



**FROM THIS DISTANCE** KAREN McLAUGHLIN

A novel

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*For  
Sara Juel and Jennifer Morain  
with love and gratitude*

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE



## ONE

THIS MORNING THE headlands of Nova Scotia are shrouded in fog. Boundaries of sea, sky, and land are smudged. I can't tell if the tide is halfway in or halfway out; I haven't been paying attention these last ten days. Nor have I checked the tide predictions for many years. It doesn't matter anymore. I am headed west in this two-tone Buick Skylark that has been willed to me by Muriel, a woman who complained endlessly that she had lived her life according to the will of others. I have stopped here on the gravel verge across from the entrance to Fundy National Park to breathe in salt marsh and think about the young slim girl who stood at this same edge, twenty years ago.

Behind me now is the Village of Alma. I have crossed the bridge that spans the millpond and mouth of the Salmon River that connects the park to the village. To the left is the great sweep of Alma beach — cut in two by a deep channel created by run-off from the river. A fishing wharf juts out into the channel between the Irving Gas Station and the once-grand Parkland Hotel. To the east, on the village side, the beach is bound by the headlands of Owl's Head and to the west, just ahead, winding up into the park, by Church Hill, steep

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and stately with its columns of Aspen trees that are just beginning to leaf out on this warm spring day.

A massive breakwater protects the sand dunes, marsh, and road. Out on the beach, long slicks of red-brick mud gleam up against the gravel flats. Springs trickle around sandbars. The channel winds through in a slate blue rush and, scattered all about are rocks, large and small. At the water's edge, even in this smudged, silvery light, the water is streaked with bands of mauve.

If the tide is on its way out, then in a few hours the whole bay will be emptied, exposing the bottom of the sea for a short time until the current begins to build speed and reverse direction. Even if the pace of the rising water appears leisurely and the tide is on its way in, then momentum is already present. Here, the largest tides in the world occur. Two monumental highs and lows power in and out, like sorrow in a family, every twenty-four hours and fifty minutes. A person could set her watch on the rhythm. In the summer of 1971, I set my heart by it.

Looking out I feel myself as that young woman, a girl really. Seventeen, with an open heart. I am standing ankle deep in slack water on the flood tide. Sand and pebbles sift under my toes. A small breeze stirs, dispersing the mingled smells of red mud and salt marsh freshly awash in tidewater.

My senses tingle. Before I know it, that slim young body slips right through me like a soft white light. I shiver. A deep resonant *unh* escapes my belly and mouth as I lurch for something elusive. That old longing of mine.

My eyes close. Transported, I feel the water rocking gently as I wade up to knees. Sun warms my shoulders. Small trenches of sand begin to fill in as soon as I lift my heel. In the shimmering light inside my head I scan the expanse of Chignecto Bay, its surface undulates in oily patches of light blue and dark blue, as if draped over a giant body, briefly at rest, with nowhere to go. On days like this, when a layer of cool air pools just above the water, distance seems to shorten.

The cliffs of Nova Scotia loom tall and close. Ile Haute hovers in the still air. Sound carries clearly. Cold water penetrates my bones. My ankles ache. Shins sting. That deep chilling sensation.

My eyes fly open. Cold streaks right up into this heart of mine. It is not so open as it was twenty years ago. It has bulked up like my belly that has begun to fold over the tops of my legs when I sit down if I don't remember to hold it in. That belly that seems to be mine, and not to be mine. That won't go away no matter how many miles I cycle along the interconnecting pathways and parks in the sprawling prairie city of Calgary where I live with my daughters and — until a few months ago, before he went away — with Muriel's beloved, though bewildering son, Jamie.

The husband who seems to be mine and not to be mine.

The summer I pose ankle deep in slack water, I feel his eyes on me before I even see his face. He is brazing up and down Church Hill in a shiny blue Triumph Spitfire. The sound scatters my concentration. There's been a buzz about that neat little wind-in-your-face car in the coffee shop in the park where I work, ever since Jamie's father Donny, one of the wardens, won it in a poker game at the Legion. I have not noticed Jamie before at the weekend parties but a high school friend who came here with me talks about him all the time. So I have this image of him.

I wouldn't mind a ride in that car that is somehow above the crowd, and below the crowd, at the same time. I could use a diversion, though that's a word I don't know at the time. I am searching. Restless. The mystique of spending the summer in a National Park is beginning to wear off. Cat Stevens was rumoured to have camped here in late spring but nobody remotely like him has materialized in the crowds of people who flock here from all over to experience the highest tides in the world. And the parties aren't what they're cracked up to be if all you do is end up on the sidelines observing everyone getting stoned. Last year in math class I read *Valley of the Dolls* twice and saw it as a morality tale. So I don't smoke dope or

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drop acid, and in answer to Gordie-the-campground-attendant's question the night of our first date, I don't *ball* either. At least not with guys like him.

By August, to relieve disappointment I let myself get caught in a spell by the monumental rhythm of the bay. I pace the shore along the sand dunes and watch the oscillating patterns of tide and current. The way waves come in. Waves within waves, Chignecto Bay within the Bay of Fundy. The pattern constantly changing. Somehow I have it in my head that if I try hard enough, my body can be a measuring stick to detect the exact moment when the tide turns. I believe that the shift must happen in a moment that is as precise as the centre part in my dark brown hair. There's something I want but I'm not sure what it is. Something bigger than myself and at the same time, something more naked than naked. Something of essence. I'm not sure. Perhaps all I'm saying is *Here I am. I feel you. Do you feel me? Let me know.*

With the sound of the Triumph behind me, I edge further out into the water and hold my body still, trying with all my might to detect the shifting tide. When the cold water laps my thighs and stains the hem of my short skirt, I look down, heart sinking. The water has turned a milky silted blue, saturated with mud particles stirred up by tidal currents. Sea, sand, and pebbles sieve through my toes. Water sloshes behind me. I turn toward shore to witness white foam ruffling the beach in its wake. Though the surface is calm, the water has started to reverse direction, building power to shift away. A smooth rolling swell drenches my skirt. Soaks my panties. Leaving me agitated as it starts to pull out.

The tide has turned and I have missed the moment again.

AS I SCRUNCH up through the tidal trash, the Triumph idles by the side of the road. I lean against a ledge of sandstone riprap to clean off curly black strings of seaweed and tiny, rosy, fragments of clam-shell and sticks and tide-tumbled stones plastered to my cold red feet. Jamie and his buddy sip lukewarm beer and watch me from

the car. When he pushes in the clutch and slips into first, pulling away, he looks over to me and nods to his buddy *She's the one*. I know this because his utterance is the first line in the enduring story we tell about our marriage. *She's the one*.

We have been together for more than half our lives.

As I leave this place where I once felt at home, but am now casting off, I feel like a crab shedding its shell. For the first time in several years, I feel raw and exposed. Not defenceless and naive like the girl on the beach, but aware and tender. Because for one split second — a few days ago on that cataclysmic afternoon when the ground was opened up to take Muriel — where we stood in disbelief in front of the crushed marble fireplace in that bilious living room of hers, Jamie collapsed into me with a sob that will crack me open forever.

And into that crack flooded images and smells and tastes and sounds, and in an instant, feelings and sensations that had long been buried detonated into the present. I can no more ignore these memories — they seem more real to me than recent events — than I can ignore the simple fact that I am rolling down the car window. I don't need to get out. I only need a little air. A few minutes to shake off some of the dander from two funerals before I hit the road.

As I adjust the seat, pulling the seatbelt across chest and hips, I feel a flutter of relief and a flutter of regret start to duke it out in the corridors between my belly and heart.

I will miss this landscape. But will I miss this place? Back then, I felt attuned to the natural world and was filled with possibility. Now I live by demands or expectations, and desire only to build on my hard-won successes. I don't even know if I live for myself.

Wedge between my purse and file folder of maps on the passenger's seat there is a picnic basket, like a nest, heaped with the remnants of funeral food Muriel's sister Agatha thrust into my hands just a few moments ago. *Waste not want not* was on her lips, but I think she recognized that the nature of our relationship has shifted. In the last few years I have outgrown the schoolgirl crush I had on her. For

our farewell, she silently wobbled as I hugged her ancient corseted body. An armful of feathers after eight months in the role of nursemaid and warden. Instead of thinking this might be the last time I hug Agatha, I fill my head with an image of her kitchen-sitting-room layered with accumulated books and newspaper clippings, postcards and string, or her floor-to-ceiling pantry, chock-a-block with festering jars of preserves left over from her mother Philomena's days. The antiquated, almost-used-up bottles of Kraft salad dressing lined up next to faded packets of Jell-O with logos from my childhood era. I don't buy that Depression, *we-had-to-do-without-stuck-down-here-in-the-woods-so-we-don't-throw-anything-away* argument anymore. Or that she's far too busy with local politics to bother concerning herself with the triflings of domesticity. That's too easy for Agatha. I am finally figuring out the difference between excuses and reasons. Agatha is a hoarder by heart. Something inside her makes it impossible to make decisions about what to do with the mess; she simply can't part with anything — even family secrets. Until she spilled her guts to me on the Veteran's Ward up at the Georges Dumont Hospital in Moncton just after Muriel's funeral.

If Muriel had been quietly laid to rest without being upstaged at her own funeral, I would have told a different story than the one that's bursting in my heart today. Funny how you think a person's story is over when they die. Then something happens. Someone gives you new information. The story takes on another life and the dead cultivate a new beginning — inside the garden of your head.

Too many things live on. Like the spite and jealousy between Muriel and Agatha. "I can't believe," Muriel told me in suppressed rage after her diagnosis last summer, "that Agatha will get to go to Andrea's wedding and I won't."

When I hug Agatha to say goodbye, I feel her X-ray vision penetrating my body and tabulating all the stuff I've got stashed in the car. I almost hope she sees that hideous tapestry handbag that used to belong to Philomena, thrown so carelessly on top of my suitcases in the back. "I'll let you have this bag," she told Muriel a few years

ago, “as long as you promise to never let it fall into Robyn’s hands.”

My motives aren’t as squeaky clean as my new-found reasoning or understanding of family events. I wouldn’t let her take back the antique chocolate set she gave Muriel for her birthday the year we all met, either.

I don’t know what I feel as I hug this eighty-year-old body. Something real passes between us.

*She kept the ring. She kept everything.* Muriel’s voice from the Great Beyond intrudes. An old complaint, thinly veiled as they all were: *Don’t love her. Love me.*

When well out of sight, I’m going to dump Agatha’s offerings. What really interests me is the booty in the bottom. The photograph in the silver frame of Muriel and Agatha when they were four and five that I snatched from the whatnot upstairs. A blue velvet Birks box with two identical tiny gold locket that was left on top of the clock on Muriel’s nightstand. A packet of letters with no postmark that I found nestled in a hatbox at the top of the attic stairs along with Muriel’s stripeless nursing cap and a shiny muskrat stole with little feet, empty eyes, and a scrunched up nose with a fastener embedded in the mouth that grasped its tail. Stashed in Muriel’s underwear drawer was a heart-shaped chocolate box fringed with white lace that held two folded notes Jamie wrote to her when he was little and home sick from school.

Between the funeral food and all that stuff of Muriel’s is a floppy goose down pillow that I take on my travels and the black velvet bibbed hot pants I wore the first Christmas Jamie and I spent with Donny and Muriel. Finding them shocked me almost as much as donning my black suit and sling-back Bally heels to attend a second funeral in four days.

My hot pants, Muriel? What were you doing with my hot pants in your cedar chest? So small they almost look like doll’s clothes. I always knew you took an interest in what I wore and you bought me some pretty nice duds over the years. But finding my hot pants in your cedar chest makes me feel sort of creepy. It suggests a kind

of collusion I find hard to stomach. As if I have something to be ashamed of. As if you were there from the very beginning, before I even knew. My black velvet hot pants you squirreled away makes me wonder. What was being played out when Jamie watched me from the side of the road? Or later that night when we eyed each other at a party up at Shadow Lake?

MOST OF THE summer park crowd is stoned or drinking *goof*, listening to Jimmy Hendrix. Still agitated, but straight, I dance around the edges of the room all alone. Wearing a bubble shirt. Skin-tight. Pale pink like my pale skin. A pair of hip huggers, bell-bottomed GWGs, and a wide belt. My high school friend is sitting on Jamie's lap on the sofa but he can't keep his eyes off me. (He thinks I'm topless. This is the second line in our story.) Swivelling my hips like a go-go girl, I have all the moves, but anxious and unsure, split that scene before I steal my girlfriend's date.

All the next week, even though he's gone back to his surveyor's job in Kouch up on the North Shore, Jamie's gaze hovers around me. Days before I had hardly been aware of his existence, but all of a sudden I am living in a bubble that is somehow about him. The feeling is seductive although I don't truly know the meaning of that word yet. I am being chosen. This feels good since I arrived here so heart-sore. And better than being all-keyed up wondering if Gordie or one of the other camping lot attendants (never a naturalist) was going to come along and get me into the Parkland Bar where I'd nurse a rum and coke, thrilled to be included with the fast crowd.

That gaze has me stymied. Even the tides and the beach don't draw me in. By the weekend I drift off with the coffee shop girls over to the bunkhouse with a bunch of guys who came down from Montreal. I finally give in and take my turn nibbling a lump of hash the size of an Easter egg as it makes the rounds. Someone gets the bright idea to break into the saltwater pool over by the golf course. The guys strip off. I'm the only girl who dares to jump into the black water in my underwear. When we stumble back to the boarding

house it's past curfew, we're locked out, and end up sleeping on the porch. The deep creeping chill of fog permeates my wet underwear and hundred and ten pound body. This big handsome guy with a Lebanese name cuddles and necks with me all night to keep me warm but neither he nor the stupor of my body-stone dispels the bubble of Jamie's gaze. In the morning I come down with a sore throat.

That's the last time I went out with anybody else but Jamie and if I'd had even an inkling that in a year I'd be married, perhaps I would have tried a little harder to remember the guy's name, or at least his face. As it is, all I have is this impression of him: large, older, comfortable. In some ways, during the last few years, everywhere I go, I'm hoping to bump into him.

Does this shock you, Muriel? Somehow it feels like you have slipped out of my head and have settled into the seat beside me. (A passenger as always. Even in death.) I see entitlement has survived internment. Oh well, make yourself comfortable, it's not like I'm not used to having you around. And I feel a little entitlement of my own after sorting through all your earthly possessions. I can ask you anything now that you're on the other side. Is that how you felt about young Dr. Moore when you left him behind in Montreal in 1937? Were you always on the lookout for him too? His name was still on your lips more than thirty years after your nursing school misadventure, although in reality I doubt somehow that his lips ever got anywhere near yours.

Oh god Muriel. The things we remember.

IT WOULDN'T BE TOO long before I abandoned all desire to measure the exact moment when the tide turns. You had your hand in that. You wanted me for something else. How could I have predicted that? Or predict that I would tail the last generation of North American women who followed their pioneering men unquestioningly from east to west, north to south, back and forth again as they plundered and manipulated the continent's natural resources. Let alone predict that in the last two years of your life you would act so out of

character, and besmirch, as Agatha — that repository of authority — charged. Besmirch your good family name. (Of course she meant the name the two of you shared, your maiden name, Steadman. The Gallagher name, she divulged last week, had been ruined in 1927.)

Thinking of pioneers, you, in your own way, Muriel, were a pioneer of sorts too, weren't you? You held your ground in the fifties and sixties (it was too late by the seventies) in favour of your own profession. You would not budge. Even when it cost Donny all chance of promotion. What gave you that power over him? Did you always feel superior? Was it your Methodist and Baptist upbringing? Or was it that you had such an abiding historical sense of yourself? The big moments. Think about it Muriel, you were born the month the Great War was declared. You remember sitting on your father's shoulders the night four years later when the whole village turned out on the beach to burn the Kaiser in effigy. (Even though Agatha always harrumphed that you couldn't possibly remember that event because she can't, and she's older — though not by much.) You remember the fire that swept through the village burning eleven houses (one of which was your family home), four stores (including your father's general store), the Alma Superior School, the Orange Hall, the United Church, and all the mature maple trees that had adorned the main street. You remember your father burning his Depression ledger in a rusted oil barrel out in the backfield because he knew there was no money in the village to pay him. *I can't even talk about it*, you'd say whenever the Hungry Thirties were brought up (and they were always brought up at some family dinner in regard to somebody's thanklessness) and you'd throw your hand out in front of yourself as if to brace against the whole weight of the Depression.

I always wanted to ask what couldn't you talk about, Muriel? Last week Agatha gave me a clue. Mentioned a detail that never passed your lips. Tell me, what else did your father burn in that barrel? I want to hear it from you.

You went to university during the thirties for four years. (Five. I now have to correct myself since Agatha tattled on you that it was five years because you dragged your heels for a year. *And father had to pay.*) Mount Allison no less. That august institute of higher learning tucked away in Sackville that has the richest alumni in the country because that's where so many daughters and sons of the high and mighty were shipped off to for decades. It was the place to get into. Still is. Though I have yet to fathom what you learned there. You never talked about those years except to complain that Agatha told on you for going to dances, playing tennis, and wearing nail polish — all unladylike activities in the eyes of Perley and Philomena, those self-consciously Victorian parents of yours. (Not that I ever met them, but they were always so damned present.) What subjects did you like? What books did you read? Two biographies, one of Jacqueline Kennedy and the other of Jennie Churchill, are the only books I've known you to read. You were a magazine thumber. Constantly clearing your throat while you flipped the pages. The *Moncton Times* got a casual perusal, though in the evening you usually fidgeted with the crossword puzzle while you listened to television. Something always had to be on the go.

(Did you ever notice that you were faithful to the clothes and convolutions of your afternoon soap? Do we ever see those things about ourselves?)

Just what did you get out of your education except an achievement, a degree, a teaching profession?

The only tangible trace of those five years is the Limoges china you hand-painted in an elective. I've got the big vase and two plates wrapped in those monogrammed towels you never used tucked away in the trunk. Alexis took the rest. Jamie was indifferent to the china, but he kept your graduation portrait we found in the linen closet. In that portrait, except for the tilt of your head, you are almost unrecognizable. Smooth, sweet, and dewy. Hopeful. Only the silenced part of you looks familiar.

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What I remember you saying about university is that it's not what it's cracked up to be. All your suffocating talk those first years was family politics, loaded with defences and excuses and *What Ifs* and *If Onlys*. Full of the *Great War*, the *Hungry Thirties*, and then *The War* and *The Sacrifice* — all that collective suffering that gave you moral authority over us — and the knitting of socks for six years while your heart burned for Donny (or his cousin) to come home.

ALL THAT WEIGHT on you, Muriel. You knew exactly where you stood.

I suppose you detect a tone from me. You're right. If you knew yourself historically, then I must confess from the start of this trip that I, as one of the late Canadian Boomers (the ones too late for Woodstock), aim to know myself psychologically. We Boomers are fascinated with our bodies and our minds. We analyze everything. We can't get no satisfaction. We don't have the privilege of history anymore; you old folks stopped it dead in its tracks when you saved us from evil. (Well obviously that's a bit of an overstatement but that's how it feels.) If we've heard it once we've heard it a thousand times. *You have no idea ...* And it's true. We have been largely protected from the great horrific moments of the exterior world. So some of us journey inward, away from the tribe, into the defining moments of our own lives. These moments are scary places, Muriel. They make us shake and tremble, but we try to stick with them and see what they're all about.

Here's one, Muriel. *Don't go near the water.* Your mother's hysteria. That's why you never learned to swim until you were well over sixty. You blamed Philomena for that until the day you died. Even when you had conquered some of your fears and paddled about, your short fat arms whirling frantically while you strained to keep your thin, brittle hair dry, you would never go out over your head. In your heart, you were always afraid of the water, but you had such longing. I was proud of you for learning to swim. Hell's

bells, I was proud of you for pouring yourself into spandex and risking those heavy dimpled thighs to public view. Inspired. Ever believing that you'd somehow confront the other disappointments and failures of your ponderous life with the same determination. In so many ways you became my role model.

A mother that seemed to be mine and not to be mine.

That coy voice of yours calling from your bedroom, "Is that you sweetheart?" to Jamie the night of our enchantment. Your voice was so reassuring. After all, I had been expecting, "Who the hell is making all that noise?" in a voice like my mother's, when we landed at your house to make a pizza at two in the morning.

"Won't they mind?" I asked.

"Nah, the Old Lady won't mind. And the Old Man sleeps like a log."

Your kitchen smelled like biscuits and jam with a faint hum of Javex from the dishcloth wafting over everything. There was a clutter of crockery and jars on the counters. With one eye I spy a Friendly Village bowl, surprised to see you had the same hideous, nostalgic set of dishes as my mother, thinking you wouldn't catch anyone making a pizza at my place at two in the morning. Not on your life. With the other eye I took in Jamie, weight on one foot, leaning half-way out the kitchen door that connected with the hallway, his wide shoulders and rugby-playing backside.

"Don't forget there's lots of cake left," you sang out softly.

"It's her birthday," he whispered to me. "That's why I was so late coming over to the boarding house tonight."

"Did you have a party?"

"Nah, the Old Lady doesn't take a shine to a lot of people."

I didn't think to question what he meant by that. I don't question at all. I marvelled that only a couple of hours earlier, sometime around midnight, Jamie had come over to the boarding house to claim me.

I see myself perched on a tall stool wrapped in an old green blanket in the middle of the kitchen feeling sorry for myself because I

have greasy hair and everyone is getting ready for the big end-of-the-summer party out at Waterside. I'm not going anywhere. My throat is still sore. I'm flapping my friend and her date — she'd given up on Jamie at this point — out the door when he knocks and walks in, brushing past her.

Aw fuck, she turns and mouths to me.

But I knew, Muriel, I just knew that Jamie had not come for her.

“Are you going to the party, sad sack?”

(This is the third line in our story.)

“Can't. Sore throat.”

“Okay.” He closes the door.

Subdued by languid thoughts I eyeball the dingy wallpaper peeling around the scratched and worn wainscoting, contemplating the oily patches of light blue and dark blue that reappear here and there from previous patterns layered over the years. The summer is almost over and soon I'll have to go back home. I don't know what to do. The thought of going back to those dull-eyed teachers in the high school in Sussex makes me intolerably restless. I didn't even stick it out for grade eleven. Its smell makes me sick. All my friends are older and have graduated and are moving on to bigger things. I have no encouragement from home. My stepfather is a self-made man and has no use for higher learning. Mum wants me to be a nurse but that's her old dream. I have this half-assed idea about becoming a hairdresser. You only need grade ten to get in and I'm pretty good with my hands.

The door opens a crack.

“Are you sure?”

That's when I look Jamie full in the face. Shaggy sandy hair, olive green eyes, smooth tanned skin. I get all shivery. Run my cold hands through my long layered hair. “Okay, what the hell,” I shrug as if this statement isn't going to change the whole course of my life. Up the broad oak stairs I run two at a time, brush my teeth, decide it's too late to bother with make-up, and throw this loopy black-and-white crochet hat over my head to hide my greasy hair. All

night I don't dare take it off, especially in the Javexy glare of your kitchen.

After the pizza, we vamoosed in Donny's Spitfire, roaring over hell and hackety all night long, hugging the winding roads, pounding over potholes, in and out of fog banks, up and over hills, always on the lookout for deer or moose. In no time we establish that Jamie hates school as much as I do and cautiously confesses that he's on probation in engineering down at Saint Mary's in Halifax. I don't give a shit about his marks. Achievements are not on my mind. My body thrums with the car's vibration on the pebbly surfaces. We are so low to the ground.

I AM ABOUT to enter the magical kingdom of Jamie's childhood, Muriel. Two hundred and six square kilometres of the great beauty of the Maritime Acadian Highlands, an extension of the ancient Appalachian Mountains. Fundy National Park, created in 1948, preserved and protected by the Government of Canada and patrolled by Jamie's father, your war-worn husband. There was nothing Donny liked better than tramping through the deep spongy woods or wading across the park's system of streams and rivers counting trees and marking deer in the deep valleys; sitting by a milky-white waterfall eating the hearty lunch you had so lovingly prepared; or pounding along the thirteen kilometres of coastline in an open power boat scouting the sandstone cliffs and beaches in the name of his father, and for his son, and the holy ghost of lost opportunities and misplaced memories. Trying to forget the six years spent as an armourer in England loading Lancaster bombers with deadly payloads. Or worse yet, running toward a bomb with his tiny set of tools, to diffuse what had not been dumped over Europe, as the pilots and crew ran from their aircraft when they came back from their missions with altimeter bombs that had not disengaged. (Bombs, bombs, bombs. They riddled Donny's brain.)

Our first stop in the magical kingdom is the warden's bungalow way up the back logging road that cuts into the steep hill by the

radar station on the park's eastern boundary. This is where you moved in the early fifties from the house that you and Donny built in the village after you first got married in 1947. And this is where Jamie begins to speak from a place so deep inside him, from a well of such depth, tenderness, and piety, that there is no space between him and me.

The enchantment begins.

“Dad used to let me sit on his lap and steer the old International Jeep he drove on patrol. There were no other kids around to play with so Mom let me hide her old pearl and rhinestone jewellery in treasure boxes out in the yard. I never got tired of digging it up. In the winter she'd take me tobogganing. In the summer Dad taught Alexis and me how to swim out at Broad River. They even bought us ponies that we kept in a pen out back.”

The ponies really got to me, Muriel. I would have died for one when I was a kid. And you know what? Jamie's real feeling about those ponies didn't come out until a few months ago, when his anger about them seem to boil up out of nowhere one morning. But that night he told me the stories he lived by. He gave me snapshot versions of *the curtains*, *the cake*, *the kick in the ass* when you were going through *the change*. He made these legends out to be funny and charming. But how could he have left out all that rage of yours? How could I have understood that by making these stories harmless they set you in irons on a hormonal sea? I couldn't. Not then. Completely hoodwinked, I was convinced that you and Jamie and Donny and Alexis made the ideal family.

As we lean against the Spitfire watching the distant lights at Apple River over in Nova Scotia hover like tiny blobs of stars through the patchy fog, which is beginning to dissipate, it dawns on me that this is the site of one of the radar stations that was lit up on a giant painted plywood map of the Maritimes mounted on the wall at the radar station in Chester on the south shore of Nova Scotia where my English stepfather worked as the station manager just after he and Mum got married. She was pregnant with my brother and sometimes

we used to sleep there when Dad was on the back shift. Those nights were always magical to me. The dials and switches on the banks of equipment. All the beeps and squeaks. The alien, burning-dust smell of electronics. *Mind those little fingers. Don't touch.* Lying on a mattress on the floor in an electronic fortress that sent and received signals out into the ether, wondering about the people in the other places lit up on the map with light bulbs. Wondering if I would ever go anywhere. Thinking this map encompassed my world of possibilities. Knowing I could never go to England because *all English children are naturally good and all Canadian children are naturally bad.*

“You were in this house, right here, next to the radar station when I used to stare at the lights on the map,” I say to Jamie, getting my stepfather’s voice out of my head, as a wave of something I think must be fate plunges through me. I feel a little dizzy. Hooked.

“Is that where you lived before you moved to Sussex?”

“Oh god no. We were out of Chester by the time I was six. I’ve always wanted to go back there though. We moved all the time until Dad finally took the leap and opened his photography shop in Sussex three years ago. But I hate that valley town. Every square inch. If I ever get out of there I’m never going back.”

I try to think of a funny mother story in return for *the curtains, the cake, the kick in the ass* stories, but my parents are always getting mad at each other, and during the last couple of years, especially since my aunts were killed in a car crash, my mother goes off the deep end and disappears from time-to-time. I keep most of this to myself. For now I tell Jamie about the heat wave last summer and my mother with her feet stuck in a lasagna pan of cold water the day she gave up painting the house, fanning her face with a copy of *Mandingo* muttering to no one in particular (because nobody listened to her either, Muriel), *I can't believe this Christless heat.*

“I’m not a women’s libber,” I declare, after this useless information. “Someone has to keep the peace in the family.” (This is the fifth line in our story.)

“I want a job in the National Parks like my dad,” Jamie beats the big drum. “Play golf on Friday afternoons and not work too hard. Take my kids out on picnics. Buy furniture on credit. Carry on the family name.” (This is the sixth.)

At the park headquarters we drive by the bungalow where you lived when he was in elementary school. According to Jamie, this was the greatest place in the world to grow up. Close to the ballpark. The woods. The beach. Just up the hill from the village and his grandparents who treated him like gold.

“I was never in, always out. Always on the tear except when playing in the sandbox with my trucks. I remember the day Dad came home from work and towering above me in his warden uniform and felt hat said, ‘Boy, when you grow up you’re going to be an engineer and build a big road. A real one.’ He made me feel so important.”

Out at Wolfe Lake on the northern boundary of the park, twelve miles from Alma and thirty miles from Sussex (as you so often complained), we tumble out of the Triumph and stand on the shore of Lake View, so pretty with its fringe of forest and hills that recede into the depths of the park. Through the trees he points out the white bungalow where you and Donny and he and Alexis lived when he was in his teens. Here his voice gets a little boggy. Distance creeps in but he holds it at bay.

“Al and I had to go to private school when we moved out here. There’s no high school in Alma. We would’ve had to take the bus all the way up to Hillsborough, and in the winter the roads are real bad. The Old Lady said it would’ve been too much going back and forth. So she started teaching again to pay Alexis’s tuition down at Netherwood and for a while there was just the three of us. I drove into Alma with her to school every day. Then I got the boot. But it was great when I came home for Christmas. Dad took us out on the park snowmobiles and we’d make a fire and boil up tea. In the summer I had a canoe I rigged up with a sail and spent whole days out on the lake alone. Then Alexis started going out with Ed and

he'd come for all the holidays. I had the best days of my life with Ed out on the water, or up in the loft over the garage where we used to sleep."

I should have paid attention to the fact that I was about to hitch my star to someone who already thought he'd had the best days of his life. But instead I was fixated on Netherwood. How I had longed to go to Netherwood down in Rothesay. I bet it didn't stink down there. I bet the teachers were more on the ball. I bet they had horses and art classes. Piano lessons. Lucky Alexis. With that princess name I am in awe of her already. She is three years, two months, and seventeen days older than Jamie is. She never lets him forget it.

"Did you go to Rothesay Collegiate?"

"Nope. They shipped me off to King's down in Nova Scotia."

"How was it?"

"The first term was the pits. When I wasn't looking, Al stashed my teddy bear on top of the stuff in my trunk and everyone saw, so I started off with a lot of ribbing. *Teddy*, they called me, but eventually I muscled out of that one on the rugby field and the hockey team. Then I got to be the Regimental Sergeant Major in the cadets. But shit, it was hard, you know? Sleeping in a strange place with a lot of rich kids. By the first Christmas I was pretty much toughened up. The food was never like home food though."

It's hard for me to imagine that he missed your cooking, Muriel. But he did. And what's alarming for me these last couple of years is that he has begun to prefer his steaks well done. Potatoes lumpy and watery. Pasta mashable. Turnips with everything. Not a green veg in sight.

The enchantment is almost complete. On the way to Point Wolfe we drive past your bungalow snuggled in the woods on a rise down near the Herring Cove turn-off where, a few hours earlier, we had made pizza and listened to Cat Stevens straining from the middle of his throat that he's old and happy while Donny sawed logs. (And you, Muriel, probably laid on your back with your legs crossed on the cheap twin beds that you and Donny had bought in an effort to

*From This Distance*

be together but apart while you struggled to hear what we were talking about.) To my young mind all these isolated outposts look like havens of peace and are abstractly comforting. Romantic even. Ideal places to raise a couple of kids. Not that I think of having kids in any real kind of way. (Only years later does it occur to me that in reality, these are the ideal places in which to incubate anger and despair.)

Jamie toots the horn for good luck when we pass through the red covered bridge by the old damn at Point Wolfe. A wave of pleasure surges through me when we park and he clutches my hand as we climb up on the rocks beside the covered bridge. While we listen to the water from the Point Wolfe River spilling over the remnants of the old damn down into the estuary that winds its way out into the bay, Jamie stands behind me with his arms folded loosely around my waist. Fog clings to the cliffs and treetops. The smell of fir and moss and salt mingle in the mizzling rain. I bide my time waiting nervously for a kiss. He tells me how the long-gone mill here used to supply electricity to Alma from early in the morning until 9 pm, when the lights would blink as a warning that they were shutting down for the night.

Then he tells me proudly how his father's father made enough bonus money during the First World War when demand for timber was acute, to buy his own portable sawmill, and set himself up as a businessman. Making the Gallaghers sound like a dynasty, he goes on to claim, "I was named after him and my son will be named after my father. That's the way it is in my family." (This is the seventh line. The fault line.)

I have this image of myself as a little girl down in Nova Scotia the year of the crib death, in the last light of a damp winter day, opening the front door a crack looking into the living room where I know my mother will be rousing herself from the couch, lighting a cigarette with one hand while pushing the back of her other hand across her groggy Snow White face, getting up the energy to go into the kitchen and start supper. Little balls of ice rim the edge of my sleeves, orbiting my skinny wrists, leaving smeared red stinging

slashes in their wake. My mitts are soaked and the wet woolly snow pants I hate with a passion are itching like crazy. “Can I please come in now?” I whisper through hot chapped lips.

This image persists until we scoot past the golf course on the way back down to my boarding house in the village and Jamie tells me about the farmhouses that were expropriated and torn down to build it. “The Old Man inherited a couple of them from his father but when he got back from the war, he just gave them to the people who were living in them. From time-to-time, the Old Lady still seethes about him giving away his inheritance. There was good money to be made from the expropriation.”

“Well, people are funny about things. Too bad about the houses though.”

“No way. This golf course was designed by one of the best and I know every square inch of it. Do you like to golf?”

“Can’t say I’ve ever given it a try.” My opinion of golf is informed by my stepfather who holds a geek’s disdain for the game, and my mother who dreams only of golf courses where she could be taken to dance.

“They say I could have been a pro. But the folks are dead set against it. Not very practical, I guess.”

(Practical, I will come to learn, is one of the most important words in the family vocabulary.)

By the time we get back to Alma, fog has followed the tide out the bay. Light land breezes skither thin clouds across the stars and full moon. Jamie bumpety-bumps Donny’s Spitfire out onto the fishing wharf. He opens my door and gives me a hand out, tucking it under the cable-knit sweater you made for his birthday. In the chilly air we look down at the lobster boats resting on their bellies in the muddy sand and gravel. The air is heavy with the smells of sea, marsh, and creosote; old wood and rough rope; well-mended lobster traps. Diesel fuel and motor oil.

Jamie reveals to me the two types of flying dreams he had as a kid. How they always took place in the olden days. In one it’s

daytime. He's flying toward the cemeteries up Bucket Hill on the way to Moncton, but when he gets to the point where the road disappears around the bend he's caught in an updraft. He flies down the main rutted street that parts the houses in the village and tries to follow the road out to Sussex, but the wind keeps him back and he hovers over the marsh and millpond. He glances upstream to the mill. There is a constant thunder of noise: water rushing through the turbines, the whining rasp of saws, the muffled sound of heavy boots and lumber being stacked, men shouting back and forth and the clanging beat from the blacksmith shop. He smells the marsh and the mud and the freshly sawn lumber. Smoke from the slash at the mill feathers out over Church Hill. When he tries to swoop down the road past the farms that used to be on the golf course he gets pushed back and all he can do is drift back over the bay. There are waves of hills and trees as far as he can see. He can't get anywhere.

The other dream is just about the same except it's night. The tide is all the way in. The moon is out and the bay looks as if it has been draped with a thin luminous sheet. Fresh stacks of lumber gleam against the dark pilings of the wharf. There's a scow tied up ready to take the deal out to a four-masted schooner anchored out in the bay. He longs to stow away, but it's the same as the daytime dream. He can't get anywhere. He looks down into the water and a thin porridge of sawdust debris from the mill that looks a peculiar green under the water that swills up against the wharf.

The next thing he knows he's in the dining room at his grandparent's doing his homework and the lights blink. He thinks he can put his books away and go to bed, he's so tired from playing ball all day, but you, Muriel, appear with an oil lamp and say, we never had it as good as you, and make him keep adding up columns of numbers that grow longer and longer, all night long.

These dreams are so intimate I feel shy for a few moments and don't know what to say. Then I reveal to Jamie that I have been trying to discover the exact moment when the tide turns.

"Have you ever tried it out at low tide?"

“Only on the highs. The naturalists warned me that it’s dangerous to go out there alone because you never know when the tide will turn wrong on you.”

“Forget them. I know this bay like the back of my hand. Come on. Let’s go. The tide will be all the way out by the time we get there.”

I am relieved that he doesn’t think my endeavour is weird. “Okay,” I whisper.

“Village side or park side?” he asks.

“Park side. No street lights. No one watching.”

We scramble over the breakwater. There lies the crescent of beach that wraps the village — completely drained of water. Moonlight plays on the purplish outwash of mudflats and sandbars as clouds floss past. Puddles and rivulets wink against the dark forms of rocks and gravel that have been tossed and scattered by retreating waters.

We shuck our sneakers, roll up our jeans a few inches, and set out for a middle-of-the-night walk on the bottom of the sea, following the channel until it dwindles to a ribbon, criss-crossing here and there as it meets ridges and shallows cut by the tide. An hour later at the shore’s edge we turn and look back at Alma. Except for a few streetlights, and a handful of cottage porch lights nestled here and there in the wave of forested hills that loom out behind the village, there is no sign of life. Down on Main Street, old clapboard houses with broad sun porches stand out against the newer, flat-roofed buildings that have been wedged between them. Jamie points out his grandparent’s house with the wraparound, glassed-in sun porch next to the squat, charmless post office.

“My grandfathers were the two biggest businessmen in Alma,” he says with such reverence.

(A bit grandiose, wouldn’t you say Muriel? Where did he get that from?)

When we reach the tide line, we inch into the dark cold water. Jamie curls his arm across my shoulders. I snuggle into his side. His body is hard and muscular with a nice, soft top layer. Resting his cheek on the top of my head, we rock gently, lulled into a half-sleep.

For an indeterminate amount of time, the world stands still. With a start, I glance up. The sky is beginning to lighten over Owl's Head. I suddenly realize that the tide has crept past my ankles. Water gurgles as clam holes start to fill in.

"Shit! I can't believe it," I push away from him. "The tide's gone and done it again."

"It doesn't matter," he says, and pulls me back. Then, scrunching the loopy crochet hat into his pocket he cradles my head in his hands and kisses me. Gently. Deeply. Harder. Christ almighty. He slides his hand over my right breast. The top of my head nearly blows off.

"We can come another time."

A FEMALE WHITETAIL deer nudges her speckled fawn away from the side of the road as I skid to a near stop. What the hell are they doing out here at this time of the day? I wonder. The mother takes an appraising look at the car as if she knows who the real owner is, then in two seconds flat she and the fawn spring up and away, disappearing into the bush.

Jesus, Muriel. That was close. Have you got your seatbelt on?

My heart is racing. Where were we? Oh yes, another time. How could I forget? Another time! We must have walked that tide out a hundred times but we never *made* the time again for my endeavour. There was always a family crisis to attend to or occupy our thoughts. Either your family or mine. At some point I must have stopped thinking about measuring the exact moment when the tide turns. I have no idea when. Somehow, like water seeping into clam holes, duty and responsibility began to fill in the parts of my mind that used to breathe imagination.

When I think about myself, Muriel, sitting on that stool, miserable with a sore throat, wrapped in a green blanket, inert, like the beach waiting for the tide to roll in and change its shape, I have to wonder what happened to the girl who had once turned over every rock, skipped along the railroad tracks, swum across the lake by herself. The girl who was never afraid of the outside world, only the world

inside the house. Who had Jamie come back to the boarding house for that night?

The girl who stood ankle deep in cold water on the flood tide. He didn't see my mind working; he was looking at my legs. He found beauty in what he thought was my stillness. He thought he saw something of you in me. What was that? (You have no idea how much this troubles me.) He would have followed me anywhere that night. I had no idea. I was afraid he'd laugh at me. But he wasn't really paying attention. I'll bet he shrugged my endeavour off as an idiosyncrasy. And now that's all I've become to him. A clutch of idiosyncrasies he can't get a grip on. Do you know what he said one evening last year when he came home from the construction site on a turnaround?

"You're weird, Robyn."

"What?" I asked. Surprised and hurt. (Still cringing after twenty years about my loopy crochet hat. *I thought it was a tea cozy*, he confessed, months or years later. That is the last line in our story.) But what good would it do to provoke him? He'd only leave the house to get some distance between us then come back later in martyred silence. (Like one of your great silences, Muriel. You taught him so well.) Then, both gutless, when eventually neither of us could stand it anymore, one of us, almost always me, would start talking about something banal to break the ice.

"Weird?" I asked, from my spot on the love seat. "You mean since I went to art school?"

"No," he answered flatly. Fully. From his spot in the corner by the wall unit. As if he had been pondering this for twenty years and a light bulb he didn't want to look at just went on. "You've always been weird." Then he turned back to his pipe and his scotch, adjusted the headphones, closed his eyes, and cranked up Howlin' Wolf.

As I speed all the way up Church Hill, past the park headquarters and the clump of red spruce where Sid's Coffee shop once stood, gunning up the hairpin turns of Hasting Hills, fishtailing for a moment as I hit the remnants of sand and gravel pooled in pockets

where the road freezes and heaves during the winter, I try to push our recent grievances away and bask in the extravagance of these first date memories. I wonder if they would have remained so strong if it hadn't been your birthday, Muriel. If we hadn't been trotting out these memories on the 14th of August for over twenty years.

Thinking of you, those first date feelings subside. Though here's what's really strange, when I remember now — that walk out onto the bottom of the sea — it's as if you're already with us, even though I really didn't meet you until a couple of weeks later. But somehow your presence was there. This is one thing I've learned: how the heart remembers things is not necessarily the order in which things happen. At first you took a shine to me. Maybe you were the moon, Muriel, eyeballing us as young lovers — jealous? disconnected? — and forever following us wherever we went. Sometimes shining brightly on us, sometimes casting shadows. Always present and not present. Always waxing and waning. Because really, when you come to think of it, how can you look up into the sky on a moonless night and not evoke the idea of the moon?

In the end, those hard eight months you lingered when the doctors gave you three weeks completely eclipsed anything we had that was left of us. I hate you for this, Muriel.

Pulling over at the viewpoint at the top of the hills to take one last look at the bay and the headlands, I clutch jacket lapels close to my chest with both hands and roll them in as I step out of the car. All that's visible below is a bowl of low clouds and fog feathering up over the treetops. It's really soaked in down in the village. I'm well out of here, I think, grabbing for the door handle. Already the air has condensed and laid a thin film of moisture over the entire car, taking a little of the shine off.

I wonder why the hell you have willed me this car, Muriel. This 1988 two-tone burgundy Buick Skylark. Surely it is a strange bequest from a mother-in-law to a daughter-in-law. It was the only car that was ever just your car. When Donny was carted off to the Georges Dumont, you were hot to get that second-hand Ford Jamie had

talked Donny into buying out of your long paved driveway. Not that you'd open your mouth at the time, you just slapped that helpless they're-doing-it-to-me-again look on your wrinkled old face. You chose this car, but I don't think you ever loved it. This poor little Buick was merely a conveyance and a bit of a status symbol. It got you down to Agatha's and the post office — a stroll from your front porch but you always drove — and over to the park for a turn past the golf course on warm evenings to count the deer under the apple trees. It's true you risked driving out to Sussex now and then — I could hear the fear in your voice when you announced this on those dreaded weekly Sunday calls — but you always got Bob-next-door to drive when it was your turn for a shopping jaunt up to Moncton. Driving in a city, even one you had known all your life, scared the pants off you.

How could you have loved this car? You never got the feel for it. Never tested it, pushed it, trusted it to get you out of a tight corner. You babied it. Kept it all spiffed up. Maintained the appearance of being looked after. You took pride in it.

I wonder now if pride was not the motivating emotion your in life. (I wonder what my motivating emotion is.) That air of superiority that hovered around you. God, Muriel. Superiority and fear. What was the potential of that admixture? No wonder you could not walk down the main road in the village where you were born and lived for seventy-eight years. The hinges of your life. Like your reverence for men and privileging their stories over your own. Yet you always had your own bank account. You kept your finances separate from Donny. I thought it so strange the way you divvied up your financial obligations: you paid for Alexis to go to Netherwood and Mount A because she was the girl, and Donny paid for Jamie to go to King's and Saint Mary's because he was the boy. How well did that work out? Hmmm? How come nobody noticed, that crucial year we met, when everything was in upheaval in both our families, that while you were losing your mind, and Donny was losing his marbles, that Jamie was losing weight? He couldn't bring

himself to tell anyone but me that Donny forgot to pay his tuition. He couldn't bring himself to remind his father. And he couldn't tell you because he was not your responsibility. Jamie had a different kind of pride. That was one of the reasons we got married. So Jamie could apply for a student loan. What kind of a solution was that?

Our ignorance was staggering. That night when I was seventeen and walked through the door on your fifty-seventh birthday the world was in flux and everything was shifting but I denied it. *I am not a woman's libber* I said. And Jamie upped the ante by saying *I want to be just like my dad*. We revealed so much that night. How Jamie saw the world as reliable and protective. How I saw the world as a trap, hurtful and unpredictable.

I thought I had nothing to lose so I followed him and allowed myself to be coddled in some of the godforsaken corners of this great big country for twenty years and didn't see how things were changing until the women's movement surged into my consciousness the night the dream came to me with that perfect, elusive word, embedded in a crystalline, glass box that I fashioned with my own bare hands. Suddenly I was awakened, not just from a dream, but a lifetime, and transformed into a woman who saw herself both psychologically and historically and then, then there was hell to pay.

There is always choice and therefore personal responsibility.

All this shifting ground, Muriel. I'm not sure where I've been but now I am going home. To my daughters, and my own truth. And I am going to find the elusive word that disappeared the morning I woke from the dream. Somehow I just know it's the key to the whole story.

As I dip down into the curve past Bennett Lake, humming "I'm Being Followed By a Moonshadow" under my breath, your image hovers before me, heavy and wrinkled in a bathing suit at the Banff Hot Springs outdoor pool in Alberta the Christmas before last, when lonesomeness forced you back to visit, though you had been brooding about us for quite a while. It is late in the afternoon, the sun almost faded, and everything is a uniform shade of grey with no

shadows. Fat snowflakes, white and aimless, burst from the featureless sky, melting in the halo of vapour surrounding our heads and shoulders. When Jamie and I sit on a shelf that hugs the walls of the pool, and you try to wedge between us, you keep willowing up in the hot mineral water like a tall clarinet note, buoyant and laughing. The density of your old bones no match for the soft folds of flesh. Jamie and I are on each side, holding you down by the elbows and the second we let go you're off again on your involuntary ascent, squealing, "Don't let me go. Don't let me go."