A Moxie and a Pop Tart

by J.R. Allison

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For my darling DeeAndra

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Laurie Wilson, Carol Harmon, James Manring, Tom Keelan, Russell Carruth, Dave Patch, Tom Krcelic, Bryce Garner, Carl Sara, Anthony Lembo, and Robert Lamb for tea and sympathy, support, constructive criticism, and boundless patience.

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Prologue: Adult Situations, Brief Nudity

I don't like prologues. My editor, William Pruitt, made me put this in against my will. What I need you to do is to get a pen (or pencil, or crayon) and cross out where it says "Prologue" and write "Chapter One" instead.

There. Problem solved.

William and I didn't always agree, but he really was a magician: he created the illusion that I was a competent writer. I did not envy him this Sisyphean task. On a rare visit to his office, I spoke to him across the vast expanse of his disgustingly uncluttered Brazilian mahogany desk. How anyone could work like that was a mystery to me. My reflection in the polished top was so clear I couldn't resist sticking out my tongue and making an ogre face at myself. William had known me for years and was accustomed to this sort of behavior.

"The time has come," I said, "for me to write my memoir."

He looked at me as if shocked to find so much stupidity contained in a single diminutive woman. Provoking William's exasperation was a game I liked to play, probing the limits of his patience each time we met. He preferred to conduct our business by mail and phone, but I could exasperate him there, too.

He frowned at me. Feeling like a schoolgirl about to endure a

scolding from the principal, I squirmed on his leather office couch that cost more than my car. The couch made a farting noise.

"That wasn't me."

You'd think for that kind of money they'd give you a couch that doesn't fart. William pretended no couches or bottoms had spoken.

"Your...memoir," he repeated.

"Yep."

He took a deep breath. "Tell me, Bonnie-Kate, do you recall the book you published last summer?"

"Which one?" I knew damn well which one.

"It's called *Would You Like a Pop Tart*. It's your memoir."

"Oh, that. Yeah, I remember."

"So—"

He waited for me to concede my mistake, but I hadn't made one. When I declined to respond, he came right to the point. That's an effective tactic to use on me since I'm a little slow on the uptake.

"So...you have already written your memoir. A few months ago."

"Right. But I had to leave out a lot of the sex, violence and fart jokes. Now my conscience is bugging me. I need to write an honest one."

"If you publish two different memoirs in the same year, you

will undermine your own credibility. Your readers will never trust you again."

My readers had no reason to trust me in the first place. I lied to them all the time. That was my job. But that was beside the point.

"I didn't say I was going to publish it, just that I'm going to write it."

His eye-roll may have been involuntary, but I didn't think so. Score one for me.

"As I'm sure you're aware, Ms. Caldwell, we are a publishing house. If you don't intend to publish it, why are you here?"

"I was in town so I popped in to say hi."

"Hi, Bonnie-Kate. Anything else?" He drummed his fingers on his super-fancy desk.

"I think that about covers it. Unless you want to grab some lunch? My treat."

"It's eight fifteen in the morning."

"Too early? Wait a sec—" I rummaged in my purse. "Would you like a Pop Tart?"

"Yes. Yes, I would. Blueberry. Frosted, please. Toasted, if you don't mind."

Touché, William. Well played.

When we met many years ago, William told me an author was permitted just one exclamation point per novel. His tone suggested he would prefer one per career. Sorry, but my life has

had a lot more exclamation points than that.

Should you choose to read this (mostly) un-Williamized account of my cartoonish and patently absurd life, be warned: you will be exposed to a certain amount of violence, some graphic. I lost a few body parts over the years, including an eye and half of my right leg (guess which half). I committed some of the violence myself, like the time when I killed a guy. He was asking for it, so it wasn't technically my fault.

You will also encounter adult situations in these pages, and brief nudity.

Wait. Full disclosure, the nudity is prolonged.

And, as you've already seen, I wasn't kidding about the fart jokes.

Bonnie-Kate Caldwell
Mille Jours Island, Maine
2025

A Moxie and a Whoopie Pie

I had just turned five when the sea first tried to kill me. This was my earliest memory, and it set the tone for everything to come. The mud flat had swallowed me up to my knees and the tide was coming back in. The more I struggled, the deeper I drove my feet into the death-grip of the blue clay beyond the clam flat. I knew only this: I was in BIG TROUBLE.

Before we left Wiscasset for a two-week vacation at the Caldwell family homestead on Mille Jours Island, Mom and Dad bought me my first pair of clamming boots. When I put them on, I was transformed. No longer the undersized foreign-looking kindergartner no one cared to be friends with, I became Island Girl, intrepid explorer of the inter-tidal zone, impervious to mud and water (as long as it wasn't too deep and there weren't any big sharks around). I had boots like the lobstermen now, so I was a rough-and-tumble seafarer just like them. Right?

I had seafaring in my blood, and I was proud of it. My dad was a merchant sailor and my mom was Filipina, born and raised near the sea. My love of all things oceanic was genetic, a foregone conclusion.

Our first day on Mille Jours, we went down to Scoter Cove for

a picnic. My grandparents lived in one of the four houses on the island, but Gramma wasn't feeling up to a hike so she and Grampa stayed home at the cabin.

My dad and I explored the Scoter Cove tidepools and I found a storm-lost wooden lobster buoy painted red and white, my first treasure from the sea. There would be many, many more.
Our shorecombing successfully concluded, we had a feast.

When my mom prepared a meal, we did not eat, we feasted. The term was hers, not mine, but I strongly approved: a feast was far more celebratory than a mere meal. That day we had lobster salad sandwiches, whoopie pies and ice cold Moxie to wash it down. Yum was all around.

The late June sun had burned off the morning chill, so Mom spread out a blanket and we all lay down with full bellies for a nap in the fresh salt breeze. I was overstimulated about being on Mille Jours—the place I loved most in all the world (what little I had seen of it)—for two whole weeks, and about having my very own pair of super-fancy Maine Coast Island Girl knee boots. Sleep was not happening.

I'd recently learned it was bad manners to disturb sleepers, so I was careful not to wake anyone. I scuttled sideways off the blanket, slipped my boots back on and crept to the water's edge. The slack tide had turned with deceptive speed and was steadily refilling our quiet cove. I put my newly acquired Island Girl powers on full display by walking right into the sea.

"Ha! I fear no rising tides! I stand *in the water*, but my socks remain dry! Behold the magnificence of me, one of the chosen few bold enough to wear brand new Big Girl knee boots!"

Beneath my rubber-soled feet I could feel the firm sandy mud of the clam flats. Beyond that was an expanse of blue clay so dense and sticky not even the clam worms wanted to live there. Undaunted, I waded farther out on the flat. Island Girl's bold adventuring would not be thwarted by something as trivial as a little clay. The mud flat before me lay submerged beneath six inches of water; my boots were at least a foot tall.

Onward.

When I stepped from the semi-solid footing of the clam flat onto the oozy clay, my feet sank in faster than you could say *shiver me timbers*. Or some other suitably nautical expression. I tried another step, but the sucking mud held me fast. Growing alarmed, I tried flailing, but it didn't help. After a moment or two, a large fishing boat passed in the distance but her captain didn't see me. I wasn't yet desperate enough to flag him down, but it would have been futile anyway: diesel exhaust mingled with the salt air as he cranked up her engine and turned southeast for the open sea.

I worked at wriggling my boots free but only drove them deeper. Cold seawater flooded in over the tops, drenching my socks, which, if memory serves, had Winnie-the-Pooh on them.
A shivering horror overtook me as I came to understand the

depth of my predicament.

"I am going to be *DROWNDED IN THE SEA!*"

It was time to cast manners aside and awaken my napping parents. Consequences be damned.

Before I was able to do any effective shrieking (up to then I was only making thin mewling sounds), the fishing boat's wake bore down on me. When it hit, I felt as though I'd been bulldozed by a large angry person whose foul mood I had somehow provoked. I was indignant at being flattened by a wave while already engaged in a life-and-death struggle. What on Earth had I done to deserve such treatment? Being drownded like this was not at all fair.

I regained my footing—sort of—in time to be knocked down by the second wave, and again by the third. By then I was crying hard, which I hated because a proper Maine Island Girl is one tough customer and does not cry, not even when she's being cruelly (and unreasonably) drownded by the sea. When I tried to sit up again my hands sank into the mud as well, leaving me in the intertidal equivalent of four point restraints. A seagull flew by and laughed at me, which I didn't much appreciate.

Having learned nothing from the entombing of my feet, I struggled to free my hands in the same way, thereby ensuring my doom. Nestled in the mud but unable to sit fully upright, I felt the sea lapping at my shoulders.

Big trouble had grown much, much bigger.

The mud was cold but I felt impossibly sweaty, a phenomenon that occurs only when you're about to die, I assumed. I was about to unleash a banshee howl when the last of the fishing boat's wake rolled over me. I swallowed enough seawater to gag, which made me cough uncontrollably, which prevented me from howling like a banshee (or any other creature from Celtic folklore), which I needed to do to stay alive.

There are some who claim to have reached a kind of resigned equanimity when faced with certain death. This did not happen to me. I thrashed around as much as a child bound hand and foot could, fighting that mud like it had eaten the last Pop Tart.

It was not enough. I kept hacking up seawater and failing to yell for help. My strength waned. The tide advanced on me. The mud was going to win. With the ocean lapping at my chin, I closed my eyes and waited to die. When you're about to die, you close your eyes so you won't have to watch.

In the next instant I was suspended in mid-air, my legs dangling and feet shod in nothing but wet Winnie-the-Pooh socks. My father's hands were in my armpits, and reeking low-tide mud dripped off me in a blue-grey cascade. Dad hugged me to his chest, heedless of my befouled state.

"It's ok, Bonnie-Kate. You're safe now."

I was grateful but would not be so easily consoled. My flood of tears continued.

"The sea tried to drownd me!"

"Aw, hon, don't be afraid. Everything's going to be all right. Let's get you home and into some dry clothes."

He wiped away my tears with his thumb. I hitched and snuffled against his sternum. He patted my back, making little wet squishy noises and saying "There, there," and other good child-comforting words. I squirmed in his arms, twisting to look at the spot he'd yanked me from. I saw nothing there but a cloud of mud drifting beneath the waves.

Between sobs I managed, "B-but my boots! I lost my buh-hooots!"

Their loss was simply the worst thing in the world, maybe even worse than drownding. How could I be a proper Island Girl without my boots? I remember thinking they might come floating to the surface at any moment and if I could just spot them, Daddy would get them back for me. I could then regain the coveted title of Island Girl.

The more my boots didn't appear, the more I didn't stop crying. Dad carried me back to the shore where Mom waited at the water's edge, wringing her hands in maternal panic. She gave me a whoopie pie, because feasting cures all ills.

"Tell you what," said my dad, taking off his mud-slathered shirt, "How about you and me sail over to Jonesport tomorrow and get you some new boots, then we'll grab a bite at Cap'n Jack's."

At Cap'n Jack's Lunchbucket, kids got an extra cherry on

their sundaes. I therefore considered it the finest eatery on the planet, and awarded it one million Michelin Stars.

"Cap'n Jack's? Really?"

"Ayuh, you betcha." He patted me on the head.

With the promise of new boots and an extra cherry, the worst of my ordeal had come to an end.

When we sailed back to Mille Jours the following afternoon, my belly was full up with a nice greasy cheeseburg, Cap'n Jack's fries and a two-cherry pineapple sundae. My feet freshly shod in a brand new pair of Muckers, the finest clamming boots money could buy, Island Girl returned home in the height of seafaring style, the envy of every fisherman from Kittery to the Canada line.

Only one piece of my mud flat fiasco haunted me: why would the sea I loved so dearly try to take my life? I may not have been able to spell it (or pronounce it) correctly, but I knew what drowning was. It was one of the ways a person could die, and dying was one of the worst things that could happen to you, apart from losing your boots.

I also knew if you loved something it wasn't allowed to kill you. That was part of the deal. Someone here was not playing fair, and that someone wasn't me. When I went for an after-dinner (after feast, I mean) stroll with my grandparents, the question was much on my mind. I asked Gramma how the sea could be so mean to me.

"The ocean is a mystery, dear. A mystery dark and vast. The

sea gives, but it also takes away."

She tactfully avoided saying it most often took away only if you did something remarkably foolish, like wandering too far out on the mud flat.

"We must always give the sea its due respect."

We were walking the dirt road past the Caldwell family cemetery where, of the dozen or so headstones, the oldest dated to the late 1700s. Some of the inscriptions were no longer legible, but my grandparents knew who each stone was for. Grampa took my hand and led to an imposing marble slab just inside the rusting wrought-iron gate. 125 years of freeze-thaw cycles had softened the engraving, but it was chiseled deeply enough to remain clear for centuries.

"This marker is for your great great grandfather, John Stephen Caldwell."

I was glad he told me because I was five and couldn't read that well. He recited the full inscription.

"Captain John Stephen Caldwell. Born 1789, died 1840. Lost at sea, presumed drowned."

"He drownded? How?" I first assumed he walked out too far on the clam flats.

"His ship went down in a squall off Sable Island. Back in those days you never knew what the weather might bring."

I tried to picture John Stephen Caldwell. In my mind he looked a lot like a pirate. I thought about what a fine thing it was

to be the descendant of a bold sea captain. My heart swelled with pride.

"The sea took him away," I said.

Gramma said, "Drowning is a terribly sad thing, but it is among the noblest ways for a seafarer to go, Bonnie-Kate. Our Captain Caldwell died honorably, he went down with his ship."

"But why would the sea want to do that? To drownd him?"

"It wasn't so much that the sea wanted to kill him, it's just the cycle of birth and life and death. That's the way of the world, dear. The world, the cosmos, the universe. On and on it goes."

This was awfully deep stuff for a five-year-old, and I was nowhere near as precocious as everyone seemed to think. I didn't know what a cosmos was, so I reviewed what I knew about the universe. That's what you saw when you looked up at the night sky. It had a lot of stars in it, and was the biggest thing you could think of. Bigger than the whole state of Maine, I supposed. And now I knew it would try to kill me if it could, and that's what I was up against. I would have to keep an eye on this so-called universe. It was clearly not to be trusted.

Bonnie-Kate Caldwell and Aoife Doyle, the Meet-cute

The first thing I noticed about Aoife Doyle was that she was tall and fair. That was the opposite of me: short and light brown. They say opposites attract. Could be. She was from Maine but her family moved to Ireland when she was one and a half. They lived over there until she was six, then moved to Portland and stayed for a year. After that they moved back to Wiscasset where they started from.

Since Aoife (pronounced EE-feh, sort of like Eva, but with an F) was two years older, I hardly noticed when she moved in three houses down. At our age—five and seven at the time—two years might as well have been a hundred. Before the Wiscasset Town Fair I'd never met her. I met a lot of people in the years since, but no one to compare with her. Not even close.

My dad was a merchant sailor. He was at sea when the fair came around, so my mom took me instead. She tried to win me a stuffed bear by shooting ducks, but the game was rigged. Too bad, I was a big fan of bears.

They had a little rollercoaster and a Ferris wheel, but they both had "You Must Be This Tall" signs. I wasn't this tall, so I couldn't go on any of them. They also had a couple of horses you

could ride in a circle but the horse guy said I wasn't tall enough for that, either.

Aoife Doyle was right behind me in line when he said I couldn't go. She said to the guy, "Don't be a shite," but he still wouldn't let me ride. They really should have called it The Wiscasset Town UnFair, *Making Small Children Sad For Over Seventy-five Years!* That's what it was doing to me.

Since I wasn't allowed to ride a horse I stood by the rail and watched other kids walk around the circle. When Aoife came by, she steered her horse over to the fence and stopped, which she wasn't supposed to do. The horse guy yelled at her but she didn't care. She stuck her hand out to me and said, "Let's ride, Champ."

I think she got that from a Clint Eastwood western. I climbed on the fence rail and she hoisted me up into the saddle in front of her. She spurred the horse to a sprightly canter and we went around twice before they could stop us. Aoife cackled like an asylum-dweller the whole time. The UnFair people were so mad they kicked us out.

That was the first time Aoife and I got kicked out of anything, but not the last. By far. We left together, walking a few yards behind our moms, who didn't know who to be more upset with, us or the UnFair people. That's when I found out Aoife was Irish. And crazy.

"How come you told that guy not to be a shite?"

She checked to make sure our moms weren't listening. "He

was being a shite, wasn't he."

"Well, what's a shite?"

"A shit. It's like saying don't be an arsehole."

"Goodness. I'm not allowed to say that."

"Me neither. Sometimes what you have to do is different to what's allowed, dontcha know."

"I had fun riding that horse. Thanks."

"We'll go again tomorrow, won't we. I love ponies."

"But they said we're kicked out."

"They also said you couldn't ride. Did you ride?"

"Yep."

"See? They don't know shite."

"You talk funny."

"I'm Irish. It's not that funny." She popped her gum like a gunshot.

Aoife's father was from County Cork and I sometimes found his speech incomprehensible. He loved his only daughter's Irishness, but once they moved back to the states her mother and peers encouraged her to subdue her accent. A born contrarian, Aoife responded by cultivating her brogue and syntax to a point just shy of Leprechaunese. She didn't do it to please her father, she did it to aggravate everyone else. Also, she thought of herself as an Irish person who was accidentally born in America.

When the time came, Mom wouldn't let me go to the fair again. She wasn't any too happy about me riding the pony, or

about being thrown out. She said she was more dafide.

I was already a collector of interesting words and dafide was a new one. At the time I didn't think Mom was dafide at all, so how could she suddenly be more dafide? Whatever it was, the whole thing was my doing so I was afraid to ask what it meant. I just knew it was bad, and it would be better if she was less dafide, or not dafide at all.

I made it all the way to junior high before I learned—to my great humiliation—that dafide was not a word in the English language. I was, of course, mortified.

Since I couldn't go back to the fair, Aoife asked if I could come over and play. Mom said ok, but be good. I always tried to be good. Usually. Aoife and I went to the playground across the street and got on the swings.

"How'd you learn to ride horses?" She was good at it.

"From me Da."

"Who's Meedah?" I'd never heard that name before.

"My father. We lived on a farm in County Cork, with sheep and ponies."

I thought it would be a fine thing to live on a farm, as long as it was by the sea. Or on an island.

We finished swinging, went on the slide a few times, then walked back to her house. Her room had pink carpet and pink-stripe wallpaper with red flowers that might have been geraniums. She had pictures of horses on the walls, an Easy Bake

oven, and Ken and Barbie.

"Where's her head?" I asked.

Barbie's head was gone; Ken's was where it was supposed to be. Aoife opened the Easy Bake oven and there was Barbie's head in the little baking pan. She still looked happy; nice big Barbie smile.

Before I could ask, Aoife said, "That's what she gets for misbehaving, doesn't she. Ken, too, sometimes." She snapped Barbie's head back on.

I couldn't decide if Aoife Doyle was fascinating or terrifying. Further inquiry was needed.

"What did she do?"

"Made a baby with Ken, she did. Tried to, anyway."

"Huh?"

"Like this." She lay Barbie on the pink carpet and put Ken on top of her and bounced him up and down. I didn't get how that could possibly make any babies.

"That's it?"

"Or like this." She bent Barbie over the Easy Bake oven and put Ken behind her, then bounced him against her little plastic bottom. I tried to make sense of that, but couldn't.

"How do you get a baby from that?"

"I don't exactly know, but, sure, that's what they do, isn't it. Our sheep used to do that and me Da said they were making a baby sheep. There's seamen involved, and it's summat to do wi'

their willies, the boy sheep."

"What's a willie?"

"The old fella, dontcha know."

"The what?"

"The John-Thomas."

I still wasn't getting it. "The who?"

"The dick, Bonnie-Kate! The pickle, the peepee!"

"Well why didn't you say so?"

"But the sheep don't lay down. Only people do it that way."

"If you say so."

She told me about the time on the farm when she climbed up into the hayloft because there were kittens up there. Her Uncle Aiden came in with the girl—Aoife called her a lass—from up the lane and that's what they did. On hay bales. They never knew Aoife was there. She watched, but it was a secret.

I was still confused. "I don't think Barbie can have a baby. She's a doll."

Aoife put them away. "And so are you. A wee China doll."

This troubled me, as I'd just seen how she treated dolls.

"I'm not from China. My mom's from the Fill-a-peens."

"But you have Chinese eyes."

I was often mistaken for Chinese, Japanese or Korean. People wondered aloud why I had the least Asian-sounding name imaginable. My Dad gave me that, and I liked it just fine.

Aoife said, "You're still like a wee doll." She winked at me.

"Uh, ok." I didn't want to argue. She might put my head in the oven if I made her mad.

"I told you a secret. Now you have to tell one of yours."

"I don't have any good secrets. Not like that."

"You've never done anything bad?"

I didn't usually do bad things, but I thought of one.

"You know the stone wall in front of my house? Once I saw a little faerie run and hide in one of the cracks."

"Did you now."

"I went out there to see if I could catch him. I was poking around with a stick and a couple of rocks fell out. Then a whole big part of the wall fell down. I ran up to my room and acted like I didn't know anything about it."

"What about that faerie then?"

"He got away."

"Ok. We're blood sisters now."

"Huh? What's that?"

"It's like blood brothers, but with sisters. Since we told our secrets."

She left for a minute and came back with a razor blade from her dad's shaving kit.

"We have to cut our hands and shake on it so it's official."

"I don't really wanna—"

"You go first." She handed me the razor.

I cut my finger once when I was helping Mom with some

radishes. It hurt worse than a bee sting, but I didn't cry. Crying was for babies, of which I wasn't one.

I didn't want to cut myself again, but I couldn't be Aoife's blood sister if I didn't. She was sitting right in front of me on her pink carpet, looking so hopeful, waiting for me to do this one little thing that would make us sisters for life. A small cut didn't seem like much compared to a lifelong friendship, so I closed my eyes, gritted my teeth, and went *zhip!* across my palm.

"Ow. Oh, OWWW!" At the age of five I couldn't quite bring myself to swear, but in this situation I would have been justified.

Nobody warned me that razors were sharper than knives. Well, they were and they hurt more. When I opened my eyes I saw blood everywhere, all over my hand, running down my arm, going pit-a-pat on Aoife's pink carpet.

She yelled, "Aaagh! What've you done?!"

I held up the razor blade and croaked, "Your turn."

To tell the truth, I wasn't feeling so good after seeing all that blood. I closed my hand so I wouldn't have to look at how bad it was. I thought I might faint, or worse, barf.

Aoife gasped, "Omigod omigod you weren't supposed t' really do it! Aagh, the blood, so much fuckin' blood!"

I was afraid she might barf, but neither of us did.

Aoife had no compunctions about strategic use of the F-word, although in her Irishness she pronounced it "fook" (rhymes with book, not spook. And sometimes she said 'feck' instead). My

fascination with her increased by several orders of magnitude.

"But...but...we have to be blood sisters, don't we?" I feared I had just ruined our lifelong friendship. My palm continued to gush. I was clearly bleeding to death.

"I was having you on, Bonnie-Kate! Taking the piss! You couldn't tell?!"

Unfamiliar with the expression, I looked for signs of urine on the pink shag carpet, but saw none. I recall thinking that even if she was taking a piss, what did that have to do with the blood sister thing? Surely the two were not mutually exclusive?

Wait, I thought, was she just trying to get out of cutting herself? Trying to distract me with outlandish claims of reckless urination? Had I called her bluff? No. She was crazy. She'd cut herself to ribbons if it's what she wanted to do, eight days a week and twice on Sunday. I was thinking all that, but I said, "Why would you pee on the floor?"

She was still being hysterical. I was witnessing firsthand a person being more dafide.

"Not *A* piss, *THE* piss! It means I was pulling your leg! Making fun! Not serious, taking the piss! My god, the blood!"

I didn't know it at the time, but people would repeat various versions of *my god the blood* to me as I went on with my life. Aoife would do it several times herself.

I said, "It's still your turn."

"Let me see it." She meant the wound, not the razor.

She opened my hand, took one look and said I needed stitches. Lots and lots of stitches. We went and got her mom, who called my mom, and we all went to the emergency room together. I got eight stitches but I couldn't feel it because they gave me shots first. I felt the shots, though, and that was bad enough. The rest of it didn't hurt at all until later, then it hurt plenty. When we got home from the hospital, Mom said she wasn't so sure about this Aoife Doyle.

"You've seen her twice, and twice there's been trouble."

"She can't help it, Mom. She's Irish."

I figured most Irish people were crazy, like Aoife was. I told her about how Aoife lived on a farm in Ireland and loved all kinds of animals, especially horses. I also told about Ken and Barbie.

Mom said, "They...what?"

"Tried to make a baby. Aoife was mad."

I mentioned the part about Ken bouncing on Barbie but not how Aoife Easy Baked Barbie's head. Mom wouldn't like that. It was a little creepy, if you think about it.

"But I still don't get how that makes a baby."

Mom put on a pot of tea and gave me a Pop Tart. We sat at the kitchen table for a long time, and I learned the names of all the body parts I didn't already know. Also, how to make a baby. That part was gross. I sure didn't want any babies, not if that's what you had to do to get one. There really was some bouncing involved.

When Mom was done telling me, I called up Aoife and told her to come right over. She needed to know all this stuff.

You Could Hardly Tell There Was a Chickadee

When I was seven, I understood this much about death: All things that live will die if you give them enough time, and when they do, you bury them in the ground with profound sadness. I learned this from Bojangles, our beloved pet beagle who got cancer and had to be put down. No sooner had I recovered from the wheezing tatters his death made of my heart when my Grampa died on me. Literally.

These were the first two entries in my Chronology of Sorrows, a document that has over the years grown robust and horrifying.

I spent the summer of my seventh year with my grandparents on Mille Jours, still blissfully unaware of the procession of tragedies that would soon come to define my existence. That summer I filled my days with all the things I loved most about island vacations: boating, fishing, hiking, clamming, beachcombing, berrying, and generally behaving like a happy idiot, which is the god-given right of children under ten.

It was also around age seven when I started writing things down, just because I could. I didn't know I wanted to be a writer yet, that would come later. Since my interest in writing coincided

with my grandfather's death, that was one of the first things I ever wrote about.

From the Journal of Bonnie-Kate Caldwell
August 9, 1964

Gramma went to the mainland to visit her friend Bernadette in Millinocket. Edgar Tuttle, the only other full-time islander took her over, so it was just me and Grampa on the island for a few days. It was a real pretty day so we went fishing in the morning and I caught two flounders that Grampa fixed for our lunch. Then I put on my birdwatching overalls with a chickadee that Gramma embroidered on the front and we went to see if we could spot some birds. There's always new birds if you look hard enough. We found some sparrows having a fight, and I also saw a FEEBEE which I'd never seen one before. It was turning out to be such a good day I felt like there was no way anything could go wrong, but it sure did.

When we got back to the cabin, Grampa got his tinwhistle and I sang *Row, Bullies, Row*, which is a sailor song I learned from my dad. I knew all the words but didn't really understand some of them.

> Along comes the mate with his jacket of blue
> A-lookin' for work for the sailors to do

It's jib tops'l lariats he loudly does roar
Sayin' lay aloft, Paddy, you son of a whore
Singin' row,
Row, bullies, row
Them Liverpool girls, they have got us in tow

"What's tops'l lariats, Grampa?"

"That's the riggin', dear."

"What's a whore?"

"A naughty lady. Don't use that one around your mother."

"Not even if she's naughty?"

"Especially if she's naughty."

Then Grampa played some more and I danced a silly little hornpipe that always made him laugh except this time it didn't. He stopped tootling and looked at me like he didn't know who I was, then he teetered and fell down, and knocked me down, too.

It made me think of the time when Billy Whitby pushed me down on the playground in first grade. I skinned my knee and was about to start crying.

"What did you do that for?"

"Because you're a dirty Jap, that's why."

"I am not! I'm part Fill-a-peena!"

I got up and he went to push me again, but I yelled at him, "I WILL KICK YOUR PENIS INTO OUTER SPACE!" A third grader came over, too, and yelled at him that you don't hit girls. That

was pretty good.

When Grampa fell down, his elbow hit me right in the face and made me cry. *Why did my Grampa hit me? This can't be happening!* After some crying I got up but Grampa didn't. He was laying on the ground so I poked him but he still didn't get up.

"Grampa? Are you ok? Why did you fall down? Why did you hit me?"

When he didn't answer I knew something was terribly wrong. His forehead hit a rock when he landed and there was a little blood so I ran inside to get the first aid kit Gramma kept under the kitchen sink. I didn't know how to do first aid but I could probably figure it out. On the inside of the cover there were terrible drawings of broken bones and bleeding, and that didn't make either of us feel any better. In fact I almost barfed. I found a tube that said SMELLING SALTS, so naturally I took a big sniff and fell on the ground crying again. SMELLING SALTS came without a drawing of someone getting slapped in the face, which would have been helpful since that's exactly what it felt like. No way was I putting that under my Grampa's nose. It would just make him mad.

I found Band-Aids and put some on his head where it was bleeding—a little round one, a regular one, and then a big square one that got stuck in my hair when I unwrapped it. I ended up pulling a bunch of my hair out which also hurt but not as much as SMELLING SALTS. I stuck it on Grampa's head anyway since I

figured a few extra hairs wouldn't hurt anything. After the Band-Aids were on I found the Bactine, which I should have put on first but it was too late for that so I sprayed it on the Band-Aids instead.

None of this was waking him up so I looked in the first aid kit again and found two bottles of pills whose labels had mostly words I didn't know. I took pills once when I was sick and they made me better, so I figured they were exactly what Grampa needed.

I put one of each kind—a little blue one and a bigger white one—in his mouth but he didn't swallow them so I ran back inside to get a cup of juice. Pills are supposed to go with juice but he still wouldn't swallow and it just ended up on the ground and made orange-flavored mud.

I was getting pretty frustrated with the whole thing so I tried yelling to see if that would help.

"Grampa! You're in mud! Time to get up!"

Well, that didn't work either. I couldn't believe how hard it was to roll him over but I finely did it. Then I went back inside to get a towel and clean the mud off his face, and after that I tried more yelling.

"Grampa! It's getting dark! We have to go inside now!"

Nothing. I almost panicked but then I got an idea. I ran inside to get pillows and blankets. I couldn't just leave him there all alone so I figured we'd have a camp out and he would wake up

in the morning when the sun came up and we'd have Pop Tarts and go fishing.

But in the morning Grampa was cold. I tried to lift up his arm but it wouldn't move. That's when I knew he, like Bojangles, was gone. I felt like someone reached right inside of me and pulled out any chance of ever being happy again. My Grampa was dead, and without him my whole life was ruined.

I cried all morning, the kind of crying that makes it hard to catch your breath and is so loud it scares all the birds away.

After that I went to Edgar Tuttle's house and banged on the door in case he was back on the island.

"Edgar! It's me, Bonnie-Kate! My Grampa died!"

Edgar was an old lobsterman and also my friend but he was still on the mainland from when he took Gramma over. I cried my way over to the other two houses because that's all there was on the whole island besides a little church that was starting to fall down. But there was nobody home so I walked back to our cabin to see if Grampa woke up somehow but he didn't. I remembered that we didn't eat supper yesterday and I was pretty hungry so I went to get food and think about what to do next.

I couldn't reach the Pop Tarts so I had cold hot dogs and watermelon pickles and that was pretty good. Not as good as Mom's feasts but still pretty good. Gramma always gave me some 7-Up with a cherry in it but I couldn't open the 7-Up so I just ate a bunch of the cherries.

Now, Gramma was supposed to be gone for a week and she left three days ago. I couldn't figure out how many days that left, but I knew it was a long time. Nobody would take care of Grampa if I didn't do it myself.

The little graveyard by our house was called The Bone Zone —that's what Grampa called it—and Mommy and Daddy said my four bears were in it which I didn't really understand.

I knew it would be hard, but it was time for me to take Grampa over there and bury him. It had to be done and that's all there was to it.

I tried pulling him by the arms and then by the legs but he wouldn't budge. Then I tried rolling him over like I did to get him out of the mud, but he was too heavy and I was too worn out so I went to get the shovel. I figured I could dig a hole right next to him and then push him in, or I could dig some dirt out from under him and he would fall into the hole all by himself. But the first thing was to dig the hole.

I found out that regular shovels don't work too well if you're a little kid so I went to get the small gardening shovel Gramma used to plant flowers and stuff. That worked a lot better, but it was going to take me about one hundred years to dig a big enough hole.

After a while I stopped digging because there were tree roots and I cried some more about Grampa being dead and about how hard it was to dig one stupid hole in the ground. Then I went and

got Grampa's hatchet and chopped all the roots out of the way so I could keep digging. By sunset, the hole looked long enough but it I still had to make it a lot deeper. I was getting pretty tired so I ate more hot dogs and went to camp out with Grampa again. It got a little spooky out there at night, especially if the owls were talking, so I was glad I didn't have to camp out alone.

In the morning my hands hurt pretty bad so I put on Gramma's gardening gloves and started digging again. I was very tired but my Grampa had always taken care of me so now I would take care of him, no matter what. When Gramma got back she would be sad that Grampa died but at least she would be glad he got buried right. It made me cry again to think of all that, but I kept on digging. I would make Grampa's grave even better than the ones in our little cemetery.

After a while I got tired of digging so I walked to the shore and brought back the biggest rock I could carry for Grampa's headstone. It wasn't very big but it was the best I could do. I put it by the hole and got my crayons and wrote GRAMPA on it. The stones in our cemetery had other stuff on them like their birthday but I didn't know when Grampa was born so I just wrote HAPPY BIRTHDAY. That looked pretty good so I went back to digging.

By the end of the day the hole was as deep as half of me when I stood up in it, but I'm pretty short. After another camp out and one more day of digging I figured it would be deep enough. It had to be done before Gramma came home. That was very important.

I had covered Grampa's face with a towel because it felt like he was watching me and because he looked sad. I wondered if it hurt very much to be dead. I hoped not. By that time my overalls were so dirty you could hardly tell there was a chickadee. If I changed into clean ones they'd just get dirty, too, so I didn't bother.

I stopped digging at lunchtime the next day and feasted on Monster cheese and marshmallows since we were all out of hotdogs. I had more of those cherries, too. Grampa's grave was past my bellybutton now, and I decided it was finely deep enough. I was too tired to keep digging anyway.

If my Grampa was alive he would have been so happy with the grave I dug for him. All I had to do now was put him in and put back the dirt. Then I could put flowers on top and pray. You have to pray if somebody dies. I didn't know any prayers but I would think of something.

I tried and tried to push Grampa into the hole, but he wouldn't go. Just his legs went in, and only partway.

I was too tired so I rested a little. I went and got a bunch of tulips from the garden at Edgar's house and hoped he wouldn't be mad at me for stealing them. I put the flowers by Grampa's headstone and then I got an idea. I got down in the hole and tried pulling Grampa in instead of pushing, but that ended up being a terrible idea because he fell in and landed on me. I didn't think I could cry anymore but then I tried to get out from under him and I couldn't. I was trapped in the dirt, in a hole, under my dead

Grampa. That was pretty bad.

Grampa's towel fell off his face and I could see his eyes and they were all wrong like they might fall out. I wish I never saw that, it was scary. I tried everything to get out of that hole but I was so tired from all the digging that I couldn't get Grampa off of me. It was just terrible to be stuck like that, so I tried praying which you're supposed to do anyway.

> "Dear God,
> My Grampa is dead. Please take him to Heaven so I can get out of his grave that I dug all by myself. Amen.
> PS- I got good grades this year so please help me."

I couldn't remember if God cared about grades or if that was just Santa Claus.

I waited for a long time but God didn't take Grampa to Heaven and then it started to rain which made everything worse because now we were in cold mud. I figured that would be the end of my chickadee, for sure. When the grave started filling up with rain I realized I was going to be drownded. If Gramma came home and me and Grampa were both dead, it would ruin her whole day. That made me cry even more.

Well, the rain stopped and I didn't get drownded. I layed in that cold mud for a very long time and was hungry and sad and I peed my pants but don't tell anybody. At least I was warm for a

minute.

I had tried my best to give my Grampa a good grave with a headstone and flowers and now when Gramma got home everything would be all messed up instead. I felt just awful and hoped she wouldn't be too mad.

After a while I just gave up and lay there wondering why God made it rain when I asked him to help. That was pretty mean, like something Billy Whitby would do. Maybe God thought I was a Jap, too. All I knew was I was not asking God for any more help. He was probably the one that killed Grampa in the first place.

Hours and hours went by, but then I heard Edgar's boat in the harbor and before long Gramma finely came home and found us. She helped me get out of the hole and I told her all about what happened with Grampa dying and everything. She wasn't mad. We cried together for a little while.

After I took a bath we went to Edgar's house and he used his radio to call for help. I told him I was sorry about his flowers and he said it was ok. Some men came to the island that night and took Grampa away, but they brought him back in a few days.

Mommy and Daddy came out to the island and so did my aunt and uncle from Kansas, then we had a funeral in our little cemetery with flowers and praying. They put up a big grey headstone with Grampa's birthday on it but when everybody went back inside I got the little one I made and put it in front of the big one. That looked pretty good, and now my Grampa would

always remember that I loved him.

Before I went inside I checked all the headstones but I couldn't find a single bear. Since Captain John Stephen Caldwell was lost at sea, that meant he wasn't in his grave, so that must have been where they put my four bears. They must have been little ones.

That night Gramma came in and read me *Burt Dow, Deep Water Man*, which was my favorite bedtime story since it had all different colors of whales in it. When it was done, Gramma said, "Your Grampa loved you very much, Bonnie-Kate. I know he appreciates everything you did for him."

"Why didn't they put him in the grave I made?"

"It was a very fine grave, but our cemetery is where all the Caldwells are buried. Grampa needs to be there with our family."

"In the Bone Zone."

She looked like she might laugh or cry, I couldn't tell for sure.

"Yes, Bonnie-Kate. The Bone Zone."

"Will you go there too?"

"Yes, someday. It will be a good place to rest awhile."

"And me?"

"Yes, if that's what you choose. But not for a very, very long time."

I thought I would like to be with my family in the Bone Zone someday. Just resting. Maybe I could find out more about those four bears.

When I helped Daddy fill in the hole I made for Grampa, he said, "You know, Bonnie-Kate, you showed great strength in these last few days. I think it's safe to say nothing so difficult is likely to come your way again."

I hoped he was right.

When the dirt was all back in the hole we put some grass seed there but most of it got eaten by fat little chickadees.

The Marmalade of Hope

Another one from my early journals, 1965:

After Grampa's funeral we went back to our house in Wiscasset which was made of stones and ivy like a house from a fairy tale. It was pretty there, but not as pretty as Mille Jours. Mom and Dad tried to get Gramma to come home with us but she wanted to stay on Mille Jours. I didn't blame her. If I was a grownup I would never leave the island for anything. It's the best place in the world.

When we got home, Daddy got us a new dog named Griff who was supposed to cheer me up but he wouldn't stop farting. We tried all different kinds of dog food but nothing helped. I loved him anyway. One of the best things about Griff was that you could let one fly any time you felt like it and no one would know it was you unless you did a really loud one, which I did sometimes to be funny.

After a while Mom got tired of Griff stinking up the house all the time so he went to stay with Gramma on the island. He lived there for about a year but then my Gramma died, too, and Griff went to live on a farm where he could run around outside farting

his brains out and no one would care. They said Gramma died from a pullnomary embo-lizzum but I think it was from breathing too many dog farts. I'm pretty sure that can kill you.

We had Gramma's funeral on Mille Jours and buried her right next to my Grampa in the Bone Zone, so now they're just resting with my four bears. I remembered to ask Dad about that one day when he was taking me to school.

"Am I the only one that has four bears in the Bone Zone?"

"No, hon, most of us Caldwells do."

"You have four bears there?"

"Ayuh, sure do."

"Does Mommy have four bears in there, too?"

"Mom's are on an island in the Philippines."

"Which island?"

"Cebu."

"Boo!"

He laughed when I said that but I wasn't sure why. He explained it.

"No, that's the name of the island. C-E-B-U. Cebu."

"Ok. What kind are they?"

"Er...what?"

"What kind of bears? Like pandas or koala bears or grizzlies? Or teddy bears?"

He said they're the people in your family who lived before you, but I still didn't get why they were called bears. Oh well.

I was in third grade at the Edna St. Vincent Millay Elementary School that year. After I read a few of her poems I tried writing some of my own, but they were just terrible.

On life's breakfast table
I was only the toast
Until you came to me with butter
And the marmalade of hope.

When I read that one in Miss Durbin's class she almost started laughing at me, so I didn't write any more poetry after that. I stuck to writing in this journal and some little made up stories that also weren't any good but at least nobody laughed. Wendell Chapman sat next to me in Mrs. Locke's class and was always poking his nose into my business.

"Whatcha writing, Bonnie-Kate?"

"Nothing. Just a story."

"What's it about?" I wished he would stop looking on my desk.

"You wouldn't like it." I turned it over so he couldn't see.

"How come? Can I read it?"

"It's a love story."

It was about a guy who went to sea and how his girlfriend stowed away and went looking for him. I got the idea from a song called *Jack-a-Roe* that my dad used to play on his guitar.

Wendell looked disappointed but said, "Can I read it anyway?"

"If I let you read it will you quit bugging me?" I think I hurt his feelings but he said ok. I felt kind of bad about it.

"It's not done yet. Maybe tomorrow."

This would be the first time anyone besides my mom and dad read one of my stories so I wanted to make sure everything was right. I pretended not to care if he liked it or not, but it would be terrible if he didn't.

When I got to school the next day he was waiting for me at the bike rack, sitting on his Schwinn Stingray that he thought was so cool. My bike was a little red Huffy that was my dad's when he was a kid.

"How come you don't ride a girl's bike?"

"Because I don't wear dresses, just jeans." I wasn't a real tomboy or anything, I just liked to wear my Levi's.

"So? You're still a girl."

"Do you know why girl's bikes don't have that bar in the middle?"

"Um...so they won't hurt their cootchie if they have a wreck?"

"Wrong!" I was going to explain that it's called a vagina but I didn't bother. "It's so you can't see their underpants when they get on."

He looked totally confused.

"—if they're wearing a dress." I could see him thinking for a minute before the little light went on and he got it.

"Hey, you're pretty smart."

I guess I wasn't too smart since I couldn't think of anything to say to that, and I sure didn't like the way he was looking at me.

"You got that story?"

I went through my notebook to find it but I was worried he only wanted to read it so he could make fun of me. That's when he came up and kissed me on my face. I stopped looking in my notebook and stood there staring at him because I had no idea what I was supposed to do. Then he kissed me again with his lips right on mine.

I didn't know anything about how to do that kind of kissing and thought I should smack him to make him stop but I decided if I just did what he did then I wouldn't look like a stupid fool who didn't know how to kiss.

When it was done I said, "What did you do that for?"

"Because you're beautiful."

"Oh." That was a good enough reason even though it wasn't true. "Do you still want to read my story?"

He did. And he said it was pretty good for a love story.

After school I went over to Aoife Doyle's house and told her all about what happened with Wendell. She was in fifth grade so she knew more than me about stuff like that.

"Ooh," she said, "He's a cute one."

I never thought about that but I figured she was probably right. He wasn't ugly anyway.

"What do I do now?"

"Wait and see if he gives you stuff. If he does, then he's your boyfriend, isn't he."

"What kind of stuff?" I liked getting stuff.

"Candy, jewelry, stuffed bears, that kind of thing."

"And what if he doesn't?"

"Bonnie-Kate, have you not seen a mirror lately?"

"Um."

"You needn't worry. He'll give you stuff, won't he."

Sure enough when I got to school the next day he was waiting for me at the bike rack with Smarties and a Tootsie Pop.

"Thanks Wendell. I guess I'm your girlfriend now?"

"Really? Neato."

And then I kissed him on the lips so he would know he's not the only one who can do that.

When we were walking to class I heard *Bonnie-Kate and Wendell, sitting in a tree* but when I turned around everybody acted all innocent like they didn't know who said it. So immature.

When I got home my dad was there which was good because sometimes he went out sailing the ocean for a long time and I missed him. He brought me presents from all over the place, like Hamsterdamn and Sing-a-Pour. Last time he got me a little violin from Denmark and I learned how to play *Blow the Man Down* and *Red River Valley*. I practiced every day so I'd be able to play all the songs he knows.

"Hi, Dad. My friend's coming over, ok?" He was fixing the stone wall in front of our house where the squirrels and chipmunks like to sit and eat acorns.

"Aoife? Sure." When he said sure it always came out *shoo-ah*.

"No, it's Wendell Chapman from school."

"A boy? Oho! Is there romance in the air?" He was trying to embarrass me but I wouldn't let him.

"Yep. He's in love with me."

Dad laughed and said, "And so it begins."

When I told Mom he was coming over she went straight to the kitchen to see what she could feed him when he got there.

Wendell came over and said our house smelled good. That's because Mom was cooking and Griff had been gone for a while. He brought me more stuff: Pixie Stix and Dubble Bubble. Mom gave us oatmeal cookies then we went to ride bikes and play on the swings at the park.

"You don't always have to give me stuff, Wendell. I like you just fine."

"But I like giving you stuff. You always smile."

After a while I heard Mom calling and I said, "Come on, Wendell. Dinner time."

"Ok, I'll see you tomorrow."

"No, you're eating with us."

"But my mom—"

"My mom already called yours. Guaranteed."

We had chicken roasted in coconut milk with garlic rice and grilled pineapple. Wendell had seconds of everything so Mom thought he was some kind of gift from God. Feeding people was one of her favorite things to do. She went, "You know, Wendell, one day our Bonnie-Kate will cook like this. We Filipinas make the best cooks."

"Jeez, Mom!" I said. "It's not like we're getting married."

"Not yet but maybe someday."

"I'm eight!"

Dad said, "Let's not get ahead of ourselves, dear (*dee-ah*). They've only been in love since yesti'dy."

He got me with that one. "Agh! You guys!"

Wendell sat there smiling at everyone so I guess he liked the idea. I had to think about it for a minute but I decided that was kind of sweet. Mom started to say something else but all of a sudden there were sirens and we got up to see the ambulance go by because that hardly ever happened around there.

When it was time for Wendell to go home, I walked him to his bike and we had two more kisses. I was getting pretty good at it.

Wendell didn't come to school the next day so I called over to his house but nobody answered the phone. On Saturday I rode my bike over there but they weren't home. I thought maybe he was avoiding me which didn't make any sense because why would he buy me all that stuff? On the other hand, there were lots of

times when I would avoid me if I could, so maybe that's what it was after all. Then I realized something weird: I missed him. It was weird because there were other kids I didn't see for a few days, like Aoife for instance, and I didn't sit around going, "Oh, boo-hoo, I wish Aoife was here." But that's exactly how I felt about Wendell. Especially when I went to bed at night I would miss him so much and I would miss those kisses, too. It made me all tingly to think about it, but that's a secret.

Mom went to work at the jewelry store—she had a jewelry store—or a while on Sunday but she came home before lunch time.

"Bonnie-Kate? Where are you, my little cabbage?"

She called me that sometimes and said it was from the French, *ma petite chou*. The French are super-fancy but I guess they go around calling each other cabbages. That's pretty weird.

"In here, Mom!" I was in the kitchen nibbling on Cheddar cheese like a little mouse. We were all out of Monster, which was my favorite kind.

"Come and sit with me, Bonnie-Kate. I have news."

"Uh oh." I knew all about news. It was always terrible.

"You haven't seen your friend Wendell lately, have you?"

"Not since we had dinner." I didn't tell her how much I missed him.

"Remember the ambulance that went by?"

"Yep."

"It went to Wendell's house. For his mother."

"Oh." I felt bad for her, and for Wendell, too. "Is she ok?"

"She's in a diabetic coma. Do you know what that is?"

"It's where you fall asleep and they can't wake you up." Kind of like what happened with Grampa except he never woke up.

"Yes, that's right."

"How long will she sleep?"

"No one knows, Bonnie-Kate. A few days, a few weeks. Or she might not wake up at all."

"That's terrible."

I was starting to get the idea that in life, the worst thing will always happen, so she probably wouldn't wake up at all.

"Wendell has gone to stay with his father."

"Ok." I knew his parents got a divorce.

"In Wisconsin." She looked at me like I might explode or throw a hissy fit and start screaming but I didn't. "So you might not see him for a while, ok?"

"Ok." I felt sad that he was gone, but at least he wasn't avoiding me on purpose.

I went up to my room (which I decorated all by myself except Mom helped) and looked at my map of Maine but I couldn't find Wisconsin on it anywhere. I thought it should be close to Wiscasset since they both started with Wisc.

"Da-ad! I can't find Wisconsin."

He brought me into the den—he had a den—and got this

huge book with all the maps in the world in it. He showed me how Wisconsin is in a whole different state called, uhm... Wisconsin.

"Is it in America?" I was pretty sure it was, but you never know.

"Sure."

"Ok. That's where Wendell is." I was glad he didn't leave America.

"Ayup, so I heard. You ok, hon?" He called me hon instead of cabbage.

"Yeah. I guess he's not coming over for a while."

"I don't suppose so."

"What's Wisconsin like?"

"Oh, it's a fine place. They have a lot of cheese up there."

That's when I started crying because I didn't even know if Wendell liked cheese.

"There, there, hon. T'isn't the end of the world. He gave me a big hug but I didn't stop crying.

"B-but what if he doesn't like ch-chuh-heese?! He'll stuh-harve to death!"

"Don't you worry, dear. There's a lot more in Wisconsin than just the cheese."

That helped a little but now I missed him more than ever. The phone rang and Mom said it was for me.

"Hello?"

"Hi Bonnie-Kate, it's me, Wendell."

"OH MY GOD, WENDELL! ARE YOU OK? ARE YOU STARVING? *DO YOU LIKE CHEESE?!!*"

Well, Wendell thought I'd gone crazy and now that I'm telling it I can see why. It turned out he was ok, not starving, he liked cheese but not the stinky kind, he missed me, too, and his Mom died. He was coming back to Wiscasset for the funeral and wanted to know if I could go. Mom said it was ok and Wendell's dad said it was ok, so that was the third funeral I ever went to. I had a black dress from my Gramma's funeral that still fit me because I wasn't growing very much.

After the funeral, we all went to Wendell's grandparents' house in Rockport to eat *orderves* (that's French, too) and talk about how sad we were. Me and Wendell went down to the basement but we didn't get all kissy that day because Wendell was pretty sad.

When it was time to leave, I kissed him goodbye and everybody went, "Aw, isn't that cute." I wanted them to mind their business but I didn't say anything. I didn't know I was kissing him for the last time in just about forever, but that's what it turned out to be. We sent each other love letters, but after a while they stopped and my heart was broken right in two. It hurt just as bad as when my Gramma and Grampa died, but in a different way because Wendell was still alive out there somewhere.

I learned a lesson from all this: if I love somebody, something terrible will happen and they will either leave or die, and everyone's heart will be broken. I realized if I ever wanted to kill someone all I had to do was love them and they'd probably die. I decided I shouldn't do that to anyone else. The problem was I already loved my mom and dad and I couldn't just unlove them. I asked them to please be extra careful not to die.

When my Grampa died out on Mille Jours I asked God to help but everything just got worse. Even though I swore I wouldn't ask for anything else, I prayed every night for him to keep Mom and Dad safe from dying. You can probably guess how that went.

My dad got killed just three months after Wendell's mom died, and he was only thirty-five, which was pretty young to die. When that happened, I felt something break inside me, and I knew I would never be the same. Mom would be mad if she knew, but I was ALL DONE with this God person. I could write a bad word here, but I'll just say he is *terrible* at his job.

When my dad came home from the sea he would always take one special day for just me and him to go adventuring. One time we went to Owl's Head and another time we went all the way to Portland which was like a real city and we saw some boats that were gigantic. Dad called it *Pawtland*.

For our last adventure we were going to Pemaquid Point to see the lighthouse and have a picnic by the sea with Mom's fried

chicken and potato salad and Pop Tarts for dessert.

We drove down there in the morning and I had on my t-shirt with a big lobster on it that said BACK OFF, LANDLUBBER. There was a truck full of lobster traps up in front of us and he hit a bump in the road. A couple of his traps fell off. This fancy car was coming the other way and tried not to hit them but he ran into a tree and got in a big wreck because he was going way too fast. His car bounced off the tree and ran right into us and a piece of his car broke off and hit my dad in the head. It killed him just like that. We got in a wreck, too, and my nose got broken and two teeth got knocked out. When I woke up I was in an ambulance with blood all over me but most of it wasn't mine.

We had my dad's funeral on Mille Jours with flowers and praying so of course it rained. That was the fourth one I ever went to unless you count Bojangles, then it's five. Mom said that was too many funerals for me being so young, and that she would love me twice as much from now on. I was afraid to love her back twice as much because you know what would happen then.

After they got done praying, I played *Red River Valley* on the violin he gave me. When I got to the part that says

> *Remember the Red River Valley*
> *And the girl who has loved you so true*

I just fell apart and had to finish with tears running down my

face. They said I didn't have to play the rest, but it was for my Dad so just try and stop me.

Irish to the Rescue

It hurt so bad to see Bonnie-Kate all torn up over her da's passing. She was over the moon for that guy, and when he died she was in a state for a while. Her ma kept her out on that island a few days and when they came back she was a bit better. Just a little. Sometimes I caught her staring at nothing and knew she was thinking about him. I tried to cheer her up, or to give her something different to think about.

"You don't have to, Aoife. I'm ok now."

But I did have to. She was so small and helpless, like a wee lost kitten. How could I not help her?

"You should get another boyfriend. I bet that'd be fun."

"Boys don't care about me. I'm too short."

"Short and adorable, you mean." She was so cute you could hardly stand it.

"I see how boys look at you," she said. "They don't look at me that way."

Sure, boys looked at me sometimes but only just because I was getting boobs. I was almost twelve and I'd had three boyfriends. I made out with two of them, and one was serious.

"Stand up, Champ."

"What for?"

"Let's have a look at your walk."

"Why? It's just a normal walk."

"Maybe that's the problem. What do boys like best about girls?"

"That they're pretty?"

"Nope. Boobs and butts."

"Pft. I don't have any boobs."

"That's why we're fixing your walk, isn't it."

She sighed like the whole thing was stupid but she got up and walked to the fireplace. If I had a card with a big 3 on it, I would of held it up. "Nope. Sorry, Champ, but no, no, no. All wrong."

"What do you mean 'no'? I got here without falling down. That's what walking's for; to get somewhere."

"Except when you're trying to get a lad to look at you. Like this."

I walked across the room. If there were any boys there, they would of stared. I learned my walk by watching old movies with Mae West and Greta Garbo. I practiced until I had it down. There wasn't a boy in the world I couldn't make follow me, and I didn't even have a very big arse, or *bottom*, as Bonnie-Kate would say. She sounded like an old lady with that.

"Now you try it. Remember, it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing."

"Ok. Like this?" She took a few steps.

"More swing. Pretend your butt is...um...the sun, and...ah, no, wait, your butt is a billboard sign...er, no...it's like your butt is a steam locomotive and...no, not that either. Pretend your butt is the tide, then. I mean, a grandfather clock—"

"Aoife. Pretend your butt is making sense."

"Ok, ok. Watch me again." I swayed over to the front door. "Did you get that?"

"I'll try."

She started off well enough but lost control and did a bit of bump-and-grind on the end table. The lamp fell off and broke on the floor. Bonnie-Kate didn't normally cuss, but, "Oh fuck." She went to get the broom.

"It's ok, Champ. 'Twas an accident, wasn't it."

"What do I tell my mom? I broke the lamp practicing my butt walk? She'll kill me."

"Ah...ok, we'll come back to that."

"Good. I don't want boys looking at my bottom anyway. That's weird."

"What about kissing? You have good lips. That'll help."

"I already know how to kiss."

"How many boys have you kissed?"

"Just one, but we did it eleven times so I know all about it."

"Show me."

"How am I supposed to show you?"

I said, "Lob the gob wi' me then. If you're so good at it."

"Girls don't kiss girls!" She looked scared. Horrified.

"It's just for practice. Come on, then." I patted the couch next to me and after a bit she sat down.

"I don't know about this."

"It's no big deal, Champ. This is how girls learn how to kiss, sometimes."

"Ok. But don't tell anybody."

She leaned in and kissed me. I was right about her lips. They were like a fat plum, only not so purple. I didn't kiss back, I just wanted to see how she did it.

"That was a fine kiss," I said, "If I was your grandmother."

"That's how I kiss. Wendell liked it. A lot."

"Try again. Pretend I'm Ricky Nelson, or Paul McCartney, right? Lay one on me."

She tried one more time. I would of held up that 3 again. I didn't want her to be discouraged so I said it was good for someone who's only kissed eleven times.

"Well," she said, "how many boys have you kissed?"

"Five. Three were boyfriends."

"How many times?"

"I lost count."

"Wow."

I didn't care to brag, but she asked. Now she knew I was the expert on kissing.

"Here, lemme show you."

I didn't wait for an answer. I wrapped her up in my arms and ran my fingers through her hair. I put my tongue on hers and went, "Mmmm," too. When I was done she sat there staring at me with her mouth open. I didn't know what that was supposed to mean, and she didn't say.

I said, "Now you try it."

"No."

"What's the matter?"

"I think we should stop now. This makes me feel funny."

I knew exactly what she meant but I didn't think it was a good reason to stop. I had to take into account she was a bit younger than me, so I stopped. She never talked about that again for a real long time.

Bonnie-Kate would be mad at me for telling you this, but it's too late now.

At the end of all that, she said she didn't want a boyfriend anyway because they'd just get killed. She was a real screwball sometimes. Maybe that's what happens if your da dies when you're only young. She'd get better, but it would take time.

Her ma came home and said, "What happened to the lamp?"

"It fell over and broke. It was an accident. Sorry, Mom."

"These things happen."

I said, "Hi, Mrs. Caldwell. I should get along home then."

"Not so fast, Aoife Doyle."

I thought I was in trouble but she just made me eat cookies

before I was allowed to go.

It's Complicated

Even with all the troubles I kept running into, I was still much better off than a starving kid in Africa, or someone born with no arms, or a lot of other tragedies that could happen to you. I still had my mom, who loved me like crazy even though I was afraid of letting her get too close. She always made sure I had food and clothes and a warm place to sleep. I never asked for any more than that, but if I did she would take care of it. I felt guilty for not being more loving to her than I was, but it was too dangerous.

"You should ask for a pony," said Aoife. "I bet she'd get you one."

"What am I going to do with a pony?"

"If I had one I'd ride him all over the place, wouldn't I."

I put myself in the pony's shoes: would I want some stupid human sitting on me all the time, telling me where to go? I don't think so. Aoife clearly didn't consider the pony's point of view. One thing I learned from my dad before he died was that you should always think of others, and I'm pretty sure that includes ponies, too.

It was five years now since we buried Dad, and I'd almost

gone to join him in the Bone Zone several times. That's about what I expected.

When I was ten, I got knocked off a pier by a hoist operator who didn't see me. I was easily overlooked because the growth spurt I was promised never happened. I remained tiny. Also, I was standing in the wrong place, so it wasn't totally the operator's fault.

I wasn't a very good swimmer so I grabbed hold of a dock piling and held on like a starfish until help came in a rowboat. A bunch of tourists stared and I felt pretty stupid. Some of them took pictures.

The following winter I went skating on the Grey's Road Pond and fell through the ice even though I only weighed 50 pounds. There were other kids twice my size and they didn't fall through, so this was just another example of how something out there was trying to kill me. They got me out with a rope, but it took a while. If you've never fallen through the ice in Maine in February, can I just say I don't recommend it? If you don't believe me, try it and see. I ended up getting pneumonia and that tried to kill me, too.

In the spring of that year there was an evil dog who barked at me every day when I walked home, so of course on the last day of school he broke his chain and attacked me. I curled up in a ball but he still bit me on the head and hands and arms. I got 37 stitches and couldn't play my violin for a month. They shaved parts of my head to put the stitches in, so I looked like I had

mange or leprosy or something. I stayed home a lot until it grew back, and also wore hats.

The police never did anything about that dog, but one day he just disappeared and Mom claimed she didn't know anything about it. I knew her better than that.

I did a pretty good job of not falling in love for the last five years, even though some of the boys at school were after me. Alan Wright said I was *exotic* and Tommy Sprague called me a *dusky jewel*. He stole that from The Doors though, so I wasn't too impressed.

Dad told me if I didn't like a boy I should still be kind.

"Let 'em down easy, hon. There's already too much heartbreak in this world." Don't I know it. I got real good at saying "You're sweet but I like you more as a friend."

I didn't have many friends and no real close ones except for Aoife. I kept it like that so nobody would get killed or maimed or have their mother die.

I met Aoife's Irish cousins when they came over from Kill Arnie which is a pretty strange name for a town. They have another one called Kill Kenny and another that's just called Kill. Whoever's in charge of naming the towns over there can just stay clear of me, thank you very much. I've been on borrowed time since the day I was born and I don't need entire Irish towns tempting fate.

The Doyle cousins played music every night and I got a secret

crush on the one named Kevin, who was 16, a little older than me. He said I was 'a wee slip of a lass' and told me to bring my violin so they could show me some Irish songs. I learned *On Raglan Road*, *The Star of the County Down*, and *I'll Tell My Ma*, of which Aoife sang all three and they sounded nice and, well, ...Irish.

I was careful not to fall in love with Kevin so he wouldn't get killed or have an Irish town named for him. After a week the cousins took a couple of days to visit more of the Doyle family in St. Louis before coming back to Wiscasset again. When they flew out of Portland I couldn't hardly sleep until I heard from Aoife that they made it to St. Louis alive and well. I missed Kevin when they were gone but at least I would see him again before they went back to Ireland.

I somehow got to junior high and here's what I hated about that: gym class. I was no good at running, jumping or flailing my arms around like an imbecile, which, as near as I could tell, ruled out every sport known to man. I got to spend a delightful hour every day disappointing my gym teacher and not being picked for teams. In case my humiliation was less than total, I also got to strip naked and shower with 35 girls I didn't know, who were all more physically developed than me. Contrary to what the boys thought, the girls' locker room was not an earthly paradise. I felt like a little kid in a room full of grownups.

Gwen Taylor's locker was next to mine and I thought she

might have some sympathy because she was kind of large. Really very large, actually.

"I hate this part," I said, peeling down my knee socks.

"What part?" She stripped off her gym suit and sat on the bench, fatly naked. I tried not to look since I assumed that, like me, she didn't much like being seen in the raw.

"The showers. The naked part," I said.

"I would feel that way, too."

"Would?"

"If I looked like you." She stood up and I saw that the metal bench had impressed a dozen perfectly spaced lines into the abundant flesh of her gigantic bottom, which was now in unfortunate proximity to my face. She started a naked conversation with a girl named Julie Corbett, who was popular and from the look of it, would someday be a centerfold. Julie also seemed not to care that they were starkers.

I didn't mean to overhear but one of them said, "...got lost on her way to third grade." They looked at me and laughed.

I waited until they were gone before I finished undressing and was careful not to make any lines on my bottom. It was an ungodly long walk to those showers and you didn't even get a towel until you got out. Call me crazy, but I'd rather wash my private parts without an audience. That's why they're called *private*, duh.

By eighth grade I was tired of writing stories but I kept doing

it anyway. I would get an idea and think on it a while and before I knew it I was jotting outlines whether I wanted to or not. Mr. Jenkins caught me working on one in English class. He thought I was passing notes so he went to embarrass me by reading it out loud.

"Miss Caldwell thinks this is more important than understanding subordinate clauses: 'Sunday dawned grey, with cold spikes of rain pattering ephemeral rings on the ebbing sea. Barren November oaks bent, creaking, while brethren spruces held fast against the gnawing wind. On the shore of Cedar Island, Dennis Watts worked alone, digging a grave.'

Mr. Jenkins didn't look mad anymore, just confused. "See me after class, Bonnie-Kate."

After everyone left he said "Did you write this yourself?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"A story." Did he think it was a grocery list?

"About…?"

"A fisherman whose wife drowns."

"This is quite good, Miss Caldwell. Do you have others?"

"Yeah. A bunch." I should have said no, but sometimes my mouth outran my brain.

"May I read one? Or two?"

"I suppose."

I had a finished one in my notebook so I gave it to him. I

wasn't too crazy about letting him read it because he might start having expectations, and that would complicate everything.

The secret to a happy life is to avoid the expectations of others, even if you had to run away screaming, and to keep your own expectations low. That way, when the worst possible thing happens—which it almost certainly will—you won't be disappointed. Trust me on this.

Aoife came over after school that day and talked about the two things she knew best: all the other girls in our school, and boys she thought were cute.

I noticed that boys liked to talk about which girls are cute, too, but they almost never talked *to* them. I thought boys and girls were basically terrified of each other and it was all because of the dreaded expectations. I stayed out of that whole mess, but Aoife tried her best to drag me in.

"Guess who likes you."

I didn't care, and I didn't want to play that game. "Benjamin Franklin."

"Ew? Old?"

"All right, who?"

"His initials are K. D."

"You only know his initials?"

"You're supposed to guess."

"Why?"

"It's more fun that way, isn't it."

"For who?"

"JUST GUESS, WILL YOU!"

"Jake Philbrook."

"THAT'S NOT THE INITIALS! IT'S K. D.!"

"Katherine Dalrymple."

"AAAGH! IT'S NOT A GIRL!"

One of my best strategies for avoiding expectations was to make people regret talking to me at all. I was good at it.

"I give up."

Aoife took a deep breath to calm down. "You didn't even try."

"Ok, ok. How about… the Kaiser of Deutschland?"

"Fine. I'm not telling you, am I."

"Fine. I don't want to know."

I turned on the radio and Janis Joplin told us all about her and Bobby McGee. It wasn't until after Aoife left that I realized K. D. might be Kevin Doyle.

In English class the next day, Mr. Jenkins called me up to his desk while everyone was studying their subordinators.

"I read your story last night and would like to include it in the next *Echoes*." That was a collection of student poems and stuff they published twice a year. "With your permission, of course."

I wasn't exactly wild about everyone reading it; they'd probably laugh at me.

"Can I use a pen name?"

"Why would you do that?"

"So people won't bug me."

"Bonnie-Kate, you should be proud of this story. It demonstrates a level of maturity and grasp of language rarely found in so young a writer."

"I don't think I want anyone to read it."

"Why on Earth not? It's brilliant."

I didn't want to explain the perils of expectations. He was old; he should have known already.

"I'd like my story back please." I held out my hand.

He sighed like he couldn't believe what a brat I was. Sometimes I couldn't believe it either.

"Why are you being so difficult, Bonnie-Kate?"

I appreciated his directness. "Ok, sorry. It's because I'm a 14 year old girl. Difficult is what we do."

That got a laugh out of him.

"All right. What pen name would you use?"

"How about...Trixie Maneuver?"

"Be serious, Bonnie-Kate."

"Ginger Vitus?"

He was silent a moment, then came back with, "Natalie Drest?"

The game was afoot. My riposte: "Anna Mossity."

"Donovan Ewage." Good one, Mr. J.

"Asher du Smelbad." My personal favorite. That got another laugh, but we weren't done.

"Hugh Mannity? Seymour Butts?"

"Wanda Fahrenwyde? Erasmus B. Pimpley?"

He tried not to laugh again but couldn't help it. "Ok, I surrender, you win. I'm outmatched."

I basked a moment in the thrill of victory.

He said, "How about Anonymous? It's tried and true."

"Nah, it's been done to death."

He leaned back in his chair, lacing his fingers behind his head.

"Let's try this. Pick a woman's name, the first one that comes to mind."

"Veronica." That came from the Archie comics.

"And a man's name."

"Charles." My dad.

"And there's your name: Veronica Charles."

I liked it. "But my friends call me Ronnie."

He raised his eyebrows. "Of course."

"I have a palatial estate in Kennebunkport."

"I'm sure it's very nice."

I looked at him expectantly.

"—Ronnie," he finished.

That's better.

The story was called *Witness Tree*. When it came out, no one cared, not that I could see. Just as I planned.

The next time I saw Aoife she said, "Guess what, I'm starting

a band." I was glad she didn't make me guess. "I'm the singer, amn't I."

"Who else is in it?"

"Nobody. I need a guitar player and a drummer."

"Don't forget the bass." Aoife had a good strong singing voice but I didn't think she knew the difference between a guitar and a bass.

"Of course," she said. "Maybe a piano player, too. Know any musicians?"

Being in a band would not only be a complication, it would undoubtedly lead to expectations. I carefully failed to remind her that I played an instrument.

"No, not really. What kind of music?"

"I dunno then. Beatles? Some Irish stuff, Van Morrison, the Stones. *Tie-eye-ee-iiime, is on my siiiide, yes it is!"*

Like most of Aoife's ideas, this one wasn't even quarter-baked. That was one of the things I liked best about her: she was a ready-fire-aim kind of girl. She also didn't care that I was two years younger, she was still my friend. I could absolutely see her in front of a band, but I doubted she could assemble one from scratch.

A few days later I stopped by her house on a Saturday morning and found her rehearsing with piano and drums. I listened as they thundered through *Domino* by Van Morrison. Aoife improvised the outro lyrics with a reckless abandon Van the

Man would have envied. You have to respect a girl who will spew an avalanche of verbal nonsense into a live mike with people watching. It's one of many things you'll never see me do, so I was awestruck.

Practice ended and I stuck around, Aoife asked my opinion.

"Sounds great but you need guitars."

"The guitarist starts next week, doesn't he."

"Who?"

"My cousin from Ireland. Kevin. He'll be staying in the States a while."

My heart thought it would be a good time to impersonate a jackhammer. If Aoife noticed, she didn't say anything. So I did.

"Oh. Kevin. Kevin Doyle."

"Ye-es?"

"K. D.?"

"You got it, little sister." She laughed.

This placed me squarely on the horns of a complication. It was well established that being on the receiving end of my affections was generally fatal, and I didn't want to send Kevin to an early grave. I didn't think I could resist him as easily as I did Alan Wright and Tommy Sprague, whose interest flattered me even though they were just boys.

After successfully avoiding boyfriends for so long, why was I suddenly in danger of falling for Kevin? I gave that a great deal of thought, and came up with six reasons.

1. I was 14 now, an actual teenager. I even got my period. Males in general had become somewhat more interesting to me.
2. Kevin was 16, so he was kind of like a man, not a boy. Unlike my earlier admirers, he had hair on his chest, and he even shaved sometimes.
3. Kevin was Irish. European. *Worldly*.
4. Kevin played the guitar.
5. Kevin could drive a car.
6. Kevin's accent did things to me I'm not going to talk about here. How was I supposed to defend myself against that?

I couldn't. I wasn't made of stone; I just acted like it sometimes. I could probably come up with some more reasons, but six was enough, wasn't it?

When he asked me out for burgers at Saltwater Slim's I melted like a slice of American cheese, a simile so lame it actually hurt to write it.

I convinced myself that our date was safe because Kevin would be going back to Ireland and there wouldn't be time for a disaster. It had only taken me thirty-six hours to destroy Wendell Chapman's life, but that fact was extremely inconvenient, so I

didn't add it to my calculations. Besides, Aoife had survived my friendship for eight years now, so maybe the Irish were immune.

After burgers and fries we went walking by the sea.

"When do you have to go back?" I asked.

"Eleven. You're trying to get rid of me, then?" He winked.

"No! I mean back to Kill Arnie."

"Dunno, love. I'll be staying on a while."

"Really?" My smile grew large and idiotic.

"Me ma thinks I'm better off this side of the pond for a bit."

"Yeah? How come?"

"She fears I'll be after joining the IRA."

I didn't really follow world affairs but I knew the A in IRA stood for ARMY, and they were having an endless war with someone. I didn't like to think of Kevin getting mixed up in any wars, endless or otherwise.

"Would you?"

"I would."

"And be in a war?"

"Sure."

"But you could die."

"There's such things as a lad might die for, Bonnie-Kate."

"Like what?"

"How about… the love of a fair colleen?"

That's when he grabbed me and kissed me. He also put one of his hands on my bottom. Oddly enough, that was nice.

All this made me think about where we might be headed, romance-wise. I'd never encountered a bottom-toucher before, but that's not saying much. I never had a boyfriend except for Wendell, and he never had the chance.

I knew this much: what started with a little innocent bottom (or boobie) touching was probably headed in the direction of eventual sexual intercoursing. There were a lot of stops along the way, and I'd be getting off* before we arrived at Fuck City, I just didn't know where. I also didn't know if Kevin expected me to ride all the way to the last stop, but he might. If I said no, what would happen then? Would I lose him? Was I ready to do...um...other things that might substitute for intercoursing? I didn't think I would know until we got there. If we got there. The whole thing seemed fraught with expectations.

Kevin could touch me all he wanted, even under my clothes, I didn't mind. But I was not getting naked. Why one was ok but not the other, I didn't think I'd ever understand. That's just how it was. I didn't want to be looked at. What if someone saw lines on my bottom? They might point and laugh, or tell someone else, then everyone would call me Liney Heinie and I would just about die.

Around that time I asked Mom if we could get another dog. She thought I might be dog-shy after the attack, but we adopted one and named him Bailey. Well, this one wouldn't stop humping

* Not like *that*, Mr (or Ms) Dirtymind.

on me, and I didn't like what he was implying. I had the worst luck with dogs.

The entertainment value of Aoife's band skyrocketed with the addition of Kevin's guitar, and their repertoire grew in a predictably Irish direction. Rehearsals were less like a band polishing their chops and more like good friends getting together to bang out some tunes for the fun of it. I never missed a chance to be there, not only because I would have paid for a ticket, but because I was amorously discombobulated over the guitarist. When he played *I'm a Believer* and looked into my eyes I was reduced to a molten pool of adoration.

We were entering dangerous territory, though, and only I knew it. Here was a terrible complication: I had to warn Kevin about what happened to people unfortunate enough to be loved by me. As I saw it, telling him would accomplish two things: the preservation of Kevin's life and the end of our budding romance. That's what happens when you leave the door open for love to come waltzing in with its preposterous ideas about having someone to hold on cold Maine nights.

Kevin came over and Mom made a feast of boiled lobster, scallops the size of hockey pucks, fresh veggies from our garden, home-baked rolls and German chocolate cake for dessert. Kevin ate well, and she liked him just fine.

After feasting he took me to see *OLIVER!* but we sat in the back row and didn't watch the movie. It was about 9:00 when we

walked home and I still hadn't said anything about the complication. How was I supposed to bring that up when we spent the last two hours smooching our brains out and when the armrest was in the way he put me in his lap and my aforementioned bottom detected a major complication in his pants? That's a fair question and I don't even care if it's a run-on sentence so sue me.

We stopped at Saltwater Slim's for Cokes and fries. Jefferson Airplane was on the jukebox asking Didn't I Want Somebody to Love? Of course I did, but it was never that simple.

"Listen, Bonnie-Kate. We're playing at Aoife's tomorrow night. You'll come?"

"I wouldn't miss it for anything."

"You'll bring your fiddle, then?"

"Oh. I guess I could."

"We'll be needing some fiddle on the Irish tunes."

"Are you asking me to join Aoife's band?"

"I am."

"Does she know?"

"She will."

I took a long sip of Coke, burped—which thank god Kevin thought was funny, not gross—and said, "There's a problem, Kevin."

"Fixing your problem is what I'm put on this Earth to do."

Oh, that accent. I leaned on him in the red vinyl booth, he

put his arm around my shoulder and cozied me in. Meltiness ensued.

"It's about what happens to people I love." All at once I realized I was about to sound insane.

"And what would that be?"

"They die."

"Breakin' hearts, are ye?"

"No, they actually stop being alive."

I explained about my grandparents and my dad. I also told him what happened to Wendell's mom and how I never saw him again after her funeral. "So anyone I fall in love with is basically doomed in one way or the other."

"I'll take me chances then, won't I."

"How can I fall in love with you—which I'm plainly doing, if you haven't noticed—if it's going to kill you?"

"Think about what you're saying, love. If it's so, what will you do? Live your whole life without love? Never to wed or have a wee child? Pass the years all alone?"

I couldn't tell him that was exactly what I planned to do, so I just said, "It won't be that many years."

"Meaning?"

"The Universe wants me dead and is actively trying to kill me."

He held me even closer. "I won't let it."

I absolutely dissolved.

I wanted so badly to believe Kevin Doyle was my prince, come to rescue me from a life without love, from facing a mostly hostile world alone. But I misread Kevin Doyle and failed to understand the problem I faced was neither a malicious Universe nor life's casual cruelty, but my own foolish expectations.

When he walked me home, Mom made him come in and eat more cake. He kissed me goodnight on the front porch. Bailey nipped him on the ankle and then started humping my leg.
Stupid dog. I turned as red as a lobster right out of the pot, but I don't know if any steam was coming off of me. It felt like there was.

I was tempted to kick Bailey in the balls, but it wouldn't have been fair. He was just being a dog. Besides, I didn't want Kevin to get the idea that I was a balls-kicker. Most guys don't approve of that.

I showed up at Aoife's the next day with my violin and apparently joined her band, now called The Callous Sophisticates. I walked wide-eyed into that complication and didn't care since it brought me closer to Kevin. The other problem was looming, though, and I had no idea how to deal with it: the complication that arose in the back row when we didn't watch *OLIVER!* I knew about that because Mom was always open and honest about sexual matters, and she told me how it is with boys a few years ago.

"There comes a time in their life when they want very much

to put their penis in a girl's vagina, and it's about all they can think about."

"But why?" I knew how babies got made, but that couldn't be it. I never met a boy who wanted anything to do with babies.

"It's in their blood, part of their growing up. They can't help it." She was slicing strawberries for a pie.

"Ok." Boys were weird.

"You need to be aware of this, little cabbage. It will happen to you someday, maybe soon. A boy will want you to do certain things with him."

"Sex?"

"Yes, or other things."

"What other things?"

She told me and I was like "Ew" but I was only twelve then. It's different now. Mom said I was becoming a woman, and made it sound like I should get a trophy for surviving childhood. The problem now was what to do with Kevin's complication since he would undoubtedly have some kind of expectation about that.

A few of the possible answers would involve some (possibly extreme) degree of nudity on my part, which, I'm sorry, was out of the question. You know how I felt about that.

But what if he wanted me to touch it? Was I supposed to just go happily yanking on his complication, which, by the way, penises were just about the silliest looking things ever, so what if I laughed at it and hurt his feelings? I thought very hard about all

these things and concluded quite firmly that I still had no idea what to do.

When I was leaving English the next day Mr. Jenkins cornered me.

"Will you be submitting a piece for the spring semester's *Echoes*?"

Aagh! Ambushed again. This was exactly the sort of expectation I hoped to avoid.

"I don't… I'm not sure I have…um…anything to—"

"Come now, Bonnie-Kate. Don't hold out on me."

"Who is this so-called 'Bonnie-Kate' person?"

"I mean Veronica. Ronnie."

"All right. I'll dig something up. If I must."

The next morning before classes started I gave him a copy of a short one called *Findley's Lament*.

"If you print this, I only have one request: No edits. Last time someone tried to 'correct' my spelling. The correction was incorrect."

"No." He looked aghast.

"They changed 'tenterhooks' to 'tenderhooks.' Veronica was pissed."

"I'm sorry. That won't happen again."

"There are no mistakes in this story."

"Got it. No mistakes, no edits."

He caught up with me that afternoon when I got out of social

studies.

"Bonnie-Kate. Veronica. I read your submission."

"That's good. No one else will."

"It's excellent, as I expected."

"But?"

"How did you work seventeen uses of the F-word into a five-page story?"

I said, "Don't forget the S-word and the D-word." Dick, not damn. "That's how Findley talks. He's rough around the edges."

"We can't print this in a junior high anthology."

"Every kid in this school knows these words. Most of us use them every day."

"I don't suppose you'd care to submit something a bit less—"

"Authentic? No, I wouldn't."

"I was going to say 'less obscene'."

"Would you have Rhett Butler say, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a flapdoodle?"

He laughed. "Point taken, Ronnie. But *Gone With the Wind* didn't target a junior high audience. If we print this we'll be sued by outraged parents."

"But that's censorship."

"True. A textbook case."

"What about Chaucer?"

"What about him?"

"The Miller's Tale."

"Certainly. A marvelous work, a classic. I'm glad you've read it."

"It has a fourteenth century rimjob in it."

"What is a 'rim job'?"

Oh, jeez. I couldn't believe he didn't know. I only knew because Aoife told me. She knew all that sexual stuff. But I wasn't about to explain it to Mr. Jenkins.

"It's...ah—probably in your dictionary." He had a giant dictionary on a stand where the immature kids would look up 'fuck' and 'fart' (I only did that once). He flipped some pages but rimjob wasn't in there.

"Enlighten me, Veronica. What does it mean?"

"It's dirty."

"We're all adults here."

We are? I'll remember that tonight when I'm putting on my footie jammies with Snoopy and Woodstock on them.

Because I like my feet to be warm, that's why. Don't judge me.

I sighed. "Ok. Well, it's, ah, when somebody...uhm...licks, y'know...another person's bottom."

He went more or less crimson. "I see."

"In the middle."

"The middle?"

"...of their bottom."

He was speechless. Until he said, "I wish I didn't know that."

"So the Miller's Tale is pornography, right?"

"Chaucer isn't pornography, it's ART."

"And my story isn't?" I swear I wasn't being a brat. And I sure as hell wasn't comparing myself to Chaucer. I was just defending my stupid little story.

Mr. Jenkins paced between his desk and the big-ass dictionary, thinking it over.

"Ok, point taken again. Can I offer a compromise?"

"What."

"We leave the words in, but with asterisks for the vowels. That's the best I can do. And I'll still hear about it from the parents."

Oh, man. I didn't want to get him in trouble. "Maybe we should just call it off?"

"No, I'm willing to take some heat for this one. You're correct—everything that appears in *Echoes* is a work of art, in its way. Artistic expression shouldn't be censored, even when it offends. Let's call this a lesson in taking a stand."

I could have hugged him, but that would've been weird. "Asterisks will be fine, Mr. J."

He nodded, smiling again. "Thanks, Bonnie-Kate."

"I'm not ready to retire Veronica, but you can put my real name on this one."

"I approve, but why the change of heart?"

"I just had a lesson in taking a stand. Did I pass?"

"A-plus."

I saw Aoife that afternoon and she asked if I was ready to be a rock star.

"Not if I can help it. Why?"

"The Callous Sophisticates have a paying gig this Saturday night!"

When I joined the band it was with the understanding that we were just some kids who liked playing music together. "How did this happen?"

"Kevin set it up. We get to play in front of people!"

Aoife wanted me to be overjoyed but I received the news like a diagnosis of terminal butt problems. "*GET* to?"

"Aren't you excited?"

"Should I be?"

"YOU SHOULD BE JUMPING UP AND DOWN!"

"Why?"

"BECAUSE WE GOT A GIG! THEY'RE GOING TO PAY US!"

"How much?"

"TWENTY DOLLARS!"

"That's only $3.33 each."

"AAAGH!"

"Sorry, Eefs. Would it help if I jumped up and down a little?" I jumped once to try it out. Aoife was not amused.

"Just be ready on Saturday afternoon, ok?"

"What if I'm not?"

"AAAGH!"

She went stomping off to find the rest of the band. I was left to consider all the ways this could become a public humiliation and haunt me to my deathbed. There were so many.

Kevin brought his guitar over that night and we worked out some stuff for me to play on the pop songs since it wasn't going to be an Irish-folkie kind of crowd.

Mom fed us and went to play bridge with her friends, saying she'd be back in a couple of hours and to be good. We decided that could mean any number of things. That night Kevin's complication came out to play.

I kind of knew that was coming[*] but it still took me by surprise. He showed me where to squeeze it and where not to—you have to be careful with balls, apparently. He wanted me to put it in my mouth.

Aoife had told me about how to do blowjobs and demonstrated with a Popsicle (Lesson one: don't blow!). She said it wasn't a big deal, but I didn't want to. All I could think of was how stupid I'd look with a penis jammed in my mouth. I had so many other ways of looking stupid, like wearing footie jammies at the age of fourteen.

Kevin put his hand under my shirt and touched my boobs. I expected that, too, but didn't know it would give me my own complication, the kind girls get. It's a little confusing here, but

[*******] Not like that either! Stop it!

that made me more interested in his complication, which I was still holding on to, but not at all putting in my mouth. I couldn't imagine somebody putting one of those things inside me, vagina-wise. I was pretty small, and boys' complications—if Kevin's was any indication—were bigger than I thought. Ow.

He moved my hand up and down, the way he wanted me to do it, and his complication was getting extremely complicated. I knew what would happen if I kept doing that: seamen. I figured I should see what that's like, so I kept going. *It's ok, I can do this. It's not so bad. And Kevin will like me. Maybe love me.*

He closed his eyes and made 'mmm' sounds I assumed were sex noises.

Then Bailey started barking.

I dropped that penis like it was radioactive and ran to my window.

Kevin said, "For the love of Jaysus, lassie, don't stop now!"

"My mom's home! Put that thing away!"

I couldn't help but notice he wasn't putting that thing away. I went over to where he was sitting on my bed and shoved it back in his pants and zipped them up, but it was still sticking out the top. I tried to push it down but it wouldn't go. I panicked a little. *Mom's gonna come in here and see my boyfriend with a complicated penis! Not good! Do something*!

"Can't you make it go down?!"

"Not until it wants to."

"How long does it take?"

"After all that? Days."

"Aaagh!"

I stood him up and pulled his t-shirt down over it. You could tell it was there, but only if you looked for it.

Mom might look for it. She knew what kind of stuff could go on in a teenage girl's bedroom. She used to be one. I gave Kevin a book to keep in front of it, just in case.

Mom laughed when she saw he was holding a *Curious George* coloring book I should have gotten rid of years ago, then she went to make us fudge brownie sundaes, yum.

When she went to bed we adjourned to the front porch swing where I finished the (hand) job. It was dark out so I couldn't see what it was like, but I felt what it was like (warm, gooey, sticky) and what it smelled like (bleach and pancake batter?!).

Somehow, this did not ignite the flames of my desire.

Kevin did some extra panting when it was over. "You're sure you've never done this before? You're good at it."

"I'm glad you had fun." Subtext: ...because I didn't, really. But, y'know, it's ok, whatever.

Despite the somewhat disappointing nature of my first face-to-face encounter with a real live penis in the wild, things between us still felt fresh and exciting. We were moving along just fine without any disasters, deaths or hospitalizations. I still worried about that sometimes. I was happy, and feared the

Universe wouldn't stand for that very long. I worried more about what the cosmos might do to us than about Kevin wanting things I wasn't prepared to give him. Yet. But eventually.

The Callous Sophisticates played their Saturday night gig, and I survived it intact. It was a birthday party for some kid I didn't know. The stage was a corner of the finished basement; a crowd of 30 surrounded us as we tuned up. I looked out at them and saw hostile strangers with judgment in their eyes. I wondered how many were packing rotten tomatoes to throw at me. My mind raced to unpleasant destinations. *What am I doing here? I'm not good enough for this!*

My hands trembled like a San Francisco earthquake until Kevin unplugged his Silvertone and came over to where I stood, back beside the drums. He took me by the waist and kissed me hard on the lips, right in front of everybody.

"I'm playing every note for you tonight, Bonnie-Kate. You'll play for me?"

"But…all these people—"

"Don't look at them, love. Look at me. I can't wait to hear you play."

My earthquaking fingers calmed down a little.

Kevin said, "We sound great together, don't we."

"Ok. I'll play for you. Just you."

I can do this. I'll fake it if I have to.

We opened with Tommy James and the Shondells' *Draggin'*

the Line. I took a few tentative stabs in and around the melody, adding uncertain flourishes here and there. I looked over to where Kevin stood at his mike, harmonizing with Aoife but looking at me. He smiled and winked. I melted a little and so did my stagefright, until I was no longer playing—I was performing. For Kevin.

By the third song—*Brown-eyed Girl*, which Aoife (curiously) sang without changing it to *Boy*—the audience had pretty well faded from my sight, a vague clapping and dancing blob that no longer concerned me. I was too busy playing my violin and trading mooney-eyed looks with Kevin Doyle.

When it was done, I'd only made a couple of little mistakes no one noticed. I felt pretty good. I might even do that again someday. Most of the time, a thing only looks impossible because you've made it that way in your head.

I was left with one nagging question: what is a Shondell? My dictionary didn't have that.

We all went back to Aoife's after the show but everyone gradually wandered off. It was just me and Kevin in the basement.

"I've a surprise for ye, lass. Something to help celebrate."

He reached in his coat and took a little bottle from the pocket. It looked like whiskey. He took a sip and handed it to me.

"Oh. Uhm...I don't think I want any." I tasted whiskey once and it was like putting a fire made of poison and bees in my

mouth. I was kind of particular about what went in there, and besides, barfing wasn't a very good look for me.

"Just a wee nip, Bonnie-Kate. 'Tisn't whiskey, just Southern Comfort."

He took another drink and kissed me. Next thing I knew, there was Southern Comfort in my mouth. That was pretty sneaky on his part, but he was right; it wasn't like whiskey at all, just sweet and syrupy. I swallowed it—what else could I do?—and felt warm all over, which was really very nice.

"I can't go home drunk, Kevin. My mom will kill me."

That was a lie. My mom didn't kill anyone, but she knew people who might, for instance, remove a certain evil bitey dog from the picture. For her part, Mom just got disappointed.

"Not to worry, little one. You'll be fine." He handed me the bottle again. I figured there was no harm in feeling warm, so I drank a little more.

Well, we were making out like we always did and everything was fine. We had a few more sips of that stuff and before you could say, *Pop goes the penis* it was out again. Out, and complicated.

I knew what to do with it now, so I did. Kevin touched me all over, even between my legs. I made a sex noise when he did that, but I didn't mean to. Then he tried to pull down my pants.

"Please, Kevin. You know I don't like it." I pushed his hand away.

"It's a shame to hide yourself away like this. Such beauty gone to waste, lost under all these clothes."

He left my buttons alone though, and pulled me in for another kiss. Everything was ok again.

I was resting my head against his chest, feeling nice and warm and cozy and loved. He was still touching me in ways I wouldn't let anyone else do, which was fine, then he suggested I move my head a bit lower. He did this by gently pushing my head southward, in the direction of his penis, which I had so far only held onto with my hand. *Oh! Something sexual is happening here.*

I had decided I was ok with a little of that, but I still didn't know how much. The only thing I knew for sure was that I wouldn't do any actual intercoursing.

Kevin suggested my head on a further southward course and there was no mistaking what that was all about. *Not so sure I want to do this!*

But if I didn't, was I being a whatchamacallit, a cock-teaser? I made him this way by letting him touch me all over, and by squeezing his penis, didn't I? Whatever was happening, it was at least partway my own fault. This sexual stuff was way too confusing.

Aoife told me she had done a blowjob before, and that it's not a big deal. But she was sixteen now. I was only fourteen and hadn't been for very long.

Kevin pushed on my head a little more, but this time I pushed back. Not very much, just enough to let him know I wasn't so sure about this thing. He stopped pushing.

"Kevin? Is it ok?" I meant is it ok for me to not do this.

"Of course it is, love. I wouldn't expect you to do what you don't want." He held me a little tighter.

I obviously was no expert on this kind of thing, but Aoife had explained to me that boys like to get blowjobs about as much as poor people like winning the lottery. It makes their day.

So I did the fellatio thing. I wanted to make Kevin's day, especially since he said I didn't have to unless I wanted to. That made me want to.

Since I hadn't done it before I was nervous about getting it wrong and looking like a fool. I'd never even given a hickey, and this was miles beyond that. I did ok, though, and it wasn't long before I tasted bleach and pancake batter, which I should have been expecting but wasn't. Ew.

Between that and the Southern Comfort, I felt a little queasy. I stopped, but apparently that's not when you're supposed to stop. Kevin held my head and basically intercoursed my face until I had a mouthful of those seamen; don't ask me why they call it that.

There wasn't anyplace to spit it out and I'm sorry if this is gross but I swallowed a little bit, and thought I might puke. The rest of it got all over the front of my shirt, then I ran into the

bathroom and did puke.

I was still heaving up Southern Comfort when Aoife came stomping down the stairs. She saw me on my knees at the porcelain altar, and Kevin on the couch putting his penis away.

"What the fuck is going on here?" she demanded.

I said, "Bluh-hurrgh," which is about all you can say when you're barfing. Kevin didn't say anything.

Aoife put a cool washcloth on my neck and helped me pull myself together. She stood me up and buttoned my jeans where Kevin tried to take them off. With fire blazing in her eyes, she looked over to where he sat on the couch.

"Say, Kev, I don't suppose you'd know how all the seamen got on Bonnie-Kate's shirt, would ya?" She looked daggers at him, more like napalm and hand grenades.

"Settle down, Aoife." Just what an angry person wants to be told. "'Twas a bit of fun, that's all."

"Maybe you forgot this, but less than four months ago, SHE WAS THIRTEEN. You think it's ok to make little girls suck your dick? You fucking shitehawk?"

"I didn't make her do anything. 'Twas n'more than what we both wanted, wasn't it."

That wasn't exactly true—it was a lot more what he wanted than what I wanted. It was ok, though. I could have stopped it any time by yelling, or running away, or just saying no, I changed my mind.

Since I didn't do any of those things, I was a willing participant and at least partially responsible for the seamenizing of my favorite Josie and the Pussycats t-shirt (I was too old for them, but I really wanted one of those kitty-ears hats. I'd wear that everywhere).

I came to Kevin's defense. "We were just messing around, Eefs. Got a little carried away, that's all."

"He's almost seventeen, Champ. He knows better." She scowled at him some more.

Kevin said to her, "See? I told you it was nothing."

I wouldn't say it was nothing. It was definitely something, but I wasn't sure what.

"Nothing, huh? So When Bonnie-Kate's ma asks her why she's covered in jizz, she can tell her it's nothing, right?"

Aoife walked me home. It was a good thing we only lived three houses apart because I was a little stumbly. Before we went inside I turned my shirt inside out and zipped up my windbreaker. The plan was to scoot right past my mom and up to my room, but she herded us into the kitchen and made grilled cheeses.

"How was your band concert, little cabbage?" She bustled around, happily plying us with drinks (7-Up with a cherry) and potato chips.

"Pretty good. They danced and clapped and didn't throw anything at us."

All of a sudden her smile disappeared. "What is that smell?"

"Uhm...some of them were drinking. I got something spilled on me. Probably."

"Not that smell." She sniffed in my direction.

"I—I gotta run pee. Be right back."

I went to my room, changed my shirt and slathered myself with Jergens since I didn't have any perfume.

While I was gone, Mom asked Aoife why I was drunk and covered with seamen. Aoife didn't know about the booze but confessed the seamen were Kevin's. She didn't mean to give that up, but my mom could be wily.

Mom was smiling again when I came back down. Aoife told me with her eyes that the jig was up.

Mom said, "When you wake up tomorrow, pack a little suitcase. A week's worth."

"Where am I going?"

"What would you say to a few days on Mille Jours?"

Going to Mille Jours was always good, but I had a feeling Kevin would be gone when I got back. I hoped he wouldn't get in too much trouble.

"I'd say great, but what about school?"

"Leave that to me."

Pleading a family emergency—which she thought this was—she called the principal at home. He gave me a week off, but I would have to make up the work.

Before we left Wiscasset, Mom called over to Aoife's and talked to her dad.

"If Kevin is still here when we get back, I will go to the police. If the police won't help, I'll take care of him myself. You do not want that."

I thought of the bitey dog who disappeared, and worried for Kevin's safety. My mother, the hit-man.

We got on Route 1 north and headed for the island, where no one jams their penis in your mouth and the only thing that gets on your best t-shirt is flounder bait.

Reading in the car always made me vomit, so I had some time to think about what happened between me and Kevin. On one hand, I felt kind of sophisticated now because, unlike most of the girls in my school, I had actual practical experience with a live male penis. The penis, in fact, of an older boy whom I had successfully caused to ejaculate twice. That had to be good for something.

All the kissing and boobie touching and bottom squeezing had gotten me worked up, but when it came to the...um...jobs (hand & blow) I was pretty underwhelmed. Wouldn't it be just as nice to lay down together and hold each other close? Maybe even nicer? And certainly not as messy.

I didn't get what the big deal about blowjobs was. I knew I looked stupid with a penis in my mouth, and I'd look even stupider with one in my vagina when the time came. I'd have to

be naked for it, too, so I wasn't in any great hurry to do real intercoursing. Unfortunately, Mom thought I'd already done it.

I didn't have any regrets about what I did with Kevin, but I was a little troubled about the age difference, once Aoife brought it up. The more I thought about it, the more I thought Kevin might have taken advantage of me being younger than him. I wouldn't say I was naïve, just unduly influenced by him being older. It was in the past now, so I wasn't going to worry about it. Much.

I always woke up early on Mille Jours so I was the first person in the whole country to see the sun on the horizon. (That might even be true.) After it came up, I went inside to help Mom make breakfast. She showed me how to make an omelet with onions, peppers, mushrooms and cheese, so that's what we had. Pop Tarts, too.

"I am so sorry, little cabbage, for all you've been through."

"It wasn't your fault." It wasn't anyone's fault, it was just a thing that happened. There was no point in placing blame. I'd pretty much stopped thinking about it already. The only part that still hurt was losing another boyfriend.

"I should have protected you better," said Mom, but we both knew that was impossible. Stuff happens, some good and some bad, and that's just how it is.

We had a nice week of hiking and picnics and fishing and birdwatching and jigsaw puzzles.

At that point all I wanted was to be left alone. I was beginning to understand that life was complicated, and it got more complicated as you get older, not less, whether you liked it or not. That was not a very happy thought. I wished I could just stay on Mille Jours forever so I wouldn't have to deal with other people at all.

There. Now that I'd said it, the Universe would make sure I never, ever, got it.

When we got back to Wiscasset, Kevin had flown home to Ireland to join the IRA and get blown up or put in jail. See how it works? I fall in love with someone and their life gets ruined. Happens every time. I should stop doing that. I'm sorry, Kevin.

I went over to Aoife's to see what was happening with The Callous Sophisticates.

"Wi'out Kevin, we're not a band, are we. It's over."

"That sucks," I lied. I was relieved. No more threats of rotten tomatoes.

Aoife went on to overstate our musical achievements, as was her custom.

"We burned so brightly it couldn't last. Look what happened with the Beatles."

If we were to compare ourselves to the Fab Four, I figured I must be Yoko.

"Did I miss anything at school?"

"Yeah, a bunch of ninth grade boys got suspended."

"How come?"

"Oh, you know what, forget I said that. 'Twasn't anything, really."

I folded my arms and gave her the I'm-not-leaving-until-you-tell-me look.

"All right, okay. Some of them made a list, is all."

"A list." Not generally a suspendable offense.

"Of girls."

"They got kicked out for a list of girls?"

"It was like, 'most likely to…' y'know, dirty stuff."

"Oh." I thought about that for a second. "And you didn't want to tell me because…?"

"No reason."

"BECAUSE I'M ON IT!"

She didn't answer and wouldn't look at me. I grabbed her shoulders and tried to shake her, which was pointless because she was easily a foot and a half taller.

"'Twasn't so bad, Bonnie-Kate."

"I'll be the judge of that!"

"Best Butt, ok? They voted you Best Butt, is all."

"Oh." She was right, that wasn't so bad. I was expecting Most Likely to Barf Up Southern Comfort and Irish Seamen, or worse. Dodged that bullet.

When I got back to school some of the other kids were giving me funny looks, pointing and whispering. I figured they heard

about me and Kevin, or about my best butt.

Please don't give me a nickname.

Sarah Kirsch was a seventh grader who had sex with her boyfriend. After they broke up he told everybody her vagina felt like sandpaper. She was in ninth grade now, and everyone still called her Sandpaper Sarah.

I was about to become Booty-Kate Suckwell.

I would have to find a different school.

Wait. You know what? That's just FINE. Go ahead and try to shame me with your stupid nickname. I'll have it tattooed on my goddamn forehead. I didn't give a flapdoodle what they thought of me.

I was on my way to first period math—a miserable way to start your school day—when I was approached by a couple of seventh graders I didn't know. I braced myself for childish remarks about my bottom, or about blowjobs.

"You're Bonnie-Kate Caldwell, right?"

Shields up. "What do you want."

"That story you wrote? About that guy Findley? That's amazing."

"You...read it?"

"Everybody read it."

That's why they were pointing and whispering.

I still had a few minutes before the bell. I ran down to Mr. Jenkins's class and found him in the hall outside his door.

"Thanks, Mr. J."

"For?"

"Giving me a reason to keep writing."

Most Likely To

Bonnie-Kate is the only person I told this to.

Me ma and da kept dragging me off to confessional so I had to keep making up new sins to tell Father Galbraith. I wasn't about to spill the real stuff; I hardly knew the man. The rules said I could confess anything up to and including murder and he wasn't allowed to repeat it to anyone, not even my parents. He could tell God, but I'd outgrown him just as I'd outgrown Santa Claus, so I didn't give a toss.

I told the Father so much outrageous bullshite he, a supposed Catholic, wanted to put me on birth control, have me checked for syphilis, and send me to a convent. Being Catholic, though, he wasn't allowed to recommend the pill. A shame, that. I was getting awfully tired of all the abortions.

Kidding, dontcha know! I was (technically) a virgin still.

Confessions are supposed to be anonymous, but I'm the only lass in all Wiscasset with such a thick Irish brogue, and fierce proud of it, too. He knew exactly who was confessing to him. After our first two, the good Father never looked me in the eye again.

All those confessions were lies. The ones I'm about to tell are

true, but I didn't say anything to Bonnie-Kate until much later.

First, those lads with their list? They had me on it, too. Twice. They voted me Best Tits. I didn't mind so much, but only because it was true. These babies are fan-feckin-tastic. It's the same reason Bonnie-Kate didn't mind winning Best Butt. She didn't like to admit it, but she knew. Hers was a bum for the ages, wasn't it.

They also voted me most likely to fuck a teacher, and that one pissed me off. Most likely to fuck up your stupid face, ye pencil-dick plonkers. They only said that because I was taller than them and it was all they could think of with their immature little minds. I was glad they got in trouble for it.

I'm sixteen now, and I've had nine boyfriends. Some didn't last very long. How many did I have sex with? ZERO. The last one, Teddy, wanted to but I wouldn't let him. We'd only been going out for a week and hadn't done much besides lob the gob. I'm about ready to try it, but it has to be with the right lad, dontcha know. He's hard to find.

I don't know what it was, but all my boyfriends left me feeling like something was missing, or wasn't quite right. Not always, but most of the time.

I also didn't tell Bonnie-Kate the real reason I was so pissed at Kevin when they were going out, especially after I encouraged it. Ok, he was a couple of years older, and he should never have got her to do the oral thing with him. But it wasn't that big a deal.

I mean, I was around her age the first time I did that, wasn't I. And it's not as though he forced her. He just persuaded her. She could've said no, but she decided to go ahead with it. That's exactly what she told me: she decided. Her choice, not his. So that's ok, I was being too protective.

But there's more to it than that.

I was pissed at Kevin because when they were going out, she hardly had any time for me. I know that's childish, but it was true. I missed her. I always felt good when Bonnie-Kate was around, even when she was acting the maggot and behaving like a little shite. Kevin was hogging her all to himself, wasn't he, and that's why I made sure he got sent back to Killarney. I didn't want to share.

I didn't know how it happened, but Bonnie-Kate became my best friend even though I was a bit older. It's odd, sure, but I liked being with her a lot better than girls my age. Don't be thinking I'm conceited now, but girls my age were jealous of my boobs, and the way boys looked at me. Bonnie-Kate didn't get jealous like that, she just took me as I was.

Listen, then. I don't think I'm all that great. I'm no stunner, I just developed early. And a lot. I learned that walk, too. Bonnie-Kate always said the walk was too much.

"You already knock 'em dead, Eefs, do you have to set them on fire, too?"

I try not to use that walk so much anymore, but it's hard to

unlearn it, don'tcha know.

Bonnie-Kate was really smart for only being fourteen. She'd often see things I missed. But I still thought of her like a cuddly wee kitten who needed protecting. It was all I could do to keep from scratching her behind the ears and giving her a tin o' tunafish.

That's far from normal, I suppose, but I never cared much for being normal. Normal was boring.

I wondered if she'd purr when she's happy and contented. Heehee. Maybe one day I'd find out.

Lab Partner

In my sophomore year of high school I befriended my biology lab partner, Petra Basov, the only daughter of an immigrant from the Soviet Union. Like every other choice I'd made in my life, this was a terrible mistake.

Ours seemed at first a timeless friendship. We were both the only child of a foreign-born parent; Petra's father was Estonian, my mother was Filipina. We had also both lost a parent—the American one—in a pair of freak accidents that left us more than a little shell-shocked.

The things that drew us together also placed us at the outermost social fringe of our clique-infested whitebread high school. I railed against that caste system and thought Petra should, too, but I never told her I was disappointed at her failure to join me in my righteous indignation.

Fine, I thought, *I'll be outraged for both of us.*

Petra's outrage would surface eventually, but it had nothing to do with social injustice. Hers was simpler than that, only more explosive. I would be its recipient.

When Archer Pettis and his crew of cro-mags passed our table in the cafeteria, they stared at Petra in her big clunky shoes

and sacklike peasant dress. Such blatant refusal to conform could not be left unpunished.

"What's for lunch there, comrade? Borscht and vodka?" Archer's cadre of jackals howled at his juvenile wit.

"I do not care for borscht." Petra's thickly accented English wavered between too formal and broken to the point of compound fracture.

"So just the vodka, huh?"

I despised him, this captain-of-the-yearbook, Camaro-driving dater of cheerleaders. Petra didn't know he was mocking her, or maybe she just didn't care.

"Da. Is good, vodka. Yes?" She smiled and was strikingly beautiful, but too alien for anything but Archer's contempt.

"Oh, right: *WOD*-ka. Hey, barkeep, give us another round of that *WOD*-ka!"

The jackals nearly pissed themselves with glee. Petra looked mystified and I'd had enough.

"Aren't you guys gonna be late for your Hitler Youth rally?"

"What's the matter Bonnie-Cunt? Get kicked off the Lollipop Guild?"

"Fuck you, Archer."

"Beggar."

Insulting my stature was futile. I already knew I was short. I was sometimes called an Oompa Loompa by my peers despite not being bright orange, or owning a single pair of little white

overalls. I didn't care. Calling me short failed as an insult because it was a simple statement of an obvious fact. Might as well accuse me of having black hair, or being a girl. Guilty on both counts. Calling me a cunt didn't work either because I have one of those, and you're not getting anywhere near it, pal.

Once Archer and co. went on their knuckle-dragging way, I turned back to Petra. Before we were set upon by the creep squad, she had been telling me about her mother.

"She is to die when I have six years only."

"That's so sad, Petra. How did she die?"

"I kill her with a Batman kite."

I assumed she mangled her syntax and this was not at all what she meant.

"I'm sorry, you...what?" I wrapped the uneaten half of my tuna sandwich for later.

"Batman," she said. "You know him?"

"Er, yeah." I opened my blueberry Pop Tarts and gave her one. "But not personally."

"I have a kite with him on it. You know what is kite? Flies in the sky? On string?"

"Yes, ok. You had a Batman kite."

"It goes in a tree and I am to cry."

"Ok, your kite got stuck in a tree."

"My mother she goes in the tree to get him, but is wires. She is becoming...um...electric, how do you say it?"

"Oh my god, Petra. She was electrocuted?"

"No. Is not electro-cute. Is electro-dead."

She took a deep breath and stared at her Pop Tart. "From me," she added.

"Petra! That wasn't your fault! It was an accident. You can't blame yourself."

If it was me, I would never stop blaming myself, and I knew Petra wouldn't either. One more reason for the transcendence of our friendship, or so I believed.

After school we walked to my mom's jewelry shop. It was called Ruby's, but she sold very few actual rubies, and her name was Sonia. Mom was teaching me to make earrings and pendants from the fragments of sea glass I was fond of collecting at low tide.

She greeted us with hugs and kisses, and was visibly distressed at not having anything to feed us. I don't want to perpetuate any stereotypes here, but some (possibly many/all) Filipinas seemed genetically or culturally predisposed to serving a five-course meal to anyone who could remotely be considered a guest. That included postal workers, appliance repairmen, and the kid who mowed the neighbor's—but not our—lawn. Mom said: "No one can be sad when they have a full belly."

Petra paid rapt attention as I worked on my magnum opus, a necklace of sterling silver and sea glass that was nearing completion. I was showing her how to solder when an order of

take-out arrived from The Imperial Wok. Mom all but spoon-fed it to us.

"Not as good as Filipino, but it will do for now."

This suggested we were to be fed again before she was done with us. We were.

In biology the following week, I noticed Petra doodling in the margin of her notes: a girl in a peasant dress was being decapitated by a man with a large, cruel-looking sword. She noticed my sidelong glance and hastened to close her notebook.

"Necklace is finished, yes?" She pretended I had not just stolen a look at the terrifying interior of her idle mind.

"Yep, all done." I thought it might be obvious since I was wearing it.

"Is beautiful, very good. You are to sell this jewelries?"

"No, it's not good enough to sell."

Despite Mom's insistence to the contrary, I was certain my amateur tinkerings would never produce anything of real value. She had even threatened to put some of it on display.

Petra held out her hand. "You give to me."

I wondered if it was common practice in Estonia to casually demand that others relinquish their jewelry. It struck me as odd, but I suppose one man's strongarm robbery may be another's polite custom. Mark Twain said that.[*]

Petra did not withdraw her hand. "No. I take."

[******] No, he didn't. I did. Just now.

"I'll make another one. A special one just for you. I promise."

This was getting weird. Normally I liked things to be weird, but Petra's face was hard to read: crestfallen with a hint of indignation, and undertones of defiance I read as *this isn't over yet*.

At the Friday pep rally I would not have attended had I not been forced, I found myself accidentally seated next to Julie Corbett, the future Miss August. She was Archer Pettis's female counterpart, but without all the childish meanness. I felt I had acquitted myself marvelously in my recent confrontation of Archer & co, but I was about to cede whatever ground I had gained.

It was not my intention to behave as though Julie was the product of evolutionary advancement far beyond my own, so when I did exactly that, it came as no surprise. My intentions rarely panned out, but my unintentions often did.

Julie was statuesque with a preposterous Barbie-like figure, clad in a denim jacket and ultra-fashionable striped bell bottoms. Beside her I felt like a tiny misshapen ogre who should have known better than to venture out among decent folk. I became aware of her eyes on me and began to sweat. *Here it comes*.

"Excuse me." The Goddess was addressing me. "I didn't mean to stare."

"That's ok. I don't mind." The logical postscript to this could easily have been *because I'm an idiot,* but Julie didn't notice.

"That necklace is totally boss. Where'd you get it?"

"I made it."

"No. Way."

"My mom taught me. She has a jewelry store."

"Oh, wow. Can you make me one? I'll buy it off you."

That was my first interaction with her, and I was pleased to find she wasn't Archer-like at all, but friendly and kind, even to one like me, a lower life-form. Here, I realized, was an opportunity to attain the unthinkable: admittance to the rarefied atmosphere in which dwelt the exalted likes of Julie Corbett. I dug deep and found within me a subservience so fawning it nauseates me to recall it. I took off my prized necklace and put it in her hand.

"Here, you can have this one."

"I couldn't."

"It's ok, I have a bunch of them," I lied.

"That's so nice of you! Thanks, um...Bonnie-Kate, right?"

"You're welcome, Julie."

"How did you know my name?"

"Everyone knows your name." I sat there beaming like a dorky schoolgirl whose hopeless crush had just given her the time of day.

For the record, Julie Corbett was not my hopeless crush. I didn't have one. The most troubling part of this episode was how quickly I abandoned my long-held social injustice principles

when confronted with the merest possibility of acceptance by one of my supposed nemeses. Way to show some spine, there, Champ. Your stand is as solid as a freakin' jellyfish.

Julie Corbett's approval notwithstanding, I was beginning to realize my affections targeted a certain kind of person, and the gender of that person was not very important to me. Attractive girls like Julie (not my type: perky, popular) and Petra (my type: nerdy and weird) both provoked feelings I knew must never be spoken. I received my share of disdain for being a foreigner (even though I technically wasn't); imagine the field day my detractors would have if they knew I sometimes thought about...well...laying down with, you know...a...a...a girl. There. I said it.

I assumed (hoped) such attractions were an adolescent phase and wondered how soon it would pass. Maybe this was an involuntary response to my experience with Kevin Doyle? Not that I was unhappy about what we did together; it just wasn't what I'd so hoped it would be. Confidentially, by that time the idea of doing...similar things...with a girl had popped into my head a time or two, and although my first impulse was *No! Never!* such things were not entirely unpleasant to think about.
What if I'm done with boys forever?

Wait. If I was a lesbian, why did I still drool over that photo Wendell Chapman sent me? It was a few years ago now, but I could just imagine how gorgeous he must be growing up. The more I kicked this stuff around in my head, the deeper my

confusion grew. I was not aware at the time that confusion would become my near-constant companion as I tried to navigate the turbulent waters of my life. Confusion often seemed the only thing I could rely on.

In the middle of dissecting a fetal pig—which gave me an inexplicable craving for pork chops—I caught Petra doodling again. The peasant dress character was now being burned at the stake. The character, I now understood, was Petra herself.

I tried and failed to arrive at an unfrightening interpretation of her art, but there was only this: Petra felt she deserved to be gruesomely dispatched, perhaps to atone for her mother's death. A smart person might have taken this information to a guidance counselor, but at fifteen, that person was not me. I alone would rescue this odd, outcast girl who may or may not have been my friend; it was awfully hard to tell. I wanted to fix her. Strong feelings passed between us, but I was afraid to give them a name. As it turned out, Petra was, too.

"You come to my house after school, yes? We listen to music records."

I had made this mistake before, but said, "Sure, ok."

In the era of the Byrds, Cowsills and Strawberry Alarm Clock, Petra's musical taste ran to Edith Piaf, Judy Garland, and, most baffling, the *musique concréte* screechings of Yoko Ono. I suffered in silence for the sake of our friendship, and of my ill-conceived attempt at crisis intervention.

As we left school that day, we passed Julie Corbett in the hall. Surrounded by a gaggle of squawking minions, she still threw a nod in my direction.

My heart soared. I grinned like a mindless sycophant. "Hi, Julie!" I showed off our acquaintance like a County Fair blue ribbon.

Petra stopped. She looked at Julie, then at me.

"Petra? What is it?"

She looked at me and frowned, then began walking again.

"Is nothing."

Petra's father, a human grizzly bear (but a likeable one; you know how I am about bears) wasn't home from work yet. She gave me a dish consisting mainly of pickles, cold fish and sour cream, then put on a record that sounded like someone methodically disassembling a live chicken.

We sat uncomfortably on wooden straight-backed chairs. There seemed to be a ban on upholstery in the Basov household. Petra listened to the music, concentrating hard and staring without expression into the unlit fireplace.

"You don't wear necklace," she said.

I thought we'd moved on from that. "Um...yeah. It doesn't go with this top." It would have gone beautifully with that top.

"You do not have." Not a question, an accusation.

"It's at home."

"You say a LIE!" Her teeth clenched, cords in her neck stood

out like the rigging of a three-master.

"Petra, please. I'll make you one, I swear. An even better one."

She screamed at me in Russian, which meshed eerily with what Yoko was doing to that poor chicken.

"Calm down, Petra, I'll fix it."

"No, Bonnie-Kate, you don't fix." She pounded a fist against her chest. "I FIX!"

She stormed out, slamming the heavy wooden door behind her.

I sat wretchedly in the god-awful chair that was clearly engineered to encourage standing, feeling despicable. Julie must have been wearing the necklace. I didn't notice, but Petra did.
Before I could physically beat myself up, Petra came storming back in with a small handgun and shot me in the head.

I blanked for a moment before realizing I was on the floor. I reached for my right temple, but Petra stopped me.

"Do not touch. Is bad."

"Did you shoot me? Oh my fucking *god*, you shot me with a fucking gun!"
Wait. I am Bonnie-Kate Caldwell so OF COURSE I've been shot in the head. This is how I will die.

This would become a lifelong mantra into which I could insert whatever calamity was currently befalling me. There would be many.

"Is accident, Bonnie-Kate." As always, she pronounced my name *Bawnie-Kett*.

"You accidentally tried to murder me?!"

I saw a lot of blood but felt little pain. I thought I'd been grazed, but that wouldn't put me on the floor, where I remained because it was more comfortable than that fucking chair.

"I call doctor. You stay here."

"Where am I gonna go with a giant fucking hole in my head?!"

I apologize for my language. Getting shot makes you crabby.

I lay on my back and felt what seemed an endless cascade of blood seeping through my hair. I caught snippets of Petra on the phone.

"...so I shoot her...no, not going to shoot, already shooted. With gun, yes...no, not dead, is awake. In head...yes, her head. I see her mind...what? No, not mind. Is brain, yes? Inside her head, I see it a little bit there."

I realized too late that shrieking "Oh my god, my brain is out?!" was just the thing to really crank up the pain.

I learned later that what was exposed was not my brain but a protective covering for it called the *dura mater*. If it had been my actual grey matter, I probably wouldn't be here to tell you all this. Someone else would have to do it.

I reached up to digitally investigate my injuries but an image of toxic germs leaping from my fingertips onto my shiny clean

brain made me reconsider.

The Wiscasset police arrived in impressive force. Three cars with lights and sirens, and an ambulance soon to follow. They had Petra on the ground and in handcuffs before my ambulance arrived. An officer with a kindly face sat on the floor with me while I waited. He looked surprised to find me conscious and speaking.

"Will I die?"

"Don't you worry now, everything's going to be just fine."

I doubted that very much.

"The paramedics will be here any minute. How do you feel?"

"Kinda stings."

My breathing was a little shallow but I didn't feel like I was going to expire, at least not in the next few minutes.

"Can you tell me what happened here?" He didn't say, quick, before you die, but that was what he meant. He had a perp to collar.

I was surprised to hear myself say "an accident" instead of attempted murder. Not that it did any good. Petra was in a squad car at that very moment, calmly explaining to the detectives how she had tried to murder me.

It took a few days to get it all sorted out, but the upshot (no pun!) was that Petra had in fact aimed her father's .22 caliber pistol at me and pulled the trigger. The bullet missed and struck the stone fireplace before ricocheting at my head. The misshapen

slug knocked out a postage stamp piece of my skull's frontal bone as it passed, then buried itself in the door jamb. The little piece of skull bone remained attached to my head by a flap of skin; a tiny peek-a-boo door where you could visit my brain if you wanted to.

I missed two weeks of school. Mom would have taken me to Mille Jours but I was unable to travel by car: too painful. Every bump in the road—Route 1 was a veritable symphony of pot holes and frost heaves—would have sent a bolt of agony straight to the hole in my head.

We stayed at our stone-and-ivy house in Wiscasset. Mom hovered fretfully, as if I were some rare and delicate butterfly in danger of being destroyed by the least puff of breeze.

If I was going to be an insect, I'd rather be a woolly bear because I'd be cute and fuzzy for a while, and then I'd be able to fly. Beat that.

Some of the kids from school came to visit me while I was laid up.

A few.

Very few.

Ok, just Aoife.

Not Julie Corbett or Petra.

I wasn't really interested in having friends anyway, is that ok?

Aoife's first visit (of many) came on a Tuesday after school.

"I knew she was a bleedin geebag[******], didn't I," she said. "Knew it from the first."

"You mean the only time you met."

"Just the once was plenty."

"She was just having a bad day."

"Most of us get through a bad day without attempting quite so many assassinations."

While that was technically true, I felt all the fear of Petra was uncalled for. I knew her better than anyone else, and I wasn't afraid of her. Of course, I was a terrible judge of character, but that was beside the point.

Mom's opinion of my would-be murderer was equally unforgiving.

"Mom! Can I see Petra?"

"Dear God, why?"

She set before me a plate of steamed lemon grass fish and vegetable spring rolls I had not requested. For some reason she refused to divulge, this woman wanted me fat. My metabolism thwarted even her most calorie-intensive assaults; I rarely strayed five pounds north or south of 70.

"Because she's my friend," I said around a mouthful of fish. I had no idea what had become of my assailant.

"I don't think it's a good time to see Petra." Mother shook her head. Such an encounter might shatter the butterfly beyond

[******] An annoying or foolish female person.

repair.

But she knew something, I could tell.

"Where is she?"

"How should I know?"

"You're keeping a secret." After a moment I added, "Badly."

I didn't mean to go into bitch mode but my patience was wearing thin. It wasn't the convalescence I was tired of, it was the endless coddling. I wished everyone would stop acting like I was so fragile. I realized long ago my life would not be a meandering journey but a careening, a hurtling from one disaster onto the horns of the next, waiting for the one that would snuff me out. I believed my remaining time could be measured in days, even hours, and it was up to the will of the Universe. I had come to terms with that, and it was high time my mother did, too.

"Tell me."

Mom sighed. "Petra is in the hospital."

"What happened?"

"A psychiatric hospital."

I waited for her to go on. She didn't. "And?"

"They wanted to try her as an adult but the judge had her committed instead. Mentally incompetent."

"Oh. That sucks."

Petra and I had some catching up to do. I missed her in the same way one might miss—dare I say it?—a hopeless crush. The way I once missed Wendell when I was alone in my bed at night.

"Don't worry, little cabbage. She won't hurt you again. She can't get out."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not afraid of her, Mom."

"I understand. She only tried to execute you."

There can be no substitute for the radiant warmth of a mother's sarcasm.

"Like I would hold that against her."

Mom looked at me with the pity one normally reserves for the profoundly stupid, then introduced a ham-fisted change of subject.

"Let's take a walk on the shore. Feel up to it?"

"Yep. I do."

I had taken up collecting sea glass again. I could spot the bright fragments but Mom had to pick them up for me because I wasn't allowed to bend over that much. Pressure on the wound and all that. Thanks, Mom. I had one more necklace to make.

Petra wasn't allowed to contact me, but when I received a letter in Russian, the source was pretty obvious. I took it to her father since he was the only one I knew who could read it.

"I am so sorry, Miss Bonnie-Kate."

"Sorry? Why?"

"Petra is not to trouble you in this way."

"No, it's ok. She's still my friend. I worry about her."

"This letter is Estonian, not Russian."

"Can you read it to me?"

"I can." He cleared his throat.

"She writes, 'My dearest Bonnie-Kate. I wish to explain why I shot you in the head. It is because I love you. When I see you have given jewelry to another, it put me into a jealous rage. You see, this is why I wished you to give me this necklace: because I cannot have you. I wished only for something to think of you in remembrance. I will not make any more problems in your life. I am very sorry for the troubles I have caused to you.

Good-bye,

Petra.' "

Mr. Basov snuffled, emotions catching him off guard. A sad bear.

"Um...thanks, Mr. Basov."

He looked at the floor. "I did not know of this."

"Me neither."

That wasn't at all true, of course. I suspected. I may have even hoped. How much anguish could we have been spared if Petra and I had just been honest with one another? I took a sea glass necklace from my pocket and gave it to him.

"Please tell her this is for remembering."

"Yes, I tell her." He handed back the letter so I would have a keepsake, too.

"Will she be home soon?"

I wondered what would happen between us now that I knew this about her. And about me.

"No, not soon. Some few years, I think." He examined the necklace, making bearish little grunts of approval. "She is batshit crazy, you know."

"She'll get better."

Adolescent phases notwithstanding, I knew it was risky for me to love anyone. Now I knew it worked both ways. I could not allow anyone to fall in love with me. The only way I could keep people from dying—or going batshit crazy—was to become an island. I knew all about that.

Like My Little Sister

You'll bear with me, won't you. I'm not the writer here.

Bonnie-Kate claimed she wasn't a people person, but 'twasn't true. Sure, she took up wi' that Russian chick from biology class, even when no one else would have her.

Petra was hard to understand, and she dressed fierce odd. I swear she didn't have a single pair of Hip Huggers, and but one pair of shoes—ugly ones. She was pushy, too—always had to have her way. She was a ride[*] all right, but hardly anyone noticed because of all the other stuff. Or maybe it was the way she always wore her hair up in a tight little bun. She looked more like a teacher than a student, didn't she. We were like, 'What are you? Forty?'

Bonnie-Kate agreed Petra was unusual, to say the least. In truth she was utterly bizarre, if you were to ask me. I knew it even before Petra tried to kill her.

Bonnie-Kate only liked people who were 'different' but she really meant 'weirdos.' 'Twas a plain wonder she and I got on so well, but sure, we did. She was the best friend I ever had, even though she messed with me sometimes. But she did that to

[******] A sexually attractive person.

everyone.

I went with her to Petra's only once. First she put on an album that wasn't even in English and sang along with it. Her voice was miles worse than Bonnie-Kate's, like a swarm of angry bees. Bonnie-Kate's wasn't near as bad as she thought, just a little chipmunk-y. 'Twas cute. But not Petra's. Hers was creepy.

When I had friends up to the house, I'd get some Cheetos or Chips Ahoys (or Pop Tarts, if it was Bonnie-Kate) to munch on. What does Petra the Cossack give her guests? Cabbage and onions with vinegar and mayo and a metric ton of black pepper, like some kind of deranged coleslaw from the very bowels of hell. And a hunk of this so-called bread that was black and tough as a spare tyre. With no butter. I ate to be polite, but I had to keep my bedroom windows open for the next three days, I swear.

Petra went on and on about socialist republics and political dissidents and the news she heard from Tassen Pravda (who the feck?!) like any of us cared. She liked to thump on her chest when she talked. I had a go at changing the subject to something more fun, like guys, bands, movie stars, or guys in bands. Petra wouldn't have it.

"Is not to matter, these things. Silly trifles."

"Don't get all uptight, ok? It's just for fun."

"Americans. Interested only to the Holly Wood. Ignorant of life in the real world, the conflicts, the struggles."

"Did you call me ignorant, then?"

"You know nothing of Russia, of Asia, of Europe. Not even to hear of Edith Piaf, beloved by all the world. What do you know of Khrushchev? Of Brezhnev, or de Gaulle?"

"More than you know about John Lennon, or Mick Jagger, or, or...Davy Jones." I had a wee crush on Davy Jones, even though he was English.

"Childish trifles, all of these. You never know what it is to be hungry."

"You just fed me raw cabbage and onions. I can tell you about hunger, can't I." I pounded my fist on my chest for emphasis, but I shouldn't have. No one takes you seriously when you punch yourself in the tits.

I swear I never did anything to her, she was just plain rude. I even pretended to like her disgusting coleslaw. So excuse me, Miss Gobshite, but fuck you, see you next Tuesday, bitch. I'm not the one who ended up a looney. That was you, my wee soviet fruitcake.

I put on my coat and got my purse. When I left, Bonnie-Kate followed. She admitted Petra was being an absolute shite for no good reason.

A little snow was falling as we walked back to her house. I couldn't wait to get there. Her ma would feed you rack of lamb for an after-school snack.

I said to Bonnie-Kate, "You're taking pity on her, isn't it? That's why you hang around with her?"

"We have some stuff in common. Is that so hard to believe?"

I believed it, sure, I just didn't want it to be true. Bonnie-Kate was my little munchkin and I didn't like to share. I outgrew playing with dolls long ago, but she was like having a real live one. Selfish, I know, but you can't help how you feel.

I was dating Kenneth Lynch at the time. Not Ken or Kenny, he insisted. He once told me I was obsessed with Bonnie-Kate and I should get over it, then. I had to admit it was odd, the way she was so much in mind. I tried not to mention her when we went out.

We dated a month before we had sex. Contrary to the epic football team orgies of my confessions, that was my first time. It went well enough but I could honestly take it or leave it. His basement was damp as a peat bog and musty. There were crickets. Not the most romantic place in the world.

We did it a lot in the next few months and it got better. I got good at it, too. After the first few times I got the idea that, as far as guys were concerned, sex and romance were totally separate. They mostly want to get their hands and their gobs all over you and then have their climax. I didn't get any of those.

I was all set to graduate high school a semester early. I wanted to go for a Vet Tech so I could get a job taking care of animals, like cats and horses. I was accepted to McAlpine Veterinary College in Connecticut. I wouldn't be able to see Kenneth anymore but I was tired of him by then, wasn't I. He was

sweet, but too fussy about things, like his name, for one. He was picky about food, too. I couldn't stand that. It's all good, lad, just shove it in your sodding face! I was more upset about leaving Bonnie-Kate behind. What if she had another crisis and couldn't handle it by herself? She needed me.

And I needed her.

She looked up to me because I was older. I never had a little sister to look up to me. That's what she was like to me, wasn't it: a little sister. Not a daughter though.

I didn't know what she'd do with herself if I went to Connecticut. More writing, I guessed, since she didn't have a lot of friends.

She wouldn't let me read her stories except the one they put in Echoes, about the guy who swore all the time. I could tell she was a good writer just from that. I wasn't sure I got her point though. It was about an old lobsterman who had an argument with his sternman. She said it was about 'intergenerational tensions and simple empathy fostering mutual acceptance.'

Right. I thought it was about two guys yelling at each other on a boat.

See, there's stuff I know more about than her, but she's smart in other ways. Put us together and we add up to one clever lass, dontcha know.

Would You Like a Pony?

I became an island too late to save Petra Basov, who committed suicide as soon as she found an opportunity. They were so careful not to give her any razors or the means to hang herself, but all she needed was a syringe stolen from an examination room and her grim Slavic determination.

She waited for lights-out. When she couldn't be roused for breakfast, they found a pool of blood on the floor beside her bed where she'd bled herself out and slipped away.

So, correction: she didn't find the opportunity, she created it.

Petra's father called to give me the news and said he was moving back to Estonia. That's what I would have done.

Near the end of my sophomore year I got a letter from Wendell Chapman, my first boyfriend, whose life I ruined. He sent a picture and said he was doing fine in Madison, Wisconsin and that he would never forget me since I was the first girl he ever seriously kissed. I sent back my picture and said I was fine too, thanks for writing. There was no need to reignite any sparks there, but he sure did turn out handsome.

By that time I didn't see Aoife much because she graduated early and went off to veterinary school. Apart from my mom, I

was mostly alone, which was in everyone's best interest.

That summer I ended up on a plane with my mother, bound for Kansas, of all places. I don't know what perfume the lady across the aisle was wearing, but she must have applied it with a brush and roller. Everyone on the flight was dabbing at their eyes soon after she boarded. She treated the stewardess (it was 1971; they weren't called flight attendants yet) like a waitress, demanding her in-flight peanuts be delivered NOW because she was important: her husband was on the city council of whatever ratfuck town they were from. I wanted her to have a heart attack and get cancer and I almost got my wish, sort of.

I had never flown before so Mom let me take the window seat. This gave me an unobstructed view of the plane's right engine as it exploded in a ball of flame, launching shrapnel through the wing and into the side of the plane. Mom prayed, others screamed or cried. I sat there with my mantra—*of course my plane blew up; this is how I will die*—and tried to ignore the perfume-saturated harpy across the aisle, who thought verbal hysteria would somehow improve our chances of survival. She missed the pilot's announcement that we could still fly with one engine, and didn't stop shrieking until the man in the next seat told her to knock it the fuck off. He instantly became everyone's hero.

Relative calm followed until the pilot announced that the landing gear didn't work anymore. Mom grabbed my hand and

closed her eyes to pray some more while the lady across the aisle made high-pitched whining sounds because she was afraid of getting yelled at again.

I leaned over and gave her a mentally unbalanced grin.

"Kiss your ass goodbye, lady. We're doomed."

She looked horrified and I couldn't think of anything else to say so I sang *99 Bottles of Beer* instead. That didn't improve the harpy's state of mind at all. I felt like a fool when nobody joined the refrain, probably because my singing voice was so awful.

They covered the runway at Kansas City International with foam and we belly-flopped onto it. No one died after all. But then I had another problem: I was in Kansas, or would be very soon.

In case you've never seen it, Kansas is a picturesque state of rolling green hills, expansive prairies, and majestic forests of black walnut, poplar and red oak. It is also a state of 105 degree summer days, 800% humidity and several trillion insects per square foot who simply refuse to be quiet. I could have forgiven all that (if forced to at gunpoint) but Kansas was also a state in which you literally could not be farther from an ocean, any ocean, and that, friends and neighbors, made Kansas completely unacceptable.

Mom dragged me to this coastless, cicada-ridden wasteland to visit my Aunt Laura and Uncle Gordon, whom we had not seen since my father's funeral. Laura was my dad's sister; she and Gordon Fletcher had produced my only cousins, a trio of tow-

headed sisters who got straight A's, didn't swear, and referred to life as their 'walk with Jesus'. I liked Gordon and Laura well enough, but I fucking loathed their kids. Not for being Jeezoids, but because not one of them had entertained an original thought in their entire little-house-on-the-prairie-dress-wearing lives. If we were in Utah, every last one of them would have volunteered to be the thirteenth sister-wife of some toothless eighty-year-old geezer by now.

"It's so good to see you again, Bonnie-Kate!" said Kathy, the eldest at seventeen (spinster!). "What would you like to do today?"

"What have you got?" I stole that from James Dean or Marlon Brando, I forget which.

"We could go roller skating, or play ping pong. Oh, and we have Bible study in the afternoon."

"Got any weed?" Pretending to be a dopehead might keep these goody-two-shoeses at a safe distance.

"I'm sorry, any what?"

"Weed. Reefer. Grass."

"Uhm...you mean marijuana?"

"Yeah, that's it."

"You smoke marijuana?"

"You don't?"

"It's against the law." She behaved as if she, personally, had enacted said law.

"What's your point?" I said.

"No, I don't have any marijuana."

"How about LSD?"

"No." She was itching to rat me out to her parents, I could see it in her narrowing eyes.

"Heroin?" Might as well go all out. "I need a fucking fix, man."

"I just remembered I have to go to the library today." She did not invite me to tag along, and instructed her obedient sisters Deana and April to stay away from me because I was a BAD INFLUENCE.

The high point of the trip was a tour of the grain elevator where Laura and Gordon worked. As high points go, this one was excruciatingly dull. I didn't want Laura and Gordon to feel bad, so I remarked at intervals things like, "Holy cow! That's a lot of grain!" and feigned paralyzing awe. Their satisfaction was tempered by a suspicion that I was on drugs at that very moment.

Driving back to Wiscasset—Mom had cashed in our return tickets and would never fly again—I thought it best to come clean about my allegedly prodigious drug use.

"I don't get high, Mom."

"That's not what I heard." We were halfway across Missouri and her eyes were on the road.

"I was just being squirrelly. Like I do, y'know?"

"But why?"

"Self-defense."

A billboard advertised WALNUT BOWLS and I wondered why you'd need a special bowl just for walnuts, and what kind of person would actually pull off the interstate to get one.

"Self-defense against your own family?" said Mom.

"They're not my people. Sorry."

Mom never subscribed to my theory of fatal affection—that those I loved or who loved me were at great risk of death by calamity—so it was no use claiming I'd done it for their own good. That would also be a total lie.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, little cabbage, but I'm glad you're not on drugs."

"I didn't say I never used drugs, just that I don't do it regularly."

"I see." Her knuckles went white where they gripped the wheel. "What kind of drugs?"

"I smoked pot a few times."

"Did you."

"But it made me feel sleepy, hungry and dirty, all at the same time."

"Dirty?"

"Yep. Weird, huh?"

I had to give up pot after I kept dozing off in the tub with a Pop Tart in my mouth. Not really my thing. I didn't tell her I'd tried LSD and found its effects fascinating, but not something I

needed to experience more than a few times.

I tried these things out of a healthy intellectual curiosity, not a need to alter my consciousness. Most people who knew me thought I was a sad and pitiful little foreign person, which was neither entirely true nor entirely false. I could hardly deny the void I had created in my own life, but I knew this much: any attempt to chemically mitigate my sorrows would be met with firm, possibly lethal, resistance from the Universe, the world, kismet, karma or whatever it was that had it in for me. The matter was out of my hands.

"Can I drive for a while?" I was sixteen and had my license.

"I don't like you taking drugs, little cabbage."

"Let me drive and I won't do any for a year." This was disingenuous; I was already done experimenting.

"Two years."

"Year and a half." That would permit a cocaine and heroin fueled Saturnalia on my 18th birthday, an event I had no desire to either orchestrate or attend. I kind of doubted I would live that long.

"All right. You can drive for a while."

We made it home alive and picked up Bailey—who had abandoned his sexual conquest of me since we had his balls removed—from the dog sitter. My renewed friendship with this former adversary gave me an idea for filling the empty space in my life: it might be safe to befriend animals.

"Mom! Can we get another dog?"

"What's wrong with this one?" She ruffled Bailey's fur.

"Nothing. I just thought it would be fun to have another."

"I don't know if that's such a good idea." That was her way of saying not in a million years.

Thus began another round of negotiations that ended with me getting a hamster. There was a problem, though: my hamster was an asshole. Oh, sure, he acted all sweet and adorable in the pet store but the minute I got him home the little motherfucker started biting me and I couldn't get anywhere near him without a suit of armor and welding gloves. Which they didn't make in my size.

So I was stuck with this ungrateful fur-wad I had to feed and water and whose cage I had to clean once a week at great personal peril, and who refused to hold up his end of the deal.
I told Mom his name was Effie, but it was really Fuckface. I put up with him for six months then I took him for a drive in the country and only one of us came back, guess which one. It was a terrible thing. I didn't like having to do that but he left me little choice.

That summer when Aoife came home from veterinary school she called me up.

"If you had a million dollars, what would you buy me?" That had become our standard greeting. The idea was to offer some elaborate gift the other would have no use for whatsoever.

I was ready for her. "A monkey chauffeur who I trained to secretly poop in your car."

Aoife approved. "Good one, Champ. I'd have him in the want ads on day one: Free to Good Home."

"What are you gonna do all summer?" I said. "Besides check out guys."

Aoife was a bit plain-looking when we were kids, but her adolescence transformed her into a stunning young woman. She was enormously popular with males of all kinds.

"I got a job at Wild Care." That was a wildlife rescue and rehab center in Damariscotta.

"Yeah? Cool." I was a little jealous.

"Well, it's volunteer work, not for pay."

"Still cool."

At seventeen I had no idea what sort of career I wanted but thought being around animals would be good for me. I didn't know at the time Fuckface had been a furry little harbinger of disaster.

"So," I asked, "Raccoons and bobcats?"

"And birds too, isn't it. Right now there's a wee baby deer who's just adorable. I wish I could bring him home."

"I don't suppose—"

"Sure, they always need reliable help, don't they. Want their number?"

I reported for my first shift at Wild Care full of enthusiasm

for the noble work I was about to undertake, work that would surely fill the yawning abyss I'd made of my life. I would rescue magnificent beasts from their suffering and lovingly return them to their native habitat to live out their days free and majestic, never to forget the simple kindness of the tiny odd-looking woman who saved them from certain death. There would be rainbows and waterfalls; the dawn chorus would daily sing my praises.

"Hi, Bonnie-Kate, is it?" This was Connie, the director. She looked like my Gramma and sounded like she smoked four packs of unfiltered Camels a day. (In an act of juvenile defiance I had stupidly taken up smoking, but less than five cigarettes a day.)

Connie said, "Let's get you started, shall we?"

The Wild Care complex was a ramshackle arrangement of inexpensive buildings, some old and decrepit, some newer but utilitarian. I liked it well enough, but thought the whole thing could use a coat of paint. Something cheery, like pink and purple.

The rehab had its own mouse and rat breeding program to ensure a steady supply of freshly dead (or doomed) rodents for the birds of prey and predators. My job was to clean the more than 100 cages where this Purina Predator Chow lived out their short and hopeless lives. Somewhere in the wild, Fuckface was laughing his fuzzy little ass off.

Before I grew disenchanted enough to quit, they entrusted me with the feeding of orphaned songbirds. It was more

rewarding than rat duty, but I yearned for hands-on experience with fierce and deadly beasts. 'I feed baby sparrows' lacks sex appeal when given as an explanation of one's volunteer work. I wanted to claim close and possibly harrowing association with bears, lynxes and other life-threatening denizens of the Maine wilderness. The closest we had at the time were a bobcat and a coyote, both too human-friendly to be released to the wild. Those I would regale with my exploits didn't need to know that.

When I asked to work with apex predators—or at least help Aoife with the skunks and raccoons—I was told I needed pre-exposure rabies vaccine, and that it would cost $250 out of my own pocket.

"Mom! I need $250."

"Whatever for, little cabbage?"

"So I don't get rabies and die."

She deemed that a good enough reason, and I was soon granted access to dangerous creatures.

Among my new responsibilities was the wholesale slaughter of the rats and mice whose cages were once my domain. When dead rodents were needed, which was every day, it was my job to make them dead. This was the diametric opposite of what I signed up for. I sent them to a tiny gas chamber where I dispatched them with CO_2. They fell asleep and died peacefully, then I cut their still-warm bodies in half with kitchen shears. I soon began having nightmares in which they regained

consciousness halfway through that gruesome procedure. Imagine their surprise.

The first time I went out back to feed the great horned owl, Aoife came along to walk me through it. The afternoon was hot and sunny (85 is hot in Maine) and the lowering sun threw long shadows on the ground. Aoife's was a giantess; mine was a woman of average height.

I approached the owl's enclosure holding the southern half of a northbound rat, being careful not to spill its delectable and nutritious guts on the dusty ground.

"Nice and slow now, Bonnie-Kate," said Aoife, who knew her way around an owl. "You don't want to startle her."

The owl fidgeted on her perch, a little nervous about meeting me for the first time. It was mutual. I unlatched her door and proffered the rodential bounty, thinking she would graciously accept the meal I had personally murdered and butchered for her sole benefit. It didn't quite go that way.

As her door swung open she launched herself at me and with one beat of her wings landed on my head, driving needle-sharp talons into my skull like roofing nails. Once situated, she tried to eat my eyes.

That was hard to defend against because I was still moronically clutching half a super-yummy dead rat like a cherished childhood toy I couldn't bear to part with.

Aoife shrieked at the blood streaming down my face. I might

have shrieked, too, since it hurt like the proverbial motherfucker, but my thoughts were otherwise occupied: *Of course a bird of prey is pecking my eyes out, this is how I will die.*

Aoife finally regained enough presence of mind to remove the owl from me. She did so by ripping her off my head, which tore my scalp so horrifically the red rivulets on my face became a cascade. I looked like I had put on a bright red Halloween devil mask. Aoife put the owl back in her cage and I lobbed the half-rat in before she closed the door.

"Mission accomplished," I said. "The owl is fed."

Aoife was wringing her hands and going, "Ogod ogod ogod we…you…hospital, Omigod the fucking blood!"

So, yeah, they sewed me up again, twenty four stitches that time. There was more head shaving, so it looked like my mange had come out of remission. The most painful part was a torn eyelid which would never heal quite right and left me looking like I was about to ask an incredulous question. People continue to find this facial expression offputting, which suits me just fine.

I took a couple of days to recuperate, then I went back. My co-volunteers were surprise to see me again so soon. Or at all.

The first person I saw was Connie, who stared open-mouthed for a moment before accepting that I was not some mange-afflicted apparition come a-haunting. On her desk was a box of squirrels and in the corner of the reception area I noted the unmistakable shape of a banjo case.

"Yours?" I asked, nodding at the case.

"You bet. I don't leave her in the car when it's hot out."

"Smart." I peered into the squirrel box. "And these guys?"

"A kid shot their mother with a .22. They ought to ban those damn things."

"I hate .22s." Petra's weapon of choice.

"I meant kids."

She gave a sardonic laugh and asked me to take the squirrels into the back where we kept the juveniles. I had worked with squirrels before and found them most agreeable. Not at all bitey. Aoife helped me transfer them to more suitable housing, then I was ready to face owls, bobcats, and coyotes, the more savage the better, bring 'em on. I was eager to get back on the horse, and especially to work with the bobcat, who behaved like an adorable thirty-five pound kitten.

When I returned to Wild Care the following day, I brought along my violin for no other reason than to make it broadly known that I owned a violin. Such vanity.

Connie said, "Can you play that thing?"

"Hell yes."

She folded her arms and waited for me to prove it, so I baked up a nice crispy rendition of *Angeline the Baker*, a traditional piece I'd nailed down the previous summer.

Connie approved. "Been at it a while, haven't you?"

"Um...nine years, give or take." It was actually ten, but I'd

lost some time to head trauma and dog bites.

"You one of those child prodigies?"

"I'm seventeen," I said, a bit indignantly. "Not exactly a child." I drove a car to this place every day. Did she not notice?

"You look...ah, well, nevermind." I silently thanked her for not saying I looked twelve. She went on. "Bluegrass player, huh?"

"And shanties, and classical. A little bit of everything, really."

"*Whiskey Before Breakfast*?"

"Yep."

"*Nine Pound Hammer*?"

"Sure."

"*Foggy Mountain Breakdown*?"

"Any breakdown you want."

She chuckled. "We play on Friday nights. It's informal, just amateurs playing for grins. Care to sit in?"

Just when things were going reasonably well, here it was, staring me down: a gold-plated, fire-breathing complication, and one of my own devising. I might as well have ordered it from the Sears catalog.

I had in the past asked myself what the point of all this fiddling was, and answered (unconvincingly) that it was for my own amusement and nothing more. Effective immediately, I called bullshit on that.

"Yeah, ok, sounds good. Where and what time?"

We met that Friday at Connie's house, an older cedar-

shingled affair with lots of nooks and crannies, after all the critters were seen to.

As the music unspooled I barely held back my tears for all the lost years I'd spent hiding in my room, playing with and for no one. What on earth was I thinking when I intentionally denied myself all this joy?

There was another fiddle player—twice my age and half my skill—but we meshed just fine. It was just as Connie promised: amateurs playing with no particular aim but to have as much fun as possible. I would keep these acquaintances casual, and politely decline any offers that might lead to actual friendship.

The youngest male in our group was forty-seven and looked like Mel Torme, so the spectre of unwanted romantic entanglements was not a concern. I had lately thought of jettisoning my pesky virginity, but it wasn't urgent, and wasn't going to happen here. I made it clear at the outset that I wouldn't play in public, and everyone agreed that was not what we were about. Then they hit me with what might have been the deal-breaker: Everybody sings. I protested.

"I promise you, no one wants to hear me sing."

My voice was like an eighty-year-old Appalachian woman crossed with a six-year-old child, trying to harmonize with a drunken goat.

"Don't sing because it sounds good," said Mel Torme, "Sing because it feels good." He demonstrated: "I am a lineman fer the

cown-teeeee—"

If my billy goat was drunk, his had wandered onto the interstate and been flattened by a semi. He nodded at me and said, "You're up, fiddler." They all looked at me, waiting for a song. In case you weren't aware, being called upon for an impromptu performance will always cause every song you know to be instantly erased from your memory.

"I can't think of a good song."

"Then sing a bad song," said Mel.

Damn it. I was going to have to do this. I meekly started on the first thing that came to mind.

"Little bunny—"

"Louder please!" That was Connie, always in charge.

I glared at her. Fine, I thought. You asked for it.

"*LITTLE BUNNY FOO FOO, HOPPING THROUGH THE FOREST!*"

Everyone joined in. "Scooping up the field mice and boppin' 'em on the head!"

Connie smiled and said, "And that was your trial by fire. You passed, you're in."

Little Bunny Foo Foo became an indispensable part of our repertoire, rolled out when comic relief was needed, such as in response to a murder ballad like *Tom Dooley* or *Banks of the Ohio*.

When I found out our rag-tag collection of players had no

name I suggested The Velvet Frog, which was resoundingly approved. I felt accepted, my place secure.

I began to feel a dangerous happiness. In conjunction with my wildlife work, our Friday night gatherings came perilously close to negating the void in my day-to-day existence, and therefore would not be allowed to stand. Nature may abhor a vacuum, but it made an exception in my case and demanded one. It came to me this time in the shape of a coyote named Wylie who registered his dissatisfaction with me by biting off and consuming (with apparent relish) a portion of my left middle finger. It was my fault. He was just being a coyote.

Wylie generally behaved like a well-manner domestic canine —no excessive farting or leg humping—and I foolishly treated him like one. When I brought his evening meal, he poked his nose through the chain link fence, which I (or any other reasonable person, I must insist) took to mean he would like a friendly scratch on the snout. I misread the coyote.

He locked onto the last joint of my finger like I had no business claiming it for my own. I said firmly, but not quite hysterically, "Wiley, no!" and tried to pull away. He now viewed our conflict as a battle to see who would claim the life-giving sustenance that was my finger. He folded his ears back and set up a fearsome growl through his clenched teeth. I pulled, he pulled back. Sheer panic arrived right on schedule. I gave a mighty heave that caused the parting of sinew and bone. Distressing as

that was, still worse was watching him chew and swallow what until recently was a cherished—or at least useful—piece of my own personal self.

I bled like a French whore for a while, then several things took place in rapid succession: a tourniquet, a break-neck ride to the emergency room, several doctors and nurses, one surgery, and lots of painkillers. Hospital personnel repeatedly demanded to know what (or who) bit me. I wasn't giving Wiley up.

"Miss Caldwell, we need to know so we can test the animal for rabies." That was medical shorthand for 'we would like to cut Wiley's head off,' which is the prerequisite to a rabies test.

Aoife came to the rescue. Not mine, Wiley's.

"There was a stray dog running around, wasn't there. That's who bit her."

I nodded stupidly; the painkillers were working just fine.

"And where is this dog now?"

Aoife and I looked at each other, which had the same effect as holding up a WE ARE LYING banner.

"Oh, he ran away," I slurred.

"Any idea where?"

"Off to see the Wizard, the wonderful Wizard of Oz!" I giggled like an idiot.

"Try to follow me, Miss Caldwell," said the doctor, who looked like Atticus Finch, I mean Gregory Peck. "If we can't test the animal that bit you, we will have to test for the level of pre-

exposure vaccine in your system. While we wait for the results of that test, we must assume the animal was rabid, and give you the post-exposure vaccine, which is a series of fifteen to thirty injections in the abdomen. They're quite painful."

Since I was wasted, Aoife asked, "How long does it take to get the test results?"

"Up to three weeks, it depends on the lab."

Aoife said, "What do you say, Champ? Ready for some belly shots?"

"If you had a million dollars what wait nevermind I forgot what I was gonna say."

Somewhere in all this I agreed to get the shots so Wiley wouldn't have to die. Three weeks later the lab informed us I was already protected and didn't need the agonizing rabies series I'd received. I already knew I didn't need them because Wiley wasn't rabid, but state law would have cut his head off, anyway. Hence the web of lies.

On the plus side, when all was said and done, I was fucking bulletproof. Buried alive in rabid bats and foxes, I would emerge victorious.

The minus side was formidable. I would never again flip the bird effectively with my left hand—I often used both hands to really get the message home—and my future as a violinist was in question. Had Wiley feasted upon my right middle finger (bow hand), this would not have been as grave an issue. But his feast

was catered by my fingering hand. Many weeks would pass before the pain subsided enough for me to relearn my instrument.

Mom responded to my latest debacle in her usual way, packing us off to Mille Jours for a week. Her childhood home was on a cay in the Philippines and she subscribed to the healing power of the sea's rhythms. I thought if the sea did any healing it was due to the placebo effect, but I loved Mille Jours as deeply as a normal person might love a spouse or child. I wasn't about to argue the point.

At the end of the week we were packing to return to Stone-n-Ivy, when I threw out a radical suggestion.

"What if I stay a while?"

"What, here? On the island?"

"Yeah."

"All by yourself?"

"Not really. Edgar's here."

"I don't know if that's such a good idea."

"Come on, Mom. I'm almost an adult."

"How would you get back to the main?"

"Edgar could take me over."

"You know I pay him for that, don't you?"

"Oh."

"And how would you get back down to Wiscasset?"

"I could find a ride."

I avoided mentioning the H-word, but Mom was no dummy, she knew I meant using my thumb. I returned to the mainland with her that day, but a new glimmer iridesced in the back of my mind: I might one day pass great spans of time alone on Mille Jours, without interference from people, animals, appointments or schedules. I filed away my visions of a personal utopia and focused on another, more immediate complication (of the non-fleshy variety).

In the years since Dad was killed, Mom never once complained of financial difficulty. I had no excuse for failing to consider that things might be hard for her, a single parent. I cringed to think of how thoughtlessly I expected her to fund such frivolities as my rabies vaccinations and the little red Volkswagen Beetle in which I came and went as I pleased. Who the fuck did I think I was, anyway?

Epiphany struck like a ball-peen hammer (which is the funniest kind of hammer): I had become Fuckface, expecting everything, giving nothing in return. This had to be set right.

On our return to Wiscasset I drove to Wild Care and tendered my verbal resignation.

"I'm sorry, Connie. I won't be able to work here anymore."

"Nobody blames you, Bonnie-Kate. We're all so sorry about your...accidents."

"Oh, that's not it. I have to get a real job that pays money."

"What about the Frog?" She meant the Velvet one.

"I'm out for a couple of months, maybe more."

She looked at my ornately bandaged left hand, then my unencumbered right. "Y'know, you look a lot like our new tambourine player."

In a moment of blinding imperception I said, "You got someone new already?" I had more of these moments than one might care to admit.

Connie crossed her eyes at me, an expression she used in place of saying, "No, dumb-ass, I'm talking about you."

"Oh! You mean me! Ok, sure, I can do that."

"I trust you can still sing, too."

"I never could before."

She dismissed that as a technicality and said she'd see me on Friday.

My first ventures into the world of gainful employment met with mixed results: disaster mixed with catastrophe mixed with crimson embarrassment mixed with immediate dismissal.

Saltwater Slim hired me as a carhop, but I quickly tired of the indecent proposals from the male clientele. One was in his fifties and correctly guessed my Filipina lineage.

"So, sweetheart, are you an LBFM?"

"I don't think so," I said, smiling, anticipating a generous tip. "What is it?"

He wouldn't tell me, so I asked Mom.

"Where did you hear that?"

"A customer asked if I was one."

"You're not." She obviously didn't like talking about this.

"But what does it mean?"

"Ok, little cabbage, you may as well hear it from me. It came from US servicemen stationed in the Philippines in World War II. They used to call…um…*eligible* Filipinas LBFMs. Little Brown Fucking Machines."

I swore vengeance on that customer but was summarily fired before I got the chance. Another patron suggested I get in the back seat with him. I politely if impatiently declined his offer and went to place his order. When I returned he repeated his proposition, this time waving a $20 at me. I inverted his lunch in his lap. The large cherry Coke did the most damage.

He was out of his car instantly, brushing ice cubes, french fries and chili dogs off his saturated chinos.

"You little cunt! Bitch! Fucking whore!"

I planted my right foot in his nuts, but it wasn't as effective as I'd been led to believe. He failed to collapse on the ground in agony. Saltwater Slim arrived in time to stop him from murdering me, while simultaneously promoting me to the ranks of the newly unemployed.

I thought I might parlay my Wild Care experience into a pet store job. That lasted three days, during which I was bitten by everything with teeth, up to and including the goddamn fish, for Christ's sake. I should have been flattered that so many varieties

of animals considered me a delicacy, but I was not.

On my first day at Tjorgensen's Pizzeria a child untied my apron three times and kicked me in the shin, so I kicked him back. I was summarily escorted from the premesis. I honestly didn't know it was so hard to have a job. Summer was almost gone and I hadn't earned squat.

"I got fired again, Mom."

"Poor little cabbage. What happened this time?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"I understand. Would you like a snack?"

She didn't wait for answer, just darted to the kitchen and returned with Triscuits and sesame chicken salad upon which we feasted.

"I don't seem to be very good at, y'know, jobs."

"Don't be silly. You just need to find your calling."

"I don't think I have one."

"Of course you do. Might I suggest...?"

She was always so careful not to ruffle my feathers, like I might get mad and run away from home. I guess that was because we only had each other and she didn't want to be alone in the world. That was true for me, too, but I tried not to think about it. Too scary.

"Suggest away," I said. "I need some more stuff to get fired from."

"A good job for you will involve the English language.

Grammar and vocabulary, that kind of thing. I've read some of your stories, you're good with words."

"Any job openings around here for a teenage newspaper editor? Or copy writer, or English professor?"

I was still writing, but mostly against my will (stories in my head insisted on being written, whether I wanted to or not), and nothing I could get paid for.

"Not likely. But you might find something in the field, like an office assistant or an unpaid intern. For the experience."

"Unpaid won't cut it, Mother. I need a paycheck."

"Do you need more allowance?" My allowance was already generous.

"It isn't that." Note to self: stop accepting allowance.

"Then?"

"I need to pay for something myself instead of having you throw big handfuls of money at my every whim. I've been greedy."

"But, Bonnie-Kate, you hardly ask for anything, and you do so much around the house. When you need something I'm glad to help. That's part of being a parent."

"But a single parent? With all the bills and stuff? How can you afford all that?"

I saw in her eyes she was about to lay some great big adultish TRVTH on me.

"What do you really know about our finances, little cabbage?"

"Not a damn thing." She frowned at the d-word, which wasn't fair considering her very recent use of the f-word. "Not much, I mean."

"Talk of money is distasteful, but you are old enough to know that we are well off. Your father had insurance and a will that provided handsomely for both of us. This house is paid-for, and the jewelry store does well. We're not millionaires, but money is one thing you don't have to worry about."

Well. Didn't I feel like an idiot for asking. Or not asking. I'd always assumed we were struggling in the lower middle class.

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

"Aoife once said you'd buy me a pony if I wanted one."
We laughed together, then she said in all seriousness, "Would you like a pony?"

It was coming on the start of my senior year in high school, so my job prospects were restricted to afternoons and weekends. Well off or not, it was time for me to earn my own money, and now it was personal: I needed a job to prove that I could get one and not be fired in the first week.

After a few more dismal failures (hardware store, bowling alley, movie theater concession stand—don't ask about the extra butter incident—I put on my rattiest jeans and a Felix the Cat t-shirt, set my jaw, and marched into the lobster co-op where the

fishermen sold their catch and bought bait and fuel. It was an entirely male-dominated field and I was about to plant my vagina right in the middle of it. It was the early 1970s; women's lib was happening.

Everyone who worked at the co-op, young and old, could be described as grizzled. I approached the first person I saw, a stern-faced man who was quite grizzled indeed.

He sized me up and said, "Hey there, li'l bit. You lost?"

Everything in this office, including the man I was speaking to, was covered in a thin layer of dust, and smelled of fish you wouldn't buy at the supermarket, not even for your cat.

"Who does the hiring here?"

"You're lookin' at him." The sunlight in the room filtered through windows that had not been Windexed in the last hundred years, making his expression hard to discern.

"I want a job."

"This some kind of joke?"

"Nope."

He suffered a momentary loss of speech, during which he stared at me open-mouthed. I saw he was missing some important teeth.

"I really need a job. Please?"

"I see." He scratched his whiskers. "Name?"

"Bonnie-Kate Caldwell."

"Mike Hutchinson. Call me Hutch."

"Ok, Hutch."

"This ain't what you'd call a woman's line of work, y'know."

"I know."

"Men can be awful crude."

"I know."

"Lotta harsh language, dirty jokes, that kind of thing."

I looked at him unblinking and said, "What did the fourteen-inch cock say to the freshly shaved pussy?"

"Er...ah..." The power of speech left him again, briefly. "Well, I don't know, Miss Caldwell. What did the fourteen-inch cock say to the freshly shaved pussy?"

I shrugged. "Fuck if I know. Here's cum in your eye? Maybe?" I was absolutely making it up as I went.

"Your joke sucks, lady," said Hutch, but he was smiling.

"Thanks, I've got a million of 'em. Can I have a job now?"

"Follow me."

I went with him down to the dock, which was also redolent of spoiled fish despite being in the open air. Several men were transacting business with a couple of lobster boats. Hutch pointed to a wooden crate full of lobsters.

"Put that on the scale."

Everyone stopped and watched me fail repeatedly to lift the crate anywhere near the height of the scale.

"Ok, try that one." Hutch indicated a box of salted herring that was, if anything, heavier. I barely made it budge. "Ok, follow

me."

He led me back up the ramp to the so-called office where we sat on dusty chairs.

"Heavy lifting ain't your strong suit, is it?"

"Guess not." It wasn't looking good.

"Well. There's other work besides lifting. I admit I admire your gumption."

"That's me, lots of gumption. Tons, really." (*What the fuck is gumption?*)

"Any references?"

I couldn't use any of my recent employers, but I mentioned Wild Care and how the animals tried to kill me.

"Any other qualifications that might be useful?"

"I won Best Butt in junior high." That was the sole item on my list of accolades; I was literally resting on my laurels.

"I see." He scribbled on a piece of paper. "Here's the thing, Miss Caldwell. Just now when we came up the ramp, did you happen to look back at the guys down there?"

"Nope."

"I did. Every feller on the dock was pritneah[*] hypnotized, watchin you walk up the ramp. You follow me?"

"Yep."

"If you was to come to work here, I could tell 'em hands off, but I can't stop 'em from lookin'. And they will look, I promise

[*****] Pretty near.

you that."

"I'm used to it."

"But are you ok with it?"

"I'm not crazy about it, just realistic."

We hashed out some details like my age—Hutch thought I was fourteen—my hours, and my wage: $4.00 an hour; not bad for a kid in 1972.

I was hired as an errand girl, but between errands I operated the fuel pumps, which meant lots of running up and down the ramp and dragging hoses—green for diesel, black for gas—around on the dock. My shift was afternoons, a busy time when all the boats came in to settle up before going home to supper.

On my first day I was filling up the tank of a boat called *Darling Millie* when one of my co-workers, Matt Something, said, "Looks like you know how to handle a big ol' hose."

I smiled and yelled, "THANKS MISTER TINY-PENIS!" I was an accomplished yeller; this echoed across the harbor. I waved at him with my pinkie, thus our working relationship was established. They would try to rattle me with innuendo and I would fire right back, as bad or worse. It became a game and they usually let me win.

Staring happened as promised, but I wore shapeless waterproof overalls that left everything to the imagination, so they gave up on that pretty quick. I confess to having mixed emotions about that. I wanted one day for women to be able to go

about their business without being objectified and drooled over, but on a personal ego-stroking level it wasn't so bad to know there were men who thought there was something attractive about me. I apologize to Gloria Steinem for that.

On day three I tripped over one of my own hoses and fell off the dock. As I thrashed about in the water, a harbor seal came over to see if I had any fish, but I didn't. Matt and Hutch hauled me out. I finished my shift making squishy noises in my boots. Before we quit for the day, Matt came up and said "Don't feel bad, you ain't the first to fall in. I done it. So has Hutch."

I somehow fit in with these grizzled men and they were glad to adopt me as one of their own. It was my foul mouth that won them over. Does that count as language skills? My mother would be so proud.

My senior year of high school progressed more or less as planned, even though I didn't feel senior to anyone. 'As planned' meant in complete anonymity, without complications or expectations. I joined a creative writing group at Mr. Jenkins's insistence and allowed a couple of items to be published (to zero fanfare). I used my own name since Veronica Charles was killed when the private plane she was piloting crashed in the jungles of Borneo. I hated to say goodbye, she was SO intrepid.

The Velvet Frog still met on Fridays and I joined them when I could, banging the tambourine on my much-lauded hip and gradually reintroducing my violin to the proceedings. I sang as

required, taking the lead vocal on *Blackjack Davey*, *O, The Wind and Rain*, and *Girl From the North Country*. Mel Torme was absolutely right: singing your ass off felt good. I was still a little self-conscious, but that went away when the music started.

On a Friday in November I came home and found a note stuck to the fridge with a sand-dollar magnet I made in second grade.

> Hello Little Cabbage!
> I had to go back to the shop for a bit, could be late so don't wait up. Inventory, ugh! Dinner's in the oven.
> Love ya, Mom.

I wolfed down a plate of beefy cheesy casserole, hit the shower, the books and the sack, in that order. My schedule was beating the crap out of me, but it was a good kind of tired when I lay down at night.

I slept less than an hour before the doorbell rang. My alarm clock said 11:37. I answered the door dressed in an oversized t-shirt that used to be my dad's. It said MAERSK on it, which was a shipping company or something.

"Miss Caldwell?" Two men stood in the porch light, one was a cop.

"Yeah?" I was not entirely awake.

"Bonnie-Kate Caldwell?"

"Uh huh."

I'm Detective Stroud of the Maine State Police. This is officer Ellis." That came from the non-cop who it turned out was really a cop. "I'm afraid we have some bad news."

I yawned at him. "No thank you."

"Er, excuse me?" He looked perplexed.

"I don't need any bad news right now. Maybe tomorrow." I started closing the door.

"Miss Caldwell, it's about your mother." He looked at his little notepad. "Sonia? Owner of Ruby's Jewelry?"

"Oh. God. No." I felt weak. "What the fuck are you saying?"

"There's been an attempted robbery. Your mother was injured."

"How bad? Where is she? Why aren't you arresting the person that did this? There aren't supposed to be robberies in Wiscasset, it's too quaint!"

"Try to stay calm, Miss Caldwell. Your mother was taken to the emergency room. She's been shot."

My knees gave out and I collapsed on the carpet. When I came to, they told me she was in surgery and would I like a ride to the hospital.

"No, I have a car. I can drive." But my hands trembled like I was having my own personal tectonic shift.

"Let us help you, Bonnie-Kate. You're in no shape to drive."

The uniformed one said that. He seemed nice, and I let them

drive me.

There was a waiting room, too bright and sterile, although now that I think about it, that's what you want from a hospital, isn't it. The cops offered to stay but I didn't want anyone around so they left me in peace. I tried to read one of the magazines—they had Newsweek and Down East—but I could only read the same sentence over and over. I gave up and stared at a fake plant, hating its fakeness.

After a while a doctor came in and said, "Are you Miss Caldwell?"

"Yes."

"Is your father here? Or someone—"

"No, it's just me. I'm her family. How is she? Can I see her?"

He looked especially pained at having to deal with what he thought was a child. "Isn't there an aunt or uncle?"

"I'm her only living relative. And she's mine." A small lie that might as well have been true. "Will you please tell me what's going on?"

He exhaled sharply. "I'm terribly sorry, Miss Caldwell."

I didn't let him finish. "She died, didn't she."

He nodded and started to go on, but I grabbed my purse, thanked him, and walked out of the room.

Of course she died.

The doctor caught up with me in the hall. "I'm concerned for your well-being."

"Don't be. I've done this before."

I left the hospital and stood in the chilly fall night, watching the moon and waiting for tears. I took a cigarette from my purse, lit it, and crushed it out. Then I started screaming.

People in lab coats came out of nowhere, bearing sedatives.

This Is Not Elba

My roommate was an older woman named Janet who rose at 5:30am to sit in her chair until breakfast, rocking and crying. After pancakes and eggs at 6:30, she came back to our room to do that some more. Concerned, I told the nurse.

"Yes, we're monitoring her."

"Can I help? Like, talk to her or something?"

"It's better not to."

I returned to our shared room and sat in my chair since there wasn't anything else to do. I'd only been there a few hours, most of them asleep, and wasn't planning to stay long. I didn't know any of the other patients on the psych ward yet, but assumed they, like Janet, were in genuine need of mental help. I was an impostor, an emotionally stable person taking up valuable bed space that could be put to better use.

After the meds wore off I did some crying, too. That was a big mistake because it made them think I was as unstable as Janet. They tried to give me more meds, but I had other plans.

"I have to leave now." Everything I was doing there could be better done at home.

"The doctor would like to speak with you, Bonnie-Kate. He'll

be here this afternoon."

"But I have to feed my dog." The idea of Bailey going hungry gnawed at me, and in my current state was likely to provoke further tears.

"We have a note from the Wiscasset police, your dog is being cared for by...let me see here...by a Mr. Flaherty?"

He was our next door neighbor, so Bailey was safe.

"I'd still like to leave now." I could see the gears grinding in her head as she tried to come up with a reason why I should stay. "I'm not a danger to myself or others, ok?"

"The doctor would still like to see you before you go." She gave me an oily smile.

"Why?"

"Just to make sure you're ok."

"How will he find out if I'm ok?"

"By talking with you."

"So my release will depend on whether I'm ok to go...according to me."

She looked confused and started flipping pages on her clipboard like one of them might tell her how to make me stop whatever it was I was doing to her.

"Listen," I said. "I have a lot more crying to do, and I would prefer to do it in the privacy of my own home. Surely you understand that? And I can tell you right now, according to me, I am good to go, squared away, shipshape, seaworthy and A-ok."

She riposted with "Will you at least stay for lunch? The food is good here. You'd like some lunch, wouldn't you?"

In other circumstances this would have been an effective tactic but I sensed it was from chapter one of *The Care and Feeding of the Stark Raving Mad*: 'The insane will often respond favorably to bribes of food.'

"I'm not hungry."

This was another tactical error on my part. Lack of appetite is a sure sign of clinical depression. I was clearly about to kill myself. The nurse flipped more pages and notated furiously.
Before our dispute came to blows, another nurse with another clipboard came in and said, "Miss Caldwell? You have visitors."

It was my Aunt Laura and Uncle Gordon who had just red-eyed their way from Kansas City to Portland via La Guardia. While they showered me with condolences and airport gift shop trinkets (including a stuffed lobster named Larry, whose name I immediately changed to Lucifer), hospital staff worked behind the scenes to blue-paper me when I wasn't looking. That's a fancy term for having me temporarily committed, which meant I couldn't leave until they said so. I got a look at this document after the fact and found it fraudulent. My 'global assessment of functioning' was 20 on a scale of 100, which meant I was shoving berries up my nose and throwing poop at the walls, two things I almost never do. At least not at the same time.

I considered making a run for it—Chief Broom in miniature

—but when I played out the scenario in my mind it always ended with me effortlessly subdued and mortally sedated. Possibly lobotomized.

I abandoned my escape plans and cooperated to a reasonable extent with the headshrinkers and their minions.

Aunt Laura and Uncle Gordon (L&G) hesitated to talk about the details of Mom's death but I eventually hammered some useful info out of them during their visits to the psych ward.

"Did they catch the guy that did it?" I couldn't speak the words 'murdered my mother' yet, even though it seemed awfully cold to refer to the killing of the woman inside of whom I once lived as 'it.'

"Yes, they got him," said Aunt Laura since Uncle Gordon wasn't much of a talker, which was what I liked best about him.

"Is he in jail? What's going to happen to him?"

Laura patted my knee and resettled her ultra-unfashionable cat's eye glasses. "He was shot and killed by the police on the night of the robbery."

She thought I'd be overjoyed at this, but even I was surprised at how numb I felt. More dead people, yay.

"Ok, I guess that's good. Where's Mom now?"

"She's been released to a local funeral home. Davis & Sons."

"She has to be buried on Mille Jours, with Dad." I growled this so they'd know it wasn't negotiable.

"Of course. The arrangements have been made."

"When is it?"

"This Sunday, in the afternoon."

I felt a moment's panic. "What if I'm still stuck here?"

"You will be at your mother's funeral," said Laura. "Don't worry about that."

I thanked her, then we were quiet for a minute. I had more questions and didn't like being in a position where I had to ask them. I was Mom's only daughter and couldn't do anything to help her. A kid, shepherded by grown-ups.

"What happens to her house? And Ruby's? Where will I live now?"

"Your mother's estate is in the hands of a law firm who will be in touch with you very soon. All we know is that she had a will and life insurance. Uncle Gordon and I have been over to the house to put everything in order."

"In order to what? I want to stay there."

"Let's not try to solve everything right this very minute. There will be time to work out the details after the funeral. I must say, Bonnie-Kate, you seem to be bearing up well, considering the circumstances."

"I must say, Aunt Laura, you're being evasive, considering the circumstances." But I let it go.

Things went quiet again, so I had time to think about what was meant by 'circumstances.' My mother, whom I was so careful to keep a certain distance from, was murdered at the age of forty,

with only half her life lived and so much more she wanted to do. I was now an orphan at seventeen with no real family to speak of. Mom was estranged from whatever family she might have in the Philippines, and L&G, bless their hearts, might as well have been random strangers. I knew next to nothing about them, which was my own fault, and they knew precious little about me (also my fault). I was effectively alone in the world and I hadn't even finished high school.

Visiting hours ended and hugs were exchanged but I didn't really feel it.

I stayed on the ward for three days during which I met a staff member—a janitor—who remembered Petra Basov from her brief stay before she was moved to the state mental hospital. In his recollection she never laughed or smiled, not once. Sounded exactly like the Petra I once knew.

The psych ward finally released me after L&G promised to keep an eye on my situation. They actually planned to do much more than that. When I got home I found that 'putting everything in order' meant packing up all of Mom's stuff and getting rid of the perishable food. They were the adults (theoretically) so I assumed they knew what they were doing. I did question the removal of foodstuffs since it could only mean we weren't staying at Stone-n-Ivy, the house where I grew up.

"Uhm, what's going on here?"

"What do you mean?" said Gordon.

"Where's the food?"

He looked guilty. "Sit down, Bonnie-Kate. Just for a minute."

I was sorely tempted to remain standing so they'd know I wasn't their freakin' marionette, but that would have been needlessly testy. There's a time for testy, and this wasn't it. I sat.

"You're going to tell me something bad, aren't you."

"Oh, no, not at all. We just need to talk about your mother's will for a moment."

"Look, I don't care if she left me anything or not. I'm not thinking about that right now."

"It isn't about her estate."

"Then?"

"Her will specified that if she were to pass away before you turned eighteen, Aunt Laura and I would be appointed your legal guardians."

"So you're my guardians for, like, six months."

"We won't kick you out on your eighteenth birthday, dear." *Dee-ur*, not *dee-ah*. Agh.

"Out of where?" I already knew the answer and thought I would shatter like fine china if it were spoken aloud.

"Our home, of course. Your home."

I cracked a little. "In Kansas."

"Yes, in Kansas."

I cracked a lot more. There was a creaking of chairs, and the ticking of the wall clock that had marked every minute of my

seventeen years.

"What if I don't want to go?"

"It was your mother's last wish, Bonnie-Kate," said Laura, trying to guilt me.

"That isn't even true. And besides, I hate Kansas." I wasn't being difficult, just honest. Well—both, really.

"Why would you say that?" asked Gordon.

"There's no ocean. I need the ocean."

"There's lakes." He looked so hopeful, like you could substitute a muddy catfish-infested pond for the indisputable majesty of an ocean. With whales!

"I have to go see Bailey now." Code for 'I'm going to cry now.'

"Who is Bailey?"

"Oh my god! I'm supposed to live with you and you don't even know I have a fucking dog?!" I ran from the room and out the front door with Gordon right behind me. "Stop following me!"

"Please, Bonnie-Kate, everything is ok. Try to calm down."

I steadied myself and snapped, "Your definition of OK is a lot different from mine!"

He started to say something but I yelled "Bailey!" and went after the sound of his barking.

We stayed at Stone-n-Ivy that night and Laura made dinner from the canned stuff that survived the great purge: Chef Boy-ar-dee ravioli, Campbell's minestrone, and Del Monte creamed corn.

There were mandarin oranges for dessert—Libby's, I think.

"Bonnie-Kate, would you like to say grace?" Gordon was trying to be polite.

"No, I don't talk to that guy anymore."

"He still loves you, sweetie," said Laura.

"Yeah, well, he's got a strange way of showing it."

"Bonnie-Kate—" she began, but I cut her off.

"We are not having this conversation. Not now, not ever."

Gordon said grace while I silently thanked farmers, industrial agriculture and Kraft Foods for the bounty we were about to receive.

In the morning I called Mom's lawyers who said the estate would take a while to finalize. There was nothing for me to do until I was a legal adult, so why didn't I go along with the Fletchers to live in Kansas for a few months and collect my thoughts. There were decisions to make and papers to sign, but not until I was eighteen. Not wanting to make things any more difficult than they already were, I agreed. It wouldn't be easy, but I could survive a few months in the heartland, and not a minute more.

I went next door to see Mr. Flaherty. "Thanks for taking care of Bailey for me."

"We were delighted to have him. Doris and I were so sorry to hear about your mother."

Doris was his wife, but she was ill and didn't come out much.

"Is there anything we can do for you? Anything at all."

"Actually..." I hesitated as one often does before asking a humongous favor. "It looks like I'm going to be stuck in Kansas for a while. Until I turn eighteen, this summer."

"Yes?"

"Do you think you could watch Bailey until I get back? I'll pay for his food and vet bills and stuff."

His eyes lit up. "Of course we will. We'd like nothing better." He and Bailey had really hit it off.

"Mr. Flaherty? Don't say anything to my aunt and uncle but I will be back in Wiscasset the day after I turn eighteen. No more than two days, depending on the drive."

"Got it. Mum's the word." Mr. Flaherty was pretty cool for an old guy.

I believed L&G wanted to mold me into a god-fearing corn-fed Midwest prairie girl and hold me prisoner in Kansas forever. In the interest of not hurting their feelings any more than I already had, I didn't visibly recoil in horror at the idea, but they had willfully overlooked an immutable truth: I was a woman of the Maine Coast. I ate barnacles for breakfast and I pissed saltwater. Transplanted to the prairie, I would soon wither and die.

My last two loose ends—L&G had already taken me out of Wiscasset High—were Aoife and my job at the co-op. Unable to reach Aoife by phone at her school, I explained everything in a

letter, promising to return by August. I went to the co-op in person and Hutch said my job would be waiting for me if I still wanted it, an act of kindness that made me cry a little.

When my dad was killed, his wish was to be cremated. We put half his ashes in the Bone Zone and scattered the rest at Breakers Beach on the east side of Mille Jours. I promised Mom I would do the same for her if I outlived her. If not, she should do the same for me.

"Don't be silly, little cabbage. You'll have many years after I'm gone."

I wasn't so sure, but it's not the kind of thing you argue about.

When it was time for Mom's funeral, L&G found a minister somewhere and contacted Edgar by radio to meet us in Jonesport and take us over. No one else was on the island that time of year.

Mom always loved the roar of Breakers Beach, so we went down there first. The ebb tide lapped at the exposed rockweed beds, and I had to walk through all that to get to the waterline. The sea was rolling pretty hard, like it generally does in November.

I waded in.

I scattered some ashes.

L&G stood back, looking uncertainly at the unnavigable field of boulders I'd just hopped across like the nimblest of mountain goats. I'd been rock-hopping since I was four. When you learn it

young, it never leaves you.

They bit their nails and waited for me to be swept away by the ocean, saying things like,

"Oh, be careful sweetie," and "Please, not so close!"

"I'm trying to bury my mother here, ok? Could you please just knock it off for a minute?"

"But...the waves—"

"Be quiet!"

I let another handful of Mom sift through my fingers into the sea. Fragments of her swirled around my feet in the icy water, settling in bone-white flecks on the seabed and on the legs of my jeans.

"Honey, you're getting all wet, you'll catch your death—"

"AAGH! WILL YOU SHUT UP! PLEASE!"

I poured the rest of my mom into the water. My legs felt weak, so I knelt, then sat down in her midst. I heard gasps from the gallery.

The cold shocked me at first, but I got past it and soon felt nothing but my mom's final embrace. Her body washed over my submerged lower half. I wished for a rogue wave to take us both out to sea. We would drift away, together forever in our beloved ocean, the boundless waters we could not have lived without.

I sat there a moment, waiting for the wave that wouldn't come. L&G didn't want to get yelled at again so they fretted in silence on the shore. Mom was now and forever part of the sea,

and of Mille Jours. This was where she reunited with my dad. I wished her luck, said goodbye, and promised to always stay close.

As soon as I got back from fucking Kansas, I mean.

I stood and walked out of the sea, back to the living people I wasn't exactly gung-ho about residing among anymore.

The breeze picked up. The cold bit me as we walked back to the cabin, trying to freeze my wet clothes solid.

"Oh, sweetie, your teeth are chattering."

"N-n-no they're n-n-not."

I gave Laura this much: she was remarkably forgiving of me being such a little snot. Gordon took off his coat and draped it on my shoulders. I wished they would stop being so nice, it made it that much harder to be snotty. I was in the anger stage of grief and didn't have any targets but the Universe. L&G just happened to be in the fallout zone. Sorry.

After I drank a cup of coffee to warm up, I changed into funeral clothes and we all went to the Bone Zone. We were supposed to be comforted by the minister's god words, but it didn't work for me. It never did. Edgar was the only one there who really knew Mom and me; I got a great deal more comfort from his strong, silent presence. His labor-wizened hand on my shoulder said more to me than any of the words I heard that day. Edgar had a way of always knowing exactly what to do, and when words would be hollow and useless.

When it came time for me to play *Ave Maria* (Mom's

favorite), it rained. Umbrellas came out. I stood under Gordon's while I played, and got through it without too many tears. Then the rain stopped. L&G would call that a coincidence, but I knew better.

We interred Mom's urn, more useless words were said, and we went back to the cabin for snacks and misery.

That afternoon I caught Laura rearranging the dresser in the big bedroom. She had a stack of Mom's clothes set aside on the bed, like she was planning to take them somewhere.

"I was just putting away some of your mother's things."

"Emptying her dresser is the opposite of putting away."

"Just packing a few things up."

I took a stack of Mom's clothes and returned them to the dresser. Her scent was on the sweaters, mingled with red cedar. I nearly cracked.

"I let you do this at Stone-n-Ivy. Not here."

"I'm only trying to help."

"Thank you. It would help most if you stopped doing this right now. I'll take care of it when I get back from Kansas. Ugh." I didn't actually say 'ugh' but it was implied. She knew it was there.

"What if you decide to stay with us in Kansas?"

"That's about as likely as you joining the First Church of Satan."

End of discussion.

We flew out of Portland the following afternoon, arriving in

Kansas City without explosions, fires, or emergency landings, the latter of which was unfortunate because I wanted to go down the big slide. The lack of disasters made me wonder if now that the Universe was done robbing me of everyone I loved, maybe it was finished with me. I was still conspicuously alive, which the Universe had in the past found problematic, but I'd anticipated my own untimely death for so long the prospect no longer frightened me.

Arriving at the Fletcher house, I was reminded how much I disliked it. A split-level ranch, it stood in a newish upper-middle-class subdivision called Greeley Park, where, by all appearances, only two models of houses were permitted. You put your money down, made your selection, and your cookie-cutter dwelling popped out of the House-O-Matic machine, all ready for you to move in and be stripped of every shred of individuality, if you ever had any. It made me want to puke.

I was, however, pleased to learn that Kathy, the eldest of the flawless Fletcher children and the archest of my nemeses, was away at secretarial school or Suzy Homemaker College or some other Institution for Keeping Women in Their Place. Top of her class, no doubt.

L&G enrolled me in the senior class of Pawnee Mission West High School, a name that conjured up images of noble indigenous peoples having their culture beaten out of them with bibles and the lash. 100% of the student body could have been

dropped into an episode of *Our Miss Brooks* without so much as a wardrobe change. I was no beacon of hipness, but these kids were like, squaresville, Daddy-o.

In my music class we were told to bring a record from home, ostensibly to let us hear a cross-section of current trends in popular music. I suffered through Donny Osmond, Conway Twitty, and the maudlin drivel of Bobby Goldsboro, then I took my shot. I had some bluegrass and Paganini but opted for something more suited to my rebellious frame of mind: *Exile on Main Street*. Someone had to introduce these Future Farmers of America to rock and roll.

Miss Snead, our teacher and an actual spinster, allowed only thirty seconds of *Rocks Off* before plucking the stylus from the groove and saying, "Well. That's enough of that." It was right at the part where Jagger complains that his dancer friend always pirouettes away from him when she climaxes, leaving him with his rocks unappeased. Another satisfaction-related problem for poor Mick. The inhabitants of the lonesome prairie weren't ready for that, nor could they comprehend it.

To be fair, I met a few kids who liked bluegrass, but that was all we had in common. I fell into my customary role of the sad little foreign-looking person who did not want to be your friend. In other words, my comfort zone. I was confronted with anti-Asian sentiment only once.

"Hey, Ching-chong, is it true what they say about your

pussy?"

I acted like this was a reasonable and thought-provoking inquiry, deserving of open discussion. "What do they say about my pussy?"

"That it's sideways. Is it?"

"Which one?"

"Uhm...which...what now?"

"We have two, you know."

"..."

"You didn't know that?!" I walked away shaking my head. What fools these yokels be.

I made home life in Kansas tolerable by letting everyone know I'd like them to stay the hell away from me. My cousins, Deana and April (thirteen and sixteen, respectively), were still afraid of me because I was a heroin addict and my mere presence was an open invitation to Satan. I had no trouble discouraging them from attempts at friendship. April foolishly spoke some god-words at me once. I asked, "Where do you suppose god was when my mother was being shot in the face?"

She said I should just have faith that it was for the greater good, because this god person always did everything for a godly purpose which was always right and good.

"So you're saying my Mom being shot in the face was a good thing."

"Well, um, it's like—"

"When I reach zero, I am going to start killing you. FIVE! FOUR! THREE!—"

She hoisted her petticoats and wisely decamped.

L&G explained to their children that I was under a lot of strain.

The Fletchers were really very kind to me; kinder than I deserved, making sure I had a steady supply of Pop Tarts, and only searching my room for drugs once a week. When I expressed an interest in working, they set me up with a clerical after-school job at the grain elevator. I learned the hard way that my foul mouth wasn't going to win anyone over.

I said to one of my co-workers, "We shipped an absolute fuckload of soybeans today." He looked at me like I had three vaginas. (For the record, Filipinas-2, Japanese-3, don't even ask about Cambodians.)

I tried my fourteen-inch cock joke but it was met with a marked lack of enthusiasm. I guess gals ain't supposed to talk like that-there. Y'all.

What. The. Fucking. Ever. Five more months.

In March I got a letter from Hanson, Richardson and Dow, my mom's lawyers. Finalizing had occurred and I would soon become the deeded owner of Stone-n-Ivy, and the family homestead, our cabin on Mille Jours. Both free and clear.

Ruby's had been sold and the inventory liquidated. I was sole heir to Mom's cash assets which were just over $385,000. Her

life insurance tacked on another $250,000.

Here's what I hated about that: my mother made me obscenely rich (for a teenager in 1973) and I'd done not a blessed thing to deserve it. I wasn't really a bad kid, but I was stingy with my affection and now it was too late to fix it. What if she died without knowing how much I loved her? Why couldn't somebody shoot me in the face instead of her? She had stuff she wanted to do; I had no long-term goals because I woke up every morning expecting to die before sundown.

Aunt Laura noticed I was more mopey than usual. I think she figured it out because I was only playing slow ballads on my violin, never anything uptempo or happy. I was still learning to play without the last joint of my middle finger. I called it the Wiley Method and it had no advantages whatsoever.

On a Saturday morning I was helping with the breakfast dishes when she said, "Bonnie-Kate, would you like to talk?"

"Of course not. Are you new here? When do I ever want to talk?"

"Don't be like that, sweetie. I'm only trying to help." She was right, I was doing it again.

"Sorry. It's just—" I sighed and told her how I had distanced myself from Mom in the last few years, that I was a deplorable excuse for a human, and that my continued existence was completely uncalled for. She nodded like she understood, which I was sure she didn't, but lo and behold, she did.

"All teenagers do that, kiddo. To one degree or another. It's normal."

All teenagers subscribed to my theory of fatal affection? "Get the fuck out."

"I wish you wouldn't use that word!" She was pissed, the Fletchers had strict rules about words. I once incurred their wrath by saying, "I don't give a rat-fart."

But she continued, more kindly. "Really, Bonnie-Kate, it's a part of growing up. My kids do it to me, I did it to my mother, and your mother did it to hers."

"Get the—" Fuck, I almost said it again. "I mean, no way." I knew by then it was impossible to explain my theory without sounding insane, so I didn't try.

"It's basic adolescent psychology," said Laura. "There's a time in a young person's development when they must assert their independence from their parents. They *must*."

"Yeah?"

"And your mother knew that. She knew you loved her and were growing up and becoming independent just like you're supposed to."

"That changes everything." Not only did it change how I felt about my own (still questionable but maybe not indefensibly horrific) behavior, it made me rethink my attitude toward Aunt Laura. Could it be that she was...smart? I was not at all prepared to abandon my theory of fatal affection, but I began to question

it. The point may have been moot by that time since I'd run out of people to apply it to. Well, there was L&G, but I don't know if love was the right word for what I felt for them. Abiding gratitude was a better fit, but that, too, raised the crucial question: was it lethal?

Someone might be able to make sense of all this, but I was as lost as ever.

That spring L&G wanted me to apply to various colleges and I was forced to be difficult again. I refused. They expected me to remain in Kansas indefinitely, but for once I had a detailed plan for my immediate future:

1. Move back to Maine.
2. Figure something out.

I graduated from Pawnee Mission West in May, and wished I'd left myself one credit short so my diploma would be from a school in Maine. In the long run I didn't suppose it mattered. I did the ceremony, cap and gown, all that crap. Some of the students in attendance had assumed I was a freshman and didn't expect to see me sporting the mortarboard (the least functional headwear ever devised by man) since a high school senior couldn't possibly be that small. Guess again, cowpokes.

L&G were there to clap for me, and I smiled for their pictures. They were beginning to feel like family, but such

feelings were, of course, fraught with peril.

They put together a graduation party to be held at one of the area's catfish infested swamps, which turned out to be a genuine lake and not very muddy if you didn't look too close. The Fletcher's speedboat was launched for the occasion. They also brought a portable bbq grill on which impressive rib eye steaks were grilled perfectly medium-rare (the production of high quality beef being the lone regard in which Kansas did not blatantly suck), a cooler of ice-cold non-alcoholic drinks, and various other munchies including my requisite Pop Tarts. I responded by becoming uncharacteristically festive, and didn't even get snarky with my cousins, all three of whom were in attendance.

After we ate, there was still plenty of daylight, and I was openly threatened with water skiing lessons. I would probably never encounter water this warm again, so, when in Rome, c'est la vie, what the fuck, might as well.

It took quite a few embarrassing failures but I finally remained upright for a short and admittedly exhilarating run, at the end of which I went *splat*. The boat came back around and I bobbed in my life vest near the stern while flaxen-haired cousins yelled "Geronimo!" and cannonballed around me.

Hilarity ensued until Deana, the youngest, sitting backwards in the captain's seat, accidentally butt-shifted the idling engine into reverse. The propeller sucked me in and carved a series of

bone-deep gashes in the back of my right thigh, finally severing my lower leg and pitching it into the air. I watched it sail past, splash down, and disappear beneath the water. I refused to believe another part of me had been amputated without benefit of anesthesia. Surely—I mean *SURELY*—that was someone else's smallish brown leg that just flew by.

Intense pain hit like a knockout punch. I confess that I failed to bear this one with my usual aplomb. I scarcely had time to think *of course my leg has been torn off* in advance of the following, in rapid succession: screaming, tremendous blood loss, tourniquet, more screaming, ambulance, morphine, surgeries, etc. Attempts to locate my AWOL appendage fell short, and I could only assume it was feasted upon by legions of crawdads.

So there's another animal that thought I was food. Bon appetit, motherfuckers. A Maine lobster would kick your ass.

During my convalescence I befriended nurses whose tireless efforts to ease my suffering and raise my spirits were nothing short of heroic.

In my abundant idle time I was left to ponder all the things I would never be able to do again, like walk, dance (which I only did if no one was looking), or drive a car. Dr. Sheffield patiently disabused me of such notions, saying I would soon be fitted with a prosthesis that would allow me to do all of those things to one degree or another. I would be able to live a fairly normal life apart from 'a little hitch in my git-along.'

Idle time also allowed me to dwell on the cosmic implications of misplacing a major limb. My conclusions, as always, were wholly unsatisfactory. I had begun to question my belief that I was on the Universe's hit list, but my unscheduled lower-legectomy reaffirmed it to a near certainty. I had indulged in happiness, and this was the cost the Universe exacted from me.

They tried to give me antidepressants but I declined; that would be tantamount to suicide.

When I returned to L&G's house (sorry, I still couldn't call it home) they went overboard to make me comfortable, which made me feel bad, which kept me safe from further acts of vengeance on the part of the Universe. So, thanks for that. As much as I tried to resist it, I continued to feel a certain warmth toward them and so was once again internally conflicted, my natural state.

After a few weeks I returned to my part-time clerical job at the grain elevator. If you've never seen one up close, grain elevators are basically massive silos ten stories tall. South Wind Milling had three of them standing in a row next to the business offices where I worked. I didn't see L&G much since their jobs kept them on the milling side of the operation.

On the day I returned to work, there was an earthquake that made everything fall off the office shelves. Since they don't have earthquakes in Kansas I first assumed this was the cosmos taking further exception to my ongoing presence. I wondered why it

didn't send a tornado, which would have been more in keeping with that godforsaken flatland.

I looked out the window and saw nothing but blue sky occupying the space normally reserved for our monolithic grain elevators. They had been replaced with a Dresden-like pile of twisted steel and smoking concrete rubble.

Twenty seconds before that, a maintenance engineer working inside the middle tower lit his welding torch, igniting a massive column of airborne super-fine grain dust that subsequently went all Nagasaki on the elevator complex, leaving seventeen employees of South Wind Milling dead, including Laura and Gordon Fletcher.

By the time I got back to their house, the cousins heard the news and were in hysterics. A pastor of some kind was there trying to console them as the *where was god* question came home to roost. Kathy pulled herself together enough to speak to me.

"Uncle Robert's coming from Omaha." That was Gordon's brother.

"Ok. Are you guys going to be all right?"

"I don't see how." She started crying again.

"Yeah. I know."

It was time for me to do the Fletcher kids a great big favor. I went to my room and got my violin, then wrote Kathy a post-dated check for $1,000, twice the value of the Chevy Vega I was about

to steal from the driveway. I really wanted the Jeep, but it was a three-speed and I didn't think I could work the clutch with one and a half legs. I left a note:

> I am so sorry for your loss.
> Thank you for your kindness,
> I am going back to Maine.
> -BKC

I almost said I was leaving so no more of them would die, but that would have taken too much explaining. It was still five days from my birthday so I took a detour south through Oklahoma, Texas and Arkansas before turning northeast for home. In Texas a state trooper pulled me over for being a foreigner and a child, and for having out-of-state plates. Only one of those was actionable, if true, but it wasn't.

I argued against the first count by speaking flawless English, and the second with two photo IDs showing I was of legal age to drive.

"Well, what's a li'l gal from Maine doin' here in Texas, in a car with Kansas plates?"

"Long story."

"Uh huh. Where's your folks at?"

"Dead."

"This their car?"

"My uncle's. From Kansas."

"Where's he at?"

"He got blown up."

"You got an aunt in Kansas, too?"

"Blown up."

He called me in on his radio and couldn't find anything arrestable about me or the Vega.

"Your people get killed in that mill explosion?" It had made the national news.

"Yep."

"How about you tell me your long story."

I did, pulling up the leg of my jeans to show him my metal leg when I got to that part, and explaining that I was on my circuitous way back to the Pine Tree State, trying to synchronize my arrival with my eighteenth birthday for legal reasons.

"That don't make a lick a sense."

"Yeah. I know."

He stared at me for a minute then handed back my IDs. "Y'all drive careful while you're in Texas, y'hear?"

He smiled and I thanked him for not being a dick. I lit a Marlboro and took two aspirin against the ever-present throbbing in my leg, then put the cop in my rearview, where I watched him getting smaller and smaller.

1600 miles to go. I wondered if Bailey would remember me.

Alfredo or Marinara

When I was away at McAlpine, Bonnie-Kate's absence from my life troubled me no end. I knew I'd miss her, and hoped she might miss me, too, but 'twas more like losing a limb. We'd have a bit of a chat on the phone, but it wasn't the same, was it. I needed to see her face, to touch her, to give her a hug when she needed one. That kid needed a lot of hugs.

And now that she'd gone away to Kansas, she might as well have been on the other side of the world.

The day I got her letter I was in such a state I couldn't go to the rest of my classes. How was I to focus on my studies after reading *Dear Aoife, My mother has been murdered*? My hands shook so bad I had to get someone to read the rest to me.

I should never have gone away to school. If only I'd stayed in Wiscasset. I might not have been able to save her ma, but I'd not let anyone take her away like that, would I. I'd have hidden her under my bed, or in the attic. But no, I went prancing off to uni, leaving the poor wee lass to fend when she needed me most. I'll not forgive myself for that any time soon.

She'd told me of her Kansas people. They were well-meaning enough, but they didn't understand her in the least. They wanted

her to be a goody-two-shoes and sure, that's a thing she'd not be. They didn't understand her, they didn't care to understand her, and they didn't deserve to have her.

Now that she'd lost her dear Ma, no one deserved her but me.

Right. I can't believe I said that. What I meant was *I hope I deserve her*.

The first time she called me from Kansas it was such a relief to hear her voice again I nearly broke down in tears. After sobbing at one another a moment, we were right back as we'd started, as if we'd not been apart at all.

Between sobs, I said, "If I'd had an idea where to start, I'd've come after you, wouldn't I."

"It's ok, Aoife. It would have been like looking for a needle in a haystack."

"You mean a noodle."

"Huh?"

"You know—a noodle in a haystack."

"Why would a noodle be in a haystack?"

"How am I to know? Maybe someone had spaghetti in there."

"Eefs, trust me. It's needle."

"Well, why would there be a needle in a haystack, then? It doesn't make any sense."

"Someone might have lost it when they were darning their socks."

"Who darns their socks in a haystack?"

"The same guy who ate spaghetti in there."

She thought she had me, but I was ready:

"Aha! So you concede the fundamental logic of having a spaghetti dinner in a haystack!"

"EEFS. IT'S NEEDLE, OK?"

"A NEEDLE WOULDN'T BE SO HARD TO FIND, BONNIE-KATE."

"YES IT WOULD! NEEDLES ARE TINY!"

I calmed myself. Nothing loses a debate quite so fast as flying off the handle.

"Knitting needles are quite large."

"It's a regular sewing needle, not a knitting needle."

"How do you know what kind of needle it is?"

"I just do! Everyone knows this!" she said.

"And how do they know? Because it was so easy to find? Hm?"

"A needle would be almost impossible to find in a haystack."

"You could get a big magnet and you'd find it pretty quick."

"Aaagh!"

"What if it was a hypodermic needle? That wouldn't be so hard to find, either."

"YES IT WOULD!"

"Or a pine needle, say, a balsam fir. You'd be able to smell it."

"NO YOU WOULDN'T!"

"All I'm saying is it would be much harder to find a noodle."

"No, it wouldn't! Aaagh!"

"Uncooked spaghetti noodles look just like hay. Ye'd not find that in years."

I heard Bonnie-Kate take a couple of deep breaths. "So now the guy in the haystack was eating raw spaghetti? Who eats raw spaghetti, in a freakin' haystack, no less?"

"It could have been fettucini."

"But still raw."

We argued about what foods might correctly be called raw. I cornered her and forced her to claim, preposterously, that plain bread was commonly known as 'raw toast.' I could almost taste victory.

I knocked her off balance with, "Me uncle used to eat raw sea urchins."

She made a deflating sound. "You're doing this on purpose, aren't you?"

Sure, I was being impossible. Learned it from the master, didn't I.

"Doing what?"

"Putting noodles in haystacks?"

I couldn't see her but I knew she was grinning like a madwoman. Bonnie-Kate's smile was brighter than the sunrise. It made me feel warm again just to think of it.

"I love you, Bonnie-Kate." That just slipped out, but sure, I meant it. Like a best friend, though. Mostly.

"Oh. I...uh...love you, too?"

"Let me come and get you."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"You're not after coming home?"

"You have no idea. But it might be kidnapping. L&G could make trouble."

"'Twouldn't be against your will."

"True, but I'd be a runaway, technically."

"You're nearly eighteen!"

"Closeness only counts in cigars," said Bonnie-Kate.

"You mean horseshoes, isn't it."

I was ready to have another go, but she had me with one of my own tactics, adamant denial:

"That's what I said, horseshoes."

"You'll come home soon? Promise me." I feared she would meet a lad out there and never come home to Maine.

"The second I turn eighteen. Promise."

She kept her promise, didn't she.

Remember the time when we were kids and we tried kissing for practice? Between you and me, I never forgot about that. I thought about it a lot. Odd, huh?

In Which I Fail to Be a Road Warrior

On my way back to Maine I drove through twelve states and was nearly killed in ten of them. I passed through Missouri and New Hampshire pretty quick, so they didn't have time. After a few of these close calls, I realized my objective should not be to live in Maine, but to die there.

Goals must be realistic.

In east Texas the Vega stalled in the middle of a railroad crossing—where else?—and refused to start. As if on cue, a Union Pacific locomotive appeared and bore down on us in a murderous diesel-belching fury. This was, to me, completely unsurprising.

I turned the key in a last desperate attempt before bailing out —*Come on baby, come on sweetie, come ON you fucking piece of shit*!—but the Vega had a death wish. It didn't care that I would be collateral damage. I grabbed my violin and jumped out just as the train's horn was inflicting more trauma on my eardrums than front row seats at a Black Sabbath concert.

I fled, stopping only to deliver a vengeful kick to the Vega's rear bumper. The engine started and the car pulled away without me, clearing the crossing seconds before the train arrived. It left me stranded on the other side.

I stood at the crossing with slumped shoulders, waiting for the train—1,000 miles long and traveling at .5 miles per hour—to pass. I wondered what sort of adventures the Vega was having now that it was free of my iron-fisted rule.

When the train passed, I saw a traffic jam at an intersection thirty yards ahead, at the center of which a driverless orange Chevy Vega rolled unimpeded, having failed to stop for a red light. Angry Texans laid on their horns from all directions as I tried to overtake my errant vehicle.

It took some serious hobbling to catch up; the abuse from other motorists didn't help. Their chief complaints appeared to be A) What kind of a gol-durned fool lets their car get away? and B) Us Texans don't take kindly to gol-durned fools.

They did not come to my aid.

With a single working leg I had only one hobbling speed: none too fast. The Vega wasn't exactly rocketing off to the horizon, so I soon drew even. I grabbed hold of the driver's side door but fell down before I could get it open. I was nearly crushed to death by my own car, rolling to safety just before it would have flattened me. Still holding my violin, I picked myself up, did more hobbling, and caught up again. The car was now struggling up a slight incline so it was a little easier to catch.

I hurled myself into the driver's seat, but landed upside

downish with my face scrunched into the floor mat.[*] The brake pedal was right handy, so I pushed on it and we stopped. I squirmed myself around to right-side up and gave all the Texans a S*orry!* wave. I would have fucked them off for not helping, but they might have had guns.

Back in control of my car, I drove to the nearest mechanic to find out why it drove away without me. I told the guy at the desk of Lone Star Tune-n-Lube what happened. He acted like cars driving away all by themselves was a common problem. He turned to the garage and yelled "Jimmy!" whereupon a greasy mechanic appeared.

Jimmy smelled like gasoline and radial tires. He wore a nametag that said EARL. He put the car in the garage and said, "Ok, li'l bit, let's see what the trouble is here."

He poked around under the dash, then under the hood, finally pronouncing the Vega's gennectigazoink feniculator faulty and need of immediate replacement.

I think that's what it was.

"That sounds expensive."

I was young and naive, but even I knew unscrupulous grease jockeys liked to overcharge helpless and desperate women, and especially foreigners. I held no emotional attachment to the Vega,

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[****]If stranded far from civilization you might survive by eating your floor mats, but I now knew from experience they don't taste very good.

and would not hesitate to go and buy a new piece of junk if Jimmy/Earl tried to screw me over.

"Nah, ten bucks and ten minutes, getcha back on the road."

Jimmy Earl proved to be a man of his word. I paid up, bought two 7-Ups from the machine (no cherries), gave one to Jimmy Earl and continued my journey east.

It felt good to go tooling down the highway secure in the knowledge that I would have no further trouble from my gennectigazoink feniculator. Such confidence is refreshing.

I crossed into Arkansas later that afternoon. Stopping near Texarkana to stretch my leg(s), I was beset by a group of inexplicably cranky razorback hogs. They wouldn't listen to reason, and chased me into a stagnant creek where a snapping turtle the size of a fucking bumper-car tried to bite off my remaining leg. Not cool.

I scrambled up an embankment and waited for every living thing to go away. That took a while. I amused myself in the interim by throwing rocks at the hogs until they dispersed. I was in no great hurry.

When the coast was clear, I scrambled back to my car and drove on. I stuck to the smaller state highways to get a better look at the countryside I would never intentionally visit again if I could help it. Some was pretty, some was dull, all of it lacked oceans. In the Ozark foothills I pulled off the road and curled up in the hatchback for a little sleep. This is an advantage of being

pint-sized: you can make a comfortable bed out of anything larger than a bushel basket.

I awoke rested, refreshed and surrounded by a motorcycle gang called the Sataneers. It was on their jackets, along with a grinning devil face. I yawned fiercely, but was still able to mutter *Of course I am being waylaid by a biker gang. This is how I will die.*

An unwashed man with long hair, beard stubble, and a lot of missing teeth knocked on my window. I saw black motorcycle grease under his nails. He sported traditional biker regalia: a Harley Davidson bandana, denim vest with a death's head button, motorcycle chain for a belt. He had more tattoos than I could count. My favorites were the cobra, dagger, and a nude woman with big breasts. Her name was Nikki, according to the ink.

The biker man invited me to "come out and play," which I took as a euphemism for "be gang-raped and murdered."

"Whatcha doin' out here all by your lonesome, sleepy-head?"

I climbed out of the hatchback and reached back in for my toothbrush and half a tube of Crest. My morning breath would scuttle the Spanish Armada, so I stood before the Sataneers in the early sunlight, blinking away the sleep and brushing my teeth. They found this amusing. They also noticed I was minuscule, which led one of them to say, "Well, good morning, little schoolgirl."

I held up one finger (index, not middle), walked to the roadside ditch and spat Crest on the native brambles. Wiping my mouth on my sleeve, I walked back and said hello to the men who would soon be measuring me for a shallow grave in a densely wooded area.

"What's your name, sweetheart?"

The guy who woke me said that. He must have been the leader (or duly elected spokesperson).

"Bonnie-Kate."

"Ain't that a purty name. I'm Maggot." He gestured to his cohorts. "And these-here knuckleheads, don't pay 'em no mind."

Some of them guffawed, one took a generous slug from a pint of something I could scarcely imagine drinking at that hour of the morning.

"Good morning, Mr. Maggot."

"What're you, about thirteen?"

What is the least rape-and-murder inducing age? Realizing I couldn't pass for seventy-five, I went for brutal honesty. "I'm seventeen, almost eighteen."

From the nearby woods—where I would soon be buried—a mourning dove called three times. Premature, I thought.

"That's a hell of a limp you got there."

I showed him my metal post.

"Hoo-wee, how'd ya get that?"

"Outboard motor. A couple of months ago."

"Jimbo! See that?"

Another paleolithic specimen, presumably Jimbo, dismounted and walked up to where Maggot and I stood near the back of my car.

"Show 'er," said Maggot.

Jimbo put his boot on the Vega's bumper to show me the steel post that lived where his leg used to be. I smiled without meaning to.

He said, "'Fifty-two Vincent Black Lightning." I assumed this was a motorcycle of some kind. He confirmed: "I miss the bike more'n the leg." He gave me a wink that looked more conspiratorial than lascivious. I might have taken that as a ray of hope, had I not learned long ago that hope was the enemy.

"That outboard get your finger, too?" said Maggot, pointing at my left hand.

"No, a coyote bit it off."

"Daaamn, little lady. You been through the wringer, ain't ya."

Just then I realized not a single car had passed while we were talking. Probably not a good sign.

Maggot eyed me up and down, landing on the scar at my temple.

"Howdja get that'n?"

"I got shot by an insane Russian lesbian."

He laughed and said, "Naw, really?"

"Yep. I was fifteen."

"You've had a time of it, all right."

"And I was almost torn to pieces by wild boars yesterday."

"You're a tough little mama, I'll give you that."

"I try." I kicked at the ground a little but didn't say, "Aw shucks."

Maggot produced a pack of Lucky Strikes and offered me one. Still playing my cards carefully, I accepted one for fear of seeming uncool.

"Thanks. I'm a big smoker, you know."

"Are ya now."

"Yep, that's me, smokey-smokey, all the time. Probably get cancer."

His look told me it was time to shut up about that. I also noticed, incidentally, they were not raping and killing me.

"Um...Mr. Maggot? It was awfully nice to meet you guys but I should be getting back on the road. If that's ok?"

"Get rolling, Bonnie-Kate. We won't keep ya."

The one with the bottle offered me a drink. I took a little sip of whatever jet-fuel that was, figuring it was strong enough to kill all the diseases he was transmitting to me. I went ever so slightly blind for a moment, but it cleared right up.

"Thanks guys. Have a nice day. Drive safe."

They laughed because no one tells biker gangs to drive safe.

I fired up the Vega—listen to that feniculator hum!—and drove on.

I snuck across Missouri's bootheel and landed in southern Illinois. I got a motel for the night because I was way overdue for a hot bath. I'd been getting by on PTA showers[*] in gas station bathrooms, so I felt pretty scrungy. The desk clerk at the Centralia, Illinois Motel 6 looked askance at me, assuming I was an underage truckstop prostitute, but took my money and handed me a key. I think he was disappointed when a steady stream of horny truck drivers failed to visit me in the night.

I left Centralia in a rainstorm. I'd been driving for an hour when an oak tree the size of a Saturn Rocket fell across my path. I hit the brakes, did a three-sixty, and slammed sideways into the tree. I wasn't wearing my seatbelt, and was thrown into the passenger seat where I used my face to create an intricate spiderweb of cracks in the side window. My nose bled like an open fire hydrant but I didn't think it was broken. This was a grave misdiagnosis.

The Vega's right (starboard) side was rumpled and the passenger door stuck shut. It still ran, so I backtracked a little and was soon heading east again.

Indiana sent a semi-full of livestock—pigs, by the smell—to run me off a suspension bridge and into the White River. I escaped certain death by squeezing the Vega onto the pedestrian walkway, which was at the time free of pedestrians, lucky for them.

[****]Pussy, tits, and ass.

At about 1:00am somewhere in Ohio, my headlights landed on a sign reading CAUTION: LAKE AHEAD, but not reading IN LESS THAN TWENTY FEET, which the lake, in fact, was. I drove a little ways into that. I rescued my rucksack and violin from the back seat and waded ashore. There was a cozy stand of cattails so I found a spot that wasn't too damp and caught a little shut-eye. In the morning I walked to the nearest town and found a tow truck driver who thought I was a dumb-ass for driving into a lake. He probably had a point.

He dragged the Vega back to dry land and sprayed some stuff that smelled like an auto parts store on the engine. It eventually started up, so off I went.

I drove with the windows down to dry out the car but it still smelled musty. A couple of days later I found a dead bluegill under the driver's seat. Things smelled a lot better after I got rid of that. All I lost in that ordeal was a box of waterlogged Pop Tarts and half a pack of Marlboro Lights. It could have been worse.

Pennsylvania, being a wide-ish state, had time to make two attempts on my life. It was raining hard outside of Pittsburgh when I stopped for lunch at a place with a covered redwood deck. I would dine *al fresco*, just like super-fancy people did. I figured I'd earned it.

The upper level was crowded so I took my chef's salad (with French dressing because Ranch wasn't ubiquitous yet; those were

primitive times) to a table on the lower deck. I'd only eaten two of the cherry tomatoes when the upper deck unbolted itself and came crashing down on me. I found myself buried alive under fallen redwood timbers and several dozen upper-deck diners in varying states of shock and outrage.

My left radius and ulna were snapped like kindling. I suspected that on top of everything else, the Universe was punishing me for having the audacity to be somewhere other than Maine in general, and Mille Jours in particular. I doubted that was true, but it fit my theory *du jour*, subject to modification as needed.

Having your arm broken by a collapsing deck pretty well sucks, but waiting an hour and a half to be pulled from the rubble attained a pinnacle of suckage never before dreamt of by mortal man. Not only that, I could no longer reach my salad, which I had already paid for. It looked really tasty.

I whimpered, cried, and recited *of course I've been crushed by the architecture*, but none of it helped. At the hospital they gave me a cast, painkillers, and instructions not to drive under the influence of them. I disregarded that advice because at seventeen, I was obviously smarter than a doctor, right? I made it about twenty yards before epiphany struck: I was wasted, man. In no condition to drive.

I spent a few days in another cheap motel where I was again regarded as some sort of child prostitute, this time one whose

arm had been broken by a disgruntled customer or pimp. The maids looked upon me with sympathy, but I was not given a discount on the room. That would have been a nice gesture if any of the above were true, but since it wasn't, I couldn't complain.

In the Poconos (I was dumbstruck to learn it was not spelled Poke-a-Nose or at least Polka Nose) I pulled off on the shoulder and dashed into the woods for an emergency pee break. I was shot at by some local yahoos who mistook me for a white-assed woodland creature whose interests they thought would be best served by a hail of gunfire. I think the yahoos were drunk, which everyone knows is the best time to get out the guns. They missed me, but not by much.

Halfway across New York, an object fell or was thrown from an overpass and landed on the Vega's hood. It popped open at high speed in traffic. Driving blind, I eased onto the median and came to a stop less than one foot from a concrete construction barrier. Had my reflexes been a couple of seconds off, I would have hit it at sixty miles an hour. That's among the worst speeds to hit a construction barrier.

I was now mentally roughing out a survival strategy for when I got back to Maine: go home, sit in a chair, and don't move or touch anything ever again. I realized that would be a sure-fire way to make my house explode, burn down and collapse, so I discarded it and considered alternatives. Maybe if I sat motionless in an empty field.

No: bears.

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts was the last to make an attempt on my life. While I was off transacting the purchase of an apple fritter at a Dunkin Donuts in the Berkshires, a sinkhole opened beneath the Vega and swallowed it whole. On my return, I climbed into my car's grave, popped the hatchback and retrieved my stuff. I ate my fritter while I was down there, then climbed back out.

I thumbed a ride to the Greyhound terminal from a guy who thought I was a teenage runaway. I boarded the bus in mid-morning and rode that 'hound all the way to Wiscasset.

My first glimpse of the Atlantic came as we crossed the stubby little toe of New Hampshire. It was so beautiful I cried, causing my fellow travelers to vacate the seats around me. Pot-holed Maine pavement was soon beneath our wheels and I no longer objected to the possibility—probability—of being killed. If I must die, let me die in Maine as nature intended.

In Wiscasset, the bus stopped at the Water Street Hotel. When I disembarked and entered to use the phone, the proprietor, a red-faced porcine man with an unfortunately upturned nose, was all set to whip out the NO PROSTITUTION sign but soon realized I was only there to make a phone call.

I called Aoife Doyle, who was still home on summer vacation. We'd spoken sporadically while I was in Kansas, mostly about how much it sucked to be stuck in Kansas, so there was a lot of

catching up to do.

"If you had a million dollars, what would you buy me?"

"Oh my god! Bonnie-Kate!"

"Well?"

"Um…an all expenses paid trip…to…the sun."

"I'll pack my Coppertone. Listen, I'm not in Kansas anymore."

"Where are you then?"

"Water Street Hotel. Come get me, wouldja?"

When she got there the first thing she said was, "My god, what have the feckin' bastards done to you?"

"What."

"You're a mess, aren't you."

"Yep. You know how it is."

"How is it, then?"

"Me and the Universe don't get along."

I explained about the cast on my arm and the missing leg, insisting I was ok, but she didn't believe me. People always act like getting your leg cut off is a big deal.

"What about your nose?" she said after a brief period of hysteria.

"What about it?"

"It's all crooked now."

"I guess I must have broken that." Apart from the Vega's rearview, I'd been avoiding mirrors.

"You guess? You don't know?"

"Do you know every single time *your* nose gets broken?"

"Yes! I do!"

"How many times?"

"It's never been broken!"

"Then how do you know?"

"Aaagh! I missed you so much, Bonnie-Kate!"

She threw a bear hug on me that included a pat and squeeze of my bottom, which was weird. But I've been told that thing is irresistible, so, y'know, whatever.

Arriving at Stone-n-Ivy, I found the property well-maintained. The lawyers said they would take care of that and I pictured men in $1,000 suits with alligator briefcases trimming the hedges and tending the pachysandra. That's probably not what they meant.

My key still worked and everything inside was just as I left it, only more dusty. I wrapped my broken arm in a trashbag and showered while Aoife watched a rerun of *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom* on the TV I never paid much attention to as a kid. Free of road dirt, I called the law office of Hanson, Richardson and Dow. I told them I was eighteen effective immediately and would like to inherit things now, please. They said to come by in the morning and sign papers.

I found two cars in the garage, my little red Beetle and Mom's white LTD I always thought was too much car for her. Imagine

how it would look on me: like a chipmunk driving an aircraft carrier. I ended up selling that one to Mr. Flaherty and he took good care of it. I hadn't seen him yet, and I hadn't heard Bailey. That was a bad sign, so I was afraid to go over there and ask.

The next day, Aoife drove me to the law office and I came out of there a rich person. We went from there to the Drydock Inn where we had lobsters, steamed clams, fancy desserts and beer. I was allowed to drink 3.2 beer, but would have to show my ID until I was sixty. We feasted with wild abandon. It cost almost $20 for just the two of us, I'm not even kidding. That was my celebration for making it back to Maine alive. I knew this much: I would one day die in Maine, if it was the last thing I ever did.

I had to be careful with all that money, Mom and Dad's money, and not go pissing it away like some drunken sailor on shore leave in Brothelvania. After I paid the check, Aoife wanted to know all about it.

"How much did you end up with? Not that it matters, I mean."

"It's ok. About six hundred."

"Six hundred dollars?"

"Thousand."

"Six thousand dollars? Wow." She whistled, then apologized for it, trying to be delicate.

"No, six hundred thousand."

"As in...more than half a million? Dollars?"

"And two houses."

"So you're rich, then."

"Kind of." But still not very happy.

"You'll buy yourself a little...something?"

"I don't really need anything. Maybe some groceries. And I'm out of smokes."

"Not a pony?"

"I have a car."

"But you could have a different pony for each day of the week."

"What is it with you and ponies?"

"It's the sad eyes, isn't it."

That was my Aoife: twenty years old and still all worked up about sad ponies. I missed her, too, but I'm not using the L-word. Could be dangerous.

She dropped me off at home—so good to use that word again—and I went to sit on the back porch and think about what to do next. College seemed like a good idea, but I was too late for the fall term. I thought I'd take a year off and work on some other stuff.

Kansas never inspired me to write much, but now that I was back in Maine I was brimming with ideas, one of which might even support a short novel. It seemed the sea was my muse. Or my muse lived in the sea, something like that. Some of those ideas would insist on being written, whether I wanted to or not.

That was some work I could do.

I was still not back to 100% on my violin, so I had work to do there as well, once the cast came off. I might even join another band someday, complications be damned. I hoped I had outgrown that tenet of my personal philosophy.

Speaking of complications, wasn't eighteen a bit old to be lugging around this cumbersome virginity? I should do something about that, too. At times my thoughts went wandering to places inhabited by that other four-letter L-word: lust. Such thoughts were infrequent, but when I had them I felt so desperately separated from the rest of humanity, especially (but not exclusively) the part that I might like to lie down with for a while in my lonely little bed.

But I feared the act of physical love would be a death sentence for my partner, so I was basically screwed, and not in the good way. Maybe that meant I could only have sex with people I didn't like. If so, I might as well have given myself up to my friends the Sataneers. Not that I truly disliked them, I only feared them. I wondered—are outlaw biker gangs in the Yellow Pages? I bet they'd remember me.

But before all that, I needed a job. My Mom and Dad didn't leave me all that money so I could blow it on frivolities, like some profligate wastrel.[*] That small fortune was my four bears' legacy and I was the only Caldwell left to watch over it. My job was to

[****] Future English major, ok?

preserve, not squander. It was the least I could do.

With one arm and one leg, I faced limited employment prospects. Maybe Hutch would have something for me. I could still pump gas and do the accounts.

I snapped out of that train of thought when I heard a sound more enchanting than a Stradivarius in the hands of Vassar Clements: a barking dog. A blue Frisbee sailed down the Flaherty's back yard; Bailey snatched it from the air with a magnificent leap. His feat was rewarded with cheering and laughter from Mr. Flaherty and an indeterminate number of grandchildren.

I couldn't wait to see Bailey again, but that's what I did. I waited. I'd never been accused of being perceptive (or tactful) but I recognized the sound of memories being made. My dog had become a part of my elderly neighbor's life. I was known for fucking up everything I got my hands on, but maybe I could get this one right.

I waited until evening to knock on Mr. Flaherty's door. He greeted me the same way everyone else did.

"Bonnie-Kate! What on earth happened to you?"

"Kansas didn't agree with me."

He invited me in and we got caught up on everything. Mrs. Flaherty passed away shortly after I left. I was sorry about that but I swear I had nothing to do with it.

He introduced me to his grandkids who were sleeping over

and had never seen a prosthetic leg before. They thought I was cool for having a metal leg. I basked in that for a minute because I was hardly ever cool.

Bailey remembered me when I said his name because I always said it the way Minnie Pearl used to say "How-Dee!" on *Hee Haw*. I saw that a couple of times by accident. He knew that sound better than my face because my nose was in a different place now, apparently.

Mr. F said, "I'll get his things."

"He has things?"

"Leash, bowl, Frisbee, tennis ball, chew toys. He has a bed, too."

Mr. Flaherty had been taking better care of my dog than I ever did.

"Wait," I said, "I can't take him."

"What? Why not?"

"I...um...I'm going to college. Eventually." He didn't need to know it wouldn't be for another year.

"Do you need me to keep him a while longer?"

"Would you? It's an awful lot to ask."

"No, it isn't."

We worked that out. The next day we removed one board from the fence between our back yards, so Bailey's cruising range was effectively doubled. He came to visit me sometimes but mostly used my yard for a bathroom. That was ok, it was good for

the pachysandra.

Although it still felt like Mom and Dad's house, the reality that I now owned Stone-n-Ivy settled on me every once in a while, and felt heavy. I was filled with sorrow, but also a sense of independence and awesome responsibility I probably wasn't up to. Conflicted, as usual.

After a couple of nights in Wiscasset I tried sleeping in Mom's bed. I could almost feel her in the room with me. I woke up sad in the middle of the night, and went back to sleeping in my room. I didn't believe in ghosts or anything like that, but my mom and dad would always live in that house. When I stayed on Mille Jours, they'd be there with me, too, along with my Gramma and Grampa and all my four bears. If you've ever lost someone dear, you know what I'm talking about.

Mr. F helped me get my Beetle started again and I went down to the lobster co-op to see about getting a job.

"Bonnie-Kate! What the hell happened to you?" Hutch shook my hand since he was too gruff for hugs and also didn't want to risk breaking me any more than I already was.

"This is what I got for leaving Maine. Should've stayed put."

"Ayuh, that'll teach you."

He gave me my job back, with the understanding it would only last until lobster season ended in December or January, February at the latest. I'd make enough to keep all my property taxes—my new largest expense—paid. My first lesson in this

experimental adulthood was: it's expensive to own stuff. The gummint exacted a heavy price from those who fell ass-backwards into owning two houses. The taxes on the Mille Jours cabin should have been cheap because the island received almost no services from the main, but weren't because it had shore frontage and a million-dollar ocean view. Once the fishing season ended, I thought I might spend a little time out there.

I had been to the cabin on Mille Jours in the wintertime so I knew the climate was as agreeable as electro-shock therapy. *Mille Jours* means a thousand days. (That's French, which I speak quite well, thank you.) The island got that name from early French settlers because a thousand days was all you could stand out there before the hardship and solitude drove you crazy.

Bearing all this in mind, I also knew there was no better place on Earth to go. If Wiscasset was home, Mille Jours was, um...even more home. Home-er(?) Words obviously failed me just then but you know what I mean. I loved that island in a way it wasn't possible for me to love a person. This could mean only one thing: there was something fundamentally wrong with me.

I would stay in Wiscasset for a while, but the island called to me, as it always had. Aoife was a good reason to stay in Wiscasset for a while. I was still a little shaky and it was good to know she was close by.

She came over one afternoon with her boyfriend, Howard, and dropped two bombshells. First, that she had a boyfriend

(named Howard), and second, they were doing it. I had to pry that second bombshell out of her when Howard was in the bathroom.

"Are you guys, y'know, doing it?"

"Yeah."

So, not that much of a pry, per se.

"What's that like?"

"I like it. It's fun." After a few seconds she added, "Wait, are you a virgin?"

"Yep. But it's not my fault, I was in Kansas."

She asked the obvious question: "People don't fuck in Kansas, then?"

It would have taken too long to explain about yokels and future farmers and sideways vaginas and *Our Miss Brooks*, so I said, "Yes. The population of Kansas is in steep decline. Free-fall, really."

She acted like she didn't believe me. Pft.

Two nights later, Aoife and Howard came over again to drink beer and watch *The Birds* on TV. Aoife followed me to the kitchen and dropped a non-verbal bombshell: she kissed me.

"Uhm...w-what was that?"

"Me and Howard want you to go to bed with us."

"Oh. My."

"Don't be afraid, love. It'll be nice, won't it."

"B-but...with you? I'm not a, y'know..." I was afraid to say

lesbian, like it might hurt her feelings.

"Me neither. It's just a bit of fun."

"I don't think I want to, um...lick...anything."

"That's fine then."

"What about Howard?" I actually liked Howard well enough. He was nice, and kind of cute.

"I already told him to go easy."

"Does he have a big complication?"

She giggled, a little drunk. "I don't know what that means, do I."

"I'm small. I don't think I want any big penises going in me. It might hurt." I felt awkward talking about it, so of course she made it much worse.

"Howard! Come here, lad. Bonnie-Kate wants to see your dick."

And *BOOM!* Just like that, we were looking at Howard's penis in my kitchen. Right there with the toaster and the spice rack.

My hands-on experience of penises was still limited to Kevin Doyle's—and one of those was mouth-on, not hands—so I wasn't sure what to make of it.

"It gets bigger, right?"

Howard said, "Considerably." He was oddly comfortable with us standing there in my kitchen debating the merits of his penis.

"Well, how much bigger?"

It appeared to my untrained eye that this vaunted biggering was already in progress. Aoife grabbed the end of it and stretched it out. I didn't know you could do that.

"It gets about that long," she said, still holding it by the tip. "Not too big, not too small, just right. What do you say then, Champ?"

I poked at it with my finger to make sure it wasn't hot or too cold or anything. It seemed ok to me.

"All right. But I don't want anyone looking at me when I'm naked."

"Aww." They both said that. Jinx.

I went up to my room and got in bed with the lights off, then Aoife and Howard got in with me. Aoife didn't do any licking, but there wasn't a single part of me she didn't touch. I squeezed her boobs. They were awfully big; I couldn't hardly avoid them. I didn't know if that made me a lesbian or not.

The actual sex part hurt at first but then it was ok. I was glad I finally did that. Aoife had said the whole thing would be nice, and just for fun, but it was way more than that.

Once when we were kids she showed me how to kiss when you're making out. Apparently I was doing it wrong. She only kissed me once. It was making me horny—I mean sexually aroused—so I made her stop. I wasn't supposed to feel like that with a girl. So I thought at the time.

Then came poor Petra Basov, just a few years later. I had a

crush on her, plain and simple. I thought the girl-attraction thing was a teenage phase, but if that was true, it was a long phase.

When I went to sleep that night—no longer a virgin—my thoughts were a lot more of Aoife than Howard. Those thoughts were nice and warm, but I still had a lot of uncertainty about sexual things. I wanted to lie down with them again and see if I could figure it out, but they went back to college two days later and I never got the chance.

My life would change now that I was an intercoursing member of society. I was proud of it and wanted to tell people. I didn't know anyone besides Mr. F and the guys at the co-op, who I ruled out for different reasons.

Mom had some little stick-on name tags that said HELLO! My Name Is: and then a blank space. I filled one out that said HELLO! My Name Is: I HAD SEXUAL INTERCOURSE. It almost didn't fit, but I squeezed it in. I stuck it on my sweater and wore it around the house all day. No one saw it but the mailman. He thought I was nuts.

After a couple of weeks I noticed people were not regularly having sex with me. The floodgates I thought I'd opened were in reality locked up tighter than a Kansas cousin. No deposits, no withdrawals. It was probably the cast on my arm that was scaring them off.

In the coming weeks I became good friends with Mr. F. He

showed me a bunch of stuff about how to take care of my house, like changing a fuse, fixing a broken window and a leaky faucet. He was going to do it himself but I wanted to learn how. I needed to be able to fix stuff on my own.

He invited me over for Thanksgiving dinner with him and his family. I stayed to watch a football game on TV, even though I didn't know anything about football. It was still fun. We did the same thing at Christmas except I invited them to my house for the festivities.

"Oh, no, Bonnie-Kate. That's too much work to put on you."

"But I want to, and I like to feed people. I don't have anything else to do."

That was the first time I got to play hostess at my own house. It made me feel grown up, even though I was (and continue to be) nothing of the kind. I would never forget Mr. F for helping me get through that first holiday season with no family of my own.

Aoife came home for winter break but Howard went skiing with his family in Vermont, so we couldn't do that sex thing again.

Aoife said, "We could still lay down a bit."

"What, naked?"

"If you want to."

"Wouldn't that make us lesbians?"

"Just a little. Does it matter?"

I wasn't sure if it did or not. "What if we weren't naked?"

"Then probably not."

"How about if we kept our underpants on?"

"You ask too many questions, don't you."

"But I want to know." I was trying to understand what sort of intercoursing person I was. There were lots of different kinds.

"How about this," said Aoife. "If it feels good, do it."

So we lay down with our underpants on but they didn't stay on for long. Aoife's hands went wandering, and we did some kissing that time, too. She was good at that. It was so sweet to hold someone, and to be held. You don't always have to bring a bunch of penises and vaginas into it.

Well.

Not penises, anyway. Not always.

By that time I had been back in Maine for several months and not a single thing tried to kill me or anyone I loved. *Maybe that's all behind me, and things will be better from here on out.*

Fool.

I was fueling up *One-Eyed Jack* at the co-op when the sternman, Pete Brewer, asked me out for pizza. Now, maybe I'm weird, but I like a guy in oilskins, blue work gloves and insulated knee boots. That hard-working-man look just does something for me. Plus, we'd been flirting back and forth for weeks. I said yes.

He took me to a place called Good Time Charlie's and we feasted on pizza and beer. After dinner he asked me what I would like to do, suggesting a movie (*Kansas City Bomber* was playing)

or a pinball arcade, or a drive along the shore. It was too cold for miniature golf, which I'd never played but would have been good at because I was miniature.

At the risk of being thought a loose woman, I said, "We can have sex now, if you want." He seemed nice enough, and was funny, too.

"Yes. I want." He gave me a Groucho Marxish leer.

"Great! Let's do that instead."

I couldn't think of any reason to pretend I wasn't eager for a little more intercoursing. Practice makes perfect, right? Maybe this would be a thing, unlike most things, that I could do well. We went back to Stone-n-Ivy and I learned some new ways to do it. The one Pete called Reverse Cowgirl felt the best, so yee-haw, pardner! He wanted the lights on but I explained I had a thing about that and he said ok, but I think he was disappointed. I made it up to him the best I could.

When all the intercoursing was done, I asked him his favorite position, if he had one.

"Man on top, woman in magazine."

There's a lot to be said for a guy who will intercourse you half to death and then leave you laughing. He stayed the night and I made him a super-fancy breakfast in the morning.

Weighing my desire for intercoursing against the love = doom factor, I went out with Pete Brewer a few more times. After the first date, we dispensed with the dinner/movie/pinball

arcade part of the evening and went straight for the intercoursing. That was what we both wanted to do, so why not get right to it? Sometimes he took me out to breakfast, but he didn't have to.

Pete was kind and patient but he got frustrated with my darkness rule after a while.

"I wish I could see you."

"Putting your penis in me isn't enough? You have to gawk at me, too?"

"You have a rockin little bod, Bonnie-Kate. I want to memorize you."

I appreciated the compliment but it couldn't have been genuine. I was basically mutilated.

"Didn't you already memorize me with your hands?"

I liked Pete just fine. If there had been more time, I might have come around on the darkness thing, but there wasn't.

On a Friday in January we went to a hockey game on the Grey's Road pond. There were fires to stay warm, and interesting things to drink. I was glad to be there having fun with my man. We watched the game, and I told him about the time I was nearly drowned on that very pond.

"I was eight or nine. I fell through the ice right over by those trees." I pointed to a stand of birches.

When Pete turned to look, a hockey puck hit him in the head at one hundred miles an hour.

Of course it killed him.

That puck was delivered by the fucking Universe, but it had my name on it. I did not attend L&G's funeral, nor would I attend Pete's. Would you want your killer present at your graveside? Me neither.

If Mom was alive, she would have taken me straight to Mille Jours to soothe my sorrows. It was time to see if it worked when I went there alone for a while. Maybe a long while.

The Lark's Lovely Warbling

I swear I wasn't bisexual. Bonnie-Kate said she wasn't either. I can't speak for her, but I did have a sexual preference: I was strongly in favor of it. With a guy or a girl, as long as the girl was my own Bonnie-Kate. Or, as I recently learned, with some combination of the two.

I worried that she might have felt pressured into doing things with me and Harold that she didn't really want to do. Or that the whole thing was a mistake she made after an ill-advised third pint. I rang her up the next day to make sure she wasn't having a *what have I done?* moment. I've had those. They're maximum minus craic.

"Hello? May I speak to a non-virgin, please?"

"Speaking. Hi Eefs."

"So it was ok last night, all that stuff we did?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't it be?"

"Folks will sometimes do things after a few pints and regret them later."

"I don't regret anything."

"Not the stuff with me?"

She hesitated, then said, "That was very nice."

"'Twas, wasn't it?"

"I had such a good time."

I got the impression that for her, making out with me was a bit of a lark. No pressure, Champ. It didn't have to be anything more than that.

More confessions: I had a crush on her. She woke something in me I'd never felt for another girl. Sure, I knew girls I found attractive, but I didn't think about doing things with them. All right, once or twice, but not often or seriously. That's not bisexual then, is it?

I wasn't after pursuing anything with them anyway. There's a stigma, isn't there. People would start calling you a lezbo or a vaginatarian and act like you had a disease. I didn't care to deal with that, and I sure as hell didn't want sweet little Bonnie-Kate dragged into it. After all that happened to her, she might have been too fragile to handle any more disapproval from folks. They'd already pegged her as weird.

I'd never bring that on her, no matter how much I might want her.

When I came home for winter break we had another bit of a hoolie up in her bed. 'Twasn't planned, that one. We were just hanging around over to her house and she brought up the thing with Howard. So we went for a lie down.

Bonnie-Kate's skin was softer than anyone's, even a wee bairn's. I didn't ever want to let go of her. That thing guys get

from sex, The Big O, dontcha know; I had one with Bonnie-Kate and we weren't even trying. I was lying on her with one of her legs between mine, and I was rubbing...um, grinding... against her like that and there it was, the waves of pleasure came upon me. 'Twas more or less earth-shattering, it was.

By then I was dangerously infatuated with her. Dangerous because I was afraid she'd get hurt somehow, and because I feared an unhealthy obsession.

Listen to me, going on about all these worries, just as Bonnie-Kate would. I shouldn't have been so freaked out, should I. She was experimenting, that's all. Nothing too serious. Yet.

After I got back to McAlpine, I rang her up and she told me about this lobsterman she was over the moon for. I wasn't sure how to feel about that, was I. As long as she was happy, I guessed a lobsterman was ok. I wasn't jealous, if that's what you're thinking. That would be ridiculous.

If you hit the sheets wi' someone twice, is it still a lark?

"I have to go away for a while."

Mr. Flaherty raised an eyebrow. "Back to Kansas?"

"Oh, dear god no. Mille Jours. Kansas doesn't like me. And it's mutual. "

He grinned. I'd made no secret of my feelings toward the Sunflower State.

"Does Bailey go with you this time?"

"I think he's your dog now, isn't he?" I thought he might argue but he just nodded, still smiling. I told him I'd be gone a few months and he showed me how to put my house to bed, and said he'd keep an eye on it for me while I was away.

"What if I need to get in touch?" he asked.

"You can't."

"Oh. I see."

"You can send a letter to Jonesport but I might not get it for a few months."

He frowned. "There's no phone?"

"No, sorry. And anyway, I need to be alone. Seriously alone."

"Like Garbo. 'I vant to be alone.'"

"Did you hear they've resurrected her? Regrettably."

That pun was so bad I think it caused him physical pain.

A trip to Mille Jours generally required a great deal more planning than I put into that one. Once you're there, you can't just pop down to the store for the thing you've run short of, so woe unto the person who forgets the toilet paper or lady items or cigarettes.

I packed my long johns and fiddle, then drove to Jonesport, which was my point of departure on the main. There I bought supplies by the case and had them sent to the dock, along with a couple tubes of propane. Once everything was delivered to the harbor, I stuck out my thumb.

The day was cold and grey with wind as sharp as a guillotine whipping frothy peaks on the waves. Lobster season had ended and there was little boat traffic to brandish my thumb at. Mom had always pre-arranged this part with Edgar Tuttle by radio, but I didn't know how to contact him, or if he was even on the island.

A big purse-seiner came in but I couldn't persuade her captain to make a pass by Mille Jours on the way back out, not even when I offered a crisp $50. Same with a scallop dragger that showed up an hour later. It was looking like I'd spend the night snuggled up with my groceries on the dock when a lobster boat called *Scoggin's DeLuxe* came in to fuel up and unload some traps. There was only one guy aboard.

"Where's your sternman?" I asked.

"When the lobstahs quit, so'd he." He muttered a few

mother-based epithets.

Taking up gear at the end of the season pretty well sucks, but it's usually part of the deal. You get on with a lobsterman for the good-money part of the season with the understanding you'll still be there for the bad-money part, too. Skipping out is unconscionable. Whoever the absent sternman was, he would not work out of Jonesport ever again.

"Need a hand?" Without someone running the hoist, he'd be there all afternoon.

"Nah, I got it."

But I was already lowering the hook. He shrugged and said, "Well, if you ain't got anything better to do."

"I'll be late for tea with the Queen, but she can wait."

After all the traps were loaded onto his truck he went to fill his boat with diesel.

"I'll buy your fuel for a ride out to Mille Jours."

He looked at me like I'd asked for a ride to the sixth moon of Jupiter.

"Mille Jours? There's nothin' out there."

I pointed to my supplies. "There will be."

"You're serious."

"Yeah." I gave him a look-what-a-pretty-girl-I-am smile.

"Long way out there and back."

I produced the $50 again. "Getting any shorter?"

When Scoggins dropped me off on the dock at Mille Jours

Harbor, Edgar showed up before we were done unloading all my stuff. He heard us coming and came down to see about it since no one just shows up out there in February.

Edgar was the island's unofficial caretaker, and always knew who was coming out, when they'd arrive, and how long they'd stay. He was flabbergasted at my unscheduled appearance on our beloved rock at the most hostile part of the season.

A widower, Edgar spent a fair amount of time alone on the island, visited infrequently by his son, Dennis. I'd known both of them since I was knee-high to a flounder, which is, by the way, a rare delicacy. Flounder knees, yum.

Edgar talked shop with Scoggins—which among commercial fishermen usually means griping about the latest state and federal regulations—while I started loading my stuff onto Edgar's truck. They soon concluded that lawmakers in Augusta and Washington had their heads inextricably lodged in the deepest recesses of their own posteriors, and Scoggins went on his way.

"So sorry about your mother, Bonnie-Kate. She was a fine woman."

"Thanks, Edgar." I picked up a case of pork and beans, he picked up fruit cocktail. We lugged them up the dock to his truck.

"What, er...what's happened to ya?"

I explained the missing parts, and the muddy clothes I got from Scoggins's traps.

"Wasn't expecting you so early," he said. I interpreted his

look to mean *what the hell are you doing here?*

"I had to get away for a while."

Edgar was a man of great tact and few words, and was kind enough to accept my explanation without further inquiry.

"Winters out here can be kind of tricky." He chose his adjective carefully so as not to frighten me, likely rejecting *harsh*, *perilous*, and *deadly* before he spoke.

"I'm ready for it."

"How about your firewood?"

"Uh, how much do I have?" That was one of the chores Mom paid Edgar to do.

"Couple weeks worth, maybe."

"Fuck. I mean, darn it."

"How long do you mean to stay?"

"Three months, at least. Maybe through the summer."

He explained the arrangement he had with Mom and offered me the same, but I needed to do things for myself as much as that was possible. I'd gathered my supplies and gotten myself out there; I could get my own firewood, too.

Edgar showed me how to work the chainsaw in my tool shed and explained the basics of firewood collection. He suspected I was embarking on a fatal misadventure, but decorum dictated non-interference in these matters as a general rule. My failure to consider the firewood supply was in keeping with my track record of fucking up even the simplest endeavors beyond redemption,

but I could fix this one.

I spent my first day on the island settling in, filling the kitchen cabinets—you've never seen so many Pop Tarts—and reacquainting myself with the cabin that had been my family's homestead for more than a hundred and fifty years. I was the last Caldwell now. Even if I could persuade something to marry me, our offspring wouldn't carry the Caldwell name to future generations of islanders. This saddened me. What a grave disappointment I must have been to my four bears. Had they wished for a boy? If so they never showed it, which was kind of them. So sorry for being a girl.

On the second day of my great pilgrimage I planned to solve the firewood problem so I wouldn't be reminded of how foolish I was not to think of it beforehand. I'd never done lumberjack-related work before, but how hard could it be? You find a tree—it was impossible to *NOT* find a tree on Mille Jours (even in winter!)—cut it down, cut it into stove lengths and, presto-change-o: firewood.

You would be astonished at how many ways that could go wrong. I know I was.

I was off to a great start when I found a nearby spruce tree that had already fallen down. This was going to be easy.

There was some snow on the ground and the day was sunny but crisp. Although inexperienced, I assumed this was perfect lumberjacking weather. In any case, it seemed a fine day to not

accidentally kill myself with a chainsaw.

It was refreshing to be out there, taking on this good honest labor, a task nothing short of life-sustaining. Without fire, we die. I was taking care of business, providing for my most fundamental needs like an adult might do, like a person in charge of her life, rather than the other way around. I am (tiny) woman, hear me roar (which I could do pretty convincingly if I had to).

The chainsaw said HUSQVARNA on the side—what is that, Icelandic? Do they even have trees in Iceland?—and it started on the second pull. It was so loud I was tempted to run away from it, but that wouldn't get the job done so I didn't.

I started cutting at the thickest part of the tree and, man, the saw went through it like an electric knife through a Christmas goose. It stopped halfway through, though, and wouldn't go the rest of the way. The chain was still going and pretty soon there was smoke and the tree was catching on fire. I suspected that was wrong, so I stopped the saw. Well, it was stuck in the tree and wouldn't budge no matter how hard I pulled. I tried kicking it, but that didn't work either. I kicked the tree a couple of times, too, because it was pissing me off, then I admitted defeat, lit up a Marlboro, and went to find Edgar. I was forced to concede that I was no Grizzly Adams. More like Winnie-the-Adams.

Edgar was already on his way to my house when I found him. He heard the saw stop and figured I'd cut off an arm so he came to see about it.

"No, the saw got stuck," I said as we walked to the scene of my most recent unmitigated fiasco.

"Got wedges?" he said, and I grabbed the seat of my jeans and gave them a sideways yank. He looked at me like I had at least seven vaginas.

"What."

"Do you have wedges?" He spoke slowly, as if to a not very bright child.

"Oh, I thought you said I had a wedgie. Which was kind of weird because I can usually tell when...uh...nevermind."

There was a tool kit weighing several tons that I was supposed to have brought with me but forgot in the shed, so we went back to get it. It contained wedges and a maul which in this case was a sort of little sledgehammer, like a lady's or children's sledgehammer. So: wedge goes in the saw cut, a few taps with the maul and the chainsaw was free.

"Thanks, Edgar. I can take it from here."

"Ayup, good enough." He stepped back but didn't leave. I restarted the saw and stood looking at the tree like it was a mystery to rival Stonehenge. I glanced back at Edgar, whose expression said *you're doing at least thirteen things wrong at this very minute.*

I stopped the saw again. "Maybe I'll start at the other end this time."

"Mm-hmm. You could do that." He didn't say *but that would*

be stupid, leaving me to fill in the blank.

Or maybe, um...well..." I looked at the tree like it might tell me what to do, but it wasn't giving up its secrets.

“So Edgar, if you were me where would you start?"

"Well, lets see." He acted like he had to puzzle it out, again to spare my feelings. He knocked on the trunk a couple of times and said, "I'd start with a different tree. This one's gone punky."

"What's that? And how can you tell?"

He took the saw from me and cut a wedge out of the trunk. It was light as balsa.

"It's rotten. No good for firewood, or much of anything else."

I felt discouraged; I would have to abandon my hope of collecting firewood without murdering any trees.

"Help me find a better tree?"

So I attended the Edgar Tuttle School of Lumberjacking, in which he showed me how to select, fell, buck, and saw into stove lengths a forty-foot spruce. He did the first one and walked me through a second, after which I was ready to go solo. I picked another tree to kill, and Edgar left me to sink or swim.

I know exactly what you're thinking because I was thinking it, too: Bonnie-Kate Caldwell, high priestess of life-threatening clusterfucks, natural born catastrophe-magnet, alone in the woods with a chainsaw, many miles from medical help. You are forgiven for thinking the obvious: *This is how she will die*.

But I didn't.

I had one actual disaster in which I chainsawed my prosthetic leg for a second, but the only casualty was a pair of jeans. I later turned them into shorts, nevermind that we got maybe ten days a year that were warm enough for shorts.

I was beginning to think I was the master of lumberjacking when I realized all the beautiful logs I had so artfully sawed still needed to be split and somehow carried out of the woods to my cabin. Two or three logs at a time was my maximum carrying capacity, so that part of the job would likely occupy several decades of my time.

"Edgar!"

Is it just me, or is asking someone to show you how to be self-sufficient a contradiction in terms? Maybe it's an oxymoron. I think there's a moron in there somewhere.

Edgar kindly showed me how to split logs with a bigger wedge and a bigger maul. He let me borrow a toboggan-like gizmo to drag my firewood home over the white and drifting snow. By the end of the day I had another month of firewood, multiple blisters, and body aches that didn't show up until the following morning.

Edgar said another half dozen trees would get me through the coldest part of the season, so at the rate of three trees a day, I was only looking at two more days of balls-out labor. Wait, what's the female equivalent of balls-out? Tits out? No, ovaries-out?

Fallopian tubes-out? Nevermind. Anyway. I woke up so achy even my balls(!) hurt, so I thought I'd take a day to recover.

"Ayup, you could do that," said Edgar, leaving me to fill in *but I wouldn't.*

"Or maybe," I said, just to give him the opening he needed to tell me why I'd be a damn fool to do whatever I was thinking of doing.

"You never know when the weather's going to turn on you and wreck your plans. Today's thirty degrees and there ain't much wind. Tomorrow could be in the teens and blowin a gale. I wouldn't let a day like this get away. Could be a while before we see another."

So I went to work. To keep things interesting I adopted a persona: Pioneer Woman, hard-bitten, raw-boned, reaping the forest's bounty. Pass the hardtack and/or pemmican, whatever sawdust-based foods hardscrabble pioneering women survived on. In keeping with the pioneer motif I used candles and oil lamps that night instead of the generator. I nearly lost my pioneer spirit when I opened a can of Spaghetti-Os for my supper. Pioneer woman does not open cans; she kills a furry animal of some kind with her bare hands, flavors it with sawdust and puts it in the stew. I made a mental note to ask Edgar what sort of things I might kill and eat.

After my third day of lumberjacking I had a fine supply of firewood. I awoke the following morning at 5:00am in

considerable pain, and stood up too quickly. Everything went fuzzy and I collapsed on the floor. Brave Pioneer Woman pulled herself together and went to make the goddamn coffee.

That was a Thursday. On Friday I investigated the liquor cabinet I'd never paid any attention to before. I found it brimming with intoxicants, some dating to the immediate post-prohibition era. That evening I grabbed a bottle of rum—yo ho ho!—and went to pay a social call on Edgar. We drank and played Stratego, which Edgar used to play with Dennis when he was a boy. I was wasted after two drinks and lost every game.

"So Edgar, if you wanted to live off the land out here, what would you eat?"

"Fish."

"Besides fish." Without the proper gear, fish could be hard to come by in the wintertime.

"Shellfish." I was already doing that. Clams, mussels.

"What else?"

"Venison."

I'd been considering rabbits and squirrels but didn't think I'd be able to kill one. They were too cute and fuzzy. Deer wouldn't be any easier because they have those sad pony eyes and Aoife would never speak to me again if she knew I shot one. Maybe I wasn't cut out for pioneering. I asked Edgar if he'd ever shot a deer on the island.

"Ayup. Every fall. You've got to." He took a sip of his rum and

I exploded a lieutenant on one of his bombs.

"Why have you got to?" I knew they raided gardens but didn't think that carried the death penalty.

"Otherwise they'd starve. You get too many deer out here and some of 'em won't survive the winter. Ain't enough food to go around."

"You have to kill them so they won't starve?" I was clearly missing something here.

"Slow, painful starvation or a quick bullet. Which would you pick?"

"Gotcha." Here was an unpleasant reality: animals in the wild rarely died of old age, snug in their beds and surrounded by loved ones. More likely it's disease, famine, or getting eaten by something else, which I knew from personal experience really sucked. This put a different light on all that wildlife work I wanted to do. A hard truth, but that was part of why I came to Mille Jours: To learn hard truths about myself, and life and my place in the world, about who I was, what I wanted, and where, if anywhere, I belonged. In the absence of interference, maybe some of those things would be revealed.

Edgar got my flag for the fourth time and I put on my Carhartt and ski cap for the walk home, about a mile under a sliver of moon and a billion stars. Before I left he gave me two frozen venison steaks I accepted with gratitude and a useful realization: Pioneer woman may barter goods in exchange for

animals others have killed. It was time to brush up my pie baking skills.

Over the course of that winter, Edgar was kind enough to instruct me in some of the arts I would need to survive, such as replacing wicks in my oil lamps, keeping my ancient (Revolutionary war surplus, I think) generator running, properly building and banking fires in my woodstove and keeping the chimney clean, which I learned must be done often when burning spruce, lest one set fire to the island. If not for his help, I wouldn't have made it to April.

I found that every other week or so I would crave human contact, if only for a short while. That surprised me to no end since the utopia I sought had always entailed a small, brightly colored planet with a vast ocean and a population of one. Maybe throw in a few ponies, what the hell.

Clutching a bottle in one hand and a pie in the other, I would hike down the icy mountainside to knock on Edgar's door for an evening of strong drink and Stratego, which I continued to always lose. Edgar fought in the South Pacific in WWII (hence his skill at Stratego?) and could be persuaded to tell war stories, but he never once suggested I might be an LBFM, not even after a great deal of Kentucky bourbon.

Another useful thing I learned from Edgar was how to nurse no more than two drinks over the course of an evening. Any more might see me dancing suggestively on the coffee table, which

many would consider a social *foe-pah* (that's French) of the highest order, myself and presumably Edgar included. That lesson was invaluable; I wish I had known it when I dated Kevin Doyle.

During the late winter and early spring, a hundred and twenty-five page novella called *Acadia Jennings Has Lost Her Mind* forced itself out of my head and onto legal pads. This was notable for being the single longest waste of paper I had yet achieved. I put it on the shelf for a few weeks and upon rereading found I liked it enough to produce a redraft.

I rewrote it in longhand between stints of lumberjacking, clamming, and trading pies for Edgar's venison, for which I had by then acquired quite a taste. The art of pie making held great appeal for me, for what is a pie but a gigantic overstuffed Pop Tart? I ventured into the realm of pot pies, ultimately devising my *pièce de résistance*, a roasted garlic, venison and potato pie even Edgar, a dour man who jealously guarded his praise, declared to be "some good."

In May we went to the main for the first time in three months to restock food, fuels, and household supplies. I stopped at the Post Office and found a small handful of letters waiting for me, mostly forwarded from Wiscasset. I bought postcards and answered the ones from Mr. Flaherty and Aoife, saying I planned to stay on the island until August unless forced to vacate sooner. To Aoife I suggested a visit as soon as possible.

A few days after that trip, Edgar came by to tell me he'd be leaving Mille Jours for a month to visit his sister in North Carolina. "Should be back the end of June."

"Oh. Ok."

"You don't sound so sure about that."

"No, it's just, I didn't think you ever left for more than a couple of days."

"Maybe you'll visit Wiscasset while I'm away? Be glad to take you over."

"No thanks." I saw disappointment in his eyes and wondered why he would care if I stayed or left, then—duh—it hit me: he felt responsible and disliked leaving me marooned out there. There were only two other houses on Mille Jours and they would be vacant until July, so I'd be on my own once Edgar left. If anything went seriously wrong, I would be well and truly fucked.

"I'll be ok, Edgar, really. I promise not to burn down the island while you're away." I was about to add "or get killed" but that was a harder promise to keep.

When he left on a breezy morning three days later I gave him a letter to mail: my application to Wolcroft College, the only college I applied to. If they wouldn't have me, I'd try again next year.

Edgar waved as he sailed from Mille Jours Harbor and the island was mine alone.

Pioneer Woman had by that time been shelved and was

supplanted by Lady Jane Blackmore, ruthless seventeenth century privateer. I was absorbed for a week or so with swashbuckling and went around the island provoking ornately choreographed swordfights with the shrubbery, untold numbers of which fell to my savage rapier (a pointy stick).

We one day took a prize off the Barbary Coast and found her laden with gold and jewels, but her captain was a grandiloquent popinjay whose florid prattling I could scarcely abide.

"Be silent, thou windbag, lest I make a shish-kebab of ye."

Aye, Lady Jane, he's for the plank.

"WHO SPEAKS?!" I thundered.

'tis I, the gunner's daughter.

"Avast, ye lubber. I alone shall decide his fate."

Hang him from the yardarm, I say.

"Hark, ye dog! What did I just say?"

Yeah, ok, sorry.

Sometimes my inner voice/alter ego inserted herself unbidden into my loneliness. She was a good friend to have, but we rarely agreed on anything. After some discussion we sewed the fop's mouth shut with a rigging needle and tranquility reigned once more on our deadly caravel. We counted our gold on the morning tide, and things grew progressively stranger from there.

By the fourth week of Edgar's absence, my sanity had departed and left no forwarding address. I despaired to learn the

solitude I craved for so long was not at all a viable way to proceed with my life, and was forced to ask whether anything I believed about myself was true. My waking hours were plagued with nagging regret for everything I'd ever done. My first and last thoughts on any given day were, *Who the fuck am I?* and *What the fuck am I doing?* Intelligible answers eluded me.

Attempts to alleviate my woes with alcohol made matters predictably worse. I grew increasingly despondent in the absence of sentient beings. One method I devised to keep my poisonous thoughts from strangling me was to stand atop the cliff behind my cabin shouting gibberish—*eep beedly bop a doobah dee!*—at the top of my lungs and listening to it reverberate across the sea. I had become the Madwoman of Mille Jours (famed of many an old salt's tale).

One bluebird-clear afternoon I was in the throes of doing that very thing when a voice behind me said, "Mmm chicha zappity boom aye eee!" I first assumed my alter ego had arrived to mock me. When I turned and saw Aoife Doyle grinning at me like a fellow madwoman I threw myself at her with such frantic hunger we fell into the geraniums. A kiss of the more-than-just-friends sort landed wetly on my lips; she tasted sweet like butterscotch. I buried my face in the hollow of her shoulder and breathed her in, shedding tears of joy, wanting to stay forever in that early summer sun, holding, being held, being unalone. That's a word, I said so.

At dinner that night—venison chili, met without objection—Aoife told me she'd hitched a ride to Mille Jours on a sailboat, hence her stealthy approach.

"By the way, Champ, what's all that yodeling about?"

"Yodeling?"

"That you were doing when I got here."

"Oh, that." I refused to be embarrassed. "I was just going quietly insane."

"Loudly insane," she corrected.

"Yeah, ok, but I'm better now."

She nodded as if that made perfect sense. "Cabin fever?"

"It's the solitude. I've been alone out here for a solid month. It gets to you."

I explained about the untimely demise of my Utopian ideal.

"Sorry, Champ. That sucks. You ok then?"

"Yeah." I buttered a hunk of cornbread and drizzled honey on it. "How long can you stay?" I needed her to not leave me there alone.

"I dunno. I don't have to be anywhere until September."

Had I known how to do a happy dance, that's when I would have done it. I might have her for the whole summer.

"But you'll get bored before that," I said, prompting her to contradict me. Please.

She obliged. "Bet I don't."

"How much?"

"A million dollars."

"You're on." I said this knowing she did not have a million dollars.

"You know I don't have a million dollars, right?"

"Yeah," I said. "Neither do I."

"We'll have to set up a payment plan."

"Have your people get in touch with my people."

"Done." There was quiet for a moment, then she broke it. "Where do I sleep?"

"Where do you want to sleep?"

"You have to ask?" She hit me with a devilish smile.

"No. Did you?"

I won't say too much about what happened in my bed that summer, except that we spent a lot of time there, and we learned a lot of new things about ourselves and each other. Once I asked about Howard.

"I see him sometimes. It's casual."

"He was nice." I guess you always remember your first, but I didn't really know the guy.

"He's crazy about you," said Aoife.

"No way."

"Yeah. Expect a call when you get home."

"I am home."

"I mean Wiscasset home."

"I don't know if I'm going back." The truth I couldn't tell her

was that I feared (irrationally) returning to the main for anything more than a supply trip, and even that made me nervous. Solitude may have tried to drive me insane, but the island, given every opportunity, had not done me in. The longer I stayed without a tragedy the more convinced I became that Mille Jours was the only safe haven I would ever know. Everything else had been called into question that summer, and the island seemed the only truth I had left.

Edgar Tuttle returned a week after Aoife arrived. He looked upon our closeness with reserved curiosity but asked no questions. I resumed pestering him for war stories and board games. Aoife revealed a hidden talent: she could beat him at Stratego.

In July, Aoife discovered the 1948 Jeep Willys that lived in my tool shed.

"Does it run?"

"Yep."

"Aagh! Then why do we walk everywhere?"

"Because we have time. And because gas, like light, costs money and I don't have a job."

She'd groused about the gloom that held sway within my cabin but soon acclimated and even wondered aloud why Edgar's house was always so bright. (Answer: he could afford to run his generator more than I could.)

"Can we go for a drive then?"

"Have you seen the So-Called Road? Or what's left of it?" That was the road's official name; it even appeared on state maps, if they had enough detail.

Mille Jours had only one road, built in the 1930s and running the length of the island, just over two miles including the switchbacks that led to my cabin on the cliff. It received little maintenance to speak of in the forty years since it was built, and looked as though it had sustained multiple aerial bombardments.

Bringing cars to the island was a lark, proposed in the early 1930s and enacted by one Pennington Massey. He was a baron of the burgeoning chemical industry who could not bear the crushing indignity of having to carry his suitcase a hundred yards from the dock to his summer cottage. He rallied the neighbors—including my great-grandparents—and hired a barge to bring over several cars and a supply of fuel. The island "road" quickly reduced all those vehicles to scrap iron. Most of them were ultimately pushed into the woods and forgotten. In the forest near my cabin was a 1928 Model T Ford whose roof rusted out and now had a stout Norway spruce growing through it.

Islanders eventually discovered it was more entertaining to push dead cars off the cliff, and there remains to this day a pile of rusting engine blocks on the shore beneath my home.

Edgar's truck and my Jeep were now the only functional vehicles on the island.

"Yeah, I saw the road. Come on, Bonnie-Kate, it's a Jeep, isn't

it. It's made for this!" She acted like it was a rollercoaster.

So we went for a spin to the dock and back, rarely exceeding five miles per hour. I let Aoife drive since the clutch was still a little tricky for me. She was like a kid with a new toy. That was just one of many reasons I was in danger of falling in love again.

When Edgar went over to the main to ferry a summer family out—the Carrs, of Fairfield, Connecticut—Aoife and I went along for the ride, savoring the views as Edgar's boat, *Four Aces*, threaded her way through a scattering of pine-crested isles. In Jonesport I collected the mail and bought a ridiculous quantity of paraffin so I could try my hand at the ancient candlemaking apparatus I found in the tool shed. Pioneer Woman strikes again.

The mail—five letters!—included one from Wolcroft College in Renfield, Maine.

Back aboard *Four Aces*, Aoife wanted me to open that one on the spot but I wasn't sure how I might react to the news it carried. A meltdown was possible, and I didn't want to have it in the presence of the Carrs, whom I didn't know that well.

"Come on, Bonnie-Kate, I'm sure you're in."

"We'll know soon enough."

"Just open it!"

"What's the rush?"

"I WANT TO KNOW!"

"Why do you care?"

"AAGH! GIVE ME THAT!" She tried to snatch it away from

me; the Carrs were beginning to stare.

"All right," I said. "Keep your panties on, I'll open it." She clapped her hands, I removed the letter from its envelope and read.

"What's it say? What's it say?" She was bouncing slightly. I noticed that her boobs came to rest a couple of seconds after the rest of her, and was envious.

I read the first line and stopped. "Well, fuck."

"Oh no! I'm so sorry!" She looked like she might cry.

"I was accepted."

"There must be a mistake, then. How could they—wait, what?"

"I'm accepted. Now I'll have to go." As in, to mainland America, where my safety would be in no way guaranteed.

I didn't care to have that whole conversation over the engine's roar, so I told her we'd talk when we got home.

When we arrived I put on a pot of wax to melt and sat down with Aoife, in whom I had kindled a state of deep confusion. I lit a Marlboro, now approaching a pack a day.

"That'll stunt your growth, won't it."

"Very funny, Eefs."

She didn't interrupt as I unspooled the muddle-headed philosophies, contradictory theories and abiding disarray that defined my inner life. I apologized for all of the above.

When I finished, she said, "That's ok, Champ. You're nutty as

a fruit-bat. I've always known that, haven't I."

"But do you understand about the college thing?"

"Not entirely."

"It's simple. Mille Jours is the only place on earth that doesn't regularly try to kill me. I'm afraid to leave."

"Do you really think so?" When she said 'think' it came out *tink*. Thin was *tin*, and I'll spare you what she called Richard III.

"Without question. Since you came out here in June I've been sort of...happy." I was careful to whisper so the Universe wouldn't overhear and put a stop to it. "I don't feel like anything's missing. It's like, as long as I stay on the island I will be permitted love and joy. If I leave—say, to college—sorrow will find me again. I'm sure of it."

"You know that's crazy, right? Locations don't punish people, I can tell you."

"Yeah. My mind knows that. But rationality doesn't seem to be calling the shots, most of the time."

We were quiet a moment and I got up to stir my melting wax.

"I'll go back in September, won't I," said Aoife. "If Edgar leaves again you'll be all alone out here."

"See how it is?"

"Fucked if you do, fucked if you don't."

"Yep."

She thought hard about how to fix it. "How's this: Make a deal with the Universe. If it leaves you alone for college, you'll

move out here permanently when you graduate."

"And do what?"

"When?"

"When I move here after college. How do I support myself?"

"Pfft. You have tons of money."

"I'm not going to piss it all away, Eefs. I have to earn my keep."

"You could...um—"

"See? It's not that simple."

"Oh! I know! You could be a lobster...person."

I explained about territories and competition, and that Edgar already had a long-standing claim to most if not all of the nearby waters. If I suddenly showed up out there with a boat and traps, he'd let me fish, but I would be encroaching. I couldn't do that to him.

"Maybe he'd take you on? As a helper?"

"A sternman. But if that's what I'm going to do, why am I going to college?"

"Well, duh, Bonnie-Kate, so you don't go crazy out here. More crazy, I mean. Than you already are."

So that's what it came down to. Live safely on Mille Jours as a sternman, but leave the island from time to time at great personal peril in order to preserve what remained of my sanity. It was no crazier than any of my other ideas, nor was it any more sane. That can be a fine line.

"A deal with the Universe, huh?"

"It's worth a go, isn't it."

"All right. I'll try it."

"Good," said Aoife. "now go yell it from the cliff."

"What for?"

"So the Universe will know, ya silly."

In early August we finally got some hot weather.

"Let's lay out and get a bit of color then," said Aoife.

"I'm already brown." Laying out never appealed to me for that and other reasons, deer flies and mosquitoes chief among them.

"Suit yourself. I'm catching some rays."

I went to the kitchen and made lobster salad from the previous night's leftovers, then went out back to see if Aoife wanted some. I found her in the chaise lounge wearing nothing but sunglasses. She was chewing bubblegum and reading *Acadia Jennings Has Lost Her Mind*.

"Whatcha up to, Eefs?" That came out by accident since there could be no doubt what she was up to. It was all plain to see.

"Reading." She flipped a page.

"You're naked."

"You noticed that, did ya."

"Um…what if you get a sunburn on your vagina?"

"You'll kiss it and make it all better." She blew a large pink

bubble of Bazooka at me. "You wrote this?"

"It's only a second draft. You don't have to tell me it sucks, I already know."

"This does not suck. It does the opposite of suck."

"Ok, it blows."

"That's not what I mean!" She looked up at me, shading her eyes with her hand. "You should get a publisher."

"If only it was that easy." I continued to feast on her with my eyes; she continued to be extremely nude.

"Listen, me da knows a guy. Let me show this to him."

"Nobody's going to publish that. You'd be wasting your time."

"It's my time, I can waste it if I want to, can't I."

She adjusted herself and parts of her bounced delightfully. I bit my lip. Guilt prodded me for my insistence on unlit romantic encounters. Maybe she would like to see me, too? I couldn't imagine it, but worried I was being selfish again.

I went to my (our) bedroom and took my clothes off, put my shades on, and walked in silent discomfiture to the back porch door. *I'll just walk right out there and be naked with Aoife in the sun. That's exactly what I'll do.*

I reached for the screen door with my partially eaten hand. I looked down with distaste at my amputated leg, the aluminum post that ended in a false foot-shaped device that wasn't fooling anyone.

Aoife doesn't want to see this mess.

Yes she does.

"How do you know?"

Just go out there. You'll see.

"I can't."

Who faces down wild animals and motorcycle gangs?

"That's different."

Stop thinking about it and just go.

I opened the door and stepped into the sun, then turned and ran back inside, nearly tripping over my own fraudulent leg.

Coward! Loser!

"Shut up. I never asked you anyway."

Maybe not, but—

"But nothing. I tried."

And failed miserably.

"Which is what I do best, so quit acting all surprised." I went back to the bedroom and covered my shame.

We went to bug Edgar that night and played Monopoly instead of Stratego, but I still lost. I was pouring my second scotch and soda—easy to sip slowly because it tasted like rusty nails in Sterno—when Aoife came out with, "Hey, Edgar, does it ever make you crazy to be out here alone? The solitude?"

"Used to. Not 'nymore."

"Yeah?"

"You get used to it after a while. Just takes a little practice."

"Because Bonnie-Kate was right around the bend when I got

here." She made a circular motion at her temple, the universal sign for looney-tune.

I didn't want Edgar worrying after me anymore than he already did, and gave her a *what the fuck?* look. As was often the case, she had to spell it out for me, which she did after we got home and exchanged the kisses that made it all better.

We lay panting in the dark until Aoife caught her breath enough to say, "Did you catch the thing Edgar said?"

"Nice pillow talk, Eefs. You're amazing, too."

She giggled and squeezed me, bottom-wise. "No, really, Champ. It's important."

"Ok, what." I lit a smoke.

"He said you get better at being alone."

I had to think about that for a second.

She went on. "Which means—"

When I didn't finish, she did: "—you can have your utopia! Without going insane! All you have to do is practice."

"Oh. That."

"Don't get too excited, little coleslaw."

"Cabbage. It's little cabbage." I wasn't sure how to tell her my unattainable dream had changed to include a willowy Irish lady named Aoife Doyle.

A significant part of my vision centered on avoiding harm to those unfortunate enough to care about me. That summer taught me Aoife was an exception—maybe the only exception—to the

rule. I still wished I could stay on Mille Jours, but I also wanted to be wherever she was, even if it meant going somewhere that might try to kill me. I had a feeling I could avoid extermination if I was with her. That feeling was dangerous.

Despite her flashes of childlike exuberance I still looked at Aoife as slightly older and therefore wiser, so I came right out with it.

"Eefs, are we lesbians now?"

She said, "Hm," to let me know she was thinking about it as her hand traced my private contours. "Right now, sure, I guess we are." Her fingers walked around on the small of my back. "But I don't know about long term."

I felt myself go tense, fearing what that implied.

"Like, do you never want to sleep with a guy again? Ever?"

It was my turn to say, "Hmm." Since she'd come to the island I hadn't thought much about guys. At all.

Aoife put a finer point on it. "Say Howard showed up out here. Would you want to do that thing again?"

"Yeah, that was fun." On reflection, my experiences with Howard and Pete had shown me the hidden value of penises.

"Me, too," said Aoife. "And that makes us bisexual, not lesbians."

"So we could fall in love with a boy or a girl."

"We could."

I now had a much better idea what kind of sexual

intercourser I'd become, but our conversation raised new questions. Emboldened by a second scotch and soda, I asked one.

"Well, what if I fell in love with you? Like romantic love, I mean."

"Then we'd be Even-Steven, wouldn't we."

I answered her, but not with words.

After a while I realized I was gazing upon a whole new spectrum of possibilities, but also complex uncertainties. If I got married someday, should it be to a man or a woman? And whichever I chose, wouldn't I miss the other? I bounced these questions off Aoife and she said, "You think about things too much."

Then she kissed me and made it all better again. I fell asleep that night thinking it was high time I redefined my utopia.

I stood on the brink of an understanding I could latch onto and call my own; a new personal utopia free of sorrow and fear, in which I could pursue love and happiness without repercussions from the cosmos. It would be the dawn of a new age for Bonnie-Kate Caldwell, a time of decisive action in the pursuit of my totally realistic and infinitely achievable dream.

Enlightenment lasted all of six hours, then I got up and went to cook breakfast. I came to what passed for my senses as I cracked a couple of eggs: Utopia is a myth, and I was a fool (so what's new) to set my sights on it. All of mankind's attempts at it had failed, some catastrophically, and it wasn't going to be any

different for me or anyone else. Fortunately, there was a solution to the problem right at hand: Stop wanting that.

I looked up to see Aoife in her underwear and yawning, her wavy auburn hair piled on her head in a gorgeous mess.

"What's cooking, Champ?"

"French toast and Jimmy Dean."

"Mmm...gimme." She poured herself a black coffee.

"I've been thinking, Eefs."

"You should stop doing that so much." She took a plate and drowned everything in Aunt Jemima. "It just gets you into trouble."

That might have hurt my feelings had I not said it myself many, many times. "Am I more confused than most people?"

"Yeah," she said, matter-of-factly. "Way more."

"How do I fix that?"

"Therapy?" She sipped her orange juice, Minute Maid from concentrate, but don't tell Pioneer Woman.

"I don't know." I pictured myself on a psychiatrist's couch spilling my unfortunate history. The words INVOLUNTARY COMMITMENT flashed in my mind. "I don't think that's an option."

"You just need someone to talk to, To help sort things out, dontcha know."

"Most people don't need that, do they?"

"Most people don't lose their whole family before they're

eighteen."

"Is that why I'm weird, do you think?"

"It's as good a reason as any." She looked at me with what I thought was deep sympathy for my inner turmoil but said, "You gonna eat that?" and nodded at the sausage on my plate.

"Go ahead." She plucked it away like she feared I might change my mind and demand its return.

I said, "Could I talk to you? You're pretty smart."

"I'm all ears, Champ. Let 'er rip." Her tongue darted out to catch a stray drip of syrup. "But you might not like what I say."

There in my dark little cabin kitchen, my world according to Aoife was revealed:

I'd had more than my share of bad luck, but that's all it was—luck.

The cosmos was not out to get me. That's superstition, and I was too rational to hold with such foolishness.

I was not being punished for anything, by anyone.

I was not accident prone, I just put myself in dangerous situations.

There was much to be happy about in my life. I had a home in the place I loved most in all the world, I had a lot of money, and my life was really just beginning. This was a summer of love and joy; there would be more like it.

There would be sorrows, too, but hadn't I proven my resilience? I mourned my dead and got on with my life, and was

better at it than many would ever have the chance to be.

So, effective immediately, this was resolved: I would not let the Universe boss me around anymore. I would live my life where and with whom I chose. If the Universe didn't like it, I would cordially invite the Universe to go intercourse itself. I dare you to kill me. And even if you did, you *still* wouldn't win because I'd be dead and I wouldn't care. Stupid asshole Universe.

I turned nineteen that summer and Aoife turned twenty-one. It was time to put away childish things. Utopia was overrated anyway.

We returned to Wiscasset the third week of August to prepare for the fall semester; she for her vet school, me for my first year at Wolcroft, where I would major in English, the very direction my mom had aimed me.

When we left the island, I caught Aoife slipping the second draft of *Acadia Jennings* into her bag. I protested.

"I still have work to do on that."

"That's what Van Gogh said about *American Gothic*."

"Eefs."

"It's also what Hemingway said about *Great Expectorations*."

"Eefs."

"Why are you so afraid someone will find out you're talented?"

She may have had a point. I thought about it all the way to Wiscasset and decided it was one of my childish things that must

be put away.

On my arrival at Wiscasset, I realized summer had come to a close without any fatalities. How odd.

The Little Fuzzy Ones

The trouble with being a vet tech is that so many of the animals you see are suffering. My mission was to stop that suffering, wasn't it, and when I succeeded I felt I couldn't have a better job. But my heart was broken everyday when they came in sick or injured- dying of distemper or rabies, hit by a car, shot, maimed, abused, neglected.

I was once a radical anti-euthanasian (ask Bonnie-Kate if that's a real word). I mean, death is always the worst thing, isn't it. After I'd seen a few raccoons and deer and foxes in agony on their way to a prolonged, painful death, I understood that final needle could be a great kindness.

I may have chosen the wrong field of study. I wanted all creatures to frolic in meadows and forests, carefree, well-fed, and insanely happy. I also wanted the little fuzzy ones to sit in my lap and be petted, but that wasn't very realistic, was it. I'd have to be satisfied with relieving some of the suffering. I hoped that would be enough.

Bonnie-Kate was a small, fuzzy surrogate. She liked to curl up for naps and be petted. She was the perfect size.

By the time she called me about spring break, I'd convinced

meself I was corrupting her and needed to stop it. What if she missed an opportunity for true love while she was busy fooling around with me in a relationship that wasn't going to give her anything like the future she wanted and deserved? I'd feel terrible then, wouldn't I.

If she were to initiate some kind of dedicated long-term romance with me I wouldn't be able to say no. Faced with the chance to do the wrong but fun thing, I had no feckin' will power at all, did I.

That was one of the reasons I went to Fort Lauderdale instead of Wiscasset for the break. The other was the guy who invited me down there, Danny LaFontaine. We were good together, but I got tired of him after a while. He was so insistently *male* all the time. He was just so intentional about it. Everything Danny did and said carried a hidden message: I am a *MAN*, make no mistake about it, and I'll prove it all the time so there won't be any doubt.

See here now, I don't have a problem with people being male. Sure, some of my best friends are male, and everyone I've ever shagged was male except for one. I just couldn't see why a lad would need to go around asserting his gender like that. It's not hard for the casual observer to tell what sex you are, unless you're being actively ambiguous about it. Which some folks, David Bowie, for instance, might do. I don't make any judgments about it, dontcha know. It's their business, not mine.

If you have to prove your maleness all the time, it tells me you're insecure, possibly gay, and you've a wee little willie. So get yourself along now with your muscle cars and guns to show how manly you are. We both know what it really means, but that can be our little secret.

I'd dated the super-macho guys, and I'd dated the ones who didn't have anything to prove. I had fun with both, but they all left me feeling unfulfilled. Not sexually, that part was ok, but generally. 'Twas me, not so much them.

And why was Bonnie-Kate the only girl that really did it for me? I must have been some sort of gay, but not quite ready to admit it.

An Intermittent Stream of Strange Men

On our return to Wiscasset, Aoife spent two days at my house before going home to her parents. I ordered Italian take-out and we watched the seven o'clock news to see if we'd missed anything in our self-imposed sequestration. We had. This is what happens when you spend six months beyond the reach of radio and TV: they change the president and don't even bother to tell you. History's like that sometimes—blink and you miss it.

A president's resignation impacts the life of every American, but I, being less than politically astute, would be at a loss to tell you how. Politics held little interest for me even after I became a legal voter. I based my choices on whose policies were nicest, because being nice solves everything. Yes, I am aware that a person with such a tenuous grasp of the issues should not be choosing our leaders. Sorry.

When I drove Aoife to meet the train that would take her back to school I created a minor scene at the train station. The gravity of her impending absence hit me hard when we were standing on the platform. I could not be consoled.

"Will you date other girls?" I sniffled miserably at the thought of losing her to some lab-coated veterinary siren.

Aoife answered firmly and without hesitation, "No. Just guys."

"B-but you might meet some…girl there." Tears came.

"It doesn't matter. They're not you."

We had never formally defined the terms of our relationship, but there it was: exclusivity. Partial exclusivity, anyway.

"I'll miss you so bad," I said, then hugged her, hiding my leaking face in her softness.

Her hand stroked my hair. "I don't think you'll have time to miss me."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Watch out for those college lads, Champ. You'll be awfully popular wi' them, won't you."

Flattery made a fine distraction, but our parting was still tearful and freighted with honest, heartfelt lies about *all eternity* and *the whole world*. People on the platform stared. A public sighting of women in love was rare at the time, still decades from broad acceptance. When we kissed goodbye with undisguised emotion, several commuters gasped, but fuck them.

On my arrival at Wolcroft a few days later, I observed that students undergo a radical transformation between the senior year of high school and freshman year of college. They turn into something resembling adults. Some of them.

Most, maybe.

Certainly not me.

These young men and women had chosen academia and were paying for it, unlike high schoolers who had an education forced on them, sometimes unwillingly. Imagine trying to impress upon a kid who already knows his future is hauling lobster traps the importance of mastering advanced algebra. *Set traps here, keep a weather eye, and solve for X. You must find the value of X! Your success as a lobsterman depends on it!*

Sorry, Professor Fogbottom, but that kid already knows X = bullshit. I was inclined to agree, but I came to Wolcroft to study letters, not numbers.

My roommate, Cecilia Duncan, arrived a day before me and laid claim to everything desirable in our room before I had a chance. She decorated with pictures of herself in the ranks of several sports teams, an eight by ten of David Cassidy that was autographed, and a picture of Jesus that, perhaps tellingly, was not. Nor was I impressed with her grasp of the obvious.

"Oh! You're Chinese."

"My god, when did this happen?!" I grabbed the mirror from her dresser and howled in mock dismay.

"Ok, sorry."

"I'm Filipina, not Chinese."

"It's just, when they said my roommate was Bonnie-Kate Caldwell, I expected someone more…um…American."

"Ah so. Please to tell me the wonders of your great land. Is all so strange to me, honorable roommate-san." I bowed. She looked

at me like I had twenty-three vaginas.

"Well...um, there's the Grand Canyon, and Mount Rushmore. And the White House, that's where the president lives." When she couldn't think of anything else she asked, "So what's it like in the Philippines?"

"Everything made from bamboo and coconut shells, very fine. And how is food in America, plenty good?"

"Oh yes. There's pizza, lasagne, tacos, hot dogs, and french fries. And cheeseburgers, too."

I knew if I gave her long enough she'd think of one that was actually American.

She asked, "What kind of stuff do you eat in your country?"

"Raw eels, kung-pao dachshund, live baby birds, very crunchy. You like, yes?"

"Er, uhm, ok, uh, sure." She made a little bit of a pukey face.

"Very good. I make for you."

"Oh, you don't have to do that." She trembled, plainly terrified I would make her eat a dog.

"Wait, I have—" I dug through my duffel bag. "—is some dried squid in here someplace." That was a favorite of Mom's but I didn't actually have any with me. Too salty, too fishy.

"You know, I have to go to the, um...quad for...uh, something important. In fact, I'm already late, sorry, can't stay, see ya, bye." Her athleticism was on display as she bolted out the door, not bothering to close it behind her.

I unpacked my clothes, violin and cigarettes, then went to find out where my classes were. When I returned an hour later, Cecilia Duncan and her belongings were gone without a trace and I was the sole occupant of my room. Is plenty good, yes?

I put up a Hawkwind poster—I loved them for their quark, strangeness and charm—and hung a sign on the door that said YOU MUST BE THIS WEIRD TO ENTER with arrows pointing in all different directions. No one dared.

On the first day of my creative writing class, our instructor, Professor Kirchener who wanted us to call him Dave, had us all stand and introduce ourselves. I sat and listened as my fellow wannabees presented their complete resumes, including every teen-angsty screed ever published in their rat-bag high school newspaper.

Like many people, public speaking ranked high on my list of terrors, right up there with being partially eaten by wildlife and and having a major limb chopped off in Kansas. When it came around to me, I was thinking about all the things Aoife said to help me make sense of my world. Unable to find any strength in that, I remained petrified, torn between introducing myself or jumping out the window and running away. Recalling that we were on the third floor, I stood, briefly entangling my prosthesis in the legs of my chair and nearly landing on my ass. So far, so good.

"My name is Bonnie-Kate Caldwell and I am no longer

confused. Also, everyone I know is dead, mostly. Sometimes I write things."

They looked like they were expecting a punch line but I was all done talking, so I said, "Sincerely, Bonnie-Kate Caldwell." I curtsied, which apparently you're not supposed to do in college, and sat back down, tripping over my chair again. The room was overcome with a nervous silence I was proud to have authored. That's what you get for not giving me time to prepare.

After the first week they gave me another roommate. I put more effort into normalizing relations with this one.

Sylvia Moore knocked softly, probably put off by my sign, and entered as if on tip-toes for fear of upsetting the mentally unstable roommate about whom she had surely been forewarned. This frightened little creature stood before me, gazing from dark eyes deep-set in a wan face whose expression seemed to say *please don't hurt me*. She looked at my Hawkwind poster and grimaced.

"It's ok, I don't have a stereo. You're Sylvia?"

"Yes. Bonnie-Kate?"

"That's me."

We shook hands. Her grip was as firm as a thin layer of dense fog. I stood near my bunk, a tangle of unmade sheets and blankets sown with half-read books, empty Lays (with ridges) bags, and underpants whose clean/dirty status was at present undetermined.

"Which bed is mine?"

"Sylvia. Do you really think I would do this to you?" I indicated my sty.

"I didn't mean...I guess not, no, sorry." She set down her bag.

"Everything on that side is yours." I gestured to her desk, dresser and neatly made bed. Fearing she might grab her suitcase and flee at any moment, I tried talking to her, using a practiced facade of normalcy.

"I guess you're a freshman, too?" That would explain her skittishness.

"Junior."

You could have knocked me over with a thin layer of dense fog. "Yeah? What's your major?"

"Astrophysics." A field known to be incomprehensible to mere mortals.

"Oh."

"And yours?"

"English." A field in which most Americans have achieved a fair mastery by the age of six.

So that's how it is, eh? Our intellectual dynamic was established and I was not at all accustomed to being the dumb-ass in the room, but there it was: a desperately needed dose of humility. I was learning that college could be educational to me in many more ways than the strictly academic.

Rather than plunking down their institute of higher learning

down in an established village, Wolcroft's stodgy founders built it in the middle of nowhere. This, they hoped, would facilitate uninterrupted focus in the young minds they were charged with shaping. Imagine their dismay when the town of Renfield, Maine, not only popped up adjacent to their hallowed institution, but encircled and laid siege to it with taverns, All-Nite Diners serving meatloaf of questionable provenance washed down with pitchers of cheap beer, and at least one strip club rumored to provide additional services in the trailer out back.

Wolcroft students, those fresh-faced and inbred scions of Old Money, could neither approach nor depart from their school with being sorely tempted by titties, beer, and, should they brave the meatloaf, dire gastrointestinal distress. Now that's a fun weekend.

In my first two weeks of college a number of young men approached me—as prophesied by Aoife—with amorous designs upon my person. Jeff DuChamps, who I knew from Creative Writing, invited me to Marty's Wheelhouse, a tavern known for not checking students' IDs except in the most blatant cases. I still bore the countenance of an eighth grader so Marty's henchman asked for proof of my age and—not unreasonably—denied me entry. Marty did not wish to be seen serving hard liquor to a child. The Redbird Diner, just down the main drag, had 3.2 beer and endless french fries, so that's where we ended up. Merriment ensued, and some groping.

My dear mother had always spoken frankly with me about sex, and warned me against giving it up too easily or too often, as if sex were a thing I owned, that boys would try to take from me. By the time I landed at Wolcroft, I'd come to understand that was not entirely true, and that sex was also a thing I might try to take from them. If this was an act of thievery, it was shockingly easy to commit, and generally went unpunished.

Mother would have advised against giving sex to Jeff DuChamps on our first date, so I took it from him instead. In my little red Beetle, because Sylvia never stopped studying and I didn't want to be rude. I had similar encounters with seven—if I haven't forgotten anyone—fellow students that fall semester while declining enough invitations to avoid being labeled a slut.

My affairs burned brightly and flared out, usually when my paramours learned they weren't allowed to look at me during the act. One guy, under the pretense of meeting me halfway, proposed that I take a few Polaroids of myself and give him a couple, which I did: one in jeans and a Pink Floyd t-shirt, the other in gym shorts and a bikini top, neither of which were quite what he had in mind. We still parted on good terms.

One night in November, a girl put the moves on me as I ate a late supper at the Redbird.

"I've been watching you," she said, mistakenly believing that wasn't super-creepy.

"Why would you do a thing like that?" I said this instead of

fleeing in hysterics, although I kept that handy as my Plan B.

"You've been with a girl before," she said.

I looked her over and saw nothing to indicate her own preference. I assumed she was either hitting on me or was part of some jackboot anti-lesbian squad here to persecute me for my past misdeeds with Aoife.

"What makes you say that?" I took a savage bite of my chili dog and followed it with a gulp of Pabst, leaving her to consider the possible downsides of a romantic evening in the company of such a voracious consumer of beans and beer.

She licked her lips and smiled at me. "Sometimes you just know."

My cues had failed; I did not reply.

"Let's take a walk." She touched my arm with red-nailed fingers.

"Sorry. I'm spoken for."

"Him or her?"

"One each."

"I'm better."

"By saying so, you have made it clear that you are not." I didn't like to be unkind, but I also didn't like egos, or being pushed where fidelity was concerned. I worried that she might have a .22 in her purse and was preparing to shoot me in the head.

"Your loss," she snipped, and didn't shoot me at all.

"Yours," I snapped, and ordered a chili dog and fries to take back to Sylvia since she never went out. As a duly sworn Filipina, it was my duty to feed her.

It took less than twenty-four hours for the banner headline of my confessed bisexuality to permeate the Wolcroft student body. I heard whispered rumblings, and some enterprising soul affixed a crude rendering of a cat flanked by knife and fork to my door, which was also Sylvia's door.

Two of the suitors who had lost interest in me suddenly regained it with great zeal. They petitioned me for a threesome, which I was led to believe was a sexual holy grail for intercoursers of a certain mindset.

I said, "Sorry," and did not add *you had your chance*. That would have been cruel.

I returned to the dorm after English Lit and found Sylvia with her nose buried in a volume so advanced I couldn't even understand the fucking title.

"Can I talk to you a sec?"

She looked frightened, as always. "Certainly." She closed *The Sub-Infinite Quantum Theory of Quark-AntiQuark Protomolecular Intra-radial Transectory Paradigms* using her finger as a bookmark.

"How's the book?" I asked, keeping things nice and chit-chatty, as though she were reading the latest Harlequin romance.

"It's not that kind of book." Her mouth made an arrow-

straight line.

"Guess I won't wait for the movie." A chuckle was not forthcoming.

"Something on your mind, Bonnie-Kate?"

"Yeah. Rumors. Have you heard?"

"I don't get out much."

"Everybody's saying I'm bisexual."

"Are you?"

"Apparently."

"Is that all?" She was itching to get back to the *The Sub-Inf*... that book. Sylvia was brilliant but in this instance she was missing the broader implications.

"People are bound to think you, as my roommate, are also bisexual. With me."

She tapped her yellow highlighter on her chin. "I suppose they will."

"If you want to move, I'll understand."

"I'm not bisexual, Bonnie-Kate, but if I was, it would be with you."

It took me a moment to realize the girl born without a sense of humor had made a little joke. She cracked a nervous grin and we had a laugh.

"So you don't mind me being—like that?"

"It's none of my concern, and I don't care what people think. To borrow your phrase, if I may, I don't give an Aroostook

County Thunder-fuck."

"Well done, Sylvia." I had been expounding on the linguistic value of a well-placed obscenity and that was the first time she used one unprompted. I beamed with pride.

"Anything else?"

"Nope. That about covers it." I let her climb back into her brainiac book and left her undisturbed until our pizza arrived: pepperoni, mushroom and extra cheese, a taste we shared.

Contrary to our own expectations, Sylvia and I got along famously and were highly compatible. Mutually respectful, quiet, reasonably neat (I only created landfills when left to my own devices), and studious, although she won that category hands-down. I learned to temper my oddness—no insane yodeling or making ogre faces in the mirror—for her benefit. I didn't want her moving out. I even put my violin away when she returned from her classes, although she swore it didn't bother her. "It's only distracting when there are lyrics."

"I wouldn't do that to you. Or anyone."

Our next door neighbors, Rhonda and Cheryl, were hippies enjoying a college experience fully subsidized by Mommy and Daddy. They treated Wolcroft like a party inconveniently interrupted from time to time by classes. Their festivities became a problem and I suspected it was Rhonda's pencil sketch that had graced our door at the height of my bisex controversy.

Knock, knock.

Cheryl opened the door to a room that smelled of candles, spilled wine and marijuana, and contained at least twenty students in various stages of intoxication.

"Hi Cheryl, I hate to ask, but my roommate's studying and it's getting kind of late, do you think you could turn your music down just a little?" It was Crosby, Stills and Nash, whom I liked just fine—adored, really—but not right now.

"Sure, Bonnie-Kate, no problem. Sorry to bother you." She closed the door, said something that made all nineteen of her friends howl with laughter, then turned up the stereo a couple of notches.

The next morning I grabbed the Renfield Gazette and found several vacant apartments in walking distance. I had a job clerking for Professor Dave, and made enough to offset most of the rent. I ran it past Sylvia, who I now called Sylvie, which she seemed to like.

"I've been thinking about an apartment."

"Did I do something?"

"Oh, no, it's not like that. I want you to come with me. If you want to, I mean."

"I can't afford it. I can barely afford the dorm, and it's free."

"I'll pay the rent."

"There'd still be phone bills, utilities—"

"I've got all that covered."

"Really, I couldn't."

"Please? I want you to."

She appeared to be considering it, so I sweetened my pitch. "Think of it, Sylvie, no more all-night parties next door. Just you and me, endless peace and quiet twenty-seven hours a day." That was how many hours she studied, on average.

"What about boyfriends?"

"I don't care if you have someone over."

"I mean yours." She said this without judgment.

I had never brought a guy to our room. Not for *that*, anyway. "I don't have...I don't think..."

She looked at me without expression and I didn't know what to say.

"It's ok, you're popular, I get it."

"I'm not so popular," I said.

"How many dates do you turn down per week?"

"Not that many. Maybe two, three." This was where I needed my inner voice/alter ego to tell me to shut the hell up, but she was a no-show. It didn't occur to me that I was being insensitive. Sylvie was not conventionally pretty, nor was she unattractive. She was certainly not without charms, particularly her Einstein-level intellect, and her enviable blondeness. Even so, I didn't think she'd been out on a date in all the time we'd known one another.

"Sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to...um...do whatever it was I just did there."

"It's ok. I just don't have a lot of time for dating right now. Or interest."

"Don't you get lonely?"

"Not with you around." She gave a rare smile.

"Where does that leave us? Apartment-wise, I mean."

"I wouldn't be comfortable with a steady stream of strange men spending the night."

"What about an intermittent stream of strange men?" Strange men were the only kind I liked. Or if they looked like movie stars. Or young Elvis.

"How intermittent?"

"Say, two nights a week at most. And I promise we'll be quiet."

"I could live with that."

When we moved out two days later, I slapped a drawing of a bruised and diseased penis on Rhonda and Cheryl's door. The drawing bore the legend GONORRHEA DISPENSARY, and was my last official act. Sylvia nodded and pronounced her judgment: "Those fucking bitches." Nice.

Our apartment was the converted third floor of an older but not elderly couple's home, and had a private entrance via a back staircase. They made no specific rule about overnight visitors but I sensed a hint of Puritan sensibility about them and acted accordingly, by which I mean resorted to sneaking lovers in and out when the coast was clear.

Sylvia left the decorating to me, so I put up my Hawkwind poster, a framed print of Wyeth's *Christina's World*, and a battery powered Mighty Mouse wall clock I bought at Goodwill for a dollar. Needless to say, I'd had no interior design classes. Sylvia declared our new home 'the perfect lair from which to launch our conquests' which I took as further proof I was rubbing off on her. I apologized to her for that.

When I wasn't negatively influencing Sylvie, I studied with reasonable diligence, didn't drink too much, and called Aoife often enough that she ran out of things to buy me if she had a million dollars. It occurred to me that I was experiencing happiness with a high degree of regularity. My instinct was to be terrified of it. I looked back over the previous two months; my bold venture into academia, my friendship with Sylvia, and my relative promiscuity. Despite my body-image problems, it turned out that I really liked intercoursing. Oh, no! Had I become an LBFM?!

I weighed these positives against accrued injuries, illnesses and lost appendages in the same time span, which were none. This had never happened before. I was ahead of the game.

My world according to Aoife Doyle appeared to be holding true, but I wondered if her theories had really been put to the test. I wanted desperately for her to be right, but struggled to overcome the entrenched fatalism that had served me so well for so long.

I would see Aoife again in just a few more weeks when winter break came around. I awaited our reunion like a sailor awaits shore leave, and hoped we might make plans for another summer together on Mille Jours.

That was also new to me: I was making plans with the basic assumption that I would still be alive when the sun rose tomorrow. That would take some getting used to.

I continued to go out with Jeff DuChamps infrequently and he didn't push for a threesome. I thought he was interested in me primarily as a whole person and not just a readily available vagina. I shamefacedly confess that I was most interested in him as an available penis and only secondarily as a person. But in my defense, I never led him to think otherwise. Not intentionally.

As much as I enjoyed my casual romances, I remained internally conflicted.

In contemplating my future—it seemed more and more likely I would have one—thoughts of marriage and a child or two were taking shape. Where such considerations were once downright terrifying, I now realized the possible benefits of such an undertaking. With my theory of fatal attraction discredited (or nearly so; Jeff DuChamps was not dead) I was free to produce from my own personal loins a family to replace the one I had lost too soon, with children to celebrate the birthdays of, to nurture and send off to school, to share joys and sorrows with, and to dandle the children of upon my ancient knee, should I still have

one.

I could have a family again. All I had to do was make one. This epiphany was huge, but as always, there was a problem. Its name was Aoife. I didn't just love her, I was *in love* with her. Therein lay the difficulty.

The law (which we all know is a idiot and a ass)[*] said we couldn't get married, and the laws of biology said we couldn't produce offspring, so if I wanted a family I would have to get from—ok, *with*—a man. How fair would it be to him if I was already in love with a woman? Why must everything be so fucking complicated all the time?

I was sneaking Jeff DuChamps down the back staircase on a Saturday morning while the landlords were still asleep when he asked me to come home with him over the holidays.

"I'd like to, but I'm already committed to Wiscasset."

He was from Madawaska, so far north they spoke Canadian. He knew I had a house and other ties in Wiscasset.

"I'll miss you." He sounded hurt. "See you when we get back?"

I wanted him to not be hurt. "Come with me."

"My folks are expecting me."

"Come with me for a few days, then go home."

"Yeah?" He rubbed his chin. "That might actually work."

"I'll call your mom and dad and explain it, if you want."

[****]Dickens said that, not me.

So that was settled, and led to the following farce-worthy conundrum: Aoife was the reason I was returning to Wiscasset, but she showed up with a boyfriend of her own, an owlish-looking guy named Anthony who had a mustache that wasn't doing his face any favors, if you asked me. It wouldn't be polite to just abandon these boys and go upstairs for a romp, so Aoife proposed a foursome. Neither Anthony nor Jeff was too keen on getting into a bed that had the other's penis in it. I understood that, having felt somewhat the same when Aoife first propositioned me.

"Ok, then," said Aoife. "How's this. Tonight me and Bonnie-Kate sleep with Anthony, tomorrow night we sleep with Jeff."

I was amenable if not wildly enthused, but Anthony didn't want to share Aoife with Jeff, so it never got off the ground.

I took the bull by the nuts: "Tomorrow night you guys are going to a Mariners hockey game in Portland. I'll buy your tickets. After the game you're going to the topless bar in South Portland where you will drink yourselves stupid and admire the boobies until closing time. If you return to my house before 3 am, we won't let you in. Deal?"

Anthony looked dumbfounded but Jeff laughed.

"See, this is what I love about you, Bonnie-Kate. You're a lady who knows how to get what she wants."

After a week Jeff went up to Madawaska and Aoife declined to accompany Anthony to his parents' house in Stamford, much

to his poorly-mustachioed chagrin. The menfolk dispensed with, Aoife and I spent our nights in one another's arms, causing great dismay to her Irish-Catholic mother, because proper young ladies aren't supposed to make *Mmmmm* sounds on one another's vaginas. So sayeth the lord.

I returned to Wolcroft in January, and despite my assiduous promiscuity, still failed to meet the man who would one day father my child(ren). Since realizing the option of parenthood was available to me, I had grown somewhat impatient to get on with it, or at least to locate the guy who would supply the sperm. I pictured my future child standing by, tapping his or her foot, waiting to be conceived. I would beg a little patience; I'm fucking as fast as I can.

My second semester was almost entirely forgettable. Professor Dave assigned a few creative writing exercises I didn't care for, so I submitted things other than what he requested. After a few of these, he took me aside.

"Have you handed in the wrong assignment, Bonnie?"

"I don't know anyone by that name."

"Bonnie-Kate, sorry."

"No, that's the one I meant to hand in."

"Perhaps you misunderstood the assignment?"

"I understood that it sucked."

"I'm sorry you feel that way. I believe it was beneficial to a significant portion of the class."

"Do you want to talk about what I didn't write, or what I did?"

He handed back my essay. "Fix the mechanics where I've noted and I'll give you an A."

"Thanks Professor Dave."

Two weeks later he began a class by introducing us to (and I quote) "A sterling example of thoughtful, well-executed fiction in short story form." We expected Steinbeck or Updike or Katherine Anne Porter. When I realized he was reading *Winds Northwest*, a story I wrote a week earlier, I gasped and said, "Oh my god" or "What the fuck," I forget which.

As my story spilled out I felt the eyes of my classmates upon me. I squirmed in my seat like a guilty person under cross-examination by Clarence Darrow.

When I went to work that afternoon I found Professor Dave in his office. I still wasn't sure how I felt about him putting my story out there like that.

"What was that all about, reading my stuff in class?"

He disarmed me. "I'm recommending you for the honors program."

"Ok, why?"

"You have a natural talent for storytelling, Bonnie-Kate. I cannot overstate how much I hope you will pursue a career in writing."

"I was thinking of teaching. Maybe."

I lately aspired to become Old Miss Caldwell, the oddball English teacher the kids thought strange but basically cool. I focused in that direction for one reason: summer vacation. That was, of course, a terribly selfish reason to go into teaching, but I wasn't going to pretend I was serving some lofty ideal about nurturing young minds. I wanted summers off so I could go play on my island, alone or with a statuesque Irish girl, and eventually —dare I even think it—with a husband and child of my own. I could have these things because I was not in anyway doomed, apart from the doomedness we all ultimately face.

That's right, I said doomedness. Deal with it.

"Please don't think me self-serving to call it a noble profession," said Dave, "but I hope it leaves you time to express your literary side."

"I don't have any control over that."

"You don't?"

"I don't think up stories, they show up in my head and insist on being written."

"Perhaps you're channeling Dostoevsky."

"Doubtful." Nothing against the great man—I adored *The Brothers Karamazov*—but if I was channeling anyone it was more likely to be Bozo the Clown or Gomer Pyle or some other hapless doofus.

Shortly before spring break I took yet another bull by the nuts: I, the least organized person who ever lived, would put

together a band. I missed playing music.

I drew up another sign and posted it on the quad. This one featured no diseased penises or felines flanked by cutlery.

> WANTED: Amateur bluegrass/folk/trad musicians, any skill level.
> Why? For fun and adventure!
> P.S.- not so much adventure, but fun anyway.

At the bottom I put a bunny playing a banjo, the only animal I knew how to draw.

Music was too great a source of happiness for me not to be creating some. That was the lesson of the Velvet Frog, and to a lesser degree, the Callous Sophisticates. I had been neglecting it for too long.

Forgotten life lessons were a great contributor to the confusion that once plagued me. It was time to start writing this stuff down.

I collected a group of five players, one of whom, Robbie Waters, had a rich baritone and was immediately appointed lead singer. That spared us all the pain of my attempted vocals. We met on campus twice before the break and roundly agreed that our merrymaking might be the ultimate catharsis. We called ourselves Creatures of Havoc.

As spring break approached I called Aoife to sort out our

plans, hoping to avert another farce.

"What time do I meet your train?"

"Oh, sorry Champ, you know what? Some of my mates invited me to Daytona beach. They've booked the hotel and such."

"You mean you're not coming home? At all?"

"It kind of looks that way. But, sure, I'll be around this summer."

"But...but—"

I did not say (or wail or moan) *How can you do this to me? I thought you loved me? Is there another girl? What will I do without you? IF YOU LOVED ME YOU'D COME TO WISCASSET!*

...but that's what I was thinking. I reeled in silent, crushing heartbreak.

After we said goodbye I went to my room and cried for a while, then I pulled myself together. Aoife didn't owe me anything; it's not like we were married. She said she wasn't interested in other girls. I trusted her and she trusted me. I was admittedly naive about how relationships worked, so I had to assume this was the sort of thing that happened with couples sometimes, if that's what we were. It seemed likely, if I were to face facts, that men would come between us soon enough, and where that would lead us remained a deep and foreboding mystery. When I tried to juggle Aoife and husbands and children

in my mind, I ended up dropping them all splat at my feet. Aoife and I had set ourselves up for heartache, the question was when, how long, and how bad. Like a storm from the nor'east, it loomed.

I had no reason to return to Wiscasset now. With Sylvie off visiting her parents—a sojourn requiring four hundred pounds of books I helped carry to her mom's car—I was free to spend the break doing just as I damn well pleased. My first thought was to get Aoife off my mind with the best diversion I knew: Fuckfest!

Imagine my disappointment upon realizing all my regular (irregular) bedfellows had departed Wolcroft for sunnier climes. So I stayed alone in my apartment. I'm not going to tell you how I passed the time since that would be pornographic.

Yep, said too much already.

The morning Sylvie was due back I answered a knock at the door, which was unlocked, making me wonder why she didn't just come in. On our welcome mat stood a lanky young man who bore a passing resemblance to young Elvis.

"Can I help you?"

"Bonnie-Kate?"

"Yes?" Where did I know this guy from?

"I said I wouldn't forget you."

I fell into Wendell Chapman's waiting arms.

I Am Still Not the Grown-up in the Room

I confess my first thought upon finding not only a male person but an attractive one on my doorstep was *here is a person from whom I might acquire some sex*. I thought better of it, mostly because Sylvia was due home any minute. It would be awkward, not to mention inconsiderate, to greet her with moaning and panting from behind my bedroom door.

Neither Wendell nor I realized it, but this moment would alter the trajectory of our lives, bringing joy beyond measure and unfathomable sorrow. Had I invited him directly into my bed, his impression of me might have been less favorable, and our ensuing relationship could have been undermined by a moment's pleasure. Probably several moments of pleasure, but still.

I extricated myself from our embrace. "How did you find me?"

"I tried Wiscasset first. Your neighbor said I'd find you here."

"You came all this way to see me?"

"I would have gone anywhere. China, the moon."

We stood looking at each other for a moment before I said, "You grew up real nice, Wendell."

"You too."

"Well. Flattery will get you everywhere. Before you ask, a coyote ate my finger, an outboard took my leg, I broke my nose in two car wrecks, I got shot in the head, and an owl tried to eat my face. That's why I look kind of funny now."

"You're as beautiful as ever."

"Don't be silly, Wendell. I'm mangled." I made one of my ogre faces.

Before he could protest we were distracted by a white station wagon pulling into the drive. Sylvie got out and started unloading her library, which appeared to have gained a dozen volumes.

"That's my roommate. Come on, she's got a million books."

With Sylvia re-established in her fortress of knowledge, I turned my focus back to Wendell.

"What brings you back to Maine?"

"I still have family here, and I missed the ocean."

"Oh yeah?" My eyes lit up. Here was a man after my own heart, who understood what it was to need an ocean.

"Wisconsin's fine, but I need salt water and pine trees."

"Lobster boats and chickadees?"

"Tide pools and open seas."

"Scallop shells and...um...honeybees?"

We were all out of rhymes so I said, "You have no idea how much I can relate."

Before he left Wisconsin, Wendell graduated from technical school and offered to repair at no charge any large diesel motors I

might have lying around. He was staying with his grandparents in Rockland and would start lobstering with his grandfather in a few weeks.

"He's getting on, too old to do it all himself."

A lobsterman. I approved. It's the Mainest job ever.

When I told him what I'd been up to—burying my entire family and suffering grievous injuries—he expressed his deepest sympathy. He wanted to know what I was studying.

"English."

"Oh, hey, I speak that. See how much we have in common already?"

He shot me a sly wink and I wondered if an expression of romantic interest lay beneath the joke. It was ten years since I'd seen him. If he was carrying a torch, its flame must have been guttering. I dared ask myself if he was a potential co-creator of the family I was determined to reconstruct.

Sure, Bonnie-Kate, guys who look like Elvis always marry deformed half-Asian/Pacific Islander trolls! Wedding bells are definitely ringing!

He said, "Personal question?"

"Ok."

"Is there a man in your life?"

He was just making small talk, right? I mean, his little black book had to be bigger than one of Sylvie's incomprehensible tomes.

"No one special," I said, failing to mention Aoife. I couldn't guess how he might react to that and I didn't want to scare him off. He'd asked about men, so it wasn't really a lie.

"I have to drive back to Rockland tonight. Can I take you to dinner before I go?"

"You sure as hell can." My first thought was chili dogs and beer but I didn't know where the evening might end and was relieved when he suggested the more digestively predictable option of seafood.

Dinner with Wendell was like an evening with a close and dear friend, which he wasn't, but in my unrealistic view might become. We compared likes and dislikes, finding a great deal of common ground, then we talked about our plans for the future, which, unlike a year ago, I now had. Wendell's was pretty well mapped out: fish with granddad until he retires, then take over his gear and territory. I pictured myself romantically involved with a lobsterman, and wondered how I would handle being left on shore each day, waiting for his safe return from the sea. Fretfully, I was sure.

Wendell drove me back to my apartment and I asked him in but he had to get on the road.

"Would it be ok if I gave you a call now and then?" he said.

I wrote down my numbers (Wolcroft and Wiscasset) so quickly, smoke came off my pencil.

"But I'll be on Mille Jours all summer. No phone."

"Then I'll just have to sail out there."

I almost said *I'd like that* but didn't want to seem desperate. Besides, I planned to spend the better part of the summer tied in a human Gordian Knot with Aoife Doyle, which he didn't need to know just yet.

We stood in silence a moment, watching the sun climb down the western sky.

Wendell said, "Well, I suppose," and turned to head down the stairs.

"Not so fast, pretty boy." I worked my arms inside his jacket for what I meant to be a goodbye hug, then turned my face up to accept a kiss I wasn't sure I had coming.

After a brief but sweet liplock, I said, "Last time we kissed I didn't see you again for almost ten years."

He brushed a lock of hair from my eyes and said, "Yeah, I blew it. I won't make that mistake again."

I stood on the balcony waving goodbye, only heading inside after his taillights faded. It was way too early to think anything lasting might come from our dinner date, but it felt more promising than any of my collegiate dalliances. Wendell called me a few times that spring semester, just enough to keep the kettle at a tantalizing simmer.

I finished my freshman year with a 3.8 GPA, made a quick pass by Wiscasset to collect Aoife, then went north to meet Edgar in Jonesport for a ride to Mille Jours.

"I have to go back in four weeks," said Aoife as we rolled past Bucksport.

"How come?" I didn't expect to hog her for the entire summer but was still a little disappointed.

"Trip to County Cork. Family stuff."

"If you see Kevin tell him I said hey."

"Done."

When we got to the cabin, I noticed Aoife's tote bag held a large manila envelope and assumed correctly it contained *Acadia Jennings Has Lost Her Mind*. I nodded toward my magnum opus.

"I see that came back."

She plucked it from her bag and handed it to me. "There's a letter in there, too."

"Did you read it?" The letter, I meant.

She hemmed and hawed a moment before confessing. "Sorry, little campstove. I couldn't resist."

"Little cabbage."

"Sure, that's what I said." She continued unpacking.

"Well, what does it say?"

"Good news and bad. Read it for yourself then."

I did. The gist: Fine first effort but would need to be longer as we don't accept novellas. Consider a redraft in first person with Acadia as narrator agent. This manuscript shows great promise; we would welcome future submissions.

"So no dice. What did I tell you?"

"Did you think your first try would be an international best seller?"

"No, but—"

"Do you know how many rejections Virginia Woolf got before she published *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"*

"Eefs, she didn't—"

"Listen, little camshaft..."

"Cabbage."

She was still unpacking, and brandished a fistful of lacy black underwear at me. "This letter is really encouraging. They just about begged for more submissions, didn't they."

"Maybe. Sort of."

I feared encouragement, which was one of the disguises expectation wore. It's also known as setting yourself up for disappointment.

Aoife soldiered on. "You know what I think? You'll be a writer, won't you, and a damn good one. Think about it—it's a job you can do without ever leaving your island, isn't it. That's what you want."

I had to give this due consideration because Aoife was right about everything else, the works of great painters and novelists notwithstanding. A writing career would solve a lot of problems, but it was too much to hope for, and the odds were insanely long. "Things like that don't happen to me."

"Exactly right, Champ. It won't happen to you. You'll take the bull by the horns—"

"Nuts."

"—by the nuts and *make* it happen, won't you. You're going to write your pretty little ass off, and then submit manuscripts like a woman possessed, to every publisher in the fucking galaxy."

"I am?"

"If you end up teaching tenth grade English instead of writing novels, all mankind will be the worse for it. It will be a Gweat Twagedy."

"What the fuck?"

She whispered, "It's Elmer Fudd's birthday, isn't it," and put a stack of sweatshirts in the dresser.

I checked her pupils for tell-tale dilation or constriction because you'd have to be on something really fun to be this much of a goofball. Or you might just be Aoife Doyle.

I said, "That's just gweat, Eefs. Tewwific."

"Isn't it then."

"But that's what I'm studying for. To teach English."

"With summers off to write?"

"Yeah, to spend on Mille Jours, anyway." I nearly said *with you* but didn't want to complicate things that much just yet. Let's tie a few semi-exclusive but non-committal Gordian Knots first.

"C'mere to me, little clambake: where do you see yourself in five years?"

I carefully avoided saying *living on this island with you and raising our child who may or may not have been fathered by Wendell Chapman and hence resembles a tiny Elvis*. And Wendell will live here, too. But that was what I wanted. Or some version of it. What I did say was, "I don't know. But in the next two minutes I'm going to find out how much of your body will fit in my mouth."

Aoife dimmed the lights.

That afternoon when the tide was out we went to the dock to collect mussels for our supper. It was four miles there and back so Aoife insisted on taking the Willys, which she still treated like an amusement park ride. I let her drive.

On the shore below my cabin were mussels beds galore, but they were laden with useless pearls upon which one might shatter a molar. The mussels from the dock lacked pearls, and cooked up pink and delicious when dipped in pot liquor and drawn butter. Nummy to the fucking num-nums.

I had grown up thinking of mussels as trash—except the empty shells, which made fine little tide pool boats—because the shores of Mille Jours were so alive with the purple-grey mollusks that you couldn't walk from A to B without crushing hundreds of them. My ever-resourceful mother wore down my resistance by sneaking them into fish stews and chowders, a bit of Filipina legerdemain for which I would be forever grateful. Mom also introduced me to periwinkles, the greyish penny-sized snails that

were equally ubiquitous on our shores, but I drew the line at whelks. Considered a delicacy by some, whelks were known colloquially as 'snot wrinkles,' a sobriquet I continue to find insurmountable.

Aoife and I harvested our dinner methodically, filling my Grampa's oak-and-lath clam roller with medium-sized shellfish, leaving the little ones to grow up and the big ones to make more little ones.

Aoife resettled her rose-tinted John Lennon sunglasses. "How's Jeff DuChamps?"

"Fine, I guess. We weren't that serious."

"Maybe you weren't. I saw how he was with you."

"I was playing the field."

"Told ya." She wrestled another mussel loose from a dock piling.

"Told me what?"

"You'd be popular."

It would have been vain to concede that, so I didn't. "How about you? Met the man of your dreams yet?"

"Nah. A few interesting ones, though."

"Tell."

"Marcus Harmon. A fine lad, sure, but he took *forever* to finish. I thought there was somethin' wrong wi' me."

"Forever?"

"Never went less than a solid hour."

"Oh, my."

"I don't know about you, Champ, but after fifteen-twenty minutes I've done everything I set out to do. Time for a shower and make some popcorn or something."

I'd never brought a stopwatch to my intertwinings with Aoife but knew it was different for us. We'd take thirty minutes just undressing each other and touching before we got anywhere near the main event. And then there was post-coital cuddling. Lots of that.

Aoife added another mussel to the collection, the roller was half full.

"How about you, then? Met anyone…interesting?"

"A few. Let me ask you something. Is it normal if they want to put their penis where it doesn't belong? Most of them want to do that."

"Up your arse?"

"And in my mouth."

"Sure, that's pretty normal."

"You let them?"

"As long as they don't try to stick it in my ear, or up my nose, it's ok. Whatever gets 'em there, dontcha know."

I was so thankful for Aoife. These were things I could not have asked my mom, regardless of her frankness in such matters. And while I wasn't a huge fan of misdirected penises, it was comforting to know my dates were not a bunch of sexual

deviants.

The day latened. Aoife and I drove home to feast on steamed mussels and asparagus fresh from the garden. After dinner I cranked up my ancient generator and we worked on a five hundred piece jigsaw puzzle—Songbirds of North America—beneath the Tiffany lamp in my kitchen. Foe[*] Tiffany, anyway.

"Any more ideas about after you graduate?" said Aoife.

"Not really. Just teaching."

"And writing?"

"If the mood strikes. I have other stuff on my mind right now." That was a small lie of omission; I had several plots simmering in my head.

"You've not confused yourself again, have you?"

"Just a little. I decided to make a family."

"Oh?" She equipped a scarlet tanager with its beak. "How come?"

"Because I don't have one." I searched for chickadee parts.

"Fair enough." She considered that for a moment. "So, a husband and babies then? That's the plan?"

"I was thinking more of a wife and babies. Somehow." I met Aoife's gaze and held it. She didn't look away. She scootched her chair a little closer to mine. "Whatcha got in mind?"

"Us, together. Eventually." I lit a smoke and tried to gauge her reaction, but I was never much good at reading body

[*****]That's French for 'fake.'

language.

She said, "Go on."

Not a yes, but better than *Are you out of your fucking mind?*

"I'd also need a male person to knock me up."

"Then what does he do? Just gets himself along?"

"He could hang around at the edges, if he wanted to. Like a family friend." Wendell would do that for me, wouldn't he?

"It's a lot to ask of a lad." She completed her tanager's wing. "And a baby would interfere with your writing and teachering, wouldn't it."

"Well, what do you think I should do?"

I was beginning to think I could figure life out on my own, but Aoife often saw things I overlooked.

"You really want to know?"

"Of course."

"You're what, nineteen now?"

"Twenty in August." I added a red berry to my chickadee's perch.

"We, you and me both, are way too young to be thinking of husbands and wives and babies. Do you feel like an adult? Sure, I don't."

"Yeah, not really. But I doubt I'll ever feel like an adult." I still looked fourteen, but felt, well, fifteen. Sixteen, max.

"I might want to get a wee bairn, too, at some point."

I never thought of Aoife as having a mother instinct, but she

obviously did. Just look at how she cared for animals—a natural born nurturer. I didn't say so, but I thought Wendell wouldn't mind knocking her up, too. It was all speculative, of course.

Aoife went on. "I get it, Champ. You miss your family. I can't begin to imagine how much that must hurt. But I think you should live a while for yourself before you start thinking about babies. There'll be time for that, won't there. Besides, families can be really demanding. Like mine."

"They are?" Mine never was, unless you count a few unwanted expectations.

"You haven't any idea." Her tanager had grown a tail and was ready to fly, or sing.

What Aoife's family currently demanded was that she find a suitable male, suitable meaning many things, mostly that he be Catholic and employed. Failure to connect with such a person, i.e., running off with me instead, would provoke most strident disapproval, up to and including abandonment. Her mother was more adamant about this than her father, but he was in on it. Aoife was right: it continued to be complicated. I now doubted the wisdom of including her in my long-term plans.

I finished my chickadee, but there were an awful lot of pieces left to put in place.

June of that summer passed blissfully but quickly. Aoife's parents put an end to our fun when they met her at the dock in Jonesport. Her mother scowled at me when I kissed her goodbye,

then swept her out of my life to the other side of the Atlantic. I feared they might keep her there, just so she couldn't be with me.

Edgar took advantage of our trip to the main to run a few errands, and after my goodbyes with Aoife I walked to Kylie's Superette to replenish my dwindling supply of Marlboros. My alter ego caught up with me as I strolled through the postcard-pretty coastal town.

Nasty habit, young lady.

"Agh, you again."

How would Mom feel about you spending her money on cancer sticks?

"Funny, I don't recall asking your opinion."

Slave to a weed!

"Busybody! Buttinski!" I could see the Kylie's sign two blocks ahead.

You'll wreck your health.

"Mind your business."

I bet you can't even run from here to Kylie's.

"Hello? Missing leg here?"

You can still jog.

"I don't have to prove anything to you."

Yes you do.

There was some citizenry about. I wondered how it would look if I suddenly took off running. Well, no stranger than standing there arguing with myself, so let's go.

I soon stood beneath the Kylie's sign wheezing like the bellows in an out-of-tune pump organ. A young mother pushing a strollerful of twins regarded me with concern.

"Is everything all right? Do you need the police, or a doctor?"

My first thought was *oxygen...hospital...coroner*, but I said (with grave difficulty), "It's...her...fault. (puff, pant, wheeze)" and gestured toward my alter ego who was, of course, invisible.

Stroller mom looked at me like I had a virtually unlimited supply of self-replicating vaginas and quickly put a safe distance between her babies and the crazy woman hyperventilating on the streetcorner.

So...how'd that go?

"Shut up."

I had no idea I was in such rough shape. It should not have come as a surprise. Apart from nature walks and romps with Aoife, I never got any exercise.

Your lungs sound like an octogenarian coal miner.

I ignored her, entered Kylie's and filled a basket with cigarettes by the carton. Our dispute degenerated into infantile name-calling as we stood in the checkout line.

Loser. Halfwit.

"Nitpicker. Den mother."

"Anything else today?" said the cashier, a gravelly-voiced woman who looked like a prison guard and had a Marlboro of her own smoldering in an ashtray beside the register.

Borderline trainable. Simpleton.

"Nincompoop. Jackass."

"Excuse me?" The cashier removed her glasses, a prerequisite to the fisticuffs I was plainly provoking, which would surely leave me hospitalized.

"Oh! Sorry! Not you! I was talking to—" I recalled my encounter with stroller mom and didn't want to make that mistake again. "—myself. Talking to myself."

The cashier looked at me like, well, you know how she looked at me. I defused the situation by handing her a wad of disorganized money. "Keep the change!" I grabbed my smokes and fled in all haste. Outside the store I lit a cigarette and drew deeply on it to calm my rattled nerves.

You don't need the Universe to kill you; you can do it all by yourself!

"Quit bugging me."

Quit killing me.

"Oh, puh-lease." Such a drama queen.

You're the one who wants babies.

"Dude, I'm not pregnant."

Mommy, Mommy, why did you get cancer and die?

"It's not like that."

It's exactly like that, dumb-ass.

I finally got her to shut up, but it was too late: as usual, she had reason on her side, while I had nothing. The mother

argument chewed me up like a nest of Kansas fire ants as I walked back through the town. When I imagined not being around to dress tiny Elvis in a rhinestone encrusted white jumpsuit, I crumbled.

I turned back to Kylie's Superette and took a few hesitant steps before visualizing the encounter I was about to have with the warden/cashier, and how badly it would go. She might really hit me if I tried to return all the cigs I bought less than five minutes ago.

I crossed the street and sat on the bench in front of Charlie's Barber Shop (which was called Charlie Manson's Barber Shop until Charlie changed it 1970) trying to give away ten cartons of smokes, but found no takers. Failing that, I emptied my tote right there on the bench and built a little faerie house out of the cartons. I walked back to Kylie's and bought ten bags of Tootsie Pops. It worked for Kojak.

I gained ten pounds that July, which might not seem like much, but when you only weigh seventy to begin with, it really shows up. I noticed when practicing ogre faces in the mirror that I was now a significantly chubbier ogre. I adopted a strict regimen of diet (more vegetables, fewer Pop Tarts) and exercise (mostly rowing Edgar's skiff around the harbor). I lost my extra blubber before returning to Wolcroft.

I spent July and August with *Acadia Jennings*, expanding and polishing her tragic tale until I felt it was suitably large and

shiny. By the time I reached the end, she inhabited me as deeply and needfully as a child within my womb, but without as much morning sickness. I found I could not send her to the grave as I had in my previous draft. I let her live, and suggested to the reader that she would do so happily.

On my return to school in the fall, I availed myself of Wolcroft's typewriters and set a new world record for use of correction tape. What I eventually produced was 450 pages of *Acadia*'s third draft. I kept a copy, mailing the other to Phil Hackett, Aoife's father's acquaintance at Malcom & Dillon, a New England based publishing firm with offices in Hartford, Connecticut.

That done, I eagerly anticipated never hearing from them again. I shifted my attention back to my studies, wherein I would learn words like *plangent, apotropaic,* and *contumacious*, and when their use was appropriate in modern fiction. (Never, ever.)

As the winter break of my sophomore year approached I grew concerned that Aoife might head south again. I could be conniving: I pinned her down when I called on Thanksgiving, before anyone else had a chance.

Jeff DuChamps, whom I still saw casually, said I was welcome to join him in Madawaska. I declined, thinking I might get Wendell to meet me (and Aoife) in Wiscasset instead. That fell through: he called in early December to say he'd be fishing for at least another month, so that plan was run hard aground. Aoife

and I spent the winter break together, unencumbered by males.

Much about Wendell Chapman remained unresolved in my mind. As with my other male friends—who in more modern times would have been called Fuck Buddies—I was careful not to lead him on too much. He still occupied my daydreams more than the others combined. We may have been moving toward a future of some kind, but I was unsure what it might entail. I tried very hard to avoid any scheming or conniving in his direction.

I was still confused, but in a more interesting and less hopeless way than I once was. Aoife would ultimately rescue me from my confusion once more, but not in the way I hoped. As I struggled to sort things out in my mind, a sad realization came clear: I would lose one of them. I didn't see any way around it.

When the spring break rolled around, Aoife turned down an invitation to party in the Sunshine State again, and came home to Wiscasset. She divided her time between her parents and me. The division was not at all equitable. Afternoons with them; evenings, nights and mornings-after with me.

When Wendell called to say he'd be down from Rockland since it was the off-season, I kept looking over my shoulder because that much happiness was sure to be canceled out by famine, pestilence and an invasion by hostile and technologically advanced spacemen, none of which actually happened.

Wendell arrived at 9:00 am on a Saturday morning as Aoife and I were reading *The Hotel New Hampshire* to each other,

which wasn't as weird as it sounds. We alternated chapters and paused frequently to discuss John Irving's masterful prose. When Frannie turned out to be bisexual, well, that was just peachy.

The doorbell rang and Aoife got up to answer it in her bra and underpants, a trick she used to discourage Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons and the like. I stayed on the couch under the afghan we were sharing.

"Bonnie-Kate! It's for you, isn't it."

"Who is it?"

"A male model or Adonis of some sort. *PLEASE* invite him in."

"Hi Wendell. You're early."

"Couldn't wait to see you."

I threw off the blanket and stood, remembering too late that I, too, was clad only in my underwear.

"Oh, I forgot—"

Wendell looked at us and said, "Boy, did I come to the right place."

I excused myself to throw on a shirt and jeans, then suggested Aoife do the same lest she lure away the potential father of my children with her A-Bomb boobies.

She complied, then tactfully excused herself, claiming a family emergency that wasn't actually occurring. I silently thanked her for not suggesting a threesome right off the bat, a great demonstration of reserve, given the way she salivated over

my guest. I meant to have Wendell in my bed that night (or sooner) and hoped it wasn't selfish to want him all to myself. The time would come to share, but tonight he was mine.

We drove into town with a vague notion of catching a matinee at the Fine Arts, but were diverted by a free concert in the park. Wendell rolled down his window, bent an ear, and listened for a moment.

"Hey. Blackberry Blossom."

That's a required tune in any self-respecting bluegrass outfit's setlist. Wendell knew I was a musical omnivore, but we hadn't discussed specifics.

"You like bluegrass?" I unwrapped a grape Tootsie Pop.

"Ayuh, sure, bluegrass, folk, shanties. All that stuff."

I was floored. "Excuse me, did you just say *shoo-ah*?"

He smiled and said, "Sure did."

A thousand heart-shaped bees made honey in my head.

"One more question."

"Shoot."

"What's your opinion of Pop Tarts?"

"Mmmm—apple-cinnamon."

I kissed him savagely.

After the concert I tried to take him home so I could feed (or some other verb starting with F) him, but he whisked me off to an intimate little steakhouse for wining and dining. Both of which were unnecessary because that boy was already getting laid

within an inch of his life that night.

In the morning I made Denver omelets with cheese, and apologized for my total-darkness rule.

"Don't apologize for anything, Bonnie-Kate. Last night was...beyond description."

"I'm glad we agree on that." I favored him with what I hoped was a smoldering *woman-well-satisfied* look and not an accidental ogre face, which I'd done once with poor Pete Brewer. I took a sip of cranberry juice and Wendell asked the question that had been on both our minds since he first appeared on my doorstep.

"I don't suppose...there's a future for us? Together?"

I got up from the table and parked myself in his lap so there would be no mistaking my intent.

"Short answer, if there isn't, I'll be destroyed. Longer answer, yes, but it's complicated."

"I was afraid of that. You're too pretty not to be taken."

He seemed to be suggesting my parts that were spared amputation were arranged in a manner pleasing to the male eye. If that was truly the case, I would suggest the male eye is none too discerning.

Before I could answer, he said, "There's a guy, isn't there."

I wondered if he thought I'd spent the previous night enthusiastically cheating on this other guy. Honesty was called for, so I came right out with it.

"It's not a guy. It's Aoife."

He looked confused. "Your friend, Aoife? Who I met yesterday?"

"Yes. But a lot more than friends."

"Oh." He pondered a moment. "That's...ah...hmm, I see. That is complicated."

"You have no idea."

"So, you're a lesbian?"

"Wendell, do I fuck like a lesbian?"

"In my defense, I don't know how lesbians fuck."

"I'm not really into women, per se, just Aoife."

"I can't compete with that." It hurt me to see him look so crestfallen.

"No, it's ok, you don't have to compete, just share."

"You, with Aoife."

"And I'll share Aoife with you."

That got his attention. I saw him mentally calculating the benefits of such an arrangement.

"So, we would—"

"Yes."

"All together?"

"Yes."

"At the same time."

"Yes."

He was plainly dumbstruck, but managed, "That sounds,

um...interesting."

"I promise it will be interesting at the very least."

I ascertained he was free to spend another night or two, and called Aoife.

"Hi Eefs. Coming over tonight?"

"Bored wi' the lad already?"

"Nope. But if you ask nice I might share."

I was tempted to go on hogging him, but a bit of *manazhe ah twah* (oui, more French) would make them both happy. See how generous I was?

We agreed on 7:00, then I went to take a shower. Wendell asked to join me so we washed each other in the dark.

When Aoife came over that night we introduced him to the joys of sharing. He instantly became its most ardent proponent. Before heading back up the coast, Wendell asked if maybe we could do that again sometime?

Aoife and I nodded like bobble-heads.

When I returned to Wolcroft for the second semester of my sophomore year, there was a letter from Malcom & Dillon: my first official rejection. It stung, but was not unexpected since it is a rare bird indeed that sees its first effort go to print on the first try. I relegated *Acadia Jennings* to the dustbin of my nascent bibliography—currently the sole receptacle therein—and poured my heart and soul into the writing of my next certain failure, whose working title was *Five Nautical Miles*.

Creatures of Havoc continued to wreak it two or three nights a week and was asked by some committee or other if we would play a short set on the quad in celebration of the term's impending conclusion. My impulse, as always, was to flee in terror. My bandmates felt otherwise. We performed a twenty-five minute set comprising seven songs. My pick was *Banks of Newfoundland*, but the standout was *Whiskey in the Jar*, which even got some clap-along from the small crowd.

If anyone can aid me, it's me brother in the army
If I could find his station in Cork or in Killarney
And if he'd go with me,
we'd go rovin' through Kilkenny
And I'm sure he'd treat me better
than me darlin' sportin' Jennie

Without this song I might never have learned the truth about Irish town names.

When summer came I went to Mille Jours alone. Aoife had landed a prized internship and Wendell was waist-deep in the lobster season that would claim all his time until midwinter. On my way north to Jonesport I stopped in to see him, and was relieved to find his torch still burning as brightly as mine. There was little opportunity for intercoursing, but we found a way. Love always finds a way.

I arrived on Mille Jours to find the population booming. Distributed across the four houses were eighteen people including me. Even Edgar had a guest, his son Dennis, out for a couple of weeks' vacation. Dennis was a childhood friend, an older kid who helped me fix my bike when the chain came off, and joined me at the dock to fish for mackerel on those endless blue-sky summer days. We were often the only kids on the island, so we kept pretty close company.

That summer would be for writing—*Five Nautical Miles* was growing insistent—and for housecleaning. The cabinets and drawers of my cabin held the clutter of many generations and some of it would have to go.

There was no trash collection on the island, and in the days before recycling and composting that meant disposing of glass and biodegradables in the ocean, burning paper and cardboard on the shore, and avoiding plastics entirely, as much as that was possible. In the 1970s the world was becoming more environmentally conscious, so I loaded my discards into a Hefty bag to take to the main on my next trip over.

As I went search-and-destroy through the dresser drawers I came upon a tiny pair of denim overalls on which my Gramma had embroidered a fat chickadee. When I was done crying, I carefully folded and stored them with the other keepers in the hall closet.

The closet held a great assortment of Caldwellian relics, from

rubber fishing boots to umbrellas, to a broken harpoon and flensing spade brought home in the early 1800s by Elias Percival Caldwell, who sailed out of New Bedford aboard the whaler *David Henry* in pursuit of right whales. I deemed these tools worthy of display and set them aside for mounting on the cabin walls among the oil and watercolor seascapes already hanging there.

I make no excuses for my ancestors' participation in an industry now looked upon as barbaric. Is it possible for any hero of the past to withstand the scrutiny of the present day? Maybe, but not very often.

As I stood in the closet contemplating the misdeeds of my four bears[*], an early summer breeze caught hold of the door and slammed it closed behind me. Plunged into sudden darkness—which was normally my steadfast ally—I nearly jumped out of my shoes. A single bare lightbulb hung from the ceiling, but it only shed light when the generator was running, which, of course, it was not.

When I tried to push the door open I heard the disheartening sound of the metal latch settling into its locked position. My first thought was that I could easily unlock it with a credit card. My second thought was *I neither have with me nor do I own a credit card*. There was a driver's license and library card in my purse,

[****] I knew by now it was *forebears*, but I liked the other way better so I kept it.

but I wasn't sure where it was at the moment. I knew where it wasn't: in that closet. Which led me to my third thought, *Who the FUCK puts a LOCK on a goddamn CLOSET?!*

I pushed with all my strength and the door did not open.

I kicked like a bee-stung mule and the door continued to not open.

I threw my shoulder into it like a miniature linebacker, yet the door persisted in its unopeningness. Fucking useless door.

Surely there was a credit card-like object somewhere in that closet, all I had to do was find it. In total darkness.

I tried a piece of cardboard torn from a shoebox but it became lodged between the door and jamb, precluding further attempts at the latch. I realized this was the kind of thing that could only happen to me, and was forced into the following conclusion: *Of course I'm imprisoned in a tiny room without food or water. This is how I will die.*

I felt around the walls hoping for a loose board, but found none. I tried the floor. Ditto. I thought there might be a way out through the ceiling, so I climbed the shelves like a small one-legged monkey but ended up on the floor, buried beneath a rubble of fallen shelves that were not actually nailed or otherwise fastened to the walls. To my astonishment, I couldn't find a single broken bone. Even my nose, the Universe's favorite fracture-target, escaped unscathed.

Yelling for help seemed my only recourse. I was an Olympic-

caliber yeller, but hesitated to use my ear-splitting gift. The last time I tried to solve a problem with yelling, all it did was invoke god's wrath. I doubted god would make it rain inside my hall closet, but he might introduce venomous spiders or angry bees to the equation, and that would be no help at all. I had to chance it.

Before unleashing my vocal cords I paused to consider what I should yell. *HELP!* would probably suffice, but seemed awfully generic. I could also try *EDGAR!* since he was accustomed to me doing stupid shit like getting locked in my own closet, but his house was a mile away. I doubted I could project that far, even at my most stentorious. Sensing hysterical madness on the horizon, I settled on a round of insanity yodeling, interspersed with *helps!* and *Edgars!*

I roared, "Eep beedly bop-a-dee! Help!"

I bellowed, "Doodly deeble beep! Edgar!"

I howled, "Aar barble bop da-deebah! Et Cetera!"

I rested to give my rescuers time to arrive, which they conspicuously failed to do. I counted my reps as I alternated yelling and resting, but lost track somewhere in the hundred and tens. By the time I heard a knock on my door, my voice was shot. I croaked, "Ack, agh Edgar help," but couldn't get any volume, so I used an ice skate to beat *shave and a haircut* on the foul and evil door that imprisoned me.

I listened intently, at first hearing only the breeze in the pines, but then—oh, then, my friends, as if from a chorus of

haloed angels on high it came to my yearning ears: *Two Bits!*

After three such exchanges, Dennis Tuttle opened the closet door to find me standing amid the rubble of shelves and artifacts, holding a hatbox partially filled with urine because I'd been in there a long time, ok?

"Hi Dennis," I creaked.

"Hey Pookie." He called me that when I was little. "How's it going?"

"Yep, pretty good." I really needed some water.

"Whatcha got there?"

"Box of piss."

"Alrighty."

He verified that I would be ok, then went home to tell Edgar what an imbecile I was, a bit of news that would come as no surprise. Who but Bonnie-Kate Caldwell could turn something as innocuous as spring cleaning into a life-threatening crisis? Answer: no one.

I went down the mountain that night for liquor and Stratego. I explained that my closet ordeal could have happened to anyone, really, but I don't think they believed me.

Writing went a lot better than housecleaning and I returned to Wolcroft with 537 manuscript pages of *Five Nautical Miles* that lacked only the denouement.

Sylvia graduated the previous spring and went on to post-grad at UMaine Orono, but I kept our little apartment. I looked

half-heartedly for a new roommate. I was accustomed to writing without distractions of any kind—thanks to Mille Jours, where the world comes to a standstill—and was soon mailing off another fat package of words to Phil Hackett at Malcom & Dillon. While I was at it, I sent a copy of *Acadia Jennings* to Random House, who had the good sense to publish John Irving and were therefore too wise to give me the time of day. If they didn't take out a restraining order, I would consider that submission a success.

Fall semester was a time of significantly reduced intercoursing. I was trying to be patient about family-building, and so felt less urgency to throw a reckless fuck at every male on campus. I did not completely abstain, but my few trysts left me feeling guilty and dissatisfied. Perhaps my wild oats had all been sown. Sexual encounters with my fellow collegians now felt like cheating on Wendell.

They did not feel like cheating on Aoife, and I wondered if one could only cheat on one's lesbian lover with another female. That didn't seem right, but I was the first to admit I didn't know my way around that stuff. I was in the dark, as usual, but at least I wasn't knocking down the shelves and peeing in a hatbox.

With winter break approaching again, Creatures of Havoc was asked to provide some noise for a party to be held at Marty's Wheelhouse, an establishment I could now legally enter. We tailored our set in a more folk-rock direction than usual,

including covers of Neil Young, Jim Croce, and Cat Stevens, and so were not booed off the stage. Marty approached as we were packing up and asked who the leader was. My bandmates pointed at me. I took exception, but they insisted.

Marty said, "How's about playing here Friday and Saturday nights."

"You mean...for money?"

"Unless you want to do it for free."

I looked at the band, who nodded with varying degrees of enthusiasm. To Marty I said, "How much are we talking about here?"

"Two sets per night, an hour each, $75 a set."

We were drums, bass, two guitars and a violin, so $60 apiece for giving up our weekend nights to do something that we liked to do anyway. Deal.

Of the five of us, I was the reluctant one. This could be a ticket to public mortification, but I pictured my lanky Aoife gently yet firmly kicking me in the ass and telling me to do this.

None of us expected it to go beyond a two-nights-a-week bar band gig, but Marty had connections and wasn't afraid to use them. We ultimately found ourselves in danger of becoming regionally popular. I trembled in undisclosed fear.

Winter break unfolded a bit differently that year. I went to Wiscasset alone to see Aoife, who had a new boyfriend in tow, Aaron, a fine-looking and affable guy a few years her senior. She

took me aside at first opportunity.

"What do you think, Champ?"

"About what?"

"Care to cozy up wi' me and Aaron tonight?"

"Uhm, I don't think so."

"What the feck, little cap-gun?"

"Cabbage."

"Right."

I gathered that Aoife had promised (or hinted at) a threesome, and it pained me to deny them, but I was bound by my conscience, which I seemed to have developed one of.

"I'm sorry, Eefs. I don't think I'm sleeping with any more guys."

She looked stricken. "You're only for the ladies now? Why didn't you tell me?"

"It's not that. I fell in love with Wendell. It was an accident."

"Aaron's going to be disappointed."

"Sorry."

"Will you still kiss it and make it all better?"

"Always."

We found a little time for ourselves when Aaron nodded off on my couch. We adjourned for a quick one. That happened twice during their visit, which made me think he was doing it on purpose. Aaron was a kind soul.

I returned to Wolcroft in January and was greeted by not one

but two rejection letters. Random House suggested I look for a more New England-centric publisher (shorthand for 'fuck off, lady') for *Acadia Jennings*, which I had already done.

Malcom and Dillon accused me of a contrived plot, so I wrote a fiery rebuttal insisting they were sorely mistaken. My plot was no more contrived than Jane Eyre, or Pip Dickens, whatever that fucking kid's name was. Fortunately, I came to my senses before I could find a stamp.

I still felt bitch-slapped, and was drowning my sorrows in caramel-pecan ice cream when my phone rang.

"It's me, Wendell."

"Your timing is perfect."

"I have three days off. Could I come by?"

"I need you to do just exactly that."

What was accomplished in those three days—in addition to a *phenomenal* amount of intercoursing—was this:

"Wendell, I don't think I want to go out with any other guys besides you now. Pretty sure. Would that be ok?"

It was ok, and was reciprocated.

"What about Aoife?" he asked.

"That's different, isn't it? I don't want to give her up."

"You don't have to." Whether he was being open-minded or considering how he personally might benefit was uncertain, but either one was fine with me.

It wasn't until after he returned to Rockland that I began to

feel uneasy. It seemed we had a good thing—a very good thing—but my body-image foolishness was bound to create problems down the road. Short of intensive psychotherapy I had not the faintest idea how to fix it.

With a little help from an alter-ego, Mille Jours would ultimately provide the answer.

Barely Making It

Creatures of Havoc was:
Robbie Waters- rhythm guitar, vocals
Carly St. James- guitar, banjo
Jake Brady- upright and electric bass
Kelly Hazelton- percussion, harmonica, washboard
Me- violin, tambourine

Of my bandmates, I was closest to Carly St. James, who took her instruments seriously and had a singing voice that would, like mine, make your pets hide under the sofa. When she and Jake (her boyfriend) invited me to join them and a group of friends on a trip to Mardi Gras, I envisioned our merry band boarding a flight in Boston and dying in a fiery crash just after takeoff.

The chain of misfortune that descended on me when I last dared to leave the State of Maine was still fresh in my mind. I'd been on a prolonged winning streak, but my luck was bound to fail at some point. A trip out of state might be the opening the Universe needed to resume its fuckery of me.

"Come on, Bonnie-Kate," said Carly. "Fat Tuesday, we'll have a blast."

I frowned. "Is your insurance paid up? Pack a parachute in your carry-on?"

Carly ultimately prevailed with convincing arguments about good food and good music, so I boarded a flight south against my better judgment. Imagine my surprise when our plane landed in New Orleans without making a single air disaster headline.

Among my traveling companions was a thunderously large pair of breasts (larger than Aoife's, even) attached to a girl named Amy Gilmore, who found it amusing to rub them in my face.

Figuratively, so you can stop visualizing that.

At four-foot-six in three inch heels and sporting the scantest of A-cups, I was seriously outbreasted. Amy flashed her way to a small fortune in cheap plastic beads while I watched the parade with a stormcloud over my head, beadless and silently despising her, finally departing to lose myself in a bowl of crawfish etoufée.

It wasn't Amy Gilmore's fault I refused to flash my boobs. I was hesitant to undress with the lights on, even when I was alone. I didn't know where my body-shyness came from. I was so afflicted even before I started losing body parts.

I eased my wounded ego that Mardi Gras trip with the private consolation that Amy's more southerly attributes were likely a cellulite farm, whereas my body became more interesting once you sailed past my equator. My romantic encounters tended to culminate with me face-down in one way or another. Jeff DuChamps once referred to my hindquarters as *spanktacular*, an

assessment in line with my Best Butt award and confirmed with the aid of two mirrors.

Sadly, even in the face of such indisputable evidence, my poor body-image persisted. I wasn't about to start baring my bottom for Mardi Gras beads.

Who in their right mind wants to see a breastless one-legged woman naked, anyway? Not I. I returned to Maine without beads, having shown none of my parts to anyone.

Following my junior year at Wolcroft, Edgar Tuttle delivered me to Mille Jours, then left for a month-long visit to his sister's.

"I'm off-island 'til the first of July, ain't no one else due until the middle of the month. You'll be ok, got everything you need?"

His trust in me was marginally greater than the first time I went solo on our beloved isle, so I brimmed with misplaced self-confidence.

"What could go wrong?"

He didn't say *plenty*, but he wanted to. I was safe from chainsaw accidents and self-locking closets since I had a good supply of firewood and had removed or disabled every lock in the cabin, even on the exterior doors, so I couldn't lock myself in or out. My main concern was solitude madness, but I felt it was time to face down that beast. I had writing to keep myself occupied, and hoped a constructively engaged mind would leave no openings for insanity to come weaseling in. If that didn't work, I would yodel off the cliff. I might do that anyway, just because it

was fun.

Although I'd made no such plans, my inner voice/alter-ego presented me with another self-improvement project that proved far more valuable than spewing words onto paper, or gibberish into thin air.

It began with a day much like any other. Up before sunrise, I started the coffee and took a hot shower, then strapped my prosthesis back on and dressed in a robe and frog slippers (with googly eyes). I took my first cup of Folger's outside to see what the sea was up to. I found it retreating. I took a sip of coffee and felt my robe slip open, exposing me frontally to the Universe. I panicked, and put a stop to that show since no one had paid to attend.

With my lone garment secure, I resumed my sea gazing, watching for the sun to break on the far horizon.

Bonnie-Kate, you fool.

"What."

Look out there. What do you see?

"The ocean. The sky."

Any boats or inhabited islands?

"No."

So why the panic?

"Because I'm naked under here, ok?"

If a lady is naked on an island and no one sees her, is she still naked?

"Oh, how Zen."

It's time you stopped living in fear of your own body.

"If you think I'm going to stand up here naked—"

Why not?

"What if somebody sees?"

Like who?

I had to concede her point. There was no one around for miles and miles.

"Ok, I shouldn't have freaked out about the robe. I get it."

Prove it.

"I don't have to do what you say."

Yes you do. You have to stay out here until you show some skin.

I had never won an argument with my alter ego, and this one wasn't likely to change that.

"Fine." I pulled open the top of my robe a little. "There. My tits are out." I showed them to the sky and sea, bouncing a bit for good measure.

It's a start.

A start? I didn't like what that suggested about the days to come. I stood for a moment with my bare breasts warmed by the rising sun, basking in an unexpected cascade of new sensations. Freedom, certainly; a kind of daring exhilaration, underpinned with a delightful naughtiness from the infinitesimal chance of being caught. I was getting away with something, and it was

tittilating[*] in the extreme.

I was unabashedly naked to the entire outdoors, a nymphet of Eros free for the taking by whatever Robert Redford lookalike might emerge from the underbrush.

Standing topless on a vacant island may not seem a daring exploit, but at twenty-one I had never gone skinny-dipping, streaking, or played strip poker. These were all popular among my peers, but I considered them likely precipitators of death by humiliation.

My alter ego satisfied for the time being, I put my tits away and went inside to dress. Left unchecked, this outdoor naughtiness could lead to an arousal I was scarcely equipped to deal with. There was nothing to fuck on the entire island. I didn't even have any phallic vegetables.

I awoke the next day feeling ashamed at the previous morning's public lewdness, thinking of myself as a kind of trench-coated flasher. Let us never speak of it again.

Twenty minutes after rising I stood atop the cliff behind my cabin freshly showered, robed and frog-slippered, waiting for the sun to thrust its orange fire above the seascape.

There's no one on this island but you.

"Yeah, we covered that yesterday."

There is still much work to do.

"I'll feel ashamed."

[****]Sorry. Couldn't resist.

Remember how good it felt to be exposed?

"How could I forget?"

I stood near the cliff's edge and felt the sun's hands caressing me. I opened the top of my robe and let the light have me again.

"Aah."

Nice tits, lady. You should let them out more often.

"They're too small." Picture a bisected tennis ball with a pencil eraser stuck on. Except not green and fuzzy.

On the contrary, they are proportionally perfect.

I arched my back, shoving them in the Universe's face.

You naughty girl.

"Heehee." I grinned.

No one on this island but you. It's ok, you can do this.

I pushed the robe from my shoulders and let it fall to my waist, fully topless in broad daylight. No shame.

How does it feel? Be honest.

"Delicious."

No one here but you. You can do ANYTHING.

I looked around idiotically to make sure no one was near, then untied the loose knot at the front of my robe.

Do it, Nudie-two-shoes. Be naked. Dare to be bare.

I let the robe fall in a terrycloth pool at my feet and gasped at the shock of sun and breeze on parts of my body I'd been hiding for twenty-one years.

Good girl!

I looked down at my unclothed body, my leg and a half, my hips, my small pubic delta, the narrowing of my waist and stomach. It all seemed reasonably attractive in that light. Even my prosthetic leg looked sort of bad-ass.

"I've never been this naked before, and I'm still wearing frogs."

Glorious lady-flesh in the morning sun. You magnificent little beast, you are SO naked.

"You bet your ass I am."

My robe still lay at my feet where I could grab it in a heartbeat if—

If what, Miss Nude-in-Nature?

"If…if someone were to—"

You are alone on this island.

"I suppose." I looked out to the empty sea and saw only gulls wheeling and crying.

Step away from the robe.

"I don't think I can."

You must.

"Why are you so demanding?"

Trust me, Nudie. I made you give up your smokes, didn't I? We're going to fix this.

I stepped to the right and looked back at my robe on the ground, then at my cabin. I wanted desperately for one of them to be closer.

Why?

"Because I'm afraid, ok?"

And that's why we're here. To confront it. Now pick up your robe.

"Gladly." I snatched it from the ground like a drowning man grasping at a lifeline.

Now throw it off the cliff.

My almond eyes grew round. "But I...I—"

Don't think, just do it.

My robe fluttered away like some kind of collapsed seabird, landing on the water. It disappeared to a place beneath the waves where I could never retrieve it, no matter how many people might show up to gawk at my nakedness.

I'm so proud of you, Nudie-two-shoes. You are simply the nakedest lady in the world. Well done.

I stood at the top of my cliff, stripped bare and at a loss to deny the excitement of it. That was why I could never be a nudist. For nudists, nudity was a beautiful and natural state. For me, as it turned out, nudity was so closely mated with plain, earthy lust that simply standing there unclothed had set up a tingling in my nether parts that would soon demand my attention.

I put my hands on my hips and spaced my feet slightly apart, a Naked Avenger spreading nudeness across the land. I taunted the empty sea and sky, and the Universe beyond.

"Look at these tits!" I jiggled obscenely.

I used my hands to outline my fertile delta, thrusting that forward as well.

"My vagina's in your face, Universe!" I never intended for it to become so sexual, but I was in too deep. No turning back.

About face, Nudie. Show your best asset.

I turned to face the cabin, yielding up my remaining spanktacular flesh to the Universe. I smacked my right cheek like I once saw a stripper do, then stood with hands on hips again, feeling sun and breeze on my skin. I had shown the Universe my everything, and it was ok. It was better than ok.

Bonnie-Kate, you dropped a nickel.

"I wha...oh. Really?"

Really.

"Oh, man." I bent at the waist and touched the sandy ground with my fingertips. Now I had shown my everything. There was nothing to be ashamed of. I looked over my shoulder and struck a final hipshot pose, then hurried back to my cabin.

What's the rush, Nudie?

"Hey, I was totally naked out there for a whole five minutes."

Ready for strip poker?

I imagined a card game I was losing badly, the eyes of my more skilled opponents crawling over and feasting upon my exposed flesh.

"No. Not ready for that."

Then we still have work to do.

"Yeah, I suppose we do. But right now I must attend to the little man in the boat."

I drew a hot bath and stayed in it for an hour and a half, lavishing fervent attentions on myself four times, the last so powerful it included screaming.

That was all I accomplished that day.

I awoke the next day buried in shame.

"My god, what have I done?"

The sun wasn't up yet but I had already devised my plan for the day: assume a fetal position under the blankets and remain there for the rest of my natural life.

Back to square one, eh?

"I can't do this anymore."

You can and you will. Why the shame?

"Well, for starters, I showed my own personal butthole to THE ENTIRE FUCKING UNIVERSE YESTERDAY."

So?

"What kind of pervert does that?"

You are exactly that kind of pervert. Embrace it.

"It's just so wrong. Disgraceful. What would people think?"

So Amy Gilmore gets all the beads again.

"Don't. Just don't."

Get up and put your frogs on, you sex-crazed nudity addict.

"No."

It's the only way to get past the shame.

"God. Dammit."

When the sun rose, it barely illuminated a day of fog, rain, and shivering cold. I showered and began to dress.

What do you think you're doing, Nudie?

"Too cold to go out there naked."

That's why we're staying inside. Naked.

"Ha. Easy." I stripped down, safe from the prying eyes of the Universe.

Put on shoes and socks.

"What on earth for?"

So you'll look ridiculous. Make it black socks and tennis shoes.

With my foot and prosthesis dorkishly attired I set myself to some writing, housecleaning and cooking, for the latter of which I was permitted an apron with a cartoony chicken on it.

"Can't I wear the white one?"

Not ridiculous enough.

"What's that all about?"

If you're comfortable looking like a complete goofball, you'll be more comfortable in your own skin. Get it?

"Ok." I added salt to a boiling pot of potatoes. "I think I'm getting the hang of this naked thing."

Don't get ahead of yourself.

"Excuse me?"

Remember this, Nudie: when you're naked inside, you're

still wearing a house.

"You think of everything, don't you?"

That's because I'm smarter than you.

"But you are me."

Then why am I so much smarter?

"Aagh." There was really no talking to her.

At 5:00am the next day I stood on my cliff wearing hiking boots and a smile. I was eating a strawberry Pop Tart.

That's my nude girl. She's got a positive nude-itude.

"Ok. I think it's ok now."

It's better than ok. Way better.

I felt that defiant freedom again, the vulnerability and secret wickedness. If my friends only knew what naked sexual hijinx I was up to. Me, prim and proper Bonnie-Kate. Little Miss Lights-Out.

I froze at the sound of a boat, but judged it too distant to be of concern. Fishing boats, pleasure boats and sea kayaks often approached Mille Jours. Kayakers even landed there sometimes. If I was to be caught with my pants down, it would be by a kayaker since their approach was silent.

You worry too much about being 'caught'.

"Easy for you to say. You're not out here in the altogether."

What if that boat came closer?

I glanced toward the cabin and wondered how quickly I could cover that distance. I only had one leg, but I could still sort of

run.

Wrong answer, Nudie! You would smile and wave.

"I don't think so."

Be Brazenly Naked, that's your new motto. You are the one and only Nudie-two-shoes and you don't know the meaning of the word shame.

"Listen. Nobody wants to see me naked."

Oh, boo-hoo, poor Bonnie-Kate, the loss of her leg has rendered her permanently unfuckable. So sad.

"I never said that."

You don't have to. I know your thoughts.

"No you don't! Oh, wait."

Consider this, Nudie. How often do men approach you?

"Too often. But they don't stick around."

Why do you think that is?

"Because I only get approached by jerks."

Men are visual. They approach when they see something they like.

"So jerks like me. Great."

The distant lobster boat had moved nearer, but still out of range.

Shut up and listen, naked one. Men like your looks. Your face, your body, everything. They only lose interest when they find out how inhibited you are.

"I'm not that inhibited. I'm naked here, right?"

When was the last time you had sex with the lights on?

"That would be never."

I rest my case.

"I don't like them gawking at me!"

Which brings us full circle.

"Does not! And fuck you anyway!"

Prove me wrong.

The lobster boat drew nearer. I could make out a man working on the deck, which meant he could make out a small naked woman standing on a cliff, having a vociferous disagreement with no one. In other words, a crazy person.

I was growing weary of this pseudo-Socratic dialogue.

"I need another Pop Tart. I'm going inside."

The hell you are. You're going to make some new friends today.

"You're not the boss of me."

That's fine, Bonnie-Kate. Scurry away into your little hidey-hole so you can spend the rest of your sad little life in passion-killing fear of your own physique. Amy Gilmore wins again, and you can kiss Wendell goodbye, too.

The fishing boat continued its approach. Mounted on the VHF antenna was a buoy displaying their colors: day-glo orange with a black stripe. Bobbing on the water near the base of my cliff were numerous buoys, including a couple of black and orange ones.

"They're coming. They have traps down there."

This is where we separate the nude from the clothed. Are you ready?

I swatted a mosquito that dared land on my left boob. "Ow." The boat continued on its path.

Nudie?

"Yeah. That's me." I struck the Naked Avenger stance. "Fuck Amy Gilmore."

When the boat arrived I saw two men aboard but they hadn't seen me up on my cliff. I fixed my hair a little, took a deep breath and said "Hi."

They can't hear you.

"Hi! Good morning!"

The fishermen looked up. One dropped the lobster he was holding. Gawking ensued. I said Hi again and waved.

"Well, hello there," the older one finally managed.

I had no idea what sort of chit-chat might be appropriate to the occasion, so I went with "How's the fishing?"

They continued to gawk. "Um, yeah, real good," said the younger one, adding after a moment, "Everything ok?"

"Oh, yes. Just fine, thanks." I smiled. "Pretty day, isn't it?"

The lobstermen nodded like hungry chickens pecking. I was in complete control. Remarkable. And a little thrilling.

Oh! I get it now! I finally get it: nudity is *POWERFUL*.

I looked to the open sea and they continued to stare at me

since that's what you do with a naked lady.

Nudie! Don't forget the flip side.

"Huh?"

SHOW THEM YOUR ASS, YOU FOOL!

I continued to not show them my ass.

Listen up, Nudie. You possess that most desirable of feminine charms, the heart-shaped bottom. You know this is true.

"Um."

A small child could stand behind you in a rainstorm and remain dry.

I pictured a little girl holding her hand out from beneath my ass to see if the rain had stopped, then turned toward my cabin so the fishermen wouldn't see me laugh. After a moment I looked over my shoulder at them. They were gratifyingly spellbound. I smacked one chubby cheek and turned to face them again.

"Ok, guys, have a good day. Bye!"

They actually applauded. The captain gave a couple of quick blasts of his air horn as I walked away.

In the days that followed I experienced naked gardening, naked jogging, and a naked picnic on the shore. Morning-after guilt evanesced to nothing, replaced by a long-awaited sense of liberation and empowerment.

My naked excursions would cease in a week when Edgar was due to return, but that was fine since I now had nudity down to

an art.

What about sex?

"Do you see any men around here?"

What if there was.

"Does he resemble Robert Redford?"

Sure, why not.

"Ok then. I'm game."

With the lights on?

"Abso-nudely."

Oral?

"Yum."

Butt sex?

"Mmm...kinky." I wiggled my bottom a bit to demonstrate my enthusiasm.

You talk a good game, Nudie. But...

"I know, talk is cheap."

The day before Edgar was due back I watched through my binoculars as an unfamiliar lobster boat pulled up to our dock and disgorged a single passenger. I fired up the Willys and bounced down there to see who had arrived on my rock.

There was no public land on Mille Jours, apart from the inter-tidal zone, but we got an occasional camper whom we allowed a few nights' accommodation if they agreed to our rules about fires (on the shore only) and trash (take it with you). This was probably one of them.

I caught up with the unscheduled visitor and found he was none other than Wendell Chapman.

"Hey, stranger," I said. "You look lost."

"But now I'm found."

I gathered him up and drove back to the cabin, stopping at the meadow near the pond. Wendell looked puzzled.

"Got something for you," I said, then climbed down from the Jeep and stood in the middle of the road. I took off my cheap shades and set them on the hood. I took off my t-shirt and sports bra, and put them beside my shades. Wendell gawked, as I wanted—no, *needed*—him to.

"Wow."

I took off everything else but my shoes and socks and stood naked in the road in the early summer sun. I raised my arms like a ballerina and turned a slow pirouette that left Wendell mesmerized and momentarily speechless.

I bent down and pulled up my socks (black, with red tennis shoes). "Do I look ridiculous?"

He laughed, unbuttoning his shirt. "A little."

I picked up my underpants and draped them over my head, leering at him through one of the leg holes.

"How about now?"

"Yep, that did it."

"Race you to the pond!"

I was off and running, but I let him catch me.

Stouthearted Mariners, We

It bears mentioning that I had not made a new entry in my Chronology of Sorrows since the death of poor Pete Brewer. I could not decide if the disastery part of my life had truly passed, or if I was just overdue. I proceeded with cautious optimism.

Wendell stayed with me for a glorious week. On the morning of his last day, I took him hiking on the east side to see if we could spot a bald eagle. Knowing he was no stranger to Maine Coast beauty, I asked, "How do you like our little rock?"

I was of the opinion that Mille Jours was a place of unrivaled beauty, but was aware of my bias. I just wanted him to fall in love with the island I grew up on.

"It's the best place I've ever seen."

"Yeah?"

"I wish I'd brought a camera. I bet you can't take a bad picture on this whole island."

"Could you ever live in a place like this? Without movie theaters or restaurants?"

"In a heartbeat. I wish I didn't have to leave."

I had envisioned Aoife, Wendell and I living together on Mille Jours, all of us married to each other, producing a baby or

two and living happily ever after, supported by my fabulous writing career. It was a preposterous scenario, but it made me feel warm and fuzzy. Wendell's approval of the island made it seem less preposterous, but just a little.

With Wendell lobstering in Rockland and Aoife not expected until mid-August, I faced a distraction-free six weeks in which to write, putter, and recreate. There was a time when I was happiest doing things alone, but recent years taught me the value of recreating with at least one other person. Like intercoursing, it was more fun when you shared.

My first project was to mount on the wall the old harpoon and flensing spade I found two summers ago in the closet of doom. Greenpeace might take issue with my glorification of whaling, but it was my maritime heritage, not theirs. So even though they meant well and I supported what they did, they could basically bite me on this one.

I don't have to explain what a harpoon is, except that this one was broken off at about six feet, half or a third of a working harpoon's length.

A flensing spade looks sort of like a shovel, but the leading edge is honed razor-sharp for stripping tons of blubber off the whale you just killed with the harpoon. A flensing spade is also normally attached to an eighteen foot pole, but this one was truncated similar to the harpoon, making them a matched set.

One might think my fooling around with surgically sharp

instruments of whale-death could only end in my demise, but that was not the case. The harpoon would one day cause a bloodbath, but the blood wasn't mine.

I ended up with a fine nautical display featuring a big swatch of twine and floats (That's fishing net, landlubber), on top of which I mounted the whaling tools and didn't even have to get stitches. On the shelf below, I arranged more family heirlooms: A whaletooth scrimshaw of a woman in a hoop skirt and corset, carved by Captain John Steven Caldwell (1806-1847, he of the empty grave), an oak belaying pin from the *Lucretia Dawes*, a merchant brigantine on which my great great grandfather served as boatswain. Beside these, I lined up five seabirds—loon, guillemot, herring gull, eider duck and osprey—carved from red cedar and painted in fine detail by five generations of my seafaring four bears. My dad did the osprey. I decided to learn woodcarving so I could make my generation's contribution to the procession. I wanted to add the puffin our collection was so sorely lacking.

As a child I was told the carving of seabirds was strictly the domain of Caldwell men, and the lot of Caldwell women was to tread fretfully on the silvered boards of the widow's walk, an architectural feature my cabin didn't actually have. I gathered that I was to pace and worry somewhere, while waiting for a man to either come home from the sea or be drowned in it. I was too young to articulate a cogent protest and accepted this as

inevitable.

Now that I was approaching adulthood (chronologically if not in terms of actual maturity) I could give full and resounding voice to my objection: Fuck that, I'm carving a bird. Try and stop me. Apologies to my four bears but there's nothing more to discuss. I may end up pacing the widow's walk, too, but the bird was not negotiable.

I found a good carving knife in the shed and bribed Edgar with blueberry cobbler to show me how to keep it sharp with an oilstone and emery cloth.

I started slow. By selecting two narrow pieces of wood resembling chopsticks, I soon produced my first completed carving: a pair of chopsticks. Neato. My puffin was a long way off, but I had lots of time.

In the coming weeks, my harpoon spent more time off the wall than on. It made a splendid woodstove poker and fit my hand nicely as a walking stick, but its best use by far was as a spear to brandish at the Universe while insanity yodeling. Once I discovered that, all my previous yodelings paled in comparison. Proper insanity is best evinced while holding a spear, and naked, if the weather permits. My missing limb added a crucial element of recklessness to the overall insanity vibe.

The lobstermen of Rock and Rye—my friends, of the black and orange buoys—arrived to haul their traps one foggy July morning while I was doing that very thing. They expressed

concern for my psychological well-being, but I feigned mental competence and they soon went on their way.

Feeling somewhat discouraged in my pursuit of the Great American Novel, I wrote short stories that summer, thinking I could easily fail to publish a collection of them, too. If I was to be a starving wannabe writer, I would at least be a well-rounded starving wannabe writer. I might even take another shot at embarrassingly bad poetry. That could be my grandest failure of all.

Meanwhile, the woodbox next to my stove grew heavy with attempted puffins.

Aoife arrived August fifteenth. I went along with Edgar to pick her up at the landing in Jonesport, taking advantage of the extra trip to restock my Tootsie Pops, which were no longer a crutch but a guilty pleasure, like my Pop Tarts.

I had been considering the merits of boat ownership and paid close attention to Edgar's skillful maneuvering of *Four Aces* around the underwater shoals and pine-crested isles that lay between Mille Jours and the main. Sometimes he chose routes that seemed needlessly long.

"Isn't that way quicker?" I asked, pointing to the narrow strait between Tolliver and Bobcat Island, upon which an actual bobcat was rumored to live, although no one had seen it in over a century. I figured it didn't get out much, being that old.

"Tide's wrong," said Edgar.

It looked like a regular tide to me. "How so?"

"See that rock on Tolliver, the one that looks like a sea turtle?"

It was in fact called Turtle Rock, at least I knew that much. "Yep. I see it."

"See how his head's showing?"

"Yep."

"When his head's out you'll run aground if you draw more'n four feet."

"Draw?"

"It's how much water you need to float clear of the bottom. The distance between sea level and your prop or keel or rudder, whichever's lowest."

"Ok. How much do we draw?"

"Five feet, underway. I don't trust anything less than seven."

It appeared to me that boating—like every other goddamn thing—was more complicated than I thought.

"I was thinking I should get a boat."

"Ayup. You could do that." Translation: *that would be stupid*.

"It seems silly to live on an island and not be able to get there."

"I'm glad to run folks back and forth. Gets me out of the house."

I knew that was true. Lately he wouldn't even accept payment from me, saying, "Nah, keep your money. I was going over

anyway."

"Well, I might want to go boating just for fun."

Being on the water was a fine thing indeed, a bonding with the primordial soup whence we all sprang. I often recalled fishing trips with my dad and grampa in our sixteen-foot runabout, which had long since been sold. The more I thought about it, the more I could see myself captaining Aoife and Wendell around the waters of our fair isle. Oh, hell yes. I already had the peg-leg, all I needed was a parrot and an eyepatch.

"There's two things you need to know," said Edgar. "First, a boat is a harsh mistress—she needs a lot of attention. And second, a boat is a hole in the water that you throw money into."

"I don't have to get a fancy one."

"Get a cheap one and you'll just throw more money in the hole."

"Oh." Shot that down.

"And you'll want something big enough to cross with."

"How big?"

"I'd go twenty-five foot, at least. Thirty-two would be better."

"That's big."

"Any smaller and you can only get across in the fairest weather. I don't know as you've noticed, but the majority of days ain't all that fair."

Mille Jours, for all its unspoiled beauty, was something of a wind-magnet. Big winds = Big waves. There were beaches on the

east side where the sea thundered in without respite, big rollers that went *BOOM!* moving rocks the size of my red Volkswagen up and down the shore. I went down there sometimes to watch, but I wouldn't care to live there. You'd never get any sleep.

"Ok, say you've got your boat. Where are you going to keep it?"

I sensed a trick question, but threw out what seemed the obvious answer. "Tied to the dock?"

"Nope. Here's Johnny to tell you what you didn't win."

"What."

"First, there ain't room enough. You got to leave space for other boats to land there, too. Second, when the weather rolls in, your boat and the dock will likely trash the hell out of each other. And they'll both lose the fight."

"So what do I do?" I didn't have a boat yet and I was already sending out distress signals.

He explained how I would need to sink a mooring in the harbor at Mille Jours, and another in Jonesport. And these things would all need frequent, possibly costly, maintenance. Boat ownership would require further pondering before I could arrive at an informed decision.

We rounded the western point of Cloud Island and I saw the Jonesport landing in the distance. Aoife stood on the dock waving. I had a fiendishly clever plan to spring my newfound body confidence on her, once I got her home.

She arrived travel-weary so I suggested she have a drink and take her ease in the chaise lounge out back. The day was warm with a clear sky and bright sun (Aoife called this kind of weather *fierce mild*). I thought she might strip, but she only did so down to a tank top and shorts. My devious plan was to wait until she least expected it, then come prancing nakedly out the back door in broad daylight, a feast of lady-flesh for her eyes only.

After a little chit-chat I excused myself, went inside to undress, then prepared to make my grandly naked entrance. I stopped at the mirror to check my hair. I couldn't resist making an ogre face because that was the best use I had for mirrors. I crossed my eyes, snarled up my face and stuck out my tongue, an ogre fit for Hans Christian Anderson.

I reeled in my tongue.

I unsnarled my face.

I uncrossed my eyes. They didn't go.

I tried again to uncross my eyes.

I tried a third time to uncross my eyes, again without success. I grew dizzy with double vision. In the back of my mind, my mother said, "...or they'll get stuck like that," a phrase known to all mothers and children, broadly accepted as an old wive's tale. It seemed at least one old wife knew what she was talking about.

I looked around me. The room spun and I nearly fell on my ass. I aimed for the door but kept veering away like a wino on his third bottle of Mad Dog and walking into the jamb, which gave

me a black eye. Panic overcame me, but I finally got outside by aiming well to the left of my target. I tried to go straight to Aoife but careened into a maple tree upon which I smacked my head, drawing blood, and fell to the ground. I landed in the raspberry patch, where I was slathered in mud and gruesomely perforated by thorns. I'm pretty sure I made another ogre face as I lay in the canes yelling, "Eeeefs! Aagh, it hurts!"

She scooped me up from the brambles and held me as one holds a sleeping child, saying, "My god, little crockpot, what's happened then?"

"MY EYES GOT STUCK!"

"Ok, ok, hold still." She stood me up and looked into my crossed eyes, steadying me with her hands on my shoulders. I felt small rivulets of blood running from the punctures made by the raspberry canes, and from where I'd smacked my forehead on the maple tree.

"Now close your eyes," said Aoife.

When I did, everything swirled until she slapped me *WHACK!* across the face. I was all set to go real-life ogre on her but when I opened my eyes the world was right again. I stood before her, bleeding, bruised, tear-streaked and dirt-smeared, rubbing my cheek where a red Aoife-print was now blooming.

She said, "Better?"

"Yeah, that fixed it. Thanks. I guess."

"One question."

"Hm?"

"Why are you naked then?"

"Ta-daaa!"

I explained it while she put a box and a half of Band-Aids on my punctures. She remembered the Bactine.

That evening was chilly so I built a fire out of failed puffins and we curled up on the floor in front of it, munching on brown sugar-cinnamon Pop Tarts. When I ran my boat idea past Aoife she greeted it with her usual enthusiasm, thinking of it as another amusement park ride.

"I dunno, Eefs. It would be pretty expensive." I was still hemorrhaging money on tuition and had very little income. Clerking for Professor Dave defrayed a small part of my expenses but I was, on balance, eroding my inheritance. A boat was not, as I previously believed, a one-off expenditure. It's the gift that keeps on taking.

And taking, and taking.

"We could just get a little one, couldn't we?"

I explained everything Edgar had explained to me.

"Well, how about a rowboat. That would still be the craic, wouldn't it?" (Craic = fun. It's an Irish thing. Craic was of the utmost importance to my Aoife.)

"We can just borrow Edgar's. I do that a lot."

"If we had our own, we could paint it and give it a name and such."

In all my travels throughout Maine and elsewhere, I had not once encountered a rowboat store. There must have been such things. Rowboats were made from trees, but they didn't grow on them.

When we next visited Edgar, I asked him how one might acquire a good skiff. He took us out to his workshop and pointed up to the rafters.

"Like that one?" he said.

We looked up and saw our new rowboat. Ten feet long, white, complete with a set of oars.

"Where'd you get that?" I asked.

Edgar scratched his whiskers. "I don't rightly recall. Been up there a good forty years."

Aoife bounced, giddy with exhilaration. "An antique boat! Cool! What'll you take for it?"

"Let's see if she's seaworthy first," said Edgar.

Getting the boat down looked so impossible I supposed it had been put up there first and the workshop built around it, but Edgar said, "Nah. Piece of cake."

He used a hoisty thing called a block and tackle to lower down a big packing crate that was in the way, then hitched up the boat and lowered that down, too.

Hooking the packing crate back up, he said, "Careful now, that one's fragile."

"What's in it?"

"Jesus."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to be nosy." I wondered what secrets might lurk in the crate.

"You ain't nosy, it's just got Jesus in it, that's all."

I looked at him like he had at least three—no, nevermind, not going there.

"This box right here?" I said.

"Ayuh."

"Has Jesus in it."

"Ayuh." He waited a few seconds to see if I would figure it out but I remained mystified. Edgar finally gave it up. "From the chapel. The stained glass."

The god-fearing citizens of Mille Jours built our little chapel back in 1847 when the island was more populous. Its crowning glory was a stained glass representation of Our Lord and Savior cradling a lamb.

I attended the Sunday service with Gramma and Grampa when I was a child, before I found myself at odds with the G-man, and thought that window was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. By the early seventies the chapel had fallen into disuse and disrepair, so ravaged by carpenter ants that Edgar had to post a sign on the door

CAUTION-DO NOT ENTER-UNSAFE

to which I might have added 'FOR MIND AND BODY' but that would have been snarky so I didn't.

The dwindling island population could muster neither the will nor the supplies to make the necessary repairs. They opted instead to rescue the stained glass Jesus and store it above Edgar's workshop. I think it kept him from swearing too much when one of his projects went awry. The whitewashed chapel spire collapsed into the main body of the building one winter, coming to rest at an angle suggesting an ice-planet laser tank.

It was the first landmark you saw when approaching the island by boat. First impressions are lasting ones: *Welcome To Mille Jours Island, Home of Natural Splendor and Abject Disrepair*.

The rowboat, which Edgar said was a *lapstrake wherry* (translation: rowboat), was deemed nearly serviceable. Tiny gaps had opened between a few of the boards, but he said "That won't bother. Just put the 5200 to her, and a fresh coat of paint."

5200 was a marine sealant like caulk or really thick glue. We asked him to do that part since we'd likely banjax it (Aoife's word. Banjaxed = broken, screwed up, in a bad way, etc.). After the sealant was on he let us use his shop to paint her yellow trimmed with blue, the main colors Edgar had on hand, which were also the colors of his buoys.

He wouldn't take any money for it, so Pioneer Woman expressed her thanks with a couple of pies. We named our boat

Alice B but didn't tell anyone it referred to Alice B. Toklas in specific or sapphic love in general. On launch day Aoife tried to christen her with a bottle of orange Fanta, but her thumping did more damage to *Alice B*'s prow than the bottle. We drank a toast instead.

To *Alice B*, our first vessel, long may she roam the seven seas.

The harbor at Mille Jours was partially protected by Little Auk Island to the north, a direction Edgar called 'northward' and pronounced "norrid." Aoife and I took our first boating excursion to Little Auk for a weenie roast on the white sand beach there, a sort of rare thing on rockbound Maine islands.

I don't know about you, but for me there's only one way to properly cook a hotdog: impaled on a stick, over a driftwood fire, and served on a bun warmed by the sun with the condiments of your choosing.

On the subject of condiments for hot dogs, I am led to understand ketchup is controversial. Anti-ketchuppers say—often with warranted condescension—it should only be used by children under ten. I couldn't pass for ten anymore (twelve maybe, in pigtails), but I'm hitting that dog with ketchup, spicy mustard, sweet relish, and chopped onion. Yum, dee-lectable. I was also up for a chili dog, again with chopped onion, but it's hard to make chili on the shore. I'd do sauerkraut, too, but beware of the aftereffects. Consider yourself warned.

"I have a surprise," said Aoife. From the pocket of her

cardigan she produced a small blue velvet box.

I nearly dropped my weenie in the fire. *She's going to propose! Can she do that? What do I say?!*

She held up a ring with a fat little diamond on it. I felt tears welling until she put it on her own finger and said, "Aaron proposed, didn't he? I said yes, we're to be wed!"

My tears erupted like a hard rain, falling in a steady stream.

"Bonnie-Kate? What's the trouble?"

"I'm so happy for you," I lied, but I was far beyond sniffling. I cried the ugly-cry of heartbreak, and there was no hiding it. I wore the mother of all ogre faces.

Aoife looked horrified. "What is it, little corncob?"

"CABBAGE, GODDAMMIT!"

"Er, right."

"You were supposed to marry ME! Not some...some...*MAN*!" I spat the word like it was toxic and I wanted it gone from my mouth.

"But, Champ...listen. We can't get married, not legally."

"I don't give a flying rat-fuck about legally. We were supposed to live happily ever after. How could you say yes?!"

"I'm sorry, Bonnie-Kate. I might want to make a family, too. You understand, don't you?"

"I thought we were too young for husbands and babies. You said so yourself."

She didn't answer.

I'd made way too many assumptions—all of them foolish—about what we both wanted, but the news still hurt like a gunshot wound. I lashed out.

"So what does this make me? A fling? A fucking *experiment*?!"

"Oh, no, not at all. I still love you. We'll still be together sometimes, won't we."

"So I'll be your torrid secret affair. Real nice, Eefs. I feel SO much better."

I threw my hotdog in the fire and stormed off to sulk in the boat—our boat—with my head in my hands.

She gave me a few minutes to sob, then came over.

"Champ?"

"I'm not done pouting yet. Go away."

"Ow. That hurt."

"Good."

She tried to give me a hotdog.

"How about you take that fucking weenie and shove it up your fancy Irish ass?"

"Please don't, Bonnie-Kate."

I saw tears on her face as she plodded across the sand, back to our campfire. That's when it hit me: I was being an absolute cunt, and that was the worst kind. I knew this day or one like it would arrive, yet here I was handling it as deftly as the Three Stooges handle a plumbing repair. Knowing that grief of some

kind was inevitable did nothing to prepare me for the pain of being bumped into second place in her life. I blamed her, which I had no business doing. This was clearly the work of the cosmos, not done fucking with me and up to its nasty old tricks.

I needed desperately to take a step back and re-evaluate.

Way to spoil the picnic, dumb-ass.

"Aagh. I'm not talking to you."

So don't talk, shut the fuck up and listen. Have you forgotten that you once chose Wendell over her?

"I never."

Winter break. How do you think she felt when you said no to her and Aaron? And think about this, my little dullard: If she had quote unquote married you, you would have been doing to Wendell what she just did to you. So stop being such a cunt.

"Why do you have to be so goddamn reasonable?"

That's what you hired me for. Now go apologize.

I told Aoife I was sorry, that I just wasn't prepared for it, and to forget everything I said. She was incredibly forgiving.

We had our little picnic, then lay down for a nap in the summer sun.

When we rowed back to Mille Jours, I taught her a shantie:

> First I met a Yankee girl, she was fat and lazy
> To me way, haul away, we'll haul away Joe
> Then I met an Irish girl, she damn near drove me crazy

To me way, haul away, we'll haul away Joe

I picked that one on purpose, and not just to make the rowing easier. I suppose that was a slightly cuntish move on my part. Sorry.

Apart from short stories, I didn't get much writing done that summer. I outlined and made copious notes for another novel, tentatively called *Mother of Pearl*. I vowed that if I didn't get one published by the age of twenty-five, I would concede defeat and direct my energies elsewhere. I didn't know where elsewhere might be, but the path to making a new family had, with Aoife's announcement, become substantially clearer. I sailed on, with my course set for Wendell Chapman. Smooth sailing would have been nice, but there's always the goddamn weather, isn't there.

Something Odd, To Be Sure

Bonnie-Kate said the passing of her folks had left her with a dread fear of falling in love. That's as may be, but love stayed strong in her, whether she liked it or not. Right on the heels of all her love-denying, she said I was supposed to marry her. A clearer case of mixed signals there never was. Tell me then, what was I to think? She loves me, she loves me not? Did she even know? And what did I suppose was going on in her pretty little head? Something odd, to be sure. Fierce odd.

Every time I thought I had her figured out, she'd do something I couldn't make any sense of. Remember now, this was the girl who had arguments with imaginary friends, and regularly ate the head off the universe. She was known to have a great frothing row with all of them at the same time when she thought I wasn't listening.

'Twasn't normal, but with her, that was often the way.

I shouldn't have been so surprised when she blew up over my engagement. Swear to Jaysus playin' bongos in a peat bog, I never meant to hurt her. Sure, a lot happened between us, some of it in words, most of it in deeds. They call it the love whose name shan't be spoken, don't they. We mostly didn't, but it was

so much bigger than either of us that it pretty well spoke for itself. Bigger, even, than the man I was to wed, if I'm to be dead honest. But how could it ever be?

'Twasn't our first blow up, and her anger passed, but it was hard to forget. It had been years since anything made me cry, and I was sore afraid it would be left hanging there between us, an unwelcome little giftie waiting to spring itself on us again in a tense moment.

I'm sorry, Bonnie-Kate. I just didn't see a way for us to be together. How long were we to bide away the time, waiting for a thing we both wanted but couldn't ever come true? With the weeks and months and years of our lives slipping away, didn't we have to get on with it before we were too old?

Sure, I once told her just the opposite, that we had nowt but time, no need to be thinking of husbands and babies yet, not to worry about it so much. But that was years ago. By the time Aaron got on his knee, we weren't kids anymore, we just acted like it.

I feared it was too late for us, anyway. I'd made my bed, now I'd be after lying next to Aaron in it, but still thinking of my dearest Bonnie-Kate. We were all going to be miserable, weren't we. And it was of my own doing.

I'd say no more on that. We'd talk of happier things, like fuzzy little bunnies, and lesbian rowboats, and the time she came strolling out, cross-eyed and naked.

Stall the ball, now. I just realized why she went into a rage about the engagement. Paying me back for that slap, wasn't she.

Fair enough, Champ. Now we're even.

Little Bitty Homicide

By the time I got back to Wiscasset, Bailey was dead and I never got to say goodbye.

"It was old age," said Mr Flaherty. "He lay down for a snooze and never woke up. When it's my turn, I hope I go that easy."

"I'm so sorry."

"Don't be. We had a lot of good years." He paused and I offered him a cherry Tootsie-Pop he surprisingly accepted. "I'll miss him, no doubt about that."

"Will you get another?" I didn't like the idea of him being all alone.

"I don't suppose so. I'll be moving soon, someplace a bit smaller."

"A smaller dog, then?" Bailey was the epitome of big, dumb and lovable.

"I'm thinking cat. Less maintenance."

My experience of cats was limited but positive. I'd considered adopting one, but my peripatetic lifestyle wouldn't be at all conducive to feline contentment. A cat of even temperament would be well-suited to Mr Flaherty, though. And vice-versa.

I stayed three days at Stone-n-Ivy before returning to school.

On my last day in Wiscasset I fried up a mess o' pork chops with mashed potatoes and gravy and had Mr F over for a feast because he'd confessed to a mostly Swanson's-based diet of late. I told him of my writing and family building plans, he got me up to date on his kids and grandkids, great sources of joy in his declining years. My worries about him were without foundation, he had so much family he didn't even need a cat.

When Mr F moved, it was all the way to Florida, saying he was done shoveling snow. I didn't get to see him again, but at least I got to say goodbye and thank him for all he'd done to help me.

I returned to Wolcroft for my fourth and final year and went back to submitting manuscripts all over creation. The effort was sure to yield a bounty of painful rejections, but hopefully no death threats.

I began to question the wisdom of writing my third novel when my first two had failed so abysmally, but Mother of Pearl was banging on the inside of my head, impatient to be let out. I was right full of words, so I spilled them onto legal pads before and after my classes, and between playing with Creatures of Havoc, which had grown into a polished outfit.

Our bass player, Jake Brady, graduated so we put out the call for a new one and found Dalton Potts, who neither owned nor played an upright. We made it work because A) He was really good, and B) Kelly Hazelton, (percussion & harmonica) had a

thing for him.

When Carly St. James (guitar, banjo) went to get our gig at Marty's Wheelhouse back, Marty asked where 'that little Asian chick' was. Carly assured him I was still in the band.

He replied, "Good, folks like her."

I didn't know if he meant me or my playing, but assumed the latter since I was better heard than seen. My appearance onstage was in fact an issue the band brought to my attention. Carly took me aside.

"Could you try being more animated when we play out?"

"Like what." I didn't like the sound of it. They'd better not ask me to start Mick Jaggering around.

"Just move a little more. You know, rock out a bit."

Jaggering. I knew it. "That's not really my style."

My style was to stand there and play, then leave before anything embarrassing had a chance to happen.

"How about some foot stomping?"

"I dunno..." I would prefer to hide behind a black screen.

"Just on your lead breaks and solos."

I gave her a firm 'maybe'.

That Friday night we played at Marty's. When we opened with our cover of *Maggie's Farm*, a Dylan tune in which my violin was prominent, Carly gave me a glare for failing to stomp or otherwise emphasize my stage presence. When my second lead break came around I walked to the front of the foot-high stage

and made eye contact with a guy who—unlike most of the crowd—was paying more attention to us than his beer.

I stomped at him. He thumped his mug on the table.

I stomped again. He thumped with a few others joining in.

I stomped and made an ogre face. The audience thumped what I hoped was their approval. Some of them made faces back at me.

I stomped, made another ogre face and yelled "Aaagh!" a perfect fifth up from the note I was holding. They yelled back and didn't throw a single beer bottle.

Cool. This was what ogre faces were for. I knew all that practice would pay off someday.

At our next practice, Dalton suggested I sing one.

"Do you think that's wise? We don't normally play behind chicken wire."

"I've heard you sing. You're not as bad as you think."

My singing voice had matured. I now sounded like a schoolgirl's impersonation of Edward G. Robinson having his toes smashed with a ball-peen hammer. Our band was run democratically though, and the popular vote said I must sing.

We worked out a few selections I could warble to, and the next time we played Marty's I took the lead vocal on *Donald, Where's Your Troozers?*

Let the wind blow high and the wind blow low

Through the streets in me kilt I go
All the lassies say Hello!
Donald, where's your troozers?

I took a little bow at the end and was greeted with applause and laughter. I gave center stage back to our lead vocalist, Rob Waters, and retreated to my usual hiding place back by the drums.

For our next gig we closed with a shantie since the call-and-response form invited audience participation, which drunk people like to do. Shanties are best and most authentic when performed a Capella. We put our instruments down and lined up at the front of the stage. I shared a mike with Carly, singing the responses:

Haul on the bowline, the bowline haul!

I'd almost forgotten how good it felt to sing, and the audience hardly seemed to mind at all. Drunk people can also be very forgiving.

As the year progressed, the weekend crowds at Marty's grew steadily larger. I assumed this was due to increased enrollment at Wolcroft, or people moving to Renfield to take advantage of the...the...well, I'm sure they had a good reason.

One Saturday just before the holidays we finished our set

with Johnny and June Carter Cash's *Jackson*. I split the vocals with Rob and it was—I don't want to sound prideful here—I'll just say it was well-received. When we were packing up, Marty came over and gave us each a crisp $100 bill.

"You kids are knockin' 'em dead. I'm raising your pay to $150 a set." Not bad for a college bar band from Nowheresville, Maine. Marty went on, "I'm not the only bar in town, but I'm the only one that's SRO every weekend. Keep doing what you're doing."

This led me to believe the growth in crowds was somehow correlated with—if not outright attributable to—Creatures of Havoc, as far-fetched as that may seem. But Marty insisted it was true, and even lined us up with some gigs in the general area, as far away as Skowhegan in the south and Dover-Foxcroft in the north. He made sure these were weeknight gigs because he needed us on the weekends to "put butts in the barstools."

I avoided public humiliation all the way to Dover-Foxcroft, where I blanked on the second verse of *Marie's Wedding* and, not knowing what else to do, substituted scat singing that sounded a lot like insanity yodeling.

There were less than 40 people in the club and most of them didn't notice I'd blown it. The ones who did were drunk enough to laugh uproariously at my blundering. I pulled it together for the third verse and final chorus, took my little bow, and in my haste to get away from the spotlight, tripped over a power cable and did a face-plant into the drums. Our drummer, Kelly, bless

her heart, played a rimshot to put the icing on my ineptness cake. The room went quiet as Rob and Carly helped me up and checked to see that nothing (especially my violin) was broken.

I played the rest of the show standing behind one of the P.A. stacks where no one could see me, and did no foot stomping or ogre-facing at all. Fortunately, that was the final show of our World Tour: three gigs, all within a thirty-five mile radius. After my disastrous finale, my bandmates tried to ease my wounded pride, but I'll take that one to my grave.

Ah, memories. Who needs 'em?

When the lobster season ended in January, Wendell came up to visit and I made him stay until the end of April. He didn't mind. I was still in the same apartment and thought it best to clear it with the landlords so as to circumvent any surprise evictions. I caught up with Mrs. DeLeon when she came out to fill her bird feeder.

"I think I'm getting a new roommate."

"It's ok with me if it's ok with you."

"It's a...male person."

"Yes, I know." She loaded a feeder with sunflower seeds, most of which would be raided by squirrels.

"You do?"

"Of course."

"And you don't mind?"

"If I was your age I'd want him for a roommate, too. What's

his name?"

"Wendell Chapman."

"We should update the lease." She hung a mesh bag of suet on a juniper bush.

"Ok."

"And Bonnie-Kate?"

"Yes?"

"It's none of my business, but this one looks like a keeper." She gave a sly grin.

I said, "Count on it."

So, Mr and Mrs DeLeon were wise to my stealth-intercoursing activities from the start, all the way back to my freshman year. I would now have to come to terms with not being as clever as I thought.

I'd started racking up student-teaching hours the previous year with a class of fourth graders, a surprisingly uneventful enterprise, given my track record. In my senior year, I student-taught eighth grade English at the local junior high. All my students were bigger than me. Some of the bolder ones asked me out on dates to eat pizza and play Asteroids Deluxe. I believed that sort of thing was frowned upon, so, no, thank you. You're sweet but I like you more as a friend.

As my final year at Wolcroft wound down, Wendell returned to Rockland to help his grandfather prepare for the coming lobster season. He promised to return for my graduation. Aoife

said she would be there, too, and could she bring Aaron? Absolutely.

Living together for four months taught Wendell and me a great many things about ourselves and each other, first and foremost that we were compatible in every way that mattered. We liked (and disliked) the same foods, had musical tastes in common, didn't much care for TV or pop culture, were not religiously inclined, and shared an abiding adoration of the sea and of the Maine Coast in particular. We also both wanted a child. Or two. Also, we were both doofuses in the extreme. That was of critical importance.

I was all set to get started on family-production but didn't want to rush things. Were I a more conniving sort I might have "accidentally" gotten pregnant, I was not without a conscience. I found the very notion of stealth-maternity reprehensible. How could you do that to someone, especially someone you profess to love? I would be patient. There would be time for that.

One night after our second set at Marty's, Creatures of Havoc were enjoying a round of free beers—which was, by the way, my favorite price for a round of beers—when Rob suggested a summer tour.

"Marty can line up some dates for us. Probably wouldn't make any more than expenses, but it'd be exposure. We'd have some laughs."

Everyone was up for it but me. *Mother of Pearl* was now

rattling her tin cup across the bars of my mind, demanding emancipation. Writing had progressed at a periwinkle's pace during the school year. I bemoaned my flagging productivity.

"Sorry, guys. I can't. I have obligations."

I'd made myself a firm commitment to finish my book, and also to do far fewer face-plants into drumkits with people watching.

So, that's how I got fired from my own band, a band I had nurtured from a rag-tag collection of rank amateurs into the folk-rock powerhouse it became, playing for crowds of several dozen, some of whom actually listened, and embarking on epic three-club tours yielding no financial gain or notoriety whatsoever. Sadly, I was left with little choice but to focus on a writing career that was sure to be equally unsuccessful.

My life continued to be a journey of many possible paths, all of which ended at brick walls topped with concertina wire and armed guards, fame and fortune—or at least basic material comfort—taunting me from the other side, forever beyond my grasp.

That last part turned out not to be true, but that was how it felt at the time.

I was glad for (most of) the experiences I had with Creatures of Havoc, and wished them all success. Such success came to them that summer when they accepted a lucrative recording contract with a record company out of Nashville. So, yeah, I got

out of there just in the nick of time.

When I moved out of my apartment, I shoved my paltry belongings into a couple of duffel bags, shoved those into my little red Bug (still running after all these years) and drove to Jonesport to catch a ride out to Mille Jours. Wendell came out for a week in June and said the time we spent apart was getting harder to take. We agreed to work on that.

From mid-June to mid-August I did little apart from work on *Mother of Pearl*. I developed a system: write a chapter, sleep on it, edit the chapter, then start the next. Multiple redrafts were still inevitable but would not be the staggering pile of unpolished verbiage I'd given myself with the first two books. Which still languished, by the way, unsold.

When Aoife came out in August she brought Aaron with her and I saw firsthand how happy they made each other. I cringed to recall the infantile tantrum I'd thrown when she gave me the news. Note to self: try not to be such a fucking twat, ok?

For their first dinner on the island, I splurged and bought a bunch of lobsters from Edgar. We ate them with oven-roasted veg from the garden and a bottle of Asti Spumante.

"Set a date yet?" I said, wrenching the tail off a nice two-pounder.

Aoife laced her fingers through Aaron's and said, "Next May. A spring wedding."

Mud season wedding, I thought, but said, "How nice."

"You'll be my maid of honor?"

"Sure. But I'll probably cry."

"That's ok, so will I."

Aaron cracked a claw and joked, "This doesn't sound like an auspicious beginning to married life. Women sobbing at the altar."

"Better than sobbing on our wedding night, isn't it."

"Yeah, but save some tears for that, too. Big letdown, guaranteed."

That night Aoife crawled into my bed around 10:15, shortly after I turned in.

"Hi Eefs. What are you doing here? What about Aaron?"

"He sent me." She removed what little clothing she wore, then started on mine.

"That was nice of him," I said.

"He's a prince, little crabcake. He understands us. I told you it would be ok, didn't I."

I lit the candles on the nightstand so we could see what we were doing. Aoife said, "The more I look at you, the more I want to keep looking at you."

I felt a little less disfigured.

I managed to turn twenty-three that summer but could not escape a nagging worry that I'd forgotten something important. Near the end of August, I prepared to leave Mille Jours since I'd been doing that every August of my entire life, but realized,

having failed to secure a teaching position (That's what I forgot: to apply for jobs), I didn't have to be anywhere. I went to spend a couple of weeks with my Wendell, then came back to the island.

On a late-September supply run to Jonesport I stopped at the post office to reap the latest harvest of rejection letters—a bumper crop!—and mail off *Mother of Pearl* to Malcom and Dillon. They returned it two weeks later with a note saying they didn't accept handwritten manuscripts. Picky, picky.

Questioning Edgar, I ascertained there was not a single typewriter on the whole island, so I fled to bang out a copy on Mom's old Underwood, which still lived at Stone-n-Ivy. Even by late-seventies standards it was a fossil from the mists of typographic antiquity. I loved that Underwood, the way its Bs and Gs were always dropped below the line, and the way its lowercase Ps and Es were sometimes filled in. Just charming.
I hunted-and-pecked my way to a third draft of *Mother of Pearl*, made a copy, and sent it back to Phil Hackett at Malcom and Dillon. I felt it had its best chance of publication with them, since they were New England based and everything I wrote took place in Maine, often on islands.

With that chore out of the way, I looked for teaching jobs, and had one fall into my lap under the most sordid of circumstances. Mr Hundley, the ninth grade English teacher at a midcoast Junior High was summarily shitcanned when it came to light that he was having a romantic affair with a fifteen-year-old

student (who insisted it was all her idea). When her parents called in the State Police, Hundley hanged himself from the apple tree in his backyard rather than go to prison. It is a well-known fact that men's complications make them do remarkably stupid things sometimes. Hundley's suicide created an immediate and fantastically creepy job opening I was right on time to fill.

I continued to be propositioned by the student body. I shooed them away, explaining that I didn't wish to end up in an apple tree.

In January I received a letter from Phil Hackett. I opened it, steeling myself for another episode in the crushing of my dreams. I read it. I read it again.

Phil wished to meet with me in person to discuss the publication of *Mother of Pearl*. Could I come down to Hartford for that?

YES! I THINK I CAN MANAGE IT!

Since I had a little free time and no one was watching, I celebrated by whooping and hollering while jumping around like an utter fool. A soon-to-be-published utter fool.

Malcom and Dillon offered a generous advance and we hashed out rights and royalties with the signing of a few boilerplate documents. I met the man who would be my long-suffering editor and eventually my good friend, William Pruitt. His role would sometimes expand to personal advisor, charged

with keeping me from doing stupid things, especially those that would cause my premature demise or further loss of limbs. I kept him pretty busy.

To make his job easier, I put myself on high alert for sudden death and dismemberment to come raining down from the skies, boiling up from the ground, or thundering in from tempestuous seas. Such cataclysms left me alone, at least for a time. I was encouraged to find myself not at all killed.

My first instinct was to tell no one I was being published, or, failing that, to tell everyone I was being published. That should give a clear picture of how useless my instincts were.

I arrived at a compromise: I told Wendell, but swore him to secrecy on penalty of disapproving looks and harsh language, but not withholding sex because that would punish me, too.

I worked closely with William Pruitt, and *Mother of Pearl* went to the printers in time for summer beach reading season, which would start a couple of weeks after Aoife and Aaron's wedding.

At which we both cried.

With the ink not quite dry on the first printed copies, I called Wendell, then Aoife, and invited them to a party I was throwing in celebration. I also invited Professor Dave, who declined but wished me well, and William, who showed up with champagne and cigars.

I accepted one and said, "I thought cigars were just for new

babies."

"Don't be absurd. Babies are too young to smoke cigars."

I loved William's sense of humor. Bone dry. "You know what I mean, you silly man."

"Can you keep a secret?"

"Does it involve an unsolved murder?"

"Er, no."

"Then yes, I can keep a secret."

"These are Cuban cigars. The finest smokes on earth, but not strictly legal in the U.S."

"Well, light me up then."

Starting that again?!

"Shut up, you. I'm a novelist now."

William was right: Cubans are amazing.

My publication party continued late into the night, with prodigious consumption of alcohol but no arrests that I knew of.

Mother of Pearl was reviewed favorably in the Portland Press Herald, but they're notorious for giving Maine writers a free pass, as long as they don't suck in neon-green letters a thousand feet high.

William kept me apprised of my book's progress and sent me carefully curated reviews, fearing the negative ones would send me into a death spiral, never to write again. Whether that was true or not will never be known because he protected my fragile ego like a mother bear protects her cubs.

Counter to my foolish expectations—is there another kind?—becoming a published author did not simplify my life. On the contrary, it created complications I could scarcely have imagined. I was forced to give up most of my summer to go on a book tour involving several states that were disconcertingly not Maine.

My reading public did not expect me to be so small. I could only assume that was because I wrote like a larger person, about normal-sized people. One autograph seeker refused to believe I was the author of *Mother of Pearl* and went to fetch store security. *Officer, there's a little brownish girl impersonating a novelist! Come quickly!*

A great number of readers asked if I was Pearl and I told them no, she was much smarter than me. That left them satisfyingly confused.

I also got a couple of questions about what happened to my nose. I told them I was once a prize-fighter. One reader had seen me with Creatures of Havoc and asked if I still did that.

"No, I had to quit after the drums assaulted me."

"The drummer?"

"No, the drums—two floor toms, a crash cymbal and a hi-hat. The cowbell was in on it, too."

On my return to Wiscasset from the book tour I was hounded by the media. By hounded I mean asked for three interviews, two of which ran on Saturday morning radio and were heard by at least ten people each. The third was aired on Maine Public

Television on a Sunday afternoon, to an audience of equally staggering numbers. I was sometimes recognized in public by fans who were surprised I didn't have 'people' to do my grocery shopping for me. They almost certainly ran home to tell hubby they'd seen Bonnie-Kate Caldwell buying Tampax and Pop Tarts at the A&P.

I hung around Wiscasset long enough to indulge in an item from my splurge list: a new prosthesis rigged so I could turn the foot around backwards to A) attract attention, or B) make people go away.

While I waited for that to be delivered, I went down to the school where I taught to quit my job since it turned out I didn't like teaching, but no one was there.

Oh, right: summer.

I had to call the school board chairman, who got all pissy with me because now they had to get a new teacher on short notice. Sorry!

I hid at Stone-n-Ivy writing notes and outlines for a while but after receiving too many unwanted visitors I retreated up the coast to reunite with Wendell for a few days.

It was the height of the lobster season and he was working 4:00am to 6:00pm or later, so we only had a few scant hours a day together. I tried writing to pass the time while he was at work, but couldn't focus. I needed to be on Mille Jours for that.

One night we went to dinner at The Clam Shack, where they

boiled the lobsters and deep-fried the fuck out of everything else. A delicious heart attack on every plate.

I was drowning a hush puppy in malt vinegar when I noticed Wendell was not quite himself.

"Something's bugging you."

"Yeah, it's nothing."

"Come on, Wendell. Talk to me."

He scooped cocktail sauce with a fried clam. "I finished your book."

"That bad?"

He laughed. "No, that good."

"So what's the problem?"

"It's just—you're a lot smarter than I am. How can you be happy with a blue-collar knucklehead like me?"

"It's easy to look smart when you get to rethink every word a dozen times before anyone sees it. I'm *WAY* more of a knucklehead than you, I just hide it better."

"What if you become famous?"

"I'll be a famous knucklehead." I stole one of his clams.

"But you'll meet a bunch of literary types, and rich people."

"Maybe, but I doubt it. And that won't change how I feel about you. Not one bit."

"It might."

"Wendell. Don't you know how much I love you?"

"I love you, too."

"If you asked me right now to marry you, I would. No hesitation."

"You would?"

I didn't say anything more, I just beamed love at him.

He took one of my hands. "Bonnie-Kate, will you marry me?"

"Oh, hell yes." I got up from my side of the booth and moved to his, then planted a big wet kiss on him. "You taste like cocktail sauce."

He said, "You taste like malt vinegar."

We both said *yum* at the same time. This was going to work out just fine.

I stayed a few more days in Rockland. He gave me a ring he'd already bought, not knowing if I would accept it. When he gave the jeweler my size, she asked if it was for a child.

Before I left for Mille Jours I called William Pruitt to tell him I'd be incommunicado for a while. He was not pleased.

"What if we need to get in touch?"

I told him I didn't have a phone out there.

"Does someone else have a phone, who could give you a message?"

"There's no one else on the island, usually." It was coming on winter again; adios, vacationers. "And they don't have phones either."

"You'll be all alone out there?"

"Sometimes." I could actually hear him worrying. Knitted

brows, furrowed forehead.

"Which island is it?"

"A small one. I'd rather not say."

"What about Wiscasset? Can't you do your writing there?"

"I write better on the island." That was a plain undisputed fact, tested by clinical research.

William sighed. "How long will you be away?"

It was early November, two months from the end of lobster season, when I would grab Wendell and take him to Wiscasset to hole up for the harshest part of the winter.

"I should be back January-ish. Give or take."

"Two months?!"

"I'll have my mail forwarded. You can still write to me."

"This is a bit—difficult, Bonnie-Kate."

"Sorry, William. That's how I work. You want another book, don't you?"

He capitulated, and I learned there were advantages to being one of those temperamental artist types.

I eventually got on the road north and caught a ride to Mille Jours on a lobster boat called *Aye, Cap*. I thought I might meet up with the guys from *Rock and Rye*, but that would have been awkward. They might not recognize me with my clothes on.

I arrived on the island late in the afternoon and unloaded my supplies on the dock. I'd left the cabin fairly well-stocked so I only brought a few cases of canned and dried goods, along with

two months worth of Tootsie Pops and Pop Tarts. Dark would come soon, so I hurried up the snow-covered road to get the Willys and transport my supplies to the cabin.

Remember when you were little and the snow would get a crust you could walk on? I could still do that. But I fell down a lot.

It wasn't until I reached the switchbacks leading up the mountain that I smelled the smoke. *The island is on fire! This is how I will die.*

Then I saw the smoke silhouetted against the darkening sky. It came from my chimney. *Someone is in my house!*

The only two people I would allow to make themselves at home without asking were Wendell and Aoife. I'd just left Wendell in Rockland and I'd just called Aoife to tell her I was engaged ("I'm so happy for you, little catfish!").

I would also have allowed Edgar, if, say, his house was broken or something, but I'd seen *Four Aces* on the mooring in Jonesport so I knew he was off-island. Also, I just walked past his house and it didn't look broken at all.

I crept toward my cabin in the dark, careful not to alert its uninvited occupant to my presence. The muted light of my oil lamps spilled out the front windows, casting golden rhomboids on the snow. I tiptoed closer, avoiding the glow.

A man I'd never seen before sat in my Windsor chair near my woodstove, wearing a green plaid shirt (not mine) and sporting a scruffy reddish beard (ditto). A cigarette dangled from his lips as

he whittled a piece of wood with my carving knife. I wondered if he was making a puffin.

My prosthesis crunched through the frozen snow. The whittler looked up but didn't see me. He resumed his carving and I went slinking away to hide in the woods.

Wait just a goddamn minute. This is my house. Instead of skulking around in the bushes I should be evicting this squatter, who didn't even ask permission to carve a puffin in my favorite chair. Not that I would have agreed to it, but there's a principle to be upheld here. Basic etiquette dictated that you don't carve a seabird in someone else's favorite chair without asking! Emily Post has a whole chapter on that, I'm pretty sure.

I strode across the snow to my front door, threw it open and burst in.

"Why are you in my house?"

He glared at me like you'd glare at a pestering child, then stood and came at me with murder in his eyes. My squatter was a large man. This wasn't going to be a fair fight.

I struck a kind of karate pose (I think), made an ogre face and yelled "Aaaagh!" but it didn't even slow him down. He picked me up with one hand and bounced me off the wall. My maritime display crashed to the floor and I got a nasty cut from the flensing spade. I expected my assailant to jump on me when I was down, but he foolishly assumed I was too small to be a threat.

He walked back to my Windsor chair and armed himself with

my carving knife. He came at me again.

Of course a large squatter is about to stab me. This is how I will die.

I fought him like a small angry bear but it didn't do any good. He knocked me down, pinned my hands above my head and sat on my leg(s) so I couldn't move. He put the knife to my throat.

"For chrissake's man, don't kill me! I didn't do anything to you!"

A man of few words, he just laughed at me. Rum that I paid for was on his breath. I tried to mentally prepare for a throat slashing, but my throat was not his target.

Using my own woodcarving knife, he popped the buttons off my shirt one at a time, then started on my jeans.

Killing me was one thing, but sexual assault was where I drew the line. No matter how I squiggled and squirmed, I couldn't do anything to stop him. Pretty soon he had my pants down to my knees and was making rude comments about my vagina. Apparently this festering lesion of a subhumanoid thought he was raping a child. Sorry to disappoint you, fuckwad.

When he reached down to get his penis out, I saw my chance and I took it.

Unaware of my half-leg, the would-be rapist had inadvertently freed it when he pulled my pants down. I whipped it upward with great ferocity, turning his balls into testicle puree. He howled and grabbed what was left of them. I got a hand free

and groped around on the floor for anything that might be a weapon. What my hand found, I put right to work.

"Eat harpoon, motherfucker!"

I jammed it into his side below the ribs, working it from side to side for maximum damage. It was his turn to yell, "Aaagh!"

The last thing he did before he fell over was to stab me in the eye with my own goddamn knife.

Without anesthetic.

Yet again.

Fuck.

Well, that sure did suck. It hurt as much as having your leg chewed off. I tried screaming but that made it hurt even more.

The squatter seemed pretty dead, so I curled up in a ball and moaned for a while, waiting for the worst of the pain to subside, which it had no intention of doing. After a while I said fuck it, and put my leg and pants back on.

Still marveling at how painful it was to be stabbed in the eye, I cobbled together a bandage from gauze and an old t-shirt, then I kicked the squatter's face in. I fell down once but got up and kicked him some more because I was really mad.

I needed medical attention. No hospital on Mille Jours. Must get to the main.

No boat.

Except my little yellow rowboat (with blue trim).

Rowing many miles across to Jonesport in a ten foot skiff in

wintertime was also known as 'committing suicide' but the alternative was to sit in my cabin and wait to die from my injuries. *Oh, this shit has the Universe's fingerprints all over it.*

I was probably going to die one way or the other. Since I preferred death at sea over death sitting on my couch, I went to launch my rowboat and take a shot.

Here's some stuff I learned about having one of your eyes stabbed out:

Not only did it hurt like crucifixion, every movement amplified the pain. Because of that, it felt like being crucified over and over with nails that were on fire and driven through your face instead of your hands. I couldn't think of too many things that sucked worse than that.

Jesus got crucified with nails through his hands.

Amateur.

My rowboat was pulled up on the shore by the dock. I wanted to drive the Willys down there but I couldn't get the shed doors open, so I walked. Every step felt like driving an icepick into my eye. About halfway there I slipped and fell on the ice. It hurt so much I screamed and blacked out, but I didn't know how long. All I remember is waking up in a state of *what the fuck!?*

I got lucky. The tide was in. I only had to move my boat a dozen yards over the snow to launch it. Had the tide been out, it would have been more like thirty yards, and without snow to glide it over I never would have made it to the water.

I left the harbor I idiotically unprepared for the voyage I intended to make. No food, no water, no safety equipment of any kind. I went to sea knowing full well I might die out there, and didn't even leave a note for Wendell and Aoife. I later cited panic and searing pain as the causes of my thoughtlessness, but I still felt guilty about it.

Once I'd rowed past Little Auk Island, every pull of the oars an icepick to the face, I got a blurred visual on the blinking red light atop a mainland radio tower. I pointed my bow at it and struggled at the oars in the cold and dark, certain my efforts would be futile. I would never see Wendell or Aoife again, never marry, never build the family that would make us all so happy, and our lives rich and full.

I somehow punched myself in the face with an errant oarstroke. It hurt so much I screamed again, and screaming hurt so much I lost consciousness again.

I was out until first light, when I was rescued from the shore of Burke's Island by a lobsterman. I'd washed up there after drifting three miles off course in the night. I'd lost one of my oars but was able to paddle out to the boat that found me. The captain's name was Archer, and his boat was named *Bullseye*, a bit of wordplay that didn't register until a few days later. Clever. I'm a little slow on the uptake sometimes, especially while in the throes of agonizing and inescapable death.

Archer helped me aboard and seemed pretty matter-of-fact

about the situation. *'Nother day, 'nother half-dead castaway child in a rowboat. Wake me if anything* interesting *happens.*

"Whatcha doin' out here?" (hee-ah) he said, pouring me a coffee from his thermos.

"I got stabbed in the eye." As if that explained everything.

I took a tiny sip of his coffee. It was the best thing I ever tasted.

"Izzat so." He probably wondered how being cast away logically followed an eye stabbing, but didn't bug me about it.

"Yep. I killed him with a harpoon."

"Kilt who?"

"The guy that stabbed me."

He considered this a moment before adjusting his Red Sox cap and saying, "Ayup. One good stabbin' deserves another, I suppose."

He picked up his radio and called to the main for medical help to meet us at the Jonesport landing. I think he would have told them to bring a straitjacket (x-small) but I was sitting right there.

In the ambulance the paramedic removed my makeshift bandage and said, "Let's see what we—oh. My. God."

"What."

"I, um…uh…you'll be ok, Miss…"

"Caldwell. Bonnie-Kate."

"Ok, Bonnie-Kate. You're going to be fine."

"Since when does *oh my god* indicate being fine?"

"Sorry." He pretended to check my pulse again.

"If you don't tell me right now what you're oh-my-godding about, I will stab you with a harpoon. I have one, you know."

"Whoa, easy."

"I already stabbed one guy with it."

"I'm sorry, Bonnie-Kate, it's your eye."

"Oh, that."

"I doubt they'll be able to save it. I'm very sorry."

"I've had worse."

The medical guy looked confused, so I pulled up the leg of my jeans and said, "Vietnam, 1972. One of Charlie's landmines caught me in the jungle southwest of Da Nang. They had to Medevac me all the way to Saigon."

"Really?"

"Actually, no. Never happened."

"Hm."

"It's all just the Universe trying to kill me, but I'm still alive. Fucking Loser-verse."

He radioed ahead that the incoming patient was plainly delusional and would require sedation, immediate and heavy.

After my initial treatment at the hospital the police showed up wanting to know what happened. I told them about the squatter who stabbed me, and how I harpooned him to death.

"He's still out there bleeding on my floor." I paused a

moment. "Someone's going to have to clean that up," I said, hoping they would volunteer, but they didn't. They sent some state troopers out there, but without any mops or Lysol.

After the doctors did a bunch of surgical stuff on my eye socket and told me they're working wonders with glass eyes these days, another cop came to see me.

"Miss Caldwell? Detective Langholtz."

"Did they get that dead guy out of my house yet?"

"Not exactly." He looked at me with what could have been either pity or suspicion. "We found no one on the island, alive or dead." I detected a note of impatience.

"No way, dude."

"I'd like to ask a few questions, if I may."

"Wait a minute. You don't believe me. You think I made it up."

"No, Miss Caldwell, not at all. When the officers entered your home they found a significant amount of blood on the floor and a broken harpoon, also covered with blood. The blood from those samples did not match your type."

"So that rules out me harpooning myself. Bravo, we've cracked this thing wide open."

He asked a bunch of questions about what happened and I'm pretty sure he was trying to catch me in a lie. I told him I didn't feel so good. The nurses made him go away but he came back that afternoon.

"He handed me a photo. "Do you recognize this person?"

The photo was a mugshot. "Yep, that's him. That's the guy."

He looked a little different without a harpoon sticking out of him, but I would have recognized the crazy eyes and scruffy red beard anywhere.

"His name is Keith Bucknell. Career criminal. He was admitted to Eastern Maine Medical this morning, suffering from an injury consistent with being stabbed by some type of spear, such as a harpoon."

"Told ya." Though it hurt like fuck, I gave him my best triumphant smirk. "I kicked up his face, too."

"It appears he stole a small craft from the harbor at Jonesport and helped himself to your house for a few days."

"That bastard," I said. "Eating my food, carving my wood, pooping in my outhouse. Is there no decency anymore?"

"After you injured him, he took the boat back to Jonesport and sought medical attention."

"Did you arrest him?"

"Mr Bucknell developed peritoneal sepsis. He passed away."

"Pft. Passed away? He didn't 'pass away,' I murdered that eye-stabbing piece of crap. Murdered the hell out of him."

"We're calling it self-defense," said Langholtz, putting away his notes.

"Ok, so I self-defensed him to death. I still win." I tried a grin but it hurt too much.

"Very well. Thank you for your cooperation."

He left but came back ten minutes later and asked if I would sign his copy of *Mother of Pearl*.

To Detective Langholtz, What would eye do without you? Love, Bonnie-Kate Caldwell.

I left the hospital before any news people found out I was there but they still had some articles about it in the paper. With a slew of doctor appointments coming up, I went to stay with Wendell in Rockland instead of going back to the cabin right away.

Wendell said, "Keith Bucknell was lucky."

"How so?"

"He died before I could get my hands on him."

I got a new glass eye to match the real one—dark, dark brown—and also ordered a custom one to go with my backwards-foot prosthesis: jet black, so it would look like I had a bottomless hole in my face. I could hardly wait for Halloween.

When I finally returned to Mille Jours, I collected a package from William Pruitt at the Jonesport post office. It was a box of Cuban cigars. William's note said, "For special occasions." When I declared standing outside the Jonesport post office a special occasion, my alter-ego chimed in but I told her to fuck off.

Landing on the island, I found my supplies from last time still piled on the dock. My cabin had crime scene tape around it, but the wind had reduced it to black and yellow tatters.

After I dug the Willys out and gathered up my groceries, I got to work scrubbing Keith Bucknell's blood off my floor. I found one of his molars under my couch and later made it into a necklace for when I wanted people to know I was a cold-blooded killer.

My harpoon and carving knife were gone, taken into evidence by the state police. *That's just great, I'm all alone out here without so much as a harpoon to defend myself.*

I wouldn't get them back until I returned to the main in January.

With my assailant's blood scrubbed out of my home, I started writing *All Due Respect*, my fourth novel, and second to be published. Edgar showed up in December. By mid-January I was in desperate need of some Wendell time, so I asked Edgar to take me back to the main.

Collecting more mail at the Jonesport post office, I found two letters from Malcom and Dillon. The first was from William, and was typically succinct:

> NY Times Sunday Magazine rave review of *Mother of Pearl*. 1st printing sold out, 2nd printing barely meeting demand.
> Congrats, contact me asap.

The second envelope contained a statement of quarterly

royalties deposited in my bank account. I assumed there was an error.

A grave error involving way too many zeros.

Shhh…don't tell the Universe.

A Day to Remember

Had I remained on Mille Jours a few more weeks I might have avoided my next misadventure, but it was not to be.

No sooner did Wendell and I arrive back in Wiscasset than William was on the phone telling me to get my ass down to New York City for a live interview on *America Today*. The popular morning show had chosen *Mother of Pearl* as a Book of the Week.

It was a short hop from Portland to NYC so our plane didn't have time to explode or catch on fire. It wanted to. I could tell. Coming in to La Guardia, it looked like we were crash-landing in the ocean, so I grabbed my hubby-to-be and yelled, "I'LL ALWAYS LOVE YOU, WENDELL!" assuming these would be my last words.

Nope.

Once we were on the ground a stewardess came over and asked me if I was ok.

"Yeah, I think so. What the hell was that, anyway?"

"What was what?"

"We almost crashed in the ocean!"

"That's just how the runway is at La Guardia. You come in over the water."

"How was I supposed to know that?"

"I'm sorry if you were frightened."

"You couldn't make an announcement or something?"

"Sorry."

"You'd have a lot less people pissing themselves on your airplane if you gave us fair warning." I stood up and checked my seat to make sure I wasn't one of the pissers.

As I've mentioned (ad nauseam), not being in Maine always made me a little edgy. New York City fairly screamed out that it wasn't Maine in any way, adding to my stress. It didn't help that even a short building in Manhattan was taller than if you took every building in Maine and stacked them all one on top of the other.

I settled down when we got to our super-fancy hotel, also a million stories tall. I had never dreamed of such opulence. There were little soaps that looked like scallops, and a Mr Coffee right in the room!

In case I didn't mention it already, here's what I hated about live television: being on it. The host was Vanessa Stewart whom I'd seen on TV many times, interviewing flavor-of-the-month celebrities such as myself. I didn't realize until I met her that she was about nine feet tall, and wore stiletto heels, the better to lord it over the altitude deprived, again, such as myself. As if to emphasize our height differential, the producers put me in a chair from which my feet dangled a good six inches above the

floor. They might as well have given me a high chair and a sippy cup, for fuck's sake.

It became obvious Vanessa had done zero homework on my background, but that didn't stop her from asking about it. That being the case, I felt free to answer her questions with a bunch of made-up bullshit bearing no relation to the truth. Many of her questions were about *Mother of Pearl*, which I suspected she'd only read the Cliff's Notes to. Or maybe the dust jacket.

"Your character Pearl is an avid traveler. Are you?"

"Absolutely. I get on a plane every chance I get. There's nothing I like better then traveling the world."

"Do you have any favorite destinations?"

"Tierra del Fuego."

"Why?"

"Well, there's a bunch of tierra down there, and if you get tired of that, they have some fuego, too."

"I see."

She did not see.

She soldiered on: "You've written so eloquently about a mother and daughter's struggle to come to terms with a difficult past. Does the novel draw from your relationship with your own mother?"

"Ok, sure. It's totally about that."

"You and your mother are close?"

"We're inseparable. She's here today, wouldn't miss it for the

world." I smiled and waved at a random woman in the studio audience. I chose her because I liked her sweater. She looked behind her to see who I was waving at.

The interview went on like that, with questions so lame I expected to be asked my favorite color (purple).

Near the end of our conversation, Vanessa, who pretended to be my friend but was in reality another tool of the fucking Universe, said of a passage I'd just read aloud at her request, "It certainly gives one pause."

Millions of eyes watched and several TV cameras recorded for posterity the moment I examined and then raised my hands to show that it had not given me paws, so what the hell are you talking about, giant TV lady?

I didn't actually say that last part but it was written all over my face, which, by the way, all the TV makeup in the world couldn't fix. Since my most recent disfiguration (the ocular one), I was well on my way to a permanent ogre face and a rewarding future as a professional child frightener, in case the novel writing thing didn't pan out.

Leaving the studio, I asked Wendell if he was sure he wanted to wake up to this every morning.

"Do you know how many men wish they were in my shoes?"

"I dunno...three? And they're probably amputee fetishists."

"Bonnie-Kate, please. Don't be a knucklehead."

"Three point five?"

"I love every inch of you, from the top of your head down to your sweet little pinky toes."

"Toe," I corrected, hugging him for always saying the right thing.

We stayed a few days in the Big Apple, doing touristy things like eating foreign food from street vendors and visiting the Museum of Modern Art, at which 1880 is considered 'modern.' I'm sorry, but that was like, a hundred years ago, not modern. Van Gogh was wicked cool, but I bet he didn't even have an Atari.

On 42nd Street, a cabdriver from Bazookastan ran over my toes. They weren't my real ones, but I shrieked anyway. He acted like it was all my fault and yelled at me in Urdu or Farsi, one of those languages that sounded like a bathroom-related problem. I let fly with an impenetrable salvo of insanity yodeling until he went away. Passersby saw nothing unusual in this, and went about their New Yorkish business unperturbed. One of them even asked me for some spare change to buy a hotdog. I gave him eighty-five cents. He walked into a nearby liquor store so I guess they had pretty good hotdogs in there. The locals always know the best places to eat.

The afternoon was cold and grey with winds whipping between the buildings, which somehow made it windier. Wendell and I did some window shopping and discovered that everything in NYC was ungodly expensive. Malcom and Dillon were picking up the tab; boy, were they in for a surprise.

I stopped at a bakery window to drool over the cakes and pies when I recoiled at a most alarming sight: my reflection. I made a fearsome ogre face and said, "Maybe I'll get a nose job."

Wendell stood behind me, massaging my shoulders. "Please don't."

Taking full advantage of the giant window, I continued making faces and *I'm-gonna-get-you!* gestures. "Why not?"

"I mean, you can if you want to, it's your face. But don't do it for me, or anyone else. You don't need any fixing."

"Maybe I will, just for me."

I refocused my eye and looked past my reflection, noticing for the first time all the bakery patrons who had paused from their tea and muffins to check out the nutcase striking horror-movie poses at them from the sidewalk. Unlike insanity yodeling at foreign cabbies, this amused them. I would have liked a muffin but I couldn't go in there now.

After another short flight lacking catastrophic engine failure, Wendell and I were safely back in Maine. I congratulated myself on foiling once again the Universe's plan to exterminate me, then settled into a familiar state of self-doubt, recrimination and general insecurity about everything. I convinced myself I'd published a mediocre novel that was only popular due to sympathy reads, probably resulting from my lack of physical stature, multiple deformities and questionable intellect.

Good for you, Bonnie-Kate! You try so hard, just like a real

writer.

If not for the pity-reads, my book would have hit the remainder bins within a week of release. Sales spiked again after my *America Today* fiasco, which only proved my point. My uppance would surely come, and I would be exposed for the brazen fraud I knew myself to be. I later learned this was a fairly common affliction known as Impostor Syndrome. At the time, I only knew I felt bad when I should have been reeling with joy for all the wonders in my life.

"Wendell! I need something to cheer me up."

"Anything your heart desires, my love. What shall I bring you, a professional sports team? A developing nation? Perhaps an international airport full of Fortune 500 companies?"

"Smaller."

"A frosted strawberry Pop Tart?"

"Bigger."

"A Saint Bernard."

"That would be fun, but I have a bad track record with dogs." A Saint Bernard who took a Bailey-esque liking to me would be my undoing, for sure. In the back of my mind I heard Aoife saying *But you could ride him like a pony!* I still had to decline.

Wendell continued. "A kitten?"

"I was thinking maybe I'd get that nose job."

"Instead of a kitten?! You're quite mad, you know." (stately British accent).

"Muah-ha-ha!" I twirled the tips of an imaginary mustache.

Once I assured him it was for me and not for him, Wendell said he'd help any way he could, even though he loved my nose as it was. He said, "Nobody has one like that."

I made an appointment with a plastic surgeon named Dr Deminski, who said he could fix it for $3000, a sum I could now afford. I remained wary of lavish expenditures. The purchase of columned mansions with hot-and-cold flowing champagne would likely put me on the Universe's radar again, exactly where I did not want to be. But one little nose job stood a pretty good chance of going unnoticed.

Dr Deminski explained the rhinoplasty. "First, we'll give you a local anesthetic."

"So I'll be awake for the...um, procedure?"

"Yes. General anesthesia isn't needed and would add significantly to the cost."

"I see."

"We would then re-break your nose to align it correctly."

"How do you do that?"

"With a surgical...instrument."

I might have been the queen of dumb-asses, but I didn't just fall off the rutabaga wagon. He was going to hit me in the face with a hammer. Now, I made myself a promise long ago that I would not voluntarily undergo any medical (or psychiatric) treatments calling for the use of a surgical hammer.

I told Dr Deminski I would think it over (a bald-faced lie) and bid him goodbye. Forever.

I took my money and for a fraction of the cost got something much better: a new custom prosthesis. This one was a wooden peg-leg for Lady Jane Blackmore, to make her even more fearsome and piratey than she already was.

"How'd you lose that, Lady Jane?"

Aar, a cyclone rent our ship asunder in the South Seas. I was cast upon Pitcairn's shore and had to eat it to stay alive.

"Don't they have fish and coconuts on Pitcairn's?"

Yar, what's your point, wretch?

"Did you at least cook it?"

Aye. I'm no savage.

"How did you cut it off?"

How...what? Wait a minute. Yar, prob'ly should have done that first.

"Er, yeah."

Here, have some jerky.

"Um, thanks, but I just had moldy biscuit and weevils."

I made it meself.

"Oops, look at the time. I'm late for a keelhauling."

Wendell had by then become accustomed to my personas. He said they were the perfect compliment to my adorable neuroses. Being tiny, I tried not to be or do anything adorable, but I let it slide that time.

We set our wedding date for July. I suggested we have it in Rockland to make things easier.

"Not on the island?" said Wendell.

"It's more convenient on the main. For the guests."

I would have preferred an island wedding but there were logistics to consider. I also didn't want to start our married life by insisting on things, or having expectations, but Wendell made it unnecessary.

"Mille Jours is perfect for a wedding. We can keep it small."

All my life I had envisioned an ornate Catholic church wedding-palooza. That's how Mom would have had me do it. Such an extravaganza would be fraught with public-humiliation style perils, so I leapt at the suggestion of a small ceremony. Fewer witnesses to the debacle I would surely find a way to create.

"How small are we talking here?" My guest list would max out at two.

"I'll invite my Dad and my grandparents. I'd ask my brother, but he won't come."

In his youth, Wendell's brother Ethan had chosen Keith Richards as a role model. He lived in the artist community of Taos, New Mexico, where he tended to his various addictions. I knew him from when we were kids but would never see him again, not even at Wendell's funeral.

"I'll have Aoife and Aaron. Oh, and Edgar, of course."

"So six guests plus the minister."

"Perfect."

"What about catering?"

"Fuck that, I'll make lobster rolls." I thought about it for a second and decided it wouldn't be enough food. "And Tater Tots. Everybody likes those."

"Excellent. How about the champagne?"

"Asti Spumante. I'll take care of that."

"You can't pay for your own wedding, my dear."

"I fell ass-backwards into a big pile of money, remember?"

"Nope, I'm paying for all this stuff. Now what about your wedding dress?"

"Do I need one?"

"Of course you do. And flowers everywhere, and ladies to fuss over you all morning."

I laughed. "I don't think Aoife's that much of a fusser."

"My Grandma is. She'll do it."

I liked that idea. Wendell's grandma was always kind to me. "Anything else?"

"Wedding cake."

"Let's have wedding pie. I'm better at pie."

"So it shall be. And what about a honeymoon?"

Concern clouded my face. "Do we have to?"

Honeymoons usually involved travel, and Wendell knew how I felt about that, despite the lies I told Vanessa Stewart. After a

brief discussion we decided to just spend a week together on the island, intercoursing our brains out.

Important questions remained, such as where we would live, and how soon we should start cranking out babies. Wendell had a small apartment in Rockland. His grandfather was due to retire soon, leaving Wendell his boat, *Althea Rose*, gear, and territory. I understood fealty to one's maritime heritage, but fishing out of Rockland stood in direct conflict with my need to do my writing on Mille Jours.

The solution looked pretty simple: winter and spring on the island, summer and fall in Rockland. We agreed this was workable, if less than ideal, but the issue would soon resolve itself without any shots fired, as would the question of baby production.

Stone-n-Ivy didn't have a place in the equation, but selling her was out of the question. I could never relinquish such a vital connection to the early years of my life. Nostalgia can be a strong motivator to making unwise decisions. For me, anyway.

When I went to pick up my wedding dress, the lady at the bridal shop looked suspicious, like I might have been there to rob the place. I told her I was there to pick up a dress, but she still eyed me like a potential criminal.

She located my dress and handed it to me, saying, "We've never made one this small."

"I apologize for not being larger."

In the fitting room she helped me into it while Wendell waited out front. According to the superstition neither of us believed, he was not supposed to see me in my wedding dress yet, under penalty of some undetermined 'bad luck,' which in my case would mean no less than the Earth being engulfed in a ball of fire and ejected from the solar system. With extreme prejudice. That would interfere with our plans.

The seamstress buttoned up the back of my dress and asked quietly if I was all right.

"Why wouldn't I be?" The final fitting of one's wedding gown is not normally a harrowing ordeal.

"You seem awfully young to be getting married. You're not being...pressured, are you?"

Now I understood. She thought I was a Filipina mail-order bride, being human-trafficked into an arranged marriage with a fossilized geezer whose grandkids were older than me.

Aha! Here was an opportunity for mischief. I calculated possible responses but couldn't think of one that wouldn't result in deployment of a SWAT team to effect my rescue. SWAT teams frowned on false alarms, and might send me a bill.

I caught her eye in the mirror and resisted (with great difficulty) the temptation to throw her an ogre face.

"How old do I look?"

"Fifteen?"

"I'm twenty-four. I wrote a New York Times bestseller last

year."

"Oh. Well, I didn't mean anything by it."

She still looked doubtful. Before I left, I got a copy of *Mother of Pearl* from the car and showed her the author photo on the dust jacket. I don't know why I felt I had to prove anything to this woman, but I did. Sometimes you just want to be right, even if it is childish.

She groped for an appropriately apologetic response but I cut her off, saying, "Thank you for your concern, the dress is perfect."

When winter capitulated to spring, Wendell returned to Rockland for his first fishing season without his grandfather. I worried about him being out there all alone, where so many things could go wrong, where even a small mishap could kill you.

I still had no widow's walk to pace, but I'd seen one on a house at the Rockland harbor. I thought maybe I could borrow theirs, but it would be too weird to ask. I just hoped Wendell knew where all the underwater rocks were hiding, waiting to take a bite out of *Althea Rose*.

I was still plugging away at *All Due Respect* but feeling bogged down and distracted, so I retreated to Mille Jours in the hope of accomplishing something. In the land of no TV, radio or phone I would be much better able to focus on the task at hand.

Arriving on the island I found my firewood in short supply. I blamed Keith Bucknell, that waster of firewood who squandered god-knows-how-many days' worth before I murdered him to

death. Bet he won't make that mistake again.

I put Pioneer Woman to work lumberjacking and soon recovered my supply, amassed without the loss of a single appendage.

As the weeks passed, I relieved manic spates of word-spillage with puffin carving and fiddling on my cliff. Mostly clothed, but not always. I needed to stay in practice with the nudity thing. Insanity yodeling had grown obsolete, but I did it anyway, just for fun. Again, mostly clothed; Maine is chilly in June.

My many hours of carving finally yielded a suitable puffin, and I wondered if being stabbed with my own knife was perhaps a requisite step in the process. To the best of my knowledge, my four bears had all skipped that part. I got out the paints and was set to apply a beautifully puffinous color scheme when I remembered I didn't know how. I practiced that for a couple of weeks, squandering a great deal of paint. Among my first successes was a sign I posted on the cabin door:

Bonnie-Kate Caldwell
Novelist - Murderer
Books Written, People Killed
No Job Too Big or Small

That was technically an illegal solicitation of murder-for-hire, but Mille Jours was lawless as the Wild West, so, technically,

shmechnically. The sign stayed.

My painting skills hit a plateau far short of bird-worthy and I couldn't help but wonder how my four bears had so skillfully executed their waterfowl. They really were lifelike. While pondering this, I found among the cabin's extensive library—two whole walls of floor-to-ceiling bookshelves—an ancient volume titled *How to Carve and Paint Birds*. By means of this book, one might gain the skills and knowledge needed to not only carve, but also paint, a seabird. Learning from a book. What a novel approach.

My puffin soon joined the procession, and the old paradigm was shaken to its very core: Caldwell women DO carve birds. Now all I had to do was produce a Caldwell woman to carry on the updated tradition (even though I hoped for a boy first).

I hoped to finish a presentable draft of *All Due Respect* before the wedding party arrived, but I wasn't good with deadlines so that didn't happen. There were still three chapters to go when I set aside the legal pads to participate in my nuptials and the attendant festivities.

With the big day approaching, I sailed to Jonesport with Edgar to collect my betrothed, and our wedding guests.

It being the day before the wedding, we gave the ceremony a dry run. Wendell and I would exchange our vows on the cliff, with the ocean as a witness to our deep and abiding love. The Universe would also be present, and might try to pull something.

I remained vigilant.

After the rehearsal I joined forces with my bridesmaids, Aoife and Wendell's grandma, to produce two blueberry wedding pies and an obscene amount of lobster salad. Wendell put three bottles of Asti Spumante in the fridge to chill.

Everything was perfect until Wendell's dad asked who would be the wedding photographer. I knew we'd forgotten something.

Aaron had with him a newfangled gizmo called a video camera and offered to tape the ceremony, but we needed still photos, too.

At the last minute I ran over to invite Marsha and Clifton Massey, who happened to be vacationing at their cottage on the island. Marsha was, among other things, a talented nature photographer and said she'd be happy to take wedding pictures of me and Wendell in our natural habitat.

"But we don't have any formal wear, Bonnie-Kate."

"That's ok, Edgar's giving me away and he doesn't have anything but jeans and flannel."

"Awfully casual for your wedding day," said Clifton, a bit snobbishly, I thought.

"Don't worry. He's going to tuck his shirt in."

"Hmpf."

Clifton's job, as near as I could tell, was to manage (i.e., squander) the vast fortune he inherited from his Boston-industrialist four bears. I still liked him. He was basically Arthur

without the British accent.

When the big day arrived, my bridesmaids helped me into my prosthesis and gown, then did my nails and fixed my hair, by which I mean brushed it. There wasn't enough for an up-do. Grandma Chapman fussed over my makeup until it was just so.

The Wedding March played from a tinny-sounding cassette deck as I came out the back porch door and took Edgar's arm. I held a bouquet of fresh-cut irises as I walked toward the man I would marry. He was impossibly handsome; I experienced a high degree of meltiness. I joined Wendell and the minister, all three of us beaming with the joy of the occasion. Marsha snapped photos and Aaron videotaped (with sound!).

I would never forget this day.

As I took Wendell's hand, a large, angry insect of some kind —possibly a flying scorpion—emerged from the folds of my iris petals, landed on my face and sank its teeth into my freshly rouged cheek. I screamed and threw my flowers off the cliff, then careened into Aoife, knocking her to the ground. I tripped on the hem of my own dress and was headed for a face-plant into the junipers when Wendell caught me around the waist. Sadly, his heroic effort caused me to blast a deafening polytonal fart, indistinguishable from a Herb Alpert trumpet solo.

The wedding party met this clarion call with embarrassed silence. Wendell helped me regain my footing. I looked over to Aaron, and ascertained that he was still filming.

"Did you get all that?" I asked.

He gave me a thumbs-up.

Perfect. With sound!

I suspected the Universe might try to pull something, but never guessed it would be my finger.

Aoife collected herself, then she and Grandma fussed me back into presentable condition. The ensuing exchange of vows was marred only slightly by the presence of a golfball-sized welt that looked like someone had glued a radish to my face. It showed up just fine in the wedding photos.

I made it through the rest of the ceremony without further humiliation, and we all went inside to feast on lobster rolls, Tater Tots and wedding pie. Yum.

Did I mention that I would never forget this day? No matter how hard I tried.

I was bolting down my third flute of Asti by the cliff when Aoife caught up with me.

"Beautiful ceremony, Champ."

"Are you out of your fucking mind? It was an unmitigated disaster. I was mortified."

"Sure, there's that, yeah." She looked at her feet.

"Thanks for coming, though."

"Look at it this way, little claptrap. Everyone got their money's worth, didn't they."

"Except me."

"You got Wendell, didn't you? He's only gorgeous."

"Yeah. Thanks, Eefs. You're right, of course."

I shouldn't have needed her to tell me my glass was half full. Things could have been far worse. It could have been a big church wedding I farted in the middle of. The Universe would have loved that.

I stepped to the cliff's edge and looked for the remains of my bridal bouquet. When I couldn't spot it I assumed the sea was carrying it and the flesh-eating bugs it might harbor to strange and distant ports. Bon fucking voyage, motherfuckers.

I finished my champagne and looked out across the water. A tall ship in full sail was passing in the distance. Aoife sidled up and put an arm around my waist.

"What's on your mind, Mrs Chapman?"

"Caldwell-Chapman. We hyphenated."

"Cool."

"I was thinking about where this leaves us."

"What about it then?"

We watched the windjammer sail toward the horizon.

"Are we...over?"

She considered it a moment, then said, "Husbands make it complicated, don't they."

"You started it." I was joking. Half-joking, anyway. She gave me an uncertain grin. "And babies, eventually," I said. "They're probably complicated, too."

She looked pained but didn't respond. I took a step back from the cliff, saying, "We need more champagne."

"Wait a second, Champ. There's another thing. A problem."

"What."

"I didn't want to tell you on your wedding day."

"Come on, tell."

"Aaron got a new job. We're moving."

"Where?"

"Manhattan."

"Ooh, Broadway shows and art galleries. Watch out for the Bazookastani cab drivers, they're crazy."

"No, the other Manhattan."

"They have another one?"

"In Kansas."

"OH DEAR GOD NO! NOT KANSAS! AAAAGH!"

"Calm down, little clockspring. 't won't be s'bad, will it."

"May I remind you of MY adventures in Kansas? I barely escaped with my life!"

"I promise not to go water skiing with your cousins."

"I'll never see you again."

"You can visit any time you want."

"If you think I'm setting foot in Kansas—"

"Oh, right."

We stood watching the sea for a moment. The tide was coming in.

"Well," I said, "What's the job?"

"Some sciency thing I don't quite get."

"What does it pay? I'll double it." I could actually do this. Just not for very long.

"You're going to hire Aaron? For what then?"

"To...uhm...to...sharpen my pencils."

"You use pens."

"—and mow my lawn."

"You don't have a lawn."

"I'll get one."

She looked at me without expression.

"Wait," I said, "he could work with Wendell."

A fleeting but typically ill-considered image of us all living together on Mille Jours flickered in my mind. It was very close to my old utopia. Desperation does that to you. It didn't occur to me that Wendell might want a say in who he fished with, but it didn't matter. Aoife shot it down like a duck in a barrel.

"Aaron gets seasick. He barely made it out here for the wedding."

"Well, crap."

"It'll be all right, Champ. Kansas isn't so bad, really." She smiled bravely and I reminded her that she'd never been to Kansas, but guess who had.

Anyway. State Tourism Board, take note. Aoife has just handed you a new ad slogan: "Kansas: It's not so bad, really."

This was as close to a glowing recommendation as I'd ever heard of the place I considered Hell's epicenter. I didn't say it, but I was sure the Universe was behind this somehow, back to stealing away the people I loved.

I went back inside to make sure Wendell hadn't been stolen, too. I found him in the kitchen working on a plate of Tater Tots, talking shop with Edgar and his grandfather, Harold. Edgar, like Harold, was retiring from the fishery. They exchanged industry-specific jargon I was at a loss to decipher. Whale gear? Gunk holes? Hard and soft bottoms? I went to bug Marsha and Clifton. I found them in the great room, admiring my birds and whaling tools. Clifton was drinking scotch, because that's what Clifton does.

"Where'd that come from?" I nodded at his glass.

He opened his coat to show me a silver flask. "I travel fully stocked, when possible."

I was still holding my empty champagne flute. He extended the flask toward it. I made the just-a-wee-dram gesture and he poured me a walloping shot. Already tipsy from the champagne, I nursed that one a good long while lest I do something to further embarrass myself. I doubted I could top the fart heard round the world, but it wasn't a chance I cared to take.

When I found Wendell again he said, "Edgar invited me to fish out here."

My eyes, I mean eye, nearly bugged right out of my head.

"Out here? On the island?"

"I think he meant in the water."

I swatted him on the arm, he swatted me on the bottom which, fortunately, declined to comment.

"We could live here all year?"

"Yeah, if I agree to it."

"You didn't tell him yes?!"

"I said I'd have to think it over."

"You WHAT? What's there to think about? This solves everything!"

"Big job, moving a lobstering outfit."

"I'll do the work! I'll hire people! TELL HIM YES!"

"I dunno, honey. He said if I didn't take it, he'd offer it to someone else. Could be too late." He kicked at the ground, wearing a mischievous grin I failed to register in the moment.

"Aagh! Where is he? I'll tell him."

A short but frantic search turned up Edgar chatting with Wendell's dad. They were standing by the enormous grey rock called The Humpback, which I used to climb up on as a kid. From the top, you could see the whole island laid out before you. Pretty.

"Wendell accepts your offer."

"Ayup, he did."

"He did?"

"I barely got the words out of my mouth."

"When?"

"Yest'd'y. We talked it over." (oh-vah)

I returned to Wendell where I'd left him, near the back porch, grinning maniacally.

I said, "So that's how it's going to be?"

There was another exchange of arm and bottom swatting.

When Edgar ran the wedding guests back over to Jonesport, a handful of the brightest stars dotted the darkening sky. With zero light pollution, they showed themselves early. On moonless nights, it was as good as a fireworks display. I must remember to take up astronomy some day.

With the island mostly to ourselves, Wendell and I spent a few days quote unquote honeymooning (which also entailed hard and soft bottoms, his and mine respectively) before we returned to our jobs. One morning over scrambled eggs and home fries, I told him of Aoife and Aaron's looming departure for the land of exploding grain elevators.

"I might take a little trip down to Wiscasset to say goodbye."

"Sure."

"At my house."

"Ayuh."

"In my bed, specifically."

His eyebrows went up but he didn't say anything.

"Just for a couple of days, or until we sprain our tongues."

"Just Aoife, right? Not Aaron."

"Don't be silly, Wendell. I'm a married woman. I don't sleep with other men."

"Just women."

"Just Aoife."

It was admittedly odd that I'd never had a sexual relationship with a girl other than Aoife. If I was bisexual, as I professed to be, I wasn't very good at it. There were times when Wendell and I were in a public place and I would elbow him and say, "Whoa, look at the tits on her. If she goes jogging she'll beat herself senseless." Or words to that effect. I didn't lust after such women, I just acknowledged their attractiveness.

I made sense of all this by telling myself it was different with Aoife because she was my first love, even though that wasn't strictly, or at all, true. It was one of the many harmless (I hoped) lies I told myself in order to maintain my sanity in the half-doomed, half-charmed life I somehow continued to live.

I offered to help Wendell relocate all his lobstering stuff but he said I should stay on the island and finish my book. It was the beginning of the season. With help from his grandpa and Edgar, Wendell moved 800 traps from Rockland to the waters around Mille Jours in just a few days.

Edgar went with him to set the first few loads of sixty traps so Wendell could meet the other fishermen in the area and not be pegged as an interloper. Edgar explained to the other guys out there that Wendell would be taking over the territory he was

retiring from, so his presence would not increase the pressure on the lobster population. Failure to go through these formalities would likely have resulted in a lot of missing traps, so, yes, even lobstering was more complicated than I thought.

Edgar was kind enough to fish with Wendell for a few weeks so he could learn some good spots to set his traps, and avoid the underwater ledges that liked to eat boats. I would also learn about the ledges, but too late, and the hard way.

In August I went to Wiscasset to say goodbye to Aoife. On our last day together I didn't make a scene, as I was wont to do, but still cried all the way back to Jonesport. I shouldn't have let her departure bother me so much, but it did.

I kept my circle of friends very small, and had no female friends to speak of. This was a holdover from the days when I wanted only to be left alone, and avoided befriending people out of concern for their safety.

Before Aoife and Aaron left for the wasteland of Kansas, I didn't think much about what I now realize was an unconventional social sphere for a twenty-five year old woman: Wendell, his grandparents, Edgar and, um...yeah. William was kind of like a friend, so that was five. I guess that wasn't too strange, except that with Aoife gone my only female friend was Wendell's sixty-seven year old grandmother. I couldn't talk to her about some of the things I could discuss with Aoife (like errant penises, for example), but she knew all about the delivery, care

and feeding of babies, so I figured we'd get along just fine.

I eventually produced a complete draft of *All Due Respect* and had Wendell take me to the main because I still didn't have a typewriter. I stupidly left Mom's Underwood in Wiscasset, which may not have been so stupid after all because lugging fifty-pound typewriters up and down the Maine coast was not my idea of a good time. I needed one just for the island.

Unbeknownst to me, electric typewriters were now fashionable in the seaside town of Jonesport, and a manual one couldn't be had for love nor money.

I didn't actually offer any love, just money.

Just so we're clear on that.

A few phone calls tracked down a used one in good condition but I had to drive all the way down to Ellsworth to get it. That sort of inconvenience was a fundamental aspect of island living, borne by most islanders with a certain amount of pride. Overcoming such obstacles made me feel like I was participating in the life plan I'd chosen rather than being swept along by one thrust upon me by forces outside my control. That was how living on the main made me feel.

It was late fall when I returned to Jonesport to mail *All Due Respect* to William. I gave him a call to let him know it was finished, and that I was still alive.

"Phil Hackett wants to revisit your first two manuscripts, *Acadia Jennings* and *Five Nautical Miles*."

"What on earth for?"

"With *Mother of Pearl*'s success, there is now enough interest to justify a printing."

"Right. My adoring fans need to know how much I used to suck at this."

"I wouldn't say either of them sucks, per se."

"Your rejection letters suggested otherwise."

"You've grown as a writer, Bonnie-Kate. We're confident you can polish these."

"That makes one of us."

"Shall I send my notes?"

"Sure, why not. Send more cigars, too. I'm almost out."

I had taken up the habit of rewarding myself with a Cuban on completion of each chapter. I knew it was a slippery slope, but a Cuban wasn't just a smoke, it was a luxury.

With rewrites of *Acadia*, *5NM* and *All Due Respect* on the horizon, I faced a giant stack of writerly work in my near future. While waiting for all these projects to arrive in the mail, I went lobstering with Wendell, something I always wanted to try.

"You don't have to, hon. I'm ok working alone."

"I know I don't have to. I want to. If you can stand being around me that many hours a day."

"Welcome aboard, sailor."

"It's only for a few weeks, or until I decide to go over and get the mail."

She who controls the arrival of the mail controls no less than her own destiny.

In addition to lobstering, there was lumberjacking to be done. Our plan was to winter-over on Mille Jours. I thought Wendell should experience the raw-boned privation of an island winter, and he agreed. Pioneer Woman would see him through it, she was an old hand at privation.

I awoke at 4:30am on a cold November morning for my first day as Wendell's sternman. My job would be to measure the lobsters, peg their claws, and put a fresh bag of bait in the traps. The latter of those tasks was accomplished with a tool called a bait iron, which resembled a freakishly overgrown icepick, fifteen inches long and set into a wooden handle.

On first introduction to this cruel-looking instrument, I wondered in what way I would ultimately find myself impaled on it, for that would surely happen. I hoped it would pierce a fleshy part of me and not a vital-organy part.

There was only one element of the job I didn't care for: crabs. Especially the little green ones who were just dickheads and would bite you for no discernible reason. I guess that's why they were called crabs and not something more agreeable, like fluffmuffins, or ookie-pookies, or just about anything besides crabs, really.

Working alongside Wendell on the high seas fulfilled a maritime need in me, the seafaring legacy thing. It also renewed

my interest in boating. Between pegging lobsters and stuffing bait into bags, I studied Wendell at the helm the same way I used to watch Edgar navigate up and down the bay. At the end of the day I asked if I could try driving us back from Jonesport where we'd gone to sell the catch.

The sea was a little choppy, and Wendell hesitated to put our lives in my hands. I threatened to mutiny and turn the boat over to the ruthless and bloodthirsty Lady Jane. He reluctantly gave me the wheel.

A problem was immediately evident: I was too short to see out the front windows. Althea Rose was clearly designed to be operated by a tall person, not a child.

Making up in resourcefulness what I lacked in stature, I stood on an empty bait box and gained enough elevation to see where I was going. I had one close call as we passed an uninhabited island called Sloane's Fall, so called after a guy named Sloane, who fell. Off the island, I mean. What a dumb-ass.

I was cruising along, following the shoreline, doing seventeen knots in sixty feet of water when Wendell said, "Hard a-port there, Cap'n Caldwell." I was technically Cap'n Caldwell-Chapman, but I knew who he meant.

I hung a sharp left—that's what port means—but couldn't see the obstacle I was supposedly avoiding. Wendell explained.

"Shoals up ahead, just underwater. Watch your compass, run due east until the nav marker lines up with the boathouse on

Tolliver's, then back to the sou'east."

This, I learned, was called triangulation, handy for getting around. I also learned running into the rocks in question would be the last thing a careless captain ever did. The shoals formed an underwater ridge that dropped off into ten-fifteen fathoms on each side. At low tide the rocks lurked unseen just a foot or two below the surface, waiting to eat a lobster boat for breakfast.

I worked with Wendell until late December when the lobsters tapered off, then I went to Jonesport and got the mail. In addition to the three manuscripts William sent, there was a note requesting that I return to Wiscasset for the redrafting of *All Due Respect*. He assigned top priority to the new book, saying he had a good feeling about this one. I was about to protest at being removed from the island again, then I opened my bank statement.

My mother had once said to me, "We're not millionaires."

We weren't, at the time. Funny how things change.

"Wendell! I have to go back to Wiscasset for a while."

"Oh?" he looked disappointed.

"Yeah, writer stuff. I've kept William waiting too long already."

"How long?"

"Couple of months, most likely."

"So no island winter?"

"I guess not. Maybe next year."

"Curses. Foiled again."

"It's ok, winters out here are kind of apocalyptic anyway."

He thought I was kidding.

The trouble with Mille Jours winters was simple: Wind. It went like this. If you didn't remove your aluminum storm doors by November first, you would never see them again. After the winter winds, if you were lucky enough to find them at all, your storm doors would be deep in the woods where the gale-force winds deposited them after ripping them off your house. They would be crumpled like discarded Miller Lite cans, so there wasn't much point in looking for them.

Storm windows stood a better chance of survival, but only because the wise islander bolted the storm shutters before the winds picked up. Failure to do so was folly of the highest order.

When I was a child, the island winds frightened me, even in summer. I was five years old, hiking with my Grampa when I came upon a squared-off block of marble in the woods above our cabin. It was the size of a steamer trunk and looked very much out of place.

"What's this for?" I asked. It was too big for a grave marker.

"Long time ago there was a house up here." He pointed out the other blocks that made up the foundation. They'd been overtaken by moss and grey lichens.

"Where'd it go? Did it fall down?"

"Blew right off the cliff in a winter storm. That must have

been sixty-seventy years ago."

I pictured an old-timey family with handlebar mustaches and suspenders (even the wife and children) sitting down to their sawdust-based supper and having their whole house lift off like an Apollo lander, only to be thrown into the sea and miserably drowned.

"What happened to the people? Did they get drownded?"

Grampa sensed rising distress in my voice. "Don't you worry, dear. They weren't home when it happened."

"But did their house float away?" Here I pictured the intact dwelling catching a sou'wester and sailing off to some strange land where the people didn't speak American.

"No, it broke up on the rocks. Most of it drifted away."

I clutched at myself in terror. From that day forward the sound of a stiff breeze at night found me holding onto my mattress for dear life. If our cabin were blown off the cliff, I reasoned, I could use it as a life raft and not end up on the hostile shores of Bazookastan.

Much later I learned that my outhouse was built with lumber salvaged from the house that blew off the cliff. It was a fine thing to poop in a place with some history behind it. What better time to reflect on how fleeting and inconsequential our lives could be.

Or you could think about how you shouldn't have eaten all those hot peppers. I did that sometimes, too.

The other downside of a Mille Jours winter was also wind-

related. Snowfall transformed our island into a wintry paradise of unrivaled beauty. Until the wind made snowdrifts.

The lay of the land created the most favorable snowdrift conditions on my end of the island, far from the dock and summer homes. The drifts sometimes resembled snow sculptures ten or twelve feet high, with exquisite arcs and crests finessed by the wind into fortress-like barriers. That's all fine and dandy until you need to go somewhere, even if it was just to visit Edgar, and you were confronted with an El Capitan of snow. An avalanche was possible, but to the best of my knowledge it had never happened. Or maybe there just weren't any survivors left to tell the tale.

Proximity to such perils was the price we paid for living in our winter wonderland.

Winter in Wiscasset was a bird of a totally different feather. The roads were paved, plowed and salted. Venturing out did not entail such a high risk of death.

What fun is that?

Wendell and I were long gone from the island before the winds turned vicious that year. My displeasure at being called away from Mille Jours faded as soon as William and I put our heads together on *All Due Respect*. It went to the printers in late February. Pre-orders were shockingly good.

Wendell and I celebrated the completion of my second (actually fourth) novel with a steak dinner at which we spared no

expense. Filet mignons, baby asparagus with wild Maine blackberry vinaigrette, appetizers I couldn't pronounce, with caviar and truffles, all the stuff normally reserved for fancy people in France.

The preparation of steaks another area of marital harmony for us. We felt anything beyond medium rare was a travesty, a crime against cows. Picture me making an ogre face at the very idea! Come on, man, it's a dead cow. Of course there's blood. That's the whole point!

This unreasonable tirade has been brought to you by the lady who, at twenty-five, still put ketchup on hotdogs. If it's any consolation, I didn't have any strong opinions about politics.

In the running tally of our two homes' merits, the availability of a good steakhouse was a point in Wiscasset's favor. As it turned out, so was the availability of a doctor.

Wendell and I decided it was as good a time as any to start producing some babies, and since I was on the main anyway, I made an appointment for a physical. I didn't normally do that because I got checked out by doctors every time I lost a body part, and I thought that was often enough. Still, I thought it best to make sure I was in good condition for whelping before we got started.

My doctor was Gladys Lissenbee, whom I chose based solely on her excellent name. It sounded like scolding a yellowjacket.

Dr Lissenbee declared me fit for childbirth and said she

would bee[*] in touch when she had the results of my blood and urine tests. That took about a week, during which Wendell and I got right to work on the baby project.

We were cozied in with warm blankets and Pop Tarts, watching *Goldfinger*, when Dr Lissenbee called.

"Bonnie-Kate? I have your test results."

My first thought was *I'm dying of something*. "Yes? Is there a problem?"

"No, not at all. You're in excellent health, and it's a good thing."

"Why?"

"You're pregnant."

"No. Fuckin'. Way."

"Yes, Bonnie-Kate. Fuckin' way."

Well. That first part was easy. And really fun.

One of my most fundamental rules for navigating life was that everything is more complicated than it appears. This had been proven out, time and time again. I wondered how that rule would manifest itself with regard to the tiny person now living rent-free inside my body. There was probably more to it than just blowing up like a pan of Jiffy Pop and splurting out a child, slick as a wedding fart.

I looked down at my belly and whispered, "Good afternoon, Mr Bond. Welcome to my secret underground uterus. Do make

[****]See what I did there?

yourself at home."

And then, louder, "Wendell! We're knocked up!"

I was going to have a family again, even if it killed me.

Sometimes You Feel Like a Nut

With *All Due Respect* finally turned loose on an unsuspecting public, William continued to supply me with curated reviews. He sent me the ones with words like *weaves her magic, morally complex, rich and vibrant, audacious, unconventional* and *triumphant*, while shielding me from *Caldwell still has her head up her ass*, which someone somewhere probably said. My ego was not all that fragile, but thanks, William.

Wendell and I were in Wiscasset for a while, the home base to which I would return between public appearances to promote the new novel. I remained something of an unwilling participant in the writing of my stories; the tales simply demanded they be told and I didn't have much say in the matter. Imagine, if you will, how little patience I had for interviews and book promotions. Travel, in and of itself, remained unnerving. Without Wendell to keep me company and provide moral support, I would have been up a tree without a paddle. Or even a boat. Or a kite, whatever you take up into a tree. I don't know, I never climb any trees, ok?

Book tours seemed to take me farther afield with each successive trip. Malcom and Dillon had a guy to schedule the stops, which I agreed to with one stipulation: I would not under

any circumstances set foot in Kansas, ever again. Way too risky.

"What about Kansas City?" Phil Hackett was looking over my proposed itinerary.

"That would only be fatal. Do you want me dead?"

"It's in Missouri, not Kansas."

"What the fuck?"

"There's one in Kansas, too, but the Missouri one is bigger."

"Let me get this straight. The largest city in Kansas is actually in Missouri? Is that what you're telling me?"

"Not exactly, but close enough."

I later confirmed it with the World Almanac and Book of Facts. See how fucked up Kansas is? It couldn't even persuade its own most populous city to live there.

"All right. I'll do a signing in Kansas City, but only the Missouri one."

I was hesitant, but thought I might arrange to meet Aoife there.

Before we left Wiscasset, I booked a room at the Hyatt Regency in Kansas City MISSOURI and called Aoife in Manhattan.

"Bonnie-Kate! How's-a-going then?"

"I'm in Kansas City June 16th and 17th. I booked us a room. Meet me there?"

"I'll make that happen."

She was working at another animal rescue but was due for a

little vacation. Malcom and Dillon had reserved a room at the Ramada for me and Wendell, who was very understanding about my need of some Aoife-time. The question of a threesome never arose. Wendell was sympathetic to Aaron's wish to not have other men intercoursing his own personal wife and was of a similar mind. Aaron would reciprocate by not intercoursing me.

When I arrived at the Hyatt I found both Aoife and Aaron occupying our little love nest.

"Um…Aaron? Hi?"

"Don't worry, Bonnie-Kate," he said, wrapping me up in a quick hug. "I'm out of here. Where's your better half?"

"Airport Ramada."

"Ok if we get 'faced and hit the titty bars?"

I glanced down at my little 'skeeter bites. "I think he'd like that."

Between my two scheduled book signings, Aoife and I luxuriated in a king-size bed and ordered fancy snacks from room service. She planted sweet little kisses on my expanding belly, saying, "What's the craic, wee lad? 'tis your own Auntie Aoife, come to call."

"It might be a girl."

"I don't think so, little creamed-corn. I have a sense about these things."

"Cabbage. Little cabbage."

"Sure, that's what I said." She wiggled a fingertip in my navel.

"That's a boy, no question."

How could anyone not love Aoife?

After leaving Kansas City, the tour took us as far west as California, where the people were weird but they had a pretty good ocean. In San Francisco Wendell and I visited Chinatown, where the other tourists took me for a local. We bought and consumed an entire roast chicken we saw in a shop window. A side-trip to Haight-Ashbury made me want to do acid again but it wouldn't be good for the little person in my belly, so we didn't.

I had an interview on PBS in Los Angeles, a whole new audience to embarrass myself in front of, but I somehow managed not to. After the interview we spent a day in Hollywood wandering around and hoping to see a movie star, but we couldn't find any. I think they only came out at night. A few people looked at Wendell like he might be one, but he didn't sign any autographs.

A little woman with blue hair came up to me on Rodeo Drive (which they pronounce *ro-DAY-oh* even though it's obviously *RO-dee-oh*) and said, "You're that writer from the TV! I thought you'd be taller."

"Er, ok."

"Murray! Come over here! I found a famous writer!"

Murray wore black knee socks and Bermuda shorts. He carried a Polaroid Instamatic and asked Wendell if he would take a picture of me standing between him and his wife. We obliged.

The ensuing conversation revealed that they were the Snyders of Flagstaff, Arizona, and it was their third trip to Hollywood. They once met Lloyd Bridges and he was 'a real nice fella.' I offered to sign a copy of *All Due Respect* for them. Mrs Snyder said, "What's that?"

"My book. The new one." For some reason I thought she might have a copy in her enormous shopping bag of a purse.

"Oh, sorry, I haven't read it." Mildly embarrassed, she added, "Yet."

"*Mother of Pearl*?"

That didn't ring any bells either.

We'd passed a bookstore a couple of blocks back. It was a strange feeling to see my own work on display in a shop window on the whole other side of the country, so it stuck with me. I herded the Snyders down there to buy them a copy of *All Due Respect* so they could ask me to sign it.

When we brought it to the cashier, he said, "Oh, you'll love this. She's brilliant."

I said, "Do you have her other one? I didn't see it on the shelf."

"It's currently out of stock but should be in this week. She's very popular at the moment. Shall I hold one for you?"

"That won't be necessary. I have a copy at home."

He flipped the book over to get the price off the back.

He looked at the author photo.

He looked at me, then at the Snyders, who were now giggling like schoolchildren. I officially adored them.

The cashier looked back at my picture. You'd think a guy working in a shop on Rodeo Drive would be hard to flummox with one's celebrity, so I was especially pleased at having done so. He gaped for a moment before saying, "Miss C-Caldwell?"

"The same. Her is I." Right down to my fucked-up nose.

He placed the book in a bag and handed it back. "This one's on us."

"No, really." I brandished an American Express card.

"You're money is no good here. I insist."

"That's kind of you."

On the sidewalk out front, I gave the book to Mrs Snyder who looked over the jacket design and said, "It's not dirty, is it? Books nowadays are always so dirty."

"No, ma'am. Nothing graphic in this one." Good thing they were out of *Mother of Pearl.*

I waited for her to ask for my autograph, but it didn't occur to her.

"Would you like me to sign that for you?"

"Oh, yes, would you?"

"I'd be delighted."

"Make it out to Ernestine and Murray Snyder. Snyder with a Y."

To my dear friends, Ernestine and Murray Snyder. All my love,

Bonnie-Kate Caldwell.

I left the Snyders of Flagstaff, Arizona with a signed first edition of my book that might bring as much as two dollars at their next garage sale.

Watching them walk back down Rodeo Drive, Wendell chuckled, saying, "What was that all about?"

"Not about the book. I don't think they'll even read it."

"Then?"

"I gave them a story of their own. One they can tell when they get home. I hope they get some miles out of it."

Just between you and me, though, this was far from a selfless act. I was ecstatic over being recognized as a famous person on Rodeo Drive. Casting couch wannabe starlets, take note: I was more famous than you and I didn't have to fuck anyone or suck a single dick. Although I might have, if it came to that. So, you know, I'm not judging. Just saying.

When we finally got back to Wiscasset I called Phil Hackett to let him know I was home and would soon start work on another draft of *Acadia Jennings Has Lost Her Mind*.

He said, "Are you sitting down?"

"OH DEAR GOD WHO DIED?"

"Easy, Bonnie-Kate, no one died."

"Then why in the twenty-four carat fuck are you trying to give me a heart attack?!"

"Bonnie-Kate, listen to me. It's good news. Hollywood is

interested in *All Due Respect*."

"Oh. I just got back from there and they didn't say anything."

"..."

"Did you know I'm famous out there? I posed for pictures and signed autographs. Autograph, I mean."

"I'm happy for you, really." His tone said *why must I suffer this fool?*

He waited for me to go on, but I was all done being smug. Smugging. That should be a verb. Technically a gerund, but I don't mean to get all schoolmarmy on you.

"May I finish?" His impatience was thinly disguised. I have that effect on people, especially when they're being needlessly serious and I won't reciprocate.

"Yup, go ahead. Whatcha got?"

"MGM and Paramount are in a bidding war for the rights to your screenplay."

"Oh yeah? What's the last bid?"

He said a big number. It's a good thing I was sitting down.

When it became clear my fortunes were soon to be vastly multiplied—barring some sort of global apocalypse which, ok, with my luck could easily happen—I decided to go buy some stuff. That's what you do when you have tons of money, the Universe's objections notwithstanding.

Little did I know, that selfsame Universe was lying in wait, eager to foist another tragedy upon me: the gruesome demise of

my little red Volkswagen.

I left Wendell at home watching a football game and went off on a reckless spree, in the throes of which I disbursed almost *FIFTY DOLLARS*. In less than two hours I acquired a treasure trove of priceless artifacts.

For Wendell, I bought a mako shark's jaws mounted on a varnished board, a steal at $10. I got myself a pirate hat (Lady Jane wanted that), a Patsy Montana record (1940s Western Swing, with yodeling!), a movie poster from *Beach Blanket Bingo* (Annette Funicello's Vargas-girl boobies made me think of Aoife), and a purple beanbag chair I bought because it was on sale and purple.

My last stop was at Tjorgensen's Pizzeria—because no one knows pizza like Scandinavians, right?—to get a large thin-crust pepperoni and mushroom to bring home for dinner.

It pains me to admit this, but if am to be entirely honest, Maine pizza mostly sucks. It's not that you can't get a good pizza in Maine, it's just that you mostly do not. Having consumed pies in New York and Chicago, the pizza capitals of America (New Jersey also tries to claim this, but they're grasping at straws, desperate to have just one thing about their state that doesn't completely suck), I can speak with some authority on the matter. Fortunately, I am an adherent of the old adage that says bad pizza is like a bad blowjob: it's still pretty good. Or so I am told. So there you have it: my conclusion, rendered through

unassailable logic, is that Maine pizza pretty much sucks, and is pretty good.

This is known as Caldwell's Paradox, which I just thought of, this very moment.

Tjorgensen's parking lot was full (all three spaces) so I parked across the street beside a tall red brick building. When I say 'tall' I mean by Maine standards, not New York City standards. It was three stories and housed an insurance company and a historical society or something. I forget.

While I waited for my pizza I entertained myself by watching the brick building fall down. Part of it, anyway.

And where did the Universe deposit an avalanche of falling masonry? Why, on my beloved Beetle, of course.

Telling the pizza man I would be right back, I ran (sort of) out there to assess the damage. What I saw was not at all encouraging. Volkswagen vs Tons of Bricks was hardly a fair fight.

The bricks had flattened the trunk to the thickness of a large thin-crust pepperoni pizza (with mushrooms). The part in back with the motor in it was also crushed, but more like a thick-crust deep dish Chicago-style pizza. The middle part—where the people go—escaped the worst of the flattening and therefore did not resemble any kind of pizza. It was only battered beyond recognition. The windows were shattered. I could see my newly purchased artifacts inside, and there were beans everywhere.

This was where being really small paid off. I was able to squiggle through the broken windshield to try and get my stuff back. A passerby, had one come upon me, would have seen half a woman protruding through the shattered glass and assumed, not unreasonably, that I had been summarily bisected. That's what the cops did.

I had retrieved my Patsy Montana album and Wendell's shark jaws. I was going back in for Lady Jane's pirate hat when Wiscasset's Finest arrived. The first one on the scene, Officer Dunbar, addressed my bottom where it stuck out of the broken windshield.

"Hello? Can you hear me?" I heard static crackling on his radio.

Now, this would have been the perfect time for a fart. How often in life does someone speak directly to your ass and expect a reply? But I came up empty. Any other time I could have summoned up a real foghorn, but now that I needed one—nothing. Silence.

"Yeah, I hear you, I'm ok."

He got on his radio and called for an ambulance.

"I don't need that! I'm fine!" I would have been more fine if I could reach my freakin' pirate hat, but it lay just beyond my grasp.

"Can you move?" asked Officer Dunbar.

This guy wasn't going to stop bugging me until I showed him

I was intact. I extricated myself once more from the wreckage.

"See? I'm fine."

"Is anyone else in the car?"

"No, just me."

"What happened to your leg?"

"Yeah, that got torn off a couple of minutes ago when the building fell down. Fortunately, I never go anywhere without my lucky prosthesis."

"..."

"Ok, sorry. Look, I'm not hurt. Can I just get the rest of my stuff now?"

"Sorry, Ma'am, I can't let you do that. It's too dangerous."

"But...but—"

"I need you to step back now. There could be more falling debris."

"How am I supposed to get home without my pirate hat?" My owl-damaged eye made the question more incredulous than I intended, but the cop was unfazed.

"You'll manage. I get home without mine all the time."

Touché, Officer Dunbar.

I stomped, fuming, back across the rain-damp street to get my pizza and call Wendell for a ride. While I waited for him I went to talk to the cop again.

"How do I get what's left of my car back?"

"Cleanup's going to take a while. We'll have it towed to the

town lot."

Wendell got there before they closed off the street. I was waiting at Tjorgensen's with our supper still nice and hot.

"Hi honey. Did you see my car?"

"It doesn't look too special. You sure you're ok?"

"Yep. I was in here when it happened. I got to watch."

"I'm just glad you weren't out there."

I exhibited courage in the face of the Universe's latest outrage, but the destruction of my Bug disheartened me more than I let on. It wasn't just a car, it was an extension of me. I told Wendell it was one of the Universe's near-misses, then changed the subject.

"Oh, hey, I got you a dead shark's face." I withdrew the mounted jaws from beneath our table and set them on the pizza box.

Wendell raised an eyebrow. "We're gonna need a bigger boat."

"It's got lifeless eyes, like a doll's eye." It didn't actually have any eyes.

"Farewell and adieu to you fair Spanish ladies," sang Wendell in a salty growl.

"Farewell and adieu, you ladies of Spain," I finished in my screechy croak.

That was enough *Jaws* for the time being. We traded lines from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* sometimes, too.

Because we were a couple of complete dorks, that's why. You had to ask?

I looked across the road to where Officer Dunbar was stringing up yellow CAUTION tape, thereby placing yet another obstacle between me and my pirate hat. Like the loss of my car wasn't misfortune enough for one Sunday afternoon.

Wendell knew all about motors and stuff so I asked him if he could fix my flattened Bug.

"Only by replacing every single part with an exact replica."

"Oh." I stared at the ruins of my car as if waiting for its earthly remains to ascend into automotive heaven. "Time to go car shopping, I guess."

"Ayuh."

"Well, lets go home and feast on this pizza. You're missing your football thing."

"Let's eat here. The Patriots are getting their asses kicked."

I pictured British Redcoats sneaking up behind men in tri-corner hats and planting a boot in their bottoms.

"By who?" I asked, feigning interest in (and comprehension of) The Great American pastime, football.

"Guess," said Wendell, knowing I only pretended to care, and didn't know the names of any teams.

"The…um…Wolfs?"

"Nope."

"The Sharks?"

"Uh uh."

"The Kitties?"

"Think really big kitties."

"Tigers, Ocelots, Panthers, Lynxes, Jaguars, Pumas, Lions?"

"Correct! I award you seventy-five million points."

"Which was it?"

"Does it matter?"

"Nope." I'm pretty sure it was the Oklahoma Ocelots.

I got us a couple of sodas and we feasted on Scandinavian Maine pizza that was appalling and delicious.

Insurance ponied up $800 for my totaled Bug. I went to visit her carcass at the salvage yard. I paid a greasy man with a cutting torch to open her up so I could get back my pirate hat and Annette Funicello's thunder-tits which were rolled up in the back seat. I even recovered my ruptured beanbag chair that only needed a few stitches and some new beans.

Tuesday morning was warm and sunny. Fierce mild, Aoife would say. Wendell was putting new shingles on the back porch — he was handy like that—so I borrowed his pickup and went to look for a new car.

The salesman recognized me and guessed correctly that I had prodigious sums at my disposal. He tried to make me buy a Porsche, a BMW, and a Jaguar, in that order. I liked the Jaguar best, but it looked too much like a penis. Oh, wait—maybe that's why I liked it.

If my car was a penis, though, I would be sitting in the balls when I drove it. I certainly wasn't going to pay $25,000 for a car that made me feel like a testicle when I could get an Almond Joy for thirty-five cents. I needed a car that would make me feel good when I drove it. Bear with me here.

You know those Playskool (or Fisher-Price) things where you push it like a lawnmower and the little colored balls go jumping around like popcorn? That's how I felt when I was driving my Beetle. Happy and bouncy like one of those popping colored balls, especially on speed bumps or train tracks. Taking that into account, I realized whether I drove a VW Bug or a super-fancy penis shaped Jaguar, I would still feel like a ball. I went home without a new car that day.

"Wendell! I can't find a good car."

He handed me a catalog full of cars and trucks. "Take a look in there, maybe spot something you like."

It didn't take long to find the one I wanted: a 1973 Oscar Mayer Wienermobile.

Wendell said, "You're nuts."

"No, that's what I'm trying to avoid."

Sadly, when I went to test drive it I found that the Weinermobile was a lot bigger than it looked in the picture. It was clearly more wiener than I could handle. I also realized that driving a Weinermobile would make me feel like the stuff that goes into hotdogs, like opossum snouts, raccoon sphincters and

— you guessed it—pig balls. I had to pass on the Weinermobile.

After a few more fruitless test drives (Opel Manta, Citroen Duck, and VW Thing), I fell in love with a pastel pink 1963 Nash Metropolitan. Not only was this car just so *me*, it was like driving a pack of Dubble Bubble. How fucking cool was that? I bought it on the spot. Paid cash.

I realized too late that while bubblegum usually came in sticks or little blocks, it also came in, what else, balls.

God. Dammit.

Such are the dilemmae with which I must daily contend. (That's probably not the plural of dilemma, I don't care.)

That spring I got a call from Dean Peterson of Wolcroft College, who wanted me to deliver the upcoming commencement address. I respectfully declined.

He offered a sum of money I later calculated to be the equivalent of $1000 per minute. Sorry, still not interested. Not only was *All Due Respect* still on the bestseller lists, Malcom and Dillon had negotiated with MGM for the screenplay on my behalf and gotten us an insane amount of money. Next time Aoife called to ask what I would get her if I had a million dollars, I could say, "a million dollars" and mean it. I'd like to see the look on her face when she got that traveler's check.

But I digress.

Dean Peterson went on about how the graduates would be so delighted to hear from me, one of their own, how greatly they had

sacrificed to meet the demands of a rigorous curriculum, yada, yada, blah.

I let him talk me into it.

Fool.

I wrote that goddamn speech six times with the same result: "This is a giant load of horseshit, and they'll know it."

As graduation day drew nearer, my panic escalated accordingly until I hit on a solution that was sure to please everyone, especially me. With the possible exception of the people paying for it.

Wendell had returned to Mille Jours to ready his traps for the coming season, so I drove to Renfield alone in my bubblegum car that I named Poppy. I got into town early so I stopped in at Marty's Wheelhouse for a beer. He remembered me but, not being much of a reader, wasn't aware that I was accidentally famous now. That suited me just fine. I asked about Creatures of Havoc and he said they'd gone to Nashville to make records.

I also stopped by the Redbird Diner for a chili dog on the off-chance my speech might need to be punctuated with a rousing fart. I owed it to my alma mater to be prepared for such an eventuality, however remote.

When the time came for me to speak, I jammed my pirate hat on my head and Lady Jane peg-legged her way to the lectern. I'd worn my black glass eye for the occasion. Adjusting the mike, I coaxed an ear-splitting squeal of feedback from the PA system,

thus setting the proper tone for what was to follow, which I made up as I went along.

"Avast! ye lubbers, or I'll keelhaul every man-jack of ye."

I went on about my days as a young up-and-coming pirate, studying Navigation 101 and Intro to Plundering at this very institution. I expounded on the many ways Wolcroft College had prepared me for my murderous campaigns against Queen Isabella's fleet upon the Spanish Main, the glory and untold wealth seized from her majesty's greedy clutches by me and my barbarous crew of ne'er-do-wells.

When I got to the end, I finished with strong words of encouragement.

"Hell will one day call your name, and when it does, you're fucked. Until then, I urge you to loot and pillage on the high seas, give no quarter, and be a pox on humanity. Yar."

The graduating class greeted my speech with hoots, hollers, and wild applause. Faculty, administration and parents did not.

After I left the stage Professor Dave approached me to say it was the best commencement address ever given at Wolcroft. I also ran into Dean Peterson who smiled broadly, shook my hand and said, "We are not paying you for that."

"Aye, keep your filthy doubloons. The speech was its own reward, ye wretched slumgullion[*]."

When I turned the address over to Lady Jane, I had one goal

[****]I think that's a kind of stew.

in mind, and she achieved it effortlessly, in her own piratical idiom: I would never be asked to do another commencement speech.

I soon joined Wendell on Mille Jours, where we discussed baby names. I suggested Charles, for a boy. An homage to my dear departed father, of course.

"I dunno, hon. Other kids might call him Charlie Chapman."

I pictured our baby with a bowler hat and a cane, sporting a little Hitler mustache. "Yeah, you're right. Not so good."

"What about Harold, after my grandfather."

"Has anyone under the age of sixty ever been named Harold?"

"Prob'ly not."

"Wendell junior?"

"It feels a little, I don't know, self-indulgent?"

"I see your point. How about Bradley?"

"After who?"

"No one that I know of."

"Bradley, huh? Bradley Caldwell-Chapman. It has a ring, doesn't it."

"Let's test drive it." I said.

Wendell looked at me like he knew exactly how many vaginas I had.

"Like this," I said, and put on a TV announcer voice: "This is Bradley Caldwell-Chapman reporting live from the Pentagon for

ABC News."

Wendell tried one. "Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, this is your pilot, Bradley Caldwell-Chapman. Welcome aboard Pan Am flight 739 to Sioux Falls."

"Coming soon to a theater near you: The Big Unpleasant Monster That Wrecked Up Everything, starring Raquel Welch and Bradley Caldwell-Chapman."

"And Brad Caldwell-Chapman hits his fourth grand-slam of the game! The Red Sox win!"

Then we sat grinning at each other like a couple of idiots. I hoped to Jaysus H. Christ our child would not be as much of a dork as we were.

On days when the weather was nice, I helped Wendell work on his traps, which he had brought ashore at the end of the last season. I figured the fresh air would be good for me and the baby who may or not have been Bradley. We'd settled on Hannah for a girl. I had suggested Aoife, but dismissed it on the grounds that no one can pronounce it.

When it was too cold out to do trap work, Wendell and I puttered around the cabin. I worked on *Acadia Jennings* and he mounted his new shark face above the nautical display on the south end of the great room. It belonged there.

He also used my carving knife to whittle a schooner from red cedar. He gave it three masts and attached curls of birchbark for the sails. I put it in an honored spot on the shelf of seabirds. My

four bears would have been proud to sail on such a fine vessel.

In between everything else, we worked at lumberjacking so we wouldn't have to worry about it in the winter. The baby was due in October so we planned on spending September through New Years in Wiscasset before returning to our island home. Wendell still wanted to experience a Mille Jours winter.

Edgar was going off-island for two weeks, so we had him to supper one night before he left. I made Reubens and Jeno's Pizza Rolls, which is a way better combination than it sounds like.

"When's your little one expected?" said Edgar, dipping a pizza roll in marinara (My mom's recipe, by way of Betty Crocker).

"Right about Halloween."

"Spooky."

"I'll be the first woman ever to give birth while wearing a pirate costume."

That wasn't even remotely true, but I didn't think anyone could prove it, so.

Ever the oracle of island lore, Edgar said, "The last child delivered on Mille Jours was born to a Miss Charlotte Petty, about the time of the Civil War. Single mother, it was quite a scandal at the time."

Wendell suggested I make island history by delivering a twentieth century baby there.

"Fuck that, honey. I want my epidural." Pioneer Woman be

damned, this kid wasn't going anywhere until I got my shot.

Our cabin on the cliff became a veritable fount of joy and love that summer. If I wasn't so busy being overjoyed, I might have realized life was blissful and idyllic.

I didn't notice that, but the fucking Universe did.

If you are not in need of a good cry, you should stop reading this now.

The Anvil Falls

Wendell and I lived at the south end of Mille Jours on the island's only mountain, called Topgallant[*]. My four bears built our cabin a little over halfway to the top, a hundred yards down from where the house blew off the mountain into the sea.

People who live in states with mountains of the Rocky, Smoky, Adirondack, etc, varieties are welcome to scoff at me for calling Topgallant a mountain. In those places it would hardly qualify as a foothill. Topgallant is only four hundred feet tall. I believe the determining factor in its mountainhood is its proximity to the zero-elevation sea.

Whether you called it a mountain or not, Topgallant served us well, providing not only panoramic vistas but a seemingly inexhaustible supply of white spruces, our primary source of firewood. A few oaks and maples grew there, too, but not many. We left them alone, even though they would have burned better —longer and cleaner. The spruces grew like weeds and were therefore renewable and expendable.

During a stretch of warm, windless July weather, Wendell went down to his boat and put a load of fifty traps aboard. He set only one string (ten traps) before the thick-of-fog settled in and

[*]Pronounced '*T'gallant*,' with an old-timey sailorish inflection, when possible.

he had to sail back to the dock.

I was surprised to see him home so early.

"Done already?"

"Can't see your hand in front of your face out there."

I felt his frustration, he liked to put in a good day's work. I hadn't noticed the fog outside, just the fog in my brain. In his absence I had accomplished a solid hour of staring blankly at *Acadia* without writing a word worth keeping. Some days were like that. My muse just went on vacation and didn't say when she'd be back.

"I'm not getting anywhere here, either. Wanna go lumberjacking?"

"Ayup, might just as well." He sang a verse of *The Lumberjack Song*, something about cutting down trees and wearing women's clothing. That was Monty Python again, who, when they nailed it, were still the funniest thing in the world. They *always* nailed it.

We threw our lumberjacking tools in the wheelbarrow and followed the path up the mountain. I showed Wendell the flying house's foundation and told the story of how the whole thing went airborne one frigid December morning.

"That's why the winter gales make me nervous."

He said comforting things about how that could never happen to our cabin. I knew it was true, but my neuroses had doubts.

We picked a good tree not too far off the path. I banged on the trunk several times with the big maul to scare away any squirrels or chipmunks before we cut their house down. I felt this was common courtesy. Wendell felt this was insane. He was probably right.

He let me cut the tree down because it made me feel like I knew how to do something useful, which, as concerned virtually every other area of human endeavor, I did not. I was quite pregnant by that time, but still able to do some work, as long as I could rest in between. I sawed off the branches while Wendell dragged them out of the way. Working together, we were a lumberjacking dynamo to rival Paul Bunyan.

After some more resting, I sawed the trunk into stove lengths and Wendell split them with wedges and/or the maul, depending on how big they were. When the wheelbarrow was full, we took it back down the mountain to unload it, then came back for more.

After the third trip, Wendell set a medium sized log on end and took a mighty swing at it with the maul. The muscles in his arms made me somewhat melty. Unknown to us, the log concealed a heavy iron spike, driven there at least a hundred years ago, for what purpose I will never know. I do everything in my power not to think about it, or that day.

I had barely missed it with the chainsaw. Hitting solid metal would have been disastrous, but what happened instead was a chain of horrors mere words could never adequately describe.

Wendell swung the maul, striking the unseen iron spike a ferocious but glancing blow. The ancient spike dislodged and took flight, striking me in the face. Ugly wounds opened on my cheek and forehead. I fell to the ground, as I often did when something surprised me.

Continuing its downward arc, the wedge side of the maul head missed the steel toe of Wendell's work boot, cutting clean through the laces and tongue before splitting his foot lengthwise along the metatarsal bones.

Wendell said *Ugh*, grossly understating the severity of the injury he'd inflicted on himself. A bloodbath was unfolding on our mountain.

He wrenched the maul out of his ruined foot. The crater in his boot instantly overflowed with dark arterial blood, forming a red pool on the sawdust strewn ground. After a disoriented moment or two, I made it up to my hands and knees. Wendell saw blood streaming down my face and tried to come to my rescue, but collapsed on the ground when he took the first step.

"I'm all right, Wendell...your foot—"

"It ain't good, hon."

He sat up and struggled to remove his work boot.

"Oh Jesus *FUCK*, Jesus fucking *CHRIST* that hurts."

So much blood was coming out of him I could smell it, strong and coppery, overpowering the smell of cut pine. Disregarding the latest insults to my face, I jumped to my feet. The fucking

Universe was trying to steal my husband.

Now you have me to contend with, motherfucker, and I WON'T HAVE THIS.

Wendell got his boot off and was peeling down what remained of his white sock, now gone entirely red. He spoke quietly to himself. The gist, as best I could make out, was, "Fuckfuckfuckfuck ow fuck."

I remembered how many times I said—screamed, really—fuck when Uncle Gordon's boat ate my leg. Uncle Gordon never said fuck, but he knew just what to do. I heard him in my head. *Elevate it. Tie it off.*

"Wendell! Lie down, put your foot up here!" I gestured at our wheelbarrow, partially filled with firewood. He couldn't raise his leg that high so I put it up there for him. I tried not to bump it, or look too closely. He winced and continued saying *fuck*, which was appropriate for the occasion.

I ripped off my shirt and used one of the sleeves for a tourniquet. Not perfect but serviceable, it was all I had. I wrapped the rest of it around his foot to hold it together. A horde of mosquitos descended to make a blood meal of my exposed top half. That made no sense to me, with so much of Wendell's blood on the ground, free for the taking. Stupid fucking mosquitos.

Once I had his leg tied off, Wendell said, "Yeah, I think I'm good now," and tried to stand, like he'd just go strolling down the mountain and everything would be fine. I could see it wouldn't

work before he even put his weight on it. The bloodflow that was stanched by my half-assed tourniquet erupted again. He tried a step, but collapsed on the ground.

"I just need a crutch," he said, looking around for a suitable tree limb.

"Wendell, no. You can't stand up, you'll bleed to actual death."

He said "fuck" again, but he knew I was right.

The question before me was dirt-simple and contained a horrifying mathematical impossibility: How does a four-and-a-half foot tall, seventy-pound woman, somewhat pregnant, carry a man six-foot-two and a hundred eighty-five down a mountain?

It was my turn to say "Fuckfuckfuck."

When I was finished with that, I figured out what had to be done and I just fucking did it. Don't ask me how.

I dumped the split logs out of the wheelbarrow and helped Wendell get in. He said he was getting dizzy. I thought it was either blood loss or shock, but didn't say so. Once he was in the wheelbarrow I had to elevate his mutilated foot. I couldn't just leave it hanging over the side. I stood between the handles and lifted his leg up onto my shoulder. The effort made my face bleed again but I didn't care.

When I tried to lift the wheelbarrow it was too heavy.

Too heavy?! Your husband is bleeding to death! Just fucking do it!

I pictured the Universe laughing at me and found some adrenaline or motivation or something and got the wheelbarrow up and rolling. I wasn't made for that kind of lifting and felt muscles and tendons at their limits, screaming at me to put him down. I screamed back that we're doing this, even if it puts us in a fucking wheelchair. There was no one else there, and it had to be done. That's all there was to it.

We made slow but steady progress and Wendell kept apologizing for not being able to walk. Halfway down the mountain I ran into a tree root and spilled him onto the needle bed.

"Oh, ouch, sorry, Wendell, I'm so sorry."

Through clenched teeth he managed, "It's ok, I'm all right," but I'd hurt him badly. I don't know how he kept from screaming. I felt like screaming and I wasn't the one with a mangled foot. I got him back into the wheelbarrow but didn't think I had the strength to go on.

Just. Fucking. DO IT!

One of my early memories was of being pinned in a shallow grave under the dead body of my own grandfather. I survived that, and came out stronger. I also lived to tell the tale of a leg amputation and an eye stabbing.

I persevere. Whatever the goddamn thing is that needs to be done, I just fucking do it. That's who I am. I looked at my bleeding husband who needed to be carried down the mountain.

I just fucking did it.

The woods thinned near the bottom of the trail, so I parked Wendell with his leg propped up against a tree and ran to get the Willys. I was still shirtless and had a frightening splash of his blood running down my left side. I didn't have time to think about any of that. I had a singular focus: battling the Universe for the life of my husband. Also, I was mad as hell.

Arriving winded at the shed, I had a brief word with my foe. "I'll win this or die trying. So suck it, whore."

I fired up the Jeep and went barreling back to get Wendell. Getting him from the wheelbarrow to the passenger seat was as easy as advanced theoretical physics, but we did it. He lost more blood in the process.

Driving back to the cabin I tried to avoid bumps. There being no road, only bumps, I failed pretty badly. Wendell gritted his teeth but didn't complain.

Over the noise of the motor I yelled, "Are you ok?"

"'Tis but a scratch."

He looked pale and I feared he was going into shock after all.

"We have to go over, Wendell. To the hospital."

"Ayup, reckon so."

When we got to the cabin I told him not to move. His foot had become a semi-coagulated mess but was still leaking. I ran inside to get blankets and covered him with them. That was all I knew about treating shock.

Back inside I threw on a shirt and grabbed an Ace bandage to wrap Wendell's foot and keep it from falling apart more than it already had. I drove us to the dock—more bumps, sorry! Sorry!—and helped him hobble aboard Althea Rose. He limped to the helm and started the engine. I saw way too much blood seeping through the many layers of Ace bandage.

"Wendell! You can't stand up, it makes your foot bleed." I pointed to the seeping red and tried not to think about how much he'd already lost.

I made him as comfortable as I could in the clear space between the open wheelhouse and the traps still stacked on the afterdeck. He lay on the deck covered in blankets, with his foot up on the starboard rail.

I grabbed a bait box to stand on, cast off the mooring lines and pushed the throttle into the corner. I wouldn't normally run wide open like that, but when your husband is dying you're not thinking about engine wear. We came roaring out of Mille Jours Harbor and plunged into the fog bank that still shrouded the bay. I couldn't see a goddamn thing, not even Althea Rose's bow. I had a radar screen to keep me from running into any boats or islands, and sonar to keep me out of shallow water. I mistakenly believed these nav aids, along with the compass, would get us safely across.

I had by this time in my life become a fairly competent pilot of lobster boats, but when you factored in the blinding fog, panic

and borderline hysteria, a trip to Jonesport demanded more than mere competence. It required expertise. I was just not that experienced, and my inexperience cost us everything.

I grabbed the VHF mike and said, "Mayday, mayday, mayday. FV *Althea Rose* with a medical emergency on route from Mille Jours Island to Jonesport. I need an ambulance at the town landing."

There was a frightening silence, then an unknown voice answered from the main. I later learned it was Willie Gompert, the Jonesport harbormaster.

"Roger that, *Althea Rose*. What's your ETA?"

"Twenty minutes out." We were making twenty-four knots, pretty quick for a lobster boat. I hung up the mike and yelled over my shoulder, "You're gonna be ok, hon! They're getting the ambulance!"

He didn't answer.

"Wendell?"

Still nothing. Maybe he passed out from the pain?

"Wendell!"

From where I stood at the helm, I saw his leg fall hard from the gunwale to the deck. That had to be excruciating, but he didn't scream, or even yell "fuck" again.

"WENDELL!"

I throttled down, put her in neutral, and went to save my husband. A river of his blood ran down the washboard, another

pool of red stained the deck. I'd never seen so much blood, except when it was my own. I didn't know what else to do, so I jumped on him and pumped his chest. I doubted it would do any good, he'd lost so much blood. It was everywhere but I didn't have a way to put it back in. That was what he really needed, more blood. With one hand thumping on his chest I used the other to slap his face, but not very hard.

"Wendell! Wake up, baby, you're gonna be ok, we're almost there!"

My dearest Wendell was not going to be ok. I guess I knew it right then, but I wasn't about to give up on him. I stayed where I was, doing the chest compressions that were the only thing I could think of to do. I stopped for a moment to tighten up the tourniquet. I understood when I picked up his leg that I was not touching the flesh of a living man.

I looked to the sky but saw only fog. I raised a fist at the Universe.

"You! Mother! Fucker! *YOU* did this to him, you filthy cocksucking ass-licking scumbag gutter whore! I swear I will destroy everything you care about! I hope your fucking house burns down, you maggot-faced rat-fellating son of a bucket of pus-oozing leprous pestilence! *YOU WILL DIE! EVERYONE HATES YOU!*"

I thought the Universe would back off, but it was just getting warmed up. There would be no end of horrors that day.

Firmly rooted in denial, I kept pumping Wendell's chest, tears and blood streaming down my face.

"Come on, baby, you're gonna make it, come back to me, don't give up now."

But he wasn't waking up, or moving, or breathing.

Wait. The ambulance will have a defibrillator. Let's go.

I checked the compass and spun her around to the north, then jammed the throttle back in the corner. The fog was still thick, I had fuck-all for visibility. I could see maybe ten feet past the bow.

I checked my instruments. Twenty-five knots in fifteen fathoms of water, or about ninety feet. Radar showed an island to my west'rd but I didn't recognize it. I'd lost track of where we were in relation to damn near everything.

I looked back to the sonar. Twelve fathoms, still plenty deep. In the space of just five seconds, the water's depth went ten-eight-five-two-zero, and I slammed *Althea Rose* full speed into the ledge jutting out from Sloane's Fall. The rocks tore a huge, jagged hole in her port bow.

An avalanche of work tables, traps and other gear came crashing into the wheelhouse, crushing me belly-first against the helm. I felt part of the wheel break against my baby bump.

That was what I thought at the time, but I was wrong. It wasn't the wheel that broke.

My face shattered the front window and what felt like a red-

hot dagger burned into my left thigh. I assumed a broken femur, but looking behind me I saw that fucking bait iron sticking out of my leg. It had gone clear through.

The afterdeck was a maelstrom of traps, crates and ropes. Wendell was somewhere in the middle of it.

Taking on water through her shattered hull, *Althea Rose* rolled to her starboard side. Traps and crates were swept into the sea. I tried to fight my way aft to find Wendell, but I was pinned to the bulkhead and down to zero working legs. I spotted him on the deck, his eyes closed and face ghostly white, awash in a deep swirl of seawater. A wave rolled in and swept him toward the gunwale. With the next wave, the gunwale went under. When it came back up, Wendell was gone.

I screamed loud enough to rattle windows all the way up to Jonesport Harbor.

Still trapped at the helm, I got ahold of the bait iron and tried to pull it out of my leg but couldn't get leverage. The pain of the attempt left me gasping. It took three such tries to finally remove the fucking thing from my flesh.

I started pushing traps overboard to make a path to where I last saw Wendell. I would find him and pull him back on board.

I didn't get very far.

The block—that's a big metal pulley—walloped me in the head, knocking me out cold. I don't know how long I was gone. When I opened my eyes there was seawater lapping at my legs. The fog

was burning off and I saw the profiles of distant lobster boats on the bay. But I didn't see Wendell anywhere. I screamed some more but there was no answer.

I tried to get back to the radio but it was now steeply uphill from me, well out of reach. *Althea Rose* was sinking. Unable to call for help, or get to the lifejackets stored below, I was going down with the ship.

Wendell was not coming back. I had to survive so our child could be born, but I didn't know how. I also didn't know our child was already gone.

The water was up to my chest when I heard a roar from one of the distant lobster boats. I looked up and saw a rooster-tail of water coming from her stern as she came about, thundering toward me across the waves. As she bore down I could make out the orange and black buoy mounted on top of her wheelhouse. *Rock and Rye* to the rescue.

I spent just one day in the hospital. The front window I broke with my face had butchered me, but I didn't know it at the time. I thought the blood was from the maul accident. When they were done patching me back together, the line of stitches stretched from my hairline all the way to my chin, and down my neck a ways. The bait iron that pierced my leg had missed my femoral artery by a scant half-inch.

One half inch, the distance between living and dying.

When I hitched a ride back out to Mille Jours, it was the worst thing I could have done. I returned to the island a widow and mother of a stillborn child. I swore vengeance on the Universe for all of it, including that one half inch.

Just kill me already, will you?!

I should have gone straight to Wiscasset and called Aoife. She would have talked me out of what I did next.

A Tangled Web

I attended my husband's funeral a broken woman, with a black widow's nest of sutures holding my face together. I looked like a zombie in a black dress and felt borderline catatonic. As had become my sad habit, I played a song for him on my violin, *Ashokan Farewell*, a civil war era tune we both loved for its simple beauty.

Of course it rained.

Wendell's family was in attendance, as was Edgar Tuttle. I couldn't find the strength to call Aoife in Kansas (nor could I find a phone), but sent her a letter she would receive the following week. I hoped she would forgive me some day.

A preacher of some kind offered god-words to comfort us as Wendell and our unborn child came to rest in the Bone Zone. I'm sure he meant well, but it all rang hollow to me. If the god-person did exist—which by any truly objective assessment seemed unlikely—he was certainly no friend of mine. Run along, now, God; go play with the Universe. I'm sure the two of you will have a ball thinking up new ways to torment me.

I had clashed with Wendell's family over the funeral arrangements, so their condolences and smiles seemed forced. They wanted him buried in Rockland but his wish to be buried on

Mille Jours was clearly stated in his will. I'm sorry, but could you just do us a favor and respect a dead man's last request?

There was an undercurrent of hostility running through my post-mortem interactions with his father: *If you knew how to drive a boat, my boy would still be alive.*

I don't know if he really thought that, but it seemed the most likely explanation for his icy demeanor. In case he did, I would like to formally apologize and issue the following statement: Did you think that hadn't occurred to me?

It did.

And now I would have to live with it for the rest of my life.

After the funeral, Wendell's grandparents invited me to Rockland for a while.

"You should spend some time with family, Bonnie-Kate. It isn't healthy to be alone with your grief."

"Thank you, but no."

I didn't explain that my plans for the immediate future included a complete disregard for my health, and required unfettered access to the ocean. Rockland offered plenty of ocean access, but it was a bit too fettered for my needs.

After the service, Edgar took the mourners back to the main, a trip I declined to make so I wouldn't have to go anywhere near the Sloane's Fall ledges again.

I sat alone in the cabin where Wendell and I had shared our dreams. I cried in my favorite Windsor chair, looking at the relics

of our all too brief time together. His fishing boots still stood in the mud room, ready for another day of lobstering. His carved schooner sat perched amid my family's seabirds, and his newly mounted shark jaws presided over the maritime exhibition.
Outside, the rain continued.

I thought I might return to Stone-n-Ivy, but seeing the stroller, crib and bassinet we'd bought together would figuratively kill me. I needed something more literal.

My chair made familiar creaking noises when I stood, the same noises it had been making to announce the rising of Caldwells for the last hundred and fifty years. Disregarding the echoes of my four bears, I walked through the gentle rain to stand at the top of my cliff. I looked over the edge at the jagged rocks and rusting engines thirty feet below.

"A fall would be fatal, wouldn't it?"

Maybe. Eventually.

"Instantaneously would be better. I don't much care for prolonged suffering."

Just stop it.

"Stop what?"

You're thinking about killing us.

I looked down at the shore again and tried to imagine lying there with multiple compound fractures, waiting hours for the tide to come in and drown me. That would plainly and simply suck.

Well?

"No. I'm not going to kill us." I added softly, "But that doesn't mean we're not going to die."

What was that? That last bit?

"Nothing. Mind your business."

I turned and headed back to the cabin, stopped halfway, and returned to the cliff. I flipped the Universe a double bird and muttered, "Nobody likes you." Then I went back inside.

When Edgar got back from Jonesport he came over to check on me, as I thought he might. I would normally offer a tot of rum but it wasn't the right time.

"You holdin' up ok, Bonnie-Kate?"

"Yeah, thanks Edgar. I'll make it all right. I just need a little time."

"If you need anything a-tall—" His eyes met mine, something they didn't often do.

"—I know where to find you," I finished, giving him a weak smile.

When he turned to go I said, "Thanks again. Thanks for everything."

He looked a little bemused but nodded and went on his shambling way back down the mountain.

I went to the kitchen, filled a quart jug with water and made a chicken salad sandwich. I cut it in half diagonally (because the other way is wrong), and put it into a Ziploc bag. I put on my

fishing boots, both of which would have fit inside one of Wendell's, and walked down from Topgallant Mountain to where I kept *Alice B* on the shore of nearby Scoter Cove.

Emergency Picnic

"Aaron, we got a letter from Bonnie-Kate."

"How's things back east?"

"Banjaxed beyond redemption."

I read him a bit of her note: '...on the emergency trip to the hospital I ran us aground on a ledge. The boat sank, Wendell was drowned, and I miscarried. I do not know why I was spared. I am so sorry I did not call you. As with so many things, I tried but failed. Do not worry about me. I am holding up ok. I do not wish to add further distress to already distressing news. Edgar is here looking after me with tea and sympathy. This too shall pass.'

Aaron stood gaping, without words for his shock, just as I did when I first read her letter.

"I have to go to her." I was already packing a case. "You'll come?"

"I—I can't, Aoife. I'm sorry. Work—"

"You needn't explain." I shoved more clothes in my overnight bag.

"How long?"

"I don't know. She's out on the island, you know how that is. We might be stuck there a while."

I kissed him goodbye and off I went to find a flight east.

Within a few hours I sat in an aisle seat on a six-hundred-mile-an-hour 727, wishing the buggered thing wasn't so slow. All the way from Kansas to Maine I tried not to think of what desperate acts Bonnie-Kate might come to after losing her family again.

It was 6:00pm the next day when I caught a twenty-five dollar ride out to Mille Jours with a lobsterman who lived on one of the other islands out that way. Edgar came down to see who'd landed, and gave me a ride up to Bonnie-Kate's. He apologized when the springs in his old truck

tried to launch me at every pothole.

"Been meaning to fix some a them."

"Nah, this is more fun than bumper cars."

He gave me a side-eye that asked *Are you sure you're a grown woman?* He said, "She'll be glad to see you."

"Sure, she needs friends right now."

"Ayup, reckon so."

"She appreciates you, Edgar. That she does."

If not for him, God only knows what she might have done. He dropped me off at her door and, not wanting to interfere with our reunion, drove back down the mountain.

"Bonnie-Kate? It's me, Champ. How ya getting on?"

No answer. I went round the back to see if she was behaving strangely on her cliff. She'd be after that at times, especially when she was stressed over something. In other words, always. 'Twas

therapeutic, she said, but it was just nuts, wasn't it.

She wasn't on her cliff. I checked the jacks, also no one home. I knocked at the back porch door. "Hello? Bonnie-Kate? Little cowpoke?"

Still nothing. She might have gone hiking, but that did little to ease my worries. Her letter had been full of red flags, the largest and reddest being the lack of contractions. I was something of an expert on the private correspondence of Bonnie-Kate Caldwell and I say this wi'out fear of contradiction: even at her looniest, she'd not write *I am*, *did not*, or *do not*. She used the shortened forms one hundred percent of the time. No contractions in her letter told me she was seriously broken this time. Not properly in her right mind.

Hence my urgency, as she would say.

I stood at her unanswered door with the worst of my fears stirred up and rampaging. What if she's lying in her bed right this moment, full up on whiskey and painkillers? With all her accidents, she'd a great stockpile of lethal drugs. She could pull the plug on herself any time the mood struck, couldn't she.

Her door, as always, was unlocked. In I went, trembling at what I might find.

I found everything but my own Bonnie-Kate.

In her kitchen I came upon the aftermath of sandwich-making: an open loaf of Beefsteak rye (her favorite), crumbs on the cutting board, a wee pot of chicken salad and an unwashed

chef's knife.

'Twas all so un-Bonnie-Katelike. She was no maker of beds, but was fastidious in the kitchen. That was a torch handed down from her ma, one she'd always carry.

Maybe she had another squatter who made himself a sandwich and left. If he knew owt of how she dealt wi' squatters, that would have been wise.

Looking a bit closer, I saw the bread was stale and the chicken salad had gone off, left out for a day, maybe more. Bonnie-Kate would never do that, not in her right mind.

Unless she just gave up.

I couldn't allow myself to think such things. Maybe there'd been an emergency. Maybe a crazed fan showed up and she ran off. No. If a crazed fan had shown up when she had knife in hand, there'd be crazed-fan blood everywhere.

Maybe she was hiding as a prank. I didn't think it likely in the circumstances, but with her anything was possible.

I went to the cliff and called out a few times, but all I got back was echoes.

Remembering she always left the keys in the Jeep (who's to steal it?) I got her from the shed and drove down to Edgar's.

"Bonnie-Kate's not t'home."

"Where'd she go?"

"That's what I'd like to know. There's no sign of her anywhere."

"That's odd."

"Odd? More like terrifying?"

"How come?"

"Edgar, she's not well."

"She's probably gone out for a walk, that's all. Just to clear her head."

"Or she's kidnapped, or murdered by some deranged shitehawk of a fan, or...or maybe she just couldn't—" I was unable to say it.

"Couldn't what?"

But then I had to. "Maybe she couldn't take it anymore. Maybe 'twas losing Wendell and the baby as finally sent her round the bend."

"It doesn't seem likely. She's tough, that one. Tougher than you'd think."

"I got a letter from her."

"What'd she say?"

"It wasn't what she said. It was between the lines."

He waited for me to go on.

"She and I have been more than best friends since grade school. When she wrote to me she was right on the edge of a breakdown, she was. That's why I dropped everything to come out here."

"You know her better than I do, I suppose."

"In a way, sure, I do."

I waited for him to propose some kind of plan, but he seemed a bit befuddled. Not like him.

"I'm going to look for her," I said, turning back to where I'd left the Jeep.

"Which way you going?"

"Up the mountain."

Edgar grabbed a windbreaker off the peg. "I'll take the shore."

I drove back to the cabin.

Hardly an experienced woodsperson, I was nervous about going into the forest with night coming on. I stopped at the shed for a lantern, set my hair on fire lighting it, then followed the path up the hill and into the woods.

Rounding a corner I startled a deer who snorted, stamped his foot and ran off. Unnerved, I went on up the path cringing at the next thing that would scare me out of my wits.

The next thing was an owl that waited until I was ten feet away before hooting me into a cardiac episode and taking flight. Probably a barred owl, I didn't get that good a look. I was occupied with that special kind of fear that only comes in the dark. 'Twasn't so much the animals as scared me, but the startling.

Just off the path, my lantern lit up an object that didn't belong to nature. I crept up, expecting it to scare me somehow, but it didn't. It was Bonnie-Kate's chainsaw. I looked about with

the lamp and spotted the other tools she and Wendell left there when he hurt himself. There was probably blood on the ground but the rains had washed it away.

Everything was rusty, and I couldn't help but wonder why she'd left her chainsaw behind. This was a lass who took her woodcutting seriously. I pulled the cord a few times but it wouldn't turn over. I took it along anyway, thinking it might deter some of the forest-dwelling startlers.

That didn't work. Things kept alarming me all the way up one side o' the brae and down t'other. I'd been all over that mountain, but in the light of day. After dark it gave a sort of summer-camp-axe-murderer vibe I didn't much care for.

On the far side the ground leveled off and I lost my bearings, didn't I. I went in circles for a while, then recalled that people lost in the wild can avoid that by always going downhill. Such would eventually bring me upon the shore where Edgar was searching, and not as lost as me. If I couldn't find him, he'd have to give up the search for Bonnie-Kate so as to search for me. I had done a very Bonnie-Kateish thing, becoming so lost while part of a search party that another search party needed forming to search for the missing searcher. I had to fix that.

With only one detour when I was stuck in a brake of wild raspberries, I found the water's edge. I looked to the right and saw no sign of Edgar's flashlight, then left, where a warm yellow lamp winked through the pines. I went that way.

To my everlasting surprise, the warm yellow light was a beacon guiding lost travellers (and searchers) to Edgar's own back porch. I went round the front, straightened myself up, and knocked.

"I found her chainsaw in the woods," I said, pretending I'd not been hopelessly lost.

"Her boat's gone."

"She has a boat?" I pictured a cabin cruiser or somesuch.

"*Alice B*."

"Right. That boat. She couldn't have gone too far then."

Edgar said, "I don't like the look of it. She knows better than to go at night. And the tide runs hard through the ledges over there."

"Can we take your boat and look for her?"

"Ayup, we can try. I was just waiting on you."

'Twas full-on dark by then, but with a full moon and a spotlight we stood a chance of finding her.

Edgar Tuttle kept *Four Aces* spotless, but all the scrubbing in the world won't stop a fishing boat smelling like a fishing boat. There's always the trace of bait, mud, lobsters, seaweed and such. I'd grown to love that faint trace because it meant I was on my way to Mille Jours to be wi' my Bonnie-Kate awhile. 'Twouldn't be fair to Aaron if I said she was my one true love. So I'll not say it. Not out loud.

I had no idea there were so many other wee isles around

Mille Jours. Looking out to sea from the cliff you could only see a couple of tiny ones to the east, too small even to build a shanty on.

We sailed to the west and north, around dozens of islands, most wi'out people on them, looking for *Alice B* to be pulled up (NOT washed up) on one of their shores. We found nothing. By the time we returned to Mille Jours Harbor the stars were fading.

Before going ashore, Edgar called the Coast Guard on his radio and told them we couldn't find Bonnie-Kate or her boat anywhere. The Coast Guard guy didn't seem so interested and I wanted to eat the head off of him for it. Then he asked her name.

"Caldwell," said Edgar. "Bonnie-Kate Caldwell."

"As in...you mean...the writer?"

"Ayup, that one."

"Do you know it's a crime to file a false report with the Coast Guard?"

Mr Coast Guard thought Edgar was too much of a yokel to be associated with one as literate as our Bonnie-Kate. I'd never seen him angry before, 'twas a bit of a fright, wasn't it.

"You think I'm makin' this up? She's my neighbor just up the road and she could be lost at sea, junior. Now what do you intend to do about it?"

He agreed to look for her.

We went back to Edgar's, not expecting them to find her in the dark. It was encouraging to hear a helicopter in the hour

before dawn.

"That'll be them. What now, Edgar?"

"I'll run you home so's you can get some sleep. There's nothing more to do until daylight, then I'm going back out."

"I'll be going, too."

"One of us should stay here. Case she comes home."

"You mean I should stay here, tearing out great swatches of my hair?"

"I didn't—"

"I'm after going wi' you. End of discussion."

Edgar wasn't accustomed to such boldness from one ranked lower than a deckhand. He gave a stern look.

"All right, have it your way. I'll come by and get you in an hour or so."

"How about if I just catch forty winks on your couch?"

After a moment he said, "I suppose. Best eat something first."

We went to his kitchen to make Fluffernutters. When he opened the cabinet above the stove, I saw a box of Pop Tarts.

Apple-Cinnamon.

I lost it.

"Oh God, Edgar! What if she's really gone?" My tears fell like rain.

Edgar's manner said he'd been called on to comfort a crying lass or two in his day. A surprisingly gentle hug came from the old salty dog, along with all the right words of encouragement.

"No need to assume the worst, dear. There's plenty of other possibilities, all just as likely. You know how she is, wandering off from time to time."

"What about her boat being gone?"

"Could've slipped her mooring. It ain't so uncommon."

"You think so?"

"Ayup, we'll find her alive and well. Guaranteed."

I didn't think I'd sleep, but when he woke me an hour later I was having a dream where I tried to keep a frisky little kitten from running onto a busy highway while I was wearing Frankenstein boots made of lead.

We went out and searched all the islands again. After the islands, we went to the open sea, but it was just so bleedin' huge. If you've any doubts about the sheer enormity of the ocean, try playing hide-and-seek on it. Looking at all that endless water, I felt my panic rising again.

I'd never been out so far before. Sure, it scared me. The waves got really big out there and when the boat was down in between them I couldn't see anything but solid walls of water in every direction. It was like we were to be crushed by giant steamroller made of seawater. But next thing you know, we've popped out on top again, about to slide down into the next trough. Not only did it scare the Christly BeJaysus out of me, it made it damn near impossible to look for Bonnie-Kate.

Edgar said, "Weather's comin'. We best head 'er."

"Head 'er?"

"Back to the mooring. It's gonna blow."

As we made our way back to Mille Jours, Edgar got the Coast Guard on the radio. They found *Alice B* forty miles away, floating upside down. They'd not found Bonnie-Kate. I started crying again.

"It doesn't mean anything," said Edgar, "Just that her boat came untied."

"Ok," I croaked through my tears. "I hope you're right."

We made one more pass by the islands, hoping to find her waving to us from the shore. If she was on one of them, she didn't want to be found.

She might have gone to one of these wee isles for a picnic and forgot to tie off her boat. That would account for the aftermath of sandwich making I found in her kitchen. It didn't explain why she didn't clean up after herself, unless she was in some great hurry to go on this picnic. The more I thought about it, the less likely it seemed. Had anyone ever gone on an emergency picnic?

It was early afternoon when we returned to the island. Edgar radioed a fellow lobsterman on the mainland to ask if Bonnie-Kate's car was still parked at the Jonesport Landing.

"Ayuh, it was there as of this morning." He said *thay-uh* and *mawnin*.

That ruled out an unscheduled trip to Wiscasset, or anywhere else down the coast.

Edgar drove me back up to the cabin, but I was too worried to enjoy the potholes. Rain was coming soon, and we both needed sleep. I asked him what was next.

He looked to the sky. "Let this weather pass, then we'll go back out. Start checking the interior of some a these islands."

"Don't go wi'out me. Please?"

"I won't. And don't worry, we'll find her."

Putting my provisions aboard, I pushed off and headed *Alice B* southeast, pulling at the oars in quick, even strokes. The sun gradually disappeared behind Mille Jours.

Where are we headed, Champ?

"Only Aoife gets to call me that."

You're rowing us straight into nothing.

"There's places out there."

Such as?

"The Azores."

That's two thousand miles away.

"You have someplace you have to be?"

You're committing suicide, aren't you?

"WRONG. I brought food and water. People who kill themselves don't pack a lunch."

People who want to live don't take a tiny rowboat on the open sea.

"We're just out rowing, that's all."

Excuse me, but have you seen the ocean? Do you know what it does to tiny rowboats?

"Enlighten me."

It devours them! We'll die out here!

"Yeah, most likely."

Aha! Suicide. I knew it.

"Nope. Wrong again."

You said it yourself. I was like, 'we'll die' and you were all, 'most likely.' It was less than five seconds ago!

"Do I have to spell it out?"

Apparently.

"We are going to die. But it will be the Universe that kills us, not me. So it's not suicide, I wouldn't give the Universe the satisfaction."

Semantic games don't absolve you of responsibility.

"How many chapters must one add to a chronology of sorrows before they call it complete? Before they put down their pen and stop telling the tale?"

You act like you're the only person who ever lost their family.

"I'm the only Bonnie-Kate Caldwell of Mille Jours Island, Maine, who ever lost *two* families, and this is how I deal with it."

Remember what Aoife said? About how good you are at mourning your dead and then putting it behind you?

"There's no more room back there."

I looked up to where I'd last seen land. Mille Jours was a tiny speck, everything else was gone. The sun had set below sea level, leaving its glow on the western horizon. Still I pulled at the oars, rowing from the deepening blue sky into a night a didn't expect

or want to survive.

Once the light faded to black I stopped rowing and drifted where the winds and currents took me. The ocean swells grew mountainous in the night, but, much to my dismay, *Alice B* rode them up one side and down the other, neither capsizing nor sinking.

The moon arrived late and assumed a position offering no directional clues whatsoever. I fell asleep for a while but woke up when I drifted into a pod of whales and one of them bumped me. They were minkes, big but not enormous. I watched them slipping through the black water with the silent grace of aquatic ballerinas and wondered how my four bears could have killed something so beautiful.

In the morning there was no land anywhere. Clouds rolled in just after sunrise and I thought (hoped) they might portend the storm I needed to get this thing done. Way off on the south horizon I could make out an oil tanker or containership, probably out of Portland, many miles away. The last thing I needed was for a ship to come over and start bugging me, but it was too far away to matter.

Dying was taking longer than expected, so I rationed my scant victuals and hoped for foul weather. I drank a few sips of water and ate half my sandwich. I might have consulted Lady Jane Blackmore before setting sail, but her idea of provisioning the voyage would be to eat my other leg.

I put it off as long as I could, but there came a time when my bladder would no longer be denied. I hesitated to squat at the gunwale for fear of being bitten on the bottom by a shark. That didn't happen, but I think most would agree it was a legitimate concern. I came out here to be drowned, not to have my ass chewed on by marine predators.

I put my oars back in the water and rowed for a while, but I'm not sure why. The sun was directly overhead, so for all I knew I was rowing back toward land. After a while the fog settled in, so I drifted some more. I tried another conversation with my alter ego but she didn't want to talk to me anymore. Same with Pioneer Woman and Lady Jane. Even the Madwoman of Mille Jours had forsaken me in my last desperate hours. Eep bop bah-dee?

A little breeze came up and dispersed the fog. Off to what I thought was the east, storm clouds gathered. Waves began to wave. The sea-mountains rolled along and *Alice B* shipped an inch of water. I threw away my bailer so I wouldn't be tempted. With the end in sight, I ate the other half of my sandwich. I hated seeing food go to waste.

That was a mistake. The end was not at all in sight. I drifted for another day and a half without taking on any more water. I grew famished and considered gnawing on my prosthesis, but it was mostly metal. I wondered if the Universe had chosen starvation over drowning. Then the wind picked up and a steady,

cold rain began to fall. It looked like I'd get the damned job done after all.

Alice B was half swamped when I saw red and green running lights ahead in the distance, moving closer. Jumping overboard would have been suicide so I would just sit tight and let the approaching vessel run me down and sink me. Not my fault! An unfortunate accident!

As she drew nearer, the ship's spotlight came on and played over the water through the wind-driven rain. I hid in the bottom of *Alice B* but it didn't do any good. They lit me up like I had the lead role in a Broadway play about leaky rowboats.

The ship's bow said *Katie Didn't* and I assumed she was a fishing vessel of some kind. She eased up beside me and several men appeared at the rail. The spotlight hurt my eyes. I saw only silhouettes. One of them reached down to me and yelled over the wind, "Take my hand!"

"What for?"

"You're sinking!"

The rain fell in sheets. I was down to my last few inches of freeboard.

"No, not really. Thanks, though."

The man looked baffled, and conferred with the other guys at the rail.

"What are you doing out here?"

"Just rowing."

"Rowing? You're eighty miles from land!"

"I'm pretty good at it."

After more conferring he said, "We can't leave you here."

"Says who?"

"Says maritime law."

"I won't tell if you don't. Promise."

He stuck out his hand again. I regarded it uncertainly.

"Come on, don't make me get the gaff." I saw one of the others was in fact holding a gaff.

I didn't want to be gaffed, but I didn't want to just give myself up, either. I rowed out there for a purpose that far superseded maritime law, as far as I was concerned. I would not abandon my principles without the proper incentives.

"You guys got any Pop Tarts on board?"

"Any what?" The howling wind had stolen my words away.

"POP! TARTS!"

One of them said, "For the love of Jesus Alexander Christ, she wants a Pop Tart." He said something to the one with the gaff, who went to check with the ship's cook. The cook came up to the gunwale and addressed me directly, through the pouring rain.

"Are Toast 'Ems ok?"

Hmm. Poor man's Pop Tarts. "What flavor?"

A wave washed in over *Alice B*'s transom and filled her to the rails with seawater. I couldn't help but notice she wasn't sinking quickly enough to suit my immediate needs. I puzzled it out:

Alice B was made of wood. Wood floats unless you put something heavy on it. I was not heavy. Ergo, my plan was doomed to fail from the start. How typical.

In the mere seconds it took me to reach that conclusion, the fishermen grabbed me and pulled me aboard. I threw an infantile tantrum.

"AAAGH! I ASKED WHAT FLAVOR OF TOAST 'EMS GODDAMMIT!" I struggled mightily in their arms.

Fearing I would hurl myself overboard, they refused to unhand me, and also didn't answer the question.

The one with the gaff said, "Whoa! You're Bonnie-Kate Caldwell."

"Who wants to know?"

"I—I'm Kirby Hayes."

"And what makes you think I'm...whoever you said just then?"

I was unsure whether my notoriety would be an advantage or a handicap here.

Kirby said, "Nobody else has a nose like that."

Like my nose, I was busted.

Kirby went on. "And you're what, four feet tall?"

"Four and a half, Mr Smart Guy."

"But you're her, right?"

"Yeah, ok, you got me."

He looked at all the stitches and said, "What happened to

your face?"

"I used it to break a window. What happened to yours?"

He looked confused, and touched his face all over to see what was wrong with it.

I turned my attention to the ship's cook. "Now what about those Toast 'Ems?"

"I got blueberry and apple-cinnamon."

"Ok, then. Now we're getting somewhere."

They took me inside and I met Captain Groff, a barrel-chested banty-rooster of a man who snarled at me.

"The hell are you thinkin', coming all the way out here in a rowboat?"

"What difference does it make to you?" I found his hostility inexplicable and undeserved.

"Now we gotta drop everything and take you back. That's two days' wasted fuel and stores, two days missed fishing."

"Oh. That's...ah...explicable then, isn't it. Sorry."

He stood glaring at me. The cook brought me an apple-cinnamon Toast 'Em. I unwrapped it and took a savage bite, feeling guilty about eating up their limited supplies. I mean, I just had half a chicken sandwich two days ago.

"Wait," I said through a mouthful of Toast 'Em. "I can fix this."

Captain Groff remained gruff[****]. "How d'ya plan to do that?"

[****]Yes, I did that. Couldnt resist.

"You don't have to take me back. I'll work. What are we fishing for?"

"Swordfish on longlines."

"Show me what to do."

"You don't know nothing about longlining."

"I've lobstered before."

"Hmpf."

"And I harpooned a guy once. That's almost whaling."

"G'wan."

Kirby Hayes backed me up. "Yeah, Cap, she did. It was in the papers and everything."

The captain appeared to think it over.

"What about stores? We got enough for five guys, not six."

"I don't need much. Bread crusts and leftovers, really."

"You just came aboard and you're already depletin' our Toast 'Ems."

It was the first time I ever heard someone drop the G on a word like depleting, or utter the phrase "Depleting our Toast 'Ems." I was impressed.

I tried to give back the half a Toast 'Em I held. The cook, who was called Espo, short for Esposito, said, "No, you go ahead. Need anything else?"

I wanted a drink of water but figured that, like everything else, was under strict rationing. It was still raining hard, so I thought I'd go stand out there with my mouth open. Then I

remembered there was a half jug of water on *Alice B*.

"I have some water on my boat. Just let me grab that real quick."

This was met with a general shaking of heads. A guy with a salt-and-pepper beard said, "I hate to break it to you, but your boat's gone."

"Gone where? You didn't save her?"

"It sank."

"No, she didn't. She's made of wood." They didn't say anything, so I added, "Which floats." I resisted saying "Duh."

As a guest on their boat, it would be unconscionable to ask them to search for her, that would be rude.

"Can you go search for her?" So rude.

"No."

"How'd you find me anyway?"

"Showed up on radar."

It was my turn to be incredulous. A small boat with no metal wasn't likely to make a blip. That's why they sell radar reflectors to put on small craft.

"My boat's all white oak, even the thole pins." (oarlocks)

"Must've been a hunk of metal on 'er somewhere."

Had I put on my all-wood Lady Jane peg leg before I left Mille Jours, which I nearly did, *Katie Didn't* would not have been alerted to my presence. I would have been left to beg a Pop Tart from Davy Jones.

I wanted to stand at the rail and with heavy heart bid farewell to *Alice B*, but they wouldn't let me. Eager to get back underway, Captain Groff made a few command decisions and barked out the orders.

"Stephanie, get her some dry clothes and put her in a vest." The salt-and-pepper guy got a change of clothes from another guy named Ramon, who was closest to my size, then got a life vest into which I was summarily bound.

"You're Stephanie?" I asked, as he cinched down a strap.

"Nah, they just call me that."

"Um…why?"

He came around in front of me and pulled out the collar of his rain gear. There on his neck, tattooed in perfect Palmer Script, was *Stephanie*.

"Your wife?"

"Ex-girlfriend."

"So what's your real name?"

"Brenda." He pronounced it *Brender*.

A moment's mirth ensued among the crew of *Katie Didn't*. Stephanie Brenda finished wrapping me up. He'd put the vest on backwards so I couldn't escape from it.

Captain Groff said, "Anybody sees you tryin' to get out of that, we'll tackle you and lock you up with the stores. Clear?"

"Aye aye, Cap." If I grumbled, they might put me in there right now.

"Awright. You're coming with us but you don't get a share."

"A share?"

"Of the catch. It'd come out of our pockets and we ain't having that."

"I don't need a share."

"You can't work. I won't be accused of unpaid labor."

"But I wanted to catch a swordfish."

"Not happening."

I tried hard not to make a pouty face, but failed.

"Now, if we get boarded by Marine Patrol, what are you doing here?"

"Umm—"

"Got to be quicker'n that."

"Oh! I'm researching a book, right?"

"Wrong. You'll tell 'em exactly how you come to be on board. We start playin games with the authorities, we could get fined. Might even lose our license."

"Got it."

"Ain't no extra bunks. You sleep on the floor."

"Ok."

"I ought to make you pay for what you eat."

"Fair enough. How long do I have to wear this thing?" I tugged at the vest where it was already chafing my neck.

"'Til we get back to New Bedford. Problem with that?"

"No. No problem."

"This whole thing's against my better judgment."

"I feel kind of bad about it, if that helps."

It didn't.

"You're one lucky lady, you know that? You could have drowned out here."

It would have taken too long to explain it, so I didn't. He went back up to the wheelhouse and *Katie Didn't* was back on course for the Grand Banks.

The crew went back to work on fishing gear, a chore I had interrupted. I stood there watching, semi-straitjacketed and looking lost. Espo said, "Come on," so I followed him to the galley.

"Can you cook?"

"Yep."

He gave me two onions, eight potatoes and a paring knife. I peeled, we chatted.

"Is the captain always like that?"

"Like what?"

"He seemed unfriendly."

"Nah. He's a pussycat. You'll see."

He added salt and pepper to a bowl of ground beef and started making patties.

"Will he really make me wear this jacket the whole time?"

Espo looked me up and down. "How many cheeseburgers are you good for?"

"One. A little one." Mindful of the food supply.

"I only make 'em one size."

"What size?"

"Real fuckin' big." He was slapping burgers into shape with great violence, like they had insulted his mother. "Don't worry, somebody'll finish it if you can't."

I was ravenous. A real fuckin' big cheeseburger would not present a problem. I'd probably still have room for whatever this onion and potato thing was going to be.

With the burgers beaten into submission, Espo sat opposite me, thin-slicing the potatoes I peeled.

"What are we making here?" I asked.

"Scalloped spuds a la Espo. Mwah. Finestkind."

The dish required aorta-clogging amounts of butter, cheese and heavy cream. Yum.

I noticed he had not answered the vest question. I picked up another red russet and tried to make a face that said, *What about the life jacket?* That's a hard one to pull off, especially with a couple dozen stitches in your face. I probably looked more like *what is the meaning of this potato?* with overtones of *should I be afraid?*

Somehow, miraculously, he got my intended drift.

"No more'n a couple-three days, I'd imagine."

"I can live with that."

He looked at me like I was a complicated math problem.

"Feel like talking?" he said.

"I don't have anything else to do."

"What were you doing out there?"

"Just rowing, like I said. It's good exercise."

"Come clean, Bonnie-Kate. Unless you want to keep wearing that." He tilted his head toward my ultra-fashionable neon-yellow vest with reflective stripes like they were wearing in Paris that year.

"I—I was in a, um...whatchamacallit, a boat race, a regatta. From Maine to Nova Scotia. I got off course a little."

"Nope. Try again." Espo was too much of a smart-ass to be taken in by my smart-assery.

I tried to think of plausible reasons for a person to be eighty miles from land in a ten-foot skiff, and decline help when offered.

There weren't any. I looked at the floor.

"You came out here on purpose."

"Mmm-hmmm."

He diced an onion with the sure knife strokes of a veteran cook.

"You're a writer, huh?"

"Yeah."

"And a famous one, according to Kirby."

"A little. Not very." It didn't feel like a good time to mention Ro-day-oh Drive.

"It's been my experience—correct me if I'm wrong—that you

writer-types tend to be right clever."

"If that's the rule, I'm the exception."

"But you know better than to take a little wherry out to the open sea."

"Yeah. I suppose."

"You never planned to come back."

I looked at the floor some more. It wasn't very interesting so I tried jazzing it up with a few teardrops, thinking I could blame it on the onions.

"Hey," said Espo, putting down his French knife and handing me a paper towel. "Oh, hey now."

I sniffled. "It wasn't suicide. I just quit trying to stay alive."

"What happened to you?"

"How much time do you have?"

"Long as it takes."

"I'll tell you because you asked, but I'm not a whiner, ok? Not whining about it."

"Ok."

I recited the highlights from my chronology of sorrows, finishing with the horrific events of the previous week.

"Holy. Crap." He sat gaping at me, like he didn't know how I could still be alive. Or sane.

"But it wasn't suicide, ok?"

"All right. We won't call it that." He looked skeptical.

"It wasn't. I just surrendered to the forces already aligned

against me. Do you see the difference?"

Not sure why it mattered, but I cared what he thought of me.

"Go on. The forces…?"

"I thought—yeah, I know this sounds crazy—if I gave myself up, the Universe would either take me or stop persecuting me all the time, and killing the people I love. I basically called a ceasefire. I didn't choose to die, I left it up to the enemy."

"Then we came along."

"Yep."

"Maybe the Universe sent us?"

I looked him over. He did not appear to be a minion, or in cahoots. Still, I couldn't deny their timing was extraordinary. Perhaps the arrival of *Katie Didn't* seconds before I would have drowned was simply the Universe accepting my terms.

"Yeah," I said. "Could be."

"So if we took you out of that life jacket you wouldn't jump ship."

"That would be suicide."

"Gotcha."

"Thanks Espo."

"For what?"

"For understanding. I know it's pretty weird."

He nodded, then got two mugs and a bottle of Moxie from the fridge. "Can't say as I know that much about it. Except for the stupid crap you hear people say."

I took a slurp of Moxie, which is, by the way, awesome. "Like what?"

"It's a permanent solution to a temporary problem."

"Like a person who wants to die will be talked out of it by a fucking bumper sticker." I said. "That, and 'she took the coward's way out.'"

"Cowards don't generally volunteer for certain death," said Espo.

"Damn straight."

"Not that any of this applies to you."

I raised my cup of Moxie. "To life."

"With the possibility of parole," said Espo.

We clinked mugs, then finished making dinner for the crew.

In the coming days I came to know the men who worked on *Katie Didn't*. They reminded me of a song Aoife used to sing called *The Irish Rover*, whose crew included Johnny McGurk who was scared stiff of work, and Slugger O'Toole who was drunk as a rule.

Besides Kirby, Espo and Stephanie (who was next in charge after Captain Groff) there were two other guys. The one named Stanley looked like Bert from Sesame Street and didn't talk much. He called me Ladybug, which I didn't care for, and I suspected he was mentally undressing me at every opportunity, which I cared for even less.

The other was Ramon, the smallish Mexican guy who

provided me with a dry t-shirt and jeans the night I arrived. He also didn't talk much, but that was just because he didn't speak English. He seemed nice, and smiled a lot.

The crew passed the time in transit to the fishing grounds by working on gear, which there was a lot of. Stephanie showed me how to make up the hook and sinker rigs they were assembling. When I finished my first one he said, "Ok, good. Now do that a thousand more times."
That was the part of swordfishing I didn't especially enjoy.

Captain Groff said he didn't want me working, but they were feeding me and giving me a ride, so I wanted to help where I could. He knew I was pitching in a little, but he mostly stayed up in the wheelhouse and didn't bug me about it.

I found that the hardest thing to do was nothing. I woke each morning (on the floor, which I didn't mind because you can't fall off) to a horrifying world in which everyone dies, a world I no longer shared with Wendell, a world our fine little baby would never see. My first thought on rising each day was *What fresh hell is this?* which was terrible for the obvious reasons, but also because I couldn't come up with something original and had to steal that from Dorothy Parker.

Having ceased (or so it seemed) hostilities with the Universe, I soon learned idleness was my new nemesis. Idleness, during which my thoughts were free to roam, always wandering to places of sorrow and loss and hopelessness where the sun never peeked

through the clouds, where it was always cold and rainy, where no one ever smiled because they were all dead. It was my own personal Bone Zone of the mind, where love and joy were now and forever interred, a place I was not allowed to leave.

The men of *Katie Didn't* rescued me from the sea, then exhumed me from the brain- and heartsick graveyard where I kept burying myself.

Here's what one might think of a bunch of deepwater men inhabiting the decidedly male-dominated world of commercial fishing: hard drinking, bar-fighting, girl-in-every-port types who can't wait to get the damn job overwith so they can blow their paycheck on a spree of wild debauchery before heading back to sea, one step ahead of Johnny Law.

Yeah, ok, some of them were exactly like that. I met representatives of that stereotype on the crew of *Katie Didn't* (no names), but there also wasn't a man among them who didn't offer me a sympathetic shoulder.

I tried not to be mopey but often failed. They shepherded me out of my misery with sea stories, jokes (some dirty), and card games.

When the fishing started, though, Kirby said the best thing I could do would be to stay out of the way. I did, but it wasn't easy. I watched as they set out miles of line and thousands of hooks, each man doing his part so the whole thing came together like an automated swordfishing machine, one with each individual part

programmed to constantly bust balls on all the other parts.

Catching a swordfish, as it turned out, wasn't like catching bluegills in a pond, where you cast your line out with a bobber and a worm. I supposed a swordfish could be caught with a fishing pole, but I didn't think they ate worms. To match the efficiency of a commercial swordboat, you'd need a thousand guys with poles, which was why they used longlines instead.

Once the lines were out they let them sit for a good while, then hauled them back. That's when things got really interesting.

The first thing I noticed was the absence of sea shanties while they worked. Not a single chorus of *Haul on the Bowline*, *Fire Meringo*, or *Hangin' Johnny*. I could have taught them an easy one, like *Bring 'Em Down*, but I didn't feel much like singing.

Later, I asked Espo why they didn't sing shanties.

"Don't be retarded. You see any sails on this boat?"

He said *retahded* which might have offended me had I not known it was a pet expression. Things that failed to meet his approval fell into one of two categories: *retahded*, and *wicked retahded*. I was pleased to have thus far escaped placement in the latter.

I found a place to sit at the rail behind the elevated wheelhouse, from which I had a bird's-eye view of the work as it unfolded below me. Since the crew didn't sing, I murmered a shanty to lighten their burden.

Soon may the wellerman come
To bring us sugar and tea and rum
One day when the tonguin' is done
We'll take our leave and go.

They couldn't hear me, so it probably didn't help very much. When they started working back through the lines, I learned two more important lessons right off the bat. First, even a small swordfish was bigger than me. And second, a big swordfish was bigger than three or four of me.

I wanted to pitch in, but from where I sat I could see at least six things that would kill me instantly were I foolish enough to go down there.

As deaths go, impalement on a swordfish had a certain poetic elegance, but would be awfully uncomfortable, about like being harpooned, so I stayed where I was.

In light of my truce with the fucking Universe, being killed was (theoretically) off the table for the moment, but the fucking Universe still needed to earn my trust. Which it could do by not killing me, even when given irresistible opportunities.

If I was to have a future, it would be one of solitude and sorrow, living alone on Mille Jours with my ghosts, rarely if ever speaking to other living beings until the day I died (without committing suicide). I would have plenty of time to think about what, if anything, the Universe expected of me. I once tried to

understand what was not permitted but soon realized it would be easier to focus on what was. That would be a shorter list. Much shorter.

Writing books was permitted. They kept getting planted in my head, and I assumed the Universe was at least partially responsible for their presence. If the Universe didn't want me writing, it would prevent the planting, wouldn't it?

Amassing ridiculous sums of money also seemed to be allowed. Spending it remained uncharted territory into which I rarely ventured, always with the abundant caution of a fat man testing April pond ice. If the Universe thought I was trying to buy happiness, there would be hell to pay.

After much consideration, I decided being on Mille Jours (unlike other places) was not in and of itself life threatening. The chain of events that killed my husband and child began and ended there (or in the near vicinity), but the objection was to my creating a new family, not my mere presence.

If I was reading the signs correctly, being in love with Aoife was not only permitted, but encouraged. Her absence from my life at that point seemed interminable, though, and I feared it was permanent.

At that point in my ponderings, Aoife would tell me I think about things too much.

Yep.

I lost track of the days. On what might have been Saturday, I

was helping Espo with lunch. I delivered a gigantic Italian sub up to Captain Groff in the wheelhouse. When I returned, I walked past Stanley in close quarters and he helped himself to a big handful of my bottom. He was lucky I wasn't holding a pot of chili, because he would have been wearing it.

"The fuck, dude?" I was about to remove my leg and beat him to death with it when Ramon got up and punched him in the mouth.

“¡No la moleste! ¡Su esposo está muerto!”

Stanley took a swing at him, but Ramon dodged it and rabbit punched him into a corner. Espo and Kirby broke it up before anyone was seriously hurt.

I said to Ramon, "Thank you, er, mucho...muy gracias," which translated to "a lot of very thanks." He knew what I meant.

When Captain Groff came down to refill his coffee, he saw Stanley's swollen lip and said, "What the hell happened to you?"

"I cut myself shaving."

"What'd you shave with, a hammer?"

Stanley didn't answer.

"Somebody want to tell me what happened here?"

Stephanie said, "It's nothing, Cap. A little misunderstanding, that's all."

"About what?"

Everyone was quiet, but he saw Stanley giving me a sideways glance. He turned to face me.

"I won't have you consternatin' my crew." Another linguistic first.

"I didn't do anything!"

"Do I have to lock you in a closet?"

At the mention of a closet (of doom) I jumped to my feet and pointed at Stanley. "This asshole grabbed my...um...asshole!"

Not sure why it came out that way, but there it was.

To Stanley's credit, he didn't deny it.

"Just got a little carried away, Cap."

"Ok. Are we all ready to start actin' like grownups now?"

"Yeah, sorry," said Stanley. "Won't happen again."

"If it does, you'll be walking home. Got it?"

He stomped back up to the wheelhouse to look at his charts and talk to other captains on the radio.

As of day three (maybe four?) I still wasn't allowed on the deck when the actual fishing was happening, but Espo went to bat for me about the life jacket. He prevailed, and I was released from my emergency flotation prison. That made it easier to do gear work and help in the galley.

That afternoon was clear and calm. I was making a loaf of garlic bread—heavy on the garlic[*]—to go with Espo's spaghetti and meatballs.

"I could help with the fishing part, too."

He raised an eyebrow.

[****]People who dislike garlic are not to be trusted.

I continued. "I mean, if I don't catch something out here on the actual huge ocean, it will be a missed opportunity I'd live to regret."

It also seemed a fair chance to put my non-agression pact with the Universe to the test. If there was a mortal mishap awaiting me, this was the most fertile ground ever.

But Espo shook his head. "Cap won't allow it."

"He lets me work on gear."

"You can't die from working on gear."

"You don't know me very well, do you."

"Working on deck's different. It's dangerous."

"Danger is my middle name."

"I thought it was Kate."

"Nope. Danger."

"Bonnie-Kate Danger Caldwell."

"That's right."

"I'll just go up and say, 'Listen, Cap, her middle name is Danger, so let's have her gaff the next line.'"

"Let me know what he says."

"I was being facetious."

"I wasn't."

We folded our arms and stared, but I blinked first.

"Hold on," he said. "I got an idea."

He disappeared for a minute and came back with a spinning rod. "You might catch something with this."

I instantly abandoned the garlic bread, which was done anyway.

"Gimme."

I took the rod from him. It was rigged with ten-pound line and a shiny lure like you'd use for mackerel.

"Can I go fishing now?" It was slack time, the deck was clear.

"I'd imagine so, but be ready to clear out if you see us coming."

I stood at the rail casting and reeling, but not getting any bites. Stephanie came out on the deck so I reeled in my line and got out of the way.

"No, you ain't botherin'. Any luck?"

"I don't think there are any swordfishes here."

He chuckled. "You'd better hope not."

"Huh?" I had pictured myself battling a graceful, leaping swordfish, a majestic duellist of the deep, a mighty king of the northern seas I would vanquish with yada, blah, etc.

"If you was to tie into a sword, he'd steal your rod. Might even steal you, if you don't let go right quick."

"Oh." I made another cast and reeled it back.

Stephanie shook his head. "Want a pointer?"

I didn't, really—I learned to fish from my Grampa, thank you very much—but didn't want to be rude. Or stupid, but it was probably too late for that.

"Reel 'er in," said Stephanie. "Now open the bail and let out

half your line. Just let 'er sink straight down."

I did all of that.

"Now you jig 'er up and let 'er fall, no more'n two-three foot each way."

He watched me for a minute, ascertained that I was fishing correctly, then went back inside.

Hmpf. Like I needed a guy named Stephanie Brenda to show me how to fish. I was an old hand at this. He was probably in there laughing it up about how he told me to jig the lure up and down, and Miss Fancy-pants Writer-pants was actually doing it! Haw, haw, what a numbnuts!

Then my rod bent in half.

After an hour or so I went in to get a knife from Espo.

"What for?"

"To gut my fish."

"You...caught one?"

"Six. But I only kept four. I think they're haddocks."

That's what they were.

Once I got the fillets off, it was enough to feed everybody so Espo put away his meatballs, made hushpuppies instead, and fried up a mess o' haddock. I made the coleslaw. The hardworking men of *Katie Didn't* feasted with great relish, and declared that I was not a complete waste of space. I was so happy to be only a partial waste of space.

On the day we finally headed home, I was sitting up in my

usual spot behind the wheelhouse, watching the crew work the last longline of the trip.

Right in the middle of things, Stephanie made a *Come on down!* gesture at me, so I climbed down the ladder to see what he wanted.

"Watch Kirby."

Kirby was gaffing the fish and dragging them onto the deck. I watched him land two smallish swordfish.

Stephanie said, "See how he does that?"

"Yep."

Kirby handed me the gaff. "Next one's yours."

I watched a couple of empty hooks go by as I waited for my chance to fuck this up somehow. The third hook held a struggling swordfish. Stephanie hauled on the line and yelled "Marker!" which I took as my cue but it wasn't. It meant 'hundred-plus pounder.'

I got the point of the gaff into it and was instantly confronted with another mathematical impossibility.

Woman x seventy pounds divided by fish x one hundred pounds/armed.sword = X

X being my immediate and gruesome demise.

Stephanie heaved on the line and Kirby grabbed the sword. If not for their help, that fish would have given me the ol' Nantucket

Sleighride all the way to the Caribbean. That would have gone better for the fish than me. I would have been equal to X.

Once we got the swordfish on deck, Kirby said, "That one'll go one-forty, maybe one-fifty. Good job, Miss Caldwell. You went to sea and you caught a swordfish."

My four bears would have been proud. I had never paced the widow's walk, but I was an actual widow, and I had walked in other places. And now I had achieved what was surely one of the most seafaring feats imaginable.

Not only that, the Universe didn't kill me, even when it had such a golden opportunity. That had to be worth something.

On the way back to New Bedford I helped clean up the boat and keep the fish iced down. The crew of *Katie Didn't* were tired, but uniformly and abundantly cheerful. I figured they were just happy to be going home, but Stephanie clarified.

"All that fish in the hold? That's a nice stack of hundred dollar bills for every man on board. Cap put us right onto 'em this time out. Gonna be good to see the pay table."

I went back to work with my scrub brush and got Kirby and Ramon to join me on a few choruses of *Haul On the Bowline*. Ramon's lack of English had him singing *Hole in the Pauline*. Too bad for the *Pauline*, I guess.

I said goodbye to the crew when we landed in New Bedford, sparing a hug for Espo since he'd welcomed me into his galley and talked me off the ledge. I walked over to where Captain Groff

stood on the wharf, tending to the weigh-in of the catch. I lingered there in silence until he turned to me and said, "Yeah?"

"Thanks for the ride, Cap."

He nodded, but didn't speak. I walked up the dock to find a pay phone.

"Hey, Caldwell." It was Captain Groff. "Next time you feel like rowin' across the Atlantic, come down here to New Bedford."

"Er, ok?"

"We'll take you fishing." He winked.

Just like Espo said, he was a pussycat.

I found a phone outside a bar called AnnaLee's Dockside. A message scratched on the wall instructed me to call Monica J 4 a good time. That was tempting, but I called Phil Hackett instead.

"Bonnie-Kate, how are you?" It was the first time we'd spoken since I called to tell him Wendell was dead.

"A little better. Can I ask a favor?"

"Anything at all."

"I need a plane ticket. Logan to Portland. One way."

"You're in Boston?"

"Sort of."

"Why are you sort of in Boston?"

Phil and William Pruitt had become somewhat paternal toward me, and knew how frequently I got myself into trouble. Phil wasn't nosey, just concerned.

"I went to the Grand Banks on a swordboat. It was an

accident."

He made some exasperated noises, started to ask a question (How in the name of my Aunt Fanny...), then decided it would be better not to know. I was expected to do ridiculous things from time to time, this was one of them.

Phil said, "Call me back in twenty minutes."

I did.

"United flight 721 out of Logan, departing three-twenty pm."

"Thanks, Phil. Oh, and could I get a little money, too? I need a ride to the airport and I don't have my purse."

"From where?"

"New Bedford. You could Western Union it."

"Listen, Bonnie-Kate, where are you, exactly?"

"AnnaLee's Dockside, New Bedford Harbor. It's a bar, or something."

"Stay there. I'm sending a car."

"Thanks Phil."

I went inside to see if I could get someone to buy me a real strong drink. The bartender took note of my uneven gait, heavily sutured face and generally disheveled appearance that came from wearing the same clothes for more than a week. It had been a few years since I'd seen it, but I recognized his expression: *a small brown prostitute has infiltrated my place of business.*

He was about to kick me out when Stephanie came in and said, "Get this lady a drink, Flynn. Anything she wants."

"You know her?"

"She's only the most famous author on the entire Eastern Seaboard."

That wasn't anywhere near true—Hello? J. D. Salinger? John Irving? Stephen King?—but it was nice of him to say it.

Stephanie looked at me and said, "What'll you have, Miss Bonnie-Kate?"

"Rum and Coke, please."

"A good strong one, Flynn. One-fifty-one, and don't be stingy. She's earned it."

Before I could stop her, a heretofore unknown persona emerged: Southern Belle.

"Why, Mr Stephanie, I do believe you're trying to get me inebriated."

That came out a lot more flirty than I intended, but Stephanie just laughed and ordered himself a dark Lowenbrau.

We sat in a booth with a view of the harbor and traded idle chitchat during which I learned his actual name: Cyrus Pembroke.

"Don't you wish people would call you Cyrus? Or just Cy?"

"Where's the fun in that?"

So Stephanie Brenda had his priorities in order. Like my Aoife, the top item on his checklist said:

1. Will it be fun?

I also asked him why he chose swordfishing.

"I don't feel right with dry land under my feet. I'd rather be out there." He nodded toward the harbor. "Besides, I ain't smart enough to do anything else." He sipped his beer. "So, why do you write books?"

No one had ever asked me that, not in so many words. Or so few words.

"I don't mean to, it just happens. I don't know how to do anything else."

"Good paycheck?"

"Yeah, pretty good."

"Is it fun?"

"Not so's you'd notice." Even when the words were just pouring out of me it wasn't what you'd call fun. "But it lets me live by the sea."

"That's important?"

"Crucial." I took a gulp of the rum and Coke Flynn had mixed with the clear intention of putting me into an alcohol-induced coma. "I come from seafaring stock. I can't live without an ocean nearby."

I could see in his eyes that it all made sense now, why I'd gone out there to die. It wouldn't be a death so much as a joining up with the lifeblood of my four bears.

Well, ok...and death, too. I admit it would still be that.

He finished his beer. "You need a ride someplace?"

"I'm good, thanks."

On his way out, Stephanie said, "Hey Flynn, keep 'em coming over here. My tab."

It was a half hour before my ride showed up. I passed the time by removing all the stitches from my face with a pair of nail clippers I'd forgotten to return to Espo. The window of AnnaLee's Dockside made a poor mirror, but I could see a bumper crop of ugly new scars. There was a time when that would have bothered me.

I asked Flynn for another Coke, without the rum this time. There were demons waiting for me in Maine: bassinets, cribs, chainsaws—and no one left to confront them with. I would need my wits about me.

The Ocean, Huge and Actual

Comforting as Edgar's reassurances were, I was unconvinced. I was about to express my doubts when the front door of the cabin flew open and out stumbled Bonnie-Kate, blinking and yawning, wearing footie pajamas with sailboats on them, and frog slippers.

"Eefs! What are you doing here?"

"OH MY GOD, LITTLE CARROT-CAKE! YOU'RE ALIVE!"

She said something about cabbage, I didn't quite catch it.

I ran to her and wrapped her up in my arms, picking her up off the ground. I couldn't stop saying "omigod omigod omigod." Waves of joy and relief washed over me; I held her as if to never let her go.

"Eefs...put me down...can't breathe..."

"Sorry, Champ. It's just, we thought you were dead."

She made a face I couldn't quite interpret. "Nope, I'm not dead. See?" She jumped around a bit to prove she was really alive and not just faking it. She may have been *gamboling*, I'd not seen anyone do that before. Edgar had to restrain me from crushing her with another hug.

To Bonnie-Kate he said, "We were a mite concerned."

He wouldn't ask where she'd been since that would be too nosy, a breach of island decorum. If someone wants you to know where they've been, they'll tell you. To ask is to pry. That may have just been Edgar decorum, I'm not sure. But either way, I was not well-versed in it. And being lately from Kansas, I was bound by neither the rules of island nor Edgar decorum anyway.

"Where were you? We looked everywhere."

Edgar cringed, but just slightly.

"Did you check Massachusetts?" said Bonnie-Kate.

"Ok, everywhere but Massachusetts."

"I went fishing on the Grand Banks."

Edgar nodded like it was no more than he expected. "Any luck?"

"Six haddocks and a swordfish."

"Any size to 'em?"

"The haddocks ran three-four pounds. The sword went about one-fifty."

"Nice."

Bonnie-Kate was quite please wi' herself for having caught fish, and for trading a little shop-talk with a guy who spent the last sixty years catching things from the sea. But I still had questions.

"The Grand Banks? That's in Massachusetts?"

"We sailed into New Bedford. The Grand Banks are way the fuck out on the huge and actual ocean."

"Huge and actual," I repeated, recalling how hard it was to search out there. "Tell me about it."

"Not until after I get some sleep." She yawned enormously for emphasis.

Edgar turned to go, but stopped and said, "Coast Guard found your boat."

Her eyes lit up. "Is she ok? Can I get her back?"

"You'll have to take it up with them. Getcha some shut-eye. We'll sort it out tomorrow." He said *tomorry*.

Edgar climbed into his truck and went home for some shut-eye of his own. Bonnie-Kate and I went inside, ate some Pop Tarts, and went to bed. I spooned her like she was a dish of pineapple sherbet, only softer and warmer. And not so sticky, dontcha know.

We lay in one another's softness. I felt something I hadn't truly felt in much too long. I was suddenly afraid I'd made some really bad choices in my life.

"Hey, Champ, still awake?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Gotta tell you something."

"Please, no more bad news."

I felt her body go rigid, tensing up for the blow.

"It's not that. It's just that...I really love you. A lot."

"Love you too, Eefs. Can we sleep now?"

"I mean I really, really love you. More than I've ever loved

anyone before. When we thought you were...gone...I pretty much fell apart. I don't think I could stand it if you went away."

She rolled over to face me, our eyes locked. She touched her lips to mine and we just stayed like that a while.

We slept straight through until early morning. We woke up and showered (with some sexual stuff), (Earth-shattering sexual stuff), then Bonnie-Kate made three-minute eggs and waffles on an ancient waffle iron. I don't know how, but her cooking was always extra-delicious. Even the eggs tasted better than anyone else's, and she didn't even have a chicken, did she.

"Can you stay awhile?" she asked, slathering a waffle with butter and putting it on my plate. I made it a raft on a sea of syrup. She knew I favored breakfasts wi' syrup.

"I think so. For a little while."

She looked a question at me.

"When I got your letter in the post, I bailed out of Kansas faster than...than—"

"Faster than me bailing out of Kansas?"

"That's it. I told my job I had to leave but didn't say how long, just that it was an emergency. I might be fired. Aaron couldn't get away from his work or he'd be here, too."

"I'm glad you came, Eefs. I'm not sure why, though. I told you I was ok, didn't I?"

"Liar. Get up out of that." I dipped a bite of waffle in my three-minute yolk.

"Huh?"

"You were *not* ok. I could tell."

"I had a couple of rough days."

It was my turn to look a question at her, but she didn't answer it.

"So your boat disappeared at the same time as you, and you ended up fishing way out on the huge and actual ocean. Then you came back to New Bedford, which even I know is a deep-sea fishing town. They send boats out to the huge and actual ocean, they do."

"So?"

"Listen to me, little coal-mine. You've made no secret of your admiration for that guy who drowned."

"What guy?"

"Three Bears."

"Who?"

"You know, the one with the empty grave."

"Oh. He's one of my four bears."

"Not three?"

"Nope. His name is John Stephen Caldwell."

"I thought he was an Indian."

"Er..."

"So anyway. You've some strange ideas about drowning at sea, haven't you."

"Maybe."

"Tell me about it."

"Could we just be happy for a little while?"

"We could. Sure, let's do that." She'd tell me when she was ready, wouldn't she.

After a day or two she started writing again. I saw the change that always came on her when she was churning out a tale. She became more purposeful about everything, not just the writing. 'Twas almost as though she needed storytelling to keep her focused and moving forward with her life.

"Whatcha working on, little crow's-feet?"

"Cabbage." She picked up her coffee mug and frowned at it for being empty. "*Acadia Jennings*."

"Still?"

"Still and again. Phil thinks they can sell it."

"Ok then. Didn't mean to interrupt."

"It's ok, I'm going on a break."

"Cool. Let's do something fun."

"Like…?"

"Pretend swordfight? Naked yodeling?" 'Twas one of the warm dog days. Fierce mild.

"Naked swordfight?" she said.

"Yeah! And with yodeling, too."

"Perfect. Choose your weapon, wench."

I called the harpoon. Bonnie-Kate chose Lady Jane's pointed stick.

I said, "She should have a sword, shouldn't she."

"I keep forgetting to stop at the sword store."

She went back to the bedroom and came back wearing just her wooden leg and pirate hat, carrying a stick that didn't quite qualify as a shillelagh. Cutest pirate you ever saw. I stripped off and got the harpoon from the wall. We went out back to square off and yodel at the universe in the sun.

Bonnie-Kate was a lot better at swordfighting than me. She kept dodging my lunges and whacking me on the arse with her stick. Instead of yelling 'touché!' she yelled 'tushy!'

"T'isn't fair, lass. I can't whack your bum wi' this." I gestured with the harpoon, which would draw blood if used as a bum whacker.

She gave a pirate laugh. "Ye had your choice of weapons, lubber!" She easily won the day. "Ye be vanquished, ye scurvy nudist!"

We stopped a bit to catch our breath, then did some insanity yodeling while brandishing weapons.

She led off with, "In the name of St. Waldo the Objectionable, I damn you to the fires of Hell!"

I came back with, "In the name of...um...St. Sandy, the Arf!"

Then we spouted gibberish. Hers was fierce loud. 'Twas all maximum craic.

No boats came to gawk, but Edgar showed up right in the middle of it. Bonnie-Kate had come such a long way from her

days of lights-out.

"Oh, Hi Edgar." She made no effort to hide herself, nor any of her lovely bits. "We were just yelling at the sea."

"Dear Lord, cover yourself, girl."

He clapped a hand over his eyes and turned away. Either one would have been enough, but he was sore embarrassed. I also didn't try to hide meself because, although I was no Miss August Centerfold, I was blessed wi' great big Irish titties and a little white Irish arse currently adorned in red marks from being whacked by a tiny Asian pirate. I hardly ever got to show them off.

Edgar stammered, "I'll come back later," and started backing away.

I walked over to him. "It's ok, how's-a-going?"

"The, um, Coast Guard's got your boat down to Bar Harbor." He kept his eyes to the ground.

Bonnie-Kate clapped her hands. "How do I get her back?"

"Pick 'er up any time."

"They don't deliver?"

"Ah, no."

"She won't fit in my car."

"I'm going over next week. I'll grab her on the way back." His mainland car was a truck.

That settled it then, and Edgar took off like his eyes would catch fire if he saw us naked again.

I said to Bonnie-Kate, "I should go back over with him when he goes." That felt all wrong as soon as I said it.

She didn't answer, just nodded a bit sadly.

"I'd rather stay, wouldn't I."

"Aaron needs you."

"Sure, Aaron."

We looked at each other for a few seconds.

"Unless you need me to stay?" *Please make me stay*.

"I'll be all right. Really, this time. I'm better now."

"Ok."

"We still have a few days."

"We have, haven't we."

Looking back, weren't we acting the eejits. We both wanted the same thing but neither one would say it. Bonnie-Kate looked dejected but drew her weapon again.

"*En garde!* Tushy!"

The next day we walked up Topgallant to bring back the log splitting tools left behind from the accident. Bonnie-Kate didn't know as she could face it.

"What if there's still blood up there?"

"I don't think so, Champ. There's been rain."

"I'll have an atomic meltdown."

"Why don't you stay home and work on your book? I'll take care of this."

"Thanks, but no. I have to deal with this or I'll never be able

to go lumberjacking again."

I went in first and found no blood. There were some split logs about and she cried a little on seeing Wendell's work there on the ground. I cried a little, too. That poor girl. I wondered if she'd ever catch a break. I ached, wishing I could stop bad things from ever happening to her again.

We collected the tools and put them in the shed, then went up with the wheelbarrow for the logs.

"Holding up, little cactus?"

"Cabbage."

At times she'd just say 'cabbage' out of the clear blue, no telling why. An odd one, she was.

She went on. "Yeah, I think I'm good. With this part anyway."

"There's more parts?"

"Stone-n-Ivy's full of baby stuff. I don't think I can go there."

We stood there a second and all you could hear was the breeze in the pines and a far-off seagull crying. Baby stuff was too much for us. We tried to comfort each other but there's only so much you can do when a wee bairn's died. We had a cry.

After a time I said, "Listen, honey. I'll go down and take care of all that when I leave, on my way out of town, won't I. It's ok?"

She looked at me with wet eyes. "Key's under the stone frog."

"What to do with the...items?"

"Donate it somewhere."

"Goodwill. Got it."

"Thanks, Eefs."

The first thing I did when I went over was to call Aaron from Jonesport.

"Hi, I'm on my way back."

"Well, hey. Don't go to any trouble."

"What're you on about?"

"Nothing. I love housecleaning and baloney sandwiches. Especially after a ten-hour workday."

"Aaron, I'm sorry. It was important. She was in deep trouble."

"I swear, you worry more about her than me."

I hadn't a comeback to that, it was true. In the silence that followed, I heard a woman's voice in the background.

"Who's that?"

"The radio."

"The radio said your name in a sleepy voice."

"No."

"Radio Free Aaron?"

"Aoife, stop it."

"Ninety-five point seven on your FM dial, all Aaron, all the time!"

"Aoife."

"Get your fucking whore out of my house, ok dear?"

"Aoife, listen to me."

"No." I hung up and walked to Edgar's truck. "Looks like I'll

be staying after all." I tried to disguise my trembling, but didn't do it so well.

Edgar didn't quite pry. "Everything ok?"

"Never better, let's go get *Alice B*."

I fumed all the way to Bar Harbor. Edgar would have taken me to Stone-n-Ivy if I'd asked, but that was too much. I called my family before we went back to the isle. Ma and Da weren't so fond of my Bonnie-Kate at the time, thinking she'd led me down the twisted path of lesbian perdition. Da even regretted his small role in connecting her wi' Phil Hackett, who made her rich and famous. They mostly dealt with our love by pretending it wasn't happening. They were still sympathetic over Bonnie-Kate's miscarriage, and felt that was a very hetero thing to do, ergo, their assistance would not be promoting an alternate lifestyle. It took some doing, but I talked them into clearing out the baby stuff for me.

I thanked them, and Edgar, and we set sail for Mille Jours with *Alice B* in tow.

When I got back to the cabin, I found Bonnie-Kate on the cliff with her fiddle, playing *Maid of Fyfe*. She stopped when she saw me.

"No, keep playing, Champ. I love this one." I picked up the verse:

There once was a troop of Irish dragoons

Came marching down through Fyfe-i-o
And the captain fell in love with a handsome serving maid
And the name she was called was Pretty Peggy-o

We rocked it all the way to the end, where the poor captain died for the chambermaid of Fyfe-i-o.

"Eefs? Why are you back?"

"Because I'm in love wi' you, that's all."

"But...Aaron—"

"Trouble on the homefront, little crapshoot. Big trouble."

"Oh, no!"

"What's the time, lass?"

"I dunno. Three-ish, four-ish?" The only clock she had was a tide clock.

"Can we get drunk? In absolute ribbons? Would that be the craic?"

"Sure, if it'll help."

"It never does."

"Then?"

"Rum or whiskey?"

We had Cuba Libres. The first two felt warm and good. I didn't usually cry until well past the fourth, depending on how strong we mixed them.

"I called Aaron from Jonesport."

"Is he ok?"

"He's mad at me. And he's cheating wi' some fucking geebag wagon (annoying areshole, female), a great sow, no doubt."

"But you guys are so good together. I thought you'd be with him forever."

"It's seriously minus craic, but I half expected it. He's frustrated."

"Why is he—"

"I can't get pregnant. It seems."

"Oh, no."

"We've been after it for two solid years. No luck."

"Maybe it's him?"

"No, we had the tests, didn't we. 'Tis me alone."

"You could adopt."

"I want my own son, he says."

"Well, that's pretty fucked up."

"And now he's mad because I'm not home yet."

"You do seem to be taking the long way back."

"Yeah. Now I'm mad."

"Eefs. You need to go home and fix this."

"Not yet. If ever."

Bonnie-Kate said ok, and took a healthy slug of her drink. "Are we in ribbons yet?"

"Getting there, Champ. Cheers." I raised my glass and downed it.

For being only a wee bit larger than a good sized watermelon, Bonnie-Kate held her rum surprisingly well. By her third, she'd grown giggly, but not yet stupid. I was what's called 'a tall drink of water' so it took me longer. We arrived at stupid as evening fell.

We felt antsy, the way drunk people do, which never leads to anything good. I didn't have the sense not to say, "Let's go do something."

Bonnie-Kate didn't have the sense to say, "Let's not."

We took the bottle wi' us.

I can't remember much after that, but we woke up on the porch around sunrise, naked except for our shoes. 'Twasn't a good sign. We'd been out a-roving. Nude.

Better there than in town. We spent the following day hung over, banjaxed in the extreme.

In the next week, Bonnie-Kate came around a bit, not feeling her most recent losses quite so badly, and I grew less angry with Aaron. For most, marital infidelity is a deal-breaker, but Aaron and I were different. How hypocritical of me to complain about his fucking sow when I was off in Maine, lobbing the gob and trading pussy-licks with a lass who made my whole marriage feel like a tragic mistake? I had to set out for the Great Plains again to see if Aaron and I could repair what was on the whole not a bad relationship.

"I don't like leaving you here by your lonesome, Champ."

"I have a TON of work to do. I'll be fine."

"And what if you feel sad again?"

"I've had a lot of practice."

"Don't forget about me, Bonnie-Kate. If something happened to you, sure, I'd be destroyed.

"Don't worry, Eefs. We'll make it somehow."

When Edgar took me over she came along, saying she had another demon to face down.

We left the island on a grey, windless morning in September. The tide was low. At Sloane's Fall the sea washed over the rocks where Wendell drowned and Bonnie-Kate lost her child. Without a word, she walked out onto the open deck. I froze.

She raised her arms to the sky, jabbing middle fingers into the chilly sea air. Her partly amputated finger made the gesture even more obscene. She spat at the deadly rocks as we sailed by.

"*NOBODY LIKES YOU EITHER, MOTHERFUCKERS! AAAGH!*"

She came back into the wheelhouse smiling.

"Feel better, little cashbox?"

"Cabbage."

"Sure, cabbage, obviously."

"Yep. A little better."

There's times when you just need to throw out some futile rage. I went out on the deck and yelled, "AAAGH!" at no one in particular, blowing off my own futile rage. Couldn't take it home

to Aaron, could I.

Sure, we'll fix this. It's worth saving.

Edgar looked at us like we were a matched set of loonies, but the jury was still out on that, wasn't it.

Failure is Always an Option

When Aoife was here she helped me put away all the Wendell and baby items that would have hounded me into the blackest depths of despair. By 'helped,' I mean did it entirely herself. I held on to Wendell's fishing boots, and kept his schooner among the seabirds. I also kept his shark face on the wall with the whaling gear.

It's a delicate dance, choosing what to keep and what to pack up. You never want to forget the ones you've lost, but when the wounds are still fresh, too many reminders will break your heart over and over again. You might ruin it forever, if it wasn't already. Not all reminders are demons, but all demons are reminders, and of the most painful sort.

The day Aoife returned to the hopeless wasteland that is Kansas, I stood on my cliff, gazing out to sea.

"Oh, great. More demons."

Sky blue and bright red lobster buoys bobbed on the waves, each with Wendell's initials and license number burned into it with a branding iron. These demons had to be exorcised.

Edgar had not yet broached the subject with me, thinking it might be too much to deal with at the moment. If he was waiting

for me to be less of a mental case, he might as well take off his boots and get comfortable. It's going to be a while.

The remnants of Wendell's career presented a number of options for their ultimate disposition. The single most valuable piece of his equipment, *Althea Rose*, had a permanent berth on the seabed near Sloane's Fall, but there were miles of rope, and hundreds of buoys and traps, some of which imprisoned lobsters whose fate was now in my hands.

My options were to keep his gear, sell it, or give it away. I was leaning to the latter since I'd been meaning to do something charitable with some of the wealth I had no apparent use for. This seemed a good enough place to start. Perhaps the Universe would approve, and leave me the fuck alone for a while longer. I didn't have a clue about how, where, or to whom one donates used lobster traps.

Armed with my flashlight and a plate of brownies (with chocolate chips, pecans, and maraschino cherries), I walked down the mountain to seek Edgar's counsel. Before leaving the cabin, I paused a moment in front of my nautical display to spare a thought for Wendell and my four bears.

"It's just me now. I'll do the best I can."

I didn't say don't expect much. They already knew.

When I got to Edgar's I found him listening to the *NBC Evening News* on a small black-and-white TV that was turned to face the wall. It was given to him by his sister in North Carolina

who didn't understand the hard truth about TV reception on Mille Jours: there was none.

I tried to watch a show on Edgar's TV once, but the picture only resolved into vaguely recognizable shapes once every few minutes, then dissolved again before you could tell what you were looking at. Trying to make sense of it only made me angry. Edgar's experience was much the same, that's why the TV faced the wall.

We feasted on brownies and the news turned into *WKRP in Cincinnati*. We listened to that, trying to guess what the cast looked like. I found out later I was way off on everyone but Johnny Fever.

When *Who's the Boss* came on, Edgar shut off the TV. He pictured Tony Danza as a fat, cigar-smoking mafioso-type, and was not a fan of the Brooklyn accent. To be fair, I'd met Brooklynites who found the Maine accent indecipherable and therefore intolerable. I liked all kinds of accents, but I knew some of them were an acquired taste.

"I guess I should do something about Wendell's traps and stuff?"

"Prob'ly so."

"I thought I'd give them away to someone who needs them."

Edgar nodded, waiting for me to explain the perfectly unworkable way I intended to go about it so he could say *Ayup, you could do that*. But the joke was on him.

"I have no idea how to do this."

Now he had to tell me what to do. I claimed this as a small victory.

"I know a fella over to Great Stag who'll take 'em. His boy's just starting out, needs all the gear he can lay his hands on."

"Will he come and get them?"

"Reckon so." He looked into the distance as he spoke, still mulling it over.

"Do I need to do anything?" I asked. It's always best to not have to do anything.

Edgar was still grinding brain cells about something, so I gave him time. After a while he said, "I don't suppose—" but then he trailed off.

"What? What is it?"

He scratched his whiskers. "What if you were to hang on to a few of those traps. Say a hundred or so."

"Why would I do that?"

"Maybe you'd like to fish 'em? Between writing your books, I mean."

I never considered that an option until he mentioned it. At first blush, I liked the idea quite a lot. At second blush, it looked impossible.

"I don't have a lobster boat."

"You can use mine."

"Oh yeah?"

"Sure." He'd been thinking on this for more than the last thirty seconds. "You went with Wendell some, didn't you? You already know the ropes."

"I only know the sternman part. Wendell did everything else."

"Maybe I'd come along? Give you some pointers?"

Now I understood. Edgar had sold off his gear when he retired, and now he missed being out there on the water. I thought about how it would be to put down my pen a day or two a week and go fishing. I evaluated the proposition using the Universal-Standard Aoife Doyle/Stephanie Brenda criterion:

1. Will it be fun?

Yes. Resoundingly. But there was a problem.

If I fished a few traps, I might present myself to the public as a lobsterman who also writes books. That might add considerably to my appeal with a certain element of the book buying public. It wasn't like I'd ever denigrated the industry and then exploited it for my own benefit. Such a thing would be unconscionable.

Wouldn't it be selfish, though, for me to contribute to the pressure on a limited resource when I already had buckets of money hanging around? When the men and women of the fishery broke their backs every day to feed their families and pay their bills?

On the other hand (this is the third hand now, if you're keeping score), here was an opportunity to carry on the seagoing legacy of my beloved four bears, and of my late husband.

Also (fourth hand), as a woman in the business I could make myself a standard-bearer for generations of seafaring females to come. So what if they're not Caldwells? I might even use my questionable if not outright fraudulent notoriety to further the cause of women already toiling in the industry. This could be a movement. I could be an agent of far-reaching social change, ushering in a new era in which strong, independent women were no longer excluded or frowned upon for exercising their inalienable right to yada, blah, etc. Insert more lofty ideals here.

Or it might just be fun. That would be enough, wouldn't it?

I kept one hundred of Wendell's traps. I could have fished alone, but that wouldn't have been as much fun as having Edgar for a sternman. I didn't feel entitled to call myself a lobsterman when I was only doing it as a hobby, but Edgar said it was ok and made a point of calling me 'Cap.' There was another entry for my resume: Writer, Murderer, Lobsterman.

That got me thinking about other things I might take on and fail to master. I'd often thought I'd make a good *bon vivant*, but was unsure how to become one. Or what it meant. That's got to look good on a resume. *World-Class Bon Vivant*. Maybe I'd try it next year.

I lobstered until November, then we brought all the traps in

for the winter. There were still lots of lobsters out there at that time of year, but you had to go out a long way to catch them. Also, the weather after New Years will sometimes try to kill you.

That year I finished redrafts of *Acadia Jennings Has Lost Her Mind*—whose title at publication was shortened by four words—and *Five Nautical Miles*. They received modest critical acclaim and sold in quantities both stupendous and absurd. It seemed there was a not inconsiderable portion of the reading public who would pay top dollar for a grocery list, as long as it had come from my pen.

Malcom and Dillon kept throwing great wheelbarrows of cash at me, but I wasn't counting anymore. As promised, I made charitable donations here and there, mostly to animal rescues, mostly anonymously. I sent a particularly hefty chunk of change to the wildlife rehab where Aoife continued to hold one of the few salaried positions. If she knew the donation's source, she never said so.

She and Aaron patched things up—I confess to mixed feelings about that—and our contact grew sporadic again. That was entirely my fault for living beyond the reach of Ma Bell. I missed Aoife terribly, but refused to interfere in the life she had chosen. I'd already interfered quite enough.

The final edits of *Five Nautical Miles* necessitated a trip to Wiscasset, but only for a few days. I took advantage of an off day to run down to the courthouse and complete the process of

having my name legally changed to Bonnie-Kate Danger Anne Caldwell. Anne was given to me by Mom and Dad so I didn't want to change it, I just added Danger[*]. Now no one could say I lied to the crew of *Katie Didn't*. Although, technically, I still did. It was less of a lie now though.

With the work on my early manuscripts complete, I set free the next story simmering in my imagination. The working title was *The Universe Can Suck It*, but Phil Hackett nixed that. I offered to change it to *I Hope the Universe Gets Hit By a Tidal Wave Made of Fire and Angry Bears That Are Also On Fire*.

That's why it ended up being called *Tenth Moon*. Yaaawn.

That one was knocking around in my head so long I'd amassed three hundred pages of notes. That would have expedited the first draft had so many of them not contradicted one another.

Around that time, I also did some research on becoming a bon vivant, and by research I mean looked it up in my big-ass dictionary.

Bon Vivant: *A person who lives luxuriously and enjoys good food and drink.*

Ok. That was pretty subjective. The word luxury had a number of meanings, so I chose the one that fit me best:

[****]With the option to hyphenate again: Danger-Anne. I like that a lot.

Luxury: *A foolish or worthless form of self-indulgence.*

Insanity yodeling and naked swordfights both fell into that category, and were pretty fucking *bon*. I was halfway there already. I also had the food and drink requirement covered. I never ran out of Pop Tarts and rum, both of which I *enjoyed*. I ate a lot of lobster, too, because it was a cheap meal and the perfect excuse to consume melted butter by the quart. Yum. And that, friends and neighbors, is about as *vivant* as it gets. If I'd known it was this easy, I would have become a *bon vivant* long ago.

I wondered if someone might hire me to do that, or if *bon vivants* were supported by donations from those who enjoyed their presence at social gatherings. They'd probably want *bon mots* from me, too, but I could write up a list of them and keep it on me. So, no pressure.

I could do that. I bet it would be easier than writing books, and more fun.

On the other hand, I'd have to move someplace fancy, like Hong Kong or Liverpool, and I couldn't wear jeans all the time.

I guess I won't be *bon vivanting* any time soon, but I'm still fully qualified and I'm adding it to my resume.

Somewhere between the end of *Five Nautical Miles* and the beginning of *Tenth Moon*, Phil and William found out my secret island was Mille Jours. When I declared my intention to spend

the winter there alone, they, specifically William, raised a subtle objection.

"Have you taken leave of your senses?"

"I don't think so, but if I have, then I'm hardly in a position to make that determination, am I?"

"I'm told winters on your island are not so much a season as a cataclysm."

"That's not true."

"Are you sure?"

"Well. Only partly true."

"Which part?"

"It's a cataclysm, but no one gets killed by it. Very often. Hardly ever, really."

"Can I be frank?"

"Can I be Margaret?"

He ignored my M*A*S*H joke. "We would prefer that you not take such unnecessary risks."

Translation: We would like to continue making tons of money from your books. Your death would interfere with that.

"I do my best work on the island. You don't want mediocrity, do you?"

"Why can't you write in Wiscasset?"

"I can't explain it without sounding like an absolute nut-job."

William didn't say *We already know you're a nut-job*. He went with "I'm listening."

"I'm a different person when I'm on Mille Jours. I can feel the presence of the ocean resonating in my bones. I'm able to join with my four bears in a synergy of spirit that transcends everything the Universe throws at me. And my senses feel...nourished. Remember what the dormouse said?"

"Dormice don't talk."

"*Au contraire!* Quoth the dormouse, *Feed your head*."

"Meaning?"

"Mille Jours feeds my head. The main doesn't. How is my head supposed to think up a good story on an empty stomach?"

"All right. Ok. I obviously can't change your mind. Will you please not do anything to put yourself in harm's way while you're out there?"

"Did you say *danger*?"

"No. I didn't."

"But that's what you mean. You want me to stay out of DANGER."

"Right. Like skating on thin ice, or operating a chainsaw."

I didn't tell him I planned to do both of those things. Possibly at the same time. Possibly naked.

"I'll have you know that Danger is my middle name."

"No it isn't."

"Is too! Wanna bet?"

I won a box of Cubans off of him. If I didn't live alone on an island I could have won so many bar bets.

In December I returned to Mille Jours for the winter to finish writing *Tenth Moon*, which was only halfway done. I told Malcom and Dillon not to expect word from me until spring. Through no fault of my own, they heard from me a lot sooner.

I was to meet Edgar in Jonesport at 10:00am for a ride, but I arrived early. I turned Poppy over to Aubrey's Garage where they kept an eye on her for me, then I walked down to the dock to wait.

Late December didn't normally see that much action at the pier, but I found it bustling with fishing-related activity. Bundled up in my trusty Carhartt, I parked myself on a stack of crates, put on my Ray-Bans and turned my foot around backwards to see if anyone would notice. A ruddy fisherman in orange oilskins walked by and did a double take, then went on his way scratching his head and looking mystified.

The next guy stopped in front of me and took off his hat.

"Excuse me, ma'am, are you all right?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, your foot's on wrong."

I acted surprised and said, "Pfft. There it goes again." I wrenched it around in the proper direction. "Damn thing."

"Does that a lot, does it?"

"It's an old sports injury. Some people get a trick knee—"

"And you got a trick foot."

"Yep."

"What sport?"

Football came to mind but I didn't resemble a football player at all, not even in the ultra-peewee league.

"Footb...I mean, women's bobsl...no, figure skating." It seemed like you could get a trick foot from that.

"Right. That's a tough sport."

"I skated in the Olympics in, um, Germany? Munich, Germany? Remember those?"

It was the only Olympics I could think of. I hoped he wouldn't recall that those were summer games.

He looked doubtful. "Is that so." He may have been onto me.

"Women's Individual, short program."

"Did you win?"

"Took silver."

"Wow. I'm impressed."

"Don't be."

"Why not?"

"I just made all that stuff up."

"Ok." He tapped out a Camel, but didn't offer me one. "Why?"

"I'm a pathological liar."

"Really?"

"No. Not really."

"Then?"

"I just do that sometimes."

He looked at me like I was written in Sanskrit. "Wait a minute. I know you."

"I'm sure you're mistaken."

"You don't have a place over to Mille Jours?"

"I might."

He stuck out his hand. "Willie Gompert, at your service."

"Why is that familiar?"

"We spoke on the radio. I'm the harbormaster."

He was the guy who called the ambulance for Wendell on the day the whole world imploded, the ambulance that took me instead because Wendell was at the bottom of the sea. The day that would haunt me forever.

I looked at him like he had a bomb strapped to his belly.

"You're not a demon, are you?"

He grinned. "Depends who you ask."

He had a kindly face, and had never given me a ticket for exceeding the two-hour berthing limit. People without boats rarely got those. I decided he was a coincidence and not a demon, although they can be hard to differentiate sometimes.

Edgar and I crossed the bay under a restless sky that amused itself by thundering and lightninging[*] at us, which was unusual for the time of year. When we arrived on Mille Jours, the Universe was lying in wait for me.

There had been some snow, just enough to dust everything

[****]What?!

white and let the variable winds swirl up little snow-devils. Shortly after I disembarked from *Four Aces* I slipped on a patch of it. My prosthetic foot turned sideways and shot out from under me. In trying to prevent a fall, I twisted my real ankle, landed on my back, and whacked my head on a dock piling. I saw stars but not little tweety-birds like they have in cartoons. That was disappointing, and my ankle hurt like the proverbial motherfucker.

First—and most important—I checked for witnesses. Edgar was busy putting *Four Aces* on the mooring, so my mishap was perpetrated without benefit of an audience. I hobbled over to his truck to wait for him, thinking if I did everything right he would never know that I'd stupidly hurt myself again.

But the fun was just beginning.

I leaned against the truck, minding my own business, thinking about the novel I'd (ostensibly) come here to write.

BOOM!

Everything went white, then black, and I was picking myself up from the ground fifteen feet from where I'd been standing. I smelled ozone and thought someone had tried to assassinate me with dynamite. I knew there were people who didn't like my books, but *come on*.

Edgar came running up from the dock.

"Oh my God, are you ok?"

"I think so." There was ringing in my ears. I took a quick

inventory of my parts, they were all there. "Yeah, I'm fine. What the fuck was that?"

"You didn't see it? You got hit by lightning."

On reflection, I was amazed this had not happened before. Regularly. When I walked back to the truck, Edgar spotted my limp. I explained it away.

"Must've landed funny."

I said that through gritted teeth, trying hard not to scream or cry. Edgar inspected his truck and found the aerial melted and the passenger side window blown to smithereens. Peals of thunder kept rumbling so we got out of there *toot sweet*[*].

When he dropped me at the cabin I started a fire and put the kettle on for tea. I'd acquired a taste for Chamomile, Earl Grey and Orange Pekoe. I drank tea, ate a Pop Tart and fell asleep on the couch.

When I awoke, the sun said it was late afternoon. I wondered why I slept so long. Maybe lightning makes you sleepy.

I raised my head from the pillow and noticed I'd left a few strands of my hair on it. An alarming amount of hair, really. I brushed my bangs out of my eye(s) and a great swatch of my own personal hair came out in my hand.

"Aaagh!"

Yelling aaagh might seem a foolish thing to do, but when your hair starts falling out a handful at a time, I'd like to see you

[****]That's French for 'in a great big fuckin' hurry.'

come up with something better. When I went to the outhouse to pee, and learned that hair had fallen out, too.

"Noooo! I look like I'm seven!"

Then I remembered I wouldn't need to impress anyone with my vagina any time in the foreseeable future. Crisis averted.

I went back inside to sweep up all the hair I'd pulled out and put it in a plastic bag. I couldn't throw it away, what if my hair didn't grow back? I'd have to glue it back on somehow. Glue would probably work better than duck tape for that.

Once I stopped panicking, I made a five-step plan.

1. Do not look in any mirrors.
2. Wear hats all the time.
3. See if it starts growing back.
4. If 3 = yes, celebrate.
5. If 3 = no, freak out, row to the Grand Banks again.

I was too flustered to do any writing that day, so I drank some whiskey and went back to bed. When I woke around 4:00am it felt like some stubble was coming in but I couldn't be sure. By evening, though, it was clear my hair would return. I just needed to stay home a few weeks, continue wearing hats and avoid Edgar. Admitting this to him would be to confess being bested once more by the goddamn Universe. I was not keen on being made a public laughingstock. Again.

I was never much for hats, so I didn't have many. A couple of ski caps and a goat-roper was about it. The goat-roper was the warmest and made me look even more Asian. In the closet of doom I found two more: a Patriots ball cap of Wendell's, and a sou'wester hat, which is the yellow rain hat you've seen on that notorious purveyor of fish sticks, the Gorton's Fisherman. If Mrs Paul had one, she never wore it. I tried it on and I don't like to brag, but I made that thing look good, even with my head covered in peach fuzz.

After a few weeks I could no longer deny my need of human contact so I slapped my sou'wester hat on over what was now little more than a crew cut, grabbed a bottle of gin, and went down the mountain to find Edgar.

Halfway through our second game of cribbage (an evil card game that makes you count to fifteen) he broke with decorum.

"What's the hat for?"

"Found it in the closet. Pretty cool, huh?"

"You know that's a rain hat."

"Yep."

"Did you notice it ain't raining here in my living room?"

"You don't say." I looked around the room as if such an outlandish claim needed empirical verification.

Edgar moved his peg several miles ahead of mine on the cribbage board, then tried a new tack.

"Your hair's different."

"Yep." I studied my cards but felt him waiting for me to explain.

"Sooo..." I said. "How about those...um...that sports team that's been, ah, playing sports...lately?"

"Which team?"

"The Ocelots?"

"Yeah, they'll prob'ly win the Stanley World Bowl this year. Everything ok with you?"

I got that question a lot. "Sure. Fine."

He tried to formulate his next query so as not to offend me or seem like he was too much in my business. Failing that, he went straight to the heart of the matter.

"Did you shave your head?"

Realizing his subtext was *Are you having any sanity-related difficulties?* I thought carefully before answering. I could either suffer the embarrassment of having been denuded by the Universe's lightning bolt, or I could give Edgar all the reason he needed to call in the men with straitjackets and giant butterfly nets.

I fessed up.

"The lightning made it fall out."

"I never heard of that before."

"Me neither. But it's coming back in ok." I found the courage to remove my rain hat.

Edgar looked me over and said, "It's kind of...different."

"How so?" I'd been avoiding mirrors, at least while hatless.

"More poofy."

I figured it looked that way because it was so short. For the record, my hair had always been black, straight, and just off the shoulder. A utilitarian cut for my low-maintenance life.

When I got home I braved an unhatted peek in the mirror. Looking back at me was a young Asian/Pacific Islander boy with poofy hair and a fucked up nose. I found this curious, but my mirror gazing degenerated into ogre-facing and I didn't think about it much more.

My hair ultimately grew back poofy in the extreme. I looked like I was wearing a big black helmet, or peering out from the inner recesses of a small, dark cave. When I put on a ski cap, my hair stuck out like something black and furry was exploding on my head at that exact moment. This was how my mortal foe had left me permanently marked (as was its habit), but I had in reality emerged victorious. It was much too cold for such foolishness, but I stripped naked and dashed out to the cliff in my frog slippers.

"I LIKE IT POOFY! HAHAHA! I WIN AND YOU SUCK!"

I ran back inside, only falling down in the snow once, which also sucked. Then I had cocoa with marshmallows and sat down to do some work. I put my clothes back on, too, because I didn't have anything to prove that day.

On Christmas eve, Edgar and I made a trip to the main for

supplies. I planned to stay on the island for the next three months, so I bought stuff by the case. Mostly canned goods, rice, beans, pasta and beverages. Since I still operated at the mental/emotional level of a ten-year-old, I also laid in a huge supply of Pop Tarts and Tootsie Pops. Also, lots of booze—mostly Captain Morgan's—and extra violin strings. I already had a box of Cubans I won from William, and would continue to award myself one on completion of each chapter. With adequate supplies of firewood, gas, propane and kero already on hand, I thought myself well-provisioned for the coming winter cataclysm.

When I met Edgar at the Jonesport Landing, he was antsy.

"Got weather on the way. Best head 'er."

"What weather?"

"Big snowstorm comin', then wicked cold." *Snowstawm*.

"I love the snow. It makes everything so pretty."

Edgar was not interested in pretty. He made a face like he smelled something rotten. I checked my pits to make sure it wasn't me. Pretty sure it wasn't.

By the time we got back to Mille Jours and unloaded our supplies, the sky had gone slate grey. A few snowflakes whipped past on a freshening nor'westerly wind.

"So, Edgar, what are you doing for Christmas?"

"Might maybe listen to a football game on the TV."

"Come on up to the house. Dinner's at six."

"I wouldn't want to impose."

I offered a menu he couldn't refuse: "Meatloaf with gravy, home fries with onions, buttered lima beans and homemade biscuits." Non-traditional, but...yum.

"Well."

"And there will be pie. Obviously."

"Six, you say?"

"ish."

"What can I bring?"

"Scrabble."

Not only did Edgar save me from a Christmas spent alone and crying (Holidays are the mother[fucker] of all demons), I won two out of three of the scrabble games. I had to prove QUINCUNX and HARUSPEX were real words, but then he accepted defeat gracefully.

When he went home to catch the Ocelot's game, we exchanged casual goodbyes I now wish had been more heartfelt. Always remember, each time you say goodbye to someone you love, it could be the last. Make it count. Every time.

By the day after Christmas the snowstorm was stalled over the Great Lakes. I double-checked all the shutters. It was coming, just running a little late. The temps would soon drop to single digits so I closed off my unused rooms and camped in the great room to make best use of the woodstove. That was standard practice for island winters.

The frigid, splintery seat of my outhouse had tormented the

winter bottoms of me and my four bears for too long, so, in luxurious *bon vivant* fashion, I set myself up with a latrine bucket next to the woodstove. This may not have been standard practice, but it was just fucking brilliant if you don't mind me saying so. Let the snowstawms do their worst, I would remain in the lap of elegance, drinking my Captain Morgan's, eating my Pop Tarts and peeing in the warm comfort of my own personal pee bucket.

Satisfied that I was ready for anything, I stoked the fire and sang terribly in the kitchen while my dinner of Top Ramen (SO elegant) simmered on the stove.

> Let every man drink off his full bumper
> Let every man drink off his full glass
> We'll drink and be jolly
> And drown melancholy
> And here's to the health of each true-hearted lass

My Grampa taught me that one when I was but a tiny seafarer. I hoped someone would sing it at my funeral.

I thought I'd go for a little walk after dinner, before the night got cold. When I opened the front door I found the vaunted snowstorm raging. The wind screamed and the red needle of my outdoor thermometer pointed—*j'accuse!*—at fourteen degrees. I would not normally be daunted by a little snow, but calling this a

little snow would be like calling World War II a little misunderstanding. I closed the door and drew the bolt against the icy winds, banked the fire and dimmed the lamps. I burrowed into the quilts on the couch and slept.

By morning—I think it was morning, but with the shutters latched it was anyone's guess—the cabin was cold enough for my breath to come out in little white clouds. I stirred the embers and threw a couple of logs on. I dressed in long johns, flannel lined jeans and a thick cable-knit sweater, over which I donned a pair of thermal coveralls. The standard island winter uniform. Thus toastily attired, I uncapped a Scripto and spent the morning(?) writing by lamplight.

The wind kept howling and the cabin sometimes groaned like a tired old man, reproducing the sounds that made me clutch my mattress in terror as a child. With the benefit of age (but not wisdom), I felt reasonably sure the cabin would not go airborne. Wisdom, had it been present, might have led me to consider other ways in which my sanctuary might be in jeopardy.

But no.

When I broke for lunch—spam, cheese and egg sandwich on rye toast—I again tried to venture out. I opened the front door to a wall of snow up to my forehead. The wall promptly collapsed, knocking me to the floor. With broom and dustpan I scooped up the snow, banishing the white intruder to the outdoors whence it came. I faced a major snow removal project in my near future. I

dreaded it, so I procrastinated to the best of my ability. I closed and bolted the front door again, pretending to know nothing of the looming chore. The snow could wait, I had important literary work to which I must attend.

It turned out snow, a minion of the Universe, did not like being told to wait. I returned to my work, heedless of the snow's impatience.

Over the next day and a half, I finished writing Chapter 18 of *Tenth Moon*, slept on it, and completed a meticulous redraft for William to shoot full of holes in the spring. I put the cap back on my pen and added the chapter to seventeen others in manila envelopes in the desk drawer. I took a polished brass Zippo from the pocket of my coveralls and lit a celebratory Cuban. It was my first cigar in months and made me dizzy enough to sit back down in my writing chair, not to be confused with my favorite chair, the creaky Windsor.

The fuzziness passed without injury. I picked up my violin and continued playing *Spanish Ladies*, singing with the fat Cuban parked in the corner of my mouth.

> We'll rant and we'll roar, like true British sailors
> We'll rant and we'll roar, all on the salt seas
> Until we strike soundings in the channel of old England
> From Ushant to Scilly 'tis thirty-five leagues

Scilly is pronounced 'silly'. If I lived there I would wear clown pants and big shoes all the time.

I danced around the room as I played and sang, an awkward spectacle you should be glad you did not witness. The cigar gave extra resonance to the Edward G. Robinson quality of my voice. That would be useful if I ever found myself in a band again, especially one foolish enough to make me sing.

After the festivities I crashed on the couch for a while and woke up feeling positive about my progress. That was a stupid thing to do. Way premature.

While squatting on my bucket, I noticed it needed emptying, because you don't really want a big bucket of piss in your living room if it can be helped. I put on my Carhartt, ski cap (*poof!* went my hair), gloves and snow boots, then went to see about that shoveling I'd put off for too long.

I'd only lit one of my four hurricane lamps so it was dark in the cabin. When I opened the front door I found a wall of snow filling the doorway from top to bottom, admitting no light (or dark) into my humble and poorly lit home.

My snow shovels were in the shed with the Willys. I would have to get past this wall somehow to get the tools I needed to get past this wall somehow.

Ugh. Fuck.

The snow just stood there mocking me and failing to get the

hell out of my way, so I kicked it. It ceded no ground, but I fell down, landing on the floor on my unfrozen and splinter-free bottom. I had scarcely dented the snow monster, which was, as I just learned, packed solid under its own weight.

Assuming no more than a particularly bad drift, I took down my harpoon and jabbed at the white wall. It offered firm resistance and no sun (or moon-) light. I hauled off and rammed the harpoon in up to the hilt, but this, too, was a huge mistake. The upper portion of the drift collapsed into the cabin, knocking me backward again. I kept my footing, but kicked over the latrine bucket. I watched in horror as a gallon of my own personal urine spread yellowly across the painted boards of my floor.

Ugh. Fuck. Again.

I was halfway through mopping up the piss water when I realized the snow I dislodged had yielded no sign of access to the outdoors. It was a day and half (best estimate) since I first found four and half feet of snow at my door. Just how much fucking snow had fallen, anyway? I remembered telling Edgar how much I liked the snow. The Universe must have been listening.

"We're supposed to be having a truce, you asshole! Lightning bolts and blizzards are a direct violation of the Grand Banks Accords!"

Never trust the Universe. It lies.

With the piss emergency mopped up, I turned my attention to the snow mountain in my entryway. It was now melting, and

could not be sent back the way it came. No problem, I'll just throw it out the back. I walked down the hall to the closed-off part of the cabin, but found the back door no less blocked than the front. Someone had dropped a fuckload of snow on my island.

I applied my limited and questionable Yankee Ingenuity to the problem. I used a broom and dustpan to scoop the snowberg into a sixteen-quart stockpot normally used to boil lobsters, then emptied the pot into my bathtub, whose drain I had plugged lest the runoff freeze and rupture the pipes. (Yes, I was on PTA sponge baths that winter, if you have to know everything, Nosy Rosie.)

Using the harpoon, I assailed my captor from many angles, but made no progress to speak of. A barrage of scurrilous invective yielded nothing. I tried scraping the snow away with my gloved hands but found it too dense, as if it had been tamped down by the Jolly Green Giant building a snow fort.

Forced to conclude I was dealing with more than a mere snowdrift, I arrived at what I believed was a sober and reasonable assessment. I had two options:

1. Panic.
2. Close the door and pretend this isn't happening.

To be safe, I did both, in that order. I may not be smart, but I am thorough. The panic option manifested in wild flailing with

the harpoon to loosen the snow, then raking it out by hand. After an hour of manic labor, I'd only advanced three feet. I found no daylight and had created another snowberg that had to be removed to the bathtub.

Exercising Option Two, I closed the door, made a cup of Earl Grey, and made copious notes for chapter 19. I would wake up tomorrow and find all the snow melted, and tropical birds serenading me from the trees.

I found small comfort in the short-lived fantasy. When I opened the door again I was not greeted by sunshine and parakeets, but a fresh wall of snow by which my scant three feet of progress had been obliterated. That was totally unacceptable. I did some yelling and stomping around, but it didn't help any. There was nothing left but to start digging again.

Alternating between the harpoon and my hands, I made it a little farther than last time. I still found no trace of sun, sea or sky. Pity. I really wished I could see how the island looked. A modest snowfall made it beautiful, after all this it must have been melt-you-in-your-tracks gorgeous.

I stopped for a meal but didn't know which meal it was time for. I felt like chili dogs so I ate two, felt guilty about the second one, then accidentally nodded off on the couch with a Tootsie Pop in my mouth. I ruined a throw pillow with sticky red drool.

I dreamed I was crossing the bay on a motorcycle, but it caught fire halfway to Jonesport and sank. Exactly the sort of

thing that would happen to me in real life.

I was awakened by a loud *CRACK!* but didn't know if it was real or in the dream.

On waking I lit three lamps and got back to digging. Things were starting to piss me off. I was missing out on all kinds of fun stuff, like ice skating, lumberjacking, running the generator, emptying my pee bucket, etc. I kicked the snow again, without falling on my ass that time, and called it names. 'Syphilitic whore' was among the better ones.

Then it was time for more tea and Pop Tarts.
I decided on coffee instead of tea, so I brewed a strong half-pot. This was, of course, (say it with me now!), a huge mistake.

Strong coffee, as you may or may not know, sometimes works like a large dose of Ex-Lax (whose active ingredient, I think, is strong coffee). The effect was immediate and I was faced with an emergency. The pee bucket was NOT for number twos, but I couldn't get to the outhouse, which was. Time was not on my side, so I did the only thing I could do: went into my snow tunnel, dug a hole off to one side, and, well...ahem. I'll spare you the details but will offer this: Until you've been forced to wipe your ass with snow, you do not know the meaning of *discomfort*. I mean, fucking *brrrrr*. I was soon to experience unimaginable levels of even greater discomfort, but didn't know it yet.

I dried off my shiny clean bottom with a kitchen towel (never to be used in the kitchen again) and sat in the Windsor with a

blueberry Pop Tart, trying not to think of what I'd find on the ground beside my front door when the spring thaw came. I got up to stir the fire (in addition to snow-breaking and squatter-killing, harpoons make great woodstove pokers) when *BANG!* an onomatopoeia like a gunshot rang out from somewhere up in the rafters. I ducked instinctively, looking up just in time to see a huge timber take a nose-dive and demolish my couch.

Abandoning my harpoon and spewing Pop Tart crumbs, I bolted for the safety of my snow tunnel. I do not bolt well, ergo, I didn't make it. As the cabin roof collapsed into my great room, a giant log hit me from behind, knocking me face-first into the snowberg on the floor and pinning me there.

Of course my cabin is collapsing. This is how I will die.

With gritted teeth I steeled myself for the end. The roar of destruction drowned out my thoughts. The roof caved in, walls broke apart and fell, windows shattered. In less than one minute, more than two hundred years of Caldwell history were reduced to rubble. In the silence that followed, I slowly came to understand that I wasn't the least bit killed. I heard a hissing noise, and dripping water.

Oh, no! If it gets in the pipes they'll freeze and burst!

No. Wait.

Bigger problem now, right?

By the light of the one hurricane lamp that was somehow spared, I surveyed the damage as best I could from where I'd

gone *splat*. The first thing I saw was that my snow tunnel had collapsed again. Had I made it there, I would have been struggling for my last breaths right about now. The log that knocked me down had saved my life. That, and my inability to bolt effectively.

Wait a minute. If I was pinned to the floor by a giant timber, shouldn't I be screaming in pain?

With no small effort, I got my head turned around enough to see the five hundred pound piece of wood that lay across me, supported by my prosthesis just enough to keep from crushing my real leg. I unzipped my coveralls and wriggled out, leaving the mangled prosthesis behind. It was the one with the trick foot, but I could always get another.

I wrestled my coveralls from under the log and put them back on. I needed a safety pin to fasten the empty leg up out of the way, but didn't have one. I didn't have much of anything at that point. There wasn't room to stand, so I fiddler-crabbed my way to the one hurricane lamp, dragging my empty leg behind me. I held the lamp up to get a better view of the destruction. I found it utter and complete.

I had been charged with the care of my four bears' legacy, and now look at it. All the relics I held so dear, crushed, ruined, destroyed. The bookshelves had collapsed. The carved seabirds and Wendell's schooner were god-knows-where beneath the rubble. In the last place I'd seen my beloved Windsor chair, there

was nothing but a pile of ice and snow, and timbers that had shattered like ancient bones.

They never should have left me in charge. Big mistake. Blaming it on the Universe—which was surely behind this in some way—did little to soothe my conscience, but it pretty well angried me up. I swore right then that I would one day make it up to my four bears, and that I would hold the Universe accountable.

I confess: all the devastation made me cry a little, but I reminded myself that crying wouldn't help, and was for pussies anyway, of which I wasn't one. I am Pioneer Woman, Lady Jane Blackmore, The Madwoman of Mille Jours. I am Bonnie-Kate Danger-Anne Caldwell. I fear no impromptu amputations, I pee in a bucket and wipe my butt with snow. If the Universe thinks the near-total destruction of my family home will break my spirit, I have some news for the fucking Universe: I am indestructible. Take that and shove it up your universal ass, you galaxy-spawning cocksucker.

As I was thinking all that, another piece of the cabin collapsed. Judging from the direction of the sound, it was pretty much the end of my kitchen. God! Damn! It! My Pop Tarts were in there.

It seemed a good time to shut up and figure out what to do. I must devise a plan of some kind, no matter how hopelessly misguided. I assessed the immediate threats.

First, with no woodstove, it was only going to get colder. I

might freeze to death. Second, I had no drinking water so I might die of thirst. Third, my kitchen was flattened. I might starve.

Ye can eat your other leg, wench.

"Shut up, you."

On the lone prairie we'd make a stew of sawdust and pinecones.

"You, too. You're not helping."

Eep a deeble bee?

"Leave me alone, you assholes! I'm trying to think here!"

Well, mercy me, Ah do declay-uh.

"Aagh!"

Fourth, I could conceivably run out of air. Somewhere in the darkness, more of the cabin came crashing down. Fifth, my home was still collapsing, I might yet be squashed like a cockroach. I should do something about that first.

The walls on either side of the front door had crumpled like cardboard, but the door frame stood uncompromised. I scuttled over there to take shelter from falling timbers, but found another cascade of snow sitting right where I wanted to park myself. I shredded my gloves raking that out of the way, but I didn't have much choice. When I'd made enough space, I sat within the stout timbers of the frame with my back against the upright, plotting my next move. Bits of the cabin continued to fall down around me.

I was dressed in a good set of layers, but was hatless and

coatless. Insulated boot(s) would have been good, too, but I left them by the stove. They were gone forever.

Being directly adjacent to what remained of the mudroom, I was able to snag a hat, but not a very good one. A thin ski cap with a Red Sox logo that would do little to keep my head warm. I put it on anyway so the people who found my body in the spring wouldn't mistake me for a Yankees fan.

I'd left my Carhartt jacket—the hardest working winter coat yet devised by man—draped over the back of a kitchen chair, so my chances of recovering it were right around zero. There was a lightweight red flannel jacket wedged between the broken sections of the mudroom wall, but I tore it in half trying to get it free. Coat-wise, I was basically screwed, but I'd be ok as long as I kept moving and generating body heat.

Which was going to be impossible because there was no room to move.

Fuck.

The next problem was thirst. I wasn't aware of being thirsty until I started thinking about it. I ate some ice chips but didn't think that would get me very far. Plus, it made me colder.

What I really needed—and fantasized about—was a big cafeteria-style coffee urn full of Maxwell House, Chamomile tea, or Swiss Miss (with mini-marshmallows). The odds of that just materializing were pretty slim, so I moved on to the food problem. On considering possible solutions, the word

insurmountable popped into my head with troublesome regularity. I admitted defeat. The problem of air flow appeared equally intractable; I could only solve it through escape.

So. Of the five identified crises, I had solved one. It was time for more digging. Escape was the first step toward wreaking merciless revenge on the Universe for its crimes against me and my family, and would go a long way toward keeping all that other stuff from killing me. I would leap into tunneling with renewed vigor. I crunched on a few ice chips and felt around in the sepulchral dimness for my harpoon.

Which I last used to stir embers.

And left by the woodstove.

Fuck.

I held up the lamp to see if any alternate snow tools would present themselves. They did not.

Looking around me, I spotted a tortuous path by which I might slither into what remained of my kitchen. I heard an ominous groaning of timbers from the same direction and decided against squiggling in there for fear of being flattened.

Lacking other options, I tried digging with my hands again, further shredding the fingers of my gloves. Why I expected a different result remains a mystery. That's the kind of thing a stupid person would do. I tried a little more harsh language.

"Fucking snow-fuck of a fucking fuck-snow fucker!"

That didn't help either, and sorely lacked variety. It felt pretty

good though.

The tortuous path to the ruined kitchen was looking better. I cried a little more about how hopeless everything was, then got on my belly and slithered like a garter snake into the darkness and creaking timbers poised to do me in. I crawled through broken beams and cabinets, bent pots and pans, and scattered grains of rice where a sack had been ruptured. I found a spot where I could sit nearly upright. A flick of my lighter revealed spills of flour and sugar, and broken china ahead of me. Beyond that were cans that had been crushed and burst open. I couldn't see much but I smelled Hormel and Dinty Moore.

Mmm. Hungry.

Snow tools, however, remained elusive. A stressed piece of lumber groaned, threatening to squish me for tarrying too long. I got on my stomach and wriggled back the way I came.

I was most of the way to relative safety when another flick of the Zippo caught a glint of polished metal. The shape of my flensing spade resolved faintly, ahead and to my left. It resembled a small snow shovel. I inched over there but it was just out of reach, on the far side of a barricade of wreckage. Its handle had been broken again, this time at about three feet. Still workable, for my purposes. I wasn't doing any actual flensing.

Collapsed timbers protested when I shouldered my way into them, but I got a hand on the spade, wrestled it free, and scootched myself the hell out of there. I heard stuff falling and

breaking in the place where I'd just been.

"Hah! Too slow, motherfucker!"

I laughed like a homicidal maniac, which worked well here, much better than in an upscale California restaurant called *Chez Cochons du Matin*[****] where if you laugh too maniacally too often, they will ask you to leave before your entree even arrives.

If you promise to stop it and behave yourself they will let you stay.

I had the lamb chops. Yum.

I sat by my lamp and ate some ice chips before digging again. I have no idea why I thought six or eight feet of tunneling would set me free, but I was damn near certain of it.

Guess again, Danger-Anne.

Standing in the door frame, I hacked at the snow with the flensing spade. It worked better than the harpoon and my progress doubled.

I'll be out of here in no time.

That turned out not to be true, but it got me thinking about what I'd do when I did escape from this mess. It wasn't like I'd be able to fix any of this. I would have to find Edgar, and humbly admit I'd let my house fall down. How embarrassing. He would ask if I shoveled the roof like I was supposed to.

After a few hours of digging, I had a good tunnel going. I stopped to catch my breath and eat more ice, but I was still

[****]House of the Morning Pigs. I think that was it.

parched, and my lips were cracking from the dry and cold. I lost a lot of moisture sweating under my layers, and expected dehydration to arrive momentarily. I didn't know how to spot it, just that it was bad. I sat in the snow and rested. My lamp had burned half its kero. I checked my Zippo to make sure it still worked, then put out the lamp to save fuel. That left me in the darkest dark I'd ever seen.

I heard the maddening sound of water dripping somewhere. I thought of all the juice I'd brought over: cranberry, grapefruit, apple, grape. There was also ginger ale, which mixes really well with cranberry juice and—what the hell—a healthy shot of vodka, too. That train of thought did nothing to ease my suffering.

I sparked up my Zippo just long enough to get oriented, then garter-snaked back to the kitchen in search of food and drink. Mostly drink.

I made it back to my sitting upright spot without causing further destruction. What I saw offered little encouragement. The beverage cabinet was crushed and its door pinned by a fallen beam. Liquid of an indeterminate color oozed across the adjacent floor. I would have lapped it up, but there was broken glass, too. The only cabinet I could reach held canned goods, most of which were smashed and wedged between collapsed shelves. Cans were worse than useless, they required a can opener I didn't have. I reached in there anyway because blind rooting in the dark seemed like a thing to do. My hand found some gooshy wetnesses

that could have been anything from Progresso lentil soup to Musselman's applesauce to some unfortunate combination of the two. Ew.

I was about to give up when I located a stack of small oblong tins. What the fuck? Then I remembered Wendell's fondness for canned sardines.

Wendell's sardine cans came with a little key to open them.

Feast! I rejoiced silently so as not to disturb any timbers.

I extracted the tins one at a time, ending up with six. Two in oil, two in mustard, two in tomato sauce. This feast would rival Alice's Thanksgiving. I keyed the lid off one of the cans (in oil) and gobbled up the slippery little fish, then schlurped down the remaining oil like it was the nectar of the gods. Gods drink a lot of nectar, or so I am told. That's what I'd have if I was a god. Nectar and Pop Tarts.

I shoved the other cans into the pockets of my coveralls and reached back into the cabinet in case I missed something. A creaking sound reminded me of my peril. I grasped blindly, wrenching free a large misshapen can whose label I couldn't make out in the dark.

Moving like quicksilver I scurried back to the door frame so nothing would have a chance to murder me. I lit the lamp again and emptied my pockets. The dented can said DOLE, famous for their pineapples and senators, and I gave a little fist-pump before remembering I had no way to open it. There was cool, delicious,

life-giving pineapple and juice in that can. A thin layer of metal was all that lay between me and tropical-fruity salvation. I whispered *aagh* since yelling was known to cause avalanches, no matter how desperately you needed to do it.

I grew despondent, and wondered if it was possible to bite through a tin can.

Skipping ahead a bit here...no, it's not.

I banged the can against various things but succeeded only in denting it some more. Then I thought of my flensing spade.

Two quick hacks against a corner of the stout iron blade and I banished the thirst-demons, then devoured luscious yellow pulp.

Sated and warm(ish), I sat in the door frame and closed my eyes for a minute, not intending to sleep even though I was awfully tired. I wished for my violin, but it was currently buried under the rubble of the great room, condition unknown. I sang instead.

> Me bully boys of Liverpool,
> I'd have you to beware
> When you're sailing a packet ship,
> no dungaree jumpers wear
> But have a big monkey jacket
> all ready to your hand
> For there blows some cold nor'westers
> on the banks of Newfoundland

I nodded off briefly, and dreamed I was wearing a big monkey jacket. Mmm...warm. I woke up with my tunnel collapsing again, leaving me half-buried in the snow.

Well, that sucked. But it could have been worse. I was sitting at the entrance when the tunnel came down. If I'd been inside...*splat*.

I didn't know it at the time, but it was still snowing. Veritable truckloads of the stuff fell from the sky, and a number of long-standing meteorological records for total accumulation fell, too.

I scrambled away from the door frame and reconsidered my circumstances. After a great deal of thought, I arrived at a firm and well-reasoned conclusion: What the fuck am I supposed to do now? Decisive action was called for. I was not some helpless damsel who wrings her hands and cries when everything goes wrong, so I didn't do that for very long. Half-hour, tops.

Then I picked up my flensing spade, hawked and spat into the darkness pretending it was the Universe's face, and started digging again. It was either that or lie down and die. My death appeared to be the Universe's objective, but I couldn't imagine what I'd done to set it off that time. I had no intention of cooperating.

I noticed the top piece of the door frame bowed downward, pregnant with the weight of snow. I held the lamp up and found cracks in the wood. When I tapped on it with the spade handle to

make sure it was stable enough to work under, surprise, surprise: it was not.

The frame collapsed, bringing with it further scraps of wall and roof, cutting off my escape route. Looking around in the aftermath, I ascertained the latest collapse had not deprived me of anything I required (except an escape route). Lamp? Check. Flensing spade? Check. Sardines? Check. Deep and abiding hatred of the goddamn Universe and its fucking minions? Check, oh hell yes.

I was still fully equipped for survival.

What if I just sat in the snow and ate sardines until help came? As much as I liked the idea of passive resistance, I had to be honest. Help wasn't due until June. It was now January. Five tins of sardines wouldn't last that long, not even with strict rationing to one fish per week. I listened for sounds of further collapse, but heard only the continued dripping of water. My mouth was a tiny Gobi Desert. I ate more ice.

I landed on a stroke of pure genius. I ate the last of the pineapple, then filled the empty can with snow. By setting the can on the lamp's chimney, I hoped to create drinking water, but succeeded only in extinguishing the flame. This was diametrically counter to my intention. Patience, please. Rome wasn't built of snow in a day.

I removed the glass chimney, relit the wick and held the can over the flame with a gloved hand, mindful of burning my fingers

or setting the shredded glove on fire.

I was congratulating myself on having invented a way to make drinking water when I made another important discovery: I wasn't careful enough, and my glove was now blazing like an Olympic torch.

Here's a useful tip: When your glove is on fire—and this will surely happen at least once in your life—waving it rapidly back and forth will not put out the flames. Rather, the increased airflow will feed the fire, thus putting the rest of your attire in jeopardy.

In a rare instance of quick thinking, I plunged my conflagrated hand into a mound of previously excavated snow, thereby averting pre-mortem cremation. The glove ended up interestingly charred but still serviceable. Sort of.

With a bit more trial and error (emphasis on error), I created some drinking water and started thinking I was on top of this thing. Which I was absolutely not. Not even in shouting distance, not even close. One thing remained clear: I had to find a way out or I would die.

Ideally, I would climb up the caved-in beams and pop out the top like a tiny stripper from a bachelor party cake. I looked up but didn't see a way to get there that wouldn't also result in my immediate and fatal dismemberment.

Armed with my trusty Zippo, I went exploring, belly-wise.

I scootched back to the kitchen to see if there were any openings

where I might start another tunnel to the outside. I couldn't find any. What I did find, sticking out from under a pile of snow, was the sleeve of my Carhartt jacket. I slithered over there and yanked on it but it was pinned down. I scraped away a bunch of snow and tried again, but it still wouldn't budge. The layers I wore would keep me from freezing, but if (more like when) it turned colder, I would need my jacket to stay alive. I removed more snow and flicked my Zippo to see why my coat still behaved as though it was nailed to the floor.

The end of a fallen rafter rested squarely in the middle of it. That was why.

I might have been able to shoulder that thing out of the way, but a much larger beam was blocking it. If I could just break off a corner of the smaller one, I could move it ever so slightly upward and warm coatiness would be mine. Warm coatiness equals not freezing to death, so it was kind of important.

I assailed the rafter with a couple of vicious karate kicks, but not knowing karate (get your stereotypes off of me!), failed to accomplish anything.

Then I hit on another stroke of genius. I scurried out and scurried back with my flensing spade. It was still as sharp as the last time my four bears used it to strip tons of blubber from a whale who was still using it. The blubber, I mean. I whacked at the offending rafter a few times and *viola!* my jacket was free. I dressed myself in another life-saving layer.

That was progress, but things still looked pretty grim.

I gathered up my Zippo and spade. Peering into the wreckage I saw a number of possible paths into the darkness. These would have challenged even the most skilled of contortionists, but there weren't any contortionists around so I had to do it myself. After a couple of dead ends I got through, but it was an awfully tight squeeze. A less protuberant bottom would have served me well.

At the back of the cabin I found a snowberg that had either fallen from the roof or entered through a breach in the wall, the latter indicating a potential way out.

I scraped some of it away by hand and didn't encounter anything impenetrable like a concrete wall or angry fire-bears guarding the exit. It looked promising, so I went back and got the rest of my stuff (lamp, sardines, pineapple can).

It was incredibly fortunate that claustrophobia was not among my neuroses, because I had precious little room to work. As I lay on my belly removing snow a freakin' tablespoon at a time, I had an epiphany.

All my life I had been deprived of things because I was too small to go on this ride, to reach the Pop Tarts, to do an effective cannonball, to play pro basketball. In my current difficulty, however, I had average-statured people at a great disadvantage. If I lived through this, which at present seemed unlikely, it would not be because I was smart, strong, or even tenacious. It would be because I was small enough to squiggle my way out of a

homestead the Universe had converted to a death trap.

Smallness was my superpower. Long live the tiny.

It took about a hundred years to uncover what turned out to be, as I had hoped, a rift in the wall just big enough to squeeze through, by which I could take up tunneling again. I had only the workspace one might find in a VW Beetle's trunk, that was why it took so long. As soon as I had enough tunnel to crawl into, I brought all my stuff along.

It had only been half a day since the collapse, but it felt like a week. My muscles ached like I'd just run to San Francisco and back. I chalked that up to the triple-whammy of hunger, thirst and cold. Wait, and lack of sleep. And a certain amount of abject despair. So that was a quintuple-whammy. I hardly stood a chance.

I dug like mad for a while, then lay back in my tunnel panting rapid-fire plumes of stinky breath (I had sardines, remember?). I entertained troublesome thoughts about my air supply. With the remains of my cabin flattened beneath an impossible snowfall, I didn't think you could get any oxygen in there short of airmailing me a couple of scuba tanks, which, if you're already going to the trouble, could you throw in some Shake-n-Baked pork chops, too? And a ripe mango, if you can get one. Thanks.

I melted some snow and had a drink before getting back to work. The going was periwinkle-slow because I had to shove all the loosened snow back through the little hole in the wall. After a

while I couldn't fit any more in there.

Another hundred years later (an approximate figure), I found the fallen back porch roof, and more importantly, a large open space beneath it. I now had a much more efficient repository for my excavated snow. Progress accelerated and I was soon beyond the cabin.

I tried tunneling upward, but the snow was deeper than I could reach with the spade, which must have been around seven feet. In meteorological terms, this was known as a *Christly Fuckload* of snow.

I went on, more or less horizontally. My lamp was low on fuel and I suspected it was burning up a limited supply of breathable air. I put it out and worked in the dark. It was a simple one-way tunnel, how lost could I get?

Answer: plenty.

After another century of digging (approx.) I hacked into a foreign object. Lighting the scene with my Zippo, I saw it was a tree branch. According to my horrifically flawed calculations, I should have been precisely nowhere near a tree.

Next question: where the fuck have I tunneled to?

I zigged around the tree to the left and was about to zag back when I saw faintly before me, shining like a glow-headed Jesus...LIGHT.

There was daylight on the other side of the snow ahead. I plunged with the spade and broke through. Cold air rushed in

and my tunnel was filled with the grey light of a late afternoon sky from which a great deal of snow was still falling.

I shouted something, but I don't remember what. I think it was "halla-fucking-looyah!" but I'm not really sure.

My ordeal was at an end. The Universe had once more tried and failed to kill me. I could go find Edgar now, and he would fix everything. Tears of joy streamed down the left side of my face since the right side didn't cry anymore.

I pushed my way past the intruding tree branches until my head emerged into glorious daylight. I was immediately and profoundly confused by the scene that came into focus: rusting auto parts lapped by a frigid sea upon which slabs of broken ice drifted. It was a long way down there.

Oh. I am on the edge of my cliff.

Closer examination revealed that I was perched on a ledge of snow protruding beyond the edge of my cliff, supported by not a goddamn thing. If it collapsed, I would plunge to my death.

Of course it collapsed.

I felt the snow shift beneath me and grabbed at the tunnel's walls in a futile attempt to stop my fall. I say futile only because such an action, had it succeeded, would have resulted in me falling to my death holding two handfuls of snow.

As it went, I only got one handful of snow. The other hand found the obstructing tree branch.

The snow beneath me broke away and fell to the rocks and car

parts below. My heart either stopped or skipped a few beats, neither one of which was at all helpful. I was falling, but falling wasn't the problem. Landing was the problem. I expected it to hurt at least as much as being stabbed in the eye, but all over, like getting a full body massage from a large angry man with a meat mallet.

At the last moment I grabbed the tree branch with both hands and hauled my top half back into the tunnel, which collapsed on me before I could get my leg(s) in. I screamed, but screaming while entombed in snow neither resonates nor satisfies. There was an upside: I was no longer falling to my death. I was being crushed to death by tons of snow instead. Whether that constituted an improvement was uncertain.

I gripped the tree branch with one hand and tried to punch the snow with the other, looking for a void I might pull myself into. Sadly, one does not throw effective punches while buried alive so much as lie immobilized, waiting to die. I found the whole thing pretty distressing because dying now would mean never seeing Aoife again, and she was the main reason I kept plugging away at the business of staying alive. I couldn't stop myself from entertaining foolish notions of us being together one day in something like permanence.

Like I said: foolish.

My leg(s) dangled from the cliff. Still more maddening was that my nose itched and I couldn't scratch it. I feared what might

happen if I sneezed while encased in snow. Would my eye(s) pop out? My eardrums burst? My hair fall out again? I was pondering these possibilities when I sneezed gale-force into the snow. Not a single part of me exploded or fell off. What did explode was the crust of snow covering my face.

I blinked in the darkness, amazed that I was now able to blink. In the darkness. Or at all. I tried turning my head and found I could do that, too, but not all the way around, like in *The Exorcist*, which would have been pretty cool.

A new question arose: Could I dig my way out of there using only my face? Human faces are not well-suited to snow removal, but that was all I had to work with. Sensing my hesitation, Pioneer Woman was right there with encouragement.

In my day, we used to plow the fields with our faces.

I pictured her raw-boned husband (Abe Lincoln) tilling the soil with one of her legs in each hand. While not exactly emboldened, I shoved some snow out of the way with my chin, just to see how it worked. It took a couple hours of frozen-faced misery to free one of my arms, but when I did I was able to pull myself away from the ledge and back into the tunnel without too much trouble. Famished and thirsty, I crawled back to where I'd left my stuff, further back in the tunnel.

I scarfed down a tin of sardines in mustard and had a very hard time not eating another. I wished mightily for a pack of Pop Tarts. Any flavor would have been fine, such was my desperation.

My Pop Tart dreams were unproductive, though. Sardines were a better source of protein, which I needed much more than a sugar rush.

I filled the pineapple can and was melting it when a chunk of snow the size of a toaster-oven fell from above and broke apart on my head. I yelped like a stepped-on puppy and scrambled down the tunnel, listening as more of it collapsed behind me. I went fetal and covered my head.

"No, no, no, please don't kill me."

I held my breath and waited to be snuffed out. The tons of snow didn't come. I dug out my Zippo. The first fifteen feet of the tunnel had caved in, robbing me of my lamp, sardines, and source of drinking water.

Overtaken by frustration, exhaustion and despair, I re-assumed the fetal position for warmth, and lay muttering in the dark. It was only a matter of time before the rest of the tunnel came down, and I was just so tired of the fight. I closed my eyes and listened for further movement of the snow. I heard only silence.

Arr, I never thought ye'd hang up your cutlass and scuttle yourself, scurvy lubber though ye be.

"You thought wrong."

But why, after ye've sailed so many leagues?

"Because fuck you. That's why."

My eye was leaking again. I closed it.

Farewell and adieu to you fair Spanish ladies…

"Aagh."

A new voice chimed in.

Don't forget me then, Bonnie-Kate.

"Eefs?"

Sure, it's me, little cabbage.

"Cabbage."

That's what I said, isn't it.

"No, you said…oh, wait. What the fuck?"

You can't give up now, Champ.

"Watch me."

If you don't make it I don't know how I'll go on.

She said something like that to me the last time we were together. It seemed an awfully long time ago.

I said, "You'd be ok," but she was already gone.

She wasn't really there, of course, no more than Lady Jane was. I was playing the usual stupid games in my head. How else could she get 'cabbage' right?

How long had I been under all that snow? I remembered back about a million years ago when I was so worried about running out of air. I was now in a small snow cave, closed off at both ends. I wondered how much of my oxygen I'd burned up with the hurricane lamp. Too much, I was sure.

When I sat up I felt light headed but figured it was from lack of food and water.

It's from lack of air, Champ.

"I thought you left."

Someone has to keep an eye on you.

"I can take care of myself."

I expected a snappy retort, but she was gone again. I said it once more.

"I can take care of myself."

Well, you'd better get to it, fool. (That was just me, thinking out loud.)

I felt around in the dark until I found the flensing spade's handle, then flicked my Zippo to see where I was. I sank the blade in, digging upward at a steep incline. I took deep breaths to overcome the thin air, but my dizziness only worsened. I increased my angle of attack until I had to kick toe-holds to keep from sliding back. My tunnel narrowed until it was just big enough for me to squeeze my hips through and keep putting snow behind me. Strange colors and patterns interrupted my field of vision, created at random by my oxygen-deprived brain. Until that happened, my impending death by suffocation seemed a distant prospect. It had now become imminent, and, believe me, everything changes when actual death is happening to you right fucking now.

Far from my usual resigned acceptance of doom, I was no longer receptive to being exterminated. I had stuff to do.

I thrust the spade as savagely as one in a naked swordfight,

digging out the snow by hand, heedless of the damage to my gloves. I expected each thrust to bring a flood of fresh air and light, but only found soul-crushing disappointment.

"How is it even possible for this much snow to fall in one fucking place?"

I made another vicious jab and caught a faceful of snow. For reasons unknown, that struck me as funny. When I heard my own laughter I realized my brain was sputtering, running on fumes. And that was funny, too.

My path narrowed still more. I considered the parallels between my tunnel and the birth canal.

"Hahaha! Paging Doctor Freud!"

My time was up. I would fail to be born.

The spade fell from my hands. When I tried to pick it up, my hands refused to obey. I scratched at the snow above me, dislodging another cascade that hit me square in the face. I brushed it away and opened my eye. I saw nothing but black, and wondered if this was what it was like to be dead.

A single tiny pinpoint of light came into focus from billions of miles away.

I was looking at a moonless night sky.

One star.

I shook my head and blinked twice, but it didn't go away.

If You Knew This Was Going To Happen, You Would Have Been Nicer To Me

Reaching for the surface, I tried to pull myself out but wasn't strong enough. I lay back in the hole and filled my lungs with the bitter night air. After a time my limbs were responding again and I was able to think clearly, which was odd because I'd never been able to do that before. I hauled myself out, finally on top of the snow instead of under it.

I tried to crawl away but the top layer of snow was a foot of loose powder. I sank in up to my shoulders every time I tried to move. I gave up on that right quick, flopped over onto my back, and lay in the snow watching more stars come into focus until there were thousands. I hadn't allowed myself to cry while I was digging out, so I got all caught up on that.

It didn't take long to feel the bite of the wind and single-digit cold. I needed shelter, but didn't know where to look for it. I once saw a wilderness survival show whose grizzled host recommended burying yourself in the snow to keep from freezing to death. I looked back at the hole I'd emerged from.

"You must be right out of your fucking mind. Not happening."

I reached back in to get my flensing spade and said goodbye

to the tunnel that now seemed more like a grave than a birth canal. Funny how perspectives change.

I took in my surroundings. What I saw was not at all comforting. The familiar landscape of my mountain had vanished, replaced, apparently, by the ice planet Hoth. To my left stood a copse of young trees that should have been a towering stand of old-growth spruces, with branches draped in lacy Spanish moss. That was all wrong, but they were the only thing resembling shelter I could see. In my first try at getting to the trees, I wasted twenty minutes trying to use the flensing spade as a crutch. I failed at that, but nearly succeeded in amputating my right arm.

So: crawling. Not so much crawling as dragging my weary bones through the snow. It took half an hour to get to the trees, and they were only thirty, maybe forty, yards away. After twenty-four (or more) hours of cursing the snow for being so dense, I now cursed it for being too powdery.

"Why can't I just have the right kind of snow, for once!"

I waited for an echo but the snow swallowed it up.

Hauling myself to the trees was a new adventure in misery. My gloves were so tattered I might as well have gone bare-handed. I sank so deep with every move that the snow weaseled its way past my fortifications, entering at my collar, up my sleeves and into my boot. Fucking snow.

I pegged the temperature at five degrees max, so cold it

burned on my exposed skin. I still wore a simple ski cap, between that and my poofy hair my head wasn't freezing but my ears were. I stopped and looked to the trees that were my destination, realizing they were in fact old-growth. So much snow had fallen that they were mostly buried in it. Only the top ten feet stuck out, hence my mistaking them for young trees. The upshot: three winters' worth of snow had fallen in just a few days. This was not supposed to happen.

Arriving exhausted at the trees, I nestled in as best I could among the branches. It wasn't any warmer but at least it broke the wind (Ha! Fart joke!). I sat with my back against a tree and pulled my head turtle-like inside my Carhartt and coveralls. It was warm in there but I was nearly incapacitated by my own body odor. My *god*. I reeked like one of those landfills where they get rid of used skunks. I was light-years from caring. I reminded myself ever so slightly of stinky French cheese. Yum? Er, no?

I rested about an hour but I don't think I fell asleep. When I peered out from my layers the sky was lighter in the east, out over the icy sea. The ocean was the only landmark not lost to the blizzard. I oriented myself to that, and set off in what I hoped was the direction of Edgar's house. He would probably know an old-timer's trick where you bang on a log with your hand and it makes your cabin stand up again. He knew all that kind of stuff.

The trek was so miserable I nearly surrendered to despair again. Frostbite attacked on multiple fronts and I had no answer

for any of them. My torn fingers left trails of red in the snow where I passed. I could have curled up in a ball to retain body heat, but I was starved, dehydrated and sleep-deprived, a combination that might conspire to kill me if left unchecked. I had to go on.

The wind came up again, whipping great powdery clouds of snow into the sky. Ice crystals blinded me, and felt like thousands of tiny razors jabbing me in the face.

I conjured up visions of warmth and sustenance awaiting me at my journey's end. There would be rum. There would be hot soup, venison steaks and Pop Tarts. There would be a fire crackling away in Edgar's wood stove, radiating life-giving heat. All that stuff seemed eternities away, but it spurred me on. Between here and there lay Hell on earth, courtesy of the motherfucking Universe.

It took four agonized hours to get to Edgar's. When I arrived, I found a crater in the snow roughly the size and shape of his house. I hardly had the strength for it, but I screamed anyway.

"Aaagh! No! Edgar! It's Bonnie-Kate, where are you?!"

I heard nothing but the wind screaming back at me. He was there somewhere—probably stuck in his collapsed house—and I had to dig him out. That's all there was to it.

"Attention!" I shouted. "I am speaking to hunger, thirst, pain and exhaustion. You are not welcome here. I need you to go fuck yourselves, all of you, right now. I'm afraid I must insist."

I slid down into the crater with my spade and started digging. In a couple of hours (during which I died several times, I'm sure) I found broken lumber and cedar shingles. I yelled, "Edgar!" at intervals but heard no answer. Had he escaped? Was he making his way to the cabin to find me at this very moment? What if we passed while blinded by the swirling snow? I climbed from the crater and stood at the top edge, scanning the snowscape for signs of movement. I saw only snow. The unbroken whiteness made my face hurt from squinting.

"How am I supposed to survive this if I can't find Edgar?"

Oh, right. I was supposed to die, not survive. Stupid question, sorry.

I climbed back into the crater and whanged the stump of my right leg on a piece of Edgar's broken house. I fell face-first into the snow. That made me really mad.

"Aagh! Would it be ok if just *one fucking thing* went right for me? Just ONE!"

I picked up the spade and attacked the snow like it had tried to steal my car.

"Fare-*WELL!* and a-*DIEU!* you *LAY!*-dies of *SPAIN!*"

Three feet down I met an obstruction I thought was another tree branch. I jammed the spade in again and gasped at what it uncovered.

Protruding from the snow was Edgar's hand.

I just severed three of his fingers.

His hand was frozen. No blood came.

I screamed, dropped the spade and scrambled out of there without looking back.

"No! That didn't happen, I didn't do it! I didn't mean to, no, no, no!"

The Universe took Edgar. *Stole* Edgar. From me, from his family, from Mille Jours, from the world. If there was any doubt remaining as to the Universe's foul and remorseless iniquity, that final abomination left it no room to stand.

Edgar was no more than kind, humble, and generous to a fault. When I lost my family twice, he stepped into the void without expectation, there to comfort but not pity, to guide but not direct, to have a drink and a laugh and send me on my bumbling way, feeling better about whatever was currently perplexing me.

The Universe must be made to pay. I could foil its plans by staying alive.

When I got to the top of the crater, my arms and leg(s) felt like they were made of stone. I fell down in the snow. I cried and dry-heaved, but there was nothing to puke up. My tongue was a shriveled piece of rawhide, I ran it over my cracked and bleeding lips for no apparent reason. I ate some snow, wincing at the cold of it. My tongue felt a little more like a part of me and not a foreign object someone had left in my mouth. Some of my fingers looked freezer burned and felt like they were on fire. That was

frostbite, but I didn't know it at the time. Say duh, Danger-Anne.

When I was done crying and dry-heaving, I gathered my thoughts and tried to figure out how not to die.

1. There were two more houses on the island, and no reason to think they'd been spared.
2. Assuming there was no shelter to be had on Mille Jours, I would have to find a way off the island or I would inevitably die.
3. To leave Mille Jours, I would need a boat.

I got on my hands and knee(s) and began once more to drag myself through the snow. I crawled in the direction of Mille Jours Harbor, where *Four Aces* rode on her mooring. It was one mile and several anguished hours distant.

For most of the afternoon I knew nothing but snowblindness, freezing cold, and searing pain. According to the sun, it was late afternoon when I got to the foot of the rise overlooking the harbor. Once I made it to the top, it would all be downhill from there. I would get aboard Edgar's skiff and row out to *Four Aces*, then I'd be on my way to warmth and safety on the main. And a double cheeseburger. And a large 7-Up (no ice!). And two orders of fries. Yum. It was almost over. I was going to survive this fucking thing after all.

I plowed my way up to the crest of the hill, prepared to fall

over dead with every step. What I saw when I arrived at the top made me scream again.

I was so sick of screaming.

Mille Jours Harbor had been transformed into a solid sheet of sea ice. *Four Aces* sat trapped in it, listing hard. That was the last thing I saw before the cold winter sun sank below the horizon.

Scanning the dusk-shrouded landscape, I saw no trace of the Massey or Carr houses. The only thing standing was the ruined chapel, only half-buried in snow. It didn't have a roof to collapse, hence its continued state of unflattenedness. That might be shelter.

While it was technically downhill from there, it was no less grueling. I sank so deeply into the snow that a person happening upon the scene would have mistaken me for a quadruple amputee.

It took another hour to get to the chapel. The door was buried and I'd left the spade back at Edgar's, so I had no way to dig it out. The snow on the southwest side had drifted to the top of the wall and cascaded into the interior. I scaled the drift, made sure I could get back out, and dropped inside like I was on *Mission: Impossible*, whose theme song played in my head the whole time. That was ok at first, but got annoying after a while. I wished it would knock it the fuck off.

The depth of snow in the chapel varied from one foot to eight

or ten. There was no shelter to be had in there. I took a quick look around and found nothing useful, just a few ancient hymnals.

Braced against a damaged pew, I stood up and slammed my head into the underside of the fallen steeple.

"Ow! Jesus Fuck! God! Dammit!"

Then: "Oh, oops...I mean...ah, sorry, sorry!"

Not that I thought Jesus was actually there. Just covering the bases.

My wits were a little slow due to cold and hunger (not because I was generally slow-witted, so you can stop thinking that right now, Mister Man). It took a moment to understand what I'd smacked my head on was dry wood. I picked up a hymnal and found what I needed: dry(ish) paper. At the base of the broken steeple I found shards of splintered wood.

Paper plus kindling plus wood equals fire. Equals remaining among the living, at least for a while.

"Nothing personal, Jesus, but I'm going to burn this motherfucker to the ground."

I made a little pile of combustibles directly beneath the fallen steeple. I took my Zippo from my pocket.

When I was a little girl[*] I used to sit in this very church with my Gramma and Grampa, listening to Reverend Hopkins's sermon and thinking how I'd rather be catching greensnakes or picking blueberries. Was I really going to burn down such a

[****]Yes, I know, I'm still little and still a girl, very funny, hahaha.

cherished memory?

Yep. You betcha.

I opened my lighter and spun the striker against the flint. A tiny blue flame appeared, guttered, and winked out before I could touch it to the torn paper.

In the next few minutes, I learned two crucial life lessons:

1. No amount of cursing will coax a viable flame from a lighter that has run out of fuel.
2. The sparks from a fuel-less Zippo cannot be used to ignite dry(ish) hymnal pages.

Final Score—Jesus: one, Me: zero.

"This is how you treat a guest in your home, who just dropped by to set it on fire?! Fine. But you'll be sorry when I freeze to death. You'll wish you'd been nicer to me."

To put the icing on my dissatisfaction, I wrecked up the place a little before I left. I felt better after that, but not much.

Muttering a few choice blasphemies, I resumed my wretched trek to *Four Aces*.

When I arrived at the harbor, the tide was out and night was all around me. The temperature had fallen by at least fifteen degrees, all the way from *This totally sucks* to *This will kill you very soon.*

I plunged down a long windswept slope to the water's edge,

where I found the shore littered with broken slabs of sea ice. A veritable minefield of obstacles, these were not designed for ease of navigation by the lower-leg deprived. I crossed it, but fell down a lot.

I was soon crawling across the main ice sheet that covered the harbor. Its rough surface quickly chewed a hole in the knee of my coveralls. My jeans and base layer grew miserably damp with a cold that felt like a drill made of ice boring a hole through my kneecap. So much snow had accumulated on my ski cap that I was basically wearing an ice hat, which everyone knows you only wear in the summer. Parts of me—ears, fingers, toes—felt like they were dying if not already dead.

I could fix this. I would board *Four Aces* and start the engine. There would be warmth. I would be able to thaw myself, even if I couldn't go anywhere.

Unnerving crackles came from the ice as I dragged myself toward the boat, but I kept on. Behind me was a slow, painful death, ahead was the slimmest chance at survival.

Four Aces stood guard over her small patch of open water with her bow riding low, listing heavily to starboard. The encroaching sea ice had cracked her hull. The deck was piled high with snow, but the enclosed wheelhouse was dry. I climbed over the gunwale and felt the boat shift. I knew from unfortunate experience that when a boat takes on water, it loses stability. I didn't think my scant weight could capsize her, though. The

chipmunk-to-aircraft-carrier ratio would work in my favor here. I put my shoulder to the wheelhouse door and crashed into the protected space. The sensation of not standing on ice or snow for the first time in days was so joyful I started crying again. I swear, I was not this much of a Sobby Bobby, but stuff was really getting to me.

The key was in the ignition, where Edgar always left it. I turned it to running position and hit start.

Silence. Not even a click. I tried again and got more silence. I looked around for an obvious problem and didn't see one, nor would I have recognized one had it bitten me on the bottom. What I did see was the VHF radio mounted above the dash. I gave a couple of fist pumps and felt the boat shift some more.

"Yes! I can call for help! They'll come and get me!"

I pressed the power button. No helpful indicator lights appeared.

Maybe there's a different button for that.

I snatched up the mike from its cradle. "Mayday, mayday, mayday."

No lights, no static, no answer, no nothing.

"MAYDAY! MAYDAY! *MAY-FUCKING-DAY GODDAMIT!"*

I threw the mike at the window, making a spider web in the glass. The radio was dead. No power to it, or anything else. Sparking the Zippo for a quick flash of light, I opened the companionway door and looked in. Despite my limited—read:

nonexistent—mechanical aptitude, I diagnosed the problem. The engine compartment was flooded and the battery was submerged and encased in sea ice. Irredeemable.

Four Aces had been my last hope. Now there was nothing.

I hung my head.

"I wasn't supposed to die like this. I was supposed to die at sea."

I felt tears on my cheek and was surprised my dehydrated body could still produce them. I tried to think of a new plan but came up empty. Unless the bay froze solid enough for me to drag myself to another island, one with people on it, I was extremely fucked. The last time the bay froze that much was back in the 1880s. It just didn't get that cold anymore.

So, as Aoife would say, that's me, finished. At least I'd be able to sleep in the wheelhouse that night, protected from the slashing winds.

The Universe took that away, too, rolling *Four Aces* hard-a-starboard. It's never wise to fall asleep on a vessel that is actively capsizing. It would have been so nice not to have wind and snow for my last night on the fucking planet. But no.

I took a last look around for anything that might keep me alive a few more minutes. I grabbed a pair of yellow oilskins and a roll of charts, then took a bright orange case from a bracket on the wall. I'd never asked Edgar what was in it, but assumed it was first aid, maybe some help for my fingers, and hopefully not

The swamped boat kept rolling. I bailed out of the 'house and got one foot up on the starboard gunwale. Before I could push off, it sank below the surface, filling my boot with murderously cold seawater.

Not sure where the strength came from, but I found it, and leapt from *Four Aces* onto the ice, landing like a sack of frozen herring. The ice sheet cracked where I landed, and freezing water percolated up to soak my entire right side. I picked myself up and crawled to where it was more stable. The first aid kit had broken open and its contents were strewn across the ice. There were a half-dozen pill bottles but when I picked one up it was oddly heavy, like it held pills made of lead. My Zippo was still in the pocket of my coveralls so I made sparks and read the label:

Aerial Signal Flare

Still in the case was a brand-new bright orange flare gun.
O, Joy.

FOOM! That's the sound a flare makes when you shoot one off. They're kind of pretty, slicing through the night sky with a tail of orange fire. I fired off two more, saving the other three for some purpose that had not yet occurred to me. They made a nice fireworks show, but I had little hope of anyone seeing them. Not

this far from the main. Might as well shoot one up my ass and get it overwith.

I wriggled into the yellow oilskins, wishing I'd done that before the broken ice soaked me. Wearing wet clothes in subzero weather was a torture to rival anything ever thought up in a medieval dungeon. That anal flare was looking better all the time.

I found the nautical charts and unrolled them to create a moisture barrier between me and the ice. I didn't know who would be protecting whom at that point, but I had salvaged the fucking things and I would by god get some use out of them. Hope (which was the enemy anyway) was fading.

"Yeah, you had your chance," I said to Hope as it receded into the merciless winter night. Before its departure was complete, Hope threw off a final bright spark.

You can use a flare to start a fire in the chapel. You can be warm.

Hope had failed to take into account my state of unmitigated exhaustion. The cold of my wet clothes—even my ever-reliable Carhartt was soaked—intensified my suffering to what may have been the limit of human endurance. I entertained wild fantasies about being doused in kero and set ablaze like a Buddhist monk protesting a war. Mmm...so warm. Get the fucking marshmallows.

"Ok! Fine! I'll go back to the fucking chapel!" Nobody said I had to be happy about it.

Hope wasn't listening anymore.

I put the gun and remaining flares back in the orange case. Holding the flare kit in one hand, I started crawling back toward the shore, a journey that would require an effort equal to the building of the Hoover Dam. I had to stop every few yards and marshal the last remaining shreds of my will to survive. My mind was no longer firing on all cylinders. That was one of Edgar's expressions. I wasn't too clear on what it meant, but I liked the sound of it. It occurred to me that Hope's voice had sounded a lot like Edgar's.

You really think so, Champ?

"Eefs?"

We used to freeze ourselves solid each November and stay that way until June.

"Pioneer Woman?"

Aar, ye know nowt of suffering until ye've dined upon your own limbs, wench. Without ketchup!

"Lady Jane?"

Greeble eep ba-doo-bee.

"Madwoman?"

You'll make it, my little cabbage. I know you will.

"Mom?"

Keep after it, hon. Be strong, don't give up now.

"Dad?"

And when it's done, what say we go catch a flounder for

lunch?

"Gramma? Grampa?"

Pfrt.

"What?! Who farted?"

Oh. That was Griff.

I stopped to rest, trying to get my brain on straight before I started talking to Wendell, or Petra Basov, or Fuckface.

By the light of the stars I could just make out the rocks of the shore. Between me and them lay dozens of slabs of broken ice. The tide had come in. The ice slabs were floating, and they wouldn't support me. I was stuck on the icebound harbor until the ebb tide, eleven hours away. It takes a lot less than eleven hours to freeze to death.

I inched closer to the water's edge. The ice under my hands cracked and broke off from the main ice sheet. I gasped at the widening span of water that opened beneath me. When I heaved myself back onto the solid ice, I lost my grip on the flare case. I watched it disappear, sinking into the black water.

"Oh. Ok. Bye-bye."

I gave a feeble little wave. If a Golden Gate Bridge to the shore were to somehow materialize out of the ether, it would do me no fucking good at all. I'd lost my means of creating fire.

I fell back on the ice and looked up at the stars, tiny fires burning so far away.

"Of course I'm freezing to death. This really is how I will die."

More tears came as I said my goodbyes, to Aoife, to Wendell, to my Mom and Dad. To the long line of my four bears.

"I did the best I could. I'm sorry I wasn't strong enough."

In my last thoughts before consciousness slipped away, I recall being awestruck at all those stars in the winter night sky.

Out there in the goddamn Universe.

I closed my eyes, hoping the end would come soon, and wouldn't hurt too much.

I awoke to light so brilliant it was all I could see. The wind blew so hard I could scarcely catch a breath. Thunder roared at me, constant and deafening. When I heard the voice of God coming from above, I knew I was dead, and in big trouble for all that stuff I said about him.

God told me to get in the basket.

"Huh? What basket?"

I looked up and saw His name stenciled in heavy black letters on the underside of the helicopter:

United States Coast Guard

"Ah, Ms. Caldwell. You're awake."

The doctor acted surprised and I wondered why. Being awake is not a big deal. Most people do it every day, at least for a while. Heck, I'm doing it right now.

"Yep, that's me—wakey wakey. Except when I'm sleeping."

"Or in a coma," she said, peering at me over the top of her glasses.

Good comeback. I liked this doctor, she was going to be straight with me.

"Was I?"

I didn't recall being in a coma, but I think that's the nature of comas, isn't it?

"Yes, briefly."

"I see." I shifted in my hospital bed. Everything hurt. "So...did you not expect me to wake up? Like, ever?"

She didn't exactly answer the question.

"It is remarkable that you survived your ordeal at all. How long were you out in the elements?"

"Twenty-four hours, give or take." I didn't include tunneling time because I wasn't technically out in the elements. That was a couple-three days, I think.

"Twenty-four hours in conditions that could have killed you in four or five." She shook her head in what I assumed was disbelief.

I reached up to scratch my nose and found my hands bandaged like a mummy's. I held them up.

"What the fuck's this?"

"Frostbite. We had to amputate the last two joints of three fingers. One joint was already missing."

"A coyote ate that for an appetizer."

She looked at my chart. "You also lost two toes."

"Anything else?"

"Most of your left ear."

Ok, that explained that bandage. I must have looked like a little Asian Van Gogh.

"You're taking this awfully well."

"The Universe has been reclaiming me one piece at a time."

"Wha—?"

"It started fifteen years ago, so I'm used to it by now."

She gave me a sleeping pill and made a note for the resident shrink to come and bug me. I didn't like him, though, so I fucked him off. He tried to say my head was all messed up and I needed this treatment, and those pills, and that therapy. Nope! My brain was just fine, and that's more than I could say for his.

I stayed a few days at the Eastern Maine Medical Center, which I didn't mind at all. I was exhausted and achy and

everyone there was nice to me. A nurse named Wanda snuck in some Pop Tarts and a couple of MacDonald's cheeseburgers. She had to feed them to me since my hands weren't working at the time. I couldn't talk her into bringing rum, but that was a pretty big ask.

On day three I had a visitor, Edgar Tuttle's son, Dennis.

"Hey, Pookie. Holding up ok?"

"Yeah, pretty good. I'm so sorry about your Dad." I wondered if he knew I'd cut off Edgar's fingers.

He just nodded. "Did you lose more parts?"

"Just little ones. Nothing I can't spare."

"Are they taking good care of you?"

"Yep. Except they don't know how the Coast Guard found me. Or if they know they're not telling."

I wanted to talk to those Coast Guard guys again. Not only did they rescue me, they went back to find Edgar's body after I told them what happened. I wanted to say thanks.

Dennis said, "It was the flares."

"No way. From that far out?"

"They made a blip on radar. Coast Guard knew right where to look."

I made a mental note to never go anywhere, not even the outhouse, without a flare kit.

"So what's next?"

I hadn't given it much thought but assumed I'd be living in

Wiscasset for a while. Insurance would pay for the cabin, but rebuilding was months away.

"I guess I should go back out there and see what's left."

"I wouldn't plan on that any time soon. Not until the thaw, anyway."

"Yeah, probably not."

I offered him a Pop Tart on the condition that he feed me one, too.

"How long are they keeping you here?"

"A few more days, not long. Can I get a ride to Jonesport when I get out?"

"You're not going to the island, are you?"

"No, just to pick up Poppy."

"Who's Poppy?"

"My car."

"Pookie and Poppy. That's positively perfect."

I tried to think of some snappy alliteration but was still doped up so nothing good came to mind. I eventually thought of powdery petunia petals piled precariously on the promenade, but I'd missed my opportunity.

Dennis stood to go.

"It was so kind of you to visit."

"I'll be back in a couple of days. What can I bring you?"

"I'm good, thanks." I wanted Captain Morgan but didn't want to be a pain in the butt.

I lay there for another day before they let me try to walk again. With a prosthesis on the right and a crutch on the left, I'm not sure what I did could be called walking, but I was soon able to get from A to B under my own power. Not bad for someone who didn't have a leg to stand on! (rimshot, haha!)

I made two phone calls from my hospital bed. Nurse Wanda dialed for me because I was still Edward Bandagehands.

Aoife was first.

"Don't get alarmed, but my cabin fell down."

I heard a flurry of rustling sounds on her end.

"Eefs? What is it?"

"I'm on my way."

The rustling was her jamming sweatshirts and underpants into her overnight bag.

"No, Aoife, really. I'm ok. You don't have to fly back."

"Where are you then? Stone-n-Ivy?"

"Um, no, I'm still in the hospital but—"

"Aaagh!" There was more rustling.

"Eefs, calm down."

"Physical hospital? Or a mental one?"

"Physical."

"What've you lost this time?"

"Just some little things I didn't need anyway."

"Things? Plural?"

I gave her the inventory.

"No major limbs or organs?"

"Not this time. Like I said, it's nothing."

"When are you out? Is someone picking you up?"

"A couple more days. Dennis Tuttle, Edgar's son, remember?"

"How's Edgar, anyway?"

"I'm sorry, Aoife. I don't know how to tell you this."

"Aaagh!"

I dissuaded her from an emergency visit even though I ached to see her again. The time for that would come, and sooner than expected.

I also called William Pruitt at Malcom and Dillon.

"We didn't expect to hear from you until spring. Everything ok?"

"Yep. Mostly."

"How goes the manuscript?"

"Yeah, about that. There's a little problem."

"Oh?"

I heard his fingers drumming as he thought, *What has our little fool done this time?*

I took a deep breath. "My cabin fell down. Like, seriously all the way down. On the ground."

"My God, Bonnie-Kate. Are you hurt?"

"Just a little. But my first eighteen chapters are still on the island, buried under all the stuff that fell down. And the snow."

I pictured him rubbing his temples with a pained expression. I didn't appreciate what he was probably thinking about me.

"—so there's going to be a small delay," I said.

"Will you be able to recover the first eighteen chapters at some point?"

"Maybe. But not until the snow's gone."

"Between now and then you'll be able to finish the book?"

"All my notes are buried out there, too."

"This far into it, you know where it's going though, right?"

"Sort of."

"Maybe you could finish without your notes?"

"Are you suggesting I write this book without notes, somewhere other than Mille Jours?"

"Only the second half."

"What would be the point? It will suck, and you'll just make me do it all over again."

He refused to rule that out. "Making you rewrite things is my job."

He had me there. Bested again.

"Ok, I'll try. I'm not promising anything."

When Dennis came back he brought me Chunkies, my favorite candy bar when I was a kid, and several issues of Down East and *Bon Appetit*, my two favorite magazines.

"Hiya, Pookie. Less bandages, huh? Lookin' good."

I still had the Van Gogh bandage but the ones on my hands

(handages?) were down to individual fingers. A big knot of gauze and tape filled the space once occupied by the Little Piggie Who Had None and cried "Wee! Wee! Wee!" all the way home. I once suggested to Aoife that the last piggie was French, and actually cried "Oui! Oui! Oui!" but she said that was too sexual for a nursery rhyme. This is the same Aoife who insisted the books of Laura Ingalls Wilder were called *Best Little Whorehouse on the Prairie*.

So, anyway.

"I'm about ready to blow this Popsicle stand. Two more days."

"What time do I pick you up?"

"The doc will want to see me before I go, so, I dunno, say...tennish?"

"Not racquetball?"

"Not shoccer?"

"Not bashketball?"

That was when I realized my dorkishness was contagious. I'd given it to Wendell, now Dennis had it, too. Good thing we were in a hospital.

I was set free on a Tuesday morning, with instructions for the care of my injuries and enough drugs to put down a moose. If I was a druggie, I would have cried *Oui! Oui! Oui!* all the way to, uh, wherever druggies go to take drugs. A crackhouse, is that it? I plead ignorance. There was no crackhouse on Mille Jours, and no

druggies that I knew of. Keith Bucknell might have been one. How'd that work out for ya?

Dennis took me out to breakfast. I had two over easy, hashbrowns, link sausages, toast, and pancakes. It's important that you know this, because breakfasts are plainly awesome.

"Did I miss Edgar's funeral?"

"We had him cremated. The memorial's this summer."

"Can I go?"

I was supposed to wait for an invitation, not ask for one. Miss Manners would have slapped me stupid.

"Of course you can. You were his best friend."

"I was?"

I always thought I was a bit of a pest.

"Dad was so proud of you, your books and everything."

"Oh, that. Pft."

"The evenings of gin and Stratego? You have no idea how much he enjoyed that. And your pies? My God, he used to rave."

"I can live with that. I'll miss him."

Dennis gave me a look that said, *You sure grew up weird*. I changed the subject.

"I guess I should go out there eventually."

"Me, too," he said. "See what's left. But not too soon."

"I was thinking late April, early May."

"Mud season."

"Snow should be pretty well gone by then."

"There was that much?" Dennis knew island winters, but nothing like this one.

"An actual fuckload."

"Yeah, that's what the Weather Channel said."

I pictured the Weather Channel's scrolling banner: *Coastal Maine inundated with fuckload of snow.*

We agreed to meet in Jonesport on May 7th. Dennis said he would line up a ride to the island and back.

I picked up Poppy from Aubrey's garage and drove to Stone-n-Ivy under the influence of mild painkillers. That was wrong, but it made the trip more fun than usual. It hurt my hands to turn the steering wheel but nothing I couldn't handle. It was my first time back to Wiscasset since the post-funeral purge of Wendell and baby items. I found the house demon-free but it still made me sad. Our fine little baby would have done some of his growing up here. That was among my reasons for keeping it.

I worked on *Tenth Moon* a little but only produced one chapter, and lots of trashcan fodder. When I finished chapter 19 I awarded myself a Cuban. Except my Cubans were on Mille Jours, crushed out of existence, so I couldn't. A quick scan of the phone book showed me how many tobacconists there were in our fair city: zero. I wasn't going to subject myself to some eye-watering El Ropo[*] supermarket stogie, so I jumped into Poppy and hauled ass down to Portland where they have everything.

[****]Cheap cigar, made from a short length of old rope.

The guy behind the counter at The Humidor—*Portland's Finest Tobacco Products* made a snarky comment about not selling cigars to children, but his co-worker chased him away.

"How may I help you, Miss Caldwell?" His nametag said BOB.

"It's like this, BOB (I said it in all caps), I know you can't sell Cuban cigars. Just get me as close to that as humanly possible. Rich, smooth and buttery. Cost is no object."

"I have just the thing."

He produced a box whose label was in Spanish: *El Mapache de Mi Tio esta Muerte*[*]. Pretty sure that's what it said.

"Would you care to try one?"

"Oh hell yes."

I was no cigar aficionado, but that thing was magnificent. The Godiva's Chocolates of cigars.

"Perfect," I said, blowing a couple of smoke rings. "I'll take a half dozen."

BOB looked at me like I'd just blown smoke out of my eye.

"Uh, Miss Caldwell? Are you feeling all right?"

"Yes, fine, why?"

"You just blew smoke out of your eye."

"Get the fuck out."

"No, really."

He went in the back and returned with a small mirror. I drew

[****]My uncle's raccoon has died.

on the cigar again and blew more smoke rings. Jets of smoke issued impossibly from somewhere behind my glass eye. I watched gossamer tendrils of smoke emerge from my eye socket, intertwine, and drift ghostlike to the ceiling. I looked like I'd just arrived on the 6:15 from Hell.

AWESOME.

I put down the mirror.

"Well, this is new."

BOB was speechless.

"So…how much for the cigars?"

He pushed six of them across the counter at me. "No charge, Miss Caldwell. I love your books?"

He made it a question, as in, "but why was I not warned that you're a freak show?"

I drove back to Wiscasset blowing smoke out of my eye at other motorists, nearly causing several accidents. When I got home I made an appointment with Dr Lissenbee because blowing smoke rings from one's eye may bee the best party trick ever, but it probably indicated ocular distress of some kind. I'd already had my quota of that.

"There is a small tear in your eye socket, Bonnie-Kate. It opens into your sinuses."

"That explains the smoke."

"The…smoke?"

I explained about the smoke eye trick, and the cabin collapse

ordeal that probably caused the eye socket damage.

"It can be easily repaired. Minor surgery."

"Will I still be able to do the smoke eye?"

"No, you won't."

"Then I don't want it fixed. What happens if I don't get the surgery?"

"Because your eye socket connects to your sinuses, which connect to your trachea, which connects to your lungs, you could drown in the shower. Theoretically."

I was not prepared to give up my smoke eye to avert a drowning that was only theoretical. Check back when it's imminent, and we'll see.

I got new neighbors that spring, the Delaneys who bought Mr Flaherty's house. I met them one day over my stone wall when they came home from grocery shopping at Hannaford's. I took an instant dislike to them, and said so.

"Hi neighbors, all settled in?"

"Yes." The Delaneys did not smile at me. "You live there?"

"Since I was born."

I saw an eye roll pass between them. I said to Mr Delaney, "I can't quite place your accent."

"We're from Philly. Couldn't get out of there fast enough."

"Yeah?"

"It was fine until the niggers and faggots moved in."

"Sooo," I said. "You're a couple of turds? Have I got that

right?"

They had no immediate riposte, so I said, "Be a stranger, ok? Don't drop by, any time at all." I walked to my door.

"Hey, fuck you, girlie. Ya fuckin' slant. Go back to Cambodia, rice-breath."

I raised a double-bird salute and didn't look back. I was down to just one and a third birds now, which I liked to think said *Fuck you SO MUCH you're not even worth the other two-thirds of this finger*.

I spoke to William that afternoon and told him about the racist homophobe infestation next door.

"Do you know any well-armed, militant, flamboyant, black gay men I could rent my house to?"

He said he'd get back to me on that, so I was stuck with the turds for the time being.

On May 7th I met Dennis at the Jonesport dock. We sat on the empty steamer trunk I'd brought along, and ate a couple of the whoopie pies I'd also brought along. My backpack held half a glazed ham, a barbecued chicken and a three-pound meatloaf. I had no intention of being caught foodless on Mille Jours ever again. I made Dennis carry the bottled water. Our ride to the island, *Andrew's Airborne*, showed up right on time. I was about to board, but stopped.

"Are there signal flares on this boat?"

"Ayuh." Andrew pointed to a flare kit mounted beside the

dash.

"Ok." I clambered aboard. "Sorry, I don't go anywhere without flares."

I wasn't kidding. The first thing I did after collecting Poppy from Aubrey's Garage was to fill the tank and buy her a flare kit at Hamilton Marine. I was not aware that road flares and aerial flares were two different things. Imagine the Coast Guard's chagrin when I fired off a couple before changing a flat tire beside Route One, which Edgar had taught me how to do. Also imagine my surprise when a bunch of first responders showed up within minutes. I received a stern upbraiding but they decided not to arrest me because I was famous, and too small to put in jail.

Superpower.

Told ya.

Andrew's boat had a huge motor and sounded like an attack helicopter thundering across the bay. He dropped us off at the Mille Jours landing twenty minutes after we left Jonesport, which was a new world record.

Dennis took one end of my steamer trunk and we started up the road to where his father's house once stood. There were patches of snow here and there, mostly in the shade of trees and big rocks, but not enough to interfere with our mission. Which was not impossible and therefore had no theme music.

The road was muddy, and tried to hitch a ride on our boots, so we stuck to the green stripe in the middle. I spooked a garter

snake and said, "Eek!" out of surprise, not fear. I wasn't afraid of snakes, but that didn't stop Dennis from laughing at me.

Edgar's house and workshop had both been steamrollered by the blizzard, not even Jesus survived. I didn't want to poke around too much, but saw my flensing spade on the perimeter of the wreckage. I grabbed it and put it in the trunk. That thing saved my life. It deserved to be on a wall somewhere. Edgar would have been ok with that, even though it stole some of his fingers.

Dennis dug a few mementos out of the ruins, including a pocket knife and a handful of photos. He handed me a portrait in a silver frame. A youngish couple in black and white stood before an antique car on a country lane. The young man was quite handsome in a 1930s kind of way, and looked vaguely familiar. I furrowed my brow at Dennis.

"My mom and dad, before they were married. That was Dad's first car, a '37 Buick."

I stared, dumbstruck. I had rarely thought of Edgar as anything other than a solitary man, content to live his solitary life on the solitary rock we shared. He had never been any older or younger than about sixty-five, just the right age for me to unintentionally turn him into a surrogate grandfather. I realized I had also done that with Mr Flaherty, and that it was an odd thing to do. I had a mainland grandfather and an island grandfather. William Pruitt, be warned: I am all out of grandfathers.

Dennis reached in the pocket of his windbreaker and handed me a small piece of blue plastic.

"Thought you might want that?"

It was a Stratego piece. A corporal. I hugged Dennis and ugly-cried into his chest.

"There, there, Pookie. There, there."

"Where?" I snuffled.

"There. Like I said."

"You doofus."

"I know you are, but what am I?"

If smallness was my superpower, doofuses were my kryptonite. I was powerless against them, if you hadn't noticed.

My cabin, razed as it was, had not collapsed as completely as Edgar's house. Dennis said the cabin's timber frame was stronger than Edgar's two-by-six construction.

"I wouldn't have expected your cabin to come down at all, ever."

I pretended to know the difference between timber frame and two-by-six. "Yep. Me neither."

To my everlasting relief (and whatever the opposite of revulsion is), there was no pile of poop outside my door. There was, however, a spot beside the front step where the native flora came in particularly lush for a few years, including some wild blueberries I could not bring myself to eat.

The outhouse was the only structure left standing. The shed had

fallen and crushed the Willys into the exact shape of something permanently inoperable. My chainsaw, which was supposed to be in one piece, was now in several. I was mad as hell.

Please don't say *it's only stuff, you can replace it*. Until you've had the last remaining embodiment of your great-grandbears' spirit stolen by the pestilent ratfuck known as the quote unquote Universe (yeah, right), I respectfully request that you withhold your judgment of me. Never underestimate the fury of a tiny woman who is righteously pissed at everything and has a harpoon. It is unwise. Dennis got it right. He was right there with me, and he didn't even think about saying it was only stuff.

Dennis Tuttle was a-ok in my book. He helped me move broken walls and bookshelves so I could get to the things I wanted to save. Of the cabin itself, it appeared little could be salvaged. My woodstove survived the devastation, as did my claw-foot bathtub, which was currently full of melted snowbergs. I reached in and unplugged the drain since it was no longer attached to anything.

When we left the island several hours later, my steamer trunk held six carved seabirds, a sou'wester hat, Wendell's schooner and shark face, my harpoon and spade, a few letters and photos, and the first eighteen chapters of *Tenth Moon*, soggy but readable. I also saved the scrimshaw whale's tooth and the oak belaying pin, not to mention my violin, which had an ugly crack in the body and the headstock snapped off. Fortunately, I knew a

luthier in Vermont who was so good he could rebuild a burned instrument from its ashes.

In my pocket was a handwritten list of all the titles I could make out in the moldering pile that was once my family's library. I could rebuild that, and I had a much better starting point than a pile of ashes.

On the way back to the main, I told—shouted at, actually, over the attack helicopter noise of *Andrew's Airborne*—Dennis about my plans to rebuild the cabin.

"You're rebuilding?" he said.

"You're not?"

"Dad insured every damn thing but his house."

"What about the land? It's worth something. Probably a lot."

"Know anyone looking for a piece of a remote Maine island? Shore frontage, water views, and a collapsed house at no extra charge."

"What'll you take for it?"

He threw out a number. I whipped out my checkbook.

"Um...hold on, Pookie. I think we need a real estate agent, don't we?"

"Maybe. Call this earnest money."

I made out the check for the full asking price, so he would know I was extremely earnest. When the deal was done, I became the owner of half of Mille Jours.

I returned to Wiscasset and spent a month or so finishing up

Tenth Moon, arguing with insurance people, and looking for a contractor to clean up the remains of my cabin and build me a new one. When I sent *Tenth Moon* off to William, I enclosed a brief note.

> Dear William,
> I told you this would suck, and it does. It's your problem now.
> This is the price you pay for making me write on the main.
> BKC
> Ps- I'm out of Cubans again.

He called me up a week later to say it didn't suck in the least, and I was being too hard on myself. When he returned the book, it was blue-penciled within an inch of its life. He always did that, it was his job.

Ok, I'll fix it. That was my job.

Three days later the UPS man brought me a box of El Productos that were really Cubans. Clever, huh?

The contractor I hired gave me an initial very rough estimate that included a large sum for ferrying materials out to the island and lugging them from the dock to the building site. I got around that by hiring a helicopter (no guns) to deliver all the lumber and stuff directly to the site. It would only take half a day and would

save me a fuckload of money.

There was still a great deal of expense in ferrying the workers out and back each day, but I fixed that, too. I bought a lobster boat from a guy in Eastport who picked it up cheap from a guy in Canada when their lobster fishery tanked. It was a Novi boat, meaning the bow was a little taller and more vertical than a Maine boat, the wheelhouse a bit farther forward. Her name was *Jerilyn B*. I renamed her *Doofus*, and painted her white with vivid purple trim, a color scheme no self-respecting lobsterman would ever dream of putting on his boat. Apologies to anyone who has done this.

Most of Wendell's traps had survived the blizzard. I planned to keep fishing a few because A) Good honest labor is its own reward, and B) I was a Caldwell, and Caldwells go to sea. I mounted a sky blue and red buoy on *Doofus'*s VHF antenna so the other guys who fished around Mille Jours would know it was me. Otherwise they might chase me away or kill me or something. I also made sure she had a lot of flares on board.

Tenth Moon finally went to the printers and quickly sold a bazillion copies. I foolishly agreed to an interview with Teri Gross on NPR's Fresh Air. Teri always did her homework before an interview, so I couldn't get away with my usual bullshit. She researched me so well, in fact, that she uncovered some of my previous bullshit.

"You've said in recent appearances that your mother is alive

and you're close with her, that you haven't seen her since she entered witness protection when you were a child, after she took part in a failed CIA plot to assassinate a South American dictator, and that she was killed by a yeti while attempting a solo ascent of Mount Everest in a polka-dot bikini. Are any of these true?"

"I can't lie to you, Teri. My mother was part of a top-secret, um, government... experiment... uhh—"

I trailed off. Teri waited patiently.

"She was killed in a robbery when I was seventeen. I don't like to talk about it."

Teri already knew that. She just wanted to see if I would make something up.

"I am so sorry for your loss."

Apart from that minor stumble, I enjoyed being on with such an astute and insightful interviewer. I still found a way to fuck it up, royally.

She asked about my obvious adoration of the natural world as manifested on the Maine coast. I explained about my childhood summers on Mille Jours, how my four bears had instilled the sense of wonder in me, and my great love of hiking on the shore.

"Every cycle of the tide brings new treasures for me to discover, especially the antric fencostipar untepsil."

"Excuse me?"

"Frayspire eps tiboral. Mefto."

"Are you all right?"

"Shen. Tosintle."

"Are you having a stroke?"

"Heb! Sah tee!" (translation: *Of course I'm having a stroke. This is how I will die.*)

The stroke was fairly mild, it didn't kill me or steal any body parts. It did steal my hearing though, for which I would have gladly traded another toe.

Being deaf was a whole new thing for me, and I didn't especially care for it. I'd never considered myself handicapped until that happened. One of the worst things was not having music. I'd recently gotten my violin back from the Vermont luthier and had been relearning it for the third time. My inability to hear the notes was a far greater hindrance than my ever-increasing finger deficit.

When word of my deafness got out, I was contacted by a fan who was also a grad student at MIT. She offered me the use of an experimental high-tech telephone that could convert speech to text. This was very new technology at the time. This phone was super-fancy, but it got confused a lot, like when Aoife replied to the news of my stroke with "Aaagh!" It spit out a bunch of question marks, followed by even more question marks as it tried to interpret the sounds of her shoving underpants into her overnight bag again.

"No, Eefs, I'm ok. Really. I don't use my hearing much

anyway." Downplaying it to ease her concern.

"Why are you yelling at me then?"

"Am I?"

"You are."

"I can't tell how loud I am."

I toned it down a bit, telling her not to come unless it was for a casual visit. My emergency had passed.

"Sorry, Champ. Things are a little touchy right now, aren't they. I'd better not, if you're done with your crisis."

I took that to mean I was still a point of contention in her marriage. That was a shame, especially after Aaron used to be so understanding of us. As much as I missed her, it was better that she not come. For the sake of her marriage, but also because the Universe was still on the offensive, and Aoife was the only target left.

Speaking of the goddamn motherfucking Universe, I was now without a writing project so my mind was free to scheme on ways I might appease, destroy or achieve detente with the aforementioned motherfucking Universe, pardon my fucking French.

I was nearly thirty. I'd been trying to solve this for twenty-nine years[*] with little success. It was high time I took decisive

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[****]My earliest efforts involved the attempted weaponization of the zoo animal mobile above my crib. Epic fail.[†]

[†]This didn't really happen.

action.

So I did.

Not yet.

Pretty soon, though.

I mean it this time.

I made another call on my space-age phone to talk to Charlotte Carr, matriarch of the Carr family of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, who were now the proud owners of a pile of splintered lumber and broken glass on Mille Jours. I explained how I planned to helicopter all my building supplies to the island and perhaps she would like to coordinate with me? (and split the cost, of course).

"I appreciate the offer, Bonnie-Kate, but we've chosen to relocate rather than rebuild."

"Really? Are you sure?"

"Quite sure. Why are you yelling?"

I said I was deaf and asked if she'd had any offers on the land.

"It's not listed yet. We need to clean it up first."

"$85,000, as-is." A ridiculous sum for an undeveloped lot on Mille Jours at the time.

"You aren't serious."

"Who do I make the check out to?"

It took a few weeks to finalize, but I soon owned three-quarters of Mille Jours.

Overjoyed at the ease with which I was acquiring my own personal island, I got Clifton Massey on the phone to see if he was selling, too.

"Why are you yelling?"

"I can't help it, I'm deaf."

Not wanting to appear over eager, I tried the old lets-split-a-helicopter ploy that worked so well with Mrs Carr.

"You know, Bonnie-Kate, that's not a bad idea."

"Unless you'd rather just sell the land and spare yourself a lot of headaches?"

"You're yelling again."

"Sorry."

"No, we'll be putting up a new cottage. A bit more floor space, you know."

To a man like Cliff Massey, 'cottage' could mean any number of things, up to and including a twenty-four bedroom castle with moat and drawbridge. In this instance, I eventually learned, it referred to a five bedroom main house with a two bedroom guest house. We split the helicopter, but I failed to acquire the entire island. For the time being.

I also called Dennis Tuttle, just to stay in touch.

"Why are you yelling?"

"Sorry, Dennis. I had a stroke."

The texty thing spat out more question marks, so I assumed he said "Aagh" or its equivalent. But he probably wasn't shoving

underpants into a carry-on.

"I'm a lot better now, except for some deafness."

"Some?"

"Well, you know, like…the normal amount?"

"I don't know what the normal amount is."

"It's where you can't hear anything."

"Anything?"

"At all." I told him of the texty gizmo that made our conversation possible.

"Aww, Pookie. I'm really sorry."

"It's not so bad. I'm learning how to sign and lip read. (Not a lie: I was actually doing those things) I'll get along just fine."

"Still."

"Yeah, I know. But listen. My cabin's supposed to be ready in September. I'm having a few friends out to celebrate. Can I count you in?"

"Absolutely. I leave for Italy this fall, but I'll still be here in September."

Dennis was not planning to return from Italy. Ever. I didn't say so, but I had a little job for him before he left. That's why I invited him out.

Since I was stuck in Wiscasset without a book to write—one percolated in my head but wasn't quite ripe—I went to see about replacing my trick prosthesis. That one was easy, so I ordered another with secret compartments where I could stash a flask of

rum, a few sticks of beef jerky, and a couple of aerial flares. When it was done, it was my go-to leg.

In my idle putterings at Stone-n-Ivy (Dad's trains were still set up in the attic, I played with them a lot), I came upon Sylvia Moore's phone number. She was my evil-genius college roommate. The number turned out to be her parents' house. After asking why I was yelling, her mom gave me Sylvie's new contact info.

"Hey Silvie, it's Bonnie-Kate Caldwell. Remember me?"

"How could I forget? And why are you yelling?"

"It's not my fault. Listen, do you still do astrophysics?"

"I 'do' astrophysics for a living."

"Could I buy you lunch tomorrow? I need some astrophysics."

"I don't understand."

"Steak, seafood, Chinese?"

"Er..."

"Oh, wait, I remember! Pepperoni pizza with mushrooms and extra cheese, right?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"I know a great pizza place right on the waterfront." Maine pizza, but passable.

"I live in Renfield now, Bonnie-Kate."

"Oh. Up by Wolcroft?"

"I work there."

"Perfect. Meet you on the quad, tomorrow noonish?"

"This is a bit strange, Bonnie-Kate."

"No, Sylvie, it's a LOT strange. An actual fuckload of strange. See you tomorrow?"

"Ok." She didn't say *I don't know why I'm agreeing to this*, but it was there.

After talking with Sylvia, I figured I should call William and let him know I'd lost my hearing. To be perfectly honest, I was fascinated by my new texty gizmo and liked playing with it.

"Hi, William. Just wanted to let you know I'm deaf now."

"Why are you yelling?"

"Pretty sure I just told you why."

"Oh. I see."

"I had a stroke, right there in front of Teri Gross and everything. You should have seen the look she gave me! But I'm better now, mostly. Except for being deaf."

"You're still yelling."

"Well, excuse the hell out of me for being a handicapped person."

"Right, sorry."

"How long have we known each other? You should be used to this kind of thing by now."

He sighed. The texty gizmo made more question marks.

I met Sylvia at Wolcroft the next day, as promised. She looked more academic than ever, all professory. I took her to

Tony C's, where we used to get all our pizzas.

"We'll have a large pepperoni and mushroom with extra cheese."

Sylvia cringed.

The waitress said, "Ok, lady. You don't have to yell. I'm not deaf."

Sylvie explained that I was, and still working on my volume control. My lip reading wasn't very good yet, so she may have actually said *Don't mind my friend, she's only insane.*

I would never know for sure.

With our order placed and our waitress apologized-to, I got down to business.

"So. Astrophysics, huh?"

"Ye-es?"

"Tell me what you know about the Universe."

"I only have an hour for lunch."

I had to ask her to repeat that, slower and with more enunciating. She did.

"Ok, then, just the juicy parts."

"The what?"

"You know, scandals, failures, lapses of judgment, bad behavior, dirty little secrets. Poor citizenship. That kind of thing."

She looked at me like I was five-dimensional.

"The universe guards its secrets very closely. If I uncover even one of them in my career, it will be a career well spent."

It didn't surprise me that the universe guarded its secrets. A person who knew them would have some serious leverage with the most powerful force in the entire Universe. That being the...um...Universe.

"And how do you go about uncovering those secrets?"

"Lots of math. And a high-powered observatory is helpful."

"You have one of those?"

"Sadly, no. We use data from other locations in our research. Hawaii, Colorado—"

"But you'd like one of your own. Or Wolcroft would."

"It goes without saying."

"It also goes without hearing."

Our pizza arrived. I (apparently) shouted *THANK YOU!* at our waitress, who scowled at me. Just when I was beginning to think Sylvie had forgotten all I taught her, she said, "Jeez, Bonnie-Kate, not so fucking loud, ok?"

"Yay!" I clapped my hands. 'Fucking' is pretty obvious to lip readers.

We were quiet for a moment, feasting on pizza and orange sodas.

"Why the sudden interest in astrophysics?"

"I'm having a war with the goddamn Universe. I'm losing pretty badly and I need ammo."

She nearly choked on a mushroom.

I went on: "I thought some inside info might give me an

edge."

She looked at me like she was no longer certain just how many dimensions I existed in.

"Bonnie-Kate, are you feeling all right?"

Did I mention I get that a lot? Almost as often as 'Why are you yelling?'

"Pretty good," I said. "Considering."

"Are you taking any medications?"

"Just painkillers."

I slugged down some orange Fanta and burped ornately. Sylvia waited for me to elaborate.

"Painful things keep happening to me." I wiggled my truncated fingers and brushed back my poofy hair to show her where my ear used to be.

"My God, Bonnie-Kate."

"The Universe did this to me. That's why I need your help."

And that was where I lost her. She suggested long-term inpatient psychiatric care.

Being deaf bolstered the general aura of insanity I projected, as if deafness and multiple amputations were somehow correlated with schizophrenia. At the supermarket, strangers had lately mistaken me for a State Mental Hospital escapee, just because I was missing a few parts and talked to myself habitually. Er...yelled to myself, I mean, since I no longer had a volume knob. *THESE RADISHES ARE WAY TOO EXPENSIVE!!!*

Fine. I didn't care what they thought of me. It was no epidermis off my patoot. I kept pumping Sylvie for the inside dope on the Universe but she stonewalled me, saying things like, "It would take six years of classes to make you understand."

I began to suspect Sylvia Moore had become a minion.

I dropped her off at Wolcroft a half hour later, saying, "We should do this again some time."

She said, "Ok."

"That's it? Just ok?"

She smiled. "Fuckin'-A, Bonnie-Kate."

I hugged her with all my might.

So she probably wasn't a minion after all. I left Renfield, Maine, with useful info Sylvie had imparted without knowing it was useful. It would ultimately shift the balance of power in my ongoing war.

Nefarious Plans

Prior to my lunch date with Sylvia, I envisioned returning to a life of solitude. And deafness, although that part was new. I would scribble down whatever books emerged in my imagination, catch a few lobsters, and commune with my four bears in this place of tide-washed shores and eldritch forests, where their spirits and stories never die. I could endure whatever ills prolonged isolation might bring. Maybe it would drive me crazy. If so, that would not be a long and arduous journey, but one I could complete on foot, in an afternoon. I wouldn't even have to pack a lunch.

How far from Looneysville could I be anyway, to go around thinking the entire Universe had singled me out for persecution, to cling like a jealous octopus to all manner of childlike behaviors because they kept me a little closer to the time when everyone I cared about was still alive? In all honesty, was that really so crazy?

Yep. Pretty sure it was.

So I unenvisioned all that, and with Sylvia Moore's unwitting help hatched a nefarious scheme, the lurid details of which unfolded that summer and fall. If my plan succeeded I stood a

chance of achieving the impossible: long term happiness.

With my Wiscasset-based affairs in order (except for the racist scumbag neighbors still defiling Mr Flaherty's house with their vile presence), I returned to Mille Jours with my contractor, Gary Rudman. He reminded me of Santa Claus or Jerry Garcia, who remind me of each other, except that Santa didn't take quite so many magic mushrooms. On approach to the island aboard Doofus, Gary pointed to the ruined chapel.

"Is that it?"

It was ok to yell because of the engine noise, so I did. "That was a church. There's a lot less of my cabin left standing."

I tied off at Mille Jours Harbor and we walked up to what remained of the Carr's house, now a pile of wreckage just off the road. The day was cool and foggy, but the road wasn't as muddy as last time.

"Hoo-ee, you weren't kidding."

I'd described the devastation in gruesome detail.

"You want this one cleaned up while we're here?"

In my experience, structures near the shore soon returned to the earth whence they came if one so much as deferred regular maintenance, let alone allowed them to collapse. The brass, steel, porcelain, glass, etc., tended to remain on the ground for decades, reposing like holy relics of some bygone age. Those relics might one day mean a great deal to the person who came upon them while hiking the shore. They might even put them up

on a wall with a shark face and some little wooden birds. Or they could make up a story about them and put it into a work of contempo fiction.

Ok, they probably wouldn't do that with a toilet, but maybe a few links of rusted chain, or an old tool (like a harpoon or a flensing spade).

"No, you can leave that one. I'm still rummaging." My speech was still a bit yelly, but improving.

We had the same conversation when we passed Edgar's, the disposal of which I also felt should be left to the elements rather than an impersonal bulldozer or wrecking crew.

We finally came to the site of what was once my cabin. I was nearly brought to tears again. Gary took off his cap and wiped sweat from his brow. He wasn't accustomed to so much walking.

"Lucky nobody was here when this came down. They'd a been toast."

"I was here."

"Lucky you weren't inside."

"I was inside."

He regarded me at length. "How are you alive?"

"Just lucky, I guess."

Gary declared the cabin's foundation sound, and said the rebuild should be straightforward. We agreed to retain the original footprint, a basic rectangle, to keep things simple. And cheap.

"We can reuse some of these timbers, and there's a goodly

handful of lumber at the other sites, too. Be a shame to waste it."

I suggested another outbuilding in addition to the shed, built from the salvaged wood, if possible. This was a pivotal part of my scheme, phase one.

"How big are we talking?"

"About like a two-car garage."

He rough estimated it could be built using the remains of the three fallen homes, and maybe a little from the chapel.

"It'll need a foundation, though. That's going to cost you some."

I took him for a walk up Topgallant Mountain to the place where there once stood a little house that flew away.

"Oh, look," I said. "A foundation."

Gary kicked one of the blocks. It didn't budge.

"You want to build it here?"

"Yep."

Not wanting to look like a rank amateur, I kicked the marble block, too. It kept not budging while I, perhaps predictably, fell on my ass.

Gary helped me up.

"Thanks, Gary. I keep forgetting not to kick things. I'm not very good at it."

"So I see."

"Had to give up pro soccer. Too much kicking."

"Right."

I was about to tell him how I won silver on the Olympic soccer team but he interrupted before I could steal the valor of actual Olympic athletes, which I did only if I was going to immediately recant. For the record, Olympians are amazing. Me, not so much.

"These trees'll have to come down." He nodded toward the stand of spruces that took up residence when the old-timey house set sail for distant shores.

"I can do that part."

Gary looked doubtful, but I was already estimating how much firewood I'd come away with. More than a winter's worth, I was pretty sure. He checked to see if the blocks were still level, which they were. Close enough, anyway.

"So, you want garage doors on this one?"

"A regular door will be fine. I do need a roof that opens, though."

He looked at me like I said I wanted it made of monster cheese.

"A roof that...opens? What?"

"It doesn't have to be the whole roof. Just part of it."

"Ah...Miss Caldwell, have you ever seen a house where the roof opens?"

I thought about it, and was forced to concede that no, I had not.

"Oh, wait—missile silos have roofs that open. Can you make

one like that?"

What I wanted to know at that point was: why did people get so frustrated with me all the time? Was I really so unreasonable?

Judging by Gary's reaction, yes. I was. He ended up adding a kind of solarium with a retractable metal awning. That would work for my nefarious plan.

Cabin reconstruction began in June. I ferried the work crew over and back each day. That was fine, and saved money, but I had to stay in Jonesport every night. Four crossings would be close to eighty miles a day, plus there was nowhere to stay on Mille Jours. I slept in Poppy's front seat for a week, then moved to a hotel. At the start of tourist season the rates went up, so I moved back to the island and lived in a tent I got cheap from the want-ads.

I had a lantern, a sub-zero sleeping bag, a two-burner camp stove, and a bunch of Scriptos and legal pads. William Pruitt had been dropping hints about my autobiography. That would be better than writing someone else's autobiography, but I still declined. I started making notes anyway, in preparation for losing the argument.

I also got started on the tree clearing project with my new chainsaw, sold to me by a salesperson who laughed when I asked to see a 'Huss-kyoo-varna.' I'm not from Iceland, ok? How am I supposed to know how it's pronounced?!

I bathed in the pond each day, except when it was too cold.

When it was too cold for two days or more, I avoided Gary and his crew so they wouldn't have to smell me.

Much to my dismay, I found my outhouse no longer functional. The back wall was partly collapsed. When nature called for big potties, I went to the woods with a garden trowel and a good handful of bum-wipe. The age old enigma occurred to me in a more personalized form: Did my four bears shit in the woods?[*]

I gave Gary Rudman free use of *Doofus* to run his crew back and forth each day. That way I didn't have to go to America all the time. I saved a fortune in time, fuel, and nautical miles.

On helicoptering day my new cabin was delivered to the work site, some assembly required. The island deer had never seen such a thing (I assumed it was loud, too) and scampered off in great haste, fearing for their lives. I spent that afternoon looking for heart attack victims I might turn into pot pies, but I couldn't find any. The helicopter delivered the Massey material after mine. It took four trips because there was so much of it. Their crew showed up the next day with a bulldozer, and converted the Massey ruins into a large bonfire I was sure would burn our whole island down, but didn't.

Having both crews out at the same time proved advantageous. There was some tool-borrowing between the sites, and they all traveled together aboard *Doofus*. I told Gary he could

[****]Oh, stop groaning. It wasn't *that* bad.

charge them fare if he wanted to, but they just split the cost of fuel and called it even.

Between lumberjacking and scribbling autobio drivel, I put some of Wendell's traps back in the water and hauled them a couple of times a week, weather permitting. I ate a lot of lobsters that summer. On Fridays I would boil up a big pile of them for the work crews' lunch. We feasted together, and everyone stayed on good terms. Nothing says *I appreciate your work* like a boiled arthropod.

I wanted to help with the project, but the building of a log cabin was a highly specialized type of construction for which I was uniquely unqualified. Gary showed me how to identify and recover salvageable boards from Edgar's and the Carr's (which were actually mine at that point). I spent a couple of hours each day with a crowbar and a hammer (sadly, not a ball-peen), disassembling wreckage. I wasn't much good at building things, but I was an absolute whiz at wrecking them.

Gary said, "By the time you're done, we'll have enough to build a whole 'nother house."

I grew mildly concerned that he was reading my mind.

By the end of August, I was officially writing my fucking memoir. William talked me into it. Thanks, we'll probably sell a good half-dozen of these.

By that time all the construction was done, except for the Massey's guest house, which would ultimately remain unbuilt.

I did end up working on the cabin: I put oakum between the logs so it would be nice and warm in the wintertime. Also so I could say I helped build it and not be a big liar. Pants on fire.

Unlike the original cabin, which was adapted to four-season habitation, this new one was designed for it. The difference was immeasurable. My favorite upgrade was the year-round indoor bathroom, complete with a chemical toilet and insulated pipes I wouldn't have to mollycoddle so much when the weather turned frigid. No more frozen bottoms! Is this a party, or what?

Second was the new generator I could fire up any time I wanted, just by *turning a knob in my kitchen!* Oh, the miracles of the modern age. Such modernity was tempered though, by my attachment to the hundred-year-old claw-foot tub and woodstove, both of which survived the snowpocalypse unblemished. Relatively. That was more than I could say for myself.

Gary had suggested a kerosene heater and gave me a strange look when I declined. I explained the importance of getting my own firewood just as my beloved four bears had done since the day before forever. If I had a kero heater, I might be tempted to complacency and use it too often. Gary's strange look was respect, something I'd never seen directed at me before. That's why it was so strange.

In addition to the new bathroom and generator, there were some solar thingies on the roof that made electricity on sunny

days. It was enough to keep the place lit up like Las Freakin' Vegas, but not enough to run an industrial machinist's lathe, which I didn't have one of. So that was ok. I no longer needed my oil lamps but bought some for sentimental reasons and used them pretty often. That was a little strange, too, but I was comforted by the dimness and gloom, and the smell of kero always reminded me of childhood summers.

The last thing I asked of Gary and crew was to help me dispose of the mangled Willys that sat beside my new shed, lending a hint of junkyard chic to my property. I never cared for the combed-and-manicured lawn look. On Mille Jours I stuck with the no-lawn-at-all look, greatly preferring my little paths and clearings in the bayberry, juniper and native field grasses, some of which were sensuously soft. A dead vehicle rusting in the yard for a few generations wouldn't ruffle my feathers in the least, but here was an opportunity to revive an island ritual with deep connections to my four bears. I apologize for not being more environmentally conscious here, but... four bears, dammit!

Gary and crew took out the battery and we drained the toxic fluids, then we all pushed together. In a bittersweet parting, we rolled the Willys off my cliff. That way, I didn't really have to say goodbye to it. I would rust away long before the engine block did. The tide was out. It crashed on the rocks in slow motion, landing upside down. Cool, man.

It was still a little sad, but I secretly wished I had some more

cars to push off of there. It was almost as much fun as fireworks. Edgar's pickup was also dead, but it was too far away. I thought I'd just let the woods grow up around it, which would only take twenty-five years or so, but Aoife had other plans. She eventually blew it up with high explosives, intentionally and gleefully.

I bought a new island vehicle and had it ferried out in September. I almost bought a VW hippie bus (painted psychedelic) but pictured Edgar saying, "Ayup, you could do that." So I bought another Jeep instead.

The previous owner had painted it cerulean blue with a brush and roller, so I named it Mr Johnson, after the guy who more or less invented the blues. It was dented, peeling and rusting, but my friends at Aubrey's declared it mechanically rock-solid. A perfect island car.

One might think a Jeep was a poor choice for a lobsterman, and one would be right. But when you have your own island, or most of one, you can take up your gear at the season's end and leave it stacked right there on the dock. Since I shared the dock with no one (the Masseys had their own), no one would yell at me to move it, except maybe the ogres in the bedroom mirror. I'd stopped listening to them a while ago.

I still had September ahead of me, a month noted for mild temperatures and abundant (by island standards) sunshine. I kept plugging away at the memoir I didn't care to write. Who writes their life story at age thirty? Aren't you supposed to wait

until you're dead? I argued endlessly with William about what to put in and what to omit, eventually padding it out with a bunch of made-up bullshit. I might get caught by Teri Gross, but it was a chance I was willing to take.

I continued lobstering, wishing I had more traps because I really liked it. It was hard work, often made harder by the weather, but it was also like a game where you try to figure out where the lobsters will be. I did pretty well, but only because Edgar had shown me the tricks of the trade, and the best spots to put my traps.

Sometimes the traps came up with interesting sea creatures in them, like furry little toad crabs, brittle stars, big moon snails, and lumpfish that came in two colors: aqua blue and bright red. They looked tropical, like they had no business being in the Gulf of Maine. They would attach themselves to your traps and/or ropes with a sucker disk on their bellies. Their skin was coarse and leathery, and they had cute little faces like they were smiling at you.

Other times, you'd get a fearsome creature of the deep, like a wolf fish. They weren't friendly at all, and never smiled. These things couldn't even close their mouths properly because there were too many long, jagged teeth sticking out of it. If a wolf fish got a hold of you, you were basically fucked. They wouldn't let go, not even if you cut off their heads.

I got one in a trap once. I removed him from the trap and

held him up to the wooden wheelhouse roof. He sank his teeth right in, and stayed hanging there right up until he died, refusing to give up the fight. At the end of the day I had to pry him off with a screwdriver. Imagine a wolf fish doing that to your hand. You'd lose parts, for sure.

The best thing I ever caught (besides lobsters) was a basket star. At the center of a basket star is a three or four inch disk, more of a pentagon, really, with arms that branch off again and again and again until it reaches about four feet in diameter. That, in the world of sea stars, is pretty fucking huge.

I'd also get an occasional codfish or haddock or a nice flounder in my traps. Those I collectively referred to as *suppah*.

When I wasn't scribbling, lobstering or lumberjacking, I puttered in my garden where I grew not a goddamn thing that summer because I was living in a tent at planting time. My rhubarb and asparagus came in of their own accord. I feasted on some of the rhubarb (with lots of sugar) and most of the asparagus, ultimately leaving the gate open so the deer could have the rest. The cervine palate regards asparagus as a delicacy, much as my palate regards venison. Fair is fair.

One Saturday morning I awoke at five(ish) with a family of deer in the dooryard, made the coffee, greeted the day from my cliff (as was my custom), and scribbled words until mid-morning. Satisfied that I had created almost nothing of literary value, I took a walk outside only to discover some individual (or cabal)

had destroyed my composter. Ok, chicken wire and two-by-twos with garbage in the middle, but I can call it a composter if I want. Either way, something mangled it.

My first suspect was the deer. They were known compost raiders but the devastation I beheld was well outside their profile. This looked more like the work of multiple raccoons, but there weren't any on Mille Jours.

A coyote? Again, *no tengo, Señor*.

However! The deer had come to the island by swimming the archipelago of godforsaken rocks that ended here, so a raccoon could likely do the same, given the right tides and proper motivation. Like, say, being chased by a hungry coyote.

But never mind all that. I had a composter to repair. This provided me with an excellent excuse to put off the continued scribbling I wasn't looking forward to anyway. Using pliers, wirecutters, and big hammers (look! I know how to use tools!), I fixed that thing to withstand Armageddon.

I took the following day, Sunday, off. I slept until six(ish) and decided this fine and foggy Sunday would be improved by homemade biscuits, so I set about homemaking some. A half-dozen biscuits went into the oven and I stepped outside to yawn cavernously at the Atlantic for ten to twelve minutes.

My freshly rebuilt composter lay once again in ruins.

I turned to the nearby forest for some venting.

"Stop fucking up my composter, asshole!"

I couldn't hear myself but knew I was loud enough to instill terror in the marauding raccoon's heart. I walked back toward the cabin to get tools. At the front door I turned to the woods again and saw a rustling in the undergrowth. The rustling's author exited the woods and presented himself.

I looked to the sky—because that's where Mother Nature lives—raised a fist and shouted, "Tell me you did NOT put a fucking BEAR *on my island!*"

Oh, but she did. I had long suspected she was on the fucking Universe's payroll; here was all the proof I needed.

The bear locked eye with me, took a step in my direction and stopped to sniff the air. I stood my ground, staring him down, muttering—too loudly, I'm sure—that yes, of course there's a bear on my island because a life and death struggle with a ferocious animal of some kind was long overdue, and this was how I would die. I continued to stand my ground. Bonnie-Kate Danger-Anne Caldwell would stand aside for no bear. I made a rough estimate of how many bear-and-potato pies I could turn him into. Answer: Lots.

The bear took another step.

I puffed out my chest and stood my ground. Who did this bear think he was messing with?

The bear started running.

At me.

I screamed like a little girl and darted inside, slamming the

door behind me. I turned the deadbolt I was sure I'd never need, then threw lots of furniture at the door. The bear brushed aside my fortifications as if I had put up a dainty shower curtain and not a wall of sofas. I found myself in the awkward position of playing hostess to a bear in my living room. I repaired to the kitchen with all speed. The bear was absolutely not invited, but the mannerless brute came along anyway.

At that point, I didn't piss myself at all, but if I had, I wouldn't have felt bad about it. If ever a circumstance called for urinary incontinence, that was it. My last remaining refuge was the back bedroom, but that door may as well have been cobwebs, for all the resistance it offered. The closet doors behaved in a similarly traitorous fashion, leaving me face-to-face with three hundred pounds of hungry black bear that was going to kill me.

For breakfast.

Motherfucker.

As he drew closer, I spoke the very last words I would utter upon this earth.

"You dickhead! I don't even taste very good, I bet."

These turned out to not actually be my last words.

He approached to bite me, so I yanked off my prosthesis and whacked him on the nose with it just as hard as a half-blind one-legged seventy-pound woman could. I closed my eyes so I wouldn't have to watch myself being eaten.

But the bear ran away.

Back through my kitchen, through my great room, and out the front shower curtain posing as a so-called 'door.' I walked out on the front porch and saw him pause at the wood's edge. I hurled a throw pillow at him and yelled, "Yeeeaaaghh!"

He disappeared into the trees. I went back inside to eat hot buttered biscuits because it had been ten to twelve minutes. They turned out really good.

I suspected the smell of biscuits attracted the bear in the first place. A heated argument ensued.

How in the name of Captain Ahab would a bear know that biscuits are food, ye scurvy trollop?

"Bears aren't stupid! They can tell!"

On the lone prairie I once kilt a grizzly with a biscuit at forty paces.

"I don't put sawdust in mine!"

Beese-keet bop ba-dee?

"Says you! Quit ganging up on me!"

Southern Belle might have chimed in but she fainted at the first sign of conflict.

I propped up my door and refused to be scared off of Mille Jours by a single bear. If it was on fire, or some kind of a war-bear, then maybe. But not just one regular bear.

I saw him scavenging on the shore two days later so I yelled "Yeeeaaaghh!" and he ran away again. I guess we know who's in charge of the bears around here.

I kept writing my memoir, unsure how to end it with satisfying resolution since, try as it might, the Universe had thus far failed to put an end to me. I figured I would burn that bridge when I got to it.

My daily to-do lists—I liked putting things in lists—usually looked like this:

Make coffee
Write
Eat food
Fix what the bear broke
Yell at the bear
Write more
Tea and Pop-Tarts
Write more
Smoke a cigar (where applicable)
Sleep

Mille Jours was about two square miles of mostly unspoiled wilderness. Sometimes I had to go find the bear if I wanted to yell at him. That was ok, I needed the exercise.

It was a bit late in the season when the Masseys came up from Boston (*lah-di-dah*) to take their new cottage for a weekend test-drive. They came over in their own boat, some kind of super-fancy rich-people boat with four outboards that cost $15,000

apiece. They used their boat twice each year. Once to come out to Mille Jours, and once to go back. It didn't even have a pot hauler.

Despite his occasional snobbery, Clifton Massey didn't bother me, but his wife, Marsha, sometimes did. In all honesty, I was jealous of her. But only certain parts of her.

Marsha Massey was a dark-haired, olive-skinned waif with small but insanely perky breasts that pointed to the sky. If you posed her in combat boots with an Uzi, she would have been an effective recruiting poster for the Israeli army. And her tits would have looked *great* on me.

That late-summer though, petty jealousies aside, I had to warn them (the Masseys, not Marsha's breasts) about the bear, lest tragedy strike.

I suspected the Masseys saw me as little more than a name to drop at their high-society soirees. *Say, Muffy, the last time we had cocktails with Bonnie-Kate Caldwell, our FAMOUS WRITER FRIEND, she was heard to remark yada, blah, etc.*

I didn't mind. My pedigree might have been lacking (I was fish sticks to their *langouste en croute*) but where the mastery of bears was concerned, they were my woeful inferiors. We would never be best friends, but I would still be saddened if they were eaten by my bear. It would be an unfortunate addition to my chronology of sorrows.

When I arrived at the new cottage, I found them relaxing on their redwood deck.

"Bonnie-Kate, so good to see you again. Let me get you a drink. Cuba Libre, right?"

He remembered. How thoughtful. When I accepted the cocktail I noticed Marsha's eyes lingering on the space no longer occupied by my amputated fingers. It's so distasteful when commoners go around displaying their mutilations for all to see. Can't they wear gloves or something?

My partial digits darted to her face and back.

"Got your nose!"

I savored her discomfort at having been touched by my vile deformities, then turned back to Clifton.

"Thanks for the drink, there's a bear on the island."

The Masseys exchanged a meaningful glance. First meaning: This tiny woman is mentally unhinged. Second meaning: This tiny woman just wants the island all to herself.

Clifton's mouth made the shape of "A bear, eh? You don't say." His eyes said *you have stated an impossibility*.

"It keeps wrecking my composter." Still too loud, but I didn't care.

"Well. I guess we'd better be on our toes." He smiled as though I'd just warned him of a cocker spaniel invasion.

I chugged down my Cuba Libre. "Ok, thanks, bye."

I bit rude on my part, but I was mentally unhinged, so what did they expect? I didn't know any better.

The next day I was out walking (ok, looking for my bear so I

could yell at him) when I encountered Marsha sitting on a tree stump, sketching a quiet cove. She was an art major. She drew a lot and was enviably good at it.

I said, "That's a beautiful sketch (it was) and turned to continue my quest. There, in the meadow, drinking from Fowler's Brook, was my bear. I pointed him out to Marsha, but from that distance he looked like a big rock. She naturally assumed the last of my remaining marbles had departed.

Then my bear stood up. He was really tall.

Marsha screamed like a little girl.

My bear roared at her.

I said, "Watch this!" and charged at him with my arms up, making an ogre face.

Marsha screamed, "Bonnie-Kate! No!"

Or something like that. I don't know; I was deaf, remember?

I yelled, "Yeeeaaaghh!"

My bear ran away.

Marsha ran away, too. Home to pack her bags.

The Masseys departed our fair but bear-infested island within the hour. Whether they fled in fear of me—the insane can be dangerous—or my bear remains unclear, but it didn't much matter at that point. It was not at all my intention to chase them off the island, but that was the net result.

It seemed a good time to make an offer on their property, so I went home and wrote them a letter in which I mentioned a

princely sum.

With the cabin all to myself, writing progressed without further interruption apart from that of the ursine variety. I didn't mind that. Bears will be bears.

Early one morning I walked out back with coffee and frog slippers to nudely greet the day. I looked to the uninhabited isles to the east and found them partially shrouded in morning mist. So pretty. Standing tall on the crest of the nearest one was my bear, looking back at Mille Jours.

He was leaving.

Abandoning me.

In that moment I understood how much I needed him, and how much I needed to not be abandoned.

"Don't go!"

My voice carried, borne on the fog. He looked up at me with an expression I took to mean he was tired of being yelled at.

"I'm sorry! Please come back! I won't yell anymore, ok? And I'll make biscuits!"

But he turned to go. Without my bear, what was I? A tiny, solitary woman all alone and in charge of *nothing*.

He lumbered into the chilly sea, swimming for the next godforsaken rock in the chain. I actually cried.

Then a thought occurred to me. It was so remarkable I said it out loud to see if it would be contradicted with lightning bolts, falling anvils, or what-have-you.

"I...won?"

Nothing struck me dead, so I repeated it.

"Holy sacred bleeding fuck, I won! My bear wasn't a tragedy."

After a few minutes I went back inside to wrestle with my bio some more.

Wait. My memoir. I was still in charge of that. And now I knew how it would end: with me conquering a goddamn bear. Still...I wouldn't mind that much if he came back some day, just for a visit.

With the bear situation under control, I sailed to the main to make a phone call, and so began phase two of my nefarious plan. I didn't have my texty gizmo, so I had to get a bystander to make the call for me. I flagged down a sullen high school girl who was not at all interested in helping a little deaf foreigner until I threw money at her. I had her call Dennis Tuttle.

"Bonnie-Kate says the new house is finished and she's having people out for the weekend. Can you come?"

He would be delighted.

I picked him up at the Jonesport landing on Friday afternoon.

"Hey, Pookie. Where is everybody? Am I early?"

"They couldn't make it."

"No one—"

"It's just you and me." I smiled to let him know that was fine.

"Er..."

"Come on. Can't wait to show you the place."

He started saying something that might have been a protest. I grabbed his hand and hauled him aboard like he was a four-foot trap with a dozen keepers in it.

Well, a six-foot trap. I was the only four-foot trap around there.

In my experience, when a very small person goes all assertive on them, larger persons offer little resistance. I think that's out of concern for breaking or otherwise damaging the small person. I had been using this to my advantage for almost three decades. Dennis operated according to the behavioral model, and we set sail for the island of our childhoods.

When we got to the cabin I unpacked the housewares I'd brought over. I was slowly equipping my new home; today's expenditure was fire extinguishers and more signal flares. I now had a flare kit in every room including the bathroom (which, by the way, and I don't mean to brag, was now *entirely indoors*. Have I mentioned that?

Oh. Ok. Then I guess I did mean to brag. So sue me again).

Flares would be useful if or when the cabin blew off the cliff and out to sea.

I gave Dennis a tour and he said "wow" and "very nice" at all the right times. He noted that aside from a few updates it wasn't all that different from the original. That's what I was shooting for. I even put the birds, shark face and whaling tools in the same

place.

I cracked open a bottle of Asti to maintain the housewarming party illusion, then put together a celebratory meal of spaghetti and meatballs, served with a side of shrimp eggrolls and sweet and sour sauce or hot Chinese mustard. Again, an unusual combination, but show me a person who doesn't like it and I'll show you a person of no consequence who won't be invited to my dinner table any time soon.

Dennis and I feasted, which is what you're supposed to do at a party, then went for a walk up the mountain.

"Whoa, what's this?" he asked.

It was the other building I asked for.

"That's, um, just a thing I had them build."

"What is it, a guest house?"

"It's a secret."

"I won't tell."

I motioned for him to bend down so I could whisper it in his ear. Making sure I was whispering and not yelling, I spoke slowly, brushing my lips against his ear. He gave me a look that said *You did that on purpose* but wasn't disapproving, just a little confused.

"Why is that a secret?"

"Shh…the Universe has ears."

We lingered a moment, watching the sunset from among the pitch pines that grew up on Topgallant.

"We should head over, Pookie. You don't want to come back across in the dark."

Oh, no! He couldn't leave; I'd hardly begun executing my plan. Think of something toot sweet, Danger-Anne! In trying to suppress my panic, I evinced sheer panic.

"Ah—we can't go over."

"How come?"

"Sorry, my boat is…um…broken."

"No it isn't."

"You'll have to stay overnight."

"Um…"

"Please?"

That's when he knew I was up to something.

"You're up to something," he said, grinning.

"I just need you to sleep here tonight. With me. As it were."

"As it were?"

I touched his arm but didn't say anything. If I said anything it come out even dorkier than 'as it were.'

"I don't know, Pookie. I've always felt like a big brother to you. Wouldn't it be weird?"

Unsure how best to convince him, I struck a hipshot pose worthy of a Berlin streetwalker. And not a cheap one. We're talking boo-coo[*] Deutschmarks here, people.

"Dennis. Do I look like a little sister?"

[****]Parlay voo frawnsay?

"Not very, I guess."

In desperation I addressed him over my shoulder.

"Did you notice my bottom? It's all the rage, you know. Very much in demand."

"Now that you mention it, I did notice that, yeah."

"And...and...uh, I'm not afraid to run around naked. Wanna see?"

"Pookie, you don't have to."

He was still grinning, but not salivating, which was what I needed him to do. I was losing him, and needed decisive action to dismiss his preposterous notions of my sisterliness. Phase two could not fail.

Thanks to my superpower, I was able to perform such a decisive act without getting on my knees, which most girls would have to do. Let's just say I had a Popsicle. But I didn't *finish* the Popsicle. Yet.

Everything from there on out was purely pornographic so I'm not telling that part, except when I explained that my objective was to get knocked up. It would be unconscionable not to tell him.

I gave him a quick overview of the project: impregnate me, then go about your business without further obligation. I would sign papers, if he wanted.

"You think one weekend is enough?" Dennis said.

"Yeah, but we'll have to do it a lot, just to be sure."

"You're a Fertile Myrtle, huh?"

"Yertle the Fertile Turtle, more like."

Anyway.

Dennis agreed to help, so there was a great deal of vigorous intercoursing on my island that weekend. When I took him back over on Monday morning—he was going to be late for things, but said it was worth it—I couldn't tell if I was pregnant yet. I walked funny and smiled a lot, which were good signs.

He kissed me goodbye at the dock, exactly the kind of kiss one does not give a little sister.

"Should I write you in Italy? So you'll know if it worked?"

He gave me an address in Palermo and was gone. We exchanged a few letters after that, but I never saw him again. It was no more than I expected, but still a bit sad.

I will not keep you in suspense: it worked. I hear you thinking *What? Again with the baby thing? Has she learned nothing?*

Bear with me, there's a madness to my method. No, wait, I meant there's a...method...er...

Never mind. I had it right the first time.

I finished a draft of my memoir and stayed on Mille Jours until the first snow, just to make sure it wouldn't cause any panic attacks. I was fine, and the snow as only beautiful. I would have stayed out there all winter but I had matters in Wiscasset that would permit no further procrastination.

I put my cabin to bed and sailed for Jonesport on a crisp December morning. I put *Doofus* in drydock at the yard, got Poppy from Aubrey's and sped down the coast ahead of another snowstorm.

My first phone call was to Aoife. Aaron answered and said she was at the wildlife rehab center. He didn't tell me she was living there, and apart from asking me why I was yelling didn't seem like he wanted to talk to me.

I got Aoife on the horn.

"He calls it a trial separation, Champ. But there's nothing trial about it. That's us, finished."

"What happened?"

"A couple years of bullshite, that's all. Then he took a new job wi'out telling me, and I'm expected to drop everything and move again."

"What's the job?"

"Feck if I know. It's in fucking *Belize*, for Christ's sake."

I almost laughed when my texty gizmo, which choked on something as simple as 'aaagh,' handled *feck* and *fucking* with ease. I maintained control. This was no time for laughter.

"I'm so sorry, Eefs. Can you fix it?"

"Don't care to, little Clapton. There's nowt left to be fixed, is there."

Shocked, I blurted out my first thought. "Can you come up here and live with me now?"

"I'll do just that. How long can I stay?"

"Forever and ever?"

My texty thing spat question marks, a sure sign of underpants being stuffed into a carry-on. When we said goodbye I sat on my couch for a minute, waiting for the anvil. Nope!

I danced with tears of joy on the left side of my face. Aoife was mine, a piece of our happiness puzzle I never expected to fall into place. That's how it was always supposed to be. Executing a joyful pirouette, I tripped over the coffee table and fell on the floor, but nobody saw so it was ok.

I called up Dr. Lissenbee for an appointment and got lucky—she had a cancellation that afternoon. She checked me out, said I was somehow fit for childbirth, took some blood and pee, and promised to call with the results as soon as she had them. I was about to leave when she said something I didn't see. She looked at me expectantly, then remembered I was deaf.

"You seem to coping well with your hearing loss. Any issues I can help you with?"

"Apart from the deafness? Nope."

"Have you given any thought to cochlear implants?"

"Coke...leer...?"

"To restore your hearing."

"There is such a thing?"

I could see from the way she recoiled that I'd gotten a bit yelly there. Sorry.

"Er, yes. They have a very high success rate in qualified recipients."

"Am I qualified?"

"Let's find out, shall we?"

So I sat by my texty phone all the next day. When it rang (blinked its light, actually), it was Aoife.

"Hi honey." I adored it when she called me honey. "I'll be up to Portland at 4:30, gate three."

"I can't wait."

"I'll be after swallowin' you whole, dontcha know."

"I need you to do just exactly that."

"I'll do unspeakable things to your heinie, won't I."

"You better."

My phone spit out more textual pornography. Aoife had a filthy mouth and a vivid imagination. And vice versa. She referred to herself as an *ethical pervert*. That's the best kind.

I hadn't felt that melty since I was with my Wendell. I was dealing with the meltiness right there on the couch when the phone blinked again. It was Dr. Lissenbee.

"Good news, Bonnie-Kate. You're pregnant."

Phase two, complete!

Aoife and I were going to be the proud parents of a fine, fat baby. I would soon bee a four bear after all, just think of it! Me, a four bear!

I was so happy I radiated faint golden light, like a distant star

in a winter night sky.

You can't prove that didn't happen. Ha. I waited again for the anvil, and was again spared. I had a plan for keeping the Universe out of my affairs once and for all. It was called Phase Three.

Negotiating the Purchase of a Happy Meal

When I met Aoife at the Portland Jetport I threw myself at her like a little bear throwing itself at a...a...um, what do little bears throw themselves at? Pots of honey? Salmon? No, that's a terrible simile. *I threw myself at her like she was a salmon*. That doesn't work at all.

So anyway. I threw myself at her. Period, end of story.

Sorry, I'm under a lot of stress here. Didn't mean to get snippy.

We hugged so hard we both cried.

"I'm so sorry, Eefs. It took way too long for us to get here."

"I'm sorry, too, Champ. But it's ok now, isn't it."

I snuffled against her, but it was the happy kind of snuffling. She took me by the shoulders and gave me a long look.

"Your hair's gone poofy."

"Yeah. That happened."

"Not on purpose?"

"Not exactly."

"Tell me you've not been licking wall sockets."

"Er, no."

"Well?"

"Promise not to yell 'aaagh'?"

Her eyes widened. I didn't know how to lip-read *aaagh* but her mouth looked like it was already saying it. Yelling it, really.

"No, Eefs, it's not like that. I just got hit by lightning. A tad bit."

She made that mouth again, only more.

"My hair fell out and this is how it grew back. I kind of like it."

She *aaaghed* again, then wrapped me up in another hug.

"Listen, Aoife. I'm fine. And I have a surprise." She was a sucker for surprises.

"Yay! What is it?"

"I'm pregnant again."

I hadn't mentioned any relationships so she was understandably confused.

"How did this happen?"

Patient Mommy persona emerged. "Well, you see...when a man and a lady love each other very much, the man puts a bunch of fertilizer on a baby seed in the lady's tummy—"

"Not always!" I saw mischief in her grin.

"What."

"Sometimes he puts it on her face."

"Or on her bottom."

I'd received a gluteal whitewashing fairly often. Jeff DuChamps in particular was like the Old Faithful of semen.

Aoife nodded. "Sure, that too. But who's the da?"

"Dennis Tuttle."

"I didn't even know you liked him."

"I do, he's nice. But mostly he was a penis in the right place at the right time."

"Are you getting married?"

"Not to him. He went to Europe and isn't coming back."

"Aw, I'm sorry, Champ. Another hit-and-run."

"No, that's what I wanted. Kind of like Garp's mom, remember?"

"I get it. Congratulations, then?"

"Yep."

When we got back to Stone-n-Ivy we spent a long afternoon in my bed, interrupted only once by a call from Dr. Lissenbee. I hoped it would bee good news, and it was. She connected me with a different doctor whom I didn't expect to restore my hearing, but after two appointments he did exactly that.

Everything seemed loud at first. It was my turn to ask why everyone was yelling. When we got home I danced a supremely foolish happy dance with Aoife in the kitchen.

"I can hear things! This is fucking amazing! Talk to me, Eefs, I love your voice. I haven't heard you in so long."

"I...um...what'll I say then?"

"Anything."

"To be or not to be, what was the question? Whether 'tis

nobler in the mind to suffer the stings and elbows of our forefathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, 'twas brillig and the slithy toves areep bop beeble dee."

Aoife's speaking voice was incongruously thin and reedy; it could never be mistaken for anyone else's. It was a wonder she had such depth and resonance when she sang, considering her starting point.

"Let's sing something," I said.

She obliged.

> "*I'll be with you in apple blossom time, I'll be with you to change your name to mine— (this is where I jumped in, way off key) One day in May, I'll come and say, Happy the bride the sun shines on today!*"

Aoife did a slinky 1940s-style dance with so much hip action the Andrews Sisters would have run and hidden in their dressing room. I dragged her off to our bedroom to perform unspeakable acts upon her heinie.

With my hearing restored, I was eager to start relearning the violin for the third time. Since Aoife and I had never been deterred by the absence of a fiddle, we sang anyway. Aoife's voice was gorgeous, mine was awful. The sound we made together was love.

The next morning we woke up to three inches of fresh snow.

Drawn to the window by the scrape of a snow shovel, I looked out and saw my racist homophobe piece of shit neighbor shoveling his driveway. He saw me in the window, sneered at me and spat in my direction.

"Eefs! Come and make out with me!"

We'd just finished breakfast (Important: crabmeat omelets with home fries, English muffins and Knorr-Swiss hollandaise all over everything). Aoife came running, making grabby-squeezy gestures at me with her hands.

"Not here," I said. "Outside." I was putting on my warmest sweater.

"Whatever you say, little pudding pop."

"You're not even trying, are you?"

"What." She put on her jacket but left it unbuttoned.

"Pudding pop?"

"What."

I took her hand and yanked her out the front door. The neighbor-turd stopped shoveling to glare at us.

"Now?" said Aoife.

"Yep."

Not to go all porny on you, but we basically molested each other without regard for common—or uncommon—decency, right there in my snowy front yard. As predicted, Mr Hitler didn't care for that one bit.

"Hey! Knock it off, I've got kids over here!"

I unhanded one of Aoife's giant boobies just long enough to shoot him an enthusiastic bird, then latched onto her again. Her nipples were, like, an inch long, you could just about tie a knot.

Sorry, that was porny.

"Fucking dykes! Carpet munchers!"

It seemed he was not overly concerned for his children's virgin ears.

Aoife unbuttoned my jeans and pulled them down to mid-thigh, exposing my undies, which had Tweety Bird on them (standing guard over my puddy-tat). I stopped her there.

"No indecent exposure, Eefs. We could get in trouble.'

"Oh, right."

"We're about done here anyway. Mission accomplished."

She picked me up and threw me over her shoulder, turning so that Mr Hitler was confronted simultaneously with her face and my ass, both smiling. She smacked me loudly on the bottom. The resulting *whap!* resounded through the quiet streets. She carried me inside while Der Fuhrer foamed at the mouth, spewing all the anti-asian-lesbian misogynist hatred he could muster.

Whenever possible, Aoife and I came outside and groped each other when the Hitlers were in their yard. They shouted abuse at us, but their son, Adolph Jr (presumably), followed our exploits with great interest.

In March a FOR SALE sign appeared in their yard, and three

weeks later they were gone. I hoped Mr Hitler had learned a lesson from this: you can't win against mentally unstable lesbians. So don't even try.

I was going to apologize for the pornyness of the foregoing episode (and indeed, this entire book), but I changed my mind. True, it is a poor writer who must resort to such base titillations to attract readers—so stop thinking that about me—but is it not the job of the memoirist to impart to her reader the truth of her inner self, including the more private aspects of it? We all have stuff that's ugly, or embarrassing, or unflattering; it's called The Truth. The porny elements of my life are none of those things, so I don't know why some people get all worked up about it. I'm not playing along. My objective in telling my story here is that by the end of it—which is mercifully in sight, I assure you,—the reader will come to know me intimately. Otherwise, what's the point?

As is true of most people, whether they admit it or not, I am a sexual being. Much of what I have or have not done in my life has been motivated, often subconsciously, I'm sure, by the sex drive quietly pulsating within me, as it does within us all. I readily admit that my sexuality may be a bit more visible than that of most, but why shouldn't it be? It's nothing to be ashamed of, or feel awkward about. The unceremonious defenestration of such notions enjoys my undying support. I wear my lust on my sleeve.

My point, which I realize I am now belaboring, is that you cannot fully connect with me until you understand at least some

of the porny parts of my life experience. They're a part of who I am, and their omission from my 'official' memoir was an almost criminal act of autobiographical dishonesty.

I hope that's ok with you. I think it is, or you wouldn't still be here. Before I move on, a very brief word about the hypersexualization of Asian women. I've seen it, and I understand the objections. A pair of almond eyes do not a geisha make. Does that mean I have to pretend asexuality? UNsexuality? Forgive me, but I don't want anyone deciding that for me. If I choose of my own free will to go around being hypersexual, whose business is that? Answer: not yours. Another monkey wrench in the works: Does the hypersexualization objection apply only to Asian women? Because I think of myself as a Pacific Islander woman who happens to have Japanese eyes. I may even be somewhat Polynesian.

Right.

Shortly after Aoife's return to my life and the restoration of my hearing, I called Clifton Massey to see about buying his piece of Mille Jours. There I was, entering negotiations with a man who had been negotiating things since before he could walk. My disadvantage was clear: I sometimes had trouble negotiating the purchase of a Happy Meal.

"Bonnie-Kate, delighted to hear from you."

I heard ice cubes tinkling as he took a sip of Crown Royal at 11:00 in the morning. So good to be able to hear things again.

"How are things on the island?" he asked. "Any more trouble with the bear?"

"Oh, yeah. He's been wrecking up the place." That was my first lie.

"Dreadful. Just dreadful."

"And now there's more of 'em. He invited his whole family out." Second lie.

"Good heavens."

"It's a regular bear sanctuary out there." No longer counting lies.

I heard Clifton drink more scotch to steel himself against the bear-terror I was trying so hard to instill.

"And how is Marsha? Doing well, I hope."

"Yes, yes. Quite well."

"I know the bear was upsetting to her." I was careful not to say 'my bear'—too cuddly sounding.

"Sadly, she's traumatized. Marsha is a bit delicate; she won't return to the island."

"That's a shame. Too bad the bear situation isn't improving."

The presence of bears tended to have a downward pull on real estate values. I waited for him to mention the offer I made by mail. He persisted in mentioning no such thing.

"Well," I said. "Have you considered the offer I made? By mail?"

"Offer?"

"For your property. On Mille Jours."

"Oh, yes. I remember."

"Any thoughts?"

"Remind me, what was it again?"

This was a man unconcerned with pittances of less than six zeros. I mentioned the figure anyway.

"You know the guest house is yet to be built. The materials are at the site."

"I'll take care of that, no problem."

He agreed to sell, and said we could likely arrive at mutually agreeable terms. He would turn the matter over to his people, who would get in touch with my people. I was too embarrassed to admit I didn't have any people, just an accountant who kept my taxes paid and scolded me when I bought expensive things like islands.

We made it happen. As of late March, I was the sole owner of Mille Jours Island in its entirety. This felt like a dream come true, even though I'd never really expected to own outright the island of my childhood. So it didn't count as a dream, or at least not a long hoped-for one. This was closer to a spur-of-the-moment dream, the kind you have when you take a twenty-minute nap in the afternoon.

Ok. So there's a new sheriff in town—me—and there'll be some changes made around here. Actually, not that many changes. Almost none, really. Come to think of it, just one

change, Universe/Phase-three related. But I could make a lot of changes if I wanted to because it was all mine now. Lucky for Mille Jours, I liked it just the way it was and hoped it would never change.

Aoife and I grew anxious to return to the island before I was too pregnant to stay out there, but I had to be in Wiscasset until my memoir went to the printers. The title was *Would You Like a Pop Tart?*

During one of the seemingly interminable pauses in the project, Aoife and I went to Portland to buy a telescope. The first one they showed us was a little backyard star-gazer.

"I need something bigger, more menacing."

"Menacing?"

I didn't want to waste the scientific supply man's entire morning explaining phase three, which I admit fell miles short of rational. But it wasn't about being rational anymore, it was about the stuff in my head. When inner peace cannot be derived from objective external reality, one must create it of whole cloth, as I'd been trying to do for a long time.

"Wrong word. Not menacing, just larger. I want to be able to look directly into the blackened soul of the Universe."

What I really wanted was a telescope that looked like heavy artillery, a cannon to aim right between the Universe's beady little eyes. They didn't have one like that in stock, but they had a catalog. The telescopes I wanted were in a section labeled

'Research Grade.' The big guns.

For what I ended up spending, I could have bought myself another island. A little one. I also bought Aoife a chemistry set she wanted because the illustration on the box showed a boy in a lab coat and safety goggles, with a look of scientific ecstasy on his freckled face. Aoife wanted to be scientifically ecstatic, too.

To the salesman I said, "When can we pick up the telescope?"

"No need. Delivery and set-up are included. Where shall we send it?"

"Mille Jours Island."

"Er..."

"Twenty miles out from Jonesport."

"Is there a ferry?"

"Nope."

"How do we get there?"

"Well, I wouldn't start from here."

We hashed out the delivery details. I would meet the installers at the Jonesport Landing on June first, and run them over and back. We'd make a day of it. Phase three, progressing only slightly behind schedule.

Malcom and Dillon sent *Would You Like a Pop Tart?* to the printers that spring. When I got my next bank statement it seemed like we'd sold more than a dozen copies, so I guess it wasn't a complete waste of time. It still struck me as odd that I'd written my life story well short of its statistical actuarial

midpoint. If everything went to plan, the rest of my life would be too boring to write about. That was where I set my sights.

We still had some time before I was too far along, so Aoife and I bailed out of Stone-n-Ivy and went to get *Doofus* out of drydock. While she was up on jacks in the yard, we took the opportunity to put on a fresh coat of bottom paint, which was basically liquid copper. It kept algae and barnacles from growing on her hull. That project led to a great many jokes in which we threatened to paint one another's bottoms.

We didn't, though. Copper paint was too expensive for that. Tempera paint, however...

I called up my contractor guy, Gary Rudman, and said I had one more job for him. It involved the unbuilt guest house of the Massey lot, which I wanted to remain unbuilt. I already had a guest house: the five-bedroom cottage the Masseys built and abandoned after overreacting to an exaggerated bear problem.

I suppose I should call this construction project Phase four, although it had little to do with the other three phases. Neither did Aoife's divorce, but I made it fit in. My grand scheme was nothing if not adaptable.

When Gary came out I took him to a spot on the west side of the cabin.

"Can you put something up here? Another shed, only bigger. About the size of a boxcar, I think."

"Sure. It'll need a foundation though."

"What are we looking at, money-wise?"

He said a number I could afford but didn't want to spend. It was high time I stopped disbursing buckets of money at every whim. Not to suggest this project was a whim. It was an important piece of the long term happiness puzzle, and a surprise for Aoife, little did she know.

"Well, fuck." I said. "I don't want to spend that much if I can help it."

There had to be a way around this. Something underhanded and not strictly legal, perhaps.

"How about if it was on wheels?"

"Wheels?"

"Then it would be a trailer, not a building, right?"

"It wouldn't be very stable."

I didn't want to argue, but that was exactly what it would be.

"The wheels don't have to work, they're just for show. You could make them out of wood, if you want."

"I see. Any utilities?"

"Yep." I hadn't thought of that but pretended I had. I also pretended I knew what he meant by *utilities*.

"Which?" he said.

"Which what?"

"Which utilities?"

"Oh. Umm, when you say utilities, you mean what, exactly?"

"Water, electric, heat."

For reasons unknown, the fact that these were called utilities had temporarily escaped my mind. It wasn't so unreasonable to think utilities might mean something else in construction-speak, was it?

"Oh, right. I knew that, of course. Just making sure we're on the same page. You might have meant, I don't know, an oven, or a color console TV."

"Those are appliances, not utilities."

"Yes, right, of course they are." I kicked at the ground but didn't fall down. "Glad we agree on that."

"So...?"

"Right. A couple of lights and an outlet, water spigot and a little heater."

"No wood stove?"

"Not this time."

"What's this for anyway? Some kind of art studio or something?"

I looked around to make sure Aoife wasn't listening. I'd left her in the kitchen with coffee and a crossword. She was still cruciverbalizing, but I whispered anyway.

Gary nodded his approval. "I've never seen a better place for it."

He suggested big doors and a sturdy entrance ramp. I agreed. By that time I was fatly pregnant, but there was still time to pull it all together.

Mood swings began in the second trimester. I became an absolute horror. Some days I just stayed in bed because I was A) Exhausted, and B) Too hormonally fucked up to interact with civilized people. I looked like the Exorcist girl, but I still couldn't rotate my head. I behaved like a thermonuclear cunt.

Gary and crew were finishing up the project and wanted to consult with me about a couple of details. Aoife made the mistake of waking me.

"Good morning, little pu-pu platter!" She was sing-songy and way too cheerful.

"CABBAGE!"

She yelled cabbage, too, and stood there smiling.

I did not smile back.

"Gary wants to see you. It's about the new shed."

"I'm not going out there. You do it."

"But—"

"YOU DO IT!"

"All right then, easy, I'll do it."

"And where's my toast?"

"Did I know you wanted toast? I didn't, did I."

"Of course I want toast! It's morning, isn't it?!"

"Sure, it's that. But—"

"Less chatter, more toast, ok?!"

She left and came back with four slices of buttered whole wheat. She put them on the bedside table, careful to stay out of

my biting range.

I picked up the top slice.

"What. Is. *THIS?*"

"Toast, Champ."

"No horseradish? No anchovies? No curry powder?!"

Aoife made a pukey face and went to talk to Gary.

One morning shortly thereafter, when I wasn't being quite so rotten, I woke Aoife at six and we had Rice Krispies for breakfast. She put milk and sugar on hers, I had mine with milk, sugar, bread-and-butter pickles, red onion and parmesan cheese because I craved that.

What.

"So what are we doing today?" said Aoife.

"Gotta go over."

"Yeah, how come?"

"It's a surprise." I grinned at her like a fat little devil.

That set her bouncing with anticipation. "A surprise? For me?"

"Yep."

She could hardly contain herself, even when I let her drive the boat.

We got Poppy from Aubrey's Garage and I drove us off into the countryside up around Machias. Before long Aoife started are-we-there-yetting me.

"Almost, Eefs."

"How much farther?"

"Maybe ten minutes."

She was briefly quiet. Very briefly.

"How about now?"

"Nine minutes."

"Aagh."

Nine minutes later I pulled into the gravel lane that led to AnnElise Baker's farm.

"We're here."

"Ooh! It's a farm, isn't it."

"Keep your panties on, Eefs."

She looked around and pointed at things like she'd never seen a farm before, even though she once lived on one.

"Look, a tractor! Look, chickens! Look, horses!" She really was beside herself with glee.

"Yep. All the farm stuff."

I was very much taken with this charming little farm, but it didn't quite give me the multiple orgasms she was having.

"This is the feckin' craic! Why are we here? Can we pet the chickens then?"

I parked Poppy, and AnnElise came out of the house to greet us.

"Hello, Bonnie-Kate. I just finished reading your memoir. Loved it."

"Ugh. That wasn't my fault."

"I'm so sorry for everything you've been through."

"It's ok, we all go through...everything."

Aoife stood fidgeting beside me, clearly on the verge of pissing herself from the excitement.

"This farm is amazing! How many chickens do you have? What are their names?[*] You must get a lot of eggs! What's that, a goat? Can I pet that goat? I smell horse poop, don't I! I love the smell of horse poop!"

I was in no position to judge the olfactory predilections of others—low tide and lobster bait scents ranked pretty high with me. Horse poop was good, too.

"Can I pet the horses?" Aoife gravitated toward them as if pulled by a strong magnet.

"Right this way," said AnnElise, leading us to the barn.

The first stall on the right held a grey pony with a black mane and enormous sad eyes. Aoife nearly lost it. I feared she would have a seizure right there in the pony straw.

"He's so beautiful!"

AnnElise opened his stall. "Would you like to ride him?"

She gasped. "Can I? Really?"

"Of course you can. He's your horse."

"He's what, then?"

AnnElise looked at me. "Oops."

I was petting the white pony in the next stall. "It's ok, tell

[****]AnnElise declined to recite the names of 250 laying hens.

her."

"Bonnie-Kate bought these ponies. The grey is yours."

Aoife looked to me for confirmation. I smiled and nodded. She hugged her pony and cried a little.

"No one's ever done anything so kind for me."

AnnElise said, "His name is Samson."

Samson was a sturdy fellow who would have no trouble carrying Aoife anywhere she wanted to go. Which would be, as she once put it, all over the place.

We stayed at the farm a while, getting to know our ponies (mine was named Aida, not Delilah), and some of the basics of caring for them. They would eventually come to live with us on Mille Jours, but we had a great deal to learn before that could happen. Aoife's veterinary background would help, but her experience with equines was limited.

"Wait," she said as we drove back to Jonesport. "That new shed? The big one? It's a stable, isn't it."

"The secret's out."

"Planned this a long time, did you?"

"Only since I knew you were coming home."

"Home. I like the sound of that."

On the way back, we loafed around Jonesport for a while, window shopping and eating magnificent greasy cheeseburgers from Cap'n Jack's Lunchbucket. (Yum.)

We sailed for Mille Jours shortly before sunset. Once we got

in the lee of Little Seal Island (halfway across), I put *Doofus* in neutral. I sat next to Aoife on the transom as we drifted along through scenery that was almost too pretty for postcards. There was a lot of that up in our neck of the woods.

"What's the craic, Champ?" She was still eating Cap'n Jack's fries. Finishing mine, actually; Cap'n Jack was wicked generous with the fries.

"I have another surprise."

She stopped mid-fry. I took a small blue velvet box from my pocket. Aoife's eyes bugged out.

"Oh my god, little couch-cushion, someone's proposed to you?"

"Er, no."

Confusion clouded her freckled face. "Then...what?"

"Someone proposed to you."

"Who did?"

"I did."

"When?"

"Right this very moment."

Understanding arrived in an instant. Aoife was adorably flighty but she wasn't dumb. She did the New York Times Sunday crossword in about twenty minutes. In pen.

"Omigod omigod omigod—"

"Aoife, I would like to be married to you. For real and forever. Do you think...would that be ok?"

"Omigod, that's completely ok! Yes, good, sure we will! Very ok!"

The ring was diamond and tourmaline because Aoife loved tourmaline and so did I. She put it on, there was kissing and crying, then we sailed the rest of the way home. I let her drive.

Easing up to our mooring in Mille Jours Harbor, Aoife said, "I thought of something, Champ. Might be a problem, mightn't it."

"What."

"Women can't marry each other. I think it's against the law."

"Fuck the law."

"Uhm—"

"The law can suck it, Eefs. Mille Jours is our sovereign nation. We are the law out here."

"Yeah?"

"We are the queens of our island. We make the rules. We can marry each other six times before breakfast and I'd like to see them try and stop us."

That settled that. We wondered who we might get to perform our ceremony. Aoife knew a Catholic priest in Wiscasset, but didn't think he would do it. He was old. And Catholic.

Since Phase three involved having Sylvia out for a visit, Aoife and I amended the Mille Jours constitution so that astrophysicists could officiate at weddings of no less than two (and no more than seven hundred and fifty) persons of any, all,

or no genders. This amendment was enshrined in thin air because that document's brilliant flexibility derived chiefly from its nonexistence.

Sylvia might require some persuading. Remember: she thought I was weird. I couldn't bribe her with lobsters, our season wouldn't start for another six weeks. And the telescope hadn't arrived yet. It needed to be in place before she came to the island, so I had time to consider the options.

I knew Sylvia was open-minded but still thought it unwise to tell her in advance she'd be performing a lesbian wedding ceremony. Better to get her out there and then spring it. She wouldn't have to do much. Aoife and I could recite our vows and Sylvie would mostly be a witness.

When the men (Bud and Charlie) brought our telescope, they grumbled about having to schlep it up the mountain to where the flying house once stood. I placated them with Pop Tarts and coffee. I also sent Aoife up there to hang around in a threadbare t-shirt and no bra while they did the installation. They stopped grumbling right quick, even though she asked too many questions.[*]

When it was all set up they showed us which part to look into (Charlie positioned himself for max cleavage viewing when Aoife bent over the eyepiece), how to focus it, and how to point it in different directions. Charlie gave me the owner's manual, which

[****]"Can I pet that telescope?"

was bigger than a Bangor phone book. Sylvia would know what to do.

I made Bud and Charlie eat club sandwiches and chicken wings with me, then I took them back over to Jonesport. Before we left the cabin, Bud asked if my 'friend' was coming along. She was taking a nap.

"Eefs? I'm taking the guys back over, ok?"

"Mpf."

"Wanna go?"

She yawned and stretched.

"They really want you to go."

She giggled and put her white t-shirt back on.

That night after dinner (Spaghetti-Os and salad, sometimes we did an easy one), we walked up Topgallant with a lantern to look at the moon through our new telescope. When we got there I tacked up a little wooden sign I'd painted that morning, the finishing touch on the preparations for Phase three.

The moon was half full. Through the telescope it looked like you could reach out and pick up one of the rocks. I got an eerie feeling the Universe was lurking right behind it, just waiting for a chance to do something bad to me. To complete Phase three, we needed Sylvia. With her brainiac-style assistance, the fucking Universe would be dealt with once and for all.

The next time we went to the main—to get hay bales, something we would soon need a lot of—I called up Sylvia at

Wolcroft and gave her my best pitch.

"You are cordially invited to spend an all expenses paid weekend on beautiful Mille Jours Island, in the company of at least one undistinguished novelist of dubious repute. What do you say?"

"Bonnie-Kate, you know I'd like to, but—"

"Wait, don't say it. I really need your help with something up here."

"Does this have anything to do with the universe?"

"It has everything to do with the Universe."

Now, it doesn't make any sound when someone rolls their eyes, so I could tell by the silence that's what she was doing.

"I'm sorry, but I—"

"I have a surprise for you." I was all about the surprises lately. I had one for the Universe, too.

"What kind of surprise?"

"An astrophysical one."

That piqued her interest.

"It's a really good surprise."

She was thinking it over.

"Please, Sylvie? It'll be worth your while, I promise."

"I just noticed you're not yelling."

"I got that fixed. One more reason to visit: no yelling."

She sighed. "All right. I don't know why I let you talk me into these things."

"Because you love me? Platonically, of course."

"Uh, sure."

"I love you, too, Sylvie. Platonically."

"What should I bring?"

"Do you have any hay bales you don't need? No? Ok, just a change of clothes then."

While we had access to a phone, Aoife made a much-dreaded call to her parents to tell them we were getting married. I only heard the Aoife side of it.

Aoife: "Hi, Ma. Guess what, I'm to be married again."

"It's not that soon."

"That's for me to decide then, isn't it."

"Bonnie-Kate."

"Calm down, will you?"

"Disown me? YOU are disowning ME? Ha."

"Yes, that's funny."

"Because we have ten times your money, that's why."

"No, I am disowning YOU."

"Whatever, Ma. And you're not invited to the wedding either."

"You'll put Da on the line?"

"Fine. I didn't want to talk to him anyway." Click.

Me: "Oh, jeez. That didn't sound too good."

Aoife: "She'll come around."

She seemed unconcerned. After all, we were happy.

You heard me right: WE were HAPPY. And we made no secret of it. Go ahead and tell the fucking Universe; we don't even care.

When I met Sylvia in Jonesport she was waiting in her husband's truck, listening to the classical station out of Ellsworth and reading a twenty-three pound science book (what else). In the truck bed were a dozen bales of hay.

I mention this only to dispel any notions about Sylvia Moore having a stick up her butt. Not true! She brought pony chow! If she met Samson and Aida she would probably melt just as much as Aoife did.

We hoisted the bales onto *Doofus* and crossed the bay under sunny skies with a light breeze. The beauty all around us rendered Sylvia speechless, or maybe she just didn't want to yell over the engine. She never was much of a yeller.

At the cabin I introduced her to Aoife, who hugged her and acted as though she was no mere astrophysicist but the President of Space. My Filipina instincts kicked in (guest in range, must...feed...) so we had smoked gouda on Club crackers with sliced honeydew and Schweppe's raspberry ginger ale. I had a craving for some dirt, but that could wait until lunchtime. Or when nobody was looking, whichever came first.

"Ok, Sylvie. I promised you a surprise. Ready?"

"It won't hurt, will it?"

"Nope! Let's take a walk up the mountain."

When we got to the telescope shed, she read my sign.

Welcome To
The Sylvia D. Moore
Astrophysical
Space
Observatory

At the bottom I put a bunny playing the banjo because I still didn't know how to draw anything else.

"What's this all about?" she asked.

"It's your own personal observatory. Look inside."

"But my middle name is Emily."

"Oh."

"What's the D for?"

"How about *Danger*. That would be kind of cool, don't you think?"

"I've always thought Danielle was a pretty name."

"Sorry, no. It's Danger."

We went inside. Sylvia gasped at the huge telescope.

"My God, Bonnie-Kate. Did you buy this?"

"Stole it in a crime spree."

"No, you didn't."

"Ok, I bought it. But it's yours now."

"You can't be serious."

"Aoife, am I serious?"

"She means it, Danger-Emily."

Sylvia tried to speak but mostly sputtered.

I said, "You can come out here any time you want, stay as long as you want, and observe the huge and actual Universe."

"I don't know what to say. Besides thank you, I mean. This is all so unexpected...ly wonderful. Unexpectedly wonderful. How can I ever repay your generosity?"

"Two things."

"Oh."

"First, if you catch the Universe doing anything untoward, tell me. If it so much as farts sideways, I need to know."

"Done."

"Second, I'm getting married today."

"Congratulations."

"To Aoife."

"How nice."

I knew from college Sylvia didn't judge.

"You'll perform the ceremony?" said Aoife.

"I'll do what? I can't perform a wedding, are you nuts?"

I took her last question first. "Yes. Of course we are."

Aoife answered the rest of it, the part she hadn't asked. "We amended our constitution to allow weddings by astrophysicists. We'll do our own vows, all you have to do is the *I now pronounce you* part."

She thought it over briefly. "Ok, what the hell. Sounds like fun."

Aoife clapped and bounced.

We ran through a quick rehearsal so Sylvia would know when to talk, then we went out to the cliff and got married.

We stood together in a near-perfect early summer day. The air was filled with the lush scents of pine and juniper, and the fresh green smell of new sweet ferns. Gulls wheeled and cried, songbirds tweeted at us with their happy little songs. I wondered what would go wrong. Something, surely.

We took our places. I didn't have (or want, really) a bible handy, so Sylvia held a *Peterson's Guide to Wildflowers of North America*. Aoife wore jeans and a flowery top; I wore grey sweats and a huge t-shirt with Scooby Doo saying "Ruh roh!"

Wedding vows commenced:

"Do I, Bonnie-Kate Danger Anne Caldwell, take this woman to be my lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, to yodel on the cliff and go lobstering with sometimes, to help raise our fine fat little baby and to make awesome breakfasts for, mostly with syrup? Yep, That's exactly what I do."

"And do I, Aoife Danger Marie Doyle, of County Cork, don’tcha know, take this woman to be my lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, to have swordfights with, to go on naked pony rides, and to lick every inch of on a regular basis? Oh, Hell yes. Gimme."

She made grabby-squeezy hands at me again.

Sylvia said, "Any objections?"

I cringed, expecting a piano or anvil, but the Universe was silent.

"I now pronounce you wife and wife. You may kiss the bride, and vice-versa."

She forgot the most important part, so I gave her a *yes, and?* look.

"Oh! Sorry." She cleared her throat and gestured expansively. "Fuckin' A!"

We got her to take a few pictures with my little Instamatic, then we went inside to feast on homemade lasagne because I knew she liked Italian. It occurred to me as we devoured peach pie with butter pecan ice cream that I got through the entire wedding without a single fart.

Correction, without a single *audible* fart.

Heh, heh.

That was pretty good.

After a couple of drinks (Sylvia was partial to vodka and grapefruit juice) it was time for the coo day grahs[*], the culmination of the master stroke that was Phase three.

The sun was setting and Sylvie was itching for nightfall so she could put her new telescope through its paces. I had one more little chore for her; the very crux of Phase three.

[****]Did I mention that I'm fluent in French?

"Can you come out to the cliff with us for a sec?"

"Sure, why are we doing that?"

"We have an appointment with the Universe."

"Great!" She's gotten used to our general strangeness, and also had a pretty good buzz on.

I took my harpoon from the wall, Aoife chose Lady Jane's pointed stick and asked Sylvia if she wanted a weapon.

"Do I need one?"

"With the Universe, you never know."

I gave her the flensing spade. She liked its heft.

We stood on the cliff in the waning daylight, me on the left, Aoife on the right, Sylvia in the middle, all looking out on a placid sea.

I lit a cigar and explained that we had to be naked for the next part.

"Wait," said Sylvia. "I have to be naked? I didn't sign up for that."

"No, just me and Aoife. But you can if you want to."

She declined. Aoife and I stripped off and put our clothes on the porch steps.

I started the proceedings with insanity yodeling because that was how you get the Universe's attention.

"Areeba bop ba-dee!"

Sylvia was understandably stupefied.

It was go time.

"Attention Universe!" I bellowed. "The tides have turned!"

Aoife stepped forward and echoed, "Turned, I say! Eep-beeble!"

I puffed on my cigar and blew smoke out of my eye.

"I have an astrophysicist now, and don't think I won't use her!"

Aoife shouted, "Astrophysicalist!" and walked around Sylvia, gesturing like she was a grand showcase prize on *The Price is Right*.

I continued my tirade. "Your secrets are no longer safe! We know everything you're up to!"

"Every! Thing!" yelled Aoife, adding, "You rotten shitehawk bastard!"

"So you better leave me the fuck alone, or I'm telling!"

"Telling! Aaagh!" Aoife was pretty worked up by that time, and jabbed at the air with her pointed stick.

I turned to Sylvia, who paid rapt attention to the smoke streaming from my eye. "Did you want to say anything?"

"Like what?"

"Anything you want. It's the Universe."

She softly declared, "Oota breep eeble dee." She brandished her weapon.

"Good, Sylvie! Perfect!"

That was when the sailboat came around the point. There were a bunch of tourist-types on it, who hooted and hollered at us

for being naked. I was also fat, but they didn't seem to mind. We brandished spears and waved hello, then Aoife whacked me on the butt with her stick.

"Tushy!"

The boat sailed on and the people waved goodbye. Aoife bounced her boobs at them.

Sylvia giggled, "Ok, what now?"

"Now we wait."

"For...?"

"A sign that the Universe has accepted our ultimatum."

Aoife absently twiddled one of her ridiculous nipples. "Maybe that boat was the sign?"

"Something more Universal, I think."

Mosquitos were feasting on us, so we put our clothes back on then rejoined Sylvia on the cliff. We waited a few minutes but no signs appeared. I told the Universe it had one hour to answer, then we went back inside. I put together snacks and drinks to take along to the observatory. It was almost dark. I got the lantern and gave Sylvia our flashlight since she was a bit unsure about the woods at night.

"Are there dangerous animals?"

"Not anymore. There used to be a bear, but he ran away."

"Are you sure he ran away?"

I took her flashlight and shined it on my unmolested composter.

"Yep, he's long gone."

We stood on the cliff, looking up at the night sky.

Suddenly:

"That's it!"

"The sign, isn't it!"

"Yay!"

We all saw it, plain as day. A shooting star.

Aoife leaned close and whispered, "But...we see those all the time, don't we?"

I shushed her and squeezed her hand. "Not. Now."

She grinned and said a bit louder, "Right, sorry. Oh, 'tis a very impressive sign, that."

I grabbed Aoife and danced her around in a circle. I hugged Sylvia. I had tried so hard, so many times, over the course of my thirty-odd years to peacefully co-exist with the Universe. All my previous efforts failed—some disastrously—but this one worked. I had never been so certain of anything. I felt it in my bones. I had a shooting star and witnesses to back it up. From that day forward, Aoife and I would be able to live our lives as we chose, without fear of Universal reprisals.

The key to mollification of the goddamn Universe turned out to be nothing more than brazen effrontery, threats of bad press, and a willingness to believe whatever I needed to believe.

With this knowledge, I was free.

Sylvia drifted toward the path to her observatory. I grabbed

the lantern and led the way, confident that no fire- or war-bears had been surreptitiously placed on our mountain. Those days were gone.

Sylvia cranked up her telescope and showed us some stuff that was in space. It warmed our hearts to see her so happy, but I was mostly there for the snacks (even though I just had some dirt). Aoife asked an endless barrage of questions our astrophysicist was glad to answer.

"What would happen if I were to ride a bicycle on Venus?"

"You would melt, and die screaming."

"How about if I went ice skating then?"

"One: there is no ice on Venus. And two: you would melt, and die screaming."

"Hmpf. That's not really working for me."

"Indeed."

"So a trip to Venus would be seriously minus craic. That's off my bucket list."

"Mine, too." said Sylvia.

After making sure she didn't mind coming back alone, Aoife and I went home to consummate and get some sleep.

I woke at sunrise to shower and make the coffee. I went to the cliff to greet the new day, then started prepping a lavish breakfast for Sylvia and MY WIFE.

I liked saying that.

I was mixing pancake batter (it was wild blueberry season,

so...) when Sylvia came stumbling in through the back door. I stopped whisking.

"Um...hi? I didn't hear you go out."

"I didn't." She looked bleary.

"But you just came in."

"I was at the observatory."

"All night?"

"So it would seem. What day is this?"

"Saturday. Let's get some breakfast in you, and put you to bed."

"That would be lovely, Bonnie-Kate."

"It's almost ready. I'd better wake up MY WIFE, she likes breakfast, too."

When I took Sylvia back over on Sunday afternoon, I presented her with a key to the guest house formerly known as the Massey Cottage.

"What's this for?"

"In case you want to come out and observe stuff when I'm not here. You can stay at the guest house."

"How would I get here?"

"Hitch a ride on a lobster boat. That's how I used to do it."

"Your generosity is so touching. I will absolutely do that."

"Or you could just stay at the cabin. I never lock either of them."

"Ok. And I need a key then...why, exactly?"

"You don't."

"Then why...ah...never mind. Thank you so much."

Aoife and I stayed on the island a few more weeks. We got a bit of the garden in—carrots, beets, Yukon golds—but she had to do most of the work because I was about to pop. I mostly waddled to and fro, and rested a lot. Sometimes I pointed at things.

It was a time of sunny summer days abounding in happiness and love. Ok, and a few days when I was in psycho-bitch mode, but not that many. It gets old fast; just ask Aoife.

Sometimes we sat together in the chaise lounge on the cliff, watching boats go by and making up ridiculous stories about them. The story Aoife told about a notorious gang of female rum runners germinated and took root in my head. I would write it eventually (working title: *South of Ordinary*, which became *Rotten Hannah* on publication, at William's insistence), but at the moment I was too baby-focused to write anything.

"We should head back to Stone-n-Ivy pretty soon, Eefs." It was only thirty days to D-day.

"Yeah, I suppose so."

"Try to contain your excitement."

"Oh, sorry, that's not it. I just...I love being out here on the island. It's my favorite place, isn't it?"

"Mine, too."

"Do you ever think of how lucky we are?"

"Sometimes. A little."

My luck still ran about fifty-fifty: spectacularly good or horrifically bad. With the Universe finally tamed, I looked for my odds to improve, perhaps vastly.

Aoife went on. "A lot of folks live in their places. Our place lives in us, too."

The girl who once claimed Leonardo da Vinci's greatest painting was The *Mony Mony* (on display at the Loover) had once again hit me with a TRVTH I'd failed to consider: You can take the girl out of the island, but you can't take the island out of the girl. Especially when the girl in question owns the island in question and lives there, too. In question.

I liked it so much I embroidered it on a sampler, but not until I was pretty old.

Some people meditate, some pray, some do mindful yoga stuff. Whatever it takes to keep them in a good frame of mind. Aoife and I maintained inner peace by refining our anti-Universe ritual to an art. This was the sum-total of our spiritual practice. It was now unnecessary, but we still performed it daily when conditions were favorable. Sunrise and sunset were the best times, fog was good, too. Low light conditions made it all spooky and mystical.

We looked forward to the day when we would howl at the cosmos from atop our ponies, but had to get this baby squared away first. A girl would be Annabelle Marie (Aoife's middle name,

pronounced Irishly: MAH-ree.) A boy would be Wendell Charles Edgar. Both of these names might have Danger appended. We were still in talks about that.

The week before we were to leave for Wiscasset, Aoife and I stood naked on the cliff just after sunrise, brandishing spears and ranting incoherently. The wind had come up in the night. Big waves crashed against our cliff, sending spray skyward. We alternated taunts; Aoife went first.

"We're watching you!"

"Don't fuck with us! You'll be sorry."

"Aaagh!"

"I mock you with my giant fat belly!" I waggled a bit to show I wasn't kidding and that my belly was truly giant and fat.

"Ho! Ho! Ho! Her fat belly!" said Aoife.

Despite all the breakfasts with syrup, Aoife had always maintained an enviably slim belly, upon which I now planted a couple of kisses.

And then doubled over in pain.

"Little bandicoot? Are you ok? What is it?"

"Buh...buh..."

"What?"

"Buh...buh...andicoot?!"

She knelt and put her arms around me. I convulsed and groaned.

"What is it, honey? What's happening to you?"

"Cuh…cuh…cuh…"

"Oh, right. Cabbage, I meant. Sorry."

"No, Cuh! Cuh!—contraction!"

Our fine fat baby was knocking on the door three weeks early.

Misbehaving already.

This is How We Will Live

Because Aoife regarded *Doofus* as another amusement park ride, I let her take the helm for most of our crossings. She'd become a skilled operator of lobster boats. I had faith in her ability to captain us across the bay, especially with the Universe neutralized and me in labor. Neither of us expected the ocean to be as unreasonable as it was that morning, but that's the ocean for you. It does what it wants. Had this been a grocery run, we wouldn't have chanced it.

We eased out of our protected harbor into breaking four-foot seas. That's not life-threatening, but it was unpleasant to sail a small craft in, or to prematurely whelp a fine fat baby.

The rain started as we approached Sloane's Fall, coming down so hard we could scarcely make out *Doofus*'s bow eight feet in front of us. With distances and directions in question, I freaked out over our possible proximity to the ledge that murdered my second family. It would probably like to steal my third one as well.

"Eefs!" I shouted over the engine and rainstorm, "Where's that nav can?"[****]

[****]Navigation marker.

"Over there, I think." She pointed to the port side.

I couldn't see anything out the side window, so I waddled onto the deck to see if I could spot it. It was imperative that the nav can be on our port side. If it wasn't, we were sailing straight into downtown Ledgeville.

I saw no nav can off our port side. I turned to re-enter the wheelhouse and there to our starboard, shrouded by rain, was the green nav can bobbing in the waves.

"Eefs! It's over there!" I made hysterical rightward gestures.

Aoife hauled the wheel toward the marker.

One thing you don't want to do in a big sea is to turn crosswise to the waves (abeam, athwart, something like that. I encourage you to use the one you deem most piratey. Yar.). Hauling the wheel toward the nav can did just exactly that. The first wave hit us hard enough to knock me off my feet and slam me into the port gunwale. The impact either caused or coincided perfectly with my next contraction. Aoife saw me hit the deck and came to help.

"Aoife, no! The helm! Tack! Tack!"

She gave me a pained expression, then tacked us out of immediate trouble (i.e. *Danger*) while I lay on the rain-washed deck contracting and moaning "uuhhgh."

We lost a hundred yards before she got us turned back around, then we sailed on with the nav can off our port side where it belonged. Aoife kept looking back at me and reaching

out like she meant to come back there again.

"Just steer, Eefs. I'm ok."

She did, but she wasn't too happy about it.

When the contraction passed I got up, bumping my head migrainously on the gunwale. I dragged myself back into the wheelhouse. A herring gull who'd lost his bearings in the wind and rain came in with me. I swear that had never happened to anyone before.

Realizing his mistake, the bird flailed about, thrashing us with his wings, creating a maelstrom of flying feathers and pooping indiscriminately on everything in sight. Aoife and I screamed like little girls until he flew away.

Needless to say, these events added up to a less than auspicious start to our baby's birth day. I sensed a pattern.

The sea kept rolling like it didn't want us there, but we still put some miles behind us. A third of the over, I remembered to radio ahead for a doctor. You'd think I would have this down by now.

"Willie Gompert, you got your set on?"

No reply.

"FV *Doofus* calling Jonesport harbormaster." (FV= fishing vessel)

A few anxious moments passed, then:

"Go ahead, um...*Doofus*?"

"Willie, it's Bonnie-Kate. From Mille Jours."

"Ayuh, go ahead Bonnie-Kate."

"Listen Willie, I'm halfway over. I'm in labor."

"I'd a thought you'd be management."

I still don't know if he was joking. "The other labor, the having-a-baby kind of…uuuhhgh!"

Aoife took the mike. "Can you get a doctor or summat to meet us there at the dock?"

"Ayuh, sure can, will do."

"Ok, thanks then, see you in fifteen."

She hung up the mike and focused on navigation. That couldn't have been easy with all the wind and rain, not to mention me curled up on the deck in a writhing ball of *uuhhgh*. I bet that was distracting, too.

We made it a couple more miles when all of a sudden *Bam! thump thump thump*. I recognized the sound but Aoife hadn't heard it before.

"Oh no, Champ! The bleedin' engine's banjaxed, it blew up!"

"I don't think so."

"Flat tire?"

"Eefs."

"Oh, right. Boat, not car."

The thumping continued.

"Neutral, Eefs. We hit something."

We went out on the afterdeck and saw pieces of an exploded lobster buoy in our wake. Our *thumpthumpthump* came from a

snarl of rope that spun itself up in our prop when we hammered the buoy.

Don't blame Aoife. In high wind and low visibility it just happened sometimes, even to grizzled old salts such as myself. We couldn't reach the snarl to clear it, so we were effectively dead in the water, unable to tack or otherwise maintain a safe orientation to the waves. The following sea turned us sideways again in a matter of seconds. Buckets of seawater sloshed in over the rails. Our bilge pump worked overtime to clear it out but we were still losing ground. Aoife went down the companionway and came back with rain gear and life vests. She bundled me up in both, then did the same for herself. I got back on the radio and yelled, "Mayday mayday mayday! FV *Doofus* foundering to the west'id of Bobcat Isle! Help! Mayday! We're looking kinda fucked here!"

Aoife opened the flare kit. "Can I shoot one of these?"

"Shoot all of these!"

She fired off all six flares. They're prettier at night, but she still went 'ooh!' after each one. Willie Gompert radioed back to say he was getting the Coast Guard. I wondered if they would remember me. I also wondered if they would make it in time. I hugged my immense belly and spoke to the little person who lived there.

"Hang in there, kiddo. You'll get born if it's the last thing I ever do."

Our child kicked me and set off another contraction. *This one's a scrapper*.

I fell on the deck again and saw more water coming in through the open scuppers than going out. This, I believed, was a condition the old-timers would call 'sinking.'

Aoife had dressed herself in a yellow rain slicker and a sou'wester hat. She knelt beside me looking like a salty dog, except with real big boobies and no beard. I saw terror in her eyes.

"We're gonna make it, Eefs. Don't worry."

"Ok, little crumbcake. We'll make it, sure."

She didn't believe that for a second.

"Plug the scuppers, ok?"

She banged the wooden plugs in, then crawled back to the wheelhouse to escape the rain. Holding onto the pot hauler for support, she looked out to the tempestuous sea. She pointed toward the strait between Bobcat Isle and Althea's Head.

"Boats."

"Huh?"

"Boats. Boats! BOATS! ARE! COMING! TO SAVE US!"

She jumped up and down, still holding the pot hauler. I pulled myself up just enough to look over the rail. Not one but two lobster boats had been hauling their gear in the lee of the islands when they heard our distress call. They bore down on us from less than two hundred yards away.

Our radio crackled to life. "Mayday boat, come in." I guess he was embarrassed to say *Doofus*.

Aoife grabbed the mike. "That's us, we maydayed!"

"We've got you. Sit tight."

"Is there a doctor on your boat then?"

"Uhm...negative."

"We're having a wee baby over here!"

"Oh, lord. Right now?"

"Well, pretty soon anyway."

"Sit tight."

The boat was called *Lonesome Johnny*. They came up beside us—no mean feat in such an unfriendly sea—and got as close as they could. Aoife picked me up like a fat baby and handed me across to the sternman, then climbed aboard, too. Remarkably, no one fell in.

Lonesome Johnny's captain, whose name I forgot to ask but was probably Johnny (although he didn't seem especially lonesome), made sure we weren't injured, then called off the Coast Guard and made full-throttle for Jonesport. The second boat, *Laughing Bones*, hailed us on the radio and said they were towing *Doofus* to the yard, and that she'd be ok.

I thanked everyone and promised to make it up to them somehow. After the words left my mouth I realized they might be interpreted as an offer of sexual favors. I was thinking more along the lines of a fruit basket or a nice pie. Maybe we'd meet them

halfway: oatmeal-raisin cookies and a handjob.

Did I just say that? That's more like something Aoife would say.

And perhaps do.

I guess I could make the cookies.

A state trooper, Officer Winitz ('Call me Stan'), met us at the Jonesport landing and whisked us into his patrol car for a breakneck ride to the nearest medical facility. We didn't actually break our necks, but we came pretty close. With lights flashing and occasional blasts of the siren, we tooled along lickety-split, feeling pretty damned important. *Clear the way! Fat lady coming through!*

We hit a stretch of flooded pavement, the patrol car hydroplaned, went off the shoulder and into a ditch where it rolled upside down in slow motion.

Well. That put a stop to our fancy flashing lights, didn't it. Officer Stan whacked his head on the side window but wasn't hurt. Aoife and I had buried ourselves in each other, so we were ok, too. Cue another contraction, though.

Aoife thought it was baby time right there in the upside down police car. She undressed me from the waist to the ankles, which was a bit awkward with Officer Stan right there.

"Push, little tortellini! Take a deep breath! Count to seven! Make a fist! Say 'aah'! Turn your head and cough!"

I began to suspect midwifery was not among her skills.

"Not...time...yet, Eefs. Just another...uuuhhgh!"

"Oh, sorry." She pulled my underpants back up.

Officer Stan politely looked the other way and called to find out where our ambulance was. He tried to open his door, but it wouldn't.

After a few tries, Aoife kicked her side open. It was still raining hard, so she closed it again and we stayed in the dry albeit inverted squad car waiting for the ambulance that was supposed to meet us halfway.

It was pretty cozy in there (indoor coziness factors are elevated by inclement weather) and we chatted between contractions with Officer Stan, who told us police stories. He was nice. He had a gun but he never shot anyone and hoped he never would.

The rain refused to stop falling, and now there was thunder, too. Our ditch became a stream, but it didn't get in the car. Yet. After a while I had another contraction and Officer Stan said they were eight minutes apart. Doctor Aoife forgot to check that. Stan called on his radio again and they said the ambulance was less than five minutes away.

"You'll be at the hospital in plenty of time."

I figured I could have the baby in the ambulance, if need be.

Wait. I might not get my epidural, so, on second thought, that would not be the least bit ok.

Another police car showed up before the ambulance so we all

got out of the upside-down one and into the rightside-up one instead. We were about to go looking for the ambulance but we heard the siren coming so we just waited for it.

The paramedics strapped me to a gurney and put me in the back. When Aoife tried to climb in, they stopped her.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, it's against the rules."

I wanted her with me. "Come on, doc. Please?"

He said he was sorry again. "There isn't room."

"But—but...she's the father!"

He gave Aoife a visual maleness check and couldn't find any.

"I don't think she is."

"Not the biological father, duh!"

Aoife wasn't much help. "No, I'm the mother. The other mother. The wife, I mean."

The paramedic, Joe, looked perplexed. "Whose wife?"

"The wee baby's?"

"The baby isn't married yet, Eefs!"

Confusion reigned until Officer Stan took charge.

"It's ok, Bonnie-Kate. Go ahead, we'll be right behind you."

The paramedic closed the ambulance doors and it was just me and the fat baby, on our own. Except for the two paramedics. So not really 'on our own' in the conventional sense.

But still.

We sped off doing ninety with the sirens blazing. We would have been at the hospital in no time at all, but we only did that for

about thirty seconds before we had to stop again. Rather abruptly, I thought, for an emergency vehicle carrying an exploding fat lady.

"What the fuck, dude?"

Joe got up and looked out the front. "Oh, not good, not good."

I tried to get up and look, but there were straps holding me down.

"What? What's not good?"

"Downed power pole. Sparks. Not good."

Me, figuratively: "Are you fucking me?!"

Him, literally: "I—I don't believe I am."

He glanced quickly downward as if to make certain his penis hadn't somehow entered my vagina.

"Aaagh!" Then another contraction. "Uuuhhgh!"

That was way less than eight minutes.

So the all too familiar stream of birth day misfortunes flowed unabated. One thing I knew for sure: this was NOT the work of the Universe. Some days were like that, that's all. It didn't mean a goddamn thing.

The ambulance eventually executed a sixty-three point turn and went back the other way. Aoife and co. followed in the squad car. I asked Joe if we would still make it to the hospital in time.

"Don't worry, we have everything we need to deliver a baby."

"So...'No' is what you're saying. Not gonna make it."

He told me to breathe or push or count to seven or something. I forget.

"Can I get an epidural?"

"We'll make you as comfortable as possible."

"Aagh! That's not a yes!"

"Ma'am...Bonnie-Kate—"

"I WANT MY FUCKING EPIDURAL!"

"Bonnie-Kate, listen to me, please."

I huffed and puffed for a bit, then I listened.

"Do you know what an epidural is?"

"Anti-hurty medicine, right?"

"Epidural anesthesia is administered through a needle inserted into the spinal column. It is a very delicate procedure that cannot be done safely outside of a hospital setting. You could end up paralyzed."

Didn't I feel like an idiot. "Well, I don't want that then."

He looked at me sympathetically, and checked my vitals again. Not wanting to say anything else stupid, I shut up for a while. When the silence became awkward, I ventured:

"Do you want to look at my vagina?"

I'd said it many times before, but that was the first time I ever meant it medically.

"Yes. I do. In the strictest professional sense."

He put on a fresh pair of rubber gloves. He poked around a bit and said, "Oh, my."

Apparently I was dilated in the extreme.

"You're almost there, Bonnie-Kate."

"This is going to hurt, isn't it. I mean, hurt more."

"Probably. But not for long."

Another contraction began. "Uuuhhgh! Bullet!"

"What?"

"BULLET! BULL! ET!"

He tsk-tsked me. "Now, now. You'll get through this. Don't think like that."

"Not to kill myself, you fool! To bite on!"

My arm was free so I snatched the pen from his pocket and bit it in half. Pen shrapnel went flying.

Joe said, "Wow. That was pretty impressive."

Perhaps fearing his finger was next, he tied a knot in a sterile towel and gave it to me. "Bite that."

"Wait, do I have to pay for this towel?"

"Imagine so."

"God! Dammit! Got any more pens?"

"Sorry, fresh out."

He saw me eyeing his fingers.

"Tell you what, the towel's on me. My treat, ok?"

"Grrr." I ate towel.

He got back between my leg(s). I was about to ask him—with a thick layer of sarcasm—how he liked the view down there when another contraction hit.

"Deep breath, Bonnie-Kate. Now a good hard push."

"I CAN'T PUSH, I'M IN THE MIDDLE OF HAVING A FUCKING BABY!"

I said this so strenuously it amounted to a push. I hoped our child would never find out I'd referred to him or her as 'a fucking baby'.

If the events of the day so far were in any way predictive, I would probably die in the next few minutes. That was ok, as long as the baby made it. Aoife would be a great mom.

I huffed and puffed some more. Another contraction came.

"Push, Bonnie-Kate. You're doing great, now push."

"Tell my wife I love her!"

"Tell your…what?"

Just then, to the surprise and everlasting relief of everyone present (me and Joe), I splurted out a fine fat baby.

I fell back and lay panting, spewing shreds of sterile towel in the air.

"Is it…is he…is she…?"

"It's a boy, Bonnie-Kate. Ten fingers, ten toes, everything's there."

"Call…Eefs."

He was busy with certain umbilical requisites, and with cleaning up Wendell Charles Edgar (Danger) Caldwell to make him presentable. After a moment he wrapped him up in towels and let me hold him.

I kissed his forehead. "Hello little man! Look how awesome you are!"

He was surprised to see me. He had dark brown eyes (slightly Asian) and a pretty good mop of black hair. He wasn't as fat as I would have liked, but I could fix that. I didn't have any Pop Tarts on me, so I asked Joe.

"Uh, sorry, no Pop Tarts. You know he doesn't have any teeth, right?"

"Oh. Of course I know that. I wanted one for...ah...for me. Kinda hungry here. All that whelping, y'know."

So that was two big lies for the price of one. I swear I knew he was supposed to get milk, I was just a little flustered. I'd been through some stuff that day. Joe probably thought I was going to be a terrible mother.

"Hey, Joe. Thanks for all the delivering."

"My pleasure, Ma'am."

"Please, call me Bonnie-Kate. Would you like a Slim Jim?"

He looked at me with a raised eyebrow, concerned about where I, wearing only a t-shirt, might be concealing a Slim Jim. He'd already investigated the most obvious repository. Curiosity got the best of him.

"Yes. I would love a Slim Jim."

He sat back with is arms folded, waiting to see if I would pull a Slim Jim out of my ass.

"They're in my leg."

"Huh?"

"The false one." It had been detached and set aside during the whelping, so as not to interfere.

"Open that little door on the side."

Wrong door. My flask was in there. I put my hand out.

"I'll take that."

"What is it?"

"Captain Morgan."

"I don't think you should—"

"After all that, you don't think I've earned a little refreshment?"

"It's against the rules." He handed it to me anyway. "Don't tell anyone I did that."

I took a good strong pull and instantly felt better.

"Slim Jims are in the other door. Get one for the driver, too."

We had the driver, Mitchell, radio back to the squad car that it was a boy.

They answered, "Roger that, it's a boy."

In the background I heard Aoife, squealing with delight.

I stayed in the hospital a little while, mostly because it would reflect poorly on the doctors if a noted writer, murderer, lobsterman and *bon vivant* died on their watch. They were also genuinely concerned about my health, but that was just because I was missing so many parts. I was fine, and Wendell was, too, for being so early.

Aoife pretty much lived in my hospital room with me, leaving only when the nurses (and once, security) chased her out. When she cradled tiny Wendell in her arms, cooing and oohing and ahhing, my heart was hit by a love-quake, a nine-point five on the wrecked-her scale.[*] She became such a consummate mother I expected her milk to start, but I guess it doesn't work that way. Too bad for Wendell; that would have been a feast.

We camped out at Stone-n-Ivy for a couple of months. I still had my texty gizmo hooked up, even though I no longer needed it. I used it to call William Pruitt and warn him of my continued existence.

"Hi William, I had my fat baby. His name is Wendell."

"You had a baby?"

"Yep. A fat one."

"I didn't know you were pregnant."

"Well, I'm not anymore."

"Right. This is wonderful news, Bonnie-Kate. I'm so happy for you."

Hmm. I hoped my bold declaration of motherhood might yield a box of Cubans, but he didn't mention any.

"I got married, too. We're heading back to Mille Jours soon."

"Congratulations. Who's the lucky fellow?"

"Her name is Aoife Doyle. My other childhood sweetheart."

"Oh. A girl." He'd not encountered this before. "I didn't...I

[****]Stop groaning. That one was pretty clever, I thought.

mean—"

"How's this for awkward?" I teeheed at him. He stumbled over some more words, but they didn't add up to a sentence.

"It's ok, William. You'll get used to it."

"Any writing in the works?"

He was eager not to talk about lesbians anymore. Not judgy, just nonplussed.

"I'm going to be mothering for a while. No time to scribble."

He didn't reply. I'd met my contractual obligation to Malcom and Dillon with *Would You Like a Pop Tart?* so he couldn't make my write anything until I signed another one. That would happen soon enough, but for the time being, I was coasting. *Bon vivanting*, if you will.

"Listen, William. I have a really nice guest house out on the island. Why don't you round up some grandkids and come out for a while. You can stay for free, and I'll even stock the pantry for you. What do you like to eat? Lasagne? Pie?"

"That's awfully kind of you, but the grandkids are occupied this time of year."

"So plan it for next summer. June's cold and foggy sometimes, but July and August are nice. There's an absolute fuckload of free lobsters, too."

"That actually sounds kind of...wonderful. How soon do you need a commitment?

"Any time at all. The guest house is always available."

If Sylvia came out she could stay with us in the cabin. Maybe I'd try to have her out at the same time. Wouldn't it be nice to have good friends on the island for a while? And a bunch of laughing children running around? It might even make some memories. Perhaps it was time to start keeping a Chronology of Joys.

In early fall, Aoife and I packed up all the baby supplies and returned to the island with our child. Little Wendell had by then grown delightfully chubby, which is just what you want in a baby. The September days stayed warm and pleasant. I was in the chaise lounge with Wendell when Aoife came back from a wildflower spotting excursion. She came over and kissed us good morning.

"Howja do, Eefs? Anything interesting?"

"Sure, there's blue flag in the meadow, starflower and purple loosestrife by the marsh (she meant the freshwater one. We had a salt marsh, too; both attracted ducks), and mullein everywhere, though the blooms are about done. Asters are coming in, aren't they."

"Nice."

She stood and looked out to sea where a mahogany quahog dragger slowly plied its trade. Closer in, there were a few lobster boats.

"I was thinking, Champ—"

"Yeah? About what?"

"You know what kind of weather this is?"

"What kind?"

"Pony weather, it is."

"You may be right."

"Can we bring them out now, do you think?" She was bouncing slightly.

"I'll go see AnnElise tomorrow. Can you babysit?"

"Yay!" She jumped up and down, and then went to play with her chemistry set on the porch.

Before the baby, she did her chemistry at the kitchen table. As near as I could tell, her 'experiments' consisted of combining small amounts of different chemicals to see if they would explode. When they didn't, she tried lighting them on fire.

I came in from the garden one afternoon to find Aoife doing chemistry and our cabin stinking like long-expired cabbage. I at first assumed an infestation of Northern reticulated farting skunks, or maybe Aoife was just expressing the aftereffects of the bean and cheese burritos I made for lunch.

I pulled up my shirt for a mask. "Good god, Eefs."

"'Twas the sulfur, wasn't it." She waved her hand in front of her nose.

That's when I banished chemistry to the back porch, where I set her up with a table made from an old door and sawhorses, a fire extinguisher, and a set of signal flares just in case.

To date, the fire extinguisher had only been used once.

I went up to visit AnnElise and arranged for our ponies to be barged over the following week. On the way back I stopped at a half dozen stores but I couldn't find a lab coat for Aoife anywhere. I called Sylvia from the payphone at Jonesport Harbor.

"I need a favor."

"Shoot."

"Could you steal a lab coat from biology and bring it out the next time you come? Make it a large; it's for Aoife. She's six foot, even."

"I have to steal it?"

"I stole that telescope for you, didn't I?"

"You did no such thing."

"Well, there's that, yeah. But I would have if you'd asked me to."

"How?"

"I'm well connected with various international crime networks."

"No, you aren't."

"I'm wanted by InterPol."

"No, you're not."

"Can we just pretend I am for a minute?"

"Ok."

"Good. Now where were we?"

"Aoife's lab coat."

"Right. So what do you say?"

"I'm gonna do this favor for you. Maybe someday you'll do a little favor for me."

Her Brando was surprisingly accurate. When she brought Aoife's lab coat, it still had the price tag on, so probably not stolen.

When Samson and Aida arrived, we rode them all over the place. At first we went in turns because Wendell was not to be left unattended, not for one second. Aoife sewed a little papoose carrier out of an old denim jacket so we could go riding together and he could come with us. He liked that, and gazed in wide-eyed wonder at his island home.

Sometimes Aoife rode naked, but only if she was going by herself. When she was near the shore, she waved to passing boats, whose passengers and crew immediately produced binoculars and cameras with zoom lenses. Aoife had long, luxurious auburn Lady Godiva hair. When riding naked she kept it tied back in an un-Godivalike ponytail or braid because sun and a salt breeze felt pretty damn good on the boobies, I'm here to tell ya.

We started out putting the ponies in the stable each night, but after a while it seemed a bit silly. It wasn't like they were going to run away someplace where we couldn't find them. We let them wander the island because we couldn't think of a reason not to. They grazed contentedly and ran around like happy equine

fools, as ponies are wont to do. Aoife taught them to come when she whistled so we could saddle up and ride whenever we wanted to, pardner.

We did not find any of the pony-related chores—and there were many—at all disagreeable, not even shoveling poop. Sometimes we took a wheelbarrow and went around the island looking for more. Our garden was going to be amazing from here on out; radishes the size of fucking tennis balls, and lots of sugary carrots to reward the ponies for their contributions.

As befits—behooves, even—pony riders, we often pretended we were in the Old West. I bought us cowboy hats and cap-gun six-shooters that Aida didn't like, so we used them without the caps, yelling *Bang!* instead. A persona called The Dakota Kid emerged, and Aoife went by Tex. We still swashbuckled sometimes. Lady Jane came out for that, but the other ones only made rare appearances. They were useful in their time.

Since naked yodeling felt inappropriate with a baby around, Aoife got some light-as-air gossamer fabric and sewed us a pair of yelling robes with hoods (IMPORTANT: the hoods were NOT pointy!) to wear on the cliff. It was like being clothed in smoke, very witchy.

We would sit on our ponies, wearing smoke and brandishing spears. In low-light conditions, with a breeze to make our robes floaty, we looked like we'd just crawled out of the Bone Zone. I sometimes added the smoke eye to complete the illusion. If a

boat approached for a closer look, we made ogre faces at them and flashed our boobs, a supremely mixed message. We would ride slowly away, yodeling, or if I had my violin, singing *Spanish Ladies*. Softly, so as not to wake the baby.

One morning over cinnamon-raisin French toast, poached eggs and crisp bacon, Aoife asked how I was doing with the Universe-persecution thing.

"Yeah, that's all done."

She snickered. "So the big bad universe is afraid of little Sylvia. Ha."

I should note here that Sylvia was not what most would call 'little.' Skinny, yes, but she was about five foot seven. That didn't stop Aoife from lifting her off the ground when hugging.

Sylvia visited from time to time, usually staying at the guest house—now renamed the Petra D. Basov Memorial Guest House—or with us at the cabin when she came without hubby Jim (who was nice).

"The Universe was never all that big and bad, Eefs. Sylvie and the observatory, the yodeling and daily rituals, that's just for my head. Ask the dormouse."

"I'm so glad to hear you say that." Aoife was an ardent supporter of mental soundness, probably because her own was so frequently in question.

I took one last bite of French toast and patted my no longer immense stomach to indicate satedness. Satiety. Satiation. Belly-

full.

"The universe was a story I told myself so the sorrows would make some kind of sense. I couldn't allow such horrors to be random or coincidental. It made the world too scary to live in."

"You've always been one for the stories, you have."

I picked up Wendell and cradled him in my arms. "I feel a little sorry for the ones who aren't."

Aoife kissed me and looked adoringly at our little boy. She pointed at the bacon still on my plate and said, "You gonna eat that?"

She finished my breakfast and started clearing away the dishes. In my lap, Wendell grew fussy, resisting all my best baby-calming techniques.

"Hand over the bairn," said Aoife.

She pulled up his tiny shirt (with a bear on it) and blew a symphony of fart noises upon his fine, fat belly.

When she handed the boy back, he was laughing.

The Wreck of the *Clementine*

I was a girl of five spending the summer on Mille Jours with my grandparents when I saw my first whale. My Grampa woke me up just after sunrise, saying, "Get your boots, Bonnie-Kate. We're off to the shore."

"Clamming? Yay!" I was a great clamming enthusiast because it was a legitimate excuse to be in mud.

"Even better," said Grampa, handing me an apple-cinnamon Pop Tart. "You'll see."

We followed the path through the morning-damp forest to an accessible part of the shore near Kingfisher Point. As we neared the water I caught a pungent scent mingled with the sea breeze, something far less benign than the normal low-tide reek I'd already come to love. My eyes watered as the new smell intensified.

"Gak. What stinks, Grampa?"

He handed me his handkerchief and I buried my upturned nose in his Old Spice. We emerged from the pines onto the open clam flats.

I stared in undisguised awe at the thirty-five foot right whale carcass the previous night's tide had deposited on our shore. This

mighty king (or queen) of the seas had ended its reign in a state of decomposition so foul even the intertidal scavengers had gone off in search of something less nasally offensive, like a roadkill skunk, or a sewage farm.

As I walked the dead whale's length, I absently pocketed Grampa's hankie and was rewarded with a noseful of cetacean rot. I barfed apple-cinnamonly on a barnacle covered rock.

Sorry.

Morbid curiosity proved an irresistable enticement, though, and I revisited the whale several times before the tide reclaimed its fetid prize. In the course of those few days, its condition did not improve.

In spite of that vile attraction—no, let's be honest: because of it—I remained an avid shorecomber. In the intervening years, Aoife, Wendell and I collected many treasures left by the tides, but nothing as noteworthy as a dead whale until now.

Having somehow attained the utterly uncalled-for age of sixty-three, I remained blissfully wedded to my Aoife, who was now a graceful sixty-five. Our marriage was now legal and recognized, even over in America.

Aoife spent the last thirty years working as a freelance wildlife rehabber, dealing primarily with unreleasables. She would bring them to the island, nurture them back to health and release them to live out their lives here, naturally and in relative comfort. We cared for them as needed, meaning we gave them

food.

Aoife and I continued our daily nature walks, which now included unexpected but delightful encounters with overly friendly raccoons, skunks, crows, porcupines and what-have-you.

In the past thirty years I had not been bitten by anything larger than a mosquito, unless you counted lobsters and bitch crabs, which I didn't.

Nor had I lost a single body part, a testament to the effectiveness of our continuing anti-universe rituals, now sporadic rather than daily. Once a month seemed to do the trick.

Years ago Aoife turned the unused half of the stable into a little art studio where she could draw and paint. Her work tended to the pony-centric, but was nonetheless impressive. Sometimes I joined her out there, making a little sea glass jewelry and (still) perfecting my bunny-with-a-banjo.

She outgrew her chemistry set, graduating to straight black powder which could be counted on to explode more consistently than random reagents. She'd recently blown up a chair we didn't much like, and a few years back she detonated the rusting remains of Edgar Tuttle's pickup truck. That was pretty good, but the ponies didn't like it.[*]

I had by this time signed over Stone-n-Ivy to Wendell and his wife, Boe, a Scandinavian beauty about whom Aoife said 'rowr'

[****]Tillie Gee and Ranger. Aida and Samson had since passed, after long happy lives.

but don't tell her that.

They had two boys, Brady and Daniel, and a daughter, Siobhan, whose middle name was Danger. They attended public school in Wiscasset and spent their summers on Mille Jours with their aging grandmothers. They would sometimes team up with Sylvia and Jim's grandkids to drive the adults to distraction.

As of mid-August, the kids had returned to Wiscasset for school and Aoife had driven to Vermont to pick up a too-friendly bobcat. It was during this rare interval of solitude that I discovered the *Clementine* run aground on the same spot where a thirty-five foot Right whale passed its peak of freshness almost sixty years ago.

Clementine was a forty-two foot ketch with no obvious damage, apart from laying beached on her starboard side. I approached with a marked lack of caution.

"Hello! Anybody home on the *Clementine*?"

Apparently not. My first thought was *Free sailboat!*

I climbed aboard and quickly abandoned an ill-conceived attempt at walking upright on her forty-five degree deck, adopting instead a halting crawl that at least kept me from sliding overboard. I had not dressed for mud that day, as I often did, and at the height of shorecombing fashion, too, I might add.

It didn't take long to locate *Clementine*'s problem: her electronics had caught fire. At her helm were several melted pools of black plastic, bristling with scorched transistors and

charred wires. An empty fire extinguisher lay next to the gunwale, but there was no sign of her crew. This was a mystery worthy of Hercule Poirot.

I was not a writer of mysteries. I wasn't even much of a reader of mysteries, apologies to St. Agatha. And where the fuck is she when you need her, anyway?

I was not at all sure how to interpret the evidence, but feared *Clementine*'s crew had met a bad end. I scanned the shores north and south but saw no survivors.

The tide was returning. I disembarked in case the boat had designs the would be best served by sending me out to sea. Boats rarely take it upon themselves to do that, but *rarely* isn't *never*, is it. I exited the beached craft near the stern and found more clues: remnants of a campfire and footprints washing away under the incoming tide. A lot of them, like the *Clementine* had been carrying a professional sports team, or the audience from a Dave Matthews concert. Hard to say, really, but I knew this: Strangers had infiltrated my island, and they were probably in a bad mood, and hungry. I would have been. I envisioned all manner of ruffians, knaves, blackguards, and mountebanks traipsing about my island with utmost disregard for decorum, treading on my paths and perching uninvited upon my rocks. Insolent bastards. I considered hiding so I wouldn't have to deal with them but then I thought what's the worst that could happen?

Well, if they were really hungry they might roast me over a bed of

coals and serve me with toast points and smelly French cheese.

Motherfuckers. I'd like to see them try.

On review, the foregoing seemed a needlessly grim worst-case scenario. I summoned my courage and followed the footprints, wishing I had a giant magnifying glass and a deerstalker hat. *Zut alors! Sacre bleu! Voici la fenetre, Monsieur Poirot!*

At least I had the element of surprise. If the intruders were in fact cannibals I'd know before I revealed myself. I had a sixth sense about that kind of thing.

I located my quarry at the Petra D. Basov Memorial Guest House. I crouched in the underbrush to secretly evaluate the shipwrecked hooligans from a safe distance.

There were five of them milling about on the porch, mostly looking bored. None betrayed outward signs of cannibalism. Cannibals usually have some bones around, and they're always gnawing on femurs and the like. These people looked more like garden-variety non-flesh-eating tourists. One even had a suitcase with him. Before I could move in for a closer look, a voice behind me said, "Excuse me, Ma'am."

I nearly jumped out of my granny panties. "AAGH!"

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

While I was distracted by the potential cannibals, two men had approached from behind in stealth mode with the apparent goal of giving me a heart attack. They nearly succeeded. I looked

them over and determined they were probably not cannibals. They didn't appear to be scoundrels, rabble or miscreants either, but those can be harder to spot.

One of the men was heavy-set; he introduced himself as Captain August Mitchell.

"And this is Dewey Hannigan." A slender young man half August Mitchell's age (and girth).

"Bonnie-Kate Caldwell. You're from the *Clementine*?"

"Yes, ma'am, we're the crew. We got in a mess yest'y evening. Must have drifted ten-twelve miles before we fetched up here."

Dewey shifted uncomfortably. "Where is here?"

I said, "You landed on Mille Jours Island."

He glanced at my crooked nose and facial scars.

"You're that writer lady, aren't you?"

I nodded, preparing to apologize for my books, but he said nothing more. That was fine with me. I didn't want to talk about my books anymore. Once they went to the printers I was glad to be rid of the damned things. Yet the people who continued to read them did so voluntarily, or so I was told. These were strange times, indeed.

I pointed to the people gathered at the Petra House. "Yours?"

Captain Mitchell nodded. "Waiting for us to get help."

"Ok. I'm help."

When we got to the house, *Clementine*'s passengers were so aggressively pleased to see me they formed a small mob and

swallowed me up. Figuratively, not literally, though I was still on the alert for that possibility.

One of them, a pretty, dark haired girl named Ginny Mae Hawkins, spoke to me with an agricultural twang.

"I've read all your books, Miss Caldwell. I just love the way you develop your characters!"

From her purse she produced a notebook and pen, so I gave her an autograph that made it sound like we were old friends.

Before she could say anything more, the man with the suitcase took my hand and pumped it vigorously, as if we had just iced a world-altering financial transaction.

"Carson Bell, Ms. Caldwell. This is my wife, Angelina."

I noted his wristwatch and her earrings, together worth more than the house upon whose porch we stood. I was out-classed again.

Angelina shook my hand and leaned in to whisper at me with great urgency.

"Is there a bathroom?"

Ah, poop. The great social equalizer.

I opened the (unlocked) front door. "Take the first right, then the first door on the left."

"Thank you, darling." Her old-money accent rendered it *dahling*, of course.

I led the rest of the lost travelers into the Petra House and attended as best I could to their immediate needs, by which I

mean gave them water, and furniture to sit on. I was itching to feed them, too, but there wasn't much food at the Petra House, the good stuff was all at the cabin. I normally used Petra's for guests and a few summer renters, but none were due for a while so the larders were lacking.

I handed a tumbler of well water to the other young lady of the group. She introduced herself as Margot Randall and extended a limp hand I had no idea what to do with. I considered slapping it but realized that was probably not what she intended.

A strawberry blonde of striking beauty and a Jessica Rabbit figure, she was cannibal-bait if ever there was, and somehow oddly familiar.

"Do I know you?" I asked, thinking perhaps she'd come to a book signing. Fans became sort of faceless after a while, but I would have remembered this one.

"I don't believe so," she cooed, affecting coquettishness. "Maybe you've seen my films?"

I nearly said, *I don't watch porn. Very much.* but I caught myself. "A thespian, eh?"

"Horror movies, mostly."

"I love horror movies, the cheesier the better. Anything I'd know?"

"Did you see Revenge of the Cannibals? I was Zothani, the Cannibal Queen."

Aha! I knew it! A cannibal hiding in plain sight.

Just then I noticed she wore a necklace hidden beneath her sweater.

Human teeth?!

I inched away from her and closer to the door, but the last of *Clementine*'s passengers stood athwart (yar) my escape route.

Before I could fly into hysterics, the scholarly looking man I had wrongly assumed was Margot's significant other gave me a disarming smile.

"Ah, Miss Caldwell. So pleased to meet you. John Newton."

I kept one eye on the actress-cannibal since they're known to wait until you're not looking and then eat your face when you least expect it.

"What brings you to this neck of the bay, Mr Newton?"

"Our ill-fated sightseeing tour, I'm afraid. I was just catching my breath before fall semester."

"Student?" He looked a little older, but you never know.

"Faculty. Mechanical engineering at MIT."

"I think *Clementine*'s problem may be more electrical in nature."

Captain Mitchell broke in and said, "I don't suppose we could use your phone, Miss Caldwell? We can float her on the tide and navigate by chart, but we should call our home port before they send out a search party. If they haven't already."

Aoife had a cell, but I didn't. She didn't use it much and I didn't use it at all. "Sorry, no phone on the island. But there's a

radio on my boat." I still liked being mostly incommunicado.

I walked up to the cabin and got Mr Johnson (still rusty, still blue, still running) then drove Mitchell to the harbor so he could use *Doofus'*s radio. On the way back to Petra's he assured me they would be out of my hair (still poofy) in another couple of hours.

"Don't hurry on my account."

"That's awful kind of you, but...the tide—"

"—waits for no one. It's one of the only things you can count on."

Helping castaways was good for me, it made me feel useful. I liked these people, and wasn't prohibitively troubled by the cannibal lady as long as she kept her distance.

We jounced our way back to Petra's. The long driveway there was in far worse shape than the So-called Road, but Mr Johnson didn't mind. We'd only put five hundred miles on him in the last thirty years.

Captain Mitchell disembarked when we pulled up, anxious to offer further assurances to his passengers, for whose well-being he was solely responsible.

"Hey, Cap," I said. "You guys must be starved. Let me buy you lunch."

"You've already done so much—"

"Nonsense. Wait here, I'll be right back."

I drove to the cabin and entered through the front door, upon

which I had hung two hand-painted signs. The first said

Bonnie-Kate and Aoife Caldwell
All Are Welcome

(except cannibals, but that went without saying). The second one said

WARNING
This Door Is
Not Bear-proof!

At the bottom of that one I'd painted the internationally recognized symbol for lack of bear-proofness, a bunny with a banjo.

I returned to the Petra House with pasta and sauce, two loaves of garlic bread and two bottles of red wine. I took great care not to select a nice chianti.

Ginnie Mae jumped right in to help with the cooking and serving. When it was ready we all feasted together like old friends.

The wreck of the *Clementine* reminded me that solitude makes you weird, and I was fairly weird to begin with. No need to gild that particular lily. Or encrust it with diamonds. I could feel my encroaching weirdness slip away as I shared a good meal with my newfound friends. If I learned anything in my sixty-three

years on the planet, it was this: Hell is other people, but so is heaven.

When the tide returned to Mille Jours, Captain Mitchell and first mate Hannigan floated their vessel. They sailed her to what was once the Massey's dock at Burnt Cove so her passengers could board for the trip home.

I stood on the weathered planks of the pier wishing them a safe journey as they made ready to sail. I harbored a minor concern over Captain Mitchell's fitness for duty. It was he who ran them aground in the first place. He assuaged my fears once he was at the helm, clearly in his element, barking out commands to his hapless first mate.

"Hannigan! Make fast the mainstays and hand up those charts."

"Oh. About the charts."

"What is it, Hannigan?"

"I used them to start the campfire last night."

The skipper of the *Clementine* removed his cap and struck his first mate over the head.

"Hannigan! I oughta!—"

He was interrupted by Professor Newton who came aft to report that he had repaired the radio with mussel shells and pinecones. Hannigan looked relieved.

Just then Margot Randall came up on deck wearing a low cut gold sequinned dress so tight she must have been sewn into it. I

saw that her necklace was pearls, not teeth, and was comforted. Ginny Mae Hawkins came up behind her with bared (and enviably trim) midriff. She presented me with a coconut cream pie as a token of thanks.

Carson Bell, not to be outdone, approached with his suitcase and popped the latches. Angelina looked on through her lorgnette. The case held more money than I'd ever seen in one place, easily a million dollars in crisp hundreds. He handed me five $5000 bundles, saying, "We are ever so grateful, Miss Caldwell."

I tried to stuff the cash in my pockets but found it impossible while balancing the pie. Hannigan turned to me and winked.

"You know what to do."

Of course I did. The pie left my fingertips at a positively screeching velocity.

Hannigan ducked with expert timing.

The pie exploded like an atomic custard-bomb across Captain Mitchell's face.

"Thanks a lot, Hannigan."

At least that's how I remember it.

I waved goodbye and watched them sail into the picture perfect summer afternoon.

The Petra House would need a little sprucing for the next renters, a widower named Bradley and his three young sons. They would stay for a week, followed by a pretty single mother

and her three daughters, all with hair of gold.

I was never been one to play matchmaker, but thought I really should introduce them.

Ok.

Having now instilled in the reader grave doubts as to the veracity of any and all events in this quote unquote memoir, I am sorely tempted to throw up my hands (or just throw up) and declare that I am finished here. I quit, my tale is told, I'm tired and I want to go to bed.

Everything interesting has already happened, so you can stop reading now. Thank you for your time.

Bye, now.

Or you may read on. Your funeral.

It was pea-soup fog on the morning I went over to get Aoife and the bobcat. I did not fly into a panic over this as I might once have. I had recently equipped *Doofus* with a super-fancy chartplotter gizmo. That's basically a computer screen with a map on it that shows where you are in relation to the land, the islands, the ledges, shoals, and shallow water areas. Between the chartplotter, sonar and radar (which showed where the other boats were), you could cross the bay in zero visibility and never

once get in a mess out there. You might bump into a piece of driftwood or take out a lobster buoy, but those usually weren't catastrophic. Unless you were whelping in a thunderstorm.

I arrived in Jonesport early and walked up the hill to the Lunchbucket for a hot cup of Cap'n Jack's nitro-coffee, which was indistinguishable from road tar. Yum. It was 9:30am so they were still serving breakfast. I'd had oatmeal with raisins and pecans before I left the island, but the smell of frying bacon aroused my inner Bilbo Baggins, who urged me to partake of Second Breakfast. Who was I to argue with a Hobbit? Little dude's got a sword; all I had was a pointed stick. I ordered two over easy, bacon, and rye toast with extra butter.

In the next booth were a couple of fishermen whose day was cut short when all that fog dropped in. I swear I wasn't eavesdropping.

"How many times have you seen 'em?" The one that said that was wearing red flannel and had a red beard shot through with an insurgency of grey.

He was answered by the one with grey hair, suspenders and a John Deere cap.

"Three times, over the years. Must be twenty years since the last time. You?"

"I only seen 'em once, about ten years back. They made a sound I wish I'd never heard, like banshees from the grave." He shivered.

"Ayuh, it's the stuff of nightmares."

"Gives me the creeps just thinkin' about it."

A younger guy in jeans and fishing boots entered and looked around the dining room, then came to join them.

"Mornin John, mornin Art." He pronounced the old-timer's names Jawn and Ott. "Right thick out there today, ain't it?"

"It's a witch day, all right," said John Deere Hat.

"You don't really believe that crap?"

"Don't have to believe it. I seen 'em with my own two eyes, and more 'n once."

"Quit yankin' my chain."

"I ain't yankin' nothing. There's two of 'em, always together. A tall skinny one and a little dwarfy one. They sit on pale horses and carry spears. Set up a caterwaulin' to put ice in your bones."

"Get outta here with that."

Red Beard chimed in. "They wear these wispy robes, and they're right pretty until they catch you lookin' at 'em."

Young feller perked up at the mention of 'right pretty,' probably picturing Elvira. "Yeah? Then what?"

"Then it gets weird."

The waitress, CORA, came over and refilled their road tar, calling them *deah* and *sweet-haht*.

Red Beard went on. I kept not eavesdropping.

"Their faces turn—horrible. Just horrible. Like a couple of Medusas, scowling and mean and just plain evil. Ugly as Satan

himself."

The younger one remained skeptical. "Go on, then what?"

"In the middle of all the scowling and howling they...ah...well, they pull their robes open. You could see everything. They bounced their titties at me, scowling all the while. The tall witch has great big ones, the little one don't. She looked to be Japanese, or somesuch."

"Where was this?"

John Deere Hat said, "I seen 'em out on Mille Jours, but they been spotted on the Eastern Ear and Sloane's Fall, too."

That wasn't true. We never yodeled anywhere but Mille Jours. How would we get the horses over? But that's how folklore evolves. Pretty soon they'd have us eleven feet tall and riding bears, shooting laser beams out of our private parts.

I could hardly wait.

"It's been some time since I seen 'em, but I swear on my life they was out there." I glanced out the front window in time to see Poppy drive by with a large pet carrier sticking out of the trunk. The carrier was empty, its former occupant sat next to Aoife in the front, riding shotgun. The cat was smiling.

I mopped up egg yolk with the last bite of my toast and left CORA a huge tip because waitstaff *work* for a living. I stopped at the fishermens' booth on my way out.

"Hi, sorry to intrude. Those witches are still out there."

They looked at me like I had a vagina or two growing out of

my forehead. They didn't speak, so I did.

"Gareeble beep ba-deee!" I held aloft an imaginary spear and made a hideous ogre face. I would have flashed boobs but there were children present. They were kind of saggy anyway. The boobs, not the children.

I exited the Lunchbucket, leaving the lobstermen in stunned silence.

On the dock at Mille Jours—The Charles and Sonia Caldwell Memorial Dock (there was a sign)—Aoife turned the bobcat loose. We expected him to go running off in the joy of newfound freedom, but he sat at her feet like he didn't know what he was supposed to do next.

"What's his name, Eefs?"

"Her name. ThunderBeast."

"Hmm."

"Yeah. I don't like it either."

"Can we change it?"

"Sure. How about...Fluffernutter?"

Too silly.

"Scootie Poof?"

WAY too silly.

"Bob?"

Too obvious.

"How about Pippin?" I was still thinking hobbitly.

Aoife scratched her under the chin. "Pippin. I like that one.

She favors a Pippin, doesn't she."

We drove up Topgallant to the cabin in Mr Johnson. Pippin took shotgun, still smiling. I stopped at the pond per Aoife's request. She and Pippin walked to the water's edge, Pippin waded in and unselfconsciously pooped.

"I thought she might want that. It's their instinct to go in the water. Covers their tracks."

"Smart kitty. Should we walk her down here every day?"

"No need. We'll show her the brook. She'll take it from there."

Aoife got in the back seat, leaving shotgun for Pippin who decided she'd rather be in my lap.

"Can you drive with her there, Champ?"

Pippin nuzzled me, looking for a scratch behind the ears I was more than happy to provide.

"I wish I could always drive with her there."

Up at the cabin Aoife explained that Pippin hadn't really learned how to hunt like she was supposed to, but that she'd do some of that anyway. We would need to supplement her diet until she learned how to be wild and free.

"What do we feed her?"

"Raw chicken's fine."

"Not rats?" At Wildcare the bobcats always ate rats.

"Rats are as good or better."

"Let's breed some rats then. We know the drill."

I took charge of that. Back on rat duty.

We slipped inside while Pippin was sniffing around in the geraniums. No sooner did I close the door than she began crying to be let in. The sound was more than my pushover heart could take.

"What if I let her in?"

"She lived in a city flat before the rehab. It'll be ok."

She bounded in and sniffed around, pausing briefly at the leftover scent of my bear, then jumped up on the couch beside Aoife and curled up for a nap.

That night she wanted to sleep in our bed. It was queen-size, plenty of room for bobcats. Once Pippin grew accustomed to her freedom she spent her days wandering the island, catching meadow voles and the odd hare, and taking long luxurious naps in the sun. At night she prowled a bit, but always came home early to have her half-a-rat and settle down between us for the night. There was a time when a bobcat in our bed would have been (ahem)...inconvenient. Aoife and I were old at this point and required less play time. When it happened at all, it was in the afternoons, finishing up with a Pop Tart and a luxurious nap of our own.

Did I mention that having a bobcat around is just fucking awesome?

Next time we went over (for hay bales, rat supplies, and window shopping), I caught Aoife salivating over a Wal-Mart display case full of laptops and super-fancy cell phones.

"Look at this one, little concubine." She pointed at one of the phones. "It does pictures and movies, and has the whole internet on it, too. All in that wee bit of a phone."

I understood the basic idea of the internet but didn't think I would have much use for it. Call that a failure of the imagination. I was happy with the antiquated word processor I used, basically an electric typewriter that let me fix mistakes and rearrange paragraphs. That was good enough for me.

Aoife had more computing experience, gained when she visited Wendell and Boe at Stone-n-Ivy. She went down there a lot.

"So," I asked her, "What's that internet like? Is it any good?"

"It's mostly pictures of naked lasses, dontcha know. I think there's other stuff, too."

"You gonna get that?" I pointed at the shiny red one she'd shown me.

"I dunno, Champ, its a bit dear. $300."

"Pfft." I flagged down a salesperson. "We'll take that one. The red one."

I bought it for her because I still loved her as much as anyone ever could, even though she said I was "a little pain in the tits" sometimes.

And also for the naked ladies. Yum.

On the next warm(ish) day we rode down to Breakers Beach for the afternoon. The waves came in six or eight feet high over

there (fifteen to twenty or more in a storm) and the place had a smell all its own, as so many places on the island do. You could blindfold me and plunk me down anywhere on Mille Jours and I could tell you where I was just by the combination of smells.

At Breakers Beach the sea churned up long brown streamers from the kelp beds and left them on the shore where they let off a briny-vegetably-seaweedy fragrance. That combined with the cordite smell of basalt and pink granite boulders grinding against one another as the sea rolled them up and down the shore. Factor in the salt air, ubiquitous pine needles and a mild undercurrent of pony poop, and you had a unique olfactory marker you'd never forget.

Pippin and the horses had by that time grown comfortable with one another, so we all went down there together. I brought blankets, pillows, and lunch, of course—cold striper sandwiches from last night's leftovers. We'd caught a dozen striped bass when they schooled up in Scoter Cove the previous day. We also had antipasto salad (more briny vegetables) and Pop Tarts. I also brought some carrots for the ponies so they wouldn't forget how much we loved them, and half a rat for Pippin, for the same reason.

On our arrival at the shore, Pippin spotted a pine marten and gave frenetic chase. The marten wisely secreted itself into the rocks where it could hole up for a week, if necessary. Pippin was left to bat a paw around in the spaces she could reach, but came

up empty. She was armed with some serious claws. Picture a fishhook. Now picture ten fishhooks, ten times bigger. That was Pippin's weaponry. If she wanted to, she could fuck you seriously up.

After a few tries at the marten she started whining so I gave her the rat to distract her from her bobcattish woes. That worked. After lunch Aoife did some sketching while I walked the shore in search of sea glass for making jewelry.

When I lay down for a little nap, Aoife and Pippin came to join me. Aoife got out her new internetty phone and clicked some buttons, then handed it to me.

"How about this one, little glockenspiel?"

"Glockenspiel?!"

"I meant harpsichord."

The phone showed a young lady of noteworthy posterior endowment. Oh my. She had misplaced her underpants (but not her eight-inch stiletto heels).[*]

I sighed. "I used to have a bottom like that."

"Still do, Champ." She followed up with a smack and a squeeze.

She clicked more buttons.

"What's your Mom's full maiden name?"

"Sonia Estere Labayen. Why?"

"You can look up all your old relatives on here, can't you."

[****] If I had a nickel for every time that happened to me.

"You mean...your four bears?"

"Yeah, four bears."

She worked on that for a while, then gave me the preliminary run-down. The bulk of my Asian/Pacific Islander four bears had been some variety of seafarer: merchants, navy, fishing, shipping, etc. They were from as far south as Borneo and as far north as Hokkaido, Japan. That's where I got my almond eyes; a lot of Filipinas don't have them.

Most importantly of Aoife's findings, I had living blood relatives on Cebu, Mindinao, and Shikoku, Japan. I noted that these were all *islands*.

"We'll have to go down there, Eefs. I have a family. Actual living and breathing four bears."

I thought about that for second.

"Well, maybe not so much *four*, but bears nonetheless. People related to me."

"We'll go then, won't we."

She clicked some more. "When should I book the flights?"

"We can't fly, hon."

"Sorry, of course not."

She clicked away, looking for creaky wooden three-masters bound for the South Pacific. A cruise ship would never do; that wasn't our style.

We weren't passengers, we were seafarers.

PS. Sorry about that *Gilligan's Island* thing. I was just messing with ya. Like I do, y'know?

About the Author

J. R. Allison is a retired lobsterman who worked the waters around the Downeast Maine islands before retiring in Portland. His writing draws on his years along the Maine coast and explores a wide range of voices, moods, and perspectives. He is the author of the short fiction anthology *Rock Bottom & Rising Tide*. *A Moxie and a Pop Tart* is his first novel.

He has won no awards of any kind, but there's always that chance.

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