

Rock Bottom & Rising Tide

Maine Island Stories

by J. R. Allison

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This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

This anthology is dedicated to my darling DeeAndra.

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Between a Rock

When Johnny Bonneau saw there was nothing but air between him and the rocks, one simple but distressing thought crossed his mind: *This is going to hurt. A lot.*

It couldn't have been worse if the rocks were somehow molten. His right femur snapped on impact with an audible crunch. The two ribs that subsequently fractured did so with less fanfare but an equal if not greater degree of pain. The upper rib punctured Johnny's right lung. His body shuddered, slipping from the jagged ledge, and became lodged in the adjacent crevice. He struck his forehead as he fell, causing a concussion. The barnacle-encrusted rock opened a gash on his brow from which a crimson rivulet ran, blinding his left eye. Above and to his left lay the outcropping where Johnny lost his footing.

Johnny's quite literal downfall came at the hands of a marine alga which sometimes coats rocks near the low water mark with an invisible gel, rendering them slick as lard in a hot skillet. Were he not immobilized, Johnny would be kicking himself for making such a bone-headed move after nearly seven decades of treading these rocks sure-footed as an ibex, having never slipped, fallen or broken so much as a shoelace.

The pain hit him like a nine-pound sledgehammer in the hands of an angry Norse deity, but Johnny did not cry out. Doing so would call attention to his foolish predicament and he would

not be made a fool. He got himself into this mess and he would by God get himself out.

A herring gull wheeled and cried before coming to rest amid the small flock in the cove.

"Shaddap!" yelled Johnny, regretting it when his broken ribs jabbed at him with the kind of pain one might get from eating a bowl of Swiss Army knives. He winced, drew a shallow breath and forced open his one good eye. He saw sky: blue, cloudless, cold. It was eleven o'clock in the morning, but the pale winter sun cast shadows like it was mid-afternoon. He saw the headland of the cove's opposite shore rising to a 30-foot promontory capped with white spruce and patches of windblown snow. At the foot of this were rocks and seaweed, then a broad expanse of sandy mud exposed by the ebb tide—the clam flats. He saw the water that remained in the shallow cove and caught a glimpse of the sea beyond, then his view was obstructed by his own rubber-booted foot. In that glimpse the sea was calm.

Johnny tried to move his broken leg and was nearly blinded by the pain of bone on bone. Consciousness fled for a time and he slipped deeper into the crevice. When he opened his eye again he saw the rusted tines of his clam rake where it had come to rest on the ledge above him. His wooden clam roller had gone missing.

At the moment, he thought, seems I got bigger problems than scrounging up the daily bread. This really ain't good a-tall."

There were five houses at Richard's Cove, none of them within Johnny's narrow field of vision. Four were summer cottages that lay above the cove silent and empty. The fifth belonged to Gooden Webster, the sole member of the tiny year-round island community whom he could not stand the sight of. Through generations of rivalries and fishing territory disputes, infidelities and disapproved marriages, their mutual dislike had weathered a great passing of time. The Webster and Bonneau families of Little Seal Island had not been friendly since the early 19th century when they worked side by side in the island's nascent fishery. Johnny reserved the kind of warmth for the Websters that a Hatfield traditionally extends to a McCoy. It was mutual.

As Johnny lay drifting in and out of consciousness, Gooden was running his scallop drag on nearby Isle au Haut Bay. His absence left Richard's Cove deserted and with very little chance of any of the island's thirty-four residents just happening by. The totality of his solitude came limping into Johnny's pain-fogged awareness.

"Just as well," he told himself. "If Gooden Webster showed up here with a band of angels to float me out of this godforsaken hole on a cloud of cotton candy, I'd tell every last one of 'em to go straight to hell. As I figure it, a man who can't save his own self prob'ly ain't much worth saving anyways."

A little more tension left his body and he felt himself slip still deeper into the crevice. His left hip made contact with the mud

and loose stones at the bottom. He felt a small relief in knowing he could go no further into this damnable crack in the earth.

Johnny tried moving his right arm and found that he could do so, if gingerly. The throbbing of his shattered leg was either numbed or intensified by the cold; he'd never broken a bone, so he had no frame of reference by which to judge. All he knew was it hurt like a five-star bastard. He made a grab for his clam rake, knocking it free from the ledge above and catching it with his face. The rake split his lip and a spasm racked his body, awakening the fury of his fractured bones. His suddenly small world was all darkness again.

When he returned to consciousness the sun was discernibly lower. He'd lost some time but did not know how much. His clam rake now rested on his broken body. He thought for a moment and concluded that it could be the instrument of his rescue.

"If I can catch ahold of that ledge with the rake, I can most likely pull myself up out of here and crawl back to the truck."

So many of life's problems are solved if one can only make it back to the truck.

Johnny hooked the rake's tines onto the ledge above and heaved mightily with his good arm. His upper body rose, unpinning his left arm. Then the fire in his broken leg and ribs ignited and robbed him of consciousness again.

On awakening he felt a new kind of cold biting at his lower extremities. He realized with growing alarm that his lower legs were now underwater. He thought, stupidly, *Tide's runnin'.* *Guess I should've thought of that. Damn.*

He craned his neck for a better look at the crevice's interior. Above and behind him were barnacles, periwinkles, and rockweed attached to the walls. Their presence reminded him when the tide was high the crevice would be submerged.

"What I need here, I think, is a miracle. Just a small one. Dammit! I come down here this mornin' just the same as any other, looking to keep myself fed for just one more day and now I'm supposed to die here? All from one slime-covered rock? Well, I'll be doubly-god-damned if I'm just gonna set down here in the mud and drown like some idiot flatlander. No sir, I won't have it."

Johnny heard the distant sound of a big marine diesel engine. He cocked his ear. Was she coming or going? The sound grew just perceptibly louder. Coming. In another moment he connected the motor's sound with a boat he knew as well as his own: *Lucky Seven*, a 42-footer with a 650 Cat for a powerplant. Owner and captain, Gooden Webster.

Webster would not bring his boat into Richard's Cove; the entry was too shallow, and there was no dock or mooring. But he would be roaring past the mouth of the cove in another minute or two. If Gooden saw him, he might come to his aid.

Johnny had sworn he would prefer death to aid from Gooden Webster. Now he was staring a cold drowning square in its hungry face and knew he must put generations of distrust aside. It was either that or *adios muchachos*.

The approaching boat appeared to be his last hope, but a question arose: was the bad blood so deep that Webster, even if he did become aware of Johnny's imminent drowning, would

refuse to render aid? It seemed a possibility, but he was short on options.

He extracted a folding Barlow knife from the pocket of his jeans. His breath came in staccato gasps as he hacked at his threadbare jacket's sleeve until it came free. He wove the brightly colored sleeve between the tines of his rake. He thrust this makeshift distress flag as far above the crevice as he was able, waving it steadily back and forth. If Gooden saw it as he passed the cove he would come to investigate. Wouldn't he?

Johnny couldn't see the boat but the engine's roar reached a crescendo, indicating that it was passing the mouth of the cove. The flag would be in Gooden's line of sight for a few seconds, at best. He stretched his arm against the pain and gained another inch or two, waving his distress flag like a peapod's sail in a hurricane. The blue and orange jacket sleeve came free of the tines and fluttered down into the crevice. He lost his grip on the rake. It clattered on the rocks and splashed into the water beyond his submerged legs.

He had done all he could do. He listened in desperation for *Lucky Seven* to ease off her throttle. The engine's sound faded, but only with increasing distance. Gooden Webster had passed and he'd seen nothing. He kept *Lucky Seven* at three-quarters throttle, making for the harbor two miles away at the island's north end.

Johnny closed his one good eye and lay back in the gathering darkness between the rocks.

"So now I wait for the tide. I am really going to die here. Dammit. I wasn't done livin'."

He tried to find some peace in the darkness. A low hissing sound came to his ears. Another 20 minutes and the tide would have him. The hissing grew louder.

"Is this dyin'? It ain't supposed to be like this."

Johnny's scream frightened the flock of seagulls into flight. Their screams were nowhere near the volume of his as the sea blasted him from the crevice like the cork from a bottle of cheap champagne. *Lucky Seven's* thundering wake poured into the rock cleft, raising him up, spilling him out, and leaving him drenched, battered, and howling on the shore of Richard's Cove.

The blackness returned but faded in a few minutes' time. Johnny Bonneau struggled to open his good eye again. He could see his truck just up the rise, less than 50 feet away.

Gloria Polk's Ordinary Day

When I saw the fog bank I knew I was in trouble. And not little trouble either, more like the kind where you get grounded for a bazillion years. The oars wouldn't keep me out of the fog, no matter how hard I rowed. The tide was running too hard.

Sometimes it's like a river, but I didn't think of that when I got in Papa's boat. I just wanted to go rowing. I went with Mama last week after school and we had so much fun. I rowed us all around the harbor and I didn't even get tired. But it was high tide then so it was easy. Mama said she was too busy today so I went by myself. That was a big huge mistake.

The whole thing was Jimmy Summerlin's fault for saying he could row better than me, and that girls shouldn't go in boats anyway.

"Oh yeah?" I said. "What about Linda Greenlaw? She can drive any boat there is. Probably even an ocean liner."

"No she couldn't. You and her oughta just stay home and bake cookies and leave the boats to the men. That's how it's s'pose to be."

I was getting mad. "A girl can do anything a boy can do."

"Can not."

"Can too." I knew I was right because Mama said so.

"Can not. They're too prissy."

That's when I punched him in the stomach. I was trying to make him cry but he didn't. At least I didn't get in trouble for it. I doubt if he'll ever call me prissy anymore.

I was about halfway across the thoroughfare when the tide got ahold of me. I rowed as hard as I could but I just kept getting farther away from the shore. When it took me past the old lighthouse I was yelling for help but nobody heard me. I saw that fog bank getting closer and I knew I was going out to sea. I tried everything, but the fog swallowed me up like a big white monster that eats 2nd graders and rowboats. I kept on trying to row back to the island but the fog was so thick I couldn't see anything.

Pretty soon I couldn't even tell which way I was supposed to go. It was just the stupid fog, everywhere. I thought I might be making things worse by rowing, like I'd end up in China or Paris or something, so I put up the oars. Then I just sat there and cried while the ocean took me away to who knows where.

I wished Lord Fluffington was with me so I'd have someone to talk to. I realized I might never see him again if I ended up in China and then I cried even more. But at least I had my favorite dress on, the tie-dye one me and Mama made. Papa said I looked like The Princess of the Flower Children. That made me laugh, to think of a garden where the daisies all have smiling little baby faces. When I thought of that it made me stop crying for a while.

It seemed like I was lost in that fog for a bazillion years. I even said some bad words, I was so mad. H's and D's. But not F's. I would never say one that bad. Jimmy Summerlin said that one once. I hate him.

It took just about forever but finally I could see something in the fog. It looked like a boat, and there were about six or eleven people in it. They were all standing up and wearing pointy black hats. I thought they were fishing. I yelled over to them but they didn't look up so I started rowing over there. I rowed and rowed but they didn't get any closer. At first I thought they must be trying to get away from me but then the fog lifted a little more and I could see that it wasn't a boat at all. It was an optickle illusion, a little island with pine trees on it and it was pretty far away. I figured there might be a phone so I rowed like crazy until I got blisters on my hands. The island seemed a little closer and I kept rowing even when one of my blisters broke and it hurt really bad.

The fog was mostly gone when I came into a little cove there and pulled Papa's boat onto the shore. There was a big driftwood log and I tied the boat to it so it couldn't float away. I didn't know what island I was on. I just knew it wasn't Harper's. It seemed like a good time to cry some more, so I did.

"Hold still, child."

I almost jumped out of my sneakers when I heard that. I looked around and then I saw her. A lady was sitting by a big rock, painting a picture of the cove. She had a red hat with a floppy brim and she was very old. She might have been forty. Or even fifty. And she was weird. But I wasn't scared of her. I just got done being lost at sea. Nothing could scare me now. I bet Jimmy Summerlin would have been totally scared.

I asked the lady, "What island is this?"

"All in good time, young lady. Now stand still."

"But..."

"Don't look at me. Look at the trees over there."

"Are you painting me?"

"When Dame Fortune sees fit to cast a lachrymose urchin upon my shore what else am I to do?"

I hardly understood any of that, except when she called me an urchin. "I'm not an urchin. Urchins are prickly."

"Very well. Judging by your particolored frock, one might surmise that you have fallen out of a rainbow. Perhaps you are a muse. By what name are you known? Erato? Thalia?"

"You talk funny."

"I speak the Queen's English, my dear. Perhaps it is you who 'talks funny.' And your name?"

"Gloria."

"That's all? Just Gloria?"

"Gloria M. Polk. I live on Harper's Island."

"And what does the M stand for?"

I didn't really like telling people my middle name, but she looked at me with those eyes that meant she wasn't gonna stop.

"Monday. Gloria Monday Polk, ok?"

"Ah. A delightful bit of wordplay. Sic transit gloria mundi. Charming. Your parents are quite clever. I am Madeleine Vanderveer. You may call me Miss Vee. I live here."

"Where is here?"

"Spanker."

I looked around, worried. I'd have sworn she just told someone to spank me. But there was no one else there.

"What did I do?"

"What on earth are you on about, child?"

"If you spank me my Mama's going to be mad."

"Not at all, my dear! This island is called Spanker. It's a sail, not corporal punishment. The hindmost sail of a tall ship."

"Corporal who?" Were there soldiers here? This lady hardly made any sense at all.

"Never mind that, Miss Gloria M. Polk. Please look at the trees so I can finish painting you."

I liked being painted and for a few minutes I forgot all about being lost. Maybe I would be famous in an art museum. I love art. Especially Van Gogh. He went crazy and cut off his own ear. Ew. I did a report on him for school and got an A minus. He was an impressionist. I wondered if this lady was an impressionist, too. She still had both of her ears.

After a while she put down her brush. "Well, that's as finished as it will ever be."

"Can I see?"

"Certainly. But be forewarned: this painting is dreadful. The very height of mediocrity."

I looked at it. It was one of the most beautiful paintings I ever saw. I looked just like a girl who knows all about going to sea.

"Why don't you like it?" I turned around but she was walking away with that big red hat flopping on her head. "Wait, where are you going?"

"To my home, child. It isn't every day such a lamentable waif arrives on my island. We must mark the occasion with tea and biscuits. Come along now. Be a dear and bring that ghastly painting. Mind the wet."

While we walked to her house I told her how I got lost and I found out she was British and that's why she talked so funny. Also that she owned the whole island and nobody else lived there. She said she had a husband once and seemed sad, so I didn't ask her any questions about him.

Her house was really big. It had at least eleven rooms. It was grey and white with a big porch that went all the way around. She had tons of stuff from the sea, too. Like moon-snail shells and a basket star and even some big huge whale bones. It was all stuff she found on the shore.

"And what do you suppose is the most remarkable thing the tide has delivered to my island?"

I tried to think of the most amazing things in the sea, like sea turtles and whales and great white sharks and pirate ships with treasure. But she just shook her head.

"I give up."

"The single most remarkable thing to land on my shore was a wooden rowboat bearing a little girl with hair of gold, whose dress seemed made of rainbows."

I started laughing, and she smiled for the first time. "Do come in, Miss Polk. I shall put on the kettle."

She left me in her living room. The furniture was like old-lady furniture. I bet it was a hundred years old. There were so many books it was like the library on Harper's. And there were tons of paintings all over the place. I think she painted them all. When she came back I was looking at a painting of a black and white cat sleeping in a basket.

"I see you have found Schrödinger."

"Who?"

"He was my cat when I lived in England. Sadly, he has since passed. Tell me, Miss Polk, are you a fancier of the feline?"

"Um."

"Do you like cats?"

"Oh. Yes! I love cats!"

"And have you any cats?"

"Yes. His name is Lord Fluffington."

"Good Heavens! Is he of the nobility? What is he Lord of?"

"I - I don't know."

"Well, he must be Lord of Something."

I thought of him and how loud he purrs when he's happy.

"He's Lord of Purring...dale."

"Splendid! Of course he is! My dear, you have a quick mind and a marvelous imagination. They will serve you well."

Thinking of Lord Fluffington reminded me that I should call home. Everything was ok now but I was still kind of lost. "Miss Vee? Can I use your phone?"

"May I, dear. May I use your phone."

"Um. I don't have one?" Why was she asking for my phone when I just asked for hers? I told you she was weird.

"You would be most welcome to my telephone but alas, such modernity has yet to arrive on Spanker Island."

"Um."

"I have no telephone."

"Oh. How will I get home?"

"You have a rowboat, haven't you?"

My blisters would be so bad if she made me row all the way back to Harper's.

"Don't fret, Miss Polk. I am pulling your leg, as they say. I have a fine boat with which I shall personally deliver you to Harper's Island."

"When can we go?"

"Patience, child. We haven't had our tea yet."

She took me into the kitchen and I sat at the table. There were placemats with birds on them. One was called a ptarmigan which seemed like a silly name for such a pretty bird. The lady was poking around in the cabinets and saying, "Oh dear, oh dear."

"What's wrong, Miss Vee?"

"It would appear that my supply of biscuits is depleted."

"I like mine with butter and strawberry jelly."

"No child, not that kind of biscuit. Cookies, you would call them."

"I like cookies, too."

"Then we shall bake some. Tea without biscuits simply will not do."

I remembered Jimmy Summerlin saying me and Linda Greenlaw should stay off of boats and just bake cookies. Miss Vee saw the look on my face and asked me what was wrong. I told her all about that, except for the part where I punched him.

"You were absolutely in the right, Miss Polk. You are surely capable as anyone, boy or girl, no matter the task."

"So I don't really want to bake cookies."

"I feared as much. Tell me, have you ever baked cookies?"

"Yes, ma'am. With my Mama. We made Christmas cookies and I decorated them with sprinkles and stuff."

"And did you enjoy it?"

"It was fun. I got some frosting on my nose."

"And would you let Jimmy Summerlin spoil your fun?"

"No way! Not in a million years."

And that's how I ended up baking cookies with the weird British lady. It was fun, too. When they were done she asked if I knew how to make a property and I said no. I thought she was crazy. Then she showed me how to make tea instead. She put milk and sugar in it and it was pretty good. We ate the cookies, too, and talked about all kinds of stuff. I told her about the Island School and my friends and about how I was really very good at rowing even though it probably didn't seem that way. I told her I wanted to be a boat captain when I grew up. Or a veterinarian who helps cats if they get sick.

"And what of your family, Miss Polk? Are they all on Harper's?"

"Just Mama and Papa and my brothers. My Grandma and Grandpa live in Castine. It's not an island, but it's kind of pretty."

"What are your brothers called?"

"Tommy and Arlo. We play Bad Mitten sometimes."

"And your parents?"

"Noyes and Edith. But everyone calls Mama Edy."

"Very well. I must attend to a small errand, Miss Polk. Do make yourself at home. I shall return in a trice."

I had no idea what a trice was but I thought it might be some kind of hat. Or maybe a car with three wheels. I looked at her books while she was gone but I couldn't find any with pictures. I did find one picture though. It was in a gold frame on a table and it showed a soldier standing by a jeep. He was handsome in his uniform and I thought it was her husband, the one she was sad about. I hoped he didn't get killed in a war but I was afraid maybe he did. Wars are terrible.

When Miss Vee got back she didn't have any trices with her, as near as I could tell. Maybe she forgot. I didn't ask. By then it was getting dark out and I was worried about getting home.

"I have contacted your island, Miss Polk."

I didn't get how she could have done that. "I thought you didn't have a phone?"

"By radio, dear. My boat has a radio."

"Are they coming to get me?"

"How would you like to be my guest for the evening?"

I had to think about that for a minute. Miss Vee seemed nice enough and I think she really wanted me to stay. She must be lonely on this little island all by herself. "What about Mama and Papa? They might be getting worried."

"Indeed they are, young lady. I daresay they are panic-stricken. This would in fact be an understatement."

I didn't know what an understatement was, but I nodded like I did. She went on.

"But I have spoken with one Jack McAllister of Harper's Island—"

"Uncle Jack!"

"Mr. McAllister is your uncle?"

"Not really. We just call him that. He's Papa's best friend. Ever since they were little."

"I see. In any case, Mr. McAllister has by now relayed news of your safe landing to your parents, so the gravest of their fears is allayed."

"Um."

"They are no longer worried. Or perhaps less worried."

"Ok."

"We shall speak with them presently." She looked at her tiny silver watch. "In twenty minutes, precisely."

"But how...?"

"They will be standing by with Mr. McAllister at 7:30 sharp. We mustn't be late."

We walked down a long path to the other side of the island. That's where her boat was. She said it was a Boston Whaler but it

was way too small to catch any whales. I saw a whale one time and it was HUGE. Maybe they have smaller whales in Boston.

Miss Vee got Mama and Papa on the radio and they seemed to know who she was. I mostly didn't understand what they said because of how Miss Vee talks so fancy. She showed me how to push the button to talk but I already knew that. I know lots of stuff about boats, like how to work the radio.

"Hi, Mama! I'm on a different island!"

"You sure are, honey. Are you all right?"

"Yep. I learned how to make tea."

"Sounds like an adventure."

"Just an ordinary day," That was a joke between me and Mama. She says if you have an ordinary day it means you weren't paying attention. She laughed.

"Do you want to stay over with Miss Vee tonight?"

"Ok. She has a huge house full of books and paintings."

"She'll bring you back here tomorrow morning, ok?"

"Ok."

"You know you scared us, hon. Disappearing like that."

"I'm sorry, Mama. I didn't mean to." Then I talked to Papa for a while and he promised to give Lord Fluffington a hug for me. Then we said goodnight. Over and out.

"I am delighted to have you for the night, Miss Polk. It will be a grand time."

And it was, too. She made great big sausages for supper and they were really good. I ate a whole one all by myself. She said they were bangers but they didn't make a sound. She told me

some funny stories about all the places where she lived. She'd been to at least six or eleven different countries. She learned how to paint at a place called the *Sore Bun*. I wondered if they had uncomfortable chairs, or maybe they spanked you if your painting wasn't any good. I thought that was really funny. Miss Vee laughed, too. I told her about how I caught a green snake once and it was really pretty. Holly Bartlett was scared of it and she screamed. But I'm not scared of snakes at all. Miss Vee said I was "quite a trooper" and that made me think of the handsome soldier. She saw me looking at his picture.

"That is my husband, Robert Vanderveer."

I asked her what happened to him.

"Sadly, he too has passed on. He was killed in the Vietnam war."

"Oh. That's sad."

"Indeed."

"I bet he was really brave."

"Yes, I suppose he was. That was long ago. We were married scarcely two years when he shuffled off his mortal coil."

"Um."

"Shakespeare, child. It means to die. From Hamlet's Soliloquy."

"Oh. I didn't know that." We were quiet for a minute and her house made spooky creaking noises.

"Mr. Vanderveer and I had no children. We very much wanted a little girl. A little girl just like you."

She was very sad about not having a little girl. I learned from Mama and Papa that sad people need hugs. So I gave her one and then she was happy again.

"Rise and shine, Miss Polk. There is much to be done." At first I didn't know where I was. The sun was just coming up but I smelled bacon and blueberry pancakes so I jumped right out of bed. Miss Vee let me make the tea and she said it was superb. When breakfast was done we did the dishes and then I was all ready to go home.

"Not quite yet, Miss Polk. We still have a task before us. A lesson."

It was Sunday, not a school day, and I didn't really want any lessons. Weekends are mostly for having fun, like going fishing or picking berries. I hoped it wasn't math because I don't like math very much. Then I thought it might be a painting lesson but it was even better than that.

"Today you shall learn to operate a Boston Whaler." Then she laughed because my eyes just about popped out of my head.

"Really?"

"Most certainly. You seem a quick study, and there is nothing difficult about piloting a small craft, provided the sea is calm."

She gave me a life jacket that was way too big but I didn't mind. She showed me how the wheel turns and how to make it go fast or slow or even backwards. She said the only hard part was coming up to a dock. I watched her do it two times and then she said, "Miss Polk has the helm," and it was my turn. The first time

I ran into the dock pretty hard. The second time I stopped too far away from it. Then came the third time.

"Quarter speed, Miss Polk. Slow now, slow. Neutral. Wheel hard right. Easy, easy. Full reverse...and...stop!"

The boat went right beside the dock and barely touched it.

"Splendid, my dear! A perfect landing!"

I was so happy I almost cried.

The lesson was probably a whole hour. I must've pulled up to that little dock at least six or eleven times. I messed up on a couple of tries but not very bad. Miss Vee sailed us to the other side of the island to get Papa's rowboat and then it was time to go home. When we were out of the cove Miss Vee let me drive the boat again. I couldn't even believe it.

"Three-quarters speed, Captain Polk. Bearing north-northwest and mind the lobster buoys."

We both laughed because she called me Captain Polk and then I said, "Aye, aye!" It was turning out to be one of the best ordinary days I ever had.

But then it got way better.

I slowed down when we got to the thoroughfare at Harper's. Since it was Sunday, all the lobster boats were still in the harbor but I didn't bump into any of them. There were some people on the town dock and I saw Mama and Papa waiting for me. They waved. I remembered everything from the lesson and I brought that Boston Whaler in just as pretty as a ptarmigan, with no bumps or anything. Mama and Papa were totally amazed. But this was the best part: There were some kids fishing off the dock

and one was Jimmy Summerlin. He was watching the whole time. I waved and said "Hi" but he just stood there with his mouth hanging open. I know for a fact he never drove a Boston Whaler before so he was totally jealous of me. I acted like driving that boat was no big deal, like I drove Boston Whalers all the time.

I said goodbye to Miss Vee and told her how much fun I had.

"It was a most enjoyable sojourn, Miss Polk. You are welcome to visit Spanker Island at any time." I said I would and she gave me a hug. "It would be best, however, to make the voyage in a more seaworthy craft than your Papa's rowboat. After all, you can drive anything now."

"Even an ocean liner?"

"In due time, my dear. Surely."

I was sad to see her go.

When I went back to school on Monday, Jimmy was trying so hard to pretend like he didn't care that I could drive a Boston Whaler, but I could tell he did. Boys are weird.

Before the morning bell rang, Holly Bartlett asked me about the creepy lady on Spanker Island. I said, "She's not creepy, she's just British."

A funny thing happened that day. When I came back from afternoon recess I found a little folded up piece of paper on my desk. I opened it up and it just said I LOVE YOU.

I'd know that handwriting anywhere—it was Jimmy Summerlin. That made me laugh.

Mama was right: ordinary days are never really ordinary, are they? You have to pay attention.

Cap Scully Had a Good Run

"Hey, Jib. How long you going for?"

"Forever. You coming?"

"I guess. Where are we gonna go?"

"Up Coombs Mountain. I know a place they'll never look."

Jib Stovall took two cans of pork and beans from his father's kitchen cabinet and tucked them into his SpongeBob SquarePants backpack. Cap Scully looked on, worried.

"There might be a monster up there."

"Nuh-uh."

"Yeah-huh. Jim Everett said he seen it once."

"He made that up. All that monster stuff is for little kids."

"You're seven, Jib."

"I'm not a little kid, Cap Scully. So shut up."

"Make me."

Jib Stovall ignored the last, continuing his preparations for a hasty departure. His plan was to be long gone by the time his father returned from hauling his traps. Jib was grounded as of yesterday afternoon, but felt the punishment was disproportionate to his offense: failure to complete his chores as promised. Jib was not given to fits of temper, but this was an outrage.

SpongeBob also took two sleeves of Ritz crackers and a box of strawberry Pop-Tarts. Climbing down from the chipped and yellowing Formica counter, Jib opened the catch-all drawer and

added a church key, a small spool of twine and a box of wooden matches to his provisions. He made a last stop at his father's workshop where he collected a Barlow knife and a small well-honed hatchet. He then burst out the side door with anger on his brow and Cap Scully in tow.

That afternoon Jib Stovall was seen walking alone on Little Seal Island's mostly unpaved road, away from the white clapboard saltbox where he had lived his entire young life, toward the trailhead for Coombs Mountain. He gesticulated wildly as if in a heated debate with someone only he could see. An observer might think this odd, but for Jib it was normal. An island kid being an island kid.

Kids growing up on Little Seal—there were rarely more than a dozen, even in summer, and at times as few as one—were often responsible for their own entertainment. With no electric service on the island, television and video games were simply not a part of their lives. If an island child wished to be entertained he had to use his imagination. Indeed, his imagination often became his best friend. A rocky cliff was a medieval castle under siege; the pine forest was an African jungle full of lions, gorillas and hostile natives. Every sailboat entering the harbor became a privateer unleashing one deadly broadside after another, come to take a prize.

Ascending the mountain, Jib stuck to the well-marked trail until he was halfway to the top. He then struck out northward, through dense stands of white spruce and bristling undergrowth

of fragrant juniper and sweet fern. Jib had come this way more times than he could remember.

Jib and Cap Scully emerged from a stand of pines and stepped onto a sun-dappled plateau. A clear spring-fed brook cascaded along one edge of the clearing, the marshy soil there giving purchase to a fresh green-scented brake of fiddleheads.

Jib said, "We're there."

Cap Scully was unimpressed. "This? This is your great hiding place?"

"Ok, Negative Nellie, you got a better idea?"

"Dude, there's only one good tree and it fell over."

"That's where we'll sleep."

"In a dead, fallen tree. Yeah, good luck with that, dumb-ass. Jeez." Cap Scully rolled his eyes.

Nothing Jib Stovall did seemed to meet with Cap Scully's approval anymore. Jib was just starting to get the hang of ignoring him.

Jib scowled, made a dismissive gesture and dropped his laden backpack to the mossy ground. He walked to the edge of the clearing where he felled a half-dozen saplings with quick strokes of his hatchet. He dragged them across the clearing to the larger fallen tree Cap Scully had looked on with such disdain.

The large tree was about 45 feet tall, or had been until a 70 mile-per-hour winter gale toppled it two years earlier. Its root system now stood perpendicular to the ground, forming a solid wall. Jib's idea was to build a lean-to using the old spruce's roots as the back wall. Once he had all the saplings in place he saw that

his front wall was a bit sparse and felled a few more trees to fill in the thin spots. On completion a sturdy little bower stood before him. It wouldn't withstand a gale but would spare him a thorough soaking if the rain came. Jib crawled inside and after trimming a few branches arrived at a spacious interior.

After some consideration he decided there was room within the bower for a small fire-pit and set about constructing one from stones he gathered near the brook. Anxious to try it out, he cut up some deadwood from the fallen spruce's top branches and collected a few curls of bark from a nearby birch tree for kindling. Shortly after he touched a match to the birch bark his fire was crackling merrily away. Less than one minute after that, Jib Stovall came hurtling ass-over-teakettle out the opening of his newly constructed shelter coughing, gasping for air and close to puking. Regaining his breath and composure, he became aware of Cap Scully's reproving gaze.

"Don't say it. Don't even think about saying it."

"I'm not thinking anything, Jib," Cap Scully lied.

"Shut up, Cap."

"It just looks like you built a real nice lean-to and then tried to burn it to the ground before you even spent one night in it."

"Some help you were."

"Just sayin'."

"I thought I told you to shut up."

"You shut up."

Fortunately, Jib's bower did not burn to the ground and was only inaccessible for about ten minutes. Once the smoke cleared

he rebuilt the fire-pit about ten feet from the lean-to, an arrangement which proved altogether more satisfactory. Jib kindled another fire and spent some time laying in a small supply of firewood. He opened a can of pork and beans and set it in the embers to heat. Realizing he had no spoons, Jib carved one from a spruce branch with his Barlow knife. It wasn't pretty but it would have to do. His evening meal was sumptuous: canned beans with half a sleeve of Ritz, capped off by one judiciously apportioned Pop-Tart for dessert.

"Gotta make these last."

"What about when the food runs out?" Cap Scully asked.

"I can get more food. Easy."

"How?"

"See that scrub over there past the ferns? Blueberries. And there's also blackberries around here. You can eat those fiddleheads, too."

"So we're gonna live out here eating nothing but berries and ferns. Jeez. Why don't you just kill me now? Better than starving to death, grazing on freakin' weeds."

"I can get other stuff too!" Jib's anger at his father spilled over in the direction of Cap Scully, who continued to fret over the food supply.

"Like what else?"

"There's deer."

"How are you gonna get a deer?"

With a dramatic flourish Jib withdrew the Barlow knife from SpongeBob's clutches and brandished it glinting in the afternoon sun.

"You're gonna stab a deer. Brilliant! *Hey Bambi, come over here a sec so's I can slash your throat.* Good plan!"

"Shut up, Cap. Ok, ok. Maybe not a deer. There's rabbits, too. I can catch those."

"Yeah?"

Jib walked to the edge of the clearing and using a bent-over sapling for a spring and a length of twine for a snare constructed what gave every appearance of a functional small game trap. He baited it with a Ritz cracker, thought better of it, and added the corner of a Pop-Tart to the lure. Cap Scully tried not to be impressed, but was.

"Where'd you learn that?"

"Found my dad's old Boy Scout manual in the attic. I been studying it."

"He was right, ya know.

Jib raised an eyebrow, "What?"

"Grounding you. He's right."

"Grounded because I didn't paint his stupid buoys? That's not fair, just mean."

"I still say he was right. You had a deal."

"Don't be a retard, Cap Scully."

"Takes one to know one."

The night passed more or less uneventfully apart from a spell of mournful hooting from a barred owl, which momentarily

raised the specter of Jim Everett's monsters. Early in the evening Jib cursed himself for failing to bring a flashlight, but with darkness all around and nothing to do, he was soon overtaken by sleep. He had one blanket and used his empty backpack for a pillow; he slept well in spite of the uneven ground. Sunrise found the rabbit snare unvisited, which provoked further criticism from Cap Scully. Jib gathered a few sweet-tart wild blueberries and ate them with another handful of Ritz for his breakfast. He also cut off a fiddlehead and tasted it, but found it bitter. He spit it out, hoping the situation would not become so desperate.

As the sun began to assert itself on the eastern horizon Jib Stovall and Cap Scully sat near the fire-pit and listened to the forest coming to life all around them. Cap Scully whispered, "Something's moving by the snare."

Jib's eyes locked onto a small rustling of the grass near his rabbit trap about 20 feet away. He and Cap Scully held their breath, holding still. To Jib's grave disappointment a tiny chipmunk appeared and moved furtively toward the bait.

"Can you eat chipmunks?" asked Cap Scully.

Jib sighed. "I doubt it. Might have to find out, though."

Before Cap Scully could formulate a sarcastic comment about how many chipmunks you'd need to make a meal, the unfortunate rodent tripped the snare. Rather than being trapped, the unsuspecting chipmunk was launched through the air as if by a catapult, and with pretty good altitude, to boot. It sailed right over Jib and Cap Scully, who watched in disbelief, finally landing shaken but unharmed in a thicket of grass on the far side of the

clearing. The bewildered chipmunk scampered into the underbrush and was not seen again in Jib's little haven.

"Oh, man! Did you see the look on that chipmunk's face?!" Jib couldn't help but laugh. "That was epic!"

"Do another one!"

Jib reset the snare but after 20 minutes they lost their patience and became convinced there would be no further visits that morning from woodland creatures. They passed a joyous hour using the snare to launch anything and everything they found at hand, finally settling on pinecones as the best projectiles. It was an hour well-spent in laughter and the kind of camaraderie they'd shared for years, before Cap Scully grew so inexplicably critical of Jib Stovall's every move. In time the catapult mania ran its course and the question of the food supply arose once more. Jib had an idea.

"We'll get clams."

"Ha. You think there's clams on this mountain?"

"No, you fool! It's only a mile from here to the east side. We can dig some at Sorrow Cove and bring 'em back here to cook over the fire."

Cap Scully declined to acknowledge that this was an excellent idea. "What if your Dad sees us? He might be hauling the east side today."

Jib scoffed. "Not today. More likely he's out looking for me."

"You oughta go back, you know. And tell him you're sorry."

"Nope. Never."

"Really? Never?"

"Well." Jib paused, considering. "Not yet, anyway."

"Pfft. Your funeral."

Owing to a minor miscalculation on Jib's part, when he and Cap Scully arrived on the eastern shore of Little Seal Island they found themselves not at the mud flats of Sorrow Cove but at the apex of the chasm known as Sharpe's Gulch. Each wave the rolling Atlantic sent to that shore thundered into the gulch with tons of raw power blasting skyward and working up a chaotic froth among the jagged rocks at its base. They'd missed Sorrow Cove by at least a half-mile. Jib Stovall and Cap Scully cautiously approached the edge of the gulch and peered into the seething maelstrom below.

"Nice guide work there, Pocahontas. Only missed by a zillion miles."

"Shut up, Cap. If it was up to you we wouldn't have made it this far."

"I wouldn't have gotten us lost."

"Bet you would. Only more."

"Nuh-uh."

"Yeah-huh. And besides, we're not even lost. Sorrow Cove's right down there." Jib gestured southward. Cap Scully peered south, then out to the open ocean. "There's some boats out today."

Jib quickly picked out the profile of his father's lobster boat from the handful of craft plying their trade on Jericho Bay. "He went to work. I run away from home and he doesn't even bother lookin' for me. See? He doesn't even care."

"You've got it wrong, Jib."

"Oh, and here's a big news flash: Cap Scully disagrees! Shocker!"

"Think about it, Jib. He knows you ran away, right? So where are you gonna go? It's a pretty small island. There isn't much out here that can hurt you. No bears, no moose, no snakes. You see what I'm saying?"

"Um."

"He went to work because he knows you can take care of yourself out here. He's probably even a little proud of you."

"I knew that."

"I don't think so."

"You don't think, period."

"You still gonna stay out here forever?"

Jib kicked a clump of moss into the gulch. "Prolly not."

"What are you gonna do?"

"I dunno. Quit bugging me."

"Jib. You really need me to tell you?"

Jib gave a sigh of resignation. "Ok, fine. I'll go home and paint buoys. Like I should have done in the first place."

After a moment's silence Cap Scully spoke again. "Seems like maybe you don't need me around so much anymore."

"Yeah. Not like I used to."

"I'll be going then, I suppose."

"We had a good run, Cap Scully."

"Yeah. A pretty good run."

Cap Scully edged up to the rim of the thundering gorge and spread his arms out to his sides.

"A swan dive, Cap? Really?"

"Yeah, Jib. You're right." Cap Scully walked ten paces back, then turned and ran straight for the gorge, the grin on his face only breaking up as he tucked his knees and shouted, "Cannonbaaaaaaall!"

Knowing there would be nothing left to see, Jib had no reason to look into Sharpe's Gulch again. Cap Scully was so gone it was like he'd never been there.

Jib looked down at his SpongeBob backpack, thinking he was about due for a new one. Maybe one with Green Day or Tom Brady on it.

Nothing remained to be said or done, so he strapped SpongeBob to his back and began the long walk home.

A Peculiar Notion of Fun

Evan Cooper's lobster boat, *Sportin' Jenny*, sat on her mooring in the harbor, her stern describing a small arc in the water as she rode the incoming swells. A teenage girl in black sat on the transom splashing her bare feet in the cool blue water, feeling out of place.

Bree Morrison didn't belong anywhere, really. Not on this boat, not in the world she'd left behind. Mesmerized by the moon jellies drifting past like translucent saltwater ghosts, she sat in silence, her mind drifting back across the preceding months.

After a day of running errands on the main, Evan Cooper spent the previous night at his sister's in Rockland. Bree stole aboard his boat as he slept, making herself small in the engine compartment and hoping he wouldn't look in there before setting sail. Her luck held. The trip across the bay to Little Seal Island took forty-five minutes, during which Bree believed she might die from heat, from thirst or from engine fumes. She survived the crossing but wound up stranded on Cooper's boat in the middle of the harbor with no way to get ashore. She waited alone on *Sportin' Jenny's* stern looking a bit like a miniature Joan Jett, only sadder, and hoping someone other than the boat's owner would come to her rescue. Here, her luck failed.

"You kids can't just come out here and help yourself to somebody's boat." The man in the hunter green rowboat looked

at Bree like she'd just changed the channel during a Patriots game. "How'd ya get out here in the first place?"

The diminutive Goth-girl blew black-dyed bangs from her eyes and confessed that she had stowed away in Cooper's engine compartment on his morning crossing from the main.

"So you've been sittin' here since this morning?" It was mid-afternoon.

"You got any water? I'm dying here."

"For Chrissakes. Get in. I'll run ya to the store."

Bree dropped her backpack and shoes into the skiff. "Can I row?"

"What for?" he asked. Strange bird, this one.

"I don't know. For fun?"

"You've got a peculiar notion of fun, Miss..."

"Bree. Just Bree."

He extended a hand. "Evan Cooper. Call me Coop."

He lit a Marlboro Red and looked her up and down. This must be one of them Gothic types, a girl in black-and-white; something the young folks do nowadays.

Bree chewed a black-enameled fingernail. "Spare a smoke?"

"How long have you known me?"

"About 30 seconds."

"And you've already asked for three things. Four, if you count the ride out here."

"Sorry, Coop." She looked at her bare feet. Black nail polish there, too. "Didn't mean to come off all needy."

"Ok. You can row. But you're too young to smoke."

"Started when my parents died."

"Lord Almighty. Both of 'em?"

"Drowned."

"Poor kid."

Bree bristled at being called 'kid' but figured Coop was old enough he'd use the term for anyone under thirty-five. She let it go and focused on pulling the oars.

She hadn't worked a pair of oars since she was a child, but held fond memories of a long-ago summer day spent paddling around Stark's Pond with Bennett and Mothre. Bennett was her stepfather; Mothre got her nickname from a homemade Valentine six-year-old Bree had given to *The Best Mothre in the Worlde!* Having recently learned to spell BLUE and LOVE, Bree was pretty sure most words ended with a silent E.

She was ten when they took her to the pond for a picnic, and twelve when they drowned in a boating accident on the Penobscot River. Now seventeen, Bree woke each day to a grey world from which Bennett and Mothre were now and forever absent. Despite their tragic passing, the memory of that day on the pond brought warmth instead of pain.

At the Island Market, Coop bought her a Welch's Grape Soda ("Purple's my favorite flavor," she said) after learning she had no money. He got himself a Moxie, and they sat on the deck with the cold sodas and a sea breeze. Coop had a lot of questions for the girl.

"You got friends out here? Family?"

"Nope."

"Goin' back on the late ferry?"

"Nope."

"Where you gonna stay?"

"I don't know. Don't care."

"So why'd you come out here?"

Bree sipped her soda and looked out across the harbor. She didn't answer.

"You in some kinda trouble?"

She failed to hide a pained expression, still saying nothing.

"I won't tell nobody. 'Less you're a murderer."

"Yeah, I'm a serial killer. Is it that obvious?"

Bree looked like she wouldn't serial-kill a fly, gloom-and-doom regalia notwithstanding.

Coop tried again. "Pregnant?"

Bree laughed.

"Sorry, but it's not so uncommon for a girl your age."

"It is for me."

"Yeah?"

"I don't like boys."

It took a second for this to land. When it did, Coop said, "Oh." Then louder, "Ohhh."

Bree silently thanked him for not acting as though there was something wrong with her. "I had a... friend, like, a really special one, over there in Rockland. Had to leave her behind when I took off."

They sat in a silence soon broken by the cries of seagulls and a passing outboard motor. Whatever she was hiding from, Coop

admired her courage. Girls like Bree often ended up badly, falling in with ne'er-do-wells, or doing things they hated just to survive. That wouldn't happen to her on Little Seal. Maybe she knew it. Maybe that's why she came. He drained his Moxie, belched loudly and pegged the empty can into the recycle bin. Bree did the same, producing a thunderous purple belch of her own.

"Thanks for the soda, Coop." She stood to leave.

"Where you goin'?"

"To have a look around, see what there is to see."

Coop disliked her taking off with no money and nowhere to stay. He produced a \$20. "For when you get hungry. Or if you change your mind about the ferry."

Bree looked at the proffered bill. "Thanks, Coop, but I'll manage. Really."

His estimation of her grew again. "Listen Bree." He paused to light another smoke, lit two, and handed her one. "You didn't get that from me."

She flashed an impish grin. Boyish, Coop thought. He pointed to a cedar-shingled building just up the road.

"That one with the green trim? That's the town hall. It's never locked. There's a bathroom upstairs and an old couch downcellar. It's a mess down there but it's warm and dry."

Bree's eyes went teary; the scant kindnesses she encountered since the loss of Bennett and Mothre had felt artificial; Coop's was genuine. She wanted to thank him but feared the tears that would come if she tried to speak.

Coop continued. "Ain't nobody in there after dark. Best be gone early in the morning, but don't let 'em see you leave. I wouldn't use it more'n a day or two, time enough to get your head on straight and figure out a plan."

When Coop got home he found Caroline in the yard, thrashing the daylights out of the living room rug with a Louisville Slugger.

"Hey, Carrie. Vacuum broke?"

"Spring cleaning."

"It's July."

"Next spring then." She banged another shot past the Green Monster and stopped to catch her breath. Coop stole a peck the cheek.

"Gotta love a woman who'll go toe-to-toe with an area rug."

Caroline got into her batting stance. "Hold still, you look a little dusty."

Coop exited the strike zone. "Almost brought home a stray, dear."

"Cat or dog?"

"Teenager."

Caroline took a final swing. "Go on."

Evan Cooper swore his wife to secrecy and told her what he knew about the girl in black.

"A stowaway? No kidding?"

"Only in the movies, right?"

"She can't stay out here. How's she going to feed herself?"

"Got some trail mix in her backpack, I guess."

Caroline sighed. "If you see her again, send her over. She'll be needing a hot meal."

Coop left the house the next morning just before sunrise and was surprised to find Bree at the town landing sitting on a crate and looking out to sea.

"Hi, Coop. Going lobstering?"

Her manner of speaking was an impossible combination of mopey and cheerful Coop had never heard before, like a cross between Eeyore and Spongebob Squarepants.

"That's the general idea."

"Can I go?"

"I don't believe you'd care for it much."

Bree made a sad puppy face. "I've never lobstered. It looks like fun."

Coop was enumerating the many reasons why lobstering is the opposite of fun when Phil McKernan came down the dock with his dinner-pail and a thermos of his wife's black coffee.

"Mornin' Coop. Who's your friend?"

Coop fumbled a second or two. "This is Bree. She's... ah... she's my niece, out for a visit."

"Didn't know you had a niece. Nor one so pretty. How do, ma'am." Phil tipped his Red Sox cap.

Bree saw her opportunity. "Uncle Coop's taking me lobstering."

"What'd you do to deserve that?" He shot her a wink.

Bree laughed and climbed aboard Coop's hunter green skiff.
"I get to row, too."

Phil turned to Coop and said, "Don't let this one get away."

Aboard *Sportin' Jenny*, Coop outfitted Bree as best he could with a pair of comically oversized Grundens overalls and a pair of blue gloves. "Ain't no boots. Your feet are gonna get soaked."

"Just show me what to do."

"None of this is rocket science. If it was I'd a starved years ago."

He showed her how to fill bait bags with salted herring—"Mmm, eau de poisson," she said, looking into the evil-smelling bait barrel and recalling her one year of French—how to pick traps, how to measure lobsters and band claws. An hour into the workday she was doing the job as well as any sternman Coop ever had.

At the noon break Coop let *Jenny* drift with the tide and they shared his lunch. Bree bolted down half a meatloaf sandwich and a handful of club crackers, washing them down with bottled water.

"For such a little thing you sure can put away some chow."

Bree gave him that boyish grin again. "You know what's good with Club crackers?"

"No, what."

"Brie."

Coop looked at her sideways and groaned.

She spoke through a mouthful of crackers. "Gotta have a sense of humor when you're named after cheese."

Coop lit a Marlboro and leaned back on the stern to stretch his sore muscles. "You ain't gonna bum a smoke?" It was not a habit he wished to encourage, but he got a kick out of permitting her this one small delinquency, like letting your daughter sneak a beer at the 4th of July clambake.

"Nah," she said. "I decided to quit."

"Smart kid. It's an expensive hobby."

"Can we do more lobstering now?" She got up from the gunwale and shoved a handful of dead fish into an orange bait bag.

She had surprised him again. Not only was this kid fearless, she was smart and a good worker. "You don't act much like one of them Gothic types."

"How are we supposed to act?"

"I thought it was all gloom and despair with you kids. But here you are, a little black ray of sunshine, bustin' ass all day like you ain't afraid to work up a sweat. I'd a never guessed it."

"Yeah, I'm just full of surprises." She grabbed another handful of fish.

By the day's end they'd hauled twice the gear he would working alone. He sold 500 pounds of lobsters to the seafood dealer on the main, made a quick run to the bank, and climbed back on board *Sportin' Jenny* to find the girl still at it, scrubbing obstinate fish grease off the bait boxes.

"You can knock off now, Bree. I'm about as impressed as I'm ever going to be."

"You ought to wash these things more often, Coop. They're nasty."

She kept scrubbing. Coop thrust a handful of something in her face.

"Here."

Bree re-focused; saw it was money. "What the fuck?"

"Language, child. It's your cut of the catch. Your pay."

She thumbed the bills with a gloved hand. "But this is..."

"300 bucks. 20 percent. Standard deal for a sternman."

"I can't..."

"Yeah, you can. It's yours. You earned it."

Bree pocketed the cash and went back to scrubbing while Coop headed *Jenny* home to Little Seal.

Rowing to the dock—Bree at the oars—Coop said, "Come on up to the house, get ya some supper."

Bree narrowed her eyes slightly. "Mmm... probably not. Thanks though."

"You afraid I'm gonna bite?"

"I've had guys offer me 'dinner' before."

"For Christ's sake, Bree. That's what you take me for? First off, I'd never, and second, my wife's t'home; she's the one who made the invite. If you think I'm gonna go pervy on you, let alone with Caroline sittin' right there, you ain't so clever as I give you credit for."

"Well." She eased the skiff up to the landing and tied off the painter. "Ok. I am kind of hungry."

Coop reminded himself she was running from something, and not to judge too harshly. She wouldn't be around long enough to gain her trust, and she was wise not to give it too easily.

At Coop's house, Caroline steered Bree to a hot shower and put her clothes in the wash, then put together a small collection of hand-me-downs since their sizes were close. Bree scrubbed herself for a solid half-hour and still thought she reeked of herring. Dinner was chuck roast, mashed potatoes, and buttery brussels sprouts; Bree feasted.

"I suppose you'll catch that ferry in the mornin'," said Coop, "Now that you've got the fare."

"Could be," said Bree.

"You're welcome to stay on Little Seal," said Caroline, "but there's nothing out here for you."

"Sure there is."

"Like what?"

"There's peace. And it's kinda pretty. And there are people here who don't think I'm broken and need to be fixed."

Caroline put down her fork and looked Bree directly in the eye. "You're not broken. And anyone who says different doesn't know what they're talking about." She paused, then added more gently, "I taught high school for ten years before I married Coop and moved out here. I saw plenty of kids who got labeled as problems just for being themselves. You want to know what most of them needed?"

"What?" said Bree.

"Somebody to believe they were fine the way they were." She picked up a serving dish. "More brussels sprouts?"

Coop figured Bree's mention of feeling accepted was her way of expressing gratitude, but it was also a hint at what she was running from. He couldn't decipher it.

"Pretty good day today, wasn't it?"

"Yes." Bree's voice rose at the end, making it a question.

"You know by now I don't mean you no harm."

"True."

"What's got you so troubled, Bree? Maybe we can help."

"I can take care of myself. It's nothing. Is there dessert?"

Coop sighed and sipped his coffee. "Whatever it is I guess it ain't hurt your appetite."

Bree declined coffee but tore up cherry pie and ice cream, turned down an offer to sleep in the spare room, and left while it was still light enough to find her way to the town hall. Coop wouldn't let her go until he'd given her a bicycle, a relic from the 1960s with a basket in front and a bell that only worked if you hit it with a rock. Bree loved it.

Just after sunrise the next morning Coop was surprised to find Bree waiting at the town dock again. She wore Caroline's hand-me-downs and held a paper bag containing three apples she'd snatched from Julie Walcott's tree. In the basket of her Peewee Herman bike was a 2-liter Pepsi bottle she'd rinsed and filled with water.

"Goin' back over today, Miss Morrison?"

Bree dropped her apples. "How do you know my name?"

"You made the news last night. Have you seen this girl?"

"Fuck."

"The picture didn't much look like you, but I recognized the piercings."

"What did they say?"

"You disappeared from some kind of summer camp. Like a vacation Bible school?"

"Not quite."

"Well?"

Bree took a long draft from her water bottle. "Promise not to send me back?"

"Yeah, promise."

"I was twelve when my parents drowned. Went to a few foster homes and ended up with the Carters, a pair of real Bible-bangers. When I came out they sent me to a so-called conversion therapy camp. Pray the gay away, all that bullshit. That's what I ran away from."

Coop spat off the dock. "God. Damn. It."

Bree's eyes went wide; she took a step back. "You're mad at me? You're gonna make me go back?"

"I ain't mad at you, girl, I'm mad at them. Self-righteous assholes trying to force you into their mold. That just pisses me off."

Relief swept Bree's face, "I didn't know if you'd get it. That's why I couldn't tell you. But listen, Coop, don't blame the Carters. They thought they were helping. They just didn't understand, that's all."

They were quiet for a moment. Out in the harbor Phil McKernan turned his engine over and a blue heron took flight from the far shore. Bree watched the majestic bird rise and soar. Coop straightened his ball cap, and said, "Ferry don't come for another two hours y'know."

"I'm not here for the ferry." Bree picked up her brown-bag lunch and climbed aboard the hunter green skiff. "Burning daylight, Coop. Those traps aren't gonna haul themselves."

When they broke for lunch Bree ate two apples and traded the third for one of Caroline's chocolate chip brownies. Her water bottle was half empty. "Hey Coop, what if I... um... where should I... is there someplace..."

"For Chrissakes child, spit it out will ya?"

"I HAVE TO PEE, OK?"

"Is that all? Just go up on the bow and hang your ass off the side." He held a poker face.

"Uhhh... maybe I'll just hold it."

Coop chuckled and handed her a five-gallon bucket. "I won't look."

Bree looked at the bucket, then at Coop, then at the houses on the shore, a scant hundred yards away. She imagined people with binoculars.

"Fine," said Coop, "go up in the wheelhouse. But don't get it all over the place, you'll short the electronics."

Bree laughed and walked to the wheelhouse swinging her bucket. "My aim is true."

"You're too young to know Elvis Costello."

At the end of the day Coop handed her \$270 and another dinner invitation, both of which Bree accepted. Coop set a course for home.

"I'm your sternman now, right?" said Bree. It wasn't so much a question as a declaration, a staking of her territory.

Coop looked at her with a crease in his brow. "Ok. We'll call it that for the time being. I don't expect you'll be staying on Little Seal any too long."

"But I like it here. I like lobstering."

"Right now's the easy part. Come November it's bigger seas, harder work and, eventually, a lot less money. Once the bugs are gone for the winter there's no pay to speak of and all the gear's still gotta come ashore. That's 800 traps and believe me, it's a bear. Wear ya right out."

"You think I'm afraid of the work?"

"It ain't so much that. I don't want to start relyin' on a sternman only to have 'em up and disappear one fine day." Coop stepped back from the wheel and doffed his hat to a passing boat.

"I won't disappear."

"What about school? You can't just quit school."

"I'll get a G.E.D."

"What about your foster parents?"

"I don't owe them anything."

"They fed ya, didn't they? Paid the bills so you'd have a roof over your head."

Bree had to concede that point. "Yeah, I know. Until they sent me to boot camp with the Jesus-Nazis."

"You could at least let 'em know you're alive. They're wrong-headed but they ain't evil."

"Ok, I'll write a letter. But I can't send it from here."

"Caroline's off to Rockland tomorrow. I'll have her post it down there."

Bree grinned. "See what just happened there? You're helping me stay. I'm definitely your sternman. No question."

Coop screwed up his face and scratched his whiskers as he realized she was right. He exhaled deeply and turned the wheel to the starboard, skirting an underwater shoal. "All right. I'll give ya till the end of August."

"That's only six weeks."

"My boat, my rules. I pay 20% off the top. Workin' for me is your new top priority. Fair enough? You won't find a better deal, not even if you got on a boat with Brad Pitt."

"Ew."

"I mean... um..."

"Mila Kunis."

"Yeah, ok, her. All this hardware you got stuck in your face has gotta go. It's a hazard."

Bree made a little huffy noise.

"I don't care if you wear a whole scrapyard on your head, long as you do it on your own time. One a them things gets hung up on a trap you'd either go overboard or get your face tore off."

"But..."

"And I got a feeling there's a bucket of black makeup in your backpack. I won't have the Bride of Frankenstein for a sternman, so you can leave that 't home, too."

Bree made the sound teenage girls make when they want to scream *You are such an asshole!* but can't. "It's not a bucket."

Coop eased Sportin' Jenny into the harbor at Little Seal.

"You get seasick?"

Bree raised the front of her t-shirt and smacked her unexpectedly toned belly. "Solid rock, cap. I don't get anything-sick."

He disregarded the steel post that ran through her navel.

"When we get in a big sea you might, 'specially since you ain't used to it. If you get to feeling queasy try watching the horizon. That helps. If you do lose it, don't puke in the bait. Over the side's ok, or on the deck and wash it out the scuppers. But don't spoil the bait."

"Roger that," said Bree. "No puke on the bait." Sadly, Bree's professed iron stomach would fail her before she came anywhere near a big sea.

Coop tied off on his mooring and handed her a short length of rope. "Tie a bowline."

"A bolin? What the fuck's a bolin?"

"Language, child. Gimme that. First, make a loop. Rabbit comes out of the hole, runs around the tree, goes back down the hole. Got it?"

She got it. By the end of the first week she could get that rabbit home in three seconds, watching the gulls way up in the sky all the while.

Bree met Coop at the dock the following morning under a troublesome gray sky, ready to get out there and give 'em hell. Coop walked to the end of the pier and pointed to distant rollers pounding the shore of a neighboring island.

"Thrashin' pretty good out there. NOAA says she'll blow 18-20 knots today."

"Who's Noah?"

"National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Anyway, we ain't goin'."

Bree made the sad puppy face. "But I wanted to lobster."

"Get used to it, kid. Weather's the boss. We'll have a shot at 'er tomorrow if it lets up."

Bree's hands curled into little fists at her sides. "Just because it's a little windy we don't get to go?"

"Yep."

"Well, I don't like this at all. Not one bit."

Coop went home to putter; Bree rode back to the Town Hall to get her backpack and money, then took the ferry to the main.

Phil McKernan was at the store that afternoon when Coop went to top off his gas tank. "I see your niece went home this mornin'. Had a good visit, did she?"

Coop stammered, "She did? I mean... she did. Real nice visit."

He paid for his gas and went straight to the Town Hall. He opened the basement door expecting the same hundred years of clutter that had been there all his life, but found it transformed. It was still a repository for the detritus of running a small—very, very small—town, but all the boxes and files had been dusted, organized and stacked along the walls. Excess card tables and folding chairs were put away out of sight, save one each, which made up Bree's living room suite. On one wall she had hung a long tapestry of a winter night scene, the backdrop from a long-ago school Christmas play. Coop saw that a century of cobwebs had been swept away and scratched his head, puzzled.

"Thought she'd a kept those. Ain't cobwebs Gothic?"

One bare bulb lit the area but Bree had found an old desk lamp and set it up near her couch/bed for reading. A wooden crate was her bedside table; on it lay a bookmarked copy of Daphne du Maurier's *Jamaica Inn*, borrowed from the island library. Coop was unnerved by the sudden awareness that he'd broken into her home and quickly left, feeling like a thief. Walking back to his truck he realized what was missing from Bree's makeshift apartment: any sign of her planning to return.

"Quit on me already. Shouldn't come as a surprise. Damn kids."

At five pm Coop went to pick up four coils of new rope and a bundle of wooden trap runners from the late ferry. Bree Morrison sat alone on the ferry's elevated observation deck sporting full gothic war paint on her eyes and lips. She disembarked carrying a cloth tote bag.

"Thought you'd bailed out on me," said Coop, still not entirely sure she hadn't. He had seen an unknown darkness in her when he canceled their workday, something beyond her usual deathmetal demeanor. He looked into her bag and saw a new pair of orange Grundens overalls, a sleeve of blue work gloves and a pair of knee high fishing boots. "Guess I was wrong."

"Damn right you were. I went to gear up, that's all. And to see Mallory."

"Mallory?"

"My friend in Rockland. The, um, special one, y'know?" She remembered there was no need to dance around the subject with Coop. "I mean, my girlfriend."

"Well, good." No further comment was needed. Coop grabbed his trap runners from the boat. "Went over to your place today."

"I wasn't home."

"You got it fixed up real nice, don't ya?"

"It's a fucking palace."

"Lang... oh, never mind. Long as you're comfortable, I guess. Why'd ya knock down the cobwebs? I figured they'd be right up your alley."

"I'm not Lily Munster."

"And you call yourself Gothic."

In the coming weeks Bree learned that although Coop gave the orders, weather really was the boss. When storms kept them ashore, she worked on gear in Coop's shop or organized the trapyard, chafing at the delays but never complaining.

Bree proved herself fearless and capable, though Coop prodded her one weakness in a moment of poor judgment. He'd trapped a large garden spider under a cup in his workshop to relocate it outside, but thought Bree could use a bit of pranking first. When she lifted the cup she let out a strangled yelp and launched herself backward, tumbling over a stack of traps under construction.

Coop chuckled. "Thought nothin' scared you."

"Spiders." She was still eyeing the escaped arachnid with horror. "Spiders scare the piss out of me."

"It's just a garden spider. It ain't gonna hurt you."

"Get that fucking thing away from me!"

The next morning Coop found an inverted styrofoam cup on his workbench. When he lifted it, there was a note:

Spook me with a spider again and I promise to burn this fucking shop to the ground. - B

He believed her.

One morning when she opened the bait tank, Bree found that the warm night had not done the herring any favors. Gas bubbles erupted *bloop!* through a floating layer of rancid orange fish grease, creating the illusion of a 50-gallon kettle of rotten herring stew on low simmer. Bree gagged.

"Coop! The bait's turned."

He pinched a baitfish and found it suitably firm. "It'll do. Prob'ly just herring farts." He pronounced it *herrin' fahts*.

"Get out. Herring don't fart."

"Course they do. Schools of gassy herring was mistaken for U-boats in World War II. That's a plain fact."

While this was true, it wasn't the cause of the bait tank bubbles. This herring had passed its peak of freshness two days ago.

"Oh, puh-leeze," said Bree.

She was about to protest further when *blurp!* a tiny but loathsome gobbet of fish crud launched itself into her open mouth. Her stomach of steel instantly conceded defeat. She retreated to the gunwale, where she let rip with a glorious technicolor yawn. Hungry seagulls descended to feast on her regurgitated Froot Loops, a visual that triggered a bonus round of dry heaves. Her knees gave out and she hit the deck hard.

When she finally stopped convulsing, Coop cranked up the washdown hose and rinsed her puke off the side of the boat, then gave her a cold splash down the back of her shirt. She scrambled to her feet.

"What the fuck was that for?!"

"You all finished? Ok if we do some work now?"

She called him an asshole, but the soaking had revived her. Twenty minutes later the first traps came up full, and the tension burned off like morning fog.

Word got out that Bree was living in the town hall basement. Wishing to avoid a dangerous precedent, the board of selectmen had no choice but to evict her. She offered to become a live-in caretaker, but the town fathers stood firm. Bree moved into the

Cooper's spare room the first week of August. She offered rent but they declined. Coop stopped deflecting questions about his 'niece' and started answering questions about Bree Morrison, God-centration camp escapee. The boyish little Goth-girl who had landed in their midst personified the independence and pioneering spirit islanders uniformly valued. Her secret was safe on Little Seal Island. Fairly safe.

The Coopers talked it through and agreed Bree's well-being far outweighed the risk of harboring her. There remained a question about what to do when school resumed in September. Coop, and especially Caroline, whose background was in education, were set on Bree's return to school for her senior year. But Bree insisted on working until season's end in December or January. The Gothic dynamo grabbed this dispute and hog-tied it before it could strip the threads off her plans.

Using the town library's computer she had Caroline administer the full battery of online GED pretests. She aced them all.

"Her lowest score was a 97 in science, and she didn't even study. Don't look now Coop, but she's smarter than you and me put together. She already knows everything high school can teach her."

Coop shook his head. "What about friends her own age, and senior prom, and graduation? Don't she need them, too?"

When he suggested this to Bree at work the next day she laughed at him. "I already have all the friends I need. As for graduation, if it makes you feel better I'll throw my hat in the air

after I slam-dunk the GED. I don't need a mortar-board and a silly ritual. And senior prom? Those things tend to be strictly binary, if you know what I mean. You think the prom queen's going to dance with me? Sorry, but that's the last place I'd want to be."

Coop still had doubts, and said so.

"I still have doubts," he said.

Bree executed a pivot: "Before me, you worked alone, right?"

"I did."

"Now you get through twice as much gear per day."

"Ayup. Give or take." Coop's net income was way up.

"And the best hauls of the season are on the winter grounds in November and December, right?"

"Generally."

"And you can't go out there without a sternman."

"It ain't recommended."

"So you need me."

"I know a couple fellas lookin' for work in the fall."

Bree looked wounded. "You'd do that to me?"

Coop flicked a cigarette butt into the sea and thought about how much her friendship meant to him, how much he and Caroline benefited from her youthful—if somewhat spectral—presence. "No," he said, "I don't suppose I would."

"Then don't worry about school. That's my problem, not yours, and I'll deal with it. You just worry about getting us onto those lobsters."

Coop swatted a horsefly—he called them *hussflies*—and frowned when it flew away unfazed.

"All right. We'll try it. But I think you'll have a rude awakening when we get out there in deep water. It's a whole different ball game."

By the end of September, Little Seal was exploding in fall color and the early mornings grew increasingly brisk. Bree was glad for the cooler weather and said it made her more energetic.

"I wouldn't a thought it possible," said Coop.

When he called a day off, Bree went shopping on the main again and returned with her tote bag full of insulated cold weather gear, bursting to get out on the winter grounds and prove her worth.

In October, foul weather kept them on shore a lot more than they liked, but there was gear work to do and Bree took it on with her usual great but strangely grim enthusiasm, even though it earned her no pay. Her money came solely from lobsters in the live well.

The first day of lengthening-out, they were plagued by near-constant sleet, but still ran three big loads of traps out to the deep water of the winter grounds. It was a laborious and time-consuming process that left Bree aching but satisfied. They were both exhausted as they plodded up the icy dock ramp at the end of the day. Near the top, Coop lost his footing. His ankle twisted in a way Bree would never be able to unsee.

Two surgeries and a cast later Coop was repaired, but facing months of recovery. He could run the boat but couldn't haul traps.

"I can do everything else," said Bree.

"It's too much work for one person. I spoke with Ray Lowry. He's coming on board to help."

"He what?"

"Don't worry, you'll still get your twenty percent."

"When have I ever given a flying rat-fuck about splitting the money, Coop? I don't want someone else on our boat."

But Coop insisted.

On their first day working together, Ray tried to take charge.

"You got that wrong. Let me show you how we do it."

Bree made her position clear: "I know my job. You don't tell me what to do."

Ray put his hands up. "Ok, ok. Just tryin' to help."

Confident Bree could handle herself, Coop stayed out of it. But Ray's easy capitulation wasn't what it seemed.

By day three he was passive-aggressively assaulting her under the guise of manic exertion—thumping her with buoys, pinching her fingers between traps, critiquing her methods. At one point he watched her organize traps on the deck and shook his head. "Nope, you got that all wrong. You got to turn 'em up sidewise."

Bree dropped the trap she was holding and got right in his face. Actually right in his sternum since he was a good foot and a half taller.

"Shut your fucking pie-hole and quit acting like you're my boss. I work for Coop, not you."

When Ray "accidentally" splashed her with slime from the hot tank, Bree grabbed a bucket and scooped fish juice from the bait barrel. Coop intervened before she could douse him with it.

"Play time's over. Are we gonna get through this gear or am I gonna run you two back to the dock?"

They finished the day in the hostile silence of an armed truce. At the dock Ray played his last card. "Listen, Coop. I'm all done with this little bitch. You want a sternman, she's got to go. It's her or me."

Coop frowned. "Well, Ray, I suppose you're right. This ain't working."

Bree's mouth fell open. In the next moment she would be fired from the work she loved, from the position she had more than earned.

Coop lit a Marlboro and looked at her sadly. "I hate to do this to you, kid, but you're gonna have to fire Ray."

Bree clapped her hands and did a strange little victory dance—a jerky two-step with finger guns and a hip wiggle that looked as much like a seizure as a dance.

"You're done, Lowry. Get off our boat."

"I don't fucking believe this. You'd rather work with this cunt than me?"

"Watch your mouth, son. My foot's bound up but my fists work just fine. You'll talk to her like you was talkin' to my daughter."

Ray stormed up the ramp, stopping at the top to flip a bird, disappearing before they could respond.

Bree turned to Coop. "Is that really how you think of me? Like a daughter?"

"Yeah. Pretty much. Me 'n Caroline both."

She blushed, giving him a quick sideways hug. "Nobody ever picks me." She gestured at the traps on deck. "What now?"

"We keep pluggin' away."

"Are you bringing somebody else on?"

"Reckon not. Ain't no one else looking for work."

"We don't need help. We're awesome."

The next morning Coop woke to find Bree's room empty and a note on the kitchen table. He went cold for a second. This is what runaways do. He picked it up with a trembling hand.

Went to get started on bait. Be there by five or I'm going without you! - B

When Coop arrived at the dock Bree had already bagged the entire day's bait, warmed up Sportin' Jenny and sailed her from the mooring to the dock to pick him up. She had to stand on a bait box so she could see out the front windows. Coop shook his head, disbelieving. *There ain't no stoppin' this kid.*

They put \$4,000 worth of bugs in the tank that day and still had time to take up a load of unused traps.

On arriving home Coop found his wife entertaining an unknown woman and a weaselly-looking man with round glasses

and a tie. He didn't know their purpose but they'd clearly upset Caroline.

"They're from Child Welfare, Coop. About Bree."

Coop landed heavily in an armchair. "All right, let's have it."

Speaking in clipped tones like an actor in a 40s gangster film, the man in the tie introduced himself as Mr. Sanborn. "We understand you are harboring an underage runaway. Her foster family has requested our assistance in her return."

"And if she don't want to go?"

"It's not her decision. She's a minor. Where is she?"

"Ridin' her bike. Should be here any minute."

When Bree entered, the woman—Ms. Price—smiled with too many teeth. "We are here to return you safely to your home, Miss Morrison."

Bree wanted to put a fist into her unctuous smile. She looked at her, stone-faced, then turned and walked to her bedroom, closing the door. Ms. Price followed but found the door locked.

"Miss Morrison... Bree... don't do anything foolish." She rattled the doorknob. Sanborn went outside to prevent an escape from her window. Coop hobbled along behind.

Bree went to her closet and opened her backpack. The woman yelled, "Open this door, Miss Morrison!"

Bree took her time. "Keep your fucking panties on, lady."

She withdrew a small item from her backpack, closed it, and unlocked her door. She walked past Ms. Price, back to the front room. When Coop and Sanborn returned she slapped the item down on the table. "Boom-shaka-laka!"

Coop picked it up. It was a Maine driver's license with a D.O.B. that made her eighteen nine days ago. Coop spoke softly to her. "Swear on your life this ain't a fake ID."

"On my Mothre's grave, Coop. I'm eighteen. For real."

Sanborn shuffled papers and said, "Our records have you as sixteen. Born October 24, 2004."

"Your records suck monkey-nuts, weasel-boy." She did her strange little victory dance again.

"Language, child," said Coop. He turned to Ms Price. "There's obviously a mistake here."

"If that is the case, the ward will still need to come with us until it can be cleared up. There is an allegation that she has been forced into unpaid labor on your fishing boat."

"Ah," said Coop. "You been talkin' to Ray Lowry."

"We are not at liberty to—"

"Excuse me," interrupted Bree. "But none of that matters. The ward is a legal adult and she's not going anywhere with you. So feel free to get the fuck out of our house."

"If we have to, we will return with the State Police."

"Bring 'em on," said Coop. "We ain't going nowhere."

The unwelcome visitors were shown the door. Coop sat down with Bree.

"First, me and Caroline ain't about to let them take you. Second, if you're not really eighteen we could all be in deep trouble."

"I don't lie. You know I don't."

"Where's your birth certificate?"

"Don't have one."

"Where were ya born?"

"Augusta."

"Get your coat."

"Why? Where are we going?"

"Augusta. Right now."

Bree and Coop returned to Little Seal the next day with a fresh copy of her birth certificate, and the hospital's birth record. She dug her social security card out of her backpack for good measure.

By three o'clock Bree had grown tired of waiting and called the State Police barracks in Vassalboro to settle the matter.

"Before your officers waste a day coming out here, you should know I have a stack of paperwork that proves I'm eighteen."

"Child Welfare says you're sixteen."

"Did you confirm that with State Vital Statistics?"

"As of this moment, no."

"Don't take my word for it, call them. I'm just trying to save you a boat trip."

The continued absence of state troopers from the island told her everything she needed to know. After a week she called again and received confirmation and an apology. The expected battle of the documents was averted. She was free.

"Why didn't you tell us it was your birthday?" Caroline disliked Bree missing the celebration of a milestone almost as much as she disliked missing an opportunity to throw a party.

"I dunno. I didn't think it mattered."

"Of course it does. Turns out it mattered a great deal. Anyway, your party is this Saturday. Starts at six."

"My party?"

"I'll take care of everything. Hope you don't mind, but I'm inviting half the island."

Bree gave a rare smile. "Can I have friends out from the mainland?"

"I'll send Coop to bring them over."

On Saturday afternoon, Bree and Coop took *Sportin' Jenny* to the mainland to collect her friends. At Rockland harbor, a small contingent of black-clad teenagers waited. When Bree spotted her elfin and bespectacled Mallory among them, she vaulted off the boat before Coop had a chance to tie up. The two girls collided in a hug that made him look away, smiling.

The Goths boarded Sportin' Jenny for the crossing to Little Seal, where their arrival caused a minor rumble of concern until Bree introduced them around. The Goths had landed.

Bree's party, which included a chocolate birthday cake with black icing, and music Coop simply could not understand, tapered off by 10:30. Coop herded the young Goths back to his boat for the return trip. A few had clearly imbibed; he made sure they weren't driving.

At the dock in Rockland, Mallory lingered on the boat with Bree, talking on her cell. When Coop approached to help her off the boat, she handed him the phone. "It's my mom. She wants to talk to you."

Coop looked mystified.

"Hello, Coop here. Ayup... oh, sure. We'd be delighted. Yep... long as she wants. No, no trouble a-tall. Ayup. Yep, ok, bye now."

He returned her phone and said, "Glad to have you, Mallory. Stay as long as you like. If it gets too boring just holler and we'll run you back to town."

Bree and Mallory exchanged a look that said this would not be boring. They sat together on the transom for the return trip to the island, bundled against the cold. When they kissed, Coop pretended not to notice.

Caroline offered Mallory her choice of the couch or a folding cot, but Bree spoke up. "She can sleep in my room."

"Oh. Ok. I'll just put the cot in there."

"She won't need it." Mallory looked self-conscious but Bree was direct and unapologetic. "My bed's big enough."

Now Caroline looked self-conscious. "Well ok, if you're sure —"

Coop found the discussion amusing. "Come on now, Caroline. Leave 'em be. Let Bree get the rust off her crank. It's prob'ly been a while."

Mallory went bright red; Bree laughed. "I never heard it called a crank before. Thought that was a guy thing."

Coop's grin was full of mischief. "Orchid? Butterfly?"

"I'm going with vampire bat." She took Mallory by the hand, went to her room and closed the door.

At breakfast Monday morning Coop asked Mallory, "Do you have to get back to school at some point?"

"I graduated last spring."

"You don't say." He slathered an English muffin with an obscene amount of butter. "I wonder then... I don't suppose..."

"Oh!" said Mallory. "Right. I should be getting home."

"No, no, it ain't that. You're welcome as the flowers in May. I was wondering... do ya get seasick?"

Sportin' Jenny finished the season with a captain and two sternmen. Mallory went home for the holidays with an extra \$2,000 in her pocket, but Bree stayed on since there was still gear to bring in. She did the work of two men without complaint, and the last traps were ashore by January 15th. The final load only yielded twenty pounds of lobsters, but Coop handed Bree a \$1,000 cash bonus.

"What's this?" She looked at Coop and the wad of twenties with equal suspicion.

"End-of-season bonus." Coop pretended this was standard procedure, but it wasn't. Bree insisted through the year that she be treated the same as any sternman; she wouldn't accept the bonus if she knew it was unusual.

After Bree stacked the 798th trap in Coop's trapyard—they'd lost a pair somewhere—she wiped her brow and reinstalled her piercings. "What's next?"

Coop said, "Disneyland."

Bree had little enthusiasm for the happiest place on earth. "Don't we work on traps or something?"

"Ayuh, we do. Come April or May."

"And until then?"

"We're on vacation. Me and Carrie are headed south for a bit. You're welcome to come along."

"I don't know, Coop. Winter's my favorite season. Maybe I'll go to Mallory's for a while."

Bree turned in at 9:00, leaving the Coopers to watch crime dramas and the late news.

"I believe we're losing her," said Coop.

Caroline shook her head. "We never had her to lose, Coop. She's not ours." She squeezed his hand. "But she trusted us enough to land here when she needed to. That's something."

"Maybe so. Still gonna hurt like hell when she goes."

"I know it will." Caroline's voice was steady. "But we don't get to hold on. We just get to love her and let her figure out where she belongs."

Coop nodded. "She feels like one of our own, doesn't she?"

Caroline smiled sadly. "She does. And maybe she's what we needed, too—somebody to remind us we still had it in us."

"There ain't a lot of opportunities for romance out here, 'specially not for her. I'm afraid she needs more than this island can give."

Bree spent a week with Mallory before returning to Little Seal, telling her she had business to attend to. The Coopers left her with a key and instructions to make herself at home should she return. She let herself in, took a shoebox from beneath her bed and went to find Monica Padgett, first selectman of the town.

"I want to buy the mountainside lot." It was a five-acre parcel owned by the town and available at a deep discount to anyone,

provided they live on the island year-round. The land came with strict deed covenants to prevent profiteering and keep it affordable should it change hands. It had been on the town's books for decades; the logistics of building an access road had thus far been deemed insurmountable by all prospective homesteaders. In the interest of an informed transaction, Monica mentioned this to Bree.

"The fuck do I care about a road? I ride a bicycle." Monica almost laughed, but realized Bree was serious.

"You are aware that you can't enter into a legal contract until you're eighteen, don't you?"

"Boom-shaka-laka!" Bree's ID hit the table again.

"I see." Monica liked Bree, and understood it was her duty to humor the odd little Goth girl's pipe-dream. The disclosure of cold, hard dollar amounts would bring their negotiation to an end. "The parcel is \$20,000, with a minimum downpayment of \$5,000."

Bree picked up her shoebox as if to leave, but instead emptied its contents on the table. Monica gasped at the mountain of cash that lay there. "How much... umm—"

"Eighteen thousand. I'll pay the rest when fishing season starts. Where do I sign?"

It wasn't quite that simple, but soon enough Bree became a tax paying landowner with a piece of the island to call her own.

Coop returned from Florida without his cast. A few days later, Bree invited him to go for a walk up the mountainside. The upper end of her property was 250 feet above the sea with a

panoramic view of the bay and its many islands. Bree had borrowed two folding chairs from the town hall basement so she and Mallory could relax and enjoy the view from what would one day be her front porch. She and Coop sat and watched the sunset splash its colors across the underside of the clouds.

"Am I on with you next season?"

Coop nodded. "Wouldn't have no one else."

"Can I stay with you until my house is built?" A couple of years, maybe."

"Ayup. Reckon so."

"I found a place where I fit. How the fuck do you like that? I'm home."

"Language, child."

Live Nude Girls—A Love Story

My name is Noyes Polk, and I was born in 1968 at the age of sixteen. Like most islanders, I had heard of a thing called The Summer of Love, but that happened over on the main, on a coast as geographically distant as one could find without leaving the continental U.S. The expression held no real meaning for me until the Witches brought it to Harper's Island a year after it ended.

Within an hour of their arrival on the island, the Witches were suspected of using marijuana and LSD, sexual liaisons with men, women and each other, naked frolicking in broad daylight, goat sacrifice, and sundry other moral turpitudes.

It was all more or less true, except for the goats. They weren't real witches, though. They were hippies, a breed hitherto unknown here on Harper's Island. It was only a few biddies engaging in the age-old pastime of withholding approval from outsiders who called them witches, but the appellation grew legs and stuck. The biddies had a queen: the aged and upright Miss Hannah.

The withholding of approval was normally a temporary measure, kept in place until the newcomer's threat level could be properly assessed. But Miss Hannah declared that the Witches did pose a threat: all three were college girls twenty years and younger, adorable, free-spirited and braless, filled with a mischievous joy of youth. It was as though Harper's had become

infested with a small plague of kittens. But these kittens were buxom and flirtatious, and some of the island biddies feared for their menfolk.

They should have worried about their sons instead.

I was sixteen that summer. This was the best age to be when the witches arrived; it was also the worst—apologies to Dickens. Best, because at sixteen I was a raging bundle of hormones and became instantly infatuated; worst, for the same reason. I was at the peak of an awkward adolescence and therefore terrified of that which I most desired: Pretty girls. Although losing what seemed an eternal virginity was often on my mind, the mere thought of speaking to these nubile Witches left me petrified. Luckily it was they, or one of them anyway, who spoke first.

It was a typically cool July morning, too foggy to go to work. You can't haul traps if you can't find your buoys. My dad gave me the day off while he busied himself mending traps. Jack and I loitered at the Town Dock for lack of anything better to do. I picked up a newspaper left behind by a summer person—a Sentinel, a Journal, a Post, I forget which, from Boston or New Haven or somesuch. A place with tall buildings and more than one road. Jack and I were salivating over the movie section—first-run movies were a rarity for island kids—when I noticed a small ad near the bottom of the page:

THE SULTAN'S DEN

Live Nude Girls

The second line wormed its way into my consciousness and attached itself, remora-like, with little pink hooks. I knew such places existed, but the ad felt so brazen, as uninhibited as the sultry woman it advertised, that I was momentarily transported there. Under my breath I said, "Wow." It was as much a moan as a spoken word.

Due to the unyielding cascade of fog, the mailboat was late. I heard the tinkling of tiny bells—an anklet, so it turned out—and a beautiful girl in a gauzy peasant dress emerged from the fog and parked her hourglass physique next to me on the railing. She sat so close my bare arm pressed against hers. My heart rate doubled.

"Hi, I'm Gloria Monday. What's your name?"

Mesmerized by her curves, her plainly visible areolae and evidently phototropic nipples, it took me a moment to come up with the correct answer to that poser.

"Uh, Noyes," I finally managed.

"Noise?"

"Yep. Noyes."

"That's funny. What's your last name?"

"Polk."

"Poke?"

"Yep."

She made an incomprehensible sound and gently jabbed a finger at my upper arm. "Okay, Noise Poke. Pleased to make your acquaintance. You live here?"

"Yep."

"Isn't it boring in the winter?"

"Sometimes." I was now acutely aware of my failure to produce the sort of witty repartee needed to impress a girl of such formidable breastworks. As anxiety hit its nerve-shredding peak I entertained a fleeting notion of making a run for it. This, I felt, would be preferable to the blithering panic-induced meltdown I was about to have in the presence of this hippie goddess. The familiar sound of the mailboat broke the tension and I found two words to speak that might not be taken as oafish blather:

"Mailboat's comin'."

"So it is. You going over?"

"Nuh-uh."

"Too bad. I would've liked the company."

"Um." The implications of her simple statement did not register. "Have fun," I said, idiotically.

"Okay, Noise Poke." She gently poked me again. "I'll be back on the late boat. Maybe I'll see you around."

I nodded, declining to say 'yep' a fourth time.

"Let me get your bag for you," I said, already reaching. She gave a giggle—not an unkind one—and I remembered she didn't have a bag. I was at this point certain she'd pegged me a drooling moron. At least I performed better than Jack, who at thirteen was more awkward than I, and spent the entire three-minute encounter with Gloria Monday gawking at her abundant chest. Being more mature, I only did that when she laughed and set things in mammary motion. I couldn't help myself; these breasts were a force as irresistible as the gravity they appeared to defy.

As the mailboat pulled away, Jack regained his voice. "Holy tits!" he said, still trying to calm himself. He wiped his palms on his jeans, then glanced around to make sure no one had overheard him. "You heard about them witches, didn't ya?"

"Some. Why?"

"I hear they're doin' weird stuff up there at the Fowler Cottage."

"Yeah? Like what?"

"Like smokin' pot. And runnin' around naked."

"I guess that's their business. It's a free country."

"They might even do naked stuff outside."

"Who told you that?"

"Miss Hannah was talkin' about it up to the store. Yest'dy. She says they got no shame."

"Miss Hannah's just jealous because she's old."

"Well, I'm gonna find out for myself," said Jack.

"What makes you think they'd tell you?"

"I ain't askin'."

"Well."

Jack leaned in. "How about we go up there tonight after our folks are asleep."

"And do what?" I asked.

"Look in their windows and see."

"Spy on them?"

"Yeah."

I considered this for a moment. The prospect of witnessing live nude girls firsthand had a rather obvious appeal to my

testosterone-addled mind, but my conscience spoke louder. "Tell me something, Jack."

"What."

"If you caught some kid spying on your sister, how would you feel?"

"I'd kill him."

"Then how is it okay to spy on the witches?"

"They're not my sister."

"I think you missed my point."

"I got your point," said Jack, scowling. "I'm still going up there tonight."

"I'm not."

"Fine. Suit yourself."

With nothing better to do, I spent the next hour or so at the island store, where Miss Hannah was holding court. I nursed a cold Moxie while pretending to read the bulletin board. When the subject of the Witches arose Miss Hannah had a lot to say, none of it charitable. I wanted to speak up for them but kept my mouth shut. It was never wise to argue with Miss Hannah.

At about 8:30 the copper cowbell signaled the arrival of customers and the other two witches entered, smiling and beautiful. The first, a statuesque brunette, wore a diaphanous paisley miniskirt; the second was less than five feet tall and reflected a heritage of the Asian subcontinent. Her rich cocoa-brown skin was complemented by a magnificent gold and white Indian sari. They offered hellos, bought a ridiculous amount of candy and departed in a wake of giggles and patchouli. Miss

Hannah, for all her righteous indignation, spoke not a word in their presence but took up her diatribe again before the ringing of their laughter dissipated. I shook my head, cursed myself for lacking the courage to speak up, then followed the witches out.

I stood transfixed for a moment, pausing on the deck to watch the gentle sway of their hips as they crossed the parking lot and settled at a paint-flaking picnic table by the shore. I noted with great interest that they held hands as they walked.

The fog burned off and the day turned bright, leaving the harbor in full view. The witches sat side-by-side, thighs touching, sucking on Jolly Ranchers, admiring the scenery which they seemed to find amusing. I took two steps toward them and stopped, unsure what I would say. Too late. Paisley miniskirt saw me. She stood and approached, then took my hand and with great solemnity placed in it a watermelon Jolly Rancher. She then led me by the other hand to come and sit with her and her diminutive friend. An exchange of pleasantries revealed that paisley miniskirt called herself Cricket and the Indian girl was Lakshmi. I found myself sitting between them at the picnic table.

What is it, I wondered, with these witches and their close-sitting? Do they not know the effect this has on the male of the species? It did not occur to me they knew quite well the effect, and how to use it. As we sat hip-to-hip and shoulder-to-shoulder, I fell under their spell, and would have done anything they asked of me.

We sat a moment without speaking. Why were the Witches so friendly to me? I knew it wasn't my looks or personality—I was

perfectly unremarkable in both respects. Then it occurred to me: I was the only unmarried person on Harper's Island anywhere near their age. Youth was the common bond.

"So what are you guys up to today?"

Cricket giggled. "Sleeping! All day."

"We were up all night," said Lakshmi, apparently proud of the fact.

"But you'll miss all this beautiful sunshine," I said, gesturing at the welcome absence of fog. They erupted in laughter, leaving me worried I'd said something incredibly stupid.

"We won't miss any sunshine," said Cricket. "We own the sunshine. We are the sunshine!" More laughter followed.

Lakshmi then produced from within the folds of her sari a tiny orange tablet and said, "This is all the sunshine you'll ever need. Right here."

I accepted the proffered tablet thinking it was some kind of miniature Pez or Sweet Tart, and that these girls were awfully childlike in their candy obsession. Lakshmi stopped me before I could pop it in my mouth, saying, "Save that for later. Come and see us at the cottage tonight and we'll show you what it's all about." I was puzzled but still understood this to be—oh glory of glories—an invitation to visit the Witches. I beamed, astonished at my good fortune. I pocketed the little orange Pez and asked what time I should come by.

"Time?" said Cricket. "There's no such thing as time."

"Time isn't real," said Lakshmi, as if nothing could be more obvious. "It's just an abstract." They both giggled.

I was baffled as to their meaning and still more confused at my newfound ability to evoke such mirth. I thanked them and stood to leave. As I walked to the gravel road I remembered why I had approached them in the first place: to warn them of prying eyes in the night. That can wait until I see them tonight, I thought, and turned to give a gesture of goodbye, but they were looking out at the harbor again and continuing to find it inordinately funny. That's when I realized what the orange Pez actually was.

That evening after supper I left the house, telling my parents I was going to play a pickup game of softball at Spencer's Field. This was my usual habit. I arrived at the Fowler cottage around 7:30 pm (*there is no such thing as time*) and was greeted by Gloria Monday, who danced out the front door calling, "Noise Poke! You came!" She enveloped me in an unexpected hug that placed certain points of her remarkable anatomy in tantalizing proximity to my face. I was immediately transported to that precarious space between embarrassment and erection. If the latter won that tug of war, it would surely elevate the former to an agony. Fortunately, Gloria released me before the stirring amounted to anything noticeable. She took my hand and led me inside.

The smoky front room was lit by the reddening sun streaming through the open windows. The Fowler cottage lacked electricity—Harper's power station would not be operational until 1974—and I gathered from the as yet unlit array of scented and multicolored candles that the witches didn't use the propane

lamps. The room smelled of strawberries on fire; I realized this was incense, cloying, blending with the patchouli oil the witches used as perfume.

Cricket and Lakshmi were napping on the couch, Lakshmi wrapped in a red sari and in Cricket's arms, an orange tabby cat beside them. The girls awoke and welcomed me with sleepy smiles. Lakshmi asked if I remembered the sunshine. I patted the pocket of my flannel shirt.

"Yep."

"Are you ready?" asked Gloria.

"Ready for what?"

"To have your mind blown."

I tried hard to grasp her meaning. I failed.

Gloria Monday held in her hand one of the little orange tablets which I now understood to be LSD or something like it. She popped it into her mouth, chewed once and allowed it to dissolve. "Your turn," she said, catching my gaze with what I noticed for the first time were vivid green eyes, a perfect compliment to the spray of freckles splashed across the bridge of her nose.

I took the LSD tablet from my pocket. "What will this do to me?"

"It'll open your eyes to a new reality you could never have imagined."

My experience with altered states of consciousness was limited to the one time Jack and I drank a couple of illicit beers. I remembered trying to hide the fact of my mild intoxication from

my parents and worried that the effects of LSD would not be so easily concealed.

"I have to be home by ten."

"Don't worry about that, Noise Poke," said Gloria Monday. "Don't worry about anything." She sat on the arm of the chair I'd settled in, all golden hair and gemstone eyes and woman scent. I took the little pill expecting it to taste like oranges. *Oh, right. Not candy.*

Cricket and Lakshmi were now up and about. I asked if they were going to take LSD but they said no, they had tripped the night before and explained that it was best to wait a few days between lysergic excursions.

"How long does it last?" I asked, still concerned about facing my parents, however briefly.

Gloria Monday sensed my concern. "Don't worry, Noise Poke. There is no fear. There's only peace and love and beauty."

"I don't think my parents know that."

"But love always finds a way."

I thought about this a moment and decided it might be true. In my current state of infatuation I would have believed anything she said.

Cricket picked up an acoustic parlor guitar that was nearly in tune and began to play. She sang about walking out in the morning dew; Gloria Monday and Lakshmi supplied harmony. The more they sang, the more I loved them.

When the song ended I still felt the same as when I'd arrived. Maybe LSD doesn't work on me, I thought. Gloria Monday

brought out a cigar box containing a plastic bag of marijuana, cigarette papers and what looked like dozens of the little orange tablets. She rolled a joint with well-practiced movements and handed it to Lakshmi, who lit it with a red-tipped kitchen match struck on the stone fireplace. She drew deeply from the joint and passed it to me. I did the same, pretending I'd done this before. I quickly betrayed my first-timer status by exploding in a fit of red-faced coughing. With a little coaching from the ever-solicitous Gloria Monday I was able to successfully inhale another draft of marijuana smoke and hold it. Each time the joint came around it was easier, and my worries soon slipped away like the ebbing tide.

I remembered that I'd come to warn the witches of Jack's intent to go Peeping Tom on them.

"Um, listen, I have to tell you something." My head felt stuffed with soft warm cotton and my voice sounded foreign. It might as well have come from the cat. This struck me as wildly funny. The witches traded knowing smiles and laughed along with me.

"What is it, Noise Poke?" asked Gloria.

"Well, you know, some people have been talking about you."

Cricket said, "That happens everywhere we go." The guitar was still in her lap; she strummed a few disconnected chords.

"Um. Yeah. Well there's this kid I know who's heard the rumors—"

Cricket interrupted, "Wait, what rumors?"

"Some people say you're smoking pot up here."

Lakshmi said in a voice of affected innocence, "Oh, we never do that." More laughter. Why was everything so outrageously funny?

"And we're all virgins, too!" said Gloria Monday. The witches found this funnier than I did since I assumed it might be true. I laughed with them anyway.

"Some people say you run around naked," I continued, adding that I personally did not believe that, lest they deem me a pervert dwelling on thoughts of their unclad bodies. "And that you do weird mystical rituals. Like sacrifices."

Cricket caught me with a stony gaze and spoke in a tone straight out of a Vincent Price movie. "Why do you think we invited you here tonight?" A moment of eerie silence, then we all collapsed giggling.

"Well, Noise Poke, I know you just met us today, but do we seem like the kind of people who go around sacrificing things?" asked Gloria, her voice sounding slow and far away.

I snickered without meaning to and managed to say, "Probably not." I noticed the crucial nudity question had gone unaddressed.

I felt an odd fluttering in my chest. The hard edges of things—the coffee table, the stone hearth—now appeared soft, then blurry, then vibrating with a faint opalescence. Tiny traces of brilliant colored light zipped along these edges, almost too quick for the naked eye.

"But wait," I said, "there's more." I feared I was growing incoherent. I turned in what felt like slow-motion to Gloria

Monday who was now looking at me like I was a new and rare kind of specimen. "There's this kid named Jack."

"Yes?" She reached out and touched my cheek. The warmth from her fingertips spread across my face and seeped into my skull, filling it with a love as tactile as it was emotional.

"He said he's coming up here to spy on you. Tonight."

"He told you this?"

"Yep. He wanted me to come with him."

She placed her ring-fingered hand on my forearm. In that instant all my senses collided with all of hers, erupting in a five-dimensional wave of adoration so brilliant I feared it would consume me. The fear grew and became terror; I felt myself dying from it. Then Gloria smiled at me and the fear sloughed away like the melting of a suffocating skin. I smiled back. And then we were both laughing again.

"Wait," I said, catching my breath, "why is this funny?"

This, of course, made us both collapse into laughter once more.

Gloria Monday finally announced that Jack's impending spy mission was "groovy" and "out of sight." I asked why, but she just said, "Wait and see."

Lakshmi stood and said she and Cricket were going to take a shower. *Together?* I watched slack-jawed as they disappeared into the bathroom and steam began billowing out of the door they didn't bother to close.

"Are they lesbians?" I had never encountered a lesbian, at least not that I knew of.

"Does it matter?" said Gloria. "They love each other."

Vivid images of steam-kissed flesh awoke in my mind: roundnesses, curves, tender enveloping folds. I moaned softly.

As the sky darkened the effects of the LSD intensified. Gloria Monday waved a hand in front of my face and it was followed by a dozen iterations of itself, each one a different color and texture, some morphing into birds and butterflies that floated away on unseen currents in the air. Soon Gloria herself was radiating a spectrum of colors, each undulating ray rooted in one of her emotions, her whole life and being, her essential Gloria-ness. I realized these colors were also radiating from me, and where our colors met I could experience the part of her life from which they emerged. Gloria Monday as an infant, as a child, an adolescent, an adult, at middle-age, as an elderly woman of great kindness and boundless wisdom. I was in a state of pure empathy with her—past, present and future.

At some point—maybe minutes, maybe hours—Gloria conferred with her freshly bathed friends about Jack and arrived at a giggling consensus. She explained that I would have a role to play. She and I were the advance lookouts; we were to hide by the roadside and spot Jack as he came around the bend toward the cottage. We would then return unseen to warn Cricket and Lakshmi, whereupon they would go into action.

I picked up an apple from a bowl of fruit and felt it infusing me with a complete understanding of its meaning and purpose, of the necessity of its being perfectly present in my hand at this exact moment among the eons. I felt the apple expand and

contract; it was breathing. It was a flawless paradigm of everything that ever lived.

As daylight faded, Gloria Monday and I secreted ourselves behind a patch of sweet fern at the side of the one-lane dirt road. I heard crickets and peepers in the forest and nearby marsh. A mourning dove wept. A sibilance of waves broke on the western shore. The island was singing to us. I looked at Gloria with love and desire, watching her freckles trace exquisite arabesques on the silken flesh of her face. It was here I found the courage—or maybe it was abandon—to kiss her. She wrapped her arms around me, fell into me, kissing back.

I winced in a momentary twinge of guilt as I recalled ogling her and her friends earlier that morning. The feeling quickly passed as I came to understand that the Witches' desirability was an essential and cultivated part of their mystique. There was so much more to each of them than sexuality alone, but their sexuality was not hidden or diminished. It simply was.

"I love you, Gloria Monday," I said, my voice sounding oddly matter-of-fact, as if I were announcing that it was Tuesday.

"And I love you, Noise Poke." I knew it was true, if only in the sense that she loved everyone and everything. She kissed my cheek and said, "I do. But right now we have to watch the road."

"I don't know if I can." Everywhere I looked I saw things I knew were not really there.

For the next half-hour I watched alien beings, steam locomotives, marching bands and entire galaxies come around

the distant bend. I looked down and saw my Levi's-clad legs morph into giant blue snakes that slithered off into the woods.

I was still laughing at this when the beam of a flashlight pierced the darkness and Jack came down the otherwise deserted road. We watched until we were certain it was him, then skittered out from our hiding place to re-enter the cottage through the back door. Gloria Monday led me through the darkened kitchen to the front room where the other girls waited, now dressed in white robes improvised from bedsheets. I was instructed to crouch out of sight near the front window as Gloria donned a white robe of her own.

"What now?" I asked.

"Just peek out from behind the drapes and tell us when he's here." I thought I might be able to separate Jack from the ongoing hallucinations.

"Then what?"

"Little Jackie wants a sacrifice and he's going to get one." Gloria reacted to the alarm on my face. "Don't be afraid, Noise Poke. It isn't you."

"But someone's going to be sacrificed?" I was aghast.

"Just tell us when he's here."

The witches stood in the shadows, unlit by the single white candle that burned on an otherwise vacant table. I saw the beam of Jack's flashlight winking through the pines as he approached. When he neared the front gate the light went out, leaving him to find his way by the glow of a half-moon. Jack came alone. He trailed a dazzling array of pulsating shapes and colors I dismissed

as generated by the orange sunshine. Jack entered the dooryard and approached the cottage, stopping about 25 feet from the front windows. Dissatisfied with this vantage point, he came nearer and climbed into the crotch of an oak tree, fixing his gaze on the cottage windows.

"He's here," I whispered. "He's in the tree."

The witches filed solemnly out of the shadows and into the candlelight— Gloria Monday, then Lakshmi, then Cricket. Gloria and Cricket held their hands clasped before them as if praying. Lakshmi also held her hands before her, and I saw they were bound with a strip of cloth. *Lakshmi is the sacrifice. Poor little Lakshmi.*

The three girls walked slowly to the table where the lone candle burned. Gloria and Cricket removed Lakshmi's white robe, leaving her clad in a bra and bikini panties that were marvelously ill-suited to the containment of her behind. There was nothing sexual in her undress, though. Her face was a mask of abject fear.

I stayed near the window, paralyzed at what I was seeing, all my input meters red-lining. Against Gloria's instructions, I stood and took a tentative step toward the witches. Gloria came to me with assertive strides and put a comforting hand on my shoulder. She whispered in my ear, planted a tiny kiss, and returned to the others at the table.

I stood alone in the darkness laughing quietly to myself. I was startled when I saw that Cricket now held a large kitchen knife. Gloria Monday made Lakshmi lie on the table and quickly bound her feet in a fashion similar to her hands. Gloria held the

slim candle aloft, casting faint light over the eerie tableau. Cricket raised the blade, holding it with both hands. The assailant-priestesses began chanting in a language I could not understand: *Om Mani Padme Hum*. Gloria held the flame directly before her. Cricket stepped up to the table and unleashed a demonic howl. She thrust the knife savagely downward at Lakshmi, who began shrieking just as Gloria blew out the candle, dropping the curtain on our one-act play.

I looked out the window again just in time to see Jack fall from the oak tree and land roughly on the root-twisted ground. He rose clutching his arm and ran back to the road, where he vanished into the shifting landscape of brilliant hallucinations.

I said, "Jack's gone," but Lakshmi didn't hear, and went on wailing in mock agony. Gloria Monday found another kitchen match and relit the candle; only then did Lakshmi fall silent. I saw to my everlasting relief that she was unharmed and had in fact begun to laugh as Cricket freed her hands and feet. Lakshmi rose from the table and walked toward me, resplendent in and oblivious to her near-nakedness. She joined me at the window, still in her underwear, and I realized I was at this moment closer to a live nearly-nude girl than I had ever been in my life. I stared. Gloria saw me and said, "She's beautiful, isn't she?" Lakshmi was in no hurry to cover herself and, although my heart was with Gloria Monday, I was in no hurry to stop stealing glances at the girl who was nearly sacrificed.

As the night progressed, I couldn't shake Miss Hannah's claim that these girls ran around naked. Although that wasn't

presently happening—apart from Lakshmi's underwear episode—it certainly seemed possible. The LSD and Gloria Monday's playful affection created in my mind the idea that nudity was imminent, called for by the cosmos itself. I also believed anything I did to bring it about would prevent it from happening. Nudity must arise of its own accord. The hour grew late but the Witches remained obstinately clothed.

It was well after midnight when the trip arrived at a luminous crescendo. I found it harder and harder to differentiate between where I ended and the rest of the universe began. I told Gloria and she said, "Exactly."

Shortly before daybreak she stood and took me by the hand. "Come on, Noise Poke." She gently poked me for emphasis.

"Come on where?" Cricket and Lakshmi were now standing, too.

"To greet the dawn," said Gloria. "We always greet the new day. Then breakfast and then to bed." She pulled her dress over her head in one fluid motion. Cricket and Lakshmi were already stepping out of their clothes. The nudity I'd imagined all night had finally arrived, and it felt as natural as breathing.

The LSD was still strong but waning. I followed my beautiful Witches out the back door and into the newborn day, filled with perfect peace and profound understanding.

It was right around this time when Jack, sleeping fitfully in his room a mile away, was awakened by his father to prepare for a day on the water. The first lobsters of the season were coming out

of the rocks and moving down the bay. Catches were way up, and Jack's dad meant to get through a lot of gear that day. When Jack tried to beg off, claiming a broken arm, his father first ascertained that it was only a sprain, then began a line of incredulous questioning. Jack painted himself into a corner and had to spill the truth as he knew it: He'd heard the rumors, went to the Fowler cottage to verify them and inadvertently stumbled on the ritualistic slaying of Lakshmi, whom he called "the little dark one."

Jack's father was having none of it. He ordered his son into his beat-up F-150 and set off to confront the witches.

In the silence that followed their third attempt to bring the Witches to their front door there came from behind the cottage a faint, vaguely musical sound. Jack's father led the way.

Turning the corner by the back porch they came upon us, four young people, three girls and a boy, standing with arms raised in exaltation to the sky. We chanted *Om* in one voice as the nascent sun's rays bathed us in golden light. Each of us wore an expression of unremitting joy, and on our heads were garland crowns of wildflowers.

Jack was almost knocked over backwards when a callused hand clapped over his eyes and turned him about-face. His father marched him back to the F-150 saying, "That looked like all three of 'em to me, alive and well and naked as the day they was born."

My parents didn't realize I was gone until I came home that morning. As I look back on the episode my chief regret is that I broke their trust. Any heterosexual sixteen-year-old male would

have done as I did, given such an opportunity. Well—maybe not so much the LSD. But who could resist the siren song of live nude girls?

My punishment included a ban on visiting the Fowler cottage and gathering an entire winter's worth of firewood. I found ways around the first restriction and met covertly with Gloria Monday several times before she and her friends returned to Dartmouth at summer's end. Love always finds a way.

News of my overnight escapade spread fast. No one said much about it to me, but I got disapproving glances from a few of the biddies who were now feeling triumphant and vindicated. Miss Hannah, to her credit, looked at me and sighed, then murmured, "I was young once, too." She might have elaborated but thought better of exposing the chinks in her stodgy armor.

On a warm mid-July morning shortly after my introduction to LSD, I was splitting firewood with the maul and wedge when Jack came along on his trusty Schwinn Stingray, freshly released from a grounding.

"Well, they're talkin' about ya." Jack kicked at a low-growing juniper, releasing its sweet sun-warmed fragrance into the morning air.

I leaned the maul against my growing stack of split logs.
"Who is 'they'?"

"You know... people. A bunch of them."

"Saying what?"

"That you had sex with one of them witches that night.
Maybe more than one."

"I guess they got to have something to gossip about."

"Well? Did ya?"

"Nope. I didn't. Cross my heart and hope to die."

This was the truth. Jack didn't need to know my years of innocence came to an end when I crawled out my window and met Gloria Monday on the pier two nights later.

Here it is, fifteen years on, and lately I spend most evenings out in the workshop building a skiff by hand. The wood plane makes a satisfying hiss as I even the planks. On this fine late spring evening, a small voice pipes up from the porch.

"Daddy, can we name the boat *Sunshine*?"

I turn, sweat stinging my eyes, and in bounces my daughter, seven years old, golden curls wild as her mother's were when she first danced down the pier, anklets jingling. Her two brothers trail in behind her. Mom leans in the doorway behind them, arms crossed, smirking like she knows exactly what I'm remembering.

"Edith Chubbock," I say to her, mock-stern, wiping my hands on my jeans. "First you give our daughter your old alias as her given name, now she wants to name the boat after that little orange tablet. Are you two in cahoots? What's next?"

She laughs, the same sound that once turned the Fowler cottage into pure light. "I was never an Edith, Noise Poke. You know that. But the alias deserves to live on."

Our daughter tugs my sleeve. "My middle name is the best, Daddy. Gloria *Monday* Polk. Only that's what Mama says when she's mad at me."

Edy winks. "Just when you're late for supper."

I hoist the girl onto my hip, her wildflower crown from this morning still crooked in her hair. Fifteen years since that first orange tablet, and the island still whispers about the Witches. But the only magic I need is right here—three kids, and a wife who never did look like an Edith.

Love always finds a way.

The Circumambulation of Richard Ensley

A newcomer to full-time residency on Harper's Island, I was out back repairing the split-rail fence that bordered my five-acre property when I met the neighbors from up the road. The woman approached carrying a basket covered with a blue gingham cloth, and I recognized her immediately—this was Gloria Polk, from summers I spent on the island years ago. She looked very different without her signature dreadlocks, but the rose-tinted Lennon-specs gave her away. She had a warm, open smile and a t-shirt that said *Where Are the Flashbacks I Was Promised?* She came bearing gifts.

"Blueberry muffins," she said, lifting the cloth.

"Still warm. My favorite, Miss Polk. Thank you."

"It's Summerlin now." She held up a wedding band, Celtic knots in gold. "That's five muffins. Jim stole one." She elbowed her husband's ribs gently.

Jim extended a hand. "Good to see you, Rick. Please tell me you didn't come here to fish."

"Um?"

"Lobsters are stretched a mite thin."

"Ah. No worries. I do boring computer stuff."

"Excellent. The island needs a boring computer guy."

"I'm your man," I said. "I'd invite you in but I seem to have arrived ahead of my furniture."

A fragrant sea breeze wafted by. Gloria tucked an errant golden tress behind her ear. "An apt intro to island living."

I looked quizzical; she explained.

"Island time's like this: In an hour means tomorrow. Tomorrow means next week. Next week means next month. Next month means next year. Next year means it's never going to happen."

I laughed.

Jim said, "She's not kidding. You get used to it. When did they say your furniture would be here?"

"Another three days before they can send it over."

"Give it a week and a half."

"I see. Any other advice for a newbie?"

"Circumambulate as soon as possible." I saw Gloria shoot him a darkish look.

"Circumambulate?" I said. "Er, around...walk?"

"It's a rite of passage. You walk the island perimeter at the waterline. It's about 24 miles; takes a day and a half, depending."

"And why would I do that?"

"You'll be the new guy for twenty years, Rick. Nothing you can do about that. But take that walk and you'll gain acceptance. It shows you're serious about living here. About the community."

Community. That was the magic word. It was absent from my life in Disturbia; one of the reasons I came here. I was eager to be an islander, to be a part of this different way of living. To make my mark, however small, on the lore of this enchanting place.

"Fair warning," Jim said. "You're going to run into some sheep down on the south end."

I felt my face flush. "Ah. Those."

Jim grinned. "You know about the sheep?"

"Yeah, they were around when I was a summer kid. It's my fault they're there. Well, my family's fault." I set down my hammer. "Generations ago my forebears raised sheep on Harper's to supplement the family income. His name was Richard Ensley—I'm his namesake. When he passed, his wife, Ellie, looking for relief from her wool allergy, turned them loose. The neighbors were none too happy about it, but knew she would supply them with a piece of her mind if they were foolish enough to complain."

Gloria laughed. "I'd heard the story but didn't make the connection. You just moved here and you're already infamous."

"Let's hope I'm not judged too harshly."

"Nah," said Jim. "We take a shot at corralling and shearing the wild flock each spring, but the sheep do not take kindly to being penned. It's pandemonium every time. We don't mind the sheep. They're part of the island now."

I relaxed a bit. "I just hope someone doesn't connect me with them before I've had a chance to—"

"Oh, they will," Gloria said. "The island has a long memory. It's only a matter of time."

The next morning I loaded my backpack with a blanket, dry socks, bottled water and various edibles including a bologna sandwich the size of a small child. Hiking is hungry work.

Starting just after sunrise at the town landing, I saw Jim Summerlin rowing out to his lobster boat; he gave me a nod and a grin. I set out southwesterly. The first mile or so was pea-gravel shores with a few granite outcroppings draped in rockweed, none of which presented much challenge. There were houses here; this was still considered "town." I imagined their occupants watching me pass, shaking their heads at the nut-job hiker who lost his trail and was marring their ocean view.

The largest of these houses belonged to Charlie Morris. I was a sprawling structure of gray shingle, its multiple additions speaking to generations of hard-won prosperity pulled from the sea. Charlie once became embroiled in a fishing territory dispute that saw a man shot and left the waters unsettled for more than a decade.

1961 - Charlie Morris, Harper's Island Thoroughfare.

It's all about the bottom, any lobsterman'll tell you. Out here on Harper's we've got some of the best bottom in the Gulf of Maine, and it shows in our paychecks. Now, some of these mainland fellers thought they'd move onto our territory in the fall when theirs wasn't producing so good. Me and a few others half-hitched their buoys to let 'em know we wouldn't have it, and they come back cutting our lines. Of course we cut 'em back and then

it's all-out war. Nobody wants that but it ain't like they left us a lot of choice.

One evening at the height of it, here comes Ebb Mulvaney from over to the main, cruising slow right down our harbor like he owns the place. Ebb steps back from the helm and Jesus Christ, he starts waving a pistol around and hollering threats at anyone who'll listen. I run out on my dock loaded for bear. Ebb draws a bead on me and I'm yelling, "Go ahead, you son of a bitch, shoot me!" Figuring he don't have the guts. The dock piling beside me blows up in a shower of splinters and wood chips. Then my wife Maybelle comes out of the house carrying on with a fury of language that'd damn near make the Devil himself blush bright red. She's got hold of my deer rifle. Ebb fires another shot; this one buries itself in a coil of potwarp by my feet. He ain't about to hit me at this distance, 'cept maybe by accident. I turn to tell Maybelle to go on inside but she's got that rifle up to her shoulder. Ebb goes to squeeze off another round but *BLAM!* Maybelle shoots first. Ebb drops his pistol and I see a red blossom spreading on his right shoulder.

'Course there was a big to-do about it but any fool could see it was self-defense. By the time it landed in court the season was over and all parties was ready for a break from that damned territory war. We took up our gear without much hope for peace in the next season.

When the charges against Maybelle was dropped, Ebb and his mainland boys threw a fit and was out to get their revenge. They come stealing out to Harper's in the dark of night and

torched my dock. Those idiots came over in a dory, rowing so's not to be heard. Staties were waiting for 'em when they got back. Every last one of 'em did time, but it still took the better part of ten years for things to really be settled. And we never gave 'em an inch.

2020 - Rick Ensley, Harper's Island Thoroughfare.

It was low water when I passed what was left of Charlie Morris's dock. Charred timbers and thick slabs of stone overtaken by rockweed. They don't build them like that anymore. Probably still be here 100 years on.

I worked my way south, the houses disappearing when I rounded Sullivan's Point. This was where the wilds began, though they weren't always wilds. I walked as far out on the point as was safe and caught a little spray from the breaking waves. Turning back inland, the rocky point soon gave way to windswept field grasses and a mix of hardwood and evergreen trees. Merritt's Cove lay ahead.

No one had lived there since the 1940s when all the men—and some of the women—went to war. There are still a few relics of that once-thriving island community. It had its own store and school, and its protected waters gave shelter to eight or ten fishing boats in its heyday.

Among the flotsam at the high water line I found a good walking stick and used it to investigate the tall grass as I plodded on. Probing the overgrown coveside, I came upon a badly rusted

iron hoop—the remnant of a long-ago dip net, the kind once used to scoop up herring by the bushel.

1910 - Alice Crowe, Merritt's Cove.

For two years afterward I could not bring myself to speak of it. I find it difficult to this day but not impossible, as it once was. Stillman and I always trusted the Lord to keep us, but in five years of searching I have not discovered His Almighty Purpose in putting my husband to such an excruciating end.

Stillman Crowe was a hardworking, resourceful, God-fearing man. He plied his trade from sunup to sundown and beyond to keep us from want.

I was at my mending on a rainy August evening; Stillman was out in his shop. He came in all a-bustle, saying there was herring in the cove.

"In the rain?" I asked.

"Herring don't mind about the weather, dear."

"I thought you might." I should have known better. Stillman would go after bluegills in a blizzard if it would put a meal on our table.

He took his oil clothes from the peg and wasn't I glad to see them go. He made his own; they made the whole house reek of paraffin and coal oil, the vile things. I stood at the window and watched his lantern bobbing down the hill to his dory and out onto the rain-pocked water.

I saw the flare-up when he lit the dragon torch. The flame attracted a school in no time and Stillman's dip net was coming up full, loading his boat with teeming silver fish.

Bessie picked that moment to set up a squall from her crib; I saw to her then returned to my workbasket. A rumble of thunder brought me back to the window.

I watched Stillman lean out with his dip net. He lost his footing among the fish and fell onto his dragon torch. His oil clothes went alight and he was quickly made a column of fire. I cannot recount his agonized flailings. When the flames subsided my husband's charred form lay atop a bed of herring that no longer teemed; they had been cooked. I smelled something more, and it was ghastly.

What was the lesson in this, Lord? How did this abomination serve you? Were we not your humble servants? The seeds of doubt are pernicious, and they were sown.

2020 - Rick Ensley, Merritt's Cove.

I was not the first to come across the remains of this dip net, but those before me left it, deeming it an unsuitable relic of times past. It lacked the ready identifiability of a lobster buoy, or an ornate piece of driftwood.

I took a moment to imagine Merritt's Cove as it was a hundred years ago. I dropped the metal hoop into the deep grass, knowing I would never fully grasp the grinding hardship that defined lives once lived here, and the motivations of those who stayed.

Lacking a GPS device, I could only guess at my progress. I estimated I was six miles into the hike when the land rose sharply, slowing my already glacial pace. At several points I encountered impassable shoreline and was forced to turn briefly inland. One such turn brought me to a clearing where I startled some of the descendants of my family's sheep as they browsed.

Disturbed at the intrusion, they fled. One ram lingered, giving me the ovine evil-eye before following the herd.

The land continued at a steep incline and when I turned seaward again I came out near the top of a hundred-foot cliff against whose base the sea crashed, unrelenting. There was a hiking trail here too; a sensuously soft needle bed underfoot and a cairn of several hundred small stones. I placed a rock on the pile and wondered how many visitors had done the same without knowing it was a memorial.

1932 - Abigail Meade, Sable Ledge Overlook.

Emma made me promise not to tell but I guess it doesn't matter now.

Emma and Maddie Settlemyre were twins, thirteen, and I was their best friend. Maybe their only friend. Everybody else thought they were too strange. They acted like witches but I never believed it. I let them pretend.

It was spring. We met in Bertie's Orchard after school. I remember the smell of last year's apples rotting on the ground. It's funny, but I like that smell.

Emma said, "The hour draws near." Maddie nodded like she knew exactly what that meant. Like they'd talked about this before, without me. It gave me an eerie feeling. Emma had dark circles under her eyes, like she hadn't slept in days.

"What hour?" Half the time I didn't know what they were talking about.

Maddie said, "When we join our sisters from Salem." She looked tired, too, and hadn't taken a comb to her hair in a while.

"Oh." A trip to Massachusetts? Who can afford that in this depression? "When will you be back?"

"We shall not return. Not in the flesh." That's Emma, talking in riddles again.

"Er, okay?"

She took my hand. "No one must know. Come, we must away."

I didn't have anything else to do so I went. We stopped at their house to get their little gray cat named Scratch. Maddie said he was familiar and I thought *of course he is, he's your cat*. I looked at her, then at Emma. When they're dressed the same you'd be hard put to tell them apart. They switched places sometimes, to trick people.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"To the cliffs, Abigail."

It seemed an odd time for a nature walk. "Why?"

Maddie said, "Because of Mr. Upshaw."

Mr. Upshaw was our teacher. Two weeks ago he cut his leg shearing a sheep and almost bled to death. I said, "I'm glad he's

better now." I forgot they were mad at him. I didn't care too much for the look they gave me.

Emma and Maddie were the same age, but Maddie got held back so she was in sixth grade and Emma was in seventh. When Maddie had a big test they switched places and Emma took it for her. But they got caught and Mr. Upshaw told their parents. Their father said, "Let the punishment fit the crime," and they got switched. Owie. And Mr. Upshaw got hurt the day after that.

"We hexed him. That's why he was cut," said Maddie.

"He was meant to die," said Emma, scratching Scratch behind the ears.

"Never send a familiar to do the work of a witch," said Maddie, as if that explained it. I doubted this story but it didn't seem a good time to say so.

"What does Mr. Upshaw have to do with the cliffs?"

Emma went on in a daze, like I didn't say anything. "And now our fate is up."

Why did she always talk like it was a hundred years ago?

"What do you mean?" I said.

Maddie said, "Someone is going to expose us. To betray us."

"How do you know?" We were getting close to the overlook; I could hear waves lapping below.

"Ouija said so."

"You don't think it's me?"

"No, Ouija gave initials: B.E."

"Bernadine Ensley?"

"Or Bill Elliot."

"Or Bertie English," said Emma. "It matters not." I'd never seen her look so sad.

Maddie looked at the ground as we walked on. "We are lost. Hope is gone."

We came to the clearing at the top of the cliff. It was a clear day; you could see all the way to Mille Jours Island, a tiny speck in the distance.

Emma asked me, "Do you know what they do with witches?" I shrugged. "Nope."

"They burn them. Witches die in agony." She sounded terrified, and her hands were shaking.

Emma and Maddie walked to the cliff's edge. Scratch was purring in Maddie's arms. They turned to face me again, with their backs to the ocean. Emma spoke in a trembling voice I'd never heard from her before.

"We shall not burn."

She took her sister's hand and fell backwards from the cliff, taking Maddie and Scratch with her.

I screamed. I looked over and saw them burst open on the rocks. It was a horrible sight. I wish I had never seen it, but I still can't get it out of my mind.

Two days later Scratch showed up at my house, unhurt, begging for a saucer of milk. I screamed again.

2020 - Rick Ensley, Sable Ledge Overlook.

I stood on the brink. What if I suddenly snapped and threw myself off? If I landed in the water could I survive? Or would I be

erupted on the shore like those misguided long-ago girls? I hoped their death was instantaneous. What torment it would be to lie broken, lapped by the salt sea, even for seconds.

I turned from the cliff's edge and found the familiar evil-eye ram staring me down. If he charged, we would both fall.

"Easy. Easy big fella." I sidled to put the cairn between us, and selected a good throwing stone.

The ram snorted—derisively?—turned, and was gone.

I replaced the stone.

I set my pack down and dug out provisions, then put it all away again. I was hungry but it seemed a sacrilege to have a picnic at the site of Emma and Maddie's suicide. I would wait for the next landmark, Loosestrife Harbor, a mile or so on.

I had seen sepia-toned pictures of Loosestrife Harbor in the historical archives at Harper's Town Hall and Library where I'd whiled away rainy afternoons of earlier island visits. The mature hardwoods in the pictures had given way to white and Norway spruces—opportunistic softwoods that claim ground after fire.

1880 - Victoria Polk, Loosestrife Harbor.

I will never forget how cold the sea was that night, even in July. It's a plain wonder we did not catch our death.

It was berry-pickers who started it. I never much cared for their kind, these itinerant field workers. They come out every June to pick wild blueberries. Black raspberries, too. It's public land; we can't stop them. They set up their gypsy camps, drinking whiskey and carrying on, singing along with their pipes and

fiddles until such hours as no decent folk should be astir. Many's the time our whole family was roused after midnight by their shameless carousing. Even my grandchild Lynette, who always slept like a stone.

And then one night a group of them passed out dead drunk and let their fire get away.

I was fast asleep when Casey came to my room.

"Wake up, Mother."

"What is it, lad?"

"The point's ablaze and coming our way."

"Dear Lord," I said and threw off the quilts.

"We've but moments to spare. Sarah has the baby, I'll get the dogs. Meet us on the wharf." And he was gone.

I drew the curtain aside and saw flames in the sky. I watched a giant chestnut tree fall and thrust burning limbs 60 feet in the air. Where they alit, fires began anew.

I rode a steam train once up to Portland; the sound a wildfire makes is akin to that. Fire simply roars, like an unending clap of thunder.

There wasn't time to save anything. I threw on slippers and a dressing gown and ran out into the half-moon night.

The heat was stifling even with the fire still distant. I started down the path to the wharf but met Sarah coming back. She held Lynette, who was shrieking as loud as the day is long. Sarah tried without success to calm her.

"We cannot make the wharf. The heat." Her voice was hoarse, as if she were as old as me. She gasped but could not

seem to catch her wind. By moonlight I saw her eyebrows were singed away and a sight of blisters had arisen on her cheek.

"Where is Casey?" I asked.

"I don't know, Nana." She fell into a racking fit of coughing. A blister on her cheek burst, the fluid running down like tears.

"Can you keep on? Are you able?"

She nodded.

"Go out on the headland and wait by the shore. We'll find you." I went along the path to find my son.

The night breeze grew so hot it became painful to draw breath, as though the very air were searing my lungs. I turned back toward Sarah and despaired of how Casey might be faring if he had gone to the wharf.

I was but four steps along when I heard the dogs barking and then—O' be joyful—my son's voice hushing them. I ran to him, losing my slippers in the darkened wood.

"I sent Sarah to the point." I felt the flames in my lungs as I spoke. "The fire has taken the wharf, or will very soon."

"Lynnie?" he asked.

"Yes, she's with Sarah. And putting up a fuss."

"Wouldn't you?" He wiped his brow and turned toward the headland to see to his wife and child.

We found them on the shore, their stricken countenances lit amber by the approaching tempest of flames. Looking to the fire I saw the homestead engulfed. It grew as it fed on our belongings, our memories, our home.

Lynn timer had quieted to a whimper but grew loud again. Sarah was plainly terrified; I tried to put her at ease. "We are all safe now, dear. Everything else can be replaced."

"Are we?" Her voice was still raw with smoke.

Casey came down from the ridge with his two bluetick hounds. "It's burning clear across the point. No passage to the other side. No way around it."

We were on the point of a peninsula with a storm of fire approaching and nowhere to turn. We would be burned alive or driven into the sea to drown—a choice no one should have to make.

"Maybe it will burn itself out," said Sarah, even though she knew there was little hope of that.

I judged the fire was a quarter mile away but we still felt its heat increase with each passing minute. Great clouds of smoke rolled down the point to choke our breath and sting our eyes. Casey looked across the harbor but the far shore was impossibly distant. He pointed to the lobster car moored offshore.

"That is our last chance," he said, taking Lynnette from her mother's arms. He held the child's head above water and walked into the sea. Sarah followed.

It was thirty years since I'd donned a bathing costume, but I'd been a strong swimmer in my day. I walked to the water's edge with my feet in a torment from the stones and broken shells. I entered the icy water with my dressing gown wrapped around me but found it too great an encumbrance to swimming and soon

shed it. I would prefer to survive in my bloomers than to die with my modesty intact.

There was a southwest wind, enough to work up the sea and make swimming so much the harder. Between the shore and the lobster car was a rocky shoal; we found this and paused to regain strength. The tidal current swirled about us, bent on sweeping us out to sea. Behind us the fire continued its advance on the point, casting great waves of smoke upon us, even here. Casey tried to comfort his daughter but she howled without respite, shivering and frightened. The dogs paddled about us as if it was all great sport. I wondered how long they would last.

The lobster car was a floating pen filled with thousands of lobsters, but there were platforms adjacent and those were our goal.

Our rest on the shoal was fleeting; we had to swim or the tide would take us. We were off again, posthaste. How Casey kept two heads above the water is a wonder. Sarah and I barely spared ourselves from drowning. We struggled to mount the floating platform, but finally succeeded.

The wind freshened and kept the smoke from overwhelming us. We no longer felt the heat of the fire; we were instead afflicted with the wind's chill. I looked across to the headland and saw no trace of our home remained. The point was ablaze in its entirety. The headland would be unapproachable for days, leaving us nowhere to go. The harbor's opposite shore was still well out of reach.

As dawn approached, the sky lightened to reveal thunderheads. We thought our salvation might come in a passing boat, but the threat of stormy weather would keep them on their moorings. We saw the fire burning inland but could not know how far, nor whether anyone might come close enough to espy us on our raft. It seemed doubtful.

And then it began to rain. A blessed torrent, a glorious deluge that quenched the fire and left the headland smoldering. The clouds of smoke abated, replaced by clouds of steam.

"The wharf still stands," said Casey, peering through the downpour and dense vapor. "I'll get the dory." He leapt into the sea where we soon lost sight of him. It seemed an age but we finally heard the approaching rattle of the oarlocks. Casey rowed up to the lobster car and shipped his oars. He stood and handed me my dressing gown, damp but serviceable. A fine boy, my Casey. I gave the gown to Sarah so she might swaddle the child against the cold.

2020 - Rick Ensley, Loosestrife Harbor

The Berry Pickers' Fire is now the stuff of legend. It burned over 90% of the island, cropping up in a new place every time they thought it was controlled. No relic of the fire remains at Loosestrife Harbor, just the massive white marble blocks that were the Polk homestead's foundation. The family still owns the land and have executed legal documents to keep the harbor undeveloped in perpetuity. A fine legacy.

I walked out on the point beneath spruces that staked their post-inferno claim 140 years ago. Looking back toward the harbor I was struck by the pastoral splendor of the place. The only thing missing was a flock of sheep.

Wait. Probably just waiting for me to leave.

I ate half a bologna sandwich wondering if the flat rock I sat on had encountered the feet of terrified Polks back in 1880. Such a depth of experiences in all these places. I looked out to where the lobster car had been. Nothing moored in this harbor now. If a fire took hold I would be royally screwed.

Two coves and a long mudflat later, the sun was working its way down the sky behind me. I guessed I was more than halfway through the trek. A tumbling stream emptied into the sea; the brackish water smelled foul but gave rise to tall tufts of marsh grass just beyond the high water line. It was a mistake to step on one. The seemingly sturdy tuft of well-rooted flora collapsed underfoot, plunging me shin-deep. I overbalanced and did an extravagant face-plant into the fetid mud.

God. Fucking. Dammit.

I walked on just long enough to escape the brackish-water stink and stopped to clean up the head-to-toe muck. I rinsed my shirt and jeans in seawater, thinking I would wear them dry before sundown. That almost worked. I made camp at nightfall and didn't sleep for the cold and damp. I put on dry socks that my sodden boots made instantly wet, and was moving again well before sunrise. Along the southeast shore I encountered little

apart from songbirds—phoebes, grosbeaks, thrushes—a few deer, and the odd sheep here and there. In the accumulated flotsam at the waterline, among the sand fleas and green crabs, I found a length of rope I coiled up and carried for no apparent reason, and a dark-blue and red lobster buoy which I did not, although it would have made a handsome souvenir. I really should bring back something; some token of the expedition. Such a token would doubtless present itself before journey's end.

I came next to the Eastern Ear. A house stood here, but just barely. It was once the island's parsonage but had gone unused for decades. The congregational minister had his own house on the north end of what was euphemistically called the "town," and had no need of the drafty old manse. What struck me most about this derelict edifice was that even with the roof partly collapsed, all the windows remained intact. What is it about island youth that they don't break windows? Everyone knows there is no stronger call to mischief than an unbroken pane in an abandoned building.

1943 - Daniel Flynn, Eastern Ear.

If they'd let me and Billy and Ernest enlist, we'd have stopped old Fritz right in his tracks, believe you me. There would be none of this annexing Poland or marching into France, nosiree. But no, they said me 'n' Billy were too old, and Ernest was 4-F from when he busted up his fingers and couldn't pull a trigger. So we had to sit by and watch all the able-bodied men go off to glory. 'Keep the home fires burning,' they said. I suppose

someone's got to. But what I wouldn't give to draw a bead on one a them Nazi bastards.

I was down to the Ought-not Strait that morning tending the weir. Walking back across the Ear I passed the old parsonage and just out of the corner of my eye I saw the greatroom curtain flutter ever so slightly, like somebody was peering out from behind it. Mighty suspicious. It's a good twenty years since anyone's lived there. I knocked, but whoever mighta been in there wasn't receiving callers on that fine April morning. I made a quick once-around of the property. It was overgrown, but nothing out of the way.

Playing cards that night with Billy and Ernest I got to thinking out loud. 'I wouldn't put it past the Nazis to come out here prowling.'

Billy sipped his rotgut whiskey. "Out here? Whatever for?"

"It's a perfect spot to case the Iron Works over to the main."

Ernest put his nickel in the pot. "Wouldn't they like to put Uncle Sam's war effort out of business."

"Exactly," I said. "Save 'em the trouble of sinking one ship at a time."

Billy's eyes widened. "You might be onto something, Dan. There's places they could hide out and we'd be none the wiser."

I nodded and lit up a Lucky. "Ayup. Empty houses down to the south end. You could watch the Iron Works with a good pair of field glasses."

Ernest said, "Pay to play." We anted up.

The day was gray but calm; I went for cod out around the Wooden Ball. They run pretty thick out there. Had a good day and come back by the Eastern Ear. I looked up to the parsonage as I passed through the strait.

There was a face in the window. Cold. Scheming. Malevolent. A face of pure evil. I looked to the sea and when I looked back it was gone.

That night we armed ourselves and went to see what's what. If Fritz thinks he can come out here and get up to all manner of devilment, well, he's got another think coming.

We figured there must be a boat somewhere, so we combed the shore first but didn't find one.

"Maybe they was dropped off," said Billy.

"Or used a whatchamacallit—inflatable," said Ernest. "Or they've got away."

We didn't like to think that. We scaled the hill and came up real quiet on the parsonage, looking for any trace of light, but Fritz is smarter than that.

"I'll go around front and see can I rouse them. You two watch the back in case they run for it."

I looked through the front picture window and saw a silhouette pass, low down, crouching. Somebody creeping around in there; no two ways about it. I hollered, "Come on out! You're surrounded!"

There was a gunshot and that picture window shattered. I opened fire and so did Billy and Ernest.

Local Men Apprehend Spies on Harper's Island

—that's the headline we would've liked. This is the one we got:

Local Men Mistake Sheep for Nazis, Shoot Up Abandoned Parsonage.

Ernest fired that first shot. Wanted to prove his trigger finger, I suppose. Took out two windows with one shot. Billy got his nose broke when the ewe came barreling out the back door and ran off. A big fluffy sheep made fools of us all. And the congregation insisted we replace all those windows.

Damnation.

2020: Rick Ensley, Eastern Ear.

I went around the back of the parsonage, the ocean-facing side, and all those windows were intact too. The evil-eye ram was there, grazing in the adjacent meadow. We stood staring at one another for a moment. I reached into my pack and found grapes. I threw one to the ram. He snuffled it out of the tall grass and came up with a purple stain on his mouth. I took a step toward him and he disappeared into the woods.

I returned to the water's edge and departed the Eastern Ear. In another mile I arrived at Thunder Beach. The topography of the seabed there causes massive waves during a storm, powerful enough to move bulldozer-sized rocks up and down the shore. To

the northwest lay a string of tiny isles extending out to sea beyond the horizon, curving to the south and terminating with Mille Jours, the only inhabited rock in the chain. The island was first settled in 1654 by a small but determined family who at first glance desired nothing more than to be left alone.

1657 - Wynnifred Harper, Thunder Beach.

It was the last thing I expected to see coming in from the outer bay in January. There's nothing out there but a chain of empty islands too small and rocky to notice, but here it came—an open dory of no more than 16 feet, beaten by waves and wind. As it drew near I counted three souls aboard. I shuddered to imagine their suffering on that deathly cold morning. It became evident they intended to land at Thunder Beach, generally a fatal undertaking in any season. Beset by rocks, wind and waves, little comes ashore there without first being reduced to splinters. I went to fetch Nathaniel from his chair by the fire.

"What is it, Wynn?"

"A boat comes. Get your coat."

"You jest."

I brought him to the window.

"What in the name of all that is sacred." He went for his coat. How he got them safely ashore is a mystery for the ages, but soon they were inside—a man and his wife, their daughter, a dark-haired girl of about ten, and a babe of no more than two. Soaked and shivering but unharmed. We put them in dry clothes and set them before the fire. These were the most gaunt and raw-boned

specimens I'd ever chanced upon, even the little one. I brought tea and biscuit; they supped like they'd not seen sustenance in weeks.

Their most immediate needs answered, the man made introductions in English, but with a thick French accent.

"My name is Jacques Beaubien. My wife, Elizabeth, our daughter Rebekah. The baby is Hannah."

Elizabeth held the babe. "The child ails," said she, and placed her hand upon Hannah's brow. I did the same and found her feverish. The babe was oddly dark of complexion with a prominent sloping forehead, high broad cheekbones and dark, nearly black eyes—attributes she shared with her sister Rebekah. The mother and father were lank, pale and fair-haired; his eyes blue, hers green.

We fashioned a crib from a basket and kept Hannah bundled, plying her with broth and thin porridge until her fever broke. Little Rebekah was most solicitous during that time, almost unduly so. She stood a constant and fretful vigil by Hannah's crib. My attempts to engage her brought forth terse replies and she rarely met my eyes. I concluded she was somehow troubled, but left it be for fear of seeming forward. I learned little of her, apart from her true age of fourteen years.

After the evening meal Nathaniel offered Jacques a pipe and the two sat smoking.

"Tell me, Mr. Beaubien, whence did you come when you arrived upon our shore?"

"The far island."

"Which island?"

"*Le dernier*... the last. Last of the chain."

"And what brought you so far of a winter's morn?"

"Our homestead is there."

"The devil you say." Nathaniel looked to me. "We were of the belief they were all vacant. How long have you dwelt there?"

"Ah, *mille jours*...one thousand days. About three years." He looked as though each of those days had taken a piece of him.

"Why chance a crossing in such hard seas?"

"Starvation. Our provisions failed. *Et l'enfant*...the child, was unwell. Elizabeth feared for her life."

"'Tis best you came," said I, to reassure him. "Hannah grows stronger already." I favored him with my most hopeful smile.

If Jacques felt any relief he didn't show it. He was quite reticent to speak of his family at all. Curious, I persevered. "I have spoken with Rebekah. She is quite a doting sister." Jacques tensed at the mention of her name. I continued, "She is of such... unique... countenance." I didn't hazard that she looked nothing like her mother and father, but Mr. Beaubien sensed I was leading him there. He spoke peremptorily.

"She—Rebekah—is not... she is adopted. From the Indians."

"She is of the Passamaquoddy—" began Elizabeth but she was silenced by a glare from her husband. She and Rebekah spoke little in his presence. I excused myself to tend the mutton stew and to consider what I'd learned of this unusual family. I felt this man Jacques was not entirely forthright.

That night in our chamber I spoke to Nathaniel of my concerns.

"What might apprehend a man that he would take up living on so desolate an isle?"

"The motivations of men are often beyond fathoming, Wynn."

"Odd they adopted an Indian child, wouldn't you agree?"

"Again, the motivations."

I tried a new approach. "Rebekah certainly cuts a striking visage."

Nathaniel made no reply.

"As does the baby Hannah."

"Yes?"

"Consider, Nat: if Rebekah is adopted and Hannah is Elizabeth's child, why does Hannah favor Rebekah and not Elizabeth?"

"It is curious."

"'Tis more than curious. Have you noticed that Rebekah is far more concerned for Hannah's welfare than the mother is?"

"What are you getting at, Wynn?"

"I suspect Rebekah is not Hannah's sister. She is her mother."

"Nonsense. She is naught but a child herself."

"She looks ten, but hardship and poor nutrition have retarded her growth. She is fourteen. And Hannah is two."

"This is madness, Wynn. Your imagination has gotten the best of you. They are no more than a family in need and it is our Christian duty to aid them as best we can."

There was more at work here than my fertile imagination. A mother knows, a mother senses such things. It was plain to me that the welfare of all three women was at stake. I would not let the matter drop.

The next morning Nathaniel and Jacques went early to take a deer or a few squirrels, anything to restock our waning larder. We did not wish to butcher another lamb if it could be helped.

I took Rebekah aside to see what I might discern of her plight. We sat with a pan of potatoes between us, peeling them for the kettle.

"Have you any recollection of your parents? Of your tribe?"

"*Oui, un peu*, a little." She still would not meet my eye.

"At what age were you adopted?"

"Nine."

"Your memories, then, must be quite clear."

"Yes, some." She reached into the pocket of her frock and briefly clasped some object therein.

"May I ask, Rebekah, why you were adopted?"

"I don't know." Tears came to her eyes, spilling upon her cheek.

"It will be for the best, child. You will be safe now."

She was openly sobbing. "*Mais non*. We are not safe. We will never be safe."

"Of course you are. Your family is welcome here, until your father—"

"He is not my father." Her sorrow shaded to anger.

"Does he not feed you, clothe you? Give you shelter?"

She shook her head but otherwise did not answer. Fresh tears fell upon the half-peeled potato in her hand.

"I don't wish to upset you, Rebekah. Mr. Harper and I want only to help you and your family."

"*Ma famille c'est Hannah. Seulement—only Hannah.*"

She brought a hand to her mouth as if it had spoken against her will and must be silenced.

It was as I feared. "Mr. Beaubien has been... unkind to you."

"*Il n'est pas...*" She trailed off. After a moment she answered wearily, "*Oui. Unkind.*"

"And Mrs. Beaubien?"

"She fears him. She permits his... liberties. With me. *C'est trop horrible.*"

I gathered the weeping girl in my arms. She stiffened at my touch. "Never again, child. He will not harm you again. I swear it, on my honor."

Jacques and Nathaniel entered carrying muskets and rabbits. I rose and relieved Jacques of his weapon and the coneys, then bade him sit by the fire. He did not notice Rebekah's tears but Nathaniel did. I gestured for him to join me in the kitchen.

"What has troubled Rebekah so?" He leaned his musket in the corner and hung his hat upon a peg.

"Mr. Beaubien." I laid the rabbits upon the table and stropped a skinning knife.

"It cannot be. He wasn't here." He looked at me as if I were addled.

"Hannah is Rebekah's daughter, Nathaniel. And Jacques is Hannah's father."

"Come now, Wynn. We have had this discussion and I will hear no more of it."

"The girl told me." I made several cuts and peeled back rabbit skin. "Beaubien raped her. More than once."

Nathaniel evinced shock but said nothing.

"And he will do the same to Hannah in a few years if he isn't stopped."

"Why should we take her at her word? Children tell tales."

I opened the coney; entrails spilled warm upon the table. "Ask yourself this, Nat, and excuse me being so blunt: If you raped your daughter and she conceived, how might you conceal that incriminating fact? Might you hide her away on a remote unpeopled island until her condition was past?"

"See here, Wynnifred. We cannot rush to judgment."

"Nor can we stand idly by. Have you not seen how they are with him?" I selected my cleaver and stropped it as well.

"Pray, how are they?"

"Frightened. Terrified." I cut the rabbit in four pieces, set them in the stewpot and ran my knife up the next belly. "They fear to speak in his presence. All we have seen stands to the truthfulness of Rebekah's claim."

Nathaniel fell into silent consideration and finally said, "I shall speak with him."

"Speak prudently, Nat. A wild animal cornered is a great danger."

That night I kept watch over Rebekah as she slept. I had given her my promise.

I was not privy to Nathaniel's conversation with Jacques but later learned his evasiveness lent grim and undeniable credence to Rebekah's accusation. Said Nathaniel afterward, "There must be a reckoning. Immediately, before he can interfere with her again."

In the morning Nat and Jacques went hunting again. I heard the report of a single musket from the direction of Thunder Beach, which was known for its absence of game. I rose and looked out to see Nathaniel ordering Beaubien into his dory at gunpoint. He gave a mighty shove and set the dory adrift upon the outgoing tide. As the boat sailed out, Beaubien took up the oars and disappeared into the fog and a stormy sea. I stood witness to his banishment.

When I told Rebekah, she took from her pocket a necklace of tanned buckskin from which there hung a black bear's claw. She fastened it around her graceful neck. Standing straight with no weight upon her shoulders, she looked me directly in the eyes, unblinking.

"*Mahtigan*," said she, pounding a fist to her chest; her own name in the language of her tribe. She said it meant *Wolf Woman*: strong, survivor.

2020—Rick Ensley, Thunder Beach

The foregoing episode in the history of Harper's is documented in oral histories taken centuries ago from the redoubtable Wynn Harper and the equally formidable Mahtigan Rebekah Harper, both of whom are now counted among the island's founders. To this day there are traces of native heritage in the faces of some islanders; Quigleys, Polks, and a few of the still-present Harpers.

I left Thunder Beach and surmounted a few rocky outcroppings, following the shore as it tended north-northeast. My expedition was three-fourths complete, give or take. I was still on the (mostly) uninhabited side of the island and reckoned I would begin to encounter summer homes in the next three or four miles. A mile or so beyond that and I would be at the town dock again.

A couple of ugly blisters had arisen on my feet—I blamed the combo of damp boots and damp socks. Thus hobbled, I walked on, eventually making my way to the Loche Flats.

At the Loche Flats the tide was out, exposing acres of glistening mud. I should have backtracked and taken the long way around, but I was fixated on the most direct route, and my common sense wasn't traveling with me that day.

Ten yards in, one boot sank past the ankle. The next step went deeper—the mud took a pneumatic hold. Struggling only drove me in further until I'd disappeared to mid-shin, then the knee. I stood perfectly still, calculating how long until the tide

returned. A drowning due to sheer stupidity was not at all how I wished to enter island lore.

The boots were the problem. I rolled up my sleeves and groped beneath the muck for the laces, finally freeing my feet but losing my balance in the process. I landed hard in the mud and, now wearing a full suit of it, crawled back to firmer ground. My pack had taken a soaking and had also gained a coating of malodorous sludge. I threw its wet contents to the sea and watched herring gulls descend in a screeching cloud.

The loss of provisions was trivial. The loss of footwear was catastrophic. The last five miles would now be the most arduous, and I doubted my soft suburban feet's fitness to see the journey through.

I retreated to where mud gave way to rock, stripped to my boxers and rinsed off in the sea. Inland from the shoreline ran the island's only road, but it wouldn't carry traffic this time of year. I draped my wet clothes across low branches and found a comfortable patch of moss to rest on, finally dozing off.

I awoke at dusk shivering, with the ram nudging my head. I'd been using his dinner for a pillow. He ignored me and continued his grazing. I reached for my coil of rope, fashioned a crude lasso and slipped it over his head, unsure how he would take it.

As it turned out, not at all well. He bolted, leaving me in my boxers with rope burns on both palms.

I put my still-damp clothes back on and headed for the shore, thinking I could manage another half mile before dark.

Ahead of me the ram had fouled his rope in a juniper thicket and struggled at the end of his tether. He bleated as I approached.

I came on slowly, making sheep-soothing sounds (*Who's a good sheep? I bet it's you!*), and took hold of the rope. He calmed when he saw I meant no harm. I untangled the line and gave a light tug. To my surprise, he followed—reluctantly at first, then without (much) resistance.

We made slow progress across the rocks in the failing light. My bare feet were tentative on the uneven surface, and the ram kept pulling toward the woods. At the top of one promontory I stepped on a broken crab shell and took a vicious gash to the heel. I sat dabbing at it with a piece of cloth torn from my pocket lining, waiting for the blood to stop. I thought we might rest a bit there, but the ram had other ideas; a sheep is not a creature of the intertidal zone.

Darkness fell. A full moon arose and I resolved to finish by sunrise.

At Cannery Cove, which had not been home to a cannery for a hundred years, I paused to pay respects to the Avery boys, Zack and Tobias, who drowned here the same year the Titanic sank. Just a couple of innocent kids who wandered too far into that sucking mud.

My foot was bleeding again. An incomplete circumambulation seemed increasingly likely. I thought of all the history I'd walked through—Victoria Polk escaping her burning home through icy water, Charlie Morris standing his ground

against Ebb Mulvaney, Mahtigan Rebekah Harper surviving what might have destroyed her.

I stood and tugged the ram's rope. "Come on, buddy. Just a couple more miles." My voice sounded strange after so many hours of silence. "We're finishing this thing."

We passed Leatherback Point and kept moving. The beginnings of town appeared as the sky began to pale. An hour before sunrise and the island was waking up.

We stopped near a gravel bar at the edge of town. A lobster boat motored past in the pre-dawn darkness—Jim Summerlin heading to the mainland for bait. I waved but he didn't see me.

Two hundred yards to go.

The sheep and I walked onto the town dock as the sun broke on the horizon. My circumambulation was at an end.

I found no joyous phalanx of islanders waiting to greet me. No horns or banners. How disappointing. After a few minutes an old fisherman came by. He nodded and said, "Mornin'. Nice sheep."

I smiled. "His name is Baron von Fluffypants."

The sheep and I limped up the road toward home. I passed the Summerlins' house just as Gloria came out to tend her geraniums.

"Christ on a pogo-stick, Rick. What happened to you? And why do you have a sheep?"

"I'm fine. Just got back from the circumambulation."

"You... went?"

"Of course I did."

She stared. "You went... barefoot?"

"Lost my boots in transit."

"Er, right." She took off her gardening gloves. "Why don't you come in the house and let me look at that foot."

"No need. 'Tis but a scratch."

"There's fresh coffee and cinnamon buns."

Inside, Gloria sat me down and cleaned the gash on my heel, then found me an old pair of Jim's tennis shoes. The coffee was strong and the cinnamon buns were buttery and delicious.

"I can't believe you really went," she said.

"I said I would."

"Rick..." She refilled my cup. "I'm sorry, Rick, but it's a prank. Jim always pulls that one on newcomers. No one actually does it."

"Oh." My face went hot. Richard Ensley had fallen for it, hook, line, and sinker.

Gloria touched my arm. "No, it's okay, Rick. It's kind of cool that you did it."

"Thanks, Gloria. That feels a little better. Just a little."

"What's up with the sheep?"

"Souvenir of the expedition."

"You couldn't find a seashell? Or a pretty rock?"

I laughed. "His name is, um... Ram. A-Lama. Ding-Dong." I really needed to stop naming things.

When we got home I gave the ram a handful of grapes, then put him in the fenced pasture that was my yard. Lucky the

previous owner kept a horse. He looked forlorn flying solo in all that acreage, like he could use a friend or two.

My foot healed in a week. I laced up my new hiking boots, grabbed my pack, and left at sunrise with a length of rope coiled on my shoulder.

My place in island lore would be this: The guy who circumambulated not once, but many times, until he rounded up every last one of his great-grandfather's lost sheep, atoning for the sins of his ancestors.

Just Until I Die

I was in second grade when Rachel was enrolled in the one-room Fairweather Island school, where I'd spent two years being mostly invisible. My sister—two years younger and already a hurricane of positive energy—had earned the nickname Sparky by age five; a reference to her light-socket hairstyle that no amount of brushing could tame. On her first day of kindergarten she excused herself to use the restroom, which was in the basement. Ten minutes passed before Mrs. Seibert went to check on her. She found the bathroom unoccupied and Sparky behind the oil furnace with a transistor radio, dancing a hole in the floor.

"Would you care to rejoin the class, Miss Tyler?"

"Oh. Ok. Pretty soon." Sparky smiled broadly and did not stop dancing.

"Now would be better."

"But I loooove this song!" It was Aretha, singing Chain of Fools.

"This is neither the time nor the place, Rachel."

"Why?"

"Because school is for learning, not dancing."

"But I am learning."

"Learning what?"

"The Funky Chicken."

Mrs. Seibert took Sparky by the shoulders and pointed her toward the stairs. "Off you go, Miss Tyler."

Rachel announced her return to class with a loud *B'kaw!* She settled into her desk and preened imaginary feathers, clucking contentedly.

A fourth grader named Kevin Weiderman said to me, "Dude. Your sister's weird."

There was nothing I could say.

At afternoon recess Kevin instructed Sparky in the fine art of cursing like a sailor. Fair enough; his father was a sailor. Near the end of the school day, Melanie Lightfoot made a friendly joke about Rachel's hair, saying she favored a Brillo pad on a stick. Rachel gleefully shot back some of her new vocabulary.

"Fucker! Cunt!" She erupted in laughter as the rest of us gasped and fell into a fearful silence. We expected kindly Mrs. Seibert to start crying or spontaneously combust, but she did neither.

"Well, class, it's nearly three, we'll stop a few minutes early. Enjoy the rest of your day. Miss Tyler, may I speak with you a moment?"

Rachel was unaware she'd done anything wrong.

"Did you enjoy your first day of school, Rachel?"

"Yeah! It was a blast!"

"Good. You learned some new words today, didn't you?"

"I sure did. From Kevin. A bunch." She beamed with pride.

"I see. Rachel, there are some words we don't say in school."

"Why?"

"Some words can make a person angry or sad."

"Like if you say they smell bad?" Rachel said this to our father once when he reeked of overripe lobster bait.

"Kind of like that, yes. I'll leave it to your father to explain. For now, I ask that you not say those words in school any more."

As we walked home I warned Sparky that she might be in trouble with Dad. She stopped in her tracks, said "Uh-oh," then wandered off in no particular direction, doing The Robot and singing "Raaay-chel's in truh-bull, uh-oh! Uh-oh!" over and over.

I took this as further evidence my beloved younger sister was mentally deranged.

After supper Rachel received a talking-to from our father. She stood before him contrite, looking at her feet and not saying a word. She appeared to be trembling; Dad thought she was on the verge of tears. Dad looked puzzled when he realized she was not crying but laughing. Rachel had unleashed a silent but deadly riposte. When it reached him, Dad furrowed his brow, wrinkled his nose, and buried his face in his T-shirt. He said to Mom, "Dear God, Ava, what are you feeding this child?!"

Rachel did an exaggerated buck-and-wing to the front door, stopped to throw jazz hands, then ran off down the road, triumphant, cackling maniacally, leaving Dad to founder in the withering miasma she left behind.

To say Sparky was a difficult child would be wrong. She didn't argue bedtimes, ate her vegetables, brushed her teeth (if not her hair). She was never mean or sulky, just happily uncooperative at times. When corrected she would ask why, and would disregard on principle any rule whose justification was "It

just isn't proper," or "Because I said so." Dad melted in the face of her cherubic irreverence, but our staunch Presbyterian mother concluded she was some sort of devil-child sent to test her faith. Mom did not so much draw conclusions as carve them in the holy stone of her dogma. Her rightness was biblical, and therefore eternal and unerring.

Dad was more sanguine. "She'll grow out of it."

"What if she doesn't?"

"There are worse things than being ridiculously happy, Ava."

"She can't go through life like that."

"Give it time. She'll settle down."

Fortunately, Dad was wrong. Sparky's exuberance persisted and grew more, not less, infectious. How dull might my own childhood have been, were she not so afflicted.

It was Mom who took us to the Fairweather Island Congregational Church each Sunday. I harbored unexpressed doubts about the God thing, but Sparky was agreeable. Until she learned to read. The gilt-edged family Bible raised more questions for her than it answered. She went to Mom for clarification.

"Is God perfect?"

"Yes, Rachel."

"And loving and merciful?"

"Of course."

"Then why did he kill so many people?"

"Because He is also just, and He only killed people who were evil."

"How can a baby be evil?"

"Babies aren't evil, they're precious. Who told you that?"

"First Samuel 15:3."

Mother's loving, merciful God had in fact ordered the slaughter of infants.

"Well, maybe they would've grown up to be evil."

"Then why didn't God kill Hitler when he was a baby?"

"Maybe he was saving them from a worse death that would've happened later on."

"Killing them with swords was the best he could do?"

"Rachel, we aren't to question the ways of the Lord."

That was all Sparky needed to hear: God would be disregarded on principle. She still attended church, but only to hear the organ music. More than once Mother had to retrieve her from the vestibule, where she was waltzing with an imaginary partner to *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*.

Sparky had already won the hearts of most islanders by happily skipping—yes, skipping, a habit she would keep into adulthood—all over the island, infusing friends and strangers alike with her madness of joy. By age nine she was orchestrating elaborate routines for the island talent show, held each July at the Fairweather Town Hall. It was generally understood that when Sparky showed up, things were going to get interesting. I was thrilled to be conscripted as her assistant.

I will always remember her first appearance. She stood alone on the dimly lit stage dressed in a lavender tutu and knee-high clamming boots. She held a borrowed Deering Goodtime banjo,

slung low à la Jimmy Page. She did not know how to play. As the opening riff of *Smoke on the Water* rang out from the PA, Sparky hit the switch on the Christmas lights we had earlier woven throughout the hornet's nest of her hair. We had no smoke machine but improvised with a box fan and a heap of confetti. Sparky heaved herself into all manner of guitar-hero poses, from Chuck Berry duck-walks to Pete Townshend windmills. She belted out improvised lyrics in a voice better suited to Puccini than Deep Purple, pausing now and then to spit out pieces of confetti. "Cooookies on a plat-ter! (ptoo!) I'm a rock star! (ptooey!), saving them (pfft) for laay-ter!"

She won Most Original Performance, a category seemingly created with her in mind. I basked in second-hand glory; this was as close to fame as I would ever get, and I loved her for it.

Rachel had no actual talent, unless you count utter fearlessness and lack of inhibition as talents. She might have pursued a career in dance but had no patience for the rigors that separate art from pastime. She wanted her whole world to be a dance floor where she could go nuts at the least provocation. Studying professional dance moves would be an obstacle to that.

Our dear Mother fretfully suggested Sparky tone down her talent-show spectacles. Such wanton displays were un-Christian, she said. In the summer of '83, when Sparky was 14, she made a gesture of appeasement: a poetry reading.

Ensnconced in a wing-back chair with a snifter of Canada Dry masquerading as brandy, she sported a tweed jacket with elbow patches and a Sherlock Holmes meerschaum. She introduced "An

epic contemporary work by perhaps the greatest poet laureate of our time." In a regal British accent she reeled off Shel Silverstein's *Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout Would Not Take the Garbage Out*, while I stood in the wings pelting her with chicken bones, banana peels, and other items of household refuse. She ended with a cantaloupe rind on her head, grinning madly as she blew a stream of soap bubbles from her pipe to a rousing round of applause. Most Original Performance, once again in the bag.

When she was 16, Rachel told me she was asexual. I wasn't familiar with the term.

"A sexual what?"

She explained. It was more than I really wanted to know, but I understood. I had come to expect the unconventional from her and this revelation was in keeping with her unapologetic oddness. She still danced on the edge of nirvana at every opportunity, but now she had curves, and her slinky gyrations took on a new dimension. She certainly didn't *look* asexual. Dark, sleepy eyes, wasp-stung lips, her face a perfect unblemished oval. She had grown into a flawed beauty, the flaw being the bouquet of corkscrews jutting from her head.

Around that time Rachel appointed herself Fairweather's one-woman welcoming committee. Each Friday she met the ferry in a homemade grass skirt and a lei of pinecones, doing a bizarre hula dance while pressing a live lobster into the hands of startled tourists. Some accepted the gift. Some tried to give it back. A few asked if they could return theirs to the sea.

“You should do whatever makes you most happy,” she told them, showing them how to slip off the rubber bands without losing a finger.

The summer boys were especially happy to see her. One of them made a remark about her lips I won't repeat. I was a peaceful man, but you don't talk about my sister like that. I put him on his back on the dock. Sparky knelt beside him, apologizing for my behavior and offering him another lobster. “It's just that I'm not interested,” she explained, “in essing any dees.”

He left without his lobster.

In 1988 Rachel left Fairweather to attend a Grateful Dead concert at Oxford Plains Speedway and didn't come home for seven years. Her absence was like the amputation of a limb: painful, and producing phantom sensations. The island grieved. Mom and Dad were nearly driven mad with worry. I was left hurt and abandoned, but had an idea why and where she had gone. After a couple of weeks there was a postcard.

Hey Everybody! I decided to travel a while and see the country. Sorry I didn't get a chance to say goodbye and I hope you didn't worry too much. Not sure when I'll be back. Life on the road is a blast! Lots of new friends. Miss you guys! Sparky

The postmark was Berkeley, California.

How could she run off and have an adventure without me? I was her best confidant and unindicted co-conspirator. Without

Sparky the whole island felt subdued. We went about our workaday lives without respite, laughing and smiling less. Social gatherings were not as entertaining; it seemed there were no surprises anymore. Even the talent show grew less enthusiastically attended. After a few years without Sparky's outrageousness it was canceled for lack of interest.

After a time I gave up hope of her ever returning. Life went on, but I told myself I would never forgive her.

One afternoon in September of 1995, Mother and I went to meet the late boat to collect an order of groceries sent from the Hannaford's on the main. It was a fine fall day; warm and sunny with a few high clouds to ornament the sky. Ferry passengers stood along the rails taking the fresh sea air. As the boat drew nearer I saw among them a pretty girl in a dazzling white wedding gown. She wore mirrored aviator shades, and on her head was writhing nest of vipers. She was dancing the Watusi.

Sparky was home.

Mother's greeting to her only daughter was warm as a polar vortex. God only knew what vile iniquities she'd committed while she was away. I instantly forgave Sparky for everything but feared we were just another stop in her ongoing travels.

"Will you stay awhile?"

"Just until I die."

"Promise?"

"Pinky swear. There's no place like Fairweather."

She clicked the heels of her ragged Converse high-tops together and was disappointed when they failed to produce an audible click.

I looked her up and down. It was in fact a wedding gown she wore, a little dusty around the ruffles. She also had on a sequined red satin sash with MISS GRANGEVILLE spelled out in ornate white letters. She carried an oversized paisley print handbag that brought Mary Poppins to mind.

"Did you get married?"

"Don't be silly, Caleb. Why would I do a thing like that?"

Recalling her professed asexuality it did seem an absurd notion. But absurdity was clearly still her modus operandi. "Well, did you win a beauty contest?"

She giggled. "Nope! Got it at the Goodwill Store. Isn't it sparkly?" She turned slightly. The sequins glittered as if powered by some hidden engine within her.

"Where on Earth is Grangeville?"

"I dunno. Maybe Wyoming? Idaho?"

We stood smiling at each other a moment. I could scarcely believe our amputated limb had regenerated. I felt as though I'd been holding my breath for seven years and could finally exhale.

"Oh! I almost forgot." Rachel reached into her bag and brought out a small white duck. "I want you to have this." Her tone was solemn. "His name is Elmer." The duck shat copiously on the dock. "Yeah, he does that a lot."

It took exactly one day for Rachel to restore our little island to the vibrancy and vitality it lacked for the past seven years. She

was a whirlwind, skipping from one end of Fairweather to the other, re-establishing old friendships and creating new ones with the few people who moved to the island in her absence. She was warmly—even ecstatically—received by all, with the exception of C. M. Abbott, a curmudgeon who didn't much like anyone, and especially not Sparky. They'd locked horns a time or two. On learning of her homecoming he made his feelings known with a wet blast of flatulence that sent his long-suffering wife, Mabel, scurrying for the Febreze.

Sparky eventually revealed to me the details of her odyssey: She'd spent seven years following the Dead, living on an old blue school bus with some kindred spirits, dancing their way through life and the country. When Jerry Garcia cashed in his chips, it was over for her. She came home.

"Where will you stay?" I couldn't invite her to stay with me; I was living with Emily Matthias by that time.

"Not with Mom and Dad." she said. "Too old for that."

"The Mary Beth's vacant." A 20 x 30 postage-stamp of a cottage on the main (and only) drag.

"Perfect! Will you come to visit?"

"With bells on."

"Who's Belzon? Is he new? Do I know him?"

Sparky moved into the tiny cottage and furnished it sparsely, preferring to spend what little money she had equipping the kitchen. She still danced like a runaway tornado but had adopted a new mantra: *Food is Love; Feed Everyone*. There were some hungry days on the old bus and Sparky now placed a high value

on the sharing of a good meal. She often spent her morning preparing an elaborate lunch. When it was ready she bounced outside to flag down the first person who happened by. "Hey! Come in here and eat with me!"

This led to new friendships, the exchange of life stories with complete strangers and one comic misunderstanding when a young man didn't hear her say "with."

I was a frequent guest at Rachel's table—actually at Rachel's floor since she had no furniture—and found she'd become an excellent cook. One of a great many things she learned on the road, she said.

One passerby she targeted for feeding was Marsha Delacroix, a lifelong islander who had seen Rachel grow up and was now owner of the Fairweather Inn. After dining on Rachel's rock crab cakes with caper-dill vin blanc, Marsha offered her a job, which Rachel accepted.

I doubted her ability to do anything on a schedule but she was serious about feeding people and was good at it. Breakfast and lunch were her responsibilities and Marsha soon gave her a free hand with the menus. Sparky loved the job. She danced while she worked, with the soundtrack furnished by her Sony Walkman. Anticipating what she would call an *issue*, Marsha took Rachel aside.

"You understand that Old New England quaintness is our stock-in-trade," Marsha said. "I love what you're doing in the kitchen, but keep the music and dancing out of sight. We have an image to maintain."

Thereafter Rachel remained hidden in the kitchen, entering and exiting through the back door to avoid any guest who might find her lacking in Old New England charm.

She had worked at the Fairweather Inn for most of a season when Senator Ledgerwood (D-Mass) came to spend a weekend. For Marsha, the importance of his visit could not be overstated. Everything must be *just so*.

In addition to her usual breakfast and lunch duties, Sparky helped with extra sprucing and stayed late to help with the caviar and lobster salad for the Senator's arrival. News of the senator's visit made the rounds and while most islanders left the man in peace, a handful came to the dock at ferry time to catch a glimpse of their visiting dignitary. Marsha arrived to collect her guest in the inn's restored '49 DeSoto—oh, so quaint—and was dressed in heels, basic black and a tasteful string of cultured pearls. She was visibly miffed at the gawkers, but figured it couldn't be helped. Most of them wore flannel, denim and fishing boots; at least they were suitably quaint.

Then Rachel showed up.

She came skipping down the dock in gym shorts and a Hello Kitty crop-top, all atomic hair, exposed midriff, and generous cleavage. Rachel wasn't thinking about Senator Ledgerwood; she was there to pick up a gallon of interior latex sent over with the freight. She stopped beside one of the cars on the dock, cocked her head and said to the driver, "Hey, turn that up!"

It was *Frankenstein* by the Edgar Winter Group. Rachel went terpsichorially berserk just as Senator Ledgerwood arrived

on the boat. I watched the color drain from Marsha Delacroix's face. She marched to where Rachel was now registering an eight-point-five on the Richter scale and hissed at her in a fury. "Stop it! Just stop it! *The Senator is here!*"

Rachel would not have been more shocked if Marsha had presented her with a live hand grenade and run away with the pin. Her dancing provoked many responses over the years, but never rage.

"I—I didn't... I was only—"

Sparky, who desired nothing but for everyone to be just as happy as they could stand, had caused an unhappiness so great it exploded in her face. People were staring. Marsha stormed off.

Sparky walked away with tears in her eyes, back to her little cottage.

She forgot her paint. It was fuschia.

Standing alone in her living room, Rachel replayed the scene in her head, wishing it undone. The corners of her vision went hazy, then faded to black. She collapsed on the plywood floor.

When she returned to work the next morning Rachel found Marsha in her kitchen prepping for the breakfast of eggs Benedict. Rachel found it hard to meet her eyes.

"Oh, Marsha. I'm here, let me take care of that."

"That won't be necessary, Rachel. I want you take a leave of absence."

"I don't want a leave of absence."

"Think of it as a well-deserved vacation."

"But—"

"No buts, Rachel. When I need you back I'll let you know."

Just like that, Rachel's purpose was wrenched away from her like a molar extracted without anesthetic. Only this was more painful.

My sister could be fragile, I knew, but I never saw her so dejected. Dropping by for a visit—more of a well-being check—I found her lying on the yoga mat she used for a bed, staring at the wall.

She spoke without inflection. "I'm fine, Caleb. I just need a little time."

I left feeling not at all reassured. When I returned on Sunday morning, I knocked softly. From within: "Ugh." She had not moved.

"I don't get it, Rach. You've always been one to make lemonade."

"I am all out of lemons." There was no humor in her voice.

Over the next few hours I called on nearly every person residing on Fairweather. My last stop was the inn, to tell Marsha what was going to happen whether she liked it or not. I was pleasant but firm. I came back to Rachel's around 4:00 and found her still staring at her unpainted wall.

"Come on, Sparky. Time to rise and, uh, sparkle."

"I can't."

"We're going to see the senator off."

"Have fun. Tell him I said hey."

"I will carry you to the pier if I have to."

I threw her over my shoulder, surprised at how little she weighed. By the time I got her out the front door she was laughing at the absurdity of arriving at the crowded dock as first, but agreed to walk with me anyway. Absurdity was still the way to her heart.

Parked on the dock was a flatbed Chevy normally used to transport lobster traps. Today it held a pair of stereo speakers the size of small Frigidaires. There were no fewer than 70 people on the dock, easily ten times the usual number. As we approached someone shouted, "She's here!" A cheer went up, then the crowd grew quiet. Marsha Delacroix emerged from their midst and walked toward my sister, who now wore a look of bewilderment.

Marsha was clad in her husband's bib overalls rolled up to her knees, peppermint-striped knee socks and bunny slippers. The bunny ears flopped around like demented helicopters as she walked. She must have used a whole can of Aqua-Net to make her graying hair frizz out like Rachel's. At her side was Senator Ledgerwood. He reached for Rachel's hand. "Miss Tyler, may I have this dance?"

Dire Straits' *Walk of Life* poured from the speakers as 70 islanders and beloved summer friends joined Sparky and the senator in busting a rapturous move. After the first song, Ledgerwood thanked Rachel with a fatherly kiss on the cheek and retired to the sidelines. Kool & the Gang's *Celebration* began; it ended with Rachel and the Senator's Secret Service man dancing a fevered boogaloo atop the flatbed while the onlookers cheered.

After the ferry departed, Marsha approached Sparky again.

"I'm sorry, Rachel. I put our image before our humanity."

Sparky nodded. It was ok. "Can I cook breakfast tomorrow?"

"Tired of vacation already?"

"Vacation sucks. Like a brand new Hoover."

Marsha laughed. She looked at their reflections in the rippling water. She'd forgotten what she'd done to her hair, and was startled to see a pair of aquatic Phyllis Dillers looking back.

"Be there at six. Don't forget your Walkman."

"How did you get the Senator to dance with me?"

"That was entirely his idea. It turns out he's seen quite enough quaintness. Your particular brand of eccentricity was just what he needed. I'm guessing the cleavage helped, too."

Rachel's sorrow had wounded me almost as much as it did her. I was relieved to hear her laugh again.

The inn closed for the season after Columbus Day and Sparky was left wondering how she might amuse herself through the long, dark island winter. There would be no passersby to feed. She needed a project. She paid a visit to Virginia Seibert, who still taught at the Fairweather school.

"Can I have a job?"

"We already have a custodian, Rachel."

"I want to be a teacher."

"Do you have a teaching certificate?"

"Nope! Where do I get one?"

"College."

"Oh." She thought for a moment. "I could be the gym teacher. You don't have one of those."

"Nor do we have a gym. Anyway, you'd still need a degree."

Sparky proposed an after-school dance class.

"We couldn't pay you."

"Deal!"

It was mostly girls in Miss Sparky's dance class, except for a couple of kindergarten boys she called The Littles. Two afternoons a week Sparky taught them to dance like gravity was optional. They had a ball.

On a Thursday afternoon in November, Sparky's class was learning what she called The Sugar Magnolia Twirl, a dance she picked up from her sisters on the Blue Bus.

"Be careful not to get dizzy," she warned.

Her words still echoed in the room as her vision clouded and the black curtain came down again. She fainted, sprawling on the floor. All movement stopped. One of the Littles said, "Did Miss Sparky die?" and gently poked her shoulder.

She squinted through one half-open eye. "Don't. Make. Dizzzz..."

Her headache was thunderous; she gripped her head in her hands, moaning. Class was over. The kids danced on mats, which were in short supply; Sparky danced on the hardwood floor, hence the black eye that would purple the left side of her face for the next week.

Sparky later told me this happened again that winter while she was at home. She was sitting on her most comfortable milk crate—the La-Z-Boy of milk crates, she said—tapping her toes and reading Emily Dickinson. The air around her suddenly

crackled with static. A frenzied horde of black and white ants marched into her field of vision and she came down hard. That time the headache lasted two days.

"I'm afraid for you, Rach," I said.

"You should stop being that."

"You need to see a doctor."

"Oh, no. I tried that once and he poked me with a needle."

I persisted but she shrugged it off. Several months passed without another incident. The episodes were odd, but oddness happened, and was still welcome in her world.

When spring finally came, the island roared to life like a black bear coming out of hibernation. Construction and gardening projects began, lobstermen painted their boats and spent long hours in the trapyard gearing up for the new season. Rachel was seen bustling about on the shores, collecting washed-up pot warp and a few storm-lost lobster traps. I thought she'd set herself a shore-cleaning project.

"Whatcha up to, Sparky?"

"This year I am going to sea. I will become a lobsterist."

"A lobsterman?"

She stared at me without expression.

"You don't have a boat, Rach. Not even a skiff. And you'd need a two-year apprenticeship to get licensed."

"Hmm. A skeptic. Just you wait, Caleb."

Sparky's boat was delivered to Fairweather the following week. She found it in the want ads and bought it secondhand from a freshwater marina in New Hampshire.

It was a swan. Ten feet long with foot pedals to turn the paddles concealed under its white-feathered fiberglass body. The swan's head was five feet high, the beak sun-faded orange, its eyes staring from a mask of jet black.

The week after that Sparky dropped by to show me the non-commercial lobster license—no apprenticeship needed—that arrived in the day's mail. She was allowed to fish up to five traps and could not by law sell any lobsters. She nevertheless presented me with one of her new business cards:

Rachel 'Sparky' Tyler
LOBSTERIST
Fairweather Island, Maine

There was a little red lobster at the bottom but no address or phone number. That summer she gave one to pretty much every person who lived on or visited the island. To this day no one has the faintest idea why. She called her boat—her pedal-swan—*Berd*, and painted the name in fire-engine red across the swan's ass. It was either that or *Bote*, she explained. She had two traps she found on the shore and bent back into shape. Sort of. One of her buoys was an inflatable Yosemite Sam pool toy, the other was an empty Clorox bottle on which she used a Sharpie to draw a giraffe, as if these disparate icons bore some relation to one another. When I queried her on this she said, "Duh, Caleb. Just think about it."

I have yet to crack that particular mystery.

Like everything else she set her mind to, Rachel worked her two traps with a passion. She set them in the eel grass in the harbor—*Berd* was not really fit for the open sea—and hauled them by hand every other day, weather permitting. I met her on the dock one clear July morning; she had her catch in a five-gallon bucket.

"Howdja do, Rach?"

"You always get a few." A phrase borrowed from an old-timer.

I peeked into her bucket. It was nearly full of fat two-pounders. "Looks like you had a good week."

"Day."

"That's one day? Two traps?" My traps were averaging a pound to a pot; Rachel was getting ten times that?

"Well, yeah." Her tone suggested I had inquired as to the Pope's religion or the location of a bear's lavatory.

"Shut the f... front door. What are you using for bait?"

"Haggis and raisinettes. I made the haggis myself." She smiled proudly. "It's just awful!"

I walked away shaking my head. Lobstermen don't like to reveal their tricks of the trade. The Lobsterist had learned this lesson and was clearly yanking my chain. On the other hand...

I went home and scoured Emily's cookbooks for haggis recipes.

Later that summer, Rachel got laid.

"Just to see what I won't be doing for the rest of my life."

"So? How was it?" Not sure I wanted to hear this.

"Messy. I didn't know there would be so many liquids involved."

"Yeah. It's a little slippery."

"And the licking. He licked my butt."

"I don't really think—"

"He squirted his liquids on me."

"Stop talking now."

Rachel returned to work at Marsha's when the inn reopened in June. She donated most of her lobsters to the inn, turning them into succulent Newburgs, bisques, scampis and seafood salads. A number of guests asked for her recipes, which were meticulously filed in her head and nowhere else. There was talk of a cookbook, but circumstances conspired to shut down the project and eventually my sister, as circumstances will sometimes do.

On a chilly August morning Rachel was skipping down the road before dawn on her way to work when she took a header into a marshy fernbrake. She arrived at the inn mud-slathered, with fern fronds in her hair.

"Goodness, Rachel, what happened?" Marsha asked, concerned.

"I fell down. Ferns happened." It was another blackout.

Two days later Marsha was discussing the next day's menu with her when Rachel, apropos of nothing, collapsed on the kitchen floor. She did not lose consciousness this time, just her

balance. Marsha got her sitting upright, called Diana Sanchez, the island EMT, then called me. Diana was there when I arrived. She pronounced Rachel's vital signs acceptable and after a few questions recommended a physical. Rachel complained of a headache and swallowed several Extra-strength Tylenols. Marsha suggested she take the day off.

"Oh no! I have to feed the guests."

"Can you?"

"Sure! I'm fine as a fiddle."

"Fit as a fiddle," I corrected.

"Hey diddle-diddle!" She flashed a grin and belted out *That's Amore*, mincing shallots in time to the music in her head.

It was Marsha who finally persuaded—cajoled—Rachel to see a doctor. After several appointments and tests, an MRI revealed a brain tumor the size of a Brazil nut hiding between her corpus callosum and pineal gland.

"I'm very sorry, Miss Tyler. The tumor is inoperable."

"Am I going to die?"

"You still have some time. I would say six months to a year."

"Oh." Rachel considered this. "I've never died before."

Doctor Bradley was at a loss for words.

"Does it hurt? To die, I mean."

"With hospice and palliative care your discomfort should be minimal."

Rachel thanked her and left her office. She stood in the cool fall air looking across the parking lot trying to recall where she parked. Then she remembered she was on the main and didn't

have a car. Then she remembered she'd never learned to drive because she didn't want to run over a squirrel. She walked off in no particular direction doing The Robot and singing, "Spaaa-arky's gonna die-ee-eye, uh-oh! Uh-oh!" over and over.

When I saw her the next day she was bubbly as ever. She hailed me from down the road, waving and yelling, "Caleb! Hey Caleb! I'm going to die!"

I was certain I misheard. She came skipping up to me. "Did you hear? I'm going to die."

"What the fuck, Rach? Don't say that."

"I got a tumor. In my bray-ay-ayn." She did a rock-star sashay.

"You're not serious."

"Dead serious. Ha! I made a pun."

"This isn't funny, Rachel."

Now, I was known to be a little slow on the uptake. It took me a minute to connect the blackouts and headaches with her doctor appointments and what she was now saying. In my defense, I was thrown off by her inexplicably upbeat demeanor. Then, at last, epiphany: "Oh my God. It's true."

"Yuppers. So what are you up to today?"

"You're only 27. You can't die."

"Oh yeah? Just watch me." She went skipping off down the road.

Were it anyone else I'd suspect they were putting on a happy face. Not Sparky. A new experience—death—awaited her. She

would run headlong into it, ready to try it out and see what it had to offer. She was saying, I get to die.

I looked from the road out to the sea and saw the morning sun reflected on the water. I imagined all the joy in my world crashing down, swept away as if on an outgoing tide.

For the next few weeks Rachel went about her usual affairs, hauling her two traps, cooking, dancing; having infrequent blackouts. She gave me another one of her LOBSTERIST business cards. On the back was written in blue colored pencil:

Rachel Tyler's Last Will and Testament

Listen! Caleb gets everything.

Love, Sparky

She drew a blue heart beside her name.

"That's more anatomically correct, you know. The blue."

"Rach, I don't think this is legally binding."

"That's ok. I don't really own anything."

"What about *Berd*?"

She produced another business card.

Bill of Sale

Sold to Caleb Tyler for

The sum of One Dollar:

My pedal-boat Swan, named Berd.

Signed: Rachel

"Oh, Sparky. That's so kind of you." I was close to tears.

"You got my dollar?"

She wasn't kidding. I located four quarters and placed them in her waiting hand.

"Woohoo! I'm gonna get me a Kit-Kat and some Lifesavers." She took off running in the direction of the Island Market as though these long sought-after confections had never before been within her financial grasp.

The following day she paid me another visit, this time to discuss her funeral arrangements. I suggested Mom was better equipped to handle such matters.

"Caleb. You know I love Mom, right?"

"Yes."

"It's just that, well... she'll make it some kind of God-stravaganza. And that's not me."

"True."

"She'd probably invite Jesus or something."

Though I felt the chances of that were fairly remote, I agreed to help. It turned out Rachel had given her last hurrah a great deal of thought. She made some specific, and, of course, unusual requests. She'd never attended a funeral and had only the haziest understanding of what one entailed.

"First, the dancing. Just a couple of songs. Start with The Loco-motion—Little Eva's version, not Grand Funk's—and finish up with a nice slinky Bossa Nova."

"I think that's a bit much to ask of people in mourning."

"I don't want any mourning. That would be too sad."

I explained about the grieving process and the need of closure, but she was unconvinced.

"Rachel, don't you know how much we love you? How much you'll be missed?"

"The regular amount?"

"More. Much, much more."

"Like, eleventy-three percent?"

"At least."

"I see." She paused to weigh this suggestion and after a moment deemed it sufficiently persuasive. "I'll take your word for it."

She popped a Wint-o-Green Lifesaver and offered me one. I accepted.

"Ok, no dancing," she said. "I guess a bouncy-house is out of the question."

I pictured dour funeral attendees in basic black and stocking feet, sorrowfully bouncing. "Rach..."

"Ok, ok. No dancing, no bouncy-house. How about fireworks? A big show to light up the sky." She looked so hopeful. I couldn't think of a single reason why she shouldn't have fireworks.

"Done." Even if it meant a second mortgage.

"You'll have to bury me at night."

Again— why not?

"And my headstone must be a sculpture of a ballerina doing a *grand jeté*."

I suggested having the image engraved on her stone since it might be more durable.

"Is it expensive?"

"Not as much as a statue. Not that we should consider cost at a time like this."

"A cheaper stone would leave more money for skyrockets."

I had to acknowledge the truth of this. Rachel entered our world and our lives in a celebratory fashion; it was fitting that she should exit in the same way, in the way she had lived her entire life.

C. M. Abbott was the only Fairweather Islander who never took a liking to Sparky, not even when she was just a little mop-top. She was only six when he yelled at her to get off his lawn. She complied but was hurt and never forgot it. Ten years later she took her revenge.

We were walking to Silent Cove for surf clams and happened to pass C. M. Abbott's house. He was sitting on his porch reading the *Press-Herald*. Before I could stop her, Rachel was striding up his front walk.

"The hell do you want, kid?"

Rachel climbed the creaky wooden steps and stood grinning at him.

"Get off'n m'porch, girlie."

She held his eyes, dropped her Levis, squatted and pissed on his welcome mat.

Grinning a Cheshire grin, she hurried back to where I waited on the road. When she turned and saw the aged C. M. Abbott tottering up behind her with murder in his eyes she weighed our options.

"Um... run!"

Eight weeks after Rachel's diagnosis, C. M. Abbott was the only witness to her death. He sat on the town dock with a rod and reel, looking to catch a nice oily mackerel for his wife's cat. Rachel was out in the harbor aboard *Berd*, cleaning up after hauling her pair of traps. C. M. watched with a mixture of amusement and disgust. *Stupid bird-boat don't have no business out here.*

Rachel had her headphones on, singing along with *Midnight Train to Georgia*. Her voice carried across the water. She leaned out to scrub the mud from *Berd's* side. The black-and-white ants arrived in profusion, making her black out and fall overboard. The current swept her out of reach of *Berd* before she could swim to the surface. C. M. Abbott watched her fall in. By the time he got his skiff untied, Rachel had drowned and her body settled into the eel grass.

When I arrived at the dock, Rachel had been retrieved and was laid out on the planks. Diana Sanchez had defibrillated her several times and was still performing CPR. A life-flight helicopter was called, but Diana warned me not to pin my hopes on it; there was little they could do that she hadn't already done. Twenty minutes of chest compressions had not produced a pulse;

it was likely already too late. When the paramedics arrived they confirmed it. Rachel would dance no more.

I watched in defeated silence as my sister's body was lifted onto a stretcher and covered with a white sheet. It might have been my imagination, but I think she wore the slightest of grins.

The stretcher was loaded onto the helicopter for transport to a mainland morgue. I stopped the paramedic before he could close the door.

"Wait, I saw... I saw her toes! Her toes are moving!"

I swear they were tapping the rhythm of *Midnight Train to Georgia*.

Every resident of Fairweather Island was at Sparky's funeral, even C. M. Abbott, whom I suspected of attending only for the fireworks. I believe Rachel would have been ok with that.

The funeral began at 9:30 pm with family and some of Rachel's closest friends saying a few words by torchlight at the graveside. Mother spoke briefly of God, heaven and eternity, and Sparky would have been ok with that, too.

I barely held myself together as I talked about the many things I learned from her, foremost of which was not to take life—and especially myself—too seriously.

Dad was the last to speak. At Rachel's request, he recited a passage from Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, her favorite poem. It was an odd choice for a funeral, but also oddly fitting.

The service ended around 10:30. Sparky's fireworks were launched from the shore of neighboring Ram's Head Island, their flashes of brilliant color mirrored on the calm sea. They were simply magnificent. So many of them burst in a pattern resembling a dandelion gone to seed that I was soon reduced to a steady flow of tears.

The next day I put my lobsterboat in drydock and power-washed her 36-foot hull, preparing to touch up her buff-over-white paint scheme and bottom paint. I stood looking at her clean white hull and thinking of Rachel, how she never liked those colors, said they were too conservative. She had also suggested my boat's name—*Sea Wolf*—was uninspired.

I carried a gallon of newly purchased buff paint back to my workshop and returned with several cans of leftover odds and ends.

The job took three days. When it was finished I stood back and admired *Sea Wolf's* new colors: white with black and day-glo green zebra stripes. Her bow sported a fearsome shark's mouth worthy of a World War II fighter plane. From the tip of her VHF aerial a red satin sash reading MISS GRANGEVILLE fluttered randomly in the sea breeze. It amused me, but probably wouldn't last very long. Seems like the best things never do.

The finishing touch was to paint over *Sea Wolf* on her stern and apply her new name, *Berd Too*, in fire-engine red, followed by an anatomically correct blue heart. Beneath that I had a local artist paint Yosemite Sam with six-guns blazing, riding a giraffe.

Obviously.

The Gravity of Hemispheres

"Order up, server three."

Valerie Fairbairn was there in seconds. "Thanks Mike, looking good." It was typical diner fare, nothing fancy, but I still took pride in my creations. Val delivered the plates to her customers at the Redbird Diner with a smile guaranteed to maximize her tip.

Any ticket marked three received my fondest attention. This was how I declared my incurable adoration for Valerie Fairbairn. She always collected her orders with a smile, occasionally punctuated with a wink so enticing it hit me like a broadside of Cupid's arrows and left me foundering on the Unrequited Sea. I refused to accept that she was beyond my grasp although nothing could have been plainer. I was 16, she was 24; a vast yawning abyss of years—and maturity—lay between us. She not only had a boyfriend, she lived with him. I met him once and the encounter emphasized my inferiority.

Valerie lived with a *man*; I was a *boy*.

As is true of most sixteen-year-olds, my masturbatory habits were chronic, serial, olympian, heroic, indefatigable and, according to the Christian theology of my parents, deeply shameful. Needless to say, Valerie Fairbairn was the frequent star of my mind's hormone-drenched wanderings. If women knew what teenage boys really thought about them they would never stop slapping us.

My adolescent backseat fumbblings with girls my age had reached a pinnacle with the recent touching of Kimber Swann's breasts. I was sufficiently encouraged by the generosity with which Kimber shared her frontal appendages that I bought her jewelry and we became exclusive. Kimber was fifteen. It soon became clear she was not the immediate answer to my sexual frustrations, but might be at some undetermined point in the future. She was a rare beauty who soon superseded Valerie Fairbairn in my fantasies. Farewell, my dearest Valerie; I shall never forget the many romantic interludes we absolutely did not share. My heart belongs to Kimber Swann, and I will not betray her trust, not even in the most secret spaces of my thoughts. Probably.

I took Kimber to see *Rogue One*—during which I touched all two of her breasts—and had her home by ten since it was a school night. After ravaging her in absentia, I fell asleep around 10:30. My phone rang at 11:30. It was Valerie. This had never happened before.

"Hi Mike."

"Yeah?"

"S me, Valerie."

"Hey."

"I can't find my wine."

"Umm."

"I looked everywhere. I mean EV. VREE. WAAARE."

"Are you ok, Valerie?"

"Waay - sted." She giggled.

"Oh."

"Y'gotta help me find my wine."

"It's kind of late, Val. Isn't there anyone—"

"Come aawn, Mike."

"Are you sure you need more wine?"

"Maybe I just wanna fuck your brains out."

I searched for an appropriate response and came up empty. The unattainable Valerie Fairbairn was considering me in a sexual context. If she only knew.

"So y' comin or not?"

"Yeah. Ten minutes." I would help her find her wine. The other part was just drunk talk. She didn't mean it and I wasn't going to betray my Kimber.

Valerie opened the apartment door, grabbed me by the arm and pulled me inside. There were large men playing poker under a cloud of cigar smoke that hovered above the dining room table. They were not overjoyed to see me. Valerie's boyfriend, Steve, regarded me like I was an insect he couldn't be bothered to step on, although he would if he wasn't busy. I said hello; they grunted in my general direction and continued their card game. I was only there because Valerie was tired of being ignored, that much was clear. I was also fairly sure the presence of her boyfriend meant my brains would remain safely ensconced within my cranium for the foreseeable future. Valerie draped herself on me and said, "D'you know where my wine is?"

"Where's the last place you saw it?"

"Eyeono." She looked at me like I was her savior, come to deliver her from winelessness.

"Did you drink it all?"

"Hic." She mulled this over with a look of deep and abiding confusion. "I think... um, I don't think I... er... hmm. Eyeono."

What can we deduce from this, Watson? Not a damn thing, Holmes. I checked the kitchen trash, but it held no empty wine bottles. Opened the fridge, strike two. It wouldn't be in the freezer but I had to rule it out. It was in the freezer. A large bottle of Riunite Rosato with an inch or two in the bottom. I brought it to Valerie who squealed with joy. "You foun' it! I knew you'd fine it." She pressed her sinuous form against me and my heart executed a Ginger Baker drum solo. I cautiously permitted her embrace but didn't reciprocate. Steve wasn't paying attention but I wasn't taking any chances.

Valerie took a large swig from her bottle and offered it to me.

"Oh. Thanks." I took a tiny sip. Too sweet. I handed it back and she took another hearty pull.

"C'mere. Eyeonna show you somethin'." She led me down the hall. When we reached the bathroom she shoved me inside and quickly followed, closing and locking the door behind her. Her t-shirt said SKI TELLURIDE, a message I was barely able to ingest before she pulled it over her head and let it fall to the tiled floor. She stood deliciously hipshot before me, looking into my eyes and not saying a word.

I was not well-versed in the intricacies of women's undergarments but what I saw was a prodigious pair of Vargas

Girl breasts barely restrained by a brassiere that was clearly designed for display rather than concealment. The clasp, I noted, was in front, not in back, where I had puzzled over Kimber's bra so inexpertly she reached back and undid it herself.

Valerie was offering me the free run of her monumental chest and the means to access it without coming off as a blithering virginal fool, which is precisely what I was. My hands trembled, Ginger Baker doubled his tempo, and I stammered, "Vuh vuh—Valerie..." unable to complete whatever it was I was trying to say to her.

She took another slug of wine and said, "Don'cha wanna?"

Every nerve ending screamed *Yes! We wanna!* Valerie was drunk and I was locked in the gravitational pull of hemispheres she brandished like mighty weapons I was powerless to withstand. But it wasn't that simple.

I took a deep breath, time enough to think of Kimber, her trust and relative innocence. Then I visualized the hospital room where I would likely spend upwards of a week after Steve & Co. ruptured all my internal organs. But it was Kimber who returned me to sanity.

If something happened with Valerie tonight it would never happen again. This was certain. Guilt would probably shipwreck my relationship with Kimber beyond rescue, and she was a young lady I was lucky to have gained the attentions of. Valerie and Steve might not survive for the same reason. And what would happen when Valerie and I returned to work at the diner? There would be no more smiles or playful little winks. It would get

weird, as the saying goes. One of us would probably have to quit. I had to say no to the bounty of flesh she offered and I had to do it without making her feel rejected.

"Listen, Valerie. If you do something with me tonight—as much as I would really, really like it—you'll regret it tomorrow."

"Aaw, Mike."

"You know it's true, don't you?"

She hugged me again. I picked up her shirt and helped her put it on. It was the most difficult thing I ever had to do.

The next afternoon at work Valerie approached me and placed a hand on my arm. "Those were drunk hugs, Mike. You know?"

"It's cool, Valerie. Don't worry about it."

She shot me one of those killer smiles.

Much to my surprise I had done the right thing, but it left me squarely on the horns of a moral dilemma:

Is it infidelity to recall the moment when I was confronted with Valerie Fairbairn's lacy brassiere?

To imagine I undid the clasp?

Vividly?

With sound effects?

Over and over and over?

Glory and Clear Light

This time it wasn't Porter. Just the voice inside, pushing.

Tell it.

No! It's a terrible story—I don't want to.

You must tell it.

Why?

So the world will understand.

OK, fine. I will tell it. But don't interrupt me.

Very well.

First I saw the mother. She came out of the woods behind the house to eat the blueberries. When she saw me, she stamped her foot, snorted, and ran away. After a few days I saw her again. She was with Lily that time. I stayed very quiet and didn't move. They didn't see me. They sniffed at Mom's vegetable garden but couldn't get in, so they ate more blueberries and went back into the woods. Lily had white spots and big, dark eyes. I wished I could touch her.

The little ones are soft.

I know. Very soft. I wished I could pet her like I do with Max.

What happened next?

Next time it was the father. I think it was the father. He had great big antlers. Max barked and chased him away. I didn't see the mother or Lily that day. In fact, I never saw the mother again. I think she got shot by a hunter.

Ah, you are wise. You figured that out.

I am wise. I know many things no one else knows. I know much that is sacred.

Tell more.

OK, OK. The first time I saw Lily by herself, she was in the garden eating Mom's asparagus. I forgot to close the gate. Mom was mad, but I didn't care—I don't like asparagus, and if Lily ate it, I wouldn't have to. They always insist I eat it, even though I hate it. It's one of their ways of controlling me.

But you won't let them.

No, I won't. They don't realize who I—

No, no. Tell the story.

I SAID, DON'T INTERRUPT ME!

Sorry, please tell.

I started leaving a carrot by the big tree stump, and every day Lily came to eat it. After a while Mom said, "Who keeps eating all my carrots?" So I switched to apples from our tree. I knocked them down with a stick. Lily liked them just fine.

I had to be careful so Porter wouldn't see. Him and his friends think they're so smart. He's probably the meanest stepbrother on earth. He thinks I'm stupid.

He would scare her away if he saw.

I named her Lily, after Mom's favorite flower—the big orange ones. She grows them in the old dory in the backyard. I'd hide behind it and wait for Lily to come out of the woods. She came a little closer each day.

I took a picture of her with the camera they gave me. They gave Porter a pellet gun, but Dad said I can't have one because of my spells. I don't care. Pellet guns are stupid anyway. Porter gets everything he wants. He even has his own TV. I don't—not since I broke the big one in the living room. The man on the screen

shouted terrible things and wouldn't SHUT UP, so I hit him with the lamp.

He was a very bad man.

I know. He was an abomination.

He tried to read your thoughts.

That's why I had to stop him. There were a lot of sparks and I got cut and had to get four stitches. Then they gave me more pills.

That's another one of their ways.

Yes. But I stopped taking them. I pretend to swallow, then I spit them out.

You are too smart for them.

And I have power. Mostly over animals, but some people too. Sometimes I sit by my window and watch everything that happens. I saw a kingfisher once. He wanted to fly away, but I made him stay until I took his picture. I watched Mom in the garden, singing a song about Mairzy Doats, whoever that is. And I watched Porter and his stupid friends with his stupid pellet gun. They won't even let me try, since Dad says I'm on the spectrum.

So? Porter says, "You're on the rectum," and he thinks I don't know what it means. He's the asshole, not me.

He is unkind.

I know. I tried to make his friends leave, but I don't have enough power yet.

You will.

Then I'll be over them, and they'll be sorry.

They are an abomination.

And I will be bathed in glory and clear light—like God.

Tell the next part.

I was hiding behind the dory with an apple for Lily. I waited a very long time.

You have great patience.

Yes. I have. She finally came from the woods and stood about six feet away looking at me with her beautiful dark eyes and twitching her little white tail. She was nervous. I tossed the apple

in front of her and she ran away a little bit but then she came back and ate it.

She trusts you.

She trusts me. I talked to her while she ate. She didn't try to read my thoughts. A few days after that she took an apple from my hand. I talked very softly to her and then I petted her on the neck and she didn't run away. I made the fear come out of her.

Your power is growing.

I am coming into my glory. At last.

Tell the last part.

I hate the last part.

You must tell it.

Yesterday morning, fog covered everything. I waited, and Lily came out of the mist like a spirit animal. She came unto me, and I gave her the apple. I was petting her, telling her many things—sacred things. I looked into her eyes, and then I heard the *CRACK!* One of her eyes burst; clear liquid spilled out, then blood. She stood there for two seconds, then fell over dead. It was Porter. He killed her.

It is a terrible story.

It is a great tragedy.

You must write the next chapter.

I know. But it will be hard.

*I will guide you. When it is done, you will be in ascension—
in glory and light. Like God.*

I will.

It is time.

*

*

*

I know how it works.

Are you sure?

I watched Porter enough times. I know how.

Shh. Quietly. Don't let him hear.

Yes. I move in silence.

Use the crosshairs.

I never realized his eye was so blue.

Does This Look Infected?

In three days I would return to Harper's Island, where thirteen years earlier I'd been wrongly accused and convicted of attempted rape. Two weeks after my return to the island, I'd kill the man who actually committed the crime. His name was Ed Hewitt, and when his skull finally washed ashore eighteen months later, I would hide the evidence by smashing it to powder and scattering it in the sea.

But first I had to get through this miserable afternoon in the Finestkind Diner.

The waitress's nametag said CANDACE but her haggard look said she'd been fighting Candy since the day she was born. I had been tying up a booth in her station most of this dismal afternoon, nursing the same bottomless cup of coffee, and her patience had run out. She stopped calling me "Hon" an hour ago. I think she knew I didn't want the coffee, just a refuge from the miserable weather.

Candace never pegged me a Daddy Warbucks but I don't think she knew I was a homeless transient. It was coming on nightfall and all she wanted was to count her tips and be gone from the Finestkind Diner for the next 16 hours. I wanted to leave her a couple of bucks or even a fiver, but the fifty cents in the pocket of my Salvation Army coat was at the time my total net worth. I'm sorry, Candace.

I stepped out into a hostile October night and shambled along the main drag of Finney's Bend, Maine, with no place to go and no way to get there. There were no streetlights to draw imagined warmth from but at least the rain had stopped.

Everything was closed except the diner and Big Ben's Gas & Groceries. This rat-fuck town oozed desolation like pus from an abscess. The air carried scents of fuel oil, rust and desperation. I could almost smell the souring of lives that began shiny with promise but hit a dead end at the paper mill and the deteriorating clapboard shacks creeping out from either end of Main Street. I fastened the only two buttons on my coat and slogged past dead cars in weed-grown yards, naked trees waving barren arms in the wind like the horror of it all had driven them mad.

God, I hate the fall. Everything dies.

This is painful to admit: Compared to me, the people in these houses were living like royalty. It hurt to walk down that two-lane road, departing the living to wander among bare trees and spent brown fields. The windows I passed leaving town looked in on families sitting down to dinner, kids laughing, an older couple snug under a shared afghan watching one of those old Hope/Crosby road movies. Everywhere I looked I saw comfortable yellow light spilling from houses filled with people who had no idea how it felt to walk that joyless road knowing not one person who cares if you live or die.

The citizens of Finney's Bend would sleep in soft, familiar beds under downy quilts while I looked for a ride to anywhere or, failing that, a dry culvert to escape the wind. Yeah, I wasn't in a

position to pass judgment on anyone's town, rat-fucked or otherwise.

My name is A.J. Beckford and I used to live in a house. And I once had the love of a fine woman. But now I'm a shadow. I pass unnoticed, shunned or ignored. My own family stopped answering my letters a decade ago.

It must have been near midnight when my outstretched thumb finally did the trick. A retiree named Ted Watkins in a pickup with a camper shell. His bumper sticker said MARINES and his camper bore an illustration of the consummate outdoorsman, his hat bedecked with dry flies, landing a rainbow trout of improbable dimensions. They don't generally make 'em that big.

"How far you goin', son?"

"All the way, I guess."

"All the way where?"

"Doesn't matter. Anywhere but here."

"I can take you as far as Blue Hill, if that helps."

"Sure does. I'd kick in a little for gas, but—"

"No sir, this one's on me. Smoke?"

I quit years ago but the destitute accept alms in whatever form they take. I fired one up.

Route 15 frost-heaved and pot-holed its way south-east under our wheels while high clouds played Whac-a-Mole with the constellations and a cold crescent moon. The hardwoods and empty fields gave way to pines as we approached the coast and I soon smelled the salt water of Frenchman's Bay. It was the scent of home once.

I parted company with Ted Watkins at the Amoco station on the edge of town. I picked up my rucksack and he handed me what was left of his Camels. "Here, young feller. You take these. Doc's been after me to quit." I wished him well and thanked him for the lift and the smokes.

In the half-shelter beside the Amoco's dumpster I slept a fitful hour or two and got back on the road before sunrise. It wasn't until I took the Camels out of my rucksack that I stumbled upon the hidden portrait of Andrew Jackson. I mentally added Ted Watkins to the list of kind souls to whom I was indebted. That's a real short list.

When I awoke that morning I was of a mind to work my way south to Rockland or Portland—homes of soup kitchens and homeless shelters—but twenty bucks changed everything. I was less than 25 miles from Weir Cove, the seaside village where one might catch the ferry to Harper's Island, the place I once called home. That was thirteen years ago and an awful lot of water has since slipped by the pier.

It wouldn't do to be recognized out there, not after all that happened, but I was very different from the twenty-five-year-old who left Harper's in handcuffs all those years ago. I'd traded my long hair for a buzz cut; my beard held traces of salt and pepper and had grown out to disguise my sallow face. With my ski cap and cheap shades I felt safely incognito.

My thumb got me to Weir Cove in time to catch a seven-dollar boat ride to the island, leaving me with return fare plus six bucks to keep myself fed for a day or two. Top o' the world, man.

On the trip over I saw two people I once knew—Noyes Polk and his wife, Edy—but they didn't recognize me. It's odd for a solitary man to come over after Labor Day and I detected a few raised eyebrows among the passengers. I kept my face buried in the only book I owned—Thoreau's *Walden*—and no one asked any questions.

My family moved off of Harper's in 1990. At the time I couldn't imagine not being an islander; living there was everything to me. I had also fallen in love with an island girl, Bridgette McFall, so I stayed.

I rented a piece of land with a little house and a 40 x 60 workshop where I built custom high-end furniture: armoires, blanket chests, dinettes, you name it. Had a Unisaw, duplicating lathe, dedicated mortiser, a real first-rate setup. It took years to put it together then I was arrested and *poof* all gone.

I also worked on the boats now and then, the lobster fishery being inescapable on the coastal islands. There are few islanders who haven't hauled their share of traps.

When the ferry landed at Harper's I saw more familiar faces on the pier but again went unnoticed. Leaving the dock I walked toward town, past the house where I lived much of my childhood. Memories rained down, some like warm sun, some like bitter winds I'd rather forget.

I never understood what made my father so cold-hearted, but life under his roof tended to be fearful, my siblings and I never knowing what would set him off next.

It all changed when I was fourteen and discovered I could outrun him. This knowledge placed at my disposal a whole untapped catalog of smart-ass replies whose immediate consequences I could now escape.

"Goddammit, A. J.! Why in the christ haven't you mowed the lawn?!"

"Because I didn't fuckin' feel like it."

Zhoom! See ya!

Dad said I would land in prison if I didn't straighten up and it was one of the few things he got right, if only on a technicality. I did time all right, but it was for a crime I didn't commit. The one I did commit, I got away with. And it was as bad or worse.

I continued along the road past Johnny Rowe's fish shack, where the island lobstermen would gather of an evening to drink Jack Daniels and see who could tell the biggest lie. In my last year on Harper's I was drowning my post-Bridgette sorrows and would sometimes join them. It will come as no surprise that many fishermen drink as hard as they work. I was no fisherman but I tried to keep up. Some nights I would stagger home, other times I only made it as far as Johnny's dooryard. Often as not, I wasn't the only one to end up there yodeling my dinner into the blueberry patch. This is the truth: I had a drinking problem I was not ready to admit, much less confront. As I grew more and more withdrawn these evenings at Johnny's became the sum-total of my social life.

I saw as I walked along that little about Harper's had changed in my thirteen year absence. I approached the five

buildings that constituted the town and saw not a living soul, which was about right for a Thursday morning in October. It was after 8:00 a.m. The lobstermen sailed at daybreak and islanders with appointments and errands had taken the ferry to the main.

A woman I didn't recognize sat in the passenger seat of a nicely restored teal-over-tan 1948 Studebaker pickup that idled on the road in front of the post-office, which still operated out of Liz Broadmoore's living room. There was no parking lot for postal customers because Liz was disinclined to pave her dooryard.

Edward Hewitt exited the P.O. with a parcel and letters in his fist, the morning sun glinting on the single gold tooth he wore like a freakin' tiara. The woman in the truck turned and flinched at his approach, her features coming into the daylight. I felt sucker-punched.

It was Bridgette, thirteen years older, a bit heavier, and still enchanting in her nerdy-cute kind of way. She glanced blankly at me while Ed shot me a glare like I had no business standing there on his island. I once knew Ed well—and loathed him—but neither of them let slip any sign of recognition.

The torch I carried for Bridgette still burned; I felt it bright and aching as I realized this was what she had come to. Her expression suggested she wasn't exactly thrilled about it either.

When I last lived on the east side of Harper's, Ed Hewitt occupied the abutting ten acres. The size of his lot kept him at a reasonable distance most of the time, but I still would have preferred him on the far side of the planet.

Nothing had ever met with Ed's approval. He muttered unceasingly about the whole world's failure to live up to his expectations. In my drinking days he would sometimes show up at Johnny Rowe's, gaining entrance with a bribe of Crown Royal or Glenlivet, but that was mercifully rare.

Being present in a room while Ed Hewitt pontificated—and no room had yet been found wherein he would not do this—brought on the kind of delight one might attain by striking one's thumb with a ball-peen hammer. Being shitfaced in the same room was perilous since the internal governor switch that kept me from knocking that gold tooth down his throat was liable to get tripped, and Ed was only a little smaller than a steamroller. Top-shelf whiskey or not, when he got loud at Johnny's I was out of there faster than Wile E. Coyote on a new pair of Acme rocket skates.

In my previous life on Harper's Island I worked stern for Ed once and only once. Around 7:00 am we were two miles out from the southern shore when he came out of the wheelhouse with a Remington over-and-under, aimed it skyward and let go with both barrels. A half-dozen herring gulls exploded in a screeching frenzy of guts, bone, and feathers, landing *splat* on the blue water.

"That'll shut 'em up a while."

The clean salt air was left reeking of gunpowder and coppery avian blood. Despite my roiling disgust it did not occur to me at the time that the world would benefit from his absence. It would

be another twenty years before I'd get around to killing him—that's the one I got away with. I only regret having waited so long.

Standing there by the post office I feigned interest in a squirrel chattering from a nearby tree and watched peripherally as Ed climbed aboard the Studebaker he had so lovingly restored. My revulsion erupted anew, but killing him was still not in my immediate plans. That would come later.

Ed and 'Gette sped off and I walked on with a little voice in the back of my head suggesting it was a mistake coming back to Harper's in much the same way a flat tire suggests you stop driving. I loved the island but it wasn't like they'd ever let me live here again in peace. I recognized the little voice as my better judgment and, as with a number of crucial junctures in my life, I disregarded it. We all receive an allotment of stupid acts per lifetime; I was pretty sure I'd surpassed my quota, and I was only thirty-eight.

The day was brisk but fair; early clouds had dissipated so I started for the east side thinking I'd just have a look, see what had changed and what had not. Before leaving the main drag I faced a moment of indecision over entering the Island Mercantile for something to fend off starvation. Hunger growled out a win over fear of losing my anonymity.

The store was vacant apart from the winsome—albeit dreadlocked—young lady at the register who, to my great relief, was unknown to me. She looked up from her dog-eared copy of Kerouac's *On the Road*, smiled, and said "G'morning" in a voice that suggested she didn't get much sleep last night. I located a

one-dollar box of generic saltines and approached the counter she occupied like her own personal faerie garden.

"Anything else today?" A broad smile, warm and fair.

"Thank you, no."

"You must've come over this morning?"

"Indeed I did." She was only being friendly, but I wore a prison-hardened shell designed to ward off those who were bent on minding my business.

"Staying long?"

"I haven't decided."

She darkened slightly, realizing I would not be playing twenty questions with her. I bid her a fine day and was gone.

Continuing east on the road I reflected on our brief conversation and decided I might stay a few days after all. I could be homeless on Harper's or the mainland—did it really matter? Not too many resources for the down-and-out on the island—none, actually—but I had been getting by with nothing for the better part of a year and by God I was pretty good at it.

The town soon yielded to aromatic pine forest and vacant summer homes whose opulence I once viewed with envy. I looked at them now through the lens of poverty and saw opportunities for survival.

Further along, I turned on to a narrow path that opened into the woods on my right. This was where it happened, the crime that put me in the Maine State Prison for the longest eight years of my life. The crime that saw me falsely convicted while the real perpetrator went free.

Island kids still used the path just enough to keep it defined as it bisected the island, wending its way to the eastern shore. Deep in the woods I stopped beneath a massive red oak that stood out of place among the spruces.

The assailant hid himself here behind the stout trunk waiting to descend on his prey. His victim found the courage to scare off her attacker and so was not raped. Had she not denied him I might have been exonerated by a DNA lab, but I have always known it was better for her to be spared than me. The attempted rape took place on July 4th of '05 after the big to-do the island had thrown at the town hall. I looked forward to dances, potlucks and other social functions with all the giddy exhilaration of a crack dealer awaiting a visit from the DEA. Such gatherings provided me with an excuse to stay home and get hammered, then pass out in front of the TV. Like I needed an excuse.

The dance broke up at 10:30 and sixteen-year-old Annelise Baker left alone, walking to her house at Randall Harbor just down the road from mine. She took the shortcut, following the beam of her flashlight into the woods. When she passed the big oak the would-be rapist grabbed her from behind. In the seconds before she dropped her flashlight it shone on a red-flannel-clad arm holding a knife with a thunderbird carved into the haft. She winced at the blade against her throat as her blouse and skirt were wrenched from her body. She smelled booze and was scratched by beard stubble against her neck. When his fingers entered the waistband of her panties she screamed loud enough to wake people on the next island. Her attacker lost his nerve and

ran off into the cool summer night, leaving Annelise Baker emotionally traumatized but physically unharmed.

When she arrived home distraught and without clothing, Annelise's father gathered a stalwart band of islanders and they went looking door-to-door for the slimy bastard.

When they came to my house—lo and behold—they found me passed out on the couch sporting three days' growth of beard, wearing a red flannel shirt and reeking of Tennessee whiskey. The only thing missing was the knife, which they figured I left in the woods. The Coast Guard brought a couple of Staties out to arrest me and before I knew it I was sitting in the Knox County Jail charged with gross sexual assault on a minor.

The mind of an alcoholic plays tricks. I had to concede rationally the possibility that I had blacked out and assaulted Annelise while my mind was absent. Although it did not explain the knife, that errant kernel of doubt produced a finding of "inconclusive" from the polygraph. The power-suited female assistant D.A. fired all bow tubes and my conviction was little more than a formality.

Eight years in prison, three years probation, ten years on the sex offender registry. They turn you loose and tell you to be a good, productive citizen, pretending they haven't made it all but impossible. I tried to put it behind me but the stigma persisted, enshrined in the bits and bytes of the computer age. It was no longer possible to escape one's past.

These many years after the incident I emerged from the shortcut on the island's east side and saw that, apart from a green

and white Scout International parked at my former home, little had changed. I walked south past Ed Hewitt's place where the Studebaker sat ticking as the engine cooled. Another quarter-mile down the road I came to Randall Harbor, once a bustling hive of activity comprising more than thirty homes and businesses. That was a century ago; six summer homes were all that remained. On that late October morning Randall Harbor was vacant as an osprey's nest on New Year's Day and would remain so until June.

I watched the harbor shed its blindfold of late morning fog, exposing rockbound shores, dew-laden meadows and water the color of sapphires. In my years of hardscrabble living I'd forgotten the transcendent power of such beauty. I had missed the island more than words could tell. I would stay.

I survived the coming weeks by raiding summer homes for the canned and dry goods their owners left behind, sleeping in them only during snaps of bitterest cold. For more utilitarian items I visited Ed Hewitt's storage shed and workshop after the sun clocked out for the night.

I had been many things in my life but never a thief, unless you count scavenging from supermarket dumpsters as theft. My conscience nettled me for those pilferings from the summer folks and I swore I would pay for or replace what I took, even from Ed Hewitt.

Casing his workshop one early November night I saw that in addition to the apparatus of lobster-trap construction and repair there appeared to be cases upon cases of goods stacked at the far end of the shop. Thinking I'd stumbled on an inexhaustible trove

of foodstuffs, I entered through a window to investigate. I didn't know Ed's present whereabouts—the Studebaker was gone —so I operated with quicksilver speed and cat-burglar stealth. My eyes took a moment to adjust to the moonlit interior but I moved swiftly.

Under the first tarp I found a Delta Unisaw. The second concealed a Powermatic duplicating lathe, the third a dedicated mortiser. The scheming rat-bag had stolen my entire operation and likely did it the moment I set foot on the Coast Guard cutter 13 years ago. And to think he had the gall to make a statement at my sentencing, urging the judge to assess the maximum penalty. Turns out you had a vested interest didn't you, Ed. Annelise was his niece, but his motive, as always, was his abiding self-interest.

I left his shop thinking there was at least one benefit to be had from this discovery: stealing from him would no longer engender soul-crushing guilt. I may even get all that stuff back one day, although I didn't see how. That question would resolve itself by winter's end.

Only twice that winter did I patronize the Island Mercantile; once to buy a toothbrush and spool of dental floss, once for the needles and thread I was unable to find elsewhere. Miss Dreadlocks manned the register and persisted in trying to chat me up. She was friendly and polite but failed to conceal her surprise at my continued presence on the island. Harper's is small enough that you can know everyone if you want to, but big enough that you don't have to. Working at the island's only grocery store, Goldi-Dreads knew everyone and knew I was out of

place. She would without question feed news of my ongoing presence into the rumor mill; it was an unspoken requirement of the shopkeeper's job.

As the winter wore on I supplemented my raids on the summer folks' larders with foraging excursions on the deserted southeastern shore. Mussels were plentiful (though laden with pearls) as were periwinkles which I found to be surprisingly tasty when boiled in salt water. I popped them from their shells with a toothpick: Popcorn Escargot. I only wished I had some drawn butter.

In early February I needed a couple of items from Ed's shop—a length of rope, a quart of kerosene for my borrowed campstove—and arrived at his place around ten p.m. The Studebaker was gone. Probably drinking himself stupid over at Johnny Rowe's. A light in the house meant Bridgette was home and awake, making this an ill-timed foray. While I stood brooding in the moonlight Ed caught me in his low-beams as he slid into the gravel drive.

I hit the ground like a soldier under fire and skittered around to the back of his workshop, pulling myself into the shallow crawlspace beneath the joists and crossbeams. I picked up a nasty gash on my right palm from what I at first thought was an exposed nail. When I yanked my hand back a knife fell from the beam into the dirt. Etched into the haft was a thunderbird.

I thrust panic aside for the moment and let my mind follow this path to its obvious conclusion: it was Ed Hewitt lying in wait behind that big oak tree thirteen years ago and this is where he

hid the knife he held to the throat of his niece when he tried to rape her.

I lay still in the dirt under his workshop waiting for the sound of boots on gravel coming to drag me out.

Ed killed the engine and headlights, then slobbered out the driver's side door muttering about goddamned young bucks who ain't done a lick of honest work in their whole jo-jeezly life. He stumbled up the porch steps and oozed into his parlor, leaving me panting in the dark and silence. I took to the woods quick as a lightning strike, thinking he might come back any second with that Remington over-and-under. I watched from the safety of the trees but he did not reappear.

Back at my campsite—well-secluded and near a small cave to escape the rain and snow—I examined my hand by flashlight and saw a gaping, jagged gash clear across my palm. As prepared as I was for survival at its most primitive, I was neither equipped for nor capable of performing reconstructive surgery on myself. I cringed mightily at the thought of sewing this thing up, but stitches—quite a few, it appeared—were inescapable. I applied a half-assed bandage and went to see about pilfering the bottle of hydrogen peroxide I'd noticed in the medicine cabinet of a house at Randall Harbor. I returned to my camp with the injury elevated and wrapped in a stolen pillowcase.

I threaded a sewing needle with dental floss, sterilized it—I hoped—with peroxide and gingerly tried a stitch. The pain was roughly equal to that of medieval torture, and I broke into a profuse sweat even though it was twenty-five degrees out. I

scraped away the top few inches of what was once a large snow drift until I could see nothing but clean white, then plunged my hand in until the cold hurt worse than the gash. Another splash of peroxide and I steeled myself for the needle again. It penetrated easily and I was more revulsed by the thought of skewering my own flesh than by the actual pain. Mind over matter, I distracted myself by reciting *Jabberwocky*, returning only once to the snow bank before the ghastly chore was done. My stitchery would not win any embroidery prizes, but it would spare me a case of gangrene. 'Twas brillig, indeed.

My nightly raids would come to a halt while I healed up. I parked myself in the low cave with blankets and *Walden*, and thought about Ed Hewitt and his crime.

I now held evidence that might exonerate me, but I couldn't prove how or where I'd found it. Were I to present it to law enforcement they would be glad to show me the door. If it had Ed's fingerprints on it they'd been obliterated by mine, not to mention my blood and DNA.

Were I to plead my case to the people of Harper's I might sow a trace of doubt but it would ultimately be his word against mine. In other words, I'd achieved no more than an ugly scar and permanently limited range of motion in my hand.

A part of me wanted to confront the son of a whore just so he'd know I was wise to him, but where would that leave us? Knowing what I knew of Ed Hewitt—that he could be dangerous—I had to ask if I was prepared to face still more consequences from his offense. Would it be worth that risk to feel personally

vindicated? An incendiary thread was gradually taking up residence in my mind and my trains of thought grew accordingly fuzzy. I would think things over at another time, with a clearer head.

Wild turkeys and white-tailed deer roamed the forests of Harper's, both of which I had ruled out as food sources since hunting was prohibited throughout the island. I had already broken enough laws that winter. It came as a small but unhappy surprise when in the course of his illegal poaching Ed Hewitt blundered across my hidden camp and in the nearby cave, me.

He spat tobacco juice in my general direction. "Well, what do we got here? Come on out of there now."

A disturbing scene from *Deliverance* crossed my mind as I crawled out, taking care not to start my hand bleeding again. Ed carried a deer rifle but didn't aim it at me; just let me feel its presence establishing the power dynamic in our little *tête-à-tête*.

"Name's Jack." Ed had met me before, and I gave him my middle name since my first—Arthur—was a giveaway.

"What d'you think you're doin' out here?"

"Just camping."

"In the middle of wintertime?" His chaw worked up a vile brown froth at the corner of his mouth.

"I like the cold."

"There ain't no camping on Harper's, junior."

I didn't dare reply that there's no hunting either.

"I'm not bothering anyone."

"Wait a minute." He studied me like I was something he blew out of his nose. Then, "I know who you are."

Oh, fuck. He remembers me.

"You're the bum Gloria's been yakkin' about."

"Gloria?"

"That granola-hugger down to the store."

"Oh. Her."

"Well, the party's over, Sunny Jim. I'm puttin' you off."

"Putting me off?"

"Off the island, numbnuts. You best grab your shit, pal. I ain't got all day."

Most of what little I owned was already in my rucksack. I added my book and the bottle of peroxide. Ed noticed my bandage for the first time.

"The fuck'd you do to your hand?"

"Got cut. It's nothing."

He declined further comment and we walked from the forest to the pier where his boat, *Reaper*, was tied up.

When we passed his house I looked up and saw Bridgette through a kitchen window. We came around to the back and there she was on the porch wiping her hands on a floury apron. Ed Hewitt does not deserve a woman who bakes her own bread, I thought.

She regarded me with concern then looked quizzically at her husband. "Ed?"

"Got to run over to town, babe. Won't be long."

Bridgette inspected me with curiosity. "Who is—"

"Never you mind about that," Ed snapped. "Tend to your baking."

Her eyes stayed on me as we walked away, but she said nothing more. I was sorely tempted to identify myself but didn't see what good it would do. The life I once knew here was irretrievably gone; I would return to the mainland and leave Harper's Island behind me again, fading into the fog of the past.

I boarded Reaper and set my pack on the engine housing where it protruded into the wheelhouse. Ed leaned his rifle against the bulkhead, in easy reach if I should act up.

I had no intention of acting up. I buttoned my coat against the cold wind and pulled my ski cap down over my ears. Less than a mile into the five-mile voyage we crossed the path of the *Island Transporter*, a massive barge out of Rockland. Ed's Reaper rode up the first roller of the *Transporter's* wake and slid with a thump into the following trough. I watched in dismay as my rucksack jarred open, disgorging a small bottle of peroxide, *Walden*, and a rust-spotted knife with a thunderbird haft.

Ed throttled back and stepped away from the helm, leaving the boat to trace a broad circular course in the *Transporter's* wake. We were at a momentary standoff. Ed aimed his gun at my chest while I held the T-Bird knife in my left hand. His eyes bored into mine.

"Lose the hat, there, mister I-like-the-cold."

I had no leverage; I scraped it from my head and dropped it next to my rucksack.

"Beckford. As I live and breathe. Put the pieces together, did ya?"

"Yeah, it's me, all right. How've you been, Ed?"

"You ain't done too well, have you, A.J.? Living rough, out in the woods. I see you got my knife." He resettled the gun on his arm. I nodded; he spit tobacco juice into the sea. "Drop it, A.J. Knife never beats gun."

I let the knife clatter to the deck and he kicked it away.

"I don't s'pose I'll be puttin' you off after all. Leastwise not on the main."

His meaning hit me like a rogue wave. My presence on Harper's was little more than rumor to everyone but Ed, Bridgette, and Gloria, and of all those people only Ed knew my name. No one would ask questions if I disappeared. His biggest problem would vanish with me.

Oh fuck. He's putting me off here and now.

I picked up my cap and put it back on, then rubbed at my nose, itchy with the beginnings of a cold. "Prison was hell, Ed. But this last year or so... yikes."

"I'd say so, by the looks." He gave a malicious chuckle.

"Then I had to go and fuck this up." I made my hand into a tight fist and felt fresh blood soaking into the makeshift bandage.

Ed tightened his grip on the rifle, wary of a trick. "Looks t'me like you got a bigger problem now."

I sighed, "Yeah. Probably so."

I unwrapped the bandage and spread my fingers, shuddering as the stitches tore into the flesh of my palm. A red cascade

erupted. I raised my hand and said, "I think it's infected," but he wasn't falling for it. His eyes stayed focused on mine.

I touched my nose again and let go a violent sneeze, at the same time flicking a spray of blood across his face. In the instant he was blinded I swatted the gun aside. Ed pulled the trigger and the bullet pierced the sleeve of my coat, then struck an old marine battery on the deck, spilling acid on the grey deck paint.

Ed squinted, his eyes stung by the blood, and fired another shot. I wrenched the rifle barrel away and aimed this one into the sea. I fought to keep my grip on the blood-slick barrel; Ed literally had the upper hand. He struggled desperately for his gun but lost his footing in a pool of battery acid and melting deck paint, cracking another bullet into the sky as he fell. His head connected loudly with the engine housing and he lay on the deck like a blackfish carcass, spewing tobacco juice, a trickle of blood at his right temple. I disarmed him and stood with the rifle aimed at his head. Gun certainly does beat knife, but as Ed just discovered, a slippery deck sometimes beats gun. He sputtered in his rage.

"Goddamn convict. Thieving homeless beggar."

Even though it pulled at me like a rip-tide, I resisted the urge to put a bullet in his brain.

I ignored his ongoing diatribe while my thoughts raced across the lost years of my life and the lost innocence of poor Annelise Baker, who would see rapists in the shadows for the rest of her days. Ed seized on my hesitation.

"You ain't got the balls to shoot me, scared of bein' locked up again." Apoplectic fury throbbed in his eyes but what he said was true: my fear of prison had spared his life. So far.

"You would have drowned me, Ed, without a second thought."

I studied his face, looking for any trace of remorse. Even fear would have sufficed. Instead he spat another stream of tobacco juice aimed at my face. It fell short, leaving a foul stain on the breast of my jacket.

He tried to regain his footing but I flipped the rifle end-for-end and walloped a crushing blow to his skull with the hardwood stock. He fell and lay supine with eyes wide but motionless. Blood ran from both his ears.

The words *self-defense* pulsed in my head as I dropped the gun and stood over him with trembling hands. With my record—and without witnesses—a plea of self-defense was not likely to gain much legal traction.

I rewrapped my hand then prodded him for signs of life. I checked for a pulse but couldn't locate one. Ed's mouth had fallen open so it looked like he was showing off that gold incisor. I closed it, grimacing at the touch of dead flesh, while *Reaper* continued idling in slow circles, going nowhere.

After twenty minutes of hernia-inducing effort, I'd wrestled Ed's bulk up onto the transom, followed by the acid-leaking marine battery. I removed Ed's belt and looped it around one of his ankles, then secured the other end to one of the battery's

carry straps. I glanced at the sonar: forty-six fathom, or about 280 feet with a mud bottom. That would do.

The splash propelled a column of icy water into the late-fall sky, washing down on me in a frigid salt rain; the vile bastard's parting shot. Blinking and sputtering I shook it off, then dropped the knife and gun into the sea to join their owner. I scrubbed the deck with soap and seawater then took the helm, setting a course for Randall Harbor, which would remain vacant for at least two more months. I wanted no witnesses to the scenario I was about to create: Ed Hewitt fell overboard on his way back from the mainland and drowned. I never set foot on his boat.

The remains of the drowned sometimes come ashore once decomposition floats them, but many are never found, lost forever to the vastness of the ocean. The Coast Guard would in time conclude that was Ed's fate and would have no reason to suspect anything other than fatal misadventure. Bridgette saw me but could not say if I actually boarded Ed's boat or not, and in any case did not know my name.

She might still be the rope that hangs me.

The last piece was to dispose of *Reaper* and it had to be done quickly, before I lost the tide.

Randall Harbor was home to a small dock accessible only at high water, along with five sheltered moorings. All were currently unused since the runabouts and day-sailers of summer were in dry dock. I arrived on a three-quarter tide that was ebbing fast and eased up to the dock, anticipating the shock of hull on stone. It didn't come, but only by inches. I put *Reaper* in neutral and

made her fast, then ran to a nearby boathouse and searched the eaves for icicles. On the north side I found several that had been building all winter. I broke off the largest ones and took them back to the boat.

Reaper faced southeast toward the open sea; the only obstacle between her and Africa was the wide Atlantic. If I could, I would send her at least part of the way across.

I climbed aboard the boat and entered the wheelhouse. The engine idled; the fuel gauge read half full. I broke the icicles against the engine housing and tried several pieces before finding the one that would jam the helm in the correct position. I put the boat in gear and she strained at her mooring line, held captive. I nudged the throttle up to a quarter and exited the wheelhouse, leaving the heat from the engine to hide the last evidence of my crime. I cast off the line and she was on her way. I held my breath for a nail-biting moment when she scraped her hull on a rock, but the ice wedge held the wheel steady. She sailed past the headland on a course for the open sea. I was overtaken by a creeping dread, the fear that I was seen ditching the boat. I turned to study the dirt road and summer homes but saw no one. I followed the path out to the headland and perched on a rock to watch until she was a tiny speck on the far horizon, turning in slow, broad circles, looking for all the world like her captain had gone overboard. Poor bastard.

What I had done to Bridgette stung me more deeply than what I had done to Ed. In the year between our breakup and my arrest I'd grasped at a pitiful hope of winning her back, exactly

the sort of desperate self-delusion alcoholics thrive on. If there was ever the tiniest shred of a chance she would take me again I had now done the very thing that would not only forever negate it, but would fill her with justified bloodlust at the mere mention of my name, should she ever learn the truth.

A breeze whispered through the winter-brown native grass as I studied the endless sea and sky. I heard gentle rollers breaking on the shore far below and wondered how it was even possible to fuck up one's life to the degree I'd fucked up mine, and now Bridgette's.

I returned to my camp and read the same line of *Walden* over and over as my mind volleyed between guilt and justification, failing utterly to achieve equilibrium. The raw nerves of my damaged hand howled in unremitting torment.

All this healing was going to take some time.

I awoke on the third day of my convalescence pleasantly surprised that the authorities had not descended on Harper's to apprehend me. I felt encouraged, but mulled with cautious optimism the many reasons my uppance might yet come. I needed to know what had happened on the island since Ed went missing—if there was an investigation, if questions were raised about the nameless shadowy character seen twice that winter at the Island Mercantile. Goldi-Dreads, the island's nexus of current events, would know. Direct inquiry was out of the question but if I were to show up at the store her reaction might tell me what I needed to know.

I took the shortcut through the woods and entered her Edenic domain just after it opened for business. She wasn't there. In her place was a petite and mousy woman with owlsh glasses I recognized instantly: Bridgette. She sat on a stool by the register, regarding me with an expression mild, pleasant, and unsurprised.

"Well, hello there." Her voice was raspy but cheerful, almost as if she'd been expecting me. I nodded, avoiding her eyes, and disappeared down an aisle, having learned nothing from her demeanor.

I dawdled, pretending to be deeply engrossed in the ingredients list on a bag of Doritos. Bridgette and I were the store's sole occupants, making it impossible for me to slip out the cowbelled door unnoticed. When I approached the checkout Bridgette had returned to her copy of Down East and was plainly not interested in me. I paid for a small sewing kit with the last of the \$20 Ted Watkins gave me about a hundred years ago. I had one foot out the door when Bridgette spoke again.

"A.J."

I froze, visualizing angry islanders with torches and pitchforks gathering to forcibly evict me from their island. I turned and walked back to the cash register with the cowbell announcing my return. "'Gette. You found me out."

"I did." She spoke softly with the gravel in her voice I'd always found so appealing. "About a week after you came back. Gloria Polk mentioned a stranger who looked a bit... forgive me... ragged. I knew you were out and thought you might come back. Harper's does that sometimes; draws people back."

"And you made an educated guess."

"I wasn't certain. Not until the day you and Ed walked past the house.

"He didn't recognize me until we were halfway across."

"So you were on his boat that day."

"Yeah. I was."

"Will you tell me what happened out there?" She saw my mind working, thoughts of a murder conviction and life sentence furrowing my brow. I stammered and failed to deliver a coherent reply. She looked up at me with geeky magnified eyes that darted away.

"I'm sorry, A.J. I'm just so sorry for everything you've had to go through."

"You're apologizing to me?" I was unable to mask my confusion. "What on earth for?"

"Because I knew what he did. Not at first, not until after the trial. But I finally understood why he started acting so strange around AnnElise. Like he was afraid of her."

"I don't doubt he was. If one little thing had jogged her memory—"

"I lived in fear of him, A.J. If I'd only been brave enough I could have spared you all those years in prison."

"You don't owe me anything, 'Gette. I owe you."

"I don't think you do."

I could unburden myself at the risk of Bridgette reporting me, or spend the rest of my life waiting for the hammer that may or may not fall. It was time to decide.

"About what happened on Ed's boat." She looked up at me as I spoke; I saw the beginnings of tears in her eyes. "He knew I'd figured it out. I had his knife. I never meant to kill him but one of us was not coming back from that trip. I wish I hadn't—"

"No, don't say you're sorry." She fidgeted with the buttons of her sweater and continued to avoid my eyes.

"He was your husband."

"You saved me the trouble of divorcing him. Or worse, heaven forbid." She dabbed at a tear. "I swear, A.J., he wasn't always like that."

I raised an eyebrow. In my admittedly limited experience he was always exactly like that.

"Our entire courtship was basically a scam. I didn't see his true colors until it was too late."

We stood in an uneasy silence, our secrets hanging like thunderheads between us. I had only one thing to offer her.

"I won't repeat what you told me, 'Gette. It won't solve anything."

"That's kind of you, A.J., but some have already guessed. There are undercurrents on Harper's that have nothing to do with the tide."

I nodded, knowing just what she meant about island grapevines.

"Getting about time for me to disappear again, I'd say."

"You don't have to."

"I'm afraid I do. Undercurrents, you know. An island has a long memory." I took a step toward the door.

"Listen, A.J., do you want a job?"

I almost laughed. "Who's going to hire me out here? They all think I'm a convicted rapist."

"I need a caretaker for the homestead. I can provide living quarters, too."

"Yeah?"

"Rent free."

I smiled for the first time in years.

I could not have hoped for things to come together as well as they did.

Eight years ago Ed and Bridgette bought the property next door: my old house and workshop. The idea was to rent it out in the summer but it became more burden than it was worth. 'Gette made me a deal: I could stay there until I got some wind back in my sails, then I'd have the option to rent or buy. There was one string attached; Ed's former workshop was cluttered with a bunch of large woodworking machines and it would be my task to dispose of them as I saw fit. She gave me a sly wink as she told me this.

When summer arrived the families vacationing at Randall Harbor found themselves embroiled in a mystery. Unexplained cartons of groceries appeared on their doorsteps, each one accompanied by a note saying "I apologize," and nothing more.

Two artifacts have persisted from my homeless days: an ugly scar on my right hand—I won't be practicing my Paganini etudes any time soon—and a taste for boiled periwinkles.

One fall evening after a storm roiled the sea I took my collecting pail and walked the southeast shore gathering the little purple-grey delicacies. Ahead on the rocky beach I spotted a softball washed up by the recent storm. An old white one, not one of those crazy neon green things like they have nowadays. It was half-buried in a clump of rockweed I nudged aside with the toe of my boot. It rolled over to reveal eye holes teeming with brine shrimp and tiny green crabs. A howling rictus was made more ghastly by the presence of a single gold tooth.

Using a piece of granite rounded by centuries of tides, I reduced the skull to powder and scattered it on the green-grey waves.

The Bottomsiders

Robert Coates

Everything will be ok once Jerilyn gets here. All the unanswered questions will be resolved and my existence—if that's what you'd call it—will make sense again. Which leaves me torn between wanting her to show up yesterday and hoping for her sake that she doesn't arrive for many years. The former would be selfish in the extreme; I often remind myself that I must wish for the latter.

Elijah was the first one I met when I came here in 2018, and he remains the only one I have spoken with at any length. He has a great store of knowledge about life on Raney's Island in the 1800s and the amateur historian in me was keen to hear it. My attention was riveted by the fine detail in his discourse but I realized it was to be expected: he was born here on Raney's in 1835.

When I wasn't absorbing Elijah's history lessons my thoughts frequently turned to Jerilyn. She was my wife. I had no greater desire than to grow old with her. Rocking chairs on the porch, watching the sunset over Jericho Bay. It came as no small shock when I learned it was never going to happen. It is said that we tell no tales. Well, we don't watch any sunsets, either.

Elijah T. Spencer

I heard the topsiders up there digging again. It was quite a spell since they planted a new one. We were of a mind that the Moffat Cemetery had fallen into permanent disuse, but it appears we'll get a new member for our little skull-and-bones club after all.

I was the last one interred, way back in '62. Me and Yarborough joined the Union soon as war was declared but we were the only ones from Raney's Island.

We landed in the 20th Maine. I caught Johnny Reb's rifle ball at 2nd Bull Run and came back to the island in a pine box. I've been reposing here 150 years, wondering who won the damned thing and what's become of Yarborough. You may be assured of this: there was nothing *civil* about it.

I would also like to know what's on my stone. How about *Here Lies Elijah Thomas Spencer, He Died Young So Others Might Live Free*. No, no. Too prideful. More like: *So Punctual He Came Early to His Own Funeral*. Yes, I would like that.

When I was buried they let me settle in a few days before Andrew Moffat woke me. He said it eases the shock but I was pretty well taken aback, nonetheless. This new one's been here four days—out of eternity—and it's up to me, being the last arrival and closest in proximity, to tell him how things stand.

Now, I didn't so much say this as think it in his direction. That's how it works here.

"Hello there and welcome. Name's Elijah Spencer. Folks call me Lige."

"!!?...?"

"How's that again?"

"???...!?"

Wellsir, it went on like that and I couldn't make head nor tail of what he was telling me. I tried again next day only to get more of the same. We all talked it over and decided it was a madman or an imbecile; some poor soul whose brain was broke or diseased. Like as not, we weren't about to get any news out of him. Pity, that. I reckoned I'd best get comfortable for another 150 years. All good things come along in their own time.

It wasn't but a week later the topsiders broke out their shovels again. Seems the Moffat Cemetery was back in business.

"Hello and welcome. I'm Elijah. Folks call me Lige."

"What? Where are we? Why can't I see anything? What the hell is going on here?"

"Whoa, Nellie. I'm here to answer all that but first your name, if you'd be so kind."

"Robert. Robert Coates."

"Mighty pleased to meet you, Mr. Coates. You and I are currently residing in the Moffat Cemetery at Kitts Harbor, Raney's Island, Maine."

He was incredulous. "Say again?"

"You didn't know?"

"Know what?"

"Ah—sorry to say, Robert, but you're dead. We all dead here."

"Get the fuck out."

"Is that the sort of language topsiders use nowadays?"

"Sorry Elijah. No offense."

"These here are the facts, Robbie: with your arrival there are thirteen of us here, mostly Moffats. You are safe; forever free from the dreadful wind and rain, and you will want for nothing. You won't hear from most of us. After 200 years they don't much care to be disturbed. The oldest is Little Abenaki. He was buried by his tribe a century before the island was settled. Near as we can tell he's someplace between the last row and the iron fence, not quite as deep as the rest of us but every bit as dead. We figure he's been here 400 years. He's got no English so we don't rightly know much about him. But he sends out things from time to time - not words exactly. Images, I'd call them. With feelings connected to 'em somehow. You being a history man, you might could get a sense what he's showing better than the rest of us. Now me, I'm the youngster of the group, buried in '62 at the age of 27."

As it turned out, Robbie was intrigued with this history but still flummoxed by his new circumstances.

"Lige, this is all so..."

"Preposterous? Absurd? Tragic? Yessir, it is all that and more. But it isn't so bad and you will become accustomed to it, you have my word." I let that sink in for a beat or two before I continued. "For what it's worth, your senses still work, after a fashion. Think about eyesight and you'll see the darkness of the grave. Think about hearing and you'll get silence, for the most part. I'd advise you not to think about smell unless you've a mind

to get the scent of your own decomposition. Trust me, that is no rose. I'd give it five years. After that it's just soil and damp wood."

"Can we move? I don't think I can move."

"Correct, Robbie. None of us can. We're immobilized. If not, one of us might take a notion to dig their way out of here and roam about frightening the children and womenfolk."

Robert seemed amused at the thought and I heard him think a word that sounded like *zom-bees*. "No indeed," he said. "That would never do."

"Now, I have one question before I go on. Could you tell me please, who won?"

"Who... won?"

"The war."

"They did."

"Damnation. All that Yankee blood for nothing."

"They rolled tanks right into Saigon. We had to evacuate the embassy by helicopter."

"Helly-copiter? What?"

"Uh. Wrong war."

"My lands, Robbie, how many have they had?"

"Too many."

"I fought for the Union. Shot at Manassas, eighteen-hundred and sixty-two."

"Civil War. You won, Lige. The Union won."

"Well, praise be. 'Twas not in vain. I don't suppose you've heard tell of a feller name of Yarborough?"

"Sure. Jason Yarborough. First selectman."

"No, no. Hosea."

"Jason's great-grandfather."

"Then he survived. Hallelujah." We fell silent a moment, the quiet of the tomb being an utter sonic void. Then:

"Lige, are we really dead? As in forever?"

"We are, and that's a fact. Not quite what the Good Book promised, is it?"

"I'll say."

"I've had a fair stretch of time to ponder it. We are souls or spirits of a kind. There may be some other part of us up yonder just a-ringin' them golden bells, but you wouldn't know it by me. Whatever we are, this here part stays with the bones. We reckon it's eternal."

"And what do we do to pass eternity?"

"Not a blessed thing."

"I'll lose my mind."

"I can state to a dead certainty you will not."

"I don't even know how I died."

"Be thankful it was quick and painless."

"Probably a brain aneurysm. There's a history in my family. I was only 48."

"And you always will be. Listen, Robbie. Everyone comes here troubled by a question or two. What's to become of my wife, my child, my home. And later, what has happened in the world since I left it. But these yearnings fade with time."

"My wife. Jerilyn."

"Mine's news of the world; the march of progress."

"I can give you an update."

"All in good time, thank you kindly." I'd waited a century and a half; another day or two wouldn't matter.

"Since it appears they're using the Moffat Cemetery again, you can surely look forward to news of your beloved, by and by."

"Her plot is next to mine."

"How'd that come to be?"

"It's her family's land. Old island stock. I was the newcomer."

"So much the better. She'll tell you firsthand. Here's hoping for a good long spell before she joins us, though."

"And until then?"

"Sleep. Years and years of it."

"I can't sleep for years, Lige. I have insomnia. It used to drive Jeri crazy."

"I have good news, Robbie. You'll find that all your bodily ailments have left you, including your insomnia. And this sleep is different. You don't dream or snore or toss and turn. You shut yourself down, like putting out a light. It's a more restful sleep than you ever had in your life."

"How?"

"Just think on it a minute and out you go. I'll wake you this time tomorrow."

Robbie acquired the knack right quick. When I woke him all he knew was he'd been gone for one day. He had no recollection of sleeping, just as folks have no memory of the time that passes before their birth. In death the passage of time takes on a whole new meaning.

"You may be right, Lige. It isn't so bad."

"With a little practice you can choose when you wake up. I rouse myself every five years but most go longer. Little Abenaki once slept 100 years, leastwise we think that's what he said."

"What else?" I sensed Robbie was fishing for more history, like he feared it might get away.

"Oh, plenty more, and all the time in the world to tell it."

He was accepting of this, and volunteered:

"Speaking of the world..."

"Ah, yes. The news." I roused a few others I knew would take an interest.

Robbie asked me, "Where to begin?"

"I don't suppose you've looked at my stone."

"I have. Deer Isle granite. Showing some wear."

"And the inscription?"

"Just name and dates, as I recall. Simple, dignified."

"That'll do. That will be just fine. Now listen, Robbie. There's one buried right close to you we can't make sense of. He, or maybe she, doesn't have language of any kind, just these odd impulses, I'd call them, of bewilderment. Been here less than a month." I didn't exactly hear Robbie laugh, but I felt his amusement. "You know who it is?"

"That I do. It's Jonesy. I nearly forgot he was here."

"Well, what's wrong with him?"

"Apart from being dead?"

"Very funny."

"Nothing's wrong with him, he's a dog. My old yellow Lab."

If I still had a face, its expression would have been that of a fool. "Is that a fact," I said, and found myself laughing for the first time in 162 years.

Robbie called to his old hound. "Jonesy. Hey, Jonesy. Who's a good boy?"

"!!ROWF!"

So the afterlife works for dogs, too. How about that. I guess you're never too old—or dead—to learn something new. "One more question, Robbie."

"Shoot."

"What about this-here helly-copiter? What manner of a contraption is that?"

Robert Coates spent the better part of a week describing a world that seemed plucked from a futurologist's wildest imaginings. We could never have dreamt such things. Motion pictures, wireless radio, television, automobiles, atomic bombs, air travel and computers. I was skeptical of his claim that man traveled to the moon in '69 but he clarified that it was 1969, 167 years after my death and not seven.

By the time he finished, every soul in the Moffat Cemetery was awake, even Little Abenaki. I felt something from his direction - not words, but an image: the night sky over the harbor, big seagoing canoes pulled up on the shore, stars so thick they looked like snow. A feeling came with it... wonder, maybe? Awe at how far we'd traveled?

"Seems Little Abenaki's taken a shine to you, Robbie," Elijah observed. "I felt that one too, but he was aiming it at you. He don't normally reach out like that."

They all went back to sleep once the tale was told, satisfied with—and sometimes troubled by—humanity's progress in their absence. I kept Robbie company a bit longer.

"Tell me, Robert, how did you come to live on Raney's Island?"

"I was a summer kid in the 1970s and 80s. Me and my brothers. We loved the place. The beauty of it, the easy pace of life."

"Easy to do when you're a child. You see the idyllic and not the hardship."

"True. Jerilyn's a native, born and raised right here at Kitts Harbor. I fell in love with her, too. She'd been through hell here, but it was still home to her. She spoke so eloquently of her roots—of legacy, heritage, birthright and conservancy—that I knew she'd never be happy anywhere else. This island was to her the family she had lost."

"The sacrifices a man will make for love. She must be a real peach."

"In all honesty, Lige, Jeri is not the easiest woman to love, but I do. More than words can tell."

He paused, pining. I wanted to assure him it would pass like an April snowshower but this was not the time. Sometimes you just have to let it hurt for a spell.

I spoke again after a time. "I'd just about bet the farm she's up there right now missing you just as you miss her." We left it at that.

Robbie inquired about day-to-day life in the 19th century and I was pleased to oblige. That conversation ended with Robbie nodding into a blissful oblivion that was to remain uninterrupted for 18½ years, barely a heartbeat on the scale of eternity. Over the years I woke from time to time, and found myself in wordless communion with Little Abenaki. He showed me the island as it was— the shoreline, the fishing grounds, faces long turned to dust. I showed him what I could of the world I'd left behind. We were students of each other's histories.

Robert Coates

Elijah and I awoke when they started digging again. We heard mourners, then bagpipes. The coffin came to rest. The grave was filled and silence returned to the Moffat Cemetery. When the time came, it was up to me to do the orientation. I was eager for this; I would no longer be the new guy.

"Hello and welcome. I'm Robbie, class of 2018. And who might you be?"

This was met with a faint whimper and a strong wave of alarm. "It's OK, everything is OK. Nothing to be afraid of." The fear abated somewhat. "Just think your words in my direction and I'll hear you."

"Uhhh... like this?" A male voice. Not Jerilyn.

"Yes, that's it. Loud and clear." He sounded old.

"Samuel Merchant is my name. I think... I mean, I'm pretty sure... I died?"

"That is correct, Mr. Merchant. This is the afterlife."

"Are you the Lord? Saint Peter?"

"Oh no, nothing like that. Turns out that was all mythology."

"Then?"

I gave Sam Merchant a quick run-down of the basics of being dearly departed, with a promise of further details to come. As a topsider he'd been religious but not fervent, and took the shattering of his illusions well. That's one of the features of being dead: quick and cheerful acceptance of even the hardest truths.

"Tell me, Samuel, did you know a woman named Jerilyn Coates in your time on Raney's Island?"

"Not personally. I knew of her."

"Is she still on the island?"

"No, she left long ago. Close to twenty years, I think."

"Do you know where she went?"

"State prison."

"She what? My God, why?"

"She murdered her husband. His name was Robert."

Had I not been dead this would have killed me. I couldn't think. Couldn't form words. The darkness pressed in like it never had before.

Sam asked, "Are you alright?"

I wasn't. Nothing was alright. Nothing made sense.

From Little Abenaki's direction came an image—brief, unbidden. A face I'd never seen, young and beloved. Then

absence. The feeling of a loss so old it had worn smooth, like a stone beaten by centuries of waves. He wasn't offering comfort, exactly. Just... empathy. He knew this kind of pain.

"It's just..." I finally managed. "I'm Robert. Her husband."

The silence that followed was different now—thick with Sam's horror at what he'd just revealed.

"Oh, my." A long pause. "You didn't know?"

"No. I didn't."

I tried to calculate reasons why she might have done such a thing and came up empty. Apart from an infrequent and very minor spat our marriage was without strife. I'd learned her triggers early on, or so I thought.

"I don't suppose you recall her motive."

"No, Robert. Sorry."

I was about to ask how she did it but realized it didn't matter. The means were of no consequence; the end would remain the same. Me, dead.

Elijah T. Spencer

I'll confess it; I eavesdropped on Robbie's chat with our new man. And I believe he learned more than he wanted to know. That's the chance you take, I reckon.

"Wake up, Robbie."

"Huh."

"Seems you've had some bad news?"

"Yeah. Kind of caught me off guard."

"You bearing up ok?"

"Sure. Although I can't help but wonder why." He paused a moment, collecting his thoughts. "I mean—I can't for the life of me imagine how I drove her to that. I knew she had issues; things in her past. But homicide? Everything I did, I did for her."

It was a mystery that wanted solving, and I must admit my curiosity was aroused.

"What do you recall of your last day, Robbie? Maybe we can unravel this."

"I had some business off-island. I left around 7:00 am and came back over on the 10:00 mailboat."

"What business?"

"The bank. Financing a project."

I'd gathered from our conversations that Robbie was a dealer in trade or commerce of some kind. "What project?"

"Jeri and I had a nice parcel of land, ten acres and shore frontage. I was about to build an upscale house on a piece of it."

"Ah. Moving up in the world."

"No, not to live in. As an investment."

"How's that?"

"I could build it for \$500,000 and turn it over for a million or better. In the current market anyway. People will pay beaucoup for that kind of harbor view."

I believed he'd misspoken. "A million? U.S. dollars?"

"It's not like that, Lige. It's a fair chunk of change to be sure, but it's not what it was in your day."

"In 1860, a million dollars would buy... let's see...the better part of Vermont?"

"Doesn't go quite as far in 2018, but yes, it was to be a high-end cottage, without question."

"And how did your beloved feel about this enterprise?"

"She didn't know. I meant to surprise her once I'd sealed the deal."

"Is this the same girl who spoke of heritage and birthright and conservancy?"

"Yeah, I know what you're getting at. But she would have come around. I was sure of it."

"Maybe you should tell me more about her difficult upbringing."

Robert Coates

"Do you realize the life she's lived?"

That's what Dad said when I announced my intention to marry her. I knew she was a lifelong island girl, highly intelligent, and a fawn-like beauty. But I didn't know the details of her past.

"And what of this life she supposedly lived?" said Lige.

"Her four-year-old sister died in a freak accident—burned her hands on a woodstove and ran outside screaming, right into the path of a falling tree. Jerilyn was twelve, watching it happen. After that, her mother was institutionalized, and her father crawled into a bottle of rum and stayed there. At fourteen she was sent to live with an uncle in Ellsworth who abused her. She escaped and came back to the island. To this day she cannot abide the sound of a chainsaw. It sends her right back to that

moment. By the time I met her in the summer of 1985 the worst of it was over. But the damage was already done."

Elijah agreed this qualified as a difficulty. "I see. That would surely leave her troubled."

In the silence that followed I heard the sound of something with many legs burrowing through the soil around me. Some kind of subterranean millipede, on its way to somewhere.

Lige asked, "Where was the lady on your last day, while you were over to the main?"

"At home. I told her I had business in town, nothing more."

"Did you tell her you were meeting with the bank?"

"No. I wanted it to be a done deal before—" I stopped.

"Before what?"

"Before she could... worry about it unnecessarily."

"I see. So what happened when you got home?"

"I'd hired the O'Shea brothers to level the building site the following week. But they found themselves idle and needing a paycheck, so they started early. I hadn't told Jeri about the project yet, and she ran over there spitting fire the minute she heard the—"

I stopped.

"The minute she heard what, Robbie?"

"The equipment. The tools."

"What kind of tools?"

I didn't want to say it. Saying it would make it real.

"Robbie?"

"Chainsaws," I finally said. "They were clearing trees with chainsaws."

"The sound of which she could not abide."

"But she didn't know—I was going to explain—"

"In her eyes you sold off a piece of the legacy and heritage she held so dear, disregarded her ideal of conservancy, went behind her back to do it, then sent her reeling into hysteria with the one sound she couldn't bear."

"It wasn't like that. I did it for her. For our future."

"But she never got to hear that explanation, did she?"

"No," I admitted. "She didn't."

"So yes, Robbie. To her, it was exactly like that."

I wanted to argue. To explain how she would have understood eventually, how it was a sound investment, how I'd planned the whole conversation out. But the words wouldn't come.

Elijah was only playing Devil's advocate. Man, I hate it when the Devil's right.

Elijah T. Spencer

Robbie went quiet after that. Not sleep, exactly—more like he'd turned himself inward, away from all of us. I'd check on him from time to time over the years but he had nothing to say. I reckoned he was working through it in his own way, preparing himself for what was coming. Twenty-three years passed before the topsiders broke out their shovels again.

Samuel Merchant

"Greetings! Welcome to the afterlife, Sam Merchant here."

"Uh... hi." A gravelly voice, like a long-term smoker. "Can you hear me?"

"Clear as a bell."

"Am I buried next to my husband?"

"Yes ma'am, I believe you are. Would you be Jerilyn Coates?"

She seemed to think about this for a minute. "I was."

She was badly shaken, but that's to be expected. I said, "One moment, Mrs. Coates. I'll wake Robert."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

Robert Coates

Sam should have known I was already awake. We all heard the topsiders digging. They don't do anything quietly.

"Hello Jeri."

Silence. I felt something that wasn't quite a sob, more like the memory of one.

"Robert. Oh, god. Robert, I'm so sorry. I didn't... I mean... I never thought..."

"I know. I've had time to think about it. We both have a lot to say, I imagine."

There was a pause while she composed herself.

"I know about the chainsaws," I said. "About the house. Lige and I worked it out."

"I just... snapped. It was like I wasn't even there, wasn't even me. All I could hear was that sound, and everything just—"

everything I'd tried to hold together just came apart. The rage... it wasn't even rage, really. It was like drowning."

"I understand now. I made bad decisions, Jeri. I thought I was securing our future, but I didn't see... I didn't fully understand what you were carrying. What that land meant to you. What I was asking you to bear."

Her confusion was palpable. "But Robert... I *killed* you. I took everything from you—your life, your future, everything you would have had. How can you forgive that?"

"I've had twenty-three years to think about it. About us. And I know this: I don't want to spend eternity angry. We both made mistakes. We both paid for them."

The silence that followed was different than before—not empty, but full of something like acceptance, or understanding.

"The years have been harder on you than me, I think. Would you like to rest? Really rest, the way we do it here. No dreams, no awareness. Just... peace."

"I would." I felt her relief, deep and genuine.

"A year, then? On the scale of eternity, it's barely a blink."

"A year sounds perfect."

We settled into the darkness together. When I woke—whether from some internal clock or sensing change—I found Jerilyn stirring beside me. A year had passed like a heartbeat.

And then I felt it: a tremor in the earth. Distant at first, then closer. The wind had risen.

"What is that?" Jerilyn asked. She'd never felt weather from this side of the ground.

"Storm coming. A big one, by the feel of it. Not to worry, we're safe."

The vibrations grew stronger. We could hear it now—not just wind but something massive moving above us, branches snapping, debris hitting stone, huge rollers breaking on the shore. The rain came in sheets so heavy we felt the impact through six feet of soil. The soil on our seaward perimeter began to shift, saturated and unstable.

"Elijah?" I called out.

"I'm here, Robbie. Worst blow since 1851. Hold fast, it'll pass."

But holding fast wasn't an option for all of us. From the periphery, near the iron fence where the land dropped toward the harbor, I felt an alertness from Little Abenaki. Not his usual reserved presence—this was different. Something had changed in him. He felt lighter somehow, less anchored to the earth. Like he'd been waiting.

"Lige, do you feel that?"

"I do. Something's different about him. You don't suppose... after all this time... I wonder if his time's come?"

The images came then, faster than they ever had before. Not directed at me alone but broadcast to all of us—a life remembered in fragments: The harbor in summer, fish running thick. Faces of his people, beloved and long-scattered to dust. The island before it was an island, when you could just about walk to the mainland at low tide. The smell of cook fires. The sound of his language, words none of us would ever know.

And then: water. The storm surge hit the cemetery's edge and the saturated earth gave way. We felt him moving—not dragged or torn, but released. Rising through the liquefied soil toward the surface, toward the bay, toward the wind and water he'd been separated from for four centuries.

His final sending wasn't words or even images. Just a feeling, pure and unmistakable: *Home. Finally going home.*

Then silence. The absence where he'd been was profound—not empty, but complete. It felt like a candle extinguished, but only because the dawn had come.

The storm raged on above us, but down here in the dark, we were quiet.

Elijah spoke first. "Well. I reckon that's how it ends, given time enough."

"How long?" Jerilyn asked. "How long before...?"

"Can't say for certain. Little Abenaki had four hundred years. Might be we need that many, might be more. But now we know it comes, eventually. The end comes."

We were quiet for a while after that, each of us reflecting on what we'd witnessed.

"So it's not forever," Jerilyn said finally. "Not really."

"No. Just a long wait."

"We're good at waiting now." I felt something like a smile in her thought.

"That we are," I said. "And when our time comes—"

"We'll go together. Back to the island, back to the bay."

"Finally home," I said.

We closed the eyes we no longer had or needed, and settled into sleep. Not the eternal void we'd feared, but a long rest with an ending. Centuries would pass before we stirred again, but what were centuries now? Just weather. Just seasons. Just the slow, steady work of time carrying us toward release.

Stickyboard

It's just me and McEars working on this slice of bread It left on the counter. Whole grain bread with nuts and seeds—oh, man, are we feasting. Then *Bam!* the lights come on and we're right there for all to see. So McEars realquick says to me, "Come on, Chubbs!" and we run-hide behind the toaster. It always goes Eek when It sees us, but didn't that time. So far so good, we just got to bide our time 'til It leaves. Then It sees the half-eaten bread and says something about it's got dam ice again. Throws our feast in the trash and gets more from the bread box. If only we could get in there.

We're about scared shitless when It puts two slices in the toaster but we don't budge. McEars whispers to me, "Sit tight, Chubbyfats. I'll check it out." And he real sly peaks out from behind. It doesn't see him, just stands there waiting for toast. I'm not too worried, McEars always knows what to do.

The warm from the toaster is real nice and cozy, 'specially since it's winter and there's snow. This time of year it's even cold in Hidey Hole. But we're Maine mouses. We're tuff.

Now the warm is really getting very warm.

And then the warm is getting scary. I feel like I'm about to be on fire. McEars is panting, "We gotta run for it, Chubbs. On three." Then he realquick goes, "Onetwothree!" and we haul ass out of there. It says Eek but too late, we're gone.

Back in Hidey Hole they all want the story. Whiptail's there, so's Nubbins, Squeaks and Greyson. I'm nestled in with the babies, listening to McEars tell it. He's a good teller and everymouse listens real close.

"So me and Chubbs hauled our fuzzy little butts out of there quicker than fleas off a drowning rat."

Whiptail looks at me. "Did It chase?"

"Nah. We's too quick for It."

Whiptail's had his share of close calls and he's none too impressed with our narrow escape. "nother day in the life, eh?" Making little of it.

"We almost went on fire!" I yell. Sometimes I don't like him very much.

"Easy, Chubbyfats. Glad you made it back, what with your little ones n' all." He looks over at my babies, just starting to get fur. "Just that I've seen worse. You haven't forgot about Bear, have you?"

"How could anymouse forget about Bear? I still have nightmares."

We all loved Bear, he was a credit to Mousekind. I had some of his babies once. Big strappin' boys they were. He got his back broke on a midnight raid. It was a terrible time.

McEars sits back twitching his ears and takes in the argument. He don't like a squabble. Finally speaks up. "Listen. I have an Idea. We might be able to stay fed without risking our necks two three times a day."

"The hell, man?" Whiptail dislikes any Idea that's not his. But everymouse else wants to hear it since McEars is smart. Maybe even smarter than Bear, and he was pretty smart.

"What if instead of eating food where we find it, we was to bring it back here?"

Whiptail already doesn't like it. "That'll never work."

"It might," says McEars, "just listen. Me n' Chubbs had a whole thick slice of fine seedy bread. We had to leave it behind. Woulda fed us all for days. So what if we carried it back here instead of eating it there in the Out?"

Whiptail scratched behind his ear. "Like there's something wrong with going Out?"

"Out is where It lives. It is dangerous."

"It ain't so dangerous."

"Tell that to Bear."

Whiptail rolled his eyes. "We got to go Out. We're mice, it's what we do. What we've always done. There's such a thing called tradition, you know."

McEars lets it go and we all have a Sleep with the disagreement hanging in the air. Me and McEars don't rest too good.

When Dark comes McEars wakes us to go get food. All but Whiptail want to try bringing it back. McEars says fine and then gives a little speech to us that's with him.

"Since me and Chubbyfats almost got caught, It knows we're around. That means look out for stickyboards and snappy traps

like the one that kilt Bear. Be careful, watch where you put your feet."

McEars understands the traps are connected to It somehow. The rest of us don't really get Ideas. We never would have thought of that. See how smart he is? That's why I had his babies, too.

"When we get there don't make holes in bags. That'll give us away. Also, don't poop! If It sees that, It'll know we were there."

Whiptail snorts. "Oh, come on. All poop's the same. It'll think it's Its own."

McEars shakes his head. "This is just a hunch, but I think It's poop is different from ours, Bigger. Or more."

Whiptail just goes, "Pfft."

McEars turns back to the rest of us. "Are we ready?"

There's a moment of silence while we all poop. Then we're ready.

When we get back to the kitchen we can still smell that good bread. There must be a piece of it somewhere, not wrapped up. Squeaks finds it laying on top in the trash. Squeaks don't talk much but when we hear her going *squeeble squeeble* we know she's found something. Whiptail's off doing his own thing—and probably pooping all over creation—so McEars and Greyson climb up there to see. I wait on the ground, hiding behind Broom. I don't much like being there; It tried to squash one of me and Bear's kids with Broom once.

There's some scratchy noises from the trash can and I hear Squeaks say *squeeble* again then all of a sudden *KA-BOOM* that

slice of bread lands on the floor beside me. I damn near jump right out of my fur. I see the tooth marks, it's the same one me and McEars was eating. The others climb out of the can and come back down. We all eat a couple of bites for strength then McEars says, "Let's see if we can carry it."

I look at that big slice of bread and us four little mice and I'm afraid Whiptail is right—it won't work. But I don't want him to be right.

We try a couple of different ways but it hardly moves at all. McEars goes, "Two in front pulling and two in back to push." He wants me in back, says my weight will work better that way.

That bread just sits there like it's on a stickyboard and our toes go skritch skritch slipping on the shiny floor. Greyson goes, "I think we're screwed," and right then *ZHOOM* that bread goes sliding along just as nice as you please. We figured out the trick is once you get started to keep it moving.

We get it back to Hidey Hole and it won't fit. Whiptail's already there and he's pissed that we even got this far, but he ain't letting on. Just watches us trying to get it inside, says, "See? It won't work. I tried to tell you."

McEars looks at the bread and says to us, "Everymouse eat now. Eat right down the middle of it." I figure he wants us to eat as much as we can before we have to leave it.

So we're all chomping down and McEars is showing us where to eat. I'm thinking *what difference does it make*, but he says to us, "We'll make it two pieces."

Squeaks says, "Squeeble?", which doesn't help any, and Greyson goes, "If we can't fit one piece how are we gonna fit two? We want it to be less, not more, don't we?"

McEars says through a mouthful of bread, "Trust me, ok? I think this'll work."

Whiptail snickers at us and crawls back into Hidey Hole. By now we're all getting pretty fat from eating so much. I look at the piece of bread and, duh, realize what McEars is up to. I tear back into it and in a jiffy the bread is in two. It's two pieces, but smaller. McEars says, "This one first," and we push/pull it into Hidey Hole real slippy like a tomcat on a frozen crick, then we bring in the other one. It works, just like McEars promised. We'll eat for days.

We're all fat and tired so we snuggle in for another Sleep, piled up to stay warm. Me and McEars rest real peaceful this time.

I wake up when Whiptail pulls himself from the pile and starts to leave. I ask where he's off to.

"T'get food."

"There's bread right here. Eat that."

"No, thank you, Ma'am. That's yours, not mine."

"We all share. Then everymouse is safer."

"It's not right, Chubbyfats. I ain't eating that. And you shouldn't either."

I say to myself I can't make him eat, then I ask, "And why shouldn't I?"

"Because it ain't right!"

That wakes up Squeaks; she yawns, stretching, and goes "Squee..." back into her cozy little nap. Whiptail goes on, a little quieter. "Think what your little ones will get from this."

"They're still on milk, Whiptail. You think I grew all these boobies for nothing?"

"But not for long, right? They're almost weaned."

"So?"

"They gotta learn to get food, to stand up on their own four feet. If there's always a big pile of food here, they'll never learn to take care of their own selves."

"They'll still go Out, Whiptail, just not as much."

"Yeah. Out with three-four other mouses to help 'em do every little thing."

"You think we shouldn't be safer?"

"That ain't the Mouse Way. We take care of our own selves. We're supposed to be independent."

That's the biggest word I ever heard. I don't bother asking what it means. I'm not going to change his mind so I tell him good luck and he goes Out into It's part of the world where there's snappy traps and Broom.

"Squeeble!"

It's so loud I think Squeaks got stepped on. Then we hear it again and it's not Squeaks. It's coming from Out. McEars looks from the door and goes, "Everymouse stay here!" and runs Out. We don't know what's happening. I look from the door and see Whiptail with his hind foot on a stickyboard, hauling on it like to bring the whole thing home, trying to get himself unstuck. McEars

is scurrying to him quick as he can and from the other direction here comes It.

It has Broom.

There's a big panic with lots of squeaking and It swinging Broom like to put a great deal of death onto McEars and Whiptail. Things look real bad and I can't watch. The last thing I see is McEars and Whiptail fighting each other. That doesn't make a whisker of sense.

I get knocked down by a mouse who comes charging fullspeed into Hidey Hole and things are very confusing for a little while. I see it's McEars, and with blood all on his face. I look at him and gasp, "M-McEars? How come that blood?"

Such blood. He looks bad hurt. I think he's been smashed by Broom and he's dying with all his blood coming out of his mouth.

"I'm ok," he says. "Where's Whiptail?" He does not look ok at all.

"He's on a stickyboard. Didn't you see?" Surely he saw.

"I unstuck him."

That doesn't make any sense either. You can't unstuck a mouse on a stickyboard without getting stuck your ownself. Every mouse knows that. A mouse on a stickyboard is a goner.

I go to look out the door again and what I see makes me sick. The stickyboard is still there. Stuck to one corner of it is Whiptail's foot, covered in blood. But he isn't there. Only that terrible foot. I cry at the sight of it.

I look back to McEars and realize the blood on his mouth isn't his. It's Whiptail's.

I hear a tiny squebble and look to see Whiptail lying there in the Dark of Hidey Hole, panting and bleeding from his leg, from where McEars bit off his foot.

Whiptail is in a bad way for many days. Sometimes we think death might come on him but it never does. We bring pieces of the good bread and he eats a little. We were afraid he'd refuse. He wants water but we don't know how to give him some. I get an Idea that milk is sort of like water so I give him that and slowly he gets better. I'm happy for him and also because I had an Idea. McEars must be rubbing off on me.

The good bread lasts a few more days and then we have to go Out again. We go to the pantry quiet as churchmouses and find a lot of good smells but they're all too big to carry. Then Greyson goes, "Over here," and we all go see. Its a crinklybag you can see into and we smell nuts and sweet like sugar all at the same time. If we can move it, it's the jackpot. Food for days upon days. It even looks the right size to fit in the door of Hidey Hole.

There's five of us this time—Nubbins came, too—but with three pushing and two pulling we still can't make it budge. We try and try but it won't go more than an inch or two. At this rate Dark will be over before we even get it halfway back and we'd have to leave it. We almost decide to go back to the old way, Whiptail's Mouse Way, when there's a little scritchthump noise behind us, getting closer and closer.

Whiptail comes limping up and sits there laughing real quiet. "Thought you'd run Out without old Whiptail, did ya?" Then he

gets on the pulling side, sets his teeth into the crinklybag and says, "What're we waiting for, Saint Stuart's Day?"

Later, after the hard part's done, we all sit cozied up in Hidey Hole eating honey-roasted sunflower seeds. Squeaks starts on her fourth one and gives a tiny squeeble of happiness like she can't believe our good luck. Whiptail's having some too, and I see his leg looks better. Healing up.

McEars has a little grin and goes, "What do you say now, Mr. Whiptail?"

Whiptail knows he's being joshed around; says, "I never said there's only one Mouse Way, did I?"

I look over at my babies, all taking tiny nibbles from the seeds. Growing up so quick, and smart as their Daddy. And a little safer, for a little while.

After we eat and have a Sleep, I look out to see if Dark is ending yet. I forget all about that when here comes It with an armload of stickyboards and snappy traps, more than I'd ever seen.

Eddie and Millie Chapin Call It Quits

"So the Kongress wanted, like, a gazillion dollars to stop so-called climate change, which everybody knows is totally one of those hoax thingies, duh..."

The President rolled her eyes, turned to show a more flattering three-quarter profile, and made duck-lips from behind the podium.

"But I was all, 'No way, dooDz!'"

The hand-picked press room audience cheered as directed by the applause signs. The Kommander in Chief blew kisses at them as the holographic presidential seal morphed colors to better compliment her Versace gown and matching handbag.

"So I decided to take that gazillion dollars and use it where it will do the most good for the Kountry. I'm like totally jazzed to announce the kreation of a super-fabulous new federal program I'm calling Affordable Superficial Surgeries for Unattractive People. Just think of it, my fellow Amerikans. We as a nation are poised to become the most amazing-looking people on Earth! No more hideously misshapen noses. No more crow's feet or sagging boobs. Even the children of our poorest rural kommunities will finally be able to afford the tummy-tucks and Brazilian butt-lifts they so desperately need. Not only that, but electrolysis, liposuction and kollagen injections—"

Millie Chapin had seen enough.

"Alexa, TV off."

"I have to do everything around here? Alexa do this, Alexa do that."

Eddie Chapin had left her mood code selector on 'Disgruntled.' He found this amusing.

Millie and Eddie were no fans of President Kardashian, having voted the straight Incredible Party ticket in the 2048 election. When Kardashian won her first term back in '33, Eddie, an odd little man, gathered up his wife and moved to Catch Colt Island on the eastern fringe of Maine's Jericho Bay. Handy with hammer and nails, Eddie whacked together an odd little house for them to live out the remainder of their lives far from the prevailing madness. It was not far enough.

Millie set down her teacup and watched it slide to the left, snatching it just before it fell to the floor. Eddie must be downcellar, lifting the house again. She told Alexa to water the houseplants ("*Bite me!*") and walked outside to see what her odd little husband was up to. She descended the ten steps to the muddy yard remembering that not so long ago it was only three.

She found Eddie under the house turning the screw-jacks.

"Tide come up to the sixth step again last night."

Eddie had raised the house and rebuilt the steps twice in the last five years to accommodate the rising sea. Millie squinted through her cat's-eye glasses at the towering stone-and-mortar pillars on which their odd little house was now perched.

"How much higher, dear?"

"Another six or eight inches, I suppose."

"Then what?"

"Then we go to plan B. I can't raise it no more. A stiff breeze would just about knock her off the piers as it is."

"Oh, my."

Millie drummed her fingers on her chubby little belly, noted the stiff breeze blowing at that very moment and looked up uncertainly at the pine floor joists above her head. She took several steps backward, hoping Eddie wouldn't notice her anxious retreat. From a safe distance she asked, "What's Plan B?"

"Seal off the first floor and move upstairs."

"Goodness me."

"'Twon't be s' bad, Millie. Nice view from up there."

Eddie chuckled, confident he had the ongoing crisis well in hand. Millie lacked his certainty but forced a smile.

"The President was on."

"Spare me."

"Said there's no climate change. Again."

"She won't admit it 'til it sneaks up and bites her right on her giant rump. Idiot Hollywood Flatlander."

"Said there's to be free boob jobs for all."

"This is what happens when you let stupid people vote."

"Ayup, 'tis."

Millie wiped sweat from her brow. 8:00 am and 85° already. In *Maine*, for Pete's sake.

She returned upstairs where Alexa was drowning her African violets with extreme prejudice. Millie began moving her collection of llamas to the second floor. Porcelain, stuffed, terra

cotta, chrome, papier mâché, ceramic. All things llama were A-OK in Millie Chapin's book.

Six months later Eddie took delivery of a shipment of tongue-and-groove white oak which he promptly nailed to the outside of the first floor. Millie stuck her head out a second floor window as he applied a bead of marine sealant to the groove of the third course.

"It's not too pretty, is it, dear?"

"Dagnabbit, woman, wait till I get it painted."

Millie's cherubic visage popped back inside. Five minutes passed and a llama hand-puppet popped out the same window and yelled, "Nebraska!"

"You sure?"

"Yep. Hundred percent. Just saw it on the news."

"Bloody hell."

Two days ago Millie's hand-puppet yelled *Delaware!* and the week before that, *Rhode Island!* These were the relative sizes of ice shelves breaking away from Antarctica and floating north to melt and raise the sea.

Eddie finished boarding up the ground floor in a little over a week, then went back downcellar to caulk the seams under the floor. High tides were now up to the eighth step and rising.

With the first floor sealed against the floods, the Chapins were safe for another year or two. Eddie laid in another supply of tongue-and-groove white oak just in case the second floor had to be sealed off, too.

The following announcement comes to you live from the Oval Office Bubble Bath, and is sponsored by Calvin Klein and Kristian Dior. But not K-Mart, ugh.

"So I hear there's been, like, some floods and stuff? Don't worry, my fellow Americans! I have a crack team of scientists working 24/7 on this stuff and they told me *water is good!* It's, like, fantastic even. So when you see a flood coming, just remember that: water is good, for real. See? I'm in water right now. Look how good it is!"

President Kardashian blew a handful of soap bubbles at the camera which short-circuited and blew up, terminating the broadcast. In the ensuing panic, the POTUS chipped a nail, putting media outlets across the nation on high alert. Gnoozgle led with the 72-point headline

PREZ SURVIVES BROKEN FINGERNAIL
RESTING KOMFORTABLY @ MAYO CLINIC
FULL RECOVERY EXPECTED

Millie Chapin had once again seen enough.

"Alexa, Apocalypse Channel."

Alexa crackled with static. "Roger that, Houston.

Approaching Apocalypse Channel on heading zero-two-niner. Over."

Eddie left it set on Buzz Aldrin this time. Millie was pretty sure he did this on purpose.

When the Great Storm of Summer '51 came Eddie had not yet boarded up the second floor, but knew it was inevitable. High tides now came to where the windows had been on the first floor and the dooryard was awash even at low tide. Eddie and Millie had recently gone clamming in their own basement and gathered a nice bucket of steamers for supper.

"There's always a bright side," said Eddie, wiping drawn butter from his chin.

On the night of the Great Storm Eddie awoke with a start at 2:30 am. Tossing a few stuffed llamas aside, he ran to the window. The odd little house had disengaged from its earthly foundation and was listing hard a-starboard. Under the starlit sky Eddie saw they were riding the crest of a ten-foot wave.

"Wake up, woman! We're adrift! We've gone to sea!"

Millie sat up in bed but was knocked flat again by the stack of bedsheets Eddie threw at her.

"Don't just lay there lollygagging, sew these up!"

He threw on his Oshkosh B'goshes and ran from the room.

Lacking electricity for the sewing machine, Millie improvised with Kwik-setting Kardashian brand Inkredda-Gloo™. She soon had four sheets made into one. Eddie's hammer rang out from the rooftop in the night and Millie opened a dormer yelling, "What in creation are you up to now, fool?"

"Belay your squawkin' and hand up the sheets!"

As the sun broke on the horizon Eddie was rigging the bedsheets on the mast he'd built from tongue-and-groove white oak at the odd little house's roof peak.

"Close reef and square the main yard!" Eddie was no sailor and hadn't a clue what this meant, but liked the nautical sound of it.

Millie's sail caught the freshening breeze and billowed like wind-blown clouds, propelling the house across the waves on a northerly course. Eddie lashed Millie's ironing board to the back porch for a rudder and corrected course to the east-northeast. The square rigged odd little house made a brisk twelve knots, bound for the rocky shores of Nova Scotia.

Eddie Chapin donned a yellow sou'wester hat and stood a watch on the roof peak, alert for hazards, useful flotsam or other humble abodes that might sail by. Late that afternoon as they crossed into Canadian waters Eddie spied a llama hand-puppet watching him from the dormer window.

"What is it, woman?"

"Do they have llamas there?"

"Alpacas."

The puppet considered this a moment and said, "Close enough."

The breeze carried Eddie's voice across the empty ocean miles, echoing as he sang *O, Canada* with a C and not a K.

Rock Bottom

Duffy and I finished hauling our traps late—it's a long workday when September rolls around. When he dropped me off at home, Hope's car was gone. It wasn't like her to be out at this time of day; not like there's someplace to go. If there were sidewalks, which there weren't, Fairweather Island would roll them up at 5 p.m. It was going on 7 and the island was closed for business.

The note she left got right to the point.

Hey Lettermore,

Went to stay with Emily and Caleb. Your dinner's in the cat. Give me a call if you ever get your shit together. Get help, Dean. Seriously.

—Hope

I always counted on Hope to give it to me straight. Thanks, Hon.

What she left in the kitchen sink, though, was a plain horror. Grinning at me from among the cruel shards of glass was the swashbuckling face of Captain Morgan, a man I had come to trust more than myself. When all else failed—as it so often did—Captain Morgan was there for me, ready to ease the pain, the sorrow, the hopelessness.

Yeah, that's me: Hope-less.

Not only had that bottle been nearly full, it was the only booze in the house. The Island Market was closed and I had systematically alienated everyone on the island who might be willing to help me get properly shitfaced that evening.

I conducted a frantic search and found a nearly empty bottle of vanilla extract and a similarly depleted bottle of cough syrup. You couldn't get a fucking mouse buzzed on that.

The Gas-n-Grub over on the main was open 'til 8:00 and that was my last shot at a good stiff drink. It was nine miles across the bay to Machiasport and it had been been choppy out there all day. Not the most agreeable crossing weather when all you have is a 14-foot skiff. Desperate times, though.

I stepped out the front door and became painfully reacquainted with the absence of a vehicle at my disposal. It was only a half-mile walk to the dock; I could still make the Gas-n-Grub if I hauled some serious ass. An image of Captain Morgan entered my mind, laughing at my desperation. Well, maybe I won't go after all. Maybe I'll just be sober tonight. Hell, maybe I'll quit drinking altogether. Then Hope would come back and we could be happy again. You think I'm kidding, Cap? You think you're running this show? The fuck you are. Too dangerous to make that trip over to the main anyway. Suicidal.

I went inside and stood in my living room, looking out across the water. Yeah, there's whitecaps and a four-foot sea. Bet I could make it though. Not that it mattered; my mind was made up solid as the rock I lived on. A new start for Dean Lettermore, and it starts right fucking now.

I went to clean up the mess Hope made in the sink and got a noseful of that good spiced rum.

No.

Stop thinking that.

I picked pieces of the broken bottle out and damn near sliced off the tip of my index finger. "Son of a whore!" A fat drop of blood pattered on the stainless steel and made a rill I watched disappear into the drain. Down the drain, through the P-trap and off to join my rum in the septic tank. No, my blood wouldn't get that far without a little help. I reached for the faucet but froze before I could wash it away. I replaced that P-trap last spring. I opened the cabinet and looked at my handiwork. I bet there's two good shots of rum sitting in that trap right now. Unless Hope ran the water, which she probably didn't.

I took a pair of Channel-Locks from the junk drawer and loosened one end of the trap. Careful now. There's booze in that thar plumbin'. Maybe. And broken glass. And a little blood. And whatever grease and gunk have built up on the inside since April. I could strain it out through a sock or a coffee filter, right? And then I could heat it on the stove to kill any leftover biological nasties, couldn't I? Wait, that might burn off the alcohol. Or would it? I can probably Google that, oh wait just a goddamn minute. I'm supposed to be making a new start here. So what the fuck am I doing? Am I this pathetic? Sewer booze? I heard Captain Morgan laughing.

I dropped the Channel-Locks and yelled, "You don't own me, motherfucker!" I went to the meds cabinet for a couple of Band-

Aids and a splash of peroxide. Came back out and punched the TV remote. I will sit and watch the ball game and not think about how desperately I want a drink.

A Bacardi commercial interrupted the Red Sox game.

I stood and looked at the sea again. A light rain fell in the waning daylight. If I'm going over it's now or never.

Well, I'm not going. That's final.

Not.

Going.

Maybe I'll take a little walk to clear my head, let the cool summer rain wash the cravings away. Just stroll down to the dock and back, take the evening air. Good for what ails ya.

I was halfway to the dock when the rain started acting like it meant business. I heard someone singing. W T everlovin' F?

Along came that wack-job Rachel Tyler, drenched to the bone and skipping through the puddles, belting out *Singin' in the Rain*. She was a lunatic, but she was our lunatic. She normally wore her hair in an afro-like frizz, but the downpour plastered it to her head. Streams of rainwater cascaded down her face and she didn't give a damn.

She took my hands and danced one circle around me, then went on her way, singing about glorious feelings and happiness. She never once looked back. How can you feel that good without booze? I don't think I'm even capable of feeling that kind of careless joy anymore. Was I ever? Maybe I'm just genetically predisposed to misery.

I stood on the dock watching the rain. The sea looked rough beyond the Quandary Point breakwater but it's hard to gauge it from the shelter of the harbor.

My skiff had taken some water so I hopped aboard to bail her out. The rain was easing up. Maybe I'd just take her out for a quick spin around the harbor. Not going to the main at all. Nope. Not going to get a bottle of rum. Definitely not.

My aging 25-horse Evinrude started on the second pull and I cruised out to the end of the breakwater. Yep, it was tossin' pretty good out there; slim chance for a crossing. Not that it mattered since I wasn't even thinking about it. Not at all. I was thinking of the price I'd paid for my close friendship with the Captain. The lost jobs, the wrecked cars, the lost friends. And now Hope was gone. Do you blame her? You, Dean Lettermore, are a straight fucking moron. And if you didn't already have enough rock-solid reasons not to go to Machiasport tonight, here's Johnny Law to tell you all about the fabulous prizes that await you on the mainland. That's right, Dean-o, it's a luxury suite of outstanding arrest warrants! Disorderly conduct, DUI, and to cap off your Grand Prize Showcase, it's felony damage to property, good for up to six months in the beautiful Knox County Jail! All this could be yours!

I tell ya, man, sometimes I hate myself for the stupid shit I've done. And that's awful hard to live with.

There's a good handful of pine-crested islands between Fairweather and the Machiasport Gas-n-Grub (open tonight for another 45 minutes, not that I was counting). The nearest one,

Addie's Island, lay on the far side of a 100-yard stretch of ill-tempered sea. The lee side of Addie's looked calm as a beaver pond from where I sat. With some careful tacking I could make that.

The congratulations I awarded myself after navigating that ugly 100 yards were premature. Nice seamanship, Dean, said Captain Morgan as I eased my skiff into the slack water.

"Oh, fuck off, ya goddamn pirate. Didn't they hang you or something?"

I am absolutely not going over.

The next stretch of open water looked to be a good quarter mile of maritime chaos. No way was I sailing into that.

Well, what are you going to do? Go back home, sit on the couch and cry? Tear your hair out in great big clumps? Call Hope and beg like the pathetic dog you've become? And tomorrow morning you get up at 4:30, work your ass off for 12-14 hours then come home to your empty house and spend your wonderfully sober evening wondering why you bothered to be born.

So either way it's a world of hurt. Fuck that. Fuck all of it. I turned my boat toward the mainland. In the distant blue hills I could just make out the friendly lighted sign of the Gas-n-Grub. I cranked the throttle and wallowed into the deadly turbulent sea that lay between me and the Captain. Who was I kidding, anyway? No matter how the cards fell I'd get the full dose of misery. Might as well enjoy the fuckin' ride.

I wasn't too far into that stretch of violent water when my conscience up and aired a grievance. *You used to have a spine, Dean. You used to go toe-to-toe with adversity and leave it bleeding in the gutter. Are you really going to be pushed around by a bottle of tan liquid? By a buccaneer from the 17th century?*

I turned back toward Fairweather and the sea tried to pour itself into my boat. With one hand on the tiller and the other bailing, I still lost ground. I couldn't let go of either—the bailer kept me from foundering, the tiller kept me from capsizing.

I gradually brought her around to face Machiasport again. I told myself I had no choice. The Gas-n-Grub was still lit up like the welcome sign at the entrance to Hell. *Come in, weary traveler. We've been expecting you.* Ever notice the similarity between Captain Morgan and Satan? Uncanny.

This is rock bottom, isn't it? I'm told rock bottom is different for each alcoholic. If this wasn't mine I didn't care to imagine what was. I lost the woman I loved and now I was on the edge of drowning because I didn't have the cojones to stay sober for just one fucking night.

The incoming seawater continued to gain on me; I threw my bailing arm into high gear. I would either make landfall or have my supper with Davy Jones.

Oh man, I don't want to die. I think I don't.

I heard the Captain's laughter borne on the westerly wind. *Belay that sobbing, ye scurvy wretch. There's no rock bottom here! Hahaha!*

While I distracted myself playing angel-vs-devil, a big roller caught me abeam and over I went. I was thrown from the boat as it capsized but fought my way back and got a grip on the hull. That victory had a downside: the wind and currents carried me away from land toward open—and far more tempestuous—water. The course to the open sea was clear, but I would pass within a couple hundred yards of Mouse Island on the way out. My last chance.

Mouse Island was about three acres of rock and pine trees and was not the place where old mice go when they retire. In 32 years on these waters I had not once set foot on Mouse Island because there'd never been a reason to. There was ample reason now. At what I judged to be the nearest point, I set my inverted boat free and swam.

The current threatened to sweep me past the island and I had to compensate by swimming toward a point well to the west of where I hoped to land. My shoes and pants added needless difficulty to my strokes but stopping to remove them, were I foolish enough to try it, would have been the last thing I ever did. The grey-green waves swept me under again and again; I was only able to draw breath in the shifting hollows between them. I swallowed and inhaled enough seawater to brine me from the inside out.

Sadly, the thing I found most horrifying was that I now had no chance of arriving at the Gas-n-Grub before they closed. I also had little chance of making it to the rocky but nonetheless inviting shores of Mouse Island. At some point I decided

drowning in the cold sea would be more agreeable than a night without rum. If that was so, there really wasn't any rock bottom for me. With daylight slipping away I came to a place where my hands made contact with rockweed at the lowest arc of each stroke. I was in shallow water. I tried to stand but couldn't; still too deep. Every muscle railed against further struggle, but I put another fifteen yards behind me and tried the bottom again. My shoes made contact. It was still a jungle of kelp and seaweed and water up to my neck, but drowning was off the table for the moment. I tried for solid footing but slipped on the marine vegetation and went under. After a moment's panic I surfaced and found the strength to swim a few more strokes.

I stopped in waist-deep water and my feet found the kelp bed again, slippery as wrymouth eel. Each time a wave broke I was knocked down, unable to keep my footing on the slippery bottom. I was finally nearing the shore.

Waves rolled in around my knees but I still stumbled and fell again and again on the seaweed-covered bottom. I looked up toward Machiasport at the very moment the Gas-n-Grub's friendly sign went dark. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.* That was the real tragedy in all this.

Another step toward dry land, another indecorous slip and fall. One of my wrists felt sprained. I got to my feet and fell yet again. Blood ran from my elbow where I scraped it on a jagged patch of barnacles. God fucking dammit will you just let me stand? I'm almost there, you fucking useless son of a whore

seaweed! Is it too much to ask for just a little solid rock under my feet for these last few yards?

I rose again and stood teetering, looking at Mouse Island, listening to the bitter wind whistle through its tiny stand of pines. I shuddered to think of the shelterless night I would spend there, cold and wet, sober and alone. Sunrise was my earliest hope of rescue—I faced at least nine hours of unyielding misery on this derelict isle. And nothing to occupy my thoughts except that I had nearly died for a drink I couldn't get and didn't need.

I chanced another small step. As expected, the kelp shot my feet out from under me. I pitched forward, landing face-first in less than a foot of roiling water. I planted my palms to raise myself and felt nothing beneath them but sacred, unforgiving stone.

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