



DARK TALES OF THE BRUCE ♦

The Jane Miller

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Pull your chair in near the fire tonight, friends, because this tale comes to us off the cold grey water of Georgian Bay, from the limestone country up around Wiarton and Owen Sound and the little ports that ring Colpoy's Bay. It is a true story, and it is one of the great haunting mysteries of these lakes. This is the tale of the steamer Jane Miller, a little wooden boat that went out into a November snowstorm in the year 1881 with some twenty-five or more souls aboard, and was never, ever seen again. And Carol, the strangest part is that people were watching her the whole time.

CAROL

Watching her the whole time. Oh, Marty, that already makes my skin prickle. A boat full of people, right there in sight of shore, and then gone? Tell me about her. What kind of a boat was the Jane Miller?



MARTY

She was a small thing, Carol, a wooden passenger-and-freight steamer, the kind that stitched all these little harbours together before there were good roads. She worked the ports of Georgian Bay, running between Wiarton and Owen Sound and Meaford and Big Bay, carrying whatever needed carrying, a few dozen passengers, barrels and crates, the mail, the goods of the season. Her master was a Captain Andrew Port, a Wiarton man, and by all accounts a capable one. But you have to understand the time of year, Carol. This was the very end of November, the tag end of the shipping season, when every captain on the lakes is trying to squeeze in one last run before the ice shuts everything down till spring.

CAROL

The last run before the ice. Marty, I can feel already that there's a pressure in that, a reason to push when a body ought to stay tied to the dock. What was the night like, the night she went out?



MARTY

It was a bitter night, Carol, the twenty-fifth of November, 1881, and the weather was turning ugly. There was a late-autumn snowstorm coming down out of the northwest, the kind that rolls across Georgian Bay in squalls, one minute you can see, the next you're blind in a wall of white. The Jane Miller had come into Wiarton that evening, and there she took on her passengers and a heavy load of freight for the run across to Big Bay. And here is the first shadow on the story, Carol. Men on the dock said she was riding low. She was loaded deep, heavy with cargo, sitting down in that cold black water further than a careful man would like.

CAROL

Riding low in the water, on a night with a storm coming. Oh, Marty, I don't like the sound of that at all. Did no one say anything? Did the captain not think to wait it out at the dock till morning?



MARTY

That is the question that has haunted this bay for a hundred and forty years, Carol. We will never truly know. But you have to remember what I told you, that end-of-season pressure, the freight that had to get through, the passengers who had somewhere to be. Captain Port was determined to finish his run. So a little after seven o'clock that evening, low in the water and heavy with freight, the Jane Miller cast off her lines at Wiarton and steamed out into Colpoy's Bay, headed across for Big Bay, straight into a rising snowstorm. And Carol, all around that bay, up on the bluffs and down at the little settlements, there were people who could see her lights.

CAROL

The lights. Marty, tell me about the lights. There were folks watching from shore, you said, ordinary people at their windows on a winter night.



MARTY

Ordinary people, Carol, at Big Bay and along the shore, watching the way you do when you know a boat is out in weather. Colpoy's Bay is ringed with high limestone bluffs, and the settlements looked out over the water, and there in the snow they could see the Jane Miller's lights, her running lights, working their way out across the bay. And they could see she was struggling. The squalls would come down and swallow her, and then the snow would thin and there she'd be again, her lights swinging in the dark, fighting the wind and the sea to make her crossing. The watchers stood there in the cold, Carol, following those little lights across the black water. And then a heavy squall came down over the bay, thick and white, and blotted her out.

CAROL

Blotted her out. And then? Marty, when the snow cleared again, when they could see once more, what did they see?



MARTY

Nothing, Carol. That is the whole terrible heart of it. When that squall passed and the watchers strained their eyes back out over Colpoy's Bay for the Jane Miller's lights, there were no lights. There was only the snow and the black water and the wind. The lights were simply gone, as though the bay had reached up and taken her. She never made Big Bay. She never made any harbour. The Jane Miller had vanished, Carol, with every single soul aboard her, some say twenty-five, some say twenty-eight, men and women both, and not one of them was ever seen alive or dead again.

CAROL

Not one of them. Oh, Marty. All those people, so close to shore, close enough that folks were watching their lights. Surely, surely in the days after, the bay gave something back. Surely they found something.



MARTY

Almost nothing, Carol, and that is what has kept the story alive all these years. In the days that followed, boats went out and searched the bay, and men walked the shorelines under the bluffs looking for any sign. And all that cold water ever gave up were a few small things. A handful of sailors' caps, floating in the icy chop. And one butter dish, a single butter dish off the boat, bobbing in the waves off the bluffs. That was all. A few caps and a butter dish, for twenty-five and more human lives. No bodies, Carol. Not one body was ever recovered from the Jane Miller. The bay closed over her and kept everything, the boat, the freight, and every soul she carried.

CAROL

A few caps and a butter dish. Marty, that undoes me, that little everyday dish floating out there on the grey water where all those people had been. And the wreck itself? Did they never find the boat, all those years?



MARTY

For well over a hundred years, Carol, no one found her. She became one of the great lost wrecks of Georgian Bay, a boat that people knew went down within sight of shore and yet could not be found, down somewhere in the cold deep water of Colpoy's Bay. Divers looked, and time went by, and the Jane Miller passed out of living memory and into legend. And that is where the hauntings come in, Carol, because a loss like that, so sudden, so close, so complete, it doesn't stay quiet. The people of the Bruce began to say that the Jane Miller never truly finished her crossing. That she is still out there, still trying.

CAROL

Still trying. Oh, Marty, the way you say it. What do they see? What do the people of the Bruce say they see out on that bay?



MARTY

They say, Carol, that on the wild stormy nights of late November, when the snow comes down over Colpoy's Bay the way it did that night in 1881, you can look out across the black water and see her lights. The Jane Miller's lights, out on the bay, moving through the squalls, just the way the watchers saw them the last night she sailed. Her running lights, swinging in the dark, working their way toward Big Bay, toward a harbour she never made and never will make. Fishermen and cottagers and folks along that shore have told it for generations. On a bad November night, you'll see a boat's lights struggling across Colpoy's Bay where no boat is, and then a squall comes down, and the lights are gone. So if you're ever up on the Bruce, Carol, standing on those limestone bluffs on a snowy night at the end of November, and you see a little boat's lights fighting across the bay, say a kind word for the souls of the Jane Miller, still trying to come home. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I'll be thinking of all those souls out on Colpoy's Bay, so close to shore, so close to home, and the folks who stood watching their lights go out. Hold your people close on the cold nights, spare a thought for the ones the water kept, and always, always come back to the fire.

