

# **McCahery's Mistake**

by J.R. Allison

The history of the McCahery family describes a catastrophic and protracted failure of the luck of the Irish. In 1789 the Commonwealth of Massachusetts bestowed upon Padraic McCahery a grant of land in return for his valiant service in the Revolutionary War. The land in question was an unnamed 500-acre island twelve miles off the coast of what would in 1820 become the State of Maine. Upon his first landing there, McCahery dropped his musket, which discharged and blew half his head into the sky. Padraic's instantly widowed wife and six children were sad witnesses to the tragedy. Anne-Marie McCahery was determined to make a go of it on the island that now bore her late husband's name. She and her clan cobbled up a homestead and a pair of dories and settled into a raw-boned but tolerable existence on the island now called McCahery's Mistake. They fished, raised pigs and chickens, grew potatoes and shot some of the deer that populated their little island.

They fared well enough until the first winter descended on them like a polar bear descends on a harp seal. On a windy late-December evening Anne-Marie's eldest son fell overboard and drowned as he tried to land a 250-pound halibut. In January her second- and third-born, a daughter and son, died of scarlet fever, leaving her fourth child, Sean McCahery, the man of the house at age twelve. After a spell of Arctic cold in February killed the livestock, the widow McCahery came to believe the island was bent on destroying what remained of her family. They fled as soon as the bay was free of ice, leaving the island deserted until 1835 when a grand-nephew brought his new bride to live on McCahery's Mistake. Kevin McCahery built a second house and began operation of a salt-works on the island's south shore. This enterprise was successful enough to warrant the hiring of a second man. When the hired man absconded with his young

wife, Kevin McCahery got good and drunk, then hanged himself from an apple tree. His decomposing body was discovered much later— eyes, ears, and lips gone to carrion fowl.

In 1843 Kevin's brothers Seamus and Brian moved from Searsport to McCahery's Mistake bringing their wives and children with them. They worked the seas with moderate success for several years until news of the Gold Rush reached them, at which point they built a schooner and departed en masse for California. The McCahery brothers were not the master shipbuilders they believed themselves to be, and their vessel foundered, sinking with all hands in a squall off Cape Hatteras in the spring of 1849.

The island sat idle for a decade while the McCahery family on the mainland struggled to keep the taxes paid. In that time there grew among them a festering hostility toward the authority levying the taxes, that being the Town of Guillemot Island two miles to the west of McCahery's Mistake, under whose administration a number of small, mostly uninhabited islands fell. Since McCahery's Mistake received no services of any kind from Guillemot — or from the mainland, for that matter— they felt they should be exempt from these taxes. Years of legal challenges yielded no appreciable results. Seeing the potential value of their little isle in the sea, the McCahery family continued to pay the taxes, their remittances often accompanied by furious polemics directed at the Robber-Barons of Guillemot Island and the State of Maine.

The fishing was extraordinarily good in the waters surrounding McCahery's Mistake. Over the next half-century McCaherys came and went from the island, building various shanties, workshops and other structures mostly relating to the fishing industry. As of 1910 there were three families of McCaherys living in the small settlement on the Mistake and none remaining on the mainland, unless one counted those still in County Wicklow, Ireland.

By this time the McCaherys' sole occupation was lobstering, and in an abrupt reversal of their usual lot, they

prospered at it. For a while. The McCaherys' good fortune came through diligent labor and vigilant policing of their territory. They claimed all waters within a one-mile radius of their island, an expanse of territory encompassing some of the most productive lobstering grounds on the entire Eastern Seaboard. Fishermen from neighboring islands knew this and pressed the boundaries, but the McCaherys dealt swiftly with all interlopers. They reserved the harshest measures for Guillemot Islanders, their tax-assessing oppressors. No warnings were given, their gear simply disappeared. Having exclusive access to such fertile seabed brought unexpected wealth to the McCaherys who now numbered 13, including five children too young for the boats. It was too good to last. There were, after all, McCaherys.

The morning of September 27, 1912, dawned with a stiff 18-knot breeze out of the south-southwest. When day broke, the sky remained dark with clouds and the sea turned hard and mean. Heavy rollers broke on the western shore of Guillemot Island where Jack Morehouse and his son Leon were already busy mending nets. Looking up from his work Jack was surprised to see the single triangular sail of a lone peapod moving across the bay. As the small boat approached Jack noted the sail was unmanned and swinging wildly about the mast. The boat moved erratically, sometimes fetching up on offshore ledges and nearly capsizing twice. It became clear that the tiller was also unmanned and Jack surmised the peapod was adrift, having broken free of a dock or mooring. The boat moved at the will of the wind and was now bearing on St. George's Point where Jack and his son stood watching. Leon watched with furrowed brow as the sea tossed the small boat like a cat batting a newly captured mouse.

"Reckon somebody fell overboard?" suggested Leon.

"More likely she slipped her mooring. No one's fool enough to take a peapod out in a sea like this."

"I've met some fools to belie that remark."

Jack laughed. "Come to think of it, so have I. She'll be hard ashore either way. Let's have a look-see."

The peapod moved out of view as the two men spoke, running aground 100 yards down the shore. The rolling sea thrust the boat well up onto the rocky beach where it came to rest on its port side. Jack and Leon came around to the open topside of the peapod and saw both of their guesses were incorrect. The captain of the peapod Anne-Marie of McCahery's Mistake was still very much aboard his vessel. He lay supine and moldering on the planks of his grounded craft, just as he had for the last several days at least, judging from the state of his decay. Leon turned away and puked up his flapjacks while his father bent down for a closer look. At 65 he still recalled the carnage he witnessed as a young man in the Union Army. At least this body was whole, unlike many he'd seen.

"I can't make out his face," Jack said, "but he's from the Mistake. One of those Irish." He searched the dead man but only found a six-inch folding knife and a pocket watch, both of which he quietly transferred to his pocket, reasoning that this particular McCahery would have no further need of them.

Leon recovered a measure of his composure. "Best go and fetch Harold down here."

"Reckon we'd best. Not that he'll know what to do. He never does."

Jack and Leon righted the boat with its occupant still aboard and wrestled it to higher ground, then went to find Harold Weeks who in his official capacity was the lone constable of Guillemot Island and whose edicts were universally disregarded. Still, he was the nearest thing to law on Guillemot. When Harold arrived at the scene he remained true to form. He had no idea how to proceed.

"I guess we ought to give the poor bastard a decent burial."

"Maybe we should figure out what's killed him first," said Jack, hoping Harold might take a cue.

"He's been lost at sea. Any fool can see that."

"He's from McCahery's Mistake, Harold. How lost can you get between here and there? They aren't but two miles apart. You can see one from the other except in the thick of fog, and we haven't had that since June."

"Maybe his heart gave out."

"Maybe so, but we should have a little better idea before we go putting him in the ground. At least get Doc to look him over."

"I say we take him back to the Mistake and let them figure it out," said Leon.

"Now that's the best idea yet. They won't want us burying him over here anyway." Jack looked at Harold Weeks who nodded his agreement, glad to be absolved of further responsibility.

September 28 arrived with light breezes, bluebird skies and a calm sea. Jack, Leon and Harold left Guillemot just after daybreak in Jack's boat, towing the Anne-Marie and her dead captain. The putrefying sailor was now covered with a moth-eaten horse blanket less for the sake of decorum than to keep the flies away.

The crossing was uneventful but the three men dreaded the coming encounter with the McCaherys, who still made no secret of their animosity toward the people of Guillemot. The unbidden arrival of their antagonists bearing the corpse of one of their kin was bound to garner a less than cordial reception. Tempers were already on a hair-trigger over fishing territories. Angry words and threats had been exchanged. If the McCaherys connected those events with this, their reception would be colder than an Aroostook County outhouse in January. The possibility of violence could not be ruled out.

Approaching the harbor at McCahery's Mistake the men of Guillemot immediately sensed something amiss. It was full

daylight and the McCaherys' fishing boats were still on their moorings. On the shore were a workshop, a small barn and three hovels, but no activity apart from that of two small children squatting near the water's edge. When they saw the boats approaching the children gestured frantically, beckoning the visitors ashore.

The three men soon stood on the weather-beaten wharf attempting to interview the two filthy children. The little ones' comportment approached hysteria as they jabbered in an incomprehensible brogue. Leon gradually came to understand they were asking for food, but the men had none to offer. Jack Morehouse saw that the barn was open and walked toward it. One of the children, a boy of about five, followed. Jack told him to wait on the wharf but the boy seemed not to understand and continued along at Jack's side. As they passed a stand of wildflowers the child's hand darted out to a thick stalk of mullein and came back holding a large grasshopper, which he then consumed with sickening crunches.

"Wait! Don't... you can't..." Jack stammered as the boy swallowed the insect and looked around for another. Jack felt his stomach clench and quickened his pace so as not to witness this again.

On entering the barn a pungent waft of putrid apples and excrement hit Jack like an olfactory sucker-punch. In one corner was a cider press beside which were stacked empty bushel baskets and full glass and ceramic jugs of varying size. A few overripe apples were rotting on the dirt floor. Opposite the cider press was a stall holding a bale of straw, two goats and a great accumulation of goat manure. The nanny brayed in complaint when Jack entered, her udder looked near to bursting. The little boy picked up one of the smaller cider jugs, uncorked it and drank. He carried it to Jack, who hesitated. *This child eats grasshoppers; Lord knows what he might consider fit to drink.*

Jack sniffed at the bottle then took a small taste and found it quite good. He drank a satisfying draught before handing it back to the child. Jack led the nanny goat out of

the barn and told Leon to milk her lest she explode. The children disliked the milk going to waste on the ground and ran back to the barn for a tin bucket.

Jack started down the path to the three shanties with the boy following again. When he approached the first dwelling the child refused to accompany him and remained on the path wearing a stormy expression Jack interpreted as either sorrow or fear. Jack called out and rapped on the door, but there was no response. He opened the door and took one step inside, surveyed the darkened interior and stepped back out into the cool September sun. He repeated this at the two remaining shanties; each time the boy held back. Jack Morehouse returned to the wharf where he rolled a cigarette with trembling hands.

"Put these children in the boat. We're taking them to Guillemot."

"Er, won't the families object?" asked Harold.

Jack's eyes were downcast, his voice soft and measured. "There are no families here."

"They left these tykes to fend for themselves?"

"Not exactly," said Jack. "They're all dead."

"All of them? Dead?"

"I make it eleven, including our friend the captain. Men, women, children. All dead."

Leon sighed. "I was afraid of this."

"Afraid of what?" asked Harold.

"Nevermind. Just... speculation." Leon's eyes met Jack's.

"Well, what do we do now?" asked Harold.

"Back to Guillemot. These children are near to starved.

All these people need burying but we can't do it today. We'll come back tomorrow with Doc and a few more hands."

"We'd better get the State out here to investigate," said Harold.

"That's the last thing we'd want to do." Jack was already considering ways to turn this tragedy to personal gain. "I'm for keeping the State out of our affairs at all costs."

"But this isn't our affair."

"It might be," said Jack. Leon nodded.

Back on Guillemot the traumatized children were unofficially adopted by a childless young couple while a search for relatives was undertaken. The inquiries would reach all the way to Ireland since the McCaherys left no relatives in Maine. People who knew of them at all— who were very few— spoke of them with a vague distaste. The McCaherys had isolated themselves on their island and had little contact with outsiders. Few people knew of their existence on the Mistake, even fewer cared.

The next morning Jack and Leon again sailed to McCahery's Mistake, this time with a few able-bodied men whose grim task it was to inter the eleven dead McCaherys. Among this crew was Doc Monahan, who was precisely not what his name implied. He had no formal medical training but had picked up a few shreds of knowledge, enough to set a fracture or sew up a gash. He'd even delivered a few babies on Guillemot in the absence of a midwife.

Doc made his fully unqualified examination of the bodies and found no outward sign of violence. The position of some corpses suggested convulsions or severe respiratory distress. Most had spewed mucus from the nose and mouth. Doc's pronouncement was that they'd consumed poison. He couldn't guess what kind, or whether it was suicide, homicide or accident.

A rusting wrought-iron fence bordered the small

cemetery on McCahery's Mistake, enclosing weathered marble headstones half-covered in grey lichens and dating back to the late 18th century. As the sun descended on the afternoon of September 29, 1912, the cemetery was nearly full. There was no time for caskets or headstones. Each fresh grave was marked only with a plank into which "McCahery 1912" was carved. Some were misspelled: "McCarey." These would last about a year before the soil reclaimed them, as it did the flesh of those buried below.

Sailing back to Guillemot with the last of the day's light, Jack suggested it would be best not to talk too openly about the tragedy for the time being. There were at present too many unanswered questions.

On the following day Jack Morehouse convened a clandestine meeting of the town elders, whose families, like his own, had the deepest roots on Guillemot. His son Leon was present,

as was Lemuel Parry, the town's blacksmith, and island matriarch Maggie Adams whose ancestry on Guillemot predated the Revolutionary War. Harold Weeks was present, albeit as a formality, as was another representative of the island's fishery, Asa Farrell.

In Jack's opinion the McCahery tragedy was linked to the fishery: a fight over territory had blown out of proportion. Leon and Asa were of the same mind and had suspicions as to the responsible party. Jack's intent was to see the matter laid to rest without undue scrutiny from those outside the fishery and minimal impact on those within. First and foremost, as Jack saw it, the State must not be called in. He would propose to his fellow islanders that the risk of harm to the island's relative autonomy was too great. But Jack, Leon and Asa were concealing an ulterior motive: their wish to take possession of McCahery's Mistake as their own. Observing that it was only a matter of time until lobster boats would be outfitted with motors, they knew the territories around the outer islands would soon become far more accessible to fishermen from the main. Competition was sure to escalate. If a few men from Guillemot were to base their operations from the Mistake they would maintain an edge. The Mistake featured less than

five miles of shoreline compared with Guillemot's thirty or more and would thus be much easier to defend. If they were able to police their territory as ruthlessly as the McCaherys, their claimed waters would be some of the most remote on the coast. If the state authorities became involved it would be all but impossible to turn the McCaherys' tragedy to their advantage without casting suspicion on the lobstermen of Guillemot.

Jack opened the meeting with the news of what had befallen the McCaherys. Maggie Adams shook her head in disbelief. "I hope this ain't what it seems, Jack. Not again." As usual, Maggie did not look up from her knitting.

"It gives every appearance of it. Some of the particulars have changed but it looks to be an act of retribution, what with the territory dispute brewing between Guillemot and the Mistake. The signs are pointing right at Guillemot."

"What signs?" asked Maggie.

"I'd call this an escalation that got out of hand. We know Andrew Larabee's been at war with them for the better part of a year, more so than anyone else working out that way."

"And it's been worse lately, with fall coming on and the lobsters moving to deeper water," said Asa Farrell. "I saw Andrew in a shouting match with one of those Irish boys out by the Finback Shoal. Said they'd cut his gear. That wasn't no more than two weeks ago. Andrew says he's keeping a rifle on board, but he's none too anxious to use it."

"Doc says the McCaherys were poisoned," said Leon. "It's been a long time but we all know what can happen in a gear war. It starts with harsh words, then somebody's gear gets cut. Next thing you know boats are sunk, a dock gets burnt, somebody's well gets poisoned. There's only one well on McCahery's Mistake... and everybody there used it."

Maggie was skeptical. "If everybody used it, how come them two kids ain't dead? They must have drank from it too."

"I wondered about that, but there's a cider press and a couple of scraggly goats over there. I figure they were drinking cider and goat's milk instead of well-water."

"I'm doubtful about Andrew," said Lem Parry. "I don't think he's got it in him."

"He had the motive and the means," said Jack. "I'll admit he doesn't seem the type, but a gear war brings out the worst."

"What means did he have?" asked Maggie.

"That little shack where he makes his photographs is right full of poisons. All manner of bottles, jars and boxes with the skull and crossbones."

"If it appears he did it, what then?" asked Harold, out of his depth, as usual.

"We put him on trial," said Jack.

Harold nearly choked on his coffee. "A trial on Guillemot? You must be joking."

Absent from the island were a jail, a courthouse, a judge, advocates, and any of a dozen other requirements for a formal legal proceeding. About the only thing they did have was a Bible to swear on. Harold was quick to mention this inconvenient fact.

"That never stopped us before," said Jack.

"There's been a trial or two. Must be 50 years back," said Maggie Adams. Knit one, purl two.

"Surely you're not suggesting--"

"No sir. But if all them Irish folk are dead and he's the cause, we've got to handle it ourselves."

"If the State gets involved, our way of life could be

jeopardized," said Jack. "Look what happened on Roan Mare."

In 1890, a murder there drew mainland authorities, and the islanders never regained full control of daily affairs. That caution lingered with Guillemot's elders. Harold Weeks remained unconvinced. "What if the State finds out about the McCaherys and comes over here asking questions? It'll look like we tried to hide it."

"The State's got no interest in the Mistake," said Leon. "They won't take the trouble to go out there. Never have before."

"As long as we handle it ourselves," said Jack, "we keep our way of life intact. Simple as that."

"True," said Maggie. "Outside meddling is the last thing we need."

"Just because they never sailed out there before doesn't mean they won't this time," said Harold. "So the question stands: if the State comes snooping, what do we do?"

"We tell them the God's truth," said Jack. "We sailed over there and found all the McCaherys dead so we gave 'em a decent burial. Simple as that."

"And what if they dig them up to see what killed them?"

"By the time they get around to that there won't be nothing left but bones," said Lem Parry. "That won't tell them anything. They'll figure it was consumption or scarlet fever, most likely."

"And what about the two children?"

"What about them?" said Maggie Adams, who had fallen into the role of stand-in grandmother to the waifs. "They're fine right where they are."

The adoptive parents, Ethan and Hannah (nee Adams)

Dunning, took it upon themselves to locate any remaining McCaherys in Ireland, a task which would consume many hours and one they were in no great hurry to undertake. They had come to love the McCahery children as they would their own.

When the informal meeting adjourned Harold Weeks reiterated his skepticism but agreed not to make waves—particularly mainland waves—for the time being. He was dubious as to what might happen if their neighbor Andrew Larabee was tried and convicted. Would they really hang a man on Guillemot? They couldn't very well sentence him to prison, they didn't have one.

Andrew Larabee was not his name. Born Auguste LaVeillette near Lac Saint-Jean, Quebec, he had spent the better part of two decades putting distance between himself and a bad batch of bootleg corn liquor he distilled that left a lumberjack's wife partially blind. The axe-wielding husband, a man named Cottle, had sworn vengeance. By the time Andrew settled on Guillemot in 1907, he'd changed his name twice and his address half a dozen times.

Andrew Larabee lived on the harbor shore at Guillemot in a ramshackle abode whose unpainted exterior was aged to the soft silver-grey of weather-worn cedar. There were two outbuildings not counting the outhouse: a workshop in which he repaired and maintained his lobster gear and a darkroom where he developed the photographs that were now a hobby rather than a source of income. Both structures bore the signs of indifferent upkeep and inexpert repairs, but continued to serve their respective purposes. On the evening of October 3, 1912, Andrew Larabee finished an early supper of fried haddock and was lighting the oil lamps when a knock came at his door. Although he was generally well-regarded by the citizens of Guillemot Island, with only five years of residency he was still a newcomer. Andrew was not an overly social creature and could not call to memory the last time he'd opened his door to a visitor after sunset. He was surprised to find his friend Asa Farrell accompanied by Jack Morehouse and Harold Weeks standing in his dooryard in the chilly fall dusk.

"Evening, Andrew," said Jack. "Got time for a little chat?"

"All the time in the world." Andrew's English bore the shadow of a French accent. He stepped outside to greet his visitors rather than asking them in. "My house is not so comfortable; better we talk out here."

"How's the fishing been lately?" asked Jack.

"Oh, you always get a few." Although he had not yet discerned their purpose Andrew sensed these men were not here out of concern for the fishing.

"Been setting out a little deeper, have you?"

"As we all do in the fall."

Asa Farrell took the lead. It was crucial to approach the subject of the McCaherys' demise so as not to arouse Andrew's suspicions. Better to get him talking. Try to elicit and evaluate subtle expressions, reactions, gestures, eye contact. Asa wished it was lighter out.

"Been out by the Mistake?" Asa affected a casual tone and was caught off guard when mild mannered Andrew exploded like a powder keg.

"Damn those Irish bastards!"

"Er... what?" The investigators were not at all prepared for this.

"Those son of a whore McCaherys! I'll kill them all, they touch my gear again!"

"What... uh, what happened?" asked Harold.

For the next few minutes Andrew Larabee told the men an invective-laden tale of the territory war between himself and the McCaherys. Their narrator spared no hatred, vitriol or threat of grievous bodily harm, ending by recounting his

argument with two McCaherys at the Finback Shoal. He was vicious in his condemnation of the gentfolk of McCahery's Mistake.

After assuring Andrew he was not alone in his dislike of their Irish neighbors, Asa tried another approach. He took a tentative step towards Andrew's darkroom saying, "That where you make your pictures? That all seems about like magic to me. I don't see how you do it."

At the mention of his beloved avocation Andrew brightened. He would gladly discuss the art and science of the photograph with anyone willing to listen. Assembled in the darkroom, the men feigned interest in Andrew's explanations of modern photography. A shelf on the wall above the work table more urgently captured their attention; it was filled with containers bearing ominous-sounding labels: Silver Chloride, Magnesium Flashpowder, Potassium Cyanide. Skull-and-crossbones symbols were shown on several containers. "A regular chemistry lab you've got here," said Asa. "That stuff looks dangerous."

"Very dangerous, some of it, yes."

Jack noted a spot on the shelf demarcated by the absence of a thin layer of dust showing where two containers, one round and one rectangular, until recently occupied spaces. He studied Andrew's lean hawk-like face in the dull lamplight. "I guess you've heard the latest."

Andrew turned to Jack. "What latest?"

"From the Mistake. We sailed over there a few days back and found them all dead."

"You... what?"

"They're dead. All the McCaherys. Stone dead."

"But how?" Andrew did not appear shocked or horrified, just puzzled.

"It appears their well was poisoned."

"Serves them right."

"Maybe so," said Jack, "but we can't countenance the murder of eleven men, women and children. Someone's got to be held to account, and the Mistake's in our jurisdiction."

"But who would have done it?" No sooner had these words left Andrew's lips than he understood the purpose of their visit on this fall evening. In the next instant he also realized he had just plainly described to them his murderous intentions. Andrew Larabee began to sweat, and although it was not seen in the dim yellow lamplight, his hands were shaking.

"We thought you might have some idea about it," said Harold.

"How should I know something?!"

"Who else was having a gear war with them?"

"Nobody likes those McCaherys... you said so yourself!"

"Dislike is one thing, a gear war is quite another."

"Folks don't normally get murdered over mere dislike," added Asa.

Andrew Larabee's alarm shaded to anger. "So you think I did this thing, killing these people?"

"That's what we hope to find out," said Harold, calmly.

"Upon my word, I did not. Upon my honor."

Jack was not at all convinced. "Just saying it doesn't make it so."

"I will ask that you gentlemen leave now."

“Sure we will. But don’t go too far, Andrew. We’ll likely be talking again, and soon.”

“Save your threats, Jack. I have nothing to hide.”

Andrew emerged from the encounter shaken but intact. Twelve days hence would come another confrontation in which he would not fare so well.

“He’s got a past, you know,” said Asa as he and Jack walked by moonlight toward their respective homes.

“Do tell.”

“I don’t have all the details but there’s folks in Quebec after his hide. Fella named Cottle. Lumberjack.”

“You don’t say.”

“From a place called Lac Saint-Jean. And Larabee’s an alias. We don’t know his real name.”

“The plot thickens,” said Jack.

“We’ll have to look into it.”

"Indeed we will."

On the morning of October 15, a single-masted vessel sailed from Castine to Guillemot and deposited a single passenger at the town landing. He was met by Jack Morehouse, who supplied him with the location of Andrew Larabee’s house. By that evening, Andrew lay dead in his parlor, the victim of strangulation. O.W. Cottle, having finally avenged the crippling of his dear wife, returned to Castine and headed north, disappearing into the Maine woods. No one on Guillemot had even learned his name.

The discovery of Andrew’s body occasioned another meeting of the town’s elders who agreed— to Harold’s everlasting relief —that the case of the McCaherys was now closed. The murder of Andrew Larabee was still unresolved

and would remain so barring the unknown O.W. Cottle's return to Guillemot to proclaim his guilt, an event the islanders deemed marginally less likely than the Pope opening a brothel on Main Street.

In the spring of 1915 ownership of McCahery's Mistake reverted to the State due to years of unpaid taxes. The authorities in Augusta even sent an agent to the island but he reported the settlement dilapidated and long abandoned. The State asked no further questions.

In 1916 the State of Maine put McCahery's Mistake on the auction block where it was snapped up by a consortium of Guillemot residents, namely Jack and Leon Morehouse, Asa Farrell, Lemuel Parry and Maggie Adams. For Lem and Maggie it was an investment. For Jack, Leon and Asa it was the culmination of a plan they'd set in motion four years earlier when eleven innocent McCaherys met with a premature demise.

By mid-July, Jack, Leon and Asa moved to the Mistake and dug a new well, filling in the old one as they worked.

The completion of the first of several cabins they intended to build was cause to celebrate, and on August 17 the men gathered mussels, clams and sea scallops for the main course of the feast.

The previous night, just as it did on the night of September 23, 1912, two days before it killed the eleven McCaherys, a virulent concentration of red tide bloomed in the harbor at McCahery's Mistake under the shroud of darkness. It left every specimen of shellfish a ticking time bomb of lethal neurotoxins.

The island's new owners shared a pint of whiskey as part of the festivities, and consumed the sea's bounty with great relish. It was near 10:00 pm when Jack Morehouse, doubled over in pain, set sail for Guillemot under a three-quarter August moon. The winds were favorable and he completed the crossing in less than half an hour.

It was not until three days later that his decomposing body was found on Guillemot's east side, lying next to what was left of his peapod, its hull stove-in and canvas in tatters. Jack's dying thought was likely of Leon and Asa, who both expired in a similarly gruesome fashion not more than fifteen minutes after Jack went for help.

Two years later Ethan and Hannah Dunning abandoned the search for relatives who might be willing to care for Jake and Siobhan McCahery. Hannah struck up a brief correspondence with a distant cousin of the McCaherys, but was assured the children were better off on Guillemot than back in Ireland. Ethan and Hannah gladly accepted full custody of the children who were by now thriving on Guillemot. The early trauma they endured soon passed from memory.

Hannah Dunning looked out the kitchen window at her adopted children, now seven and eight, as they played in the yard.

How odd it was, she mused, that they never acquired a taste for shellfish.

Beyond the dooryard Hannah spied a small flock of the pretty black and white seabirds for which her island was named. She watched as they landed on the blue water, rising and falling easily on the tidal swells that rolled inexorably into the harbor at Guillemot Island.

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