

## Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

*Tom Sheehan*

### **The Catch of the Day**

**T**HREE OF US WERE TIGHT AS A FIST, and Eddie's call came at 4:00 in the morning. His whisper, not wanting to wake his wife, said "Great storm at sea last night. Want to check the beach?" I knew he had called Ray already. Eddie knew false dawn practically every day of his adult life, his internal clock telling him not to miss anything the dawn brought along behind it.

An awakening grace on my end also told me it was Saturday.

That's all it took in the darkness beside my wife, turning, stretching, eyes blinking, rolling over, going back to sleep. She knew it was Saturday too.

Once before, after a storm out on the Atlantic, we had found a dozen quahogs at Nahant Beach, picked them off the sands with an assortment of sea clams on the mile of curving beach along the causeway linking islanded and insular Nahant to the City of Lynn. For years we swam at Nahant Beach, celebrated with evening cookouts, and watched the girls on long summer days.

In silence, in darkness until I reached the kitchen, I left a note for my wife: "Storm at sea last night. Will be at Nahant looking for quahogs to stuff and bake. Eddie called. Ray and I are going."

The morning was special. A summer nip climbed in the air, saying, as ever, that Saturdays are full of expectations – all you have to do is keep your eyes on the faintest line of the horizon where sky and sea make their ocular mix.

We did not bring baskets or bags (that would call for too much organization), but hurried to view the scene, not to be left out of the treasure yield the storm and Father Atlantic might have tossed onto the beach. On the way, in Ray's car, an old green Studebaker that smoked and made strange noises, we talked about grinding them up for baked stuffed quahogs for munching during TV hockey games, or for freezing them, after being ground up, to use in Thanksgiving turkey stuffing. Some would be earmarked for adding to the menu of a corn and lobster clambake classic in one yard or another, and large copper pots loaded with seaweed sitting atop several joined camp stoves.

In our five mile ride to Nahant there was little traffic, the sun just burping over the horizon, all of Europe halfway through its day.

We hit the beach, and were stunned; in front of us was the mother lode from Father Atlantic. As far as we could see, along the strand stretching away from us in a long curve, the beach was littered with quahogs and sea clams, all sizes, tossed like stars, fragments of an inordinate explosion. In joy and surprise we screamed at each other for not bringing baskets or plastic bags to carry off the loot. Hunger tantrums made way on us. The forgotten taste of baked stuffed quahogs came back in a hurry. Tabasco sauce, a glass of wine or a glass of beer, a kiss from the wild Atlantic. Wives would bustle, demanding condiments as varied as kitchen wallpa-

### Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

per, tastes born of hunger, experience, aromas brought back from mothers off on the long forever ride.

Scrambling for anything to carry them in the trunk of the car, we found an old pair of wading boots and two old work jackets. We rushed up and down the beach, filling all the limbs of those boots and the jackets, lugging them to the car. We filled the trunk and then the back seat. It was exhausting work, running back and fro, waiting for the hungry crowd to come over the horizon, to get their share.

We thought the morning was as complete as it ever could be, the three of us, Pine River fisherman, trout fisherman, who were mesmerized by sea food ... lobster, clams, shrimp, the catch of the day stuffed and baked, broiled in the back yard over an open fire and matched with August treasures taken from our own gardens.

But, in another wake-up call, along the paved walk of the strand, on an old-fashioned skinny-tire bicycle might be next seen in the Antique Roadshow, going slow, studying the beach, came an elderly gent. He wore a shirt and tie, on a Saturday, and a blazer. His shoes shined like a car bumper just out of the car wash. Clean, creased, neat as rows of peas in the garden, he appeared as if he was ready to perform a ceremony, judge a criminal case, present the future to any audience looking over its shoulder. He was thin and wiry, but not squirrely. Something told me this straight-standing man was on the same hunt that we were, but likely it was more of a mission, a command he had accepted. The neatness came from by long habit.

We asked him if this was his regular morning constitutional, from insular Nahant, to pedal the causeway out and back, to keep fit what was an 80 year old body, at least.

"Not really," he said with a soft smile. "My wife Mirabel, she's sitting at home waiting for me, we've been married almost 60 years, sent me out to see if I could find a couple of quahogs she could stuff and bake tonight. She knows her weather patterns, the tide climbing and leaving the rocks of Nahant, what happens out at sea that she can read sitting back here in a house she's lived in for more than 60 years; I'm not sure how many years. I know if I'm successful on my search, she'd pull out like magic out of her hat a nice bottle of wine from some place in the house, and we'd have ourselves a grand evening. Rich salt air, a little wine, music from a favorite old opera, and baked stuffed quahogs.. The lip-smacking was in order. "It can't get any better than that." He smiled the soft smile again. He was not out to beat anybody.

The old man, we believed, at that moment between the tides and forever after, had found Nirvana and Utopia.

Ray, quick to spread his wealth, opened the trunk of the car. Quahogs, like huge coins, spilled onto the pavement. We filled the little basket sitting across the handlebars of the old gent's bike. A dozen quahogs, loaded with promise, sat like the riches of the Orient.

The air was special. Saturday was special.

Eddie said, "Do you want us to follow you home and make a special delivery, a big delivery."

### Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

“Oh, dear, no,” the old gent said. “That would only spoil it.”

To a man we knew what he meant.

We never saw him again.

We never saw the beach littered like that again.

We never made that trip again, time having its way, and mortality.

But I think about it often, and all the players on that special Saturday.