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Spartina

JOHN CASEY



John Casey

SPARTINA

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The Half-life of Happiness

Spartina

Testimony and Demeanor

An American Romance

SPARTINA



John Casey

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Dick Pierce swung the bait barrel off his wharf into his work skiff. He cast off and began to scull down Pierce Creek. He built his skiffs with an oarlock socket on the transom. He had to tell most buyers what it was for. In fact sculling was a necessity for him—this far up the creek it was too narrow to row and, except at high water, too shallow to put the outboard down.

The tide was still dumping and he let her drift a bit. A spider's strand broke against his forehead. A light mist came off the water but dissolved as soon as it got above the black banks. Dick loved the salt marsh. Under the spartina there was black earth richer than any farmland, but useless to farmers on account of the salt. Only the spartinas thrived in the salt flood, shut themselves against the salt but drank the water. Smart grass. If he ever got his boat built he might just call her *Spartina*, though he ought to call her after his wife.

He always started off these fair early-summer days in a mood as calm and bright as the surface of the water. Everything was lit up silver and rose—the dew, the spider's webs, the puffs of mist, even the damp backs of the dunes on the barrier beach that divided the salt ponds, the marsh, and the creeks from the sea.

Where Pierce Creek joined up with Sawtooth Creek he let the outboard down and cranked it up. He could see the breachway and through the breachway the horizon, a pale streak. The skiff climbed onto a plane with ease. Eighteen-foot, but she was as light as any sixteen-footer and almost as narrow. She held as much as clunkier skiffs, he didn't clutter up the inside with knees or thwarts. She was extraordinarily high in the prow; he didn't mind taking her out in moderate seas. The only thing he couldn't do was run a deep trawl of pots way offshore. And that's where most of the lobster were in summer. He dared go twenty miles out, but it wouldn't do him any good without the heavy machinery to haul even a single trawl of heavy pots and heavy warp.

Dick throttled down as he went past Sawtooth Island to line up for the run through the breachway. He could see the line of surf on the sandbar just outside the mouth. He nipped through and turned hard to starboard to follow the tidal channel around the sand. He came back to port, feeling the chine and the skegs catch and hold through the turn, and so out on the glassy swell; for all his troubles, his skiff was sinless, and her sweetness sweetened him.

He soured a little after he'd pulled ten pots—trash in all but two—spider crabs and whelks. A fat two-pound tautog which he kept for bait. After he'd pulled a few more empty pots he began to think of the tautog as supper. Things looked up—three small keepers, one more questionable. He put the gauge on it and threw it back. Five for twenty. The kind of day he put up with in August but not in early June. He ate half of his cheese sandwich and drank half of his thermos of hot milk and coffee. He considered whether it would be worthwhile moving some pots to a deeper hole. It was a couple of miles away, might have someone's pots there.

already. And that hole was more frequented by sport fishermen who weren't above pulling a pot if the striped bass weren't biting.

Dick had caught a pair of them at it once. He'd come round the rock just in time to see them drop his pot overboard. A college kid and his girlfriend in a deluxe Boston Whaler, a white fiberglass, white vinyl rubrails, and chrome rodholders. Dick had come alongside and jumped into their boat with his six-pronged grapnel in his hand. He swung it against the kid's outboard casing, cracking the plastic.

Dick said, "I see you near one of my pots again, I'll put this through your goddamn hand."

The kid said, "I was just taking a look."

The girl said, "You're crazy."

Dick got back in his own boat. The girl wrote down Dick's boat number, cranked up her engine, and left.

It turned out it was the girl's boat. Her father sent Dick a bill for the engine casing. Dick sent it back with a note. "Your daughter and her boyfriend pulled one of my pots. That's stealing."

The father called him up. That was when Dick still had his phone.

"Mr. Pierce, my daughter tells me she and her boyfriend didn't take anything. Is that correct?"

Dick said, "They pulled my lobster pot."

"They may have pulled your pot, but they didn't take anything. You threatened them. You do that again, I'll have you charged with assault with a deadly weapon."

Dick said, "Go to hell."

The father was still talking when Dick hung up.

Some time later Dick went to Westerly on his annual round of banks. While he was waiting to see the loan officer, a man came up to him and said, "Mr. Pierce?"

Dick got to his feet and said, "Yes."

"Mr. Pierce," the man said, and Dick recognized the voice. "I've had a look at your loan application. If you'd care to step into my office ..."

Dick thought of his application. The list of his jobs, the crews he'd quit, the crew he'd been fired from. His house. His mortgage. His wife's job as a piecework crab picker. His purr income from lobstering and quahogging. His pickup he was still paying for. His claim that his half-built big boat was worth forty thousand. His power tools ...

Dick said, "Give me back the application."

The man said, "Are you saying you wish to withdraw your—"

Dick said, "Yes."

The man sent a secretary out with the form. Dick went around to the Hospital Trust, Ocean State Bank, Columbus. Nothing doing. At Rhode Island Federal Savings & Loan he got a woman loan officer. She suggested he get someone to cosign. Then they'd consider giving him half what he asked. At 17½ percent. On ten thousand dollars that was 1,750. Unless he built someone else a boat, he couldn't do it. If he built someone else a boat, then he wouldn't get his own boat built.

The woman said, "You're a family of four. If you depreciated your tools and your workplace—you work at home, right?—you could qualify for certain assistance programs for your family—"

Dick said, "Welfare?"

The woman took a breath and said, "Yes."

Dick didn't get angry with her. If she'd been slick, young, sure of herself, crossed her legs with a little scratch of nylon on nylon as she leaned forward, he might have blown up. But this woman wasn't sure of herself, was trying to be nice. Her cheap navy-blue jacket, the unevenly crushed ruffles of her blouse, the way she picked at the frayed leather corner of her desk blotter—were all awkward and nice. Dick said, "I know you're trying to help." The woman started to say something, Dick went ahead. "From what I've heard, welfare people come round to inspect your house. I've just told four banks more than I care to about my life. In the second place, I've got a half-built fishing boat in my backyard. I don't mean a little dinghy. She's over fifty foot long, eighteen-foot beam. She's damn near the size of my house. The welfare people could see she's worth thousands and thousands of dollars. The wood and hardware alone. Even half built she's worth more than welfare allows. But I can't get anyone from a bank to come look at her, I can't get you to ask someone who knows half a thing about boats to tell you she's already worth more than I'm asking to borrow. You could ask Joxer Goode, he owns the crab plant—"

The woman said, "I know about Mr. Goode...."

Dick said, "If I had a boat it wouldn't be a question of risk, I could sign up with Joxer Goode and haul red crabs. There are boats not much bigger than mine bring in twenty thousand dollars' worth of red crabs two and three times a summer. Joxer Goode has contracts in Providence and Boston, pretty soon he'll be shipping to New York City. His crabmeat sells at half the price of lobster, restaurants love his crabmeat, he's going to get rich. And the boats supplying him are going to make good money. He needs more boats, he can't get enough lobstermen to put out for crabs. They're stuck in their ways, and some of them are scared to go all the way out to the edge of the shelf. I'm ready to go. I need twenty thousand dollars and before next summer is over I could pay you your 17½ percent. That's just on crabs. On the way out and on the way back I could stick a few swordfish. At forty fifty, five dollars a pound, average size two hundred pounds, that's nearly a thousand dollars a fish. I'd have to be missing both arms if I couldn't bring in an extra ten thousand from swordfish."

Dick pulled out the glossy green-and-white flyer he'd picked up in the bank lobby. He turned to the page with green cartoons. There was a house, a kid in a cap and gown holding a diploma with dollar signs flying around his head, and there was a big motorboat. Dick pointed to the caption: "Let us help your dream come true."

The woman looked genuinely sad. Dick said, "Fishing-boat captains who own their own boats make around forty thousand a year. I've been on their crews, I've built two of the boats when I worked in the boatyard. I've been on the water my whole life. I could be making good money, and you tell me to go on welfare."

The woman said, "If it was up to me ..."

"Yeah, okay, you don't hear me cussing you. It's the way it works—when I've got the money, the bank'll lend me the money."

The woman squared up her desk blotter with her fingers. Dick said, "Thank you."

The woman said, "Have you thought of asking Mr. Goode to help you finance your boat?"

"Oh yeah. One of these days he might get time to take a look." Dick thought he'd talked

enough for that day. He said thank you again and left before he got into the story of his
miscue with Joxer Goode. He got into his pickup and got out of Westerly. He felt a sludge of
depression. The pickup backfired as he slowed down for a light, reminding him he'd have to
put in a new muffler. At least he hadn't got mad at anyone this trip, not so he said anything
drastic.

Now, drifting on the swell, he decided to leave his pots where they were. He'd spend the
afternoon tonging until he had enough quahogs to make the trip to the shellfish store in
Wickford worthwhile. The quahogs put him in mind of steamers—summer prices had begun
and he had a scheme for steamers that would bring him several satisfactions. The moon was
right, the tides were right. There was a risk, but if he pulled it off it would make up for a lot



Dick had had this plan ever since a Natural Resources officer had run him out of the bird sanctuary. Dick had dug steamers on the inside beach of Crescent Pond his whole life. When they set up the bird sanctuary Dick was all for it; it meant the salt marsh would be pretty well preserved, from Sawtooth Creek all the way to the Green Hill restaurant. Dick still owned the sliver of marsh between Pierce Creek and Sawtooth Creek and he could still show ducks and geese on that edge of the sanctuary. Clamming was allowed, but the Natural Resources officer had run him out of Crescent Pond because he'd come in with his skiff. No motors in the bird sanctuary. Dick said he'd row. The officer got stiff about it, impounded his peck of steamers. The only other way to get to Crescent Pond was to walk the mile-long trail from the state parking lot. Easy enough if you didn't have a basket of clams to carry.

Tonight Dick was going to satisfy himself. He'd borrowed Eddie Wormsley's tractor with its front scoop. At eleven at night he got his two sons to climb on back, drove the tractor out of his own driveway, down the shoulder of Route 1, and nipped into the bird sanctuary, where a tree had fallen across the woven-wire fence and pushed it down. There was an old causeway that the farmer who'd owned the marsh in the 1800's had put in for his wagons to come and get salt hay. It was probably a hundred years old, silted over and covered with grass and bushes, but firm enough to keep the tractor from bogging down. The boys clung to the fenders, their feet on the clevis bar, ducking as the branches of scrub whipped past. When they got to Crescent Pond, Dick lowered the front scoop. The beach was bare twenty yards out—a full-moon low tide. Just up from the waterline Dick stuck in a corner of the front scoop and drove, cutting a trench fifty yards long. The moon gave enough light so that the boys could pick up the clams and toss them into the fifty-five-gallon drum Dick had lashed to the clevis bar and the back of the driver's seat. By midnight they'd filled the drum. Dick thought he heard the Natural Resources jeep on the seaside beach. He raised the scoop, the boys climbed on back, and Dick notched the throttle up to get them up the slope of sand and over the crusted lip of earth where grass and scrub began. Dick kept up his speed back along the swath he'd cut on the way in, the boys clinging like limpets to the back of the tractor, ducking branches and vines. Dick shut the motor off when he got near Route 1 and sent the older boy out to the shoulder to make sure the coast was clear. Dick drove the few yards necessary to get past Sawtooth Creek, then turned into the tangle of brush that was his sliver of land between Pierce Creek and Sawtooth. When he got in a ways he stopped, and he and the boys loaded gunny sacks with the clams, tied the throats of the sacks, and lowered them into Pierce Creek. Dick left the boys to finish with the clams on their own. Dick got the tractor back to his yard, up onto the flatbed trailer, hitched the flatbed to his pickup, and drove as fast as he dared to Eddie Wormsley's. Dick told Eddie what he'd been up to. Eddie laughed, but he got worried too. Eddie had been caught killing a swan the year before. The Natural Resources officer let him go, but he didn't want more trouble. Dick hosed down the front scoop and the rear tires and scrubbed out the treads of the front tires with a wire brush.

Eddie made him pick out the leaves and pieces of vine. Dick asked him if he wanted a clam when he sold the clams. Eddie wavered, finally said he'd better not. Eddie gave Dick a beer and then sent him home. Dick knew it must be late—Eddie was famous for his night hours.

Dick was up at dawn. He loaded the gunny sacks into his skiff and skipped past Westerly on the glassy morning sea. He sold the clams to a shellfish dealer in Connecticut for \$112.

He set some more pots on the way home, and pulled and rebaited his others. He was pinching with hunger by the time he got back. The tide was just trickling in, so he had to scud the last bit to his dock. He made himself a sandwich in the kitchen, but his wife, May, heard him and lit into him before he could start eating. She was weepy with anger. She took him to the boys' room. They were lying on their beds with the covers back, their legs and arms puffed up like wormy logs.

"Look at that! Just look at that!" May almost never got mad at him, and when she did he always felt awful, but this was worse than usual. Dick saw what had happened—the riot through the brush had whipped some cuts across their arms and legs—their hands were oaken since he'd made them wear gloves to pick up the clams. Poison ivy had got into the cuts and scratches and foamed up in wet blisters and raw spots. May wanted him to take them to the hospital. Low as he felt, Dick resisted that idea. Dick said he'd get them something from the drugstore if they would go lie in the salt creek till he got back. "It'll sting some, but salt water'll pull the juice right out. I swear, May, it's the best cure. When I got fish poisoning all up my arm I cured it with salt water." May wouldn't answer him, but the boys did what they were told. Dick felt bad enough so he spent more than twenty dollars on tubes of cortisone gel.

By evening the boys felt better, but May was still sullen. After supper, when he was smoking a cigarette on the porch before the mosquitoes came out, he found out why she was still so mad. "Parker stopped by to see you," she said. "He was here when the Natural Resources officers came by. He made it worse, his being here. Eddie Wormsley's one thing, but Larry Parker!"

"I should have told them to wear long pants. I am sorry about the boys, May."

Dick was amazed that didn't do it. He apologized to her once a month at most. May said, "I need some money to get the phone back."

Dick didn't say anything.

May said, "They want a fifty-dollar deposit."

Dick peeled it off the roll, let her settle back in her chair, and said, "I'm going down to the Neptune to see the ball game. Maybe I'll run into Parker."

He felt bad about that as he drove past Galilee, then he remembered he only had forty dollars left, and twelve hours before he'd had \$112. He put a five-dollar bill in his left pocket and swore not to spend more than that even if he had to buy Eddie a drink. Of course, if he ran into Parker, Parker would buy.



Parker had always scared Dick a little. Parker would do anything, that was part of it. And Parker seemed to know things about Dick that Dick didn't. Parker said he'd never get Dick into anything that he himself wouldn't do. That didn't strike Dick as much of an assurance.

Dick had gone off on some wild-ass rides with Parker. One time a few years back, Parker got hold of a motor yacht that the owner wanted moved from Newport to the Caribbean. The owner gave Parker a credit card for fuel, berthing fees and food, and two plane tickets back to Boston. The guys at the Neptune who knew Dick and Parker were surprised the two of them got along. But with just the two of them running the fifty-foot yacht, they didn't see much of each other the first week. After four hours on, one of them would wake the other up, say a word about the weather, and that was it. Each had a cabin of his own the couple of times they tied up at night. Parker was eager to get south, so they usually ran all night. With the owner's credit card on board, fuel economy was not a big item, so they ran as fast as the seas would allow.

Dick had loved the trip south. The boat was good, even in a half-gale. He liked getting a look at Chesapeake Bay, Cape Hatteras, the islands off Georgia. It was there Parker took him on a side trip in the dinghy. They went up a salt creek that cut into Ossabaw Island. "Look there," Parker said, "I'll bet it's the first time you saw one wasn't on a shirt." Dick looked. He saw the eyes blink first and then took in the body floating in the muddy water. He'd always liked Parker for taking the time to show him an alligator.

Parker got less amiable when he started looking for fun in the islands. He railed at Dick for turning in early, for getting cold feet at padding the expenses. Parker thought Dick was having a case of social nerves, that Dick was intimidated by the fancy bar life. Dick had to admit he was thrown some by the accents of the West Indians, the English, let alone the foreigners. Parker got into the act, even dressed the part. A pale sweater woven so loose you could just about see through it, no shirt. Cream-colored topsiders, no socks. But Dick could tell him apart from the carriage trade. Parker leaned forward, his eyes moved fast, and his mouth, with his bad teeth and gray fillings, was held in small and tight, even when he was having a good time. Parker did have a good time. Dick saw that, envied him his nerve, and admired it.

It was funny—when Dick was with his friend Eddie Wormsley, Dick was the wild hair. When Dick was with Parker, Dick was the fuddy-duddy. But it wasn't just that, or the foreignness of the people or the sleekness of some of them, that put Dick at half-speed. It was the *place* that knocked him for a loop. The air, the sea, the islands. Dick had fished off Cape Cod, Maine, and Nova Scotia. All that was more or less the same, or at least understandable. Different. The West Indies was another planet. The air smelled different, touched his skin like silk. The water was the same salt water, but the colors were different, greens and blues he'd never seen. The movies and magazines hadn't prepared him. And it made him uneasy that he had very little idea what kind of bottom or what kind of deep the waters hid. The who

thing left Dick in a daze. They'd finally worked it out that Dick would put in the first part of the evening with Parker, then he'd turn in early and have the first part of the day to himself. Dick most often took the twelve-foot dinghy and just poked around, caught a few fish, turned them back.

Dick went along happily when Parker took on a couple of tourists he'd met in a bar. They paid five hundred bucks for two days and a night of fishing and gunk holing. Parker gave Dick 40 percent. That was fine with Dick, Parker was the ace at dealing with strangers. Dick did the work of keeping things shipshape, set up the fishing rods. Parker did the patter.

Parker and he finally delivered the boat to the manager of a yacht club. A day later, no problem. But then Parker cashed in the plane tickets, got them passage to Florida with another guy he met in a bar. Parker showed Dick the bus station in Miami and split. But Dick had four hundred cash in his pocket and all he had to worry about was May being sore at him because he got back a week late.

Though there was that one other little detail. A month passed and Parker had showed up on Dick's front porch. Dick knew what Parker wanted. Dick said, "I threw those old boots out, that's what you're here for." Dick had discovered them in the bottom of his sea bag, the name *Jimenez, J.* stenciled in ink on the canvas lining.

Parker laughed and said, "No, you didn't."

"I tried them on, they didn't fit, I chucked them."

Parker nodded and smiled.

Dick said, "Besides, the heels had broke off."

Parker said, "There you go, you got the right idea but you came out wrong. Bring the boots, I'll show you."

Dick got the boots and Parker slit the canvas lining and fished out a handful of flat plastic pouches.

Dick said, "What is that? Because if that's heroin—"

"Dickey-bird. Never go near it. This is just a little toot, is all this is. If anyone had've looked, these here boots belong to Jimenez, I'd've spoken up. As it is, we're still sixty-four and I'm here to pay my debt."

Dick said, "No thank you."

Parker thought a while. He said, "Look, one out of three, maybe one out of two crews has someone doing coke when they're out there pulling pots ten, twenty hours straight. You know that. I'm not hanging around some schoolyard with this stuff. So that couldn't be the problem. Now, I did use you a little, you've got a fair gripe about that, but on the other hand I know what I'm doing and you were being what I'd have to call real slow. So I used your rugged good looks, you know, your grim Yankee manner. But I'll tell you, I'm not crazy and I'm not greedy. Keep it simple, keep it small." He pulled out a roll of twenties and counted out ten of them. Dick did the math in his head. "Five hundred bucks for that?"

Parker said, "Roughly. I don't sell on the street. You want to come along when I—"

"No. I wasn't doubting you."

"Oh, I get you. Yes, it is amazing. That's what does people in, it's so goddamn amazing. That's why I don't do more. This little, even if someone mentioned it to someone, it could be just a little recreational use. Now, *dealers*, dealers get eat up, and not just by the Coast Guard. They eat each other. Users are small fry. So we'll stay small."

That “we” set off a caution light. Dick hadn’t gone south again. He’d helped Parker move boats—motor yachts, sailboats—anywhere along the Northeast coast. Parker knew the damnedest people, he seemed to specialize in careless rich people. One guy called him up from Nova Scotia. He’d got his ketch down there and run out of vacation. Parker and Dick brought her back up to New York. On the way Parker got up to his game again, picked up a family off the dock in Rockland, Maine, made a quick deal with the father, took the whole family including the three kids out for a long afternoon. Parker had just walked up to the recreational vehicle and started chatting. He let the kids haul the sails, take the wheel, gave them certificates saying they’d passed their offshore crew rating, signed it “Lawrence Parker, Capt.” It didn’t seem to be the money, though Parker had picked up a couple hundred bucks. It was just that he needed to be up to something.

Parker had actually owned boats of his own. Dick didn’t understand how Parker got the first one. Somewhere along the line Parker got one boat that was barely afloat and worked a whole summer with two green college kids. First week in September her engine caught fire, she burned and sank. Parker and the two college kids came in in the dory. Ran the outboard until it was out of gas and then took turns rowing all night. Parker collected the insurance, a good amount, but no more than a sound boat of that same size would have been insured for. Sensible Parker. Don’t get greedy.

Dick couldn’t explain to himself why he went along with some of the stuff Parker got up to. Most of the time Dick didn’t like people who were slippery. Parker wasn’t just slippery, though Dick had heard him slither around until Dick didn’t know how Parker himself knew which way he was headed. Dick didn’t think it was the fun of being in on it that made the difference, but maybe that was part of it. It was Parker’s light touch too, made it seem he never do any real harm.

May said Parker was a bad influence on him. True enough. But in another way Parker kept him straight, Parker was the channel-marker, shoal water on the other side of him.

Dick stuck up for Parker when May complained, or when someone at the Neptune made a crack, but Dick wouldn’t have called him a friend, not in the sense that Eddie Wormsley was a friend. Eddie would cut off his hand for Dick and Dick would do the same for Eddie. Eddie and he saw eye to eye on most things. Eddie once had some words with Miss Perry but, that aside, Dick felt Eddie and he were dumb the same way, capable the same way, set the same way. Parker, now, Parker liked to change his skin and, what was more, tried to get you to change your skin. One night in the Bahamas Parker had come back with a girl, an English girl. Dick was still on deck smoking a cigarette. Dick went up to the bridge to leave them alone on the afterdeck. Parker and the girl went below. Dick stayed on the bridge. Dick was startled to hear the intercom come on. He and Parker hadn’t ever used it, so it took Dick a while to find the cutoff switch. He heard enough to get that the girl was English, enough to get prickly. Dick didn’t go below until they left.

Next day, after they put to sea, Parker laughed about it. So it hadn’t been an accident. “Those English girls love to chat, don’t they? No matter what, they’ll just chat along....”

Dick said, “Jesus, Parker.”

“It’s a whole different way they have—”

“You do what you want, but don’t do that again.”

“Okay. But it’s all part of seeing the world, Dickey-bird.”

On the whole they got along. Parker was a good cook, deferred to Dick's edge in boat handling and navigation. Parker knew a lot about the islands—who lived there, what they did, what was in the sea. If you didn't let him tip you off balance, you could have a pretty good time. Once a year was about right, enough to run your engine fast, shake out the sludge

When he got to the Neptune, Dick found Parker at a table. The first thing Dick noticed was that Parker's right forearm was in a cast. Otherwise he looked healthier than before, relaxed all spruced up. New shirt, red and white checks, the collar still stiff.

They had a beer, watched the Sox go ahead, hold on, put it away on a pop-up to Yankee. Parker collected a five-dollar bet at the bar, bought the loser a beer, and brought back two dollars more for Dick and him.

"I got a boat," Parker said. "I got a college kid. I could use someone else. The kid doesn't know much. And my arm's not right yet."

"You going to be around here or you on your way somewhere?"

"I'll be around a while."

Dick didn't press just yet. He was thinking he didn't like Parker's boats when Parker had college boys along. Parker played with them a little too hard, worked them too near the edge when they weren't used to it. Halfway through a night of hauling pots Parker would say in the TV announcer's voice, "It's time for ... Captain Parker's Pep Pills for Sleepy Sailors!"

Some of Parker's college boys didn't get to sleep for a day or two after they got ashore. You could see them at the Neptune or the Game Room playing Space Invaders till closing. Parker paid the zombies with ten bucks' worth of quarters.

Parker said, "I could use some more pots."

Dick said, "I can find you some pots. I got a few heavy-gauge ones myself. Your college kid's likely to bust up wood ones."

"I got a few days. The boat needs a little work. You want to help out? Maybe make a run when we get her back in the water? Stick some swordfish. I hear there's some around."

"Can you handle the wheel with your arm? No use trying to nose up on a swordfish if you got your college boy at the wheel."

Parker smiled. Dick saw that Parker's front teeth looked good—all square and white. Dick said, "You been making some money?"

"Here and there. I could use some more. I want to get a boat, not the one I got, a good looking boat I can use for charters. Winter down in the islands. Spring, work out of Virginia Beach. Come up here summers for the tuna derby. Take out some sportsmen. You know what a charter boat gets for a three-day run from Virginia Beach to the Gulf Stream? Twelve hundred dollars. The mate works for tips. Minus fuel, that's three hundred a day. The sportsman pay whether you get fish or not. 'Course it's better if you've got a reputation for finding fish. That and good food, some good stories. An all-around good time."

Dick laughed. "Sounds like your sort of deal."

"But it's got to be a class boat. Fast. Maybe twenty, twenty-five knots. Loran, sonar. A lot of that good stuff. Going to cost, though. That boat I got in the yard'll only pay for a fraction."

Parker spun his beer glass in his fingers. "I got friends in the islands. I got a real good friend in Virginia Beach. But my crystal ball tells me this is the place for this summer. Hang on to some pots—I got a barge load set a week or so ago. But mainly get some swordfish. I know

some about that, but I figure you know even more. You're undervalued around here. You ever hear rich people talk about stocks and bonds? That's always what they're looking for, something undervalued. I could make something out of you. You could make something."

Dick changed the subject for a while. Told Parker about how he'd dug clams with a tractor and made a few quick bucks.

Parker was amused by the story, but came back around to his boat in the yard. "Tell me what, Dick. You take a look at her. I'll pay you to fix one or two things on her. Pay you two bucks an hour under yard prices, that's more than you'd make if you did it working for the yard."

"What's wrong with her?"

"The yard fixed her up some, a plate or two was loose...."

"What's wrong with her now?"

"I ought to take a look at the stuffing box."

Dick said, "Damn. I hate messing with that. That's a real shitty job."

"Uh huh, a real shitty job."

"Okay, I'll take a look at her."

Parker said, "Only thing is, I can't have an outside worker. You know the rule. I'll have to sign you on as crew for you to work."

Dick said, "You going to use a spotter plane? I don't want to go out and wallow around on the swordfish grounds, just me and you."

"Maybe a spotter plane. Got to make some money, I owe the yard. Maybe second time out. You go down, take a look at her, and consult your horoscope. I'll be here."



Dick ran his skiff out with a half-dozen pots he'd repaired. He pulled his pots, rebaited a few. Brought in all the heavy-duty ones. He probably would go with Parker. He sold a basket of lobster, fifteen bucks. Groceries, nothing to put by. If he went with Parker, the boys could pull these few pots he'd left in less than an hour. May didn't much like the boys going out alone if there was any sea running. She got a little bit grim if Dick took them out when it was blowing hard or foggy.

Dick checked the water temperature. Sixty-six degrees. Might be sixty-five out on the swordfish grounds. Sixty-five to sixty-eight was what they favored, and mighty picky they were about it. Dick wished Parker would hire a spotter plane. The rate was fifty bucks an hour plus a bonus of a hundred dollars per fish, no matter what size. The price at the wharf for swordfish was \$3.50 a pound. Probably going up as the summer people came in. If Parker and him got just one 150-pound fish they'd pay for the spotter plane and his bonus. With good fish, two hundred pounds, they'd start to make some real money. With a plane they could spot the fish ten, fifteen feet down, not just the ones finning. Two, three fish wasn't out of the question. And if they stuck a real good fish the first day, they could keep the spotter plane working for a couple more days. Parker was generous about shares—of course he didn't want to have a busted arm. Dick was supplying the pots for lobster—or red crab if Joxer Goode's price was good—and Dick was bringing the harpoons, a little more experience, good eyes.

Dick got to the yard early enough so he didn't have to argue with the yard manager about whether he was working on Parker's boat or just looking at her. He got down inside to the stuffing box. Rotten wood and the stuffing all clumped up. Tear it all out. One of the few decent things about the boat was easy access to the stuffing box. And the propeller shaft was true. The hull was fair to poor. Not a design he'd seen around—shallow draft, hard lines. Parker must have bought her down on the Gulf Coast. The half-dory on board was local, but not much good. Dick lined up a couple more strings of heavy pots, one in Westerly, one in North Kingstown, dropped them off alongside Parker's boat. *Mamzelle*. Dick wasn't sure the right way to spell it, but he knew it wasn't Mamzelle.

Dick stopped by Joxer Goode's crab-processing plant to check the price. The wells on Parker's boat were pretty big. The price for crab was about half that of lobster, but if they got to the right spot they might get twice as many. Dick asked if Joxer was there. Joxer had a few enough boats going out for crab that he might just give a tip about where to set the pots. One thing Dick knew was even the nearest crabs were way out, on the edge of the continental shelf, took a day or more just to get out to the grounds.

The secretary told him Joxer was out on his motorboat showing some friends around the salt ponds and then picnicking on Sawtooth Island.

Dick went home and headed down the creek in his skiff. He took his quahog tongs. He didn't want to seem to be looking too hard for Joxer. When he got into the pond past Sawtooth he saw Joxer's boat pulled up on the tiny beach on the southwest of the island.

Sleek little water-jet with padded seats, like the inside of a new car. Two couples standing on the beach. Joxer and his wife, both of them great big folks, played lots of sports. Tennis, waterskiing. Joxer had a little single shell. He'd been a single-sculler in college, Dick had seen the engraved cups in Joxer's office, and a picture of Joxer with a lot of Japs on board a fishing vessel. But Joxer knew his stuff. Dick had heard how Joxer had gone into the water with his scuba gear to cut loose a propeller fouled with a stray piece of polypropylene. The boat had tied up at Joxer's dock to unload crabs and got fouled as she was pulling away. Joxer had another boat standing by to unload and didn't want to wait around. So in he jumped.

Dick understood that. What he held against Joxer was his paying his crab workers piecework instead of an hourly wage. And then breezing through the plant jollyng up the pickers, patting the women on the back. "That's the ticket, ladies!" As though it was a little league game and a lot of fun. And his Jap foreman who never talked but just reached over the picker's shoulder and showed her how to do it faster.

Joxer was out to make his million. Didn't have time to come look at the boat Dick was building.

Joxer's wife. You couldn't tell she'd had two kids. Striding around in a tennis outfit or bikini with a beach robe that just came to the tops of her yard-long thighs. Dick saw her waterskiing around the salt ponds and out on the ocean on calm days. She and Joxer were good at things like that.

The other couple were smaller versions of the Goodes. Same healthy good looks, but scaled down, and more willowy too—the pair of them.

Dick began to work his tongs.

The couples were in a huddle, pointing to parts of Sawtooth Island and back up to Sawtooth Point. Dick had heard there was some buying and selling going on. Dick would have minded having Joxer Goode as a neighbor, that would give Dick a bit of a claim on Joxer. Dick had always been a handy neighbor during snow, flood, power outage. But the only landowners left on Sawtooth Point were one old couple—every other house was now a summer rental—even the Wedding Cake, completed in 1911 by Dick's great-uncle. Dick's part of the family had never lived in it. When his great-uncle died, his son, who'd moved away, sold it, along with a narrow right-of-way from the Post Road. Dick's grandfather got the rest of the point, Dick's father sold off two house lots—the Buttricks' and the Bigelows'. Then Dick's father had sold off his house and the rest of the point, except for the acre Dick now owned, when he went to the hospital. He thought he'd leave Dick some money after his bills were paid. There was so little left, Dick had to use up his own savings from his Coast Guard tour to build his little house. Dick had tried to shut his mind to all the ifs. If his father had held on a little longer, the land prices would have doubled, tripled. If the old man had had health insurance. If the old man had deeded over some of the land to Dick. If, if, if. The old man had paid his debts. He probably held the record at South County Hospital for biggest bill ever paid by an uninsured patient. Dick had been away at sea, helicoptered off his cutter when his father died, was buried. Dick's hitch was up eight months later and he was back in time for the final accounting after probate. He'd figured there might not be a lot, but he hadn't been prepared for next-to-nothing. He'd thought of using the money—he'd hoped there would be ten thousand at the very worst—to send himself to the Merchant Marine Academy.

He'd had a plan: by age forty he would be master of a ship. Here he was at age forty-plus an eighteen-foot skiff. Here he was tonging quahogs. Here he was watching four beautiful people in swimsuits so small that all four of them wouldn't make a single shirt.

There was a small part of Dick that recognized that his dream of working his way up to master wouldn't have been a piece of cake. He hadn't done so good in the Coast Guard, and that was before he could blame his bad temper on his bad luck. Even his friend Edd Wormsley told him he wasn't good at taking advice, let alone taking orders. When Dick crewed on fishing boats, the various captains and shipmates had been glad to see the last of him. When he worked in the boatyard, even though the yard owner let him do his work his own way at his own pace, Dick drove boat owners up the wall. There was a pretty strong tradition at most New England boatyards of rich boat owners' putting up with blunt talk from grumpy workmen. The New England bankers and lawyers who owned boats didn't expect well-mannered servants—they even liked being roughed up a little by an old salt when they handled their boats badly, or came in to get a dumb mistake fixed. “Of course you broke your mast. There was whitecaps on the *pond*, and you tried to take her to Block Island.” Dick's mistake was adding a little barb. Like “You're a real piss-to-windward sailor.”

The yard owner let him go, but still called him in for a job now and again. And when someone asked at the yard to have a beetlecat built of wood, he referred him to Dick.

The beetlecat was a beauty. Cost four thousand dollars. Dick's profit was less than a thousand, and the pay rate finally came to less than three dollars an hour, including driving around for the right wood and fittings. You could buy an okay used beetlecat for a quarter of that. A new plastic knockabout for only a little more.

He built a couple of skiffs to sell, and then the one for himself. A smaller one for the boy. Thought he would just see if a man with a good skiff could make do. The answer was yes. Barely. But the yes gave him less and less satisfaction as the seasons went by. Then, three years ago, he started his big boat. He saw the plans in the *National Fisherman* and fell for her. That was the main part of it—he just fell in love. Later on he felt other motives, felt the jump this would give him. No one expecting it, he'd pop her into Great Salt Pond at high water and chug past the rest of the fleet to the town wharf. The harbormaster would ask him if the owner was a resident. “You can't tie up here unless the owner's a resident. You know that, Dick.” Dick wouldn't answer. Just stroll back and look at the lettering across the stern, though he was checking where the boat was from. Dick wasn't sure of the name—maybe *May*, maybe *Spartina*—but underneath it would say “Galilee, R.I.” The harbormaster would come back and look. Dick would show the papers. “Owner: Richard D. Pierce.”

The harbormaster would say “Jesus! Jesus, Dick.” The town-wharf crowd would see something was up then. They'd all come over, even Captain Texeira. They'd all say, “Jesus, Dick.” Maybe Captain Texeira wouldn't say “Jesus,” but he'd damn well think it.

“Where'd you get her?”

“She's not the one the yard's been building ...?”

They'd figure it out. One of them would pretend to just be strolling the length of her along the dockside, but he'd be counting the paces. He wouldn't be able to keep it to himself. “Fifty-four feet!”

Dick might say something then. He might say, “Near enough.” The harbormaster would have seen it written down. He'd say “Fifty-four feet, eight inches.” He was always settin

people straight.

Dick had a couple of other scenes he couldn't help playing in his imagination no matter how he tried not to. Miss Perry, Captain Texeira, and the harbormaster were recurring characters. So was Joxer Goode. Joxer Goode with a sweet contract. "Dick, I need you and your boat. Here's the deal...."

Joxer briefing the skippers of the red-crab fleet, pointing out likely spots near the edge of the continental shelf.

"And by the way, men, the *Spartina* was this month's bonus winner. Some of you six-footers better stay out longer."

Dick took a bite of the bottom with his tongs. He could feel the good crunch of sand. He was working in about eight feet of water, not far in from the gut. Farther back in the pond was mud and black silt—with eel grass and wrack to get fouled in the tongs. Too much current near the gut for that stuff. Dick closed the tongs and flipped up the business end using the padded gunwale as a fulcrum. He shook a bit of ooze and muddy sand loose from the basket. Bingo! Look what the Easter Bunny left. He pulled the tongs in and picked up the quahog. He used to say that to Charlie and Tom when they were little. So little they had to use both hands to pick up a good quahog. Look what the Easter Bunny left. Dick held the quahog in his hand, ran a fingertip over the fine grooves of the shell.

He reached in with the tongs again. It was a good patch in here. Hard to get to except by boat. Didn't get weekend quahoggers wading in with their forks, pulling their inner tubes over a string with bushel baskets riding in the doughnut hole.

The effort of tonging calmed him. The mild southwest wind blew toward him from the scrub at the back of the barrier beach. Beach plums, bayberry, beach peas, poison ivy. He caught a whiff of beach-rose blossoms.

He was bringing up a quahog or two with every try. Better than he'd expected. If he topped off a bushel he'd run them over to Mary Scanlon's Green Hill restaurant, just west of the salt marsh bird sanctuary. The tide was running in—he could get up the salt creek right to the restaurant porch. He'd come away with a few bucks for May. Sweeten up the fact that he was going out with Parker. Mary usually threw in a pie or a cake that hadn't turned out just right—that would sweeten up May and the boys.

It came through to Dick that Joxer Goode was calling to him. Dick looked up. Joxer waved both arms and yelled again, "Ahoy! Dick Pierce!"

Dick finished sifting the basket, dropped another quahog on the pile, and waved back. Joxer beckoned to him. Dick saw that Joxer's boat was pulled up pretty high on the beach. Dick yanked his anchor up, but didn't crank the motor. He caught a little curl of the incoming tide that took him the first fifty feet, then he fitted his sculling oar and stroked across the current. Joxer waded in and caught the prow.

"Hello there, Dick. Sorry to bother you, but you haven't by any chance got a bottle open on board?"

Dick shook his head, not meaning so much "no" as "goddamn."

The smaller man put down a big movie camera that rode on his shoulder on a padded stock. He said, "We have all this cold beer, but it's in nontwist bottles."

Joxer's wife said hello and introduced Dick to the other two, Marie and Schuyler van der something. Dick saw a look on Marie's face that was familiar to him. It was a little bit

puzzled, a little bit vacant. Dick knew it from May. It meant “I’m not saying anything, but I’m not having as much fun as everyone else.”

Dick said to Joxer, “You got a screwdriver—or a marlin spike?” Dick pulled his own rigging knife from his pocket and opened the spike. He took the bottle of Heineken Schuyler was holding and gave a little pry to several of the crimped furrows of the bottle cap with the tip of the spike. There was a satisfying hiss and a little foam leaked down the neck. Dick popped the cap off and handed the bottle back. Schuyler toasted him with the bottle and took a swig. Schuyler’s wife said, “Would you like one, Mr. Pierce?”

Dick said, “No thanks.”

Dick was having a little trouble with the bareness of the four bodies, particularly the two van der somethings. They looked barer than the Goodes. All four of them had early-summer pink-brown tans. Dick looked away and thought it might be the fact that both the van der somethings had perfect sets of tight blond ringlets.

Joxer had the knack of prying open the beer now. “Would you like a sandwich, Dick?” Dick hesitated. Joxer’s wife handed him one and he couldn’t resist. It was fancy egg salad with bacon strips in it. He wished he’d taken a beer.

Joxer said, “Come on ashore. I’m glad I ran into you—I’ve got a favor to ask.”

Dick didn’t want to scrape the bottom of his skiff on the sand. He tossed the stern anchor out, rolled up his boots, and waded ashore with the bow anchor. The skiff rode in a foot of clear water. Joxer looked at the boat. “She really is a beauty.” He turned to the others. “She’s not typical—Dick puts a higher prow on his boats. And a little more sheer—is that right, Dick?”

Dick nodded. He was uncomfortable, but pleased. Joxer said, “And all you need is the little twenty-horse there ... and she flies along.”

Joxer pried open another beer. “Dick’s family used to own Sawtooth Island, Schuyler. You and the Pierce family are going to be neighbors in a way. Dick lives up that creek.” Joxer pointed out the creek and then turned back to Dick. “Schuyler and Marie bought the Wedding Cake house last year. That used to be your grandfather’s—or was it your great-uncle’s?”

Joxer handed Dick the beer he’d just opened and sat down on a flat rock. The others sat on their towels in the sand. Dick leaned back against a round boulder. Barbara Goode said, “I love your boots. Don’t you, Marie? I love the way all those folds gather under the knee. They go all the way up the thigh, don’t they, when they’re unrolled? How do they stay up?”

Dick finished chewing a bite of sandwich.

“They hook on to the belt.”

“For when you have to go wading, is it?”

“That, and when you’re working in a cockpit just got a wave dumped in her.”

Dick wondered that Mrs. Goode didn’t know all this. Or maybe she was just trying to draw the other woman out. If the other woman was like May, Mrs. Goode was wasting her breath. And making a fool out of him in his boots. When it was the two ladies that were bareheaded and covered.

Schuyler sang, “I am a pirate king! I am a pirate king! It is, it is a glorious thing to be a pirate king!”

Marie had pulled a spare towel over her shoulders like a shawl.

Dick envied people who could just open up and sing. Parker would do that in bars even

once in a while, just as if he was a guinea, knew some guinea songs too, he'd puff up his cheeks like a bird on a twig and let go. He'd do guinea opera songs, Elvis Presley, Roy Orbison.

Joxer and Barbara Goode smiled at Schuyler's singing. Dick recognized himself in Marlow now—when Parker started singing, Dick slouched down in his chair.

Dick finished his beer and stood up. Barbara Goode said, "Dick, before you go, we've got a couple of favors to ask. Joxer and Schuyler are doing a clambake here on the island and they need some help from someone. Could we get you to help? I mean, if we could buy the clams and maybe some lobsters from you. And if you could show them how to dig the pit. And where to put the fire and the stones and the seaweed. Joxer *thinks* he knows, but I know you know. We're going to have thirty people and I don't dare let the two of them get it wrong."

Dick said, "I'm going out in a couple of days, I'm going to be fixing up a boat for a friend of mine."

Schuyler cocked his head. "You're going out on the ocean in a fishing boat?"

"Yup."

"I'm doing a little film—that's what I do, is make films. You don't suppose I could go along? Me and my camerawoman?"

Dick was taken aback. "I don't know. It's for four, five days. It's not like it's ... I suppose I could ask Parker."

Mrs. Goode said, "Well, let's get the clambake settled first. Joxer, you and Dick have a little talk."

Joxer walked Dick over to Dick's skiff. Joxer said, "This would be a big help. You can see how it is. Barbara's getting worried, this is her shindig, along with Schuyler and Marlow. Barbara wants them to get off on the right foot now that they're moving in. So let's say five hundred dollars to cover the raw materials. You know the stuff—steamers, quahogs, potatoes, corn—I don't suppose there's any corn this early. Can you get thirty lobsters?"

Dick didn't know what to make of this. Even for thirty people, lobster, quahogs, steamer and potatoes would come to less than two hundred dollars. Dick thought with regret of the barrel of steamer clams he'd just sold to the dealer. He didn't dare go back to the bird sanctuary with the tractor, but he might send the boys back. Drop them off in their boat with a couple of baskets. But Dick couldn't figure the five hundred. He said, "That's a lot of money."

Joxer said, "Well, Barbara figures it's a lot of work. And she's right. What with digging the pit, gathering the driftwood, the seaweed. And I think she hopes you'd give me a hand ferrying people from the point to the island, so there's the use of your boat."

Dick began to see. He couldn't see it all, but he began to get the picture. A lot of the independent lobstermen he knew had made deals with families who had summer houses. They drained the pipes in the fall, fixed the screens in spring. It started that way. Then they get a call that the family wanted to spend Christmas at the beach house if they could have the water turned back on, the heat, maybe a load of firewood. And if it wouldn't be too much trouble, get that Eddie what's-his-name to plow the driveway. And if there was a nice pine tree that would do for a Christmas tree, if it wasn't any trouble, just cut it and leave it on the porch. Half the lobstermen Dick knew got a nice Christmas check that way. And another nice check in the spring. He'd sworn he'd never do it. But here it was. Five hundred bucks. Dick looked at the quahogs lying in his basket. He looked across the channel to the Wedding Cake

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