Dreams

by

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A story that reflects the author's recurrent interest in the bittersweet period between childhood and adulthood.

I was sixteen years old when he took my dream away from me. It is not a small offence to be a stealer of dreams.

Our family lived in Mackerel Cove, a small fishing village on the South Shore of Nova Scotia. When I tell people that, when I point out the exact location, they look at me with a puzzled, almost incredulous expression. Sometimes that look is all I get. Other times, they give voice to their astonishment. "But how did you become what you are? How did you get from there to here?"

What do they think goes on in small fishing communities? Nothing? Do they assume that such places contain people with no brains, no ambition, no dreams? They look at me as though my skin had just turned green. As though I'd been cast in some inferior mould and had, by some miracle of agility or cussedness, found a way to jump out of it. By the time those questions

started, I was a junior executive in an oil company, in the days before oil became a questionable commodity—in Toronto, where the mould is often even more fixed than elsewhere.

When I was a boy of eleven, the horizon was endless, physically and metaphorically. From our yellow frame house—which was perched on a hill, without the protection or impediment of trees—you could view the wide sea, stretching from the rocky point and behind Granite Island, disappearing beyond the edge of the sky, inviting dreams of any dimension. And in the foreground, four reefs threw their huge waves up into the air—wild, free.

I spent a lot of time sitting on the woodpile—when I was supposed to be cutting wood, piling wood, or carting wood—looking at that view. And thinking. Planning. Rumour had it that if you drew a straight line from our front door, right through the centre of that horizon, the line would eventually end up on the west coast of North Africa. How can Torontonians conclude that such an environment is limiting? They're lucky if they can see through the smog to the end of the block. I could go straight from the woodpile to Africa. Or I could turn left and wind up in Portugal.

And the wind. On that hill, where my great-grandfather had had the vision to build his house, the wind was always a factor. Even when it was not blowing. Then my mother would emerge into the sunshine or the fog, and take a deep breath. "Gone," she would announce. She hated the wind. She was from near Truro, where the slow, muddy Salmon River just limps along its banks, shining brown and slithery in the dead air. Dead air—that's what inlanders seem to want. Then they feel safe. Or peaceful. But those were two words that meant nothing to me at that time.

What is it about kids that makes them so blind and deaf for

so long? Some of them, anyway. How can they go charging into life with such a certainty that all is well? Without, in fact, a passing thought as to whether it is or is not? It's just there. Mackerel are for jigging, the sea is for swimming, a boat is for rowing around in. The gulls are for watching, particularly on those days when the wind is up, when they just hang high in the air, motionless, wings wide, riding the storm. I was like that when I was eleven, sailing along with no effort, unconscious of the currents and turbulence that surrounded me.

Twelve seems to be a favourite time for waking up. What is so special about twelve that makes it such a hazardous, such a brittle age? No doubt it's partly because of all those puberty things—those unseen forces that begin to churn up your body, making it vulnerable to dangers that didn't even seem to exist before that time. And with the body, so goes the head and the heart.

All of a sudden (it really did seem to start happening all within the space of a day), I began to hear things. Things like the edge in my mother's voice, the ragged sound of my father's anger. Where had I been before? Too busy on the woodpile, in the boats, at the beach—*outside.* Or when inside, shut off by comic books, TV, the all-absorbing enjoyment of food. And lots of arguing and horsing around with my brothers and sisters, of whom there were five. But, now, suddenly, the wind blew, and I heard it.

Once you have heard those sounds, your ears are permanently unplugged, and you cannot stop them up again. Same thing with the eyes. I began to see my mother's face as an objective thing. Not just *my mother*, a warm and blurry concept, but a face to watch and think about and read. It was pinched, dry-looking, with two vertical lines between the brows. Much of the time, I saw, she looked anxious or disenchanted. I didn't know the meaning of that word, back then, but I recognized the condition. She

was thin and pale of skin—probably because she didn't like to be out in the wind—with a head of defeated-looking thin brown hair. I saw that for the first time, too.

Within twenty-four hours of my awakening, I felt that I had discovered and recognized everything. My mother, I knew, was worried about money—or about the extreme scarcity of it. That seemed a waste of time to me. There were fish in the sea, vegetables in the garden, loaves of bread in the oven, and second-hand clothes to be had at Frenchy's. But look again. Not just worry. Something else. And that, I knew, had to do with my father. I watched very carefully. He didn't ask for things. He demanded. "Gimme the sugar." "Let the dog out." "Eat your damn vegetables." He didn't praise. He criticized. "This soup is too cold." "There's a rip in them pants." And on pickling day, "Too blasted hot in this kitchen." As he made each one of these remarks, I would see a small contraction in those vertical lines on my mother's forehead. Not much, but to me it was an electric switch. I was aware of a connection.

With this new and unwelcome knowledge, I watched the other kids to assess their reactions. But they were younger than I was. So there was nothing much to watch. They continued to gabble on among themselves, giggling, pushing, yelling at one another. Even when my father would shout, "Shut up, damn you!" they'd all just disperse, regroup, and continue on as before. Well, not quite all. I focused on Amery, aged seven, eyes wide and bright, chewing on his nails. Awake, too, I thought, and felt a kinship with him.

My father didn't work as a fisherman in our little village. He was employed in the fish plant, gutting fish. Slash and gut, slash and gut, eight hours a day, five days a week, fifty weeks a year. Enough to limit the vision of any Bay Street Torontonian. I heard

people in our village talk about what it was like to work with him. "A real jewel of a man," said one woman to my mother. "Patient, and right considerate. Always ready to help out." I looked at Ma while the woman was talking. I was thirteen by then, and very skilful at reading faces. She's struggling, I concluded, to keep the scorn out of her face. It was a fixed mask, telling nothing—except to me. A man friend of Pa's once said to me, "I sure hope you realize how lucky you are to have a father like him. He's some kind. A real soft-spoken man." I said nothing, and adjusted my own mask. When my father had left the house that morning, he'd yelled back at my mother, "Get your confounded books off the bed before I get home tonight! I'm sick of you with your smart-ass ways!" Then he'd slammed the door so hard that a cup fell off the shelf.

My dream was a simple one. Or so it may seem to you. I wanted to be the most talented fisherman in Mackerel Cove. Talented! I can see the incredulous looks on the faces of my Toronto colleagues. Do they really think that the profession of fishing is just a matter of throwing down a line or a net, and hauling up a fish? A good fisherman knows his gear, his boats, his machinery, the best roots to use when making lobster traps. He knows how to sniff the air and observe the sky for signs of unforecasted winds and fogs. He knows his bait, his times of day, his sea bottom, the choices of where to go and how soon. A talented fisherman knows all these things and much more. And—in spite of the wrenching cold, the disappointments, the flukey comings and goings of the fish population—he loves what he is doing with his life. I know this to be true. I spent half my boyhood tagging along with any local fishermen who'd put up with me—on their Cape Island boats, their Tancooks, or just in their dories.

No one on Bay Street can describe to you the feeling of setting out through a band of sunrise on the water, trailing five seine boats, a faint wind rising. Or the serenity that fills your chest as you strike out to sea, aimed at the dead centre of the horizon, focused on Africa. That's what I'd longed and hoped for from the time I was five years old. At sixteen, it was still my dream.

The exam results came in, just four days before my seventeenth birthday. I stood at the mailbox, holding my marks—the highest in grade twelve for the whole of the county. And more. The biggest university scholarship for that region, puffed out with some fat subsistence money donated by a local boy who'd made good on Wall Street. I took all of it and laid it on the kitchen table.

"I don't want it," is all I said.

My father and mother looked at the marks, read the letter, raised their eyes and looked at me. My mother had her mask on. Not my father.

"What in blazing hell do you mean—you don't *want* it?"

"I don't want to go to college. I want to stay here. I want to be a fisherman. The best one around. It's what I've always wanted, ever since I laid eyes on a boat."

My father stood up. He was skinny, but he looked big that day. With one abrupt gesture, he swept everything off the kitchen table onto the floor—four coffee mugs, *The Daily News*, cutlery, Ma's books, a pot with a geranium in it, a loaded ashtray.

"You want to be a fisherman!" he shouted. "Us with no gear, no wharf, no shed, no launch. Not even a decent size boat. No, young fella! You turn down that offer and you got but one route to take. Me, I'll teach you how to do it, because I'm the best gutter in the plant."

He paused for a breath. Then again—"*No*, dammit! You just

pitch out your fancy dreams and grab that scholarship, because I'm sure not gonna keep you here any longer come fall. Not if you can make money with that fool book-learning that your prissy ma seems to have passed along with her mother's milk." He smashed his fist down on the empty table, and kicked his way out the back door.

Ma died when I was twenty-four, just one week before I received my MBA from the University of Toronto. I'd picked up two other degrees on the way, and had sailed through university with accolades and scholarships. There I was, half an orphan, embarking on a life of prosperity and maladjustment, cut off by my past and my present from my original dream.

I skipped graduation and flew home for the funeral. I stayed three weeks. Pa was silent and shrunken-looking, although he was only fifty-five. He sat around a lot, guzzling beer, going through two packs of cigarettes a day. The only kid left at home was Amery, and he looked as though he'd like nothing better than to jump ship. Thin and fidgety, he'd startle if you so much as snapped your fingers. He was working in the plant, too. Gutting.

"Thinkin' o' closin' down the plant," said Pa, one day. "No fish worth a darn. Most o' the time, anyways. Foreign vessels scoopin' 'em all up before they has a chance to spawn."

He didn't say this angrily. He said it wearily, as though he had nothing but lukewarm water flowing through his veins. And no blood transfusion in sight.

The day I left, I waited until Amery and Pa had departed for work. Then I went out and sat on the woodpile. The offshore wind was blowing strong and dry, and the gulls were coasting around in the sky, wings spread, barely twitching. The sun was well up, casting a wide path over the ruffled water. While I

watched, a Cape Islander crossed the path, low in the water with a big catch of mackerel. In the distance, the horizon stretched taut and firm, broken by the leaping waves of the four reefs.

I searched in vain for Africa. Apparently it wasn't there any more.