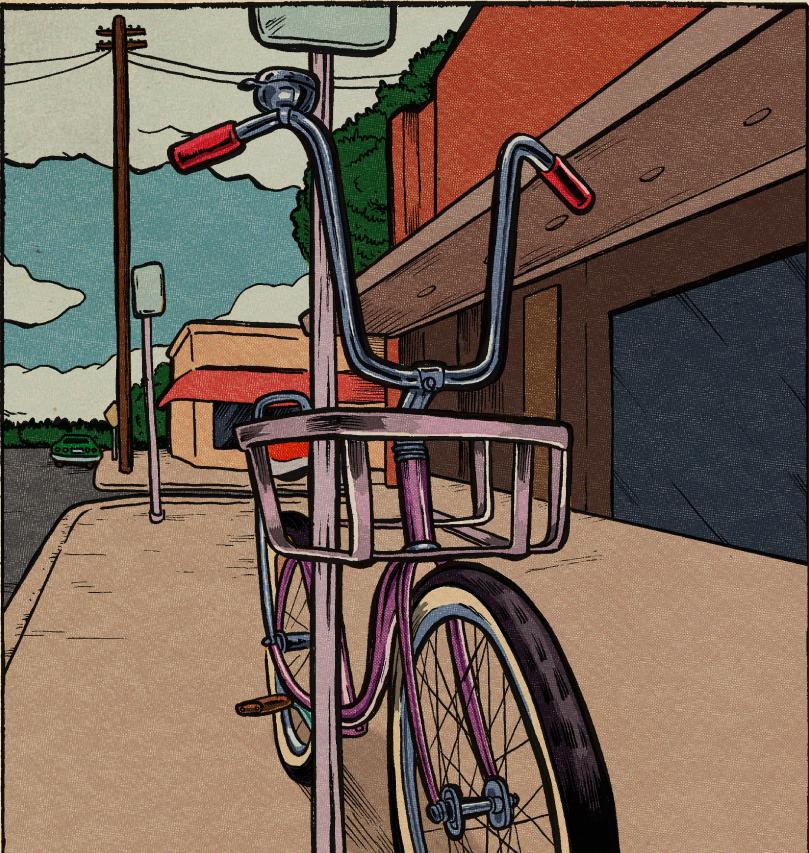


TIM BOWLING

THE MARVELS OF YOUTH



THE MARVELS OF YOUTH

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THE MARVELS OF YOUTH

TIM BOWLING



A Buckrider Book

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For my parents
and their grandchildren

You are what you eat. You are also the comics you peruse as a child.

Carlos Fuentes, "How I Started to Write"

What is the use of being a boy if you are going to grow up to be a man.

Gertrude Stein, "What Are Master-pieces and Why Are There So
Few of Them"



Lari Edison, doyen of the Haunted Bookshop, is dead, and my eyes return at once to their tenth year of seeing. Kierkegaard wrote, “The characters we will have are largely formed by the age of ten,” and if I could step through the crowded arras of the years and let my eyes scan the shelves of worn paperbacks that constituted half of Mr. Edison’s small enterprise, I wouldn’t be surprised to find there some tattered copy of the old Dane’s wisdom.

But sales of Kierkegaard pay no one’s bills; they didn’t even pay Kierkegaard’s. So we must face the cold, blunt fact: Lari Edison, whose storefront window on a skinny, potholed street starting at the post office and ending at the river sported a dishevelled and sun-faded edition of Christopher Morley’s *The Haunted Bookshop*; whose son, Stuart, my age but afflicted with a harelip that made him lisp so that for years I thought of that peculiar malady as a “hair lisp,” sometimes worked behind the tall counter; whose daughter, Norah, round as a fluffed sparrow and freckle-faced pretty, perhaps fourteen, also sometimes appeared, and so calmly it was as if she didn’t know that with such a name she belonged in the pages of James Joyce’s biography and not in a tiny fishing town redolent of oolichan oil and pool-hall tobacco smoke and fresh rain landing softly on puddles of

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old rain; whose wife, as thin as her husband was stout, took the weekday morning and early afternoon shifts while he made his primary living as a window cleaner hanging from the office towers of a Vancouver that still used the sawdust from century-old red cedars to cover up the vomit of the drunks leaving the Gastown hotels, and who didn't seem to know or even to care that issues 96, 97 and 98 of *The Amazing Spider-Man* were unusual because they lacked the official approval of the comic authority's barcode (due to their depiction of the Green Goblin's son's acid trips) or that she might have played Laura in *The Glass Menagerie* if the part called only for frailty and soft-spokenness and the ability to move like a scent carried by invisible bees; Lari Edison – the spelling of whose first name was never questioned, let alone explained, whose blue eyes were kind but who never brooked a disrespect to any authority except schoolteachers, policemen, politicians, truant officers, dogcatchers, ministers/priests/pastors/reverends, librarians, employers, Revenue Canada, literary critics, art critics, theatre critics, music critics and God, and who always gave discounts to the elderly ladies when they bought more than six copies of Agatha Christie at one time – is dead. And I am left with the mystery of the single “i” of his first name, which might be solved, and of the years, which have no resolution, only continuance.

Though four decades have passed since that bittersweet spot of time between the release of *Jaws* and the release of the first Star Wars movie, the rain still falls on that familiar street the colour of rhinoceros hide when dry and panther skin when wet. It falls so hard that the minute hand on the town clock, which has never kept the right time, almost drops and I almost see the last turns of my bike wheels again as I pedal hard for the sanctuary of story. Children didn't wear backpacks in the 1970s – we had lunch kits and Thermoses like our fathers because we went off alone to jobs just as our fathers did, without choice, without undue brooding over our lack of choice. So how did I carry home my assignment to distinguish between Upper and Lower Canada? In what way did I keep dry the field-trip

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permission form to visit the Dairyland factory in the city? I must have folded such paper into my lunch kit and dangled the kit off my handlebars, my fingers as red as the autumn maple leaves hanging over the granite cenotaph for the World War dead, those leaves I just passed under as I rode through Memorial Park, except I can't really show them to you unless the rain falls harder and the minute hand descends another minute on the left side of Time's battered face.

But instead, the rain stops. Now the tea bag of my little hometown begins to seep. It will seep for days, spreading a curious olfactory flavour through the air, much as time spreads the same brown flavour through the pages of the books Lari Edison prices in pencil as I shiver like a wet stray in the transom between the world and worlds. Outside, against the plate-glass window, my Mustang bicycle leans with Irish insouciance, the rust forming in its steel like the foxing that waits inside the chemicals of the paper in Christopher Morley's forgotten novel. In my eagerness, I have left my lunchbox hooked to the handlebar; I have left the question of Canada to Canada's weather.

Mr. Edison's eyes are the soft, powdery blue of the chalk for the pool cues next door. I am allowed into that establishment only briefly, to retrieve my brother who is twenty-seven and full of swagger and small-town bonhomie (though he'd hate the use of a French word to describe him, given how much he dislikes the Montreal Canadiens). The pool hall is called Hurry's Place, on account of the elderly Greek owner whose name – Harry – and whose pace – frenzied – naturally combined to form Hurry, but during much of the week the pool hall is no livelier than the bookshop. Indeed, it is like a gentleman's den from the Victorian era into which you could conduct your fresh copy of *The Strand Magazine* and recline, with some fisherman's Lab or springer spaniel at your feet, and breathe in the strangely exciting smells of stale Hickory Sticks, cigarette smoke and Mrs. Hurry's bubblegummy perfume. Mrs. Hurry is a little younger than my brother, and, since this is the 1970s, she's actually referred to as "Hurry's wife." As far as I can tell, from eavesdropping when Mrs. Maxwell is having a cup of Red Rose with my mother, Hurry's wife is a little chippy

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who has her claws into the silly old fool for all he's worth (to which my mother, as was her wont, politely demurred, citing "the girl's unfortunate upbringing"). Mrs. Maxwell's gossip, however, doesn't change how I look at Mrs. Hurry; on the contrary, it has the surprising effect of altering my perception of her husband, who ever afterward scuttles through the streets, his claws stuffed into his pockets to hide his crustacean heritage. For who could attract a little chippy with claws except a wily old crab?

Mrs. Hurry is violet-eyed and raven-haired, her bosom small and high. She wears tight jeans the colour of the inside of a mussel shell, plenty of rouge and eyeshadow, and charm bracelets on both wrists, as if she's recently freed herself from bondage to a jeweller who specializes in miniature astrological signs, killer whales and peace signs. Also, she has a large gap between her front teeth, which is somehow both attractive and unsettling. It'll be over a decade before I come upon the medieval notion, as applied to Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*, that such a gap in a woman's smile is a telltale sign of promiscuity, but even as a boy I'm mesmerized by the way she sometimes covers the gap with her tongue. The truth is, I'm a little in love with Mrs. Hurry; she's like Veronica in the *Archie* comics, or would be if Riverdale had a wrong side of the tracks and Veronica had grown up there.

"Hey, Sean," Mr. Edison says between bites of a giant Wonder Bread sandwich that consists of half a head of lettuce and half a jar of mustard, "you're in luck. The new issues just came in."

I look at my red-raw and rain-sueded hands. There's no way I can handle a mint condition comic book now! My hair is dripping and my windbreaker's like a Jackson Pollock canvas in process. I look up. Mr. Edison waits with his customary patience. A drop of mustard lands on his already-stained T-shirt, which is a dingy white otherwise and doesn't quite reach over his belly to the top of his faded jeans. A clutch of chest hair, tough and thick as crabgrass, pokes out of his collar. His smile is tired but sincere. He's one of those rare adults who genuinely likes, rather than suffers or pretends to like, children.

Before I can look at my hands again, an old woman shuffles out of the paperback stacks and approaches the huge cash register, which is solid steel

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and covered on its back and sides with stickers about American politics peeled out of *Mad* magazine. It has all the sacred aura of a real writer's typewriter. Whenever Mr. Edison pounds away on it, his expression grows serious; he might be Franklin W. Dixon or Mickey Spillane or even the totemic Christopher Morley himself. The old woman, recognizable as one of the dozens of pensioners to whom I deliver the afternoon *Vancouver Sun*, is tiny, sharp-nosed and bespectacled, prone to holding her head of frizzy white hair to one side like a robin listening for worms. Mr. Edison often says, and always with the unspoken admonition that we are not to repeat this to anyone, that he believes the characters in Agatha Christie's books shop in his store in order to learn what they're supposed to do next. Mrs. English, who is Scottish, must be Mrs. Marple, who is English. This makes her only mildly interesting, however. Like the other elderly people on my route, she's worthy of my full attention only at the end of each month, when she carefully considers whether to give me a wee tip and perhaps a shortbread cookie the weight of a horseshoe.

I look away from her and gaze at the wall behind and above Mr. Edison. It's covered with Mylar-jacketed copies of comic books I could never afford to buy, many of whose covers, in fact, show superheroes travelling the cosmos. From a wood-cased radio in a corner comes the faint sound of David Bowie singing about fame.

The ordinary world is gone now. It's fallen away and I will have to concentrate very hard to remind myself to re-enter it. After all, I have newspapers to deliver, six days a week, thirty papers a day, my route covering several miles – the thirty dollars I earn each month is usually the only money I have to spend on comics. Already I am learning life's hard and fundamental lesson: you must engage with the world so that you can escape the world. It is the lesson I see in the eyes of the drunken men who spill out of the Arms and the Legion and, on weekends, the pool hall – and I also see it in the eyes of Mr. Edison whenever he doffs his window-cleaner's cloth cap and picks up a freshly sharpened HB2 pencil and begins to doodle on the clean foolscap he tapes all over his counter, inviting any of his patrons to join in. My feeble stick figures and only slightly more confident

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block letters have already adorned several countertops' worth of paper. Sometimes, if I'm in the shop when a fresh piece of foolscap is required, Mr. Edison lets me keep the doodled-on sheet – one of them is taped to my bedroom wall where nightly its weird characters invade my dreams. Perhaps if I take some of the correspondence drawing courses advertised at the backs of the comics, the ones recommended by Norman Rockwell, I could become a real artist. But I dream of something else: I have already written a *Hardy Boys* mystery in which Frank, Joe and Chet travel into outer space and encounter a group of thugs with laser vision. But better than that, I have started to create my own comic book. Well, not just my own; my best friend, Jay, who's two years older and a wizard at cartooning, is really the main creative force. We've already named the strip *Cosmos* and created a superhero named Blackstar. At school, we regularly skip out of our multigrade class, hide in the paper supply room on a top shelf behind stacks of carbon and mimeograph paper and plot our first issue. If I could live in the paper supply room and the bookshop, with brief periods away to visit my family and perhaps get in a spirited game of road hockey, I'd be as happy as a black Lab romping through the marsh to retrieve a mallard.

“But there are three mysteries in this one,” Mrs. English says. “So if you add these other books, that makes six.”

Mr. Edison sighs. He looks longingly at the sandwich he's placed on the counter. “Six stories, yes. But not six books. An omnibus edition is still one book.”

Mrs. English tilts her head even more to the side. She clutches her purse to her breast as if to staunch a wound.

“Listen,” Mr. Edison says calmly, “it will cost you four dollars for these books and you'll get to read six stories. Otherwise, if you put the omnibus back, you'll need to buy three others to get the discount, which would be five dollars for six stories. So you're saving a dollar.”

“Ye-e-e-e-s.” Mrs. English reaches deep into her bloodstream and draws up all the Glaswegian suspicion she can find. “But I've already read one of the stories in the omnibus.” The last syllable of this last word she pronounces “boose,” as if it rhymes with “puce.” “And that would make it

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four dollars for only five stories.”

Mr. Edison looks at me and winks. “Here’s a thought. Spend the four dollars and give the extra dollar to Sean here. He’s writing his own comic book and you can be one of the first subscribers.”

Mrs. English gazes at me over the glasses at the end of her nose. “I already subscribe to his newspaper. And if he’s a good lad and actually brings me a copy before suppertime, he might just get that dollar as a Christmas tip.” She clears her throat. “I’ll just put this omni-boose back on the shelf, then. That’ll be three dollars.”

“Never mind. I’ll put it back. Just leave it on the counter.” Mr. Edison takes her proffered bills and makes a quick jab and counterpunch on the register.

As kind and patient as he is, as much as he tolerates the antic behaviour of his shop’s younger patrons, Mr. Edison isn’t without a temper. When he gets angry – for example, when a non-initiate into the joy of comic book collecting roughly handles a choice item, or when Jay and I sometimes forget that he’s running a business and not a schoolyard at recess – his cheeks redden, his saloon barkeep moustache trembles and his forearms become particularly burly as he crosses them over his chest. Fortunately, these occasions are rare.

Once Mrs. English has gone, I realize that I’m dry enough to look at the new comics. As usual, Mr. Edison anticipates my request and, carefully moving his sandwich out of harm’s way, begins to pull out the crisp, mint issues of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, *The Fantastic Four*, *The Avengers*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *Conan the Barbarian* and *Thor*. Now even the world away from the world disappears. I’ve shrunk into little squares and dialogue balloons as quickly as Dr. Bruce Banner explodes into the Hulk. New comics cost twenty-five cents each and I have a limp two-dollar bill in my pocket, which I earned by selling one of my brother’s used goalie sticks. A collector must always be resourceful, and over the past year, since the Haunted Bookshop opened, I’ve learned to read the various material hungers of my peers. Many exceptional transactions have occurred because some bug-eyed classmate couldn’t live without a complete set of the 1972

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Team Canada hockey cards. And I once sold a bright green banana seat off a rusted old Mustang I found stuck in the mud of the riverbank. It pays to keep your eyes open. Although, as life often proves, it sometimes pays to keep them closed as well. The trick lies in knowing the difference.

The phone's jangling ring brings me back to earth. Mr. Edison picks up the receiver, then reaches it across to me, unwinding the cord. Sotto voce: "Your mom."

Sheepishly, I take the receiver and mumble into it. My mother reminds me that I need to complete my route quickly today because my father is "going out for the dark set" and he wants me to come along. How could I have forgotten? Normally, I love going out on the boat with my dad, but ever since seeing *Jaws* in the summer, I've been apprehensive about being on the water – even drifting in a swimming pool, my torso and legs have felt intensely vulnerable to attack. Of course, the Fraser River, let alone a swimming pool, contains no great white sharks, but in the years of unlicensed imagination, anything is possible, all worlds and all seas intersect. How could I know for certain what deadly creatures my father might yank unknowingly to the surface in his gill net? After all, the white sturgeon, grotesquely prehistoric and potentially as large as a small whale, frequented the murky depths of the Fraser River estuary and sometimes rose thrashing to the stern of our boat (though I'd never seen one more than four or five feet long, which was long enough). As for a swimming pool, I'd read enough comics and newspaper articles to know that humans are capable of placing deadly creatures into unexpected places. If a python could live in the sewer system and surface in a toilet bowl, why couldn't a killer shark somehow find itself in a rectangle of backyard chlorine? Sure, it was unlikely, but at age ten, my febrile enthusiasm for possibility had yet to be polluted by the logic and statistics of the world.

I tell my mom I'll go as fast as I can, speaking more softly into the phone because I'm embarrassed to be tying up the line. But Mr. Edison, happily grazing on his leafy sandwich, pays no attention to me until I hand him the receiver and ask him to keep my purchases safe behind the counter while I finish my route; I don't want to risk damaging the comics when I'm folding

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newspapers. The soft blue of his eyes, the yellow splash of mustard on his shirt; there's something Mediterranean about his presence that girds me for the dark and the rain and the lonely revolutions of the splashing wheels. "Excelsior!" I ought to shout, but "Bye" is all my secular Anglo-Protestant background will allow as I slide like a muskrat into the day's black current.

The rain hasn't started again, but it feels imminent, the sky a trembling wheelbarrow about to be tipped. A streetlamp sizzles on at the river end of the street but it isn't dark enough yet for the yellow light to make a difference. Far along the sidewalk in the other direction, Mrs. English stands, hunched over, gazing into a shop window, probably of the clothing store. Several elderly people find the female mannequins offensive, and it's true that the hard nipples are quite visible through the fabric, but there's nothing risqué about even a fully naked mannequin compared with Mrs. Hurry, and she often appears for hours at a time in the pool hall window, seated behind the cash register. But I suppose a wax dummy *could* be moved, whereas Mrs. Hurry wouldn't move a single long eyelash unless she felt like it. As my brother says, "That girl's her own boss. Not even Hurry can make her do a damned thing she doesn't want to do."

Across the street from Mrs. English, Jiggs, a grizzled black Lab of the neighbourhood, is making his slow way home. He pauses to chew on some lime-green grass growing up through the cracks in the sidewalk, and then, as he gathers his strength and goes on, I can almost hear his bones clack. He's like a sunken couch, worn velour-smooth with the years, that shivers out loose change and dust whenever it's shifted.

I draw a deep breath of the rain-sweet air. A dozen barn swallows swoop beneath the telephone wires in front of the vacant lot across from me. I'm tempted to pick up some rocks and practise my aim, but there isn't time. And besides, just then the bell of the gas-pump hose outside Brownlows' garage dings and there's every chance that some fussy adult will take me to task for even thinking about throwing rocks in the vicinity of windows and windshields.

I still don't move right away, however. This is the most important street in my life and though I am not, as I am now, a six-foot vessel filled with

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memory and the dust of older memory, I seem somehow to recognize and appreciate the beautiful simplicity of this straight travelling line, the perfect mathematics that allows me to move from one part of my world to another with familiarity and ease. Delta Street is not long, not well paved, not even busy most of the time. The small shops along each of its sides sit like the shunted boxcars of trains for which there is no destination. To the east, there's the bookshop, pool hall, barbershop, Royal Canadian Legion, the museum, an insurance agency; to the west, a clothing store, bank, butcher shop, convenience store, a notary public, dry cleaners and a shoe store. There are also a dozen vacant lots and empty stores, including the sunken grassy space where my grandfather, who died a decade before I was born, had his plumbing shop and residence. It's the mid-1970s and North America's economy has slumped. Even the harbour at the north end of the street is quieter than usual – no creak of a winch hoisting nets, no gunning of outboard engines, no shouts of fishermen.

But Delta Street, even in the autumn rain, shines with promise as brilliantly as any long impression in the grass shone for a group of medieval pilgrims setting out for the Holy Land. It shines still, though I'm not there to see the streetlamp's filaments reflect in the puddles and all of the old businesses are surely gone. But it shines, I know it does, and probably for children and old ladies and anyone else prey to these brief and inexplicable epiphanies of time that the world cannot suffer because the world must make its living. And I am part of the world and must make mine too.

Forty years ago, I did the same.

For the next two hours after leaving the Haunted Bookshop that day, I biked through the wet streets, a canvas sack of newspapers slung over my shoulder, as darkness crowded around the streetlamps like Homer's wine-dark sea and dingy flocks of seagulls flew silently inland, spiralling away as if I had tossed them out of my sack. The town, already quiet, grew quieter. The first few stars appeared faintly in the north, over the mountains beyond Vancouver. Raindrops fringed the telephone lines and the telephone poles

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remained flushed from the previous storm. The weeping willows and horse chestnuts and monkey puzzle trees along Arthur Drive – one of our town’s original streets, lined with Victorian and Edwardian houses set far back on huge lots – trembled with the black and silver remnants of the rain. Finally I parked my bike in the cluttered side yard of our modest bungalow and hurried on foot to the twenty-foot-high gravel dike at the end of our street. By then, the bulb of the corner streetlamp had pinged on, but the air still wasn’t dark enough for the light to show. Since it took my father only ten minutes to reach his preferred drift on the river, I knew we’d have time to make our set.

I heard my father a full minute before I saw him. When I reached the government wharf and paused at the top of the cleated wooden gangway angled steeply down to the dozen small floats chained and roped together on mossy and creosoted logs that served as moorage for the fishing fleet, a familiar whistling drifted across the damp air and caressed my attention. This time, I recognized the music, because we had just watched *Fiddler on the Roof* on TV a week earlier. *Sunrise, sunset, sunrise, sunset, slowly through the years* . . . It had surprised me as a boy, but makes perfect sense to me now, that my father’s eyes moistened during the wedding scene. How heavy and pain-filled even the most joyous events can be when we sense that there’s no holding them! My mother and father must have looked tenderly at each other, must have recalled their own wartime wedding in Toronto thirty years earlier, must have touched silently on the painful loss of my brother, stillborn three years before my birth, and then, like Tevye and all the suffering fate-tossed Jews of the musical, returned to the ordinary flow of the days, buying, selling, working and wondering, their lives carried along on tide-drawn boats rather than horse-drawn carts, and the cry of “Rags! Bones! Bottles!” that my mother had heard as a child in the west end of Toronto during the Great Depression somehow serving as the undersong of every labouring family’s unregarded drama.

The whistle came to me, and I followed it to the source, as physically unlike the burly, thick-bearded, kohl-eyed Tevye as a robin is unlike a raven. My father was a small man, five foot seven in his stocking feet, and

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without an ounce of fat on his lean body, though he was then over fifty years old and a pack-a-day smoker whose only exercise came via manual labour. When he wasn't wrestling tides and fish, he drove a tractor on the potato fields on the outskirts of town; when he wasn't working, he pattered in the backyard, looking after his bountiful vegetable garden or drinking endless cups of tea in front of winter's driftwood fires. A lover of solitude, he had earned the nickname of "Ghost" for his annual absence at most community events, though most people unknowingly called him by another nickname, thinking it was his real name. Heck or Hecky (a garbled version of Harold that had clung to him in childhood) sometimes became Hector. But these names mattered less than my father's reluctance to correct anyone. For forty years, the farmer who employed him and the packer to whom he delivered his catches on the river called him Hector, while nearly everyone else called him Hecky. No one ever called him Harold. I'm not sure that he would even have looked up if anyone had used that name.

He stood in the stern of his twenty-four-foot flat-bottomed gillnetter, in the small space between the wooden drum on which the net was rolled and the wooden rollers over which the net would be wound into the river. Wearing a black skullcap and a blood-stained black floater jacket, a lit cigarette held loosely between his lips, he had stopped whistling and was tying a coal-oil lantern beside the bright red scotchman at the end of his net. In the faint forsythia glow of the wharf lights, he looked both as apprehensive and cheerful as an elf in Santa's workshop. I understood the apprehension better than the cheer, for we were going out on the river to fish, and the river and the fishing were both dangerous. My understanding of a middle-aged man's contentment wouldn't develop for over forty years, and even then would prove a complex and confusing business, which is another way of suggesting that such contentment might just be a myth.

But in the autumn of 1975, I was more concerned with great white sharks and the oily darkness into which our boat would soon be disappearing. Not even my father's calm voice and assured presence could distract me from the image of those gaping jaws widening as they rose toward the hull of our boat. I could imagine the planks snapping as easily as balsa wood;

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worse, I could feel the awful numb solidity of my own legs and torso. It certainly didn't help that, as my father and I began the process of leaving harbour, the first few strands of a typical October fog slid in off the Gulf of Georgia, in their whiteness and gliding stealth a kind of phantom version of the evil I most feared.

We undid the thick, wet ropes that bound us by stern and bow to the wharf on one side and to another gillnetter on the other. Sometimes as many as four other boats would have to be slid out of their position, held in the current and then re-moored, before we could free ourselves. It was a delicate, graceful ritual, requiring a deft movement from one bow or stern to another, a hurried untying and retying of ropes – a slower, heavier version of the maypole dance that the girls performed each spring in the park, but done often in darkness without admirers (like so much of the life of that vanished salmon fishing world). This time, however, I had only to step, at the exact right second, from our stern to the wharf with the neighbouring boat's stern rope in my hand as my father pulled our boat forward. The concentration on the timing settled my nerves briefly, but once we had secured the other boat and my father had swung our bow downriver and we'd idled past moss-coated net sheds, rusted launching ways like dinosaur fossils in the muddy bank and a few float homes sagging like birthday cakes left out in the rain, I felt so vulnerable that I moved from the stern to the main deck just behind the cabin.

After a few seconds, my father emerged from the gasoline-dense interior in order to guide our passage the mile to the fishing grounds from the outside steering wheel.

"Well, Monk," he said, using the nickname he'd given me, presumably because I was so often to be found alone, reading, and because my head was close-cropped when I was a little boy, "your brother didn't come in for supper, so we have some catching up to do." He put the cigarette between his lips as he considered the steering wheel. "Ah, somebody else has been working hard too." I watched as my father carefully lifted a strand of spiderweb off one of the wheel spokes and tried to connect it to the cabin without destroying the web or harming the spider; he looked like a

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small child playing pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey but finding only the air. At last, satisfied that he'd done the best he could for his co-worker in the catching arts, he removed the cigarette from his mouth, exhaled at length and smiled at me. "We might just beat the dark at that."

We did, but not by much. The cottonwood trees on the shores of the two silt islands between which our two-hundred-fathom-wide section of the river flowed faded like colour from the wallpaper of abandoned Georgian houses, and I could see only a few fathoms of our cork line as the drum rolled and the nylon net – forty meshes deep, a hundred and fifty fathoms long and stretched down to the murky bottom by a thin line of lead weights – passed like flax through my father's bare hands.

"Upriver," he called firmly but calmly from the stern. I turned the outside steering wheel to the north, where the ski lights on Grouse Mountain beyond Vancouver were just coming clear with the first low stars. Ten seconds later my father called, "Downriver," and now I turned the wheel to the darker south. This call-and-turn, designed to lay the net out in soft loops so that the meshes would hang loosely enough in the current to keep the salmon from striking and backing out, happened once more before we'd crossed from the bank of one island to the other. "Upriver," my father called to me. "Downriver." And my hands moved. "Sunrise," he whistled out of the lost years. "Sunset."

Once the whole net had rolled off the drum, I could see only the light of our coal-oil lantern blinking rheumily as it bobbed in the current. But the darkness did nothing to hide the shark's jaws still rising toward my numb legs and torso, the same awful rising as depicted in the movie poster.

"Shut her off, Monk," my father said.

I ducked into the greasy, gasoline-drugged cabin and turned the key in the ignition. The uncovered engine, which took up much of the interior space, shuddered like a sleeping animal, and then fell silent. Now what had been a low thrumming quiet turned pure and much deeper, like flowing water become ice. Alone with the black engine – a freshly dug and wet grave in the cabin's darkness – I felt my panic grow and so almost flung myself on deck. My father was gone.

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I stared and stared against the night, but it took several seconds before I could see his black outline in the greater blackness. The pick-up light – a 100-watt bulb encased in a metal arm clamped to a spot beside the rollers and extending over them – hadn't been switched on, so only the slight shifting of his body as he lifted the burning red end of his cigarette to his mouth at last made his presence apparent. As always during a night set, my father trained his attention on the coal-oil lantern: if it stopped moving (or got hung up, as the fishermen would say), that meant the net was snagged, and either the meshes and light lead line would break and the lantern and net would drift freely again, or else the snag was a bad one and we would have to leave this end of our net attached to another lantern, take the boat across to the point of the snag and try to pull the net off – a stressful process even in summer daylight. But in October, in the dark and thickening fog, my father's anxiety must have been considerable, though he showed it only by the amount of cigarettes he rapidly smoked. All these decades later, I don't know that I've ever stared at anything as intently as I stared at the lantern on the end of my father's net, except perhaps my father's face on his deathbed.

But that foggy night, we stood a dozen feet apart, listening to the current slapping the hull, breathing in the rich musk of mud, brine and leaf mulch, silently asking the river for free passage over its mysterious depth. Somewhere below us, where the channel turned west and, picking up speed, eventually spilled into the sea a few miles away, my older brother Dan must have been pulling in his own net by hand, straining against its weight and its catch of leaden dog salmon and white springs, of branches and wildly rooted stumps, readying himself to return to the top of the drift and make another set. Down there, too, would be old Rod Beveridge and Big Hoot and Little Hoot, the drunkard Mackenzie, perhaps my aunt and uncle and – most eccentrically of all, dangerously and deliciously so – Edgar Winterbourne, quick as a spider in a squall, dark as a ruined cannery piling, whose singular speech was matched only by his tumultuous, probing silences.

One of these fishermen's boats would eventually emerge out of the

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darkness, first as a pattering or thrumming engine sound, then as a faint mast light, and sometimes as a voice of greeting or warning. The presence of these other boats was complicated, for even as they alleviated the terror and risks of the night fishing, they also lessened our profits by competing for what was too often a meagre catch.

I stayed on deck, tensing for the great white shark's explosion through the rippling, oily surface around our boat. But the stillness remained, and our lantern, winking in three second intervals, never stopped moving. Nor did the fog and the cold, which began to pierce my jacket and jeans and gumboots so that I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, no doubt attracting the attention of every creature gliding remorselessly over the river bottom. Within seconds, I could no longer see our lantern or my father's outline as the fog fully set in. From a long distance off, north of the Steveston lighthouse, rolled the two-noted call of the foghorn, the second note even deeper than the funereal first.

"Better start her up," my father said at last. He might have been standing right beside me or on the bank of the far island.

With great care, I felt my way through the skinny entrance of the cabin and, fumbling as inexpertly as my father had expertly moved the spider, found the key and started the engine. Then I flicked the switch for the pick-up light.

Back on deck, I heard the words that I'd been dreading: my father's call to join him in the now dimly lit stern. It was my job to stand to one side of the rollers, gaff hook in hand, and gaze into the river as the net came in, on the lookout for fish or sticks or whatever else might be pulled to the surface.

I swallowed hard and tried to ignore the feeling of deathly whiteness that the fog created. My father stepped on the drum pedal with his left boot and the drum lurched into motion, turning like some horrible spinning wheel in a fairy tale. The light bulb's glow barely penetrated the dark and fog. Mesmerized, I watched the corks slide toward me like the black, dripping scales of a serpent, like apples pulled from a barrel of blood. But the corks, ominous as they were, provided at least some minimal comfort – for when I stared to the side of them, at the dripping fog and dark, I felt

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myself plunging forward and down even as I held perfectly still. Now my body had lost all substance. I couldn't feel the wood of the gaff in my bare palm. Over my head, the foghorn boomed, and the sound echoed and died in my rib cage. On and on, the net rolled in, fathoms of meshes empty except for mud and bulrush stalks like the clammy fingers of corpses. Just when I thought I couldn't stand the tension any longer, my father took his foot off the pedal, the drum's squeaky revolutions ceased, and I heard the current again, sucking like a beast at the hull. With his bare left hand, my father took up the cork line, feeling his way along it for several inches and then pausing.

"Give me the gaff," he said in a clipped tone.

Now I couldn't bear to look down, except that not looking down was even worse. Inexorably, my father pulled a half-fathom toward him. The black corks had vanished, which meant that something had pulled them under, something heavy. My father leaned far over the rollers, cork line now in his left hand, gaff in his right. The seconds passed so slowly that they began to move backward, as the river itself sometimes did.

Though my breathing sent steady clouds across my eyes, I wasn't aware of it. "Please," I urged to the night and river in general, "please be a stump or a salmon, not –"

The river exploded. My father wildly swung the gaff, overhand, as if throwing a baseball. I closed and opened my eyes in furious succession as the net and the fog and my father's body merged into one amorphous shape of white and black, which appeared and disappeared in what seemed a strafing of strobe lights. For a few terrible seconds, I saw and heard the fish – a rising, quivering mass of pointed scutes that, once struck by the gaff, roiled and thrashed like the river itself until my father, with an uncharacteristic curse and a heave of breath, lifted his empty gaff as high as a lightning rod against the light bulb's jaundiced glow and then appeared to slump back against the drum behind him, though in truth he hadn't moved more than a foot.

A strange silence settled over us for a few seconds before the familiar world gushed in, a flood of clarified shapes and sounds – the roundness of

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the rollers, the bunched net at my father's waist, the idling of the engine and slavering of the current and, finally, my father's calm and low voice again.

"That was a real monster. One of the giants." He turned his face skyward as he spoke, as if to reorient himself between the river and the invisible stars. "I'm lucky the gaff didn't catch. Might have broken my arm."

By now, I realized that he was referring to a white sturgeon and not a great white shark. But what difference could any knowledge make to me at such a moment? I had been convinced of our imminent deaths, of our limbs being ripped from our bodies, of our blood erupting like lava into the fog. As a result, I couldn't find any words equal to the occasion. So I just stood, arms limp at my sides, until my father stepped on the drum pedal and began picking up the net once more. But when he returned the gaff to me, I remained a foot back from the rollers, unable to face the river surface. My father, no doubt consumed by his own reflections, didn't seem to notice my position. He resumed his work as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

The drum turned. The dripping meshes rolled in. My father untangled a few dog salmon – eight-to-twenty-pound sharp-toothed fish with dark purple streaks along their pewter scales – and some chunks of driftwood. Every few minutes the foghorn sounded, a low note, then a lower one. Finally, an engine sounded above our own, just below us, approaching along the near bank. Then the black shape of another gillnetter – I couldn't tell whose at first – loomed up almost right at our gunwale, not even its running lights or mast light visible in the fog.

"Better reel 'er in, Hecky, better get a move on."

The rapid-fire nasally voice couldn't have been more distinctive.

"She's runnin like bat shit in the slough. Better pick faster, Hecky, goddamn ya."

The laugh that followed fell somewhere between a witch's cackle and a dog's growl.

My father said, "Did you see Dan down there?"

Another laugh, longer and more gleeful. "Danny's pickin' pickin'

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pickin'. Below the dynamite ship. Mebbe through the bridge into the gulf by now. What's he doing on that chunk of bark, Hecky, eh? Jesus Christ."

Then my father mentioned the sturgeon.

"That old bugger," the voice cried out with childish pleasure. "Ripped a big hole in my net last week. Big old bastard. Older than you, Hecky, goddamn ya."

By now I could pick out two figures through the fog. Their dark shapes seemed to stand in the air – one tall, the other below knee height. It was Edgar Winterbourne and his dog, a hairless yellow sort-of terrier mutt named Bullet, which Edgar always called Bully. No comic book duo – not Captain America and Bucky, not Batman and Robin, not Warlock and Pip – were as inseparable.

"Gonna catch him this fall, Hecky. Drag him in like a big old red cedar, eh? Guts full of tin cans and shoes and shit."

Then the figures slid away as if they'd never been there at all, the weird voice dissolving into the current and finally drowned out completely by yet another long booming of the foghorn.

Our net drifted on, the river running faster to the west as the fog still crept in to the east. Soon, we entered the narrower slough between two other silt islands and my father's pace – normally measured to the point of meditative – intensified. If the net wasn't picked up within the next few minutes, we'd risk wrapping it against the cluttered mainland shore of wharves and deadheads and – most notoriously – the carcass of a rusted forty-foot ship that had once been used to transport dynamite for logging companies.

But I could tell that my father was distracted by something else. He kept peering downriver, away from our lantern. I suspected that he was concerned about my brother. Dan was an experienced fisherman and had been running his own boat for several years, but the boat he had been renting all summer and into the fall was named the *Driftwood* for good reason. Flat, without either a cabin, a drum or an inboard engine, it was little more than a fifteen-foot-long sheet of plywood propelled by a Mercury outboard. Even in fair weather, the *Driftwood* was a challenge, as the

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net had to be pulled in by hand; in foul weather, especially in the fall, with more rain and fog and darkness, the boat was a constant source of worry to my parents. My brother, on the other hand, was devil-may-care, a product of the free-spirited '60s who wore his scarlet hair long and his ginger beard bushy, drove a gold El Camino and worked long and hard so that he could play the same way. Because he still lived at home and still fished, I saw a great deal of him during my childhood.

This night, however, he was nowhere to be seen. And so, once my father had pulled in our dimly glowing lantern, he hurried to the cabin, put the boat in gear and turned the bow to the south. But we didn't speed up much. The current was already moving fast, and the fog made visibility almost impossible. Our small searchlight made little impact, so my father stuck his head out of the cabin window, listening as much as looking for guidance.

Strange pings and cracks and what sounded like sighs emerged from the fog. Even more than previously, I felt exposed, convinced that we had left the river entirely and were now drifting over the ocean where, of course, much larger and more dangerous creatures than giant sturgeon lived – killer whales, for example.

Slowly we descended with the current, the sharp tang of brine increasing with every fathom. Where were the other boats? I couldn't see any mast lights or in fact any lights at all. Perhaps everyone had returned to harbour on account of the fog. Dog fishing in October wasn't lucrative; most of the year's fishing income was made during the summer sockeye runs. My father, because he kept to the same part of the river and didn't chase up and down the coast with the "highliners" (a fishing term for the most ambitious, or greedy, fishermen), barely made a subsistence living, so he needed whatever income he could earn from the fall and even the rare winter openings.

Soon we must have left familiar waters, for my father pulled his head in and shut off the engine. Now even the little pinging, cracking and sighing sounds had stopped. I pressed myself against the large exhaust pipe on the outside deck, not for the heat but for the solidity. It seemed as if the deck had been slid out from underneath me.

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The interminable floating into blankness continued. My father came on deck and, warning me first, shouted my brother's name. It broke heavily against the stillness and then echoed dully into a deeper silence. Finally, the arching black length of the wooden suspension bridge – that mostly provided farm vehicle passage from the river mouth's largest silt island to the mainland – loomed into view, almost right over our heads. Quickly, my father slipped into the cabin and reversed the engine. It would be impossible to navigate passing under the bridge in such conditions.

The act of moving backward felt painful, as when you accidentally swallow an ice cube. Yet we were returning to the familiar, to home and routine, even the routine of the extraordinary. I didn't know it at ten years old, or even for decades later, but that reversal in the fog would come to represent my purpose and my meaning, as I sought the heat of old firings and my father's voice died on the waters running away all around me.

We backed up against the river's whole force, pressing down from Hell's Gate in the Fraser Valley and from the Rocky Mountain source hundreds of miles beyond. Then we turned and inched our way against the terrific black flow, hoping to find our own blood in the still chaos, as the salmon themselves do, willing their genes on to the death that spawns life. When my father called for my brother again, turning the engine off to do so, our boat was flung downriver several fathoms before the name died on the dripping air.

Eventually, after what seemed like hours but was more like twenty minutes, we reached the top of the drift again. There was still no sign of my brother.

"He's probably gone in," my father said as he moved toward the stern to make another set. I knew that he was speaking to himself more than to me, so I didn't respond. I also knew that he didn't believe what he said.

But in those years, when few fishermen on the Fraser bothered with radio communications, much had to be done on faith and instinct. My father, knowing what he was up against with the fog and the tide, must have chosen to accept his fate, and the fate of his eldest child. He took out yet another cigarette and struck one of his wooden Eddy matches to light

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it. I could almost hear the paper burning down as my father inhaled.

“Upriver,” he called out.

Even now, through all that fog, I can see my boy’s shivering hands on the wheel.



Tim Bowling is the author of twenty-two works of fiction, nonfiction and poetry. He is the recipient of numerous honours, including two Edmonton Artists' Trust Fund Awards, five Alberta Book Awards, a Queen Elizabeth II Platinum Jubilee Medal, two Writers' Trust of Canada nominations, two Governor General's Award nominations, two Canadian Authors Association Awards and a Guggenheim Fellowship in recognition of his entire body of work.

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