

1986

Driftwood

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Recommended Citation

Ferguson, Keith (1986) "Driftwood," *Calliope (1954-2001)*: Vol. 1986 , Article 32.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/calliope/vol1986/iss1/32>

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DRIFTWOOD

We stood in front of the realtor's office in Medford, Nova Scotia, waiting for the realtor to guide us out to the coastal house I had rented for the summer to do my work in. My wife followed along, but not so eagerly. I knew that I was slowly losing her to someone else. Time passed slowly as I continued to stand there and she wandered off looking in small shop's windows. Things seemed to move so calmly and slowly in this town by a little bay. The only thing that seemed to bustle was the fishermen trying to sell their day's catch.

Drifting mentally away, my attention was returned by a scraggly old woman who stepped briskly from the realty office door cursing the realtor.

"You know damn well 'dat owse is awnted," she screamed at him, "so why's you goin' ta put sum pooor 'merican fool's live in danger?" She stopped to catch her breath, and caught a glimpse of me and my gaping mouth at the same time. "I 'spose 'dat green stuff can e'en c'rupt ar own people."

She looked at me and spoke. "d'you 'lieve in phantoms mister?"

I shook my head "no" honestly and smiled.

"Well, you will," and walked away without uttering a sound.

I stood there slightly amused at her craziness, and smiled widely. The realtor saw my smile and relaxed. He laughed nervously then spoke. "She's our local loon, don't let 'er get to ya."

"Oh, I won't, but I would like to see my summer home and get settled in as soon as possible. I have publishers waiting you know," I said happily, without thinking about it.

The trip seemed easy, my Rabbit followed his large car through the rocky coast roads as if it had found a new home. Maybe it knew that we both had.

Elizabeth was rambling on incessantly about something she had seen in a shop window, until I broke a pinhole through her protective shield with a question.

"Why can't we talk anymore, Elizabeth? We haven't been married that long, have we?"

She paused, and I could feel her almost stammering, but she caught herself quickly. Maintaining her deep illusion that I'd never know about him until she was gone.

"I don't understand darling, we talked all the way up here in the car from Detroit."

She gave that innocent look which only her name can describe. "Elizabeth," doesn't that have a whining, ill-begotten ring to it? I simply shut my mind off and let everything slip by me. She wasn't going to talk straight, not ever. Deep inside me the knowing that she was lost from me forever hurt, and I wanted to cast her away. The way one might get rid of his hefty bags on Monday morning trash pick-up. Whoever the garbage man was, he could have her: dimpled legs and all.

My mind drifted back into the real world when we finally came up the drive to the big old house. It was even beautiful in its delapidation. Its Victorian style gingerbread moldings were flaking their ancient white paint all over. The sea-side wall of the house was weatherbeaten to a gray shade more than any other part of the house. However, the house had a solid feeling to it. As if it were in a state of constant preservation.

I heard a slightly audible groan come from Elizabeth, which made the house all the more fascinating to me. It had always been a challenge to me to make the things she didn't like more than bearable.

"You told me it was furnished," I said to Bob, the realtor, "I hope you didn't lie."

"Oh! Of course not Mr. Carent!" He said zestily and handed me the keys, which seemed to be the set to a bunch of locks a hundred years old. They were.

I wasn't disappointed with the inside once we removed the sheets from all the furniture. Everything was as old inside as the house, and all was well preserved; showing very little wear. It was the perfect place to inspire a blocked professional writer. I heard Elizabeth moan again, but this time from the kitchen.

"Everything in here is ancient!" she exclaimed. "It's got a wood stove, and hand pump at the sink." I walked to the kitchen more excited than upset. "Daniel, how do you expect me to function in here?"

"The same way as your grandmother did," I answered her. The look I got in return wasn't friendly. "You always have to have something to bitch about, don't you Elizabeth?"

She stomped off quickly, the way I expected her to react, and I turned around headed for the stairs, which were to the left of the entrance from the living room to the kitchen. Bob followed me up, and I knew that he thought me the equivalent of an excited little child.

The upstairs had four bedrooms, a master and three guest rooms, a sewing room a study, and what I would call a sitting room in the corner of the house's peak, or what the villagers would call a widow's watch. A single rocking chair sat in front of the ocean-facing window, on top of a New England woven green and gray rug. Otherwise the room was empty.

I felt Bob become uncomfortable and I laughingly asked "That's where they see the ghost, huh?" and pointed to the chair.

"There and on the rock ledge," he spoke slowly, "they say she lost 'er man out there an' is still waitin' for him to come home."

"What do you say?" I asked him, seeing the fear in his eyes.

"No sir, I don' believe in no such thing, it's all a bunch of malarcky," he became quickly relieved, and I didn't know if he was acting or not.

Bob had left when Elizabeth came back into the house poutilly and asked me if I was going to sit around and daydream or unload the car. I went out the door without a word, and brought my trunk upstairs to the master bedroom, then carried her countless little suitcases up. I finished then sat on the old, high legged couch, and propped my feet on a footstool.

"Dan," Elizabeth spoke in her sweetest voice, "Where's the phone?"

"In the kitchen darling," I almost snarled, "You can't miss it, it's that big box on the wall."

I knew what would come sooner or later, but kept my mind open.

It didn't come until after we had loaded the dresser drawers with our clothes, and the cupboards with our canned foods. Then came the inevitable "get Dan out of the house so I can call Him on the phone."

"Dan?" she called me from the kitchen. "What time is it?"

"It's three-thirty, why?" I called, almost knowing the excuse that came.

"We're going to be needing some milk, bread, and meat. I just feel too tired to go in after it..." she continued, not able to see the pain on my face, and I sat on the ancient divan silently crying. She could hurt me even when I knew it was coming.

"Don't worry about it, Elizabeth. I'll be right back," I told her from the living room as I walked out and light shut the screen door behind me.

The Rabbit started easily, and I glanced in my mirror to watch Elizabeth check out the window for my departure. She did, and disappeared beyond the curtain after she assumed I was well on my way.

I killed the Rabbit's engine a few hundred feet farther around the rocky road, and quietly hiked my way back. I needed that last little stretch of evidence that would either prove my Elizabeth's guilt or innocence.

Crouching beside the window the sound of her voice on the phone tore my last shred of hope from me. "When are you coming to get me Peter, I don't know if I can stand living with him any longer. His writer's habits are insane! He sometimes gets up in the middle of the night and turns that damn machine on, and types away."

My mind drifted away after sending a final instruction to my body to get in the Rabbit and run the errand. I had to eat.

"To hell with Elizabeth," I mumbled to myself, but I knew that I still loved her.

I changed a little, grew a little older, and I grew a little colder during my errand. I became angry, then depressed. I drove the coastal highway most of the way back then abruptly stopped the little car and hid it in between the rocks of a small beach.

"If they want each other so bad, I'll be damned if I'll give her the chance to take my Rabbit and see him." I mumbled angrily. "If he really wants her so bad, he can come out to this Godforsaken spot and get her!"

I walked up rock-broken sand the direction of the house, and soon found myself climbing the wall of a small rock point.

It was getting dark and cold, but my anger still warmed me. The anger was still inside me, but it was momentarily surpassed by my fascination with the point. Panting at the top, the flat platform at the very tip of the peninsula was a welcome resting place to my body.

I sat there and watch the fog come in, and the moon rise.

Then she came from out of nowhere in particular behind me, in her white lace dress at least as old in design as my grandmother, her knit white shawl, and bare feet. She seemed embarrassed as I sat and stared at her in my bewildered fascination.

"I...didn't know anyone was here," she said shyly, "I'll leave you alone." She turned away, and started walking off.

"No, please don't go, I didn't mean to stare." She shyly turned back to me. "I'm Dan Carent. I rented the old house up the way for the summer."

"It's my pleasure to make your acquaintance Mr. Carent, I'm Sarah Fontaine, and I live in a house up the way also."

She spoke so softly that I had to strain to hear her words, but I still assumed that she was uncomfortable with me there.

"Please, call me Dan?" I asked her.

She smiled faintly, parting her lips slightly, and I noticed that there was no trace of makeup on her thin, pretty face. Sarah's hair was long and thick.

"I come here almost every night during the summer, watch the fog roll in, and see the moon shining down." She blushed as she noticed my gaze intent upon her.

"This is the first time I've ever been here. I'm just out blowing off some steam..." My words ran off into nowhere, when I swore that I heard her say "I know" but I never saw her lips move.

Sarah turned and faintly smiled at me. "Is there something troubling, Dan?" she asked.

"Yes, I suppose there is."

I felt no reserves in telling her how I would soon be losing my wife, and probably everything I owned. She listened silently as I told her how I still loved Elizabeth, but couldn't stand to look at her face any more. Sarah sat and took in everything I said.

"You feel betrayed don't you?" she asked me.

"Completely."

"Will you walk with me, and listen to the ocean's tides roll against the rocks. I believe that you need me as much as I need you."

It was a proposition that stunned me slightly, but I couldn't resist. To me, she was ever so beautiful, and I did need someone. Anyone.

As soon as we caught sight of the old house she stopped walking, and grasped my other hand. "I must go now, Dan. Will you meet me at the point again tomorrow night?" Sarah's voice sounded so sweet and innocent to me then, that even if I had wanted to, I couldn't have resisted.

"I'll be there, I promise," I said softly.

We kissed a very short kiss goodbye, then I stood there, and watched her walk away until her shape faded into the fog.

I entered through the rickety old screen with caution, expecting something to be thrown at me, but to my great disappointment there was nothing like that waiting for me. To me, it would have meant that she still cared.

"What happened, Dan?" she asked. "I was starting to worry about you." She got up from her stretched out reading position on the old de'van, and met me face to face.

There wasn't even a stitch of emotion in her eyes, and it made me turn bitter. To her, it would be better if I were dead. She would have no one to fight against.

"Take the house, your jag, and everything we own, except for my Rabbit, and my income. If he's such a damned great lover let him start feeding you." There was a frighteningly controlled calm to my voice. A calm that was almost capable of murder.

Elizabeth started to shakily say something, but I interrupted her.

"Either take my offer, or call him now and end it. It's your choice."

She went to the phone, and my heart skipped a beat thinking that maybe she did still love me.

"Peter?" she said. "He knows, and he wants me out. "...you're going to have to come after me." She listened for a moment, then sneered at me as she told Peter she loved him and would be waiting for him.

I slowly walked up the stairs, and acquired: one of the blankets off the master bed, a pillow, and a flashlight. For some reason I headed for the widow's watch, and crashed on the floor inside after I locked the door behind me.

Sleep came unexpectedly easy to me that night, and I felt a sense of well-being come with it.

I awoke to the sound of the rocking chair creaking slightly. Groggily noticing a white figure in the chair facing the window, my subconscious brought conscious to a full alert.

"Elizabeth?" I called.

The figure abruptly turned towards me, revealing the face of Sarah, which in turn faded into that of an old woman, and then into nothingness.

I sat fully awake, and in shock. The sweat poured down my body as I sat up with the blanket unevenly wrapped around me, and the pillow clenched tightly in my arms.

"It was only a nightmare, Dan," I told myself, and believed it, because I wanted to.

The night went by slowly from there on, and I woke up looking as if years had been cut from my life. After a good shave and an insult session with Elizabeth, I felt a little more myself.

Elizabeth was packing, and it didn't really matter to me by this time. I only hoped she'd be gone soon. Best of all, the Rabbit was still hidden in the enclave, and I would get the chance to look the bastard who was stealing my wife from me in the eye.

The fog burnt off by noon and it turned out to be a nice day to be out without a sweater. Which after the cold day before seemed an omen as to what was ahead for me. Peter came at about one. Elizabeth left without one word to me, and Peter just stood next to his green rental car a short man trying to hide his bald spot with a corny, off-shade toupee. I found myself laughing hysterically until they were out of sight, then I started crying. I couldn't let myself cry over her, so I thought of Sarah for the rest of the day.

I worked off the rest of the day doing odd jobs on the exterior of the hosue, until just before sunrise.

I went in the house and grabbed a sweater and an apple. then I excitedly headed for the point. The air was starting to chill and the fog would be rolling in soon, so I planned on inviting her in for a drink or two.

The quick pace I usually kept was surpassed by the one I was walking then. The only thing that caught my attention when I was on the sand intermittent to the rocks was the bits and pieces of driftwood. Somehow I felt like one of those pieces of driftwood; having been cast off by nature or man, and having the gumption to come back in a new and very different form. Sometimes even a mangled form.

Sarah was standing in the distance, her white shawl wrapped around her, but this time she was wearing shoes. She was as beautiful as the Greeks believed their goddess Aphrodite to be. And yet she was gently alluring, and not as sure of herself as many other women with her looks. Her smile made me smile even more in response.

"Hello," she said to me, reaching out both of her pale hands to me.

"Hello, I said back as I took her hands in mine. I noticed an odd coldness to them again, and again as if she knew it displeased me, they grew warm.

"I saw her leave you today. How are you doing?"

"I'm happy," I said, then would have sworn I heard a reply but never saw her lips move.

"Why are you happy?" You've lost everything."

"Because I knew I could count on you being here tonight."

I couldn't hold myself back any longer and I wrapped my arms around her, passionately kissing her all over.

"It's cold out here, shall we go back to your house?"

"Yes," I answered without hesitation.

I drank more than a couple of the night-caps, and would have sworn she drank with me, but later I only found one dirty glass. I woke up naked and pained all over, lying in the master bed. The sound of that rocking chair creaking in the widow's watch was somehow amplified until it was almost deafening. I reached over beside me to see if Sarah was there and found nothing but empty covers. The sound was getting louder.

I got up from the bed and slid my shorts on. I then headed towards the sewing room, and the sound died down to a normal creaking. Reaching out my hand and grasping the doorknob I felt it throb and pulsate in my palm. The door opened easily and quickly as I jerked it, wanting to get my hand off the knob.

Sarah sat there in the chair, rocking, and staring into the window. I could only see her back so I walked to the side of the chair. Her face was pointed towards the center pane of glass, and I reached out my hand to touch it. Before I had my fingers on it she turned abruptly so that she was facing me. Her face was that of the old woman's and my hand flashed quickly back to my side. She smiled a sad smile and I mistakingly looked deep into her eyes: I watched our meeting on the point; the discussion I had with Elizabeth when I walked in that night; her getting into balding Peter's rental car as I laughed insanely at them; the rental car flying off one of the coastal roads into the rocky water; and, Mine and Sarah's second rendezvous. I heard a silent "I'm sorry" and then there was no longer an old woman in the chair in front of me. The chair finally stopped squeaking.

I was shaking as I sorted the pictures together that I had seen. Sarah had forced Peter to drive off the road. She'd killed them. Why?

I sat down in the rocking chair. There was no reason to fear anything anymore, and I knew then that there never had been. She didn't want to hurt me, she was just past the ability to love me in the usual way. She was a spirit, she technically couldn't exist, let alone love me.

I watched out the window and saw her supple form searching for driftwood in the intermittant beaches. She reached out her hand and waved up to me. I couldn't wave back, I could only cry for both of us.

Keith Ferguson