed door. “Oh my god, you guys, ew! Tell me how bad it is! I can smell it! It stinks! It smells like used radishes out here.”

“Honey, it’s fine! We’ve got it,” Nick yells. He’s bent over the toilet with the plunger again, working it like he’s churning some kind of debased butter.

“Your dad is lying!” I call out to Willa. “We’re, like, knee-deep in sewage.”

Nick looks up at me and smiles. “Are we *knee-deep in sewage*, Rocky?”

We are not.

“We are,” I say. “I like how that T-shirt fits you, actually,” I add. “Just as a

side note.” He laughs, flexes his sexy biceps. There’s a sudden sucking sound, and the rest of the water swirls away. Nick bends over again calmly and twists the valve to refill the bowl.

We’re at the cottage—the same one we’ve been renting every summer for twenty years. It’s late afternoon on Saturday. We’ve been here for approximately one hour. Less, maybe. We know better than to overwhelm this ancient septic system—there’s even a framed calligraphy admonition hanging over the toilet that says, DO NOT OVERWHELM THE ANCIENT SEPTIC SYSTEM!—but, well, here we are.

“Do you need help?” Willa calls in. “Say no, though. I actually really don’t want to help. Jamie needs to know the Wi-Fi password.”

“I think it’s still *chowder123*, all lowercase,” I say.

“Thanks,” she says. We hear her call it out to her brother. “Sorry, also, do you guys know where the bag is with the swimsuits in it?”

“Fuck,” Nick says. He straightens up. “Did you already look in the car?” he calls out to Willa, and she says, “Yeah.”

“Fuck,” Nick says again. “I’m worried I may have left it in the hallway at home. I can kind of picture it there.”

“Are you kidding me?” I say. I’m still standing on the edge of the tub, balancing myself with a hand on the shower-curtain rod. “I specifically said, ‘Did you get all the bags out of the hallway?’ And you were like, ‘Yeah, yeah, I got all the bags.’”

“Right,” he says. “I know. I guess I didn’t.” He doesn’t look at me when he says this. “It’s not, like, a massive crisis. We can get new swimsuits in town.”

“Okay,” I say. “But you totally minimized my concern about *whether we had all the fucking bags*.” Ugh, my voice! You can actually hear the estrogen plummeting inside my larynx.

“Jesus, Rocky.” He’s dragging a bath towel around the floor with his foot now. “It’s not a big deal.”

“I didn’t say it was a big deal,” I say quietly, but my veins are flooded with the lava that’s spewing out of my bad-mood volcano. If menopause were an actual substance, it would be spraying from my eyeballs, searing the word *ugh* across Nick’s cute face. “Just acknowledge that you never really listen to me when I ask you something.”

“Never,” he says flatly. “Wow. Good to know.”

“Are you guys standing around in shit water and fighting?” Willa calls in.

“Are you having a meta fight about the way you’re fighting? Don’t. Dad, did you apologize for whatever it is that Mama’s mad about? You should probably just apologize and get on with your life.”

“I did,” he says, and I roll my eyes. “Did you, though?” I say, and he shrugs, says, “Close enough.”

“Willa,” I call out. “We’re good. We’ve got this. Go do something else for a few minutes.”

“Okay—but ew, something’s seeping out from under the door. Oh, okay, Jamie’s saying it’s *chowder* with a capital C. Ew, you guys! Clean up in there and then come out,” Willa calls. “I want to figure out the swimsuit situation.”

“Yes,” I say. “We will.” And then there’s a popping sound, which, it turns out, is the sound of the curtain rod unsuctioning itself from the wall. I lose my balance, grab at the slippery starfish-printed fabric that is no longer attached to anything, and splat onto the floor, banging my head on the edge of the sink and thwacking Nick in the face with the rod. I’m on my back, the shower curtain twisted over my body like a shroud.

Nick looks down at me, not overly alarmed. “How’s your vacation going so far?” he says, and smiles. Then he reaches down with both hands to help me up.

2

“Don’t mind my parents,” Willa is saying to the young woman who works at the surf shop. “They had an accident in the bathroom.”

I’m limping—there’s something in one of my knees that feels like a crumbling old rubber band—and Nick has the beginning of a black eye, the area beneath his dark lashes turning swollen and plummy. Back in the cottage, the bathroom is clean, and, in the little laundry building of the complex, the towels are running in a very hot wash with a big slug of bleach. Nick and I have showered, and we’ve also inspected each other’s wounds mockingly, which is going to have to count as making up.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper to Willa. “Are you using Plungergate as an excuse to flirt with the cute girl?”

“So?” she says, and laughs, winks at me. When I look over a minute later, the cute girl is typing something into Willa’s phone.

I wanted to drive to the Ocean State Job Lot—the discount place—to look for scratch-and-dent suits, but I got voted off that particular island. So here we are.

We’ve spent no small fraction of our lives in this shop. When you think of Cape Cod, you might picture those lapis skies or skies tiered in glorious bands of gray. You might picture the wild stretches of beach backed by rugged dunes or quaintly shingled houses with clouds of blue hydrangea blossoming all over the place. You might think of the deep steel blue of the sea as the setting sun puddles into it in melting popsicle colors. Which is funny, because most of the time you’re actually at the surf shop or the weird little supermarket that smells like raw meat, or in line at the clam shack, the good bakery, the port-a-potty, the mini-golf place. You’re buying twenty-

dollar sunscreen at the gas station. You're waiting for your child to pick out six pieces of saltwater taffy with the beach in a querying thought bubble above your head while your beard turns white and grows down to the floor, pages flying off the calendar. You're waiting at the walk-in clinic because the kids have sudden fevers and, it turns out, strep throat; you're waiting at the old-fashioned pharmacy for the ancient pharmacist to mix up—or maybe *invent*—the antibiotics that will make everyone need to lean out from their narrow beds with the anchor-printed coverlets and barf feverishly into the speckled enamel lobster pot you've placed on the floor between them. But also, yes, beaches and ponds and epic skies. All of it.

"I think I'm just getting these again." Jamie is holding out a pair of black board shorts in the hand his girlfriend, Maya, isn't holding.

"Great," I say. "I'm really glad you packed your own swimsuit," I say to Maya. "Feel free to get something if you want, though!"

"I'm good," she says, "but thank you."

Maya, like Jamie and Willa and young people everywhere, is a perfect human specimen. Her hair cascades—it actually *cascades!*—over her shoulders in shiny black curls in a way that makes me reach back to feel my own damp ponytail, as narrow as your grandma's crochet hook. Her skin glows and gleams. She's got a pair of tiny silver hoops in one perfect nostril and a pair of enormous silver hoops in her two perfect ears. She's wearing just the merest suggestion of cutoffs and also a garment that is, I think, a bra—but which I'm told is a *bralette*, which means it is a shirt. I am here for all of it—the young people and their bodies. I wish I'd dressed like that when I was their age instead of in the burlap sack dresses we favored for their astonishing shapelessness. "What's in there?" people surely wondered. *A youthful human torso and legs? A truckload of Idaho potatoes?* There was no telling.

"I'm glad you're here," I say, smiling at Maya, and she says, "Me too."

"I'm just going to get these same ones I got last year." Nick is holding out a pair of black board shorts that is either similar or identical to Jamie's. Willa's getting a gray sports bra and the same shorts as her father and older brother.

"Okay, okay," I say. "Shit. You guys are fast. I've got to try some stuff on. I don't even know what size I am this year." I look down as if the top view of my boobs is going to resolve into a numeral. "Help me. I need something with, I don't know, some kind of padding? Some kind of *compression*

something or other.”

“Just get one that’s comfortable, Mama,” Willa says. “Or you’re going to be picking it out of your ass crack and mad at Dad the whole time about forgetting the swimsuits.” This is probably true. I run my hands over the rack of one-pieces and I am suddenly remembering buying a suit here twenty years ago, when Jamie was three and I was very pregnant with Willa. My boobs were enormous again. When I’d gone to put on the tankini I’d worn through multiple summers of pregnancy and nursing, the taxed elastic had made that sad ripping sound, the one that means it won’t be snapping back again after. Come to think of it, I’m surprised my actual body doesn’t make that sound every time I bend over.

“What?” Willa says. She’s looking at my face. “What’s going on with you, besides being concussed or whatever you are?”

How are you an adult? is one question I don’t ask. *Are all those little girls nested inside you like matryoshka dolls?* is another. All those summers of the kids with their sticky hands and sticky faces and excitedness! “Just sentimental,” I say instead, and kiss her perfect rosy empath cheek. I try on two different sizes of the same navy-blue tank suit. (“Keep your underpants on!” Willa yells helpfully into the fitting room because when we were her age we probably went nudely into the changing cabinet to infect all the woolen swim costumes with syphilis.) The suit that doesn’t squinch my groin is gappy at the chest. I jog in place and it’s not good. One big wave and my boobs will definitely be celebrating their dangly freedom. The one that’s snugger, though, feels like it’s going to pinch my legs all the way off. It also bisects my butt in a way that makes it look like I have two distinct sets of ass cheeks. The more the merrier! But actually less merry. There is also some kind of situation between my rib cage and legs—something new that looks like a bag full of dinner rolls. Or maybe just a large loaf of peasant bread.

YOU ARE ON UNCEDED WAMPANOAG TERRITORY, someone has written on the door in Sharpie. My aging body is not going to change the course of history one way or another. I pick the roomier suit.

“That was a fun two hundred dollars to spend!” I say in the car, and everyone grumbles at me to let it go.

“Check your privilege,” Willa says, and I can’t tell if she’s teasing or not—but she’s right.

“That’s fair,” I say. “Is it *check* like check it at the door? Or *check* like take a good hard look?”

“I don’t know,” Willa says. “Just pick one and do it.”

“Beach?” Nick says. “Dinner? What’s everyone feeling like?” What everyone is feeling like is quick beach and then clam shack. Nick signals to turn toward the bay.

“Wait,” I say, craning around to talk to Jamie. “Did you tell Daddy about your work—the nice thing your supervisor said?”

“Ew, Mom,” Willa says.

“What?”

“Don’t call him Daddy.”

“Oh, right,” I say. “I forgot that we’re not supposed to say *daddy*. Even in the car, when it’s just us. We might think we’re sex trafficking each other!”

“Do you guys even know what *daddy* means?”

“Yes, Willa. We know what *daddy* means.” Do we, though? I’m not actually sure. I mean, I’m the same person who thought the Fleetwood Mac song “Oh Daddy” was about Christine McVie’s father, to whom she seemed to be unusually devoted. Nick looks at me quickly and grimaces, shrugs.

“Okay, then, tell your peepaw,” I say to Jamie, who laughs and says, “I think I’ll just tell him later.”

When we get down to the water’s edge, the sun is disappearing behind pink-and-blue cotton candy clouds. The sand is damp and cool, freckled with dark stones and white bits of shell. There are only a handful of other people, everyone turned toward the horizon. We hold up towels so that Nick and Willa can take turns changing into their new suits, both of them tearing off tags in a way that makes me cringe. *Don’t rip the fabric!* I don’t say, because, duh. The rest of us watch from the shore as they run screaming together through the froth. I see Willa wrap her arms around his neck so that Nick can bounce her in the waves like a baby. *Daddy*, I think, because I’m stubborn. Because he’s been their daddy so long, his strong arms holding them in the water and out of it. Holding me too. It’s hard to change, even though, I know, I know. You have to change.

I remember standing here with Jamie when he was four. I was pregnant and he was afraid of the water. I had to squat down so he could wrap his fretful little arm around my head. “Daddy is okay,” he said, like a mantra, pointing at the speck of his father’s head. “Daddy is a good swimmer and is okay.” I rubbed his little velvet shoulder. “Daddy’s fine,” I said. “He’s having a lovely time in the water. You’ll join him again out there when you feel like it.” I was so tired. “I will,” he said thoughtfully. “I would like to.”

The following summer I watched from the beach while Jamie bobbed in the waves with his dad.

I shake my head now. Willa and Nick are clambering back toward us through the wavelets, the sun just a sliver of color tracing the water behind them. “Sunrise, sunset,” I sing out, and Willa sings with me: “Swiftly fly the years! One season following another—laden with happiness and tears.”

“And claaaaaams!” Willa yells. “Oh my god, I’m starving!” And suddenly, I realize, so am I.

3

Willa's mad at the candy store. Specifically, she's mad at Jamie, who has simply purchased a half pound of rocky-road fudge rather than spending an hour with her studying the penny candy like there's an exam coming up and one question will be a compare and contrast about flying-saucer Satellite Wafers versus Zotz.

"Take your time," Jamie says to her from the bench on the store's front porch, where he and Maya are sitting under the twinkle lights and licking fudge off their fingers. Nick and I are on the other bench, sharing a bag of chocolate-covered pretzels even though I'm as stuffed with seafood as a seal. "We're not in a rush."

"That's not the point," Willa says. She's standing in the doorway holding a little basket that currently contains two individual Swedish Fish and a Blow Pop. "Jamie, you can't just leave me to do all my baby things by myself. It's too sad."

This candy store! The kids used to vibrate with excitement if you even mentioned it. It's almost painful, the way little children just trustingly hold out their hearts for you to look at—the way they haven't learned yet how to conceal what matters to them, even if it's just chewing gum or a plush dolphin or plastic binoculars.

Jamie stands. "Can I please have a dollar, Dad?" he says, and Nick fishes one out of his wallet. "Let's see what they've got this year!" he says, joining Willa in the store, and she says, "You're the best."

"Maya, you can have a dollar too!" I say, and she laughs, says she's good. "Were they always like this?" she says.

"Willa and Jamie?" She nods. "I think the answer is yes. But I probably

should ask what you mean,” I say.

“Mmmm.” She’s thinking, leaning forward now over her golden legs and gleaming like a doubloon. “Like, were they always easy?”

“Ah,” I say. “I think they were. I mean, that wasn’t always our experience of raising them.” I look at Nick, who smiles reflexively, but I think he’s just eating pretzels and spacing out. “Actually, it was probably Nick’s experience of raising them. But I sometimes felt kind of overwhelmed by everybody’s feelings and rashes and whatever.” Hello, understatement! “And, I mean, sometimes they bickered or were mad at me or sad about the idea of the summer ending. Jamie always cried when the first back-to-school circulars arrived. But, yeah, they were always more or less the way they are.”

“That must have been so fun,” she says. “When they were babies. I mean, I’ve seen some of the pictures.”

“It was fun,” I say. In my memory, they roll through the world like delighted beach balls. Also, they lie on top of me in a damply sobbing tangle of miserable arms and legs. I feel like there’s something Maya wants to hear or say, but I’m not sure what it is. “Was it fun for you, being a little kid?”

She waves the question away with her hand. “Not really. There were so many of us,” she says. Maya is the middle child of five. “It was kind of chaotic. Yeah, I guess it was fun too. I don’t know. It wasn’t so”—she hesitates—“intentional, the way you guys always seem.”

“*Seem* might be the operative word in that sentence,” I say, and she smiles. “Also I’m guessing *intentional* is a polite word for *overly precious*. But yeah.”

“Did you ever want more kids than just the two?”

“No,” I lie. “Two was perfect. What about you? Do you picture having kids?”

“Oh my god, Mom.” Jamie is suddenly standing in the doorway with his little candy basket. “Sorry, Maya. She’s the worst.”

“It’s okay,” Maya says to him. “Yes, definitely,” she says to me.

No time soon, I hope! I don’t say, even though that’s my next line in the sitcom script. But you really never know what you’re dealing with, do you?

Besides, we’re interrupted by Willa calling to us from inside the store. The candy necklace has pushed her over the dollar limit and she needs more money.

More! It was Jamie’s first word. It’s the call of children everywhere. And it’s how I feel about my time with them now. About parenting in general,

maybe, now that the days of oversaturation are long behind us. *More, more, more!*