

DOGS



# DOGS

1

“And in the fifty-ninth minute of the twenty-third hour on the sixth day, God created Maine.” Tabitha half-grinned at Trent, indicating she was only half teasing. He smiled back, enjoying her commentary as they sped forever north.

“I feel like Lisa Douglas from that old TV show, going off to Green Acres,” she said.

“You’ve been using that joke since Connecticut. And it doesn't even fit; that was a farm.”

“She was someplace desolate, Kansas, Maine, makes no difference.”

Trent rolled down the window and stuck his head out.

“Put that up,” she screamed above the wind. “You’ll wake the kids.”

He heard but feigned temporary deafness. He was joined by Mop, their black and white Biewer, who jumped into his lap to hang her head out the window. Trent turned to Tabitha. “Put your window down and stick your head out.”

“I will not.”

Trent took a deep breath. “Smell that?”

“Ewww, I think Mop took a dump.” One of the twins, Ricky, had been awakened by the wild rush of wind.

“It’s the ocean, low tide.”

“What’s that?” Ricky asked.

“Put the window up,” Tabitha told him again.

He did, and it was as if the car had plunged into a vacuum it was so suddenly quiet. “It’s when the ocean is closest to the moon so the moon pulls the tides away from the shore,” he called over his shoulder.

“Nah,” Ricky said. “It’s Mop.”

“This smells nothing like poop. This is seaweed and dead fish.”

“God, dad, we gonna be smelling that every day?”

“If we're lucky.”

They were leaving Reston, Virginia. Tabitha, his wife, was hoping Maine was just something he had to get out of his system. Reston, he declared, was what he had to get out of his system.

The nine-year old twins, Ricky and Jeremy weren't old enough to be familiar with leaving family and friends behind. They had been traveling nearly thirteen hours, but to them Autumnwood Drive would always be just minutes away and around the corner. No one but Trent was for the move, but no one else had a choice.

Trent Aress was the Washington front man for a California lobbying firm that represented several defense contractors. He won his bona fides as a grant writer for several small midwestern colleges. He had been a lobbyist for thirteen years, five of them pre-marriage. He enjoyed most of it, but the work, the location, with the cross-country travel and intense stress, was never his dream. That was here in Maine where he spent his boyhood summers on his grandfather’s potato farm.

In his heart he was a relic from the nineteenth century even as he hobnobbed with the power brokers of D.C. Over drinks or coffee, the talk would most always turn to life-after D.C. Few had visions of staying in town for long. The Capital was little more than a staging area for politicians, civil servants, and lobbyists. Most were heading out to join big firms as captains of industry. He used to hide his humble ambition until he became comfortable in his skin. Now, it drew stares, mostly blank, and questions that usually ended with raised eyebrows and a shake of the head.

It wasn't a whim, he told Tabitha early on. She wanted kids right away, two would be optimum. He obliged. His plan? They'd be raised in Maine when the time was right. They'd learn to work boats on the ocean, sail, deep-sea fish, maybe even become lobstermen. That time had nothing to do with OBD, One-Bad-Day on the job. It would be right when he felt it. He'd let her know.

Meanwhile, he kept abreast of the Maine business environment and real estate, more specifically the service industry and motels. He had the money, saved and invested since before his marriage, he told Tabitha on the day he quit his job.

"You'll like it," he told her. "No, you'll love it."

From the age of seven to fourteen, he spent his entire summers in Maine. He couldn't pack fast enough from home in St. Louis to get there, and he hated leaving in August. "The life grows on you," he said.

"So do liver spots."

"No, it does. This shit I'm working, it doesn't touch me. I have no ownership. It's a way to make money, that's all."

"Good money," she said.

"Is money good for the way you make it, or the way you use it?"

"Well, from my end that's a no-brainer."

She was from Vienna, Virginia, a town that boasted of great schools, a thriving downtown, a Metrorail station, and a chunk of the Washington and Old Dominion railroad which they tore up to make a biking and hiking path. "They had to make a place to walk and ride a bike," he would chide her. "They had to tear up railroad tracks so you could walk without getting run over. What's that tell you?"

But she loved it. Even Reston was too far away at ten miles. "That's because ten miles around here is a forty-five minute drive," he'd say whenever she rose to applaud her hometown. "In Maine ..." And she could fill in the rest, so often had she heard it each time he cursed the D.C. traffic, people, buildings, noise. *In Maine, you can walk for ten miles and the only vehicle you'll see is a John Deere. In Maine the loudest noise at night are the waves crashing against a jetty. In Maine, you can watch a bird fly for ten miles and then some.*

The only things she ever found remotely interesting about Maine was that it was the only state with one syllable; and Eastport, the eastern most city in the country, was the first one to see the sun in the morning. "See," Trent said, "that's kismet." "No," she said, "it's fifth grade geography."

For so many years she heard it as bluster born of frustration. But as the time drew closer, it worried her. He began perusing the Internet for motels-for-sale. He was subscribing to magazines like *Yankee*, *Mainebiz*, and *Down East*. And he was reading them. Cover to cover. Dog-eared pages on industrial kitchens and cabin renovation. He even had a Bedandbreakfast.com shortcut on his desktop.

He would attempt to impress with such tidbits as, "you know ninety percent of the country's blueberries come from Maine?"

"Hundred percent of ours come from Safeway."

"And ninety percent of the country's toothpicks. They have a state cat. There are over 3100 islands. York was the first official city in America. It has enough deep water harbors to dock every naval fleet in the world. Most people don't know this stuff."

"Most people don't care," she'd say. "Anything in those magazines that might remotely interest me?"

"It's home to LL Bean."

"Not even close."

A month ago he sprang it on her over breakfast. He tossed eight, 5-by-7 colored photographs on her strawberry jelly-covered English muffin. "Whatta ya think?" he said.

She wiped the jelly off the glossies. "Looks like something from Somalia."

"It's a vacant motel," he said.

"No wonder."

Trent held one up. "Know what this one is?"

"Smudges on a windshield?"

"Our motel from space."

"*Our* motel."

"Six guest rooms and three cabins."

That was when he told her about his life savings; the one they could have used to replace their worn carpets, their ancient refrigerator, their scarred living room furniture, their outdated master bedroom set. He told her his timing couldn't be better. Interest rates were low. Unemployment was down. Property values were heading up as was expendable income.

Stryker John Island of Washington County, off-season population 43; seasonal population, about the same, eastern-most county in the U.S, encompassing Eastport, the only place in Maine Tabitha knew a thing about. It was ten miles from the mainland, Nuthatch Cove, another metropolis of 500, swelling to near 2,500 in summer.

The motel he purchased wasn't nearly as bad as the photos suggested, the realtor assured him. Trent checked it out himself the weekend before he bought it. That was his emergency trip back to St. Louis, so he told Tabitha to avoid another argument. Good thing he went too. There was an near-binding offer that he trumped with an amount twenty-five grand over asking. Still fifty thousand below what he was willing to spend. He'd used that to rehab the old place.

Tabitha was incensed he would do such a thing without her knowledge, input, or concurrence. She was taught by her father to be skeptical of all things she couldn't inspect for herself. That included people, places, and things. "This island doesn't even have a Wikipedia page," she said.

"Yeah," he said, "Isn't it great?"

"Do we get our own house?" she asked.

"There's one."

"You have photos of it?"

"No."

"I see. Not a priority for you."

“Not really, but you'll love it. If you think it needs work, I'll do it or we'll get it done. Mainiacs love helping people out. It's the bartering system. You got a skill, you can trade it for food, labor, equipment, just about anything. My grandfather did it all the time. He was a wizard with farm equipment.”

“And just what is your lobbying expertise gonna get for us?” she asked.

“Lobbying might come in handy, never know.”

They drove Maine's undulating topography that rose and fell as if the waves of the nearby ocean. The kids and Mop were antsy. Tabitha was uneasy. Trent was immersed in the rapture of the journey. This coastline, rich and abundant since the beginning of time, had been a bounty for generations. To centuries of early travelers who passed through, it offered little more than fish and forest. But there was more. Much more. As much as each heart and mind could hold. The distance he and Tabitha had traveled could not be measured in miles alone.

## DOGS

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Trent hadn't looked at a map since leaving Reston. There was no need. The destination was as natural to him as cradle to grave. He pushed off and drove his family as did the stalwart pioneers before him. He was on the move, looking for space, fulfilling a restless spirit to live beyond what life had to offer, demanding instead what he could take from life. Instead of expanding with the mass of humanity, Trent was looking to be solitary. In a world big with complexities, he wanted only its vastness.

Their last stop before Stryker John Island was Eagle Grove to fill up and eat at Lewright's Deli. They then sped fifty-five miles north to Nuthatch Cove and the ferry. It took them an hour and a half, though there were few stoplights and fewer cars. Trent drove slow, insisting on taking in the scenery which Ricky said hadn't changed a darn in the past three hours.

It was early April. Trent wanted a solid two months on the ground before tourist season began. January would have been his choice but Tabitha wanted to be home for her mother's birthday and the birth of her first niece. And winter in Maine had less appeal to her than the state itself. Only Trent knew the transformation spring would bring.

The boys perked up when their father said they had just five short miles to go. They passed a service station that quadrupled as a feed store, bait shop, and grocery mart. There was just one road down to Nuthatch Cove and back out. From their vantage point the town looked old and run down. Tabitha's heart sank. She was holding on to the smallest of hopes.

Trent marveled at the slices of glacier rock still coated with scattered layers of crusted snow and fast ice. Seagulls cut the sky like the mighty aircraft out of Andrews Air Force Base. This entire world was thick with the smell of ocean. It was a kingdom. The buildings that lay upon it were ancillary to the land, pedestrian structures meant only to assist in any way deemed appropriate by the people who ruled here.

They sat quiet and long in the vehicle as it made its way on the ferry across the bay. "They knew we were coming," Tabitha said.

"These are all good, caring folks. You'll see; they're all about helping one another."

Really? All good folk? She wasn't feeling Trent's kinship. The ferry boat pilot greeted them with this head-bobbing discourse, "So you the folks who bought the motel. Busy winter, bringing all those workers and equipment out there. Haven't seen the place yet but will. Lotta work done looks like. Gotta be nicer than it was. Don't go asking Abe Carver if he likes it. He don't."

He didn't sound excited about them or the motel. He spoke only to Trent; his tone dull and disinterested. And when Trent spoke, with the lobbyist voice that never failed to charm and cajole, it fell flat on this man who appeared to have gone suddenly deaf. Even those extra fares from the workers he'd been taking over to the island sounded like a nuisance. And who was this Abe Carver? If Trent knew, he wasn't saying.

Out of excitement or fear, Mop bounced left to right, from lap to lap, panting and whining through the partially open windows. Tabitha had them put back up to deaden the roar of the twin 450 horsepower engines. It didn't stop Mop from her frantic dance as she licked, pawed, and banged her snub nose on the glass. "She's gonna pee," Jeremy said.

"She's not going to pee," Tabitha hoped.

"Yes she is, she always does."

"Well take her out on the deck."

"Cool," Ricky said, "I'll take her."

"Both of you go," Tabitha said.

This was sure to be a big world for Mop. Ricky gave her the name. As a puppy, the twins would slide her across the kitchen floor to each other. When Tabitha scolded them to stop, Jeremy would tell her they were helping to clean the house. "She's not a mop," she told them, "she just looks like one. "She is today," Ricky said.

Though she no longer allowed herself to be so abused (she'd scurry behind Tabitha's legs to escape) she never grew out of squeezing her full seven pounds into the tightest places. They'd find her under the sofa cushions, between the cushions and armrest, under furniture and beds, and behind the dryer. Finding her was never easy. She heard the calls and whistles but ignored them. No one fretted when she didn't respond; she eventually came out, but the fear was they would sit on her or worse.

She was Tabitha's dog, bought for her by Trent when the twins were five. It was meant as a joke when Tabitha complained the boys were no longer infants. "Wouldn't it be nice to have a little one around again? One who never grew up?" He brought Mop home a week later.

Tabitha was a good sport about it. It would be great for the boys to learn responsibility and not fear dogs like so many of her friends' kids. It was certainly an added benefit that she would never get heavier than her handbag.

Tabitha named her Alice, after her great aunt who died when Tabitha was six. But with Trent and the boys calling her Mop it was senseless to add another name. Though she fed and coddled her, and the boys wrestled with her, it was Trent's near neglect that Mop most gravitated to. It was if she was working hard to earn his attention.

The engines shot into reverse as the ferry approached the island dock. Tabitha rolled down the window and called to the boys. They jumped into the backseat and Ricky dumped the

shaking dog between them. "You should have seen her, mom. We put her on the floor and she vibrated all the way across it."

"The deck," Trent said. "The floor of a boat's called a deck."

"Yeah. She just kept vibrating and couldn't stop," Jeremy said, "It was so funny."

"Oh, she's still shaking." Tabitha reached around and pulled Mop onto her lap.

"Home," Trent murmured when they landed.

There was something very childlike in the way he spoke the word, like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, awoken from her frightful dream. Maybe he had been, too. At the breakfast table that morning he broke open his inner child. "I thought I went to the farm because my grandfather wanted me there," he told her. "I was ten before I realized that wasn't the case. Summer was the time my old man used to get away from us. He'd go off to god-knows-where. I don't know if it was to the end of the world or the end of the block. My mother sent me up to Maine so I wouldn't notice. My two sisters were too young to get it. By the time they did, none of us gave a crap about him or the family. But I kept up like I didn't know. I kept it up because I loved being in Maine as much as I hated being home.

"I know you have your family back here," he continued, "but Maine is all I have worth holding onto. This is my chance to take something and make it mine. And really, it's not that far away and with the motel we can block off rooms whenever we want so they can come stay with us. They'll love it up here, you'll see."

She couldn't argue his point. It was the only event of his past he showed any passion for. He didn't even display photos of his parents, both now deceased, or his sisters whom she had met only twice, last time at their wedding.

Trent knew what it took to put window dressing onto the most desperate situations. It was, after all, how he had made his living. He had the place fixed up from what he told her and the ferry captain confirmed. The island was now cold, barren, and lonely for the winter months he warned her, but at least the living would be comfortable. So while he tended to the harsh realities it would take to make this business thrive, she could maintain the family with a modicum of security. But that was to be another miscalculation.

The main house was a circa 1850 cedar-shingle structure which had been empty for nearly six years. Someone had been back to clean out the cobwebs, mouse droppings, and anything else you'd expect to find, but it had seen its last serious renovations somewhere in the 1970's. It was linoleum, wrought iron, faux wood paneling, and sculpted carpets of assorted greens, harvest gold, and aqua blue. There were several hanging lamps left behind. As the wind rattled the looser parts of the structure, Tabitha stood by the ancient windows. The cold bit through her. Hence, the need for the heavy, dark drapes.

"It's big and sturdy," Trent announced. "The way they used to make 'em."

"It smells," Ricky said.

"Go upstairs and pick out your bedrooms."

"Not alone," Tabitha yelled behind them as they bee-lined for the stairs.

Ricky halted. Trent shot her a quizzical look.

"You don't know what kind of shape it is up there," she said.

"Fine, I'll go with them," Trent said.

It was getting dark. Outside a cold, wet blanket was being drawn over them. There was a small porch, more of a platform, off the kitchen door. She looked out at it dispassionately. The old movies her parents adored, she watched with no romantic affection. That banging screen



door and the steady breeze that sensually teased the heroine's loose strands of hair had no effect on her. She saw it for what it was, what she was feeling now. Isolation. Emptiness. A feeling that whatever was pulling her husband in was pushing her away.

The boys bounded downstairs having caught their father's enthusiasm. "Can we sleep here tonight?" Jeremy asked.

"No. There's no furniture."

"Dad packed our sleeping bags," Ricky said.

"How thoughtful."

"That was the last ferry of the day," Trent said from the stairway. "We're stuck." He tried to smile his way out of it but her harsh stare struck him down.

"We need to talk," she said.

Trent waved the boys upstairs as the last rays of sun vanished. "Take Mop with you so he can get comfortable."

"That makes me feel good," Tabitha said, "concerned with the dog's comfort but not mine."

"The movers will be here tomorrow; I paid Hack an extra hundred to make an early trip over."

"Who?"

"Hack, the ferry boat pilot."

"But this place, I thought you were fixing it up?"

"Not the main house, the rooms and cabins. We need to be ready for tourist season."

She spread her arms. "But — "

"It's livable enough for now. We'll get it done, you'll see. It's just ... not the priority."

"Oh, okay, I'm not a priority."

"No, see? I *knew* you'd twist it that way."

"There's another way to interpret that?"

"Tabitha, we're running a business. All businesses when they start out need certain things, and they can't be done all at once. So you prioritize."

"Don't patronize me, Trent."

"I'm not; I'm explaining. What good is it if this place is done to the nines but the guest areas are trashed, and trust me, Tabitha, they were trashed. I mean, not even livable. Mold, dead bugs, water damage, I mean, you don't even wanna know."

"And you bought it why?"

"The potential." He went to the window and pulled the drapes back. The sunlight was gone. "Well, hard to see now but the ocean, the beauty, the solitude. So many people are looking for that."

"So many aren't."

He stared at her as he let the drapes fall. "Why you doing that?" He saw that puzzled look on her face. "And that. First you say something very argumentative, then you come on with a look like you don't know it."

"You're serving a lot of masters here, Trent, I don't think you can accommodate them all."

He walked outside, what he had planned to do since getting into the house, this early confrontation just making it more urgent. He started down the road to their nearest neighbor. Three days a week, thirty minutes each day, he hit the treadmill at *Fitness First*. But after just

half a mile on this gravel road his inner thighs ached. He smiled. This world would test his mettle on many levels.

He was breathing hard when he arrived at the house. He wasn't even sure anyone was home, but then, where would one go? The town center, if it could be called one, was nearly four miles away. He walked around the side which ignited the bark of a serious dog. Then two. The thick-coated German Shepherds jumped from the shadows behind the house. Trent heard the rattling of the heavy chains, but even so, the temper of the animals threatened to tear them loose. He had no time to regain composure or to settle his heart when the front door crashed open and an old man who normally wouldn't have the legs for such a thing, raced forward with a shotgun at port arms. "Who the fuck are you?" was his greeting.

Trent threw his hands up. The dogs strained mightily against their chains. "Neighbor ... from up there," he said in a panicky twitter.

The old man thrust the right side of his head towards him. "Who?"

"Trent Aress. I just moved in up the road."

The shepherds continued their offensive, digging at the ground to their front, leaning on their haunches for traction. The old man poked the muzzle of the shotgun into a dog's face to force them back. He lowered the shotgun, much slower than Trent would have liked. "Yeah?"

"I saw your light on. Thought I'd come down to pay a visit."

The man eyed him cautiously. "Put your damn hands down."

Now it was cold. The adrenaline had left him and his muscles remained tense. He began to shake and his teeth chattered uncontrollably.

"Whatsa matter," the old man asked, "got some kinda palsy?"

"It's cold."

The man looked around. "Suppose it is."

"That's quite a pair of dogs," Trent said, nodding to the corner of the house. "Kinda aggressive."

"Very aggressive."

"Yeah. You got anymore hanging around I should watch out for?"

"Huh? Yeah, could be." Even with the absence of light the old man squinted and pursed his lips, making Trent very nervous, as if the man might inopportunistly mistake him for a bear and shoot him.

"What are their names?"

"Names is dog."

"Okay. I'm Trent Aress. Guess I already told you that. And your name is?"

He turned his back to Trent and walked away. With a slight wobble, he disappeared back into his house muttering, "Don't want no visitor; don't want no neighbor."

When Trent got back home the boys were laying on the floor, their heads resting on Tabitha's lap. They were tucked away into the furthest corner of the living room. By flashlight she was reading to them, *Love You Forever*. She stopped as the three looked up at him. "I think I just met Abe Carver," he said.

# DOGS

3

Stryker John Island was named after its first full-time resident, whose true name was never known. It measured eleven miles at its longest, by five and a half mile at its widest. The Passamaquoddy Tribe were its first known inhabitants but were driven off over the centuries to a plot of land that now measures just over two miles squared.

That left behind a man who called himself Stryker. No one knew it to be his first name, last name, or nickname. And since the island offered nothing the mainland didn't have, no one much cared. The curiosity of him existed only for being the one white man allowed a plot of land by the Passamaquoddy. If he had a secret for it, he didn't let on to outsiders.

He lived alone on the island until his death in 1796 or 1797. His remains were found in his small shelter through the misfortune of a fishing boat crew forced onto the island by a winter gale. Among his few belongings was a letter from Germany, addressing him as John. The details of the letter were lost in time so only urban legend exists. And it was only natural that a ghost tale grew up around it.

The people of this harsh coastal region had enough to worry about in the present; history was just that, gone and soon forgotten. So the exact whereabouts of Stryker John's cabin was never recorded. He was buried on the island, that which remained of him, and his gravesite, too, was long lost. But islanders swear they know where he lived then and where he haunts now.

All this was known by Trent. He heard it from the realtor. It wasn't a warning, nor was it an informal and unwritten disclosure statement. "Might be a great marketing tool," the realtor suggested. "Tourists love a good spook story." Trent didn't think so; such things were a niche market, and definitely not family fare, which is where he was heading with this venture. But when Tabitha continued to balk, he tried it out on her. She didn't believe but warned him, "You dare tell that to the boys, and I swear I'll swim to shore with them on my back."

The motel was near the northeast tip of the island. From sea to land, this was an archeological dream; the greens, blues, and foamy white ancient waters pounding eon-old black glacier rocks that cradled and guarded young brown sand and younger brown earth. Trent stood in awe. Not of its power, but of his new union with it.

From the backyard Trent could see across the Bay of Fundy to Nova Scotia. But not this first morning, not this early, not until the sun's morning rays stretch themselves along the furthest ends of north and south. He watched as their brilliance lifted the clouds that moments earlier seemed so anchored there. They fled upwards until they ran out of sky, and oranges and reds lay in their stead. In the mornings to come Trent would watch to see whose sky it would become. He saw in it an epic battle played out as if among Norse gods. If the pressure was right, it could have easily gone the other way. Today it was for the sun, but the clouds could have hung on and smothered the sunlight like a fat, wet thumb snuffing the wick of a candle. Soon it would be so and being a man who enjoyed give and take, Trent was anxious to wake another day to be part of it.

What he thought was the rustling of the tall grasses behind him turned out to be Ricky racing to his side. "Kinda early for you to be up," Trent said.

"I couldn't sleep; the dogs woke me," Ricky said through a shiver and a stifled yawn.

"Who? Mop?"

"No, somewhere out here. They barked all night."

Trent hadn't heard a thing. As a matter of fact, he hadn't slept so well in a long time, even on the hard floor in the sleeping bag. He worried that thoughts of what he wanted to do and had to do would keep him awake for nights on end. But he cracked the window just a bit, in spite of his wife's protests, and fell dead to sleep to the crashing waves and sweet ocean smells. "You like it here, champ?" he asked his son.

"It's okay, I guess."

"Okay? Just okay? Look at this ocean?"

"There's no beach like in Virginia Beach."

"There are better things about the ocean than beaches."

"What?"

"Well, we can fish, deep-sea fish. And go boating."

"Can we go on a boat?"

"Sure we can. Sailing."

"Today?"

Trent had no desire to make promises he couldn't keep. Ricky was an intuitive boy. Lies didn't sit well with him, and they sat with him for a long while. "Well, not today. It's a bit cold and rough out there during the winter. Besides, we don't have a boat."

"We can rent one, or have an instructor take us out."

"We'll buy our own, how about that? And when we do, we'll teach ourselves; we don't need anyone out here teaching us anything, do we?"

Tabitha called out for breakfast from the kitchen door, cold sausage sandwiches and hash browns. Trent and Ricky ate ravenously, while Jeremy picked through the hash browns with great skepticism. Tabitha quipped about how they'd survive out here, dependent upon cross-island runs for fast food that wouldn't make decent fare at a Burger King. Trent told them all their fast-food days were behind them.

The moving company assured them they'd be there by nine. They arrived at close to one. "You folks know how far out this place is?" one of them asked.

"Yes," she said. "Didn't you?"

"Not exactly. I don't know, we might have to charge you more."

"The rate is by the mile, not by the isolation."

He scratched his head. "You don't even have cell phone service out here, you know that?"

She didn't, but she wasn't surprised. "You're late, and we'll be spending the entire night putting ourselves together."

"Nuthin' much else to do out here," his partner muttered.

As the two workers moved at a feverish pace to get the hell out, Tabitha found herself alone in the house with them. She put on her coat and went to the back porch. Trent was nowhere in sight. She called to Ricky and Jeremy. She heard a high-pitched call in return but it was just the wind. Would the wind always be so omniscient? She knew so little about this place.

It had to be getting warmer. The movers wore lightweight sweaters and no gloves or hats. But like the native animals, they were accustomed to the climate and adapted easier to it. Tabitha shivered and dug her fisted hands into her coat pocket. She called out for the boys again before

venturing away from the porch towards the water. The sight of the waves beating the rocks with such fury scared her more the closer she got. Two figures were but commas on the shoreline up ahead; a smaller one plodding frantically behind.

She was running now to the edge of the yard, just before the berm littered with algae coated shingles and cobbles. In her suede clod slippers, she dashed across the stones, losing one, not stopping to retrieve it.

Ricky and Jeremy were two hundred yards ahead, traversing jagged rocks that to Tabitha may as well have been the ridge of Mount Everest. Ricky was jumping from edge to edge. Water sprayed him. She was close enough to hear his defiant laughter. He taunted Jeremy to keep up. Mop needed no encouragement but the wicked winds were having their way with her, and Tabitha cringed at the thought she could be spat out to sea, Ricky too preoccupied and Jeremy too overwhelmed to notice.

She managed to reach them, negotiating a few rocks herself, alarmed at their slickness and sharp edges. "Get down from there." She sounded more frantic than she wanted to, but no more than she was.

It startled both boys. "We're just playin'," Ricky said.

"It's not safe. Now down, all of you."

As usual, Jeremy was the first to comply. He walked gingerly back over the slick ridges. "I told him not to go up there, mom, I did," he said, relieved to be on solid ground.

"That's 'cause you're chicken," Ricky teased, racing up behind. In contrast to his brother, Ricky made the return trip with reckless abandon.

There was a sophomoric pride in watching him. They were not identical twins. Jeremy was thick and squat. Ricky was two inches taller already and much thinner. Whereas Jeremy shuffled heavily and noncommittally, Ricky was lithe and moved as if there was a purpose to every step.

The differences were apparent from birth. Ricky was the first to crawl, to teeth, to say his first words, to walk, to be potty trained. Then, he walked further, ran faster, and talked more. Heaven help her but it made her more attune to him, and she wondered now what came first: Ricky's development or her attentiveness. It was her dirty little secret. Nothing sexy. Nothing a tabloid would find juicy enough to print if she were a celebrity. But it unsettled her. How much does a nine-year old understand? How far back can he reach? How much can he pull out? How much does he dare?

There were times, like now, when Jeremy stared at her knowingly, and she had to look away. Tonight, it will be Jeremy asking her to read a bedtime story. It will be Jeremy asking her to leave the light one. Endearing for a mother to be sure, but in comparison to Ricky, it made her wonder what made them so different; Ricky so daring, so independent, so reckless, while Jeremy's spirit was firmly grounded.

"There are rats here, mom," Jeremy said.

"Rats!"

Ricky hopped back onto a rock. "Yeah, big ones. That's so cool. Let's find one," he said.

"Let's not."

"Betcha they came off a ship that crashed here like a hundred years ago. Like a pirate ship. We're gonna go sailing."

"You are, are you?"

"Yep. Soon as dad buys one and no one needs to show us how."

"Never, ever come down here without one of us with you. These rocks are dangerous. One slip and you're out there," she pointed. "Back to the house to help unpack. And where is your father?"

"He went walking down there." Ricky pointed down the road to the nearest house, the one Trent said Abe Carver lived in. Ricky turned to dash off in that direction but Tabitha was anticipating it. She grabbed the collar of his coat to hold him, but it took a swat across his bottom to get him back in line.

When Trent returned her disposition hadn't changed much since getting the kids into the house. "We're gonna love living here," he said.

She held him off at the door. "Jesus, Trent, do you know where the boys were?"

"Playing down at the water?"

"You left them there?"

"I went for a walk; they were fine, it's our backyard."

"Like being in our backyard makes the ocean less dangerous?"

"Not like they were *in* it."

"Trent, think of the ocean here like Reston Parkway, do we want the boys anywhere near it?"

"Oh c'mon, what fun can they have on an island if they can't get near water?"

"Don't make me out to be the bad guy," she said. "This is all new to them; it's new to all of us. There's a learning curve here. And what's this about us getting a boat?"

"Need one," he said as he hustled past her into the kitchen, "we live on an island."

"But a sailboat?"

"Where are the boys?"

"Upstairs unpacking. And we got rats here."

"No rats on an island. Just field mice."

"The boys saw them."

He put his hands on her shoulders. "Let's go out for dinner."

"We got work to do."

"Later."

"We have to at least set up the beds."

"Sleep in the bags like last night. They kids loved it."

"No, not again. Not when I don't have too."

The men finished moving in the last piece of furniture. One handed Trent a bill he didn't even bother to look at. "You guys live near here?"

Trent asked.

"Nope. Wells. We picked this load up in Augusta; the closest storage facility we got."

"That's a long ways back," Trent said.

"Over two hundred miles. I take it you folks are new to Maine," his partner said.

"Ah-huh."

He snickered. "You folks gonna find that a lot, ain't nuthin' close enough way up here."

She looked at Trent who obviously found this further evidence of isolation a bonus.

Trent shook their hands. He still hadn't looked at the bill. When they were out the door but before they left the driveway, she chastised him. "Read it. Make sure they didn't overcharge us because we're out in the sticks and if they did —"

"It's fine."

“You don’t know that.”

“Don’t sweat it. Besides, how would I know if I was overcharged?”

She looked at him in shock. He wasn’t one to count every penny but he did his nickels and dimes. And in this new venture, which she knew so little about, they would need to save because there were no guarantees. This cavalier attitude was deeply disturbing to her on so many levels.

