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## *When You Wake Up*

WHEN I finally drag my tired butt into the house, it's four in the morning and my dad ain't on the TV couch, he's sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee. Circles so dark around his eyes, he looks like a skinny raccoon with a dirty beard.

Wants to know where I been.

"What happened, Skiffy?"

"Nothin'. Motor wouldn't start."

But I can tell he knows that ain't the whole story. Figure it'll go faster if I say what happened. Then I can go to bed and sleep forever.

When I'm done telling, he looks as sick as me.

"The Croft kid has been cutting your traps? Why'd he do a thing like that?"

I shrug. "For the fun of it, I guess. And because I'm a swamper and he's not."

"Swamper? You serious? Didn't think anybody still used that word."

"Tyler does."

"I thought them days was long gone," says Dad, talking to himself. "I'll be darn."

"So," I say, "you gonna call Mr. Croft and make him pay for what Tyler done?"

Dad looks at the floor and sighs. He gets himself up from the chair, goes to the Frigidaire, and takes out a can of beer. He pops the tab and studies the foam. "I'll have to think about that," he says.

"You think about it," I tell him. "I'm going to bed."

There's a time just before you wake up when your brain thinks all the bad things that have happened only happened in your sleep. Wake up, your brain says, wake up and everything will be okay.

What a crock. When I wake up, all the bad stuff is still there. The *Mary Rose* still don't have an engine, and my traps are still cut.

Oh yeah, and my dad is passed out on the TV couch, which makes it perfect. I can smell the beer even before I get downstairs. I hate that smell. It comes from the pile of beer cans on the floor by the couch, and it comes from him, too. Passed out with his mouth open, like a little bird waiting for the next meal.

I kick that stupid pile of beer cans across the room, but he don't notice. I could set off a firecracker and he wouldn't notice, that's how drunk he is.

Looking at the scattered cans and the sight of him snoring with his mouth open, I decide I hate him almost as much as I hate Tyler Croft. 'Course I don't, not really, but it's one of those mornings where it feels good to hate somebody.

By the time I finish my cereal I'm done hating him for the time being, and I go in and clean up the cans and open a window to air out the smell.

Don't seem right that it's a beautiful summer day, with the sun shining to beat the band. I'd rather it was

foggy and miserable, like me. I go out to check on *Rose*, but really, what's the point? Dad was right, should have left her sunk at the dock.

Thought I had it all sussed out, how to make the money for a new engine and all. What I didn't figure on was Tyler, and I should have. There's always somebody like him, looking to make folks miserable. Can't fight him no more than you can fight the wind or the tide. Wasn't him it would be somebody else. Joey Gleeson or Parker Beal. Somebody. My mom used to say there's always another turd in the bowl, no matter how hard you flush.

She was joking, but it's true.

For a while I mope around the *Mary Rose* and the dock. Check out my skiff, see there's a place on the bow needs fixing, from crunching into the Whaler, but I ain't in the mood. Finally I settle down and chuck around with the motor. Turns out it weren't nothing crucial, just a loose connection on the fuel line. So I start her and head up the creek for Mr. Woodwell's place.

Don't know why exactly, just to get away.

Something about the old man's boat shed always



calms me down. Like the air is quiet there, and when you breathe it, the quiet gets inside you. Smell of them cedar shavings is nice, too, or maybe it's the smell from Mr. Woodwell's corncob pipe. Anyhow, that's where I go, and when I get there, Captain Keelson's long rowing boat is at the dock.

The two of them are in the shed, studying a broken oar.

Mr. Woodwell looks up and goes, "'lo, Samuel! What are the fish doing today?"

"Swimming around, I guess."

Captain Keelson gives me his crinkly smile and says hello. "Broke an oar," he says. "Caught the blade on a piling."

Mr. Woodwell has the broken oar clamped in a vise on his bench. I can tell they're in no rush to fix it. They're at the talking-about-it stage and that will take awhile.

"Rose okay, is she?" the old man asks. "Still dry?"

I nod and pretend to study the oar, but the truth is, I can't tell where it broke.

"How about your lobster business?" Captain Keelson

asks. "Going pretty good, is it? Dev Murphy says you're catching 'em by the bushel."

"Dev Murphy don't know everything!" I say, feeling hot inside.

Now they're both studying me instead of the broken oar.

"Best tell us, Samuel," says the old man.

"Won't do no good."

He puffs his pipe and nods. "Come up the porch," he says. He turns to the captain. "Alex, you mind?"

"Amos, as you know very well, I don't care if that oar gets repaired this year or the next. I've plenty of oars."

The old man nods. "Boy needs a drink. Strong lemonade with plenty of sugar. Care to join us?"

We go up the porch and wait there while Mr. Woodwell fiddles in the kitchen, squeezing juice from the lemons.

"Weather's been good," the captain says, looking out on the creek.

"Yup. Pretty good."

"Remarkable lack of fog," he says.

"I guess."

"There was a summer when the sun never shined. This is before you were born. Fog came in on the Fourth of July and didn't leave until Labor Day."

"Oh yeah?"

"It was so damp, the mold complained. Several people dissolved. Just melted away in the street. Left nothing behind but soggy pairs of shoes."

I know he's trying to make me smile, but I ain't got one to spare.

"Fog was so thick, they were selling it by the slice. Genuine State of Maine Fog. Very popular with the tourists, if you could find one. Many got so lost, they ended up in Pennsylvania."

"That's pretty funny," I say, to be polite.

"Actually, Pennsylvania is a very serious state."

Mr. Woodwell brings out the steel pitcher and three glasses. "What did I interrupt?"

"Fog," says Captain Keelson.

"Fog? Alex does a mighty fine fog, if I do say so. Did you tell him about the man who melted?"

"I did."

"Left nothing behind but his hat."

"It was shoes," I tell him.

"Must have been another fellow."

"Thank you," I say when he hands me the icy glass.

Captain Keelson takes a sip and makes a face.

"Didn't spare the lemons, did you, Amos?"

"Too tart?"

"No. Exactly tart enough. Thank you kindly."

"How about you, young man?"

"Really good," I say. "Like always."

Mr. Woodwell settles back in his rocker. His hands are so cramped up, he has to use both of 'em to hold the glass, but it don't seem to bother him. "Now then, Samuel," he goes. "You are among friends. Something is troubling you. If there's anything either of us can do to be of assistance, you have only to ask."

"There's nothing nobody can do."

"Just so you know."

"My traps been cut!"

"Good heavens!" says Captain Keelson, so surprised, he spills lemonade on his shirtfront. "How many?"

"Don't know, exactly. Most of 'em." Then I tell them the whole story, like I done with my dad. Except

I leave out the part where I smacked Tyler's Boston Whaler.

When I'm done, Captain Keelson sighs and goes, "He's correct, you know, Amos. There's very little we can do. It's an awkward situation. Big Skiff and Jack Croft have a history. Best not to meddle."

Mr. Woodwell nods in agreement, but he looks mournful sad. "I'm sorry, Samuel. I was thinking we might be able to help. But your father would not want us interfering in his personal affairs."

"It ain't my dad's problem. It's mine."

"Maybe so. But you're Big Skiff's son, and he's Jack Croft's son, and that makes it complicated. If anything is to be done, your father will have to do it."

'Course I knew that before I come up the creek. They made me tell for nothing, and that makes me mad all over again. Mad at Tyler and mad at my dad and mad at the beer cans on the floor and at myself for thinking it might be different.

"It's a sorrowful thing, that kind of cruelty," says Mr. Woodwell. "Not confined to boys, either."

"Mmm," says the captain. He leans forward and

catches my eye. "I suppose you'll try grappling for the lost traps?"

I ain't thought that far and he knows it. Real casual, he allows as how if I was to drag a grapple along the bottom, I might hook up on my traps.

"I guess," I say.

"You must be terribly discouraged."

"I'm mad is what I am. It ain't fair."

"No," says Mr. Woodwell.

"Indeed no," says the captain. "Decidedly not."

We sit awhile, drinking our lemonades, and nobody says much after that.

## *By Hook and by Crook*

NEXT couple of weeks I work on finding my lost traps. Captain Keelson's idea about the grapple helps. What you do is tie the grapple — it's like a big fish-hook with four barbs — to a length of rope. Then pull it along the bottom until it hooks on something. Might be a trap. Might be an old boot or a tire or a plastic milk crate or a clump of seaweed. All kinds of junk on the bottom.

Once I find this old telephone all clotted with mud. Take it to Dev Murphy at the bait house. He puts the receiver up to his ear and goes, "I hear the ocean!"

Sometimes if it's in a shallow spot and the water is flat calm, you can see the trap down there. Sometimes a lost trap comes up clicking with lobster. More often it don't.

Anyhow, I got nothing better to do. Stripers are running, but somehow it don't seem right, taking time off for fun. Not until I get the traps back. 'Course I can't locate them all. Tide or current has shifted 'em, or I don't recall exactly where I set 'em. Figure out of two hundred traps I'll get back half, eventual.

Dev thinks I should rig out and put them back in the water, but what's the point? I know Tyler. He won't quit on this. He come by in his Whaler to tell me so. Parker Beal is with him. Parker don't say nothing, he just tries to look tough, and laughs at everything Tyler says, like that's his job.

"Hey stinky!" Tyler shouts. Keeping well away in case I try to ram him with the skiff. "Whatcha doing, lobster boy?"

"What's it look like?"

"Looks like you're trolling for more stupid junk to put in your stupid junky shack. Drag long enough



you'll probably find an old toilet seat for your outhouse."

Matter of fact, I had pulled up a toilet seat but threw it back. He must have seen me from the shore.

"Go away," I say. "Leave me alone."

"It must really suck being you, Skiffy. How do you stand it?"

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

He laughs. Parker laughs, too, of course, but he don't know why exactly, except Tyler wants him to.

"Later, lobster boy!"

Then the Whaler zooms off. I'm still mad, but it's a deep mad now, not on the surface, so I can stand it without my ears getting hot whenever I think about what he done, and what he keeps on doing.

Sometimes I wonder why he hates me so. I never did nothing mean to Tyler, but he's always been at me, since back when his dad and my dad were friends. Got so miserable on the school bus, with him pulling my ears and singing that song he made up, that I took to riding my bike. My mom used to say he'd grow out of it, but he just grew meaner and meaner.

You ever seen where someone will take a magnifying glass and try to focus the sun on a fly until it burns? Just because they want to hurt something and they got nothing better to do?

Feels like Tyler is the sun and I'm the fly.

One day I'm going by the fish co-op when a big sport-fishing boat is unloading. Not *Fin Chaser* or I wouldn't have gone in close. Some fancy boat I never seen before. There's a whole crowd standing around and jawing, so I tie up to see what all the fuss is about.

"Will you look at that fish!" somebody says, and then whistles. "Four hundred and ten pounds!"

The boat captain has a big ice chest open and he's letting folks admire his fish. It's a giant bluefin tuna like my dad used to harpoon. Seven foot long and built for speed.

"Now that is a beautiful animal," the captain says, showing it off like a fancy sports car. "See the big tail? Bluefin can flick its tail back and forth thirty times a second. That's faster than the eye can see. Turbo-charged thruster. See these dorsal fins? How they fold

back into a groove? That decreases drag, increases efficiency. Even has special eyelids to make it move faster through the water. Gills have ram ventilators for increased oxygen. Strong, rapid heart for power. Warm-blooded, so it's quick. How quick? Bluefin can hit fifty miles an hour. It can leap fifteen feet into the air. It will swim two thousand miles to feed on a particular school of fish, at a particular time of year. When the good Lord created fish, He reached perfection with the bluefin tuna! This is the fish of all fishes. The king of fish! The queen of the Seven Seas!"

Folks are mighty impressed that he knows so much, but the captain — a tall, skinny guy with a sunburn — he laughs it off. "Don't get me wrong. I'm no expert. Got it all off the Internet! Easy as falling down."

"How many you catch so far this year?" someone asks.

"How many? Why, this is the first tuna I ever caught in my life."

"You serious?"

"Serious as a heart attack."

"How'd you hook it, then?"

“Pure luck,” he admits. “I was bottom fishing for cod out near Jeffrey’s Ledge when a whole school of tuna swam by, feeding on mackerel. Lucky I happened to have the big reel on board. Threw out a chunk of bait and *wham!* Hit it like a locomotive. All I did was hold on until it got tired. Fish did all the work.”

He shows off the fancy rod and reel that whipped the fish.

“Nice. How much a rig like that cost?”

The captain shrugs, like he’s embarrassed to mention the price. “These are expensive. Reel is a grand, rod five hundred. But worth every penny.”

He’s about ready to tell the story of catching the tuna all over again, for anybody who didn’t hear it the first time, when Mr. Nagahachi the fish buyer shows up.

He’s this short, stocky Japanese guy with shiny black hair and a big smile. I seen Mr. Nagahachi checking out tuna before, when my dad was fishing. What he does is make a couple of cuts to see the quality of the meat, and then he uses a little tool to take a sample of the fat content. That helps him set the price.

If he buys the fish he'll pack it in ice and send it overnight by air to Japan, for auction at the Tokyo fish market tomorrow.

Ten minutes later, Mr. Nagahachi tells the captain he'll buy the whole fish for sixteen dollars a pound, cash or certified check.

Six thousand five hundred and sixty dollars for one fish that got caught by accident!

Folks on the wharf are shaking their heads in amazement. Happens all the time, but it's still amazing that one fish can be worth so much just because people on the other side of the world like to eat little bits of it raw, on a mound of sticky rice.

"You know what it's like?" somebody says. "Like winning the lottery. Only more fun."

"Don't kid yourself, George," a friend of his says. "That boat cost half a million bucks if it cost a penny. And you heard how much he paid for the rod and reel."

The guy called George goes, "Who says you have to spend that much? You heard the man, he wasn't even looking for tuna. It came right up to his boat and

asked to be caught. Think about it. That's like finding money on the sidewalk!"

"Why don't you do it, then, George? Get yourself a boat and hook up a tuna?"

"Maybe I will," says George. "Next year."

"I knew it," says his buddy, grinning. "All talk, no action."

I wait around until most of the crowd gets bored and goes away. Until Mr. Nagahachi has got the big tuna loaded into his van and packed in ice for the trip to the airport.

"Scuze me," I go. "Can I ask you a question?"

He nods, looks like he's trying to place me.

"You pay that much for tuna tomorrow or the next day?" I ask.

"Depends on fish," he says. "Sometimes more, sometimes less."

"How much less?"

"Eight dollars a pound for skinny fish. Eighteen for nice fat fish."

"Thanks."

"Where's Big Skiff? You his son, am I right?"

“He’s sort of retired for a while.”

“Retire? He young man. Too young to retire. Big Skiff, he the best harpoon. Always strike good fat fish! Tell him I say ‘hi,’ okay?”

“Sure,” I say. “I’ll tell him.”

I mean it, too. But when I get home, Dad is passed out on the couch with a whole new load of empty beer cans. Maybe he used to be the best, like everybody says, but right now he couldn’t catch a tuna if it jumped in his lap.

But I’m thinking maybe I can.

## *Where the Big Fish Live*

WHAT that tuna does, it gives me a whole new way of thinking. I been moping around and feeling sorry for myself, but maybe Tyler done me a favor. Work my butt off all summer hauling traps? Make money a dollar at a time? Why bother, when all I got to do is catch one measly tuna!

Okay, not measly, exactly. Has to be a big tuna. Five hundred pounder would be nice. Tuna get as big as a thousand pounds, but I ain't greedy. Five hundred will do. Then I'll have so much money, I can buy all kinds of stuff. First thing, the rebuilt motor for *Rose*. But I deserve a new bike, right? Fancy mountain bike



even better than Tyler's. And a new vacuum cleaner so the house don't get so dirty. New curtains for the windows, like Mom was planning on. Whatever we need, we'll get it.

Amazing, when you think about it. A bluefin tuna is going to change my life. Maybe change my dad's life, too. Wait till he hears that new motor purring in *Rose* — he'll want to get back fishing and acting like normal again. Me and him will be partners and a little pip-squeak like Tyler Croft won't dare cut Big Skiff Beaman's traps, no siree, not if he wants to live another day.

One fish, that's all it takes. One big fish!

I'm too excited to eat supper. Too many things to do. First is check out the line situation. There's a tub of heavy line in the bait shack that don't look too bad. I pull it out and walk it back and forth along the dock to measure it. Six hundred feet, more or less. Should be plenty.

Takes me an hour or so to coil it just so in the tub, the way I seen my dad do when he was harpooning tuna.

That's what I'm aiming to do, see. Harpoon me a

bluefin tuna! One that'll be so fat and juicy, it'll make Mr. Nagahachi reach for his wallet. One that's rolling around out there right this minute, waiting for me to show up. Big fish with my name on it. *Try and catch me, Skiff Beaman!*

Anyhow, first things first. Got the heavy line coiled in the plastic tub. Next thing, a keg to attach to the line. Because that's how they do it. You stick the tuna with a harpoon. The harpoon dart is tied to one end of a line and the keg to the other. Line runs out and the tuna pulls the keg around until it gets tired. Then you grab the keg and pull, and on the end of the rope is a big fish. Easy as falling down.

Takes me another hour or so to locate a keg that looks the right size. Not too big and not too small. Too big and the dart will pull out of the tuna. Too small and the tuna won't get tired quick enough. Heard Dad say that many times, back in the day. Gotta be exactly right, and there it is, the perfect keg, hiding behind the tool chest.

I drag the tub of line and the keg along the dock and lower it into my skiff. Haven't figured out what to do for a harpoon yet, but I will, eventual.

Next is fuel for the outboard. I grab a couple of empty gas cans and walk to the gas station and fill them up and walk back home. Round trip about a mile. Harder on the way back, with the gas cans yanking on my arms. Don't know how much gas I'll need, but more than usual, that's for sure. Takes two trips to fill the tanks. So there's another hour and a half gone.

Bait. I get my last bucket of salt herring from the cooler in the shack and put it under the middle seat in the skiff. Might come in handy if I need to put out a chum slick — bits of cut-up bait that put the smell of food in the water.

It's full dark by the time I go back in the kitchen and make a stack of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and fill a jug of water. Provisions for the trip. I ain't hungry now, but sooner or later I will be, and a peanut butter and jelly sandwich always hits the spot.

After the food gets squared away, I check on my dad. Still passed out, or sleeping heavy. I turn off the TV and collect up the beer cans real quiet.

He rolls over, groans.

"Rose," he mutters, "that you?"

Moment later he's snoring away.

Part of me wants to leave him a note, let him know where I'm headed and what I intend to do. But the other part says don't be a fool. What if he wakes up in an hour and reads the note? He'll try and stop me for sure, or raise a fuss with the Coast Guard. Either way, no big fish. No big wad of cash money from Mr. Nagahachi. No rebuilt motor, no fancy mountain bike, no nothing.

Can't risk that.

I hang out by the dock until the tide goes slack. Time to move. I know what I need to do about the harpoon, but it's shameful, so I don't want to think about it. Just do it.

I'm about to untie the skiff and get going when I remember the compass. Never needed a compass hauling traps because I was always in sight of land. But going offshore in the dead of night is different. Got to know which way is east.

"Hey, Rose?" I go. "May I come aboard?"

The *Mary Rose* shifts a little as she takes my weight. I know a boat ain't really alive, not like a human being is alive. But sometimes it seems like the *Mary Rose* knows me almost as good as I know her.

“Rose, you mind if I borrow your compass for a little while? I promise to bring it back, good as new.”

Rose don't mind. I unscrew the compass and take it back to the skiff and screw it down to the middle seat. Mighty big compass for a small boat. Compass like that you could steer all the way to Portugal. I ain't going near so far. Just thirty miles, more or less. Thirty miles seems like a mighty long way to go in a ten-foot skiff, but compared to Portugal it ain't much.

Thirty miles out to sea. Thirty miles to where the big fish live. Thirty miles to the end of the rainbow and the pot of gold. Thirty long miles in a very small boat, in the dark of night, alone.

Best get moving.

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## *The Blushing Bandit*

AT the bend of the creek I shut off the outboard and get out the oars. Rowing soft and quiet as I come around the curve. Last thing I want is for Mr. Woodwell to see me. Not that he will. The lights are out in his house. Old man like him goes to bed early, I guess. Unless he's sitting on the porch in the dark.

Soon as I think about the porch I can feel him looking, wondering what I'm up to, coming in so sneaky. 'Course it's just my imagination — he's probably sound asleep and dreaming of the boats he made. Plus he can't see so good anyhow. Must be dead to the world by now. Stands to reason.

But just in case, I come up on the far side of the dock, out of sight from the porch. Nudge my skiff on the bank and stand ankle-deep in the cool water listening to the quiet. Even the birds gone to sleep. Only sound is crickets and peepers and the hush of warm summer wind.

I take a deep breath, ease it out.

There's a hot blush on my cheeks. Always happens when I'm about to do something bad. Once when I filched a cookie from the jar, Mom called me the Blushing Bandit, on account of my red face. You know what? Having her laugh at me was worse than getting spanked. Made the cookie taste like dirt. Then she grabbed me up and said something that made me feel better. I don't remember what exactly because I was only four, but knowing Mom, it was funny and sweet and sassy.

Mosquito lights on my neck. I squash it real quiet. Then I'm up the bank to the far side of the boat shed. Seems bigger in the dark. Big as a castle from a story-book. The high windows look like dark eyes watching me, and the shed doors are a giant mouth.

Tell myself, don't be stupid. It's a boat shed, that's all it is. An empty boat shed. Get a grip.

My head feels light with knowing what I got to do. Which is exciting and scary all at the same time. I slip up to the shed and lean against the outside wall. The boards are rough and smell of rain and old wood. Feel my way along the boards until I get to the big iron latch.

Here's where I got to be extra quiet. Mr. Woodwell may be halfway deaf, but a squeaky door will get inside your sleep. I ease up the latch and feel the weight of the big door. It wants to open and let me in. Big, old hinges don't squeak, they make a deeper sound like *ohhhh nooooo*. Or maybe like an old man clearing his throat.

I slip inside and pull the door shut. Take another deep breath and taste the smell of fresh wood shavings. Kind of a green smell that feels good inside your nose and down the back of your throat, like spearmint candy.

At first it's so dark in the boat shed, it's like a soft blanket settled over my eyes. Then I can make out the



shape of the high windows and a smudge of starlight. Still can't see much, but enough to make out the farthest wall. On the way I stub my toe on a sawhorse, but manage to swallow the ouch.

Serves me right, sneaking in like a thief.

Try to tell myself what I got in mind ain't stealing exactly. But if it ain't stealing, what is it?

Feel along the back wall. Finding tools hung on pegs, splinters, knotholes. What I'm after is out of reach, so I drag over a sawhorse and climb up on it. Kind of holding my breath as I reach up.

There it is, right at my fingertips. My father's harpoon. The one he made and gave to Mr. Woodwell. I lift it off the pegs, expecting heavy, but the harpoon is light. Long and light and balanced where you hold it. The surprise of that makes me dizzy, I guess, because the next thing I'm on my back in the sawdust and I can't breathe. Got the wind knocked all the way out and it takes awhile to get it back, a little at a time.

When I'm breathing again I worry some more about Mr. Woodwell. What'll he say if he finds me taking his harpoon? What'll I say back? Can't think of nothing that makes it right, but that don't stop me

doing it. I been over it in my own head and there's no way around it. The fish are out there right now. Tomorrow or the next day might be too late. So I got to head out tonight and be there when the sun comes up, ready to strike the first big fish that rises. Need a harpoon for that, no two ways about it.

It's not like I can ask to borrow the harpoon. Tell the old man I'm headed out to the tuna fishing grounds and he'll rope me to a chair and call my dad, or worse. So I tell myself Mr. Woodwell will understand after it's over. After I got my fish and the money and everything. But mostly I try not think about how wrong it is, stealing from Mr. Woodwell, who's been so good to me.

In the end he don't wake up, or anyhow he don't come out to the shed to see what's making all the noise falling down and squeaking the doors.

First thing I notice outside the shed is a swarm of lightning bugs shining like little stars in the tall grass. Like they're pointing the way back to my skiff. Figure that has to be a good sign, when the bugs want to help you find your way.

I scurry down the bank to where my skiff is waiting.

The harpoon is longer than the boat. So long, it sticks out over the bow like the emblem on an old car. Big old harpoon is meant to be used, ain't it? What's the point of making a thing like that if it never gets used?

Once I'm out on the creek I stop worrying about Mr. Woodwell and start thinking about the giant fish. The big bluefin. I can almost hear it talking. Sasssing me like a bully in the schoolyard. *Come and get me, lobster boy. Come and get me if you dare.*

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## *Three Rules for Skiff Beaman*

DOWN the creek I go, with the dark all around and the trees watching and the water shining black. Down the creek and past our little house, where my dad is passed out on the TV couch. Down the creek to the river, where the current is fast and the water is deep. Down to the river and out to the harbor, where the lighthouse stands on a hunk of bare rock, tall as a giant with a head of light.

The only sounds are the slap of water on the hull and the mutter-putter of the outboard motor. And me whistling soft to keep myself company.

At this time of night my skiff is the only boat on the move. All the other boats in Spinney Cove are sleeping at their moorings. I'm wondering if the bluefin tuna sleep, too. Some fish sleep, others got to keep moving. Probably your big blue is the keep-moving kind.

Once I asked my dad how fish see way down deep where it's always dark. He told me a fish has got special nerves under its skin so it can feel the shape of things moving in the water. Little fish twitches, the big fish feels it, good as we can see with our eyes. You mean like magic, I asked, and he thought about that and said, no, it's not magic, it's just Nature's way to give one creature advantage over another.

That's when Mom chimed in to say the main advantage of being human is the brain, so use it or lose it, young man. She was big on that, wanting me to think about things, and do good in school, and read books and stuff. Sometimes in the middle of my head I can still hear her going, "Show the world what you're made of, Skiff Beaman."

Couldn't hardly get through the kitchen without her saying that. Or reminding me what the three rules

were. Mom's Three Rules. Rule Number One, think smart. Rule Number Two, speak true. Rule Number Three, never give up. First two I'm always forgetting. The third one, that's why I'm out here. Only thing, what if never giving up means not thinking smart or speaking true? Does it cancel out?

*God gave you a brain, Skiff Beaman. Use it.*

Okay, Mom. I'm trying. Honest.

*Honest? You just stole a harpoon from that nice old man!*

Had to, Mom. Can't give up, remember? Rule Three.

*You smart-mouthing me, Skiff Beaman?*

No, ma'am.

*All right, then. Can't change what's already been done. But you be careful.*

I'll be careful.

*You know where you're going, and how to get there?*

Yes, ma'am.

*Stay in the boat. Whatever happens, you stay in the boat. Promise?*

Yes, Mom. I promise.

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Tide carries me past the lighthouse.

*Put the light behind you and steer for the big red buoy.*

My dad said that the first time he ever took me out in the *Mary Rose*. Sat me on his lap and let me steer for the buoy. He was always doing that, explaining which way to go, what rocks to stay clear of, and where the channel markers were. So I know which way to go, once I clear the harbor. Flat east for thirty miles. Couldn't be simpler. Just head into the sunrise, that's where the fish are waiting. Piece of cake. Any fool can find the Ledge. Why not me?

When I pass the big red buoy it sighs at me. That's just air going up and down inside as it rides on the swell. But it almost sounds human, and mournful, like it thinks I'm making a big mistake. Maybe I am. But I can't stop now. No way. For the rest of my life I'd be sick thinking on what might have been. Sick on missing my big chance.

Think fish, I tell myself. Don't think about how big the dark is, or how small the skiff feels, or how scared you are. Scared from the inside out, from the pit of

your stomach to the tips of your fingers. The kind of scared that makes you tingle all over.

Think fish. Big fish shining like a lighthouse, showing you the way. Big fish gonna change your life.

Big fish, big fish.

Thinking on that big fish so hard, I almost forget to check the compass. Lucky for me it glows in the dark, and I line up the "E" and stick to it.

Trust your compass. That's another thing my dad was always saying. Trust your compass because you can't trust your instincts in the dark or the fog. Without a compass a man will steer himself in a circle, nine times out of ten. Give up on the compass and you're lost for sure.

Every once in a while I look back, and each time the lighthouse beacon gets smaller and fainter. After a while it's only a glow on the edge of night. Then comes a time it ain't there at all. Which means I've gone at least five miles. Five miles out to sea.

Twenty-five miles to go. Should take three, maybe four hours.

Nothing to it. Piece of cake. Nothing to be scared of, so long as I stay in the boat and trust the compass.



Still, I keep thinking how much water there is. Black, black water. Water so dark and deep, it takes your breath away. Water so everywhere and all around, you can't tell it from the sky, or the sky from the water, or whether you're rising or falling.

Don't think about that. What does it matter how deep the water is? Think about steering east. Think about getting there. Think about big fish. Think about what you'll do with the money. Think about the *Mary Rose* as good as new, and your dad as good as new, too, and Tyler Croft with the outhouse song dying in his stupid throat.

Steer east.

Steer east.

Steer east and think about what happens when the sun comes up and the big fish rises.

I'm steering east and pretty much over being scared to death when the motor up and quits.

## *What Happened to the Stars*

NOTHING like a quit motor to put a lump in your throat. I got so used to the sound of it that the sudden quiet almost hurts.

Ain't just the quiet, though. Without a motor to push a boat along, the sea takes over and does what it wants. Soon as the motor quits, the big swells start to turn the skiff around. Turning me like the wind turns a leaf in a puddle, making the compass spin from east to west and round again. Feels like I'm going down the drain.

This is bad, real bad.

I yank on the cord. The motor sputters and dies.

Yank again and again. Nothing. What went wrong? Could be a hundred things. Bad spark plug. A broken wire. A gummed-up carburetor. Maybe the miserable old motor finally died of old age — and no way to know for sure in the dark.

I'm so mad and scared, I almost cry. Almost but not quite. Finally I think to check the gas tank, which I should have done right away. It's bone dry! I switch the fuel hose over to the next tank, squeeze the primer bulb, and yank on the starter cord, thinking, pleasepleaseplease start.

The old outboard sputters to life.

Sweetness! Nothing sounds so pure and sweet as a motor running when you're all alone in the middle of nowhere. Minute later I've got the skiff headed east again. East for the Ledge. East until the sun comes up. East where the big fish live.

I look up, hoping to see the stars, but there must be clouds because the sky is as black as the sea.

Nothing to do but trust the compass.

*You sure this is a good idea, Skiff Beaman?*

I don't know. But it's the only idea I got.

*Rule Number Three doesn't mean risk your life. It never meant that.*

Don't worry, Mom, I'll stay in the boat.

*When you were little you were scared of the dark.*

Still am. Don't matter.

*Had to leave the night-light on or you'd wake up crying.*

That's when I was a baby.

*Remember what I told you: Being brave isn't the same as being stupid.*

I'm not being brave. I'm just going fishing.

*Be careful, Skiffy dear. That harpoon is bigger than you are.*

I'll be careful, Mom. I won't do nothing stupid.

It's not like I think my mom is really talking to me. More like all the things she said are stored inside my brain and come out when I'm alone. Like I know what she'd say about stuff, and how she felt about things, and what she'd want me to do.

Once when I was about six I did a cannonball off the dock. The water was way over my head and Dad had to fish me out or I might've drowned. After they

dried me off, Mom asked what was I thinking, to do such a thing? I told her I was learning how to be brave. That's when she said that thing about brave not being the same as stupid, and that before I could try being brave I had to use my brain and be smart.

Life is a gift, she said, whenever I did something really dumb, like ride my bike no hands with my eyes closed down Spotter Hill on a dare. Life is a gift and you mustn't just throw it away.

So here I am in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, thinking about my mom and praying on the sun to come up soon. Thinking everything will be okay when the sun comes up. When the sun comes up there will be other boats out fishing for giant tuna, same as me. Get in trouble, all you got to do is wave your arms or make some noise, they'll lend a hand.

Once when my dad was out on the *Mary Rose* a storm come on sudden, and the swells broke out in whitecaps and he decided to head in early, just to be cautious. Then a cooling hose blew and he lost power and started to take on water. Dev Murphy saw him and towed him home, which ain't easy in a heavy sea. Both boats got beat up by the storm, with windows

broke and gear smashed and traps lost overboard. When I asked Dad if he had to pay Dev back he said that's not how it works. Fish and you fish alone, every man for himself. But when one man gets in trouble at sea we're all in trouble. We're in it together, so you lend a hand and don't think of what it costs, because the next time it might be you with a busted motor or a sinking boat and the waves crashing all around.

Not a soul out here with me at the moment, though. Not even a bird in the sky. Ain't really a sky you can make out, more a close-up darkness right over my head. Just me and my skiff and the sound of the motor putt-putting along, and the slap of black water on the hull.

After a time the steep swells smooth out. Nothing to see but the compass. Keep the arrow on the big "E" for east, I know that much. Now and then I flick the flashlight beam out from the skiff, but it don't catch nothing but water. Water so black, it sucks up the light.

*If you think you're alone, try singing a song. Somebody's sure to tell you to shut up.*

Not much for singing, Mom. Not like you.

*I won't laugh, Skiffy, promise. Go on and sing.*

Can't think of a song right now.

*Sure you can. Remember your favorite song when you were five years old? The fishing song?*

I do remember that song, or part of it, anyway. *Momma's going fishing, papa's going fishing, I'm a going fishing, too.* Dad bought me a brand-new pole for my birthday but wouldn't give it to me until I learned that song. Trouble was, once I learned it I wouldn't shut up. Sang that silly song until Mom said if I sang it one more time her ears would fall off. You promise? I said, because I thought ears falling off was pretty cool, and she got to laughing so hard, Dad had to pat her on the back. Sing it all you want, she said when she got done laughing. Sing it until it wears you out. What about your ears? I asked. I like my ears, she said, touching the earrings Dad gave her for their anniversary. I like my ears and I think I'll keep 'em. Now you go on and sing.

My voice sounds real small against the empty all around, but it feels good singing. Let the ocean know I'm here.

“Momma’s going fishing. Papa’s going fishing. I’m a going fishing, too.”

Sounds better if I hit the seat with my hand, keeping the rhythm. *Wompa, wompa, wompa.*

“Momma’s going fishing! Papa’s going fishing! I’m a going fishing, too!”

Trouble is, all I can remember is just that one line of the song. There’s something about a cane pole and a fishing hole, but I can’t find it. So it’s just as well there’s no one to hear me acting stupid. Boy in a small boat singing his head off, can’t even recall the whole stupid song. Probably think being all alone in the dark made me crazy or something.

Maybe I am. Crazy, I mean. What a totally insane idea, take a boat this small offshore this far! What was I thinking? Even when the sun does come up I won’t be able to see land. How will I ever find my way back home?

The compass, you fool. Stop your blubbering! You got a compass, don’t you? A good, solid compass from the *Mary Rose*. A compass that always got her home, even in the worst kind of weather. Catch your



fish, Skiff Beaman, then head west. Head west for long enough and you'll bump into land. Might not be the harbor at Spinney Cove, if the current sets against you, but it will be land. Sell that big tuna to Mr. Nagahachi and you can take a limousine home.

Me in a limousine. The idea makes me laugh, and somehow that gets me off worrying myself to death. Shake my head to clear it and realize I been drenched in cold sweat. Soaked through to my skin. Or that's what I think at first. Only I can feel the wet in the air as I putt along. It ain't me that's in a cold sweat, it's the dark itself.

Fog.

That's what happened to the stars, you knuckle-head. Fog so thick, it melts on your face. Bad fog. Blind fog. White darkness. What they call a real pea-souper.

All I can do is pray for sunrise. Pray the sun will burn off the fog and let me see again. Because if there's one thing scares me more than being lost in the dark, it's being lost in the fog.

## *If Mist Made the World*

THE sun comes up, eventual. It always does, don't it? No matter how much we fret and worry the night won't end, the sun comes up. But this time the sun don't touch the fog. Too thick for that. Fog so thick, you can't see the sun, only the light it makes. Kind of a dull white glow inside the mist.

My dad says fog is just a cloud that comes down to eye-level. But clouds are fluffy and pretty and fog ain't none of that. Fog is not being able to see where you're going, or which way the waves are breaking. Fog plays tricks with your eyes. Shows you shapes of things that can't be there. A floating castle. A pirate

ship about to run you down. Monster things from your worst nightmare.

When I was little I somehow got it fixed in my head that fog came from dragons. Must have seen it in a book, fire-breathing dragons, only I got it wrong and thought the dragons were breathing fog. Dragons that had scales like fish, and breath that smelled of seaweed. There's still part of me believes that when fog comes in on the tide it means there's a dragon waiting inside the mist. A dragon that will suck you into the fog so hard, you'll never get out.

Stop it, fool! Stop fussing about imaginary monsters and stuff you can't touch. So you're fogged in, so what? You can still see your boat and the water around it, can't you? You can see farther than you can throw that big harpoon, that's for sure. What more do you need?

Birds, I'm thinking. I need birds. Birds is how you find fish. When fish make a commotion feeding on the surface, birds will circle over and dive. You can see the birds from a long ways off and know where the fish are. My dad says that's how the first human caught a fish, by watching what the birds did.

How can you spot birds in fog this thick? You can't. Plain and simple can't.

After a while I stop fretting and settle down. Can't do nothing about fog. It happens. You got to go with what you got. I got a good little skiff and a pail of bait and a finest-kind harpoon. Probably the first human had nothing but a sharpened stick or a piece of rock. So I'm way ahead, right?

Right?

*Shut up and fish.* Saw a tourist with that on his T-shirt once. Makes sense. Now or never, I'm thinking. So I pry the lid off the bait bucket and cut up some herring and drop it over the side. Cutting it fine so the fish oil will spread. The idea is, attract small fish into the chum slick and the big fish will rise up to feed on the small fish. Sometimes it works and sometimes it don't and you never know until you try.

So I get to work, chopping and cutting. Fog? What fog? Oh *that* fog. Does it bother you? Heavens no. Love the fog. Hope it stays forever. You hear that, Mr. Fog? Stick around and see what happens.

I'm cutting up herring and dropping it over the side for most of an hour before I hear the first little splash.

Splash like a pebble makes. Figure it must be my imagination, but then there's another little *splink!* And then a bunch more, like rain on a puddle.

Come on, fish! Over here. Feed your way up the chum slick, all the way to my boat.

Minute later, there it is. The nervous, zaggedy shape of a mackerel just beneath the surface, working the chum slick. Small mackerel, what we call tinker size. Maybe five inches long. Then another and another until there's a whole school of tinker mackerel darting up to nibble on the chum, fighting one another for the pieces I been cutting up and dropping into the water.

I'm grinning so hard, my face hurts. It's working! And tinker means I must be pretty near the Ledge, where the big fish come to feed. Got the mackerel in my slick, come on big tuna! Come on and take a bite. Show me your fin and I'll show you my harpoon.

Only trouble is, I got just one bucket of herring. One bucket, that's all I had room for, and already it's halfway gone. So I start cutting even smaller, and putting less pieces in the water. Barely enough to keep the slick water shining with fish oil. The tinker don't seem

to mind, not at first. They're having a fine time swarming in the slick, darting around like small, speckled rockets. Grabbing bits of herring and shaking it like dogs with a bone.

"Hey, little fish. Stick around for the big fish, why don't you?" Bad habit of mine, talking out loud to fish. Makes it less lonesome, hearing the sound of my own voice. "Come over this way, Mr. Mackerel, you missed a piece. Ooh, don't let the bad boys get it! Fight for what's yours! Go on and eat it before somebody else does, or before something bigger eats you. Good. Here's another piece. More you eat, the bigger you'll grow. Bigger you grow, the better your chance."

Try to pick out one particular fish for a conversation, but they're swarming, so I keep losing 'em in the crowd. Can't tell one from another. Which makes you wonder, can they tell themselves apart or do they think all together? Are there bully fish that take advantage, and weaker fish that keep losing out? Must be. That's the way it is with most creatures, from what I can see. Birds, dogs, cats, and people, too. Which means there's nothing original about Tyler Croft. He comes from a long line that goes all the way back to

the mean molecule. Mean old Tyler ever heard me talking to fish, he'd have himself a good laugh.

"Hey you! Psst. Yes, you. Funny-looking one with the pale spots." I flick a little chopped herring on the water and watch it settle. Watch the skittish fish watching me, watching the chum, trying to decide what to do, eat it or run away. "That's lunch," I tell 'em. "Don't worry about the bill, lunch is on me."

Fish scoots in, inhales the speck of chum. Fish scoots back into the school. Back behind the boat. Getting farther from the boat because I'm running out of chum. Trying to stretch it out, give the tinker just enough to stay in the vicinity and not a speck more.

Come on, Mr. Bluefin. Can't you smell the chum? Can't you feel the baitfish feeding? Ain't you hungry?

Tinker stay in the slick for an hour or more and then blink! They're gone, just like that. Like somebody flicked a switch.

Gone. And with 'em any hope of finding a big tuna.

I sit there inside the fog and curse myself for a fool. What was I thinking, bringing only one bucket of

bait? Did I really think it would be that easy? Was I thinking at all?

Answer: Mostly I was thinking about the money I'd get for the fish instead of how to get the fish in the first place. Like if I could only get out to the Ledge, it would happen automatic. As if a hundred boats didn't go out every day and come back empty. Big, fancy boats with thousand-dollar trolling rods and gold-plated reels and radar and radios and fancy fish-finders and gallons of frozen chum. If boats like that come back empty, what can you expect from a plywood skiff with one pitiful bucket of salted herring for bait?

Nothing, that's what. And nothing is what I got.

So there I am, drifting in a world made of white mist and feeling mighty sorry for myself when all of a sudden I hear a splash. Not a little tinker-size splash.

A big splash.



## *Take My Breath Away*

FIRST thing I do is grab the harpoon and stand up in the stern of the skiff. Trying to balance myself and the harpoon and keep my heart from pounding so hard, it makes my ears hot. All because of that splash. Sound of a giant bluefin tuna crashing into the water. What else could it be?

“Come on, fish,” I whisper.

But that’s all. Just the one splash, then nothing for the longest time. Harpoon starts feeling heavy, so I rest it on my shoulder and try to breathe normal. Listening hard, but I can’t hear nothing but the slurp of water around the skiff.

Maybe I imagined that big splash out there behind the fog. Maybe I wanted to hear it so bad, my brain obliged. Or it was the fog playing tricks on my ears. Sometimes the fog makes a faraway noise seem close by. Hear a man talking and you think he's right next to you but really he's on the other side of the cove, clear across the harbor. So maybe the big splash came from miles away.

Maybe.

Then the fog gets bright and I realize it ain't my heart making my ears hot, it's the sun. Sun shining down through the fog, burning a hot blue hole in the sky. Sunlight never felt so good. Sun hits the white mist and the mist starts to get thin and wispy and then a little breeze stirs and the wall of fog starts to back away and I can see a fair distance, as much as a half mile or so.

Sea don't seem so empty with the sunlight making it look almost alive. Then I see it ain't just the sunlight glittering on the water. Something is happening back there in the last of my chum slick. A rippling just below the surface, like something is trying to get out.

My brain starts clicking. Should I put down the

harpoon and start the motor and steer toward the ripple? Or would the noise of the motor spook whatever it is? Before I can decide, a whole bunch of tinker mackerel explode from the water and scatter in all directions. Looks like a fountain of fish, hot and silver in the sunlight.

These tinker ain't feeding. No sir, these tinker are on the menu. Because before the little fish can get back underwater, a huge tuna comes up behind them and launches itself into the air like a fish-seeking missile.

A giant bluefin!

The big tuna hangs in the air long enough to catch the sunlight and then *wham!* back into the water with a mouthful of the little fish.

Never really knew what they meant by "take your breath away." Now I do. That big fish takes my breath away and he won't give it back. Whew! I come thirty miles in the dark and fog for this. Giant tuna going airborne. Heard all them stories my dad used to tell, about five-hundred-pound fish flying ten feet into air, like they were launched from a cannon. Big fish that can leap clean over a boat. Giant fish that think

they can fly. Fish in such a frenzy to feed, they don't notice a man with a harpoon.

It's all true.

Then, much closer, a pale streak underwater. Slant of light catching a big fish ten or fifteen feet below the surface, streaking like a torpedo, so fast that the eye can't hardly keep up. Half-moon curve of the tuna's tailfin is nothing but a blur, accelerating from zero to fifty in a heartbeat. Makes me wonder how I'll ever get a harpoon into a thing that moves so fast.

Bluefin must be reading my mind, because one comes out of the water much closer to the boat — blue and silver and dripping in the sunlight — but it's back in the water and going deep before I can think to lift the harpoon, let alone throw it.

You got to be ready, but how do you know where the next one will come up? There! Another big bluefin whooshing along the surface like a speedboat, throwing a wake, chomping on tinker. Looks pretty close, so I heave the harpoon and pray for a strike.

Pitiful throw. Harpoon goes sideways and sort of doinks into the water. Misses by a mile. Meantime I fall across the stern and crack my elbow. When my

elbow stops throbbing I pull on the line and draw the harpoon back to the boat. Tuna must be having a good laugh. You see that? Stupid kid can't throw worth beans.

Hard to believe my dad once harpooned eight of these amazing critters in a single day. Eight in one day! They still talk about it down the harbor, the time Big Skiff got eight fins and bought himself a pickup truck and a gold necklace for his wife and a bike for his boy, all with cash money.

When the line is coiled I stand up again, holding the harpoon shoulder high. Looking for the streaks in the water, trying to figure where a fish will come up, hoping it will be close enough to hit. I take another throw and this one is better but it still misses. Or maybe I was throwing at a shadow, hard to say. Tinker mackerel exploding like hard rain all around, but the bluefin are deeper now, driving the tinker up. Working together, half a dozen big tuna, keeping the little fish in a big ball so they can slash in and feed from underneath.

Part of me wants to put the harpoon down and just watch. Other part of me wants a big bluefin so bad, I

can taste blood in my mouth. I know from how my dad used to talk that he mostly hit the fish when they were directly under him. More or less straight down. But none of these want to cooperate. Like they know how far I can throw and they stay that far away. Slashing at the poor tinker like they ain't eaten in months, like they're afraid they'll never eat again.

I use the oars to turn the skiff around so I can stand in the bow, which makes it easier to throw and not get tangled up in the rope. I'm holding the harpoon high, checking for streaks under the boat. Watching the amazing fish leap and slash dive and basically go nuts just out of range. Once I see a streak, but it's gone before I can even think to throw and by then it's too late.

I keep throwing anyhow, even when I can't see anything. Hoping luck will put a fish on the end of the harpoon. Harpooner has to be good, but his best friend is luck, that's what Dad used to say. Can't stick a fish without luck on your side.

I throw until I can't throw no more. Until my arm is all knotted up and aching and I ain't got the strength to lift the harpoon to my shoulder.

It's like the bluefin know how tired I am, because

they give one last flurry of feeding, making tinker explode in all directions, and then suddenly they're gone. It's amazing how fast it happens. One second they're everywhere, the next the sea goes flat quiet and it's like the fish were never there at all. Like I dreamed the whole thing.

More like a nightmare than a dream. Seeing all those big fish and not being able to hit one. The excitement drains out of me all at once. Like I'm on an elevator going down, down. What do I do now? Can't think. Like the mist has invaded my brain and made everything foggy inside my head.

Okay, first thing you do is sit down before you fall down. There, I'm sitting, what next? You're thirsty, right? So drink. Lift the water jug up to your mouth and drink. Good. That wasn't so hard, was it? Okay, what's next? You eaten lately? No? What about all those peanut butter and jelly sandwiches you brung along? Good idea. Only my hands are shaking so bad, I can hardly open the bag of sandwiches. Partly the shaking is because I'm so hungry. Didn't realize it until my brain said "food" and then all at once I'm starving.

I wolf down two sandwiches and the shaking stops. Think about eating a third sandwich but decide it's better to save it for later. Might be here awhile. Who knows when the big fish will come back. Or if they'll come back. Fog clears from my head a little and I'm thinking it was really stupid to keep throwing the harpoon even when the fish were out of range. Smarter to wait until you can't miss, even if that means waiting for hours. All throwing did was make my arm hurt and spook the fish. You got to choose your moment. That's something Dad used to say, but until now I never knew what it meant, exactly.

Full stomach makes me sleepy. I decide to take a little catnap while I got the chance. Might as well. Fish come back, the noise'll wake me up better than an alarm clock. So I lie down in the skiff and pull my cap down over my eyes and use my life jacket for a pillow.

I'm back home on the dock. Fog is so thick, I can't see the house. I can hear my mom and dad talking to each other but I can't see them. They're looking for me, but for some reason I can't make any noise. Can't make noise because I'm asleep, which don't make



sense. Somehow I know I'm asleep in a dream, but it don't matter, I can't make noise and I can't wake up and I can't see Mom or Dad or the house. Want to call out to Mom worse than anything, but I can't. Like I'm tied down with soft ropes of fog or something and the fog has got inside my mouth and sucked all the talk right out of me.

Mom, I want to say, Dad, I'm over here. Keep looking and you'll find me. But their voices get farther and farther away and it's just me alone inside the fog and I can't move or talk and then Mom's voice turns into a horn and I wake up.

*Blaaaaaaat. Blaaaaaaat. Blaaaaaaat.*

Foghorn. Something coming my way.

## When the Whoosh Comes By

WHEN you hear a foghorn you're supposed to signal back. That way the other boat gets an idea where you are and steers away. Trouble is, I never thought to bring along a horn. Didn't even think there might be fog, which is really dumb because I know better. Maybe that's what the dream was telling me about not having a voice. Don't matter now, there's nothing I can do but listen.

*Blaaaaaaat.*

Big old foghorn seems to be getting closer. I can hear a boat engine thumping. Then it seems to be going away and the engine gets fainter and fainter and

the horn sounds smaller and then the wake comes through and rocks me like a baby in a cradle and I'm alone again inside the fog.

"How long did you sleep, you reckon?"

That's me talking out loud to myself. Got no good answer because another thing I forgot to bring along is a wristwatch. Figured I'd know what time of day it was from the sun, but the fog has come on thick again and I can't tell where the sun is, except it feels like I slept for a long time, so it might be afternoon now.

"Skiff Beaman, you are a darn fool."

There. Almost feels good to say it. To speak the truth out loud. Only a darn fool would do what I did. Go to sea in a ten-foot plywood skiff without a thought in my head but catch-a-big-fish. Like there was no room in my brain for what happens if there's fog, or you can't find the fish, or you can't hit the fish even if you find them. Turns out I found the fish all right, but it don't matter because I'm not big enough or strong enough to hit one with the harpoon. So here I am thirty miles out to sea in a blind fog with nothing but a few peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and a jug

of water. Oh, and a compass in case I decide to give up and go home. Which I ain't ready for, not yet.

Why bother? Home is Dad on the TV couch and a boat with no engine and a rich kid laughing while he cuts my traps. Home is where my mom don't live anymore except she's still there somehow, in all the rooms of our little house, me and my dad missing her something fierce and not wanting to give up how much it hurts because that would be like forgetting. Home is a rickety old dock and an outhouse with a half-moon cut in the door, and the bright orange flowers my mom called "outhouse lilies." Home is where everything happens, good or bad, except it's been mostly bad lately.

So I'm lying there in the bottom of my little skiff, munching on a sticky sandwich and feeling sorry for myself when the whoosh comes by.

*Whoosh.*

There it is again. Sound of something slicing through the water. Not far away, either. Right on the other side of the plywood hull, a few feet from my head.

*Whoosh.*

Careful, I tell myself. Sit up slow. Don't rock the boat. Don't scare away whatever it is that's making that sound.

I sit up real slow. And see the tip of a fin over the top edge of the boat. Fin like the curved edge of a knife. A fin as blue as the sky on a perfect day in May. Big blue fin making the whoosh as a giant fish circles my boat.

Harpoon is lying along the seats with the tip out over the bow. I know what I want to do, but can I do it? Got to try. Now or never. No mistakes allowed.

I take the harpoon in my right hand while I'm still sitting down, facing the back of the boat. Keep hold of it while I ever so quiet stand up and turn around and face the front. Quiet now, quiet as a mouse. I stand on the seat without making a sound and look over the side into the dark, wet eye of a giant bluefin tuna, close enough to touch, and so alive, I swear I can hear his heart beating.

I'm looking down on the biggest fish I ever seen in my life. Bigger than me. Bigger than my boat. Bigger than any tuna I ever seen brought into the dock.

I got the harpoon raised but I don't dare move, not until it's perfect, not until I'm ready to strike.

I swear the giant fish is looking at the boat. Like maybe it wants to know if this is where the chum comes from that brings the mackerel it likes to eat. Can it still pick up on the scent of the bait I was cutting up and tossing over? Is that it? What's it thinking? Why is it circling my boat? Or is it circling me? Curious about a small boy with a long stick in his hand.

I never realized how much bigger a bluefin tuna looks when it's alive in the ocean instead of dead on the dock. I can feel the power as it swims by, making the boat rock with the *whoosh-whoosh-whoosh* of its giant tail shoving it through the water easy as can be. Man on the dock said the tail can move faster than the eye can see, but this one is going slow, gliding along as easy as can be. Almost like it's showing off. *Look at me, you puny human. Look at my big bad self, you never seen nothing so awesome as me.*

The big bluefin is so amazing and so beautiful, I almost forget what I need to do. Almost but not quite. My dad used to call it "getting froze up." Man out in

the pulpit of a tuna boat, he's waiting for hours for a chance to throw and when the chance finally comes, he can't do it. Like the fish sort of hypnotizes you into not throwing the harpoon.

Froze up. Come to think of it, that's sort of what happened to Dad when Mom died. Except he ain't on a tuna boat, he's on the TV couch. Stuck on how miserable he feels.

*Never mind your father and the couch, Skiffy. Concentrate on the fish!*

She's right. There's plenty of time to worry about my dad later. So I wrap both hands around the shaft of the harpoon and plunge it straight down at the biggest part of the fish. Straight down with all my might. Straight down so hard and fast, I fall halfway out of the boat and my face is an inch from the water and I'm looking down and I don't see nothing.

Fish disappeared. Gone in the blink of an eye.

Had my chance and missed. Again.

I groan and roll over and rub my knee where I bumped it and then I fetch the harpoon and pull it into the boat. That's when I notice the barb is missing. Must have come loose when I fell down. Great. Harpoon

without a barb is just a long stick. Then I remember the barb is attached to the keg line, so all I got to do is pull the line in and put the barb back on the harpoon.

Who knows? If I drift around for another hundred years or so, I might find another fish as big as the one that got away. Anyhow, I put my hand on the line and give it a tug and then a weird thing happens. The line slips through my hands.

Line is running out of the tub, over the side of the boat, and straight down into the water.

For a moment I can't make my brain figure out what that means, line running out of the boat, and then I stand up and shout, "FISH ON! FISH ON!" at the top of my lungs.

Nobody around to hear me, so it's like I'm shouting to myself, to make me believe what happened. I hit the big fish! He's got the barb in his back and he's diving deep, dragging line out of the tub. I'm so excited, I fall down again and crack another shin but I don't even care that it hurts because I got a fish on the line.

My dad used to talk about the first dive a bluefin makes after it gets hit. They call it "sounding." Most often a fish will go right to the bottom and stay there



for a while, until it figures out what happened. Sometimes a fish will run right across the surface, skipping and leaping and trying to shake the barb loose. Other times a fish will give up and die right away, if the barb got buried deep enough.

My fish hasn't quit, not yet. Line's whipping out like he's running clear across the ocean. Already the tub is more than halfway empty and the line is still running. I'm staring at it, trying to figure the best time to throw the keg over the side. Wanting to check the knot that holds the line to the keg, but I don't dare, there isn't time; whatever knot I tied will either hold or it won't.

When there's about a hundred feet of line left in the tub, I go to pick up the keg. And that's when a loop of line snags in the tub. Without thinking about it I reach my hand out to clear the snag.

Big mistake.

Snag whips around my wrist, fast as the blink of an eye. There's no time to get loose of it. There's no time even to take a deep breath or get ready for what happens next. Because the moment the snag closes

around my wrist, the line jerks me over the side and the next thing I know I'm flying out of the boat and into the water.

Into the cold water and down. Pulled down by the fish that hooked me. By the fish that's trying to kill me.

## Keg Rider

IT happens so fast, I don't have time to take a deep breath. One second I'm in the boat, the next I'm underwater. Water so cold, it makes my bones ache, but I don't care about that. All I care about is getting the line off my wrist and kicking back up to where there's air. Air is all that matters.

Cold water makes my eyes sting bad, but I can see what I got to do, sort of. See the loop of line snagged on my wrist. Probably cutting into my skin, but I can't feel it. Can't feel nothing but the panic exploding in my lungs and the cold, stabbing pain in my throat. A fish must feel like this, getting yanked from the nice safe water into the air, where it can't breathe.

Get loose. No room in my head for anything but  
“get loose.”

I’m scratching at my wrist, prying under the loop of  
line, but it’s way too tight.

Think. You got to think how to get loose.

I follow the line out with my other hand and try  
pulling on it, maybe get enough slack to slip it off, but  
the line slips through my fingers and I can’t get a grip.

Hands weak, getting weaker.

No time. No time!

I’m kicking, trying to get back to the surface, fight-  
ing the steady tug on the line.

Air! Must have air!

The surface is shimmering above me. Looks like a  
silver mirror made of liquid. Beautiful. Air bubbles  
coming out of my mouth rise up and melt into the  
shimmering silver mirror. Never seen nothing so pretty.

*MUST HAVE AIR!*

Who’s making all the noise? Shouting while you’re  
underwater? That’s really stupid. Can’t shout under-  
water, you fool.

Relax. Quit fighting. Open your mouth and in-  
hale. You know you want to. You have to inhale

something, right? Maybe your lungs can take air out of the water like a fish. Mom always said you were part fish, right? So breathe underwater and prove it.

I open my mouth and try to inhale but nothing comes in. I can't get my throat unstuck; it's like there's a ring of ice around my neck.

*SKIFF BEAMAN, DON'T YOU DARE BREATHE WATER!*

Can't help it, Mom. Got to breathe something. Got to. Got to. Got to.

*Don't give up! Listen to me! Rule Number Three! Never give up! The surface is right above your head! Kick! Kick! Kick!*

Too far away. Can't make it. So tired.

*Try, Skiffy, try!*

I kick and kick until there's nothing left in my legs. I want to laugh because it's so funny, getting drowned by a fish. Funniest thing in the world. But my throat is closed and the ice has gone into my lungs and laughing hurts too much. Good joke, though. Really, really funny.

*Rule Number Three: Never give up. Don't ever give up!*

Blackness shimmers down from above. I'm inside the warm dark.

Time to sleep.

Coughing hurts so bad, it wakes me up. Is this drowning? Water in my mouth, making me choke, but there's air, too. Real air. I'm at the surface, bobbing up and down. Voice in my head made me wake up, but I can't remember what it said or how I got here.

Choking and coughing hurts worse than drowning. Plus I can't see because my eyes are drenched in salt water.

*KLANG!*

Back of my head whacks into something hollow. Turn around, flailing my arms, find the keg bobbing next to me. Grab hold. Pull myself up, so my shoulders are clear of the water. Hug that keg with all my might while I get my wind back.

What happened? Can't put it straight in my head. Okay. Hand tangled in the line, I remember that. Getting yanked into the water. Tried to get loose and couldn't. Thought about inhaling water but couldn't do that, either.

So why am I alive?

When my eyes finally clear up, I see why. There it is, circling inside the wall of white fog. The giant bluefin back on the surface, swimming in a big circle around me and the keg.

Does it know it almost killed me and then saved my life?

I want to shout out to the fish, ask it where my boat is, but my throat hurts too much.

Figure my little skiff can't be too far away. Somewhere inside the wall of fog. Got to find that boat before too long or the cold water will kill me. Already I'm so numb, I can't hardly feel a thing from the neck down.

Cold water is sucking the heat out of me. And they say if your blood gets too cold, you die.

Hang around the town wharf, you hear about it all the time. How falling out of a boat can kill a man if he stays in cold water for long. They say in the winter-time, with water close to freezing, you ain't got but ten or fifteen minutes before your heart quits beating. Summer water takes longer. Figure maybe an hour or two.

Part of me wants to let go of the keg and swim around looking for the skiff before I'm too weak to move my arms. But the keg is helping me float, letting me get my strength back, and if I let go I may never find it again. Then where'd I be?

If I was wearing my life jacket it might be different. Keeping hold of the keg wouldn't be so important. But like a darn fool I left my life jacket in the bottom of the boat, under the seat. Life jacket don't do much good if you don't wear it. My dad must have told me that a thousand times, but I guess it didn't take.

Too late to worry about that now. Mistake's already been made. Worry about keeping your head above water. Worry about holding on to the keg. Worry about finding the skiff. Can't be far, can it? No wind to speak of. Nothing to move it but the tide and current, and that same tide and current is moving me and the keg in the same direction.

Can't be far. Look around, maybe you'll see it. The fog may lift again. See that little boat, you swim for it with all your might. Meantime, ride the keg and hope for the best.

Shivering cold reminds me of the day Mom died.



She'd been real sick for a long time, and we all knew what was coming, so I should have been ready, but it don't work like that. Knowing a thing is bound to happen don't make it easier. Thing is, you keep hoping for a miracle right up to the end and then when it don't it's like the floor disappears and you're falling but you never hit bottom.

When it happened, all I could think to do was run. First I ran in circles around her room. Then I ran around the house kicking at the stupid snow. Then I ran across the road and into the woods and climbed up a tree and lay there hugging the icy branch while the ambulance came and went. I watched Captain Keelson and his wife drive up and go inside and then Dad came out with them and Captain Keelson shouted my name and asked me to come home, please, and be with my father, but I kept hugging the branch and hoping I'd wake up from a bad dream and Mom would be okay except I knew it wasn't a dream and I'd never ever see her again or hear her voice, ever ever ever, and that's when she said, *Skiffy, go to your father*, her voice in my head as clear as day, and I

knew that's what she'd want me to do and I did it, I came down from the tree and went back to the house and told Dad not to worry, everything would be okay because Mom said so, and he give me a look so sad, it hurt to breathe and then he went and lay down on the TV couch and didn't say nothing for a long time.

I guess Dad can't hear Mom's voice like I can, or if he does he won't listen.

Anyhow, I'm riding that keg and thinking about my mom and my dad and home and the *Mary Rose* and that's when the skiff comes out of the fog, bobbing up and down like it's trying to say "hello."

First I think my eyes are fooling, but there it is, big as life, looking like it missed me.

I keep hold of the keg for a minute in case the skiff decides to disappear again. Maybe it's a trick to make me let go of the keg. But the skiff keeps drifting closer and closer and when I can almost reach out and touch it I let go the keg and kick like mad and pull myself into the boat.

Then I lie in the bottom of the skiff and laugh like a maniac because it feels so good to be alive.

## *A Nantucket Sleigh Ride*

IT ain't the cold makes me shiver. The summer air will warm me up soon enough. What gets me shaking is how scared I was the whole time in the water.

Down the town wharf they tell spooky stories about fishermen who fall from boats, but I always figured it was like ghost talk around a campfire. I guess those kind of things are make-believe until they happen to you, and then it don't seem so far-fetched. Turns out falling from a boat is dead easy — any fool can do it.

When the shivering eases, I sit up and look around. Fog. Seems like it just won't leave me alone.

I find my soggy life jacket and put it on. Just in case.

And that reminds me of the fish. How it was circling when I grabbed hold of the keg. But the water is gray and glassy and calm. No big bluefin up on the surface, that's for sure. And the keg is still bobbing next to the skiff. Which means the fish must have got free somehow. Pulled the barb or cut the line. Only fair, I suppose. Fish had a chance to drown me and didn't.

I tell myself it's okay. Tell myself not to feel too bad. Easy to want a fish more than anything in the world until you almost been drowned. That sure changes the way you look at things. Still, I do look around for the harpoon. Never know when another big fish might decide to come by.

But the harpoon is gone. Must have gone over when I did.

Face it, boy. You'll have to catch a giant tuna some other day. You're wet and shivering and hungry again. Out of bait, out of luck. Time to pack up and go home. So I reach over the side, lift the keg into the skiff, shove it under the front seat, and start to pull in the line. Coiling it neat in the tub. Thinking how harmless it looks until it's wrapped around your wrist and you're being dragged under.

Next thing, I yank my hand away from the line like I been shocked with electricity. *Because the line feels alive.*

The fish is still on! Must be right under the boat. Resting up from all the hard work it's done trying to drag me under. Only now it's feeling much better, thank you. Because the line is running back out of the tub. Running fast. And this time I know enough to keep my hands away. I aim to give it room. Don't even want to touch the keg; that's what got me in trouble the last time, trying to throw it over. Figure the keg will pop out from under the seat when all the line runs out.

But it don't pop out. Tension on the line locks the keg under the front seat and then the skiff jerks out from under my feet. I land hard on the rear seat. The skiff is moving. Line is twanging like the high string on a steel guitar as the fish rises up to the surface, pulling the skiff behind it. Seems crazy, but the tuna weighs more than the skiff and me combined, and even with a harpoon barb buried in its back it has the strength to run.

Nothing I can do but hang on. My dad says in the old days men going after whales in small boats sometimes got what they call a Nantucket sleigh ride. Dragged behind a whale trying as hard as it can to get away from the human beings that hunted it. Them Nantucket whalers thought it was more fun than Disneyland, getting a fast ride from a whale. Not me, though. I wish it would stop. What if the skiff tips over? What if I get thrown out and the skiff disappears into the fog again? I got my life jacket on, but so what? Cold'll kill me for sure this time.

The skiff skates along, throwing up a wake. Kind of creeps me out to be going this fast without a motor. A bluefin tuna ain't a whale, but still it's way bigger than me, and a million times stronger, pound for pound. I'm thinking get the knife and cut the line, but something in me says no. Never give up, even when it scares you half to death. Especially then. So I hang on with both hands and pray everything will be okay. Dear Lord, don't let it sink me. And don't let the barb pull loose. And don't let the line break.

I figure God got more important things to do than

help a boy catch a fish, but you never know. Never hurts to ask, my mom used to say.

No idea how long the sleigh ride lasts. Could be ten minutes, could be an hour. But there comes a time when the line stops pulling and the skiff slows down and stops. I look around for the fish and there it is, fifty or sixty feet away. Rolling around on the surface like it don't know which side is up. That big fin all wobbly and weak, and blood coming from the place where the barb went in, and the shiny dark eye staring at me, as if to say, *look what you did*.

I caught lots of small fish, mackerel and pollock and cod and flounder, and cleaned 'em, too. Never bothered me, once I got used to it. But this is different. This time I feel sorry for the fish. Could have drowned me but it didn't and now it's dying and I'm the one who killed it. Big beautiful creature so alive, it seemed like it could never die. But I know better. I knew it when I threw the harpoon.

Then I get to thinking what it will mean if I can get the fish to shore and sell it to Mr. Nagahachi. New engine for the *Mary Rose*. New traps to replace those that were cut. Something nice for my dad, that will

make him feel like he used to feel before things went bad. The look on Tyler's face when he sees me bring in a really big fish. New bike, new life, new everything.

When the fish stops moving I get out the oars and work the skiff as close as I can. Ready to back off if it comes alive. But the fight has gone out of the fish. The gills are barely moving and the bright blue color is getting dull.

I know from what my dad said that I need to get a rope around the tail. Control the tail and you control the fish. But how do I do that without jumping into the water? Because I ain't going back in the water, no matter what.

Fish rolls over and looks at me. That big dark eye starting to cloud over. Weight of the head starting to pull it down.

Now or never, boy.

My hands are shaking, but not so bad I can't tie a loop in a rope. I work the rope into the water and around the half-moon curve of the tail and I'm thinking, this ain't so hard, what was I afraid of, when the fish decides it's not quite ready to die.

Tail slaps the water, spraying me. The loop tightens



and now I got my hands full, hanging on as the tail lashes back and forth. I brace my feet against the seat and cling to the rope.

Once at the Fourth of July picnic they had tug-of-war, and the losing side got pulled into a puddle, which looked pretty funny unless it was you in the mud. Mom said the secret was to know when to let go, to make the other side fall first. But as scared as I am to hold on, I'm even more scared to let go. Give the fish an inch and it'll get its tail under the water and then there will be no stopping it. I been there and I don't want to go back. So I hang on as it thrashes around. Hang on until it feels like my arms will get pulled from the sockets. Hang on with my heart beating so hard, it makes my face hot.

Finally the thrashing slows and then the big fish shivers and stops moving. It's still alive but not strong enough to fight, or to keep me from looping the rope around the stern cleats.

When I got the rope hitched I take a breather and decide what to do next. All the thinking I done about harpooning a big fish, I never thought about what

happens after. Too big to haul into the boat, even if I was strong enough, which I'm not.

Only thing I can think to do is drag the fish behind the skiff, tail first.

My arms are so weak, I can barely pull on the starter rope, but the old outboard fires right up anyhow. I put it in gear and steer until the compass finds west. I can feel the weight of the fish behind the skiff. Outboard chugging as if to say, what's going on? What did you do? How'd the skiff get so heavy all of a sudden?

Caught me a giant tuna, yes I did.

Proud of yourself, are you?

Matter of fact, yes. Tired and cold and hungry, but mighty proud, too.

Keep steering, fool. Don't let it fall off to the south. Steer west. True west. That's where the land is. That's where the ocean ends. Hold the course, boy. Thirty miles to home. Thirty miles to find Mr. Nagahachi. Thirty miles to sell the fish and then everything will be good again.

Everything will be perfect.

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## *The Angel in the Mist*

LITTLE flat-bottomed skiff like mine was never meant to tow anything heavy. With a giant fish behind, it starts to wallow. That means the back end of the skiff gets low in the water as the outboard tries to push it forward, then it comes up hard against the rope and slows down. When that happens the outboard makes a funny sound, like an old cat trying to cough up a fur ball. Don't sound good, that's for sure, and it makes me worry about a wave coming over the stern.

I try to balance the skiff by shifting gear to the front

and scrunching myself forward, but it don't help much. Doubt we're going more than five miles an hour, me and the big fish. So if the tide is going out — and I think it is — we're not making much headway at all. A mile or two each hour.

Not near enough.

Come on, little skiff, I'm thinking. You're a good boat. You can do it. Keep heading west. Head for Spinney Cove. Head for home. Get this mighty fish to the dock before Mr. Nagahachi goes home for the day. Before my dad figures out that me and the skiff and the last harpoon are missing.

Do the math, though, and it don't sound good. At this rate it'll take fifteen hours to get back to shore. Tuna won't keep for fifteen hours, even in cold water. Have to sell it for cat food, a few pennies on the pound.

Then I remember that the tide turns every six hours. So pretty soon it'll be coming from behind, pushing the skiff toward shore. Or the fog might lift and I can make a deal with one of the tuna boats out on the fishing grounds. Give 'em part of the profit to

tow me and the big fish back to the dock. Hate to split up the money, but if it means a higher price for a fresh fish, it'd be worth it, right?

I'm still calculating the profit when the outboard starts to sputter.

"Hey motor? Please don't you quit on me now. Take me home, I'll give you a new carburetor. I'll have you rebuilt good as new."

But it ain't the outboard. I know better. It's the gas. Been running for two or three hours and now it's down to fumes. I give the fuel tank a shake and the motor picks up for a time, but then it sort of fades away, *oop-oop-oop*, and makes a little clunk, and that's it, no more outboard motor.

Quiet all of a sudden. Hush of the fog. Whisper of water on the hull. Little thump as the swell pushes the big fish up against the back of the skiff. Tail thumping soft as a puppy's tail to remind me of what I done. Only other noise is me getting out the oars.

All along I knew it would come to this. Even without towing a lot of extra weight the skiff wouldn't hold enough gas for the whole round trip. So it was always going to come down to me rowing the last few

miles. Except this is more than a few miles. More like twenty miles.

I done a fair bit of rowing, up the creek and back, and around the harbor, but nothing like twenty miles in one shot.

Figure each mile could be worth as much as a thousand dollars, if I can get the fish to the dock before it goes bad. Thousand bucks a mile! That makes me put my back into it. But from the very first pull I know how hard it's going to be. I can feel the huge weight of the fish fighting the oars. Plus it's hard to watch the compass and keep to the right course when you're facing backward and pulling with all your might.

What choice do I have? No choice at all. I got myself into this mess and now I got to row myself out of it, plain and simple. I heard stories of men rowed a hundred miles when they had to, in worse weather than this, and without food or water.

Which reminds me I'm out of food and water, too. Wish I hadn't chomped down that last sandwich. I sure could use it now! My stomach feels so empty, it hurts. Scrambled eggs and sausage and toast with raspberry jam, that's what my stomach wants. Then a

warm bed and a soft pillow. Or curl up next to Dad on the TV couch and forget about everything wet and cold.

“Hey Big Bluefin,” I say. “Give us a push, why don’t you?”

Big Bluefin ain’t talking. Every now and then the giant tail makes a feeble slap, but the strength is fading and pretty soon that tail will stop moving forever. The great head lolls around and looks at me as it rises on a swell. Big sad eyes that say good-bye.

I pull hard on the oars, and then the rope comes up tight and the whole skiff jerks to a stop.

Got to find the rhythm or I’ll never get anywhere. Pull, ease. Pull, ease. Pull. Pull. Pull. Time it so the rope never goes slack. And don’t forget to check the compass. Without a compass you’ll row in circles, sure as Christmas, because one arm is always stronger. Same as a hunter lost in the woods will walk in circles, if he don’t have a star to guide him, or know that moss mostly grows on the north side of trees.

Fog this bad, no way to know exactly where land is until I hit the shore. So stop thinking about home and the harbor and the creek you know like the back

of your hand. Stop thinking about how hungry and thirsty you are. Don't think about nothing but rowing.

Don't think about how much it hurts.

Don't think about the blisters on your hands.

Don't think at all.

Pull.

Ease.

Pull.

Pull.

Pull.

I'm like a machine. A tired and worn-out machine that can't stop or it'll fall apart. Can't hardly tell where my arms end and the oars begin.

Pull.

Pull.

Pull.

Don't think.

Pull.

Pull.

Pull.

Hours go by. Or it could be days and weeks and



months and years, for all I know, because time gets strange when every part of you is tired and hurting.

I remember sitting at my desk in school, last period of the last class of the last day, and waiting for the minute hand to tick along until the bell rang. The last ten minutes of that class took a week at least. This is worse, much worse. As if each minute is an hour and an hour is forever.

All that's left of me is the rowing part and the hurting part. The thinking part of me is hiding in the back of my head and won't come out. Why should it? Nothing out here but hungry and hurting and thirsty and miserable.

Pull.

Pull.

Pull.

The glow in the fog fades to a dull gray. Takes me a year or two to realize the sun is going down. That's how long I been rowing. And every lick of it feels like I been rowing in place, never getting anywhere. Rowing against the tide, against the weight. Moving around the same patch of black water, towing a giant fish. Like walking up a steep hill with heavy iron

boots, only you can never get to the top of the hill because it keeps getting higher and higher and the boots get heavier and heavier.

Pull.

Pull.

Pull.

I want to tell the fish it won. It beat me. For every stroke of the oars it pulled back harder. It never gave up. It tuckered me out. It drowned me in fog and dark.

Pull.

Pull.

Pull.

The fog turns from day fog to night fog. It must be getting cooler, but I can't feel it. My hands been numb for a long time, but when night comes they feel warm, which don't seem right, and then my hands slip off the oars and I fall off the seat and land in the bottom of the skiff.

Put my hands to my face and realize my hands are bleeding and that's what made 'em slip away from the oars. I get back into the seat and take a deep breath and try to clear my head, which ain't easy. I stopped

being hungry a long time ago, but not eating makes it hard to think.

What can I do? Comes to me there's only two possibilities. Cut the fish loose, or find a way to keep rowing.

Cut the fish loose is giving up, and that means breaking Rule Number Three. But Rule Number One is think smart. Maybe thinking smart is cutting loose the fish. Which is more important, never giving up or thinking smart?

I'm trying to decide when I notice something under my foot. A lumpy sandwich bag. Which don't make no sense, since I ate all my sandwiches a long time ago.

Or did I?

Takes all my strength to reach down and pick up the plastic bag with my bloody fingers and hold it up so I can see it. I'll be darn. A plain old peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

Bar of solid gold couldn't look any finer.

My hands are so slippery and shaky, I have to tear the bag open with my teeth. Sandwich! Squished and soggy don't matter when you're starving. I eat the

whole thing in one fat, wonderful bite. It tastes sticky and sweet. Better than candy. Better than anything.

That little bit of food clears my head and stops me shaking. It helps me decide what to do. Helps me think how to be smart and never give up, both at the same time.

What happens is I remember a true story Mr. Woodwell told me once, that happened long ago. In the old days they fished from schooners, big wooden ships with white canvas sails that took the fishermen far offshore to the Grand Banks fishing grounds. Each schooner carried a bunch of wooden dories stacked on deck, and when they got to the fishing grounds the men got into the dories and rowed away, looking for cod and haddock.

This one guy got lost in a winter storm and couldn't find the schooner. He's a hundred miles at sea and can't find his ship. All his gear is washed away, except for his oars. He knows his hands will soon get frost-bite and then he won't be able to grip the oars. Before that happens he dips his hands in the cold water and freezes them to the oar handles so he can't let go. And he rows all the way from the Grand Banks, off Nova

Scotia, to Gloucester, Massachusetts. Lost his hands to the frostbite but rowed all the way home and lived to tell the tale.

He never gave up. He did what he had to do.

What I got to do is somehow keep my hands from slipping off the oars. So I cut two pieces of rope. Lash my left hand to the left oar and tie the rope with a good knot.

There. Can't let go.

Lashing my right hand is much harder, so hard it brings tears to my eyes, but I finally manage to pull the knot tight with my teeth. Both hands tied to the oars. Can't let go, can't give up.

Ready?

Ready.

Pull.

Pull.

Pull.

One day near the end when my mom was really sick she called me into her room. Her voice was so small and quiet, I had to lean close and smell the sick

on her breath. I didn't care. I wanted to be that close. I wanted to feel her fingers feather-light on my cheek.

*I know you're still a small boy, Skiff Beaman, but I've got a big job for you.*

Anything, Mom. Anything at all.

*I want you to take care of your father. You understand?*

Sure, Mom. Take care of Dad.

*Swear on a stack of pancakes?*

I swear, Mom.

Thing is, I'd have done that anyhow, without her asking. Mom knew that, but she wanted to hear me say it, to put her easy in her mind.

Comes to me that the only really good reason to keep on rowing is to keep that promise. And if I cut the fish loose I can get home sooner. Makes sense. Only thing, I can't cut the rope because my hands are lashed to the oars. So there it is.

Pull.

Pull.

Pull.

One time we all went out for a picnic on the *Mary*

*Rose*. Anchored behind Boone Island, out of the wind, and Mom put a checkered tablecloth over the engine cover and passed out fried chicken on paper plates and potato salad and pickles and stuff, and home-made blueberry pie for dessert. I ate so much, I like to bust and started complaining about a full stomach and too much food, and she said never complain about too much food, that's an insult to the cook and an insult to all the hungry people in the world.

I sassed her and had to stay down in the cabin for the rest of the picnic. When we got back to the dock, Mom came down in the cabin and said have you got over being a smart mouth? and I said no. Mom shook her head and sat down on the bunk and said what am I going to do with you? Don't care what you do, I told her, my stomach hurts and you don't care. Mom said look me in the eye and say that and I looked her in the eye and I couldn't say it because it wasn't true. She smiled then and said, you have as much stubborn in you as a full-grown man. I hope someday you put it to good use.

That was our last picnic on the *Mary Rose*.

Pull.

Pull.

Pull.

When Mom got sick I kept wishing I had a time machine so I could go back and fix things. Take back all the mean words I ever said to her. Change what made her sick. Change myself into a better person that didn't ruin picnics.

Pull.

Pull.

Pull.

Can't feel my arms. Can't feel my hands. All I can feel is the weight of the skiff and the big fish and the fog pressing down. Brain ain't working right. Something wrong but I don't know what. Almost like I'm asleep but I can't be asleep because I'm still rowing. My eyes are wide open but the compass has gone blurry. Am I still headed for shore?

Pull.

Pull.

Pull.

Can't stop. Want to give up but can't. Now I'm watching me pull on the oars. Like I'm floating just above, watching Skiff Beaman row and row and row.



Crazy boy, where's he think he's going? Going to Boone Island for a picnic. Going to get it right this time.

Pull.

Pull.

Pull.

Can't see the compass, can't see the fish, can't see the end of my oars dipping into the water. Only thing I can see is the funny-looking giant striding high above the fog. Tall thing with skinny legs and a bright white halo shining behind its head. Do giants have halos? Can't be a giant. Giants don't exist, do they? Must be an angel. An angel in the mist with eyes like beams of light.

Don't matter. Must keep rowing.

Then the angel comes out of the fog and it's a boat not an angel and the halo is a spotlight shining down from the tuna tower and a man shouts from the tower but I can't understand what he's saying and it might be a dream tempting me to give up so I don't stop rowing, I never stop rowing until my father jumps down from *Fin Chaser* and picks me up, oars and all, and carries me to sleep.

## *The Tail on the Door*

### SMALL BOY HARPOONS BIGGEST FISH

*Portland Press Herald*—The largest bluefin tuna taken by harpoon in Maine waters this season was caught by twelve-year-old Samuel “Skiff” Beaman, Jr., of Spinney Cove. The 900-pound fish fetched a record price but very nearly cost young Mr. Beaman his life. After harpooning the trophy tuna and securing it to his ten-foot skiff, Beaman ran out of fuel and rowed from Jeffrey’s Ledge to within five miles of shore, a distance of twenty-five miles, in unusually heavy fog.

The Coast Guard cutter *Reliance* and a number of commercial fishing vessels had been searching through the night for the young harpooner when he was found by his father, Samuel Beaman, Sr., aboard *Fin Chaser*, a private tuna boat owned by Jack Croft of Spinney Cove. Mr. Croft reports that the boy was badly dehydrated by the time he was discovered, and that he had apparently been rowing without pause for more than twelve hours.

The boy was treated at the Maine Medical Center in Portland and released the next day. He is expected to make a full recovery.

The newspaper article is in my scrapbook now, along with a photocopy of the check from Mr. Nagahachi. Too bad they didn't take a picture of the fish, but everybody was so worried about me, I guess they forgot. Dad says not to fret, there will be other fish and we can take a picture then. Have to wait until next year, at least, what with getting the *Mary Rose* fixed and school starting and things to do around the house.

Today Dad vacuumed the living room, which is a first. We're cleaning up because Mr. Woodwell has been invited to supper and Dad says it don't matter if the old man is halfway blind, he still knows dirt from dirt. Plus he's an honored guest and I'm lucky he didn't have me arrested for stealing the harpoon.

The deal is, Dad is going to show me how to make a new harpoon for Mr. Woodwell, to replace the one I lost. Also I'm supposed to help the old geezer around the shed for nothing, for as long as he needs me. Like I mind, right? When the truth is I'd rather be in that boat shed than almost anywhere else in the world. Except out in a boat, of course.

The other good thing, besides fixing the *Mary Rose*, is that Dad is going to meetings to help him stay sober. Says he has to take it one day at a time. Says that looking for me in the fog scared the beer right out of him. We'll see. So far, so good.

As for Tyler, the lying weasel, he swore up and down he didn't cut my traps, but his father didn't believe him, so he lost the use of the Boston Whaler for a year. Big deal. Dad says Jack Croft doesn't know what to do with the boy and probably wishes he had

me for a son, but somehow I doubt that. Blood is blood, and you got to keep together with your family, even if they mess up. Friends, too. Like Dad says, he found two things in the fog, me and his old pal Jack, who didn't think nothing of risking his boat for a true friend.

Which brings me to the biggest fish. The fish that almost drowned me and then saved me and then took me for a ride, and then nearly killed me all over again. The biggest fish in the big blue sea got flown to the other side of the world and was served up at weddings and ceremonies and birthday parties all over Japan, where they call the giant bluefin tuna *hon maguro* and believe that it melts in your mouth and into your soul.

All except the tail. The tail I nailed up above the outhouse door, where everybody can see it. Dad offered to tear down the old outhouse so nobody would think to sing that stupid song again, but I said leave her be.

I like things just the way they are.

# AFTER WORDS™

RODMAN PHILBRICK'S

## *The Young Man and the Sea*

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## About the Author

After years of writing mysteries and suspense thrillers for adults, Rodman Philbrick decided to try his hand at a novel for young readers. That novel, *Freak the Mighty*, was published in 1993 to great acclaim and stellar reviews. In addition to being named an ALA Best Book for Young Adults and winning several state awards, it was also made into the Miramax feature film *The Mighty* in 1998. Rod returns to Maxwell Kane's story in a sequel, *Max the Mighty*, a fast-paced cross-country odyssey.

Rod takes young readers to the American West in his exhilarating tale of two brothers on the run in *The Fire Pony*, winner of the Capital Choice Award, and on to a land where nothing is as it seems in the science-fiction adventure *REM World*. His thought-provoking novel *The Last Book in the Universe*, also an ALA Best Book for Young Adults, takes place in a futuristic world where no one reads anymore. Rod thought back to his New England roots and knowledge of boat building to write *The Young Man and the Sea*. *School Library Journal* praised its "wide-open adventure" and "heart-pounding suspense" and named it a Best Book of the Year in 2004.

Rodman Philbrick has also written several spine-tingling series for young readers with his wife, Lynn Harnett, including *The House on Cherry Street* and *The Werewolf Chronicles*. Rod and Lynn divide their time between homes on the coast of Maine and in the Florida Keys.

## Q&A with Rodman Philbrick

**Q:** *You started writing when you were in the sixth grade. Did you always want to be a writer? Do you remember any of your first stories?*

**A:** I always wanted to be a writer, although at various times I also wanted to be an astronaut, a doctor, a lawyer, and so on. The first short story I remember completing was a five-page, trick-ending thing called "The President's Barber." Each day the White House barber gives the president a shave with a straight razor, and each day he secretly decides whether or not he'll let the president live, or cut his throat.

**Q:** *Have you always written for kids?*

**A:** No. For the first fifteen years of my career as a novelist, I wrote only for adult readers — mysteries, suspense novels, thrillers, and so on. Then I stumbled on the idea for a story that had been happening in my backyard, so to speak, and wrote *Freak the Mighty* in the summer of 1992. Since then I've published books for young readers as well as novels intended for adults.

**Q:** *Did you have a hard time getting your first book published? What other jobs did you have when you were first starting out as a writer?*

**A:** I had a lot of trouble getting published. I wrote my first novel at sixteen and then wrote eight more before I finally found a publisher at age twenty-eight. During those years, I



worked as a longshoreman, a carpenter, a roofer, and a boat-builder.

**Q:** *Is Freak the Mighty based on a true story?*

**A:** The idea for *Freak the Mighty* was inspired by the personality of a real boy. Like Kevin, one of the book's two main characters, he suffered from a disease that made him very short. Like Kevin, he had a big friend who sometimes carried him around. And, like Kevin, the real boy was highly intelligent and interested in both language and science. His mother, like the Fair Gwen, was and is quite beautiful. There the similarity ends — the plot of the story is pure fiction.

**Q:** *Max, the other main character, is also unusual. What inspired you to create him?*

**A:** I'd seen my little friend riding around on the shoulders of one of his big buddies. I didn't know the big guy, so that allowed me to invent an entirely fictional character. I thought it would be interesting if he had some darkness in his past — a father in jail, his mother dead.

**Q:** *You've said that Freak the Mighty is about a writer learning to find his voice, and that theme recurs in your novel The Last Book in the Universe. How did you find your voice?*

**A:** Over many years and over many thousands of pages. Learning to write a readable, compelling story was hard work for me.

**Q:** *What inspired you to write The Last Book in the Universe?*

**A:** The editor Michael Cart asked me to contribute a story to an anthology called *Tomorrowland*. At first, all I came up with was an intriguing title, "The Last Book in the Universe." Then I had to think up a world where there might be a "last book," and think about why people had stopped reading. After finishing the short story, which was eventually published, I couldn't stop thinking about the world the narrator, Spaz, lived in and I set about making it a full-scale novel. No doubt many of the "sci-fi" elements came from my love of movies like the original *The Time Machine*, and from my adolescent fascination with comic book adventures.

**Q:** *Did the short story change a lot when you expanded it into a novel?*

**A:** The short story is pretty much confined to Spaz and his mentor, Ryter. To make it an interesting novel, I needed more characters and more adventure. So I invented Eden and populated it with people who had "improved" themselves genetically. Then I added Spaz's sister, Bean, put her in peril, and the adventure began.

**Q:** *You've written books that are based in a familiar setting, like Freak the Mighty and this one, and others that take place in lands you've invented, like REM World and The Last Book in the Universe. Which is easier to write about?*

**A:** Imagined worlds are always a bit more difficult for me. I can't write about a place until it seems real in my own head, so

that obviously takes a leap of imagination that's not required for the real world.

**Q:** *The characters in your books have such interesting, evocative names: Gram and Grim, Loretta Lee, and Killer Kane from Freak the Mighty; Spaz from The Last Book in the Universe; and Skiff Beaman from The Young Man and the Sea. How do you come up with them?*

**A:** Names are important to me. I can never really get started on a story until the characters have names that mean something to me. Sometimes the names come out of thin air, other times from newspaper articles or songs.

**Q:** *You've written several books with your wife, Lynn Harnett. Is it hard to write a book with someone else?*

**A:** It depends on who you're writing with! Lynn has been my only collaborator, and she is an experienced writer and an editor. When my publisher asked if we'd like to write a series of scary stories for young readers, we said yes. Our first series was a haunted house trilogy called *The House on Cherry Street*. So far, we've written ten books together, but we continue to write books on our own as well.

**Q:** *What inspired you to write The Young Man and the Sea?*

**A:** The notion of a boy harpooning a giant bluefin tuna came to me when my younger brother, Jonathan (a teenager at the time), worked as a crewman on a tuna boat. He told me tales of the giant fish and it always stuck in my mind.

**Q:** *The title of the book brings to mind Ernest Hemingway's 1952 novella The Old Man and the Sea. Are the similarities in the title intentional?*

**A:** Before I had a definite title, my editor and I called this "the young man and the sea book" because I had mentioned that Hemingway's famous story about an old man and the sea had inspired the part of my story that involves going after a big fish in a small boat. My original title for the book was "Lobster Boy," but people kept expecting a kid with claws for hands, sort of the "lobster version" of *Edward Scissorhands*. Finally we decided that *The Young Man and the Sea* worked best as a title because it openly acknowledges Hemingway's influence. Oddly enough, the British edition of the book reverted to the old title, *Lobster Boy*.

**Q:** *Is the character of Skiff Beaman based on a real person? What about Mr. Woodwell?*

**A:** Parts of Skiff's personality were drawn from people I knew as a kid. There actually was a Mr. Woodwell. When I knew him he was an elderly gentleman, a retired schoolteacher who was rebuilding an old Friendship sloop. As a young man I sailed Down East with him. We were headed for the race at Friendship, Maine, but got fogged in in Casco Bay. I combined Mr. Woodwell's wise and gentle nature with that of another, highly skilled boatbuilder who lived up the river from me, a man who had a boat shed very much like the one in the book.

**Q:** *Skiff has a very distinctive voice. Do people from Maine really talk like that?*

**A:** To my ear, many do. Skiff's way of talking is somewhat modified — the real residents of "Spinney Cove" tend to drop the letter *r* even more.

**Q:** *There is a great deal of detailed information about trapping lobsters and boatbuilding. Did you have to do a lot of research to write about those subjects?*

**A:** Before I was a published author, I was a boatbuilder for a number of years, and therefore I know quite a lot about boats and boat repair. For information about traps and lobster fishing, I consulted my friend Paul Brown, a lobsterman in Kittery, Maine.

**Q:** *When you travel on your boat, what's your favorite destination?*

**A:** I have two favorite destinations, one north and one south. When we're in Maine my favorite destination is the Isles of Shoals, a group of islands seven miles offshore. When we're in the Florida Keys, my wife, Lynn, and I sometimes take a twenty-eight-mile run across Florida Bay and explore the wind-swept beaches at Cape Sable, which is part of the Everglades.

**Q:** *Do you enjoy fishing?*

**A:** I'm an avid fisherman, and I practice the fine art of angling as frequently as possible. In Maine I fish mostly for striped bass and bluefish. In the Florida Keys I fish for a variety of species, including the giant tarpon. Except when I'm going to cook fish for supper, I always practice "hook and release."

**Q:** *Are you working on a new book right now? What can you tell us about it?*

**A:** I'm always working on a book. That's what I do — besides fishing, I mean. At the moment, I'm writing a novel with the working title "The True Adventures of Homer Figg." It's about a boy from Maine who runs away from home and follows his older brother into battle during the Civil War.

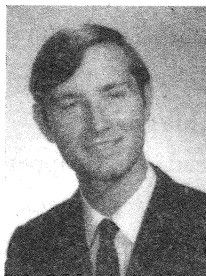
## Rod's Writing Tips

Rodman Philbrick began writing when he was in the sixth grade. At first, he kept his stories a secret because writing didn't seem "cool" or "normal," but when he turned sixteen, he decided to send his first novel — about a boy who admires his best friend, a genius who eventually dies tragically — to several publishers. Although the novel was rejected, Rod didn't give up. When he was twenty-eight, his career as a writer took off with the publication of a suspense novel for adults. Here, Rod shares some of his tips for writers of all ages.

1. Getting started is easier than you think. You can begin by telling a story to yourself — one that you don't have to share with anyone else — either by writing in a journal or typing at your computer.
2. Even when you're writing fiction, you have to tell the truth. This doesn't mean you have to write about real people or even your own life, but you can make your readers believe in the characters you're creating if their emotions are clear. Joy makes you feel capable of flight. Anger puts murder in your heart. An insult physically hurts. These are feelings we can all relate to.
3. A good memory helps. Again, even if you're not writing about your own past or present experiences, the characters and situations you're writing about need to feel real. Think about your bedroom. Where do you sit when you're in there? What can you see from the windows? What does it smell like outside? These concrete details can help you

shape a world that your readers will recognize — even if you're writing about life on another planet.

4. Play the "what if" game. Ask yourself a question, and find out where the answer leads you. You could start with a question about your own life: What if you found out you had a twin brother or sister that no one had told you about? What if you wanted to meet your twin, but your parents said it wasn't a good idea? What would you do? Or perhaps you could start with a question about the world in general: What if kids never had to go to school? What if they never learned to read or write? What would they do instead? What would their lives be like?
5. Listen to the voices in your head. Sometimes when you're thinking about nothing in particular, a word or phrase or even a full sentence enters your brain. One day, I was on a long drive from New York to Maine when I heard a voice say, "I never had a brain until Freak came along and let me borrow his for a while, and that's the truth, the whole truth." Maybe you're just daydreaming, or maybe it's the beginning of your next story.



*Rodman Philbrick,  
Age 17*