

## ONE

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THE WHITE OF THE ICE-CHINKED BAY glimpsed through breaches in the trees, the coldness of its breath already on my face. The road veered to the left and then the bay opened wide before me, miles of pan ice glaring white beneath the sun and so tightly pummelled into the basin that it buckled upward, forming ridges some ten, twenty feet high in places. Hummocks they called these ridges, and scattered amongst them were the loftier heights of trapped icebergs, their wind-polished peaks sparkling like opals.

I fumbled for the handle on the rented car and tightened the window, hating the harsh coldness of the ice, hating how it crunched up over the beach, wedging against the roadside and near cramming the car against the black wall of rock to the right of the road. After a year on the gently contouring lands of Alberta, the Newfoundland coastline felt more rugged, harsh. Cutting around a sharp turn, I geared down, straining across the seat for a closer look at Father's woodshed, the plaid bush jacket belonging to my younger brother Chris left lying on a pile of unsplit wood, the axe flung aside as though a call had sounded.

The car almost stalled, then jolted ahead the last few yards, rolling to a stop as the road ended on a sagging grey wharf that jutted thirty or forty feet to its left, into the sea. Encumbering the right side of the wharf, and wedged into the cliff behind it, was the house Father had floated forty miles up the bay

from our old homestead in Cooney Arm. Sitting in his favourite spot, slouched against the side of the house with his feet dangling over the wharf, was Chris. He wasn't sketching seals or humpbacks on this day, or paring birds out of wood, lips pursed in a melodic whistle as he plied and coaxed his knife around the curve of a wing or a beak; instead he was staring moodily out over the ice, his slumped shoulders carrying the forlorn look of a forgotten child.

I knew that look. Had seen it all through our growing up years, each springtime when Gran would take me back to Cooney Arm and leave Chris bawling on the wharf, reaching after us. For he too yearned for that old homestead where he would cling to my hand as I dragged him amongst the barred-up houses and wooden shacks of the small abandoned outpost, answering his growing stream of questions of why God, why fish, why rain. Since the day Father gave in to the emptied fishing grounds and wrenched his house from those blessed shores we had often stood, staring back the way we'd come, longing for those huge fat days of summer with the wind sweeping sweetly over the finches and the meadow and the three little dears sleeping in the graveyard. And too, there were worlds in those barred-up houses in Cooney Arm, worlds hidden amongst the emptied bedrooms and drawers, whose voices remained locked into the wood as though awaiting the souls that once were to come back and reclaim them.

"Bloody governments," Father told us, "is why the people were forced to move, gawd-damned arse-up governments, screwing up the fishery and forcing people to move in search of work."

Yet, despite Chris's thirst to return to Cooney Arm, he balked that first summer when Gran and I were readying ourselves in the boat, going back to plant Gran's garden. One

hand clinging to Mother's, the other reaching for mine, he stood, his mouth quivering with both want and fear. Mother's skirts he chose, and his tears wet his face as he peered out from behind them, watching the boat leaving without him. Come fall, day before school when Gran and I returned, the boat brimming to the gunnels with spuds, turnips, carrots, and cabbages, he was sitting on that very spot, back to the wall, legs dangling over the wharf. Piles of shavings from his carvings floated towards us on the water as he held out long, slender arms to Gran, sobbing as he told her of his many dreams, one in which the moon swallowed her house whilst she turned to water inside.

"Poor boy," said Gran, holding him to her. "Poor, poor boy." Tears crept from her eyes as he proudly presented her with three small drawings, astonishing her with his flair of lines. The first depicted her crouching in her garden, snipping turnip greens, her knees embedded in the earth. The second showed her with a broom made of cabbage leaves, sweeping her garden free of caterpillars. The third had her kneeling beside a potato bed, her knees again embedded in the earth, her hands curled in prayer, her hair loosened and swept into a cloud of wind. "My, my," she kept saying, "my, my" as she gazed at her broom made of leaves, her hair swept into a cloud, "my, my." And yet it was his manner of drawing that so touched her, his faint, wispy lines so effectively capturing her likeness yet barely discernible on the paper in places, and so easily erased by the slightest smudge of a thumbprint that she held her breath whilst others examined them for fear of being erased herself.

As he grew so did his drawings, his lines lengthening with his limbs and enveloping his pages, his images becoming more and more dreamlike as he sprawled across the table, the wharf,

beach rocks, the woodpile, sketching the abandoned houses of Cooney Arm and their spirits swarming through their windows, Father's decrepit stage sitting before two moons, me floating laughingly in the curl of a hurtling wave, Mother billowing out sheets that fluttered into clouds. Always his images appeared wispy, airy, as though seen through a mesh, a veil of light. And always there was no beginning or ending, each image arising from nowhere and fading into nothing, and all in between a swirl of lines appearing to be one, as in a spool of thread unravelling itself into thought.

He rose now as I stepped out of the car, softly calling his name. He was two years younger than me, yet taller, his eyes the same glistening brown as Father's, his hair the same thickness and coarseness, but fair and full of light whereas Father's hung darker than peat across his brow. I ran to him and was engulfed in his arms, my face smothered in the myrrhy smell of Father still clinging to the corduroy.

"Why are you here?" I cried. "Why aren't you with them?"

His voice was strained. "Did you go? Did you see him?"

I shook my head, wiping my eyes on his sleeve. "I called from the airport. I— Mom says he's fine. His heart's badly damaged—but she says he'll get better. Why aren't you with her, Chris—you know she wants you there."

My voice faded. I knew why he wasn't there. We were one and the same, Chris and I. During those times when outside forces threatened our world—like when Gran fell to the floor with a dizzy spell, or our youngest brother, Kyle, was choking on a marble, or Father chopped his hand with the axe—we'd fled, Chris crouching into my back as I crouched behind the house, the both of us hiding from what was probably a far simpler incident than what we were conjuring up with our frightened thoughts.

“But why didn’t you drive straight there—from the airport?” he asked.

“Mother said to come get you.”

“What—she didn’t think you’d be crazy to see him?”

I circled my arms around his waist, resting against him. “I needed to see you,” I whispered. “Mom says you’re taking it hard. Ohh, Chris, it must’ve been horrible.” I buried my face in his shirt, needing a stronger smell of him, of Father. His arms tightened around me, a soft moan catching in his throat. The shrill *chewk chewk chewk* of a fish hawk warned off a predator. Over his shoulder I watched the bird of prey flapping out of the woods, the white underside of its wings fanning out against the sky.

“Kyle. And Gran,” I said, looking to the house. “They’re at the hospital? I forgot to ask Mom.”

“Kyle’s driving the truck—”

“Ky’s what?”

“He’s seventeen, Sis.”

“Lord. And driving Dad’s new truck? That should get him on his feet soon enough—Kyle driving his brand-new truck.” I stood at the edge of the wharf, looking down onto the second of Father’s brand-new purchases that year—a sleek, fourteen-foot rowboat that had cost three years’ savings. Its stem looked straight as an arrow, its flared bow extending upwards and outwards, lending an air of lengthiness and grace to its rounded sides. Meticulously painted the deepest of greens, it now sat motionless on the ice, Father’s heavy winter coat laid neatly across a thwart, his gun and lunch bag tucked inside the cuddy. I raised my eyes, staring out over the sea packed tight with pan ice. Its surface was rugged but so white and pristine that it echoed silence into the vastness above it. And yet an insidious groaning sounded from beneath as it continually crushed

against itself, grinding and gouging itself to bits. It made me shiver, thinking about Father, seeing him as I'd seen him a hundred times, holding on to the gunnels of his punt, shoving it over that shifting, heaving mass, jumping from ice pan to ice pan across loosely opened channels, and whenever a lead presented itself, leaping aboard his boat and paddling across it.

"Hunting them damn old seals," I muttered. "No wonder he's tore up, heaving his boat over that, year after year. Couldn't he wait? Couldn't he wait for the ice to break?"

"He was excited," said Chris. "About his boat. Couldn't wait to try her."

"Well, how come he was by himself, then? Didn't he have nobody going with him? You can't launch a boat over ice by yourself."

Chris's face twisted with self-reproach.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "You were supposed to go with him? How come you didn't, then?"

He looked at me, his honeyed hair and face warm as summer. But it was his eyes that always held me, their cherry brownness so soft, so momentous with emotion that even when they were glimmering with laughter I hurt for them. "Why, what's the matter? Chris, what's the matter?"

He looked away from me, his lips so tightly compressed they quivered. He swiped at them with his fist, an act that lent a hardening to his mouth. I fell quiet, watching self-dislike take hold of him like a cancer.

"Chris. Chris, you don't think it's your fault, do you?"

He beckoned me towards the house. "Go. Get washed or something, I sees to the gear. Then we'll go see him." He hoisted himself off the wharf onto the ice, grabbing hold of the boat as the ice swelled and ebbed with the sea beneath, crunching against the wharf.

“What’re you doing?” I asked as he took a box of gun shells out of his pocket and opened them for a quick count. I threw up my arms with a quick show of temper. “Ohh, for gawd’s sake!”

“I got someone going with me.”

“Right, sure you do. When? When are you going—aren’t you coming with me to the hospital?”

“Tomorrow morning. Tomorrow morning I’m going.”

“And who’s going with you? Who?” I demanded as he didn’t answer. “Ohh, for gawd’s sake, what’s the big deal about a bloody old seal. We don’t even like seal, Mother hates the stench of seal—it’s only Father, and you think he’s thinking about seal right now?”

“Just—go get ready.”

I stared at him, seeing his face tighten with guilt. “You got yourself thinking something now then, you do,” I said softly. “And how’s Dad going to feel, you blaming yourself—never mind Mother. She’ll be hooked up alongside of him she hears you’re out on that ice. Chris, you can hardly keep up with Dad—how are you going to do this on your own?”

His face darkened and he made to speak, but the shifting pan of ice beneath him suddenly hove upon a swell, sending him grabbing awkwardly for the gunnels. “Go,” he yelled. “Else you’ll leave without me.”

He turned his back, stowing the shells in the cuddy along with Father’s lunch bag, his shoulders tensed with that old stubbornness that sometimes arose within him and that was always a reassurance to Gran. “Bit of backbone does him good,” I heard her say to Mother once after Chris wore them both down in one of his rare upsets.

I marched in a huff to the house, then stood looking back. Chris was slumped over the boat, motionless, staring out to

sea. He could slump for hours like that, without moving. Like he had no bones, as I'd often thought of him as a youngster, finding comfort in whatever seat he happened upon, whether it was a rock, a pillow, or once even a bottomless bucket turned upside down that he'd slowly sunk further and further into till his knees were flush with his chin and I had to yank him out of it. 'Course it wasn't a comfortable seat he'd been sinking into; he simply hadn't realized he was sinking, his attention snared by a fly caught in a web etched between two pickets and buzzing furiously as a spider worked its way around it.

"Flies don't feel nothing," I'd said after he'd been pulled from his reverie as well as the bucket and was besieged with sorrow for the fly. It was always his way to be so absorbed by a thing that his eyes would fill with the hugeness of it and he'd forget a simple thing like hooking the fly from the web if he wanted to save it—as though he felt totally removed from the thing, or that he was the thing itself. And in those moments when his mind was called to something, like why he didn't hook the fly from the web, his eyes would so fill with self-reproach that I'd quickly divert his thought and then stand back watching as he almost immediately dissolved into something else. Always I marvelled at his absorption in the ordinary. Always I marvelled at his unordinary presentation of it later with his pencils.

Where are you now, I wanted to call out as he continued gazing out over the ice. As if hearing my thoughts, he flashed me an impatient look.

"Right then," I muttered. Pulling open the door, I stood for a moment, my crossness with Chris colliding with the acidic smell of Mother's bleached floors, of lemon-tinged wax and pine-smelling cleansers. Above all was the poignant smell of lavender, Mom's favourite scent, infiltrating the room from its

bundles hanging from the kitchen ceiling and growing in planters along the window benches, its feathery purple blooms prettifying the window since the first I could remember, whilst its oils permeated the dryness of Mother's winter skin. I leaned against the door, breathing deeply for a moment, allowing the scent to embrace me. As a youngster I thought the scent was Mother's, and the lavender a pretty plant that smelled like her.

I stepped deeper into the house. It had been a bit more than a year since I'd been home, and my eyes flitted anxiously over the wide, open space of the kitchen and living room, the windows flushed with light, the dark wooden table and chairs spruced to a shine, the black polished woodstove, cold today, but so eternally cracking out heat in memory that I hovered unconsciously towards it, holding out my hands, and shivering in the stillness of the emptied house. My eyes lingered on the warped wooden legs of an old rocker, so utterly Mom's as it faced a window looking away from the water, her faded blue shawl draped around its back, a pile of well-marked books sitting on an end table beside it.

Across the room, near the window overlooking the water, was Gran's rocker, her woollen shawl hanging from it should she find a draft, a basket for her knitting beside it, her oil lamp from Cooney Arm sitting nearby so's to give her the soft yellow light she was used to. A breeze tinkled at the kitchen window. I turned, half expecting to see Dad leaning one arm onto the window bench, the other on the table as he gulped back tea, staring out the same window as Gran, searching for fish, seals, birds, boats, and whatever else the sea flung towards him. Echoing through the rooms were Chris and Kyle's shouts as they rode the humpty between Mother's and Gran's rockers or cushioned themselves amongst pillows bright as wildflowers springing from the sofa.

A nice house. Mother kept a nice house. But it was Gran's house where I'd spent the first seven years of life. And ever since the move from Cooney Arm sixteen years ago, when me and Gran moved in with the rest of the family, I'd never felt quite right. Like a sprout from a different seed, suited, yet with a scent unlike the rest. Backing out of the house, I quietly closed the door.

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IT WAS AN HOUR'S DRIVE to Corner Brook, a small city that had grown out of a paper mill. I recalled how much Mother loved it—the paved highway rolling out before her, curving around the sandy shores of Deer Lake; the cragged grey cliffs climbing out of the thick blackish waters of the Humber River, the snowy heights of the far distant mountains, purplish on a hazy day. “So beautiful,” she exclaimed to Gran once, upon return, “the houses so nicely painted, and the trees all in a row, and the grass perfectly green and trimmed, and, oh, what flowers!” Once, a taxi driver drove her through High Station where the rich people lived and she hardly spoke for a week, so filled was her mind by the grandeur of things.

Father made the trip once. “Hurts me teeth,” he said when Mom tried persuading him back. “Driving on pavement hurts me teeth.”

“Ahh, you poor fool,” she said, “your mind's still anchored with your boat.”

“And that's where it'll stay, clear of the stink of mill rot,” he returned.

“Listen to him, just listen to him; forgets the fish guts he sniffed for thirty years,” said Mother, and huffed out of the room, leaving him telling Gran how he'd been sitting in his truck near the mill when the sea hove up a burp from the

heavy sludge of bark rotting on its floor, the stench worse than farts from a horse's arse.

I smiled at the memory. "He's gonna be fine," I said now with sudden certitude. "He's gonna be fine. But you—" Chris was shifting about worse than a crampy youngster in the passenger seat. "Why are you doing this—blaming yourself? How foolish is that? Well, then?"

"Watch the road," he growled. "Christ, for gawd's sakes!" He jolted upright as a truck blasted past, leaving the car shaking in a gust of wind. "Jeezes, keep your eyes on the road. How's Ben?"

"Ohh, who knows about Ben."

"There she goes."

"There *you* goes! It's complicated stuff having a heart attack, never the one thing causing it—was probably building for months."

"I said how's Ben!"

"And I said I never sees him."

"Never?"

"No. Never. Few times."

"He's still working the rigs?"

"Yes."

"With Trapp?"

"No doubt."

"He's still drawing?"

"Who knows. What about you?"

He shrugged.

"Well, are you drawing?"

"Sure. Most times."

"Thought maybe that when I start my grad studies—year from now—you'd come stay with me for a while," I offered.

"What—you're going back to school?"

“Course. Do my master’s. Perhaps a doctorate. Why stop till it’s done?”

He shook his head. “Envy you that. Fixing your mind on something and keeping it there. Chore for me to read a comic—and I love comics.”

I looked at him in disbelief. “Says he who crawls inside a pencil for hours and don’t blink. What’s that if not discipline? Christ almighty, how come you’re always ranting on about Ben’s drawing but never your own? You’re better than him. Yeah, you are,” I said to his snort. “Pours from you like life. Ben draws a boat, it’s just that—a boat. You draw a boat, and it’s every boat that ever was.”

“Jeezes let’s not start that agin—”

“You never allow for your talent—”

“Here she goes.”

“Thinks I’m talking through my hat, don’t you. Well, I’m not talking through my hat. Been to enough art showings these past five years to know something when I sees it, and you got something, brother, you really do. I think you’re a visionary, a true visionary. Privileged. And here you are groping and fumbling about with nets and chainsaws! Jeezes. Them days are passed when you gotta hide your paints and jig fish. You can do anything you want now, school’s in! Did you get those brochures I sent you?”

“What brochures?”

“Art school in Halifax.” I held my breath. I’d done far more than send him brochures. I’d actually filled out an application into the art program on his behalf and signed his name to it, submitted it to the art college along with a portfolio I’d made up with the drawings he’d given me through the years and an essay explaining why “I” wanted to pursue that course of study. “It’s where I’m doing my master’s. Gorgeous city—no more

than a big town, really, and quite close to home, can hop the ferry in the morning and be home before Mother turns out the light. Did you—well, did you get them—the brochures?”

He was gazing out his side window, scarcely listening.

“Chris, did you get the damn brochures or not?”

“No.” He glanced at me irritably.

“Well, you should’ve, you should’ve had them by now. It’s a well-recognized program and I thought you’d find some of the material interesting. Nice old artsy building, cobblestones out front, great bar right alongside with live music and juicy burgers. Lotsa people our own age milling about, most of them from Newfoundland,” I added. “Always somebody hitching a ride back home for the weekend, or driving and wanting somebody along for company.”

“Yeah, you’ll like it there,” he said vaguely.

“I’m thinking about you, brother.”

“Yeah, well, you just think about yourself, enough to think about yourself. See that little pine tree over there, next to the tall birches? Father got it tagged for this year’s Christmas tree. Don’t mention it, no cutting allowed. We’ll get it late some evening, when it’s dark.”

“You’re ignoring me.”

“Think you’ll be home for Christmas?”

“Don’t want to listen to talk about university art programs. Afraid you might have to do something. Like make a plan, leave home someday.”

“Will you just watch the gawd-damned road.”

“I’m watching the gawd-damned road, and I’m telling you that’s half your gawd-damned problem right there, don’t want to leave home. How come? That’s what I can’t figure—how come you don’t wanna leave home, because you don’t, do you?”

I looked over at him, trying to see what was behind his eyes, what was in his head, what he was thinking. It was always like that; any time I ever spoke to him about leaving he'd scoff it off, turn to something else, make jokes out of it. Surprisingly, he was holding himself back this time, his chest tensed and his mouth working as though he were struggling with some feeling he couldn't put words to. Kinda reminded me of those times when we used to hide behind the house in fear of some unknown fate.

But it was no youngster sitting beside me on this day. I could see thick cords jumping in his neck as he strained away from me. I could see the veins roping his wrists as he nervously flexed and re-flexed his hands into fists. He bit his lip as though to quell whatever thought he was struggling with and my fingers itched to touch him, to do away with whatever strain I was putting him under.

"It's not such a big deal, you know," I blundered, "leaving a dead-end logging town built around a post office."

He snorted. "There goes her nose agin. Haughty, by cripes—"

"I'm not haughty."

"Hell you're not. Anything outside the outports is a step up for you. A bog."

"Oh, foolishness."

"Foolish, hell. You ranks everything over the outport. The whole island's a outport to you, and now you've left that—rather waitress in some oil town—"

"Grande Prairie, Alberta, and it's a pretty city with bars that quadruple the pay offered by any bar in St. John's or Corner Brook. That's why I'm there, to make fast money."

"Sure you're not chasing Ben?"

I near drove us off the road.

“Ohh, Christ, is that what you think? That I’m chasing Ben Bonehead Rice?”

Catching his grin, I sucker-punched his leg. Glad to have a smile back on his face, I decided to keep the application into the art program for another time, the return trip, maybe, after we visited with Father and made sure he was going to be all right.

As though ensuring silence for the rest of the drive, he switched on the radio, cranking it loud. For the rest of the drive we sat mired within our own thoughts.

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INSIDE THE HOSPITAL PARKING LOT, Chris was the first out of the car, looking up at the sprawling, red-brick structure. I followed him across the lot, starting to feel apprehensive. The warming spring sun and heartening smell of fresh earth gave way to the emptied white light of long hospital corridors and the acrid odour of sickness and antiseptic. Inside the heavy doors of the intensive care unit, cowed by the silence of pending death, Chris faltered. I took his hand then and we crept like two frightened youngsters past the hushed, uniformed figures and their whitish faces hovering over blue-screened monitors that charted failing hearts in curtained-off beds. Through an opening in one of the curtains I saw Mother’s coat draped over a chair.

Chris hung back, pulling on my hand. “Say nothing about my going sealing,” he said lowly.

I shook my head and then held my breath as he lifted aside the drape, nudging me forward. I expected to see them both, but there was just Dad. I near cried. So big and dark in

memory, his hair fanned by the wind, his black brows shading his eyes as he stood in his boat, he now lay still beneath a white sheet, his hair without sheen, his face with the pallor of an aged tombstone. His breathing, aided by rubbery oxygen tubes pronged and taped to his nostrils, sounded long, deep, and raspy.

I bit into my fist, watching as Chris approached the bedside, his eyes fastened to Father's hand, brown as bark against the white of the sheets and pierced with needles and tubing. Carefully he touched a finger to Dad's and stared into the dulled, dark orbs of his eyes, their faint glimmer of life.

"Looks better," Chris said thickly.

Father blinked in response.

"Best not to talk."

Father nodded, staring a steady stream into Chris's eyes, flooding them with the confusion of his weakness. Chris, as though his heart were too full to hold more, stood back, saying gruffly, "Brought someone to see you. Sylvie—your Dolly," he added lamely. Pushing away from the bedside, he bolted outside the curtains.

I gripped the bed railing so's not to run myself. Father lifted his hand weakly. I tried to speak, but couldn't. Taking his hand, I forced a smile at the needles. "A pin cushion," I said with a shaky laugh, "one of Gran's pin cushions." I leaned over him and pressed my mouth against the warmth of his brow.

"The boat," he whispered.

"The boat." I forced a laugh. "Is that what you're thinking about now, your boat? Chris got it tied to the wharf."

He nodded. "Next week. Home next week."

"No doubt. Be snowshoeing on the downs soon enough."

He tried to smile.

“Seriously,” I whispered, my eyes filling with persuasion as he searched them out.

Satisfied—else overcome with fatigue—his breathing deepened and he lapsed into sleep. Laying my palm against his cheek, I felt its roughness, almost tasting the salt from the days he straddled his boat in the stiff morning gales, hand-jiggling codfish in the ways of old, face bared to the wind, legs anchored to the sea. How tall he’d stood those early mornings in Cooney Arm when he tossed me and sometimes Chris aboard with him. We’d squat in the stern, white-knuckled to the gunnels, as he rose against the sky, all big and black in his sou’wester and oilskins, doing his dance with the sea as he jiggged: one hand up, one hand down, one hand up, one hand down, his hips swaying with the swell, his boat bucking with the lop. How strange his face looked now, all still and pale on that stark white pillow, his squinty eyes bereft of weather and so looking like death it was as if they knew what death was.

And in a sense he did know what death was—or a form of death. From the moment he picked up his chainsaw and started his first summer in the woods he cursed over the sweltering heat away from the sea, and the flies, the gawd-damn flies—blackflies, sandflies, mosquitoes—all swarming inside his nostrils, his ears, his eyes, and gawd-damn deer ticks gouging and breeding in his flesh. Many times I’d be hanging about the wharf when Father got home from the woods, and I’d listen to his cursing, and then Mother chiding him for his cursing, for his being wimpy over flies, for going straightaway out in boat with his nets when he’d already worked all day and hadn’t had supper yet, hadn’t washed, hadn’t fixed the latch on Gran’s door, hadn’t rested.

“I gotta breathe,” he’d shoot over his shoulder, already pulling away from the wharf, “the heat, the heat, there’s no

getting from the gawd-damn heat; can't breathe, no wind, no air, no gawd-damn air."

"Give up the nets, give up the nets, Sylvanus, working yourself in the grave with them damn, bloody nets."

And on and on they would argue about his working the woods, his nets, and the handfuls of fish that were hardly worth his while. Till now. Till now, as usual, when Mother proved herself right.

Chris reappeared from behind the curtain.

"He's sleeping," I whispered.

"Is he okay?"

"I don't know. You find Mom?"

"I—no. I think I knows, though."

We fell silent, looking into the grey of our father's face.

Chris nudged me. "You want to go find her?"

I nodded, but was unable to leave. "Hardly looks like him, do it?"

"He looked worse yesterday."

"Imagine if he'd died."

He abruptly took my arm and led me back out through those heavy doors. I followed, sniffing quietly as he led us through a series of corridors. Mother was sitting in the front pew of a small chapel. She looked shrunken, her shoulders tiny like a girl's. She was bent before a crucifix, her face the pallor of Father's.

Chris spoke her name. She rose, rushing towards him as she always did, as though he were a font from which she must drink. Unlike me, who she'd held aloof from birth. Small wonder. Three dead babies and me the fourth one born, small wonder she held me aloof. And then that "dark spell," as Gran called it, the weeks and weeks of darkness that Mother succumbed to after my birth, so dark a spell that it bruised her

skin in places and blocked her nipples from milking, I once heard her old friend Suze say.

But I hadn't fared bad. Gran brought me across the brook to her own house and fed me goat's milk from a bottle, and such great comfort I was to that dear woman that when Mother started getting well, Gran pleaded to keep me. Which served them both, as Mother was soon pregnant again, and suffered morning sickness straight through to the last day of her pregnancy.

Given that their houses were a stone's throw apart, and that Gran and Mother were tighter than blood, Mother was as much a daily fixture in my life as Gran was. And I grew happy and warm, never knowing but that Mother was happy and warm too. Till I saw her coddling Chris that first time. The way she smiled into his eyes as he suckled her breast. Such a change, such an incredible change came upon her, a glow that touched her eyes, her skin, dissipating a form of darkness from her face that I hadn't before noted.

Naturally I can't recall these things. But some part of me did. It watched now as Mother clung to Chris in the small chapel, caressing his cheek. It remembered how she used to smooch him with kisses when he was a baby, how she used to squat beside him on the shoreline, watching and smiling as he scooped up wriggly-tails from amongst the rocks, but then one day when I scooped up a worm and brought it home she brushed it from my hand, squished it on the stoop, and then scrubbed my hands, gently but firmly, with a bar of soap, chiding me about dirt.

Mother put Chris aside, reaching for me. "You've seen him?" she asked, putting her arms around my neck. I nodded, and clung to that familiar scent of lavender, all warmed and fused into my mother's skin. "You'll not let him see that," she

said as I started to cry. She pulled back, the sharp blue of her eyes piercing through the tears in my own. “He thinks he’s getting better, and that’s what we’ll let him think—he’s getting better ...” She faltered, turning towards the altar.

“Isn’t he, then— isn’t he getting better?” I choked.

Mother looked at me, then at Chris who was paling visibly. “Yes, oh, my yes, he’s getting better, of course he’s getting better,” she cried, both hands reaching for Chris. “But—oh,” she said, her voice dropping with a sudden realization, “you don’t know, you never talked to Gran, or, or Kyle. ’Course you didn’t, how could you,” she added with a silly laugh, “when they only just left—”

Chris broke in. “Don’t know what? What is it?”

“He’ll not work again. Your father will not work again.” She spoke with such conviction it was as though she herself were commanding his fate.

“The doctors—?” I asked. “Is that what the doctors are saying?”

“Yes. No. They don’t rightly know yet, but he’ll never be the same, they said he can never work in the woods again.”

“There’s other things, he’ll work at other things,” I said, infusing my tone with hope.

“Sure, other things,” said Mother. “What other things, Sylvie? There’s the woods and fishing on the trawlers. Your father won’t do that, he’ll never fish offshore on them trawlers.” She looked around emptily. “Might as well have killed him, he can’t work the woods. No, no, don’t take it like that,” she pleaded as Chris sank onto a chair, hanging his head. She sat beside him, her tiny, pale hands cupped around his like a clamshell. “He’s alive, thank god he’s alive. Be grateful for that. And we’ll keep him alive, keep him home, resting. There now,” she soothed, drawing Chris’s head to her shoulder, “there now.”

I sat next to her, speaking in the same soothing tones as Chris leaned forward, hanging his head again. “He’s strong, Father is. Chris, he’ll get past this. He’ll find his strength again, and he’ll find other things to do.”

“Sure. Sure,” Mother repeated, her tone becoming lifeless. “He’ll get past this. Live another twenty years if he don’t go dragging about chainsaws.” She rose, wrapping her arms around herself and crossing the room in short, quick steps. “How are we going to do that,” she demanded of the air around her, “how are we going to keep him from the woods? He gave up fishing, it’ll kill him to give up the woods, too. Damn old fishing—that’s what done it to him—working the woods all day long, then coming home to them damn old nets. And if he wasn’t dragging about nets and chainsaws he was traipsing through the bogs, dragging a gun. Never stopped, he never. Never stopped for a minute in the day—whatever he thought he was made of. Even the blessed Maker took his one day of rest. And dragging that old boat over that ice by himself. No wonder he’s near dead, dragging that boat across the ice by himself.”

“We can’t say that,” I cut in, noting the pained look on Chris’s face. “Others fish and log and live long, healthy lives.”

“Others,” snorted Mother. “We’re not talking about others, Sylvie, we’re talking about your father—and how he slaved at two jobs for twenty years. Others didn’t do that—two jobs for twenty years.”

“He was never working when he was fishing,” I argued. “Would’ve killed him in a worse way if he couldn’t fish.”

“Well, it has now, hasn’t it—it’s killed him in all ways.”

“He’s not dead—cripes, you talk as if he’s dead. He’ll find his way through this. He’ll start doing things differently, is all. Perhaps a bit of fishing, with his rod—or his jiggers. He always loved jigging, no strain there.”

“Providing he’s sitting in an armchair on the wharf, there’ll be no strain,” said Mother dryly. “That what we’re going to do—keep him in an armchair on the wharf?”

“I’ll haul his boat,” said Chris. He was still hunched over, elbows on his knees, head hanging like a weight from his shoulders. He raised his eyes to Mother’s. “I’ll haul his nets, too. The fish are making a comeback. So might Father. Maybe he can just go back to the way he used to be.”

“The way he used to be?” Mother stopped her pacing and sat between me and Chris, laying an arm around Chris’s shoulder. “Was there a time he wasn’t slaving his self to death?” she asked with a glimmer of a smile. “But you’re right. Least with fishing he’s not cursing his soul to hell like he is in the woods. God, he hates the woods. No wonder he’s near dead, always working against himself.”

Her hands fell onto her lap. So helpless they looked, lying there palms up as though waiting for something. I touched one, then folded my hand around it. “What else did the doctors say?” I asked quietly.

She rose in a huff, my hands falling away like the discarded hands of a toy doll. “What else is there to say?” she answered absently. “Chris, did he speak to you—did your father speak?”

Chris stared at my discarded hands as I held them oddly in my lap. “Sylvie,” he said softly. “He spoke to Sylvie.”

“A few days—is that all you can stay?” Mother asked me, her tone softening. “You should be with him, then. Go. Go sit with him, he don’t like being alone, not in this place. Did you see Gran? No. No, course you didn’t, I already asked. That’s another worry, Kyle driving your father’s new truck—you know your father bought a new truck, do you, Sylvie? First time he ever went to a bank—pray Kyle don’t have an

accident—god forbid, not just for the truck’s sake. Are you sure you can only stay a few days?”

“I—well, if you need me. Or if Dad needs me here, I can stay—”

“Rest is all he needs,” said Mother. She wrung her hands and started pacing again. “Rest and making sure he stays in that bed once we gets him home.”

“I can come back from Alberta. Maybe I’ll move back.”

She looked at me in wonderment. “My, you don’t mind flying across the country like that? You makes it sound like a trip across town. Certainly, you were never one for sitting still. Always on your feet, running here and there.” Her blue eyes shimmered for a second, as though gazing through a veil of tears onto a beloved memory. “You’ve done so well,” she near whispered. “Making the dean’s list—my, you should’ve heard Gran—poor Gran.” Just as quickly the blue eyes darkened and she was wringing her hands and pacing again. “She’s too old for this, too old and worn out. God forbid she sees another of her boys die. She’ll be glad now that you’re here, Sylvie, she’s been watching planes, wondering if that’s the one you’re on—will you go, sit with your father—Chris, perhaps we can have tea, did you have supper?”

“I’ll sit with Dad—” Chris began, but I silenced him with a sharp look. After waving him back to his seat, I gave Mother a quick hug and left the room.

A series of wrong turns and I found my way back to the unit. Quietly I stepped behind the curtain draping Father’s bed. He was sleeping, his face grey upon his pillow, and with his eyes shuttered behind thin, crinkly lids, he looked like an old weathered house without light. I laid my hand on his heart, feeling its faint pulse beneath the rise and fall of his chest. His mouth twitched.

“Dolly,” he mouthed, without opening his eyes, and in the quiet of his love my heart broadened. I sat, folded my arms onto the cool white sheet covering him, and cushioned my head, my cheek touching the warmth of his hand. Through the oxygen tubes his breathing sounded loud and deep. I slowed my breathing to match his and must’ve fallen asleep, for I awakened to slobber on my arm and Mother talking lowly to Chris about the long flight from the prairies, how tired I must be.

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“YOU LOOK NICE,” said Mother at the hospital doors as Chris and I were leaving. “Your face is nice.” She touched a hand to my cheek. “Must be that prairie air—nice and dry. No salt chafing your skin,” she ended with a smile.

“Perhaps you can visit sometime,” I offered. “You always talked about travel.”

“Talked lots of foolishness when I was young.” She looked at Chris, who was pushing out through the doors. “Be sure you drives, Chris—your sister’s tired. You let him drive now,” she called after me, and followed as far as the curb. “Chris, you drive now. Watch for moose—be careful.”

I stood beside the car, raising my face to the darkening evening sky. A faint drizzle dampened my brow and I closed my eyes, grateful for its coolness.

“You all right? I can drive,” said Chris.

But I motioned him towards the passenger seat and slipped behind the wheel, lowering the window. I drove slowly past the hospital doors, and Mother was still standing outside, her eyes wearing the same wariness as when I used to trot from Gran’s house to hers, clamouring for Chris to come play. “Take his hand, take his hand,” she’d call. And me, just two years older than Chris, guarding his every step as we mucked about the

meadow, forever steering him away from the cliffs, from rotting jelly fish, rotting capelin, dead birds, dead anything that might hurt him, forever mindful of Mother's eye watching after us.

"Worse thing ever happened, she got pregnant with Kyle," I said sulkily.

I felt Chris's look of surprise. "What's that suppose to mean?"

"She got sick and I had to care for you, is what it means. Like she was jealous every time she seen me walking off with you. Like I was taking you from her."

"Whoa, Sis, now how foolish is that?"

"Not foolish at all. I can still hear her singing after me every time I led you along shore, *Don't go too far, don't go too far*—it was Cooney Arm, for gawd's sake! Six boarded-up houses. Where'd she think I was taking you?" I lapsed into silence, hating the sulkiness of my voice, hating even more that I'd spoken out loud and Chris was staring questioningly at me. Not at my sulkiness, though, for he understood that, and was always apologetic in the face of it, as though a part of him also remembered our mother's breasts milking for him but not for me.

"Jealous!" he exclaimed. "Now, how'd you come up with that—jealous of who, of what?"

"Of me, you—that it wasn't her out running about with you."

"Cripes, Sylvie, now *that's* foolish."

"What would you know—you were lots younger, and always looking at your feet."

"Nerves, Sis. She had bad nerves, she always got bad nerves."

"Right, bad nerves. Chase down a grizzly, Mother would."

"So she'd chase a grizzly—don't mean she wasn't scared of it. She was scared of something."

“Yeah. She read too many books. The old always said too much reading drives you mental.”

“Oh, come on,” chided Chris, and I had the grace to flush at my own silliness. “In the hospital, after they wheeled Dad away, first person she said to call was you,” he said. “Always talking about you—how hard you works, graduating university with honours, how you’ll travel the world—she’s always saying that, you’ll travel the world someday. And—*and*,” he repeated for emphasis, “when you’re coming home next! She’s always wondering when you’re coming home next.”

“And when I’m here she never knows what to do with me.”

“You’re always arguing with her, that’s why—the both of you, always arguing. Why don’t you come home more often? She don’t like you staying away. True,” he added as I drove in silence, “she’s always talking about you. And Dad—jeezes, Dad—he looks bad, don’t he—gawd, he looks bad ...” His words trailed off.

I steered us onto the grey, darkening highway, rubbing my brow tiredly, seeing our father’s face, all worn and ashen on his pillow. Aside from the yellow line shooting rhythmically beneath the car, that was how the whole world appeared to me this evening—the hills, the trees, all limp and grey against a pewter sky.

Till I neared home. Till I turned off the highway and finally onto the rutted side road leading to our house on the wharf. Then the rocks themselves burst into colour, the trees and sky and all else around me dissolving into a thousand pictures of Father: walking wearily from his stage after a day’s fishing back in Cooney Arm, sitting at Gran’s supper table, falling back on the daybed after he’d eaten, cuddling me on his great, heaving chest, his snores rattling my bones, hugging me tight against his itchy, worsted sweater, hugging me tight against his wet, scaly

oilskins, trundling about his stage, shouting for me to come help lay out the fish, laughing at Mother's complaints that he had me smelling like himself, a pickled capelin.

I didn't care about his smell. I loved sniffing pickled capelin. I loved it that Mother, Chris, Kyle—all of them—squirmed against his itchy, worsted hugs and his scaly wet oilskins; that nobody else liked going into his stage as I did, helping him lay out his fish in the puncheons; that only I worked the flakes alongside him, laying out his fish to cure in the sun; that only I accompanied him in boat sometimes, crouching anxiously in the stern as he leaned easily over the gunnels hauling his nets, grunting and cussing if the catch was poor, whistling and singing if the fish were thick and he was piling them at my feet.

More pictures came before me—pictures of me sitting at Mother's table, being home-schooled along with Chris, and Dad winking at me across the room; Dad looking innocently away should Mom, all prim, proper, and teacher-like, turn her attention towards him; Dad sitting beside me at the table, learning from Mother how to read and write and laughing at his clumsiness with a pencil; Dad walking me home after lessons—staying for a while during those cold, bitter nights, running the heated flat-iron over my bedsheets before tucking me in—as Gran always did—and heating dinner plates in the oven, wrapping them in towels and placing them beneath my cold feet before bundling the blankets around me. It felt like he was mine then, when he sat on the side of my bed, his head so close to mine as I said my prayers that I could smell his sour, pickled breath and feel the scattered strands of his hair, all soapy and vinegarish, tickling my face and making me squirm through the amens.

Abruptly the pictures changed. We were no longer in Cooney Arm. The soft darkness of Gran's firelit corners was

blasted by garish electrical lights that lit Mother's house on the wharf, leaving me—along with Gran, Father, the boys, and sometimes even Mother—blinking like nocturnal creatures, flitting about the house like bats searching for a rayless niche in which to roost. How disoriented I'd felt those first months in Mother's crowded household, with all the attention constantly heaped upon me by Mother, the boys. Times I'd run, looking for Father and finding him equally disoriented, hunched over the wharf, looking back to Cooney Arm, gutted by the loss of his stage, his flakes. Home from a day's work in the woods, he'd sit carefully amongst Mother's new, brightly patterned cushions on the sofa and watch, confused by my resistance to Chris and Kyle's overzealous attention to my every move, confused by my defiance with Mother over some small thing, confused by my new math and the queer gawd-damned way of mixing letters and numbers.

My most favoured imprint was the day of my first birthday living in Mother's house. Father had bought a watch from the store in Hampden and hung it on the outside knob of my room door because he was too shy to give it to me and wanted to make a joke out of it. It hung there all day—nobody else saw it, and I refused to see it, fearful of its not being mine and that he'd see the want in my eyes. Gran finally spotted it, and brought it to the supper table and gave it to me, chiding him for his foolishness. I felt too shy beneath his gaze to properly hook it around my wrist. And so Mother, looking a mite shy herself in her new dress that she was wearing just for my birthday, leaned close, helping me hook the watch strap, she too chiding Father for his foolishness—all of us hiding our shyness behind his foolishness.

So why had Mother looked shy, I pondered now, but then pushed the thought away as I drove past Father's woodshed

and pulled up to the wharf. Turning off the headlights, I sat for a minute, staring at the house, at the smoke pouring from the chimney, the windows yet unlit in the growing dusk. A wooden cubbyhole was built to the side of the house, Father's chainsaw, his bucksaw, his handsaw laid inside, along with a box full of jiggers and bits of fishing gear. Other stuff, his barrels, puncheons, nets, was stored in the woodshed or rotting into the ground in Cooney Arm.

Wrapped in canvas at the end of the wharf lay an anchor, an old motor, some boat parts. Poor Father. He hadn't the heart to build another stage here on the wharf. Why bother when fishing had become more of a fun thing than a mainstay? And now everything he owned was all scattered about—like Father himself, his soul wandering the emptied fishing grounds of Cooney Arm, his heart fighting for resurgence in some hospital room in the city.