

A summer night. An oceanside dinner party. Someone intriguing refills your glass, looks in your eyes and asks, "If you could return to Earth in whatever form you wanted, what would you choose?"

Once my answer would have been, "A tall blonde." A Diane Sawyer sort of blonde. A sloe-eyed sort of blonde whom a maître de always remembers and a lover can't forget. Yeah. That's the life I wanted. Just once. But now — now I would lean back, sip my wine and say, "A book."

Yes. A book. Because, while blondes may have more fun, books have more *joie de vivre*. To appreciate the difference, think elegance to *élan*. Think sophisticated to *soignée*. Think Diane Sawyer to Sir Peter Wimsey.

Consider the recent year in the life of the birthday book I gave to my son, Sebastian Junger's *The Perfect Storm* (W. W. Norton and Co., © 1997). The story is a harrowing, true-life tale of an ill-fated fishing boat from Gloucester, Massachusetts — a riveting recounting that's hard to put down.

So my boy Matt was wise not to open it immediately. He and his wife are busy, and Matt's November birthday has always been nipped in the heels by the coming holidays. There the book lay, beside the cosy fireplace of the young couple's Pennsylvania home. A turkey roasted; a tree went up; cats slept and snow fell, until, finally, in February, Matt called. "This book," he verily gasped, "this book, it's terrific."

"Bring it to me when you're done," I said.

On a rainy March morning, my neighbors scraped their cars while Baltimore's late spring tucked its head under a crocus leaf and slept on, but I... why I was between the covers. The book and I, we were in bed, our only witness an old spotted cat. And there we stayed, our connection secret, intense, and thoroughly enjoyable, while the neighborhood slowly quieted to the steady drip of rain on brick walks. The morning wore on; the book and I were reaching the climactic ending where the overwhelming tides of nature and human misjudgment converge — when suddenly I had other desires.

My appetites are many, and all demand satisfaction, so the book and I adjourned to my sun room, where we reached a civilized denouement over scones and coffee. At the end, I stared

at the rain soaking the delicate fuzzy blooms of the japonica, drew my robe about me, and thought, "Damn, this was one good read." Then I thought, "Mom should know about this."

So I sent the book to Mom.

Now, Mom lives in California, in a town too north of San Francisco to be overwhelmingly *chi chi*, yet still enough within its galaxy to be star-dusted with panache. It's the sort of town where a lady can wear a hat with a wide brim and while away an hour or two at a café with cappuccino and a good book.

My Life as a Book by Patricia Schultheis



But not Mom. Mom is a transplanted New Englander, and, for her, the tale of the Gloucester fisherman conjured up memories of rocky shores, flat vowels and, in Sebastian Junger's wonderful phrase, "...the smell of the ocean so thick you could lick it off the air."

So Mom, when she got the book, she cooked. "I made pot roast," she said. "Simmered it for three hours. I guess some people wonder what's that smell from my condo, but I don't care. And the whole time it cooked, I read." As far as I can tell, Mom cooked escalloped potatoes and ham, corned beef and cabbage, and a lemon meringue pie for that book. She was onto stew and oatmeal cookies before she and it were through. "The best

stew I had in a long time," said Mom.

I was telling my sister about Mom and the book on a late summer afternoon. We were having a beer and enjoying the view of "the prettiest harbor in Maine" from her front porch. We are at the point in our lives where the corrosive pull of anticipation is broken and whatever pleasures that come are serendipitous and fully appreciated. So imagine our delight when what should arrive in the mail, but the book! Like an unexpected, but entertaining guest, the book was just in time for a stroll down to the pier to watch pine-covered islands blacken against a silver sea while our lobsters steamed on the dock.

My sister's life is on the cusp. For her the delightful details of daily life countermand the allure of professional success. The contrast of fragile white garlic skins on a dark blue saucer, a bird feeder with a squirrel-proof dowel, well-planted bulbs — these now are what my sister treasures, just as she treasures her freedom to live alone in her house by the sea. When she opens the book, she will enjoy it surrounded by the scent of pine forests, salt spray and clam chowder in a red glazed pot. Not bad.

So, given a choice in the Vedantic scheme, I would return as a book. If *The Perfect Storm* is any example, I could expect expense-paid travel, warm welcomes and pleasant accommodations. Like a bachelor uncle who arrives just in time for dessert, a book can enliven conversation and diffuse familial tensions. It can even link one generation to the next. A book is usually appreciated and almost never abused. When not otherwise used, it frequently enjoys a place, if not of honor, at least of comfort, on an overstuffed couch, say, or a lace-covered table by a sunny window. And when it's time to move on, something has been shared, never to be forgotten.

Come back as a tall blonde? Why would I? I'm certain any of them can tell you, when a lady's looks have gone with the wind, all her great expectations have been dashed, and it looks like she'll be alone from here to eternity, she can always curl up and snuggle down with a good book. It's as easy and as exciting as falling down a rabbit hole.

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