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Julia Phillips is a brilliant writer." —ANN PATCHETT

# Bear

*A Novel*

HOGARTH



# Julia Phillips

Bestselling author of *Disappearing Earth*



BY  
JULIA PHILLIPS

*Disappearing Earth*

*Bear*

# BEAR

A N O V E L

JULIA PHILLIPS



H O G A R T H  
N E W Y O R K

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For Alex and  
our two beloved cubs

“Poor bear,” said the mother, “lie down by the fire, only take care that you do not burn your coat.” Then she cried: “Snow-white, Rose-red, come out, the bear will do you no harm, he means well.” So they both came out, and by-and-by the lamb and dove came nearer, and were not afraid of him. The bear said: “Here, children, knock the snow out of my coat a little”; so they brought the broom and swept the bear’s hide clean; and he stretched himself by the fire and growled contentedly and comfortably. It was not long before they grew quite at home, and played tricks with their clumsy guest. They tugged his hair with their hands, put their feet upon his back and rolled him about, or they took a hazel-switch and beat him, and when he growled they laughed.

—BROTHERS GRIMM



# SAN JUAN ISLANDS



**T**HE FERRY FROM FRIDAY HARBOR left fourteen times a day—fifteen on weekends—to loop around San Juan Channel’s scattered islands. Every trip lasted at least sixty-five minutes. Too long. Sam spent that whole time, hours daily, tourist season after tourist season, in the galley making coffee for people who treated her like a peasant.

Like Cinderella picking lentils from the ashes, Sam was a nobody doing work that meant nothing, but no prince was ever going to pluck her out of this. She saw them all the time on the boat, those royal types: the usual wealthy with their salt-and-pepper hair and orthodontist-straightened smiles. The celebrities and Seattle tech millionaires, meanwhile, glowed at the gas station after getting to the island by private plane. They didn’t see her. They never would. Young as she was, Sam had lived long enough to know who could be counted on and who couldn’t, who could be trusted and who had to be put up with in order to pay the bills. Broad-shouldered men lined up before her all day long; it didn’t matter. Elena was the only one who would save her from this place. They were going to have to save each other.

Sam’s station was a little box trapped inside a big one, a high-walled beverage and snack counter at the center of a wide room lined by fluorescent lights and shatterproof windows. Outside those windows, the waves rippled, the clouds shifted. Sometimes a dock appeared. Passengers shuffled on and off. The dock receded. Under the lights, people yelled after their misbehaving children. They made ostentatious plans for how they would spend their vacations: kayaking? Beachcombing? Visiting the lavender farms? They stared through Sam to the food display cases and asked whether the boat’s prepackaged cinnamon rolls were any good. She said they were. They weren’t. Whether she recommended the pastries or suggested a pretzel or warned them about eating chowder on rough seas, the tourists barely touched

the counter's tip jar, which was wrapped with a paper sign exhorting them to be kind and consider generosity.

Some tiny part of her couldn't blame them. After this long in food service, Sam, too, had stopped considering generosity. Now it was all bare routine. Brew the coffee. Dump the grounds. Restock the sugar packets. Get through one more shift.

Sam made twenty-four dollars an hour riding across gray waters, selling plastic-sheathed cookies and bags of chips. Ten dollars above minimum wage—one dollar for every year of her life spent at the whim of the Washington State Department of Transportation. Good money, if she actually got reliable shifts, but she'd never yet been able to stitch together a living.

A decade earlier, high school diploma in hand, Sam had pictured making a salary they could count on. Even flourish with. Elena had paid for Sam to get a merchant mariner certification so Sam could work for the ferries—those were good jobs, state jobs, with benefits and a pension and health insurance that would cover the whole family. But the state didn't hire Sam. They didn't even interview her. Nothing she had counted on back then had come to pass. Elena'd had to scramble to get Sam a job with her at the golf club, where management didn't like Sam and Sam didn't like them, and the club members told long, dull stories about their days on the green, and everyone complained about how their drinks were mixed. When, finally, dining opened on the ferries, it seemed a small miracle: Sam was certified, qualified, experienced. Elena was relieved. The ferry's dining vendor did hire Sam. They paid her. They got her into a routine, and then the pandemic arrived, and sailings were canceled, and the galleys shut down, and they dropped her for two years.

Two years at home. Two years with nothing better. The club wouldn't hire Sam back at that point; they said they could barely afford to keep Elena on as it was. Fewer tourists were coming. On the island, Sam only saw boutique coffee shops with narrowing hours, second homes that needed less cleaning, fancy restaurants that would never employ her anyway because she had bad people skills and fucked-up teeth. After Sam ran through her unemployment, she started taking online surveys for cash, but those didn't deliver the big bucks, either—a couple dollars for every hour tallied, maybe.

She drove their mother to doctors' appointments, sat in parking lots to tap through market research questions on her phone, and took the meager payments that arrived.

Their family had had to put so much on Elena's credit cards these past couple years. Sixty-five hundred dollars, which had turned, with interest, into nearly eleven thousand, the last Sam heard. And then their car broke down over the winter. The cost of their mother's medication went up. When, in April, the state announced they were reopening ferry dining, Elena put her head down on their kitchen table, and Sam said, "Are you crying?"

Elena looked up, dry-eyed. Worn out. "No," she said. Then: "But thank God."

Sam didn't see any reason for gratitude. She'd been back in the galley more than a month now, and things were as tight as they'd always been. She was still taking her phone surveys, though sometimes she'd forfeit even those if the boat left an island and she lost cell service before she finished filling one out. Tourists interrupted her with inane questions about the Lummi Nation as if Sam had the time to go to canoe landing ceremonies or make herself an expert on San Juan's history. Elena, meanwhile, was trying to keep her tips, stinking of hamburger grease from the club's grill, on top of the refrigerator as an emergency fund, but emergencies kept coming, kept taking. Everything they made was siphoned away by taxes and bills and their mother's healthcare costs.

How exhausting. This slog. Endless. No matter their jobs or their wages, this is how things would be, as long as they lived on the island. They would have to move, Sam always told Elena, if they wanted a life worth living. And Elena didn't disagree. They didn't even have to discuss it: the necessity of moving. Both had committed long ago.

These days, Elena only quibbled over the details. That was her role, maybe, as the older sister, to think more practically. They would need savings to go, Elena said, and they didn't have any; they had to pay this, and that, and here, and there, and...

Friday Harbor was behind Sam now. Ahead of her. Behind. Across the waves, along the channel, as the ferry orbited the center of Sam's tiny

universe. Black seabirds swooped along the water. The islands of the archipelago made an unending series of green velvet mounds. Over their shorelines, shining white buildings sat on stacked hills. Years ago, before Elena devoted her time to fretting over a million logistics, she had told Sam that they did have one way out of this place: the house. Sell the house, and their better future would at last arrive.

The house was a 1979 vinyl-sided nightmare, a too-small two-bedroom bought by their grandmother with her survivors benefits after their grandfather passed. She must have imagined, then, that it would be a stepping-stone to lift their family through the middle class. It wasn't. It hung heavy around their necks. Their grandmother had died in that house, and their mother brought Elena and Sam into the world there. Around them all, the place had aged. The trim under its stair treads bent off. The wall paint, peach and pastel, was peeling. The tiles in the shower were cracked, letting water seep into the house's body, where it sat and rotted, degrading what little legacy their grandmother had left.

But awful as it was, it was still a property on scenic San Juan Island. The house sat on six wooded acres five miles outside town. That land was gold. Useless as it weighed on their family for now, it would mean something to somebody, someday.

The sisters had shared a bedroom until the summer before Sam's senior year, when Elena, newly graduated, moved to the living room. Elena at eighteen was restless, wilder. More willing to chatter with Sam about the possibility of their dreams. One night, after Sam crept out to spend time together before sleep, they sat on the sofa, pillow and blanket balled alongside, and Elena set out the whole plan.

Their mother had already started, at that point, to cut back her schedule at the salon. Her breath was short. She felt chest pressure. Elena saw how tired she was, how much weaker she was growing, and understood—she needed them. So they would stay, Elena told Sam. They would take care of their mother, as she'd taken care of their grandmother, until she didn't need care anymore. Eventually they would inherit, then sell, the house, and use the proceeds to set themselves up elsewhere. A place where they could do what

they wanted. Slog less, live more. Become the people they had never before had the freedom to be.

That night, Elena guessed they might only have a couple years left with their mother. Five, at most. They had to spend that precious time with her.

It rocked Sam, a wake against her body, to count the years that had passed since that decision. She was twenty-eight now, and Elena nearly thirty. Their mother kept living. Needing them more these days than ever before.

Sometimes Sam thought that moment, when they were teenagers, on the sofa in the living room behind the curtain Elena had tacked to the ceiling for privacy, had in fact been the best chance to go. She thought of it when the passengers didn't tip, when the water was rough, or when the boat was delayed. But then she thought again. Time had proved Elena's plan right. They couldn't have left without their mother—who would've cared for her, what would she have done?—and their mother, especially as she got sicker, did not want to go. Barring doctors' appointments, she spent most days in bed, as comfortable as possible in the home where she'd raised her children. They would've tried to take her away from that? Convinced her to sell the property and start over somewhere else? It wasn't possible. It could never have been.

So those thoughts, when they came to Sam, were wrong. Elena had been clear. Their only hope was an inheritance. Five hundred thousand dollars, Elena had guessed of the property's value that night in the living room. Half a million in land sitting underneath them. One day it would be in the sisters' names, and then, at last, the ascension that their grandmother had surely expected for their family—an end to the service sector, to split shifts, to suffering—would come to pass. They'd take their final trip across the channel.

Until then, Sam rode the ferry, and brewed strangers' drinks, and filled out surveys about her age and ethnicity and tastes in television. More hours wasted, more anchors dropped. More paychecks earned, deposited, and taken.

Sam was waiting for her life to change. She had spent a long time waiting.



Concessions closed for the evening at eight-thirty. Sam, after locking up, went out to the passenger deck to pass the rest of her ride back to Friday Harbor in rare open air. The islands that swept by were soft and dark with leaves. The sun wouldn't set for another half hour, but the sky was already getting dusky. Crowds were thin. A handful of tourists worn out from their long day at the tide pools.

Down the way, the orange tip of a cigarette glowed over someone's mouth, and though Sam was supposed to intervene (smoking was forbidden on Washington State ferries), she stood there and smelled it. Secondhand pleasure. The thin, delicious breath, the tastes exhaled. Sam used to smoke but she'd had to quit after the state kept raising the price—ten dollars a pack was unaffordable. A few times after that, she'd bummed smokes off passengers, but then someone complained to a supervisor. All Sam could hope to do now was this: stand with her back to the boat's wet white wall, inhale, and watch the water.

A shape broke the surface. A creature. Moving. Someone near her shouted.

“YOU WON’T BELIEVE WHAT WE SAW FROM THE BOAT TONIGHT,” she told Elena, who was at the sink washing the day’s dishes. It was late, and Elena’s shift had ended hours earlier, but she always waited up for Sam. Elena had brought home from the golf club leftover chili con carne, and Sam was picking at it, shredded cheddar and green onion. Their mother was in her room sleeping. “Will you guess?”

The woods around their house were silent and black. Thick with hawthorn, which grew dark fruit, and Douglas fir. A yellow gleam at the edge of the kitchen window marked the presence of their closest neighbors, the Larsens, who had spotlights tastefully illuminating their landscaping, and who gave too-polite greetings to the girls whenever they bumped into each other in town. Danny Larsen, their youngest son, had asked Elena to homecoming senior year. His mother shut that down immediately.

Elena said, “A dead body.”

“Oh, Jesus,” Sam said. Put down her fork. “Would I talk like this if we saw a body?”

“I don’t know. You get worked up over the weirdest stuff.” Elena pushed her hair from her cheek with one wet wrist. “A whale.”

“We see whales all the time. Guess again.”

“A sea lion.”

Sam rolled her eyes. And though she was behind her sister’s back, Elena couldn’t see her, Elena still seemed to know. The movement must have been felt. So Elena was already on to the next guess: “A merman.”

“You’re never going to get it. A bear!”

“No way.”

“A huge bear! Swimming in the channel!”

Sam had seen it herself: the wet, furred hump of the animal's back, the line of its neck, its pointed nose and small round ears. The water was silver and the sky was dimming blue, and the creature, against those colors, was a dark spot, but the last light in the air outlined its form, made it clear and shocking and strange. The tourists called out to each other in delight. Exclamations in English, Spanish, Chinese. One of them tossed something in the water toward it, and another passenger scolded them. The ferry chugged on, but for a few minutes, long odd ones, the boat and the bear were side by side, pushing forward, abandoning the mainland together, heading out toward the night. The captain even made an announcement over the intercom so anyone sitting inside could come see for themselves. The bear's lifted head. Its slicked shoulders. The widening ripples it left behind. It did not look in their direction as it paddled determinedly on.

Elena was drying the plates now, stacking them in the cupboards. "Where in the channel? You don't think it could reach us, do you?"

"Between Shaw and Lopez." Sam was tickled by the question. "Why? Are you scared?"

"Of bears?"

"Of scary bears?"

"You're not?"

"No way." What was Sam afraid of? Withering away here. Dreaming of chances she'd never be able to take, and shriveling up from that denial, getting poorer and put under more pressure and pushed even farther from the rest of the world. Compared to those fears, getting mauled by a bear seemed a delight.

Elena turned back to the sink. "Our brave girl."

"How was your day?"

"Fine. No wildlife. Unless you count Bert Greenwood coming in drunk at noon."

"That's not unusual, I guess."

"More of a whale than a bear," Elena said.

Her hands were under the faucet. Her face was tipped down, making her neck stretch long and the bones bump up at her nape. "Want me to do the

pots?” Sam asked.

Elena shook her head. “It’s no problem. Keep talking.”

Sam was out of stuff to say. Those few wet minutes seeing the strange swimmer in the sound had been the only novel ones in the day. Everything else was routine: dismissive passengers, weak coffee, stacks of paper cups swaying as the ferry churned on. Except—“Ben asked if I wanted to go camping with him.”

Elena looked over her shoulder. Thin and dark as the skin under her eyes was, she still looked, for the moment, bright. Pleased. Like she’d heard a joke. “Camping?”

It was so embarrassing. “On Orcas on Thursday.”

“Where? At Moran?”

“At...I don’t know, I didn’t ask.”

Elena smirked, just a flash of it, before facing the sink again. “You should go.”

“No. Ew,” Sam said.

“What’s ew about it?”

“I’m not going to spend the night with him. In some tent, stargazing.”

“Why not?” Elena was faced away, but Sam could hear the smile in her voice, the little laughter there. “He likes you. It’s adorable. He wants to roll up in sleeping bags and make s’mores.”

“Don’t make fun of me.”

Elena turned back around. Her face was sincere. “I’m not making fun of you.” A swoop of purple underlining each wide eye. Sam didn’t say anything, but she forgave Elena, immediately, with no grudge held, and Elena knew it. “I wouldn’t,” Elena said. Then returned to the dishes.

“Anyway, I told him no,” Sam said. “It’s a stupid idea. I’m sure one of us will have to work on Friday.”

“So what, you can’t board from Orcas?”

Sam didn’t know about that, whether she and Ben could start their respective shifts from a different port. But she said, “No. You can’t. Anyway, you need me here overnight.”

“It’s fine.” Elena was scrubbing the bottom of a pot. One shoulder high with the effort. “You don’t really get up with her anyway.”

“Yes, I do,” Sam said.

Sudsy water sloshed into the sink. Elena turned on the faucet again, rinsed the pot, and set it on the counter.

This was love: the two of them in the kitchen at the end of the day. The one bond that would last their whole lives. Speaking shorthand, getting irritated, understanding each other so well that they didn’t even need to speak the words of a fight out loud.

Sam shook her head at her sister’s back. “I can’t believe you’re sticking up for camping. What a waste of time.”

Her sister was rinsing out the empty sink. “Oh, yeah, your precious time.”

“I’m not trying to go on dates with Ben. Right? We’re not here to get into relationships or whatever.” Sam was repeating what Elena herself had said, in so many words, when they were starting high school and things began to get bad with their mother’s boyfriend. That man had wanted to set himself up as king. Rule their household. It had been their family’s very worst time—no matter how punishing the relentless routine of these days now could feel, they were nothing compared to the actual punishments he had dealt out, his shouting and his hands. Surviving his reign made everything clear: they could only count on each other.

Elena turned off the faucet. “Just saying. A little stargazing sounds like fun.”

From the back room, a cough. Sound traveled too easily through this house. Thin walls with meager insulation. Elena took up a dish towel.

“I’ve got it,” Sam said. She put the chili in the fridge and fetched a clean glass from the cupboard. To fill the glass at the sink, she had to stand close to her sister. She put her hand on Elena’s back. That touch, and the water glass, were an apology. Elena was right: Sam did not take her fair share of the nighttime responsibilities. Sam could do better. Look at her now, standing, acting. Under her fingertips, Elena’s long shoulder blade felt flat as a dish. The water ran over the glass’s sides and Elena shut it off.

The sisters were born thirteen months apart. They had been raised together here in their mother's rangy care, in this house that smelled of mildew, where the cupboards were never empty but the utility bills weren't always paid. The men who'd sired them had left long before Sam could remember. Elena said she didn't remember, either. Their mother must have remembered, but had chosen never to tell. When they were young, the girls tried to question her, but she would only distract them in response. If she was painting their nails, they took that quiet moment, her bent worshipful head, as their opportunity to ask: who were their fathers? How'd she meet them? Where'd they go? She would hold up the sisters' hands and say, "Look what a beautiful color you chose." Ice blue with white sparkles for Elena's manicure. Deep, brilliant red for Sam's.

As children, Sam and Elena imagined fathers worthy of keeping secret. Heroes. Princes. Spies gone deep undercover. But eventually they realized (their mother's boyfriend, when he moved in, proved it) that people refused to speak not about exceptional romantic adventures but about run-of-the-mill assholes. At fourteen and fifteen, the sisters were told by their mother not to complain about their home life. He was stressed, she said, and that's why he lashed out. They all had to be more sympathetic. When Elena mentioned to her tenth-grade science teacher what was going on, and child services got involved, their mother was shocked, silent. Bewildered by their decision to disclose. The social workers visited, wrote up reports, and vanished, and Elena's teacher did nothing after that but gaze with furrowed eyebrows at the girls in the school halls. Once the man moved out, no one ever wanted to mention him again. Sam and Elena understood, then, that whoever their fathers were, they were better not discussed.

Their mother hadn't dated anybody seriously since. As kids, the sisters thought they might one day marry—maybe a pair of brothers, they told themselves—and move out, but that didn't happen. Within a couple years, their mother got sick, and so the stories they made up with each other shifted. A town where they were strangers to their neighbors. A garden of their own with two rosebushes, white and red, that they would have the time to indulge in tending.