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A NOVEL

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LONDON

Blood Fable

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DEATH FALLS! my father cried, and whirled his axe, Death falls on your neck! Axe flashed through the sky and fell—birch log snapped in two; Myles rested, glasses crooked, head bound in a white rag, black hair on end—demented samurai. I caught up the log halves, stacked them, and placed a whole one upright for division.

He was half answering a question half-heard.

The night before, a drunken hunter had mistaken my cat Shadow for a raccoon and shot her. Or so we guessed—we never met the man, but armed drinkers were known to stagger through the woods, and Shadow did look a bit like a raccoon, especially at night, which is when they're hunted in these parts. In any case, she was dead. We found her in the morning under her favourite tree.

Though she was my first love and though the blood from her bullet wound covered me, I didn't cry. My mother wrapped her in an old bedsheet while my father dug her grave. As she disappeared under handfuls of dirt, it occurred to me that

she'd been likewise invisible before I watched her slip from her mother's body four years earlier. For that invisibility I had no name; perhaps it too was death. The rest of the morning I considered the matter with desperate attention to quell the sob welling in my chest because I thought it would kill me if I let it. For added distraction, I spoke to Myles.

Do we go back to death because we're born from it?

(Half-heard, half-understood.)

Death is simple, he declaimed, Unlike birth, which is a feat of unparalleled difficulty. A feat of rage—explosive. We each of us seek our incarnation.

Axe fell again and wedged in the log. Face locked in a vicious grin, Myles raised axe with log and hammered both against the stump. Sweat flew from him and from the rag on his head and the rag at his neck and his dripping shirt, until the log sundered and he leaned against a tree, breathless and purple.

You chose us, he gasped, straightening his glasses. You picked us out and now we're in for it.

From her position nearby, where she was planting a spindly pear sapling over Shadow's grave, Iris called out that although I was, without question, the cause of their union, I couldn't be blamed. Myles replied that I certainly could be—it was only logical.

I blame him, he said proudly, but I admire him—the effort it must have taken to force the two of us together. To beget is simple—to be gotten is a trial of cunning and tenacity.

Iris raised her dirt-streaked, tear-stained face at this and retorted, For a man to beget is to pleausurably pollinate. For a woman—nine months of possession ending in painful dis-possession.

An event you bungled, Myles grunted as he smote the next

log. I slapped blackflies and gaped at a smeared rainbow of spilt chainsaw fuel. I daydreamed, or tried to, but it was no use...their voices rose inch by inch.

Like Caesar's mother, Myles went on, You required a blade. Iris paled.

Inform your son where you were then! she exclaimed. Bidding adieu to your other lovers while your child was cut from my body.

Myles sighed.

It was a joke! he said, I don't fault you that our son refused to come out the way he went in.

The way he went in? said Iris, I see Catholic school left you with medieval fantasies about human reproduction!

Myles ignored this, saying that as for severing ties with lovers, he'd done that long before, *months* before, and, as she well knew, on the day of my birth he walked with trepidation in the hospital gardens as though in some anti-Gethsemane, awaiting the arrival of his son, his heir, his fate.

Yes, of course, now Iris remembered (how could she forget?) that he had strolled among the lilacs while she bled.

This, said Myles, Is rank exaggeration, as usual, but how, in any case, could she be expected to remember anything from that glorious day when she was doped to the gills for the knife, while he, *he* was in a state of ecstatic transport as he beheld and held me in his arms for the first time.

As they disputed, I felt a strange interior tug, as though a different source of gravity were pulling me at an oblique upward angle. The combined force of the twinned gravities, one internal, one terrestrial, produced a lateral floating sensation.

I remember, I said quietly but abruptly, and fell to the ground.

HERE IN the woods on the coast of Maine in 1980, a hundred years had passed since a shovel had delved this soil, or axe split the local wood; the stones of an old farmhouse foundation had become the outline of a frog pond, and trees swarmed over the swampy ground, shrouding all signs of human toil. Then Myles and Iris joined a nearby Buddhist community, bought these few acres, and began to reclaim them with chainsaws and fire. For my part, I advanced with a pint-sized saw through the close alders, whispering apologies to the saplings I gingerly severed from their roots and watching salamanders start slowly from beneath overturned stones. And later, after the wreckage and the bonfires, the crack of hammer blows bounced back from the receded forest as my father and his fellow disciples raised beam over post and a house stood once again on the land.

In the middle of that land, on a clump of grass I now lay, feet to the trees, head to the house. Loose corners of black tarpaper were flapping, and the plastic over the window openings bellied and smacked in a wind that blew over the forest from the ocean. And how do I recall these details? I don't. Nor do I remember my parents kneeling above my damp body, waving away the blackflies, panic-stricken as I spoke. They tell me my eyeballs were rolling in their sockets and my joints were rigid. I was muttering something about an old building full of new music, an accident.

Myles picked me up from the grass and carried me to the car. Iris rushed ahead to prepare a battery of flower remedies and herbal tinctures. Settled on the back seat of our station wagon, staring blindly upward, I continued, something about sad hallways, illness, death waiting, threatening.

My poor little pumpkin seed, Iris cried, climbing in next to me, squirting liquids in my mouth, massaging ointments into

my temples. Hurry! she said to Myles, who threw the car into reverse, tore out into the dirt road, and bounced off over the potholes at top speed.

Slow down! said Iris.

Make up your mind! shouted Myles, compromising between her two commands by easing off the gas pedal for a few seconds before flooring it again while saying, Write it all down.

I went on, speaking of a fugitive on the run, but the images were scattered, no story jelled.

My little beetle, said Iris, by now typing dictation at warp speed on her manual Olivetti, which was rarely far from her side. In the months that followed, those images became a story. As I told it, Myles also took notes, scrawling in his nearly illegible (but aesthetically intriguing) penmanship. When I retrieved those notes years later, he told me he still intended to devise from them a vast mythopoetic hermeneutic, just as William Butler Yeats had done with his wife's automatic writing.

For her part, Iris had undertaken structural adjustments and revisions of my muddled, run-on sentences. The onion-skin sheaves of her typing would, over time, come to contain great quantities of cross-outs and notes in the margins, alongside the sketches she planned to turn into illustrations. It is from my parents' combined records that I have reconstructed that narration, so it comes filtered through the syntax and vocabulary of three adults.

In the back seat of the car I apparently babbled of a bridge spanning the interior of a glowing world.

Dimly I heard my father exclaiming from the driver's seat that I was experiencing some kind of visionary state.

Or a seizure! said Iris, unhappily.

Or a mystic trance! Like Edgar Cayce, said Myles, He may have access to another plane of consciousness.

Just hurry, said Iris, But not too fast.

A seizure? No. I knew about Edgar Cayce, the Sleeping Prophet, the mystic clairvoyant. Back then it was hard to avoid him. My parents and their friends spoke often of his various predictions—especially, and with secret hope, the imminent disappearance of California under the waves. But for my part, no. No seizure, no vision. I'd grown sick of the heat and of my parents' argument and felt dizzy enough to lie down. Well, maybe I fainted a bit, I won't deny the possibility. And if I did, that would explain the little bits of dream I spoke as I came around. The combination of collapse and surreal utterance electrified Myles and Iris. They stopped bickering and bent their attention on me. I couldn't disappoint them. And anyway, I wanted to find out what happened next. So I went on, as best I could. It's not as easy as it sounds, making things up and pretending you're not, especially when there's so little material, just a small, strange jumble of images. Among them: a traveller in need, in peril, sheltered, smuggled to safety; a headless bird, feathers and blood everywhere, shining guts; a gleaming treasure trove; a sinking boat—there were more, but in my fainting spell they'd spat themselves at me too fast to hold. Then they slowed until, at last, they settled on a scene of quiet waves sieving through a pebble beach.

WRAPPED IN an old coat, I sleep on a beach. Stones squeak. Lonely sound—hollow shoes on hollow planet. City shoes, expensive once, strange for a sailor, which is what he is—the one wearing them. At least, I think he is. He could be lots of

things. Hard to tell how old he is too. Thirty? Not yet, but on the verge. He walks up to me where I'm lying in the cloudy light, and says all is ready, the ship prepared, crew assembled, and I should come at midnight because he'll be on watch then and can smuggle me aboard.

Rook (that's his name) makes a strange face that bends his broken nose (but that's the shape of his smile) and then walks away. His hair looks like black springs that bounce when he walks.

I don't follow him, won't press my luck—following was how I got to him in the first place. Last week I saw him smoking on the beach and realized he was from the *Lizzy Madge*. I took my chance and asked him to get me on board. That was the first time I saw his snarl-smile, his big black hair, short thick braid in the back, wide black eyes, brown skin, long, thin, twisted nose. He wanted to know if I had any money. I had a little. He nodded, scratched his chin, said he'd think about it.

So, this day, three later, full of hope and fear, I go to my sea cave, the driest of the holes in the headland on the border of the beach. It's where I've lived for the past weeks, subsisting on raw bivalves and leftovers from the back-alley trash cans of Night Harbour.

Where I come from I don't remember. One afternoon I woke up on the beach not far from the mouth of the sea cave. No past, no old life to recall, no idea who I was or where I came from. Just some images, or pieces of them, which I hold tight since they're all I have of who I once was. Every hour of every day I tend my collection, gathering it in my mind's eye—my little trove of visions. I lay them out one by one in the darkness of my thoughts, to contemplate and polish.

an old house in the night, music leaking out

a car accident on a long road
a green waiting room, death in the shadows
the belly of a glittering planet
a man from a faraway country seeking refuge
an axe on a bloody stump, head of a bird on a bed of
feathers and shining guts
a treasure of silver coins
two people up to their ankles in water on a sinking boat
a spectre on a desolate road at night
a ghost with a gun, a shot, a wound
a rainbow of light flashing on a wall in a room full of
children
firewood dragged on a sled from a broken forest
through blue snow, cold blue air
a round loaf of bread hot from the oven, end cut and
battered, steam rising from it
a woman (my mother?) in bed, pale, in pain
an explosion of light in the middle of a dark night
a brown-haired girl betrayed, face once vivid, now
ashen
an old book with my own life printed inside it
two men fighting in thick snow, moon behind sky-
spanning clouds, dark trees pointing up to it.

I march those images onto an interior stage and let them play and replay while I survive. And there they form their own kind of gravity, which pulls me toward a final sight, a city. It's a place I've never known, but I can see it clearly: tall buildings with a big river flowing between them in waterfall after waterfall, and somewhere nearby there's a park full of lilacs. So many lilacs the scent is strong, sweet, almost sickish. The city isn't just a city, it's City. I feel it in my muscles, my sweat,

my nose and tongue. It pulls my bones like the earth pulls a stone, but the direction it pulls me is out to sea.

I heard from town gossip that the *Lizzy Madge* is chartered to take a strange crew of people on an expedition to find an island in the Southern Seas. The island is supposed to have some secret, or treasure, maybe a fountain of youth. The rumours are airborne. I don't care about the island—all I know is that to find City I have to get on a boat.

After dark I say goodbye to my cave, bundle up the few clothes I've stolen from Night Harbour clotheslines, and head for the port.

The moon is out, a half moon, in its light I look back at the beach. Goodbye, beach.

Something near my cave, something in it. A person? Animal? Hot animal smell on the wind, but it moves too quickly to tell what it is. The moon's not bright enough. Whatever it is, the back of my head heats up instantly. To cool it, I turn away and walk fast.

Night Harbour is a backwater, barely quaint, stinking of diesel and brine. But at the end of its rotting dock the *Lizzy Madge* floats in its own private atmosphere of scruffy glamour, promising other waters, other shores.

I walk up the gangplank, feel the fresh coat of tacky paint on the bumpy railing and the engine throbbing in it.

A hand grabs me and pulls me through a door. I hear Rook's voice say, Quiet! and the door closes and locks and I'm in the dark.

MY VOICE fell silent at last, and in the quiet that followed, I heard somebody gently urging me to lie back and relax. I was in the hospital. Wires were attached to my chest with round

stickers and a nurse patiently chatted with my nervous parents as she watched a screen. She made a printout and a doctor came in and looked at it and said, No, there's no problem with his heart. Let's get an EEG.

Then somebody wheeled me into a windowless room and stuck wires on my head with some kind of goo and flashed lights in my eyes over and over in different patterns for a long time. Eventually they printed something out and a doctor looked at it. He shook his head. No, there was no problem with my brain.

So then another doctor sat with us and said it was probably just a fainting spell from the heat. Iris noted that my cat had just been killed and the doctor said, Yes, a sudden shock plus hot sun could cause you to faint, so I wouldn't worry about that. Try wearing a hat from now on. And speaking of sun, what about this?

He pointed to Iris's leg where her shorts rode up and showed a black mole just above her knee. It was blotchy and big, and Iris said yes, she knew, she should get it checked.

No time like the present, said the doctor, and with her permission, he scraped a little bit of it onto a glass slide and took it away.