

On the Rocks

A WILLA CATHER AND
EDITH LEWIS MYSTERY

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ARBOR FARM PRESS
Albuquerque

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ARBOR FARM PRESS

P.O. Box 56783, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87187

arborfarmpress.com

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Printed by BookMobile, Minneapolis, Minnesota USA bookmobile.com

Distributed by Itasca Books, Minneapolis, Minnesota USA itascabooks.com

Cover design by Ann Weinstock

Interior design, photo illustration, and typesetting by Sara DeHaan

Photo and illustration credits: Window frame (front cover) copyright © Csaba Molnar/Vetta/Getty Images; Willa Cather and Edith Lewis 1920 passport photos (front cover) courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration; *Grand Manan Map* (frontispiece), *From the Red Trail* (p. 143), *Facing the Bay* (p. 199) by Jake Page; *Grand Manan Ferry 1927* (p. 9), *Tourist Brochure 1927* (p. 116) courtesy of the Grand Manan Archives, Grand Manan Museum; *Hole in the Wall* (p. 28), *Herring Weir* (p. 49), *Eel Brook* (p. 65), *Low Tide Seven Days Work* (p. 171), *Naughty Spruce* (p. 215) by Sue Hallgarth; *Whale Cove Inn Living Room* (p. 84) courtesy of Laura Buckley; *Rock Wall with Herbs* (p. 107) by Sara DeHaan; *Their Circles Widen* (p. 244) by Cliff Romig.

This book was set in Bembo with Bodoni titling,
using Adobe Creative Suite 5.5 software.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2012938786

ISBN 978-0-9855200-0-7

*To the late Kathleen Buckley
and the “Cottage Girls”*

I

EDITH LEWIS GOT out her easel and watercolors and set them up near the edge of the bluff in front of their cottage on Whale Cove. Most of the previous afternoon Edith had spent trying to catch the rough beauty of the rocks just where the water cascaded over for a long, leisurely dive to the darker rocks below, then joined the chill, salt water of the Bay of Fundy. From this angle she could just hear the faint sound of its rush.

Actually two waterfalls occupied this section of the cliffs between Whale Cove and Ashburton Head known as Seven Days Work, where rock layer upon discernible layer rose well over two hundred feet to tower above the beach below. The height of the cliff in front of the cottage she and Willa had built four years before was breathtaking, but these cliffs just to the north were even more dramatic, dwarfing the fifty-foot tides that regularly rose and fell in this part of the world, so that except for the long rattle of shingle with each tide's withdrawal, the waves seemed almost usual.

The afternoon light was perfect for another try, Edith decided, fastening the paper so the slight breeze coming off the water would not disturb her work. A pair of gulls circling just off to the right caught her attention, and she paused to watch as one of them, nearer the water, pumped her wings and rose to the same level as her mate, then reached out to re-embrace the air. Floating opposite each other in the same lazy circle, the pair rode effortlessly, graceful, chattering occasionally, almost inconsequentially, Edith surmised, about the prospect of fish offered by the solitary rower in the dory below. He was, Edith knew and she thought the gulls probably did

too, heading out to check the herring weir staked well out in the water below their bluff. A lone boatman inspecting nets at high tide would supply few fish for the gulls. They must know that too, Edith thought. Perhaps they were riding scout just to be sure or, it was such a lovely day, maybe they thought it would be a shame not to tag along for the flight.

Flying seemed such joy compared to bobbing about on the sea. Edith never reached Grand Manan without nausea and had only once dared to go out with the others to see how the local fishermen worked their nets. Willa went out at least once every season, but Edith preferred the solidity of earth. Such rolling about was the same as living with an inner ear disturbance, Edith declared every time they made the crossing between Eastport and North Head. Humans weren't intended to imitate fish, and only dead fish float like boats.

But flying might be different, Edith thought now, turning back to her preparations. At least soaring would be, like those gulls. Lindbergh made flight look easy. Willa and Edith had followed closely the news of Lindbergh's flight. When he landed in Paris, it was as though he had reached the moon, Edith chuckled to herself, people were that excited. Of course, now he had to learn to live with fame, Edith took a moment to massage the bristles on her brushes. And fame was much less glamorous than most people guessed. Lindbergh still seemed to be having fun, even with all the row about his wedding and new wife. But they were young, Edith smiled, plunging her brush into water. They should have fun. Plenty of time for the rest.

With the afternoon sun on the other side of the island, shadows cast the rocks near the two waterfalls into sharp relief. Edith hoped today she could manage exactly the right touch, fanning her brush to keep the deeper shades firmly on the outer edge of the bristles. It was difficult to capture the jagged recesses of the ledge just where

the waterfall flung itself over. Once she had that, she thought a few strokes of the darker hues topped by some touches of green to suggest the wind-tossed evergreens above, and it would be finished.

A flash of red caught Edith's attention, and she stared at a stand of scrubby trees less than thirty feet from the nearest waterfall. Nothing red reappeared. The weathered spruce where the flash had been reminded Edith of nothing so much as naughty children digging in their heels and leaning back vigorously, as though they wanted to touch the land beneath with their whole bodies, refusing even to look at the sea beyond.

Someone must have scurried away from the edge, Edith guessed. The old sheep trails everyone used could get much too close for comfort along Seven Days Work. Inexperienced hikers were often afraid, especially when they found themselves sharing a trail with the sheep that still grazed loose among the rocks.

Then a sound came, muffled, something like a shout. Edith strained to hear, but it was gone. Nothing followed. Just water falling and the waves. Gulls still chattered near the weir. Edith touched her brush to the paper, fanned it slightly, and then pulled the stroke down. This would work, yes, she decided. She reached for the ocher and glanced again at the cliff.

Soundless this time, motion. The back of a red shirt straightened. An arm shot out. Then a body appeared to fling itself over the edge, head first as though diving. It was a man, dressed in what looked from this distance like a business suit, but tilted oddly, sideways, as though he had decided to face Edith throughout his decline. After the first rushed impulse, the body seemed to slow precipitously and momentarily to drift, then pick up speed again as it neared the waves, Edith realized with a shock, receding from the rocks below.

EDITH alone had seen the body plummet. Eric Dawson, the solitary rower, glimpsed only the end of its fall, his attention directed

by Edith's horrified shout and frantic gestures. He laid to the oars and watched Edith spin away, running first toward the cliffs at Seven Days Work, then back toward the cottages at Whale Cove. Before he reached the spot where he thought the body landed, just south of the waterfalls, he saw the cliff by the cottages fill up with women, first the one they called Cather, then several more. Cottage Girls. He could tell by their clothes. None of the local women wore men's horse-riding pants or dresses that looked like sacks with no waists at all. They were holding onto each other and pointing, running back and forth, arms flailing. A dog leapt from one to another, almost spinning in air, then charged a few sheep making their way toward the cove. White dots disappeared into the trees. Eric could hear only his own breath, the quick creak of the oars, and the waves washing him in.

When he reached the beach, Eric could see no body, just a few boulders poking through the foam. Instead of leaping out of the dory and running to rescue the man as he expected, Eric had to climb onto the seat of his dory to get a vantage point. He put his hand to his forehead, shading his eyes as though that might help him find the man. Then he noticed reddened foam sliding from one of the boulders, and just beyond a dark suit rose and fell, slapping gently against the rocks nearby.

II

“STRAIGHT UP. THAT’S how I take mine,” Sabra Jane accepted the cup Edith had offered earlier that afternoon. “I’m not a fussy person. Never have been.”

The day had been typical on Grand Manan, a small island in New Brunswick, located just above Campobello in the Bay of Fundy. Populated by fishing villages and invaded each spring by a few tourists and colonies of summer residents, Grand Manan spent most mornings cloaked in fog, then the sky would clear and the day would remain peaceful, quiet, and generally uneventful.

Edith smiled, appreciating Sabra Jane’s directness. It matched her sensible habits of dress, the tailored red shirt with sleeves rolled to the elbows revealing the strong hands and wrists of a potter. Locally, Sabra Jane was famous for her clothes and long, loping stride. People thought it was nice that she could also make pots.

Edith bent to offer the second cup to Willa, turning the tray slightly so Willa could reach the milk and sugar easily.

“Just a touch of milk and sugar. That’s all I ever take,” Willa settled back in the Adirondack chair, placing her heels on the low wicker table that did double duty as their hassock outdoors. “And I like my tea hot,” she sipped. “Hot and strong, so I can taste it. Just the way I like coffee. It’s the taste I’m after, and the heat. Sets me up as if it had a lot of caffeine but without the aftereffects.” They had been talking earlier that afternoon, as they prepared the soil for planting herbs, about homeopathy and Willa’s preference for Sanka, one of the special supplies they brought with them every summer to Whale Cove. The caffeine in coffee worked against homeopathic remedies.

“I’m afraid I’m almost British when it comes to things like tea,” Edith felt momentarily stuffy but smiled again, this time at herself, pleased to have gotten the whole sentence out without the halting half-stutter that sometimes made her blush. She took the chair between Willa and Sabra Jane and almost without thinking rested her feet next to Willa’s on the low wicker table. Their canvas shoes nearly touched. Sabra Jane certainly wouldn’t mind, and it felt good to stretch her legs after so much strenuous labor. Building a rock garden was not a simple matter. “I want my tea well brewed, and I add plenty of everything,” Edith reached for the sugar.

“Sounds like Twenty-Seventh Street to me,” Willa’s grin was infectious, her teasing gentle. “You can take the kid out of Nebraska,” Willa added by way of explanation, “but you can’t take Nebraska out of the kid.”

“Or the kid out of the adult, presumably,” Edith teased back. “You have smudge on your nose.”

Willa rubbed the side of her nose with the loose, flowing end of her sleeve, still unbuttoned and turned at the cuff from her earlier effort to recivilize herself, as she called it, with the wash basin at the back stoop, where there was plenty of soap and water but no mirror.

WILLA and Edith, with the help of Sabra Jane Briggs, had spent several hours grubbing in the bank behind their cottage. Earlier that morning, Roy Sharkey and a nice young man named James had delivered a load of stones from the creek bed below Ashburton Head and stayed long enough to loosen the soil for them. Dense fog still blanketed their end of the island, and the morning was so cool the men stayed wrapped in their jackets and so foggy Edith wondered how they managed to find their way through the woods on the unmarked portion of the trail from the road to their cottage. So many twists and turns and, as customary on these mornings, except for reassuring, rhythmic moans from the fog horn at The

Whistle, just above Ashburton Head on the northern tip of the island, so much silence.

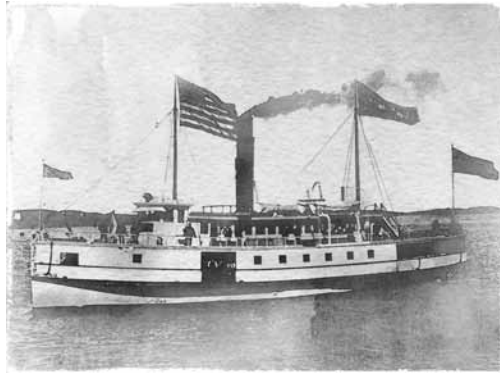
While the men worked, Edith remained indoors reading, periodically building up the fire in the living room fireplace, knowing Willa would share the heat from its chimney. Willa spent mornings in the attic room above, working at the small desk she kept there. Spare, almost spartan, as Willa's workrooms always were, this one was also comforting. Pungent cedar shakes served as both roof and ceiling, and windows in the gable ends brought glimpses of the cliff and sounds from the sea below. Willa filled the shelves around the perimeter of the large, open room with books from Quebec and Paris, and they covered large parts of the unfinished wood flooring with some of the rich earth-toned rugs they brought with them from Santa Fe and Taos.

The fog lifted just after lunch when Sabra Jane arrived, as promised, to provide expert advice. She had just finished a rock wall behind one of her cottages on the south end of the island and promised to show them how to build one that would last. The rest of the afternoon they spaded fertilizer into the soil, then began placing rock upon rock in rising tiers on the freshly turned earth. Progress was amazingly slow, but the bank reached over five feet high and the rocks were to span a twenty-foot stretch. The rock wall with herbs interspersed would take most of the summer. It would be their marker for 1929.

NEVER at ease among large numbers of people, Rob Feeney liked it best the way it was now. Only two passengers he didn't know were making the crossing with him from Eastport back to Grand Manan. One of them, a young woman, was probably going to The Anchorage or Whale Cove. She had an air of confidence in her stride. The other one, Rob couldn't quite tell. The man was a loner, like a porcupine with its quills out. The only person who drew

even a flicker from this fellow was Burt Isaacs, a loner himself and surly enough. Rough customer, Rob thought, could be doing anything on the American side, even bootlegging, which Rob knew was illegal there. He wanted nothing to do with Burt Isaacs. Rob wondered briefly whether Isaacs knew the other loner, but Isaacs spent the crossing in the galley by himself. The others stayed on deck. Rob eyed the other fellow standing off by himself, pressed against the ship's rail where the breeze pulled at his jacket. Something pinched and mean about the eyes, Rob thought, and the man was oddly overdressed. No one ever came to Grand Manan with eyes like those. Certainly no one in pin stripes with wing-tipped shoes.

Grand Manan suited Rob for exactly that reason. The island had no real strangers or dress-up occasions. Gatherings and celebrations, maybe, but no crowds or calls for starched collars beyond office hours. Rob actually enjoyed events like yesterday's Canada Day parade in the village of North Head, but he was still happier spending the holiday quietly on the American side, though it did mean he would be out of his office until the S. S. Grand Manan docked this afternoon. But Rob had always loved the hours on board, despite the fumes belching from the ship's smokestack, settling soot on his collar and cuffs. Nothing new in that, though it might be to the pin stripes. Rob glanced at the man again. He seemed unconcerned. It was a problem Rob dealt with on a regular basis, since it was his job as the company's shipping line agent to check the passengers and lists of lading as they came into dock at North Head. Rob was often on board this and every other ship that came into Grand Manan, whether he actually went anywhere or not. And Rob had loved going places ever since the war. He had hated being in the service but loved the life, transporting troops to and from Southampton and later Le Havre.



Grand Manan Ferry 1927

That's where he had seen eyes like those, Rob paused in mid-thought to glance again at the pin stripes. Vacant eyes, empty eyes. Eyes that had seen death and didn't care. Rob had seen men with eyes like those sometimes on returning transports and occasionally, very occasionally, on the streets of Le Havre. Pinched, mean. Eyes that were hard at the center, hard at the edges. It was as though, Rob finally decided, when some men get the hang of death, they hold onto it. Mercifully few came away from the trenches of that bloody war with eyes like that. Eyes that cared about nothing, nothing at all.

WHEN Sabra Jane left, Willa retrieved the story she had worked on that morning and settled back down in the Adirondack chair. Whenever the weather permitted, they used the early afternoon to hike along the bluffs or work on projects like the rock garden, but Willa generally took some portion of the afternoon to edit her day's progress. Tea had extended the visit far longer than any of them planned, and Sabra Jane drove off lamenting the fact that she was completely off schedule and still had to stop in North Head

for supplies. But she was as pleased as they were with the job they had done, and she left promising to advise Roy Sharkey about additional sources for stones. They would need several more loads.

Sabra Jane Briggs, Edith mused, putting away the few things she had gotten out for their tea. Finally, a chance to get to know this young Amazon the island had been buzzing about for years. They began hearing about Sabra Jane the moment she first stepped off the steamer and checked into The Swallowtail Inn. Red hair, everyone marveled, blazing red hair. And jodhpurs, the islanders gossiped, always jodhpurs. And she whistled and strode about with a free air. Sabra Jane surprised more than one islander cutting cross-lots or bursting out of the woods wearing a backpack and carrying her own water. She's an artist, off-islanders would shrug and flicker a sharp look, from Greenwich Village.

The second summer Sabra Jane brought a friend with her, a young woman named Marjorie. They leased the old Ingersoll place in North Head and started an inn of their own. They called it The Anchorage, a place to grab hold. Sabra Jane's lungs would no longer tolerate New York. Foul air, she explained. Her doctors advised a coastal cure. The third summer, she brought a Reo with a rumble seat. It had to be craned on deck in a net. With cars still rare on the island, Sabra Jane's patent black Reo was the cat's meow. A Flying Cloud it was called. Everyone wanted a ride in the rumble and got it. Even Willa succumbed. Islanders, off-islanders, the Reo never went anywhere without passengers. It helped attract lodgers, though business at The Anchorage was never as brisk as it was at Rose Cottage, The Marathon, or Swallowtail Inn, the three other places in North Head that catered to summer tourists. Or as dependable as at their own Whale Cove.

The fourth summer Marjorie stayed in New York and Sabra Jane began a series of long conversations with Sallie Jacobus, who had been taking care of lodgers at Whale Cove for more than twenty

years. Cobus, the islanders called her. Cobus, Coney, and Felix. People said the names as if they were one. Between 1900 and 1902, Sallie Jacobus and Sally Adams, two young graduates from the Boston Normal School of Gymnastics, and Marie Felix, recently graduated from the Boston Cooking School, purchased twenty acres with a few outbuildings and immediately invited their friends to join them while they fixed the place up. Alice “Peter” Coney, a classmate of Sallie Jacobus, was first to take them up on the offer, and when Sally Adams decided to marry a young medical student, Coney bought her out.

Each summer the number of friends who returned for the season increased. Cobus, Coney, and Felix bought adjacent cottages. They added bedrooms. They hired more kitchen help and enlarged the communal dining room in the main house until it served twenty-four at one sitting. Finally in 1926, several of the Cottage Girls, including Willa and Edith, bought adjoining land and built their own cottages but continued to use communal facilities and services. Whale Cove had become a cooperative, with Cobus in command. Sallie Jacobus had plenty of advice for Sabra Jane Briggs.

By the fifth summer, Sabra Jane had given up the lease in North Head to start a new Anchorage twenty kilometers south, on land that had a farmhouse, one barn, two ponds, and a wooded ridge. She would repeat the Whale Cove experiment on the other end of Grand Manan, right down to the concept of central lodgings with a communal dining room surrounded by private cottages. Whale Cove had a full house. Sabra Jane was certain she could fill The Anchorage with her own younger clientele of single, professional women who wanted good company, good food, maid service, and a place away.

The new Anchorage prospered so quickly during the next two summers that Sabra Jane hired several women from Seal Cove to help out while she and the Reo maintained a constant crawl up and

down the island, hauling young women from New York, New Jersey, and as far west as Ohio to and from the docks at North Head. During the eighth summer, when Ray Gilmore and his brother Claude agreed to extend their one-car taxi service down island, Sabra Jane finally began to relax and even to take time away.

Edith thought it generous of Sabra Jane to lend them a hand with a project as taxing as a rock wall, but everyone on the island was charitable that way. Distinct lines existed between islanders and off-islanders: off-islanders usually paid for the help they required—but everyone was available to assist everyone on Grand Manan. The whole island turned out in a storm, and because island time followed the tides, the same periods of high and low activity were built into everyone's daily schedule.

ROB FEENEY'S office had been in shade for several hours when he finally arrived from the S. S. Grand Manan, carrying a satchel of papers to file. The doorknob felt cool and firm against his hand. He liked its feel, the well-worn brass smooth to the center of his palm, and the quiet click of its latch. The door swung open, almost of its own volition, and Rob inhaled the odor of polished wood. He liked to keep everything about him well preserved.

Pin stripes in front of the bakery caught Rob's attention, and he paused for a moment, remembering those eyes. Then despite the afternoon's warmth, he felt a chill and put the satchel down to button the jacket of his uniform. Just then, Sabra Jane Briggs exited the bakery, and Rob found himself witnessing an event he thought more promising of fireworks than any Canada Day parade—the Encounter of the Amazon and the Pin Stripes. Sabra Jane Briggs tolerated no fools, especially male fools, and Rob could only guess what the Pin Stripes might make of Sabra Jane. But the Encounter proved disappointing. The Pin Stripes' eyes widened and then narrowed and grew hard at the center, hard at the edges. His mouth

moved briefly, lips tightening over his teeth and curling into a sneer. But Sabra Jane merely glanced at her wrist and responded with something brief. Even from the rear it was clear she barely had noticed the man.

Of course, Sabra Jane Briggs rarely did notice men, Rob chuckled to himself. But like most women more attentive to other women, she generally got on well with men. An affable, brotherly, sisterly, companionable getting-on, the words ran through Rob's mind. A getting-on easier and less strained than what often passed for friendship or love between the sexes . . . or between men. Rob finished his musing and curved his right hand around the satchel's leather handle. The encounter between Sabra Jane and the Pin Stripes had passed without the slightest pop of a firecracker, but even on such slim observation, Rob felt certain he knew few men who hated women the way this one did.