

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Town That Forgot How To Breathe

Kenneth J Harvey

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About the Author

Kenneth J. Harvey is the author of several novels, including *Brud* and *The Hole That Must Be Filled*. *Nine Tenths Unseen* was praised by J. M. Coetzee as 'a harrowing journey into the dark underside of family life'. Kenneth J. Harvey lives in Newfoundland.

For Emma Sarah, Katherine Alexandra and Jordan Rowe

The
TOWN
That
FORGOT
How to
BREATHE

A NOVEL BY
KENNETH J. HARVEY

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LONDON

“... Thy way is in the sea,
and thy path in the great waters,
and thy footsteps are not known.”

— *77th Psalm*

THURSDAY

MISS EILEEN LARACY shuffled up the higher road in search of lilacs to lay atop her white chenille bedspread. With the summer sun fierce above her, detailing each line in the wrinkled mapwork of her face, she sang lamentfully:

“Bury me not in da deep deep sea,
where da cold dark waves will swallow me,
where nar light shalt break t’roo da darkenin’ waves,
'n nar sunbeam find me silent grave.”

Smacking her toothless gums together as if savouring the splendour of the afternoon air, she paused to fish an embroidered handkerchief from the sleeve of her green and white striped dress. The bandana that covered her head and was tied beneath her chin was green with a multitude of tiny blue polka dots. She blew her bulbous nose vigorously, then wiped at it several times before shoving the handkerchief back up her sleeve.

“A girl on shore many tear will shed,
fer 'im who lies on da ocean bed,
where above 'is heart da whale will hiss,
'n 'is pallid lips da fish will kiss.”

A lone fly buzzed close to her ear, interrupting her mournful dirge. “G’way fly, ya bloody nuisance,” she griped, raising her tiny hand to swat it away. “Lest ye be a lilac fairy in disguise.” She chuckled, then, humming, continued on her search.

With their brief lives and breathtaking fragrance, lilacs were considered a favourite of the spirits. Miss Laracy

welcomed visitors from the afterlife, unlike those who feared them as navigators assigned to carry off kindred souls. She devoted an inordinate amount of time to attempting to lure them into her home, offering sanctuary through her faithful presence.

From the time she was a little girl, up until middle age, she had been spoken to from beyond the grave. But shortly after her forty-fourth birthday, on a brisk fall night, the spirits no longer came to simply sit and stare while she lay in bed, or pass plain comment back and forth. Their serene fellowship had been a comfort. Miss Laracy had spoken with them of infants and of generations passed on, for they were filled with the blaze of their ancestors, lineage that trailed after them like a stream of unbroken dusty amber. This was the endowment when a mortal passed on — the melding of energy of familial souls linking the chain of spirits, augmenting their command of the absolute.

Through years of births and deaths, Miss Laracy had grown accustomed to endings and beginnings. Yet she had never stopped missing the spirits. Even the mysterious presence of an unheld candle gleam travelling up the stairs was a hopeful sign she longed to witness once more. Eileen Laracy sighed as she proceeded up the higher road, her doll-size feet disrupting pebbles. A child screamed shrilly at play and a lawnmower droned down by Codger's Lane. She glanced north, to her left, the land sloping toward the old square houses arced around glistening Bareneed cove. It was a fine day, yet she felt out of sorts. A hollow spot had ached in her heart since that night the spirits abandoned her.

A couple of crows cawed back and forth, announcing her advance. Gazing up at the sharp blue sky, she searched for the black birds. She listened, counting the crows by their caws. One for sorrow, two for mirth.

In her pocket, she clutched a piece of thick oval-shaped hardtack, sailor's bread so hard you could snap a tooth off

trying to bite through it. As a rule, she kept a piece in the front pocket of her dress when near the woods. It was a gift for the fairies should the tiny creatures appear fluttering before her. When settlers ventured forth from England and Ireland, crossing the Atlantic to ply the fishing grounds around Newfoundland in the 1500s, hardtack was one of their staple foods. It was a natural choice to offer the fairies, to prevent them from transporting a person off to their underground abodes. As a child, Miss Laracy had seen the fairies twice and had given them the bread, careful to keep her eyes averted. A child didn't want to be carted off by the little people. What happened to babies and children who were taken by fairies was common knowledge. They would be returned not as themselves, but of a different shape and size. It had happened to Tommy Quilty from down the road. He had been changed; he had also been given 'the sight.'

Miss Laracy stopped to regard a house with a steeply-sloped glass roof, which was set far back from the road, a dark purple aura shrouding it. The twisted branches of two small lilac trees grew close to the house, a good distance down the lane. "'Tis where dat artist hides away," she informed herself. "Da one who lost 'er daughter. All dat unrest," she tutted, her heart going out to the woman for her troubles. "Shockin' stuff."

Shuffling on, she glanced probingly at the bushes along the side of the road, vainly searching for evidence of blueberries. A brown butterfly with black-tipped wings fluttered around. She paused to watch it, caressing a memory of how she and her playmates used to catch butterflies when she was a child and tuck them under a rock. The next day, when they returned and tipped up the rock, there'd be money in place of the hidden butterfly.

Looking up, she realized she was in front of the old Critch house. There was a small blue car in the driveway, the lid of its trunk open. New folks moving in for the

summer. The lower branches of a lilac tree extended close to the side of the road, their scent intoxicating. Miss Laracy understood wholeheartedly why the smell attracted the spirits. It was right beautiful. She raised her wrinkled fingers to fondle the delicate flowers, rubbing lavender dust between her fingertips. Her eyes flicked toward the half-open front door. A man appeared there, his eyes on the grass as he stepped out; he faltered at the sight of her.

Miss Laracy waved her arm high. "How's she goin', me ducky?" she called.

"Pretty good," said the man, squinting to try and make her out.

"I was wunderin' if I could borrow a few o'yer lilacs?"

"Sure." The man stepped nearer. "Yes, be my guest."

"Me name's Eileen Laracy." Miss Laracy grinned and winked while she bent a thin lilac branch back and forth before yanking it off, making the once-connected branches shudder. "Wha's yer name?"

"Joseph Blackwood." The man extended his hand. Miss Laracy shook it attentively and gave him the once-over. He was neither too tall nor too short, with solid limbs and warm, capable hands. His manner of dress indicated a townie: scarlet shirt, jeans and new summer shoes, no baseball cap stuck on his head like most other men these days. An almost handsome face with sandy-blond bangs thinning atop a high forehead. Blue, clear eyes that could look right into you, without a trace of ill intention. The smile he gave her was natural, not put on, and he used it freely in the face of a stranger. Miss Laracy suspected he would guard himself more with those he loved. But, most importantly, the gauze-like vapour that floated around him was pale blue with deepening edges. A transition between ease and unrest.

"Dere's a Blackwood lives in Bareneed. Doug Blackwood. 'E be kin ta ye?"

"My uncle."

"I never knew 'im ta 'av any relations."

"We're from St. John's."

"Awww," Miss Laracy said with a wary intake of breath. "Townies."

"I guess so." Joseph chuckled disparagingly. "I'm an evil townie. You should do away with me now and get it over with."

"Naw, 'tis not me lot ta save ye frum yer sufferin'." Eileen Laracy grinned, warming toward him. "'Av ye got a pencil 'n a bit o' paper?" A small girl came out of the doorway, her sneakers pausing on the threshold as if suddenly glued there. The girl's curly blonde hair was clipped shoulder-length, and her eyes were great and expressive. She had a comely face with a sprinkle of freckles high on her nose and cheeks. No more than seven or eight by the looks of her. In one of her hands there was a notepad and in the other a pen. Miss Laracy's curious attention lingered on the girl before she felt compelled to glance at the neighbouring house, her eyes leading her there. *A connection brewin'*, she told herself.

"Hello, me love," she finally said to the child.

The girl gave no reply.

"Say hello," prompted Joseph.

"Hello," the girl quietly offered.

"This is Robin," Joseph explained.

"'Tis a beauteous day, Robin. Look at it all 'round ye." Miss Laracy gestured with a grand sweep of her arm.

"Sure is." Joseph stood with his hands on his hips, watching her nimbly plucking lilacs off the tree. "Can I get you scissors for that? Oh, you wanted a pencil."

"Naw, no use fer scissors." Pluck, pluck, pluck. Soon, her wizened face was practically concealed by the mass of mauve flowers. "But a bit o'paper would be right grand."

"I've got some in the car." Joseph stepped to the passenger side and leaned through the open window, rummaging in the glove compartment.

Miss Laracy nodded hopefully at Robin. Their eyes were locked in uncertain yet thoughtful recognition, until Joseph returned and offered a pencil and a scrap of white paper torn from a pharmacy bag. He had one of those itty-bitty black wireless phones in one hand and was pushing buttons and listening intently but not responding before he tossed it in through the car window.

“Can’t stand cellphones,” he said.

“Den why ye got one fer?” Miss Laracy stepped toward Robin and, noticing a figure on the notepad, asked the girl what she had drawn.

Robin slid the pen behind her ear. With both hands she held up the pad for Miss Laracy, who saw that the figure was a fine rendering of the neighbouring house, only her version had the house made entirely of glass. All around it there were amber swirls.

“Ye’ve a fine talent fer art.”

“Thank you,” said Robin in a quaint yet somewhat strained voice.

“Do us a favour ’n hold dese fer me, sweet one.”

Robin set down her pad on the front step and opened her arms while Miss Laracy daintily transferred the bunch of lilacs, practically burying the girl.

“’Av a good whiff o’dem,” she said, then accepted the paper and pencil from Joseph. She began writing, squinting and scrawling in a painstakingly slow thick script that involved the concentration of her entire body. Done, checked and seemingly pleased with her work, she returned the paper and pencil to Joseph.

“Dat be me name ’n phone number,” she said, nodding at Joseph’s ’hand. “Come down ’n see me. ’Av a chat, a cup of tea ’n a raisin bun.”

While whispering fondly to the lilacs, Miss Laracy used both hands to affectionately gather the bulk from Robin. She then abruptly turned toward the tree and plucked a few others. It was charitable of them to allow her this

favour. With thanks, she winked at Joseph. "Finest kind," she said, noticing Robin staring at the ocean, sparks of silver reflecting in her ocean-blue eyes.

"Ye see da shimmerin'?" Miss Laracy gasped, anxiously peering toward the water while bending near the child.

"Shimmering?" Joseph raised a hand, shading his eyes, searching.

"Yays, 'tis sumtin' ta see."

"What is?" Joseph asked, scanning the harbour, trying to discern the focus of their attention.

"Wouldn't be made plain ta da likes of ye," she said, straightening in indignation to her full diminutive height. "If ye be a fisheries officer."

"How'd you know I was a fisheries officer?" he asked with a smile.

The old woman jabbed a finger at his car. "Parkin'sticker on yer windshield, buddy."

"Oh."

"Secrets fer fisher folk 'n da blessed, not da likes of ye." With a huff, she commenced shuffling away, but soon paused to peek down at the lilacs in her arms, the sight of them gorging her heart with adoration and reverence. Coquettishly, she glanced back at Joseph. "T'anks fer da flowers, me ducky." Regarding Robin, Miss Laracy couldn't help but return with a piece of much-needed advice.

"If ye journeys in da woods make sure ta take a bit o'ard tack."

Robin nodded, her lips parted in wonder while she watched Miss Laracy shift the mass of lilacs into the crook of her arm and reach deep into her dress pocket to extract an oval lump. Miss Laracy offered it to Robin, who merely stared at the smooth-edged curve of bread, then at the fingers of the veined wrinkled hand holding it upright, pointed toward the sky.

"Ye be da blessed," she whispered secretively. "All form o' protection be known ta ye."

“That’s okay,” Joseph interjected with bridled amusement, hands casually in the pockets of his jeans. “We can pick some up if we need it.”

Miss Laracy shoved the hardtack back into her pocket. Grumbling, she gave Joseph a scalding grimace and was about to leave when she caught sight of the silver once again shimmering in Robin’s bewildered eyes. She leaned her lips near the girl’s ear, and whispered ardently, “Ye see da shimmerin’.”

Robin nodded uncertainly.

“It be da fish tryin’ ta fly, me love.”

EIGHT DAYS AGO

MURKY DESPAIR PERVADED Donna Drover's mood as she hesitantly approached the step of her son Muss' square fisherman's house. The dark roots of her blonde hair showed plainly in the sunlight. She hadn't bothered having her hair done that month, a routine she usually diligently adhered to. The perm had grown out completely. Her hair's want of style emphasized the rough chunkiness of her face, and the brown bags under her eyes were made more apparent by her recent paleness. She coughed a smoker's cough.

With the nauseating heat from the sun beating down on her, she stood facing Muss' door, noticing, toward the bottom, a brown yellow-speckled lichen clinging to the weather-worn wood. In time, this would creep upward and cover the entire surface, making it impossible to paint the door. Donna tried scraping it off with the tip of her sneaker, but her effort left no mark. She stopped, not wanting to alert Muss to her presence. She knew what awaited her behind that door: Muss would be seated in the parlour, a frightening violence eclipsing his eyes whenever he dragged his stare away from the television to regard her. His anger seemed to have compounded each time Donna visited. Ten days ago, when she suggested they take a shot up to the Caribou Lounge for a beer and a bit of video lottery, Muss had refused to leave his home, claiming there was nothing left for him out in the world.

Donna glanced down at the plastic bag in her hand — groceries for Muss. She had taken it upon herself to bring food, yet her son merely observed the deliveries with disdain. On her previous visit, Donna had noticed the other bags she had dropped off still resting on the table beneath

the kitchen window. Not even the carton of milk had made it into the refrigerator. That fact disturbed her more than anything, the souring milk within the container insinuating a thickening dread.

Donna had forced herself to visit, pulled herself away from her favourite soap operas and talk shows. Lately, when watching television, she suspected that she was no better than some of those crazy women on the programs. Muss was her son and she was ignoring him, even scared of him. Didn't he need her? She checked over her shoulder, her eyes scanning the harbour directly across the road; the surface of the water was calm, unbroken by a single sea creature. How many times had she sailed out from Bareneed harbour to fish the waters? And how many times had she listened to the stories of what lurked beneath? The tales of giant fish and survival against all odds. The legends. Fish in the water. Fish in the sea. All meaningless in her deadened heart now.

A black car rumbled along the road, heading deeper into the community. She wondered who it might be, but lost interest at once. Taking a step backward, Donna then checked the parlour window, the lace curtains drawn. She had made those curtains years ago and hung them herself. Muss had even helped. He had been such a sweet boy, a kind gentle boy, helpful and always trying to relieve the tension between her and Muss' father, Francis, with a joke and a smile. Without further thought, she turned and trod toward her pickup truck, climbed aboard, laid the bag of groceries on the passenger seat and watched it for a moment before starting the engine. She checked the rearview, waited for a power company repair truck to pass, then backed out.

Two days ago, Muss had gruffly declined Donna's offers to make him supper. He refused to look at her when she spoke, simply stared at the television, his gloomy eyes two shallow pools that lacked recognizable depth, his

dishevelled black hair tangled, as if blown by a steady wind, and raven hair coarse on his face. He wore the same black jeans and blue denim shirt he'd been wearing for weeks. Occasionally, he'd grumble viciously, then sigh apologetically, as if he meant nothing by it. Startled, he'd gasp in a panicky way.

Pulling out of Muss' driveway and onto the lower road, Donna thought: He'll kill me if I go in there again. She passed alongside the L-shaped concrete wharf. Crab pots, like rusted metal frames of huge lampshades, with green or orange netting woven around them, lay stacked in need of repair.

Two crab boats were tied up at the wharf where three children cast lines out into the calm water, trying to catch their deaths. No, not their deaths, but fish. Why had she thought such a thing, she wondered. Why? The children were catching tomcods, flatfish or sculpins. But what were they really catching, what unheard-of forms lay secreted away beneath the fish scales? Why did the children catch the fish at all? Didn't they just let them go again, throw them back? Pure futility. And why the desire in the first place to snag and pull living things from the sea?

Farther out, fins of the albino sharks stirred circles in the gleaming blue water. Nearer shore, a turquoise tail reared up and slapped down with a resounding splash. Tentacles of a giant squid languidly curled and uncurled six feet above the surface. Although she could somehow see it, she ignored it all the same. It was stupid. Foolish. She fought against a growing urge to claw out her own eyes.

Donna continued east, the Atlantic Ocean to her left, adjacent to the lower road, houses and barns at her right. Sunset colours hung in the sky. The hues had struck the water and were melding as her pickup rolled along, yellow and orange turning pink and purple like an ugly bruise.

Donna blandly regarded the colours. They were less vibrant than she remembered, losing their essence, fading

toward grey. Another sunset. A feeling of uselessness curled in the pit of her stomach like a slab of indigestible food. She used to love going for walks around this time, her gaze fixed on the massive ocean, her mind filled with awe. The weight of the sea.

It was all too real to her now. Her evening walks were a thing of the past, as was her love of this place. She had nothing. Nothing. A sick son who hated her. No job. Bareneed, once a lively and warm place, now stank of drabness and heartbreak.

A mercurial flash thumped the bonnet of her pickup, then bounced to the left as Donna slammed on the brakes, bucking ahead. "Christ!" Recoiling in her seat, she immediately checked her rearview. A seagull swooped down to retrieve a small fish, a sleek caplin by the looks of it. The caplin must be rolling in on the beaches to spawn. They would bring the whales with them to feed on the millions of fish that struggled ashore to lay eggs each summer.

Donna cursed violently under her breath as she drove on, reaching the end of the lower road, the pavement turning to gravel and veering sharply left, up the steep incline of Codger's Lane. In her rearview, she glimpsed the ocean and a series of small houses in the community of Port de Grave far across the inlet. A sequence of silver flickers hung above the water, like fireworks popping in succession. The flashings floated higher, hung for a moment, then descended, plunging into the ocean.

Halfway up Codger's Lane, Donna veered the pickup into her driveway. The tail end slid as the tires skidded on gravel, and Donna realized how fast she had actually been travelling. If she had continued up Codger's Lane she would have arrived at the abandoned church and graveyard, where the asphalt resumed and the higher road cut sharply west, back toward the community, offering an extensive view of the square houses, the protected bay and

the massive rock-etched headland that towered above the three white buildings of the fish plant across the harbour.

Fuming about her careless driving and the litany of misdeeds regarding her son, Donna twisted off the engine key and stormed out of her pickup, slamming the door. The old barn behind her house grabbed her attention. It was absent of colour, black and white, with the evergreens behind it and the green grass to either side. She thought she saw someone out of the corner of her eye — a child in the doorway, a girl aged seven or eight with sleek rust-coloured hair and a soaked dress plastered to her frail shivering body. Her face was pearly and mottled green and her buried-blue lips grimaced in a misshapen, bloated way.

The vision sent a shuddering chill through Donna. The girl resembled the daughter of the artist who lived by herself up on the higher road in the house people said was heated by the sun. The daughter, Jessica, had disappeared with her father some time ago. She knew the girl's name because she had contacted the police when the child had first appeared in her barn more than ten days ago. A policeman who wasn't from around here had come. He looked different, with dark skin, brown eyes, like he was Native. Sergeant what? Who? A car thing. A police pursuit. A chase. Yes, Sergeant Chase had come. A search party had scoured the woods. Not a sign of the girl. Donna felt horrible shame for giving false hope to everyone, particularly the child's mother.

On the second sighting Donna made another call to the police, but once again their efforts proved futile. The girl was not found after the third reluctant call either. Finally, Donna had stopped using the telephone. She wouldn't even answer it when it rang. The voices at the other end were unrecognizable. She could not see their faces. She did not know them. Threatened by the loss of her faculties, she would hang up and guiltily wonder what she had done wrong.

The air had grown startlingly quiet. Donna strained to listen. Only the silence became amplified. The door to the barn was open. No girl there now. Donna would burn the barn to the ground if she had a match. It was cluttered with old things, things she would never use, things that reminded her of her past life, her husband, long gone, her job, long gone, her life ... No, burning the barn was insane. What was she thinking? She would hack it to bits with an axe, splintering the wood, her heart quickening with release as each quaking blow found its savage mark. The axe blade biting into wood. Sticking. Stuck. Lodged.

A scant breeze rose, delivering the unsettling quiet of a child's hushed words: "Fish in the sea."

The sound of chopping in her ears. Then deafness.

Donna was not breathing. Panic gripped her heart. It raced frantically, kicking percussively in her breast. *This is it*, she wearily informed herself. *I'm dying. I'm finally dying. This is death.* Dizziness wavered behind her eyes. She shut them and braced herself for the blackness that had been threatening for weeks. It was suddenly complete yet impenetrable. She had to snatch a breath, hold the oxygen in her powerless lungs.

No pressure to exhale.

No urgency to draw another breath.

It was as if she were already dead.

She made a conscious effort to exhale. Then, without the slightest prompting from her lungs, she drew another deeper breath, held it in until, lacking momentum, she knew it was time to exhale.

"Sweet Jesus!" she gasped as another chill coursed through her flesh. Sweat soaked her hands and brow, trailed along her cheeks. She feared a heart attack. But there were no chest pains. No pain anywhere. She was light-headed, disoriented. She thought she might faint as she reminded herself to pull in another breath.

Exhaling through her wide-open mouth, she moved forward, but stumbled, white fear draining strength from her knees and ankles. She slapped one hand against the beige vinyl siding. Gazing at the sky, she saw the grey, hubcap-size satellite dish affixed to the front of her house and, beyond that, the empty blue sky.

She heard the girl's icy voice: "Myyyyyy fawww-ther went to sea-sea-sea to see what he could see-see-see, and all that he could see-see-see was the bottom of the deep blue sea-sea-sea."

The soaked girl stood in the barn doorway, an iridescent sea trout in her hands, the V-shaped tail quivering. Donna fixed her eyes there, then bowed her head. Bone-weary, heart hammering, buzzing in her ears, she felt no greater need than to lie down. She rationalized: *If I'm inside, I'll never get out.* She braced her other sweaty palm against the siding, and her knees gradually gave way until she found herself kneeling on the grass, dampness seeping through her track pants. She lay back with a despondent groan.

All was still in the world, all confined and still and draining colour. Donna stared at the pointless eternity of blue sky as it diminished to grey, the sun burning a blackened silver. She lay paralyzed on the grass, trembling in fits and starts, unable to move as she witnessed three white seagulls, no, not gulls but grey-winged fish, circle above her, high in the slate-grey sky.

THURSDAY AFTERNOON AND NIGHT

DOCTOR GEORGE THOMPSON, a portly man of sixty-one with a boyish, good-natured face and a thick mop of grey-and-white hair, paced anxiously out to the front desk to escort Lloyd Fowler and his wife into the examination room. Thompson was puzzled to see Lloyd Fowler in his office. Complaints of breathing difficulties should have seen Lloyd sped to emergency and yet, according to the information hurriedly imparted by Lloyd's wife, Barb, Lloyd had refused to visit the hospital but had agreed, with much cajoling, to visit Dr. Thompson. He had been rushed in ahead of those in the half-filled waiting area.

"Let's have a look, Mr. Fowler," Thompson said. The white paper on the examination table crinkled as the patient settled in place. The doctor studied Lloyd's ruddy face in a way that obviously unsettled the man: grey eyes that seemed a touch too far apart, white nose hairs and eyebrows in desperate need of trimming. He knew that Lloyd was in excellent shape for a man his age. In fact, he was in fitter health than the doctor himself.

"You don't smoke, do you, Lloyd?" Thompson warmed the stethoscope in the palm of his hand, a service he usually reserved for women, but thought appropriate considering his patient's unease.

Mr. Fowler shook his solid head, his eyes scanning the carpet.

"Unbutton your shirt, please. Any history of heart disease in your family?"

"No, sir," he said bluntly, unfastening the second and then third button. Mr. Fowler was not one to make a fuss, being the sort who would visit a doctor only if his arm was hanging by a thread and then dismiss the injury as a trifle,

nothing serious, just another means of testing his God-given abilities to conquer the mere mortal in himself. "I can make due with one arm, no problem there," he might staunchly profess, then go about labouring twice as hard, heaving and grunting to menace the expectations of disbelievers.

Lloyd Fowler's wife had dragged him in to see the doctor. Barb was a slight woman with black curly hair and masculine features made more severe by the black down above her top lip. She and Lloyd had just left Muss Drover's funeral. Muss, Donna Drover's son, had died of causes unknown to Thompson or any of the other doctors who had examined him. They had suspected depression, even speculated that Muss had taken his own life. There had been rumours, but an autopsy had ruled out suicide. And now Donna was presently on a respirator in the Port de Grave hospital. Donna had experienced breathing difficulties, much like Lloyd Fowler, even though no cause had been determined after a battery of tests. It was an unusual case, like nothing Thompson had experienced in his thirty-eight years as an MD. The doctors at the hospital believed there might be a link between Muss' death and Donna Drover's condition, but no correlation could be verified. The balm of scientific explanation, which usually offered some sort of soothing relief in the face of death, could not apply itself to Muss' demise. The man, although young and in seemingly excellent health, had simply quit living his life.

"Take a deep breath," Dr. Thompson requested, sliding the head of the stethoscope over the thick white tangle of hair on Mr. Fowler's chest.

Mr. Fowler drew in a fierce breath through his nostrils, frowning all the while.

"Okay, out." The doctor listened intently. "Another one." He glanced at Mrs. Fowler, who stood close by, clutching her purse, ready to do whatever the doctor might suggest.

“Take another deep one and hold it.” Dr. Thompson, straining to listen, held his own breath. Nothing out of the ordinary. Fowler’s lungs were clear, his heartbeat regular. “Okay, breathe.”

He shifted the stems of the stethoscope from his ears and stared into his patient’s eyes. Mr. Fowler sat straight on the examination table, his white-haired hands gripping the edge of the black vinyl, his eyes fixed on a diagram of a skeleton posted on the wall.

“Any pain in your chest?”

“No, sir.

“Pain in your arms or legs?”

“No, sir.”

“Any burning in your lungs, when you breathe?”

“No, sir.”

“Heartburn?”

“No, sir, nothing like —”

“Trouble sleeping?”

Mr. Fowler steadfastly shook his head, tightened his lips.

“Ever wake up sweating, heartbeat pounding, feeling like you’re not really there?”

“Christ Almighty, no!” He glared at Thompson as if the doctor were stark raving mad.

“He was just walking and got dizzy,” Barb Fowler butted in, inclining her body forward. “It was like he couldn’t breathe. It happened before, too.”

Mr. Fowler shot a hostile glance at his wife. “Be still, woman!”

“How long ago?”

“I don’t know,” Mr. Fowler hotly responded, his cheeks flushed. “I first noticed of a Sunday, last week.”

“It’s Thursday now,” Thompson noted. “Get down from there, if you like.”

Mr. Fowler nodded and diverted his glance toward the cream-coloured venetian blinds as if mortified to be in the doctor’s presence. “It’s nothing,” he muttered, sliding off

the table and buttoning his shirt. There was a short space of silence, in which Thompson watched his patient through the corner of his eye, and then Lloyd Fowler caught his breath.

“Allergic to anything?” Thompson asked, returning to his desk and carefully sitting, trying to repress a groan, but mumbling “Cripes.” His knees were bothering him more than usual today, aching from arthritis. The extra pounds he had packed on over the winter months were exacerbating his condition. He would have to ease up on his late-night addiction to jelly doughnuts and milk. Rich cream sauces and imported beers, sweet liqueurs and slabs of brie and havarti with dill were practically a daily indulgence.

“He’s not allergic to anything, Doctor.”

Thompson opened Lloyd’s file and sifted through its contents. Nothing to indicate a history that might precipitate breathing difficulties. No signs of asthma, although he should be sent for tests. But shortness of breath was shortness of breath. A warning sign, a portent of greater complications.

“Plenty of pollen in the air. It’s a bastard for causing inflammation. This time of the year especially. Your eyes water at all?”

“No, sir,” said Lloyd. He now stood by the wall with his hands at his sides. Like a big child called into the principal’s office, Thompson mused.

“Your heart sounds perfect, your lungs are clear. Could be allergies, a touch of asthma, or it could be nothing.” Thompson scribbled on his prescription pad. “This is for routine blood work. We haven’t had any blood out of you in years. We’ll have a look. Might be an infection. A virus. If there was chest pain, I’d book you for a stress test. Maybe I’ll do that anyway, just to be on the safe side.” He tore off the top sheet and laid it aside. “This one’s for allergy and asthma tests. I’ll have an appointment made at the hospital

in St. John's." On ripping off the second sheet, he handed both orders to Mrs. Fowler. Her husband glanced at the small white sheets while trying his utmost to ignore them.

"How about exercise?"

"He likes his television a bit too much these days," Mrs. Fowler chided, then whispered to the doctor, "since young Bobby's passing away." Mr. Fowler darted another piercing glance at his wife. This seemed to be the breaking point, the moment of ultimate humiliation that heaved him toward the door.

"So," Mr. Fowler barked. "I'm not goin' ta drop dead?"

Dr. Thompson chuckled agreeably, feeling his chin double. He leaned back in his chair and twiddled his pen. "I don't know, Mr. Fowler. Any of us could go at any minute."

"I s'pose so," said Lloyd Fowler, yanking open the door and striding off.

Mrs. Fowler watched her husband leave. Then, hesitating a moment, as if agonizing over the substance of her next disclosure, she leaned toward the door through which her husband had just fled, peeking out.

"Something else?"

Convinced the coast was clear, she faced the doctor and confessed, "He's got a real temper lately."

"How so?"

"Angry a lot."

"Irritable?"

"Yes, doctor. Only worse."

"You mentioned Bobby's passing away." Thompson paused a moment, out of respect. He set his elbows on his desk to further punctuate his shift in tone. "The breathing problem could be panic-related, depression. Has his routine changed much? Does he still enjoy doing the things he used to?"

"No, not at all. He's different."

"Sounds depression-related. I could give him a low-dose antidepressant. I'll need a thyroid test."

“Lloyd wouldn’t touch anything like that.”

Thompson scribbled on his pad, tore off the sheet and stood, handing the scrip to Mrs. Fowler. “Maybe you could convince him to try a few of these anti-anxiety drugs first. See if they make him feel better.”

Mrs. Fowler placed the prescription atop the others in her hand and, with a burdensome sigh, neatly folded them, opening her purse to secrete them away.

Thompson escorted Mrs. Fowler to the hallway. “Bring him back if things don’t improve.” In a lower voice he said, “Keep an eye on him,” and winked, in hopes of lifting her spirits.

“Yes, doctor. Thank you.” Mrs. Fowler gave a fleeting, vanishing smile, then passed ahead of Thompson and through the waiting area as the doctor accepted the next patient’s file from his receptionist. He frowned to himself at the sight of the name, then called out: “Aggie Slade.” He bit his tongue, preventing himself from adding: the community’s most renowned hypochondriac. “Welcome, Aggie. Welcome. What form of pestilence have you got today?”



Lloyd Fowler turned furtively as his wife hurried out the clinic door to join him on the wooden landing. He remained still with his jaw clenched, his eyes squinting at the late-afternoon brightness reflecting off cars in the gravel lot.

“Those people,” he grumbled. Having spoken, he was made aware of his need to breathe. His face flushed redder and he snorted hotly. Irked, he snatched a breath, steadfast in his refusal to regard Barb. “Those people in that waitin’ room thinkin’ me a sick man. I’m no sick man.”

“No, Lloyd,” Mrs. Fowler reassured him, reaching for his shoulder. “It’s probably nothing.”

At the touch of his fretful wife, he stomped down the three stairs, cursing his need to grasp after another breath. A deep one. How he hated where he lived, the land and the sea with all its unremarkable creatures that cavorted foolishly. How he dreaded the sensations that he was losing his mind, losing his breath, losing what he was. A plague of pointlessness tormented his bones. How he despised his average wife and his average house. When was it that the world had lost its character, he asked himself, and sunk to a level of such unendurable plainness?



“Don’t go in there by yourself,” Joseph called.

The two-storey square barn was painted rust-red; several small panes were missing from its white-trimmed windows. A sheet of plastic had been positioned behind the openings where someone had masked the holes in hopes of keeping the elements at bay. Not a breeze stirred. An insect buzzed behind Robin, a bumblebee by the sounds of it, hovering low to the ground where it drifted from delicate wildflower to wildflower. A bird twittered from high off in a tree or passing through the blue sky. The narrow barn door was ajar. It, too, was rust-red. At its centre, a white heart was evenly painted. With notepad clutched to her chest, Robin stepped up on the worn threshold, one hand reaching to rest on the outer wall where paint was peeling from the clapboard. Blindly, she picked at a flake, felt it beneath her fingernail.

“Why not?” Robin complained back at her father.

“I haven’t checked it out yet. Could be nails on the floor. Come on, now, help me bring in the rest of the stuff.”

Robin faced the barn’s dimness, her eyes adjusting to discern indistinct shapes. She thought she made out an old mattress and a piece of tall furniture. There were four tires closer to the door; she could see them quite clearly. She

held her breath, listening for movement, straining to catch the scamper of mice or stray cats. She heard a dripping, like water pattering on the floor, from upstairs. Then buzzing. Not the sound of a single fly. More like the hum from a mass of flying insects. With her eyes tipped toward the sounds, she wondered, *Flies or hornets?* At the thought of hornets, she stepped back and caught the movements of a young girl, deep in the barn, raising her hand to her face as if to shield herself from the light. Flinching, Robin dropped her notepad. Immediately she crouched and gathered it up, her eyes fixed on the space where she had seen the girl. No one. But as she stood, the girl came back into view and so Robin suspected the girl to be only her own reflection in a dusty full-length mirror toward the back. She leaned to one side and the reflection did exactly the same. She scrunched up her nose then scratched it. What did they say about an itchy nose? Going to have a visitor, or a fright.

“Robin, come on and help,” her father called, grunting under the weight of some load he was carrying. “Don’t be a slouch.”

The sound of the dripping slowed, then disappeared. The drone of flies faded. A smell of rotting fish wafted over her, the odour so disgusting that she twirled away and made a small noise. In the stillness that followed she waited for her body’s reaction, only to feel her stomach and throat constricting. She retched, wanting to spit out the taste. She scraped her top teeth against her tongue. “Daddy, what’s that horrible smell?”

Joseph, bent over the trunk, straightened with a pillow tucked under each arm, and sniffed the air. “I don’t smell anything. Lilacs, maybe.”

“No, it’s stinky.”

Her father shrugged and shook his head. “I don’t know.” He awkwardly gripped the handles of a black travel bag, clenched the pillows tighter beneath his arms, and headed

toward the house. "I can't handle this heat," he muttered. "Gimme snow instead."

Robin noticed how the car was parked on the grass because the driveway was overgrown. She liked the idea of everything growing wild. There were small red flowers in the grass and the lilac trees alongside the road were in full bloom. The smell of lavender mingled with the scent of grass warmed by the sun, and overpowered the smell of fish. In the distance, down over the sloping landscape of scattered evergreens and tall wild grass, and beyond the old square houses, the ocean glistened blue in the intense summer sun. The sun made her itchy. She scratched the back of her head, feeling the dampness in her hair, and watched for the silver flashings the little old lady had pointed out. The fish trying to fly. She remembered drawing flying fish a few weeks ago and flipped open her notepad, thumbing through the sheets only to discover that the drawings were in an older notepad. The old woman, Miss Laracy, seemed happy to know that Robin drew pictures. She had called Robin's drawings "art." Robin liked the old lady a lot.

Her father blew out a breath as he stepped from the house. His forehead glistened as he poked around in the trunk, squinting, then pawing sweat from his eyes. "Grab that bag," he said, nodding toward a plastic bag of food. "I'm taking a break." He sighed and sat on the lip of the trunk.

"You got Crunkies. My favourite."

Joseph laughed and mussed up Robin's hair. "What d'you think of the house?" he asked, tipping his head toward it. "Neat, or what?"

"It's great. I love it." Robin whisked the pen from behind her ear and began drawing the house.

"It belonged to a fisherman, years ago. They moved it from another community farther up the coast."

"Moved it?"