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THE WATER IS THIN

A Thesis Presented

by

JEREMY A. CHURCH

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2007

The Master of Fine Arts Program for Poets and Writers

THE WATER IS THIN

A Thesis Presented

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JEREMY CHURCH

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PROLOGUE

We were on the train heading back to my apartment after the Rose Auditorium that didn't fix anything. We'd walked from the Big Bang to homo sapiens, taking our measure of insignificance, time wise anyway, which was a dumb idea because Petra was bursting with significance. It was my last grand gesture toward perspective and it went unnoticed: she'd made up her mind before we walked the eons. I don't remember what she said on the train that made it clear we were over. I don't remember the words.

Stay on the train. That was my spot plan. We rumbled along silently side-by-side in the crowded train. When we got to my stop we stood to get off.

"Take the key," I said. "I'll swing down to Las Palmeras and bring the food back. I'll be back in an hour if you call it in now." Before she said whatever she said, which did include the phrase "spinning your wheels," I'd suggested we order from our favorite Cuban restaurant in Chelsea.

She stepped off the train, the bing bong warning sounded and the door closed with me still on board. She didn't have much time to say, *No, I'll come with you*, or to jump back into the train. She could say that if people asked how it happened—she could say the doors closed and he was gone. This was an unpleasant perversion of the chance

romantic subway connection, the kind you see in commercials and movies in which trains pause, eyes meet, trains move in different directions. One uptown, one down. This was what happens four years after that chance encounter. One stays on, one gets off.

I think Petra knew I wouldn't be back with the food. I'd like to think she called to place the order at Las Palmeras anyway. I thought a lot about if she placed the order for the next several hours I spent riding the train. I rode to the end of the line in Far Rockaway, took it back through Manhattan and up to its northern terminus in Inwood, then returned to my apartment's stop, still unable to recall the words, what she said when she canned me, and uncertain as to whether she called in the food or not.

I was hoping something weird or exciting would happen on my trip, but the train through all those stops and boroughs was workmanlike: newspapers, headphones, hard-to-hear conversations, bags clutched, decisions made of what part of whose body to lean more into, turn away from. I had a seat and looked up at it all: the wary weary peoples of the world, their problems bigger or lesser than mine, riding the train to errands or work or dates or whatever to make things better or clear up something or satiate themselves in some way or make something done. I thought I was owed a great encounter. I didn't get one and spent the hours dwelling on the food order. And my birthday.

It was in a week. Petra knew I didn't care about it, was neither excited nor depressed and made it clear, as I had with the previous three, that I didn't want a party. This birthday insouciance bothered Petra from the first. To her it indicated that I didn't care about anything. I thought about that on the train. Petra's timing was meant to make a statement: You don't care, I don't care.

When I got off the subway my apartment was unlocked and empty. The keys were on the table near the door, under them a note:

> *D, I know you'll find what you're seeking on your own, but I'll always return your calls. Love – P.*

I put the note in a book of poetry she once gave me, French sophist by the name of Paul Eluard. I read some of the poems. One of the lines was, *Presence for me has the stuff of what I love*, which is true—it's nice to be alive, regardless.

The machine was blinking. It was Billy reminding me about a show at The Continental, where he was a bar back. It had been on the agenda for Petra and me. From my place it was seven long blocks and twenty-one short ones to the club, but I wanted to walk so I did. Nothing exciting on that trip either—people on the train out and above now, briskly moving closer to their whatever. I thought about walking through a sketchy neighborhood on the way but there aren't any left in Manhattan. Not a bad thing except on the night you've been let go and are brave or stupid enough for an old New York story.

Billy had a video camera and was showing Widge and others footage he'd shot of his day on a lobster boat on Cape Cod.

"I didn't think sea captains still existed."

Billy: "Here's Captain Jack cutting a fish he caught. Striper. He filleted it on the boat right there at the mooring. See? We ate it hours later. Fresh fish."

The tiny screen glowed in the dark club. Billy shot a line of piss over the transom, pointed the camera at his face and smiled because micturating in nature makes him feel like he's part of something bigger than himself. You could see he was wearing his Batman T-shirt and cape when he panned from his satisfied face to the blue sky and

held it there. Not a cloud or even the slightest variation in the blue. The camera slow-zoomed in. You could hear the puttering of a small plane off camera, like a lawnmower two streets down. The camera zoomed to its outer limits, still and squarely blue: no clouds, no plane trailing a banner advertising clam rolls. Just the lingering possibility of it. Billy was a physics major at Harvard before he dropped out, but he wanted to be a painter because he said that by framing something you naturally left all the good stuff, *the potentialities*, to be imagined outside the frame. He has many plans for a still life.

"It's like working in a Hopper painting," he said, then turned to me. "D.L., you can get a job as a stern mate. What else are you gonna do? Wait to get fired, pass a couple months of depression because you realize anew that you have no prospects for a life of corporation, that you are hopelessly lacking in cunning and that you see an odious 'life-with-career' ahead, whatever the fuck that is—career. I mean: Jesus Christ. What are you going to do, get another hideous corporate job? I can hook you up with Captain Jack! They call him the Mayor of East Orleans. He has a knife on his belt! He's a hunter-gatherer! Good God, he's a national treasure. And he needs a mate for the season! There it was. Where's Petra?"

"When does he need a mate?"

"He needs one now! I'll give you his number." Billy took out a slip of paper from his Velcro wallet, which rarely had money in it but was thick as a short stack with alphabetized slips of paper. He says he uses his OCD, which started in college, to counter his ADD. Billy's not the point, though, not a reasonable subject of digression. There should be no Billy in any world that pretends to be civilized, which of course is precisely why there is Billy. There's nothing conditional about Billy. He's there on the

boat in his cape, pissing over the transom and probing the blue heavens for the good stuff off to the side.

Widge, down from upstate, said, "You'll go there, fall in love with the place, the idea of it, salt of the earth, salt of the sea, all that bullshit, and you'll work on your lobster boat and it'll be high times for the summer then the weather will turn and you'll get drunk for five straight months like the locals, but you'll make it out the other end and fish again or dig clams, you'll feel connected and special again like a regular fucking shore elf in your marshy shire, until another November and five more months will turn into twenty years and you'll wake up one day in your 50s, alone and cold on a bluff, a stone crab carried there by the last storm surge nibbling on your toes. I'd rather love did that to me than romancing the dunes. Bottom line, D: That place will change a man. And what would you do about Petra? Don't be a fool. Billy, put your camera away and hook me up with a beer."

I called Jack the next morning before I went to work. No answer, no machine. I called again in the evening.

"Hi, is this Jack?"

"Yeah, who's this?"

"My name is D.L. My friend Billy gave me your number."

"Billy who?"

"Batman."

"Batman? Jesus. How you know Batman?"

"It's been years. Through a friend from college. I don't wear a cape, just so you know."

"Yeah, well, what can I do for you—what did you say your name was?"

"D.L."

"D.L.? What's it stand for?"

"Damn Lucky." He didn't ask me what it actually stands for, like most people do. "Batman said you might need a mate. And I was thinking if you did I'd love to do it. If that's at all possible."

"Where are you now?"

"New York."

"Uh huh." I could hear what sounded like a pull on a cigar.

"But I'm leaving. My girlfriend just dumped me, my job sucks—I've been meaning to quit for a while—and I need to find a place again because my sublet's up."

"What do you mean your job sucks?"

"Oh, it's just the usual. Except this one's a little different because the turnover's high because people can get another job anywhere, for more money. I like most of the people I work with. We play a lot of Nerf hoop, which is fun and all but management is very costly. Not worth it, the tradeoff—it's not like I'm making millions anyway. They promise stock options if the company goes public, which it won't. There are a lot of kids just out of college here; they buy the stock options sham." I was pacing around the apartment.

"How old are you?"

"Thirty." It was in a week but I figured I'd get started.

"Congratulations, happy birthday." For all he knew I could have been 11 months into the age. He said happy birthday as if I'd turned 30 that day. I loved that.

"Thanks. I know Orleans a little. I've been to Batman's family's house on the Heights a bunch over the years. He told me they buy lobsters from you."

"Uh huh."

"We have another friend whose family has a place in Orleans, across the inlet from the Heights. And my aunt and uncle have a place in Chatham. They have a boat. We used to go out on it and fish for blues on Nantucket Sound."

"You get sea sick?"

"Not that I know of, no, but I haven't been out in that heavy a sea."

"Uh huh."

"I can handle myself. I'm strong."

"You got a place to stay?"

"No. I could probably stay with my aunt and uncle in Chatham for a while."

"Too far away."

"OK."

"Thing is, I don't know until I see you, ya know, if it's gonna work out or not."

"OK."

"Check in with me when you get here and we'll see if we can work something out."

"OK. So I should just go there?"

"I'll see you when you get here."

"Now?"

"We're gonna get going for real soon here, already started."

"OK, thanks, Jack. I really appreciate it."

"We'll see. I gotta go."

"OK, I'll be up there soon, maybe a week. Where do you live?"

"Don't worry, you'll find me."

Why did he seem to hire me over the phone in a three-minute conversation? Why didn't he have a mate? What did I care? Moving on doesn't cede much quarter to details. I was good at bolting with the quickness.

I gave them two weeks at work; they said leave today. What followed was a week of phone calls about Petra. Billy reiterated his position that I didn't have anything better to do. Widge said he didn't blame Petra because I'd become a drain in recent years. He asked me for the green light and I said, "Listen, dickhead, you're in your sixth year of graduate school for geography. I think map-making might fall under her idea of spinning one's wheels."

I took a bus to my parent's house, west of Boston. They weren't home. I thought about calling them at work but didn't. I decided to leave a note because a talk would be fraught with pauses. My parents are both processors when it comes to biggish stuff, unquick to speak before they've digested. The pauses aren't necessarily judgmental. They feel that way, though, because when I hear myself say biggish things to them or anyone for that matter—I'm moving to New York because … or I'm vegetarian because—what follows the because always sounds arbitrary even as I say it. The vegetarian example: I saw a *Frontline* on the Rwanda massacre, almost a million bodies

hacked to pieces by machetes, and couldn't eat my sirloin kabob as I watched. I didn't eat meat the next day or for the next two years. I wasn't concerned so much about eating organisms with brains, wasn't doing it for health or environmental reasons, didn't do it because animals are not clean or any of that. It just stuck for a while. (A curious defense of eating animals is that they have no shame—they crap and piss and sex in plain view—whereas humans apply discretion. I don't buy it. I wouldn't eat Billy, for example.)

Talking to my parents wouldn't have been the best thing in the world for me. I would leave a note and walk to the commuter rail station. I would walk on with my backpack down West Main. This was the note I left on the kitchen table:

Ciao,

Off to the Cape because I have (possibly) a job as a stern mate on a lobster boat. It's in Orleans. Remember when I threw up in the lobby of the movie theater there? That summer we were down visiting Aunty Jane and Uncle Corey? I was eightish. The movie was Arthur. Anywho, Petra dumped me, I quit my job, left the city and am en route to the Cape now. I'm taking the train to Boston then a ferry to P'town then a bus to Orleans. Don't be concerned I made a rash decision. It wasn't/isn't, I don't think. Or if it was it was a good one, if such a thing can be said of rash decisions. So much depends on a patch of blue sky. I'll call you when I get settled.

Love,
D

On the bus from Provincetown to Orleans I sat next to a young Irishman. His plan was to spend the summer traveling around the states, starting in Provincetown. He'd been there a week, long enough to determine that P'town in August would be a great finishing destination for his journey. He'd gathered that P'town in May is prudish compared to its skin in August, when it's not uncommon to see a gaggle of gay men walk down Commercial Street with thongs visible above the waistlines of cut-off jeans. Drag

queens and sunburned tourists, lesbian skate rats circulating among them. I told Seamus everything. He told me he was fleeing, too, something about a provincial childhood.

"Sounds like she's not on your wavelength then," he said.

"Yeah man, yeah." Such was the depth of my trying to understand the situation, find out where I was going, what I was seeking, that even the faintest suggestion Petra was wrong and I was right had me using "man" and inflating the judgment of a stranger on a bus—his thesis was that life is better lived serendipitously than routinely, which is a theory I hadn't theretofore considered I was applying to my own life. I'd simply bolted. But I liked the romance of his thesis.

I told Seamus I missed my dreams, that they'd been gone from my sleeping life for years and that I needed to coax them back. This is something crazy people do: attach great significance to abstraction. But my dreams were more practically attainable than any chance of righting the ship with Petra—it was over, I knew it, we would never get back together. I told Seamus soon I would probably have plenty of time to interpret my dreams if I could only get them back. I said that—*if I can only get them back*—wistfully, like a starlet in one of the old romances. Seamus said I should try bananas, said bananas increase the frequency and intensity of dreams. I wrote, Buy Bananas, in my notebook.

From downtown Orleans the long walk to the landing was exciting like traveling in another country even if Orleans was familiar. I kept a steady pace. When I got to the landing I saw several trucks. One, dark green, was parked on the shoreline, a skiff nosed right under its lowered tailgate. The guy loading the truck with stuff from the skiff had on brown rubber boots and orange rubber overalls over a gray T-shirt flecked with seaweed. He was emptying the contents of the skiff, which included several red plastic

fuel containers, a coil of rope, a trash bag and a hard plastic bin two arms long, one arm wide, and a foot deep, full of his lethargic catch.

"Hi."

"Hi." He didn't look at me.

"Do you know Jack Zolokowski?"

"Yeah." He heaved the bin from his aluminum skiff onto the tailgate. The connection between the land and the sea in the image of the skiff sliding right up to the shoreline and under the lip of the tailgate, of one vessel floating to a stop at the other vessel, the idea of moving between the water and land like that thrilled me.

"Oh," I said. "I was looking for him." He slid the box of lobsters along the bed of his truck and closed the tailgate.

"Why you looking for him?" He took a balled up piece of burlap from the skiff, dipped it in the few inches of water he was standing in, and laid the dripping swatch over the lobsters.

"I was supposed to meet up with him about working for him."

"You the guy from New York?" He looked in my direction for the first time, though I couldn't see his eyes through his mirrored sunglasses.

"Yeah. I mean, I'm not from New York, I'm from Massachusetts originally, but I'm coming from New York."

"You ain't gonna make any money with him." He took a step toward me, his left hand on the rail of the truck.

"Who are you?" I said. The lobsterman, who'd taken off his rubber gloves and thrown them in the bed of the truck with all the other stuff, had hands like mallets.

"I'm Shustock. You ain't gonna make any money with him, Polack's a cheap prick. He ain't gonna pay ya." He grabbed the anchor from the skiff with one hand, pushed the skiff off with the other, heaved the small anchor like a discus into the water, then got in his truck and drove away.

I'd been composing a list of things to do on the day's journey, basic stuff, possible to achieve, such as Stop Talking About Petra With Anyone Who Will Listen. There at the landing I added a mental one: Stay Arm's Length Away From Shustock's Hands At All Times And At All Costs.

I picked up a small stone, a nice flat one, and side-armed it low over the water. It touched down about fifty feet from the shoreline where I was standing, sliced up from the water then down, skipping again and again and one more time before slipping through the pane of water and out of sight not far from a skiff gliding toward shore. If Billy was directing, he would have followed behind the stone itself, capturing only its impressions on the water, and would have held still on the last impression, the stone skimming off camera in perpetuity.

The skiff was driven by another lobsterman who, standing to stern with his hand controlling the outboard, slowly guided the small craft to me. He cut the motor about 50 feet from the shoreline.

"You D.L.?" The nose of the small boat eased onto the sand. He turned, lifted the outboard out of the water and locked it into place.

"Yeah," I said to his back.

"I'm Jack." He turned around and walked the length of the skiff to meet me at the water's edge, stuck out his hand and I shook it. "Nice to meet you." Big smile. I returned it. "Was you talking to Shustock?"

"Yeah, I asked him if he knew where you were."

"Go get the truck," Jack said, motioning to the truck parked higher up on the sand. "Key's in it."

The truck was a faded black Ford. Rust along the seams and all over the tailgate. One of the bumper stickers said, *Women love me, fish fear me*. The other was faded beyond understanding. A stuffed animal lobster the size of my hand was affixed to the driver side door, sitting there sideways, weathered to pink. One nub of key in the ignition, no key chain. The ash tray was open, a stub of a cigar on the lip. I backed the truck down to the skiff and Jack, rolling it to a stop when he raised his hand. We loaded the truck with the contents of the skiff—a small bag of trash and three plastic boxes of lobsters. I felt him observing me as we lifted the boxes, like the tryout had started.

"How many lobsters Shustock have with him?"

"I don't know."

"How many of these totes he have on his skiff?"

"Oh. It looked like he had one."

"See how many I got? Three to one, that's about right. And that's working alone so far. You'll see. Guess who catches the lobsters around here?" Jack smiled again and motioned for me to get in the truck. "Come on. We gotta go to the market." I put my backpack in the bed of the truck and we were off moments later.

Petra would have had us race through the timeline—she was occupied with the things she would say on the train after the Rose Auditorium. But I went slowly, particularly near the end. Homus erecti travel farther and wider as their history continues to be dug up. They're still moving. Throughout Africa, Europe, India, Indonesia, China. They're getting smarter, possibly using language, cooperating more and using better tools. They're varying their diets, varying the hunt. They're taking to the sea. One day they'll catch up to us. We'll walk together, we'll ride the subway together, and we'll get off, each at our own stops, walking on because we'll have nothing better to do or everything to do.

Off to market we go. I pictured the truck a horse-drawn cart, lobsters falling off its sides.

1

"You don't get sea sick?" Jack drove slowly from the sandy beach at the landing up the hill to the Heights then onto the main road. The truck complained from the seams.

"No. I'm certain of it. I think I lucked out."

Jack's elbow was resting on the open window frame. I did the same with mine.

"Good. You said you quit your job?"

"Yes." I looked out the window at the fresh green of the world. If there's a month that beckons fellowship with the Lord, it is May.

"Thing is, if it works out, I need you here until Thanksgiving at least."

"No problem. Can I crash at your place until I find an apartment?"

"You'll stay with me in my extra bedroom. Three hundred a month."

"I was going to look for a place—"

"You have a vehicle?"

"No."

"How'd you get here?"

"I took a bus to my parents' house, train to Boston, ferry to P'town, another bus here."

"You walk from downtown?"

"Yeah."

"Good walk."

"The last leg."

"You stay with me so I don't have to pick you up in the morning. You ain't gonna find an apartment now, not for three hundred anyways. I live right down the street there." He pointed down a side street then reached for and lit the stub of cigar that was in the ash tray.

"I was planning on buying a used truck—"

"Don't worry about it, you don't need one." He switched the cigar to his left hand and positioned it in the draft behind the big driver side rear view mirror then turned to me, gave me a once over. "You need a vehicle for a hot date or something you can take my Caddy. It's across the street at the widow's."

"OK, thanks. Do you mind if I smoke?"

"No. What, cigarettes?"

"Yeah."

"No. Go ahead. I used to smoke them things. I know what it's like."

"When did you quit?"

"Ten-twenty years ago, something like that. Tough habit."

I lit my cigarette and positioned it in my side rear view's draft. Several cars, mostly trucks, waved as they passed us. Jack returned the waves with his left cigar hand, like a blackjack player who doesn't want any more cards. At the market he parked in a handicapped spot closest to the back door.

"My back keeps acting up like this we'll be able to park here legally!" Another big friendly smile. Pink canvas shirt open to just below the sternum where two gold

medallions—a sand dollar and a lobster hanging from a gold necklace—were nestled in white chest hair. More white hair wisping out from under his cap. Faded jeans, running sneakers. He was skinny and his hands, like Shustock's, were disproportionately large, or swollen hard. When I shook the right one back at the landing the grip was strong but not because he exerted pressure—there seemed to be a conscious effort not to squeeze, that if he did he'd make more obvious the physical characteristic that marked his life's work more than an early summer tan or a gold lobster and sand dollar hanging around his neck. Maybe he was self conscious about his hands, or he didn't want to show off. I wanted those hands. If I got them by Thanksgiving it would mean that I put my work in and maybe would mean the work would replace time otherwise spent dwelling on Petra.

We carried the three totes of lobsters, one at a time, through the back door then stacked them on top of each other on a big scale.

"Let's go find Suzie." Jack stood in the threshold that separated the front of the store from the back. A young woman exited the walk-in behind us.

"You ready to go, Captain Jack?" Suzie had a big, friendly smile, like Jack's.

"Suzie, sweetheart." He sized her up, head to toe, his hands on his waist, actually sized her up, shaking his head while he did. "If I was his age …" he thumbed to me. "This is my new first mate, D.L."

"Nice to meet you."

"You too." The smiling was infectious; I fell in line.

Suzie's T-shirt short sleeves were rolled up over her shoulders. She wrote the total pounds on a slip, handed the slip to Jack and returned to the front of the store where a crowd waited for their seafood. Jack grabbed one end of the top tote and turned his

back to me, pointed toward the front of the store. I grabbed the other end, lifted, and we lugged it to the front.

"Nice and easy," he said. Each of the three weighed about 70 pounds.

He told me to watch as he weighed each lobster individually on a small scale, then placed them in their appropriate pool according to weight. Selects—a pound and a half and up—went in one pool. Anything smaller than selects, quarters and chicks, went in the other. The two pools were in the middle of the store, customers on one side, the store's workers and us on the other. A long glass case continued the partition, in it fish and shellfish on ice, lemons. A counter with the register further separated the four workers and us from the crowd. Parents held their kids over the pools and blurted questions like: where did you catch them, did you catch them today, what's the biggest you've ever caught? One mother took a picture of us. Jack had a lobster in each hand. He put one arm around me, the rearing lobster in that hand near my head.

Suzie's co-workers were young guys with gym muscles and Red Sox caps and dopey expressions. She had big walnut eyes, very white teeth. Breasts humming like power lines. She looked to be about their age, college. Sneaking looks I did that thing where you fast forward a summer to a life, marriage, kids, that crazy thing you do when you look at someone and think: possibility, even if the person you're thinking that about isn't thinking the same thing. Possibility, but she's, what, 20? Won't look good on the permanent record. Fuck it anyway. I'm here to sort of sort things out. I'm here to work on the sea. I shall keep my notebook and collect my thoughts. Perhaps I'll learn to surf. Surfers talk of transcendence.

I left the market with a new understanding of Jack's work day, and what would be mine, too: that the market was the business end of a day in which Jack knew exactly what he did. He got up early, hauled his traps and showed up at the market with three totes of lobsters. After the weigh-in there was a written slip, an account of his catch. Jack could ask himself: What did I do at work today? And he could answer, simply: 200 pounds.

At the Interweb job in New York I couldn't remember what I did any given day by the time the sun was up on the next. We all got new computers when I was there. The tech guy set up my new box next to the monitor on the desk instead of under it, must have been in a rush. I didn't bother to unhook it and move it below, in part because it gave me a partial buffer from my cube mate to the left, who badly wanted to know how many shares I was offered and what I thought the opening price would be.

One day the computer wasn't working. I sat in front of the box, eye to disc drive, trying to think of what I'd do for the rest of the day, and what I'd done in the morning when the computer was working. I know e-mails were read, some of them responded to. I know I copied and pasted for about an hour. I was surfing when the computer went kaput and killed most of an hour with my own unsuccessful trouble shooting of shutting off the computer and turning it back on five times before I called tech support. It was another half hour before someone came, during which time I sat in my office chair and stared at the box in front of me, remembering what Billy once told me about a temp job he had scanning surveys, and how scary the big scanner was: "I didn't know what to do with it, it just sat there looking down on me. I thought, Hmmm, many orifi: maybe I can fuck it. But I don't know how. There it was: Machine 1, Billy nil. Billy loses. More response from a zucchini than that odious machine. Don't you feel like you can take an

awful human being, take Widge, that awful little man, and even if you can't draw out whatever corpuscle of good he has, even if you can't get through to Widge or Hitler or mother, you think you can render them not so awful and even though you can't, your hope that you can survives their awfulness? Such is not the relationship between human and computer—it just computes, processes, et cetera, even as it has awful power, maybe not Hitler awful power or mother, but individual crushing power. That's why Kasparov was like, Fuck that, I didn't lose, after he lost to Deep Blue. He realized that he could play six more or six hundred more chess matches with the computer and never for a second experience the hope that he might have some effect on his opponent by beating it or losing to it. Yet Kasparov remains, as will Billy."

When we got in the truck Jack gave me the slip.

"Put that in the filing cabinet." He pointed to the glove compartment. I opened it. There was a pile of slips. "Put it on top so I can keep track."

"How often do we come to the market?"

"Every day we haul. We're going out tomorrow morning. There's gear on the boat until you can buy your own."

"What should I do when we haul?"

"I'll tell you tomorrow. Introduce you to the *Hattie Marie*." He picked up the cigar, still lit, and got his hand in position.

"Why did you name it *Hattie Marie*."

"That was her name when I bought her. I didn't want to confuse her with a new one."

"Makes sense."

"How long was you in New York?"

"Just a year."

"You like it?"

I talked the rest of the way to the house. He waved and listened.

The driveway was crushed shells. The activity on or about the driveway looked like a flea market. Up close, upon our slow, crunchy entrance in the truck, totes were a scattered theme, there was a head high stack of lobster traps, a trash barrel, a stool, a row of new white buoys whose sticks leaned against the side of a turned over skiff at the end of the driveway adjacent to the small yard, a can of pink paint and a brush on the ground. There was a makeshift table with some tools on it, string and scattered nails. Coils of rope in a small pile near the open garage doors. The garage was even more cluttered.

Jack got out of the truck, eased through it all and into the house. He gave me a tour. It was a small cape. He said he bought it for nothing and moved it here, got a deal on the land, too, because it was all brush and trees before he cleared it. There were two upstairs bedrooms, a bathroom between. Downstairs was another bedroom, the living room, a small dining room, the kitchen, and a sort of extended breezeway that had a bathroom off it near the front door.

We ate leftovers for supper in the living room and watched TV. There were red lobster tchotchkes everywhere: a lobster pillow and three lobster stuffed animals of different sizes on the couch, a lobster ash tray, a ceramic lobster on the mantel, a lobster

Christmas tree ornament on the window sill. On the end table near the couch was a real lobster claw longer than my head, faded almost white.

"Quite a collection of lobsters in here, Jack."

"I know it. People give them to me all the time. More lobsters in here than in our traps today."

At eight he got out of his La-Z-Boy slowly, hunched, and announced he was going to bed.

"Stay up as late as you want, but we gotta be out the door at six. There's sheets on the bed in your room."

"Thanks. I'll wash the dishes then hit it, too. I'm kind of tired. Long day."

"I know it."

I stayed up a while and snooped around. There were lobster tchotchkes in every room. Pictures of Jack as a young man in the dining room. One large framed black and white photo was of a beached *Hattie Marie*. The boat was lying on its side, Jack standing beside it, smiling. There was a hand-written title: Polish Sea Captain. Billy'd said that in addition to the Mayor of East Orleans, Jack was known as the Polish Prince.

He knocked on my door at 5:30.

"I'm leaving a pair of boots outside your door here. Go ahead and put em on. We're leaving in half an hour."

On the short ride in his truck to the deli Jack gave me a brief overview of my new job.

"You'll see," he said, stopping when he got to the part about traps breaking the surface. "Just don't get your foot frigged up in the line and you'll be alright."

He introduced me to the owner of the deli, who was tying a roast. I got a kind of furtive smile from him, and took it to mean what he said upon shaking my hand: "You're in for a summer."

I was hungry but followed Jack's lead and bought a coffee. Maybe he got up earlier than me and had something to eat at the house, but I suspected breakfast was coffee at the deli.

At the landing we got in the skiff, loaded it with our roast beef sandwiches and chips from the deli and two large red fuel containers that were in the bed of the truck, then Jack pulled the outboard to life and we skimmed the few hundred feet to the boat. He cut the outboard and wrapped the bow line from the skiff around a cleat on the rail of the boat. We climbed in. He did everything deliberately. I wasn't sure if he had a slower pace than I'd expected or if he was going slow to show me.

"Grab that funnel there on top of the engine box and bring it over here so we can fuel up. You ever been on a lobster boat?"

"No."

"Take a look around. Down below there," he gestured to the opening leading to the forward hull space, "I got some gear hanging. Go ahead and put it on."

In addition to an orange Grunden's rain coat and rubber overalls down below there were tools, all of them crusted in rust, a case of oil, a case of bottled water, and on platforms that ran to the nose of the boat were two small plastic mattresses about two inches thick. I emerged with the rubber overalls. Jack was pouring the fuel into the tanks

at the rail. I leaned against the opposite rail and tried to slide a pant leg of the overalls over a boot. It got stuck. I was trying to yank it through when I lost purchase and hit the deck. Jack turned around.

"Generally easier if you take your boots off first." He smiled.

"Right, Cap. That would make sense."

He started the engine and turned on the electronics. A cloud of exhaust lingered.

"Wash that tote with the bait in it," he motioned to the tote in the middle of the deck. "Take the outwash hose there and rinse it off to stern."

I grabbed the hose and sprayed the tote, scattering flies. Brown juice washed across the deck.

"Good. Now help me lift it on the engine cover here." The smell burned up close. The handle of the tote was salty and wet. We didn't have gloves on, though I'd noticed a few pair on the dash. We crabbed the tote onto the engine cover.

"When we start hauling, take a handful of the cod fish skins, no more than a handful, and put it in a bait bag. Fuckin' bait gone up another five bucks a tote this year."

"OK."

"Now, go up the bow there and take the bow line out of the cleat." I stepped on the rail near the wheel and walked up the narrow gunwale to the bow. It was a nice breather from the bait and diesel exhaust lingering aft. I was certain I'd never been sea sick, but I was already feeling queasy and the boat wasn't moving.

I was struggling to force the line around one point of the cleat when Jack slid the windshield open.

"Pull on the line for slack then free it through."

I did. It was a simple maneuver but not my instinct.

"You've hired a moron, Jack."

"Don't worry, boy, I've had plenty of new guys. Just pay attention, you'll be fine."

He eased the *Hattie Marie* away from the mooring and the big pink floating ball that marked it. We were on our way. I went back down and stood by Jack, empowered by proximity and the orange rubber overalls. He guided the boat slowly, right booted foot on the rail near the wheel, his right elbow propped on that raised knee. He took an apple from the dashboard and started to peel it with a pocket knife he wore around his belt. He threw the peels over the side. I wondered if crabs eat apple rind. He cut a piece and offered it to me.

"Nice in here, huh?"

"Yeah." The exhaust and rancid bait fumes dissipated a bit, trailed mostly behind us.

"We'll see what it's like out there," he said, with a nod to the ocean. "You can go back up top if you want, sit on the roof, take a look at your new office."

I hopped back up on the gunwale, walked forward, holding on to the top of the wheelhouse, the roof of the boat. We made our way along the winding channel through the inlet, which eventually would snake us through to the cut—the break in the beach that lets the ocean into the inlet. We cruised slowly past moored sailboats, lobster boats, skiffs. The sound of an outboard moved in and out like a bee. Birds I didn't know the names of called in to the montage. Spartina on a boggy bank lined one edge of the channel, long green blades gently swaying with our wake, like wheat on a Plains farm, as

we cruised by. Fair weather clouds, an aberrant shark's head among them, poking through the bright blue sky. There were two lobster boats ahead of us, also slowly making their way through the inlet in a kind of processional.

We passed another town landing and another congeries of boats and skiffs, five or six trucks in the parking lot, some of them with lobster traps stacked head high in their beds. The water was blue ahead and around, green when you looked into it. It was clear to ten feet and looked so clean I wanted to jump in.

"When the stripers come into the inlet," Jack said from below, "you'll be able to see them from up there. We'll stop what we're doing and catch us some bass for supper."

The radio squawked. I wanted to go down there with Jack to listen but I was also content to try to take it all in from my perch, happy with the idea that there would be plenty of time for radio banter and that every day for the next several months I'd get to see the office at least twice a day. Billy was right: it was like being in a Hopper sea painting. Every sensation was clear, detailed to a whiff of salt, until a new sensation entered the montage. I could see myself in it and felt the uncaricatured beauty of the place because I was working in it, I was part of it, or felt like I was. I thought: the magnificence of this scene would render Petra unironic—wouldn't that be something—but I'll just enjoy it for its own sake, not for what a palliative it could be for my cool ex, who, in our one trip to the Cape over the four years of our connoiter, when we went to my aunt and uncle's place in Chatham for the weekend, had said of the ocean view from their porch, "It's like lobby art." There's nothing you can say to thin relativism. It's not worth it.

Hauling went like this: I grabbed the trap when it broke the surface of the water, pulled it onto the rail, opened the door by pulling the bungee latch, took out what was in it, put lobsters on the culling board on the engine cover near the bait, threw the rest of the contents of the trap overboard (mostly small crabs that first haul), removed the bait bag from a hook in the trap, grabbed a handful of bait, put it in the bait bag and hung it on the nail in the wood trap, closed the door, latched it, waited for Jack to motion with his hand to push the trap off the rail and into the water, turned around to the lobsters moving slowly on the culling board, gauged them (checked their length with the gauge tied to the culling board to make sure they were legal), banded them with the banding tool if they were legal, and put them in the tank to stern, which was full of circulating sea water from the outwash hose. There were any number of other things to do here and there, but that was basically it. We did that for 200 or so traps. I watched Jack do the first two traps then I took over. Grabbing the lobsters to band them was tricky because they shot their claws up and back of their heads. The traps were heavy, probably fifty pounds soaked, and awkward to grab and swing onto the rail. I did this alone, and realized lobstermen get mates in large part so they can preserve their backs, let the young guys do it, which was fine with me, but I was out of any kind of shape that didn't involve sitting in front of a computer. I used muscles that I hadn't used in years, maybe ever, along my sides and especially my lower back—it was like washing the dishes, big dishes, for six hours. Jack kept telling me to bend my knees or I'd be all balled up tomorrow, be spending all my hard earned money at the chiropractor's.

About midway through the day, a few hours, I was struggling with a crab holding tight to the side of a trap when Jack said, "Your friend Batman cleaned them traps spotless."

"He's good at cleaning." I took Jack's comment as a suggestion that I needed to do a better or quicker job removing the contents of the traps. I continued to pull on the crab, which wasn't letting go.

"It's OK, no rush. Sometimes if you pull hard on one claw the other will loosen up and you can get it." He did this and got the crab free, tossed it overboard. "Thirty some years fishing, all the people I had on this boat, I never had a cartoon. He always wear costumes?"

"For special occasions."

Jack shook his head.

"You say you broke up with your girlfriend?" He was standing beside me, the engine idling, trap on the rail baited and ready to go. He looked at the cliffs of Wellfleet, two towns north of Orleans. We were about three miles offshore. I'd stayed on top of the wheelhouse for the forty-minute steam out there from the inlet. The sea was calm, the sun felt great.

I followed his gaze to the cliffs, which were about an inch tall from our perspective. The sand faces, almost as rich as clay, made a distinct, thin orange stroke between the dark blue water below and light blue sky above. I wanted to break my rule and talk Petra with Jack, a man who had the old animal magnetism with respect to attracting the opposite sex, it was clear, on sight of him—the handsome sailor in a pink shirt, the welcome smile that would be a furtive grin on a man of lesser charm. Women

he didn't know, mothers, taking pictures of him (and me because I was with him). Suzie's lighting up when we came in to weigh the lobsters. Jack, who would probably be a font of wisdom on the matter of the opposite sex, a man I suspected had a keen interest in affairs of the heart and mattresses, a single man in his early 60s who was not burdened (outwardly anyway) with loneliness, Jack, a welcome stranger who would have more to say, give me more to chew on than Seamus's she's not on your wavelength, serendipity is the way.

"She broke up with me," I said. "A week before my birthday." I stared at the cliffs, too, and waited.

"I know what it's like, I know it. You'll see." He was still staring at the cliffs. "I look at them cliffs, when we're in the suds, and they move on me."

The cliffs didn't appear to be moving. We bobbed up and down lightly, but the cliffs seemed to be pretty much sedentary.

"The suds?"

"Close in, just this side of where the waves break if there's a swell on."

"What do you mean they move?"

"Oh, well, they squiggle, ya know. The sand, not the whole cliff, just the red sand. It moves like one of them color telescopes you looked in when you were a kid."

"A kaleidoscope?"

"Yeah, sort of like that."

"Really? Weird."

"You'll see it too when we hit the suds in July. You can't see it from out here. Those cliffs play tricks with your head. You'll see."

For the rest of the haul I looked at the cliffs every chance I had. Maybe he was saying the cliffs actually move, which, of course they do—they're sand. The whole Cape is sand and till, scraped back with the retreat of the last ice sheet 10,000 years ago. They're not really cliffs, they're escarpments, a word that perfectly captures in its sound and look the geological personality of them: holding on, scraped and raked, battered constantly, but holding on. They shift and move with the wind and sea. They'll disappear completely one day. Was Jack's vision of them so precise that he could see this erosion in seconds? That kind of vision seemed superhuman, seemed so dialed in to the transience of the sand as to be sighted from higher than a lobsterman on a boat. I didn't think a summer would get me there—you have to do your time for transience and transcendence.

2

At the market Jack parked in the handicapped spot. We lugged the totes, two, onto the scale. Suzie remembered my name. We did the weighing and sorting. Photos were taken.

"Get the slip from Suzie," Jack said, then walked around the pools to the front of the store where there was a cooler.

"Good day," Suzie said, meaning the haul. I looked at the slip. She returned to a customer. In the truck Jack gave me a beer, opened his, took a huge slug.

"Don't I like a nice cold beer after a long hard day on the high seas. What'd we do today?"

"One eighteen." I opened mine and slugged.

"Not bad," he finished his beer in a second slug, "this early in the season," and threw the empty can behind him out the open window into the bed of the truck.

"Does Suzie weigh all the guys in?"

"Usually. Some of them young guys aren't too responsible with finances."

"So she knows what everybody's been catching?"

"Everybody knows what everybody's catching, especially the guys who aren't catching anything."

We drove to the deli. Jack was after a steak and got one on sale. "See, D.L., you get a nice steak like this a little gray in places and nobody wants to eat it, so Ronnie puts it on sale. That's where I come in because it's aged, the way you're supposed to fuckin' cook it in the first place. Can't tell them that, though. That's alright. I'll take it on sale. Ronnie knows."

I bought a six-pack and a hand of bananas. Jack said there was blue fish in the fridge, caught day before yesterday, which I could have. We got back in the truck, the doors of which were open, key still in the ignition.

"You like bananas?" He picked up the still-lit cigar.

"Yeah, I mean not especially, but I met this guy on the bus from P'town and he said a banana before bed stimulates dreams." I finished my beer and chucked it in the bed.

"Why was he talking about dreams?"

"I was, actually. I haven't had dreams in years it seems. I miss them."

"Yeah, well, tomorrow we're gonna spend the day at the trap yard."

"Where's that?"

"Across town. Tonight, we'll go celebrate your first day on the high seas."

It seemed early (wasn't dark), but I remembered Jack saying no partying after eight when he'd gone over the ground rules of our living situation. He'd said it with a grin, though.

The small gravel parking lot of the Flapping Elbow looked like a road house mated with a country club: trucks and high end coupes. There was a long bar and tables

in one big room. Most of the seats at the bar were taken but there were two empty on the end. Jack sat in the last one, I sat in the other. I'd rinsed my arms with the outwash hose when we were back at the landing, but there were still flecks of seaweed on them and a thin coating of salt, which I noticed with great happiness when I put my elbows on the bar. Jack's stool was nearest the bar wait station. The three waitresses standing there smiled as he sidled up. He introduced me to them, and to the bar tender. "Me and my first mate here would like two substantial martinis," Jack said.

The waitresses cleared. "Don't worry about your ex-girlfriend, plenty of local hen hawks to keep you busy this summer."

"Have you ever been married, Jack?"

"I was close once, she run back to the doctor." He took a pull off his cigar. "You'll see. Women fall in love with this place. They stay here for the summer, get a nice tan on, some of that nice Nauset sand between their toes. They fall in love with it then they're gone when the weather turns. Know what they always say?"

"What?"

"They always say they're finding themselves here." He smirked. "You'll see. They'll be long gone when we're freezing our asses off in December. We'll still be finding ourselves."

People came over to chat with Jack. I was introduced. He titled them after they walked away: "Frank, the selectman," "Pammy, hot shot realtor," "the lawyer from New York," "the blonde bombshell." I didn't get involved with the conversations and was sure I wouldn't remember all the names, but was also sure that many of the people he'd introduced me to would be around, would be in my life for the next several months, and

that they had more incentive to remember my name because of my close proximity to Jack, who provided them with weather information, sold them lobsters for cash at a buck more per pound than the price the market gave us, which was a few bucks less than they'd pay at the market. But mostly it was cool to know him and talk to him at the bar, to be seen with him. I listened to the conversations and the ball game on the TV above the bar. Looking down the length, I saw Shustock alone at the opposite end by the door. Rather, I saw his mallets smothering a bottle of beer.

About an hour after we got there, after several other visitors had come and gone, an older man approached us.

"Jack."

"Plummy boy," Jack said, briefly turning away from the TV then just as quickly turning back to it.

"And you must be Jack's new mate." He stuck out his hand.

"D.L., nice to meet you." I shook it. Again with the enormous hands—his fingers had to be twice as wide as mine.

"Can you say that again?" He cupped his right hand around his right ear.

"D.L."

"Nice to meet you, too, D.L. I beg your pardon. If you could speak up a little … because I'm deaf in this ear," he pointed to his left ear, "and I don't hear so good out of this one. I'm Henry Plumly. Most of the reprobates like this one call me Plummy but I prefer Plum if it's to be shortened. Course, I prefer a lot of things that haven't gone my way. But that doesn't mean you can't smile at the complications life affords us."

I offered my seat, which I thought might have been reserved for him, but he declined. Plum's shirt, like Jack's, was open to below the sternum. His medallion was a pair of orange bifocals, hung there with monofilament fishing line. Jeans and sandals. Plum was older than Jack and his eyes had a glaze to them. He showed us pictures of his recent trip to England, pointing out the beauty of the cliffs of Dover. Jack wasn't impressed.

"Why would you go all the way over there to see them cliffs when you can see our very own cliffs right here?"

Plum turned to me.

"He's never gonna leave this place, he's got no greater aspiration to see the world, experience new cultures … fuckin' pilgrim."

Jack had a substantial sip of his substantial martini and said, "That's OK, you go spend your hard earned money when you can see the same thing right here. Them cliffs look any better than what you saw today, D.L.?"

"Don't listen to him. He's a simpleton. You seem like a smart guy, D.L., don't listen to him … Christ, if you had any smarts, you wouldn't be working for him, much less living with him."

"Old Plummy boy and me used to fish together, years ago," Jack butted in, "he's as full of shit now as he was then … Don't listen to a word he says."

"You guys suppose there's *anyone* worth listening to? I'm already getting tired of people telling me not to set myself up with you."

"With who?" Jack looked at me.

"With you."

"Who said that?"

"I think Henry just did. And Shustock did yesterday at the landing, before I met you."

"What'd he say?"

"He said not to work for you."

Jack turned away and looked up at the TV. He pulled on his cigar.

"You'll be fine, boy," Plum said, "don't worry about who you should listen to, just don't say anything and you'll be alright. Don't tell 'em anything. Course you won't learn that from blabber mouth."

"Ya know, Henry," Jack said, turning back to us from the game, "in order to be a blabber mouth, which I'm not, but if I was, it would be because I have something to say, unlike you who all you can talk about is fuckin' cliffs halfway across the world that you can see any day here!"

Plum chuckled and shook his head. There was a lull. I had small talk with Plum, told him I'd been coming to the Cape since I was a kid, told him about my aunt and uncle in Chatham, Widge and Batman, their families' summer houses in East Orleans, told him why I left New York, that I really didn't have anything better to do, not that this is a lesser thing to do, I said, in fact it's already better, with a better office.

"Well, you're in for an entertaining summer. Some humor," he patted Jack on the shoulder. "Some humor."

Jack looked down at the pictures. "Them cliffs move on you while you was over there?"

Plum looked at me and grinned. "No. They've been stationary for some time."

"You know how when you're in the suds and the face of the cliffs squiggle on you, that's what I mean. Them cliffs over there move on you like that?"

"Not that I could see," Plum said, "but then I don't have your unique vision of things." Jack turned back to the TV.

On the ride home Jack said again that he and Plummy started out together, said they had all kinds of stories, that Plummy was an old Cape Codder, that when he gave up fishing he started a ferry service from the Town Cove to the beach on a small pontoon boat, that it's a pretty good business in the summer, that when we pass by the *Queen of Orleans* with old Plummy boy at the helm ferrying people to the beach we should wave if we're coming back and I should go to the tank and hold up the two biggest from the catch for his passengers to see. Jack said Plummy's wife kicked him to the basement a few years ago. He said Plummy takes showers a couple times a week at Jack's because Plummy, see, he doesn't have a shower in the basement, don't be surprised if we come home one day and there's an old man singing sailor's songs in the downstairs bathroom.

When we got back to the house, voices from the garage radio were covering the last of the sixth. It was a little after nine, felt much later. We were sitting on the two wooden chairs in the yard, which was graded a few feet higher than the driveway and gave a commanding view of the trade in the yellow light from the garage.

"Do you always leave the radio on in the garage?"

"That radio's been on for twenty-thirty years."

"All the time? Day and night?"

He nodded and pulled on what little remained of his cigar.

"Why?"

"So the raccoons and squirrels have something to listen to at night." He didn't smile or smirk or grin, said it matter-of-factly. "So they can have a nice conversation together. Anyways, I'm going to bed. We're going to the trap yard tomorrow. You can sleep in. We'll head over there at eight. Good job today. You'll see how it goes."

"Thanks. Is it OK if I stay up for a bit, listen to the rest of the game out here?"

"I know it, I know what it's like, listen to the ball game and drink some nice cold beer."

"It's a nice night."

"I'll see you in the morning."

I sat out there and listened to the rest of the game. From the chair I didn't see any woody critters go into the garage. I went inside and ate two bananas because you always have to double up on the prescription.

Upstairs, I could hear the TV from Jack's room down the short hallway, the marine forecast playing on the local cable station. I could see falling asleep to that robot voice. Did it affect his dreams? Did he dream? I would have to ask him.

In my notebook I labored through the process of the day. Just as I was nodding off by the night table lamp, I finished my entry with Shustock alone at the end of the bar: *If you know people are going to be around for a while, be in your life for a spell, you also sniff out the more ominous among them*.

3

The trap yard was only a few miles across town from his house, but Jack drove slowly and it seemed like the ride was the longest one we'd had without talking. I wondered if he was sore over my comment about people saying I shouldn't work for him. It was when I mentioned Shustock at the Elbow that he turned away.

Jack navigated the truck through a path surrounded on all sides by dense, tangled growth that canopied in sections over the path.

"This is Owen's place."

"Is he a hobbit?"

"What?"

"It looks make believe."

"What do you mean?" Branches scraped both sides of the truck. I leaned away from my window.

"I mean it's so dense and lush and overgrown it looks like a fairy tale scene."

"It clears up up ahead."

And so it did. A huge wood-hulled lobster boat was stilted up near the garage, which was separate from the old one-story cape, spare in trim and look, and in need of a scrubbing. The path continued through the clearing back into overgrowth and past two clearings of indeterminate purpose. Then another clearing, where several hundred pots

were stacked upwards of eight feet. Overgrowth had captured the pots on the edge of the clearing, green vines and leaves doing yeoman's gothic work. Jack stopped the truck, turned it off and sat for a moment looking at the traps.

"How long have you known Owen?"

"Years."

"Why do you keep your traps here?"

"I used to keep them over by the dump but my buddy sold his land there. Owen, he was going through a divorce at the time, so I let him stay at my place, ya know? And then when he bought this place, he let me keep my gear here. That was ten-fifteen years ago. Let's get going."

There were oak lathes lying around, a bonfire pile of buoys, and tools—a couple of rusty hammers, a cordless drill, a hand saw, pliers—on a makeshift table. There was a contraption of opposable wire brushes nailed to the top of a beat-up trap. Jack grabbed a trap from the top row of a stack. I helped him take it down. We put it on the table. He looked at it for seconds, shaking his head.

"Rat trap. This here, you just have to figure it out." He had his hand in the innards. "Usually you can fix it without cutting the whole net out. You know knots?"

"No."

"I'll work on the traps. You take the rope out of the traps, uncoil it and run it through them wire brushes," he said. "After you run it through, coil them back up."

When I ran rope from each trap through the wire brushes, hand over hand, a fine dust of dried seaweed paused in the still air. I'd finish cleaning the rope before Jack finished mending, so I'd watch him. When he was done I'd stack the traps in the truck,

as instructed. We worked like this until the truck was loaded with three rows of traps lengthwise, two high. Then we put the stick ends of buoys in the webbing of the traps and tied the traps together with twine so they would be less likely to fall off separately on our trip back through town to the landing. There, we loaded the skiff and skimmed the traps to the *Hattie Marie*.

It took two trips to get a truckload of gear on the boat because the skiff was narrower than the truck. Even if you could make one trip with a truckload loaded on the skiff, which I suggested was possible, Jack said you'd spend more time trying to get them over the rail and onboard than if you had a smaller load. Besides, Jack said that while one guy was on the boat tying buoys to the lines, the other guy could take the skiff back to the truck at the shoreline and load more traps. That's what I did—ferry traps on the skiff. When I watched *Flipper* as a kid I always thought the boy had a great life, skimming around from one adventure to the next in his outboard.

After loading the boat we went back to the trap yard. The plan was to get another load on the boat before we hauled the following morning so we could set a full string of thirty.

I started working on my own traps when I got ahead on the coiling. I cut replacement lathes with the saw like Jack did. I hammered them into place on the traps. I was using tools, I'd pull-started and run the skiff at the landing. It was some feeling of usefulness.

We'd been back in the verdant cave a couple of hours, talking only about what we were doing—Jack asking me to give him a hand or another tool, me asking him for a

hand, Jack reviewing my repair job on a trap then correcting me on it, and so on, when Jack paused and said:

"D.L., you think there are oceans on heaven?"

I broke out of my attention to the trap I was working on and the baseball game that was coming from the truck and looked at Jack, sweat dripping off his brow, shirt off, the white band of his tighty whiteys bunched up above the waist of his jeans, his slight paunch hanging over the front. He had a hammer in his hand, a nail between his lips, slightly off to the side.

"There's evidence of seas on Jupiter." He'd said *on* heaven, as if it was a planet.

"I mean heaven." The nail moved up and down when he talked.

"I picture waterfalls and unicorns."

"If it's like here on earth but better, wouldn't there still be oceans?"

"If there *are* oceans on heaven there'll be mermaids in them. Imagine if we pulled up a baby mermaid in a trap."

"That ain't gonna happen."

"Could."

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"I'll be retired in heaven."

"But let's just say you're not retired and you pull up a baby mermaid. What would you do with it?"

"Same I'd do with a short—throw it back," he said, the nail moving up and down. "But I won't be working on heaven because that defeats the whole purpose of heaven." He looked at me like *I* was weird.

"Has anyone ever been caught keeping shorts? It doesn't seem like there's much oversight."

"Every now and then we get boarded." He turned back to the trap he was working on.

"By who?"

"Green cops," he said over his shoulder.

"What do they do?"

"They look for shorts and eggers. Safety violations. Guys that keep eggers scrub them." He turned around. "If you get a lobster with any eggs throw her back." He pointed at me with his hammer. "Even if she doesn't have the load on. We'll start seeing eggers soon. Some of them cocksuckers down Chatham way scrub. Them guys aren't going to know if there are oceans on heaven."

"Do you have dreams, Jack?"

He turned back. "I have dreams about fixing these rat traps so we can get back to the boat before the sun's below the yard arm."

"Right."

We got back to work. Some traps held dried out crabs from the year before. Many had sand dollars. I'd sling them sidearm into the trees and brush. We worked on the last trap together. An hour or so had gone by without talk between us.

"I think you're right, Jack," I said.

“What?”

“I think there are oceans on heaven.”

“We’ll see.”

4

My phone rang a little after 4 a.m. I tried to pretend it was a dream: Phone rings, 4 a.m., 30-year-old man sleeping in a strange bed, his master across the hall, 62, dreaming about the weather in his tighty whiteys, a fisherman, who welcomed 30-year-old into his life like it was expected, said I'll see you when you get here, *Oh you'll find me*, and you're riding through town on a donkey cart throwing lobsters at doorsteps like the morning edition, following your route to a big canvas at the bottom of the hill that you ease through to a place where the cliffs move, a shark above smirks like it knows the end game, the sights and sounds and smells stay on you even after three showers with a singing old man whose thingy is small and shriveled and you think: I hope he can still get it up with the old mental rolodex, and you see yourself years from now, kicked to the basement, unused thingy, and now he's out of the shower making blue fish smoothies, a recipe handed down from his father, who used to shoot seals in the inlet from a dugout canoe he made, hauled the seals on and cut off their noses and took them to town hall for a $5 bounty because the seals take belly bites of striped bass and flounder and waste the rest and this is not a place where any wild critter goes to waste except the ones who know they're in the painting and can't escape, and so in perpetuity you get the mottled steaks on sale and listen to the ball game with the squirrels and raccoons and occasionally the coyotes, who bring an edginess to the conversation about why Martinez shouldn't have

thrown a fastball on a 3-2 count, like the stakes are higher with the coyotes because they're nocturnal and big time predatory, they're out there killing house cats.

You can't will dreams, though. The bananas weren't taking. Maybe the vibrating phone was Petra calling to ask me back, sobbing, I'm sorry, I was wrong, I was so wrong, it's OK to spin your wheels, let's spin them together, you're such a decent person, no, a good person, and we'll be good on the front lines of fun and excitement, we'll be comfortable in our bed with our comfortable heads making comfortable plans. You're so right, D, you're so right to seek that, and birthdays *are* meaningless, worse than meaningless because they mark time—*the mausoleum of all hope and desire*—why would we celebrate another year passed when we mark time all the time anyway… Oh, you're so right and good and concerned about the remainder even if you are the remainder, it's OK, we'll carry the two, please take me back ... please.

I reached for the vibrating phone and looked at the small display: *Billy Cell*. Hence, moment of self pity numero lost count. I turned the phone off. We were in a stretch of unseasonably warm weather that first week; the windows were open to a cool breeze blowing sheer white curtains in and out as if they lacked direction, too, but slow-danced with it.

The lobster boats at the two landings were moored (parked) along the channel a few hundred feet from the shoreline and spaced about fifty feet apart. On either side of the *Hattie Marie* were moored the *Bug Catcher*—Owen's boat—and the *Throwback*, Shustock's.

Shustock swung by in his skiff as Jack and I prepped to go out. I was a little surprised he and Jack were on speaking terms given what each had said about the other to me, though Shustock had been harsher.

The inlet was lake calm again. That early, it was so quiet that when a sound came in, like a gull dropping a clam on one of the boats all the way over to the other landing, you heard it like the clam was dropped on your boat—the acoustics of an amphitheater. Clam shells, mussel shells and gull shit were features of the top floor. I'd sprayed the roof with the outwash hose when we came back after the first haul, when we were steaming back in and Jack told me to wash the boat. I figured that as long as I was cleaning the deck and rails and engine box I'd clean my roof perch for the next cruise through the inlet. Not that it mattered because there would always be crap up there and the first thing I did after we got on the boat was dip below and put on my super gear, which was impervious to shells and gull shit when I sat on them for the morning commute.

We got to Priscilla's first. After I cut the skiff's outboard and we got on the boat, Shustock's outboard was the next non-natural sound to punctuate the scene. We had a load of traps on. I was handing Jack our pink buoys, which he tied to the lines of the stacked traps. I watched him tie and made sure we hadn't missed tagging any traps.

Shustock allowed his skiff to nose up to our starboard, then put his outboard in neutral and held on to the rail.

"You been to the can?" he asked.

"Not yet."

"Busy out there."

"I know it." Jack looked at Shustock as he tied. I looked at Shustock, too, and his big, mirrored sunglasses. Fly eyes.

"How many you got in?"

"About half. You?"

"Almost all in with this load," he gestured to the *Throwback*, which also had a full load of gear on.

"Good."

"They're not fishin' yet. I don't know if they're gonna fish at the can. Fuckin' amusement park out there."

"I know it."

"New Guy set right on top of me."

"What's his buoys again?" Jack asked.

"Yellow this year. Fuckin' mess."

"Way it goes."

"You doing a long tide?"

"Yeah. Be back over the bar no later than six. I can make three and a half hours either side of low water." The sand bar out front once connected the cut. It's lowest water at low water, where you're most likely to ground if you time it wrong.

"Well, big bite," Shustock said.

"You to."

He pushed off, put his outboard in forward and skimmed over to the *Throwback*. Not once in the brief conversation had he looked at me.

"What's the can?"

"Spot off Wellfleet, about three miles."

"Why is it called the can?"

"There was an old Coast Guard buoy there. Coast Guard couldn't afford to keep in the water. Rocky bottom underneath where it used to float before they towed it away."

"How long had it been there?"

"Long as I can remember."

Jack said he was the first to fish the can after it was removed. When it was there nobody fished close to it because there was a tacit understanding that it should be given berth. Jack didn't picture a rock pile down there, but he did see at least the large bell anchor mooring the buoy that maybe provided modest cover for a few lobsters. More important than imagined reasoning was Jack's hunch that there were lobsters down there.

"You have to trust your instincts. That's why I don't use the box scores when I make my football bets. You have to figure it out up here," he said, pointing to his head, placing his viscera in his brain case. We finished up the buoys and made ready to shove off.

He had a hunch and dropped a string of twenty pots in a wide circle—a 'wagon wheel' directly below where the can used to float. When he went back to tend the initial twenty pots he set at the can, he said it was like striking gold. In a year's time, in just one cycle of the seasons, lobsters intent on spawning in the warm inshore shoal waters in the summer approached the can on their way in and found the rock reef a nice place to call home. They'd been going there for centuries, perhaps, but since the small area had never been fished it seemed to Jack like they showed up that year just for him.

"Boy them bugs must have put the word out to all their friends and relatives," Jack continued as we slowly made our way through the inlet en route to the can, which is where we were going to set the load of gear—he hadn't mentioned that to Shustock because Shustock didn't ask if Jack was going to set his gear there, he asked him if he'd been there yet, and since Jack hadn't, he didn't lie, but he also didn't elaborate on or advance the subject the way sometimes people do in conversations.

Jack said every pot in that initial prospecting string at the can was so packed with lobsters it took several minutes to remove them from each successive pot and band them with his then mate, Baker, who lived then and lives now down the street from Jack. Baker comes by a lot, Jack said, like Plum. He'll drink all your garage beer if you're not careful.

"We averaged seven pounds per pot that first string, one had twelve keepers I remember. We couldn't keep up with the banding, them lobsters were crawling everywhere."

"What's the average pounds per pot?"

"In the high season—June, July, August—you like to average a pound and a half per pot. So two hundred pots you're coming in with around three hundred pounds. You make twenty percent of the catch, D.L., after fuel and bait. Because you're green. Works out to about a buck a pound, depending on the market price."

"How much does an experienced mate get?"

"Twenty-five. Anyways, we pulled up a hundred forty pounds of lobsters from them twenty pots first time at the can." That would have been $140 in less than an hour for me. I was pretty excited to check out the can.

Jack kept talking as we made our way through the inlet, peeling his apple, one foot on the rail, elbow on knee. "We did above average the rest of the day, too, about two pounds. One string in the suds was giving three, four pounds as I remember. But, guess what? Wasn't Owen sitting right there in his truck at the landing with the glasses on us when we come in. He watched me and Baker load the skiff and the truck with nine totes! We had over six hundred pounds when all was said and done."

"Wow."

"Yeah, well, that was it D.L. Owen saw us hauling alone out there that day before he come in and put two and two together. A week later when I went back, he joined the party. Week after that everybody was out there … That was the last time things got bad …"

When we got out there the can looked like any other stretch of ocean we'd hauled, lobster buoys in north-south lines. Jack put the *Hattie Marie* in idle and grabbed his oilers, leaned against the rail and put them on. It was exciting when the engine dropped to idle. It meant we were starting the haul after all the prep on land and sea.

"I stopped doing the wagon wheel because so many guys got here and started doing the same thing it was like a dartboard."

"Is that why they're all in a line like the rest of the strings?"

"Yeah, but you can see there's still too many guys here too close together. I took one of my diver friends out here years ago. He said the rock pile's small, something like fifty feet wide and twice that longways, running east-west. So most of the pots out here aren't fishing the pile anyway. That's the New Guy, right on top of Shustock he was talking about." Jack pointed to a yellow buoy and a red and white buoy just a few feet

apart. I looked down the line, probably a couple hundred feet away to the next two buoys, and they were similarly close. And so on as far as I could see. I think Jack's buoys were pink because they stood out better from a distance. It could just as well have been a fashion statement, though.

"Do they get tangled?"

"Yeah." Jack was back at the helm, putting on his gloves. I was already duded up, ready to go.

"Why did he set so close to Shustock?"

"Because he don't know what he's doing yet. Tide probably took his pots closer to Shustock than he thought when he set."

"So when Shustock hauls this string he's going to pull up the New Guy's traps, too?"

"Sometimes they manage to stay untangled, but he's right on top of him there."

"Is he new this year?"

"Who?"

"The New Guy?"

"He's been at it five-six years."

"Then why is he called the New Guy?"

"Oh, cuz that's what we called him when he started out. You gotta understand, D.L., some of us have been doing this twenty-thirty years. He's still the New Guy. He'll learn. One way or the other, he'll learn. He'll learn if he sets on top of Owen. Every year he paints his buoys a new color."

"Why?"

"Maybe he was a painter in another life."

"Shustock seems less than pleased."

"Yeah, well, he's always got a hair across his ass about something."

"What did you mean when you said that's the last time things got bad?"

"I'll tell you another time. We gotta set this gear."

"But why are we setting here, why does everyone set here if most of the pots in the strings aren't close to the rocks?"

"Because we all remember what it used to be like. You strike it rich it's hard to forget. This string fishes about average, all's said and done. Put it to you this way, D.L. You ever have a girlfriend who was really good in the sack?"

"I can think of one."

"Well, if you had a chance to get back in the sack with her again, even if it was years later and her tits were sagging and she wore too much makeup to hide her smile wrinkles, would you get back in the sack with her again?"

"I can't say I wouldn't."

"That's why we come back here."

Setting is easier than hauling. I'd position a baited trap on the rail, throw the buoy into the water as Jack steamed the boat along, heading north or south, depending on the current. I waited until the line paid out, then pushed the trap over the side. And so on for thirty traps. Jack told me the first day to watch you don't get your feet caught in the lines, but the hauler spools the lines somewhat neatly on the deck when the traps come up. He must have been referring to setting, but even if you were to get your foot caught

the weight of the trap and drag probably wouldn't be enough to haul you over with it. Regardless, Jack suggested I keep a knife on me when we worked, "in case of in case of."

After setting the can we steamed to another string. It took us about ten minutes to get to it. I'd been noticing all the buoys and tried to connect the colors with the boats and owners. They were everywhere.

"How do you know where our strings are?" The whole lot of gear—at that point around 400 traps—was spread out from Truro to the north to near Chatham to the south, a range of thirty miles, and from less than a mile from shore to three miles out.

"Oh, well, for example, the string we just set at the can you can tell because it's between the staircase and the tower," he said, pointing to shore and a barely visible staircase that led from a parking lot down the cliff to one of the Wellfleet public beaches, and just north of that to the water tower. "But I could find the gear in black fog if I needed to … it's all up here," he continued, his left hand pointing to his left temple, his right hand holding the throttle lever at three quarters because Jack takes it easy on his old diesel engine and, generally speaking, is in no rush, especially when he's offshore.

One pot broke the surface with a huge gray fish in it, fangs everywhere. It thrashed around so much that I couldn't get hold of the trap as it swung from the block. Jack stopped the hauler.

"What the hell is that?" I'd already seen a number of different fish come up in our traps—flounder, skate, hake, black sea bass, the small sculpin with its sharp head tines, the sea robin with its big mouth. For sculpin there was a dowel with a rusty nail pointing out the end that I'd use to stab the small fish in the belly and sling overboard because they're quick and the tines will puncture your glove and your skin. This gray

fish was much bigger than any of them, must have been 20 pounds; I couldn't understand how it fit in the trap. It looked mean.

"Wolf fish. Wolfie. We'll save it for Plum. Grab the trap and swing it on the rail." As I caught the bottom of the trap and yanked it toward me he pulled the line off the hauler disc. The trap fell at my feet. I jumped out of the way because it was like the whole trap was bouncing around with the mad fish inside.

"Grab that end," Jack said. "We'll get it on the rail and dump it on the deck. Don't try to pull that fish out—we'll just flip the trap over and dump it out. Watch your fingers."

I had a better look at the fish, saw inside its mouth when it launched at the side of the trap. It had rows of teeth and bashed around. I opened the trap door quickly and we flipped the trap over. It took several seconds but Wolfie eventually let go and fell to the deck, where it continued to bash around, bloodying itself for several minutes.

"People eat those things?"

"They're good in chowder. Plum loves em. He'll eat anything. His old man used to walk around town with a sack over his shoulder, with a jug of wine and road kill. Keep an eye on old Plummy when he cooks."

We finished hauling the string then hauled another before stopping for lunch. We weren't doing well. I was already getting the idea that a run of more than a few empty traps was not good, and that averaging under a pound per trap, which was about what we'd done for those first two strings, was not good at all.

We sat on top of the house. Lunch was a sandwich, chips and Coke from Ronnie's.

"You ever see that movie where the guy gets eaten by a lion?" Jack asked.

"I can't think of a movie with a man-eating lion. Why?"

"Oh, I don't know, D.L. … it was a good movie. It was like *Jaws* but with a lion in Africa or somewheres. Everywhere he goes there's a man-eating lion. Christ, I haven't been to the movies in twenty years …"

"Are you kidding?"

"What?"

"You haven't been to a movie in twenty years?"

"I don't know. I can't remember."

"We should see one."

"That's OK. You go ahead without me."

"It'll be fun. We'll go up to the drive-in in Wellfleet. Bring some beers …"

"Yeah, well, you having any success with them bananas?"

"No. I tried to force a dream last night but it didn't work. I'm not sure, though. I might have been dreaming. The phone woke me up."

"Who was it?"

"Batman."

"What'd he want?"

"I don't know, I didn't answer it. I don't really want to deal with him."

Jack was looking toward the cliffs. I scanned for flukes and shark fins.

"I had a dream last night …" he said.

"Yeah?"

"What happened was … all these lobsters came … thousands and thousands of em, D.L."

"Yeah?"

"They were everywhere, far's the eye could see. In the back yard by the bird feeder, by the bulkhead, next to the bird bath, all over the yard, crawling all around my rose bushes, all in the driveway, piled up in the bed of the truck … every square inch was crawling with them lobsters!"

"Jesus."

"Yeah, well, guess what? Guess what happens next?"

"They attack you?"

"No. I'm standing there in my underwears, looking out the window and I can't believe it. I just … can't … believe it, D.L. I run downstairs, don't even put anything on, and I go outside and as soon as I do them lobsters start scurrying across the yard and into the street!"

I looked at Jack, who looked back at me with his light blue eyes, vessels of the sun. I got the sense he wanted an analysis, he wanted my opinion on the dream and what it meant, just like he really *had* wanted my thoughts on heavenly oceans. His eyes had this effect where they made you want to jump in, like I frequently wanted to jump overboard and into the water.

"I'm telling you, they just started running away from me, into the street … so I started running after em, ya know. I'm trying to grab them but they're too fast for me and when I get to the street all them lobsters go scurrying down the storm drain."

"No!"

"Every last one of em. Gonzo! And I'm left standing there in the street in my fuckin' skivvies!"

"No!"

"I know it."

"Son of a bitch, Jack."

"I know it."

"Did they come back?"

"Nope, that was it. Right when they go down the drain is when I always wake up. And the funny thing is, that's right when I have to get up to go fishing anyway, no matter what the tide's doing."

"You've had this dream before??"

"I have it all the time! Only thing I ever dream about is them lobsters. And the bastards always get away! What does that tell you?" I laughed, but I didn't know what to say. I looked at the cliffs. Nothing.

5

I was beginning to wonder if the Mayor of East Orleans had sway with the local handicapped caucus because once again the spot was empty and once again he parked in it.

"How'd we do?" I asked Suzie.

"One twenty."

"Have you weighed any other guys today?"

"I've weighed lots of crustaceans caught by other guys." She smiled. I did, too, smiling being an important part of the local vernacular. Was this some sort of Happy Valley, was there on the outskirts of town a surly in a cage paying for the community's at large happiness?

"How'd they do?"

"That's privileged information, sailor."

"Do the other guys ask you who's catching what?"

"Sometimes."

"Do you tell them?"

"I'd only tell Jack, but he never asks."

"What if Jack asked me to ask you?"

"Did he?"

"No."

"I wouldn't tell you anyway."

"Why?"

"Because how do I know I can trust you?" Another smile. Radiant but not blissful or manic, gravitas behind the radiance like you sometimes see on successful investors or certainly on someone who wouldn't fall for the stock options sham, for example, someone for whom the approach of love must be treated with caution on account of its unknown qualities. In addition to the smile, I was dealing with other stimuli there by the scale, such as her aforementioned magnanimous and humming breasts, her big round eyes, round being a physical theme that included her cheeks, and exposed shoulders.

"Why do you trust Jack?"

"Look at him."

"Right."

"It's not like you didn't catch anything."

"I'm sensing he's not thrilled about the catch. I don't have any measure for what we should be catching."

"This is your first time lobstering?"

"Yes."

The market was abustle, as usual. I wouldn't have long to talk to Suzie near the scale. Her co-workers didn't want her talking to me because they needed her help and because every one of them wanted to get in her pants. I was starting to acquire an interest in getting in her pants, too. Widge's advice, in another phone call with that awful man,

was to get over Petra by getting back on the horse, any horse'll do—responsibility escapes when engaged in an epic battle of heartache, like you have a free pass to whore it up for the duration of the convalescence. But until Suzie flirted with me that day my thinking time regarding the opposite sex was spent on Petra.

"Are you getting the hang of it?" she asked.

"I think so. It's not that hard. Physical but not that hard. I suck at knots but it's not as hard as chemistry, for example. What are you doing here?"

"Summer job."

"You're in school."

"Just finished my second year."

"Where?" I wasn't 100% certain she was out of high school.

"Harvard."

"I have a friend who went to Harvard." Billy.

"When did he or she graduate?"

"He never graduated. He kind of got kicked out for grades."

"That's hard to do."

"He's kind of a fuck up, but I shouldn't be casting stones." I looked down at my T-shirt, smelly pants tucked into rubber boots. I knew I stunk on ice but that kind of smell was anesthetized in the market. Suzie probably stunk on ice, too. "Is that the saying? Don't cast stones at glass houses?"

"I think you mean people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones."

"Right. It kind of doesn't make double sense. For example, the grass *can* be greener on the other side of the street, often is. I believe in clichés, their gist, even if they

sometimes kind of don't make double sense like good tabloid headlines. I mangle song lyrics, too. What's your deal?"

"I spell words backwards in my head."

"For real?"

"Yes," she said.

"I do too!"

"Do you do it phonetically in reverse or make up your own sounds for the backwards version?"

"I alternate. Sometimes I take the easier of the two, like if I'm in a rush. Mostly because I'm lazy, though. I can't believe you spell words backwards in your head! Wicked."

One of the guys yelled Suzie's name from the front of the store.

"I gotta go."

"Right, sorry. See you tomorrow ... EE-zoose."

"That's how I'd do me, too. How do you do lobster?"

"I've been going with retsbawl, sort of phonetically."

"Me, too. I gotta go."

OK. I love you. "See you tomorrow."

6

I learned about soaks—the amount of time a string of hauled and re-baited traps sits in the water before being hauled again. Each day we went out we would drop a new string. Jack said we'd probably go out three or four days in a row and use the days onshore to keep prepping traps at the yard. We went out three days that third week of May, so I got to talk to Suzie three more times at the market:

"How'd we do?" I'd left Jack in front after we sorted the bugs and put them in their pools. He was fielding questions from the crowd.

"One twenty three."

"Can't retire on that."

"It's still pretty good. You're making a lot more than me."

"I'm not complaining. Maybe I am, actually. Bitching seems like part of the job."

"Jack doesn't seem like one to bitch."

"Everyone does it, like you're doing something wrong if there's nothing to bitch about. Owen Chase came up to us offshore today. He said, 'This keeps up we'll have to get jobs sucking farts out of the sheets at the laundromat.'" I tried to say it gruffly, like Owen.

"Gross. Owen's already been in. He wasn't lying. What does Jack bitch about?"

"His back, mostly. And he says things like, 'Every man's against us.'"

"Isn't that why he's got a strong man like you, to do the heavy liftin'?" I'd noticed the hint of southern accent the day I met her, but hadn't asked about it. Something of an anomaly to hear a sweet lilt in that environment.

"Whereabouts are you from, originally?"

"Georgia."

"What brought you here?"

"Me and my mom have been renting a cottage here every summer since I was in high school. My parents are divorced. When I got into Harvard we decided to stay here. My mom bought a house last year. It's down the street from Jack's. How about you?"

"I'm coming from New York. I'm from Massachusetts—we used to rent a cottage when I was a kid and my aunt and uncle have a place in Chatham, so I spent some time during summers on the Cape, usually a week or two. And I have two friends whose families have summer places in Orleans—but I'm coming from New York most recently."

"Why'd you leave?"

"I needed to find a new apartment, I had an awful job and was about to get fired. That and my girlfriend of four years dumped me."

"Ouch."

"Yeah."

"How did you end up here with Jack?" Suzie evidently understood the necessity of moving on in a conversation when something awkward came up.

"My friend from Harvard, his name is Billy, he knows Jack, his family does—they have a place on the Heights, he's one of those friends. He gave me Jack's number and I called when things were sort of falling apart in New York. It wasn't a traditional job interview. I'm living with him, too. I've never had a roommate twice my age. I just turned 30."

Jack appeared at the scale.

"There you are." He said it like we were at a cocktail party together and had been separated for a time.

"I was just getting the slip."

"How'd we do?"

Suzie gave him the evidence.

"Time for the laundromat?" I put my hand on his shoulder.

"Say a prayer for us, Suze."

"Aye, sir."

"Yeah, well, we gotta get going to the trap yard. D.L., you bring them tags from the driveway?"

"Aye, sir, they're in the truck."

"Good, let's go. See you tomorrow, Suzie."

He walked out—there was a cigar waiting in the truck that wasn't going to smoke itself. I looked at Suzie.

"Best boss I've ever had."

"I bet he's good to be around for you now."

"I bet he's good to be around any time."

They yelled for Suzie from the front.

"Are you guys going out tomorrow?"

"Yeah."

"See you then, L.D. I have to go steam some retsbawls for the maddening crowd."

In the trap yard Jack wanted to talk about Suzie's mom, Santine. He said he wasn't sure if she was divorced or not, had only talked to her twice. Said he'd met her at the market when he was sorting up front, a couple weeks before I came. She was there to buy swordfish. Suzie introduced them. The other time she was running by the house, Jack and Plum on the chairs in the yard. He'd waved, he said, and she'd waved but looked confused, so he'd yelled, "I'm Jack, we met at the market." And she'd said, "Oh, forgive me, I'm just a little out of breath." Then Jack said he said, and this is sort of vintage Jack, he said, "You running?" I pictured her stopped in the road in shorts, a T-shirt and sneakers, standing at the head of his driveway when she said, what else could she say, "Yes." And Jack said, "Oh, don't let me interrupt you then." And she said, "No bother." "Nice to see you." "Nice to see you, too," and she'd ran off.

Jack was stuck on Santine's marital status in the trap yard. A hammer hung from the loop of my construction pants. I felt special the way I did when my father gave me a plastic kid's razor and taught me how to shave when I was eight.

"Don't you think it's funny she and Suzie are here alone without the husband if they're not divorced?"

"They're divorced."

"How do you know?"

"She told me at the market. We're going out tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah, we gotta set this load in the ten fathom, up Truro way, fishes good this time of year. Be nice to these traps."

"And we're going out day after tomorrow, too?" I was forgetting the days of the week because they didn't matter. Only the weather did, and the weather continued to be sublime.

"Yeah. Same as today, we'll come here after the market and get another load ready. We still have to get these traps in the water." He pointed to the large stack of traps. "We'll probably be moving gear in for another few weeks before we get it all in. Usually have them all in middle of June."

"Sounds good to me. I could go out every day."

"I know it. It's like spring training this time of year. Yeah, well, guess what? See where you stand in December. What was you talking to Suzie about?"

"Just shooting the bull. She's nice."

"Knockout's what she is."

"That too."

"Wait til you see momma."

"Can you show me the buoy knot again?"

"OK. … Listen. Best way to do this is I have to show you over the shoulder. Grab a buoy and some warp there." I did and from behind he put his arms over my shoulders and tied the knot. "Now you try it." As I made the tie he guided my hands.

"That's it, you got the hang of it." We may as well have been thus positioned, Jack guiding me through how to swing a Wiffle ball bat when I was a kid.

Next day a flounder came up in of our traps. "Don't I like a nice flounder for supper, D.L." I put it in an empty tote under the wheelhouse, out of the sun, as instructed. During lunch he told me to forget about bananas and eat more lettuce. I didn't ask why. The cliffs mocked me in their stillness.

Suzie was up front when we got to the market and sorted. Santine was in line.

"Santine," Jack said.

"Hi Jack." Smile.

"Hi." Smile.

"How are you?"

"We're just counting the profits. This is my first mate, D.L."

"Nice to meet you." She extended her hand over the fish case.

"Nice to meet you, too."

"You have your run today?" Jack asked.

"I went this morning as a matter of fact."

"I used to run in the morning," Jack said. There were people moving all around us. Suzie was cutting a blue fish behind me and Jack as we talked to her mother. "I can't anymore because of my back."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't worry, I know how it goes. It'll work itself out in a month or so. We're just getting started for real."

Suzie returned to the case and handed the wrapped filets to the customer, rang it up, then turned to her mother.

"What do you want?" she said to Santine in that smart-assed, even footing way a son or daughter can talk to a parent when they reach a certain age if it's a healthy relationship in that the parent and sibling like each other enough for mild ball breaking.

"That's no way to talk to a customer."

I looked at Jack, who looked at me and grinned. He liked them, he liked them both.

"I'm busy, ma'am. If you don't have a request I'm going to have to see another customer," Suzie said.

"Are you sassin' me?" Santine was also some to look at, which shed some light on Jack's trap yard inquiries.

He looked at Suzie: "You better get your mother what she wants."

As Suzie got her mother's swordfish Jack went around the case, toward the beer cooler. I went back to the scale. I stood on it and tried to guess how much my clothes and boots weighed. Probably a total of five pounds. That made me 173, five pounds less than the weight I'd been since age 18. I was already getting muscles but losing weight. I felt good and strong, the soreness starting to give way, muscles released from cubicle atrophy. My fingers were thickening. Suzie came back and found me on the scale.

"What's the damage?" she asked.

"One seventy three when you subtract the boots and clothes, I figure. That would be a decent catch."

She handed me the slip: 142.

"Better," I said.

"Things are already looking up."

"Your mom seems like a hot shit."

"She is."

"I sensed a little spark between them."

"Between who?"

"Jack and your mom."

"Eeeewwwww!" She slapped my shoulder with the back of her hand.

Jack appeared at the scale and handed me a beer.

"OK you two, back to work. Suzie, we'll see you tomorrow. I asked your mother to come over for a nice lobster supper with me and you and D.L. but she said you guys have plans."

"Our friends are coming over tonight, that's why she got the swordfish."

"How about tomorrow night?" I asked.

"Sounds good to me," she said.

Jack said, "You tell us tomorrow. We'll save some lobsters from the catch and have a nice lobster supper."

Next day serenaded by two humpbacks for almost all of one string. Also spotted: a large, oblong sun fish with the deceiver dorsal fin—"Shark!" I'd yelled to Jack when I saw the floppy fin. At the market Suzie and I weighed while Jack talked to a clammer outside.

"Are you coming over tonight?"

"Yeah."

"Sweet. Your mom like lobsters?"

"We both do."

"Great."

"What time should we come over?"

"Jack, what time should they come by?" He was on the other side of the screen door with the clammer, who was waiting to settle up with his soft shells.

"You coming over for supper?" He talked through the screen.

"Yes, sir."

"Your mom coming over?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Come by seven o'clock sharp. D.L., grab four deuces. Suzie, darling, please take eight pounds off the selects total. We'll see you at seven." We were out the door not ten minutes later with our cans of beer, off for the yard to hustle a load so we could be back at the house for six, giving us time to clean up for our double date. The slip was a lowly 115. Maybe the warmer-than-normal water was affecting our catch.

7

Plum and Baker, Jack's ex-mate, were in the TV room when we got home. They were watching the weather. Rather, they were listening to the updated NOAA audio loop that played on the local cable access channel. Plum was actually looking out the window, hand cupped to his ear, which he pointed toward the TV. Baker was on the couch, his arms folded. He was looking at his feet. They both had serious expressions.

The NOAA loop they were listening to was the same robot voice we listened to on the boat's radio and that Jack fell asleep to every night: THIS IS THE LOCAL MARINE REPORT FOR COASTAL WATERS FROM THE MERRIMACK RIVER TO WATCH HILL RHODE ISLAND OUT TO 25 NAUTICAL MILES: A WAVE OF LOW PRESSURE WILL PASS SOUTHEAST OF THE WATERS LATE THURSDAY. HIGH PRESSURE WILL BUILD FROM THE WEST FRIDAY, WEST WINDS 10 TO 15 KNOTS ... BECOMING SOUTHWEST 15 TO 20 KNOTS IN THE LATE MORNING AND AFTERNOON. SEAS 1 TO 3 FEET.

I wondered what that robot voice would sound like with a less technical script: A WAVE OF LOW PRESSURE WILL PASS SOUTHEAST OF THE WATERS LATE THURSDAY. A HIGH PRESSURE SYSTEM IS RIGHT BEHIND IT, MEANING CONTINUED CALM SEAS FOR THE HATTIE MARIE, WHOSE SKIPPER HAS A BAD BACK AND WHOSE FIRST MATE IS ENJOYING HIS EXPERIENCE

IMMENSELY AND WHO REALLY SHOULD CALL HIS PARENTS WHO ARE PAUSING AS HE THINKS, BUT THAT'S OK BECAUSE HE CAN CHANT TALES ABOUT OCEANS ON HEAVEN AND CLIPPED CONVERSATION AND DAD REMEMBER WHEN YOU SHOWED ME HOW TO SWING A WIFFLE BALL BAT? SEAS 1 TO 3 FEET.

Jack told Plum and Baker our plans, snapping them out of their weather trance in the TV room.

"Perfect," Plum said, "I have a blue fish in the truck."

"And I have a bag of clams," Baker said.

If Jack was less than pleased about their presence and enthusiasm in inviting themselves to stay for dinner he immediately didn't show it. He was at the helm, though, and instructed them to start cooking.

"Me and D.L. gotta freshen up with a couple nice showers."

"I'm honored you'd freshen up for me," Plum said.

"Me too," said Baker.

"Not you two fuckin' pilgrims. The women coming over who are better to look at and have more interesting conversations to say," Jack said, shaking his head as he walked out of the kitchen.

Plum had removed one side of the blue fish by the time I was done with my shower. He asked me if I knew how to filet fish. I said not really. I'll show you. Most important thing you need is a sharp knife. He showed me where to start. From the initial cut aft of the gills it seemed easy—pull back the flesh with one hand and slice under with

the other—but I left a lot of meat on the fish because I didn't cut close enough to the bones.

"That's OK, you'll get the hang of it. I wanted to teach you before Jack infected you with his primitive method. Also, mind your trophy. If you're not looking, he'll put it back in the oven. Most people overcook fish. Should be fork tender. A toothpick works fine. You'd think Jack would know better. Wait til you see his get up when he comes down here. Some humor."

Plum was accoutered in a striped button down shirt open practically to the navel. It was a business dress shirt. The orange bifocals were on his head. I complimented him on the shirt. He said he got it and many of his clothes from the town dump's gift shop. Orleans is a monied town in the summer and when the summer residents leave after Labor Day or Columbus Day weekend they often empty their beach homes of appliances that work just fine, of beach books, furniture and clothes. This stuff goes in a one-room building with a shingled roof away from the garbage and recycling. Plum said he's fine with it if the summer people see the gift shop as giving back to the community.

Baker did not get his clothes at the dump: "I'm not a fuckin' charity case."

"You used to work for Jack?" I asked him.

"Yeah," he said over his shoulder. He was rinsing his clams in the sink.

"He told me about the can."

"You been out there yet?"

"We set it, haven't hauled it yet."

"Me and the old man hit it big out there first time."

"I heard. What happened when everyone started setting there? Jack said it got bad."

"Cloak and dagger bullshit. Plummy saw it." Plum was putting his blue fish filets on a baking dish. "Tell him what happened."

"It was a territorial problem, D.L."

"Like most of the fuckin' problems we have here," Baker said over his shoulder.

"This wasn't about buying up native land or disposable income, though. This was a tragedy of the commons. Shustock and Owen got tangled up, see. Shustock said he was there first. Owen, he felt otherwise and told Shustock to move his gear, which Shustock refused to do. Then Shustock, he tells Norton at the bar room one night that he cut one of Owen's traps, and Norton, he relays this information to Owen and when Owen went back out to the can and was missing a trap, knife in one of his buoys, well, his disposition—which has never been too fuckin' sunny to begin with—was compromised."

"What happened?" I grabbed six plates from the cupboard to start setting the table, but I stood there with them in the kitchen as Plum continued.

"I had just finished digging on the flat and was rowing to the landing. I dig, too, D.L., for supper, got a family permit. My back is too far gone for commercial like Baker here. Long story short, I'd seen Shustock come in. He was loading his truck. Owen, who come in just after him, he took his skiff over to Shustock. I couldn't hear the conversation so well, but Owen had Shustock down in the water after the knockout punch. He took a tote of lobsters from Shustock's skiff and emptied it on him in the water there. Shustock was laid up a few days, headaches I imagine."

Jack entered the kitchen in white chinos, white bucks, a yellow shirt with the collar splayed over the lapels of a pink sports coat with gold buttons. He wore it as naturally as Plum wore his stock broker's button down from the gift shop.

"You forgot your bonnet," Plum said upon Jack's grand entrance, in which the skipper appeared in the threshold of the kitchen, surveyed the scene, then slowly swung his right arm to his mouth, where he stuck his cigar and took a kind of victory puff.

"You'll see," he said, blowing a storm of smoke toward the ceiling. He rubbed his back against the corner of the door frame like a cat might work its chin on a chair leg. "You make fun of me all you want, boys, you'll see. Ohhhh, doesn't that feel good."

Jack's grand entrance ended the territorial dispute. I considered asking Plum to continue but Jack was all puffed up, working the kinks out and ready to entertain.

Santine was almost as colorful at seven sharp. Orange capri pants, a white blouse and a gold cross hanging from her neck. Suze wore jeans, sandals and a blue T-shirt, unrolled sleeves. I had jeans and my one clean T-shirt, no shoes.

The ladies brought a bottle of chardonnay. Jack had a substantial martini. Plum had what he called 'coffee'—blended whiskey and ginger ale in a rocks glass. Baker and I swilled beers. Before we started, Santine asked if anyone wanted to say grace. Jack stepped up:

"Lord, I just want to … thank you … for having this nice bounty from the sea here before us … with our friends here in my house … and if you would be so kind as to look after me and D.L. on the high seas and direct all the lobsters to our pots, we would appreciate it. Thank you, Lord. Amen." Amens all around.

The spread was abundant. We started with salad and some of Baker's steamers and drawn butter. Me, Suze, Santine and Jack had lobsters. Baker and Plum ate the blue fish. There were green beans and corn on the cob.

"I don't like lobster anyways," Baker said, "used to feed them bugs to indentured servants."

"When I was a kid they'd wash up after big storms," Plum said. "My father and I would row to the beach and fill his sack for supper."

"Anyways," Jack said with a mouthful of food, "these lovely ladies didn't come here to talk about lobsters and ancient history. Santine, you believe in ghosts?"

"I'm not sure, Jack."

"Suzie?"

"No."

"Baker?"

"Do I believe in em? I *have* ghosts."

"D.L.?"

"No."

"Plummy boy, what do you believe in?"

"I believe in all kinds of things." Plum's orange bifocals were off his head, resting against his chest. The broker's shirt looked like it preferred its new life.

"You believe in ghosts or not?"

"Well, yes, I do." He chuckled. He'd efforted a part in his hair, of which there was still plenty. Perhaps he snuck a mirror session in his downstairs bathroom before the ladies came over. "Do *you* believe in ghosts?"

"I don't know yet."

Plum shook his head and smiled at me. I looked at Suzie, who was smiling. Santine looked like she was on the outside of an in joke.

"Some humor."

"Why you believe in them? —Suzie, darling, can you pass me the butter?"

"Well, I had an experience."

"What do you mean you had an experience? —This lobster is delicious!"

"You want to hear it?" Plum surveyed the table with his glassy eyes.

"I want to hear it," I said.

"OK, D.L., I'll tell it, but I don't want to bore our guests."

"I want to hear it, too, Henry," Santine said.

"Then by God I'll tell it." Plum looked at Jack with the some humor face, paused, had a sip of coffee and said, "I was in the yard, years ago—I used to have a lobster boat, too," he looked at Santine and Suzie, "and I was working on traps. It was a beautiful day, June, some day, bright sunshine and all. First real warmth of the year. I was in the yard there and I felt something … it's difficult to describe, but it was as if something was pulling me gently from behind. It was like there was a thread attached to my back and something was pulling on it. So I turned around and there was my uncle."

"What was he doing?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing."

"Did he say anything?" Suze.

"No. He just stood there looking at me. He'd died a year earlier. It was some sad for me. He was like a father. It was him, sure enough. He didn't say anything or do anything, but I had a feeling … that everything would be OK and all."

"What was his expression?"

"It's hard to describe, D.L. He didn't look particularly happy or particularly sad. Reassuring is what it was, one way or another. Some reassuring."

"Did you try to talk to him?" Santine.

"No. I never experienced a scene like that, but I thought it would have been inappropriate and all."

"How long did it last? How long was he there?" Suze.

"I don't know. It could have been ten seconds or two minutes. I can't say. Before that, I never believed in ghosts. I always thought people were half cocked who did."

"It sounds like what people who have had a near death experience say about death," Suze said. "After the near death experience they don't necessarily look forward to death but they're not afraid of it anymore."

"I never considered that. That's interesting, Suzie. I wasn't close to death, though. It was a glorious day. I was out working in the yard. Working on the gear, excited about the season ahead."

"That's beautiful, Henry." Santine. The gold cross hanging from a gold chain lay at the nexus of her low-buttoned shirt, almost as low as the elder statesmen at the table.

Two tapers in the center of the table got halfway down. Santine loved that nobody locks their doors. *It just feels like a time warp*. Jack said he hasn't seen the keys to his house since the day he bought it thirty odd years ago. Plum asked Suzie if she liked working at the market. She said she liked cutting fish. Jack said you should come out with me and D.L. when you have a day off. The table in the dim light was a still life after the hunt. I looked at a group of pictures on the wall.

"Is that you in that picture, Jack?" He had a moustache and was probably twenty years younger. He was sitting in his skiff, a winter vest over a long-sleeve shirt, a black bird perched on the rail.

"Yeah, that's me."

"And his crow." Baker.

"You had a crow?" Suze.

"Years ago."

"Do you like birds, Jack?" Santine.

"Yes."

"Suzie and I went to the Audubon a couple weeks ago."

"I know it. The Audubon. Plummy takes some of those bird watchers to the backside on the *Queen of Orleans*. Isn't that right, Plummy?"

"Once a week in the summer. They come as a group, generally, about ten. I take them through the inlet. They want to see the plover nests. Nice people."

"Fuckin' plovers." Baker, hammered. On his right forearm a tattoo of a mermaid that was trying to swim away. "They close the beach for those fuckin' nests." He hadn't said anything since the comment about lobsters and indentured servants.

"We're trying to have a nice dinner conversation, Baker. Try to be civil." Plum.

"I gotta go anyway." He stood up. "Santine," he stuck his arm and hand out across the table and Santine shook it. He did same to Suzie then he turned and walked away.

"You'll have to forgive Baker," Plum said. "He's a native like me. Some of us weren't instructed in manners."

"Have they always closed the beach to cars for the plover nests?" Suzie.

"No. This is new. I'd say in the last ten years, Jack?"

"Something like that."

"I like the birds and all, but they're just as much a part of the process as the rest of us," Plum said.

"But cars aren't a part of the natural habitat of the beach, no?" Suzie.

"No vehicles on the beach now, no people on the beach next—that's what Baker's worried about. I've been combing that beach my whole life. He has, too. I can't recall ever stepping on a nest of eggs. They say I wouldn't notice if I did. But 'they' are people who haven't spent their whole lives walking along it. I'd notice. The area they've restricted is the high point in the middle of the beach, where the plovers like to nest up in the beach grass. I take my skiff to the inlet side, anchor up, walk over to the ocean side with my fish pole, like I did this afternoon when I caught the blue fish. Just because I'm walking over to fish off the beach—I'm not collecting sea shells and all—doesn't mean I don't notice what I see on the walk to my destination. Baker has a native understanding of what's in his path. He understands the territory. He doesn't want people taking it away from him." Plum looked tired. "I don't mean to bore you."

"Don't be silly, Henry, you're not boring us."

"Thanks, Santine, but I should get going, too." He stood up slowly, hunched. "Are you going out tomorrow?" He looked at me. I looked at Jack.

"No, let them soak up a few days," Jack said. "Tomorrow we have to go to Chatham for fuel. We'll stop by the fish supply store so my mate here can get his own gear for the long season ahead. Then the trap yard."

"Well, it was a pleasure to meet you both, Santine and Suzie. I hope we can have more dinners like this. I don't have much close interaction with women. Somewhere there's a piece of paper that says I'm married. But we live in different quarters, see. I haven't sat down for a meal with her in years."

"It was so nice to meet you, too, Henry. Can I walk you out?" Santine recognized that Plum looked tired and he walked with an odd, labored gait anyway.

"No thanks, I can manage."

"We should be going, too," Suzie said. "We'll walk you out. C'mon mom." S and S got up.

"It's no problem—"

"Don't be silly, Henry." Santine grabbed Plum's forearm. "Thank you so much, Jack, for a wonderful evening. Next time we'll all have dinner at our house. I'll fix us a nice barbecue."

"OK, Santine. Thanks for coming."

"I'm sure we'll see you around, D.L." Santine.

"Thanks for coming."

"See you boys at the scale." Suze.

They walked out. I stayed with Jack. The dinner party had broken up quickly and I didn't want to leave the skipper alone. I wanted for everyone to go but me and Suze. I wanted to talk to her in the dim light.

"Cheers, skip." I raised my glass.

"For what?" Hesitant clink.

"A nice meal with friends."

"That's all I want. Get laid every now and then and have a nice meal."

"Santine might could have a thing for you."

Jack leaned back in his chair the way your third grade teacher told you not to, clasped his hands behind his head.

"Yeah, well, we'll see. They're not hard to look at." Jack had a bit of the Plum glassy eyes.

"Not hard to have a conversation with either."

"You ever been down South?"

"Just passing through when I drove across the country. You?"

"I been to Florida a few times. Florida and Vietnam, over to Rhode Island now and again. Used to go deer hunting up New Hampshire way."

"You were in Vietnam?"

"Merchant marines."

"What was that like?"

"Smoked a lot of menthol cigarettes. How come they talk like that down south? Is it the weather?"

"Maybe."

"All that sun down there make them so happy and polite?"

"I reckon it's not such a bad thing. How do you feel about the plovers?"

"I got other things to worry about than them fuckin' plovers."

"How are we doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"How are we doing fishing? How's the catch?"

"Slow. Last year I got out early and killed em. Only me and Owen out there to start May. Had the place to ourselves, big year because of that fast start. I thought we'd be doing better now. It's OK. We're doing better than if we didn't have any gear in. They'll come around."

"How are we doing, you and me, working together and living together?"

"OK."

"I feel like I know what I'm doing on the boat, except some of the knots."

"Yeah, well, there's plenty you don't know."

"I'll wash the dishes. Thanks, Jack, for everything. I'm having a time here with you."

"Sleep in, boy, we'll go to Chatham at nine."

The moon was three quarters. It had risen to its crest in the sky and was starting to drop back down. We'd have more and more water at the landing as the moon reached full, which didn't impede us in any way, it just made the small stretch of beach at the landing smaller. High course tides tapped into my fascination with the ocean. At its height, the shoreline made the beach at the landing just a truck's length wide, so if I

stepped out the passenger door as we drove off the small beach I'd be stepping in water. I understood the physics of the monthly gravitational pull but the water running up high like that had me stretching the reality of the pull and what it could do. I wanted the highest of the monthly high course tides to cover the landing and keep going, right up the street, up to the height of the Heights then down toward town, passing by Jack's as a river on its way, so we could sit on the chairs outside, drink our martinis and beer, skim wampum shards across the water, and try to catch the bugs before they went down the drain.

Out of garage beer, I decided to go to the Elbow and watch the end of the game. Jack's stool was vacant. As I got closer I recognized Shustock as the owner of the stool next to Jack's.

Shustock never approached us on the water, though a lot of his gear was near ours. He hadn't returned my waves in passing (I waved to everybody on the water) even if we were cruising close by him in the morning or returning in the evening, so I stopped waving to him. I never saw him in a conference with another boat on the water.

"Hey," I said. He slightly tipped his bottle of Budweiser, which seemed to be glued to his club hand.

We sat there watching the game. The Red Sox had given up three runs in the seventh and were down two heading into the home half of the inning. It was time for the seventh inning stretch, so I did, arching my back and spreading my arms wide, my left arm behind Shustock's head. As they went to commercial, he said to the TV: "Bums can't hold a lead."

"They seem to be doing alright for themselves these days," I said, bringing my arms in and resting my elbows on the bar, my right hand clutching my beer like Shustock.

"Yeah, well, they was just up two now they're down two—"

"—They were up one. They just gave up three. Now they're down two."

"That's what I said," Shustock turned to me. It was the first time he'd looked at me since the day I saw him at the landing when I showed up. I couldn't see his eyes then because they were covered by his mirrored sunglasses. When he turned to me at the bar I saw for the first time the dark beads.

"Whatever you said, the Sox are down two with three innings to go. Plenty of time. They'll pull it out."

"You're a dreamer just like your boss the Polack."

"I wish I was a dreamer. How many totes you have today?"

He looked at me again. *Dark eyes, like a doll's eyes*. "You got something you want to say to me?"

"No," I said, trying hopelessly to return Shustock's *mal occhio*. "I'll leave the talking to you."

The game came back on and he turned his head to it. Nobody heard our exchange because it was Friday night and loud. My heart was pounding. We sat there watching in silence, as if none of the words and looks that passed between us during the commercial break actually had. I wondered if the exchange simply vanished into the ether of the bar room, collected into a pine-soaked history of such encounters, safely out of the moment but always there.

We sat silently until the end of the game, each drinking two more beers. The Red Sox scored three in the ninth with two outs. The place went momentarily crazy. Shustock got up from his stool, swigged the last of his beer, laid down his money and while there was still a considerable amount of noise and distraction from the dreamers of successful seasons, turned to me and said:

"You were right: they were only up one when they blew the lead."

I didn't know what to make of the encounter, of Shustock. Earlier that day on the haul the *Bug Catcher* sidled up to us offshore. Owen worked alone, as did probably half the lobstermen on the Outer Cape. He was griping about his catch, said "Maybe we're getting some help." Jack didn't reply, and the suggestion hung in the exhaust. I gathered that getting a little help means hauling another lobsterman's traps. I was pretty sure hauling traps other than your own is a crime far worse than cutting someone's line or firing a salvo over the bow—a knife in a buoy.

When I got into bed I looked at my phone. Billy'd called again. He and Widge and others would be coming to East Orleans in a week for the semi-annual throw down at Widge's family's cottage. I wanted nothing to do with them, consumed as I was with a new consideration of ghosts, and cloak and dagger bullshit.

8

The slips took a modest swing to the upside. I bought one of the two trucks in Baker's yard for $500. He threw in a bag of little necks. It was an '86 Chevy C-10 that took a while to right itself after a turn but it ran OK and it had four-wheel drive, so I could take it to the landing. I told Jack that it would be helpful to have two trucks, that we could take two truckloads of prepped traps from the yard or the driveway to the landing. Really I wanted it to be able to wave at other lobstermen like a blackjack player, and to leave the keys in it.

Suzie and I went to the used bookstore in Wellfleet on her day off (Jack said he'd work on a load of traps we'd moved from the trap yard to his driveway, "You go up Wellfleet and have a nice time with Suzie, we're not going out anyway"). We jogged up there in my truck. The owner of the bookstore said, "I'm 92 and I still have my shoe." Suzie bought Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and several *LIFE* magazines from the 50s. I found a copy of *Billy Budd*. We had the famous oysters after, steamed, and beer at a raw bar on Wellfleet's harbor. She asked me what I was going to do end of the season.

"I have in mind some traveling if I make enough. I've been thinking about going to graduate school."

"For what?"

"I have a friend getting a PhD in geology. The possibilities are endless. Maybe meteorology? I love the weather, especially now. What's your major?"

"Theology or biology. I have to declare in the fall. What was yours?"

"History."

"What did you do after college?"

"I don't remember. A lot of it has to do with certain dependencies."

"You guys drink a lot."

"Yes. And that's only what you see at the market and supper. It's much less than I used to drink, though. At night lately I've been listening to the CD player in the truck, drinking beers and throwing the empties into the bed."

"Tough to get over the frat dependencies?"

"Listen, missy, say what you want about me, and there are many things you can say, but don't call me a frat boy. I had a shred of self worth."

"Sorry."

"Here it is: I got a job at an advertising agency, didn't like it—I can't promote myself, much less others, but I pulled it off. It was nice to make a pay check, health insurance. Great, actually. Years passed. I quit that job because I was afraid I was going to settle down. I moved to New York, thought I'd seize on the Web stuff—they'll hire anybody—and do my time in the city. The city was all highs and lows; I think I'm particularly subject to the lows."

"Now you're here."

"Yes."

"Is it helping?"

"Helping me deal with the break up? Yes. Better than if I was still there. I find myself gazing when we're offshore. I'd gaze anyway, but there's more to see here. It's no wonder there are so many painters on the Cape. Some beautiful. Austere."

"Why did you break up?"

"Petra recognized that my prospects were slim. I'm not a go-getter. I took too long to figure out what to do with my life, which still hasn't happened, as you can see. I don't blame her. Most people my age have submitted to the idea that you work, bill your hours or whatever it is, move up, and so on. Most people my age have settled up with the notion that life's a shit sandwich. May as well take a big bite. That's what my uncle said to me when I graduated from college. I guess I'm still holding out for a better alternative. Maybe I'm delusional, or think too highly of myself, like for me it's going to be better than that. The thing is, you still have to make something happen if that's your shandy. For example, there's no shortage of people who have written screenplays. It's common. But see there I betray my snobbery—that's what it is, snobbery—because at least they're trying. I like plays. I started one in a sketch book but lost it somehow in the move to New York."

"You are sort of sketchy." She slurped the last oyster.

"I don't know, Suze."

"I don't either. Isn't there freedom in that alone?"

"You're being nice to an old fart."

"No I'm not."

"Fine. I'm captive to this brand of freedom. I wish it was otherwise. Smarter people take their bites. Go to work. They have health insurance and cars that don't

complain. Nice cheeses. They're less captive because they've come to grips with it. I'm in this terrible middle ground of not wanting to come to grips, that there's more to life, and at the same time being jealous of the people taking their bites because I'm not sure I could do it even if I set my mind to. I'm not sure I could actually do it, like I'm not smart enough. Street smarts and organizational skills. I think I have them in a survival mode, scrapper kind of way, not in a prosperous way. If I chose to be more manipulative I don't think I could be. So I'm scrapping along. I worry a lot. This goes some way in explaining the drinking."

"It doesn't seem like someone who leaves a job at the age of 30 to work on a lobster boat is full of worry."

"On the face, maybe, but if another ten years pass and I'm still scrapping then it'll be time to write myself off, buy a card table with wheels and eat my supper alone in front of *Wheel of Fortune*."

"That's the most depressing thing I've ever heard."

"Sorry. I'm in a state."

"About the break up."

"Yes and no. I'd be feeling this way anyway. It's just magnified now. I don't think Petra ever understood that she couldn't fix whatever ails me."

"Maybe she didn't think much needed fixing."

"Maybe."

"Do you feel sorry for yourself?"

"I beat myself up. I guess I'd rather beat myself up than get beaten up out there. That's the plight of my generation. It's meant to be safer but it's just as painful, as far as I know. Wanna get another pitcher?"

"Sure. Do you know astrology?"

"I've never understood that stuff."

"I can't defend it just like you can't defend yacht rock." (I'd played Christopher Cross on the drive up to Wellfleet. It was in the CD player when I bought the truck. The secret life of Baker.)

"I don't have to defend 'Sailing.' It doesn't pretend to be anything more than something nice to listen to."

"Have you ever heard of Saturn returns?"

"No."

"Every 29 years, so let's round up to 30, Saturn orbits the sun. The theory is that when you get to be your age, big things start happening when Saturn returns."

"Such as?"

"It tends to be the time in life when people get married, have kids, or take on a new career path. Maybe leave a corporate job and get a job on a lobster boat … "

"Phooey."

"Maybe. But it's easier, it's more fun than the real stuff, or the supposed real stuff. Like, I find sanctity in it more than science or religion."

"Are you Christian?"

"It's hard not be where I'm from."

"Do you go to church?"

"Me and Santine go together."

"Why?"

"I like church. I like the feeling. But I don't believe religiously in the Word. Do you believe in God?"

"Not the Old Testament dude. What an asshole. I don't mean to be crass but … well, I guess I do mean to be crass: can you imagine if the world was punished for butt sex? Jack has this thing: he says 'in case of in case of.' Ya know, something unforeseen might happen, so make sure you have a knife on you. To cut a line wrapped around your boot or whatever. Imagine if the 'in case of in case of' was the biblical flood and we lucked out because we were on the ark, the *Hattie Marie*, while the bad sodomites who saw fit to satisfy pleasure were under water in the suburbs, lobsters reefing up in Applebee's and nibbling on their toes? It would be me and Jack and Shustock floating around with knives."

"The end of man."

"That's not what I mean."

"What do you mean?"

"My parents were raised Catholic. I was baptized. When it came time for confirmation, what's that, 12?"

"I think so."

"They gave me the choice."

"If you wanted to get confirmed or not?"

"Yes. It was my mother. They decided together that my brother and I should be given the choice, but it was my mother who told me. She had already given me the birds

and the bees. There's a famous cartoon book. She read it to me when I was eight. Everything you need to know. After that, during recess I was like, dude, you don't know what the fuck you're talking about. To a ring leader. Cooties and all that for holding hands. He was spinning nonsense and they were buying it. Later it was if you kiss something happens, which it does, don't get me wrong, I love to kiss, but you know what I mean."

"I think so."

"So I'd experienced ignorance at a pretty young age. When they gave me the choice to get confirmed or not, I was like, well, what does it mean? And my mother said essentially it means you can't get married in a Catholic church if you don't do it. Marriage was a long way away, and I was always freaked out about church in the first place. The few times we went—we used to go on Easter but that lessened with time—it was really kind of terrifying, though not as terrifying as *The Elephant Man*, which I had nightmares about for at least a year, couldn't sleep—my parents were either too cheap for a baby sitter or too naively open-minded to think that they could take a nine-year-old to see a movie like that and I wouldn't be affected."

"I've never seen it."

"Don't. Or do. I can't say. It was so traumatizing. The things they did to him. That savagery's never left me. I digress—"

"You do that."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Please continue."

"So I wanted nothing to do with confirmation and given the choice I opted out."

"You're a heathen."

"Yes."

"I appreciate your conviction."

"It sounds like you're kind of a heathen, too."

"Not really."

"You said you go to church and like the feeling?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"It's an anchor. A mooring, if you will."

"And God created this beautiful place, the cliffs, the inlet?"

"Maybe you're wrong."

"Maybe. I think I'm just searching for a closer proximity to right. The transcendentalists were vague about divinity in nature. Whitman's sea poems take a stab but they end up falling short. Your boy Kant tried to figure it all out but he's unreadable. Another problem with the transcendentalists, and this is not their fault, but they sort of spawned hippies. My guy is Epicurus. Have you ever read him?"

"No."

"Why did you buy those old *LIFE* magazines?"

"For collages."

"Can you explain that to me?"

"Collages?"

"Yes. Why so many young people, young women especially, are into making collages."

"It's just expression. It's perfectly mimetic for our times."

"Fragmented, distorted reality and all?"

"Something like that."

"Want to go back to the book store?"

"Yes. Let's talk to the old man in the shoe."

"Good idea. Most of the older cats around here seem to be the ones with the answers."

9

Chatter on the boat's radio. You can go for hours sans talk. Then a voice from the radio. Often logistics like, HATTIE MARIE, BUG CATCHER—. *BUG CATCHER, HATTIE MARIE: GO AHEAD OWEN*—. YOU GET OVER THE BAR OK?— *NO PROBLEM; YOU GOT ANOTHER HALF HOUR*.— THANKS JACK, OVER. Anyone can hear it if they're on 16, so there's no talk of the catch unless it's to gripe.

The unseasonably warm weather continued. We had a day in the low 80s, full sun, water temperature on the bar 66. After hauling, on the way in, Jack stopped at the mouth of the cut because the birds were diving. "Go down below and grab them poles." They were rigged for blue fish, with steel leaders. We caught four in minutes. Nothing to it when they frenzy like that. Just cast in the boiling water and you'll get one. We could have filled the boat. Jack had in mind a barbecue. Eight big filets would cover whoever came by. Plum and Baker for sure, maybe Santine and Suzie. Jack said you should always bleed blue fish. Stick a knife in the gills. It kills them quick but also the meat tastes better. There was a filet knife down below. He cut the fish on the rail, threw the carcasses in the bait box—"give our dinner guests in the 10 fathom some nice whore d'oeuvres"—and put the filets in a plastic bag from the super market. He said it was OK if I took a dip before we went in (I'd asked earlier). I took off my gear, T-shirt, socks, and jumped over the side in a pair of trunks that were down below. When I surfaced I

heard the radio. Jack was washing blood off the rail with the outwash hose. THAT YOUR MATE GONE OVERBOARD, JACK?— *YEAH, NELSON*—(Nelson must have been the boat coming in behind us)—*I TOLD HIM HIS PAYCHECK FOR THE WEEK AND HE JUMPED SHIP!*

I dove back under. We were in about eight feet. I dove to the bottom, blew the rest of my air out and sat on the sand. I looked around, turning slowly. Nothing but ribbed sand. I didn't see how we could be catching any lobsters. Nobody was hauling anyone, they just weren't there. I swam back up to the surface.

"How's that water?"

"Great. Headache's gone."

"I know it. You were down there a long time."

"I love the water."

"Good. We get the prop frigged up in line this summer I'll send you down with a knife to cut it out."

"Sounds good to me." I was treading water. "I didn't see any lobsters down there, Jack. Nothing but sand."

"Yeah, well, we won't set here until July-August. This string out front here fishes real good one or two weeks of the year. All them bugs walking into the inlet when the water gets warm. Come on out now. Let's go in and have a quick cocktail at Gina's before the market."

Billy calls the Heights the WASP epicenter of the world. It's mostly old money. Gina is a longtime friend of Jack. The few roads off the main road that winds down the

hill to the landing are sand. There are big potholes that the residents of the Heights don't fix because they act like speed bumps, natural deterrents for anyone straying off the main road into the enclave.

We pulled up, parked in the half moon shell driveway and walked in. No locked doors even on the Heights. Jack called for Gina as we walked through the living room to the front room then the kitchen. We walked out to the back yard, high above the beach below. She wasn't there either. There was a rose garden, gazebo, a vegetable garden in another quadrant of the yard, two chaise lounges. At the top of the staircase that led to the beach was a bell, green with weather. We walked over, looked down the beach. I could see clear to the Coast Guard lighthouse on the north side of the point, to the cut where I'd been swimming an hour earlier. There was a smattering of people on the beach. Jack rang the bell, yelled, "C'mon Gina, time for supper!" We went back into the kitchen. He made two martinis. He tended bar like he owned the place. We sat at the kitchen table.

"How long have you known Gina?"

"Years."

"What does she do?"

"Rents out her other properties. Family money. Most of the guys don't like these people up here but they've always been good to me. I sold a lot of lobsters up here over the years."

"Did you say your aunt used to live on the Heights?"

"Years ago. I lived with her before I started out. Came up for a summer when I was 18 and never left. Looked after her place over the winter. She wanted to buy

another house—up past Batman's family's, I'll show you—but she never did. Huge yard on that old place, most land on all the Heights. Now, guess what? Three houses there. She was going to buy it as an investment. I'd stay there and pay the bills. That was the plan, but she never bought it. Then she had to sell her place because her money run out. Old Jack lost his claim. That land's worth millions."

"Ouch."

"Don't I know it."

Gina came in. She had a sarong around her waist, bikini top. A shell bracelet around her ankle. Late summer tan, attendant smile.

"Hi Jack!"

"Gina, sweetheart!"

"This must be D.L."

"Hi," I said, "nice to meet you Gina. I feel a bit weird coming into your house and having a drink but I'm following captain's orders."

"Don't be silly! You have an open invitation. Jack's been telling me about you."

"Let me get you a drink, sweetheart." He made her a gin and tonic.

"How's fishing?"

"Not good," he said.

"How do you like working with the Mayor of East Orleans?"

"Very much," I said, "lots of benefits," and took a sip of my drink.

"Jack said you know Billy?"

"Yes."

"I don't want to offend you," she said, "but is he OK?"

"No."

"I know he went to Harvard and the whole family is smart—a bunch of wiz kids over there—but is he, like, retarded?"

"It may be a form of adult-onset retardation," I said.

"He's a lot of fun, though," she said. "I think he has a good heart, but he's out there. I mean, *way*."

"Yeah," I said, "he's going to be here in a couple days. Our friend's family has a cottage above the Mill Pond. Our friend gets it twice a year. I used to look forward to it, but now that I'm here already I'm not looking forward to it. Or I should say it's more about I don't really want to hang out with those guys."

"Why?"

"I don't know. It's going to be the usual. We'll do the same stuff we always do: get drunk, make fun of ourselves and the world. It just gets old I guess is the thing. We can make fun of the fading republic all we want but the joke seems to be on us."

The look she gave me said, *Life is a beach, lighten up*.

We stayed for the one drink. Jack said we're going to cook up some nice blue fish on the grill, do it up with mayonnaise and crushed crackers, want to come over? Yes! We have to go out early tomorrow. We'll see you at seven sharp.

Toward the end of our meal, during the first real pause in conversation, Plum told a story, his voice rising out of the relative silence of a slow fork making a half-hearted scrape at the last bit of squash, the neck of a wine bottle clinking the rim of a glass,

dribbling out the last swig. I was leaning back in my chair, holding my full stomach, when Plum began.

"Some Goddamn thing. I was driving out to the Berkshires in an old Model T that I'd fixed up and all. It was the only car we had. My father gave it to me because he said I'd need it more than him. That and his sack, my inheritance. So I'm driving out there and all of a sudden I go off the road. I don't know what happened, but I went off the road."

"Oh no, Henry," Santini said. She was a little drunk.

"Well, the long and short of it is I was thrown out of the car and somehow the car managed to hit me before it came to a stop."

"You got hit by a car you were driving?" asked Gina.

"It's pretty fuckin' outrageous, if you'll pardon my French, but I ended up in the ditch with the car after it'd hit me on its way there."

"Were you alright?"

"Well, I ended up in the hospital. I was scraped up some good, but no broken bones—"

Jack laughed. "Ladies, D.L., Baker, excuse me for interrupting old Plummy here, but I've been listening to this story ten-twenty years and every time I hear it when he gets to that part I say to myself, How did you manage to get hit by a car you was driving and you didn't break any fuckin' bones!"

The table laughed. "God was looking after you, Henry," Santine said.

"I'm not sure the heavenly father was looking close enough—the problem was I couldn't walk forward." Plum took a sip of coffee. "The doctor, well, he was a nice guy,

young guy, I don't know if he was just out of medical school or what, but he was some nice. Poor kid. He really wanted to help, and my circumstance being rather unique, he was some frustrated."

"You were walking backwards in the hospital?" Suze asked, failing to suppress a grin.

"That's right, Suzie. It was awkward and all, but I got used to it."

"How long did it last?"

"Christ, I was in there a week at least. I was at the point of thinking it was going to be a permanent situation but one day I was walking down the hall backwards as I did and another one of the doctors—I'd gotten to know them all and they'd all say hi, ask me how I was doing when they passed—one of the doctors spun around after he passed me or I passed him—I never could tell who was passing who in that condition, some disorienting—and Doc he said, 'Hi, Henry, one step at a time?' And as he said it, as he passed, I reversed direction and walked toward him."

"Put it in first gear, did you Plummy?" Baker said with a laugh.

"Some Goddamn thing. It just happened. Maybe some trigger in my brain switched back to where it was before the accident, I don't know, and I can tell you they didn't know. But just like that I was back walking forwards. I was prepared to walk backward the rest of my life. It got to be kind of interesting like that, watching things as they'd already passed, picturing what was ahead of me. But I was some happy to put one foot in front of the other in the forward direction."

After dinner I walked Suze home. Santine, Gina, Baker and Plum had already left. Suze and I and Jack shot the bull a while longer in the dining room. Jack said Plum had a crush on Santine. "No he doesn't, he's just a nice old man," Suze said. I said Baker had a crush on Santine, too. Probably they both had crushes on Santine and Gina. Probably we all had crushes on everyone. That can happen when everyone is tan and eating fresh fish and telling stories. I was feeling marvelous.

I walked down the street sans shoes. I was wearing one of Jack's pastel shirts, open to the sternum. He lent it to me for supper. It was a short walk to Santine's, maybe five minutes. Halfway there I pointed out the way the full moon caught and framed a natural arch in the leafy branches of two trees on each side of the road, making it look like a topiary bridge over the road. A natural trestle.

"I always feel like there should be some kind of ceremony when you cross under this," I said as we did.

"Have you been walkin' by my house at night to check up on me and my mom?"

"I've been walking under these trees and by your house long before it was your house."

I told her about Widge's, all the years going there since college. "Time flies. Turn around you're an old man."

"You're not an old man. You don't look like one, so you shouldn't talk like one."

We stopped in front of her driveway at the same time and faced each other and kissed in the dark, standing on the pavement, on the edge of the shell shard driveway she and Santine had spread the summer before.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked.

“Wash the dishes. You?”

“Read some pure reason.”

“Yuck.”

“Thanks for walking me home,” she said.

“Thanks for letting me. Do you think I’m a letch?”

“For being polite?”

“The kissing part. The fact that I’m quite a bit older than you.”

“Seriously, you have to get over it. You’re not that old. Haven’t you noticed that age doesn’t matter much here?”

“Yes. But I don’t know, I think—“

“—You think too much.” We kissed again. “Go wash the dishes, boy.”

10

I was painting buoys when Widge called. I put the brush down and leaned against the turned over skiff at the end of the driveway. Widge told me to open up the cottage with the key that was in the charcoal grill in the back yard. He said get some beers and seafood and shit, have it all ready for when we get there tomorrow night. I asked him who was coming.

"The usual, Billy's called me practically on the hour. He's pissed you haven't returned his calls."

"Have you talked to Petra?"

"Yes."

"How's she doing?"

"She's OK. I told her you weren't getting over her."

"Thanks."

"I told her you've been listening to whale songs at night."

"You're an asshole."

"I'm kidding."

"Well then what did she say?"

"Nothing, man. We talked about crap. Her job mostly. She wants nothing to do with me, OK?"

"Good, I wasn't a hundred percent she wouldn't be mean."

"She's not mean, bud, I'm sure she loved you, she's just moving on. Very focused, that woman. It was a forced and dull conversation, to tell you the truth. For me it was what your entire relationship must have been in microcosm. You're better off this way. Listen, we can talk about this more but I have shit to do. Just get the place stocked, OK? And lighten up for fuck's sake. Our hands are full with Billy, I don't need you being a sour puss this week. This false angst is really unbecoming. I have like a dossier of shit to tell you—I'm a train wreck. My life's a big ball of shit."

"Why?"

"I'm way behind in my work, my advisor's like, What's your deal? I keep taking these pills. I'm a wreck, D. I have no idea what I'm going to do when I finish if that ever happens because I just don't really give that much of a shit about rocks and I refuse to get a job OK'ing the building of malls in wetlands. Just get the place stocked up, stop sulking, and we'll go Dylan Thomas this week. Fuck it."

Widge had that creeping awareness. The two separate weeks in the small family cottage, one at the beginning of the summer, one at the end, always gave him some connection to prosperity. His great grandfather bought the patch on top of the bluff that looked out over the inlet, the landing, and the ocean beyond. You can see the Heights across the inlet from the back yard. It was the choicest piece of real estate on that nook of the inlet, and surrounded by million dollar homes. There'd been repeated offers to buy the place over the years. The neighbors weren't happy that we were there two weeks each summer. Widge was smart enough to realize his connection to prosperity was an illusion: his parents were splitting, his grandfather was dying and there were four aunts

and uncles to leave the cottage to, so that however his grandfather willed it, Widge would see a dilution, if anything.

We came together in the quaint cottage with the expansive expensive view and railed against all the others in law school, all the others taking their bites. We felt we could sleep at night, which of course we didn't, too busy sopping up our fellowship with whiskey and music. We'd rage, rage against the dying of the light, auditioning for the derelict role, the articulate bum in town more interested in roadside preaching than asking for spare change, a bum whom the locals all suspect was once a smart guy—*I heard he's an acid casualty*, for example, or *I heard he has two graduate degrees, such a shame*. What if it happens that we weren't auditioning as much as describing a clear path to nadir because we held fast to the principle of the thing, stuck with our scattered idealism so long that one day we were 55 and homeless, thinking our worth to society was in ideological rants, fighting the good fight. That would be one thing. But what if it wasn't quite so ideological? What if we gradually let the ideal go and decided to do something but realized there was nothing much we could do anyway.

Fishing. That's what I was doing. Jack and I spent the morning in the trap yard, loaded the truck, drove to the landing, loaded the skiff, etc., and went out to set the gear. It was a short trip because we didn't haul. When we got back to the landing I asked Jack if it was OK if I stayed on the boat to read *Billy Budd* on the bow. He said sure, bring some claws home with you. So I sat on the bow and read about the handsome sailor. *And yet a child's utter innocence is but its blank ignorance, and the innocence more or less wanes as intelligence waxes*. One hundred years later Christopher Cross unwittingly

counters with *if the wind is right, you can find the joy of innocence again.* Two worlds meet in brackish disorder.

Searching for innocence and the movement of the cliffs, gauging the wind and tide, making it over the bar, willfully submitting to the inlet's doings at least was organic. I was feeling part of the place. I couldn't hew to intelligence but I could to experience. It was phenomenal.

We kept a lobster car tethered to the *Hattie Marie*. It was a floating tote with a cover. I'd save large crabs from the haul and put them in the car when we got back, though the car's main purpose was to store lobsters if we had a big cash order to fill and couldn't fit all the bugs in the garage fridge.

With the crabs what you do is grab them by the carapace and rip their claws off. I went back to Jack's with a bucket. I'd lost track of time reading *Billy Budd* on the bow, not that it mattered, but when I got back there were three additional trucks in the driveway—Owen's, Nelson's and Wayne's. I parked across the street at the widow's. I'd mowed her lawn. Jack gave me ten bucks to do it. He'd said that when he didn't have a mate he did it. Don't you go taking any money from her, I'll pay ya, he'd said.

They were all in the living room, Jack in the captain's chair. I got the sense a handful of truck-to-truck conversations at the landing, in which two trucks pointed in opposite directions so the drivers could talk from truck to truck in their driver's seats, had led to this, and that Jack clearly knew of it in advance, though I didn't know how because I spent so much time with him and knew nothing about it. Plum hadn't let on if he knew anything. In any case it was in process. I stayed in the kitchen after a perfunctory "Got

some crab legs" and put the dishes away, making only enough noise for them to think I was putting them away and not listening to the big river debate.

What it was about was they thought, they *knew* someone was hauling their traps because they'd all reported to one another well below average catches to that point in the young lobster season. I heard most of it:

"We know it ain't any of us in here," Owen said.

They also thought they knew who it was, Shustock, though as I think of it now, I can't recall ever hearing his name mentioned in the brief meeting. It was decided by Owen that they would monitor the situation, keep an eye on Shustock more than they had, and that the purpose of the meeting was to make sure everyone assembled was on the same page before they brought others in. Stuey, Morgan, Lovely and Mike weren't hauling anyone's traps, they all agreed, "but them guys don't need to be involved yet. We'll keep an eye on him for the time being, but we're going to have to get serious and take a closer look if this keeps up," Owen said at the close of the meeting.

When it was over they walked out silently. I went into the living room. Jack had the weather loop on. I didn't know what to say. I was trying to get my head around what was implied in the meeting. Jack hadn't moved from the captain's chair. He was smoking a cigar, watching the community announcements and listening.

"What did Owen mean about a 'closer look'?" I didn't pretend that I hadn't heard the contents of the meeting.

"He meant we may have to put the glasses on him when he's fishing to see what he's up to."

“Watch him while he’s fishing? Everyone sort of keeps an eye on him and everyone else out there anyway.”

“I know it. But, see, we can’t see him all the time, and if he’s doing it, he’s doing it in low light. We gotta watch him then.”

“With the binoculars? From where?”

“We’ll have to go up the cliffs and watch him. Pain in the ass. We’ll have to take shifts.”

“When?”

“Like I said, it’ll have to be low light, early or late, which means we may be up missing sleep sitting on top of them fucking cliffs watching to see who’s stealing our lobsters.”

Jack was annoyed. Annoyed that we weren’t doing well fishing, annoyed that we might have to spy, annoyed that I was asking him questions.

“That’s a colossal waste of time, Jack, not to mention silly. Shustock’s not hauling anyone’s traps.”

11

We hauled the next day. 145. I asked Suzie how Shustock was doing. About the same as everyone else, she said. Owen had the biggest check of the previous week, she said.

"Why do you ask?"

I leaned closer to her and said in a hushed voice, "They think he's hauling their traps."

"Who?"

"Some of the guys."

"How do you know?"

"They're talking about him. You have to keep this to yourself, Suze."

"Do you think he is?"

"No."

"Why?"

"I don't know yet."

"You're turning into Jack."

"How so?"

"*Do you believe in ghosts?* asked Plum. *I don't know yet*, Jack answered. Kant spends less time on metaphysics than you boys take with the big questions."

"I just have a hunch is all. In any case, drama could be afoot."

"What are they going to do?"

"Details sketchy, plan in formative stage, but it involves the cliffs and low light. I will, of course, keep you posted. Listen, my idiot friends are coming tonight. Will you meet me at Widge's after work? I want you to see the place before it gets sullied."

"Sure, where is it?"

I gave her a map I'd drawn, put an X on the spot, burned the edges. Jack came back.

"I heard some grumbling about you up front there," he said to Suze.

"I gotta go. See you after work."

There were the usual leftovers from whoever in Widge's family had been in the cottage most recently: half a bottle of chardonnay, some cold cuts, tomatoes, bread. I added a 12-pack. Suze and I sat on the wood chairs in the small back yard and looked out over the inlet, the landing, sea beyond. I gave her the story of the place. On the mantel there's an old brown photograph of the cottage covered in snow, alone on top of the bluff, not another dwelling in site.

"I've been coming here for at least one of the two weeks every year since college."

"What do you do?"

"Frat stuff that we think is more insightful. It's sad."

"You said one of these guys went to Harvard? The view is great anyway."

"I don't know what to do about tonight. Usually the first night is the worst, everyone all excited and road buzzed. I want to stay at Jack's but Billy knows where he

lives and will seek me out—I haven't been returning his calls. At some point they'll come for me. I don't want to deal."

"What are you worried about?"

"I must not entreat them, not tonight, I'm not ready."

"If they come to Jack's just ignore them, pretend you're asleep."

"That doesn't work. They're dogged in their pursuit of raging fellowship."

"What if you tell them you have to go out early in the morning and you can't rage?"

"They won't care. Widge will say something like, 'You're pussy's hurting me.'"

"OK, so, see you in a week."

"I know it. Maybe I can hole up with Plum in his basement."

"Listen, having just now grasped the severity of the situation, I'm sure Santine wouldn't mind if you stayed with us. You can crash on the couch."

"It would be a Christian act?"

"Whatever. Do you want me to ask?"

"Yes please."

Santine OK'd it. I told Jack. He said he'd pick me up in the morning. We were going out at five. I drove back to Widge's and left a note:

> *I'm going out early tomorrow. Don't call me tonight. Don't look for me. Don't forget to turn off the grill. See you when the sun's over the yard arm. DL*

I drove to S and S's. Santine said she understood my situation and left it at that. They showed me the house. To be in Suzie's room was to be a magazine subscription card except I couldn't slip out because that would be kind of mean and also Santine was

standing behind me in the threshold of the glossy cave. It was like Lascaux after 15,000 years of conspicuous consumption, which may have been the point. I wasn't immediately certain as to the artist's purpose.

"Is it all one piece?" I asked.

"Eventually," Suze said. She pointed to one small corner behind the door. "That's left."

"Lot of blood, sweat and magazines went into this."

"Mostly magazines and glue."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Yes."

"I'm sometimes not good with meaning."

"Please form of a question, D.L."

"It's about false idols?"

"And the attendant loss of spirituality."

I looked over my shoulder at Santine, who smiled.

"But you're exhibiting it to yourself," I said.

"Isn't that what we do with art? We put it on our walls so we can see it, so we can feel it there."

"I can definitely feel this," I said, rubbing my head.

"What does it feel like, D.L?" Santine enquired over my shoulder.

"H, E, double hockey sticks comes to mind." I looked back over my shoulder. Another smile. Santine doesn't use the swear words or the Lord's name in vain. "How do you sleep, Suze?"

"Like a victor. If I had the collage on the walls outside the room, if I exhibited it to the world, then I'd just be part of the problem, another billboard. You can't avoid the problem, that's the point. So to embrace it, I mean inwardly mock it, I know that it can't get me. I wake up each morning happy to be alive."

"What do you think about this, Santine?"

"I think my baby's onto something."

"Well, I'm happy to embrace the couch tonight and I think you're both coo-coo for Cocoa Puffs."

I was thinking the change of venue might get the old dream life back. When they went to bed I secreted into the kitchen. No banana product of any kind. I tip-toed to the dining room and opened the bottom half of the hutch Santine'd told me she bought at a yard sale. Apparently God was looking after me because among several bottles of liqueur was a bottle of Crème de Banana. I poured half a glass of the syrup into a pint glass and topped it off with whiskey. I drank it, adding Mixologist to the growing list of things I couldn't do. That said, if Suze's room were a drink like boxers and other celebrities are deli sandwiches, it would be whiskey and banana liqueur—potent and disgusting.

"Batman come by last night at nine." We were making our way through the inlet. "I told him you were in bed upstairs and that I was going to bed, too, check in with him tomorrow."

"And he left?"

"As far as I know. I didn't hear anything else. You tell them guys I keep my rifle in my bedroom and if I hear any strange noises in the night I might come down shootin'."

"I will, sorry he stopped by and bugged you."

"How come you don't like your friends?"

"It's not that I don't like them as much as I don't think I'm on their wavelength anymore."

"What wavelength are you on?"

"This one. I'm starting to know the bottom." I pointed over the rail. "I know where the big rock is up ahead. I can tell where the tide's at based on how much of it I can see when we cruise by. Recently I've been noticing the bar at the cut moving a little. It seems to be creeping toward the point."

"I know it. We'll have to move the channel marker soon. Owen usually takes care of it."

Jack and I left our gear on the boat at the end of each haul, hung our oilers in the cutty. We put our gloves on the engine box if they were in good shape, turning them inside out to dry, though they were always clammy when I put them on in the morning. Jack'd told me more than once to use a new pair of gloves. You don't want that bait juice get into a cut. The gloves I'd been using had little holes, slices really, in the finger tips. I'd been careful to that point. The knife I bought at the fish supply store was always clipped to my waist, though I'd only used it to cut twine if we needed to mend a trap when we hauled or in the trap yard. I wore 45 sun block. I wore sunglasses to protect against bait juice or bleach splashing into my eyes. I bent my knees when we crabbed

totes of bait and bugs. I bent my knees when traps came up. Not sure why I didn't toss the old gloves for a new pair. Maybe it was that they felt broken in and I liked that.

The tingly sensation after the invading bacteria got in there was unique. It actually felt good the way sometimes not so good things can, like the smell of gasoline, a foot cramp. The good sensation was brief, though. By the time we got back to the landing it was throbbing and swollen, twice its normal size. There was a line like a vein at the base of it. I showed Jack. He was pissed.

"Didn't I tell you to switch out them fuckin' gloves!" It was the first time he'd been really mad at me. "We have to go see Doc now, God dammit D.L." He slammed the gaff against the rail the way he did when he eased up to a buoy during a haul and missed gaffing it.

"I'm sorry, Jack. What is it?"

"Fish poisoning, gets into your blood stream can kill ya."

"Is it common?"

"Everyone's had it, one time or another. You might of broke the record for earliest case."

"How do you treat it?"

"Antibiotics, only way. We'll go see Doc."

"I don't have health insurance."

"That's OK, Doc keeps a supply. We'll give him some culls. Doc loves lobsters."

Doc said to take it easy a few days, don't use the thumb, at least until the swelling goes down. I need to know if the line advances. He gave me the antibiotic. You should

see the bacteria under a microscope, they look like aliens. OK, thanks, Doc. I really appreciate it. In the truck driving to the market: Sorry, Jack. I'll manage, he said, we ain't catching much anyways. I'll give you a partial share until you come back. You paint them buoys in the driveway and tie em to the gear if you can. Now you got the gurry you're a real lobsterman. He smiled.

At the market I showed Suzie. Fish poisoning, Suze, aka the gurry—it's a staph infection, can kill ya. Ouch, she said, gross, but it's probably good for hitchhiking. I asked her how she does fish backwards. She said, shif. I agreed, the soft h of hsif too much trouble. I asked her where Kant fit in the grotto of false idols? He's amazing, she said. I don't know what he's saying half the time but there's a kind of understanding anyway, like some poems you just have to feel. I said, I sort of feel that way about what you just said, I think. Cool, she said. I dare say, I said, that we're working toward an understanding of one another and now I'll go because the guys up front are organizing. Where are you staying tonight? I have to embrace the fiends tonight. Be strong, she said, the door's open if your pussy hurts. Such language, I said.

I paced the small upstairs of the Widge cottage the whole night, on account of the throbbing. I had a sizeable excuse for not partaking in the rager and they mostly left me alone, but only after some Oh, shit, man, that's all kinds of funked up, you're a wreck. There were seven total, two I didn't know from New York. Widge came up at one point during the debauch and told me about how when he was in high school he worked in a kitchen with a guy who said if you really want to get off when you masturbate, shove your thumb up your ass right when you're about to come. Might be

worth a try with that thing, Widge said, then left the room. Eventually I paced myself to sleep, the last thing I saw looking out the upstairs bedroom window a lick of flame.

I stepped over a body on my way into the kitchen. My thumb was still thick as a cucumber but it wasn't throbbing as much and the thin red line had stopped at my wrist. It was itchy but I didn't want to scratch. It felt disembodied, like I'd be scratching someone else. I held it in the sunlight pouring in through the kitchen window then zoomed beyond to the yard, to the scattered charred remains of a pink stuffed rabbit that had been the size of a small bear the night before. Billy brought it. I put as much bacon in the skillet as would fit and started a pot of coffee. I walked into the front room and looked out the windows there. The exposed bar marked one side of the channel—the tide was all the way out. All seven lobster boats were out. I could barely see a truck-to-truck conversation on the landing. I picked up the binoculars from a table near the windows and aimed for the trucks. Sighted through the glasses they were oversized, grainy and up to no good. I was looking through the glasses at the truck-to-truck conversation when Billy came into the front room.

"Bacon. Bacon." His face was especially sallow. I was surprised he was up. I followed him into the kitchen.

"Who's that?" I pointed to the body under a blanket on the floor.

"No idea." Billy was standing over the skillet.

"What happened last night?"

"It was chaos. I thought they were going to burn the house down." Billy grabbed a piece of sizzling bacon from the skillet, burned his fingers, threw the bacon into the

sink, ran water over it, put the burnt fingers under the water, inspected the bacon like a child about to pull the legs off a spider, shoved it in his mouth, looked out the kitchen window at the charred remains of the pink bunny, paused from chewing and sang, "If they want to have my intervention in the yard they have some cleaning to do!"

"What intervention?"

"Widge says I treat my body like an amusement park. I'm like, 'Body and soul, dude.' He says drugs and alcohol have ruined my life, I have no prospects, I'm costly, there's no Billy, there can be no Billy, et cetera. All Widge, this intervention. It was also his idea to make a bonfire with the bunny. There it was. My adviser. Have you seen Geronimo?"

Geronimo is Billy's real rabbit. Billy loves Geronimo. It goes with him on trips like this. He lets Geronimo roam the house. Or, Widge lets Billy let Geronimo roam the house.

"No," I said. Billy was running water on another piece of bacon. "I'm going to the landing."

"Are you going out?"

"No."

"Did Jack ever tell you about the time he got the gurry?"

"No."

"He said—it was so comical—he said he tried to drink it away and I was like, Jack, it's a staph infection: it can kill you. Vodka can't stop it. And he says, he says, *Don't I know it!* The line made it from his hand all the way to his shoulder before he went to the hospital. He tried to drink it away!"

"I think the antibiotic's taking." I looked at my thumb.

"It would be more advantageous to have elephantitis of the penis than the thumb. Then you could be a porn star. Would you ever be a porn star?"

"No, Billy."

"Just saying. It's good money. How did you get the prescription?"

"Jack sells bugs to a doctor. Over the years he's filled Doc's orders with an extra cull or two."

"Amazing. You have a college education. And a job. A hard job. Yet no health insurance. Jack has to cash in on a kickback for a prescription that, ya know, if you couldn't get the prescription you could die. They wonder why we're like this. Black market health care. It's not a stretch to say that a cull or two saved your life. Saved by the one-armed lobsters!" Billy thrust an arm into the air.

"What are you gonna do?" I meant with respect to health insurance and what's left of the republic.

"I have to clean the yard, they're not going to do it, I have to clean the yard. Savages." Billy was staring out the window again.

"You're going to prepare your own tribunal?"

"I have nobody to blame but myself."

"Give yourself a seat with a view." I grabbed a mug, filled it with coffee and turned for the door.

"D.L.?"

I turned back. Billy had that pleading no-prospect look on his especially sallow face. I've always felt like he has an undiagnosed case of jaundice.

"What is it, Billy?"

"There are six billion people in the world."

"Yes."

"Why is it so hard to get laid?"

Billy says he was bucking the trend when he got kicked out of Harvard for grades. After that he rode his 12-speed to Arizona and took a bus back to his parents' house in New Jersey. He's had a car since, his mother's old station wagon, whose back door he's covered with bumper stickers. Inside are toys, prizes from happy meals, a laundry basket with clothes neatly folded in it, Geronimo's aquarium, all manner of sporting equipment—two Frisbees for Frisbee golf, a basketball, football, two mitts, a skateboard, a badminton set, two tennis rackets. Two beach chairs, a cooler. He has to have two of everything so he has someone to play with. Billy's Ark. He loves sports. A few years ago, after a bender, he showed up at the Special Olympics to volunteer. There were three entrances—one for spectators, one for competitors, one for volunteers. When he got to the head of the volunteer line, he was told the competitors' line was over there. Billy tells strangers about his undying love of acid.

"You're better with statement, Billy, you're better with the end of moral progress. Forget about getting laid, stick with the larger sermon. I'm going to the landing."

"You just said you're not going out."

"Just to have a look."

"Oh Jesus!" Billy laughed his uproarious, frantic laugh. "You're becoming a wood elf! What's it been, a month?!?!" More laughter. He had to lean on the counter.

"Just to have a look! What are you going to see? That it's low tide? You can see that from here!"

"The yard's not going to clean itself, Billy."

"I know, I know, OK, OK." His head nodded up and down like a manservant and he bolted out of the kitchen.

The two trucks were gone by the time I got to the landing. The gnats were in. A dead striper missing its sides lay near the shoreline, part of the process, gull and fly meal now, crab meal in a few hours. I left a note in Jack's truck: *Opposable digit improved, feeling downright human. I can go out tomorrow. I'll see you later at the house*.

I got back in the C-10 and looked out the window at mid-morning. Just to have a look. *Oh the canvas can do miracles* … Mid-morning, Priscilla's Landing. Most of the fishermen paintings that make it to yard sales live on for serenity or poignancy or drama or romance. I wasn't interested in any of those things. *Mid-Morning, Priscilla's Landing* starts over the shoulder, part of the face in quarter profile on the left edge, the inlet through the windshield spreads out over most of the canvas. He's sitting in his truck looking through the windshield at the serenely poignant scene, serenely poignant except for, or because of the fact that there's a smudge of gull shit smack on the middle of the windshield. That's the kind of subversion the critics go for.

I drove back to Widge's, sat in the truck and watched Billy from the small side yard. He'd taken the vacuum cleaner out to the yard by extension cord and was vacuuming the lawn. He didn't hear my approach and didn't see me because his head was down. For a month I'd been in Jack's truck sitting and watching—sitting and watching the ocean from the Heights to determine if we should go out, and to see who

was. Sitting and watching the inlet from the landing. He keeps his glasses in the glove compartment. They all do. I've seen them watching us from their trucks at the landing when we're coming in. Watching Billy in my truck felt a little like that. I know why Jack does it, why they all do: it's empowering and relaxing sitting behind the wheel observing, as if you're a social scientist: I'm sitting here watching you do things, assessing. Watching Billy felt like there was an invisible crowd behind me, behind another larger pane of glass, watching me watch Billy, and that periodically I should whisper Billy's behavior to them, through an intercom: *Undeterred, Billy vacuums specks of the dead pink stuffed animal, pausing, occasionally, from his work, pausing thinking: the evidence is substantial, the mole is at the bar, I have shit to do but I can't, I just can't, I'm paralyzed, well, there it was*. Billy stopped, dropped his pants to his ankles and urinated, looking out past the landing, out to sea as he did, then zipped up and got back to the work at hand.

I would have been content to watch him vacuum the lawn but there were buoys to paint and knots to tie. So I left Widge's for Jack's, recalling the lick of flame and with the pain in my throbbing thumb, my last thought before passing out was, well, if the chieftains burn the place down with me in it I won't have to deal with this thumb.

That painting, my wake, would be of the casket from a distance of about thirty feet. There would be the amber glow about the funeral parlor. Definitely that jazz guitar glow, and the casket from a low enough angle that you can't see my head or any part of me except the big red thumb above the casket's rail—a lobster claw. Thumb up.

* * *