

Clearer Now It Seems

Dull is the scenery of Newfoundland's interior. Sparse. As if the people just a generation before had cleared the land of its natural flora. The island is beautiful on every shore, soft beaches on the Irish Loop, all the rocky hills that glide to the water, the sheer cliffs with nearby sea stacks standing like slender orphans, the often-stunning looking starkness where this land meets the Atlantic Ocean. Much of the interior of the island, however, is quite bleak, covered primarily with scrubby trees that look like they had not been there very long. Carrick wondered if the landscape was a result of fire, or logging, or simply in this northern place in the Atlantic that these were the only varieties of trees this soil could manage. Given these spaces so uninviting, the interior of Newfoundland is mostly deserted of people, both ancient and modern, all through time everyone preferring to live near the sea.

The lack of scenery made Carrick want even more to get to the house before the sun went down. The house they had rented was purposely in the middle of nowhere, Upper Amherst Cove, and he did not wish to try to find it in the dark.

Anticipatory places always look different from actual ones, but the number next to the driveway confirmed the address, and the house at that angle looked similar enough to the photo on the website. Carrick, Wendy, and Duncan brought in their suitcases and packages of supplies they had bought in a grocery store in Clarendville, the last town of any size they might pass before arriving at the house.

They would all say later that they felt a presence, or perhaps it would be better described as a kind of disturbance. It could have been the large axe inside the door where they entered, or perhaps a few moments later when they saw the portrait in the living room. The portrait, a man with a heavy beard, looked freshly painted and resting on the artist's easel. What struck everyone most was the brightness of his blue eyes.

"Let's go down and look at the water while we can still see," Carrick said.

"We'll have to walk back to the house in the dark," Duncan said.

"So? It's the same as in the light."

"This place is creepy."

The dusky light this north of the equator made Blackhead Bay violet, perhaps indigo, a shade of color on that edge of the visible light. There were a few white caps on the bay and in the new August breeze they were glad they were wearing sweatshirts. No people were in sight in the town of twenty or so houses, and only a few lights burned in the windows. The road was

steep going down to the water and to keep from falling forward they needed to use the brakes in their legs, pulling their bodies back at awkward angles.

Wendy went immediately to look for specimens of rock, those smooth and purple with streaks of white in patterns interesting to her. With every pulse, the waves pushed the rocks up onto the shore, only to pull them back when the waves went out again. When tumbling toward the water, the rocks made a singing sound, a playful clattering, a sound Carrick assumed had been heard for centuries. Wendy liked how the lighter rings formed on the purple stones, an eternal, universal pattern and shape, like the rings of a planet, or the path a planet traces around its star, and how stars behave in galaxies, all circling something they had chosen or had been forced to consider their center.

They were not near the water but a few minutes when Duncan said, "Let's go back."

"We just got here."

"I don't want to go back in the dark."

"Just look around for a while," Wendy said in her cheerful voice.

"I don't want to go back in the dark."

Carrick had heard this edge in his son's voice before. When he was ten Carrick and Wendy had made him stay at a party crowded with people he did not know. Something in the tightness of that crowd had frightened him. Carrick always regretted making his son stay primarily for the sake of the people at the party. Duncan was quite insistent when he was in his frightened interior place, and Carrick knew when Duncan weighed this fear against his parent's words, no authority of theirs would make any difference.

They climbed back up to the house on the steep road. It was almost completely night and Carrick thought the house did in fact look creepy up there with its faded white sides and green shutters. Outside the house there was enough chopped wood to burn for several winters. Piles of logs lined the driveway, and logs stuffed full the garage and blocked what appeared to be a small porch and a window that did not seem to look out from anywhere. It reminded them of that door in the house they rented in Port Royal, Nova Scotia some years before. In the main room of that house there was a door that was locked but did not seem to go anywhere. At the Nova Scotia house, they could blame their uneasiness on the empty second and third floors, and on the old graveyard that was across the road.

Carrick tried to light a fire in the pot-bellied stove, but he could not figure out the proper draftings and ventilations. He knew it was not the right time to start yelling at something. Skills we do not learn in this new world. Wendy suggested they play a game, and the house supplied a few favorites. After two rounds of *Yahtzee!* and two of *Sorry!* they decided it was time to sleep.

Duncan was to stay in the small bedroom at the top of the stairs and Carrick and Wendy to stay in the room with the double bed across from the bathroom. It had the best view out to the bay. The third bedroom had just a standing mirror and a TV perched on an empty dresser, no bed, no chair. On the TV, they fought for two stations, both static, and so no relief would come in those familiar sounds. Wendy said the house smelled of cat piss. Duncan said he was being bitten by flies. They could hear the wind coming through the house and feel it when they passed a window. Near the axe, the front door could not be locked, and Carrick piled some wood to block it. He knew a strong push and the door would easily open.

"I don't want to stay here," Duncan said.

"Well, we have to stay here."

"Why can't we just go to a hotel?"

"There aren't any. We're in the middle of nowhere."

Upper Amherst Cove was about sixty miles north of Clarendville and about twenty miles south of Bonavista along the coast road. If they cut through the peninsula and the scrub forest, they would need to travel on dirt roads before they would get to Trinity, a popular tourist area. There might be a motel there. They had already paid for the house, had paid for the week.

"I don't want to stay here," Duncan said again. You could see it in his eyes, Carrick thought. He was carrying that irrational fear Carrick knew so well.

"Duncan, we have to," Wendy told him, and Carrick could tell from her voice that she was also afraid.

"Come on," Carrick said. "It's just a house."

Carrick and Wendy kept talking with Duncan. On the edge he was for nearly an hour.

"I'm not sleeping in that room."

Carrick tried other alternatives with him, sleeping in the living room but Duncan did not like the painting of the man with the beard. "I'll stay with you," Carrick told him but that was not enough. In the end, Duncan slept with Wendy in the small double bed. When Carrick walked in Duncan had calmed down a bit and Wendy giggled when Carrick shook his head looking at his wife in bed with his teenage son.

"We're scared," she laughed.

Carrick slept in the small room at the top of the stairs that night. He woke several times in the windy quiet, each time awakened by a strange and different dream. After one dream Carrick got up and walked downstairs to the living room. The sounds of his walking seemed amplified in the house. He took the painting of the man with the beard off the easel and turned it around to face the wall. After another dream, Carrick went downstairs again. This time, he put the axe that was near the door into a closet under the stairs.

Carrick's detox dreams became physical, something or someone crushing him, the weight pressing and forcing him into that place between dreaming and waking, the times when both the dreaming and the waking knew one another. Even early on, Carrick knew, the dreams were caused by an imbalance of booze. There were the falling dreams, the quick fright ones with the adrenaline of slipping, and the ones watching the ground coming clearer, never waking just before the bottom, somehow feeling it when the end came. In other dreams, friendly dogs would change their faces into teeth and move their biting up his arms to the back of his head. Past workers forced him into industrial accidents, placing him into the gears of the machinery and sneering. These dreams could only end in that place between waking and dreaming. He could feel the lurches of his body, both sides struggling, until some will, internal or external, would finally wake him. He was never frightened upon waking. Except for the sweating, it was as usual as it was. But he would not sleep again that night unless there was enough time to have a few drinks to drift back away before the sun would come.

For years, he had not gone a full day without drinking. In the weeks and months before the cure, he could not go many hours without drinking. To ward off the fear and the shaking,

Carrick had started to fill water bottles with vodka to bring with him wherever he went, mixing the vodka with whatever was available. The daily course of his efforts centered on when and how to have the next drink, and on ways to hide his breath from the world. He thought often that he could not possibly keep this going, had to stop somehow. He thought often that he could in fact keep this going.

In the first two days at the clinic Carrick found that his hands were shaking so violently that he could not wash down the pills they were giving him. The water was spilling from his hands, and he had to ask the nurse to help him bring the little paper cups to his lips. What would it have been like if they had not given him all those pills and shots to ease the withdrawal symptoms? When detoxing, there is nothing but the detoxing, the symptoms, nothing other to think about, nothing to feel but the detoxing. He was not sleeping more than an hour at a time on a narrow bed covered in plastic. Carrick first assumed the plastic was to guard against pissing and shitting, but then his sweating began, and his sweating became incredible. Blankets on, blankets off, and the sweating mixed with chills when the air met his wet clothing. It was the guest's responsibility to change the linens and Carrick would need to do so each morning, as well as wash his wet clothes. The third day, after the worst of the suffering was over, was when he started to go to the group sessions. Other than being a drunk, Carrick thought he had little in common with the other people. Being a drunk was common enough.

At the clinic, the dreams were more vivid and violent than ever. This was how people die in their sleep.

Morning in Upper Amherst Cove and Carrick woke at dawn. He could see Wendy and Duncan were still in bed, and still breathing. They had indeed all survived the night. The coffee maker was simple enough and while it brewed Carrick stepped onto the back porch to look at the bay right there in the short distance. Even in August, there was a morning chill and when Carrick returned with his coffee he had put on a sweatshirt. Should he try again for a fire? It should warm up shortly. Such an effort might make for an instant bad mood on such a nice morning. The sky was clear yet again, the fifth day in a row.

Even with the wakings, Carrick had slept well. He felt good. He could see himself living in a place like this. Now that they were on Newfoundland's coast, he found again the island's raw splendor, the rise of the trees and the rocks and the sky and the water. It would all be there, a little different for him every morning. He would grow to catalog the days and the seasons, how the sun's position changes so rapidly this far north of the equator. He would welcome it when those changes came around again the following year.

He wanted some type of meat for breakfast with the eggs they had bought in Clarendville. He scolded himself for not thinking of it then. While Wendy and Duncan were still sleeping, Carrick set out in the morning sun to look for something that was open. He left a note so they would not think he had been swallowed by the house.

Just a few miles up the road, in Newman's Cove, Carrick came upon a convenience store. He had thought he might have to drive all the way to the town of Bonavista at top of the peninsula. The convenience store was a metal prefab structure often seen in rural places; this

one painted a pleasant blue. Outside two headstones looked for sale, one had on it the name *Suigerny*, the other left blank to fill in later.

Inside Carrick was greeted by a very thin man, his frame the type where his bones made points in his clothing. The man had a strong Newfoundland accent. At times, it did not sound like English. The store was too large for the volume of items it had in it. There were empty white spaces at the backs of the shelving, not hidden nearly enough by the few cans and boxes fronted to the facing edges. Carrick counted fourteen facings of mushroom soup, eighteen of the same BBQ sauce, and nine of a stew proudly claiming to have been canned in Canada. Along one entire aisle there were just three kinds of cereal. In the freezer case, beef hearts were next to the ice cream choices. At the back of the store was a refrigerated case and Carrick hoped to find some local sausage or breakfast meat particular to Newfoundland. Nothing like that, unless scrunchions are considered such a thing, tiny cubes of pork fat used mostly as a topping for boiled cod. Carrick would have settled for bacon, but there was none. In St. John's, he had had what they called back bacon in Newfoundland, Canadian bacon in the states. He settled on a vacuum sealed package of ham processed far away from the island.

"Nice day again, isn't it?" The woman said.

Carrick had not seen her come in. She was a large woman, a larger version of a body type they had often noticed in Newfoundland. Barrel-shaped, they did not compensate their girth with the size of their breasts or in the roundness of their hips. When seen from behind, their wide shapes went straight down from their elbows to their knees.

"Yes," Carrick said. "Everyone tells us we're very lucky."

“Oh, you are,” said the skinny man, now moving something on a wall mixed with detergents, car parts and fishing gear. “I can’t remember sunshine like this.”

“It’s beautiful. We’re really enjoying it.”

“Where are you from?” The woman asked.

“The states. New Jersey.”

“First time in Newfoundland?”

“Yes. We rented a house up a bit. In Upper Amherst Cove.”

“I know,” said the woman. “I followed you over here. We live in the house across the road.”

Carrick had not noticed any car behind him. Carrick had yet to see a person in Upper Amherst Cove.

“You’re the third people Maggie has rented the house to,” she said. “They’ve bought it over a year ago.”

“We like it so far. My wife and son found it a little creepy last night,” Carrick laughed.

“There was a woman painter there. She was nice. She was there for a few months. From Montreal. She wanted to stay longer but they had already rented it to you.”

“Oh,” Carrick said. “She must have been the one to paint that portrait that’s in the living room. I think she forgot it. It’s still on an easel. A fisherman with a beard.”

The woman nodded slightly. Carrick caught her looking over at her husband. “She liked to paint the bay a lot.”

“Beautiful bay,” Carrick said. The convenience store was just across the road from Newman’s Cove and Carrick could see the water through the store window. “I’d love to see a whale.”

“Oh, they’re there,” the woman said.

Carrick and Wendy and Duncan kept a vigil on the porch and out the two big windows of the house that faced the bay, one window in the kitchen and one in the living room. The bay and the water were always moving, always changing.

Soon, Carrick and Wendy and Duncan began to resign themselves that whale sightings must be an uncommon occurrence, that perhaps the lady and the man at the convenience store were exaggerating the possibilities, wanting to be nice to the tourists. After days of walking past the broad windows and walking along Blackhead Bay and the other bays during their daily hikes, they grew discouraged. Still, they always faced the window when they ate their meals, and Carrick moved the table from the corner in the living room so he could face the bay when it was too windy outside. Hours upon hours of looking out from there and from the porch while reading and smoking cigars. Still, they told each other, when they looked up and could see the bay, they were thankful. They came to terms with they may not see a whale, or a moose, not even a Newfoundland dog.

Carrick felt his life had diminished. When Carrick thought of the highest moments in his life, the ones that came back to him, drinking was almost always involved. Yes, of course, there were births and weddings and graduations and such, but what Carrick particularly enjoyed was

to travel, and a large part of the travel experience was eating and drinking. The location, the place, was the central star but drinking was the essential company. There were the places he would always go to when he went to a certain city, and they almost always involved having a drink. Such a list is long. Like Vesuvio's in San Francisco for great bloody marys and for a while Janet the bartender was pouring a little Aquavit on top. Shaw's Crab House, in the lounge section, near the oysters at the bar with always a selection of six kinds, three east coast and three west coast, and Carrick wondered how they got such fresh oysters in Chicago, and the oysters tasted so wonderfully with a Goose Island Lager, or if it was the right time of the evening a nice gin martini. Or with oysters again, big Apalachicola's and a draft Abita at the Acme Oyster House in New Orleans. Or with an entire bottle of Muscadet when the oysters were glorious, the *Speciales*, the *fine de Claires* and the *Belon 00* at the Le Bar a Huitres in Paris, Carrick preferring the branch of the restaurant on Montparnasse over the one on St. Germain or the one in the Marias. All this would no longer be possible without drinking. He remembered drinking Guinness on his solo pub crawl in Dublin near Saint Stephen's Green, O'Donoghue's, Duhany and Nesbitt, Toners, Grogan's, McDaid's and Davy Byrne's, and later in the week more Guinness at McGann's in Doolin listening to traditional music and the next day another one or two at Gus O'Connor's watching the championship hurling match with the locals. Fanelli's Café on Prince Street over all the years, "the center of my universe" he so often joked, having brought everyone that was important to him there, having had something from nearly all the taps and all the bottles displayed in front of the wonderful mirrored piece on the wall behind the bar. Sundown over the Choptank River with rose` champagne being the perfect accompaniment to the steamed crabs. How could life not be diminished? No more sipping

reposado tequila in between sips of sangrita in Mexico City, no rum punch at Orient Beach on St Martin, or Oban in several bars on a cold night in Providence. Now he could not drink mint juleps from pewter cups on Derby Day, or carafes of Beaujolais on an empty afternoon in Lucky Strike on Grand street. Frank's was his favorite winery in Napa, Malbec his favorite South American red to go with the *churrascaria*. He loved the cider in the café's in Dinan, and he had looked forward to trying the cider up in Normandy. All those beers not to have at Yankee games, the US Open, on fishing trips, and with the spicy wings at the local tavern. All those night caps and ordering yet another round with all the fond acquaintances through the years, and no more random encounters on barstools with strangers whose names he would remember. How is life not diminished?

Carrick set a place with two kitchen chairs and a small table on the porch. He could rest his feet up on the banister. When the wind was less Carrick could hear the water, the small waves breaking on the rocks, and he could hear that song the rocks made as the waves receded. Across Blackhead Bay, he could see all the way to the little town of King's Cove on the other side. They had hiked there on the first morning and from the porch he could see the white steeple of the church where they had parked. The clouds over Blackhead Bay moved at different speeds, and on the more usual days in Newfoundland, the clouds might allow the sun to peak in from time to time. During this stretch of their time on the island, the sun was more prominent than the clouds. Everyone on the island made sure to tell them.

It took a few moments to realize what he had heard, and in the lateness of those moments, Carrick rushed down the steep road, careful again not to tumble. He had called to

Wendy and Duncan as he left the porch, but they did not hear him. There was no time to turn back. He could not see the origin of the sound from the vantage of the porch for the sound came from close to the shore and his sight was blocked by another white house with a ladder on its roof. When Carrick arrived at the bay there was nothing to see, not even left-over splashes or rings radiating across the bay. He stood there for some time, and after a while sat on a large rock wishing for a cigar to keep him company. He climbed back up to the house to get Wendy and Duncan and they all looked at the water for a half an hour with only the occasional white cap in the distance disturbing the surface.

The whale's breach, if indeed that is what he had heard, sounded to Carrick like a wider sounding wave. A lower octave. More fatigued. A wave sighing from the effort.

The small waves came on the shore and then receded, without a single acknowledgement. The waves and the whales cared nothing for him.

On the second night, Duncan slept in the small room at the top of the stairs. From a teenager's perspective, he must have decided he needed to redeem himself, show that he could overcome his fear. Carrick was proud of him and he told him so. Duncan was embarrassed by the compliment, and after nodding, he made a teenager whatever face. Carrick noted he should complement his son more often.

Carrick had always been a city person, had a city soul, interested in when a building was built, or what had happened in a certain city spot. He would always look for the oldest bars in the city and have a drink, his way of marking the place. Now no longer drinking, perhaps a rural setting would fit more to his situation, more to the state of his soul.

A wife who seems happy, one that smiles all the time. A son who would overcome his fears. A place for the older ones to visit, maybe someday with grandchildren. A change in thinking. A change in perspective. A change in the brain. A different brain entirely. In a place like this, he could reset the possibilities, and listen again and again for the one large sad wave among the lesser ones.