

THE LISTENING EYE 2026



Number 53

Red Sky at Night: Cynthia Allen

My son Kurt and I walk to the beach one final time before he and his wife head back to the city. They've been working remotely from our summerhouse at the Jersey shore, but now that Liza is closer to her due date, it's time for them to go home.

"Watch out for the poison ivy." I know I sound like a broken record but one brush against the bushes and he'll be covered in blisters.

He gives me a thumbs up and continues walking. This mile-long stretch of dunes is one of the few remaining sections of maritime forest that once blanketed the barrier islands. We discovered it thirty-five years ago when Kurt was four.

At the water's edge, he drops the chairs in the sand, and I shake out our towels.

"How did you change?" he asks abruptly.

"What do you mean?" I shield my eyes to see him, like a sailor saluting her captain.

"All those years when we were growing up – you weren't happy."

His words slam into me like a body blow. I don't know how to answer him.

"You've been good for fifteen years."

I calculate the time in my mind. He can't be right. I turn toward him, furrowing my brow.

"I'm old, mom." For the first time, I see age lines creasing my beautiful boy's face. I know whatever I did or didn't do to nurture him cannot be undone.

"Did you have anxiety?" His persistence makes me squirm.

My impulse is to lie, but I answer as if his life depends on it: "No, just depressed."

Now that he's about to be a father, he's sifting through his memories and analyzing the threads of his DNA looking for clues. I wonder if he's afraid his child will inherit my sadness.

Do I tell him there were days when all I could think about was dying? Days when I dragged myself out of bed to make him and his brother

breakfast and drive them to school, then promptly returned home, and pulled the covers over my head?

“I needed medication,” I say matter-of-factly, hoping to leave it at that. After all this time, I’m still ashamed.

“But you haven’t taken anything in years, am I right?”

It’s so long ago, I’ve almost forgotten. “Not for a long while,” I say.

“You did something else. What was it?”

These are questions I should have asked my own mother and father, not about medication, but about the choices they made and the way they lived their lives. I didn’t want my kids to grow up to be like them, or me--- always doubting themselves.

Kurt pops two beers and places them in the cup holders. He digs his feet into the sand. A mid-afternoon hush settles over us as the sun’s rays scatter the clouds.

“Red sky at night,” I call to him.

Kurt’s green eyes crinkle as he smiles.

“Sailor’s delight.”

I wish I could bottle up this moment and keep it forever in my heart.

He raises his beer in a toast. “To next year.”

Next year my boy will be chasing his own baby through the surf and sand and hopefully, Liza and I will be running beside him.

“Well?” He looks at me expectantly.

Finally, I know what he needs to hear – the saving words my parents never shared:

“Your love healed me.”



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