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Awakening

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Awakening

Throughout my teenage years, my principle summer job was going sternman on the *Penny*, my father's 32' wooden lobster boat. The money was good and I loved being out on the water, but going from a night owl to an early bird proved an adjustment for both of us. Although I set my alarm for 4 a.m., Dad usually had to come in and wake me up. Treading cautiously, he'd open my bedroom door so the baritone drone of WKRD's weather report and the smell of freshly brewed coffee wafted in, then he'd give me a gentle prod. More than once, in a last ditch attempt to wake me he'd climb up and jump on my bed, which got me out of bed faster than any alarm simply because he enjoyed it way too much. I'd stumble out of bed and into my work clothes and out to the blindingly bright kitchen to the dining room where Dad would be eating his cereal and toast. I usually drank my coffee in the dark living room and stared at our reflections in the picture window, savoring the ephemeral limbo of the pre-work day and waiting for the caffeine to kick in.

A half hour later, dinner pails in hand, we sauntered down the dark road to the mooring, the air laden with moisture and the smell of brine, wet wood and spruce, the scuff of our rubber boots hitting the asphalt drowned out by the dueling fog horns from Whitehead and Two Bush Islands that seemed to pierce right through the density. After Dad got seated in the rowboat, I assumed my position facing him, crouched down in the bow, already mesmerized by the otherworldly glow of the green phosphorescence that exploded each time the oars hit the water. Well before 5 a.m. we'd be steaming out of Spruce Head harbor headed for Home Harbor over in the Mussel Ridges to the first string of traps.

If we were hauling offshore, I'd climb down in the hold for a quick snooze. Undeterred by the loud noise, vibrations, and oily fumes of the engine, I'd nestle down in the jumble of life preservers and sweatshirts and within minutes be fast asleep. I instinctively woke to the sound of the engine slowing down, a sign that we were nearing the first trap. By then dawn had broken, the fog had lifted, and everything had woken up from its slumber and was clambering to be heard, especially the seagulls—the sternman's nemesis—flying rats we called them, so bold they'd try to grab a bait bag right out of your hand.

I pulled on my damp, greasy oilskins and smelly work gloves and assumed my position. Using the gaff, Dad caught the rope and pulled it and the buoy up and onto the winch, which at full speed yanked the wooden trap up from the ocean bed in a spray of water and the noise of lobster claws snapping and tails flipping and crabs scuttling sideways. It was my job to open the trap, clean out sea urchins, save rock crabs for my mother to boil and pick, remove the old bait bag and using the bait iron, string on a fresh one. While I was doing this, he'd toss the shorts and notched females back in the water and measure the "keepers". In between traps I plugged the lobster's claws with a wooden plug each so they couldn't harm each other, work on filling my quota of two hundred bait bags a day, clean starfish and urchins from the floor of the boat and keep the seagulls at bay.

We'd break for coffee about half way through, after we'd hauled a hundred or so traps, and eat a lunch while idling to the next string of traps. But on this particular day, a peculiar sort of ennui beset us, not so much a lack of motivation, but rather an awakening of a dormant restlessness that plagued both of us. We looked down in the lobster crate, nearly full already, then at the Ritz crackers and peanut butter we kept stocked on the boat and then at each other. Finally, Dad said, "We've got enough lobsters for the day, how 'bout we quit while we're ahead and steam to Rockland for some breakfast? No one will ever know!" With the promise of adventure we switched gears like we did this everyday and headed full throttle for Rockland. I finished filling bait bags in record time and then stood up in the house with him, looking out over the vast horizon, lost in a reverie in the making.

Eventually, he handed over the wheel and stood beside me for the next hour as we passed the northern tip of Monroe Island, then close by Owls Head Light and the Rockland Breakwater. We tied up to the float at the Rockland public landing and walked up Park Street to the Wayfarer in our cut-off flannel shirts and high rubber boots.

For those of you who don't know, the Wayfarer East was for many years a Rockland institution situated at the corner of Park and Union Streets. It was a combination hotel/restaurant with a dark shabby bar that smelled of stale cigarette smoke when you walked in, but put on a good feed served by career waitresses who knew each customer by name and their order. Francis was working the room, per usual, a neighbor quite unlike any of the other lobstermen's wives I knew, hair teased high, red lipstick and painted nails, large hoop earrings and sparkling rings on each finger, chewing gum. "Well, if it ain't a couple of Spruce Headers, ain't you supposed to be haulin'?" Dad replied, "Jeez Frannie, just had to come to town and have breakfast, don't tell on us!" Sitting in the Wayfarer, mid-morning during the work week eating scrambled eggs and sausage felt downright naughty, like playing hooky from school, and the fact that we were in it together made me a proud partner in crime.

We drank coffee and ate and chatted with Francis, who'd stop by in between tables and give us warm-ups and ask how the family was doing and wasn't fishing just awful right now. We agreed because no lobsterman will ever disclose how good the catch is. Knowing how well the season had been going with record numbers of lobsters being landed and the very reason we knocked off work in the first place, I just nodded my head in agreement. "It's been just terrible, really."

Neither of us wanted to break the spell, but we had to get back to Spruce Head to sell what we had already caught, so we said goodbye and left, feeling full, free, and happy. What had started out as just another predictable day lobstering had assumed an idyllically illicit nature that showed me at that young age that even responsible adults with adventurous spirits can endure and even thrive on hard work and routine as long as they are flexible enough to seize the moment and allow the momentary lapse of reason and duty needed to see serendipity through. Turns out we are a lot alike, he and I.