

## Senanus Island

by Judy LeBlanc

The pebble-searing sea startles Mandy awake. She leaps to her feet with the feeling something is wrong. She's always trusted her gut that way and sure enough, there, just offshore in the whitecaps, her escaped kayak bucks for joy. She swims toward the kayak with Pearce's voice nattering in her head. It's not like him to not come after her.

The wind switches off and she grabs at the kayak, runs her fingers along the fiberglass and eases it toward shore. She loves this boat. When she and Pearce bought hers and his as wedding gifts for one another they joked that they might call them *Effort 2*. Both were marrying for a second time. His had a gold-colored rudder. "Rooster tails," she'd teased him. In the end she dubbed her own, *My Tangerine Baby*. He'd grinned and trapped her in his eyes, the way he does. She loves that look. She loves how his eyes don't reveal his mood, how he keeps her guessing.

Back on the beach, she pulls the boat over the rocks and drops onto a flat sun-heated stone. After all these years, she's on Indian Island. It's what her parents called it before you didn't say Indian. Behind the marina, a jumble of condominiums interrupt the forest. On the other side of the inlet a highway skirts the edge of a mountain from which drifts the hum of traffic. In between there is tiny Indian Island and the water.

Four o'clock. She left him an hour and a half ago. Childish, the way they'd split off like that, their slick boats bouncing in opposite directions across the bay. Childish, the way she'd said, "Fuck you, Pearce," and dug her paddle deep, the weight of the whole ocean pushing against the blade. She faced away from him before the tears came. She never lets him see the tears.

“Mandy, calm down,” he’d called, the wind shredding his words so that she wasn’t sure if he’d said it at all.

She’s forty-one, too old to be cursing out her husband, Pearce once told her. He’d say, “let’s not fight,” and this would make her want to fight more because she felt that he was trying to muzzle her. She’d get angry and he’d match her anger and rev it up. Mandy would let him go a bit wild and then she’d bring things down. She liked feeling in control that way, but hated the fall-out afterwards – the wasted hours and the shame.

She and Pearce have perfect days on the water. How many couples have perfect days? He’d taught her the right strokes, made her match the movement of his arms, the subtle twist in his body, how to slide along the surface of the ocean side-by-side. Once he’d towed her when she was too tired to go on and one night under a full moon he’d gathered oysters on the beach and pried them open with his Swiss army knife. He’d poured raw oysters down her throat and they became something savory and secret in her belly.

Maybe he’s in the marina pub waiting for her. He’s not a drinker like her first husband, but he can nurse a beer with the look of a man who considers himself ill-treated, the eyes narrow and small, eyebrows caving into one another. It’s early September, and the sun will be dropping into the sea within a couple of hours. Something is wrong.

They’d been married for three years now and it was hard with her son, and these weekends when Gerard was with his dad she tried to make her time alone with Pearce precious. Today is her fault. Why’d she have to bring it up? On the other hand, is it too much to ask that he talk to his stepson?

“I try. He hates me,” Pearce had said.

They'd paddled a short way from the marina and were waiting for the Mill Bay ferry to get out of their path. A slight chop rocked the boats. She couldn't see his eyes through his sunglasses.

"He doesn't hate you. He's sixteen. Don't you remember being sixteen and finding out, hey, it's not like it's supposed to be."

He smacked the blade of his paddle on the surface of the water, distracted – how he gets. He can't sit still for long, is always fiddling in the kayak, leaning this way and that, spinning in circles, fiddling with the paddle. Sometimes he tries to do Eskimo rolls – over and over again – he gets obsessed. But he hasn't succeeded yet. He stopped. "And now what? You want *me* to solve your son's anger problem?"

It was that he'd said, "your son," not claiming his stepson, and therefore, in her mind, not claiming her. And it was the spit that came out of the side of his mouth.

Fuck you, Pearce.

She gets to her feet and faces the wall of trees along the bank. There's no path in sight, and yet she's certain it was this bay where her father dropped the anchor. Where they'd lowered themselves into the shallow water and her mother had passed them the camping gear and the food. There'd been a grassy meadow near the beach where she'd helped her father pitch the tent. It's still there, she's sure, somewhere in the trees. She wades through a mat of gumweed up the bank. At the top, she turns and scans the water for any sign of Pearce. It's not that he doesn't know where she is though he's not landed here before. They've passed it enough times in kayaks on their way down the inlet. He always says, "We can't land on

a First Nations burial ground.” It’s not that Pearce stands much on principle except when it comes to the dead.

Mandy wants Pearce to be with her here on the island, to get how perfect it was with her family all those years ago, how she came from stock that could be perfect. Pearce had finally agreed.

Standing above the beach she closes her eyes and tries to bring back the musty smell of a canvas tent, the sizzle of bacon frying on the Coleman stove, the collapsing driftwood as it disintegrated in the fire after dark. She strains to hear in her memory her brother, Brandon’s high-pitched laughter. He was younger than her and copied everything she did. They fashioned bows and arrows from sticks and fishing line and played at killing cougars and pirates. On the island, unlike at home, Brandon and she weren’t afraid of anything.

Pearce and she never talk about fear. Before they met, he paddled alone in the worst conditions and he never tells her not to paddle alone.

The underbrush thins as the trees get taller and the shade deepens. Mandy walks away from the shore, and it’s not long before the forest opens up and she steps into a clearing, yellow with grass and sunshine. She’s on the other side of the island. She smiles at the sudden memory of slithering on her belly through the deep dry grass with Brandon. And how her parents had been there, also on the ground, grass flattened beneath them. Her mother on her back with pale breasts rising into the sultry air, eyes closed and her father lowering himself onto her as if he were doing pushups: all around the buzzing of cicadas, somewhere the stink of animal excrement. And it had struck her as comical – her father’s skinny buttocks and her mother’s sighs. Brandon had cried out and Mandy slapped her

hand over his mouth, dragged him to his feet and back into the forest. By the time they dropped out of earshot beneath the trees, Brandon's whimpering had pitched into tears, his cheeks damp and smeared with dirt. When she rolled on the ground giggling, he finally giggled, too. It was after this that Brandon came to understand like Mandy that his family was different on the water than at home.

At home there were nights when Brandon would come to her room and she would bury him in blankets, cover his ears. And in the morning something was broken: a lamp or a glass and the space between her parents, jittery with shame.

They were allowed to stay up late on the island. Their father would tell stories about the Indian people that were buried there, how when a boat sunk out on the bay or somebody drowned, it was the work of a vengeful ghost. Though her father had never said so, she'd always believed that as long as they didn't fight, they were safe from the Indian ghosts.

Mandy returns to the beach and drops onto the gravel. Behind her the tops of the firs are ramrod straight. The air is windless and the light is shifting into evening's purple hues. Even the gulls are quiet. She recognizes nothing. Pearce was right. There's nothing here for her, only the water endlessly circling the island. The ocean is flat now, so different than only an hour ago. She thinks every shape on the horizon is Pearce.

The sun has sunk on the other side of the island so that the trees and shoreline on her side cast long shadows. Her skin is covered in goose bumps. She pulls a fleece coat over her bathing suit, the life jacket and the sprayskirt.

Out on the water the light has given everything a brass finish and made the edges of rocks and trees as distinct as cedar carvings. She squints into the setting sun and is able

to make out the marina across the bay. It takes her forty minutes to make the crossing. The ocean's black surface smells cold. The ferry dock is empty.

That time on the island was the only time she recalls seeing her mother's bare breasts where, unbeknownst to anyone, cancer cells were dividing and multiplying. Her mother has been gone more years than Brandon. Her father lives on a boat in Florida with a woman she's never met.

Her eye catches a movement, a violent flashing red light on the bank above the marina: an ambulance. She thinks she'll turn back to the island because surely by now Pearce is waiting for her, but she can't move.

On weekends when Gerard's dad comes to pick him up, Mandy goes somewhere in the house where she can avoid contact with her ex-husband.

In the dark she drifts toward shore until it's shallow enough for her to fumble her way out of the kayak. The light on the ambulance is off now and there's a murmur of voices coming down toward her. She stops a short distance from the ambulance where a kayak with a gold rudder lies empty on its side. She trembles in the cold. The man from the marina who Pearce and her talked to earlier in the day steps up beside her and says something, though she can't make out the words.

"We got separated," she says.

He puts a blanket around her shoulder and its weight is insubstantial as water.