

*from Precious*

I was happy to see Uncle Wallace, my mother's younger brother, looking harried, and hurriedly scanning the faces of passengers in the arrivals area. The last leg of my flight from Ireland, the piece from Halifax to St. John's, had been diverted to Gander because of fog. I had travelled six hours by school bus along the Trans Canada Highway, drifting in and out of sleep, my head banging against cool, breath-fogged glass. I felt as if we were travelling by submarine. I could see nothing out the window except darkness and the rain running in letter-h patterns down the pane. Images kept zapping through my head. Mr. Shaky, the carpenter I met on the first leg of my journey, on the Pan Am flight from Shannon to Boston; I kept seeing his feathery blond hair, his long skinny neck and scaly wrists. His eyes had a diluted look to them, and their expression wavered somewhere between awe and terror. But more often, the recurring image was of a stewardess on that flight, a Farrah Fawcett beauty with straw hair. She had the longest fingernails I'd ever seen; they were painted white with tips of brilliant white. She was high-class through and through, and way out of my league, or so I thought until I overheard her in the galley talking to another stewardess. "Are you kidding me?" she snarled. "I'd rather ram my finger up my ass."

Uncle Wallace was wearing a lime-green tracksuit with double pink stripes down both sides. In terms of fashion, he was way ahead of his time. His hair style was also avant garde. He covered his baldness with a comb-over, though it was as much a coil as a comb-over—a gleaming lacquered confection that began at the bun of his skull and, by some miraculous feat of engineering and design, swept forward to fall in a lank, side-parted Hitleresque do. Around his neck he wore what looked to me like a St. Christopher medal. His accent, which I remembered as being English, had almost disappeared; it was firmly mid-Atlantic. And he was also shorter than I recalled. He shook my hand, muttering something about the parking meter, and then beckoned me to follow him.

I remember the rubbery squeak of the automatic doors, and the blast of tropical air that hit us when we walked outside. The weather was not like Uncle Wallace had described in his letters. It was raining heavily. "It's the tail end of Hurricane Vernon," he said. "It's been a really bad year down south for hurricanes." I peered out into the darkness, past the airport lights, expecting to see the telltale

shapes of giant palms and other exotic trees. Instead, all I saw was Wallace's distress as another gust of wind uncoiled his comb-over, arranging it perpendicular to his temple where it flapped like a great fern: *Nephrolepis exaltata*.

Wallace had changed in the nine years since I had seen him. Not only had he lost his hippie clothes—the embroidered waistcoat, the tie-dyed T-shirt, the thick corduroys, the crucifix made from bent horseshoe nails, the braided thong bracelet and the wooden-soled clogs—he also seemed to have lost his easygoing attitude. He seemed nervous, or at the very least, preoccupied. “I hope this doesn't put you out,” he said. “I hope you don't mind, but we're having a small gathering back at the house. Just a handful of friends to celebrate the sale going through. You knew we just bought a place, right?” It was the first of several surprises that night. The next was my finding out that his dental practice was not in St. John's at all, but in a town called Carbonear, about seventy miles away. The thought of being left alone in a strange city filled me with panic. And I was hardly reassured by Wallace saying that they would be in town for a long weekend every other week. “In between,” he said, “you'll have the place to yourself.”

But there were some things about Wallace that had not changed. He still had a filthy tongue. He swore every time the car hit a pothole: “Christ Fucking Jesus!” he roared when the car's undercarriage scraped the asphalt. “These goddamn potholes. You can't see them in the rain. This city is a disgrace.” In the half-darkness, I noticed that his face had flushed pink and his head was shaking ever so slightly, just like my mother's did when she had a few glasses of wine. It was an oddly comforting sight. We hit another pothole. His keychain swung and bashed against the dashboard. “Jesus Fucking Bastard!” I noticed that his keychain had the Playboy Bunny logo. My mother had told me Wallace was always popular with the girls. So, playboy Wallace was settling down. Who was the other half of that “we?” I wondered. I would find out shortly.

Ten minutes later, he opened the front door to his new house, and I walked into a porch and on into a hallway the likes of which I had never seen. The house was practically bare: there were no pictures and little furniture. Colours and patterns blared at me from every wall. Midway down the hall, a red telephone in the shape of a kidney sat on top of a cast iron radiator. At the end of the hallway was the kitchen, where I could see four men sitting at a round pine table. Behind them was a fish tank with several goldfish in it. The hardwood floor creaked under my desert boots.

“Well, he made it!” shouted Wallace from behind me.

“And you made it too,” called back a heavy-set man with hair plugs. “We thought the RNC would have you for impaired.” His voice was droll and world weary.

“Welcome! Welcome!” said a slight man, his voice so feminine I was forced to take a second look. He wore gold chains around his neck, and an alarming amount of hair curled over the neckline of his white singlet. He had on tight acid-washed jeans with a button-up fly that emphasised his crotch bulge. A large bunch of keys dangled from a clip at his waist. His hair was cut very short and he sported a pencil moustache. “I’m Fabian,” he said. “But you can call me Fab, as in fab-u-lous.” The other men rolled their eyes.

“More like flab,” said the man who looked like Rock Hudson.

“Gosh, where are my manners?” said Fabian. “Introductions! This is Darcy,” he said, pointing to the jowly guy with the hair plugs and muumuu sized T-shirt. Darcy nodded his head.

“That saucy one there,” he said, gesturing to Rock Hudson, “That’s Ian. Ian is in the same dental practice as Wallace.”

“Nice to meet you, Bri-an,” said Ian, drawing out the first syllable of my name and batting his eyes a little. I was shocked. Growing up, I had been known to everyone in Bridgetown as Baby Power. I had for so long wanted to be known by my real name that it actually came as a jolt to be addressed in that manner. It reverberated uncomfortably. I felt oddly like an impostor.

“And this is Geoff. Wallace’s partner.”

Did he mean dental practice partner or partner-partner? I wondered, but felt too shy to ask.

“Hello, Brian,” said Geoff, in what I recognized as a London working-class accent. When he stood up he seemed to fill the room. My hand disappeared inside his huge freckled hand. He had an Afro of red hair and a boxer’s face. His nose looked like it had been broken a half-dozen times. The most noticeable thing about him, though, was how sad he seemed. His eyes were misty and had dark circles under them. Where the others had empty glasses and bottles in front of them, his place at the table had only a coffee cup and a crystal ashtray jam-packed with cigarette butts.

It felt cool to feel cool about Uncle Wallace being gay. I was suddenly that much more grown up, as if I had been let in on yet another of life’s big secrets. This

was what my mother must have meant when she said that life in Ireland was not easy for her brother. I didn't know whether to feel betrayed by her or not. My mother and I were close: she told me everything, or so I had thought. Perhaps she wasn't sure herself. Maybe Wallace was gay but not gay, the way the owner of Bridgetown's best shoe shop and the manager of Bridgetown's Unisex salon and the art teacher at Bridgetown's convent school were gay: everyone knew it, but no one said it.

Fabian offered me a beer, and this, too, was a thrill. I had only ever drunk beer once before. I looked to Wallace for his permission. He just shrugged his shoulders. "Oh my," clucked Fabian. "My son, shur most of us did all our serious drinking before we were nineteen. Shur we're all Irish here, me fine laddio." He handed me a brown stubby bottle that said Blue Star. I took a big swig and tried not to show my distaste.

They asked me about my journey, and, for some reason, I started to tell them about the carpenter I had met on the flight to Boston. I then told them about the bureaucratic snafu that allowed me to buy two bottles of duty-free spirits at Shannon Airport, but allowed me to bring only one into the United States. I described the customs officer: a big ham-faced Yank with a shock of white hair, his neck flesh hanging over his shirt collar. I told them how he had examined my ticket and when he saw that I was travelling on to Canada the next day said:

"So, you're bringing these bottles with you to NewFOUNDland?"

"No. They're a gift for the man I'm staying with tonight in Boston."

"So, you're bringing these bottles with you to NewFOUNDland?"

I thought he was a bit hard of hearing, so I repeated myself. "No. They're a gift for the man I'm staying with tonight in Boston."

He started to laugh. "OK, kid," he said. "Let me try it one more time. So you're bringing these bottles with you to NewFOUNDland?" He gave me a bulldog stare.

"Oh, yes!" The penny dropped. "That's right."

"Oh, yes. What?"

"I'm bringing these bottles with me to Newfoundland."

"Next." he said, and hit my passport with a stamper that made a sound like Winchester rifle being loaded.

This prompted Fabian to tell a story about his good friend Broderick O' Brien who was once caught in a similar dilemma when returning to New York from the Old Country and whose solution was to pull up a chair and polish off one bottle of

whiskey before he passed through customs. There was something about the hesitant way Fabian delivered his story that made every word sound like a lie. Or maybe it was the way he furnished detail that added nothing to the whole. But it was a true story, apparently.

“It wasn’t O’ Brien. It was Declan Dillon,” said Geoff.

“No. I’m certain it was Broderick.”

“It was DD,” said Ian, rolling his eyes again.

Someone offered me a second beer. I was starting to feel very relaxed. There I was, seventeen years old, a thousand miles from home, drinking beer with a bunch of queers and not feeling at all out of my element. I was a long way from Bridgetown. “Call me Baby,” I wanted to say, each time I was addressed as Brian. And then I noticed a smell like black tea burning, like when you drop it on a hot stove ring.

“What’s the stink?” I asked. They all laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“It’s weed,” said Wallace.

“Can I try some?”

“Have you ever smoked it before?”

“No.”

Wallace hesitated.

“Oh give the kid a draw,” said Ian. “It’s not like he’s not going to encounter it everywhere, anyway.” I was grateful to Ian, but at the same time I didn’t like the way he called me kid. Wallace passed me the joint. It was very small and thin, nothing like the kind you saw Rasta men smoking on television. I took a few inhales as they had done, making the appropriate choo-choo sounds and holding the smoke deep in my lungs. It tasted awful.

“So you stayed with who-was-it-again in Boston?” asked Wallace.

“Frank Dowd,” I said.

“I don’t remember a Frank Dowd.”

“He was someone my father used to drive with back in the War, when they used to haul timber.” Suddenly I had the urge to tell the story my father used to tell me about Frank. It was not like me to want to tell stories. Also, for some reason, I felt compelled—perhaps for Wallace’s benefit—to tell it exactly as my father would have told it.

“I remember one night we were carrying a load of pit props from Wexford to Navan,” I began. “I had a helper with me that day: Frank Dowd. A nice fella, Frank, but awful excitable. Bleb, some of the lads called him because he had this long beak nose and when it was cold he always had a drop of clear snot on the tip of it. We’d been on the road all day. McClusky’s, the crowd we were hauling timber for, had some awful junk heaps on the road. They didn’t give a tuppenny damn for the drivers. It was all piece work at that time, too, so every delay cost us. The lorry had broken down outside Enniscorthy that morning and we had to spend half the day waiting for them to come with the part to fix it. It was past midnight when we arrived at a boarding a house I knew about. The landlady, God bless her, Mrs. Gerraghty, I remember she stuck her head out the top window and said she had no bed for us unless we would share a double bed with another driver who was there for the night. We said we didn’t mind if he didn’t mind. ‘He won’t mind,’ she said, ‘because he’s already in the bed and sound asleep. He’s a famous sleeper.’ So we went up anyway and there was your man in the bed and we got in one on either side of him. Well, we were no sooner in than didn’t he start up snoring. Oh Mother of God, you should have heard him. I can still see him with his head thrown back and his mouth wide open. A lawn mower had nothing on him. No exaggeration now, but he made the glass rattle in the windows. I’m not kidding you. We tried everything. We slept with pillows over our ears. We poked at him and prodded at him and he’d stop for a while but then start up again, just as we were drifting off to sleep. It was cruel altogether. I suppose after hours of tossing and turning and listening to your man, Frank decided he’d had enough. I must have drifted off because the next thing you know I felt someone standing up on the bed. I looked up and there was Frank above, squinting like he was taking aim. And the next thing you know, didn’t he piss down into your man’s open mouth! Well, bucko woke up with such a start. ‘Jeethes. Jeethes,’ he said. He had some kind of lisp or an accent. ‘Now ya bastard,’ shouted Frank. ‘That’ll put a stop to you!’ And of course the man had no idea who we were. Well, I’ll tell you we took off out of there like a shot. It was a shocking thing to do really, when you think about it.”

They were all doubled over laughing on the other side of the table, Fabian cackling like a hyena. I was a hit. And then right at the high point, so to speak, I felt cold fingers creeping through my body and my brain. My hands and feet were icy cold. My mouth was dry. My prick had shrivelled. A shock of fear and nervousness rolled

through me and something else that I didn't have a name for. I was suddenly afraid that my father's story about Frank Dowd peeing in your man's mouth would be taken the wrong way, that they would think I was trying to make fun of them. "Jeethes. Jeethes," what had I *said*? And what had I said only a few minutes before that about the fat customs officer? Darcy must surely have thought I was taking the piss out of him. I suddenly couldn't look him in the eye. He seemed like a monster with those hair plugs, like an old plastic doll you'd find thrown out on the dump.

And then doubleness struck me with deadly force. Where was I? What was I doing away from everyone and everything I had known? I was neither here nor there. And who was I to make fun of Frank Dowd who had been kind enough to put me—a complete stranger—up for the night? Frank and his wife Consuelo in that fine bungalow on the outskirts of Boston. Who'd have thought Frank would have married a Nicaraguan? Frank, whose fifteen-year-old daughter—a redhead with deeply tanned skin—had given up her own bed for me. And how I had slept that night, surrounded by Barbie dolls and pictures of Bruce Springsteen, until I dreamed Frank's daughter crawled into bed with me and began raking my thighs and my belly with long white fingernails. I woke up in a pool of spunk. It was my best wet dream ever. In no time, however, I went from the high of that pleasure to the shame of realizing that I had inked a map of Mayo on Frank Dowd's daughter's crisp lemon sheets, a stain that she would surely discover. I could barely look at her or Frank or Consuelo the next morning. And even as the plane lifted off from Logan Airport and I knew I was safe, all I could think was: "Boston, Boston, a town in which I will be forever known as a pervert."