

The light breeze snuffled and sniffed around him like a curious dog as he walked beside the surf. The sable sea stretched to an indistinguishable horizon hidden under fog and inky clouds and the waves lapped gently at the beach with a soft murmur. In the distance the lighthouse swept the through the night and the fog with its unearthly light, bell buoys clanged far out and the deep, booming voice of the foghorn vibrated in his bones every two minutes. Nothing moved save the water and him. The pungent smell of low tide, dead fish, and seaweed was as familiar to him as his own name. Somewhere ahead a gull cried out and then was silent again. He paused, listening intently. No sounds except his ragged breathing and the surf, but with his heart pounding in his ears, he was surprised that he could hear anything. And then the foghorn tore through the night again, leaving his ears ringing.

He had run from the house, but he was too old to run far. Now he walked, but rapidly, almost as if he knew where he was going. He didn't. He just wanted to get some distance between himself and home, as if that could put the shambles of his life back in place. His thoughts tumbled around like clothes in a dryer, around and around, never stopping. Because if they stopped, he might have to think about what had happened. And he couldn't do that yet. He thought about the darkness and the cold, wet fog and the clouds, about foghorns and the sea, about gulls and boats. The foghorn sounded for 12 seconds every two minutes. The TV weather report mentioned the possibility of a storm in two to three days. He would have to sail his boat around to drydock sometime in the next couple of weeks. And it was time to start winter proofing the house. And why was he running? What the Hell had happened?

He stopped in front of a pier, staring at it, not seeing it, coming to a stop in his mind as well. He was the problem and there was no running away from himself. He remembered going to bed early with a headache. He'd been having a lot of headaches recently. He'd taken a couple of Ibuprofen, but the pounding in his head only got worse. He had lain in bed tossing and turning, then suddenly he was standing over Molly. She lay on the kitchen floor, blood dripping from her cut mouth onto the floor, scarlet jarring against the black and white linoleum. Her eyes were huge, staring at him with fear clouding the bright blue. She didn't say anything, just stared, mouth open and one arm half raised as if

to ward off further blows. He had felt rage roaring through him and his face had been drawn in a rictus of fury. In a moment though horror and panic had replaced madness and he had turned and run.

The world came back into focus. "Oh, my God!" he murmured. "Oh, my God! Oh, my God!" louder on each repetition. "Molly!!!!!" Whirling he started running back. But at his age he could only run so far. Bent over with a stitch in his side, breath coming in gasps, he had made it about halfway home, when he saw Molly walking toward him.

He stopped, leaning over with his hands on his knees. He watched her as she approached, terrified that she'd bolt and run from him. She halted a few feet away, bruised face anguished. "Are you all right?" Her voice was soft and sweet as ever, but there was a tremor in it and he knew she'd been crying. He straightened up and looked at her helplessly. "I hurt you." His voice broke and he stepped closer to her, reaching his hand out slowly to touch her face. She didn't flinch. "What happened? Why? I don't remember!" The words exploded forth in a crescendo, ending in a scream, tears streaming down his face.

She stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him and grasped him tightly, burying her face in his chest. He realized suddenly that he was barefoot and wearing his pajamas, pants cold and wet from the surf.

He nuzzled her hair, smelling of shampoo and slightly musky. "Tell me." he said.

She was silent for a time, but he waited patiently. Then the words came, muffled in his shirt. "You went to bed. I was cleaning up the kitchen. You came downstairs, all in a rush, shouting at me." Silence again. Then "The words didn't make any sense. You called me a traitor. I remember that. And a whore." He winced. "And then you pushed me around a little."

He winced again. From the look of her, it had been more than a little. "And I hit you." It wasn't a question.

"Yes"

Suddenly he had to sit down. He stumbled to a boulder, wet and slick from the fog and collapsed onto it.

Burying his face in his hands, he groaned. "Ah, Molly. Ah, my love. How could I do such a thing?"

Her hands rubbed his back and neck. "It wasn't you. I don't know what happened. But that wasn't you."

She paused. "It's happened before."

His head whipped around, eyes widening in shock. "I've hurt you before? This happened before? When?"

Turning her gaze out to sea, she stuck her hands in the pockets of her windbreaker. "No. Not physically. But you got angry and you weren't making sense. Something about the bank and money. And I was stealing it" She was quiet for a moment and then continued. "You threw a paperweight at me. The snowglobe that Cindy gave you. Remember?" Blue eyes flicked his way and then back to the water. "It smashed against the wall."

He remembered. He'd wondered vaguely where it had gone. "When?"

"Last week. Monday and again on Thursday."

He closed his eyes and said nothing. Molly sat on the rock next to him, stretching her arms around him as far as she could. No sounds except the surf, the bell buoys and the foghorn.

Finally Molly stood and took his hands. "Jason. Come home now." she said. And he followed her.

The tests were intrusive and more than a little frightening. The CT scan wasn't so bad, but the MRI seemed interminable. He'd never been claustrophobic, but lying in a metal tube, only slightly larger than he was, with clanging and banging every few minutes made him uncomfortable. More than uncomfortable. The worst part was the drive to the doctor's office to get the results. He wanted to get out of the car and run, as he had run away from the house. But never stop running.

The doctor was kind and sympathetic. But Jason didn't want kindness and sympathy. He just wanted to know. And then when the diagnosis leapt out and slapped him in the face, he didn't want to know. He wanted to go home and hide. Maybe it would go away. People had spontaneous remissions, didn't they?

The doctor wanted to talk about treatment plans, but stopped when he realized that Jason wasn't listening. Molly was sitting quietly, holding Jason's hand, tears cascading down her face. She wasn't listening either, staring at her husband.

Kneeling beside Jason, the doctor placed his hand on Jason's cheek and turned his face so that the man's green eyes were looking at him. "Jason. Go home. I want to see you tomorrow and we'll talk about treatment plans then."

Molly took him home and sat him in his recliner. He moved woodenly, but seemed to fall asleep when he sat back. She left him to go make lunch.

He watched her heading for the kitchen and then stared at a spot high up on the wall. There was a little water stain there, shaped like a sailboat. He'd used it as a focal point for concentration for years instead of getting up there and fixing it. Now he had nothing he wanted to focus on. He didn't want to think. Molly brought a tray of food and placed it beside him. He ignored it and stared at the little sailboat. Thoughts and memories raced around in the confines of his skull like a squirrel in a cage, looking for some escape. The first time he had met Molly. The night he proposed. His graduation. The car accident. Desert Storm. But there wasn't any escape. Brain cancer. Those were the words. Big ugly thing, growing in his brain. Making him do things he would never do. Malignancy – good word. About as malignant as anything can get.

Hamlet had it right – “to be or not to be. That is the question.” Yeah. “Whether 'tis nobler in the mind”. What if your mind's been invaded? Is it noble to stay around when you might beat your wife to death? Or nobler to just opt out? Which is worse? Which causes more damage? Which will hurt Molly less? A clean break? Or watching him dwindle away until there's nothing left but a husk? And did he have the guts to kill himself? Probably. Did he have the guts to hang on until the end? Depends on how bad it gets.

“What do you see up there?” Molly asked from behind him. He hadn't heard her come in the room. Turning to look at her, he realized she was sitting on the couch and probably had been there for a while. “A sailboat – a sloop.”

She came to stand beside him, contemplating the stain. “Yes. I see it. It's got a keel.”

She moved in front of him then and leaned over. Her expression was somber. “Don't even think about it.” she said. “I know where you are and what's going through your mind. And I won't have it. You are NOT going to bail out on me. “ She leaned in close, right in his face. “DO...YOU...HEAR...ME?” spacing each word out and forcing them through gritted teeth.

He pushed back in his chair, shocked. Forty years of marriage and he'd never seen her like this. “I.... I don't know what...”

“Bullshit!” The word cracked out like a gunshot. “You’re sitting there thinking about how to get around the suicide clause in the life insurance policy.”

In spite of everything he smiled. “Actually I hadn’t gotten that far yet. You’re jumping ahead of me – as usual.”

She straightened up and regarded him for a moment, then sat in the chair next to his. Taking his hand in hers, she spoke quietly. “We need to talk. Really talk about this and all the ramifications. You need to open up to me and neither one of us can afford the luxury of denial.”

His eyes slid back to the sailboat on the wall, evasive. “I don’t think I’m ready to talk yet.”

“Fuck that!”

Jason’s head whipped around to stare at her. Molly never used obscenities, especially that one.

“Jason, my darling. You’re going.....” Her voice dissolved in a sob and she covered her face with her hands for a moment. Then sitting up straight, she reached for his hand again and looked at him with eyes brimming. “You’re going to die and there’s not a damn thing we can do about it. So we need to decide how to proceed.”

He wanted to look at the sailboat, but her eyes held him. She had always been the stronger. But her strength angered him now. He sat up abruptly in the recliner which protested loudly and got to his feet, knocking over the lunch tray. Without speaking he raged out of the room and out of the house, going back to the sea. She didn’t follow him.

He spent the next two days either in bed or walking the beach, mind racing and at the same time blank. Thoughts came and went, memories flitted through. Nothing stayed for a visit. He didn’t talk to Molly and she left him alone. He ate occasionally.

Then he found himself in the kitchen staring at her back as she chopped up carrots for a salad.

“Are you ready to talk?” she asked, not turning around.

He grunted an affirmative.

“Good. Go take a shower and put on clean clothes and then we’ll talk.”

When the doctor started talking about surgery and debulking, Jason almost ran out of the office. He was halfway to his feet before he stopped himself. He had never been more frightened. Then after the surgery there would be radiation therapy and chemotherapy. But nothing was curative. All of that would only prolong his life a few months. At what cost, he thought. And he asked.

In the end he agreed to the surgery, but refused further treatment beyond that. It seemed to him that his quality of life in those few extra months would be made worse by the treatment. The surgery at least would relieve the headaches somewhat and decrease the chances for more personality changes.

They drove home in silence, but a comfortable one, each lost in thought.

Jason spent much of the next two days walking the beach, savoring each moment, watching the waves roll in and thunder onto the sand. He listened to the gulls and watched them swoop over his head, smooth white kites on the wind, diving down into the water, re-emerging with silver fish. Terns and sandpipers ran on the strand ahead of him. He collected shells, and pebbles until his pockets bulged. In the evenings he built a fire in the fireplace and he and Molly cuddled on the couch. In the night he slipped out of bed and went downstairs to sit and stare into the dying embers.

The day before the surgery was scheduled he told her that he was going to sail the boat around to drydock. Molly went absolutely still for a moment, then turned away. "All right." Was all she said. She came with him down to the dock. The fog was back, cloaking the world with a grey mantle. They stood holding each other tightly. His arms encompassed her and he knew he was holding onto his world. He could feel her tears wetting his shirt. Finally he stepped back and looked into her tear streaked face. "It's all right, my darling. I'm going to be all right."

Her gaze was steady and she smiled crookedly. "Yes. I understand."

He kissed her and stepped into the cockpit. Starting the engine, he cast off and pointed the bow towards the open water. Looking back once, he raised his hand in farewell.

She watched until the boat disappeared into the fog and for a long time after.

