

Golden Bay

Virginia Ryan

Anne stumbles through the tucks, her hair caught on a withered branch, her arms aching from hanging, limb by limb, from stunted trees that might or might not hold her as she descends the sharp slope leading to her destination. She's already managed the Big Gulch – half walked, half slid on her bottom down one side, crossed the river at its base, slipping she doesn't know how many times, and clambering, feet wet and heart pounding, hand over hand up the other side. Better that than the tucks, though – almost impenetrable, her hands sticky with turpentine, her arms scratched and bleeding, the sane part of her mind warning her of the danger of her descent. But descend she must because several times, looking heartbreakingly near and yet still distant, Golden Bay has spread out before her through the branches, and she has come so far, she will not stop now.

On her way from Point Lance, she has three times been detained. Once it was by a sparkling sliver of waterfall tumbling from a cliff to splatter onto a tiny beach far below where it became a rivulet running out to the sea. Then it was to view the Bull, Cow, and Calf, named for their likeness to three breaching whales – rocky uprisings of descending size spreading out behind her in an indigo ocean. And she had to stop to peer down at the Rookery – a mass of kelpy shallows far below her where dozens of seals were lazing in the sunlight, stomachs full. They ignored her, though she called to them, motionless except for the odd slap of a flipper or a heave to a more comfortable position.

The magic stopped at the tucks, though; getting through them and down them is one of the most trying and foolhardy things she has ever done in her thirty-odd years. But – suddenly, they end. All at once she is heading down a steep but grassy and tree-less slope – so steep that for a while she is inching down once again on her bottom. But it’s there, it’s just beyond the next rise; and now she’s looking down on the soft folds of waves reaching into the beach at Golden Bay.

Crossing Golden Bay Brook, she finally sets foot on the rocky beach where her grandmother once frolicked with her siblings. The waves are small and come ruffling in. The sea is lit by an enormity of blinding sun. The bay is empty of everything but water and light. She hardly knows where to go first; she has waited so long to come here.

She decides to walk first to the higher, grassy ground where their house must have been – but now there is no trace of a house. There’s not even a depression in the ground to suggest where a house might have been. There’s the swift brook curving its way from back in the country – they must have gotten their water from it, and that must have been where Nanny went trouting. Nanny used to tell Anne the stories – all the good stories:

We’d often go out fishing, or trouting in the brook. We’d look for birds’ nests in the grass and take the little birds and bring them into the house. Chase the sandlarks. We’d go at the sheep in the spring. Pick berries – there was one good bakeapple mash. Go far up the brook to Golden Bay Falls – not many knew about that . . .

The brook dwindled at the beach; if she followed it far enough back, she might find the falls. But it’s already past noon; she has to allow time for getting home. She sits on a long, smooth piece of wood, washed up in some storm, takes out her sandwich and her water and has her lunch, staring at but hardly seeing the ocean, remembering what she knows.

Nanny is long since gone – also all the other even older people who used to have the stories. Nanny’s old Uncle Thomas it was who’d first told her the back story of Golden Bay – or as far back as he could. “The first to live

in Golden Bay were two bachelor brothers and an old maid sister,” he’d told Anne when she was a girl.

It must be that their parents lived there before them, but who their parents were or how they came to be there, nobody knows... But your Nanny’s father, me brother Dan, well, he was the oldest in our family, and he left Branch and went to work for them for two or three years when he was 17 or 18. They had cattle, and he used to mow the hay and set the gardens. And when they died, they left it all to him.

Anne looks around her, the softest wind swaying the tall grass, and beyond that, the glittering sea before her. She’s trying to feel the lives that once lived here, but all she feels is silence.

“Golden Bay – now, that was the best place for fishing,” Thomas had told her more than once.

They called it “the Garden of Newfoundland,” on account of the fishing. That’s where all the fish was got. They used to come to fish from Fortune Bay, Placentia Bay, St. Mary’s Bay, and all around. See, those men that was fishing up in Golden Bay on the big schooners, they used to trap. And probably they’d haul those traps and they’d get 1700, 1800 quintals of fish the one haul. And ‘twould be lit up in the night like a city from their lights.

Anne looks out over the bay now and tries to imagine it filled with schooners, tries to picture the city of lights at night. But the bay spreads out before her, shimmering and empty, and she feels a sadness heavy inside her. It is less than empty, from once having been so full.

Anne had wanted all the story, and she had asked Thomas whether Nanny’s father Dan had spent his summers on one of those schooners, when he wasn’t setting gardens and mowing hay. “No, honey,” he’d told her.

I was about ten when I started leaving Branch in April month to fish

with brother Dan, but always in a dory – and continue every fine day from then on. And oh, my God, honey dear – I seen times we had 40 quintals of fish before ever a fish got caught in Branch. In Branch you couldn't go fishing before May. And in April, we used to have 40 or 50 quintals of fish. Now, we'd have these made, and Mother'd take it to St. John's in the spring of the year. She'd go with whatever boat would take the freight. Golden Bay was The Garden of Newfoundland, that's for sure.

Anne knows the whole story now, from the outside, anyway – has known it for years – and she feels the burden of this knowledge. As a young girl, and then during university, she'd pieced it together, fragment by fragment, from the old people now long gone. What had happened to this Garden of Newfoundland was a story for the scholars and the politicians – a story of greed and grief, of lean years and upheaval, of loss and modernization. But the story of this bay, of the man and woman and children who once lived here, it is her blood, her story, and coming here was supposed to help her feel it so she could tell it rightly. She's the only one of her generation old enough to have heard it all from those old lips. So, she waits for the whispers of ghosts on the breeze to instill in her the feel of those long-ago days; but she hears only the breeze. She walks back down to the beach, to where the rocks end and the rock-studded sand begins.

There's driftwood everywhere and tiny purple starfish stranded near the water's edge. Once in a while, a gull soars by high overhead. But further down the beach is a thing Anne has especially been longing to see – and there it is, a massive grey rock shaped something like a whale, with one big rise and then a downward slope and then a second, smaller rise, like the tail of the whale as it's coming out of the water. Nanny had told her that she and her brothers and sisters had played around that rock as children and clambered to the top to watch the gannets dive-bombing, needle-sharp into the sea, and to try to count the fishing boats. Anne has a photo of Nanny as a woman in her 50s, gone back on a hike to Golden Bay with her husband and one of her sisters. In those days you could walk there, single file from Cape St. Mary's, if you

knew the way. No one can get to Golden Bay from that direction anymore – erosion of the cliffs has made it too dangerous, the Parks people say. Anne wonders whether it's any more dangerous than the way she's come, but it's no matter, because Cape St. Mary's is an ecological reserve now, and the guides won't allow you to attempt it.

Anne thinks on the photo of Nanny taken that day. Her hair done up in a red kerchief, she's sitting atop the whale rock with a big piece of driftwood in her hand, and smiling, the sun in her eyes. What memories she must have had then as she sat there. As Anne gets closer to the whale rock, she realizes that it's no longer one rock, but two – and the tail part is several yards away from the rest. The tides and the ice have done their work. Anne climbs up to the top part of the higher rock and sits there, as Nanny sat in the photo, hoping old thoughts and feelings will infuse her.

As she sits there basking, she pieces together more of the story. "Did your father just stay on in Golden Bay after the old people died?" she'd asked Nanny one night as they drank their tea by the stove. "Ah, no, honey," Nanny'd answered.

The two old men, they died, and then Daddy was alone with Miss Joanie, the old maid. And the war was on then, and he said he'd join the Merchant Navy. So, he boarded Miss Joanie in some home in Placentia, and he sent money for her keep when he could.

But after, when Daddy was back in Branch again, the Depression was on, and everyone was on relief. And Daddy, he felt it was a disgrace. He hated the old dole. And he said, "My children, 'twill never be said to them that they were reared on the dole or had to take relief." So, he moved on back to Golden Bay, which had been left to him, with Mommy and me and five other children besides. The youngest was little Danny, named for him.

So, there you had it. A man and a woman and six young children came to live here in Golden Bay, cut off from everyone. Anne is steeped in Nanny's memories of the years she spent there, growing up – chasing the skylarks

and trouting in the brook, but working hard, too, as the oldest child, starting at only nine years of age. The family had gardens – “big squares of cabbage, and turnips and potatoes, and not a weed” – and by the time they had to leave some years later, they had 40 sheep, a horse, and two or three cows. With their father bringing in fish by the doryload and selling them over in Branch, you know that all of them who were able had to work hard, too, with the gardens, the wood, the water, and the animals.

Now, Nanny didn't often speak of the hard times – she'd only been a child then after all – but just once Anne remembers her speaking of the toll the fishing took on her father.

I used to see him coming in after pulling them oars. You know, when he'd first go fish in the spring of the year, his hands'd be tender. I remember seeing him come home in the evening with the blood pouring out of the palms of his hands. See, he'd have these oars in his hands all the time, and he'd be rowing the dory, pulling and pulling, and the oars would burn his hands. And Mommy'd go down with a bottle of peroxide to soothe his hands. We used even to haul his socks off, and wash his feet for him, then pass him clean socks to put on . . .

But Nanny wasn't one to dwell on the hard times. In her memory it had all had a rhythm, been a kind of dance: milking the cows and making butter, sheering the sheep and preparing the wool, and setting the snares for rabbits. She spoke of the healthy food they'd had – soups and stews and lots of vegetables, and the wild ducks her father brought home in the wintertime. And the time they'd had for play, as well – sliding in winter, and in warm weather going for walks with their mother down by the sea.

Nanny did tell Anne that her mother had been lonely there – that she would rather not have been there, with no other women for company. And that it was lonely there in wintertime, with the wind howling, and “big mountain-high seas that used to come right in,” and no visitors at all. But Nanny preferred to remember how in summer, they'd sometimes have visits from the fishermen, who'd bring them salmon from their traps. And how her mother would give

the fishermen jugs of milk and fresh butter – things the family had in plenty.

It was, after all, all about the fishing and the good land for farming, and the ability to feed your family and keep your pride in a time when so many people could not. And it was all about hard work, and the loneliness that came with such independence, but still an ideal way for six young children to grow and spend their days, working and playing from sun up to sun down beside the roar and shushing of the sea.

Until it wasn't.

It all came crashing down on them, early one winter, and Golden Bay would eject them, just as it had welcomed them. Nanny's mother Helen was due with her seventh child, and Dan had to take her by horse and slide over the country in a snowstorm all the way to Patrick's Cove, where his sister Margaret, who was a midwife, lived. And there the seventh child was born – a girl – but Helen died within a few weeks. She had been poorly, and the strain of the childbirth was too much for her. Meanwhile, the years of hard work had caught up with Dan and his back gave out - so there he was, in Golden Bay not able to work, with six children, his wife gone, his seventh child miles away. So, there was nothing for it but for Dan to go to the hospital in St. John's. And the children, well, they were all put in the orphanage in St. John's, the boys in Mt. Cashel, the girls in Belvedere. All but the youngest two, who found homes with family on the Shore.

Anne heard this part of the story not from Nanny nor from Uncle Thomas, but from Thomas's sister in Ship Cove, whom everyone called Aunt Sadie. Aunt Sadie was a very old woman by the time Anne was taking an active interest in all of this, but still as sharp as a tack, and Anne went to ask her about it one Sunday afternoon. And over more tea at another woodstove, this is what Aunt Sadie told her:

Well, my brother Dan stayed on in Golden Bay 'til after the baby was born and his wife died. The baby was taken in by Murphys on the Shore – her mother's people – but the rest went to the orphanage – all except Danny. His mother had had a wish that I take him.

I went out with Dan to get the child on a horse-drawn slide. It was March

month. We left in the morning and went as far as our sister Margaret's in Patrick's Cove. And then we went on, and oh, it was a lovely drive after the night's frost, and we drove 'til we come down to Lear's Cove. Dan said, "We should be pretty near now." And so, we were.

We got to Golden Bay, and I stayed two days with Dan then. I baked some bread and fixed up things for Dan and the children. And little Danny, he didn't want to come with me; I knew he hated to leave. But when the day came, we dressed him up, and I took him in my arms. He was only a little tot – maybe two or three.

But the trip back to Ship Cove wasn't as easy as the trip to Golden Bay had been.

We came to a place where there was a big flood in the river. And Dan said, when we came to it, "Sadie, honey, I don't know what we'll do. I'm afraid. If anything happened to the slide, and you on it, and the little child . . . " I couldn't look at the worried look on his face. But he took the horse further up the river and he said, "We'll cross it here." And we got across grand. And that's how I come to raise up Danny.

Anne, still perched on the whale rock, watches the sun sinking lower in the sky and knows it's time to head back the way she had come. The loneliness pierces her; the small waves suck out and shush back in again. It is almost impossible to imagine a living, breathing family here, where now there is no trace of them. A whole family split up and gone. How could this bay have been alive with dories and schooners, and now be empty? How does such enterprise turn to tragedy, and who or what's to blame? Nobody, sigh the waves. Many things, sighs the breeze.

So, what had she come all this way for? What had she expected to find that she did not already know? The feel of it, that's what. The reality of living here. She couldn't quite touch that, though she now had a first-hand glimpse of the extent of the beauty of the place, and maybe the extent of its loneliness.

But other than that, she'd found only an absence.

She'd brought the matter up once to her Nanny's brother, Danny, who'd stayed on in Ship Cove after old Aunt Sadie raised him there – how lonely but how beautiful a place Golden Bay must have been, and how good a life it would have been if all of them could have stayed there. “Let me sail up Golden Bay/with me oilskins all a-streamin’,” she'd sung. But Danny had cut her off; had rhymed off a different verse of the song –

*Let me feel my dory lift
To those broad Atlantic combers,
Where the tide rips swirl and the wild ducks whirl
Where Old Neptune calls the numbers
'Neath the broad Atlantic combers . . .*

And he'd said with some heat, “Well sure, Anne girl, that's a nice song. But the fella wrote that song – sure *he* never fished a day in his life. ‘Let me feel my dory lift to those broad Atlantic combers,’” he'd repeated with scorn.

When those “broad Atlantic combers” come in there, it's time to get your motorboat, your dory, and get out, back on shore. Those “broad Atlantic combers” – it sounds very nice, yes; but no one out there wants to see those broad Atlantic combers coming in. . . they can kill you, girl.

So, there was that. The loneliness wasn't beautiful, and that shimmering sea could be a taker as well as giver of life. Working the land and fishing the sea had broken Danny's father – broken him, and maybe his mother, too, and sent five of his brothers and sisters to the orphanage. Anne realized now how she'd longed to see in that old way of living a rightness she couldn't find in her modern life, and Nanny's stories had always made the old way seem the better of the two. Anne likes to picture the bay all lit up by the schooners in the nighttime, the fishermen coming to her great-grandparents' house on a smiling summer's day trading salmon for milk and butter. It's easy on a late afternoon like this one with the water calm and glistening to forget the gales

and drownings and a man's hands so sore from rowing that his wife must bathe them in peroxide, his back so bent from getting wood and water that it feels like it is breaking.

Anne slides down off the whale rock. She's as conflicted as ever and coming here has only added to that conflict. Maybe if there'd been no Depression and no dole; maybe if two or three other families had joined her great-grandparents out there and worked together; maybe if the base in Argentinia had never been built and people had stayed with the old ways instead of opting for hourly pay; maybe if Newfoundland hadn't joined Canada, with all of its handouts, at such a cost . . . Maybe if you could work for yourself but not so hard, and the fishing stayed constant, and the sea wouldn't kill you . . .

Anne turns back towards Golden Bay and says goodbye before heading the treacherous way back; at least now, she will be climbing, not descending. But the last image she has in leaving is not of Nanny playing on the beach but of Nanny's mother: standing at the water's edge, gazing out, wishing she were elsewhere, wishing she had a friend next door, wondering whether her husband would come safely home from sea. The story of Golden Bay is more than one of abundance, more than of a child's playground. It's also the story of a woman watching, waiting, longing for things that might not come and that could not come, and of a man bent in two by labour and danger. Anne's digging deep into her heart, wondering if it's a story she can ever fully know, as slowly the clouds move in.

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Ginny Ryan was born and raised in the U.S., but moved to Newfoundland as a young woman as a result of an ancestral connection to the place. She married here, and she and her husband spent six years as multigrade school teachers in Labrador. Subsequently, Ginny taught at the Marine Institute and in the College system, spending the last 21 years of her career as the director of MUN's Writing Centre. She has published a small number of poems, essays, and short stories in various journals, and has produced a CD of her own and traditional songs entitled "Great Wings in Flight." Writing

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the story “Golden Bay” was particularly meaningful to her, as she spent time on Newfoundland’s Cape Shore collecting the songs and personal stories of many people there and had always longed to find a way to tell the story of the family who lived in Golden Bay - a story that has long lived inside her.