The Highest Tide

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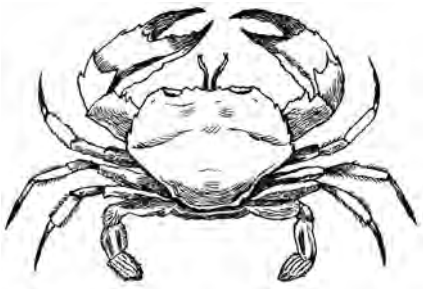


CHAPTER 1

I LEARNED EARLY ON that if you tell people what you see at low tide they'll think you're exaggerating or lying when you're actually just explaining strange and wonderful things as clearly as you can. Most of the time I understated what I saw because I couldn't find words powerful enough, but that's the nature of marine life and the inland bays I grew up on. You'd have to be a scientist, a poet and a comedian to hope to describe it all accurately, and even then you'd often fall short. The truth is I sometimes lied about where or when I saw things, but take that little misdirection away and I saw everything I said I saw and more.

Most people realize the sea covers two thirds of the planet, but few take the time to understand even a gallon of it. Watch what happens when you try to explain something as basic as the tides, that the suction of the moon and the sun creates a bulge across the ocean that turns into a slow and sneaky yet massive wave that covers our salty beaches twice a day. People look at you as if you're making it up as you go. Plus, tides aren't *news*. They don't crash like floods or exit like rivers. They operate beyond the fringe of most attention

spans. Anyone can tell you where the sun is, but ask where the tides are, and only fishermen, oystermen and deep-keeled sailors will know without looking. I grew up hearing seemingly intelligent grown-ups say "what a beautiful lake," no matter how many times we politely educated them it was a *bay*, a briny backwater connected to the world's largest ocean. We'd point to charts that showed the Strait of Juan de Fuca inhaling the Pacific all the way down to our shallow, muddy bays at the southern end of Puget Sound. It still wouldn't stick. It was the same way with beach scavengers. There was no way to make them understand they were tromping across the roofs of clam condos. Most people don't want to invest a moment contemplating something like that unless they happen to stroll low tide alone at night with a flashlight and watch life bubble, skitter and spit in the shallows. Then they'll have a hard time not thinking about the beginnings of life itself and of an earth without pavement, plastic or Man.

People usually take decades to sort out their view of the universe, if they bother to sort at all. I did my sorting during one freakish summer in which I was ambushed by science, fame and suggestions of the divine. You may recall hearing pieces of it, or seeing that photo of me looking like some bloodshot orphan on the mudflats. Maybe you remember the ridiculous headline *USA Today* pinned on me after that crazy cult took an interest: KID MESSIAH? You could have seen the same article recycled in the London *Times* or the *Bangkok Post*. Then again, you might have been among the hundreds of rubber-neckers who traveled to our bay to see things for yourself.

Part of the fuss had to be my appearance. I was a pink-skinned, four-foot-eight, seventy-eight-pound soprano. I came off as an innocent nine-year-old even though I was an increasingly horny, speed-reading thirteen-year-old insomniac. Blame Rachel Carson for the insomnia. She was long dead by the time I arrived but I couldn't resist reading her books over and over. I even read *The Sea Around Us* aloud to make it stick.

"There is no drop of water in the ocean, not even in the deepest parts of the abyss, that does not know and respond to the mysterious forces that create the tide."

How do you read that sentence, yawn and turn out the lights?

My family lived in a tiny, metal-roofed house on the soggy, fog-draped bottom of the Sound where the Pacific Ocean came to relax. Farther north, glassy dream homes loomed on rocky bluffs above the splash, but once you reached Olympia's bays the rocks crumbled to gravel, the beige bluffs flattened to green fields and the shoreside mansions turned into remodeled summer cabins.

The front half of our house stood on stout pilings that got soaked during the few extreme tides each year. Behind the house was a detached garage, over which I lived in a makeshift storage room with a closet toilet like you'd find in a sailboat. The best thing about my room was that its low, slanted ceilings kept the adults away, and its back stairway allowed me to step unnoticed into nights like the one that set the summer of my life into motion.

I loaded up my kayak with a short shovel, a backpack and Ziploc sacks and paddled north out of Skookumchuck Bay around Penrose Point into Chatham Cove, a shallow, cedar-ringed half-circle of gravelly flats that sprawled before me like an enormous glistening disc. It was two-fifteen A.M., an hour before the lowest night tide of the summer with an albino moon so close and bright it seemed to give off heat. There was no wind, no voices, nothing but the occasional whir of wings, the squirts of clams and the faint hiss of retreating water draining through gravel. Mostly there were odors—the fishy composting reek of living, dead and dying kelp, sea lettuce, clams, crabs, sand dollars and starfish.

It was my first summer collecting marine specimens for money. I sold stars, snails, hermit crabs, and other tidal creatures to public aquariums. I also sold clams to an Olympia restaurant and assorted sea life to a private aquarium dealer who made my throat tighten every time he pulled up in his baby-blue El Camino. Almost

everything had a market, I was discovering, and collecting under a bright moon was when I often made my best haul, which worsened my insomnia and complicated my stories because I wasn't allowed on the flats after dusk. The other part of it was that you see *less* and *more* at night. You also see things that turn out not to be real.

I walked the glimmering edge, headlamp bouncing, picking my way to avoid crushing sand dollars and clam shells facing the sky like tiny satellite dishes. I saw a purple ochre sea star, then fifteen more strewn higher on the beach, their five legs similarly cocked, pinwheeling in slow motion back toward the water. None of them were striking or unusual enough to sell to the aquariums. They wanted head-turners and exotics. Like anything else, people wanted to see beauties or freaks.

As I crossed the line where gravel yielded to sand and mud, I saw a massive moon snail, the great clam-killer himself, his undersized shell riding high on his body like the cab of a bulldozer, below which his mound of oozing flesh prowled the flats for any clam unlucky enough to be hiding in its path. Moon snails were often hard to find because they burrow deeply, feeding on clams, their tiny jagged tongues drilling peepholes right above the hinge that holds clams together. Then they inject a muscle relaxant that liquefies the clam to the point where it can be sucked out through the hole like a milkshake, which explains the sudden troves of empty shells with perfectly round holes in the exact same spot, as if someone had tried to string a necklace underground, or as if you'd stumbled onto a crime scene in which an entire clam family had been executed gangland style.

A feisty entourage of purple shore crabs scurried alongside the snail, their oversized pinchers drawn like Uzis. I thought about grabbing the moon snail, but I knew that even after it squeezed inside its shell like some contortionist stunt, it would still hog too much room in my pack. So I noted where it was and moved on until I saw the blue flash. It wasn't truly flashing, but with moonlight

bouncing off it that was the effect. I steadied my headlamp and closed in on a starfish that radiated blue, as if it had just been pulled from a kiln. But it wasn't just the color that jarred me. Its two lower legs clung strangely together in line with its top leg and perpendicular to its two side legs, making it stand out in the black mud like a blue crucifix.

Mottled sea stars were common, but I'd examined thousands of stars and had never seen this same color or pose. I picked it up. Its underside was as pale as a black man's palm, and its two bottom legs appeared fused. I wondered how it moved well enough to hunt, but it looked healthy, its hundreds of tiny suction-cup feet apparently fully operable. I stuck it in a sack with some water and slipped it into my backpack. I then waded up to my calves toward the mid-sized oyster farm belonging to Judge Stegner.

That was my alibi if I was caught out there, that I was tending the judge's oysters. He paid me twenty dollars a month to help maintain them, though not at night, of course. Still, it was nice to have an answer if someone asked what I was doing out there at that hour. I had the words *Judge Stegner* on my side, and I knew how everyone felt about him. My father tucked his shirt in whenever he came around. And when the judge spoke in his deep, easy rumble, nobody interrupted.

Near the oyster farm something happened that never failed to spook me in the dark. I saw a few dozen shore crabs scrambling near the rectangular, foot-high mesh fence around the judge's oyster beds. Crabs amused me in small crowds. It's when they clustered at night that they unhinged me, especially when they were in water where they moved twice as fast as on land. It was obvious there were more crabs—and bigger crabs—than usual, so I tried not to expand my range of vision too fast. It was no use. I saw hundreds, maybe thousands, assembling like tank battalions. I stepped back and felt their shells crunch beneath my feet and the wind pop out of me. Once I steadied, I flashed my headlamp on the oyster fence that

three red rock crabs were aggressively scaling. It looked like a jail break with the biggest ringleaders leading the escape. I suddenly heard their clicking pinchers clasping holds in the fence, jimmying their armored bodies higher. How had I missed that sound? The judge's oysters were under siege, but I couldn't bring myself to interfere. It felt like none of my business.

I picked my steps, knowing if I slipped and tumbled I'd feel them skittering around me as cool water filled my boots. I rounded the oyster beds, to the far side, relieved to find it relatively crab free. It was low tide by then, and I saw the water hesitating at its apex, neither leaving nor returning, patiently waiting for the gravitational gears to shift. Dozens of anxious clams started squirting in unison like they did whenever vibrating grains of sand warned them predators were approaching. I stopped and waited with them, to actually see the moment when the tide started returning with its invisible buffet of plankton for the clams, oysters, mussels and other filter feeders. It was right then, ankle deep in the Sound, feet numbing, eyes relaxed, that I saw the nudibranch.

In all my time on the flats I'd never seen one before. I'd read about them, sure. I'd handled them at aquariums but never in the wild, and I'd never even seen a photo of one this stunning.

It was just three inches long but with dozens of fluorescent, orange-tipped hornlike plumes jutting from the back of its see-through body that appeared to be lit from within.

Nudibranchs are often called the butterflies of the sea, but even that understates their dazzle. Almost everything else in the northern Pacific is dressed to blend with pale surroundings. Nudibranchs don't bother, in part because they taste so lousy they don't need camouflage to survive. But also, I decided right then, because their beauty is so startling it earns them a free pass, the same way everyday life brakes for peacocks, parade floats and supermodels.

I bagged that sea slug—it weighed nothing—and set it in my backpack next to the Jesus star. Then I gave the crabs a wide berth,

found the moon snail, poked him in the belly until he contracted, bagged him and paddled south toward home beneath the almost-full moon.

And that's where it happened.

The dark mudflats loomed like wet, flattened dunes stretching deep into Skookumchuck Bay in front of our house. From a distance, they looked too barren to support sea life. Up close, they still did, unless you knew where to find the hearty clams, worms and tiny creatures that flourish in mud so fine that at least two Evergreen State College grads get stuck every June during their naked graduation prance across the bay's shallowest neck. I'm not sure why I decided to take a look. It was still an hour before sunrise, and I knew exactly what the bars looked like in the moonlight, but for some reason, I couldn't resist.

I heard it long before I saw it. It was an exhale, a release of sorts, and I instantly wondered if a whale was stranded again. We had a young minke stuck out there two summers prior, and it made similar noises until the tide rose high enough for rescuers to help free it. You would have thought the whole city had a baby, the pride people showed in guiding that little whale to deeper water. I looked for a hulking silhouette but couldn't find one. I waited, but there were no more sounds. Still, I went toward what I thought I'd heard, avoiding stepping into the mud until I had to. I knew the flats well enough to know I could get stuck just about anywhere. The general rule was you didn't venture out past the shells and gravel with an incoming tide. I sank up to my knees twice, and numbing water filled my boots.

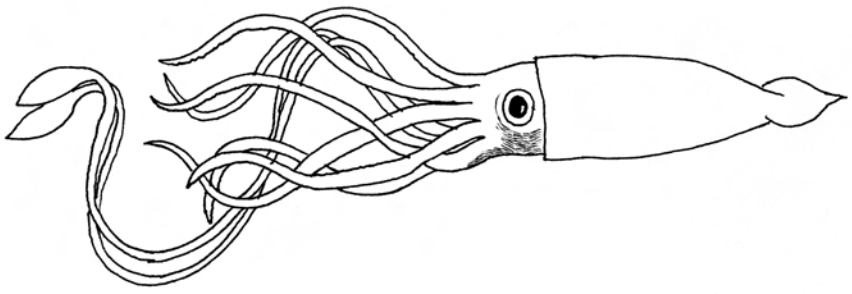
South Sound is the warm end of the fjord because most of its bays are no deeper than forty feet and Skookumchuck is shallower still, but even in August the water rarely climbs much above fifty-five degrees and it can still take your breath. I kept stepping toward the one sound I'd heard, a growing part of me hoping I'd find nothing at all.

When I stopped to rest and yank up my socks, my headlamp crossed it. My first thought? A giant octopus.

Puget Sound has some of the biggest octopi in the world. They often balloon to a hundred pounds. Even the great Jacques Cousteau himself came to study them. But when I saw the long tubular shape of its upper body and the tangle of tentacles below it, I knew it was more than an octopus. I came closer, within fifty feet, close enough to see its large cylindrical siphon quiver. I couldn't tell if it was making any sounds at that point because it was impossible to hear anything over the blood in my ears. My mother once told me that she had an oversized heart. I took her literally and assumed I was similarly designed because there were moments when mine sounded way too loud for a boy my size.

The creature's body came to a triangular point above narrow fins that lay flat on the mud like wings, but it was hard to be sure exactly where it all began or ended, or how long its tentacles truly were because I was afraid to pry my eyes off its jumble of arms for more than half a second. I didn't know whether I was within reach, and its arms were as big around as my ankle and lined with suckers the size of half dollars. If they even twitched I would have run. So, I was looking at it and not looking at it while my heart spangled my vision. I saw fragments, pieces, and tried to fuse them in my mind but couldn't be certain of the whole. I knew what it had to be, but I wouldn't allow myself to even think the two words. Then I gradually realized the dark shiny disc in the middle of the rubbery mass was too perfectly round to be mud or a reflection.

It was too late to smother my scream. Its eye was the size of a hubcap.



CHAPTER 2

Once professor kramer's home answering machine clicked on, I couldn't control my voice, and my mother shuffled out in a long mariners shirt, a finger on her lips, as if the most important thing at that moment was not waking my father. I fended her off with one hand and ignored her teeth-clenched cussing after she spotted the growing puddle beneath me on the kitchen floor. She stormed into the laundry room just as I finished my frantic message and the professor himself picked up for real. I told him the same stuff, only louder, then heard myself yell, "It's a giant squid!"

Not *I think it is a giant squid*, or *It might be a giant squid*. I stated it as fact in the cool dawn and my mother suspended her furious mopping to squint at me through puffy, nearsighted eyes as if her son were speaking in tongues.

I'd read enough about giant squid to know the most remarkable thing about this one wasn't its size, but its location. They didn't show up just anywhere, especially not in shallow, dead-end inlets within a few hundred yards of a tavern and a couple miles from a

bowling alley, a golf course and a state capitol dome. Not *rarely*. Never. Most giant squid were found, if they were found at all, in the bellies of sperm whales or sprawled on the beaches of New Zealand, Norway and Newfoundland.

Another thing about them: They were always dead. That is unless you bought those old seafaring tales of two-hundred-foot squid attacking ships and wrestling whales. I knew most people preferred myths to science, especially when it came to sea monsters. It helped justify their fear of open water. I never wanted any part of that nonsense. Upon coming eyeball to eyeball with that animal on the flats, my impulse was to run from it, but my goal, before I'd reached shore, was to save it.

By the time Professor Kramer arrived, the mud glistened in the dawn, and the incoming tide created a boulevard of suds-and-algae-twirled water that sloshed through the gentle dark dunes but still fell several feet shy of the stranded squid. The professor didn't come alone. He was tailed by the local whale rescue crew: three women and two ponytailed men who scrambled from their van onto the mud with towels, buckets and cameras.

They treated me like some irrelevant runaway until the professor explained that I was the one who'd called about "the creature." He still called it a creature, which I took personally at the time, but understood in hindsight, and was flattered that he trusted me enough to not only come running himself but to roust the local rescue squad too. Plus, he hadn't even seen it yet.

Professor Kramer was my favorite adult. When he took Mrs. Halverson's class on a field trip, I asked so many questions he invited me to his lab. That's where he showed me all the plants and animals that live in a thimble of seawater, creatures the size of pepper flakes feeding on even tinier plants. And I was hooked. He also taught me how to collect specimens, gave me a microscope, a twenty-gallon aquarium and, ultimately, the names and numbers of people who would buy whatever I gathered. He wasn't a god like

Rachel Carson, but someone with the right information in his head, which looked normal enough except for his kinky hair, which rose straight up from his scalp then flowered like the heads of those red tube worms that cling to dock pilings.

Once the professor arrived, I lost control of everything. The night I'd had to myself had surrendered to a bright morning that exposed the entire hourglass bay, pinched at its waist by the nearby Spencer Spit, which kept the Mud Bay Tavern, six rental cabins and the eastern end of the Heron Street Bridge just above the high water mark. And my discovery was definitely no longer *mine*.

Even in daylight, the squid didn't look real. It came off like a unicorn or a jackalope or some other fantasy creature—an oversized octopus mixed with the back end of a porpoise or some other torpedo-shaped mammal. But what I couldn't get over was how powerful and durable it looked. Its blotchy-purple skin reminded me of the thick rubber used for wet suits, and I noticed how the suckers along the inside of its ten arms shrank to the size of dimes near the tips.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph," Professor Kramer muttered after he'd walked around it twice. Most of the rescuers were unwilling to get very close. They winced and cussed as if it stank, which it didn't. We all watched the professor examine and measure its head, its siphon, its arms and its nine-and-a-half-inch eyes, mumbling technical terms into a tiny recorder. What was clear to me was he didn't have the slightest idea how to check its vitals or keep it alive. Finally, I couldn't resist asking the obvious.

He replied, without looking up: "It's as dead as it's gonna get, Miles."

Still, the rescuers continued pouring buckets of water on it, as if putting out a fire. "Who said it was still breathing?" one of them demanded.

The professor one-eyed me. "What did draw you out here in the dark, Miles?"

"I heard it."

"What'd you hear?"

"Breathing." I knew they were all staring at me now, but all I could see were tall silhouettes and the oversized sun flickering behind them. I looked away to where cedars and firs cascaded to the beach like long summer dresses.

"You woke up and came out here because you heard something *breathing*?" the pushy rescuer asked.

"Well, it squealed or something. It made some loud noise, and I put on my boots and came out here."

It was one of those moments when your face can't back up your mouth. I hoped none of them knew enough about beached squid to know whether they could squeal or make noises that could wake up a kid a few hundred yards away. What had I heard? A snort or a sigh? Did I imagine it altogether? Would an autopsy prove I was a liar, that it had been dead for seven hours?

Luckily, everyone forgot about me as a KING 5 van rolled onto the Heron bridge with its crew popping out military style. The rescuers resumed dumping buckets of seawater on the squid. At least they had a role. I didn't even know where to stand as the television team splashed across the mud, and a short lady with hair that wind couldn't rustle slipped to her knee and let loose a gasp topped only by the noise she made when she got close enough to see the squid's huge cloudy-black eye. That's when she turned around and puked on the mud. Four young mallards suddenly flapped in single file overhead, laughing at us. A grouchy blue heron glided by to give us hell too.

Time hopped around on me, but soon almost everyone was on the mud, including my parents, whom I'd never seen that far out on the flats before. My mother stayed as far away from the squid as possible without standing in water. My father kept checking his watch to make sure he wasn't late for his early shift at the brewery. From a distance they looked alike, short and rounded in identical

sweat jackets, but they stood paces apart, like neighbors who didn't get along.

A cheerful Judge Stegner arrived with two hot thermoses, as if it were a scheduled event he'd agreed to host. He also brought a flotilla of inflatable rafts and canoes, thinking ahead as usual, considering the flats we'd all crossed were sinking.

Another van arrived, then another and still another. The entire bridge filled with shiny white news vans, their satellite dishes telescoping into the new sky. The judge greeted and shuttled them to our shrinking island of mud. I'd never seen so many people who looked like mannequins before, or so many so afraid of a dead animal. Soon they competed to see who could ask Professor Kramer the loudest question. Finally, he asked them to be quiet and just listen to him for a few minutes.

"It's too soon to be certain," he said, "but it appears that this squid is too big to be a *Moroteuthis robusta*, the large Pacific squid that occasionally washes up on Washington beaches. No, this indeed appears to be an *Architeuthis*, better known as simply the giant squid." He spelled *Architeuthis* for them, then said, "Unofficially, this one measures out at thirty-seven feet from the top of its mantle to the end of its longest tentacle. That would not only make it a bona fide *Architeuthis* but perhaps the biggest one ever found in the Pacific and one of the largest found *anywhere* in years."

The professor's voice always changed slightly when he lectured, but this was different. This was the sound of bottled excitement, as if he were struggling to resist shouting. "What astonishes me at this point is that the giant squid is a deep-ocean creature," he continued. "How this one wound up down here in shallow South Sound in such amazingly good condition is . . ." He hesitated, searching for the perfect words. "A mystery of colossal proportions."

The air pressure changed after he said all that. Granted, this revelation involved a beached squid, not a moon landing or a Kennedy assassination, but anyone who was on the mud that

morning when the professor put that marooned creature into perspective felt as if they were witnessing a moment that mattered.

He then explained that the giant squid is the world's largest invertebrate with the biggest eyes of any earthling. "Little is known about the giant squid because it has never been studied in its own habitat. We don't even know what colors it comes in, although it can probably change hues on a whim." He took a breath before predicting that scientists from across the nation would likely rush to study this specimen.

One of the ponytailed rescuers filled the lull that followed with a rant about pollutants endangering mammals in the Sound, which I suspected had little to do with this wrong-way squid. The judge then spontaneously interjected the history and geology of the bay with the authority of someone describing how he built his house. I tired of listening to everybody and was trying to figure out how to get a ride to shore without my parents when I heard the question resurface as to who found the squid.

Professor Kramer said my name, somehow spotted me and smiled warmly, as if the squid were my gift to him. Cameras swiveled toward me.

"What did you see, Miles?" asked the mannequin who'd puked earlier.

"The same thing you're seeing," I said, "except that I think it was breathing."

"Please speak up, Miles," she said in a voice so designed to relax me it alarmed me. "So, it was alive, Miles?"

"It made a noise." I wished people would stop saying my name. I turned to Professor Kramer, hoping he would take over, but his eyes were on the squid.

"Did you have any idea what it was?" she asked.

I squinted. "Well, I could tell it was a cephalopod, and as soon as I saw the eye, I was sure it was a squid and probably a giant."

More people and equipment crowded me, blocking the low sun. I

could see the urgency and excitement in their faces, which scared me all the more.

"You called it a 'sifla-what'?" she asked.

I could already discuss phyla, hydroids, mollusks and crustaceans as easily as most kids chatted about bands and movies. The catch was nobody my age was interested in hearing any of it. Neither were my parents. So it churned inside me like a secret language and whenever it slipped out, people bug-eyed me like I'd shifted into Portuguese. "A *cephalopod*," I corrected, "which basically means its arms spring from its head."

"Was it dark when you came out here?" she asked.

"The moon was bright and I had a headlamp."

This struck them as astounding. People kneeled in front of me. Four microphones crowded my chin.

"Did it actually wake you up, Miles?"

See how people put you in a position where you have to lie or get in trouble? I tried to find my mother's puffy eyes. "I was kinda already awake."

"So you heard it and came out to see what it was?"

"Uh-huh."

"All by yourself?"

That's the sort of crap you hear when you're tiny for your age. I didn't respond, hoping the cameras and the microphones would go to someone else.

"How old are you, Miles?"

"Almost fourteen." I heard people murmuring, repeating the number.

"Why do you think this deep-ocean creature, this 'giant squid,' as Professor Kramer calls it, ended up in this little bay by your house?"

That's when I said what I said. It was a throwaway line, the sort of thing I'd heard fancy-smart people say on television when asked impossible questions. I could blame it on exhaustion, but there was a part of me that believed it. All of that doesn't much matter,

though, because I said it: "Maybe the earth is trying to tell us something."

They liked that a lot. A kid says something like that, and people go *ahhh*. Offer a plausible scientific explanation and they yawn. Dip into the mystical, especially if you appear to be an unsullied, clearheaded child, and they want to write a song about you.