Ashley Thomas Memory

Tamarisk

“What do you do,” asked one of his students, “when what you want to write about is true?”

“Ah.”

Harold had been waiting for this question. It was the eternal conflict: truth versus fiction. But he’d been teaching creative writing for many years now and was well aware of the difference.

“You have to be very careful with the truth, Miss Warren. Plain facts are of little interest to fiction readers. People who want a fix of reality watch television. A fiction reader wants something to believe in.”


Later, at home in front of the fire, Harold tried unsuccessfully to put tonight’s class out of his mind. He couldn’t believe someone had actually read that story. A writer’s first story, he felt, ought to be retractable upon maturity. And even though he had published countless stories since his first, something inside him still bristled when he thought about Tamarisk.

In spite of his uneasiness, Harold felt a nagging urge to revisit his first story. And it was safe enough; his wife was upstairs absorbed in her own book, and across the hall his two sons dreamt in their beds. It had been twenty years since the age of Tamarisk.

Locating the old journal took a bit of rummaging, but he finally found it buried underneath a stack of magazines in his cabinet. He still hadn’t made up his mind to read it, but when he spread the journal open, the pages parted immediately to Tamarisk.

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For as long as Alec could remember he had been going to Tawny Island. A narrow crescent off the Carolina coast, Tawny Island measured only two miles in length, barely half that in width. Lacking the ruggedness of the Outer Banks or the gentrified air of Wrightsville, it attracted nonetheless a devoted round of vacationers every summer. The ancient cottages of the eighteenth-century fishermen who originally settled the island had been slowly replaced by modern bungalows. Tawny Island’s most distinctive feature was the sand for which it was named, a peculiar pinkish-tan color, the remnants of some sort of prehistoric shellfish.
His mother often reminded Alec that it was upon this sand that he learned to walk. Though he didn't remember his first wobbly steps, his earliest memory of all was one of himself sitting unafraid in the surf, the salty waves washing over him like a rambunctious dog. “Oh, Alec,” his mother cried, having just coated herself with tanning oil. Her slippery arms pulled him out of the water and set him safely on her towel. “Where's your father?” she asked, putting a hand over her eyes and scanning the pier.

The three of them always came in the first week of June because Alec's mother liked to get an early start on her tan. It was a three-hour drive from Coleville to Tawny Island, counting one bathroom stop and the ferry ride from the mainland. Every year the Cassels leased the same gray bungalow, 517 Captain's Walk, two blocks from the beach.

The house itself was impersonal, filled with the secondhand belongings of the real owners. The furnishings were sparse and nondescript, a denim sofa, rattan chairs with nubby cushions. Over the bed where Alec slept, someone had hung an old fishing net, where there dangled dried starfish and oyster shells. The Carpenters, read the sign on the mailbox, Pinehurst, N.C. Though he had never met this family, Alec sometimes wondered about them. What he liked most about the house was its smell, the scent of cedar tinged with coconut tanning oil, which stained the floor in the shape of a figure eight.

People occasionally spoke of hurricanes but in June the marriage between the ocean and the sand appeared perfectly amiable. To Alec the idea that the beach was receding seemed somehow impossible as he watched the gray-green fingers of the Atlantic caress the soft pink sand. There was talk of a bridge one day, connecting the island to the mainland, but these were only rumors.

There was a seasonal pizza parlor at the north end, where his mother shagged to tunes by the Embers while his father watched from the bar. In the middle of the island, there was Shirley's Tackle, a small convenience store owned by a jolly woman with frothy white hair and pedal pushers. Alec liked Shirley because she remembered his name and didn't mind making change for the Lost in Space pinball machine outside her shop. His father paid Shirley three dollars a day to fish from her pier, even though he caught more dogfish than spot. On the beach, where Alec's mother burnished in the sun, a Mexican woman named Asuncion peddled pineapple slushies from a blue and white umbrella cart. At the south end, there was a nature preserve for spotted sandpipers.

Alec at twelve looked like his mother, with her olive complexion and dark eyes. He did not, however, have his mother's knack for striking up conversation with strangers. He spent most of his days happily alone, going back and forth between the beach and the bungalow, toting a bucket of shells. At the end of the day he would walk down to the pier and join his father.
“Look at this,” Joe Cassel would sometimes joke, holding up a wriggling dogfish. “A baby shark.”

The other signs along Captain’s Walk read like a coastal Who’s Who. The Templetons, Rocky Mount. The Wileys, Henderson. The Upcroft, Banner Elk. These people were as anonymous to Alec as the Carpenters for it was the custom at Tawny Island for the owners to rent the bungalows to pay the mortgage. Only the Mulligans from Raleigh could afford to live here all summer without renting out. The pink and white cottage across the street from 517 was by far the most picturesque on Captain’s Walk, defined by raised beds of snapdragons and marigolds. Alec saw far more of Mrs. Mulligan’s backside than her face, as she kneeled in the dirt, weeding and mulching. If she noticed him, her smile was friendly yet brisk. “Lo,” she’d say, “how are you?”

Doctor Mulligan had a practice in Raleigh and on Fridays his old Saab would putter down the street and park beside his wife’s purple Beetle. There was a daughter Alec’s age, a snub-nosed girl named Sandra with blonde braids who turned her head when she met Alec on Captain’s Walk. There were two boys also, but they were in college and Alec rarely saw them.

His favorite Mulligan was Sam, an old West Highland terrier. He usually rose before the rest of the family, poking through a hole in the screen door and relieving himself at the base of a palm tree. Alec saved the crusts of his toast, pinching off small pieces which he fed to Sam. One morning as Alec scratched Sam’s ears, the screen door of the Mulligan’s cottage squeaked open and there stood a girl he almost mistook for Sandra. But this girl was slimmer, with long, caramel hair. She wore a halter top and ragged denim shorts. When she crossed the street, he saw that she had large, dark brown eyes.

“Oh,” she said shyly, turning to Sam. “So this is where you go in the mornings, you silly dog.”

“Who are you?”

She stood up and pushed her hair behind an ear. She was at least an inch taller than him.”Sandra’s cousin. And you?”

“Alec Cassel.”

“Nice to meet you, Alec,” she said, bending down and hooking her finger through Sam’s collar. He thought that she smiled at him as she walked away, but he couldn’t be sure because the wind suddenly whipped her long hair in front of her face.

Later in the day he watched from the pier as she and Sandra stretched out on towels and sunbathed. When Asuncion rolled out her cart, they rose and bought pineapple slushies. While Sandra dozed, her cousin pulled a chair out into the surf. Alec watched as she washed out her cup and fished around for shells.
Alec’s mother lay nearby, her black maillot gleaming in the sun. She pressed her fingers to her mouth and threw a lazy kiss to her son. “Come on down,” she called, but he shook his head and went for fresh bait for his father. Later he observed the girls as they entered the ocean, cringing as the water reached their bare bellies. They swam past the breakers and floated on the raft, kicking with their legs. Around five o’clock, Mrs. Mulligan appeared and waved them in for supper.

Sandra shook off her beach towel and followed her mother, but the cousin took her time, counting the shells in her cup. As he watched her, Alec felt for the first time at Tawny Island a pang of loneliness. Sandra turned around, impatient, and called for her cousin. The word she spoke Alec had not heard before but it was a word he would never forget.

“T-a-m-a-r-i-s-k,” the cousin spelled out the next morning, as she and Alec walked along the beach. “Some sort of flower, little pink petals. My mother loved flowers, weird ones like orchids and Venus flytraps. My father says she had a whole room full.”

“Your mother, is she—”

“When I was three.” But it was all right, Tamarisk told him. She was not unhappy. She lived in a three-story townhouse in Richmond with her father, an economics professor. Her father was a big man who spent most of his time reading in a green leather armchair. At the end of a page, he would often stop and grunt, “humpf,” which Tamarisk imitated for Alec. She had a Persian cat named Mr. Whiskers, who liked terrorizing the neighbor dogs. Twin elderly housekeepers, Ollie and Zollie, looked after Tamarisk. Ollie made gingersnaps and Zollie, jam thumbprints, which Tamarisk preferred. She dreamed of being a majorette and marching with the band, but she had been eliminated during the first round of try-outs.

“What about you?” she suddenly asked Alec. “Tell me about you.”

He didn’t know what to say so he told her about the shells he liked. They knelt together on a wet mound and raked their fingers through the sand. He pointed out the banded coquinas, a blackened shark’s tooth, a piece of a sand dollar. She suddenly shrieked, holding up a tan and white fragment. “Look,” she said, rinsing it off in the water, “isn’t this a Scotch bonnet?”

Alec nodded. He had found a whole one himself once before. But some reason he did not tell her.

“They’re very rare,” he heard himself say.

“For your collection,” she said, her wet fingers brushing his hand. “Do you come here every year, Alec?”

By the summer of his thirteenth year, construction on the bridge to Tawny Island had begun. As they rode the ferry over to the island, Alec’s father pointed out the concrete columns in the distance, which stuck out of the water like
smokestacks. “Well, they’re certainly taking their own sweet time about it,” remarked his mother.

“Don’t you know how long it takes to build a bridge?” asked Alee’s father.

“No,” said his mother quietly, lowering her sunglasses. “And if you’re about to tell me save your breath.”

His parents had been fighting ever since they packed the car that morning, arguing about the speed limit, where to stop for breakfast, which credit card to use at the gas station. When they finally arrived at 517, Alee hurriedly emptied his suitcase. He wanted to go to the beach, where he hoped to see Tamarisk again.

“There’s a girl here asking for you,” called his mother, poking her head through the door. “I didn’t catch her name, it was something funny.”

“You’ve grown,” Tamarisk said, as they walked together on the beach. She held her hand over his head. “Half an inch.” She still wore her hair long, and the tip of her nose and the tops of her feet were sunburnt. “Glad you’re back,” she whispered.

“What’s up?” called Sandra, joining them.

Alee knew that if he wanted to spend time with Tamarisk he would have to please Sandra. So he bought both girls pineapple slushies from Asuncion and Teen Beat from the rack at Shirley’s. He pulled them out on the raft and pushed them into the highest waves. Later, they all dried off and sat on a blanket listening to Sandra’s portable radio. He wanted to talk to Tamarisk privately, but Sandra kept interrupting. She asked him if he had a girlfriend back home and Tamarisk blushed at his reply.

The next day he was alone on the beach, for the girls had gone shopping in Wilmington with Mrs. Mulligan. Alee alternated between riding the waves and lying beside his mother on the sand. But he couldn’t get comfortable. “This sulking is one thing,” she finally said to him, shaking the sand off her towel. “But I can’t bear this pacing. Find something to do.”

When the purple Beetle finally rolled down the street, Alee tried not to look up from the Franklin Roosevelt biography he’d found in the cottage. Sitting on the porch, he’d turned the page and affected a look of deep studiousness.

“Guess what,” called Sandra, carrying in groceries. “We’re having a clam-bake.”

“Well, well,” said his mother, fixing the collar of his polo shirt. “Your first date.”

“It’s not like that,” said Alee, his ears burning.

“Is it Sandra or that cousin of hers, now what is her name?”
Alec’s father walked into the room and suddenly his mother’s teasing stopped. “Don’t be late,” she whispered, parting his hair with her fingers. His father, though silent, winked at Alec. The night before, Alec had awakened to the sound of glass breaking in the kitchen and his parents’ angry voices. He had pulled the covers over his head in an attempt to muffle their words. Tonight he hoped that they would be asleep when he returned.

“I’ve got to go,” he said, pulling away from his mother. He crossed the street, gratefully escaping into the world of the Mulligans.

Citronella candles on bamboo poles flickered on the patio, which was encircled by a privacy border of wax myrtles. Dr. Mulligan and his sons had driven up for the weekend and several other people joined them, some more cousins, and a family down the street. The family had a boy about Alec’s age, with a crewcut and a leather necklace. To Alec’s relief Sandra seemed absorbed in conversation with this boy, whose name, Tamarisk informed him, was Wayne.

“Do you like my hair?” Tamarisk asked, leading him to a concrete bench in the back. Sandra had French-braided it, she explained. On the beach Alec would have tugged at the thick braid playfully but tonight he resisted the impulse to touch it. The oldest Mulligan boy, a junior at Chapel Hill, wandered around looking for his Jimmy Buffet tape, which no one had seen. In the end, Mrs. Mulligan had her way and they played Tony Bennett.

Dr. Mulligan whistled as he ladled out steamed clams from a brick Dutch oven. “You must be Alec,” he said, filling up his plate. Mrs. Mulligan dropped some hushpuppies to the side and added a scoop of slaw. “Glad you could make it,” she said warmly. Her usual brisk smile was extended tonight and Alec felt the glow of it linger upon his face.

Sandra and Wayne ate quickly, and then ran off to chase fireflies. Alec and Tamarisk lingered over their food, chatting quietly.

He asked after the professor, who had gone to Saudi Arabia to help the government compute population statistics. She missed her father, as well as Mr. Whiskers, who had the house to himself this summer. Ollie would stop by three times a week and see to his food. Her favorite housekeeper, Zollie, had suffered a stroke and now lived in a nursing home. Tamarisk hadn’t made majorettes this year, but she’d been a finalist again.

“Hey, look,” called Sandra, holding a Mason jar full of fireflies. “We’ve got seventeen so far. Why don’t you guys help?”

“Go on,” said Mrs. Mulligan. “I’ll take your plates.”

The four of them walked around to the front of the yard, clasping their hands around the slow-moving fireflies. “It tickles,” said Tamarisk, laughing as she dropped one into the jar.

“Twenty-five,” Wayne announced. “That should be enough.” He picked up the jar and with a stick began smashing the fireflies.
“Ooh,” said Tamarisk, shuddering. “Why did you do that?”
“You’ll see,” said Sandra. “Don’t be such a baby.”
Wayne then took the bloody stick and wrote Sandra’s name on the road. The word glowed eerily for five seconds. Sandra squealed with glee. “Don’t you want to do yours?” asked Wayne, holding out the stick to Alec.

Alec shook his head and turned away. His disgust at the firefly massacre soon faded, however, as he watched his parents through the window of 517. He saw his father walking around the living room, hands behind his back. His mother, though she wore one of her dancing dresses, sat on the sofa, immobile and unsmiling.

When Alec looked up, he noticed that Sandra also had observed the scene. “Something wrong?” she asked, smirking.
“We’re going for a walk,” said Tamarisk, who had seen, too. “Come on, Alec.”

The pain of what he knew would now come to pass seemed strangely distant as he and Tamarisk walked side by side in the ebbing twilight. Neighboring bungalows came to life slowly, illuminating one by one along Captain’s Walk. The ocean blackened toward the horizon and in the ensuing silence the rhythmic crash of the waves against the sand seemed to grow louder and louder. The occasional cry of hungry seagulls pierced the humid air around them. Tamarisk undid her braid and her long hair flowed free again, brushing up against Alec’s elbow.

At the end of the road, she turned around and touched his hand. “We should go back, now, Alec.”

Will you live with your mother or father? Tamarisk wrote. It must be horrible to have to choose. Alec would have liked to live with his father, who had taken an apartment in another town near Coleville. But he knew it would hurt his mother to know this so he went along with the hasty agreement hammered out by the attorney.

His mother shortly became engaged to Marvin, a slick-haired man who showed Alec a collection of ribbons he had won in statewide shagging contests. They couldn’t marry until March, though, when both their divorces became final. The new house they were building wasn’t quite as large as Alec’s mother would have liked, even though she had told Alec that Marvin, a general manager at Eveready, was made of money.

“We’re going to Myrtle Beach on our honeymoon,” his mother bragged to a friend on the phone. “Oh, no, we’ll never give up Tawny Island. Poor Alec would be devastated! He’s got a little friend down there, you know.”

Alec breathed easier, hearing this. He began lingering by the mirror a little longer each morning. He changed the rubber bands on his braces just as
his orthodontist ordered, and he didn’t complain during their tightening. He wore scented deodorant and practiced shaving by pushing a thin shard of soap against his face. And he began to like the look of himself in a particular shirt.

“You remind me of my brother,” Alec’s mother whispered to him. “He was quite the ladykiller.”

Girls at school slipped him notes, notes which he read and crumbled on his way home. He was more interested in making the High-I.Q. bowl team for his school. He was good at math but his ambitions were vague. He only knew that when he grew up, he wanted to be able to buy the gray bungalow at Tawny Island. He had heard that local companies often gave away scholarships to people with good grades. “Don’t be such a dullard,” said his mother, when he brought it up. “College is light-years away.”

When his mind did wander, he found himself on the beach, Tamarisk’s hair brushing against his elbow. He had kept the Scotch bonnet she’d found, which he stored inside a pinestraw basket on his dresser. Sometimes at night he held it in his hand, rubbing his fingers against the smooth pink side.

“Alec,” said his mother, turning over the paper one morning. “You know that bridge they’re building to Tawny Island . . . well, guess what?”

Alec missed the ferry, the slow, imperceptible movement across the glassy green water, the silhouettes of fish swimming underneath, the hot wind against his face. “This is so much faster than that old boat,” said Alec’s mother, looking back at her son as Marvin drove over the new bridge. “Ooh, look,” she said, pointing ahead to the island. “How cute.”

Someone had spelled Welcome to Tawny Island in begonias on a steep bank in front of them. “And a Red and White,” said Marvin, pointing to the old ferry station which had been converted to a grocery store. “We could have waited to buy food, Denise.”

“Well, it’s about time,” said his mother. “Let’s pull in and see if their lettuce is any better-looking.”

Alec walked ahead on foot to Captain’s Walk, where he knocked on the door of the Mulligan’s cottage. His heart pounded in his chest as he waited. Sam pushed his head through the screen and Mrs. Mulligan came to the door.

“Hi,” he said. “Is Tamarisk here?”

“Oh, Alec. She won’t be coming up ‘til Friday. She’s riding with the Doctor.”

His heart dropped. By then, his vacation would be nearly over.

“But Sandra’s here,” she said, pushing open the screen. “Won’t you come in and have a Sundrop?”

“Uh, well—”

“Hi Alec,” said Sandra, suddenly materializing.
She walked beside him on the beach kicking at the surf. She complained about her braces, which she’d just had put on, and about how bored she’d been.

Alec tried to listen politely, but his thoughts were elsewhere.
“You miss her, don’t you?” asked Sandra slyly. “Oh, it’s okay, you don’t have to admit it.”

She stopped under the pier and looked him square in the face. She had become a touch prettier, having lost some of her pre-teen chunkiness. Her blonde hair had been cut in layers which feathered around her face.

“Tamarisk and I have this little bet, you see.”
“Bet?”
“It’s a competition, really. We’re trying to guess who’ll be kissed first.”
Alec kept walking. He was not even tempted. “Where’s your friend from last year?” he called out, referring to the boy with the crewcut.
“Oh,” said Sandra, catching up. She rolled her eyes. “Him.”

The rest of the week was unbearable. Sandra followed him around constantly, mooning about Wayne, whom she’d seen at the Red and White with another girl. Alec’s mother pestered him to join her and Marvin at Errol’s until he finally gave in. He wouldn’t dance with her, though, no matter how much she pleaded.

On Friday night he was awakened by the sound of a pebble against his window. In the moonlight stood Tamarisk, standing barefoot on the ground.
“Hey sleepyhead!” she whispered. “Can you come out?”
“I hear you and Sandra have this little bet,” he said, joining her.

_I made majorettes_, Tamarisk wrote, adding a smiley face. _In November I’ll march with the band. I’m sending you a picture of me in my uniform. I can’t wait until June._

In between letters Alec went to the skating rink, at the urging of his mother. There he skated circles round a wooden floor to the falsetto of the Bee Gees. On the ceiling there hung colored lights, which were reflected back out over the floor by a mirrored ball. Alec regularly participated in what was called “Advanced Couples,” where boys and girls made separate lines and skated toward each other, choosing a partner. Not everyone was successful, but Alec always found a willing partner. He even kissed one of these girls by the candy machine. But it was only for practice.

His friends thought his carelessness was part of an act. “Cassel, you dirty rascal,” one of them shouted one night, and the name caught on, uttered whenever a girl approached him. No one knew about Tamarisk.

He sometimes wondered if she skated with other boys, and if she, too, practiced kissing someone else. Such thoughts didn’t trouble him for long, because he knew that she saved her summers for him.
In school he continued to progress, qualifying to take geometry a year earlier, which pleased his father, who had not attended college. “You could be an engineer, you know,” he said to his son. “Or maybe an architect.”

Alec was happy when his father finally began seeing someone, the woman who trimmed his hair. Sheila, whose voice was craggy from cigarettes, was not as pretty as his mother, but she made good French toast in the mornings. “Do you think Sheila might like to go to Tawny Island?” Alec once asked.

“Sorry son,” said his father, shaking his head. “But that was another life.”

“Don’t you get huffy with me, Alexander Cassel,” said his mother, after he’d learned that there’d been a mix-up about the rental cottage in June. They wouldn’t be able to go until the next month, and then, for only four days. His mother, distracted by the baby, no longer worried about her tan. And if she and Marvin danced, it was only to an oldies station on the radio, on the vinyl floor in the kitchen.

Alec liked his little brother, but he saw nothing of himself in the baby’s broad face. He helped out as much as he could, but at age fifteen, he felt himself breaking away. *I’ll be waiting for you in July*, Tamarisk wrote him from the beach. *You won’t believe how much things have changed.*

From the bridge Alec spotted the new Ferris wheel, its spokes outlined by neon lights. There was a train ride for children, even a putt-putt course. The island teemed with tourists, more than ever before, carrying red, white and blue bags of cotton candy.

On the beach he observed the beginnings of another pier next to Shirley’s. He also noticed that this year there were two other umbrella carts peddling drinks. Alec’s heart pounded in his chest as he looked for Tamarisk. He saw Sandra first, fawning underneath the perch of a lifeguard. What if, he said to himself, what if Tamarisk has found someone else?

But then he saw her, sitting alone in a beach chair in the surf. Just as she had been sitting four years ago, collecting shells. “Alec,” she said, her brown eyes widening with pleasure.

From a map the distance from Richmond to Coleville was only 243 miles. He told Tamarisk that next year, when he had his driver’s license he would be able to drive up and visit. She mentioned her prom and the fold-out sofa in the professor’s study. Together they walked the island, surveying the changes. At night, they rode the Ferris wheel, and from the very top they could see nearly the whole of the island, how it curved, like a smile, toward the Atlantic.

“I wish this thing would stop,” she said. “I wish we’d get stuck at the top and never have to come down.”

“Me, too,” he said, putting his hand over hers.
“Be safe,” his mother said, during the summer of his sixteenth year. “We should be there sometime after supper.”

Alec’s heart quickened as he drove to Tawny Island, going much faster than his mother would have liked. He held in his hand the Scotch bonnet, in which he’d drilled a hole and strung around a piece of cord. He would have liked to have bought her one of those pre-engagement rings the other girls their age sported, but he didn’t have the money yet.

Her last letter had been in early spring. I miss you, she had written. I’ll never forget that night on the ferris wheel. But the date of her prom had come and gone without a word. Had she gone with someone else? He’d tried calling her house a couple times but no one had picked up. He didn’t worry, though, because he knew that they’d be together at Tawny Island in June.

Captain’s Walk bustled with activity. Children ran past him, carrying their sand buckets to the beach. Fussy mothers followed behind, carrying babies slathered in sunscreen. A panting collie sauntered past Alec and curled up under a shady bush.

He saw Mrs. Mulligan first, kneeling in her garden. He waved and crossed the street, joining her.

She put a hand to her mouth and stood up, her freckled face paling. “Oh, Alec.”

Inside the bungalow, she’d insisted he sit down, while she mixed him a highball. He hadn’t yet developed a taste for whisky but he did as he was told. “Someone should have written you. Sandra or myself, at least,” she kept saying. “We just didn’t think.”

He didn’t need to hear the rest. As he walked out to the beach, he clenched in his fist the Scotch bonnet. It was Sandra who followed him out, who sat beside him on the sand and finished the story. There’d been an accident in March, she told him. Tamarisk had been on a road trip with the band. The school bus had collided with a mail van and bounced into a ditch. Others had been injured, but Tamarisk, thrown from the bus, had been the only fatality. “It was,” added Sandra succinctly, “one of those freak things.”

“She’s still got it,” he told her, “please go.” The news had a curious numbing effect; he was too stunned to cry. He balled up the shell pendant and threw it into the surf. He hadn’t thrown it far enough, however, and the waves merely returned it to his feet. Then Sandra’s arms encircled his neck. She told him how sorry she was. “You know something,” she whispered in his ear. “I’ve always had a bit of a crush on you.”

A man from New Jersey eventually bought the ferris wheel, expanding the area around it into a miniature amusement park. Shirley sold her pier to a couple from Florida, who promptly tore it down and built a new one, adding a seafood restaurant and a raft rental center. Asuncion, unable to keep pace with
character of Alec. It was the truth behind his love affair that he had left out. The truth had been too ugly to bear.

"Do you really think that you're the only one she writes?" someone had whispered into Harold's ear. "Do you think that when you leave, she walks on the beach alone?"

It had not been this whisper that had killed the love between Harold and his girl; this was only the beginning of the end. Where there should have been trust entered jealousy, a jealousy that crept into Harold's letters, a jealousy that caused him to look around them suspiciously when they walked together on the beach. Before long, the letters had stopped entirely, and when Harold met his former love on the beach, their greeting had been reduced to a chilly hello.

He felt, of course, a flutter of guilt at having Tamarisk die in his story. But by writing the story the way he did, the memory of their love was preserved as it should have been, untainted by jealousy and mistrust. In Tamarisk, two children will forever walk the beach at Tawny Island, sipping slushies, collecting shells, and hoping the ferris wheel will stick at the top.

"But how do we know what to leave in and what to leave out?" another student had asked him.

"Practice," Harold had insisted. "Lots of practice." And then he'd moved safely into the more technical aspects of writing, issues of style and diction. Tamarisk, after all, was not something he felt he should defend.

As he lingered by the fire, he thought again of his first love. Had she married? Had the caramel hair faded to brown? It didn't concern him deeply, for Harold, unlike Alec, had eventually recovered. Tamarisk had been written in honor of his first love, in honor of the feelings they shared. And it was also out of honor that he had violated a fiction writer's cardinal rule. For try as he might, he could never find a substitute name for the girl he'd known as Tamarisk.