



The Curse of the McCoys

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the fl@ubert duck series



for

Sarah, Johnny and Andrew

Only yesterday they had been speeding up the highway, past dusty gas stations at which they had occasionally stopped to adjust the signalling devices on the trailer. They had not been working at the beginning of the trip when they had bundled half-awake into the car at such an early hour. So it seemed hardly likely that they would suddenly spring to life following jiggling of the wires in some dusty gas station forecourt. While Heather was at home painting the front porch and had promised to join them later in the week, Matt had organized only two items of importance for this expedition to the island - a laptop computer and the Hobie Cat sail boat which was trailing along erratically behind them. No one wanted to look too closely through the rear window at how the boat was faring although periodic inspections were made at the various gas stations where they stopped to pick up essential supplies, potato chips, frozen steaks to be barbecued, and an assortment of worms and suckers which Johnny was holding on his lap during the drive, poking the slightly jaded creatures back to life whenever they seemed to be swimming upside down in the plastic bag.

Why had they listened to their father they were now all wondering as they sat silently staring out the windows at the northern scenery hurtling erratically by. It had been such a beautiful quiet morning - “a perfect moment to try out the sailboat”. Sarah would have preferred to stay home and peer at things through her microscope but she could see how much her father wanted to get them into that boat and she did not want to disappoint all his sudden enthusiasm.

However when they finally reached the island Matt suddenly retired to a large pile of books and his laptop computer on the cool



veranda and they were enjoined to set out on a little jaunt to ‘get the hang of the new boat.

The first leg of their expedition had been relatively restful, the boom pushed out wide as they ran before the gentle wind. Andrew had coiled all the ropes into neat spirals on the pontoon and was dribbling water onto his well-ordered creation. Sarah and Johnny were somewhat uninterested in any excessive inclination to neatness and decided to let the behaviour go unmentioned. Sarah had spent most of the expedition staring at the cloud shapes and finding faces and animals bounding about the blue sky. One of the clouds which she pointed out to Johnny was just like an old man with a terrifying look of pain written on his face. She tried to guide him through those malevolent contours but he resisted seeing it, catching instead a classic roadster with side running boards in the billowing formation.

It was so peaceful that no one quite understood what happened so suddenly or why. They all knew that it was in the nature of this boat to speed up at the first taste of treacherous waters. Perhaps it was just a freak gust. However, within seconds the pleasantly drifting entourage was sliding into the cold water and galvanized into frantic action. Paddles, life preservers floated off in all directions and had to be retrieved. The overturned sail filled up with water making it impossible to pull up the mast, however far they hiked out from the upstanding pontoon.

Even though the lonely McCoy Islands floating like a mirage on the horizon were the nearest land mass Andrew suggested that he could swim back to Fairwood to get help. Sarah however was able to discourage what she felt an unrealistic appraisal of the distances involved by commandeering Andrew’s life preserver to keep the mast

from turning upside down completely. Johnny made a concerted attempt to swim ahead pulling the boat line in his teeth, but this proved utterly fruitless. Hoping that eventually their father would note their absence they resolved to let the boat drift at least until they reached a shoal or island where it might be possible to aright it.

Slowly they drifted towards the Big McCoy Island and inexorably the sun drifted down to the horizon. Fortunately it was not too cold. The water caught on top of the sail seemed to warm up in the last hours of the day and they lay in the undulating white film and allowed the boat to drift.

It was just before dark and a gigantic, red, full moon had already appeared on the horizon when they heard the reassuring grate of rocks under the mast. As predicted they had washed up on the shore of the Big McCoy. It seemed that the boat had naturally homed in on a perfect little harbour protected on all sides from the violence of the Bay in rough weather.

Exhausted everyone dismantled the remainder of the sailboat, carried the parts up onto the smooth rocks and laid them out in a heap. There was not a breath of wind and the whole island was eerily silent as if all the animals and insects had retreated in silent terror from the astonishing rising moon.

Johnny began to enter into the spirit of the adventure. He contrived a sort of bludgeon constructed out of portions of the boom vang and wandered off along the shore in search of a suitable dinner.

Sarah was not sure quite what he had in mind nor could she conjure up what success would look like if he were able to achieve it. With the skill of a seasoned nature scout she located a well provided blueberry patch and she and Andrew settled for more attainable rewards.

Though it was twilight the radiance of the moon picked out the large pine overhead as a stark silhouette against the sky. The tree had died many years ago, perhaps suddenly from some inexplicable shock, still full of sap so that its preservation was remarkable. Its wind blasted, silvery wood picked up the moonbeams and seemed to reflect them down to the tiny glowing white violets on the forest floor.

Sarah began to get worried about her father who would obviously be in a fit of anxiety at this point, if he had noticed their absence at all. She pictured him racing madly up and down the Bay in the motorboat or frantically trying to organize a search party. Since they had no matches to make a fire, and Andrew's efforts to hit stones together had been unrewarding, she suggested that the next best thing would be to make a signal out of the sail by tying it to the old tree hulk. At least in the dawn light this would be quite visible from a distance. Andrew who had developed a simian prowess from early childhood readily agreed to climb up with the halyard and tie the sail to a high branch.

Sarah gave him a starting boost and he continued his way up branch by branch with the halyard tied round his waist - the very picture of Commando-Man.

Typically Commando-Man will only be content on reaching the highest possible branch and Andrew had almost attained his destination when there was a sudden crack and splintering sound. He plummeted

like a meteorite from the top limb and disappeared totally from view into the blueberry patch below. In horror Sarah rushed over to inspect the site of this incredible disappearing act.

The rope was still attached to the sail but no Andrew was visible. He had simply disappeared into thin air.

“I’m down here in some kind of a room”, a muffled voice emerged from the blueberry bushes under Sarah’s feet. Sarah pulled at the rope and realized that it was still attached to a living, breathing Commando-Man when it yanked back crossly. She inspected an indentation in the ground that Andrew seemed to have fallen through. She put her hand through the root mass following the rope into what seemed to be a raccoon’s burrow. Feeling the open space below she shuddered, half expecting to be nipped by some irate creature whose home she had invaded.

Suddenly she was pounced on from behind and gave a horrified shriek. Andrew had somehow mysteriously reappeared as if from nowhere. Having heard the scream, Johnny raced back dragging his boom-vang weapon and two old bumpers which he had found washed up on the shore.

“I hope that you’re not proposing those for dinner.” Sarah liked to needle her younger brother when his expectations of derring-do were not completely met.

Andrew announced breathlessly, “It’s amazing I’ve found a sort of a room hidden under the forest floor and as far as I can make out it’s full of furniture, old boxes and bottles. There’s another way in down over here.” The three followed him down the rock face to the narrow crevice from which Andrew had emerged and took turns peering through



into inky obscurity beyond. A fringe of elderberry bushes hung down obscuring the entrance from anyone who did not know exactly where to look.

Proudly from his pocket Johnny pulled a Zippo gas lighter. Sarah's faith in her brother's talents as an indomitable explorer was suddenly restored. Only Johnny would have noticed this battered bit of flotsam on the shore, and only he would have been able to dry it out and get it to work again. There was a little gas left in the bottle but they decided that they could use a bit in order to make a quick reconnaissance of the space beyond.

Holding his treasure alit in front of him, Johnny went in first followed by Andrew and Sarah. It took a moment for their eyes to acclimatize to the dim light. They were in a vast space hollowed out under the trees.

Vaguely they discerned an old table which stood to one side of the space and on it Sarah noticed among the tin plates and miscellaneous tools a candle stick which some animal had gnawed at tentatively years ago and then given up in disgust. Their eyes had grown so accustomed to the dim light shed by Johnny's lighter that when the candle was applied to it the room seemed to be flooded with a spooky light and they were able to take a better reckoning of the cavernous chamber that they had discovered.

The room was about twelve feet wide and much longer, trailing off into a little crooked passage at the far end from where they had entered. On both sides there were sheer rock faces rising up about eight to ten feet. The roof on which they had been treading about earlier seemed to have been constructed out of pieces of a salvaged boat, perhaps one of the old wrecks on the Bay. There was a large portion of steel siding perforated with old brass portholes screwed shut which one day years ago might have let a filtered light into the room. Aside from the table in the middle of the room there was an old iron bed with an ornate headboard with flowery wrought patterns of tubular metal - hardly the kind of bed you would expect to find under a rock thought Sarah, laughing to herself. The springs were rusty and animals had made a disgusting mess of the mattress which had fallen through to the floor below. The floor of this underground chamber had been pieced together carefully out of flat faced rocks, by someone who must have spent a lot of time in the room years ago.

But the most surprising feature of the room was the wall lined with crates of bottles - bottles of all sizes and in beautiful shapes and coloured glass. Much of the wooden racking which had supported the bottles and containers had long ago rotted away allowing the bottles to cascade to the ground or into the large tubs which lined the wall. The room suggested a reclusive but fastidious owner who had taken a great deal of care in planning his environment. But the owner had abandoned the place leaving all his possessions behind. There were tattered clothes on hooks in a makeshift wardrobe. There were rusty tins of preserved meats on a larder shelf and an old washstand by the bed with ancient scissors and a file sitting on a shelf. Sarah picked up a faded photograph in a metal frame and held it to the light - a picture of an almond eyed

woman in an improbable hobble skirt and hat pulled down to her ears. There was defiance in those eyes that confronted the photographer.

“This place is very spooky”, shuddered Sarah. Johnny looked very pleased.

Suddenly, they realized that they were not alone. Heavy footsteps were heard crossing the roof above.

She felt a surge of relief. At last a rescue party had seen the sail and had come to rescue them. They rushed towards the entrance shouting joyfully - but there was not a soul to be seen - only their long shadows cast across a vast, empty expanse of moonlit rock.

“It must have been a bear, perhaps a very large black bear” volunteered Johnny, a thought that was less than comforting to the others. “Perhaps this is his lair.”

Given the choice of spending the night on the rock with a very large black bear or retreating again into the mysterious underground room, they reluctantly chose the latter course. Retrieving articles from the shore, they laid out the sail and the life preservers as cushions on the middle of the floor and tried to fall asleep.

But then again came the sound of tramping across the roof - this time with a dragging sound as if the bear were pulling a large trunk behind it.

Johnny pulled his boom vang death weapon to him and even Sarah was just a little thankful for her brother’s foresight in creating a weapon of destruction.

Suddenly a hoarse voice was heard overhead so clearly it was

almost as if the speaker was in the same room.

“Scarp, you tell him to get here with that cash or he’ll end up in one of my vats. I got me blokes up and down the shore who are short of fish bait”. The companion, Scarp, muttered a foul retort.

The three souls hidden in the underground shelter looked at each other aghast.

“I think that they must be coming down here,” Sarah whispered in horror and looked around frantically for a place to hide themselves.

Stealthily, they crept up to the narrow end of the chamber and positioned themselves behind a large rusted out vat in such a way that they could not be seen if anyone came into the cavern at the other end. Johnny blew out the candle and they waited, hearts beating wildly.

Overhead there were more dragging sounds and the distinctive sounds of crates of bottles being piled up nearby.

A shout rang out “Get the lantern - she’s coming in on the wrong side of the shoal - what’s wrong with ‘im, he’s done this landing ‘undred times before.” Out in the bay they could hear the muffled roar of a large boat pulling into the harbour. All three hidden interlopers were thinking about what was going to happen when these villains found their jaunty little sailboat pulled up on the shore along with the various other signs of their presence ... particularly the sail and halyard draped over the highest branch of the tree overhead which was still hanging down incriminatingly into the centre of the room.

The voices seemed to trail off for a few minutes as if the two men who had been talking had gone down to guide in the boat, Johnny

seized the moment and rushed out into the centre of the room, pulled the halyard completely through the roof, quickly bundled it up and stuffed it behind an old vat in the corner before retreating again with the others into the dead end passage.

The passage was slightly crooked as it ran up to ground level and though they could not see into the chamber, at least they would not be seen unless someone picked his way through the rusting metal debris to the far end of the room. Six wide eyes peered into the darkness and no one dared to draw breath.

Someone had entered the room muttering to himself. It sounded like the hoarse man who had earlier been overheard talking to Scarp. He was obviously in a foul humour as he searched for a light and lit a candle. Johnny felt the other candle by his side and wondered it that was what the man was looking for. It was a relief when the room filled with the glow of a candle and the sounds of the man who was evidently preoccupied with trimming a kerosene lamp which he must have brought in with him. Apparently two other men joined him. They recognized the surly voice of Scarp from the earlier overheard conversation. The other was addressed more deferentially as 'Cap'n Murley'. The captain was soft spoken and had a educated, commanding voice. He sounded very out of place in these wild surroundings. The Captain seemed to be observing every detail of the room and made a number of comments about the "immaculate set up" though the three silent visitors could not imagine what he was talking about in a room so steeped in dereliction.

"Oh, I have a letter to be conveyed to you from the boss" announced the Captain in a rather formal tone. There was the sound of a



snatched envelope being torn open and a moments silence as the contents were read and digested.

With an icy cool voice that made all three eavesdroppers shudder in their niche, the old man said “You just go back and tell your boss he’ll have to drop me in the Bay afore I let him take over my business. Tell ‘im to remember it was me who made him rich, it’s my business and I can pull the plug on it anytime I like and let all that sweet liquor craze the fish from here to the Limestones.”

There was the scraping of a chair as Scarp with his heavy gait got up and shuffled across the room, then a clink as he pulled a bottle from the rack. Sarah wondered where he had found a full bottle in the midst of all the mess along the wall.

“Ask before you serve your bloody self” hissed the hoarse old man.

“But I’m not serving myself, I’ serving you,” replied Scarp.

The Captain said nothing but the silent tension in the room was unbearable. Suddenly Andrew’s foot which had been pressing against a rusty old tub went through it with a deafening lurch. Three hearts stopped beating for a moment. They waited.

“What was that?” said Scarp.

“Just another rat! I seem to be surrounded by them!” was the terse answer of the old man, followed by a smashing sound as the proffered glass was thrown against the rockface. Then there was the sound of a sudden lunge across the table and metal plates crashing to the floor. One

of the lamps overturned reducing the illumination in the room. Johnny craned around the corner to try and make out what was going on. Sarah tried to pull him back out of the line of vision. At the end of the room he could see the three shadowy figures. The Captain, perfectly composed, was sitting rigidly upright opposite the old man and beside the old man's shoulder was the hulk of a man that he assumed must be Scarp. Scarp was still holding the letter that the Captain had delivered and was apparently puzzling over the contents. Suddenly the old man grabbed the letter from his hands, tore it in two, crumpling the scraps and tossed it insolently in the Captain's face.

The captain was unperturbed; he merely looked up at Scarp and gently nodded. Scarp's hands folded around the old man's neck. Johnny drew back in horror. There was a sound of a struggle and of a chair overturning, then a moments silence before the Captain in his gentle deliberate voice resumed.

"We'll sink him in the Bay - it seemed to be where he was headed. Look sharp and get him along down to the boat."

There was the sound of the Captain rising from his chair and bundling up his coat before delivering the chilling words, "Needless to say it will be the curse of instant death on anyone who speaks of what happened here tonight."

Scarp grunted and was left with the body. Shortly after there was the sound of another bottle withdrawn from the rack, being uncorked, a gulp taken, then the squeak of the cork being re-inserted. Scarp set about tearing apart the bed and bundling the old man into the sheets. At last he was heard leaving the chamber dragging the body behind him.

Silence ...

Ten minutes later there was the throbbing sound of the motor of the boat starting up in the harbour. It idled for some time. Sarah, Johnny and Andrew, lying in a heap still did not dare draw breath.

A single gunshot rang out over the bay. Then the engines were thrown into full throttle and the sound began to recede into the distance.

Horror-stricken the three did not move a muscle for what seemed an eternity. However it was obvious that everyone had gone away and that the island had returned to its previous desolation.

“Why had no one noticed the sailboat moored in the bay?” thought Sarah.

“And where’s that body now?” thought Johnny?

Eventually Johnny pulled out his Zippo and dared to re-light the candle. They crept out into the room to survey the scene. There were the two chairs occupied by the old man and by the Captain. One was overturned as it had been when they had entered. There was the smashed glass on the floor.

Johnny dashed over to the corner where he had seen the old man throw the letter. Out of the dust he pulled a scrap that seemed to dissolve in his hand.

All that remained was a piece of envelope with the single word on it written in a small crabbed script- *“McCoy”*.





With a shudder the three interlopers rushed for the door and out into the silent moonlight which bathed the smooth rocks of the shore. Looking westwards out on the Bay they could see the twinkle of a receding light.

The rocks had lost their warmth from the previous day's sun. Nevertheless the three decided to camp out on the shore at the far end of the island. The wind began to come up and it was miserably cold but no one dared to light a signal fire with the found lighter. It seemed better to wait until morning and plan the day anew.

A rescue crew arrived early the next morning. Fortunately their father was at the helm of the boat that pulled into the shore. Andrew rushed down and threw himself at his father "Guess what happened last night" he gasped, but Sarah pulled him back fiercely and hissed "Remember that curse!"

Their father looked at his daughter as if her mind were wandering, but both Andrew and Johnny recalled the last words they heard the Captain address to Scarp and they remembered that bone chilling tone.

"It will be the curse of instant death to anyone who speaks of what happened here tonight."



*Yours Truly,
Fl@ubert Duck*

