

By Sanda Moore Coleman

An excerpt from A Year By the Sea

By the time they arrived on Martha's Vineyard, her family had moved a total of fourteen times: once for each year of Lexie's life. Not that she remembered every move, because of course, she didn't, but she was familiar with the drill—nine months of constant motion on a bus with Jack's band for the tour, followed by three long winter months in a hotel in Miami or in London or in Malibu or wherever Jack thought they should go that year. Last winter, they lived in New York, and Lexie was thrilled when Jack said he was taking the year off from touring. She loved the city and had been looking forward to seeing it without its cloak of ice and snow. In the end, she lived there for just ten and a half months, but she considered it the closest experience she had of a hometown.

They were supposed to wait until after Labor Day passed and the shoulder season had begun in earnest. Grandma Pye had telephoned to warn them that before then, the island would be teeming with summer people and day-trippers. But Juliet would not be deterred.

"Why would I care how many people are on that island?" Juliet tossed the words over her shoulder as she walked away from Jack, who was hanging up the phone. "We're not going for a holiday; we're going for Dr. Weiss."

Jack shrugged and left the room. There was no point in trying to argue with Juliet. She simply insisted on having her own way, and she expected everyone else to move out of the way. Everyone usually did. So they left New York the next day, arriving late in the evening, to Grandma Pye's conspicuous exasperation.

That phone call was the first time that Lexie had ever heard of Grandma Pye. As Juliet drove away from the ferry and through the streets of Vineyard Haven, Lexie began to picture a

big, soft confection of a woman, warm and sweet and smiling, smelling of vanilla. It turned out, however, that Grandma Pye was lean, spare, and stern, cut from New England granite and cold as the dark green Atlantic waves that brought the Pye ancestors to the shores of the New World. This piece of information regarding the Mayflower Pyes was given to Lexie before she'd even crossed the threshold of the old house; it was, in fact, given in lieu of a greeting and it told Lexie pretty much what she might expect about life with Jack's mother.

"The Pyes have lived in this house for generations," the old woman announced upon opening the door and glaring at them. She had a surprisingly deep, booming voice, Lexie thought, coming from such a tight, crabbed mouth. She was tall, with iron grey hair pulled severely back from her face and neck in an unyielding braid. "We came here on the Mayflower, and we'll stay here until Gabriel's trumpet sounds. No matter what."

Lexie was not certain that this was the friendliest way to welcome family, but Juliet breezed past Jack's mother, pulling Michael after her. Michael seemed absorbed in the sight of his mother's slender, pale fingers wrapped around his wrist; he allowed her to tow him into the large sitting room and by the time he was seated beside her on the sofa, Michael had moved on to examining the collection of gold bracelets that cuffed Juliet's forearm.

"Michael and I will take the second floor." Juliet glanced around as though looking for a bellboy.

"It's not ready." Grandma Pye showed her teeth in what Lexie decided was a smile. "It isn't clean. I wasn't expecting you for two weeks. After Labor Day. Shoulder season."

Juliet was already on her feet and heading toward the curving walnut stairway. "We've slept in worse places. I'll hire someone to come in to clean tomorrow." She looked briefly over her shoulder at her daughter as she pulled Michael up the stairs. "'Night, Lex."

Grandma Pye looked at Lexie, wrinkling her nose as though she smelled something bad. “My room is down here,” she said, jerking her thumb in the direction of the far side of the hallway. “You can find a room down there.” Again she pointed toward the hallway, but in the opposite direction. Then she stomped off. Lexie was to find that Grandma Pye always stomped in and out of rooms, which turned out to be a good thing, as far as Lexie was concerned; it was a bit like belling the cat.

Lexie liked the sound of the words ‘shoulder season’; they were round and plump, like fat orange pumpkins. She also liked what the expression represented: a steady flow of people leaving. Crowds of them sailed away every day; the departing ferries were always full, until at last, Lexie found the air was crisp and sharp, the sun was golden, and the island had settled into a state of repose.

It was a beautiful place. Lexie told herself that autumn was beautiful everywhere that discernible seasons unfold, but it was hard not to fall under the charm of the crisp sea air, the darkening of the horizon as the rich turquoise of summer turned to more forbidding green, and the glorious blaze of foliage sweeping the sky in predictable New England fashion. Lexie did her best to resist. She did not want to be attached to any geographical place. There was no point to it, since they never stayed anywhere.

She spent as much time outside and away from Grandma Pye’s house as she possibly could. She haunted the harbor, cafes, and the bookstore in Vineyard Haven, losing herself for hours in the crowded stacks.

One afternoon in the bookstore, Lexie looked up to see a teenage boy standing several aisles over, inspecting a display of best sellers. His hair was dark and thick and shaggy; it spilled

across his forehead and shoulders, but couldn't hide the angular handsomeness of his face. He mostly kept his face down, though, his eyes fixed on the ground, his shoes, or the various books that he picked up and discarded. Lexie moved unconsciously in the same direction along with him. He paused before a large bin of discounted items, then suddenly thrust one long arm into the jumble and pulled out a dark blue volume that he regarded with the expression of a magician who has just performed a difficult trick. He shook back his hair to get a look at the sale price and a triumphant smile lit up his face.

The dark hair and dark eyebrows made his eyes a surprise, the pale, calm green of celery. He reminded Lexie of the old black-and-white matinee film idols that she and her tutor Jamie used to love watching on hotel televisions late at night. It was the kind of sensitive, almost delicate look that almost certainly made him the object of abuse among his male peers, she thought. Lexie wondered if he was skipping school right now. He was at the counter now, paying for the book. She was intensely curious about him, and was just gathering the courage to march to the front of the shop and speak to him when he slowly turned and ambled out. He moved with such ease, such nonchalance, that Lexie was sure he was not engaged in truancy. She found herself drawn to the front window, where she watched him walk leisurely down the street, his attention focused somewhat dangerously on the book that he had just purchased. It took every drop of willpower she had not to follow.

Lexie had wanted to be close to Grandma Pye, particularly since she was Jack's mother, but the old woman refused to cooperate. Even when Lexie got up early and made pancakes for everyone, Grandma Pye refused to eat them and instead, stood at the threshold of the kitchen and

said in her loud voice, “Breathing Judas! Whoever turned this kitchen upside down better turn it right side up again. I don’t clean up after people. It’s not what I agreed to do.”

And after Lexie washed the dishes and swept the black and white checkerboard tile floor and wiped the black granite countertops until they gleamed, Grandma Pye said not one kind word about it. She poked her head into the kitchen, looked around and grunted, then withdrew.

Lexie made a cup of tea and took it to the old woman, who had retreated to a rocking chair on the veranda. Grandma Pye cried out in an oddly high-pitched, splintery voice, “That is Pye china! It’s been in my family for two hundred years! Don’t you touch it ever again.”

It was apparent to Lexie that Pye had declared war on her, and would brook no attempts at a truce. The only solution, she realized, was to put up the best defense that she could muster. She knew she was being immature, but so was Grandma Pye.

Lexie did not think the situation could be any worse, but she was wrong. She awakened one morning in mid-autumn and padded into the kitchen to find her mother standing in front of the coffee machine with a perplexed expression. Michael was sitting on the floor at Juliet’s feet, and as usual, did not seem to notice anything that fell beyond his immediate gaze, which was directed at the large windows that faced the back lawn. A shaft of sunlight slanted through the glass, causing dust motes to shimmer as they drifted past. It was exactly the sort of thing that Michael seemed to find fascinating.

Lexie had not seen Juliet or Michael for days. Her pleasure at seeing someone other than Grandma Pye propelled her across the room to take over the coffee-making duties. She’d watched Jamie make coffee a hundred times, at least. Once the coffee started to drip into the

carafe, she turned to her mother and gently guided her to a chair at the farm table next to the windows, then moved toward the refrigerator for the orange juice.

“He’s getting better, I know he is.” Juliet cocked her head at the glass of orange juice that Lexie placed in front of her as though she had no idea where it had come from.

Lexie felt, rather than heard, the baleful presence of Grandma Pye enter the room. She looked up to see the old woman standing in the doorway, watching them, her expression unmoving.

Juliet, still apparently entranced by the glass of juice, appeared not to notice. She snatched up the glass and drank the juice in three quick swallows. “We’re near a breakthrough.” Her voice was breathless, as though she were in a hurry. “He really recognizes me now, every morning, which Tasha—Dr. Weiss—says is absolutely key. And I’ve decided to move us out to the carriage house so it will be just the two of us. I think that will give him the extra push he needs to make me part of his world.”

Lexie thought about Anne Bancroft as Annie Sullivan in The Miracle Worker. She and Jamie had seen this movie over and over on late night television. Juliet had the glow of a True Believer, and Lexie could not bring herself to interfere with that. Still, the thought that it was just going to be her and Grandma Pye in the big old house made Lexie scowl down at the glass of juice that she’d poured for herself. Juliet seemed vaguely to register her discomfort, because she turned and actually looked at Lexie with her pale eyes.

“You understand, don’t you, Lex?” Juliet asked in her high, gentle tones. “He really needs just me. And you are so smart, darling. I know I don’t have to worry about you.”

Lexie let those words wash over her like the placid, rolling waves of Bend in the Road beach. She knew that Juliet was praising her, but it was a compliment that made her feel sadder

than she had ever felt before. Jack had left her a month ago; now Juliet was going, too. Even though Juliet and Michael would only be across the lawn in the carriage house, they were still leaving her behind to cope with Grandma Pye on her own. When you are smart, Lexie reflected, watching the butter melting on her toast, people think you don't need them.

It was like a tale from the Middle Ages, she told herself; her mother and brother were in exile on a magical island, trying to break the spell that disguised her brother as a wolf, while she stayed behind in the cave, trying to keep the old ogre from eating them all. Lexie was not especially fond of medieval tales, and this metaphor did not improve her opinion one bit.

From the way Grandma Pye was rocketing around the kitchen, banging cabinet doors and slamming drawers, Lexie was fairly certain that the old woman was as displeased by this sudden turn in living arrangements as she was, but there was nothing to be done about it. Juliet had made up her mind, and as infrequently as that happened, it was always ironclad.

"I don't need a babysitter," Lexie said loudly, over Grandma Pye's kitchen noise. The words came out sounding like a warning, but no one seemed to notice.

"Of course you don't," Juliet agreed pleasantly.

Grandma Pye muttered something under her breath, but that was all. Lexie didn't know why, but Grandma Pye always backed down in a confrontation with Juliet, and this was no exception.

By the end of the day, Juliet and Michael were gone from the main house and it was just the two of them, Lexie and Grandma Pye, accidentally meeting in the kitchen around dinnertime. The old woman looked as panicked as Lexie felt about the idea of the two of them dining together. Lexie nearly felt sorry for her, but then Grandma Pye hissed, "You'll get your own meals. I'm not your servant."

There didn't seem to be much Lexie could say to that, so instead, she satisfied herself by giving Grandma Pye the hard, unflinching stare of a lunatic. Her grandmother recognized it immediately, and she backed out of the kitchen with the slow deliberation of someone trying to avoid a rattlesnake, which suited Lexie just fine. She took her time in the kitchen and ate standing over the sink, chewing spitefully at the thought of the old woman lurking in the hallway, ear pressed to the door and stomach growling.

Gum-chewing, Lexie soon discovered, was one of Grandma Pye's favorite pet peeves. She frequently proclaimed that "Chewing gum makes a girl look either like a cow working a cud or a two-bit prostitute." She always used those exact words, 'two-bit prostitute,' as though, Lexie thought, it wasn't bad enough to be merely a prostitute. Grandma Pye never mentioned how it looked for a boy to chew gum, as it was implicit in her philosophy of the world that men had divine rights to do as they pleased.

Although Lexie had long ago decided that gum-chewing was a rather vulgar habit, she began standing in Grandma Pye's peripheral vision, pretending to chew a very generous wad of something. The first time, the old woman spun around and demanded to examine Lexie's mouth for the offending gum. She was furious when she could find none.

The second time, Grandma Pye actually poked her cold, bony finger into Lexie's mouth to assist the search, which of course, to her consternation, turned up nothing. The third time, Lexie stood across the room, hands behind her back and chewing vigorously while seeming to stare off into the space just left of the old lady. In her peripheral vision, she saw Grandma Pye's eyes bulge. Pye bared her false teeth in a feral expression that Lexie had only ever seen on a wolverine in a nature program on public television, and practically ran out of the room.

This almost made up for the fact that she had spent an entire week telling Lexie every time their paths crossed in the echoing, empty house that Lexie's red hair precluded a man loving her for her beauty and that she should learn to cook or resign herself to being alone for the rest of her life.

"You should take bookkeeping lessons, or dictation." Grandma Pye peered at her through narrowed dark eyes; they had passed each other in the hallway and Lexie knew, when she heard the clomping footsteps pause, that another 'suggestion' was about to be aimed at her. "Those are useful skills for a woman to have, especially a woman who won't be having a husband or children."

"Okay, then," Lexie said with an obedient smile. "I'll get right to work on that."

"You are not funny." Pye sniffed and turned briskly away. "Breathing Judas! I won't stand for it." She stumped off, Lexie thought, like a leaden rain cloud looking for somebody's picnic.

Bookkeeping and dictation—Lexie wished she could tell her tutor Jamie about that. They would both have a laugh. But Jamie must have gotten a new cell phone, because no one answered when Lexie called.

Lexie found living with Grandma Pye a trial worthy of Job. It wasn't long until she resolved to look into Buddhism—Grandma Pye's version of Christianity made her think of straitjackets and burning stakes, and love seemed to have very little to do with any of it. The very idea that such an irrational concept as love existed was, to Lexie, enough to suggest its importance, its spirituality. Love was not, after all, necessary to modern physical survival, and if people were only animals, or only intellect, the capacity for love would have been dumped in the

evolutionary process. But it has not been dumped, and therefore, Lexie determined, the fact that people love is a kind of sacred thing.

Grandma Pye, however, was what Jack called an “Angry Christian.” This meant that Grandma Pye felt not only justified in judging people harshly, but as though she had a moral imperative to do so. Lexie, however, was the only one who actually had to suffer this moral imperative, as Grandma Pye had avoided speaking to Juliet and Michael even before their defection to the carriage house.

Lexie found herself doing things that she knew full well were unwise, like calling a taxi to go swimming alone and late at night at South Beach. More than once, the bone-cold undertow had grabbed at her and thrown her back on the sharp pebbly shore, cutting open her knees and palms. The third time was to be her last; she had felt the fingers of the sea pulling at her, felt the tug of the moonlight on the water, and she decided there was a difference between unwise and foolish, so while she continued to walk the beach at night, she no longer entered the surf.

She also knew it had been unwise to go online to surreptitiously research the Pye family tree until she discovered, as she had somehow known she would, that the Pyes had not arrived on the Mayflower at all. In fact, they came ashore a full fifty years later, and with a long history of debt and crime trailing them. This last bit of information, especially, gave her a secret sense of satisfaction, as though nothing Grandma Pye ever said could possibly count, or even really mean anything, because Lexie had caught her in a lie.