

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

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NATIONAL
BESTSELLING
AUTHOR

IN BLOOM

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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Published by Amazon Original Stories, Seattle
www.apub.com

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ISBN-13: 9781662516900 (digital)

Cover design by Faceout Studio, Spencer Fuller
Cover illustration by Phantom City Creative

for John Langan

From the apex of the Bourne Bridge, almost 150 feet above the Cape Cod Canal, the undulating, fluorescent-green water bullying the shores looks alive.

Thirty-year-old Heidi Cohen has always hated driving over the vertiginous bridge, with its two sets of narrow lanes and only thin yellow center lines bulwarking the traffic, preventing cars from crashing, piling up, forming a superorganism of rubber, glass, and metal. Heidi superstitiously holds her breath as her hybrid station wagon, with over 200,000 miles on the odometer, passes over the canal's blue-green algae bloom. She exits the bridge onto the equally mad rotary, a vehicular free-for-all that confounds the hordes of out-of-state tourists who descend on the Cape each summer. Even this summer, which will be the hottest on record, until next summer. Even with water temperatures in the ponds, saltwater riverways, and bays averaging more than ten degrees higher than they were fifteen years ago. Even though these warm waters are blooming and brimming with cyanobacteria. Blue state police SUVs are beached on each of the rotary's exit shoulders, the officers neither directing nor impeding traffic.

Heidi navigates the rotary onto Sandwich Road, which traces the seven-mile length of the canal. From her ongoing research, a crash course on the effects of blue-green algae blooms, she knows that animals and people present a variety of physiological and neurological symptoms after direct skin contact with the algae or ingesting water or consuming shellfish laden with domoic acids, which are potent neurotoxins. Large blooms are even capable of producing harmful, sometimes hallucinogenic gases. Heidi presumes Sandwich Road would be shut down if that were the case now. Maybe that's a naive presumption. She eyes a cellophane-wrapped pack of pandemic-holdover N95 masks on the passenger seat, but she doubts their efficacy against toxic gas. After finally taking the on-ramp to Route 6, the sole multilane highway through about half the length of the Cape, Heidi dictates a text to her lunchtime interview subject, Jimmy Lang.

“Sorry. Running about fifteen minutes late.”

He responds almost instantly, his text read aloud by her phone in a male Australian accent: “I'm in no rush. I'll save us a table.”

Heidi is Jewish, with long, curly black hair and dark-brown eyes. When asked, she rounds her height up to five feet two inches. She is a freelance journalist, living in a small East Providence apartment because it's cheaper than living in or near Boston. Her roommate of almost four years is Ty Yoshida, a willowy Japanese man five years older than Heidi. They had not known each other prior to being roommates; she had been given his ROOMMATE WANTED ad by a friend of a friend of a friend. Three months after she moved into the apartment, the pandemic hit. Heidi and Ty became close friends, as they both joked, by necessity. They spent almost two years navigating shared quarantine bubbles that included romantic partners, both sets of parents, and Ty's two younger siblings. As an only child, Heidi freely admits that she's envious of Ty's close, breezy relationships with his brother and sister. For the majority of those quarantine nights and days, though, it was just Heidi and Ty in the two-bedroom apartment. They occasionally played Scrabble or cards, but their main shared activity was keeping a meticulous record of shows binged and movies watched, complete with their own *Hi and Ty* grading system. Because of their closeness, they endured jealous recriminations from former partners and not-so-subtle winks and are-you-two-common-law-married-yet? quips from family and friends.

Now Heidi and Ty have both been single for more than a year. She suspects he has a crush on her. The word *crush*, instead of something like *has feelings for*, is purposeful, making the situation seem less fraught, easier to continue ignoring, even though she has a reciprocal crush on Ty. Maybe. So, yeah, it's complicated.

Ty is an operations manager for Hasbro, works from home, and is in the apartment almost all the time. Heidi claims to work from home, without ever working from home. Yesterday morning, after she turned down Ty's repeated offer to go out to breakfast because she sensed breakfast had the potential to turn into a serious talk that she wasn't willing to have, at least not yet, he joked that she was always in a rush to drive away. She said, "The opposite. I'm always driving toward something," and she pointed outside the apartment, as though her hand was eager to give away her secret thoughts, her inclination to flight. Ty sighed dramatically and said they would hang out again someday. Yes, it was passive-aggressive on his part, but it seemed self-aware enough to communicate that he knew he was being petulant. Nineteen eighties music junkie that he is, Ty sang the chorus to the Missing Persons' "Destination Unknown" as Heidi walked out the door, waving at him with a

cheery middle finger.

The blue-bomber Prius wagon is Heidi's mobile office, bought from her parents, Hal and Eva, for a dollar when they moved to Florida, of all places. Heidi enjoys the extended time alone in her car and is addicted to that easy meditative state she falls into on long highway stretches, where she's convinced she does her best problem-solving. She keeps a detailed analog log (her joke) of working miles traveled, and the back seat doubles as her workspace, complete with an extendable tray hanging from the driver's-seat headrest. She tries to keep her space clean, never mind the Pollock-esque coffee stains on the upholstery and stray USB memory sticks rattling around the floor mats.

The majority of Heidi's assignments come from the *Boston Globe*, one of the few New England newspapers hailed as a success story and not earmarked for impending extinction. Success is in the eye of the beholder, though. Last night, after Heidi told her mother she was working on a story about the environmental and economic impact of the Cape's algae blooms, Mom asked, "If the paper is doing so great, how come they don't hire you full-time?" Then she suggested, as she often did, that Heidi move "down here." Mom never dared say *Florida*. She claimed there were plenty of steady, good-paying jobs *down here*, without saying that those jobs weren't in a dying industry. Heidi wasn't in the mood to argue and instead made agreeable, noncommittal sounds before their stilted goodbyes. She is both happy and sad for her parents. She knows they never wanted to leave Massachusetts. With no other living relatives in the area, she imagines herself as functionally alone in New England. She has friends, of course, but the person she feels closest to now is Ty. So again, yeah, it's complicated.

Because she is running late, Heidi doesn't drive by her parents' former house before the interview, as originally planned. Nostalgic side trip, sure, but that house is also part of the story. Prior to moving to Florida, Heidi's parents fled city life in Cambridge for the family summer home in Dennisport, a modest two-bedroom bungalow about half a mile from the beaches. Mom and Dad had planned to spend their retirement years on the Cape, but residents had been mandated to update or replace their septic systems by the year 2030 in a Cape-wide attempt to curtail the high levels of algae-feeding nitrogen and phosphorus within the untreated human waste that enters the waterways. A new nitrogen-catching septic system cost at least \$30,000, plus another \$1,500 per year to monitor and maintain. Other towns

voted on controversial tax overrides to help fund sewage lines and treatment plants that would cost municipalities as much as half a billion dollars. Local ecologists still feared the upgrades wouldn't be enough to curb the blooms, further deoxidizing the waters and creating fishing dead zones and unsafe shellfish harvests. For the already fiscally struggling population who lived on the Cape year-round, the climate projections were as dire as the economic reality. Between the new septic system, skyrocketing real-estate taxes, and their increasing medical needs and costs, Heidi's parents couldn't afford to stay. They sold the place while they still could.

In West Dennis, the Good Friend's Cafe takes up half a small strip mall. Commercial spaces on both sides of the restaurant display **FOR LEASE** signs in otherwise empty and darkened bay windows. The café's facade has a faux-beach house design: robin's-egg-blue siding, white trim lining the windows like icing. At nearly 12:30 p.m., with temperatures approaching 100 degrees Fahrenheit, no one sits in the outdoor dining area behind a mock picket fence, where the crooked, folded, and tied table umbrellas are candles melting in the sun.

Heidi considers sending a photo of the place to Ty with some sort of witty rejoinder about meeting for second breakfast, but she decides against it. She hustles across the scorching parking lot and through the front door, where Jimmy Lang is already seated at a table for two.

Three days earlier, Heidi spun through Eastham Public Library's microfiche issues of the *Cape Cod Times*, searching for stories about previous algae blooms, and she found one associated with tragedy in 1983. The blooms had occurred in a small pond in Orleans and in neighboring Orleans Cove, and the effects of the cyanobacteria's toxins had contributed to a drowning, a possible disappearance, and scores of illnesses among players and fans who had attended the Orleans Cardinals Cape League baseball game.

The young, friendly, bespectacled white librarian, Corey Farrenkopf, told Heidi that if she wanted the definitive account of the '83 bloom—"or the definitively bizarre account," he added—she had to talk with Jimmy Lang. Lang was a frequent attendee at literary events and writer's workshops hosted at the library. Corey impishly described Lang as "a loner from central casting. Lives by himself in Chatham. Something of a local character, a walking oral

historian of the kind of things people want to forget.” How could she resist? Jimmy responded to Heidi’s interview request within twenty minutes of her sending the email.

Jimmy Lang is a bear of a man, middle-aged and white, his blue-striped, short-sleeve button-down shirt stretching tightly across his broad shoulders and chest. He hunches over the menu, staring at it with the kind of intensity one might reserve for an ancient text or legal contract. Round glasses saucer his squinting, slate-colored eyes. His beard stubble is gray, and his light-brown hair is pulled back tightly into a long ponytail. Add in his paint-stained cargo pants and ankle-high duck boots, and his look is college professor meets longshoreman.

Heidi introduces herself, and before Jimmy can fuss and fumble into standing and towering over her for a more formal greeting, she crash-lands into the seat opposite him, earthquaking the table. The black surface of Jimmy’s full coffee mug ripples and threatens to spill over the rim, and his formerly stern face lights up with a warm, contagious smile. If he is a bear, he is a teddy bear. Jimmy extends a paw and offers his name. His voice is deep but not threatening, and Heidi thinks he should be narrating the dry climate-change audiobook to which she’s currently listening.

She asks for permission to record their conversation, and Jimmy cheerfully agrees. In their quid pro quo exchange of biographical and professional information, Jimmy speaks in mannered and composed sentences, which Heidi initially interprets as his being careful with what he says and how he says it. However, by the end of his backstory—leaving an American literature PhD program at SUNY New Paltz in his late twenties, moving to a run-down house in Falmouth owned by an artists’ collective so he could write poetry and draw cartoons for the regional newspaper—it’s clear how Jimmy speaks is how he normally speaks. His laugh is easy, and he waves his hands and breaks into a funny high-pitched voice when engaging in self-deprecation.

Currently, in addition to drawing single-panel cartoons, he independently publishes collections of his work for sale in bookstores and gift shops across the Cape, and he charters his boat to local ecologists. He was on the Mashpee River two mornings before with three scientists, measuring the increasing depth of the riverbed’s gray-black muck, the collected dead bodies of the algae after blooms. The muck has the consistency of mayonnaise (here Jimmy laughs and apologizes for ruining

lunch), and it chokes and kills mussels and the eelgrass of the marshes that buffer sections of the Cape from tidal and storm surges. One of the scientists sank up to her waist in the muck and had to be pulled out by rope, with Jimmy throttling his boat in the opposite direction.

Disarmed by his frankness and affect, Heidi speaks unguardedly, as though she has met a new friend, not an interview subject. Along with her educational and professional highlights, she briefly outlines her parents' history on the Cape and their economically motivated recent move. She even shares a summary of her suddenly complicated living arrangement with Ty.

A few diners wave at Jimmy as they leave, while a few others give him a side-eye and a wide berth while walking past their table. When the sandwiches arrive, Jimmy says, as though in the middle of a pronouncement, "But you're here because Corey said I could tell you what happened in the great and terrible year of 1983."

"I am," Heidi says.

"That guy owes me money." With the end of each word, Jimmy taps the tabletop with his pointer finger. Heidi isn't sure whether he's joking until Jimmy smiles and silently chuckles to himself.

Then, without further introduction or explanation or editorializing, he launches into a story interwoven with a staggering amount of personal detail and confession. The waitress interrupts his tale momentarily, once to ask whether either of them wants more coffee, then later, the check. The intrusions of the café's reality are mere commas, and somehow, as though he anticipates them, well-timed ones. In her short but intense stint as a journalist, Heidi has yet to experience a tale like this one, both in terms of its length and its unbroken presentation. The story breaks time, as all stories do. How much of it has been expanded, embellished, and burnished by Jimmy's grief and time and retelling doesn't nag at Heidi, despite details beyond belief. There are always truths submerged within stories, and her job is, if not to dredge them up, then to invite readers onto her own chartered boat, guiding them so that they may uncover those truths from the murky waters for themselves.

By the time Jimmy finishes, it's after 2:00 p.m. The dining area is empty, and the café is closing for the day.

Dad's name was James—never Jimmy. He'd get angry when anyone called him *Jimmy*, and not the joking, ironic kind of angry. As a child, I interpreted

his response to my name as derision, as an unequivocal reflection of his attitude toward me. He was the son of Irish immigrants who both died before I was five years old—one of cancer, the other of heart disease. When I'm giving Dad the benefit of the doubt, I assume his grief over his parents' deaths hollowed him out and turned him to stone. I don't know how else to square my wonderfully silly, unfailingly kind mother having married him.

Anyway, Dad was a baseball fanatic. He kept score of every game he attended, no matter whether he was at Fenway Park, Yankee Stadium, or little Obear Park, where I'd spent so many humiliating afternoons with a glove over my sweating, clumsy fielding hand. Dad reveled in the secret codes and shadings of a score sheet. He was a devout Catholic, and I think part of baseball's appeal for him was the game's rigid catechisms, its time-honored rituals. I was not faithful enough for him in either arena. When I was between the ages of seven and twelve, he signed me up for Little League. It was never a question in his mind whether I wanted to participate or not. In season, he forced me to play catch with him in our small backyard. *Playing catch* was a misnomer, as there was no play. I always dreaded it, and I regret that now, but probably not as much as I should. Dad would instruct me, sternly, at a volume just below yelling, with each throw and catch, until by the end of our session, I was hurling the ball as hard as I could. Not to him, but at him, and at his head. Only when I was red-faced and near tears would I get an "Attaboy," as though I'd earned some hard-won masculine wisdom.

I was tall and lanky and not at all athletic, and I spent most of those cold Hudson Valley springs standing in right field like the cliché of the unskilled, disinterested player. Dad came to every practice and every game. He was a big, muscular man who, no matter the cold, had his sleeves rolled up over his thick forearms. On rides home I endured his extended critiques and criticism, which centered on my lack of aggressiveness and courage at the plate and my inability to pay attention in the field. I remember so many of those car rides, me in the back seat, him glaring at me in the rearview mirror, which was only large enough to reflect his disappointed eyes.

Before my final spring playing baseball, when I was to be the oldest player in the *Minor League*—the other twelve-year-olds had moved on to the *Major League*—I asked my mother if I had to play. Mom and Dad had marital problems by then. They didn't fight and argue so much as they simply didn't speak to one another. More and more often, I'd wake to find our living room couch strewn with a rumpled pillow and blanket, the sleeper's identity

hidden from me. In answer to my question, Mom's gaze landed everywhere in our kitchen but on me. She said, "It's one last season. Then we'll all be done with it."

In the summer of '83, with my final Little League season in the rearview mirror, I felt like a hefty granite slab had lifted. I think my father was relieved too. He was an intelligent man, and perceptive to a point. When I'm giving him the benefit of the doubt—I don't know how many benefits I have left—I think he was ashamed at how much pressure he had put on me to play baseball, and that shame fed into a spiral from which he couldn't pull us free. Perhaps like most stubborn men, he didn't know how to admit to being wrong without foolishly feeling like he was negating himself and everything in which he believed. While Mom and Dad interacted less and less, my relationship with him had begun to thaw by the time we arrived at our summer rental in Yarmouth in mid-July.

It all happened on a Sunday, on our first full day of the vacation week. We didn't go to church, which was a minor miracle, pun intended. We spent the scorching midmorning at the beach, and I split time between huddling under a beach umbrella rereading comics and scouting the water's edge for kids my age that I might dare to approach. Later, the three of us made the short walk back to our rental for lunch, which passed in an indifferent if not companionable silence. Dad finished eating first and announced he was going to a Cape League baseball game in Orleans, more a statement of intent than a conversation starter. Mom responded that she was going back to the beach, presuming that's what I had planned to do. Then Dad surprised me by asking, "Wanna come?" He didn't add to the offer with a promise of ice cream or to take me to the comics store in downtown Hyannis afterward, which was where I really wanted to go. I don't know why I said yes, and Mom and Dad both did double takes at my answer. I shouldn't have agreed to go. I didn't want to watch baseball, never mind on a day that was forecast to be the hottest on record. I think I agreed simply because Dad had asked rather than couching the invitation as a command, sounding as unsure as I did.

Eldredge Park was and is the oldest in the Cape League, home of the Orleans Cardinals, now Firebirds. The Cape League's draw for the best college baseball players in the country was that the batters used wooden bats instead of aluminum, emulating professional baseball and ensuring that pro scouts were almost always in attendance. Plus, for gaggles of ball-playing twenty-year-olds, playing in the Cape League meant a carefree, sun-filled

summer on Cape Cod. On the ride over to Orleans, Dad explained all this and more, including an enthusiastic description of the Cardinals' highly regarded shortstop—I don't remember his name—who would go on to play for the Chicago Cubs. I was promoted to sitting in the front passenger seat this time.

We arrived late, at the start of the third inning. The Cardinals were already up 3–0 on the Wareham Gatemen. That detail I remember, oddly. The park itself was gorgeous, if you were a baseball fan. Skinny wooden light stanchions dotted the perimeter. Center field was ridiculously deep, a green valley. Behind the waist-high right-field fence was a bandstand, and beyond left field there was a playground. The small set of metal bleachers behind home plate was empty because of the heat. We parked our beach chairs on the grassy, terraced hillside along the first baseline. There were maybe fifty other spectators at the game. From our slightly elevated position, I could see Boland Pond, what locals called a kettle pond because of its deep, scooped shape below the water's surface. The shoreline was maybe a hundred or so feet from the third baseline. The surface of the pond was a bright lime green that wavered in the heat if I stared too long.

The game itself was languid—yes, I know, the game is always languid—made more so by the unrelenting sun and heat. I didn't dare complain out loud, but I shifted, sweated, and sighed when the backs of my thighs stuck to my creaking chair. I pulled my hat nearly over my eyes and alternated fanning myself with my comic and extending it over my head to manufacture some shade. Dad wasn't bothered by the heat at all. As stoic as ever, posture upright and rigid, he sat with his score book on his lap and his pencil alertly clenched. Between pitches, he rolled and spun the pencil between thumb and forefinger. I do the same thing with my pencils when thinking over one of my drawings.

I made it through two innings, enough time to drink a large Coke and chew through all the ice. Then I told him, not without trepidation, that I was going to take a walk around the outfield fence. I was not going to admit my destination was the playground.

Dad saw right through my circumspection. He asked, "Aren't you too old for swings and slides? Do you want me to give you a push?"

He hadn't served me a full dose of his sarcasm, but with the heat, it was enough for me to snap back that I wasn't too old to hide under the slide for some goddamned shade. I thought for sure he'd cut me down for using the Lord's name in vain, especially on a Sunday, but instead he slumped a little

in his chair and said okay and not to wander too far from the field. For the second time that day, he sounded unexpectedly vulnerable. I know my memory of this exchange has been colored, altered by time and circumstance, but it's still how I remember it.

I headed for the playground. There were no other kids there, so I ensconced myself in the play structure's covered faux crow's nest, modeled after a pirate ship. I thought my vantage point was a compromise my father would appreciate; I was shaded but elevated enough so I could still watch the game, and he could see me if he cared to. I'd brought a single issue of the *Swamp Thing* comic; the rest of my stack was in the car. After having seen the admittedly hokey *Swamp Thing* film in 1982, I had fallen in love with the hero monster and had found four issues from Bernie Wrightson's 1970s run at a tiny comics place in New Paltz. Inside the crow's nest, I wasn't really reading—I already knew the story details by heart—but lingering on the art, on Wrightson's instantly recognizable style that blurred the lines between an obsessive, detailed realism and phantasmagoric chaos. I had this trick of unfocusing my eyes so the colors on the page would blur and leak beyond their borders, and I believed that I was looking deeper, seeing the rough sketch with which the artist's panel originated. In this case, I imagined where Wrightson made his first line, the first mark of the monster. Then I redrew the panel in my head, the sketch awash in those colors that didn't fit between any lines, and wouldn't until I was finished. Sometimes I made it to the end of the replicated panel. Sometimes I didn't, and undaunted, I'd start over, mentally drawing the panel with a different first line. In this manner I fell into my usual comics wormhole, and when I finally looked up, what little of the crowd left at the game was cheering. It was the bottom of the last inning. The home team was down by a run and had runners on first and third with two outs.

I looked back to the terraced area along the first baseline. Dad stood between our empty chairs, clapping and extorting the batter on. It was the shortstop prospect he had told me about. From my distance, the batter appeared minuscule, but I could tell he was confident as he took menacing practice swings and then aggressively dug into the batter's box with his cleated right foot, never once taking his eye off the pitcher. The first two pitches were balls, way outside, and the catcher had to jab his arm across his body to keep the ball from sailing to the backstop. Dad shouted, loud enough that I could hear him, using a Wicked Witch of the West voice: "The pitcher

is melting! What a world, what a world!” Instead of feeling embarrassed, which I probably should’ve, his taunt struck me as hilarious. Since when did he use fake voices? The next pitch was a mighty swing and miss, and had I been next to my father, I would’ve joked that I felt the breeze from my seat. The next pitch was a called strike. Judging by Dad’s reaction, putting both hands on top of his head and then sliding them down his face, he didn’t agree with the call, but he would never yell at an umpire; his Catholic version of baseball included unquestioned authority. The next pitch was a ball, high and inside, passing right under the batter’s chin, and the batter didn’t even flinch. Now the count was full. By this point I was fully engaged and enjoying Dad’s unselfconscious reactions to every pitch, even as I wondered why he cared so much. I wished for the batter to hit a home run, and hit it to me in left field so that I could retrieve the ball and present it to Dad, as though it were—I don’t know—the Holy Grail. A silly daydream, but the kind that’s not so silly because it stuck with me all these years. I didn’t get my wish. The batter pounced on the next pitch, and the ball was already rocketing toward left field, a white streak in the blue sky, before I even heard the crack of the ball hitting the wooden bat. The ball was coming right at me, until it wasn’t. It curled hard to my right and into foul territory, disappearing into the weeds and knee-high grass between the field and Boland Pond. The players morosely returned to their previous spots, and the crowd’s cheers turned to low grumbles of disappointment. In that new, simmering silence, a teenage girl yelled for help.

She shouted, “Please, help! He’s drowning! He can’t get out!” while staggering away from Boland Pond and toward the baseball field. I hadn’t seen her or her brother when the foul ball had moments earlier landed in the nearby grass. She wore a blue T-shirt and peach terry cloth shorts, which were damp with water. I would find out later her name was Erica, she was fifteen years old, and she had waded into the pond after her younger brother. She had dared him, offering five dollars, to jump in and fully submerge himself, despite the water’s layer of scummy green algae. The closer she got to the field, the more she wobbled, and her yells became unintelligible screaming. Red patches, blotches, and raised lines and bumps scored the white skin of her legs. It looked like she had poison ivy from the waist down. Behind her, back in the pond, her brother thrashed and splashed.

From here, everything happened quickly, and I know my timeline is off or muddled, but I’m going to do the best I can to relate the experience in a

somewhat logical manner.

A few steps from the foul line, Erica fell to her knees and vomited. The approaching players and coaches moved in slow motion, as if they weren't sure what they were seeing or hearing. One person didn't hesitate to sprint across the infield dirt, the outfield grass, and past the collapsed girl to the pond. That was my father.

Sorry . . . one moment. I—I wasn't expecting to tear up.

Dad ran directly to the pond and the struggling boy. The boy's name was Finn, by the way. I should've mentioned that earlier. Dad ran heedlessly and splashed into the water. His decisive action spurred some players and spectators to follow him to the pond's edge. I climbed down from the crow's nest and sprinted around the left-field fence. Erica was on her back. She writhed and tore up chunks of sod and threw them at the small group of adults tending to her. Her red skin looked worse, more painful from up close. Her hands and forearms were the same angry red as her legs. I headed toward the pond and my father, made it to about maybe twenty-five feet from the water, and stopped. Or I was stopped, like I'd hit a wall. The temperature suddenly spiked, and the air went chewy, impossible to breathe. There was an overpowering, tangy smell, a room full of lilacs with none of the sweetness, though the smell was swampy too, the moldering of vegetation and sediment brined in vinegar. I got light-headed, the kind you might experience when you are bent over and then stand up too quickly. My vision, well, it didn't blur exactly, but it became unfocused, like when I stared at a comic. Colors went fuzzy and diffused beyond the boundaries. In the painfully bright blue sky, white stars exploded into brief life, accompanied by a crackling, staticky hum.

I moved forward, stuck in the molasses of a dream. Players and spectators were strewn on the ground. Some were on their knees, looking up at the sparking, burring sky, and some were prostrate on all fours, their heads down. Other people staggered around the outfield, milling about like honeybees drunk on smoke. I somehow kept my feet and continued toward the pond's shore. About ten feet away, there was a group of people, and they were . . . Have you ever seen a box of bait worms, and the worms entwine themselves into a writhing ball as a kind of defense, as though they know one of them is going to be chosen? I say that, but referring to the worms' behavior as a purposeful choice might be ascribing to them an intelligence different from their own, and not necessarily a better or smarter one, mind

you. At the shoreline, in the muck and mire, assorted players and fans were in what we called as kids a dogpile, and they roiled over and on top of each other, clutching, grabbing, flailing their arms, moaning, yelling gibberish, clicking their teeth to some secret rhythm I couldn't quite latch on to. Two audible, breathless words bubbled up from within the tumult: *help* and *please*. I remember thinking *yes*, without thinking the word, if that makes sense. My jumbled thoughts were broadcast as impulses and images, not words. And in that moment, the dogpile knew what I was thinking, just as I knew what they were thinking. I would go to them, and grab a hand or a leg, and then lay on top of the pile, and they would welcome me, and I would hold and be held, and maybe burrow my way inside, and that was how I would *help* and *please*.

What happened next I could offhandedly describe as a spell breaking, but there was nothing magic going on. My brain, as a result of the algae's hallucinogenic toxins I'd inhaled—I know that much is true—had time-traveled. I mean *time* in evolutionary terms, traveling within the coded memory of my DNA, back to when our ancestors lived in the primordial oceans and were nothing but nerves and electrical impulses dedicated to environmental observation and reaction, with little bandwidth to spare for a singular, primitive sentience. I ached to join the group, but before I could, Dad emerged from the surface of the bubbling green pond, standing waist deep, his arms still below the surface. His mouth was open, a silent scream, and his skin bubbled and blistered red. That red leaked into the air around him, forming an aura. The fleeting daytime stars flickered in and out of their angry, buzzing existence. Dad pulled the limp boy out of the water, and the green algae-slicked surface stretched like taffy, clinging to the kid like it didn't want to let go. But it did let go, reluctantly. The water bubbled with unseen movement below the surface. Dad stumbled out of the pond and casually tossed the boy to his right, into a weedy patch of dry land. The boy wasn't moving.

Dad and I shared a look. I like to imagine we shared recognition, if not reconciliation. I fear the truth is, without me adding the weight of years and regret, what we shared was a blank look, a vast, terrible blankness that I long to forget someday. Dad stepped toward the squirming worm-ball of people, and they parted. Something within the shared group intelligence forced everyone to splinter and scatter away before Dad, or something else, could make contact. I stepped back too.

Then a ten-foot green wave rose behind my father. It was less a wave

than the water leavening like bread. The rounded wall was green initially, then as the curling, morphing shape blotted out the sun, its green changed to blues, reds, and purples. Whatever it was, it cascaded onto my father, his standing form outlined briefly, almost comically, like in one of those old Warner Bros. cartoons when the hapless Wile E. Coyote is hit with a giant shovel and his face and body are perfectly outlined in the metal. Dad collapsed under the weight of the blob-like thing that oozed and flowed forward, out of the pond and toward the baseball field at a surprising pace. Fully emerged, it was the size of two cars, one stacked on top of the other. Though maybe *mass* is a better word than *size*, as it changed shape, elongating and stretching when terrain and circumstance dictated a new shape was necessary.

If I'm saying this part too matter-of-factly, I apologize. I don't know how else to tell it. What you need to understand is that my brain was in thrall, hijacked by the toxins. *Hijacked* isn't quite the right word, though. I was still me, but I was also tethered to a shared signal, a primitive connectedness, and I wasn't afraid of the creature so much as it was a new element of the surrounding environment of which I was a part. Of course, the years of incapacitating nightmares featuring algae and the creature, coupled with my waterway searches, which I will get to at the end, have sanded away any rough edges of my disbelief.

I followed the thing, or maybe I was led on by it, running to keep pace. I was the only person who followed. I don't remember anyone else screaming or reacting to the creature's presence. Not that I called out for help. I remember everyone else as those smoke-drunk bees I described them as earlier, surviving the afternoon, and however many more after, because of their collective lack of will, their lack of spine, if you don't mind an invertebrate pun. I know that's not fair, but it's how I feel. I haven't been quiet about it either, which hasn't exactly endeared me to the families of the players and spectators who still live on or visit the Cape.

The creature had no arms or legs, no permanent appendages that I could see, though it flashed amorphous flagella that then retracted, returning to its bulk after clearing its path of baseball gloves, folding over a section of chain-link fence, and eventually knocking away beach chairs on the terraced incline. Otherwise the creature progressed as seamlessly and relentlessly as a calved iceberg through the sea, shedding a slime of algae as it navigated across the field, the incline, and to the parking lot. No longer fully blanketed

in algae, it changed color, to the slate gray of sun-bleached pavement. The change was nearly instantaneous. From the parking lot, it crossed quickly over the two-lane Route 28, changing its color again to an amalgam of forest greens and bark browns as it disappeared, or dissolved, into a thick copse of trees. I followed it across the road, and later a driver, an old man who lived in Orleans, reported swerving to avoid running me over.

The rest of my chase is hazier in my memory. I remember weaving between trees, brush, and the yards of a few houses. I remember it as *weaving*, as moving like the creature moved. I remember flashes of thinking like the creature, seeing what it saw, or maybe seeing a memory, and during my passage through those woods, I oozed, effortlessly dodging and curling through a seaweed forest and around lumpen, shadowed shipwrecks doomed to the bottom of a deep, dark sea. The sky's sparking buzz dulled to a low hum.

The shared connection started weakening, and I came back more fully to myself. I saw glimpses of the fleeing creature, or thought I saw glimpses. I could follow it by sound, though, led on by the crunch of leaves and pine needles beneath its shifting, undulating weight. The *helps* and *pleases* I'd sensed or received while standing before that dogpile of people by Boland Pond now broadcast in the fading voice of my father. In the shrinking, lessening sense of shared or connected animal thought amplified or enabled by the fog of the hallucinogenic toxins, I understood there would be no saving him, no saying goodbye. Still, despite everything, I wanted to join Dad. I wanted to join Dad and the creature. That's why I followed. Eventually that shared signal cut out completely, abandoning me at the edge of wide saltwater marshes fed by Orleans Cove, unpassable on foot. I use *abandon* purposefully. Yes, I was terrified for my father, and I would mourn him in the days, weeks, and years to come, but the sense of grief I felt at the severing of the shared signal went cellular deep. The police eventually found me, sunk up to my knees in a marsh, staring ahead at the maze of saltwater rivers and streams that led to the cove, its normally dark-blue waters gone green where it met the marsh.

As I'm sure you've discovered through your own research, no one at the game reported seeing the creature emerge from the pond and take my father. That upward of seventy-five people reported illnesses, hallucinations, skin rashes, and abrasions was attributed—rightly, mind you—to the cyanobacteria exposure. The boy, Finn, died by drowning, officially, and my

father was reported as missing. It quickly became clear that no one was going to corroborate what I'd witnessed. I knew the best-case scenario was that everyone would attribute my story to a hallucination. The worst-case scenario? Well, twelve-year-old me couldn't help but imagine being left at a comic-book version of an insane asylum. So I went along with the official account of my father, likely suffering his own hallucinations given his direct contact with the algae, running alone across the street and into the woods, where I lost sight of him.

Mom accepted Dad's disappearance like she had expected it to happen, maybe even welcomed it, though she would never in a million years admit that. Dad is still listed as missing, an Orleans cold case. Orleans doesn't have many of those, so he remains in the local memory. Five years ago, the *Cape Cod Times* caused a stir by falsely reporting that my father had been found. An elderly man in a suburban Seattle assisted-living center had the same first and last name, and a nurse there had lived in Orleans as a child. She relayed to her mother her speculation that he was the infamous missing Orleans man, and a chain of gossip started until it found the ears of a young—well, I guess it doesn't matter if he was young, does it, so consider that cheerfully retracted—let's call him an overeager reporter. After the initial story ran, the Seattle James Lang was quickly determined not to be my father. One look at the guy's photo was enough for me to know. Anyway, Dad would be eighty years old if he were alive today. I think he would've gotten a kick out of his brief rebirth.

As good a place as any to end, though I did promise a word about my continued search of the local waterways. After moving to the Cape permanently in the late 1990s, and meeting Frances, my future partner and wife, at the artists' collective, it took me about ten years to save enough money to buy the boat I use for my charters. With blue-green algae becoming more common on the Cape, as well as increasingly ruinous to our ecosystem, I spend summers ferrying ecologists along the saltwater riverways and bays when the algae bloom. I'm no scientist, but I'm happy to help their cause. I'd like to say I'm no Ahab, but I think I would be lying. I don't know if I want to find that creature again, and if I do, it would be ancillary to what I really want. That said, I can't help but wonder whether the creature was fully grown or a juvenile, or if it has a life span measured in years or larger units of time. Okay, fine, at the risk of bastardizing the opening line of the famous novel, call me Ahab.

Honestly, though, I don't feel a burning need to prove to myself that what I saw was what I saw. I know it to be true, even if it was all a hallucination. What I want, what I've searched for and continue to search for, is the shared signal I experienced that terrible day in '83. Whether as a result of exposure to the algae or the creature or both, I want to be made into an antenna again. I want to be connected, or reconnected, to that evolutionary wavelength that's millions of years old. Somewhere in that signal, in that near-infinite chain, I'll find my father.

Jimmy gavels the table with an open palm and says, "I don't know if it will help the piece you're working on, but that's my story." He sighs, smiles, chuckles softly to himself, and adds, "And I'm sticking to it."

Heidi says that she doesn't know if it'll help either. Jimmy laughs his big laugh, and she joins him, while checking the voice-memo app; it's still recording. Her head buzzes with his story, and she can't help but think of his tall tale as a saltwater marsh that, if she could somehow navigate it, might lead to the wide, open ocean. She asks if he knows anyone else who has seen or heard about a creature like the one he encountered.

Jimmy tells her that he has not, and not from a lack of due diligence. Then, without being asked, he speculates that the creature is a kind of jellyfish, from an unknown branch of scyphozoa, or maybe a type of cephalopod, or some weird missing-link hybrid of the two. He doesn't think it was the blue-green algae suddenly spurred to rampaging, multicellular life, musing that perhaps the creature has a symbiotic, mutualistic relationship with the blue-green algae, not dissimilar to the relationship between some corals and algae. Reef corals get their colors from algae and feed on sugars the algae produce. The algae get shelter and nutrients from the coral as part of the deal. When the algae die, usually killed off by pollutants and excess heat, the coral dies too.

Of all the things Jimmy has told Heidi, she senses this attempt to classify the creature scientifically is him at his least confident, and maybe his least honest.

Jimmy ends his speculation abruptly, as though acknowledging that saying more would unravel his tale. "We should probably go. They're trying to close."

They leave the table and groan as they step out of the café and into the

furnace of the midday heat. They shake hands.

Jimmy says, “Feel free to reach out if you need clarification, or even if you’re in the area and want to have lunch again. I’ll bring Frances next time. And I truly hope that your”—he pauses and stirs a hand in the air—“situation with your roommate, Ty, works out the way you want it to.”

“Thank you,” Heidi says, with a question mark hidden inside. Had she told him about Ty? Then she remembers she did. That part of their introductory conversation seems like it occurred a week ago, instead of ninety minutes. An initial wave of embarrassment swells at her having mentioned something so personal to an interview subject, but the wave recedes into relief. Jimmy is the only person she has talked to about her potential relationship complications with Ty, and to have Jimmy simply wish her well, wish her what she wants, even if she isn’t quite sure what that is yet, feels like an exhalation.

Jimmy and Heidi walk through the lot together. Their cars are parked near each other, with one empty space between them. Jimmy says, “Oh hey, I should’ve mentioned this earlier, but if you’d like to see a bloom up close, I’m taking the boat out into the canal early tomorrow morning and—”

Heidi answers before he finishes. “Yes. Yes. That would be amazing.”

“Okay, great. There’ll be two scientists from the oceanographic institute on board with us. They’re going to collect algae samples up and down the length of the canal and measure the oxygen levels in the water.”

Heidi considers a joke about hunting for hidden monsters but doesn’t want Jimmy to think she’s making fun of him. She asks, “They’ll be okay with me tagging along, observing?”

“I’m sure they will. Besides, it’s my boat. It’s my charter.” Jimmy laughs.

“Quoting *Jaws* now, very comforting,” Heidi says. She asks Jimmy to forward the scientists’ names and emails to her, along with details about where and when to meet.

Jimmy agrees and adds, “Wear long sleeves. I have latex gloves on board for everyone, if needed.”

“Do I need anything else?”

“I have one military-grade gas mask, and it’s all yours,” Jimmy says, the last bit with a smile, before disappearing into his beat-up truck.

Heidi's drive to the old vacation house is a distracted one. Instead of indulging in a maudlin, nostalgic slideshow of her childhood memories, she performs an autopsy on Jimmy's story, pulling everything apart, inspecting all the bits. She found the detail about Jimmy staring at his father's angry, disappointed eyes in the rearview mirror to be the most heartbreaking. She fights an odd urge to tilt the mirror so she can see her empty back seat. The timing of the creature's last-inning appearance, along with the *Swamp Thing* comic, seems a little too pat. But another minor detail nags at her: Jimmy's multiple mentions of being married to a person named Frances, when Corey the librarian made a point of saying Jimmy lived alone. Was Corey simply mistaken, eager to embellish the local man's legend? Had Jimmy conjured Frances out of whole cloth as a way to make a fleeting connection with what Heidi had shared about herself and Ty? She assumes Corey is in the wrong, but as an interviewer, Heidi has learned never to underestimate the mysteries of the whys, truths, and lies we tell each other.

As she parks across the street from her parents' old house, Heidi fixates on Jimmy's last sentence, the one about the gas mask. Was it a winking reference to the blue-green algae's toxic gas in his story? Or the kind of joke an older sibling tells a younger sibling to make them, if not scared, then on edge? Heidi sometimes believes her anxieties about her ability, or perceived inability, to form close relationships is due to her not having had siblings with which to practice. Regardless, she thinks Jimmy's delivery and presentation of the gas-mask line suggested a joke. Yet the information was true. He does own a gas mask, and he was offering it to her. Did he have enough for everyone who would be on board in the morning? Was he implying that he has only one, and that he'd forgo wearing it? If so, he is less like Ahab and more like Quint from the *Jaws* film, who gave his two crewmates life jackets and didn't save one for himself, having quipped earlier he'd never wear a life jacket again after what had happened in the shark-infested waters following the sinking of the USS *Indianapolis*. Heidi plans to make some sort of Quint joke at Jimmy's expense in the morning.

Heidi takes photos of her parents' old house, the front yard all dug up for the installation of an upgraded septic system. She originally planned to spend an hour or two writing, parked within view of the house, but the melancholic concoction of the torn-up yard, Jimmy's tale, and her sitting alone in the back seat, maybe sneaking peeks at the rearview mirror for a disappointed parent's eyes, is too much for today. She decides to head back

to East Providence early.

Heidi does not use her GPS app, figuring that midafternoon on a weekday won't involve heavy traffic. But on Route 6, about two miles from the Sagamore Bridge and the Sandwich Road exit, traffic slows to a crawl. She is stuck, already past the exits where she could escape and try the back roads. With cars snailing forward, she turns on the GPS and groans at the estimated arrival time in East Providence.

Heidi plays the recorded conversation with Jimmy Lang, which starts at their introductions. She normally hates the sound of her own voice, and when the subject of her roommate, Ty, comes up, Heidi cringes, though not all unpleasantly, and thinks, *Is that how I sound when I'm talking about Ty?* She turns off the recording and sends a voice text.

"Hey, Ty guy. My plan was to leave the Cape early, but traffic. Death by traffic. I can barely see the bridge. If I ever get home, how about dinner out tonight?"

She turns on NPR while waiting for a response. She doesn't have to wait long before her phone reads Ty's text in that Aussie accent.

"How about IHOP for dinner? Because I still want breakfast food."

"Ew."

The Sagamore Bridge, essentially the Bourne Bridge's anxiety-inducing twin, looms ahead like an ominous mountain peak. There are no cars in any of its four lanes.

Heidi voice-texts, "Sagamore is closed. Fuck me. Looks like I'll meet you at IHOP. Tomorrow morning."

Ty responds, "Oof. When you get here, we better go someplace with wine."

"All the wine. No pancakes."

"Are my texts being read by the creepy Australian voice?"

"Yes, but it's not creepy."

"It's creepy. But I'll speak in an Australian accent at dinner for you tonight."

"Promise? You have to order your food that way. No going back on that."

She wants to tell Ty all about Jimmy Lang and his story, but she'll wait until they're sitting across from each other at dinner. For now they continue their easy text banter. She knows that reading tone into his bot-read texts would be ludicrous, but at the same time, Ty sounds comfortable, or at ease,

as though the weight of an impossible decision has lifted. Maybe Heidi has made a decision too.

Police cars with flashing lights block egress to the Sagamore Bridge. All traffic from Route 6 is detoured to the Sandwich Road exit, sending everyone along the canal and toward the Bourne Bridge, the only other way to get off the Cape. It takes twenty minutes for Heidi to crawl along the winding exit ramp onto Sandwich Road, which at its start curls under the shadow of the Sagamore's initial incline. She wonders at the cause of the closure and finds it impossible not to connect it to the canal's algae bloom. She worries again about Jimmy's gas mask.

Heidi texts, "I guess you're not working this afternoon either."

Ty responds, "Multitasking. You'll be billed for my traffic consultation later."

"Fair. Hey, can you find out why the Sagamore is closed?" She pauses. "Am I stuck in a toxic gas cloud?" But then reaches out to her phone on the dashboard and hits "Delete."

Ty writes, "Thy will be done. Crikey. I texted that in an Australian accent so when it's read, the accent should be double thick. Never mind."

"Groan, dude."

Police cars dot the sides of the shoulder ahead. Driving at a steady five miles an hour, Heidi can't yet see the canal and its algae bloom behind a row of trees that will thin out somewhere ahead. She is sweating, and a swell of nausea rises. She turns up the air-conditioning. There's an oversweet, tangy smell like burning antifreeze, and she hopes it's the car in front of her and not hers. Her mouth is dry, and a weird taste starts in the back of her throat. She regrets not having filled her water canteen at the café or eaten more than half her sandwich.

Heidi sees three glowing dots on her phone screen. Ty is typing something back. Maybe she'll stop at the gas station before the Bourne Bridge rotary to get a water or something, as she's not feeling so great. She flashes a look into her rearview mirror and spies the long line of cars behind her. A section of the Sagamore Bridge rises beyond the borders of the mirror and into the cloudless blue sky. The traffic in the opposite lane is equally horrific, making her feel even more panicked, like a trapped animal, more convinced that something is wrong.

Heidi says, "Come on, come on," and thinks that maybe she won't return tomorrow for Jimmy's boat trip if the traffic is going to be like this.

Her eyes return to the phone. No text from Ty, and the three dots have disappeared. “Dammit, Ty—”

The car in front of her abruptly comes to a full stop. Because she is looking at her phone, Heidi is slow to react. She steps hard on the brake, and her front bumper stops inches from the other car. She swears and darts a look at the rearview mirror to see if the car behind her will brake in time. A section of the Sagamore Bridge still looms in the small rounded rectangle of the mirror, and then there’s something green, then purple, the color change instant and as fluid as the giant fin shape that rises, elongates, and then stretches into something that’s not a fin, something that curls and crests and then crashes onto the bridge.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo © 2021 Cheryl Murphy

Paul Tremblay is the author of several novels, including the Bram Stoker and Locus Award–winning *The Cabin at the End of the World*, which was adapted into a feature film by M. Night Shyamalan. He is also the author of the short story collections *Growing Things and Other Stories* and *The Beast You Are*, and a contributor to the Amazon Original Stories collection *Forward*.