

By the Light of Tomorrow's Sun by Holly Phillips

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I arrived by boat, because End Harbor is an outport and that's the only way to get there. Jacques Devries came to pick me up at Kiet's Inlet in his dad's old diesel-powered troller. He looked so much like his old man, with his black hair tucked under a greasy John Deere cap and deep grooves already around his mouth, it shocked me when his young man's bawl rang out across the wharf. "Daaaaan-yuuuuuuul!" He slapped my shoulder and called me a city slick, and carried my duffel bag down the gangway to the float as if he didn't trust me not to fall in the drink. But the subtle shifting of the boards was intensely familiar to me, like the slap of the oily water under my feet, the creak of boatlines, the stink of fish, diesel exhaust, and the sea. So terribly familiar I didn't know if it was love or panic that filled my chest. I sat in the wheelhouse with Jacques and we talked, of all things, hockey.

When we arrived I could see the End was the same as it always had been. And yet, that's a lie. Though I'd lived there all my life until I away, there were things about the place I hadn't known. Or rather, I knew them only at the roots of me, in my cells, not in my mind.

But I had no trouble recognizing the village's unpainted frame houses strung together by floats and boardwalks and stairs. The old cannery still leaned on its pilings across the inlet, its steel roof a sagging tent of rust, and the crescent of beach was still tucked at the far end like the web of flesh between a finger and a thumb. And the trees still hung above it all, giant firs black with shadow, feathers on a raven's wing that reached to snag the fog.

There's always fog on that stretch of coast. Sometimes, like it was that day, it's a thin veil that glitters in the trees when the sun eases through the clouds. Other times it submerges the world under a breathable ocean of gray. Days like that the only clarity is at the still surface of the ocean, where a seal coming up to gasp for air sounds like a message from another world. And that was the surprise I felt, the new recognition of the old, old truth: End Harbor looks like nothing but what it is. The meeting place of worlds.

Jacques slowed the boat, killing our wake before it could rock the floats, and glanced my way. "Hey, Dan. Glad to be back?"

I couldn't say it, but I was. I was.

God, how I loathed myself for that.

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The house I grew up in was on the ocean side of Tempest Point, a twenty

minute walk from the village through the trees. The warm mushroom smell of decaying fir needles filled my lungs, an earthy undertone to the rank green of the wet salal and thimbleberry that lined our way. Black mud oozed under my boots, long stretches of the trail so smooth I could see that only deer had been that way since the last big rain.

It being the coast in springtime, the last big rain could have been that morning, but Harold Peach said apologetically, “It’s been a while since anyone’s been out there. Your granddad made it plenty clear he didn’t need no visitors, and Dick Turnbull took out a box of groceries last Sunday, so—”

“You know the old man,” Jacques added. “Grumpy as a sea lion in rut.”

Jacques and Harold Peach had volunteered to walk out with me. As much to make sure I actually went, I thought, as to offer me support. They knew I would never have come back if Margaret Peach, Harold’s wife, hadn’t tracked me down and told me to. The old man was failing, she had said, and the house was falling into the brine. My mouth was full of cold saliva, a result of the nausea of fear. I wanted to push my way off the path and lie down under the ancient trees, to disappear under the blanket of moss. Why had I come? But even as my mind flailed, my bones knew. Fate gripped the back of my neck and marched me to the end of the trail.

Falling into the brine. It was no exaggeration. The house hung at the edge of a cliff, the stumps of its foundation posts buried in earth that was being eaten by the waves. Like an organic glacier, the thick black forest duff, that was centuries of dead needles, dead animals, dead trees, poured off the mountainside and into the sea. Underneath, frangible basalt cracked and crumbled away, bedrock less certain than water. The house had been twenty feet back from the edge and twenty feet above high tide when it was built. This winter past, according to Harold Peach, storm waves had washed the back porch, warping the wood and worrying the foundations.

“You can see the lean in her,” he said, and he was right. I could. Small weathered house, its roof of cedar shakes green with moss and infant trees. I felt a visceral dismay that the whole thing hadn’t been washed away. As a blank space at the edge of the world, it would have been beautiful.

“Gotta take a leak,” Jacques said, heading around the side of the house to the cliff edge.

Coward, I thought at him, who’d once been my best friend.

Harold Peach climbed the stairs to the front porch and stamped his feet to clean the mud off his boots, better than knocking. “Matwa? It’s Harold Peach.” From within, silence. “Hey, Matwa! Come see who’s home!” He turned to slip me an uneasy wink. The only sound was of the waves beating the shore below. I stood stupidly on the bottom stair. Even the hand of fate couldn’t drag me any further.

Again, I thought, why am I here?

Then Jacques shouted, a wordless yell of horror.

A cold sheet of sweat washed my skin. A tide of sick relief.

“That’s why.” The words escaped my mouth. Harold Peach gave me a strange look as he ran past me down the stairs.

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But of course it wasn’t what I hoped. The old man had fallen, yes, but he was still alive.

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The cliff below the house wasn’t a clean knife cut. Nibbled by storms, it fell by stages into the waves, a rough slope of earth and roots above, and then steep crannied stone down to the water. Slow waves sloshed against the shore. It was low tide and the tumbled lumps of black rock at the base of the cliff were clad in white barnacles, purple mussels, green and russet weeds. Spring kelp was visible beneath the surface just beyond the intertidal zone, and then, beyond that, the smooth blue swells of the ocean. The clouds were breaking up, letting sunlight through to dazzle on the water. I squinted, some relic of a habit making me search the horizon for strange ships. Usually they appeared after storms, or on the still gray days when they got lost in the fog, but we always looked when we were kids, wanting to be the first ones to wave them into the harbor. The visitors, the strangers, like Matwa my grandfather once had been.

“Hey. Daniel. We could maybe use your help here.”

Harold Peach was crouched at the edge of soft dirt staring up at me. God knows what he thought, me gazing out to sea with the old man stranded down below. One of Matwa’s canes was there by the house’s corner foundation post, its rubber foot clotted with mud. I picked it up and propped it against the wall. Harold Peach was easing himself down to the ledge where Jacques perched by the old man’s side.

“He must of fallen last night,” Jacques said looking up at us. “He’s good and wet. I can’t believe he’s alive.”

The old man was an ungainly huddle against the dirt. He’d drawn his crippled legs as close as he could for warmth, and he had his right arm hooked around an exposed root. The trees that might have stabilized the cliff edge had been cut down to build the house and expose the view, but their huge root boles had remained under the ground until now. Dead and buried, keeping him alive. Saliva filled my mouth. Jacques was wiping mud off the old man’s face, that was dark and heavy with bone, strong even when it was slackly unconscious. There was no sign of the

other cane. I turned against the wind and spat.

Harold Peach was digging rough steps in the earth with his boot heel. He said without looking up, “Dan, find a couple blankets and a rope. We’ll wrap him tight and pull him up.”

“If he busted something when he fell—” Jacques said.

Harold Peach shook his head. “Looks to me more like he climbed down and got himself stuck.” He was still kicking at the dirt, and starting to pant. “Come on, Daniel, get to it.”

Eels in my gut, my feet clumsy as anchor stones, I climbed through the side rail to the back porch—the steps hung out over pure air—and went inside.

Everything that was End Harbor was in that house. The wholly prosaic: homemade cedar table and chairs, iron stove, kerosene lanterns, braided rugs. And the wholly wonderful: the silk cushion embroidered with four-legged birds, the harpoon of shining golden stuff that wasn’t gold, the hide of the sea-beast with the long scaly neck and black flippers like wings. Mementos from the sailors who found themselves in the End, hopelessly lost, but still willing to trade. There were glass net floats on the windowsills, too, frozen bubbles of pale green and blue, but those had mostly washed ashore from Japan. I pushed into the old man’s bedroom, trying not to look at anything while I pulled a couple of wool blankets off the sour tangle on the bed, but on my way to the front porch for a length of nylon line my eyes fell on the trunk by the door. Dark wood bound in brass, carved with letters only one man on this earth could read. There was still a gleam of old polish under the dust. When I’d taken the coiled line from the hook in the porch roof I went around the house instead of cutting back through the inside.

Harold Peach had finished his stairway and was teetering at the old man’s feet, telling Jacques what to do. I passed down the blankets and line, and then stood there feeling sick and useless while they wrapped the old man in his cocoon. He moaned once, his eyelids flickering to reveal yellowish whites, but he didn’t come to. Harold Peach and I hauled on the line from above while Jacques pushed from below. Jacques’s footing on the unstable ledge wasn’t good, and the strain was visible in his face. Right past his head I could see the water, bright green now in the sun.

We got the old man onto level ground and then Jacques, clumsy probably with relief, slipped. He wasn’t in much danger, but he threw himself in a belly flop against the slope, scrabbling with his hands.

“Shit,” he gasped. “Shit!”

I left the old man to Harold Peach and ran to grab Jacques’s wrist. He grunted, but he didn’t look at me, or even try to pull himself up.

“Come on, man.” I gave his wrist a yank.

“Hang on.” He twisted his wrist out of my grasp. He was still scrabbling at the dirt, but not for purchase. “Jesus,” he said. “I don’t believe this.” His voice was blank, almost mild. Beyond shock.

His searching fingers had uncovered a skull.

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By seven o’clock that night there were half a dozen people in the house, and a carefully wrapped bundle of bones on the back porch. The old man was in his bed. He’d come to long enough to drink down a cup of sweet coffee, but he was back under now. Margaret Peach had gone in to see him, and came out shaking her head.

“Still out,” she reported. “His breathing doesn’t sound too good, neither.”

This was accepted without much response. The silent consensus was that maybe it’d be easier on everyone if he never woke up at all. The discussion about whether to get on the radio phone and call Kiet’s Inlet for the RCMP had been perfunctory. Then there had been a lot of concern about the bones: how to get them out of the mud, and clean, and sorted away. But finally the skeleton was recovered, and now they were all inside, the leaders of End Harbor. The Peaches, Jacques’s folks, the Turnbells that owned the store. They’d found themselves seats in the crowded living room and were all of them looking at me.

“So,” Margaret said. “What do you know about all of this, young Daniel?”

The endless waves sounded like they were right under the porch. Thud, rush, sigh, like the blood through my heart. I looked away to a dark corner, the skin around my eyes tight and sore.

“It’s obvious, isn’t it?” I said. “It has to be Lise.”

“It could be a stranger off a boat, or a body what washed ashore.” Harold Peach spoke so promptly I could tell he had been thinking it over for a while. I could also tell the alternatives were offered purely as a formality, like the offer to call the police.

“It’s Lise,” I said with too much certainty.

Lucy Devries looked at me out of hollow eyes. Her husband echoed Margaret: “What do you know, Daniel?”

Jacques, their son, Lisette’s brother, didn’t look up from the floor.

I said, “Nothing you don’t know. My folks took grandma up to Kiet’s Inlet to see the doctor, and the fog rose, and they never made it back. The old man went nuts. Lise disappeared. What more do you want? I mean, Jesus!” I couldn’t get enough air. Their stares were crowding it all out of the room.

“Is that why you ran away?” Mr. Turnbull asked. He was a short, graying bear of a man, one of those quiet men who are listened to when they speak.

“Listen,” I said. “You don’t know what he was like after the boat disappeared. He was crazy. He stayed all night on the cliff screaming at the ocean. Half the time he said he should have been with them, half the time—” I caught my breath.

“Half the time?” Margaret said.

I couldn’t bear their eyes. I looked at the floor, muddy from all our boots. “He said we should go after them. Him and me.”

“You mean looking?” Jacques said. “In a boat?”

“No.” My throat was so tight it was a whisper. “Not in a boat.”

Margaret sighed and shook her head. “Still, Daniel, crazy with grief is one thing. Killing a little girl is another.”

There was a general stir of discomfort. “Now, Margaret,” Mrs. Turnbull said in her soft way, “as far as that goes, burying someone isn’t to say the someone was killed.”

“You don’t know what he’s like!” It tore out of me, beyond control. “You never knew him, none of you did! You all saw him fall in love with grandma and stay behind when his ship pulled out, so you all thought, how romantic! As if that’s all there was. You don’t know how hard it was for him to learn the language. You don’t know how he kept after my grandmother to live by his people’s ways. How he kept after my dad even when dad was grown. Even when I was a kid, he was always—You don’t know the stories he used to tell about murder and war and sacrifice. Sacrifice!” I wrestled myself silent. Finally I wiped my face with my sleeve. “You’re right, Mrs. Turnbull, I don’t know. I don’t know. I just know what he was like, and I know Lise was supposed to come out to see me the day she disappeared.”

The silence was different then. There was compassion in the way people looked away. The surf washed underneath the porch where Lisette’s naked bones lay. Boom, hush, sigh.

Finally, Mr. Turnbull let out a huge gust of air. “I remember. We searched all

the woods between here and town.”

“And the shorelap,” Harold Peach agreed. “For two weeks we had our boat out every time the fog lifted, looking for a sign.”

“Oh, yes, that was a terrible year for the fog, wasn’t it?” Mrs. Turnbull said. “Days at a time socked in, and when it lifted not a ship in the harbor nor a crab in the pot.”

“And the old man sitting out here,” Margaret said, as if she’d no patience for their attempt to ease the heartbreaking tension. “Sitting out here alone, and young Daniel coming into town for a bite to eat and a civilized word.”

“And I remember,” Burt Devries said, “how the old man said he was looking for our daughter on the day he fell on the rocks and broke his legs, when none of the rest of us had set eyes on him the whole time we were searching.”

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People who live in the End have a way about them. A sort of philosophy developed over generations living in a place where other worlds come to call. They leave room for the mysteries. They let silences speak. They allow you to find your own way through the fog.

I knew that I was absolved from suspicion by the way Mrs. Turnbull and Margaret Peach washed the coffee cups and heated me a tin of soup. There was no argument when I declined Jacques’s offer to stay overnight. Even if the old man was a murderer, he was old and crippled, probably dying, and I was young. But there was a promise in the look Jacques gave me, and in the way his father shook my hand. The question of Matwa’s guilt remained.

When they were gone I ate the soup, though I wasn’t hungry. I washed the pot and bowl, swept the drying mud from the floor, built up the fire in the stove. Old habits still lived in my hands, doing the work without any direction from my mind. I knelt for a while, the dry heat of the coals stinging my face as I watched the seasoned hemlock start to burn. They had taken the bones from the porch, but the dead still spoke in the spaces between the waves.

I walked out the back door and vomited all the lies over the railing into the sea.

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Lisette was a year younger than Jacques and me, twelve to our thirteen the year she died. She had stiff black hair and brown eyes that tipped at the corners, a straight nose and a round brown face, and I thought she was beautiful. She had a terrible temper. If she thought she was being teased she’d throw whatever came to hand, a book or a rock or a handful of salt water. She loved End Harbor. She was one of those who lived with the awareness of the magic shining through their skins.

“Look at her,” my grandmother used to say. “There’s one child who really belongs in this place.”

While the old man, who had never belonged, would scowl and look away.

I went in to check on him. The hoarse labor of his breathing filled the room, echoing the drag of the surf on the rocks. I stood over him, watching the lantern light waver across the harsh bones of his face. He didn’t seem to have changed at all. He only had to open his glaring yellow eyes and he would be the same man who had lured Lisette to her death.

Who had made me lure Lisette to her death.

“She’s the only one who can help us,” the old man had said to me. After days of rage, wild cursing, violent tears, he had fallen into a long, thinking silence. Where this sudden calm came from I did not question, any more than I questioned the subject of his contemplation. I clung to his surety like a starfish clings to a rock in a storm. He said, “Your grandmother is right. The girl is part of the presence of this place. She can help us tap its power. She can help us bring them home. You must tell her to come.”

Matwa’s people knew about magic, about imposing the will upon the world. I did not have to forget his bloody tales of where their power came from. They were buried as deeply as my parents and grandmother were buried beneath the waves, or beneath the gray fog that swept the End, giving and taking away. I swore Lisette to secrecy and told her to come. She agreed without pause, her dark eyes shining with a child’s curiosity and an adult’s compassion. The idea of magic was as natural to her as the idea of breathing, and she wanted to help. So did I. I knew when the old man went out into the woods back of the house to make his preparations. And when he returned and said he’d been in the village, when he said he’d seen Lisette and she’d told him she couldn’t come after all, I knew it was a lie. He sent me down to the cove on the other side of the point to gather driftwood—an ingredient in the spell, he said. I circled round through the trees until I could see the house, and I waited, as he waited, for Lisette to come.

This I remembered, as the surf beat beneath the house’s foundations, and the breath rasped in the old man’s throat. I remembered everything.

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The fog crept in before dawn and drowned the world. As the dim underwater light grew, I sat by the open front door with my face to the trees, but they never came into view. I might have been on a raft, surrounded by the rhythm of the waves and the groans of the house as it leaned over the brink. On a raft, drifting into the unknown, with the fog a cool touch on my skin. I held my hands out before me, as if the damp air alone could wash them clean. It carried strange scents into the house, a

powerful ocean smell one moment, a delicate spice like birch bark and cinnamon the next. I knew all the signs. It was a stranger's fog, the fog of change.

Jacques came out early, as he'd said he would. I heard his boots on the muddy trail long before he appeared out of the gray. I wiped my wet hands on the tail of my shirt and carried the coffee pot out onto the porch, along with a couple of cups.

"Hey," he said as he climbed the steps.

I handed him a steaming mug. "The old man's dead."

He looked up from his coffee, dark eyes searching my face through the steam. "How'd he go?"

"I was asleep." I turned my shoulder to Jacques to pour coffee into my mug. "He wasn't breathing so good when I went to bed, but it wasn't any worse than before you left." I shrugged. "I could have stayed up with him, I guess, but I don't know what I would have done."

"Not a lot you can do if somebody stops breathing." Jacques settled himself against the railing and looked out into the fog, but he might as well have been staring at me still, the effect of his attention was the same. "You really think he killed Lisette."

I swallowed bitter coffee. "I guess I have, subconsciously, for years." I drew a slow, careful breath. "I'm sorry, Jacques."

"You said it yourself. The old man was nuts." His voice was brusque with an old grief. He gentled it some when he said after a while, "We're going to bury her today."

I nodded. "He can wait till tomorrow, then."

Jacques turned and looked at me strangely. "Why should he? Put them down together. That way it'll all be finally over."

Without warning, tears spilled out of my eyes. I could not seem to control anything anymore. I raised my arm to wipe my face on my sleeve, but when I took it away I could see Jacques was crying too. So we stood there together and silently wept, while the trees dripped, invisible in the fog.

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The murdered and the murderer went in the ground together, side by side. There's no preacher in End Harbor, and no undertaker, so funerals are a community affair. The women lay out the bodies and sew the shrouds, while the men dig the

graves. It's hard work, digging a deep hole in the heavy, root-clogged earth. Jacques and his father dug Lisette's grave together. I dug Matwa's alone.

Sweat soaked my shirt and stung my eyes, while blisters burned on my hands and fog moisture gathered in my hair. Every spadeful hurt, the sodden dirt as heavy as the old man had been when we carried him wrapped in blankets from the house to the Peaches' boat shed. He lay there now, washed and bound in linen and cedar bark, ready for the end. Old Mrs. Reedy, Margaret Peach's mother, lined the graves with damp hemlock boughs, and then they were ready as well. Tired as I was, I could imagine lying down there on that fragrant furry green to sleep. Sleep as black and heavy as the earth.

The dead were carried up from the water's edge to the graveyard above the village. Men in clean sweaters bore the biers, while women walked behind, singing. Not hymns, but children's songs for Lise's sake, eerie in the fog. For Matwa there would be nothing.

He had spoken so gently to Lise, there at the foot of the cliffside cedar near the house. I think that must have been why I in my hiding place felt no fear for her, although it was utterly contrary to his usual manner. I could hardly recall an instance of kindness from the old man, yet Lise even laughed once at something he said as he cut symbols into the tree's bark. The sun was golden in the vapor that slid among the branches of the trees, and seagulls were dancing on the wind. How many times had we stood on the back porch, Lise and Jacques and I, throwing scraps for the big white birds to catch in their yellow bills? Laughing ourselves sick when two gulls fought over the same tidbit, tumbling fearlessly toward the waves. As fearless as Lise, trusting Lise, who wanted to help. Who stood while Matwa dug his symbols in the flesh of the tree. Who fell when that same blade released her blood to flash like a scarlet banner across the air.

The violated earth of the graveyard smelled just the same as the ground where I had pressed my face. Hiding from the sight, burying my screams.

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There was food at the Turnbulls' after the funeral. I stood alone in the crowd, sick with a decade of silence, while End Harbor ate and talked, talked and ate. I was lost in time. I was the same boy who'd stood quietly at Margaret Peach's side while the village mourned the loss of my family. The same boy who'd trailed after the searchers, suffocating with the need to speak, choking on the words I could not say.

Choking, because—deep in my heart, in a place neither words nor conscience could reach—I was waiting for Matwa's magic to work. I was waiting for the sacrifice to bring my family home.

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The fog was only just beginning to thin as we filed out of the Turnbulls' onto

the boardwalk below their store. The evening sun was a white ball balanced at the mouth of the inlet, weaving its cold light through the skeins of mist above the water. The tall ship riding the tide into harbor was a ghost, a wraith, a mockery of all my sins.

“Eh, there, wouldn’t you know,” Margaret sighed. There were sighs like hers all through the crowd, an acceptance that was half humor, half exasperation. “Trust the fog to bring ‘em now,” her husband said, and someone answered, “Death and change, Harold Peach. Death and change.”

I stood at the boardwalk railing with the rest of them to watch the ship drop her anchor and lower her boat. She was a three-master, her square sails hanging lank and white as shrouds in the dimming air. The water of the inlet was a still dark perfection, a mirror, the interface of worlds. Men rowing the boat called out even before they had reached Turnbull’s dock, asking in a harsh alien tongue where they were. Mr. Turnbull and his tomboy daughters went down the gangway to take their line. The Turnbulls were long accustomed to offering reassurance without words. They would take the strange ship’s officers in, give them a good meal and warm beds, and tomorrow there’d be trading. Used to this schedule, the adults of End Harbor were saying their goodnights and gathering up their reluctant children.

Margaret touched my arm. “Come on to our place, Dan. No need to risk your neck in that ill-omened wreck of a house tonight.”

I shook my head, then cleared my throat and managed, “Thanks, Margaret. I’ll come by in a bit, if it’s all the same to you.”

She patted my arm, then took her hand away. “Take your time, lad. Take your time. Dinner’ll be waiting when you get there.”

“Thanks, Margaret. I appreciate all you’ve done, the both of you.”

“Well, I knew when I told you to come home it’d be hard on you, but I never thought it’d be so bad as this. I’m sorry I ever called, so I am.”

“You were right, though. I had to come.”

She gave my arm a final pat, then collected her husband and headed for home. The lost sailors were climbing out onto Turnbull’s dock, talking amongst themselves as they interpreted Mr. Turnbull’s pantomime. Listening to the voices ringing in the quiet evening, I felt myself tumble through another layer of shock, as my grandfather must have tumbled down the cliff when he’d gone to see if Lisette’s first grave was still hidden. Shock, because I could understand some of what the sailors said. They were men from my grandfather’s world, from the island he called home. And hearing them swear in their confusion, I heard again his fury as he cursed me from the rocks beneath the cliff, the rocks where he’d fallen, shattering both his legs, after I’d

pushed him off the porch.

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“You said they’d come back!” I screamed at him the day Lisette had been given up for lost. “You said you’d bring them home!”

And he’d shouted back at me, in the language he so rarely spoke, “They are dead, you stupid boy! Dead and gone! It is I who should be going home!”

That was how I knew. He had not killed Lise to bring my family back to me. He’d killed her to bring a ship to take him back to his blood-soaked world.

His magic had failed us both.

I shoved at him with all my strength, and he fell off the porch steps, off the cliff top where he’d killed and buried my friend’s sister, my first love. I pushed him onto the rocks where he should have died, and ran.

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That night at the Turnbells’ I acted as interpreter, to the relief of the ship’s captain and the bemusement of everyone else. There was a good morning’s trading, while the last of the fog cleared and the wind rose up to tip the blue waves with white out beyond the harbor’s mouth. And when it was done, and there were handshakes and hearty thanks all around, I asked the captain if he’d give me passage. He gave me a long, wary look, as if he thought I was insane, but he took me on with the understanding I would work for my passage. The Turnbells would have tried to dissuade me, I think, but I gave them no time. I climbed into the dory and took up an oar as if I’d been doing it all my life, and we rowed out to the ship with our faces toward the shore. Clutching the oar’s shaft in hands blistered from digging, I could not wave good-bye.

And now, as I stand here at the ship’s rail watching End Harbor slip out of sight, I can let myself remember the feel of the pillow in my hands pressing down on the old man’s face, and the way he had jerked and shuddered as his body fought to breathe. The sea air is sharp with spray, and the voices of my new shipmates are loud with fear and hope, for, sailing before the wind, we do not know what world’s ocean we will see by the light of tomorrow’s sun.