

Excerpt from *Among Other Things, I've Taken Up Smoking*

by Aoibheann Sweeney

Among other things, I've taken up smoking. Ana says I should stop with the good girl/bad girl stuff, and obviously she's right, but sometimes when I have a cigarette in my hand and the streets are dangerously empty and I've had a few drinks after my shift and I am noticing the lights that are on in different apartments, lighting stairways and whole buildings, blinking red on the skyline, I think about the nights on the island when I was content to stand alone outside the house, listening to the fog horns in that soft blackness, and tasting the air, sweet with salt.

My mother and father moved to Maine when I was almost three, so that my father could work on a translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. I grew up on Crab Island, about a mile or so across the water from a small town called Yvesport, which, more often than not, was hidden from us by a thick Down East fog. A few months after we arrived my mother disappeared into the fog and didn't come back. She cooked us oatmeal in the morning and then went into town. When she didn't return that night my father made more oatmeal and put me to bed; in the morning he radioed Mr. Blackwell, who checked to see if our boat was at the dock. That afternoon the Coast Guard found the boat washed up on the mainland without a scratch. It took them three days to find the drowned body. They asked us lots of questions. Mr. Blackwell told me later that she would have frozen to death before she drowned—in the winter it takes about six minutes for your heart to stop beating. She wasn't used to boats, he said—she must have lost her balance, trying to see her way.

My father didn't talk about her, but Mr. Blackwell came over every day after she was gone to make us lunch and supper. I was convinced that all around the island there were women inside the trees. When the wind was up they whispered and showed the underside of their leaves, and I pretended not to hear them. I remember sitting in the yard for hours during the summer, just listening to my breath, feeling my limbs go numb—watching for twilight when the bats would crisscross between the blackening trees behind the house. Sometimes I could almost feel my skin thickening into bark, my toes rooting into the ground, my arms raising stiffly to the sky. My father would forget I was there, and I would watch him wander over to the window, stand for a long time looking out. I liked to imagine he was looking for me—calling my name. I pictured him stopping in front of the new sapling in the yard, studying me in a way he had never looked at a tree before, trying to see my skinny form underneath the bark. My elbows would be knots in the thin branches of my arms, and finally he would recognize my knobby knees, my flat-chested trunk.

My father is Irish and trained for the priesthood when he was growing up but ended up teaching Latin and Greek, first in Boston and then in New York City, where he helped a man named Arthur Mitchell found the Institute for Classical Studies. He has a picture of himself with Arthur Mitchell on his desk: In it my father is tall and young, his hair inky black. Arthur Mitchell is small and dapper, holding a cane just off the ground, like a

walking stick. It was through him that my father inherited the island and the house. Mr. Blackwell told me he still remembers driving my mother and father and me across the water to the island the day we arrived. My mother was carrying two blue suitcases and my father had his duffel bag; the books came later. Mr. Blackwell says he carried me all the way up through the underbrush to the house, holding nettles away from my fat little legs. When my father unlocked the door, we could see the furniture, which had been carefully draped with sheets, was spattered with bird droppings. Mr. Blackwell put me down and walked toward the fireplace to check if the flue had been left open. A huge raccoon came out from behind the couch to hiss and spit at all four of us. My mother screamed. Mr. Blackwell figured the animal was rabid; he picked up the iron hat rack and smashed it in the head. Its skull spit open and it made such a bloody mess that my father went outside onto the rickety porch to throw up. I went straight for the dead animal, crouched over it to give it a good long look.

I think I do remember her little hands, curled up like she was sleeping, but the rest—the bloodied head—I don't remember at all. It turned out that she had nested in one corner of a velvet couch near the fireplace and had been protecting five pink babies that were squirming blindly in the stuffing. My father helped Mr. Blackwell bury her and the two of them carried the ruined couch outside. Later I helped them gather a pile of branches to put on top of the babies to protect them from the eagles, but they were gone the next day, and I suppose there must have been very little chance they would survive.

In the years after my mother was gone Mr. Blackwell looked after me, and I followed him everywhere except fishing. When he went out on trips in the *Sylvia B.* he was gone for weeks at a time, but in those days he was not fishing often. When I was old enough he used the *Sylvia B.* to take me back and forth to Yvesport Elementary School, before he taught me how to drive our dory myself. It occurred to me only later that my father must have paid him all that time. When he finally went back to work full time, fishing for a Canadian company that was still buying herring, I was almost ten. My father gave me his watch and told me to go wherever I wanted as long as I was home on time for us to make dinner.

I started timing things. I timed how long it took to get up to the first branch of the apple tree from the house, how long it took if I started down by the beach, how long it took to get from the porch to the cliffs, how long it took to walk around the island through the woods and how long it took along the shore, balancing on just the big rocks. The watch slid heavily on my forearm, though I'd buckled it as tight as it would go. When I was hot enough, I would take it off and leave it on a rock, and check how long it took to swim to the end of the pier and back.

That was how I got the idea to swim across the deep end of our small cove. I remember thinking that it wouldn't matter if I couldn't make it, I could always turn around and swim back in. It was warm, and the wind had just begun to come up from the southwest, darkening the water with ripples as I waded in. In a few strokes the rocks and seaweed disappeared below me into silty rays of light, and I stopped looking down and tried to concentrate on my breathing, I felt the ocean open up around me, dark and cold. Mr.

Blackwell had once caught a small shark out by Hanson's Point. There was no reason to think they didn't sometimes come all the way into the bay. I tried to think about stretching my arms out in front of me and pulling them fast down the length of my body, but still I could feel myself being carried out further. I started counting strokes, keeping my sights on the channel marker I was aiming for, but it wasn't getting closer. I was rolling all the way over on my side to breathe, but the waves had begun to lurch around me as I slipped further into the bay, and I was swallowing more and more water.

I could feel the cold. It hurt at first but after a few minutes the pain started to fade, and for whole moments I felt feverishly warm. I kept swimming, trying again to count my strokes—up to five, then ten, then twenty—and as the waves got bigger and the last of my warmth left me, I started imagining that I was a fish, that my body was thinning and flattening, that my mouth and salty lips gasped open and closed on a translucent hinge. Finally I just began to swim, swim toward the channel marker I could see in front of me, imagining the flash of my tail, the flash of other fish swimming beneath me, my father up high, up high on land in our dry warm house.

When I got close to the channel marker I saw that there was nowhere to hold on. The tide was pulling it violently to one side, exposing the rust below, sharp and scabrous, and a fringe of algae that heaved and swelled at its water line. I swallowed more water as I tried to breathe, kicking against the sweeping current.

Ten, twenty, forty, I counted, my arms stiffening with the cold. One, two, three, I was counting, when Mr. Blackwell's boat reared up in front of me: one, two, three.

As he pulled me out of the water I scraped against the side of the boat and landed like a fish in the bilge. *I've been caught*, I thought. My eyes stung so much with salt that I kept them closed, but I could feel the sun, and I could breathe. Mr. Blackwell said nothing when I told him I'd wanted to swim to the mainland, but he put me in an old rain slicker to cut the wind, and I felt his boat turn toward home. I pulled the coat tight around me, wishing it were as tight as my skin. The front of it was stained with fish blood.

I sat up as he turned into the cove, and he held me by the elbow and helped me out of the boat. For a moment, I was afraid he would ask for the coat back—it seemed like it would tear at my flesh if I took it off.

"Put that hood over your head," he said instead, his eyes hard with worry. "That's what champion swimmers do."

I put the hood over my head and we walked up the hill toward the house. All I could see were my feet on the path; I felt my toe cut on a rock, but I kept walking, listening to the sound of my breath rasping inside the warm, musty hood.

"Is it six?" my father asked, looking vaguely over at the grandfather clock when the screen door slammed shut behind us. I could see his chair pulled tight into his desk, the

pages of the book he was reading glowing under his bright lamp, the house dim around him.

“You smell like fish, my dear,” he said. “Did you have a good afternoon?”

I tried to open my mouth to speak but nothing came out. I saw him put down his pen. When he stood I could see only his waist, the wrinkles of his smoothly ironed shirt tucked around his neat belt buckle. He was moving toward me, blocking the desk light.

“I found her in the channel,” said Mr. Blackwell.

My father crouched down and tilted back my hood. I felt him focusing on my pale face, my blue lips—imagining his alarm pouring over me like warmth. Sometimes I still try to convince myself that the minute he saw how cold I was he took Mr. Blackwell’s fishing slicker off me and wrapped me in something soft. Or that he ran a warm bath, and gave me some tea, or whiskey.

“That’s a very long way,” he said, straightening up, as if he didn’t believe him.

“She was caught in the tide.”

“We’re lucky you were there to rescue her, then,” my father said, with a strange smile. “Aren’t we?”

Mr. Blackwell looked him straight in the eye. I thought he might hit him. He seemed suddenly to be twice my father’s size, his big hands hanging like weights from his thick, brown arms. “You oughtta keep a better eye on her,” he said.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” my father said, but Mr. Blackwell had already turned away from him.

“You take care now,” Mr. Blackwell said to me, brushing his big hand gently across the top of my head.

My father just stood there. I went upstairs to bed, numb as a soldier. It seemed like hours before he came after me, though maybe it was only minutes—I had already sunk into a feverish sleep.

He pulled up my covers, though they were already at my chin. “How are you feeling?” he asked when I opened my eyes.

“Okay,” I said, looking at him. “I lost your watch.”

He nodded, his eyes shining in the dark.

“Did Mr. Blackwell go home?” I asked after a minute, as if I didn’t know. When he didn’t answer I got my arm out from under the covers and held his hand. But he took it away and asked me to come downstairs and rest on the couch. I got out of bed obediently; he put the blanket around my shoulders like a robe and brought down my pillow.

I lay on the couch and watched him sit down at his desk, but after a few minutes I stood up and went over to him. “Will you read me your book?” I asked, and when he said yes I climbed into his lap. Instead of asking me to get down he pulled me closer. I could feel his breath in my hair, his solid chest behind me.

“From the beginning,” I said, though I knew it by heart. He turned the manuscript back to the first page, and then his voice rumbled through me as if it were my own:

*My purpose is to tell of bodies changed into different bodies. You heavenly powers, since you were responsible for those changes, as for all else—look favorably on my attempts, and spin an unbroken thread of verse, from the beginnings of the world, down to my own times...*