NO MAN'S LAND

SIMON GAUL

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For Bill and the Baymen of Long Island.
This one's for you.

Now I drive my Downeaster Alexa,
More and more miles from shore every year,
Since they told me I can't sell no stripers,
And there's no luck in swordfishing here.

I was a bayman like my father was before me,
Can't make a livin' as a bayman anymore,
There ain't much future for a man who works the sea,
But there ain't no island left for islanders like me.

Billy Joel
'The Downeaster Alexa'

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

No Man's Land is a novel in which fact and fiction blend with conspiracy theories: real people, events and places fuse with the fictional characters. Any resemblance the fictional characters may appear to have to anyone living or dead is coincidental.

PROLOGUE

Sag Harbour, Long Island, New York.
Saturday, 12th December 1992. 10:50.

(This article was first published in *The East Hampton Star* in May 1981. It is one in a series by journalist Peter Duxbury, who documents the lives of those who work the waters of the Atlantic Ocean.)

'It's no fish ye're buyin, it's men's lives'

Sir Walter Scott

IT SHOULD NEVER HAVE HAPPENED. But it did.

Dawn. Monday last. The grey sky was one with the Atlantic Ocean; both were foreboding. It already felt like the day had been set aside for evil. A nor'east wind had angered the ocean's swell. Breaking rollers, mighty rollers, ploughed up the beach at Amagansett as if they were troops eager to wage war. Fork-tailed terns worked offshore, and a flight of cormorants flew where the horizon met the sea. A twenty-five-knot wind ripped the salt-spray off the whitecaps and spat it into a stinging mist. The long undulating expanse of sand dunes – they stretch for thirty-one miles along the Atlantic coast from Shinnecock Bay to Montauk Point – had been scrubbed by the elements. Gone too was the fat stench of seaweed, flotsam and the oily smell of fish.

Amagansett's beach was deserted, save for Jake Dealer, a Bonacker, as the original settlers of the eastern end of Long Island are called. He shared the coarse sand with his haul-seine crew, and a few hardy gulls who cowered in the lee of an immense jawbone of a right whale; sooner or later the scavenging gulls sensed there'd be fish to pirate. Tall and lean at thirty-five, hard chin unshaven, Jake stood apart and stared out beyond the lines of surf. Sweating inside a woollen plaid shirt, he ground his waders deep into the sand. There were fish out there. The barometer had been erratic, and the rapid changes in atmospheric pressure would have renewed the water with oxygen making the fish frisky. All that was missing this morning was sheeting rain.

The Dealers have worked these waters for over 300 years, and Jake

could read the conditions. Days such as these were the baymen's sworn enemy. To launch an 18-foot dory through crashing surf and then deploy 500 fathoms of seine net could be treacherous. Afterwards, hauling a net full of fish ashore would be duck soup. So, on that fateful morning Jake and his crew had no alternative but to try. It had been a bleak winter and a wretched twelve months for the Long Island baymen.

Jake had to wait for a 'slatch' – a break in the wave pattern – to launch the dory. His elder brother, Harvey, tried to crack the despondent mood as he pulled on his jack-line gloves and told joke after joke: each one lousy. The crew laughed none the less, for since first light, Jake had had a flinty look in his eye.

Ten generations of observing the Atlantic Ocean coursed through Jake's veins. He had an envied sixth sense, a peculiar gift, one they call hereabouts a Posey-smell. He flared his nostrils and squinted again. There were schools of striped bass toiling beyond the pounding surf. This was his land, and he smelt money fish out there. The market was paying $3 a pound for 'stripers', ten times the price of bluefish. There were bills to pay. Today was going to be payday.

Heavy slicks of current rose beyond the breakers when Jake suddenly tugged his long-billed cap and yelled at his crew. He'd caught a quick run of slatches. With astonishing speed and agility, Harvey Dealer and Eddie Silver leapt into the trailered dory. Harvey crouched in the stern, his thigh-high waders up around his chin. Beside him the coils of seine net were ready. Eddie took his position. He pulled on the cord of the Johnson 25hp outboard. It fired up first time.

"Go! Go! Goddammit! Go!" hollered Jake.

Nate Freeman had been revving the flatbed Ford in neutral, and on Jake's command, he urgently shunted the truck into reverse. Jamming his left foot hard on the brake pedal, Nate red-lined the engine without mercy. The fat, semi-deflated tyres threw out a rooster tail of wet sand as they bit down hard. Harvey and Eddie held on tightly to the dory's smooth sides. Slatch or no slatch, this was going to be one of the roughest launches ever. Nate, driving backwards, hard and fast, rammed the dory's trailer into the breaking surf. Then he jumped on the brakes. Over his shoulder he watched the dory catapult off the trailer straight into a wall of foaming green water. Nate's heart pounded. He'd certainly never launched a dory into breakers like this before. He caught Harvey's big grin. Jake was right. There were stripers out beyond the breaking surf. Salt water drenched Harvey and Eddie, and Harvey got off a quick salute to his younger brother as the dory crested the first breaker.

Then it happened.

A fusillade of freak waves came out of nowhere. The faithful dory weathered the first rogue, just, but the outboard sputtered and died. It was the second rogue that took them out. Like a juggler throwing a baton, the ocean picked up the dory and pitch-poled it through the air. Eddie was thrown clear but Harvey, clinging to the sides, went under with the boat and 500 fathoms of seine net.

Maybe Harvey found a footing on a false bar of sand and was dragged down by the quicksand

that was always on its inside slope, or maybe he was simply knocked unconscious under the crashing dory. Either way, when the second wave hit, Jake's brother was gone. Drowned. In all probability, the sand-roil had filled Harvey's waders and he had been sucked away into the Atlantic's dark, swirling currents.

Harvey's body, or rather what dismembered pieces remained after the sand crabs had had their fill, washed up the next day on the beach of the Maidstone Club in East Hampton. Harvey would have liked that. "Upset. Uptight. Up-Streeters. That's all we got in the Hamptons now. They wanna eat fish but they don't wanna see fishermen no more?" That was his refrain.

What of Jake? The crew captain and the man who lost his brother? What did he say? Two things. Both telling of the man.

The first, well, Jake grinned with real pride when he learned that Danny King's crew had hauled nearly nine thousand pounds of 'stripers' from the ocean, just two miles west of where Harvey had gone under that morning. Like the other baymen, Danny had needed a good catch, and it was the biggest for over a year. Second, and Jake told me this without a hint of irony in his voice – Harvey had never learned to swim. Harvey was a bayman who couldn't swim.

"It takes longer to drown than you'd think, Pete, takes all the time in the world. After you're done strugglin' to carry on livin', knowin' that all the while you're drownin'." He paused. "Shit, it made no difference that Harvey couldn't swim. Me and him was brought up to know who's the boss. Always the ocean."

Jake rolled an imaginary grain of sand between his scarred thumb and forefinger as he spoke.

"Fishermen are self-reliant, independent. On the water everything has an order, nature's order, it makes you who you are out there." Jake raised his head as if in a salute. "Everything makes sense, it's here on land that it doesn't. Harvey died like a bayman, Pete, with water in his lungs. Doubt I'll be lucky enough to go that way; most of us die of plain hard work. We grind it. Then we grind it some more. Know many people nowadays who die the way they should? Do you, Pete?"

I've known Jake Dealer since he was a young boy, working with his father on the ocean and inlets of Long Island. It was the first time I didn't have an answer for him.

* * *

My name is Peter Duxbury. I wrote that article for *The East Hampton Star* in 1981, eleven years ago. To me, it reads like it was only last week. I'm sixty-one years old and time seems to have accelerated lately. I've lived and worked in Sag Harbour, on the South Fork of Long Island, all my life. I grew up in these parts, and except for being in the US Army

during the Korean War, I've been a writer with *The East Hampton Star* since I graduated high school here in Suffolk County. Over the years I've chronicled, even championed, the cause of the Long Island baymen. In so doing, I've written about a disappearing America – a dying way of life that I have sadly, yet with privilege, observed.

Still, I'm one of the world's optimists. I've had to be, what with the Great Depression and three wars. I survived and got to return to a place and a job I love. When that happens, you can't help but think your glass is always going to be half full. Until, that is, something changes – a sort of deus ex machina in reverse. When you least expect it. Like what happened to Jake.

Looking back on it now, as I write the prologue to this book on a cold and squally winter Saturday, I'm convinced that this story began with Harvey's death.

Jake didn't seem to mourn Harvey for too long, perhaps on account of his son Dougie's birth five months before, in December 1980. I don't know, but I imagine the symmetry would have comforted him. For the rest of us in this dwindling Long Island community, Harvey's death really hit home. It wasn't that Harvey had been a pillar within Suffolk County – he wasn't – but his passing drew attention to the plight of the baymen, the last of the hunter-gatherers on the eastern seaboard of America. These men had stood sentry over the ocean for generations. Their ancestors had learnt their skills from Native Americans when the Atlantic coast was but a frontier. Nowadays, there are less than 100 baymen working the Long Island waters. Even the Native Americans can't understand it.

Jake seemed to sense, first with Dougie's birth and then with Harvey's death, that all the traditions – and independence – were coming to an end. They say fate likes multiple acts. Trouble is, you just don't expect there to be nearly a decade between the first and the last.

* * *

At the end of May 1990, I received a letter from Eric Tull, manager of the East Hampton branch of the Suffolk County National Bank. He was an acquaintance of Jake's and mine.

For some reason I recall the unseasonable weather on the day the letter arrived. It was a friendless Monday morning. The light was pale, sickly

even; the wind blustery. There wasn't a hint of early spring warmth. The sky was raw, as if it had been cast in alloy. A brown and white osprey circled above the chop, its talons poised for fish. The hungry osprey and the angry sea licking across Gardiners Bay were all I registered from my Sag Harbour apartment that morning.

Usually, my mail is the uninteresting fodder of junk and bills. Sure, I get the occasional postcard from my sister in Canada, and letters from a friend who's a foreign correspondent with *The New York Times*, but never handwritten envelopes marked '*Private and Confidential*'. It was Jake's handwriting on the envelope, and it had been forwarded to me by Eric Tull. My subsequent telephone conversation with the banker is a tape that just won't erase.

"Where did you get the letter, Eric?" I asked.

"I was expecting your call, Pete."

"OK. So, how'd you come upon it?"

I was in no mood to fence. Jake was a friend – couldn't say a good friend, he wasn't the sort to have good friends, but when someone I know vanishes completely, as if they've evaporated, I sit up and take notice. Even at my age.

"Beginning of the year, Jake walked into the bank dressed in his working clothes. He stank rougher than roadkill. Haven't seen or heard from him since, until an envelope arrived. Inside was another envelope addressed to you. Jake had written me a note on scrap paper asking me to forward the envelope addressed to you if he didn't come into the bank to cash a cheque for a couple of weeks. I put the letter in my drawer. So, that's why you got his letter now Pete. I thought it was kind of strange at the time, but you know Jake. Always a mystery."

"Didn't you think it was a peculiar thing to do so soon after . . . well . . . you know . . ." I was going to fill in the blanks, he was a banker after all, then thought better of it.

"Frankly, Pete, I must have been busy. Last time he was in my bank, the staff almost ran out the door. Heck, he'd already emptied the place of customers that day."

"As Harvey used to say, *'Folks wanna eat fish, but they don't wanna see fishermen.'*"

Eric Tull was holding something back. I was convinced of it. My line of work teaches you to detect lies of any colour. Even from well-versed practitioners such as bankers.

"Jake's disappearance seems more your line of work, Pete. I thought journalists snooped and investigated. Look, when you've figured it all out, or you've found Jake, just let me know."

He chuckled. I could hear his fat, pink jowls wobble.

"Jake can't owe you any money, Eric, you sound too darned relaxed." I was angry now.

"Too right. You know that family, been the same for generations. Bankers never made money out of them fishermen or their business. Too darned eager to pay off a loan. They're careful people Pete." He paused before adding, "I'll be hearing from you, I expect."

The line clicked dead.

* * *

Jake Dealer was a loner. A man caught between two lines, both of which were, for him, the enemy. Out there in no man's land. I suppose he thought that if he stayed between those lines, maybe, just maybe, he'd be able to provide for his family.

But a 300-year-old way of life had begun its death throes. Jake saw it coming before Harvey's death on that chill dawn in May 1981. In August 1983 Governor Cuomo wouldn't veto New York State's 'Bass bill', which banned striped bass haul-seining from the beaches; then a mysterious pollution – we called it 'the Brown Tide' – killed off the scallops and there were no money fish. And the baymen's crime? Well, it was being visible from the beachfront properties of the newly affluent; their catches were infinitesimal compared to the trawlers far out at sea – and far out-of-sight. With no bass from spring to fall, no scallops in winter, it was the end for the baymen. Some of them went off to be janitors or make motel beds. Or worse.

Not Jake.

He had only ever understood the ocean, for it was his home. His territory. His land. He wasn't about to be defeated. That's the sort of man he was, like a handsome man who knows he's handsome, but never acts it. So, he bought an old down'easter, rebuilt her from the keel up and

named her *Sweet Amy* after his daughter, Dougie's older sister. He fixed a short harpooning pulpit and a watchtower, and eked out the seasons as best he could. By the spring of 1986 he had decided to go into the chartering business out of Montauk, not far from where he lived in Poseyville, Amagansett.

I last saw Jake and Dougie in Montauk, just shy of three years ago. Early January 1990. Dougie was nine years old. Jake was born on V-J Day, and I recall he once said, *"That was the day their war ended and mine began."* In 1945, 'bebop' was sweeping the US. He'd remarked that afternoon that he was dreading his forty-fifth birthday. *"You know Pete, JFK died when he was just forty-six."* Jake wasn't being morose, he never was around Dougie, but he'd always had a thing about numbers. And premonitions.

The three of us were sitting on the dock in Montauk Harbour gazing out across the ocean. Jake and Dougie had just returned from an easy-going day on the water – Jake used to say that November to January were 'sometimes' months for fishermen: sometimes bad, sometimes terrible. *"You gotta tough it out with the sea, but it's always a one-way fight, Pete."* The afternoon was gold 'n blue, and mild for that time of year. Jake was hunkered down over a large scrap of paper, his massive, calloused hands working a stubby pencil furiously with spider-like numbers. He was sweating. His ashen forehead contrasted with his wind and sun-scarred cheeks; another 'tell' of the men who work the waters. He put his arm around his son, squeezed him close. Then he looked up at me with eyes kindlier, rounder and browner than a roe deer.

"I never do the state lottery and now I ain't never goin' into the city again!" His toothy smile flashed like a cresting wave.

"What are you talking about Jake?"

"Go figure this out Pete," he said glancing down at all his notes. "You got roughly a 1-in-26 million chance of winning the New York State Lottery, and a 1-in-3,763 chance of being shot while in New York City nowadays? So, that means you got 6,910 more chances of being shot than you ever have gettin' rich!"

Jake laughed and laughed. I just grinned. Again, he wiped his furrowed brow. Of late he had begun to look older than forty-four.

"I was never taught to be rich. I was brought up to fish. Fishermen ain't ever rich. Good thing too – if they were you'd have no fish and no fishermen."

He sighed and balled the paper with all his longhand math on it. He hooped it straight into the yonder garbage bin like an NBA pro and smiled. What a smile!

"Pete, all I ever wanted was to be a sword-fisherman with my harpoon. Guess I was just too late, the swordfish are gone. Now, what with the bass and the new laws, I don't know."

That was the last time I saw Jake and Dougie together. I keep thinking of that handsome little boy and that big powerful man standing on the dock in Montauk Harbour.

And those infernal odds. Jake's odds.

PART ONE

FRIDAY, 12TH JANUARY 1990