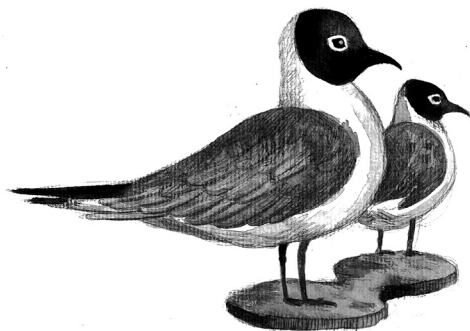


# Island War

PATRICIA REILLY GIFF



HOLIDAY HOUSE  NEW YORK

*title page: Bonaparte's Gull*

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Printed and Bound in August 2018 at Maple Press, York, PA, USA.

[www.holidayhouse.com](http://www.holidayhouse.com)

First Edition

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Giff, Patricia Reilly, author.

Title: Island war / by Patricia Reilly Giff.

Description: First edition. | New York : Holiday House, [2018]

Summary: "In 1942 Izzy and Matt become trapped on a Japanese-occupied Aleutian Island when the rest of the American population is evacuated and must survive on their own for the duration of World War II"—Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017019228 | ISBN 9780823439546 (hardcover)

Subjects: | CYAC: Survival—Fiction. | Friendship—Fiction. | World War, 1939–1945—Alaska—Fiction. | Alaska—History—1867–1959—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.G3626 Isl 2018 | DDC [Fic]—dc23 LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017019228>



*With love*

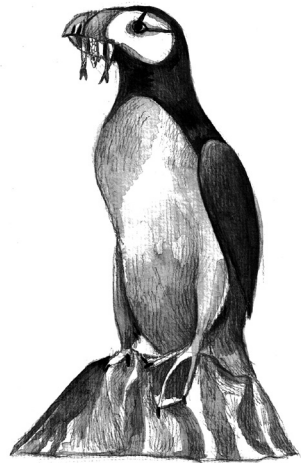
*To my husband, James Anthony Giff,  
who believed in me,  
and who was everything to me.*

*To my son, James Matthew Giff,  
who shared love of family  
and the world of books with me.*

*To my grandson, James Patrick Giff,  
who was there for me  
when I needed him most.*



—1941—



*Horned Puffin*



# O N E

Izzy

**M**Y closet was empty, except for a pair of woolly pajamas I'd thrown in back with the dust balls. I'd never wear them in a hundred years.

Everything else was spread out: on the floor, the bed, even covering the scratched-up desk I never used. My warm jacket and boots were there, and a couple of pairs of knee socks, one with holes. My pink party dress with the velvet buttons was hanging off the lampshade.

"Izzy?" Mom called. "Isabel?"

"Coming," I said, half listening.

She must have thought I said "Come in." She opened the door, then leaned back against the wall. "Oh, Izzy. What are you doing?"

I sank down on the edge of the bed. "Packing, I guess. Just in case you change your mind."

"We can't go to the island. Not without Dad." Her blue eyes filled with tears. "It's so far," she said, almost

thinking aloud. “A thousand miles stretched out from Alaska, the Bering Sea to the north, the Pacific to the south. Cold and foggy.”

She reached for my hand. “And suppose war comes?”

What did I care about a war? Hadn’t Dad said, “Oh, Izzy, my girl, you’d love the island, the snow, and the wind! You’d feel as if it would blow you across the fields, and over the mountain, and above the sea.”

Dad had leaned forward, his elbows on the table. “Imagine. Eons ago, nothing was there but water. Ah, but underneath, a chain of mountains. Maybe they wanted to see the light. They inched up toward the surface and the water fell away. Now there were islands, Izzy. One of them was ours.”

Dad had written dozens of books about adventure and travel. I’d read the one about that wild and mysterious island; I’d read the one about a land bridge that stretched from Asia to the island, and the people who traveled across, all those years ago. They settled on the island, loving it. It was eleven hundred miles from the main part of Alaska, and only about fifteen miles wide. I had to see it for myself.

“Dad wanted us to go, you know that. He made the



plans, times, and tickets,” I said. “You’d see those birds you always talked about. You’d write about them.”

And I could skip school. Imagine what that would be like! No ending up with Mrs. Dane for the second year in a row, fifth grade and now sixth. No book reports that would keep me sitting still, reading some boring story, for half the afternoon.

“Think about your notebook,” I told Mom. It was filled with thoughts about birds: those that flew overhead here in Connecticut, and a list of those she wanted to see on the island.

She loved birds! Yesterday, she’d teetered on a ladder roof-high as she returned a house wren, nothing but fluff, to its nest.

I reached over to the night table and pushed a couple of books aside, summer reading that I hadn’t done. Somewhere I had a picture of a special bird Dad had drawn.

Yes. I held it up. A bittern, yellow above, buff below, and long yellow legs. It must have come to the island, instead of staying in Indonesia where it belonged. “If a bittern lands there,” I said, repeating Dad’s words, “Mom will spot it.”

“Dad . . .” Mom began; her mouth trembled.

I knew we were both thinking about him. How he'd loved Mom with her pillow shape, and my twelve-year-old self with my thick-as-a-bottle eyeglasses, my restless legs and arms.

That terrible day came back! *The truck barreling along the avenue, the driver looking out the side window . . .*

*The truck screeching as it hit the curb, hit Dad.*

*Two months, thirteen days ago.*

Stop!

I began to talk, to fill space. "We'd take trains and boats, zip across the country from Connecticut, all the way to the island, a thousand miles out from Alaska. The people there think you're coming. They have a house for us. And I want . . ."

*A new place. Wind. Snow. Everything.*

I reached for some of the other pictures Dad had taken with his box camera: plovers and teals perched on a ledge, the mouth of the cave where he'd listened to the roar of the ocean's surf, and watched snow sweeping sideways against the wind. He took pictures of places he loved and Gram had some of them framed in her bedroom.

Gram stood in the doorway now. "Go," she said, grinning at me.

Gram with her dark eyes and straight hair like mine. Gram, who poured orange juice into her cereal instead of milk: “Delicious, Izzy, try it,” and stayed up every night to listen to the radio. “Who wants to waste time sleeping?” Gram who had lived with us forever and was more fun than anyone I knew.

Mom looked at Gram, and then at me. Her arm circled my skinny back. “We’d be starting over.”

Just what I wanted. I waited.

Mom turned. “I guess . . .”

Behind her, Gram was nodding.

I hugged Mom hard. “Hurry,” I said.

She and Gram went into the kitchen to talk things over, and I slid the summer reading books under the bed. Then I began to fill the suitcase. On the very top I put the pink party dress that Gram had made for me. It was cottony soft and I loved it. I couldn’t leave it at home.

I slammed the suitcase shut and leaned on it so I could fasten the buckles.

I was ready!

## T W O

### MATT

OUT on Long Island Sound, I rowed hard, a wake churning up behind me. My hands were used to this, my palms callused. I dug in the oars, listening to the waves slap against the boat, and counted the strokes in my head.

*Faster. Smoother.*

I breathed in the salty air. School would begin next week, and the rowing competition after that. And Mom swam every day, getting ready for her swim meets. “We’re getting better all the time,” she’d say, smiling at me.

In the distance, a barge chugged its way toward the Atlantic. Then something made me turn. Pop was standing on the dock, hands on his hips, watching me.

Pop?

How had he gotten there? How did he even know where I was?

Mom and I hadn't seen him since he went on one of his trips weeks ago. And who knew what they were all about? He'd never said a word about where he'd been, or why.

So he was home!

The peace in the house was gone. He was always annoyed. *Did you take the garbage out, Matt? Your books are all over the place. Did you mow the lawn?*

I lowered my head, taking another stroke. From the corner of my eye, I saw his arm raised, motioning for me to come in to the wharf.

I used the left oar to circle around, then straightened out, moving toward him. Let him see I knew exactly what I was doing.

"Hey, Matt." He reached out to loop the boat rope around the hook. "News."

Drips of water plinking, I held the oars up, then shoved them back into the boat.

"We'll get a hamburger or something," Pop said, "and I'll tell you about it."

"Where's Mom?" I asked.

"Home. I wanted to talk to you myself."

I dragged the boat up onto a grassy spot, and then we walked back along the gravel path to the diner on the

corner, his hand on my shoulder. Inside, he began to tell me what was going to happen.

To me!

“We’re going to an island,” he said. “American, but closer to Asia. The weather’s not so hot, only eight or ten days a year are clear. The rest are rainy, foggy, and snow in the winter, of course. But we’ll manage. It’ll only be for a couple of months.” He shrugged. “Maybe until spring.”

I looked at him, horrified. “Spring! And Mom has swim meets all winter. How can she give all that up?”

He shook his head. “No, it’ll just be you and me, the two of us.”

Before I could think of what to say, the server came to take our order. Pop spoke for us both. “Hamburgers with onions.”

I hated onions.

“Wait.” I held up my hand.

How could I give up rowing, or cheering Mom on as she raced?

Most of all, how would it be to spend time with him on some island with not-so-hot weather? I knew what the answer to that was.

“What will Mom say?” I asked.

“She knows. I told her we need time together. Months, maybe.”

The server slapped down our plates, everything smelling like onions. Pop took a bite. “Eat. It’s pretty good.”

I pushed the plate away. “You can’t make me go,” I said, knowing he could, of course he could. “I row every day. And what about school?”

“There’ll be another school. And you might have a boat on the island. It’ll be different, Matt. Things aren’t always the way you think they are. It’ll be the adventure of a lifetime.”

I stared at my plate; the onions looked like small worms.

“Let me tell you about the island,” Pop said. “The Aluets have been there for thousands of years. You love the water, and so do they. They fish for big catch in their kayaks. I want you to see that place. We’ll get to know each other better. I want that too.”

I didn’t have a choice. Who knew what would happen to my own boat? I wouldn’t watch Mom swimming. Everything in school would be normal. But not me.

I’d have to give it all up. Worse, I’d be with a father who was gruff and miserable, in a place I’d never heard of.

I swallowed. If I choked up, I could imagine what Pop would say.

I pulled the plate closer, managed to eat the hamburger slathered with onions, and stared out the window at the Sound.



# THREE

Izzy

WE took one dusty train after another all the way across the country. A week? I'd lost count of the days. And then one ship after another.

But then, the last ship! We climbed aboard, on our way. We chugged toward the island, feeling the wind pick up and waves pitch the ship from side to side.

Mom went inside where it was warm, but I circled the deck, trying to keep my balance. I darted around boxes and jumped over loops of rope.

I didn't see the boy sitting against the railing, his huge feet stretched out in front of him, until it was too late.

I tripped over him and went down hard.

Scrambling up, I was ready to say *Sorry*. He pushed back his hair with hands the size of dinner plates and stared at me as if it were my fault.

Of course, it was my fault. My elbows were always scraped, and my knees had scabs as big as apples.

The boy glared. “Huh!” he muttered under his breath, but loud enough for me to hear.

Then I realized. I knew who he was. I’d seen him in the halls at school. He was a couple of classes ahead of me.

I slid behind a huge metal container and balled up my fists. “Watch out, kid,” I whispered. Dad would have laughed. I didn’t have the strength to fight off an ant, much less a kid who was ten times bigger than I was.

I stayed away from him for the rest of the trip, wiping the rain off my glasses so I could peer around corners at him.

When the island was close, Mom came outside. “Ah, look,” she said as we heard birds honk overhead. “A pair of emperor geese.”

I saw their white heads and dark bodies, but only for a moment. The rain had changed to sleet; it stung my face and spattered the waves that rose almost to the railing.

Imagine! Sleet in October.

How I loved it. I almost twirled off the gangplank, beating that kid off the ship. Mom followed, smiling, as the weather suddenly cleared.

The rest was a blur. There were only about forty people on the island. It seemed as if almost everyone was

there. Women surrounded us, telling us their names and showing us the houses, our wooden cottage.

Inside were three rooms: chairs, a table, and a couch in one, two bedrooms in back. The bathroom was outside.

This would all be perfect except that from the window, I saw the kid from the boat, walking with a man who must have been his father. He stared in at me.

One of the women started a fire in the wood stove so we'd be warm. "Driftwood," she said over her shoulder. "We spend a lot of time at the water's edge looking for pieces to use." She shrugged. "Not one tree on the island. We have to import wood we need to build."

Baskets woven from dried grass were set up on a small table. A girl leaned toward me. "Don't look at the basket in back. It's mine, the first one I've done, and it's a little—" She broke off, looking anxious.

"It's beautiful," I breathed, looking at the small basket with a lid.

She grinned at me; her dark eyes crinkled as if they were smiling too.

I pushed my glasses up on my nose. "I'm Izzy."

"Maria," she said. "Come on."

Outside, she walked slowly along the gravel path,

while I had to hold myself back from racing to see everything: ryegrass blowing in the field, mountains in the distance that would be covered with snow this winter.

We passed houses huddled together, and Maria pointed to a white church. “If it weren’t foggy, you could see the steeple. It almost reaches the sky.”

Looking up, I nearly stepped on a large dog asleep on the path. “*Sabaakax*,” Maria said. “Dog, in our old language.”

I couldn’t begin to pronounce that. But Maria went on. “He doesn’t belong to anyone, so we all feed him.”

I glanced after him, a mess of a dog with droopy ears and thick gray-and-white fur. I wished he belonged to me! I’d always wanted a dog I could race around with, a dog to cuddle up with on cold winter nights.

Maria locked her arm in mine, and we climbed a hill so steep, it made me breathless. “Thor Hill,” Maria said as we reached the top. “Not its real name; I just call it that. I like to read about old myths, and Thor had something to do with storms and thunder. Perfect for this place.”

What would it be like to let myself go, arms out, to sail down the other side, the wind in my face? But my

feet and legs were tired. I looked back toward the village. "A long walk," I said.

Maria grinned and waved her hand. "This is nothing. You'll get used to walking. It's miles to the ocean side. After a while your legs will toughen up."

It sounded fine; it sounded wonderful. I'd be able to walk along paths, to find my way . . .

"Wait," I began. "There was a cave . . ." I thought of Dad's words. *From the opening you can see kittiwakes and cormorants flying above, shrieking.* "My father spent a summer here once writing a book," I said. "He wrote about that cave."

She shook her head. "There are so many rocky places; it could be anywhere. There's a place I love on the other side of Thor Hill. Just an overhang under the rocks, but cozy. We'll go someday."

If only Dad were holding my hand, showing me where to go. But I'd find that cave. Miles would be nothing.

"Don't you love to read?" Maria asked.

Read? The last time I'd read a book I'd been conned into it by Dad. "Read a page for me every day," he'd said. "Just one."

I wished I had done that, wished I had read all of his books.

“Did you bring books?” she asked. “We could trade back and forth. I have *The Call of the Wild* and *A Girl of the Limberlost*. Oh, and one about myths and legends.”

I was lost! I shook my head. “I didn’t have room in my suitcase.” At least that was the truth.

She gave my arm a shake. “Here comes that new boy.”

He saw us, frowned, and turned back down the hill, but Maria wasn’t paying attention. She pointed. “Across the sea to the north is Russia. This island used to belong to them. And Japan is southwest,” she said. “They say we’re going to have a war, but the American army might come to evacuate us.”

Before I could think about it, she was asking what I’d read lately.

Outside of Dad’s book, there wasn’t one I’d ever finished. Just a title, I told myself desperately, even Dad’s, but I couldn’t even come up with that. I raised my shoulders and looked away as I saw her surprise.

The next day I started school. School after all! It was only a few doors down, but Mom and I hugged as if I’d be gone for days.

How strange to be in a class with only five other kids. It took only a few minutes to remember their names: Nick, Paul, Catherine, Maria, of course, and that boy: Matt.

Outside, the wind was strong; it rattled the glass panes and sent an empty box flying across the village. My feet were restless under me. If only I were out there, arms stretched like wings, flying along like the blue herons I could see in the distance.

In front, the teacher looked out as Mom went by, her notebook fluttering in her hand. “Long ago, there was no wind,” Mrs. Weio began, pushing back her gray hair. “A woman longed for a child, so her husband carved a wooden doll for her. One night, the doll breathed, and the next, he was gone.”

Maria whispered, “Mrs. Weio loves old legends.”

Mrs. Weio raised her thin arms. “The doll punched through a hole in the sky ceiling, and wind blew in, bringing birds and animals with it. Happy, the doll went home to live.”

The teacher smiled, lines deepening across her forehead. “And so we have wind, *williwaws!*”

I could imagine it: dogs, and cats, and bears, tumbling down to earth.

But outside at recess, no one talked about legends; they talked about war.

“It won’t happen,” Maria said.

The ship boy, Matt, stared at her. “You’re wrong!”

I couldn’t resist. “You think you know everything? You’re not so perfect, you know.”

He glared at me, then turned away.

That night, Mom and I wrapped ourselves in blankets and sat on the couch. She talked about plovers with their dark gray neck rings as we sipped tea and ate slippery oysters that someone had left in our doorway.

For the first time, I was uneasy. Was that miserable boy right? Was war coming?

Would it happen here?

It was too much to think about.