



THE COMPLETE ILLUSTRATED COLLECTION

Tales of Newfoundland

8 Stories · An AI Wrangler Collection

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EPISODE 1

The Sealing Disaster of 1914

MARTY

Pull in close tonight, friends, and hold the ones beside you, because this Newfoundland tale is a true one, and it is among the hardest I know. It happened in the spring of 1914, out on the great ice floes off the northeast coast, where the men of the Rock went every year to hunt the seal. And it is the story of how a hundred and thirty-two men were left out on that ice, in a blizzard, for two days and two nights, and how seventy-eight of them never came home.

CAROL

Oh, Marty. Seventy-eight. Before you even begin I can feel the cold of it. Why were they out there at all, on the ice?



MARTY

Because the seal hunt, Carol, was how a poor outport family survived. Every spring the sealing ships pushed north into the ice, and the men went out over the floes on foot, miles from the ship, to take the seals. It was brutal, dangerous work, and it was often the only cash money a fisherman saw all year. In March of 1914, a crew of a hundred and thirty-two men off the ship the SS Newfoundland

went out onto the ice under a young captain's son named Wes Kean. And what killed them, Carol, was not the cold alone. It was a mistake. A terrible, human mistake.

CAROL

A mistake. Oh, Marty, those are always the worst. What happened?



MARTY

There were two ships out there, Carol, close together on the ice. The Newfoundland, and another called the Stephano, captained by old Abram Kean, the young captain's own father. Wes Kean sent his hundred and thirty-two men across the ice toward his father's ship, believing they would be taken aboard the Stephano for the night, or sent back with clear orders, as the weather was turning. And his father, old Abram, believing the men were being looked after by the Newfoundland, gave them a bit of a meal, and then sent them back out onto the ice to walk home to their own ship. Each captain, Carol, thought the other had the men. And so no one had them.

CAROL

No one had them. Marty, and a storm coming. Two fathers and sons and a hundred and thirty men caught between them.



MARTY

Caught in the gap, Carol. And as those men set out across the ice to walk the miles back to the Newfoundland, the storm broke. A full blizzard, driving snow, wind that could take the skin off you, and the temperature falling like a stone. And the men could not find their ship in the white. And their ship could not come for them, because it had no wireless, no way to know they were even out there in it. So a hundred and thirty-two men were stranded on the open ice, in a blizzard, with no shelter, no fire, no food, and no one coming.

CAROL

No one coming. Two days, you said. Marty, how does a man survive even one night of that?



MARTY

Many of them did not, Carol. They did what men do. They huddled together for warmth. They built little walls of ice against the wind. They kept each other moving, kept each other awake, because to sleep was to die. Fathers held their sons. Brothers held brothers. And through two endless nights, one by one, the cold took them. Some, driven mad by it, walked off into the storm and were never seen. Some simply sat down and did not get up. And the ones still living had to stand among the frozen bodies of their friends and their kin and keep themselves alive till morning, twice over.

CAROL

Oh, Marty. Standing among their own dead to survive the night. I can hardly bear it. When did anyone find them?



MARTY

On the second day, Carol, the Newfoundland finally understood her men were not aboard the Stephano, and the alarm went up, and ships came searching through the ice. And what they found, Carol, is the image that Newfoundland has never forgotten. Men frozen where they stood, some still upright, locked in the ice. A father and his two sons frozen together in one last embrace. Fifty-four men were pulled off that ice alive, many of them ruined, hands and feet lost to frostbite. Seventy-eight were dead. And it happened, Carol, that same terrible week, another sealing ship, the Southern Cross, went down in the same storm with every one of her hundred and seventy-three hands. Newfoundland lost two hundred and fifty men to the ice in a matter of days.

CAROL

Two hundred and fifty. Marty, in one week. There cannot have been an outport on the whole coast that did not lose someone.



MARTY

There was not, Carol. The grief went into every harbour on the northeast coast. Whole crews gone. Villages that lost their men, their boys, their futures, in one blow. And the hardest part, the part that made the whole country angry as well as heartbroken, was that it did not have to happen. There was no wireless on the Newfoundland to call for help, a cost the owners had spared. The two captains had each trusted the other. It was a disaster made of thrift and miscommunication and pride, out on the cruelest ice in the world.

CAROL

A disaster made of small human failures, and paid for by seventy-eight lives. Marty, is there anything but sorrow in this one? I need something to hold.



MARTY

There is this, Carol. Out of that horror, Newfoundland changed. The disaster forced the laws to change, forced wireless onto the ships, forced better care for the men who did that deadly work. The seventy-eight did not die for nothing, though God knows the price was too high. And more than that, Carol, the story became sacred. Newfoundland took those men into its heart and never let them go. A great writer, Cassie Brown, set it all down in a book so the country would remember every name. And they do remember. On the Rock, the sealing disaster is not history in a book. It is family. Everyone's great-grandfather knew a man who was out there.

CAROL

It is family. Yes, Marty. That is how a place holds its dead, isn't it, by refusing to let them become strangers.



MARTY

That is exactly how, Carol. So tonight we hold them too, the men of the SS Newfoundland, frozen on the ice for two nights because of a gap between two ships. We remember the fathers holding their sons. We remember that they were poor men doing killing work to feed their families, and that they deserved so much better than they got. And we remember that a hard land like Newfoundland raises hard, brave, loyal people, who will stand among their own dead in a blizzard and still try to keep each other alive till morning. That is the Rock. That is her people. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight my heart is out on that ice with those brave, doomed men and the ones who held them. Hold your people close against every cold there is, and come back to the fire.



EPISODE 2

Beaumont-Hamel

MARTY

Welcome back to the fire, friends. Tonight's Newfoundland story is the most sacred one the island keeps, and it did not happen on the island at all. It happened far across the ocean, on a July morning in 1916, on a field in France called Beaumont-Hamel. And in about half an hour on that morning, Newfoundland lost almost an entire generation of her young men. To this day, while the rest of Canada celebrates on the first of July, Newfoundland bows its head.



CAROL

While the rest of the country celebrates, they mourn. Marty, that tells me everything before you even begin. What happened at Beaumont-Hamel?



MARTY

It was the first day of the Battle of the Somme, Carol, the bloodiest day in the history of the British army. And there, in the line, was the Royal Newfoundland Regiment, near eight hundred young men from the outports and from St. John's, most of them volunteers, fishermen and clerks and boys who had never seen a war, who had crossed the ocean to serve. And on the morning of the first of July, they were ordered to go over the top, up out of their trench, and to advance across open ground toward the German lines.



CAROL

Open ground, Marty. Toward the guns. Had the attack, the ones before them, had it gone well?



MARTY

It had already failed, Carol, that is the unbearable part. The waves that went before them that morning had been cut to pieces. The German machine guns were untouched and waiting. And by the time the order came to the Newfoundlanders, the ground ahead was already carpeted with the dead and dying of the earlier attacks. The Newfoundland Regiment had to climb out of their trench, in full daylight, and walk forward into machine-gun fire across a field where everyone could see there was no hope. And they did it, Carol. They climbed out, and they walked forward, because they were ordered to, and they did not break.



CAROL

They walked forward knowing. Oh, Marty. What kind of courage is that.



MARTY

The purest and most terrible kind there is, Carol. They came up out of the trench into a wall of fire. There was one lone tree out in that open ground, a bare and blasted thing the men called the Danger Tree, because the German gunners had it ranged, and to reach it was almost certain death, and yet it was the only landmark, and so the Newfoundlanders pushed toward it and fell around it in heaps. Most of them never got even that far. They were cut down within yards of their own trench, walking forward into the guns, and it was over, Carol, in about thirty minutes.



CAROL

Thirty minutes. Marty. How many? How many of the eight hundred?



MARTY

The next morning, Carol, when they called the roll, to see who was left to answer, only about sixty-eight men stood up to answer their names. Of the roughly eight hundred who went forward, some seven hundred were killed, wounded, or missing. Nearly the whole regiment, gone, in half an hour, on a field in France. There was scarcely a family in Newfoundland that did not lose a son, a brother, a father, a sweetheart, on that one July morning. An entire generation of the island's young men, cut down in a single stroke.



CAROL

An entire generation. Marty, a small island like that, all its young men. How does a place even survive a wound like that?

MARTY

It survives by remembering, Carol, and by grief that never quite heals, which is its own kind of faithfulness. When the news came back to Newfoundland, the whole island went into mourning, and it has never entirely come out. They call the first of July Memorial Day there, and it is a day of sorrow, of bowed heads and the last post and the reading of the names. And there is a monument on that field in France now, on the very ground, a great bronze caribou, the emblem of the regiment, standing on a rise and bellowing out across the old battlefield toward the enemy lines, forever. And you can still see the trenches there, and the shell holes, and yes, Carol, the Danger Tree still stands.

CAROL

A bronze caribou crying out across the field forever. Oh, Marty. And the tree is still there. That gives me chills right to the bone. Why do you think Newfoundland holds this one so much closer than any of its other losses?

MARTY

Because of how complete it was, Carol, and how willing. It was not an accident, like the ice. It was not fate. It was a whole generation of young men who chose to serve, who crossed an ocean for a cause, and who, when they were ordered to walk into certain death, walked, without breaking, out of duty and courage and love of their comrades. There is nothing to blame and nothing to fix, Carol. There is only the pure, staggering fact of their sacrifice. And a people cannot help but hold something like that forever, because to forget it would be a second death, and worse.

CAROL

To forget them would be worse than losing them. Yes, Marty. So they carry it, generation after generation, on purpose.

MARTY

On purpose, Carol, and with pride under the sorrow. Because those men gave everything, and they did it as Newfoundlanders, and the island will not let that go. So tonight we stand with them too. We remember the young men of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment who climbed out of the trench on the first of July, 1916, and walked forward into the guns at Beaumont-Hamel, and did not come home. We remember that only sixty-eight answered the roll. And we hold, as the island holds, the forget-me-not, the little blue flower they wear there still, so that no one ever does. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I am wearing a forget-me-not in my heart for the young men of Newfoundland. Hold your people close, honour the ones who gave everything, and come back to the fire.

EPISODE 3

Shanawdithit, the Last of the Beothuk

MARTY

Pull in close, friends. Tonight's Newfoundland tale is the heaviest we will tell all season, and it is important that we tell it, because it is about a whole people who vanished from the earth, and about the last of them, a young woman named Shanawdithit, who carried her entire nation inside her, alone, to the end. She was the last of the Beothuk, and when she died, they died with her.



CAROL

The last of a whole people. Marty, I can hardly take that in. Who were the Beothuk?



MARTY

They were the first people of Newfoundland, Carol. They had lived on the island for thousands of years before any European ever saw it, a people of the coast and the interior, who painted themselves and their belongings with red ochre, so that the first Europeans called them the Red Indians, and some say that is where that name for all Indigenous people wrongly began. They lived by the sea in the warm months and the woods in the cold, they built fine bark canoes, and they wanted, above all things, to be left alone by the newcomers.



CAROL

To be left alone. And they were not, I take it.



MARTY

They were not, Carol. When the Europeans came to fish the Grand Banks and settle the coast, they took the very shorelines the Beothuk needed to live, the salmon rivers, the seabird islands, the coves where they gathered their food. And the Beothuk, unlike some other nations, chose not to trade or treat with the settlers, but to withdraw, deeper and deeper into the interior, away from the coast that was their lifeblood. And so they were slowly starved, Carol, squeezed inland away from the sea, while disease the newcomers brought, tuberculosis above all, burned through them. And there was violence too, cruel and shameful, settlers who shot Beothuk on sight. Between the hunger and the sickness and the killing, a people who had numbered in the thousands dwindled, over two centuries, to almost nothing.



CAROL

Squeezed away from the sea that fed them, and struck down by sickness they had never known. Marty, it is a slow horror, worse in a way than any battle. How does the story come to one young woman?



MARTY

By the 1820s, Carol, there were only a handful of Beothuk left alive in the whole world. In 1819, settlers captured a young Beothuk woman named Demasduit, they called her Mary March, and took her from her husband and her people, and she died the next year of tuberculosis. And in 1823, three starving Beothuk women came out of the woods to the settlers, near death, and two of them soon died. The third was a young woman of about twenty, and her name was Shanawdithit. And she was, though no one knew it for certain yet, the last of her nation.



CAROL

The last one. Oh, Marty. To be the only one left of your whole people. I cannot imagine a loneliness like that.



MARTY

There is no loneliness like it, Carol, in all of human experience, and Shanawdithit carried it with a dignity that breaks my heart. She lived among the settlers in her last years, and there was a man named William Cormack, who had searched the interior for the Beothuk and grieved their vanishing, and he took her in, and he did something precious. He asked her to tell him about her people. And Shanawdithit, the last Beothuk, sat down and drew. She made drawings, Carol, of her people's history, their camps, their canoes, the ways they lived, the events of their last years, even the deaths of her own family. She poured out everything she knew, everything her people had ever been, onto paper, so that it would not all be lost when she was gone.



CAROL

She drew her whole world so it would survive her. Marty, that is the bravest and saddest thing I have ever heard. She knew she was the end, and she tried to save what she could.

MARTY

She knew, Carol. She knew she was the last, and she spent her final strength making sure the memory of her people would outlive her, one careful drawing at a time. And then, in the summer of 1829, in St. John's, Shanawdithit died, of the same tuberculosis that had taken so many of them. And with her, the Beothuk people of Newfoundland came to their end. A nation of thousands, thousands of years old, gone entirely from the earth, and its last light a young woman drawing pictures for a stranger so the world would not forget.

CAROL

Gone entirely. Marty, I do not have words. A whole people, and their language, and their thousands of years, ending in one lonely young woman in a strange town. How do we even hold something so enormous and so terrible?

MARTY

We hold it, Carol, by refusing to look away from it, and by refusing to let her be forgotten, which is the one thing she asked of the world with those drawings. The

Beothuk are gone, and nothing can undo that, and it is one of the great wrongs of this land's history. But Shanawdithit is not forgotten. Her drawings survive. Her name is honoured now, in Newfoundland and beyond. Scholars and her fellow Indigenous peoples keep her memory and the memory of the Beothuk alive. And every time we tell her story at a fire like this one, we are doing exactly what she hoped, Carol. We are remembering. She made sure her people would not vanish silently, and they have not.

CAROL

She made sure. Marty, that is the one small mercy in it, isn't it. She was not able to save her people, but she saved their memory, and we are keeping it right now.

MARTY

We are, Carol, and we always must. So tonight we remember the Beothuk, the first people of Newfoundland, and we remember Shanawdithit, who carried them all inside her to the end, and who, in her last loneliness, drew the truth of her people so that we could not pretend they never were. Remember them, friends. That is her legacy, and it is ours to keep. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I am holding the Beothuk and their last daughter in my heart, and I will not forget. Honour the first peoples of this land, hold your own close, and come back to the fire.

EPISODE 4

Peter Easton, the Pirate Admiral

MARTY

Welcome back to the fire, friends. We have had some heavy nights on the Rock, so tonight let us lighten the sail a little, and tell you about a pirate. Not a scruffy, doomed sort of pirate, mind you. A pirate so successful, so powerful, that he ruled the whole coast of Newfoundland like a king, was never once defeated, and retired rich as a lord to a castle in the south of France. His name was Peter Easton, and they called him the Pirate Admiral.



CAROL

A pirate who retired to a castle and never lost. Marty, that is not how pirate stories usually end. I am already rooting for the rascal.



MARTY

Most people are, Carol. Peter Easton began, in the early sixteen hundreds, as a respectable English privateer, sailing with the Queen's blessing to harry Spanish ships. But when the old queen died and the new king made peace with Spain, Easton was suddenly out of a job, and a man with ships and crews and a taste for plunder does not simply take up farming. So Easton turned pirate, and he sailed his fleet across the ocean to Newfoundland, where the real treasure of the age was not gold at all. It was fish.



CAROL

Fish, Marty. A pirate who came for the fish. Now that is a Newfoundland pirate.



MARTY

The most Newfoundland pirate there ever was, Carol. Because in those days the cod fishery off Newfoundland was one of the richest enterprises in the whole world, hundreds of ships from England and France and Portugal, hauling up wealth from the Grand Banks every summer. And Peter Easton looked at all those ships, and all those tough, skilled, poorly-paid fishermen, and he saw an empire waiting to be taken. He set himself up at Harbour Grace, in Conception Bay, and he built forts, and he took control of the fishery itself. He taxed the ships. He took supplies, and cannon, and above all men.



CAROL

He recruited the fishermen, Marty? To be pirates?



MARTY

By the hundreds, Carol. And here is the thing that people forget about piracy. To a poor fisherman working himself half to death for almost nothing, a charming, victorious pirate captain offering adventure and a real share of the plunder was a mighty tempting offer. Easton is said to have taken on hundreds of Newfoundland fishermen into his crews, and with them he grew so strong that no one could touch him. He had a fleet of ten ships or more. He ruled the Newfoundland coast completely. Warships were sent to stop him, and he defeated them or bought them off. For a few years, Carol, Peter Easton was, in every way that mattered, the master of Newfoundland.



CAROL

The master of Newfoundland, a pirate. Marty, did no one ever bring him down?
That is usually where these stories turn dark.



MARTY

And here is the delicious part, Carol. No one ever did. Easton was too strong and too clever to be beaten, and too smart to keep pushing his luck forever. He raided down to the Caribbean, he plundered Spanish treasure, he grew fabulously rich. And then, when he had enough, he did the thing almost no successful pirate ever manages. He quit. He got out. He is said to have twice been offered a royal pardon, and he took his fortune and his fleet and sailed to the Mediterranean, to the Duchy of Savoy, and he bought respectability. He became a nobleman, a Marquis, and he settled into a fine palace and lived out his days as a wealthy gentleman, having gone from privateer to pirate king to lord, and never once paying the pirate's usual price at the end of a rope.



CAROL

He retired a Marquis. Marty, that is outrageous. Crime paid, and paid handsomely, and he got away clean. But surely, being a Newfoundland pirate, he must have left some treasure buried somewhere?

MARTY

Ah, Carol, now you are speaking the language of the island. Because of course, wherever a rich pirate walked, the legends of buried treasure sprang up behind him like footprints, and Peter Easton's are among the best. They say he buried chests of Spanish gold on the islands of Conception Bay, on Kelly's Island most famously, and folks have dug those shores for four hundred years hoping to strike the Pirate Admiral's hoard. Has anyone found it? Well, Carol, if they had, we would not still be telling the story. But every so often, someone in Conception Bay turns up an old coin, and the whole legend catches fire again, and the shovels come out.

CAROL

The shovels come out. I love that, Marty. So he may still be down there in the ground, his gold, waiting. Why do you think Newfoundland is so fond of a pirate who basically robbed it blind?

MARTY

Because he was one of theirs, in a way, Carol, and because he won. Newfoundland's history, as we have seen these nights, is so full of hard endings, of the ice and the war and the sorrow, that there is a real joy in a story where a bold rogue takes on the whole ocean and the great powers of the world and beats them all and sails off laughing to a castle. Peter Easton is not a hero, Carol. He was a pirate, a thief, a taker of ships and men. But he was a magnificent one, and he reminds the island that its waters were once ruled not by kings and empires, but by a clever fellow with a fast ship and a good crew of Newfoundland fishermen. There is a wink in that story, and the Rock has always loved a good wink. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I am tipping my hat to the Pirate Admiral, safe in his castle with his ill-gotten gold. Hold your people close, keep one eye on the horizon, and come back to the fire.

EPISODE 5

The Old Hag

MARTY

Welcome back to the fire, friends. Tonight's Newfoundland tale is one you may know in your own bones, even if you have never heard its name. Because on the Rock, they have a name for a terror that visits people all over the world in the dead of night, and once you have heard it, you will never forget it, and you may find yourself glancing at the dark corner of your own bedroom tonight. They call it the Old Hag.



CAROL

The Old Hag. Marty, just the name of it puts a shiver in me. What is she?



MARTY

Here is how it comes, Carol. You are asleep in your bed in the night. And you wake, or you seem to wake, and at once you know something is terribly wrong. Because you cannot move. Not a finger, not your head, nothing. You are pinned, wide awake, aware of your own room, unable to stir or cry out. And then, Carol, comes the worst of it. You feel a weight settle onto your chest. A crushing, pressing weight, growing heavier, until you can barely breathe. And you become certain, with a dread beyond all reason, that there is someone in the room with you. And you look, and sitting on your chest, holding you down, is a hideous old woman, a hag, glaring into your face.



CAROL

Oh, Marty. Stop. That is horrifying. Awake, unable to move, and a witch sitting on your chest crushing the breath out of you. I have goosebumps up both arms. Does she, does she do anything?



MARTY

She holds you, Carol. She presses down and steals your breath and fills you with a terror you cannot describe, and you strain with everything you have to move, to scream, to break free, and you cannot, and it seems to go on and on. And then, at last, something gives, you jerk awake for real, your body suddenly your own again, your heart slamming, and you sit up gasping in the dark, drenched in sweat, and she is gone. On the Rock they have a phrase for it, Carol, plain and chilling. They say the Old Hag was on you. Or simply, you were hagged.



CAROL

You were hagged. Marty, and this happens to real people, not just in a story? This is a real thing on the island?



MARTY

It is very real, Carol, and this is what makes the Old Hag so remarkable. This is not a spooky tale someone dreamed up. It is a genuine folk belief, so common and so consistent in Newfoundland that a scholar named David Hufford went there and studied it, and wrote a whole book about the terror that comes in the night. Because all over the world, and all through history, ordinary people have had this exact experience, the waking, the paralysis, the crushing weight, the sense of a presence, the figure on the chest. Every culture has a name for it. And on the Rock, the name is the Old Hag.



CAROL

So it is universal. Marty, that almost makes it more frightening, not less, that the same hag visits people everywhere. Is there a, well, is there an explanation?



MARTY

There is, Carol, and I will give it to you honestly, because I think the truth here is as fascinating as the folklore. What the science says is that this is a thing called sleep paralysis. As we drift in and out of the deepest dreaming sleep, the body naturally paralyzes itself, so that we do not act out our dreams. And sometimes the mind wakes up before the body's paralysis lets go. So you are conscious, aware of your room, but your body is still switched off, and you cannot move. And the dreaming part of the brain, still half-running, fills that helpless, frightening moment with the most primal thing it can conjure, a threatening presence, a weight, a figure. The Old Hag, Carol, is your own sleeping mind, caught between two worlds.



CAROL

Your own mind, caught between sleep and waking. Marty, that is extraordinary. So there is no witch at all. And yet, and yet, that does not make it feel any less real when it happens, does it.

MARTY

Not one bit, Carol, and that is the wisdom hiding in the folklore. Because here is the thing. Knowing it is sleep paralysis does not stop the terror. People who understand the science perfectly well still wake up hagged, still feel the weight, still see the figure, still cannot move, and are still frightened out of their wits. The experience is completely real, whatever we call it. And so I have a deep respect, Carol, for the old Newfoundland folk who did not have the science, but who had something almost as good. They had a name for it, and a shared understanding, and even a set of remedies.

CAROL

Remedies, Marty? What did they do to keep the Old Hag away?

MARTY

All manner of things, Carol, passed down through the outports. Some slept with a nail or a knife or a bit of iron under the pillow, for the old folk believed iron warded off evil. Some placed their boots by the bed pointing away from them, or

a board with a nail driven through it. Some said their prayers with special care. And there was a darker piece of it too, Carol, for it was believed that a person could send the Old Hag onto an enemy, could call her down on someone they wished ill, by saying the Lord's Prayer backward. So the hag was not only a terror of the night. She was, in the old belief, a weapon that a bitter neighbour might turn on you.

CAROL

A neighbour could send the hag on you. Oh, Marty, that is the folklore turning properly sinister. So which is it, in the end, the science or the witch?

MARTY

It is both, Carol, and that is exactly why I love this one. The science tells us what is happening in the sleeping brain, and it is true. But the folklore tells us what it feels like, and that is true too, truer in its way, because the feeling is the real thing, the ancient primal terror of being helpless in the dark with something pressing down. Our ancestors, on the Rock and everywhere, met that terror the only way people can meet a thing they cannot escape. They named it, they shared it, and they laughed at it a little in the daylight, and passed the name to their children, so no one would ever have to wake up alone and think they were the only one. The Old Hag is the whole human race, Carol, keeping each other company in the dark. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I am putting my boots by the bed pointing at the door, just in case. Hold your people close, keep a light near, and if the Old Hag comes calling, remember she has visited everyone who ever lived. Come back to the fire.

EPISODE 6

The Fairies

MARTY

Welcome back to the fire, friends. When you hear the word fairies, you likely think of something small and sweet, with gauzy wings, out of a children's book. Put that clean out of your mind tonight. Because the fairies of Newfoundland are nothing of the sort. They are old, and strange, and not to be trifled with, and on the Rock, within living memory, sensible grown people took great care not to offend them. Tonight we talk about the Good People, and about what it means to be taken by them.



CAROL

The Good People. Marty, I have heard they call them that not because they are good, but because you do not dare call them anything else. Is that right?



MARTY

That is exactly right, Carol, and you have put your finger on the whole heart of it. In Newfoundland, brought over by the Irish and the English who settled there, the fairies were a real and serious presence, and you never, ever named them plainly or spoke ill of them, in case they were listening. So you called them the Good People, or the Little People, or just, delicately, the fairies, and you kept on their good side, because a person who fell foul of the fairies could find themselves in a great deal of trouble. And the greatest trouble of all, Carol, was to be taken.



CAROL

Taken. Marty, taken where? By whom?



MARTY

Here is how it happened, in a hundred outport tellings, Carol. A person would go out, often a child, sometimes berry-picking on the barrens, or walking home along a wooded path at dusk. An ordinary walk, ground they knew well. And then, somehow, they would not come home. And the whole community would turn out to search, calling and searching through the woods and the bogs, all night sometimes, days sometimes. And when the lost one was finally found, Carol, and often they were found, they would be somewhere they had no business being, and they would be dazed, and strange, and unable to properly say what had happened, only that they had been away, with the fairies, in the fairies, as they said, and that the time had passed differently, and they were never quite the same again.



CAROL

Away with the fairies, and never the same. Oh, Marty. That is such a specific, eerie thing. What do you think was really happening?



MARTY

Well, Carol, let me give you the honest ground under it first, because it is real and it is important. Newfoundland is a place of thick woods, and endless barrens, and sudden fog that can drop over you like a blanket and turn the whole world into featureless grey. And a child, or anyone, out on the barrens when the fog comes, could become lost within a hundred yards of a path they had walked a thousand times, wander for hours in terror and exhaustion and cold, and by the time they were found be so dazed and frightened and hypothermic that they truly could not tell you what had happened. That is a real danger. It killed people. And when it did not kill them, it left them shaken and confused in a way that begged for an explanation.



CAROL

And the explanation was the fairies. Marty, I see it. A way to make sense of a child vanishing on ground they knew, and coming back changed. But it was more than an explanation, wasn't it. People actually protected themselves.



MARTY

They did, Carol, with real care, and this is where it becomes wonderful. There were rules, protections, everyone knew them. The most famous was bread. You never went out onto the barrens or into the woods without a bit of bread in your pocket, because bread, the honest food of home and hearth, was proof against the fairies, and they could not take you while you carried it. If you felt yourself going astray, getting that strange led-around feeling in the fog, the remedy was to turn your coat inside out, to confuse the fairies and break their hold on you. You did not whistle after dark, for fear of what might answer. And if the fairies did leave you something, a bit of fairy money, you might look in your pocket in the morning and find only dead leaves, for fairy gold never lasts.



CAROL

Bread in your pocket and your coat turned inside out. Marty, I find that so moving, actually, that whole communities carried bread against the fog. It is folklore, but it is also just, wisdom, isn't it. Take something from home when you go into the wild.

MARTY

That is precisely it, Carol, and it is why I never laugh at the fairy belief, however much I understand the fog and the bogs beneath it. Because those old rules kept people alive, and kept them careful, and kept the children close. Do not wander off alone. Take food when you go out. Respect the wild places, and do not be too proud or too loud in them, for they are older and stronger than you. Turn back when the fog comes. Every one of those fairy rules is good, hard survival sense, dressed up in magic so that a child would remember it and a grown man would not feel foolish obeying it.

CAROL

Magic as a way to make people remember good sense. Marty, that keeps coming up at this fire, doesn't it, that the old legends are wisdom in a costume. But tell me true. Is that all the fairies were? The fog and good sense?

MARTY

Here is what I will tell you, Carol, and it is where I always land. There are people in Newfoundland, right up to today, sober and sensible people, who will tell you, quietly, that once, out on the barrens or in the woods, something happened to them that the fog does not explain. A feeling of being led. A time that did not add up. A presence just out of sight. And I am not going to sit at this fire and tell those people they are wrong, because I was not there, and the world is a great deal stranger than we like to admit. So carry your bread, friends, when you go into the wild places. Maybe it is only good sense. And maybe, out on the lonely barrens where the fog comes down, the Good People are watching still, and would rather you kept on their good side. I would. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tomorrow I am putting a heel of bread in my coat pocket and leaving it there. Hold your people close, respect the wild and the old, and come back to the fire.

EPISODE 7

The Vikings of L'Anse aux Meadows

MARTY

Welcome back to the fire, friends. Tonight's Newfoundland tale carries us back a thousand years, to a windswept meadow at the far northern tip of the island, and to a secret that Newfoundland kept in the ground for ten centuries. Because long, long before Columbus, before John Cabot, before any of the fishing fleets, other Europeans came to the shores of the Rock. They came in longships. They were the Norse. The Vikings landed in Newfoundland, and for a thousand years, almost nobody believed it.



CAROL

The Vikings, Marty. In Newfoundland. A thousand years ago. I have heard whispers of this and always half thought it a fairy tale. It is true?



MARTY

It is entirely true, Carol, and it is one of the great stories of the whole New World. Around the year one thousand, the Norse had pushed west across the top of the world, from Norway to Iceland, from Iceland to Greenland, where Erik the Red made a colony. And Erik had a son, Carol, a bold one, named Leif Erikson, and Leif heard tell of lands still further west, sighted by a sailor blown off course. And Leif Erikson took a ship and a crew and sailed off into the unknown Atlantic to find them. And he did. He came to a coast of forests and meadows and wild grapes, a place the sagas call Vinland. And the northern tip of Newfoundland, Carol, is where they built.



CAROL

So the old Norse sagas told this story all along. But nobody believed the sagas were real history?



MARTY

For centuries, Carol, the Vinland sagas were treated as legend, grand old tales of Viking adventure, poetry, not fact. Everyone knew Columbus discovered America in 1492, and that was that. The idea that Norsemen had stood on North American soil five hundred years before Columbus was a lovely story, but where was the proof? A saga is not a foundation. You cannot dig up a poem. And so it stayed, a beautiful maybe, for a very long time, until a Norwegian couple decided to go and settle the question for good.



CAROL

A couple went looking. Oh, Marty, I love it already. Tell me.



MARTY

Their names were Helge Ingstad and Anne Stine Ingstad, Carol, an explorer and an archaeologist, husband and wife, and they believed the sagas. And in 1960, Helge Ingstad went to Newfoundland, to the northern peninsula, and he did the thing that had never been done. He asked the local people. There was a fishing village up there called L'Anse aux Meadows, and the fishermen there had always known of some strange old overgrown mounds and ridges in a meadow by the sea, that they figured were an old Indian camp, or nothing at all. And a local man named George Decker walked Helge Ingstad out and showed him the bumps in the grass.



CAROL

Bumps in the grass that everyone had walked past forever. Marty, and that was it?



MARTY

That was it, Carol. Because when Anne Stine Ingstad and her team dug into those bumps in the grass, over the seasons that followed, they found the outlines of buildings. Norse buildings, Carol. Turf-walled longhouses of exactly the kind the Vikings built in Greenland and Iceland. They found a forge, and iron nails and rivets, worked in a way the Indigenous peoples did not work iron. They found a bronze cloak pin, and a stone lamp, and a spindle whorl for spinning wool, a woman's tool, telling us this was no mere camp but a real settlement, with women in it. And when they dated it all, Carol, it came back to right around the year one thousand. The sagas were true. The Vikings had been there.



CAROL

The sagas were true. Marty, that gives me chills. A thousand-year-old secret, sitting in the grass, and a fishing village that had walked past it for generations. So Leif Erikson really did stand on Newfoundland.

MARTY

He and his people really did, Carol. For the first time, there was hard, undeniable proof that Europeans had reached the Americas five centuries before Columbus, and the place they proved it was a meadow in Newfoundland. It rewrote the history of the entire New World. But here is the part I love best, Carol, and it is very Newfoundland. The Norse did not stay. They were there only a few years, a decade at most. They found the land rich, but they were desperately far from home, a tiny band at the end of the world, and they met the people already living there, whom they called the Skraelings, and there was trade at first and then there was fighting, and the Norse were too few and too far away to hold on. So they packed up their longships and sailed away, back to Greenland, and left their turf houses to sink slowly into the meadow.

CAROL

They came all that way, and then they left. Marty, why does that move me so? That they were there, and it did not last.

MARTY

Because it is so human, Carol. They dared the impossible ocean, they reached a whole new world, they achieved a thing that would not be matched for five hundred years, and then, quietly, they found it was too hard and too lonely and too far, and they went home, and history forgot them for a thousand years. There is no glory in the ending, Carol, no empire, no monument they built. Just a few brave, restless people who came to Newfoundland, lived a while at the edge of everything, and left. And yet the meadow kept them. The ground remembered. And a fisherman named George Decker walked a Norwegian dreamer out to some bumps in the grass, and gave the whole world back its lost first chapter. L'Anse aux Meadows is a wonder of the world now, Carol, honoured across the earth. But it started as bumps in the grass that the local folk had always known were there. The Rock keeps its secrets, and gives them up in its own good time.

CAROL

The Rock keeps its secrets. Marty, that is a beautiful thought to end on. A thousand years, and it was waiting all along.

MARTY

Waiting all along, Carol. So the next time someone tells you Columbus discovered the New World, you can smile, and think of a meadow at the top of Newfoundland, where a thousand years ago the Norse built their houses of turf, and where the grass grew over the truth and kept it safe until we were ready to believe it. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I am marvelling at Leif Erikson and the meadow that remembered him. Honour the old daring, keep your own secrets safe, and come back to the fire.

EPISODE 8

The Signal on Signal Hill

MARTY

Welcome back to the fire, friends, for the last of our tales from the Rock, and after all our nights of ice and sorrow and old ghosts, let us end on a triumph, and on a moment when Newfoundland changed the entire world. It happened on a hill above St. John's, in a howling December gale in the year 1901, when a young Italian and three faint clicks in a headphone shrank the whole Atlantic Ocean to nothing. It is the story of the first wireless signal to cross the sea, and it landed on Signal Hill.



CAROL

Signal Hill. Marty, even the name sounds like it was waiting for this story. What happened up there?



MARTY

To understand it, Carol, you have to remember how the world was in 1901. If you wanted to send a message across the Atlantic, from America to Europe, you had exactly one way to do it fast, and that was the undersea telegraph cable, a physical wire lying on the bottom of the ocean, which had been a marvel and a fortune to lay. The idea that you could send a message across three thousand miles of open ocean through the empty air, with no wire at all, was, to most sensible people, close to madness. And a young inventor named Guglielmo Marconi had bet his life and his reputation that he could do exactly that.



CAROL

Through the empty air, no wire. Marty, in 1901 that must have sounded like sorcery. Why Newfoundland?



MARTY

Because Newfoundland, Carol, is the piece of North America that reaches furthest out into the Atlantic, closest to Europe. If a signal was going to make the great leap across the ocean, the shortest jump was from Cornwall, in the far southwest of England, to the far eastern edge of Newfoundland. So Marconi's people built a powerful transmitting station at Poldhu, in Cornwall, and set it sending, over and over, the simplest possible signal, the letter S, three little dots in Morse code, dot dot dot, out into the air toward the west. And Marconi himself sailed to St. John's, and climbed Signal Hill, that high rocky headland over the harbour, to listen for it.



CAROL

Three dots. Dot dot dot. Sent out over the ocean, hoping. Marty, and how do you even listen for something like that?



MARTY

With enormous difficulty, Carol, and no small amount of desperation. Marconi needed to hang an antenna, a receiving wire, up high in the air, and the December weather on Signal Hill was atrocious, a full Newfoundland gale, screaming wind and freezing rain. He tried lifting the antenna with a balloon, and the wind tore it away and carried it off. So he tried a kite, Carol. A great kite, flown up into that howling storm, dragging the antenna wire up into the sky above Signal Hill, plunging and bucking in the wind, while Marconi sat below in a cold, bare room in an old fever hospital with a telephone receiver pressed to his ear, straining to hear three faint clicks come three thousand miles across the raging Atlantic.



CAROL

A kite in a gale, and a man with a receiver to his ear, listening across an ocean.
Marty, I am on the edge of my seat. Did he hear it?



MARTY

On the twelfth of December, 1901, Carol, in the early afternoon, with the wind screaming and the kite bucking overhead, Guglielmo Marconi heard, faint and unmistakable in the receiver, dot dot dot. Three little clicks. The letter S. Sent from a hilltop in Cornwall, flung out across three thousand miles of open ocean, through the empty air, with no wire at all, and caught on a kite string above St. John's. He handed the receiver to his assistant to be sure he was not imagining it, and his assistant heard it too. Three dots. And in that instant, Carol, on a windswept rock above Newfoundland, the world got smaller forever.



CAROL

Three dots, and the world changed. Marty, that gives me goosebumps of the very best kind. Just the letter S, and yet it was everything.

MARTY

It was everything, Carol, because it was proof. Proof that a signal could leap the ocean without a wire, that the very air itself could carry human messages around the curve of the earth. Now, I will be honest with you, because at this fire we always are. There were doubters, Carol, and for a while some serious people wondered whether Marconi had truly heard the signal or only wished it out of the crackle and hiss of the atmosphere, for it was very faint and there was no recording. But Marconi went on, and proved it beyond all doubt in the years that followed, and the whole world came to agree on what had happened that December day on Signal Hill. It was the birth of transatlantic wireless. It was the first breath of the connected world we all live in now.

CAROL

The first breath of the connected world. Marty, everything, the radio, the telephone across the sea, all the way down to the little device in my pocket, it all traces back to three dots on a kite string over Newfoundland?

MARTY

All the way back, Carol, to that cold room on Signal Hill and a young man listening in a gale. Every wireless signal that has ever crossed the ocean since, every radio broadcast, every transatlantic call, every message flying invisibly around the world this very moment, is a descendant of Marconi's three faint dots. And it is a wonderful thing, I think, that it happened where it did. Because Newfoundland, Carol, for all its history of being remote, at the far edge of everything, cut off by the cruel ocean, was the exact place where humanity first reached across that ocean through the empty air. The Rock, so long defined by its distance from the world, became the place where distance itself was defeated.

CAROL

The place where distance was defeated. Oh, Marty, what a way to end our nights in Newfoundland. After all the ice and the loss and the old ghosts, a triumph, and a kind one, that brought the whole world closer together.

MARTY

A kind one, Carol, and I saved it for the end on purpose. Because Newfoundland's story, as we have told it these nights, is so often a hard one, a story of a brave people at the edge of the world, battered by the sea and the war and the sorrow. But on Signal Hill, that same edge of the world, that same distance, became the doorway through which we all reached out to one another for the first time. So the next time you send a message flying across an ocean without a thought, remember a kite in a December gale, and three faint dots, and a young man on a rock above St. John's who heard them, and shrank the whole world to the size of a fire like this one, where we can all sit together, no matter how far apart. Thank you for sitting with us, friends, all through Newfoundland. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol. From the ice to the fairies to three dots on Signal Hill, it has been an honour to share the Rock with you. Hold your people close, near or far, for the distance is smaller than it looks. And come back to the fire. There are always more stories.