

## Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

Lara Strong  
Dust

I live in a village near the sea. Fog sweeps over us regularly. The froth and foam of the waves puff up like clouds above the water and spill over land, smelling of salt, cool and moist. But after a while the vapor stings your skin. At times like this, we hear the click-clack, click-clack. It's a soft sound. Not loud enough to shake anything. Not like thunder. Click-clack, click-clack. More like the chirping of crickets. A sound that blends in with life's everyday hum.

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"Thar she blows!"

The words belong to Mr. Brothers. Every so often he gets drunk and wanders down the dirt road, yelling at the top of his lungs. With that and the click-clack on foggy days and nights, you might think our village, Poo-spatack, isn't quiet. But most of the time, it is.

Perhaps that's why the words ring in my ears in the evenings when Mr. Brothers is out and about.

"Thar she blows."

Most people smile when Mr. Brothers goes on one of his rambles through the village. But not the elders, like Grandma. They shake their heads and look sad.

"Mr. Brothers thinks he's still at sea," Grandma whispers to me. "His eyes look at us, but they see old dirty sailors with tobacco-stained teeth. They see the great big sails, the ocean swells, the spouts of whales."

"Thar she blows," I say.

Grandma smiles. "Thar she blows."

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The men in my village have hunted whales since the beginning of time. But in the old days they never went farther than the eye could see. They didn't have to, because whales came close to the shores of Long Island. The men went after them, the lone whales, the sick ones, in canoes and used spears they'd made themselves. "The Unkechaug were ... are skilled whalers," Grandma says.

But now the men go on great big American ships. Way out to sea, way beyond the horizon. Like my cousin, Solomon. He left on his second voyage more than three years ago. In the year of our Lord 1851. He's gone to places I can't see. That's how it is. The men used to go whale hunting for a day or two. Now they go for years. The women folk get sad. But they try to keep busy and wait for the ships to return.

Mr. Brothers was one of those men. He was gone for so many years people weren't sure who he was when he came back.

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Today, the fog unfolds, like a fiddlehead fern. Its milky whiteness spreads all over the village. Click-clack, click-clack. Louder and louder, the

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sound rises as if on a sea swell, then all at once begins to diminish. She has moved past our house. Quieter and quieter it grows. The click-clack. Until silence fills our ears.

*She.* Most people call her the lady of the fog.

"But what is the clicking sound?" I asked Grandma once.

"She's knitting."

"What's she making?"

"A blanket."

"But why?"

"For her baby."

I found that odd. A ghost making a blanket for a baby?

"How did the lady of the fog die?"

"Her heart broke into a million little pieces." Grandma's voice shook just a little.

My eyes were fixed on Grandma. She gazed back at me. Her smile was faint, but her eyes were warm and shiny, as they always are when she looks at me. "You want the whole story, don't you, Liza, my little girl?"

"Yes."

"Her baby got sick, you see. It was a lung disease. Consumption they call it. Your lungs fill up with liquid and you can't breathe. She said it was because her baby was so cold at night that he got sick. She thought if she could just knit him another blanket, he'd be good and warm. He'd get better. So she knit as fast as she could. But it wasn't fast enough. He died when she was only half way done with the blanket."

"And then she died, too?"

"Yes. Her own sadness took her away. And since that time, she walks through the village knitting that blanket. Always when there's fog. Because it was a foggy day, the day her baby died."

"Did you know her?"

"Oh, no. I was just a few years old when all this happened. That clacking's been going on as long as I remember. My grandmother told me her story."

"Where's the lady of the fog buried?"

"Up in the old cemetery."

"The one at the top of the hill? The one all overgrown?" I'd seen the old tombstones, most were over one hundred years old, among the saplings and low bushes.

"That's the one."

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Grandma wraps some apple cake in a cloth. "Bring this to Mr. Brothers, would you? I don't think anyone's dropped in on him in the past few days."

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"Yes, Grandma." I take the bundle from her.

When Mr. Brothers answers the door, he looks at me with glassy eyes, seeing, but not seeing. His snowy white hair falls loosely to his shoulders, framing a dark brown face, rough and wrinkled. He calls me Matthias, but I tell him I'm not Matthias. I tell him I don't know anyone by that name. I'm Liza.

"It's ok, Matthias," he says. "You didn't mean to."

"Didn't mean what?" I say, as he opens the door wide for me to enter. I walk in and put the cake on the tiny wooden table. He lives in a one room cabin. His only furnishings are a little bed against the wall. A small hearth with a fire burning in it. The table and a stool. A rocking chair. And a sea chest.

"Didn't mean what?" I repeat, turning toward him.

He shakes his head in a funny way, sort of up and down and then from side to side. Again he says, "It wasn't your fault."

"I know," I say.

He looks at me bright-eyed. "You know?"

"What?"

"Oh, Matthias. It doesn't help to pretend you don't know." He looks upon me, worried.

"But I don't know. Because I'm not Matthias."

Confusion sweeps across his face. He squints, as if perhaps finally seeing me. His eyes fill with wet, drippy tears. Then he goes over to the fire. Grabbing a stick, he begins poking it. "Ah, Matthias," he says, as he pushes around the burning wood. "Just remember, it wasn't your fault."

I edge to the door as he continues to mumble to himself and prod the fire. "You mustn't beat yourself up about it."

As quietly as possible, I slip out of the cabin.

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"Grandma, I brought the apple cake to Mr. Brothers, and he started talking to me, but it was as if I was someone else. He kept saying it's not your fault. When I asked him what wasn't my fault, you know what he said?"

Grandma looks at me curiously and gives a little shrug.

"He said it doesn't help pretending you don't know."

Grandma smiles and pats me on the head, like I'm a little puppy or a lamb. I don't like that. I'm twelve, after all. I'm not such a little girl anymore.

"I already told you. His mind's somewhere else."

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That afternoon the sky turns dark. Fog moves in off the sea. But fog or no fog, I have to feed the pigs. Like most people in the village, Grandma

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and Grandpa keep pigs and chickens. We have a little vegetable garden, too. And in the early summer, wild strawberries cover the path leading up to our house.

With the slop pail in hand, I step out the door. I can see only a few feet in front of me. In the distance, from far down the road I hear the click-clack. Setting down the pail, I crouch behind the picket fence that surrounds our yard.

The clicking grows louder and louder and louder. I hear whispers. A woman's voice. I know it's the lady. Knitting her blanket. She whines and whimpers, and lets out low groans. I lift my head above the fence and look into the fog. All I see is a dark, moving shadow. I shiver from the intense cold as she goes by.

"Madam," I whisper.

But the shadow doesn't stop. It moves off into the depths of the fog. I feel a funny sensation in my throat, a nipping at my eyes. And a huge sadness descends upon me, one I can't describe – a sadness I've never felt before.

I hear some grunts and the thud-thud of heavy steps. The lady's gone, but a new shadow emerges out of the fog.

"Mr. Brothers?"

He stops and looks toward me. Stepping over to the fence, he puts his face just a few inches from mine.

"Ah, young Matthias. Looking at her. She's lovely, isn't she? Her eyes shine, don't they, like pretty copper pennies? I knew you fancied her."

"Did you know her? The lady in the fog?" I ask incredulously. "You did know her, didn't you?"

But he hasn't heard me. I watch him as he trudges off into the fog.

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The next day, I wrap up some tiny cakes in a cloth. They're still warm.

"What are you doing?" Grandma asks.

"I think Mr. Brothers must be hungry."

"Why Liza, that is so kind of you. Yes, by all means, take those to Mr. Brothers." With a pleased look, she turns back to her sewing.

I want to know more about Matthias. And I want to know about the lady of the fog.

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I knock on Mr. Brothers' door.

I hear the slow, heavy clunk of his boot-clad feet as he approaches the door. He opens it just a crack and peeks out. He looks at me, up and down, his mouth twisting in puzzlement. Finally, he opens the door.

"Do I know you?"

"Yes, Mr. Brothers. I live in the village."

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"What's your name?"

"Umm, I'm ..." I bite my lip with uncertainty. Am I Liza? Or am I Matthias?

"Ah, yes. I know you," he says before I can answer. "Come in, come in. What a pleasure, Abigail. The captain's daughter doesn't usually come down to the forecandle. What can I do for you?"

"I've brought you some more cake. Blackberry cake this time."

"Blackberry. Where'd you find blackberries?"

"In the woods."

Question marks flash in his eyes. "Woods. There are no woods here. Ah, just a little addled, you are. Don't mind about it. Being at sea does that to a person."

A pot hangs from a metal bar above the fire. With a large ladle, he scoops some water out of a bucket by the door and pours it in the pot.

"Sit down, sit down," he says motioning to the rocking chair. "I'll make some tea." I put the blackberry cakes on the wooden table. He sits down on the stool. I lower myself uneasily into the rocking chair. It dips backwards; my feet lift off the ground.

"Mr. Brothers," I say as I rock forward, shifting my weight so my feet remain steadily on his dirt floor. "I am the captain's daughter, am I not?"

"Yes, of course," he says.

"Then who is Matthias?"

A tremor runs through his body. Is it surprise or fear? "Well, but. You do not ... Well, who am I then?" he asks, puzzled.

"You are Mr. Brothers." I take a deep breath. "You are a kindly old man who spent his entire life at sea, on a whaling ship, but a few years ago, you returned to our village, to Poospatuck. Nobody remembers you, exactly. But the old people, like my Grandma, they say you're surely one of us. An Indian. Unkechaug. You have no family, so everyone in the village looks out for you. That's why I've brought you some cakes."

His eyes widen with my every word, as if I'm telling him the most fantastic tale.

"Now, please, Mr. Brothers. Could you tell me who Matthias is?"

He draws in a quick wheezy breath and his eyes shoot to the side, toward the window. He stares out. With a deep breath, he says, "The sea is calm today."

"Yes, it is. Now Mr. Brothers. Who is Matthias? And what did he do?"

He begins twisting his hands, his fingers rubbing his knuckles hard. He takes more deep breaths, and shakes his head back and forth.

"Matthias didn't want to hurt ..."

I study his face carefully, hoping. "What? Hurt what?"

He sniffs and looks mournfully at the ground. "The cat," he says.

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My heart drops in disappointment. "A cat?"

His face contorts, as a memory – I'm sure it's a memory – passes through his mind.

"Umm, I'm sure he didn't want to hurt it," I say in a delicate voice. "But, what did he do? To the cat?"

"He didn't mean for it to happen. He didn't." All at once his lips begin moving rapidly, but at first no sounds come out. Then some mumbles, then a jumble of words. He says something like this: "He loved it too much."

"But that's ... good ..." Then a thought enters my head. We'd had a kitten once. Grandma had warned me ... Liza they're tiny and fragile. You mustn't hug it like that or else ... "Did he squeeze it too much?"

Mr. Brothers plops down on the stool by the table and takes deep, heavy breaths.

"Things like that can happen."

A low groan comes from deep in his throat. His lips begin again to quiver. I stand up from the rocking chair and edge toward the door. My hand is on the latch.

Suddenly he's back on his feet again. "I forgot about the tea. I'll make it."

"No that's all right. I've got to go."

"Ah right, Abigail. Always lot's to do on a ship. Mending sails, huh? Yes, you'd best get back to it."

"Yes, I need to." The lady in the fog hovers in my mind. I haven't forgotten. I want to ask him what he knows. But my heart thumps too wildly.

"Good day, Abigail." He nods at me with his glazed eyes, seeing me but not seeing me. I quietly slip out the door.

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That night, I ask Grandma, "Is life hard at sea?"

She is busy sewing. She doesn't look up as she answers my question. "Yes, I think it is."

"Hard in what way?"

"When the whalers come back ... Ow!" She has poked her finger with the needle. She blows on it, then continues talking. "... sometimes they're not quite right. Too many years on those little ships. Like penned animals, they are." For a brief moment, she pauses, as she holds the needle high in the air, the thread taut. Worry crosses her face. "Makes a person crazy, I think."

"Crazy enough to kill someone?"

"Probably not." She plunges the needle back into the fabric. "Well, maybe sometimes. Liza, I don't know. Why all these questions?" Her head is cocked towards me. I know she's thinking of my cousin, Solomon. She doesn't like it that he's at sea. She frets about what will become of him. But I can only think of Mr. Brothers.

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"I think Mr. Brothers killed someone."

Grandma sets down her needlework. "Why do you think that?"

"Because he said he ... Well, there was this cat. He said he loved it too much. I think he means he squeezed it too much. He killed it. But I don't know, Grandma. I kind of felt like it wasn't a cat. He just called it a cat. I mean, do you think that's possible?"

Grandma leans her head against the back of her chair and looks at the ceiling. "Liza, anything is possible, I think."

We're both quiet for several long minutes. Grandma, staring at the ceiling. Me, staring at the floor.

"Liza, I don't think you should visit Mr. Brothers anymore."

I nod. "Ok."

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I climb the hill to the clearing. Hundreds of gravestones fill the space between the young forest growth, the saplings and tall grass. The older tombstones are crumbling, like ancient stories muffled by the chatter of new life. The engraved words are worn, the carved edges rounded and smooth. I kneel down and feel the grooves in the rock. With my fingers I can decipher the words, the dates. I go from tombstone to tombstone, feeling each one. At first nothing seems wrong. But as I keep moving, I notice something. Over and over again. The same date. 1762.

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"Grandma, all the graves say 1762. Everyone died the same year."

Grandma looks at me. Her hands are covered in sticky flour. On the kneading board in front of her rests a large mound of dough. "You went to the old cemetery?"

"Yes."

"1762. Smallpox. Lots of people died. Nearly a hundred." Grandma looks away from me. I know why. My mama died of smallpox, but much later. I know the year exactly. 1844. I was two years old. I was lucky. I got sick, but only a little. But mama died, and my Aunt Anna. Grandma only had two daughters. She lost them both within two days of each other. That's all I know. I never ask about mama, because it makes Grandma sad.

In fact, the only time she's talked about what happened to my mama was when a travelling minister came to town a few years back. He said the smallpox epidemics, which always struck the Indians the worst, were God's work. Mumbles and grumbles sounded from the congregation. He quickly said, "God works in mysterious ways ... Now, now, my sisters and brothers, you must understand. It's God's will."

"It was God's work?" I asked Grandma in a tiny voice, frightened by her red face and blazing eyes.

"Heaven's no!" she stammered. "God's work. Certainly not. That man is a fool. Small pox is the work of the devil!" But she didn't say devil. She used the Unkechaug word: Mutchesesumetook. "I just don't know why

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Mutchesesumetook's will triumphs over God's sometimes." She stopped walking and looked at me. I turned toward her. She smiled faintly, sadly. "But he doesn't triumph all the time." She kissed me on the forehead. "That's why I've got you." She took my hand again, as we walked the rest of the way home. I remember how her hand felt. Soft, warm, and strong.

Grandma presses her hands back into the dough, causing large bubbles to form. The dough thins, then opens like a gaping yawn, as the air escapes.

"But the lady in the fog ..." My voice is quiet. "You said she died of a broken heart."

"She did." Grandma buries her knuckles in the dough. "Not all the tombstones say 1762. Her name was Jenny Cooper. If you look on her gravestone, the year of her death is 1797. Much later than the small pox epidemic. But she was the last person to be buried in the old cemetery." She folds the dough over creating more bubbles which she punches down with her fists.

"How do you know?"

"Because I've been to the old cemetery, too." She raises her eyes to meet mine. "And I just know."

"What happened to her husband?"

"He was at sea – on three-year voyage. When he returned to Poo-spatuck and learned what had happened to his wife and child, he immediately signed on for another voyage. He never came home again. Must have died somewhere out there in the great big blue."

"What was his name?"

"If I remember correctly, it was Matthias."

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For weeks the skies are clear. The days are filled with bright blinding yellow. The winds from the sea blow cool and moist. Mr. Brothers is quiet. No calls of "Thar she blows!" in the early hours of the evening.

For awhile I forget about the lady of the fog, Matthias and his crime, Mr. Brothers' confused eyes.

Then one afternoon, Grandpa, who does odd jobs in town, comes back from work earlier than usual. He and Grandma talk in hushed tones. But I already know. Mrs. Kellis told me in the morning when I brought her some of Grandma's beach plum jam.

"Outbreak of smallpox in town," she said as she handed me two jars of honey. "Tell your Grandma I have some dried leaves from the pitcher plant. She can have some if she wants. I've got plenty." I nodded, knowing the pitcher plant is supposed to help people if they get sick with the pox. It grows wild in the forest. Grandma already has some ground up leaves in a clay pot on the cupboard shelf.

In the evening Grandma puts a spoonful in boiling water. Once it cools she pours the water through a strainer into a cup, and gives it to me. I sip the bitter tea, feeling its strength. But why hadn't it helped mama? Why

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hadn't it helped the people in 1762? I don't ask. Grandma and Grandpa sit at the table, sigh, smile at me, and say nothing more than, "Drink up, little one. It'll do you good."

In the village three people come down with a fever. Then seven. Then ten. Grandma goes from house to house, making tea, applying cold wet towels to people's foreheads, holding their hands, and whispering things into their ears.

One day, she says, "Mr. Brothers is ill."

She sets off down the dirt road. I go after her.

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The air is heavy in Mr. Brothers' cabin. He lies in bed, moaning with fever.

"It's me, Rose Perdue," Grandma explains to him. "I've come to help. I'm going to put this cloth on your forehead. Is that ok?"

Mr. Brothers' eyes are glassier than usual. He looks about the room, but his eyes see nothing.

I help Grandma make a fire in the hearth and boil water for pitcher plant tea.

Grandma sits at his bedside and wipes his forehead. That night she spreads some blankets by the fire and tells me to rest. She kisses my forehead. "You shouldn't be here," she says.

"Mutchesesumetook can't touch me."

"I know." Grandma says she doesn't know why, but if people get sick with the pox once, even just a little, they never get sick again. I got the illness, too, when I was a baby. When my mama died. But I only got a few dots on my forehead. They're still there now. They'll never go away. Grandma says every bad thing in the world leaves its mark.

But she still makes me drink tea. "Just to make sure Mutchesesumetook doesn't even think about getting close."

In the middle of the night Mr. Brothers gets noisy. I wake to cries of "Matthias, it wasn't your fault. Matthias! Listen to me, believe me. It wasn't your fault!"

Grandma holds Mr. Brother's hand and leans toward him. Quietly, she says. "Of course not. It wasn't Matthias's fault."

Pushing the blanket off me, I rise to my elbows and stare at Grandma.

She looks at me with a quizzical expression. Then she turns back to Mr. Brothers. "Of course not, of course not."

"He loved it. Didn't mean it. But it died. Killed it, he did."

"Right. A cat. But he didn't mean to. He didn't." Grandma presses the cloth to his forehead.

Mr. Brothers looks at Grandma, his eyes wide, his mouth open.

Grandma and I exchange glances again. The same thought enters our

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minds at the same time. Grandma turns to Mr. Brothers. "Tell Matthias, that baby died of consumption. He didn't kill it. Why, he wasn't even there. He was at sea. You can't kill something from far away."

Strange low rumbles come from Mr. Brothers' throat.

"Shhhh. He didn't want it to happen," says Grandma. "He couldn't have known."

Mr. Brother's voice crackles, like leaves rustling in a breeze, but he utters no words we can understand. His eyes flash, like eyes that see, but don't believe.

Coldness fills the room. Mr. Brothers continues to let out quiet, deep, guttural sounds. Grandma says quietly over and over again, "You're right, it was not Matthias's fault..." She presses her lips together for a moment as she studies his face. I know she's trying to understand the thoughts tumbling through his mind. Suddenly she says, "It was not your fault." He looks at her. His eyes glow brightly in the candlelight. They're different somehow. They're still. They're clear. Then he blinks, as his eyelids grow heavy. His head sinks deeper into his pillow. In the early hours of the morning, the strange sounds from Mr. Brother's throat stop. Grandma pulls his blanket over his face. She looks at me gravely. "This is what the sickness does."

The next day a grave is dug in the new cemetery, next to the new church. Mr. Brothers' body is burned, as it must be when smallpox strikes. His ashes are placed in a wooden box, and deposited in the ground. Minister Drummond stands by quietly as Grandma and Grandpa burn tobacco and say prayers of their own over Mr. Brothers' grave. Only a few other people come to his burial. Grandma says that's a good thing. During times of sickness, people should stay at home. In June at the *Wikandaminabo*, the feast of the dead, the rest of the village can say their prayers for him.

Many weeks pass and the sickness leaves the village, the neighboring town. It leaves Long Island all together. Only five people from the village have died. Most of them were old. Grandma's relieved.

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Spring comes. Grandma and I walk to Mr. Brothers' cabin. Grandma thinks it only right that we should pack up his things. Give away anything useful. Burn what's not. "Nothing is sadder," she says, "than to let things just fall apart."

We wash and dry all his bedding, then fold it up. "Mrs. Brown could perhaps make use of this," she says, tying the linens in a bundle. She scrubs out his pots. "I'm afraid he was not a neat and tidy person." She points to the crust of cornmeal around the edges of his wooden plate, the only one he's got. She kneels down beside his sea chest. The lid is heavy and makes a loud creaking noise as she opens it. She and I hold our breath. The questions in my mind quiver and shake.

Grandma heaves up the lid. We stare into the chest.

It contains not a thing.

"Well, that's that," Grandma says. She sits back on her heels and rests her hands on her knees.

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"How old do you think he was?"

"Older than me and your Grandpa by a good amount I'd say."

"No one remembers him. Really? No one?"

"Liza," she says, her voice firm. "He was at sea most of his life. What was there to remember? He must have signed onto his first voyage before I was even born. And when he came back to Poospatuck, already his mind wasn't quite right. He was never really with us. We tried to ask him questions ... Brothers isn't an Unkechaug family name. But ... well, you can't ask too much." She bites her lip and makes a funny face. "He knew more Unkechaug words than I do. But yet he couldn't tell us whose family he belonged to. Or he didn't want to. Or he didn't have any family left to talk about. Oh, Liza." She sighs. "We'll never know, now."

"Do you think he might have been ..."

"Matthias? Anything's possible, Liza. Anything. He was old enough, I suppose."

"Why would Mr. Brothers ... I mean Matthias ... think it was his fault? The baby dying and all?"

Grandma shook her head. "I guess, because he was supposed to take care of his family. But he didn't. He was at sea. Maybe he thought if he'd been home, he could have saved them."

"But he couldn't have."

"No, he couldn't."

The next day, Grandma, Grandpa, and I walk back over to his cabin. Grandpa drags a cart behind him. We pile the bedding, the pots and pans, and the one wooden plate in it, and Grandpa pulls it back to our house.

In time, people come and take away the furniture, one piece at a time. They sell it, or burn it, or use it well. Even the sea chest. The cabin now stands completely empty.

Whenever the thick fog rolls in, we hear the clicking of Jenny Cooper's knitting needles and hear her quiet whimpers. At those times, I think of her baby. I think of Mr. Brothers. And I think of mama.

Then, I hurry and find something to do.

Memories are like air, thin and wispy. But if they settle, I've learned to blow them away, as I do the dust that accumulates on the cupboard shelf. One puff, two puffs. They're gone. Floating somewhere far above me. As do all things that have no weight.