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Doctor Protar's Tomb

THEY GAVE HIM his own tomb at the end of a dirt road. After studying a handbook, the islanders began to address him as a doctor, letting him make up his concoctions, curing their infections. He'd worn a long wide beard that spread from one earlobe to the other.

In 1892, he'd come to a cape of the island on a boat after leaving prison. He'd been a civil engineer, born in Estonia, lived pretty much all over. He was a known man on the island, planting up a garden in his yard and fixing up his chickens. He patched his patients up for nothing.

You can walk into the tomb and lie there, staring at the copper plate that is now green and mossy. His face will look at you and words call him heaven-sent, adding that he never failed us. There is no date or name engraved, except for the road sign that directs you.

You can sit on a rock and look at him straight. His tomb is surrounded by a forest, and you can hear birds singing high and low and chirping, and at late hours owls hooohooing, hearing the wind rustle in the branches, and you can let the bugs eat up your arms and legs, feasting mostly on your skinny little ankles.

I put a piece of paper up to the engravement, running my pen over the inscription, wishing I had chalk. I only succeeded in

obtaining the signature of the artist who'd engraved. At the doctor's home a mile away, I'd looked into his windows, finding his hard chair and the desk he probably worked at. I sat on his porch and put my hand up on a table that his friends might have put a pie on or a request for some salvation. I looked at the same trees he might have looked at every morning, noon and evening, at the front pine with its leaves sagging very badly, and then I stepped to the backyard to the old building that was probably an outhouse. All the doors were boarded. I looked back at his house, at its behind, the rotted siding, up at the roof in need of the repair it would never be receiving. I found a little pile of stuff and ran my shoe along it, crushing some remnants of what looked like rusted metal cans that he might have used to test his chemical equations. I found a piece of thick and orange ceramic and I bent down and touched it with my fingers, rubbing off the dirt and then only feeling smoothness. I looked for more and saw some glass, probably the bottom of a bottle. I read the writing: Patented. Imperial, April 20, 1887. I closed my eyes and saw the face of the old man, imagining the roughness of his fingers. I picked it up and put it in my pocket, rubbing a sharp edge on my thumb.