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THE MONEY CAT

By

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From the upstairs I watched Mrs. McGreary work her way toward us along the berry path. She wore her husband's old hunting coat, bright orange against the unrelenting gray of the North Atlantic, her arms criss-crossed, hugging herself for warmth. She was coming to give us the news. We already knew of course. On an island this small -- seventeen families whose fortunes ebbed and flowed with the weather, the cod, and the inclinations of a few summer people -- news, rare real news, seemed to shoot through the very ground beneath our feet. I wiped the perspiration from my hands on my skirt.

Manago would have called by radio from the mail boat to Simpson, the dock master, to have him make sure that old man Packard could leave his store to deliver a telegram. The docks and the store were the only two places to congregate without a preacher so at least one or two others would have heard. From there it fanned out like fire on a dry August afternoon.

It reached me at the schoolhouse where I was helping Mr. Simon grade the papers of the younger students. I stayed almost every afternoon to help him out one way or another. Little Billy Packard came bursting in and the screen door slapped back like thunder. He was out of breath. He sputtered “Navy telegram for McGreary,” and then took off toward the forest path.

This was 1943 and a telegram from the Department of the Navy could only mean that there would soon be a small silk square with a gold star hanging in a window, the government’s way of making sure that every mother who’d lost a son could notify the world that duty and grief had intersected at this house. The island had three boys under the command of the Department of the Navy: one who sought glory in the Marines and two who were aboard ships in the regular Navy. Roddy McGreary was on a destroyer somewhere in an ocean I had only seen on the big map that hung next to the blackboard at the school. The Pacific on the wall was still flat, peaceful, blue – how would it change with the blood of Roddy and who knows how many other boys who sank into its depths?

This was the first telegram, but I could have guessed what it said: We regret to inform you ... in service to his country... you should be proud... our sincerest condolences. Tears dripped down onto the shaky script that ambled across the ruled papers I held in my hand. I felt Mr. Simon's hands on my shoulder, squeezing gently and guiding me into one of the hard wooden benches where the students fidgeted each day. I put my head down into the crook of my arm and let the tears fill the gouges and carved initials in the oak desk.

My eyes were now dry and red as I followed Mrs. McGreary's progress through the scrub that grew like bushy eyebrows above the rocks.

“Mother,” I called with half a voice. “Mrs. McGreary's on the path.”

My mother and Mrs. McGreary were not friends. In fact I cannot think of anyone who would call my mother a friend for she held herself apart from as much island life as she could. But Mrs. McGreary knew about Roddy and me. She'd seen us holding hands on the porch. I was the one who stood next to her and threw flowers after the mail boat when it set off to take Roddy to the mainland to find glory in the war. She and I lingered after church sometimes to compare the details in the letters that he sent to each of us. She told me that, once Roddy and I were married, we could move into the old cottage up on the bluff that she'd been renting to summer people. She had taken things farther than had Roddy and I, but then island nights by the fire are long and quiet.

All I knew about love came from books in the school - the Brönte sisters were my favorites - and Roddy was the only boy I ever really loved. We had loss in common - his father's boat had gone down in a storm in '36 - but hadn't been more than classmates until about a year before he went away. He was the boy who kissed me deeply out on the rocks of Washerwoman Point. I was the girl who ran her fingers through his hair, bleached almost as white as sea spray by endless days on the boat, and waited for him to come back from a run to the Banks, to be given back to me by the sea. He would be a good man - I could feel that much in my bones - and Mother always told me that that was the most important thing to look for. Love, she said, is just getting used to each other.

Now Mrs. McGreary and I would share details one more time, if the Navy provided any. Was it a bullet? A torpedo? Was he brave? Or foolish? Or just unlucky? Would there be a body to bury or were we to say our good-byes to the neatly typed rows of words carefully composed by someone somewhere to ensure us that this death had meaning?

She was wet and windblown when she stepped onto our porch. Mother had the decency to put on the tea water and arrange a few crackers on a plate. We stood in the small sitting room, it shared the first floor with the kitchen and pantry, and inhaled the warmth of the fire. In the dim lamplight I could see that Mrs. McCreary's ashen face was swollen and blotchy with grief. When she squeezed my hand I reached out to hug her, but she pushed me back. Then she reached into the hunting coat and produced a tiny calico kitten.

“I told you Roddy's cat had kittens about two weeks ago,” she said. “I thought you should have one, dear.”

I took the wee thing in my hands and kissed the downy black spot behind its ears. Its body was mostly white with black on the head, the rump and both of the front legs. Splotches of orange ran along its right side like careless paint.

“Thank you, Mrs. McCreary. He'll have a good home.”

Mother, hovering in the doorway where the sound of the kettle would allow her a quick escape, locked on me with her steely eyes and shook her head, no. I felt my heartbeat through the kitten's tiny body and I could not let go. In answer to my prayers, Uncle Hiram walked through the back door and surveyed our triangulated clatch.

“Sorry about your boy, Margaret,” he said as he crossed the room. He squeezed Mrs. McCreary's forearm. “He was a fine lad.” He looked at me with summer sea eyes. “What have we here, darlin'? We're in need of a mouser, don't you think?” His gnarly hand barely ruffled her fur as he stroked her. The kitten sniffed his hands once and began to lick. “Well, I best scrub the fish from me pores. We'll be at the service Margaret. You know, anything you need...” He headed out to the hand-pump for water.

There was no body for the funeral – Roddy’s ship had been torpedoed went down with all hands – and the Navy wasn’t slowing down to recover the maimed, bloated corpses. After all, wasn’t burial at sea the ultimate tribute for a sailor?

We gathered on the cliff looking east, offering our prayers into the roaring, pounding surf of the open ocean because we needed to speak directly to Poseidon and his minions. No chapel seemed big enough for this pain. Reverend Bellows read words of comfort from his Bible and we bowed our heads at all the right moments, but I know that it was the wails of the island women that touched Roddy first, wherever he might be.

The fishing boats stayed in that next day as the men paid tribute to the loss of one of their own. It was the way things went. Whenever a man was lost, the fleet stayed in to check lines and life preservers and other supplies because you never knew which boat would be the next to give one of its crew to an angry sea. This may not have been a loss to a storm or careless accident, but there’s some comfort in tradition.

I spent the day on the boat with Uncle Hiram. I was the only girl to be seen, but nothing was said. I silently coiled rope and moved equipment from here to there along with the men. Maybe I should have been with Mrs. McCreary, but I knew there’d be others to help her in her grief. I needed to be with Roddy.

We’d been living with Uncle Hiram for all of my seventeen years as best I could tell. My birth certificate said St. John’s, I spied it once in Mother’s keepsake box when I was playing dress up, but Mother wouldn’t say much except that my father had been lost to the sea. Then she made me kneel on sand in the corner by the stove so I’d learn not to go into her things. So whenever the sea rose up against the land I imagined my father, a handsome man holding hard onto the

wheel of his ship as he wrestled Neptune until at last he was slammed against the rocks or sucked under the crest of a wave that rose high as the night. When a strange ship appeared on the horizon I dreamed that he was its captain, come back to find me. It never was. Uncle Hiram provided for us. In all those years he never once failed to kiss me goodnight. And he had no problem reminding mother that she was not his wife and had none of the nagging privileges that would have come with the role.

I named the kitten Friday, as Robinson Crusoe was the only book I ever knew Roddy to finish. I hoped my Friday would help me survive in this wilderness. Mother didn't warm easily to another mouth to feed, although once he rid the pantry of mice he garnered a bit of respect from her. Mother's first requirement was that you carry your own weight and Friday seemed to understand that. He also knew he been sent to comfort me. He came with me to school and down to the docks where I helped Uncle Hiram repair his nets. Friday loved the boat because there was always a spare mackerel head or two that he could snatch from the bait pail and Uncle Hiram didn't seem to mind. Each night Friday slept beside me, trying to fill the hole in my heart.

Uncle Hiram was a small man but his muscles were thick and twisted tight like a bow line. His eyes headed to both port and starboard at the same time and he seemed to always be in his waders going to or from the boat. He fished cod, mackerel, whatever was running. He kept a string of lobster pots, too, and would dig clams or scallops when he could. He seemed to make it his personal mission to harvest whatever the sea would provide. On weekends, when the weather was good, he would take me out on the boat, the Fair Wind. He'd whistle through the gap where one of his front teeth should have been as he worked the traps. I'd sing along and help as best my skinny arms would let me. Mother would curse him when I came home smelling of fish, but he

would just wink at me and tell her it's better that I should be able to fish than get stuck home doing housework all day long.

Months later, it was Friday who brought me to Tom though, on balance, I don't think that it was intentional. He ran off one day that next summer, chasing mice or butterflies or the little songbirds that rode the warm breezes to our island, or perhaps Mother threw him out for paying too much attention to her stew. At suppertime he hadn't come back and I ran out into the fading light across the back field calling his name. The word bent the tall grass and caused the new pine growth to sway with a whisper. It crashed with the waves as headed over the rocks out by the Hays place and up by the McGreary's cottage.

A stranger stared silently at me from the porch of the cottage, his right hand rhythmically stroking Friday's head. He had a hurricane lamp lit on a table by the rocking chair even though it was light enough to do pretty much anything but read. The chair still rocked from when he stood up to see who was shattering the sweetness of his evening. He wore clothes that didn't look like they'd seen real work and had skin too smooth to have spent much time at sea - he was from away. I stood back by the stump of the old oak. I hadn't been back up here since the news came about Roddy. I could see the last porch post grayed without paint. Roddy had replaced it just before he'd gone to war and now it stood like a soldier out of uniform.

"You Mr. Davis?" I tried to keep my voice steady.

"Who's asking?" He stepped down from the porch and headed toward me. When he got close I could see that he had green eyes dotted with little flecks of gray. He was older, like my teacher but not as old as Uncle Hiram and had an elevated look that suggested that he only

worried about the big problems of the world. He wasn't so much a handsome man as he was pleasant looking.

“I am. That's my cat.”

“That's too bad,” he said. “I could have used the company.” He handed me the cat and Friday purred like a lobster boat motor. “How'd you know my name?”

“We only get about five, six families for the summer here. The Holts, Dempseys, and Walshes own their houses, the rest rent. Mrs. McGreary told me she'd rented this place to a Mr. Davis.”

“You're quite a detective, Miss...”

“Payne. Leila Payne,” I told him.

“Well you can call me Tom, Leila. Do you know what kind of cat you have there?”

I told him that I wasn't stupid. It was a calico cat.

“That's true,” he said. “But what you really have here is a money cat. They say that male calicos are rare so they're worth money. I don't know if it's true, but that's what they say.”

Friday was a money cat too because Tom asked me if I was interested in doing a little cooking and cleaning around his place for the summer. Said he'd give me fifty cents a week. I knew Mother wasn't going to like this. She didn't like me with the summer people. Especially the men. Said it was just trouble with a short fuse. But with reports of U-boats keeping Uncle Hiram and the rest of the fishermen close to home, the catch was light and money was something you didn't show to the door. So starting the next day Friday and I walked up to the cottage after I'd finished my chores at home.

On the way home that first day I picked wildflowers and brought them to Mrs. McGreary. I'd tried to stop by at least once a week since Roddy had passed. We'd have tea and talk about what once was and what might have been. Today I wanted to talk about what was right now.

"Why aren't those just the prettiest?" she said almost before she looked at them. "What's the occasion?"

"I got a job, Mrs. McGreary. And it's all thanks to you." I was practically skipping with excitement.

"Really? Now how did I do that?" She winked in a way that told me she already knew what I was about to tell her but didn't want to spoil my fun. She took a deep sniff of the flowers and walked into the kitchen.

"Well, you rented the cottage to that nice Mr. Davis and I'm going to be his housekeeper." I fell into one of the kitchen chairs and just began to ramble. "He's a writer. Teaches English at Columbia according to the business card that I found on his dresser while I was dusting. Says he came here looking for peace and quiet for working on his second novel."

Mrs. McGreary cut in with a laugh, "With nothing but the mail boat twice a week to bring us news of the rest of Creation, peace and quiet is something we'd about cornered the market on."

"Don't you see? He's a teacher. I want to be a teacher someday. He can tell me everything."

She smiled the gently. "Well don't forget to keep your mind on your chores or he'll be telling you to keep house for somebody else." She put two cups of tea on the table. "It's good to see some life in you, Leila."

I thought, good to see you smile, too. “You moved Roddy’s star,” I said when I noticed that the silk square that held it no longer dangled from the sash lock.

Mrs. McGreary pulled her housedress tight as if she were wiping dirt from her hands. “No one much by here to see it in the window, dear. I put with his picture on the mantle.” She pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and pressed it to her eyes.

The days quickly became routine. I would sweep the small cottage, do Tom’s wash, change the linens, and cook a meal that would last through supper and the following noontime both. Tom sat on the porch mostly, Friday in his lap, with the old typewriter that he’d lugged out with him. He’d peck through a page or so each day and in two or three weeks the manuscript seemed to be working its way toward a respectable thickness. His mood varied considerably and I could generally judge it by the tempo of the clacking keys. Sometimes I would look out and see him staring at the machine like a priest willing words to appear on the page, daring them to reveal his vision. He developed an appreciation of fried eggs and fish cakes; I learned not to whistle as I mopped the floor.

I passed my days pretending to be the lady of the house and in my make-believe drifting I heard Roddy’s lilting voice call out my name as he came striding up from the landing, the oars from the dinghy resting on his broad shoulders. I waited for our baby crying and smelt apple pie crisping in the oven.

The summer might have passed like that – with Tom and I unknowing, silent partners in grief -- had it not been for a July storm that sent down crooked bolts like matches being struck one after another in the pitch of night. Rain fell so hard that it bounced off the rocks and thunder rocked the trees so that Friday withdrew into a deep crevice in the larder. Mother would be

furious, I knew, but we weren't going home until the storm let us. I was glad that I'd made cod cheeks and hash since I'd be eating too.

That was the first night that I asked Tom about the book. He told me that it was just a story. A man. A woman. The tumult of war. The pages I'd watched pile up were just repeated drafts of the first chapter. I told him about the outline method and how it had helped me win the outer island essay contest the year before. He laughed and shook his head. Maybe it was the rain or maybe it was the second glass of whiskey, but then he told me about the fire that spring that had taken his pregnant wife.

“She was my reader,” he said. “I'd write five, ten pages and then listen to her read them back. Just hearing her voice I'd know what was right and what needed to be changed. She breathed flesh onto the characters and put lights in the windows of the places they lived. I listen for her here, but even in this quiet I can't find her voice... or mine. “I wanted to cry as I watched him in front of the fire. His hair had grown long and curled behind his ear. His brow furrowed up like punky wood. The sun had tanned him and his eyes had the mist of an April morning. I wasn't sure what to do, but I found myself picking up the manuscript and beginning to read.

I was barely in ten pages when there was a loud rap at the cottage door. I quickly stood up, smoothed my skirt, and went toward the door. Tom also jumped up and motioned for me to sit back down.

Tom opened the door and my mother's eyes shone in hard like polished granite. She spoke to Tom, but looked straight at me.

“I've come for my daughter.” Her hair was plastered wet against her skull. Water ran down through the crevices of her weathered face. She made no attempt to cross the threshold. I got up and went to the larder to get Friday.

“She’s been waiting for the storm to let up,” Tom began.

Mother cut him off. “It’s late. She should be at home.”

“Mother, there was lightning,” I said, trying to shield Tom from some of Mother’s animosity.

“Would you like to come in, Mrs. ...”

“No, thank you,” she said curtly. “This wasn’t a social call.” I came to the door and she handed me a mackinaw that she had carried with her.

“I’ll see you in the morning, Tom, I mean, Mr. Davis.”

“Just get home safe,” he said as Mother ushered me off the porch.

I made sure to be home early for the next few evenings but, as Tom and I began to spend more of our time reading and Friday began to find dust balls to play with, I stretched my days with Tom as long as I could. It was early the next week that I was late for dinner.

“Getting home late again,” said Mother when I skipped through the back door. “We can’t be waiting dinner on you. Are you dilly-dallying on a paying customer the way you do around here? He must be one patient man.”

“He’s a writer, Mother. He’s asked me to read for him.”

“Who ever heard of such craziness? Is he paying you for reading to him?” When I said “no” she just sighed and turned back to the soup on the stove. “You are a simple girl, she said. There’s plenty of work to be done here. If he’s not paying you, I want you home.”

“But Mother. He’s a professor. He may be able to help me get into a teacher’s college.”

“Stop with that craziness. There’s only one thing a man’s going to help you get and it’s not into some college. It’s time you get your head out of the clouds. If you have time to read, you

have time to help me here. We're going to re-string the washline tomorrow. You get done with your Mr. Davis in the morning. I'll need you here right after lunch."

The next morning I arrived at about 9:30 surprising Tom with his hair still wet. I banished him, wet head and all, to the porch with Friday and told him to get to writing. I started in the front room with the broom and then followed with the mop. When Tom came in to offer help moving the furniture, I simply pointed him back out the door. At lunch, I handed him a dry ham sandwich through the window and kept working. By the time the shadows of the trees had come about halfway to the house everything was as clean as it should have been. I gathered up my things and called for Friday as I headed toward the steps.

"Where are you going? We haven't read yet."

"Can't today. I have to help Mother."

"What's gotten in to you? Have I said something?"

"Mother needs me."

"I need you, too. I need you to read."

"No you don't Tom. You need to understand that. You believe you do. You just need to believe in yourself putting the words down on the page."

"What's wrong?" he asked. "What's happened?"

It took a bit more prodding, but I finally told him what my mother had said. He pressed a silver dollar into my hand. "Give it to your mother and tell her that's back wages. There'll be fifty cents more a week for my reader.

"I pushed the money back at him. "I don't want to get paid for this," I said. "I'm not doing this for money."

“Take it,” he said. “It's a pittance to pay for the privilege. I'd pay a hundred times that if I could.” He ran a hand through my hair and let it settle on my shoulder. His soft smile and pleading eyes shone nothing but kindness. “You're very special, Leila. Don't let anyone ever tell you otherwise.” Then he kissed me tenderly on the forehead.

“You were right,” I told Mother that night.

“Never thought I'd hear those words.”

“Mr. Davis is going to pay me a whole quarter a week to read to him.”

“See girl,” she said with a smile. “You can't let people take advantage of you.”

Tom was reading a week old copy of the *Bangor Times* when I arrived that next Wednesday. There was a front-page story was about the progress of the Navy in the Pacific. I thought of the ghost of Roddy battling the Japanese alongside his buddies.

“Why aren't you there, Tom?” I twisted around so that I could see the sketchy map and a photograph of our boys waving at the camera, looking as though they would just as soon lie down and call it a day. I wondered how many of them would be sent home in telegrams.

“I tried to steal home when I was eight.” I looked at him quizzically. “Bobby Edwards should have taken the pitch, but he swung and I caught it right on the side of the head. Hearing's never been quite the same since. Besides, Leila, I'm 30. I'd just slow those boys down.”

“Did you try to enlist?”

He reached out and stroked my hair. “A bunch of us from the University went down together right after Pearl Harbor. I knew what was going to happen but I had to set an example. I

have a couple of my younger colleagues over there and more than a few students. Do you know anyone over there?"

"The Atkinson's have a boy in the Navy; Jim Shore is off in the Marines."

"I hear the McGrearys lost a boy."

"Yes," I replied turning away. "That certainly was a shame. Are you hungry for lunch?"

It was mid-August, the time of the Perseid meteor showers. It was one of Uncle Hiram's favorite sky shows. He taught me a lot about the stars. How to find true north and then plot a course to the mainland. How to mark the passing seasons by the constellations that rose and fell from the heavens. Which fish would be running when Cirrus hung low with Venus at dusk. Just look at ol' Perseus in August, he'd say, and there would be dozens of glittering missiles streaking silently through the darkness.

I didn't watch the showers with Uncle Hiram this year. I told Mother that I before I took Tom out to the bluff where you could hear the whoosh of the minke whales as they scuffed the surface. We sat among the wild asters staring at the sky.

"Tom," I said, "you're a lucky man."

He laughed. "Me? You hardly know me. I'm a widower. That's sadness I hope you'll never know." I wanted to tell him that he was the first person who lightened that sadness for me, but somehow those words wouldn't form in my mouth.

"I don't mean to make light of your loss, Tom. But you teach. You write. I've dreamt of being a teacher since I was in the sixth grade. I work a few hours a week as the teacher's aide, but it's not the same thing. I want to stand in front of those expectant faces and show them the world, that's what I want to do."

“Then do it.”

“That's why you're lucky, Tom. You can. And when you want to go someplace quiet to write, you come here. You can. I'm here and I'm not going anywhere else. Don't get me wrong. I love this place. But I want to see more. Do more.” I tossed a rock over the cliff and into the turbulent surf below.

“There's a teacher's college in Belle Meade. It's not far.”

“It's a million miles. I could never pay for that.” I laughed. “And I think if I left Uncle Hiram alone with Mother he'd turn her into fish bait in about a week.”

“Be a dreamer,” said Tom. “Never be afraid to dream.” He put his arm around me. I glanced over and saw that look that told me that for him life was an open field to wander across barefoot.

“Look,” I said, pointing up. A speck of white shot across the sky. Then another. And another.

“See,” said Tom. “Dream.” And then he turned and put his lips on mine. I hugged him close. His hands moved over my body and I was underwater, on fire, trembling and strong. Tom was gentle and sure, pushing away my fears. I felt his weight upon me and I thought that I heard him whisper her name. That was all right, though, because for a moment, just a moment, it was Roddy I saw silhouetted in the moonlight above me. And then it was my name Tom spoke as he kissed away my tears.

The next day we made no pretense of maintaining our former relationship. Tom met me on the porch and kissed me deeply. Inside we were soon squeezed together on his narrow bed. I traced the outline of his chest muscles with my finger and he nibbled gently at my neck. We

moved with an energy that broke the gauzy strands of our pasts and our grief. There was only us and today and the warm breeze that pushed back the simple curtain on the window.

As days became a week, I began to think that this was the place I should be. One morning I charged a pound of flour and two eggs to Tom's account at Mr. Packard's store the next morning so that we'd have the makings of a cake at the cottage. Friday and I snuck across the Johnson's back field because it was faster than heading along the rocks. Dew glistened on my bare feet and turned the hem of my pink skirt a deep crimson.

The curtains were closed and I found a note on the door when I arrived. It said "Gone clamming with Mr. McCreary. Go on in. If I don't see you today, I'll see you tomorrow. Best, Tom" I noticed that the typewriter was gone from the porch.

I did my chores quickly and left the groceries on the sturdy pine table that filled the center of the one room that doubled as sitting room and kitchen. As I got ready to leave I looked around at Tom's things. The plaid shirt hanging on the peg by the bed; the books stacked neatly on the side table. His scent had seeped into this place. I could feel him when he wasn't there. I took the shirt and pulled it tight around me against the cold that now permeated the shadows where I stood.

It was two days more until I saw Tom again. I ran into him on the path that led down to the docks from the hill above town. His suitcase and typewriter were piled into a wheelbarrow.

"What's going on?" I asked. "Why have you been avoiding me?"

"School's starting soon," he said. "I have to go."

"You weren't going anywhere the other night."

"Well, plans have changed. Things have changed. You're just a girl, Leila. I can't."

“Seemed like you thought I was woman enough.”

“Men make mistakes, Leila. These past few days can’t be the rest of our lives.”

“It could for me.” I reached out for his hand.

Tom stepped back. “Damn it, Leila. Sometimes we can't have what we want. OK? Let's just leave it there.”

“You owe me more than that, Tom Davis. You owe me more than that.”

“You’re right, Leila. I do. Two days ago I was ready to go talk to your mother and your uncle to see if they’d let you could come back to the mainland with me. I was going to tell them that I’d get you into a teacher’s college. But that would have been a line. I couldn’t promise you or them anything about college or anything else for that matter.”

“But, Tom,” I sputtered.

“I have to get my things down to the dock. The mail boat leaves in a couple of hours.”

“I love you.”

Tom simply stared at the ground.

It was Mother's hand across my face that announced my pregnancy. The hard slap sent me back against the wall where I could feel the rising heat of the morning fire in the stove. Friday let out a screech when my foot caught him in the belly sending him sliding across the floor. It was my third day waking with stomach sickness. The first I put to Tom's departure. I envisioned him scanning the dock for my face while I knelt retching over my chamber pot. I had no time to watch another man leave this island. The second day, could it have been cod left out or milk that had turned? Mother, though, knew the real cause by that third morning and felt obliged to deliver her diagnosis.

“You're carrying his bastard child,” she hissed. I felt my face flush. Then she laughed. “You're with child and you didn't even know it, did you?” Her voice rose and turned starchy. “Did you? You lay down with that man, didn't you? I hope you enjoyed it because there'll be no more pleasure from hereon. You've brought shame upon this house.”

I slunk back through the doorway toward the narrow stairs. “He's... not like... you think,” I sputtered through my tears. “He... doesn't... know.” I began to haul myself up the stairs on hands and knees, just beginning to comprehend that there was a new life in my belly. I held Friday held tight in one hand.

She pursued me, wiping her thin dry hands on her apron. “Your damn right he doesn't know. He doesn't want to know. And don't expect that he'd come running back if he did know. You stupid child.”

“It's not true” I cried. “You don't know him.” She was tear-blurred scowling up at me from the bottom of the stairs.

“I know them all,” she replied, shaking her head. “Now pull yourself together. There's work to be done.”

It was a day of silence as I tried to understand what was happening to me. The sickness passed by mid-morning yet Mother's eyes kept the bile churning. I stole away on the solitary chores of hanging laundry and beating the rugs. My body felt no different but Mother wasn't often wrong. She wasn't often wrong.

I got into bed and pulled the old quilt tight around me. Friday didn't seem to understand and leapt at my feet under the covers, determined to make me laugh. I'd move them and he'd leap again until finally I grabbed him and pulled him close to my face and kissed his forehead.

Mother and Uncle Hiram were arguing in the kitchen beneath me, their voices rising like steam through the floorboards.

“Do you know what's ahead for that girl and that child?” she hissed.

“Yes, Esther. The best life we can give her and her baby. I don't like it any more than you do, but what's done is done.”

I could hear Mother pacing around the kitchen. Her heels clacked like the claws of an angry lobster.

“There was a Negro woman in Port Clyde who they said took care of these things. Hiram, you have to take us to the mainland tomorrow.”

“You're talkin' about goin' against God's will, Hester.” I heard a mug slam on the table.

“Don't give me God's will.” She was spitting words now. “A God that puts you in a situation like this, he's no friend of mine. We have to get that girl taken care of.”

I was not going to be “taken care of.” Not with Tom's baby. There was no good reason that he had to lose two. He didn't know. He didn't know. He wouldn't have left if he had. He would have known God's will. God was giving me his child and that had to count for something.

Mother would never let me go. Why give away any evidence that the whole world was conspiring to make her miserable? She didn't know Tom. She wasn't even going to give him a chance to prove her wrong. There was no faith in him. Or me. Or anyone for that matter. Life with her had never been easy though all I had to compare it to was what I'd read in books. I tried to thumb forward, but I couldn't find a happy ending.

I waited until the sky was dark as ink and Mother and Uncle Hiram had gone off to bed. I stuffed a few bits of clothing into my schoolbook bag I'd made from old bits of cloth. Last in was

Friday, his head poking out with curiosity. I wore the old quilt as a shawl to keep back the night chill.

I hurried across the front field and onto the rocks, my feet working from memory. I could have named each of these boulders, they were my brothers and sisters and cousins. Tonight they were sure and steady aids to my flight. I could hear the waves breaking onto Dead Man's beach with the soapy crests glistening in the moonlight. I swung west along the shore to the McCreary's. I'd leave her a note so she wouldn't worry.

The tide was at the mid-point so I only had to push Uncle Hiram's skiff a few yards to the water. The island is six-and-a-half miles offshore. Not an easy row, but one I could make. Seal's Head Light was dark with the wartime blackout, but the moon was bright. Just head straight out to the shoals and then follow the North Star into the harbor. I'd make my way from there. I had five dollars and sixty-three cents and Tom's business card. Roddy took a troop train from Bangor to New York. Must be passenger service, too.

"Late for a row." Uncle Hiram was leaning against a large boulder, legs and arms crossed as if waiting for a bus. "Where you headin'?"

"I can't stay here, Uncle Hiram." The tears felt as if they were freezing on my cheeks. "You can see that can't you?"

"But where are you going to go that's better than here? You've got no family. No one out there who loves you like we do. Who's going to take care of you?"

"Being taken care of is what I'm afraid of." He looked perplexed. "I heard you and Mother talking. She's not going to kill this baby."

He walked across the rocks and wrapped his arms around me and I grabbed him like a lifeline. “She’s can’t have me and she can’t have this baby,” I cried into his shoulder.

“And the bottom of the ocean isn’t going to get either one of you either. That’s where I’m afraid you’ll end up tonight. What’ll that do for anyone? Come on.” One strong arm steered me back toward the path and the other threw the school bag over his shoulder.

“But Tom and teaching and...”

“Maybe you weren’t born here, but you’re an island girl. This is a strong place. I learned long ago it’s hopeless to fight against nature – just lean back and let her take her course. Ride her tides and move to her rhythms. She’ll make sure you end up in a safe place. You can trust in nature once you learn to read between the lines.”

Mrs. McGreary met us at the head of the path with a lantern. She stroked my head and then fell in step beside us. We turned down along the berry path away from the house.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“You’ll stay at my place tonight, Leila,” she said. “Tomorrow you can move up to the cottage. It’s empty now ‘til next summer. Be good to have a body staying there.”

The moonlight shone down into the clearing as we approached the house giving the yard an almost phosphorescent glow. Once inside, Uncle Hiram threw a log on the fire and Mrs. McGreary put on the water for tea. I sat in close to the flames and squeezed my eyes tight. Then, I felt Friday leap into my lap.

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