

Lights  
on the Sea

Miquel Reina

*Translated by Catherine E. Nelson*

*Sometimes we need to get lost in order to find ourselves.*

Anonymous

# Prologue

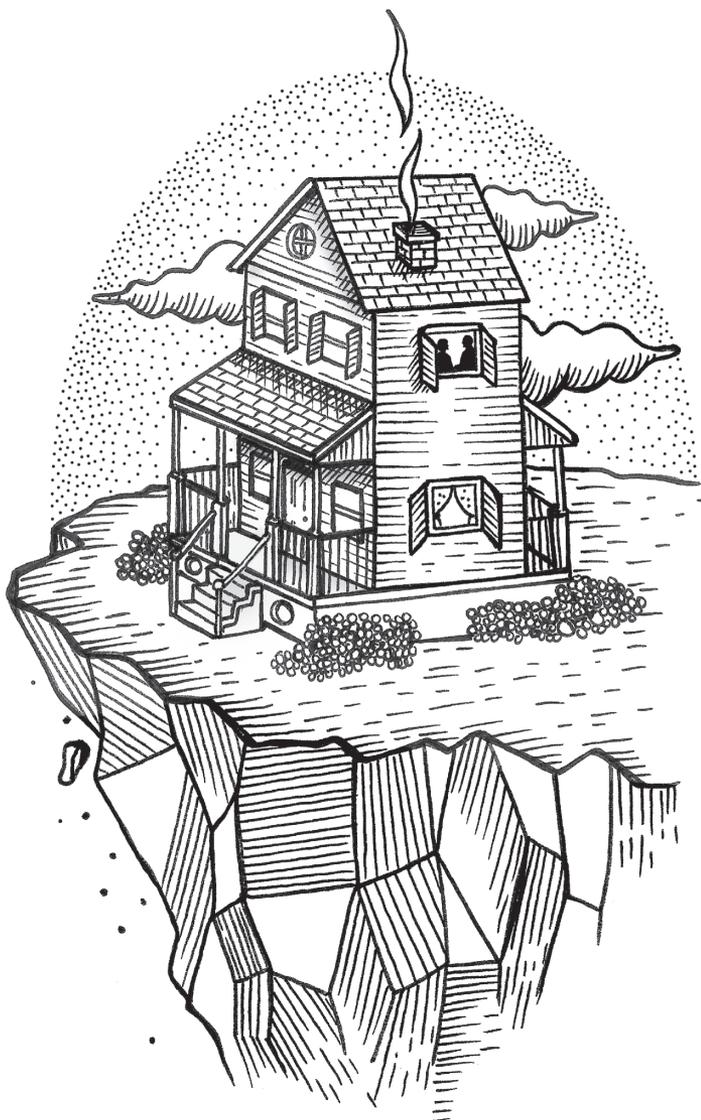
It all began with a bolt of lightning. Cutting through the stormy night sky, it crashed down on the roof of the most remote house in San Remo de Mar. The retired couple living there already knew it was to be the last night in their home. What they didn't know was that a lightning bolt would set off a chain of tragic—or perhaps miraculous—events that no one ever could have imagined.

But all this was still hours away. Whether they could have done something to change the course of events, or if everything was already predetermined with the arrival of the first drops of rain, was not something they could question at the time. As it happens, this story did begin with that lightning bolt, and certain details should be noted to understand how they came to be in that extraordinary situation.

Harold and Mary Rose Grapes, known to all as Mr. and Mrs. Grapes, lived in what was, quite possibly, the most special place on the whole island. Unlike the homes and shops that huddled together down on the beach, Mr. and Mrs. Grapes's house was located outside the picturesque town, at the end of an unpaved street, at the highest point on Brent Island. It perched defiantly on the edge of Death Cliff, right over the ocean.

On a clear day, the townsfolk could see Mr. and Mrs. Grapes's bright-yellow house from miles away, whether they were strolling the

fertile hillsides of volcanic rock or sailing the small island's chilly waters. Either of those activities would have been ideal for enjoying the hot Sunday morning before the storm. The island's beaches, trails, and café patios buzzed with activity as San Remo's inhabitants took advantage of the rare warmth and clear sky. But as usual, Mr. and Mrs. Grapes chose to spend the day inside, enjoying, for the last time, those old walls that were their home.



## An Uncertain Future

Mrs. Grapes spent most of Sunday morning packing up keepsakes, trying to decide which ones she could do without. As she was removing the last items from the wardrobe, a wrinkled photograph fluttered to the ground. She picked it up gingerly and, turning it over, felt a prickling sensation all over her body.

She sat down on the bed and took a deep breath before she dared to look again at the image she had hidden away years ago to forget the pain that was too deep. A man, a woman, and a boy, all smiling and hugging one another. Behind them, illuminated by the setting sun, was a partially built ship.

The photograph had faded, but Mary Rose could still picture the scene in full color. The man's hair was pitch black, and behind his glasses were eyes of the deepest blue, just like the boy's. Mary Rose felt a stabbing pain, and the poison of past resentments surged through her. She took another deep breath and looked at the boy's smile and his hair, which was the same shade of brown as that of the green-eyed woman holding him.

A tear fell behind Mrs. Grapes's oval-shaped glasses as she remembered the hundreds of afternoons they had spent at San Remo's old shipyard. Back then, they'd dreamed of discovering the world beyond the island. They had no fears, no ties, and no regrets. Now, thirty-five

years later, Mary Rose didn't even recognize herself. When had she stopped being that woman? When had she allowed their dreams to die? The questions cut through her. And now, leaving this house and facing an uncertain future without it terrified her. She looked at the photo once more, then placed it in an open box and went down to the kitchen.

In the cluttered basement workshop, Mr. Grapes was working on one of his miniature ships. Shafts of sunlight came through the porthole windows. Here, moving boxes still sat folded, leaning against the washer and dryer. Everything was still in place. Dozens of old appliances lay scattered near the enormous cistern. The only space reflecting the impending move was the almost-bare pantry hidden behind a thread-bare checkered curtain.

Despite his constant complaints about the cramped space, Harold spent most of his time amid that chaos. He enjoyed tinkering and working on inventions. But his favorite activity—the only one that could cheer him on the days he felt down—was building ships in bottles.

Using old bottles that he found washed up on the beach, he built scale replicas of historic ships. Those small marvels had previously been found throughout the house, but now they'd all been carefully swaddled in Bubble Wrap and placed in boxes. All but one.

Unlike the others, the replica that Harold now held was not in a bottle but in an old, squat mason jar. Inside, his most treasured ship sailed defiantly across a sea of resin. It was the first he'd ever made. This ship had no detailed ornamentation, no royal crest emblazoned on her sails. It was a simple seaworthy sailing vessel, a modest boat longing for great adventures. A model of the full-size ship Harold had begun building long before the miniature copy he was now dusting. A ship that never had a name.

Sometimes Harold could still smell the wood, tar, and sea that permeated the shipyard where he had worked as a young man. He could

still hear his hammer strike the chisel as he packed oakum between the boards and feel the sun on his bare back. Harold remembered with nostalgia each of the real boats he had worked on: fishing boats, trawlers, passenger ships . . . The work was hard, but there was such joy in seeing a ship you'd labored over set sail for the first time.

And nothing compared to the love and care he had put into building the sailboat he now observed in miniature. A ship that had held all his dreams and had taken up all his free time. Harold set the jar down and sighed. Those dreams had sunk before the ship's hull ever touched the water. There was nothing left now but a bitter dream inside a glass jar.

A light tremor ran through his body, returning him to the gloomy basement filled with the smell of wax. The whole basement began shaking violently, and Harold grabbed the jar so it wouldn't crash to the ground. A few seconds later, the shaking stopped.

Harold huffed with irritation when he saw the miniature's mainsail had come loose and fallen onto its deck. He put on his magnifying glasses and picked up tweezers to repair the damage.

Mrs. Grapes's voice came from the top of the stairs. "Harold! Did you feel it? That was a big one!"

"No worse than the others!" he shouted.

"I'm sure it was! Thank goodness almost everything is packed, or there would have been a lot more damage." She came down the stairs as she spoke. "I'd feel better if you'd go check the guy wires."

"Sure. When I'm finished here, I'll go take a look. OK?"

"All right." And before returning upstairs, she added, "Lunch will be ready in ten minutes."

Even after all these years, Mary Rose had never gotten used to the earthquakes. When she reached the kitchen, her heart skipped a beat. The

mauve-and-fuchsia hydrangeas that had graced her sturdy table now lay on the floor, uprooted in a heap of dirt and pottery shards.

The shattered flowerpot transported Mary Rose back to a time before this house could have existed in their wildest dreams. Suddenly, she was in their old apartment in town, hearing rain drum on the dining room window and watching lightning crash over the sea. A pot of hydrangeas had slipped from her hands and broken on the tile floor. A premonition had immediately filled her mind: *Something terrible has happened.*

Back then, Mary Rose knew the damaged hydrangeas were a bad omen. But nothing prepared her to face what she would discover hours later.

A burning smell jolted her back to the present. She ran to the stove, but it was too late.

While Mary Rose improvised a soup with the little bit of fish she had managed to salvage from the scorched dish, Harold used the time to inspect the guy wires.

He went down the steps of the back porch and circled around the house to the first of six steel cables that, like tethers on a giant tent, came down from the rooftop and were anchored deep in the rock underground. Harold had installed them years ago, when the foundation began to shift due to the unforgiving erosion of the cliff.

Harold squatted down in front of the guy wire and pushed aside the lush hydrangeas growing around it. But then he shook his head. In a few hours, they had to abandon the house. It no longer mattered if the guys were secure. So he stood up and went for a walk. He passed by grapevines he had planted with his father long before he and Mary Rose decided to build the house in that extraordinary place—even before he and Mary Rose had met. The vines used to cover the property, but they hadn't borne fruit for years. Choked out by the hydrangeas, the

twisted vines were dry and bare of the fruit his family had once used to make grape jam, his favorite. Harold felt nostalgic as he gently touched a wizened branch. But, as with the cables, there was no use in worrying about the barren vines. The next morning, neither they nor the house would be there. Everything would be gone.

Harold continued to the end of his yard: the rocky edge of the cliff. From that spectacular overlook, he could make out part of the contour of the island and the immense sea surrounding it. In the distance, wispy clouds gathered on the horizon, but the beach still teemed with people. Near the cliffs, he saw a group of surfers fighting to stay on their boards. On the opposite side, where the mountains gently sloped to the sea, fishing boats were headed out.

San Remo was a small town on a rocky island in the middle of a cold ocean, so isolated that the rest of the world barely knew it was there. Life there was monotonous, and the locals were distrustful of everything: outsiders, change, and even their own neighbors. Like most of its inhabitants, Mr. and Mrs. Grapes never had set foot on ground other than Brent Island, nor had they sailed out of view of its shore. The piece of earth beneath their feet was their whole world, a tiny world to which they'd had to adapt and in which, like the flowers and vines around them, they'd planted their sorrow as deep as possible.

A gust of cold wind raked the yard and tore some petals from a hydrangea close to the edge of the bluff. Harold's gaze followed their erratic dance until they disappeared, swallowed by the abyss. Then he went back inside.

"Two hours of cooking wasted!" fussed Mary Rose as she served Harold some watery soup. "I wanted to make something special for today."

"It's just another day." Harold tried to sound convincing, but when he glanced up at his wife, he knew he hadn't succeeded.

"Everything OK outside?" she asked, changing the subject.

“Everything’s fine,” he answered, watching the pieces of burnt fish sink to the bottom of the bowl. “I don’t think we need to worry about the guy wires, considering there will be nothing left to secure, come tomorrow.”

Mary Rose took a spoonful of soup, and the burnt flavor spread down her throat. She drank some water, but the bitterness remained.

“I still can’t believe this’ll be our last night in our home,” said Mary Rose.

Just as Harold was about to answer, the doorbell rang. Mr. and Mrs. Grapes looked at each other in surprise and, almost without a sound, carefully laid down their spoons. They never had visitors at this hour; they normally didn’t have visitors at any hour. The doorbell rang again.

“Do you think they’ve come for us?” Mary Rose whispered.

“Ha!” Harold exclaimed. “I’d like to see them try to force us out before it’s time!”

“Shhh! Don’t shout,” she said softly.

The bell rang again, insistently.

“All right already!” Harold exclaimed as he got up from the table. “I’ll just remind them that, according to their blasted letter, we have until tomorrow morning!”

He stomped to the front door, while Mary Rose followed hesitantly a few steps behind. The bell sounded yet again, but the noise was interrupted when Harold opened the door. On the other side was the tall, thin figure of a man in an elegant gray suit that complemented his ashen complexion and gray hair.

“Good afternoon, Harold . . . Rose,” he said, dragging out their names mournfully.

“Good afternoon, Matthew,” said Mary Rose.

“What brings you here, Mayor?” asked Harold curtly.

“I’m sorry to bother you, but I just wanted to stop by. May I come in?”

Harold hesitated, then stepped back and allowed the man to enter.

Mary Rose made tea, and the three of them sat in the living room. The atmosphere was tense, and the mayor, shifting uncomfortably, spoke first.

“To be honest, I wasn’t sure if I should come. Dealing with this situation hasn’t been easy for me, but you must know that, first and foremost, you’re my friends.”

“We don’t blame you, Matthew,” said Mary Rose.

The man’s eyes went hopefully to Harold.

“Look, Matthew,” Harold said, fighting to keep his anger in check. “If you came to have us ease your conscience, you’re out of luck.”

“Believe me, I’m not here to make myself feel better. I know what it means for you to lose this house,” the mayor started slowly. “I came for you, to see if I can do anything to help.”

“Help!” exclaimed Harold. “Don’t you think it’s a little late for that?”

“Harold, you know city hall had nothing to do with the eviction,” he insisted, twisting his teacup back and forth.

“But city hall did decide where we have to go.”

“Yes,” the man stammered. “I tried to get you something better, but your pension wouldn’t cover the rent.”

“And what about our compensation?”

“You know the land here isn’t worth much—”

“So tell me what you’ve done to help us.”

The mayor looked around the room as if he suddenly didn’t know what he was doing there.

“Harold, calm down, please,” Mary Rose intervened. “I’m sure Matthew did all he could.”

“Oh, you’re sure?” he asked furiously.

They were interrupted by a flash of lightning. Even the light fixture hanging from the ceiling was rocked by the shudder of thunder that followed.

“Even though you don’t see it now,” Matthew said as he watched the light swing, “I think that in time you will agree it was for the best. You may not be able to keep the house, but you will have everything else, including my friendship.”

“Friendship?” Harold echoed. “The word *friendship* doesn’t mean much on this island.”

Mary Rose’s teacup clinked against her saucer. She knew what Harold meant, but she didn’t want to think about it. The memories were too painful.

“I should go,” the mayor said, getting up. “It looks like a big storm is heading this way.”

“Yes,” Harold said, taking the last sip of his cold tea. “And we still have a lot to do.”

Mary Rose placed her cup on the table and got up to accompany their guest to the door.

“I’ll be here tomorrow at nine to help. All right?” the mayor asked.

“We’ll be here,” she replied.

Those were the last words Harold heard before the front door closed. He got up and slowly walked to the window. With the sleeve of his sweater, he wiped off the condensation and looked out. The beach was deserted. Thick, gray clouds covered the sky, and the wind off the ocean was beginning to blow in the first drops of rain that stuck to the glass like tiny insects. A few moments later, Mary Rose returned.

“I think you were very unfair,” she said, joining him at the window. “You know Matthew isn’t to blame for our misfortunes.”

“But this time, he could have done something.”

“It’s not in his control! Or ours either! The letter was clear.”

“The letter, the letter!” he moaned. “Curse the day we got that letter!”

Another peal of thunder made the living room light flicker.

“There are plenty of people in town who have lived in the residence for years, and they’re perfectly fine,” Mary Rose said.

“You know as well as I do that everyone hates that place. And we aren’t old and feeble, needing someone to feed us like we’re babies.”

“Stop complaining, Harold Grapes!”

“I don’t understand how you can be so accepting! Don’t you understand what it means to lose our home?”

Mary Rose felt a knot rising in her throat.

“The mayor’s right. This storm will be a bad one,” Harold said, staring out the window. “I’d better close the shutters.” He turned on his heel and left.

# The House on the Cliff

Harold went upstairs to the second floor. He couldn't stand the way Mary Rose had seemed to surrender these last few months. It wasn't like her. And he couldn't simply accept the situation. This wasn't just a house. This home had been built with something irreplaceable.

Harold went from room to room, securing the shutters along the way. The rooms were now stripped bare, occupied only by the boxes that held decades of memories, furniture waiting to be moved, and a random assortment of items to be packed in the morning. Before fastening the last shutter, he looked outside. Sheets of rain swayed back and forth, pushed by the wind that was whipping up the waves along the beach. The gutters overflowed, soaking the hydrangeas in the garden. The rain was seeping into him too, slowly diluting his anger but soaking him in a heavy frustration.

Leaving meant more than losing their house; it transcended the material. It meant abandoning the only thing left from their happiest days, the scrap of wood that had helped him stay afloat, his only connection to everything he had lost. His life hadn't gone the way he'd wanted, but at least he'd learned to survive. Now, his whole world would disappear. His whole life would be crammed into a little room in a retirement home in the middle of the island. A barren place far from the sea, far from everything Harold had loved. Far from him.

He went to the dresser, opened the top drawer, and found the letter. He held it again in his hands, and the memory of that cold January morning flooded back. The morning the mayor delivered the thick ivory envelope.

“Good morning, Matthew! Come in before you freeze out there,” Harold had said.

The man entered a little warily.

“Would you like to join us for breakfast?” Harold asked, closing the door. “We were just about to eat.”

“No, no. I’ll just be staying a minute,” Matthew said, without removing his gray raincoat.

“At least have some coffee with us,” Harold said, motioning for the mayor to follow him to the kitchen. “It’s been months since we’ve seen you!” Like most of the islanders, the mayor wasn’t a terribly social man, but he was the only person who had never turned his back on them over the years.

Mary Rose joined them, and the three sat down to a table laden with eggs, coffee, toast, and butter. The mayor was still wearing his coat. Mary Rose felt unsettled by his anxious demeanor.

“And what brings you out here?” Harold asked. “Don’t tell me you’re finally going to pave the road into town?”

“Well, no, it’s not about the road,” said Matthew.

“Of course, I can’t imagine the mayor would spend money on something so practical.”

Matthew responded with a forced, awkward smile. “I came to give this to you in person,” he said, pulling an envelope from the pocket of his coat. “It’s from the Central Government.”

“The government?” Mary Rose echoed. “Is it important, Matthew?”

“You should read it yourselves,” he said, laying it in the middle of the table.

Harold picked up the official-looking envelope and weighed it in his hand. He carefully cut open the thick paper with a bread knife and removed the letter. A large, fancy emblem graced the top of the letterhead.

“Central Government,” he began reading aloud. “Commission for Protection and Public Safety—”

“Protection and Public Safety? Have we done something wrong?” Mary Rose interrupted.

“No, no, Rose. It’s not that at all,” Matthew replied. “I think it has to do with a study that was done on your property.”

“A study?” Mary Rose was visibly upset. “Have there been people nosing around without us knowing? Matthew, what’s this all about?”

“Honestly, I didn’t know anything about it,” he said, sounding to Mary Rose a little less than convincing. “About three months ago, three officials came to do research on the island. I thought it was a demographic study or something like that. I didn’t think it was a big deal.”

“But it was on our property? I don’t understand!”

“Please let Harold read the letter,” the mayor said, trying to calm her down.

Harold remembered the scene perfectly, and even though months had passed, he felt the same foreboding as he reread the letter:

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Grapes,

We are writing regarding the new Law of Geological Safety, approved by Parliament on the fourteenth of September of last year. The law stipulates that new construction along the coast conform to more rigorous regulations. Among the new standards, the law states that new construction must be

built using anticorrosive materials and be situated a minimum of thirty-two feet from the shoreline.

Your residence, built before the new law went into effect, would normally be grandfathered under previous regulations. However, due to extraordinary circumstances, we are unable to exempt your residence from the new building codes. Below are relevant excerpts from a report by our committee of experts:

1. Land composition: the fragile composition of volcanic rock that forms Brent Island is much more susceptible to erosion than any other type of geological formation.

2. Lot and safety restrictions: at its closest point, the residence is situated four feet, ten inches from the shoreline . . .

As he reread that last sentence, Harold was overwhelmed by a sense of helplessness. Although it was true that the distance from the last step of the back porch to the edge of the cliff was less than five feet, it hadn't always been that way. In response, Harold and Mary Rose had sent in the original plans for the lot, showing that the house had been built more than sixty feet from the edge. It wasn't their fault that, over the years, the ferocious sea repeatedly crashed against the island and eroded the cliff, causing mudslides and eating away at the rock as if bent on making the whole island disappear. He sighed, looked again at the crisp print, and kept reading.

3. Morphology of the coast: the location of the residence is imminently dangerous. The residence is situated on a ledge, 111 feet above the water, a height that is not suitable for any human activity, particularly daily living.

Miquel Reina

In view of the above information, and despite dealing with a construction predating the indicated codes, the Commission is obliged to take necessary measures to ensure the safety of its inhabitants.

Therefore, you are hereby instructed to vacate your property on the eighteenth of July. Once cleared, the residence will be demolished.

Further details are forthcoming.

Sincerely,

Gregory Gray, Deputy Delegate of Public Safety

Harold let out a long sigh and carefully folded the paper. The letter held far more significance than simply requiring a move. It was a key that had reopened a cursed box. A box they had buried years ago in the foundation of the house and that now, like the rotting boards of a sunken ship, had begun to float to the surface again.

Suddenly overcome by a wave of anger rising from deep inside, Harold ripped the letter to pieces. He stared at the bits of paper that fell to his feet like dead leaves. Suddenly, an explosion roared overhead. A strange yellow light shot through the cracks in the shutters as the floor shuddered under his feet. He had never felt anything like it, but he knew exactly what it was.

# Lightning Bolt

Much later, when Harold could piece together what had happened, he would remember the fear that paralyzed him for a millisecond as the word *lightning* resounded in his head. Then the house went dark.

“Rosy!” he yelled as he stumbled down the stairs. “Rosy! Please, say something!” He was disoriented, and his voice sounded strange, muffled by the ringing in his ears.

He made it to the front hall but didn’t see anything. Under his feet, he felt the crunch of broken glass and wood.

“Rosy!” he yelled again, feeling his way along the hall to the kitchen.

As he bumped into the table, he heard a voice coming to him as if from far away.

“Harold, I’m here!”

“Rosy?” he said, tripping on a chair. “Where are you?”

Then Harold was momentarily blinded by light.

“Oh, sorry!” Mary Rose cried.

Harold opened his eyes again, and before him materialized Mary Rose in silhouette, a flashlight in her hand.

“I couldn’t find you! Where were you? Are you OK?” said Harold, going to his wife.

“In the dining room,” she answered breathlessly. “And then I saw the burst of light through the window! Everything just lit up at once. I

don't think I've ever felt the house shake like that. I thought it was going to come down on us!" After a pause, she added, "Did you call me Rosy?"

It had been years since he'd used that name. Harold cleared his throat awkwardly. "I'm going to check on the electricity," he mumbled.

He groped his way to the breaker box by the front door. Mary Rose pointed her flashlight, and Harold began to toggle the switches.

"Nothing," he said. "The lightning must have hit the lines outside. I should go out and check."

"I don't think that's wise, Harold."

"You can come with me. I won't go far."

They grabbed a couple of umbrellas and went out onto the porch. Immediately, they were assaulted by the roar of the storm. Harold took the flashlight from Mary Rose, and they struggled through the wind and rain to the utility pole. Even though the flashlight was feeble against the storm, Harold could tell that the wooden post and electric lines had not been damaged.

"It must have struck farther away," said Mary Rose, pointing. "Look, power is out in town too."

Harold peered into the darkness. Only the flashes in the sky revealed the area normally marked by the little lights of San Remo de Mar. But Harold knew the noise had been too loud for the lightning to have struck so far away. His searching eyes fell on lumber jutting up from the abandoned shipyard hidden beyond town. He saw it for a fraction of a second, in the blink of a lightning flash. Few in San Remo even knew the island had a shipyard other than the one next to the port. It was in a remote area surrounded by sharp rocks and practically impossible to access without a boat. A shipyard already abandoned when he was young and which he had used to build only one ship: theirs. Since then, he hadn't set foot on that part of the island and avoided even looking in that direction. Harold turned away and looked again at the house. Water cascaded from the roof. He couldn't make sense of the fact that,

in just a few hours, the only thing they had managed to rebuild from their broken dreams would be gone forever.

“Everything all right?” asked Mary Rose.

Harold nodded and started again across the soaked yard, circling around the house and trying to focus his thoughts on the task at hand. A strong odor brought him to a halt.

“Do you smell that?” asked Harold.

“Yes, it smells like . . . something hot.”

With the flashlight, he began to scour the darkness that shrouded the porch, concentrating on the area where the odor was strongest, but he didn’t see anything out of the ordinary. They continued walking, following the circle of light three feet in front of them until it landed on something unusual. Something seemed to swallow the beam of the flashlight. Mary Rose grabbed his arm.

“Please, Harold, let’s go in. There’s nothing here . . .”

But her words fell off as the pair noticed a strange vapor rising from the dark place. Beside the house, where one of the steel cables was buried, a deep hole was emitting steam. Bits of dirt, rock, and scorched hydrangea were scattered around the newly formed crater. The guy wire remained firmly anchored in the rock, seemingly undisturbed. Harold passed the light along the cable that ran to the top of the house. There, where the post that anchored the six guy wires protruded above the roofline, rose a plume of smoke.

“It can’t be,” Harold said.

He rushed around through the wet hydrangeas to where one of the other braces was secured in the ground. As he shined the light, he found another crater slowly filling with the torrential rain that continued to fall.

“What is it, Harold? You’re scaring me,” said Mary Rose.

Harold looked up and was surprised to see his wife’s wet clothing. He too was soaked to the skin.

“Let’s get inside,” he said.

Once they'd shut the door, the roar of the storm diminished.

"The lightning hit the house," he said, peeling off his wet shoes. "Luckily, the cables acted as grounding wires."

"That doesn't make me feel any safer," Mary Rose murmured, her teeth chattering. "Maybe Matthew's right—it's too dangerous to live here. Leaving is the best thing."

At those words, the flashlight slipped from Harold's wet hands. It hit the floor and went out, plunging them back into darkness.

"I'm going to go change," he said.

The sound of his footsteps on the stairs faded, and Mary Rose was alone. She bent down and felt around for the flashlight. She turned it on again and went up after Harold.

Mary Rose entered the bedroom, but Harold wasn't there. One of the shutters had blown open, and she could see the dark sea beyond the cliff roiling furiously. She went to the window and secured the shutter. She used to like storms—the fresh, damp smell; the cold rain; the sound of thunder. Now, it all made her nervous. She shined her light around the dark bedroom. It had never seemed so gloomy. Moving boxes stood sentry around the room, awaiting their final contents. Soon the room would be completely empty.

As she turned to leave, she thought of the old photo of the shipyard she had uncovered that morning. Again, she was flooded with memories of those days long ago, before her life had been taken prisoner by the unexpected events that turned her world—and all her hopes and dreams—upside down. Mary Rose searched through the clothing where she'd packed it, but it was gone. Harold must have found it.

# The Dream That Never Set Sail

As she opened the attic door, Mary Rose was hit by a strong smell of burnt wood. She looked at the central support beam that ascended more than nine feet to the roof. Black marks had been burned into the grain of the wood and looked like veins. She felt truly scared. The fear seemed to emanate from a dark corner of her soul, a corner scorched like the post itself. It was a fear she hadn't felt for years. Mary Rose crossed the big room, the floor creaking beneath her feet, until she neared the round window that took up most of the wall. Harold's silhouette was outlined against the glass, illuminated only by the bolts of lightning zigzagging across the sky and cutting through the storm clouds and falling with thunderous force on the sea. Fishermen had dragged the smaller boats up onto the shore, but the larger ships at the port were buffeted dangerously.

Beneath the cliffs, the waves rose even more violently, amplified by the turbulent winds that lifted them up to crash against the rock walls blocking their path. Mere feet from the edge of the cliff overhanging that same raging sea, their house boldly faced the elements. There were no obstacles to block the gusts of wind raking across the barren grapevines and the hydrangeas closest to the edge, tearing them from the ground they struggled to hold on to. The rain fell in torrents over

the polished surface of the slate roof, gushing from the girders onto the yard below.

Mary Rose stopped a few inches from Harold and spotted the photo in his hand.

“I’m sorry I said that,” she said quietly. “You know I don’t want to leave either.”

Harold sighed mournfully. “I know, Rose.” He paused, watching the choppy sea that seethed around the island. “Do you ever ask yourself what would have become of us if it didn’t exist?” He crossed to the center of the attic. “What would have happened,” he said, looking up at the scorched beam, “if this were still a mast? If this floor were still the deck? If the portholes in the basement had never been removed from the hull?”

Mary Rose felt as though she’d been struck. She perceived in Harold a pain and fragility she hadn’t seen in him in years, a pain that came from a place as old as the house itself.

“Of course I’ve wondered,” she said, the words catching in her throat. “But what choice did we have? We did what we had to.”

“Yes. And now what will be left of what we fought for all these years? Of the only thing that kept us afloat?”

Harold returned to Mary Rose. The rain crescendoed, a deafening hail that drove at the glass.

“I’m not afraid to spend our last days confined to a windowless room, far from the sea. What scares me is losing the only thing we have left from that time. The only thing we have left of him.”

Another bolt of lightning touched down, and the house shook violently. It seemed the storm wasn’t outside, but right in that old attic with them. With a trembling hand, Harold touched her face and turned her to look at him. His eyes were red, with hardly a trace of deep blue. There was only pain.

“I’m afraid too, Harold,” she said. “But as long as we’re alive, as long as we’re together, those memories won’t die. We have to hold on to them.”

Harold lowered his eyes to the picture of the three of them smiling in front of their unfinished ship.

“I really try, Rose. Every night when we go to bed, after turning out the light, I hear the storm. I relive every second, every detail, and every sound.”

Thunder shook the house.

Harold paused and then continued. “But when I try to remember his face, when I try to see his smile and his shining eyes—each day they’re a little blurrier. His voice and his laugh are swallowed by the roar of the rain. And that’s when I feel truly scared, Rose. I’m scared of forgetting. Of losing the memory of when we were happy, dreaming. I’m scared of knowing that the only thing that keeps us close to him is this house. This house that, come tomorrow, will be gone forever.”

Harold looked up from the photo and into the tear-filled eyes of his wife. They both wept silently then, not daring to breathe, barely conscious of the storm battering the house that had once been their ship.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t able to give you the life we wanted,” continued Harold. “To be able to live great adventures together or to fulfill our dream. You deserved to be happy.”

Mary Rose put her arms around Harold. “We deserved to be happy,” she whispered.

## Two Storms

Mr. and Mrs. Grapes weren't hungry for supper, so they each took one of Mary Rose's sleeping pills and went to bed early. The wailing storm filled each empty room of the house, drowning out their deep breathing and the ticking of the grandfather clock.

Outside, the yard was turning white, as if covered in snow. Hail shot down like bullets, mutilating the grapevines and the beloved hydrangeas. The deep craters beneath the six guy wires became shallow wells.

The hail beat down everything in its path in town also. It broke windows, dented cars, and damaged fruit ripening on branches. Only the oldest residents of San Remo could remember a storm as strong as the one lashing the island that night. A storm that had come thirty-five years earlier, when the house on the cliff did not yet exist and a young Mr. and Mrs. Grapes lived in a tiny apartment in the center of town. Harold still worked at the shipyard and Mary Rose in a florist shop. Just like this one, that storm had begun with a beautiful day, when the scent of flowers drifted through the open door of the florist, filling the streets with an intoxicating aroma.

"You're late," said a young Mary Rose when she saw the little eight-year-old boy run into the shop. "Your father's waiting."

“Sorry, Mom,” said Dylan as he approached the counter, his brown hair mussed.

Mary Rose smiled, left the bouquet she was arranging, and went around the counter. “Come give me a kiss.”

Dylan made a face, but dutifully offered his cheek to his mother.

“Don’t worry. I won’t keep you,” Mary Rose said. She pulled a bag off the shelf under the cash register. “This fish is for your dinner, got it? Tell your father you’re to eat it, not use it for bait.”

Dylan’s deep-blue eyes widened, and he smiled sheepishly. He was surprised his mother knew they did that. He grabbed the bag and ran back toward the door.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” said Mary Rose.

Dylan turned and saw his mother holding a squat, empty mason jar. He grabbed the jar and, giving her one last kiss, ran out of the shop.

“See you tonight, Mom!” he yelled as he disappeared down the street.

The hands of the grandfather clock in the dining room moved to mark midnight, and the chimes began to sound. Eviction day had arrived. And just as the last chime went silent, the gears of chance triggered by the lightning strike began to turn.

A sharp snapping sound burst from the craters around the bases of the guy wires, and as if someone had pulled the plug in a bathtub, they began to drain swiftly. After an enormous gurgle, the holes were empty, revealing new, deeper breaches. There was another cracking sound, and thin fissures began to open out in every direction, fed by the torrential rain that continued to filter down through them. The earth creaked and groaned as the cracks snaked across the terrain, surrounding the house like a ring of fire.

Finally, they reached the edge of the cliff. There was a fleeting moment of stillness, and then a powerful quake shook the foundation

of the house, reverberating across the island all the way to the shipyard by the port. The shipyard in which, on that stormy afternoon thirty-five years ago, Harold had impatiently waited for his son.

The clinking of lunch boxes against the glass jar in the sack alerted young Harold to his son's arrival as Dylan dodged through the stream of sweaty men exiting the shipyard. It was the end of the work day for the laborers, but for Harold, it was time to start his second shift, the one he and his son eagerly awaited all day. Dylan quickly made his way to the dock, where his father was waiting in a small rowboat loaded with boards and tools.

"Sorry I'm late, Dad!" Dylan exclaimed as he jumped in the boat.

"No problem," Harold said, and playfully ruffled his son's hair with his strong hands.

"Looks like we can fish tonight," said the boy, showing the sack to his father.

Harold burst out laughing and began to row. Slowly they left behind the enormous dry docks on which massive ships waited to be finished and headed out to sea. After fifteen minutes of rowing, they'd left the port of San Remo behind, hidden by a high rock wall. Ahead, on the shore of a small cove, appeared the old, forgotten shipyard. They secured the rowboat on one of the dock's rusty moorings, unloaded some of the boards, and entered the dilapidated building.

Every time he passed through those doors, Dylan's chest swelled with pride. He couldn't believe he was helping build a ship, a ship that would carry him and his parents away to fulfill their dream. He had been helping his father for almost two years, learning the ins and outs of the trade. Each one of the boards they fitted had his fingerprints on it. In those two years, he had never missed a day. Even when sick with a fever, he'd been unwilling to miss a moment of the construction. This

ship would take them far from the island to live anywhere in the world they wanted. He couldn't wait to call it home.

"How long until we finish her, Dad?" Dylan inquired.

Harold buckled his tool belt. "There's still a lot of work to be done, son. But if we keep going at this rate, and the sails arrive on time, I'm thinking we can take her out by the end of the summer."

"That's only two months away!" he cried, jumping up and down.

Back up on the bluff at Mr. and Mrs. Grapes's house, the rain continued hammering the ground. The fissures expanded rapidly, completely separating the house from the rest of the lot.

The house shuddered again, and the only miniature ship Harold had not packed, the replica of his own sailboat, crashed to the ground, covering the mason jar with a web of tiny cracks.

The shaking ceased, and the house settled down. The windows stopped rattling, and the lamps stopped swaying. The thunder outside faded, and the hail eased back to rain. But a moment later, just as Harold rolled over in bed, a new cracking sound shattered the calm. The growing fissures had reached down into the very core of the cliff, causing the whole foundation to break free.

The six steel cables strained with tension as the house pitched on an angle. Inside, the remaining pictures on the walls hung at severe angles. Moving boxes slid across the floor. The floor, ceiling, and walls creaked like dry branches about to snap.

The wind blowing in from the sea intensified, and one of the cables tethering the house snapped. It was a hurricane-force wind, identical to the one thirty-five years ago that brought the first storm clouds to darken the old shipyard where young Harold and Dylan kept working, oblivious to it all.

Harold had spent a couple of hours installing the railings on the deck while Dylan was busy polishing the rounded timber of the topmast that stood proudly in the center of the deck.

As twilight descended on them, Dylan saw a pale-yellow light blink by the stern and smiled. Silently, he went to the bag his mother had given him that still held the untouched supper and retrieved the empty jar.

A raindrop fell on Harold's arm. Surprised, he looked up through the holes in the shipyard's ramshackle roof.

"I think that's enough for today, Dylan," he said, dropping his hammer on a pile of timber.

"We're going already? But it's still early!"

"A storm is coming, son, and I don't want to get caught in it here."

"It's four raindrops, Dad. And, besides, I haven't caught any fireflies," he complained, pointing the empty jar in his hands toward the stern.

Harold watched the yellow glow of the fireflies flitting among the timber. He sighed and anxiously looked back at the sky.

"One more hour, and we're leaving!"

The severed cable whipped the wooden siding, and the ground beneath the house slipped, detaching from the rest of the yard and sinking several feet. The other cables strained.

Some hundred feet below the house, the waves crashed against the cliff's porous rocks. Two more cables snapped.

Rocks slid away from the enormous fracture below the cliff and were swallowed by the waves that furiously licked at its base.

In one of the wind's sudden attacks, the fourth and fifth cables were like giant slingshots and launched their anchors into the air. The sofa streaked across the living room floor as the house tipped at an uncomfortable angle. For a moment, time seemed to stop. There was only the

sound of the rain falling on the wood house, as it had fallen on the old timber of the shipyard where Harold and his son worked all afternoon, when the black clouds of that earlier storm had covered the whole island under a gloomy blanket as thunder rolled closer and closer.

“Put this on,” said Harold, handing Dylan an old yellow raincoat many sizes too big.

“What about you, Dad?”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m used to getting wet.”

They ran to the dock, guided by the glow of Dylan’s firefly jar, as the rain fell hard on them. The wind slammed their rowboat against the wooden gangplank over and over. Harold helped his son, practically swallowed by the giant raincoat, into the boat. Then he untied the line, pushed away from the dock, and began rowing.

As the boat moved away from the cove, the rain and darkness seemed to devour them. As he strained at the oars, Harold’s breathing accelerated. He wished he were stronger; he wished he could get them to land faster. He rowed without resting, cutting through the black surf that crashed into the boat on one side and then the other. Harold knew their destination wasn’t far, yet the cove of the shipyard kept getting smaller and the port of San Remo farther away.

Then he realized his mistake. The current swirling around the island was too strong. It was pulling them out to the open sea. Harold’s whole body tensed, and he looked at his son anxiously. But Dylan didn’t appear afraid. It wasn’t his first time on a choppy sea. Besides, he always felt safe with his father. Harold, however, was beginning to panic. He let go of one of the oars and grabbed the boat’s line, throwing it at his son’s feet.

“Hold on as tight as you can!” Harold shouted above the roar of the storm.

Dylan smiled at him, his face lit by the soft glow of the firefly jar. Just then, a wave slammed against the hull. The little boat flipped over, and darkness swallowed the light. It was precisely that moment when the pot of hydrangeas slipped from Mary Rose's hands and crashed to the floor in the little apartment, the moment she knew something terrible had happened.

If anyone in San Remo unable to sleep because of the storm had looked out their window toward the cliff, they would have seen something truly unbelievable. A three-story house tilted at a thirty-degree angle toward the sea, suspended as if by magic.

Or one last steel cable.

Inside the house, heaps of boxes, chairs, and furniture piled up against the walls, leaning toward the precipice. The only piece of furniture that remained in place was the heavy bed in which Harold and Mary Rose slept, submerged in a deep sleep by the powerful pills.

Thunder rolled over the island, and the earth shook again, shattering the precarious equilibrium. The last cable began to vibrate wildly, and the wind uprooted the utility pole in the yard. Then one of the strands of the thick steel braid split. More strands followed, unraveling, unable to support the titanic weight of the house.

If that hypothetical resident had indeed looked out the window a few minutes prior, surely they would have called the police, who might somehow have arrived in time to pull Mr. and Mrs. Grapes from their bed. Then Harold's and Mary Rose's lives might have continued as planned and what followed would never have come to pass. But that didn't happen.

The last section of earth supporting the house broke away from the rest of the cliff. The cable groaned and finally snapped. The yellow house, along with a section of garden attached to the foundation, began to free-fall toward the white-capped sea. The impact was brutal. Everything was cloaked under the dark of night. A darkness as deep as

the one felt by the young Mr. Grapes as the rowboat capsized and he plunged into the water.

It took Harold mere seconds to resurface. Coughing up salt water, he tried to shout, frantically looking all around, but all he could see was blackness. He managed to grab a piece of lumber that had fallen out of the boat, but he didn't see any sign of the boat itself. Or of his son.

"Dylan!" Harold screamed. "Dylan!"

Harold let go of the board that was keeping him afloat and began to swim. His body rose and fell with the waves that hit him and dragged him under in a frozen embrace. He cried his son's name again, but he was alone. He dove under, waving his arms and legs wildly, in hopes of brushing against his son. But there was nothing. Only darkness.

Harold could hardly breathe. The waves beat against his face, and little by little, salt water filled his lungs. Harold was drowning. He closed his eyes and let himself be swallowed by the sea, his only wish to be with his son.

As his head slipped under, a yellow glow appeared. In front of him, he saw the mason jar filled with fireflies sputtering to their watery death. Harold grabbed it and bobbed back to the surface. Then the light became stronger, blinding. It was a spotlight from a fishing boat. Strong arms hauled him up and laid him on the deck. Harold began shouting his son's name again, still clutching the glass jar with its fading glow. He clambered to his feet, sobbing and striking out at the men who held him back from jumping into the water.

The fishermen made every effort to find the boy, but their search proved fruitless. They never found his body.

That day, the light that had guided the lives of Mr. and Mrs. Grapes went out. Nothing made sense anymore. The pain threatened to drown them. They buried their memories in the foundation of the house they built from their broken dreams and the wood of a ship that never set sail. From the only thing left of him.