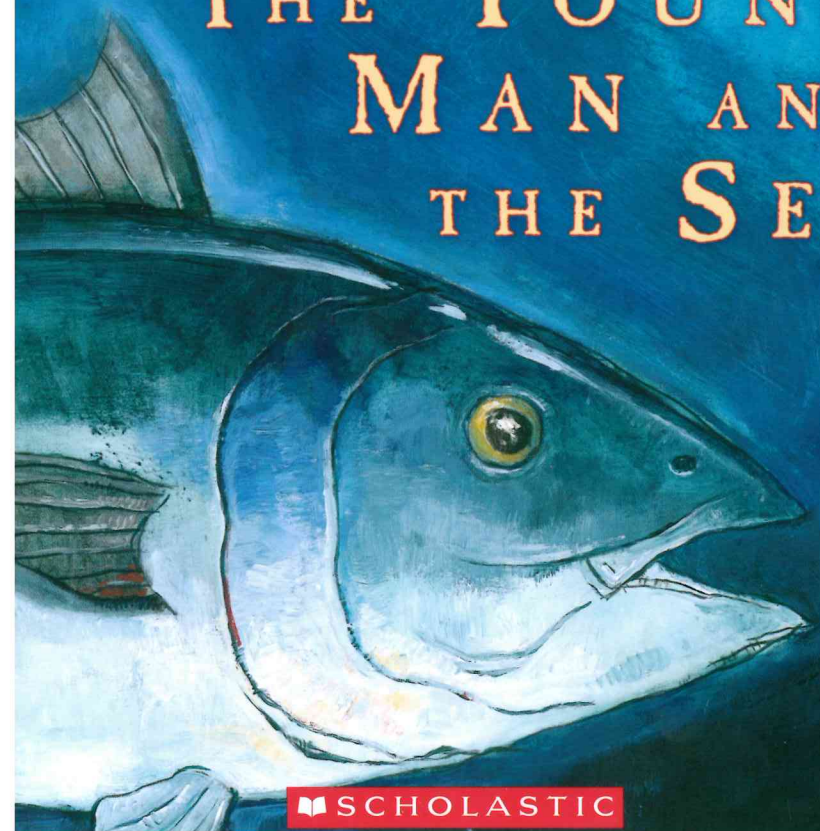




RODMAN PHILBRICK

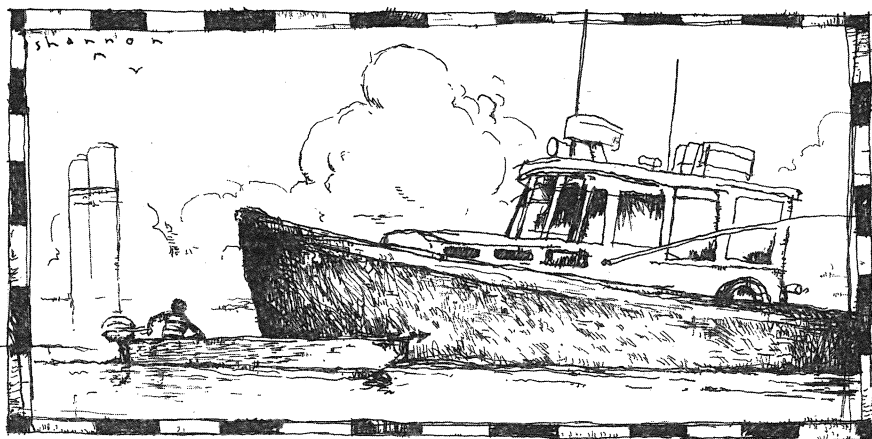
Author of the bestseller FREAK THE MIGHTY

# THE YOUNG MAN AND THE SEA



 SCHOLASTIC

## THE YOUNG MAN AND THE SEA



Rodman Philbrick

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THE  
YOUNG  
MAN  
*and*  
THE  
SEA

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The author wants to thank Paul Brown, of Kittery, Maine, for his insights into the fine art of trapping lobsters. Also, some of the amazing physical abilities of the bluefin tuna were gleaned from Douglas Whynot's book *Giant Bluefin*.

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# 1

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## Lobster Boy

BEFORE I tell you about the biggest fish in the sea and how it tried to kill me and then ended up saving my life, first you got to know about the leaky boat, 'cause it all began right there. The great repair and the trap wars and the angel in the mist, none of it would have happened without the leaky boat.

It starts the last day of school. I'm on my way home, coasting down Spotter Hill on my crummy old bike. The birds are chittering and stuff, and I'm riding no hands with the wind on my face. A day like that you can feel summer in the air, and the smell of cut grass, and the sting of salt from the harbor. Then our

little house comes into view, and right away I see that what I been afraid of these last few months has finally happened.

Our boat the *Mary Rose* has sunk at the dock.

It breaks my heart to see her so pitiful, with just the top of her cabin showing, and a shine of oil spreading like blood on the water. A sunk boat is a pitiful thing. It's enough to make a person cry, but I ain't cried since the day my mom died. No matter what that rotten rich kid Tyler Croft says, it ain't true.

I been bailing *Rose* for months, getting up before dawn to pump out the bilge and keep her floating. Just in case my dad decides to get his lazy duff off the TV couch and go fishing. That's where he lives ever since the funeral, lying like a sack of nothing on the TV couch. Most times he don't even put the TV on, he just sucks on his beer and stares at the cobwebs on the ceiling.

It ain't like he's a real drunk. He don't beat me or curse me or nothin'. He just lies there feeling sorry for himself and it don't matter what I do or say. One day I swore him out for ten straight minutes, about how he was a good-for-nothing and a worthless boozier,

and how he might as well be dead as lying on the TV couch, and what would Mom think if she could see him. But even that don't get him going. He just sighs and says, "Skiffy, I'm awful sorry about everything," and then hides his head under the pillow.

I can't even be sure if he's talking to me or to himself, 'cause we got the same name. Samuel "Skiff" Beaman. Down the town wharf they used to call my dad Big Skiff and me Little Skiff, to tell us apart, but my dad don't go down the wharf no more. He don't do nothin' at all. Not even when I come running in the house to tell him *Rose* has sunk.

"Dad!" I go. "She gone under!"

He rolls to one side and puts a bleary eye on me. His beard is all matted because he ain't combed it in months, and it makes him look old and scruffy. "School's out, huh? How'd it get to be that late?"

"The boat sunk! What'll we do?"

"Do?" He puts his hand over his eyes and sighs again. "Oh, I suppose we could raise her up, but she'd just sink again. Best leave her be."

"You can't leave a boat sunk at the dock. It ain't right!"

But my dad turns his face to the back of the couch and won't hear me, so I run outside and skid down the steps to our rickety old dock, but there ain't nothing I can do. Once a boat has gone under, you can't bail it no more. There's nothin' to do but wait until the tide goes out and then somehow winch it onto the cradle before it sinks again. Then maybe I can find the leak and plug it.

There used to be a winch in the trap shack, and that's where I'm heading when Tyler Croft comes by on his thousand-dollar mountain bike and thinks he sees me cryin', which he don't.

"Hey Skiffy!" he goes, popping a wheelie and showing off. "Heard that old wreck of yours finally went under. Good riddance! Ugly thing stunk up the whole creek. That wasn't a boat — it was an out-house!"

"Shut up!"

"Ooh, Skiffy's cryin'!"

"Am not!" I said, looking around for something to throw at him, a rotten apple for his rotten head.

"Skiffy's cryin' and I ain't lyin'! Little Skiff Beaman lives in a shack, he pees in a bucket and craps out

back! Hey lobster boy! Your momma's dead, your daddy's drunk! Go back to the swamp, you dirty punk!"

I been hearing variations on that stupid song since Tyler Croft was old enough to talk, so it don't mean nothin'. All it does is make me want to womp his head with a hard green apple because that would make him cry.

There's nothing close to hand but an old chunk of wood. I heave it and miss. Tyler laughs and then screams away on his bike.

"I'm tellin' the whole wide world!" he shouts back over his shoulder. "Little Skiff Beaman cried like a baby!"

He will, too. Not that it really matters. When your whole life is sunk, it don't matter what nobody says about you, they can't make it worse.

Still, I wish I had that hard green apple.

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## Swampers

I GOT to admit, what Tyler Croft says is partly true. Our little house used to be a shack, until my mom married my dad and made him fix it up. I wasn't there, of course, but I seen the pictures. We got running water now, and indoor plumbing, but my dad never seen no reason to tear down the old outhouse with the half-moon carved in the door. Says it reminds him of the way things used to be, and how cold it was on winter nights when you had to put on your hat and boots just to do your business in the outdoor toilet.

When I was real little I remember my mom used to always be at him to take down that ratty old out-



house, but then she got used to it and planted flowers around it and painted it up and stuff, and didn't mind too much when folks came round to see what it looked like, because it's the last outhouse in all of Spinney Cove. Kind of historical, you might say.

My dad's family, the Beamans, they was swampers. That's local talk for white trash, I guess. In the old days, swampers was folk who lived in shacks near the salt marsh or on the creek, and got by digging clams and trapping crabs and lobster and selling salt hay to the farmers. Come fall they'd shoot ducks and geese and salt 'em down and sell 'em by the barrel to restaurants in Boston. The point is, they lived off what they got from the marsh and the creek. This is way back before my dad was born, but they still called him a swamper on account he was a Beaman, and Beamans had always been swampers, simple as that.

My mom, now, she weren't no swamper, not even close. Her people was Spinneys that settled here and got the town named after them, or maybe they named it for themselves, same difference. There are rich Spinneys and poor Spinneys and regular Spinneys, but there

ain't no swamp Spinneys, and my mom's family never let my dad forget it, believe you me. Mom never liked that, and stood up for my dad. She always said we all came from the same place, if you go back far enough, and what did it really matter what names they put on the headstones?

The name on her headstone is Mary Roselyn Spinney Beaman, so you might say she got to have it both ways.

One thing with swampers, though, they're good with boats. It's in our blood, I guess. When I was nine, my dad nailed up a little skiff for me out of plywood, and put an old five-horse Evinrude motor on the back, and give it to me for my birthday, which was really cool.

I'm twelve now, but the skiff still fits me pretty good, and don't leak a drop. "A tight boat is a good boat," my dad used to say, but now he don't care if the *Mary Rose* sunk, so it's up to me to raise her.

Only thing, I don't really have a clue how to go about it — I never raised a sunk boat before. So I get in my skiff and row around above where she went under. I can see her down there sitting on the mud, but

it still don't figure, what to do next. Finally I get sick of looking and decide I'll row up the creek to Mr. Woodwell's place and see if he has any ideas on the subject.

Lucky for me, he does.

Mr. Woodwell is about a million years old now, and mostly retired, but once upon a time about half the working boats in Spinney Cove come out of his shed. He built the *Mary Rose* before I was born, and I seen the picture of him standing by the bow when she got launched for the first time. Even in the picture he looks quiet, and it's only got worse since then. Folks say he's so shy with words that weeks go by between one sentence and the next. That may be, but he always says hello to me. "'lo, Samuel," he'll say. "Come alongside and tell me what the fish are doing." And I'll put in to his dock and tell him the smelt are running or the mackerel are in, or if the stripers are feeding. He don't fish — never has — but he likes to know.

The day the *Mary Rose* went under he's planting a bed of flowers by his back porch, the one that faces

the creek, and don't see me till I holler. It's too far for him to holler back, so he waves his hat instead, and I put my skiff in to his dock and walk up the grassy slope to the porch.

"'lo, Mr. Woodwell," I say.

"'lo, Samuel," he says, patting dirt around his flowers. "What are the fish doing today?"

"I don't know," I say. "Rose has sunk and I can't raise her."

It takes him awhile to get up from the flower bed and wipe the dirt from his hands. "Come up the porch," he says, and I do.

He fetches lemonade, and that takes awhile, too. Everything takes awhile with Mr. Woodwell, 'cause he moves so slow, but I don't mind. You never tasted lemonade so good as what he makes in his steel pitcher, from real lemons and white sugar stirred in.

"There you are," he says, handing me a glass. "I've been worried about that boat," he says, easing himself down into his rocker. "You've been pumping the bilge out regular?"

"I bailed her just before I went to school, and when I got home she was down."

"What did your father say?"

"Nothin' much."

"So it's up to you, is it?"

"I guess."

Mr. Woodwell sips his lemonade and stares out at the creek. "I won't say anything against your father," he says.

"I don't care about him," I say. "I care about the *Mary Rose*."

He gives me a hard look, to see if I mean it, which I do. "Okay then," he says. "I'm too old to be raising sunk boats. I can't hardly lift a hammer, let alone a thirty-six-foot hull."

"But you can tell me how."

"Yes," he says. "That I can do."

### 3

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## *By the Barrel Raised*

OLD Mr. Woodwell, he give me a list of things I need to raise the *Mary Rose*. Fifty feet of rope, a ten-foot plank, and some big steel barrels, what sometimes they call drums. I guess he knew we'd have such things close to hand — every dock on the creek has drums and rope and an old plank or two. Anyhow, first thing I do is fish the rope out of the bait shack. Then I drag a plank out of the woodpile and set it on the dock. The plank has a little green moss along the edge, but it's still plenty strong. There's half a dozen empty steel drums behind the bait shack, and I roll out the four have the least rust. All of 'em got

rainwater sloshing around inside, so I tip each one up and empty it out, then fix the cap down tight to make it watertight, or nearly so.

"Four drums will lift two thousand pounds, approximate. That should be just enough to shift the keel," Mr. Woodwell told me. "You put that rig in place and then let the tide do the work."

His idea is tie two barrels to each end of the plank, then run a rope from one end of the plank down under the back end of the *Mary Rose* and up to the other two barrels.

When the tide comes in, the big steel barrels will float up and lift the boat.

"Sounds awful easy," I told him.

"A thing doesn't have to be difficult if you give it some thought and apply a little elementary physics."

To look at him, you wouldn't think Mr. Woodwell was so smart, but he is. My dad used to say a good boatbuilder was partway an artist and partway a scientist, and it was the science part of Mr. Woodwell that was going to help me raise our boat.

Not that my dad cares. Never even sticks his head out the door to see what all the fuss is, with me banging

barrels around and talking loud to myself, like I'll go, "Guess I'm on my own out here!" and, "Sure could use a hand with this heavy plank!" and, "Anybody know how to tie a good knot?" and so on.

Finally I give up trying to rouse him and concentrate on rigging the barrels like Mr. Woodwell told me. What sounded dead easy takes me all the rest of the afternoon and partway into the evening. That's okay because the tide won't turn until about nine tonight.

I get it all rigged with an hour or so to spare, so I figure to cook supper for me and Dad while I'm waiting for the tide. He don't care about food much these days, but you got to eat.

"Don't trouble yourself," he says from the couch. There's a show on the TV he's pretending to watch.

"No trouble at all," I go. "Easy to cook for two as for one. You'll need your strength if you're gonna help me with the boat."

He sighs kind of heavy and goes, "Nothing to be done, even if we raised it. She'll just sink again."

"Maybe not."



“Salt water kills an engine dead, once it gets inside. Boat’s no good without an engine.”

“Here. Eat your spaghetti.”

I’m pretty good with store-bought tomato sauce. The way you do it is add fried sausage and onions and cover the whole mess with grated cheese. Spaghetti’s fine, I give you that. But by rights we should be eating fresh cod and lobster, only you need a boat to catch ’em. Which I figure to do myself, if Dad can’t be bothered.

See, I got it all figured out. Raise the boat, fix the leak, fix the engine, then go fishing. Supposedly I ain’t tall enough yet to steer *Rose* by myself, but if I stand on a milk crate I can see good enough. It’ll be fun, fishing on my own, and when Dad hears about me working the traps, it’ll shame him into helping.

That’s my plan. But when my dad gets a beer from the Frigidaire and goes back to the TV couch, all he says is, “Be careful. I couldn’t stand it if you drowned yourself.”

I go, “You could give me a hand,” but he don’t say nothing back.

Outside, it's real still, like it gets when the sun has just gone down and the tide is about to change. Like the world is holding its breath and you want to hold yours, too, to make it last. I climb out on the plank and tighten up the ropes some and then there's nothing to do but wait. Hoping that old Mr. Woodwell got it right, and the tide will lift the boat. I'll save worrying about the ruined engine for later.

All the barrels have to do is raise the boat clear of the bottom, then I can pull the bow onto shore. I got that rigged, too, a one-ton come-along winch where all you got to do is crank the handle. That was my idea, and Mr. Woodwell approved.

I'm thinking about all these things at once: the tide coming in, the barrels floating over the sunk boat, what happened to the boat when it went underwater and how much of the gear got ruined, my dad on the couch. My dad on the couch and the summer ahead of me like a big blue train I'm chasing.

I'm thinking so hard, I don't hear Captain Keelson rowing down the creek.

"Skiff Beaman!" he says, loud enough to jog me. "What's up, Little Skiff?"

Captain Keelson is leaning on his oars. Even in the dark I can see the worry on his face. He ain't near as old as Mr. Woodwell, but he's pretty old. He says the rowing keeps him young, but if you ask me, it don't show much.

"Boat went under," I tell him.

He nods. "Yup, I can see that. You rig those steel drums by yourself?"

"Mr. Woodwell told me how."

"Ah yup. What happens when she lifts?"

I tell him about the come-along winch. He thinks about it and nods again. "Should work," he says, talking in his slow way. "Where's your paw?"

"Just nipped inside. He'll be right out."

"That so? Well, you give him my regards."

Then he glides away, dipping his long oars into the water so smooth and soft, it makes me wish I could be rowing, too, out on the creek in the dark, rowing away from everything.

Thinking about rowing on the dark water makes me tired and I lie back on the dock for just a little while, with the current humming around the pilings. Moving water sounds sleepy, like a tired person going

“shush,” and before you know it I’m flat-out fast asleep.

In the dream I’m adrift on the current in a leaky boat in the dark of night and can’t find my oars and can’t see the shore and can’t do nothing to save myself. I want to shout out for help but my voice don’t work and it don’t matter anyhow because there’s no one can hear me.

What finally wakes me is the barrels nudging against the dock, *bonk-bonk*, and the top of the *Mary Rose* white as the moon, raised up from the bottom, come back to life, just waiting on me to fix her.

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## *Rotten to the Keel*

MY dad never does come out to see the boat. When I wake him up on the TV couch and tell him the *Mary Rose* is high and dry, he looks at me like he don't understand.

"How'd you manage that?" he asks.

When I explain about the barrel rig, he shakes his head. "All on your lonesome?" he says, like I bragged on going to the moon and back and he didn't quite believe me. "A twelve-year-old boy, and small for his age?"

"I ain't that small! Plenty boys my age are smaller'n me. Besides, a thing don't have to be difficult if you

give it some thought and apply a little elementary physics.”

I knew that one would stump him, if he didn't guess I'd borrowed it from Mr. Woodwell. But as nice as he was being, acting all impressed, it still wasn't enough to shift him off the TV couch and see it with his own eyes.

I'm bone-tired from cranking on that winch but too excited to go to bed yet, so I go out on the dock and stand there under all the stars and admire the boat. What with the dark and the deep shadows, you can't tell how hurt she is, or know the engine is probably ruined. At night she don't look much worse than the last time she was hauled out for painting, more than a year ago.

They say a thing that's broke can always be fixed, if you work at it. And that's what I intend to do, no matter what.

When morning comes, I'm up with the sun, busting around the kitchen like an itch you can't scratch. That's what my mom used to say when I got an idea in my head and wouldn't be shut of it. This morning

my idea is pancakes first and then fix the boat. I'm a demon for pancakes. That's another thing my mom used to say. I'm in mind of her because of the boat, I guess. But Dad don't want to hear nothing about Mom; he says it only gets him down and what's the use and better not to think about it.

So far he's been doing a pretty good job of not thinking about much of anything, but he don't say no to a plate of pancakes.

"These Aunt Jemima from the box?" he asks.

"No, she come over and helped me mix 'em up from scratch," I say. "What's a matter, they don't taste good enough for you?"

"No, no. They're perfect, Skiff. Delicious. I didn't mean — they remind me . . . oh, never mind."

Pancakes ain't supposed to make you look like you want to cry. Me, I'm feeling fine and dandy; I won't let no blubbery looks ruin what I got in mind for the morning, which is fix the boat, have lunch, then go fishing.

The boat got a different idea. When I crouch and look under, down at the bottom by the keel, I can see where one whole plank has come loose. I poke at her

with my jackknife and the wood is soft and crumbly. Rotten. I can't figure what to do about it, so I climb in the boat and pull up the floorboards and look at it from that side.

One thing I know, you ain't supposed to see daylight when you look at the bottom of a boat. This is bad, real bad. I'm worried maybe the whole of her is rotten and can't be fixed. That she'll never float again. That all my plans for the summer are just plain stupid, and Tyler Croft is right about me being a swampy good-for-nothing.

Or maybe I ate too many pancakes and the syrup has gone to my head. Like Mom used to say, looking at the thing won't fix it. And since I ain't got the first clue where to start, I get in my skiff and row up to Mr. Woodwell's place again.

When I get there he's out in the shed where he used to build his boats. It's a big, spacey kind of building with windows high up, and daylight coming down in beams, and the clean smell of wood shavings in the air.

He's standing by the tool bench but not working on nothing. Just smoking on his corncob pipe and



looking kind of wistful. Thinking about the empty shed, I guess, and all the boats he built there.

“’lo, Samuel,” he says. “Did she rise?”

I tell him everything worked just like he said it would, and the *Mary Rose* is high and dry, but now I’m stumped. I tell him about the plank that sprung loose near the keel, and how I’m pretty sure it’s gone bad.

Mr. Woodwell puffs on his pipe for a bit. “Your dad could repair that, no trouble at all. He knows about such things.”

“He’s not in the mood for fixing stuff.”

“But you’re willing?”

I nod. “Only I don’t know how.”

Those cool gray eyes of his kind of soak me up as he thinks about it. When he speaks it comes out deliberate and careful, like always.

“You’re willing to learn, I can see that. Mmm,” he goes, puffing on the cob. “I’ll have to survey the damage. Yup, that’s the first thing. Can you get me down there in your skiff, do you think? To the scene of the crime?”

The old man takes a long time lowering himself

from the dock to the skiff, but I know better than to rush him. Once he's settled, I row out into the creek and let the current take us.

Mr. Woodwell trails a hand in the water and smiles with his eyes, staring off at the tall pine trees along the shore. "Been some time since I've been out on the creek," he says. "Thank you."

"I ain't done nothing. You're the one doing the favor."

That makes him chuckle deep in his throat. "You always say it straight out, don't you? Much like your father. Did you know he worked for me when he was your age and a bit older?"

"Sure," I say. "He still brags on it."

"Does he now? He was a quick study, Big Skiff was, and a hard worker. By which I mean he worked hard to get it right, whatever he did. Could have been a fine boatbuilder if he'd had a mind to. But the sea drew him. Wanted that open sky around him. Finest kind of fisherman, your father. Best man with a harpoon in Spinney Cove, no doubt about it."

"I guess."

"It's still there. Give him time."

“Yes, sir, I will.”

But really I’m thinking, what can you do with a man who blubbers when you make him pancakes?

I give Mr. Woodwell a hand getting from my skiff to our dock and it’s amazing how light he is, for a grown-up. Like his bones are hollow or something.

“There now,” he says, straightening up. “I’ll take just a minute. If I move too fast, my head forgets where it is.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you know how old I am, Samuel?”

“No, sir.”

“I’ll be ninety-four in August. I was an old man when your father came to work for me, and that was many years ago.”

“Yes, sir.”

“My eyes aren’t so good, but I can still see a thing by touching.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m telling you this because it will take me some time and I’m asking you to be patient. Boys are not patient creatures, as a rule.”

I swear to him I’ll be patient, but waiting for the old

man does try me. Watching paint dry is a speed sport compared to watching Mr. Woodwell inspect *Rose*. He touches every part of her with his skinny bone-looking old hands, from the bow all the way along the keel to the stern. He has to bend over to get under the boat, and I can see it hurts him, but there's a look in his eye that says don't say nothing, and I don't.

It's getting on to noon when the old man finally works himself out from under the boat. "You may help me stand," he says, holding out his hand.

I help him up. He takes a deep breath and finds his balance.

"Could be worse," he says.

"The boat," I say, "or you?"

That gets him laughing until his eyes are wet. "Oh, you are a spark, Samuel." He takes a breath that whistles inside his nose. "Now, the boat. Garboard planks are rotten on both sides of the keel, but the keel itself is sound enough. There's nothing that can't be repaired. No reason the *Mary Rose* can't be made as good as new."

That makes me so happy, I run up to the house to tell my dad, even if he don't care right now.

## *Attack of the Vampire Mud Worms*

I' M wrong about Dad, sort of. Turns out he's pleased about the boat, or anyhow about Mr. Woodwell helping me fix her.

"Good old Amos," my dad says, sitting up on his couch. "I most forgot he was still alive! Amos Woodwell! Yup, he give me a hand when I really needed it, way back when."

"He said you could have been a real fine boat-builder, if you wanted."

"Amos said that?" my dad goes, acting pleased. "I don't know. There was a time I followed him around like a little puppy dog. Things were pretty bad at

home, if I remember correctly, and I moved into Amos Woodwell's boat shed for the summer and partways into the fall. He taught me a few things. Not just boats."

"Mr. Woodwell says there's nothing wrong with Rose that can't be fixed."

He nods and rubs his eyes. "Amos'd know. She was one of the last boats came out of his shed."

I ain't seen my dad acting this interested in anything for a long while, but it don't last. When I start telling him what we got to do, pulling off the bad planks and stuff, his eyes get that look that means he's not listening and pretty soon he's staring at the TV again and sighing. The sighing part really gets my goat.

I suppose a really good son wouldn't try to shame his father, but I can't help it, the words just come out mean. "Hey, Dad? I'm off to get the toolbox. You recall the toolbox? Man needs tools to work. Screwdrivers and hammers and stuff. Plenty of tools there, you want to help," and so on.

Might as well talk to the TV, for all the good it does.

The *Mary Rose* is waiting for me with her bad side turned up, like a dog holding up a hurt paw. Mr. Woodwell says the only thing I need right now is a screwdriver and a pry bar, but I bring along a hammer, too, just in case I want to hit something.

"Hello, Rose," I say, sliding under the bottom and wiggling my way down to where the keel sits in the mud. It's drippy under there because the planks are still weeping and you got to be careful of barnacles. Barnacles are sharp as razors if you hit 'em just right.

"Mr. Woodwell says I got to pry off these two planks, Rose. I hope you don't mind."

Sounds pretty crazy, a boy talking to a boat, but I always talked to that boat, ever since I was little. My mom used to say don't worry unless the boat talks back to him. It ain't happened yet, and I don't expect it ever will. But that don't stop me trying.

"Weren't your fault you sank," I tell her. "That was us, not taking care of you. Hold on now, this won't hurt a bit," I say, trying to work the pry bar along the plank that came loose. Being careful, 'cause Mr. Woodwell says we need the whole thing in as near as one piece as I can manage, so we can trace it out and

cut another just like it. But the rotten plank is stubborn, and I have to leave off the pry bar and dig out the screws that hold it to the ribs.

Takes me most of the day to back out the screws. And I have to keep apologizing to the boat for swearing every time I scrape my knuckles on a barnacle.

“Ouch! You miserable . . . stinking . . . scum-sucking . . . stupid barnacle!”

I’m still trying to work the first plank loose when something bites me in the back. I sit up quick and bump my head against the plank, and that don’t improve my language. Then it bites me again and suddenly a bunch of things are down inside my underwear, wriggling around and nipping at me.

That gets me crawling out from under the boat as fast as I can. It ain’t until I’m standing up that I figure out what’s going on. Mud worms! I been lying on one place for so long, they finally found me. I’m mad enough to spit, and scared, too, because they won’t stop biting.

The only thing I can think to do is strip off my pants and jump in the water. That works. When I hit the cold water and give my underwear a shake, the



worms let go. But it ain't over, not quite. Soon as I wade back to shore and pick up my pants, this monkey starts hooting at me. Monkey by the name of Tyler Croft.

"Hooey! Lobster boy! That where you take a bath, that dirty old creek?!"

Just my luck. Tyler and a couple of his rich-kid buds from up the cove. Joey Gleeson and Parker Beal. Parker ain't no bigger than me, but hanging with Tyler makes him think he's tough, I guess. All three of them showing off on their fancy mountain bikes.

"Hey Skiffy!" goes Parker Beal. "Is that mud on your underwear or did you poop in your pants?"

"Come on down here and find out," I tell him.

No chance of that. Might ruin his hundred-dollar shoes. After a while they get sick of calling me names and ride away laughing.

Maybe I should feel bad, getting made fun of like that, only it seems so stupid, I can't take it serious.

Bloodsucking mud worms, now *that's* serious.

No point telling my dad about the worms, he'd only say a swamper boy should know better than to

lie down in the mud. Anyhow, by the time I get cleaned up he's already had a bunch of beers and don't want to talk.

Like I said before, some kids when their fathers drink, they bust up the house or hit their mom or worse. Not my dad. He just lies on the couch and don't say nothing. Only way I can tell is the smell of beer and the way he breathes sort of heavy.

"'lo, Dad," I go, "mind if I watch?"

He makes a grunt that means "go ahead," and I flop down in the ratty old chair by the ratty old couch and stare at the screen. Actually it's a show I like, about cops and lawyers solving crimes and stuff, where everything gets settled in the end. Wouldn't that be great, if everything really fixed itself that easy? Like if because I raised the boat my dad would quit drinking and turn over a new leaf or something.

It don't work that way in the real world. Still, even with the beer and all, it's sort of cool, the two of us watching the same show and probably thinking the same things about it.

In the end he's asleep before the show gets over. I

already know what happens, so I turn off the TV and go, "Sleep tight and don't let the bedbugs bite."

When I'm halfway up the stairs, he calls out, sort of sleepy, "Your mother used to say that."

"She still does," I say, because it's true inside my head.

He don't say nothing to that.

## 6

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### *The Finest Kind*

ONE of the best things about Mr. Woodwell's boat shed is the clean smell of wood shavings and varnish. It sort of clears my head to take a deep breath. Even the smoke from his little corncob pipe smells good, the way it blends in.

When I drag the bad planks into the shed, he's sitting on a stool at his workbench, sharpening his chisels on an oil stone.

"'lo, Samuel," he says without looking up. "Lay those down on the sawhorses, if you please, next to the cedar planks."

I lay 'em down and rub my hands on my pants.  
"Took a lot longer than I figured."

Mr. Woodwell nods as he wraps his chisels up in soft cloth. "That's the way it is with boats."

I reach in my left pocket and pull out an envelope. "I only got twenty-eight dollars for the new wood right now," I tell him. "So can we go up to that and then stop?"

The old man smiles. "I figured to charge you exactly what I paid for it," he says, "which was nothing."

"Somebody gave it to you?"

"My father did, many years ago. He left me a woodlot full of prime white cedar. That's how I first got started in the business of building boats. Had to do something with all that cedar, didn't I?"

"I guess."

"So you can put the money away. You're going to need that and a lot more to repair the engine, when it comes to that."

We go over to the sawhorses and he shows me how to clamp the old plank onto the new wood and trace

around it with a pencil. When I'm done tracing he has me take the clamps off and carry the new plank to the band-saw table.

"We'll have to be very careful," he says. "Keep your hands well away from the blade."

"You want me to cut it?"

"My eyes are weak, Samuel. I can't see the line. I'll guide you through it. First rule: Never rush a cut. Second rule: Let the blade do the cutting. Don't force it. Third rule, especially for beginners: Don't cut too close to the line."

We position the new plank on the cutting table. The old man presses a button, and the band-saw blade starts running. "Ease it forward," he says putting one hand on the plank, near mine. He can tell I'm scared to make a mistake and ruin the plank. "Can you steer a small boat into the current?" he asks.

"Sure. That's how I got here."

"Think of this plank as a boat. You're steering the plank so the blade stays on that side of the line."

It makes sense. At first I'm sort of wobbly and worried the blade will get ahead of me, but then I realize

the blade don't move, the plank does, and nothing won't happen until I make it happen, and from then on we're okay.

After I get the plank cut out, Mr. Woodwell has me set it in his bench vise and he takes up a block plane. "This part I can still manage," he says.

What he does is feel along the edge for the pencil mark, and shave off the wood real smooth until it's just touching the line. "How does it look?" he asks. "If the line disappears, you tell me."

I go, "It's perfect, Mr. Woodwell," and that makes him smile and nod to himself, like he wasn't sure he could still do it until he started.

After we get the new plank shaped, we take a break so Mr. Woodwell can puff on his cob pipe for a while and I can drink lemonade and have a plate of cookies to keep up my strength. I'm munching a cookie and gandering around the shed when I notice this big old harpoon up on the shed wall, sort of hiding in the shadows. The kind of skinny, wicked long harpoon used for giant tuna, like my dad used to catch before he switched to TV and beer.

"That was your father's," Mr. Woodwell says, when he sees me looking. "Shaped it himself, that year he worked with me. Last thing he ever made in this shop. Left it here as a memento."

"What's a memento?"

"A token of friendship. Something to remember a person by."

Mr. Woodwell looks like he's got more to say, but he holds back. I guess he knows I ain't in a mood to talk about my dad right now, or what a great harpooner he used to be, or how many big fish he caught when times were good.

When the old man finishes his pipe he goes back to his bench and takes out a different plane. He explains that the new plank needs a beveled edge so it will fit up tight against the keel.

"This is the tricky part," he says, showing me what he's doing. "Fortunately I know that particular keel pretty well, and remember where it curves."

"You want me to do it?"

"Rather you watch and make sure I don't make a mistake."



The old man is pulling my leg, of course. I bet he ain't made a mistake in a long time. You can tell the way he holds the plane and skates it over the edge. The way he makes the shavings flutter down into thin little pieces of wood that look like curly wings.

"Smell that?" he asks. "Fresh-cut cedar, like they'll put in a chest or closet to keep the moths away. This particular plank has been seasoning here in the shed for near on twenty years, but it still cuts fresh. Nothing like it."

It takes us the rest of the day to get the new planks ready. When they're done, Mr. Woodwell suggests we stand back and admire our work.

"Not bad," he says, nodding with satisfaction, "not bad at all, for a young boy and an old geezer with bad eyes. I think we're a pretty good team, Samuel, don't you?"

"Yes, sir," I say. "Finest kind."

## *The Ringing of the Hammer*

PUTTING on the new planks takes two whole days. I learned my lesson with the mud worms, so I drug out an old piece of plywood and lay on that. Then I clamped the plank to the ribs like the old man told me, and drilled holes for the new screws. Then I put the screws in, all one hundred and ten of them, and that took forever. Then I had to put in the plugs that covered the screws, and that took forever, too.

Got to know the bottom of that boat real good. Every dent and seam, every place it had ever been repaired.

"Won't be long now," I keep telling her. "'nother day or two you'll be floating on your own. Maybe the engine ain't ruined and you'll take me fishing and make us some money, hey Rose? You were always good at finding fish."

One time Captain Keelson rows over and checks out the job. He used to be a tugboat captain, and tugboats are made of steel, but he knows a thing or two about wooden boats and gives me a thumbs-up on what I done so far.

"Heard from Amos Woodwell on the telephone," he says. "Asked me to set the cotton when you're ready, with your permission."

That makes me laugh, a fine and proper gentleman like Captain Keelson asking my permission to help. Setting the cotton has got me worried, because the old man says if it ain't done right, the boat will still leak, even with new planks.

The day we're ready, *Rose* and me, they both come by, Captain Keelson and Mr. Woodwell, together in the captain's red Ford pickup truck. The old man has brought a canvas tool bag that holds caulking irons

and a big wooden mallet, and a coil of fluffy white cotton. He hands it all over to Captain Keelson. "Make her ring true, Alex," he says.

The way it works is, you shove cotton into the seam between the plank and the keel with a caulking iron, which is like a dull chisel with a wide blade. Then you womp on the chisel with the wooden mallet and drive the cotton home. If you do it right, the caulking iron makes a ringing noise as the mallet strikes. Then later, when the wood swells up in the water, it will press the cotton tight and keep the plank from leaking.

Mr. Woodwell says they been doing it pretty much like this since the first wooden boat was built, and not to worry, it'll work just fine.

My job is to move the caulking iron along the seam while Captain Keelson hits it *womp!* with his big wooden mallet. "I will try my best not to miss," he promises.

He don't miss, not once in two hours, and I'm grateful for that. But still, my hands hurt from gripping that iron. By the end it feels like the ringing of the mallet comes from deep inside my bones.

After the cotton is set, Captain Keelson crawls out

from under the boat and dusts himself off. He goes, "I leave the rest to you," and he and Mr. Woodwell sit on the dock and watch me fill the seams with tubes of caulking compound. They holler stuff like, "This is the life, watching a boy do a man's job! Stick to it or the caulking will stick to you!" and so on, but I don't mind. It's not like Tyler Croft ragging on me or nothing. Old guys like them only tease you if they like you.

When I finally crawl out, Captain Keelson shakes his head and goes, "Young man, I hope you got as much caulking on the hull as you got on yourself," but I'm too tired to joke back.

Tired as I am, I can't wait for tomorrow. That's when we'll see if the planks hold and keep the water out. That's when we'll know if the *Mary Rose* is ready to go fishing.

I decide from now on if my dad don't bother asking about the boat, then I won't bother telling. I'm sick of pushing stuff on him that he don't want pushed. All it does is put me in a mood, and believe me, that ain't a pretty sight. When I'm in a mood I get all sulky and just want to be miserable. It's like when I'm in a

mood, being miserable is the only thing that makes me happy. Weird but true.

So, no moods, thank you. Just make Dad his supper and see he eats some of it. Take out the empty beer cans and hide 'em in the shed so the guys who pick up the trash won't have nothing to talk about. Go to bed early and read my stash of comic books, the ones I found in the shed about The Flash and Green Lantern and Batman before he was a movie. Except I've read 'em so many times, I'm not really seeing the page, I'm seeing the *Mary Rose* and worrying she'll leak as bad as she did before, and sink again. And I'll keep trying to fix her and she'll keep sinking, and that's when I know I'm asleep and dreaming, but there's nothing I can do to make myself wake up until the alarm clock finally goes off.

*Brinnnnng, brinnnnng.*

Bring me some luck, please. I sure could use it.

## 8

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### *What the Grease Monkey Said*

WHEN the morning tide comes in, I'm ready. Got the winch rigged at the deep end of the dock, to pull the *Mary Rose* free of the shore. Got lines fixed to tie her alongside the dock so she don't drift away. Got my fingers crossed, and my toes crossed, too, hoping she won't leak too bad.

It's one of them soft and misty mornings on the creek. Happens in the summer when the water starts to warm up. Ain't thick enough to be a proper fog, mind you, just a thin, wispy mist that leaves everything kind of blurred. You can't quite tell where the

shore lets off and the water begins, and the tall pines look like they're melting into the sky.

There's almost always good fishing when the mist comes on the creek. Fish like to feed in the soft light. Normal times, a day like this, I'd be out in my skiff looking for striper swirls. Instead, I'm waiting with my stomach all clenched up like somebody punched me. Wanting to get it over with, the not being sure.

Can't hurry the tide, though. Tide has a mind of its own. Eventually it does cooperate. When the water's lapping around the high marks on the pilings, I give the winch a couple of cranks until the line goes tight. Then I wait a few minutes and do it again. And again.

That's how the boat comes free, a few inches at a time. About as much fun as watching ice melt — until all of a sudden the winch line goes slack and the *Mary Rose* is floating free.

It seems too easy somehow, and that makes me worried what I'll find. But when I hop aboard and crawl into the bilge to look, the boat is dry inside. No leaks to speak of. I run my hands over the new planks and find a few beads of moisture at the seams, but



from what Mr. Woodwell told me, it don't amount to nothing.

"Thank you, Rose," I tell her, "for not giving up."

I'm thinking maybe I should jump up and yell "hurrah!" or something when I hear footsteps coming along the dock.

My dad is standing there, pale as milk.

"I'll be darned," he says, rubbing his eyes. "You did it."

But he don't sound happy. And he looks like he's seen a ghost.

Mike Haley, the diesel mechanic, comes by in the afternoon like he promised when I found his number in the book.

"Big Skiff around?" is the first thing he says.

"He's got the flu," I tell him.

"The flu, huh?" Mike looks up at the house like he don't quite believe me, but then he lets it go. "Heard the *Mary Rose* sunk at the dock. Figured your dad would call me."

"He don't much like the phone."

Mike gives me a funny look. "Is that right?"

"I can pay you to look at the engine." I show him the envelope. Same envelope I offered to Mr. Woodwell.

Mike shakes his head. "No charge for a consultation. Hope you aren't expecting good news on an engine that's been submerged in salt water."

"But you can fix it."

"Depends. Let me have a look."

He climbs into the cockpit with his wrench box. The engine cover is stuck where it swelled up. That makes him sigh and shake his head, like the whole idea of a sunk boat turns his stomach. He goes at the hatch with a pry bar. The hinges sound like a cat with a stepped-on tail, but he gets it open.

"Here goes nothing," Mike says. Talking to himself, not to me. He climbs down beside the engine. I can tell he don't like me staring at him, so I go sit on the end of the dock and wait for him to finish.

It don't take long.

"Skiffy? That what they call you?" He sits down beside me, clears his throat, and spits into the creek. "Wish I had better news, son. I'm just an old grease

monkey, but I've been climbing around boat engines for long enough to know the score."

"So can you fix it?"

He looks at me kind of sorrowful. "You mean like add some oil, turn the key, and off she goes?"

"Whatever," I say, embarrassed that he read my mind.

"That would be a miracle, kid, and in my experience, miracles don't happen to boat engines."

"So it can't be fixed."

"Hang on now. Hear me out. It's not as simple as can it be fixed or not. The exhaust manifolds were about rusted through even before she sank. They'd have to be replaced. Starter is shot, and diesel starters are pricey." Mike's talking faster and faster, like he's getting rid of words he don't like. "All new wiring," he goes, counting on his fingers. "New batteries. It may need new pistons — can't tell until I pull the head. New main bearings, that's a certainty. So the answer is, yes, I can fix it, but we're talking a major rebuild, okay?"

"How much?" I ask, thinking of my pitiful little envelope.

Mike sighs like he's the one been sunk. "Even with the fisherman discount, you're looking at a five-thousand-dollar job. Minimum. Could go higher, I start tearing her down and find something else."

I don't know what to say. Five thousand dollars is a mighty big chunk of money. If my dad was fishing, he might get lucky and make that much pretty quick. Once when the tuna were running he made enough in a month to buy an almost-brand-new pickup truck. But he can't fish without a boat. So it might as well be five million as five thousand.

"Tell you what," Mike says. "Have your father call me. I'll tell him myself."

Probably he says some other stuff before he leaves, but I'm not listening. I'm scheming how to find a way to make five thousand dollars before the summer is over, and that about fills up my whole brain.

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## *Money by the Pound*

“So what did Mike say?” my dad asks.

I tell him the short and sweet of it.

“Five grand, huh? I figured a lot more.”

“Do we have the money?” I ask.

Dad shrugs himself around on the couch, so he’s staring at a different part of the ceiling. “You know we don’t,” he says.

“Then it don’t make no difference, does it?”

He shades his eyes and looks at me. “Don’t be mad at me, Skiffy. I couldn’t stand it if my own son was mad at me.”

That makes me feel pretty rotten, because it’s true.

But I know it ain't fair to be mad at my dad because we're poor, so I go, "Ready for some lunch? Today is grilled cheese day."

By the time the sandwiches are ready I'm over feeling low. Because I got a plan to get the money and solve all our problems.

All along I been concentrating on *Rose*, getting her fixed. I been thinking so hard on that, I forgot she ain't the only boat in the world. There's the skiff my dad built me for my ninth birthday. I been up and down the creek in it a million times, and all over the harbor, too. It's a good little boat, and the outboard runs most of the time. No reason the skiff can't be put to work earning money.

After lunch I get out the calculator.

Okay, here goes. Figure my skiff is big enough to hold me and three lobster traps. Three at a time. There are two hundred perfectly good traps stacked on the dock right now, all licensed and tagged, not doing nothing since my dad quit fishing. If I bring 'em out three at a time I can be fishing all two hundred traps in a couple of weeks.

This time of year they're paying two bucks a pound for lobster at the co-op. So figure two thousand five hundred lobsters equals a rebuilt engine for the *Mary Rose*. Sounds like a lot, but that means each trap has only got to catch about thirteen lobster and we're home free.

Thirteen lobster. That's all. That's the magic fix-the-engine number. Thirteen for each trap and I got all summer to catch 'em. That's like two lobster a week in each trap! This is going to be so easy, I can't think what I was so worried about.

Best thing of all, I can start right away.

There's really no point letting Dad know, but I'm so excited, I tell him anyhow. He looks at me waving a sheet of paper with all my calculations on it and he closes his eyes and sighs.

"It ain't that easy," he says. "You're forgetting what it costs for bait and lost traps and gas for the outboard. And sometime the lobster don't cooperate, you know that."

"The point is, I'll be making money."

"Boy your age should be playing with his friends."

Like I said, no point telling him. All he looks at is

the bad side. Like why bother if things are going to go wrong? He's been like that since Mom got sick and stays that way no matter what I say or do.

It ain't an easy thing, but I got to forget about Dad on the TV couch and concentrate on my own stuff. Maybe he'll come around and maybe he won't, but in the meantime there's lobster out there just waiting to crawl into my traps.

Money by the pound. Easy pickings.

First day after lunch I work like a demon dragging traps to my skiff. Lobster trap is an awkward thing to handle because the weight is all in the bottom. That's to make it sink, of course. But it means I need to be careful how I load the traps into the skiff, so I don't tip the boat over.

Once I get the first three traps into the skiff, I fire up the outboard motor and take us down the creek and into the harbor and up to the wharf at Murphy's Bait & Fuel. I leave five dollars in the jar for a bucket of bait and try to skedaddle before anybody thinks to ask what I'm up to. They're pretty busy salting down a new load of herring, but Devlin Murphy, the boss



and owner, he gives me the eye and comes over before I can get away.

I can tell he wants to talk and I'd rather not.

"Bucket of bait? If your old man is back fishing, he's going to want it by the barrel."

I go, "Yes, sir. See you later," and try to scoot out the door.

"Not so fast!" Devlin says, laughing through his beard. He's this huge guy with a big chest and belly and legs that look like tree stumps. He hooks a finger in my shirt and slows me up. "What are you up to, Skiffy? This bait for your dad or what? Heard you fixed the *Mary Rose*, is that it? He finally getting back into it, is he?"

Devlin Murphy is a fiend for gossip. Always wants to know everything that's happening on the creek and round the harbor. My mom used to say he was better than a radio station for having all the local news, and he'll keep at you until you tell him every little thing, even if you don't mean to.

I finally have to tell him the bait is for me.

"Oh," he says, "you going to fish a few traps this summer? Good for you, son."

He follows me out to the wharf and spots the skiff tied up at the end. "Hey, I remember when Big Skiff built that! Lovely lines. You think you can haul up a trap all by yourself?" He laughs and squeezes the muscle on my arm, and that gets me riled.

"For your information, I'll be fishing all two hundred traps," I go, bragging on my own idea. "If you don't think I can pull 'em, just watch me."

That shuts him up, but only for a second. All of a sudden he's looking serious. "What about the *Mary Rose*? I heard you and Amos Woodwell fixed her up."

I shrug. "Bad engine. We're saving up to have it rebuilt."

He scratches at his thick red beard, wrinkles his fat nose, and studies me. "Uh, yuh. That makes sense. Let me think on this. Two hundred traps from a ten-foot skiff. Mmm. That's a whole lot of traps to be hand pulling, young Skiffy. Your dad worked that many with a full-size boat and a hydraulic puller."

"I got the skiff," I tell him, "so that's what I'm using."

He rubs the top of my head, which I hate more than anything. "Tell you what," he says. "We'll set up an

account for you, like I did with your father. Give you the fisherman's discount. You can charge the bait and gas you need, and we'll settle up at the end of the summer. That okay with you?"

"Sure it is. Thanks, Mr. Murphy."

"My customers call me Dev. Now you go on and catch a ton of lobster, son. And tell your father Dev Murphy says hello."

He stands there at the end of the wharf, big as his own bait shack, and watches until I'm out of sight.

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## *Lobster in the Parlor*

THINGS go real good the first two weeks. I'm up with the sun every morning, raring to go. Have my toast and cereal and then run for the dock. Check to make sure *Rose* ain't leaking — nope, dry as a bone — and then drag traps out to the end of the dock and lower 'em into my skiff.

If you do it right you don't have to lift much. Trap itself ain't that heavy, but it's got bricks in the bottom to make it sink. Anyhow, I'll load on, fire up the out-board, go down creek to the harbor, fetch a bucket of bait from Dev Murphy, then off again to wherever I'm setting traps.

Setting traps, that's where the science comes into it. Everybody says so. You got to put your trap where the lobster lives. Lobster crawls along the bottom eating what it can find. So you got to think what the bottom might be like even if you can't see it. Watch where the current whirls, and how the shore comes down. Try to picture it down there. Mostly it's a feeling you get, that this is a good place to set a trap.

'Course there's about a hundred other guys setting traps, too, and you got to take that into account. Set too close to one of theirs, they don't like it. What they'll do is tie a hitch in the line to your buoy, as a signal to back off. That's if they're being nice. Push it far enough, buoys get cut. Then you got a trap on the bottom and no way to find it. Which don't do nobody no good.

Anyhow, by the end of the first week I get near a hundred traps in the water, all baited and waiting for visitors. The old saying is, first the kitchen, then the parlor. See, a trap is divided into two "rooms." First room the lobster crawls into is called the "kitchen." Kitchen has the bait bag and the lobster wants to get at it. But when he tries to leave the kitchen, only place

he can go is the "parlor," and there's no getting out of the parlor. Lobster is stuck in there until you pull the trap.

Only thing, pulling the traps out of the water turns out to be a whole lot harder than putting them in.

I wait four days and then go back to the first string of traps. Can't wait to see what it caught. Picturing it chock-full of two-pound lobsters. But when I grab hold of the buoy and start pulling in line, it don't budge. Trap feels like it's been nailed to the bottom.

I cleat down the line, rub my hands together, and try again. This time it shifts a little, but then the rope slips through my hands and the trap clunks back on the bottom.

How can a thing that's made of wood and sunk in the water feel so heavy?

Finally I figure a way to pull the rope up and keep it cinched around a cleat so it don't slip back, and that's how the first trap comes up, a few feet at a time. By the time it comes over the side, slick and dripping, my arms are shaking from the effort.

But that don't matter because there's stuff in the trap. Lobsters, lots of 'em, and a bunch of crabs.

Trouble is, all but one of the lobsters is too small to keep. They're real strict about that. It makes me sick, having to throw back the shorts, but you got to do it.

Still, I do get one keeper.

One down and two thousand four hundred and ninety-nine to go.

"Wake up, Skiffy."

I jump up. Has the alarm gone off? But I'm in the living room not my bedroom and it ain't morning it's night, or getting there. Must have dropped off accidental.

"Figured to let you sleep," says my dad. "You want, I'll fix us some supper."

"Got twelve keepers and a bucket of crab," I tell him.

"So you said. That's good."

I can't recall the last time my dad fixed supper. It's only hot dogs in the fry pan, but still, that's something. Nothing wrong with dogs and beans. Except my hands are so tired and achy from hauling traps, I can barely hang on to the fork.

"Had me a string of traps when I was your age."

"That so?" I go, watching him crack open a beer.

"Thirty traps, that's all it was. Kept me awful busy, though. Thought my arms was going to fall off the first few days. Then I got used to it."

"I'm already used to it."

"I'm just saying," he says. "Two hundred traps. It's possible you bit off more than you can chew."

I go, "That's your opinion."

He sucks on the beer. "Dev Murphy give you credit?"

"Yup."

"Thought he might."

I'm figuring this is the start of a long yammer. Him telling me what to do and so forth, and stuff about what it was like when he was my age. Like dads and sons are supposed to do. But he picks up his beer and goes back to the TV couch. End of conversation.

Anyhow, the dogs were tasty.

Food makes me sleepy again, and I just about crawl up the stairs. Must have, because that's where I wake up the next morning, in my own bed.

Stupid alarm going *brinnnnng, brinnnnng,*



*brinnnnng*. Bring me some lobster, bring me some money, bring, bring, bring.

What I really feel like is rolling over and hiding my head under the pillow, but there's bait to fetch and traps to pull, so I get up and dress and eat and do it all over again.

And again.

And again.

After a while it ain't as hard. Traps don't seem quite so heavy. Bait bucket is lighter. I can work all day and stay awake for a whole hour after supper. End of two weeks all two hundred traps are fishing and I'm pulling twenty-five a day by hand. Averaging a pound and a half per trap, keeper size, and more crab than I know what to do with. Can't get nothing for small crab, nobody wants it, too hard to pick the meat out, but I don't care. I'm a lobster boy, and all I care about is them crawly bugs with the big claws. Money in the bank.

My brain is humming like a cash register, totaling it up, making change. Take out for gas and bait, I'm still

ahead by nine hundred dollars, and next week looks to be better, everybody says so.

Like I say, things are going real good. So naturally that's when the crud hits the fan.

Miserable rotten crud by the name of Tyler Croft.

## Trap Wars

ONE day I'm leaving Murphy's, loaded up with bait and a couple of traps that need new heads. Heads are the little nets the lobsters crawl through to get into the trap. Anyhow, I'm feeling real good about things and minding my own business, and that's when I notice *Fin Chaser* tied up to the town wharf.

Beautiful boat. Finest kind of tuna boat. Forty-foot hull with a high tower on top for spotting fish, and a bow pulpit near as long as the boat. The idea is, the long pulpit puts the harpooner right over the fish so he can strike down at them before they feel the boat.

I never been out on *Fin Chaser*, but I know all

about it because my dad used to be the best harpooner on the crew. Come August he'd lay up the *Mary Rose* and mate on *Fin Chaser* for a month or so. Fished the boat from Provincetown to Bar Harbor, chasing the big tuna. Sometimes he made more money in that one month than all year lobstering.

One summer my dad harpooned eighteen tuna, twice as many as the next best man in Spinney Cove. That's the year he got his new Ford pickup, and Mom got her new kitchen. He and the *Fin Chaser* owner were really tight until Mom got sick and Dad quit working. Then the *Fin Chaser* guy said something to my dad about him drinking too much, or maybe they argued about money, I'm not really sure, and my dad said something back, and they ain't spoke since.

The problem is, the guy who owns *Fin Chaser* and used to be my dad's best friend? He's also Tyler Croft's father. And there's Tyler on his father's boat, loading the long harpoons aboard and acting wicked cool while his dad, Jack Croft, dumps buckets of ice in the ice hold, getting the boat ready.

Last thing in the world I want is Tyler to notice me, but he does. Gives me a big sneery smile, points at my

little skiff, holds his nose. I ain't close enough to hear, but his father says something sharp, something that wipes the sneer clean off Tyler's face, and then Jack Croft himself looks at me. Short, strong-looking guy with a long-billed cap, and his eyes all squinty from looking for tuna. Studies me and don't say nothing, just gives me a little nod like they do. Then he's talking to Tyler and pointing at me, like he's saying something about me, and Tyler, he sneaks me a look that says, just you wait, lobster boy, just you wait.

Don't have to wait long.

Next day I'm out by Little Sister Rock, just outside the cove. Got a dozen traps set in close to the rock where the lobsters like to hide. It's one of those perfect summer mornings. Water like rippled glass, with just a few soft clouds in the sky, and everything sparkling. The way the sun comes off the water, it's hard to see at first. But I get in as close to the rock as I dare, with the sea slurping over the top and the seaweed floating like a woman's hair, and I pull up the first trap.

Empty. No lobsters, no crabs, no bait left in the kitchen. Nothing.

Most traps have at least a crab or two, but it happens.

I put the bait bag in the kitchen, drop it back down. Then I grab the next buoy, pull on the line until I feel the trap lift off the bottom. Wrapping line around a cleat as I go, so I don't lose it. Get the next trap up to the side, grab the end, haul it over the side.

Empty. Same thing as the first. No lobster, no crab. And this time I see where the bait bag has been cut loose. By something sharp enough to cut the head net.

Could be a lobster claw, but where's the lobster? Did they get smart all of a sudden and figure a way to back out of the trap? Don't seem likely.

I got a sick feeling in my stomach that it's something else.

Pull the third trap. Empty. Same as the other two.

Pull the fourth.

Pull the fifth.

Pull the sixth.

Empty, empty, empty.

Take a break, my arms aching. Sun drilling a hole in my head. Then haul another six traps, inch by inch. Foot by foot. All empty. Bait bags cut.

Hits me like a bad clam for breakfast. Somebody is stealing my lobster. Worse, they're cutting out the bait bags so the traps won't attract any more lobsters to replace the ones they stole.

Whoever did this wants me to know.

Only one name comes to mind, would do a thing like that. Tyler Croft. Must have snuck out here and emptied out my traps, letting me know he's better than me. 'Course he knows I can't prove he done it. Could have been anybody. But it wasn't. I know that like I know the smell of a rotting fish.

That makes my whole face hot, but it gets worse.

On the way back in I stop to check on another spot, on the inside bend of the channel where the bottom is rocky.

There's not a buoy of mine in sight.

Ten more traps clean gone. Either stolen or the buoys cut, which amounts to the same thing,

Now it feels like my head is going to explode. The only thing I can think of is, open up the throttle and head over to the town wharf, looking for *Fin Chaser*. But the big boat ain't there. Must be out chasing tuna.

I'm so miserable mad, it hurts, but there ain't

nobody to hit or cuss, so all I can do is go home and mope around, thinking of things I'd like to do to Tyler Croft.

Tie his stupid mountain bike around his neck and throw it in the harbor, and that's just for starters.

Later on I'm banging cupboards and stuff, feeling sorry for myself, when Dad wakes up on the couch.

"What's wrong, Skiffy?"

"Nothin'!"

"Must be something."

"What do you care! Go on back to sleep! Watch your TV shows! Drink your beer!" I say that and a whole lot more, mean as a snake to my own father.

Worst thing is, he don't say nothing back.

No way can I sleep. Not with Tyler out there stealing lobster and cutting buoys. I got to do something, but I don't know what. Find a way to stop him before he puts me out of business.

Just hating the miserable little twerp ain't enough. I been racking brains and nothing comes to mind. Call him names? He don't care. Throw rocks at his head?



He'd throw 'em back, and plenty would pitch in to help. Call his father? I know Tyler, he'd just lie to his dad and keep on with what he's doing. Report him to the Fish & Game? I ain't got proof. Tell my dad? Don't make me laugh. If he wouldn't get off the couch when the boat sank, he ain't gonna move his butt over a few traps.

What it comes down to is this: It's up to me.

That's why, when midnight comes, I sneak out of the house, get in my skiff, untie the lines, and drift down the creek, quiet as the night.

Watch out, rich boy. Lobster boy is coming to get you.

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## *Rich Boy in the Dark of Night*

THE thing about drifting the creek at night is how it makes you feel invisible. Like you can watch the darkness of the world go by but nothing can see you. You can see the tall pines standing like an army of zombies along the shore, with stars for eyes and the wind moving their ragged arms, but they can't find you. Nothing can.

It's like being asleep but watching yourself inside the dream, drifting on the creek. Letting the tide pull you around each bend. Letting the current carry you along but keeping you always safe, always moving.

Until you wake up and remember that what you've

always been afraid of has already come true. Like what happened to Mom and the *Mary Rose* sinking. Makes you never want to wake up, but in the end you got no choice, that's the way it works in this world. You got to wake up, or disappear.

And I ain't about to disappear. Not without a fight.

I can't know what buoys he'll cut next. All I can do is try and guard what's mine. Figure a sneak like Tyler will take the easy way, and hit the traps closest to home. The Croft house is way out on the east end of Spinney Cove, with all the other big houses. Places where they got electronic gates and garages big enough for six cars, and more rooms than people to live in them. Rich-people houses. Houses so important, they got names, like Windswept and Beach Rose and Seaview. Rich guys like Tyler's dad, they don't fish for money, they fish for the fun of it, and because it gives them an excuse to own a big expensive boat and wear a long-billed fisherman's cap.

Nothing wrong with that — you can bet I'd have a wicked big boat if I were rich, and a new hat, too! — but it gets my goat when rich people steal from me. And that's what cutting traps is, plain and simple:

stealing. Sticks in my craw like a rusty hook, knowing how little it means to a rich creep like Tyler Croft, that he can ruin my life anytime he feels like it.

There's no moon in the sky, but the stars make enough light to see by, just barely. Enough so I can find my way, weaving through the boats moored in the harbor. Shadows of boats is more like it. Looming things that move with the current, swinging all together like a flock of ducks set down on a pond, beaks to the wind.

Sound of my outboard echoes off the hulls. So loud, it seems the whole world must know where I am. But they don't. It's just another sound in the night, a small boat going by, no big deal.

Just beyond the harbor, striped bass are feeding on baitfish in the shallows, making a noise my dad used to call "fish grenades." Kind of a hard, wet smack. Big fish eating little fish. You can tell by the way they hit sometimes, that the little fish gets away.

I like it when that happens.

I'm easing in along the shore, about a hundred yards from the Crofts' big floating dock, when a boat pulls away from the dock. I quick shut off my motor

and lie down in my little skiff as it goes by. When I peep over the side, there he is: Tyler Croft taking off in *Boy Toy*, his own personal Boston Whaler. Brand-new four-stroke outboard runs so quiet, all you can hear is the slap of water on the hull. Perfect for sneaking around at night. Doesn't have his running lights on, so I know he's up to no good.

Trouble is, he's going so fast, he's almost out of sight before I can get my little five-horse motor started. All I can do is follow along in his wake. But that's enough to get a pretty good idea of where he's going. The curve inside the jetty where I set a dozen traps. If he's really there, cutting my buoys, I'll have to sneak up on him. Otherwise he'll just take off and I'll never catch him.

Once I get to where the jetty starts, I turn off the motor and get out the oars. Row up close to the jetty and then follow it along. Jetty is like this big arm made of rocks that pokes out into the harbor and protects it from waves whenever there's a storm. Right now it's hiding me in its shadow as I row along. Being careful as I dip the oars. Splash might give me away.

As I row I'm looking over my shoulder. Wishing I

could see in the dark like a cat or something. I do see something out there, but what is it? Could be just a boat anchored on its mooring, farther away than I think. Distance is hard to judge at night, on the water, with only the light of stars to guide you. But then something moves on the boat and I know.

A person standing up. Then leaning over the side of the boat. Then standing up again. Can't quite make it out, but it's got to be Tyler, grabbing my buoys in the water and cutting the line, then moving along to the next buoy. Must be it's too much work to actually haul up the trap and steal the lobster. Easier just to cut the buoy.

I keep rowing until I get opposite the dark boat. Then I take hold of the starter cord and pull, praying my outboard motor will fire up on the first go.

It does.

I got no plan in mind except how mad I am. So I twist the throttle and head for the dark boat as fast as my little skiff will go. See him drop a buoy and then my bow goes *wham!* into the side of the Whaler, and he falls down inside the boat. Cursing and hollering, madder than a bee in a jar.

Knocked me down, too, but I don't care. I'm glad I hit him, even if it probably did more damage to my boat than his.

"Tyler Croft, you're a thief! I hope you die, you miserable piece of crud!"

Tyler's head pokes up over the side and I can see him clear as day. He's smiling.

"Well, look who I bumped into," he says.

"I bumped into you."

"Whatever."

"You owe me five hundred dollars," I go, making up a number. "Pay up or else."

"Or else what?"

"You'll get arrested. You'll go to jail."

"You're cracked, lobster boy. Why would I go to jail?" He's having fun now, teasing me.

"Stole my lobster. Cut my buoys."

"Yeah? Prove it."

"Saw you with my own eyes."

"You didn't see anything. It's too dark. Nobody will believe anything you say. You're just a lying swamper and everybody knows it!"

The thing that makes me maddest of all, that makes

me feel like I swallowed a frog, is how right he is. My word against his. Lobster boy versus rich boy. You know who wins that fight. I ain't got money for lawyers and he does, or anyhow his father does.

No way can I win against him.

Our boats have started to drift apart. My motor has stalled, so I get out the oars and try to close the distance.

He sits there, waiting, like he's got nothing better to do than remind me that I can't hurt him but he can hurt me.

"Why'd you do it, Tyler?"

"Do what, Swamp Thing? Mess with your stupid traps?"

"Yes."

"Come a little closer, I'll tell you."

That makes me stop where I am, backing water.

Tyler stands up, swinging a boat hook. I duck and feel it whoosh over my head.

"You're a loser, lobster boy! Get used to losing!"

Then he fires up his big outboard and zooms away, rich boy in the dark of night, laughing and hooting my name, Skiff-eeeeee, Skiff-eeeeee.



My motor still won't start. I'd like to unhook the rotten old motor and drop it in the water, but I don't. Instead, I row all the way home.

Takes me the rest of the night. Night ain't half so dark as what's inside my brain.