

Garbage · *Ron Tanner*

CAPTAIN SAYS we can't dump here because the tide's too strong and will wash everything ashore, which'll catch us hell when we return. So we head out, losing sight of the city, its towers sticking tops through the haze like gray fingertips through dirty rags—like someone drowning in garbage. No one's drowned yet on our run, dangerous as it is, though my mate, Douglas, fell in once when we were dumping and the load dragged him fifty feet down, he said. But he was buoyed up finally by a loose trash bag that had filled with gas somehow. A chemical reaction, Captain said. So we found Douglas grasping black plastic and bobbing barely afloat amid the debris, gulls swooping and shrieking excitement, and the sharks starting to stir in the distance, their fins cutting closer through the flotsam. It seems to bring everything to life, the dumping, contrary to what the critics say—we're feeding the seas. You never seen so many fish surface, wallowing in the burbling sinkage, mouths gaping as if they'd swallow the bricks of crushed vegetable and rag waste whole. Gulls clamor and clap, delighted it seems, lighting on the barge decks to watch what comes rolling up—squared-off packs of compressed stuff the size of compact cars, which bob in the foam for a while as hundreds of gulls begin pecking, leaving each garbage block oozy and brilliant white with droppings, before the packs sink finally, carried off the continental shelf by outbound currents and to the sea floor some two thousand feet down, where they will sit for a million years, Captain says, until they are nothing but sand-covered slime.

We don't usually unload until we're three miles out, on the international sea, but sometimes Captain gets tired and lets it go early. He's got no patience with the tender-hearts who are making things hard nowadays, trying to ban sea dumps. Just like the people who eat steak, he says, but can't stand the thought of butchering and want their meat well done so they won't have to look at the blood. You got to take the heat if you're going to cook with fire, he says. They should be out here to feel what it's like. Tell us where to put a 30,000 ton load. It's five barges long and Captain can barely pull it. We're four knots into the chop, the barges rolling on the wake like a flag in a breeze, the wash spilling up and over, our pumps working full-throttle, and a dark cloud of gulls a mile long spiraled

behind like an airborne waterspout. Captain says we might go over night if the chop won't let up.

A night dump's something to see because some of this stuff glows. More chemical reaction, says Captain. Some of the fish glow too. Captain can't explain that, but says it's just the way things are—you see all kinds of things people ashore can't figure. I was looking once to make sure the dump's going clear and suddenly a silver flash as big as a baseball diamond came up at me in the black water like a constellation falling from the sky. I toppled back and was nearly mauled by one of the lifters as it slammed into place. Just a school of fish, Captain told us, don't be scared, tender-hearts. He teases like that. But we do get scared sometimes. And Captain says smart people ought to. It's the only way to stay alive.

Here's trouble: the Canadian Coast Guard telling us over loud speakers to back off, their huge red maple leaf flapping overhead as they arc around our bow, their uniformed young men at attention, squinting at us from one side. They wear little caps that look like artist berets, every man clean-shaven and frowning at our smell, which the sun makes bigger than usual. You get used to it, Tender-hearts! I shout at them, but they can't hear. Douglas turns to smile at me. It's a baby-like smile because he's got no teeth. Captain is cursing in the cabin. He blows the horn, then starts talking to the Canadians over the radio, the static crackling like burning wood. If we let go here, they tell us, the stuff will find its way back to Newfoundland—they've got the currents figured out and there's no arguing with them because they've got guns and speed. Captain carries a rifle, shotgun, and two revolvers, enough for each of us, though we've never had reason to use them; but I can't say we won't ever, things are getting so rough out here.

South we go, says Captain, steering that way. First Mate winches me and Douglas to the barges to make sure nothing comes loose as we make the course change. First Mate reminds us to wear our life vests, something we didn't start doing till Douglas went over that time. It does good to be unhampered by clothes back here, there's so much that gets in the way. So when it's real hot, life vests are all we wear, me and Douglas running along the rusted barge sides like Adam and Eve their first day, Paradise piled in steamy stacks before us and Nature clamoring all around. Douglas is what they call "dumb," unable to speak anything but a grunt, so he's got a whistle around his neck he uses to signal me. Nobody can read him

as well as I can, so Captain counts on my abilities when we need Douglas bad because Douglas is the one who does the dangerous stuff, dropping between two barges, say, to secure a chain when the chop could crush him like a cracker; or climbing up the barge tower in a thunder storm to fix the antenna so we can call for help. Don't know where Captain got Douglas, but when I came on, his mate had just fallen dead from heart failure—an old man who'd been like a father to him—so Captain was looking for someone to bunk with Douglas and take the old man's place. I'm not that old but I was willing to hold a head now and then and say, There, now, it's not so bad, as Douglas bawled silently, his eyes awash but without a break of sound. I'd never seen anything like it.

Douglas enjoys running through the clouds of flies that hover always over the stacks. The birds give him a hard time because they think it's their territory—they swoop at him and even rain droppings. But Douglas doesn't mind. It's like he's one of them. He whistles to let me know the pump on number three is out. He's standing on a stack, gulls circling over him, a cloud of flies like a black halo around his bald head. He has no body hair to speak of. Mutation, Captain calls it. Which means things didn't go right when his father and mother made him. But he's OK in the head. No one finds as many things wrong as he does—he can spot it immediately when a pump's out or a stack's giving way. I wave back to him to say I got the message, which I shout back to First Mate, who just shakes his head in disgust because he can't stand to see things go wrong the way things are starting to go today. First Mate's a young man who wanted to be in the US Coast Guard but failed for some reason. Maybe because he couldn't stand to see things go wrong. It gets him twitchy, his right leg jittering like he's having spasms.

Douglas and me take off our clothes, it gets so hot, the barge mounds blasting furnace waves of odor, decomposing fast. We eat lunch under the barge tower on number five. Great thing about eating back here is that the flies and birds leave you alone, they have so much other stuff to pick at. Wave wash reaches where we sit, cooling the iron and making foam steam along the barge edge. Sitting out here's made us so dark we don't get blistered any more. We got cans of chili and two handfuls of hard water biscuits for eats. Douglas tips his can to his mouth like drinking soda, the beans clinging to his upper lip and chin. When he's done he just tosses it overboard and I wag a finger at him: Tender-hearts are going to sue you

for that, Douglas. He grins and gives me the finger.

A chopper overhead startles us because it seems to come from nowhere, dropping from the white-sunned sky like a monster bird about to settle on the tug roof and sink it. First Mate is shaking his fist at it. Douglas and I run up to see what's the matter. Turns out the state of Virginia is afraid we're going to let go nearby, which would foul the Chesapeake, so they're warning us off. It's like that all the way down the coast — two weeks and three refuelings later. First Mate says we ought to let go wherever we damn well please because these are international waters. But not international currents, Captain reminds him, smoothing a wrinkled hand over his gray beard. He looks at us like we have ideas. Where are your clothes? he asks. Douglas and I look to the barges and shrug. We forgot about them, we've been so busy, I tell him. Barge three is about to give in, so we've been trading pumps, moving four to three and back again. But it can't go on like that. We're exhausted. The wind's picked up so much the flies are clinging to the heaps like barnacles and the gulls waver overhead, fighting to keep up with us, their wings outstretched like stiff kite sails.

When the Florida Coast Guard speeds towards us First Mate pulls Captain's shotgun from the rack and aims it out the cabin window. Douglas, on the outside, jumps up, putting his face to the gun barrel and blows his whistle, startling First Mate so bad it gives Captain a chance to slam him with a cola bottle. By the time I get there they've got First Mate tied on the floor, Douglas sitting on his chest grinning and naked except for his orange life vest. It all happens so fast the young Coast Guard men don't see it — they're too serious to imagine such a thing, Captain says, every boy with narrow eyes and pinched nose like we were some kind of floating plague. Go south, they tell us. So we do. But Captain's discouraged. Says he's getting too old for this kind of run around. The city commission's going to hear about it. Things are getting too political, he says, glancing down at First Mate, who looks asleep, a welt the size of a hardball at the back of his head.

Douglas and I take turns holding ice on First Mate's head till he feels better. We spoon soup into his mouth but he lets half of it spill out, he's so angry. Let me go, he says, over and over. Douglas shakes his head no, and holds out another spoonful of chicken noodle. Eat, I tell him, or you'll get sick. He tells me to go to hell. We can't run the barges without him, he says, because Captain's too old to do the work of two men. Already pump

four's starting to sputter with weakness, it's been moved and worked so much. One of the barges is going down. It's just a matter of time, says First Mate, glancing from me to Douglas and back again. Douglas shakes his head—no—once more. First Mate tells him to go to hell.

I winch Douglas to the barges so he can check the pumps. Captain's looking at charts and shaking his head. We may have to turn back, he says, though it might mean the end of his career. You just don't go out with 30,000 tons and come back with it a month later. It costs a fortune. He's got to dump somewhere. First Mate says Mexico is the best bet. The whole country's a dump, he says. Captain tells me to take the wheel while he goes down for more charts. First Mate smiles up at me and says I'm the only one with brains on the boat. I'm the only one who's ever made sense in his thinking. After all, he says, who can understand Douglas best? And who does the Captain rely on when things get rough? I turn around to look at him. Me? I ask. Look who's at the wheel, he says: you. Let me go, he says, and I promise I'll behave. He speaks so kindly, I do what he says. Then he punches me in the stomach, takes a pistol from Captain's drawer, and tells me to stand. Captain looks about to faint when he comes up and sees what's happened. To Mexico, First Mate says. He makes Captain pilot and he keeps the gun to my head, his right leg jittering. Douglas is whistling that barge three's about to go. But I don't answer. When I glance back I see him standing on a stack and waving with both arms. But no one waves back. He's stuck out there now.

We'll drop in the gulf as soon as we can, First Mate says. The tug's slowing because barge three is filling with water. Douglas keeps whistling and the gulls shriek in response, they're so irritated. We'll all go down if we don't do something about that barge, Captain tells First Mate. Soon as it's dark, First Mate says, we're sinking the barges. All of them. The whole thing will be logged as a catastrophe. That way nobody will be to blame. What about Douglas? I ask. First Mate shrugs. What about him? Suddenly we see an ocean liner, drifting like a white cloud on the horizon, the first ship we've seen since leaving the city, not counting flecks of sail boats in the distance now and then. If we're going to log an accident, Captain says, we'll have to signal distress. First Mate's eyes go wild with panic. He shoots the radio. You shouldn't have done that, says Captain, sounding very tired. Douglas keeps whistling. The gulls cry.

Something jerks the tug and we look back to see barge three going

down, garbage blocks beginning to float, birds swooping madly, stirred by the change. Douglas is behind with number four trying to unhook the linkage—he wants to save what he can. Captain groans. Untie! First Mate tells me, Untie! He shoves me to the back of the tug. I'm on my knees staring at the froth churning from the tug-end, chains clanking against the grease-streaked stern, the blue-green water below. Captain cuts the engine. First Mate pushes his pistol into my neck. The cold makes me shiver. My hands grip for algae-covered chain links but they're too slippery and too heavy. It takes two! I'm shouting, two people! A jolt knocks First Mate down. Douglas has sent load four over, emptying the barge, but the force of it, dragged with sinking number three, makes the barge line buckle. Now four is sinking and Douglas stands on five, whistling for help. We're going down. I'm about to leap on First Mate when Captain starts shooting, aiming for First Mate, but missing, the bullets pinging off the deck. First Mate dives. Then we follow.

The suck of sinkage pulls me down like a vacuum, yanking off my life vest and spinning me like a cork screw until I'm so dizzy I don't know which is bottom and which is top, my head and nose so full of stinging water it seems my eyes will pop out. Pain inside and darkness everywhere. Confusion. Then there's light, a blinding glare on the water, so suddenly calm now. I spit up, blinking, reaching for something to save me—a clump of foam. Heaps all around burble as they sink, water bubbling and foaming, flies swirling in angry knots at the surface. I'm kneeing through, almost crawling, the dump load is so thick in the water. Captain dog-paddles towards me, his gray beard dripping, his eyes sad like a spaniel's. Follow me, he says. I'm panting, trying to call out for Douglas, but all I do is cough. The idea is to get as far from the junk as possible before the sharks come. Schools of fish flutter by, flashing in the turquoise below. There will be so much confusion, the sharks'll tear into whatever moves, tails flailing, fish darting frenzied through the dark passages of gnarled waste. Gulls watch us from sinking piles, their black eyes blinking as we paddle close by. They gobble strands of vegetable muck and snap at flies. A ship—the liner—sounds its horn, a distant moan. Does it see us? How could it miss? Captain says.

What looks like a mound of oil-soaked fabric and foam just ahead is Douglas, we discover, dragging First Mate, who nearly drowned. Douglas smiles in greeting. I kiss his forehead. First Mate sputters, flailing in his

savior's arms. He's as pale as fish belly. Captain says we should swim slow and easy, conserving our strength because it's a long way to the liner. But we're saved, he says. They'll send a boat to pick us up. Expect an investigation, he tells us, and much controversy. But that will change nothing, I know, because by the time we get back to the city another 30,000 tons will be waiting for us, the people desperate to get rid of it, and so about this time next month we'll be at sea again, pulling another barge line and seeking another place to drop our load, me and Douglas working in the sun all day with the sea lapping our feet like nothing else exists except it, the stacks of garbage, and the endless horizon.