

Matinicus

Darcy Scott

*"Please send by bearer, the following articles. . .
Four pounds of salt and a small cask of whiskey;
four pounds of lard and a large jug of whiskey; three
stout fishing lines and a quarter hundred weight of biscuit;
the same weight of Cheshire cheese and two large flasks
of whiskey; one paper of limerick hooks and a gallon of
whiskey in any old vessel you don't use; also one pound
of white sugar and a small jug of whiskey.*

*"P.S. As we shall be gone for several days and as we may
get wet fishing, my doctor, who just stepped in, suggests
that we had better take along a little whiskey. Please send
it over and enter it on your books along with the items
above."*

**Early provisioning request
Matinicus Island, Maine**

*God has given me mine eyes
I will see life only once
I mean to make the most of my chance*

Inscription, Matinicus gravestone

Prologue

“What the hell, Tiff? Ain’t like you never done it before.”

Just like him to whine like some baby—too lazy to get up and come over, ask her nice. Well, screw him. Tiffany was fifteen now; she didn’t need Ivan-fucking-Ames to make up her mind for her.

She stood at the window, the heat like a slap—hip slung against the grimy glass as she gnawed a thumbnail and watched Kathy’s dad rocking in his skiff thirty feet below and across the way. A hand on the ladder as he tossed the bag of lobsters up to Gail on the wharf, her stupid green apron that said *Kiss the Cook* fluttering in the breeze. Gail was so lame. Like anybody round here would pay for lobster salad at some restaurant when they could just make some up from their own catch if they wanted. Yachties, maybe; but there weren’t hardly any right now. Wind was wrong.

“What’s the matter—you on the rag or somethin?”

Out in the harbor *Ka-Ching* was in, Cash swinging crateful after crateful over the gunwale—the red staysail with its crossed rifles and that lame Fu Manchu he’d painted on the Jolly Roger holding the boat against the float. Most of the guys sold their catch to Island Lobster right here in

the harbor; but he sold over in Rockland twice a week so he could pick up that other crop, the one half of them put in their veins every night. Ivan ever started that shit, they'd be done for good. She'd told him so a hundred times.

Tiffany pried the hair from her sticky neck, fanned herself with it which didn't do anything but stir up more dust, like there wasn't enough up here already. Sweltering. That's what you called heat like this.

"Take them clothes off, you won't be so hot," Ivan suggested from the mattress.

She shot him a look—glared at that dumb stringy beard, those filthy orange flip-flops, the smelly old futon somebody'd dragged in, and hated him. Not an hour ago she'd liked him good enough to come up here. No use tryin to figure it.

"Cash'll be bullshit you didn't show this morning," Tiffany said, turning back to the window. "Find himself another kid over to the Sands to go stern with him like he said. Somebody who ain't piss-in-his-pants scared of John and who don't start pukin soon as the boat clears Indian Ledge."

Ivan glared. "Fuck you. Just cause he's screwin Cheryl don't mean he owns me. Man's gotta do what a man's gotta do. C'mon," he moaned. "What's the big deal?"

And just why they had to do it in the loft above the old store was beyond her anyway. Worse than doing it in his truck which was just as gross, but at least that had windows you could roll down and a floor you weren't gonna fall through. She hated this place—the nails poking through the roof always catching her hair, the creaky floorboards—the whole history of the island pressing down on her in the smell of oily rags and about a thousand years of fish guts, other things she didn't even want to think about. The heat and the smell about made her want to puke. Plus it was pure dangerous up here; twice she'd stepped through a rotten board, but Ivan caught her by the arm and dragged her back up. Place should just be torn down. Wasn't a Young left on-island who'd claim it as his own.

Ivan smiled that gooey smile, the one he used when he tried to make up for stuff when all he really wanted was sex. Guys were just pricks. She giggled at the joke.

"What—this is funny now? I'm hurtin here; look at this huge fuckin thing." He paused. "Okay, a BJ, then, you gonna be so pissy about it."

She heard it, then, the four o'clock—circling like some monster mosquito heading for the airstrip. Three minutes out, maybe.

"Plane's in," she told him, heading for the ladder. If she didn't get out of here soon, she really would puke. "Gail's gonna skin me I don't get up there. Got some beer coming in."

“Fuck, Tiffany.” Like he couldn’t believe she’d do this to him. “I mean it; get back here!”

But she was halfway down the ladder by then, grinning hard as her shoulder punched the door and she burst through to the blazing sun.

ONE

1829

Matinicus, Friday 10 July

The light fades as I take up my pen, this book my only refuge against loneliness and the troubling omens of a strange new life. These past hours the most unsettling of all since my coming to the island, delivered up as wife to old man Isaac. A time of fire and death, and the arrival of a stranger whose presence in this house leaves me not a little afraid.

A chill fog having settled with the southwest breeze this noon, it was the smoke and not the sight of the stricken ship that first spoke of danger. My first thought for the salt hay at the cove grown so close to harvest. Why, I wondered, had not the church bell been rung as is the custom here in case of fire? To be sure, such a thing might finish us all.

I saw it then, a glow to the west, the light shifting and hovering as if aloft which as all know means a ship afire. One coming down full upon us.

Unseen feet pounded past me, setting the sheep to a fearful bleating as men shouted and made for the western cove and the place they call the Rumguzzle. So named for the launching of boats for rescue and salvage, much of it in the way of spirituous liquors. Grabbing my shawl from its hook,

I called to Alice to pull the chowder from the fire, to turn the beans timely and took myself there as well.

O, the eerie scene! The boys and few men not gone to the Banks for the summer fishing, Weston Philbrick, Squire Young and old Tyrus Wivell among them, and Tyrus himself half-addled even when not in rum, all of them, young and old, silent now. Helpless and expectant amid the shale and dogweed of the cove, watching that awful, sulfurous glow until its direction and thus their action might be determined. The children like puppies among them, happily freed from Weston's schoolroom for the event, making a game of stamping out the cinders raining down upon us all.

That the ship had no steerage was certain; no one experienced as one must be to captain such a vessel would dare travel a fog-choked cut between islands as known for wrecks as is Matinicus. And though we could not as yet make her size, her rigging and sails were clearly ablaze.

Only moments later there came to us such a horrible creaking and grinding as ever I've heard, the ship doomed for certain now, fetched up hard as she was on the rocky ledges ringing this cursed place. And with an unholy holler that chilled my bones, the boys jumped to the rowing boats and made to pull off through the fog. The Crie brothers, Josh Ames, Daniel Norton and the like—the hope of plunder in their black little hearts. Isaac's own Seth among them, though he be but five years.

T' would serve his father right if he was drowned in this effort. For husband Isaac is at sea, if still living; the ship from which he'll claim a share loaded with as much rum as bait, it is sure. That he too should be lost, I can only hope, for I might then be returned across the bay to Vinalhaven and happily so. He was a month and a week first widowed and we but days married when he left for the fishing, with naught but me to care for the unruly brood left him by his dead Patience. She who takes her final rest buried, it is said, with the babe that took her off rather than see itself born.

I was pulled from these thoughts by the sight of Weston on the surf-pounded shore below me. The color full upon his face, sleeves rolled high from his exertion, adding his cries to those of the laughing gulls wheeling unseen above us as he called to the young ones now heading off.

Look to survivors, lads, yells he; and leave off the salvaging for such time as the fog is not so thick.

Charged as he is with schooling such wild youth as grow here and with so many of their fathers gone now to the fishing, Weston tasks himself with their safety as well. Doubtless he feels there are few enough left as is; no need to lose yet more over such as this.

I had a thought of the chowder then, knowing Alice in her laziness would not think to give a stir to the pot. Mary, though she be but three years, has more wits about her than that one. Supper would surely burn; and there would be nothing but bread and the rest of the milking for the

seven of us tonight, and Weston as schoolmaster, boarding with us for the term, certainly deserving of more.

Pulling my shawl about me and turning for home, I was stopped by Weston's sudden shout, a strong foreboding taking me as I drew my head round. Wading urgently through the surf, he struggled toward something so dark and mammoth it seemed the devil himself coming among us. A seaman I realized, half washing, half crawling from the waves. And as Weston pulled him to shore, old Wivell with his useless, rum-soaked brain latching to the other arm in like errand, I spied another of the kind bobbing face down not ten feet behind. Squire Young, loathe to soak himself on behalf of one so obviously lost, trying for the man instead with a gaffing pole.

I glanced then to my skirts where Mary clung, whimpering and runny-nosed, at my knee. Blonde and as rosy of cheek as an angel, she is not yet infected with the brutal glee such sights bring out in the others. Twill not be long before she too sets the cats ablaze of an evening's entertainment, buries brothers too stupid to keep fast to the harbor in a squally sea. And with a prayer that supper not after all be burned, I turned and made for the house, pulling her stumbling and sniveling behind. There was the spinning yet to finish, the mending to tend.

In all, five men both living and dead, came ashore here this day. Four whites, three of them gone to God; and a blackjack, as they call negro sailors here, barely alive. It was the black Weston pulled from the waters and

brought to this very house; the injured white man, knife wounds, it is said, taken off and put under Lydia Tolman's care.

Thus it is I keep my own knife close, a thing that would surely turn my mother's heart. The negro sleeps before the fire now, an immense creature taking his ease on the rag carpet Weston brought from his own chamber. Warm and safe among us while the fog presses thick without, as if to crush all in this house to very death.

TWO

2005

Hate flying; always have. It's a small plane thing. The one I'm in now, a Cessna 206 piloted by a chatty guy named Doug, is worse than most—its single three-blade prop and lack of landing instruments having much to do with this. Has excellent short field performance, though, which Doug says we'll need. I don't bother asking; I've seen the airstrip out there. A dirt and gravel expanse the width of a driveway—unforgiving rock cliffs dropping into the sea at one end, an enormous barn squatting at the other.

Doug continues his version of the take-off chat, shouting over the noise of the engine. Empty weight of two thousand pounds; freight capacity of sixteen hundred, including three passengers of which I'm the only one on this particular afternoon. Good thing, too, considering all the freight packed around me. Boxes of liquor, bagged grocery orders, cases of Diet Coke and Bud Light, a couple FedEx packages. Topping the pile where Doug tossed it as he climbed into the cockpit is a duct taped paper lunch bag that keeps

sliding into my lap. Can't spot my duffle or sleeping bag, but I'm pretty sure I saw someone throw them in right before we took off. I pull the brim of Dad's old Dodger's cap down against Doug's spiel and watch the blue hills of Camden recede over the top of my Ray-Bans, nudging back the stuff slowly shifting into my side. I cheer myself with the thought that the fifteen minute hop from the airport in Owl's Head to Matinicus beats the wet hour and a half I spent pounding into a nasty head sea on a twenty-eight foot Albin my last time out here; but at least that had radar and a life raft. I think of meeting my end in a nose dive into the frigid, cerulean waters of Penobscot Bay and crane my neck nervously for the scatter of out islands somewhere ahead of us.

"First time in a week I been able to land out here," Doug yells. "Too muddy with all the rain we've been having. Probably okay now."

Probably.

Then I see it, at least I think it's Matinicus—the deadfall standing guard at the eastern entrance to the bay far worse than last time. Spruce mostly, the spindly trunks tumbled at odd angles like so many matchsticks. Funny how different the place looks from the air. Coming in at sea level it resembled nothing so much as a

hairy pancake as might be observed if your cheek was lying flat against the table, as mine has been on any number of occasions.

We circle lazily and I get a good view of South Sandy Beach where I attempted an ill-advised and spectacularly unsuccessful seduction of Rachel my last time out. The Old Gil, I tell myself as we swing over Wheaton Island and buzz the harbor with its tight cluster of lobster boats and scows, then make a graceful arc around Northeast Point and begin our approach. Below us a line of pickups and ATVs bumps its way along the main road toward the airstrip.

Without warning the plane begins to buck and lurch, buffeted by gusts that come out of nowhere. Doug grips the yoke, cursing; I close my eyes and wait for the inevitable crunch of aluminum against unforgiving rock face. Six months ago it would have been the scariest thing I'd been through. But that was before Annika got me in her sights. For sheer terror nothing beats a grad student cum lover who goes whacko on you. You know it's time to throw in the towel when your love life is on a collision course with life expectancy.

Something lands in my lap with a soft thud. The mummified lunch bag.

"Hold onto that!" Doug yells, "or he'll shoot us both."

I stare down at it, so flummoxed by this—could we really be

shot for losing some guy's lunch?—I actually miss the miracle of our safe landing. The angry whine of the engine as it kicks up gravel mere yards from the raging surf is my first clue that we've actually touched down. Trees flash by on either side, and as we slow I note a few faces by the ATVs and pickups I'd seen from the air.

"How long you here for?" Doug asks, nodding at those collecting around the door as he slides boxes and bags from the plane.

"Not sure," I tell him, the early August heat boring into me as I step down and hand off the lunch bag. No one gives me a glance; I might as well be invisible. "Couple weeks, anyway," I say, hefting my rucksack.

He one-hands the lunch bag to a guy in worn jeans and faded red wife-beater tee who tucks the thing in his pants then heads off without a word. "You been here before, you said."

"Five years ago."

"Got some real squirrels out here," he says watching the guy's bowlegged retreat into the woods. "And I don't mean the cute, fuzzy type. You'd do best to keep your head down til they figure out what you're about." He hands me a card, tells me to call when I'm ready to head back.

I cock my head toward the receding back. Can't help myself.

"So what's in the bag?"

"Payment from his wholesaler over to Rockland. About eighty grand this time—all Matinicus Ones." Shoots me a wink. "That's hundred dollar bills."

Lobstering's been good, it seems.

I join Doug in a contemplative eyeballing of the airstrip. Hardly the length of a football field—Christ.

"It's shorter than usual today," he informs me. "We lose about fifty feet when the tide's this high."

Huh.

A slender girl with auburn hair just brushing her shoulders—twelve, thirteen tops—hefts cases of beer to what I'm pretty sure is a Ford pickup, or used to be. Might have been blue once, maybe green. Hard to tell. No doors or license plate, engine hood secured to the grill with a piece of lobster warp. Climbing behind the wheel, she yells to two boys—the oldest can't be ten—carrying off a case of Dewars. I watch in disbelief as they lay it in the back of an old golfcart then bump off down the road, the old Ford peeling out behind.

Surely this can't be legal.

I locate my gear, fork over a Matinicus One for the flight, and giving my cap a tug, strike off toward Rachel's place—maybe a

hundred yards down the road. Dropping everything on the back porch—I don't bother knocking; I know she's not here—I head to the harbor to collect the key she promised to leave at the Galley Hatch.

Common sense tells me there's got to be some kind of road or driveway to the place, but the only way I've ever found it is by picking my way along a meandering, trash-strewn path that loosely follows the slow curve of the harbor. I pick it up behind the old Young store, making my way from boardwalk to rocks to planks; over sleeping dogs, across piers and past open shed doors, between long lines of lobster traps and bait barrels, and finally up through a hilly tumble of thorn bushes—old engine parts embedded in the packed earth for purchase—where I reach the open, grassy expanse of yard with its good sized wharf. There in the opening is the Galley Hatch—a large, weathered gambrel perched on the rocks at the harbor's edge with a view that's nothing short of staggering on even the worst of days.

I take the three steps to a large deck and push through the screen door into a place I remember with an immediate and visceral tug, connected as it is with my frustratingly unfulfilled and therefore compelling infatuation with Rachel. A short lunch counter sprouting twin jars of Slim Jims and beef jerky sits to the right beneath an

overhead pole strung with vintage ball caps. The rafters themselves are hung with the same faded buoys and old hub caps I remember from last time, a flag from the Maine Maritime Academy dated 1941. In fact, the only thing that looks to have been added is the illuminated BUD LIGHT sign on the left wall above the regulation size pool table.

I order a tube steak—mustard, extra relish—from Al, who clearly doesn't remember me. No reason he should, really. People come and go here all the time in summer—boaters, birders, naturalists like myself here to count trees or catalogue the almost staggering variety of plant life.

I devour half the dog as I push out onto the deck and slide onto one of the benches that line the railing. Immediately before me is the harbor, gorgeous as hell in the late afternoon light and full of boats with names like *Hombre*, *Ka-Ching*, *Plan Bea*. Not the sweet little vessels you see in magazine spreads about quaint seaside villages but serious, off-shore fishing machines built for long hours in rough, often horrendous, weather conditions. These things can cost as much as a house.

Change is depressingly apparent all around me, from the dish antennas sprouting from most of the ramshackle places ringing the harbor to the guy, farther down the deck, talking on his cell, his

other ear plugged with a finger. Sad to think that in the few years I've been gone technology has caught up with this place. Then again, I don't have to live thirty rough ocean miles from the nearest hospital or bank—let alone a real grocery store.

I stuff the rest of the hot dog in my mouth just as the old pickup I saw at the airstrip bounces from between two houses and pulls into the yard. Hopping out, the auburn-tressed teen loses no time in scraping a case of Bud from the truck bed and, using her thigh for leverage, begins humping it our way. The slam of a back door brings Al limping over to grab another. War injury or bad hip; he's of an age where it could be either. Neither speak.

I decide on a couple more tube steaks and a beer to keep them company, and head back inside to wait at the counter. I'm flipping through a dog-eared copy of Uncle Henry's, a local swap magazine, when Al finally appears.

"Another hot dog?" He might be sixty, pleasant enough looking in faded jeans and blue denim shirt with rolled sleeves, a shock of white hair that matches his close-cropped beard. A little hefty, but jolly looking. An old Philco refrigerator chuckles against the wall behind him.

I nod. "Make it two—mustard, extra relish. You hiding a Heineken back there by any chance?"

He cocks his head toward a cooler, cheek by jowl with a grimy top loading freezer at the end of the room—the pair of them facing off against a couple minimally stocked grocery shelves.

“Bud and Bud Light. Might be a couple Moosehead left.”

He’s eyeing my ball cap when I return with a longneck Bud. Maybe I can order a case of Heineken from the pilot? Probably only cost me two or three times what it would on the mainland.

“Noticed your cap,” Al says, sliding a plate with two dogs under my nose. “’55 Dodgers, right? Year they won the Series.”

“Yup.” The guy’s obviously a buff. The ball caps strung along the ceiling tell me this—a ‘48 Boston Braves, ‘70 Pittsburgh Pirates, ‘45 Philadelphia Athletics, and a ‘28 Yankees from the era of the Bronx Bombers, the Babe and Lou, arguably the best team in history—maybe fifteen in all and each too worn to be one of those newbies available over the Internet. If that’s not enough, the grease board on the wall before me features sandwiches named for some of the biggest players of all time—The Rocket, The Hammer, Tom Terrific, Mr. October, The Georgia Peach—along with the promise of a free lunch for anyone able to match all the monikers to their respective players. A serious buff.

“Mind?” he asks nodding toward my cap.

I slide it over, twist the cap off my beer and take a long slug. It's then I catch sight of the baseball on a shelf above the cash register. The shiny brown patina of age, two signatures I immediately recognize.

Al catches me staring. "Gehrig and the Babe. Ball was a power hit to the upper rightfield bleacher, Yankee Stadium, 1928. My Grandfather caught it."

"He get the cap then, too?" I ask, cocking my head toward the ceiling.

He nods—impressed, I can tell. As am I. God only knows how I remember this crap.

It appears the sniff and piss game is finally over. "So," he says. "What brings you to the edge of the world?"

There's a kitchen in the back; I can see it through the open door to the left of him. Big cast iron stove, twin basket fryolater beside it. The edge of something that might just be a pizza oven.

I swallow what's left of the first dog. "Rachel Leland said you'd have a key for me," I tell him, wiping a hand on my jeans and extending it. "Gil Hodges." I give it a beat. "No relation. That a pie I see on the stove back there?"

"No shit," he says, giving my hand a pump. "Al Freeman." Which I know. "Hodges was one of the best first basemen in the

game—hell, I don't have to tell you. Eight time All Star; Boys of Summer, helped put the Yankees down in seven back in '55." Hands on his hips now. "Gil Hodges, and with the cap to boot. I was gonna try and buy it off you, but it would surely be a sin." He glances back toward the stove. "My wife Gail's blueberry pie. Best on the island and on the house for you. Seems only right."

He returns from the kitchen with a huge chunk, pulls a key from a nail on the wall and slaps it down in front of me. "So you're a friend of Rachel's." A different kind of appraisal now—a did-he or didn't-he kind of thing.

"Ben was a student of mine," I say, skirting the implied question. Then, because I'm not sure how much he knows about Rachel's son, "Urban Forestry Program at UMaine."

I knock the second dog off in two bites, the better to get to the pie which wafts of warm berries and cinnamon.

"So you're like a professor of trees or something?"

"Something," I say, wrapping my mouth around a forkful. It's pure ambrosia—the kind of thing you chew slowly, deliberately, swallowing only when you absolutely must lest saliva roll unchecked down your chin. This is like trying to talk and have sex at the same time; impossible to concentrate on either. Forced to make a choice—well, there isn't one.

"A shame," Al says. "I liked that kid. Cancer, right?"

"Non-Hodgkins lymphoma." Three years ago this September to be exact. "How much for the whole thing?" I ask as the door opens and a sunburned guy of about forty comes in, grabs the stool farthest from me. Takes a swig from an open Rolling Rock he's brought in with him—something that bothers Al not a whit.

"What—the pie?" Al laughs, reaching to the top of the fridge and pulling a pack of Marlboros from an open carton and tossing them to the guy. "You're serious." His gaze wanders to the stove, calculating. "Three bucks a slice, six slices, that's eighteen. Give it to you for fifteen since it seems there's a piece missing." A wink as he slides some kind of ledger out from beside the cash register, makes a note, slides it back.

The guy ignores me as he simultaneously lights up and unscrews the glass jar of Slim Jims, drawing one out. He looks like a blown out Bobby De Niro but with less hair—snarly weathered face, graying two-day beard, dirty tee shirt with a long smear of something that looks like axle grease across the front. He takes a pull on his beer.

"Clayton," Al says, "this here's Gil Hodges, a friend of Rachel's. Used to teach Ben."

That earns me a hard flick of the eyes. "You missed her. Left a couple days ago. I'll take a bowl of that chili, Al."

"Hell, he knows that," Al says heading to the kitchen. "He's stayin up at her place." He lays a steaming bowl in front of Clayton, makes another note in the ledger before glancing up at me. "So, just why *are* you here, Gil?"

Why indeed, with the lovely Rachel off-island—wisely opting to avoid another of my attempts at conquest, no doubt. The Old Gil, I remind myself again—gone but not forgotten.

"I'm a botanist," I tell him—a statement that earns me looks of puzzled respect in most circles; here it generally results in hoots of derision. "Dendrology, specifically. Here to catalogue trees." That's what I told myself when I decided on this trip anyway. Good way to start my sabbatical, I figured—though I expect the answer is a bit more complicated.

A snort from Clayton. "Our tax dollars at work."

"Yup," I agree pleasantly, though this project is actually one of my own invention—my time, my money. Besides, I've no interest in engaging this guy's hostility. I stand, throw back the rest of my beer and pocket the key.

"That it?" Al asks.

I shake my head, making for the shelves. "I'll grab a couple

supplies.”

The pickings are broad-ranging but slim—everything from tubeless tire repair kits and Wonder Bread to Dramamine, Pampers and thirty pound bags of kitty litter—and if there’s any kind of order to the stuff, it escapes me. I grab a quart of milk from the cooler, tuck a box of Wheaties under my arm, a loaf of bread. Decide on a cry-o-vac of sliced ham, head of lettuce. Enough. I can always come back and eat chili, devour a nickname or two.

“Weren’t no kids, Al, and you know it,” Clayton snarls. “Too fuckin mean to be kids.”

Al snorts his disbelief.

I shoot them a look.

“Someone killed Clayton’s dog yesterday,” Al explains. “Sweet old mutt. Butchered him with a nail gun. Maybe fifty three-inchers. Brutal, nasty mess. Tacked the poor thing to the barn door when he was done.”

Jesus. Nothing personal in that.

“Ain’t his business,” Clayton warns. “And it weren’t no kids. It was fuckin John did it.”

Embarrassed silence as I settle with Al and make to leave. Turning at the door, I point with my pie toward the sandwich board.

"Roger Clemens, Hank Aaron, Tom Seaver, Reggie Jackson. Only one I don't know for sure is the Georgia Peach."

"Ty Cobb," Al grins. "Friday's pizza night, if you're interested. Got a band coming out, too, long as the weather holds." A wink.
"Helluva time."

THREE

I was Ben Leland's academic advisor. He was a terrific kid, bright and open and ambitious. But what I admired most was his passion. Where I fell into my profession more out of laziness than anything else—literally following the scent of a coed I fancied into a botany class one morning the fall of my sophomore year—Ben knew what he wanted from the minute he landed on campus. Urban forestry, described in the literature as the studied use of plantings within the urban landscape to its ecological and human benefit. PR-speak for planting bunches of trees in hopes of improving air quality in metropolitan areas. The very idea intrigued him, God only knows why. Could have had something to do with spending summers on an island almost obscenely rich in plant life, most of it courtesy of an equally wide array of birds flying in on their way up and down the coast. Think of it as a rest stop on the migratory I-95 where they'd chow down, cat nap and, more to the point, shit out countless seeds consumed in varying far-flung locales.

My interest in the place took root, so to speak, when Ben brought me a scientific cataloguing of Matinicus flora done in the early 1900s. At first I thought it was a joke. Over seven hundred

distinct species on about the same number of acres. Forty-four kinds of trees alone, including eight different species of willow and five of cherry. Twenty species of fern, fifty-seven different grasses. Berry patches, cranberry bogs, wild orchids. A botanist's dream. Ben's suggestion was that he work on an update of the thing as a kind of independent study over the summer. I thought it a terrific idea; and when he subsequently invited me to the island for a few weeks—a kind of working vacation to check on his progress—I jumped at the chance.

Unfortunately, once on-island I took little notice of anything other than the beautiful Rachel who, I noted with considerable glee, fit my preferred body type: slender and leggy, long dark ropes of auburn hair. I should mention that Rachel isn't just beautiful; she's poised and graceful and an artist, it happens, of considerable talent. Made sense that Ben would come from such as she. A testament to her distinctive singularity is that she's the only summer person on the island to whom the locals have even remotely warmed. No husband in the picture, either; which I figured left the field wide open for me. Ben tolerated my obvious lust with his usual good humor though it couldn't help but lessen my value as a field assistant. And if my head hadn't been so far up my ass, I might have realized he saw my company as a chance at the kind of

relationship he'd never had with his old man. All this was back when I was still being led around by my prick, mind you. These days I'm lucky if I can find the thing to take a piss.

It was Rachel who told me Ben had found and mapped some twenty-two species of wild orchid. I was half in love with her by this time and would have happily trekked off behind her through the bracken, nettles and sumac in search of them, but she had different ideas.

I spent the next week and a half painting her barn.

All of this is running through my mind as Rachel's antique white cape comes into view. I grab my duffel and sleeping bag off the back porch, slip the key in the lock and step into her 1950s-era kitchen. And here's the thing. Though I've known for days she wasn't going to be here, I'm still disappointed. It's a different kind of place with her gone—with both of them gone—at least I perceive it so. A note on the table greets me on friendlier terms than I no doubt deserve; her home is mine, etc., and informs me she's in the midst of a war with the crows. If I see any I'm instructed to shoot them. The rifle is just inside the barn, loaded and ready to go, along with a full box of shells. And if I see anyone hunting pheasant on her land, which they've been warned not to do, I'm to shoot *them*, as well.

No game warden on Matinicus, no police. No doctors, lawyers or Indian chiefs for that matter—all of which means nothing unless I shoot myself in the foot as I invariably will should I be forced to handle the thing, at which point I'll no doubt die of sepsis before I can find anyone to handle the lawsuit.

Rachel's home, the oldest on the island, is known as the 1799 House—split lathing and horsehair plaster, hand hewn beams, forged nails—and except for the west-facing back porch and kitchen tacked on the place about a hundred years ago, it retains all of its original flavor. Small rooms, four or five working fireplaces—that kind of thing. I'm an open concept guy myself, my urban loft being all brick and glass and radiant heating, so I don't really get it.

I wander from the kitchen into what Rachel calls the keeping room—remembering when, wine glasses in hand, we did her version of the historical tour. Here is the largest room of the house—both the physical and social hub of nineteenth century domesticity—functioning as kitchen, dining and work room, as well as the place most guests were entertained. All other first floor rooms open off it, including the only bathroom in the place which is going to make my occasional nocturnal urges a real pain in the ass. The centerpiece of the room is an enormous brick fireplace with all the original hardware—trammels and pot hooks and the like—an oven built into

the side of it above an open ash pit. Back in the day, the door I've just come through opened directly onto what was called a dooryard—the area between house and barn where Rachel tends an impressive flower garden.

By now it's nearly seven and my low-alcohol light is flickering. I'll reacquaint myself with the rest of the house later, I decide, and instead rummage through my duffel for the fifth of single-malt scotch I wisely thought to bubble-wrap for the trip out here. Grabbing my pie and snagging a glass from the dish drainer, I head to the porch for a sunset that promises magnificence. I drop into an old webbed lounge to enjoy my supper, noting with satisfaction that the mainland—just visible beyond the barn and assorted outbuildings, the hay field where Ben and I pitched our tent five years ago, and a few distant rocky out-islands—has been reduced to nothing more than a long dark puddle shimmering beneath the molten sun.

It's a little known fact that pie is best eaten with the fingers. It was Ben who taught me this. I no longer remember just why we opted to sleep out under the stars for the duration of that visit unless it was simply to sleep out under the stars. I do remember staring longingly each night toward the upper reaches of the house imagining Rachel in something slinky and diaphanous—head thrown lustily back on the pillow surrounded by those long masses of curls.

Raputa, Raputa the Buta. . . flip me down your hair; let me climb up the ladder of your love. Something like that.

I break off a chunk of pie, feel the satisfying burst of berry sweetness and buttery crust. Wash it all down with a slow slug of Laphroaig—those single malt purists be damned.

Raputa, Raputa. I think I musta got lost.

Ben was taking my second semester Forest Biology course when he was first diagnosed. Non-Hodgkins is a tenacious little fucker and his was what they call a high grade lymphoma. A double whammy the kid met head-on with his usual confidence during weeks of brutal radiation and chemo that caused him to miss both his final exam and the make-up I quietly arranged for him. Still, when it came down to it I gave him an A for the course anyway. I mean what the hell. Other than that, I never once reached out. Unbelievable, I know—even to me. Wounded pride, I guess. Three weeks as the fair Rachel's houseguest and not only had I not managed a tumble, the woman seemed utterly immune to my charms. Oh, I came up with all kinds of excuses why I couldn't make the trip to their place in Bennington, and it's true I was still feeling pretty raw from going through the same kind of shit with Dad some years earlier—but when it comes down to it, any unmarried man of forty-two with no children, pets or plants, or anything else that

might conceivably depend on him, is pretty much free to go where he wants. Truth is, and I'm not proud of this, I'm not used to failure in the sexual arena. Follow thy prick is a mantra that's served me well over the years, happily rolling as I have from one long-legged, dark haired grad student to another as we mutually tired of my shallow interest in them.

So given my atrocious behavior toward Rachel on any number of levels, why did I call her out of the blue a few weeks ago and ask to come back? Good question. I offered some vague plan to finish the cataloging Ben had started that summer. A kind of tribute, I said. Did she believe me? Probably not. Was I hoping for another shot at her? Might have had something to do with it. Thing is, the whole mess with Annika shook me. Badly. Here, now, in the dual glow of a crimson sunset and a couple pours of single malt, I can admit this. Rachel appeared in my mind as a balm to the spirit; maybe I could paint her house this time. But her email of three days ago, informing me she'd be off-island through most of September—something about a series of shows at galleries in Kennebunkport, etc., etc.—but that I should feel free to use her place as my base of operations, cleared up any lingering doubt as to her interest in me.

Probably for the best. Besides, a few weeks of clawing my
way

through the pruckerbrush might just be the kind of physically exhausting labor I need to set myself right.

The light's fading as I back my way back into the kitchen cradling my scotch and empty pie plate—making a mental note to add a couple bottles to the Heineken order I intend to call in to somebody or other in the morning.

Duffel in one hand, bottle by the neck in the other, I pass through the keeping room where, on either side of the fireplace, twin doors open onto identical front parlors—each with its own small fireplace. One of these Rachel uses as a living room, the other a summer studio cum gallery. The two come together in a front hall where a narrow split staircase rises steeply to the second floor. It's all I can do to wedge myself, my duffel and the precious bottle up the torturous thing and I make a note to look for a piss pot once I figure out where I'm sleeping, lest I kill myself trying to navigate it at three a.m.

I head directly for Rachel's room at the front of the house. Not sure why, exactly, except that the sight of it makes me feel good, connected somehow. Here, simple lace panels hang in the front windows and the walls are covered with a faded blue-flowered paper. Above an intricately carved headboard, the nirvana of my fantasies, she's fashioned the letter *R* from shells and dried sea

grass—something at once feminine and girlishly innocent that touches me deeply for some reason. All at once I'm overcome with a fatigue so profound I want nothing more than to crawl between her sheets, lose myself in the smell of her pillow. Sorely tempted as I am, though, it seems a violation that's beyond even me.

As I turn to leave I'm struck by a painting on the wall by her closet. Not a Rachel Leland, or not her usual style, anyway. Her medium is watercolor, her work all soft washes and light, earthy tones—the suggestion of this, an intimation of that. This thing is clearly an oil, the color almost troweled on. Its focus the nexus of two muddy, grayish-brown walls in what looks to be the corner of a room. A smudge of black mid-wall suggests a window on the left, the edge of what might be a fireplace to the right. A figure, at least I think it's a figure—my impression is of a child but perspective is my only basis for this—is nothing more than a murky, translucent shadow crouching in the corner, face buried in its hands as if crying. The whole thing a study in darkness, utter despair. Gives me the creeps, frankly, so I continue my tour.

Across the hall, the door to Ben's room is cracked. I nudge it with my foot and catch sight of a bevy of medicine bottles on the night stand, a dusty glass beside them. Appears Rachel hasn't touched this place since his death. He was into lacrosse, I

remember now—a kickass center on UMaine’s perennially winning team—and his stick still hangs on the wall opposite the door. I bet if I pulled those dresser drawers open I’d find his entire summer wardrobe. No way, I think, closing the door softly behind me. This I cannot do.

There’s one more room at the back of the house, and I’m struck by how oddly devoid of personality it seems compared to the rest of the place—not a book, memento or personal touch of any kind. Single bed on a brown metal frame, night table, dresser—that’s it. Oddly, the fireplace in here is bricked up. A dry, musty smell is evidence that the room’s rarely used; ergo, perfect for my needs. Place has kind of a freaky feel to it, but I’ve slept in stranger.

Deep in the night I’m woken when something grazes my cheek. A quick stroke, a feather touch.

“Rachel?” is all I can manage and much of that adheres to the roof of my mouth. I rest my forearm over my eyes, swallow, try again. “Rachel?”

Another touch, or is it a sigh? I reach for her, my hand flopping feebly in mid-air—so absurdly glad she’s here, the potential of her presence obscures the utter implausibility of it. I fight the

knowledge that the Cessna can't make trips at night, no matter how many Matinicus Ones are on offer. Hell, I don't care how or why she did it; I'll take her any way I can get her.

"Rachel?" I'm slowly coming to now—an amazing feat considering how much scotch I consumed before falling asleep or, more accurately, passing out.

Something cool along my scalp. A breath by my ear that sounds suspiciously like a child's whimper. Disembodied pain and sadness; an almost desperate longing.

I cock an eye. The tingle along my scalp, I realize, is my hair which has begun to rise—an involuntary response to the small filmy presence beside me. Female for sure, but definitely not Rachel.

I bolt from bed, the bottle of Laphroaig—tightly corked I can only hope—smacking to the floor and rolling away as I tear from the room in a blind stumble toward the stairs. I fail to remember the physics involved and take most of them on my ass, landing in a sprawl and cracking my head on the newel post. The sharp edge of a table rams my thigh as I streak through the keeping room toward the kitchen door; then, tumbling from the porch, scramble, half-crawling, til I'm almost to the barn. Only then do I rise, gaping through the moonlight at the quiet, peaceful-looking house—arms limp at my sides.

What the fuck?

"Rachel?" I croak weakly, stupidly.

Normally, I'm no coward. Any guy who's a tightly muscled six-two and a black belt in Tae Kwon Do doesn't shirk from much; but there's no goddam way I'm going back in there tonight. I stand like this for maybe five minutes, the scientist in me struggling with the obvious incongruities. I can be incredibly stupid when I'm determined to be and this is apparently one of those times because for all my logic, there's one thing my years of training and skepticism can't chase from my head.

Something very bad happened in that room.