The Whaleboat House

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One

'Conrad. Conrad . . .'

The first light of dawn was creeping over the horizon when Conrad was roused from his slumber by Rollo's hollering. Conrad only ever slumbered, he never slept, not the sleep of a child, dead to the world, its oversized surroundings. One small part of his brain kept constant vigil, snatching at the slightest noise or shift in smell. It no longer bothered him. He accepted it for what it was: a part of him now, like the scar in his side and the remorseless throb of his damaged knee.

The boards groaned under his feet as he shuffled from his shack on to the narrow deck that ringed it. The sharp salt air stabbed his lungs, raw from too many cigarettes the previous evening. As if in reprimand, an overflowing ashtray still sat on the arm of the slatted wooden chair out front. A book lay face down on an upturned fish crate beside the molten remains of a candle and an all-but-empty bottle of cheap Imperial whiskey.

He had read deep into the night, the bugs dancing dangerously close to the candle flame until it had finally sputtered and died. The waxing moon, so high and prominent at dusk, had long departed, having run her early course; and for a further hour he had sat in the deep darkness, breathing in time to the beat of the waves beyond the high beachbank, sleep rising up around him like the unseen tide, his mind numbed by the liquor, his body by the blanket of night-dew settling over him.

Conrad stared at the chair, unable to recall the short stroll he must surely have made from the abandoned perch to his bed.

'Conrad. Conrad . . .'

The cries were closer now, carried on the breeze, but Rollo was nowhere to be seen among the tumbling dunes. Conrad guessed that when he finally appeared he'd be flailing his arms like a windmill. He always did when he was excited or running. Right now, it sounded like he was doing both.

A few moments later Rollo hove in sight. Sure enough, his arms were slicing the air. He bounded down the face of the dune, hurdling a large clump of beach grass, stumbling momentarily but recovering his footing. He was panting, sucking in air, when he finally drew to a halt by the shack. Conrad waited for him to catch his breath.

Rollo's lank dark hair was streaked by the sun and the salt air as it always was at this time of year. When he finally looked up and smiled, his teeth stood out like bleached bone against the deep amber of his skin.

'You're not wearin' no clothes.'

'Well, what do you know?' Conrad allowed a note of mild irritation to creep into his voice.

'Go get togged up.'

'This better be good.'

'Oh, it's good, it's good.'

They paused as they reached the top of the high dune that separated Conrad's isolated home from the ocean. Overhead, a handful of stars winked their final farewells in the brightening sky. Beneath them, the broad beach stretched off to the western horizon, one hundred miles of almost unbroken sand, straight as a yard-arm, reaching into the heart of New York City.

A few miles to the east, beyond the sandy lowlands of Napeague where they now stood, rose the high ground of Montauk – a noble upthrust of ridged and pitted glacial moraine at the very tip of the South Fork: Long Island's last defiant cry before it tumbled into the oblivion of the Atlantic. Beyond lay nothing but water . . . and the lost dreams of the Old World.

The ocean was suspiciously calm and limpid, the towering breakers the only indication of the powerful forces that lurked beneath its pewter skin. Even from here, Conrad could see that the longshore set was still running west to east – a sporadic event that occurred when a tendril of warm water broke free of the Gulf Stream, snaking northwards, assisted on its lazy passage by a sustained southwesterly blow.

The marked rise in sea temperature was welcomed by the ever-increasing number of city people who populated the ocean beach from Memorial Day to Labor Day. It lured them beyond the relative safety of the crashing surf into the deeper water with its counterintuitive jostle of currents. Fortunately, the warmer waters were awash with bait, and with the bait came the predators, bluefish and striped bass, which in turn attracted an even larger predator – man.

Many owed their lives to the happy conjunction of treacherous swimming conditions and increased fishing activity off the ocean beach. Many were those who'd been plucked limp and spluttering from the water into one of the cumbersome little dories used by the local surfmen. Once deposited safely on the beach, embarrassment – more often than not – would get the better of gratitude, and they'd hurry off, eager to banish the memory, casting a few mumbled words of thanks over their shoulders as they went. This wasn't always the case.

Everyone knew the story of Gus Bowyer, how he had returned to his shingled home on Atlantic Avenue one afternoon to find a gleaming new motor car standing beside the old barn out back. The handwritten note attached to the windshield meant little to Gus, who was unable to read or write, and he'd been obliged to wait two puzzling hours for his wife's return from Montauk, where she worked as a dispatch clerk for the Long Island Rail Road. Within a few minutes of crossing the threshold, Edna Bowyer informed her husband that they were now the proud owners of a Dodge Special Type-B Sedan – a gift from a gangling New York architect whom Gus had saved from near-certain drowning off the ocean beach the previous month.

News of the couple's windfall soon spread, and for the remainder of the summer, bathers who were even so much as tumbled by a wave would find themselves descended upon by a pack of alert and overly obliging local fishermen. Edna, a pillar of Puritan common sense, had urged Gus to return the overstated vehicle to the Halsey Auto Company in East Hampton and recoup the purchase price in cash. God knows, they needed the money. Twenty-two years on, they still needed the money and Gus was still driving the hulking Dodge around the back roads of Amagansett.

'She's on the turn,' said Rollo, meaning the set, not the tide. The wind had come around overnight. By noon the vast body of water in motion would grind to a halt then slowly turn back on itself. The natural order would prevail once more with the current scouring the coast from east to west. Interesting, but hardly worthy of a pre-dawn rousing.

'Remind me to be angry with you when I wake,' muttered Conrad, turning to leave.

'Whale off!'

Everyone knew the call to arms, though it was no longer heard on the South Fork of Long Island, the days of shore whaling some forty years past. Conrad turned back slowly.

'Bound east'rd inside the bar.'

'You sure?'

''Less you saw a fifty-foot bass before,' grinned Rollo, pleased with his riposte.

They scanned the ocean in silence, with just the hoarse cries of a few black-backed gulls wheeling overhead on dawn patrol. Suddenly, Rollo's arm shot out. A patch of whorls and eddies ruffled the still surface of the ocean a hundred yards directly offshore. A few moments later, the whale broke water and blew – two distinct jets, fanned by the wind, caught in the sun's earliest rays.

'Right whale,' observed Rollo, identifying the species from its forked spout. But Conrad was already gone, padding down the side of the dune on to the beach. The whale blew four more times before sounding.

For over an hour they tracked the leviathan on its journey eastwards, their faces warmed by the rising sun. They walked in silence, not needing to share their thoughts.

Right whales hadn't been sighted off Amagansett for decades. Hunted to near extinction, they had once been a cornerstone of life on the South Fork. Three hundred years previously, when a straggle of English families first appeared in the woods a few miles to the west, they found the local Montaukett Indians already preying on the migrating schools that roamed the ocean beach, going off through the treacherous winter surf in their dugout canoes. With the crude geometry of a child, those first white settlers pegged out a community around a slender marsh, fashioning cellar-shelters from the trees they had felled, naming their new home Maidstone after the English town in the county of Kent where most had sprung from.

Fourteen years later, when the hamlet rechristened itself East Hampton, the dwellings had crept above ground, the early 'soddies' replaced by New England saltbox houses clad in cypress shingles and insulated against the sharp winters with seaweed and corncobs; the marsh had been excavated to create the Town Pond; and the townsmen were in effective control of a small, burgeoning and highly profitable shore-whaling industry.

'Away with you. Hoooo. Woooo.'

Conrad was dimly aware that they'd passed the Napeague Coast Guard station. Now Rollo was striding towards the water's edge waving his arms in front of him. The whale had altered its course and was heading inshore at an angle to the beach. With a lazy flick of its giant flukes it sounded.

'She's goin' to beach,' cried Rollo. He started running, set on heading the whale off.

When Conrad caught up with him he was standing in the wash, oblivious to the waves breaking around him, scouring the ocean. Without warning, the whale surfaced beyond the white water to their left. At this short distance, the sheer bulk of the creature was overwhelming. It filled their field of vision, deadening all other senses.

'Hooo. Woooo. Yaaaaa. YAAAA –'

A rogue wave caught Rollo broadside, slapping the wind from his lungs, sending him sprawling. Conrad hauled him to his feet, dragging him up the beach, but Rollo pulled free, stumbling back into the wash. The waves became clouded with rile, churned sand where the whale had grounded.

Conrad was struck by the bitter irony of the sight – Rollo Kemp, grandson of the legendary whaleman Cap'n Josh Kemp, the last man to take a whale off the ocean beach; Rollo Kemp pathetically hurling handfuls of wet sand in a vain bid to save a creature his grandfather had devoted a lifetime to slaughtering. Laughter filled his head. It was a few moments before he realized the sound was coming from behind him.

Gabe Cowan, Chief Boatswain's Mate of the Napeague Coast Guard station, stood chortling uncontrollably, his creased face like weathered oilskin. A good-natured man, and a first-rate fiddler till arthritis turned his hands to gnarled claws, Conrad's reproachful look seemed only to amuse him further.

'It's them krill,' said Gabe.

'What?'

'Come up on the Gulf Stream then pushed inshore. She's feedin', off of the krill.' He laughed some more.

Beyond the prancing figure of Rollo, the whale had turned parallel to the beach, sieving its breakfast from the ocean.

Conrad hurried over to Rollo. 'Rollo, she's feeding . . .'

Deaf to his words, Rollo's face was wet with spray and tears. Conrad seized him, binding his arms to his sides, holding him tight.

'It's okay, she's just feeding on krill,' he said gently. Rollo's struggles subsided, his eyes searching Conrad's face.

'Never seen it before,' muttered Gabe, appearing beside them. 'Sight to behold, boys, sight to behold.'

Conrad only released Rollo when he started to laugh. 'Go get 'em,' he yelled. 'Go get 'em krill!'

Maybe his cries startled the whale, more than likely she had had her fill, but with some difficulty she swung herself around and

headed offshore, presenting first her small end and then the giant fan of her tail as she kicked below the surface. They waited, watching. She showed briefly just beyond the outer bar, blowing only once before disappearing for good.

A summer flounder flapped weakly at the edge of the wash, stunned by its encounter with the whale.

'Well, what do you know . . .' said Gabe, taking two nimble strides and stamping down with the heel of his boot. 'Lunch.'

They accompanied Gabe back to the Coast Guard station, reflecting on what they'd just witnessed. As far as any of them knew, the coastal wanderings of right whales had always been confined to the colder months, June at the very latest. What was it doing here at this time of year? Had it been alone? Where was it headed? Conrad contributed his share of idle banter, but his thoughts were elsewhere. The episode was somehow emblematic of the times. It was as if the turbulence of the past years had infected the ocean as well, disturbing the natural rhythms, disorienting its occupants.

'You boys figure on haulin' down?' asked Gabe.

Rollo looked to Conrad to reply. They had planned to take the morning off, treat themselves to a well-earned rest, maybe set a gill net off Shagwong later in the day.

'Seeing as we're up,' said Conrad, and Rollo beamed.

'Set's on the turn. Be one hell of a chop out there come noon.'

'How else we going to make you earn that wage?'

'That ain't no wage, it's a goddamn insult.'

'Man your age, scavenging for his lunch?' said Conrad. 'The shame of it.'

Gabe glanced at the dead flounder and laughed. 'That's the truth.'

Everyone knew that Gabe had squirreled away a small fortune over the years, largely thanks to a case of temporary blindness contracted during Prohibition.

'Wouldn't bank on much of a haul,' said Gabe. 'When the wind's from the east, the fish is least.'

He wandered up the beach to the Coast Guard station, a grandiose weatherboard affair perched high on the frontal dune.

Conrad turned to Rollo. 'Thanks,' he said.

'Huh?'

'For waking me.'

Rollo smiled. 'Told you it was good.'

They ate a full breakfast on the front deck of Conrad's house as they did every morning, weather permitting. The menu never changed – pork belly and eggs fried side-by-side in a skillet, sourdough bread smeared with butter, and strong coffee, black as caulking tar, thick enough to float a nail. Afterwards, over a smoke, they would discuss the fishing prospects for the day ahead, trading the little hearsays that were the lifeblood of the fishing community. 'Old Emmett took a full charge of cow bass on the Two Mile Hollow set, none of them under thirty pound,' Rollo would say, or 'Lindy says the bluefish is running off of Cedar Point.'

To Conrad there was something deeply pleasing about the mundanity of his morning routine with Rollo, its repetitive, unchanging nature. He would have been disappointed if, having hauled on his stiff black waders, Rollo hadn't promptly struggled out of them again, announcing that he needed to relieve himself – the click of the chest straps acting as some kind of Pavlovian trigger that also spared him the chore of loading the gear.

The equipment was stored in a barn behind the house. Windblown sand had banked up against its sides giving the impression it had risen up out of the ground, pushing its way through the soft mantel. The barn's clean hard lines belied the muddle inside. Sails hung from its rafters like giant bats. Gill nets, drift nets and haul-seines were bundled up all around. There were cod lines, drag lines, Greenport sloop dredges for scallops, basket rakes and bull rakes for clamming, oyster tongs, lobster traps and eel traps; as well as all manner of other paraphernalia for ensuring the smooth operation of the above – tubs of cork floats and lead weights, clusters of small anchors and marker buoys, spools of

twine and coils of rope, buckets of nails, tins of grease and barrels of tar.

Stacked in one corner of the barn was a jumble of obsolete whaling gear – lances, double-fluke and toggle harpoons, long-handled blades for cutting into blubber, block and tackle for prizing the blankets free from the carcass, more blades for mincing the blubber, two cast-iron cauldrons for trying-out the whale oil, and large sieves for skimming off the bones and skin.

This clutter had come with the old whaleboat house – Rollo's contribution to their enterprise – that now stood beside the barn. A twenty-six-foot whaleboat had also formed part of the package. They had hoisted the craft up into the barn's rafters where the beauty of its slender lines was revealed to maximum effect. It was the first thing Conrad's gaze would settle on each time he heaved open the double-doors. This morning was different in that he found himself smiling as he stared up at the craft.

He singled out a short haul-seine net, grappled it outside, and shouldered it into the dory. He was hitching the boat's trailer to the back of his battered old Model A Ford when Rollo appeared from the outhouse.

'Let's go get us a bunch,' said Rollo, predictably, in words that never changed.

The stretch of ocean beach they planned to fish was no more than a few hundred yards from where they stood, but there was no breach in the tall dune that fronted the sea, no passage for a vehicle, and they were obliged to take the long route round – up the rutted sand track that connected Conrad's secluded world to Montauk Highway, a mile westwards into Amagansett, then down Atlantic Avenue to the beach landing and back along the shore.

At any other time, they would have been met at the landing by Sam and Ned Raven, the foul-mouthed sons of the equally foul-mouthed Joe Raven. A family of scallopers from Accabonac Creek, the quiet tidal backwater a few miles northeast of Amagansett, the Ravens were true 'Bonackers', and proud of it. They did little to hide their resentment at having to sell their services to other

fishermen from the wind-scoured days of March, when the adult scallops began to die, to the limpid days of late summer, when they could take to their sloop again in pursuit of the inshore pectens.

The boys had grunted half-hearted interest when Conrad offered to take them on for the short haul-seine season. 'I don't know, a quarter share for haulin' another cunt's nets?' was how Ned had phrased his hesitancy.

Conrad figured they'd come round to the idea. The eelgrass was still dying back and the scallops had been down that winter. Most baymen had struggled to hit their daily limit of five bushels, and money was tight for the Ravens and their kind.

After a couple of weeks in Sam and Ned's company, Conrad had begun to wish the brothers had rejected his offer. The flood of blue speech that tumbled from their lips displayed an impressive and, at times, amusing grasp of the English language; but it unsettled Rollo, a devout Presbyterian and church-goer.

Fortunately, the reduction gear on the Briggs & Stratton winch bolted to the bed of the Model A had given out a few days back, and Conrad had taken the opportunity to lay the boys off until it was repaired, buying a respite from the obscenities. This meant that he and Rollo were hauling by hand right now using a shortened eighty-fathom net, about a third the length of their usual seine. A two-man crew also demanded that they go off through the surf with only one oarsman, difficult and dangerous at the best of times.

The semi-inflated tires carved blunt furrows in the soft sand as the Model A slowly ranged the beach, Conrad teasing the stiff clutch to keep apace of Rollo, who wandered the water's edge, scanning the ocean. He was looking for signs of fish: driven bait stippling the surface, like handfuls of sand cast upon the water, or a feeding slick that marked the spot where the larger fish were wreaking their havoc beneath the waves. Gulls and terns, ever-alert scavengers, would sometimes help guide the eye. If you were lucky. Most sets were made blind, based on some inexplicable feeling that the fish were there. Some called it smell, and Rollo came from a distinguished line of 'long-nosed' Kemps. In the brief

time they'd been in business together Conrad had come to respect his uncanny instincts.

Rollo drew to a halt, squinting out to sea. Conrad eased the gear stick into neutral, letting the motor idle. He knew better than to say anything, and had time to roll a smoke before Rollo finally turned.

'I don't know,' he said. 'I don't know.' He appeared puzzled that his sixth sense had deserted him. 'Good a place as any, I reckon.'

Conrad backed the trailer down to the water and they dragged the dory into the wash. As surfboats went she was a little shorter than most – fourteen feet along the bottom – but in all other respects she was typical, her high, flaring sides climbing to sharp ends fore and aft that sliced through the surf when going off and parted the following sea around her stern on the equally perilous run to shore. Along with her oars and two nets, she was the only piece of his father's gear that Conrad still owned.

Hitching the inshore end of the net to the back of the Model A, Conrad pulled the vehicle up the beach until the line ran taut. He hurried back to join Rollo and they wrestled the dory through the thumping chaos of white water, fighting to keep its bow headed into the seas.

Conrad scrambled aboard. Moving fast, he slipped the oars into their locks and began to row gently, still standing, setting his stroke. His eyes were fixed on Rollo, chest-high in the water, doing his best to steady the dory. There was no need for Conrad to glance over his shoulder at the rearing seas. Everything could be read in Rollo's face as he waited for a slatch between two series of waves.

The next few seconds were critical. Rollo's judgment would determine whether they went off cleanly, or whether they filled up, broached to, or – God forbid – pitchpoled.

'Pull!' yelled Rollo, pushing off and struggling aboard in one graceless movement.

Conrad arched his back into the stroke. The dory slid up the face of the first capping sea. It broke over the bow, dowsing them, but Conrad was already well into his second stroke, shifting his

weight, the oars biting deep, driving them down into the trough. His third stroke, long and measured, propelled them up and over the face of the next wave before it broke. They knew they were safe now unless Conrad popped an oar or the gods tossed a rogue wave their way. But the gods were in a good mood and Conrad hadn't popped an oar in almost a decade.

Clear of the surf, Rollo could now concentrate on paying out the net, pitching the coils of lead line over the gunwale, the cork line dragged right along with it. Conrad settled down on to the thwart and eased into his long distinctive stroke. Carrying so little twine, he soon began to turn the dory in a short clean arc. The thicker mesh of the bunt began passing through Rollo's hands. This reinforced middle section housed the bag at the very center of the net, marked by a cork flag buoy. As soon as the bag was set Conrad swung the dory parallel to the beach.

Rollo paid out the rest of the net until the offshore wing narrowed to a manila line coiled at his feet. This was Conrad's signal to turn again and begin their run to shore.

Speed and timing were everything when approaching the surf line. If Conrad lost momentum the dory would slip back into the trough, floundering at the mercy of the chasing waves. If he came in too fast the dory would hurtle down the face of a breaking sea, plant her bow in the sand and pitchpole forward, jackknifing over in one brief, heart-stopping moment, crushing her occupants.

Rollo was aft, his face a mask of concentration, applying just enough resistance to the net line whipping through his hands to keep the dory's stern headed seaward. If Conrad misjudged, coming in too fast, Rollo could yank on the line, stalling the boat's headway, buying them another shot at a clean approach. The line would skin his palms in an instant, but it was a small price to pay to avoid pitchpoling.

As it was, Conrad committed them to the surf on the back of a large, lazy sea that lowered them kindly into the maelstrom of white water. He boated the oars and seized the thwart to brace himself. As soon as he felt the jolt of the dory stranding he was over the port side, Rollo over the starboard. They seized the

gunwales and hauled the boat up the beach, assisted by the next breaking wave.

Exhausted, clinging to the dory for support, they laughed. It always felt good when they judged the seas correctly, going off and coming back without mishap.

They left the net to fish for a while, buying themselves time to recover from their exertions and share a smoke. Conrad had relished the last couple of days, the timeless, almost biblical simplicity of the fishing – two friends, the beat of the sea, a net cast from a boat then hauled up on to the sand – no machinery, nothing to fall back on besides their experience and brute physicality.

After ten minutes or so they drew the offshore wing up on to the beach, closing the net. The semicircle of cork floats danced merrily on the building chop, the flag buoy at the apex not even a hundred feet beyond the breakers. They had yet to see any signs of fish. In all likelihood, the building heat combined with the shift in the longshore set had driven them into the deeper water beyond the bar.

'You okay?' asked Conrad.

Out of superstition, they never spoke when they sensed they were about to make a dry haul. But there was something else in Rollo's silence, the manner in which he mistrustfully regarded the ocean. He made to speak. It wasn't that he checked himself so much as gave up, unable to find the words.

'Meet you halfway,' said Conrad. He headed off down the beach to the Model A and unlashed the onshore line from the back of the truck. They started to haul on their respective ends of the net, hand over hand, in unison.

Conrad felt the weight almost immediately, a particular kind of weight – dead weight – not the twitching load of fish breaking for deep water and coming up against the twine. A dead porpoise, perhaps. Another thought flashed through his mind. He shut it out, cursing himself for even considering it, for lending it any kind of credence or life.

He glanced along the beach and knew immediately that Rollo had also sensed something amiss. His rhythm had slowed and he

was staring intently at the shrinking half-circle of water, their small bite of ocean enclosed by the net. Still no visible signs of fish. Just the inert load being drawn towards the crashing surf. Short of abandoning the haul, there was nothing either of them could do to alter the outcome.

They had been drawing ever closer together, measured steps to keep the bag centered, coils of sodden net snaking behind them on the sand. Only ten or so yards of beach divided them when a big sea caught hold of the bag, raising it from the bed. They hauled speedily, taking up the slack.

Conrad glimpsed a streak of white – the belly of a large fish? – buried behind the glassy face of the capping wave. It was lost to view as the wave broke, collapsing in a thunderous tumble of water.

The wash receded to reveal a body snarled in the bag – a woman, long blonde hair braided with seaweed, sand crabs scurrying, sea robins flapping, drowning in air. Then she was engulfed by the next breaking wave. Instinctively, Conrad and Rollo used the momentum to drag the bag up the beach, beyond the wash.

Conrad stared, deaf to Rollo's religious mutterings and the crash of the surf.

The woman was lithe and long-limbed, wearing a navy blue swimsuit. She was lying face down, her right foot cocked behind her left ankle, her right arm tight against her body, the left extended above her head, the fingers of her hand slightly splayed as if reaching for something.

She moved. Conrad hurried forward. She was definitely moving. Seizing her cold, pale shoulder, he turned her over. An enormous monkfish bucked and flailed beneath her. The bloated lips of its grotesquely broad mouth seemed to be reaching for the woman's, lunging for an embrace. As for the woman, her lips were blue, starved of oxygen, of life.

Conrad delved into the bag, seized the mollykite by the tail, and in one violent movement swung the creature high out over the breakers. He remained staring out to sea.

‘Conrad,’ said Rollo helplessly, looking for guidance.

Conrad finally turned. ‘Help me take her out.’

They peeled the net off the woman as best they could, swept the sand crabs from her face and body, and drew her out by the feet. She was completely rigid, unbending, as if frozen or hewn from a block of white marble.

Her hair snagged in the mesh. Rollo proffered his jackknife, but Conrad ignored him, finally freeing the woman from the clutches of the seine.

Rollo seemed reluctant to touch the woman again, so Conrad took her in his arms and carried her up the beach.