

Gini

One summer in 1965, Hoppy checked on his new lobster boat, the Gini H.

That morning the sky gleamed streaks of red across the inland horizon. The weather report warned of a possible late summer squall with high winds by mid-morning. Gathered at Ray Moore's dock, the fishermen traded insults and lamented the coming squall that would keep them from work that morning. In the small fishing village, no work meant no pay.

Hoppy had named his boat after his wife. Gini's calm ease circled him like the harbor that sheltered the boat. As the morning wore on, a curtain of grey approached the Rockport Harbor from the west. It reached from the sky to the sea in ominous shards. Heavy rain stirred the surface of the water. Winds whipped waves into ten-foot peaks in seconds. The air howled. The Gini H strained at her line. A few drops of rain hit her deck and spattered the cabin as the boat faced the coming storm. The heavy rain hit the harbor first. The 50-mile an hour winds quickly followed. In seconds, the calm harbor heaved with waves that looked like arms reaching out from the sea. The boat rocked like a hobbyhorse on the anchor line. Its frame groaned with the impact. Across the harbor, the other boats were hidden by the driving rain as they resisted the downward pull of the sea.

“Sit up straight, comb your hair.” Gini heard those words enough as a child to know that nothing she did was good enough for her mother. Mother's family was loyal Congregationalist. Things were done a certain way. Mother went to church every week and participated in women's events. Once a month, on Saturday afternoons, the ladies dressed in their ankle length, silk crepe, drop waist dresses. In summer, they wore hand-made lace caps for sleeves. In winter, they were replaced by long tapered sleeves. White gloves adorned their hands and their heads were topped with cloche hats, often with veils. The silver tea service shone for the special occasion.

Dad didn't go to church if he could help it. He was kind to all people, especially children and animals. He had a small dog, Tippy, that he loved. Dad's strong hands held Gini's small one on walks down the

street. His encouraging words were sunshine on her shoulders. He was always ready with a smile or a joke to make her laugh.

When Mother went to town for groceries, Dad stood at the window, sneaking a cigarette. One day, he dropped burning ash on the curtain that burned a small hole in the fabric. Gini was worried for Dad and quickly figured out a plan. She got scissors to cut out the burn and then used a needle and thread to sew up the hole. They both knew it was just a matter of time until Mother found the repair. Twice each year, Mother moved both the blue and brown flower-covered divan and the matching wing chairs into the middle of the living room. She scrubbed down the cream-colored plaster ceilings and wall and washed the slipcovers and the white two-tiered curtains in the kitchen. She cleaned and pressed the paneled pale blue linen drapes in the living room.

Gini was two houses down talking to her cousin Pricilla when she heard Mother scream. Gini ran home immediately. Sure enough, Mother had found the burn hole in the curtain. Dad and Gini were sent shopping for new curtains.

Mother had smooth blond hair and a medium build. She wore cat-eye glasses. Mother's sister, Aunt Alcie, had eyes that pierced blue, pinning the object of her attention. She emphasized words in her speech so no one could mistake what she meant. She smoked cigarettes in a long, jeweled holder. Alcie found work as a secretary in a law firm in Boston. She began attending law school at night, eventually joining the firm as a partner and becoming independently wealthy. Aunt Alcie favored Gini's younger sister Barbara. Alcie bought Barbara new clothes and machine-made socks. On weekends, Aunt Alcie and Barbara would visit Boston or Martha's Vineyard. Gini wore hand-knit knee socks and Alcie's refitted, hand-me-down dresses. Secretly, she was glad not to have the fancy clothes. Actually, Barbara didn't like them either. Neither girl wanted to stand out from their classmates. Some of the poorest girls wore dresses made from flour sacks.

Black Tuesday hit Wall Street and Gini's family on October 29, 1929. In the aftermath, the U.S. and the rest of the industrialized world spiraled into the Great Depression that lasted for the next ten years. Dad's radio tube business held on for a few years before folding. Men without work from all over the

country began to ride the railways, and some of them would gather in the park near Gini's home. When Mother would send Gini to the store, she had to walk past vagrants who yelled out to her, "Hey Red! Hey Goldilocks." Her feet ran faster than her frightened heart could beat.

Mother stocked small cans of beans to give to men who came to the door begging for food. When Dad's business closed, he found work as a lighthouse keeper on the Crane Estate, home to a wealthy family with a successful plumbing supply business. Dad moved his family from Washington Street to the lighthouse keeper's cottage. He kept the lighthouse operating and worked on the estate vegetable farms and orchards. Every day during growing season, he'd bring home baskets of peaches, apples, green beans and tomatoes.

Gini canned the produce. It took all morning to prepare. Peel. Snap or cut up. Remove skin. Gini boiled the canning jars to sterilize them and prepared the hot water bath in a large metal tub. After she filled the jars with fruit or vegetables, she placed the metal top and screw on the ring to hold the top in place. Then she placed the quarts in a rack in the heated water bath on the stove to seal the jars. Gini waited until Dad came home for lunch because she couldn't lift the heavy racks of jars out of the water bath. Dad's strong arms were there to help.

Gini remembers the beach years as a lot of hard work. As a teenager, she had responsibility for the family. Barbara and Rusty were younger and swam in the waves and played for long afternoons at the beach. Dune shadows cast over the desiccated grasses. The wind bent the grass blades, drawing half circles in the sand. They had a black and white cat named Peter who had been abandoned by the previous lighthouse keeper. Peter lazed in the beach sunshine and then walked up the road to meet Gini, Barbara, and their brother at the bus stop after school.

By 1941, the United Shoe Manufacturer's Company was making war guns and Dad was brought back to work in the machine shop. The family returned to the house on Washington Street and life in their small town surrounded by family resumed. Barbara had become an attractive teenager, blond and popular. She and Rusty attended dances every weekend. Gini had graduated high school, attended a secretarial college and gone to work in an accounting office.

Gini took the bus to the Metropolitan Life Insurance office in nearby Beverly. A dozen girls worked in the office. Josephine Szukalski was Polish. Mary Dilorenzo and Rose Biodini were Italian. The rest were Irish. Gini was the only Protestant. Gini passed the girls' lunch table, looking straight ahead, wordless, afraid to join them. What would Mother say about her talking to Catholics? The isolation knotted her stomach. She wanted to leave the job, but Mother wouldn't allow it.

Ten years passed. One morning, Gini collapsed with a bleeding ulcer in the bathroom of her parents' home, where she still lived at age 33. She called for her father. When she recovered from this illness, Mother finally relented and let Gini quit her job and get another at the Five Cents Savings Bank in Salem.

By now, both Gini's sister and brother were married with families, as were most of her friends. When her parents spent time with older friends at a camp on Province Lake, New Hampshire, Gini stayed in town to work. Those days were long and lonely.

Standing outside church one day, Gini's friend introduced her to Hoppy. A few weeks later, Gini visited another friend and Hoppy was there. Hoppy invited Gini to a drive-in movie. He talked through the entire show. He told Gini his whole life story, including the tale of his recent divorce from a woman who had cheated on him. His wife had three sons, only one of whom Hoppy recognized as his own. From that day on, Hoppy was a daily visitor at Gini's parents' house. Other men that Gini had dated tried to put their hands up her skirt. Hoppy talked quietly, absorbed in Gini's stillness. When Hoppy asked Gini to marry him, she said yes without hesitation.

Mother did not approve of Hoppy's divorce and forbade Gini from marrying him. Also unsettling, Hoppy was a poor commercial fisherman with an unfinished house. Mother made a terrible fuss, but Gini held firm. With his wife angry and his daughter alone in her resolve, Dad was so stressed that he had a heart attack. Because of her husband's illness, Mother relented and abandoned Gini to make her own wedding plans. Gini's grandfather walked her down the aisle. Dad watched, quietly seated. He had been granted a brief pass from the hospital to attend the wedding.

Gini and Hoppy enjoyed their love in the unfinished house in Rockport. Hoppy didn't want more children, and Gini didn't object. Gini chose the paint colors for the walls and floor coverings. She started

to work in accounting for the Cape Ann Business Service where she stayed for 25 years. Butch, their large mixed breed dog, went with Hoppy to the docks in the summer and waited for him to return from fishing late in the afternoon. When Gini let Butch out in the morning, sometimes he ran downtown, waiting at Gini's parking place until she arrived. She'd drive him home. Butch would come back and when customers opened the door, he would run in and find Gini's desk. She'd keep him at her feet until she went home.

Gini's only friends those days were two women in Rockport who didn't listen to the gossip about her husband's first marriage. Divorce and scandal were not easily forgotten, and Gini learned what it felt like to be shunned. Lying in bed at night, she wondered why Hoppy's past made her so objectionable to her own mother and the townspeople. She chafed against the tether of judgment.

One day, Hoppy's teenage son, Dave, called from Arizona where he was living with his mother and asked to visit. Dave hated his stepfather and had run away from home many times. His visit with Gini and Hoppy became a permanent stay, and Dave enrolled at Rockport High School. The peace and quiet in the cape house eased the boy's tension and the troubles of a tough beginning. Gini easily welcomed him into her daily life. She made cookies for Dave and his friends who sat on the Cape breezeway in the summer. In her way, Gini sheltered her stepson from the cloud of shame that hung around his own mother. She began to understand that past actions or origins were not as important as acceptance and love shared by family and community. With a prick of guilt, she remembered how she had shunned the Catholic girls at her first office job years earlier. The prejudices of her childhood began wearing away, grains of sand whose rough edges became polished in the waves.

Hoppy fished, even in winter when the weather wasn't too cold or windy and lobster prices were high. In summer, he smoked cigarettes on the lounge in the breezeway after work while he emptied cans of beer. He didn't interfere with Gini's life at work, at church or with her friends and Gini never bothered him about anything either, including his beer drinking. Gini juggled finances to make ends meet.

Gini's sister Barbara had gone off to college at Tufts University; Aunt Alcie provided tuition money. Barbara then moved to Chicago and married an educated man from a wealthy family. Barbara's husband

hit her, and he abused their four children. He couldn't hold a job long enough to support the family.

When Barbara and her children visited, they sensed the same comforting rhythm in Gini's home that Dave had felt, escaping from his stepfather. Barbara's three daughters shared the attic bedroom; their brother slept in an alcove down the hall. They listened to the ocean lull, sweeping the stones on nearby Rockport Beach. Riding the waves in the summer heat, they laughed and shrieked with glee. Gini made sandwiches for picnics. In contrast to a home peppered with their father's anger, Gini's house was a haven of acceptance and simple quiet.

Geraniums and petunias in front of the cape house bloomed each summer. Snows blew up against the clapboards each winter. Familiarity had always eased Gini through the occasional storms of life. And it was constancy that sustained her when Hoppy died of lung cancer after they had been married for 25 years. Dave had married by then, with a family of two children. They lived just up the road from Gini, who was now alone in a home for the first time in her life. She cast away her worries as she cast stitches on her knitting needles, pieced together her colorful quilts, and traced her ancestors back to 12th century England. Some of them eventually boarded the Mayflower; her most direct ancestor came over as a soldier during the Revolutionary War.

Gini had known Don growing up. He was the kid who weeded gardens and dug potatoes to earn money for a new bike that he proudly rode down Washington Street. Gini's friend, Lucy, married Don's brother. After Don's wife died, he hung around Lucy's house and Gini saw him when she visited. Both widowed, they struck up a friendship that grew into a companionable marriage. Don had a good pension from his work as a postman and for the first time in her married life Gini didn't have to budget so tightly. Don walked a few miles every day, a habit that carried over from his postal route. He and Gini went out for coffee or to the mall. They visited Don's six children. Mother was in a nursing home, and for eight years, Don drove Gini to Ipswich each morning to visit. Gini and Don sat together over her baked haddock casserole or in front of the television. It's best to live happily; some people don't, thought Gini. Happiness was the comfort of her own home, Don's companionship, family around, and neighbors. She had worked steadily and retirement, when it came, was welcome.

Another 25 years passed. Don talked about living to be a 100, but one day when he was 94, he had terrible stomach pain and went to the hospital. Within a few days, complications of a bowel obstruction took his life.

These days, Gini wakes at 9 am in the lounge chair where she sleeps every night. She isn't hungry. She is comfortable. There is no real reason to get up except to take the chemotherapy pills that kept her slow-moving leukemia at bay. These days, Gini's companions are the help from Senior Care Services who stop in four times a week. They clean, shop for groceries, do the laundry, and give Gini a shower and shampoo. Don's daughter Donna faithfully sorts her pills each week, takes her to doctors' appointments and picks her up for holiday celebrations. Gini sleeps in the lounge chair at night and rests much of the day. After her second husband died, she never went back to the bed she shared with him. She sleeps most deeply early in the day as the sun rises higher. She doesn't stir because she has shaded her eyes with a cloth that partially covers her white hair, still streaked with some blond and red highlights.

Neighbors come by to take her trash to the landfill and put her air conditioner in the window for a hot spell. She talks to her friends Sue and Lois in Rockport. Lois isn't doing so well. She's in and out of the hospital. The doctors can't figure out what's wrong. In Ipswich, Gini's hometown, two friends also live in their homes. The three of them remain from a group of six girls that had been friends since grade school.

In her recliner chair, after reading a bit with the magnifier glass and a small dish of ice cream, Gini rests.

As quickly as it began, the squall ceased. The slashes of rain absorbed into the harbor. The waves calmed; an angry face smoothed into concession. The dark sky lightened to a soft mouse grey. Several small sailboats in the harbor had come loose and were blown against the shore and sustained damage: a hull that would need to be patched, snapped halyards to be replaced. The Gini H remained firm on her line. Rain streamed from her rails and across the deck. A cabin window leak had let some water seep onto the equipment stowed below.

With the harbor only slightly choppy in a remaining breeze, the Gini H bobbed slightly. After the

storm rinsed the air, the sun streaked through breaking clouds and revealed the afternoon's promise. A boat has patience at anchor, in wait beneath the sailing wings of gulls, their cries interrupted the stillness.

The soft evening sunset glow eased across the harbor from land and over the bow of the Gini H. The wind shifted slowly to the west, almost diminished. The gulls came in from their day's search over parking lots and picnic areas to rest in the calm harbor or on rocks. Light worked its way down the boat cabin windows like eyelids closing. The shops and restaurants on the neck illuminated for the coming darkness and nighttime visitors.

At dusk, the Gini H rested at anchor. Though buffeted by the day's squall, the afternoon sunshine softly gleamed on the ripples against her hull.