

Richard Butts

Before Clare

She'd been standing by the front door when I pulled into the driveway. A tiny straight woman in a black hat and a dark coat that was too warm for this time of the year. At first, I didn't know who she was. The small suitcase by her feet. I thought she was going to ask me if I'd talked to Jesus today and push a pamphlet into my hand. Didn't they always come in twos?

She should have gone in and sat in the sunporch. I remember apologizing but feeling it was her own fault. I'd forgotten that she was coming. To help with the baby, Clare said. But the baby had come early, so no one would have been home anyway.

I think I asked about her flight. I put out some cookies with the tea. She said tinned milk would be fine. We didn't have any. I wished Clare were here. I'd met Margaret only once before when she and Wes had come up to Toronto for the wedding. It was the first time Wes had ever been out of Newfoundland, and he confessed to me—a few hours after I'd married his daughter—it would be his last. But I was welcome to stay over in the parlour if I ever got to Point au Gaul. Margaret had been to Montreal once to see her daughter Caroline.

I wasn't sure I was happy to have Margaret sitting in my kitchen drinking rum and coke. I was thankful Wes had been true to his word. It had been a long day. But it was her right, I suppose.

When I think of it now, it is absurd that I was angry at Clare for not being here to deal with her mother. Under the circumstances, she could be excused.

I fell back on formal gestures. I offered Margaret another cup of tea. I wanted to go to bed. Surely, she was tired. She'd changed flights twice, in Halifax and then again in Montreal. She'd called Caroline from the airport and talked to her for over half an hour. Caroline had moved to Montreal when Clare was a baby.

-I see.

At odd moments during the day, I'd caught myself rehearsing the clever announcement phrases I'd have to phone across the country.

-Would you like to go into the living room?

The kitchen was just fine for her thanks.

Like, hello granny. Ugh.

I was surprised I got out the rum. I was even more surprised when she said with coke. Why did I think she didn't drink? I'd put away her hat and coat in the hall closet. I'd put her suitcase in the upstairs bedroom. I'd taken as long as I could to find the bedding Clare had already arranged. When I went back downstairs, she'd finished the tea.

-Would you like some rum?

I think I did it for something to say. We were out of ice, and the coke was warm. So I added more rum. Tired, one drink would put me to sleep. I tipped slightly more into hers. Clare had been asleep when I left her. A nurse wheeled the baby out of the room and down the hall. Would they watch him all night? I sat across the table watching Margaret. Her unsleepy eyes took in everything in the room. The eyes of an animal anticipating a trap. When just a bit of coke left in her glass, I'd yawn and tell her that I'd made up her bed. Not say more than was absolutely necessary. But she would have this ritual talk which I wanted no part of. On this night of all nights. Fragmented family stories which only made me feel our strangeness. I knew I'd be too tired to remember.

I think Margaret said it had been a warm October on the Burin Peninsula.

She was a little drunk. I got us both new drinks. She broke the filter off the cigarette I passed her. There was nowhere to go. Her names and places demanded nothing of me. I withdrew into my own smoke.

Wes had been back from the boats for a couple of hours. Fall fishing was always good and the nets had been heavy. His son-in-law Michael had joked that he was getting too old to pull the fall fish. Too old? Wes Tyler at only forty?

"I've been pulling the nets since before you were a twinkle in your father's eye, Michael Wilkes, and I'll be pulling them long after you've gone."

"I wish you luck, Mr. Tyler. I know a man needs to feed his family, specially a growing family like yours."

There was a deep affection between the two men. During the summer, they'd been too busy for talk, too busy supplying the European buyers who came to Point au Gaul for the cod. But since the

end of September, from the time his mother-in-law had begun to show, Michael had been tireless in finding new ways to tease Wes.

"I know you're not one to let a man steal your lines, Mr. Tyler, but I promise you that Caroline and I won't have any more now that we got the twins if you want to call it a draw."

Dinner was over and the women were down at the landwash splitting and salting the catch. They wouldn't be finished till after sunset. With Margaret's time so near, Wes had been reluctant to go up the hill to football that night.

"You might as well go," she'd told him, "I don't want you hanging around the house like an old man. There's nothing for you to do here." The end of the summer had brought a new playfulness to all his family. His wife too took pleasure in chiding him about becoming a father at forty. "You shame me, Mr. Tyler. If the parson didn't know that all the men were out in the boats, he'd think I'd been having visitors."

"I don't think I should leave you tonight."

"Well, Mr. Tyler, if you think you're too old for football with the young ones, I'll get you a shawl and give you my chair by the stove, while I split another log for your comfort."

"I don't want you to be alone, Margaret."

She saw that he was anxious. She smiled at him and folded her hands neatly across her middle.

"I'm never alone, Wes. I'm never alone." Suddenly she winced, looking at her swollen belly. "I'm certainly not alone tonight. This little footballer here says if his father isn't willing to go and hold up the Tyler side at the match, he'll go himself."

Wes watched her. "What will you do if you need something?"

"I'll call Mrs. Burgess next door."

That was an hour ago. He stood on the top of the hill watching the tide go out while Michael Wilkes and his brothers called him to join their side.

There's little recorded about what happened that day. The world was concerned with matters of more consequence than a shift in the ocean floor some forty miles off the south coast of Burin. One account places the time of the undersea earthquake at approximately 5:30 p.m. Newfoundland time. Popular wisdom has it a little later. The slight shudder of the earth in Point au Gaul marked the passage of dinner: plates had been cleared away and replaced by teacups, and after the rough work they performed on the sea, the thick fingers were packing pipes and rolling cigarettes with a gentle efficiency. Sometime between 5:30 and 6:00, part of a disturbed and uneasy sea floor under the Grand

Banks buckled downwards to form one of the deepest pits on the earth's surface. In Point au Gaul, some teaspoons rattled themselves against their cups; a freshly packed pipe, unlit and balanced against a saucer, shook itself and then lay down; a dog howled at a back door. Less than an hour later, the walls of the great trench placed themselves together, closing the wound in the ocean floor and driving from its belly the immense mass of the Atlantic which had so quickly filled its depths.

"You're as deep as the grave, Mr. Tyler," Michael said. "You look at that sea any harder, you'll bore a hole in it."

Wes didn't hear his son-in-law. The younger man ran towards him, smoothly pushing the ball before him with his feet.

"Hello, Mr. Tyler, my brothers and I were wondering if you'd do us the honour of joining us this evening and showing us, please, how football was played in the old days."

Someone laughed. Wes turned from the sea to the grinning faces. A voice called Michael for the ball. With a heavy thud, the ball lifted itself through the air, looming up against the sun like a brown shell lazily ejected from the cannon of an ancient man-of-war. It hung there for a moment, a speck against the light, and then it fell harmlessly back to earth, bouncing several times before it rolled to a stop.

Wes drew slowly on his pipe and lost himself in the contemplation of the quick leaps of the ball and the controlled scurry of the men as they chased it across the open ground. Michael Wilkes was good. He had a physical grace in his movements: he turned back all assaults, stripping the ball from the attackers and dancing away with it skipping over the tufts of brown grass before him. Howling, a pack followed him up towards the other goal. Caroline had married well.

When Wes turned to tap out his pipe on a large rock pushing through the ground, his eyes sought the calm of the receding tide which marks the end of a fisherman's day. The tide must have gone out early tonight; he'd never seen so much of the landwash exposed. The place where the men met in the evenings for football was the highest point in Point au Gaul. From where Wes stood, he could see out for several miles. On clear evenings, he could see the naked masts of the schooners rising and falling in the sea. But tonight there was no movement. He couldn't see the undulating edge of the tide. There was no surf. The dories were still, their grey sides exposed as they lay tilted in the mud. The masts of the schooners were arrested preternaturally in groups of oblique angles. The coastal sea was a ruled line below the horizon.

Wes felt someone beside him. Michael was following his father-in-law's gaze toward the sudden stillness of the harbour. Someone called him back to the game, but he didn't move. The noise of the game stopped abruptly, as if a great tap had been shut. The silence was palpable. The men had assembled quietly behind Wes and Michael, the only sound their heaving breaths which slowed as the game passed from their bodies. They couldn't know that this withdrawal of the waves from the shallow coastal waters was the sea's response to a quaking chasm forty-two miles off the coast.

"Lord God," whispered a voice.

No one moved. They waited as if with one mind from something. It was Wes's voice that broke the silence.

"Bring the children and the old folks from the houses up here. We'll have to get the women from the landwash. They won't see it from down there."

"I'll go for them," said Michael. It was over a mile to the salting sheds where the women were cleaning and drying the day's catch. He turned to a man. "The twins will be with your missus, Mr. Johnson, while Caroline is splitting. Bring them back with you."

A voice stopped him: "There." They looked out to the sea. It had leapt up behind the schooners to hide what should have been the line of the horizon. Although the sun was still a luminous wafer in the west, the schooners' masts no longer stood out boldly as dark lines cutting across the light of the southern sky. They were blurred, indistinct, only shadows of themselves, against the leaden wall of water which seemed like a curtain suddenly dropped from the sky at the end of day.

When Wes reached his house, Mrs. Burgess was in the kitchen with her daughter Bessie. Caroline too had come. Wes found her in the upstairs bedroom sitting by the bed, holding her mother's hand. Caroline rose to give him the chair, but he waved her back. Margaret smiled at him. Her hair was damp. There was a tautness in her face.

"Well, Mr. Tyler, it looks like I won't be alone to have this baby. You picked a good time to come home. We were just going to send Bessie up the hill for you." She winced as a tremor gripped her, then passed from her body.

"Breathe, Mama, just breathe," Caroline said quietly.

Margaret released her breath and opened her eyes as her body relaxed. Her voice was softer when she spoke, but it had lost none of its gentle teasing.

"What do you think, Mr. Tyler? Your grown daughter has left her own babies to come to tell her mother how to have another."

Wes knew he had to take them from the house, but he was transfixed by something wonderfully vital in the scene: his wife, his daughter, his unborn child, all of them involved in this immense responsibility of living. They didn't know that the sea was challenging their business with life, that soon it would grow impatient with the drollery of their lives, that soon it would demand its tribute for the many lives which it had suffered to live by its shores and, from their small boats, plunder its waters.

"She's a bossy girl, just like her mother," Wes said. "But now, up to the hill. The tide's coming in too high, and we'd best be up there when it hits the landwash."

Both women started to talk at once. Caroline allowed her mother to answer.

"What is it you're saying, Mr. Tyler? I'll not be climbing mountains this night to have my baby born on a rock like a savage."

Another tremor seized her. The ragged sound of her breathing was audible. They heard the front door open and heavy boots in the hall. Mr. Burgess's voice was heard in the kitchen. A moment later, Mrs. Burgess appeared at the bedroom door. Her face was white.

"My husband's come. It's a tidal wave."

Caroline leapt to her feet. "My babies!"

"Mr. Johnson's bringing them," Wes said.

"And some are still down at the sheds!" she cried.

Wes hesitated a moment. "Michael went for 'em."

A shadow crossed Caroline's face. "He'll be looking for me. He won't know I'm here!"

"The others'll tell him," Wes said. "Don't worry, he can take care of himself."

Mr. Burgess's voice called up the stairs.

"We must leave now," said Mrs. Burgess.

Margaret looked into her husband's eyes. Her face was contorted by forces within her, but her eyes were clear. Slowly, with great deliberation, as if trying to let the sound of each word die away before she started another, she said, "I won't go."

He knew he might as soon stop the water with his hands as move her that night.

"I'll stay with you, Margaret," he said. She had closed her eyes as he spoke. "But the rest of you, go," he said sharply.

Caroline looked at her father, her eyes pleading, torn by the conflicting claims of children, husband, and mother.

"Mrs. Johnson will need you to take the twins, Caroline. She'll have enough to do with her own," Wes said.

It was done; he'd made the decision for her; he'd taken the responsibility. She cried as she embraced him, and he kissed her on the forehead before he pushed her gently towards the door. With a last look at her mother, she fled down the stairs after Mrs. Burgess.

The tidal wave reached the landwash the same time as Michael. The women had no chance. The sea took them as it took back the fish the men had gathered that day. Michael's body was found by one of his brothers three weeks later tangled in the reeds of a duck pond half a mile inland. The schooners were flung against the land as if they were toys. The dories were hurled first against the salting sheds and then against the houses, their sharp bows slicing through walls as if they were paper. Houses that were not crushed by the weight of the water were lifted from the ground and carried, along with nets and oars and broken masts, further inland to their destruction.

Wes Tyler's house had a foundation and withstood the assault. The sea struck it and shook it for several seconds. Then it let go. The water rushed on past the house for a few hundred yards, slowed, and, as abruptly as it had begun, stopped. Wes sat by his wife's bed holding her hand while the sea licked the top step of the stair outside the bedroom. It rose no further. The sea's anger had lasted less than two minutes. The wave had passed completely over the landwash and most of the village. Its passion spent, all that was left was for it to slowly withdraw, bloated with its catch.

If the clock in the hall hadn't been under water, Wes might have heard it chime nine o'clock at the moment their baby was born. Margaret lay with her daughter against her breast, her breathing slowing to a regular, languid rhythm. The sound of the water lapping against the stairs was peaceful. Wes stood by the window. Night had fallen and his eyes were drawn to a bright speck in the darkness which would disappear for some moments and then reappear a few feet further south. The signal beacon on the bow of a schooner that had gone adrift, or a buoy that had come loose from its moorings? Later he would learn that it was the hanging kerosene lamp he'd seen through the kitchen window of the house containing Mrs. Hopkins and her two granddaughters, Mary, the eldest, and Susan, the baby. The light would disappear when the waves turned the floating house in such a way that its narrow window couldn't cast its appeal into the window of the Tyler bedroom, into the only eyes that marked its progress out to sea. Wes watched it for almost half an hour, until out past where the

schooners would have been anchored, the light disappeared completely.

He was still waiting for it to reappear when Margaret called him. He went, and she took his hand. "We'll call her Clare," she said.