

Off Island

by David Ackley

There were only six passengers aboard the small ferry when it came about from the island dock and began to beat thickly through the cold grey November swells toward the main. Waiting at the landing, the four who lived on the island year-round had exchanged greetings, two old women and a burly man in cap and wool plaid jacket using each other's first names—Edna, Coretta, Rodney—but calling the fourth, a woman in her thirties, “missus.” The three were lifelong islanders, she a newcomer, Cleo Lansman, dressed in a vaguely English manner in Shetland sweater, waterproof jacket and slacks, who'd moved to the island the previous May with her adolescent daughter.

But when the boat pulled away, the four, and the two off-islanders who'd waited off from the others, spread through the cabin warmed by the big Halliburton diesel. The island fell behind, a dark mound in the mist. Cleo and the two older women faced each other from benches along the starboard and port sides while the others chose spots among the double row of benches faced forward like church pews; they could see through a half-door the pilot's broad back and a bit of dash, gauges and lights, and quarters of the wheel, rocking in the pilot's hands. It was the slow season and soon this mid-day ferry would be shut down leaving only morning and evening runs, primarily for the kids who attended high school on the main.

“Weather Permitting” warned the schedule, indicating less willingness than the island lobstermen to front gale, rough seas, blizzard, or killer fog. “Pickled in brine,” the islanders joked, “tough as a fuckin' boot.”

The two old women were clad alike in faded print dresses with hems that fell below orange slickers like the ones their husbands wore on their boats—or had worn, in the case of the widowed Edna Bingham, who also wore Harold's black rubber boots. Her companion was a few years younger than her cousin, smaller and

less imposing, and was helping Edna to her appointment with a rheumatologist in Devonsport.

In a middle pew, a young man with a nylon briefcase shuffled through the papers inside, his complexion suggesting he might soon need to remove to the narrow deck cabin-side, wind or no. Taking note, Edna nudged Coretta and tipped her head his way. There was a woman, in jeans and parka with a small pack beside her on the bench, from which she presently took an apple; an offseason day-tripper, of no interest to the others. In the back, from the moment he sat, Rodney had begun to doze, swaying forward and back to the rise and fall of the bow, more at home than in his own bed back on the island.

The island was a few miles off the mainland, and the blunt little ferry beating against the tide made slow progress. Cleo took a paperback from her coat pocket, opening it to a marked page, and Coretta attacked a purple swatch and yarn from her handbag with her quick knitting needles, her eyes darting here and there as she worked, though never falling on her deft, independent fingers.

After a few minutes, Edna Bingham began to speak, at first in brief murmurs to her companion, then louder, so as to benefit all the other passengers.

“Been on that island all my life, that's the fact of it. Won't be long I'll be up to the graveyard with Harold, my husband that was, lookin' down on God's house and the boatyard.” Coretta nodded and glanced toward her cousin, with a musical hum, brief and supportive, that Edna drew from her now and then, like a chorus. Edna coughed. “About all I know's that island. Some might call that plain ignorance.” She barked a laugh--possibly at her own expense.

It was hard to tell where she was looking, with her fleshy features folded among mounds and ripples, her eyes all but buried, with only an occasional blue glint like water through trees. Her head was tipped slightly toward the deck though she would lift it regularly to look through the glass next to Cleo, monitoring the blow in the way of those who take their living at the pleasure of the sea.

"I 'spose it's better to know one thing pretty well than a pittance about half the clutter goes on these days."

She paused, foraging in her coat pocket for a pack of Camels, from which she tapped one, circled the cabin with a challenging look, and lit it with a paper match. "Course they's plenty as *thinks* they knows the island." Coretta gave her little hum and her needles clicked audibly.

Cleo pressed her book a little harder into her lap: a copy of Mead's Coming of Age in Samoa which she'd picked up, amused by the thought it might cast refracted light on the tribe she'd found herself, mystified, living among.

"We was even studied up by the university, some mucky-muck professor, come after us with all these questions, then wrote us up. All about kin and such, who was married to who. Who's goin' to stay in such a place 'cept them was born to it? I says to him. Who they going to marry but someone else raised there? They's families go back two hundred year and more on that island, all twined together like squid in a bucket."

Cleo's own family, smaller and of briefer duration, had been sundered by a savage divorce; the friends all went to Douglas, leaving her only Melissa, fourteen then, whom she'd wanted to distance from all that mess and had brought somewhat kicking and screaming to the sanctuary of the island, where Cleo could paint and hide and Melissa would adjust, as kids do. As, in fact, she had-- in so short a time it seemed to surprise her too.

Coretta leaned toward Edna, murmured a few words and Edna barked again. "Goddam right... Coretta can give her whole genealogy by heart, name every one of them five generations back... Kin and kind is what a island is. And how it gets on under the hard life we chose....Not that I got anything against a newcomer. Hell, their money's good as anybody's." She laughed her hard laugh again. "Don't hurt if they know what they're gettin' into. You hate for someone to be thinking they can wall off a piece and call it their own island. Hiring on carpenters and masons from off island when we got men right here could use the work."

Across from her Cleo's head moved slightly, though she didn't look up from her book.

"Not that it's any business of mine. I'm not one to put my nose in other people's business, no matter what some might say."

She paused, puffing on the cigarette hanging from the corner of her mouth, its ash growing dangerously longer, until she tipped the ash into her hand and ground it and the butt under her rubber boot. For a time her head sank lower toward her ample chest, as if she had lost interest in her own conversation. There was a sense of relief; her voice intimidated with its roughness and confidence.

The wind's wail had grown steadier, and there was a slight yaw to the boat, as it fell off to one side of a rising wave now and again. The young man rose from his seat, said, "Guess I'll step out for a breath," and opened the cabin door which blew in hard against his grasp. Feeling the gust, the pilot turned, then shrugged and went back to his wheel. The passenger went out, yanking the door shut behind him.

"'Spose we ought tell him 'bout not puking to windward," Edna said, reviving. She was leaning forward, speaking again loudly but with a confidential air as if what she conveyed was not for all. Her legs were spread and her right arm rested across her thick right thigh. "He'll have to figure it out his self. And course some never does. Always gazing the other way, painting their pictures of the sunset and such."

Cleo raised her head, smiling a gentle, placating smile at no-one in particular and lowered her gaze to her book again. The smile meant to soften the atmosphere on the boat. It said, I know I'm different, I know they don't like me. But it's all right. It's their island. I have no claim. I just want to live on a small piece and look at it, the sky, the sea.

"All the same," the old woman resumed a bit later. "It's nice when a new child comes, gives ours someone fresh to know. I like to see them waiting on the ferry for school, playing and fooling around. Not naming any names they's one girl, cute little brown-haired thing, goes to the tenth grade with Bobby Colter and his cousin Dennis."

With an inner start, Cleo recognized Melissa, recast as a stranger in the old woman's description of her. Coretta smiled and nodded, her needles unceasing.

"Me and Harold wasn't lucky in that way. Don't know whose fault it was. God's will, I spose. But, way it is on an island, sometimes it feels like they're all mine anyway. Come Halloween they're at my door in their costumes and I give them as much candy as they can carry off. I get to know them, watching from my window every day...I see them growing up, the boys and girls apart, then after a while starting to take notice of one 'nother."

The young man came back inside and re-took his seat. The wind had begun to abate, and the swells were lower, less abrupt from crest to trough; they were coming under the modulating influence of the great continent.

" They're good kids, island kids, good as any off-islander as claims to look down on them. You take my nephew Ralph Taylor's son, Peter, in his senior year already, been hauling' traps on Ralph's boat since he was twelve. Plays the high school basketball. Big strapping, good-looking boy. I seen the Pittman girls get into it over him, Peter standing by, laughing his ass off. But the boy's got his head turned now, aint for me to say who. Whoever she be, she aint got a worry with a serious boy like that. Not one to run away, he aint, even if they're wishin' he'd a tied a knot in it."

She paused again, sensitive to the boat's lunge as it turned from the channel and the fast, outrunning tide into the easier waters of the inner harbor.

"And they's other things I see, " she presently resumed, "like how a girl's coloring will sometimes change. I spose cause it never happened to me I'm always watching for the signs. Like when she starts to favor certain clothes, wearing a sweatshirt, or a big coat even on the warm days. I aint usually wrong. I 'spose someone else mightn't notice, thinking she's just dressing like the others do, to fit in — even someone close...if the girl didn't want them to know ..."

She'd shifted slightly to the right, her eyes on the woman reading her book. Coretta mirrored the look, her needles stilled, and even

big, laconic Rodney, who rarely attended to the talk of women, had wakened to watch Cleo from under the bill of his cap. "I guess that's why some people comes to an island, so they can pick and choose, closing their eyes to whatever aint so elegant."

Cleo's head was still bowed, but she gave the impression she was no longer reading the words, that the page had gone blank on her.

"Course there's one telltale as never fails. You won't see a woman do it much 'cept them that's carrying. Can't help it I 'spose — always folding their arms tight across their bellies — wanting all the time to be feeling what's growing inside...Can't miss that, 'specially if you carried one of your own, can you, Missus?"

Missus. Misses. Missed...

They felt the engine begin to throttle back.

"Coming into the main," she said. "Time to go see some young knowall thinks he knows from books what it's like to get old with the arthritis."

Very carefully, Cleo had closed her book and put it back in her coat pocket, her head raised, looking straight at the old woman but seeming not to see her, as if someone else stood between them. Her fine hands were twisted together in her lap. She was seated by the door to the deck on the starboard side, and, when, one by one, the other passengers moved past her to debark, none but the old woman was able to refrain from glancing at her as they went by, her face taut and pale, gazing straight ahead, her lips silently forming words they were just as glad not to hear.

She stays until they've all gone ashore, then leaves the ferry for a picnic bench by the landing. The harbor is calm out to a band of turbulence along the channel, as if something is swimming just under the surface. A pair of gulls kite to the water and settle without a splash. How easily they change state. She hasn't found it so.

The old woman's words have the blunt force of a mugging, reducing Cleo's feelings to a numb prickle, her thoughts only to reclaim her daughter and get away, quick and far.

She'll wait until the kids come down to the landing, waylay Melissa with cheerful lies about a mother-daughter night in town, shopping, maybe a movie, a sleepover in this neat bed and breakfast she knows: It'll be fun! They'll watch Melissa's friends pull away on the boat, in their rough play pretending to shove each other overboard, the tall boy a little apart on the deck, looking back at them. Melissa waving goodbye until they're out of sight. In Cleo's vision, the tall boy, Peter, doesn't return the wave, sensing that they won't be coming back. When the boat has passed from view, she'll tell Melissa that she knows and that it's okay.

She's the mother. She's fought this battle before and won against an enemy fiercer than any tribe of throwbacks dying out on a pile of rock. Try a desperate, scheming ex-husband with money and a school of Great Whites for lawyers. There will be time to decide, time to grow up. If there's to be a child...but her mind steers away in alarm... no use to plan that far, which is like trying to look beyond the point where the harbor ends to the invisible sea beyond, the island out there somewhere in the mist. For now it will be enough that the boat leaves and that they're behind on the shore.

In that invisible beyond there will be objections, arguments, recriminations, self and otherwise. Love might be offered in counterclaim, oh all sorts of things will try to pull her child from her arms. So was first roused the fear, choking and irrational, walking along the sidewalk in the crowded city, the air cold and filled with dread, that in the next moment some stranger might come from the crowd, tear her baby from her arms and disappear. How tight she'd clasp her, eyes on each passing face. Through all the years of Melissa's growing up, her fear awoke with each threat, real or imagined. For herself risk could be taken in stride, at times welcomed. But the fear could own her, and she, a free woman, didn't like it. To be yanked bolt upright from exhausted sleep, senses vivid as a hunter's, at what? A held breath, a stitch in the silence. It was hyperalert, clamoring at hints, intimations, nothings: the slack manner and glazed look of a babysitter; the sudden churn of the plump little legs toward the curb; the airy, too-precocious "Oh, he's harmless," for a

sullen, knowing friend; the junior high cheerleader who let slip the phrase “blow job;” the older boy with a fast car, resplendent to the fear's hound nose with tequila, vomit, weed. Most of all a constant, anxious whine, warning of the soi-disant father grooming his pubescent daughter, like the call girls he patronized, opening his wallet to every teasing caress, happy to pay for what he chose to call love. During the warfare of the divorce proceedings it grew, taking almost all the breathing room.

It crowded her from the inside.

And then they'd moved to the island, she woke one morning and it was gone. She could breathe and reclaim herself. The island coiled around them.

Occasionally, in a seascape, she'd paint a few stripes of white for a lobster boat, adding dabs of orange for the slickered lobsterman. They must have loved that. To be “picturesque?” To have all the grind and struggle stilled in a few dabs of orange? No wonder they hated her. She'd seen only the serenity, the verities of sea, rock and sky and the enduring islanders who seemed to partake of them, and looked away from whatever wasn't that; the charge is just, even from the vile mouth of an ignorant old woman in black rubber boots.

It pants at the edge of awareness, feeling for a way back in. Her attention drifts away, allowing it closer. She recalls reading of an island overrun by a predatory species, where the mothers lie awake at night, machetes at hand, watching over the children, at risk even asleep in their beds under the teeming rafters. She'd sought to separate herself from her fear and leave it whimpering on the shore when she went away. She wonders if she should have held it close, her very child.

