

[Home](#)

[Summer 2007](#)

[Spring 2007](#)

[Winter 2007](#)

[Autumn 2006](#)

[Summer 2006](#)

[Spring 2006](#)

[Winter 2006](#)

[Fall 2005](#)

[Summer 2005](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[SNR's Writers](#)

[Contact](#)

RELENTLESS TIDE

BY CATHERINE J.S. LEE

COPYRIGHT 2007

Squinting into the August sun, Jared Parker scans the horizon as the *Wayfarer*, eighty feet of steel-hulled trawler, knifes eastward through Passamaquoddy Bay. He's about to start setting trawl when Lemuel Sharpe hollers, "Jared, get in here! Quick!" from the wheelhouse.

Grey-faced and gasping, Jared's father lies on his back, his feet splayed beneath the boat's wheel. The spilled mug of tea soaks his navy pullover and tan canvas pants. Unattended, the boat begins a slow turn to port while Lem, Pop's oldest friend, slides his folded buffalo-check shirt beneath Pop's head. As Lem carefully straightens his arthritic back, Jared captures the mug with one hand, steadies the wheel with the other. "I'll take it," Lem says, and steps around Pop to the helm.

"What happened?" Jared asks in a wobbly voice. He sinks to his knees, pats Pop's shoulder.

"Heart attack's my guess," Lem says.

The words punch Jared in the gut, hard, knocking all the wind out of him. The old man's seldom sick, and then only an occasional cold or sore throat. Unsure of what he's supposed to be listening for, Jared leans forward and presses his ear to his father's chest. He can't hear anything through the layers of sweater and shirt, but he feels the hitch as Pop fights for each breath. "What in hell do we do now, way out here?" It's half a shout, half a cry.

"Get back fast as we can, I reckon." Lem keys the mike and calls the Coast Guard.

The radio crackles, and a Coastie's voice assures them an ambulance will be waiting at the breakwater. Search and Rescue can't come – the 44-footer is down off Bucks Harbor, where a lobster boat's on fire and sinking.

Lem hangs up the mike. Jared pulls off his Bundy Marine cap and runs the back of his wrist up his forehead and over his close-cropped red hair. He says a quick prayer. *Please, let him hold on.* Pop groans, clutches feebly at his chest, but keeps breathing. Almost seventy years old, he's hard and unyielding as Maine granite, knows everything about holding fast.

"Thank Providence we wasn't farther out," Lem says.

Jared only nods.

"He's a fighter," Lem says.

Jared swallows hard, grips Pop's right wrist. "I know. I know he is."

What will become of them if something happens to Pop? Just thinking about all that responsibility – the house, the boat, the business – sends Jared's heart lurching.

Ten minutes crawls like an hour, fifteen like two. Jared grits his teeth, gives Pop's wrist one more squeeze, then stands up and paces the deck to work off some of the frantic energy that's making his head and heart pound.

Off the starboard bow, he spies a sleek black speedboat slapping over the swells, straight towards them. It slows and runs alongside, matching the *Wayfarer's* speed, and Jared catches his breath when he sees the skipper's black eye patch. Allan Woodsome is just about the last person he'd expect to see today – or any day, for that matter. Woodsome's shouting something, and Jared leans out over the rail to hear.

"Heard you over the radio. I can get your dad ashore a lot quicker than you can."

Jared looks over his shoulder at Pop's ashen face, knowing he'll feel like Judas no matter which choice he makes.

They lower Pop down in a sling of seine, and Woodsome tenderly settles him into the arc of cushioned seats in the stern. It'll be okay, Jared tells himself. Pop won't be angry later.

"You coming with us?"

Jared runs his index finger up and down the sharp, freckled bridge of his nose. He tells himself that Lem isn't too used up to dock up the *Wayfarer* alone, but that's a damn lie. Moving Pop has taken everything Lem's got. "You get going," Jared says. "I got to bring the boat home." Woodsome reaches for the throttle, and Jared leans over the rail again. "Just one thing. Why you doing this for us?"

Woodsome looks up, his one eye flashing. "This ain't for you. For him, neither. This is for Robbie." He cuts a wide turn and roars away. The *Wayfarer* continues her course towards home, and Jared thinks about Robbie, his long-lost brother, and the part Woodsome played in his disappearance thirty years before.

* * *

Jared calls Mom from the breakwater pay phone, but there's no answer. She monitors their radio, and must've already found someone to take her to the hospital half an hour away. It's the last place Jared wants to go, with its untouchable antiseptic surfaces and complicated gadgetry and Pop sick and helpless.

On his way off-island, he gasses up the truck and buys a can of Mountain Dew. What he really wants is a beer, but Mom doesn't hold with drinking alcohol. As he drives across the causeway connecting Moose Island to the mainland and turns up Route One, he realizes he never thought this day would come. He's thirty-seven years old, and Mom and Pop and the *Wayfarer* have been his whole life – no wife and children, no serious girlfriends, no hobbies, no real friends. His sister Mattie got out, went to college on a scholarship, teaches school in Indiana, far from the ocean. Jared stayed, to please Pop.

In ICU, his mother stands outside the curtained cubicle, eyes closed, head bowed in silent prayer. For the first time, Jared notices how she's aged, the copper faded from her hair, hands twisted with arthritis from years in the cold, damp sardine factory. "Mamma," he says. He hasn't called her that since he was maybe six years old. "Mom, is he . . ."

"Holding on." She slides her wedding rings around her finger. "I haven't seen him since they brought him up from the emergency room. They're still . . ." She pauses. ". . . working on him." Jared doesn't like the sound of that – as though Pop's an engine with a stuck carburetor or broken timing chain.

A brisk, rumped nurse pushes the curtain aside. She carries a tray of needles and tubing, and there's one small, dark spot of blood on her rose-colored tunic. "You can go in now, Missus Parker." She smiles what's probably meant to be a reassuring smile, but it doesn't reassure Jared.

Propped up by pillows on either side, Pop seems smaller, more transparent. IV bags drip mysterious fluids. The oxygen mask fogs and clears with his labored breathing. Beneath his iron-grey hair, his face

is pale as paper. Green lines ping across a video screen, tracing a jagged pattern over and over and over. "He's sedated," the nurse tells them. "But he knows you're here." She touches Pop's ankle through the white, waffle-weave blanket. "Robert, here's your family." Jared thinks, She should have more respect, she should call him Mister Parker.

Mom sits in the one chair, rests a hand on Pop's. Jared moves to the window, stares down at the parched lawn where one tenacious birch sapling rattles its thirsty leaves. He hates Pop being here, and he hates feeling disloyal for wanting to be somewhere, anywhere, else.

Soon, the nurse is back – Hospital policy, ten-minute visits each hour, mustn't tire our patient. She directs them to the lobby, because there's no waiting room in ICU, and they walk down the hall like dutiful children, neither of them daring to demand more time with Pop. Jared feels guilty relief at being freed from that sad, white space where Pop seems to be slowly sinking into nothingness.

They sit on a slippery plastic double seat in the lobby. Jared asks, "Did you call Mattie?"

"She's flying in to Bangor in the morning, getting a rental car." The way Mom flattens her lips together makes him think she wants to say more. She doesn't.

He flips through a six-month-old issue of *American Rifleman* without registering even one page of it. "I don't know what to do about the boat. Where can Lem find a crew on such short notice?" Pop and Lem and Jared have run the *Wayfarer* for almost twenty years, have it down to a science, but no other three men could manage it.

Mom pats his hand. "I think you should still go. Mattie'll be here, and you can come up in the evenings. I don't know if Medicare covers everything or not. This all must be terribly expensive." She pauses, pushes the sleeves of her cardigan up her freckled forearms. "Let's try and keep things as normal as possible."

Normal? What's normal any more? Everything is rudderless now, drifting into uncertainty the way a boat drifts into storm chop on a foggy sea. But if Mom wants him to fish, well, this isn't the time to refuse and upset her. "Maybe I can get the Weeks brothers out," he says.

Mom nods. "It's what Pop would want." Jared holds that thought as he walks to the pay phone.

* * *

Since their boat, the *Lady Starr*, is laid up after grounding out on Nancy Ledge, David and Larry Weeks are willing to help Jared out. Lem, however, is a different story. "Taking the wife to see her sister up in Gouldsboro." He pauses, sneezes. "Been thinking, ain't none of us knows how much time's left."

Jared hangs up the phone and wonders if Lem's trying to tell him he should stay ashore with Pop. But Mom wants him to fish, so now he's got to find a fourth. He sits back down with her. "Who can we get?"

Mom doesn't hesitate. "Allan Woodsome." When Jared's jaw drops, she says, "Close your mouth, son. It's not that bad a solution."

"No way. No way Pop would have Woodsome on the *Wayfarer*."

"Some things has got to be put behind us." Mom taps him on the arm with every word.

"Pop says –" Jared begins, but she shakes her head slowly. "We've always –" he tries again, but she cuts her gaze away from him and looks into her purse for change. Once Mom gets set on something, that's it, no matter what. Jared prays Woodsome will say no.

He watches her cross the lobby to the pay phone, where she talks briefly, and then he watches her come back again. "It's done," she says. "Allan will go."

* * *

When he thinks about Allan Woodsome, Jared's reminded of the winter he was seven, back at the beginning of the 'Seventies, a memory so detailed it could have been etched with acid.

His big brother Robbie, nineteen then, stormed into the house one February afternoon like a northeaster, trailing snow from the hems of his bell-bottoms across the freshly-waxed kitchen floor. He dropped the mail on the table, then strode to the woodstove. As Jared and Mom and Mattie, who was twelve, watched, Robbie levered off a lid and held an envelope above the leaping orange flames. The bottom edge turned black and curled up, and he dropped the whole thing into the fire.

Jared couldn't figure it out. The letters Mom got always made her happy, but Robbie looked beyond mad.

"Bad news?" Mattie asked.

Robbie turned towards her so fast his shaggy red hair slapped against his cheeks. "None of your fu – "

"You watch your mouth, son. Don't be using language like that in this house." Pop, just back from scalloping, stood in the kitchen doorway.

"Sorry," Robbie mumbled.

Pop pulled off his fish boots and put on his moccasins. "Get anything done with the truck today?"

Robbie hooked one foot through a rung, pulled a chair from the table and sat down. "The truck's beyond me." He picked up the deck of cards from the blue and white oilcloth and shuffled. "I was going to take it to Daggett's, but Allan's father says that transmission place over the river is better. Got an appointment tomorrow."

Pop sat down and put matchstick pegs in the board as Robbie dealt for cribbage. "What's this world coming to? Have to go to Canada these days to get an American truck fixed. 'Tain't right."

"Yeah, I know," Robbie said. "But it's the way it is."

Early next afternoon, a blizzard closed school and kept the entire scallop fleet in port. "Ain't Robbie back from Canada yet?" Mattie asked as she padded across the kitchen in her stocking feet. "I got decimal division."

"Not yet." Mom picked up the chopping knife, began dicing salt pork for chowder. "They left at nine. You'd think the truck would be done by now."

Pop, already settled into his rocker in front of the woodstove, drank two cups of tea while Mom finished the chowder. Mattie kept reciting lines from Robert Frost's "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" and checking her English book to see if she'd gotten it right, until Mom said, "Could you do that in the living room?" Jared listened for the truck as he pushed his Matchbox racers around the kitchen floor.

The phone rang, and Mom talked a few minutes to Allan's mother, saying that no, she hadn't heard from the boys yet. The Regulator clock above the kitchen table ticked away an hour as the chowder aged on the back of the woodstove. At last, headlights flashed across the blue gingham curtains. "Thank God," Mom said, and dashed through the kitchen door to the woodshed. Jared followed. The heavy storm door creaked open, letting in a big swirl of snow. But it wasn't Robbie – it was Allan Woodsome, alone.

"Here's the keys and the receipt, Missus Parker." He bent close to Mom's ear and whispered something Jared couldn't make out.

"No." Mom folded her arms and shook her head. "He would've told me."

"He couldn't," Allan murmured as Pop came into the woodshed, mug in hand and Mattie right behind him. "Got to run," Allan said. "I'm sure Mother's worried."

He started out the door, but Pop grasped one shoulder of his parka and pulled him back. "Where's my son?" Allan looked at Mom and then at the floor. His straight sandy hair fell forward, screening his face. "Where's Robbie, Allan?" Pop's voice was tight, as if he was both scared and mad.

"Let him go," Mom said. "We'll talk without the little ones around."

Pop said, "You answer me, boy."

"I left him in Saint Stephen. That letter yesterday – Robbie says he ain't getting caught in the draft."

Pop drew back his hard, salt-cracked fist, and Jared heard a squishy, crunching sound as the punch landed on Allan's nose. Mom reached out her hand between them, palm towards Pop, her work-worn fingers spread wide. "Robert, don't. Allan, I'm so sorry."

Mattie grabbed Jared by the arm. "Come on. This is grownup stuff." Jared shook her off.

"By Tophet, I'll bring him back," Pop said. "No son of mine's going to be a shirker and run off to Canada."

"You won't find him." Allan sounded like he had a bad cold as he fingered the squashed bridge of his nose. "He got on the bus this morning. Hundreds of miles away by now. He's not coming back."

"Not ever?" Jared's voice squeaked out around the lump in his throat. What would make Robbie leave them forever, especially without saying good-bye?

Pop's shoulders slumped, but only for a moment. He drew himself up, his bushy eyebrows coming together like two black caterpillars. "I can find him. There are ways. Now you get your sorry carcass off my property."

"His nose – " Mom began, but Allan said, "It's all right, Missus Parker. It'll be fine." He went out, and pushed the plank storm door shut behind him with a gentle click.

Mom shooed Jared and Mattie into the kitchen as Pop stood staring at the door. "We can talk about this later," she whispered. Mattie nodded, so Jared did, too. With Pop in a rage, all you could do was stay out of his way.

After clearing Robbie's place from the table, Mom served the chowder. Pop buttered a slab of homemade bread. His sharp face looked even sharper, skin stretched tight over the bones. "We got two fine kids," he said. "Two *fine* kids. Don't nobody mention that shirker's name in this house ever again." His voice cracked just a little on "ever again," and for the first time, Jared thought he sounded like an old, old man.

No one spoke for the rest of the meal. Mattie opened the latest issue of *American Girl* magazine, and neither Mom nor Pop told her it was rude to read at table. Jared fished his Matchbox Stingray out of his pocket and drove circles around his chowder bowl. The silence bore down like a heavy weight.

After the supper dishes were done, Jared heard Mom's slow footsteps going up the back stairs. The quick patter of Mattie's feet followed. Jared knew they'd lie on Mom and Pop's big bed and talk softly together. He used to be allowed to join them, but once he started school Pop said he had to stop hanging around with the women.

Pop sat in his rocker before the woodstove and sucked on his pipe until the smell of Cavendish tobacco filled the air. Jared arranged his Matchbox racers in two lines and began smashing the cars together, and all at once he knew. The Saturday before, Robbie and Allan had gone ice-fishing and wouldn't take him. Jared had told his friend Mickey he hoped Robbie fell through the ice and never come back. Mickey must've told his mother, and she wrote that letter that Robbie burned.

Jared shoved the mess of tiny cars under the table and crawled in after them to the safe cave made by the overhanging oilcloth. "I'm sorry, Robbie," he whispered. "Please come back. I didn't mean it." He stayed under the table for a long time. Tears rolled down his face, but he didn't dare make a sound. Pop would strap him, tell him crying was sissy stuff.

Above the creak of Pop's rocker and the crackle of the woodstove fire, he thought he could hear his mother and Mattie sobbing in the bedroom. But maybe it was only the wind in the eaves.

* * *

The sky and sea are early-dawn silver when Jared watches Allan Woodsome descend the ladder and step aboard the *Wayfarer*. David Weeks is inspecting the trawl and Larry's dipsticking the oil, so it seems

like a good time to get things straight.

"I just want you to know," Jared begins, "I don't think this is a good idea."

"Your mother more-or-less said that last night." Woodsome lights a cigarette, flicks the match over the rail. "Look, I know you're like your old man – you'll hold a grudge from a shout down to a whisper, and then you'll keep holding it long after the echo's gone. That's you. But your mother asked me to do this for her. What kind of shit would I be if I said no?"

"The kind that helped my brother run away." Jared is probably more stunned than Woodsome at hearing that pop out of his mouth. He looks up at the breakwater that rises twenty feet above them now at slack tide. Topside are three old-timers, who all turn away when Jared glances at them. He's certain they're watching this meeting with great curiosity.

Woodsome gazes upward, too. "That's your father's opinion. Get this straight. Robbie did what he had to do, without encouragement. And so did I – I helped my best friend. And then I went to Nam, and Nam took half my sight and all of my peace of mind, tore me up so bad I can't even wear a glass eye. Instead, I have to look like a fucking pirate. If anyone's earned the right to despise a draft-dodger, it's me." He pauses, and the look he gives Jared cuts to the bone. "Robbie did the only thing he could do, and it took guts, more than you can ever imagine. You have no idea what a choice like that costs."

Jared doesn't know what to say. He picks a couple of pieces of lint off the sleeve of his sweater. "You do your job and I'll do mine, and things will go okay."

"I'm on this boat, I'm giving a hundred per cent," Woodsome says. Jared nods and heads for the wheelhouse.

He sets a course for the distant Wolves, the outermost islands in Passamaquoddy Bay, tall and shimmering in the thick, moist air. It seems strange, being at the helm instead of out on deck tending the trawl, stranger still running the *Wayfarer* with a completely different crew. He grew up with the Weeks brothers, has always been friendly with them, especially Larry, but Pop will be furious if he finds out Allan Woodsome is walking the *Wayfarer's* deck. Still, Jared reminds himself, it's what Mom wants. Sometimes, he figures she's like the vice-president, in charge when the president's laid up, and because of that he's right to do as she wishes.

There's only one cure for all this noise in his head – work. Jared studies the fish finder, but the depth lines across the screen remind him of those monitors in ICU. It's not right, all this responsibility. Lem should be in charge of the boat now, he's had so much more experience. Pop's told Jared what to do his entire life, and he's always done it, the good son.

A cloudy form appears on the screen, and they swing into action. The trawl pays out with a rattle of tackle and spreads like a dark shadow in the sunlit sea. Jared holds the course as the net fills, and his crew winches it on board. Pogy by the thousands flash silver in the hard, bright light as they spill into the hold.

* * *

The sky's orange with sunset when Jared turns the boat towards home. The catch is good, but now it dawns on him they have to split five ways instead of four – one share for each of them, plus one for the boat, and only two out of the five will go into Parker pockets.

They tie up to the Maine Pearl wharf, and Jared climbs the ladder. Unlike their herring cousins, pogy go for fertilizer, except the scales, which by some secret process are turned into pearl-essence, the stuff that gives nail polish its frosty gleam. Percy Swope, Maine Pearl's owner, quotes Jared a price several dollars a hogshead below what he was paying Pop. Swope's probably guessed that Jared can't dicker like Pop, who could bargain the birds out of the trees, and it's obvious the old weasel intends to take full advantage.

"It's the market." Swope shoves his hands in his pants pockets and rocks back on his heels. "I got a business to run here, just like you do."

Jared's still pondering this when Woodsome comes topside and asks, "Everything okay?"

"No," Jared says.

Woodsome bends close to Jared's ear. "We heard his price. This ain't right. The brothers say you can do better at SeaPride."

Jared calculates. It'll take twenty minutes to get around the island. Then, if SeaPride's buying, they'll have to negotiate, unload, settle up, get back to port – the list goes on. He'll be late getting to the hospital, and Mom will worry. But he can call and tell her they're going to be late getting in, then surprise her at the hospital with the good news that he's managing as well as Pop would. Her expectations drag at him like a long anchor chain.

"Let's do it," he says, and they cast off lines.

* * *

Mom and Mattie are sitting in the hospital lobby when Jared arrives, and he's relieved to see his sister hasn't changed in the two years since he last saw her. Her face is serene as ever, and her hair, black as Pop's once was, has only a few threads of grey. And it looks like she's finally found a man – a thin, fiftyish fellow with a shaved head shares the settee with her. He looks strangely like her as couples sometimes do, the shape of his nose, the cut of his mouth below the bushy silver mustache. But as Jared walks towards them, he notices something else: the man's left ring finger cut off at the top knuckle. Jared remembers a finger like that, its first joint severed in the winch on the *Martha Matilda*. He stops and stands in the middle of the lobby, unsure what to do. He wants to talk to Mattie but not to Robbie, not until Pop says it's okay.

Mattie crosses the space between them, throws her arms around Jared. "I'm so glad to see you." She steps back and takes his hand and leads him to his brother. "See who I brought."

Jared nods stiffly. It's the best he can do. "Has Pop seen him?" he says to Mom.

Robbie and Mattie glance at each other, and Mattie murmurs, "Told you so." Robbie shakes his head, and the gold hoop in his left ear catches the light. None of the men Jared knows wear earrings, and he can't imagine the kind of man who does. His brother might just as well have been hiding in another galaxy all these years as in another country.

Jared wavers between curiosity and loyalty, but as always, loyalty wins. "Has Pop seen him?" he says again.

Mom looks down at her hands and shakes her head. "No. Your father ain't been much awake today. I think he's real sedated."

Robbie drapes his arm across the back of the settee. "Pop will understand, once I get to talk to him. I know he will." Jared doesn't think so.

No one speaks as uncomfortable seconds creep by. Mattie touches Robbie's wrist. "Let's see if the coffee shop's still open." Together they disappear down the hall.

"So," Jared says.

Mom doesn't look at him. "Except for my red hair and freckles, you've always been the spit of Pop." She runs two fingers up and down a seam on her purse. "Don't make the same mistakes he did, Jared. Don't shut out your family because their choices aren't the ones you'd make."

Jared doesn't want to hear this. "How'd Mattie find him?"

The expression in Mom's hazel eyes is as tough as Pop's. "We didn't find him. He wasn't ever lost."

Jared feels cold fingers marching down his spine. "Maybe you better tell me what you're talking about."

Mom sighs. "That spring after Robbie went away, Allan came over before he left for basic and gave me Robbie's address. We've been in touch ever since."

"And Pop never once got the mail before you, in thirty years? Come on." Jared picks at a hangnail.

"I took a box at the Pembroke P.O. I'd mail a letter one Monday, and he'd mail one from Toronto the

next. So, every other Monday, I'd go to Pembroke."

"No. That's not possible. You never had a car."

"Ada Woodsome would take me, or once in a while old Mrs. Tully." Jared's amazed to see Mom almost smile. "When the fish factory was running, we used to save all our breaks that day and run up on our lunch hour. But when them phone-card things came out, I got one and we'd talk instead. While you and Pop were fishing."

Jared stares at her. For thirty years she's been false to Pop, and that's just too wrong for words. "You've been living a lie."

Mom folds her arms and looks straight at him. "Maybe so. Do you think that's better or worse than living with a heart full of hate?"

* * *

Jared thinks about Mom sneaking away from the factory, and suddenly a memory clicks on like a movie in his head, something he hasn't thought about in more than twenty-five years. He was eleven, and Pop had agreed to take him fishing. In those days they still ran the *Martha Matilda*, a thirty-eight foot Novy boat rigged for scalloping. Pop and Lem were spending the summer, the off-season, handlining for haddock off Yellow Rock.

They'd been on the fishing grounds maybe four hours that July day when Jared drove a fishhook through the meaty pad below his left thumb. It happened fast – one minute he was removing a haddock from his jigs, and the next he was clutching his wrist and trying not to scream.

While Jared bit down on Pop's leather belt, Lem worked the hook through enough to cut the barb off and pull the rest back out. But the double puncture bled and bled and bled, even when Lem clamped a handkerchief over it and pulled Jared's arm above his head. "Must've nicked a blood vessel," Lem said. "Better get him ashore." Pop hauled the rest of their lines and turned the boat for home.

They tied up hastily at the slip, and Pop and Lem hurried Jared, dizzy and stumbling, up the ramp. All three of them came to a dead stop at the empty space on the breakwater. Pop said, "Somebody stole my damn truck."

"Everyone knows you leave the keys under the floor mats," Lem said. "Let's get the boy seen to, and you can worry about it later."

After Doctor Williams stopped the bleeding and did Jared's hand up with smelly salve and gauze and adhesive tape, Lem and Pop went to tie up the *Martha Matilda* in her usual place while Jared sat on Lem's tailgate. He was still feeling woozy, and at first it didn't register that Pop's truck was pulling into its parking space with Mom behind the wheel. With her was another lady in a factory apron. Jared jumped up, yelling, "Mom! Mom!"

A frightened look passed across her face as she walked towards him. "What happened to your hand?" she asked breathlessly, and then, "Where's Pop?"

"I got a fishhook in it. And Pop's coming right behind you."

Mom took a deep breath, and turned. "Robert! How did it happen?"

Pop glanced from Mom to the truck and back to Mom again, and when he spoke, his pinched, white lips barely moved. "You stole my truck. What were you thinking?"

Mom spoke lightly and evenly. "I was thinking, it's a rare thing for me to need that truck, but it is mine, too, you know. As your wife."

"You took it without telling me. Where'd you go?"

Mom tucked a strand of red hair back into her factory hairnet. "Mrs. Neely had to go to Pembroke to feed her sister's cats while she's away, and her car wouldn't start. The poor things couldn't go hungry. Seven

of them, Robert."

"You're lucky I had Jared to take care of, 'cause otherwise I would've called the police."

"The police would realize it was a misunderstanding. No harm done."

The one o'clock whistle blew, and Mom walked back to the factory, and so far as Jared knew, the incident was never mentioned again.

* * *

For several days, Pop continues to drift. Jared comes to the hospital late, sits on the opposite side of the lobby from the rest of them and ignores the greetings sent his way. It isn't just Robbie he's mad at. It's Mom, too, for being faithless to Pop for so long. And it's Mattie, who'd apparently been visiting back and forth with Robbie since college. And it's whichever president gave amnesty to a pack of draft dodgers and allowed Robbie to come home again. Mom and Mattie and Robbie, in league against him and Pop all these years. Jared doesn't know whether he's more hurt or mad to have a family that's such a pack of sneaking backstabbers.

Every day he hopes Pop will be awake enough to talk, so he can say how wrong he thinks it is that Robbie's come back. Pop should know at least one member of the family is on his side.

Then one evening a nurse meets Jared the second he walks through the door of ICU. "Thank goodness you're here. He's alert tonight, but he won't see your mother or brother or sister." Jared feels as though he's let Pop down by not arriving earlier. He goes into the cubicle, where Pop's sitting up in bed eating a dish of radioactive-looking green Jell-O.

"Hello, son." Pop's voice sounds different because they've taken away his dentures.

Jared fights the urge to throw himself on the bed and hug Pop hard, though he and Pop haven't hugged since he was maybe eight years old. "It's damn rotten what Mom and Mattie have done to you. I ain't speaking to them, neither."

Pop nods. "How's you and Lem doing on the boat?"

"Lem's in Gouldsboro. The Weeks boys are helping out." He feels like Mom, lying by not mentioning Woodsome. "We're doing real good. Price is up."

Pop nods. "Credit to you, boy. Never would've thought you could get more out of Swope than I could."

Jared grins. "He's a sharp one, isn't he? Couldn't do a thing with him. We're selling to SeaPride."

Pop coughs, flecks of green Jell-O all over the white covers. "You're taking my catch to Hacker Mitchell?"

"I – " Jared begins, but Pop's bunched jaw and red cheeks silence him.

The old man makes fists, beats the mattress. Blood backwashes into one of his IV's. He's trying to shout, but his voice comes out a reedy whine. "I ain't spoke to Hacker Mitchell nigh on fifty years. You let that old bastard get one up on me? Don't seem right, a man's whole family turning against him."

"Pop, I didn't know. I'm sorry." What had he let Allan Woodsome talk him into?

Pop punches the call button ferociously, and the nurse comes running and whisks the curtain shut.

Jared shuffles down the corridor to the lobby. He wants to howl, and his chest hurts from keeping all the sound inside. Now he's tarred with the same brush as the rest of them.

Mom gets up when she sees him, and so does Mattie. "Has – has something happened?" Mattie asks, and he realizes they think Pop must be – must have . . .

"He told me to get out."

Mom sits back down and puts her hands over her mouth. Mattie touches his arm. "I'm so, so sorry, Jared. I know how hard you try to not disappoint him."

Jared wipes his eyes with the heels of his palms. On the other side of the lobby, Robbie sits and watches across a space that seems wide as the Gulf of Maine.

* * *

The *Lady Starr's* back in business so Jared loses the Weeks brothers, but Lem's ready to work again. Jared tells him the whole story as the *Wayfarer* slices the green late-August sea on the way to the pogy grounds. "What a tough old bird," Lem says. "Holds a grudge tight as a barnacle. Him and Hacker fell out over a wager on the lobster boat races down Jonesport way. Your pop said they was betting even money and Hacker said it was three-to-one odds. Your pop refused to pay the difference. That's the whole of it."

"That's it?" Jared tries to make sense of a feud that's as old as Mom and Pop's marriage, older than he or Mattie or even Robbie. It doesn't seem possible to stay mad that long.

Lem adjusts a knob on the fish finder. "Him and I had a set-to once. So trivial I don't even recollect what about. Round about the time Robbie went, it was. He put me off the boat, said don't come back. 'Course I just showed up anyway. First day, wouldn't let me aboard, scalloped short-handed and the sternman threatened to quit. Second day, he had to take me but wouldn't pay me." Lem scratches one armpit and chuckles.

"I didn't know you two ever passed a cross word."

"Land, yes. Third day, I told him, Take me back regular, or I'm spreading it around the fleet that your boy skeddaddled to Canada. 'Cause he'd put out that Robbie'd gone down south to work the Gulf shrimpers. Things got back to normal pretty quick after that." Lem dips snuff. "Don't suppose you got any leverage like that?"

"No," Jared says.

"Then I guess you got to hope you wear him down."

Wear him down, Jared thinks. There isn't enough time in eternity to wear Pop down.

* * *

They're finishing a lunch of devilled ham sandwiches when the call comes from the Coast Guard. Pop's taken a turn for the worse and Mom wants Jared at the hospital. Lem and Allan drop him at the breakwater and head for *SeaPride* with the catch, and Jared races to Calais.

Time's running out now for him and Pop to mend fences. Jared's prayers are usually a shorthand he knows God will understand – *Please, Lord, help me* – but this time he has to be more specific. *Please, Lord, let Pop live, or at least let him forgive me before You take him home.*

There's no one in the lobby when Jared walks in, so he hurries to ICU. The curtain's drawn across Pop's cubicle, and a woman in green scrubs and a white lab coat stands talking to Mom and Mattie and Robbie. Mom and Mattie are crying. Robbie's staring at the floor, chewing one side of his mustache.

Mattie runs to Jared and hugs him. He wants to pull away, but doesn't. "He's gone. Gone."

Jared feels as though someone has driven a knife into his spine at the base of his neck. His legs go so weak, he's afraid they're going to collapse. His fingers lose their grip on the truck keys, which rattle to the floor. Robbie picks them up, and Jared takes them without touching his brother's skin.

"Did Pop – did he mention me?" It's all he'll have to hold on to, Pop's forgiveness at the end.

"He wouldn't speak to any of us." Mattie goes to Mom, puts an arm around her shoulders. "We'd come in, he'd turn his face away. Oh, Jared, what he's put Mom through these past two weeks. It isn't right. She devoted her whole life to him, and look at the way he leaves her."

This, Jared thinks, is how it feels when your heart finally breaks. This cold, squeezing feeling in your chest and head. This utter emptiness.

* * *

Pop hated any kind of hoopla, wanted nothing more than his ashes scattered at sea, so there's no funeral. Lem's the one who says, "Deer Island Point on an outgoing tide. He'd haunt us forever if he ended up on East Haven."

Now Jared, Mom, Mattie, and Robbie stand quietly on the deck of the *Wayfarer* with Lem at the helm. It's a grey day, the sky almost pearl behind the long dark streaks of cloud, the water dull as graphite. There must be a storm offshore somewhere, because seabirds – gulls and terns and shags – are sailing landward. But here all is calm, just the flat tidal wavelets and a fitful briny breeze.

Mattie's twisting her fingers in her long black hair the way she did when she was a kid. "I tried hard to be a good son," Jared tells her. He's tried more than once to talk to Mom about this, but she just pats his shoulder and says, "And you were." It's not enough.

Mattie strokes Jared's cheek. "Pop loved you best. But he was angry his whole life. He just never saw the good in anyone or anything. Mom's the one who saved this family. I mean . . ." She grasps Jared's wrist, and he can tell she's as set on what she believes as Pop ever was. "Just learn the lesson, Jared. Don't be like him. Let us be a family again."

For the first time in his life, Jared feels as though he might be seasick. But maybe this nauseated, disoriented feeling isn't seasickness – maybe it's the vertigo of having everything he's always held on to stripped away, as though there's no more gravity, no more sea below and sky above, no order. He fixes on Deer Island, across dark water cold as Pop's anger, and feels anew the paralysis that always came when Pop's expectations ran contrary to what the whisper in his heart told him was right.

"Make peace with our brother," Mattie says softly, and Jared knows he must, and knows also that he doesn't know how to begin. Across the deck, Robbie's talking with Mom, who holds the urn that contains Pop's ashes. Deer Island Point looms ahead, a grassy field above the raw grey cliffs that rise out of the ebbing sea. Jared feels something loosen in his chest. Even if he can't find the words, he can still put out his hand to his brother.

He crosses the deck. Robbie ignores the outstretched hand and grabs Jared in a hug, tentative at first, but growing stronger. Jared pats his brother's back awkwardly, then takes a deep breath and holds on tight.

When they step back from each other, Jared clears his throat, pauses, then shrugs. Robbie winks at him. "It's okay, little brother. *We're* okay."

Jared nods and says, "I missed you," and hearing himself, he realizes it's true.

The world seems wider now, limitless. Out towards the Eastern Passage, the corrugations of the sea swells are echoed in the mackerel sky. The sun is distant and dim. Jared holds onto Mattie in the tight circle of their brother's arms. It's Mom who scatters Pop's ashes on the restless tide that carries them away.

Copyright 2007, Catherine J.S.Lee. © This work is protected under the U.S. copyright laws. It may not be reproduced, reprinted, reused, or altered without the expressed written permission of the author.

Catherine J.S. Lee's fiction has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *juked*, *Cezanne's Carrot*, *ShatterColors Literary Review*, *Amarillo Bay*, *The Rose & Thorn*, and *The Binnacle*.

