

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." Her mouth shaped itself into a chilly grin. "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 finally returned to the small rocky island at the bay's mouth.

It was crazy, the island didn't have an official name, it was nowhere on any record or even visible on any chart. However, the little island did have a place in this family. The children looked for it every day; they talked about it, dreamed about it, and made elaborate plans to travel to it one day. Terry was going to design a driftwood sailboat complete from stem to stern. It would have one sail like on a Chinese Junk and a small outboard motor if they could ever get one. Wendy sketched charts of the bay in great detail. Her drawings included colour crayon depictions of the tides and currents and prevailing winds that she and her older brother would need when the big day arrived. And the parents played along with the stories and dreams of their children; they remembered their childhoods and knew no harm - only joy - would come from supporting the existence of such a magical world dwelling in the hearts of these kids.

"Maybe we'll all go there together," the father said one night while the family was sitting outside by the fire, toasting marshmallows on a perfect fall night; the shimmering galaxy stretching overhead and the unhurried surf breaking on the beach below.

But the lucky island got a name – and Terry's little sister Wendy loved to tell the story of the 'Naming of The 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 called out in boisterous unison.

"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, as he remembered the story.

Alone in his sister's house, 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.

Terry had phoned his sister from the Institute Thursday. Today was Friday. "I don't want you back here, Terry." She had said in a weak, tired-out, defeated voice. He felt her trembling in the awful silence.

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. And he said he didn't need to have a girlfriend with a fucked-up family. And I say I don't need to have a fucked-up roomer. So goodbye."

"You can't lay that mess on me." Terry regretted saying this as soon as it came out; he hoped she hadn't heard him.

She'd heard him. "I've got to unload it somewhere, like at your doorstep with the rest of your garbage."

He came to his sister's door, anyway, there was nowhere else. "What's that for, Sis?" He said, pointing at the sign stuck in the centre of the lawn. Dillan Bragg was staring back at him from the quarter sheet of plywood, trying to smile. "I went to school with him, didn't I..." he said, absently. "He grew up to be a real estate jerk?"

"I got the house," she said. "And you got the money. And you drank it."

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

"There's nothing left, Terry. We fucked up." She let him in.

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Terry went back to his chair by the window and looked out over 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 not much else - but he got it. Back and forth, she 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 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 cheery 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 gargantuan lemonades for a thirsty crew." She pulled her young son to her side, tossed 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," and she put one 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 dropped this behemoth so far above the high-water mark.

He sat on the warm sand, leaned against the ancient back rest, 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. He wondered why he was so angry.

"Are you dead?" It was the voice of a curious child, but when he opened his eyes, Terry looked into the eyes of 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 dead Alcoholic."

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

"Terry. I know it's an odd name; it means 'Leave Me Alone' where I come from."

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

"Not yet."

She came closer.

"How many crazy people like me 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, but who's counting."

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. 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. "Everybody watches when you float into the bay," he said.

"Spies?"

"Sorry, no spies, they'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. "What happened to you?"

She took a moment. "I guess I got sidetracked. And you?"

"Same almost, except the train came back and ran me down 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."

That made him pause. "Can I see inside?"

She stood up. "Nope," she said. "Look, 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 questions like these, tricks and traps that made him feel worse than he did already. "How's Mum," he answered.

"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."

"Lots of people don't *want* to know who I am."

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 drive away.

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. He tried harder. He looked at the lid up close to see if she had actually glued it on. Maybe? 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 dreamt about you more than once."

In his frenzy, Terry almost overlooked a something trapped inside the bottle, twisting slowly in the golden liquid - but the moment he saw it, the bloated, white, worm turned on 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!"

"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..."

"And that...?"

"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?'"

"No."

"Well...?"

"Don't fall. You'll make me look bad." He stared out the window. "I actually said that."

"You were joking."

"I wish." 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 sweating, Terry."

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

Wendy went to him. "Come on big brother, grab my hand – I won't let go."

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

“Anything to say, brother?”

“Yeah, for Christ’s sake, Sis, get a car that a human can get in and out of.” He rubbed a shoulder and made a big deal of trying to lift an arm. “Or at least supply passengers with a can-opener, or a crowbar...shit!”

Wendy looked at him, speechless.

“And take down the ugly fucking sign at our home.”

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 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 couldn’t figure out how to get the cash.”

“Typical...dough head.” She pulled the door shut. “See 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 creepy ugly fucking sign the moment you get home – you’ll never need it.”

The doors to the Institute opened and Terry 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 crouched beside him, shifting his sore head to the soft cushion of her leg. She was saying something - the voice sounded so much older, but he knew the words by heart.

“Help me Terry - please, help me, Terry.”

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.”

“Hush up, there's help here,” the young sister said.

“Mum and Dad's money is all there,” the older brother said.

“You know, you're my hero. Right?”

“Of course.” Terry passed out with a smile on his face.

The end