

GRENELL

1923

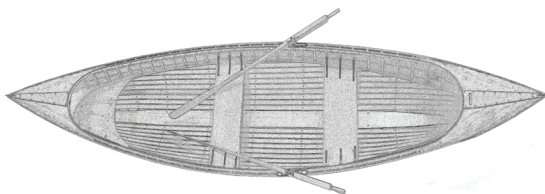
A NOVEL



1923

BOOK 5 IN THE THOUSAND ISLANDS SERIES

Lynn E. McElfresh



**River Skiff Press
Grenell Island, NY**

This is a work of fiction.
While real characters from history are represented,
their appearance, personalities, mannerisms,
and dialogue are imagined.

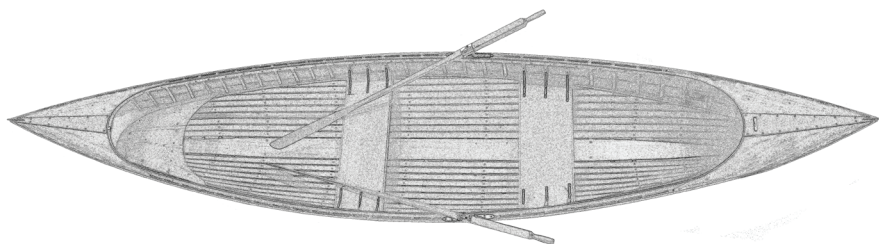
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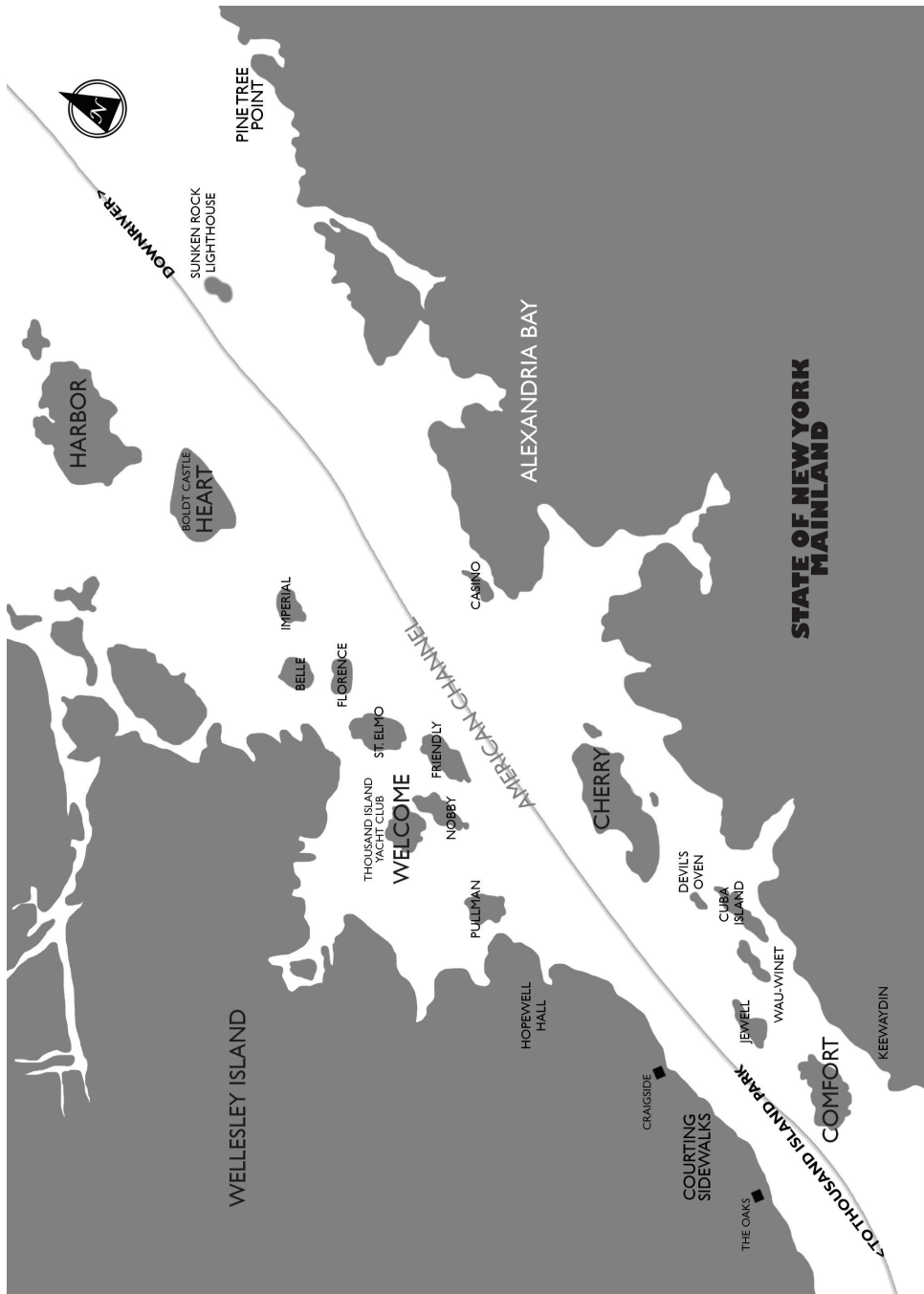


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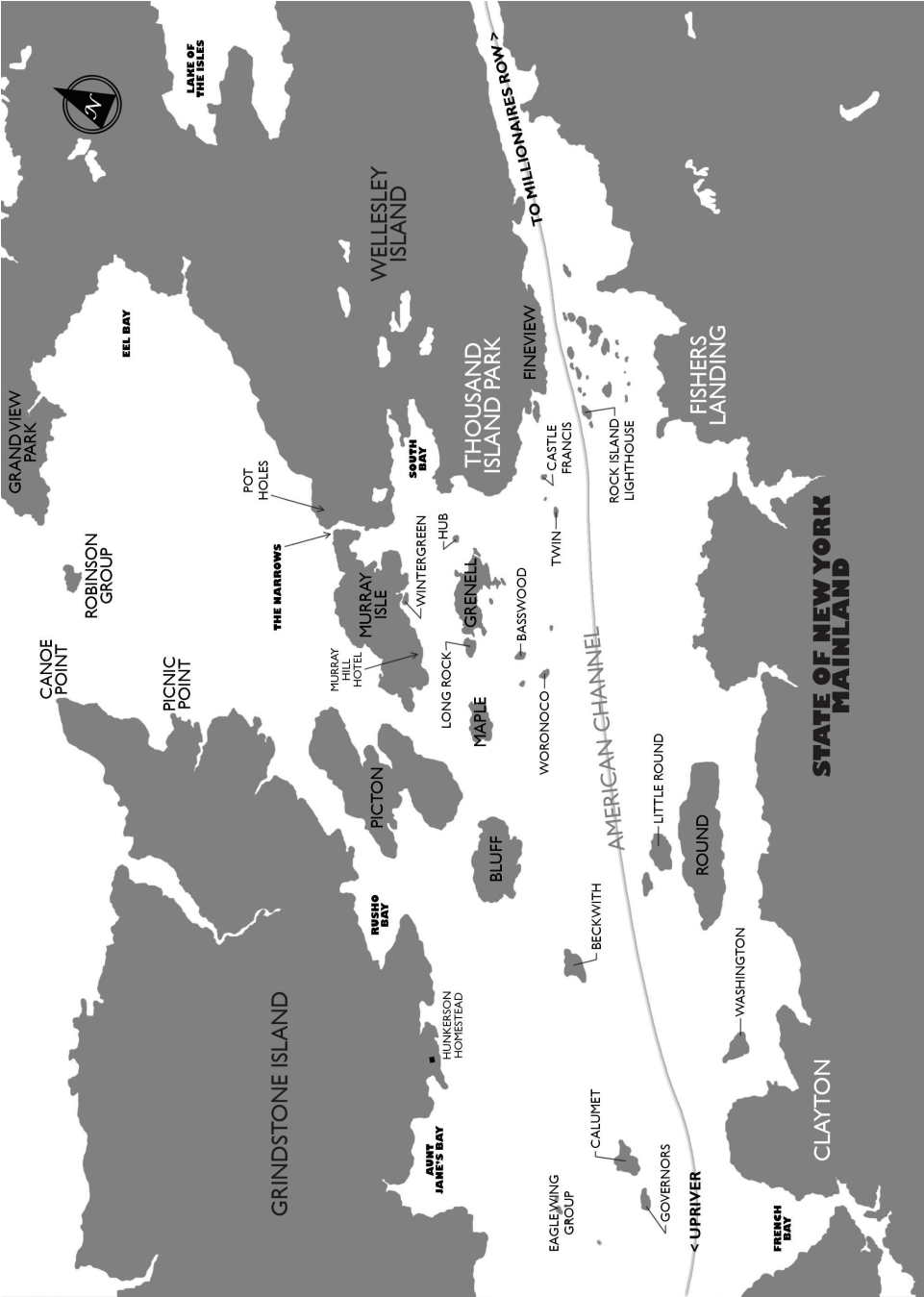
**To Bob & Peg McElfresh
Thank you for your stewardship of
our little point on Grenell.**



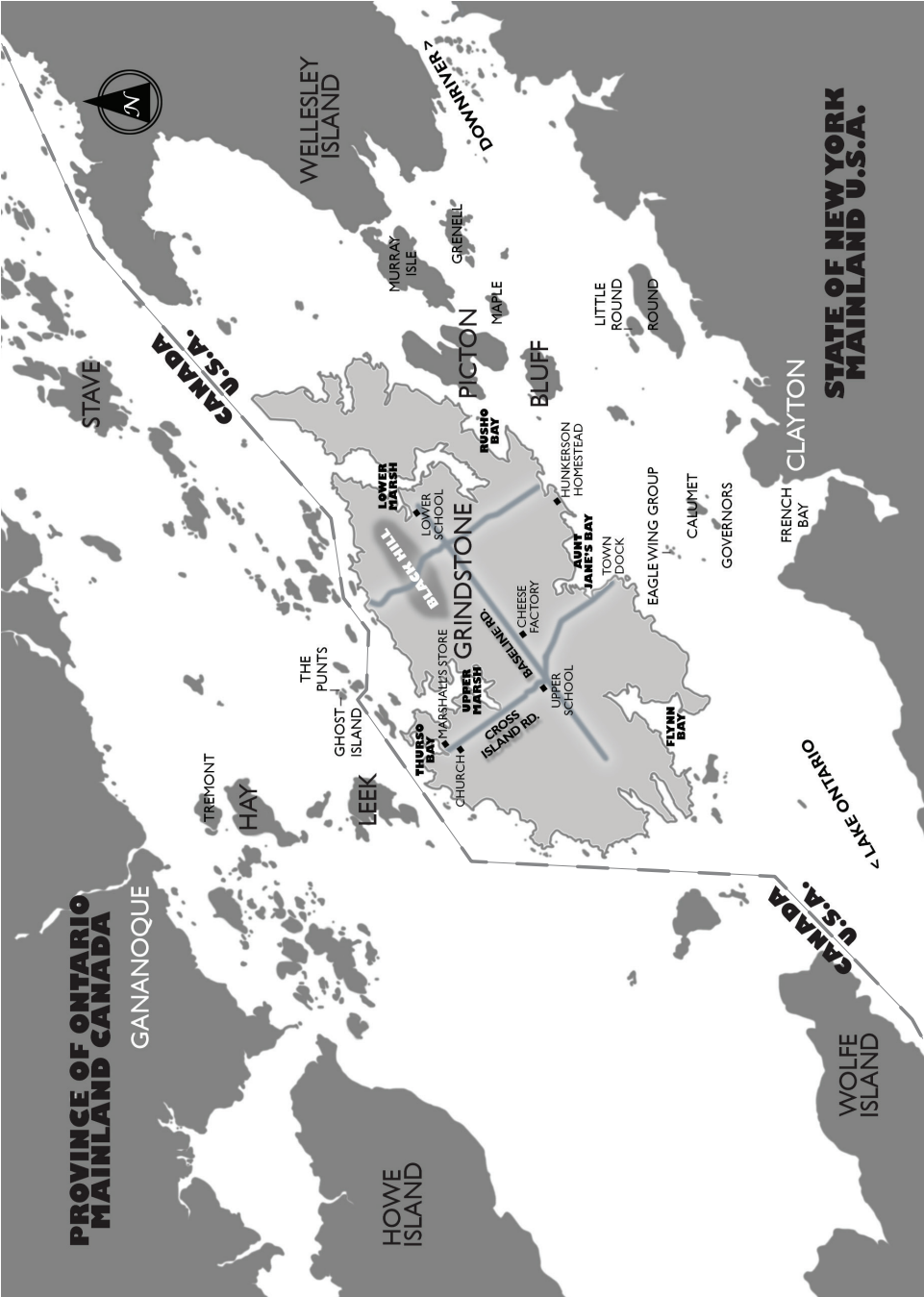
Millionaires Row 1923



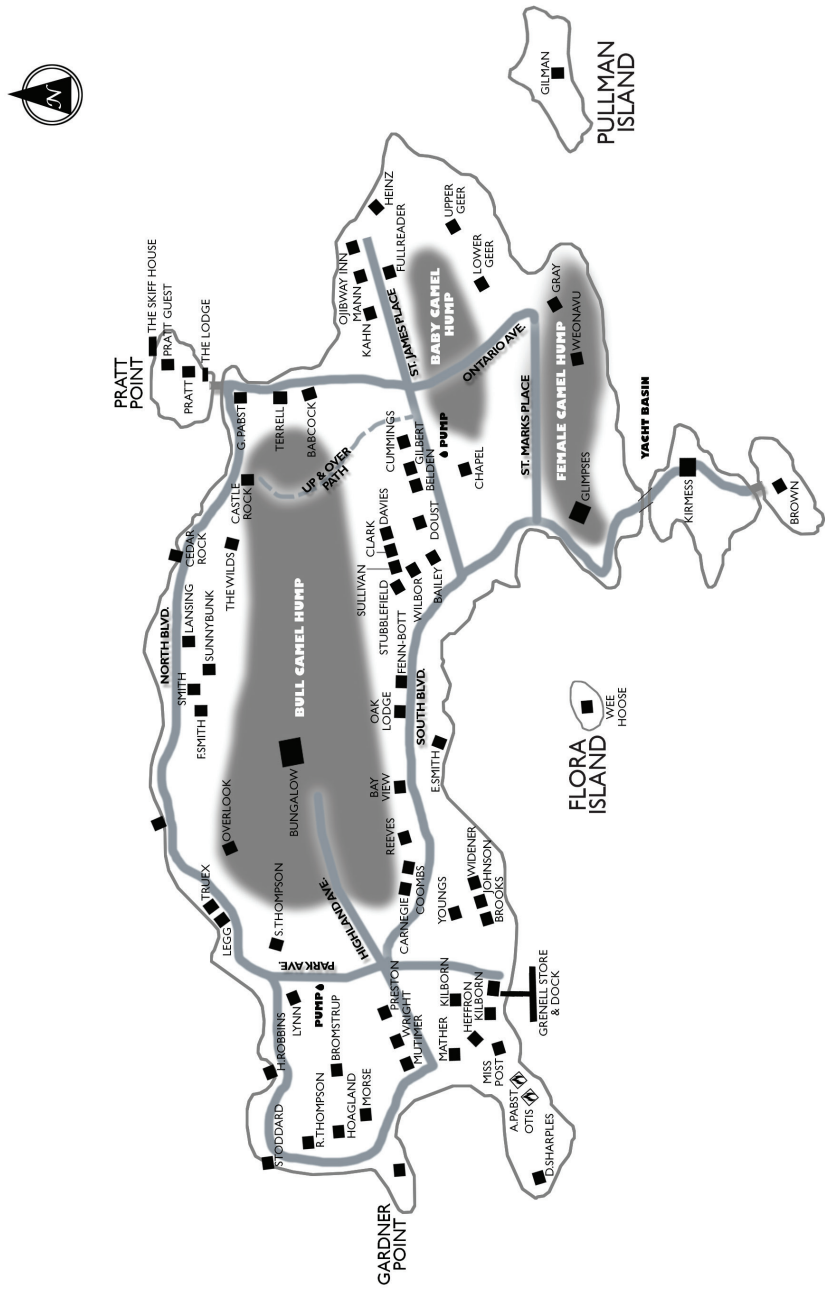
Thousand Islands Region 1923



Grindstone Island 1923



Grenell Island 1923





Tuesday, January 2, 1923

GRINDSTONE ISLAND, THOUSAND ISLANDS, NEW YORK

Knee-deep snow blanketed my island world. Thank goodness I had my snowshoes. I'd sent for them when I decided to spend the winter on Grindstone Island. Hunk teased me about wearing tennis rackets as I strapped the snowshoes on my feet this morning. I smiled at the memory. Smiling hurt. My face was tight with cold. The tip of my nose and my earlobes burned. By the time I reached the end of the lane, I was panting. Each breath of tingling cold air stung my lungs.

I checked my wristwatch and was alarmed to see how long it had taken me to snowshoe from the Hunkerson homestead to the main road. At least, I hoped this was the road. I could only assume that beneath all the snow, this parting in the trees was Base Line Road. No time to rest. I still had over a mile of deep snow ahead of me before I reached the Upper School. I'd have to pick up my pace to arrive well before the students.

It was still dark. Perhaps an hour before daybreak, but I could see my way. The full moon reflected off the snow giving my surroundings a mysterious glow. Above, the wind whistled through the bare oak and hickory branches, but was muffled to a whisper as it passed through the

- Lynn E. McElfresh -

pine boughs. With each step, the leather straps of my snowshoes creaked and groaned as they compressed the powdery snow beneath them. My breath came out in steamy puffs as I continued on. I sounded—and perhaps resembled—a locomotive chugging uphill.

Occasionally, the biting wind swept powdery snow from an overhanging branch and tossed it in my face. The moist kiss of snow on my cheeks instantly took me back to the last leg of our honeymoon. After a month exploring Greece and another in Rome, Gilly and I spent a joyous Christmas and New Year's in Bernese Oberland, the most British of the Swiss winter resorts.

Gilly couldn't wait to try skiing. The thought of speeding down a mountainside terrified me, so I chose snowshoeing instead. The winter woods surrounding the resort were enchanting. The hotel staff found it odd that honeymooners would decide on separate activities. But Gilly and I had each been single for so long. That may be why we were comfortable with individual pursuits. Besides, the best part of our day was meeting up at the lodge afterward and recounting our experiences.

We had been sharing our day-to-day lives through writing for years and continued to do so. On day one of our marriage, we started the tradition of writing a daily haiku in a lovely leather-bound journal. Gilly always wrote his haiku in black ink. Mine were written in blue. But an astute reader could discern the poet—not by color, but by subject matter. My haiku always revolved around nature—savoring every nuance of the season. Gilly's poems reflected his active, adventurous heart. My favorite of his was:

dashing down mountain
skis hiss, heart pounds, leaving
a powder cloud behind

What haiku will I write about today? I thought as I trudged along Base Line Road. The sound of the snow beneath my snowshoes? The kiss of windblown snow on my face?

I looked up. The sky was brighter now. I was no longer trudging through a black-and-white world. Instead, the landscape was bathed in blues. Above, the oak limbs were a deep navy against a royal blue sky. Below, the snow was a soft powder-blue. The wind stirred the oak

branches and sent a dusting of snow drifting down, shimmering and glittering in the early light. *Perhaps I will write about the blue hues of a winter dawn*, I thought as I approached the Upper School.

"There you are, miss," a small voice said, causing me to jump.

My hand instinctively clutched my chest. "Andy! You startled me," I said.

The little guy wiped his nose with the back of his mitten and hung his head. "Sorry, miss," he mumbled more to his toes than to me. His cheeks were bright with cold.

"Andy Carnegie, what are you doing here so early? School doesn't start for another hour," I said as I loosened my bindings, slipped off my snowshoes, and leaned them against the outside wall.

"Ma sent me ahead to help with the fire and such. Oh, and I got a note from Miss McRae for ya, too," he said. He bit the end of his mitten, pulled his hand out, and rummaged in his coat pocket for the folded paper. The Carnegies lived down the road from the McRaes.

I took the note from him and slipped it into my pocket as I pulled out the key and inserted it into the lock. Yesterday, I'd been asked if I would fill in for a day or two at the Grindstone Upper School. Miss McRae, the teacher, was very ill with the gripe.

A school teacher at last, I thought as I pushed open the door.

It wasn't my first time being asked to teach on Grindstone. I was only sixteen when I was offered a job at the Lower School in 1881. That had been over forty years ago. Back then, I had been confident I could handle such a position, but I chose to continue my education at the University of Pennsylvania instead. After earning a doctorate, I spent decades teaching Greek and Latin. I'd retired from my university position in 1912 when I married Percy Guilford—my dear sweet Gilly.

I was staying at the Hunkerson homestead on Grindstone Island and teaching at a one-room schoolhouse. It felt as if I had stepped back in time. *My life has come full circle*, I thought.

I stamped my boots on the flat granite slab that served as a doorstep, stepped inside, and shivered. The door opened into the cloakroom, but I wasn't prepared to take off my coat or boots just yet. The schoolhouse had been locked and closed the week between Christmas Eve and New Year's Day. It seemed colder inside the building than outside.

I hurried across the main room to the teacher's apartment on the opposite side of the building. Back in 1881, when I was first offered a teaching position, the teacher was shuffled about the community, boarding with a different family each month. The Hunkersons had offered to board me full-time. Decades ago, a tiny one-room apartment had been added to the schoolhouse. Even though Bertha McRae had family on the island, she chose to live in the apartment.

Having an apartment attached to the schoolhouse was especially advantageous on days like today. Miss McRae would have had a coal fire lingering in the schoolhouse stove overnight. A few logs from the woodbox in the back corner of the room would have brought it roaring to life. It wouldn't take long for the classroom to be warm and toasty before the students arrived. But Bertha had spent Christmas at her parent's farm, where she became ill. She remained there so her mother could nurse her back to health.

I hadn't planned on lighting the four Aladdin kerosene lamps that hung from the high ceiling, but the windows were caked with frost and ice, which dulled the early morning light. I'd have to add "light the ceiling lamps" to my ever-growing list of things to do before the students arrive.

But first things first. While Andy was outside shoveling, I needed to change out of my wet clothes. My experience in Switzerland had prepared me. I quickly took off the tweed jodhpurs and peeled off my wet socks. I'd packed extra socks and a long wool skirt in my rucksack. The style these days might be for shorter hemlines, but the Jazz Age was slow to arrive on Grindstone Island. Here, a long wool skirt was more appropriate. Warmer, too. I purchased the cashmere sports socks in Switzerland. The fancy turnover top hid the utilitarian metal garters that would keep my socks snug in place for the rest of the day. As I buckled on my shoes, the memory of Gilly removing my stockings after snowshoeing in the woods sprang to mind. "Your toes are like little icicles," he had whispered in my ear as he pulled me to my feet. "I have ways of warming you up," he'd said as he wrapped his arms around me. "All the way down to the tips of your toes."

Those words replayed in my ears as I hung my wet socks on the standing towel rack. They sent a tingle down my spine. I could almost feel Gilly's warm breath as he whispered in my ear. I breathed in deeply,

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remembering the familiar scent of his barberry shaving soap.

I hung my snow-dampened jodhpurs next to my wet socks. Hopefully, Andy had not noticed my jodhpurs. The farm folk of Grindstone were very traditional. A woman in men's clothing would have sent a scandalous ripple through the school and probably the rest of the island. I grabbed the note from my jodhpurs' pocket and perused it.

"Ah, yes! I'd need to put the kettle on," I said aloud. I scanned the small kitchen and grabbed the kettle.

By the time I re-entered the classroom, Andy had finished lighting a fire in the stove. "Here," I said, handing him the kettle. "Fill this with snow. We'll have to pour warm water down the hand pump to de-ice it. We'll need a bucket of fresh drinking water."

I reread the list of lessons on the schedule that Miss McRae sent yesterday. Today's note also included a seating chart.

Students started arriving well before I rang the bell to signify class was to begin in ten minutes. The schoolhouse was warmer but far from toasty when the children began shuffling in. I stationed Andy outside the door and directed him to tell the students to stamp the snow from their feet.

A few students pushed through the cloakroom door and, with them, cold air. "Keep that door closed," I commanded.

The boys gave me a sheepish look and murmured, "Yes, miss."

Even with the door closed, I could hear raucous voices emitting from the long narrow room. Suddenly there was a bang as if something or someone had been shoved against the wall. The portraits of President Lincoln and President Washington that hung against the back wall clattered in their frames.

I stopped writing the recitation poem on the blackboard, took the pointer from the chalk tray, and rushed to the cloakroom. Had a fight broken out? When I opened the door, I found boys jostling with each other—pushing and shoving. There were no harsh words, only snickering and laughter. I suspected it was all good-natured fun. I rapped the pointer hard on the doorjamb for attention. The crack of the wood immediately silenced the hubbub.

"Order! Please remove your galoshes and outerwear as quickly and silently as possible, then take your seats," I directed.

The crowded cloakroom smelled of wet wool. An occasional hint of

manure tweaked my nose, reminding me that many had spent the early morning hours dealing with the care and feeding of dairy cattle. One boy tried to help another pull his galoshes from his shoes, but lost his grip. The momentum sent him backward into a group of boys. I immediately realized what had caused the thud that rattled our former Presidents.

I instructed two boys to bring chairs—one for the boys side and the other for the girls side of the cloakroom. The students could sit to remove their galoshes. The girls side of the cloakroom was a bit more orderly. I observed older girls helping the younger girls remove their leggings—thick, corduroy pants—that they wore under their dresses to protect their bare legs from the cold. Their socks were soaking wet. Their thin, bare legs were chafed from the cold.

I winced. They had to be freezing, wet, and uncomfortable. I wish I could have brought dry socks for each of them and prepare hot chocolate for the entire group, wrap them in blankets, set them around the stove, and read stories to them all day. But they had come here at considerable effort. The one thing I learned long ago was that the residents of Grindstone Island were serious about their children's education. These hardy farm families did not coddle their children.

Miss McRae had included a warning in this morning's note. "Establish authority quickly or the entire day will descend into chaos." She suggested I review the school rules on the wall behind the teacher's desk. Then, she recommended that I remind them that I knew each and every one of their parents. She had provided a seating chart and said that Andy had been instructed to inform me if students weren't in their correct seats.

It was one minute after nine. I was late ringing the school bell. I pulled the rope. The bell rang, signifying the start of the school day. The remaining students rushed from the cloakroom to their seats.

Although in their seats, they were far from orderly. The din from their voices bounced off the high ceiling. I rapped my desk with the pointer. I started the school day as Miss McRae had suggested, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance and the Lord's Prayer. I counted heads as the students finished the prayer in their singsong cadence. Thirty-six students. Everyone was present, but were they in their correct seats? I raised the seating chart and looked at the students. Despite the speech I had given affirming that I knew them and their parents, I was unsure exactly who was

who. Dano children had light blond hair and bright blue eyes. The Slates were mostly dark-haired and the Garnseys were full-faced with broad shoulders.

I shot a look to Andy, who gave me an almost imperceptible shake of his head.

I cleared my throat. "I see all are present and accounted for—though some of us are in the wrong seats. I'll give you a chance to remedy that while I finish writing the poem for recitation on the blackboard." I turned my back and heard the shuffling of feet and shifting bodies behind me. By the time I wrote the last word, the movement had stopped. I turned and shot a glance at Andy. I took the slow blink of his eyes as the "yes" I was looking for.

"That's better," I said.

The last order of business before the start of today's lessons was to put the soup on for the noonday meal. Each day, one family provided broth and meat while another family provided chopped vegetables. I could see the quart canning jars out and ready.

According to the seating chart, Dan Garnsey was supplying the meat and a spritely blonde named Ordellia Dano had the vegetables.

"What sort of meat do we have for today's soup?" I asked as Dan approached the stove.

"Squirrel," Dan said with an impish smirk. Dan was an eighth grader. Though, outside the schoolhouse, I might mistake him for someone years older. He was a full head taller than anyone else in the room with broad shoulders and an intelligent—some might say mischievous—glint in his eyes.

"Three of 'em," he said, holding the jar so I could see the cubed meat. "Shot them myself yesterday before the weather set in. Skinned, deboned, chopped, and ready to go." He unscrewed the top and poured the contents into the waiting pot of water.

Ordellia followed suit with her canning jar of chopped vegetables. I gave the pot a good stir before returning to the front of the class.

The morning lessons reminded me of a three-ring circus. I was a poor ringmaster, never quite in control of the activities whirling around me. Thank goodness for Andy, who automatically tended to the fire in the stove and Ordellia, who occasionally stirred the soup.

Next thing I knew, the first-grade students were complaining that they

were hungry and I noticed it was ten minutes after noon. Where had the morning gone? No one was more ready for a break than I was.

Ordelia dashed off to get the bowls, spoons, and a ladle as the others cleared off their desks and readied themselves for lunch. Some students brought a lunch pail with a hunk of bread. Many of the older lads had sandwiches, but most only had soup for lunch. After I had ladled soup into everyone's waiting bowl, the schoolroom was mostly quiet except for the slurping and the clinking of spoons on the enamelware bowls. Most used their sleeves for napkins. When the soup was gone, the room quickly became noisy. I asked two girls to gather the bowls and put them in the sink. They told me they were supposed to wash them, but I told them I would do it later. They shared a look of utter wonder at their luck and raced to get ready for recess.

"Do not go out the door until I tell you," I shouted as everyone disappeared into the cloakroom.

Hunk had given me the idea of constructing a perfectly round circle for a fox and geese game. I figured creating the circle and spokes in the knee-deep snow would take two lads with long legs. I picked Dan Garnsey as he was by far the tallest and another eighth grader, Laurence Garnsey. Dan and Laurence didn't look like twins, so I assumed they were cousins. "There were so many Garnseys on the island..." I'd heard summer-resident Stanley Norcom comment once, "...that if anyone stepped on one Garnsey toe, there would follow an island-wide howl of pain."

Watching the children in the play yard was the highlight of my day. They were red-cheeked, out of breath, and caked with snow by the time recess was over. Removing their snow gear was arduous. It was nearly one-thirty when they returned to their seats for the afternoon lessons.

I decided to substitute Miss McRae's arithmetic lessons with lessons on circles—using the parts of the fox and geese circle as an example.

With arithmetic lessons out of the way, I recited this week's poem. "My Shadow" by Robert Louis Stevenson. "That was real good," a little first grader told me when I finished. "Your mouth makes all the words sound like they're store-bought."

"Store-bought?" I asked. "I'm not sure what you mean by that."

A sixth grader explained. "He means you sound like summer people sound. They get all their stuff—clothes and such—at the store while Ma

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makes our clothes at home. Your talk sounds store-bought.”

I suppose he meant I sounded elegant. He meant it as a compliment, so I ruffled his hair before ensuring the older students correctly copied the poem in their composition books.

Next, I began reading *The Call of the Wild*. I thought the students would love the rugged nature of the book. Besides, it made me think of Gilly as he had been the one to introduce me to the book.

Reading to the class was my favorite part of the day. Well, that and dismissal time. The sun was low in the sky as I sent the last bundled-up student homeward. By the time I had swept, washed the lunch bowls, and reviewed tomorrow’s lessons, the sun was down. The light was fading fast. My shadow stretched before me as I trudged back to the Hunkerson homestead.

“I have a little shadow that goes in and out with me.” I remembered the first line of the Stevenson poem I had copied onto the blackboard. Gilly loved that poem. He recited it often on our daily constitutional.

It was dark when I pushed through the back door of the Hunkerson home and into the warm kitchen. Hunk gave me a lopsided smile as I hung my coat on the peg beside the back door. “How’d it go?”

I let out a long sigh. “Fine.”

I glanced around the warm kitchen and was pleased to see the kitchen table shoved closer to the wood stove and laundry strung on two lines on the far side of the long room. My first and only argument with Sadie was about hanging the laundry in the attic when the weather was inclement.

Last fall, Sadie was laid up with a badly sprained ankle. Dr. Fowler insisted it would only heal if she stayed off it. I could hardly refuse when Hunk asked if I could be her legs for a few weeks. Sadie was not accustomed to accepting help from anyone, especially someone who was “citified.” My past position as a university professor did not raise me in her esteem. It only stamped me as an “over-educated idiot, lackin’ common sense.”

Until that first rainy Blue Monday—washday—I had done everything she asked of me without question, albeit I never did it as quickly or expertly as she wished. However, I balked at carrying the wet laundry up two flights of stairs to hang it in the attic.

She was aghast at my refusal, hinting that my lazy, citified ways were

to blame. After all, she'd been hanging the laundry in the attic for decades when the weather was inclement. She insisted that the kitchen was too busy to be cluttered with hanging laundry.

I pointed out that it was true when she had four children underfoot. Back then, there were more laundry items, not to mention more activity in the kitchen. But her children were grown and out of the house now and there was no reason to trudge up two flights of stairs when the kitchen was warmer and large enough to accommodate the laundry. I hadn't waited for an answer, but commenced stringing lines and hanging laundry.

Sadie didn't speak to me for two days. So, to see the laundry hanging there now was a shock. She had only started putting weight on her injured ankle in the last week. Hunk forbade her to go outside—afraid she would slip and reinjure the newly healed joint.

Hunk and I shared a look, but we knew better than to comment on Sadie's change of heart. Instead, I turned my attention to Hunk. "More snow coming tonight?" I asked.

Hunk had always been a fount of weather wisdom, more accurate than the *Old Farmer's Almanac*, which puts out yearly predictions, and head and shoulders above the United States Weather Bureau, which Hunk usually referred to as the "Old Probabilities." I'd first become acquainted with Hunk in 1881 when I was only sixteen. Through the years, he had become a devoted caretaker of my tiny summer cottage on Grenell Island. He was a quintessential river man.

"Nope," Hunk said, warming his hands over the cookstove. "Pretty certain we've had our share of snow for the week."

Even before I committed to spending the winter here on Grindstone, Hunk warned me that we were in for a hard winter—severe cold and lots of snow.

On the mainland, most people warmed their homes with coal. Some islanders had also switched to coal, but last summer's coal strike led to a coal famine. Luckily here on the island, wood was still plentiful. Hunk had been chopping, splitting, and stacking wood near the back porch since the first of September.

When I first arrived at the Hunkerson homestead, I was surprised to see a New Perfection Oil Cook Stove in the kitchen next to the old cookstove. "Too hot to use the cookstove in the summer," Sadie

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explained. "But come this winter, the kitchen will be where we'll spend all our time. It'll be the only warm place in the house."

Forecasters at the United States Weather Bureau predicted a typical winter, but Hunk disagreed.

"From signs I'm seeing, we're in for a long, cold winter. If you recall, the geese were flying high and south about the time you arrived in late September. They're usually out of here around mid-October. At harvest, the corn had the heaviest husks in recent memory. And the muskrat lodges are thicker than I've ever seen. All those things add up to a long, cold winter. As for the snowfalls we're likely to get, ya gotta count the heavy fogs we had in August."

I thought back. "Hmmm. We did have a lot of fog in August, but I don't remember how many."

Hunk held up nine fingers. "Nine heavy fogs in August will equal nine heavy snowfalls this winter."

"How many have we had already? Let's see, it snowed in October," I started.

Hunk let out a huff. "I don't count that as a heavy snowfall. It was here and gone before we knowed it. Just a dustin' really."

"Does the snowfall we had in November count?"

Hunk nodded. "Now, that was a knee-slapper, wasn't it? Thunder and lightning! And wind that came from the east. Don't get many thundersnows!"

I won't soon forget that night. The wind howled and the whole house shook and shimmied. The gale-force winds wreaked havoc up and down the river. Buildings were damaged, trees uprooted, and boats ripped from their moorings.

"Well, I have chores to do," I said, reaching for the coat I wore for milking.

"Don't worry about the cows," Hunk called. "Milking's done. Started a little early and did your cows, too. Figured you'd be beat. Took care of the chickens, too."

"You can set the table," Sadie called over her shoulder as she stirred something on the stove. Whatever it was smelled delicious. She was sitting on a tall stool that Hunk had made for her. Sadie's injured ankle hadn't slowed her down much. I was always amazed at what she could accomplish

on crutches or from a sitting position.

After dinner and dishes, I helped take down the laundry. We carefully smoothed everything flat to hasten tomorrow's ironing and left it in a stack at the end of the kitchen table.

"Maybe after you finish up at the school, you can get to that book you *say* you're writing," Sadie said, flashing me a dubious look as she flattened out a housedress with her hands. "Been here since September and haven't heard the clatter from that typewriter contraption of yours once."

As soon as Sadie turned her back to get another dress from the line, Hunk and I shared another look. It's not easy to pull the wool over Sadie's eyes. I wondered if she had figured out that my presence here had more to do with me helping while she was laid up with a mangled ankle than it did with me writing a book. It's true that I'd talked for years of writing a book about how a classical education influenced our Founding Fathers. While that was the explanation I had given Sadie for spending the winter with them, it wasn't what had sent me north for the winter.

By the time I had the laundry down and stacked, Sadie handed me my hot-water bottle. Hunk lit my finger lamp and they sent me off to bed. The upstairs was cold. I could see my breath. I put the finger lamp on my bedside table and lit the kerosene lamp on the table I use as a desk. I tightened the wool shawl around my shoulders and sat down. I blew on my hands to warm my fingers before I took out a fresh piece of stationery.

I wrote today's date in the upper right-hand corner in slow, careful handwriting. "My Dearest Gilly," I penned. I quickly described my first day at the Grindstone Upper School and closed with my daily haiku.

Ironically, writing the seventeen-syllable haiku took me as long as it took to write the two-page letter. Of course, I worked it out on scratch paper first, writing down keywords and images. I crossed out and struggled to find just the right words before it was finished. My method was totally opposite of how Gilly composed haiku. If Gilly were here now, I could see him leaning back, staring at the ceiling as he worked out the haiku in his head. I knew he was finished when that cocky smirk spread across his face. Once it was in his head, he would write it in our shared journal—perfectly formed. I always envied how he could do it in his head without pen or paper.

- Grenell 1923 -

I wrote today's haiku at the letter's close and then in our shared journal.

wind gust pushes snow
from branches to deliver
a winter wet kiss

I quickly changed for bed. Gooseflesh rippled across my skin in that fleeting moment between removing my blouse and brassiere and pulling my cold nightgown over my head. I let out short, shaky, frosty breaths before I burrowed beneath the covers. The hot-water bottle had done its job, but the sheet on either side was icy. Inside my wool socks, my feet felt frozen. I warmed my chilly toes on the hot-water bottle.

Gilly's words came to me again. "Your toes are like little icicles! I have ways of warming you up." I could almost smell his bayberry shaving soap and feel his warm breath as he nuzzled my neck. I reached over and turned the little knob on the finger lamp until the wick dipped below the burner. The light flickered, dimmed, and glowed orange for only a moment before it blinked out. I drifted to sleep, thinking of Gilly's warm arms around me. The kisses I dreamt of were not winter cold and wet.



My stint at the Upper School lasted the entire week. I quickly fell into a routine. Up well before dawn, then snowshoed to the school, started the fire in the stove, and prepared for an endless round of morning lessons. After serving soup at noon and watching the children play, there was another round of afternoon lessons. Although I often had older students help younger students, I rarely sat. I was constantly moving from one group of students to the next. After cleaning the classroom and preparing for the next day, it was dark by the time I tramped back to the Hunkerson homestead.

Staying for the entire week enabled me to finish reading Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*. On Friday, before recitation, I read the poem "Cremation of Sam McGee." Another of Gilly's favorites. He introduced both to me while exploring the North Pacific aboard the *USS Albatross*, a Navy research ship.

After reading the poem, I planned to talk about geography and show the location of Tennessee and Alaska on the map. But my day took a detour when little Elmer Dano raised a hand and timidly asked, "Miss, what's *cream-ation*? Got somethin' to do with milk?"

I felt as if my legs had been knocked from beneath me. It wasn't the first time I realized teaching six-year-olds wasn't the same as teaching college students. I should have defined *cremation* before I started my recitation.

I took a breath and explained to the confused child that cremation was a way of disposing of a dead body instead of burying it.

The confusion on Elmer's face intensified. "Disposing?"

Another word unfamiliar to a six-year-old. My mind searched for a synonym. The first phrase that came to mind was *get rid of*, but that wasn't appropriate. My mind quickly ran through a list of synonyms: remove, expel, jettison, discard. Instead, I decided to explain what cremation did. "Cremation turns a body to ash."

Elmer tilted his head to one side and scrutinized me. "And what d'ya mean by 'turn to ash'?" Suddenly, realization washed over him. His eyes widened in horror. "You mean he *burned* Sam's body to *ash*? But if the body is just ashes, what happens on Judgement Day? There won't be a body to raise?" This sent a current of excitement through the rest of the classroom as everyone shifted in their seat, pondering Judgement Day for a cremated body.

I swallowed hard, realizing this poem had been inappropriate for this group of children.

"That is a discussion for another day," I said authoritatively, reaching for the arithmetic book. "It's time to work on sums. Get out your slates."

Honestly, I don't know who learned more that week. The children? Perhaps. But more than likely, it had been me.

The noonday meal was always a learning experience. Somebody brought a new type of meat each day. We had squirrel, muskrat, rabbit, and chicken. But the biggest surprise was donated on Friday by the Slate family. I unwrapped the brown paper and was bewildered to see cubes of what I presumed was beef. "Beef?" I asked Harry Slate.

A huge grin spread across his face at my mistake. "No, miss. That there is beaver." A collective gasp went up and all the children rushed to the stove to peek at the cubed meat carefully wrapped in butcher paper.

I learned that beavers were a rarity in the Thousand Islands. Old-timers said they had been trapped out decades ago. Only recently had beavers been spotted.

"Yeah. Pa trapped a beaver over on Picton yesterday. It was a doozy!" Harry spread his arms wide to show the mammoth size of the beaver. "Thick as a nail keg and twice as long. Had the tail for dinner last night." He rubbed his belly. "We'll have more beaver tonight, but Ma said there

would be plenty for me to bring to school to share.”

Harry went on. “I watched Pa skin and dress the thing. The pelt is thick and warm. Pa says it’ll fetch a pretty penny. He cut off the tail and I thought he was gonna throw it away. Didn’t look like anything I’d want to sink my teeth into. It’s like a flat leather paddle, as tough as an old shoe. But Ma said she knew how to make beaver tail soup. First, she put the tail in the oven and it puffed up like a balloon. It looked like it would explode, but it didn’t. When it cooled, Ma easily peeled away the outer skin. The tail meat looked nothing like what we just put into the soup pot,” Harry reported. “It was white, almost fish-like, but not as flakey. After boiling the beaver tail meat for awhile, it just fell apart makin’ the soup thick and creamy. Ma added sliced carrots and dried peas. It was delicious.”

I learned that one beaver could feed a large family for several days. Harry thought beaver liver was the “cat’s meow” as it was milder and sweeter than calf’s liver. I was surprised to hear slang I usually associated with flappers, but I suppose even schoolboys on Grindstone read Tad Dorgan’s comic strip. Dorgan popularized several words and phrases that I’d heard at recess: “dumbbell” for a stupid person; “for crying out loud” an exclamation of exasperation; “hard-boiled” for tough and unsentimental; “nickel-nurser” for someone who is cheap; “applesauce” meaning nonsense; and probably my favorite, “busy as a one-armed paperhanger” for being overworked. That expression especially tickled me when I heard it because I doubted if any of these children knew what a paperhanger was. As far as I can recall, none of their homes had wallpaper.

During lunch, I sometimes asked the children about fish, duck, or other game that found its way to their dinner table. I learned that snapping turtle was a favorite. The McAvoy twins—Arloine and Avery—were eager to share that there were seven different types of meat in a snapping turtle, but to their tastes, the darker, the better.

Arloine started the story. “We once found a huge snappin’ turtle in the woods. His shell was as big as a barrel top. We held a stick in front of his mouth and he latched onto it.”

Avery picked up the story there. “Once a snappin’ turtle bites, it don’t let go. So, you better make sure it’s not your finger! Arloine took one end of the stick and I took the other. We dragged the monster home. It was

heavy,” she said, rubbing her shoulder at the memory of the burden.

Raccoon was also a staple on many tables. Raccoon stadium coats are all the rage among college men. As a good pelt could garner as much as \$8, several families run traplines either here on Grindstone or neighboring islands. While trapped for their fur, the meat does not go to waste. When I asked what raccoon tasted like, some said it was like chicken only greasier. Some said it was more like pork. Others just snickered and said, “Like money.”

I learned about the chores they did in the morning before and after school. It wasn’t unusual for one or more of the first graders to doze off in the afternoon. I didn’t scold or punish them but gently nudged them awake. Often, I asked them to get a drink of water for me from the enamel water pail at the back of the room.

I was appalled to see that every child in the school drank from the dipper that was then plunged back into the pail. That same dipper was used to fill my teacup. Perhaps I could speak to Bertha about this at our meeting today after the Sunday church service.

The McRaes lived in Thurso near the Grindstone Island Methodist Church, so I had assumed we would meet at her home. I was surprised when I didn’t find Bertha among the congregates that morning. I hoped that she had not had a relapse. After the service, I approached her mother, Nettie McRae, and inquired about Bertha’s health. Nettie assured me that Bertha was feeling just fine, but since I had left the school and apartment in such a frightful state, she had to spend Sunday morning scrambling to put things right to be ready for the Monday morning school session.

Nettie said that last part a bit louder than she needed to. She raised both her chin and her voice so that anyone in close proximity could hear exactly why Bertha wasn’t at Sunday service. After glancing around to note if she had attracted any attention, Nettie glared at me as if daring me to deny her pronouncement.

I felt my face flush as my mind groped to recollect precisely how I had left the schoolhouse. Certain that I had left it in apple-pie order, I conjured a smile. “Well, perhaps I can help her arrange things to her liking.”

“I’m sure that won’t be necessary. Clearly, you’re not capable. Heard you were filling our children’s minds with heathen notions. You and your

city ways,” she said with a dismissive tongue click.

Sadie was at my side in an instant. “Come along, Marguerite,” she said as she looped her arm through mine. She pointed me toward the sled where Hunk and his favorite Belgian draft horse Brutus were waiting for us. “Don’t pay her no never mind,” Sadie said as we climbed aboard the sled. “Clearly, Nettie’s just jealous ‘cause all the young’uns flocked to you this morning like you were the Pied Piper. If you recall, those same children avoid Bertha like the plague, whether they see her at church, the store, or any other social gathering.”

I explained to Hunk that Bertha was not home but at the Upper School. I asked if he would mind taking me there and picking me up later. I apologized for putting him out.

Hunk gave me a lopsided smile as he shook the reins. “Don’t give it a second thought. We need to haul drinking water back to the house anyways.”

I looked back as the sled inched forward and saw Nettie, a short, dumpy woman with a perpetual scowl on her face, pointing at me. A group of women surrounded her. I could only imagine what she was saying about me.

Sadie saw me looking at the women clustered around Nettie and patted my knee. “Don’t you worry about what Nettie might be sayin’. Everyone on the island knows what a busybody she is. Most of what comes out of her mouth doesn’t amount to a hill of beans. That woman has a sharp tongue. Never has nothing nice to say about nobody. Exceptin’ when she’s talkin’ to summer people. Then she’s as sweet as pie, with a shit-eatin’ grin on her face.” Sadie slapped her hand over her mouth. “Forgive my language and in the shadow of the Lord’s house no less, but that woman makes me madder than a wet hen.”

As Brutus trotted away, the air was filled with the delightful tinkling of sleigh bells. The happy sound drowned out Nettie’s harsh words that still echoed in my head. I was grateful that even here on Grindstone, horses wore sleigh bells. Hard for sleds to stop, especially on a downhill section of a road, so the bells help alert pedestrians of the sled’s approach. Sleigh bells kept me from harm’s way this week as I snowshoed to and from the Upper School.

Hunk’s utilitarian sled was different from the sleigh my father had

while I was growing up. My father's Albany Cutter sleigh had curved metal runners and two rows of upholstered seats tucked into a stylish, elegantly-painted chaise. Hunk had simply replaced the wheels on his buckboard wagon with four wooden runners. We sat on a wooden plank—no upholstered cushions for us.

Sadie spread the horsehair blanket across our laps, reached over, and tucked the end under my thigh. She was still mumbling her discontent over my encounter with Nettie.

I first noted ill feelings between Sadie and Nettie at a barn dance. Fall on Grindstone had been such a surprise. Farm life was new to me. Busy, of course, with harvesting and preserving food for the winter, but oh so very social. The islanders who had spent the past three months catering to summer people now had time to socialize. It seemed every week was a reason to celebrate.

After Labor Day, when most summer people returned to the city, there was a barn dance. At Halloween, there was a big social event at the church with a candy booth, an odds & ends booth, a gold mine, a fish pond, and a grand costume parade. The children were so imaginative in their homespun costumes. There were thimble parties and hay rack rides. The islanders worked hard, but seemed to find any excuse to get together and raise a glass or two.

It wasn't like the speakeasies I heard about in the city, filled with gambling and jazz singers. Here I noted that at a barn dance, most gents and a few of the ladies had a tin cup filled with some libation or another.

In 1920, the first summer after the Volstead Act had passed, Hunk asked how my rye supply was holding out. I just rolled my eyes and sighed. A week later, he arrived at my cottage with two bottles. The price was double what I had paid before Prohibition, but I was glad to pay. I didn't ask how Hunk had obtained the contraband.

Smuggling was familiar to the islands, particularly on Grindstone. Its northern shore was a stone's throw from the Dominion boundary. Most residents had as many ties with Gananoque, Ontario as with Clayton, New York. Place names at the head of the island—Whiskey Island and Rum Point—hinted at Grindstone's long history of smuggling alcohol from the Dominion of Canada.

Decades ago, smuggling whiskey from Canada was to avoid paying