

TWO MEN ON A LOG

Dave dropped the paper bag with the beer to his feet. He took the sea into his lungs with one gasp then bounded off into the darkness. Before long, he had found some dry grasses underneath an overturned boat at the edge of the beach. He yanked out some of the pulpy mass for kindling. They would have a good fire.

Back with the beer, another man sat on a log, gazing at a low moon glowing above the mountains on the other side of the strait. Within the pale blue moonlight shifted a breeze lifting off the gentle stretch of ocean between Vancouver Island and the mainland. Perched on the log, the other man's long limbs jutted at severe angles, giving him the look of a grade school teacher in a student's desk.

He was soon forced to abandon the moon's powerful silence as his friend, grunting and cursing, weaved his wobbly way back amongst the logs and stumps, finally dropping next to him into a hasty squat. From there, he quickly scooped out a small pit in the cool sand, separated the paper bag from the beer and tossed it into the depression. The dry grass he laid on top carefully, with a curious deftness that rather defied his drunkenness. Then, feeling about his immediate surroundings, he retrieved some small sticks and set them on top of the grass.

"Let the fire be lit," Dave cried as he ignited a full book of matches and rested its sulfuric glow next to the base of the combustible pyramid. "Have a beer."

Dave tossed Rob one of the cans, its perspiring surface caked with sand. Rob turned his eyes to the fire with a slight resignation, leaving the moon to tremble alone in its temperate silence. Now he observed heat and light noisily consume the first two layers of fuel, while Dave, the fire burning as much in his own head, crashed off in search of starter wood, kicking over his beer and slamming his ankle against a log. Rob followed his dancing shadow as it receded over the dark folds of sand.

The fire was soon established, an ample stack of driftwood piled nearby. Each man held a beer in one hand and a poking stick in the other.

"Twenty years? I don't know," Rob was saying. "I can't think about next month."

"C'mon," Dave insisted, his thin face squinting with impatience in the fire's glow. "Where do you see yourself in twenty years? You'll be fifty then."

"Right here, I guess. I'm not going any place else." Rob sighed as his body settled into its mattress of sand, but Dave wouldn't let up.

"You want to live by the ocean, is that what you mean?"

"I don't know what *you* mean," Rob muttered, roused from his grainy cradle. "I'm living by the ocean right now."

"You're not living at all," Dave said. "Not really. You just work and get drunk and feel lousy and guilty all the time and you hardly ever get laid. And you don't have any money."

"Speak for yourself. Besides, I get laid all right."

Dave ignored him. "We're not doing so good, man. When our parents were our age, they were already married. They had mortgages. They'd been through a war!" Dave paused for a moment, summing up, in repetition. "Married, mortgages, a war ... nope, we're just not doing so good."

“Marriage is war,” Rob noted. He didn't like his friend when he got all preoccupied like this. “Maybe it's not a matter of us doing good or bad, it's just that things haven't gone our way.”

“What about the mortgage? You have any idea how much a house like those costs?” asked Dave, swinging an arm towards a far a row of glinting yellow lights where houses lined the bay, mirrored in flickering gold by the water's reflection.

Dave didn't really want money, he just thought about it a lot. For the greatest part of each day, in the heat, in the rain, in the bar afterwards, he thought about things in terms of their relative cost weighed against their absolute value. For it seemed to him that everything, even a sunset, has its price. A sunset in the company of a pretty woman at a window seat of a fancy restaurant simply had more value and justified a higher price. And a sunset camping by the lake could be broken down into gasoline and tents and paper plates and a hundred other things to find its net worth. Problem was, all this thinking didn't help Dave understand a thing.

It could be ironic, Dave decided, that his job was building giant houses for the wealthy retiring folks streaming in from the Mainland, or back East. And if their big money meant steady pay, it also meant pain-in-the-ass features like stained glass skylights or intricate staircases lined with the Italian marble Dave had to lug over muddy trails on the job site. Surely ironic, considering his own grand residence was a decaying trailer at the back of Joe Baker's house.

Joe Baker, whether by coincidence or design, actually ran a bakery in Qualicum Beach, but since the supermarket had expanded and added its own, Joe's business had dwindled. Joe, in honesty, would have accepted less money for renting the trailer, but Dave didn't know it. He just wasn't very sharp about money. Not like his boss, Steve Jensen, who got the contracts to build the houses and had a GPS in his truck and a natural blonde wife with outstanding tits who could actually cook and actually did, too.

Rob began to sing, although it resonated more like a murmur. Unlike Dave, Rob felt little pressure to succeed. He had ambition, make no mistake, but it went in the opposite direction to what is typically expected. His ambition was to succeed at nothing, to find gaps between the mental chatter and dwell in their expansive nothingness. For him, nothing was worth racking your brains over, not stained glass windows, not blondes, not anything. He didn't know it, but Rob understood that money can't buy peace of mind.

The darkness was fading now, as if white paint were being slowly poured into the blackness, tinting it to ever paler shades of gray. The temperature had fallen to its lowest point, but the fire had by now generated a large bed of shimmering red coals, and it warmed them well, fending off the dampness in their clothes.

“You okay to drive?” Rob asked.

“Nope.”

“You think you can float on a log?”

“Yup.”

It didn't take them long to select a thick cedar, roll it into the water and launch it atop the small waves of the retreating morning tide, all the while calling out utterances such as “Ahoy,” and “Cast off” and “Aye-aye, mate.” They had paddled a few hundred yards when a pale summer sun crested the hills along the eastern coast of the Island.

The importance of impulse, it seems, has been lost, if but for obsession, on our frantic society, its direction culled from haphazardly tangled metadata. Life for most has

become a running game of snakes and ladders, tempered with both encouragements and setbacks small and large at varying intervals, a game in which the final outcome puts into question the object of the game, or worse, the need to play at all. And the twin variables of the board's design and the roll of the dice make sure there can be no predictions. Yet, at times, we are confronted with the open hand of impulse, offering unknown desires, manifested in non-causal action to an unconscious signal, entreating us to turn around, to switch lanes, or, as in this case, to float on a log.

“You think you'll marry Eleanor?”

Rob was absorbed by a quiet gathering of gulls on a bed of kelp.

“I wonder if that's where they sleep,” he said.

“I'd do it if I were you. Don't let that one get away.”

“Where would she go?”

Dave laughed. He didn't know. “The same place they all go, Roberto, the same damn place.”

If we are to have any say in the placement of our ladders and snakes, it is in heeding the mute directors of the spirit, by following their cues, wheedling from invisible folding chairs, whispering from backstage. It is a submissive action, but an action nonetheless; perhaps the only truly unmethodical action a person can perform.

Whether or not Rob or Dave were acting on impulse, by this measure, is actually not yet the point, however, if you allow thought to examine it longer. No, what is extraordinary here is that Rob and Dave habitually acted together, suggesting that their inner directors were ever conferring, changing scripts and designing new plots for an altered theme involving the combined destiny of two men. If you were smart and had a university degree, you might call it “The Laurel and Hardy Effect,” or something like that.

They tried to cling to the shoreline, paddling with their arms in a swooping motion as they floated on the giant cedar. An apple twirled past the log and Rob ate it. “I bet we could make Mexico before Christmas,” he said, only half in jest. “Water would warmer there,” he added.

As the noon hour approached, they were far from the beach where they had built their fire the night before, and even farther from themselves. They didn't talk now; the scriptwriters were idle. Not even a mention of turning around, and Mexico still a thousand miles away. Then without warning a small vessel crossed their path and its wake set Dave and Rob bobbing, and the pair struggled to keep the log from spinning. The boat swerved in a wide circle around them. Its motor stopped.

Dave and Rob, as it happened, had strayed a considerable distance from shore, and were relieved when they climbed aboard the boat. In it were two American sportsmen, with whom they laughed and barked in exuberant tones, explaining themselves and offering advice on where to catch the big Coho.

To follow one's impulse has nothing to do with understanding right or wrong. Rather, falling short of the urge to jump headlong in front of an oncoming train, impulse is normally reserved for actions that carry no specific outcome, no sense of urgency; this is how one distinguishes impulse from insanity. To act impulsively, one must employ a sort of instant appreciation for events that have yet no future, no outcome. For, if events consist of their material parts bound together in the construct of space by the illusion of

time, impulse is something like a momentary singularity of material outside of both space and time. Destiny knows nothing of the past or the future. Rob's not far behind.

As it turned out, the Americans were not only looking for a little fishing, but were also interested in buying a cabin. "Be cheaper to build one," Rob had said without thinking, before he knew what he was saying.

"Sure," said the bigger of the two Americans, mindfully rubbing fish scales from his shirt, "but I sure as hell don't have the time to build a cabin."

"We do."

And so without anticipation was an outcome. Details were discussed, arrangements considered, but the spark, the essence of it all remained elusive, intangible. Call it by any name: divine energy field, subconscious mind, God, the universe, or Murphy's Law. Of course, the pair might well have been devoured by a killer whale, or maybe they really could have made it to Mexico. For now, they lay in the sun drying, warming, evolving, as the Americans trolled back to the beach from which they had set sail.

Dave grinned at Rob as they climbed the steep slope to the highway, feeling in his pocket for the card with the Americans' phone number. He doubted Steve Jensen had started out this way, but he didn't care. They went to Lorna's Cafe for supper, and Dave considered getting both bacon *and* mushrooms on his burger. As for Rob, he had already forgotten the Americans. He was once again an observer, the world's only witness to the biological ingestion of an overloaded foot-long submarine sandwich.

The waitress stopped at their table to pour them more coffee. Dave smiled at her, something he rarely did. When she smiled back, he broke further with ritual, speaking to her out loud.

"You're a natural blonde, aren't you?" he asked shamelessly.

The girl looked at him hard but sensed no bad intention.

"Yeah, that's right," she answered.

"Thought so," said Dave, his smile expanding. "I'll bet you like to cook, too."