

## The Island

I hadn't been back to the island for more than four years, except at Christmases and then I only stayed for two-three days and kept my head low. By now, I figured I was over Rita. I'd be okay.

It was good to be back home, to re-acquaint myself with the island's rocky shore line and sandy coves, the marshlands, the scrub fir and spruce woods of the interior. I became conscious again of the rhythm of the tides, the signs of coming weather in the easterlies, or in the still, thick fogs. I eased back into the slower pace of island speech, and welcomed the sense of belonging to a community where everyone knew everyone else.

I'd landed a job at the Provincial Park at the north end of the island, the same place I'd worked through high school summers. Art Benson was still foreman. Even the pay was not much different: eight-fifty an hour instead of six-fifty. But I didn't have to worry about money this summer; I had a teaching job lined up for September.

At first, before the season got started, it was just Art and me working. We cleaned up debris from winter storms, painted picnic tables, dug drains, hosed down the canoes and paddle boats. It felt good to be outside in the spring sunshine, stretching muscles I hadn't used in five years of studying.

One of my first days on the job, Art and I came on a gang of boys throwing rocks and cans at the shags in their nesting ground up at the point beyond the beach. I leaped out of the truck. “Hey! Cut that out!” They were local kids. Joe Ames, Rita’s youngest brother, was the ringleader. He swung a longneck in one loose hand, daring me to stop him, while the other boys looked on. Joe had always been a bratty kid. “Says who?” he sneered.

I glanced around to see if Art was getting out of the truck to back me up, but he was showing no signs of moving. There was nothing for it but to stride across the road and grab the bottle out of Ames’ hand. It worked. “Says the rules of this park,” I said, once I’d got hold of the bottle. “No harassing the wildlife.”

“They’s only shags!” Ames protested.

“They’re cormorants.” I used the correct name for the birds. Then, flexing authority while I had it, I ordered, “Put those cans and bottles in the recycling bin and leave the birds be.” I set the example by tossing the bottle I’d taken from Ames into the proper blue plastic barrel. I waited till the boys did the same, got on their bikes and rode away on the dirt road.

When I climbed back into the truck, Art was carefully, uselessly, polishing his glasses with his thumb. “Why didn’t you back me up there?” I asked. “Those kids could just as easily have given me a hard time.”

“They’ll be back in half an hour,” Art said and put the truck into gear.

“Then we’ll have to keep monitoring the site,” I said. “We’ve got to teach some respect for the rules around here. And for the wildlife.”

“Yeah, well. Them shags are dirty birds anyways.”

Actually, Art was right. The smell of rotting fish was pretty powerful around the place. Still, the shags had always nested here and they had as much right to their living space as any creatures. “If those kids threw rocks at the seals or the sandpipers or, God forbid, the whales, you can bet the environmentalists, the police, the SPCA and God knows who else would be down on them like a rip tide. The shags ought to have the same protection.”

“Gone ecological, have you?” Art asked, turning the truck into the perimeter road.

I didn’t answer. I figured the question was sarcastic from the way he pronounced e-co-log-i-cal like it was five separate words.

But he must have talked to the park manager because a day or two later, McKenzie offered me the job of leading the park’s whale watching tours. “I hear you’re interested in ecology,” he said.

I was still feeling sorry for the cormorants – I’d caught kids hassling them again that very morning – and instead of accepting, I said I’d like to do cormorant tours instead.

“Cormorants?” McKenzie asked. “You mean the shags? Nobody’s interested in them.”

“I am.”

“They your specialty or something?”

I didn’t know anything about the birds. “Yes,” I said.

“O.K., why not?” McKenzie shrugged. “We’ll give it a try. We need a cheap morning program anyways. I’ll put you down for, what? Fifteen-twenty minute talks? Weekdays at eleven? Up at the point there?”

“Great.” It would be good practice for teaching. And reading up on the birds and preparing the talks would give me something to do with my evenings. This was going to be a boring, lonely summer for me. Most of my old friends from school were long gone to jobs on the mainland. The few that remained were married and tied down with their families and their jobs and part-time initiatives to pay off mortgages and car loans. I’d be spending most of my off-work time alone. And with my Mum, of course. I owed her some time. She’d never complained about my long absences these past years – she understood about my wanting to avoid the island after the Rita business - but I knew she’d missed me. And, come September, I’d be leaving again for my teaching job in Sydney.

The park educational programmes started on the July first weekend. I gave my cormorant talk. The spiel I’d prepared lasted only seven and a half minutes. No one asked any questions. Obviously, I needed more material on my subject. So on Wednesday, my day off, I headed for the library to see what I could dig up. That was when I saw Rita.

She was sitting on the bench in front of the laundromat, smoking. “Hey Matt! What’s you saying?”

“Rita.”

She had a black eye, just starting to turn yellow.

“So what happened to the other guy?” I asked.

“God, I’m, like, so sick of that question!” She took one more drag from her cigarette and then stubbed it out. “I hear you’re working down the park again,” she said through the smoke.

“Yeah.” I propped a foot up on the bench in a casual sort of way. I could handle this. “How’re you doing?” I asked.

“How does it look?” She pointed to the shiner. “Not so good.”

“Jesus, Rita. You don’t mean, is that like... Did someone...”

“Well, I didn’t, like, walk into a door.”

I stared at her. My heart felt like something clunking around in the dryers behind us.

She looked up at me. “Yeah. He beat up on me. But you know, I’m thinking maybe it was a good thing. Like a wake-up call to leave the fucker, you know?”

“So did you? Leave him?” I asked.

“Why else would I of come back to the island? No wheres to go but home.” She pulled the pack of cigarettes from the pocket of her denim jacket and held it towards me.

“No thanks, I don’t smoke.”

“Yeah, you always did the right thing.” Rita replaced the smokes. “Not like me.”

“I hear you’ve got a kid now,” I said, and then could have kicked myself for the timing of that remark.

Rita nodded towards a stroller just inside the door.

I took a quick glance at the sleeping child. Curly dark hair, just like Rita’s. “Cute kid,” I said because that’s the kind of thing you’re supposed to say. I wasn’t going to get into it any further, though, with questions like, Boy or girl? How old? I was on my way

to the library. I needed to know more about shags, not about Rita and her husband - ex-husband - whatever – and her kid. “I better be going. Take care, eh?”

“You too.” She kind of turned sideways and looked up at me and I remembered that thing I used to always do when we said goodbye: run the back of my hand slowly along her shoulder, down her arm, all the way to her hand where our fingers would meet and clutch one last time. It was a move we’d seen on a dance show. So sexy it would drive us back into another clinch and we’d have to do it over and over. It was really kind of a dumb thing to do, but that’s the way we were with each other, Rita and me.

Christ, that black eye looked awful. The skin was broken across the eyebrow too. But it wasn’t my business, not now. I hurried on over to the library to research cormorants.

Now that the summer holidays were on, there were a lot more workers around the park: lifeguards at the beach, gate keepers, store workers, and a naturalist, a cute, perky brunette from Digby who did the whale tours.

I could have traded up to an easier job at the gate, but I chose to stay on maintenance with Art. I liked his laconic company, I liked the steady, unhurried rhythm of our work days, driving from job to job in the dusty green pickup that smelled of hot vinyl and Art’s cigarettes. I liked the pull of muscles as we hauled logs, cleared brush, hacked down weeds, shovelled sand and gravel. I liked my eleven o’clock cormorant lectures. I’d even got to like the shags themselves, now that I’d studied up on them.

“Welcome, everyone, to the home of our island’s cormorants. As you can see, folks, these sea birds are not great nest builders. They’ll set up house on any old bit of

land or rock as long as it's close to their food source. They scrape together a few sticks and that'll do. Home sweet home." I pointed out a couple of piles of sticks and rockweed that looked more like haphazard heaps than nests.

"The cormorants are not the best of housekeepers either. They don't wash the floors and they never take out the garbage. That aroma you may have noticed"- I waited for the polite chuckle from the adults and the simulated gags from the children - "is coming from bits of fish they've left lying around rather than from the birds themselves or their droppings. But because of the smell that surrounds their nesting places, and because of their black plumage, cormorants are often mistakenly derided as dirty birds."

The tourists seemed to be pretty interested. They took a lot of pictures.

"If you teach it right, you can make any subject interesting," I told Art.

"Yeah." He always waited in the truck while I gave my talks. "If we drive real slow, it'll be lunch time by the time we get back to the hut."

Soon I could tell the shags apart and had names for them: Black Jack, Misery, Grover, Dracula. Each one had his or her own style. "Though quick and graceful in the water, cormorants are not elegant fliers and on land they are quite clumsy. Just before coming in to land, every cormorant goes through a distinctive routine. Here's Grover coming in now over to the left by the dead tree. If you watch carefully, you'll see him circle and flap his wings hard, twice. There he goes. One. Two. We're not sure, but we think the cormorants do this as a signal to others in the nests nearby. What Grover may be saying is, 'O.K. you guys. It's just me, Grover, coming in for a landing. In case I overshoot and land on your nest, don't get upset. My intentions are good.'" To the

delight of the crowd, Grover stumbled to a bad landing, crashed against a stump, and, shamefaced, or at least I thought he looked shamefaced, he waddled over to his own nest.

I was in the middle of my talk one morning when I saw Rita at the edge of the little crowd. She was wearing tight jeans with a bright orange bikini top. I couldn't help but stare. Having a kid hadn't harmed her figure any. Maybe the curves were a little softer, her breasts fuller, the hips wider. My eye was caught by something sparkling above the low-slung jeans. It took me a moment to realize what it was: one of those navel studs, an artificial diamond, glittering in the sunlight. That husband - ex-husband - Dominic Lebrun was his name - he lived across on the mainland just by where the ferry docked - he must have put her up to getting the tacky thing, I figured.

“Do you know, huh?” A kid in the front row was asking me a question.

Flustered, I wrenched my eyes away from the stud. “Sorry, I didn't quite catch that.”

“Why don't they make nicer nests?”

“Uh, well, I don't know. I guess they think they don't need anything fancier.”

A young boy, maybe about twelve, was standing next to Rita and staring at that stud until his mother took him by the shoulders and pointed him towards me and the shags again.

I went on with the talk. “The shags ...the cormorants,” I corrected myself quickly when an older man gave a snort of laughter, “the cormorants' feathers, unlike those of most waterbirds are not waterproof. When they dive, their feather get flat and wet like your hair does when you dive. This means that under water they're sleek and thin and

fast, and good at catching fish. They're able to move faster than ducks or geese whose more buoyant feather coats slow them down under water.

“But when the cormorants come up out of the water, they feel cold and wet, just like you do after a swim. So they hang out their feathers to dry in the sun and wind. You can see a couple of them over there, with their wings stretched out.” I pointed to the shags and then glanced over to Rita. She wasn't paying any attention to me; she was talking to a couple of guys who'd just joined the tour. If she was planning to hook up with someone new, she should be more careful in her choice. Those guys looked like real losers.

When I got to the part about fishermen in some cultures clamping iron collars around the shags' necks so they couldn't swallow the fish they caught, Rita turned and began to saunter away, pushing the stroller with the kid sleeping in it, his dark curls flopping over the handles. The guys must have lost interest when they saw the kid.

I'd always loved the way Rita walked, hips thrust forward and her neat round bum swinging side to side.

“Is that the end of the cormorant talk?” The same mouthy kid in the front row was asking now.

“Yes. Unless, there are any questions?”

“When does the whale watching tour start?” someone asked.

“Whale watching at one thirty and three thirty, down at the dock.” I headed towards the truck where Art was waiting for me.

We drove to the maintenance hut where we took our lunch. Art settled himself into the creaking wicker chair he kept there and swung his legs up on the crate he used as a footrest. He tipped his thermos towards the window. “She following you, or what?”

Rita was out there by the rocks where there’s a little gravel beach. She’d spread a plaid blanket and was setting up the kid with some sand toys and a bag of chips. Then she unzipped her jeans and wiggled out of them slowly so I got a good view of the bottom part of the orange bikini.

“She’s not following me.” I took a big mouthful of tuna sandwich. I didn’t want to discuss this with Art.

“I think maybe,” Art said. “See that thing in her belly button?”

“Latest style,” I muttered around the tuna.

The little beach by the rocks there was where she and I used to hang out the last summer before I left, the summer we decided to give up the promise we’d made to each other back in Grade Ten to keep ourselves virgins for our wedding night. It didn’t make sense, we figured, not feeling the way we did about each other. In the long evenings of that summer we lay by the rocks on the tiny deserted beach and discovered and rediscovered just how perfect we were for each other.

Rita and I had been best friends from kindergarten on. Always together. Never thought of dating anyone else when we came to that age. At least I didn’t.

Rita was never that good at school and after grade ten she went to work at Marine Plastics. I stuck with school. I wanted to be a teacher. We planned out our future. I would get the first two years of study under my belt – Mum made me promise that much

- then Rita and I would marry. As soon as I got my permanent teacher's certificate, we'd start a family.

But before I'd finished the first year at Dal, Rita left the island. She ran off with Dominic who had a job driving a tanker truck. Mum said she heard they were living up in New Glasgow.

At first I couldn't believe it. I actually suspected Mum of making the whole thing up. She'd never been that keen on the idea of Rita and me together. The Ames family were not well thought of on the island.

When I finally took in the truth that Rita had left me for Dominic, I could have just about gone crazy with the grief and anger and hurt of it. How could she think of going with someone else? We belonged together, she and I.

"Nothing you can do about the situation," Mum counselled. "Might as well be sensible."

I was sensible. I could have turned to drink or drugs but I didn't. I pulled myself together. I drowned my sorrows in study. I accumulated facts. I concentrated on solveable problems. I passed with honors. "You've always been a smart boy," Mum said.

I went out with girls, lots of them, but none of them touched my heart the way Rita did. Some talked too much. They seemed to want to show off how smart they were; they'd talk right through a kiss, even. Others were too wild. They pulled off clothes, theirs and mine, too fast, and drank too much. I had some good times at Dal, but I didn't fall in love.

Rita and the kid were coming to the beach almost every day now. Maybe I imagined this, but it seemed to me that she always waited till I was working around the area to pull off her jeans and sweatshirt. She'd pull them off slowly, like it was a strip tease. I'd promise myself not to look, but I always did. I was fascinated by that navel stud. I wanted to see it up close and touch it. I wanted to run my hand over the smooth brown skin around it and catch my finger in the ring and turn it to the light and ... Hell. Maybe I wasn't as much over Rita as I thought I was.

Art and I were shovelling sand out of a drainage ditch one afternoon. Rita had done her strip tease act as we were coming out of the hut after lunch. "Art," I asked now, "do you believe real love lasts forever?" Art had been married to the same woman since he was sixteen.

Art leaned on his shovel. "If you're thinking about that Rita Ames, my advice is stay away. That family's no good. Never has been."

Sometimes this island makes me so mad I swear once I get away to Sydney, I'll never come back here.

Other times I feel it's the only place I'll ever want to live.

Art polished his glasses in his annoying way, "Why don't you ask out that whale watching lady? She's some looker all right."

"She's too young for me."

Art waved his smeared glasses to a blocked section of the ditch and I got to work.

Rita was a great swimmer back when she and I used to hang out. Sometimes after we'd made love, she'd go and swim way out till I climbed up on the rocks and waved a flashlight and called, "Come on back, Rita."

These days, she didn't swim. Sometimes she took the toddler – it was a boy I knew by now; Ricky was his name - to the water and he'd paddle around a bit. Mostly he sat on the blanket and pushed a plastic truck back and forth or shovelled pebbles in and out of containers and ate chips while Rita smoked cigarettes and sipped from a can of diet coke and looked bored.

"So why does she keep hanging around here?" I asked Art.

"You tell me." He took off his glasses, spat on them, rubbed them with his calloused thumb.

"For God's sake, why don't you clean those glasses properly? I don't know how you can see through them at all." I handed him a tissue.

He handed it back. "I always clean my specs this way. I can see well enough."

Rita looked so bored and lonely, I started eating my lunch with her instead of with Art in the hut. Art's smoking was giving me a headache.

"Hers don't?" Art asked.

"Well, she's sitting outside."

"Watch it," Art said. "If you won't strike up with the whale woman, why don't you ask the Pearson girl out at the gate lodge for a date? She's crazy about you."

"I got all the girlfriends I can handle," I told him.

"Yeah?"

I gave Rita's kid half of the salmon sandwich Mum had packed for me. I gave him my container of milk too. Soon I was bringing a little lunch for him every day.

"You want to go for a swim, I'll keep an eye on the kid for you," I offered.

"Hey, that'd be great."

She swam and Ricky and I watched. He was a nice little kid, quiet. Sometimes, sitting there on the rocks, I felt like in the old days, waiting for Rita to swim back in to me.

When she turned and swam back towards me, I felt my heart lift and skip the way it used to, and when she came out of the water, I wanted to wrap her close in her towel and in my arms the way I used to. It was a good thing I'd be leaving soon. I really wasn't over Rita as much as I should be.

"Be careful," Mum said one morning as she handed me my lunch with the extra in it.

You can't do anything on this island, not even take an extra sandwich for your lunch, without everyone's knowing all about it.

"So you figure you're going to stay on the island now?" I asked Rita that day while Ricky ate his sandwich.

"I dunno. Mum and Dad, they're asking me the same thing. I don't know where else to go. Time I paid rent and day care in Halifax or wherever, I wouldn't have nothing left. It's home or pogeys are my choices, I guess." Her smoke-blue eyes were sad.

"Hey! Give a hand here," Art called from over by the hut. "Government of this province ain't paying you to sit on the beach yakking to married women."

"She's not married, not now," I said as I got into the truck and slammed the door.

In August whenever we drove past the nesting grounds, there were no kids throwing rocks. I was pleased that my talks had served their purpose. “Kids have learned to respect the wildlife,” I boasted to Art.

“Yeah, well, it’s the end of the season,” Art said.

The last week of the summer, Rita and Ricky didn’t show up on the Monday. They weren’t there on the Tuesday either. I checked the laundromat, but they weren’t there. I rode my bike past her folks’ place. Ricky’s little tricycle was in the driveway. Finally, I got up my nerve and knocked on the door.

“She’s went on up to Digby to see about a job,” her mother told me while Ricky clung to her leg and smiled up at me. “She thinks she can get on at Sobey’s there.”

The rest of that week I thought about Rita and Ricky. I thought of her standing long hours at a cash desk, smiling wearily at customers: ‘Thank you for shopping at Sobey’s.’ I thought of her picking up Ricky from some hole-in-the-wall cheap daycare and the two of them eating Kraft dinner for supper. Rita would spend the evening watching t.v., maybe drinking a beer for a treat. Some creep would ask her out and she’d go, just because she was so bored

It wasn’t right she and the child should suffer a life like that just because she made one bad choice. She was young at the time.

And some of it was my fault too. I was the one who went away, left her alone on the island. “Let me come with you,” Rita had pleaded. “I want to be with you. Now. Always.”

I repeated my Mum's advice. "Marriage and studies don't go together. If we really love each other, we can wait. I need to at least get started on my degree before we think of getting married."

There was Mum's advice, and there were my own secret thoughts too. Going to Dal would be my first time away from home and the island and I wanted to enjoy it. I had a single room reserved and paid for in the men's residence. I wanted to be a university man. I wanted to go to parties and get drunk at the football games and meet new people, including girls. I sure didn't want to be the only married freshman at Dalhousie.

Of course, I'd come back to Rita. I just wanted a little free fling first. I couldn't help wondering what it would be like with another girl, a university girl. What Mum said about not tying yourself down when you're too young made sense.

I couldn't explain all that to Rita. She wouldn't understand. She was so eager to come to Halifax with me. "What am I going to do here without you?" she asked. "I'll go crazy. I'll die. We need to be together," she said. "'Member what you said that night? 'I'm the moon; you're the tide. You're the sea; I'm the shore.' That was so pretty."

"I'll be home at holidays. Plus we can talk on the phone."

"On the phone is no way like being together. I've got to be with you."

"Rita, honey, we just can't do it," I told her on our last sad night while she held on and cried into my shirt. "Not this year. This is how we planned it."

"How you and your Mum planned it, you mean," she said.

So I went to Dalhousie and Rita stayed on the island. While I went to the dances and the parties and the games, she worked at Marine Plastics. And ran away with Dominic in his tanker truck. And got beat up.

I met the ferry every evening till Rita arrived back on the Friday. She'd got the job in Digby, she told me. She could rent a room at a cousin's who would look after Ricky during the day.

It didn't sound like a great life.

"It's better than hanging around here," she said.

"You should have told me what your plans were. Couple more days and I'd have been gone."

"Yeah."

I kicked at some loose gravel at the edge of the road. I'd had enough of being sensible and practical. Love isn't sensible and practical. "So, why don't you come to Sydney with me, you and Ricky?" I said.

Rita, she didn't hesitate. She didn't have to think about it for weeks, like I did. "Okay," she said. "If you want."

"I want." I slipped my arm around her, and it felt just right. We walked along the beach road, around the point, past the shags in their untidy nests and on towards our beach by the grey rocks.