
Opening Extract from...

The House at the Edge of the World

Written by Julia Rochester

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For my parents, Ralph and Barbara

The people along the sand
All turn and look one way.
They turn their back on the land.
They look at the sea all day.

As long as it takes to pass
A ship keeps raising its hull;
The wetter ground like glass
Reflects a standing gull.

The land may vary more;
But wherever the truth may be –
The water comes ashore,
And the people look at the sea.

They cannot look out far.
They cannot look in deep.
But when was that ever a bar
To any watch they keep?

Robert Frost

Prologue

When I was eighteen, my father fell off a cliff. It was a stupid way to die. There was a good moon. There was no wind. There was no excuse. He was pissing into the chine at Brock Tor on his way home from the pub and fell headlong drunk into the spring tide with his flies open.

I spent that night on the beach with Corwin, watching the moon silver the sea, and later an image lodged in my mind of our father in slow descent, turning within a glittering moonlit arc of urine. When I confided this to Corwin, he was angrier than I had ever seen him. I had fixed the image, and now he must share it with me, as if it were a memory. He hit me, which was fair, I thought – a back-handed swipe across the mouth that drew blood. I was so upset that I ran to the cabin and lay there all night half awake. At dawn, Corwin came and crawled into the bunk with me to kiss my swollen lip and say sorry. He was more generous then.

Of course, boys had been pissing into the chine for all time; atavistic squirts against the terrible indifference of the North Atlantic. But my father was not a boy, he was forty-four, and it was almost ten years before I was able to forgive him the vulgarity of his death. When, finally, I did so, I found that the imaginary falling man was more real to me than my memories of the living John Venton, and that all that remained of my sense of him was the residue of my embarrassment. I remember the exact moment of forgiveness. I was looking at a piece of sculpture in an exhibition, a model that lay on the floor. It was the perfect reproduction of a man's corpse but reduced to the size of a large doll – or a baby, perhaps. It was agonizingly tender, and when I saw the title,

Dead Dad, I felt an emotion so violent and so unexpected that it took me some moments to identify what it might be. I thought of the man who had made this, how he had sat, dispassionate, by the naked corpse that had been his father and had recorded every detail of the last of his physical presence in the world. I envied him, I realized – the emotion I was experiencing was *envy*. Oh! I thought. That's interesting!

I did not share this with Corwin. He was off and away. I did think to tell Matthew, and to ask him to explain his son, my father, to me, but by then he had become translucent with age, as if he were screen-printed on fine silk, and I did not want to risk anything that might pierce or rend. I should have asked, of course. And not only then: Matthew was always disappointed to find me so un-inquisitive.

Matthew used to say that every tribe must have a *Rememberer of History*. He often spoke in italics. It was an annoying habit, which Corwin has inherited. Matthew said that among tribal peoples myth and history are passed down as if the teller has experienced it himself, in the first person. The teller does not recount, he recalls. 'And who's to say,' asked Matthew, 'that he is not, in fact, *remembering*? What do we know of the fate of the soul?'

Here I sit with Matthew's map. The whole story is contained within it – or, should I say, trapped within it? When he was dying and we began, too late, to decode the map, I understood him better. Matthew remembered on our behalf, and he imagined on our behalf, and he perceived that remembering and imagining share agency: any story, whether or not rooted in fact, may unleash any number of real events, and vice versa. Matthew's map is a work of his imagination, his collection of myths, histories, half-truths, fabrications and omissions, but it is also a real world. When he drafted it, when he began to paint for himself his very own garden of earthly delights, he drew a circle around himself – and, it took me some time to realize, around us. Circles

are strong in magic and, whether he intended to or not, Matthew fixed himself upon the centre. Sometimes I indulge in upsetting myself by imagining him there, with marionette arms and legs, secured to the canvas by a butterfly collector's pin.

But before I get back to my father, I need to dwell a little longer on Matthew, to remember on *his* behalf. I'm explaining this here, now, because you might say: 'You can't possibly know that. You weren't there.' Or you might say: 'That's not how I remember it.'

It doesn't matter. This is how I remember it. This is how I have imagined it. It doesn't matter if you don't imagine it like this at all.

PART ONE

I.

The house sits at the centre of the map, framed by the Venton lands as set out in the deeds. One hundred and fifty acres fan around it: to the north, a swathe of wooded valley, tangled branches tumbling into the mill stream; to the south, gorse- and hazel-edged grazing; up and east, where the land settles into wind-washed fields, what was once Thornton Farm. But by the time Matthew painted it, most of that land had long since been lost to the Ventons. The house itself had the bones of a farm, but had been tamed to genteel Georgian proportions, and the Ventons, having forgotten that they had once been farmers, looked only west from their windows, down through the indented fields, to the Atlantic.

Long before Matthew came to contain his life within a circle, that triangle of ever-altering sea was the shape that expressed his world. Later, when he was old enough to be let loose, he added another triangle, the three points between which he ran and played: house, church, cabin. In those days, before he learned to fear the sea, this triangle seemed to point towards an exit – west across the water. Matthew sat on the cabin steps and dreamed himself agile in the rigging, toes gripping rope – a dream unimpaired by the fact that the tall ships were long obsolete.

It was Matthew's father, the wilful James, who had built the cabin. He also had dreamed of crossing the sea. He was a restless man with ideas of escape. It had been his ambition to travel to America, and he pictured himself striding through birch forests, crunching through snow with a rifle slung over the shoulder of his bearskin coat. James had saved the money for his passage and had been all packed to leave, but he had exercised his strength of

will upon Matthew's mother and, instead of crossing the Atlantic, found himself standing over the Norman font in Thornton church, renouncing the Devil and all his works, with the infant Elizabeth – the first of his four children – in his arms. In the churchyard lay dead Ventons, their bones weighted down by tombstones, while in the church other names were remembered on memorial tablets, which echoed the lament 'lost at sea, lost at sea', around the cold walls. James envied them the freedom of their souls.

Matthew was the late, hope-long-given-up-for, son. His mother never quite lost her air of surprise that he should be in the world. Before him were The Sisters. He thought of The Sisters in the singular – an entity that was older and of the world in a terrifyingly practical way. The Sisters made a lot of noise – mainly a six-legged clattering of shoes on the flagstones – and moved at the centre of a storm of flying objects. Pots, pans and preserving jars circled, suspended in the air, always on the point of falling. There were flurries of wet sheets and dry underwear. Rouges, hair-pins, magazines and knitting patterns scattered in their wake like autumn leaves. Matthew often thought that if he hadn't had so many sisters, things would have been very different: he would not have spent so much time hiding in the woods on the bank of the mill leat.

He burrowed into the spaces formed by storm-tipped trees, which he transformed into earthy dens furnished with wooden crates. He hung lanterns from overhanging roots and hid there with his books and a sketchpad. He sketched the plants and fungi around him and took the pictures home to identify in the large reference books in his father's study. After a while Matthew began to sketch pictures of the creatures he saw or imagined there. Badgers and foxes became increasingly anthropomorphic; leaf-clad pixies appeared. James, who took an interest in the development of his son's mind, was horrified – it was effeminate to believe in fairies and talking animals. He called upon the Crab Man.

The Crab Man looked like Matthew's idea of Long John Silver, but without the peg-leg or the parrot. Instead, his props were the crabs that rattled around in the metal bucket at the kitchen door. Laughing saltily, he would take a couple out of the bucket, one in each hand, and, with a leathery leer, wave them in Matthew's face. Snippety-snap went the terrifying crab claws within an inch of Matthew's nose. They smelt of fish-water and engine oil.

James had conceived an adventure for Matthew, a man-making crabbing expedition. One evening, one of the Crab Man's children appeared at the kitchen door with the message 'Dad reckons tomorrow will do', and the following early morning James shook Matthew awake and they walked over to The Sands together in the dark. It was May, turning warm, the scent of ploughed soil rising from the fields and the rooks stirring in the trees. In the Crab Man's kitchen, Matthew allowed himself to be laughed at by the older children. James had told him to accept some tea and a bit of bread so as not to offend, but to decline any second offers because *life was hard* for the Crab Man, and it was Matthew's duty to note this and learn from it.

James came with them and waved from the harbour wall, quickly disappearing from view into the before-dawn. Already, Matthew knew that this was a mistake. The thick, sweet smell of engine oil had travelled through his blood to his gut and no amount of breeze would shift it. Whenever he looked back to that day, which he did often, he saw the ink-black water swelling towards him, and remembered the elastic falling away of the centre of his body as the boat dipped into the shining bowl left by the wave, and the rising and re-springing of his intestines far up into the centre of his chest as the bow lifted. As dawn greyed over, he apprehended, through the misery that burned from his throat to his navel, that the shore, obscured by mist, was not visible. He filled with terror at the vastness of the sea, and began to understand the scale of ocean and, even more terrifyingly, atmosphere and universe. It seemed impossible that this tiny molecule of a

vessel could keep them safe, and he believed quite sincerely that he would die and that the sea, in her colossal, insatiable greed, would swallow him whole. The waters will close over me, he thought, and I will leave no trace. The salt water will fill my nostrils, and my lungs, and take my voice, and I will sink. And the fish will nibble at my eyes and my flesh, and my veins and arteries will float and trail like seaweed, and my bones will lift backwards and forwards at the bottom of the sea and grind to sand, and no one, no one, will know that those tiny white grains were me.

He slumped in the boat and, between bouts of hauling himself up the gunwale to empty his stomach, prayed to all the gods that were plausible to him. The Crab Man, who had expected this, did not hold it against him. He and his son dropped their crab pots into the water while Matthew vomited himself dry. Eventually, the son made Matthew a little nest of coiled rope in a locker in the bow and pushed him in with a friendly pat on the shoulder, and there Matthew lay, passing in and out of sleep.

Around mid-morning he woke to an altered pitch of the boat. It was bumping very gently on its fenders against the side of the cliff. He roused himself to see where he was and found that they were in a cove, protected from the wind. The engine was switched off and the Crab Man was holding the boat steady. His boy was standing on the gunwale and reaching into the cliff face. When he pulled out his hand there were two mottled brown eggs in it, which he handed to his father, who, seeing that Matthew was awake, held them out on the flat of his palm for him to look at.

The gulls were strangely resigned to the robbing of their nests, and Matthew, curious enough to overcome his nausea for a moment, emerged to look up the height of the sheer cliff face at the wheeling gulls and the enviably balancing boy. 'Why don't they attack?' he asked.

'I don't know,' shrugged the Crab Man. 'I've often wondered that myself.' He placed the eggs in a bucket lined with straw. And then, to make sure that Matthew understood, 'You don't take

from a full nest. You take from the nests with a single egg, when they've only just started to lay – that way they'll lay again, see?'

On the way home, the Crab Man switched off the engine and put up some sail, and he and his son sang, which only increased Matthew's misery because he could not join in. In the moment that he jumped from the boat onto the harbour wall he experienced an ecstasy of love of dry land and a relief to be alive that left a deep impression on his eleven-year-old mind. The thing about land, he now perceived, was that it could be marked – you could leave upon it scratchings and scrapings, and in the future, centuries after you were dead, an imprint of you would remain and someone who knew how to read it might revive a memory of you. And the more time you spent on land engraving your story upon it, the greater the chance that there you still would be.

Matthew did not paint the Crab Man or his boat into the map, but the cipher for the day he learned to fear the sea is there, for anyone who knows how to read it.

A third of the way up Highcliffe is a ledge.

And on that ledge is a nest.

And in that nest is a single seagull's egg.