

Skin Cream for Mermaid Leg Scars  
By Adriana Maggs

Tish Nightengale becomes Mrs. Butt once she starts to show. The white hot sand, the visit to the Louvre, the sphinx in Egypt with red rubies in his eyes are places she visits on her honeymoon in her mind, in her bed, in the dry corner of her parent's basement at night, alone. Her new husband, her father and the b'ys drink the night away in the tiny kitchen above her head. Their rowdy voices, their stomping feet, the echo of things to come.

Mrs. Butt hangs her wedding dress up with the rest of her maternity clothes.

Mr. Butt emerges from the mine everyday in time to see the sun go down. He shows his new wife the handkerchief full of black soot after he blows his nose as he waits with his tea, for his supper.

Twenty hours of labour and Mrs. Butt laughs at history's heroic men. Pain so brutal, so savage, so exposed and so forgiven once the nurse puts a clean and swaddled baby girl in her arms. Mr. Butt does not try to hide his disappointment and she knows she can never love him. She stares into the infant's glossy black new eyes. She names the baby Joy and knows that her daughter will never feel about her the way Tish feels for her own mother.

Mrs. Butt dances around the Butt's new pressboard and carpet living room with Joy in her arms. The record player is their Christmas gift to themselves. She collects Joy's smiles and laughter the way she once collected beach glass and sea shells, turning them over and over in her trembling fingers. Stop time. Let me stay here for a little longer. She loves you, ya ya ya. She loves you ya, ya, ya.....

Mrs. Butt has three miscarriages. In her bed at night, she prays for her lost boys. The surviving family drive into Corner Brook where she buys Joy a navy blue coat and a bright red scarf which bring out Joy's chestnut hair, her big brown eyes. Mrs. Butt has never seen such a beautiful combination of colors. She is sure Joy's heart will never be broken.

The mine caves in and she waits to hear that Mr. Butt was miraculously spared. But the town is dead. He finds work on the night shift at the Corner Brook Pulp and Paper Mill. The family moves to the big city. Her kitchen has a real linoleum floor.

The Corner Brook women stare at Mrs. Butt with dark flickering eyes. She learns that her family are Baymen. She cannot meet their gaze. She starts to have misgivings about meeting Paul McCartney.

The Tuckers next door have a cat they neglect. Mrs. Butt puts a saucer of milk out for him in the mornings. He starts to expect it and then is a regular visitor. The Butts share a pew with the Tuckers every Sunday at the Anglican Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist.

Mr. Tucker finds out that Mr. Butt works the night shift, he comes over fifteen minutes after the mill whistle blows the shift change. He tears at her robe. He does not take no for an answer. He comes to expect it and then is a regular visitor.

John Lennon is shot. It is the first time Joy sees her mother cry. Mrs. Butt spends the day listening to Beatles albums for a hidden message. She needs something more from them. The meaning of life, a prophecy for her future. Even a recipe for something other than meat and potatoes for supper would help her at this point.

Mrs. Butt tries to make the best of things with Mr. Tucker. She rolls over afterwards and tells him that her name used to be Tish Nightingale and that she once sang the Newfoundland anthem in front of four hundred people and they all said she was bound for New York City. Mr. Tucker looks at the ceiling. He tells her he is not planning to leave his wife.

All the mill houses in Corner Brook are exactly the same. Most of Joy's friends have the same bedroom as she does. They mock the accents of their parents who don't speak like parents on TV. They can't wait to get out of school and leave the town behind. Joy says the same thing.

Mrs. Butt's mother dies. Orphaned at forty - odd. A door in her heart closes forever. Her black hair dulls with a net of gray and her mouth turns down at the corners. Her mother always said "when God closes a door, somewhere he opens a window", but if her mother were here right now, Mrs. Butt would ask her how it is good that she is even more alone?

Joy resents being forced to make the long drive to the funeral. She will miss the school dance where the boy with the ponytail who wants to take her into the woods, in the snow, on his Yamaha skidoo will likely find another. She decides not to speak to her mother for the entire weekend but softens when she sees her poppy sitting, crumpled in the tiny kitchen, so lost, so lonely, cataracts bleaching out the windows to his soul. She makes out with a boy she hopes is not a cousin. She holds her mother's small, rough hand though the service.

Mrs. Butt looks for Tish Nightingale in the askew, pink room that watched her grow. All she finds is a water color picture of the Fab Four ripped from a writing pad and signed with that name in the bottom corner, tacked to the pressboard wall. She can feel their disappointment. "We were painted by someone with dreams."

Mr. Butt gets switched to the dayshift. He joins the land of the living. He eats with his family and joins his wife in bed at night. Whispered questions about whether or not the dog was fed or whether or not it is garbage day tomorrow turn into conversations about Christmas gifts and whether or not Joy is drinking. These lead to talks of their own childhood. Reminisces of a town long dead and an adolescence too soon forgotten. Mr. And Mrs. Butt are becoming friends.

Joy sits at her nightstand. Black licorice lipstick in her hand. She puts out a cigarette in her eye in the mirror. Tonight she's bringing evil to the whole damn town.

A thin layer of powder over crisp hard snow. Mr. Butt breaks through immediately but Mrs. Butt can walk on the hard snow for a second. For a second she is Tish Nightingale lightened by the dreams that float inside her- and then she breaks through. Mr. Butt holds her mittened hand. They walk together. Wind swirling the light snow. Snowflakes in the streetlight. Christmas lights on every house. And home with a tree. And even Joy is a child again. And Mrs. Butt finds Tish Nightingale somewhere deep in her eyes, underneath the wrinkles, underneath the rolls around her middle.

Joy is lying on a carpeted floor of a trailer, she can see dawn peeking in through the square curtain hanging over the round door window. A boy's soft fingers crawl across her stomach, under her shirt and gently brush the underside of her breasts. She is a vegetarian in a province that can grow only turnips and potatoes. She worries about shanty towns in Detroit, seconds away from yuppie suburban sprawl. She longs to stroll through winding hallways covered in paintings in Prague. She dreams of a Pacific Ocean she has never seen.

Joy was meant for bigger things than her mother who is wise only in the International language of laundry instructions. She would not like it that her mother sneaks into her room at night to watch her face slip back in time, back to the little girl who slept so sweetly and laughed so freely so long ago.

Joy is going to Chad's house. She will avoid his mother's eyes as she lets him lead her up the dirty painted stairs into his dark room where they will find a sit com on the TV at the end of his unmade bed and she will finally let him. But, he braves the icy winter and hitchhikes to Port Aux Basques, on to the ferry boat, off to Halifax, on to better things and he promises to write but he never does. She grieves for him.

Three mill whistle blasts in the crisp, black February night. A fire in the left wing of the mill. The street comes alive. Mrs. Butt waits to hear that her husband is spared. He may even walk again but it will take time and hard work. Mrs. Butt's heart breaks whenever she looks at his lively eyes in his dead body but there is another feeling. She knows she will have to find work. Her belly quivers with anticipation. She sees that change is not just for a chosen few. That God closed a door and opened a window. Mrs. Butt wants to phone her mother and say you were right but Joy is on the phone and besides, her mother is dead. Perhaps she knows already. Perhaps she is manning the controls from beyond.

Joy blares music as she speeds down the dark Trans Canada Highway. She feels a tinge of disappointment when the car doesn't smash into a million pieces that will burn forever in the sky, in the sea in her eyes. She loses her virginity to one of Chad's friends. They agree that it was no good. She wants it to never have happened. She wants time to have past. She wants to say something that will make it all better but the walls are closing in and they are turning into strangers faster than she can get her clothes on.

Mrs. Butt has found a job working with kids nobody wants for half days at the local integrated school. They call her Mrs. Big Butt and she pretends not to hear. She starts to collect Popsicle sticks and buttons, toilet paper rolls and egg cartons, empty preserve jars and brightly colored beads. She buys paint brushes, acrylics and glue sticks and jars of funny shaped pasta. She buys glitter and cotton balls and Styrofoam packing. When the school's budget is not enough she dips into her own.

And a student loan and Joy is gone. Please let her leave her anger here. Let her name be her face. Let her find what she is looking for.

Mr. Butt is dubious of female physiotherapists who don't have husbands. He refuses to do his exercises. He has gone back to his sit com families. Mrs. Butt wonders what will happen to him if he never gets his legs back. She tiptoes up the steps every day coming home, and turns the door knob so slowly, so quietly hoping to catch him in the middle of a stretch or a lift. Nothing yet.

Mrs. Butt's unwanted children exercise their pain with sticky masses of brilliantly colored sculpture. They express themselves with finger painting upon mixed media finger painting pinned along drained classroom walls. They find themselves in the treasure map that becomes their classroom floor. They battle flying paper mache demon piñatas hanging from the cork board ceiling, if only every abusive parent, neglectful foster home and tireless bully were filled with candy. It is a room pulsing and shimmering with creative emotion. The Louvre comes to Mrs. Butt.

And Joy is home and a baby grows inside her, making a nest in her flat belly, pushing the nest into the shape and size he needs until he sheds it on a white and bloody table at Western Memorial Regional Hospital, but there is another color. He is lost to the black race, his co creator knowing nothing of his existence. Not many black people counted among the dwindling population of Corner Brook.

Joy stares back into the tiny black eyes that search constantly for his mother. She cannot explain this irrational love and floats on a secret she shares with all mothers.

Joy spends a winter with colic and screaming, falling into bed with the baby at 8:30pm and waking to do it all again. Pain shoots from her back to her calves and her conversational skills have been reduced to "spit that out" and "please". She learns that nobody is going to thank her or pat her on the back, that some things in life you just do. It's about survival and making your babies survive. She wonders if he can taste resentment from her breasts, the way a cow's milk curdles with fear when she smells blood from the slaughter house.

Mr. Butt wonders aloud why this fleeting trend of interracial dating must manifest itself in his grandson.

Joy gets a job with a local newspaper despite leaking breasts that spray across tables of due articles. She needs half day child care. A nervous girl sits on the edge of the couch

looking sideways at Mr. Butt who will not turn down the TV. Though he is listening, wanting to know who Joy will invade his castle with next. The nervous girl doesn't drink. She belongs to a religion who do not cut their hair. Mr. Butt fires her after the first week but mentions her often after.

George Harrison dies. The Beatles are dropping like flies.

But maybe it all changes now, the day Tish Nightingale comes home to an empty house, a frantic Joy. They search up and down for the baby they would die for, if only that were enough. Where is the man who can barely move? The Television performs for no one. Joy stops at the kitchen window and watches, beckons her mother to come and look.

Tish watches her other half stand finally, leaning on a gray and metal cane, her daughter's boy dressed in red and blue tottering around him, neither of them completely convinced that the ground beneath their feet is enough. But they stay there, as the day glows blue and fades to dark, and by the end of it another paragraph written: He has taught the boy to catch a ball.