
Opening Extract from...

The Cartographer of No Man's Land

Written by P. S. Duffy

Published by Myrmidon

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P. S. DUFFY

Myrmidon
Rotterdam House
116 Quayside
Newcastle upon Tyne
NE1 3DY

www.myrmidonbooks.com

Originally published in 2013 by W.W. Norton & Company Inc.,
500 Fifth Avenue, New York

First published in the United Kingdom by Myrmidon 2014

The poem, *Lasca* by Frank Desprez, appears in *Best Loved Poems of the American People*,
Hazel Felleman (ed), Garden City Books, Garden City, NY 1936 (pp 257-259)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (Hardback) 978-1-905802-98-2
ISBN (Export Paperback) 978-1-910183-00-7

Set in 11.5/17pt Adobe Caslon by
Falcon Oast Graphic Art Limited,
East Hoathly, East Sussex

Printed in the UK by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CRO 4YY

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

For Joe

Prologue

The boy had been laughing under the clouds on a flat grey sea as his father sang an old and funny song about all the fishes climbing upon the seaweed trees. But then the sun broke through in a banded stream that coursed across the water to their boat. His father stopped singing and stopped rowing and looked about. And the boy stopped swinging his legs beneath his seat and looked about as well. His hair ruffled in the breeze. All around them the sun revealed water dancing in a way not firmly lashed to the here and now. It mesmerised the senses, suffusing everything in its catchy-caught ripples upon the open water so that there was nothing but the dance.

His father drew in the heavy oars, and the sound of their smooth, worn wood slipped into the boat. The light was golden against the floorboards. The spangled sea was so bright they could not tear their eyes from it—rippling, flickering, drawing them in. His father drew the boy toward him without taking his eyes off the silver sea. The boy turned between his father's long legs and rested a small hand on his father's knee. His father circled him with his arm and felt the boy's heart beat into his hand.

In all this world there was only the gently rocking boat and dancing water. All time—past, present and future—gathered and expanded and released. There were no boundaries, and there was no fear of being without them.

The boy wanted to reach out to catch the water's dance, but more than that he wanted to remain forever leaning lightly against the rough wool of his father's shirt, with his father's hand resting against his chest.

They stayed like that, the boy and his father, until a wide breeze blew over the boat, and his father said quietly, 'We have witnessed God's beauty, had an encounter with the Divine.' Or maybe that's only what he thought. What he may have said was nothing at all as the breeze freshened and a deep blue returned to the water, and the waves grew rougher and stopped shimmering. He took up the oars and shoved them through the wooden pins. The boy turned and hopped back up on his seat. His father pulled in long smooth strokes and sang once again of all the fishes in the sea climbing upon the seaweed trees.

One

February 1st, 1917
Western Front, France

Angus MacGrath unbuttoned his greatcoat and leaned back against the one tree left on the bank of a river he did not know. Not far downstream, a private, standing waist-deep in the river, squeezed a bar of soap between his hands. It shot upward, and four or five other soldiers lunged for it, splashing and falling over themselves. Their uniforms, boots and rifles lay in a heap by a jagged row of blackened tree stumps. Under a weak early morning sun, bands of mist rose from the cold river, occasionally engulfing the soldiers so that they took on a dream-like quality of white arms and torsos appearing and disappearing.

Above the river on a low stone bridge sat the engine of the troop train where, a day into their journey, it had lurched to a stop, unable or unwilling to carry on. Sunk between endless flat fields, the tracks ran east-northeast toward the Front. Angus flipped open his old pocket compass for confirmation, for comfort, really, and slipped it back in his pocket. He figured they'd be on the march soon, the engine still on the bridge.

While repairs were attempted, the ranks milled about the train, grousing over the delay, but grateful for it all the same. And for the

sudden break in the weather. Housed in drafty huts in a camp thick with mud near Le Havre, most of them hadn't bathed since they'd crossed the Channel and arrived on French soil five days earlier. Those in the river were taking up a challenge. 'Baptism and bless me!' one shouted, wading in. 'Sweet Jesus, it's freezing!' cried another, plunging in after him. In the train, the owl-faced ranking officer drank steadily from his flask.

Like Angus, the boys in the river and those cheering them on from the bridge were fresh recruits from battalions broken up after training in England to be bled into existing battalions. Most would join the 61st. But Angus had been singled out and reassigned to replace a dead lieutenant in the 17th Royal Nova Scotia Highlanders—a decision no more random than any he'd encountered since joining up. If there was one thing Angus had learned it was that there was no predicting how things would turn out. Of all the predictions he might have made, himself as an officer in the infantry was not among them.

In the state of suspension between the world as he'd known it and the absolute unknown, Angus considered the interplay of light and mist, the hazy edges, blank spaces and mute eddies at the river's edge. Above him, the sky turned a gauzy grey, and a fine rain fell. He tipped his head back and closed his eyes.

Rain. It had been a constant in the collected bits and pieces of the past few months. It had slicked the deck of the ship that carried him to England and slanted in rushes off the tents in the camp where he'd held a rifle for the first time, adjusted to the heft and length and balance of it, and where, surprisingly, he'd found he was a good shot. And where, not surprisingly, he'd found a heady release in charging straw-filled burlap bags, bayonet plunging into their sodden bellies.

Rain and rage. Rain and regret. He'd been sent over with assurances in a letter from Major Gault to a Colonel Chisholm that he'd be a cartographer. In London. Behind the lines. But Gault was unknown

to Chisholm, and there being no shortage of cartographers, Angus had been dispatched to the infantry, where shortages were never-ending. 'The infantry?' A chasm of disbelief had opened up.

'You heard me,' Chisholm's adjutant had snapped. 'You can bloody well draw terrain maps on the field. In the meantime, the infantry can use your other skills—the ones you'll get soon enough.'

And get them he did, with the rest of the 183rd, in an onslaught of rain that left bedding heavy and damp, uniforms drenched, and the camp awash in mud. Good preparation for the Front, he was told.

Rain had dripped steadily into a bucket by the major's desk the day Angus was told he'd been promoted to lieutenant. 'Your education is one thing,' the major had sighed. 'Not orthodox exactly, with time in divinity school, but nothing in this war is orthodox. This is a citizen army, and we—'

Can't be too choosey?

'What I mean to say is that combined with your age and maturity—and the fact that you've been a captain of, what was it, a cargo vessel? In the Maritimes?' He tapped his pen on the desk.

'Coastal trader. Nova Scotia, yes sir,' Angus answered. Small schooner, crew of three, nothing grand, he might have added.

'Understand you were headed for cartography.' The major coughed, put the pen down, picked it up again. 'Look, you seem to have your head on straight. You're steady, well educated, and Sergeant Campbell thinks, as do I, that you'll be well placed as a first lieutenant.'

Campbell? Campbell the bulldog had recommended *him*? That very morning he'd slapped up glossy photos on an easel, depicting in revolting detail just what a bayonet could and should do. Disemboweling men was quite another thing from ripping through straw targets. When he'd closed by saying the pictures were of *Allied* soldiers, he had men frothing for revenge. Head down, Angus had not joined in. 'Aww . . . squeamish?' Campbell had mocked. Angus had known better than to reply. Squeamish was the least of it.

'Well?' the major asked impatiently. 'First lieutenant. What have you to say to that?'

Angus had had little to say. Lieutenants were as expendable as the rank and file—more so. They dropped like flies, leading the charge. His education was hardly the preparation called for, but at thirty-four, age he did have. 'Maturity' was a kind way of putting it. What did he think? He was astounded and afraid. How exactly did one grow into the hope of taking another man's life?

All that was left to say was, 'I'll do my best to honour the regiment. Thank you, sir.'

'Yes, yes, of course,' the major said, turning back to his paperwork. But then looked Angus in the eye and said, 'I'm sure you will, MacGrath.'

Standing outside on the rickety steps, Angus wasn't so sure. He turned up the collar of his coat against the heavy mist. '*Lieutenant MacGrath*,' he repeated softly. That night, the rain's steady drumming took on the beat of a cold rain on the *Lauralee*'s canvas. It called up the rush of her bow wave curling and falling back, the lull of it transformed to repetitive regret.

Three weeks after his promotion, on leave in London, the rain stopped and the skies cleared suddenly. All around him black umbrellas came down, were shaken and folded. People were smiling, and the puddles, shimmering on gray flagstone, took on the pale blue of the sky and caught the reds, whites and blues of the Union Jack in a child's hand. Without effort, Angus reproduced the image in a quick sketch in a pub, right down to the fragmented reflection. He wanted to memorialise blue sky in case he never saw it again, he'd said to the amusement of his fellow officers. The drawing was in charcoal.

Now, as the men hopped about in the cold and towelling off with an army blanket, Angus let that memory of colour and reflected sky engulf him. Allowed himself the luxury of going further back—to the tall white house on the hill above the bay and the low-roofed sheds

behind it, to the sharp smell of turpentine, the twist of sable brushes in the dented tin can, the paint-splattered floorboards. And on down the hill to the stony beach where seaweed draped over itself in the low tide and where Hettie Ellen, hair coming loose in the wind, leaned against a boulder, watching Simon Peter skipping rocks with ease, one after another, three, four, five skips. And beyond them to the *Lauralee*, nodding at her mooring, bright work gleaming in the last, long rays of sunlight.

Idealised images, every one. Angus knew it. He dealt in such images, after all. Could paint them, could sell them. And had. Idealised or not, they flooded through him in all their tender beauty—fragile strands of memory which even the faint crump of distant artillery could not touch—until it did, and the memories spun out and away, replaced by the unadorned image of his father, slumped at his desk, unable to comprehend how Angus could have turned against him.

Angus was right about the train. And the march. He fell in with the rest of them and they marched fifteen miles to a railhead, arriving worn and hungry. They learned that the next troop train headed to the Front was expected in less than an hour. Chunks of bread and fruitcake were passed out. A young soldier named Mueller fell over—with exhaustion, it was thought, or too much fruitcake. But he was burning up with fever.

The promised train arrived. A space was cleared in the aisle so that Mueller could lie flat. Angus helped him drink from his canteen and called for a blanket to put under his head, then found a seat next to a young lance corporal who said not a word. The train clacked on. Angus reached for a cigarette and pulled out the picture of Ebbin. He'd shown it to just about everyone he'd met, an automatic gesture that along with the words 'Ever seen this man?' led to nothing, until he'd begun to feel as tattered at the edges as the

photograph. In London, he'd finally bought a leather sleeve to keep it in. 'Your brother?' people would ask, studying it. 'Brother-in-law,' Angus would explain patiently. Angus, a head taller, with dark hair and darker eyes, bore no resemblance to the carefree, light-featured Ebbin, but 'brother' might indeed have been as accurate. In the picture Angus stood, rope in hand, to the side of Ebbin on the deck of the *Lauralee*. A photographer named Klein from the States, dressed in a suit, tie askew, juggling cameras and tripod, had taken the picture and many more of Snag Harbour and the islands, hoping to turn them into picture postcards. Angus, just back from Yarmouth, had been tying the boat up at Mader's when Ebbin strolled down the wharf. The photographer instantly wanted Ebbin in the picture. Only too willing, Ebbin had hopped aboard and slung Angus's duffel bag over his shoulder in the pose of a seaman home at last, though he was a bad sailor and prone to seasickness. Hence his grin and the wry smile on Angus's face. The photographer wanted more pictures and suggested a sail, with Ebbin at the helm. 'You come along, too,' he'd said to Angus as an afterthought. Ebbin had laughed out loud. 'Suppose we buy you a drink instead,' he suggested. 'It's the safer course, trust me.' The photographer had readily agreed. There was a better photo, a portrait of Ebbin in uniform taken a year later, but it was the earlier picture that Angus had chosen to bring with him.

He slipped it back in his pocket and conjured up Ebbin waving his arm in a wide arc on the gangway of the troop ship with an enthusiasm that had vanished from his letters the minute he'd hit the Front. Ebbin Hant, on the brink of promise.

'Off to save the world from the Hun,' he'd said, chin up, at the crowded Hant family dinner in Chester one Sunday in 1915. 'Signed up yesterday.' He'd tousled the hair of the nearest young half-brother, but grew serious when he caught his father's eye. At the head of the table, Amos Hant adjusted his great bulk. Chatter died out. 'Well,

boy, you go ahead,' Amos said slowly. Angus shot a look down the table at his own father, Duncan MacGrath, his boyish face grim.

Amos pounded the table with his ham-like fist. Plates jumped. Cider splashed. 'Go ahead, by God! Blast them to Kingdom come!' He stood. 'To Ebbin! Make us proud!' He raised his glass and looked round the table. 'For Empire, God and King!' he bellowed.

Duncan spun a salt shaker in half-circles on the table. Hettie Ellen sat back as if she'd been shot. Everyone else, children included, raised their glasses. Stood up. 'King and Country!' they said. 'To Ebbin!' Ebbin cocked his head, then rose himself. 'To Canada!' he said, and emptied his glass.

Angus reached for Hettie's hand, limp at her side, but she didn't return his squeeze and pulled away as war talk took over, as pot roast and vegetables were served up and plates passed hand to hand down the long table.

Elma Hant, at the opposite end of the table from Amos, excused herself to the kitchen. Angus found her leaning on the table, her raw-knuckled hands spread before her, head bowed. 'Not to mind me,' she said, pushing away and straightening as he entered. 'I'll get over it.' She was a big woman, broad and tall. She looked out of the window, slowly folding a towel. 'I may not be Ebbin's real mother, God rest her soul, but . . .'

'Ebbin can take care of himself,' Angus said.

She heaved her shoulders. 'I suppose . . . Done it well enough up in the Yukon, out West.' She shook her head and met his eyes. 'How's Hettie going to manage is what I want to know—her brother off to war? Did he think of that? And Amos. What's to become of him if something happens? If you'd ever seen the care he took with them two as babies when he'd come to pick them up at night, scrubbing the dirt off his hands afore he touched them. Tying up their bonnet strings . . .'

Amos Hant's thick fingers fumbling with bonnet strings made Angus say, 'The war will be over soon.'

'They say by next Christmas, don't they?' She shot him a hopeful look. 'Or was that what they said last year?'

'They did, but it'll be over soon.'

'That's right. Long before the younger boys are of age.' She recovered herself and said, 'Now. What do you need?'

'Only a fork.'

She wiped her nose and opened the cupboard drawer. 'Well, that's one need I can fix up straight away. You never ask for much, Angus.' She placed a fork in his palm and folded his fingers over it.

Late that night, back home in Snag Harbour, Angus watched Ebbin jump out of Zeb Morash's truck at the bottom of the hill road and saunter up to the house—a dark silhouette against the moonlit water until the black spruce closed in behind him. He tried to imagine Ebbin in uniform, but couldn't for the life of him see him succumbing to regimentation, yes sir, no sir, at the bottom of the heap.

An hour before in the upstairs hallway, with Young Fred's head drooping on her shoulder, Hettie Ellen had begged Angus to change Ebbin's mind. 'He's already signed up,' Angus told her. 'There's no changing that.' She wanted him to try anyway. Thirteen years into their marriage, she remained as much Ebbin's sister as Angus's wife, a fact Angus accepted as part of the bargain, a price to be paid.

When Ebbin hopped up on the porch Angus lifted the jug of rum at his feet, withdrew the cork with a satisfying *thup* and handed it to him. Their glasses stood empty on the porch railing. 'Off to save us from the Hun, eh?' Angus said.

Ebbin took a long swallow, wiped his mouth and grinned. 'Somebody's got to do it,' he said. 'I take it Hettie's in bed.'

'You expect *her* to do it?'

Ebbin gave a quick laugh. He leaned back on the railing and said,

'She wouldn't talk to me after dinner. I'll catch her in the morning. She'll come around.'

'Doubt it. Not this time. What the hell, anyway? Were you drunk?'

'Yeah, maybe. Me and the boys had a few.' He lit a cigarette.

'Who was with you?'

'Virgil, George Mather. We'd have signed on anyway. No families of our own. Tough to justify *not* going. The Germans can't just stomp all over Europe and claim it for themselves, for Christ sake. England's at risk.'

They talked about the course of the war and the boys they knew who were over there. Then Ebbin tipped his head back and waved the cigarette across the night sky. 'This is the shape of things to come, the grand sweep. I want to be part of it.' He paused and looked back at Angus. 'Don't tell me your old man's got you against the war. He's gone pacifist, hasn't he?'

'*Gone* pacifist? Always has been. You know that.'

'I always thought that for him "pacifist" was just another word for "anti-Empire."'

'No. Maybe. Dangerous in this climate, either way.' Angus lit his own cigarette. 'As for me, I'm not against the war, just you in it.'

'Yeah. I'd feel the same. I'll tell you something, though—when I signed up, I felt different. I felt . . .' He shook his head.

Proud, Angus thought. He felt proud. Ebbin had studied law, worked for his father at the forge, and rejected both. He'd considered stage acting, but saw no future in it. He'd disappear for months at a time—working horses out West, tramping around in the wilds of northern Quebec, the Yukon. He once spent a winter in Wyoming at the base of the Beartooth Mountains with a survey team. Trailing hints of a roughshod world, he'd return with money in his pocket and stories to tell, ones that made you laugh, and ones that made you wonder—fending off a maniacal Mountie who rode into their camp bareback and backwards; sipping water from a stream so pure it tasted

of earth and sky and sugar. He had Hettie's fine features and restless nature, but unlike her had an endless store of self-confidence and an unforced, infectious optimism. Ebbin just needed to find the right opening and he'd do fine, everyone said. But Angus had seen the trace of lines around his eyes, the shadowed doubt. Now this sudden singularity of purpose. How often did that come around? Only in war perhaps. Or in love.

'Come with me, why don't you? We'll fight them like we did the pirates on Mountain Island,' Ebbin said. 'Seriously, how long are you going to drag up and down the coast on the *Lauralee* for the old man? When are you going to escape?'

'The *Lauralee is* my escape.'

'Not for long, eh? A fella risks his life just stepping aboard.'

'She's not that old.' She was, of course.

'Yeah, she is. Rotting away, and you along with her. Railroads, motorised transport—that's the ticket to trade these days.' Ebbin jabbed his cigarette at Angus. 'Or so Hettie whispered to me like a sweet song yesterday.' He raised his brows in theatric exaggeration.

'Railroads? She *said* that?'

'Something like that,' Ebbin shrugged. 'Thinking of the future, unlike you. Point is, coastal trade was supposed to be temporary. Remember? Yet there you are, still going, resenting every minute of it.'

'Except when I'm out there,' Angus countered.

'True enough,' Ebbin agreed.

It was true. As much as Angus resented working for his father, sailing the *Lauralee* fed something deep, made him feel part of 'the grand sweep'—not of history, but of the sun's first rays breaking over the curve of the earth, the currents below, the wind above, propelling him forward and letting him know just how small a part of the grand sweep he was, but still—a *part* of it. Suspended, sustained in the territory beyond the points of the compass. And it was that he wanted

to capture on canvas—more than capture, he wanted to let it flow through him and out and back again. God had given him talent, or maybe just the longing, but either way, not enough courage to trust it. He took another drag on his cigarette.

As if party to these thoughts, Ebbin said, 'Maybe you should chuck it all, rent a garret and—'

Angus held up his hand. 'Let old dreams die a good death, would you? For once?'

'Dreams never die a good death. Seabirds, seascapes. They're so easy for you.'

'Too easy. Failures of imagination.' He'd never studied art, had never been to a museum or gallery. What he did came naturally, easily, but he wanted more than sentiment. Wanted to get down what he felt, not just copy what he saw. Wanted to capture things beyond his knowing—a unification, closely rendered, expanding out. Yet only rarely did he risk it, and all too often it left him feeling a fool.

'Weir loves your pictures,' Ebbin reminded him.

'Weir loves them because they sell. "*Illustrations*," he calls them, and rightly so. Sailors buy them for their mothers.'

'And that's not enough for you—pictures that sell?'

'Sell for a song. And no.'

'What about those ones you're afraid to show around? Why not take them to Weir?'

Angus flicked his cigarette into the yard.

Ebbin shook his head and sighed. 'Always shortening sail when you could go with the full set. You make life hard. You know that, don't you?'

'Fair enough. And you make it all seem so easy.'

'By choice! There's always a choice. Until you decide there isn't.'

Angus folded his arms and cocked his head. 'That's about the dumbest thing I've ever heard you say.'

'Or the most profound,' Ebbin countered with a grin.

Angus returned his smile. 'Hand over that jug. I'm not near drunk enough for your platitudes.'

They were next to each other now, facing the yard. After a moment Ebbin said, 'I don't know what you're after exactly, but I know it's more. I wouldn't be talking this way, but with me heading off . . .'

A bat fluttered past. Angus said, 'I wish you weren't. But I know what you're after, too.'

'Yeah? Do you?'

'Sure I do.'

Ebbin threw his arm up around Angus's shoulder. 'Remember that day we met a hundred years ago? When you were afraid to go sledding?'

'I wasn't *afraid*. Jesus.'

'Yeah, you were. Afraid of what your old man would say, anyway. Still are, as far as I can see.'

Angus lifted the jug and took a long swallow. Golden was the memory of that overcast day on the snow-packed hillside so long ago. Angus's mother dead a year; his father holed up on dry land, the two of them at opposite ends of the long mahogany table, night after night in silence. And then the burst of the Hant family onto the scene. Hettie Ellen, a toothpick in thick woollens and scarves, on a sled behind Tom Pugsley that day. Her shrieks echoing down the steep run ricocheted against Angus's hesitation and longing. And Ebbin, whom he'd just met, waving his hand over his sled with a bow, saying, 'She's yours. Just steer around them two boulders. Be the ride of your life.' The dazzling smile, the gallant gesture—a perfect counterpoint to his father's newfound adherence to an angry, puritanical Old Testament God, sucking the life out of pleasure and the pleasure out of life, which in Ebbin's presence seemed so attainable, so utterly possible. Angus had put a cautious knee on the sled, had shot down the hill, and had the ride of his life.

Ebbin swung over the porch railing and dropped like a cat onto the yard. 'Take the pictures to Weir and see what happens. For me. It's a long way to Tipperary, you know.' He whipped out his harmonica and played the first notes.

'Longer still to France . . .' Angus said. 'Oh, alright. I'll do it. Give Weir a good laugh.'

'There's the spirit.' The silver harmonica flashed, and the sweet notes of *Annie Laurie* drifted down the hill to where the maples hiding among the spruce and silvered by the moon stirred, their new leaves clinging. Ebbin gripped the porch railing and swung back up. 'Home before you know it.'

Angus, a little unsteady on his feet, handed him a glass. 'Home before you know it,' he agreed, and they clinked their empty glasses.

Ten months later, in March of 1916, shortly before the Battle of Saint Eloi Craters, where the Canadians had over 1,300 casualties, Ebbin's regular letters stopped. He was seen afterwards, that much the home folks heard from George Mather, back from the Front in a wheelchair—no one returned without wounds; signing up meant 'for the duration'. George claimed to have seen Ebbin in September after Courcelette, near Thiepval. Embedded as this information was in repeated number sets and words like 'silver', 'angel' and 'whirlwind', it was hard to know what he saw. And after those first few days of incoherent ranting, George had gone nearly mute.

In the months between Ebbin's departure and his disappearance, Hettie Ellen drifted like a leaf in a current, as she had several times over the years. When he went missing, she seemed to spiral away from herself.

For Angus, Ebbin became a phantom limb, painfully there and not there. His unknown fate offered hope at first. But hope grew dimmer by the day. Letters to Ebbin's commanding officer went unan-

swered. Letters to higher-ups had been met with uncertainty. Ebbin was not yet officially declared missing in action. There was nothing to fill the space where Ebbin had been—no sign, no word, no body and no grave.

Was he in hospital without identification? Blown to bits? Maybe he'd wandered off with a concussion, unable to tell some poor peasant his name. Maybe in a prison camp, forbidden from writing. Maybe . . . Maybe . . . Angus lay awake at night next to Hettie, the two of them silently conjuring scenarios, his hand a cradle for hers under the quilts.

With Ebbin missing, thousands of casualties mounting and the war escalating, the tenuousness of Angus's own purpose grew pronounced. He had feverish dreams about his painting that startled him awake and filled him with regret. It was there in the milky white stone clattering in on the surf, in the streaked semicircles etched in a black mussel shell. There, too, in the sweep of clouds racing away from a chalice of blue sky. It was in fog seen through a lace curtain, in bloomers pinned to the line, sailing on the wind. It was in paint chipping off a lone bell buoy and in the dull clang of the bell itself on the slowly rising, slowly falling sea.

A fine hobby for your mother, his father said of his painting, *but a man works by brawn or brains, and you have plenty of both. Use them, would you? You've a life to live. Make it count.*

And so it was, with a family to support, Angus had agreed to ply goods up and down the coast for his father—the once and great schooner fishing hero, a wealthy man by Snag Harbour standards, owner of fishing vessels and the timber to build them. A man who had given up a life at sea to raise his son and never let him forget it. A man for whom words about the sanctity of life and honour and obligation and money in the bank were sufficient expressions of love. And a man who had supported him, no questions asked, when Angus had needed him most,

seeing to it that a house was built for Hettie and the baby when, at nineteen, Angus stood before him in paint-splattered boots, pockets empty.

In charge of the *Lauralee*, Angus could grasp some essential part of himself. Now she was heavy in the water and her rigging groaned with fatigue. Refitting her was an exercise in futility. The days of hauling cabbages, potatoes, timber, salt and barrel staves in a sailing vessel were drawing to an end. Still, every now and then as he brought her up to the edge of the wind, she'd take hold and he'd feel the synchronized perfection of water pouring off her foredeck, running along the lee rail and back again to the sea. 'Drive her, boy! She's singing now,' Wallace would shout.

On a brilliant July morning, with Ebbin still missing and the Battle of the Somme raging, Angus and his father spread out the *Lauralee*'s mainsail in the yard behind the house. On his knees checking for weak seams, of which there were plenty, Angus said, 'Stevens says it's new or nothing. He'll cut us a new set of sails on Hutt's Pond as soon as it freezes over.'

Duncan grunted to a stand. 'Well,' he said, 'Randolph Stevens might be the best sailmaker around, but she's well beyond them. And she won't do with an auxiliary motor. The vibration would knock her timbers loose.'

And knock the soul out of her, Angus thought. He placed the flat of his palm on the soft cotton canvas, bleached white by the sun, and remembered the deep cream colour the sails had been to start, and how he and Wallace had taken pains to let the light winds of sunrise and sunset work the perfect curve into the main. He thought of how in a wild sea, the jib in tatters and the main halyard jammed, they couldn't get the mainsail down, and how a crack raced halfway up the mast before the wind blew out two seams. Thought about Stevens's perfect repair, and ran his hand along the length of it.

It was at this moment that his father chose to tell him that he'd been thinking of talking to Balfour.

'*Balfour?*' Angus looked up sharply. 'Why? You're not trading on Hettie's friendship with Kitty, are you?'

Unfazed, his father replied: 'Of course not. I'm trading on that summer she helped him out when his clerk dropped dead. Balfour's coming down from Halifax to check out property in Chester, and I aim to go over there and show him around. Talk a little business. I want you with me.'

Angus sat back on his heels. It was the last thing he wanted to do. And the mere mention of Kitty and her father, the silver-haired Balfour, a Halifax financier, brought Angus back to the summer Hettie had spent in their big stone house on the Northwest Arm. Back to the lawns and gardens and Kitty's invitation to go out for a sail with her cousin Blanchard—'BB', he was called—on the sleek little thirty-two-foot Herreshoff sloop that Balfour had bought him. Reclining in the cockpit in pleated white trousers, passing a silver flask around, BB and his friends had let Angus rig the boat and sail it for them like a hired hand. All these years later, Angus still remembered how responsive the sloop was, how she'd cut through the chop like a knife, how she'd tempered his humiliation, and how it had returned full throttle when, rowing back to the Yacht Squadron after the sail, BB and his friends tossed Hettie's name around as if she belonged to them.

'Connections. That's how things are done,' his father was saying. 'Even Hettie understands that.'

'Maybe you should take her on as a partner.'

'You can joke all you want, but I'm serious here now. Balfour's heard about the pretty penny I'm turning up at Dawson's. He might want me to invest in a brickworks he's looking at in Bridgewater. Wants to merge it with one in the Valley. There's money to be made by the high rollers that make that happen. Mergers and whatnot. And Hugh Balfour is honest enough to avoid war-profiteering. A good man. The

problem is, I don't pretend to understand this high-finance business and I'm too old to learn. What I understand are things I can grab hold of—timber turned to boats, land you can plant your feet on. But I wouldn't mind some of the action. High time you came in off the water and helped me out. Expand your horizons.'

'You're going to scrap the *Lauralee*.'

'I didn't say that!'

Angus had hit a nerve, as he knew he would. It was a line of defence that had worked before to protect him from a life onshore under his father's thumb, working as a glorified clerk, a manager, checking up on properties and holdings and other men's work. And now, even worse—high finance, high rollers, the money game—all that animated men like Balfour. His father, unlike them, lived almost as simply as he always had. The fortune he was building and the one he dreamed of was just another way of coming in off the Banks with a hold full of fish. A race to the finish. Angus may not have known a paper stock from a rolling stock, but he knew just how high the stakes were and what denying that legacy would do to the man he hated and admired and loved. And what capitulating might do to himself.

His father unrolled his tobacco pouch and slowly filled his pipe and lit it. Squinting off toward the bay, he said, 'We'll haul her up, see the kind of repairs she needs, but we best face it. She's not worth a new set of sails. Coastal trade in a sailing vessel is over. No money in it. And I didn't raise you to be a common sailor.'

Angus got to his feet. The world was closing in. 'Maybe that's just what I am and what I want to be,' he said. 'Just because you gave up a life on the water doesn't mean—' He stopped. Too late. His father seized upon the opening with 'And who'd I do that for? *You*. A motherless boy.'

It had taken years for Angus to recognise the fiction of that response. After his mother's death, his father had in fact headed straight to the Banks, driven by his own demons, whatever they may have been, and

driven back to shore by them as well, where like a drowning man he clung to his Bible and went from singing sea shanties to ruminations on fate and the hand of God. As time went on, every deal he made seemed to come out in his favour, which he began to see as part of God's plan as well, a reward for a moral, upright life, the outcome of which—his holdings, his empire—might not outsmart death, but would give it a good run for the money.

His father jerked the sail and started pleating it into folds. 'It took years for me to move up from catchie to captain. Years. I wasn't just handed a boat like you. You want to toss your life away, roving around at sea? My God. Look at Ebbin. Never settled down. Never got serious. And where'd he end up? At the bottom of a trench. No more senseless way to die.'

'We don't know he's dead yet,' Angus snapped. It was all he could do not to rip the sail from his father's hands and shove him against the wall of the barn.

'Only an idiot would believe otherwise. Accept it. And get your wife to do the same. Look at her. Barely eats, barely talks, wanders around like a boat adrift. Good thing I can spare Ida so she can see to you folks down here.'

With utmost control, Angus replied, 'We can do well enough on our own,' though Ida's sturdy presence in their midst was a relief. He turned and started down the hill. 'It's the uncertainty that's killing her,' he said.

'Then give her some certainty,' his father shouted after him. 'Convince her. And get on with life.'

A WEEK LATER, Angus took three of his oils to Weir's shop in Halifax—the one of the phalarope on the storm-tossed Lynch bell buoy, which loomed out from the lower left corner of the canvas, and the two others, nearly devoid of colour: a line of huddled gulls facing the

wind on the bleached bones of a grey whale and a white-gray canvas of masts and hull emerging from fog in the faintest of lines. All three were rendered in oils of thick application, none of them quite capturing the suspended mystery, the tender, flawed visions he was after. Weir set them up and stood before them, brows furrowed. Gone was his heavy-lidded disdain, his feigned disinterest. He took the odd step forward and back. He smoothed his well-oiled hair. But in the end, he pronounced two of them colourless and strange, experimental without conviction, and all three—particularly the bird on the buoy—as impossible to sell. 'Stick to real birds,' he said. Angus picked up the paintings and left.

On the sail home, with Chebucto Head off the starboard quarter and Wallace pumping away at the bilge water, Angus tossed the pictures one by one over the side. The last of the three, the phalarope, one foot up, one on the bell buoy—almost in flight, still clinging to uncertain refuge—hovered in the following wind. Angus lunged for it just as it dropped into the wake and stared back at it long after it had disappeared from view, then swung the wheel, checked the compass and set the boat on course.

He considered telling Hettie when he got home. In her starched white blouse and blue skirt she was suddenly talkative, fully there. But it wasn't the sort of thing he had the words for, and she was on about Balfour: how Duncan had brought him round for a visit while Angus was away; how he'd been pleased to sit around the kitchen table as if he were used to it; how he'd invited her to sit right down and filled her in on Kitty's life in New York and included her when talk came round to brickyards and paper mills. 'Papering our way out of the 1913 depression,' she added with a shy smile, quoting Balfour. Stocks and securities, a play on words, she had to explain to Angus. Through it all and on that note, Angus thought of the phalarope, floating on the waves, slipping under.

In August, with yet another unsatisfactory response from the army

in his pocket, Angus went over to Chester and entered the gloom of the forge where the furnace raged against the silhouette of Ebbin's father, Amos Hant, gripping the clamps and pounding away at the hot lead on the block. Amos stopped pounding when Angus spoke and went back to it when he finished without looking up. Angus put his hand on Amos's massive shoulder and glanced away from the tears cutting tracks down his broad, soot-stained face.

Back in Snag Harbour he headed straight for the tavern, where talk was of a U-boat sighted by a Newfoundland schooner off Sambro Light, and where from an enlistment poster on the far wall, Lord Kitchener pointed his finger straight at Angus.

It was Andrew Rennick, dean of the Hill Theological School, pitching the plight of the boys over there from the pulpit at St. Andrew's—the honour of sacrifice that *was* God's greater purpose, that *defined* Faith—who after the service suggested cartography and said he could put Angus in touch with a Major Gault who would smooth the way. Rennick reminded him of the amendments Angus had made to official provincial charts over the years, correcting misplaced shoals, uncharted rocks, inaccurate depths. Angus could search the hospitals for Ebbin himself while making maps *in London*, the dean stressed—*behind the lines*—risking neither life nor limb.

Standing there in the church vestibule, Angus thought about Hettie and about Amos; about certainty and uncertainty and about the mechanical precision and reproduction that was mapmaking. He knew about charting depths, not elevations. Knew nothing about surveying, but that would hardly be required. And surely he could learn how to turn a photograph into a flat-line map.

'Men risk their lives flying over enemy lines to get those photographs,' Rennick said. 'You could help save lives by transforming them into maps.'

Perhaps, Angus thought, he'd been led to this point all along. After all, he was good at drawing 'real' birds. *Accept who you are*, Rennick

had told him years before, agreeing with Angus's decision to leave the seminary. Here was the opportunity to use his skill and do something that mattered.

Art with a purpose, his father called his chart work, something of which Angus reminded him when, white hair wild, eyes wide, shaking with controlled rage, his father warned him about the immorality of serving as a cog in the engine of war, no matter how remote from the field, about putting his talent to evil purpose.

It was the first time Angus had heard him use the word 'talent'.

On the floor beside him Mueller moaned, and Angus jerked back to the troop train, which was slowing to a stop at a Casualty Clearing Station. Flags snapped brightly above the Matron's tent as Angus and some others helped Mueller off the train, where he was collected by two oddly cheerful young women. Ambulance drivers. From Toronto, they told him. Behind them a group of privates, recovered from wounds and illness and cleared for duty, climbed aboard. One man was left on the platform. His shoulders were raised up awkwardly on his crutches and he swung forward and back, his good leg barely sweeping the ground. His only leg, Angus saw on second glance. The soldier stretched his lips into a grin. 'I get to go home now. Grand, ain't it?' Angus forced his own smile and nodded. 'I'm a logger,' the soldier said. Still grinning, he bobbed his head up and down.

The logger's cockeyed grin stayed with Angus as the train rocked on, as did the words 'casualty clearing station'. Casualties . . . 57,000 casualties on the opening day at the Somme, 24,000 Canadian casualties in two months of fighting in and around Courcelette. And 'clearing'—sorting men out, fixing them up for another go at becoming a casualty. In his search for Ebbin, Angus had seen enough in the London hospitals to understand that burns, blindness, amputation, loss of speech, and mechanical contraptions to fill in missing parts

of the face were but the order of the day. Ebbin's name would have been registered if he had been in hospital, Angus was told. Soldiers without tags rarely made it back to England, and if they did, their identities were almost always sorted out. But Angus had been taken to the nameless and, upon seeing the drooling, slack-jawed faces, the vacant eyes and those for whom death would be a prayer answered, had thanked God Ebbin was not among them.

As guns like thunder boomed in the distance, the British soldiers on the train, 'Imperials' as they were called by the Canadians, broke out in a rendition of *Marching to Pretoria*. The Canadians took up the song and added a few bawdy verses. The Imperials added a few of their own. Everyone got a good laugh out of it, even Angus.

What was truly laughable, he thought as the song ended and another began, was the idea that he could have found Ebbin from a safe distance behind the lines like some kind of armchair hero. Now he was on his way to inflict wounds and likely become a casualty himself. Yet to lose Ebbin was to lose a link to himself—and to Hettie. Ebbin was her other half. She used to hang on his every word. Angus thought of her as Ebbin's kid sister, for years, in fact, until she went away to school. And then came that summer she spent with Kitty—happy to wear Kitty's handoffs to dances, to sit on a terrace wall and sip champagne from a fluted glass beneath the hanging lanterns, seemingly oblivious to the effect she had on BB and his crowd.

On his increasingly frequent visits, Hettie and Angus had broken faith with Ebbin and discovered each other, tentatively at first and then with growing confidence that had culminated in a moment of passion behind the gazebo at the bottom of the Balfour lawns. An endless moment, out of time, that had ended nonetheless and was followed by a fumbling, fruitless search for two pearl buttons in the shadowed grass and tears over the torn lace and streaks of green up the back of Kitty's best white linen. More confusion and regret followed. Ebbin, stunned and speechless at first, had found it in himself

to forgive Angus and, not long afterwards, pronounced the marriage and baby to come a gift, forever linking the three of them.

That Simon Peter was a gift was never questioned in the thirteen years since. Easy, imaginative, unspoiled, he was their golden boy—their only child. The flame of passion that brought him into the world had failed to rekindle. Angus remained tenderly protective of Hettie, wanted her happy, hoped for but expected little in return, and tried not to think how he'd cut her chances short. She said she had no regrets, claimed he'd rescued her from Kitty Balfour's silly crowd. But after the wedding, sitting beside her, her delicate gray-gloved hands lightly resting in her lap as the wagon jounced over the rutted road past the sheds and fishing nets, the stacked lobster traps and sturdy wharfs of Snag Harbour, he doubted that.

Removed, remote, almost ethereal, Hettie was a mystery, drawing him in, keeping him at bay. Yet she could on occasion, like a tourist innocent to local custom, ask a question that cut through long-held assumptions to the heart of the matter, weaving disparate strands into a whole with stunning originality and pragmatism. It was she who suggested that Angus sell his bird and shore pictures on cargo runs, and that he make them consistent enough to be associated with the name A. A. MacGrath; she who had encouraged Duncan to help set up an insurance fund in Lunenburg, beneficial in the long run to widows and fishing consortiums alike, she pointed out. No wonder she'd been taken into Balfour's confidence. She'd shrugged it off as she did her looks.

She once told Angus that her favourite word was *and* because it meant something always came before and something always followed, which, like the infinity of numbers, was reassuring. Her practical visions of the future, countered as they were by her dreamy detachment from the physical world and her fairly constant detachment from him, were perhaps her way of ensuring that a future was possible.

But the past and future were nothing now. Only the grinding

present. Next to him the lance corporal leaned over his knees, hands folded in prayer. The train was pulling to a stop. Finding Ebbin was a fast-fading hope and the only hope Angus had. What lay ahead was not the training for war, nor war's ginned-up national pride. What lay ahead was the certainty of battle and his own uncertain place in it. Even as this thought shuddered through him, he held out hope that there was a larger purpose at work, that he was meant to be here, could do some good, and that Ebbin was just around the corner, in some trench or lying on a field or hiding in a farmhouse eating an apple, waiting for Angus to find him.

As the train came to a full stop and Angus angled around the lance corporal into the aisle, what came to him was his last glimpse of Simon Peter at the railway station in Chester—shoulders back, legs apart, hands stiff at his sides. But what stayed with him as he stepped off onto the platform and wove through the crowd of soldiers pushing ever onward was that last little wave—a child's wave. Stay alive, Angus told himself. Stay alive.