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Oxygen

by Steven J. McDermott

The place I've picked is off Burrow's Island, along Rosario Strait. It's not the ocean, but I'm sure he'd understand. He used to pass by there on his way from Fisherman's Terminal in Seattle to La Push, Neah Bay, Alaska.

—There's a lighthouse there, I say to the skipper of the island ferry, a barge shuttling around the San Juan Islands.

—I know the place, he says.

He's only a few years older than me, blond and bearded like a viking. I'd expected someone older, someone who'd devoted a life to the sea, someone who would understand.

—Would it be possible for you to stop there, offshore, so I can—

—I get the idea.

—He was a fisherman, I say. My grandfather. His eyes linger on the urn clutched to my abdomen.

—I'll pay.

—No, forget it, he says. I'm heading past there anyway. You'll have to make the full trip though, out to Lopez and back. Three, four hours, depends on how long it takes to unload.

—That would be just fine, thanks.

II

We were miles out, my grandfather and me, several miles beyond the horizon seen from the beach. We were in his domain, riding the heaving slate of the Pacific Ocean. Sonar revealed a school of fish. We drifted, oozed up and down the combers rolling beneath the hull. I was thirteen, scared, and out fishing with him for the first time. I stayed out of his way and watched his sure and easy movements while he dropped the poles, baited the hooks, fed out the line. Soon the bells on the end of the poles were ringing. The winch ground, reeling the line in, salmon flopping every few hooks. He lifted them off without slowing the winch, clubbed their

heads, threw them into the cleaning tray. When all the lines were in we'd caught twenty fish. He gutted them with quick flicks of knife and gloved fingers, then stuffed them with ice down in the hold. When he was done he held up a small fish.

—Sea-going trout, he said. We're supposed to throw them back. But we'll have this one for lunch. He winked, waved towards the wheelhouse: Come on.

We went up the stairs into the wheelhouse, a tight curve of burnished teak. The spoked wheel was surrounded by the bank of electronic equipment he commanded: radar, sonar, loran, engine controls, UHF and VHP radios. Still holding the trout by the gills, he pushed a couple of buttons on a console and the engine started, then rose in pitch, vibrated the floorboards as he manipulated the throttle.

—We need the generator going to run the stove, he said. Come on, let's fix some lunch.

Down the stairs, down again on the vertical ladder into the galley below decks where the clatter of the churning pistons made thought difficult. Two bunks angled in a V to the bow: duffel bags on one, sleeping bag on the other. A four burner stove and a fold-down table beside the cupboards. He took a can of chili from the cupboard, a can opener from a drawer, and handed them to me.

—You do the chili, he said, I'll do the fish. He unclipped a pot and a pan from the hull above the stove and slapped the trout into the pan. He opened the door to the engine compartment and the churning pistons became deafening. He flipped a switch, closed the door, but not before the reek of diesel had filtered into the galley.

We cooked side by side. The heave of the hull seemed more pronounced in the dark confines of the galley, and with the roll and sway of the boat it was hard to stand in place at the stove. He lit a cigarette, began a wracking series of coughs.



—This damned sore throat!

He continued smoking, the bitter tobacco aroma mingling with the smell of chili, diesel fumes, seared fish flesh. We sat on the edge of the bunks and ate at the fold-down table. He poured himself a shot of vodka, downed it, poured another. I became queasy, found it difficult to breathe because of the pervasive odor of diesel.

—I think I'll eat on deck, I said, I need fresh air.

—Getting seasick?

—It's the fumes.

I pulled myself up the ladder with one hand and balanced my plate against the sway of the boat with the other. As soon as my head was above deck I sucked in a deep briny breath and clambered the rest of the way up the ladder. I sat on the hold, breathing deep until the nausea dissipated. The deck pitched with the flex of the ocean as the boat slid down a wall of water, then up, cresting for an instant and giving me a panorama of the limitless horizon, the spread and sweep of the ocean.

He joined me on deck.

—Better?

—Yeah.

—Sea air cures all ails, he said.

He inhaled deeply on his cigarette, only to give in to the wracking cough again. I ate while he smoked.

—Can't beat fishing, he said after a moment. It's a hard life, sure, but it's free, unconstrained. I've been doing it since the end of the war. Thirty years. If I couldn't fish, I don't know what I'd do. Best years of my life have been spent on this boat. You should come with me more often, spend the summer fishing with me. You're old enough now.

—I'd like that, I said.

—Okay, next summer you can be my deck hand.

A crescendo of coughs took control of him, bent him double, then he arched and hawked phlegm skyward, over the deck and into the rising water.

III

From where I sit in the chair beside my grandfather I can watch as my grandmother makes the drinks; only a splash of vodka in the water. She hands them to us, leaves the room. I see his frown as he tastes, then drinks half before handing me the glass, eyes pleading. I fill it to the brim with vodka, watch the wave of pleasure flush his face as he swallows. My grandmother returns. He and I share a conspiratorial smile, and for a flickering moment I see him as he was: a big John Wayne of a man whose eyes were always aglow with mischief. Then he's gone again, sunk back inside his emaciated Fred Astaire body. I wonder where a hundred pounds goes.

We don't talk, rarely do when I visit; it's enough that I'm there. So few come by anymore, and I can't blame them really. I've had to call the paramedics before. Now the respirator sits beside him just in case. The pale green canister and hoses looking like a floor vacuum—which is what his lungs are when he can't breathe, a vacuum. No, the oxygen tanks, the valves and switches, the black rubber mask, do not encourage visitors.

He reaches up with a pale bony hand and removes the ascot. My grandmother makes clucking noises and leaves the room. He takes the pack of cigarettes and lighter from his shirt pocket. I stare transfixed at the hole in his throat, the in-puckered reminder of the sore throat that wouldn't go away; like a cauterized bullet hole it doesn't bleed, yet never heals. He holds the filterless cigarette to the throat-hole, flicks flame from the lighter and inhales. Eyes closed, he exhales, smoke spewing from the throat-hole like a surfacing whale geysering water. He inhales again and I think this is perhaps why he has so few visitors. It's hard to take. He'd survived throat cancer, made it three years beyond the seven years the doctors said was evidence of a cure, only to keep doing this: smoking the most tar-laden filterless cigarettes through his throat.

The cough starts deep, twisting his frail body,





Photo by Kerri Bentley

and something wet hits my cheek before he gets the handkerchief to the throat-hole. He continues coughing as I feel for it on my cheek, grab it between thumb and forefinger, study it, the wet brown fleck of dried tobacco leaf. The cough subsides, but he's wheezing now, stabbing out the cigarette. As the plume of smoke rises from the ashtray he reaches towards the respirator, the only electronic equipment he commands anymore, and flicks the oxygen pump to life. The black mask goes to his throat as the respirator whirs and throbs like an engine—like a muffled diesel engine: all that's lacking is the fumes. I know that the sound is killing him ten times faster than the mutant cells devouring his lungs. I can tell by his eyes that he sees the realization in mine. He fumbles on the coffee table for the speaker. Lowering the mask, he places the speaker against his throat where his larynx used to be. He presses the button with his thumb, begins moving his lips, but the metallic vibrato voice is not human.

—Do you know why I drove the oil truck in

the winter?

—To keep the money coming in. He shakes his head.

—No, the speaker says as the oxygen pump keeps its pistoning cadence. I could have done anything.

The black mask goes over the throat-hole.

—It was the smell. The diesel smell reminded me of the boat, of fishing.

He closes his eyes, rests his head against the chair's cushion. The speaker lies dormant in his lap. Ten years of not being able to fish are deeply etched into his face, in the recessed eyes, the taut skin over cheekbones.

The mask lowers. The gasping growl of esophageal speech:

—You. Would. Have. Made. A. Good. Deck. Hand.

IV

The wake had been his idea: "I don't want a bunch of people standing around a goddamned hole



in the ground crying over me. And no goddamned funeral either. Have a wake, an Irish wake. Drink and laugh and remember the good times, for Christ's sake."

So we do. In the house he shared with my grandmother for forty years, the house with the wall of photographs of family, friends, his boats, and he and I in oilskins, tangible proof of that one time I went fishing with him.

A crush of people arrive, the friends his life has touched, the immediate family, other branches of the family tree, the root stalk. I am the designated greeter, lucid, emotionless, dispensing hugs, words of condolence, then encouragement: This is a wake, I say over and over, celebrate his life, what he gave us.

The rush of arrival ends, the small house is packed. I think he would be pleased as the mood turns festive. But I need fresh air, revitalization. As I head for the backyard I hear several people saying: "Remember the time..." and pass the bathroom, glimpse the tub and remember the time it was filled with clams: "We have to keep them alive

until we can steam them," he'd said.

I go down the stairs to the back door, and there, next to the garage door, sits the respirator, with its green canisters, with its hoses, with its switches, with its black rubber mask. I loosen my tie and step into the backyard. I take deep steaming breaths, sit at the picnic table on the patio, where seed husks litter the flagstones and the sparrows are busy at the feeder he built for them, twittering, beating wings, heaving seeds to and fro, splashing themselves in the tinfoil pan that is their bathtub. I hear the chicks squawking in the nest under the eaves. The parents appear content to frolic in the feeder atop the fence.

I study the fence he built, painted barn red, then surrealistically painted with sea images: an octopus, a mermaid, a tidal wave, a leaping salmon, a whale spewing water through its air hole. Fish nets hung with glass floats drape the top of the fence. Reminders all, but nothing I can taste, nothing I can smell.

I get up from the table, walk around the corner



of the house. Over the gate the roses on the arbor are coming into bloom: pink, orange, red; but not the fragrance I crave. The small circle in the lawn is freshly edged. I get down on my knees, grasp the gray spokes of the cap with both hands, apply force, spin it free. I remove the cap from the heating oil tank, bend closer, my nose in the end of the pipe, and let the diesel fumes flood over my face, into my mouth, into my nostrils.

V

We edge around the northwest end of Burrow's Island, stay inside of where the tankers and tugs buck the strait. The lighthouse beckons, a stark white sentinel against the verdant backdrop of fir, hemlock, cedar. Gulls glide in criss-cross patterns as we enter the cove where the abandoned Coast Guard station lingers. I sit on the engine compartment, the urn in my lap, the clattering throb of the engine in my ears. The salty air mingles with the diesel fumes, tastes like bilge water. I realize that my life has no such web of sensuality to miss. There

is nothing I love doing so much that not being able to do it would kill me. That is the essential emptiness of my life.

—The tide's running out fast now, the skipper yells to me. So I won't be able to hold her here too long.

The pitch of the pistons rises as he throttles against the pull of the tide. My grandfather's boat made the same sound when he shifted into reverse as we docked, our one fishing trip together ended. The diesel fumes rise in thick plumes from the engine compartment, heat waves shimmering like a hologram. Holding the urn out over the warm updrafts, I raise the lid an inch or so and let the acrid dreg-gases of diesel waft over the ashes. I close the lid and move over to the side of the ferry, lean against the hull's damp planks, upend the urn. The ashes plunge under water en masse. I watch until bubbles float to the surface, burst in a spray of oxygen as the water turns a soupy gray.

