



MY FATHER, GUMBOOTED AND SKULLCAPPED, WITH A SWITCHED-OFF flashlight in hand, stood on the braided mat by the kitchen door, speaking softly to my mother. She wore her housecoat and slippers, so I knew without even looking at the clock that it was very late.

“What’s happened?” I asked, surveying all the chairbacks for my coat, just in case.

My mother sighed. “Go back to bed, Tim. There isn’t any fishing.”

I already knew there wasn’t any fishing because I knew the scheduled openings better than anyone. Once school ended in June, and before it started again in September, I phoned the Department of Fisheries and Oceans’ recorded message three or four times a day. Even now, a month and a half into another school year, with dew heavy on the spiderwebs and on the pumpkins orange as salmon roe in the fields, I phoned the DFO just to hear the list of zones that had closed – Bella Coola, Bamfield, Ucluelet. The names were a sort of lullaby to the seasons I already sensed I would miss as much as I would miss my father himself one day.

Headlight beams poured through the window and slid along the wall above my parents’ heads. When the beams clicked off, my parents seemed

to inhabit a greater darkness than they had just a few seconds before. An engine shut off and a car door closed. There was a crunching sound as someone walked up our gravel driveway.

“Who’s that?” I turned from one parent to the other. “What’s going on?”

“It’s Dr. Kaney,” my mother said, clutching the two sides of her nightgown together at her neck. “I wonder if I should put the kettle back on. He might like a tea before you go.” She looked at my father, who shook his head.

“He’s a busy man. Look what time it is now,” he said.

He wasn’t speaking to me, but I raised my eyes to the clock on the wall anyway: 1:17.

The doctor’s footsteps clumped on the wooden stairs, and I didn’t hesitate. I hurried into my room and pulled on a pair of jeans. Then, back in the kitchen, just after the door opened and the doctor’s shadow fell on the braided mat, I discreetly found my coat and pulled it on. It didn’t much matter to me why my father and Dr. Kaney were going out together in the early hours of the October morning, but since they obviously were, I knew that the outing involved our boat and the river.

“Good evening. How’s the young scholar today?”

Dr. Kaney’s slight smile seemed broad due to the fullness of his lips and his general grave demeanour. A heavysset man with remarkably bulbous eyes and a permanent five o’clock shadow, he always reminded me of a slightly down-on-his-luck Alfred Hitchcock. Because he spoke more slowly than anyone else I knew, and because he was connected in my mind primarily with illness and boredom (the wait to be called into his office during my infrequent visits was always interminable), I both respected and feared him. The adults in my life were not professionals; in fact, most, including my parents, had not completed high school. The college certificates on the walls of Dr. Kaney’s office might as well have been hieroglyphics.

But because he spoke to me as I put on my coat, and made a passing reference to my recent honours status in grade eight, my parents must have interpreted his words as an invitation. Whatever the case, no one objected as I hurriedly pulled on my boots.

"I apologize for the hour," the doctor said, "but I had a delivery tonight and have early rounds at the hospital in the morning."

"I'm a night owl anyway," my father said. "I'd just be poking a stick into a fire in the yard."

"Mrs. Maxwell is very concerned." The doctor's eyelids slid halfway over his bulging eyeballs before sliding back again. Even on waking, he must have always looked exhausted. "Otherwise I would not think to ask for your help at such an ungodly hour."

My mother, handing a brown paper bag to my father, said, "There have been many times when you've come to us in the middle of the night. When Nola had rheumatic fever."

Again, the slow, reptilian smile that did not part the lips, and a kind of half-bow. "I remember. A fever of 105. I was impressed that you had not called me sooner."

My parents, children of the Great Depression who had married during wartime, had an exaggerated respect for authority, especially medical authority, and also an individual capacity not to trouble it unless absolutely necessary.

"Be sure you have some sandwiches and tea," my mother said as the men turned to the door. "I made plenty. Harold, there's the basket too."

"Tim can grab that."

As I bent to pick it up, Dr. Kaney said, "Provisions will be more welcome than us, I'm afraid."

My parents looked quickly at each other, a glance I understood to mean, "Helen Maxwell doesn't exaggerate"; it also meant, "Tim would not be going if there was any real danger"; finally, it meant what I had by now grasped: we were going to Alf Harley's island.

Dr. Kaney tightened the belt of his beige trench coat across his stomach. His five o'clock shadow seemed an inch thicker than when he'd arrived, his jowls a little more pronounced, as if pulling the belt triggered physical changes on his face. "Shall we?" He placed his hand, hairy as a werewolf's paw, on the doorknob and, nodding good evening to my mother, opened the door and walked out. My father and I followed.

In the narrow side yard stood a large Gravenstein apple tree. The thick aroma of its last windfall rose up from the wet grass but wasn't strong enough to mask the smell of the river for long. As if the dike had burst, the river pushed its tide of mud, brine, dead fish and leaf mulch across our low-lying little town of potholed streets, straw-filled doghouses and tattered backyard gardens. The tide seemed to swing the catch of dead pheasants hanging on the black branches of the apple tree, still dripping blood because my older brother had hung them there only a few hours before, just after dusk. The tide even seemed to make the faint stars shiver.

Beyond the tree, outside the jonquil shine of the porch light, the darkness possessed a material thickness, falling in alluvial folds off the sharp edge of the invisible moon. Once we'd left the driveway, we heard, more than saw, each other. Neither my father nor the doctor bothered with small talk, and I already knew that the questions I wanted to ask would be answered soon enough, so we completed the few-minute walk to the government wharf in silence except for the doctor's harsh breathing. He was perhaps a decade older than my father, and considerably larger; we walked behind him as if tracking a wounded bear.

On the deck of my father's small gillnetter, a broad-sterned, shallow vessel designed to cope with the shifting sandbars and flowing muds and silts of the river mouth, Dr. Kaney cleared his throat as he gazed westward, downriver. I saw half of his rough, bouldery face in the match's flare and then, embarrassed by the silence throbbing above the coughing engine, I slipped into the cabin.

My father, at the wheel, held an unlit cigarette between his lips. It dangled expertly from the corner of his mouth as he peered into the dim spotlight for signs of floating logs or even just driftwood large enough to damage the propeller. The harbour channel was narrow, not more than two hundred feet from bank to bank: the town side was cluttered with wharves, net sheds, moored boats of various sizes – from long aluminum herring skiffs to high-bowed seiners; the river side just marsh grass broken intermittently by the charred candelabra of a weeping willow.

I stood beside my father, above the uncovered engine, mesmerized as always by the motion of the pistons and the fan belt, not quite sickened by the gas fumes. I wanted to shout a question above the steady noise, but somehow to do so seemed violent with the reserved doctor on board. So I just watched the wild bank of the mainland dissolve into the waving grassy point as my father, knowing the underwater layout of the sandbars, kept going when it seemed that he might turn upriver toward the north and the distant clump of ski lights on Grouse Mountain. Indeed, he almost touched the eastern bank of the first silt island before he turned the wheel and chugged along at a few knots past the graveyard of deadheads dragged into place by fishermen tired of snagging their nets on the same heavy hazards.

The tide was running out, I knew, because the deadheads all pointed downriver, like dogs straining at the leash, and we seemed to inch up the muddy bank even though the engine rattled and throbbed and I almost gagged on the fumes. Carefully, my father took his cigarette from his lips and then bowed as he backed out of the cabin and assumed a safe smoking position at the deck wheel.

For a moment, I thought we'd lost Dr. Kaney overboard. But to my surprise, he'd moved into the stern, behind the large wooden drum on which two hundred fathoms of net were wrapped, and was gazing back toward town, his hands behind his back. Somehow his two positions, the one leaning oceanward, the other landward, troubled me. It was as if, in the course of our short journey, he'd made an important decision, and one that I couldn't understand. But at least he'd carried his black medical bag with him into the stern; whatever he'd decided, at least he hadn't given up medicine.

Within five minutes we had turned down one of the broad sloughs between the islands. Three feet of mud showed between the river and the grass along each bank – occasionally the tide tore a chunk of mud off and it splashed soundlessly under the surface and the drone of our engine. I shuddered each time at the sight. Already the chill southeasterly wind had penetrated my clothing and my gloveless hands grew heavier by the second as the numbness set in. But I realized that the shuddering had a human source.

For one thing, it was strange to be out on the boat with no intention of setting a net. My father was not a recreational sort of man, and I was not old enough to be allowed to take the boat out on my own. For another thing, we never had non-family members on board. Finally, no one – and this was a fact that, at twelve, I could fathom only in the way that I could study a heron’s shadow to understand flight – ever went near Alf Harley. Oh, you’d drift along his island, of course, and sometimes see the smoke rising from whatever particular grove of cottonwoods he’d dragged his boat into all those years ago, but you never saw the man. And, apparently, he never left the island either. My father, without regarding the situation as noteworthy in any way, described Alf Harley as a hermit. When I’d pressed him on the subject, during some lazy slack tide a few summers before, his answer had been brief and direct: “He doesn’t like being around people, that’s all. Prefers his own company.”

“Doesn’t he ever get lonely?”

I believe now, if I could bottle the silence that followed my question, and use my father’s distant look as a label for the bottle, I could sell some sort of tonic for the human condition. But at that time, I was twenty years away from William Carlos Williams’s lines “I was born to be lonely / I am best so!” and forty years away from beginning to understand them.

“I guess not,” my father had finally said, gazing off along his cork line and turning his back on Alf Harley’s island.

“But what about his family? Doesn’t he have any?”

“A sister, I believe. Back in England. But I’m not sure.”

And I knew there was no sense in pursuing the matter; I could tell from my father’s tone that he had exhausted his store of information, or at least his willingness to share it.

I turned from studying the muddy bank to see Dr. Kaney’s outline, just visible in the miniscule amount of mast light, still frozen in place. Beyond him, like a dirty, underwater moon, the face of the town clock hovered, the hands unclear, the hour unknown. Even time seemed to feel the deepening frost that settled over and around us.

We left one slough and slipped into another, much narrower one, perhaps forty feet wide. At the mouth of the Fraser River, some sloughs act as channels between the half-dozen small islands, and some sloughs serve as entryways into the islands themselves. The latter are, naturally, more secretive, somehow shrouded even without overhanging foliage to obscure them.

My father cut the engine and the night came alive. Or rather, the silence deepened, even in its tricklings and creakings of current and tree limbs. Somehow, the river drew back like an arrow on a great black bow – all was tensile, quivering, and yet heavy with frost that seemed to come up from the island and down from the invisible stars. Back in the random groupings of cottonwoods and maples, their seedings a matter of river flow and wind direction, something appeared to be watching us, as if an owl perched on a pillar of Stonehenge gazed across the whole of England to see a small ship approaching the coast.

My father, pike pole in hand, tested the slough's depth as we drifted, slower and slower. Raising the long aluminum pole from the water and swinging it back down again, he resembled a tightrope walker. But if he fell, he would land in perhaps a dozen feet of silty water, which was alarming enough, for the current and the night air had the consistency of a La Brea tar pit. Great fossils with massive open jaws shifted and swirled like clouds on the river bottom and far above us. At any second, I felt I would feel myself lifted or would see my father yanked down.

To gain my senses, I turned to the doctor. He had moved alongside the drum, onto the side locker, half-crouched with the medical bag in his right hand, as if ready to leap overboard. For a moment, I stared at him, horrified, convinced that he would leap and vanish. I wanted to look away, but somehow my eyes were the stones and he was the pane of glass, and if I moved at all, there'd be a terrific smash and the river would bear his pieces away as easily as it shifted the tons of silt sifted down from the interior on every tide.

"This is about as far as we can go," my father said through a great spiderweb of breath. "Tim, see if you can tie us to a big stump or log."

He bent into the cabin and turned the spotlight on the bank. Rope in

hand, I waited until a massive stump emerged out of the gloom, its roots as thick as my arm and tangled like a nest of snakes. The boat barely drifted now, so I had no trouble mooring us with a double-hitch.

My father switched the spotlight off and the darkness dropped around us again. I could hear the doctor's laboured breathing as he moved up to the main deck. For the first time, I noticed the tiny red glow of a cigarette in his free hand, which explained his breathing and his occasional harsh cough that now echoed like gunshot over the island. Lonely or not, Alf Harley would almost certainly know by now that he had company.

The idea scared me even more when my father came out of the cabin with a lit, shimmering kerosene lamp in hand and announced that he would go on ahead to make sure . . . of what he didn't specify, but I understood that Alf Harley, under normal conditions, discouraged company, and since these were not normal conditions, the other dangers had to be equally worrisome.

Using a root of the stump for leverage, my father easily hoisted himself over the bank, the light shaking around him like blossoms blown off a branch. Briefly, the island dark swallowed him as he crossed a low area, and then he reappeared, twenty seconds later – or rather his light did, fluttering erratically against the tree line like a big moth doused in phosphor.

Alone with the doctor, I immediately felt awkward. As I struggled to think of something to say, however, he surprised me by reading my mind.

"Everywhere's a kind of waiting room when you really think about it. But there aren't always magazines to look at. I think, for you, it might be a good idea to practise being alone with your own thoughts." He lifted the cigarette to his mouth, drew in, then broke into a shuddering cough that rang out across the watery island. "What I mean is . . ." I could almost hear the smile, slow as his blinking, take shape in the darkness. "There's no need to talk. I'm enjoying the quiet. I hope you don't mind."

Immensely relieved, I blurted out some kind of acceptance of his terms and retreated to the bow, where I sat cross-legged, my hand touching the cold, coiled anchor chain. Alone with my thoughts, I tried, as a model student and as the son of parents who taught me to respect my elders,



to practise *being* alone with my thoughts. But the self-consciousness of thinking about thinking – the kind of mental exercise that would define my midlife years, mostly to their detriment – only made me more anxious for my father's reappearance. I tried to locate the Big and Little Dippers, or even the north star, but the night sky was too cloudy or too dark – and then I wondered if the night could in fact be so dark that the stars wouldn't show through. As soon as the thought occurred to me, my father's light, like a low star determined to disprove my theory, began to move toward the boat, or else the boat began to move toward my father's light. It was so quiet and so dark that all of the normal space-time dimensions had ceased to operate. The night flowed tortuously toward dawn. An owl hooted somewhere in the vastness – two, three times – and I could almost hear the rapid panting and shivering of prey in the rushes and grasses.

I looked down into the slough and couldn't even tell its darkness apart from the night's. But the undertow moved ominously, as if composed of the final breaths and heartbeats of suicides. Desperately, I looked back up to see that my father's star had become a kerosene lantern and the outline of a man. I stood, my hand coming off the cold chain and immediately, briefly warming. By the time I'd reached the deck, both of my hands were chilled.

"There's no danger of being kept away," my father explained to Dr. Kaney. "He's in his bunk. Didn't respond when I spoke to him."

"Breathing?"

"Yes. But it doesn't sound right."

"But he's conscious?"

My father, standing three feet above us and bathed in light, possessed a frightening authority. Even so, he lowered his voice, perhaps for my sake, perhaps for the occasion's. "I don't really know if you could call it that. But his eyes are open. When I held the light up, I could see that." My father shifted the lantern and vanished for a few seconds. Then he added heavily, "But it didn't seem like he saw me even though he looked straight at me."

Dr. Kaney's cigarette slid through the dark air and sizzled when it hit the slough. He bent and picked up his black bag again. I could hear the instruments clink inside.

“Shall I take the light and go myself? You don’t need to make the return trip.”

My father’s face turned thoughtful and even more serious. “I’d better. If he comes around, well, he’d recognize me.”

Suddenly stricken at the thought of being left alone, even if I retreated into the cabin, I hurried to the stump and pulled myself onto the bank.

“I’m afraid I’m not such an athlete,” the doctor said pleasantly. “You’ll have to give me a hand, Harold.”

A few minutes later, we started across Alf Harley’s island. The ground was soft under the low grasses, muddy and silty, but not so soft we had to worry about losing our boots to the suction. My father guided us through the driftwood stumps and logs, avoiding the marshiest spots, walking slower than usual, probably on account of the doctor, whose heavy breathing was the only sound I heard as we crossed the island and came into the cottonwoods.

The six or seven trees seemed remarkably solid in the darkness – thick pillars of the air. Their few leaves shook ceaselessly, though more like returning bats. I felt watched, and not with kindness. As a fisherman’s son, I had no illusions about nature’s relationship to the human world; in fact, part of the love and intimacy I knew for my surroundings depended on my knowledge of my meaningless fragility within them. To be no more and no less regarded as a fish or a bird or a blackberry holding on to its last summer second was to be connected to, rather than divorced from, the environment. And yet, I was scared now, and realized that I had been from almost the time we left the harbour. And what scared me most of all was that I sensed that the fear had a uniquely human source. It was not the river, or the night and its creatures that posed any threat. It was in the doctor’s solitary gazing from the stern, my father’s body sinking and surfacing on the island and, now, the gillnetter that had inexplicably been dragged into the trees and unevenly propped at the base of two trunks, its hull raised on our side as we approached, with some kind of rough frame of drift lumber and rope holding the unusual habitation in place. The boat, about the size and shape of ours, had a cabin just as small, with little room

sufficient for sleeping in. But what I saw I saw only in the wavering corona of light from my father's hand.

"Around here," he said to the doctor, and led the way past the stern to the port side where a large, levelled-off block of cedar provided a step up onto the deck. I wasn't asked to board, nor was I told to remain on the ground. Once my father and Dr. Kaney had boarded, I felt the eyes in the cottonwoods narrow; but much worse, I heard a voice far inside me that I'd never heard before, a voice telling me to stay where I was, alone. That choice, however, suddenly seemed no different than the other. The ground might just as easily have been deep water, but the boat, too, was made of water and offered no refuge. Finally, because I loved my father, I made the only choice I could and followed the shimmering light into the cabin.

The fetid smell almost knocked me back again. It seemed caked on the sloped interior sides of the hull in the bow where Alf Harley lay, a smell of sweat and vomit and urine and excrement. I clasped my hand to my mouth and nose and watched the giant, grotesque shadows of my father and the doctor swivel on the wood of the cramped space. Their shadows seemed to be feeding on the blanket-swaddled mass in the bunk.

The doctor's breathing slowly evened out. He opened his medical bag and removed a stethoscope and plunged it into the dark swaddling. His own material bulk slid together with his shadow and completely covered the upper half of the body in the bunk for several seconds. He asked my father to move the light closer. And the light seemed to flare up briefly, like a fire eating a gust of wind. Alf Harley's sunken eyes and unkempt beard drifted out of the gloom, then sank back under. The doctor said something in a low voice, either to himself, his patient or my father. But there was no response. I hung where I had stopped, slightly above the three men, in the narrow space between the bunk and the wheelhouse. When the doctor rose, I half expected to see blood dripping from his lips. But his face had remained the colour of his trench coat. This time, I heard what he said to my father, and the words also flared briefly before they turned irredeemably cold. "He's dying."

"I figured as much," my father said after a weighty pause.

"We'll have to get him to town."

This time, the pause was longer and heavier. “When?”

Dr. Kaney’s large eyes opened and closed, as if the lamplight had shed pollen on the lids. His voice was tired. “As soon as possible. Now, if we can manage it.”

“We can’t.” My father sounded relieved, though that didn’t seem likely under the circumstances.

The doctor turned toward the bunk. “No, I don’t imagine the three of us could manage. We’ll have to come back. With reinforcements.”

Immediately I saw eight fishermen, like pallbearers before the corpse was even a corpse, trudging across the island to the trees. And then, much worse, I saw them with their burden headed back the other way.

“How long has he got?” my father said.

“Not very. A few days, maybe a week. I’m surprised his heart has held up this long.”

We all turned now, straining to hear the heartbeat through the thick flesh and heavy blankets.

“Can you give him something?” My father’s voice did not soften, but I heard the tenderness in it.

The doctor stared at my father, as if his words were somehow more complex. Then he sighed. “To ease the pain, yes. But it would be better in the hospital. He’ll be clean, and as comfortable as possible.”

The river, the trees, the night all tensed behind me. I almost heard the words before the doctor spoke them.

“And he won’t be alone.”

The last word hovered in the air for several seconds until it seemed as isolated and doomed as the man in the bunk. We all remained still, waiting for the man or the word to die. But they were connected now, as if Alf Harley had, out of his semi-comatose state, summarized his condition with one communicable breath. I had never known my father’s silence to be so weighted. He was a quiet man, often standing in the stern for hours while fishing, just smoking and gazing at his net curled over the grey waters, or sitting in a chair in front of a backyard fire until the embers burned to ash long after everyone in the house and the town had fallen asleep. He was

also a man with no significant close relationships outside of his family. But then, men of his generation seemed above friendship somehow. My father's silence wasn't unfriendly; it was just natural for him, easy. Except it wasn't easy as he picked the lantern up by its wire handle and swung it slightly toward me so that the light splashed up to my waist.

"I can take you back now," he said.

Dr. Kaney registered the change as clearly as I did. He frowned, his lips parted, closed, opened again. "Harold," he said solemnly, "there's nothing else we can do."

"Alf has always wanted to be left alone."

"In health, yes. In strength."

"Always." My father bent as he stepped toward the wheelhouse.

I scuttled back, almost falling in my haste. Suddenly and inexplicably afraid of being noticed, I withdrew to the deck.

In a matter of seconds, the light and the two men reached me. I saw my father glance at me and hesitate.

"It could be any time," Dr. Kaney said, breathing heavily just from the move from the bow to the deck. "Or a week. I think we need to assume the latter and act accordingly."

My father said nothing.

"I can't come back until the afternoon, at the earliest." The doctor followed my father's gaze, but his expression revealed little. "We should be able to get a party together by then."

Water, perhaps from an earlier rainfall, dripped off the branches somewhere back of us. I looked hard through my breath-clouds to see if my father moved, but he remained almost perfectly still.

Through this entire conversation, I detected an unsettling lack of authority in the doctor's tone. He seemed to be asking questions even as he made statements. Now, as the silence lengthened, he looked much as he had looked standing in the stern as we approached the island. The invisible dripping water might have been slowly eroding his stillness. I was afraid for him, but I had no idea why. My father, meanwhile, wore an expression

I had seen only rarely, after he'd had an argument with my mother – his lips were tightened, his jaw was set and his eyes did not close even to blink.

“I can stay until daylight,” Dr. Kaney said. His voice wasn't weak or pleading, but it lacked conviction.

“Tim,” my father said, “take the light and go get the Thermos and sandwiches.”

I hesitated, intuiting that I was being dismissed for my own protection. But from what threat, I couldn't say.

The doctor smiled his disturbingly slow smile. “It's always coldest before the dawn, as the saying goes. I'm afraid I'm going to need that tea.”

Though I knew he meant to reassure me that all was just as it should be, I could still see Alf Harley's open eyes and hear the night's dripping water, now heavy as solder. Almost against my will, I took the shimmering lantern and set off across the wet grasses.

Every minute of the fifteen that I was away, I felt that I'd trapped a hunting owl in my chest. Yet I could not bring myself to hurry either. Speed did not seem a part of the situation, since the leaving and the returning seemed exactly the same. I might have started the boat and headed out to sea and that would have been no different than stepping up onto the cedar block, as I did, and finding my father and Dr. Kaney sitting wordlessly in the dark wheelhouse, the red tips of their cigarettes like the eyes of some stalking beast. The tension was as thick as the foul smell rising up from the bunk.

The doctor rubbed his hands together as I set the lantern down. “Ah, just in time. You see that we've chosen the little bit of warmth over the fresh air. But it isn't much warmth. Some tea will help.”

My father didn't move except to raise and lower his hand that held the cigarette, so I unscrewed the Thermos and poured the slightly steaming tea into the lid.

After taking a sip, Dr. Kaney sighed before subsiding into the fraught silence. Neither thirsty nor hungry myself – but cold to the point of shivering – I kept my hands around the body of the Thermos and stared at my father.

The dawn light came slowly on. The men smoked several cigarettes

down as their profiles sharpened in the grey air and my hands cooled on the Thermos. From outside came the chittering, piercing sounds of life stirring in the rushes. Below us, in the dark bunk, the life stirred intermittently – an infrequent moan, an intake of rattling breath, but never a cry or a word.

At some point in the vigil, I understood that the doctor and my father were arguing without language, but I still did not grasp the nature of the conflict. We were waiting for Alf Harley to die. If he did not die before daylight, my father would take the doctor back to town and, later in the day, a party of men would return to take Alf Harley to the hospital. It was straightforward enough. But the tension was not so easily explained. Yes, I realized that death waited nearby, but this tension had existed before we even reached the island, existed in Dr. Kaney's tired gaze from the deck and my father's first departure with the oil lantern; it existed, too, in the river's tearing of mud from the bank and in the inexorable unseen falling of an old rainfall and the thickening of the dew like silver rust on the tips of the bulrushes.

Apologetically, the doctor, now fully visible, cleared his throat. In his heavy hand, an inch of cigarette trembled. My father turned like an iron weather vane, his eyes as open as the man's in the bunk. I shuddered at the image. And the doctor's trembling climbed up his arm without quite reaching his voice. Firmly but quietly, he said, "I'll just have a last check, then."

My father only nodded.

The doctor lifted his body as if it wasn't part of him. The effort drained even more colour from his face, and now his eyelids didn't even move. He descended to the bunk just like sinking into the marsh.

All I could hear was the beating of my heart. Or perhaps it was my father's heart. I couldn't be certain in the dull, foul closeness of the wheel-house, but the heartbeats, whoever they were, drowned out the birdsong of first light. My father's unmoving form, however, suggested somehow that his heart had stopped. When he finally raised the lit cigarette to his mouth, I had to look away, for the stick's small fire seemed to be eating my father's face to ash. We were as together and as alone as astronauts in a probe.

Ten minutes later, the doctor rose like Lazarus, grizzle thick as fresh tar on his cheeks, dark as the hollows under his eyes. He did not look at

us when he spoke, and yet he was clearly speaking to someone. The words came as slowly and inevitably as the movement of his mouth and eyes.

“The hospital will not be necessary.”

My father let his cigarette burn in his hand.

“We will need a party to take him off.” The doctor raised his voice a notch. “There are certain protocols.” Almost at the taste of the last word in his mouth, he frowned, and his voice softened again. “Of course, there’s no great urgency now.”

At last my father stood. He ground his cigarette against the dash, then cupped the crumpled butt in his palm. I shuddered as his flesh closed around the threads of smoke. Somehow, I expected him to take the wheel of Alf Harley’s grounded boat and captain it out of the cottonwoods, off the island, off the Earth, out of the light of ordinary time altogether. But he did something even more miraculous. He thanked the doctor. It wasn’t, however, the common sort of thank you exchanged between men, such as when one fisherman, helping to pull another’s net off a snag, shouts “Thanks” over the growl of engines. It wasn’t even the sort of thank you that a poor, uneducated man offers a wealthy, well-educated professional for services rendered and improperly compensated for. No, it was a thank you that hardly belonged to the world at all, a thank you stripped of its associations to roles and rules, a thank you that might have come out of any mouth, mine or even the closed mouth under the endlessly open eyes of the dead man in the bunk. I heard it pass by me and echo over the marshes, over the now-changing tide, out to the capacious, retreating sea.

The doctor, too, seemed to recognize the rare quality of the words. He almost tried to lean on them. His body, which had returned to his weight and his daily purpose, swayed a little in the fresh eruption of birdsong. I leaned forward myself, eager to hear the words that could follow my father’s.

But Dr. Kaney suddenly resumed his place in the order of our town and all towns. He nodded. He bent to his medical bag and picked it up. He smiled his excruciatingly slow lizard’s smile, and when he spoke again, it was in the same voice that I heard whenever he finally pulled open the door of the examination room and asked me how my studies were going.



“If you could take me back now, Harold, I can get started on the paperwork.”

Within minutes, we had started back across the island, the doctor now in front, as no light was needed, my father a few respectful feet behind him, and myself taking up the rear. Perhaps the order was the order of age, some concession to the natural process of our mortality, and perhaps I was meant to be at the end so I could stop and turn around and imprint the final extinguishing of Alf Harley's smoke on my brain.

But I didn't stop or even look back. All my life lay ahead of me; it was dawn light and birdsong, and even if my dozen years carried an intimation of mortality within them – of Dr. Kaney's death by leukemia and my father's death by kidney failure and of my childhood by the planet's circuiting of the sun – my fate was to advance and not to retreat.

And yet, where was I going that Alf Harley, Dr. Kaney and my father hadn't already gone? Something followed our leaving across the island, but it wasn't a living creature, nor anything I could easily put a name to. Still, its intensity burned. The tide in the slough made a last desperate swallow. I cast off and anchored in one motion. And though I continued to walk in the way of the world for decades, I already bore my share of the heavy casket on my shoulder, even if youth closed my senses to all the hungers, failures and urgencies of age, even if the hermit's eyes, within my eyes, hadn't yet opened to erode the hours, one by remarkable one.