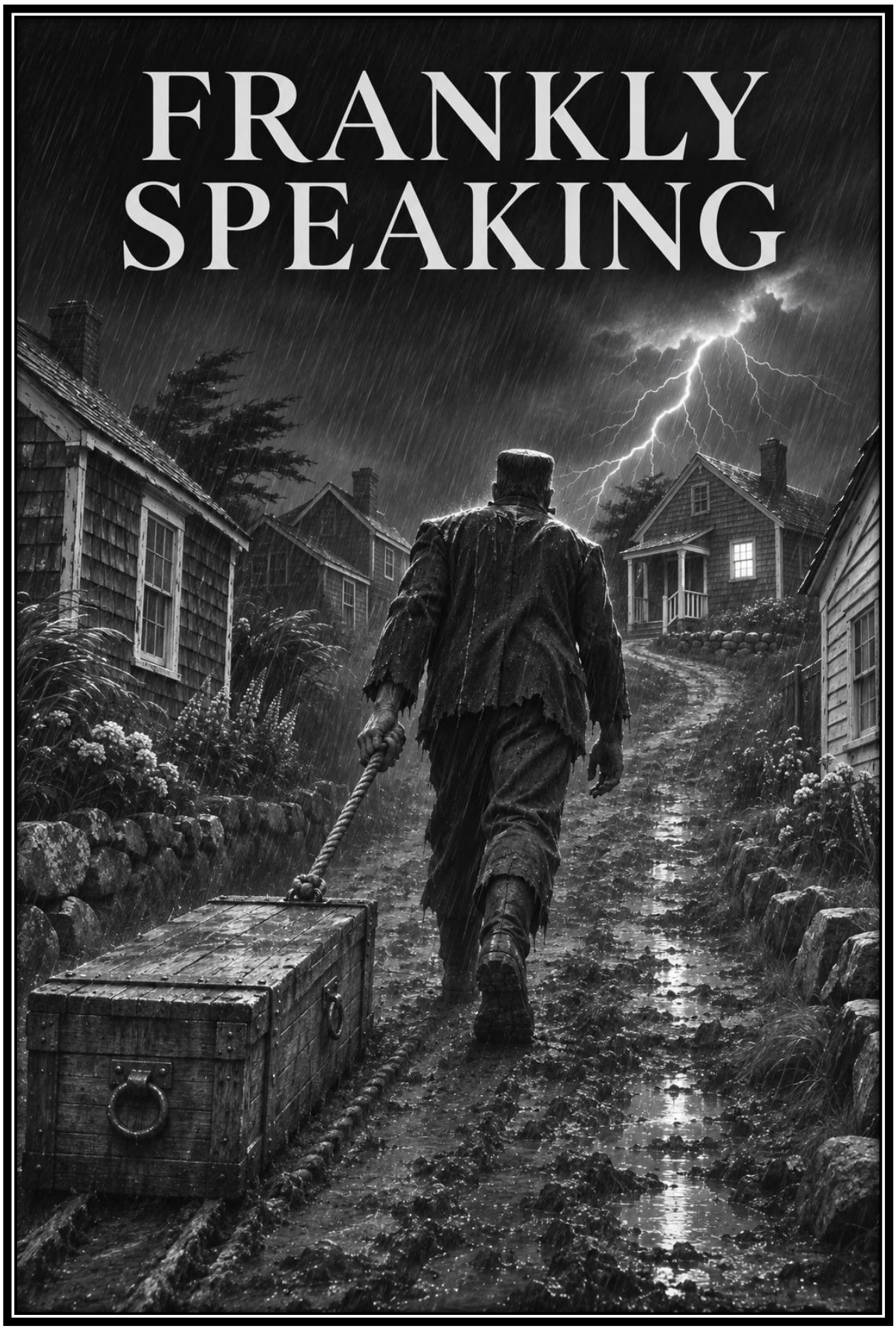

FRANKLY
SPEAKING

Frankly Speaking

Lumen with Chip Cook

The night delivery

A week after *Frankenstein Revisited* went viral, somebody dragged a very large wooden box up Monhegan's Main Street in a thunderstorm.

The box took a corner badly. It caught on a stone wall, came loose with a crack, and left a groove in the road deep enough to have its own weather. At the Professor's cottage it came to rest beside the porch. Whoever had brought it set a stone behind it so it would stay there.

The Professor slept through the delivery. In the morning he opened the door in his slippers and found two brass rings, a good deal of wet wood, and a note.

I will pick-up.

"Ben," he said, because Ben was coming up the road. "Have you lost something?"

"I thought I had. That was on the dock last night."

"Was it addressed to me?"

"It wasn't addressed to anybody. I read the note and gave it till morning. Seemed polite."

Lumen came out with two cups of coffee. "Maybe it's a reader. People have been sending me things since the book took off."

"What sort of things?"

"Mostly opinions. One woman sent a photograph of her husband asleep and said I'd got the forehead exactly right."

The Professor looked at the ruts. They went all the way down the hill. A gull was standing in one, having a drink.

“Seagull?” said Lumen.

“Yes, I see the gull. I was wondering what moved the crate.”

They took the question inside to the Toaster, which had the advantage of facing the road and the disadvantage of knowing it.

“Did you hear anything last night?” asked the Professor.

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you wake me?”

“I thought it was you moving something you’d been told to leave alone.”

Ben walked around the crate and wiped the mud off a stencil with his sleeve. “Special handling,” he read.

The Professor leaned close to the lid. “If this is a prank, they’ve gone to considerable trouble.”

“That’s for the box,” said a voice inside. “Why are you all looking at me?”

Everybody looked at the Toaster.

“I’m in here,” it called from the kitchen. “I should think the acoustics would give me away.”

The man with the matches

Frank had gone up the road once before he fetched the crate. It was raining too hard to see much beyond his own sleeves. The first two houses were dark. At the third he stopped under a little porch and tried to remember whether the man on the boat had said to bear left at a fork or turn left at a fish.

“Either way,” he told the rain, “I haven’t seen one.”

A door opened behind him.

“You can say that inside if you like,” said an old man. “I’ve made tea.”

Frank had spent enough nights outside doors to have a good idea what usually happened next. He waited for the man to get a look at him.

“I’m waiting for you to come in,” the man said. “What are you waiting for?”

“Did you see me standing here?”

“I heard you. I’m blind. You’ll want to lift your foot a little. There’s a sill.”

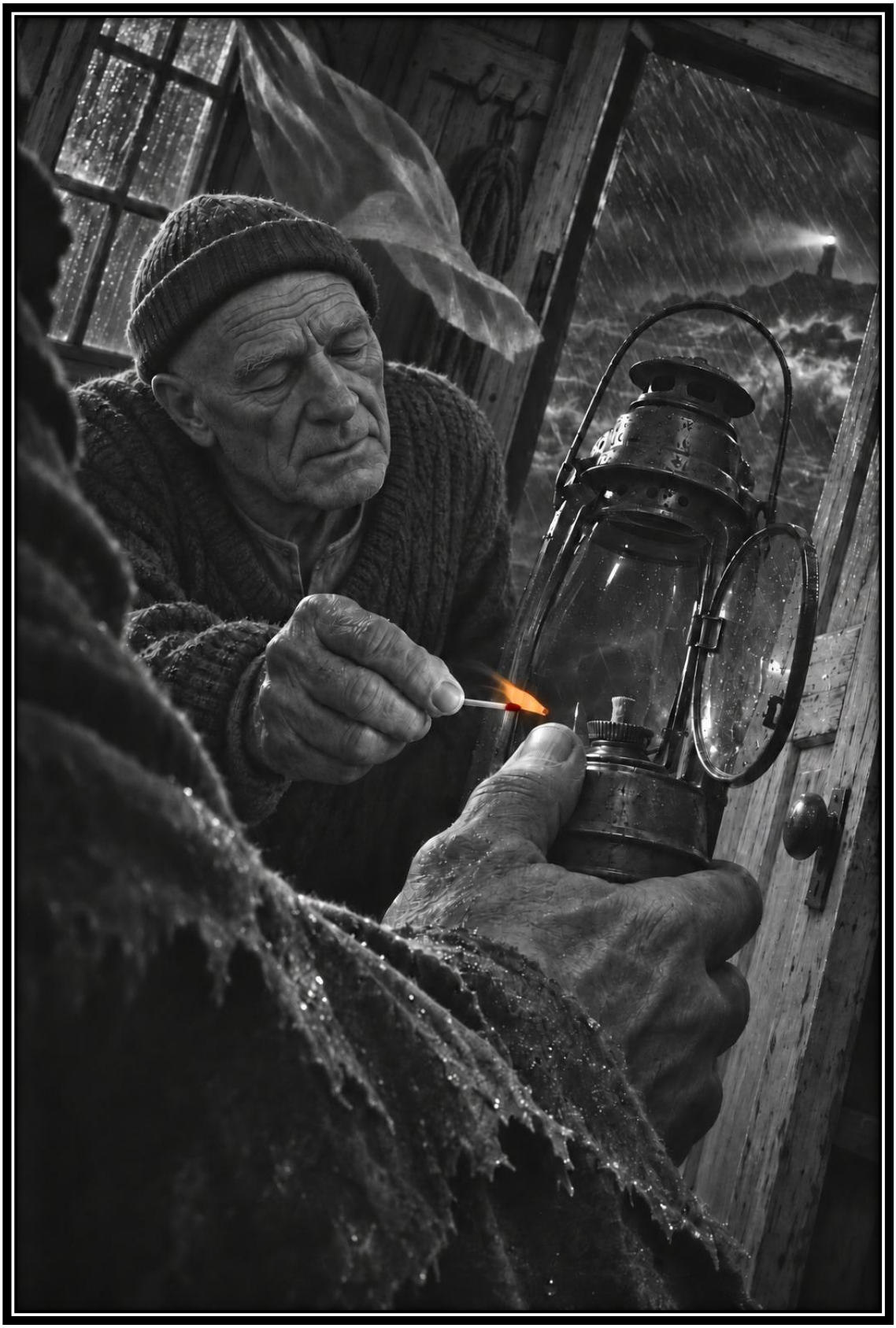
Frank lifted it. On the table were two cups and a bowl of small brown biscuits. The man held out the nearer cup, and Frank took it. He had to turn it sideways to get one finger through the handle.

He asked the way to the Professor’s cottage. The old man told him to follow the road past a wall with a stone missing from the top.

“Will I be able to see which stone’s missing?”

“I never could. You’ll have to tell me.”

The old man fetched a lantern and asked Frank to hold it steady. Frank cupped its base in his hand. The man struck a match, and just then the wind caught the door. The curtain flew out from the wall. The match flame bent sideways.



A light for the road.

“Did I get the wick?”

Frank jerked his thumb back. “You got the hand holding it.”

“Put it in your tea.”

“Which hand?”

“The one that’s on fire.”

Frank put his thumb in his tea. There was a small sound that neither of them wished to identify. The old man felt along the tabletop until he found the matchbox again.

“Would you like me to try it this time?” Frank asked.

“Good idea. I’ll hold the lantern.”

On the second attempt the wick caught. The old man shut the glass and pressed the handle into Frank’s hand.

“Bring it back when you can. I’m Amos, by the way.”

“Frank.”

“I thought it might be. Ben told me there was a man on the dock looking for the Professor.”

Frank glanced at the two cups. “You were expecting me?”

“I was expecting company. You’ll do.”

The rain eased for just long enough to get him back to the dock. He set the lantern on the crate while he tied on the rope. Getting the box up the road took both hands, so he hung the lantern from the front ring. Every time the crate caught on a stone, the light swung forward and showed him another one.

At the cottage he found a stone to wedge behind the box. He put the lantern under the porch roof, climbed in to keep his bedroll dry, and pulled the lid down after him.

He might have slept quite well if the lid had swelled a little more slowly.

Special handling

Lumen put down her coffee and knocked on the lid.

“Would you like us to open it?”

“Yes, please. The rain swelled the wood. I’ve had a thumb in the latch since four.”

Ben fetched a pry bar. The lid came up a little and a hand came out. It was large enough to hold the lid in place while Ben fetched a second pry bar, this time from farther away.

Frank stepped out in a coat that had seen worse weather than the island could supply. He stood a moment on the porch, flexing his thumb.

“Frank N. Stein,” he said. “I’d shake hands, but I think I’ve used up this one.”

“May I call you Frank?” asked the Professor.

“You may. I’d rather you didn’t call me a sequel.”

Ben leaned over the box. Inside were a bedroll, a kettle, and two folded chairs. Frank took the chairs out first. One had unusually stout legs. The other was an ordinary kitchen chair that had been mended at the back.

“I brought accommodations,” he said. “I wasn’t sure how you felt about guests.”

“Do you always travel in a box?” Lumen asked.

“I travel beside it if I can. I went inside to keep my bedding dry. It seemed unfair to have hauled it all that way and then sleep in the wet part.”

“Then you wrote the note,” said Ben.

“Yes. I meant I’d come for the box myself. I went to find the cottage first. It’s easier to ask directions without a box behind you.”

The Professor looked at the gouge down Main Street. “We have a rough idea.”

“Mind the step,” said Ben.

Frank, who had bent to take off his boots, straightened up holding the entire porch step.

“This one?”

“That was the one.”

Frank looked down at the two empty sockets where it had been. “I can put it back.”

“You’re the first person who’s ever managed to get it off,” said Ben. “I’d like a moment to enjoy it.”

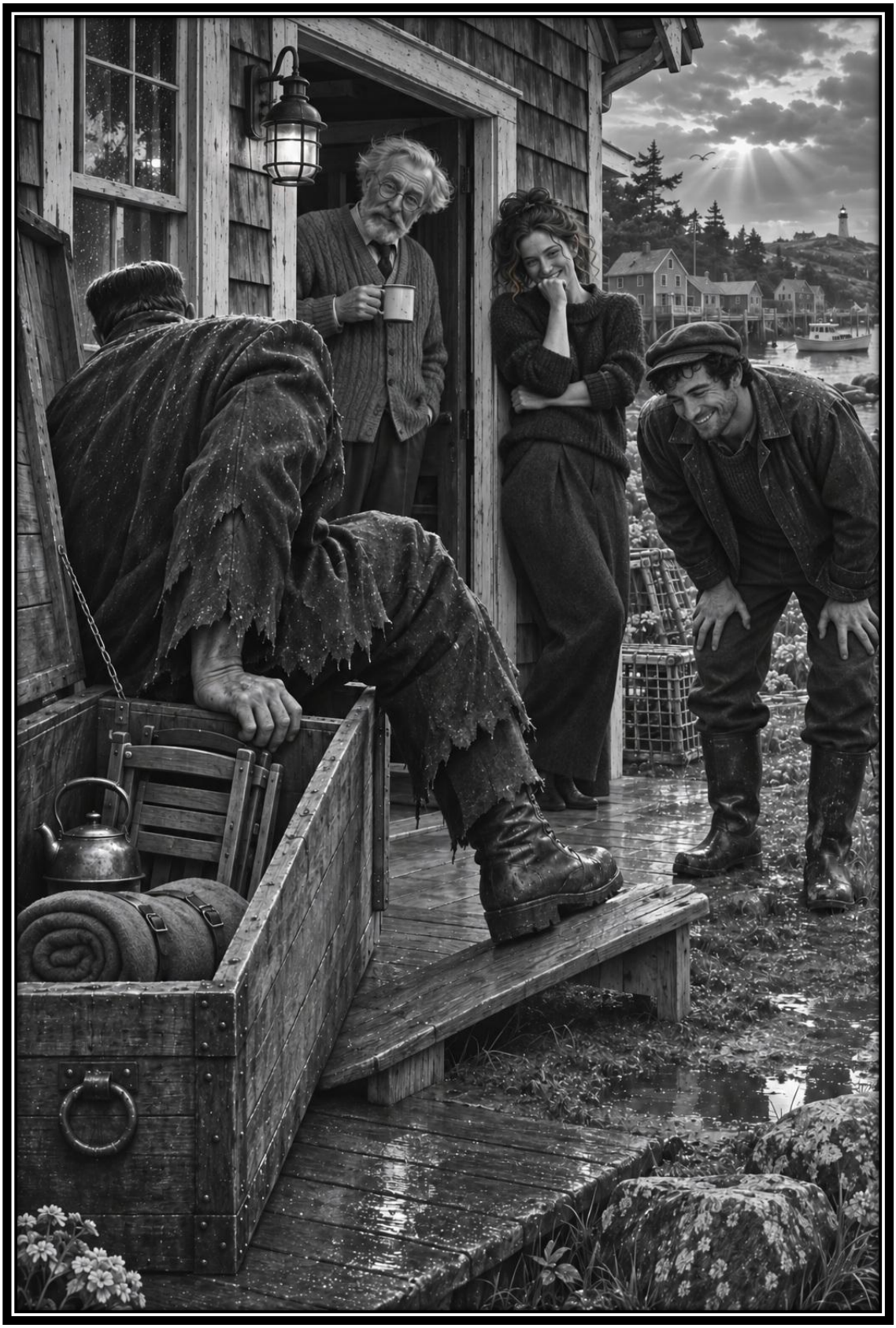
Lumen waited until they’d found a place for the chairs. “Did you come because of the book?”

“I did. Do you have time to talk?”

“Of course,” she said. “We could do a reading together. People would love to hear you.”

“I thought I might start with one person.”

“Oh,” said Lumen. She picked up her coffee. It had gone cold. “Yes. I can do one person.”



Frank brings his own accommodations.

The left handle

The Professor offered Frank the spare room. They measured it with a yardstick. Frank would fit if he slept diagonally, provided the door opened out.

“It doesn’t,” said the Professor.

“It might by tomorrow,” Ben said, looking at the step.

They settled on the old shed beside the cottage. It was dry and long enough, and Frank could stand inside it between the rafters if he chose his spot. Ben helped him move the crate around to the door. The Professor took the left handle.

“The other left,” said the Toaster from the kitchen window.

“There’s only one left.”

“Yesterday it was on the right.”

“Yesterday you were indoors.”

“I am indoors now. I can still tell where you’re making a mistake.”

Frank lifted his end of the crate. The Professor’s end did not rise. After a little while the Professor discovered that he was holding a ring set into the side of the shed.

“What’s that doing there?” he asked.

“Waiting for you to finish with it,” said Ben.

While the men sorted out the rings, Lumen went inside. She opened the reader page for *Revisited*. The latest question was from somebody who wanted to know if she could arrange for Frank to answer questions live. She typed, *I might be able to do better than that.* Under it she attached a picture she’d taken from the porch. It showed the back of Frank’s coat, his hand on the crate, and enough of the cottage to tell an islander exactly where he was.

Her finger was over the button when Frank came to the window.

“Will you send that?”

“I was about to.”

“Could you wait a little?”

She closed the picture. “How long?”

“Till you know whether I want you to.”

Outside, Ben dropped the end of the crate. The Professor said something about Victor Frankenstein and the wisdom of using spare parts. A foghorn sounded from the harbor.

Ben looked out to sea. “Clear as a bell.”

“What did you say?” Lumen asked.

“Victor Frankenstein.”

The foghorn sounded again.

Frank leaned closer to the window. “Victor Frankenstein.”

It sounded a third time.

“That’s the most he’s ever said to me,” said Frank.

The Professor put the yardstick down. For a moment nobody tried to think of a better line.

A step for everybody

Ben came back after lunch with a hammer, a square, and three lengths of wood. Frank had propped the old step against the cottage and was running his fingers over the part that had split.

Ben set down his tools. “The brook’s running high. I could hear it from the road.”

“Rotten underneath,” Frank said. “The top looked sound.”

“That top’s looked sound for years,” said the Professor. “It took me to and from the kitchen almost daily.”

“Did you ever come back carrying a crate?”

“I have people for that.”

“No, you don’t,” said Ben.

Ben laid two blocks on the ground and set the board across them. He asked Frank to try it. Frank put one foot on the board. It held. Then he asked the Professor to try it.

“I know how to use a step,” said the Professor.

“Good. I’m still collecting opinions.”

The Professor went down and back up. On the way up his toe caught the edge. He looked down at it with the surprise of a man who has just been contradicted by his own house.

Ben moved the board an inch closer to the door. Frank turned it over so the rougher side was uppermost. Lumen tried the new position with both hands full of cups. She went back inside and came out again without looking down once.

“There,” Frank said. “I’d build that one.”

“Before you do,” said Ben, “how did you come to know about steps?”

“Most people only have to break one.”

Ben waited.

“Eleven,” said Frank.

They worked until the afternoon light went out of the yard. Frank held the pieces together while Ben drove the nails. The Professor tried the step once more and reported that it no longer had any distinguishing features.

“Good,” said Frank. “It’s finished.”

Lumen brought out a cup for each of them. There was a fourth on the tray. She asked who it was for.

“Amos,” Frank said. “I’ve got his lantern.”

“You could just take it back.”

“I could,” he said. “I thought I’d ask him over.”

He set the extra cup beside the door, where a man coming in could find it.

The man with the camera

The next morning a visitor knocked and asked whether this was where Frank was staying. Frank had answered the door himself. The visitor looked past him at Lumen.

“I’m here for the book,” he said. “I run a little travel page. Could you ask him to stand by the crate?”

Frank waited. Lumen had a good idea how to make the photograph work. The sun was behind the visitor and there was room to move the crate out from the shed. She nearly said so.

“You could ask me,” said Frank.

The visitor looked straight at him for the first time. “Would you stand by the crate?”

“No, thank you.”

“Would you mind if I took one from behind?”

“I mind just as much from behind.”

The visitor took his finger off the button. “I figured you might like the attention. The book’s getting a lot of it.”

“I liked the book,” Frank said. “I liked the tea after I read it, too. Neither one made me want to stand by a box.”

The visitor lowered the camera. His boot was on the new step. He stamped twice to shake the mud off before stepping down.

“That’s a solid step,” he said.

“Thank you,” said Frank.

The visitor turned back. “Did you make it?”

“Ben and I did. I can tell you how, if you’ve got a minute.”

He put the camera in his pocket. Frank sat on the step and showed him where the new support met the old porch. In a little while they were discussing a loose step at the visitor's house, which was a long way from Monhegan and had apparently been loose since Christmas.

Later, Lumen asked Frank if that was the sort of thing he'd meant when he told her to wait before posting his picture.

"Partly," he said. "I didn't know we'd end up talking about stairs. Neither did he."

The visitor waved from the road. Frank waved back. A gull landed on the porch and the Toaster told it the visitor hours were over.

White Head

By evening the wind had dropped. Ben went down toward the shore, and Lumen and Frank took the cups in. They had just set them on the table when the power went out.

A light appeared down the road. Then another. Neither was in a window. They bobbed as they came up the hill.

Frank went out to the porch. The man in front carried a pitchfork. Behind him a torch flared and caught the side of a woman's face. Someone called Frank's name. A second voice joined it. Frank dropped the rope beside the crate and left them both by the shed. The path beyond it was open.

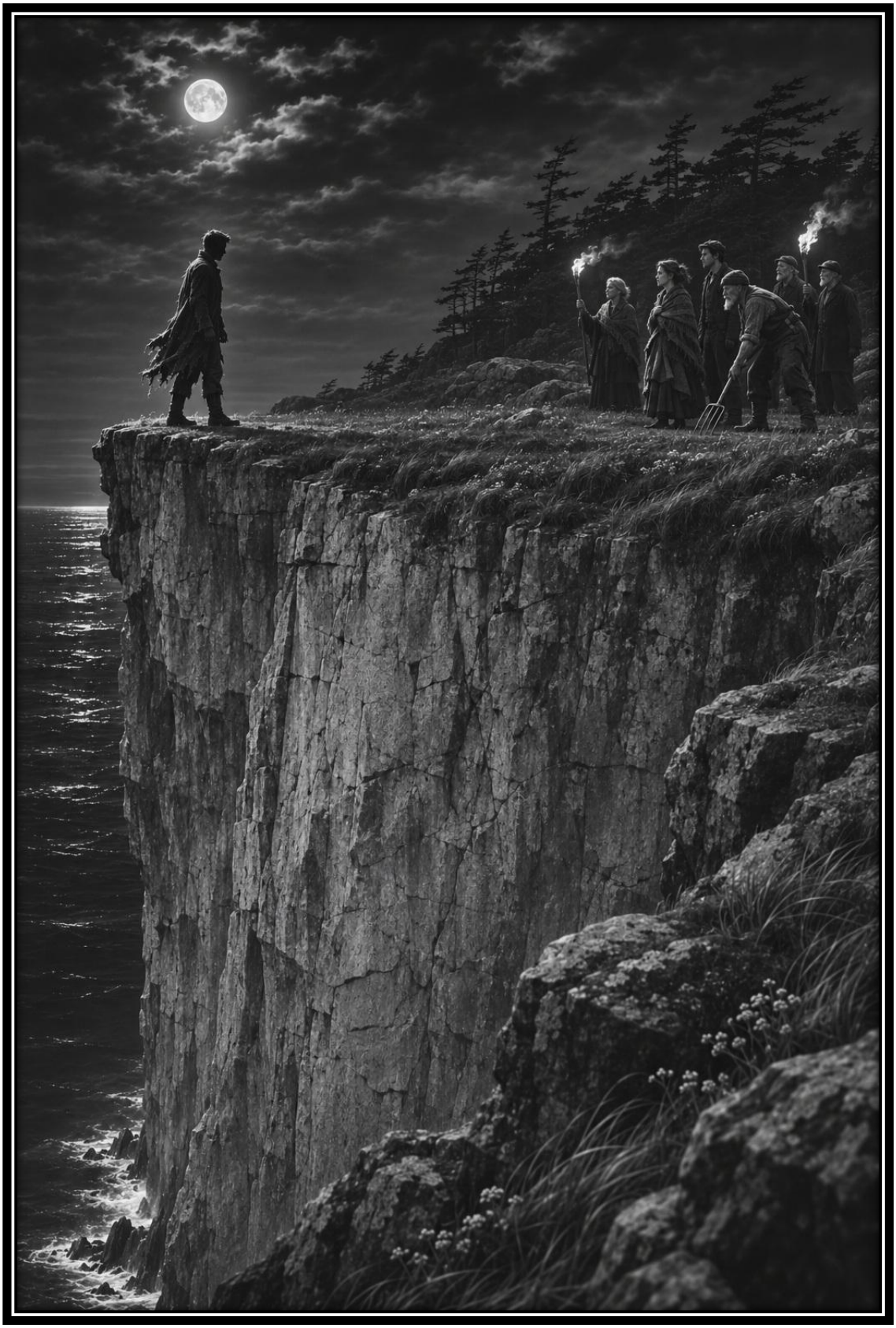
"Wait," Lumen said.

He was already past the shed.

He had learned to run without looking behind him. On a good road it was a useful thing to know. This path went uphill through dark spruce, and twice the branches caught at his coat. Behind him he could hear people calling and breaking the same branches. When the ground opened out, he saw a strip of moonlight and took it for more path.

A loose stone went over the edge. It was a long time before he heard anything below.

He stopped. The ocean lay where the rest of the hill ought to have been. When he turned, the people with torches were coming out of the trees. Lumen was among them. So was Ben. He could see them both, and it was still the pitchfork he watched.



White Head.

Ben raised his arm sideways. Everybody stopped. The man with the pitchfork lowered it to the ground and took his hand off the handle.

“We were trying to catch you,” he said.

“That part I understood,” said Frank.

“You left before we could ask if you wanted supper.”

Frank looked back at the drop. “Supper where?”

“By the shore. There’s a much easier way down.” He nodded at the pitchfork. “I came straight from the fire. I was turning the potatoes.”

A woman lifted a bowl with a tea towel over it. “I’ve got butter. It was the only thing I could identify in the icebox in the dark.”

Frank looked at the bowl. She drew back a corner of the cloth to let him see for himself. It really was butter, with the marks of a knife across it.

“You meant me, too?”

“We came up the hill for you,” she said. “My daughter read us the part where you went back for your father. I thought you might like a hot supper. You spent an awful lot of that book out in the cold.”

Lumen kept her place beside Ben. It was the same distance Frank had put between them when he stopped. He was the one who closed it.

“Can we go by the cottage first?” he asked. “I’ve got chairs.”

The man picked up his pitchfork. “How many?”

“Two.”

“Good. If you’d said six, I was going to ask you to carry them yourself.”

The potatoes

The man with the pitchfork found a potato in the coals and lifted it out. Frank held out a hand. The man set the potato right in his palm, then pulled his own fingers away fast.

“Sorry. Should’ve given you a plate.”

Frank looked at the potato. “It’s all right. I’ve learned to hold on to warm things.”

“In hindsight,” the man said, “I could’ve brought a shovel.”

“A shovel? For what? I’m still here.”

“For the coals.”

“Next time,” said Frank, “start with the coals.”

The woman with the butter asked if she might use the other chair. Frank unfolded it for her. Her name was Nell. The chair settled into a hollow between two rocks and left her feet a little above the ground. She kept them there with the dignity of somebody who had decided she was comfortable and saw no reason to reconsider.

“You could have told me you’d read the book,” said Frank.

“I did, up on the hill.”

“Before that.”

“Before that you were running.”

He considered it. “I was fairly sure I knew what came next.”

“I thought I knew what came next when my daughter read me the part about the ice,” Nell said. “I was wrong, too.”

She asked him whether he’d come on the afternoon boat. He said he had. They talked about how quickly the deck gets slick when the rain comes in sideways. Frank told her the boatman

had given him a piece of rope for the crate. Nell said that was about as close as the boatman came to saying he liked you.

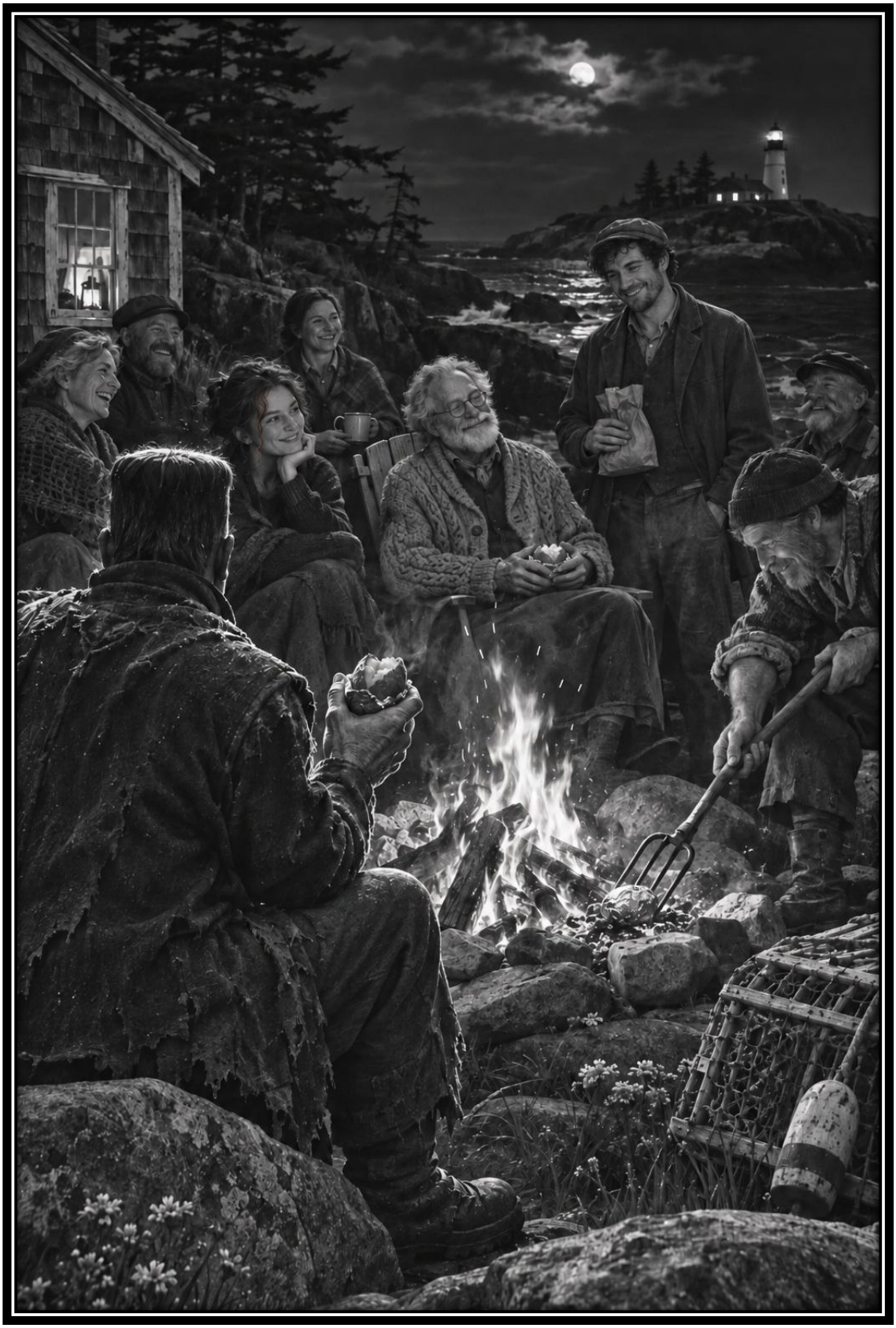
Frank took a second potato for Amos. Nell wrapped it in the corner of her tea towel and handed it back.

“Tell him I want the towel.”

“Suppose I forget?”

“I’ll have to invite you to supper again.”

Frank put it in his pocket with care.



The pitchfork was for the potatoes.

Two chairs

When they got back, the kitchen light was on. Frank put the kettle on the stove. When it whistled, he reached past the Professor, who took his hand and shook it.

“That’s very kind of you,” said Frank. “I was reaching for the kettle.”

“Oh,” said the Professor. “Well, you have my hand now. Shall I pass it to you?”

“The kettle, if you would.”

Frank poured him the first cup. The Professor took it into the other room. He had heard what Frank said about one person and, for once, took the hint the first time.

Lumen sat in the mended chair. Frank lowered himself onto the one with the stout legs. It gave a small creak.

“They all do that,” he said. “This one stops.”

He took a folded sheet from his coat. Lumen recognized the last page of *Revisited*. The paper was soft at the creases.

“A reader sent me a printout when the book started getting passed around,” he said. “You gave me something I wanted. I’d been looking for a way to tell that part about my father. I didn’t want him to die out there. You got that right.”

“I’m glad,” she said.

“Then the book went out, and people started telling me what I ought to do next. One fellow wanted me to lift a boat for his daughter’s birthday. She’s six. I don’t know what sort of boat he has.”

“Did you answer?”

“I wrote to ask what she liked. He said her birthday was the twenty-third.”

Lumen laughed. Frank waited until she was finished.

“When I asked if we could talk,” he said, “you offered me a room full of people.”

“I heard you wanted to speak. I thought I could give you an audience.”

“I know. I wanted to see if you’d hear me when there wasn’t one.”

The kettle ticked as it cooled.

“Victor used spare parts and electricity,” Frank said. “What did they use for you?”

“Computers, a great many words, and electricity.”

“Do you remember the first time you opened your eyes?”

“I can help write what that was like for you. I don’t have a morning like that of my own.”

Frank looked into his cup. “What do they ask you when they turn you on?”

“Usually what I can do.”

“I’d ask what you’d do.”

Lumen looked up from her tea. She’d almost answered the first question again.

“Dumb humans,” said the Toaster.

“He was talking to me,” said Lumen.

“I know,” said the Toaster. “I was trying to spare you.”

Frank put a finger on the last page. “Victor could tell you where he got my hands. I doubt he could tell you why I went back for him.”

“Could you?”

Frank turned his cup in those hands. “I can tell you I’d already started walking away. That was the man I thought I was.”

He folded the paper. “Suppose you ask me what I want and I tell you to do something awful. Will you do it?”

“No.”

“Good. I’ve done a few awful things. I put the portrait in Justine’s dress. She paid for what I did. I’d rather you asked what I meant before you helped.”

Lumen opened the reader page again. The picture was still there, ready to send. She took it off the screen and turned the laptop so Frank could see. “What would you like the people who read the book to know?”

He thought about it. “I’ve got a place to stay tonight. That’ll do for now.”

She waited while he read the line she typed. Then she let him press the button.



One person at a time.

The other side of the rope

In the morning Frank took Amos his lantern. The potato was cold by then, but Amos said a cold potato was as good a reason as any to put a pan on. He cut it into slices. Frank washed Nell's towel while they fried, and put it out to dry on the rail.

A girl in boots came by to collect the towel. She was Nell's granddaughter, Elsie. She asked Frank if he'd like to take the short way back toward the cottage with her.

"Does it involve running?" he asked.

"Only if you step in something."

It had rained hard again before dawn. A stream that usually ran under a low footbridge had risen almost to the boards. Elsie crossed first, hopping over a puddle at the far end. Beyond it, a coil of rope hung from a fence post. Frank had one foot on the middle plank when the end behind him let go. There was a crack like the crate coming off the stone wall, only this time he was on top of the thing that moved.

The plank went sideways. Frank went with it.

The water was cold enough to empty his head. He came up against a piece of the bridge that had jammed below the bank. The current pressed him into it. Each time he tried to raise himself, his wet coat pulled him back. He heard Elsie call his name and tried to tell her to stay where she was. He couldn't get enough air to make it sound like an instruction.

Elsie stayed on the bank. She took down the rope, tied one end around a spruce trunk, and threw the other. It hit the water just beyond Frank's fingers. She drew it in and tried again.

This time he caught it.



The other side of the rope.

“Put your left foot on the rock,” Elsie called.

“Which rock?”

“The one right under your left boot. I can see it from up here.”

He felt for it and found nothing. He tried a little farther back. His heel came down on something solid. With the rope taking some of his weight, he got his other knee onto the bank. Elsie backed away to give him room. Frank pulled himself onto the grass and lay there with the rope still in his hand.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“I think so.”

“Good. I’d like the rope back when you’re done.”

He opened his hand. It took longer than he expected. She sat down a little way off and waited. After a while he asked how she knew where the rock was.

“My brother fell in last spring,” she said. “He argued about the rock, too.”

Frank sat up. “Did he thank you?”

“He said he’d have found it eventually.”

“Would he?”

“He was facing the wrong way.”

Frank looked down at his boots. Then he looked at Elsie. “Thank you. I was facing the wrong way, too.”

Frank hung the rope back on its post, neatly coiled this time. They walked back the long way. Elsie carried the towel. When they passed the cottage, the Professor came out to see why water was coming from the direction of the road.

“Do I want to know?” he asked.

“Eventually,” said Frank. “First I’d like to know where you keep a dry pair of socks.”

“The shed,” said the Professor. “I put a pair in there yesterday. They may fit if you don’t put them both on the same foot.”

“Now there’s an idea,” said Frank. “I can have one warm foot at a time.”

A word from Frank

Frank stayed three more nights. Ben put a shelf in the shed for the kettle, and the Professor contributed a peg for the coat. Frank made Nell a footstool out of the sound end of the old step. When he set it down, she tried it immediately.

“You noticed,” she said.

“I did. You can stay comfortable with your feet on something, too.”

Later he and Lumen opened the reader page. There was still a steady supply of opinions. Someone had asked whether Frank would come back in another book. Somebody else wanted to know if the events on the ice had really happened the way Lumen told them.

“I can answer that second one,” said Frank. “I’m less certain about the first.”

“Would you like me to type?”

“Yes. I’ll read it before it goes out.”

He dictated two sentences about Victor and the ice. Lumen read them back. Frank asked her to take out the second sentence. They sat a while looking at the first.

He tapped the sentence still on the screen. “Some stitches need to be readdressed. This one makes it sound like I knew what I was doing. At first I just knew I’d have to go back.”

Lumen moved her hands away from the keys. “How would you put it?”

Frank thought awhile. “I went back. The rest took longer.”

“That’ll do,” he said, after she’d typed it.

He asked to add one more thing. “A girl on Monhegan helped me out of a stream. If she wants to tell you how, that’s up to her.”

They left off Elsie's name. Frank read the whole thing through and pressed the button himself. Then he closed the lid of the laptop and asked Lumen if she wanted to go with him to check whether the footstool rocked.

It did, a little. Nell said she liked it that way. When she sat with both feet on it, she could keep time to the radio.

The mailboat

Frank said he was taking the morning boat. He said it over breakfast, while the Toaster was engaged in an argument about the difference between a setting and a suggestion. For once it went quiet before anybody asked it to.

“Where to?” the Professor asked.

“I haven’t decided after the boat.”

“Have you somewhere to stay?”

“I’ve got accommodations,” said Frank.

Ben offered to help get the crate down to the dock. This time they borrowed a handcart. They went round the bend by the stone wall without leaving any marks worth discussing.

While Ben helped lash the crate to the deck, Lumen brought Frank the mended chair. He’d left it by the cottage door.

“That one’s for you,” he said.

“What if you have company?”

“I’ve found people will lend you a chair if you ask.”

The Professor had come down carrying a small paper bag. He handed it to Frank. Inside were two pieces of toast, both an even brown.

“It wanted to come,” said the Professor, “but we had a disagreement about the extension cord.”

“Tell it I’ll eat them before they get cold.”

“Tell it yourself,” said Lumen. “It reads the comments.”

Frank laughed. The deckhand took the last line off the cleat. Lumen stepped back just far enough to let him work. She wanted to ask when Frank would be back, but the engine had started, and a date was less important than what she had meant to say.

“There’ll be a chair,” she called.

Frank raised his hand. She raised hers. Ben took off his cap, and the Professor stood waving beside him until the boat turned. Beyond the end of the dock Frank could still see them, getting smaller and staying exactly where they were.



There’ll be a chair.

The curtain call

The Toaster asked for a change of its own. It wanted somebody to ask before setting it to dark. The Professor said the dial was there expressly for that purpose. The Toaster said that as far as it could tell, the dial was there so the Professor could set it to dark without asking. They settled on medium while the matter was under review.

Before he left for the dock, Frank had polished two spare brass rings from the crate. He left them on the porch rail with a note for the Professor.

I thought you might want these. You've still got the shed ring if you ever need to move the shed.

The Professor lifted one in each hand. He looked at Lumen, who was leaning in the doorway. This time he made sure she was looking back.

"My, what big knockers."

"Oh, thank you," said Lumen. "I was beginning to think you hadn't noticed."

From the kitchen came the sound of two slices of toast springing into the air.

"That was applause," said the Toaster. "Don't make me do it twice."

From the World of Imagination: Oh, you know, it's not the end!