

☉ One ☉

Father and Luke are gone.

Some of the men are out looking for them right now and I'm supposed to be helping but I don't want to take any chance that I might be the one to find them. The word is that when they sailed two days ago the seas came up big all of a sudden and they were swept off the deck of the *Florence* before she even cleared Pearl Island. That's why I don't ever want to go out on the boats. All that water scares me. You can't trust something that's changing all the time—one minute, calm and quiet and smooth and the next gnashing and roaring like a dog on the end of a chain. I don't care if worms eat me when I'm dead, I just don't want to end up as fish food.

Maybe I'll just sit here awhile longer and hope nobody notices I'm not doing anything useful. I'm good at that—not doing anything useful, and I'm good at daydreaming. At least that's what Father says. It doesn't look like I'm going to have any time for that right now though because Ruth is coming up over the rocks to where I'm sitting as fast as she can go.

“Aaron! Come quick! They found Father!”

She stops a minute all out of breath. Her face is red where it's stung by the wind and tears are making long salty tracks across her cheeks. “They want ya to help bring him up to the house.”

I nod, just so she knows I heard her, but I don't move.

“Ya gots to come now.” Her fingers are biting through

the sleeve of my coat, but I can't move. I got something to ask her, but I can't hardly get the words out, my throat is that closed up.

“Luke?”

She shakes her head. Her cheeks were starting to dry up some just a minute ago but are wet again as she turns around and starts back the way she came. I get up and follow. As I'm slipping on the icy rocks and the frozen clumps of rusty seaweed lying on the path along the shore, I'm trying not to think that I'm going to meet up with my father for the very last time.

I have to admit to feeling a bit better once I lay eyes on him. He's dead alright, but I was expecting that. He doesn't look a whole lot like my father and that makes it easier to believe that maybe this isn't really happening at all. His eyes are open, frozen that way, as if he's been hypnotized or something. It's like someone's grabbed him by the chin and made him look them in the face and then wouldn't let him look away. His fingers are curled into themselves like claws, sharp and stiff, and his skin's all powdered over with silver frost. His hair's a spiky halo around his head, and his lips are pulled away from his teeth like a dog ready to bite.

He kind of looks like he's growling at something—Preacher maybe. Preacher's standing over him now and has got everybody lined up all quiet with their heads down and wouldn't Father just hate that. Father wasn't real fond of church, but he's been there enough to know exactly what's going to be coming out of Preacher's

mouth. I think Father only went on Sundays because Mother made him. Well, she didn't make him exactly, wanted him to, more like, and he went to please her. He'd have done anything to please Mother. Sometimes I think the only reason Father liked me at all is because I favour her. I've never wanted to go out fishing though, and I think that kind of made him...disappointed, I guess. Father always thought Mother coddled me, never made me do anything I didn't want to do, and maybe he was right.

Well, except for going to church. There's none of us who wanted to be sitting there on a sunny afternoon knowing the day's slipping away and we'd have nothing to show for it by the time service ended. Father'd usually just fall asleep. Watching to see how close his chin could get to his chest before Mother poked at him to wake up would help pass the time some. But after a bit even that got old, and it would be up to our own selves to keep the boredom away for as long as the service lasted. Luke and Adam and Davy? They'd fidget, feet swinging and thrumming on the wood benches till Mother made them stop. The girls? They didn't seem to mind so much. Ruth'd sit with her head bowed and follow along in her Bible. Ruby'd be on her lap, playing with the doll Mother made her, and Libby'd sit tucked up by Ruth fiddling with her hair. As long as we were all quiet, everything was fine. Once I snuck a book in under my coat and tried to hide it in the hymnal so I could pass the time reading, but Mother found it and that was the end of that. William's

the only one allowed to sleep undisturbed, but he's the baby. All he needed to do was so much as twitch and Mother'd have him at her breast and he'd keep still till the sermon was done.

Since Mother doesn't allow me to read, I mostly daydream. I look like I'm paying attention. I fix my eyes on Preacher so's to give the impression every word out of his mouth is going straight through to my soul, but I'm not really there, and neither is my soul. We're both far away from Blue Rocks, with its big old boulders like great grey teeth gnawing on the sky, and its bent and gnarly trees cowering before the wind. Mostly I'm in Halifax, living with Uncle Edward in his big house, going to a fancy school, just like he promised me I'd do one day. Mother hasn't seen hide nor hair of her brother in awhile now, but I've never forgotten that promise and I aim to hold him to it.



"I'm sorry son." That's Urban Mader, Father's first mate, laying a heavy hand across my shoulder. I don't know what to say. I feel like saying it's all right because that... that laying there isn't my Father, just some tangle of flesh and bone that doesn't look like it's ever been a live thing.

But I just nod and keep my peace.

"We best git him up t' the house. Yer mother's waitin'."

I want to laugh, because I can't imagine that Mother'd ever be waiting for Father to be coming home like this, but I bite my lip and say nothing.

Urban's got a blanket and he wraps Father in it like

he's a baby. He lifts Father under the arms, and I take ahold of his legs and we start on up to the house with Ruth trailing behind us, crying all soft like. We don't go hardly any distance at all when Sidney Knickle and Hermie Rafuse appear and I'm right some glad to give up my place at Father's feet.

The ground's been moving up and down around me and my stomach's starting to feel bad. There's a muscle jumping in my leg and next thing I'm stumbling like I'm staving drunk and my feet look real far away. I know what's coming and I wave to Ruth to keep on going. I haven't had a spell since last summer and I was starting to think that maybe they were gone for good. The doctor said they might stop as I got older, but it doesn't look like that time's come yet. The next thing I know my arms and legs are starting to twitch something fierce, the rocks are rushing up to meet me and the world's going dark.



I've got no idea how long I been lying here. My pants are wet, my coat's all soaked with melted snow and the sun's looking down at me out of a sky that's the colour of ice. Ruth's sitting close by on a bleached-out stump, picking at the hem of her skirt and looking none too pleased. She's paying me no mind, so I shut my eyes and let myself drift off again. Next thing I know she's got me by the shoulder and shaking me so hard it's making my teeth hurt.

"Aaron, wake up!" She sounds mad, like she thinks I been playing possum. "Wake up!"

My eyes are all gritty and my head hurts, and she's sitting on my chest now with my head between her hands, rutching it back and forth.

“Look at me.”

I finally get my eyelids to unstick, and I see the sun's a lot lower in the sky.

“Mother's askin' after you. I said you'd be along, but that were more 'n half an hour ago. Urban said he'd come fetch you, but I beat him out the door. You gotta get up b'fore they come.”

Ruth pulls me to my feet, and I hang on at her shoulder trying to get my legs under me. My mind's spinning around in these slow lazy circles, following along with the rocks and the clouds.

“You done had one of yer turns.” She's impatient now and pulling me toward the house. She stops a minute, scoops up some snow and shoves it at me. “Here, put this on your face.” She licks her fingertips and reaches up, trying to tame my hair.

That starts me laughing, that does. I'm standing here with my coat dripping, my boots and pants covered in mud and I'd say that right now my hair's the least of my worries. Ruth looks at me as if I'm crazy, but she doesn't say nothing—just takes my arm and pulls at me all rough. And I come right along like I'm nothing but a little kid just learning how to walk.

By the time we get to the back door, I'm shivering to beat all. I run my hands through my hair then—I don't want to scare the young'uns—take myself a deep breath

and head on into the kitchen. It's full of folk in there, mostly the men, and I try to stand in back by the stove so's no one will see me. Sidney does though and pushes his way through the swell of bodies with a bottle and a couple of tumblers in his hand. He pours me out a drink and one for himself and raises the glass in the air.

"Yer father, boy."

I just stand there, staring at the gold-coloured stuff swirling around in Mother's good crystal. They used to be her mother's and she doesn't ever use them, except on special occasions. But then, I guess things don't get much more special than this.

Sidney elbows me in the ribs and raises up his drink again. "Yer father."

I'm right embarrassed when the rum bites into the back of my throat and makes me cough, and Sidney frowns at me and pours me out another.

"Yer the man of the family now, son."

I drink that down just before Mother comes into the kitchen to sit in front of the stove with William on her lap. He's fast asleep, and Ruth and Libby and Adam and Davy come along behind her. Libby's bouncing Ruby on her hip and Adam's standing there all red in the face and trying not to cry.

Somehow my glass is full again. I tip it to my lips and catch Mother frowning in my direction. She's got 'that look' in her eye and she calls Ruth over. She whispers in her ear and then Ruth comes and takes my arm and pulls me into the parlour. There's no one left in there now since

all the women have followed Mother into the kitchen.

“Where’s Father?” I ask.

Ruth looks at me like I’m right out of my head.

“Ahhh—he’s dead?” She says it like a question and she’s not sure if she answered right.

“No, I mean, where’s...”

“Out in the woodshed. Sidney’s goin’ to make the box tonight and bring it over when it’s done.” Ruth’s eyes are all brimmed up with tears. “B’sides, Ma and Rosa can’t dress him till he’s thawed out some.”

I find this funny, but I don’t dare laugh—not when Ruth’s got that face on. My legs give out on me right about then and I plunk down hard on one of Mother’s good chairs.

“You better get up from there before Mother catches you.” Ruth finishes wiping her eyes and puts her hands on her hips. “She says you’re to go upstairs and have a lie down.”

By now I’m so mixed up I could almost swear I already was lying down, but I guess I’m not because Ruth’s got a hold of me again and is hauling me to my feet. I run into the wall more than once on the way up the steps and I’ve got a good case of the staggers by the time I get to the bedroom. I trip and fall across my bed, smacking my head against the corner post on my way down, then I’m falling off to sleep in a burst of shiny stars.



It’s just coming light when I wake up. I’m on my back now—my clothes are stiff with dried mud and my boots

weigh ten tons each. My head's full of wool and my mouth feels like something just crawled in there and died. I don't think I could move even if the bed was on fire. I lay there for a minute, trying to remember what day it is, listening to Adam and Davy breathing in and out, waiting to hear Father's footfall on the stairs on his way out to the barn. Then all of a sudden, my heart beats all fast and tight and I remember.

Father and Luke are gone.

I get up then and creep down the back stairs out into the yard. I'm expecting things should look different out there, being the first day I know for sure Father's dead and all, but they don't. The house is banked with fog, the air's grey with wet and Floss and Jess are there on the back stoop sitting just like they do on any other day. They get up and pick their way around the half-frozen puddles to follow me to the barn. Floss is one of those money cats—the kind that's all coloured up brown and black and orange and white. Alma says as long as you got yourself one of those, you'll always have money. Jess is the colour of midnight and is big and stupid. He's got himself twenty-seven toes. We know that because Ruth counted them up one day. There are lots of cats around these parts that got extra toes. Folks say they're good luck, that every time a boat left England to come out to the New World there was one of those cats on board. You'd think Jess'd be a good mouser with those feet the size of snowshoes, but he isn't. I guess it goes back to that “being stupid” thing—he wouldn't know a mouse

if it came up and bit him on the nose.

I'm so busy thinking on those foolish cats that all of a sudden it hits me I've got to walk right by the woodshed and that's where Father is. I really don't want to go past there and when I stop, the cats stop with me winding themselves around my legs like they know he's in there too. I feel shivers up my spine, but I can't stand out here all day, so I take a breath, untangle myself from the cats and run fast as I can the rest of the way to the barn. I hit the door with my shoulder and barrel on through and don't stop till I'm level with Bessie's stall. It's warm in there and Bessie's waiting on me. She gives her tail a switch and looks at me all soft with those brown eyes of hers. I take the pail from the hook on the wall and pull the stool along side with my foot and sit down. I can hear Bright and Lion snuffling together in their box and remind myself to throw down some hay for them when I'm done. A bunch of chickens are all huddled on the rafters, watching the cats with queer hard eyes. It's Ruth's job to take up the eggs but I'll do it for her this morning, seeing as how I'm beholden to her for yesterday.

I finish up in the barn and head on back to the house. I can see there's a lamp lit in the kitchen and I go in and set the pail beside the door and the basket of eggs on the table. Mother looks up from the rocker where she's sitting with William. Her eyes are watery, her nose is red, and she looks mighty sad and kind of... old. She doesn't say anything at first, just sighs and tugs on her sweater and settles the baby back so he's snugged up tight

against her. He's making these little chuffing noises—kind of like the ones the oxen were making out in the stable—and he sounds mighty happy.

Good thing somebody is.

“I didn't get the chance to ask you what happened yesterday. Are they back? Your spells?”

I don't want to talk about that now, so I just shrug and go fetch the milk bucket and set it in the sink.

“The bromide's still there in the pantry, up on the top shelf behind the pickled beets. Perhaps you should start taking it again.”

“I hate that stuff. Makes me sick. Besides, I've only had the one.”

I can feel her eyes on my back when I pick up the jug and head out the door to the well.

When I come back this time Mother's got William settled in his basket behind the stove and she's pulling on her apron.

I take the top off the kettle and tip the water in. “Do ya want me to help ya get Father ready?”

“Rosa's coming for that. You can help when Sidney brings up the casket. And someone has to go get the wreaths from Nellie Hynick. She said they'd be ready later today.”

I really didn't want to help with Father and just asked because I thought I should. I hope I'm not looking as relieved as I feel.

“I'll head on over to Mrs. Hynick's after noon. If ya can think of anything else needs doing, just ask.”

I set myself at the table and Mother lays her hand on my hair as she's going past. And even though I'm too old to have my mother patting my head, right now it feels kind of good.

The moment doesn't last long because I can hear from the noise upstairs that Adam and Libby are up, and sure enough they come down the back steps yammering to beat all. Ruth isn't far behind with Ruby and Davy in tow and Mother's got the eggs in the frying pan and is pulling a sheet of biscuits out of the oven by the time they come through.

Mealtime at this table's never been so quiet. Even the littlest ones seem to know there's something wrong. They're still covered in yolks and crumbs and squabbling over the last of the bacon but somehow it isn't the same. Mother's trying to be patient which usually isn't hard work for her. I notice her eyes skittering to the door every time there's a noise outside and I know she's like me—hoping none of this is real and that Father and Luke will come through that door laughing and smiling just like they've done for as long as I can remember.

But things have changed, as much as I might wish they hadn't. And I don't dare say this out loud, but I'm afraid for myself and all of us, now that I'm the one in charge.