

A high-contrast, black and white silhouette of a woman's head in profile, facing right. The silhouette is set against a white background. The woman's hair is dark and appears to be pulled back. The overall shape of the head and neck is clearly defined.

THE FORBIDDEN
DREAMS OF
BETSY
ELLIOTT

A NOVEL

CAROLYN R.
PARSONS

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A N O V E L

Carolyn R. Parsons

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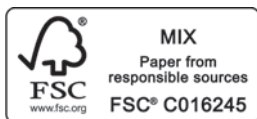
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For Dante, Dominic, and Aleena:
You are the magic.

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O N E

Though a speck against the backdrop of the earth, her body framed by the broad, biting Atlantic Ocean to the west and a battered shoreline to the east, if the sky had eyes and could see all things, it would have paid particular notice to the young woman on that cold Monday in November.

She'd marked time like a soldier, spending her days taking all the steps asked of her without ever advancing. Oh, the same could be said of most of the people who lived in her island community on Newfoundland's northern edge, but she differed in that she harboured no delusions about it. Had she been a man, she would have become a soldier, thinking it preferable to die in battle than live with the constant sameness that permeated her life. But it was what it was. She'd march in place and die here, and that was that. So, she carried on, ever moving, going nowhere.

A southwesterly wind blew across the ocean, its bite leaving a tattoo of pink across her cheek. She stopped twice to pull her headscarf forward, but it slipped off each time, and she gave up. Rounding the bend into the second cove, the wind now at her back, she marched forward on the loose beach rocks, pails clink-clanking against the water hoop. The circular metal band, taken from a large barrel, kept the buckets steady and prevented them from knocking against her legs.

The woman hated this part of her trek. The stones were too big

and rounded for easy walking. She wished she could throw them into the ocean and bare the smooth bedrock beneath. It was a short beach. She could hunker down and just heave them, whoosh, plop, ripple, over and over, until a smooth surface remained to make the walk easier. Oh, the ocean would toss new stones onto the beach, smoothed and presented like gifts to the shoreline, but it would take many years. She sighed. As usual, she didn't have time to do anything she wanted to do, so it was no good to think about it. She knew the route by heart, and though she hated stones rolled under her feet, she never stumbled. Each step forward was a victory.

Her mother always said there was something wrong with folks who lived in their head with thoughts of things they couldn't do or see. *You got to face life as it comes, because you don't get to go nowhere. Do the work put before you, keep alive, and don't think things can be different than they is. Now, you can make some stuff go your way when the time comes, but you're never going to be able to walk too far from here, so you might as well keep your head here, too.*

But the girl never paid much attention to all that. She could stop her mind from thinking what it thought no more than she could stop the tide from heaving the broken glass from sunken ships ashore. The beach glittered with bright green and blue pieces of bottles between the rocks. Tiny treasures that came only because nothing could stop them.

* * * * *

A few yards ahead, the young man determined that the sky held a threat of rain, but he figured it might hold off for a while. He was sheltered

from the wind in a cubby between two rocks, pencil scratching on paper, risking a wetting to get something down. Clouds gathered overhead, stacked like the quilts his aunt had banked upon him that night last week when the temperature plummeted and she feared he would freeze.

A moment later, a young woman carrying buckets scratching against a hoop was upon him. Jarred from his deep concentration, the man found himself caught in the glare of flashing black eyes. A bit of water splashed from the left bucket, but she regained control of it and herself in one motion.

"You needn't scare me to death." Her dialect made the word *death* sound like *det*.

"Sorry, I thought I was all alone here in the morning," he replied.

His accent was like when you took syrup and added water, the woman thought. Not as sweet, yet somehow tasting better than before. It was soft—almost British, almost Newfoundland.

"No trouble, then." She nodded and moved to carry on.

The man sat back against the stone and watched her strong back, his eyes flicking up to her shoulders. There were no houses for quite a distance. Surely she wasn't going all the way to the Elliotts'?

"Hey!" he shouted. "You need a bit of help?" He jumped up and jammed his paper and pencil into an inside pocket, stumbling and slipping in his effort to catch up with her.

With a near-imperceptible shake of her head, she replied, "No."

Committed now, the young man brought himself up alongside her. "Where are you headed?"

There it was again, that soft accent, part Newfoundland and part somewhere else. The somewhere else intrigued her.

"Where are you from?"

"Here," the man said. "Well, used to be. I've been away for years. Boston, and most recently St. John's, but Boston is home."

"I knew you was a stranger. Never seen anybody here wearing anything like that." She nodded toward his fine grey overcoat.

"I got it in New York. Oh, that sounds pompous, doesn't it?"

"A bit stuck-up, yeah, but I loves cities," the girl said, her sigh diminishing her usual sarcasm. "I haven't been to one, but I reads all I can, stories about all those people and shops and cars. Must be some nice."

"It *is* nice," the newcomer replied. "But it can become tiresome after a while. It's nicer here in many ways."

"Who's your people?"

He stumbled on a rock and righted himself. The girl stopped, too, her shoulders tightening from the weight of the buckets.

"The Hoffes. Garland and Geraldine. Garland was my father's brother."

"You're a Hoffe?"

"I use the name Taylor now. Edmund Hoffe Taylor. Mother thought it best I line up with her family when I was trying to get into Harvard, so she changed it."

The young woman lowered the buckets, then straightened up again before setting out.

"Hey, you should let me carry that for you."

"Sure, I can carry this. I does it all the time."

"Well, I can do it for you, give you a break. You're a girl."

"I'm twenty-two!"

Edmund glanced at her slim figure, unable to see the lean muscle of her arms and shoulders under her coat and the strong calves snug against her boots from the girth of her legs, where days of physical la-

bour had built them like a man's. A pretty face from Boston appeared in his mind for a moment, and he stumbled again. The girl before him pretended not to notice, but a grin tugged at her pursed lips.

"Yes, but I'm a *man*," Edmund said. Men in his circles always cared for the ladies around them. His sense of chivalry insisted that he carry this load for her. Plus, it would be easier for him. He was stronger.

Her eyes looked ahead to the flat of the stone that lay ahead, aware that around this bend was the worst part of the walk. The wind would be in her face the entire way. She considered the wisdom of allowing him to carry the pails. He wasn't used to it. She needed the water and didn't fancy going back to refill her buckets should he trip and spill them. But that smug face of his tempted her to let him try. Perhaps he could do it, though he looked as soft as a down pillow with his fancy suit, pretty lips, and that silk hanky peeking out of his coat pocket. But she might never get another offer again in all her life. Grab what's before you, as her mother always said.

"Yelp." She stopped.

"What?"

Edmund turned to her. It took a second to realize that she had said yes. He was still unused to the thick Dorset he had not heard nor spoken since his teen years. She was already setting down the pails and stepping out of the hoop.

"Well, go on then," she encouraged, admiring the square of fabric poking out of his pocket. She had never touched silk before and wondered what it felt like.

"All right." Edmund took her place between the pails and reached down for the handles.

"Oh, ouch," she said.

“What’s wrong? Are you hurt?”

“Oh, I’ve just some dirt and a splinter in my hand. I’ll pull it out when I gets home.” She held up her hand. “If I had something to wrap it in—”

Edmund pulled the handkerchief out of his pocket and handed it to her. “Please, use this.”

“Oh my goodness, thank you.” The young woman accepted it, wondering at the ease with which she had appropriated it from its owner. It had E. H. T. stitched on it in fancy letters. She recognized the lettering from a book on penmanship she had at home and from which she had spent hours practising. She could embroider a similar thing into something for John for Christmas, perhaps. What a fancy thing it was.

She rubbed the buttery smoothness between her fingers, enjoying the softness, then hurried after Edmund, who was stumbling ahead with her buckets. He hoisted himself upon the smooth rock that stretched for about fifty feet before it got rough again. She grinned, remembering how her legs had groaned and hurt for days the first time after that step up.

Gulls swooped and shrieked overhead, and the clouds attended to business elsewhere, leaving a matte blue sky behind. The young woman quickened her step to catch up, fingers still stroking the silk in her hand, but duty motivated her to be close to catch the water should he stumble. Also, the pebbled beach up ahead was the most difficult to walk on with the buckets. He’d soon give up and ask her to take over.

Or fall arse over teakettle trying, she thought, her grin breaking into a full-fledged smile.

T W O

Sensing Edmund's discomfort with her trailing so close behind, and not wanting to heighten the risk of his stumbling with the water, she skipped forward on the tree side of the shore, where the mossy ground was soft and damp. The sun had yet to dry the dew off the short juniper bush that reached and spread its claws out to scratch anyone who got too close. Her step was sure on the loose grey rocks; her heavy-laced boots took care of that. Edmund's fancy city shoes weren't doing so well. He was slipping and trying to keep balance on the rocks beneath his feet. He'd made it over Flattie—her nickname for the smooth rock path—but now he had Elliott's Beach to cross.

She paused a few yards ahead of him and peered over the water, shading her eyes with a hand. A ship was making its way westward. Its stacks—two of them—traced against a backdrop of sky and distant land. Farther down the run, a large schooner made its way in the opposite direction. Its sails fanned out, hiding the blush of the horizon. She figured it was a Twillingate boat sailing home after being hauled ashore for repairs and painting in what was commonly called being “hove down.”

Yes, it looked bright and freshly painted. It was too late for fishing, and too early for the seals that came in droves to these shores in

early spring with the northern ice floes. The number of schooners and steam vessels in the Wester' Run had dwindled as fall faded. Ships were fewer these years as people abandoned them for land prospects. Some people around the islands speculated whether the place would survive another twenty years. So many were leaving it all behind and moving away for *opportunity*, a word half the town said with awe and the other half with derision.

She looked back at Edmund. His steps were purposeful as he balanced the pails of water. She looked again at his shoes. Most people wore boots. Shoes were for soup suppers and church on Sunday, with only the wealthier, fancier, older men donning shoes at other times—like for meetings and such. None had any like those Edmund sported. They were shiny, black, and peeked out from under his tailored pant leg. Old Mrs. Elliott had described Mr. Coaker to her once, telling her about the time he had come for the first annual meeting of the Fishermen's Protective Union in '09 and how fancy his suit and shoes had been. Perhaps these were the same sort.

Edmund, too busy focusing on each footstep to notice her intrigue over his shoes, glanced up to find her staring at him.

"What? Disappointed I haven't tumbled over yet?" He smiled to hide his fatigue.

"No, you haven't . . . yet." The young woman's eyes met his, and he saw that grin for the first time.

"How far is it?" Edmund figured it must be around that bend ahead, in the next cove.

"Oh, we goes around two more coves, through the meadow path, around the hill, and down the garden. Nice piece, yet. Want me to take the buckets back now?" she asked, noting the look of dread on

Edmund's face. "But you're a strong man. You can do it for sure, if I can. 'Tis a hard path, but not that hard."

"Oh yes, I can do it," Edmund replied. It was a challenging trail, and he wondered how long he could handle the stretching pain in his shoulder and the aching fatigue of his legs and back. Perhaps an even graver concern, if the meadow was soft and wet, what sort of damage would it do to his shoes? The path widened enough to walk side by side, so the girl stayed next to him.

"Tell me about Boston."

"What in particular would you like to know?"

"How big is it? What is there to do? Do you go to movies?"

"I don't know the exact population right now. It's a big city. Up until I left, I attended the university, so much of my life was at the college. I do go to movies, and I have a lot of friends. We visit each other's houses and play cards, or music, and have dances. The houses are big, and some have a room for dancing. But there are smaller houses, tenements, and even slums. The men go to hockey games a lot, and I met Eddie Shore once after a game. Nice fellow."

"You met him? The hockey player?"

They could only get hockey news from the paper. There was nothing much on the radio station; their cove received a signal marred by static. Not that it mattered. She'd heard the station would soon be bankrupt like the rest of St. John's. Her household cheered for the Toronto Maple Leafs and hated the Montreal Canadiens. But they liked Boston's Eddie Shore, and if they weren't for Toronto they would be for Boston. All this and they had never seen a single game played, only the odd bit of commentary and scores recorded in the papers they received when ships could get in with the news.

Edmund, surprised that this girl knew who Eddie Shore was, prepared to regale her with stories of his own prowess on the ice. But his breath caught in his throat, and he realized he was working too hard at carrying the water to talk so much.

“Yes,” he murmured in response to her question. He stepped with care, shifting the weight of the pails on his shoulders. The buckets were heavier with each passing second. Wondering if he should stop for a spell, he considered that if he did, starting again might be more difficult than continuing. He’d said he would carry the water, and by damn, he *must* be as strong as this pretty girl.

He straightened his back and made his way up the rocks to the flatter part of the beach. There the moss melded into grass with a well-worn path. This appeared to be an easier section. Once up there, though, he was open to the wind, and it took him in the face. He struggled to keep his balance.

“What’s your name, anyway? Excuse me for not asking before, miss.”

“Oh, I’m an Elliott.” The name rolled out like a song. It was hers, and how she loved it. “Betsy,” she added. She had practised her new last name many times since before this land was hers. Betsy loved her maiden name, Crane, too, but only for her late father’s sake.

“Elliott,” she repeated, her voice proud.

Edmund didn’t know of this Elliott girl and hadn’t known the Elliott son—what was his name? John, yes. *Guess he married.* This daughter would have been born before he left home, he figured. Odd he hadn’t known.

“You have sisters and brothers?”

“Had.” The wind whipped at her face. Its cold fingers traced the

tracks where tears had once fallen for her siblings but were now dry. Betsy looked at the ship again as it steamed along far out from the shore. "Come on, b'y," she shouted, the steel back in her voice.

Edmund didn't ask more. Children died easily, but most families were large enough that some remained. He sensed that in Betsy's family this wasn't so.

"Coming along." Two words were the most he could manage as he tramped across the meadow. His hat, though tugged by the gusts, remained on his head. His shoes imprinted the soft path as he put his feet one after the other. He was careful, not because of the uneven ground, but because he wasn't sure he could trust his legs to hold him up.

Betsy's grin returned when she saw how tired he was. There were two more coves to go, and then the hill path, which was narrow, through the long garden. She trailed along, her hand clutching her scarf as her hair blew up and around it. She took in the tall grasses, the wind-caught branches rustling, the absence of clouds in the north sky, and the starkness of November, even on a day as fine as this one.

Edmund's arms screamed for rest, his shoulders burned, and his feet ached. His shoes scraped against his heels, galling them. But he carried forward, blisters, stubbornness, and masculine pride as his companions.

Betsy walked just far enough ahead to hear his laboured breathing, the occasional grunt, and the deliberate step of each foot as though it were his last. Head down, she moved sure-footed through the coves and around the hill until they entered the garden path that was the last leg of the journey. The house loomed ahead, and when she turned toward it, following the crook in the trail, she spotted John working near the schooner. The boat would soon head down to the tickle to be

secured for the winter. The seas were too rough to fish with December almost upon their shores. John walked up the path from the wharf. He headed to the house and reached it before they did.

Betsy led Edmund toward the steps and grinned at John. "Edmund Hoffe Taylor," she said, pointing to her helper.

John Elliott reached out to relieve the young man of his buckets.

Edmund straightened his hat and pulled his jacket back into place. His fine, light grey pants were muddied halfway up to his knees, and dirt dulled the shine of his patent-leather shoes. There was nothing he could do about that.

John handled the buckets as though they were filled with feathers. He lodged them up on the long bridge that wound around the house. Edmund groaned, relieved.

"Sir, it's a pleasure to meet you." Edmund held out his hand to John Elliott, then winced at his grip.

"Sorry," said John, who turned his hand over and sucked in a breath at the red galls from the bucket handles on Edmund's palm. "Well, 'tis work you're not used to, b'y. I heard you were from the States."

"Yes, I admit 'tis not an easy job." He smiled at Betsy, jubilant because he knew she expected his failure. She would look lovely in a Boston dress, he thought.

"Well now, you go along with Betsy. She'll fix that right up. She's a good one with the salves for sure. Makes them herself." His voice held significant pride in Betsy's medical prowess.

Betsy led Edmund into the house and motioned for him to sit at the table. He pulled a hard wooden chair out and eased his sore body into it.

“Here is the salve.”

Betsy put it on the table, then realized that she should administer it. She pulled out the opposing chair and sat. Taking his hands and tipping them palm up, she reached into the little jar with two fingers and pulled out creamy ointment. Taking her time with each hand, she rubbed some on, soothing their blisters. She pulled a rag bandage out of a drawer in a cabinet and wrapped both palms. Ripping the fabric down the centre lengthwise, she tied it around his wrist to secure the bandages.

“Don’t do much with those hands until they’re better,” she cautioned as she gathered her things and started back to the door. “I got to get me wash done and out on the line, and it’s almost eight already. Sure, Phoebe White will have hers out first and they’ll all think I’m dead. Why don’t you go see Skipper outside for a chat? He’ll be some excited about that hockey. Loves to talk about news and stuff and will be right interested in you.”

“Would he?” Edmund rose, testing his muscles to do just as she had commanded. But her next words had him sitting right back down again.

“Oh, sure,” Betsy said, heading off to a room behind the kitchen. “My husband loves stuff like that.”

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Carolyn R. Parsons is a proud fisherman's daughter born and raised on Change Islands, Newfoundland and Labrador. She spent twenty-five years in Ontario, returned home to Newfoundland in 2012, and now resides in Lewisporte. An advocate for social issues, she was co-chair and spokesperson for the *Manolis L* Citizens Response Committee, which lobbied government to remove oil that threatened the marine environment from the sunken cargo ship in Notre Dame Bay.

She penned a regular community column entitled "Connections," a biweekly arts feature, "In Conversation," and wrote general news for the *Pilot*. Today she writes a weekly column, "Art & Soul," for the *Central Voice* and co-hosts an online radio program, *Bridges*. A founding director of Literary Events NL, she also serves as the current Central/Burin representative for the Writers' Alliance of Newfoundland and Labrador (WANL).

Carolyn is married to Kent Chaffey, also a Change Islander, and they have four daughters and three grandchildren. In the past decade, she has written a poetry collection, two novels, and a book of short stories. *The Forbidden Dreams of Betsy Elliott* is her debut novel with Flanker Press.