

Pryes of Kilisut Harbor

I.

Boone walked his dog to the island general store every morning. No matter it was still closed, he preferred it that way. They stepped through the lonely hour before dawn, when the fog drug itself up from Mystery Bay, rising in human shapes, like revived manes, saturated souls that finally remembered they could move into whatever atmosphere they pleased and chose the muddled sky to disappear into.

This morning was routine enough. Rigel, eleven but sprightly, leaped from the wooden deck into the tall, dry wisps of grass, sniffing out waking voles. Having no success with the hunt, he wove his long legs between skeletons of rusted machinery until reaching the dirt driveway, a puttering shadow blacker than the last breath night takes before surrendering.

With darkened minutes clinging to the knit sleeves of his unraveling wool cardigan, Boone was no friend to surrendering. Marrowstone was a sheltered place, it had been spared longer than the mainland.

Before the blight snaked onto the rocky shores, then traveled inward, his patch of land was bright hued and robust, with raised beds protecting cherub cheeked tomatoes, handfuls of eggplant, climbing peas and blossoms of kale; then there were the deep-rooted vegetables, the gnarled pear and apple trees, and the delicate herbs. The gardens were modest but enough to feed the folk who dotted his acres in bitty houses.

He had never yearned to plant crops in his great grandfather's field. For him, the magic lived with the tall trees: balsam and Douglas rows with eight feet of separation. There was something sensual about the symmetry, safe and controlled. He had convinced himself he was growing, cutting and selling responsibly, but in retrospect had come to understand caring for nature for the sake of destroying it was part of the larger sin, the one that contrition could no longer solve.

Boone didn't even believe in Christmas, or religion, marriage or the traditions of the men who came before him. He believed in work, but the variety that only his sturdy hands could achieve—in adapting, but only so much, in solitude mixed with the company of oddly beautiful women, back when there used to be women around; they had left for the northern border towns, waiting their turn to be invited into unbarren landscape with their husbands, children, friends. Mostly the old-timers were among the few foolhardy enough to stay, and though Boone wasn't an old timer yet, he felt like he was becoming more of one by the day.

It began quickly, with mush and sour fruit, wilted leaflets that shriveled when touched, rot and mold that worked its way from seed to skin. From farm to supermarket, what we had taken for granted as being alive, being available, and being unlimited turned into the dust of disease.

The government call it terrorism, but the scientists called it "Blight of the Flesh," since it was first detected in what should have been cheerful, dependable oranges and strawberries, the fleshy fruits, before infecting all fruits and vegetables, then grains, everywhere in the country, within six months. It had been a year since the blight began. The deciduous trees were its current victims, always leafless and becoming hollow. The evergreens seemed to be spared. Whatever was newly grown withered soon after in a matter of days, sometimes hours, too soon enough to preserve the life in it.

The source of the blight remained unknown, as well as how to heal it. People fell apart then stitched themselves back together enough to panic, flee or stockpile non-perishables. Mostly, they bought rifles.

Now on the paved two-lane across from the bay, Rigel picked up an oyster shell, looking up with a shrewd blue stare to make sure his deed was noticed. Boone patted him on the head between his one floppy and one perky ear. “Good job, old boy.”

This bay wasn’t pillaged like the surrounding ones because it had already been polluted a long while back by the naval base across the water. Undisclosed nuclear operations rendered the shellfish toxic, but the skinny seagulls didn’t heed the warnings and algae-tinged shells littered the road.

An owl screeched in the distance, directing Boone’s eyes away from the mist swirled dock lit by one dim streetlight—his destination. Most days, at the dock’s end, he sat crisscrossed and drank from his childhood Thermos while studying the ripples and how they expanded under the gauzy light of a hidden sun. Rigel always stayed close to his side, keeping watch until the general store across the way opened; they’d go check the shelves, hoping for something new to eat.

When Boone’s distracted sight landed back on the dock, he made out the smooth silhouette of a tired sailboat hugging the always empty cleats and blinking twice, he felt alarmed and unsure of himself. Uncomfortably, he remembered it was Halloween morning, and all at once flashes of a dream that had stalked him in years past rushed back in.

Don’t ask me to spill all his secrets and fears, but I realize for the story to go on, I must reveal some vulnerabilities. This dream was made of bludgeoned pumpkins bobbing in slimy water, a rotting boat surrounded by corpses cozied onto floating funeral pyres, decorated in marigolds and long, silk ribbons, and a woman he once loved but left, sometimes her old self and sometimes a sorceress, holding him hostage aboard.

He could never remember the beginning or middle of the dream just so, but at the end, she always grabbed his long, graying hair and whispered, “Your debts are unpaid, Booney boy” before she pulled out his back teeth, blood running down her beautiful pale wrist.

II.

Only a few minutes from the planks, the sinking moon turned decaying branches into disembodied limbs. The autumnal air smelled monstrous, like wet fur. Rigel ran ahead until he too became invisible. Boone’s step quickened and he hummed to himself, his voice rising and falling as he prepared to abandon the asphalt, traveling through the parched ghost-grass and onto the dock.

“Rigel, come now!” he commanded. Hearing a whimper straight ahead, he deciphered a canine shape sitting statuesque in front of the sailboat. The vessel was twenty-five foot long, he estimated as he made his final approach, easy and deliberate, looking as if it had been sunk then resurrected from the watery trenches. The lines above his angular nose pinched together before he too stood motionless, as if in a trance.

The boat’s wood was faded and warped, with a splintering charcoal colored hull encumbered by clinging crustaceans. Her name had worn away, the curves of what was left of gold cursive spelling out “Dorothy” in a whisper. The main sail was tattered and patched, with a stain forming a cross. Boone’s chest clenched shut, barely beating. He fought the urge to run, though the time to seek the promise of providence was over.

Through a murky porthole an oil lamp flickered enough to reveal motion. Rigel yelped feral and shrill and started spinning as Boone watched a figure move from the stern to bow. He had not seen the companionway open. His vision was filled by a hurtling mass—a creature of muscle arced through the air, pummeling him horizontal, claws pressing into his sternum. It whined, as if injured, then bit his left cheek before licking his eyelids. Just as quickly as it was on him, it was off of him, wrestling instead with Rigel, jaws knocking. Together, they were wolf-like, snarling and sniffing one another's frames fiercely, circling, belonging to no man.

"She probably won't bite." A low voice traveled over the water, cloaked in the chill of the belabored dawn. It was familiar but warped, smokey and scratched. Then, "unless she wants to."

"We don't mean any harm," he replied, waiting to see her. Stepping into the glow of disappearing stars, she carried an almost burned down red candle as she glided toward the starboard edge. Her hair, dark amber cut with curls of white, reached her waist. Her look was suspicious, wide-eyed but sharp. Her sonsy body was twined by a hide jacket, the hem of which met leather boots strapped with two knives. She was not smiling.

"You like walking in the dark?"

"It will be sun-up soon. Just our routine to be down here first thing."

"So you aren't a 'nome who's gonna try to steal my silver and sardines?" She kept her milky green irises on him, right hand deep in her pocket. She added, "Last guy got shocked in an area most men prefer not to be shocked in."

"I live here, alright? I'm no nomad." The fleers, both peaceful and violent, seeking refuge or battle in foreign territory, were known as 'nomes.' "Besides, how do I know *you* aren't going to rob *me*?" The pixels of Boone's dream continued to crawl through his mind unpredictably.

"If my dog didn't like yours, I just might." The dogs had stopped scuffling and turned their sights on hounding shorebirds together, tracking their scent on the exposed stretch of beach.

"Why you down here anyway? Most boats avoid this bay. Nothing for you to take."

"Just passing through. Needed provisions."

"So you're a 'nome yourself?"

She crouched and if ready to pounce. "I'm the good type of 'nome, the minding my own business type."

"Then you're not going to tell a curious man where you're heading? I know these waters well, I could be of help."

She considered him. She considered the softness barely showing beneath his weathered face and bedraggled beard until she jolted back to a stand. Perhaps he was not a threat, but he certainly couldn't be trusted. "Once we can leave," she finally said. "any island that's not rotten." Her long finger pointed down to the shells and sand. "Tide needs to cut us loose." Dorothy had run partially aground but was close to floating on her own again.

"Thought you needed provisions?"

The woman took one of her bone carved knives from its scabbard, wiped it with her sleeve, and strapped it back in. Its ivory handle glinted in the last moment of the moon. "Your beard been cut lately, Boone?"

He shot a half-cocked smile at her while unconsciously shaking his head. "Do I know you?"

"Do you know you?"

Boone, now alarmed, whistled for Rigel and moved a few feet back.

She took satisfaction in alarming him. "Truth be told, I've seen you before. Untamed face like that gets recognized."

"And where would that have been?"

"In a book on early settlers. Not you, per se, but a Boone before you. Spitting image. Your forefathers came here last century to that victorian up on the hill. Public knowledge."

"Not that public. Most people don't read, much less the obscure."

"I do my research is all. History has some lessons to teach, you know." Gazing out in the direction of Boone's homestead, she added nonchalantly, "As it happens, we used to be neighbors, you and I, years ago."

"Neighbor in which house?"

"Doesn't matter," she snipped shortly, "it was a different life then."

Realizing she had about shared as much as she was willing, he chose his next question carefully. "Fine. You know my name. What's yours?" Rigel and his new friend crashed back down the dock, carrying a crab leg between them. They jumped onto the boat deck and scuddled inside.

"You can call her Sable," she diverted. She took a laborious breath and while freeing it, asked, "You handy? A fixer?"

"Depends on what needs fixing?"

"Outboard won't turn over." She paused. "I won't turn your dog into soup if you take a quick look."

Boone was silent. "I'm kidding, of course. Dog isn't a sweet meat. Look, do you believe in helping or not? It's a risk for me to even ask." With a final nod, he swung his steel boot over the halyard.

III.

The ship immediately moaned under his weight. As soon as he was aboard, a searchlight from the opposite side of the bay circled the air, inches away from Dorothy. Watercraft operation wasn't illegal yet, but there were rumors of the government holding 'nomes in detainment centers. There was talk the base housed one such facility.

Military men and the politicians they served were doing damage control, painting the image that the country was in recovery. It was in their best interest to keep their people on poisoned soil. Some said 'nomes were easy to disappear if they didn't have enough goods to offer in return for their release or if they couldn't be converted into True Believers, what they called those who started swallowing the government's snake oil and signed up to part of their "revitalize, regrow" program, which sprayed experimental chemicals on your land, placed you in "work parties" and monitored your whereabouts for vague data tracking purposes.

Side by side, they ducked in unison. "Come inside, it's better if they think she's abandoned. That's why I don't fix her up." The boat smelled of sage, though Boone knew that was impossible, reminding him of a story his mother had told him as a boy, a legend about sea witches.

Before the settlers came, a coven that called themselves "The Sisterhood" lived on Marrowstone's tip. They sailed further west than any pioneer had in search of solitude. On the 13th day of their voyage, a full eclipse showed them their island destination. The women sought to share land instead of possess it. The native people's elders agreed, helping them construct long

houses in towering ferns in exchange for spiritual protection. Decades of peace passed until more explorers sailed in from central ports, crossing the rough Strait in search for timber and fortune.

So the sisterhood started igniting piles of alders and moss to lure passengers to the promontory where the lighthouse now stands. Most of the time the current and rocks would do the deed of stopping them, and they'd sail out in homemade canoes to collect nature's victims. Bows cleanly killed the few who made it to the high bluffs, their bodies added to the flames.

It was just men, at first. When the children and women came, "the innocents" the sisters called them, they relied on spells to redirect these boats further south, but sometimes their magic was dulled during storms, and strangers made it to land, hungry to settle.

Growing weary of defending their forest, the indigenous tribe fled closer to the Pacific, but never forgot the promises that the witches tried to earnestly keep, gifting them their remaining patches of old growth. But soon, the outsiders became too numerous, and the sisters were forced to hide in plain sight, make nice, integrate, wed.

Despite their efforts to adapt and practice magic in private, early on, some sisters were suspected of witchcraft and hung by their own wavy hair from high madronas. The pain of their persecution passed through the generations. It's said that surviving sea witch descendants still sailed the harbors, looking for independence, going back to their roots of preying on men whose faces flickered with greed, boiling their bones and dumping them in Admiralty Inlet.

Despite being led by a logical mind, this legend did not bring Boone comfort. Below deck was a void. All curtains were drawn; any light source was snubbed out. They sat opposite of one another with knees knocking while the dogs curled up on the v-birth, becoming more quiet by instinct. They held several heavy minutes of quiet to be sure stillness returned outside. The searchlight seemed to have been a routine check, the last one before daybreak, which was fast approaching.

She fingered a lantern on and placed it on the floor, newly illuminating charts and vials of unknown substances. Jars of dried herbs from forgotten times lined the shelves. Small stacks of books on celestial navigation, bushcraft, history and folklore laid at Boone's feet. Pens were jammed in a smiling pumpkin mug. Rising, but without much space to walk, Boone just stood frozen, still considering the apothecary of plants he thought extinct, even in dried form.

"I keep the herbs as a reminder that something once grew. I know they've lost their potency," she said, as if reading his mind.

Out of nowhere, unable to control the words, he sputtered, "I'll let you cut my beard if you tell me your name."

"Deal." Thick eyebrows lifted as she reached down for her other knife, this one much bigger than the first she had brandished, and went to the sink to fill a metal bowl. "Scoot to the edge," she instructed.

A sudsy mixture sloshed as she lowered her knees to the floor in front of him. Up close, he was almost handsome, thick lip lowering to reveal charmingly crooked teeth when he eeked out, "Please don't take my molars."

She grinned, fine wrinkles of her forehead contemplative. "I have enough teeth at the moment."

He tilted his chin up and watched intently as her steady hand sawed through clumps of wiry hair, then offered up the soapy water. He kept watching her watching him as he complied with the lathering, the boat rocking slightly now that Mystery was rising.

She took to the intimate task of running the blade along his jawline, above his chapped upper lip, and over his temples, not nicking him once. Fetching the bowl back from where he had

been holding it between his thighs, she stood and set it on the counter before handing him a mostly clean dish towel. She leaned against the neglected teak and said somewhat stubbornly, “Twila.” Studying him, she asked, “How does it feel to be fully seen?”

“Terrifying.”

A tapping hushed enough to not disturb the sleeping dogs began; it sounded like a buoy was hitting Dorothy’s side. Twila climbed the steps, slid the hatch open and slinked outside, staying low. Then she saw it in the young purple of that moment, when night meets day.

“Boone, come out but stay down.” He did as he was told, making his way to where she peeked over the transom. A makeshift pyre floated below with a tarp covered body spanning its length. It looked rudimentarily woven from branches and sticks bent to form a crescent shape raft—lifeless detritus supported a form that looked human enough, except the only portion showing, the face, had almost been erased of features.

As the bay became a hue brighter, a fleet of pyres could be seen entering the cove, stragglers drifting in from what looked to be a horizon of countless buoyant tombs further out in Kilisut Harbor.

The pyre in front of them suddenly burst into flame, a scorching arrow sunk into the cadaver’s chest. The wind was churning a stench of gasoline and rot. Breathless, they sank down as much as they could, out of sight.

“I’m raising anchor,” Twila hissed, “Come or don’t come.”

“What about the motor?”

Before he could utter anything more she had it running, then slid her body back over to him. “Sometimes it starts again on its own. Look, those dogs will be singing soon, like they do when they wake, there are fiery pyres about to surround us, and sooner or later, we all have to pay our debts, Booney. I’m not paying mine today. Either go your own way or help me push off.”

It had been before the blight since he had heard anyone call him by that name, and for all his hesitancy, a drive deep inside knew he had a better chance at surviving not just in this moment, but in moments beyond this, if he travelled alongside another.

His dream had been a warning, a guidance, mixed words to a story that he finally read after so much time of blind waiting. No marigolds or silk hung from the pyres because the world was without marigolds or finery, but for the first time, he felt his skin pained with aliveness and welcomed the clouded unknown.

Yes, Dorothy was directly over her anchor now, and he was afraid as he pulled up the chain, hand over hand, but he kept pulling as the tide rose and the sails rose and the wind took the ship through the smoking hearts to wherever they’d next arrive, dogs howling.