

Mair

January 1870

A man who's lost a leg, or even two, can still be bobo for marrying — it's his third leg that makes the lovin', and the babies too

The afternoon Mair Rodrigues Lestrangle McCrae watched a pair of giant albatrosses soaring across the blue sky in their mating dance, she knew she could no longer put off clambering the rocks around Big Henry Island to find herself a husband. The storm petrel chicks had already hatched on Birdie Island. Her arms and heart had been empty for too long.

Mair Rodrigues Lestrangle McCrae was twenty-one years old. If she wanted a man in her bed, a cauldron above her fire and pickins of her own to love and give her grandchildren, the sea must send her a beachie, and a bobo one.

She set off early the next morning when the sun was pushing its gold through the pink haze on the horizon. The waves curled and crashed and spat froth onto her boots as she clambered across the boulders flung down long ago by the volcano towering above the island. But no boulders fell today, nor had they in the memory of any Islander. Big Henry had grumbled last night, sending the crockery shivering, but this morning its rocky black caldera simply sent up its normal spire of smoke, so clear it was just a ripple among the blue.

Birdie Island floated in the early mist two miles away, the waves crashing on its rocks looking like they were tipped with wisps of fleece. Far beyond both islands the thin black horizon line divided sea from sky. Beyond that lay the Outlands, where only the migrating birds and the island's sailor men ventured.

The Islanders called Mair's quest 'walking the beaches' but, in truth, the island had only one beach big enough for even a fishing boat to pull up on. Half of the island was edged by a black cliff, so sheer it gleamed mirror-like at midday, the rocks about its base exposed only at low tide. The rest of the island was circled by turquoise sea so shallow that no boat could approach, except through the narrow passage to the landing cove.

Mair's mami hadn't walked the beaches to find a husband. There'd been boys aplenty growing up on the island waiting to go sailing when Mami was young. Mami had married one of them, Mister Terry Jones Nkumbo McCrae.

Mair could not remember him. Terry Jones Nkumbo McCrae had been lost at sea when she was three years old, though she had been five before the letter arrived to say her da would never return to his island.

Gran's man was a beachie, though. He was on a battered ship's boat that had survived when their vessel was broken up by the great storms of the south Atlantic, with only three sailors left in it after weeks of sun that sucked the life from a man and thirst that drove them mad.

Two men were unconscious. Only Rob Murphy had still had the strength — and luck — to row the boat through the narrow channel, missing the rock teeth under the water on either side. He'd even pulled the boat onto the sand before collapsing.

A sure enough bobo man, Gran described him proudly. She'd found herself a good 'un, a gift from the sea. Big Henry Island might get sailors wrecked as they battled to reach the Cape of Good Hope, ten days' sail away if the winds were right, or men grown desperate in vessels stranded in the doldrums of the Equator, where months might pass with neither wind to push their sails nor rain to keep a man or rat alive. The island's strange currents brought debris from even further away, barrels that had floated for six months perhaps, or bottles bobbing in the waves for thirty years.

You never knew what the sea would give you. Plants or branches still with a few dead leaves attached could help make a roof. Bottles were cut down and sanded into drinking glasses or funnels or little shelters to keep seedlings from withering in the wind. Barrels could be mended. Pottery might be so wave-washed it had lost its pattern, yet still be a teacup or lidded jar.

You never knew what the sea might take from you as well.

The Smith McCrae Nkumbos had carried one of the other sailors to their cottage, back when Gran found her beachie man. The Smith McCrae Nkumbos had had two daughters of marrying age. The third sailor had lain unmoving on a door taken up to Mistress Dana O'Hara Nkumbo Fletcher's

cottage. She'd been widowed young and hoped to marry again, but her beachie had died on the third day, despite her nursing.

Grandpa Rob had gone sailing again, once he'd recovered. He'd come back home to Gran's cottage between voyages four times over the years before he finally retired to her courtyard to spend his last days reminiscing with other auldie men, or telling little Mair stories about lands where men had shrunk to no higher than your knees and were covered in hair and swung through trees, or buildings tall as Big Henry in cities a hundred times bigger than the island. He'd whittle a spoon or a ladle, and some-times, after a flagon of ale, dance a hornpipe while Mair clapped the beat, on legs that stayed sound till the day he died, sitting under the mulberry tree in the courtyard corner.

There were never as many auldie men as women. Most sea voyages claimed one in four of their crew. Island sailors were tough, but it was still rare for them to live to auldie age. A few island men found foreign lands more attractive, too, though Mair could never imagine why. Some beachies had wives and lives waiting in the lands beyond the horizon, but most men who'd known Big Henry Island returned to it, if the sea allowed it.

Big Henry Island was isolated. The nearest port was St Augustine, only a day's sail away — but you might wait six months for the winds and tides to be safe for a boat to travel there and back. Life below a grumbling volcano disconcerted some of the beachies, too. But island life also offered calm security, far from wars, disease, hunger and the other tragedies of the world outside. A sensible man returned to the island.

Grandpa Rob had brought Gran the traditional marriage gifts on his First Return, the ones needed to set up a good home afore a couple was wedded: a cauldron, a thick iron frypan, a set of knives, an axe, a bolt of cotton for sheets, a tinder box.

No island girl married till after the First Return, the one with the household gifts that showed her man was truly bound to the island no matter how often he sailed across the world afterwards, nor how long he was gone.

Grandpa Rob brought gifts home after each voyage: a new scythe, a potato fork and a sack of nails for the whole community to share; eight big glass windows in wooden frames for Gran's cottage, sacks of wheat flour, for he had a hankering for wheat bread and bakings, and sugar, too, as well as more bolts

of coloured cotton and pots of bright pink or red paint, treasured on the island to break the monotony of dark rocks, dun-coloured sheep, green garden patches so carefully built up and cultivated on what had been bare rock, and the endless blue of sea and sky.

After his fourth and final voyage, Grandpa brought young Mair a music box that played a tune when you wound its handle, a tinkle quite unlike the island harps and flutes, and as many barrels of flour and sugar as the boat from St Augustine could carry, as well as a set of carving knives for Mair's brother Lennie, a year older than her.

Lennie had been lost four years back, along with every man on the island still able to climb a cliff, including Grandpa's auldie friends, waving their walking sticks as the young men, laughing, hauled them into the island's fishing boats to go a-birdying on Birdie Island.

The men's annual egg hunt should have been a one-hour voyage on a calm sea, and delivered a bounty of eggs from the Birdie Island cliffs to bake and pickle, as well as bags of bird shit to feed the gardens, while the women prepared the Birdie Festival up at the hall. That year, though, the boats had been halfway between the two islands when a strange vast wave rose in the shallows, high as a cottage and more powerful than any wave in the worst of storms. The Wave arrived with no warning, then vanished, subsiding into the deeper sea beyond.

That festival became a funeral feast. Not one man returned to the island, though a few bodies had washed up on the rocks.

The mystery wave had crushed every man and boat the island possessed, including Duncan Nkumbo Brummel DuBeque, who Mair had done as much lovin' with as a pair could do without the risk of making a pickin before the wedding.

Duncan had already been wearing the McCrae pattern socks Mair had knitted him. No unmarried woman would even dance with Duncan once he put on Mair's socks, though he had still to make his First Voyage. After that he'd return as a Mister and with the right to marry. Mair's cottage was already built, of a black stone mortared with white lime from crushed shells heated with crushed glass, and securely thatched with driftwood shingles. It was higher on the slopes of Big Henry than the comfortable dwelling she still shared with Mami. She'd not furnish it nor live in it till she had a

man to bring its cauldron, a husband who'd share its views of the Atlantic Ocean and the gold trail of the moon's path as it rose above the waves to meet the stars.

If it hadn't been for The Wave, Duncan would have returned from his First Voyage now. The cottage's flag floor would be warmed by rag rugs woven in the complex McCrae pattern, its windows shuttered with driftwood planks till Duncan earned enough for glass for them, its bed and its two newlywed occupants covered with quilts made to the McCrae pattern too.

The vast wave had also swept across the island's lower potato patches and carried off a dozen lobster traps. There'd been strange giant waves like that before in island history. The First Landers had experienced one, and made sure the cottages and orchards were placed high on Henry's slopes. The island's nightly rains soon washed the salt from the potato patches. They recovered. Mair had not. She still heard Duncan's whisper in the howl of the gales and the lash of waves, their constant companions on the island.

Each time Mair rounded the cluster of cottages she hoped she might see Duncan loping down the track, waving and grinning at her. If the sea's strange tides could wash shipwrecked sailors from a hundred miles or more away safe onto the island's shores, why couldn't the sea give her Duncan back, as well?

Mair had loved Duncan. She still loved him, she thought, as foam from a wilder wave flecked her skirts.

Theirs would not have been a convenient marriage, where the bride had to choose from the small pool of island men they were permitted to marry. If a couple shared any of their three surnames they were too closely related for marriage.

Walking the beaches wasn't just a way of getting a husband when there was no man on the island whose feet a woman fancied having under her table, or his third leg to keep her company in bed. A woman who found a beachie was honoured. The Islanders bred sheep, hens and small Kunekune pigs. They knew the dangers of inbreeding.

Annie McCrae Murphy Nkumbo had found herself a husband on the beaches a year after The Wave, though Annie had had to walk a year to find him: a poor specimen, in Mair's opinion, a good thirty years older than Annie.

Mister Joe Jones would never see from one eye again and his crushed leg could not be saved even by Auldie Rosa's skill. Mister Joe Jones was never going to be strong enough to sail off again to bring back the marriage gifts either, much less help build Annie a house. But the Auldies Council had agreed that with such desperate need any man was better than none, if life on the island was to continue. The men who'd been sailing on the big ships that crossed the world when The Wave arrived did their best on their visits home, but they could not provide all the pickins the island needed.

Joe and Annie now lived with Annie's gran and, in return, Joe'd given Annie a son to go a-sailing and a daughter to care for her when she was old, and might even father more pickins. Mister Jones was handy with a hammer, too. He'd been worth the keeping, after all, Mair reflected as she looked a last time out at the silken surface of the sea, then turned for home.

No girl had ever found a beachie husband on her first walk around the island, but there had to be a first time if there was to

be a two hundredth. Mair twisted her dark hair, lit with red, into a knot as the wind tried to plaster it across her face and hefted the sack she carried on her shoulder. She might not have found a husband, she consoled herself, but she had seaweed for thickening the stew, and mussels and cockles prised from the rocks. Once she got to the Spit she could haul up lobster pots.

The Restin' Rock was just around the next corner: a pure black boulder that had split into two level halves, one embedded at a perfect height to sit on. It was almost a crime not to sit on the Restin' Rock.

Mair glanced up as another pair of albatrosses soared overhead. Auldie Mirtry said the giant birds flew across entire oceans before nesting on Birdie Island, along with tens of other kinds of birds, and walrus and seals too.

Some women envied the birds, and the men, seeing all the bright sights of the Outlands beyond the island. Mair did not. She loved stories of the Outlands, ones told by the men or that she read in books. But there was never a day when she didn't find some newness to love on the island — a cloud purple-black like Big Henry's slopes, a pair of crabs scuttling across the sand. Apart from such sea creatures, everything that lived on the island came from people's hands and determination. It was good to live

on a land where every house, tree or garden plot reminded you of all the love that had gone into making them.

The Restin' Rock shivered for a few seconds under her, then stilled. The island's occasional slight smell of sulphur added to the usual salt and seaweed grew stronger, then faded once again. Big Henry was grumblin' for the second time today, its invisible smoke twisting ripples in the clear air. Mair stood and stretched, retying her hair, which never would stay in its knot. Mami said Mair's hair had the red sparks of Scotland, but the life and spirit of the Nkumbos of Nigeria. Time she checked those traps at the Spit.

The sea was generous, for all it had taken their men away. Mair loved it, and respected it. There were fish caught in the island women's nets after every tide. An hour's gathering gave you drift-wood to last all day and night. Every home had family treasures found between the boulders: a ship's cauldron, not even edged with rust; a chamber pot with roses on it, not even chipped. They might have come a thousand miles, or even more, Auldie Somerton said, for she'd had an education in far-off England before she came to the island.

The sea had even given the Islanders their gardens, for nothing had grown here before the first boat landed. The First Landers had lived on shellfish, seaweed, birds and fish caught in their nets, eking out the sacks of ship's biscuit that had survived the voyage with them. They and their descendants filled crevices with seaweed, the contents of their chamber pots and eventually the droppings from short-legged sheep that grazed on seaweed, or later again the hens and pigs raised on refuse from the gardens, all obtained from the rare whaling ships that had stopped to trade and to send their boats in for fresh water. There'd been goats, too, for a while, but they'd been too independent, chewing the fruit trees and even the potatoes. They'd ended up barbecued down on the beach, marinated with plum sauce and spices.

The island gave all one needed: friends to laugh with, aunties to sing with as you all lugged up more seaweed to make more kale beds, auldies like Gran and Auldie Somerton and her wife Auldie Mirtry to teach the pickins their letters from the shelves of books kept in the building that held Damnation Donald's church as well as a library and school.

Mair stopped to haul up a drape of the red seaweed they used to set jellies, stuffing it in her bag. At first, she thought the sailor was a blob of seaweed too, for the stuff had wrapped around him, his body hunched and tangled in it so he didn't look like a man at all.

He lay wedged between two black rocks, as if they'd clasped him and would not let go, for waves still washed over him in a froth of green and white. He mustn't have been there long, or she'd have seen him as she passed before.

Mair dropped her bag and ran, her boots clapping on the rocks. But the beachie didn't move, not even to gasp in air when the sea retreated, leaving his head clear for precious seconds.

A dead 'un, thought Mair, hope draining out of her like water from the rockpools, leaving her as cold as rockpools too. Two prospective husbands and both of them dead.

Island lore said if you lost three men before you were a wife, you'd be a spinster all your life, though that hadn't happened since Auldie Lola Hendriks Johnson Rodrigues found three dead men on the beaches in a single year twenty-four years earlier. Auldie Lola hadn't bothered looking for another beachie after that. She still lived in her family's cottage, spinning and tending the gar-dens and caring for her mami.

Sometimes Mair wondered if Auldie Lola was relieved that none of her beachies had been found breathing. She most likely hadn't wanted a man at all, for she'd cared nothing for the island boys, either.

Meanwhile, Mair had a dead man to cope with. She tucked her skirt up around the rope at her waist and slid out of her socks and boots. Dead or not, the beachie needed dragging from the water. This man was some mother's son and deserved a grave on land, where his body would help feed a tree or a garden while his soul was in Heaven.

The wet rocks were sharp on her bare feet, and the waves tickled her ankles. She found a bare arm to grasp, as white as if all colour had been leached away, and pulled. The beachie slithered up — the rocks chose now to let him go — elongating till he was human-shaped again, lying on his side, naked as a babe except for strands of seaweed, and Mair stood back, panting.

He was young enough to have been a good age for a husband, thirty perhaps, black hair, black beard neatly trimmed, which meant he'd been washed overboard not long ago, in a storm, perhaps, not sat desperate in a lifeboat for weeks or months, rowing away from a ship stranded in the doldrums leaving him no choice but to die of thirst or row away.

His arms and face were browner than his body. All the interesting parts of a man are white, Gran had told her, then added 'except when they are black', and laughed. There'd been rumours about Gran

'husband borrowing' with Mister Abraham Murphy Smith Nkumbo when Mister Abraham had been on a home visit for six months, and Grandpa out at sea ...

An interesting body. A good face, too. Mair hoped his death had been swift.

And then he moved.