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Lures of Last Resort

One July morning, three men came walking up to my dad and me while we fished off the public pier. This was back in my hometown, in Gaston, home of the Gaston Sea Devils and Rex's Famous Hot Dogs. The particular rod I was fishing with, and the reel, too, I'd gotten that spring for doing nothing more than turning a year older. I had just dropped my line into the water when I saw the three men coming our way. They weren't fishermen. Their work pants were ironed smooth, and as they got close I could smell aftershave. Their faces didn't have the wrinkles you get from squinting into the sun. Didn't carry fishing rods either, these men. One of them held an expensive-looking camera. Another carried a small plastic box. The third man didn't carry anything; he just smiled dumbly.

"Take a look at this, gentlemen," the man carrying the box said to us. His voice sounded deep and resonant like the disc jockeys that my folks listened to on the radio. *Fat Billy spinning the oldies. Big Joey bringin' it to you.* This man wasn't big, though, just tall. And skinny like me. He unclasped the box. "You gentlemen won't believe what you see."

I wasn't any gentleman. What ten-year-old is? And the green plastic box, and those

feathery lures that looked like little peacocks—I'd seen them before. They were Mai Tai lures, manufactured right here in Gaston, and my dad used to sell them. Until a month earlier, Dad had sold all sorts of Mai Tai gear to tackle shops and sporting-goods stores. He had spent his days driving up and down the Jersey shore drumming up orders for reels and fillet knives and those portable toilets for boats with no Johns. And lures, too, same as these.

"You'll catch your supper in no time flat," the man said. His v-neck shirt said Mai Tai in one corner and had a stitched-on logo that looked like the lures in the box.

Since mid-June we'd been fishing that pier, my dad and I, every sticky morning from sunrise to ten a.m. I'd wake to the sound of my bedroom door squeaking open. "Up and at 'em," my dad would say, then leave me in the dark to pull on some clothes while he went to the kitchen for coffee, which always smelled good even though, like beer, it was off-limits.

That summer you could have caught fish just by asking nicely. Flukes and snappers. Flounders. Bluefish. Didn't matter to me what we caught; I didn't eat fish, and Dad was allergic. (Mom would eat anything we put on her plate and pretend to like it.) At the end of

the fishing pier, my dad would fillet our day's catch and separate the fillets into baggies, and when we came home we'd strut around the apartment complex like a couple of heroes, ringing doorbells and giving everybody free fish that'd stink up their apartments in about a minute. What we didn't give away my dad would put in the freezer, till the freezer had nothing but fish in it and my mother would say things like, "We have enough fish, don't we?" or "Maybe tomorrow you two ought to take a rest." But we never did.

The man holding the box said, "These lures're made special like that, colorful, to attract—"

"I know exactly what they're meant to do," my dad said, shaking his head. "Who the hell do you think I am? Son, why don't you tell these men who I am."

So I told them. "My dad is Lee Gernipoethy."

The men looked at one another and then back at my dad. "Well, Jesus, we didn't . . . we were sent out here on a little promotional stint. That's all. Giving away some lures. We didn't know . . ."

You say our last name like Gunnipuddy, and it's a name people don't forget. Especially when you're a big man like my dad, six-two and broad like the linebacker he'd been till senior year, when he quit high school for reasons that, though he never said so outright, had a lot to do with my being born. These men obviously had

started working for Mai Tai after my dad got fired, because they hadn't recognized him. Though by now the name Gernipoethy must have already been legend. Dad had been chewed out for some minor infraction, the story goes, when he lifted his manager's desk right up in the air—and this wasn't some small desk, either—and threw it through the window. It fell two stories to the parking lot below. Then Dad spent the night in jail.

It's a story I learned years later, when I was fifteen. By then my mother had already been remarried a while. To Rodney. One night, Rodney got home from his job as customer service manager at the water company and found me in the parking lot setting free a daddy-longlegs I'd caught in the bathroom sink. I'd scooped it up in my cupped hands and run outside with it tickling my palms. After I let it go, Rodney and I went inside, and Rodney got a bottle of Budweiser from the refrigerator and then told me the story of my dad's night in jail. Rodney liked to tell stories, and I didn't like the way he told this one—his eyes gleaming, hands in motion, voice animated, pausing every so often to take long swallows from his beer. It was exactly the way he told my mom and me the outrageous and sad excuses customers had for not paying their water bill. *But that's Lee*, he concluded, shaking his head. *That's old Lee for you. A real character, that one.*

Except he wasn't a character—he was my dad,

even if I hadn't seen him in a few years—and I sat there at the kitchen table wondering what Rodney's point was in telling me a story that made my dad look foolish, till Rodney slapped me on the shoulder and said, as if we were old chums, *But you know something, you don't have one bit of your old man's mean streak in you.*

He went to the refrigerator again, I remember, and came back with two more bottles of Budweiser. *I'm going to give you a beer tonight, son,* he said, and I punched that man in the eye as hard as I could. In thirty minutes a brown shopping bag full of my clothes sat next to me on the curb where you wait for Greyhound busses to take you away to new places. Mom was still out, working the four-to-midnight shift at the Gaston Diner, and I knew she'd be heartbroken. But I went anyway. When you make up your mind to move on, you move on. And so that's what I did.

When I was ten, though, I didn't know the details of Dad's job or how he lost it. I knew that suddenly he had time for fishing, and that he expected me to come along. Once our lines were in the water, though, he had this way of forgetting I was even there, of looking off at the horizon for long periods, not answering my questions about why clouds went pink at sunrise, or whether fish felt pain when they bit the hook, or whether a tidal wave would demolish this whole town. *Dad?* I would say, *trying to draw him back to me.* Nothing. *Dad!*

My dad was obviously involved in some heavy thinking. All the same, I'd have preferred that he answer my questions.

"Give my son some lures, then, if that's what you're here to do." Dad sure was paying attention now, watching the men hard. The man holding the box of lures handed me three of them. "Is that all you're planning to give my kid? Kid's a good fisherman, needs plenty of lures."

"It's okay, Dad," I said. "Three's enough."

But my dad wasn't listening. He had taken a small step closer to the man with the lures, and the men were glancing down at the fishing knife that hung free in Dad's belt. They were taking that knife seriously. Dad spat off to the side, looked again at the man holding the lures, and raised his eyebrows as if waiting for an answer.

The man handed me the entire box. Must've been thirty lures in there, all peacock-looking and ready for action.

"Thanks," I said, taking the box.

"No thanks necessary, son," my dad said. "That's his job, giving out fishing tackle. Don't know what that other man's job is"—he nodded to the dumb-looking one—"I never heard of it taking two men to hand out lures. Big waste of money, you ask me."

"We're on the same sales team," the man said, the man who barely reached my dad's chin.

"*Sales team!*" My dad ran a hand through his hair. "Fellows are teammates? Like in baseball?"

He shook his head in disbelief. "Salesmen have what're called territories," he explained to me. "If they start working in pairs, then they've got to start splitting commissions." He waited for them to dispute what he'd said, but they didn't. "And *that* man"—he nodded to the photographer—"it's that man's job to take pictures of the people who've gotten the lures. Action photos, preferably. Isn't that right? For next year's catalogue?"

The photographer said, "Or the local paper. Or both."

"Well, then," my dad said to me, "let's catch some fish." He pulled the knife from his belt, cut off the lure he'd been using, and dropped it into the little bucket where we kept our tackle. Then he removed one of the Mai Tai lures from its plastic package and tied it on. He did the same with my line, too, then tucked the knife back through his belt. This all took a few minutes. Some other fishermen were on the pier that morning, but I had all the giveaways. So the three men waited.

The fishing pier wasn't two blocks from the firehouse, and as Dad was slowly tying on the Mai Tai lures—deliberately slowly, I'm sure, because I'd seen him tie on lures before in two seconds—the firehouse started blaring its siren. Loudest thing you ever heard. Happened almost every day, far more often than there could be fires. I yelled from deep within my throat and without moving my lips: "I love you

Jenny Hanes I love you Jenny Hanes I love you Jenny Hanes!" Over and over I yelled it, for maybe thirty seconds. What I knew was, as long as you matched your yelling to the pitch of the siren, nobody could hear you. It could be your own secret. Jenny Hanes was the third-smartest and second-prettiest girl in my class at school, and I loved her with a wholeness that I'd never loved anybody with before or since. She was blond and thin and had a voice like smooth paint. She wore cutoffs that her mom must have trimmed herself, because little white strands of denim were always draping down her legs. I walked into walls for her, literally missed doors on purpose, because when I did, she laughed, and her laugh was worth an army of bruises.

By the time the siren died down again, Dad had the Mai Tai lures on. I set down the plastic box at my feet and we both cast our lines into the water. Fluke, we were going for, so we stood there jiggling our rods, waiting for the fish to bite.

"Get yourself ready," Dad said to the photographer.

"Are we going to be in the newspaper?" I asked my dad, and the end of my rod bent over. I yanked the rod upward, and the reel made a metallic buzzing sound, an exhilarating sound, the sound of a big fish. Everything that had been said or thought only seconds before was now miles in the past.

"Dad!" My rod bent like crazy. "I got one!"

The three men came closer. The photographer raised his camera. I imagined Dad and me in the paper, the sports section, and we were smiling big newsprint teeth, and there was a caption that made us seem tough and outdoorsy. I could smell fish blood.

But my dad shook his head. "Nah—he's only caught the ground. Look." He took the rod from my hands and held it steady. The whirring stopped and the rod straightened. He yanked the rod again—more whirring. "See? It's just the ground."

The men exhaled. The photographer lowered his camera.

My dad pulled the knife from his belt and cut the line. "That's one Mai Tai lure we won't be seeing again."

Once the Mai Tai reps saw we weren't catching any fish with their tackle, they and the photographer started muttering to one another about having to get back to the showroom. Yet they waited, and at first Dad appeared to pay no notice, just kept jerking his fishing rod up and down. Finally, without turning toward them, he said, "I don't think you men are going to get what you're after today." Without another word, the men nodded and slunk away.

As soon as they were gone, Dad reeled in his line. "There's a reason I don't use these lures, son. See that hook?" he said, and lay the Mai

Tai lure on his palm. "Hook's too big for that lure. The design's all wrong."

I reeled in my line, and we rigged up our old lures again. Dad put the Mai Tai lures back into the plastic box and closed the clasp. "Those are lures of last resort," he said. "If I was stranded on a deserted island with no food, I'd rather try clubbing fish over the head than catching them with a Mai Tai lure."

I laughed, and cast my line into the water. Dad told me that it's more important for lures to reflect light off the sun than it is for them to look like actual fish. Better off using tin foil than some fancy colorful lure.

"I'd rather jump into the water and grab them myself," I said, "than catch them with a Mai Tai lure."

My dad cast his own line into the water. "I'd rather call them on the phone, invite them to dinner, than catch them with a Mai Tai lure."

"I'd rather shoot them with a gun," I said, looking up at my dad, "than catch them with a Mai Tai lure."

"Guns are dangerous," my dad said. "You keep away from guns."

We stood there for a while, not talking, just fishing, until my dad spat over the end of the pier, sized me up, and said, "Biggest animal on Earth's the blue whale, not some dinosaur." Then he said, "Whales eat a lot of plankton. Tons and tons of it."

My dad had been doing some heavy thinking on the pier, but now he was done with thinking. Now he was looking at me, telling me that love made you do crazy things, but that sometimes crazy things were called for. Saying that I'm likely to grow to six feet if I eat and sleep right. That the tide rises just over six feet during a full moon. He was answering every question I'd ever asked, and others I'd forgotten or never asked in the first place.

He said that fighting never got you anywhere, and that only lazy people fished past noon. That tidal waves didn't ever hit this coast. But yes, in theory the town would flood.

He didn't speak quickly, yet there was urgency in his voice as if what he was telling me were vitally important. I know now he believed he was talking with me, father to son, for the last time, and so he was making up for all the lost moments, and the lost moments to come. I have no idea what he had planned, specifically, beyond getting in his car and driving in some predetermined direction, but my hunch is that his destination was beside the point. Since leaving Gaston myself at fifteen, I've picked up and moved every year or two, and not once did the destination matter at all. It's more a feeling that if you stay, your bones will crush. Your gut will bleed. You'll behave in a way you can't live with.

A dull knife is more dangerous than a sharp one, he said. In lake fishing, you're better off

along the shoreline than in the middle of the lake. He said that every mass has gravity—it's why the Earth revolves around the sun, and why the moon revolves around the Earth. An albacore fights like a fish twice its size.

"Albacore's the best thing you'll ever catch," he said, and I imagined what a battle that must be.

"Do you know why the beach erodes?" my dad asked.

I said that I didn't.

So he told me. And then he told me some more.

At eight thirty the next morning, I got out of bed and found Mom at the kitchen table staring at the wall, a half-eaten English muffin on her plate. The radio was on, the volume low, probably so that it wouldn't wake me. I was almost next to her before she seemed to notice me.

"Where's Dad?" I asked.

Mom pursed her lips, stood, and went to the refrigerator. "Which jelly do you want?" She opened the refrigerator door. "Strawberry?"

"Where is he?" I sat down in one of the kitchen chairs. But she didn't answer me. She'd begun moving things around in the refrigerator, slamming down jars on the shelves, rearranging everything. I started to feel seasick. "Mom?" I tried to sound calm, although I could feel my neck beating and the spit in my mouth going dry. "What's going on? Where is he?"

"Where is he, where is he . . ." She slammed the refrigerator door and spun to glare at me. I must have shrunk away, because then her face softened and she came over to the table. She stood over me for a few seconds, just looking. "Listen to me. Just be quiet and listen." She sat next to me at the table. Mom still had long hair then, and some strands had fallen over her face, but she didn't seem to notice. She was watching me closely. "You're ten years old and I'm not going to lie to you. You think your father's a great man, don't you? Your hero, probably. He isn't perfect, you know." She picked up her half-eaten English muffin, examined it, and put it back in her plate.

I asked her for the millionth time, Where *was* he?

"How the hell should I know?" Mom scrunched up her face like she might sneeze, but she didn't. She stayed frozen that way while the clock over the stove clicked a few times. Then she said, "Sorry. Okay? I'm sorry. I'm just telling you how it is. He leaves sometimes, but he always comes home. The last time you were too young for me to explain what was going on. You probably don't even remember."

But suddenly I did remember. Sort of. Actually, all I remembered was the seasick feeling, as if the apartment building were rolling in waves, same as I was feeling now. "How many times has he left?" I asked.

"Several times," she said. "But not for a few

years."

"Where does he go?"

"That depends. It all depends."

"Why does he leave?" I asked. We were both calming down, now. We were just talking. I was asking questions, and my mother was answering them.

"Your father would say for love. He loves me, so he leaves. He loves me, so he returns. Love, love, love. So finally I said to him. . . ." She shook her head. "Well, never mind what I said to him. But don't worry. He'll be back. I'm not going to lie to you. Your father's left, but he's coming back. He'll be back."

Either Dad's departures had lost their weight, or else Mom needed to act as if they had, because she spent the day doing ordinary things. Sweeping. Studying for a class she was taking in stenography. Humming along to the radio. Making me snacks: a plate of bologna and cheese, crackers, slices of carrots.

I couldn't eat. For two days I sat on the rug in the living room with one hand on the telephone, convincing myself that I could feel it preparing to ring. Convinced that if one hand *weren't* on the phone, then it wouldn't ring and that it would be my fault.

"Go outside," my mother told me. "I'll let you know if anybody calls."

On the third day, I woke up early without even meaning to, before sunup, and decided to be a man. I got my fishing rod and tackle from

behind the washing machine, and without waking Mom I went outside and walked the five blocks to the fishing pier. I didn't want to use the regular lures. They were my dad's, and I didn't want any help from him or his lures. And so I rigged up one of my own—the Mai Tai lures—but all morning long I didn't get a single hit. Dad had been right about one thing: these lures were no good.

A few of the usual fishermen were out, all grown men, everyone standing at a polite distance from one another, looking off to the horizon. Closest to me, a thin silver-haired man wearing overalls and dirty sneakers uncapped a Thermos and poured himself a steaming drink into the lid. He met my gaze while taking a sip, and then saluted me with the lid. We were just two men, fishing. I lay down my rod and went over to him.

"Is that coffee?"

When he said that it was, I asked him for a sip. The man creased his forehead at me, he tilted his head, but then he offered the Thermos lid and said to be careful, it's hot. I hadn't ever drunk coffee before, and it tasted as bitter as I imagined tar must, but I swallowed a big mouthful anyway, burning my throat some, said thank you, and went for my rod again.

The morning was cooler than usual, the ocean calm, and watching the horizon myself I started making plans. I would quit school and find a job earning money for Mom and me. I

imagined starting my own newspaper where I would sell advertising space to companies like Mai Tai. I was ten, but I swear I thought of that idea and several others as well. I would become famous for having a successful newspaper and being so young. I decided to start my newspaper that afternoon, walking door-to-door in the apartment building and selling subscriptions.

When I got home, drunk from my own ideas, both my parents were sitting at the kitchen table, their pinkies interlocked. Mom's eyes were red, but she was smiling and seemed content. Proud almost, as if she'd won a bet with herself. Dad's hair was mussed, he was unshaven, but other than that it could have been any other summer morning.

"Son," my dad said, and nodded as if we were both men who understood something important.

But I understood nothing. Seeing him, all I knew was that I wouldn't get to prove myself after all. There would be no newspaper, no fame, because my dad had failed at something as easy as walking out on us. And feeling disappointed in him made me feel shameful for feeling disappointed, and that, you can imagine, led me to feeling angry, furious, for having been made to feel shame over how I was feeling, which isn't exactly something that a person had any control over. Not at ten. Not when we're talking about a person's dad leaving and then

coming home again. I glared at him.

"Well?" he said, his eyes clear and wide and inviting. "Were they biting?"

For a moment I'd forgotten I was carrying a fishing rod. "Like crazy," I said, and went to put away the gear and pretend that he had never even come home. I made it as far as the doorway when my dad must have decided it wasn't time yet to be written off by his own damn son.

"What kind of fish did you catch?"

"Bluefish," I said. "Big ones. And an albacore." I turned around to face him. He was sitting back in his chair, his arms folded, his gaze on me. "Yeah, I did. And you were right about albacore, it really. . ."—and then realized too late that he had drawn me into the lie so that he could catch me in it and watch me thrash around.

