

The background of the cover is a photograph of a dense forest of tall, thin trees. Sunlight filters through the canopy, creating a warm, golden glow. In the center of the forest, a small, dark silhouette of a person is visible, standing and looking towards the viewer. The title text is overlaid on this scene, with 'THE PRISONER OF' in a smaller font at the top, 'HELL' in the largest font in the middle, and 'GATE' in a large font at the bottom. The text has a glowing, textured appearance.

THE PRISONER OF
HELL
GATE

DANA I. WOLFF

PICADOR

THE PRISONER OF
HELL GATE

A Novel

Dana I. Wolff

PICADOR

NEW YORK

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In memory of Peter James Horoszko, editor, gone before his time.

*All life exists at the expense of other life
Because you have eaten and eat as eat you must*

—Frank Bidart, “The Third Hour of the Night”

As there is a God in Heaven I will get justice, somehow, sometime.

—Mary Mallon, 1909

Mary

BROTHERS SHE HAD once, but none so suffocating as this Brother.

It is a stifling September night. The summer does not relent. Dampness prevails, as always, but this time less from the river and more from the mugginess that weighs on everything. It penetrates the very bricks, their crumbling mortar spongy to the touch.

The lettuces in the greenhouse sag under it. Under its weight, the shreds of old window canopies hang from desolate buildings like the fingers of discarded gloves.

More worrisome, the human souls who share her island float over the disused pier, glowing in the night, and she is their only witness. They yawp yawp yawp, chittering for help.

As if. They are long past earthly assistance.

To the west, thunder rolls, mocking the skyscrapers that in her time cropped up across the river like mushrooms. Sometimes she wonders whether they will be left to rot one day by those who now inhabit them, as all mortal people once abandoned her island. Every effort of man, she thinks, is but the scratch of a broken stick in eternal clay.

Just look! Weeds grow between floorboards of the gymnasium. Rust eats the iron hinges of boiler house doors. Long ago, her unhappy cottage rotted into the soil. Today, rats bathe in the puddles of its old depression.

She traps them sometimes for supper, which is only right, since she freed them in the first place.

“Mary,” Mr. Cunningham, the medical supply clerk, once persisted, “have you seen who opened that cage?”

“He was dead, Doctor.” She called them all doctor then. “Buried him, I did.”

But she had not. She had concealed the rat in her apron—the apron they gave her for work in the admitting ward. Concealed him and freed him in the woods with the others.

They were white, the original pack, white as any nurse’s starched uniform. Now, many generations later, their colors run from nut-brown to dull black. They have their warrens under the leaves, where the forces of nature cut fissures in the schist of the forest floor. Also, no more than a few dozen live under the warped gymnasium floorboards. There is not enough natural food to sustain more than that, and they will not venture nearer her sleeping quarters. They know enough to keep their distance from her, and she sets her traps far from where she usually rests her head.

The thunder nears. It rattles loose windowpanes in what remains of the vast hospital.

Without breaking stride, she walks through the pitch dark, accustomed to it. Even up and down stairs without touching the loose railing. Her gait is lumbering, unfeminine. Everyone always said so. It matches her guttural voice, like a mumble from the beginning of sound, from deep within the earth. Though she spoke when there were people around, few ever heard her. Now she sometimes calls in

the empty rooms just to register the echo, to affirm her own tenacity.

~~She measures the passage of time only by the height of the choking vines, once kept at bay, no running riot. And by the changing skyline across the way.~~

When lightning strikes the bent rod atop the old foghorn tower, she grunts aloud, thinking maybe Mathilde will hear her—Mathilde, whose hatred burns so hot and strident. Next to it, Mary's bitterness throbs like a dull ache. No less intense, only of a different texture.

She leaves the building and walks down to the pebbly shore, follows it along as the rain starts to fall in fat drops, hissing through tree leaves. The island has the shape of an amoeba. She traces its outline with her path, callused feet insensible to the sharp rocks and broken bits of iron and twigs and thorns.

When the lightning flashes again, she sees more ghostly forms, mostly women and children. They lie atop submerged pebbles, river water fluttering what remains of their clothing the way breeze stirs the frayed wings of a decaying moth. The sight of them no longer surprises her—not even the charred and blistered faces, their stump fingers, their pleading stone-dead eyes.

Is that water or trapped air or fistfuls of posies bulging their pockets? She may never know. They lie beyond her reach.

Ashes! Ashes! We all fall down.

Fire always factors into life's most plaintive moments, does it not? No matter whether it comes from outside or within.

And there is always blackness, too.

"Mary," calls Mathilde through the wind-driven rain. "Mary!"

"I'm here."

"This happened not by accident. Men it was did this. Men."

Mathilde harries her all the way along the path in the muddy woods and through the door and up the steps and down the hall and into the old laboratory, where she stops. Blue lightning illuminates the room, flashes the damp dusty room, and she sees George A. Soper standing there, imperious. Stiff like his instruments.

"Leave me alone, Mr. Soper." The only one she will not call doctor. "Leave me alone or I'll take out your eyes with this here—"

She clutches the sturdy carving fork in her fist, eighteen inches long, the tines sharpened. She had it in hand when they first pursued her, and she will never let it go.

"Now, Mary," says Soper. "By one means or another, I'll have that sample."

"You won't!" She screams and charges him. But he is gone, long dead. The points of the fork bury themselves in the wooden cabinet. Its shaft twangs, vibrating at a high frequency.

She outlived Soper—has long outlived all those who strapped her down and had their way with her.

Ring around the rosie. A pocket full of posies. Ashes! Ashes!

Yet he haunts her still.

The rain presages something. She feels it.

She squeezes a drop of water from her hair into her palm and licks what tastes like vinegar. Acid. It eats the island hardscape. The world changes but she does not. The world ages. She maintains.

Sometimes—rarely nowadays—men visit the island. Never to stay. Only to check on things or snap pictures. She hid from them all these years, but must she forever?

The storm is passing. It leaves behind the scent of electricity and rotting fish. And a sense that something is different this time, her environment altered. No living person stands across from her in the dark laboratory, yet the man's terrible presence persists longer than it ever has. Soper.

“He’s coming for me,” she says aloud.

“No,” whispers Mathilde into her left ear. “You are coming for him.”

Karalee

KARALEE SOPER SITS on the back bench of a Boston Whaler, cruising down the East River with four of her closest friends. On Karalee's lap rests her dearest possession: a brand-new Nikon 35 mm camera that she purchased on layaway from B&H Photo on Ninth Avenue in Manhattan. The Nikon replaced a Canon that she had owned from freshman year of high school straight through college, her first 35 mm and her first love. For eight years she carried that camera everywhere, wearing through three cases and yearning for a darkroom where she could develop her own shots. She carried it so incessantly that it made her father jealous, and he would tease her about it, sometimes hide it from her, other times cover his face with his hat to ruin her shot. That camera was the first thing his eyes settled upon when she told him more than a year and a half ago that she might want to change her career plans. He threw it so hard that it exploded against the stone kitchen wall of their house in Pelham, the lens cap catching her left ear as it sailed by, cutting her.

The scar on her ear itches sometimes. It remains fresh and pink, a thin line running from the antihelix—she knows her anatomy—through the scapha to the helix. But the loss of the camera disturbs her worse than the damage to her body.

She wishes she'd had the reflexes to snatch that camera out of midair. Instead, it shattered against the wall into thirty-nine pieces—she counted them through tears—the same number of lashes that Jesus received. Although her father apologized when the blood began flowing, the broken camera felt like that kind of loss to her at the time, like religious-scale suffering. She mourned for two weeks and acquired the new Nikon with her own money, saved from busing tables over two summers. Although she couldn't afford to buy it outright, she made the down payment with a few bucks to spare. Thirteen more months, and she'll have it paid off.

On the way downriver from Poughkeepsie, she shot an entire roll of film, mostly taking portraits of her friends, they who playfully call themselves the Sewer Rats. She is profligate with film—can't help herself—but that improves the odds of a great shot. For instance, she snapped half a dozen pictures of Chick at the helm, and one or two actually might have come out quite well. His round, red-cheeked face glowed in the early sun, his gaze falling on the Tappan Zee Bridge as they prepared to pass under it.

And she may have captured a characteristic gesture of Josh's, the way he pushes the black-framed glasses back up his nose with the knuckle of his pinky finger. But she got only one of those, and it's entirely possible she had the shutter set too slow and it blurred.

She snapped a good picture of Gerard, she thinks, in his San Diego baseball cap, reading a mass-market paperback copy of Norman Mailer's *Executioner's Song*, holding it up in front of his bare, hairless chest, soft Korean eyes riveted on the words like nothing else existed in the world at the

moment. Gerard, so easily distracted in other respects, focuses like a laser on printed words.

~~She may very well have done her best work so far with Estela, getting the Spaniard~~ midconversation, that flamboyant sweep of her black hair, the waving around of that half-dead arm of hers. In one unself-conscious motion—frozen in film, Karalee hopes—Estela flaunted her determination not to let anything hinder her, least of all her physical limitations.

Karalee lifts the camera to her eye again as their boat, the *Flagellum*, enters an area of the East River known as Hell Gate. But there's nothing worth noting in the frame. No one doing anything interesting, and the skyline behind them looks dull in the haze.

She feels a rumble from the boat's engine, which springs to life like an animal newly alert, and although she never held the wheel, she has a sense that the river is resisting them here. The engine vibrations travel up through the soles of her bare feet—up through her hamstrings and the small of her back, too—and flutter her guts. Something like the feeling she knows from trips to Rye Playland when the Dragon Coaster takes a precipitous drop, and for one fleeting second you confront your own mortality. But the river today holds no further sense of drama. It is stippled only by the tiniest waves.

Thirty minutes ago, Josh began calling out random public health facts, such as the amount of effluent that used to pour untreated into the waters around Manhattan and how yellow fever arrived from Barbados at the end of the seventeenth century. Now this casual recitation has segued into a full-blown lecture, Karalee listening with only half a mind. She looks out across the river and notes how the urban enterprise overwhelms what little bits of nature they can see. Buildings tower over trees. Bridges disrupt the sweep of the river. Planes and boats force waterbirds to the margins, where the Sewer Rats saw a few ducks and herons on the way down. Nature endures if you look hard enough. It's there if you scratch the façade of civilization.

One aspect of photography that Karalee loves most is its ability to scratch that façade, to explore the layers of people and things. Even when she can't find them with the lens—for now she returns the camera to her lap—she likes to catalog the layers in her head.

She thinks of her place as a physical object on the earth, listing in her mind that which lies beneath her now: the thin nylon, damp with sweat, of a modest navy one-piece bathing suit; a boxy pair of tan Bermuda shorts that Chick hates because they make her ass look big; in contact with those shorts the lightly soiled vinyl boat cushion with torn piping, stuffed with spun petroleum; then the hard slice of fiberglass bench and hull; the striated gray water that fights the boat, struggling to wrestle the boat backwards and dump them into New York Harbor; finally, the hidden sheer rock cliffs of the channel deepened by dynamite a hundred years ago to allow for the passage of ships much larger than this small pleasure boat.

What lies at the base of the underwater cliffs? Josh, when he imparted this bit of information, didn't say. He has moved his running disquisition onto the subject of Randalls and Wards Islands, which they just passed. Pot and alcohol make him garrulous. Gerard and Estela, expressionless, listen with the laughable focus of stoned people peering through mist. Maybe that's why, all at once, they've become so unphotogenic. Chick, for his part, grips the wheel with two hands and appears to have other things on his mind.

Josh speaks of how nineteenth-century New Yorkers used the East River islands as a way to banish the sick and forlorn from their sight. On Wards and Blackwell's and other islands, they built quarantine hospitals and orphanages and poorhouses and retirement homes for disfigured Civil War veterans. Later they built madhouses and prisons. They disappeared the unwanted dead there, too, even disinterring and reburying those unfortunates who moldered in Manhattan's original potter's field. These souls would find no peace in death—no more than they had found in life. Wasn't it always the

way? Uneasy rest for a man who impedes the course of progress.

“Here lies Tom, who weren’t known to anyone with the scratch to afford him a proper burial.” Josh giggles, putting on something between a cockney and an Appalachian accent. He’s from Roslyn Harbor, a wealthy Long Island suburb, and “doesn’t know from” poverty—at least not the real condition beyond the statistics that he’s studied ad infinitum. “Died on the sidewalk of Canal Street,” he continues, narrating the life of fictional Tom. “Buried in the earth of Madison Square. Dug up to make room for a park where the bourgeoisie could soak in the sun and sit in the shade. A fresh hole dug on some godforsaken island. An unmarked grave as anonymous as the life he once lived.”

“Oh, shud up already.” Estela’s brash Latin accent compensates reasonably well for the vulnerabilities she can’t hide. Her body may be out of balance, but her mind and her determination sing in perfect harmony.

Josh shoves his glasses back up his nose with a pinky and squints in her direction. He is gangly and scoop-chested, no more than a wisp of hair showing between his paper-plate pectorals. “Do I offend you?”

“Worse.” Estela exaggerates a sigh. “You’re boring me.”

Since beginning his lecture about the islands, Josh has uttered few facts they don’t already know. All of the Sewer Rats attend the Graduate School of Public Health at Havermyer University—everyone but Chick, who’s a junior professor. They are the best and brightest of the doctoral program, in fact, capable of citing obscure statistics and macabre bits of history, such as the geometrical progression of the Black Death or the number of World War I soldiers who died from dysentery in the trenches along the Marne.

Josh blushes, adjusts his chin as if Estela has slapped him, and looks to the two other men for support. But their attention has turned elsewhere. Again: stoner focus. Karalee is the only sober one on the boat, has never touched more than the occasional glass of wine or beer, fearing it will make her sloppy. She lifts the Nikon to her eye but misses Josh’s pout by a fraction of a second.

“Thar she blows!” Gerard calls, smiling proudly through squinted eyes at his own bit of inanity. He’s staring at the Bronx shore; they all are now. He drops his water-stained paperback onto the copilot’s seat—the copy that he’s carried all summer like an old friend, visiting and revisiting it. The book bounces off the seat cushion and lands on the deck, but Gerard hardly notices. He’s looking at the smoke in the sky.

Karalee follows his gaze.

Mary

SHE IS ALONE, but no more alone than she ever was.

Next morning, the halls of the old dormitory are quieter than the dust that plasters every untouched surface. Disrupting the silence, her thick bare feet clomp on loose linoleum tiles almost as loudly as the blocky high-heeled brogues that she once favored. She recalls the sound they made in the tenement stairwell on Third Avenue, climbing on her rare days off to discover the empty room at the top with Briehof's doused cigarettes floating in glasses of cruddy water.

Sometimes she would wait for him to stumble in with the dog. At other times she went down again to find him at the bar across the street, surly and brooding. She would ask if he had eaten and he would nod noncommittally to his whiskey, and did she not feel alone then? But she always allowed him back into bed, the tenement room being so cold otherwise and sleep so elusive with trains rumbling night and day on the elevated tracks outside.

In the old country, in Cookstown, the only girl in a family of boys, she walked the streets in her brothers' hand-me-downs and appeared to all the world like an orphaned guttersnipe. No one ever got too close to her. Her simpleminded mother would not meet her eyes or anyone's, as if she concealed a shameful secret. Mary learned to cook not at her mother's apron strings but by observing from the kitchen corner, where she crouched many afternoons with a thick wooden splinter to pick the coal dust from beneath her fingernails. Those nails! For all her efforts, they held dirt like a starving man clings to the crust of bread.

Now being alone and unmonitored and forgotten on this island might provide the only blessing she ever had: the freedom to abandon all efforts at cleanliness. Her nails are black not just underneath but deep around the cuticles. Her teeth—a full set yet after all these years—gleam brown like snail shells. Her thick hair—still mostly dark—is matted and oily.

On hands and knees she tends her garden, rarely needing tools beyond her fingers in the well-crumbled earth that she has worked all these decades. Today, after the rain, with her skirt hiked and gathered to her waist, the soil feels cool against her upper shins. Despite the hot sun this morning, the days grow shorter and frost will soon come—the end of fresh vegetables. Already she has gathered many seeds in preparation.

A gust of wind passes through the greenery, leggy plants swaying, held erect by frames that she has improvised. Something peculiar moves in the climbing peas. She looks up to see she has snared not one rabbit but a pair—an unusual bounty—swinging in the breeze. She rises and unties them.

The heads hang limp from her open palms. Their soft fur is damp with dew. She takes them into the kitchen and uses a sharp knife to gut and behead them, to strip the skin off, and to quarter what remains. Blood from their viscera drips off the butcher block and puddles on the floor. She leaves

for the flies and browns the rabbit pieces in hot oil, then using quick strokes chops up an onion, potato, and some vegetables and tosses it all into the pot with water from a bucket and a third of a bottle of red wine. The wine is undrinkable but adequate for the base of a stew.

At the Warrens' in Oyster Bay she made rabbit stew sometimes. Like her, the banker preferred his food hearty, even in summertime. He ate with gusto and despite a houseful of servants never showed the table manners to suit his station in life. It was said that his father grew up working class in London, but she does not know. The man never spoke a word to her, nor did his wife. Mary reported to the housekeeper, who turned up her nose at the cook.

When the trouble started at that establishment, with the children upstairs melting from disease and the household in a fevered panic, Mary slunk away just as she had arrived. Alone.

Leaving the pot to simmer, she steps out and gazes through the trees toward the southwest shore. There, all those years, she had her two-room cottage—down by the lighthouse. To say she made peace with her confinement there—no. No! But there she ground on in solitude as months and years turned to decades, as the doctors and nurses and orderlies stepped lively for the last boat leaving the island for good, and well beyond that, until the cottage roof collapsed and it no longer provided proper shelter.

Now, if Mathilde's prediction is correct, her isolation might soon conclude in some fashion. But Mathilde is so smart, why did she and both her children come to such a violent and miserable end?

On the other hand, that woman does now possess depths of knowledge learned the hardest way, in the hardest place.

Among the impotent and loveless, wisdom is its own form of purgatory.

Karalee

THEY CAME TO this part of the river for the fire. It gave purpose to their aimless pleasure cruise—the last of the summer, the last before Chick lists his boat in the pennysaver for 20 percent less than he paid. They'd just passed under the white steel latticework of the University Heights Bridge when Chick spotted what he thought were thunderheads. He was ready to turn around and retreat north to the Hudson when Estela, who interned one summer as a radio meteorologist in Barcelona, reasoned that those couldn't be normal storm clouds, and therefore must be billows of smoke from a giant fire.

No one believed her at first. Did Catalonian clouds even behave the same as New World ones? But shortly thereafter, a pair of police boats raced by with blue strobes flashing, sending Josh and Estela into fits of paranoia that almost caused Gerard to toss the marijuana overboard. Chick talked sense into everyone by observing that the cops could no more see their puffy eyes than they themselves could see the cops' faces. And besides, if the police went around arresting every wasted boater in New York, they'd have to add a new wing onto the Tombs. More interesting, there was an epic fire somewhere in the Bronx. How cool to check it out, see what they could observe from the water.

Karalee and Estela couldn't have cared less about rubbernecking a fire. "Why don't we find a beach?" Estela pleaded as they passed East Harlem and Bronx Kill. She already had the bikini on, made sexy not by her flat chest and her thin toneless legs, but rather by the aplomb with which she carried herself. "It's the last time out on the boat and pretty much the last warm days of summer. As a matter of fact, there's a cold front coming in tomorrow." She stuck out her lower lip.

But the three guys were stoked by the possibility of witnessing death and destruction firsthand. So here they are in Hell Gate, approaching the Bronx shore.

Boys and their bulldozers.

Karalee imagines Chick as a kid putting his face three inches from his yellow Tonka dump truck—the one she's seen in his family picture album—pushing it along with such determination that he plowed down everything in its path. She has a young cousin who used to wear that slack-jawed look only boys seem to get whenever they play with cars. That same slack-jawed look that also crossed Chick's face every time he gaped at her naked body.

And after that look passes, everything accelerates.

The cars crash. He grinds her into the mattress. The fire must be found.

This mad chase in pursuit of billowing smoke reminds her, too, of her father's boundless and urgent ambition, a thought she wants to shake off as soon as it occurs to her. She lifts the camera and zooms in on the horizon, but meets more grayness: lack of contrast, of layers, of nuance.

As Chick turns the boat crosswise to the current, it rocks, and Karalee's camera bounces along on her hip.

All men, she decides, are obsessed with holes. And what is a car accident or a train wreck or a fire but a hole in the fabric of social intention, the ripping open of a fresh wound. She has no interest in pictures of fires or natural disasters. Chasing fires is as stupid as those guys who chase tornadoes—the tornado being another hole, when she thinks about it.

And yet here they all are, staring northeast across the estuary at an area of warehouses they figure out for Hunts Point.

It's a big conflagration for sure, black smoke shading to gray as the fire vomits ash into the hazy midday sky. At the horizon, colors flicker. Karalee leaves the camera down. She doesn't think she could reasonably see flames at this distance, so it must be the lights of emergency boats, of which there are many. They have converged there in droves, a flotilla of gawkers and would-be heroes, and for some reason it irritates her to think of all the wasted effort. Somewhere in that borough, no doubt or on the Lower East Side of Manhattan or somewhere else close by, a lonely person is dying painfully but quietly in an abandoned tenement. Maybe it's a young boy or an elderly woman. Maybe a cripple or a tortured soul enslaved by heroin—real human destruction, but without the drama of an explosion. No macho glory in that rescue. No world to conquer. No fire to marvel at.

No hole to bury your head in.

The faint smell of smoke makes a claim on the air. The men on the boat practically drool as they debate whether they should close in on Hunts Point. Even Estela now seems entranced by the spectacle. She hunches over a map with Gerard and Josh, plotting a course.

These days, Gerard carries himself with an admirable level of confidence that he didn't have before he came out of the closet to the rest of the Sewer Rats during an intense dinner party six months ago. He even admits to harboring puppy love for Sylvester Stallone, which Karalee finds pathetic not for its gayness but for its lack of courage. "Now that you've found yourself, what's the point lusting after the unattainable?" she has pleaded with Gerard more than once. "The guy's a movie star and he's straight."

"You don't know for a fact that he's straight," Gerard always says. "You thought I was straight until recently."

She did not. Or, to be more honest with herself, she only suspected. Layers, again. Layers.

Gerard's Stallone obsession has accomplished one thing, at least. Using the equipment in a friend's garage, he has applied himself to a weight-training regimen that leaves him rippling with muscle. Karalee, by now accustomed to seeing his sculpted back, gazes nonchalantly past his thick trapezius to the plastic-coated map. In an instant, she spots something that tightens the back of her throat: North Brother Island—a place she knows only in stories, but, oh, what stories!

She tears her attention from the map and looks past the windshield, calculating. The island lies right over the bow at no more than half a mile. It is thickly wooded and vine encrusted, but through the haze, she thinks she discerns the peak of a large building.

Mary

NOW AT A vigorous boil, the rabbit stew throws off pungent steam that causes Mary's eyes to water. The steam condenses on the grease-soiled kitchen tiles that line the walls; she wipes a finger across one tile and rubs her slick fingertips together, meditating over the bubbling pot.

The flies have licked up all the rabbit blood from the butcher block—or maybe the rats ventured out when she left the room.

A different smell reaches her—something burning. But she did not see the pot boil over. She lifts the lid up but finds no sign of fresh blackness. Goes to the nearest window. From here people once could see the river and clear across the next island to the city, but many trees have grown up to obstruct the view. Nothing burns today on her island; she can tell that much.

She works through a warren of back hallways, once used by orderlies to remove biological waste, and climbs the stairs to her attic room. From this window she can see the river, and she catches sight of smoke rising to the northeast.

That's what she smelled. Aha. But activity on the opposite shores stopped interesting her ages ago. It is as meaningless to her existence as a dust storm on Mars.

The sight of the river, however, that's another matter. She stands constantly on guard for changes in its mood. Her jailer and her protector. From up here it appears as a pool of shiny-smooth solder with colorful blocks floating upon it. Today as every day, this view once again prompts thoughts of the Warrens to invade her mind—Mr. Warren so eager to sail with his chums that he moved his whole family out of the city for the summer months.

Most mornings, after finishing her prep work for the Warren kitchen, Mary went out to sit off by the side of the house and gaze between bushes at the water of Oyster Bay. Earlier in the summer, there had not been much of a vista there from the working end of the house, but Mary took to emptying the waste from her pots near the base of a tall hibiscus bush. After a few weeks, the bush stopped flowering. Then its leaves yellowed and fell off. When it turned bare, the gardener cut it down, leaving a gap.

It was a pretty view of whitecaps and sailboats, but it could never last. All beauty in Mary's life proved fleeting.

That morning she felt the change before the news reached her. Cloris, the Warrens' youngest daughter, failed to rise with the sun as she usually did, one less voice drifting to Mary from the breakfast seating area out on the patio. When the family dispersed, foreboding took hold of the household. Mary ignored the familiar feeling, presuming she still had time. When the kitchen was clean, she emptied the basket of peas into her apron and carried two large ceramic bowls outside, one for the peas and another for the shells. They smelled of fresh-cut grass and mint as she ran

thumbnail through each pod, severing the funiculi. It might have been a moment of divine peace, but the perfection of it unsettled her. She twisted around to look over her shoulder toward the house. No one there but a feeling.

Mary popped a few raw peas into her mouth, snapping them in half with her front teeth before appreciating the sweet milky freshness. Under a hazy sky, the sallow face of the sun had glided to a new position, rays now falling on her back, making her warm. She slipped off her brogues and relished the cool grass under her stockings, then looked again over her shoulder, but still no one had appeared.

When she completed her chore, Mary brushed off her apron with the palm of her hand, placed the bowl of shucked peas atop the bowl of empty pods, and rested both bowls in her lap, looking out once more at the bay. She felt a change in the air and knew for sure. In another moment, when the screen door slammed and Mrs. Farrell came up behind her, Mary barely turned around.

“Arabella is under the weather.” The housekeeper sounded stern, as always, the whole world a problem to her that ever begged for solution.

Mary slipped her shoes back on and stood, nodding to Mrs. Farrell as she proceeded to the kitchen. By the time her fifteen-minute break came, Mrs. Warren was also reported ill. By that evening, an elder daughter, Barbara, and the chauffeur failed to appear to their respective dinners. No one rallied for dessert. Mary watched the peach melba turn to soup in their bowls.

* * *

AT THE OPEN window in the North Brother bedroom, her fingertips linger on the old brass handle, much like that of the single tiny window in her garret room at the Warrens'. She squints at a wasp with dangling legs, moving capriciously, circling as it rides the air currents. She remembers the doctor coming that night, Mary standing in the dining room doorway as he passed through the foyer with long strides, clutching his black bag.

She remembers going to her room via the back stairs and packing her few things into a cloth satchel in order to be ready for the inevitable moment, when it came.

A week later, she served breakfast to three people from a family of eleven. In the kitchen, she fed five workers from a staff of fourteen, including herself. By then Arabella and Mrs. Warren lay gravely ill. Thomas, a middle son, last to acquire the disease, was rapidly slipping away. But, then again, he had always been frail.

On the day Thomas died, Mary wiped down the kitchen with a rag. When the undertaker arrived and the household devolved into hushed commotion, she took her satchel and eased herself out the side door without leaving a note. She walked with long deliberate strides from the house to the train station for the dreary ride into Manhattan.

When she reflects on it now, she resents that she never had the presence of mind to collect her final pay from the Warrens. When Soper came around asking all those questions, he did not once ask how fairly she had been treated.

And to this day they owe her.

Briehof inquired after the money first thing when she found him at the bar. She let him touch her under her skirt that night, which proved small consolation to either of them.

The wasp outside draws wider circles, changing its strategy. It arcs away for a moment but turns for the window again, flying right at Mary. Quick as a cobra, she lunges and pulls the window closed. The wasp, a moment too late, hits the glass with a ticking sound.

Karalee

PEERING AT THE upper story of the building on North Brother, Karalee perceives a flash, like the brief reflection of sunlight reflecting off a twitching mirror. She lifts her Nikon, wondering what could have thrown such a light from this island said to be abandoned. The zoom lens helps only a bit—still too great a distance. There are birds around that she can see with the naked eye. Perhaps one of them did something that briefly changed the light. Perhaps a Mylar balloon was caught in the trees, but she doesn't spot any, and wouldn't the thermals have carried it high enough to cross the river?

She decides it must come from a casement window in motion, likely swinging in the breeze. But none of the casements looks loose from what little she can see. Maybe a gust caught the window and slammed it shut in just such a way.

Or perhaps she saw nothing at all. None of the others seems to have noticed, their attention still fixated on a plan for scoping out the Bronx fire. "They probably have fireboats out there," Chick says, looking over his shoulder at the others studying the map. "If so, they won't allow us to get very close."

But Karalee can't take her eyes off the island. Anyone who knows the history—admittedly very few these days—knows that North Brother once housed a notorious prisoner but most recently hosted a well-conceived rehab facility for young drug addicts, as if the idea of shipping such addicts to an isolated island didn't defy every public health lesson America should have learned a hundred years ago.

The island's notorious prisoner died in 1938. Thirty years later, when the rehab facility closed, the authorities finally gave up on the hospital. The island, only twenty acres and serviced by no bridge or ferry, was deemed a vestige of another age, trapped in the rushing channel known as Hell Gate. It was best left to the birds and critters, and so the authorities left it. Since the last city employee boarded the last boat out, not a soul has rested his head there overnight. Karalee read that fact not long ago in a *Life* magazine article. And some of the buildings have been disused for even longer than the intervening fourteen years.

She wonders what's to be gleaned today beyond those trees, having peered many times into grainy black-and-white pictures of the place, one in particular drifting back to her now: an isolation ward lined with beds—patients cocking their heads toward the camera as if to project themselves and their misery onto the photographer's attention. Karalee turns her own head in that manner, and her eyes lose focus past the edge of the boat. The scar on her left ear itches, and she becomes light-headed. She feels not at all herself and wonders whether it's seasickness. But there are no waves—and, besides, she has never been ill a day in her life.

Sweat beads on her brow. Of course it does, she thinks, because the air is hot and humid. But she knows there's much more here to disturb her. There is that worshipped ancestor, his relationship to

this island, and the source of tension between Karalee and her father.

She recalls—as if she could forget for a second!—that when her father threw the camera at her they were arguing over her career plans. Oh, her father—so sure about everything. “That Soper certainty,” her mother calls it. And it might serve some people, Karalee is the first to admit. Her grandfather, after all, had leveraged that stubbornness into a career as a successful defense attorney. Yet for that man’s son—her father—certainty always leads to financial disaster. And don’t they have a garage full of Soper Soap to prove it? SOPER SOAP CLEANS CLEANEST! Will she ever escape the misbegotten slogan? Clean, it did—nearly cleaned them out of house and home. From which event Karalee’s father concluded that his only child must make a safer choice than a career in the arts, which left unsaid something Karalee knew for certain: his conviction that women ought only to make safe choices. And as usual, her mother agreed.

More than a year ago, with her camera in pieces, Karalee acceded to her parents’ wishes and used her biology major to obtain admittance to the Graduate School of Public Health at Havermyer. She was following in the footsteps of famed public health advocate George A. Soper, the great-grandfather she never knew but ever heard about, the man who first came to North Brother—here in front of her—in order to deposit his quarry: the wayward cook, Mary Mallon.

The island lies within easy reach of the *Flagellum* now, no more than a quarter mile away. A flock of birds rises above the tree line and settles back down among the branches, calling to one another. Maybe it was in fact a seagull she spotted moments ago—a flash of white wing, not a man-made reflection.

In any case, she aches with sudden curiosity.

She knows the island is largely a ruin. Might she bring back some pictures to show her father, let him see for himself that he clings to a relic? And if at the same time she could make the photos beautiful, he might yet come to appreciate her unique talents.

“That’s North Brother,” she hears herself saying to her friends. When no one responds, she leans over Gerard’s broad shoulders and plants the tip of an index finger on the map. Louder she says, “North Brother, where they isolated Typhoid Mary. Wouldn’t it be interesting to go there instead of chasing some stupid fire? It’s right in front of us. There.” She straightens up and points across the water.

“Typhoid Mary,” Gerard says. “I forget sometimes she operated in this area. I always think of her as a person from another part of the world.”

“She was Irish originally. But an immigrant to America. She spent more than a third of her life on that island. My great-grandfather, George, tracked her down and put her away.”

“Tracked her like a dog,” Chick says, almost with glee.

“She died there,” says Karalee. “Unattached. Childless.”

Estela rakes her gaze over the trees and what little she can see of the buildings. “Is she buried there?”

Karalee firms her chin. “She’s interred at Saint Raymond’s Cemetery in the Bronx. They say only a couple of people attended the funeral.”

“Afraid to catch something?” Josh asks.

“No. Just her only friends, I guess. One other patient ... the priest ... a couple of nurses who worked there.”

Estela nods, the left corner of her mouth curling up. “Yes, more interesting than some crazy fire,” she agrees.

Karalee is happy to have an ally. Her friend, who began on hands and knees over the map, now

struggles to her feet. The dead right arm, a birth defect, has an accompanying right leg in the same condition. As a result, both limbs hang awkwardly and get dragged along by the larger working muscles, manifesting as a twitch when she is in motion. Gerard offers a hand and she takes it. “We’re students in public health, after all,” says Estela, sucking a breath. “And her case is iconic.”

Gerard turns to Chick. “Interesting. Can we land there, Captain?”

Chick studies the landscape, assessing. “The dock is shot.” Nothing remains but rotting remnants of wooden pylons, extending like an archipelago into the river. “We could try directly for shore.”

“But the place is off-limits to the public,” Josh protests. “Could be it’s a biological hazard.”

“Nonsense, man.” Chick is a broad-shouldered bear with furry arms and knuckles and kinky shoulder-length hair gathered into a ponytail. He throttles down the motor, but keeps one hand on the wheel, the bow still knifing into the current. He twists around, his eyes meeting Karalee’s, and turns to Josh. “Who do you suppose enforces that public restriction?”

Josh picks up the map and folds it sloppily. He snaps and waves it. “How would I know? The United States Coast Guard? The NYPD? Whoever does, it’s clearly off-limits. Even marked on the map that way. It’s a bird sanctuary.”

Karalee wonders whether she’s leading them into an argument. They’ve had a great summer together, light class loads, plenty of room for fun. Why ruin it to prove something to her dad? Before she can offer to withdraw her suggestion, Gerard smirks at Josh and says, “The enforcers of the rules are all at the fire, Mr. Adventure.” He stoops to retrieve his paperback book from the floor, fumbles and drops it, picks it up again.

“Gary Gilmore.” Josh flicks a finger at Gerard’s book. “That’s what happens to people who don’t follow rules in America.”

“What? Shot through the heart for trespassing?” Chick laughs.

“Dude, Gary Gilmore murdered people,” Gerard says. “They didn’t get him for a misdemeanor.”

“Maybe he was the last man killed by firing squad, but that doesn’t mean he’ll be the last person to be killed by the system,” Josh says.

“Are you serious? Grow a pair,” Chick suggests, brushing his ponytail off his shoulder.

He’s always been more of a risk taker than Josh, who in Chick’s position wouldn’t sleep with a student if she were the last woman on earth. “The worst that happens ... they escort us off the island with a warning. Besides, they’ve got their hands full today. Out there.” He points with two fingers. “That fire’s just as bad as it was an hour ago.”

“We don’t know that. It’s all smoke.”

“Stop being such a pussy, Josh.” This from Estela. “You didn’t have cancer in med school and you won’t get shot for trespassing on an island that belongs to the City of New York.”

She’s referring to the hypochondria that caused him to abandon medical school. Most first-year medical students begin to think they have half the ailments they’re studying, but then the feeling passes and they return to their senses. Not Josh, who spent two miserable years convinced of his imminent demise before dropping out.

He swallows hard. “It was real. A lipoma. They couldn’t be sure it was benign until they took it out.”

“Took it out?” Estela will never allow Josh to save face. Probably, Karalee surmises, because she’s secretly in love with him. “They aspirated the tumor, Josh, didn’t even have to cut you open. Everyone has those fatty tumors. Want me to show you mine?”

Josh clams up and blushes. He’d probably love for her to show him what she’s hiding under the skimpy bathing suit, but not in front of others.

Gerard says, “You’re not talking about those mosquito bites on your chest, are you, Estela?”

She smiles, easy to tease, in her forwardness even joking about her arm and leg on occasion. She passes up further engagement with Gerard and pats Josh on the wrist. “Can’t you see that Karalee really wants to go?”

Karalee thinks of her father and the anger it takes to throw a heavy object at your daughter’s head, let alone using as ammunition the very thing he knew to be her favorite and most valued possession. At once she sees him in her mind’s eye, standing in their Pelham kitchen, his spectacles askew, his red face resisting self-examination or contrition. When she was a girl, he hit her mother in that kitchen at least twice that she can recall, maybe three times, maybe others. She hasn’t thought of that for a long time—has put it out of her mind since high school. When she did think of those moments, they were challenges to be struggled through, not analyzed, so she never attempted to understand the specifics of her parents’ disagreements. Just a feature of childhood, albeit a terrifying feature that erupted on an irregular basis as if from nowhere and then subsided as quickly as it arrived.

Now, suddenly, looking down at the cooler full of beer, it occurs to her that her father must have been drunk each time he hit her mother. He took a few pops of booze each day without much effect, but once in a while he tipped past the point of no return. In such circumstances, his stubborn streak transformed into a violent one, especially if he perceived that his wife intended to defy his wishes. Karalee, if she’d been older, might have more thoroughly documented the damage.

She picks up her camera again—the new camera. It is better technically than the Canon ever was, but no more loved in her mind. She lifts it to her eye and uses the backs of her friends’ heads to frame the peak of the dilapidated hospital building that pokes up from the treetops on the island. There is no way to achieve clarity on the entire field of vision, so she lets their heads go blurry and draws sharp focus on the gable of the tall brick Victorian building in the distance, where she thinks she saw the flash.

It requires little effort for her to imagine that the peak points the way forward. Like an arrow.

* * *

TAKING UP HIS friends’ challenge and that of the river, Chick steers the *Flagellum* hard to port, circling the island clockwise, his intense beetle-brown eyes studying the water’s surface for flotsam. His summer spent largely outdoors has bleached his thick long hair with mahogany streaks. He didn’t shave this morning, and velvety stubble already casts a shadow across his round weathered face. Karalee, who harbors something close to an obsession with cleanliness, wishes he wouldn’t ever go without shaving. She also wishes he would cut his hair, but he won’t be swayed.

They’re close enough to see real detail on the island for the first time, at first just the wooded shore, but then it opens up. On the west side, a brick industrial building hulks near the splintered remains of the old dock. Two giant chimneys, higher than the tallest trees, still stand so tall and proud that Karalee finds it hard to imagine they no longer have a role to play in this world.

After some consultation, Chick decides to steer hard for that building, thinking the current will force them past it and deposit them on the small beach just south of there. But as the *Flagellum*’s bow closes in, the current carries them nowhere near, pushing them sideways back out to the middle of the waterway.

“Wicked resistance in this section of the river,” Chick says half to himself. “That’s why they call Hell Gate just south of here. It’s one thing in open water, quite another when you’re trying to land a small craft.”

“Maybe quit while we’re behind?” Josh suggests.

“Nah. I’m learning. I think I’ll give it another go.”

Chick swings the boat around again and throttles up. Wind generated by their motion courses through everyone’s hair, and Gerard’s San Diego Padres baseball cap goes careening overboard, end over end. He moves to grab for it, but it settles with a small splash into the river. “Hold it!” he shouts over the roar of the engine.

The cap floats upside down. Chick reduces the throttle and takes a starboard turn with Gerard leaning out, Josh bracing his other arm. Gerard’s fingertips graze along the water and catch the bill of the cap, but his touch seals the cap’s fate. It spins once and goes under, disappearing.

“Capsized!” Gerard says, playing good sport. “Oh, well.”

They share a laugh over it; then Chick turns his attention back to the landing, his jaw set, more determined than ever. He’s a bull when he gets a goal within sight, and Karalee has seen him achieve the seemingly impossible through sheer pigheadedness—academically, professionally, and elsewhere. He got her into the sack on the third try, even though it felt all wrong to her at the time, round-shouldered Chick physically built the exact opposite of what usually attracts her. Now, at the end of summer, he’s more familiar to her but probably no more appropriate as a boyfriend, violating Havermeyer’s ethics code. Given the air of irrepressibility he cultivates, she knows he hates to lose. This assault on the island with everyone watching, feels his manhood at stake. Without another word, he swings the boat in a wide arc with the throttle open as far as he’ll dare, the hull up out of the water, riding one edge, all those aboard tipping themselves against the force of it.

When he flattens out and guns for the big building, planning to run it dead on at the risk of catching a hidden pylon, Karalee’s gut clutches. *He’ll kill us*, they all sense for a brief second. But he doesn’t hit anything, although again the river refuses to cooperate. The current pushes the little boat sideways, and tosses them out again into the middle.

She sees Chick’s tanned and furry arms trembling, no doubt fatigued from wrestling the wheel. He lets out a cry. “Hoo-ah!” Intones in mock voice-over: “It’s like fighting the invisible force fields of *Star Trek* episode.” He’s scared, trying to make light, Karalee thinks—or is he overselling the challenge just to build himself up?

Feeling the strength of the water, Karalee imagines the sheer underwater cliffs that camber to the bottom of Hell Gate. For sure, the currents here don’t quite derive from nature. The engineers made a trade-off when they dynamited these channels. In any case, the island opposes an approach from this side, at least by a boat like this one, with so little ballast.

“Isn’t this fun,” Estela says, exhilarated. “Like the log flume, only more real. My mother never let me go to amusement parks.”

“My mother *made* me go,” Josh says. “I hated it.”

Karalee fights a frown, knowing she must look disappointed. Gerard, staring right at her, says, “Let’s try to land this thing one more time, Chick.”

But Chick tells them he won’t dare. With the slightest unexpected shift in direction by the current, any approach more oblique than the one he just took might crash them into the remains of the dock. Karalee thinks of Gerard’s cap, upside down in the water, carried out of sight. Estela, in particular, for all her bravado, won’t fare well if they have an accident of that kind. And even the strongest among them, pitched overboard, might easily get swept away by the force of the river.

They have no life vests, and the water has a will of its own. It doesn’t want them to land here.

Karalee sidles up to Chick and puts an arm around his waist. “It was just a thought. I can live without this.”

“But you had your heart set, Kiki. I can see it in your eyes. There must be a way onto this dam.”

island.”

“You’re going to need a bigger boat,” Gerard says, laughing at his own jokey reference. The rented *Jaws* just the other night, flopped on couches and beanbag chairs, smoking grass and barking out the best lines before the actors got to them.

“The hell I will,” Chick says, shrugging Karalee off. “We’ll just go around to the other side.”

“But the cops,” Josh says. “That’s the side facing all the action.”

Chick ignores him, just steers. He looks long and hard at Karalee, his eyes saying, *This is what a woman wants, and I’m a man who delivers.*

In spite of herself, she makes no effort to redirect him. There are so many things drawing her to this island that she can’t catalog them all in her own mind. She wants to see the former isolation war in living color, three dimensional. She wants to step into a bit of the history she’s studying and document what’s left with her own camera. She wants to resist the father trying to impose his will upon her and to connect with the great-grandfather she never met, the famous George A. Soper.

They have almost completely circled the island. As their course along the northernmost bulge carries them again within sight of the conflagration near Hunts Point and closer to it, they snap their heads around and look eastward. Near the confluence of the Bronx River, dozens of boats cluster like herd animals. Thick smoke still rises from the fire, but it’s hard to grasp what the rescue boats and working craft can achieve. They look like children’s toys under a cataclysmic shadow.

* * *

ON THE EAST side of North Brother, an old seawall defends the shore from the unyielding river, which has already won part of this struggle, breaching the concrete in a number of places.

Karalee zooms in with her camera and snaps a quick picture, but doubts she captured anything interesting. She observes as Chick considers the seawall, its presence indicating that the prevailing current comes from this direction. Rather than drive them off, as it did on the other side, the river here encourages them toward the island. Rising to the invitation, Chick guides the boat closer, searching for an opening in the structure that doesn’t look too dangerous. But the current pushes with such force in this direction that it scares him. He turns the wheel sharply to starboard, throttles up, and pulls away. Not that he’s giving up. In a moment, he swings the boat in a wide arc and makes once again for shore.

The boat comes around, and Chick finally succeeds in finding the right approach. The river here seized his stern and they’re on a straight line for a significant break in the seawall. Eyes fixed on the goal, he throttles down and turns the wheel hard to starboard again.

This time the current shoves them in a perfect line, one that will carry them between two shattered blocks of concrete with rusty rebar sticking out like wild hairs.

At once they are twenty yards from shore, but Karalee senses a sudden loss of control, the approach feeling too fast to land them safely. She must be right because Chick quickly reverses the throttle to fight it, and when that has too little effect, he reverses harder, the engine roaring. Large stones and smaller rocks and broken concrete lie about the riverbed in front of them, along with assorted flotsam: splintered wood and disintegrating plastic and treadless car tires.

Many of the obstacles are sharp, and clearly Chick has little command of the *Flagellum*. He might easily dash her upon the broken seawall, and then they’d all be in real trouble. But he has passed the point of no return, nothing to do but work the throttle and steer like his life depended upon it, riding out the current into the shore.

When at last Chick eases up, the river fully takes over the boat like wind seizing a kite. There’s

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