SARAH ROBERTS | Buttons and Beers

My mother was eleven months pregnant with me when decided she'd had enough. "I'm going to cut this belly open myself if I have to," she threatened my father. "Do something!"

My father didn't know what it was that he could do. In fact, he couldn't help but feel sheepish that it was what he had done in the first place that had put my mother in this predicament.

"The doctor promised any day now, Carol," he said, trying to squeeze between her belly and the sofa as she warmed her back at the fire.

"He said any day now two entire months ago." My mother would have cried, but she'd tried crying in her ninth month and it hadn't helped a lick. "Garry, I am not going to carry this baby for one more damn day. " My mother was never a woman to swear.

There wasn't a hospital on the island. Down at the quarry there was a morgue and a graveyard, and a doctor. He could help a man who'd lost an arm under a slip of stone but had no advice for a woman eleven months pregnant. The doctor my mother had seen two months ago was on the mainland, and although the barge that carried folks to and from the island was a modern improvement, it was a less-than-reliable form of transportation. In a good chop, the barge couldn't dock, and folks just floated out on the water until the waves wore out. In a wind, the barge was easily blown off course, and the trip could take hours. People travelled more on some days than others, and when the barge was full, folks had to sit on the dock and wait, sometimes all day, to get across.

So my father, standing at the bottom of the driveway on Granite Ridge Road, knew going to the mainland was not an option. He knew going to the quarry wouldn't help much either. So he did what many men would do in a similar situation . . . he went to the bar.

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There were only four places to work on Smokecrest: you could cut granite at the quarry; you could operate the barge that took cars to the mainland; you could log in the camps up the bluff; or you could fish. All of these operations were owned by old man Bridgeworks, a strongly built man who'd come from Scotland in his youth, hadn't died on the railroad and had ended up on an island rich with fish,

lumber and stone. The Indian reservation was up the road that connected the part of the island with the quarry and the barge to the part of the island with the trees and the fish. Bridgeworks didn't like Indians. He wouldn't let them work for him. He also wouldn't let them in his stores or bars. Some nights at the pub you could hear him complaining that the beach in front of the residential school was the only good place for a deep-sea port, and that the blasted government had given it away.

Outside the Welcome Inn sat Clarence Dick. He was an Indian, but he was handy with his tools and helpful with his advice and was accepted in town, but not with Bridgeworks, and Bridgeworks owned the bar.

"How's Carol?" Clarence asked as my father stepped out of his '59 pickup truck.

"I don't think she'll ever speak to me again."

Clarence nodded. "Don't get many eleven-month pregnancies 'round here, eh. Sure you didn't miscount?"

"I'm sure Carol knows how to count," my father said.

"So how's about a beer?" Clarence asked.

My father shook his head.

"So how's about you go in and get some beers, and then you come out and you drive me up to the reserve."

"You know I can't do that, Clarence," my father said. He liked his job at the quarry.

"See, here's the thing," Clarence went on, ignoring him. "You go in and get some beers, then we pick up Carol and we take her up to the reserve."

"Why would we do that?"

"Well, if the bumps in the road don't shake that kid out, maybe Auntie Mona can help."

My father had never considered Auntie Mona. He went into the bar and bought two cases.

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"I GUESS I SHOULD HAVE THOUGHT of that," my mother said, pulling a cardigan tight around her middle. "Well, hello, Clarence."

She slid into the truck beside him. The buttons on her sweater popped off. Clarence, with an open beer in one hand, picked up the buttons and put them in his shirt pocket.

There were lots of bumps on the road up to the reservation but they didn't shake me loose. My mother, who almost never drank, helped Clarence through a

number of bottles and had to squat behind the truck a dozen times on the drive. Luckily, she'd stopped wearing panties in the tenth month to make peeing easier. It wasn't long before they could see the white church steeple and, behind it, two grey totem poles.

Auntie Mona lived in an old, cedar longhouse behind the church. She had never married and never had children. She lived in a household of women, and all of them were called aunties. These aunties had lots of children, but only the girls were allowed in the house.

My mother leaned against the tailgate of the pickup and was surrounded by a dozen aunties.

"This one holds on," Auntie Mona said with a smile, rubbing her fat hands around my mother's belly. My mother noticed that Mona had no teeth and that one of her eyes was brown while the other was bright green.

"Eleven months," my mother said.

"Come," said Auntie Mona.

My father followed the women as they slowly led her into the longhouse, but when he raised his foot to step through the circular doorway, Mona yelled from within, "No uncles!" My father couldn't see Mona or my mother and he wanted to be reassured that she would be okay. "No uncles!" Mona yelled again, and my father turned away quickly. He was slightly relieved to find out that men weren't allowed in Mona's house.

Neither my mother nor my father had been on band land until that day, and my mother had certainly never been in a longhouse. When her eyes adjusted to the dim light, she saw fur-lined beds, woven floormats and a large, round fire at one end of the building. On the wall were newspaper photos of the queen and Marilyn Monroe, and my mother said there was a radio playing music. She was guided to the circle of stones that formed the hearth, and the women at her elbows lowered her to the ground.

Mona reached for a kettle on the fire and poured my mother a cup of tea. "This will soothe," she said.

My mother tasted alcohol and mint and a slight smell of roses, the tea washing through her, she said, the way water quiets flame. Mona rubbed her hands over my mother's forehead and sang to her belly as she drank the tea.

The aunties cooked a meal, working around Mona and my mother. A small table was placed at my mother's side, and dishes were laid out. Mona coaxed my mother through every bite.

"Nettles give energy," she said.

So my mother chewed soggy, salty, green nettles.

"Roots for the blood," Mona whispered, and my mother bit into chalky cubes.

There were cattails, rosehips, a strange, musty-tasting salad, white fish and dried deer meat. My mother's belly had been full before she started eating, but she tasted a little of everything. She was surprised to find that she didn't become sick like she did when she cooked food for herself at home.

Finishing her second cup of tea, my mother noticed how much of a fuss they were making. All the women were solemn, silently padding over the woven mats, carrying dishes and bowls back and forth. The house was full of girls who were extraordinarily well behaved. They sat with their backs to the longhouse walls and did not speak.

"Will I have any trouble?" my mother asked.

"No more than usual," Mona said.

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IT DIDN'T TAKE MY FATHER AND CLARENCE long to drink the few beers they had left.

"Well, 'suppose we could go back to town and get some more, eh?" Clarence asked, chucking an empty bottle.

"We can't go anywhere," my father said.

"It'll be a while." Clarence jumped off the tailgate and kicked at a stray dog that ran up to him. With wide strides he walked to the entrance of Mona's long-house, but stopped at the door and made no attempt to enter. Instead, he picked up a handful of pebbles and threw them, one at a time, at the rough cedar planks.

An auntie came to the door. "Shoo," she said, waving her hands. "It's bad luck."

"How long?" Clarence asked, pointing to my father.

"After midnight, we hope," the auntie replied.

Clarence walked back to the truck. "Got time for a run."

"I'm not leaving Carol."

"No point in staying. She's in there and the baby's in her and neither will leave Auntie Mona's house for a day or two at least."

"She wouldn't want to be out here alone," my father said.

"She's not alone, Garry, she's far from that."

Leaving the reservation, my father and Clarence drove past a group of six men on the road. They were dressed in worn jack shirts and jeans, and they all had full potato sacks thrown over their shoulders.

"Stop!" said Clarence. He got out of the truck and spoke to the group. There were nods and smiles. He came back to the truck and climbed into the cab. Behind him followed the oldest man in the group, who also climbed into the cab, while the other five flanked the sides of the pickup and jumped in the back.

"What's going on?" my father asked.

"Garry, this is Joe Dick," Clarence said. Joe Dick offered my father his hand. "In the back there," said Clarence, "that's John Dick, Cecil Dick, Andy Dick, Daniel Dick, and Larry Dick. They need a ride."

This particular group of Dicks was carrying bags of fur pelts to take over to the mainland. They continued the family trade, selling marten for jackets the way their elders had sold beaver for top hats. The walk down-island to the barge would take all night.

My father hoped it would be dark when they drove into town.

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"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU UP to, MacDonald?" asked Swaney the bartender. My father had just ordered a couple more cases of beer. "Here you got a baby coming and you're driving around town with a truck full of injuns?"

Swaney was a company man. If you drowned yourself at the Welcome Inn and maybe mentioned things you shouldn't, Swaney would tell Bridgeworks, that was a fact. But there was no need for my father to worry about it because Bridgeworks was already there, sitting with his elbows on the granite bar.

"MacDonald, get over here," the old man ordered.

My father left his cases on the bar and took a stool beside Bridgeworks.

"How's Carol?"

"Bigger than your Rolls, sir," my father said.

The old man chuckled. "Saw you giving those Dicks a ride."

"Yes sir, they're taking pelts over to the mainland. It's a long walk down from the reservation."

Bridgeworks waved Swaney over. "A beer for Garry," he ordered.

My father could see his truck out the window, and in it Clarence Dick, mouthing words to a song on the radio, slapping his hands against the dash to keep time with the music.

"Looks like they forgot one," the old man said.

"No sir, that's Clarence."

Swaney put a glass down in front of my father.

"And no baby yet?" Bridgeworks asked.

"Not yet, sir."

"Well, I'm taking the car into the city tomorrow. I'll pick her up and take her to the hospital. I know a good doctor."

"That's very kind of you. You see, sir, I don't know for sure if she'll need a doctor tomorrow, generous as your offer is."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, sir, there's some women looking after her right now, and I have a feeling, based on what they've told me, that there will be a baby by morning, though I'll be sure to tell Carol how kind you've been."

Bridgeworks looked left and right. When he seemed confident no one else could hear him, he spoke.

"Auntie Mona, eh?"

My father nodded.

"Don't tell anyone, but I know of her. She sent some teas down to Eden when she was having St. John." St. John was the youngest and thirteenth child in the Bridgeworks brood. "Those Indians have their own ways of doing things," Bridgeworks continued. "Mighty handy with things like these, difficult births and such."

My father looked out the window and sipped his drink. "Clarence Dick, sir, out in my truck, he's mighty handy with things. Can fell a tree and knows where to fish. Word has it he knows the way a cleave will crack and where to find water in a dry field."

"Handy things to know," said Bridgeworks. "Handy things to know."

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BACK AT THE RESERVATION, MY MOTHER had just come from another squat behind the bushes and the aunties were lowering her back down onto the ground.

"Finish this," Mona said, giving her another cup of tea.

My mother didn't want to drink any more tea. She didn't want to eat any more food. She didn't want to be sitting on the floor of a longhouse, and she didn't want to be pregnant.

When the teacup was empty, Mona took it. My mother jumped when Mona knocked the cup against the saucer, shaking the tea leaves loose from the side of the cup. All the aunties came and stood around them, and the girls were wide eyed and holding their breath.

"See that?" Mona asked, waving a wrinkled finger at the leaves on the plate. "A pitcher means good health. Happiness starts with a pitcher."

The surrounding aunties nodded. A dog barked outside.

"That's an arrow," Mona continued. "And that's two upside-down hearts." Mona threw the loose tea into the fire. "This child has her own mind. She will be good for the island."

"She?" my mother asked. "It's a girl?"

The aunties laughed. "Of course it's a girl."

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My father knew Clarence was waiting for him, and beyond him, Carol was waiting too. But Bridgeworks kept buying drinks and telling him things he didn't want to know. He heard about how Mrs. Bridgeworks, Eden, had taken an apartment in the city after St. John was born and how she hadn't spent a night on the island since. He heard about how the Bridgeworks' sons fought over the old man's will as if he weren't still alive and kicking. He heard about how Harriet, the housekeeper, made the best damn porridge.

"Don't those Indians have diseases?" the old man asked abruptly.

My father glanced quickly out the window to see Clarence napping, his head against the passenger-side door. "No more that the rest of us," he answered.

"Well, they'd scalp you soon as look at you, isn't that so?"

"Only certain tribes, sir, and that was back a while ago, when there was war, and only in the States."

"Well, they're good for nothing, really. Look at 'em. Every last one of them sitting around on this island like God didn't give them two hands but for scratching their own arses."

My father had been drinking for hours now. "With all due respect, sir," he said, "I'm sure they're only idle because there's no work for them."

"Well, what do you mean? There's always work. The oceans aren't empty. The forests are still dark with trees. Do you think I got to where I am today by drinking beer all week? No. I dug out granite. I invested in boats. I bought logging rights and set up camps. God doesn't give you anything but the opportunity."

"But, sir, well, take Clarence Dick out there, sleeping in my truck. He builds the best well on the island and he can always find water. He can fell a dead tree so it won't land on your barn or your house. But he can't work here on Smokecrest, sir, and Smokecrest is all he knows."

"They used to carry diseases," the old man said.

"Only diseases that the settlers gave them."

"They've got those spooky grins."

"I'm sure they only want to help when they can. And the grins, well, sir, you

have to admire a people who can smile when they've lost everything they had."

"It's that damn government," Bridgeworks said.

Hours later, my father stumbled out of the bar with a case of beer clinking under one arm. Old man Bridgeworks carried the other case, and although Dennis, his driver, was waiting at the side of the Rolls with the door open, Bridgeworks walked to the pickup and put the beer in the back.

"Better let Dick drive, Garry," Bridgeworks said, rapping his knuckles against the window to wake Clarence up.

"Good evening, sir," Clarence said, suddenly sitting up straight.

"Dick, you drive this man to. . ." Bridgeworks stumbled . . . "You take this man back to his wife."

"Yes, sir," Clarence said. My father was sure that if Clarence had been wearing a hat he would have tipped it.

"And you drive safe. This man has a baby coming."

Clarence had never driven a vehicle before. My father tried to explain the intricacies of gearshifts, but it was late, and he'd been drinking. Finally they worked out the compromise. My father would work the gears and pedals, and Clarence would hold the wheel and keep the truck on the road.

They lurched forward and stalled in the parking lot entrance.

Bridgeworks's Rolls hadn't moved. Dennis got out, walked over and tapped on the truck window. My father dropped the clutch, and the truck shuddered again. He and Clarence split their sides laughing.

"We'll give you a ride," Dennis said.

Clarence and my father each grabbed a case of beer from the back of the truck. Dennis held the door open, and my father climbed inside the Rolls and plopped himself down beside the old man. Clarence stuck his head in the door, but Dennis touched his elbow.

"Best you sit up front with me, Clarence," he said.

"Oh yeah," Clarence said. "I was just getting a peek at the back."

"Take us to Carol, Dennis," the old man ordered. Dennis started the car and drove around the stalled truck in the middle of the parking lot. They drove up school hill to the intersection. "Where's Carol?" Dennis whispered to Clarence.

"The reservation," he answered.

"What the hell is she doing up there?" Dennis asked.

"For God's sake, Dennis, get a move on," Bridgeworks yelled from the back seat.

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My mother's water had broken and the contractions had started, but Mona wanted me to be born after midnight. "Wait a little longer," she urged. "A new day is better."

The aunties sang, and some of the girls asleep against the walls opened their eyes and watched from their beds.

"I'm not waiting. I can't wait," my mother finally said. She was coated with sweat and she could barely speak. Mona poured water down my mother's throat and gave her a bit of rope, made out of twisted bark, to hold between her teeth.

According to Mona, I was born at two minutes after twelve.

"She's so beautiful," my mother said, holding me for the first time. "I'll name her Cat."

The aunties tittered, and Mona smiled. "Cat's a good name," she said.

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THE MEN WOKE UP TO THE CLINKING OF pebbles being thrown at the side of the car. All the bottles were empty and littered on the floor. Dennis had parked the Rolls on the St. Mary's Church lawn, just inside what used to be a white picket fence. My father rubbed his eyes and sat up. Clarence opened the car door.

"The baby came," said one of the kids who'd been throwing pebbles.

"Everything alright?" Clarence asked. He got out and put his hands on the tops of two heads and leaned on them like they were crutches.

"Auntie Mona's been singing all morning."

"Good, good. Well, who's got coffee on?"

The children jumped up and down, each of them offering Clarence their mother's kitchen.

"Follow me," Clarence said, sticking his head back in the car. "Coffee's on, and we can get breakfast."

Bridgeworks got out slowly, and kept one hand on the cold roof as he surveyed the situation. "Guess we'd better fix that, Dennis," he said, looking at the bits of broken fence under the car's tires.

My father followed Clarence along the trail, past leaning houses and rusting vehicles. Dennis walked behind my father, and behind Dennis came old man Bridgeworks. Behind Bridgeworks was a line of children that went all the way down the reservation. Some had stayed behind to witness Father Crane's reaction to the broken fence, but most of them walked behind Bridgeworks, their brown eyes wide, silent and smiling.

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"That's a good breakfast, ma'am," Bridgeworks said. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve and dropped his fork to the table. It had been a long time since he'd eaten off a tin plate and a long time since he'd drunk all night and slept in his clothes.

Clarence had taken them back to his house where his wife, Hannah, had coffee waiting, eggs in the pan and warm bannock on the table. She chose not to speak that morning, although my father knew from past conversations with Clarence that Hannah could say lots when she wanted to.

"When can I see Carol and the baby?" my father asked.

Clarence shrugged. "There's no knowing. Mona will send them out when they're ready."

Dennis had never eaten a meal with Bridgeworks before, and while normally he might have chatted warmly with Clarence and my father, he didn't want to offend his boss. So he kept silent.

Hannah cleared the table and the men went outside for a smoke. My father didn't smoke regularly, but he tried it then, sitting on the porch of Clarence's house, looking out at the water and the shoulders of the island.

"That's a good beach you have there, Clarence," Bridgeworks said.

"Yes, sir, we catch some big fish out there." No one had bothered with "sirs" in the car.

"I've heard you're real handy when it comes to wells," Bridgeworks said.

"I've dug a few around here."

Bridgeworks belched. "I could use a man who's handy."

Dennis and my father looked at each other.

"Can you handle horses?" Bridgeworks asked.

"I've been around 'em," Clarence answered.

"Well, then I guess you should come by the house tomorrow. Come by and see Dennis. We'll put you on salary."

Dennis nodded, and Clarence nodded, and my father watched the sea.

"We should go have a talk with that priest, Dennis," Bridgeworks said. "Someone will have to pay for a new fence."

The four men walked back to the car. This time it was surrounded not just by children, but also by Mona and all my aunties. In the middle stood my mother, with me in her arms, her cardigan tightly closed with new bone buttons.