

DEEPEST HARBOUR

(excerpt)

Karen Rowe

When I got my first marriage proposal, it was in the canned goods aisle of Purdy's Superette. I was wearing my unsightly green smock that passed for a uniform (and was only worn when John Purdy was actually in the building). My hair was frizzy, I was holding two 48 ounce cans of tomato juice, and I was fairly sure my expression was the same sort of "oh shit" look a moose has just before it meets the hood of a car.

Brief Candle was not a good looking man. He'd never been attractive his whole life, which is unfortunate, because I'd always observed that ugly kids grow up to be very attractive adults, while beautiful children are hardly fit to look at by the age of thirty-five. Brief Candle, sadly enough, had never had a day where he looked good. Even asking me to marry him, he was wearing stained jeans and an old winter jacket from about 1992. He smelled just like a crab boat, even though I knew for a fact he worked in the woods. Brief Candle had never taken to the sea. Now that I think about it, Brief Candle had never taken to much at all.

With a name like his you'd think Brief Candle was more than a woodsman and part-time scavenger of discarded vehicles. I knew well enough that there was a famous line in Macbeth about brief candles, but unfortunately Brief got his name by being just that: brief. He never stayed in one place too long, never had anything to say that couldn't be said in a couple of seconds, and ate so fast you'd think someone was about to steal it away from him. His whole life was a set of short moments. His mother, Dot Candle, originally named him Reginald, but he hadn't been called that since he was a toddler. No, he was always Brief Candle and he'd always be that, too.

Brief and I had never been what you'd call close. We weren't friends. I never invited him anywhere and we'd hardly spoken since high school. So you can imagine my surprise to

find that for some years he'd been harbouring a secret desire for me; a deep, desperate longing that he had kept within him until it all spilled out in a marriage proposal in the middle of Purdy's while I was stacking cans. Purdy always had me stack cans; it was one of my only skills. I nearly dropped the tomato juice on my toe when Brief ambled towards me and opened his mouth to lay out this shocking request of marriage, but, as always, I was conscious of my duty as an apathetic grocery-girl and kept a firm hold of the two large cans, even when Brief Candle reached out to relieve me of my burden.

He had a ring. It was real gold, I suspected, with the tiniest glittering diamond I had ever seen in my life. It must've cost him at least a hundred dollars, maybe even more given the price of gold in the world.

You mustn't suspect that I'm unworldly because I stack cans at Purdy's Superette in Deepest Harbour. I read the newspaper every Sunday and listen to the radio. I have my grade twelve. Out of the sixteen graduates my year, thirteen left. Me, Brief Candle, and Muriel Hynes, who already had a three year old and was planning on getting married to Dick Tippett who's father owned the auto repair shop on the other end of the harbour from Purdy's. It's been eight years since we graduated and they're still not married. But they've got two more kids. The point is, I may work at Purdy's, but I'm not an idiot.

Given the sad lack of available men in Deepest Harbour, I should've been grateful that anyone was paying attention to me at all, even Brief, who spent more time in his shack in the woods than was probably healthy. My last boyfriend had been the bartender at the one and only lounge in the harbour. I thought we might get married, he thought he might pull up stakes and move to Alberta without me and get involved with a girl named Barbie.

I must be honest and say for a short moment I thought about marrying Brief Candle, about what he might expect from a wife, and about where in the Harbour we might live. Brief still lived with Dot in the house his late father had built and I lived in the renovated shed out back of my own parents' place. I doubted either of us had enough money to buy a house and there weren't many to rent around Deepest Harbour.

I had the funny feeling that perhaps Brief wasn't quite right in the head. He was so quiet, he hardly ever gave you reason to think he was stunned, but then again, he never proved he wasn't, either. So I said, "I hardly knew you liked me, Brief Candle."

He said, "Always have guess you never noticed."

I said, "Well, it's a bit of a shock. I'll think about it."

I don't know why I said I would think about it, because obviously I was going to say no, because I'd never gone on a date with Brief Candle. I didn't know hardly anything about him because I'd never asked. Or cared. But he was a nice boy – or man, I guess – and I didn't think laughing at him would be appropriate or kind. So that's what I came up with.

Artemis Flynn, a crab boat widow at thirty-eight, asked me what all the conversation was about the moment Brief had left the Superette. I told her. She had no problem laughing.

"Brief Candle? Marry Brief Candle?"

"It's not funny."

"What is it, then?"

I told her it was flattering. "I suppose that's the right word. It should be nice when someone likes you."

"He probably has all sorts of pictures of you up in his shack. Oh God," she squealed, brushing her hands over her hips over and over like she was trying to get something off, "can you imagine him polishing his gun and thinking about you?"

I knew she wasn't talking about his firearms.

I couldn't stop thinking about Brief for the rest of the night. No matter what I stocked or stacked or checked out, I could only see his face when he was proposing a lifetime of wedded bliss. His hair had been very neatly combed, he'd had a shave, and underneath his dirty old winter jacket he was wearing a very bright white shirt. He had taken off his wool cap and had been fiddling with it the entire time he was standing in front of me. His eyes, the most attractive thing about his squishy potato of a face, had looked like two blueberries in a sea of cold, white milk. His lips had been chapped, and he'd obviously cut himself during that shave, but otherwise, he'd made an effort. That was admirable, I thought.

I phoned my sister to tell her the news. April lived in St. John's now. She'd left in grade eleven and gone off with her boyfriend who was going to get a job building the oil platform in Marystown. It hadn't worked out, so they went to town and he got seasonal work with the highways and she had two babies and a part-time job at a bar downtown. Her children, both under the age of three, were screeching in the background when April answered the phone.

"Janey? Is that you?"

“Yes, it’s me.” I never phoned April. We might’ve been sisters, but we weren’t necessarily all that close and I was angry at her for leaving me when she was sixteen and I was twelve.

After some preamble, I told her about Brief Candle. She had the same reaction as Artemis: total hilarity. “I can’t believe it!” she said, laughing loudly.

“But why would he do such a thing?” I asked her.

“Oh, Janey,” she sighed, “I don’t know why Brief Candle does anything. He’s always been a little off – Charlie put that down! Down! Put it down or I will get angry! Put it down now!”

I raised my voice, “He’s just quiet, isn’t he?”

“January, he works in the woods and lives in – Charlie, I swear to God, if you don’t get that out of your mouth, I will come over there and make you sorry!”

“He lives with Dot, not in a shack.”

“That’s what I said,” April replied.

We hung up after April asked about our parents. She didn’t think I should take Brief seriously – after all, he was weird (her exact words).

I had almost forgotten about it the next day until I walked into Purdy’s and Artemis giggled the minute she saw me. John Purdy had an odd look on his face too. I pulled on my green smock and stuffed a piece of gum in my mouth. “Exactly how many people did you tell, Artemis?”

“Everyone I saw,” she said flatly, with an unapologetic look on her face.

I had never been overtly kind to Brief, but I’d never been unkind either and I had the sinking feeling that the whole harbour knowing about his proposal would embarrass him. Maybe he’d take back the offer? I didn’t really feel one way or the other about him taking back the proposal, but I didn’t want to see him ridiculed any more than was usual.

Brief Candle’s odd name and demeanour meant he was often teased in school when we were growing up. I’m sure part of it stemmed from his mother, too. Dot Candle was not originally from Deepest Harbour, but from Chancre Head, just around the other side of the bay. Brief’s grandfather had died when the big blade at the sawmill had sliced him clean in half, so his widow went to live with her young daughter in Deepest Harbour, where she got work in service to the merchant’s family. Dot grew up ignored and wild and never went to

church, and when she met Brief's father Gerry, she was obsessed with him to the point of infamy. Gerry died under mysterious circumstances, his body had been found stark naked up by Rigot Pond, frozen solid, in the middle of March. Poor Brief never heard the end of teasing about his odd family and the fact that he had his mother's name instead of his father's. But how much better Brief Flight would've been is beyond me. It seemed to me that he was destined to live a life outside of the rest of us, staring in at the world through a cloudy window.