

PRINCE OF DARKNESS

He was one of those too well behaved boys. His mother worried about that. She wished he would disobey sometimes, or at least that he would object. But he didn't. He was "as good as gold." And she kept her silence. She could hardly counsel her son to be bad. She was, herself, one of those too well behaved wives. Only she fretted about her son. Even this fretting troubled her; her husband would have been furious had he suspected.

The boy's name was George, or "Giawge," as people said thereabouts. George and his family lived on Monroe Island, just off of Owls Head in Maine.

"It's a Dr. Christensen, who'll preaching tonight, I see," her husband was saying to the boy. "Perhaps you ought to think of going on in to hear him, George."

"Yes, sir."

"He'll be here only these two nights. Would be a shame to miss what he has to say."

"Yes, sir. I'll row in tonight, father."

"Mm." The father turned back to his figures, tallying the day's receipts.

This matter of religion was something else the woman fretted about. Where had it come from? She had no religious inclinations herself. In her family, religion and all other forms of superstition had been treated as a subject for scorn. And she had always supposed her husband felt the same way. Not that they talked about such things. (They didn't talk about much of anything.) They had not been married in a church, and she had no reason to think he had ever set foot in one. But when George was born, her husband had arranged for a christening. And then, from time to time, he would drop the boy off at the little church in town. He kept surprisingly close track of the opportunities for a boy's religious training.

"You'll want to do your book work before supper then, George," she said, "It may be late by the time you come back."

"Yes, mother. I'll do it now." He fetched his green book bag of school materials and headed up to his room.

When George came down for supper, he had on his brown jacket and narrow black tie. His hair had been wetted and brushed. He ate his chowder without speaking, and his father didn't speak, and his mother didn't speak either. Only she smiled at the boy fondly when she pushed the shortbread toward him, after he had cleared the dishes. The strawberries were in and she'd been able to buy some local ones for the first time. He smiled back at her as he spooned the crushed and sugared fruit over his biscuit.

"We'll," he said, after he had cleared the table again and stacked the dishes, "I'll be on my way then."

His father sat on at his empty place at the table, not responding. George waited for a respectful time and then turned to go. His mother ran a hand through his hair as he passed.

The little skiff was fastened to a rope loop that passed over a reel attached to the shore. The boat could be reeled out to the buoy beyond the tide line so it didn't become stranded when the tide was out. The tidefall in that part of the coast could be as much as eight feet. George reeled the boat in toward the shore and stepped into it.

He sniffed at the breeze. The raccoons on the island, he knew, could tell the tide from the scent of the flats, and he was trying to teach himself the same skill. When the tide was in, the air had a cleaner smell, less metallic. Or at least he suspected that was true. So far he really couldn't really tell the difference. The breeze this night had an acrid remnant of the afternoon's thunderstorm. The water was glassy, the color of melted solder in the slanting evening light. He set out toward the mainland, less than half a mile away. As he rowed, as always when he rowed, his thoughts drifted away.

Tonight he was thinking about the Bradford girl, Mary Ellen Bradford. The Bradfords were "from away," from Boston perhaps or New York. It was their summer house he was headed for now. Since his father was the winter caretaker of the property, the Bradfords let him use their dock to tie up his skiff. They weren't there but for a few weeks a year anyway. Mary Ellen was approximately his age. She might be on the dock or near it this evening. In the last two years, George had seen the girl only a few times and had still fewer opportunities to exchange any words with her. But something so wonderful had passed between them on one occasion that he thought of her often.

It had been the previous summer, on June 21, her birthday. Her father had hired Mr. Deeds and his launch, the *Ida D.*, to take Mary Ellen and a few of her friends out to one of the islands for a picnic. And George, who was working for Mr. Deeds that summer pulling traps, went along as mate. The girls were all dressed in party dresses. They had to be very careful not to get them dirty. George showed them where to sit, on a long cushion covered with a clean blanket that he had set out on top of the deckhouse. But it was too much to ask for four lively girls to sit entirely still on such a morning, with the gulls wheeling over their heads and dolphin cutting through the sea under the bow and the tiny black guillemots, floating together in clusters, "rafted up" as Mr. Deeds said. Before long the girls were racing around the boat, playing tag and looking into everything. George sensed that it was his responsibility to keep them out of trouble, but he had no idea what to do. He looked helplessly at Mr. D. at the helm. But the old man only smiled and shook his head.

When they first came on board, George had explained to Mr. Bradford and the girls that they mustn't, no matter what else, touch the black exhaust stack that was mounted on the side of the deck house. It got so hot with the engine gasses running through it, he said, that it would burn anything that touched it. He spit onto his thumb and touched the stack lightly with the wet spot, making it sizzle. All the girls nodded soberly. But then later, sure enough, one of them brushed a wrist against the stack as she ran past. She paused, stunned for an instant, and then shrieked out in pain. George was at her side immediately. He took hold of her arm and plunged it to the wrist into the water at the gunwale to cool the

burn. Then he scurried below to get some petroleum jelly to smear over it. He hadn't even noticed which one of the girls it was. When he had finished with the jelly, he looked up into her tear-stained face.

"That should make it stop hurting now in no time, Miss Bradford."

"Thank you," she said softly.

He thought she looked brave for all her tears. Brave and terribly pretty.

They put the party ashore on Lasell island and passed the baskets of picnic foods and blankets and games to them on the little stone pier. Then Mr. Deeds told George to jump onto the pier himself and push out the bow. "Mr. Bradford has asked for you to stay on for their party, George. Just in case your services are required again. And I can make do without you just this once."

Mr. Bradford put his arm around George's shoulder. "A young man who can keep his head in an emergency is always worth having along."

George did as he was told, and the *Ida D.* reversed. Mr. Deeds said he would be back for them in the afternoon. So, instead of pulling traps that day, he found himself taking part in the first birthday party of his life. He ate hot dogs and cake and sang and played the games the girls taught him.

It was after the party had slowed down, after the lunch and when Mr. Bradford had gone to nap in the bushes, that George found himself sitting beside Mary Ellen, alone on a slate outcropping that ran down into the water. She didn't say anything for a long time. It occurred to him that she might be shy, just as he was. At last she nodded down to the angry red spot on her wrist and said, "It hurt terribly, you know. I didn't think I'd be able to stand it."

"I guess so."

"I almost never cry."

"Sure," he said.

Again she was silent for a while. "You were wonderful, George. The moment you took charge, I felt immensely better. Just immensely."

"I didn't do anything."

"You did." She said it matter of factly, correcting what he had said, since it was simply wrong. She waited again, considering what would come next. And then she said the wonderful thing, looking right into his eyes: "I'm going to have breasts soon," she said. "And when I do, you may touch them."

So it was sex that George was thinking of as he rowed across to Owls Head. He wouldn't have given it that word and wouldn't know precisely what the word meant for a few more years, but that's what he was thinking about. The thoughts filled him with pleasant confusion and a trace of guilt. He knew that Mary Ellen would have forgotten what she promised, but that didn't even matter. It had been said at the time, honestly and from the heart. That was what mattered. He wasn't even sure he wanted to touch her. But he loved to replay the words.

When he tied up the skiff, she was nowhere in sight. He walked on toward the church. To outward appearances, he was just another of the worshipers arriving at the little chapel building that evening, ready to participate in religious observances. Only, inside the private chapel of his head, something rather

different was playing: a close up of a pretty little blue-eyed girl saying gravely, "And when I do . . ."

The truth was that his father's insistence on a religious upbringing for him made no more sense to George than to his mother. He went to the services when he was told to because that was what good boys did. Nothing that ever passed inside the church had touched him at all. It was painless, but boring. The minister, Mr. McNeeley took care to see that he was exposed to all the proper homilies and lessons. He did this because George was the only child who came to the services without either parent. But, as he himself was not a fervent believer, nothing at all got through to the boy. George thought of church attendance as a routine no more meaningful than moving his bowels: you did it because it had to be done; you got it over with as soon as possible and then got on to more interesting things. Nothing ever affected him inside that church. Nothing, that is, until the sermon of the Reverend Doctor Gillead Christensen.

Even before he entered the church, it was clear that something was different about this evening's service. There was a battered green school bus parked on the street and the sound of murmured prayers already coming from within. It appeared that Dr. Christensen had attracted some followers from other parts. This enlarged audience was praying aloud when the boy entered, praying together without any direction from the pulpit to do so. And as he sat down, they began to sing "The Shepherd of Israel." They clapped, too, to keep the rhythm, something that was never done by Owls Head people. The villagers kept their silence, not sure at all that they approved.

When Dr. Christensen stepped to the pulpit, the effect was electric. Mr. McNeeley's usual pallid fare of goodness and sweet love of Jesus was set aside for the evening. Dr. Christensen's subject was *sin*.

He glowered at the congregation. Mostly he seemed to be glowering directly at George. "Is it the righteous who are here this night? The god-fearing and loving children of the Lord?" His voice was raised accusingly. "Is it?! Or is it just the usual pack of sinners? How many are here for love of the Lord DON'T ANSWER! Don't add to the heap sin on top of you the further sin of pride and self-celebration. You're not here for love. You are here because of TERROR. Because of fear of the just retribution of a wrathful God. He knows what is in your hearts. And I know what is in your hearts. And you know what is in your hearts." He raised himself on his toes and stared angrily at them. "It's LUST that's in your hearts. Lust, wicked lust. Don't deny it! Don't compound the sin. The sins of the flesh are reeking from your skin. I can smell them. In this sacred house of worship we find no worshipers at all, only filthy sinners. Each one more filthy than all the others. It drips from your pores, your sin does."

Before long, the congregation was moaning softly.

"You are not the friends of Jesus but of the Prince of Darkness. He dares not enter into this House, but he is just outside. And he is gloating because of your degradation. Because in the private recesses of your thoughts, you have let him in. You have indulged yourselves in willful wickedness. Haven't you?! You will be judged and judged harshly, by an angry God, not just for what you do, but for your evil thoughts and intentions.

“Oh, you think they are invisible. You think you can appear to be righteous, and still harbor in your thoughts the revels of the flesh. But you can't. You sully this holy sepulcher with your filth. And you know it. You are stained with ordures of your imaginings from almost every minute of your lives.”

George didn't know what 'ordures' might be, but he got the gist. He swallowed hard and began to sweat. Dr. Christensen's eyes were boring into him. The man knew everything. He knew about Mary Ellen and her dreadful promise. And he knew what George had been thinking only moments before. It wasn't only Dr. Christensen who could smell the sin dripping from his pores; George could smell it himself. And he was sure that everyone around him could as well.

“The Prince of Darkness is waiting for you just outside. I have only this moment to save you, only this pitiful moment of cleanliness and sanctity. Before you pour out again into his realm, and he takes you one more time. When you go out of that door, will you give yourself back to him? Will you go directly from the worship of God to the worship of the flesh? I fear so. I can hear his chortling from this very spot. He knows of your weakness. He knows he can twist and warp your inner self, to stain what should be pure and perfect with the filth of fleshly longing. And you will lend yourselves to his evil purpose. And thus ensure your . . . DAMNATION!”

It is a trick of public speaking not to address the audience, but to speak directly to individual members of the audience. It was something the Reverend Dr. Christensen had never been taught; he was a natural. He picked out one member of the congregation after another and spoke directly to each one. So that, in the end, each of them felt the whole sermon had been delivered to himself alone. Dr. Christensen railed and shouted directly into their faces. Perhaps he picked on George more than the others because the boy's face was covered with icy sweat.

“What is the means of his power over you? I will tell you in no uncertain terms.” His long bony finger was pointing directly at George. “It is the tool of the Evil One. It's what he tempts you with: GIRLS!”

George stopped breathing entirely. “Don't deny it! It is their vile bodies that dance inside your head. ISN'T IT??? Vile bodies dancing, shameless in their nakedness.”

The rest was just a mopping up. He described the fate of those who trifled with their god-given inner purity. He told them about Hell, where every sensuous thought was replaced by a burning coal, sizzling into the victim's flesh. It would not only be the pain of that burning they would have to endure, but the smell of their own frying fat, the sizzling sound of their burning flesh, until they were obsessed with only one prayer, that the torture might end. Only it wouldn't end. Not sooner and not later and not even Ever. It would go on for all of eternity. And the only thing they would hear over their own sizzling flesh and moans was a cackle of victory from the Prince of Darkness.

When the Reverend Dr. Christensen finally turned on his heel and abandoned them, George could barely move. There were tears streaming down his cheeks. Most of all, he feared to go outside. But the congregation was rising. They were leaving this sanctuary and he knew he would have to leave it as well.

He was the last one to step down the rickety wooden steps at the front of the church.

Outside, he kept his eyes down and hurried back toward the shore. There were wisps of fog in the air, a heavy and threatening fog, full of evil. Everything was full of evil.

The Bradfords' house, as he approached it, was lit up at every window. And he could hear music coming from the inside. He made his way grimly past. His head was turned squarely away from those yellow windows. He did not look there, not even once. But he knew what he would be at every window if he did look: naked girls dancing. He hurried down to the skiff and pushed off into the fog.

He rowed for a long time, perhaps too long. Perhaps he had missed the island and was pulling out to sea. But then his sense of time was confused by his fear. He could hear his own teeth chattering. He rowed through the fog, his heart clutched in the grip of his terrible tension. He was too frightened even to pray.

Little by little he became aware he was not alone. As he pulled the little skiff forward, he could hear the sounds of the One who was following him. At first it was just the slight ripple in the water, as if there was another bow behind him cutting through the glassy sea. But then he began to hear something else too, a labored breathing. There it was, a wheezing puff, as of huge and not too well-functioning lungs. There was a gurgling, and then once, a long sigh. He couldn't see in the darkness and fog, but there was a large presence behind him, he knew. An enormous presence.

What he could see now was, at his side, a yellowish disc of light reflected on the sea. When he stopped rowing and glided forward, the water smoothed out where his oars had been, and the image of the moon formed itself on the water. He had come into a swirl in the fog, where the sky was clear above him. He looked up to see the nearly full moon and the stars.

There was a sudden scraping sound behind him, and George shrieked. The skiff had ground up on the rocky shore. Then there was the other sound again at his stern. He turned back, full of terror to confront it. There in the water just aft of the skiff was a head, bigger than any head he had ever seen. It had black eyes and ears that seemed to go on forever, ears big enough to be wings almost. He realized that the Presence must be ten feet tall or more to support such a head and to be standing on the bottom in water so deep. But then, he realized that it wasn't standing at all, but swimming. Only the head was out of water. He held his breath as the head approached. Again the labored breathing, and again the sigh. Its swimming seemed so weak, so exhausted, and the sense of evil began to dissipate, to be replaced by the sense of a creature faced with its own demise, of bare and questionable survival. It was only a few feet away now, clear in the spot of moonlight. What had seemed to be ears, he now realized were not ears at all, but horns. But not really horns, either. They were antlers. Then there was the sound of hooves making contact with the rocks underneath the black surface of the sea. He stared open-mouthed as the beast moved past him and lifted itself from the water, stumbling onto the rocks. It went down on two knees, and paused there, panting heavily. Then, with a mighty effort, the huge creature lifted itself up and started up the beach. It turned one time to look back at him.

He could see it clearly now in the light of the moon, an enormous moose. Then it was gone.