

The Fourth

by Jonathan Sapers

The Fourth of July. The ambivalent holiday. The holiday which felt less like a celebration and more like payment. Her parents' payment to her grandfather and her generation's payment to their parents. There were always fireworks, but in advance of that, there were uncomfortable gatherings in quest of relationships that no longer existed. As the sole Hewitt family member on good terms with Penelope, she would always be deputized to negotiate the parties' terms. What food? What cake? Which guests? Every detail had a thousand parents. Now that the Morrisons were here, it was assumed she would act as intermediary. More details, more opinions. "Your grandfather would have loved it," her mother said, ominously.

"It's such a shame to leave a boat like the Dowager on a trailer year-round. Someone ought to do something with it," opined Michael, the Americas scholar, when they met up later in the day. "Let's float old Ironsides. How apt."

He was planning on commandeering a room in town to work on his thesis, but had as usual not gotten farther than the idea. "I feel like I have to be there to work on it," he said. "It seems wrong, somehow, here in Loyalist country. All those poor sovereign-obsessed settlers moving their houses up the coast all in order not to give up long-distance fealty to the loony English King. Going to so much trouble not to have to think for themselves."

But what had drawn her grandfather then?

"I don't know," Penelope said, when Mary asked, and Mary thought she saw a glint of — was it sadness? Lingering distrust? "My parents came because my father thought your grandfather, Thomas Hewitt, was a man who generally got things right. I think he was the first man my father had ever met whom he felt that way about. My mother didn't feel that way. And she had married my father because he let her think for herself. But then he decided he wanted Thomas Hewitt to think for him which meant my mother had to too."

Penelope said this while pondering the boating idea. She did not, as Mary hoped she might, dismiss it out of hand.

“That’s how the Morrisons came to be the so-called owners of the boat for a period of time, because my father responded to Hewitt’s idea that it would be better for our community if such things were shared. The Morrisons just took the Dowager over. But it made sense. As a young woman on my own, I didn’t have the wherewithal and of course I had no children. When I was younger, even at your age, nothing brought me so much pleasure as a sail. I’ll join your expedition.”

So as a result of her mediation, a dubious Fourth of July Sail was added to the questionable Fourth of July Round Robin, the overlarge Fourth of July Cake and the illegal Fourth of July Fireworks, which were always procured from the U.S. and smuggled over the border.

Hours later, she and Penelope stood on the shore above the Ghost Road, watching, as Michael, Arthur and her father and Henry stepped the mast on the Dowager for the re-inaugural run. Mary was embarrassed for her family members. They had no idea what they were doing. Penelope winced every now and then. Other times she seemed to twitch.

“Shall I pick you up?” Henry asked, in a tone that suggested multiple levels of concern, chagrin, and forbearance. Or should have.

“No, we’ll put her on the guest mooring,” Penelope said. “You could just leave us the dory.”

“This idea is harebrained,” Mary said.

“Fun though,” said Arthur.

He had certainly picked out the right sunglasses. As they set out, Mary sipped a beer and watched her brother impersonating a skipper, while her father remained himself, staring anxiously at the sails. Penelope kept a poker face. They made it safely out into the bay.

“You’re not bad at this,” Mary had to admit, as her brother got the boat to change direction fairly effortlessly. While Mary had been in Montreal, Michael had apparently been to sailing camp. Her father

organized the ropes. Michael sat nearby looking pained. He was trying not to be critical.

"It's hard to understand why this boat has spent so many years in mothballs," Michael said, initiating conversation.

"Harder to understand how, with all this land here, your family has stayed away so long. We're left with all of the "shared" responsibility and none of the control."

Mary felt guilty that Michael had been spending too much time listening to their parents bicker about repair costs.

The wind made a quilt out of the water ahead of them with flat squares of calm and crosshatch squares of controversy: they entered a windy square and began to pick up speed.

Without looking, Michael reached back and nudged the steering implement toward Arthur, moving the boat ever so slightly to the left. "The buoy," he said, as they barely cleared a large green one to their right. "Marks the rocks in the passage."

Arthur frowned. "It's like we're living with ghosts, or under a curse."

"Look out!" Mary yelled. The boat hit a piece of driftwood with a bang and hurtled on.

Michael came and sat on the opposite side of the stern and put his hand on the steering stick. For a minute, the two of them appeared to be steering together. Then Arthur let his hand drop.

"I'm only a cousin," Michael said. "It's really Aunt Selena, and she still stands at the doorway on the day she and Lucien used to go, hoping someone will take her but no one does. Her siblings would like her to give up her rights, maybe sell them. She's holding on to the chance that she might one day get back. That is why. It's not really up to us."

"All of this would have made your Grandfather Hewitt very happy," Penelope said. "It's just like he hoped. Here we are with this boat, doing something together. A shared interest, connections, reconnections bringing us together, prompting a discussion of your potential return. And of course he couldn't predict what would tear us apart or what the war would do to Lucien."

“No,” her father said, carefully. “He clearly didn't predict that.”

* * *

“Come with me,” Penelope said. She stood up and grabbed one of the wires that ran from the top of the mast to the deck and sidestepped along the lip at the edge of the boat. “Much less tippy up here.”

Mary followed her. She noticed her father watching.

“Gunwale,” Penelope said, quietly.

“What?”

“Stays.”

“What?”

“We're walking along the gunwale, holding onto the stays.”

Mary lay down and closed her eyes. The sun warmed her back. The water chattered softly as it rushed along the sides of the boat. A seagull murmured. She shivered.

The clothes had finally come fully off, which had, ironically, produced a moment of hesitation. An uncomfortable moment of physical negotiation in which they tried to fit the appropriate parts into the appropriate places. He smiled embarrassed and she asked why and he said it was, after all, impossible to do this in a way that could be seen as impressive or different or special since after all it had been done so many times before.

“But not to me,” she pointed out. And he smiled and began again and then pulled out — “the rubber!” he remembered, luckily and her life flashed briefly in front of her eyes. And then he started in again. She was just beginning to feel something, quite a nice feeling when it was suddenly over. He lay back and began apologizing.

“I'm sorry” he said.

“For what?” she had asked.

“I wanted it to be perfect with you. I didn't want to mess it up.”

“You didn't” she said, because what did she know?”

"Make sure your heart is really in it," Penelope was saying something.

"In what?"

"It."

"Oh. What makes you think —"

"It's obvious. Just never do anything because you think you should."

She looked over at Penelope, who was lying on her back looking up. What was she talking about? Penelope the Oracle. "What kind of reason then?"

"You want it to be essential. If it's not essential, later you might...."

Might what? If you wanted to give advice you had to give it. "Cast it over? But what if at first it doesn't seem essential and then later it turns out to have been and you can't get it back? How will you know?"

"What?"

"That it's become essential unless you see what you're like without it?"

"What?"

What kind of oracle gives up in the middle?

* * *

"No motor?" she could hear Arthur say. Had she been asleep? She opened her eyes. There was bay everywhere. The sails looked like drying laundry. Penelope was lying next to her. What did they do now?

Arthur and her father were both standing, hands on their hips.

"No, Arthur," Michael was saying. "No. No motor."

She looked. The nearest land seemed to be miles away.

Penelope roused herself. "What now, skipper?"

Her father looked glum.

"Paddle," Penelope said.

“Paddle?” responded Arthur.
“Yes, Arthur, paddle. Paddle. How else do you propose we get back? Do you intend to grow wings?” Penelope stood up. “Excuse me,” she said. She looked ahead. Mary tried to follow her gaze. The sea was completely flat. The boat began to move forward sluggishly.

Behind them, the boys were making a go of it. She inadvertently monitored their strokes to see if one or the other was pulling harder. She considered but decided against offering to help. That she did this surprised her. But as the time passed, she forgot she had considered it. Occasionally Arthur or Michael grunted. Arthur had taken off his sunglasses. Michael took off his shirt. Her father looked at the horizon and every now and then adjusted their direction. Then he looked at Penelope and looked away.

“You see the boat almost protests. It doesn't want to move forward like this, so you could imagine what it would mean to have a motor,” Penelope said. “Against nature. This is fine anyway. I feel like the Queen of Sheba.”

That's what she was like. And meanwhile her father was just standing there.

Her father never took a hand in how things turned out for him. It wasn't that he was easy going, more that he relied on others for momentum and then felt guilty about it. The trip was interminable. Occasionally, the boys put their oars down and watched. The wind did not blow. Penelope stayed in the bow staring forward as if her eyes could pull the shore toward them. She let them rest briefly then yelled, “Pull!” Mary imagined mutiny might be imminent. She let her arm troll in the water.

“You should spell them,” Penelope said. She said it so gently that at first Mary thought she'd heard wrong. “Help, when it matters. They remember.”

Mary rolled over and stood up. The world looked darker than it had. She felt as if she'd woken from a dream of brightness. A seagull flew overhead. She sat down next to Michael who kept rowing.

"I'm supposed to relieve you," she said. She half expected him to say, you did already.

"Why not him?"

Arthur did not look up.

"Fine with me," she said and went back to sit next to her father.

Her father put a hand on her shoulder. "Never miss a chance to learn how to do something," he said. What was this, the oracle boat? The S.S. Life Advice? She took the steering implement, "the tiller," Penelope had explained — a polished piece of wood — where did the name come from? Farming? "The tiller," she said, appreciatively, pathetically, hopelessly.

"There's a wind ahead now. Ten strong!" Penelope called out, and addressing Mary, "Skipper, aim us just to starboard."

Mary looked up and Penelope pointed to the right just beyond the far end of Minister's Island. Mary did her best to aim that way. She felt her hair move slightly. Heard the sails flutter.

"Trim the sails!" Penelope called. Her father pulled first on one rope, then another. "The sheet! The jib sheet!" Penelope yelled. Michael pulled a rope behind him and the forward sail billowed and tightened.

"Now the main! Mary!"

She looked around her. A thick length of rope presented itself. She pulled and pulled again. A sound like water dripping somewhere became the sound of a babbling brook. Michael pulled a third time and secured the rope. Mary gripped the tiller, which pulled at her; the boat lifted as the sails filled. "Keep the tiller in the center or pulled towards you," Penelope yelled. "Try not to let us move too far off course. Now boys, oars in and heads down, watch the boom!" The thick pole under the sail slammed across overhead.

If only one person really knew how to use the thing that was shared was it really shared? She looked at her father. How much did he regret not knowing how to sail? He had been really good at keeping this boat in the barn. What would it have meant to him each year to sail? If he had known how to sail, would he have had a different life? Been a different person? And what about her father

after all? He had been — could she even think it? — shared. She cringed. Was Penelope better at him too?

The wind was strong now and she could begin to pick out details on the island's shore: trees, a clearing. Mary began looking for the hunting lodge, even though it was too early — the lodge was around the corner. She thought Michael was looking too.

“Keep on course!” Penelope yelled. “Pick a tree on shore and stick to it tightly.”

How tightly was tightly enough? She was aware that she was an approximator. Would that be enough? What if life was like this — pick a tree and aim for it and then do your best to keep paying attention. She had slipped already. She would surely slip again.

Michael reached back and steadied the tiller. It seemed like he had barely moved it, but he let go again and looked forward. Half jokingly she counteracted his adjustment. She liked this sailing. And the truth was, she liked Michael here. Penelope raised her arm, pointing in the direction Michael had turned the boat. Mary turned back. How did Michael know these things? But he had known how once. Why had she never learned? She picked a tree on that angle and attempted to stick to it.

They rounded the island. There was a roll now on the surface of the water and the boat sledged up and down. Penelope moved forward slightly, blocking the tree that Mary had been steering by. Penelope indicated the space bordered by the green buoy and a red harbor buoy to the right. “Just like that,” she called. “Red right returning.” Then she stared at the ocean. Now Mary would have to steer by Penelope.

Mary tried to do as she'd been told, but each roll seemed to push them to the left toward the island beach. She didn't want to look in that direction even though now, when she did, she could see the hunting cabin very clearly. Michael was looking that way too. Look, she said to herself. Look.

“Hold it!” Penelope called.

“Hold it!” Michael echoed.

“Hold what?”

She was slipping again.

"We're not going to make it," Penelope called. "Michael! Take us around again."

Michael jumped up and put his hand on the tiller too, smiling at her, and pushed it into her stomach. The boat turned back out to sea, then ran parallel to both buoys.

"Ready about! Arthur grab the sheet. No the other one!" Arthur pulled, looking resentful. They sailed toward Mashinticook harbor for a while, then on Penelope's command — she was bossy as a sailor, wasn't she? But that was the point — cut back on an angle that split the buoys, closer to the red.

"More water here," Michael explained. There's water everywhere, why more here?

"Okay, in a minute, I'll need you boys up here to help me," Penelope said.

Michael offered Mary back the tiller and dutifully went up. Arthur stayed where he was.

"Both of you please!"

Arthur followed.

"Arthur's right," her father said.

"About what?" Mary asked

"The place is in suspended animation — stopped by someone else's rules and hopes. Someone else's circumstances. It should just become what it really is —"

"What?" "A single farm, the form it was before."

"So much for sharing," Mary said.

"Where has sharing gotten us? Failing at someone else's idea of how things should be and as a result holding back what might have come next — what might have occurred naturally."

"What might that have been?"

A fair redistribution according to circumstance, desire.

"Mary! We're going to lower one sail and I want you to come into the wind as we come up on the mooring."

Penelope indicated a large balloon-like thing on the surface with the word "Guest" on it framed by two rowboats just in front of it.

"Come between them," Penelope explained.

Michael was looking back at her. He was checking to see whether she was ready, or paying attention, or needed replacing. No, no, she could handle it. She wouldn't let the group down.

"Cut!"

"Which way is the wind coming from?" she whispered.

Her father stuck his finger in his mouth and put it up as if he were scoring a point. "From there," he said, indicating the mainland to their right.

"Drop the jib!" Penelope called.

Michael scurried back, let loose a rope, the sail in the bow fell. They kept coming toward the two rowboats and the mooring at a good clip — too good a clip in fact.

"Cut!"

"I think she means turn," Mary said out loud. "But I'm headed straight for it."

"Turn into the wind just as we come close, then the boat will stop," Michael was standing next to her, guiding her, telling her what to do, he was — the rowboats suddenly floated gently towards each other.

Crash! The Dowager bumped one and then the other rowboat. Mary pulled the tiller towards her and the boat came up into the wind perfectly and onto the balloon. The main sail came crashing down. Arthur leaned over the edge and came up with the rope. He tied it down.

"Got it!"

They were safe. But Mary's pulse was still racing. On the way home, she noticed twin scars of blue paint across the Dowager's bow.

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By the time they got to the party, festivities had been underway for some time. The sun was setting and the Morrison cousins were spread out around the edge of the tennis court. Michael came over.

"The poor boat," Mary said.

"You did fine," he said. "And you look nice." She did. She was wearing tennis clothes, but she'd thought about how she was going to look, how she was going to be with him —

"Hey fancy pants!" Selena yelled from the sideline. For some reason, Michael was wearing a pair of bright green checked shorts.

Stepping out on the tennis court, Mary closed her eyes, briefly. This is what she knew. This was her space; her footprints were marked along the alley and along the baseline and at the net. So too were Penelope's, and her rival Drince and others. And whom after her? A little Mary? A mini Michael? Children? She imagined them like sprites, like flashes of light, waiting outside the chain link. If the ball went out would they pass it in? Or would her Grandmother Hewitt? She had the sense it could be either. They matched up for doubles — Mary and Arthur against Michael and Sonia — and began warming up; the sun gleamed orange, bugs hummed, a miss-hit ball wacked the fence with a thwap-thwap-ting! This was their time; they needed to make the best of it. The fence simply differentiated between then and now and future then; the Har-Tru surface was like a moving sidewalk. Grandmother had passed through and their kids would be coming. Serve! Play! Understand that even though your time isn't forever, it is now.

Mary served first to Michael. He hit the ball back hard. She returned it, attempting to pass him and he countered with a shot she had to scoop off the baseline. To her surprise, Sonia got the ball back — as if accidentally — feeding Arthur, who tapped it back to Michael who slugged it back to Mary, who got the passing shot she had meant to get earlier for the first point.

She would have to serve better — to him — while being careful to tone it down for Sonia. Ugh, a calibrated game — two speeds at

once. The lower speed would always win out. She served gently and Sonia returned harder than she had expected; Arthur got there and hit the ball at Michael from the net. Michael missed the shot, grumbling, and they had their point. On the next point, Michael returned her serve at Arthur's head, but he managed to get his racket up in time to stop it and tap it back over. Without meaning to, on her next serve, she aced Sonia.

She had forgotten how good Michael was. Still, she could beat him. The question was how Sonia and Arthur would match up and how she and Michael would account for playing them. Would Michael adapt down too? What if she did and he didn't? Michael and Arthur still seemed to be angry at each other. Anger could help or hurt. She thought anger made Michael lose his serve in the next game, and could possibly account for why Arthur won his. Sonia's game appeared to be solid in every aspect but her serve and so they were soon ahead four-love.

Now was the time she should think about giving them a game. Penelope had taught her this courtesy thing. "I gave her a game," she would say. "It would have been wrong not to." Of course Penelope had beaten Mary six love, six love in her first real match after their banishment. Mary still owed her for that one.

She was suddenly conscious of the fact that her parents were now on the sidelines.

She served and aced Michael. There was no point in giving points. She aced Sonia. Two more to go. Michael now. The ball went in, but too slowly. Michael returned the serve right at Arthur, who hit the ball down the alley. Now Sonia. Could she — like that? Everything stopped. The late afternoon sun bathed them in soft orange. She had to play as herself; she didn't give games — they were not hers to give. But tennis was. She wound up to serve and hit the net. She tried again, too quickly and double faulted.

"The Ice Princess melts!" Selena yelled. Now she was back to Michael.

She looked at him. There had been something in the sailing. Where he had had to be in charge. Tell her what to do. She wound

up to serve, she served and aced him for the set. She and Arthur walked to the net and they both shook Sonia's hand. Arthur shook Michael's hand but when Mary reached for Michael's hand, he looked away. She put her arms around his neck and locked her fingers. She felt him stiffen. She closed her eyes and kissed him. He seemed to relent. When she opened her eyes, she realized everyone was still watching now in silence. There was spontaneous, polite applause.

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After the tennis came the barbecue on Penelope's beach. Penelope was chef. She wore a tennis cap and a serious expression. Why was she in charge of everything?

"You're being very careful," Penelope said.

"Of what?"

"In the game certainly, but you could afford to; but with Michael too, as if he might fall apart if you ever barked at him."

"What if I don't want to bark at him?"

Four hot dogs and three hamburgers sizzled on the grill on front of her. The partygoers were circulating into camps. The Morrison cousins still sat by the tennis court, now with beer and food. Her parents stood with Arthur in the middle of the lawn.

Careful.

"It's important not to waste time. Not yours, not someone else's," Penelope said.

"You're just like mother — worried about time."

"We have less of it —" Penelope flipped a burger and placed it expertly on a bun someone handed to her. It was Mary's father. "It is never an easy thing to be sure of, whether one's heart is in something. Hard to tell the difference."

Her father put ketchup on his hamburger and closed the bun. It was dusk now. The sun was setting over the island and her father's and Penelope's features were in shadow.

"Well, Captain," Penelope said.

"I guess not," her father said.

"No, I guess not," Penelope repeated.

Out in the middle of the lawn, Michael was talking to Mary's mother. She forced herself to look — but they seemed happy enough — her mother was laughing.

She should go over. Michael was talking.



Michael was soon drunk. As the event wore on, he started trying to kiss her. It was as if he wanted everyone to see that they could kiss. Which was definitely not something anyone needed to see any more of.

She wanted to get him out of there. But before she could manage it, he and Arthur got into some kind of argument. Arthur the burgeoning landowner. Trying to explain himself. Belligerently.

"I just meant...."

"Just because you come and we don't, doesn't mean you care more about the place. Just means your family has more money, more time. Doesn't mean you get to tell us to give up. We might hold on forever. Why not? Yeah, why the hell not?"

"What?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Don't think what?"

"That we give a fuck."

Arthur reached both arms back and pushed Michael, knocking him down. He did not immediately get up. Mary ran over to him.

"That's enough," she said to Arthur.

"Come fucking back next year," Arthur said. "Again and again. See if you like it — you don't like it. I don't like it. Keep coming back. Fall in love with it, but you can't ever have it, never, ever, no matter how close you get, how tied up in it, love it til your death — it won't die, only you will."

After a while Michael got up and her mother came over and began talking to him again. Mary drifted away and stood near Arthur. She could see Michael and her mother laughing again, resuming their previous joke; she could suddenly imagine her mother as a young woman. She was gleaming. Was she impressed? But why with him? Trying to make him feel better? Michael was swaying a little bit. Arthur was standing next to her and seemed fine. Mary gave him a cold beer.

"He deserved it," Mary said.

"I deserve it now," Arthur said.

"Do you really love it here?"

"I hate how much I want it," Arthur said.

Mary held a beer in her hand. The sky turned an orangey red and then red and the redness seemed to drain the light out of the sky. Did she want it too? In what seemed like minutes, it was dark. All of a sudden, blue and red plumes burst across the sky and cascaded earthward, creations formed and reformed in the air, explosions, shots, embers. The fireworks had begun.

She looked for Michael and her mother and couldn't find them so she just watched and drank. Night was always so dark in Mashinticook. Where the plumes weren't, the stars gleamed. Suddenly, she felt Michael's hand on her arm.

"Let's go," he said.

"Where?"

"To our house. Got a car."

She had no idea how Michael had gotten ahold of a car, particularly in his current condition, but it was waiting at the bottom of Penelope's driveway, lights on and humming. For some reason, she at first found this funny; Michael wanted to drive across the Ghost. They started across. He had a bottle of something he'd snatched from the party: Champagne?

"Let's go skinny-dipping," she said, or meant to say.

They started across the road. Michael was laughing. About how stupid he had sounded arguing with Arthur, about Arthur. Now he was imitating Arthur, nervous, angry. Now he was swerving in time

to the radio, making the car dance. Then, the car was no longer dancing, but stuck. Michael revved the engine, making it worse.

Mary got out, slamming her door. Now he'd done it. "You idiot," she said.

He got out of the car too, laughing, answered in the voice of Arthur. "You should sell. After all, you don't even know how to get a car across the Ghost."

"Stop it!" Mary yelled.

A swell of red sand was visible in the headlights.

Michael still thought it was funny. She started laughing too. It was sort of funny. They were all so serious. They weren't even 20. They wouldn't have to worry about owning property for years. Especially not this property.

They tried pushing the car, revving the engine again, but it only lodged the car more tightly. The sounds of the party filtered down to the shore.

Michael said he would go and get somebody to help. He said that it was all right. He walked for a while and then she thought she could see him in the dark distance, pausing.

"Go on! Go!"

Michael loved her and didn't want to let her out of his sight for even one small second.

There was a noise on the shore and she froze. Was there someone else there?

Michael said, "You're ashamed of me."

"I'm not."

"Because I'm not as good as you are. Only a cousin. I'm going — I'll sho—"

"Go to hell," she said, quietly.

"Canada's not hell," he said. "But close."

Then he was gone and there was silence. She was sitting on the hood, then on the roof. There was nothing but the cold of the night and the water's gentle, persistent lapping. First, it came slowly. It seemed to seep. She was cursing, "Shit, Shit." Then, it encircled the car and reached the wheels. She stared into the darkness, willing

him to come. She could see nothing but the dark mass of Penelope's woods and the solitary streetlight where the Ghost Road ended and the land road up the hill beside the properties began. She slid off the car and waded to the far shore to wait.

She wished she had a flashlight or that they had left the tent over on the island. She sat on a large rock and watched the car gradually submerge and then the street light, her last link to civilization, flicker and go out.

He would come like in Orpheus and Eurydice and get her. Find her and then turn around and walk back and she would follow and if he didn't look back, she would know. She would find out if his heart was in it. Because, if it wasn't, if he didn't, she would just give up. So she would wait. She would learn.

After a while, she imagined she had never been to the other side. That it was a place she'd only dreamed about. She smoked a pack of cigarettes, periodically holding her ash up to her wristwatch to keep track of the time. At around two in the morning, the road became passable again and she went and looked inside the car. Tried to remember whose it was. The door opened but the light didn't go on. It was very wet. The car wouldn't start. She went back to her rock.

Dawn. Light came slowly. She saw it first to her left, at the island's Eastern end, a tiny pinpoint, as if someone were flashing a pen light through a hole in a black wall. At first the light seemed very faint, but it was met, almost immediately, by the sound of birds, hundreds of them, thousands, squawking, chirping, debating, singing, arguing. They kept on for a good fifteen minutes, then stopped. As if on cue, the sky turned a deep purple with sections of pink, then softened and slowly brightened further, turning a porcelain blue. The water turned blue too but remained completely flat. She became aware of a humming sound; she thought it was either a chain saw or a motor — in front of her, on the other shore, now distant, now near, a motorboat was on its way — Michael at last.

But it wasn't Michael at all. As the boat came closer, she could see that the hair was wrong, he was too thin. It was a fisherman, yet he looked familiar.

"I told you he was no good," he said, efficiently turning off and pulling up his motor and beaching his boat.

"Charlie!"

"Yes, Ma'am. Now may I have the honor of taking you home?"

It was the same Charlie as always: Thin, with black hair, full of mystery, not ungoofy. There was a rug on the floor of the boat, two bright red gas tanks gleamed.

"All the comforts of home," he said. "Except the TV set."

She kissed him on the cheek. "You're a prince."

"Do you mind if we take a detour?"

They went north around the island, leaving a wide V-shaped wake in the still slumbering ocean. The shore looked like a children's book illustration — acres of pines topped with green swirls for branches, patches of green field, a giant silver barn with silos like turrets gleaming in the rising sun. An osprey circled, then an eagle. The green harbor buoy bounced along with the tide. They passed weirs, inlets, coves. He didn't speak until they rounded the Southeastern corner of the island and were heading home again.

"You deserve better," he said. "I wish I were the one to give it to you, but I'm not."

She reddened, kissed him again, this time on the lips.

* * *

When she got home, her family was not up yet. She got a cup of coffee and sat alone at the dining room table. She imagined that her mother must have done this more times than she could count. She sat very quietly. It was as if she could feel the house settle around her like a coat onto her shoulders.

