

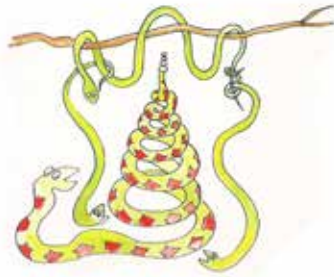


Fairwood Flotsam

The Wreck of the Asia

Tam Fairlie

the fl@ubert duck series



*for Mavis
Sarah, Johnny and Andrew
Ariane and Stuart*

The first boat had left half an hour earlier largely due to Ariane's organizing influence. She had arranged the provisions for the expedition on the previous night while the others were out on the verandah watching a spectacular electrical storm.

Lightning was dancing about them on all sides. They had been counting out loud the seconds between the ripping flashes and the arrival of the thunder rumblings to chart the advance of the storm. The roof of the house was being pummeled with rain interspersed with sudden expectant silences.

Their sense of secure distance of the audience listening to the remote drum tattoo was suddenly obliterated by a shrieking thunderbolt and instantaneous explosion which sent throbbing echoes up and down the bay. A rogue gust of wind laden with water assaulted the screens in the corner enfolding the huddled group in a cloud of cold, skin prickling moisture. The group of onlookers was in an excitable and nostalgic mood. The dogs who had not the luxury of a aesthetic detachment from the dangers of nature were cowering at their feet under the sofa, terrified by these sudden developments.

"I guess this rules out our jaunt up the Bay for tomorrow," Sarah suggested mournfully.

"Maybe it's the ghosts of the dead on Dead Island making their point that they just want to be left alone", suggested Stuart. "We don't need *you* to liven things up around here." He shrieked in a hollow voice.

Johnny dangled his arms like a zombie on the prow and let his

clammy fingers encircle Andrew's neck.

"With these winds the waves will be enormous by tomorrow morning." Ariane looked apprehensive as she pulled the expedition's provisions out of the way of rain blowing through the screens across the flagstones.

Again there was a sudden eerie lull in the cyclone of winds buffeting the house as if they had passed into the epicentre of the storm. A throb of high pressure in their ears seemed to smother any sense of hearing under a blanket of deafness. In astonishing brief moments of silence, far out among the reefs came three, solemn, wavering blasts of a foghorn followed by a further surreal silence. Ears strained to catch more, their minds perhaps fueled with the fantasy of a ship in distress out on the Bay. Then as if in furious riposte the wind whipped up a particularly hysterical shriek and the water tank gave an unearthly groan on its trestle.

"I've always thought that this is the way extra-terrestrials would communicate with the planet Earth." Andrew suggested. "Sort of a Morse code. Or perhaps they would just orchestrate the whole storm."

Sarah looked dubious. "But why bother? If they were so sophisticated that they could leap through space and time warps to get here, the last thing they would find fascinating would be a conversation with any one of us - however riveting we may appear to ourselves."

"It would be like overturning a stone and finding the bustling self-contained microcosm of an insect colony underneath. The last thing that you feel necessary is communication with their leaders to reassure them."

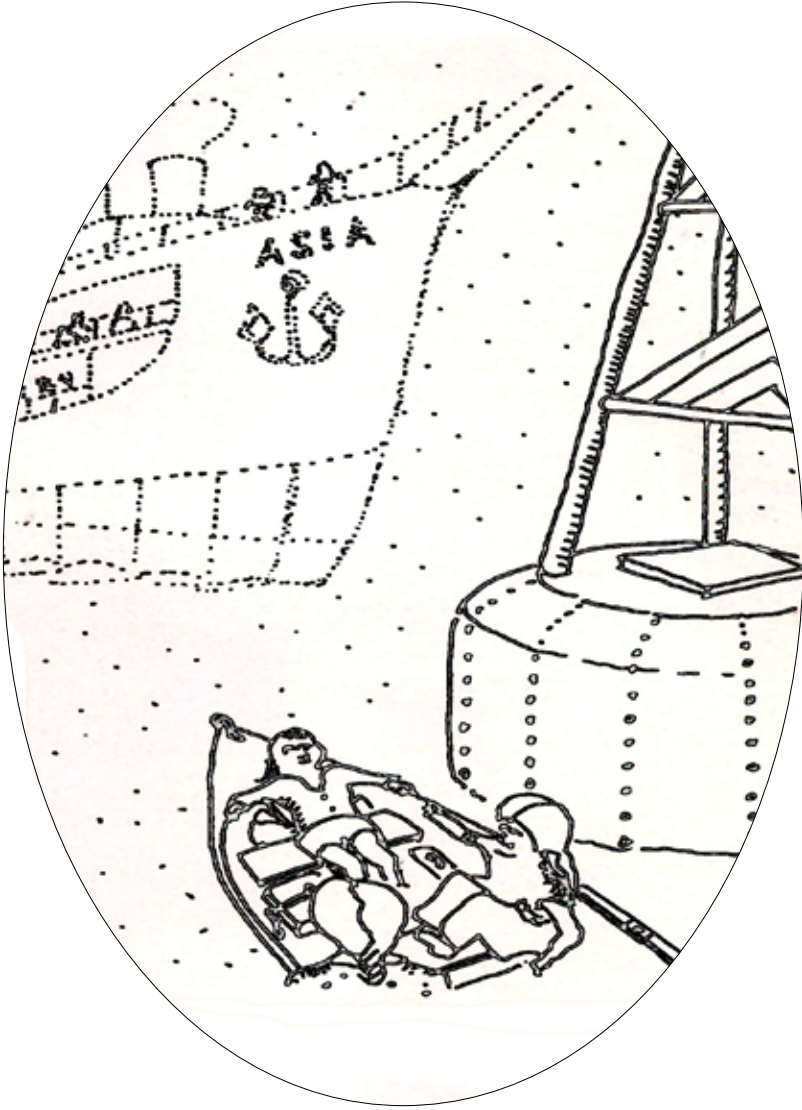
"Or perhaps you might get them to set up new little insect gods in their temples to your greater glory", added Mavis. This image appealed inexplicably to Johnny who attempted unsuccessfully to impersonate an insect at prayer. "How about a Praying Mantis?"

Another deafening thunderbolt silenced everyone again.

After a sleepless night with distant rumblings of thunder continuing to scuttle about all points on the compass, they awoke to a morning of misty calm. The channel was glass-smooth, reflecting the rocks opposite in a long decorative frieze telling a very complex story of imprisoned spirits. In the stillness of the morning huge droplets of water clung to the clumps of grass or sat momentarily poised on the edges of leaves. Distant sunlight seemed to suffuse the moisture-laden air making the puddles on the rocks into patches of molten silver reflecting the sky. Water prisms in the atmosphere seemed to refract a light that was almost unbearably bright at this hour of the morning.

The calm was confidence inspiring. There was absolutely no wind and the two little boats would easily weather the trip north on the outside channel beyond the Magnetewan Ledges to Dead Island.

Purring with confidence the first boat with Sarah, Ariane and Mavis set out on schedule, having agreed with the others to meet at the bellbuoy outside of Nares Inlet. This was the only method the girls could devise to precipitate some action and get the expedition underway. Beyond the bellbuoy the two boats would proceed in tandem guided by Johnny's compass.



As the girls passed through the channel beyond the lighthouse they began to realize that boating conditions were less ideal than they had supposed. The light mistiness of the morning seemed to be becoming denser. By the time they reached the

bellbuoy the shore of the mainland was almost invisible in the rolling fog.

“Do you think that we should just make a dash back to the mainland before it’s too late?” Ariane suggested practically. “At least while we can still vaguely see our wake, we’ll hit the mainland somewhere. And we will get away from this exceedingly prominent metal lightening conductor.”

A phalanx of dense misty vapour, a great wave of swirling white, rolled over them suddenly like an advancing army. They felt themselves choking under the power of the cold, moist assault. Skins became clammy and mottled and Ariane began to shivering visibly.

There was a further hint of thunder lumbering about the bay in the distance.

“But what about the boys? They will think that we are here. They’ll probably dream up some sort of rescue mission – too ghastly to contemplate!”

Mavis clambered up onto the bellbuoy and slowly induced the huge black tank to sway from side to side in the calm water. The old bell crashed resonantly through the fog. “I guess that it’s a good idea to send a signal. At least if the other boat is within earshot they will have something to guide them towards us.”

“Well perhaps a little bit of conspicuous heroism might not be totally unwelcome” muttered Sarah resignedly. There seemed to be no other recourse but to await developments.



And what about the boys? They had left later than expected. When they did the boat looked like something from Dogpatch, laden with debris, tangled fishing line, and bedding in the bilge. It was not till they had passed Pushwah that Andrew casually remarked that he thought they had forgotten the food, which Ariane had left conspicuously in the middle of the dock for them. This reversal meant that by the time they again reached the Pointe, a dense fog had settled over everything.

Johnny swerved suddenly to avoid a rock that had never been encountered in the channel before. Andrew began to question whether perhaps they had veered from course and slipped into the bay with the decaying log cabin on the reefs. Stuart was wide eyed with excitement as they encountered strange bits of shoreline and veered away precipitously - all at top speed.

Finally realizing that they were completely lost, Johnny stopped the engine. A total silence reigned.

"Listen, can you hear it in the distance?" Faintly far away they could detect the sound of the bellbuoy. "They're out in that direction" Andrew pointed into the densest part of the fog. "They're stranded and signaling for our help"

"To the rescue!" shrieked Johnny, pointing the boat in the direction Andrew was waving.

The chance encounters with unexpected parts of the shoreline seemed to cease, which Johnny considered to be a good sign. Periodically he would stop the motor and listen intently Every time he did so Andrew would indicate a direction radically divergent from what they were pursuing at that moment. This was unnerving even as a background for the intended heroic rescue. Stuart beat a

rhythm of his favorite song on the gunwales of the boat with his paddle to give reassurance to the stranded.

On the bellbuoy the three girls listened intently. The sounds of the Bay seemed magnified and in the distance Ariane felt that she could hear a sound of a motor punctuated by inexplicable thumping sounds. Gradually these noises became mixed with a stronger, more insistent foghorn.

“Some properly equipped boat must be making its way up the shoreline guided by proper charts and proper compasses” she hinted sarcastically.

Soon the throb of an engine became evident between blasts of the foghorn.

The sky became sinisterly darkened. Sarah looked up and screamed in horror. Looming overhead the bow of a colossal ship sliced through the fog and was bearing down upon them, heading straight for the bell buoy. There was a sudden jangling of bells as the watch on the bow communicated with the pilot and a mighty turbulence as the huge hulk changed direction a fraction of a degree, just enough to avoid running down the bell buoy and the tiny boat moored to it.

The girls gestured violently and angrily. They screamed at the glazed forecabin where they assumed the pilot or captain might be, but they could not discern anyone aboard the ship.

“It looks like an ocean liner! I had no idea that a boat of that size could navigate these waters.” Mavis looked incredulous.

As the black hull slipped by merely feet away, dwarfing the tiny bell buoy and the moored boat, Mavis clanged the bell to register their dismay at their near escape. This was answered by three more mighty blasts from the horn. Hot acrid coal smoke seemed to engulf them.

The long baleful blasts of the foghorn seemed to evoke something in their memories from the night before.

“We were hoping for a rescue mission, but this is a little beyond our requirements.” Ariane joked trying to make light of their narrow escape.

As the rest of the hull advanced steadily into view they were astonished to see the grand scale of the vessel. Three funnels belching steam hove into view. The steady slow throb of the engines churned up a roiling wake. The ship had upper and lower decks. Some signs of life aboard at last became discernible. Wrapped in dark shawls and capes the forms of crouched passengers could be made out on the decks. The three girls continued to wave wildly but no one aboard bothered to wave back or register the slightest interest, they simply stared blankly at the bellbuoy as if its stranded cargo were invisible.

“How ridiculous! Who do these people think they are.” Mavis was always outspoken. “Not a word or gesture of recognition.”

“I think that they must be filming a movie or something, what else would explain it?” Ariane suggested.

Sarah however felt haunted by the emptiness in the eyes that were paraded by. They were so near that she could almost reach her hand out and touch the hull of the ship. They all seemed to be inwardly contemplating some terrible doom.

As the stern came into view they could make out two young people on the lower deck. Unlike the other travellers they were dressed in indoor clothes and had obviously just stepped out onto the deck to enjoy the astonishing mystery of the fog. They were holding hands and laughing at some private joke. They seemed to be bathed in their own special halo of light as if making a special cameo appearance. The young woman had a dark complexion and

sparkling eyes. Her eyes engaged and she responded to Ariane's wave. She held out her hand and pointed proudly to a curious bracelet looped around her slender wrist as if this could explain all questions. The bauble seemed to be a charm bracelet, a little net into which were woven colourful pebbles shaped like fish.

Less than five feet away from them as they passed the woman laughed lightly and hugged her companion whose eyes sparkled back in recognition of their mutual good fortune.

Emblazoned on the stern, white letters imprinted on a rusty hull came into view for an instant then disappeared into the swirling fog. Sarah screamed out the simple name,

A S I A

Her face suddenly froze in horror as the gigantic wake lifted their tiny aluminum craft up perilously on one side, the starboard side being wedged under a strap of the bellbuoy. The contents, including Sarah and Ariane were spilled out into the Bay. The bilge of the boat was swamped.

The sound of the foghorn disappeared and the three girls were left spinning in its wake in silence. Speechless with rage they clambered aboard and began to bail their boat and restore its jumbled cargo.

The boys continued their fruitless meandering through the open waters. They could no longer hear the bell buoy. The luminous mists seemed to roll about on the flat calm water surface and there was no apparent way of following any consistent direction. Johnny suggested taking apart the engine to make a rudimentary compass out of the magneto, but this solution was considered a last resort. Stuart cast the anchor overboard but it was well out of the rope's depth. They decided that the most sensible course was to shut down the engine and drift around until the fog lifted enough they could make out some part of the shoreline. There is nothing more galling than foiled heroism and the trio remained silent straining to hear any sound.

Suddenly Andrew pointed into the fog. "Listen, do you hear it?" The others strained uncomprehending. Then they began to make out the sound of a distant horn sounding the familiar tattoo of distress. S O S.

At last work for heroes!

Johnny started up the motor, gaily drowning out all sound and headed full speed in the direction indicated.

When they stopped to get their bearings again the sound of explosive flares and gunshots had supplemented the foghorn. It was all suddenly very near. They could also make out human shrieks and a cacophony of animal sounds.

"Either someone's is having a lark with a tape recorder, or this is a disaster of Titanic proportions!"

The little boat suddenly strayed into a knot of utter chaos. There seemed to be huge logs floating everywhere. Stuart rubbed his eyes as a cow, spluttering, buffeted their boat with frantic



hoofs, snorting water over the gunwale. Other cattle seemed to be floundering around on all sides. They found themselves amidst a debris of floating luggage, kitchen pots, pails, bits of furniture, bedding all being churned up by the hysterical animals. Then Stuart shouted, "Look its not just animals, it's people as well" and he pointed towards some flotsam with hands scrabbling desperately to gain a grip.

They had a sense that land must be near at hand. Darkness seemed to loom close by at one side of this scene of catastrophe. Then they became caught in a great swell, as the land seemed to be sucking them inexorably towards it. Alongside was a huge ship, turned three quarters onto its side, filling with water and sucking back all of the things that had previously spilled out of its holds. Hundreds of people seemed to be clinging to the bulwarks screaming as they were lowered inevitably into the bay. Cattle snarled in the rigging were scrabbling feverishly to clamber back aboard. The din was deafening. On the high tilted deck they could make out a man in a black coat with shiny buttons holding a revolver pointed at the sky. From it erupted a huge explosion and their eyes followed a flare, which gave the thick fog a warm radiance overhead. When they looked again the man had slipped from his perch into the roiling debris below.

Johnny seemed to have formulated a plan instantly. He grabbed the anchor rope and leapt into the water, swimming over to a group of logs and started to lash them together into a primitive raft. "At least they'll stop rolling out from under people while we get them to safety."

Andrew and Stuart concentrated on picking up the people who were clearly not going to make it to the raft. None of these people seemed to know how to swim.

“Where they all come from and why would they be out on the Bay in this weather?” went through everyone’s minds. It all seemed a tragic stupidity. They pulled as many as they could out of the water and ferried them over to Johnny’s raft. The raft was under siege by frenzied cattle, those that had not already drowned.

They had assembled about fifteen people on the raft. Many more had just disappeared under the waves.

With a huge belch the hull of the ship slipped finally under the water’s surface. An ominous momentary silence reigned as the floating debris eddied in a giant circle. Suddenly there was a mighty explosion. A huge plume of water rose overhead as the studded iron boiler smashed through the midst of the debris, bobbing on the surface, spluttering and boiling off steam. It had broken through the decks of the sunken ship and hissed angrily at the centre of this whirlpool of flotsam. Johnny’s raft was shattered, scattering their rescue efforts into the water again. The other two boys were flung from their rescue boat and hurled into a whirlpool of chaos.

Having reassembled a few of the logs they were at last able to reclaim nine of their original passengers. Everyone else had disappeared under the surface. Hissing and bubbling, the boiler sank again into the depths. An eerie silence reigned over the scene as the three exhausted boys crawled up onto their raft. The passengers remained huddled and sobbing in the middle. Such was their distress that not one of them was able to utter a word.



In the chaos that followed the turbulent passage of the steamboat “Asia”, the girls’ craft had broken adrift from the bell buoy. Their first thought had been to salvage their possessions. Sarah though, had given herself a fright when she jumped into the water to retrieve a duffel bag and some paddles which had been washed away. By the time that she had swum around to these various items and collected them onto a towrope, she realized that she was out of sight of the drifting boat. The thick fog swirled eerily about her head. She called out to the other girls whose answering calls and whistles seemed to be coming from all directions. In increasing panic she abandoned the towrope suddenly aware of how vulnerable she was, a tiny speck swimming around in the swirling mist. She realized how easily she might disappear noiselessly under the surface. The girls’ calls had become increasing hysterical. Sarah marshaled her wits and shouted to the boat. “Stop the racket, only one person call, and not so loud, I can’t find my directions.”

The rope with the objects tangled with her leg giving her an unpleasant start. Inspired she grabbed hold of one end and swam to pull it out into a long floating cordon. Within minutes the girls had located the cordon and were pulling Sarah back to safety.

When at last the swamped boat had been bailed out and the water partially wrung out of the jumble of bedding, they began to paddle around in the vicinity searching out the bell buoy. The engine, which had hung underwater on its safety chain for some minutes, had ceased to function. They kept expecting to see the huge bulk of the buoy appearing mysteriously out of the fog. Their eyes seemed to have become hypersensitive, craving some focal

point of colour in an enveloping universe of subtle, luminous greys.

To lighten the outraged and gloomy silence Ariane held out her wrist and pointed to her favorite bracelet with the same haunting gesture of the callous woman on the rear deck of the boat raising her eyes and tapping the side of her nose with a melodramatic mimicry.

“If someone had given me that wretched bangle I would have calmly dropped it overboard.” Mavis mimicked the action in disdain.

“Especially if he looked like that - she must have dug him up in some graveyard” Sarah laughed. “Do you suppose that they were on their honeymoon? Ariane then began to bat her eyes as if she were flirting with a cadaver propping him up against the railing, which made them all laugh and defused some of their resentment at the callous behavior of the passing ship.

Mavis became convinced that the sky seemed slightly brighter in one direction, which she proposed must be the south. “By keeping the brighter sky to our right we should at least be heading in towards the mainland.” This seemed to be a plausible course of action though because of lingering uncertainty hearts, energies and paddles were not employed to the full.

Sarah looked downwards and exclaimed with relief. Underneath the boat, like a great white fish, a strip of quartz glittered below. The long welcoming strand was punctuated with huge black boulders.

“Bottom, I see the bottom. At least we must be going in the right direction. We’re coming into the shoals. You can even feel a slight swell of the water under us.”

Mavis leant over and tried to peer under the fog blanket through the shallow strip above the water surface to see whether there was any welcoming glimpse of shoreline.

Sarah suddenly shouted in astonishment. Swirling into view through the fog was the unmistakable silhouette of a tall horse. “It’s not possible!” The horse reared up in fright, snorted loudly and ran off across the shoal. An echo of the cry of fright returned eerily over the rocks.

“Trust Sarah, to attract the only horse that has ever been seen on a reef in the Georgian Bay” Ariane exclaimed. Sarah was too shocked to say anything.

“Well, whatever the horse is doing here it must have got here from the mainland. That’s a good sign.”

The girls disembarked and pulled their boat up on the reef. Rather than striking inland in the fog to follow the horse they decided to follow the shoreline so that at least they could retrace their steps to the boat. After a few minutes of scrambling silently from rock to rock they began to doubt seeing a horse at all. Was it not some kind of group delusion? But its greeting of terror still echoed in their ears.

Then to their further astonishment they happened upon a small group of dejected looking cattle. And more. Items of debris seemed to be bobbing around at the water’s edge, bags, kitchen utensils, and a broken deck chair. They retrieved a suitcase dragging it onto a flat rock and unlashed its cords.

As the girls peered into the soggy jumble of contents Ariane observed, “ It seems to be antique clothing - why look! All of it is hand made, all the socks hand knitted - and what on earth is that - some kind of whalebone corset. Yikes! Who would ever contemplate a corset in the Georgian Bay?”

A disoriented cow came over to seek reassurance and peered forlornly into the contents. Mavis closed the lid and they wedged the case between two rocks intending that they should come back

for it later. Sarah pulled an antique ship's lantern out of the water and placed it on the shore alongside. "These are real treasures, someone must have dumped them out in the Bay".

An awful thought suddenly took hold in their minds as they began to consider the strange passage of the Asia. They continued along the shoreline in silence, occasionally stopping to retrieve a floating object bobbing in the water. Inland Sarah thought that she could hear the snorts and whinnying of the frightened horse. Dense wisps of fog continued to roll in from the Bay.

The boys sprawled out on the crude barge and stared at the knot of rescued people who were huddled together at the other end. The ragged group remained silent and the rescuers began to suspect that they did not even speak English. They wondered what kind of refugees these could possibly be. Such was their state of shock, they did not attempt to show any gratitude for the heroism of the boys who had pulled them from almost certain death. They just moaned softly to themselves in utter despair. At first Johnny ascribed this to the terror of their ordeal. But when he began to examine the passengers more closely he became increasingly perplexed. They were all dressed in heavy woolen cloaks and shawls, all which had an air of being improvised and homemade. There was not a modern T-shirt or a flashy running shoe among them. In a discreet tone Andrew remarked on the stitching of the soles of the old man that

two of the women were cradling in their arms.

“Either we have got a load of refugees from the GUM store in Moscow or they’re extras from some disaster movie set” suggested Andrew.

“If so, they don’t look as if they enjoy decent union wages” thought Johnny as he scanned the poor pinched features and sallow undernourished complexions of the passengers.

The boys maintained their distance. The speechlessness of the passengers and their continual moaning and whimpering were extremely depressing. Exhausted, the boys lay themselves out on salvaged flotsam panels to prevent their limbs from slipping and becoming pinched in the cracks between the logs. Soon even Stuart, who had proposed to keep a watchful eye on their suspicious fellow passengers, had fallen into a deep, exhausted sleep.

Johnny awakened sometime later to a sudden jolt and sat up to see that their log raft had nudged up against the shore. He looked around but there was nothing to be seen except windswept rocks and a grouping of cormorants’ nests set along the stony shoreline. He shook Andrew and Stuart awake.

“Those ungrateful sods” he exclaimed. “The people we rescued have just wandered off without saying anything to us. Not a word of thanks.”

They found themselves on a rock-strewn shoreline surveying a slew of bobbing debris. There were rough-hewn timbers floating everywhere, interspersed with dots of smashed furniture and utensils, the aftermath of a disaster of epic proportions.

There were other dark elements floating just at the surface, which they knew instinctively to be drowned cattle or possibly worse, but they did not look too closely. In such chaos it would be

important to focus all their instincts onto self-preservation.

They quickly agreed that there was nothing further that they could do in this scene of desolation and turned directly inland hoping that they could find help raising the alarm to help deal with the ghastly tragedy. Andrew advanced the theory that if they followed the grain of the lava flow in the Pre-Cambrian Shield they would at least be pursuing a southeasterly direction. In the absence of any other sensible plan this was adopted. Before too long they found themselves back at the shoreline again. Billows of mist continued to roll in from the Bay.

A stone cairn emerged from the mist a few feet ahead and swirled again into obscurity. The boys headed in that direction and almost fell over an old man who was sitting crouched in a rock cleft looking out over the water. Initially they assumed that he must be a part of the mysterious ill-fated expedition. However, on closer inspection they saw that he was wearing slightly more normal clothing and turned around startled when he hailed him.

“Goodness”, he said in a tired, lifeless voice, “What have these drowned rats been up to?”

The relief of the boys was enormous. They blurted out their hasty account of the tragedy punctuated with excited gestures. The man suddenly looked very sad and withdrawn.

“Ah, yes, I know what you mean but there isn’t anything I can do to help. It all happened so long ago.”

“What we’re talking about is now! It’s happening right this minute out on these reefs. At least tell us which direction we can find help. We’ve got to get a boat to round up survivors. There is stuff floating around everywhere out there.”

The old man looked away sadly. “It is already too late. I am the only survivor.” he said. “And I have lived my whole lifetime in the

shadow of that tragic accident.” The tone of utter desolation in his voice was chilling. He rose to his feet and moved towards the rock face as if readying himself to jump. Andrew thought that he had better pull him into conversation to deflect this pessimism. He tried to engage Johnny’s eyes to reveal his intentions.

“Well what do you know about it, this shipwreck?”

The old man spoke in a soft evasive tone, as if he did not really intend to be overheard. “Oh but I was once so young. That I was also a fool has taken me a lifetime to discover. I thought that second chances would come to me forever. But now at last I can see the end and I realize that my life stopped on the night that I washed up on this shore. Now after a lifetime of washing up on other alien shores, I realise that this is the only one that ever really mattered.”

“But what are you talking about?” Johnny stammered impatiently. Andrew grabbed his hand to focus him in reality. His hand was cold and he remained immobile. But it closed on Andrew’s had like a vise.

“Yes I grew up well acquainted with the silver spoon that eventually choked the rest of my family. You know, I was part of one of the greatest timber families on the Great Lakes. As a boy I knew every inch of this shoreline. Our parents had fought throughout their lives to pull together the semblance of prosperity. As it happened they succeeded in spades. But we, their children, we had not the spirits to languish in the effete drawing rooms that their affluence made possible.

“Most men just drift into the patterns that Fate has produced around them. Like the giant timbers that we ferried downstream, they are caught up in the tow, inevitably moving to the sea. But for me I embraced my destiny with a full heart somehow knowing that Fate had ordained for me a life of adventure, solitude and occasional

great joy. I was born to move against the current”

“It was on one of my expeditions up the Bay that I encountered the greatest joy and the greatest tribulation that Fate had prepared for me. We were on an expedition planning the logging of the Magnetewan interior, exploring and setting out a network of waterways for easing the timber out to the Bay. Most of the logging in those days was done during the winter months when the rough-dressed timber could be dragged out over the slippery ground by teams of horses. We visited one of the depot camps by the river where the logs were collected to await the spring thaw.”

“I couldn’t even begin to describe the loneliness of camp life at the end of the ordeal of a long winter. The little community desperately craved respite from their long ordeal, awaiting a glorious moment, the terrifying cracking sound that would occur during the night, impinging upon their dreams but announcing the beginning of shifting of the ice, the beginning of the rebirth.”

“Though the tiny settlement had almost no provisions remaining, a celebration was planned to mark the arrival of us as newcomers. Provisions, bear meat, smoked fish, even a mountain of delicious cakes that the locals used to bake out of arrowroot flour appeared out of the scantiest larders. Using some kind of mental telepathy people seemed to appear out of nowhere, all the solitary souls who were crucial links in the support line that invisibly connected a vast wilderness.”

“The people who congregated were a mixed lot, refugees, criminals, confused and alienated souls. There were half-breeds, men who rejoiced in improbable names like the redoubtable one-armed Hypolyte de la Merced who boasted single handed victory over every creature the wilderness could present.”

“The celebration lasted some days. One morning during a

groggy lull in the festivities a small group of travellers appeared on the outskirts of the settlement. They were ragged and utterly dejected. They were Indians. They were not welcome. They had come to seek assistance for their community, which had suffered a devastating fire and all of their over wintering provisions. Three young brothers accompanied the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. The beauty of their purity emerging so mysteriously from the bleak wilderness seemed to terrify the by now inebriated revelers. Rumours of disease and treachery circulated quickly and they were driven away heartlessly from the camp.”

“When the camp awoke from their drunken excess the next morning it was discovered that I too was missing. People must have assumed the worst, that I had been abducted, or that there would be demands from the company for my ransom, or possibly that I had resisted and been murdered. But I had only responded to the best within me, my impulse to counter the currents swirling around me. I had followed my heart and discreetly trailed the dejected group at a distance then burst in and joined them outright to offer what little help I could.

The Indian encampment was a small collection of huts further upriver. It was more of a centre for a large community of people who were living and trapping on the land, whose young men would go on trapping expeditions or timber gangs throughout the year. The young men were almost continuously away from the village.”

“The Ojibway family was courteous and grateful but they treated me with the same suspicion that our people had treated them. When my intentions became apparent and their sister, Maneeg, seemed to be warming to me, they became increasingly hostile to my presence.”

“We lived together for that season, her brothers becoming

increasingly jealous and possessive. Maneeg and I spent our days together blissfully, fishing and making improvements to the camp. Her brothers would set off on long hunting expeditions, often staying away for three or four days at a time. I was never invited to join them and was quite surprised one autumn day when they suggested that I accompany them on a trading mission to exchange goods with a neighboring tribe. These hosts treated me with utter disdain and my questions were dismissed contemptuously. The bartering was long and arduous and the language became increasingly unintelligible to me whenever they wished to exclude me from the negotiations.”

“They had in fact bartered more than provisions for when I awoke up the next morning I discovered that Maneeg’s brothers had departed and that my hosts were determined that I should enjoy their hospitality permanently.”

“But they underestimated me. Or they underestimated my certainty of my appointment with Destiny and Maneeg. By that evening I had given them the slip taking care to strike out in a contrary direction and follow a circuitous path back to the family.”

“During the summer when we were together Maneeg had given me a pledge. It was a bracelet of her own workmanship although I think parts of it were very old. Entwined in a net of knotted wiring she had woven delightful little fish, colourful pebbles that had been carved with features and gills and strung through their eyes. Each one meant something intense and private to her – some revelation or dream of her childhood. She called them her life’s Muses and spoke of them as the gifts of her ancestors. She supposed her net to symbolize a miraculous draught of fishes. The idea of casting your net on the other side, away from conventional practice, held great power for her. She had heard the story from a missionary and somehow thought it appropriate to both of our lives. I guess that

was why she consented to accompany me. That night I stealthily visited the camp while they were busy about their evening tasks. I glimpsed Maneeg, teary eyed with apprehension about my fate. Her brothers were doing their best to reassure her that I had chosen to depart of my own volition.”

“While they were gathered around the fire I entered their sleeping hut and wrapped the bracelet in the bearskin of Maneeg’s bed where she would be sure to find it when she went to sleep.”

“On the outskirts of the camp I waited for her to decide her future. If she did not come out during the night, I knew that I would resign myself that her family obligation would overrule the dictates of her heart.”

“In the middle of the night I heard her stirring. She stealthily emerged from the sleeping hut and stood silently silhouetted against the embers of the fire. The dying embers made her skin radiant with hope. Then in the firelight I saw her hold up her bracelet and brush it by her cheek. She undid one of the little fish from its web and placed it reverently on a flat stone by the fire. I suppose that it was intended to be some sort of signal to her brothers when they awoke and discovered her absence in the morning. Each of those little fish had a secret significance to her. I knew that by putting one aside, she was sacrificing one of her dreams for me. I crept up to the fire where she was sitting and placed my hand over the stone. Maneeg’s eyes were full of tears. She lifted my hand away as if to say that that dream was not for us. As we rose to leave she did not notice that I had slipped the little fish into my pocket for I was determined that I would give her all of her dreams.”

“And so I claimed Maneeg and we stole off down river in the middle of the night. She never saw her family again. Our plan was simple. We decided to escape far away from all family influence.

Both of us knew that we were leaving behind a crucial part of our souls in leaving behind the shoreline that we knew so intimately but from such different viewpoints.”

“Miraculously, at short notice, we were able to board a steamboat out of Parry Sound, which at the end of the season was carrying a load of people and goods up the Bay to the North Shore. It was her last run of the season, but only the first leg of our journey together.”

“Our delirious happiness was so short-lived. In later years I have come to realize that there was not just a war between our races but that there was also a war between the Gods that controlled our two destinies. As the steamer we boarded passed the very part of the coastline that we had known so intimately from our youngest days, we found ourselves enveloped in fog. The drunken captain took her into the outer reefs and she broke up. Maneeg and I were among the few passengers who knew how to swim. But the fog was so dense that no one knew which way to strike out. We clung to flotsam and were able eventually to assemble a simple raft. We tried to pick up survivors late into the night and a few would cling on for a few hours until overcome with the cold they gave up their struggle and drop away to an icy death. Eventually as darkness fell, we could do no more for others. Huddled, shivering with our few survivors, we formed a tight knot of protective warmth on the raft.”

“We drifted in the fog until night fell and the air became icy cold. I bound Maneeg into sodden bedding to create a cushion of warmth around her. Gradually an overpowering sense of drowsiness overwhelmed us, that wonderful invitation to surrender all and just drift into a warm euphoric oblivion. Even to this day when I collapse into bed exhausted at the end of the day and give myself over to that delicious sense of drowsiness, I still feel Maneeg is still

beside me, reassuring me that somewhere beyond my reach she still lives and is awaiting my return.”

Andrew suddenly began to understand. “Well we’ve found your raft, or at least we did have quite a few people on board, but we think that they have got off somewhere near here.”

“Oh no. What I’m telling you about happened over forty years ago. My whole lifetime has been spent since then. There were no survivors. There was only me.”

The old man’s grip tightened on Andrew’s hand. The bony fingers squeezed tight in a vise-like grip..

“There is something that you must promise to do for me.” With his other hand he produced a battered cigarette tin, with a picture of an indomitable sailor set against a windjammer in the background. Then violently wrenching Andrew’s head in the crook of his arm he freed his hands to flip up the lid and reveal under his nose an assortment of strange coins, some round, some square, some with square holes in them.

“This is the sum total of my wealth of my long life. I have been to all these strange places, traveling ceaselessly looking for my lost heart.” He held up a coin with Chinese writing on it and a square hole in the centre. “ But since that shipwreck the centre of my life has remained a gaping void.

“I will show you one other thing” He released Andrew and from a bit of wax paper tucked into his collection his arthritic fingers unwrapped a little coloured stone shaped like a fish with an eye hole bored through it. ”This is the part of Maneeg which has accompanied me since that day. She never came to realize that I had kept it. I intended to tell her how I had salvaged it as a symbol of our love ... but Fate intervened, only hours later it was forever too late.”

“Now I have no further need for these paltry remnants of my life’s wealth. But I ask you to return this charm to the place of her family. You must do this for me. Perhaps then they will forgive me. Perhaps then I will be free.”

He thrust the metal box into Andrews’ startled hand and roughly pushed him back into Johnny’s steadying arms. As he did so he stepped back and disappeared into the swirling mist.

Having followed the shoreline some miles it was a great relief when the girls came upon a house without warning. The old log building, square in plan, was a well known landmark but they had always believed it to have been abandoned. Previously in passing Sarah had admired how the huge pine logs had collapsed to fit the contours of the rocks. The remnants of the roof were misshapen like a lopsided jelly. Mavis had intended to do a painting of it as one of the memorable romantic landmarks of a past life on the Bay.

Strangely even after years of dereliction, gigantic sunflowers still surrounded it, their roots extending into the moldering logs as if deriving some nourishment from a rich but now long forgotten history. The huge yellow blossoms provided a surreal relief in the swirling grey mists. They seemed to glow with an unearthly radiance. Some mysterious force apparently helped these flowers to reseed themselves year after year while the rest of this human intervention at the old encampment gradually crumbled and returned to its natural state.

Suddenly out of the mists an old woman emerged and passed in front of the girls. She was utterly heedless of their presence. Ariane coughed and said “Hello” in a tentative voice to draw her attention, but the woman did not seem to notice and passed in through the front door of the house.

Cautiously they approached a window. The window glass had disappeared, leaving broken bone-like segments of bleached white putty. Peering into the house they could see that there was a faint light inside. The old woman seemed to be muttering to herself. Sarah knocked at the door, which had fallen off its hinges. Together she and Ariane lifted it to one side to enter the room. The interior was a scene of utter dereliction, furniture overturned, books and papers scattered about everywhere.

However, seated at a table in a small pool of pale flickering light the old woman was writing, scratching away with a quaint pen. So engrossed was she in her writing that she did not even look up as the girls entered. Ariane cleared her throat and stepped forward to represent the group and describe their plight.

“Oh there you are!” the old woman muttered, without looking up. “Dinner’s on the table, but the soup needs re-heating.” With an offhand gesture over her shoulder she indicated the overturned table and the pile of broken worm-eaten chairs which generations of picnickers had plundered for firewood. Mavis glanced over at the old woodstove with its array of rusted enameled pots in a heap on the floor nearby. Nothing looked appetising.

“Oh, you’ve made a mistake. We don’t even know who you are.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course we haven’t met, but I know exactly who you are. You are here for the manuscript. Have a seat anyway, I just need to finish numbering the pages.”



The girls squatted down on a broken wooden bench and awaited some further display of hospitality.

“I’ve just finished the account of my presentation to Queen Victoria. Now there was a crusty old biddy. I don’t think somehow that she was fully impressed with meeting a true Indian princess. - me, by the way in case you are not making the proper connection.”

The girls listened in total incomprehension but they had a chance to observe the old woman’s features carefully. She appeared no one’s idea of a princess. Her face was dark and crisscrossed with heavy lines, which seemed to meet at right angles and gave the impression that someone had undertaken some very amateur quilting. Her eyes had sunken deep into her head, and a clawlike hand grasped the quill pen with arthritic difficulty. Nevertheless there was a strange ethereal aspect to her countenance, a kind of radiance.

“You were presented to Queen Victoria?” Ariane ventured helpfully. “That must have been fascinating.” Then she began to calculate the implications of this and reflect that the old woman was obviously severely disoriented.

“Well I was young, and very pretty, if I may say so. And besides I had connections.”

“What type of connections?” Mavis asked.

“Well for one thing besides being a princess, I guess they were all interested in my husband’s work on bloodlines and racial identity. You know I married him because I wanted to see the world. He was an old man, but well respected and he had come out to Canada to study people like me. I felt quite the celebrity, I can tell you. Above all I wanted to escape from this place. It was a clear cut decision.”

“I can understand that”, agreed Mavis, looking around at the enveloping squalor.

“Isn’t it absurd that after all these years I would find myself back here among all the ghosts that I had sought to exorcise. Yes, they plotted to bring me back to my destiny ... to the very rocks where my life broke up into little bits floating on an ocean of total despair some forty years ago.”

“I have returned to the shadow of that tragic wreck to be near the ghosts of my few moments of happiness. I realize that now.”

“What wreck was that?”

“Of course, you’re too young to remember the night when the Asia...”

“*The Asia!* But that is the ship that just about ran us down out at the bell buoy.”

“Oh, no. The Asia broke up forty years ago and sank to the bottom, carrying every single living soul with it, except for me of course. I was the lone survivor. You know I still wake up in the middle of the night to the screams of the passengers as they were dumped into the water miles out from shore. No lifeboats to speak of. Nobody could swim, the captain and crew drunk and worse than useless. There were cattle everywhere careering about on the decks sliding through the bulwarks into the water. And that was the last time I saw Ben.”

“I washed up on the shore only a few miles up the Bay. It was a miracle that I survived the exposure to the late October waters. They said that they found me tied to a log with strips of blanket. Ben’s work. They took me back to my family, back to the very people from whom I had eloped.”

“I have had the presumption to think that I could escape from my Destiny, a destiny of growing old and decaying into the land that created me like all the rest of them had done. But then I believed that I had met my soulmate. Ben was my threshold, a white man

and a white man's gateway to a huge world beyond, unimaginable to the rest of my family. It was the only time in my life when I knew exactly what I was supposed to do."

"As a child I had always thought that life was about picking up the prettiest pebbles and weaving them into the net of my life. All experience was going to be precious and beautiful, if not it would be discarded."

"When I was very young my grandmother drew me to the hearthstone which was embedded in the earth near our fire pit. The surface of this stone I had known since earliest childhood. It had been carved with a web of lines and as a child I enjoyed running my fingers through all of the little paths pretending that I was lost in the forest and fancying all sorts of delights and dangers lurking within the squares."

"Occasionally my mother would leave a flower, usually a waterlily on this stone when she was preoccupied with some problem or another. I would go with her, wading out to select the most beautiful lily from the bay. So ephemeral, just one moment of glory."

"On this occasion with great effort my grandmother shifted the stone from its bed to reveal a group of little pebbles underneath. They were carved in the shape of little fishes with simple incisions for the mouths, gills and tail fins. It was a child's delight. The little fish sat so comfortably into the carved pathways across the stone. My grandmother explained that each one of these little stones were dream stones which had powers to summon up spirits when taken to sleep."

"Not long after, we moved camp and took our family hearthstone with us. I carefully collected the little fishes from under the stone and wove my little magic talismans, into a kind of net

which seemed to symbolize the greatest things that I aspired to in my life. I saw them as my life's Muses.

"I parted with my bracelet only once in my life, when for a few short moments I placed my future in the hands of Ben, a Man with whom I had fallen in love. But our Gods did not agree with my sense of my own Destiny"

"The greatest gift ever given to me was when Ben returned my bracelet. Before we eloped he stole into my sleeping hut and wrapped it in my blanket. It was his sign that he had returned to claim me. He gave me back the responsibility for undertaking my own struggle for making my own decision. But that night I sacrificed the most potent Muse at the hearth stone of my own family."

"Within two days of its return we had stolen away, determined to complete the first part of our irrevocable flight. But Destiny delivered the clearest possible message. We boarded a steamboat, the Asia, making its last run of the season up the bay, laden with cattle and provisions. We had a small stateroom, but many of the passengers were living in conditions little better than the cattle. Only a few hours out of port and within view of the very shores that we were intending to escape, the ship came off course in the fog and broke up on the reefs. Our confidence in our unassailable right to happiness was such that we tried to round up the survivors that we could and raft them to safety. We collected a few, and spent the night tossed about in the open waters. In the morning I found myself alone, bound to a log, the others had vanished during the night ... and so had Ben ... just disappeared with all our future happiness."

"Look at the little web of fortune that has been my life." She extended her arm and displayed a curious bracelet. Into a mesh of wiring had been threaded exquisite little pebbles worn shiny smooth

with age. The green copper wiring had discoloured her skin around the wrist bone.”

“But we saw someone wearing a bracelet just like yours only a couple of hours ago.” Sarah began to look at the old woman very carefully. There was something indeed faintly familiar about her gestures, the way the stick thin arms probed the air, still so vital in someone so old.

“It has taken me a lifetime to realize the my Muses were never intended to fuel my personal ambitions. They did not care whether I explored the world or whether I made the right impression on Queen Victoria.”

“The Muses are the daughters of memory ... not personal memory, but the memory of our family’s past, the hundreds of generations that have passed across this stone, found that they had decisions to make, that they could follow one turning or another and then ultimately came to the edge and....” Her voice trailed off.

“These fish represented the long, convoluted tales of our ancestors. They are the voices in our blood communicating through our dreams from the most ancient periods of our history. This one is their songs, which have been passed down by memory for so many generations. This one is their stories. This one is my ‘painted fish’ it has the wide-open eyes to see everything in the world. They are the recollection, now only half glimpsed in dreams, of all that has gone before and has brought about my life, all of the struggles, the survivals, all of the hanging by the merest threads. All of these threads were to be woven into my life, for what is the point of a life if it does not seek to understand the greatest things of which the human being is capable?”

“But there is one that I left behind years ago. That was my treasured sense of the history of out family, where we had all

come from. This is the one I sacrificed on our family hearthstone. I returned it to the place that my grandmother had left it for me”

“Years later I returned to the broken home of our ancestors. I found the hearthstone that had been transported from so far away through many generations. It was sunken deep and forgotten into the ground. I lifted the stone and sifted the ground all around it. But alas! I could find nothing. It had vanished.”

“For years I have had a premonition that this little fish might still be living for me, waiting to be restored to me. I pictured it attached to the spirit of Ben somehow still protecting him in the afterlife until I should join him.

“And now I have finished my story.”

The old woman seemed suddenly to have lost interest in her guests. Briefly she returned to her writing. Then she picked up her sheaf of papers, clipped them together and placed them in a small cupboard by the fireplace. Slipping off her bracelet, she placed it on top. She closed the cupboard door went over to the lamp and extinguished the flame. The room was suffused with an eerie twilight. The girls watched the old woman drift out of the front door and disappear into the mists. Mavis started towards the door and peered out. Nothing.

She returned to the others. “What do you make of that? She couldn’t possibly have been done all the things she said. She’d be ancient. Somebody local must know who she really is.”

O

utside there came a hideous, whooping shriek. They leapt up in fright as the door suddenly lurched to one side, broke free from its last hinge connection and fell flat to the floor. Silhouetted



in the opening were the familiar outlines of Johnny, Andrew and Stuart.

“Well this is about the last place we expected to find you.”

“Have you seen an old man, a bit of a loon, he got away from us.”

“Oh! And by the way the boat’s gone.”

“Gone. What do you mean, gone?”

It took some moments to extract a coherent picture of the events of the past few hours from Johnny, Andrew and Stuart.

The girls were then able to deliver a much more plausible picture of their activities during the intervening hours.

But when they explained how they had come to meet the old woman that was the sole survivor of the Asia disaster, Johnny seemed incredulous.

“But the Asia went down in the autumn of 1882. That would make her about 130 years old.”

“I think that we’ll find that the whole story lies in here.” Calmly Mavis went over to the little cupboard on the wall where the old woman had stashed her manuscript. The door splintered off its hinges and fell at her feet. She pulled out a sheaf of old papers, which crumbled into dust on the floor. Remaining in her hand was a collapsed tangle of old wire mesh and a few colourful pebbles.

From his pocket Andrew extracted the tiny fish from the box of coins and restored it to the midst of its mates.

It was Sarah who noticed the stone as they left the old cabin. Shafts of light had begun to penetrate through the mists and the sunflowers dancing around the crumbling foundations were dazzling in these first direct rays. Looking over the display her eye fell upon a small clearing in their midst.

The stone was flat and almost circular. Into the granite had been incised a net of crossed lines. Despite the dense tufts of grass and moss that held it snugly overgrowing the edges, the sparkling granite remained unsullied, glinting in its own shaft of sudden sunlight.

Bending over she gently pushed her fingers under the edge of the flat stone. It seemed mysteriously warm after only brief exposure to sunlight. With Andrew's help she prised it up. Underneath was a bustling microcosm of ants rushing to secure their nest, transporting little eggs out of harms way in frantic flight.

"It's amazing that such a peaceful looking stone could be covering such a teeming world."

"I think that this must be the hearth stone that the old woman was talking about. Look how it is incised with a fisherman's net."

"Do you suppose that it is really as ancient as she said it was?" Mavis let her finger follow the curious runnels in the stone, as if it were following a road atlas. "So many choices, you can start and end almost anywhere."

"This is where these little fishes belong. She will find them here when she comes back."

From her pocket Sarah produced nine little stone fishes and dropped them into the midst of the ant colony.

Carefully they replaced the stone.





Yours Truly,

Fl@ubert Duck

