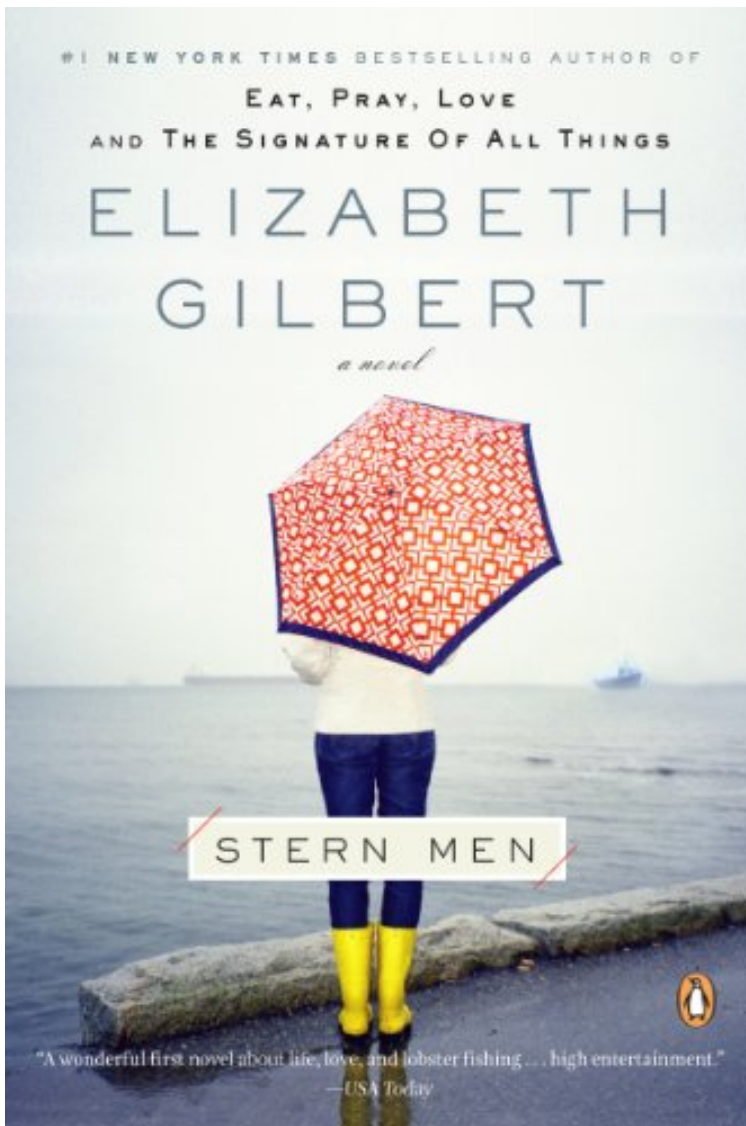


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Stern Men: A Novel



*Par Elizabeth Gilbert
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe "wonderful first novel about life, love, and lobster fishing" (USA Today) from the #1 bestselling writerLook out for Elizabeth Gilberts new book,Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear, on sale now! In 2000, Elizabeth Gilbert's Stern Men debuted to phenomenal critical attention. Now, Penguin is publishing a new edition of Gilbert's wise and charming novel for the millions of readers who devoured Eat, Pray, Love and remain hungry for more. Off the coast of Maine, Ruth Thomas is born into a feud fought for generations by two groups of local lobstermen over fishing rights for the waters that lie between their respective islands. At eighteen, she has returned from boarding school-smart as a whip, feisty, and irredeemably unromantic-determined to throw over her education and join the "stern men"working the lobster boats. Gilbert utterly captures the American spirit through an unforgettable heroine who is destined

for greatness-and love-despite herself.From the Trade Paperback edition..comJohn Irving wishes. That he could be as mordantly funny as Elizabeth Gilbert, that is. With the publication of her first novel, *Stern Men*, Gilbert has been widely compared to New England's unofficial novelist laureate. And the comparison is a natural; this writer gives us a tough, lovable heroine against an iconoclastic, rural backdrop. Ruth Thomas grows up on Fort Niles Island, off the coast of Maine, among lobstermen, lobster boats, and, well, lobsters. There's just not much out there besides ocean. Abandoned by her mother, she lives sometimes with her dad and sometimes with her beautiful neighbor, Mrs. Pommeroy, and the seven idiot Pommeroy boys. Eventually she is plucked from obscurity by the wealthy Ellises--vacationers on Fort Niles for some hundred years--and sent, against her will, to a fancy boarding school in Delaware. (Sorting out her relationship with this highly manipulative family is one of the novel's crooked joys.) Now she has returned, and is casting about for something to do. What Ruth does (hang around with her eccentric island friends, fall in love, organize the lobstermen) makes for an engaging book that's all the more charming for its rather lumpy, slow-paced plotting. Gilbert delivers a kind of delicious ethnography of lobster-fishing culture, if such a thing is possible, as well as a love story and a bildungsroman. But best of all, she possesses an ear for the ridiculous ways people communicate. One of Mrs. Pommeroy's young sons, "in addition to having the local habit of not pronouncing r at the end of a word--could not say any word that started with r.... What's more, for a long time everyone on Fort Niles Island imitated him. Over the whole spread of the island, you could hear the great strong fishermen complaining that they had to mend their wopes or fix their wiggings or buy a new short-wave wadio." The beauty of Gilbert's book is that she gives us an isolated rural culture, and refuses to settle for finding humor in its backwardness. Instead she gives us a community of uneducated but razor-sharp wits, and produces an impressive comic debut. --Claire Dederer

Extrait Praise for *Stern Men* Rich as drawn butter and as comical as the crawly crustacean itself . . . Gilbert has penned a Dickensian tale; one wishes it ran in two volumes. USA Today Beautifully wrought and very funny . . . Gilbert's tangy language has as much music as muscle; the novel is Emersonian in its clarity and Austenian in its sly social observations. *Mirabella* While Elizabeth Gilbert is not the first writer to suggest that smart women have much to teach stern men, she puts the idea forward with rugged power. *The New York Times Book* This funny, clever, and wise novel, filled with well-developed characters who are more than eccentric stereotypes, moves [Gilbert] squarely to the forefront of writers to watch. *The Seattle Times* A wonderful novel that will have you laughing out loud, *Stern Men* is an admirable debut from a writer obviously destined for literary longevity. Like Tyler and Irving (and Joseph Heller, Stanley Elkin, and Alice Hoffman) Gilbert has a gift for comic fiction that conveys serious issues. And like those writers, Gilbert will most certainly be around for a long time to come. *The Denver Post* Gilbert's storytelling brio and keen intelligence prove irresistible. *New York Newsday*

PENGUIN BOOKS STERN MEN Elizabeth Gilbert began her writing journey with two acclaimed works of fiction: the short story collection *Pilgrims*, a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award, and the novel *Stern Men*, a New York Times Notable Book. These were followed by three works of nonfiction: *The Last American Man*, which was a finalist for the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award, and two memoirs, *Eat, Pray, Love* and *Committed*, both of which were number one New York Times bestsellers. Gilbert's work has been published in more than thirty languages. In 2008, *Time* magazine named her one of the one hundred most influential people in the world. She lives in Frenchtown, New Jersey. Her Web site is www.elizabethgilbert.com. To access Penguin Readers Guides online, visit our Web sites at www.penguin.com or www.vpbookclub.com.

BOOKS BY ELIZABETH GILBERT *Pilgrims* *Stern Men* *The Last American Man* *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything* *Across Italy, India and Indonesia* *Committed: A Love Story* *The Signature of All Things*

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Table of Contents Cover About the Author Title Page Copyright Page Dedication Epigraph Chapter 1 Chapter 2 Chapter 3 Chapter 4 Chapter 5 Chapter 6 Chapter 7 Chapter 8 Chapter 9 Chapter 10 Chapter 11 Chapter 12 EPILOGUE Acknowledgments To Sarah Chalfant. For everything. In an aquarium at Woods Hole in the

summer of 1892, a conch was placed in the same tank with a female lobster, which was nearly ten inches long, and which had been in captivity about eight weeks. The conch, which was of average size, was not molested for several days, but at last, when hard pressed by hunger, the lobster attacked it, broke off its shell, piece by piece, and made quick work of the soft parts. *The American Lobster: A Study of Its Habits and Development* Francis Hobart Herrick, Ph.D., 1895

TWENTY MILES out from the coast of Maine, Fort Niles Island and Courne Haven Island face off two old bastards in a staring contest, each convinced he is the others only guard. Nothing else is near them. They are among nobody. Rocky and potato-shaped, they form an archipelago of two. Finding these twin islands on a map is a most unexpected discovery; like finding twin towns on a prairie, twin encampments on a desert, twin huts on a tundra. So isolated from the rest of the world, Fort Niles Island and Courne Haven Island are separated from each other by only a fast gut of seawater, known as Worthy Channel. Worthy Channel, nearly a mile wide, is so shallow in parts at low tide that unless you knew what you were doing unless you really knew what you were doing you might hesitate to cross it even in a canoe. In their specific geography, Fort Niles Island and Courne Haven Island are so astonishingly similar that their creator must have been either a great simpleton or a great comic. They are almost exact duplicates. The islands the last peaks of the same ancient, sunken mountain chain are made from the same belt of quality black granite, obscured by the same cape of lush spruce. Each island is approximately four miles long and two miles wide. Each has a handful of small coves, a number of freshwater ponds, a scattering of rocky beaches, a single sandy beach, a single great hill, and a single deep harbor, held possessively behind its back, like a hidden sack of cash. On each island, there is a church and a schoolhouse. Down by the harbor is a main street (called, on each island, Main Street), with a tiny cluster of public buildings post office, grocer, tavern. There are no paved roads to be found on either island. The houses on the islands are much alike, and the boats in the harbors are identical. The islands share the same pocket of interesting weather, significantly warmer in the winter and cooler in the summer than any coastal town, and they often find themselves trapped within the same spooky bank of fog. The same species of fern, orchid, mushroom, and wild rose can be found on both islands. And, finally, these islands are populated by the same breeds of birds, frogs, deer, rats, foxes, snakes, and men. The Penobscot Indians left the first human records on Fort Niles and Courne Haven. They found the islands an excellent source of sea fowl eggs, and the ancient stone weapons of these early visitors still show up in certain coves. The Penobscot didn't long remain so far out in the middle of the sea, but they did use the islands as temporary fishing stations, a practice picked up handily in the early seventeenth century by the French. The first permanent settlers of Fort Niles and Courne Haven were two Dutch brothers, Andreas and Walter Van Heuvel, who, after taking their wives and children and livestock out to the islands in June of 1702, laid claim to one island for each family. They called their settlements Bethel and Canaan. The foundation of Walter Van Heuvels home remains, a moss-covered pile of rock in a meadow on what he called Canaan Island the exact site, in fact, of Walters murder at the hands of his brother just one year into their stay. Andreas also killed Walters children on that day and took his brothers wife over to Bethel Island to live with his family. Andreas was frustrated, it is said, that his own wife was not bearing him children fast enough. Eager for more heirs, he set out to claim the only other woman around. Andreas Van Heuvel broke his leg some months later, while building a barn, and he died from an ensuing infection. The women and children were soon rescued by a passing English patrol ship and taken to the stockade at Fort Pemaquid. Both women were pregnant at the time. One delivered a healthy son, whom she named Niles. The other womans child died in delivery, but the mothers life was saved by Thaddeus Courne, an English doctor. Somehow this event gave rise to the names of the two islands: Fort Niles and Courne Haven two very pretty places that would not be settled again for another fifty years. The Scots-Irish came next, and they stayed. One Archibald Boyd, along with his wife, his sisters, and their husbands, took over Courne Haven in 1758. They were joined during the next decade by the Cobbs, Pommeroys, and Strachans. Duncan Wishnell and his family started a sheep farm on Fort Niles in 1761, and Wishnell soon found himself surrounded by neighbors called Dalgleish, Thomas, Addams, Lyford, Cardoway, and ODonnell, as well as some Cobbs whod moved over from Fort Niles. The young ladies of one island married the young men of the other, and the family names began floating back and forth between the two places like loose buoys. By the mid-1800s, new names appeared, from new arrivals: Friend, Cashion, Yale, and Cordin. These people shared much the same ancestral background. And because there were not many of them out there, its not surprising that, in time, the inhabitants came to resemble one another more and more. Rampant intermarriage was the culprit. Fort Niles and Courne Haven somehow managed to avoid the fate of Malaga Island, whose population became so inbred that the state had to finally

step in and evacuate everyone, but the blood lines were still extremely thin. In time, there developed a distinctive form (short, tightly muscled, sturdy) and face (pale skin, dark brows, small chin), which came to be associated with both Courne Haven and Fort Niles. After several generations, it could be fairly said that every man looked like his neighbor and every woman would have been recognized by her ancestors on sight. They were all farmers and fishermen. They were all Presbyterians and Congregationalists. They were all political conservatives. During the Revolutionary War, they were colonial patriots; during the Civil War, they sent young men in blue wool jackets to fight for the Union in distant Virginia. They did not like to be governed. They did not like to pay taxes. They did not trust experts, and they were not interested in the opinions or the appearance of strangers. Over the years, the islands were, on different occasions and for various reasons, incorporated into several inland counties, one after another. These political mergers never ended well. Each arrangement ultimately became unsatisfactory to the islanders, and by 1900 Courne Haven and Fort Niles were left to form an independent township. Together, they created the tiny domain of Skillet County. But that, too, was a temporary arrangement. In the end, the islands themselves split; the men on each island, it seemed, felt best and safest and most autonomous when left completely alone. The population of the islands continued to grow. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, there came a muscular expansion, with the advent of the granite trade. A young New Hampshire industrialist named Dr. Jules Ellis brought his Ellis Granite Company to both islands, where he soon made a fortune by excavating and selling the glossy black rock. Courne Haven, in 1889, hit its peak, achieving a record population of 618. This number included Swedish immigrants, who had been hired by the Ellis Granite Company as raw-muscled quarry labor. (Some of the granite on Courne Haven was so rifted and coarse that it was good only for making cobblestones, easy work for unskilled laborers like the Swedes.) That same year, Fort Niles boasted a society of 627 souls, including Italian immigrants, who had been hired as skilled carvers. (Fort Niles had some fine, mausoleum-grade granite beautiful granite to which only Italian craftsmen could do justice.) There was never much work for the native islanders in the granite quarries. The Ellis Granite Company much preferred hiring immigrants, who were less expensive and easier to control. And there was little interaction between the immigrant workers and the locals. On Courne Haven, some local fishermen married Swedish women, and there appeared a streak of blonds in that island's population. On Fort Niles, however, the pale, dark-haired Scottish look remained unsullied. Nobody on Fort Niles married the Italians. It would have been unacceptable. The years passed. Trends in fishing changed, from lines to nets and from cod to hake. The boats evolved. The farms grew obsolete. A town hall was built on Courne Haven. A bridge was built over Murder Creek on Fort Niles. Telephone service arrived in 1895, through a cable run under the sea, and by 1918 several homes had electricity. The granite industry dwindled and was finally driven into extinction by the advent of concrete. The population shrank, almost as quickly as it had ballooned. Young men moved off the islands to find work in big factories and big cities. Old names started vanishing from the rolls, slowly leaking away. The last of the Boyds died on Courne Haven in 1904. There were no O'Donnells to be found on Fort Niles after 1910, and with each decade of the twentieth century the number of families on Fort Niles and Courne Haven diminished further. Once sparsely inhabited, the islands became sparse once again. What the two islands needed what they always needed was good blood between them. So far away from the rest of the nation, so similar in temperament, lineage, and history, the residents of Courne Haven and Fort Niles should have been good neighbors. They needed one another. They should have tried to serve each other well. They should have shared resources and burdens and benefited from all manner of cooperation. And perhaps they could have been good neighbors. Perhaps their destiny did not have to be one of conflict. Certainly there was peace between the two islands for the first two centuries or so of settlement. Perhaps if the men of Fort Niles and Courne Haven had remained simple farmers or deep-sea fishermen, they would have been excellent neighbors. We have no way of knowing what might have been, though, because they ultimately became lobstermen. And that was the end of good neighbors. Lobsters do not recognize boundaries, and neither, therefore, can lobstermen. Lobstermen seek lobsters wherever those creatures may roam, and this means lobstermen chase their prey all over the shallow sea and the cold-water coastline. This means lobstermen are constantly competing with one another for good fishing territory. They get in each other's way, tangle each other's trap lines, spy on each other's boats, and steal each other's information. Lobstermen fight over every cubic yard of the sea. Every lobster one man catches is a lobster another man has lost. It is a mean business, and it makes for mean men. As humans, after all, we become that which we seek. Dairy farming makes men steady and reliable and temperate; deer hunting makes men quiet and fast and sensitive; lobster fishing makes men suspicious and wily and ruthless. The first lobster war between Fort Niles Island

and Courne Haven Island began in 1902. Other islands in other bays of Maine have had their lobster wars, but none was waged so early as this one. There was scarcely even a lobster industry in 1902; the lobster had not yet become a rare delicacy. In 1902, lobsters were common, worthless, even an annoyance. After bad storms, hundreds and thousands of the creatures washed up on the shores and had to be cleared away with pitchforks and wheelbarrows. Laws were passed forbidding affluent households from feeding their servants lobster more than three days a week. At that moment in history, lobstering was merely something island men did to supplement their income from farming or vessel fishing. Men had been lobstering on Fort Niles and Courne Haven for only thirty years or so, and they still fished in coats and ties. It was a new industry. So it is remarkable that anyone could have felt sufficiently invested in the lobster industry to start a war over it. But that is exactly what happened in 1902. The first Fort Niles-Courne Haven lobster war began with a famous and reckless letter written by Mr. Valentine Addams. By 1902, Addamses were to be found on both islands;

Valentine Addams was a Fort Niles Addams. He was known to be intelligent enough, but famously high-strung and maybe the slightest bit mad. It was in the spring of 1902 that Valentine Addams wrote his letter. It was addressed to the Presiding Chairman of the Second International Fisheries Conference in Boston, a prestigious event to which Addams had not been invited. He sent neatly written copies of his letter to several of the Eastern Seaboard's major fishing newspapers. And he sent a copy to Courne Haven Island on the mail boat. Valentine wrote: Sirs! I must sadly and dutifully report a hateful new crime perpetrated by deceitful members of our local lobster fishing ranks. I have termed this crime Short Lobster Stocking. I refer to the practice by which some unscrupulous lobstermen will covertly pull up an honest lobsterman's pots during the night and exchange the honest man's Large Lobsters for a batch of the unscrupulous man's worthless young Short Lobsters. Consider the consternation of the honest fisherman, who pulls up his pots in daylight, only to discover worthless Short Lobsters within! I have been confounded by this practice again and again at the hands of my own neighbors from the Nearby Island of Courne Haven! Please consider addressing your commission to the detainment and punishment of these Courne Haven Island Short Lobster Bandits. (Whose names I list for your agents herein.) I remain your grateful reporter, Valentine Addams. In the spring of 1903, Valentine Addams wrote a letter to the Third International Fisheries Conference, again held in Boston. This conference, even larger than that of the year before, included dignitaries from the Canadian Provinces and from Scotland, Norway, and Wales. Addams again had not been invited. And why should he have been?

What business would a common fisherman like him have at such a gathering? This was a meeting of experts and legislators, not an occasion for the airing of local grievances. Why should he have been invited, with all the Welsh and Canadian dignitaries, and all the successful Massachusetts wholesalers, and all the renowned game wardens? But what of that? He wrote, in any case: Gentlemen! With all my respect, sir, please convey the following to your fellows: A pregnant she-lobster carries some 25,000 to 80,000 eggs on her belly, known to us fishermen as berries. As an article of food, these salty egg berries were once a popular addition to soups. You will recall that the eating of this article of food was officially discouraged some years ago, and that the practice of collecting for sale any berried she-lobster was outlawed. Sensible, sir! This was for the sound purpose of solving the Eastern Shores Lobster Problem and conserving the Eastern Shores Lobster. Gentlemen! By this date you must surely have heard that some scoundrel lobster fishermen have evaded the law by scraping the valuable berries off the creature's belly. The unscrupulous fisherman's motive is to keep this good breeding lobster for their personal sale and profit! Gentlemen! Scraped as such into the sea, these lobster eggs do not become healthy lobster fry, but, rather, become 25,000 to 80,000 bits of bait for hungry schools of cod and sole. Gentlemen! Look to those greedy fish bellies for the scores of lobsters vanished from our shores! Look to those unscrupulous Berry-Scraping Lobstermen for our diminishing lobster population! Gentlemen! The Scriptures ask, Shall the flocks and the herds be slain for them, to suffice them? Or shall all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, to suffice them? I have it on excellent authority,

Sirs, that On My Neighboring Island of Courne Haven, every fishing man practices berry-scraping! The States gaming agents stand unwilling to arrest or detain these Courne Haven thieves for they are thieves! Despite my reports. I intend to commence immediately confronting these scoundrels myself, delivering such punitive measures as I shall deem suitable, representing the certainty of my sound suspicions and the good name of your Commission. Gentlemen! I remain your willing agent, Valentine R. Addams. (And I include herewith the names of Courne Haven Scoundrels.) The very next month, Courne Haven Harbor's only pier burned down. Valentine Addams was suspected by several Courne Haven lobstermen of having participated in the act, a suspicion Addams did not much allay by being present at the Courne Haven fire, standing in his peapod boat just off the shore at dawn, shaking his fist and yelling, Portuguese whores! Look

at the Catholic beggars now! as the Courne Haven lobstermen (who were no more Portuguese or Catholic than Valentine Addams himself) fought to save their boats. Not many days following this, Addams was found in Finemans Cove, having been weighted down to the bottom of the sea by two fifty-pound sacks of rock salt. A clam digger discovered the body. The fish and game agent ruled the drowning a suicide. Fair enough. In its way, the death was a suicide. Burning the single pier of a neighboring island is as suicidal an action as a man can take. Everyone knew that. No sane man on Fort Niles Island could reasonably begrudge the Courne Haven fishermen their retaliatory gesture, violent though it may have been. Still, it created a problem. Addams left behind an awkwardly pregnant widow. If she stayed on Fort Niles Island, she would be a great inconvenience to her neighbors, who would have to support her. As it turned out, that was what she intended to do. She would be dead weight on Fort Niles, a drain on a community whose working families could scarcely support themselves. Fear of this burden caused resentment over Valentine Addams death. What was more, the drowning of a man with the very rock salt he had used to preserve his stinking bait was more than a little insulting. Recourse would be sought. As retaliation, the men of Fort Niles Island rowed over to Courne Haven Island one night and painted a thin coat of tar on the seats of every dinghy anchored in its harbor. That was merely a rude joke, done for laughs. But they then sliced all the buoys they could find that marked lobster traps in the Courne Haven fishing territory, causing the pot wrap lines to snake down through the heavy water, and the tethered traps to vanish forever. It was the full destruction of the communitys industry what little lobster industry there was, of course, in 1903 for the entire season. Fair enough. After this, it was quiet for a week. Then a popular man from Fort Niles Island, Joseph Cardoway, was caught outside a mainland tavern by a dozen Courne Haven lobstermen, who beat him with long oak fishing gaffs. When Cardoway healed from the beating, his left ear was missing, his left eye was blinded, and his left thumb dangled, loose and useless as an ornament, from his muscle-torn hand. The attack outraged all of Fort Niles. Cardoway was not even a fisherman. He ran a small mill on Fort Niles and was an ice-cutter. He had nothing to do with lobster fishing, yet hed been crippled because of it. Now the lobster war reached its full heat. The fishermen of Courne Haven Island and Fort Niles Island fought for a decade. They fought from 1903 to 1913. Not steadily, of course. Lobster wars, even back then, are not steady fights. They are slow territory disputes, with spasmodic acts of retaliation and withdrawal. But during a lobster war, there is constant tension, constant danger of losing gear to another mans knife. Men become so consumed in defending their livelihood that they essentially eradicate that livelihood. They spend so much time fighting, spying, and challenging that they have little time left to actually fish. As in any conflict, some contestants in this lobster war became more involved than others. On Fort Niles, the men of the Pommeroy family were most entangled in territory disputes, and, as a consequence, were effectively destroyed by the strife. They were impoverished. On Courne Haven, the fishermen in the Burden family were effectively destroyed, as well; they neglected their labor in order to undermine the efforts of, for instance, the Pommeroy family on Fort Niles. On both islands, the Cobbs were very nearly destroyed. Henry Dalgliesh found himself so demoralized by the war that he simply packed up his family and moved from Courne Haven Island to Long Island, New York, where he became a constable. Anyone who grew up on Fort Niles or Courne Haven during this decade was raised in poverty. Any Pommeroy, Burden, or Cobb who grew up during this decade was raised in extreme poverty. And hatred. For them, it was a true famine. As for the widow of the murdered Valentine Addams, she gave birth in 1904 to twin boys: a foul-mannered baby whom she named Angus and a fat, listless baby whom she named Simon. The Widow Addams was not much more rational than her dead husband had been. She would not tolerate the words Courne Haven spoken in her presence. On hearing them, she would keen as if she herself were being murdered. She was a force of vindictiveness, a bitter woman whose anger aged her, and she prodded her neighbors to perform bold acts of hostility against the fishermen on the other side of Worthy Channel. She propped up her neighbors rage and resentment if ever they let it sag. Partly because of her exhortations, partly because of the inevitable pace of any conflict, the widows twin sons were a full ten years old before the lobster war their father had begun was fully over. There was only one fisherman among those on both islands who did not take part in these events, a Fort Niles fisherman by the name of Ebbett Thomas. After the burning of the Courne Haven pier, Thomas quietly took all his lobster pots from the water. He cleaned them and stored them, with their gear, safe in his cellar. He pulled his boat from the water, cleaned it, and stored it on shore, covered with a tarp. There had never been a lobster war before this, so one wonders how he was able to anticipate the destructive events to come, but he was a man of considerable intuition. Ebbett Thomas apparently suspected, with a smart fishermans awareness of bad weather rising, that it might be wiser to sit this one out. After safely hiding his lobster gear,

Ebbett Thomas walked up the single great hill of Fort Niles Island to the offices of the Ellis Granite Company and applied for a job. This was practically unheard of a local seeking work in the quarries but Ebbett Thomas nonetheless managed to get work at the Ellis Granite Company. He managed to talk Dr. Jules Ellis himself the founder and owner of the company into hiring him. Ebbett Thomas became the foreman of the Ellis Granite Company's Box Shop, supervising the construction of the wooden crates and boxes in which pieces of finished granite were shipped from the island. He was a fisherman, and his ancestors had all been fishermen, and his descendants would all be fishermen, but Ebbett Thomas did not put his fishing boat back in the water until ten years had passed. It was his considerable intuition that enabled him to weather this difficult episode without suffering the economic ruin visited on his neighbors. He kept to himself and he kept his family at a distance from the whole mess. Ebbett Thomas was an unusual man for his time and place. He had no education, but he was bright and, in his way, worldly. His intelligence was recognized by Dr. Jules Ellis, who thought it a shame that this intelligent man was confined to a small, ignorant island and to a miserable life of fishing. Dr. Ellis often thought that, under different circumstances, Ebbett Thomas might have been a sound businessman, perhaps even a professor. But Ebbett Thomas was never granted different circumstances, so he lived out his days on Fort Niles, accomplishing little except to fish well and for a decent profit, always staying free of the petty disputes of his neighbors. He married his third cousin, an inestimably practical woman named Patience Burden, and they had two sons, Stanley and Len. Ebbett Thomas lived well, but he did not live long. He died of a stroke at the age of fifty. He didn't live long enough to see Stanley, his firstborn, get married. But the real pity is that Ebbett Thomas didn't live long enough to meet his granddaughter, a girl by the name of Ruth, born to Stanley's wife in 1958. And that is a shame, because Ebbett Thomas would have been fascinated by Ruth. He might not have particularly understood his granddaughter, but he surely would have regarded her life with some measure of curiosity.

1 Unlike some crustaceans, who are coldly indifferent to the welfare of their offspring, the mamma lobster keeps her little brood about her until the youthful lobsterkins are big enough to start in life for themselves. Crab, Shrimp, and Lobster Lore William B. Lord 1867

THE BIRTH OF RUTH THOMAS

was not the easiest on record. She was born during a week of legendary, terrible storms. The last week of May 1958 did not quite bring a hurricane, but it was not calm out there, either, and Fort Niles Island got whipped. Stan Thomas's wife, Mary, in the middle of this storm, endured an unusually hard labor. This was her first child. She was not a big woman, and the baby was stubborn in coming. Mary Thomas should have been moved to a hospital on the mainland and put under the care of a doctor, but this was no weather for boating around a woman in hard labor. There was no doctor on Fort Niles, nor were there nurses. The laboring woman, in distress, was without any medical attention. She just had to do it on her own. Mary whimpered and screamed during labor, while her female neighbors, acting as a collective of amateur midwives, administered comfort and suggestions, and left her side only to spread word of her condition across the island. The fact was, things didn't look good. The oldest and smartest women were convinced from early on that Stan's wife was not going to make it. Mary Thomas wasn't from the island, anyway, and the women didn't have great faith in her strength. Under the best of circumstances, these women considered her somewhat pampered, a little too fine and a little too susceptible to tears and shyness. They were pretty sure she was going to quit on them in the middle of her labor and just die of pain right there, in front of everyone. Still, they fussed and interfered. They argued with one another over the best treatment, the best positions, the best advice. And when they briskly returned to their homes to collect clean towels or ice for the woman in labor, they passed the word among their husbands that things at the Thomas house were looking very grave indeed. Senator Simon Addams heard the rumors and decided to make his famous peppery chicken stock, which he believed to be a great healer, one that would help the woman in her time of need. Senator Simon was an aging bachelor who lived with his twin brother, Angus, another aging bachelor. The men were the sons of Valentine Addams, all grown up now. Angus was the toughest, most aggressive lobsterman on the island. Senator Simon was no kind of lobsterman at all. He was terrified of the sea; he could not set foot in a boat. The closest Simon had ever come to the sea was one stride wide of the surf on Gavin Beach. When he was a teenager, a local bully tried to drag him out on a dock, and Simon had nearly scratched that kid's face off and nearly broken that kid's arm. He choked the bully until the boy fell unconscious. Senator Simon certainly did not like the water. He was handy, though, so he earned money by repairing furniture and lobster traps and fixing boats (safely on shore) for other men. He was recognized as an eccentric, and he spent his time reading books and studying maps, which he purchased through the mail. He knew a great deal about the world, although not once in his life had he stepped off Fort Niles. His knowledge about so many subjects

had earned him the nickname Senator, a nickname that was only half mocking. Simon Addams was a strange man, but he was acknowledged as an authority. It was the Senators opinion that a good, peppery chicken soup could cure anything, even childbirth, so he cooked up a nice batch for Stanley Thomass wife. She was a woman he dearly admired, and he was worried about her. He brought a warm pot of soup over to the Thomas home on the afternoon of May 28. The female neighbors let him in and announced that the little baby had already arrived. Everyone was fine, they assured him. The baby was hearty, and the mother was going to recover. The mother could probably use a touch of that chicken soup, after all. Senator Simon Addams looked into the bassinet, and there she was: little Ruth Thomas. A girl baby. An unusually pretty baby, with a wet, black mat of hair and a studious expression. Senator Simon Addams noticed right away that she didnt have the red squally look of most newborns. She didnt look like a peeled, boiled rabbit. She had lovely olive skin and a most serious expression for an infant. Oh, shes a dear little baby, said Senator Simon Addams, and the women let him hold Ruth Thomas. He looked so huge holding the new baby that the women laughedlaughed at the giant bachelor cradling the tiny child. But Ruth blew a sort of a sigh in his arms and pursed her tiny mouth and blinked without concern. Senator Simon felt a swell of almost grandfatherly pride. He clucked at her. He jiggled her. Oh, isnt she just the dearest baby, he said, and the women laughed and laughed. He said, Isnt she just a peach? Ruth Thomas was a pretty baby who grew into a very pretty girl, with dark eyebrows and wide shoulders and remarkable posture. From her earliest childhood, her back was straight as a plank. She had a striking, adult presence, even as a toddler. Her first word was a very firm No. Her first sentence: No, thank you. She was not excessively delighted by toys. She liked to sit on her fathers lap and read the papers with him. She liked to be around adults. She was quiet enough to go unnoticed for hours at a time. She was a world-class eavesdropper. When her parents visited their neighbors, Ruth sat under the kitchen table, small and silent as dust, listening keenly to every adult word. One of the most common sentences directed at her as a child was Why, Ruth, I didnt even see you there! Ruth Thomas escaped notice because of her watchful disposition and also because of the distracting commotion around her in the form of the Pommeroys. The Pommeroys lived next door to Ruth and her parents. There were seven Pommeroy boys, and Ruth was born right at the end of the run of them. She pretty much vanished into the chaos kicked up by Webster and Conway and John and Fagan and Timothy and Chester and Robin Pommeroy. The Pommeroy boys were an event on Fort Niles. Certainly other women had produced as many children in the islands history, but only over decades and only with evident reluctance. Seven babies born to a single exuberant family in just under six years seemed almost epidemic. Senator Simons twin brother, Angus, said of the Pommeroys, Thats no family. Thats a goddamn litter. Angus Addams could be suspected of jealousy, though, as he had no family except his eccentric twin brother, so the whole business of other peoples happy families was like a canker on Angus Addams. The Senator, on the other hand, found Mrs. Pommeroy delightful. He was charmed by her pregnancies. He said that Mrs. Pommeroy always looked as if she was pregnant because she couldnt help it. He said she always looked pregnant in a cute, apologetic way. Mrs. Pommeroy was unusually young when she marriednot yet sixteenand she enjoyed herself and her husband completely. She was a real romp. The young Mrs. Pommeroy drank like a flapper. She loved her drinking. She drank so much during her pregnancies, in fact, that her neighbors suspected she had caused brain damage in her children. Whatever the cause, none of the seven Pommeroy sons ever learned to read very well. Not even Webster Pommeroy could read a book, and he was the ace of smarts in that familys deck. As a child, Ruth Thomas often sat quietly in a tree and, when the opportunity arose, threw rocks at Webster Pommeroy. Hed throw rocks back at her, and hed tell her she was a stinkbutt. Shed say, Oh, yeah? Whered you read that? Then Webster Pommeroy would drag Ruth out of the tree and kick her in the face. Ruth was a smart girl who sometimes found it difficult to stop making smart comments. Getting kicked in the face was the kind of thing that happened, Ruth supposed, to smart little girls who lived next door to so many Pommeroys. When Ruth Thomas was nine years old, she experienced a significant event. Her mother left Fort Niles. Her father, Stan Thomas, went with her. They went to Rockland. They were supposed to stay there for only a week or two. The plan was for Ruth to live with the Pommeroys for a short time. Just until her parents came back. But some complicated incident occurred in Rockland, and Ruths mother didnt come back at all. The details werent explained to Ruth at the time. Eventually Ruths father returned, but not for a long while, so Ruth ended up staying with the Pommeroys for months. She ended up staying with them for the entire summer. This significant event was not unduly traumatic, because Ruth really loved Mrs. Pommeroy. She loved the idea of living with her. She wanted to be with her all the time. And Mrs. Pommeroy loved Ruth. Youre like my own daughter! Mrs.

Pommeroy liked to tell Ruth. You're like my own goddamn daughter that I never, ever had! Mrs. Pommeroy pronounced the word daughtah, which had a beautiful, feathery sound in Ruth's ears. Like everyone born on Fort Niles or Courne Haven, Mrs. Pommeroy spoke with the accent recognized across New England as Down East—just a whisper off the brogue of the original Scots-Irish settlers, defined by an almost criminal disregard for the letter r. Ruth loved the sound. Ruth's mother did not have this beautiful accent, nor did she use words like goddamn and fuck and shit and asshole, words that delightfully peppered the speech of the native lobstermen and many of their wives. Ruth's mother also did not drink vast quantities of rum and then turn all soft and loving, as Mrs. Pommeroy did every single day. Mrs. Pommeroy, in short, had it all over Ruth's mother.