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# Icewhispers

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# Icewhispers

By Michael Joseph Bennett

**S**tanding on deck aboard the super-ferry *James & Clara Smallwood*, I watch the frigid waters of the Cabot Strait slip choppily by. Here fog obscures sight and leaves only the ink-dark sea for contemplation. It is the last week in July, easy cruising for the *Smallwood*, which navigates these same lanes during the dead of winter when she leans a heavy prow against the ice-choked strait. For now, though, there is no sign of ice, nor much of anything else.

I hear the big diesels slowly decelerate. A faint smudge of coastline soon appears through the mist. From North Sydney, Nova Scotia, it has been a six-hour trip, covering 96 nautical miles to this shore. Entering Port aux Basques, I lean over the rail and watch our wake totter the channel buoys side to side, their tolls flat and hollow as lost souls.

The coast, now visible, is rock made jagged and angry by glacial etch and the incessant maritime cold. All around, wood-framed buildings cling precariously to the rock and appear frail against their lithic host. Soon we tie up and an announcement sends me to my truck below. Before leaving, I take one more look and try to grasp this place where I have landed, a place called *Newfoundland*.

The next day sun filters reluctantly through sky. The Ford F-150 and I travel north from camp at Codroy Pond along two-lane Trans-Canada Highway 1. Our goal is a 4,000-year-old Maritime Archaic burial site at Port au Choix, 300 miles distant. Visible to the east rise the Long Range Mountains, a series of barren plateaus that follow Newfoundland's Northern Peninsula to the Labrador Sea.

I check the speedometer and note we are running at 75 mph, or 120 km/hour if you are Canadian. Like a Canadian, I switch on my headlights and fall into a high-speed trance. Suddenly a hare the size of a greyhound bolts across the road from the thick scrub. Both the animal's speed and improbable size draw my breath. To avoid a collision, I swerve the truck to the side then muscle her through the gravel shoulder. With two powerful strides the hare consumes the width of the

road like an arrow fresh from the bow.

In the distance, the trailless escarpments of the Long Range ignore any drama that may unfold beneath them. Near their summits the sun appears unwelcome as it fights through a thick layer of cloud the peaks refuse to shrug off. I turn on the radio and hit search, still thinking about the hare. After a full minute's static I realize I am within a stationless void. Here the dial's automatic spin comes up empty and confused in its futile dance over dead frequencies. A cloud blots the sky, and I kill the radio.

For two hours now there has been no sign of other vehicles. I stick my head out the window and feel the wind whistle through my ears and scalp. Finally it is with this sound I realize true reception in this place will require a release from all temperate assumptions of flora and fauna and the warm flame of time. Slowly I pick up the echo but am not sure. In the sub-Arctic, only recently has the Great Ice made a retreat, its memory still deep within the wary eyes of the hare, the caribou and ptarmigan. Again I listen, but the flame seems gutted and mute.

For a brief moment, the sun breaks and shines like gold on the road ahead. A small bird flushes from the roadside cover. I crank down all the windows and fix on the horizon, bringing her down to 65.

\* \* \*

Inside the bed of the F-150 a small thermometer reads 39 degrees. It is midnight, and I can't sleep. I lift the cap's latch and step outside. In the distance, the Gulf of St. Lawrence washes against a bouldered beach. I gaze overhead where stars sprinkle like confectioner's sugar across the vault. Still warm from the sleeping bag, I sit on the tailgate and let the night fill me up. Away from any city's lights, the lights above, heaven's lights, seem absolute as they hum a silent chorus against my eyes. All is quiet except the sea, the sea, the moving sea.

The next day, fog rolls in along the coast as I enter Port au Choix. I stop at an Irving filling station and ask for directions to the burials. I follow a road that leads to the small, gray harbor known as the *Back*

## First person

*Arm*, where small fishing vessels lay in anchor protected from the winds of the gulf.

Just above the harbor is a small, grassy hill where Maritime Archaic Indians buried their dead 4,000 years ago. From prior research, I know the bodies found here in 1967 represent one of the most complete ancient skeletal series in northeastern North America. I walk the site and try to recall the specifics, how most of the 62 individuals were covered in red ochre and accompanied by lavish grave goods, how the majority of skeletons were arranged in fetal positions, facing the waters of the harbor. Of specific interest was the burial pit of one female adult. In her arms were found the tiny remains of an infant, clutched to the breastplate in a posture that caused the workers on site to pause.

As the day progresses, I notice the weather worsening. I wander along a barren footpath away from the harbor toward the gulf. All around, the thunderous surf rolls in and swallows shut the cobble beach. Cautiously, I make my way down to the wrack line and assess the damage. Here, finally, rock surrenders itself to water's endless raid.

I pull up my collar and think of life along this coast 4,000 years ago when men would search for seal under pack ice in the twilight of winter. From a distant grandmother, I carry a fraction of Native blood. The ice and the ancient season glimmer dimly in my genetic memory. It is now late afternoon. Without pause, the ocean clamors around me, and I wonder at what point men simply break like cobbles on a beach.

Again the wind rises. It is time to go. Walking back through the fog, I think of a violent century's end and where the years have taken us. As I near the truck, I stop in my tracks. Along the grassy slope, I see the outline of the shaman. There he leans on bent knee over the burial pit, whispering the final prayer. Though it is cold, his work is careful as he shifts the arms of a woman around the fragile form of a child in final repose.

Michael Joseph Bennett is a writer currently at work on a novel set in *New Braintree*.