

THE RARE STILL OF THE SEA

(excerpt)

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My father was dead. I had been practicing saying it, out loud, so that my voice wouldn't catch on each syllable. My father was dead. He's dead. He died. My father died. I thought that each time I said it, the idea would seem less ridiculous. My father was not the sort of man to die. He was a huge man, both in stature and personality. His flaming ginger beard made him look like some sort of salty Viking. His hands were thick-palmed with fingers like bratwurst sausages. It amazed me that he could do anything even partly delicate with those things, but he wielded them deftly like ten fat samurai swords. He even used to braid my hair. My father passed on. Passed away. He left us, despite being the sort of man whose loyalty bordered on the pathological. He'd never leave. His body betrayed him. Or, more accurately given the heart attack that had felled him, he'd betrayed his body. Too much salt, too much beer, too much fatback pork, too much everything. Too much life. As I drove towards the bay of my birth and the outport that was my cradle, I laughed out loud. Life had killed my father. Now that made total sense.

He was one of six boys, all of them blonde or red-haired, all of them at least six feet tall. My uncle Runt was exactly six feet, if that tells you anything. He was the youngest and everyone said that my mother just couldn't grow them quite so tall. Too much effort. I remembered my grandparents as practical people. Not exactly affectionate, but not cold. My grandfather built boats and fished in them. We all built boats in my family. Even I had gone off to become a naval architect. We did other things, too – we fished, we hunted, Uncle Runt ran the fish plant, Uncle Bear – real name Ted – ran the local pub. Dad was – my father was, not is, was – the mayor and a contractor and a fisherman. No one in my family did one thing. Except me. I designed research vessels for arctic exploration.

You'd think, for a big burly man, my father would've been hard. Tough like leather and stony like the rock face that bordered the eastern edge of the harbour. One of those men who never cried. Dad cried more than my mother did. He cried at all the usual times – when his mother died (less when his father did for ancient, complicated reasons), when my brothers were born, when I was born, when Uncle Gaffer fell through the harbour ice on his skidoo and

drowned – but my father welled up at Christmas commercials and the occasional melodramatic hymn. He taught my four brothers that emotion wasn’t weakness, a fact which has led to my brothers being in more fistfights than anyone else out home. He was huge and warm and so very kind.

“My father passed away,” I said to myself, making it all the way through the sentence without so much as a quivering lip. And then my brain conjured up the feeling of my father’s massive hands, warm on my head as they braided my hair into a thick rope that fell almost to my waist and I heaved up a sob that made the car shudder. It came from somewhere south of my stomach, rising up like a swell and crashing out between my teeth, frothy and horrible.

The road home wound across barrens of stunted evergreens and ponds like pockmarks. My oldest brother, Garrett, had taught me to drive them when I was twelve and, thinking I could do it with my eyes closed, I tried. I gripped the wheel on the last short turn and squeezed my eyes shut for all of five or ten seconds. It felt longer. It felt like an accomplishment. I’d had the same feeling when Garrett had lifted his hands from the steering wheel that first time, my ass propped up on two of mom’s couch cushions so I could see properly over the dash of my brother’s Ford truck. I’d gone all of twenty clicks up across the barrens to the shore road, where the view opened up over the harbour below. But I didn’t stall once.

I pulled to a stop as soon as the view opened up. The east side of the harbour was at the foot of a plateau so the road down into the outport was steep, but the view was incredible. I could see every house, every landmark laid out just as I’d left them the previous Christmas. And while the winter landscape was pretty enough, it was late summer now and the place was breathtaking. Lush greens and browns and ocean blues, everything bright and alive. Our house – and the houses of most of my uncles – were all on the west side of the harbour. My grandfather had cleared the land with his only brother and parceled it out to his children when they got married. The Ryalls took up so much space we apparently needed our own compound. I started the car when I saw a truck in my rearview mirror. As I passed by the town hall, the flag was at half-mast.

Samuel and Belinda Ryall had six giant sons. My father was first – Eric. Eric the Red, was the obvious nickname, but nobody called him that. He was the only one of his brothers not to have a second name. As a child I thought it was sort of sad that no one bothered, but I

realised later it was a sign of immense respect. My father didn't need a nickname so people knew which Ryall he was. He was Eric. Full stop.

Bell Ryall, as my Nan was commonly known, named her sons Eric, John, William, Henry, Alexander and Peter in that order. By the time they were teenagers, they were all called something else, aside from Dad. Bear, Gaffer, Fox, Browser and Runt. When I was a kid, I didn't even know that Uncle Gaff's name was William. I'm not entirely sure he knew it, either. After they pulled his body out of the winter harbour, there had been a huge argument about which name to put on the headstone. William Patrick Gaffer Ryall had been the compromise.

Uncle Bear was the biggest. At six foot five and built like the side of a barn, the other schoolchildren used to get him to pull their sleds around like a plough horse. He had vaguely the temperament of a bear too – moody and unpredictable sometimes, stubborn and standoffish, occasionally hilariously playful and always patient with his children, nieces and nephews who, lacking an actual jungle gym, could be found climbing from ankle to face.

Gaffer had been shorter – only an inch taller than Runt. He was red-haired like my father. I couldn't remember much about him. He had died when I was eight, and before that had spent all his time on the water or in the woods. I don't think I'd ever heard him say more than five words together. It was agreed, locally, that he was the worker of the brothers. He couldn't sit still.

Fox was the leanest Ryall. Tall, wiry, slim. I knew exactly why they'd called him fox. He was sly, smart, and quick. He was hilarious, quick with words and jokes and observations. He never knew when to shut up, though, and his busy mouth had several teeth missing because he'd said the wrong thing to the wrong person and come up on the wrong side of a fist.

Browser was the same height as my father, blonde and fair like all of us. His eyes were green, which was odd, because every one of us had blue eyes. Everyone said that Browser was the best looking, which was why, my father used to say, he was so stupid and lazy. He could charm the habit off a nun, Uncle Runt was fond of claiming.

Peter Ryall, known as Runt, lived in the house next door to us. He was smart and pleasant, closest to my Dad and Uncle Bear. His hair was the same colour as mine – a strawberry blonde. He had curls, too, just like me. "If you didn't have my good looks," Dad would often tell me when I was younger, "I would wonder about your mother and Runt."

I didn't look anything like my father, really. I had his long limbs, but my mother's features, her expressions, and foul mouth. I had my Dad's grace though. He was always sure on his feet and could bound across uneven terrain without a misstep. Watching him nimbly navigate the deck of a boat on a wild sea was like watching Russian ballerinas flit on a stage.

How had he died? Barely sixty, seemingly invincible, I could hardly remember him down with a flu, let alone heart disease. I pulled my car into the driveway by our butter yellow house and listened to the surf pound the shore behind me. He'd been cutting wood in the backyard, and as I walked to the kitchen door I could see the logs scattered in the grass, his axe – like something out of medieval warfare – carelessly tossed among them. If I looked hard enough, I could see the outline of where he fell in the sawdust. I imagined him swinging his axe, gripping his chest, collapsing, and staring up at the sky for the last time.