

Fledglings

Nightfall, we put on warm clothes over our nightdresses like Mama says and follow her away from camp and down the sand dunes. Clumps of grass like bony hands in the moonlight grasp at our feet as we pass. I try not to look. My little sister Millie clings to me and I lead the way. “Close your eyes, baby bird,” I whisper.

Near the water’s edge, shells or maybe a thousand brittle bones crunch beneath our feet. Ribbons of squidgy seaweed reach for my ankles, but in the dark, they could be the grip of those poor people pushed from the ship when food ran low. I can’t see the bodies, but I think I hear them nudge against the rocks, a deep thud again and again. Millie grabs my hand and doesn’t see the man in black clothes. He tugs at a small tin boat, hidden in the scrub.

A seabird’s call and then another. They feed on the flesh floating in the water. We climb into the boat and try not to step on the handle of a shovel beneath the seat.

“Not a word,” Mama says. She places a blanket over our legs and sits next to me.

Plip. Plip. Plip. Each time the paddle dips into the water the boat rocks forward. Wind blows my hair and there’s a stinky smell which is stronger at night. I pinch my nose. Millie copies. I try not to laugh.

Further out in the bay, the man lights a lantern and gives it to Mama. Light makes the water glimmer. I want to ask what she is looking for, but mustn’t talk. My eyes sting with the cold and I snuggle into Millie. Mama makes the two of us lie down in the dinghy and she places the blanket over us. The boat rocks back and forth. I try to stay awake, but my eyes feel dry and scratchy, so I close them.

“There.”

Mama’s voice wakes me. She flips the blanket over our heads, but there’s a small gap for me to see through.

The man clatters the chain and drops the anchor over the edge. He brings the paddles together and pokes at the water using them like tongs. “Sit on the other side,” he tells her.

Mama moves. “Is it him?” She holds the lantern above.

“Think so.” He reaches over the edge and the boat tilts to one side. I’m scared we’ll fall in the water, but the man drags a bundle as far into the dinghy as he can, and we level out again.

A body. I don’t see the face, but there’s a yellow ribbon around its neck – the special one Dad bought Mama before we set off on our journey to the new country.

“Thank you,” Mama says. Her voice is shaky.

I slip my hand from beneath the blanket and touch my dad’s arm; wet, cold and limp.

The man snuffs the lantern and returns to rowing. The waves push us along. Beneath the blanket I turn and make another peephole. Mama is crying, I know. There’s no sound, but her shoulders are hunched and shake like they did the night Dad died. He’d been unwell for a while and coughed a lot. Every time he ate, he was sick. The doctor said he couldn’t do much until we got to the mainland. I knew he’d die, just like those sheep who first staggered when they walked, then couldn’t get up.

He died on the ship the day before we arrived. Sometimes the crew took the sick ones during the night and we never saw them again and didn’t know why; until that night the crew dragged them away. A week before we made it to the mainland, I woke to voices outside my cabin.

“Supplies are rancid. And some thieving git has helped himself. Doubt we’ve enough to see us through.”

“We’ll dump the sick ones. That ought to save a few rations.”

Next came a scraping sound like the sacks they carted below decks after we stopped at port. Footsteps thudded and more thumps came overhead. Screams then splashing. I left my bunk to follow the noise. Four maybe five men threw some passengers overboard. Those poor people flapped at the water, calling, “help, help.” I blocked my ears and when their cries stopped and the men returned to their cabins, I crept towards the railing.

One, two, three bodies bobbed in the water, twinkly from the stars above. One face like a tiny moon gazed from the icy surface.

I told Mama what happened. When she spoke to the captain, he said they had no choice to stop disease from spreading. And so, when dad died, Mama begged them not to take him away, but they said no.

“Wait. I want to do something first,” she said. Mama took the yellow ribbon from her hair and tied the broad band around Dad’s neck, then kissed him. She said we couldn’t follow as they took him away, but I saw pictures in my head – Dad floating on his back and me turning him face down in the water so birds couldn’t peck his beautiful blue eyes.

“Do people go to Heaven if they’re not in a grave?” I asked.

Mama wiped her tears, “No, Abbey, they’ll bury his body in the morning.”

The night after losing dad, we anchor. Natives stand behind trees and watch us come ashore. Free settlers leave the ship first. Guards chain the prisoners together by their ankles before allowing them to follow. For the rest of the afternoon they pitch tents and set a campfire. Everyone is busy. After a meal of stew and stale bread, the men share out rum and soon they get rowdy. Mama takes us back to our tent and tries to tell us a fairy tale. It’s no use, the noise outside grows louder. At first, there is laughter, then comes arguments, and screaming. This time, women. I clamp Millie’s ears, and sing songs in my head.

Mama pulls us close. “They’re just acting, my darlings, rehearsing for a play.”

She mustn’t want to watch or join the people because she takes me and my sister away from camp and settles us on a blanket in the grass. “The natives are friendly,” Mama says, which is probably why she isn’t afraid for us to hide in the bushes. She makes our bed on a nest of grass. “Let’s pretend we’re sleepy owls, and this is our nest,” she whispers.

“Do we have to eat mice?” Millie says.

We giggle.

Mama laughs too. “No, baby birds, we’ve already had supper and now it’s rest time. Sleep.”

She places a warm cover over us. “We’ll sleep here, tonight, my darlings. Where it’s quiet. And we can see the stars.”

Our new country has so many of them, somehow, it feels like we’ve landed in a snow globe, only we’re surrounded by sparkles, not flakes of snow. And by day, the blue sky stretches forever, unlike our grey skies back home in England; the sand so white, the water so clean.

Mama makes us stay inside the tent during the first few days and we watch from the window flap while the men make fences and unload the sheep. Always, the ship stank of wee and the prisoners had to cart buckets of manure up to the deck and empty them overboard, along with the dead sheep. I didn't like seeing them dragged along on their backs.

"Will they bury the sheep later, too?" I asked Mama but she didn't know. "Will they leave the prisoners because they won't be going to Heaven?"

A few days later, Me and Millie walk down from the campsite to paddle in the water. Seabirds screech and hang in the air like kites. They dive into the water one by one. Next, what looks like a sea lion rolls towards us with each wave. A very fat, woolly sheep. Then more bits tumble in the surf. Bodies. And a human head, but the face is gone. The hair wraps around my legs before I can push it away.

"Out of the water, Millie." I scramble towards the shore.

Millie squeals. "Abbey." She freezes, screaming, her tiny hands press against her eyes.

I can't move and stand trembling on the sand, crying while urine trickles down my legs and my skin dimples all over. One of the natives runs into the water after Millie and lifts her out. He brings my sister to me and sets her on the sand. Mama comes running too. She wraps both arms around us and squeezes tight. She thanks him, over and over. But we don't speak his language.

He has really dark skin and long bumpy lines on his chest. His eyes are kind like a puppy.

Seeing those bodies must have given Mama the idea to look for our dad. The crew must have missed burying some of the bodies because we found him.

When our dinghy bumps into the sand, I pretend to be asleep. The man gets out and drags the boat further onto shore, but he groans and only manages a short tug. Mama steps into the water. Together they heave my dad over the edge. I sit up slightly. They half carry, half drag him across the sand and over dunes. The man comes back and I pretend to be asleep. He lifts the shovel from the boat then retraces his steps.

They are gone awhile.

When they return, Mama says, "Thank you so much, Mr Battersby. I'm sorry I've no money to give you now, but I shall find work with the Governor."

“Guess you’d better pay me another way,” he says. A smile spreads across his face. Without waiting, he grabs Mama’s arm and takes her into the dunes again. She looks back and kind of pulls in the opposite direction, towards us. They stop and talk, but the wind carries their words away, and they walk on.

Maybe they think Dad will have some money in his pockets.

I must have fallen asleep as later Mama wakes me. “Good news, Abbey. Mr Battersby will help us board the ship for home in a couple of days.”

“But we just got here.”

“I know, my darling, but I don’t think this is the place for us.”

Why would Mama want to leave so soon? Maybe she misses our family back in England.

We row along the shore, back to campsite. A bonfire blazes between the tents. Again, there’s a lot of noise and shouting among the people.

Mama says, “Let’s enjoy this fine weather and sleep outdoors. We’ll never be able to do that back home.”

Me and Millie look at each other. This feels like an adventure. Mama asks us to wait behind trees. She goes into the tent to get our things and bedding while we stand shivering in the dark. The natives have a campfire and they’re singing and tapping sticks.

Millie says, “Mama, may we go over there?”

“Not tonight.” And Mama again leads us further into the bush, ever so quiet, and we snuggle together under blankets.

Next morning, I wake to a strange bird noise. “Ee-ee-ee-oooh-oooh.” It’s a happy little noise. She’s there, a black and white bird on a branch. Like our Magpies back home. There’s also a strong smell of ash today, and food cooking, but I don’t know what. A cracking sound then thudding comes from across the bushland. A strange furry animal jumps through the bushes then stops. Its head tilts in the air and ears twitch back and forth. Such a little head. And really huge legs.

“Mama, Millie, look.” I keep my voice low and pat the two of them. “Quick.”

They sit upright. Mama grabs a stick and presses the two of us behind her back.

“Shoo, shoo,” she calls.

Her voice brings a native woman over to us. She’s almost naked and I try not to stare at her bosom. In her hands she carries a tray of food and sets it on the ground in front of us.

“Thank you kindly,” Mama says.

I know the woman doesn’t understand but she smiles. She waves her hand at the food then us.

“I think she wants us to eat,” I say.

The tray is made of bark and there are round egg-looking things, leathery fruit, and what looks like white wrinkled fingers.

“Caterpillars?” Millie says. “Yuk.”

“Shh.” Mama pats Millie’s hand. “Just take a bit of bread.” I don’t think she likes the white things, but maybe Millie is right; they do look like fat caterpillars.

The woman slips one into her mouth and smiles. She seems to like them.

And for the next few days, we stay hidden in the bush. Mama says it’s safer that way. We share our food with the natives, and we eat some of theirs, mainly meat and potato-type of vegetables.

After a couple of days, again we take a night ride in the dinghy with the man. This time we leave behind most of our cases and head straight to the boat. In the dark, we climb up the gang plank but there’s nobody there to greet us, not like when we first came aboard.

Mama says, “Be quiet. Wait until we are in our bunks.”

We stand on deck, while the dinghy-man waits below. Another man approaches us. “We’ve arranged your passage. You can pay by instalments when you return to England.” He passes Mama a clipboard for her to sign the paper. In the dark it’s hard to see but he holds up his lantern. “I understand your plight, mam, this place aint fit for a woman with no husband.”

Mama says, “What do you mean?”

“This country would be a hard life for someone such as yourself.”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“You know, you’ll have to set up a farm. Build shelters, raise the children on your own. With no man to support you, you’ll never make it. So, I see why you’re leaving.”

Mama grabs our hands. “Nonsense. I’m a very capable woman. I can manage without a man to look after me, thank you very much. Come on, girls.”

As we trot down the plank, I look over my shoulder. The man shakes his head and smiles.

Millie says, “So, we’re staying here?”

Mama keeps marching on. “Of course, this is our home, now, girls.”

“Will we just live in the bush, too? Like the owls and the natives?”

“No, I’ll build us a house, just as Daddy planned.”

“Can we help?” I ask.

Mama rests one hand on both of our heads. “Of course, girls, I’m counting on it.”