

## Trapped

Roy heaved the lobster pot from the depths, pulling one hand over the other on the frayed rope, calluses on his hands in place of gloves. As the basket came into view, he started counting, as he always did, calculating the weight of each and the price they would fetch.

It was a good haul, he counted eight brown bodies scrambling against each other and the wire of the trap. Most of them good-sized. Probably legal. He grabbed the bridle and swung the trap onto the boat with a grunt. His next buoy was only fifty fathoms away, so he pulled in the remaining lines and his buoy and steered his boat north.

He'd given up on sternmen and other crew. The small rig he captained was easy enough to man himself, with his few single-trap trawls he dropped into inshore waters. He could still pull the traps in by hand, drop them in one at a time rather than run the length of his vessel keeping up with mechanized systems, and avoid special rigs designed to prevent whales from getting tangled. He wasn't trying to make a commercial living, although he refused to switch from a commercial license to a recreational one for reasons he couldn't articulate but had everything to do with pride and stubbornness.

No, he just needed something to do.

His weathered brow creased as he started hauling in the next trap. It was light.

He'd pulled in empty lines before—when lines frayed enough that they'd break as soon as he lifted the trap from the sea floor. And he'd pulled in his fair share of empty traps—but those still had the cement bricks necessary to weigh the trap down in the rough water and strong currents. What he was pulling was neither of these.

He glimpsed the wire of the trap nearing the surface.

Or, rather, half the trap.

Sharp wire edges bent at impossible angles, a door hung by a single hinge. This couldn't have been done by one of the harbor seals that sometimes circled his boat, curious if the contents of the trap were for them. He skimmed his sixty-year-old memory, trying to remember the last time there had been shark sightings in these waters. He vaguely remembered being told not to swim one summer when he was ten or eleven—was that because of a shark or maybe that had been a year of a red tide?

He secured the trap to his small rig and kicked the motor into high gear to speed away, even though he still had one more trawl to check. It would still be there tomorrow. He'd been fishing these waters all of his life but had never before gotten spooked.

After docking his boat, he hoped to find Clyde, a former (not retired, but discharged) Coast Guard, and friend. The docks were empty save for the kid Tom, who was perfectly adept at tying up boats but useless for discussing the fine points of what to do about his destroyed trap. Roy secured his full traps to his rig, knowing they'd be safe in the protected waters of the marina. He trudged home carrying the broken trap, which now lay in the middle of his small patch of grass he called a yard. He sat in his gear on his front stoop with the door open, the clock ticking behind him, wondering what to do.

What he meant to do was to carry out the rest of his routine and return to the marina with his truck and deal with his catch. He couldn't understand why that was seeming so hard and why he found himself entranced by a carcass of a trap on his lawn. He couldn't understand why he was suddenly worried about who he should call, if anyone would care.

And anyway, now that he was on shore, it didn't seem like such a big deal. Maybe the trap had been rusted, maybe it got bashed against a rock. But he kept picturing a ghostly monster patrolling under his boat, a surprising burst of imagination from his pragmatic brain.

He finally shook his head and stood. He removed his boots, placing them at the end of the neat row of shoes in his small entryway. His shack was spartan but he was proud of its cleanliness and order. After Mary died, he couldn't bear to be in their house without her. He'd shuttered it, told the eager realtor (Al's son, filling in his father's shoes with more exuberance than Roy thought was becoming to the job) to deal with it, and took a small two-room wooden shack near the water, where he could walk down the beach to the docks to start his day. He'd take his small green boat on the same tour, checking his traps and placing new ones. He'd sometimes drop a fishing line if he had the time, which now he had plenty of since Mary was gone and since he'd been asked to retire from his job in town. If he ever daydreamed enough to worry, he'd wonder if he could last much longer this way, in this idle ticking by of time.

But Roy wasn't the daydreaming type. For now, he was content to haul in enough to satisfy his own hunger and that of the few customers at his friend Jack's small restaurant at the edge of town. Jack barely did enough business to compete with the more well-known, shiny places on the wharf that would be packed with tourists even at three o'clock in the afternoon. His place was for the locals. Roy would bring his pickup truck full of lobsters on ice in the bed, meeting Jack around back where steam would fill the air from the vats of boiling water. Jack would wipe his hands on his white apron, and his wife Ann would step out of the kitchen just for a moment, a chef's knife in one hand and a head of celery in the other, her hair always impossibly coiffed, her lipstick always

impossibly red. She was much younger than Jack, and cut of cloth that seemed out of place in their small world, but she didn't seem unhappy filling the unlikely role of sous chef at a local fish fry.

Mary would have looked sidelong at Ann and muttered to Roy about the impracticality of wearing high heels in the kitchen while staring forlornly at her own practical clogs, the sort of shoe that could withstand her job as an ER nurse in the hospital downtown. Not downtown Portland, but downtown Brunswick, which meant it was more of a clinic, really: a constant influx of fishing accidents, bar fights, and car accidents when the weather was bad. Some college kids who'd had too much to drink. She'd stitch them up and hold their hands and fight with insurance companies while waiting for the helicopter to take them away to the larger tertiary hospitals.

Roy stood at the doorway in his wool socks, looking onto the expanse of ocean that lapped at his doorstep. His was a rocky beach. He preferred the noise of the water on the rocks, the clink of pebbles as they rolled over one another, the rough sound of the ocean hitting the jagged shore, rather than the evenness of waves crashing onto the sand. He loved that it was his ocean, something he could be with every morning, an old friend, someone who would never betray him.

But now, he felt betrayed. What was this thing lurking beneath that he didn't know? What was the ocean suddenly hiding from him?

Mary would have known what to do.

He really should get his truck and pick up his lobsters.

Was this a test? One that, if he passed, he knew he'd be okay without her?

He didn't know if he wanted to pass.

The next morning, he didn't go out in his boat. He slept late, seven a.m., something he hadn't done in years. He woke and stumbled through the room to put water on for coffee. As the

water boiled, he cracked the front door open. The trap was still on the patchy grass, damp with melting frost.

The trap had gotten bigger, he was sure of it. He'd sat in his doorway all day yesterday staring at it, turning over in his mind what to do.

He hadn't yet called anyone. Now, as he filtered the undissolved grounds of Folger's through his teeth, he thought grimly of Mary's fancy espresso machine that she could make whirl and gurgle with two pushes of a button. He had always brought her coffee in the morning, from the automatic drip he'd set to start at four-thirty a.m. so he could bring a thermos with him on the boat. It would still be on the warm setting when he returned to Mary waking, and he'd fill her favorite mug and bring it to her in bed. She'd been excited enough about the fancy machine to give up the ritual, laughing in her bathrobe the first time he tried to navigate the chrome monster, but every once in a while, she would lament that he didn't bring her coffee in the morning anymore.

He'd loved to bring her coffee.

Had he ever told her?

She would have been appalled at his instant coffee. Not even drip anymore.

Was it too late to find Clyde, he wondered? Too late to tell anyone? Clyde would probably be out on the water, but Roy thought if he at least looked for Clyde he could tell himself that he'd tried. Besides, he had to drive down and get his lobsters, anyway.

Clyde's vessel was back in its slip at the marina, after all. Roy forgot it was a holiday, Veteran's Day, falling on a Thursday this year, plopped in the middle of the week like an afterthought. Clyde was working on his boat, not having to dash off to his usual delivery jobs. Clyde's broad shoulders

heaved up and down as he scraped the stern of the boat, and Roy was horrified to see the painted name, *Our Lady*, scatter as flakes of blue onto the water below.

Clyde turned his head at the sound of Roy's old boots clomping down the dock, as he kept up the rhythm of his scraping. By way of greeting, Clyde muttered that he'd had a dream about the boat sinking and so had to rechristen it something else, bad luck be damned. Roy asked if Clyde was okay, which finally made the scraping stop. Clyde looked at him with one thick eyebrow raised, not understanding the question. Roy didn't usually inquire after Clyde's well-being. The well-being of his boat, or of his catch, or of his job, yes. But never of Clyde himself.

So, Roy told Clyde there was something he wanted him to see, that he'd help out with the boat later if he'd come take a look. Roy really didn't want to help, but he assumed that was the right thing to say. Mary would have chided him for not offering to help.

Clyde left his dock without cleaning up or putting his tools away. They both knew they'd be there when they returned, it was that kind of place. Once, the general store had its windows smashed and someone stole money from the cash register. It turned out there was a vagrant on his way from Augusta to Portland who didn't realize he could have just gone through the unlocked and unarmed door. He'd been caught trying to jump-start Ted Martin's old Buick where it sat waiting for a new transmission in his driveway. Ted had aimed his unloaded shotgun from his front porch while his ten-year-old son called the police.

The two men were back to their usual topics of conversation—observations of the weather and the upcoming city council meeting—over the heavy diesel grumble of Roy's truck. Mary always wondered how two men could spend hours together and not talk about anything. She could never hear news of Clyde's wife or how he was doing after she'd died in that car accident, or how he really

felt in that house all alone. But Roy knew all about his delivery circuit and his reaction to the Red Sox or Patriots losing, and that was enough for him. What else did he need to know, anyway, to know that Clyde was the kind of person who would drop his tools in the middle of a job to follow him back to his small cabin with a limited amount of information?

They stood on the grass over the pile of mangled metal. Clyde grunted a few times as Roy explained where he'd dropped his traps, when he'd pulled up the broken one, the logic that he'd used to suppose there was a shark "or something big" in their cove.

Clyde said it was odd behavior for a shark. Roy agreed with a nod.

Clyde said it was probably just as well to dispose of the trap. Roy agreed with a nod.

He would have agreed with anything Clyde said, just to have the matter decided.

They returned to Clyde's boat, where between the scraping, through a series of grunts and nods, it was decided the thing to do would be, first thing tomorrow, to take Clyde's boat out on its inaugural journey with its new name to the spot where Roy had pulled up the trap. They'd bring chum—they weren't going to use it as bait, after all, so it would be fine and not exactly illegal. It was good to be sure, they'd agreed through their nodding and grunting, what they were dealing with. In order to know what to do next. No use worrying anyone if it wasn't anything special.

By the afternoon, as the winter sun was already low in the sky, the *Our Lady* was the *Neptune*. Clyde didn't have a bottle of champagne to break over the bow, so he rummaged through the marina mini fridge and found two longneck Millers that they tapped on the new name before tipping them back. Mary would have hated the name and would have insisted upon champagne. Even though she usually hated waste, she was a stickler for tradition. Turkey on Thanksgiving, seven fishes for

Christmas. She'd go to the fish market in Portland to get baccala to accompany whatever Roy had hauled in. He wondered at the need for cured fish but never questioned her need for the production.

After they settled on a six a.m. departure time, Roy returned to his slip to inspect his neglected traps. He unloaded them into a large cooler, which he brought on a dolly up to his truck. Only one dead lobster out of twelve, not so bad, so he stopped by Jack's on his way home. Roy apologized when Jack said he missed him yesterday, that he'd run out of lobster early and had to serve only lobster rolls from frozen chunks and he just hated to do that—he's not a tourist place, after all, these are his friends, the locals, not people he'd never see again. But he handed Roy a sandwich in a paper bag, which Roy ate for dinner while listening to the almanac on the radio. A storm was coming in tomorrow afternoon.

Roy woke up before the alarm went off. It was quarter to five, too early and too dark, but now he was awake, so he boiled the water for his coffee and set about getting dressed and packing meat and cheese for his breakfast. Mary would always have the refrigerator stocked with fancy sliced meat from the butcher, but he bought the cheap stuff full of all the preservatives and whatnot that she'd have complained about. What was he to care about preservatives, now, and at his age?

He did still buy apples, sometimes his only healthy sustenance in a day, which he sliced with his pocket knife instead of biting into whole. He liked their tart crunch and the way Mary would nod her approval at his choice. She'd always find one diet trend or another, he couldn't keep track. When it came to fending for himself, he regressed to the basics: meats and cheeses and eggs and his catch, and apples.

He pulled his wool hat over his ears and switched on his lantern as he closed the wooden door behind him.



The sea was calm that morning, and he stood a moment listening in the darkness to the gentle lapping of waves against the rocky beach. It seemed to be a tease, a siren song coaxing him into thinking everything was normal, that instead of leaving to chase a monster, he was leaving for his normal patrol of traps that would lead into his normal day.

He couldn't remember the last time he didn't have an exact map of how a day would go.

It was Mary's influence. Mary had been a planner: she'd hung a wall calendar in the kitchen announcing who was where at which time of day. He thought it overkill for the two of them, a constant reminder that there were only two of them—no soccer games or piano lessons or teacher conferences, just doctor appointments and late work shifts and poker nights.

His most introspective thought, as he ambled along the shoreline to the marina, was whether this was a good idea, maybe they should just leave things be. He told Clyde as much when he met him on the dock in front of the *Neptune*.

Clyde insisted that they proceed. What was Roy expecting, anyway? This wasn't *Jaws*, they weren't going to have a great white chomping at the boat. Even if it was a shark, they'd be fine and back by lunch. It was probably out of the cove by now, anyway. Clyde said all this, but Roy could tell he was hoping for some sort of excitement that he could come back and share with the boys at the VFW club or along the pier, holding court with a cloud of cigar smoke enshrouding him as he told their wild tale.

If he could have told Mary, the version would have been toned down and mild, downplaying any hint of danger. He learned this after he'd tried to show off in their early days of marriage by embellishing his misadventures before they'd met, like the time he got caught in a squall and was rescued by the Coast Guard. In the end, he had only been five hundred meters from shore but

couldn't see for the rain and fog. He'd increased the size of the waves, the distance from shore, the amount of time he'd been floating without gas. Mary had not been amused. She'd threatened to set loose his boat, light it on fire, and push it away from the dock, or some other such feat of dramatic vandalism to prevent him from his morning fishing outings. Instead, he'd managed to placate her by promising never to go out too close to sunset, to install a second radio walkie-talkie on the vessel (which he almost never turned on), and to buy some sort of rescue insurance so they wouldn't be out a \$50,000 helicopter bill.

Now, if his boat ran into trouble, he wondered how long it would take someone to notice him missing, insurance or no.

Clyde shouted instructions and they were off. Roy stood on the bow of the *Neptune* and sipped coffee from his thermos, letting the salty air blow cold onto his cheeks. Nothing made him feel more alive, more connected to nature and, he supposed, God in a vague sense. Not a man in the sky but a web of energy holding everything together.

But these were thoughts of a self-aware man. Instead, he thought about the rolling of the waves and the spray on his face. The darkness stretched before him, he could see just the froth illuminated by the boat lights; beyond that, black. He'd told Clyde the general direction to go, and now needed to fine-tune the navigation. He wasn't that keen on revealing the location of his prime spot, but Clyde didn't usually fish lobster. Clyde dropped the anchor. The water lapped against the hull, telling of the impending squall. The rain would hit that afternoon, or maybe it was cold enough to snow. Either way, they wouldn't still be on the water by then.

For now, they were just two aging men on a boat, one sipping coffee and the other tying and retying knots in a spare piece of rope.

In the moments before the sky lightened, Clyde surprised Roy by asking how he was getting along without Mary. Roy shrugged. Life with her seemed very far away. Mary had said that once, after her brother died, that it was strange how a life could seem far away. Had she been talking about his life, or her life? Or their shared life, as brother and sister?

Roy watched a single file line of pelicans dip towards the water and back up, a ribbon of flying fishermen silently patrolling.

“I s’pose I’m not really in that life anymore,” he said.

Clyde grunted his response as he rose to dump the first bucket of chum into the inky water. After a moment’s consideration, he pulled in the anchor just enough for them to drift a few fathoms away. No use being right on top of the bait. They’d still see what they came to see. It was the first indication Roy had that maybe Clyde was a bit nervous.

The wintery yellow sun now hung in a strip of clear sky between the horizon and the dark cloud bank rolling in. Yes, it would be cold enough to snow today, Roy figured. He was trying not to stare at the spot the chum had been dropped. He tapped his fingers on the rail of the boat. Clyde formed more knots. They talked about the football games coming up the next weekend, which Roy wouldn’t bother to watch, because that would mean an afternoon in a smoky bar with a bunch of red-cheeked old men. He’d read about the games in the paper, later.

Clyde dumped in another bucket of chum. He didn’t bother moving the boat this time. The waves were getting choppier as the clouds thickened. Roy asked if they could collect his last trap, when they were done. Whatever “done” meant.

Roy was feeling sheepish, silly. Of course there was nothing out here. All they were attracting were seagulls and pelicans, happily diving at the fish on the surface. Roy thought maybe he didn't really want to know what was down there, after all.

Clyde cranked the winch to pull up the anchor, having decided to get Roy's traps and then return to try with the last bucket of chum. He cursed the sticky gears and kicked at the pile of rope on the deck. Roy pointed out the spot on the other side of the cove as Clyde started up the engine. Roy hooked the buoy, and began heaving in the trap, weighted nicely with probably six or seven lobsters. Behind him, Clyde fussed with the anchor lines and gave Roy gentle grief over pulling in his traps by hand. Roy heard a splash as he focused on fixing the anchor. Roy was paying attention to the rhythm of his effort—right hand, left hand, right hand, left hand, right, left—echoed in the satisfying rasp of the lines against the side of the boat. So, by the time he'd lifted his trap, yelled out “six beauts,” and turned around to face his friend, Clyde was gone.

Roy ran the perimeter of the vessel, looking over the edge. That splash he'd heard, that couldn't have been... and besides the boat hadn't rocked enough to throw Clyde off the edge. He checked the cabin and galley, thinking Clyde was playing a joke on him and hiding. He checked bins and coolers and other places it would have been impossible for Clyde to fit. He grabbed the binoculars he'd spotted in the cabin, and scanned the water around the boat. When a seagull cawed, he frantically tried to find it through the lenses, thinking the bird was leading him toward Clyde.

Roy stopped moving, finally. He stood on the deck, arms limp at his sides, aware of his heart beating. He'd never given much notice to his heart beating before. He supposed it was beating faster than normal, and harder, if he could feel it so strongly.

It finally dawned on him that the anchor line was stretched taut into the water. Roy squinted into the water where the line disappeared into the depths. He finally shook himself and started winching it in. The gears groaned with extra weight. Roy shut his eyes, but then opened them again when he conjured an image of Clyde tangled in the rope.

Roy was nearly thrown into the winch as the extra weight on the line released.

He looked over the side of the boat. He could hear his heart again. He thought he could glimpse a glimmer of red—had Clyde been wearing a red coat? Roy couldn't remember.

If it wasn't his jacket, the red he was seeing, Roy didn't want anything to do with it. He tried to think now how long it had been since he'd noticed Clyde missing. At least five minutes? He should have looked at his watch.

Long enough, certainly, that there was no hope.

At least, no use jumping in the water to try to find him.

Not even Mary would have known what to do.

Mary.

If Mary had been alive, he wouldn't be on this boat in an approaching squall with a missing friend and a pounding heart.

He'd failed her.

Roy made another calculation. He looked to the sky and the impending clouds. A drop of rain plunked against his nose.

He secured the anchor on deck. He unlatched his trap and released the six scrambling bodies back to the ocean. He started the engine and turned the bow out to the open sea.