

Just Like Always

It was the Fail word that did it. The F word.

She couldn't tell them. Couldn't tell her parents that Mrs. Jenkins asked her to stay behind after class, got up and closed the door. Have a seat, Cathy. And Cathy knew what was coming but couldn't stop it — she'd failed her exams. Last year's teacher just said she hadn't passed, which sounded nicer.

Mrs. Jenkins pulled a chair up close. Cathy hunched down over the table between them, traced a groove with her finger — dug with a compass point maybe and inked in. She could feel crumbs from an eraser and pushed them into a pile, swept them onto the floor with the side of her hand.

“...don't you agree, Cathy?”

Cathy took a quick breath and coughed on a bit of chalk dust. She looked up,

“Yes, Mrs. Jenkins.”

The chalk hung in the air, lay like snow on the teacher's green sweater, all down the arm she cleaned the board with. It had gone into lines in the bend of her elbow. She could paint that. She tried to fix the picture in her head: four long lines spreading out from the front and two short...

“So we have to think what's best for next year.”

She didn't want to hear about next year. Mrs. Jenkins was going to tell her she'd have to do Grade Seven again. *Again*. Couldn't bear it. She'd still be in Junior High, a mile taller than the rest, kids all calling her lighthouse, how's the weather up there. No hiding being two years older. No hiding being dumb.

She'd been counting the days, minutes, to the end of school, to when she could be at her pictures all day. No more homework with red lines all over, no more saying *I don't know* in front of everybody. No being left 'till last when they picked teams — Cathy's on your side. No she's not, she's on yours.

If she could just drop out — and do what? She was no good for anything or anybody. She was too young to drop out anyway, Dad wouldn't let her, but she couldn't face two more years of school. Life stretched out thin and grey and she couldn't see beyond the greyness. Forever behind. Forever painting her pictures on fences and walls and rocks. And when she ran

out of painting space she'd start again on top of the old ones until there were layers of them like those 47 layers of wallpaper in Mrs. Stuckless' old living room.

The only thing she could do, wanted to do, was paint. But now she needed someone to show her, needed proper paints and boards or canvas or whatever, and she'd never have money for those and you couldn't buy them around here anyway. So she was stuck, going round and round and...

"...Cathy."

Mrs. Jenkins was holding out an envelope saying it would all be sorted out next September. She didn't want to touch that envelope, whatever was inside that envelope. The teacher stood patting her shoulder and Cathy went on sitting like a lump. "Off you go now or you'll miss the bus. And give that to your parents as soon as you get home."

Cathy missed the bus on purpose. She cut through behind buildings out of sight as much as she could but she had to use the bridge across the Tickle and Main Street was the only way to walk in some places so she pulled up her hood, hoping no-one would see.

What was in that letter? Was it even worse than doing Grade Seven again? What could be worse? If she could read it she'd have it open by now.

Main Street was bending away from the shore past Aunt Joanie's house. Cathy pulled the edges of her hood together so she could just see the road in front — head down up the hill and round the bend, fast.

Her aunts didn't care that she was dumb, didn't notice. They just thought she was weird because she'd never played with dolls or dressed up, and now she never tried to look pretty, never talked about boys. She was A Problem.

"It's not healthy, being at those pictures all the time. Not normal."
Not normal. Cathy blinked away tears.

There was somebody walking in front of her — old Mrs. Roberts. Going to her daughter's maybe so she'd turn off at the corner. Slow as cold molasses. Cathy stood looking out over the harbour until she was gone.

The sky looked how she felt — grey and dull and heavy. It just sat on your head and squeezed the juice out of everything. Even the gulls looked bored. Nothing was going on,

nothing moving on the wharves or on the water, just the school bus coming back from Mariners Cove East on the far side, along Main Road. The low cloud had taken the yellow out of it, turned it a dirty mustard. She could still see it though, so the fog horn wouldn't be on at the lighthouse.

You could never hear it anyway. You could put your ear on the new fog horn when it was honking and it wouldn't even rattle the wax. The old one would take your head right off. The new LED lights didn't shine as far as the old ones either. Nothing was any good any more.

The tears started up again, drying in the wind, so by the time she had walked the five kilometers home her face had stiffened in stripes. Can't stay back, won't stay back. She hid the envelope in a drawer under her paint things. She washed her face over and over, said it was wind burn and her Mom fussed over what cream to use.

It was Mom's card night so supper was a rush job, macaroni and cheese, and none of the usual questions. Cathy served up and cleared away without being asked so she could keep her head down. She pushed her food around the plate and threw half of it out but Mom was fussing around, getting ready, so she never noticed.

When Cathy said she was going to bed early her Dad stared at her over the top of his newspaper like he was checking the ocean for signs. Anything wrong? No. Best kind. She only just made it out of the room before the tears started up again. Jumpins she hated this crying stuff. Never used to cry. And in bed with the covers over her head it all got worse and worse. What was she going to do? And in the hour before dawn, she decided.

The sky is a thick purple, a new day with its eyes still closed. Nothing stirs in the houses scattered across Mariners Head until in the last house up the hill a door opens. Someone comes out, easing it shut with both hands — someone used to the wind having its way with doors. She stands for a while, leaning her forehead against the surface, smoothing it with her palms. Then she pushes herself off and walks away.

By the time she reaches the main road the day has lightened through indigo to a glorious cobalt blue that you can almost see through, that you could sail through past the moon and on to the stars. That was how Cathy usually saw it, although she could never tell you in words, but today she is blind.

She walks with a long-legged swing, unhurried but effective, accustomed to roots and rocks, to being on foot. Someone with a purpose. She picks up the pace where the track meets

the road, stomps almost, elbows jabbing behind and hands clenched. She pushes off her hood despite the east wind that slices and flays.

Cathy is walking up the road to the Mariners Point Light where she goes to be alone, to paint, to escape. She always carries a bag with her art things but this time there is no bag.

She slows down, arms no longer pumping, legs losing their rhythm. Now every step takes effort. She stops for a while, eyes closed, then starts up again but in a dragging way, and as the sky turns a gold-tinged pink she arrives at the cliffs beyond the lighthouse and looks down into the black depths of ocean eighty feet below.

This is the line between here and there. No landwash, no vague inter-tidal zone, no *undecided*. She stands at the edge, a mass of instincts and yearnings and despair, while the dawn paints itself in all around her, shade by delicate shade.

A big hairy dog was licking her hand and when she jerked and yanked her hand away it barked at her, sat back with its tongue flapping and all those teeth. Cathy looked around for a stick or something to shoo it away but the new doctor's wife was coming through the spruce, calling to it. Cathy moved back where it was darker, in the trees.

Mrs. Brooks got hold of the dog's collar and stood rubbing its head.

"Sorry if he scared you. It's all a big act. He'd only hurt a fly if he sat on it by mistake." She smiled up at Cathy then the smile kind of straightened out and she stared a bit — must have seen the tears. Cathy turned away.

Mrs. Brooks half sat on a rock but before she'd even reached it she was asking questions. Was that where Cathy used to live, that house up there by the lighthouse? Mmm. Did she miss living there? Mmm. Why did they move? And she just sat there waiting for answers. Stayed and stayed. She moved to another rock but she never took her eyes off Cathy.

"They automated the light. Said they didn't need a keeper up here anymore."

"I suppose everyone has GPS these days," Mrs. Brooks said.

"No they don't." Cathy turned towards her. "That's what the Coast Guard said. That boat with engine trouble last Fall with three men aboard didn't have GPS. Those two duck hunters didn't. Lots of seamen still want the light as back-up." Cathy kicked a few fir cones with the toe of her sneaker and the dog rushed up and pounced on them, shoving its nose through piles of brown needles and moss then sneezing. "And who keeps the ice and snow off now, so they can

see it?” Cathy said, her voice rising. “Who warns the Coast Guard when it breaks down? *Oh, it won’t break down*, they said. Hah. Broke down three times last winter, always in storms when it was needed most.”

Mrs. Brooks wasn’t saying anything but she was leaning forwards, listening. Cathy kicked at a root. That was the Coast Guard for you. She might have failed her exams all by herself but the Coast Guard had spoiled everything else. Mariners Point Light was her home. She’d lived here always — four generations of Russells. Until last year when she was thirteen. Until the Coast Guard made them leave.

“They gave Dad a new office but he couldn’t even see the ocean. What good’s that to a keeper? Good for the tourists they said. He quit. Now he’s doing Biology in St. John’s so he’s gone altogether, ‘cept in the holidays.” She had kicked all the dirt off the root so it was starting to shine white along the top. Her voice sank. “First they took my home then they took my Dad.”

“Rough,” Mrs. Brooks said. “For all of you.”

“Dad was expecting it. Bought the Stuckless place on the Head when the old lady died. It was falling down but it was away from the other houses with a nice bit of land. Spent three years fixing it up. So *he* was ready.”

“What about your Mom?”

“She loves living in Mariners Head, likes it better.”

The dog came back from wherever covered in mud and rested its drippy chin on Mrs. Brooks’ knee. It started nudging her elbow with its nose, harder and harder until she scratched its foolish ears. But she never took her eyes off Cathy.

“Dad says it’s no use regretting. Move on.” There was a long pause then she muttered, mostly to herself, “All right for him, he’s smart.”

Cathy wrapped her arms round herself and stared at her feet. She wished Mrs. Brooks would look away, go away, because she could feel the tears in her chest building and building and any minute she was going to shame herself and... A big sob burst out. Couldn’t stop it. And she felt arms go round her and started to push them off but she had her own arms folded across her chest and her hands poked into her sleeves to keep them warm and Mrs. Brooks was in the

way so she couldn't get them out without knocking her over and another sob burst out and the dog was jumping up at them, barking, and making them stagger.

Then Mrs. Brooks was giving her a tissue and telling Cathy to sit on her rock while she leaned on a spiky looking spruce growing next to it and she was going to get spruce juice all over her jacket.

"What's wrong?"

Mrs. Brooks was looking at her, waiting, and after a bit she said, "Tell me Cathy. You'll feel better." And she went right on waiting.

"I failed my exams." Cathy blew her nose so hard her ears popped. The pressure disappeared, that pressure in her head and in her chest. She could breathe.

"What exactly did you fail?"

"Math and English." She hiccupped and her eyes filled up again. "Everything, just about." A beam of sunlight slid through the break in the trees. First sun for days. She stuck her foot out so it bent up over her sneaker.

"Do you have trouble with reading?"

And there it was, out in the open. Cathy took a big breath,

"Yes."

Mrs. Brooks stopped looking at Cathy for the first time and scraped the moss off another rock and sat on it.

"Not one flat rock anywhere," she said and laughed. "And this is probably full of creepy crawlies with bad habits." She put a hand under her bum on the low side of the rock to level herself up and said, "So reading is the biggest problem. Do you think?"

"Yes."

"Has anyone tried to help you read, one on one?"

"What?"

"Just you and a teacher — one of you and one teacher."

Oh. No. Then Mrs. Brooks went on asking stuff about school and books and what she'd done and not done, on and on. And partly to stop the questions Cathy said,

"Could you help me? Please."

She said she would certainly try. Cathy asked when they could start and Mrs. Brooks said she'd have to ask her parents first.

She asked about next year and Cathy said she couldn't remember what the teacher said because she hadn't heard half of it. And when she said she hadn't told Mom and Dad that she'd failed, and about Teacher's letter, Mrs. Brooks almost jumped off that rock.

"That's not your letter, Cathy. It's your parents'. You can't just hide it. And think how hurt they'll be if you don't tell them." After a bit Cathy said okay she'd tell them and Mrs. Brooks said, "Today, Cathy, today. Promise me."

Cathy walked home the other way, more out of sight. The track dove through the woods, down the steps, and sometimes she stopped and stared out through the trees. A leaf in front of her nose suddenly popped open, making her jump. Didn't know they could do that. Her Dad made videos of those nature things — flowers growing up and opening. They were a bit jerky but she thought that was because of different pieces of film being joined together, thought flowers just kind of unrolled and stood up straight.

This leaf was a bud, all sticky on the outside, with the sticky stuff keeping everything tucked in. Then something popped and now it was like a little hand. Still hadn't opened all its fingers but it was a leaf now not a bud. It must have built up such a need to grow that it just burst through the glue in one big jerk. Cathy reached for her sketch book and it wasn't there. Frig.

She gave her father the letter while they were still at breakfast and he read it out loud. It said she'd failed, said she couldn't read. He looked surprised. Why didn't he know? She always had to ask him the names in his bird books but he thought it was the Latin. She'd never made herself tell him she couldn't read any of it. If he'd said Cathy can you read she'd have told him but he never did. He saw every little thing in his birds. Why didn't he see that?

Cathy looked at her knees, rubbed at a mark on her jeans. Now it was going to say she was the dumbest kid in the school and she gripped the sides of the chair to be ready. Dad would look sad and Mom would say something Cathy didn't want to hear. She gripped tighter. Her father started reading again and there was a load of stuff about children learning at their own pace and having special help when needed. Yeah, right — but at least it made it sound as if there

were other kids like Cathy. And something about schools in small communities, but they would do what they could when Cathy moved to Grade Eight in September.

Grade Eight. September.

Cathy stopped breathing. Then she let out a big yell and leaped up so her chair fell over and her mother said eek and her father said shit Cathy and he never said shit. She ran out of the house and charged up the track and down again because she couldn't keep still. She'd be in Grade Eight and Mrs. Brooks was going to help and look what she nearly did. Look what she nearly *did*.