

The Snowstorm

MY OLDEST SON, Joe, had just come out of the service. He and I were crab potting over in Hungars Creek on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. It was in March, and we had had some warm weather. The old black-headed gulls had already arrived, and there was a fish hawk or two soaring. They had already piled a few sticks for the start of a nest around a buoy that marked the channel. The early run of peelers had not arrived, but there were a few jimmys around in the creeks, and we had caught a fair amount for its being so early.

Hungars and Mattawoman creeks were extra good creeks for crab potting and trotlining during the early part of the season. Mattawoman Creek is next to Hungars running north. I've made as much as \$100 a morning there and been back at the wharf at seven o'clock, finished for the day.

We would sell our catch to a crab truck there at the dock, close to where we moored in Hungars, and they would carry the jimmys to Crisfield to a picking house.

We were getting about ten dollars for a barrel of crabs during those early months, but later they would dip to about four dollars a barrel. It was right good money then, but it wouldn't be much today. At times they get twenty-five dollars for a basket now. You get two and a half baskets to a barrel. A basket is supposed to weigh forty pounds, and a barrel is a hundred pounds. By golly, the prices of things have changed.

We were running about ninety pots, which was all I ever ran back then. I have caught as many as twenty-three barrels with ninety pots in a morning. I'd have to hold each pot firm at the bottom while bringing it in the boat to keep the weight of all the crabs from bending the pot up. I would have to roll a barrel ahead, level it off, and reach for another after every four or five pots. The boys catch more than this now at times, but they are running around two hundred fifty pots or more. I caught twenty-three barrels twice with ninety pots. We were catching about ten barrels a day out of Hungars and Mattawoman at that time.

It was on a Saturday. We were fishing our pots before sunrise and were anxious to finish and head for home on the weekend. I had just bought a brand new thirty-nine-foot round sterner that I had named *Charles*. I had her built during the winter over in Deltaville on the western shore. During the week, we were selling our crabs to the truck in Hungars, or if we were crabbing in the Bay, we would sell to Cape Charles, which is only three miles north of Hungars. On the weekend, however, we would take our crabs to Tangier and sell them to my brother Weldon who would

take them to Crisfield on Monday. He had an old fifty-foot draketail dead rise named the *Rex*. Weldon bought her from Will Parks on Tangier, and she was a fine boat with high sides.

On this morning, Joe was fishing the pots, and I was steering. The wind was blowing some, like it does in March, but there was no sign of a storm coming. The old laughing gulls were flying down low as Joe shook the rotten bait out of the bait boxes and put in fresh bunkers. They would dip down low and pick up bits of fish from the water behind the boat. Off in the distance, I'm sure it was quite a scene with the haze over the water just before sunrise, us working the pots, and the gull behind. It would have made a good picture for some artist.

Joe yelled to me the bait in the pots was still fairly fresh because of the water being so cool. I told him to keep throwing in fresh bait. We had plenty of bait, and besides, fresher bait will catch more crabs. It would also be Monday before they would be fished again.

We did not leave the pots in Hungars very long. We crabbed the creeks early but later we would move them out into deeper water in the Bay. Joe remarked about the number of eels he was pulling up in the pots. It had not been but just a few years earlier that eels were used for bait on the trotline, and we would have been glad to have seen them.

Boy, things had changed with the coming of the crab pot. In the winter months, before anyone started using the crab pot, I would go out and gig up a barrel or two of eels and salt them down good for the coming of the crabs in the early spring. They were easy to catch because there were always two holes in the sand fairly close together. The old-timers used to say one hole was for the eel to breath and the

other was for him to come and go. Eels were all over the place back then. There were also some big ones around, and they were mighty good bait for the trotline.

As Joe fished the last few pots, I noticed a change in the temperature and the wind started blowing a little from the northwest. I told him we might have a storm a little later. We had caught a couple bushels of hard crabs, and they were in baskets sitting on the workdeck. I gave Joe the steering stick and went over to put the lids over the crabs. There was hardly any need in culling because all the crabs were big jimmys.

I took the stick back from Joe and headed on out of Hungars in the direction of Tangier. There would be plenty of work to be done around the house when we arrived. I did not want to waste any time because Sunday was not a work-day on the island. It was a special day when the family would go to church and come home to a noonday meal with fried chicken. There was some of the best eatin' in the world around Tangier back then. Joe and I would chop wood or whatever else Ida needed on Saturday afternoon.

We were hardly out of Hungars when it got real cloudy. I told Joe he best go in the cabin and wait. His foul weather gear was some he had brought back from the service, and it was not much count. I had a decent set of Sawyer's oilskins and my old sou'wester. She was a fine hat made of heavily coated cloth, designed to shed water down the back.

It began to get rough with the seas hitting the dead rise bow and water coming over into the boat. The temperature was steady dropping. It was getting cold. The weather was not horrible until we got off Occohannock Creek when, all of a sudden, it started snowing a gust and blowing a solid gale from the northwest. I could hardly believe it, but I had

seen stranger things happen on the old Bay. I wanted to go into the creek but I could not see through the snow. Those Eastern Shore creeks can be dangerous to go into when you cannot see where you are going. I was afraid we might run ashore.

I kept heading for Tangier. The water was pouring over the pilothouse, and I had to keep pumping the water out of the bilge with a hand pump. Every two or three minutes it looked like the bilge was filling up. I was getting tired, and it did not look like the water was shrinking much. I got to thinking, maybe a plank had come loose from the bottom. "Joe," I yelled. "You better get out here I think a plank has come loose from the bottom."

Joe tore out of the house and started pumping. He pumped and pumped. Finally, I could see the water shrinking, and I knew we were all right. I had been in similar storms over the years. However, I had not experienced as bad a snowstorm in March before. "I think we are all right now," said Joe.

He went back into the cabin to dry off, and I thought we were all right, but suddenly the motor started acting up. Every time a big sea would come and splash water over the house and collars into the boat, the engine would slow down and just barely turn over. I thought to myself, I guess we won't make it anyway. I glanced over at the Eastern Shore trying to see a mouth of one of the creeks, but all I saw was a haze of snow falling. It was solid coming down, like it would never stop.

"What is the matter with the engine?" Joe yelled to me out of the cabin.

"I don't know. She acts like she is getting wet someway," I said.

Through the mist I could just barely see Watts Island off in the distance, and I was some kind of glad. The engine was still acting up so Joe came out and took the stick, while I went to look at the motor. It did not take long to see what the problem was. With all the bouncing up and down, the front of the engine box had fallen down and the plugs and distributor cap were getting wet. When they would dry off some, the Chevy would catch and go along all right until another big wave hit. I asked Joe half joking why he didn't see it when he came out of the house. It was hard enough for me to see when I was looking right at it. The snow mixed with sea pouring into the vessel made it hard to see.

The rest of the way home was fairly normal. Joe pumped while I steered, and finally Watts Island was clearly in sight. Many a time I had come across the Bay about beat to death from the seas tossing me up and down, and there was always a feeling of relief to see the old lighthouse on Little Watts Island standing tall against the wind and rain. It was not there on this day, but I thought about her as we came closer to Watts that day. The old lighthouse, that provided many a fisherman relief, had been blown down in a bad winter storm in 1944. The lighthouse, the big house, and most of Little Watts Island had all blown away.

When I was a boy, Little Watts Island, which was about a half mile to the north of Watts Island, was a fairly big island. It was four or five acres, but the old Bay has worn her down until there is nothing there today.

We used to go over and pick blackberries and shove around the shore netting for crabs. There was an old fellow living in the house near the lighthouse and his name was Charlie Hardenburg. I think he was from a foreign country because once when Elmer Shores and I were over on the

island netting crabs an event occurred, which made me think he was not from the United States.

Elmer and I were just boys when we sailed across to the shore. We came upon a pear tree solid full with ripe pears. We thought it was a wild tree so we sat on the bank and ate until we were almost sick. Neither Elmer nor I knew Charlie had been working over the tree and when he saw us eating his labors, he stormed out of his house yelling "Come hither, come hither."

I guess he meant for us to come to him, but we did not wait around to see what he wanted. He was some kind of mad. Charlie was sort of a hermit, living by himself, always reading and writing. We liked him on Tangier. He minded his own business, and we minded ours. When we found out later the pears were his, we left them alone. It is all gone today, and it makes me sad.

Finally, there straight ahead was the *Rex* waiting to buy our crabs. She was a sight for sore eyes. When we came along side of her Weldon, my brother, was on the deck to help us aboard. "Elmer, I didn't think you would try to come across today," he said. "It is crazy weather isn't it."

I told him that it was fairly clear when we started across the Bay. We went inside the cabin to the warmth of the ole Shipmate wood stove. Weldon poured some hot coffee, and it tasted mighty good. It took quite some time, standing by the stove, before my oilskins would come off. They were made of light canvas and had been oiled recently. They were slick and stiff from the cold. Weldon and Joe had to help me out of them.

After we got the crabs aboard and I was feeling better, Weldon started the engine up and headed for home. When we got to Tangier, I was glad to plant my feet on dry land.