

### Low Tide

It is low tide. Crouching over the edge of the dock, I can barely reach the water to rinse the stinking mud from my hands. The air is pleasantly cool, and so the warmth of the water comes as a surprise to me. My fingertips disappear beneath the shadowy shallows. I hear the door of the truck slam, and that means it's time to set out. Standing, I raise my scoop net high in the air, and my dad cranes his neck from thirty yards away to gauge the size of the night's first captive against the fading light of a mid-summer evening sky. His eyes are pretty good from far away.

"Keeper?" he questions with the curiosity of a 10-year-old boy as he pulls on his sweatshirt.

"Oh yeah. He's a nice one, and he wasn't the only one I saw. I think it's going to be a good night."

We meet at the dock where our little johnboat is tied, and I dump my prisoner into the large empty barrel at the back of the boat. Dad chattily notes how perfect the conditions are (how there is no breeze, how clear the water is, how we've timed the tide just right...) as I tuck the nets, buckets, oars and seat cushions into position. His voice interrupts the tranquility and it's almost annoying. I feel compelled to roll my eyes; instead, I nod and smile to myself. I imagine how he must have felt taking three of his little, chirping daughters along on these trips so many years ago. I can remember being chastised, "Hey, you three can sing now, but when we get there, I don't want you scaring the crabs away, you hear???"

A gull, which had been perched, unseen, no more than twenty feet away from us, delivers a squawking reprimand and flies off. It amazes me that four of us used to fit into our little boat.

We do a last-minute equipment check on shore, and then I hold the boat snug to the side of the dock as Dad prepares to ease onto his seat. With a gurgle, the little boat sinks under his weight, and the aluminum hull scrapes the sandy bottom. I imagine it is a deafening noise for the undersea creatures, and I envision them scuttling and swimming away from the epicenter of the seaquake. I loosen the knot in the rope and set myself to get aboard.

“You got it?” he extends a hand.

“Yesssss, daaaaaad.” I hiss ungratefully. The boat barely rocks, and I am huddled uncomfortably on the small aluminum seat before I notice my offense.

We move slowly through the waters toward the opposite shore of the cove as the last light of the sunset fades. Half a moon appears overhead. His back to me, Dad rows the boat with effort. I rock back and forth rhythmically with each pull and glide. Glancing beyond his left shoulder, I can see the reflection of the marina lamp. The glowing orange orb dances lazily in our wake. It is finally dark.

“The fluorescent jellyfish are in their full splendor, tonight,” he announces somewhat suddenly. I had been enjoying the swishing of his oars.

“I see them,” I say quietly, taking note of the eerie display.

“Do you see them?” He stops rowing and stiffly turns to collect my answer.

“I see them, I said.” We have a while to row yet.

Besides the jellyfish, and the marina lamp, there's not much to see. I close my eyes, and feel the gentle splash of his oars. The oarlocks groan wearily, and I try to remember the night when they were shiny and new and I had my first chance at captaining our new "ship" across the cove. I can't, but I imagine the determined grin that must have leaked from my lips as I strained to choreograph the two heavy, wooden oars and to drive my weight and my dad's toward whatever unknown it was that lay behind me. Just before I would give up, I would feel his calloused hands on mine and we'd do a few strokes together. The water would lap at the front of the boat, and nervous with the speed, I'd glance behind me repeatedly. Then, at my stubborn insistence, ("I GOT it Daaaaaad!") he would let go and I would try to keep the rhythm going until, inevitably, the water would steal one of the oars from my sweaty little grip, and he'd help again.

I open my eyes. Dad has stopped rowing. He searches for his gloves.

"God damn hands are cracking. You sure you don't want to row?" He breathes heavily.

"We're almost there," I say, wishing he hadn't had to stop. (That's what he used to tell me too, no matter how feeble my strokes had been.)

Soon enough though, he relaxes his oars, and we ride out his last thrust until we are across the cove and within four feet of the grassy shore. He jostles the boat as he moves to the seat furthest from me, turning to face me. I brace, impatient for him to get settled. He bumps the oars, fishes around for his glasses, resituates the three nets and finally adjusts his baseball cap, and rests his hands in his lap.

"I'm ready now," he says, leaning forward to sweep some crusty mud off of the seat in front of him. In the act, he lets his glasses slip from his collar. Just as I decide to

stand, he leans too much. Rattling and clattering, everything in the boat slides to a new position. One of the nets falls out of the boat and I retrieve it before he notices.

I strain to keep my balance as he returns his glasses to his collar and the boat heaves back to equilibrium. I think of how my younger sister and I would cling to each other, teasing one another nervously about the “creatures from the depths” and about falling out of the tiny boat while we rode as helpless passengers through the blackness of nightfall. Even in the shallows, where we could shine our “spotting lamp” through the darkness into waters that were no more than knee deep, (and full of our friends, the snails,) we’d shriek and wriggle with terror when Dad would stand up to net a crab and the boat would rock gently.

“Oh knock it off! You’re not going to fall in, you silly gooses!” His weight ruled the precise positioning of the boat, and his voice ruled our confidence.

My legs have since been trained to react to Dad’s sudden, stiff movements, and now, I silently forgive his clumsiness. I connect the lamp to the battery and stand up.

Resting my elbows on the contraption (grandma’s walker) that once served as an elevated seat for a much younger “spotter girl,” I wait for perfect silence. Dad is still. A faint breeze threatens to stir the weeds, but dies quickly. Far beyond the breakwaters, we hear the dull ringing of the bell buoys. The silence does not come. Instead, the buzz of the “crabbing bugs” becomes louder and louder as we push deeper into a sheltered area of the cove.

“They’re really singing tonight aren’t they? I hope they don’t scare the crabs away.”

I chuckle, and flip the switch.

I test the visibility by sweeping the lamplight out in front of the bow. The clarity is comforting. The tiny shrimp seem to wink a friendly hello, their eyes reflecting the light. A few green crabs give way to our little boat and a lazy striped-bass flashes into and out of view. With each sweep, I notice Dad eagerly chasing the path of my lamp with his eyes, anxious for a sighting. A horseshoe crab lumbers just into view.

“What was that? Are you seeing any? Am I going too fast?”

I don’t answer.

“Sorry,” he says. He knows.

I spy a few legal-sized crabs, but silently write them off as “not meaty enough,” or “too fidgety.” I smell an air of protest as Dad impatiently waits for his signal. He used to let us practice our ham-fisted netting techniques on the little ones.

“OK. There’s a keeper,” I declare. Dad alters our course and heads for my light.

It was always teamwork. We were the team, and Dad did the work. He’d steer the boat next to the crab, release the oars and stand up, waiting out a carefully calculated drift. Then he’d sneak the net into the water and there would be a short pause. We would stand breathless at the bow, steadying the lamp between the two of us, and then Dad would lean over and dive down with his net, swipe the armored green creature off the sandy bottom, and bring him (white belly up), out of the water. We’d squeal with excitement when it was a big one, and protest that it had looked a lot bigger in the water when he’d have to throw it back.

Now, as we near the keeper, I notice that the speed of the boat is about to carry us past good netting position.

“You better slow down a bit,” I say gently. He does.

“Which way is he facing?”

“You. You have a good angle on him if you hurry.” But the boat glides over the crab and I lose sight of him.

“Did he move? Where is he? I wish you’d keep your lamp still.”

I bite my tongue.

“Give me the net,” I interrupt, thrusting my open hand back while peering over the edge of the boat. “He’s gonna come right into view. I can get him.”

Lamp in one hand, net in the other, I wait patiently for the boat to drift just right.

“I can just back up...if you want,” Dad offers, just before I put my net in the water.

“Nope. Here he is.” I pull up a monster, and wave the net over my dad’s lap.

“Nice one,” he says flipping the crab into the barrel and taking the net back. In the dark, I can’t tell if he’s smiling. We continue.

A couple of hours later, I hear Dad yawn behind me. He misses a big one. We chase it for a while but then he concedes.

“How about we call it a night?”

I admit that I have had enough. We estimate the catch at about forty crabs: nowhere near our best efforts. Nevertheless, we assume our respective positions in the boat for the ride back.

“You sure you don’t want to row?”

“Yup. You do it.”

He rows. The orange glow of the marina lamp is soon upon us and we bump gently against the dock. I get out first. Dad hands me the nets and oars, and I grab the seat

cushions and walk them over to the truck. Heading back towards him, I catch Dad stretching his back. I help with the rest of the gear and turn away again as he clambers out of the boat.

I put the truck in reverse and bring it close to the dock.

“You got your end?”

“Yes. Watch out for the ramp,” I say as we squat together to lift the boat out of the water. It is heavy and I wonder how he used to do it by himself.

The three of us (or sometimes just two,) would insist upon helping, but we were of little use.

“Just hold the lamp so I don’t trip,” he used to say. And before the exhaustion of the late-night journey crept onto our eyelids, he’d have the boat tied onto the truck, the gear packed and we’d be on our way, snuggled up in his sweatshirt in the cab of the pickup.

“Are we too tired to stop for an ice cream at the gas station?” he’d tease.

“Noooooo!” we’d sing and sit up straight. The gas station was the end of the journey for us. Droopily, and covered in marsh mud, we’d file into the mini-mart and make our selections. Before long, the ice cream was gone, the singing was over and we were asleep in the truck. We’d arrive home, well after bedtime, and Dad would open the passenger side door, roll us out of our seats and chase us to bed. The next morning, we’d wake up smelling like bug-spray and find the boat hosed out and the crabs scuttling around in our kiddie pool....

Now we have the boat on the truck. Dad fumbles to knot the rope and I pack the last of the gear away.

“Done with the lamp?” I ask.

“Yeah. Put the lamp inside the truck, and leave the battery; I’ll get it. It’s heavy,” he says.

I unclip the lamp, grab the battery by the handle and heave it over the side of the truck. I’m in the driver’s seat before the boat is tied up. He paces over to my window.

“Where’s the battery?” he asks.

“I already got it. We better hurry,” I say glancing at my watch. “You do want an ice cream, don’t you?”

I can tell, even in the darkness, that he’s smiling.