# Island Funeral

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*Thank you*

*Steve Gilberts*
*Nanci Kalanta*
*Andrew Monge*
*Norman Prentiss*

Sarah whispered, "I want to be buried at home. In the family plot. On the mainland."

"...*What?*" I shook my head, blinking away sleep. "What did you say?"

On the morning of our honeymoon, Sarah was talking about dying, graveyards? "Promise me you'll do that, Tim," she whispered, just a ghost beside me in the blue dawn shadows.

"But honey—"

She reached over and held my face in her hands. "*Promise me* Tim."

"Since when do we talk about something like this?"

"Since never. That's why it's so important. Promise me Tim."

"Okay, sure." I kissed her, and it was only then that I felt the wetness on her cheeks, and knew she had been crying. "Hey, it's okay...really. I *promise*...."

# 1

Promises made.

Promises kept.

Promises broken.

Four years later, following the hearse that was carrying my Sarah home, the memory of that newlywed morning conversation played over and over in my head. "Promise me Tim.... Promise me…."

In that long, solitary drive up the Maine coast from the Portland airport to Arthur's house, I tried vainly to keep the grey and silver hearse in sight. I was fighting tourist traffic, sun glare and memories in equal measure. The memories were four years old: the first trip Sarah and I had made after our elopement to meet Arthur, Sarah's grandfather, her last living relative. We had passed countless kitchy antique stores, stopping at most of them, or so it seemed, looking for something to give Arthur, a peace offering for the elopement. Now those same stores just flashed by, as blurred as my recollections...something about boards...and whale-shaped hat-racks....

Rounding the last turn off the highway, emerging through a final stand of gnarly pines edging an ocean of ochre grass that swept in a single, inexorable wave to the black and grey rocks, to the *real* ocean, I slowed the rental car.

Large, weathered, unpainted clapboard farmhouse, framed

against a chalky blue sky, its mantle of autumn fields folded carefully about it, and the sheltered cove beyond...the only thing missing was the cripple in the pink dress.

I continued up the road to the house.

Sarah's grandfather emerged from its shadows even before I parked. Arthur Hubbard, quintessential Down Easter patriarch, tall and lean, with a defiant shock of white hair above a handsome stone cliff of a face. Still scared the hell out of me, as usual.

Rather than coming around, he opened Sarah's door and reached across her empty seat to shake my hand. The cold air filled the car, and his rough, callused hand was like ice. "Tim," he said.

"Arthur."

"Glad you made it."

"I'm glad to be here."

His grasp was solid, lingering. Everything was in it: his daughter was dead, but no one was to blame; no one did anything *wrong; I* had done nothing wrong. Hell, she died too young from ovarian cancer, in a coma at the end, and didn't even feel it because dying in a coma didn't *hurt*; that's what all the doctors had said, hadn't they? It was just changing one dream for another, from a dream that lasted moments to one that lasted an eternity.

That wasn't my fault, was it?

Yeah, right. Tell that to the old man, the very last Hubbard now, leaning across the cheap front seat of your rental Chevy, holding your hand like he never wants to let it go.

I finally broke the grasp. "I was following on the highway but I lost sight of—"

"Don't worry. Agnes Walker at the funeral home called already. Sarey's here. She's safe. She's home." Arthur stood back, and looked into the back seat. "Where are your bags? Trunk?"

I pulled the trunk release, "I'll give you a hand."

Everything inside the huge old farmhouse was exactly as I had remembered it from our few previous holiday visits: spartan, vast expanses of creamy plaster, dark oak casements and moldings, and

hard, spindled furniture as old and worn and solid as the house. There was nothing extraneous; everything was in its place.

Arthur put the bags he carried by the bottom step of the stairs in the central hall, then took my coat and hung it up on the only piece that didn't fit: the wrought iron hat-rack in the shape of a sperm whale, the one Sarah had bought four years ago, on our first trip north to meet her grandfather, her only surviving relative. Seeing that sperm-whale coat rack stopped me cold in Arthur's entry hall, and the memory it raised washed through me again, just as it had on the road not a half hour before….

We had decided to skip the big highway and take old Route 1, where the clear Maine summer sunshine and the cold Atlantic surf both shattered like crystal against the granite shoreline: "Stop here!" Sarah pointing across the steering wheel, "Here, quick, before we pass it!"

I looked left, my foot slipping off the gas. "Right here?"

"Quickly, Tim!"

Gravel sprayed into the cowslips beside the road as I brought the car abruptly around. We bounced off the pavement and into a cinder parking lot, stopping before a faded Victorian farmhouse that had been converted (protesting all the way, by the looks of it) into a typical Down East tourist-trap antique shop.

"Bellough's Antiques & Curios / Used Furniture & Tools" the painted sign said, grey on pink, with curlicues.

I turned the car off and set the brake. The engine ticked, and the cinder dust settled.

Staring through the windshield, Sarah said reverently, "I've always wanted to stop here."

I thumbed the buttons that lowered the windows. A hot July breeze, full of salt and pinesap and truck diesel, swirled through the car. *Maine.* I said, "We must have passed a hundred places like this since Portland. What's so special about this one?"

She rested her cheek on my shoulder. "Every summer, when Grandad would drive Grandmom and me down to Boston to shop

and tour the Constitution one more damn time, I would always beg him to stop here so I could look at the dollhouse in the front window, and every time Grandmom would say something like, 'Places like this are for the summer people, Sarey. You're not summer people; you're *regular* folk.'"

I kissed her forehead, then motioned with my chin to the front window of the place. "Hate to tell you Babe, but they sold your dollhouse."

Sarah slid back across her seat and opened her door. "I know. It was gone the summer I turned thirteen." The door closed, and she leaned back in the open window with a saucy grin. "The summer I *flowered*."

"Oh Jesus," I said, opening my own door, "She's wicked today folks."

Inside, after the flurry of our shared discoveries and Sarah's whispered memories had subsided and she wandered away to find a present for her grandfather, the middle-aged, solid, and floridly complected proprietor and I found ourselves alone in the shadows of the rear ell of the house where broken tools and rusted farm implements were piled in bizarre display.

"You don't pay any extra for the dirt, o' course," the proprietor said with a straight face.

I peered over my sunglasses. "This is authentic *Maine* dirt we're talking about here?"

The proprietor returned my look with serene disregard. "Vouch for it personally." He picked up and offered a large wooden plane. "You appreciate a well-made tool, do you?"

I took it from him. "Only if it has a monitor, a keyboard and a couple of gigs of RAM." Jesus this is heavy, I thought, hefting the tool. Somebody made molding with this? I put it down and dusted my hands. "I work with computers in the defense industry," I said, looking up to find the proprietor smiling at me with his eyes. "In Washington. Washington DC."

"You from Washington originally?"

"I don't know anyone who's from DC, originally."

The quiet smile moved from the proprietor's eyes to his lips.

I reached across and touched a collection of oddly shaped planks stacked on end against the wall. "What are these, table leaves?"

"Hardly, though I daresay they might do in a pinch."

"They're too...*finished* to be just lumber, aren't they?"

"True enough, but they're all sixteen-inch straight grain Chestnut. Can't find that kind of stock anywhere anymore." The proprietor ran a finger down the dark, polished wood of the topmost plank. "No sir, these are burying boards."

Burying boards. *Burying* boards. Like a sudden, unexpected gust of wind, the reality of it made me blink. Burying boards; *Christ*.

The proprietor said, "Ground freezes solid as granite in the winter. In the days before they had mechanized backhoes and such, folks that passed away in the winter months had the final indignity of being wrapped tight onto one of these boards and stored in a cold barn loft or attic till the spring thaw."

I was still mentally reeling, and tried to find a little bit of calm perspective with a bad joke: "Put them on layaway, did they?"

The proprietor chuckled. "Someplace safe anyway, the nature of rats, coons and bobcats being what they are..."

I felt the high grain of the wood against the palm of my hand. "You, uhh, sell a lot of these burying boards?"

The proprietor slapped the topmost. "I bought these off a retiring undertaker near a decade ago, as I recall. Truth to tell, I sell maybe one a year." He winked. "Tells a damn fine story for all those pushy New Yorkers though, don't it? Every now and then one of them will strap one to the top of his S-U-V, take it home, fire up the saber saw and make a coffee table out of it. Prob'ly eat nachos and drink beer off it every Sunday watching those God-damned Giants on some God-damned wide-screen TV."

"That's telling 'em," I said, with as much enthusiasm a Redskins fan could muster this deep in Patriots territory. I lifted my hand away, saw the wood grain impressed into my palm, and rubbed at it.

The proprietor inclined his head. "You did say you were from Washington, didn't you?"

"Tim!"

We both turned.

Sarah held up a wrought iron hat-rack in the shape of a sperm whale. "What do you think?"

The proprietor glanced at me, and his single raised eyebrow spoke volumes.

"I love it," I said.

"You okay Tim?" Arthur's look of concern in the shadows of his front hall was genuine.

I blinked, dropped my hand from my mouth, took a breath, focused. "Yeah," I said, "I'm fine."

Arthur nodded once, then moved into the parlor.

I stopped dead in the entry.

The center of the room had been cleared of all furniture and replaced with a pair of raw, sturdy sawhorses supporting two long, thick planks of wood....

"I had the wake for Sarah's grandmother here in the front parlor, before your time," Arthur said. "Sarah's parents as well, when she was still just a baby." He stood a moment, lost in private thoughts. Then he went over to the boards, and the toe of his shoe touched one of the sawhorse legs. "I thought we should have Sarey's here too. I didn't think you'd mind."

I cleared my throat. "Those are called burying boards, aren't they?"

"These?" Arthur lifted the end of one of them, then let it drop with a moderate THUNK. "They're just a couple of planks I got from down cellar. I figure to cover them with a tablecloth or a sheet, something nice, something appropriate."

"Actually," said a voice behind me that literally made me jump, "Walker's would be honored to provide the shroud for that, Arthur."

I turned. A short, thin, dry-looking man in a charcoal colored

suit stood in the hall just inside the open vestibule doorway, gripping a 1950's style fedora with both hands. His face, pale and pockmarked beneath black, slicked-back hair, held a practiced expression of sympathy and patience. "I'm sorry you and my brother Edward missed one another, Mr. Moser," he said to me, "but the passenger terminal and the freight terminal were at opposite ends of the airport."

"That's okay," I said. "I saw the hearse on the highway and followed it up most of the way."

"Hello James," Arthur said, frowning slightly.

Mr. Walker nodded, almost a bow, then came up beside me and patted my shoulder. "Sarah— I mean Mrs. Moser, is safely in our care, Mr. Moser, rest assured."

Arthur said, "We'll take you up on the shroud, James."

Mr. Walker nodded again, shortly this time, his attention on the parlor, eyes darting, evaluating. "We thought a one o'clock family viewing Friday afternoon, then the public viewing beginning at two. Would that be too early?"

"No," I said, "that'd be just fine—" at the same time Arthur said, "That's *much* too early James—"

We both stopped, smiled at each other awkwardly, then I said, "Whatever Mr. Hubbard wants..."

Mr. Walker raised a finger, pointing first to me, then to Arthur. "Five o'clock for family, six for public viewing?"

Arthur raised an eyebrow to me; I nodded. "Sounds fine James," he said.

"Now," Mr. Walker continued, putting his finger to his lips, "we of course still have to discuss the *particulars*."

The particulars. The casket, the concrete liner, Sarah's best blue dress, the *cost*. I gave Arthur a look he interpreted instantly, and he took the undertaker by the shoulders and turned him firmly around. "We will stop by in the morning, James. Timothy's only just arrived. He had a long flight from Virginia. Give him time to breathe."

"Oh of course, of course," I heard Walker say, over his shoulder,

as the two of them went out from the shadow of the house into the full sun of the yard, "We have time, certainly. We have time."

"Make sure." Sarah's voice was weak but clear, pressing, an eye blink of awareness before the coma took her away forever, "the mainland, the plot, Tim, the family plot..."

When Arthur returned I said, "I'd like to go out to the cemetery. To see the plot."

He gestured to my bags sitting at the bottom stair step. "Don't you want to unpack first?"

"Later. This afternoon. Whenever. First things first."

"Make sure Tim," Sarah whispered. But why, I still wanted to ask, what's there to be unsure of? But of course I had never asked, never wanted to worry her, upset her, burden her with any more than what she already carried in that high hospital bed, under those cold fluorescent lights, through the quiet sounds of the machines at the other end of the wires and dull plastic tubes. She was dying, and she knew it. She was just trying to tie up one more loose end in what was left of her life. "It's important," she breathed, closing her eyes, her grip on my hand loosening….

"I'll drive," Arthur said.

We had to cross the state road to get to town, a two-way stop-sign intersection with the highway. "You have to be real careful here," Arthur said, squinting up and down. "Damn tourists and truckers don't stop for God or man on this stretch." He saw a big enough break between two SUVs and gunned his boat of a Buick, and we sailed safely across.

The road to the town beyond was dotted with saltbox and cape cod-style houses, most well-kept and trim, with weathered shingles and white or green shutters, and victory gardens on the side. Ahead of us, the silver glint of the bay gave brief, elusory hints of many small islands in the reach beyond. The smell of the cold salt air whipping in my open window was like a tonic, and I took in a full lungful of the stuff.

Arthur said, "The town's on the left of course, across the road,

down on the bay." He glanced across to me briefly, to see if I was listening, and pointed toward the close horizon of roofs, a steeple and sail masts beyond the brown sloping fields. "But the cemetery comes first...there." His finger moved to the right, and just where the thin strip of land between the road and the sea widened, I saw a small cluster of granite and marble markers tucked up against a formidable bulwark of old pine trees.

A low stone wall surrounded the cemetery, its rear stretch lost under the trees. There were two black iron gates in the center of the wall bordering the road, a narrow one for people, and a wide one for cars. Both gates stood open. We nosed through, following tire tracks filled with rusty pine needles.

"I'm surprised," I said, pointing back to the town steeple, "it's so far from the church."

"This is a non-denominational cemetery, not associated with any particular faith." Arthur swung the wheel over and we parked. "They take all comers here."

We had an unobstructed view of the bay, and the far-off, misty islands. "That's the Reach," Arthur said, following my gaze. "The islands out there are nothing but raw granite, most of them. Only a baker's dozen big enough for anyone to build on." He paused. "Maybe, before you leave, we can take a boat out."

"That'd be cool," I said, aware of the oddness, the enormity of the offer. Arthur and I had never exactly been friends, after all.

Sarah slammed her door, "'Cool'?" slapping my ass as she passed me, snickering. I stood beside the car, my face pale with too many memories, resisting an urge to reach behind, feel the seat of my pants, and instead looked out on the graves.

Arthur came around the rear of the car. "It's over by the trees."

"You have a separate Hubbard family plot?"

He nodded. "Hubbards have been here since before the war."

"Wow," I said. "Civil War?"

Arthur smiled briefly. "Revolutionary War, Tim." He gripped my shoulder. "Come on."

We passed Chamberlains and Willametts, Weeds and Beans,

all good old English and Huguenot stock. I saw three centuries of dates, the oldest worn smooth and forever lost to the years. We found the Hubbard plot in the back, set apart, nearly up against the pines, as advertised. The family stone predominated, a large block of finely grained dark grey granite, mirror-smooth on the front, the sides and top roughly hewn. The family name was deeply incised on the face in large block letters. A scattering of individual family member stones surrounded it, all of them no larger than loaves of bread, nearly level with the grass.

The site of Sarah's grave was on the right, in the front corner of the plot. It was an empty hole covered by two-by-fours and plywood, with a rectangle of garish artificial turf thrown loosely across to hide the raw wood. Arthur came up beside me. "Everything's ready for her," he said. "That's my son, her father there, beside, and her mother beside that."

I knelt, took a corner of the grass carpet and tugged it straight. Then I stood. "This is a nice place," I said, "a nice spot."

Arthur nodded slowly, lost again in his own thoughts. Then he roused himself. "How about we head back to the house, get some lunch going. I've got beer in the icebox."

"Sounds good to me," I said.

We had to wait at the highway intersection for three semi trailer trucks to thunder by, gravel pinging like shrapnel across Arthur's front bumper. "Nothing on their minds but schedules and early delivery bonuses," Arthur said. He looked left, then right, then floored his old car, and we rumbled across.

I saw someone walking along the road leading up to the house, leaning on a tall walking stick. He wore an old military-issue parka, and had what looked like a large flat wooden box strapped to his back. "You've got company coming," I said.

Arthur grunted. "That's just Conner Weatherby. He trespasses on everybody's property hereabouts." He glanced across to me with a meaningful expression. "Painter," he said. "Artiste."

I raised a hand in greeting as we passed him, catching a

glimpse of fat pink cheeks, florid nose, and long silver hair sticking out from under the parka's hood. Sunlight flashed across his round-lensed spectacles as he waved back. He looked like Santa Claus. "Is he any good?"

"Passable."

In the time it took us to reach the house the sun broke through the morning haze, taking if not the actual chill out of the air, at least the idea of it. I unzipped my coat as we went up the porch steps, and then shrugged it off. "Crazy weather."

"Winter's hiding around here someplace."

I collapsed into one of the Adirondack chairs. "How about we take those beers out here on the porch?"

Arthur paused, half in and out of the door. "Fine by me."

The screen door slapped.

Stretching my legs out, I watched Mr. Weatherby the artiste slowly toil up the road. I raised my hand again when he was within hailing distance. He responded with a loud "Hallooo!" and turned into the drive. Arthur came back out at that moment carrying three bottles of beer. "Figured," he said, handing me one.

Weatherby came up to the porch wearing a wide grin under his parka hood. "Arthur!" he said, dropping his walking stick on the grass and working himself free of his cumbersome backpack. It was one of those paintbox-fold-up-easles, stained with a kaleidoscope of paint splatters and smears. A small blank canvas was slipped into an outside rack. Weatherby saw me look and regarded the empty canvas himself. "No inspiration today, I'm afraid. At least, not yet!"

Arthur passed him a bottle of beer. "Ahhh!" Weatherby took it and placed it reverently on the arm of the Adirondack next to mine, then unzipped his parka and flung it open, its hood settling about him like a mantle. His earthy body odor filled the porch air for a moment before the breeze took it away. He sat, eliciting another "Ahh!", raised his beer to us both, and took a long swallow. Then he belched and turned to me. "Tim Moser, correct? It's Tim? My sincerest condolences, young man. I first knew your late wife when

she was just a sprite, just, oh, so high." He demonstrated with a palm about two feet above the porch floorboards. "A charming girl, just charming. She lit up this house, growing up. Hell, she lit up this whole damn town."

"Thank you," I said. "I appreciate that." I took a pull on my beer, wondering how quickly I could drink this one down so I could ask for a second.

Weatherby extended his hand. "I'm Conner. Conner Weatherby."

"I'm pleased to meet you," I said, taking his hand. Calluses. He had done more in his life than just paint pretty pictures.

"Will you be staying on for awhile, Tim?"

"Tim's a busy man Conner," Arthur said. "Works in Washington D.C."

"I'll probably be heading back after the weekend," I said. I took another long pull, then resisted the urge to belch myself.

Weatherby nodded. He glanced at Arthur, then back to me. "The services, then, will be this weekend?"

Odd question. Didn't everyone in these little New England towns know everyone else's business? "It's on Friday, here at the house," I said. "The viewing's at five."

"Six," Arthur corrected.

"Oh, right. Six."

Weatherby looked at Arthur again, then patted my knee. "Best not to wait, I'm sure. Best to get things settled."

"You're welcome to come, of course," I said.

Weatherby smiled at me, a kindly, secret little smile. "Why thank you, Tim. I appreciate the invitation."

Arthur stood, and pointed to my nearly empty bottle. "Another?"

"Yeah, thanks." I drained it, then handed it across. "Mr. Weatherby?"

"Ah, alas, no. No thanks. One beer before lunchtime is one beer too many for me, I'm afraid." The old man stood with a heavy grunt. "Thank you for the hospitality Arthur."

Arthur said nothing in reply. He turned to the screen door and went inside.

Weatherby winked at me. "You wouldn't know it Tim, but we're dear, dear friends." He hefted his pack, throwing it over his shoulder like a bag of toys. Santa Claus indeed, I thought, though a nice hot shower wouldn't hurt.

Lunch was brief, cold cut sandwiches and store-bought macaroni salad. I switched from beer to iced tea, and we had a mostly silent meal. The only thing Arthur and I had in common had been Sarah. Now all we had to share was her memory, and neither one of us wanted to talk about that right now. As we were clearing off the kitchen table I made mention of going for a tour of the town. "We never really did that, the few times we were up here."

"Walker's is on Chestnut," Arthur said. "Can't miss it. I can drive you in if you want."

"I'll take my rental. I don't want to bother you."

Arthur nodded, his attention on the plates in the sink. "Be careful crossing the State Road," was all he said.

Yes. The State Road; the highway. And the glare on the ocean as the afternoon sun caught the restless Atlantic just so, glittering through the smeared film of grime on the windshield, flooding it just enough to make it impossible for me to see at the worst possible moment the silver Ford Expedition doing eighty-five in the left lane….

It hooked the right rear bumper of my rental car just enough to send it spinning like Dorothy's farmhouse across the asphalt, missing another car by inches, then striking and flipping over the concrete abutment on the far side of the road, sailing out over the salt marsh beyond, 'Like an astronaut,' I thought stupidly as I floated against my seat belt an instant before the car came crashing down, before I saw sheeting red, felt impossible pain, and then nothing.

# 2

They waited as long as they could, I found out later, but after three days I was still in my drug-induced coma while they waited for the swelling of my brain to subside. It did, and I lived. But in the end they had to hold my Sarah's funeral and burial without me.

When I was finally awake and allowed visitors, Arthur filled me in on the days I had lost, and of the funeral, and the burial.

"In the town cemetery," I whispered, though it hurt to do so. "In the family plot...next to her mom and dad."

"Of course Tim." Arthur gave me a brief, odd look. "Right next to her mother, as she wanted."

*Good*, I thought. My head felt like it was made of delicate crystal, and could shatter at any moment, but the tension and pain both ebbed, just a little. I sank back into my pillow, mindful of the wires and dull plastic tubes snaking from my body to the machines beside my bed. *You got it, Sarah*, I thought, as Arthur blurred before me...*you got it*....

A week later I was released into Arthur's care. I had the remains of an epidural hematoma and a hairline skull fracture, which nothing but quiet bed rest, drugs and time would heal. I also had a bruised liver and pancreas, thanks to the lap belt that had otherwise saved my life. Finally, I had a broken right ankle and fibula, and sported a bright white cast from my big toe to just below my knee. I was told they were clean breaks, and when the cast eventually came off I was guaranteed not to limp.

My project manager at the company told me to take as much time as I needed. "Damn, Timothy," she said, "you've had some bad luck!" My position, she promised, would be waiting for me when I returned. Sure it would. Even up here, six hundred miles away, I could smell the blood in the water. The hell with it. I was broken, and I needed to mourn my Sarah. The hell with it.

The kitchen door was almost directly below my bedroom window. The sound of it opening, and the quiet slap of the screen door, woke me up in the pre-dawn, violet darkness. I heard someone, Arthur, obviously, go down the flagstone path through the rose garden. The path, I remembered, led down the hill to the small dock in the cove where Arthur had his boats.

I tried to roll onto my side, but the sudden aching explosion in my leg had something to say about that, so I remained on my back. I looked at the LED display in the little Sony Baloney clock radio on the nightstand. 3:05. I guessed the fish either didn't sleep at all, or they were as crazy as Arthur, getting up so goddamn early in the foggy dark. He was old, I told myself; old people didn't sleep much.

Now that my ankle and fibula were awake, the hairline fracture in my temple and the bruise on my liver decided to join the party, the lot of them commencing to throb in time with my heartbeat. There was a plastic tumbler of water beside the clock radio, and the prescription bottle of painkillers beside that. In moments, I had my morning dose down me, a little early, true, but I wasn't about to Alert The Authorities. I lay back in the darkness, staring at the ceiling, waiting for the sound of Arthur's boat engine to start up. But it never did.

The next sound I heard, in full, bright sunshine, was my bedroom door opening. 8:17, said the Sony Baloney. A middle-aged woman in a print housedress and apron entered the room, her hands full with a towel-covered breakfast tray. Whatever was under the towel smelled *wonderful*.

"Mr. Moser." The woman smiled, "I'm Leitha Hutchinson.

Arthur asked me to help out for a few days, seeing to your needs and such."

"That's very nice of you," I said, struggling to rise.

"Here." She put the tray down on the dresser, then rearranged my pillows and helped me sit up. "Better?" She took the tray back up and placed it across my lap.

"I'm hungry enough to eat one of these pillows."

"Well we can't have that," she said, chuckling. She took the towel off the tray, and my mouth began watering, all by itself. There were eggs, several strips of bacon, two slices of buttered toast, a heap of home fries with onions, a thick slice of fried tomato, and a big mug of steaming coffee.

"I put sugar and a little cream in the coffee this time," Mrs. Hutchinson said, "but you need to let me know how you really want it."

I took a sip. "This is fine," I said. "Perfect."

She clasped her hands together, thin, red and corded, just like the rest of her, no makeup, her salt and pepper hair pulled back in a short, blunt ponytail, another hard Maine stereotype, just like Arthur. "Anything else I can do, you just holler or pound on the floor. I'll be right below you in the kitchen, watching my shows."

I took up a forkful of eggs and home fries. "This is delicious," I said around them. "Thanks."

"I'll come back in awhile for the tray, bring you a refill on the coffee, and get you some fresh water too. You'll be okay using the facilities?"

The hospital had loaned me an aluminum cane with an angled rubber-grip handle, and the bathroom was just down the short hall. "Yep," I said, "I'll be fine. Thanks again. This," and I pointed to my breakfast, "is fantastic."

Mrs. Hutchinson ducked her head, and closed the door behind her.

Arthur came upstairs in the afternoon with a pile of magazines under his arm. "How's the patient?"

"Bored. Thanks for these." *Field & Stream, Sky & Telescope, TIME*, and *Yankee*. The painting of a leaping trout on the *Field & Stream* cover reminded me. "Catch anything?"

That brought Arthur up short, for some reason.

"I heard you go out this morning," I explained. "I figured you went out fishing."

"Sounds like you were up early."

I pointed to the lump of my cast under the blankets. "Can't argue with an alarm clock like that."

Arthur nodded. "I did go down to the boats. But I didn't go out. I never fish alone anyway, not during the cold months. Certainly not at night."

"Maybe we can still go out before I leave, like we talked about before."

"Maybe. If you're up to it. Out of that cast, of course. You ever fished?"

"Nope, never. Looks like it could be fun, though."

Arthur nodded again. "We'll get your feet wet, then," he said. "Before you leave."

My sleep was fitful, even with the painkillers. My cast was cumbersome, and the aches in my abdomen were deep and stubborn. I seemed to spend half the night in a restless, half-dreaming state. Looking at the clock radio only made it worse, so sometime after midnight I turned its glowing green display away, and let it tell its time to the wall.

At some point I heard (or dreamed I heard) voices outside, on the path, coming up through the rose garden. So strange, I thought, who would be out so late on such a cold night? Then I heard the same voices somewhere downstairs, a quiet conversation, low, hushed. I could not make out what they were saying. I finally decided this was a dream I was not much interested in, and drifted off to find another one.

The next time I awoke, or dreamed I did, the house was silent. The only sound was the wind in the pine boughs outside. The faint

glow of the Sony Baloney flickered once against the wall. I closed my eyes and slept the rest of the night away, undisturbed.

Crossing the highway for the first time since the accident, I kept my eyes closed. It was a simple, quiet form of cowardice, but the only way I could do it, the only way I could cross that road to visit with my Sarah. Arthur had done it thousands of times, of course. This time he took it extra slow, not actually entering the intersection until there was absolutely no one on the highway, in either direction. That's how it *sounded*, anyway.

"The mason's an old friend of mine," Arthur said. "He did a fine job on the stonework." We reached the entrance to the cemetery and he turned his big car through the gate, following the wheel ruts in the tough brown grass. In an hour or two it would all be covered in snow. "Only an inch or two," Arthur had said, when I had mentioned where I wanted to go, "but not till early evening. Plenty of time." The sky was already solidly overcast, and there was a steady, wet wind from the northwest. It was a cold day, all around.

Away under the pine trees I saw the stones of the Hubbard family plot. They looked lonely, off by themselves. My eyes were drawn to the corner, to the rectangle of grey earth. "There's no grass on Sarah's grave," I said.

"Too cold to put sod down." Arthur turned off the wheel tracks and rolled out onto the grass beyond the last row of individual headstones. "We'll put it down soon as we can in the Spring. It'll be pretty for her, I promise." He parked the car alongside the family plot. So I don't have to walk any farther than I have to, I realized. I opened my door, got the cane disentangled from my feet, and swung my cast out first, then my good leg. Arthur came around the car and helped me to my feet. I stood a moment, waiting for the pain, the dizziness, but it was only a mild wave, touching only the high points, and then dissipating. No nausea at all. It would be fine. I could do this.

Someone had cleared the flowers away, and the wind had

blown petals all through the grass in a wide area. It looked like old confetti after a New Year's party. Still, the pile of bouquets and arrangements left off to the side was impressive. "Were there a lot of people?"

"The whole town, I expect. I didn't count heads. But everybody knew Sarey."

I hobbled over to her grave. Arthur followed. Sarah's stone was just like the others, a big loaf of bread in grey granite. Just her first name was incised on the gently curved crown. When it snowed, the flakes would settle into the letters. In the warmer months, the rainwater would remain in them, reflecting the clearing sky in those five simple letters.

"It's nice," I said. Then, "I feel bad. I wish I could have been here. For the service. To meet the people who came."

Arthur said nothing. Good, I thought. Sometimes silence is right, and this was one of those times.

I broke it, though, driving back to the house, "Who was at the house last night?"

Arthur kept his eyes on the road. "What do you mean?"

"Last night, late, past midnight. I heard people downstairs."

Arthur shook his head slowly. "No one came visiting. I was watching an old movie, but I was in bed by midnight, for sure."

We approached the highway.

"Maybe I dreamed it," I said, closing my eyes once more.

Arthur slowed the car, and what sounded like a dozen eighteen wheelers thundered past. "Maybe so," he said.

# 3

The ringing of a doorbell woke me from a morning nap. I heard Mrs. Hutchinson move from the kitchen to the center hall with a musical "Coming!" Fuller Brush Salesman, I thought, still half-asleep. Bald-headed Hare Krishnas in orange robes.

I heard someone with a loud voice that echoed up the stairs. "It's just not fair!" Mrs. Hutchinson's quiet, steady murmur followed. Avon calling? Loud Voice said something else, then the front door closed, firmly, and Mrs. Hutchinson returned to the kitchen.

More or less fully awake now, I swung my good, then bad leg over the side of the bed and stood slowly, settling my weight on the good one. A moment of dizziness passed, then I took two steps to the side window that overlooked part of the lawn, and the sweep of the gravel drive. I saw a figure there, leaving the property, trudging through the thin crust of snow to the road. The paint box and canvases slung over his back gave him away. So Conner Weatherby, the artiste, Santa Claus, had come to pay me a visit.

"You're in no condition for callers, Mr. Moser," Mrs. Hutchinson said later, when she brought me up my lunch. "Plenty of time for that." She handed me a napkin. "And anyway, Conner's just an old fool."

"Let him up next time, okay? Now what is this, pot roast?"

I began taking my lunch downstairs in the kitchen toward the end of my first week out of the hospital. I was slowly becoming used to walking with my cast, and I found I didn't really need to use the cane all of the time. I kept Mrs. Hutchinson company, sitting with her while she watched her game shows on the little counter TV. I was starting to mend. I could feel it.

"Pretty soon you won't need me around the place," she said, taking up my empty plate and moving to the sink. On the TV, someone guessed way too high for the car behind the curtain.

I said, "I'm going to miss your wonderful cooking, that's for sure." Then, to the TV: "Twenty-three thousand...it's twenty-three thousand...."

Mrs. Hutchinson laughed. "There're no secrets about my cooking. It's just good plain food. Twenty-two thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine," and she grinned at me over her shoulder. "Don't you just hate it when they do that?"

She left promptly at one in her rusty, lime-green VW Beetle. I saw her off from the kitchen door. "You go back inside now and take that nap, do you good!" She waved once, and then was gone in a cloud of blue exhaust.

I stood on the granite slab that served as the kitchen door stoop, and took in the bright, empty sky, the dark pines swaying in the breeze, the scraps of snow remaining in only the deepest shadows, the sound of the water in the cove at the bottom of the gentle slope of hill, and for a moment, for one miraculous moment, a small trill of happiness went through me. It would get better. My sadness, my anger, frustration, helplessness, they were all still overwhelming, but I knew it would get better. It had to.

I made a decision. I went inside, got my coat, found my cane, then reemerged and set off down the flagstone path, through the trimmed-back rose bushes, down toward the shadows of the pines. I needed to see the ocean, up close. I needed to be *out*. I would pay the price for this in aches and pains later, I knew, but right now I just didn't care. A flock of gulls screeched by overhead, dappling the flagstones with their shadows. I looked up, squinting, as they

wheeled across the sky. Pain be damned. It was a nice day.

Toward the bottom of the hill Arthur's rose garden gave way to the solid thicket of pine trees and brambles. They in turn gave way to a tumble of great granite blocks at the shoreline of the cove. Arthur's dock was just long enough to berth his big cabin fishing boat on the seaward side. A much smaller rowboat was tied up on the leeward side. "You tie up *horses*, silly," Sarah said, laughing at me with her eyes. "Boats are *moored*."

I stood corrected, resting my hand on a neat, if complicated knot that *moored*, not tied, the rowboat to the leeward side of the dock.

"HALLOOO!"

I looked up.

There was a small motorboat in the middle of the cove, its engine idling, riding the gentle swells. It had once been white fiberglass. Now it was a mottled yellow color, with green stains at the waterline. Someone waved behind the nearly opaque plastic windshield. "Hallooo!" the person called again. Then I saw him: Conner Weatherby. Santa Claus. In his sleigh.

The same flock of seagulls that had passed over me was now clustered in a flapping mass off the stern of Weatherby's boat. They must think he's throwing out bait, I thought. Their screeching filled the air of the cove. Weatherby waved again, this time at the gulls. "So this is what the mighty dinosaur has come down to, Tim! Little shits begging for fish guts!"

I watched as he maneuvered his boat to the end of the dock. By the time he reached it the gulls had abandoned him, and he was positioned neatly between the two end piers. He hefted a coil of yellow nylon rope ("It's *line*, Timmy," Sarah said, "On boats rope is called *line*".) "Can you catch?"

I leaned my cane against one of the piers. "I'll try," I said. "Throw it over."

He tossed the coil expertly, into my arms. "Just tie it off to the pier on your left," he said.

"I'm no expert on nautical knots."

Weatherby laughed. "Just loop it around a few times, it'll be fine."

The tide was high, because he was able to climb almost directly from his boat deck to the dock planks. "Arthur makes a mean dock, I'll say that for him." Weatherby stamped his old sneakers on the planking. "Solid as Sears."

I took my cane back up. "You came to visit the other day?"

"I came to visit on *several* days. That Leitha Hutchinson is wasting her time puttering around here; she should be guarding the nation's gold at Fort Knox." Weatherby looked me up and down. "So how are you doing Tim?"

"Just fine, thanks. Starting to move around under my own steam." I lifted the cane. "Pretty soon I hope to retire this item."

"When does the cast come off?"

I honestly did not know. "Pretty soon I hope," I said. There had to be a doctor visit in my future sometime; I hadn't thought to ask.

Then I remembered something. "What did you mean when you said it wasn't fair?"

Weatherby looked at me sharply. "What do you mean?"

"When you tried to pay a visit the other day, I heard you say 'it's just not fair'."

Weatherby continued to look at me. He seemed hesitant, as though trying to decide something. Then he said, "What did Arthur say about the funeral?"

"He said the whole town turned out. I saw all the flowers that were left."

Weatherby nodded briefly. "Yes indeed, the townspeople were all there."

The sarcasm in his voice was plain. I felt my anger rising. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means Arthur Hubbard *owns* the town. The Hubbards have always owned it. Hell, they *founded* the damned place."

"You're telling me Arthur forced the town to go to my wife's funeral?"

"No force needed, Tim. Everyone knows their place here. Everyone knows the rules."

"Except you, apparently."

"Yeah." He laughed suddenly. "Except me."

What did you think of the funeral, Mr. Weatherby?"

"The mainland one? Beautiful. Fitting. You would have been proud. And it's Conner, please."

*The mainland one*. "Please, Tim," Sarah whispered, "I want to be buried on the mainland, next to my parents...." Her voice was plain, plaintive. Clear. I said, "The mainland one. Was there another one? Was there another funeral?"

Weatherby looked out to the ocean, just visible beyond the points of the cover. Then he turned back to me and gestured to his boat. "You up for a little ride?" His eyes were alive. He appeared to have a secret, something he wanted to tell me, to show me. I hesitated.

"The only way to answer your question is to show you, Tim."

I felt slightly dizzy. "Show me what?"

"Listen, Arthur's in Augusta for the rest of the day, Leitha is probably already home starting supper for her brood. And unless I'm mistaken, your afternoon schedule is free. Here." He clambered back into his boat, and raised his hand. "I'll help you in. Just like two steps on a stairs."

I handed him my cane, then took his surprisingly strong arm, and stepped down into the boat. No pain, no nausea, and the dizziness receded.

"See?" Weatherby nodded. "Easy."

I sank into one of the blue cushioned seats. "You have to tell me where we're going."

"A short trip into the Reach. Half an hour, tops."

"Just so we take it slow," I said. "I don't know if I get seasick or not."

"Bah. Not to worry. We'll be in the Reach, not the open ocean. And it's like a lake today. Here, put this on." He handed me a bright orange life preserver vest. It was a big one, and the straps

were already all the way out, so it fit comfortably over my coat. "Of course," Weatherby said over his shoulder as he unlooped the yellow line from the pier, "the water temperature will only grant you an hour of life anyway. Hypothermia. But the Coasties like to see preservers on everybody regardless." He stowed the line, then got behind the wheel, gave the outboard motor some gas, and we swung slowly around.

"What about you? Shouldn't you be wearing one?"

Weatherby laughed. "The Coast Guard and I have an understanding, Tim."

We headed out of Arthur's cove, into the stretch of open water separating the mainland from the scattering of islands beyond. Weatherby was true to his word, taking us slowly and carefully past the busy fishing docks at the bottom of the town, threading between smelly lobster boats, cabin cruisers and sailboats, not to mention the occasional seaweed-draped rock thrusting up from the water in a cauldron of foam and spray. Weatherby waved to everyone we passed, and nearly everyone waved back. "Having fun yet?" he yelled over the wind, the waves against the hull, and the steady buzz of the motor. I wiped cold seawater spray off my face. Bang! We angled across someone's wake, bouncing across the water, Bang! Bang!

Oh yes, I decided, I will be feeling this later.

Eventually, the boat traffic gave way to the open water of the Reach. And islands, hundreds of them, of all shapes and sizes. I glimpsed expensive vacation homes tucked in among pine stands, and utilitarian fishing shacks perched on piers among black, fissured rocks. Some of the islands were huge, but most were a few acres or less, mere collections of rocks, scrawny trees, and tough brown grass.

Standing next to Weatherby in the cockpit, I touched his arm. "Are all of these islands privately owned?"

"Indeed they are. Anything with any real estate to it, for sure." He proceeded to point out some of them, attaching family names to them, some of which I recognized from the names I had seen in

the town cemetery, but some I did not...until the last one. "That's Shelter Island," Weatherby said, pointing to a medium-sized one, off by itself. "The Hubbard family owns it."

I squinted into the slipstream over the aluminum frame of the windshield. I saw rocks, pines, a flash of ochre meadow, but no house, no buildings of any kind. The island grew out of the sea like a roughly splashed watercolor. Its shore was nothing more than split and tumbled granite boulders stained black by the waves, crusted with moss, seaweed and gull guano, and crowned with dark, spiky pines. No beach, no quiet cove; the island thrust up from the foaming breakers like an argument, an affront, a *dare*.

"So how do we get ashore," I yelled over the boat motor and crash of water against the bow, "swim?"

Weatherby pointed with a sweep of his head. "Around the other side is a quay!"

"*Key*?"

The "key" turned out to be a long, formidable dock constructed of roughly shaped stone blocks with concrete and cobblestone icing. It was blackened with age and covered with green slime and barnacles up to the high tide line. This 'quay' looked as primeval as the island itself.

Weatherby maneuvered the boat alongside, threw out the foam plastic bumpers, then deftly looped his bow mooring line through a large iron ring protruding from the concrete edge. The ring was big enough to put a fist through. "Stay where you are," he yelled, as he scrambled to the rear of the boat, grabbed another ring similarly imbedded, and secured the stern line to it with an exotic knot.

He cut the motor. In the sudden silence, I heard the squeaking of the bumpers caught between the boat and the stones, and the screams of distant seagulls. "Okay," Weatherby said, as though using the word to calm himself. "Now, up we go." He took my elbow and helped me onto the cobbled surface of the quay. I balanced on the cast until he handed me my cane. Then he joined me on the cobbles.

The pines loomed almost over our heads. The wind off the water blew through their needles with a dry, sandpapering sound. The shadows looked blue and cold.

"I didn't see any house from the water."

"There isn't one," Weatherby said.

"I wonder why they built such a big dock, excuse me, big *quay*, then."

Weatherby looked at me. "You really don't know?"

"Until a few minutes ago, I didn't even know this island existed."

Weatherby continued looking at me, then nodded abruptly. "There's a path," he said. "To the left, there."

We left the sunlight and went into the shadows under the trees.

The needle-carpeted path led us inland, and in moments we emerged in a meadow of oatmeal-colored grass about waist-high, dotted with late purple wildflowers and Queen Anne's Lace. The sun was warm on my face after the damp shadows of the pines. "This is nice," I said, smelling pinesap on the salty breeze.

Then I saw the stones.

I turned to Weatherby. "What is this place?"

The tops of ancient, weathered gravestones crested the grass; three, four, six...about a dozen, were scattered across the small meadow. Sarah whispered, "I want to be buried at home, Tim, in the family plot. On the mainland."

*On the mainland*.

Weatherby took my arm. "Watch where you walk, now. You might trip over someone."

I saw Chamberlain, Willamett, Weed and Bean. Some of the stones were too old to show any carving. Others, nearly as old, showed letters and words in alphabets I didn't recognize. The largest stone, a rounded, asymmetrical stump of stained grey granite, had only a spiral carved into it, a shape like a coiled rope. It reminded me of a standing stone from the British Isles, something transported from Avebury, or Stonehenge.

"I don't understand," I said. "Why is there a cemetery out here, so far from the mainland?" Please, Tim, Sarah whispered. *Please*.

A well-worn path began at the stone with the spiral carving, through the meadow grass to the far side. We followed it to the shadow line of the pines. Under them, deep in the shadows, I saw a collection of long boulders leaning against one another, forming a crude structure, like an ancient Celtic quoit. The entrance was a triangle of total darkness, big enough to pass through without stooping. It looked very, very old.

"What—" I began.

"TIM!"

I looked around.

Arthur stood at the other side of the meadow, at the end of the path Weatherby and I had followed from the quay.

"DON'T MOVE!"

He came striding across the meadow.

Beside me, Weatherby whispered, "I'm sorry."

I turned on him. "What is this place? Why did you bring me here?"

"I'm sorry," the old painter said. "I truly am. I—"

"You," Arthur said, close enough now not to have to shout, "need to return to your boat, Conner, and leave this island. This is private property."

Weatherby raised his hands. "I was only—"

Arthur took a step toward him, and even I couldn't look at his expression of total fury without flinching. "You had no right to bring him here. No right. And you well know it!"

Weatherby looked at me with a stricken expression, then down at his feet.

Arthur turned to me. "We're leaving," he said, and went to take my arm.

"Wait a minute!" I shook him off. "Wait a goddamned minute!"

I looked at the gravestones in the meadow, old and new, at the

path through the stiff, wild grass, worn down to the bare earth, from the big stone. I noticed, for the first time, the dried brown stains on the stone, and a scattering of feathers caught in the grass around it. I followed the path from the stone to the edge of the meadow and under the pines, where the open doorway of the ancient stone quoit showed only darkness, spoke only silence.

Then I turned back to Arthur, who stood in the strong sunlight like a stone himself. "What have you done here?" I demanded.

Arthur was silent.

I took a wobbling step toward him. "You bastard! *You bastard*! What have you done to Sarah? What have you done with my wife?"

# 4

I heard quiet conversations through the floor of my bedroom, visitors coming and going, the kitchen screen door screeching and slapping with every one. I watched the day fall to twilight. The wind came up, and the stars twinkled furiously as they emerged, one by one, in the darkening sky.

There was a knock on the door. I ignored it. Then I heard Arthur say, "Leitha left you some supper. You up to eating? I've got it here on a tray."

"Leave it at the door," I said.

"Fair enough."

Half an hour later I took the tray in, and ate the food cold.

It went like that, more or less, for nearly a week.

Weatherby never stopped by for another visit, which was just as well. I wasn't sure what I would have done if he had.

I moved from my room to the side porch, watched the grackles in the trees, the afternoon sun warm on my face. My leg, still in its cast, itched fiercely from the inside out, and the bruises in my abdomen no longer ached. Mending, mending.

I didn't even notice that Arthur was standing behind me until he spoke. "Tomorrow night," he said.

I turned to look at him, saw the pain in his face, and I fought the urge to add to it. Still, "No," I said.

He looked down; the screen door creaked in his hand. "I'll

honor your wish," he said, "but I'm still going." The door slapped shut behind him.

The next evening I was sitting in the same rocker, and I heard him in the kitchen. "Arthur," I said.

He came out. I didn't want to see his face, and I didn't want him to see mine. "You can't … fix this, can you."

"No Tim," he said, "I can't."

I sat quietly for a long time. Then, "Okay," I said.

# 5

They could only visit on certain days of the month.

I heard them on the garden path, the one that led up from the dock through the rose garden. Quiet, measured footsteps, careful of the slope of the path, and the edges of the flagstones. There must be five of them at least, I thought.

Arthur opened the kitchen door for them. I heard his voice as a low murmur, saying something I couldn't catch. One of the newcomers answered, and I was struck by the lifeless quality of the voice, and then by the sad irony of that thought.

Someone began ascending the back stairs. Slow, steady, taking each stair tread in turn. My heart skipped a beat with each footfall, and my breath caught and held at the back of my throat. Up the hall, step after careful step, stopping finally at my bedroom door. Would there be a knock? Would she ask permission to enter? If I said no, would she leave?

The doorknob turned, and the door swung inward, squeaking on its two hundred year old hinges.

Sarah's grandmother stood at the threshold, wearing a faded burgundy dress she had probably been buried in. She looked exactly the same as I remembered her from photographs Sarah had shown me. Exactly. "Timothy," she said, and attempted a smile. "So nice to meet you at last. Are you ready?"

Sarah's grandmother served tea in the dining room. I could see that she weren't breathing. She only took a breath when she had something to say. Then Arthur came to the door. Behind him, in the shadowed hall, I saw the others, all old, all dead. But not Sarah's parents. They were buried in the mainland family plot, under the stones shaped like bread loaves. The same place where Sarah had wanted, had *begged*, to be buried. Really buried. Buried forever. Arthur asked, "Are you sure you're ready?"

"Yeah," I said.

He led Sarah in. She was obviously dead. Like her grandmother, and the other relatives who had accompanied them from the island in the Reach. She was still wearing the blue dress I had picked out, the one she was to be buried in. She looked pale, tired, hesitant.

"Sarah," I said, rising, using the edge of the table to steady myself. "Honey."

Sarah looked in my general direction. There were faint frown lines across her forehead. Her gaze came up to my chin, but not all the way. She raised her hand to her mouth, put two fingers to her lips, and then looked away.

"Honey," I said. "*Baby*." Oh God oh God I'm so sorry.

"It takes time to get things back," the grandmother said, beside me.

"Of course," I said. Oh God. Oh dear God.

"Give her time."

"You've got all the time you want Tim," Arthur said.

"All the time in the world," his wife added.

We all went into the living room. I sat on the couch, and Sarah was led over to sit beside me. I took her hand. There was no pulse of life, no warmth. But no coldness, either. Just...nothing.

I felt my own warmth, my own *life*, seeping out, into her, but nothing was retained. She was like a sieve; it all passed through her, and nothing was left. Nothing at all.

"She will need your help Tim," Arthur said.

Sarah's grandmother nodded. "Just like Arthur helped me."

We sat there for a long time, long enough for me to realize that

I would never leave, ever. And, for whatever reason, good or bad, right or wrong, inspired or damned...I realized I didn't want to.

Give me an island funeral, and we will be together, forever.

# COLOPHON

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