

Settling

By Jennifer Clouter

I am starting to feel funny about being here. Wandering around the dingy empty house looking at Nan and Pop's old stuff is making me realize that I actually am here and not in the shitty apartment back in Toronto, or asleep on the plane or riding in the van. The whole gruelling trip is like a dream I woke from just this morning, miraculously transported through time and space into my dead grandmother's bed. Everything is still in the exact same place as when they were alive--- the cracked jug and basin in the corner of the bathroom, Pop's canes, all the old fashioned black and white pictures on the wall beside the stairs. They were always yellow but now they are crooked too and that makes them seem even older somehow.

In the kitchen I find a note on the old white sparkled table---

Had Budge turn on the power. Made up the bed. Theirs buns in the fridge. Town water is hooked up but you got to turn the knob under the basemint stairs. Dont drink the water unless you boils it first. Budge says the oil tank for the stove is rusted out but she still burns wood. Come up and get your dinner when you wants.

Vina

I stand there looking at the note and chewing my fingernail. I am not alone--- already someone knows I'm here, is probably watching the house right now. That means one of my goddamn sisters,

definitely Lauren, must have squealed to Mom. I just want to be by myself for a fucking minute to lick my wounds, but of course I can't. Not a single person in my whole family can ever understand the concept of alone. Not one. Not once, not ever. In my family you have to have everyone around you all the time or you are weird. Through my whole life people were always saying "what's wrong with her, off to herself like that?" And they always say it like I can't hear what they're saying because I am off to myself, which could mean I am only on the other side of the room reading a book or something.

Take Budge and Vina, they live in the house just behind Nan's and they have nothing else to do only look out the window all frigging day so they probably know down to the exact second when I got here, and the longer I take to go up and say hello, the more of a shithead I am. Especially since Budge is after turning on the power and Vina is after baking buns. I come from that kind of family, the kind that thinks you need heat and light and buns for everything, they can't even consider maybe I want to sit in the cold and dark, by myself, smoking cigarettes and drinking or something. It's like the buns and power is bait and here I am hooked through the neck. Really its Mom and Dad trying to reel me in all the way from Florida, Budge and Vina are just the line they're using. Why the fuck do they care anyway? We never spoke since I left shithole Newfoundland after Nan died and then they go and move *to fucking Florida*. I suddenly feel like shit, like I want to cry, so I do for a second but it's like I'm forcing it a bit so I give it up. I'm still not fit though, my stomach is boiling with acid because that is the only thing in there and plus I am dying for a smoke. Fuck it. I'm going to the store anyway, even if Vina and Budge watch my back the whole way down.

As soon as I open the door onto Bird Cove, it feels totally empty. In one look I see at least a dozen fences fallen over, some like Nan's rock wall that's all busted apart, others that are grey weathered spruce collapsing around boarded up houses. Down by the wharf the old general store Pop

used to work at is like something out of a ghost town, swaybacked, all weathered grey and holes in places. I am actually surprised it's still standing. That place has been closed up for almost twenty years now, since just before I was born, and every summer since we expected to find it fallen over or washed out to sea. The arseholes who own this building live in England somewhere and they don't give two shits about it because they are letting it fall right into the ground. The funny thing is, it's still full of stuff. I was in it once when I was little and there were racks of mouldy clothes, old tin signs, barrels and bottles. Dad and Pop used to argue about it because Pop still had the key, but he always said none of the stuff belonged to him, he only worked there, and if the Misterys Bryant wanted to let the whole thing rot, well then they could because it was theirs. The summer after Pop died Dad found the keys and Mom and him went down and brought back an old round mirror that was cracked and some old ledgers Pop wrote in when he was a young man. Then Dad brought me and Lauren and Amy down and he said take a good look because this is the last time you will ever be able to. The middle of the floor was a big pile of splintered wood and dust because part of the ceiling above had caved in. And all the old stuff that was in there had big rays of lights on them, god lights we used to call them, falling through holes in the roof and the big giant one in the floor above. It was full of choking, sparkly dust and bird shit because birds flapped and screeched in the peak of the roof. I guess all that old stuff is still inside, just even more rotten. I always felt bad about that old store and Dad said it was a sin for Pop to have to watch it fall down like that after working there his whole life. It was a shitty deal alright.

Just past the old store the Atlantic is ice blue and it roars and rakes in stones like always, but the wharf, a big one with a roof and all made with government money, is in two fucking pieces. I can't even believe it, the old store is a rotten fixture, but that wharf was like the cliffs, always there, always the same. It might not be the swarm of activity it used to be one time, with boats coming and going and gulls and guts and men and women and cars and kids and bicycles, but it was just always there, you know. Now the roof is totally gone and the middle part underneath where the men used to gut fish is

bashed away. That was always the first place my sisters and me used to go when we got out here in the summers. We'd run down over the hill straight from the car and right out to the end of the wharf. The roof was covered end to end with screaming gulls, it always stank like fish guts and it was slippery and bloody with the mess and buzzing with flies all over. We'd sit right at the end looking through the clear salt water at the sculpins and urchins and starfish on the bottom while the gulls dropped like bombs around us after the bones and guts the men threw over the side. On our way back a man sometimes hooked one of our hands through the gills of a big fresh gutted codfish and said "Bring that home to your Nanny now, tell her that's from Boyce". This morning I had it in my head that as soon as I got my pack of smokes at Bailey's I was going to walk right out to the end to smoke the first one, but now that wharf is totally fucked. The foundation of rocks that held the whole thing up already has fallen over like all the rock walls up over the hill and now those rocks are just down there under the water rolling themselves smaller and smaller, over and over every time a wave claps into shore.

Bird Cove is hardly a cove at all, not even sheltered a bit. It's only when you look on a map that you can see just the tiniest hollow on the tip of the peninsula. So theoretically, there is shelter, but really the North Atlantic has slapped the living shit out of this place every single day for a few hundred years, ever since some asshole decided it would be a good place to stick a town. Nan and Pop loved it though. I mean really loved it and me and Lauren and Amy loved it too when we were kids. I guess when you're a kid you don't notice so much how some of the things are falling apart. Looking around now it all seems pretty poor with the rotten old store and the busted up wharf, except I notice that some of the houses are done up with vinyl siding and satellite dishes and Bailey's has a new lit up sign that says Bailey's Super-X.

As soon as the old bell rings when I open the door I can tell that everyone in here, which is two old ladies behind the counter and one old man shopping, have watched me come down over the hill. I

can tell by the way they aren't looking at me. I go right to the back and grab the first things I see which is a can of tomato soup, a few cans of ravioli and some tinned milk. Then I'm carrying a pile of cans so I have to go back up to the front counter and get a basket. I still drop one of the cans of Beef-a-roni like a jerk and have to chase it down the aisle and then when I pick it up I have a can of Beef-a-roni with a dent and I can't put it back and get another because I know the two old women behind the counter are still watching me. Jesus Christ. They start talking with the old man a bit and I go around and get toilet paper and orange juice and some other stuff but the whole time I feel nauseous so I end up grabbing shit I don't even want. The bell rings and the door slams when the old guy finally leaves. The very last thing I get is a six-pack of beer and I hump it all up to the cash and put it on the counter where one of the ladies adds it up on an adding machine. It comes to 33.93. We are all quiet while they put the stuff in bags. I put the smokes in my pocket. I don't see why they didn't ask me something about Nan or something, seeing as how they had just watched me come down from her house, so I end up saying out of the blue that I am Ada and Alvin Morey's granddaughter Theresa and then I feel like an asshole again for a while until one of them says "Been some time since any of ye're crowd been down", which is true. I say Mom and Dad are in Florida and I am just back on vacation from my fancy job in Toronto, then she says for the other lady to write my stuff down in the book under Nan's name so I don't have to pay for any of it until the end of the week. Then the bell is ringing and I am out of there. Ten minutes later I'm throwing my guts up behind the porch after smoking the first cigarette I've had since leaving Ontario three days ago.

A few days later I finally have the water turned on, in more ways than one. This one morning I can't seem to stop crying. I don't even know what I'm bawling about, but I've been doing it so long that I just wander around huddled in Nan's mouldy old robe, picking things up and putting them down without really looking at them. A thimble. An inkwell. An old plastic comb still stuck with grey hairs. Then I start opening dresser drawers while I arm snot off my face with a sleeve that now thankfully smells like Player's Filters instead of a coffin. In the first bureau I find Nan's big old black purse, the one

she used everyday for about twenty years. The brass hasp is green and crusty but it still works. I feel weird opening it up, like I'm stealing, but I do anyway, still sniffing and snotting. There is a few things still inside of it but it's like someone cleaned it out after she died because there are no tissues or Tums or pills like when she was alive. Instead there is her wallet with a few cards neatly arranged with her Social Insurance card on top. Also Pop's drivers license from back before he got the vertigo and some religious type cards that are like regular playing cards except for on one the picture is of Jesus all draped in white robes with his hands stretched out and little blue rays coming off of him. On the back instead of clubs or spades or hearts or whatever it says The Ascension. There are a few others, all about Jesus, one in the manger, one of him with the sheep and plus one with all the people he was teaching. My favourite one though is of Jesus as a teenager because he has no beard and his hair is all long and curly and there is a bit of eye shadow on his eyes and a touch of lipstick too it looks like and that one says The Child grew and waxed strong in spirit.

There's something that isn't so bad about looking through all this old stuff. I mean it is stuff that had its day already, so it's like it isn't complicated anymore. I mean it is complicated in a way, like Nan's purse meant a bunch of different things about Nan, like that she was married to Alvin Edward Morey, that she was a religious type person and she was 67 in 1973, but because she is dead all the real stuff, the Tums and tissues and bits of knitting are all taken out. Cleaned up. There could of been a grocery list in there with things crossed off one time and you might of known that Nan liked Tiptop crackers or something, but instead all that stuff was cleaned up and only the basic stuff is left.

That's when I find the black silver plate. It's underneath Nan's purse and it is wrapped up in one of Pop's hankies which has *AEM* embroidered down in the corner. It isn't a plate like a dinner plate; it is a square plate with holes in it for screws and writing engraved into it. The thing that is written on it is this, *Jessica Rebecca Morey 1936* and below that *Aged 3 Months*. I can figure out that this was the

plate that screwed onto the outside of a coffin and that it was meant to be on a little tiny coffin that held a dead little baby girl. I realize then that Nan and Pop must have had a little baby who died a long time ago that would have been my aunt like Aunt Liz and probably Pop knelt by the coffin and unscrewed this plate before she was put into the ground forever. And kept it all of these years put away so it is almost like it might as well of been buried six feet under because I never even heard about it. And that's all there is, just this plate. But looking at that writing things suddenly seem like they are very complicated after all.

I take the tarnished silver plate downstairs with me. I'm still sniffing and my breath is hitching in every so often in a satisfying dramatic way as I light a cigarette and sit down at the kitchen table to have a good gawk at the ghoulish old thing. Just at that moment comes a knock on the door and I just about jump out of my skin. I look over and of course I see the unmistakable silvery yellow fluff of Vina's frosty hairdo through the back door window. I was thinking so hard about this weird dead baby business that I didn't even hear her crunching her heavy way over the gravel road to the door. Quick as anything I wrap the plaque back up in the moth eaten old hanky and jam it into the bun warmer over top of the stove while Vina continues to bash on the door like it was the only thing between her and a cooked supper. Jesus Christ, what time is it anyway? Not a clock working in the house but by the light through the dining room windows it could only be no more than ten or eleven. What was wrong with people, I could still be sleeping. Vina you just know, has been up since the crack, probably sweeping her crew-cut lawn or some damn thing, and if I so much as move from the house she'll see me. She knows I'm in here, and she wants in too. The possibility of just not opening the back door and of maybe being left in what passes for peace around this place, flies from me. I see it flap out the window like a fucking big black crow, wings beating like mad. And here I am on the other side of the glass, as always, watching what's possible for me disappearing into the distance like a ragged ghost. In the meantime, what I want least in the world is already jamming a fat loafer clad foot into the door even as I am unlatching it. Through the

rusted and lumpy old screen I can see that Vina is holding a covered dish and that her curly armed mauve tinted glasses have slid right down the end of her nose. I relent and swing the door wide; I grasp her mushy old arm above the elbow and help her scrawl her way inside.

Oh my Treece, I'm killed.

She is breathless from the forty-five second walk downhill from her house; she is panting and blowing like a whale. I take the dish for fear she'll drop it and leaning heavily on my other arm Vina limps over to one of the elderly chrome kitchenette chairs and collapses into it.

I'm after turning my ankle over up on the road.

Grimacing she hefts her slab of leg up onto the unoccupied chair and grunting and tugging she manages to pull her slacks up over her knee. Underneath she has on some nasty pair of tan pantyhose hauled up so tight her gnarled old toes are crumpled right up.

It's a wonder I can walk at all girl, she says, rubbing at her fat ankle.

I suppose it is, I think, picturing that bunion old foot stuffed into the absurdly tiny shoes she has kicked off beneath the creaking chair. All this business over Vina's feet and legs is purely turning my stomach, so as to divert my attention I lift the lid on the chipped Corningware casserole I'm still holding. Inside is a mound of corned beef hash, crisp and steaming and laid on the top of it two fried eggs sunny side up and a slab of homemade white bread slathered over good with margarine. The delicious, fragrant, greasy smell just about buckles my knees; I am suddenly that hungry. My stomach makes an obscenely loud moan that both Vina and I hear.

Brought youse down a little breakfast, Vina says smugly, folding her slab arms over her big belly and wiggling her gnarled toes in satisfaction.

I already have the cutlery drawer open and some kind of a fork hauled out. It's huge, it must be a serving fork but I don't care. Still standing I start shovelling in the salty, disgusting, delicious pile, using the slab of bread to push oversize mouthfuls onto the giant fork.

Yes, you needs to get some meat on your bones, you're like the stick.

Vina gives me the hairy eyeball from over top of her curly old glasses. I don't say anything on account of my mouth being full, in fact bits of food are dropping out of it and back into the casserole and I'm piling them onto the now sizably smaller piece of bread and right back into my mouth.

You were always some skinny even when you were a little girl runnin around. For someone who never ate nothing you had some mouth on you though. Your Nan didn't know what to do with you. I never had no problems with none of mine. Eight of them and I loves them all to my heart. To my heart. I look over from the rapidly dwindling pile of food. I sense that Vina is about to start winding herself up about something, so I move from the counter and sit down. She is beginning to tear up behind her tinted glasses. They slide down her nose and with a big sniff she pushes them back up again.

To my heart I do, she says, wounded. And not one of them here with their mother, not the one. Now Russell's up in Her Majesty's, it's not he's fault. He'd be here if it weren't for that and that's the God's honest truth. He'd give me the shirt right off he's back Russell would. But Roxanne, she don't know me. I never has a call, not a card, nothing. They're twins too if you can believe that and the one is like the sweetest kind and the other the hardest thing I ever saw. She calls me everything, she do. I don't care. I loves her to my heart. Now Bradley, he's my oldest, he's working up on the rigs in Alberta and so's Graham and Glenys is up there too. Sure I got so many grandkids I don't even know em.

Slowly I stop chewing and lay down that big fork. I work at swallowing what seems to be the fist-sized lump of food caught in my throat.

Lloyd is there up in Mount Pearl with he's girlfriend, I forgets, Marcy or Marsha or something, they has me in to stay. And Sherwin in St. John's, now he's on the road a lot. Sells them bars to the stores. Oh my I gets some nice chocolates from Sherwin Christmastime.

Vina's voice is now beginning to fade away into a kind of buzz buzz buzz. The lights in the kitchen, especially the dirty florescent directly overhead are starting to pulse in my peripheral vision. The corned beef hash and runny eggs is now sitting in my stomach in a salty, curdled lump. In my mind's eye I see bits of jiggling egg white sticking out and gummed over bits of white bread. I barely have time to consider the slow roll my stomach is doing and I am pushing myself back from the table and knocking over the chair in my unseemly haste to get to the counter. Faraway Vina says,

Merciful Jesus Treece, what're ya doing?

and then I yark the whole mess up into the sink. I lean there for a minute, staring at my own vomit which now that I think of it I seem to be doing a lot of lately. It looks pretty much the same as it did before it went down. I turn on the water to rinse it away, but it just sits like a horrible clot in the strainer. This whole time Vina has been struggling to get up out of the chair, and now she finally manages it.

I thought youse was eating too fast.

She is beside me now and we both regard the mess in the sink.

I won't tell Budge you're after throwin it all up. He was looking for seconds but I said no, now I'm bringing this over to Treece. He'd be rotted he would. He loves hash.

I take a few steps back from the sink and just collapse on the stinky old settle. I put my arms up over my eyes, which are now starting to leak thick tears. One after the other I feel them slide down my

cheeks. They end up in my ears. My throat hitches once, sort of comically loud, and now it is my turn to give the big ornate sniff as a river of snot threatens to run down over my lip.

This is the best thing to happen to Vina in a dog's age. I hear her bustle around, rooting in the drawers, tsking and tutting. She turns on the tap for a bit and I hear the clank of what must be the metal slotted spoon striking the sink and then the sound of the garbage can lid flipping back. More water runs and a few more drawers open and close and the sound of Vina's breathing is becoming slightly more labored. Then I feel the sprung springs of the settle settle as she sits her fat ass down and lays a cool cloth over my forehead. It feels so good and to my horror my tears begin to flow even faster, dripping from my freaking ears and rolling even to the back of my neck as Vina performs this motherly deed, her Lee Press Ons gently scraping over my brow.

S'alright girl. You knows it'll all be alright. You know, please God and all that.

She turns the cloth over cooling my head some more and my throat hitches again and I have to suck the snot back into my head.

Sure look at me, barely sixteen years old and sleeping out in the store behind the house I was that afraid. Course things were different back then. People talked, oh my they talked. Course they still talks...

Vina's voice recedes right into the background after a few minutes and I find myself suddenly thinking, as if I'm supposed to be thinking about something important, but instead I find my eyes sliding open. Nan's tattered lace curtains are filtering in the best of a foggy day and the florescent tube overhead is still stuttering and buzzing a wavering light like dirty water that leaks through a cracked and yellow fixture filled with the grey shadows of dead bugs. Vina is still droning on about her childhood as I see without seeing the peeling, lumpy and water damaged ceiling tiles partially hanging down right over

my head, where I guess the toilet upstairs leaked. Over by the back door the barometer is fixed sullenly on Poor and every other thing I lay my eyes on, the salt cellar, the sugar dish, the vases filled with crappy grey and dusty plastic flowers, everything is so cracked and dirty and sad.

Despite the profound depths of my misery Vina's droning on is soothing and I feel myself fading from the dingy kitchen. Sleeping is not exactly what I am doing, more like wilfully escaping. Escaping my stupid ruined life in Toronto, which has turned into escaping my stupid ruined life in this stupid ruined little cove, but mostly I am escaping the stupid baby that both Vina and I now know is growing inside me, ruining my life into infinity and beyond. I wish I could just disappear like a ghost, like a shadow when a cloud blows suddenly across the face of the sun. That's me. Transparent. Weightless. My edges are blurred; my clothes are melting into the mildewed fibre of the ancient settle. The settle becomes a boat, weighted with rocks and I am slowly sinking down through fathoms of rust colored water. The sounds of Vina finally collecting her Corningware, righting the chair and blessedly closing the back door waver down through watery depths. By then I am an artefact sunk with shipwrecks, barnacled, buried and forgotten.

Later that night I run a hot bath and ease myself into water as clear and brown as a well steeped cup of tea. I've finally cried myself out and I drift peacefully as my mind wanders. I think about the silver plate I found up in the attic, wrapped so carefully in Pop's hanky. I think about the layers of dust over everything. I even think that maybe tomorrow I will go down to Bailey's and pick up a few cleaning supplies. My breasts swell up out of the creek water and I place both my hands on my belly, which glows, yellow and moonlike underneath. I fancy that it might be getting just a little rounder and I lie there listening to the slap and tickle of the surf. Through the window, buried in the matted branches of the big black spruce at the bottom of the yard I can see the blood red light of a full harvest moon rising up out of the sea and into the night.

