

The Salt Mine

Ralph could tell by the way his little boat moved in the water that Starlit had hied back to shore in the night, like she usually did. A sharp pain cracked through his head, and Ralph sat up, whooo doggy. He gripped the cold aluminum sides of the boat, hung his head over, and yakked up some of the bad stuff. The sight of it floating in the water helped him yak up the rest, and he was left with nothing in his gut but the shaking empties. He settled back against his pile of molding lifejackets and let his boat slowly rock the nausea out of him. He listened to the far off sound of the Sun Oil boys firing up their barge engines. The smell of September morning helped. It reminded him of the good olden days when he used to wake up at dawn—full of beans and piss and vinegar—and go down to the salt mine with a bag of sandwiches and a thermos of hot sweet coffee. Nineteen-hundred feet down—in the warm belly of the mine—there wasn't anything better than a hearty stomach and a couple a thick peanut butter sandwiches. Nothing finer than working all day for a fine wage. Back in those days, there was also the promise of a suck job on the first Tuesday of every month. And there was nothing finer than that.

Ralph listened to the barge motors moving the oil rig to a different position in the lake. Young Steve, was out there on the rig. He was a nice kid, a roughneck. Sometimes good for a buck or a brew. Sometimes just good for a conversation. He didn't treat Ralph too bad. He drifted in his boat with his thoughts: his old work in the salt mine, the lake high above it, Starlit. Sweet Starlit. No matter what she said, the lake wasn't a gigantic dinosaur footprint full of water. But it *was* only about eight feet deep all the way 'round. You could walk all the way across it—almost a mile—if you were the tallest man in the world. Easy. It had bass and bluegills and crappies, and if you were to believe Starlit, it had selkies and water spirits too. Starlit said that the souls of sweet little babies wiped their faces on the undersides of his little boat while he slept.

Ralph liked when Starlit talked like that. Listening to her was better than watching a TV show. Better than reading a book. Better than looking at a titty magazine, even though her old titties were flat as could be, wow, flat like a couple of old bullfrogs. He wished she came by more often, talked more, didn't hie off back to shore in the night. Sometimes, on the uglier days when he couldn't bring up any good memories, Starlit could remind him about those olden days, almost forty years gone now, when he had a job and a trailer of his own. The good times before he got fired for being reckless down there in the salt mine. Fined and fired and popped in jail to cool off. Replacing that hot, sweet coffee with vodka had put him in that position—he knew that—so he didn't blame them for none of it. But still. He wished it had never happened to him.

Ralph sighed and turned his face away from the sight of the oil rig making its slow way over the lake. He waited until the shaking empties rolled closer to the shaking hungries before he took a drink from his pocket. Not much left. He would head to town

and pull a few dollars, get a little something to eat, get a little something more to drink. Ralph sat up and hauled himself in. He looped the rope around a small rotting stump, and walked over to the wide canal that fed the lake to the bay. He could follow the canal all the way to the sea if he wanted, but he never did. He didn't like to go far because his boots were old, because he was sick in his guts most of the time, because he was content with his small town with its one diner and three liquor stores.

Ralph went about his business:

He asked for leftovers of the folks coming out of the Hungry Bear Diner and got himself a half-eaten bacon omelet only an hour after he set himself outside.

He picked cans out of the garbage and bottles out of the street and took them to the recycle, five cents each, ten cents when he was lucky enough to find a good glass one.

He managed a bigger haul when he showed his "Anything Helps" sign by the main stoplight that ran out of town.

He found a lucky fiver in the street behind the dry cleaner.

Then he did his real business in the liquor store: Keystone had been on sale in the cold case for the last six months, and a few, three bottles of Popov weren't too dear. No more fancy vodka for him because it *was* too dear. A couple a Slim Jims finished his haul and he walked the two miles back to the lake.

The sun dropped away and the wind picked up after Ralph pushed off shore. Starlit usually showed up around this time. She always knew when Ralph was feeling bad. And that's how he was feeling right now, sitting in his little boat, doing a little fishing, drinking maybe eight or fifteen beers supplemented with warm pulls from the plastic bottles in his coat pocket. He drank the same stuff now that his dad had drunk.

Angel Piss, the old bastard called it. His mom called it The Devil's Wishbone, and said that the devil always got the bigger half. Ralph thought about that a lot—too much—but he'd decided not to believe in her kind of Devil, or in the wishes in wishbones.

The evening gloaming had come on and moved on and it wasn't twilight anymore. It was just after. Starlit should have been there with her comforting smell of woman, and old pee, and Dollar Store crackers.

Ralph threw out his fishing line, *Zzzzzzzzzz*. Water flicked against the metal bottom of his boat and plipped off the rope that held him to the shore. The lake was black and furred with just enough breeze that he couldn't see the stars reflected there. No fish nibbled at the line, but that didn't surprise Ralph because he was fishing with a sinker instead of a hook. He didn't have a stove to cook fish on anyway, and he didn't like to see their ripped mouths when he pulled them in. He didn't like to hook them through the eye, or the back of their spine, or their feathery fins either. Even garbage fish like crappies didn't deserve that kind of death.

He was getting too old for death, he figured.

Zzzzzzzzzzzz, plonk, reel. Comforting. He stopped reeling long enough to taste his bottle. He listened and smelled for Starlit. *Zzzzzzzzzzzz*.

“Ahoy the ship!” she called finally.

Starlit starlit starlit starlit.

Ralph scrambled up and his boat rocked, and then his head rocked, and then they both righted themselves.

“Ahoy yourself, Star-lady!” he called.

Starlit waved something at him, a banana? and put one hand at the small of her back so that her hips thrust forward at him. "Ahoy the ship," she called again.

"Ahoy yourself," he said, grinning and feeling a fool for it.

Starlit leaned forward and put her hands around her mouth like he was a hundred feet away instead of ten. "Never let your man leave the house hungry or horny," she yelled.

"Heck," Ralph yelled back, after a moment.

Starlit squatted like an old frog and reeled in the rope that held his boat. He could see her better the closer he got. It sure was good to see her face, even if it was a funny, smushy face. The boat sway-upped on the marshy bottom and Starlit waded the last few feet, holding her coats out of the water. The side dipped a little as she clambered in, but not much, because Starlit was very small, very thin, hardly there. She sat across from him with a great sigh: brown bananas, crackers, pee.

"Well, hi there, Star-lady," Ralph said.

She waved her half-eaten banana at him again and scooted her body so that the boat pushed out into the lake.

"What were you saying just then?" he asked. *Horny*, she'd said. You didn't forget when a woman said horny because horny is what it made you. "You said hungry and horny, Starlit?" He'd felt a little stir down there, and that was a not-so-often thing, so he was interested in keeping it going, if he could. But Starlit wasn't paying attention to him. She was patting about in her clothes, all those pockets, three different coats. Finally, she pulled out a crumbling Ritz and broke it in half. She handed it to him and he took it.

She dropped her hand to rest on the apex of his jeans. "Never let your man leave the house hungry or horny, Ralph." She paused, squeezed. "Because—"

He leaned forward, feeling another stir. "Because what, Starlit?"

"Because somewhere out there," she said, "is a *whore* with *sammiches!*"

She sputtered the last so Ralph could barely make it out, but he laughed anyway. Really, a whore with sandwiches didn't sound half bad. Baloney sandwiches with fried onions and good, cold American cheese. He could go for those even when his stomach was thin and sick. When she took her hand away, he didn't mind. It seemed his peter wasn't truly interested in doing anything interesting anyway.

He passed her his bottle, and she passed him the rest of her banana. He ate it along with the half cracker. He squinted into the star dark and could just make out the lettering on the side of the newly positioned oil rig: Sun Oil Drilling, it said. Steve was out there and the whole thing was closer than it had been. It seemed wrong, hunched in the lake. Not in the right place.

"Ralph, did you know that this lake is just a huge dinosaur footprint," Starlit said, with her chin on her hand so that her gums must have been mashing hard against each other. "That's why it's only eight feet deep all the way 'round."

"Yeah, I know that, Star-lady. You told me that."

"I know things," she said and tipped him a deep wink.

"You sure do," Ralph said. Starlit knew all sorts of things just like that.

"You know what else, I know?"

"What's that?"

"Thunder is just angels bowling a strike. Lighting is just the flash from their celebration cigarillos."

"Is that right?" Ralph said. That was a new one, but then again, Starlit loved cigarillos.

"I love cigarillos," she said, sitting back and sighing.

"You sure do," Ralph said.

"I like the *wooden tip*," she said, and Ralph knew that if he could see her face a little better, she would be dropping another deep wink so that he would know that *wood* and *tip* were euphemisms for penis, and specifically, *his* penis, even though she really hadn't done much with his penis since the early nineties when she still had all her teeth, and he was making money down in the salt mine.

"Yep," he said. "You sure do, Starlit."

Ralph closed his eyes and let the lake and the booze rock him. He drifted and thought about the mine again, as he did most days. Parts of it were deep under this lake somewhere. Caverns. Tunnels. Blasted out and dark and silent.

"Starlit?"

She didn't say anything, so Ralph thought she might be asleep. That was good. She deserved as much rest as she could get. She deserved everything in the world. If he could, he would get her a box of celebration cigarillos every single day.

"Remember the salt mine, Starlit? Remember?"

She didn't answer, so he did his own remembering:

Back when she still had all her teeth, Starlit had been hiring herself out on the side to some of the miners, including Ralph. Ralph paid her almost forty bucks for blowjobs on the first Tuesday of the month back then. He found out later that she had charged him a lot more what she charged everyone else, but he never confronted her about it because things went bad for her real soon after.

One Tuesday, she wasn't there. Ralph was all hot and bothered thinking about his blowjob. And when she didn't show, he got a little mad. He was still grumbling about it on the long elevator ride up the shaft when one of the other men nudged him, a new guy named Hank or Harry.

"That whore's at the hosp'tal," he said. "Blowing a doctor proolly right about now."

That got a laugh from the other men standing shoulder to shoulder, but not Ralph. He had a great whoopsie feeling in his chest. "Jesus, god," he said. "What happened to her?"

Hank or Harry smiled a bit, like a person who has news to share, interesting news. "Probably gonna die," he said. H would have said more, but that asshole, Gunderson, whacked him on the back of the head.

"Who give's a shit about some whore?" he said. Ralph hated Gunderson. A big shitting bastard was what he was. Used Starlit bad and tore up the town bar once a month on payday.

"Shut up," Ralph said. His voice wobbled a little, but he couldn't help it because of that whopsie feeling.

"Fuck you, and fuck your mother, Ralph," Gunderson said back. "Shit, you gonna cry about some whore? She got a golden dick or something?"

Ralph ground his palms into his eyes and tried not to cry. When he got off the elevator he ran outside and puked in the bushes. Nobody really talked to him about Starlit after that, but he figured out what happened to her in bits and pieces over the next few days.

Starlit's husband, a nasty whip-thin drunk, had found out about her side-whoring. She probably should have known he would, considering Gundersons big sloppy mouth. So, he plucked out all her teeth with a pair of old needlenose pliers. Right down to the last molar. She was screaming and screaming and screaming, blood gushing out everywhere, and her four year old son stepped his little angel self in there to help her, and that nasty drunk killed the boy right then and there.

A couple weeks after it happened, Ralph had walked out after the five o'clock bell and was surprised to Starlit standing by the fence to the job site.

"Remember that, dear?" Ralph said now, into the dark. "I come over to you, Starlit, remember? To see how you are doing? I see you standing there and my heart breaks into teeny pieces, Starlit."

She'd looked undone, standing by her old Honda Civic, wearing little cotton shorts that didn't cover her wasted thighs, wearing a strappy red top that didn't cover any of her other hurts. The boys didn't want nothing to do with her anymore. She'd never been that pretty to look at, not really, but now she was just plain ugly. Even Ralph couldn't help but think it.

Ralph went over to her because he wanted to tell her no-hard-feelings for the extra charge on those blowjobs, and also that he was sorry about what happened to her little angel son. So he told her, and she was grateful, and they'd gone back to his place, and she'd tried to say thank you, and Ralph tried to say your welcome, but his parts didn't want to rise. He couldn't help it. His pecker was drowning in the thoughts of her dead son—only four, just a baby, trying to protect his mama—and he could still smell the badness that her nasty husband had left on her. Like vinegar. Like hospital gauze. The smell made him sick. Plus, the sight of those plucked gums, red, and scarred, and angry, made it so that he really wasn't able to pop the kind of boner he felt like he should.

She never did tell him how she felt about that—about him not being able to get it up for her—but he got a feeling that she hated him for it, a little, maybe. So, they got to be friends instead. They drank together most nights in his little trailer, and watched TV: her cuddling an old teddy bear, him sucking at his beers first, and his vodka later. Starlit and him talked about all sorts of things. She was better than a book. Better than the TV.

"Remember that, Starlit?"

She didn't answer. She was a silent thing, hunkered in his boat.

He'd lost his job pretty soon after he started pouring the Devil's Wishbone into his work thermos instead of coffee. And after that he lost his trailer—and his temper too, a couple times, maybe—and Starlit stopped coming near him. That hurt him some, made him plenty angry too. The years around that time were bad, but he couldn't remember them that well, so it was fine. Eventually, he got his boat, and his routine in the town, and

Starlit came back a little at a time. Sure, she was bullfrog flat in places that she used to be stacked and kinda stacked in places she used to be flat, and she had gotten a little stranger and smelled a little worse, but they were friends again, so all was right with the world.

"All's right with the world now, isn't it?" Ralph whispered with his face to the breeze.

Starlit sat up suddenly and the boat heaved.

"What's going to happen to me when I die, Ralph?" she asked, into the dark.

Ralph didn't move, but his body felt like it was sucking in on itself, imploding, rushing through with whatever got squirted into you when you were afraid.

"You would—" he cleared his throat and squeezed his eyes shut, "Well, *you* would go straight to heaven, Star-lady."

She shifted and the water lapped at the boat. "Right," she said. "Yeah, heaven, but Ralph. God's throne is empty. The chair he sits on is spiders, Ralph. It's spiders and their webs. I would be alone, Ralph." And then she didn't say anything else.

Sometime later, Ralph woke up with a cry stuck in his throat. The Devil was right here in his boat, holding the bigger half of the wishbone, and sucking purple marrow into its toothed throat.

"Jesus," Ralph said, and his eyes shot to the Sun Oil Drilling rig, out there in the moonlight, so close now. He took a shaking gulp from his bottle and looked for Starlit, but she was gone.

"Jesus."

He sucked the last of the bottle down, closed his eyes, and went back under.

See Starlit.

Starlit is in the mine. It's warm, deep beneath the lake. Tunnels reach out, stretching like worms, some of them closed off for fifty years. Starlit had been down here before, when she needed the money for juice-boxes and chicken nuggets for her son. She'd gone down there with a man who pushed her against the hard ground. She'd breathed in the warm air while he bumped above her. When she left, her lips tasted like salt.

Her lips taste like salt now.

See Starlit.

She is not Starlit. She is the world that made her. It made her out mud and candy floss.

She washes away in every rain.

See Starlit.

She is curled on her side, but not fetal. Curled on her side like a sea creature, like a slug.

"I am a seahorse," Starlit says into the dark.

"Bad news, bad news, I'm telling you, there's something wrong!" Ralph was shouting now, right up in Steve's tanned face, and he could tell it was a mistake because Steve's face closed down and looked mean. Ralph pulled back suddenly.

He didn't know where he was.

He looked over Steve's shoulder and saw a younger guy leaned up against the boarded side of the Burger Shak, hiding his milk pale skin from the noon sun. The guy popped out his middle finger, kissed the tip, and blew it at him.

"Fuck you, body," Ralph said and cringed. He'd meant to say boy. Fuck you, *boy*. But the slurring was there in his voice and he realized several things at the same time: He was drunk, he didn't know how he got here, he didn't know why he was so scared.

"Right back atcha, guy," the kid said.

"What?" Ralph said. He turned his head just in time to see Steve roll his eyes.

"What?" he said again.

"Ralph, man, you gotta dry out, bro," Steve said. "Get some sleep."

"What's his fucking problem." The pale guy turned his face back towards the lake.

"Lay off, dude," Steve said over his shoulder. He reached out to Ralph and started to lead him away.

"What?" Ralph let himself be led. There was something wrong. He could still feel the urgency, something he needed to take care of. Something wrong. The salt mine. Death. Seahorses.

"Man, are you ok?" Steve said, low.

Ralph shook his head. "I don't know," he said, and his breath hitched. "What did I say?"

Steve patted him hard, smiling his young man's smile, breathing the sour chalky smell of coffee and nicotine gum into Ralph's face. "Man, you came over here, looking all crazy, and you yelled about all sorts of shit. Death and doom shit, dude. Scared the hell out of me, that's all."

"I..." Ralph started, but Steve waved him off.

"Don't worry, man," Steve kept smiling, showing all those white teeth, a little wad of gum. "I mean, we're kinda used to it, with people being pissed about the drilling and stuff out here?"

Steve led Ralph further away. "This one chick? Shit, she poured a pint of beer, good stuff, like *hipster* beer, cost me like eight bucks, and she poured it right on my dick, dude." Steve laughed. "She told me I was killing the fish or some shit."

Ralph shook his head, Steve was talking too fast, the mine, there was something about the salt mine, something about the lake. Something important.

"Shit, man, seriously," Steve patted him three times on the shoulder, hard, *thwack thwack thwack*, and stepped back, "You'll be ok, dude, I promise we aren't doing anything bad, no death or anything. Oil's good, dude. Good for the economy. Go get some sleep or something, shit, and drink some water, or like juice, that'll fix you up."

"Okay," Ralph said. "Okay."

"Alright, man," Steve flashed him a thumbs up and switched it to a finger gun. He pulled a crumpled five dollar bill out of his pocket and pressed it to Ralph's chest. "Here, dude, chill yourself out."

"I'm sorry," Ralph said. He pressed his hand to the bill against his shirt. "I don't know..."

But Steve was already walking away. The pale guy, leaning against the Shak, laughed at whatever expression Steve was making. Ralph wiped saliva off his chin and turned to look out towards the rig. The sun was straight up in the sky and there was no shadow on the water, just like there was no shadow around Ralph's feet. Suddenly he got the feeling that there was no time.

He must have gotten a hold of some booze because the next thing he remembered was waking up, sprawled in his boat. Dawn was coming over the lake again, a whole day lost. He'd missed Starlit's visit. And the foreboding was back. It was back and it felt like it was pulling him deep.

Ralph scrubbed dried vomit and tears from his mouth and cheeks and looked at the pink dawn in the distance, over the trees. He could feel something. A great poised breathlessness. He sat up suddenly and looked out over the lake.

The Sun Oil rig was capsized, the underside of the barge rolling sideways out of the water, like a slow-breaching whale. Ralph sucked in a breath and he watched the whole thing disappear, straight down into the lake, right into the maw of the devil, swallowed in one slow, massive gulp.

He stared in horror. There one second and gone the next. He sat and stared and the dawn breeze freshened against his exposed face. The sky got lighter.

And then there was something else. A pulling. A gentle pulling at his boat. A great rushing sound came to his ears. Not a sucking sound, as he would later describe it, but a soulful rushing, like wind through pine trees, like a far off train.

The pulling turned into tugging and a sudden fear (exaltation?) drove him to stand. He was being pulled towards the disappeared rig in his aluminum boat.

The whole lake was going down. He could see that now, the bottom had dropped out, and he would be next. The boat rocked beneath his widespread feet and he threw his arms out and screamed into that rushing sound, louder and louder with each moment. His shoulder, stiff from sleeping on the boat, and age, locked up and his scream turned into a strangled, "Aw, shit!"

The water's rushing became a mad swirling out there by the swallowed rig, tossing waves. He was going to be swallowed up. Swallowed and pulled under.

He gasped. No. His life, his existence, everything he had, was resting on a mostly rotted stump that he'd looped a mostly rotted rope around the night before. He turned away from the end of the world and yanked his rope from the water. He wound it around his arm with increasing wild fear. He could see his stump breaking itself apart. The lake was chaos, he could hear the voracious hungry suck, he could feel the mad pull, Jesus, Jesus, and he reeled himself in, screaming, Jesus, God, Shit. His mouth hung open and he slobbered with dread.

And then he was on the shore.

Ralph flung himself away from the boat and turned, panting, crying. He looked back and thought he saw the whole lake rocking and tossing like a huge dish of water. His boat drifted away from him, towards the whirlpool. He didn't wait to see it swallowed up. He turned instead, and ran.

He ran down the canal path, that great rushing, sighing sound chasing him, and he ran, with his legs shaking and empty, and he ran, with his chest seizing and sour around

his heart, and he ran, all the way to the town, two miles away. He passed out in front of the Hungry Bear Diner, on the sidewalk. People stepped over his shuddering body with their faces twisted with placid disgust, and their eyes fixed on their phones.

"Maelstrom Caused by Sun Oil Drilling Destroys Lake and Miller Salt Mine in One Fell Swoop!" The papers would read later. But far from a fell swoop, it started with that gentle pulling and took two days to finish.

The lake itself didn't take its time emptying. Once the oil drill punctured the top of the upper shaft, the lake poured into the salt dome that encapsulated the east end of the mine. The mine swallowed up the oil rig, but not before Steve and the rest of the crew had motored to shore—stone faced and terrified—in a couple of emergency dinghies. But the fresh water, the bass, the crappies and bluegills, the hapless swimming turtles, the little frogs, all flushed down into the mine. The water ate the saltrock away, faster and faster. The original five-foot hole grew to a churning bore over a quarter of a mile across. In the space of a few hours, the peaceful freshwater lake—and all its little creatures—filled the mine and rushed through its tunnels.

The intense suction reversed the flow of water in the canal, and saltwater from the bay came rushing to the lake. The saline ocean poured a huge waterfall down into the mine. Besides the oil rig, it took with it five barges, Ralph's boat, a tugboat or two, salt water and salt water and salt water. The next two days saw the bay flowing into the mine, filling its tunnels and caverns. When it was full to bursting, the lake slowly filled. As it did, some of the broken things popped back up and bobbed on the surface of the new salt lake.

“Not a Single Soul Dead!” the papers screamed, ignoring the fish and turtles and and the sad fact that two dogs—a stray lab with no name, and a beloved mutt named Bud—had been swept away and killed in the chaos. The lake that had been only eight feet deep all the way ‘round like a giant dinosaur footprint (and full of freshwater) was now over a two hundred feet deep, salty, and cold.

Ralph didn’t see Starlit after that. He liked to think that she forgot about him. He liked to feel that clean pain of being left. He had dreams though—if he didn’t drink enough—of her floating around down there, bumping blindly into walls in the salty water, swirling through caverns and crevices, getting stuck by her coats and wedged between rocks, with her eyes open in the corrosive water, with her body swelling and becoming pitted with sores, with shreds of ghostly pale skin scraping off as she was pushed blindly through the mine.

The End