

JASON BROWN

## THE WRECK OF THE IPSWICH SPARROW

IN APRIL OF 2000, the white clapboard house on the corner of Second Street and Litchfield Road in Vaughn, Maine, appeared on the market for the first time since its construction in 1770. The house appeared grand and square, but by stating that the new owners would need to update an otherwise fine example of Georgian style retaining many original features the Century 21 website was acknowledging that it was held together by horsehair and lead paint. Though the roof might last another winter and the knob-and-tube wiring appeared intact, the battleship of an oil furnace might explode at any moment, a dark shellac of bacon grease sealed the rusty metal cabinets and drop ceiling of the 1951 kitchen, the sills absorbed and shed water like a sink sponge, the chimney and walls housed a colony of red squirrels, and many of the south-facing windows were held in place by the strength of the glass. The realtor, Mary Simpson, was counting on out-of-state buyers with spare cash and romantic notions about the past.

The day after the listing went live, the father of the current owners, John Carleton Howland, called from California to complain that Mary had no right to “give away” the oldest structure in town (a claim that she disproved in thirty seconds of online research), which had been built by one of his ancestors.

“But it doesn’t belong to *you specifically* anymore, am I right?” she asked as politely as possible, and he hung up on her, which seemed an okay result. She recognized his name and assumed that he was related to old John Howland, who ended his days by crashing on his electric tricycle. At one time, there had been Howlands all over town.

The next day one of the two current owners—the son of the man she had talked to the day before—called from Oregon to complain that the asking price was “absurdly low.” He also claimed that Benedict Arnold had stayed

in the house for three nights during his failed 1775 expedition up the Kennebec River to take Quebec from the English—an expedition, he pointed out, that included members of his own family. He felt sure that they should be asking twice as much for the house, and he didn't feel confident that his sister and the realtor really knew what they were doing.

"What would make you feel more confident?" she asked in the same neutral tone she used for anyone who called from south of Freeport.

"More money," he said.

The other owner—the son's sister, Phoebe—also called to say that she would arrive soon from California to empty the house. She seemed to have a more reasonable sense of the house's value, which was apparently not very much by West Coast standards, and thankfully she was the main person Mary had been communicating with.

Mary told Phoebe that someone might buy the house in order to tear it down because the land, which was located just a block from Water Street, was more valuable than the house. Phoebe mentioned historic zoning, and Mary said, "You haven't lived here in a while, dear. We have no such thing."

When her father decided to deed the house to Phoebe and her brother the year before, he had just survived a heart attack and had given up eating meat and cheese. He transferred the house in a hurry, Phoebe assumed, because he thought he might die of the same heart troubles that had killed his own father. After they cleaned out his pipes (as he described it) and sent him home with an approved menu of vegetables, he began power walking through the neighbourhood twice a day and seemed ten years younger.

When she realized that her father wouldn't die soon, Phoebe offered to give the house back. As a lawyer, she had experience with people not thinking things through, and she knew that her father desperately wanted to return to Vaughn and the house where he'd grown up. But her father didn't have enough money to retire and the house needed work, so he waved her off.

"What's done is done," he said, but Phoebe felt confident that he hadn't fathomed the implications of this statement.

Phoebe's brother, who lived with his barely legal girlfriend in Portland, where he worked in a bakery, had no children, and smoked pot daily with his employers, wanted the money from the house to start a vintage bicycle

restoration business. Phoebe, who worked a million hours a week for a law firm in Palo Alto, had two kids, and recently separated from her husband—if that’s what you call it when one party decides to stop dealing with reality—needed the money to refinance her overpriced shack in Palo Alto.

“It has to be done,” her brother said in the congested tone he had acquired in the northwest.

When Phoebe dropped her kids off at her parents’ house on the way to the airport, they ran inside to their room, arranged with more books and toys than they had at home, and didn’t even say goodbye. Their grandmother, who had worked for years as a surly disciplinarian at an elementary school in Maine, had turned into an enabler of constant fun: video games, Ben and Jerry’s, staying up until nine. It wasn’t the childhood Phoebe remembered, when ice cream appeared as regularly as fireworks.

As Phoebe headed for her car, her mother reminded her to bring back Aunt Helen’s trunk. “Your father doesn’t want it to end up in some pawn shop.”

“Why doesn’t dad come out and ask me himself?” Phoebe could hear her father on the back patio listening to some game on his transistor radio. Even though he had refused to take the house back, he couldn’t forgive her for selling it (her brother didn’t merit blame).

Phoebe eventually gave in and told her mother to tell her father that she would bring back the trunk.

The house had once belonged to Aunt Helen, who was not actually an aunt, if Phoebe remembered correctly, but an ancestor of some sort—one of many to have lived in that old house. She had inherited it from her father and deeded it late in life to her nephew, Phoebe’s grandfather. Otherwise, the house never would have passed down to Phoebe and her brother. Phoebe discovered the record in the copy of the deed she took to read on the plane. She also found an old will that detailed how Aunt Helen’s brother and only sibling died before their father, leaving her as the sole heir. She had no children of her own, so she may have deeded the house to her nephew because she wanted help caring for it. That Phoebe’s father had never said much about Aunt Helen offered no insight into what he might know or how he might feel about her.

When Phoebe parked the rental car in front of the house, she could see that it had “fallen into habits indicative of self-loathing,” as her former ther-

apist would've said. She walked around the outside pressing her hands into clapboards, face boards, and windowsills. In several places her finger passed through the carapace of paint and sank up to her knuckle in wood softened to moss. She pulled a rusted iron nail out of a clapboard and snapped it in half as if it were a toothpick. In the bathroom, the floor at the foot of the tub compressed like a spring. A pile of mortar and broken bricks had collected in the hearth.

The air warmed in the afternoon, and as she walked from room to room over the shifting and groaning planks she tried to decide what she should ship back to her parents. The closets were full of dishes, wooden bowls, old boots, canvas coats, and small folding wallets containing daguerreotypes and tintypes of relatives she never knew and couldn't identify. Trunks were crammed with piles of old deeds, letters, and documents written in the scrawl of the time. And there was more in the attic: blanket chests filled with moth-eaten woolens, two old flags the length of coffins, books both on shelves and stacked on the floor in wooden crates, all of it covered in dust. Coughing so badly she thought she would crack a rib, she began to separate everything into two piles: one for storage and one to give away. If she had asked her father what to save, he would have said, "All of it." He was reliably unhelpful.

The room to the right at the top of the stairs had always been called "Aunt Helen's room"—except by Phoebe's mother, who, in rebellion against a house whose every nook signified a history not her own, had always refused to call it anything but "the guest room." This room contained the old pale blue sea trunk with the name "Capt. J. M. Howland" stenciled on the lid, a simple pine bureau with an old hurricane lamp, a pine rope bed, and a worn hooked rug on the floor. In the top drawer of the bureau someone had left several articles from the *Kennebec Journal* about Aunt Helen's life when she turned 105 in 1934. The newsprint was faded and torn to the point where Phoebe had to hold the articles under the light from the window.

*Kennebec Journal*, August 7th, 1934

A Life Full of Courage, Independence, and Often Joy

Miss Helen Jacobs Howland, a life-long resident of Vaughn and one of the oldest living people in the United States, turns 105 today.

Her age and vitality stupefy many. Born in Vaughn in 1829, she grew up travelling around the world with her family. Her father, Captain John Mainwaring Howland, was one of the town's prominent sea captains and made many trips to India and China. After she finished travelling the world with her parents, she returned to Vaughn and lived the rest of her days in the home where she was born and grew up. She never married and has been very active in town life all these years. A graduate of the teacher's college at the University of Maine in Farmington, she worked in the library until she was 93 and volunteered in the local school until just a few years ago.

As she grew older, she needed some assistance with household chores but was otherwise active both in and outside of her home. Driving her nephew's Buick was one of her favorite activities, but she decided to quit driving when she turned 103—a decision that was entirely her own.

"It was not because I was pulled over by the police or had an accident," she insisted during the interview in the Second Street home where she lives with her nephew, John Hayes Howland, and his family. "I just stopped driving." At 105, she still doesn't need a hearing aid, and her eyeglasses sit unused on a table-board most of the time. She and her nephew showed us her room and her enormous 20-year-old parrot, whose name is Polly. The massive bird swooped around the room, sat at her feet, and called her by name several times during the interview.

"She is really a unique person; she is wired differently than the rest of us," her nephew said. "She takes life as it comes and doesn't worry about things."

She loves to play cards, especially bridge, spades, and cribbage. She also keeps busy with crossword and jigsaw puzzles. She can often be found having a cup of tea while looking out the window at the river from her rocking chair. She particularly loves when the Maine lupine flowers are in bloom, and her favorite flowers are orchids. When someone complains that economic times are tough, she replies, "This is nothing."

When we saw that she had a radio on her bureau, we asked her about the new music, and she said, "They try to sing, but they just holler, so that's no good."

She is somewhat frail but independent and courageous in spirit,

and her mind maintains an iron grip on memories and dates. She doesn't hesitate when asked if she still enjoys life.

"Most things are in the past," she said, "but I have a good appetite, and I love dessert."

Phoebe had to be back at work in less than a week, so she didn't have time to go through all of Aunt Helen's papers, but she picked up her journal for a quick look. For several years after she started the journal she wrote very little and simply pasted in newspaper clippings of "Arrivals" and "Sailings" as well as "Wrecks" and "Piracies." When she did write, she spoke of wanting to go to sea with her father. "When I turn 14, or so he says," she wrote three months before her 14th birthday. But when she finally turned 14, she wrote, "He says not now. I think he wants me here forever." At the bottom of the page she drew a sketch of a ship in Calcutta Harbour that she must have copied from another drawing—possibly from one of the many sketches in her father's logs.

Aunt Helen must have felt as if her real life—the one she longed to live—waited for her beyond the mouth of the river. Phoebe didn't understand how a girl who'd never left Maine and had barely travelled outside her hometown could help but feel paralyzed by the idea of setting out with a captain who had to rely on inaccurate charts and a brass compass and sextant. But Aunt Helen did not dwell on the instruments because she knew that her father always returned from the sea and never, she wrote, suffered from bad luck or human error. Maybe the possibility of drowning felt insignificant compared to the fear of spending her whole life in her bedroom.

Phoebe had feared the same thing at fourteen. The spring before they moved to California she applied for a job at the new Dairy Queen so she would have enough money her second year of high school to buy her own car and drive herself and her friends Kim and Stacey out to the Monmouth lakes, where Kim's parents had a cabin. Kim's parents would let them use the cabin by themselves—not overnight, but still—and they would float on a raft under the sun while the fish swam beneath them.

Before she had a chance to scoop her first cone, however, Phoebe's mother announced that the family would move to Portsmouth before the fall. Phoebe's father lost his job in Augusta when the governor changed, and he had been out of work for more than half a year. "Your father and I don't want to go, but this is a really good opportunity. There are not a lot of jobs

anywhere right now. If things go well, who knows, maybe we can come back before too long.”

Phoebe knew nothing about Portsmouth, even though it was only two and half hours away. She had all her friends—girls she’d known her whole life—and planned (hoped) to play softball for the University of Maine, where most of her friends would go after high school. If they moved to Portsmouth, none of it—nothing—would ever happen.

Her mother did not seem sympathetic. She only said, “You’ll adjust. You’ll make new friends.” To Phoebe, who had lived nowhere else and had known only these people, her mother’s words may as well have been spoken in French.

When Phoebe’s flashlight flickered and dimmed, she turned it off and sat in darkness. Mice pattered in the attic above and skittered down the inside of the walls. In her bare feet, she felt her way along the planks of the hall and down the stairs. Moonlight shone on the kitchen table where her father had read the paper every morning before work. She found matches in the drawer, lit the hurricane lamp that sat on a shelf, and climbed the stairs as the light sloshed against the plaster walls. In the upstairs hallway, she froze. The door to Aunt Helen’s room was open at the end of the hall. Of course it was—she had left it open—but she had a sense now that Aunt Helen was waiting for her in the room, sitting in her chair with her parrot on her knee. By the time she reached the doorway, she could see the empty chair in the corner and the journal lying open where she had left it on the bed.

In the end, Helen never went to sea with her father. Over the next three years she filled her journal sporadically with reports of what others had seen and done in other places, and then for months at a time she wrote very little or nothing at all. It wasn’t until 1848, following her marriage to Captain Robert William Pingree of Machias, that she finally left Vaughn. With only a few words about her husband (tall, mustached, a skilled captain), she filled her journal with descriptions of the birds that followed them off shore, the porpoises and whales, the crew of the brig Ipswich Sparrow (“a poor miserable set”), and the storm as they rounded the Cape of Good Hope (“the wind blew hard and the sea rolled mountains high and we did not know if our house on deck would go to pieces, but it stood yet”).

Helen’s billowing cursive slanted to the right like sails bent under the wind, and she filled page after page with details. In June, they anchored off

Point Balasore and waited for a pilot to take them to Calcutta. At Kedegree, the first village heading upriver, they rode ashore in boats made of sewn bark and rowed by men naked except for a bit of cloth below the waist. In Calcutta, the wide streets filled with men. “Our house is brick and we live on the second floor,” she wrote. “Robert’s banian also lives in such a house and his palanquin bearers rest outside when he is inside. We go to the Red Church, the English church. Services are at nine on Sunday. In the evening we walk on the Esplanade that leads up to the fort. On the way back to the house one afternoon, I saw a man whose hand was the size of the cushion of a chair. He kept uttering ‘buckshish’ to Robert and me. Captain Dole told us to ignore him. Robert threw a rupee at him anyway, and the man followed us, saying ‘buckshish’ in my ear and waving his giant hand in the heat. Robert said that half the people in the world were born with saddles on their backs and the other half were born to ride those people to death. I asked him how he thought of such a thing, and he replied that he had not. It was a saying from Montesquieu.”

Several months after she arrived in Calcutta, Helen wrote: “I am pregnant. More than five months now.”

Robert told Helen that she must stay home and not wander out—especially not alone. If she had to go out while he worked, his banian or one of their friends from Maine could accompany her. She did not listen, though, as she could not sleep when Robert left to sail up the coast to Bombay, Colombo, Madras, and ports on the Malabar coast. She thought of people in their circle of friends she might visit, but it seemed to her as if she did not know these people except “by circumstance.”

At home she sat by an open window on the second floor. She never lit the lamps at night but lay down when the light failed. One morning she told the house staff that they could leave. They didn’t understand at first and just stood looking at the floor. She had Robert’s banian translate that she wanted them to leave. “I dismissed them, but for no fault of their own,” Phoebe read. Helen gave them much of the money Robert had left her to use and asked them not to come back.

Several days later she left through the back entrance so that the servants might not see, though of course there were no servants. As Helen described walking through the heat, Phoebe felt the strain in her thighs and the burn on the skin of her neck. When it grew too hot, Helen rested in the shade. Late in the afternoon, she walked again, lost now as she turned down

one street after another until she found the river. A quarter mile up the bank a crowd of people gathered. When she drew closer, she saw that they surrounded a man's body wrapped in cloth on a pile of sticks: "The poor widow sat on a cot frame next to her husband's corpse with her two small sons about her and a large crowd of women and men both. They pulled brush on top of the sticks until the pile was four feet tall, and they wet flax in the river. The poor wife got upon her feet with a small basket in hand. The four men took the dead corpse of her husband and laid it on the pile of sticks with his head to the northward. The wife was assisted by the men to step off the cot frame. I thought that she was going to step away, but a man rubbed red paint in her hair and she walked round the pile three times before laying herself down alongside of her husband with her right hand under his neck. All around immediately hove on brush and wood, and there were four men with green bamboos. I didn't understand why at first, and then I understood that it was to hold her down in case she should not be able to stand the flames. After they had piled on enough brush, they hove on some oil and flour of brimstone. All this done, her two sons came round the pile with lighted torches. The eldest of them set fire to the pile towards her head and the other towards her feet. The natives made such a noise that I could not hear the last groan, but I saw when the pile was all in flames that she turned over on her back."

Helen felt sick after the funeral ceremony and walked to the home of Lucinda Crosby, one of their friends from Maine. The English doctor came and stood beside the bed next to a Hindoo in full dress who bowed deeply. Servants with flowing pants and turbans of the purest white lined the wall. Lucinda told Helen that she had a fever and that she should lie down. As soon as her head rested on a cushion, she fell asleep. She later learned that the doctor had been afraid she would lose the baby, but she did not. She stayed with the Crosbys until Robert arrived. She told him the story of what had happened and apologized. She had been foolish. She had not done as he asked her to do. He said that everything would be all right now. The doctor had explained that women could become confused on their own, especially during pregnancy. Robert never should have left her.

Several months later she gave birth to a boy, who was named William Howland Pingree, and from that time on it was as if a light had been turned out and Helen disappeared from her journals. Phoebe only found brief reports about Robert's business interests and the baby. Like the newspaper clippings of shipping reports, only the barest details remained.

Phoebe and her family did not move to Portsmouth after all. The job opportunity fell through at the same time that another opened up in California. So, with only a month's warning, they packed up their car and drove across the country. Phoebe knew about California from TV, as the Brady Bunch and the Partridge Family lived there, but those weren't real people.

When Phoebe first woke in her new bedroom two months after she had turned fifteen, she saw that her mother had arranged the bookcase, the bed, and the bureau exactly as they had been set up in Vaughn. One morning her father returned from the wilderness of stoplights and shopping centres with a box of donuts and called for everyone to load into the station wagon. They were going to see the Pacific. Phoebe told her mother that she didn't want to go, but she didn't dare say anything to her father, whose enthusiasm seemed as fragile as a teacup.

Her father pulled off the road on the way to the coast and marched to an enormous tree. "Come here," he said with his hand pressed against the bark. She did as she was told and fit her fingers into the grooves of the "skin," as her father called it, of one of the oldest living things on earth. "Look up," he said. Light filtered through the canopy. She would not have been surprised to see a dinosaur run through the woods.

They drove out of the hills, parked in a lot off Route 1, and followed their father along a wooden boardwalk to a wide beach that seemed to extend endlessly in both directions. Down the beach a man threw a tennis ball into the foaming wash for his dog, which rushed into the water again and again. When the man strolled farther away, he and his dog vanished in a wave of dissolving light.

Weeks and months passed. Her father went to work in the mornings, her mother started a garden, her brother came home with new friends, and no one at her new high school even noticed that she was new. She was one of three hundred other sophomores, many of them new to the area like her, and she blended in as long as she didn't speak. Her accent gave her away.

Her father soon left his big job opportunity, which had not turned out as well as he had hoped. The politics of the people he worked for failed to meet his father's standards, meaning he had alienated them right away. Within a week, he found another job that did not pay as well and was not what anyone would call an opportunity, he claimed. A person needed a job, he told the family over supper, and none existed in Maine—not for him. Phoebe recognized her father's familiar journey from prideful rebellion to self-pity.

He seemed to know nothing in between. In an effort to be not like him (her mother had often said that Phoebe and her father were alike), Phoebe decided to stop sulking or writing to her friends in Vaughn. It seemed to her then, as it did now, that a person could not live in more than one place at a time.

Less than a year ago a man at Phoebe's law firm named Ernst put his hand on her elbow, which he had done before, though not exactly in this way. Born in Munich, Ernst was one of those childless lawyers who'd never marry a second time. He was discreet and skittish, but disciplined. A little slouchy in his linen suits, he always kept his head down. When he turned to her and asked if she would meet him after work, she didn't hesitate. They went to a bar where they had gone with their colleagues many times. After one drink, they took his car to his condo, which was just four blocks away. Her husband and kids would not think her absence strange, as she often worked late.

Ernst kept his place simple and modern, with generic leather furniture. There were only two pictures: one of two old people (probably his parents) and another of a younger man (probably his brother). Everything he cared about would fit in two boxes.

After they had sex, Phoebe stepped onto his redwood balcony in her underwear and stood in the dark. Dressed in slippers and nothing else, Ernst joined her with two glasses of wine.

"I still think I will move back to Germany someday," he said, "but probably I won't." He smiled briefly, his lips stretching across his closed mouth. In the moonlight his skin looked like milk, and for a moment she imagined what he must have looked like as a boy, before law school.

When she first met her husband, Michael, in college, he dreamed of becoming a pilot and covered his dorm wall with posters of airplanes. He had also been a Marxist and an English major. She felt then as if they were embarking on a great journey together. Now she couldn't remember what it felt like to be with him; she couldn't remember the details of their wedding. She'd been afraid when she was young that she could vanish into a man's life, but it turned out that this had never been a danger.

Then the whole thing—stocks, companies, jobs, real estate—collapsed for everyone they knew, and their house, suddenly worth nearly half as much as they owed on it, felt like a prison. When his startup went under, Michael had trouble getting out of bed in the morning. Even though he stayed

at home all day, he forgot to pick up the kids at school, to pick up items at the grocery store, to pay the bills. He went to a doctor and took medication, but soon stopped, claiming he wasn't depressed—that wasn't his trouble. At supper he blinked at the kids like a giant owl. He asked them about their days as if reading from a script. He refused to look at her. After the kids went to sleep, he spoke (when he spoke at all) of the unfairness of the system. The people who always won would always win, and everyone else could fight over the scraps.

It seemed to her now that even in college he had become easily discouraged. After they were married, he took up long-distance running. Leaving the house early in the morning and after work, he spent hours on the backroads that wound into the hills. Phoebe's father said that she browbeat him, but she could no more say when Michael had begun to vanish than she could say if he'd ever been fully there in the first place. Hindsight was no gift and no more accurate than predicting the future.

In the last months he'd begun retreating to the room they used as a study. At night she heard him lie down on the blow-up camping mattress spread out next to the desk. Sometimes she stood outside the door and listened for the sound of his breathing, the tapping of his fingers on the computer, or the turning of pages. Nothing. One night she couldn't take it anymore and pushed open the door. He lay back on his mattress reading *A Short History of England*. She told him that businesses collapse, marriages falter—a speech she had prepared in her head. She wanted to confess about Ernst but didn't. He lowered the book and shielded the cover with his hand. "What?" he said.

Phoebe leaned back in Helen's chair and looked at the lamplight pooling on the ceiling. According to her phone, it was 2 a.m.—too late to call anyone in either time zone. What she needed to do was sell the house in Vaughn and return to California. She'd already wasted most of her first day (and now the night) holed up next to the trunk, and she would have gone to bed if everything she'd read added up, but it didn't.

The newspaper story about Helen had wrongly stated that she had never married. Helen not only married, she had a child. In the bottom of the trunk she found a cheap cardboard notebook, which Helen must have purchased later in life. Phoebe remembered seeing the notebook when she was young, but the flimsy, dull cover had not tempted her. Opening it now, she found

no children's drawings—no sign that anyone had ever read what Helen had written on the blue pages.

A newspaper clipping pasted on the inside cover stated: “Wrecked—the Brig Ipswich Sparrow on the outer bar east of Sable Island during gale February 10th, 1854, Capt. Robert Pingree, family, and crew all lost.”

But no—not all lost. The wife, the mother, Helen—Aunt Helen—lived another 81 years.

The scratchy handwriting below the clipping in the notebook contrasted with the long loopy letters in the earlier journals written more than half a century before, but Phoebe sensed Helen in the writing. And the notebook was signed “Helen Pingree” below the newspaper clipping.

Phoebe carried the lamp down the hall to the landing, where the floor-to-ceiling bookcase contained random books and encyclopedias that her parents had left behind. The entry on Sable Island described a treeless crescent of sand a hundred miles east of Nova Scotia. Nothing more than a beach held together by grass, the island contained neither rock nor pebble, and when Phoebe looked at a map in the Atlas she couldn't understand at first why Helen and Robert had found themselves there. The article explained that ships heading to and from Europe commonly blundered within a mile of the island's south bar. In Helen's day, a wreck on Sable would have surprised no one. More than 350 ships and 10,000 lives had been lost on the long bars that extended in some cases 18 miles out from the shore of an island 26 miles long and one mile wide and never rising higher than a hundred feet above sea level. Waves just offshore reached a height of a hundred feet and winds had been clocked at 174 miles per hour. Some of the ships wrecked there vanished within minutes, smashed to pieces by the surf and swallowed by the sand.

“In the middle of the night we heard a grinding and crushing noise, such as one might suppose would arise from striking on rocks,” Phoebe read in Helen's notebook. “It was caused by the breaking of the rudder chain, Robert said. Though our ship had struck the sandbar bow on, it slowly swung round till her stern also struck. Surf crashed over the bulwarks and flowed into the cabin. We could not see the island—only the white flash of the crashing surf. Robert ordered the crew to tie casks of fish oil to the deck, tie one man to each cask, and tie a ladle to each man. Then the men started to ladle out the oil. The waves rose to the height of the mast but smoothed out around the ship and ceased breaking over the deck when the oil did its

work. Robert spotted the lifeboat when it was almost on us and told me to go with William and our passengers, the Hiltons and the Hills. One moment the lifeboat was far below, and the next it was in height halfway up the mast. We were meant to climb in at the right moment, but when that time came William broke free and ran back to the cabin for his books. Robert picked me up bodily and lifted me down against my will to one of the men in the lifeboat. The man rowing assured me my husband and son would be on the next boat.

“The sun began to rise, and I saw how it was with us. The surf rolled in three rows of breakers, now in a hurried rush and again more slowly. Here would appear a break, a calm area, but the next moment the same spot was the most dangerous I had ever seen. The men already on shore were making signs where to land. Twice we backed water and waited.

“Here we go, then, in the name of God,’ the steersman said. He told us to put on life preservers, but there were not enough so I had to go without. A wave washed over us, and in a moment we were carried over the top of a crest and found our boat on shore. Men rushed into the water to carry us to land and draw up the boat. We sat down on a little hillock of sand. Birds began flying wildly about our heads. We soon saw the reason: the ground around us was filled with nests. We could hardly stretch out our hands without touching either their eggs or the young birds, little downy things.

“We watched the lifeboat leave for another load, and after some delay it started from the ship. The surf was worse, and the boat overloaded, so that only two oars were in use. They came slowly hesitating, then tossing about helplessly. We saw the boat with its living cargo, one moment on top of a tall wave, the next moment vanished from sight in a trough. In addition to Robert and William, there were several passengers and the crew who had not come in the first trip. Some of our party on the beach ran about, others knelt in prayer. Next we saw the lifeboat start to bottom upwards. To my surprise it righted itself. I remember seeing sharply outlined against the sky the figure of a man standing in the boat with an oar in his hand, trying to guide its course. While we gazed, the boat rose up and hurled end over end.

“Two dead bodies washed up with white foam on their lips. They were two of the passengers, but not Robert and William. The superintendent of the humane establishment said that the ladies would go to his house and the rest of the sailors to the sailor’s building, but those of us on shore would not move until everyone from the upset lifeboat could be found. Sarah Hilton

walked the beach, asking everyone over and over if they had seen her husband. With the wind rising and the temperature dropping, the superintendent and his men forced us to move inland. Robert and William were still missing.

“Our meal consisted of bread, beef, potatoes and sea biscuits, but few could eat. When night came on, the cries of those who had lost people in the lifeboat were truly heart-rending. I walked slowly from the superintendent’s house to where the horses were kept and there, by the roaring of the sea and the whistling of the winds, was sheltered from their doleful cries until I grew too cold and had to return. The superintendent’s wife told me that when the sand got bad in my eyes I should open the door of the kitchen stove and let the smoke cause tears to wash the sand away.”

The next morning, one of the life-saving crew brought her trunk, which had washed ashore. On opening the lid, she did not recognize the swollen mass—the feathers of a dead bird, maybe, all lying wet—but her journals wrapped in oilcloth remained dry. A ship’s bell rang, and the superintendent’s wife said that all should meet in the barn for a prayer service by the superintendent.

Helen wandered away from the small compound of buildings and over a dune onto a hillock. A wild stallion appeared and approached with a fierce trot, passing Helen to the right before disappearing. Helen might have thought that the wild Sable ponies that Phoebe read about in the encyclopedia, marooned on the island since 1738 and roaming the dunes in packs, were the largest horses she’d ever seen. According to the entry, with no trees on the island people lost all sense of scale. She later saw four more stallions that at first sight ran and halted on a sand cliff. Their manes stretched down to their hooves and plumes of steam poured from their nostrils and mouths. Maybe because of their bared teeth, they seemed to laugh at her. One of the bolder ponies ran toward her with such a “direful appearance” that Helen thought she would be trampled. The stallion stopped no more than five feet in front of her, snorted, and flared its nostrils. As suddenly as they had arrived, they vanished, leaving her alone again.

On top of the next sand cliff, Helen saw the beach where she had landed in the lifeboat and the bar where the Ipswich Sparrow had grounded. The waves continued to rise high and break as they reached the shallows. Seeing no sign of her husband’s ship either in the waves or on the beach, she sat down on the dune to wait for her family. Soon an object appeared dead to

windward. At first she mistook it for a large bird, but then she saw a sail five or six miles distant running before a dark mass of clouds. No vessel could survive such mountains of water. She thought to warn the superintendent, but then she saw the life-saving crew arrive on the beach.

When the ship approached within three miles of land, waves on each side curled as high as the tips of the masts and fell with the weight of hundreds of tons. Waves breaking close to the island created troughs so deep that they touched sand. Breaking from the bottom, they appeared angry as they fell. The ship hit, and the force of the waves smashed her to pieces within minutes. Helen waited for the superintendent and his men to launch their boats, but they stood on shore. Maybe with the ship so far out, and the seas too rough, nothing could be done. Within moments, it seemed to Helen, nothing remained where there had been a ship. The life-saving crew shovelled sand into the bottoms of the 25-foot lifeboats, but the wind still dragged the hulls down the beach.

Despite the cold, she began each day by hiking over the dunes to the beach and waiting there, as she put it, “for any sign of them.” Helen must have meant their bodies, Phoebe thought, though she might have hoped Robert and William would walk out of the surf unharmed. If such a thing could happen anywhere, it could happen here. One evening the superintendent’s wife described a ship that was swallowed in one hour and then unearthed five years later during another storm. The bones of the crew still wore their clothes, and the cargo of Irish linens looked as clean as the day the ship had set sail.

For two days Helen could not go to the beach because of another storm, and on the third day she found scattered human bones—not on the beach, but high in the dunes. She couldn’t decide at first how the bones had ended up four hundred yards or more from the tide line. The place where she now stood must have once been at the edge of the sea or possibly underwater. The island itself moved with the shifting currents and storms. The dunes changed shape in the wind. When they reached a certain height, the wind blew holes in their walls and carried sand out to sea. The length of the island grew every summer and shrank by a mile every winter, the superintendent’s wife said. The long underwater sandbars shrank and swelled, Phoebe imagined, like an underwater lung. Though water deepened the farther one moved from the island, the superintendent’s wife told the story one evening of how a schooner anchored in 35 fathoms of water out of sight of land dis-

covered that a sandbar had approached like a whale and surfaced off their stern.

Another storm hit the following week, keeping her at the superintendent's compound. When she finally returned to the spot where she had found the bones, only windswept sand remained. Offshore a pod of porpoises tumbled head-over-heels. At this point, Helen lost track of her memories of what happened in the sand. She lost herself in the days, in the light and dark, in the pounding of the surf shaking her spine, in the blowing wind and sand, and in the arrival of more storms, which seemed, like the waves they produced, to arrive in groups of three. Just as one wave could have three foaming heads, what she first took for three storms might have been one storm with three layers of ferocity. She "sensed"—no, she "knew"—that Robert and William were somewhere on the island. She could not imagine leaving.

She ate meals in the superintendent's house, sitting next to the superintendent's wife, but she began to sleep in the horse barn and wander during the day. The waves and hills of sand shifted amidst the grass. Past the shallow lake at the centre of the island she found the roof of a house half buried in a dune. At first she thought the roof must have blown free from one of the compound buildings and sailed across the island, but then she discovered a chimney. Next to the chimney a hole in the shingles opened to an upstairs bedroom. The roof had not blown off the house; the sand had surrounded the walls. Elsewhere under her feet lay buried the rest of the first station the superintendent's wife had described. The sand had risen so quickly over a period of days that they hadn't been able to break down the buildings for lumber. They had to leave for the other side of the island before the island swallowed them.

She crawled through the opening, and Phoebe pictured her following the wall with the edges of her fingers, stepping carefully from room to room until she saw the chimney and the hole in the roof through which the sun shone. She lay down on the grey boards, and Phoebe saw a shaft of light arc like the hand of a clock across her shoulders and arm and climb the wall until it disappeared, sinking the room in darkness. At some point the moon appeared in the hole above, and silver light collected at her fingertips. In the morning, a light as warm as lamplight poured through the hole and with it a stream of pale green sand that collected in a mound next to her arm. She had no idea how long she stayed on the floor watching the sand pour

through the light. All she knew was that the sand had come for her.

The sky had darkened again by the time she climbed out through the window and headed back toward the superintendent's house. She didn't know where she was, and the wind increased with every footfall until it screamed in her ears. She tried to head back to the buried house, but she couldn't find her way. The moment her feet left the sand, the wind erased her footprints. Storm clouds hurled overhead, and she stood on the beach near where she had first landed in the lifeboat. The island shook as the Atlantic rollers broke and crashed into the bar. Now that she had her bearings, she ran before the wind in the direction of the superintendent's house. A "fierce gust filled my dress," lifting her through the air and dropping her thirty feet down the beach. She tried to stand and take another step, but the wind lifted her again and she flew another thirty feet with one step.

When she woke in the superintendent's house, she suffered from a terrible sickness that lasted for more than a week. She didn't care if she survived or not, but she did. Early in the spring, the schooner *Daring* arrived from Halifax to take the survivors of the wreck to the mainland, where they made passage south to meet their families. Helen's father, still living, met her in Portland. He and everyone else in Vaughn had assumed that she was lost forever.

Helen's story reminded Phoebe of her son Jacob's birthday last March—the last day Phoebe and Michael did anything with the kids together. It was a cold day, but they drove to the ocean, where low-hanging storm clouds seemed to merge with the grey water. The kids tried to pull Michael to the water (the more despondent he grew, the more they clung to him), but he told them not now and sat above the line of wet sand. Phoebe sat far enough from him that they wouldn't be able to hear each other without raising their voices. It had stormed the week before, and the waves rose high and broke.

The kids wandered the beach looking for sea glass, and suddenly Michael stood up and took off his shoes. She thought nothing of it at first, but then he removed his ball cap, windbreaker, shirt, and pants before walking into the water. His head dipped into the trough of a wave, and he was gone. She didn't breathe until his head splashed out of the wash, his back arched. Two bands of muscles formed on each side of his spine. He'd lost more than twenty pounds over the last six months, and his mannequin-thin shoulders seemed about to break. His lips turned purple. As he walked up the beach, Natalie ran up to him, and he flinched away from her. She stood with her

arms at her side, watching her father trudge back to his spot in the sand.

The following month, just after the house went on the market, Phoebe came home to find the back door open and no one home. He'd emptied his drawers, taken even the hangers from his side of the closet, and cleaned out his side of the cabinets in the bathroom. He'd left behind anything that belonged to both of them as well as things that he must have decided he wouldn't need: skis, bike, cds, suits, ties, etc. At first she wondered how he had transported everything—she drove their one car to work in the morning—but then she saw clothing overflowing from the trash bins around the side of the house. It looked as if he'd thrown away everything he owned.

She told the kids that Michael had gone to visit his mother up north in Sebastopol. Grandma was ill, nothing serious, Phoebe said, and he would be back soon. When his mother called Phoebe to ask why she hadn't heard from her son, Phoebe said Michael had flown to Mexico with an old friend for a few weeks. When her parents, who knew she and Michael were having trouble, asked about him, she told them the Mexico thing as well. As she lay in bed at night she thought of him out there, waiting for a ride by the side of the road. She imagined him anywhere, nowhere.

Several weeks before returning to Maine to empty Aunt Helen's house, Phoebe was driving down Waverly Street in Palo Alto when she spotted one of the water trucks that cycled through neighbourhoods in the dry season to keep the trees and plants hanging from antique lampposts from drying out. A man in a blue city uniform stood in back of the tank holding a three-foot nozzle up to a hanging planter. He looked from the nozzle to the planter and back to the nozzle as if he were performing a surgical procedure. He had grown a faint mustache, and his sunken cheeks seemed to have deepened the lines around his lips, but she recognized Michael. He didn't seem to notice her, even though she was driving the Toyota that he had insisted on buying with the silver colour he had wanted, the bike rack he had installed, and the dent he had put in the bumper. She turned around, pulled up next to him, and rolled down her window. He turned off his sprayer, and his eyes narrowed as he leaned forward to squint at her. They remained like this for some time—she in the shadows, he in the light—but they didn't speak. It was too late—and had been too late for some time—to admit that she had left him behind. She had let him go under without offering any help. Thankfully, she thought as she drove away, she didn't have the kids with her.

The sun rose and Phoebe wandered through the kitchen looking for breakfast and coffee as if she still lived here. There were no supplies, of course, and no power. She couldn't stand the silence, and she closed the front door behind her. Past the bell tower of the church, the blue sky seemed to vibrate. Halfway across the yard, she started to run. The heels of her shoes crunched over last winter's road sand. At the car, she clicked open the door. In the driver's seat, she wrapped her hands around the plastic wheel and breathed in the smell of the rental, which was always the same no matter where she went. Looking up at Aunt Helen's room, she wouldn't have been surprised to see Michael come to the window and accuse her with his silence and his thin lips the colour of pencil erasers.

She checked into a hotel in Augusta, where she stood with her mouth open in the shower letting the water pound her forehead. If her brother wanted to sell the house, he could fly out here and deal with it himself. If her father wanted the trunk and the other dusty stuff, he could fly out here and get it. She was finished.

By the time she dried her hair, flicked on the TV, and poured herself a cup of cheap coffee, she felt more rational. Mary had given her the names of two guys who would move the contents of the house to a storage unit, and she could tell them to haul it all to storage—every last stick. She and her parents could then split the cost of the unit for a year and deal with sorting the stuff next summer or just keep paying the fee for a while.

Mary called in the afternoon with the miraculous news that a couple from Boston had made an offer on the house. Phoebe countered, they accepted, and Phoebe arranged for the men to haul the contents of the house to storage. Phoebe checked out of her hotel in the morning and drove to the airport in Portland. In a matter of hours, she arrived in California.

She had to pick the kids up from her parents' house on the way back from the airport. They had one day, Sunday, before their lives started again. The kids would go to camp, and she would go back to work.

Her father stayed on the patio as she greeted her mother in the front room. When Phoebe decided to give in to his rudeness and meet him in his troll hide, he didn't even rise. She leaned over to hug him and thought she heard him grunt. At this hour he usually drank a gin and tonic or a glass of wine, but he sat there with a clear glass of water in his hand. When she asked how he felt, he reached for the glass, brought it to his mouth, and merely touched the water to his lips without drinking.

“Where’s the trunk?” he asked.

“Don’t worry, I have it in the car,” she said, and he looked at her from under the overgrown ledge of his brow. He didn’t ask her to carry it in, so she didn’t offer. She wondered if he’d read all the logbooks and journals. Nothing in his watery green eyes betrayed his thoughts.

Phoebe’s mother called her inside to help pack up the kids. Phoebe needed to hit the highway soon if she wanted to arrive home before the kids’ bedtime. Also, she didn’t want to fall asleep behind the wheel. She rushed the kids to say goodbye to their grandfather and loaded them into the car.

When she pulled into the driveway in Palo Alto, her son asked if his father was coming back.

“You said he would be back when you came back.”

“No, I said that he might be back,” and she knew that she shouldn’t have said that. “Do you know what the word ‘might’ means?”

His closed lips jiggled back and forth across his teeth. He would need braces soon, and who would pay for that? She had yet to mention the extra large storage unit in Augusta to her parents. Her father would be furious about the expense.

“I’m not stupid,” he said.

“I didn’t say you were stupid.”

“You’re lying,” Jacob said, staring hard at her with the same scowl her father had just shown her on the patio. Technically she had not lied, but, yes, she had lied. Somehow her relationship with her kids—particularly with Jacob, whom she had begun, against her will, to see as a little Michael—had become legalistic.

“Tomorrow,” she said, raising her voice so her daughter, who had darted back to her room, would hear as well, “we’ll drive to the beach.”

“I don’t want to,” Jacob said.

She settled the kids into bed and retreated to the back porch, which needed to be repainted or probably replaced, and sipped from a half-consumed bottle of white wine pulled from the back of the fridge. The full moon spotlighted her other real estate problems: dead grass with patches of dirt, a leaning wood fence desiccated by the sun, paint peeling off the garage. Inside: stained carpet, popcorn ceilings, hollow doors. She emptied the rest of the bottle into the back of her throat. She could still taste the cabin air of the plane—a problem no amount of wine could fix. She hadn’t been drunk in a few years and wondered if she should open another bottle. Her cell phone

rang, but she didn't answer it. An hour later it rang again and woke her. It was her mother, probably checking to see that they'd reached the house. She stumbled to the bedroom without answering.

The next morning, Jacob dutifully climbed into the backseat and folded his arms as he waited for his sister to assemble her backpack. Phoebe didn't have any food in the kitchen, and she didn't want to buy the kids chips at some gas station. She wove through town toward the opulent grocery store her father called "the Arm and Leg," across from the coffee chain he called "Five Bucks." Turning onto Waverly Street, she spotted the city watering truck again. A man stood behind the truck with the hose pointed at the base of a tree. She slowed down, but it was not Michael this time.

"I thought we were going to the grocery store," Jacob said.

"We're going to eat poison from Circle K instead."

Phoebe followed the familiar route to the beach, through dry fields, live oaks, and over Skyline Boulevard—the same road her father had taken when they first moved to California. The kids fell asleep slouched against their seat belts. Looking at them, she realized that she'd lived longer in California than in Maine, and now that she had sold the house the kids would never know the place where their mother, grandfather, and great-grandfather had grown up. They were California kids—whatever that meant.

She turned off the air-conditioning and rolled down the window as they passed into the submerged light of the redwood forest. The road wound through the trees, whose tops vanished from sight in a thick canopy she had long thought of as the earth's second surface. Lingering fog misted the windshield, and she wondered how the people who made homes in the mossy burrows tucked into the hills ever knew whether it was day or night.

When the bars registered on her phone, she pulled off the road, stepped outside, and called her parents. Her mother would have to find her glasses, which rarely happened before the call went to voicemail.

"What's wrong with dad?" Phoebe said when her mother picked up on the fourth ring of the second call.

Her mother didn't speak for a few seconds, then she said, "He wants to talk with you himself."

"He didn't say much yesterday. Put him on the phone," Phoebe demanded, even though the last thing on earth she wanted was to talk to her father. She didn't want to explain that her husband might never come back, and she didn't want to talk about Helen's house in Vaughn.

“Not on the phone, Phoebe. And you stormed in and out of here like a tornado yesterday. It’s the house, you know that. Give him some time. That’s where he grew up.”

“But he doesn’t want to live there, does he? And he doesn’t want to pay for it.”

“We *can’t* live there, and we *can’t* pay for it. You’re not being fair.”

Phoebe hung up and got back in the car.

“What were you talking to Grandma about?” Jacob said after a few minutes.

“I thought you were sleeping.”

“I was pretending to sleep,” Jacob said with his eyes closed.

As the road straightened and levelled, the trees gave way to open fields and rolling hills. As they neared the water, the light struggled through the haze. In the rearview mirror, both Jacob and Natalie looked for a moment only vaguely familiar, like photos of her grandparents when they were children. She turned off Route 1 and parked at the same beach where they had gone for Jacob’s birthday. Jacob trudged toward the sand with Natalie struggling behind under the weight of her backpack. Phoebe gazed at the sea as the kids headed south along the tideline to look for shells. Soon waves of heat and razoring light absorbed them, and she briefly panicked, but she hadn’t lost them—she could still hear their voices.

Leaving her flip-flops in the sand, she walked to the water. A wave formed into the shape of a gaping mouth and collapsed in an explosion of spray. The wash reaching around her ankles and gathering strength around her calves pulled her toward the ocean. In the face of the next breaker, she saw a tumbling shape—an arm, she thought at first—but it was just seaweed.

Down the beach a long creature, a slouched dragon, crept in her direction through a pool of heat floating above the sand. Jacob hunched in front and Natalie on the other end of a piece of driftwood. They lurched closer and dropped the log a few feet away.

“She wants to bring driftwood back,” Jacob said and collapsed on Phoebe’s right. Natalie continued to stand over the log.

“For the garden,” Natalie said. She meant the garden Michael had once talked of starting in their barren back yard. Phoebe had no idea how her kids had dragged the log this far across the beach. Too long to fit sideways in their sedan, it probably weighed more than fifty pounds. “Can we take it

home with us?” Natalie asked. Forcing herself to look her daughter in the eyes—at Michael’s lashes and her father’s green irises—Phoebe nodded.

“But first I want to talk to you guys about something,” Phoebe said and felt the air escape her lungs. Nothing she could say to them about their father would make any sense.

As she turned back to the ocean, one of the tall rollers eclipsed the horizon. When the wave reached the height of its arc through the air, she began to tell her children about an island of blowing sand that swallowed ships whole—an island where horses stood as tall as buildings, where waves reached higher than skyscrapers, where storms lasted for weeks, and where a person with the wind at her back would fly thirty feet with one step. It was a place people could end up—an island where survivors waited for the drowned to walk out of the sea.