

# 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 storey. 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

answered me. But on the tenth day I found him and he was in a bad way, he was suffering, he hadn't eaten, he was just bones, he was. T'would break your heart. I took him to St. John's but the vet said there was nothing he could for him and they put him down and I held him, I stroked his head and I whispered 'Muffin, Muffin' in his ear, and he was dead, gone. She

her," and that was you, the baby. The rabbit cat spent all its time in the woods. I called her Muffin. She only stayed a second, your mother, but you were here a long time, you were just a baby about six months old and there wasn't a peep out of you, you just stared. You were so easy to take care of. When your mother came back she took you, just like that, she

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**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.**

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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, she never did that, and she never said a word to us, sure, 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 take

never said a word, and that was it, I never saw her again. But she knew about Muffin, your mother. Did you always know about Muffin?

I nodded.

Are you sure the rabbit cat lady is still in her right mind I ask one of my cousins still living on the shore. God, yes, her mind is as sharp as a tack, what odds about the cats, she says, she's got a mind like a steel trap, she never forgets a thing.

I thought of my mother passing me to the rabbit cat lady and there was a kind of shivering in my heart. I could see her fiery hair flying in the gales swirling around her, her fingers hard around me. My mother's jaw was always firm and I can't remember her ever looking into my eyes.

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