The Mother on the Shore

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L’auteure a assisté aux funérailles d’une
parente dans une communauté rurale
de Terre-Neuve où elle a rencontré
une dame charmante, une rabbit cat
woman, eccentric, chaleureuse et
ouverte. Inopinément, elle lui fait part
de détails sur la vie de sa mère qui avait
des problèmes.

I’d heard about her for many years
but I was meeting the rabbit cat
lady for the first time. A late uncle
of mine had married the rabbit cat
lady’s sister and, in Newfoundland,
this made us kin. So there weren’t
introductions when she came to
view the pine-coffined body of her
sister. Introductions would have been
awkward and would have insulted the
rabbit cat lady. She began speaking to
me as if I brought her the mail every
day. Her eyes were blue and tiny and
she was stooped over. Her Mountain
Equipment Co-op fleece was the kind
worn by wiry kind young men in
Toronto who go hiking in Algonquin
Park, and it was wrapped around her
shoulders somewhat incongruously.
She had a palsy that added to the
air of unreality about her. She’d had
the palsy for over a decade and it
remained wholly unexplained. She
wasn’t the type to rush all the way
into St. John’s to bother doctors for
something as insignificant as that.
The only real trouble it gave her was
when she wanted a cup of tea but
she said nothing of this and quietly
perched the cup on the table, brought
her head down and slurped her tea,
increasing the tilt of the cup it drained.
Someone mentioned how a plastic
Tim Horton’s cup with a lid would
work but that was of no interest to the
rabbit cat lady who was content with
the way things are. She ignored what
she didn’t want to hear, as we all do,
but when the elderly do it, we think
they are senile. And that, I confess,
was what I first thought of her.

She was not senile. She was poor
and palsied and alone now with all
her siblings dead and her parents long
in the ground. She had never married
or even had a beau. “She’s a virgin,”
one of her nieces whispered to me,
one eyebrow raised, “a seventy-six-
year-old virgin.” Entanglements with
young men from the shore smelling
of fish were not for the rabbit cat lady
and the world beyond the shore was
virtually unknown to her. She had
her horror movies—Jason and Linda
Blair with the spinning head and even
Shaun—snaking around the walls
of her sitting room in the house her
father had bought from the railway
company when they pulled up the
tracks on the shore and didn’t need
staff accommodations anymore. The
house had been three storeys high but
you know how the wind is on that hill
so the rabbit cat lady’s mother begged
her husband to take down the top sto-
rey. And he did; I’ve always heard that
Old Mark was a man eager to please
his wife and children. Unlike some
fathers on the shore, his daughters
didn’t seem eager to get away from
him—certainly not the rabbit cat
lady who lived with him ’til his heart
gave out some thirty years before we
gathered here today after the burial of
the rabbit cat lady’s last sister.

She had never left home, the
rabbit cat lady, but she had her cats,
twenty-two at one time they said.
Most of them lived in the tilted barn
out back, with its slowly peeling sea-
splashed white paint but there were
two or three who slept on her bed
with her. Now it was Blackie and
Cuddles. The rabbit cat lady spent
most of her old age pension on cat
food, Friskies or the No Name brand
at the Quick Stop when she was short
of cash, and on vets’ bills in the city. She didn’t get the cats spayed—she could never have managed that but when one developed a nasty sty or got torn by some of the scrap metal that littered the harbour, she put them in a cardboard box and boarded the Fleetline Bus to the Sunrise Animal Hospital in St. John’s.

She could never catch the rabbit cat to get him to a vet. His wiry fur was a pale amber and he had rabbit’s paws in front, huge and broad and stronger than you could imagine. Boy, could he hop, they said. I never saw him but he was no less famous than Joey Smallwood on the shore. His mother must have got in tack with a rabbit, the rabbit cat lady said, sure, that was the only explanation. The rabbit cat did come in the house once or twice, she said, when he was really hungry but he loved the woods, my how he loved the woods. I called him Muffin, she said, Muffin, did you know that? I did, I nodded. I had been hearing about the rabbit cat since my childhood. I loved him, you know, she said, he was like my child.

I knew how the rabbit cat died as well but I didn’t want to bring that up; it was a sad enough day. The rabbit cat lady did, though. Some of the boys around here, she said, they caught him and tried to skin him, the tore the skin right off him. He got away but they hurt him bad and made him bleed and he went to the woods. He was in there for days and days and every day and night I went in there looking for him, calling out to him, Muffin! Muffin! He never went silent but then straightened her hunched back and said there was no sense going to their parents because those boys did what they liked and their parents paid no mind to it anyway, that’s the way it is around here. And it cost $200 to put Muffin down and I never had the money on me and they said they’d send the bill in the mail but they never did. At this a gentle smile crossed her face.

Now it was her sister’s time to return to the sod and here we were, the rabbit cat lady and I and a few dozen mourners, eating cold chicken and mushy potato salad in the parish hall. The drinks had started to go around but this crowd was too old to get rowdy, even if this was the shore.

I met you before, I did, I remember you, she said to me, her voice dropping down the register. But it’s your mother I call to mind so easy. She came to our house one day, your mother, her red hair all flying in the wind, she did. The gales were on. I laughed I did, cause she never came over to our house, and she never said a word to us, never, and here she was, in a mad rush, saying “take the baby I have to go to the store I won’t be long,” and that was you, the baby.

Maura Hannahan, Ph.D. is the author, editor or co-author of eleven books in several genres, including Sheilagh’s Brush, a novel, which won an IPYY bronze medal for regional fiction. Maura’s short fiction and travel writing have awards in Canada, the U.S. and Britain. She is currently the Special Adviser to the President for Aboriginal Affairs at Memorial University, where is she also an adjunct professor.