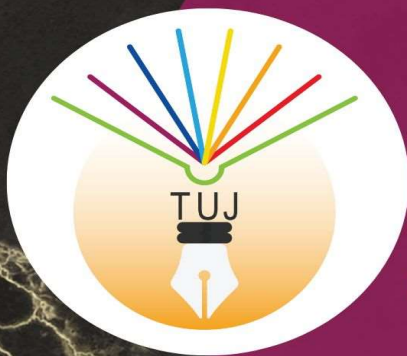


**Volume 01
Issue 05
March 2023**

ISSN: 2582-6352



The UNiVerse Journal

**A Quarterly Refereed
Open-Access Multidisciplinary
e-journal of Humanities.**

**Editor-in-chief:
C.P.Pathakk**

**Indexed Journal
Peer-reviewed**

An International Quarterly Refereed Open Access
e-Journal

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Digging Clams with No Hands

Seth Schindler

Fog lifting at dawn over Frenchman Bay, the misty silence fractured by the familiar chorus of loons laughing at me—back again, digging clams with one hand.

Brandishing my clam rake high above my head, I muttered “Zol er krenken un gedenken,” the curse I’d heard my mother scream in her sleep at the refugee camp.

The memory of it haunted me as a child and for many years echoed in my dreams, a recurrent nightmare, until I myself began to repeat it, but softly and reverently, transforming the curse into a blessing for the tormented, a prayer for the dead and those still living whose screams in the middle of the night go unheard. Invoked over and over, it became my mantra reminding me to live only in the moment, like the loons.

If only it were that simple. If only I were a loon.

I watched them dive into the dark sea and disappear, then slogged through the muck of the tidal pool. At the water’s edge, Joe sat in the stern of his leaky lapstrake dinghy, a Bud in one hand, a Camel dangling out the corner of his mouth. He took a long drag then flicked the butt overboard. As I stepped into the boat he passed me the six-pack at his feet.

“Mornin’ Ben,” Joe said, scratching the gray stubble on his chin. “Better drink a couple now, and quick. The water’s cold as my ass in the Great Blizzard of ‘52, and this bitchin’ tide’s a shorty.”

I gripped a can between my knees, pulled off the tab, took a sip and forced it down. “How can you drink this shit at the crack of dawn?”

Joe grinned, tapping my stump with his rake. “How can you make a livin’ clammin’ with only one hand?”

I could’ve told him that making a living wasn’t the point. I just loved the musty smell of primeval mud and briny sea at low tide. The salty spray in the wind whipping my face. The waves caressing the rocks along the shore. The comforting clang of bell buoys in the fog and the sight of weathered lobster boats in the channel, heading home at sunset. Especially the memory of Lori kissing me the first time as we stood in the mud in the feathery glow of the flower moon.

I could’ve told him that the first time I dug clams I fell in love and knew I’d finally come home. The glorious muddy mess where it all began.

But I never told Joe any of that. We talked about the weather, the tide chart, the crappy wholesale price of clams, and the ’67 World Series last October—his beloved Red Sox losing again.

Two beers later, we trudged across the mud flat to the tidal island called Loon Rock, his favorite clamming spot. Mine too, where Lori and I first made love, racing against the spring tide rushing in, sinking deep in the mud in our thigh-high rubber boots. I wrote a poem about it—*Love in the Mud*—and sent it to her, worrying the words in its refrain were all wrong, much too strong, a raging hurricane.

Under a flower moon she leapt into my molten heart and hers melted too

Both ablaze in the mud in the blinding light of love

Two hearts now one?

Would she prefer the lilting whispers of a gentle rain? Did she want to be the muse of a poet stuck in the muck of his own mind?

"Bet today's your lucky day," Joe said. "Look at all them wicked good breathin' holes!"

I stomped on one. Water squirted out. "I could use some luck for a change."

Joe coughed, spitting into the mud. "Sure can. A bushel a tide at ten bucks a bushel won't cut it."

"Don't know how you dig so fast, three bushels a tide."

"Been doin' it since I was a kid, just like Lori. And we both got two hands."

Picturing Lori's strong hands on my hips, pulling me close, I plunged the short-handled rake into the breathing hole, turned the mud over, and unearthed a clam. Dropping the rake, I picked up the clam.

"Figures," I muttered, seeing it was too small to sell. I tossed it and turned to Joe. "Is she coming home for Thanksgiving?"

Joe lit another Camel, started digging. "Hope so," he said, then paused, shrugging his shoulders. "But hard tellin' not knowin'. She's right straight out, I suppose. Don't write me no more."

Lori didn't write me anymore, either. Ever since I mailed her that poem, the memory of my skin tingling, our lips locking and tongues probing, leaping off the page, then her silence stinging.

* * *

The first time I dug clams with Lori I fell in love when she told me she sometimes wished she were a loon.

"Why?" I asked, looking up through the light rain into her jade green eyes. Lori was half a foot taller than me, and wiry strong like her dad. She dug clams effortlessly. Gracefully. And she was beautiful. The sea goddess Amphitrite in a faded yellow slicker.

Lori ran her long slender fingers slowly through her wet auburn hair.
“Sometimes I just want to disappear in the sea like they do.”

“And do what?”

“Hide.”

“It’s cold and lonely down there.”

“No colder and lonelier than on terra firma. My home anyway.”

“Your dad seems nice enough.”

“He is, I suppose. Means well, but doesn’t understand me at all. No one does around here. My mom wanted to, tried hard. Maybe she would’ve by now if—” Lori looked away.

“If what?”

She sighed. “I can’t wait to get out of here come September.”

“College?”

“First in my family . . . to even graduate high school.”

“Where?”

“Radcliffe, on a scholarship.”

“That’s impressive!”

“You mean, for poor white trash?”

“No, for anyone.”

Lori kicked the wooden clam hod at her side. “I’m sick of clammin’ if you really want to know. Only do it to please my dad and help put food on the table.”

“I did the same for my mother. Went to college to please her but never had my heart in it.”

In the distance thunder boomed. I jumped back, dropping my rake in the mud.

"Relax," Lori said. "It's just a passing thunderstorm, a sun shower." She turned to the east. "Look!"

A double rainbow arched over the bay. "Magnificent," I said. "I've never seen a double one before."

"I've read they symbolize good luck. Hope, I suppose. For hopeless dreamers anyway."

"To Buddhists they symbolize the last step before enlightenment."

"Does that mean one of us is getting close?"

"Maybe you, but not me."

"Let's set our hods and rakes over there," she said, indicating Loon Rock. "Go for a walk."

We walked along its craggy shore. At the south end we stopped for a moment to watch a hedge of blue herons wading in the shallow water. We crossed to the north side, sat on a gray granite slab and gazed out at the sea. Another loud crack pierced the silence. I flinched, sensing this was a gunshot, not thunder, and now hearing a different but familiar gunshot and seeing the contorted face of the man I knew I'd never be.

I glanced at Lori who'd turned her head. I followed her eyes up to a boulder where two teenage boys sat, rifles in their hands. Their laughter wafted down and it seemed to calm me, the echoes of that other gunshot and the image of the face fading away.

"What are they shooting at?" I said.

"Seabirds. Probably those herons we saw. The boys around here love to shoot their heads off. Target practice."

"They're laughing."

"Right. Their idea of fun. At our Sunday family dinners my cousin Billy brags about how many he's killed."

"That's sad . . . no, sick. But at least your family talks. My mother hardly said a word at dinner, except to kvetch about the goyim and what they did to us."

"Who are they and what'd they do to you?"

I swatted a mosquito on my forehead. "A long story. I'd rather talk about your home. You're lucky to live here so close to nature. To wake up each day to the beauty and peaceful—"

"You're dreaming. Flatlanders think this is paradise. But life here's primitive. Brutal."

"I don't see it that way."

"You don't see what really goes on behind the doors. Cousin Billy's nothing compared to the drunken illiterate savages I have to live with every day. Now do you understand why I want to get the hell away from here as fast as I can?"

"You may be disappointed."

"Why?"

"It's no better in the city, or anywhere else today."

"You're exaggerating."

"Trust me, only the weapons and their targets are different."

"What are you talking about?"

"Napalm, the Klu Klux Klan, our police. Harmless farmers bombed in the rice paddies. Negroes lynched in the dead of night. Protesters shot in broad daylight. The sordid history of mankind. War, greed, hate, and now the silent spring. The

destruction of nature and the divinity in us and all living things. Civilization is the bane of human existence.”

Lori stood and threw her arms up. “Whoa! I didn’t see *that* coming from you, despite your long hair. You remind me of that crazy Yippie guy I saw on TV, Abbie something or other.”

“Hoffman.”

“Except for your walrus mustache you even look a bit like him. The same black curly hair and olive skin.”

“That’s as far as it goes. He’s old, *real* old, in his thirties. And I’m not as crazy.”

Lori sat, her right knee touching my left. I moved mine slightly away, but she pressed hers against it. “I hope not,” she said. “And anyway you’re more . . . cunnin’.”

“I doubt it, if you mean shrewd.”

Lori’s thin lips pulled back slightly. “No, here it means *cute*. I also think you’re gentler, more philosopher than fighter.”

“What makes you think that?”

“I hear a touch of Thoreau or Emerson in you. An idealist, a dreamer.” She sighed. “Easy to dream and think profound thoughts when your belly’s full and have the time and energy to do it.”

“Can’t argue about that.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me if every single one of those Transcendentalists had a trust fund. Like the hippies, from away, living in the commune on Mount Desert Island. Going *back-to-the-land*, they call it. Going back to the bank every week for their allowance is more like it.”

I stroked my mustache. “Can you blame them for wanting out of this sinking world of hollow men?”

“Hollow men? Sounds familiar. And you’re dreaming again. I know what I see when I go clammin’ there. Lazy phonies. Stoned, dancing naked on the shore, they make me sick. So do the filthy rich summer people I sometimes work for, cleaning their damn mansions—*cottages* those snobs call them—that their greedy ancestors built. The robber barons and slave traders you probably also hate.”

“I get the feeling that’s not the only thing we’ve in common.”

“Perhaps there’s more, Mr. Hoffman,” she said, then smiled for the first time, revealing a couple of crooked front teeth that made me think I might have a chance with her.

I nudged her knee with mine. “Maybe the two of us should start a clam diggers union. Better yet, organize all the workers here and bring the revolution to Hancock Point.”

Lori kicked my foot. “Liar. You *are* as crazy as him.”

“Let’s burn down those summer cottages. Take back the land. Workers of the world unite!”

“You’re joking of course, Mr. Marx.”

“I am. It’s just that I’ve never been any good at it.”

“You need practice, that’s all. As do the workers here if you expect them to revolt. They’d much rather watch football on TV and drink beer, then beat their wives. More of those hollow men of yours and T.S. Eliot’s. Only these are real.”

“History tells us they would if they had the right leader to follow.”

“Who do you have in mind?”

I smiled. “Someone charismatic . . . who sometimes wishes she were a loon.”

Lori picked up a rock and faked tossing it at me. "You're joshing again."

"Now I'm not, I swear."

"*Cha . . . ris . . . ma . . . tic*. I like how it sounds. No one's ever called me that, and it sure beats some of the things I *have* been called behind my back. Strange and a freak, to name a couple."

"I know where you're coming from."

"Except you don't know what it also means to be a girl . . . a woman. No one's ever gonna listen to and follow us, charismatic or not." Lori dropped the rock. "Anyway, I've other plans."

"Yes, you're leaving soon." *Much too soon.*

Lori sat up straight and looked me straight in the eye. "Do *you* have a trust fund?"

"I'm just rich with lots of ancient baggage of a different sort."

"Different is right! I've never met anyone like you . . . unfortunately."

I winced, feeling a familiar stinging jab.

"You're gritting your teeth. In pain?"

I nodded, rubbing my stump.

"What happened?"

"Nothing, the pain comes out of nowhere. *Phantom* limb pain, the doctors call it. But it's as real as my baggage. Luckily, unlike that, this pain disappears quickly . . . and it's gone now."

"I'm glad. Let's walk some more. I'll show you my favorite spot here."

We strolled slowly and silently along the narrow neck of Loon Rock that jutted out into the bay. Lori stopped to pick up a little brown and white banded shell.

“The striped periwinkle, my favorite shell,” she said, holding it up. “Perfect, isn’t it?”

“It is. Lovely. Being one with nature is what we’ve lost, our so-called progress an illusion.”

“Not these shells. When I was a kid I’d collect them. I believed in God then—that other illusion—and went to church every Sunday. Thought only a God could create such beautiful things. Hadn’t heard yet about the Holocaust. Why don’t you take the shell home, a souvenir.”

“Of what?”

“Your time in Maine.”

I looked past Lori at a broken lobster trap wedged between two boulders. Entangled in its tattered net was a lobster claw, a Coke bottle and a G.I. Joe toy. “What are you saying?”

“That this is only a temporary stop on your journey, probably not the first and certainly not the last.”

I stroked my mustache.

Lori passed me the shell, her knuckles brushing against my stump. She pulled her hand back. “You’re bleeding Ben!”

“Must’ve scratched the scar earlier with my rake. Do that a lot. It doesn’t have much feeling.”

“When you get home you should put Mercurochrome on it.”

“My mother would rub honey and garlic on it. A remedy Sylvia brought with her from the old country. The sweet and the bitter, like life itself, she’d say.”

“She sure got that right. Which country?”

I glanced down at my boots covered with seaweed. "It doesn't exist anymore. And sweetness didn't exist in her life either. Only misery. *Tsuris*."

"I love the sound of that word, all your words. Want to hear more. But the tide's coming in quick now. Let's sit higher up, and talk."

I followed Lori, her legs loping long across the mud fields of my dreams.

* * *

Joe loaded the last of his six hods onto the dinghy, then glanced at my two half-filled ones at my side. "Let me give you a hand with those," he said, lighting a cigarette.

"I can handle it," I said, seeing my breath.

Joe coughed out smoke. "Maybe time to try somethin' else. Cuttin' wood up at the Bangor mill. Did it couple a years ago when that red tide hit. Pays pretty good. Well, better than this."

"I'm finally getting the hang of this," I said, lifting a hod on the gunwale. "Just need to keep working harder at it."

"Suit you self, kid. Wanna join us for Thanksgiving tomorrow?"

I turned, almost knocking the hod off the gunwale. "Lori's back?"

Joe shook his head. "I'm eatin' at my sister Pam's in Winter Harbor. She makes one wicked good rhubarb pie. Don't know 'bout you but I hate eatin' alone, specially on holidays."

"I don't mind. *Will she be eating alone, too?* Think I'll pass."

* * *

For Thanksgiving I splurged and bought a frozen Swanson's Turkey TV Dinner. I heated it up in my wood stove and shared it with Sojun, my black Lab who also shared my bed and kept me warm at night in my cabin in the Maine woods.

Thoreau might not have approved of that TV Dinner, but he would've been proud of my cabin, as simple as his at Walden Pond. Mine also had no electricity, no running water, my fridge the brook right behind it that kept my milk bottle cold, my freezer the snow drift cascading over the stone garden wall I'd built myself. On the other side, beneath the snow, was the rocky ground I'd cleared to grow my own food and live off the land, trying to be as self-reliant as my idol.

Yet I knew my life wasn't as pure as his. After all, I had a transistor radio. While eating Thanksgiving dinner I listened to the latest news about the Mỹ Lai Massacre.

For dessert I'd planned to have us also share a special treat—the wild blueberries Lori and I had gathered and preserved. Holding the jar of those beautiful berries in my hand, I pictured the two of us picking them in the blueberry barrens on that splendid sun-filled summer day, then canning them in my cozy cabin. We'd talked about eating them together in the fall, at Thanksgiving, when she'd be home from college.

I tucked the jar in my left armpit, twisted the lid off, sniffed, then jerked away. They'd gone bad.

After dinner I lit an oil lamp and set it on the wooden lobster trap that served as my table. I sat on the deerskin rug beside it. Sojun joined me there as he usually did, and I talked to him as I often did. Paraphrasing Thoreau's famous words, I asked him: "Do you believe a man is only as rich as the number of things he can afford to let alone?" Sojun yawned.

"Okay, let's talk of love instead," I said. "Do you agree there's no remedy for love but to love more?" He wagged his tail, which encouraged me to ask what was really on my mind then—no, all the time. "Do you think Lori would love me more if I had two hands?" He rested his head in my lap and looked up at me with soulful eyes as if to say, *I feel your pain*. But then he whined loudly as he got to his feet and walked

away, something he'd never done before. I had to wonder then if what he really was telling me was, *Stop whining—I'm sick of it!*

* * *

Lori led me up a rocky slope above the high tide line. We sat side by side and leaned back against the gnarly trunk of a stunted scrub pine.

"As much as I hate my life here I'll miss this view," Lori said. "Cadillac Mountain on Mount Desert Island. Can't see it clearly now—with the clouds—but after gathering shells I'd come here just to gaze at it, dreaming about what was beyond the horizon. Even then I knew I wanted more, a different life."

"You'll have it soon." *And I might never see you again.* "What are you going to study?"

"Don't know yet, can't decide. I was thinking of majoring in literature, love to read."

"Me too. If you'd been at Radcliffe a few years ago we might've been in the same classes. At Harvard I majored in philosophy but took a lot of lit classes . . . before I dropped out."

"I'll probably study something more practical. Maybe marine biology."

"You're much smarter than me, bound to do something actually useful. What my mother wanted me to do, to be."

"Which was?"

"Anything but, God forbid, a philosopher. Only a schlemiel, she'd remind me constantly, thinks he'll make a living as a philosopher. Her dream was for me to be a doctor. A surgeon, like . . . like—"

"What's wrong? You look like you just saw a ghost."

"That gunshot we heard. I've always hated guns, they make me nervous."

Lori put her hand on my knee and squeezed it. "You're the first man I've ever heard say that around here."

"A man doesn't need a gun to prove he's one."

Lori removed her hand. "What does he need?"

"Just to be a mensch."

"What's that?"

"A good person. Someone who does good for others. Though my mother would say he just needs a good job, and a wife who makes good matzoh ball soup."

"I love your accent, Ben. It's sexy."

I kicked the pebbles at my feet. "Sexy? Hardly."

"Well, exotic then. Brooklyn?"

I nodded. "Walt Whitman's hometown."

"And Ginsburg's."

"You've read him . . . too?"

"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical
—"

"Howl."

"I say it's overrated."

"I do too."

"I'd take Dickinson's *I heard a Fly buzz—when I died* any day over it."

"Not bad, if too dark for me. I'd take Whitman's *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*."

“Too sentimental for me. I read *Howl* mainly because I was curious why it’d once been banned. Just as I’m curious about you . . . your accent. Never heard it before actually spoken, only imagined how it sounds from other books I’ve read, like *Last Exit to Brooklyn*.”

“You seem to like banned books. That one’s too violent.”

Lori picked up a pine cone at her side, studied it for a moment then dropped it in her lap. “Maybe, but realistic I think, why I like it. And I think you’re Jewish.”

I smiled. “How can you tell? My horns?”

Lori laughed. “There’s something very unusual about you. What I see in . . . behind . . . your dark eyes. Always thinking intensely. Or is it dreaming?”

“You’re on to me.”

“Not that I’ve ever known, even met, a Jew before, except from books they’ve written. Marx, Freud, Kafka, Roth and Betty Friedan. All troublemakers. Are you one too? I think so. Portnoy’s one of my favorite characters.” Lori wiggled her eyebrows. “But I hope you’re not like him in *one* respect.”

“I wouldn’t worry. I’ve always hated liver. Though I had the same kind of mother, a real piece of work. Intent on making me suffer like her, and to enjoy it.”

Lori punched my leg playfully. “Do you? I sense you do. And that you’re a writer, a poet’s my guess.”

“Good guess.”

“And a romantic. A dangerous combination. If you’re not careful you’ll die young like Dylan Thomas. Broke. Drunk. Alone in some seedy hotel room.”

“At least he didn’t live a life of quiet desperation.”

“Thoreau. Can’t say I’m surprised you’re quoting him. And I wouldn’t be surprised if his mother cooked and did his laundry for him. Who’s your favorite poet? A doomed romantic?”

“Try this, a clue. The force that through the green fuse drives the flower—”

“Drives my green age. Try this. Do you rage, rage against the dying of the light while writing *A Child’s Hanukkah in Brooklyn*?”

“Clever.” I scratched my stump. “But I stopped writing.”

“Writer’s block?”

Out in the bay, gulls mewed, circling above a lobsterman hauling a trap onto his boat. “Decided to just *live* now, and to the full.”

“Like Rimbaud, and be a gunrunner instead? No, I forgot you hate them. Salinger, then. Become a hermit and do yoga?”

I laughed. “Getting close. Go on, I’m enjoying this.”

Lori picked up the pine cone in her lap and tossed it at me. “So am I, more than you can imagine. You could of course copy Kerouac and do both at the same time. Write, if poorly, while chasing experience. Or Hemingway, a much better storyteller. And, if you were to believe him, a *real* man who lived life to the full. Dressed like a girl as a kid, dumped four wives as an adult, and in the end put a shotgun to his head. A life to emulate?”

“Is there anything you haven’t read? Anything you don’t know?”

Lori’s eyes narrowed. “There is. Why you’re here. Not that I’m complaining. Just the opposite. I don’t have anyone like you to listen to me. To talk to about books, ideas. Life. Ironic, isn’t it?”

“What is . . . life?”

“That I’d given up on this place. Excited to finally leave.” Lori put her hand on to top of mine. “And now you show up.”

* * *

At dusk in Folly Cove, Joe flung his rake into the dinghy and shouted, “I’m done clammin’ this year!” He pulled a rusty metal flask from his back pocket, slumped down on the gunwale and took a drink, then two more.

I clenched and unclenched my frozen fist. “I hear you.”

“You know it’s time to quit when all you can dig’s one lousy bushel, and beer don’t do the trick no more.” He passed me the flask.

I took a sip. “Hope this works, then.”

“Ayuh. If it don’t just drink more.”

“What’s it called?”

“Ol’ Grand-Dad, my favorite.”

“Steinbeck’s, too.”

“Who the hell is he?”

“Just an old friend.”

The wet snow falling all day had turned to freezing rain. Shivering, I took a bigger slug. The whiskey felt good going down. I wiped my mouth, dislodging slivers of ice from my mustache. “What are you going to do now?”

“Nothin’ till January, ‘cept sleep, drink beer and watch TV. Then I’ll look for work. Hear they’ll be hirin’ at Stinson’s, down east apiece in Prospect Harbor. Graveyard shift.”

“The sardine cannery?”

“Ayuh. Shitty work but least it’s inside. You might give it a shot.”

"A poem, a stink, a grating noise . . . a dream," I mumbled, passing the flask back, trying to remember the rest of the opening line from *Cannery Row*.

"What you sayin'? Breezin' up, can't hear you."

"Doubt they'll hire someone like me. Hate sardines anyway. The smell."

"Plenty things stink much worse."

"I've smelled a few," I said. And one I'll never forget, I thought—the unbearable stench of burning flesh.

Joe took a long swig. "But when you got good Ol' Grand-Dad it ain't that bad."

"Maybe so."

A solitary loon flew silently overhead, heading north into the bay. Joe laughed. "If that dumb bird had any brains it'd fly south. Then again, if I'd any I'd head there too." He pointed at me. "But *you* got plenty. Lori says you been to college. What the fuck then you doin' here breakin' your back clammin'?"

The loon was barely visible in the gray clouds almost touching the churning sea. I silently intoned my mantra, then said, "Still figuring that out."

"Unlike you I ain't got no choice. Know nothin' but clammin' just like my daddy, and his. You're one tough kid, Ben. But if I was you I'd go back where you come from. Find some easier work that don't use your hands . . . hand." He tapped his forehead. "Use *this!*"

I wanted to tap my chest, my heart, and say, "No, *this!*" Instead I said, "Thanks, I'll think about that."

Joe tried to light a cigarette but the wind blew the flame out. He tossed it into the muck, then shook the flask. "All gone. C'mon, kid, let's get the hell outa here."

I stepped into the boat and, hearing a splash, looked north. The loon was gone.

I turned to Joe. "Is Lori coming home for Christmas?"

* * *

The bay froze over that winter, the coldest and longest of my life. I lost myself in Joseph Conrad and Jack Daniels. In the spring, when the ice finally melted, I dug clams alone, now with a fury I didn't know I had in me, but that helped numb me, quell the anguish consuming me, expressed in the new mantra I'd adopted: *Stop obsessing over her!*

This was no gentle invocation; it was my daily battle cry. Just as well Joe had stayed on at the sardine cannery, that no one was around to see and hear me. For variety I sometimes shortened it to the acronym, *S.O.O.H.* that one stormy day at dawn morphed into what became a desperate exorcism. "Shoo! Shoo!" I'd shout with every other thrust of my rake into the mud.

At night, completely spent, lying on the deerskin rug, warmed by Sojun snuggled next to me, I could think more clearly. I reread Suzuki, Gurdjieff and Krishnamurti, hoping their wisdom would give me some fresh insight into my pathetic condition, an epiphany to set me free.

Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised that nothing I'd gleaned from the words of these mystics and sages helped me let go of Lori any better than what Sojun had seemed to say, even if my best friend could never understand the impossibility of ever forgetting her.

* * *

"The wind's shifting, now blowing in from the sea," Lori said, then breathed in deeply. "Don't you just love that scent?"

"I do."

“Another thing I’ll miss. And the purple lupine swaying in the breeze in the meadow behind my house.”

“I’m happy to listen to you, Lori, be the one you want . . . to talk to. *To love.* There’s nothing ironic about that. Maybe it’s fate that brought us together. That rainbow speaking.”

Lori stretched out her long legs and leaned her shoulder into mine. “You *are* a romantic, just as I thought.”

“And *you* are amazing. Not just brilliant and wise beyond your years, but so perceptive. You have a gift.”

Lori pulled her knees to her chest and hugged herself. “At times it seems more like a curse, seeing and feeling too much. More than what’s good for me. For anyone. Maybe I got that from my mom. Maybe that’s what made her drink too much . . . and kill herself.”

I turned and looked at Lori, wanting to put my arm around her. “Sorry about that,” I said, patting her knee instead.

“Don’t be, it happened when I was six. I’m long over it now.”

“Still, that had to be traumatic. My father also died when I was young. But too young for me to know him at all.”

“You must know something. Your mother must’ve told you about him.”

I tugged on the end of my mustache. “Sylvia told me very little other than his name, Sam . . . Samuel . . . and that he was a surgeon. A famous one in Munich.”

“How’d he die?”

I picked up a rock and threw it into the surf. “Murdered . . . at Auschwitz. Where I was born.”

Lori's mouth opened wide. "Born there? Incredible! Now, *that's* something you should write about. Talk about traumatic."

"I have no memory of any of it. I'm lucky compared to you, or my mother who knew . . . the horror."

"You're clenching your fist. Your eyes look sad. There's more, I sense, something you're not saying."

I closed my eyes. "There is one . . . one memory I can't seem to shake. The horrific stench. *Tell her*. And . . . and—"

"And what? Tell me."

"What still haunts me . . . hurts the most, returns whenever I hear a gunshot . . . or think, talk about the death camp. Like now."

"Okay, I'll shut up."

"I . . . I saw my father shot to death. Saw the terrified look on his face. See it now."

Lori scooted closer and gently stroked my face. "I can tell that hurts. Hurts real bad. But can I say just one more thing? Then no more, I promise."

I nodded, her touch seemingly making the image and pain disappear.

She stroked my hair, her mouth so close to mine that when she spoke I could taste her warm sweet breath. "I just know that one day you'll be able to face your fear, and that'll free you."

The murky sea approached, the surf now just a few feet away crashing on the rocks below. "I suppose I'm no different than Sylvia who could never talk of the death camp. Both of us afraid to—"

"You don't have to talk about it anymore."

"Afraid to face the truth, and feel the terror again."

“Understandable.”

“But I *have* known that other feeling you mentioned, wanting to hide, luckily not much anymore. With me it’s feeling embarrassed. Ashamed.”

Lori reached out to touch my stump, but stopped. “I don’t have such a good excuse. Just being poor.”

I took her hand in mine. “That’s not your fault.”

She squeezed my hand. “You’re sweet, Ben, I really like you. It seems a shame to give up writing when you’ve hardly begun.”

“I’ll write again when I’ve truly lived, have something worthwhile to say. Finally know who I am.”

“But what do you do if you never find that out? Never write again? That’d be a great loss. We’d never know what you’d experienced along the way.”

I looked past Lori at Mount Desert Island, sunbeams breaking through the clouds, lighting up the face of Cadillac Mountain. “A loss? I suppose so . . . but only if I had talent.”

“Just hearing you speak, knowing what you’ve already been through, sensing what’s in your heart, tells me you do.” She touched my stump. “What happened?”

I leaned in to Lori, my stump pressed against her side. “A dumb thing I did when I was a kid. So childish, such a cliché, I’m embarrassed to talk about it.”

She stroked my stump. “I want to know.”

“Tony Razzeri, a hood from school, had it in for me ever since he’d caught me kissing his ex-girlfriend Connie Favioli. I should’ve seen it coming. Because the truth is I encouraged him all along. A couple of months later he challenged me to a fight. Not exactly a fair one. He pulled a hatchet from under his jacket and hacked off my arm at the elbow.”

Lori's head jerked back. "Shit . . . that's awful! Gruesome."

"It was my fault anyway, I could've just walked away. But I was looking for a fight. Trying to prove something, be someone I wasn't."

"Which is exactly what you're doing now, isn't it? Trying to be a clam digger when you must know you're not—never will be—one. What are you trying to prove?"

I dropped my head, muttering "Zol er krenken un gedenken."

"What's that?"

"Something I say to myself. Sometimes when I'm confused . . . and need help."

Lori put her arm around me and pulled me close, the tip of my nose grazing her damp cheek, the scent of her, the sea and mud making me dizzy.

She whispered in my ear. "Why dig clams with one hand when you can write beautiful poetry with it. Flowing straight from your heart, with all your heart. Like digging clams with no hands."

* * *

The morning of May 27, the anniversary of the day we'd kissed under the flower moon, I picked the last of the purple lupine from my garden. I'd grown them from the seeds of the wild lupine Lori and I had gathered in the meadow behind her house. I took the flowers to Loon Rock and left them under the scrub pine. Later that cloudless, unusually warm Memorial Day, I went to see Alan Gelfand Roshi at his saltwater farm and zendo near Blue Hill.

I'd heard that he—the first certified American Zen master--was a maverick, his approach not tied tightly to ancient tradition and ritual. That was the main attraction for me, as well as his emphasis on meditation-in-action and achieving satori in life's ordinary activities. I never found zazen, sitting meditation, appealing, and not just

that I'm the restless sort. It always felt artificial and too easy, removed from the distractions and conflicts of everyday life. As much a cop-out as monastic life. Yet, wasn't that my life now with Lori no longer in it?

When I arrived one of his students told me he was in the north hay field. I went there and found him driving a tractor. Standing on the edge of the field, I raised my hand for him to stop, shouting "Roshi!" as he passed by maybe twenty feet away, but he kept going, didn't even glance at me. So I jogged over to him.

"Why are you here?" he said, turning his head slightly as I climbed aboard the hay cart he was pulling. "Looking for work?"

"No, to . . . to study with you, Roshi."

"Speak up. This old tractor's loud as hell."

"I want to be your student!"

"Louder. Still can't hear you clearly."

The tractor bounced and lurched over humps and rocks. Holding on tight to the cart's rail, I yelled as loud as I could. He didn't answer. I shouted again and again. No answer. Something you should be used to by now, I thought, then repeated to myself for the umpteenth time the refrain in the poem to her with the unanswered question—*Two hearts now one?*

I kept shouting my request every few minutes, as Roshi kept driving around and around, up and down the hilly field. Recalling the tales I'd read of hopeful initiates being turned away repeatedly at the gates of Zen monasteries, I sensed he was testing me, my commitment.

Distracted by the thought that he'd heard, as I had, hesitation creep into my voice, I almost fell off the cart when he abruptly turned and left the field. He drove down a rutted path, lined with lowbush blueberries, finally stopping on a granite ledge overlooking Blue Hill Bay. Grunting, he climbed off the tractor. I jumped off

the cart. We stood face to face. I waited for him to say something, sweat beading up on the back of my neck. *Relax, he's just a man like you.* And he was, or seemed to be, in his dirty overalls and old work boots.

"I'm Ben," I finally said, reaching out to shake his hand, yet unsure if this was appropriate with a Zen master, whether saint or simple farmer.

"What are you doing?" He said, grabbing my stump instead, and squeezing it.

I stepped back. "Now?"

He stared at my stump, still holding it tightly, then into my eyes. "*Now* is all that matters, Ben. But what did you do yesterday, and the day before?"

"Work, you mean?"

He nodded, releasing my stump. "Is there anything else to do in life?"

"I don't know. Yesterday I dug clams. And the day before."

"Is it satisfying?"

"It is, Roshi," I lied.

"Please, spare me the Roshi nonsense. Just call me Alan."

"Okay . . . Alan. I enjoy digging clams . . . well, sometimes . . . but I'd like to think there's much more to life than work."

Roshi smiled. "Such as *eating*? A toasted onion bagel with cream cheese and lox?"

I put my hand in my pocket and felt the little periwinkle shell Lori had given me. I carried it with me all the time.

"I want to know myself," I said. *Know why she doesn't come back to me.*

"Are you sure? Better to know the clams, and that it's not you who's digging them."

I squeezed the shell. "I think I get what you're saying. I want to know . . . feel . . . the force that drives the purple crocus through the snow." *Feel again her skin quivering against mine.*

He took my head between his rough hands, and shook it, laughing. "Not another meshugenah I have to teach! How do all of you mixed up poets, artists and philosophers find me? Why no plumbers, mechanics or farmers?"

Roshi dropped his hands. Looking past him at two loons diving into the sea, I took a deep breath and heard Lori say to me, *Sometimes I wish I were a loon.*

"That's an interesting question I need to think more about," I said.

"Don't bother. Thinking's our worst enemy. Thinking we're separate from all else, including clams. Digging them must be hard, Ben, with only one hand. Though not as hard as with *no* hands. Here's your koan then. How do you dig clams with no hands? Let me know when you have the answer."

He stepped toward the tractor, stopped and turned to me. "You'll find it Ben when you stop seeking and start listening to the loons. Listen!"

A loon moaned in the distance. I waited for its mate to wail in response. All I heard was Roshi laughing.

But in his rumbling belly laugh was a whisper I'd ignored. It told me to listen instead to Lori—and my heart.

Now hearing the truth in those words she'd whispered tenderly in my ear, I smiled for the first time in what seemed an eternity of faded flower moons. I pulled out that sacred shell from my pocket, pumped my fist, then let it fly over the ledge into the sea, the weight of Loon Rock lifting, the misty silence returning.

I intoned my mantra and saw my phantom arm, the tattooed number gone. I felt my hand open, the love Lori gave me.