

AWAY *from* MY ISLAND

The True Story of Eliza Gill



~A BIOGRAPHY~

GARY COLLINS

AWAY *from*
MY ISLAND

BY GARY COLLINS

NON-FICTION

Cabot Island
The Last Farewell
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CHILDREN'S ILLUSTRATED

What Colour is the Ocean?

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I dedicate all the pages you are about to read, as well as all the scenes they portray and sometimes painfully reveal, to my late mother-in-law, Eliza Jane Gill née Wicks, and to the memories and legacy left in her wake. With my utmost respect, Aunt Eliza, *there is no one else*.

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Away from My Island

The bright sun was shining a breeze on the bay
A ship rigged and ready to sail me away
I would seek that green pasture, the lost cup of gold
I would find fields of plenty away from my island.

The isle of my fathers would not be my own
The seed of my ancestors not gathered as sown
I would walk streets of fortune down canyons of steel
Content with the gold in my pocket to feel.

Below lofty rooftops came heat without sun
No moon-path to glisten when nighttime had come
No friends in my troubles, no welcoming door
The green grass now wilted had lost its allure.

I'll go back to my island, heed that sweet siren song
To harvest the gold that was mine all along
To the isle of my fathers to secure my bloodline
Never more take my spirit away from my island.

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Prologue

On a sunny day, two young girls ran laughing up a steep, winding path edged with summer grasses. The girls stopped running where the path abruptly ended at a stretch of granite worn smooth by the elements above the sea. Breathing hard, they walked to the cliff edge and sat down. Beyond them, the blue Atlantic reached infinitely. The horizon was flecked with puffy, low-hanging clouds. Below the cliff, the roll of the blue sea was sundered to white against granite ramparts. The roil of the colliding sea exploded and hissed. There was a stiff summer breeze blowing. The two children sat on the lip of the cliff, facing seaward with their feet dangling over the precipice.

The girls looked to be the same age. They had no other resemblance. One was short and small. Her eyes were brown, and she had long flaxen hair. The other was slim to the point of being skinny. Her hair was thick, dark, and short, and her eyes were a rare shade of blue, like a moody sea. The blue-eyed girl was the first to speak.

"I hate Mondays. Washday! Lugging water from the well. Stogging the stove with wood to keep the water boiling till the kitchen is stifled with heat. Then rubbing clothes over the scrubbing board till my fingers are raw."

"It's the same at our house, Lize. And the worst day is heavy clothes day, when Ma washes quilts and pop's briggs. Sogged

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with water and heavy as killicks to hang on the line, they are. Today was heavy clothes day.”

“Yeah, I know all about it, Delilah. Washday is always hard, heavy clothes or no. Two things different at our house today, though.” Eliza suddenly looked pensive.

“What was different?” Delilah asked.

“My mom did not get out of bed this morning. She went in labour last night, and Aunt Kitty, the midwife, was called. She’s upstairs with my mom now.”

“Did you hear your mom cry out, Lize? Birthin’ a chil’ can be hard. Did Aunt Kitty ask you to bile water? Did she drive everyone out of the house so no one would hear your mom scream? I heard my mom scream blue murder when my brother was born. ’Twas pure misery, I’m thinkin’.” Delilah had a flurry of questions.

“No, I did not hear any noise coming from upstairs. ’Tis my mom’s seventh child. I ’lows she is used to the misery of it by now. Besides, ’tis washday and I was busy. When I went upstairs to check on my mom, she told me she was all right. She told me my *unmentionables*, as she calls them, were not allowed on the line with the rest of the clothes today. Not even my nightshirt.”

“What do you mean not allowed on the line? Where else would you put them to dry? And why couldn’t you put them on the line, anyway? And what was the second thing?” As usual, Delilah’s questions exploded out of her mouth.

“’Cause this day, Tuesday, July 21, is my birthday. The day in 1914 when I was born was also a Tuesday. My mom told me so. I am eleven years old now. A woman, my mom says. And a woman’s undergarments are not to be hung on the line for every man in the place to be gawking at.”

“Your birthday! Will there be a cake? Will you get a present? Did your mom say she would serve cups of tea at your house for your birthday?”

“Well, my mom is in labour. It might be all night before her baby comes. So, there will be no cake. No present. No cups of tea. How can there be? My mom just said, ‘Now that you are

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eleven years old, you have to hang your *unmentionables* indoors to dry'. It is the same way she dries her own. Hanging on the line behind the stove, over the backs of the chairs, on the doorknobs or even draped over the door. All took down and stowed under the bed upstairs before my father comes home," Eliza said.

"I hope your mom doesn't suffer long with the birthin'," Delilah said. She sounded sympathetic toward Eliza's mom for a second. "You are right about our undergarments. No problem with men's combination underwear looking like fleeces of sheep flappin' in the wind fer all to see, though. Unmentionables! Queer name fer a woman's bloomers, step-ins, ma's corsets, and breast bands. Why do you 'low that is?" Delilah asked.

"I don't know, Delilah. Men and boys, too, are different from women and girls. I guess it's one of them mysteries like . . . like why we girls have to go for a pee and boys take a piss."

Delilah was aghast. She looked around quickly. "Lize! You can't say piss!" She hissed the foul word out of her mouth and looked around again for fear of being heard.

"Oh, Delilah! There's no one on the lookout but you and me. We can say what we wants to say. 'Twill be our secret. And another thing. Mother told me some of the women in the place are wearing a new thing, a brassiere, 'tis called, instead of breast bands." Eliza looked at Delilah before continuing. "You are the same age as me, and we will soon have to wear a brassiere to hide our nipples."

"Lize, you can't say nipples!" Delilah looked around again.

"Fer God's sake, Delilah, times are changing. You—"

Delilah interrupted Eliza with another hiss. "Lize, you can't—"

"Yeah, I know, I can't say God either."

A pair of seagulls carried by the updraft rose above the sea and soared to the cliff edge without effort. Eliza and Delilah hurried to their feet. Finding loose pebbles, they threw them at the gulls.

"Stay away from the clotheslines," they shouted after the birds. Seagulls, attracted by clothes flapping on a line, often

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ruined a hard morning's wash with their shameless droppings. The birds canted their wings and, uneasy with the flung rocks and all the shouting, veered seaward. The two girls stepped away from the granite ledge and were entering the path down the hill when, with a touch of her hand upon Eliza's arm, Delilah stopped her friend. As always, Delilah had another question.

"If you was to get a gift fer your birthday, Lize, what would you like it to be?"

Eliza, standing by Delilah's side, was thoughtful for a minute. She looked at Delilah's shapeless, drab, grey clothing. Her dress from shoulder to hem was a patchwork of repair. Her shoes had holes, and the black laces had long since been replaced with grey trawl line. Eliza's own garments were a mirror of Delilah's.

"I would like to have a pair of black, shiny, patten leather shoes and a long, gold-coloured dress, as golden as the buttercups that grow by the path. The shoes would glisten in the sun and the dress would billow from my waist as I walked by," Eliza said.

"That was two gifts," said Delilah.

"The long yellow dress, then."

The two girls walked slowly down the path they had so sprightly run up. They had chores to take care of. Below them, among the houses, a few children played. Dogs, with chains fastened to their collars, barked. The chains clinked, and clotheslines, bent with dark, heavy clothes, laboriously swayed in the wind.

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Eliza

I never did get a golden dress to billow in the wind. Didn't get a pair of black, shiny shoes or any other gift that day when I turned eleven. Nor did I expect I would. I remember that day well, though. My brother Robert, my mom's seventh child, was born upstairs in the bedroom facing the harbour while Delilah and I were playing up on the lookout. Aunt Kitty had the baby swaddled in clothes in her left arm and was sitting at the kitchen table, sipping on a cup of tea when I entered the house.

"Ah, Lizer, my love. This one has already had his first suckle at your mother's breast. A boy, it is. Born on your birthday, your mom told me."

So, my mom had not forgotten it was my birthday. Aunt Kitty indicated the new baby cradled in her arm. I bent down to have a look at my new brother. His head was still damp from the birthing. His small mouth was puckered, and his face, as red as his mouth, appeared to be wrinkled. His eyes were squinted tight, and he had a baby smell. Outside, the gloaming had come. Shadows gathered in the kitchen. I lit the kerosene lamp and placed it on the kitchen table. The lamplight carried away most of the shadows.

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"I'll go check on Mom," I said.

"Give her a moment, Lizer my love. I brought the boy downstairs to give your mother a rest," Aunt Kitty said. "Poor girl. Wore out, she is. Hardly a sound she made during the birthing. Hardly ever does, that one. I should know, seeing as my face was the first one any of her brood, including you, ever saw. Mind you, an easy birth is still a hard one for some women. Not your mother, though. I am sure she hides her pain. From a hardy stock of breeders, she is."

Aunt Kitty sounded like she was referring to my mom as she would a prime sow. All I was thinking of at that moment was dirty diapers to wash. Washday just got heavier. I crossed the kitchen to the stove. The fire had died down. There was a pot of partridgeberry jam set back on the hob of the stove to simmer. I had not noticed it before.

When I went upstairs to see my mother, it was dark outside. Aunt Kitty had already gone upstairs and had taken the lamp from the kitchen with her. But the door to my mother's room on the stair head was open, and lamplight from her room shone down the stairs, lighting my way. My brother was suckling at my mother's white left breast when I entered. My mother's hair was unruly. She looked flushed and weary, but she smiled at me as I walked toward her bed. Aunt Kitty was tying the mouth of her cloth valise and preparing to leave.

"Well, Mary Jane maid, I'll be leaving for home now. You will be fine. No problem, as I can see. Another belly for you to keep full is all. 'Twill be no surprise for your husband, Joe, when he returns from the wild Labrador, to see you with a new babe at your breast. I dare say he will be right glad to find it's a boy, though, and not another girl."

Aunt Kitty looked at me before continuing.

"Ah, well. 'Tis the way of things. They always want to have sons, don't they? Makes a soul wonder where the men think boys come from, eh Mary Jane? Never could figure why they calls it the 'wild Labrador. 'Tis not as though it is all that tame around here, eh Mary Jane?"

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"Thanks for all your help with the birthing, Aunt Kitty. I don't know what the people in this place would do without you. How can I ever repay you?" my mother asked.

"Pay me? Why, Mary Jane, if I knows Joe, when he gets back from Labrador, the *Polly B.* will be well-burthen with salted cod. He smokes the best salmon in the bay, too. My winter diet, with dried cod and salmon, will be assured, so there is no need to worry about thanking me, maid."

Taking the lamp from the bureau by the bed, I walked down the stairs with Aunt Kitty. I held the lamp high, lighting Aunt Kitty's way outside. Twilight was but a regret in the west by now. The dark had come. Lamplight from the other houses beckoned on the path leading from our door.

"Good night, Lizer my love. I'll find my way home well enough. The path is well-known to my feet, that's fer sure," Aunt Kitty said.

"Indeed it is. Good night, Aunt Kitty," I said. She walked away, humming as she went. Her soft voice seemed to brighten the night.

The baby at my mother's breast had stopped sucking when I got back to the bedroom. His mouth was still wrapped around my mother's nipple. I could see milk weeping out of the child's mouth. My brother was asleep.

"What do you think of the name Robert for your new brother, Eliza?"

My mom was the only one who called me by my full name. I loved her for that. I hated being called Lizer. Mom looked at her sleeping baby. She moved her breast, and the nipple slipped out of the baby's mouth. I was embarrassed to see my mother's nipple.

"Your father and I talked about names before he left. He likes Robert. It's as good a name as any, I expect," Mom said. She adjusted the covering around the baby's head till only his face was visible. She covered her breast and sighed audibly.

"I like the name, too. He will be the only Robert in the place," I said. "What would be the name if it had been a girl, Mom?"

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My mother was drowsing again, but she opened her eyes when I spoke.

“Rose,” she said without hesitation. “If it was a girl, she would have been called Rose. I like the pretty roses that sometimes bloom wild among the brambles beside the pigsty. Right pretty, they are,” Mom said.

I stepped to the bed and bent over the sleeping baby and my exhausted mother. “I’ll take Robert for a while. You should sleep,” I said.

“Thank you, Eliza my love.”

I pulled the quilt back from the child, and sliding my hands under the small frame, I lifted him from my mother’s arms. He was still swaddled in the woollen coverlet.

“I had intended to bake patty tarts for you today, Eliza. It was to be your birthday gift. I know ’tis your favourite. I’ll bake them in the morning, my love.”

So that was why the partridgeberry jam was simmering on the stove on a washday! My mom was going to bake a gift for me. It wasn’t black shoes or a yellow dress, but it would be a gift of beautiful red tarts I loved so much. There would be a dozen, for sure. She had not forgotten. I was elated!

I lifted my sleeping brother, small, warm, and light, from the bed. Leaning down, my lips brushed my mother’s damp brow. “Thanks, Mom,” I said. But she did not hear me. She was asleep. With the lamplight on the bureau at my back, I sat in the chair by the window and looked down over the sleeping harbour. The water below, black and still, was spangled with light, the firmament on high casting its reflection upon the sea.

I was thinking the birthdate of Robert would be entered with great care, in my mother’s best cursive hand, in the worn brown Bible resting beside the lamp on the bureau. I had looked at the entries once. It contained all the history of our families, she told me. All I had read there were the births and deaths of the Button family—my mother’s maiden name—and the Wicks family, my mother’s married name. Those born were followed by a dead-straight line—so straight it must have been drawn with a

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ruler—to the date that person had died. Nothing between. Only an empty black mark across the page.

The glow from the lamp illuminated the face of the sleeping child in my arms. Bending down, I kissed my brother for the first time. His face was warm and soft. I wondered how little Robert and I would live our lines. I had read somewhere, or maybe I'd heard it in church, I wasn't sure, from the new circuit minister, maybe. He seemed very educated and talked differently from the other ministers I was used to. Yeah, it was him I'd heard it from. It was when he was baptizing a child.

"A child is like a chalice waiting to be filled," he'd said. And then, looking into the eyes of the mother who held her child—her husband was not by her side—he looked sincerely at her and said tenderly, "Make sure you fill it wisely, my dear."

I wasn't sure what it all meant then. But I was pretty sure the chalice waiting to be filled had something to do with the blank lines drawn in my mother's Bible.

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I always called her Delilah. She was my best friend. Just about everyone else in the place, including her parents, called her Li. She came bursting through the door the next day while we were having supper. I had prepared salt fish with a few potatoes, along with bread and tea with a dollop of blackstrap molasses. I did not mind it too much. I did not like tea too sweet, anyway. I loved codfish and just about everything else pulled out of the sea, but I loved a piece of meat cooked with pork fat in the skillet now and then. There was no birthday cake for me yesterday or today, but my mom had managed to bake the tarts she had promised me, and I was content with that.

“Happy birthday again, Eliza,” Delilah shouted, God love her. She fairly sang it out, making sure my name was pronounced the way I liked this one time. “Come on, Eliiiza, we goes up on our lookout to watch the sun hide behind the hills up the reach.” No wonder I loved Delilah. But I had to clean up after supper before I could go with her. I gave her one of the patty tarts, and she left without me. Delilah was always in a hurry.

When I finally ran up to the path to our lookout, the sun was long down below the hills up the bay. Night’s brush was painting the hues of evening upon its easel. Behind me, the melodious rote of the sea, which was a part of all my nights, was sounding. There was no moon-path, no moon, but I was standing under

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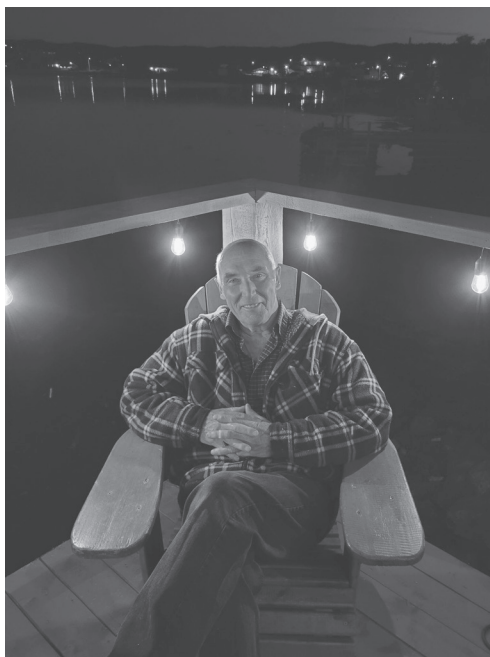


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Gary Collins was born in Hare Bay, Bonavista North. He spent fifty years in the logging and sawmilling business with his father, Theophilus, and son, Clint. Gary was once Newfoundland's youngest fisheries guardian. He managed log drives down spring rivers for years, spent seven seasons driving tractor-trailers over ice roads and the Beaufort Sea of Canada's Western Arctic, and has been involved in the crab, lobster, and cod commercial fisheries. In 2016, he joined the Canadian Rangers.

Gary has written sixteen books, including the children's illustrated book *What Colour is the Ocean?*, which he co-wrote with his granddaughter, Maggie Rose Parsons. That book won an Atlantic Book Award: The Lillian Shepherd Memorial Award for Excellence in Illustration. His book *Mattie Mitchell: Newfoundland's Greatest Frontiersman* has been adapted for film. Gary's first novel, *The Last Beothuk*, won the inaugural NL Reads literary competition, administered by the CBC, and was long-listed for the International Dublin Literary Award.

Gary Collins is Newfoundland and Labrador's favourite storyteller, and today he is known all over the province as the Story Man. He lives in Hare Bay with his wife, the former Rose Gill. They have three children and seven grandchildren.