

Clamming

by

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—fifteen years old—

Father looked up from the morning paper as Kate entered the kitchen. "Morning, Kate," he boomed loudly. "Smell that salt air."

"Morning," she mumbled, not yet fully awake. Automatically she breathed deeply as he had told her to do. The air smelled of sea and pungent marsh grass. She poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down.

Mum rested her head in her hands, her elbows propped on the kitchen table. A cup of black coffee steamed in front of her. "Could you please keep your voices down?" she asked softly, lifting her head and reaching for her coffee cup. Her hand shook.

Kate looked away.

"How about a little bacon," Father suggested, "some thick-sliced, smoked Virginia bacon?"

"No thanks. I don't want to get fat."

Kate stared at him. He was the only fat person in the family. She was thin. Mother was thin. Her sister Patrice was thin. His eating bothered her more than Mum's drinking. The drinking she could understand.

Patrice came downstairs. "Are you all ready to go clamming yet? It's low tide right now." She looked at Dad as she asked the question.

"Let Kate eat, then we'll be ready to go," he replied, putting toast, bacon, and fried green tomatoes on a plate.

Kate made a face. "All I want is coffee. I'm getting fat.

"The only fat on you is between your ears."

The master of hokey sayings, she thought.

"Come on. Hurry up and eat it," Patrice said.

"I'm not eating it." She took a sip of coffee.

"Enough," Dad said. "Jen—let's get ready."

Mum rose and obediently followed him upstairs.

Kate sat on the front step waiting for them. She could hear Patrice searching the utility closet for clamming gear. The sky was blue as cornflowers and without a cloud. Two black crows cawed as they flew from one dead, bare-branched tree to another. That's what my thoughts look like, she told herself, like old black crows. She found the comparison romantic. The crows seemed lonely, as if all they had were each other, the wind, and sky. She shoved her bare feet deep into the cold sand.

Patrice came out followed by Mum's terrier. She sat down with Kate to wait. Mum and Dad came out. Dad looked the way he always did when he was going to do something outside—half happy, half worried as if he were leading an important expedition—the big leader. Mum was only half there. Her mind was always in the clouds nowadays. She just didn't want to be bothered. Kate picked up the inner tube, Mum took the basket, Dad and Patrice each grabbed a rake. They followed a path that wound through blueberry bushes to the sea. The tide was higher than they had expected. Everyone looked at Patrice as if it were her fault, then walked into the water anyway. Dad acted brave as if the water wasn't at all cold. Mum jumped up and down when the ripples hit her knees. The dog stood on the beach barking. And Patrice and Kate dunked in the water and screamed, "Aiee, brrr," then burst out laughing. The tide was too high to use clam rakes. They had to grope in the mud with their hands, searching for clams, keeping their mouths shut so they didn't swallow saltwater. Each clam was flattish with a gently rounded shell with ridges. With a little practice they could feel the difference between a clam and a rock. Kate and Patrice filled their shirts with clams, then dumped the clams into the basket which sat in the middle of the inner tube. The inner tube was tied by a rope to Dad's waist. On shore wind blew yellow sea foam across the sand. The dog chased the foam, stopping to urinate on clumps of seaweed. Patrice called, "Come on boy, come on, get in the water." He jumped in and started swimming, his strong body pushing against the mounting tide. Dad concentrated on digging for clams. Mum looked up and said, "Now you keep an eye on my dog." When the terrier reached Patrice, she picked him up. He squirmed and licked her face. Then she walked him to shore and put him down, looking up and down the beach. It was empty.

After an hour Dad shouted, "Hey, gang, I think we have enough clams." He came in, the inner tube trailing behind him. Kate followed dumping her last load of clams into the basket. Patrice threw a stick for the dog. Dad lifted the basket onto his shoulder and cut across the beach to the path. They followed him.

Leading the way, his voice trailed back, "Later this afternoon we'll pick blueberries for a pie."

"Don't worry, I'll make the pie," Mum said when Kate looked at her, rolling her eyes.

"Would you tell me why we have to pick blueberries for his pie?"

"Shh! It won't take that long," Patrice whispered.

That afternoon the family went to the north shore. The surf was grey and rough. The dog avoided the water. Mum put on her big floppy hat and read a book. Dad read

"Medical Economics" in the beach chair next to her. They were both smeared with suntan oil. During the last week Dad had tanned a deep brown. Mum was a little red. Kate laid on a beach towel, her head resting on her arms. Patrice was down near the water building a sandcastle.

Dad looked up from his magazine. "Why don't you get a part-time job?" he asked Mum. "We could use the extra income. You don't really do anything."

Mum looked up, then looked back down and kept on reading.

He thinks a job will keep her from drinking, Kate thought. He didn't even understand why she drank. Quickly she stood up. She didn't want to hear this. She walked down to the ocean dragging an air mattress behind her. At the surf's edge she looked out to sea. Then she rushed into the water, diving beneath the waves and throwing the air mattress over them. When she had swum beyond the waves, she climbed onto the mattress and floated, concentrating on the swells. It was here out at sea that she felt happy for the first time that day. No people. No one pushing her around. Seagulls crying. Seeing her mother and father sitting side by side on shore, she could imagine that they were normal parents, that this was a normal family, whatever "normal" was. Father stood up. He walked down to Patrice dragging the other mattress behind him. She left her sandcastle and followed him into the water. When they were beyond the waves, he steadied the mattress for her as she climbed on it. He searched the horizon for waves. Big waves come in threes -- Kate remembered him telling them. Dad saw a big wave and called to Kate, "Here it comes," then lined Patrice up just right to catch it. Beneath her Kate felt the wave swell. She paddled as hard as she could, but missed it. The wave rolled past her on toward shore. Farther in, Dad pushed Patrice, shouting, "Kick. Kick. Kick." Patrice caught the wave and rode it to shore.

By four thirty, the family was burnt and tired. It was time to go home. Mum sorted through a pile of seashells she had collected. Then they loaded everything into the car—towels, beach chairs, mattresses. The dog, wet and sandy, jumped into Dad's lap.

"Would somebody get that damn dog out of my lap!" he shouted.

"Don't shout," Patrice said, pulling the dog into her lap. "Poor Pup, did you get screamed at?"

At the house Kate, Patrice, and Father covered themselves with bug repellent and hung coffee can pails around their necks, leaving their hands free to pick berries. There was an ocean breeze—the mosquitoes wouldn't be out for a while. As they picked, the blueberry bushes pricked their hands and arms. Dad picked the berries up high, while Patrice and Kate picked the lower ones. It took a long time to fill the cans -- the berries were half the size of ones bought in stores. When Father had a whole can of blueberries, they quit picking and walked back. The sun was low, the sky edged with pink. Mosquitoes were coming out. "Come on, let's run," Dad said. They dashed back to the house, giggling the whole way.

For dinner they had raw clams and steamed clams dipped into melted butter. The kitchen smelled of the sea. The sun set over the ocean, streaks of pink and

purple feeding on cloud underbellies. Wind rustled the moor's thick underbrush; it sounded to Kate as if the bushes were talking. The blueberry pie came for dessert. Dad cut himself a large piece. Kate looked at Patrice. He started to cut another piece.

"I don't want any, thanks," Kate told him.

He caught his breath as if she had said something mean.

"I'll have a small piece," Patrice said.

Dad smiled.

The girls cleared the table. In the kitchen, they went to work loading the dishwasher and washing pots and pans. The telephone rang. Dad got up from the sofa to answer it. Mum came into the kitchen to fix herself another vodka and tonic. She leaned against the counter to steady herself as she poured the vodka over fresh ice cubes.

"Thanks for cleaning up, girls," she said.

"Hey, sure."

"No problem."

"Jenny," they heard Dad call Mother.

Kate and Patrice exchanged glances and stopped banging pots and pans. Mum went into the living room.

"Jenny —" Dad's voice rose, "why didn't you tell me the hospital called last night?"

Patrice froze. She held the pan so tightly her knuckles turned white. Kate's stomach hardened into a knot. They stared at each other not uttering a word.

"Goddamnit, Jenny. You were drunk, weren't you? Weren't you?"

"I must have forgotten the message," Mum said. Ice cubes clinked in her glass.

Kate looked at Patrice. This was going to be a big one; she could feel the storm cloud mounting. Dad didn't tolerate forgotten messages.

"Somebody could have died. Somebody almost did die because of you. You're goddamned irresponsible. I take it and take it and take it without saying a word, but I will not take this."

"I told you I forgot. I'm not your damn secretary. I forgot. Okay? I forgot. For once in my life I forgot. To hell with your damn patients. What about your family?"

"Shit," Patrice said.

Kate could feel the power of their unleashed anger. Now something might happen. Now something might change. A crack, like lightning, the same sound as a bone being snapped in two. Mum cried out. He had slapped her. Patrice dropped the pan back into sudsy water and ran outside, the screen door banging shut behind her. Kate didn't know what to do. Father ran after Patrice.

Suddenly Kate flew from the kitchen, ran past him, turned at the door to face him. "Leave her the hell alone," she shouted.

He seemed deaf.

"Did you hear me?" she screamed. "Leave us alone. We hate you."

She ran out the door and raced down the road as fast as she could, her feet grinding against sand, blood pounding in her head. Father started the car. Good, he's leaving, she thought, I hope he crashes into a telephone pole. I hope he dies.

"Patrice?" she called. "Patrice, come on, answer me. He's gone. Come on."

Patrice came out from the bushes and walked up the road. Sand crunched beneath her feet. They walked back to the house. Mum's bedroom door was closed. The house was silent.

Later Kate could tell by the deep, slow sound of Patrice's breathing that she had finally fallen asleep. She didn't wake up when the screen door banged shut. From their parents' bedroom came whispers. Mum began crying. Kate clasped her hands tight into fists, putting one over her mouth and chewing on its knuckles. She wouldn't cry. He wasn't going to have the pleasure. He couldn't hurt her. He couldn't push her around. She wasn't weak like Mum. Suddenly she wanted to die. How could she do it? Slit her wrists, jump off a building, take Mum's Valium? The truth was she knew she didn't have the nerve. But one thing was for sure—she wasn't going to eat breakfast in the morning. Just let them try and make her. No way! She was going to become thin and beautiful. And one day someone would love her—she was sure of it. One day she'd get away. One day she'd be free and travel all over the world. She'd be adventurous and kind and understanding. She'd be so beautiful a man would fall in love with her. But she'd say, "No, I can't marry you. Marriage leads to misery, you see." And, of course, the man would, seeing in her eyes a strange light like flecks of phosphorescence in a dark night sea, and he would smile, understanding that there were some things a person just couldn't bear. He would understand, unlike her father.

—The End—