

In Muddy Water

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The old man knew someone was watching him. He propped

the clam rake against his shoulder and eyed across the mud flats towards the shore. The black pickup was parked on the rise, just as it was the day before. He slipped his hands under his sweater and pulled out a pipe and tobacco pouch, and with his silvery eyes fixed on the pickup, scooped the bowl into the pouch and packed it firm with a bent finger, then struck a match on the butt of the rake handle and sucked the flame into the bowl, discharging cloudy curls of smoke. He tugged the brim of his fisherman's cap over his brow, shielding the glare of the late day sun which was drawing down on the horizon and stealing the warmth of the autumn afternoon. Daylight was short, but if his back didn't quit he could keep on for a while longer. He plunged the rake into the dark water and pressed the tines downward, pumping them toward his hunched body, dredging up pulpy black gobs of muck.

Virgil looked on from the shore, gnawing on a jerky stick and gulping Ballantine Ale from a can. Dribble streamed down his chin and he blotted it on the dog-eared collar of his flannel shirt, then raised a hand to the windshield and wiped through the fog, surprised to see the old man still there. The tide was completely out and the flats oozed a rotten egg funk that thickened the air and drifted like death over the waterfront and down the side streets. Although easier in the low water, digging clams was still back-breaking hard and it was getting cold and dark and Virgil worried the old man had been at it too long. He drained the can and crushed it with his thumbs, then reached for a paper bag on the floor and twisted a new one from the cluster, popped it open and set it in the cup holder. Then he opened the door to the truck and stood, urinating, finishing just as the old man waded out of the flats and started up across the bar.

Stiff with arthritis, his gait was awkward and willful and he hunched over as if bucking a headwind. His hands were blistered and worked raw. He swung a wire bushel basket from one while the other balanced the wooden rake handle in the crotch of his stooped shoulder. Virgil eyed the basket, half-full of mud-stained round clams that ranged in size from inch and a half diameter to brawny four inch jumbos resembling wet lumps of coal. Exhumed from the mud, they shimmered and hissed and knocked their shells together as they shifted around in the basket, pumping in instinctive retreat. The old man set the load on the ground, unburdening himself to re-light the pipe clenched in his molars.

“Virgil,” he squawked out the corner of his mouth.

“How many you get?” Virgil asked.

He looked over Virgil’s truck; at the crumpled front fender and the empty cans in back. “Some.”

“You going out again tomorrow?”

“Weather’s gonna turn,” he said, lifting the rake to his shoulder. “Could be last chance.” He turned and started up a dirt path toward the hill; to a salt-battered cottage that overlooked the tidal flats and the open water beyond. Virgil finished his ale, comforted by whiffs of rum-apricot pipe-smoke that lingered even as the old man in the giant boots disappeared in the night.

Digging the depleted heels of his Wellingtons into the door jamb, Virgil pried the boots free and dropped them in the foyer, where they joined a earthen collection of, sweatshirts, baseball caps, and Carhartt work-wear. “Shelly!” he hollered, “dammit Shell!” He raised a knee to their bucking black Lab. “Down!”

From the upstairs bedroom she had heard the pickup; would have habitually met him at the door. “Be down in a minute!”

She sat at a vanity table that had been his mother’s. It was simply constructed, yet richly veneered in birdseye maple with a beveled swing-mirror that had developed a modest craze, as though revealing the vague heartache of difficult years. People told her that her eyes sparkled—that they could always tell how happy she was when

they saw her eyes. They told her that sparkle came from down inside. She studied her eyes in the mirror. Did they still look this way? Lines framed them and branched out, forming the pathways where tears ran when she cried; when she thought of the child she carried—their child, and wondered what kind of father he would be.

She heard condiment bottles rattle and hit the floor as the refrigerator door flew open and shut, then his heavy advance on the staircase.

“I’ve been trying to get you for the past hour, Shell. Why the hell didn’t you pick up?”

“I never heard it ring. I was out with the dog. Why were you calling?” She rubbed up to him and pressed her nose to his shirt.

“I wanted to know if there was beer in the fridge or if I should stop is all.” He started back down the stairs. “Doesn’t matter now.”

She reached down and laced her sneakers. “I’ll run out. We need tomato paste for dinner and I think we’re out of coffee. Take a little nap and I’ll be back by the time you wake up.”

Virgil slumped on the couch and tuned in to *The Wheel*. He heard the car start and tires backing over the crushed stone and mustered to the kitchen, reaching through the assorted bottles stored for occasion. He poured a heavy shot of gin and drank it down, then returned to the living room, dispensing as he walked and leaving a spattered trail on the hardwood floor. He solved a puzzle on *Wheel* and celebrated with a drink. He thought of Haley; the endless hours he’d spent with his sister in imagined rivalry with the contestants of the cockamamie game show, and how she was always first to come up with the answer despite his age advantage. He raised his glass to her, then switched channels for a replay of the entire show, solving one puzzle after another while working down the bottle, drunk as a boiled owl by the time his wife returned with the makings of dinner.

The old man stirred the smoldering embers in the fireplace and added two splits of seasoned cherry, prodding and jabbing them with an iron poker until they erupted in flame. The small cottage

warmed easily despite its age and lack of modern defense against the bitter New England winter. An aluminum stock pot rattled on the gas range and steamy froth escaped the lid and sizzled on the burner. He lifted the lid and poked at the spitting shells, all opened in surrender, then raised the pot over a rust-streaked iron basin and dumped. He scraped the rubbery meat from the shells and chopped them in a wood bowl, mincing them to a watery slosh for chowder stock. Then he washed the bowl and chopping knife and honed the edge on a whetstone, returning it, finally, to a hook on a buckled pegboard partition. He turned to the empty shells in the basin, picked out the larger, and set them on the hearth to dry before the fire, then adjusted a knob on the flickering oil lamp and settled into a stuffed chair; its upholstery threadbare and pale, but unwaveringly favored like an old dog. He examined one of the shells, running his thumbs over the familiar contours; the rough growth ridges of the exterior and the contrasting smoothness of the bowl inside; the silky mother-of-pearl and the cloudy purple and chalky glaze that resembled flat white paint. He closed his eyes and thought about the empty shells; the times he spent walking the beaches and searching the water's edge for the perfect one to relay to her; smooth and clear enough for him to pen a note on the inside; a declaration of how he liked the way she wore her hair, or an invitation to meet for a bicycle ride in the morning or a walk on the beach after dinner, and for her to inscribe her replies, and to candidly reveal how much she cherished their friendship and dreaded the passing of summer. They exchanged their exotic stationary through secret caches they'd pre-arranged: the knot in the big maple, the third cedar pole in the split rail fence, the old church mailbox—once the hornets had gone.

The old man sipped apricot brandy and thought of her, just as he did most nights, until the fire burned low and he eased hypnotically into the gratifying solace of sleep.

Virgil got off work at 4:30 the following afternoon, stopped at South Street Bottle Shop for his habitual purchase and pulled into the parking area by the mud flats at 5:00, but the tide was up over

the bar and it would be several hours before it would be low enough for clamming. He sat in the pickup drinking ale and watching gulls as they picked muscles from grassy clumps and dropped them from aloft, cracking them on the rocks below. It was well past dark when he finally saw the flickering lantern outside the cottage and the silhouette of the old man tottering down the path on the hill. Virgil was once again letting off the excess of his consumption, this time in the cover of a Douglas fir behind a stone wall, and not visible to the old man as he trudged up to the pickup. He watched in silence as the old man paused for a moment at the cab, then edged down the rise onto the sandy clearing. The lantern cast a yellow hue that shrouded him as he moved and revealed the empty shells he carried in the basket. He extinguished the flame at the water's edge and crossed the bar in darkness, then waded slowly outward, disappearing in the cold oblivion of the flats.

Nearly twenty-five years had passed since he'd lost his wife and daughter to the sea. They'd perished in the early morning hours when their schooner, *Starlight*, sailing on an educational charter two hundred miles out of Halifax, had slammed into a submerged object; possibly a steel container dislodged from the deck of a cargo ship or perhaps a sleeping whale. The collision had jarred them from their bunks during their off-watch, immediately flooding the cabin, filling it entirely by the time they could pull on trousers and jackets and make it up on deck, which, to their astonishment was awash with sea water; the foredeck already under. Confronted with an inexperienced captain who was paralyzed at the helm, there was little that Emma could do but hold tight to their daughter and try to calm the frantic crew. Although a flare had been fired and an emergency radio call dispatched, the life raft had not been deployed in time. Within minutes the vessel went under, slipping entirely into the unforgiving darkness of the North Atlantic—all souls lost.

In the chill of the October evening, nearly waist deep in muddy water, the old man picked empty clamshells from the basket and returned them, one by one, to the sea. Having first taken the meat,

he had cleaned the shells, dried them, and written on their insides in black ink his confessions and apologies, his affections and his fears. Reflections and meditations; fragments of poems that echoed his sadness and the agony and longing that filled him. Prayers, he hoped, that would somehow cross the boundless seas and reach her, that he might be visited and comforted and they would again share this secret correspondence and be connected just as they had in the springtime of their youth. He took each of the inscribed shells and dropped them down, planting them in a deep hole where the mud gave way to a void; a portal to the abyss where she might discover them and understand how sorry he was that he, the proper captain and master of their intrepid *Starlight*, had not been aboard; had not been with his wife and daughter, but had been shore-side with pneumonia while an unseasoned relief captain piloted the ill-fated vessel to her grave.

Squinting in darkness, Virgil watched him emerge from the mud flats. He took a deep slug from his can and watched him come up across the bar and out of the water, stopping first to light his pipe, then the lantern, and then working his way up the rise to the parking area and the pickup. Virgil gestured at the empty wire basket, "I thought you were done with that a long time ago."

"With what?"

"Jesus Christ, Pop, with trying to channel the dead with clamshells."

"I thought you were done with that," he said, eyeing the can in Virgil's hand. "It shouldn't concern you."

"We worry about you, Shelly and me. You never moved on."

"I couldn't move on. Never even wanted to."

"Come on over our place tomorrow. I'll go out in the morning and get enough for Shelly to make her baked stuffers. You bring the chowder. We'd like to see you, Pop."

Virgil woke Saturday morning in sobriety. Invigorated and fresh, he felt a renewed sense of conviction as he kissed his wife and

laid a hand tenderly on her belly, then dressed and slipped quietly from the house, hurrying to catch the low water. It was cold and gray and freezing rain bounced like pellets of glass off the hood of the pickup. He pulled into the parking area and looked out across the desolate flats. He spit the grounds from the last mouthful of coffee, yanked his chest waders up over his jeans and sweatshirt, pulled a wool skull cap down over his ears and stepped into his boots. He lifted the clam rake from the bed of the pickup, walked down the embankment to the sandy clearing and looked out at the low water rippling on the flats. It was blowing steady out of the north, and the raw sleet bit his face. A lone gull swayed on a nearby rock, squinting stoically into the wind as it ripped across the dark water, breaking gray spume from the wave tops. Virgil hitched a mesh catch bag to a leather belt cinched around his waist and headed down across the bar and out into the flats; the shallow water first just covering the lowers of his boots, but quickly flooding over the tops. Wading deeper and further from shore he was in over his knees, and when he felt the bottom go soft and workable he thrust the rake into the mud and began to dredge. He felt nothing at first, then a few heavy lumps—stones, he suspected, with maybe a clam mixed in. He brought the rake to the surface, plucked the flotsam from the tines then cast it down again. He pulled it toward him, dragging the tines through the muddy bottom, feeling through the wood handle anything it came across. Something felt like sticks or a submerged branch and he drew it to the surface. A spider crab was snarled in the tines; its body impaled. Virgil worked it free, severing its thorny legs as he tore them from the tangle of seaweed. He edged outward in deeper water, moving further from shore, pausing as the waves lapped the crotch of his waders and splashed his chest. The mud had become squishy. His boots sank over the ankle and he bunched his toes with each step to keep the suction from pulling them off. Sleet whipped his eyes and he squinted toward the shore at the pickup, trying to determine where the firm mud would be. His boots

squished deeper with each step and he thought of the sink-holes that the old-timers talked about—places in the mud that were just hollow underneath and that if you stepped in one you'd never get out and probably never be found. No one knew where they were or how deep they went. They could move around, they said, from season to season, and you'd have about as much chance of guessing where they were as guessing the lottery.

Virgil had never heard of anyone falling into a sink-hole in these flats or anywhere else, but the thought chilled him and he turned his boots in the muck and started back towards the shore and that's when he felt it give way as though he'd stepped in a vat of syrup and there was nothing—no resistance underfoot as he plunged downward. Water flooded over the top of his chest wader and filled the entire cavity with its fluid weight, and realizing he was helpless to fight it, he filled his lungs to cry out but emitted nothing but a muffled gurgle as his face went beneath the cold water.

He saw only the blackness of the deep water which entombed him; never saw his father, who had been baiting crab pots on the bar and had seen his son's head and thrashing arms go under. And as he lost consciousness he never saw the old man charge across the flats and sink himself, cutting away the flooded waders and lashing the pot floats to his son's arms that yanked him to the surface and floated him to shore.

The old man's body was never recovered. Lost in the bowels of a muddy catacomb or picked apart by crabs and urchins, or as Virgil came to believe, it simply passed through the murky portal to the eternal abyss where he knew he would find peace, joined in the everlasting company of Virgil's mother and young sister.

A memorial gathering was held in the cottage. The attendance was sparse—the few relatives that remained, some friends—mostly locals, Virgil and his wife Shelly—five months pregnant. The wind whipped snow across the turbulent water and made the fire inside crackle and dance. Clamshells graced the fireplace mantel and windowsills, propped

on their edges with votive candles illuminating the inscriptions inked in his hand. One was set in evergreen cuttings from the hillside and signed, as though in final farewell. Virgil picked it up and read quietly:

Alone I must face the winter of life
But after the winter comes spring
Forever gone the cares and strife
That peace—with God—shall bring