

## Kristjana Gunnars / WINTER GALES

Everything had come to a strange standstill for Rosamund. Rosamund Archer, always calm, always cool. That had not changed. Everything on the surface looked as if nothing had changed. It was only Rosamund herself who knew. A strange dilemma. She had what everyone wanted. A good career, a good, secure job, a beautiful home and a husband who loved her. On the other side, however, things were different. Like flipping a coin and seeing heads. Or getting to the dark side of the moon. The dark side was that she felt emotionally ravaged, psychologically excavated, and financially stranded. She knew this, but that was as far as it went. It was like a knowledge she carried around, for which there was no help, and about which she could not talk.

She had taken to staying up at night. The black windows loomed large at night. No lights outside to warm the presence of the world. No street lights, no flashing neon business signs, no traffic, nothing. Just blackness. Usually there was a sound accompanying the stark darkness. The sound of pelting rain. Heavy, large drops, crashing by the millions. She heard them on the skylight. They fell drastically on the tarpaulin they had wrapped around the deck furniture. Sometimes there was also a storm. The wind raged in the tall cedars and howled across the water. It was the time of winter gales.

She made the morning coffee even though it wasn't morning yet. The dishes were clean, the kitchen was clean. Everything was clean. The jar of dry roast peanuts was empty, last night's snack. The bread she made, standard wholewheat, was almost finished, sliced crookedly with a too-big knife. She sat down to read the paper. It was not the day's paper, for the newsrag only came once a week to this outpost. Once a week they could all read what had happened

around the coast. Headlines this week were a house fire. A man nicknamed "Biggar" had perished in his own home in Egmont. The house caught fire while he was asleep, and everything burned to a cinder. It was those winds. Once the gales catch a flame, you can't stop the fire.

She asked her friend Ramona, how could it be? How do you actually die in a housefire? Can't you just jump out the window? For Biggar, some sort of term of affection because he coached the junior softball league, was asleep, they said, on the second floor, in the bedroom. There were lots of windows. She asked Ramona because Ramona acted as if she knew everything. Sometimes Rosamund felt tired of that, of Ramona always saying "I know" in her clipped way, her little smile cemented into her face as if nothing could be more obvious. But other times that was a comforting thing. To have a friend who had all the answers. That was soothing at times. And Ramona assured her it was possible to die like that, because the smoke alone would blank you out before you could move. And those wooden buildings all around the coast, soggy from too much rain, produced so much smoke.

Something had to give. Rosamund knew that. But it confounded her that she didn't know which things in life ought to go. Her job? It was only an administrative post with BC Ferries, repeatable anywhere. Her husband? He clung to her, and he also kept himself to himself. Loved her and did not at the same time. Her house? It was expensive, lot prices going up all the time. A sanctuary and a trap both. Or maybe all of them. Somehow life had to be simplified. And yet, when she constructed the ideal, simple life, she wondered whether that was just a version of death. A life without complication and worry, without frustrations and guilt and tension and stress, wasn't that simply a non-life?

She observed an eagle trace its course through the thick cloud, high up. The white of the eagle showed brightly against the dark cloud. Looks simple, basic. But maybe that eagle had its own set of worries. Maybe that beautiful eagle circling above Pender Harbour was anxious and strung out too? Rosamund had taken to visiting a New Age shop in the village where they sold crystals and relaxation cd's and aromatherapy oils and books of alternative healing.

Sometimes when she was in there, the soft music and some perfume from potpourri jars on the counter, she thought it resembled death. That what people wanted was “tranquility,” which was another word for being blotted out. But no. Wasn’t that too simple?

She had gone so far as to take her predicament to a therapist in the village, Lorie. Lorie made Rosamund sit on the floor and make a circle around herself with green twine. The circle was supposed to indicate her comfort boundary. Then Lorie said the fact of the matter was, you didn’t just go around with the anxieties and frustrations you built up during the course of your life. You also carried with you the anxieties of your whole family. Going back many generations. So they had to retrace all the individuals in Rosamund’s family and find out what the problems were. Then they could locate what she herself had inherited. Rosamund’s questions about that, afterwards, were also simple. How far back do such “carried” feelings go? Five hundred years, or just to your parents? Or is it like the genetic code; something that just gets passed on and on and on?

She threw on her jacket and rubber boots and stepped outside the cottage. What she had was just a cottage, but an up-scale cottage, she liked to say. They had put in pale pine wood floors, panelling in fir halfway up the walls. Trinkets she enjoyed from the various flea markets around the coast decorated the little place. But best of all, she could step out and stand on the cliff outside her front door, listening to the water below. There was a small marina there, but hardly anyone used it. Right now, two boats, one covered in a blue tarpaulin. Belonging to Timmy the “Square” and to new neighbours up the road, whom she didn’t know. There were so many new people moving in, anyway. This morning there was a slight drizzle. You could hardly feel the spray on your face and hands, but you could see it on the blank water.

It came up with Lorie, that oddness about Rosamund’s past. Trying to trace the people became strangely unfocussed. Instead, she was always brought back to the Union steamships. The Union Steamship Company of B.C. Everyone in the family, going back to the mid-eighteen hundreds, had worked for the Company. In the north, Northern Canada, it looked like everything centered around the Hudson’s Bay Company. Here, on the British Columbia coast,



the "old families," the ones with history, with roots in the place, were Union Company people. Many of them, anyway. The others were logging families and fishing folk.

Her own family history always came down to the *SS Cutch*. In the family mythology, that's where it all began. How would Lorie respond to that? Would she say it didn't count? You had to begin with people? The *SS Cutch* was a two-funnel steamer that once made the rounds between Vancouver and Nanaimo. Actually it was built in 1884. What it was, was a yacht for the Maharaja of Cutch. An Indian prince. His pleasure boat. But the Rajah died just after the boat was finished and some Indian merchants sold it through the German government. Convoluted history, really. The *SS Cutch* ended up in the hands of Hajeebhoy Lalljee, a dealer in Bombay, who sold it to the manager of the Union Company. "The unfortunate Captain," he was called. Captain William Archer, Rosamund's great grandfather.

Perhaps it was that connection to the Raj. To sovereignty. Rule. A Rajah is a prince, a chief. Someone for whom silver wedding bells ring, hanging on white twine in the open air. That connection that intrigued her. And sudden death. What did he die of? And the sheer difference of it. Bombay, so crowded, so full. So overwhelming, really. They say you forget to look at the details when you're in India, because the overall picture is so overpowering. Different from here, where it's the detail that looms large. The leaves on the maples, how they come out in spring, turn color in the fall. The millions of alder trees, swaying naked all winter in the storms. Their slim trunks so flexible, they can bend all the way to the ground in a wind, as if bowing to the sea.

The drizzle in the air showed up on the blank water below Rosamund's feet like nervousness. An irritation of the surface. So slight, you could hardly tell it was there. She stood on the rock ledge outside the porch of the house. The water that lined the rock never rose or fell. It was always the same. In the storm, there were little waves. Sometimes whitecaps, if it was a real gale off the sea. But mostly the water behaved like a pond. It wasn't a pond, but a cove off the big Pacific Ocean. Her brown jacket was beginning to soak in the moisture in the air. It was a good, fresh feeling. She took a deep breath. She could hear movement in the house. Stone was back, she

guessed. Stone. Stone Bridges, the man she finally married three years ago and ever since wondered why she did. He talked her into it.

"Stone?" she called out without looking behind. There was no answer. He worked at the mill and sometimes came home disheveled and out of sorts. If it was a morning shift, he came home in the late afternoon. Then he just wanted a beer and a chair. If it was the late shift, he came home in the middle of the night. Then he crashed. Sometimes he delayed coming home. The guys sometimes went for late night beer at the village pub after the shift. Rosamund never bothered to follow those details. She kept her own schedule and her own thoughts. Went to bed at her own time, and got up early. Five or six. She loved the early morning, especially when it drizzled like this.

"You're getting wet, Rosie," she heard Stone say behind her. She turned to look. He was standing in the doorway, leaning against the doorpost. Through the mist he seemed like a figure out of someone else's dream. He was tall and lanky with chestnut brown hair that fell to his shoulders. A dark moustache and supple limbs. Still handsome, she thought. Perhaps a bit bent in the shoulders, but that was just from being so tall. He was a handsome man. That at least she could say. He smoked a lot, though. Probably a pack a day, although she never kept track of that. He just always seemed to have a cigarette lit somewhere nearby. He was standing in the doorway smoking a cigarette.

"God you're beautiful," she heard herself blurt out. He just stood there. When he stared at her like that, his eyes seemed to be squeezed half shut. He was thinking something, she could tell. Something on his mind. But there was a little smile, just barely visible in the corners of his mouth. She turned back to the water, to her own reveries.

"You seem deep in thought," he said gently. Darkly.

"I was just thinking about the Rajah. What does a Rajah do with a pleasure boat? Why is his pleasure boat our labour machine?"

"Maybe that Lorie of yours is all wet too," he breathed.

"Lorie?"

"That therapist in the village. Lorie. What are her credentials



anyway, messing with people's minds."

"She's got a certificate," Rosamund said. "Anyway, it's on her wall." She looked more closely at the water. There were lines of blue and green in it. "Looks like an oil slick down there," she said.

"Could be an oil slick," he mumbled.

"I heard the oil spills in the Persian Gulf are so thick, that you can't light a cigarette on a ship there," she mused out loud. "The water will blow up." Stone was gone inside again. She could feel his absence, when he left, without looking. He came and went like a spirit, somehow. Without substance. He washed through the house like mist. Through her life like some lost angel, drifting.

The *SS Cutch*. June 2, 1890, they brought it into service between Vancouver and Nanaimo. The "gay nineties." There was a steamer war back then. The fever of competition flared up and somehow, she guessed, it had remained in the family. Even after they beached the ship. They said they would. It was all over the newspapers at the time. *The Vancouver Daily News-Advertiser*. The competition between the Archers and the Dunsmuirs over that passenger run. The Dunsmuirs owned a steamer they named the Robert Dunsmuir. The Archers called it "Dirty Bob," because they played dirty. Turned into the general nickname for the Dunsmuir steamer. It was "Dirty Bob" against *SS Cutch*. But the Archer boat had the legacy of an Indian prince, the memory of gold bracelets and red face paint and cloud-white clothing.

She dreamed about the life that boat never got to have, when she was a kid. Her own place in it. Her family ship and her prince on it. In the mists of time, she protected her own fantasies and then reality looked better. Rosamund had always been a dreamer. Maybe she should have worried about her hold on reality. Her mother used to warn her against that. And now, sometimes, Stone did too. But Stone couldn't convince her, however he tried. He was himself so much like her dream. Her prince, the way he moved softly about the cabin, and through the morning. His incongruities. The rough work he did at the mill and the cynical attitude it gave him. Then, he had those roses. He wanted just to cultivate roses, he always said. He planted rose bushes and pruned them and looked after them. She would look out the kitchen window of the cabin and he would be

there, his hand around a lavender rose leaning down over him like a blessing. He would kiss it, and the rose would be high up, the rose tree so tall. Taller than him. His dark brown hair falling over his shoulders and across his forehead.

Funny how we reenact the dreams of our childhood, she thought. How we play them out in later life and we don't even know it half the time. She turned to go inside. Even this cabin, this house. It was a freshly built wooden home, made with pine and cedar. Pale birch coloured exterior and blue around the windows. She built this place to look like a childhood home she once thought she had, over on the other side of the bay. Maybe we just can't help ourselves, she wondered. Or maybe we can. Maybe we really are able to examine what we do and consciously change it.

Stone was in the kitchen pouring the rest of the coffee into a mug. The morning light lay darkly on the blue countertop.

"Aren't you going to sleep?" she asked him suddenly. "Aren't you tired?"

"No." He seemed taciturn. Holding something in, she could tell. Why would he not be tired after working the late shift? "Sit down, Rosie," he added, as if in afterthought. She obeyed. As always, she thought to herself. What he wants. She sat down at the kitchen table in her wet jacket. Her dark hair lay on her back like ringlets. The gold band on her left hand. She had taken to leaving the ring at home when she went to work. She wondered why. It had never really occurred to her to ask herself why. Stone sat down opposite her with the mug of coffee. He fished in the breast pocket of his red chequered shirt and pulled out a vial of white pills.

"You should take these." He spoke brusquely and deposited the pills in front of her. She took them and examined them. White powdery pills, a prescription made out to Stone Bridges.

"What are these?"

"Pills you should take."

"What for?" He was not too talkative, she thought. He let a lengthy silence elapse.

"It's Margaret," he finally answered. Margaret, his ex-wife, who lived in the village now. "Margaret came down with some form of VD. The doc gave her those and said you should be taking them



too." Rosamund stared at him. Lots of explanations suddenly became self-evident to her. Why he was always late getting back after the evening shift.

"I suddenly have a headache," she mumbled. They sat in silence. She rubbed her forehead with her fingers, as if to pass the time. As if she were bored. "Things never are what they seem," she mused. He was looking at the cold coffee in his mug.

"Maybe not," he agreed.

"Fuck you," she whispered. When she stood up, the wooden chair scraped against the oak floor. The noise of the chair seemed inordinately loud. Fortunately she still had her jacket and boots on, so she was able to walk straight outside again.

"For what it's worth," Stone said as if to grab a disappearing smoke-ring, "it doesn't mean I don't love you. I do." She heard him without hearing him. A voice that suddenly seemed far away, as if coming from somewhere else. She closed the outside door behind her and leaned on it.

Maybe all of them, she thought to herself. Maybe everything should go. Husband, house, job, the whole kit. Maybe she should just start over in some other place. Queen Charlotte Islands or somewhere. She could tell her head was hot. She knew it was anger. Strange how sometimes you can't tell if you're angry, she mused bitterly. Damn him. So now she knew why the acrimony between Stone and Margaret had suddenly, miraculously, ended after they got their divorce. As she stepped down to the shoreline she kicked the rounded pebbles, dark with the rainwater. It felt as if her private life had suddenly run aground. It's the same fate, she thought to herself, over and over. A kind of legacy. The fact was that her ghost ship, the *SS Cutch*, had come to a similar end, hadn't it? For some incompetent reason, the boat rammed another Dunsmuir ship in a hit and run collision. It happened in Nanaimo harbour in 1892. November 12, it was. The boat was trying to sail as fast as the "Dirty Bob" on one of their runs, and just hit this other ship, the *SS Joan*. It was a disaster. The Archers had to pay the Dunsmuirs for repairs. Then it had another collision later, near Juneau, Alaska. Somehow it was a marked vessel.

What should she do now? Now that she was apparently carrying



some other woman's venereal disease? She felt dizzy. Unfortunately it was a Saturday and she couldn't go to work. The cabin was quiet. She could tell Stone had gone to bed. Maybe he was even asleep already. She turned briskly, as if she knew what she was going for, and headed back to the house with sharp steps. Actually she did not know what she was walking so quickly for, but seemed compelled, almost automatically. She opened the front door and went back in. All was quiet. Stone had gone in to sleep. He was so quiet. His movements almost had to be intuited. She could see around the corner that he was in bed, his eyes closed. She grabbed the funny lighter that looked like a curling iron. Something she got from her father, who used to light the fireplace up in Pender with it. She put the canister of pills in her jacket pocket and went back outside, quietly.

When she stepped out again the fresh, newly rinsed air struck her. Wonderful smell of salt water and seaweed. Beautiful odor of cedar bark in the air. She leaned against the fresh pine of the cabin wall. The rain had stopped, the drizzle of the morning. Soon it would be warm. Soon you would see the strings and clouds of mist rise out of the wood with its drying. The mist would ascend like a spirit, over the water, up from the walkway, the stones lying cold on the ground. She stuck the tip of the lighter under a wood plank on the exterior of the cabin and flicked the switch. The small flame licked the wood, nervously. Almost passionately, she thought.

The ship that haunted her, the one she wanted to tell Lorie about, went from Vancouver to the Klondike during the Klondike gold rush. All those men had to be transported north. When it rammed into Horseshoe Reef, the family got something like six thousand pounds in insurance money. Then it ended up in Colombia. As a government gunboat. That was so bizarre. A gunboat. And all the Rajah's dreams ended up somewhere else entirely. She straightened up. That's what you have to do, she told herself. You walk away. Just so what has stopped starts to move again. What has stranded gets pulled out again and finds smooth water. To glide on the smooth water, even without direction. That's what it is.

And she did. Just as the mist was beginning to rise and to mix with a few curls of silver coloured smoke, she heard her own footsteps on the gravel as if they were someone else's footfalls.