

Hero Island

"She's back," Wendy pointed.

"So what?" he said.

"So, you'll have something to do; stare out the window all day while I'm at work." Wendy was standing in the open doorway. "Don't bother looking for the booze - you won't find it -and you'll just make a mess looking." She looked back out the window. "God, imagine the inside of that hulk."

Wendy's mouth snapped into a chilly grin and locked. "Have a nice day," she said as the door clicked shut.

Terry looked back to the scene below him, from the entire sweep of Half Moon Bay, its inviting sand, and the cottages tucked in behind the high shore's edge, to the woman on the ramshackle raft heading for the beach.

His attention came back and settled on the island at the entrance of the bay. Not much to it, really, but rock, a few gnarly trees and bits of bushes stuck to it like old scabs. The diminutive land mass seemed inconsequential; it had no name, it was not shown on any chart, or did it appear in any photographs that Terry had ever seen. The sea-battered rock was non-existent and meaningless; but since he was a kid, Terry had always felt a kinship with this rugged boulder stuck out there in the cold water, just beyond the boy's reach, but at the same time so close he could smell it and taste it in the wind.

But the island that *didn't* exist, and had no name, *did* have a name - just not a name you would find on any chart or atlas. It also had a story, and a history, and Terry's little sister loved to tell the *real* story of the 'Naming of Hero Island'.

Wendy's story begins with a young girl clinging for life like a scared kitten at the far end of a long tree branch suspended over the edge of a cliff. The damsel in distress is, of course, saved by her older brother just moments before falling to her death, dashed on the rocks seventy feet below. After the rescue and return to safe ground, the little girl is asked why she was out there in the first place. "To see the island better," she explains.

"What! *The* island?" The parents call out in boisterous unison. "Where sweetheart? Show us!"

"There!" the child yells, exasperated, pointing over the cliff edge. And just like that, the orphan island gets its name. "I dub thee 'Hero Island', after my hero brother."

What bull, Terry thought.

"Do you ever think back to those days, sis?" he asked the empty house. "I wonder."

Terry remembered the plans he and Wendy had made to explore Hero Island. It would be a bold voyage of discovery. They dreamed about it, together; they plotted and planned and schemed. Terry would design a driftwood sailboat, complete from stem to stern. It would have one sail like the one on a Chinese Junk and a small outboard motor if they could ever get one.

While waiting for the little ship to materialize, Wendy sketched charts of the bay in extravagant detail. Most of the young girl's drawings were crayon and water-coloured depictions of the tides and currents and prevailing winds that they would encounter during their odyssey.

But it was the sea-monster versions that she worked the hardest on.

Young Wendy's finest rendition was a poster sized menagerie of deep-sea creatures pulled straight out of the child's boundless and bottomless sea chest of dreams and make-believe. Enormous navy-blue whales smacked their inflated, glossy red Marilyn Monroe lips together as they grinned up at the dinosaur bird creatures flying in the sky overhead. In the milky, turquoise bay water below, a lone octopus spewed columns of sea water spray straight from the hole in the top of its head up to the top of the sky and the edge of the page where a bright orange fireball floated in the purest, puffiest white cotton clouds ever imagined. And, as the sun glared down on its magical domain, a gargantuan black and green crab clung perilously to an outcrop of rock at the mouth of the bay. The crab had its pincher-claws spread wide in apparent welcome but, as much as it seemed to be in a greeting mood – toothy smile and all - the furious, bulging, bloodshot-eyed

spectacle seemed more threatening and frightening than inviting. It didn't help that if you looked really closely at the crab, you detected something else in the picture, an oily black froth dribbling from the beast's chin and what looked like insects, or tiny stick people, crawling up the gooey stream and falling into the crab's gaping mouth.

"Nice touch, sis," Terry told Wendy when he finally spotted the drooling crab bit. "That's very cool."

When it was done, Wendy pinned the chart-work to her bedroom wall and jumped on her bed to admire it. "It's stupendous," she said out loud as she reached over her shoulder and gave herself a pat on the back. When her parents saw what their daughter had done, they agreed – they loved the painting - it *was* truly stupendous. Her brother made a driftwood frame for it. Her father drove a nail in the wall over the fireplace. Her mother hung it with a piece of wire. It was still there, over the fireplace – hanging on the same nail...at the same angle.

Terry shook his head - there was just one thing. He gave the wall a practised tap with the third knuckle of his right hand and Wendy's masterpiece straightened out.

Terry kissed his knuckle. "Still got the touch, Ter."

One beautiful evening, the family was cozied up around a good fire at the stone circle, toasting marshmallows and feeling together, the galaxy shimmering overhead in silence and the surf lapping on the beach below. "Your mother and I would like to come with you," the father said and tossed another stick on the fire. The mother nodded and took his hand in hers. "If you guys would have us along, we would be honoured."

"That was a fine moment, Dad," Terry said to the memory drifting through the room. "You guys were a class act."

Terry walked to the fridge, opened the door, and inspected every shelf carefully, moving the contents this way and that - and then back again - to make sure he didn't miss anything. This shouldn't be too difficult, he figured; he knew what a bottle looked like. Part of him hoped that he wouldn't find anything but good,

wholesome food and natural fruity drinks, but the other part was a whole lot bigger, and it knew exactly what it wanted.

He'd phoned his sister from the Institute on Thursday. Today was Friday. "I don't want you back here, Terry." She had told him in a strained voice. He felt her trembling in the cold silence that followed.

He tried his laugh - she loved his laugh. "I'll be good, I promise."

The laugh didn't work.

"You said that the last time. Guess what, brother, I've got good news and bad news. I really don't care which one you want to hear first."

"I can hardly wait."

"The good news is that there is plenty of room for you now. The bad news is that the space is here because he walked out on me - he said he didn't need to have a girlfriend with a fucked-up family. He actually said that and walked out. So now I know how he felt, and I don't need a fuck-up for a roomy either. So farewell and so long."

"Come on, Wendy, you remember way back when...right?" he tried.

"I barely remember way back *what*. Too much water over the bridge, or in your case..."

"That's enough. Forget I asked."

He came to her door, anyway; there was nowhere else left for him. "What's that for, sis?" He said, pointing at the sign stuck in the centre of the lawn. Barney Bragg was staring back at him from the quarter sheet of plywood, trying to smile. "I went to school with you, didn't I..." Terry said, absently. "You were a real jerk back then - now you're a swindler - seems about right."

"Barney's just doing his job...I got the home," she said. "And you got the money. You drank your part and I have to sell my part."

He waited for his sister to move out of his way.

"There's nothing left, Terry. We messed up."

She let him in.

Terry went back to his chair by the window and looked out at the overgrown wild-flower lawn to the cliff edge and down to the bay and the beach below. He caught the tremor in his hand as he pushed the curtain aside to improve his view.

The boat, the 'hulk', floated into the bay where a small group of beachgoers waited on the water's edge. Terry knew the boat; he had seen it before once or twice over the years. He knew he was looking at not much more than a raft with a garden shed nailed on it, steered around by an odd character wearing torn-up jeans and very little else.

Back and forth the sailor clambered over the boat like an exotic spider spinning a web - back and forth, clinging to every surface, finding holds where none appeared to exist. At one point, she was jamming bamboo poles into the sea floor to keep from hitting the shore; the next moment she was walking out into deeper water with concrete blocks on her shoulders, dropping them to the bottom at the end of very stout looking ropes.

Back on board, the woman shut down the small outboard motor that was lashed to a plank on the back of the rig, waved and whistled good-naturedly to the crowd on the shore, and ducked into her tiny cabin. A minute later, shutters were pushed open, curtains were pulled back, and a trickle of smoke puffed out of the rusted chimney pipe and drifted East over the bay.

The old steps down to the beach were shaky and dangerous and badly in need of repair or replacement. A lot like me, Terry thought, as he made it down through all the zigs and zags and landings to the bottom without killing himself. Every plank and nail and concrete pad were familiar to him. They should be; he and his dad built this staircase - just the two of them - when Terry was thirteen, and the father was a thousand and something. That was the summer Terry built up some honest-to-goodness teenage worker muscles and put on some big-guy fighting weight. When they finished the last step, father and son roared like wild Lions and embraced like Roman Centurions after a victorious battle.

Terry's mother was waiting at the top of the finished stairs. "How about two of my best lemonades for a thirsty crew." She pulled her young son to her side,

messed up his hair, and kissed him right on the forehead. "Now sit down." As always, the brand-new teenager was mortified by the huggy-kissy stuff, but he loved his Mum way too much to complain, and the reward, in treats and in love, was always worth it. The drinks came in the best, most expensive crystal beer steins the family owned. "One for you, my darling Frank." She put it in front of her husband. "And one for the boss." She put the larger one down right in front of Terry's waiting, parched lips. "I just hope you weren't too hard on my sweetheart." His Mum gave him a wink.

It was the best drink ever. He sure missed that lemonade.

Three weeks later, Frank died of a massive heart attack moving boulders to make room for his wife's long-dreamed-of veggie plot. It was meant to be a surprise.

Sea breeze and salt tang greeted him with a vigorous blast as he stepped off the bottom step of the staircase and pushed through the dense Salal, the secret entrance, onto the beach. He found the old log, the same one he and Wendy had worn smooth, sitting in the sand, backs pressed against the warm wood, whipping sticks and stones off the wave crests as far out as they could. He was pretty good – she was better. Wendy dubbed their backrest the Logrest Monster, and Terry went along with it, although he thought it was a really dumb name. And now, here he was again, and for the millionth time wondered at the height of the tide and the might of the storm that had dropped this behemoth so far above the high-water mark.

He sat on the warm sand, worked his back in against the stranded tree trunk, pushed his shoes off, and buried his toes in the cool beach sand deeper down. The wind, the sun, and the gulls singing in the sky were a tonic - no Gin needed - and it rinsed and cooled his scorched soul.

Terry wondered why he was so angry.

"Are you dead?" It was the voice of a curious child, but when he opened his eyes, Terry was looking up at a grown woman with sea blue eyes and chimes for

vocal cords. She made him think of beach glass: a little worn, unlikely, smelled like seaweed...and beautiful. Terry shook his head. He had been asleep for a while, the air had cooled, and the sun was about to touch the South peak of the Island.

He felt sore. He felt rested.

"You didn't move or snore. I thought you were a dead Otter at first or a bag of garbage." She leaned suddenly toward him. "But you don't smell like dead Otter." She waved a hand like an exaggerated fan in front of her wind-burned face and laughed. "You smell like a dead alky."

"It's actually *alco*. I am an alcoholic."

She slid a little closer on the log. "What's your name?"

"Terry. I know it's an odd name; I believe it means something like 'Leave Me Alone' in whatever your language is."

"Do you think I'm crazy, Terry?"

"I'd say the odds were good."

She came closer.

"How many crazy people do you know who own yachts like that?" she said, bobbing her head in the general direction of her 'yacht'.

He looked at the stranded box twenty feet from them with the collapsed red sail and what looked like garden ties spiked underneath it. "A few, actually, now that you mention it."

She pointed to the row of cottage homes at the top of the slope. "You're from up there, aren't you?"

"My sister, not me."

"What's she like?"

"She is an accountant."

"Why would she do that?"

"She's pretending she's not an artist. That's our Mum and Dad's house, the one with the big Arbutus leaning out over the beach, to the left of the one with the blue

trim." Terry reached up with his left hand and turned her head gently so she could see the house and the tree. "They're gone. Well, our Mum's still alive but living in a home."

He let her head go. "My sister and I have watched you sail into the bay." he said.

"You're spies?"

"Sorry, not spies, we're not that smart."

"What makes you tick?" she asked.

"Why?"

"Because people are always asking me that, that's all. I'm not sure what they mean by it." She thought of something else. "Are you right in the head?"

"You get asked that a lot too?" Terry asked. A moment passed like a wave coming ashore. "What happened to you?"

She took a moment. "I guess I got sidetracked...You?"

"Same almost, except the train came back and ran me over a few more times, just for good measure. Right off the rails - that's me. What's your boat like?"

"It's seaworthy, and it's beautiful."

"Can I see inside?"

"No" The woman stood up and pulled her jet-black mermaid hair back over a bare shoulder. "Look across; the trees on the cliff – a wind's coming...see ya."

"You worked late, sis?"

"Oh, Shit!" She stopped dead in the doorway.

"You were never any good at hiding things from me." Terry held up the bottle. "I always knew where you stashed stuff."

"You're supposed to be recovering, not recharging. Not refilling."

"I didn't touch it."

"I don't believe you."

"Check my breath. It's gross, but it's not tangy."

"Not funny, Terry. I'm leaving." But she dropped to the couch instead. "What do you need - tell me, brother - spill it."

Her brother ignored the terrible pun and her question. "How's Mum?" he said.

"She's safe and warm and as happy as anyone would be, I guess, sitting in a small room with one window and all her friends dressed up as nurses and doctors."

"I want to see her."

"She might not know who you are, Terry."

"She'll know."

Wendy got back up to her feet. "Let's start by you giving me the bottle."

"I don't think so."

She reached for it, and he swung. He missed, he didn't connect, but that didn't matter – he had tried to punch his little sister. Wendy ran, and the older brother didn't take another breath or open his eyes until he heard the Mini start up and pull out of the driveway.

The following day, Terry took the bottle to the beach. The August air was warm, but the perky CBC Weather Lady had warned of a change on the way, and he could feel a touch of West Coast autumn on the back of his neck.

What a gorgeous day, he thought miserably.

He wrenched on the cap, but the thing wasn't giving. Glued on? "This bottle has been neglected," he scolded his absent sister. "Must be interesting when you have company over for drinks." He tried harder. He looked at the lid up close to see if she had actually glued it on. Really? Sis? He got a stone and tapped at the cap. He tore off his tee shirt. He rubbed and polished the bottle frantically. "Come on Geni!" he cried out to the beautiful bottle of Canadian Club gleaming in the brilliant sun, its treasure locked up, out of reach, a million miles away. "Come on!

I watched your show, that should count for something - I even dreamed about you more than once."

In his frenzy, Terry almost overlooked something trapped inside the bottle, twisting slowly in the golden liquid - but the moment he saw it, the bloated, white worm floated onto its side and grinned right at him.

Holy crap, they told him this would happen.

"This is the highest tide I've ever seen." She dropped down beside him and pushed her long, lean legs straight out into the sand. "If the wind comes up right now, my yacht is up here with you and this log, probably forever." She glanced down. "Do you really drink that stuff?"

"When I'm driven to it."

"You're being sarcastic. I don't like that about you."

"Neither do I." He looked up finally from the bottle. "Where do you live?"

"Over there, on the deserted island."

"Then it's not deserted."

She smacked the back of his head.

"Ow!"

"See! You're doing it again!"

"It's a bad habit...let's go see your boat."

"I told you no!" She jumped up. "But I've got something to give you."

"She's gone." Terry was at the window. "I brought your bottle back; there was a worm in it, and I couldn't get the cap off."

"That stopped you?"

"She gave me this." He pulled a stained, creased brown envelope out of his pocket and pulled out a photograph. "It's delicate. She's had it for a while." He laid

it carefully on the windowsill. "Remember those old Kodachromes from the sixties?" he said. "They even had the date printed on them."

"What am I looking at?"

"That's you, hanging way out there. Her mother was here, in the boat, down there..."

"Are you sure, Terry?"

"Look, you can see me grabbing your hand." Terry pressed his finger on the faded image. "Do you remember what I said to you?"

Wendy grimaced; shook her head slowly. "Sorry, something like don't be afraid, I'll save you sis?"

"I wish."

"Well...?"

"Your brother said: "Don't fall, you'll make me look bad." He stared out the window. "I actually said that."

"You were joking."

"Right." He handed her a carefully folded sheet of paper. "And she gave me this. Open it."

Wendy stared at the pencil drawing in her hand. The hand began to shake. "This is *our* boat, Terry."

"I know."

"Did you just do this?"

"I don't know...God help me, sis, I really don't know."

"You're bleeding sweat, Terry."

He turned from the window. "I'm cold. Can you drive me back there?"

Wendy went to him and took his arm. "Come on, I won't let go," she said.

They pulled up in front of the white block building and Terry pushed himself out of the passenger side of the Mini. He looked around. The sardonic side of him saw that he was returning to an actual dead-end. What a place to put a rehab, he thought. How fucking appropriate can you get?

Wendy looked at him, not speaking.

“Get rid of Bragg,” Terry said. “You don’t need that creep standing in your yard staring at you through your kitchen window.”

Before she could answer, the glass doors on the building slid open with a hiss and an unhealthy grind, and a young lady in a white uniform helped a heavy man out through the opening. “It’s a gorgeous day, Frank.” The nurse patted the hand gripping her elbow. The man shuffled forward into the sunlight, squinted his eyes tight, and covered his unshaven face with his free hand. “I guess if I take off, you guys soon find me and drag me back. Right?”

“No, we don’t even try.” The young lady said. “It’s your choice; this isn’t a prison, but your bed will be taken by the time you reach the road.” She gently pulled his hand from his face. “Come on now, you’re doing great...open those eyes Franky.”

The nurse and her charge shuffled, arm in arm, past the Mini car and the couple frozen in conversation and started off on a walk out of the cul-de-sac.

“I didn’t drink the money. I wanted to, but I couldn’t figure out how to get the cash out of the bank.”

“Typical...dough head.” Wendy pulled the door shut. “You really *are* hopeless, aren’t you. Just get better. I miss you...”

“You get what I’m talking about. Right?” Terry pulled the door back open, bent over and looked in at his baby sister. “Burn the sign the moment you get home. It’ll make a nice little fire.”

“...I don’t know.”

“You aren’t going anywhere if you don’t want to.” He closed the car door.

As Wendy watched, the doors to the Institute opened and her brother turned, caught a toe on the sill, and went straight down in the middle of the opening. For a moment, the only sound he could hear was the banging of the panels trying madly to close on his sprawled body like blood-thirsty scissors coming for him. This time, he told himself, he might as well stay down, kissing the floor planks in a drunk tank. He had it coming.

Terry didn't move. He would wait the sorry moment out, right through to the very end. He relaxed and he began to weep. He was done, face down and lips pressed against the cold aluminum metal of a door sill. But then there was Wendy, down beside him, shifting his sore head to the soft cushion of her leg. She was saying something; the voice sounded so much older than he remembered, but he knew the words by heart.

"Help me Terry – I am so scared. Please... save me."

He heard other voices now. He felt a soft cloth caress his forehead; he opened his eyes and looked up at his sister. He tried to smile. "This is almost as bad as my last hangover."

"Must have been a doozy," the young sister said." Now hush up, silly boy, there's help here."

"Of course...yes." A smile spread on Terry's face as he passed out.

"And we've got a boat to build. We promised them," Wendy said, as more help arrived.

She got up and stepped away. "Please be careful," she whispered into the clenched hand pressed against her mouth. "That's the only hero I've got."

The end