The Last Days of Dogtown

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Extract

The Death of Abraham Wharf

Judy Rhines decided to take the footpath through the pasture. It was half the distance of walking all the way down the Commons Road and back up Dogtown Road and she wanted to get there early enough to be of help. But the going was slow. The winter of 1814 had buckled the field with frost and there was black ice in every hollow. If she didn't consider every step, she might end up as bad off as Abraham Wharf, who certainly had no need of her hurry.

The cold seemed to add hours and miles to even the shortest journey through Dogtown. Gloucester, which was barely an hour's walk for a healthy man in good weather, could seem as remote as Salem in February. It was a gloomy landscape even on a fine day, with its rutted thoroughfares and ruined houses and the odd collection of souls who had washed up into the rocky hills of Cape Ann. At least it isn't windy, Judy consoled herself.

She was the first to arrive at Easter Carter's house. "My right-hand friend," said Easter, holding out a shawl for her. "Come by the fire."

Judy smiled at the tiny woman, hung up her cold-stiffened cloak,

and took shelter in the warm wrap. After the feeling had returned to her fingertips and cheeks, she squared her shoulders and went over to take a look at the body of Abraham Wharf, which lay on the floor in the far corner of the room.

Judy lifted the faded scrap of yellow gingham that covered his face and chest. It was a shame and a sorrow. Nobody spoke of suicide much, but Judy wondered if it might be a far more common escape than anyone suspected. Then it occurred to her that there was a curious lack of blood on Wharf: if a man cuts his own throat, shouldn't his collar be soaked through? Shouldn't his hands be stained, his sleeves caked? Perhaps the cold had frozen it, she reasoned. Or maybe Easter had cleaned him up.

Before she could ask any questions, the door opened and Ruth walked in, her arms full of firewood. Judy marveled at the sight of eight real logs: the nearby hills had been stripped of trees years ago. Dogtowners burned mostly peat and dung.

Then again, she thought, Ruth brought mystery wherever she went. A stranger would be hard-pressed to see that the coffee-colored African wearing trousers and a cap was a "she" at all. Ruth had never been seen in a dress and preferred the name "John Woodman," though everyone knew her as Black Ruth. A stonemason, of all things, she lodged in Easter's attic. Judy still hoped that Easter would one day tell her more of Ruth's story. She was fascinated by everything having to do with Cape Ann's few Africans.

"Hello, Ruth," said Judy. "What a great treat you bring us." Ruth nodded, placed the logs by the fire, and retreated upstairs before the others started to trickle in.

Easter Carter's was the biggest house fit for habitation in the Commons Settlement, which was Dogtown's real name. With an eight-foot ceiling and a twenty-foot-long parlor, its fireplace was large enough for a side of beef, though it had been many years since anything so rich had sizzled there. The place was large only by com-

parison with everything else still standing for miles around, and it served as a tavern in everything but name and taxes. Young people and sailors tramped up the old road seeking a good time, and Easter let them have it. She loved having company, and even a corpse was welcome if it fetched in a crop of the living.

That day, the first visitors included a few ancient ladies who arrived, one by one, braving the cold to pay their respects to the deceased and hoping for a glass of ale in his honor, and perhaps even a bite to eat.

Among the early arrivals, there was but one unlined face, which also belonged to the only breathing male in the room. Taking his turn beside the body, Oliver Younger removed his hat and coughed, trying to distract attention while he nudged at the cloth with his foot to get a better look at his first corpse. But Tammy Younger saw what he was up to and smacked the back of her nephew's head with the flat of her hand.

"What in hell is wrong with you?" she said. All eyes in the dim room turned toward them. "What the hell did I ever do to be plagued with such a nit of a boy? I ask you, Judy Rhines. What merits me the village idiot here as my punishment?"

Judy placed herself between Tammy's squat form and the skinny twelve-year-old. She looked down at Abraham's body, and Oliver Younger saw the sadness in her eyes and wished he had the gumption to say something kind to her. But Tammy would shame him in front of God and the devil for showing any feeling toward Judy Rhines. He gritted his teeth and walked back toward the fire, even though that took him close to the creaking ladies gathered there, the eldest being Mary Lurvey, Abraham Wharf's bereaved sister, who stank of death herself.

Mary's red nose dripped a steady stream as she rocked herself back and forth on Easter Carter's best chair, blubbering about how he'd burn in hell for taking his own life.

"My poor, poor brother," she moaned. "I won't be seein' him in heaven, that's sure. He's going to burn, and it's on my head. It is, for I should have warned him off." She repeated this refrain every time the door opened upon another face, chapped and curious to learn if it was true that Wharf had done himself in.

Each new arrival clucked in sympathy as she settled in, thankful for the warmth and companionship in what had once been the community's great showplace. It was the only house ever to have a second story, even back in the days when the settlement was full of proud men. That was long before it had turned into a collection of broken huts and hovels inhabited mostly by spinsters and widows without children, and few with so much as an extra spoon in their cupboards. Marooned by poverty, or peculiarity, or plain mulishness, they foraged a thin livelihood selling berries and brews made of roots and twigs. For their pains, they were branded "trash-eaters" and mocked all over Cape Ann.

"No one left up there but witches and whores," said the wastrels in the taverns. "They dally with their dogs up there," said the farmers and the fishermen. And all of them traded lies about having it off with Judy or any other skirt that didn't have one foot in the grave. With a wink and a grin, they'd say, "A dog can have his day up there."

It was doubtless a barroom wit who first called the fading village a dogtown. That the slander had stuck with the force of a christening had been a bleeding thorn in Abraham Wharf's heart, and he'd never let the term pass his lips.

Defending the Commons Settlement had been his mission, and anyone who'd let him talk for more than a minute got an earful of how it used to be the finest address on the North Shore, indeed, in all the Commonwealth. According to him, the most respected families had lived there and raised the finest livestock—cattle, sheep, and oxen. Wharf had been their leader—or at least, that's how he told

it. His Anne was the prettiest wife. His sheep gave the best wool. His sons had been most likely to take charge of the whole damned Cape. But that was "once't," as he put it.

"He was bitter," said Easter Carter, and she recalled Wharf's much-repeated claim that the war for independence had killed off the best of his neighbors. The ones who returned with all four limbs attached decided against the thankless work of harvesting rocks when Gloucester Harbor delivered an easier living. Buying and selling became the way to making a fortune.

"Remember how he'd say the word 'shopkeeper'?" said Judy. "Like he was speaking the worst sort of blasphemy."

"My brother didn't set a foot into church for forty years," Mary said. "Forty years he went without hearing a word of scripture." Abraham had come to sit by her fire just two nights earlier and asked if she thought that killing yourself meant sure damnation. Mary had dismissed his question with a sour warning to stop talking rubbish, and she spent the rest of their last evening together complaining about her dyspepsia and her ungrateful children.

The memory of that last conversation was a terrible shame to Mary, whose shrill sobs reminded Judy of nothing so much as a stuck pig. The unkindness of that notion caused her to hurry over to the bereaved woman with another cup of comfort. The smell of boiling cabbage, wet woolens, and cheap tobacco seemed even stronger in that corner of the room, and Judy welcomed the clean, icy blast when the door swung open again.

"Well, if it ain't Granny Day," said Easter, greeting a lady nearly as wrinkled and bald as one of last year's crab apples.

"Didn't know if I'd make it in this cold," apologized the newcomer. "But then I thought I owed it to him."

"It's all right, dear," said Easter, steering her over toward Abraham's body as she retold the story of how Cornelius Finson had found him early that morning with a long knife in his own hand.

He'd done the deed in the shadow of the Whale's Jaw, two enormous boulders that together made a perfect replica of a great fish head. Cornelius, or Black Neal as some called him, had carried the corpse to Easter, who sent him straight into town to find some able-bodied relations to carry Wharf back to Gloucester for a Christian burial.

When Granny Day opened the door, the biggest of the settlement dogs had padded in behind her. A long-haired brute, nearly six hands tall, Bear ambled directly over to Easter Carter and nuzzled at her hand. Finding nothing there to eat, he headed for the chilly lean-to, which had been tacked onto the house back in the day when there'd been food enough to require a separate pantry. A shaggy congregation was already gathered there, huddled jowl by haunch on a filthy scrap of carpet: Pinknose, Brindle, Spots, Big Brown, and Greyling. One by one, the dogs had slipped into the house behind a two-legged guest, lured out of secret burrows by the unusual commotion and the smell of cooking.

When Bear entered, the others rose so he could take the warmest spot in the center. He lowered himself in his rightful place with a sigh while the rest of them circled and scratched and settled again.

Judy Rhines smiled at the pack, watching as steam rose off the breathing heap of fur. Let them call us Dogtowners, she thought, I'm satisfied to be thought of as one of them. She felt less inclined to claim fellowship with the collection of unhappy creatures in the parlor, each one wrapped in her own dark shawl. And poor, broody Oliver, arms crossed over his narrow chest, slouched against the wall, his chin on his chest.

With his thick black hair, green eyes, and high cheekbones, he wouldn't be a bad-looking boy if he'd only pick up his head and stop scowling. Oliver caught her gaze and seemed to glare back, then took to studying the ceiling. A strange one, she thought, and wondered if he'd ever make anything of himself. It was too bad that

Oliver had nowhere else to go. Tammy was his blood-kin, but he might have been better off bound out as an apprentice: maybe some honest farmer with a softhearted wife. Of course, that was a rough gamble, too, as Judy well knew.

Oliver's great-aunt was a terror, but there was no changing Tammy Younger. Her name was often invoked by mothers wishing to keep their children from straying into the woods. They called her a witch and warned that her favorite tea included the plump fingers and toes of heedless boys and girls.

Judy thought of Tammy as a force of nature, unpleasant as a wasp's nest, but inevitable. Then again, Judy was known as a soft touch, having once been heard defending skunks and mosquitoes as having a rightful place and purpose. Abraham Wharf used to scold her about being so tenderhearted. "You take care of yourself," he'd said to her, only a month before he died. "You take good care of Judy Rhines for once't." Remembering his words, Judy Rhines drew her dark brows together and bowed her head. Oliver watched and wondered how she could grieve for such a bad-tempered old windbag.

He'd never seen her look so low. Judy usually wore a gentle half smile that drew people to her. There was a sort of natural pleasantness, an irresistible goodness to her face. Not that she was a great beauty. Her eyes were a pale brown, a shade lighter than the brown of her hair, which she parted in a sharp line over her right ear. In her homespun dress, unbleached apron, dust-colored shoes, and bare head, Judy Rhines put Oliver in mind of a hen. It was not the most flattering picture, he knew, but it was comfortable enough to let him imagine her caring for him in return.

Oliver glanced over at Tammy, making sure she hadn't caught him staring at Judy. She was at least thirty, Oliver guessed, though she could be forty.

Mary Lurvey's weeping had turned into a desperate coughing fit that fixed all attention upon her. In September, Tammy had

warned that Mary wouldn't last the winter. Abraham's death would hasten that likely guess into a mystic prediction and strengthen Tammy's terrifying effect on the foolish believers who already feared her reputed powers.

After Mary quieted down, Easter served helpings of boiled cabbage and potatoes. The ladies huddled by the fire set their little china pipes on the floor and exclaimed over the plain fare like it was a wedding feast. Easter spooned more onto their plates even before they'd finished, knowing it would be their only hot meal that day and possibly the next.

Easter was one of Judy's favorites. No more than four and a half feet in her shoes, Easter had a long, beaky nose flanked by small, squinted eyes. But the face under her old-fashioned cap beamed whenever people were under her roof, especially when it was younger folks holding court and calling her "Mother."

It was Easter who'd come up with the name "Judy Rhines," and in her mouth it sounded like an endearment. Most women were called by their family name, like Granny Day or Widow Lurvey. Up in the woods, unmarried women like Easter were sometimes known by their given names, rather like naughty children. But Easter had taken a shine to the sound of "Judy Rhines" and it stuck.

It had been so long since Judy had heard "Judith Elizabeth Ryan," that if someone had addressed her so, she might not remember to answer. Judith Elizabeth Ryan sounded like a woman who owned a Sunday dress, a flowered wool carpet, and a white teapot, not someone who had often made a supper from berries and roots dug out of the woods, or who cleaned other people's houses for a length of cotton, or who kept a half-wild dog at her feet to keep from freezing on winter nights.

Just as Judy was about to take some of Easter's stew for herself, the door flew open again, hitting the wall with a bang that caused the ladies to jump and then coo at the sight of little Sammy Stanley,

borne in like a scrap of driftwood on a wave of three wet skirts and a peal of laughter. Dark Molly Jacobs and fair Sally Phipps rushed for the fire, reaching their four red hands to the glow, while Mrs. Stanley closed the door with a polite flourish and walked directly to the center of the room. When she was certain that all eyes were fixed on her, she pulled a bottle from inside a ragged raccoon muff.

"What a welcome sight you are," said Tammy, addressing herself to the rum.

"In memory of Master Wharf," said Mrs. Stanley.

"Too bad the poor old fart ain't here to enjoy it," Tammy said.

Oliver laughed at the rude word, a boyish reflex he tried to swallow when he saw Judy shake her head. But Mrs. Stanley turned her famous smile in his direction as she removed her hood. Yellow curls cascaded out, unbound like a girl's, and spread out in pretty ringlets over a shirt so white it nearly glowed in the dim room.

Mrs. Stanley—no one had ever heard her Christian name—carried herself like the great beauty she'd once been. Blue-eyed and blonde, she triumphed over the wrinkles at her eyes and the slack line of her chin by batting her lashes, pursing her lips, and placing a soft hand upon the forearm of any fellow who drew near enough to catch her nearsighted gaze.

Tammy leered. "Rum, eh? What sailor got lucky?"

"Oh, goodness," Mrs. Stanley replied. "Let's not tread that path, shall we, lest your own misplaced steps come into question."

"You old whore," Tammy said. "You've got more brass than the whole of Boston sets on its tables come Election Day."

Mrs. Stanley shrugged and walked over to see the body, pulling the reluctant child behind her. She placed a hand on her bosom and bowed her head as she pulled off Sammy's cap, revealing a matching tumble of blond hair that hung down to the boy's shoulders. Oliver started to laugh at the girlish locks, but stopped when he saw Judy Rhines frowning in his direction.

Sammy, who was no more than six years old, blinked in terror and bit his lip till it bled. He'd never seen a dead man, and the sudden heat in the room made him swoony. Judy noticed the child's distress and took his hand, leading him away from the corpse and toward the back room. Sammy pulled away when he spotted the crew of dogs, who raised their heads in a single gesture and stared.

"They bite?" he asked.

"Don't fret about them," Judy said, and handed him a cold biscuit smeared with goose fat.

Sammy took the food in his hand but made no move to eat it.

"Go ahead," Judy smiled.

He looked up at her, bewildered.

"Don't tell me you're not hungry."

"Never before the ladies," he said.

"Well, that's very nice manners." Judy Rhines leaned down and said, "But right now, I think you better eat that bread before one of the dogs comes over and snaps it up."

The thought horrified Sammy, who opened his mouth as wide as he could and ate the whole thing in two bites. The salt and sheer goodness of it brought water to his blue eyes. After he swallowed, the boy wiped his mouth delicately on the inside of his cuff, took Judy's hand, and kissed it as he made a brisk little bow. She tried not to laugh and watched him cross the room to sit beside Granny Day.

Sammy had arrived two years earlier, a note pinned to his coat. No one knew what it said, or even who had brought the child. According to the gossip, when Mrs. Stanley read the message the only words out of her mouth were, "Damn me." She introduced the boy child as her daughter's son and said his name was Sam Maskey, though he was known as Sammy Stanley.

No one knew Mrs. Stanley even had a daughter till that moment. About Mr. Stanley, she placed a well-tended hand over her heart

and said, "Lost at sea." No one questioned the claim though few believed it.

Sammy knew his grandmother wasn't fond of him, even though he did as he was told and kept still, which was all that grown people seemed to want of children. The first time he sat in Granny Day's grammar school, she'd had a devil of a time getting him to say his letters out loud and thought he might be deaf if not stupid. But then she spied him reading the Bible, and when she coaxed him discovered that he'd memorized all of Genesis and had started on Exodus. For that, she'd patted him on the head and given him a cracker too hard to chew.

Sammy felt Oliver Younger's eyes on him. The older boy curled a strand of his lank, greasy hair around his finger and pouted his lips. That didn't bother the boy. Mrs. Stanley had never shown him anything in the way of affection, but she'd taught him that you were more likely to get what you wanted if you were polite and smelled good, and Oliver was plainly filthy and rude.

After a moment, Oliver lost interest in the child and turned his glance away from that corner of the room. He didn't want to have to meet Granny Day's eyes; he'd quit her classroom long before Sammy arrived. He'd left the Gloucester grammar school as well, even though it had been warm and the girls would sometimes share their dinners. He just got tired of fighting for the good name of Dogtown, a place he hated yet felt required to defend.

Besides, Oliver didn't put much stock in schooling. A man could go to sea or enlist in a war without book learning. A man could come back covered in glory and with enough pay to claim Judy Rhines as his own. She'd see him in uniform and recognize him as just the fellow to take her out of the ruin of Dogtown. She'd cook for him and keep him warm and smile at him sweeter than she smiled at that pretty boy. Oliver longed to speak to her, or just to gaze in her direction without worrying about being caught.