

Ella and the Devil's Flute

by Barry R. Taylor

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I

The coastal road running by Dorman's Cove bordered a little park overlooking the ocean. There were picnic tables, and log benches where visitors could look out over the water and watch the waves explode against the rocks and crash into the stony shore. The seashore here was very active. On a fine day in August, a young man sat on one of the log benches, playing his recorder to an audience of birds and flowers. He was medium height, slender but not slight, inhabiting jeans and plaid like the fisherman's son he was. A giant maple tree beside him, overlooking the coast like a sentinel, provided welcome shade from the noonday sun. The view of the sea and sky was a postcard.

The delicate, precise tones of MacPherson's Lament, slightly sad but with an undercurrent of defiance, floated from the young man's instrument into the trees around him. He stopped playing when he heard the slam of a car door, then someone walking quickly down the gravel path behind him. He turned to see an attractive young woman, long hair flying loose around her shoulders, marching toward him. An angry scowl desecrated her lovely face. "I swear some day I am going to stab that man to death, in public," she declared. She deposited herself on the bench beside him.

He kissed her, brief but warm. "Another fight with your father?"

"It's always the same fight, over and over. He's so stubborn." She wiped away a tear.

"Brave heart, my love," he said, throwing an arm around her. "I'm so sorry about all this."

She returned his embrace, fighting back tears. "It's not your fault, Glenn; don't take the blame for my father's faults."

The wind off the sea tussled her long, fine hair. Ella was brown haired and brown eyed, with a lively face made more interesting by a constellation of freckles. Unlike Glenn, who looked ready to set down his recorder and get to work at any moment, Ella was dressed fashionably, down to the immaculate white sport shoes on her feet. Her top and shorts came from a shop in Montreal.

"Play something for me," she said, after a while. "Something sweet and happy, so I don't feel so wretched."

He gave her a look filled with fondness. "This is called Summer Sunlight," he said. "A trifle, but I wrote it myself." He lifted the recorder to his lips and played a gentle tune that floated over the woods like a butterfly.

"That's nice," she said, when he had finished. "You're so talented." She rested her head on his shoulder. "God I wish I didn't have to go back."

“When do you leave?”

“In a few days. Labour day weekend, as always. Back to Toronto the Gawdawful Boring. To city traffic and my father’s rich friends and my mother’s pretentious rose garden and an endless barrage of argument about why I should marry Roman straight away.”

He drew a deep breath. “Ella, I . . . I’m still a bit in shock about all this. You know I love you, but . . . are you completely sure you’re not going to marry Roman?”

“I’d sooner marry a dog.”

“Don’t be cruel. He is still your fiancé, technically. Didn’t you say you’ve been engaged for three years.”

“I was eighteen! I didn’t know what I wanted. I was young and impressionable and Roman is cool and comes from the right family, Rosedale rich, and my parents loved him so I thought I should too. Then I went off to York and met real people, students my age from ordinary places with ordinary lives whose parents didn’t summer in Nova Scotia or do Christmas in Paris or fly down to New York to take in the opera.

“That’s when I learned what a spoiled little debutante I was and what a shallow rich kid Roman was. I realized that I didn’t love Roman, and I’m not sure he loves me or ever did. Not in the romantic sense anyway. I’m more like a fine acquisition.

“But every time I suggest breaking off the engagement my father is furious. Mother too. They call me childish and selfish to even consider turning down such a perfect match, and Roman’s parents are close friends who have been so kind to me, and Roman and I get along so well and on and on and on. I think Roman is having second thoughts too. I can tell. Yet my father still insists we’ll get married next summer, as soon as I graduate. He dismisses all my complaints as pre-wedding jitters.

“Then we came out here to spend summer on the coast . . . and I met you.”

“A poor fisherman who has never even been to Paris.”

“Don’t do that. You’re not a fisher, you’re a musician, and a fine one too.”

“The poor part is true, though.”

She sat up to look at him hard. “I don’t care. I don’t care about any of that. I don’t need my father’s money and I don’t want it. You are going to make a successful career as a musician and I am going to be a writer. You are the man I love more than the whole world and I am not going to let anyone or anything come between us.”

“My god, Ella. You terrify me sometimes.”

She laughed suddenly, embarrassed. “Sorry. I’m still worked up from fighting with my father.”

“Yes. I caught that.” He paused for a beat. “Here, I have something for you.”

“Oh?” She perked up at once. “Did you write another song for me?”

“Not this time. Hold out your hand.” Glenn reached into a jacket pocket to retrieve a silver ring with three garnets embedded in it, deep red and glowing. He slipped it on her finger. He said, “Hey, I think it fits.”

Ella held up her hand to admire the ring. “It’s lovely. But sweetheart, you don’t have to buy me things.”

He chuckled. “I didn’t. That ring belonged to my grandmother. My mom said you should have it. She likes you.”

“Oh. Well, do thank your mother for me. I love it.” She leaned in for a kiss.

They were both silent for a long moment afterward. The wind in the trees mixed with the far-away splash of waves hitting the beach. Then Ella said, “Listen. You can hear the Devil’s Flute.” They both listened in silence. Another sound was drifting through the flutter of the leaves and the drone of the waves: a single note, fading in and out, low and almost sorrowful, the hoot of an owl drawn out into a song. It fluttered now and again, seeming to catch the wind, then returned to the single, extended note.

The Devil’s Flute was a narrow, coastal cave, carved by the relentless flow of water through the earth over immeasurable time. A little way inland, placid Longfords Brook poured into an alder swamp full of pools and backwaters and disappeared into the earth. The brook made its way underground through a long pipe of its own creation, until it met the tumbling sea at the base of a short cliff.

Here and there the land above the cave had collapsed into a line of small sinkholes running along the top of the cavern. The cave ululated like a shepherd’s pipe as stiff wind off the Atlantic blew through the narrow cave and out through the sinkholes. Low tide produced lower notes when the brook flowed unmolested through the bottom of the cavern. The tones grew steadily higher as rising tide pushed seawater inland and narrowed the cave. Sometimes, when the moon was full and the spring tide was highest and the northeast wind blew strong, the wail of the Flute became almost shrill.

Glenn said, “Listen to how low the sound is. The tide is out.”

“I’ve heard that sailors listened for the flute if they were coming home in a fog,” said Ella. “If they could hear the flute they knew to steer away from the coast and go north to find the harbour.”

He chuckled. “Like a foghorn? Not quite. The flute only plays in a strong wind and if it’s windy there’s no fog. But at night the sound of the flute would be a useful guide. My dad and I have heard it a few times when we were coming back to harbour in rough sea.”

“That’s cool. I like to think of it as the land welcoming you back home.

“Do you know there’s a local legend about the Devil’s Flute? About the Lady of the Bluffs?”

“I’ve never heard it.”

“My mother told me the story once, when I was very young. It was a stormy night and the wind was howling through the spruce trees. I didn’t sleep afterward.”

She looked at him with bright eyes. “Do you know the story? Tell me.”

Glenn settled back against the log. “It doesn’t look like much today, but back in the age of sail, Dorman’s Cove was a bustling place. Everything moved by water back then, and Dorman’s Cove was the biggest port north of Halifax. The harbour is well protected, long and deep enough to handle big ships. There were rows of wharfs jutting out like fingers and in summer the harbour was a forest of masts and ropes from all the ships. Goods were off-loaded here to be put on barges or barques and hauled up the Salmon River to the farms and gold mines and logging towns inland, then the ships were reloaded with lumber and gold and salted fish to be sold down the coast or across the sea.

“Almost all the shipping was controlled by two men, and they hated each other intensely. Bowden MacLellan was the richest man in town. He lived in that big manor house up on the hill, it’s a bed and breakfast now. MacLellan’s rival was a man named Creighton Longford – he of Longfords Brook – whose shipping company had moved in more recently but was giving MacLellan serious competition. The two companies competed for shipping contracts and argued over wharf space and sometimes sued each other over one thing or another.

Now MacLellan had five children and the eldest, Rachel, had a heart of fire. She was a classic Celtic beauty, so the story goes, with long dark hair with flickers of red like the flames in a bed of hot coals. Intelligent, independent, well-educated, she spoke three languages and could read books in Latin. Her father thought she would make a wonderful wife to a man who could bear her temper, and he began fishing around for suitable prospects. But Rachel insisted that she would marry a man of her own choosing or not marry at all. Rachel’s proud heart and her father’s stern plans led to many stormy exchanges between them.

In those days MacLellan used to hold formal dinners at his manor house for the other established families in the region, as well as men of means and dignitaries who passed through on the ships. MacLellan had two other daughters, but it was Rachel whom the single men most wanted to see, young or old. She and her sisters danced with the sons of local businessmen, naval officers in their sharp uniforms, ships’ captains grown wealthy on rum or gold, and even men with titles like Sir this and Lord that. Rachel kept them all at a distance.

But one August evening she met a seemingly ordinary young man who stuck in her mind because he treated her like a real person instead of a princess in a tower for him to rescue. He was a terrible dancer, but Rachel found herself laughing and talking with him all evening, much to the irritation of the other men in the hall. Oddly, the young man refused to give his name. He would say only that he was a local boy who worked on the wharf.

When the evening finally wound down, Rachel discovered she was reluctant to see her new friend go. “Will I see you again, at another dinner?” she asked, as he turned to leave.

“I regret you will not,” he replied. “For the truth is I came here without invitation, by pretending at first to be one of the servants. I am not among those whom your father would invite.”

“You are a welcome intruder then,” cried Rachel. “But why would you resort to such subterfuge to attend a dinner?”

“I admit I undertook this ruse to meet you,” he said. “I have admired you from afar for too long.”

Rachel hesitated only a moment. “Now that you have met me,” she inquired, “would it please you to meet me again?”

The young man allowed that he very much wanted to see Rachel again, but he insisted that her father would not approve of her seeing a dockman. They arranged to meet on the headland above the Devil’s Flute, not far from where we are sitting right now. There used to be a watchtower there where people could watch ships come and go as they sailed north toward the harbour or south away from it.

Rachel met her new friend at the tower a few days later. She was surprised to discover how thrilled she was to see him, and he to see her. He confided then that his name was Dalton Longford, the second son of her father’s rival, Creighton Longford. Rachel had never met him because their families kept them apart and Dalton’s father had sent him to a private school in Halifax. Dalton aspired to serving as a doctor. That afternoon in the watchtower, in the comforting warmth of a late summer day, Rachel and Dalton became lovers. From that day on they saw each other whenever they could.

They had to hide the affair from their families, of course. Not since the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet had too young lovers been as star-crossed as Dalton and Rachel. As it happened, Dalton had to sail to Boston on one of his father’s ships a few week later. The couple agreed that they would approach their parents about a wedding when Dalton returned in a month’s time. Until then, Rachel would abide.

Brisk business and bad weather conspired to keep Dalton in Boston longer than expected. When his ship, the *North Star*, had not returned after a full turning of the moon, Rachel began to worry. She spent hours on the headland over the wild coast by the Devil’s Flute looking out to sea. Sometimes she climbed the watchtower, other times she paced back and forth along the headland, following a narrow trail above the cliff. She made a fine figure up there on the bluff, tall and proud, long hair blowing behind her, skirts billowing in the wind, her keen eyes fixed on the horizon. Below her, the Devil’s Flute played on the wind, changing tone and pitch with the tides. That was when townfolk began calling Rachel the Lady of the Bluffs. And while Rachel waited, and worried, her father, having grown impatient with his daughter’s reticence, had advanced serious plans to marry her to the son of a local ship builder.

Finally, nearly a month late, when the summer had turned to autumn and leaves were turning red and gold on the trees, the *North Star* sailed into Dorman’s Cove. Unable to check her eagerness to see her lover again, Rachel met him on the dock, where their long, passionate kiss was obvious to everyone. After that meeting there was no point hiding their affair. Dalton and Rachel decided they would approach their parents together to ask permission to marry.

The conferences did not go well. Creighton Longford looked Rachel up and down as if she were a greenhorn sailor asking to pilot his best ship, and declared that if his son were set on marrying her, he would do so without his father's blessing and forfeit all interests in the Longford shipping line. Bowden MacLellan was even more intransigent. "My daughter, my Rachel, to marry a Longford!" he shouted, his voice angry and contemptuous. "By God no! Never! I'd sooner invite the devil to dinner. You, Rachel, will marry Clement Thorne, a decent man, a good and worthy man, or by God and all the saints I will cast you out of my house forever." He turned his scowl toward Dalton. "As for you sir, son of my enemy who would dare to approach my beloved daughter, begone from my house and never let me see your shadow again."

Rachel and Dalton were devastated. "Whatever are we to do?" Rachel wondered, the next afternoon, when she met Dalton on the bluff overlooking the sea. "My father will never relent."

"Nor mine," Dalton replied. "We must go away from here."

"But how can we do so? The wharf is always busy with my father's men, and your father's too. We could never board a ship without being seen."

"There may be another way," Dalton said. "There is a route near the shore where a small boat, a skiff, may pass in calm water, protected behind rocks and shoals, where a schooner could never sail. My brother showed me the way. We can make our way down the coast to Halifax, without our angry fathers ever knowing."

Rachel's fiery heart was resolute. "Let us go then," she decided. "I will marry you or I will marry no one."

They agreed to meet three nights later, when the tide was high and a full moon would light the path along the headland. Dalton promised to have a skiff waiting near the mouth of Longford's Brook, where it flowed out of the Devil's Flute. A path there led down the bluff to the shore. Rachel would wear a white dress to make her easier to see in the dark, and Dalton would play his Irish whistle so Rachel could find him by following the music.

After dinner on the appointed evening, Rachel excused herself and went to her room. She put on a white dress with a blue sash and a blue-and-white bonnet. She slung a small purse over her shoulder and slipped on a ruby necklace. If she and her lover could get to Halifax, the coin in her purse and the sale of the necklace would pay for passage to Montreal or Boston, where they could start a new life. She told her maid she was stepping out for a walk, then slipped out the back door of the manor.

She found the path down to the treeless headland and hurried toward her rendezvous. The path was narrow, used as much by deer as by people. The full moon rising above the sea etched the breaking waves in ghostly white and inky black, and cast a colourless, slanting light across the headland. The wind was blowing hard along the coast, rippling her long dress, and the Devil's Flute played brightly, its weird notes driven higher by the rising tide. Rachel could hear

the shrill notes of the pennywhistle, like the call of a sea-bird, from farther along the way, carried on the wind. She felt her hopes rise: her lover awaited her.

Another sound added to the noise of the night – the baying of dogs. Rachel looked back to see two figures following her along the trail, outlined in moonlight. One man was holding the straining leashes of two black retrievers; the other man was her father. He must have learned from the maid that she had left the house. Shock and indignation swept through Rachel's proud heart when she realized her own father was hunting her down like an animal! Her determination to be free of his house only grew.

She quickened her pace. She knew the path well by daylight. The slanting moonlight threw strange shadows; patches of darkness dwelt behind every rock and bush. She tried to follow the sound of Dalton's pennywhistle, but the music was obscured by the high wail of the Devil's Flute and the roar of the wind. Grass and brush grabbed the hem of Rachel's dress.

Behind her, her father and his dogs were closing in. She shouted to Dalton. He could not hear her over the wind and the wail of his own Irish whistle. At last she came to the end of the bluff. She could see her lover down below, sitting on a rock beside the mouth of the cave, where the cool water of Longfords Brook slid into the sea. Moored beside him was a white barque – a rowboat with a single small sail – waiting only for her to descend the slanting path down the cliff. He looked up when he saw her, silhouetted against the night-black sky in her white dress, and he waved for her to come to him.

Rachel took a step forward – and felt the rocky ground disappear beneath her. In the noisesome darkness she had strayed off the path and was now teetering on the edge of a sinkhole. The side of the hole, rocky and angular, sloped like a funnel toward a circle of blackness. Desperate, she struggled to climb upward, but the crumbling edge of the sinkhole betrayed her and she tumbled, screaming, into the dark water below.

From his perch by the water, Dalton saw her fall. He shouted, "Rachel, No!" and dove blindly into the water to save her. Rachel and Dalton were both strong swimmers, but neither was prepared for the mad turbulence of the tidal water beneath the calm surface in the Flute. While her father looked on in helpless horror, Rachel drowned that night along with her young lover.

"And that is why," Glenn concluded, "when the tide is high and the wind is strong, the song of the Devil's Flute sounds like a woman screaming."

"That's a terrible story," Ella pronounced. "So sad. Is it true?"

"Almost certainly not," Glenn replied. "I expect some of the historical figure are real, but I doubt anyone ever fell into the Flute. You would have to be blind not to see the sinkholes. The story was probably concocted as a neat explanation for the sounds it makes. And the bright colours inside."

"You can go inside?"

He shot her a glance. "My dear love, you've been coming here every summer and you've never been inside the Flute? You've missed the coolest thing around!"

"Sorry. My father doesn't exactly encourage spelunking."

He shook his head. "We have to fix this. Without delay. You can only go inside the Flute when the tide is out. Can you meet me here again tomorrow, say about one o'clock?"

"I'll try," she said.

II

"This is amazing!" Ella enthused, almost exactly twenty-four hours later. She was sitting beside Glenn on a rock ledge half-way up the side of the Devil's Flute. They were no more than a schooner's length from the mouth; the rocky shoreline and a sliver of blue sky were still visible to the left. Below them, the placid water of Longfords Brook, black and shiny in the dim light, flowed silently out to sea, barely disturbed by intruding tidewater. Summer sunlight spilled in through a sinkhole on the high ceiling, sparkling on the water as it passed, and illuminating the cave in soft, reflected light. To the right, the cave receded into darkness, broken here and there by spotlights from other sinkholes.

But it was the walls of the caves that captivated Ella's attention. The entire cave was an abstract painting done in long streaks of deep colour. The walls caught the wavering light off the water and cast it back as sparkles and coruscations, as if the rock were embedded with diamonds. The wind was low, but still Ella could feel the air vibrating around her, the earth humming to itself.

"Yes, yes it is," Glenn agreed. "I've been here a dozen times and it knocks me on my heels every time."

"Where do all the colours come from?" Ella wanted to know.

"From minerals in the rocks," Glenn said. "The sparkling white is quartz; the red is iron, I think, and the gold colour is real gold – which makes sense given all the gold mines around here."

She was turning this way and that, taking it all in. The colours shimmered with every ripple of the water. The cave walls appeared to move like a curtain in a breeze. "What about the bluish-purple streaks? What mineral is that?"

"Ah, those are the remnants of Rachel's sash."

"Oh no. Are we back on that sad story again?"

"Remember she was wearing a white dress with a blue sash? Well, the story goes that Rachel's tragic death was reflected in the rocks where she died. The white quartz is her white dress; the blue her sash; the red is her ruby necklace; gold of course from the gold coins in her purse; and shiny black for the colour of her hair. It does all fit rather well."

"You mean the story was made to fit the colours. But I don't care, this cave is awesome!"

“You think that’s impressive?” he countered. “Listen to this.” He drew his recorder out of an inside pocket of his jacket and began to play. Dulcet notes of an old Scottish air floated around the young couple. The notes reverberated off the close walls of the cavern, enriching the music with undertones and vibrato, as if a hidden orchestra were playing along. Ella was enrapt. The colours in the cave walls, following the ripple and flow of the reflecting brook, seemed to pulsate along with the music. The background hum of the cave added another layer of depth, like the drone of a bagpipe underlying the dancing notes above.

When he finished, they were both silent for a long beat. “Thank you,” Ella said, finally. “That was amazing.”

“This cave is the best concert hall a man could ask for,” Glenn said. “Though seating capacity is limited.” He grinned.

Ella leaned back against the stone wall. “I’ve been thinking about that story you told me. About Rachel and Dalton. She would have fallen through right here, wouldn’t she.”

Glenn put his recorder away. “Yes, I suppose so. She must have been right near the end if she could see Dalton on the shore.”

She turned her attention to the brook. “How deep is the water?”

“I don’t know. A couple of feet maybe, at this time of year. Twice that when the tide is in.” He recognized the thoughtful look on her face. “Something on your mind, my love?”

She turned to look at him squarely. “I don’t believe the old story,” she declared. “You know what I think? If Rachel MacLellan was a real person, she didn’t die accidentally. She was murdered. She was murdered by her own father.”

“Ella! What – where would you get such an idea?” He was still unaccustomed to her occasional ferocity.

“She drowned in less than five feet of water! She could have easily touched bottom. If she swam or drifted toward the side she could find a wall to hold onto or even stand up with her head out of the water. All she had to do was float a little way to the entrance and Dalton would be there to save her. It’s too convenient that she drowned so fast.”

He shook his head. “Imagine the scene. The land and sea are dark, lit only by moonlight. Deep shadows everywhere. Rachel tumbles down a hole she can barely see and slams into cold, black water. She is instantly immersed, shocked, disoriented. The raging current spins her around and around, keeps her from getting her bearings, or even reaching the surface to take a breath. The brook water is running to the sea but underneath it the tide is rushing in, churning and turning, holding her back, slowing her progress down the cave. Maybe she hits bottom, or the side, but she doesn’t know which it is, doesn’t know when she can take a breath and in the pitiless dark she can’t see the surface. By the time she reaches Dalton, who is fighting to reach her, it’s too late.”

Ella said, “Maybe, but I don’t believe it. The cave wouldn’t be completely dark if a full moon was up. If she could touch bottom surely she could find the surface. I’m sure it wouldn’t be a pleasant experience, but drowning seems too quick.

“And what about her father? Why did he just stand there instead of rushing in to save her? Rachel was his daughter! If he didn’t want to jump down a sinkhole he could have run to the mouth and helped Dalton, it’s not that far. He could have sent the dogs in to help pull her out. Instead he did nothing.”

Glenn was taken aback. “What are you suggesting?” he wondered.

She said, “Let me tell you my version of Rachel’s story.”

Bowden MacLellan was an aggressive, domineering man in business and in domestic life. He controlled most of the shipping coming in and out of Dorman’s Cove, and he bowled over anyone who got in his way. His dock workers regularly got into fist fights with the men from his hated rival, Creighton Longford. He cowed his wife and children. All except Rachel, the eldest, whose fiery Celtic heart he could not tame. But her beauty and education were assets, and MacLellan began seeking a suitable partner with the same shrewdness and drive he would bring to any business deal. He settled on Clement Thorne, the son of a local ship builder with whom MacLellan had close ties.

When Rachel approached him to ask permission to marry Dalton instead, MacLellan was livid with anger. “My daughter, my Rachel, to marry a Longford!” he shouted, making fists with both hands. “By God no! Never! I’d sooner sail as first mate to the devil.” He slammed one fist down on his desk. “You, Rachel, will marry Clement Thorne, a decent man, a good and worthy man, and your marriage will bring our houses together. Don’t you even think about marrying this – this oaf! And if you disobey me, by God and all the saints I will cast you out of my house forever. Do you hear me, girl? Marry Clement Thorne or you are dead to me.” He turned his scowl toward Dalton. “As for you sir, vagrant son of my enemy, get out. Get out now! Get out of my house this instant before I turn the dogs on you. And if you ever speak to my daughter again, I will see you hanged. Rachel, go to your room. You, Mr. Longford, leave my house instantly.”

Dalton and Rachel decided there was no recourse but to leave Dorman’s Cove forever. Dalton knew a near-shore route behind the outer rocks and islands along which a small barque might pass protected from the fierce Atlantic waves. They planned to leave for Halifax at the next full moon, when the tide was high. On the appointed night Rachel slipped out of her father’s house in a white dress, carrying no possessions beyond a ruby necklace and some money to buy passage to Boston. She swore her maid to tell no one where she had gone.

She hurried along the narrow path down the wind-swept headland. The full moon provided enough light to see. Dalton’s pennywhistle was a beacon. But the wind was blowing strong that night, and the high-tide wail of the Devil’s Flute sounded too much like the high reach of a whistle. Rachel became confused and risked drifting off the path. She felt branches and

brambles pulling at the hem of her dress. Maybe she was frightened, but Dalton and his life-saving boat were not far away. She pressed on, stumbling now on the uneven ground.

That was when she heard a voice shouting behind her. She looked back to see her father stomping along the trail toward her, his jacket flying in the wind. He must have extracted a confession from the helpless maid, and guessed where the Lady of the Bluffs would be going. Rachel's heart was in her throat. Her father was already enraged by her attention to Dalton. If he discovered she was attempting to elope, there was no telling what he might do. But Rachel's proud heart drove her onward. She quickened her pace along the trail.

Finally, as her father closed in behind her, she came to where she could see Dalton down on the rocks, playing a tin whistle beside his small white boat. She shouted to him but he could not hear. She heard her father shout for her to stop. She took another step forward and her right foot found nothing but air. In the dark and the noise, confused by the merging trills of the pennywhistle and the Devil's Flute, she had stumbled off the trail. Now she was standing on the edge of the last sinkhole. A pool of darkness loomed at the bottom of the rock-edged slope.

Her father appeared out of the darkness like a wraith. He was as angry as she had ever seen. He shouted at her, "Where do you think you are going, you disobedient child! Come away from there before you fall, and return with me to the house. You headstrong fool! Do you think I don't know where you were going? I told you never to see that son of Longford again."

Rachel found solid footing. She drew herself up proudly. "No, Father. I will not go back with you. I am leaving your house. I will marry Dalton Longford because he is the man I love and there is nothing you can do to change that."

MacLellan's rage and frustration boiled over like a kettle on the fire. "Then meet your bridegroom in hell!" he shouted. He shoved her hard with both hands. Rachel fell over backward, screaming. She slid down the slope and through the hole, striking her head against the side as she fell. She was already unconscious as she struck the water. By the time her blood-stained dress reached the mouth of the cave, the water had finished what her father started.

What emotions passed through the mind of Bowden MacLellan as he stood there in the colourless moonlight, watching his beautiful daughter fall to her death. Did he feel remorse? Regret? A wrenching pang of heartbreak and loss? No one can say. But MacLellan remained a man of business. He heard Dalton crying out for Rachel on the shore and he realized his business here was unfinished. He found a rock of a good size. It fit well in his hand. He gripped it tightly as he climbed down the path to the shore."

"And that," Ella concluded, "is the real reason why, when the wind is strong and the tide is high, the Devil's Flute sounds like a woman screaming."

"My word, Ella," Glenn said, "that's awful. Do you really believe a man could murder his own daughter? And her lover besides?"

"It's not unheard of," she insisted. "Although Rachel's death might be called a crime of passion. I think that makes it manslaughter?"

Glenn was still reeling. “Yes, but . . . my word, that story is appalling!”

“It did sound horrible when I said it out loud. Still, more convincing than Rachel drowning in a few feet of water.”

“Oh stop it. It’s an old story, a love tragedy. It doesn’t have to be factual to be true.”

She was looking thoughtful again. “Do you know where your mother got the story?”

“It was in a book, *Tales of Old Nova Scotia* or something like that. I read it several times when I was a little older. That’s why I remember it so well.”

“But . . . the story was presented as if it were true, right?”

“Well, yes, I suppose.”

“And it was set here, in Dorman’s Cove?”

“Yes. You’re going somewhere with this. I know that look.”

“So for all we know Rachel MacLellan might have been a real person.”

“Well, I suppose so, but – ”

She was on her feet. “Let’s go find her!”

Without waiting for an answer she began to scramble down the rocky ledge back to the mouth of the Devil’s Flute. Her flat boots skittered stones into the water. “Wait, where are we going?” Glenn demanded, following.

“To the cemetery, of course!”

III

“You know,” Glenn said, as he climbed out of Ella’s rented Subaru a few minutes later, “given that you’re leaving in a few days, I thought we might spend our little time together doing something memorable – such as working out how to tell your folks we want to get married.”

She came around the car to hug him. “I know, I know. But somehow, this story . . . it’s ignited my curiosity. Rachel and Dalton seem so much like us! I can’t help thinking there’s a lesson in their story that might help us too.”

“Please don’t tell me you want to jump down a sinkhole.”

“Nothing so dramatic. But still . . . there’s something. I really need to know if Rachel was real.”

They were standing in the parking lot of an old, white church. Despite the isolated setting, the church was tall and imposing, with a high steeple. Scrubby coastal forest crowded both sides. Across the highway, past a band of forest, the land dropped steeply down to the seashore. On the hillside behind, an expansive array of headstones marched off into the distance. The newer ones were obsidian black, clean and crisply engraved. They mixed with a variety of older stones, some leaning or even fallen, many covered in lichens, their names and dates half-erased by time.

“Churchyard’s used to be called God’s half-acre,” Ella remarked.

“This looks more like God’s half-township. I’m not even sure where to start.”

Ella bounced into the cemetery with the energy of a terrier, her ponytail flouncing. “We don’t have exact dates,” the young writer explained, “but your story said it happened when Dorman’s Cove was at its peak, during the age of sail. I’m guessing maybe 1850-1860, 1870 at the outside. Rachel MacLellan would have been in her early twenties, at most, so maybe born in the late 1830s.”

“If she really lived,” Glenn pointed out.

“If she’s here, we’ll find her. I hope. First we need to find Bowden MacLellan’s headstone. I’m guessing it will be big because he was rich. You’re sure about the name?”

“Yes. I remember Bowden because it was unusual.”

“And you’re sure he would be buried here?”

“There are only two old graveyards in Dorman’s Cove. This one, at the Parish of St. Anna, and the Dorman Cemetery outside town. Bowden MacLellan would have been Catholic.”

“Well then, let’s take a walk. It looks like the older graves are over there, up the hill.”

They set off. It was a fine day in late summer, and the graveyard was peaceful. Still, there were many headstones to inspect, the older ones too often eroded or buried in lichen. There didn’t seem to be any organization to how graves were arranged. The search was slow, and frustrating.

“Look over here!” Ella shouted, after a good while. Glenn abandoned the headstone he was trying to clean and hurried over to join her. Ella was standing beside a substantial marble monument, square sided below but capped with a tall spire. It towered above the more traditional headstones around it. The monument was engraved on all four sides.

“This is the MacLellan family plot,” Ella said, obviously proud of herself. “Bowden was rich enough to reserve an area of the graveyard for his family and descendants. Look around. They’re all MacLellans.”

“This looks like the founding father,” Glenn said. He ran his hand over the old marble. “In Memoriam, Jeremiah MacLellan, died April 8, 1843, Age 63. And his Wife, Bonnie MacLeod, Died Jan. 12 1855, Age 73. May their souls rest in peace.”

Ella was busy scanning the other sides of the monument. “Glenn!” she shouted, “I’ve found him!” She read: “Bowden MacLellan, Died June 15, 1877, Age 68. That’s our grouchy old man!”

“Bowden MacLellan was a real person then,” Glenn said. “And look at this.” He pointed to the next line of text. “Catherine Boyd, wife of Bowden MacLellan, Died Nov. 21, 1871, Age 60. Do you see what that means? Wives are listed by their maiden names. So even if Rachel got married, she would still be known as Rachel MacLellan. All we have to do is find her.”

That turned out to be another frustrating search. Bowden MacLellan had a big family and many more descendants. Ella and Glenn located names apparently belonging to Rachel’s older bothers, Hugh and Donald, and her younger sisters, Isabella and Mary, the last of whom died in

1932 at the age of ninety. They also found a grave marked, “Rafferty MacLellan, Aug. 19, 1838 – Dec. 10, 1840.”

“He was only two years old,” Ella said.

There was no grave in the family plot for Rachel MacLellan. Nor could they find her elsewhere in the graveyard.

At last Ella plopped down on a stone bench on the hilltop, looking out over the ranks of headstones below. “I was so sure she would be here,” she said.

“Maybe old Bowden MacLellan kept his word. Maybe he did disown her. Maybe she’s lying in a pauper’s grave somewhere, unmarked and unmourned.”

She shook her head. “I can’t believe he would do that. She died right in front of him, accidentally or on purpose. Either way it was a drowning. She didn’t marry against his wishes. Why wouldn’t he give her a proper burial?”

He sighed. “Unless, of course, there never was a Rachel MacLellan. Maybe the original storyteller made her up, using a common family name.”

“I don’t believe that either,” she insisted. Her sisters are here. Her brothers are here. Her father is here. Where is Rachel?”

Glenn was silent for a long time, considering. At last he said. “There’s another possibility. Let me tell you my own version of the story, which I am making up right now.”

She smiled. “I’d love to hear it.”

Glenn said, “Bowden MacLellan had built his business in Dorman’s Cove through a combination of skill and ambition. He owned both the main shipbuilding firm and the largest shipping line. He was the sort of man who had to be in control. He loved all his children, but Rachel’s willfulness frustrated him endlessly. The marriage he had arranged with the son of a local lumber dealer was good for both families, good for business, and, he honestly believed, good for Rachel. Why she would not accede to his wishes baffled him. Predictably then, when she and Dalton approached him asking for permission to marry, he refused absolutely.

“No!” he declared, “by God no, never! I’d sell my soul for a tin flute before I would permit such a union. “You, Rachel, will marry Clement Thorne, a good and decent man who will cherish you and take care of you and bring our families together.”

Rachel protested. “But Father I don’t love Clement. I don’t even know him. I love Dalton, don’t you see?”

“Enough!” her father thundered. His anger covered deeply wounded pride. “No daughter of mine shall marry a Longford! You will be the wife of Clement Thorne or by God and St. Andrew you will no longer be my daughter.” He turned his fury toward Dalton. “And you Sir, what right have you to even approach my precious Rachel? Have you entirely forgotten your station? Begone immediately from my house and never speak to any of my daughters, ever.”

Yet Dalton and Rachel remained determined to make their own way, with or without their fathers’ blessing. They decided their only choice was to leave Dorman’s Cove and never come

back. The couldn't board a ship without Rachel's father hearing of it, but Dalton's brother had showed him a route along the shore, sheltered from the open waves, where a small boat might pass in safety. The passage was only safe when the tide was high. Dalton and Rachel planned to sail down the coast to Halifax, leaving at night under a high spring tide.

As the full moon rose on the appointed night, Rachel waited until her father retired to his study, then stepped into her room to prepare. She put on a white dress with a blue sash and bonnet so Dalton could see her in the moonlight. She carried no possessions but some gold in a purse over her shoulder.

When she re-entered the drawing room, her mother was waiting. "Are you sure of this, my darling?" she asked. "Are you sure Dalton is the man for you?"

"Mother, I've never been more sure of anything," Rachel replied.

"Take this," her mother said. She fastened a ruby necklace around her daughter's neck. "You will need money to buy passage."

Rachel hugged her brothers and sisters and wished them well. "Send word to us, when you are settled," Donald said. "We will worry every day until then."

Her younger sister, Mary, had tears in her eyes. "What shall we tell Father?" she asked.

"Tell him I have gone for a walk along the bluff," Rachel replied. "Above the Devil's Flute. Good-bye everyone. I love you all." She left her father's manor by the back door.

Rachel hurried along the narrow path along the headland. She could see the waves crashing against the rocks in the bright moonlight. Dalton was waiting for her with his barque at the mouth of the Devil's Flute, where Longfords brook met the sea. He was playing his pennywhistle to guide her way, but the wind blowing through the Devil's Flute created its own confusing music. Rachel knew that losing the path in the darkness could lead to a fatal fall through a sinkhole. She pressed on, though brambles tore at her dress and she stumbled on the rocky path.

She was near her goal when she heard her father's voice behind her. She turned to see him almost running down the trail in the pallid moonlight, desperate to stop her. Rachel understood how much she was hurting him, but her heart of fire drove her onward. She would marry the man she loved or she would marry no one at all. She rushed along the trail with the sea-wind howling around her and her father's angry voice in her ears.

When she came close to the end of the Devil's Flute she paused to catch her breath. She could see Dalton down by the shore, playing his pennywhistle beside a small boat with a single reefed sail. She shouted to him, but in the wind and the music he could not hear her. "Stop, Rachel, please!" her father cried, somewhere behind her. Rachel hurried on. She took one step forward, then another, until she felt nothing but air beneath her right foot. She was standing on the edge of the last sinkhole along the bluff. Extrusions of quartz along its steep sides glinted in the moonlight. A round pool of blackness at the centre marked the opening to the sea-cave below.

Rachel's father appeared out of the darkness, breathless. "Rachel, my Rachel, what ever are you doing?" he cried. "Don't you know how dangerous it is to walk out here? Come back with me to the house, at once."

"I'm not coming back, Father," Rachel said. "I cannot. I am leaving your house to marry Dalton." She stepped down into the sinkhole, out of his reach. The earth slipped beneath her feet.

Her father became angry. "What? You would marry Dalton Longford against my wishes? Rachel you have taken leave of your senses! A MacLellan cannot marry a Longford! I will not tolerate it, now or ever! I told you then and I tell you now that if you disobey my wishes you are dead to me!"

Rachel drew herself up proudly. Her white dress and long dark hair fluttered in the wind. "Then let me be truly dead to you," she declared. "If I cannot marry Dalton I will marry no one. Good-bye, Father!" She reached down to gather her skirts, took a long step forward and leapt into the darkness of the sinkhole and the churning water below. Her final scream merged with the high-wind wail of the Devil's Flute."

Ella stared at her boyfriend, wide-eyed. "That's your new version of the story? That's the worst of all!"

"I haven't quite finished," Glenn interrupted, grinning. "Rachel tumbled into the darkness toward the cold, black water of Longfords Brook. A hand-length above the water she landed with a bounce and a grunt on the fishing net that Dalton had slung across the cave while the tide was out. Rachel heard her father shouting on the bluff above. She rolled to the edge of the net. There was barely enough moonlight shining through the sinkhole to make out the one-man canoe tied to the side of the net. She climbed in, released the rope, and paddled toward the mouth. Tidewater churned beneath her, but the unmixed fresh water on top remained calm and smooth-flowing, speeding her along. Dalton was waiting at the mouth of the cave, prevented by his barque's mast from going inside. He lifted her into his boat at the moment her father clambered down the slope toward the shore.

What emotions passed through the iron heart of Bowden MacLellan when he saw his wayward daughter again, alive and safe? Relief? Anger at being deceived? Perhaps a nascent awareness that his own reticence had driven his beloved daughter away? We'll never know. "Rachel, you – you're alive!" he shouted from the shore. "Oh thank God. Please, come back. Come back now."

Dalton was already bending to the oars. The little skiff darted forward, away from shore. "Good-bye Father," Rachel cried in return. "I love you!" Then the skiff turned a corner around the mouth of the Devil's Flute and disappeared into the night.

"And that is why," Glenn concluded, "that –"

"– when the tide is high and the wind is strong, the song of the Devil's Flute sounds like a woman screaming," Ella finished for him.

He grinned. "That is why we cannot find a gravestone for Rachel MacLellan, eldest daughter of Bowden MacLellan, in this churchyard in Dorman's Cove. Because she isn't here. She and Dalton eventually settled in Montreal maybe, where they raised five children and cherished eleven grandchildren. She died in Dalton's arms in 1923, at the age of eighty-four."

Ella said nothing for a few trills of a songbird. "I like your version best," she decided. "Except for all those children."

"That part is somewhat conjectural," Glenn conceded. "You know, I might be able to use that story as the basis for a composition."

"And the story has given me an idea about how to deal with my own father!" Ella cried. She sprang to her feet. "Come with me."

They held hands as they strolled through the graveyard back to the old church. "What's your idea?" asked Glenn.

"Rachel and Dalton, they were so much like us."

"I expect Rachel was taller."

She bumped his hip with hers. "Shut up. The point is I can tear a page from Rachel's book. I'm going to tell my father that I love him. And my mother too. But I'm not going back with them to Toronto. I'm going to stay here with you."

Glenn smiled at her. "My place is big enough for two. But what about all your stuff at home?"

A shrug. "I can get it later. I'll be going back to school in a week anyway."

"Your father will be right upset."

"He'll get used to it. My father isn't Bowden MacLellan."

They had arrived back at the parking lot. Glenn said, "I like this idea, don't get me wrong. But . . . what about Roman?"

Ella said, "I'll break the news to him when I'm back at York. I suspect he will be relieved. We were never right for each other. He will understand when I tell him I've married someone else."

Glenn stopped walking. "What?" he said.

She turned to face him. "Well, why not? We were going to get married someday, why not today? That would settle this whole business once and forever."

Her prospective husband gawked at her. "Today? How? I mean, where would we go to get married right now?"

"Sweetheart we're standing in front a church."

"Oh, right."

"All we need is a priest and a witness. Those two will do fine." She pointed to the side of the church where an older man in a Roman collar was talking with a second man in working clothes. They appeared to be discussing roof repairs.

Glenn was still finding loopholes. "Wait. Don't we need a licence?"

“A formality. We’ll get one later.”

“What about the ring?”

Ella grinned back at him. She held up her hand with the garnet ring on it. “This one will do, I think, until we can find something better.”

Glenn was smiling now too. “Very well my love, let’s have a wedding, right now.” He pulled his recorder out of his pocket. “I will even provide the music.”

Ella said, “Ooh, spooky coincidence. Did you know that the recorder was once known as the devil’s flute?”

“Oh it was not!”

“You’re right, I just made that up.” She turned to the priest and the roofer. “Gentlemen!” she called. “We have a favour to ask.”

The older man turned a kind face toward her. “Hello!” he said. “My name is Father MacLellan. What can I do for you, my dear?”

