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The Return of the Native

1979

BY JASON BROWN

GRANDMA APPEARED on the porch with her paints and her cor-gi, Emma. I sat upright with my prop, a book I wasn't reading, and Grandma worked on her painting of me. Inside the front cover of the book, *Adam Bede*, my great-grandmother had written her name, *Mary Hutchinson Fogg*. "With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past," read the first line. Grandma reached out, dabbed at the surface of her canvas, and retracted the brush.

I looked over the bay and noticed Dickey Saltonstall in his skiff erratically bouncing toward us from the mainland. Dickey, who only took his misfiring outboard to the mainland when he had to, was an old friend of my family—their only friend among the summer people. For the last few years since my parents split, he had also

been my mother's boyfriend. Despite these marks against him, he was the only person on the island outside our immediate family I spent time with. A couple afternoons a week I taught him how to sail.

Dickey's boat slapped a larger wave, and without warning he veered to the left and ground the bottom of his boat—and probably the prop—against the Turnip Island ledge. His boat had stopped; we could no longer hear the sound of his engine.

As the many times great-grandson of Captain Dudley Saltonstall, the colonial commander responsible for the disaster of the 1779 Penobscot Expedition, the worst American naval defeat of the American Revolution—and the worst American naval defeat period until Pearl Harbor—Dickey'd had a lot of problems with boats over the years. Refusing to engage the British, Captain Saltonstall led his fleet up the Penobscot River until they were trapped and bat-

tered to pieces. I considered myself a minor expert on American military defeats: Arrowsic and Kittery (if you counted colonists chased out of what's now the State of Maine by the Abenaki), Bunker Hill, Arnold's assault on Quebec. The Penobscot Expedition, so catastrophic in scale and so clearly the fault of one man (Dickey's namesake), remained my favorite.

"Dickey's been out of sorts since that letter from your mother arrived last week," Grandma said as she peered around her painting at the bay. Eight days ago, Dickey had received a letter with no return address. Just a stamp saying *Correos Mexico Oficina Del Gobierno*. Wanting to hear how my mother had been doing in Batopilas (where she had been teaching English since the spring), and also needing to know when to pick her up at the airport, Dickey, Grandma, and I had been waiting for such a letter for weeks. According to the letter,



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FICTION

she would arrive in Portland later tonight, on the last flight to land before midnight.

I wondered aloud if we should take the skiff to rescue Dickey, but Grandma pointed out that he had already set his oars and was rowing toward the beach in front of our house. Grandma believed in people helping themselves. As he beached his boat and trudged through a tangled pile of seaweed the ocean had barfed up during the last storm, I thought of pictures I'd seen of Omaha Beach—not technically an American defeat, though it certainly was for those who'd landed there. My grandfather had survived the landing but had never spoken of it.



After lunch, Grandma asked me to find Dickey and remind him we had to leave around nine that evening to pick my mother up at the airport on time. No one on the island had phones. Walking across the island, I watched the summer light flip through the maple leaves. The two-hundred-acre island where my ancestors had settled in the 1700s sat less than a quarter mile from the "mainland"—itself a larger island one could access by bridge—but I felt as if we lived far out to sea. Salt mixed with pine sap pinched my nose. I wished my cousins were here. While I stayed on the island to help Grandma, my grandfather had taken my younger sister and cousins upriver in our lobster boat to Vaughn, the town where we all lived in the winter.

I wanted to forget about my mother. I didn't miss her, exactly—she never seemed happy to see my sister or me. The three of us lived together like roommates in the old house in Vaughn. I just needed to know that she was coming back—a need I wished I could live without.

Less than three months ago Dickey, Grandma, my sister, and I had driven my mother to the airport in Portland, where, in the parking lot, my mother had squeezed my hand. "I'll see you again before you know it," she said to my sister and me, and flicked her brown hair out of her face. Only thirty-nine, and thin as a schoolgirl, she had no grey hair. She didn't want us coming with her to the terminal—too emotional for her, she said, even though she was only going for the summer. We stood around the car and watched her pass, waving,

through the revolving door.

Now the summer was almost over. In a few weeks everyone on the island except my family would drive south.

I reached Dickey's house and peered through his screen door to where he sat in the dark parlor in a frayed chair. He told me to come in before I knocked and motioned to the other chair. I delivered the message Grandma had given me, and Dickey nodded. Lying beneath one of the front windows, Dickey's dog, Persephone, opened an eye but didn't raise her head. Dickey pushed out of his chair to select one of his records. Unlike us, Dickey had electricity, a hot water heater, blown-in insulation. Though he rarely spent it, especially on clothing, Dickey had money.

"Do you remember the Gulf of Tonkin?" he asked me.

"No," I said. He furrowed his brow as he did when he talked, during our sailing lessons, about the historical forces that would someday recalibrate social inequality.

"I don't think you were born yet when she said those things to your grandfather about the war—it wasn't even a war then."

My mother and grandfather stayed on opposite sides of the room from each other during family events.

"Your grandfather was a soldier," Dickey said, "and on some level all soldiers think alike. Your mother was a moth in the firelight, you know what I mean?"

I nodded, though I had no idea.

"Then there was the night your grandfather threw the ham through the window. You were only about three years old then, right before your mother went out to San Francisco for six months."

I'd never heard of my grandfather doing such a thing, and I'd never heard of my mother going to San Francisco at all.

"Sometimes people just disappear, John. A lot of them disappeared—like Andrew Young, one of the people your father lives with over on China Lake. And your mother's friend Stacey—also a friend of mine. I was part of them, though I was too old to be. I've always been too old to be doing whatever it is I'm doing." Dickey rubbed his eyes. Maybe he'd forgotten I was there.

"Your father wouldn't go to California to get her, so I went. She was the queen of the hive out there. She raised people out of their chrysalis. Not everyone, though," he

said, nodding gravely. "They were jealous of her flame."

The mother I knew took hour-long baths, blasted Neil Young on school nights, and heated up supper from cans. In the morning she guzzled coffee and never cooked breakfast.

Dickey steeped his hands in front his mouth. "It was a very hard decision for her—going down to Mexico. She asked me to keep an eye on you... Thank god you have your grandmother."

The record ended and the arm of the player slid to its cradle. He gazed out the window at the field that ran from in front of his house to the western shore of the island. The grass warbled across the 200-year-old warped windowpanes that always looked wet, especially in the sunlight. Dickey recounted the rest of what my mother had said in the letter he'd received from her: She washed her clothes in the river with herders. The canyon walls eclipsed the sun early in the afternoon. She'd met a woman, an artist from Germany who lived in a one-room adobe studio and walked through the canyons on sandals she had made from old tires.

Dickey stood and slowly shuffled to the kitchen, where I heard him put on the kettle and open the breadbox.

By the time I reached the edge of his field, the music had returned—the same record. The sound followed me down the trail.



After dark, Grandma and I met Dickey at the island landing, and we all climbed into the skiff. Grandma pulled on the starter cord, and the engine coughed but didn't start. I told her to let me try.

"Wait," Dickey said. "She's not coming back. I've been trying to warn you."

Grandma looked at him for what seemed like a long time. "How did you try to warn us? How, exactly? Oh, for God's sake."

"She said she was in love. I wanted to warn you."

Grandma didn't respond. The hull rocked under us. Across the water, a green light flashed on the black hump of the mainland. Though I wouldn't have said so to Grandma or Dickey, I never wanted to see my mother or hear her voice again. As if I'd spoken my thoughts, they both looked at me, and I wanted to claw back what I felt.



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Watercolor by Richard Anzele

FICTION

The great blue heron that often rested on the rocks next to the dock spread its wings and leapt into the darkness. We couldn't trace its gray body against the night sky, but we could hear the whoosh of its wings and sense the air displaced by its flight brush the surface of the water. No one could stay aloft forever, not even my mother. I didn't hate her, couldn't afford to.

As we walked across the island in silence, Dickey rested his hand on my shoulder. At Devereux's Field, where the trail split, he lifted his hand and we began to part ways.

"Good night, Dickey," Grandma said.

"Good night, Mrs. H."

When Grandma and I reached the far end of the field, she stumbled in the grass and caught herself. Gripping the air with her fists, she swayed and stared into the gunmetal-blue shadows at the edge of the woods. If I had known then what I know now, that people do disappear, I would have taken Grandma's arm and held her to me. Instead, I stood



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by as she breathed deeply. A minute passed, and she started walking toward the house again. I stayed a few steps behind her. In the parlor I froze when she froze with her hand on my grandfather's chair.

"I don't care what your mother does, your home is with us now," she said over her shoulder. When she had waited long enough to be sure I had heard, she climbed the stairs. I followed. At the top, she turned right, and I turned left. I undressed and climbed under the covers. I knew Grandma had meant what she'd said; I wanted to believe her. Outside my window the moon traced a silver line from the distant islands across the bay to the cove below our house. A breeze filtered through the screen and touched my neck, and I listened to the long shallow waves, the echoes of ocean storms, collapsing on the beach with a hush. ■

Bowdoin grad Jason Brown, a former intern at *Portland Monthly*, is the author of *Driving the Heart* and the forthcoming novel *Outermark*, set on a Maine island.

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