

The Other Room

By Mary Heaton Vorse

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It was after John MacFarland was Captain of Black Bar Life-Saving Station for nearly twenty years. Every summer evening all that time I would see him and Mis' MacFarland driving along to the station, for in the summer the crew is off for two months and only the Captain stays there from sundown to sunup.

I never saw her drive past without thinking how she hated to look at the sea. She never sat where she could see salt water. She had been going out to Black Bar all these years and never once had seen the boat-drill. This was because she knew, on account of her husband's being a life-saver, what the sea does to the vessels and the men in them.

When Mis' MacFarland's married daughter died and her little granddaughter Moira came to live with her, I would see all of them, the Captain, Mis' MacFarland and Moira, driving to the station summer evenings, Moira's head peeping out between them like a little bird. And I would always think how Mis' MacFarland hated the sea, and I'd be real glad that the blowing of the sand grinds the station windows white till you can't see through them.

Then John MacFarland died all of a sudden just at the end of the summer. He had been building a yawl out there at the station for nearly two years, and she was just ready to la'nch. I remember meeting him on the boardwalk and him telling me about that boat of his, and thinking what a fine figure of a man he was for over sixty. And next I heard he was dead.

Then Mis' MacFarland had a spell of sickness, and that is how I came to be housekeeper to her and Moira. And I remember how she struck me the first day, for there she was sitting looking out over the bay watching the boats as though the sight of them gave her pleasure. I was so surprised I spoke right out:

"Why, Mis' MacFarland," says I, "I thought you couldn't abide the look of salt water."

"I don't seem to feel there's the difference between land and sea I used to," she says in her gentle, smiling way. "We learn."

I wanted to ask her how we learned what I saw she'd learned, for, if you can understand me, she seemed to have gotten beyond grief, but before I could speak Moira came running in and it seemed as if the joy in her heart shone out of her so the place was all lighted up. Her face was tanned so brown that her blue eyes looked strange, and against her skin the fair hair around her forehead looked almost silver.

"Where you been," I said, "to have so much fun?"

"In the back country," says she. "I'm always happy when I come from in back."

"Were you alone?" She stopped a minute before she answered.

"Yes--I suppose so," as if she didn't quite know. It was a funny answer but there was a funny, secret, joyful look on her face that suddenly made me take her in my arms and kiss her, and quite surprised to find myself doing it.

Then she sat down and I went around getting supper; first I thought she was reading, she was so still. Then my eyes happened to fall on her and I saw she was listening; then suddenly it was like she heard. She had the stillest, shiningest look. All this don't sound like much, I

know, but I won't forget how Moira and Mis' MacFarland struck me that first day, not till I die.

When I went to bed I couldn't get 'em out of my mind and I found myself saying out loud:

"There's joy and peace in this house!"

It was quite a time before I sensed what had happened to Mis' MacFarland and what made her change so toward the sea. She'd sit by the window, a Bible in her hands and praying, and you would catch the words of her prayer, and she was praying for those she loved--for the living and the dead. That was only natural--but what I got to understand was that she didn't feel any different about them. Not a bit different did she feel about the living and the dead!

They were all there in her heart, the dead and the living, and not divided off at all like in most folks' minds.

I used to wonder about Moira, too, when she'd have these quiet spells--like she was listening, but not to any sounds. Then next you'd feel as if she was gladder than anything you'd ever known, sitting there so still with that listening look on her face--only now like I told you, as if she'd heard. She'd be so happy inside that you'd like to be near her, as if there was a light in her heart so you could warm yourself by it.

It's hard to tell just how I came to feel this. I suppose just by living with folks you get to know all sorts of things about them. It's not the things they say that matters. I knew a woman once, a pleasant-spoken body, yet she'd pizen the air about her by the unspoken thoughts of her heart. Sometimes these thoughts would burst out in awful fits of anger--but you'd know how she was inside, if she spoke to you always as gentle as a dove.

I'd like to be near Moira those times and yet it made me uneasy, too, her sitting so still, listening, and Mis' MacFarland, as you might say, always looking over the edge of eternity. It was all right for her but I'd wonder about Moira. I wondered so hard I took it up with Mis' MacFarland.

"Do you think you're doing right by that child?" I asked her right out plain.

"Why, how do you mean?" she says in her calm way.

"Teaching her things that's all right for us older people to know but that don't seem to me are for young things."

"Teaching her things!" says Mis' MacFarland. "I haven't taught Moira nothing. If you mean them still, quiet, happy spells of hers, she's always had 'em. She taught me. It was watching her when she was little that taught me----"

"Taught you what?" I asked her when she wouldn't go on.

"It's hard to say it in words--taught me how near all the rest is."

I didn't get her, so I asked what she meant by "the rest."

"The rest of creation!" says she. "Some folks is born in the world feeling and knowing it in their hearts that creation don't stop where the sight of the eyes stop, and the thinner the veil is the better, and something in them sickens when the veil gets too thick."

"You talk like you believed in spooks and God knows what," I says, but more to make myself comfortable than anything else.

"You know what I mean, Jane McQuarry," says she. "There's very few folks, especially older ones, who haven't sometimes felt the veil get

thinner and thinner until you could see the light shining through. But we've been brought up to think such ideas are silly and to be ashamed of 'em and only to believe in what we can touch and taste and, in spite of stars shining every night over our heads, to think creation stops with heavy things like us. And how anyone who's ever seen a fish swimming in the water can think that--I don't know. What do they know of us and how can they imagine folks on legs walking around and breathing the air that makes 'em die? So why aren't there creatures, all kind of 'em, we can no more see than a fish can us?"

I couldn't answer that, so I went back to Moira.

"She'll get queer going on like this," I said. "Thin veils and light shining through and creatures that feel about us like we do about fishes are all right for old folks who've lived their lives. She's got to live hers and live it the way ordinary folks do."

"Ain't she happy?" asked Mis' MacFarland. "Don't she like rolling a hoop and playing with the other children? Didn't you say only yesterday her mischief would drive you out of your senses?"

I couldn't deny this. Unless you'd seen her as I had, she was just like any other happy little girl, only happier maybe. Like, I said, you could see her heart shine some days, she was so happy. About that time I found out more how she felt. One still night, for no reason, I got out of my bed and went into Moira's room and there she was sitting up in her bed, her eyes like starlight.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Why--I--don't know--I'm waiting for something!"

"Waiting! At this time of the night! How you talk! You lie right down, Moira Anderson, and go to sleep," says I, sharp.

"I can't yet," she says, turning to me. "I haven't been able to find it for two days now. I've not been good inside and I drove it away."

"For mercy's sake, speak plain! What did you drive away?"

"Why, don't you know?" says she. "You lose your good when you're unkind or anything."

"Your good!" I says. "Where do you get it from?" For she spoke as though she were talking of something that was outside herself and that came and went.

"It comes from out there," she says, surprised that I didn't know.

"From out there?"

"Oh, out there where all the things are you can feel but can't see. There's lots of things out there."

I sat quiet, for all of a sudden I knew plain as day that she thought she was feeling what everybody else in the world felt. She hadn't any idea she was different.

"You know," she said, "how it is when you sit quiet, you know it's there--something good, it floods all over you. It's like people you love make you feel, only more. Just like something beautiful that can get right inside your heart!"

Now this may seem queer to you, for Moira was only a little girl of twelve, but there was a look on her face of just sheer, wonderful love, the way you see a girl look sometimes, or a young mother. It was so beautiful that it brought tears to my eyes. That was the last time I worried about Moira for a long time, for, think I, anything as beautiful as that is holy even if it ain't regular.

I told Mis' MacFarland about our talk.

"What do you think she means when she says 'her good'? Is it like feeling God's near?" I asked. She shook her head.

"I don't believe it," she said. "It's more human than that. I think it's someone out there that Moira loves--"

"How you talk!" I said. "Someone out there! If you keep on like this you'll be fey, as my old grandmother used to call it."

"Well," she said, "when you get to where I am, lots of things that seem curious at first thought don't seem a mite more curious than birth or death. Not as curious even, when you come to think about it. What's there so curious I'd like to know, Jane McQuarry, about sensing the feelings of somebody else off to a distance? How about your own mother, the night your brother was lost at sea; didn't she know that and hadn't you all mourned him dead for two months before the real word came to you?"

I couldn't deny this, and I felt that the wind was taken out of my sails. I suppose it was all along with that feeling of hers, with not making a difference between those that were dead and those that were not. All the world was mysterious, and she had a sense of the wonder of the least blade of grass in it, so the things that were not so usual as you might say didn't disturb her any.

"Why," says she, "sometimes I sit in a maze just to look at this room."

"Why, what ails this room?" said I.

'T was a room like many you've seen hereabouts, with a good horse-hair sofy and the mahogany furniture nice and shiny from being varnished every spring, and over the sofy was thrown a fur rug made in lozenges of harp seal and some other fur and a dark fur border. It

was real pretty--it was always wonderful to me that folks like Eskimos can make the things they do. There was some little walrus ivory carvings on the what-not, and on the mantel a row of pink mounted shells, and the model of her father's barkentine when he was in the China trade was on the wall in a glass case.

There's many rooms alike here in this town, with the furniture kept so nice and the things the men's brought back with 'em from the north and south, as you'd expect in a seafaring town--

"What ails this room?" I said.

"Why, it's the folks who made it," says she. "So many and from so far. The whole world's here!" She went on like that until it seemed to me the room was full of folks--savages and Eskimos and seafaring men dead a long while ago, all of 'em. It was wonderful if you looked at it that way.

"So," she said, jumping out on me sudden, "what's there strange about Moira feeling like she does when there's rooms like this? It's less common, but it's no more wonderful."

I saw what she meant, though at the time her explanation of Moira seemed just nonsense to me. Though I'll say I could tell myself when Moira lost what she called "her good." She'd be like a lost child; she'd be like a plant without water and without sun.

Except for that she grew up just like any other girl, a favorite with the children, and a lovely dancer. Only there it was--she had something that other children didn't. It came and went, and when it went away she would grow dim like a smoky lamp. I got so used to it that it just seemed to me like a part of Moira. Nothing that marked her off from nobody, or that gave you anything like a queer and creepy feeling about her. Quite the contrary. She just seemed to have an abiding

loveliness about her that everybody else ought to have but didn't, not so much.

When Kenneth Everett came along, "Well," thinks I, "I might have saved myself the worry." For worry I always had for fear that this other feeling of hers would cut her off from the regular things in life. It would have been all very well in another time in the world when a girl could go off and be a saint, but there was no such place for a girl to go in a town like ours.

There was no one but Moira for Kenneth from the first. He was as dark as she was fair; sunlight and starshine they seemed to me. It used to make me happy just to see him come storming in calling out, "Moira!" from the time he passed the Rose of Sharon bush at the gate.

Things in those days seemed right to me. Maybe I didn't see far enough; maybe I wanted too much for her--all the things it seems to me a woman in this life ought to have--and that I hadn't understood what made Moira the way she was. No wonder he loved her. I wish I could make you feel the way Moira looked. You had to feel it in your heart some way. She was fair and her face was tanned with the wind to a lovely golden color and her cheeks were smooth like ripe fruit and her eyes were blue and steady, so dark sometimes they seemed black--seeing eyes, that looked beyond what Mis' MacFarland called "the veil of things." She always seemed to me as if the spirit of the sea and the dunes between them was more her father and mother than anything else. That's a fanciful idea, but she gave you thoughts like that. She was the kind that makes even plain bodies like me fanciful.

There was days when she looked to me like something out of a lovely dream--if you can imagine a girl that's been dreamed by the sea and the dunes come true.

I can't quite tell when I first sensed what Kenneth felt about the times Moira was away, for as she went to the back country--you know how

wild and secret that back country behind the town is--so there was what you might call the back country of the spirit she used to go to. I guess I found out how he felt one afternoon when he was waiting for her to come back from the dunes. She flew in as if she was helped by wings and she was listening--I'd got so used to it by now, it was so part of her, that I forgot how it might strike lots of folks.

He jumped toward her. "Oh, I've been waiting such a time, Moira! I'm so glad you're back!"

I knew he'd seen she was "away" and he was putting himself between her and whatever it was. For a moment she stood looking at him puzzled, as if it had taken her a minute to come back, and then she was as glad to see him as he was her.

"Well," thinks I, "when she gets married all her odd ways will go."

I took to watching them, and then and again I'd see him, as you might say, bring her back to real earth from the shining spot to which her thoughts went. Then sometimes after he'd go she'd be restless like she was when she was little when she'd lost "her good."

I could tell Mis' MacFarland was watching her, too, as she'd sit there praying like she did so much of the time, though it often seemed to me that her prayers wasn't so much prayers as a kind of getting near to those she loved.

I was sure then, as I ever was of anything, that Moira loved Kenneth. At the sound of his voice, light would come to her eyes and color to her face and her hand would fly to her breast as if there wasn't enough air in the world for her to breathe. Yet there was something else, too. She was always sort of escaping from him and then coming back to him like a half-tamed bird, and all the time he came nearer and nearer to her heart. All the time he had more of her thoughts. He fought for them.

He loved her. It seemed he understood her. He sensed all that was in her heart, the way one does with those we love. He'd look at her sometimes with such anxious eyes as if he was afraid for her, as if he wanted to save her from something. I couldn't blame him. I'd felt that way myself, but I'd gotten used to her ways.

Now I saw all over again that there was strange thoughts in her heart--thoughts that don't rightly belong in the kind of world we live in now.

It seems queer to you, I suppose, and kind of crazy, but I couldn't somehow see what would become of Moira without "her good." If you'd lived with her the way I did all those years you'd have seen something beautiful reflected in her like the reflection of a star in a little pool at evening, only I couldn't see the star myself, just the reflection of it, but she saw the star.

I couldn't blame Kenneth; he wanted for her all the things I'd wanted for her always--and I couldn't bring myself to feel that the reflection of a star was better than the warm light of the fire from the hearth, but it was the star that had made her so lovely.

All this time Mis' MacFarland talked liked nothing was going on and all the time I knew she was watchin'. I'd try and sound her and she'd manage not to answer.

There came a time when I couldn't hold in. Moira'd been out all day on the dunes and toward night the fog had swept over us.

She came back out of the fog with a look on her face like a lost soul. I knew what had happened--I knew what was wrong--yet I couldn't help crying out:

"What's the matter?"

She just looked at me the way animals do when they suffer and can't understand. Her mouth was white and her eyes were dark, as if she was in pain, and when Kenneth came she ran to him as if she would have thrown herself in his arms to hide. They went out on the porch and that was when I could hold in no longer.

"What do you think about it?" I asked Mis' MacFarland right plain out.

"About what?" she asked.

I looked to where they was sitting. 'T was a wet night; the windows and trees seemed like they was crying. The great drops that fell from them, plop--plop, was like tears. There was a rainbow around the street light that made it look like the moon had dropped down close. Mis' MacFarland looked at them and she just shut her mouth and she shook her head and I could tell she wasn't pleased. Then says she:

"Look!"

The light fell on Moira's face and she was seeing out into the night and I knew she was out there. Kenneth spoke and she answered and yet she wasn't with him.

He got up and walked up and down. He spoke again, and again she answered, but Moira's voice answered without Moira. Her face was shining like silver.

She'd heard--she'd found it again.

Then he stood in front of her and said in a strange sort of a voice:

"Moira, what are you doing?"

"Dreaming," she said.

"What are you dreaming about?"

"I don't know--"

"It's not about me, it's nothing about me. Moira, look at me!"

I tell you his tone made my heart bleed. She didn't answer, but looked out into the fog in that absorbed, happy way of hers.

"Moira," he said again, "Moira!" He couldn't get her; he couldn't reach her, any more than if she'd stepped into another world. He put his hands on her shoulders and turned her to him.

"Moira!" he said; his voice was husky with fear. "What do you find out there?" She turned to him as in a dream. She looked at him and she looked like some spirit when she spoke.

"I find the one I love!" she said.

"What do you mean?" he said. "What do you mean?"

"The one I love," she said again.

"Do you mean there's someone you love better than you do me?"

She nodded, with that flooding look of wonder on her face.

"I didn't know," she said next. "I didn't know--not--until now--all about it."

"All about it?" he cried.

"Yes, the meaning of what I felt--that it's someone as real as you, as real as me--that I love someone out there--someone I can't see."

"Moira!" His voice sent shivers down my back. "You're crazy--you're mad--you mean--you mean--you love someone you've never met--someone you can't see?" She nodded.

"I've loved him always," she said. "All my life I've known him for ever and ever--I know him more than anything in the world--from the time I could think he has lived in my heart--I didn't know him until now--I only suffered when he wasn't there, and went wandering and searching for him--and you've kept me from him--for I didn't know--"

"Moira," he called to her in his pain, "don't think these things--don't feel these things--"

But she only looked at him kindly and as if she were a long way off.

"I love him," she said, "better than life."

He stared at her then, and I saw what was in his mind. He thought she was crazy--stark, staring crazy. Next he said, "Good night, Moira--my darling, Moira." And he stumbled out into the fog like a man that's been struck blind.

But I knew she wasn't crazy. Maybe 't was living with Mis' MacFarland made me believe things like that. Maybe 't was Moira herself. But I didn't feel she was any more crazy than I do when I've heard folks recite, "I know that my Redeemer liveth."

But this isn't the end--this isn't the strangest part! Listen to what happened next.

There was a storm after the fog and strange vessels came into the port--and Moira came to Mis' MacFarland and her eyes were starry and says she:

"I'm going to get 'em to put me aboard that vessel," and she points to a bark which is a rare thing to see nowadays in these waters.

"He's out there," says she.

I didn't doubt her--I didn't doubt her any more than if she'd said the sun was shining when my own eyes were blinded by the light of it.

"Go, then," says Mis' MacFarland.

I tell you Moira was dragged out of that house as by a magnet. The sky had cleared and lay far off and cold, and the wrack of the broken clouds was burning itself up in the west when I saw a dory cast off from the vessel.

It was a queer procession came up our path, some foreign-looking sailors, and they carried a man on a sort of stretcher, and Moira walked alongside of him. I saw three things about him the same way you see a whole country in a flash of lightning.

One was that he was the strangest, the most beautiful man I had ever looked on, and I saw that he was dying.

Then in the next breath I knew he belonged to Moira more than anyone on earth ever had or would. Then all of a sudden it was as if a hand caught hold of my heart and squeezed the blood from it like water out of a sponge, for all at the same time I saw that they hadn't been born at the right time for each other and that they had only a moment to look into each other's faces--before the darkness of death could swallow him.

I couldn't bear it. I wanted to cry out to God that this miracle had come to pass only to be wiped out like a mark in the sand. He was as different from anyone I'd ever seen as Moira was. How can I say to you what I saw and felt. I knew that he belonged to Moira and Moira

belonged to him. If I'd have met him at the ends of the earth I'd have known that they belonged together. We all dream about things like this when we're young--about there being a perfect love for us somewhere on earth--but there isn't, because we're not good enough.

The perfect flower can't bloom in most gardens. What these two had was love beyond love--the thing that poor, blundering mankind's been working for and straining toward all down the ages.

Love was what they had, not dimmed and tarnished, not the little flicker that comes for a moment and is gone, like in most of our lives, but the pure fire. The love that mankind tries to find in God--the final wonder. Some of us, at most, have a day or hour--a vision that's as far off and dim as northern lights.

Mis' MacFarland and me looked at each other and, without saying anything, we walked from the room. I saw tears streaming down her face and then I realized that I couldn't see for my own, I was crying the way you may do twice in your life, if you're lucky, because you've seen something so beautiful, poor, weak human nature can't bear it.

After a long time Mis' MacFarland spoke.

"It has to happen on earth, once in a while," she said, "the heart's desire to millions and millions of people living and dead--the dream of all who know the meaning of love. Sometimes it must come true."

That's how it made me feel, and I've always wanted to be a witness to what I saw--but there aren't many to whom you dare to tell it.

After a time we went back and he was lying there, his face shining like Moira's had when she'd found him in the dark spaces where she'd had to search for him. His hair was like dark silver, and his eyes were young like Moira's and blue as the sea at dawn. Wisdom was what

was in his face, and love--and he lay there, quiet, holding Moira's hand in his.

But even as I looked a change came over him and I saw the end wasn't far away, and Moira saw it and clung fast to him.

"Take me with you," she said. "I have found you and can't leave you. I've looked for you so often and I couldn't find you. We lost each other so many times and the road together was so blind."

"It's all the same," he said, "she knows." He nodded to Mis' MacFarland. "It's all the same."

Mis' MacFarland motioned to me and I came to her and I was trembling like a leaf.

"It's only walking into another room," she said.

Moira sat beside him, his hand in hers, pleading with her eyes. He turned to Mis' MacFarland--"You make her understand," he said, "we all have to wait our turn. You make her understand that we're all the same."

And we knew that he was talking about life and death. And then, as I watched, I saw the life of him was ebbing out and saw that Moira knew it. And then he was gone, just like the slow turning out of a light.

Moira turned to Mis' MacFarland and looked at her, and then I saw she'd gotten to the other side of grief, to where Mis' MacFarland was--to the place where there wasn't any death.