

Dockwalloper

by

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"If you could price it, how much would a soul cost?" asked the dockwalloper.

"Not even a dime," replied his mate.

"And why's that?" Matt pushed on with his question, spitting an amber stream of chaw juice into the bay.

"No one would want to buy it. Folks have enough trouble with their own."

Made sense to him. The Bay was old and tired now. Brown instead of green with flecks of discolored foam. Life wasn't any easier now than it had been forty years ago, though the papers always said otherwise in hope of giving the new generation courage, which it was sorely lacking. And Matt didn't blame them. Who was he to blame anyone, still a dockwalloper at age sixty? But, oh, he'd been a wild one in his youth: ridden freights, fished off stormy coasts and had the boat stormed out from under him, even killed his own brother-- knocked Lee out with one punch. He sailed over backwards into the Chesapeake Bay and floated away. Long ago. And now it made sense to Matt that his soul wasn't worth a dime.

It had been worrying him lately, this business about the soul. Matt didn't believe in heaven or hell, but he wondered about reincarnation. He wanted to be reborn as a canadian goose, and this fervent desire had forced him to reconsider hunting—he was a crack shot.

"You get to an age," Matt said to Jack, "and everything flips over backwards like a turtle turned on its back."

Jack didn't answer. He usually kept quiet unless an idea came to him while he pensively chewed his tobacco. The doctor had made him quit smoking three years ago. Anxiously, he raised his right hand again and again to his mouth as if an invisible cigarette lay between his fingers, then, looking a bit surprised, spread his fingers and stroked his bearded chin.

Better keep it to myself, Matt thought, this business about reincarnation and being turned into a goose. A few of the dockwallopers knew about his brother's death.

That they could understand, even feel sorry about, but reincarnation—that was crazy talk.

Numb fingers in wintertime were part of the business, frostbite—a man's badge for toiling on the docks. Blowing on their fingers Matt and Jack punched out, left the waterfront, and drove to a bar in Fells Point. There was a small sign hanging out front with a shamrock over which was written O'Mallory's. Inside it was dark except for rays of winter sunshine which crept through the latticework of the green shutters and lit up thin sheets of dust particle filled air. The floor was stained from years of heel marks, spilled beer, and ground out cigarette butts. It had been swept twice a day, morning and evening, for forty some odd years but never washed and waxed. The bar counter was painted dark brown. It was high enough for the patrons to tip their beer mugs to their mouths without lifting them. Ten bar stools with torn red leather seats were lined up at the counter as if they were advancing soldiers.

Two women in their early to mid twenties sat on stools close to the door and far away from the jukebox. They were both dressed in blue jeans, flannel shirts, and cowboy boots. Matt enjoyed having them in the bar. So did Jack, though he had once remarked that there's no place in this world for a drinking woman. All the same, Matt thought, they're nice girls and they cheer up the place. Most of the bar's clients were paternal and watched out for the girls. There wasn't a lot of work about, and he could understand their not wanting to sit at home alone all day. "Evening Maureen, Lucy," Matt and Jack greeted them on their way in. "Buy you a beer?"

The girls ordered light beers. Jack had a shot of Jim Beam and a Bud. He'd never get used to American beer, Matt thought. It always tasted sour to him. He was sure it was the chemicals they added. He hadn't drunk beer until he had tasted the real thing in Liverpool after the war. And now he drank American beer because daily doses of whiskey would kill him and imported was too expensive. The men kept their coats on still trying to warm up. Each time the door opened a gust of icy air swept into the bar. It was a nice bar. No one played the jukebox. People talked in medium tones neither too loud nor too low. The pickled eggs were very good, and if it wasn't too busy the bartender would toast a cheese sandwich for you. Yes, it was a pleasant place which was why they'd been coming there for forty years.

Lucy smoked and talked about her brother who had joined the army. Jack watched her lift the golden Marlboro light to her lips and then down to the ash tray. Up and down. Up and down. He wondered what it would be like to kiss her. Maureen with the green eyes was the quiet type. She sat, shoulders hunched, peeling off the label of her beer bottle. They were getting to be a fixture Matt thought. He could see them at the same stools twenty years from now, their bodies worn but their souls still bright as new pennies. He felt like shaking them awake, especially quiet Maureen, and saying, "There's a whole world out there: marsh grass, sunrises, water-fowl. Don't miss it. It's dying. All of it." But he kept his thoughts to himself. Youth never understood death, he knew. They thought it would all be around forever. Ah, well, he had been the same.

Matt and Jack were an odd pair, two old bachelors as close as any married couple. Probably closer. Both were born and raised on the Eastern shore though Matt was five years older than Jack. They had met on the docks in Dundalk back in 1946. Matt had fought in the war for a year, and when it had ended he had almost been killed by an angry french sailor who had caught him with his girl. That was in Marseilles, in a cafe on the waterfront. He could still remember the light colored sawdust on the floor, the quick drawn knife, and his own red blood. It happened everywhere in all the ports--sailors and army men who had survived the war were carved up, shot, and stabbed as they drank and wenched. Someone had dragged him to a hospital, and they had patched him up. He arrived in the United States confused and hungry for the pre-war past which, of course, eluded him. So he got a job on the Dundalk docks.

The first day on the docks Matt and Jack hadn't paid any attention to each other, but later they both stumbled into O'Mallory's. It was a new bar then, open only three months. Matt bought Jack a pickled egg and a whiskey. It continued that way the two of them meeting in O'Mallory's after work each day. They didn't meet many people who interested them. Except Jack almost married once. But another man proposed to his girl, and when she told Jack, he said, "I think you'll do right by marrying him." She did.

Matt and Jack took to spending their weekends together—going crabbing or duck hunting. One time Matt had borrowed a picnic hamper from his landlady and filled it full of hard boiled eggs, ham and tomato sandwiches, and a bottle of whiskey. They had brought some half gnawed chicken legs to crab with, tying a piece of string around the leg and dropping it into the water along the bank. When a crab picked at it, they pulled the string up slowly, and slipped a net under it. Matt and Jack had lain in the sun drawing on the bottle, slapping at the mosquitoes and gnats, pulling up crabs until they had a half bushel. They didn't go home that night. Instead they had had the crabs cooked up for them by Jenny who owned the diner down the road. And that night they had slept outside in the sticky heat.

"And what do you think he asks me today?" queried Jack, raising his hand and stroking his beard. "He asks me what I thought a soul was worth. What were you thinking of, Matt, your own?"

Matt replied, "Might of been. Might of been."

But he had been remembering his brother Lee, the splash, and that dark black night. No stars. No moon. Black like a cave. He hadn't meant to hurt Lee much less kill him. He had laughed when Lee hit the water. But Lee hadn't swum back. So dark Matt couldn't see anything out in the water. One moment of still fear. One moment during which death was a possibility. But logic took over—Lee had probably swum ashore down a ways and was giving Matt a good scare.

The body was found floating face down early the next morning. Matt had tried hard to be upset. He had tried harder to cry. But nothing came. Maybe it was what the war had done to him. Probably not—he had cried hard enough when the cat died

from eating rat poison. Rat poison put out in the alleys to protect people from rats. "To protect"--those two words had seemed splendidly stupid to him at the time. Who was Lee? Why should he have cried for Lee? Why cry for anyone? His brother had been knocked in the head and drowned. Everything had an ending. No, what worried Matt now was his soul. If reincarnation was true, what would he be reborn as? Would he be forgiven for not being able to care about Lee's death? And he wondered what a soul was. He pictured it as a candle flame that sometimes burned high, other times low, a small light in the forest of the night.

"Come on, have another." Jack pressed a beer into Matt's hand. It stung as his hand had finally warmed up. Lucy was chatting up a young man down at the other end of the bar, tossing her hair back and forth, making quick movements with her sylph-like body. She had just enough drink in her to make her eyes sparkle. Cigarette smoke enveloped her like a cloud of perfume. Jesus Christ, thought Matt, watching her, we all try too damn hard. What did she want? To be loved? No one would ever love her as much as she wanted. There wasn't enough of the stuff to go around. The beer was cool and briny on his tongue.

"I think she has a soft spot for me," Jack told Matt.

"Which one, mate?"

"Maureen. She's quiet but she looks out at me from beneath those lashes..."

"She's young enough to be your daughter."

"But she isn't."

"True enough. What are you going to do?"

"Thought I'd see if she'll come have supper with me down at Kennedy's."

Matt looked over at Maureen. She was sitting in the same chair, her elbows amid beer label peelings, resting her chin in her palms, and seemed to be staring at the rows of colored liquor bottles.

"Well, it might cheer her up at that," Matt said. "She looks down in the mouth to me."

They left together: tall, stooping Maureen with her green eyes and red bearded Jack. Matt had to admit they made a nice couple despite the age difference. Lucy appeared to be doing pretty well herself with the young man down at the end of the bar. He already had his arm around her. It was Henry Dawe's boy, Less. A good man. They said he was smart as a whip. One of the few getting a college education. Maybe, thought Matt, Lucy wasn't looking for someone to love her as she spun that golden web of energy around herself. Maybe she was just looking to survive, to avoid the rat poison. Maybe she didn't have any expectations. But how could a pretty girl like that not have expectations?

Perhaps somewhere there was a key which explained it all. A philosopher's stone. Something which told why the water and sky were black as tar paper the night Matt killed his brother. Why Lucy was always surrounded by a halo of golden sparks. That explained the pollution in the Bay. Matt couldn't understand these things. No, his mind was filled more and more often now by only one thought: he wanted to be reborn

as a Canadian goose. He wanted to wake up, pull his head from beneath his wing, and see a yellow orb rising above the marsh grass thrusting out tentacles of sunlight to dry the dew. He needed to be a part of it all. To be swallowed whole.

Matt looked up from his beer. He wasn't hungry, but he ordered a toasted cheese sandwich anyway. Lucy was leaving with Less. He marveled that neither of them weaved. Watched them walk out the door into the dismal night. No streetlights. No moon. No stars. Black ink. They looked happy he thought. Then he took a bite of his sandwich and savored the taste of warm, melted cheese.

—The End—