

“Sammy the Turtle”

The two of them walked into my room together, dressed like all the others these days in head-to-toe opaque green plastic, their faces looking like something out of those huge bug-eyed space alien comic books we used to collect as kids. The one mumbled incoherently through the mask, probably asking if I was finished with my meal tray which was still sitting in front of me. Lots of the residents complained about the food in this place, which admittedly wasn't particularly tasty, but I usually reserved judgment since my late wife, bless her departed soul, wasn't the best cook all those years either. And I sure as heck wasn't used to anything fancy anyway. As my tray was removed and that woman left, the other woman – at least I assumed they were both women since before all the fetching plastic garment outerwear had taken over they always had been women – extended a yellow legal tablet and a pen towards me.

“Good morning, Raymond,” she shouted through her mask. (Why they always felt it necessary to shout was a mystery to me; my hearing was 20/20 or whatever they call that for ears.) “Since we can't all be together right now because of the virus, we're having everyone write a story about themselves over the next few days. Then we're going to collect everyone's stories and print them all out to read aloud and share. It will be our very own personal collection! Doesn't that sound like a fun thing to do?”

“Eh, no. Not especially,” I shrugged, crossing my arms rather than accepting the extended pad of paper. “I don't have much to tell an' I've heard most of those war stories over an' over from 'Nam, an' that one fella, can't think of his name, claims he fought in Korea when he was 17 or something.”

“This can be about anything at all, Raymond,” the woman nodded, the bug eyes bobbling a little. “Anything you would like to write about, but preferably from something when you were a young boy rather than in the military. Did you have brothers and sisters?”

I shook my head. I had a lot of cousins, but I didn’t mention them since she didn’t ask. My mom always told folks that she was lucky to have even had me, although I’d often wondered if she’d really meant that since she constantly complained that I got into more mischief than a half dozen kids.

“Ok, well, how about something else from your childhood? What did you like to do? Did you have a bicycle? One of the other men is writing about saving S & H Green Stamps for a bicycle that his family couldn’t afford to buy outright.”

I did have a bike, of course. Heck, every kid in my neighborhood had one. But my dad had just bought it used from Merchant’s Hardware for my birthday one year. Back rim was just a little bent creating extra pressure on the tire I remembered. Had to keep pumping the dang thing with air a couple times a week. But getting a new bike from saving Green Stamps sounded mighty farfetched to me. I remembered that my mom had saved for a fancy new four-slice toaster and an Electrolux canister vacuum with either Top Value or Green Stamps. But a bicycle? I couldn’t ever remember anything like a bicycle listed as a prize in any of those booklets that Mom had kept in the kitchen drawer. There was just, well, boring household stuff. If we were talking about Bart Kemper over in room 122 writing this story -- and there weren’t many men in this place -- then I could guarantee it was absolute hogwash.

“Or, well, let me think,” added the woman, whose name was Mary P, according to the tag swinging from her neck on a long black shoelace that dangled perilously close to my nose. I would think that rope would catch on things but didn’t ask. “How about other things you liked

to do. Did you collect marbles or maybe baseball cards? How about card games – what were your favorite ones, Crazy 8s? Slap Jack? Old Maid? Go Fish?”

Actually, strip poker with several of my girl cousins when I was about 13 or so, but I hadn't mentioned the cousins and somehow, I kinda doubted that was the sort of story she was looking for anyway. On the other hand, Bart Kemper might like it, I mused.

“Um, well, how about pets? Did your family or maybe a friend's family have any pets? Or any special animals?” Mary P continued, patience obviously beginning to wear thin since I hadn't enthusiastically embraced to any of her prior suggestions.

“Not exactly. Well ... there was Sammy ... sort of,” I finally offered.

“Oh, now that sounds lovely, Raymond!” she remarked, stopping just short of patting my arm or shoulder the way they would have done a few weeks ago. Which was fine by me. I'd never particularly liked them putting their dingy hands on me even back before all the bug garb. Well, except for that cute little Hispanic girl. She giggled all the time at my jokes, so she was ok in my book. I hadn't seen her for awhile though, so I hoped she wasn't sick. Not good when people just disappeared and no one seemed to know what had happened to them.

“So was Sammy your dog or cat?”

I shook my head.

“Bird? Hamster? A rabbit? How about a turtle?”

“Well, uh ... sorta more like a turtle I s'pose,” I responded slowly, scratching behind my ear.

“That sounds great, Raymond! I'll write down “*Sammy the Turtle*” on the top of your yellow pad and enter that title for Carolyn Bailey. She's the one who'll be collecting everyone's

stories and typing them up for our book. Don't worry about spelling or anything. If there's something that Carolyn needs to clarify I'm sure she'll stop in to see you."

She handed me the pad of paper, "*Sammy the Turtle*" scrawled in huge black letters across the top lines, once again checking herself just before patting my shoulder, and then left the room, closing the door behind her with a loud ka-thwunk. That sound always reminded me of a jail cell door clanging shut. Well, at least on tv. You know, like "*Gunsmoke*" or "*Maverick*". Maybe I could just make up a story about that. How about a jail break? That would sure put old Bart Kemper's dumb bicycle story to shame. Hey, maybe I could just claim that I was in jail for stealing a bike! Did they put 10-year-olds in jail? Sure would be more interesting. No, it looked like I was stuck with "*Sammy the Turtle*" even though Sammy wasn't a turtle and he'd certainly never been a pet. Just the opposite in fact.

Truth was, I probably hadn't thought about old Sammy in something like 70 years -- at least. Sammy was a Maryland blue crab. But not just your average run-of-the-mill blue crab. Oh no. This one was a very crafty fellow at my grandma's cottage -- in reality, a two-room shack -- way out in Deale, Maryland on the Chesapeake Bay. When you live by the bay you live *off of* the bay, meaning your meals are whatever you manage to catch. There's different ways to crab, but as kids, my cousins (this was long before our strip poker days) and my favorite method of crabbing was to walk barefoot at low tide along the inlet where my grandpa's old rowboat was still moored.

Even at low tide, the water was just over our knees in the shallowest places. Armed with a butterfly net, we'd quietly move along, very slowly and well spaced from one another, taking great care not to stir up that grey silt stretching out beneath our feet as we hunted our prey. The crabs would be lying almost completely submerged, well-camouflaged by the silt. As you

scanned the brackish water, you looked for that telltale sign of a slightly raised claw or a set of barely visible, beady black eyes. When attacked crabs can only scamper to their right or left and, assuming you had guessed correctly and scooped your butterfly net low enough into the silt, you were rewarded a big fellow for your efforts. If you missed, you'd just stirred up a huge cloud of silt that would take at least five minutes to settle back down before you could continue your search.

Once we'd caught about a dozen or so – one crab could feed your average adult back in those days before overfishing and pollution shrank them down to less than half of their original size – we'd carefully fill the rectangular crab basket lassoed to our pier, making certain the lid was tightly fastened down, and then lower the basket into the water so that the crabs, submerged once again, would hopefully stay alive for several hours. Then later that evening, once my grandmother had both of her huge pots of water boiling on the stove, we'd all run back down to the pier, located just at the end of the short dirt road, and carefully scoop the crabs into a couple of bushel baskets. On the wide-slatted wooden stoop just outside the shack's kitchen, my grandma would then carefully empty the crabs onto the slats. All the ones that started to scramble away we immediately caught – seriously, they had no hope to escape on dry land so hardly a fair game I'm sad to say – and my grandma would then drop them unceremoniously into one of the boiling pots of water. Any of the crabs that failed to scuttle off the kitchen stoop, even after significant prodding in case they were just a little lethargic, were immediately dumped back into the bay. As gruesome as it sounds, crab, lobsters and most shellfish that I know of need to be cooked alive or else they're poisonous, at least for human consumption.

So, this brings us to Sammy. I know. You've been wondering where in the hell this story was going. Me too, actually. Anyway, we named the one crab Sammy because we noticed this

little patch of white that we first thought was white paint or sand etched on his shell. Yeah, I know, “sand” is not the same as “Sammy” exactly, but we were kids, yes? So, cut me a little slack here. Anyway, one of my cousins (the one who taught the rest of us strip poker, in fact), noticed the mark when we were dumping a couple of inert crabs back into the bay and was positive she’d seen that marking once before. None of the rest of us thought anything about it, being the unobservant little dimwits we were back then. But lo and behold, about three days later, what do I swoop up in my butterfly net, but what had to be that same doggone crab with those same doggone white markings on the tip of his shell! We hauled him up to the shack in one of the bushel baskets with the other crabs that evening and sure enough, as my grandma emptied the crabs onto her wood-slatted kitchen stoop, that old crab just lay there, seemingly dead as a doornail. Grandma prodded the thing, even carefully placing it down on the ground to see if it would move, but it didn’t even twitch. So, we threw it back as ordered.

Two of my other cousins caught Sammy on two later occasions that summer. Both times, same as before, as soon as he was emptied out onto that old kitchen stoop, Sammy refused to budge from dead possum mode and found himself escorted back to the bay.

My grandma died suddenly just before Christmas that following winter. She’d had a bad cold that had turned almost immediately into pneumonia and within just a couple of days she was gone. My dad, aunts and uncles sold the cottage since that entire area had been offered a huge land development deal intended to turn the place into a showcase of summer estates for wealthy folks driving over from Virginia. I can still see the rash of billboards that dotted the landscape advertising that new place, showcasing a lot of women with their blinding Pepsodent smiles in their equally blinding white stretch Capri pants and blue striped shirts adorned with epaulettes of brass buttons or shiny embroidered gold anchors.

On a whim one summer afternoon, probably five or six years after my grandma's death, my mom and dad decided to drive over to see the development, long completed, now thriving with numerous expensive restaurants featuring the catch-of-the-day (typically flown in from the Gulf) with a question mark listed for the price, trendy nautical-themed boutiques, wineries, pizzerias (go figure), homemade ice cream dizzily whipped into exotic creations featuring Belgian chocolate, and a members-only swimming pool since the Chesapeake itself was considered far too polluted for swimming according to residents of the gated complex.

While my parents sauntered through one of the seemingly endless boutiques I set out on my own for a few minutes, brazenly cutting through one of the massive yards while dodging a set of whirling sprinklers, my ear cocked for growling rottweilers bent on protecting their property. It was low tide and I rolled my pants up mid thigh, glanced carefully in both directions to be certain I wasn't observed, and carefully waded into the water. The cold grey silt squished between my toes the same as I'd remembered as a little kid just a few years before. I walked carefully, however, trying not to disturb the mud, hoping to sight a blue crab although quite certain they'd all undoubtedly transferred residence into a far less populated cove.

It's common knowledge that crabs rarely live longer than three years. But some silly part of me somehow projected that maybe, just maybe, I'd catch a glimpse of old Sammy despite that. Regardless, I was pretty certain that Sammy had fully lived out his three years or even longer possibly. He was a pretty damned shrewd crustacean.

And now, thinking back on my 16-year-old self digging his toes into the mud that day, it dawned on me that I'd kind of lived my life like Sammy. There were many times I'd just been ambling along until some devilish, tantalizing streak had come over me, urging me just so far up onto that kitchen stoop. But then, somehow regaining my wits at the last minute, I'd managed to

get myself thrown back into the pool. I could come up with a catalog of “almosts,” in fact. I’d almost married the wrong woman (quite honestly, she was a much better cook and a lot more fun between the sheets than my wife, but she’d quickly catapulted the three men she *did* marry into bankruptcy not once, not twice, but all three times). Then, another example, I’d almost accepted a far better-paying, significantly higher-stressed job that would have forced me to relocate to rural Kansas (maybe that worked for Dorothy and her entourage but...), for a corporation that went belly up in less than two years. And most recently, I’d almost bought an expensive summer home in 2008 just before the real estate market tanked, depleting its worth to less than half within six months, that would have simultaneously shredded the bulk of our retirement investments. I’m sure if I sat and thought about it long enough, I could come up with dozens of other examples. What was really behind this fortuitous tendency anyway? My charmed life? Dumb luck? Something along the lines of Sammy’s uncanny radar? My impeccably dashing good looks and sense of style? My radiating sense of humor ... ok, ok, strike those last two possibilities. Anyway, safe to say that I had absolutely no idea.

The following week, when Carolyn Bailey rustled into my room gowned in her green plastic finery, I’d handed her the yellow tablet. She looked over it, frowning, flipping through a few pages.

“Is this all, Raymond?” she stated loudly. I suspected her voice was just plain loud even when addressing the ordinary outside world. “You really haven’t written very much, my dear.”

I stared blankly up at her but made no reply.

“Do you need a little bit more time, Raymond? Some people have needed a little more time.”

I remained silent.

“So here, so let me read what we have ... so far,” she began, clearing her throat.

We? I thought this was my story, lady.

“*Sammy the Turtle* by Raymond A. Durning. ‘Sammy was a pretty damned shrewd crustacean. The End’,” she read then looked down at me again.

I sat quietly, just staring back.

“Raymond, are you sure that’s all you meant to write? The other residents have been writing stories that are a little bit longer. Usually stories *are* a bit longer, in fact. And also, my dear, I’m quite certain that turtles are considered reptiles, not crustaceans.”

I nodded slightly, closing my eyes, knowing she’d just go away if she thought I’d fallen asleep.