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**A Novelette: Undertow**

by  
**Stephen Flemming**

**A Creative Writing Project  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
through English  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts at the  
University of Windsor**

**Windsor, Ontario, Canada**

**2006**

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Published Heritage  
Branch

Direction du  
Patrimoine de l'édition

395 Wellington Street  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

*Your file    Votre référence*

*ISBN: 978-0-494-35913-6*

*Our file    Notre référence*

*ISBN: 978-0-494-35913-6*

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## Abstract

Undertow is a novelette set in Prince Edward Island and Ottawa that combines genres of historical fiction and Atlantic-Canadian realism. The historical portion is written in epistolary format and is incorporated to the contemporary story through the main character's genealogy research. Another stylistic element is the development of a relationship over an internet chat line. Themes and contemporary issues probed in the novel include the displacement from a homeland due to economic or societal pressure, diasporas, nuances of politically correct language versus rural vernacular, consumptionism, metropolitan versus rural values, and medical care in Canada.

## Acknowledgements

Karl Jirgens

Nino Ricci

Darrell Etherington

Amir Khan

Robert Whyte

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## Undertow

## Chapter 1

*Dear James,*

*I pray everything is well with you. I am plagued with worry because so long a time has lapsed since you last contacted me. You had said you would be visiting Ireland again soon to finalize some matter of trade, but I've heard nothing from you since your sweet goodbye kiss in the heather. All manner of visions run through my head as I wonder what fate has befallen you. Forgive me, but sneaking thoughts intrude, like a mouse darting in and out of his hole, startling me, causing me to wonder if the promise to return with a ring and a wedding vow was not made in earnest, an underhanded piece of business used to obtain what you wanted. But I can't truly believe this of you James. It cannot be. I only hope you write soon to end the twisted knot my thoughts have become. But I will try to be patient. As Angus says, time is a great storyteller.*

*Kathleen*

## Chapter 2

Jim remembered his father as they lowered his brother Richard into the ground. He'd looked ineffectual, standing in the graveyard, staring anywhere that ensured he didn't have to make eye contact. His mother, needing support and not finding it searched the crowd like she was looking for answers. Jim went to her, comforting her with an arm, feeling heroic, brave. A martyr.

The small grave yard was packed, shrouded in a mist that almost hid the steel-grey of the sea. It made the green of the grass seem brighter, the only color in the landscape this early in spring. It clung to the dark suits of the mourners, somehow comforting, somehow telling them that things were as they'd always been, that their small village wasn't forever changed with the death of the three young men on the fishing boat. Jim stopped breathing, shutting off the smell of the sea that the blustery wind carried, remembering how they'd told him not to go out. Jim had told him. His father had told him. Everyone had told him. "It's too rough. There's too much ice."

But Richard hadn't listened. It was as if the warnings made the decision for him, turning a bad idea into something he confused with bravery. Jim knew this by the way Richard strutted as he loaded the traps onto the boat, and by the way he looked at his current interest, Nancy MacDonald, a girl who immediately brought to mind the image of Scottish dancers in highland dress artfully clogging. But Nancy hadn't seemed impressed. Instead, her features were twisted to a worried frown.

But then again, thought Jim, he hadn't really been worried. Richard was always ready to try anything dangerous, anything with a thrill, and he always came out on top. Jim remembered when the boys had dared Richard to dive off the Stanhope

bridge, even though rusted wreckage of years past made the chance of diving head first into the point of a rotted mast, or being caught underwater in the wire of a lost lobster trap, more than possible. Jim remembered almost crying as Richard poised on the rail of the bridge, and then being ashamed of his wet eyes when Richard broke to the surface. It seemed to Jim that their small P.E.I. village didn't have enough to satisfy the yearn for adventure that drove his brother.

But now, as it was with fishermen and fishing-boat deaths, no one knew exactly what had happened. They only knew the wind had come up, the ice came in closer to shore, and the boat hadn't returned. The bodies washed onto the beach days later, coming in with the tide like rotted seaweed.

Jim sighed. It seemed so clear, even now, seventeen years later. He'd been so caught up in the memory that the grey walls, desk and computer of the office hadn't existed. He heard a familiar voice floating above the dividers, authoritative, confident. He peeked around his grey wall to see slim legs covered in dark hose, coordinated with a navy blue skirt that stopped just above the knees. A matching blazer was opened to reveal a white shirt that in turn was unbuttoned enough to reveal a modest V of smooth skin that drew attention from many of the men, and some of the women who worked in the federal government office. The man she was speaking to looked up at her with a smile that Jim recognized, a smile that men often gave Muriel. She rewarded the man with one of her's, whirled on a stiletto heel, then tapped importantly down the polished tile of the hallway separating the rows of gray dividers. She glanced over her shoulder as she walked, giving the man another look that although friendly, was slightly condescending, the right combination to give the

impression of being friendly, but at the same time leaving no question as to who was boss. She noticed Jim peeking around the divider, and her smile changed, showing the uncertainty of a wife catching a husband's surreptitious look.

They'd been married ten years. She was the director general of four directorates, the least important being the one in which he worked. A director-general they called her, a DG. Jim's position was the lowliest in the directorate, the help desk, the first port of call for those having computer problems in the department. It was mundane work, consisting of following a set of predetermined steps to solve a problem. In the event these procedures didn't work, he contacted the software engineers who dealt with the more challenging issues. The engineers also worked for Muriel.

Stretching his neck from side to side to release the tension, Jim wondered why the memory of the funeral kept intruding. It was so long ago now. Richard had died in the spring before the bridge had been completed.

He fixed on the copies on his desk.. They showed letters that were yellowed, dark around the edges, almost as if burnt, with hairline cracks running through the margins, like lines on a map. Coleen had sent them. He'd met her on an ancestry site when he began researching his family tree. They started chatting when they discovered a common ancestor. He remembered the typed chat-line phrases getting shorter, being entered faster, conveying excitement. Coleen mentioned her great-great uncle, James MacLauchlin, born in 1826, who had left for Canada in 1847. And although James could not be certain of his lineage because his grandfather was illegitimate, he thought he must be related to a James MacLauchlin buried in the cemetery behind St. Anne's,

in Stanhope Prince Edward Island, also born in 1826. Coleen and her family never knew what became of her great-great uncle, but recently she had been given a bundle of letters written by James found by construction workers doing renovations in the servants quarters behind Aberdeen Hill House, the house where James had been raised. His shoulders relaxed as he thought of Coleen.

Abrupt, rude, the phone rang. He grabbed it before it even stopped ringing, then took a second to shake memories of Coleen and James off. “Hello, help desk, Jim speaking.”

“Listen. This is Reginald Smythe. I can’t access the personnel file and I need the information now. What are you people doing up there?”

Jim’s shoulders tightened. What a pain in the ass. A director who had no computer savvy whatsoever and who inevitably blamed others to vent his frustration. Worse, he kept escalating the problem. It often ended at his director’s office who then took it to the big boss, who of course was Muriel. Jim knew if he couldn’t solve the problem he’d have to deal with her later. He clicked his mouse to open the online problem log. His other line began to ring. He asked Reginald to hold then picked up. “Help desk, Jim speaking.”

“How the fuck are ya doin ya old arshole?”

Jim started at the sound of the heavy P.E.I. accent, an accent so full of the sea that it made the words inoffensive. His gray mood lifted as he recognized the voice. “Murph?”

“Yer fuckin right. What’re you doin up there, fuckin the dog like all the rest of them government boys?”

“Can you hold a sec.” Jim pressed a phone button

“Hi Reginald, could you hold another second?” Jim punched the hold button before Smythe could answer. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Muriel hurrying down the hall. He knew the brisk walk, a firefighter on her way to put out a bureaucratic blaze. She glanced in his cubicle. He punched Murph’s button. “Murph?”

“Yer fuckin right. Who else would it be? You got my pogeey cheque printed yet?”

Jim thought a second before he answered. “Well I did, but I already spent it.”

Murph chortled. “Thought as much. I’ll probably get a notice saying somethin about how they want a piece of my old arse.”

“Arse?”

“Yeah, like I owe a rears.”

It was Jim’s turn to laugh. “So Murph, what’s going on in P.E.I?”

“Same old shit. In winter mode. Boat’s out of the water, shanty on the wharf all closed up.”

“Good year?”

“Ah. Not so great. Had some fun though.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Had a bunch of Japanese around early in the spring. I was mendin traps on the wharf, drinkin a little beer, when someone showed up with a glass of shine. I don’t usually drink shine, but I thought what the hell, I’ll have a little jigger. Next thing we know everyone on the wharf is loaded. Then this tour bus stops in.”

“Kind of early for tour busses wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, they had their dates all mixed up. Anyway, this bunch of Japanese unloads and starts askin to go deep-sea fishin, wonderin who had their reservations.”

Murph chuckled.

Jim couldn't help but chuckle too as he pictured the drunken fishermen besieged by a busload of Japanese tourists: a river of scrubbed faces, casual clothes and expensive cameras contrasting with the weathered faces, heavy rubber boots, and gnarled hands of the working fishermen and their wives. “They had reservations?”

“No, no. The bus driver was as lost as Aunt Margaret after she got the Alzheimers.”

Murph started laughing. “But it was funny. I took them out , gave em a little shine and in the end we was all loaded, me singin up a storm, the Japanese joinin in, then they started singin in Japanese and I was joinin in.” Murph was laughing louder as he related the story. “Guess that's what you'd call a real cultural exchange.”

Jim laughed too, but it was a stifled laugh, silenced by compressed lips so as not to disturb the hush of the office. He saw the light on Smythe's line go out and his phone immediately rang again. “Hold another second Murph?”

He punched the button for his other line. “Help desk, Jim speaking.”

“Can I please get some service from you people? I have a job to do here.”

“Sorry about that Reginald. I had another call. Let me put you on hold just a second to get rid of him and I'm all yours.”

Muriel, breezing by his cubicle, accompanied now by a man who wore a it-wasn't my-fault look on his face, overheard him. Jim glanced at her and she rolled her eyes in sympathy at the mention of Reginald. He punched Murph's button. “Hey

Murph, sorry about that. Gettin busy here. Did you just call to shoot the shit or is there somethin up?”

Murph’s voice lowered in seriousness as he spoke. “Sort of Jimmy.” Murph hesitated. Your old man’s not so well. He’s havin problems with his heart. I know that your Dad wouldn’t let your Mum call because, well, you know what he’s like.” Murph hesitated again. “It’d be a good idea if you came down for a visit, soon.”

“What? What do you mean I should visit soon? Is it that bad Murph?”

“I ain’t no doctor. I’m just sayin it’d be a good idea to come down and see your old man.”

Jim didn’t respond. He just stared out his window. The air in the cubicle changed, became heavy, wavy, blurring the images he stared at everyday. Smythe’s light went out and the phone rang again almost immediately. He stared at it, his daze changing as he gritted his teeth. He punched the button. “Look Smythe. You’re going to have to wait your turn.” He slammed the phone down.

Muriel, heading back to down the hall again in the same brisk walk, her associate still with her, jerked to a stop. She glared at Jim, then raised her hands in a question. “What are you doing? Was that Smythe?”

Jim didn’t bother looking at her. “To hell with him. I’m on the phone with Murph.”

Muriel looked up and down the hallway, then leaned in, whispering, “Keep your voice down. I want you in my office. Now.” He heard her walk away, heels snapping.

The fog returned, blurring images again. He sat for a second, then with a voice

that seemed to come from somewhere out of the dense air he said goodbye to Murph. He sat for another second, then robotlike, he got up and shuffled down the tile hallway to Muriel's office. Her rich-looking door, made of heavy cherry oak, seemed further away than usual, and the journey down the narrow passageway flanked by grey dividers seemed interminable. When he got to there, he felt impatient, but at the same time felt like he'd accomplished something, but had no idea what, no satisfied sense that accomplishment usually brings, only a nervous energy that had no outlet. He opened the door, made his way around the polished boardroom table and sat down in front of her desk.

Muriel was sitting behind it, jaw clenched, fingers in her right hand white at the tips, tightly intertwined around a pen. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Jim was thinking of Murph, distracted. "What?"

"What the hell were you doing. That was Reginald Smythe. The biggest pain in the ass in here and my husband hangs up on him. I'll be hearing about this for months."

Jim focused on Muriel, seeing her anger, her face white, bloodless.

She spoke again. "Think of what it looks like when my own husband pulls a stunt like that."

Jim stared beyond her, out the window that overlooked the parking lot. He saw a rusty-blue pickup circling minivans, plush SUV's, and sporty convertibles that many of the middle-aged bureaucrats owned. For some reason it reminded him of P.E.I. He spoke as if he were telling her what he'd had for dinner. "My father had a heart attack...I think."

Muriel untwined her fingers slowly, stilled for a moment, then moved fast, coming to lean backwards on the front of the desk, looking down at him. “What do you mean you *think* he had a heart attack?”

“Murph called and said Dad was having heart problems, that I should go see him. Soon.”

Muriel hesitated, then leaned forward and put her arms around him. “I’m sorry Jim. I didn’t know.”

Jim kept staring at the pickup as his wife held him. He was unused to her affection, more used to her disappointment. He didn’t know how to respond. He watched as the blue pickup stopped by Muriel’s Lexus SUV for a moment, then roar away, as if mad at having its rust shown up by the newer machine. Slowly he felt Muriel’s hug turn less affectionate, felt other concerns overcome her, and knew she was thinking logistically, wondering if she would have to go to P.E.I., wondering if she could spare the time.

She pulled back from him, arms still on his shoulders, staring him in the eye, speaking to him as if she were nurse and he patient. “Why don’t you go home today and rest? I’ll sign a leave form for you.”

“Leave form? Jesus Muriel.”

“Sssh. Keep your voice down.”

“Jesus Muriel. Do you think I give a shit about putting in leave? I just can’t believe that’s what pops into your head. My father’s had a heart attack and you worry about leave. Afraid I’m going to piss off more people?”

“Keep your voice down. I’m just trying to help. I can’t just let you go without

the form. It's the same for everyone. The paperwork has to be done. You know I don't have the authority to just let you go AWOL." She crossed her arms. "But don't worry about it. Just go Jim. I'll take care of things here."

"Thanks. Appreciate it. I'm leaving now." He got up and walked to the door. "Make sure to get the paperwork for my father's dying straightened away."

Muriel whispered, almost hissing. "Jim.Wait."

Instead, he stalked out of the office, then stopped when he saw the rows of cubicles. The dividers seemed too silent, like tombstones in a graveyard, each identified by a nameplate. He wondered how loud he and Muriel had been. Not wanting to encounter anyone, he hurried toward the chrome elevator doors, a shinier shade of grey. He stepped inside and they slid shut, sealing him from the oppression of the dividers. His shoulders and breathing became more relaxed as he moved further toward the ground floor. He crossed the gleaming lobby and the parking lot, then blew out a breath when he finally ducked into the Lexus and started it, rubbing his hands together against the cold, waiting for the heat that would soon blow from the vents.

\*

Muriel, arms folded, watched him cross the parking lot from her office window. He looked small down below. A miniature man in a hurry. The sight made her clench her jaw. She wondered why she stayed with him. Wondered how had things changed so much from when they'd met? Where the hell was the man she loved? He used to be something, roughish, full of himself and with a hefty scholarship to attend the University of Ottawa.

They'd both been in Business Administration. She always getting the higher

marks, but always working twice as hard. She remembered she was always fatigued from reading, from writing, doing presentations, organizing student programs, or working as a student volunteer for conferences. When she met Jim, she sensed he was different from the majority of her friends. He was bright and gregarious like many were, but his outgoing nature had an air of outlandishness that made him stick out, made others stop and listen. Professors seemed to genuinely like him. “Mr. MacLauchlan,” they’d address him, knowing he was not prepared for class, but also knowing he’d come up with an entertaining remark that wouldn’t be far from the correct answer. He’d had a knack for organizational behaviour. “How would you deal with an employee who came into work drunk?” The class would wait expectantly, knowing this was a Jim-type question. “Well,” Jim would ponder a moment, then answer ambiguously, “first I’d ask him if he had anymore.”

The class would erupt. Jim would feign defensiveness. “It would be detrimental to the workplace to have alcohol around. If another employee got into it, the company would be responsible for getting he or she drunk.”

The class would quiet, but still be smiling, waiting for the punch line.

Jim would turn back to the professor with a straight face. “It would be the responsibility of the manager to get rid of it.”

Professors liked Muriel also, but they liked her as a student, liked her for her industriousness and studious nature, not how they liked Jim. He was the antithesis of her world, and it was easy to imagine, with all his charisma, that would be the successful one.

When he turned his attention to her, well into the second semester of their first year,

she was flattered, but suspicious. He was popular. She saw him in the cafeteria with many women, all of whom seemed to have a mingled sense of awe and adoration as they listened to his energetically presented arguments on any variety of subjects. Why would he want her?

Then they'd graduated and both gotten jobs with Revenue Canada. Jim's joking manner still made people appreciate and like him, but it also made him hard to take seriously. Muriel knew that most thought Jim was too easy going to get ahead in a world where attitude and dress and office-speak made the difference. But she knew better. She knew Jim was every bit as capable as anyone else, but for some reason didn't want it. It exasperated her. Their careers moved on and eventually Muriel was attending management meetings and contributing to policy. Jim had moved nowhere.

Muriel took a deep breath and looked down at her desk. Then her lips twisted, a reflected blur in the polished wood, the sensuous red now more like a gash. What was his problem? Yes. She was more successful. Should she feel guilty for that? Would it be better if he was the more successful one? Would that make things right? Or maybe they should both be unsuccessful. Maybe that would make him happy. She slapped the desk just as the door opened, her wedding ring making a hard clicking sound. "What?" The word sounded more like a book had just slammed shut than a question.

"Muriel?"

Muriel walked back to her chair and slumped into it, sighed, then relaxed.

"Hey Janice."

Janice crossed the room and sat. "What's up?"

“Not much.”

Janice crossed her legs and arms and leaned back. “Are you sure?”

“You know. I’m reading a book where a woman gets mysteriously transported back to Medieval Ireland. Wish it was me.”

“You want to go to Ireland?”

Muriel took a breath. “No, just back in time.”

Janice considered a moment. “To when?”

“To when I didn’t have to answer so many questions.” They sat silent for a second, then simultaneously began to chuckle.

Janice leaned back further in her chair. “So everything’s ok?”

“Oh, Jim’s father had a heart attack, I think, and we had a fight about it.”

“You had a fight?”

Muriel waved her hand. “It was just stupid.”

“How do you fight about a heart attack. Most people I know don’t fight *about* them, they *get* them from fighting.”

Muriel took in Janice’s bulky sweater, something she knew Janice used to hide her wide hips and large thighs, evidence of her four children. “How’re the kids Janice?”

“Kids are good.” Janice pulled her sweater further down her hips, then refolded her arms. She thought a moment. “You know, after you have kids you can’t remember what was so important before. All of a sudden everything else seems,” Janice searched for a word, “inconsequential.”

Muriel stilled. “What are you saying Janice?”

“Saying?”

Muriel kept her voice light. “Was that a comment on me? On my career?”

Janice laughed. “That wasn’t advice. You asked about kids, I answered.”

“Oh come on. That’s bullshit. You think we should all have kids and you know it.”

They sat silent a moment. Janice leaned forward. “I don’t understand Muriel. That’s

not what I meant at all. It’s just that kids have a way of taking over your life. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Muriel waved her hand in dismissal. “Don’t worry about it. I’m just picturing your life. It must be cozy.”

“What?” Janice’s voice rose but she couldn’t stop a pleased look from making a slight appearance. “You’re kidding. You know, I wouldn’t be any more surprised if you said you were going to have a sex change.” She paused. “This is just weird. You’re the successful business woman. The boss lady. Why would you want diapers and screechy soccer games?”

Muriel drummed her fingers on the desktop. “High praise indeed, the boss lady.”

Janice laughed again, hugged herself tighter, uncrossed her legs then crossed her ankles. “I didn’t mean it to sound bad.”

“Sure you did.”

Janice rested her elbows on the arms of the chair. "Did you ever want kids?"

Muriel's fingers stopped drumming, manicured nails hanging in the air. "Oh I don't know."

"Did you and Jim ever talk about it?"

A musical blurb signaled an incoming email on Muriel's computer. She started clicking her mouse and typing.

Janice watched for a few seconds. "Soooo, I guess we're done here?"

"Janice," Muriel groped for words, "Jim's father just had a heart attack. I'm a little distracted. Sorry."

Janice got up slowly. "Right. Well, guess it's time for me to get back to work." She walked to the door then looked over her shoulder with a look in her eyes that belied the pleasant tone in her voice and her smile. "See you later."

The door swung shut. Muriel raised her hands, fingers clawed, tense with frustration. Would somebody give her a break? It seemed every time she opened her mouth today someone got upset. God. She wasn't trying to be rude. It was just the remark about choosing between kids and career.

Her thought stopped suddenly as another intruded.

She blew a breath and rested her chin on her hand, remembering she and Jim had talked about having kids, he always more enthusiastically than she. She looked moodily down to the parking lot, turning the thought over for a moment. Then her shoulders tightened. Why the hell should she feel like a pariah because she never felt ready to have kids? After all, Jim had never really pushed the issue. If he wanted kids he should tell her. Why the hell was she thinking about this anyway? Jim's father may

be dying. She had a million things to do at work and now she might have to go to P.E.I with him. She paused again, mid-thought. Was she that selfish? Was Jim right? Was that all she could think about, work? Her husband's father was dying and she was worried about next year's budget? She squared her shoulders. She'd finish things up here, go home tonight, and organize the trip to P.E.I.

Then her resolve sank. God she hated P.E.I. It wasn't so much the place as the people. She never knew what to do when someone like Murph, flushed with drink, would say, "By Jesus you got a nice arse on ya." Unlike the outrage the remark would cause in Ottawa circles, the bawdy comment didn't give pause to any of the listeners on the Island. No one seemed offended. Not even the women. She remembered one particular time, Nancy, Murph's sister, who apparently had a Master's in Linguistics from some university in Newfoundland said to her, "Ya know. I was at a conference one time when a fella said he loved my accent, loved the way I rolled my rrr's with the tip of my tongue. I said to him 'I'm glad you like my accent, but it's the high heels that rolls my arse, not my tongue.'" Nancy laughed loudly at her own joke as had others who'd heard her.

Muriel always felt outside there, sitting in her suit and stilletos, feeling as if she had done something wrong by dressing that way, wishing she could leave and go to a hotel, which she couldn't because Jim's hometown, at least according to the locals wasn't close enough to a hotel, the nearest one being twenty minutes away. She had to bunk with Jim in his childhood bedroom, a room that had a sloped ceiling, really being part of the attic. It smelled of must, an old smell, a smell that somehow conjured memories of another time, another era. Whenever she looked into the room,

big enough for only a single bed, a bureau, and a space narrow enough between the two that you had to walk sideways to pass, somehow she felt a sense of history. Images of country fairs, church picnics, and kids running and playing in fields contrasted with her memories of kids getting pierced and tattooed and staring at jumping video game images. It made her feel even more apart.

Then she straightened her shoulders. Jim was her husband. They'd go to P.E.I. She couldn't very well stay behind when her husband's father could be terminally ill. She'd go to Jim. Be gentle. Softly tell him she would make reservations tomorrow. Maybe put her hand on his shoulder, maybe massage a bit, maybe lean close to smell him, kiss his cheek.

Then an image of Jim stalking petulantly out of the office interrupted her fantasy. The red of her lips again became a gash. Half out loud she said, "I'll just make the goddamned reservations."

\*

Jim clutched the wheel of the Lexus as if he was on a roller coaster ride. His shoulders were rigid, but his thoughts were out of whack with his tense body, almost casual, thinking he'd sign on when he got home. Maybe Coleen would be on. That'd be great. Then he made a face. The phrase made him clench his teeth. Jesus he hated office-speak, "that'd be great." If you would do so and so that'd be great, or how something or rather was a "new paradigm." Some used the term so loosely he thought they'd figure if the cleaning staff started using a new brand of toilet paper they'd say it meant a whole new paradigm in wiping your ass. He smiled.

Then clutched the wheel harder.

Damn his father. Smoking and drinking. Eating greasy garbage. No responsibility to anyone but himself. Selfish bastard. Killing Richard.

The thought struck him hard.

He pulled to the curb, horns chasing him with recriminations.

Killed Richard? Where'd that come from? His father hadn't kill Richard, the sea had.

He reflected a moment. But his father *had* let Richard go. He could've stopped him. All he had to do was say you can't take the boat out today. Then Jim shook his head. No. He'd thought Richard would be ok, probably his father had too. He took a breath. It was just the sea, their heritage, their legacy.

He thought of the letters, rested his elbow on the armrest, then leaned back, driving with one hand, trying to picture what life would have been like in Old Scotland. He'd read that the railroad was just starting to be built around the 1840's, that trips that previously took days would only take hours. He wondered if there was a private cab for the wealthy. The letter from Kathleen had painted James as perhaps a playboy, an incorrigible rogue, but well off nonetheless if he were in Scotland on business. He would've arrived by ship, disembarked, and probably be met by business associates from Ireland. Jim settled back in his seat further, thinking that instead of office-speak and political correctness and mannerly introductions there would be back slapping and offers of beer. They'd retire to a pub, unceremoniously stuffing their faces with colcannon, or corned beef and cabbage. The ladies would be demure, but feisty, laughing and flirting. He pictured himself drinking from a tankard, slamming it down on the bar and calling for more. He'd have a laughing woman on his lap and a

room upstairs. No worries except to conduct honest business, and to endure the small discomforts that the lack of modern appliances would bring. He sighed aloud. He hoped Coleen was online. Hoped she'd found more about James.

## Chapter 3

October 3/1846

*Dearest Kathleen,*

*Please forgive me for not writing sooner. I wanted to set my affairs in order so that my next news would be good news. I had no idea my silence would be so vexing. After receiving your letter this morning, I stood in the mist upon the Brig O'Balgownie thinking of you, as always. The river underneath was still, and the clouds had settled among the hills so as to hide the tops of them. It seemed as if the very sky had sunk closer to earth to come between us, the distance to your beloved Ireland and my Scottish shores unfathomable, impossible to navigate.*

*But forgive me my maudlin mood Kathleen. Don't judge too harshly. There's reason for my disposition, as I guess there would be for all dispositions. Last night, after the table was cleared and my uncle was well into his third glass of brandy, I told him of my love for you. The drunken fool. His reaction was pure shite. I'm embarrassed to tell you the half of it. First, he turned all shades of colour, the mottling which I have never seen before. He spluttered, or rather choked then spluttered and with a voice like the roar of a lion asked if I were mad. I told him if I were mad it was the madness of love and could only be treated by my marriage to you. Followed this his condemnations and damnations about scurvy Irish strumpets, my methods in how I intended to marry a dirty papist, and litters of filthy catholic brats. I had to still my fists. I'm ashamed to say I did not, at this point tell him of my intent to convert to Catholicism. I am certain now you accuse me of cowardice, but*

*the truth is I have to know what is in your heart before I sever my rope entirely. I am certain my uncle will halt my annuity once I tell him, or most certainly if I pummel him for insulting you. My impulse is to damn him and the rest and race to Ireland on the first ship. But I'd be left with nothing. I'd have to travel to you on highwayman's wages, take you to Dublin and raise our children by killing rats in the streets. Is this the way you want me Kate? You deserve a man of means, not a scabby ratoner. I am in a quandary as to my position. I know I cannot live without you, but it seems that God himself takes a hand in keeping us apart.*

*Your loving Scot*

*James MacLauchlin*

\*

*December 10/1846*

*Dear James:*

*Even had I time to fret o'er your so called quandary, I imagine my patience would lose interest in your simpering words. The Brits have seen fit to close the food depot here and the potatoes have caught the blight. While you watch your mottled uncle browbeat, I wander the fields in search of nettles and roots. Yesterday we were fortunate to have found a clump of seaweed washed ashore, although it was a close thing as the MacDonald's spotted it slightly after us. I thought sure there'd be a brawl, but they backed off when Angus showed. Although he's half the stone he used to be, he still carries himself well enough to ward off the likes of the MacDonalds.*

*Would that you were made of the same stuff! We are starving in Ireland while your servants clean enough food off the floor as would save baby Donal. His screams of hunger mingle with the screams of the other bairns to drown out all hope. Angus plans to join the cow-headed relief project. Relief! John McDougall dropped dead from the fever working on it. The men there have no more to eat than us. At least now modir has Angus here to comfort her in the nights. It will only get worse if he leaves. Yesterday I visited the Dooley's, hoping as they were further into the country that food may not be so scarce. But I can now imagine what a graveyard looks like to the dead. For when I entered the gloomy sod house it was like going underground to peer at skeletons that could walk and talk. I have never seen such a fearful sight. Even those who have died from the black fever look more alive than the Dooleys. So you go back to your mooning and your drunken heathen uncle and your annuity and perhaps the next thing you send could contain something useful, like a cabbage leaf, or a slice of leftover dried fish. Let me know when you have the cullach to tell your uncle you intend to convert.*

*Kate McLauchlin*

\*

February 17/1847

Dearest Kathleen,

*I received your letter just today and you can't imagine the state I'm in. I had no idea things were as bad you say in Ireland. We hear rumours of course, but I pictured you as I left you, romping in the fields with your brothers while your mother and Angus watched. I am sending money with this letter even though the postmaster tells me I shouldn't. He says there is no chance it will make it to Cork without someone stealing it. My uncle is not well. The physician says he has gout and a weak heart so Blane and I are taking over of his business interests. This brings me to my point. I am quite sure, given my uncle's disposition, that I can keep you and your family here, in Aberdeen Hill House. We would have to keep up the deception that you were servants. As would in Ireland, the very idea of a Catholic and a Presbyterian would raise a general alarm and no end of trouble. The Kirk has lost considerable power here having branched into the old Kirk of Scotland and the new Kirk of Scotland, Free. The confusion will make it somewhat easier to carry out the deception. A ship, "HMS Queensbury," leaves the harbour this day to carry my letter, but the damned fools would not let me book passage. Tis a ship that freights Irishmen to the New World and they say the harbourmaster will not let any Scotsman aboard such a vessel. They say Scotland does not want the Irish diseases. But I'll be there soon Kate, if I have to harness Pegasus himself to take me.*

*A foreboding grows in my heart with everyday that passes. I hope this damned slow voyage does not lead to tragedy of some kind or another. I itch in my boots to leave this cursed city. Twill be a good life here Kate. Have courage. I will be there to*

*take you away soon.*

*Your Loving Scot*

*James*

\*

*April 3/1847*

*Dear James,*

*I'm sorry for my asperity the last I wrote. Your last letter arrived, but of course without the money. It is with hand so weak from hunger that I am barely able to write this letter. Ewan and Sean and their children and wives moved in with us three months past. It helped the situation not at all, but at least the company kept the house warm. It hurts so much to write the next sentence. The smallest among us has gone. We buried baby Donal shortly after I sent my last mail. It has about killed my mother, whose vacant stare scares the people in the village. They believe her a witch who chooses whom is to die when. It's why my brothers came home, to help Angus protect her.*

*But I'm sure they regret their decision now to leave their homes in the north. The landlord has given us two months to clear out. The bastard! After years of our family growing potatoes and paying rent he wants to raise cattle and grow wheat. He says we have to go. The only offer he's given us is passage on what they call a coffin ship bound to somewhere called Montreal in Canada. If you can find Pegasus James, ride him here and take me away. My courage has failed. Ireland is nothing but dying*

*and more dying. They buried the whole Dooley clan under six inches of dirt, which was enough because by that time they were only bone anyway. Ewan is burning up and has the rash of the black fever. Angus says it's time to leave. He says he's tired of watching people die. I believe he's going to pack the lot of us off to Canada.*

*I've never been so scared. I've heard of those ships, the coffin ships, and I hear more die on them than do here in the streets. What good can come of leaving your home to watch death in a foreign place? I'd rather starve and die here in the streets of Cork. But if Angus goes, so will our family. I fear James, we will never see one another again, and I know we will never play in the heather as we have before.*

*Kate McLauchlin*

## Chapter 4

Jim stared at the letters Coleen had just scanned and emailed. One of the copies showed a jagged tear from the top middle of the page running down about two inches against a faded yellow. Jim didn't notice the room around him, or the manicured lawns of their suburban street from the window of his study. His father's bad heart was packed away neatly in his mind's drawer. Instead, he was thinking of Kathleen and James. He felt a kind of worry for Kathleen even though he knew she had long since died, but he also felt alive, as if he were James in 1847 chasing his love to Canada. Each time he received an email with the scanned letters from Coleen he was lost for days, romping the moors in old Ireland. He'd spent his afternoon with Coleen and the letters. He turned to his computer, typing:

You think this is the same James that's buried in Stanhope?

**I think it's a good chance. Both born on same day**

Exciting....isn't it?

**Very**

One thing I don't get. How would an Irish peasant learn to write anyway?

**A real history buff I see..haha...In 1831 the Irish implemented Universal education**

Really! Wow! I always picture the 1800's as plague ridden illiteracy and child labour.

**Illiteracy for sure and child labour but many could read. Don't you colonists read**

**Dickens?** ☺

Heh...It's all just "literature" to me. I guess I think of old stories as all coming from the same time and

place.

**I'll have to teach you sometime.**

I'd like that.

Jim stared at the blinking cursor a few moments.

It's hard to imagine the letters hidden in the wall all those years. I wonder how they ended up in the staff quarters? Do you think Kate finally ended up living there?

**I don't know. I only know I was fairly wrought up when Charles showed up at the department with them**

Being an English prof paid off eh?

**For a change** 🤖

Jim heard a tug at the front door and Muriel taking off her coat as she entered the foyer, calling out, "Jim, are you here? Are you doing ok? I grabbed a sandwich at the office. Did you eat? " He heard her heels click as she made her way up the hardwood hallway. He thought of their fight earlier. His shoulders tensed as he typed.

I have to go. My wife's home

**Right. Give her my regards..... ttyl**

ttyl

Jim clicked the X button. Muriel spoke as she opened the door to the study. "Are you doing ok? I called Air Canada from work and I can make reservations if you'd like." He swivelled around in his chair, hands behind his head. She stopped talking suddenly when saw the look on his face, then crossed her arms and leaned against the doorframe. They looked at each other in silence for a moment. The room

had a mahogany bookcase that filled one wall, a large window overlooking the street, and a polished mahogany desk that reflected the expensive looking computer equipment it held.

The screen saver flickered, red swirls bursting like fireworks then fading to black.

Jim caught his reflection in a beveled mirror hanging on the wall just beside the door. His lips were shaped like a smile, but it was mocking, like a child in a playground taunting another. He looked away quickly. Changed his expression. Then peeked again. Again he didn't like the reflection. He looked as if he had just been scolded for something he hadn't done. He glimpsed Muriel's eye and could tell by her disdain that she'd caught him looking at himself.

She slumped against the door and crossed her arms tighter. "I called Air Canada."

Jim mumbled.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Oh for God's sake. What did you say?"

Jim grunted. "I just said found time in your busy day did you?"

Muriel clenched her fists hidden under her folded arms. "Look. I don't want to fight. I had a long day and I'll feel rotten later if I fight with you while your father's having problems. I just wanted to talk to you about booking a flight."

Jim muttered.

"What?"

“Nothin”

Muriel threw her hands in the air. “OK ok you win. Come and talk to me about booking a flight if you feel like it. I’m not doing this tonight.”

“Right. Just like always.”

Muriel’s voice raised. “I’m trying to help you for God’s sake.”

“How? By phoning Air Canada. That must’ve taken ten minutes out of your day.”

“Well if it’s so goddamned easy why didn’t you do it?” She glanced at the letters on his desk. “What have you been doing all day anyway?”

“Nothin.”

Muriel slapped her forehead. “Jesus. Can we not talk like normal people? Can’t I get one straight answer from you?”

“Always my fault right?”

“Shit.” Muriel spun on her heel and slammed the door to the office as she made her way to their bedroom. He heard her flop on the bed, then the house sat silent. He folded his arms and looked around the room. He wondered why he ever thought the polished wood furniture would be calming, conducive to working. He caught a look at himself in the mirror again. He was still dressed in his work clothes, a nondescript long-sleeved, buttoned-down, dark green shirt and black pleated pants. His hair looked drab. His moustache looked drab. He looked drab. All he saw in his eyes was petulance. Pathetic. He turned away, dispelling the image with thoughts of Muriel. Yeah. She was going out of her way. Big deal. Calling Air Canada.

Then he had another thought, weaker than the rest. *You were the one who was wrong.*

He pushed it away. Imagine the nerve of her asking him what he did all day, yelling at

him at work. Like she was upset he wasn't sitting in his cubicle saying the same things over and over again. "Could you please reboot?" "Please click on program files." "There's no need to yell sir." Catering to pissed off people with small problems that made it sound as if it were a life and death situation.

He jumped up and opened the study door and yelled down the hallway. "Maybe we aren't normal, maybe that's why." He slammed it shut. Then sat. His anger receded a little. *All she tried to do was help you.* He clenched his teeth, trying to will the thought away, unwilling to admit his fault.

Then his shoulders slumped.

He should apologise. She would accept he knew. But he couldn't. He couldn't make himself get off his chair, go to her. He scanned the office as if trying to find an escape route, then spotted the printout of Coleen's letters out of the corner of his eye and swivelled toward them instead.

Soon, the fight was forgotten as he imagined the hardships his ancestors had undergone. Imagined a life without computers or cell phones. A life where a reckoning with nature took place every day. Jim thought he had no illusions about how hard life would have been back then. But he longed for it. He imagined how worried James must've been when he received Kathleen's letter. Thought of how James wouldn't be able to just pick up a phone to speak with her, or bank transfer money for food. He imagined himself as James, making his way to Ireland to save Kathleen, arriving in just the nick of time to carry her to safety. His email beeped. He

scanned his inbox quickly. Another letter from Coleen.

\*

*June 1/1847*

*Dearest Kathleen,*

*I've been to Cork and could not find you. I was told you left for Montreal. I too have heard the horrors of the ships. I only pray you've used your Irish pluck to fight the fevers and the hunger. I leave in a fortnight on a vessel bound for Halifax. They say Canada is vast but I'll find you Kate. I'll find you whether this letter does or not. My uncle has passed away and his estate has gone to Blane. Although I'm expected to stay on and help manage our affairs, I know he would rather me gone. I say to hell with him. I can make my own way and who knows, perhaps some good can come from such evil. If Canada is so vast there must be a place for a Catholic and a Presbyterian to raise children. I'm not arriving completely destitute. Blane was unable to touch my annuity. We won't be rich but there'll be enough to feed us at least, and perhaps buy a small farm. I only hope I'm not too late.*

*Your loving Scot*

*James*

May 30/1847

Dear James,

*Things have happened so fast I've not had time to write . The landlord gave each of us passage on the "Leander" bound for Montreal and told us to get out. It is from her hold I now write. I tell you James, there may have been as sorrowful scenes as on the dock of Limerick, but there certainly could have been none more sorrowful. There are roughly one hundred of us stuffed in the hold, and they tell us we are lucky, as often ships not much bigger than the Leander have upwards of five hundred. But you can imagine the tumult on the dock as a hundred Irish families were split apart. You must understand there was little choice but to leave. We were homeless and without a penny. Our only hope was this new life in Canada. But not all were allowed. We each had to clear a physician's check for disease. Those that were deemed unfit were forbidden passage. My moder was one. God how I miss her. Angus and I prevailed on the physician to let her come, because she had no disease, only a weak mind. But he said he would not afford her a berth when there were so many active minds that needed one. Ewan and his family were all afflicted with the fever so they too were refused.*

*I told Angus I would not leave, that I may as well die on my own soil with proper last rites as leave my family and betrothed behind. How would I die any better in Canada than Ireland, even if the sea didn't swallow me before I got there? But Angus said we were going and that was that. He said the McLauchlins would survive, that no damned famine would kill them. He told me it was harder for him than anyone to leave moder behind, but he would do it. I was outraged. She'll not be able to take*

*care of herself I said, and cursed him with every vile word I'd ever heard a miner use. He said he'd already made arrangements for her to be taken care of, and jostled and pushed Sean and his family and I aboard the "Leander," then told us to wait for him while he went to talk to the captain.*

*The last I saw him he was standing on the dock with moder as the Leander put to sea, waving, smiling the bright smile of a trickster, his hair dripping wet. Sean and I think he must have stolen to the other side of the vessel, hidden by the crowds, then jumped or made his way down the anchor rope and swam to shore.*

*It is only moments after he disappears from view that I write this letter. It may seem odd that I write with no means of sending it. But I must. I know not when I will be able to post it, but if I should perish, I will make sure Sean or someone sends it along, then at least you will know what became of me and where I have been. But I will do my best James. If I'm at all able to survive I will. I'll hold fast in my heart the image of starting our family and building a home together.*

*Missing you James*

*Kathleen*

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Muriel heard the yell and the door slam. She held her face in her hands. My God what a child. Every fight was like this. Meaningless. Spiteful. It was hard to remember they'd ever been anything else. She lay on the bed picturing their house, calming herself, picturing the perfection of the decorator she'd hired. Expensive paintings graced the walls of two family rooms full of tasteful white leather sofas and

chairs that somehow blended with antique tables and lamps. Hardwood shone. The kitchen had stainless steel grills in a burnished maple island, stainless steel ovens, and a walk-in freezer. A gardener came once a week, even in the winter to care for the indoor plants.

She remembered when they'd bought the house. She'd just got her promotion to Director General. The banker had looked at her appreciatively when she told him her salary, suddenly treating her with more deference, giving a smile that was even more ingratiating. She'd looked back speculatively, remembering times she'd squirmed under his gaze, enjoying the reversal. She'd crossed her legs, allowing her skirt to ride up her thigh, and asked what kind of rate she could expect. In a teasing tone she'd said, "You don't want me going across the street now do you?"

The banker had laughed as if enjoying the joke. "Of course we wouldn't want that. Just give me a few minutes. She enjoyed watching him scan his computer screen with a frown while alternately smiling over at her.

She tried to remember Jim in the bank, but couldn't quite seem to place him. She did remember him stepping into the new house after the sale was final. She'd looked to him to share the moment. He'd been standing with his hands in his pockets and returned her beam with a weak grin. She strode from room to room, sometimes whirling with her arms in the air, like a new bride she'd seen once in an old movie, with Jim following. She remembered that she just took Jim's lack of enthusiasm as normal, even back then. A few years after graduation nothing ever seemed excite him, so it wasn't unusual that he wasn't excited about the new house. But now she wondered. What made him so angry? Did he really hate it here? He'd never objected

to buying the house. He just sort of went along. Then she remembered him yelling up the hall to her and felt guilty. He was right about one thing. She hadn't even spent ten minutes contacting Air Canada. She'd just asked Janice to do it.

She stood up quickly and busied herself with undressing and putting on a robe, driving the thought away, liking the way the satin felt on her skin sliding over her breasts. God. When was the last time she and Jim had sex? She knew it couldn't have been that long ago, but she couldn't quite seem to remember when. She put on slippers and padded to the family room, stopping along the way for her documents and a glass of wine. She began studying the budget she was to submit in the morning, meticulously checking each figure, adding vertically and horizontally, double-checking again. Still later, she stretched out on the couch and dozed off.

\*

*June 3rd/1847*

*Dear James,*

*As I write, Ireland is still within my sight. Although I miss Angus and moder and Ewan and his brood and fear I may never see you again, things on the vessel are not as bad as we'd been told. The passage includes a pound of meal per day per adult, and a half pound per child, enough to make a loaf of bread or biscuits every day for each family. Although it sounds plain, no one is starving. We cook each day on the deck in the evening, taking turns using small fire-pits made of stone. It reminds me somehow of an after-supper walk in our village before the fever struck. A cooling breeze, smells of cooking and wood smoke, almost as if moder and I were walking off a big meal of corned beef and cabbage, strolling along the cobblestones in the sunset.*

*And although the water must be rationed, we are assured it's enough to last the voyage, which incredible as it seems will take two months! We'd been told by the shipping agent and the landlord that the voyage was to be only three weeks.*

*Most of the Irish aboard are from county Meath, and are a rough lot. There's only a few can read, and most are dressed in nothing more than rags. Although I must say we are dressed no better. One boy, about ten years old, constantly raises a hand as if to hit his poor mother. She defends him though, saying he's only doing as he learned from his father who was left behind on the dock at Limerick. I cannot but think that it's the better for both the boy and his mother. She seems abused enough at the hands of her son without adding the abuse of his teacher. And besides, there is another man that seems to have taken to her, but who unfortunately also seems cut from the same cloth as the man she left behind. Moreover, he seems to be taken with most of the other single women aboard, myself included. He's a dirty beggar. He uses none of his water ration for cleaning. When he smiles, dark stumps peek over his cracked lips, and his fingernails are black with grime. He hasn't hit the woman, but he often grabs her arm to drag her here or there, or shoves her from behind as if for entertainment, laughing when she stumbles forward. I could I never become so hard up as to rely on the likes of him. I'd rather cut my throat, although I'd be more rather to cut his manhood off than harm myself.*

*There's also a man here with two infant daughters, twins, whose mother was left behind in Limerick. Lucky for him there's a woman with child able to nurse the two, or I do not know how he would feed them, as I have discovered there's no milk aboard.*

*The captain does not speak to us, only to his crew. He is a diminutive, rotund man with a face that looks carved from stone and an eye as stern as a schoolmaster. His mate, however, is an easier sort. He is also a wee man, and has a limp that he tries quite hard to hide, but in the doing so only makes it all the more obvious. He is kind to the passengers though, and often inquires as to our health. This morning he was standing aft, overlooking the deck from just in front of the captain's quarters, when he dropped his looking glass and asked me to retrieve it. I did so and was rewarded with a look into the captain's rooms. I have always wondered what such a cabin looked like. It's no wonder he and the mate are such short men! Even given the captain's diminished stature the only place he can stand straight in the captain's mess is just under the skylight. There was a table that took up most of the center of the room, and two bunks on either wall full of colorful baubles such as bolts of cloths and casks. On the roof were tied rolls of maps, and swinging against the swell of the Leander, a rusty musket. I could just barely make out his bedchamber through a door at the back of the mess, but could make out all sorts of preservatives, jams and the like cluttering shelves against one wall. After months of eating nothing but seaweed, scouring for garbage in Cork and then sustaining on the rations provided here, my mouth was watering so that I had to swallow before I could answer the mate when he asked if I were alright and shooed me back to the deck.*

*It was then I noticed the grimy Meath man leaning against a mast, staring at me. It gave me a shiver the way he would not look down when I glared at him, but instead he stared right back even as he wiped a dirty knife on the tail of his shirt. The look in his eyes left no mistake to what he was thinking. I whirled as scornfully as I*

*could and went below to seek Sean and the children.*

*My emotions on this vessel seem to swing from one mood to another, just as it rocks with the ocean. I just grasp one when another displaces it. As I descended below, probably because of the openness of the deck, and the sight of captain's quarter's, I forgot the Meath man. It felt like I was entering a creaking tomb. "Cramped," would not serve to describe below-decks. The hold is stocked full of berths so close to one another that you can just barely stand sideways between them, and stacked so close atop one another that you cannot turn to lay on your side. Going to bed is indeed like crawling into a coffin.*

*I told Sean of the situation with the Meath man, and he said not to worry, he would have a word with him. He made some joke or another that a good dunk in the sea would do the dirty Meather no harm, although it would likely make any fish in near proximity dive for deeper sea. He said Darragh would likely want a word with the bugger as well. He's a Macewan we befriended here. Sean and his family and I share our cooking pit with them. The MacEwans have two girls and a boy who play with Sean's two boys. It's good they've banded together as the children from Meath tend to leave them alone now. The last scrap they had, little Erin, the youngest MacEwan girl, would bash the Meath rascals over the head with a truncheon made from an empty flour cask as they fought. They've had little trouble since.*

*At any rate, the conditions here aren't so bad that the ships could be called coffin ships, unless the term refers to the sleeping quarters. There's more food than we've seen for awhile, and what's better, it seems a steady supply. I have hope to survive this voyage and make a new life in Canada with you, and then later have*

*Angus and moder join us. It's good to have hope again. Don't despair James. I shall write many letters while aboard the Leander, almost as if I were keeping my own diary especially for you, and will write another when I know where you'll be able to find me. Dream of me James as I dream of you. I often think of the time in Cork when I awoke in your arms in the heather, and saw you looking at me with that soft look of yours. It's that look I use to banish the dirt of this voyage. Find me James. I'll be waiting.*

*Until then, all my love*

*Kathleen*

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Jim put down the newest printout from Coleen, stretched, yawned, heaved himself from his chair and left the study. He saw Muriel lying on the sofa. The house was quiet, dark except for the light from an antique table lamp that shone on her, and the flickering computer screen behind him. He wondered as he watched her how she would react to the voyage from Ireland to Canada on the "*Leander*." He smothered a chuckle. She'd probably be complaining that the steps to below deck were too hard to navigate in high heels. But then his look changed as he continued to watch her sleeping. No, she would be tough enough. He wondered if he would be up to the challenge, if he would be confident enough to defend her against the dirty Meath man.

Her robe was open just enough to show the curve of her shoulder and neck. An urge overcame him, to go to her, but he was unable to, and stood paralyzed, breathing deeply, almost painfully. He pictured sitting down beside her, softly

caressing her neck, leaning close for a kiss. Her eyes opening, surprised, then softening to desire. Jim felt an ache, a physical pain from wanting her. Then a sound, a muted groan, came from him. It awoke Muriel and the moment disappeared. Jim fled to the bedroom, startled, like a teenager caught masturbating.

Muriel sat up, groggy, disoriented, feeling like she'd dreamt something important but couldn't remember what, an answer on the tip of her tongue, a voice calling she knew but couldn't identify. Blinking her eyes she made her way to the bedroom and slipped under the covers. She lay on one side, Jim was on the other, both of them with eyes open. They lay that way for awhile, then almost in unison drifted off to sleep.

Sometime during the night she moved across the bed and snuggled into Jim's arms. Their breathing became regular. But in the morning, they had moved to either side of the bed.

## Chapter 5

Jim was bustling about the kitchen, darting from the percolator that filled the room with the aroma of coffee, to stirring a light yogurt sauce for fresh-cut strawberries. He'd heard Muriel's shower stop a few minutes before and had set the table, complete with the unread morning newspaper next to her place setting. He looked up as she came into the room, taking in a black pinstriped suit which somehow accentuated her curves even as it subdued them. "Breakfast's ready." He crossed the room and kissed her lightly on the cheek. "You look great."

Muriel sat at the table, picked up her spoon, and started reading the headlines. "Thanks. I see you're dressed. You going in today?"

"I am a bit later."

Muriel's movement stilled, then she spoke in a voice he recognized as straining to be conversational. "Why later?"

"I'm going to take care of booking the flights here. That way the whole office doesn't have to know what's happening."

Muriel took a mouthful of strawberries, then took a drink of coffee as she stood up. "I have to run." She crossed the room, her turn to kiss his cheek, then hurried to the front door, quickly shucking on her coat and pulling on her boots, shouting a short "bye" as she stepped into the frosty air.

Jim leaned back when he heard the door shut, grabbed the kitchen counter, took a deep breath, and exhaled slowly. He tried to imagine sitting with Muriel on the plane to P.E.I, tried to think of ways to relieve the strained silence that would come between them. He sighed. He hoped it wouldn't be a long trip.

June 10/1847

*Dear James,*

*What a monotonous week this was, except for that damned Meath scoundrel. Although, I must say he no longer stares in my direction after the episode last Wednesday. Serves the bugger right. I was standing on deck, staring out to sea, lost in the vastness of it, trying to sort out the hope and fear this voyage brings, when I smelled what I thought was rotted meat. It turned out it was the Meath man's breath. I was so lost in my thoughts that he'd leaned in very close without me noticing, so close his greasy hair touched my face. I was too surprised and too busy dealing with his stench and the shudder that it gave me that I didn't push him away until after he whispered in my ear, "dreamin of me were ya lass?" It was only then I twisted and pushed at his chest. He grabbed my arms and leaned me back over the deck rail saying, "would you rather a kiss or a swim my sweet?"*

*But then his eyes opened wide in surprise and next thing I knew Darragh and Sean, each holding a leg, dangled him over the rail. The Meath man was screaming. Sean was all for throwing him in, but Darragh wasn't sure of the consequences, didn't want to risk the gaol. As they were arguing the mate came along and broke it up. Later, down below, I saw the Meath man staring at the floor as Sean whispered some sweet nothings in HIS ear.*

*Since then I rarely see him, although when I do he shoots me a baleful look, then stares back down to his feet before anyone notices. But I've not been hurt by hateful looks from no-account men up to this point, and I doubt this beggar will prove*

*any exception.*

*But even with those shenanigans, the days do drag on. One after another, so much so that even sleep is a welcome diversion. I've no idea how I'll stand another seven weeks, if indeed, we arrive in seven weeks. A young Meath boy pointed out that we seemed to be sailing in the wrong direction to reach Canada. He said we should be sailing toward the sun in the evening if we were headed west, but that the sun instead was setting off the port side, as if we were headed south to England. He caused quite a stir, enough so that the passengers united and assembled before the captain's quarters to demand an explanation. The first mate, atop in the crow's nest at the time, swung on a rope, clambered down to the aft deck, and asked what in God's name we were up to. We stated our case which had no effect but to cause him to spit rather uncomely onto the main deck where we were standing. He told us that we knew nothing of sailing, and that because of the direction of the wind we were forced to tack to the south to reach Canada. Not many of us understood the procedure and could only stand with our mouths agape. However, later, after much discussion, the mate ventured below and explained it.*

*But that's not the half of it! During the ruckus, I happened to glimpse a woman in the captain's quarters and subsequently learned he has his mistress traveling with him. She is about sixty, stout as the captain is rotund, with grey wiry hair and a pleasant demeanor. The mate told us she often accompanies the captain.*

*I'll not judge them too harshly. Perhaps in Ireland I would've noted the impropriety, but here, on this wet, wavy desert, I'll give the captain his solace for loneliness without wagging my tongue in gossip. The priests would disagree I'm sure,*

*but there's little evidence of priests here. Perhaps it's a sign, perhaps in Canada improprieties won't be so important. Perhaps our religions won't keep us apart.*

*I pray all is well with you James. It's been so long now since I've lain eyes on you that I almost forget what you look like. But I must remember you somewhere deep inside my heart because you are in my thoughts often. Indeed, it is the very idea of you and I and our life together that keeps me whole on this voyage, although it may seem blaspheme to say so.*

*Keep well and dream of our reunion.*

*Your betrothed*

*Kathleen*

\*

Jim looked across the aisle at a man in a suit, hunched over, cutting his Air-Canada sausage patty with a plastic knife. He thought it must be a busy man that had to order and pay extra for a meal on a plane. Muriel was next to him, and he turned as he heard a scratching and rustling that he recognized as rummaging through a purse.

"What are you looking for?"

"My wallet."

"Your wallet?"

"Yes, my wallet."

Jim looked away, now watching a woman across the aisle and two seats up, reading a newspaper. He craned, trying to read the headline. The rustling beside him grew impatient. "What do you need your wallet for?"

"I'm buying breakfast."

“Breakfast?”

Muriel’s shoulders dropped. “Yes. Breakfast. That’s what I said. Breakfast.”

“But I offered to make breakfast this morning.”

Muriel snapped her purse shut, holding her wallet in her hand. “I wasn’t hungry then.”

“You’d prefer airplane food?”

“Look. I’m hungry now and I’m going to eat. That’s it.”

Jim held up his hands. “Ok. Fine by me. Do what you want.” Then lower, under his breath. “I could’ve made you anything you wanted.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Muriel squeezed her purse tighter. “God I hate when you do that.”

“Do what?”

“Speak so I can’t hear you then refuse to repeat it.”

Jim said nothing, instead raising his hand at the stewardess walking down the aisle. She smiled. “I’ll be with you in a minute sir.”

“Ok.”

Muriel blew a breath. “Why didn’t you just say you wanted to order breakfast. Now I’ll have to wait.”

“She’ll be back.”

Muriel zipped her purse and threw the wallet in. “Forget it.” They sat in silence a few moments. She looked at her watch. Jim looked at his. “Another hour we’ll be in Toronto.”

Muriel said nothing, opening her magazine, *Time*. Jim looked to the man who had been eating breakfast, now leaning back in his chair, sated eyes reflecting his full stomach, appearing both satisfied and happy the job was done, eyes opening and closing slowly. Jim turned back to Muriel, and noted with interest the article she was reading, "The Migrant Next Door." He started reading over her shoulder. After a few seconds, she looked up from the magazine at the seat directly ahead, staring fixedly for a few seconds, then turned to him. "Do you mind?"

"What?"

"Never mind. Here. Just take it." She thrust the magazine at him, then lowered her seat, leaned back and closed her eyes. Jim stared at the article a bit more, then closed the magazine, put it away, and again started observing passengers. There was a stout man, who looked in his seventies, dressed in jeans, sweatshirt, and a cap, who kept jumping up to retrieve things in the overhead bin in response to requests from his wife beside him. He did this, Jim noted, with a big, goofy grin, as if he was happy of both the chance to stretch, and to serve her. Jim could just barely see the man's wife, or at least he assumed it was his wife, through the crack in the seats: grayish-blue hair, a wrinkled cheek and wire frame glasses perched on a long thin nose. Jim wondered what the old guy saw that he doted on her so much. Maybe he remembered her in her twenties, maybe each time he looked at her she was a young beauty, or maybe she was a fresh catch, a new love. Who knew? Maybe they were newlyweds. Jim smiled at the thought. He looked to Muriel, skin unblemished, sculpted cheekbones and lips red, full, pouting in way he thought couldn't possibly be more inviting. Then her eyes opened, almost as if she'd been startled. She caught Jim's stare. Both were surprised,

unused to looking at each other when only inches away. Muriel shut her eyes again and Jim quickly turned to look at the passengers. This time, he saw a mother whispering to her little girl who was smiling and stifling her giggles to match the quiet of the flight.

They landed in Toronto, made their way out the door onto the covered ramp that led to the secure area, and followed the signs that pointed toward the gate that would take them to Charlottetown, their wheeled suitcases obediently following. Luggage clattered on the linoleum, sounding like rolling bowling balls, people fast-walked and ran, some in a tightly controlled hysteria. They reached arrows that indicated a ramp that had a downward slope. This hall was bare, no bright signs advertising drinks, beer or books for sale. They angled downward and finally stopped at a steep stairway, no escalator in sight. Jim looked at Muriel's suitcase. "Do you want me to carry that?"

"No. That's ok. I have it."

They continued down the stairs, Muriel's suitcase bumping loudly down each step as she continued to drag it. Jim could see the people in the waiting room below, looking up to see what the noise was. They made their to the waiting area and sat on a hard plastic chairs closely linked to one another. Muriel crossed her legs and looked around. Unlike the larger areas upstairs, here there was only a convenience store that sold refrigerated subs in plastic packages rimed with frost.

Jim noticed a difference in the dress of the people here as opposed to the flight they'd just left. Mothers were dressed in plastic looking, WalMartish sweat suits. Many of the men were dressed as was the old guy he'd seen on the plane: jeans, work

boots, and caps. The movements of the people here did not seem so precise as those on the flight from Ottawa. Men slumped in the plastic benches, hands in pockets, legs extended, laces untied on work boots. A mother yelled across the waiting room to a little girl standing near a boarding exit. "Fleesh. Get your butt over here. I told you not go near that."

Jim sank further in his seat and extended his legs before him, but then straightened when he saw the high gloss of his Italian shoes.

"Fleesh. Get the hell over here. Right now."

The woman's husband chuckled. "I'll get her." As he walked over to whom Jim supposed was Felicia, the man crouched over saying, "I'm gonna get ya. I'm gonna get ya." The little girl shrieked and tried to run past him, then burst into giggles as he reached over and swung her in the air.

Muriel spoke. "God. I can't believe we have to wait here for two hours. "

Jim put his hand on hers. "It'll be ok. Isn't she a cutie?" He nodded toward Felicia, who was now putting her hands over her mother's eyes from behind, playing "Guess who?" Muriel didn't answer.

Her father, only two seats away, heard him. "She's a handful." Felicia ran over and jumped on her father's lap. Her father looked at her seriously. "Hey Fleesh. That fella says you're a cutie. Maybe I should sell ya off." He tickled her.

Felicia squealed again, then looked over to Jim and Muriel. "She's pretty," she said, pointing at Muriel.

The man regarded Muriel seriously for a moment. "You know you're right. Maybe we should trade Mum in." Felicia slapped his chest simultaneous with his wife

slapping him with a rolled up *Chatelaine*.

Muriel smiled quickly at the family, then rose, speaking as she left. "I'm going to see if we can get on an earlier flight."

Jim watched her go toward the Air Canada desk then turned back to the man. Felicia was absorbed, playing with a button on her father's shirt. "Where ya from?" Jim asked.

The man glanced at him. "Souris." He pronounced it "surrey."

"Goin home?"

"Yep. We were just in Calgary, visitin my brother. He's up there workin for the seismic crews."

Jim pursed his lips. "Good money I bet."

"Yeah. Money's good, pogey after is good too. But he misses home. The wife and I," he nodded at the woman who had hit him with the *Chatelaine*, "were thinkin of movin there, but it's not for us."

"No?"

"Nah. Too far from home. We both missed the ocean somethin terrible out there, and that was only a week."

Jim nodded agreement. "'I know what you mean."

The man looked surprised. "You from the Island?"

Jim tucked his leather shoes further under the plastic bench. "Yeah. Born and raised."

"Is that a fact? Whereabouts?"

"Stanhope."

“What’s your last name?”

“MacLauchlin.”

The man looked down to the floor now, thinking. “MacLauchlin, MacLauchlin. I know a George MacLauchlin, used to fish lobster, retired now.”

“That’s my father.”

The man slapped his knee, then held out his hand. “Well Christ. You must be Jim. We used to freeze our feet playin hockey against one another in that old outdoor rink in Tracadie. I’m Preston MacLeod.”

“Preston? Jesus. I remember chasin you with a goalie stick after you slashed Richard.”

They laughed together then Preston’s voice lowered. “I was sorry to hear about your brother.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

The man sat Felicia on the floor, then crossed his legs. She looked up at him, hands on her hips. “Daddy. I want back up.”

He tousled her hair. “Nah. You run along. I’m going to talk to Jim for a bit.” He twisted sideways, laying his arm across the back of his seat. “So how is old George anyway?”

Jim’s voice was low now as well. “Not so good.”

The man leaned forward. “Sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah. It’s his heart. I don’t know how bad it is. A friend called me and told me I should go home soon to see him.”

The man leaned in closer, but as Jim was about to speak he was jarred by the

sound of Muriel's heels as she returned. He spoke quickly then, "Well, nice to meet you again Preston, maybe we'll see you on the Island."

Muriel, breathless from fast-walking, started to speak but stopped as a tinny loudspeaker blared in the waiting room. She pointed at the gate when the noise subsided. "That's our flight. Come on. Let's get going."

"What?"

"I re-booked. Cost five-hundred dollars, but we save the two hour wait."

Jim got up, grabbing his suitcase. "But no one will be there to meet us."

"We'll rent a car. Come on."

As they made their way out the gate and onto the tarmac, Jim squinted through the snow that was falling, grinning as he noted how much smaller and older this plane was than the one they'd just left. Muriel held *Time* above her head, sheltering her face and hair, looking downward.

They boarded and sat in seats so close together their arms touched, tense, tentative at first, then more relaxed as they were forced to press into one another. Jim leaned back, relaxing, remembering another time, his first flight to Ottawa to attend university. People smoked on the plane then, many were drunk by the time they landed, most were headed to different work destinations, Calgary, Toronto, to make a few bucks, go home, and spend the summer on pogy. It was a loud trip, but full of good humor and excitement, a kinship permeating the smoke and drunken antics. And although the smoke and drunks were gone, Jim could still feel the kinship on the plane, noticed the familiarity in the way people spoke, their postures and mannerisms. He looked to Muriel during the flight, wondering how it felt to her, wondering if she

noticed the difference in atmosphere. As far as he could tell, she did seem more relaxed, but then, maybe it was because he was more relaxed. They flew above the driving snow into the sun, but then descended back into the winter as they landed at the Charlottetown airport. Although they couldn't see it, the sun was setting, casting a grey pall on the white snow. Muriel peeked out the plane's window, pulling her coat closer. "God. Why can't they make covered ramps here like they do in the real world."

Jim felt the intimacy of coming home, perversely enjoying the hardship. James and Kathleen popped into his head, and of how they were forced to deal with storms like this with no rent-a car waiting, or plowed roads. "It's not that bad. It's only a couple of minutes till you get inside." They disembarked and hunkered against the wind, Muriel's coat flapping around her panty-hosed legs, fast-stepping to the terminal. Once inside they shook and brushed to rid themselves of snow, and watched as hugs and smiles greeted the other passengers.

Muriel spoke first, pointing at an Avis booth. "Come on. Let's get that car and get to your parents' place."

Jim didn't start after her immediately, instead watching the faces of people waiting for luggage, making small talk, looking relieved to be home. The airport was small enough that Jim could see from one end of it to the other. He spied a phone on the wall near the exit and wondered whether to call his folks. He decided not to, and instead went over to the Avis booth to listen to Muriel making arrangements.

She turned to him as the agent furiously typed on a computer. "Did you call your father?"

"No. We'll be there before it's time they leave for the airport to pick us up."

We'll surprise them a bit."

"Don't you think it's better to call than to just show up on their doorstep?"

"Nah. It'll be ok."

Muriel changed the subject. "I asked him for a four-wheel drive in case we need one. It's nasty outside."

The agent looked up from his computer. "You did right. Supposed to storm tonight. Ninety kilometer an hour winds and fifty centimeters of snow. You'll be the last flight in today."

Muriel turned to Jim. "Do you think we should rent a room and wait for the storm to pass?"

Jim shook his head. "No. It's only twenty minutes to Stanhope, and we have a four-wheel drive."

"Still. I'd prefer to be safe."

The agent spoke again. "You'll be fine. We have a Toyota Four-Runner in the lot. That'll get you to Stanhope no problem." Then he returned quickly to the computer when he saw the mind-your-own-business glare he received from Muriel.

Jim grabbed the keys. "I'll go warm it up and bring it around so we don't have to drag the luggage through the snow. You finish up here."

"You're driving?"

"Yeah. I know the roads better."

\*

June 15/1847

*Dear James,*

*What I wouldn't give to have you by my side. It would make this voyage so much easier to survive even though I have grown used to the tedium of the voyage now, and have set a pattern for my days.*

*I clean the children as best I can with spit and a rag in the morning. Then I go above deck to get the stench of a hundred unwashed bodies from my nostrils. I rarely succeed. Although the sea air seems to cleanse the odor, the stench sneaks back to my senses, elusive as a ghost, a fleeting reminder soiling the salty freshness. I wonder if it will ever disappear.*

*Things are not as rosy as I previously described but I still hold hope. Two of the men below deck had dysentery, and the smell of feces was such as to overpower the smell of vomit and the unwashed. But none, including myself, dared clean it for fear of catching disease. It was then we found out what a good woman the captain's mistress is. She got word of the mens' illness and brought them flour porridge with a few drops of laudanum. She then bade the two cabin boys clean the mess. But while this was heartening, we started to wonder at our situation. We were at sea without a doctor, with only the captain's mistress to help us if she felt so inclined.*

*This morning, as I stood upon the deck, I saw a shark following the ship. The mate told me this was a sure sign of bad luck. It was then I saw the Meath man (I've learned his name is Ronan) licking his stumps in a suggestive way while he stared openly. I have a mind to loose Sean on him again.*

*I try to keep my spirits, but I feel my courage is failing me. Perhaps it is just*

*the interminable voyage and the stench below deck that puts me in a mood today, but God help me I fear the future again. I feel it is better not to have hope because with hope I have something to lose. It was better when I had just accepted my inevitable death. Now that I've seen some chance of us being together I am more afraid that I will somehow lose it.*

*But perhaps it is just the day, and my mood and the mate's superstition and the filthy Ronan. I will try and keep courage and faith that we will reunite soon.*

*Your betrothed*

*Kathleen*

\*

Muriel sat next to Jim, peering through the snow driving at the windshield, watching the grey of dusk give way to dark shadows. "It sure looks different in the winter."

Jim nodded agreement. "Yeah. Most people only see it in the summer. It's a different place in the winter."

"It looks smaller somehow."

Again Jim nodded. "It's because all the leaves disappear. You can see how close buildings are, and it takes away depth, makes the fields look smaller."

The Four-Runner skidded sideways. Muriel grabbed the armrest. Jim twitched the wheel, righted it, then chuckled. "Don't worry. I've driven in this kind of stuff all my life."

"It's not funny." She looked around at the barren fields and farmhouses blurred by the snow. "If we go in the ditch what will we do?"

"You can wait in the truck and I'll get help from one of the farmers. But don't

worry. We'll make it alright."

Muriel sat back in her seat. "Are you sure your parents won't mind us showing up unannounced."

"Hope not."

Muriel sat up again. "Hope not? What do you mean hope not? I thought you said it would be fine."

"Well, Mum won't care. Dad'll just give us the disapproving stare."

"God. Why didn't you call them?"

"I dunno." The wipers squealed across the windshield.

"Why would you want to upset your father? He's having heart problems."

"Look. I don't want to talk about it ok."

"Jesus. I'm visiting my goddamned in-laws. If you don't treat them with respect they'll think it's me who doesn't respect them."

"It'll be ok."

As they neared the shore they could tell it had been storming harder than in town. Roads were partially drifted in and the wind rocked the truck when it gusted. As they turned down the Old Shore Road and neared his parents' drive, it intensified, driving across the icy Stanhope Bay. Porch lights wavered and flickered in the bluster. The snow had drifted in the shape of waves and the Four-Runner rose and fell like a ship in a rough sea as it hit them. Muriel gripped her seat, every now and again exclaiming in fear.

Jim peered through a hole in the snowy slush covering the windshield. "Don't worry. Almost there. We're close enough that we can walk if we have to."

“Shit.”

The rocking of the truck softened as Jim slowed and checked out his parents’ drive. Muriel still held her seat, peering out at the drifted driveway. “God. We’ll never make it up there.”

“It’s drifted in good alright. I’m going to take a run at it.” Jim backed up, checking out the mile-long driveway to his parents’ house, trying to pick out its boundary. He couldn’t. He’d have to go by memory. He shifted gears, revved the engine and turned into where he thought the drive was. The truck slewed sideways and he straightened the wheel as the Four-Runner picked up speed and churned through the snow.

Then they lurched forward, barely catching themselves as the truck slammed to a stop. They sat that way, stunned for a second, staring at the the hood of the SUV now angled sharply downward. Jim had driven into the ditch.

“Shit.”

Jim sat a moment listening to the idling engine, then snapped it into reverse. He floored the pedal. The tires screamed but the truck didn’t move. Muriel looked out her side window, but could only see black and hear the wind whistle, sounding like a tea kettle had reached the boiling point. “Are we stuck?”

Jim nodded yes.

“What are we going to do?”

Jim took a breath. “Walk.”

Muriel looked at her panty-hosed legs and high-heeled boots. “Walk?”

Jim nodded yes.

She hit his shoulder. "I can't walk. Look how I'm dressed."

Jim gestured with his head toward the back. "We'll have to get some clothes out and get you changed."

"Clothes? Goddamn it. I didn't bring any arctic wear."

Jim thought a second. "You can put on a pair of my pants."

Muriel grabbed her purse. "Wait. I have my cell phone. We can call a tow-truck."

"You'll never get anyone out tonight. We'd be here for hours waiting. Besides, we could get hit if the plow comes by."

Muriel, not listening, was holding her phone slightly above her head, squinting to read the display. "Shit. No signal."

They sat again listening to the idle of the truck, both looking at the distance of his parents' porch light. Then Jim reached over the back seat, grunting as he hauled a suitcase to the front. He unzipped it, foraged a bit and came out with a pair of jeans, handing them to Muriel. "Here. This'll help."

Muriel snatched them, then leaned over to wiggle the pants over her boots. Her coat and skirt rose as she pulled the pants up, and from the corner of her eye she saw Jim checking her out. "For God's sake. What are you doing? It's nothing you haven't seen before."

Jim shrugged. "I like. What can I say?"

Muriel paused, the pants not quite up over her thighs, hesitating. She turned, and they looked at each other, then slowly, she pulled them up and buttoned them.

“Let’s go.”

The wind hit them as they got out. Muriel’s door pulled her arm hard as it opened. When she stepped out of the truck she sunk to her waist in the snow. She grabbed the door, trying to shut it, but the wind pushed it out of her grip and it sprung against the hinges, bouncing, straining to open further. She grabbed it again, and pushed once, then twice and a third time as hard as she could before it closed. She held to the side of the truck as she waded through the snow. She shouted “Jim,” but the wind took the word so quickly she didn’t hear it herself. She stood, squinting into the blizzard, relieved to see him feeling his way along the front of the truck.

He leaned close and yelled in her ear. “I want you to grab my belt loop and hang on.”

They made their way up the drive. Their feet and fingers got cold first, followed by a painful freeze, then a worrisome numbing. They had to stop every few feet to catch their breath. Jim would put his arms around her as they huddled for warmth, then wade another few feet. Nearer the house the snow on the yard had been blown clean, and they ran, stumbling as if they’d just finished a marathon, over to the front porch. Jim hammered the door. “Dad. Mum. Open up.”

A light came on upstairs, and a minute later a glow from the kitchen. They shivered and Jim wrapped his arms around Muriel again. Then the kitchen light went off. Jim had a sudden intuition. He hammered again and yelled, “Dad. We’re out here, at the front door.”

The kitchen light came on again, then the living room light. The door opened and his father stood in the doorway. “What the? Who? Jim, is that you?”

Jim shivering with his arms around Muriel, nodded his head.

“Well what the hell are ya doin out there? Come in.”

Muriel and Jim stepped into the house, shaking, clenching their frozen hands.

His father shut the door. “Why the hell didn’t you just come in? You didn’t have to stand there barking and scratching like an old dog. All ya had to do was open the door.”

Jim didn’t say anything, ignoring Muriel’s look.

His father shook his head. “Never mind. Come into the kitchen and tell me what the hell’s going on.”

Jim saw his mother half way down the stair way trying to peek into the doorway. “George? Who’s there? What’s going on?”

Jim’s father yelled over his shoulder. “It’s Jim for Christ’s sake.”

“Jim?”

He looked at Muriel and Jim and again shook his head. “Yep.”

“Well for land’s sake, get them into the kitchen.”

Shortly after, Jim and Muriel sat shivering, hands wrapped around mugs of hot chocolate. It didn’t seem the same room Muriel had seen in the summer. She remembered it had seemed unused then, and oddly misshapen, as if room was designed just for convenience, without care for any aesthetic value.

But the room felt different now. They sat at a scarred wooden table that stood in the middle it. Along one side wall, against fading wallpaper, was a short counter and sink. Along the other side wall was a window, now stuffed with a blanket around the edges, as was the back door. Two stoves stood against the wall facing the back

entryway, one wood, one electric. A doorway just to the right of the back entry led to a bathroom, a room that jutted, looking outside as if it should be a porch. But with the wind howling, and the wood stove throwing heat into the room, it seemed cozy, a haven. Everything you needed was right here.

Jim's father was leaning against the counter. "So how the hell did ya end up here. We phoned the airport and they said your flight was cancelled."

Jim glanced at Muriel. "We ended up getting an earlier flight."

"Well Jesus. You coulda called."

"We didn't have time. The flight got changed pretty fast."

"Well why the hell didnt ya call from the airport?"

Jim shrugged, again avoiding Muriel's look. "I dunno."

His father took a sip. "How the hell did ya get here?"

"Rented a car."

"Uh huh." Jim's father took another sip. "So where is it?"

Jim crossed his arms in front of him. "I went in the ditch turning into the drive."

Jim's father gulped and coughed. "What? How the hell did you do that?"

"I couldn't see where the driveway was in the snow."

Jim's father gestured toward the road with his cup. "But I have those goddamned reflectors I got from Canadian Tire marking it."

Jim nodded agreement. "I think I drove over one."

His father looked at the floor. "Jesus."

His mother sat a dish of brownies on the table. "Doesn't matter now. What

matters now is you're safe and you're here." She turned to Muriel. "Why don't you get out of those wet things dear?"

"Oh thanks Mrs. Maclauchlin. I would but I have nothing to wear. The suitcases are still in the car."

"Well you can't sit around in those wet things. You'll catch your death of cold. Come with me. You can borrow some of my pajamas."

Jim regarded his father in his opened robe, a well-worn white t-shirt and pajama bottoms underneath, then looked to his mother in a flannel nightdress that came up full to her neck, topped with a decorative ruffle, looking like she should be carrying a kerosene lamp and wearing a nightcap. "You folks go to bed early these days. It's only seven o'clock."

His mother didn't answer, instead looking with interest at the wood stove. His father seemed to see something outside, and peered out the dark window as he answered. "Well, you know. Not much to do on a stormy night. Might as well go to bed."

His mother cleared her throat sharply. "Come on dear. Let's get you out of those clothes. Then I'll make you something to eat"

Less than an hour later, Muriel stood with hands on her hips, newly attired in one of Jim's mother's nightdresses, looking at Jim trying to stifle his laughs. "Don't you dare say a word."

Jim put a pillow to his mouth. "You look like old Mother Hubbard."

"Hey. It wasn't my parents having after-supper sex."

"Oh god. Don't remind me."

Muriel shrugged. "I think it's kind of sweet."

"Would it be sweet if it was your parents?"

"Yeah....I think so."

Muriel took her hands from her hips slowly, thoughtful a moment, then looked Jim directly in the eye. Slowly, the atmosphere in the room changed as her expression changed. She pulled the nightdress over her head, then stood naked, speaking huskily. "Does this look like old Mother Hubbard?"

Jim stared as she stalked over to him and pushed him hard back onto the bed, then tugged his boxers off. She kneeled until she was positioned over him, then leaned down to kiss him.

Later, they lay in the narrow bed, drowsy, holding one another, nodding off to sleep. He whispered, "next time let's try it with the nightdress on."

She tapped his shoulder lightly. "Shut up."

## Chapter 6

Next morning, sitting at the kitchen table, Jim could hear the start and stop of a tractor with a snow blower clearing his parents' long drive. The sound comforted him, a memory from his childhood. The storm was over and the clean up had started. Last night he'd been surprised to see a new computer with an internet connection in the hallway connecting the kitchen and living room. Apparently it had been his mother's idea. He'd gotten up early and came downstairs to check his email, excited at the prospect of finding more letters, and further excited when he saw there was, but then disappointed when he talked to Coleen.

That's the end of them?

**Afraid so**

Damn

Jim stared at the cursor for a moment.

Frustrating. I guess we'll never know what happened

**Let's keep up hope. We may find something yet.**

The cursor blinked. Then Jim typed:

You know I've never seen your face

**Ha ha. I've seen yours**

How?

**Found it your employer's web site.....and your wife.....she's quite beautiful**

Fair is fair. How do I find yours?

**I'll send you one now**

A transfer started and Jim waited. A few seconds later a picture of a curly-haired blonde woman with almond blue-eyes, sitting on a floor, wearing shorts, hugging a bare leg to her chin, came on his screen. Jim studied it for a moment.

I pictured you older

**Is that a compliment?**

I'm sorry. You're just so beau

"Jim."

Jim started at the sound of Muriel's voice and quickly shut down the screen.

Muriel peered at the computer. "What are you doing?"

"Checking my email."

"I saw the MSN screen up. Who were you chatting with?"

"Oh. I've just been getting some historical documents, genealogy stuff, from a professor in Aberdeen."

"Letters?"

"Yeah. Would you like to see them?"

"You brought them here?"

"No no. She scans them in. They're online."

"She?"

Jim clicked his mouse. "See, here they are."

Muriel peered at them for a second. "Why did you shut your screen down so fast?"

"I dunno. You startled me I guess. That's all."

"Uh huh."

“What?”

Muriel didn't speak for a second. “Where's your father?”

“Outside waiting for the blower to finish.”

Muriel ducked to look out the window. “Jesus. He's shovelling the steps. I thought he had a bad heart.”

“What?” Jim jumped up and looked outside, blocking Muriel's view. His father straightened up, took a vial from his shirt pocket, then gulped two pills. Jim saw he had finished the steps. He blew a breath. “Well he's done now.” He shook his head. “I'll talk to mum later. Find out what's going on.”

They sat silent for a second.

He turned back to Muriel. “I'll have to get the Four-Runner towed out too.”

“I'll do it. You can talk to your mother while I'm gone.”

“Gone? You don't have to leave. Just make a call.”

Muriel fidgeted a bit. “There must be something I can do.”

“Do?”

“Yes do. Or maybe you would like me sit here all afternoon with your mother and bake a cake?”

Jim's mother came into the kitchen just as Muriel was finished speaking.

“That'd be lovely dear. Give us a chance to get reacquainted.”

Muriel spoke quickly. “Oh I'm sorry Mrs. MacLauchlin. I'd like that but I really should go to town today to.....” Muriel faltered.

Jim spoke up. “You should take the rental to town to show the Avis man. Make sure there's no problem.”

Muriel nodded agreement.

“That’s fine dear. If you change your mind I’ll be here.”

Muriel pulled her robe tighter around her nightdress. “When can you get our clothes Jim?”

Jim smirked. “Well you look so good in that nightdress I hate to go.”

Muriel’s smile didn’t match her eyes. “I’d like to get dressed Jim.”

Jim got up. “Sorry. I’ll head down right now.”

Muriel spoke as she headed up the stairs. “I’ll be in the shower.”

“How are things with you Jimmy?”

Jim turned to his mother as she spoke. “Good mum.” He waited a second.

“How are things here?”

“Oh you know. The same.”

“Mum? The same?”

His mother didn’t answer.

Jim took a breath. “Murph called me. That’s why we came down.”

His mother nodded.

“Is Dad having heart trouble?”

His mother’s hand trembled a little as she poured tea into a cup.

“Would you like some tea dear?”

“Mum?”

She sat at the table, then took a sip.

“Mum!”

She took another sip. “You’re father started having chest pains about six

months ago. He's so stubborn he wouldn't go to the doctor, but finally it got so bad he could barely breathe." She took a sip of tea.

"For God's sake mum. Tell me."

"Well, anyway, they did some tests and then sent him over to Halifax for more testing."

"And?"

His mother sighed. "They told him if he'd gone in earlier they could have put a balloon or somethin in his artery real easy." She took another sip. "But now they say they have to do open heart surgery because it's so blocked."

Jim looked out the window to his father, now leaning on the porch, staring across the bay. The blower was leaving and the sound of it faded, leaving the kitchen quiet. "So what happens next?"

"They told your father to make an appointment. But he says he'll just keep takin the nitro pills and everything will be fine."

"What?"

"He says no one is cuttin him open."

"But that's ridiculous. I know lots of people who have open heart surgery and live for years. It's hard, but they get over it and feel a hundred percent better in the end."

His mother nodded in agreement. "They tell him that he could keel over at anytime, or he could go on livin for years. But they say he'll get worse and worse and will have more and more trouble tryin to do things."

"What'd he say?"

“Says he’s retired anyway. Has no things to do anyway.”

Jim stared out the window at his father. “Want me to talk to him?”

His mother shrugged. “He’s stubborn.”

Jim stood up, then hesitated. “I’d better get those suitcases first.” He went to the hooks by the back door where his lightweight, fashionable coat hung, regarding it for a moment, knowing the wind across the bay would go right through it.

His mother spoke. “Your old parka’s in your room.”

Jim looked up the stairs, hesitating, wondering what mood Muriel was in. The letters popped into his thoughts—Kate and the Meath man, Sean dangling the bugger over the side of the *Leander*. He smiled as he made his way to his room. Muriel was lying on the bed, staring at the door when he opened it, arms crossed. “Did you get the suitcases?”

“Not yet. Just came up to get my parka. The wind across the bay would freeze my nuts off.”

“What?”

Jim chuckled. “Nothing.” His smile disappeared as he grabbed the parka and shucked it on. He shouldn’t tease her, he should talk to her. He thought a moment more, wanting to say, “Sorry I didn’t tell you about the letters and Coleen. I should have,” but he couldn’t make the words come. They were in his throat, just on the verge of spilling out, but he couldn’t do it. He blew a breath. “I’ll be back in a few.”

Muriel nodded, now staring at the ceiling. Jim made his way downstairs. For some reason the steps creaked on the way down. He had to pull hard to open the sticky back door, then give it a second pull when it got stuck partway, finally scraping open.

His father turned toward him as he pushed it shut. "Made it outta bed I see."

Jim stuffed his hands in the parka pockets. "I been up for a while."

His father turned back to the bay, nodding to the Four-Runner. It looked like a sinking ship with its rear angled into the air and nose in the snow. Jim looked at it a second with his father. "I'm just going to fetch the suitcases. Anyone around here to tow her out."

His father shrugged. "Anyone who comes by with a plow or tractor'll likely help you."

Jim zipped the jacket up further and looked at the sky. "Looks like a cold one."

His father looked up. "Yep."

Jim started walking down the long drive, looking out at the ice-white of Stanhope Bay against the red soil of cliffs. Trees, atop the cliffs looked barren, gnarled, old man limbs with knobby elbows reaching to the sky. It was still, unlikelike, like a painting. When he reached the Four-Runner he stood a second, staring at the drifts he had to go through to get to the driver-side door. Then he snorted. Imagine. Being squeamish of a little snow when his ancestors had lived like overcrowded rats in the bilge of a tiny boat, alone, fighting disease and dangers like the dirty man from Meath. But at least, he thought, in some respects they'd lived life on their terms, taking matters into their own hands when need be. He smiled as he thought about dangling the officious Reginald Smythe over the side of a boat. Then his smile faded as he tried to figure how you reconciled the two, how to live life on his terms and enjoy the benefits of the modern world—his home, his security, his beautiful wife. He shook his head as if trying to clear it, then waded into the snow for the suitcases. He'd turned around and

was stumbling up the side of the ditch when he heard a tractor coming up the road. He stopped to see who it was, reflecting that the sound of heavy machinery on a country road in the winter meant something more than the noise it represented in the city, at the very least a friendly wave, or possibly a bit of talk to dull the bite of the bay. He smiled as Murph rounded the corner on a tractor that looked like it belonged in an agricultural museum. It had a large plow on its front, rusted a dark red with remnants of yellow paint. Murph waved when he saw Jim, pulled up, bouncing a little in his seat as the machine shuddered to a stop. "Ya made it down did ya Jim?"

"I did at that. Quite the tractor."

Murph guffawed. "Lemme tell ya. I drug this old piece a shit from Nancy's garage. Our granddad owned it. It's at least fifty years old." He patted the wheel. "But the old girl still has it in her."

"I never knew you to be in the snow blowin business."

Murph eyed the Four-Runner. "Never knew you to be in the ditch-cleanin business."

Jim looked toward the SUV. "Yeah. Never did like those goddamned Canadian Tire reflectors. Thought I'd run one down."

Murph chuckled. "Well, let's hook a chain up to her. Haul her out."

A couple of minutes later Murph had the SUV sitting on the side of road. They walked around it, looking for dents and scrapes. "Looks ok Jimmy boy. Not a mark on er."

"Good deal. Thanks a lot Murph."

Murph cleared his throat. "No problem. Ten bucks oughta do."

“Oh shit. Sorry Murph.” He reached back for his wallet. “Shit. All I have is a twenty.” He thrust the bill forward. “Here take a twenty.”

“Thanks Jim.” Murph avoided Jim’s look. “Had a bad year with the lobster and the deep sea fishin. Tourists must of went somewhere with the lobster. Couldn’t find either.”

“Thought you worked in Alberta in the winters?”

Murph nodded agreement. “Yep. Thought I’d stay home and hang out with Jessie and Gail this year. Jessie’s not feelin so good.”

“Nothin serious I hope.”

“Serious enough, but we’ll handle it.”

Jim nodded as if he understood. “Nice to be with the family anyway I bet.” He winked. “Especially with Gail in the winter. Better than all those hairy-assed buggers in the oil patch.”

Murph slapped the wheel. “You got that right.”

Jim was thoughtful, noticing for the first time Murph looked tired.

Murph spoke up. “Well, better head down the road, see if anyone needs a plow. Seems like most are already set up for the winter but I’ll ride around for a bit anyway. Jim smiled and waved and watched Murph head down the road. He thought it strange Murph would be out looking for extra money plowing driveways. It wasn’t like him. Murph never had a lot of money, but always seemed to have enough to get what he wanted, a decent car, pay the bills on a farmhouse he’d inherited from his father, keep him and his family in food, occasionally a twelve-pack of beer. Murph didn’t have his own lobster license, but leased his boat to those who did, then operated a deep-sea

fishing business out of a shanty on the wharf. Winters, he took off to northern Alberta and sent money home to Gail and his daughter Jessie. Jim shrugged. Maybe Murph had had enough of Alberta. Maybe he was just out making a few bucks and socializing after the storm. It was a PEI storm byproduct. He knew by afternoon the road would be bustling, and in Charlottetown coffee shops would be full of talking men and women. People couldn't seem to enough of each other after a storm that had housebound them, even it was only a few hours. Still, it was odd for Murph to charge him for such a thing. Maybe he'd been gone too long, was just another rich tourist.

He put the suitcases back in the Four-Runner and drove to the house, wrestled with the door, stamped the snow off his boots and went up to Muriel. She was in the bathroom so he yelled to her that her clothes were in his room, then went downstairs to read the rest of the letters Coleen had sent earlier.

## Chapter 7

June 23/1847

*Dear James,*

*A dreadful thing has happened. One of the men of Meath that showed signs of the fever has died and twenty others are ill. There was nothing to do for him but watch him lose day by day. The first sign of his sickness was when he was above deck and collapsed. He was then carried below and put on his bunk. Over the next few days his feet swelled, then the swelling moved up his body and even into his face, hideously distorting it as one might imagine Shelly's Frankenstein. His face then broke out into yellow watery pimples which turned black and putrid. It was the black fever as we knew it Ireland.*

*Dear God James, what hope have we here of avoiding it? The poor man kept crying out for water, but the water has gone bad. It is so vile that only desperation can drive one to drink it. The few barrels that haven't been tainted are reserved for the crew and the captain. They tell us the water was mistakenly put in casks that previously contained wine and the leftover sediment contaminated it.*

*I don't want to die here James. I wish I'd stayed in Ireland. There is no priest aboard to administer last rites, nor doctor, nor even medicine save a little laudanum. And how does one fight a disease when we are packed like rats in a sewer? What is it about the Irish luck that to be given a glimmer of hope means only that our inevitable misfortune be that much more the tragedy. I fear again James, as I did in Ireland, that I will never see you.*

*Within an hour of the death of the Meath man he was bound in a cloth and sent overboard to be eaten by the sharks, but not before the miserable Ronan had a chance to take his boots. The despicable shite amidst the death still had time to irk me. He has grown bolder and now often brushes up against me, but then immediately apologises as if it were a mistake. I know by God that it is not. I spoke to Sean about it, but I could tell it seemed a small thing to him especially with the fever upon us.*

*What destiny is this James? To be torn from Ireland to be thrown to the fishes in a place unable to be marked, your loved ones unable to even visit your grave, and denied last rites so as to never rise to heaven to be reunited in the afterlife. What have we Irish done that we deserve such a disastrous end? I know not how to fight this disease James. I only know how to pray, but I've seen many pray that have died with purulent blisters on their faces. My hope abandons me.*

*Kathleen*

\*

*July 15/1847*

*Dear James,*

*I'm numb as I write this. I sat down to tell of all the horrors of this voyage and I realized two weeks had past since I last wrote. Death, in that time, has become commonplace. As my hand was poised to write the names of those destined to lie on the sea bottom to have their black and putrid flesh finally cleansed by nibbling fish, I tried to remember their faces, and realized I would likely be unable to recall each and every one. Selfish as it seems, I now wonder if that is to be my fate, to be wrapped in a soiled cloth, face deformed and hideous, only to be forgotten by even those who buried me.*

*Little Erin is by my side, her dirty face streaked with tears. Her brothers have been thrown overboard and her father now lies sick. She clung to him on his filthy bunk for the last two days. It is only now I have been able to bring her above deck for fresh air. She stares James. She just stares and stares. The ocean above and dying below.*

*Yesterday, the rotten Ronan leaned into me then let his hand linger on my breast. A chill ran through me so that it raised the hair on my neck. I slapped him and warned him. He said not to worry, my protectors would be gone soon enough, but he was too mean to die. He would find me later. I'm afraid James. I have to tend to Sean and Erin and now this filthy Ronan touching me.*

*We barely have water to wet our swollen tongues. There was so much hope yesterday when we sailed into the St. Lawrence. The fields were as green as St. Patrick's suit on the shorelines, dotted with clusters of whitewashed houses, a cozy curl of wood smoke coming from each. Occasionally we drifted by a spire and a cross. Catholic churches James! Finally we could receive communion, finally last rites could be administered to give those dying a place in heaven, finally earth to give them a proper grave, and finally medicine and doctors for those who were sick! And civilization! We hailed another ship at least every hour. Before this we had passed islands, but the captain said the navigation was too risky, that we would run aground on a shifted sandbar, or worse, sink on a reef. But when we arrived in the St. Lawrence, in the midst of all its beauty, the captain said we would anchor offshore, procure some water, ask for medicine and a doctor.*

*But then a horrid thing happened James. A vessel approached us, a government ship with a government agent aboard. He shouted across the water, asking if we had any sick. The captain replied yes, that we needed water, medical supplies, and a doctor. At this the crew and the government man raised kerchiefs to their mouths and noses, the government man taking his away only to shout these few words: "you are denied permission to go ashore and continue on to Montreal. You must report to Gross Isle immediately." The captain started to protest but the vessel hove to and sailed away. So here we are James, headed to Gross Isle, waiting to heave yet more bodies into the bonny St. Lawrence.*

*I am alive James, but will never be the same. This Canada is a place that offers no kindness to the bereaved or sick, only a place for them to be quarantined to die together, or to be touched by evil men while good men die. It shows us beauty and hope, then takes it away. This is our life James. What hope have we here?*

*Kathleen*

*July 22/1847*

*Dear Angus,*

*My search for Kathleen progresses. I arrived in Gross Isle today, a bustling port full of ships, so I thought I'd take the opportunity to write. This is the first chance I've had to post a letter. I had quite a time booking passage, but finally got a berth on board a German vessel, the "Ophelia," bound from Liverpool. It is mostly Germans on board and the voyage here has been nothing but one great Oktoberfest. They did nothing but drink beer and dance the entire way. If this is a measure of a ship's*

*travels we needn't worry about Kathleen. I have no time to write more because the harbor master has just given us a clean bill of health and we are on our way. It seems we barely anchored before it was time to leave. I've not had time to do much more than procure paper and pen to write this letter. I'm sure an hour has not passed since we weighed anchor. I will write from Montreal to let you know how the search goes. I have every confidence I will find Kathleen there, comfortable and well settled.*

*Yours Truly*

*James*

*July 26/1847*

*Dear James,*

*We have been Gross Isle harbor three days. After so long it seems I should be overjoyed to see the end of the journey so near. But I am not. There is so much death and fear of death aboard this ship that the future, unsure as it is, seems only a troubling thought, vague. It is in the moment that I, and all aboard this ship are living. Three more have fell sick since we last saw the government agent, and one woman has died. At least she has been kept aboard to be properly buried. Sean hangs on, and little Erin has not caught the fever yet thank God.*

*It is agonizing to sit aboard this ship and stare at others. There is a line of dinghies removing bodies from the ships and carrying them ashore to be buried, like ants carrying scraps of food to the earth. A doctor came aboard the day we arrived. It was then I felt again hopeful, but again, it seems that hopes are raised for the sole*

*purpose of making life more miserable. The doctor merely looked below decks, counted the sick, and told us to clean the hold. For two days after we received no word. Then a dinghy came and took our dead, to which we had added another. It was the mother of the boy who raised his fist as if to strike her in Limerick. He bawled and hugged so the mate had to pry him from her body. His tears have yet to stop. The woman likely thought to have the dirty Ronan take care of her son, but he just pushed the lad away and gave him a kick when the little fellow tried to bury his face in the his filthy waistcoat. Ronan headed to the hold leaving the boy on his own. I was so furious I headed after him. I caught him and swung him around by his arm. He raised his fist as if to hit me but I hit him first, right in the face with my fist the way I've seen the men do it. He jumped back, showing his cowardice, then started toward me, muttering that it was about time he saw what treasures I hid beneath my dress. I cannot believe it James, but I was not afraid. I was so fed up with death and squallor that this pig, this Ronan, seemed of little consequence. I grabbed a beam and swung my feet at him, catching him below his chin. He fell backward and I threw myself on top of him, clawing his face, then grabbed a bucket and started smashing his head. By the time two men pulled me off him he was unconscious. Now he looks toward the deck when I pass by as he did previously with Sean*

*When he heard of it, Sean smiled and said it'd be me defending him in this Canada, not the other way around. Then it happened James, right in the middle of his imagined Eden, he took a coughing fit and stopped breathing. We put him on his front and pounded his back but he would not breathe. There was nothing to be done but give him our tears. If there is a God, James, he is not aboard Irish vessels. The catholic*

*church can be damned. If it was ordained that I see you again religion would not keep us apart. I care nothing for it. We'll live and raise children as we see fit and the God that kills men such as Ewan while Ronan lives can be damned as well.*

*We sit here James, staring, making little talk, watching the dinghies carry the dead ashore. We have determined how to know if a ship is Irish. All the Irish vessels have clothes hanging over the side because their stay is so much longer than the others. Germans and French come and go within a matter of hours, music and laughter boom across the water. We sit and stare.*

*But the worst is this. I'm feeling weak and feverish James. I think this to be my last letter. The saddest thing about dying James, is knowing I shall never live the life with you I'd dreamed, and the saddest thing about dying in this manner James, is that the God I must go to is one that would allow this to happen.*

*Kathleen*

## Chapter 8

Jim put the letters down, thinking of death, of Kathleen dying because potatoes wouldn't grow, of Richard dying trying to catch a few fish. Was it destiny, luck? He could remember priests saying it was all part of God's master plan. He wondered. Part of God's master plan, or part of the church's master plan to win congregations, power and money by providing an answer to what happens after you die? Kathleen had been kept from James because two competing factions in the same fundamental religion disallowed them to partner. Why? He could think of only one answer. They were competing for souls who in turn gave them power and money. He wondered what Coleen made of the letters. He brought up MSN and saw she was on.

Just finished reading the letters.

**I was wondering where you got to**

What do you mean

**Well.... before you just sort of dropped offline**

Jim stared at the blinking cursor for a few seconds.

Sorry about that. My wife came down and I didn't want her to see your picture.

The cursor blinked again. Seconds went by.

**Is she the jealous type?**

Jim's fingers again hesitated. Muriel? The jealous type? He shook his head.

No. I don't know why I didn't want her to see. I haven't told her about you or the letters. I just instinctively shut down the screen when she showed up.

Again there were a few seconds before her reply.

**That makes it sound like I'm somehow coming between you. I hope that's not the case**

Jim hesitated again. What did he think? Why did he hide all this from Muriel? Did he really hope to replace Muriel with Coleen and the letters? No. But then, why?

You're not coming between us. I guess we just haven't been getting along that good lately.

**Whew. Good. I mean not good that you're not getting along, but good that it hasn't anything to do with me. So why did you hide it from her?**

I guess...well...I'm not sure....I guess the story of James and Kathleen was just mine. I didn't want to share it. It wasn't my job, my everyday life. It was something I took with me that was all my own everywhere I went. I guess maybe I've been a little obsessed with the whole thing.

**Hmmmm....forgive me James but I can't help but say...sounds like a sort of escape for you**

The cursor blinked, this time for more than a few seconds.

Maybe

**I only say it, because now that I think of it, maybe it was for me as well. I've also been having problems with my partner lately.**

Partner? I didn't know you had a partner

**I didn't mention it earlier either. Perhaps I was enjoying the thought that we were going to hook up. Enjoying the thought of being in a regular relationship.**

Regular?

**Yes. You see, I want children and she doesn't.**

She?

**Yes.**

The cursor blinked.

**Hello? R U still there?**

Yeah. Sorry. You just surprised me a bit. Talk about reality rearing its ugly head.

**Ugly? You think what we are is ugly?**

No No sorry. It's just an expression. I just meant that I was probably using you as an escape as well. Maybe a fantasy about how I'd fly to Scotland and spend the rest of my days researching Kathleen and James with you. But the reality is so different.

The cursor blinked.

It's really quite funny when you think of it..... 😊

**Yes...I suppose it is. I guess we're both kind of pathetic...** 😊

Ha ha.....I guess so. I think I have it tough. It must be complicated to have children when you're both the same sex.

**Yes it is. How about you and your wife? Do you have children?**

No.

**Do you want them or are you both career types?**

The cursor blinked.

No. I wouldn't say I was a career type anyway.

**Sorry. Didn't mean to pry.**

That's ok. I don't know why. But for some reason we don't speak of children.

**Ok. So if you're not a dad and not a career type what is your passion?**

I don't know.

The cursor blinked.

Tell me. What do you think became of James and Kathleen?

**I think Kathleen died. Of James I have no idea. But I do believe he must have ended up in your village.**

Sad they didn't reunite and start their family.

**Yes very. They seemed so much in love.**

Jim heard Muriel coming down the stairs.

I hear my wife coming. I think I'll go have a word with her.

Give her my regards.

**You know. I think this time I will.**

He heard Muriel come up behind him, then felt her staring at the screen, reading over his shoulder. He didn't shut it down. She spoke. "Talking to your girlfriend again?"

"Yeah. I guess so."

"Mind if I check *my* mail?"

"Sure. Go ahead." He got up from the chair, leaving the conversation between he and Coleen on the screen, then went outside to the porch where his father was still standing, looking out across the bay.

"Hey Dad."

His father grunted.

Jim looked out at the familiar view. "Still as pretty as ever. Makes me wish I could've stayed."

His father grunted again. "Nothin here but a hard life fishin."

"Is fishin so bad?"

"Just think of your brother."

"Yeah. I guess you're right."

They both looked back out over the bay.

"Still. If he hadn't gone out that day do you think he would have been happy here?"

His father shrugged. "Dunno. Guess he would have married Nancy or someone, had some kids. Guess he would have made out ok."

Jim shook his head. "It's too bad he went out that day."

"He was his own man."

Jim stared at his father. "He was only a kid."

His father turned to him. "What are you tryin to say?"

"Nothin."

"You got somethin to say spit it out."

"I'm just sayin he was a kid, not a man."

His father spat into the snow. "So you're sayin I should've stopped him."

"What?"

"You're sayin if he was a kid he wasn't responsible for himself. That I was responsible for him."

Jim clenched his jaw, determined not to say anymore. He stared out over the bay. "You could've stopped him, could've said no. He wouldn't have gone out."

"I wouldn't embarrass a man like that. Wouldn't have his daddy tell what he could or couldn't do."

"You'd rather he die for Christ's sake. Jesus, talk about being responsible."

"Responsible? What do you know of it? Have you ever raised kids. Don't talk to me about responsibility until you know what it's like to have some."

"I goddamned well know it's irresponsible not to try and live when there are people depending on you."

They stared at each other for a second then turned away, again contemplating the bay.

His father spoke first. "Who told you? Your mother?"

"Murph. He called the office."

His father spat again. "That why you came down?"

Jim nodded yes.

"That was him hauled you out of the ditch this mornin wasn't it?"

Jim nodded yes.

"Saw you give him some money."

"Yep."

"Didn't you think it was a little funny? Murph wantin some money for helpin ya."

"Yeah. I guess."

His father spat again. "He's havin some tough times."

“Listen Dad. I’m sorry about what I said earlier.”

“Jessie’s havin some problems.”

Jim looked back toward the bay. “Dad.....”

His father cut him off. “Look. I’ve nothin to say. It’s my goddamned life and I’ll do with it as I please.”

They stared silent for a moment. Jim spoke first. “Somethin wrong with Jessie?”

“Yeah. She’s got a tumour in her brain they say. Needs an operation. That’s why Murph won’t go out west this year and why he’s goin around trying to make some extra money.”

“For what?”

“Jessie needs an operation. They can’t do it here. Have to go to Halifax.”

“But won’t the government pay for it?”

His father nodded yes. “But they won’t pay for Murph and the wife to go over to be with her. He had to sell some land to pay the bills around the house and now he’s been tryin like hell to raise the money for tickets and such.”

“Doesn’t seem like a lot of money to go to Halifax for a while. Why not a fund raiser? I remember fund raisers around here all the time growin up. ”

“Supposed to be one last night but the storm took care of that. And as for the money, a trip to Halifax is a lot when you have none and can’t pay the bills to start with. He’s thinkin of sellin the homestead, but it’ll kill him. It’s been in his family forever. His daddy told him to keep for his grand kids.”

“Can’t he have the fund raiser again in a few days?”

“Maybe. But he don’t know that for sure. He has to be there in two days. It’s urgent you see, operation was scheduled quick, so they didn’t have much time to set anything up.”

“Jesus. I should go see him.”

“I saw him headed home a few minutes ago.”

They stared out over the bay. Jim pulled his parka closer, then peeked in through the kitchen window. He saw Muriel had left the computer. “Think I’ll go back inside.”

His father grunted. Halfway across the porch Jim stopped and looked back toward him. “You know Dad?”

His father didn’t turn, but instead continued to stare out over the bay.

Jim spoke to his back. “At least Murph’s fighting. He’s not giving up.”

He went back inside, looked in the kitchen for Muriel then went up to his old bedroom. She was there, staring at the ceiling. He stood quiet for a second before he spoke. “Did you read the conversation with Coleen?”

She nodded yes.

“Guess the joke’s on me huh?”

Muriel didn’t smile. “I’m going home the next flight I can get.”

“Do you want to talk?”

She turned toward him. “About what? About how an internet date replaces your wife? About how you need a fantasy to replace your horrible life?”

“It was just an escape.”

“An escape? From me? Yeah that’s a lot better.” She looked toward the ceiling.

“No no. An escape from.....” Jim hesitated.

“From what?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well why don’t you fucking figure it out.”

They were silent for another then Muriel spoke. “I’m going home. Maybe you should stay here.”

“Here?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Maybe here you can figure out what you fucking want.”

Jim’s shoulders slumped. “Muriel.....”

She turned toward him. “Do you have any idea what you want?”

Jim said nothing.

“I’m going home Jim. I’d rather you didn’t.”

“Muriel.....”

“What?”

“Listen. I have to go see Murph. His little girl’s needs an operation. Then I’ll come back and we can talk.”

Muriel said nothing.

## Chapter 9

Jim eased the Four-Runner down the icy slope to Murph's house. The house had a steep-pitched roof and was covered with green shingles and green gutters. There were two rectangular windows on either side of the front door. Jim knew very few people ever made it into that room, but instead entered the kitchen through the back and visited there. When Murph had get-togethers it was always a kitchen party. He drove around back then pounded on the solid wooden door, also painted green to match the shingles. Gail peeked through the kitchen window and he could hear a thump inside as someone made their way to the door. Murph tugged it open, then beamed at him.

"C'mon in, c'mon in."

Jim studied Murph, noting Murph never seemed to age. Not that he looked young, he just always looked the same. Long, curly, blonde hair didn't seem to fit burst blood vessels on his nose, or the stocky shoulders hanging over a respectable pot belly. Jim thought if he were to use one word to describe Murph, it would be rugged, but in an appealing way. He figured it was always the big grin Murph had for everyone. But when he looked closer, he could see a tiredness and an uncertainty he'd never before seen in Murph's eyes.

"Can I get you a cup of tea Jimmy?" Jim turned to Gail, a prototype of Smurf minus the pot belly. They'd met at a bootlegger in Tracadie. Gail had already had Jessie, their daughter. Jim remembered when he was home one Christmas, shortly after Murph and Gail and Jessie had moved in together, he had ribbed Murph about never leaving the Island. Murph had surprised him by not jabbing back. Instead, he had looked at Jim seriously. "Jimmy boy, I get to come home to a hot supper, cuddle and

play with Jessie and see that smile of hers.” His manner changed to joking for a second as he jabbed with an elbow. “Then there’s the nights Jimmy boy.”

But then he’d looked seriously at Jim again. “What the hell would I want to be anywhere else for?”

No one ever mentioned that there was something wrong with Jessie, that Down’s syndrome was a handicap. It would’ve been dangerous.

“I’d love a cup of tea. How’ve you been anyway Gail?”

“Good Jimmy. We’ve got some worries about Jessie but I’m sure it’ll all work out.”

“Dad was tellin me.”

Murph looked down to the floor, then reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. “Listen Jimmy. I never should’ve taken that twenty. Here, take it back.”

Jim held up his hands. “No Murph. You got me out of a jam. It was worth every penny.”

Gail spoke up. “Listen to him Murph. Shove that twenty right back in your wallet. My grandad always said ‘let’s not be sentimental when it comes to money.’ Lord knows we can use it.”

Jim looked around the house. “Where is Jessie anyway?”

Gail set his tea in front of him. Upstairs restin. She gets tired easy these days.”

He looked up at Gail. “When’s her operation?”

“She’s supposed to go to Halifax in two days.”

Jim took a sip of tea. “You know I wouldn’t mind helpin you out.”

Gail sat at the table and took his hand. “Would you Jimmy?”

“Of course. I could loan you a couple of thousand or so.”

Murph exploded. “Jesus Jimmy. It wouldn’t take that much. I’d not be able to pay you back until next summer, and then only if the tourists come.”

His shoulders slumped and he shook his head. “Sorry Jimmy. I appreciate the offer. And if we need to we’ll borrow a little. I don’t want to but I can’t let little Jessie go off to Halifax without us. But I haven’t given up yet. I may not raise a couple of thousand, but I’ll get us enough.” He looked to Gail. “I will. I promise”

Gail took his hand, still holding Jim’s with the other, and they sat joined that way a second, as if in a prayer. A thump on the door startled them. Gail peeked out the kitchen window. “Well if it isn’t Nancy. We’re a regular bus station today.”

Nancy didn’t wait for someone to come to the door, but burst into the room with a shout, her blonde hair hanging loose and bedraggled over her parka, her cheeks red with the fresh air of the bay. She didn’t announce herself or acknowledge Jim or even say hello, but instead blurted, “Murph, I know a way to get you some money.”

Murph raised his eyebrow. “Everyone’s givin me money today.”

“It was right in front of our noses the whole time Murph.”

“What was?”

Nancy sat across from Gail. “Remember us all shittin on that arshole Paul McCartney for flyin around here callin us barbaric for killin seals?”

Murph nodded.

Nancy raised her hands. “Well?”

“Well what?”

“Well I always thought of you as a barbarian.”

The kitchen was silent for a second.

“Jesus Nancy. I don’t know if I have the stomach to go around shootin and skinnin seals.” The kitchen went silent again. “Shit, I don’t know how much I’d raise out on the ice by myself anyway. I’d have to find them, shoot them, skin them, then get them to market.”

Nancy nodded to Gail. “Well if you bring em in Gail and I can take em to market. It’s worth a try.”

Murph tapped the table with his fingers. “Jesus. I don’t know.”

Gail stood, her chair scraping a harsh sound. “Well I do dammit. My little girl is not going to Halifax alone. I’ll choke the damned seals myself if I have to.”

They heard a small noise on the stair and saw Jessie standing there. She looked troubled. Jim never before remembered Jessie looking troubled. Jim always remembered Jessie with a wide-mouthed smile that exuded mirth and happiness. Murph told her it was the biggest best smile in the world. Jessie could often be heard repeating him. “I have the biggest bestest smile in the world. But now she stood peeking through the rail of the stair. “I don’t wanna go anywhere alone.”

Murph went to her and kneeled in front of her. “You won’t sweetie, you won’t. Mommy and Daddy won’t let you go anywhere without us.”

Murph’s shoulders straightened . He looked back at Nancy and Gail. “Alright you barbarians, let’s go huntin some seal.”

Jim, still sitting at the table, clasped his hands together tightly. “You got anyone to go out on the ice with you? You goin alone?”

Murph clenched his jaw. “Yep.”

Jim thought of Muriel waiting for him, of her returning to Ottawa without him, of his father giving up on life instead of fighting for it, of how the sea had taken Richard. His thought settled on the sea and Richard. He'd never felt the same way about the water after. He'd always had a slight fear when he went for a swim, like a child afraid the boogie man was going to get him, or that an undertow would drag him out to where he could no longer see land. He'd rarely helped out on the boats after Richard had died, and the few times he did he felt claustrophobic, like he was trapped on a tiny island.

He realized he was afraid.

The thought didn't hit like an epiphany, but came almost as if he'd been expecting it, accompanied by a helplessness to combat it. Was this how his father felt? Too afraid to act? Too afraid to overcome his fear even if it meant dying for it? Jesus, how did Kathleen ever cope with her fears aboard the deadly ship from Ireland? He supposed she'd had no choice, she had to go on, clinging to her dream of being with James. Maybe that's how she overcame their fear, with her dream. Maybe if he had a dream he could overcome his fear. His shoulders slumped. He had no dreams, only a bare fulfillment of what was expected of him. He looked up from his clenched hands and saw the three staring at him. He sat up straight. "I'll go with you Murph."

## Chapter10

Jim flexed his fingers inside the snowmobile gloves. Before this he hadn't thought any wind or amount of cold could penetrate the thick plastic. Now he was worried about his fingers. It was funny he thought, how abstract fear disappears when replaced with concrete ones, then disappears altogether with the need to finish what's been started.

They'd decided to skin the pelts on the ice. Jim didn't know much about it, but his father did. He looked at his father, squatting in a patch of red blood, the color glaring against the backdrop of white ice. When he arrived home from Murph's, Muriel had left, gone to the airport. His mother told him she'd left a message for him to call her cell phone. Jim had thought about it, standing in his parents' kitchen, staring at the old dial phone hanging on the wall. He even started to dial a couple of times, but couldn't think of what to say. How's it goin? Sorry I can't be there. I'm goin seal huntin? He kept thinking of her question: What did he want? If he looked into himself for the answer, he kept trying to let what was expected of him tell him, or he kept thinking of what he should do to suit Muriel, or his parents. He kept getting sidetracked, couldn't grip the answer to his question. The ideas tumbled around like the bingo balls in a drum on a TV show his mother and father watched on Saturday night. Did he love Muriel? Should he move back home for a while like she suggested? Try fishing like his father and Richard had done? Then he'd think of hardships, drawbacks and fear. Maybe he and Muriel could patch things up, have kids, he could make an honest attempt at his career. But then he'd wonder if Muriel would want that, and another idea would emerge and another. He didn't call.

He watched his father wipe a drip of snot from his red nose, then go back to skinning seals. Jesus he was tough. Both he and his mother had tried to talk him out of coming, saying it was too much with his bad heart. His father replied the same thing to each objection : “Not much use livin if you can’t do anythin. Sides, I know where there’s a herd of seals that’s just what Murph is lookin for.” He’d seen them from Stanhope bluff through binoculars he said.

Jim dumped the seal he was carrying, and stared at his father. He’d never thought to ask what the hell the old man was doing on a bluff with binoculars. He placed his hands against the small of his back and stretched. The pups only weighed about twenty pounds each, but got heavy after carrying one load after another the three-hundred feet to where his father figured was a good spot to skin them. The herd was located a little further off, mostly on floating ice floes. Every time he heard Murph shoot, he knew a seal pup was dead. Sometimes Murph got two or three before he returned. Sometimes he had to wait, hunched, shuddering in the cold, before Murph killed another.

They figured before they’d left they’d bag about forty. Murph only wanted to take twenty, said the buyers were payin \$60.00 a hide, said that would give them \$1200.00, said that would do. They’d found a housekeeping unit in Halifax for about sixty bucks a week, and with gas and Gail stretching a buck for meals they’d be ok. But Gail would have none of it. She said you bring back fifty pelts, said they didn’t know if their old car would need repairs or not. “Imagine,” she said, “getting stuck in Halifax with a sick little girl and no way to get home. “Sides,” she said, “the doctors said two weeks, but what if it turns out to be longer. Wouldn’t be the first time a doctor was

wrong.”

Murph didn't like it but could see she was right. He'd shot about thirty in the last five hours. They only had about five hours of daylight left. They'd have to be to shore before that, couldn't risk slipping into the ocean in the shifting ice. They'd be dead in minutes. He heard another boom across the ice, then another, then another. He turned and saw Murph running to catch the pups before they slipped or flipped back into the ocean. One was still alive, and he saw Murph raise a club to finish it off. The sound of the pup was unnerving, like a baby asking for mother's milk. It was followed by a sickening crunch.

Jim walked back across the ice to retrieve them. He saw Murph bend over suddenly, and quickened his pace, hoping Murph hadn't hurt himself. Then he slowed when he saw the bile from coming from Murph's mouth. He arrived just as Murph was straightening up and put his hand on his shoulder. “You ok Murph?”

Murph nodded yes. “Fuck., this shit makes me sick. Wish there was another way.”

“It's for Jessie Murph.”

“Don't I know it. It's the only thing keeps me goin.” He looked toward Jim's father. “How many we got?”

“About thirty.”

Murph spat. “Fuck, you can smell the blood. It's like clubbin babies.”

“Wanna quit? We got thirty.”

Murph shook his head no. “Nah. Gail's right.” He chuckled. “She always is.”

He gestured toward Jim's father with his rifle. “How's the old man doin?”

“Hell of a lot better than me. Christ, he’s tough.”

They watched a gust of wind blow freezing spray and snow across the ice toward the pile of seals and hit his father in the face. His father didn’t flinch, except to wipe the snow out of his eyes.

“Your dad’s a good man you know Jim. He was just raised different than us. None of this touchy feely shit. You work hard and you’re a man. You should talk to him sometime.” Murph lowered his voice. “Especially about Richard.”

Jim looked down and kicked the snow. “We don’t seem to see eye to eye on Richard.”

Murph spoke even lower. “It wasn’t his fault Jim. It was the sea.”

They both looked back to his father and saw him taking one of his pills. Jim looked to the sky. The clouds that seemed so inviting over the ocean in the summer, like cotton, now looked hard, frozen sheets of floating ice. “Maybe you’re right Murph.” He looked back at his father again, still squatting in a pile of seal carcasses, skins and blood. “Jesus. Wouldn’t Paul McCartney like to see him now?”

Murph spat again. “Fuck Paul McCartney. Don’t imagine he ever needed to raise money to take his kids to a hospital.”

Jim nodded agreement. “Don’t imagine.” He looked to the sky again. “Did you hear on the radio this mornin they’re flyin around. Gonna try to find some seal hunters and spray paint the pelts, ruin them?”

Murph looked to the sky. “Yes. Fuckers. Lucky we’re in closer to shore than most. They likely won’t think to look here.”

“As long as they don’t fly over. Must be able to see that red against the ice a

ways off.”

“Yep. Let’s get this shit done. Man, I can’t afford to lose these. This is Jessie’s shot to have her family with her.” He stopped as another struck him. “Jesus Jimmy.”

“What?”

“I don’t know what the hell I’d do if I those arseholes showed up here with their paint.”

Jim collected the three dead pups and started carrying them back toward his father. He dumped them, then squatted across from him. “How’s it going,” he hesitated a moment, “Dad.”

His father grunted. “Twenty more and we’ll be gone.”

“How’re you feelin?”

“Good.”

His father waited a moment. “Son.”

They sat that way a second, then burst out laughing. His father spoke first.

“Well, glad we got that bullshit out of the way.”

Jim chuckled. “Yeah.” He watched his father skin the seal for a moment. “You know Dad.”

His father looked up.

Jim looked him directly in the eyes. “I’d really like to talk about Richard sometime.”

His father put down the skinning knife. Jim could see something red and oozy twining around the blade. “I’d like that Jimmy. But...”

“But what?”

His father wiped the knife in the snow then started skinning again. "You have to let it go. There's no blame to be had when someone's died at sea. Just the death."

They squatted silently, then his father spoke again. "You know, sometimes there's some good comes from a death."

"Good?"

"Yep. Richard's death kept you from the sea. Gave you that easy Ottawa life."

Jim stared at him. "Are you being sarcastic?"

His father looked up, eyebrows raised. "Sarcastic?"

"Yeah. Don't you think were all a bunch of pansies or something up there."

His father looked back to the pup. "Is that what you think?"

Jim said nothing.

"Do you really think I'd wish this hard life on my sons? That I'd begrudge them the chance to live in a big city in a fancy house with a fancy wife? Jesus Jimmy. That's what men want for their sons. They want better for them."

Jim squatted, thinking how wrong he'd been. He began to regret all the Christmases he'd stayed away with one excuse or another, of all the trips home he'd postponed, of how he'd never really tried to talk to his father, to understand him, but instead regarded him as an antagonist, an opponent who was misguided and needed to be taught that the world wasn't what he thought. Now Jim realized that he really didn't know what his father thought. He opened his mouth to speak at the same time as they heard the thumping of helicopter blades.

They stood up looking to the sky as the machine got louder then circled them. The copter lowered slowly, raising water, snow, and blood-soaked ice. Jim and his

father were deafened.

A group jumped from the helicopter. They looked like aliens, faces covered with white ski masks, white snowmobile suits with tufts of some kind of fur lining the edges of their hoods. They gestured to the seals with their paint cans.

His father turned away from the copter, shouting. The snow blew into Jim's eyes. He couldn't see what his father was shouting at. A gust of wind blew the snow free, and he saw Murph with rifle raised, pointed at the helicopter finger squeezing the trigger.

Jim turned, shouting at the snowmobile suits to get the hell out of there. Then a bigger man get out of the chopper, dressed in a suit, holding a pistol. He aimed at Murph.

He saw his father clutch his chest and fall to his knees.

## Epilogue

The black of the mourners seemed that much blacker against the blinding sunlight reflecting off the snow. Muriel was beside him, holding his hand, wearing a black skirt that came to just above her knees. Jim noted other mourners glancing at her as the priest finished, then looked down to the casket where his father lay. He'd just realized days ago that his father was someone he wanted to know. Now it was too late. They'd never finish their conversation. He gripped Muriel's hand hard. She squeezed back. Turning, he put his arm around his mother, wishing he could do more.

Murph looked at him across the grave, holding Jessie's hand while Gail rubbed his back. His look hadn't changed since the wake. He'd hugged Jim, breaking down.

"Jesus Jimmy. I'm sorry. This whole bad business. I'm so sorry Jim."

Jim had pushed him back, looked him in the eye. "It's not your fault Murph."

Murph hung his head. "Jesus Jimmy. I'm so sorry."

"Just get Jessie to that doctor ok?"

Gail had come and led him away.

They lowered the body of his father. Jim felt him leaving. Helpless he watched, almost unable to believe he'd never talk to him again. There was so much to tell him now, but it was too late. Too late to tell him about James and Kathleen, too late to convince him to try surgery, too late for anything. Jim closed his eyes and again Muriel squeezed his hand. She had just landed in Ottawa when she found out. Jim had called her on her cell. She'd only been off the Island for a total of five hours, but despite the two back to back flights looked fresher than he. She still didn't know what exactly had happened on the ice. All she knew was that his father had died, and something about

guns or celebrities and that more had almost died or been injured. Jim still thought of the famous people as snowmobile suits, faceless, like malignant aliens with strange weapons come to take over, invade and conquer. He'd never once saw their faces on the ice.

He had seen Paul McCartney on CNN bemoaning the fate of the seals, saying they weren't used as food, only for fur coats, for the status quo, and that those in favor of the seal hunt didn't have all the facts. Larry King called the celebrities heroes for taking his already dead father to the hospital despite their distaste of the seal hunt.

What was the price of a little girl's life Jim thought. How could you even compare fifty dead seal pups to that? Jim knew that he'd done what he had to, the same way as James and Kathleen, just put one foot in front of the other, carrying the heavy carcasses to his father, dealing with the sea and the ice and the cold to survive. He guessed they weren't so different from Kathleen and James after all, that a better life and family was the goal. They threw the first bit of dirt on his father's casket and the group began to slowly disperse, reluctant to leave.

He held on to Muriel's hand as they walked back to the Four-Runner. They had to part to get in but once inside Muriel took his hand again. "You ok ?"

Jim nodded yes. "You know, out there on the ice we'd just started to talk."

Muriel said nothing as Jim drove.

"Just started. For the first time."

Muriel squeezed his hand.

Jim shook his head. "Man, it happens so quick."

They drove in silence before he spoke again. "But I do know two things for

certain.”

Muriel turned to him, waiting.

“The first is that I’m not wasting any more time. It’s about time I figured out what I want.”

Muriel tensed.

“I need to know what makes me happy. I used to be afraid, just like I was afraid of the sea. Maybe I still am, but I know I can do it, and I know it has to be done. You just keep on going no matter what comes up against you, one step at a time.”

They drove on in silence again. Muriel spoke first. “What’s the other?”

They pulled into his parent’s drive and Jim parked before he answered, swivelling in his seat to look at her. “The other is that I married you because I thought it was expected of me, but I must not have the luck of the Irish, because you stuck by me through all my crap, and I love you more than I know how to say.”

Muriel said nothing, staring straight ahead.

They sat that way awhile, neither knew how long, each lost in their own thoughts.

Muriel let go of his hand. “We’d better get inside Jim. Your mother’s already here.”

As they made their way to the house Jim took Muriel’s hand again. “I know it might be too late Muriel, but I hope not.”

Muriel said nothing.

Inside, his mother, Gail, Murph, Jessie and Nancy all sat around the kitchen table. Murph said nothing, his head hanging like a wet rag. Nancy and Gail were

looking at Jim's mother as she spoke. "God he was a stubborn man. It got him the end." Murph's head sagged further. His mother looked at him. "For God's sake Murph, stop blaming yourself."

"God I'm so sorry."

His mother sat staring for a second. "He was a proud man, too proud, and stubborn, but the way he died was the way he lived his life."

The table sat silent, waiting for her to finish. "Some good always seem to come of his pride and stubbornness, even though it made a lot of folks dislike him." She took a sip of tea. "And that's the way of it here and now. He died a hero. Pride and stubbornness making him go out onto the ice to save a little girl. I'm sure he's as proud as can be right now, although he'd be too stubborn to show it to Jesus Christ himself."

She took another sip, thinking. "He wasn't big on religion anyway. Said he had no use for somethin that kept people apart. We couldn't get married because he was Protestant and I was Catholic. No way I'd marry him until he converted. I knew my Dad and Mom would never speak to me again."

Gail put her hand on Murphy's shoulder. They'd also never been married because her parents would disown her for marrying a Protestant. Murph had offered to convert, but they'd said it didn't mean anything to do it just to get married, that it had to come from the heart. Murph had a heart, but didn't have the kind of heart to pretend he loved the Catholic church.

His mother's hand trembled as she picked up the tea cup. "Didn't figure he'd be giving up the same thing on his side." She dabbed her eyes with a tissue. "His father and mother never spoke to him again up until the day they died and left him this

house.”

“What?”

She turned to Jim as he spoke. “You told me Dad was illegitimate, that he didn’t know who his father was.”

“I know.’ She took his hand. “That’s the way he wanted it Jimmy. I don’t know if he was ashamed of himself, or them, or me, or all of us, or he just didn’t want you to know all the dirt of it.” She took another sip. “I really believe he didn’t want you to know your grandparents wouldn’t acknowledge you over something he considered so small.”

“But how could I live here all those years without someone telling me?”

His mother shrugged. “Just the way it is around here.”

They sat in silence before Jim spoke. “You know it’s funny mum.”

“Funny?”

“Yeah. This woman in Scotland found some letters between a James and Kathleen MacLauchlin that came to Canada. She, er we, think it’s the same man.”

His mother leaned in close, all of a sudden intense, interested. “Really?”

“Yeah, they might have been Dad’s great- great grandfather.”

“Was this James from Aberdeen?”

“Yes. Mum? You know of him?”

His mother sipped her tea. “Yes, if it’s the same man, he’s buried in the graveyard behind St. Theresa’s.”

“Not St. Anne’s?”

“No, that’s another James MacLauchlin.”

“Really?”

“Yes the James in St. Theresa’s is buried beside his wife, Kathleen.”

“Kathleen? Mum, what else do you know?”

“Not much. Your father always wondered about them, about how they came together. He’d found a letter written by Kathleen to someone named Angus in Ireland. He’d always wondered who Angus was, and why the Scots would be writing to a Catholic in Ireland.”

“A letter?”

“Yes dear.”

“Do you have it?”

“Yes I do. It’s with your father’s things. He read it often over the years.”

“Where mum? I’ll go get it.”

“No dear. I’ll get it. It’s in our room.” She got up and walked to the stairs, then stopped, hesitating, looking up.

Muriel spoke. “Do you want me to go with you Mrs. Maclauchlin?”

His mother looked at her. “Would you dear?”

His mother made her way up the staircase, clasping Muriel’s hand.

\*

*July 5/1848*

*Dear Angus,*

*I pray this letter finds you and moder well. So much has happened since*

*I last wrote. I fell ill with the fever in Gross Isle, and was laying in a dirty room with a hundred others moaning my pain. There was no paper and pen to be had in that death room, only the smell of feces and death. I didn't know until then that death had a smell. Those that were able scrawled messages on the walls with knives or sticks or sometimes blood to leave messages for their families and loved ones. I had made up my mind to leave a letter for James when I awoke to find him sitting, staring down at me. I was sure it was an hallucination, and fell back into my fever. But the next I awoke I was in a clean room and James was wiping my brow with a cool cloth. As soon as he saw my opened eyes he grabbed and hugged so hard as to succeed in killing me where the fever had failed. He'd taken me out of the hospital, apparently with no little fracas, and found a small empty house. He cleaned it and nurtured me back to life. We made our way to gentle Prince Edward Island, not wanting any more toil or hardship than we need bear. And it is a wonderful place Angus, not so gentle in the winters, but glorious in the summer.*

*It is with great news I now write to you Angus. James has bought a farmhouse in a little seaside village called Stanhope, and I am with child. Although life is here is frugal and the winters hard and dangerous, fish and crops are abundant and we are comfortable in our home, something I appreciate so much more after our hardship in Ireland. The voyage is not so bad Angus, if you stay away from the Irish ships. We can scrimp and save on this end to help you. I dearly wish you and moder would come to live with us.*

*I must go now Angus. James has come in from checking our first potato crop, and is bellowing like some kind of demented bull for a coming home kiss.*

*Yours Truly,*

*Kathleen*

Jim put the letter down and stared at his mother. "You know what mum?"

His mother shook her head no.

"Katherine was an Irish Catholic and James was a Scottish Presbyterian, the opposite of you and Dad."

She sat her teacup down. "No." She sat a second longer. "Imagine." She stared a moment. "I bet your father's smiling in his grave right now. I think he always wondered if he had the stuff of his ancestors."

"Were there any more letters mum?"

"No, sorry Jimmy."

Jim looked at Muriel. "Do you mind if I use your computer mum. I'd like to send this to Coleen."

Muriel said nothing as his mother nodded. Murph and Gail got up to leave. "We have to get going Mrs. MacLauchlin, we're leaving for Halifax tomorrow."

"Yes of course you two. Come here and give me a kiss Jessie." Jim stroked Jessie's hair while his mother hugged her and kissed her. Muriel watched closely.

\*

**So that's it then**

I guess so

**I'm so glad you found that last letter. It ties things up so neatly**

yeah.....too bad things weren't so neat in our lives....how's the baby

business going

**God. I don't know. How about you and your wife? Are things any better?**

The cursor blinked while Jim thought.

It needs some work, but I do know I love her and I'm going to try.

**That's a start. Who knows? Maybe you'll be the one telling me you're having a baby...**

A hand startled him, reaching over his shoulder. He hadn't heard Muriel come up behind him. She looked at him while the cursor blinked. Then she leaned over and typed one word:

Maybe.

## Afterword

### Statement of Poetics

#### *Undertow* Under Scrutiny

The novelette, *Undertow*, came together as a result of two diverse interests: a desire to depict Prince Edward Island in a different light than what I would call the “little red-haired girl playing in the soft summer breeze on an idyllic beach,” by writing a contemporary story, and to experiment with historical fiction, one of my preferred genres. Other Atlantic provinces such as Nova Scotia, along with its Island region Cape Breton, and Newfoundland, have become “sexy” places due to literature reflecting emotion, an endearing idiom, and courage in the face of hardship, whether it be economic difficulty or harsh living conditions. At any rate, as the novel progressed the two notions gelled quite nicely. As with any geographic area, history plays an important part in forming the cultural and societal norms, and I believe, especially in rural P.E.I. Thus the two genres actually complemented one another. Also, I had not managed to find any historical fiction related to the crossing from Ireland to Gross Isle during the potato famine of 1847, and especially not one that relates the crossing to eventual settlement on Prince Edward Island. The intent, then, was to create a unique piece of work based on subject material and setting, as opposed to any stylistic experimentations in poesy or prose, although I found the notion of a chat line in the piece worked quite nicely. I have never read a story with a plot line developed through an internet conversation, although I suspect it has been done. The interesting element concerning the concept of a chat line in a realist novel is that the “real” can take on a surreal aspect. In my experience internet conversations between strangers are often

more frank, not only because of the emotional distance, but because of the physical distance. In other words, it is much easier to be frank to a “real” person through an impersonal medium. At any rate, I will discuss here various elements of the work, including style, themes presented, research accomplished, and methodologies.

To begin this discussion, I will start with the genesis of the idea for the novelette that was developed over the last two years. In a previous creative writing seminar I wrote a sixty page work about a fisherman from P.E.I. who ended up embroiled with the biker culture in Calgary. This novel incorporated one of my major life experiences, involvement with biker “gangs,” with a personal fascination for the men and women who braved the sea for a living. The next work that contributed to the idea for the Masters creative thesis was a somewhat autobiographical fiction that I produced for my undergraduate honour’s creative thesis, and dealt specifically with biker culture as it existed on P.E.I., again loosely based on my own experiences. I wanted to challenge myself further this time by projecting myself into a situation that would require research and imagination as opposed to a reliance on my own life experience, and I had also become discontent with limiting my writing to depicting realism based on events from my own life. Also, up to this point, I had explored neither of the two genres I often read for pure cathartic pleasure: horror fiction and historical fiction. The reason I had not previously written in these genres was twofold: I did not believe that horror or historical fiction, at least in the style of Dianna Gabaldon and others, were considered “literature,” as in canonical; and also, I simply believed that both had been “done to death” before.

The idea then struck that perhaps a combination of genres, especially with an

Atlantic-Canadian backdrop, would allow me to combine my previously practised style, what I refer to as Atlantic Canadian Realist Fiction, with Historical Fiction. The Irish diaspora due to the potato famine immediately sprung to mind as it is one of the most dramatic historical influences to affect P.E.I.. At this point I knew little of the history of the famine, only that the Irish had to move because the potato crop failed. This lack of knowledge was in spite of growing up on P.E.I. where I knew many robust Irish men and women who had strong ties to Ireland and often spoke of their homeland while sipping a cup of Irish whiskey. I had no understanding, though, of the enormity of the tragedy until I began my research. The problem of plot, however, quickly posed itself. That is, the problem of how to incorporate the two genres into a single coherent plot posed itself. Dianna Gabaldon accomplishes this by being snatched backward in time through Stonehenge. I didn't think this would work well with my realist emphasis. Instead, I drew on genealogy research that I had recently accomplished. Indeed, the idea of an illegitimate ancestor creating an unresolvable gap in a family tree arrived as a result of my own genealogical inquiries. An illegitimate grandfather had made my family's tree near impossible to trace, until I found army records that listed my grandfather's next of kin, an uncle. The story goes that my grandfather had not known who his next of kin was until he enlisted for the Second World War. It was the searching of these historical documents that prompted the idea of letters as a vehicle to develop the historical fiction. I had experienced the excitement at finding an "ancestry" where none before had existed, and imagination led to an epiphany of the excitement that finding letters written by previously heretofore unknown forefathers would instill, especially from an individual who was restless with

his lot in life. Further to this, I discussed my idea with Dr. Jirgens, who recommended A.S. Byatt's *Possession* as an example of a story using the same stylistic premise I proposed. Jim began to materialize.

The character Jim, beside being a vehicle for the historical fiction portion, was also intended to be at the centre of the contemporary story. My academic interest, Post-colonial Literature, is reflected in the novelette. In the most basic sense, post-colonial literature speaks to the consequences a previous colonization has on current-day descendants. But I also wanted to make a more subtle point here. Atlantic Islanders often feel obligated to move to the "mainland" to be economically successful, which I believe in our contemporary society is often equated with happiness. This "forcing" away from the Island, I hypothesize, results in another diaspora, or perhaps a continuation of the same diaspora, that in turn results in the same debilitating feelings of not belonging as the original Irish diaspora. This is Jim's major role: to present the listlessness and restlessness that arise from being artificially displaced from a homeland, no matter the cause. Another one of Jim's jobs in the piece was to present a contrast with his wife Muriel on the matter of "consumptionism" and a consumptionist society. Muriel takes obvious pleasure in her "things," the representation of her success, and rising in the pecking order the economic elite—the scene with the banker takes on an almost sexual undertone. Jim's view is considerably different. He wants and tries to "buy" into the consumptionist attitudes, but recognizes the failure of his "rich" furniture to calm him, to give him satisfaction. However, I want to stress that there is no intent here to moralize, to state which attitude or value system is right or wrong, but instead only an attempt to depict alternate lifestyles at

odds with alternate value systems to allow the reader to create an affinity with the character with whom he or she identifies, and perhaps ponder on the pros and cons of a consumptionist society.

These alternate lifestyles and value systems are also depicted in the difference between office-speak and P.E.I. vernacular. The political correctness pervading the bureaucracy, and other such “professional” occupations, is bawdily reversed when Nancy comments on her “arse.” I hoped to evoke a laugh in this part which in turn I hope would evoke thoughts on the humorlessness that the politically correct aspect of language inserts into our lives. Also, I hypothesize, political correctness is often an imposition that may be in part responsible for the chasm that separates the two groups in the piece, the rural and metropolitan, and is perhaps symptomatic of the chasms that exist between the regions of Canada: the West, the Centre, and the East as varying value systems struggle with one another over what is indeed proper or improper. Murph plays a part here. He is fulfilled with his wife, Gail, who is the antithesis of the current media image of “a beautiful wife,” that is one who closely resembles a Chatelaine model and is often a successful career woman. Money is not a priority for Murph, and if his marital relationship is compared to Jim’s, he seems much more at peace. However, Murph is unable to properly care for his child when the need arises. He cannot simultaneously be with Jessie and earn the cash to accompany her to Halifax. He either has to leave her sickbed to seek work elsewhere, or find some other way to raise the money.

If this piece were to be developed to a full length novel, that is not constrained by page count, I would create a section created to depict the sense of community in

P.E.I.'s rural regions. For example, a native Islander would immediately question the veracity of the story if no benefit dance was forthcoming to aid Jessie. Benefit dances and other events are often held on P.E.I. to raise money for people in predicaments such as Murph's. To get around this, I created a situation where the diagnosis compelled that surgery be performed quickly. A subsequent storm cancelled the benefit dance. However, this benefit dance/storm sequence could have been expanded with the same end result to demonstrate a sense of community that exists in rural areas, and would have contrasted nicely with Jim's desire to keep his father's illness from the office.

I did, however, manage to address two current political issues in which I have a keen interest: the seal hunt, and medical care on P.E.I.. In the case of the seal hunt my aim was to humanize the hunters, and to dehumanize the protectors. Although I probably stand on the same low moral ground of those who unthinkingly criticise men and women who hunt seals, I hope the point was made that at least on a local-regional level, the "hunters" are "real" people with "real" emotion" and "real" economic need. My question is thus posed: are the protectors "real?" The second item, medicare, relates to the debate on whether a two-tier medicare system should be adopted in Canada. My belief is that because health care is the bailiwick of the provinces, that a two-tier system already exists, and that "have-not" provinces like P.E.I. are on the bottom rung. Just because basic services are provided does not account for provincial differences in hospital wait times, doctorless families, lack of specialized services, and the hardships families must often bear in the face of these inequities. However, I had to be cautious. I had to take care to present the issues I obviously feel strongly about

without seeming didactic. That is, I wanted to couch my messages in a human story to avoid a “lecturing” effect, something I believe is annoying in a work of fiction, and unfortunately, because I have a tendency to be didactic over certain issues, something I often have to rewrite and rewrite.

However, this brings me to the historical portion of the novel, and my methodology to incorporate the historical fiction to the contemporary fiction. Jim’s zealous pursuit of the letters and his genealogy in the absence of a satisfying career and home life, which in turn may have been caused by his irresolute past and irresolute relationship with his representative of the past, his father, was the technique used to integrate the two plot lines. Contemporary issues I hope the historical portion raises include the previously discussed “post-colonial” displacement, as well as how values brought from the “old country” are still prevalent in rural P.E.I. The rift in religion is an excellent example. It is still common in rural P.E.I. (that is not to say that it is uncommon in metropolitan areas, but perhaps less recognizable) to forbid a Catholic to marry a Protestant and vice versa. The religious rift originally brought from Europe is not only still very much alive, but also allowed me to create a situation to evoke thought on organized religion’s adherence to traditional values, or perhaps on values in general, and the consequences that may occur through an adherence to such values.

Having said this, the main purpose of the historical portion, however, was to depict an ocean voyage of the type those in the Irish diaspora would have experienced, and further, the depiction was to be on the main one thing—entertaining. I wanted to compel readers to think about what those on such a voyage must have experienced. I had little historical reference to begin this task, and so related inquiries constituted the

bulk of the research that had to be accomplished for the project. I began by poking around the internet, and I found relevant references that spoke of Irish public schooling and education systems, which was no small relief as I was not sure if it was plausible that Kathleen be able to write. I also visited Gross Isle and saw writing on the walls of the Irish men and women who were detained there. However, the problem of describing the sea voyage remained. It was crucial to have some frame of reference from which to begin the story. I finally found this at the University of Western Ontario library in the form of Robert Whyte's diary. The assertion of the writer of the diary is that it he was a passenger aboard a ship carrying Irish immigrants during the years of the potato famine. Robert Whyte himself was, supposedly, an upper class passenger not confined to the hold with his poorer co-passengers. I say supposedly, because I don't believe the authenticity of the diary has been verified. It was, however, the frame of reference from which the passage from Ireland to Canada was written. I superimposed the emotion of the passengers onto many of the details of the trip taken from the diary. I had to take certain liberties in some of the description. For instance, Mr. Whyte claims to have never been below deck. I also thought it necessary to create a fictive suspense in the form of the Meath man stalking Kathleen to sustain interest, that is to ensure, as one contemporary put it, that it was not just a historical presentation substituting "she" for "the." So, as one might read in an history book, "the ships contained enough provisions for the voyage," I had to make sure I was not just delivering this information by saying, "she saw enough provisions for the voyage." It was important Kathleen be "real," or, I believe, the entire historical fiction would have taken on a non-fictional aspect.

Insofar as the integration of the two genres is concerned, an evolution of sorts occurred. The evolution began with two alternating separate stories consisting of a chapter of the contemporary story, a chapter of the historical, the contemporary, and so on. One reason for this approach was to contrast the past with the present by comparing similar events to differing experiences. Dr. Jirgens suggested I try to create a more poetic effect by avoiding chapters and transitioning between the two stories in more seamlessly. I tried this, and I am satisfied with it, but I do believe more work can be done here. Jim and Muriel's trip to P.E.I. for instance, and the modern "hardships" they underwent was a kind of tongue-in-cheek comparison of Kathleen's life-and-death voyage. Jim and Muriel's contemporary marital stress, while real enough, hardly seems to compare to the tragedy of the separation of James and Kathleen because of religious differences and the Irish potato famine. There was an intent here, however, to layer comparisons. That is to layer the 1847 hardships, the rural P.E.I. hardships, and the, what I will term metropolitan hardships. I hoped to create the nostalgia a historical fiction often does—Jim himself experiences nostalgia—but I also wanted a reality check to provoke thought on modern metropolitan and rural life: although it could be considered romantic to be sailing the sea in search of a lover in 1847, death and discomfort was very real; although often considered romantic to live in a rural area by the sea, economic hardship is often very real and can have tragic consequences; although a seemingly idyllic life is to be economically successful and comfortable in luxurious surroundings, Jim and Muriel's distress is very real, maybe due to the lack of any real emotional connection in the acquisition of "things," and perhaps, I could conjecture, a loss of community and family.

At any rate, all of the themes presented have at least two common characteristics: two or more sides of a story are presented, I hope, with an objective voice; and all themes emerged as the story was developed. In other words, the themes were not developed and then a story written around them, but instead the themes developed around the story. The only issue I clearly wanted to address was the seal hunt, but at the time I had no idea the climax of the story would revolve around the scene on the ice.

This leads me to my beliefs concerning creative writing. Indeed my entire approach to creative writing is not to invent or play with stylistic conventions, “to do” something better than another, or to dazzle with any deep intellectual philosophical insights. I certainly have nothing against these endeavours. On the contrary I admire those artists who do so, but in my case I simply want to entertain by telling a story. I find storytelling is something that comes natural. I like nothing better than to entertain a room full of people at a pub or whatever venue may be available by telling stories. Of course, as with any seemingly simple past time, there are certain stylistic conventions that must be followed, or the audience will lose interest. For example the story must be original, there must be a certain suspense that drags a reader along, and a measure of unexpected events must be combined with expected outcomes to create a catharsis. The bottom line of entertaining through writing, at least for me, is that a reader should finish a book feeling they have been inside another world, and although many would disagree, I still believe the traditional fictional catharsis to be integral to a satisfying read. Just before writing this essay, I received what I believe the highest compliment possible from a reader staying at my cottages in Stanhope P.E.I., although it was not

intended as such. That is, it was neither intended to be a compliment nor a critique. My mother being proud of her son, God bless her, shopped my manuscript, unbeknownst to me, around to my guests. One particular reader pestered me with questions: Is the James in the novel the one who settled this entire area? Where could I find the graves mentioned in the manuscript? Is this your family or someone else's? In other words, she thought it was real. Tim O'Brien, an author I consider brilliant, once said that he remains noncommittal when a reader asks him if events in his prose concerning the Vietnam war are real, but at the same time he considers it the highest compliment he can be paid. I agree, and if my tenets about creative writing could be summed up in a sentence it would be as Tim O'Brien says.

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### VITA AUCTORIS

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