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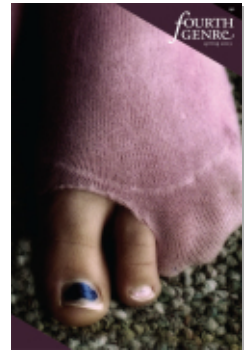
## The Lost Coast

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# The Lost Coast

ROSE WHITMORE

Today, we are fishing for smelt. It is afternoon. The tide is attacking my shins, and the water deposits thick, milky foam on the shoreline. I hold my smelting net, a shimmering web of fishing line, threaded with two-ounce lead weights on the periphery. When extended, it spreads to form a great circle, capable of cinching tight when I run up shore. The throw line, noosed to my wrist, is old nylon rope, and it scratches the soft underside of my forearm. Because I am 12, my net is part mermaid braid, a beautiful thing, older than I am, and I trust it.

My father stands a few feet away. He is wearing a green windbreaker and shorts. I am in my gym shirt from middle school and nylon pants rolled up. It is a cold, gray day on the northern coast of California. We are both barefoot, withstanding the chill of the Pacific, waiting, watching the waves for a sign of the fish running. I know to look for their silver bellies flashing in the waves as they spawn—their candy bar-sized bodies packed in dense schools. I know to throw my net the moment I read their movement, but it is difficult to see; the sky is swallowed by fog, there is no sun, and the ocean is rough, churning in the wind.

We are the only ones on the beach today with throw nets. Other smelters dot the shoreline; their bodies form strange half-ghosts in the fog down the coast. They are mostly men who wear waders with thick-soled boots and camouflage caps, and hold long, A-framed nets that attach to their waists and dip easily into the waves. The A-frames are popular, a newer invention, but the poles of their frames jut out like unwieldy stilted legs. Whereas they can only go back and forth in a straight line, my father and I dance with our nets, pulling and moving as we please. We hold them as we might hold a pile of priceless fabric, folded and bundled around

our upturned arms. Ours is a delicate process, a physical and satisfying catch.



The Lost Coast of California is a place of winding highways, people lost to fog and redwoods, towns that host canneries and abandoned industry. It derives its name from beaches that disappear in the tide, and from hidden, inaccessible stretches of rocky shoreline. Last summer my family retraced John Steinbeck and Ed Rickett's journey through Baja California, and we all miss the heat, the food, the sun. Here, we wait in the fog for a run of smelt, wrap ourselves in beach towels, and watch the slow release of the tides. A mile down the beach is our campsite. It sits among gentle dunes where Roosevelt elk graze against a backdrop of red-rocked bluffs. In the heart of the bluffs is a canyon, carved by streams headed for the ocean, whose walls are overgrown with ferns. It is a place so green the sky seems to turn a disorienting shade of pistachio.

I look to my father for a sign. He is squinting into the waves, as if divining. I wade farther out into the waters and look into the murky slip of a crest.

"Wait," he says, "you'll see it."

A wave crashes and sends a thousand tiny crystals of spray into the air. My hair forms tight curls in the moisture. I've smelted before, but today it is especially hard to see, and my feet are numb, my pants waterlogged and clinging to my legs. Although I don't enjoy being cold, I prefer smelting to the strange and terrifying underwater world of abalone. I prefer it to hours in the sun waiting for an elusive marlin, or casting a shiny fly for a sharp-toothed pike. Among all the activities with my father, my perfect communion with the sea is digging for Pismo clams. I enjoy sliding the pronged fork into the sand after the bubbles that ripple the surface. I like the *thwack* of clamshells against each other in a plastic bucket. But in a few years the clams will be depleted—over-clammed and struggling to repopulate the beaches of California. Because they are caught with nets by the hands of men, the smelt in the ocean will thrive and I will learn there is no replacement for this act of combing the waves, of parsing out my body against the tides. And when everything else is gone, I will still have this mystery, this meditative process.

I look back at my mother. She sits on the coarse, dark beach entertaining my brother who digs a smelt cave while our dog rubs her ears in the sand.

“I feel like I’m throwing blind,” I say, which belies how self-conscious I am here, among men, against the ocean. I look down the shore to see what the others are doing, if anyone appears as cold as I feel—if they are showing signs of misery.

“It’s hard to see today,” he says.

“I’m going to take a break,” I tell him, even though I know I’ll be colder on the beach, and don’t want him to feel like I’m bored.

He uses his index finger to adjust his glasses on his nose—a characteristic gesture, one he will use years later, in the hallway outside his high school biology classroom when assessing the kids who walk by. In a few years, when I am in high school, he will use this look on me, as I walk up the hill to his classroom after school to meet him. Everyday we will walk past the creek on campus, through the hallways to his truck and drive home together.

“They’re coming, Rosie,” he says jokingly.

I laugh. “I think I’ll eat M&Ms until they do.”

He nods and turns back to the waves, looking in the center of the rolling crests and watching the birds for signs.

I sit with my brother, Bub, who is eight. Gizmo, our American water spaniel, is above him in the pecking order, and sometimes she drags him around the house by his pant leg. He is less competitive than I am, easier going. He likes baseball cards and raccoons. He is scooping a hole in the wet sand, readying a place where my father and I can dump fish. My mother is taking pictures of us, both serious, intent on the task at hand. I think about hot chocolate and the interior of our car, warm and windless.

“I’m freezing,” I say.

“Help Bub,” she says. “It will warm you up to move around.”

I consider Bub with bits of black sand stuck to his face, and stay put.

While I sit, my father throws a few times, thinking he has seen a school. I like to watch him run up the shoreline, pulling his net behind him, bunched and dripping, filled with sea detritus and the slippery bodies of excited fish. I like to watch how powerful he is as he tugs on the throw line, fighting the current to cinch his net. And when another wave comes in, I learn from his body—how he uses the momentum to haul the load up the shore, so as not to lose fish back to the ocean. I watch how

quickly he moves, his thick body, the stout legs of an All-American football player, moving in short, hurried steps to the background noise of the sea, the cry of the gulls, the yelps of other fishermen. His shorts are stained with seawater, the smell of the ocean. When he arrives at our outpost on the beach, he lifts the cinch on the net and, like a magnificent curtain, hundreds of tiny, dancing fish litter the sand. He stands surveying his catch and I imagine his heart beating quickly, like it will in five years when it kills him instantly on Christmas Day and he leaves me to walk past his classroom, down the hallways, and make the drive home alone.



On the beach, a man carrying a collapsed A-frame and five-gallon bucket passes us. He looks at my net and nods in deference. I feel the burn of instant credibility well in my chest. I nod back to him, this fisherman, and decide once again to face the sea. I stand up, coil my net around my arms, and walk into the ocean next to my father. I let the water, cold and stinging, lap at my thighs and look harder into the waves because my net is old, because I throw it like a man, because I am a young girl with an earnest heart wanting connection to the pulse of the waves. But because smelting is a solitary thing, filled with the possibility to feel, for a moment, part of the ocean, I cannot shake the lingering terror of being alone against a force with which there is no reckoning. I am small against the power and vastness of the ocean. I look to my father down shore, and even though he is close, it is still just me against the waves.



That morning, I am in the middle seat of an old Chevy truck driving on the beach. I am sandwiched between my father and Ernie, a local fisherman my father befriended earlier in the week. Ernie is a professional smelter. He follows the runs up and down the coast. Today, he tells us, he heard of a run five miles north, but hasn't heard of one on our stretch of beach. The windows are down and ocean air fills the cab. A CB radio crackles against my knees. His A-frame, my brother, and our nets are in the bed of the truck.

“How often do the smelt prices vary?” my father asks. Even though we are seasoned smelters, he has not caught and sold commercially since I was a

little girl. He holds onto the top of the car, outside of the window. I can see his face in the passenger-side mirror.

“They vary some,” Ernie says.

“The night smelt run better up here?”

“My wife doesn’t like me night smelting too much, but if we have a bad run now and then, she won’t mind it,” he says. Ernie is affable, kind. He is missing an incisor and has a red beard. Every sentence, funny or serious, is followed by a boyish giggle.

“Do you own a rig for the off-season?” asks my father.

“There’s a co-op, but mostly I run the beaches.”

We come upon a sign on the beach, posted by the fish and game commission.

“What does that say?” asks my father.

Ernie shrugs and looks out the driver’s side window, toward the breakers. “I can’t read,” he says.

In this moment, I am grateful the burden of conversation falls on my father, but this is also where he shines. He has never shown me a fear of people, good or bad, poor or rich, funny or dull, literate or illiterate. I look straight ahead, but watch my father’s face in the mirror. It doesn’t change.

“I guess that means your wife has to worry about doing taxes,” my dad says.

Ernie giggles. “Yep, tax season is beer season for me. But I was always good with numbers.”

“Well, you’re good with fish,” my father says.

“I can recognize my name,” Ernie says. “Some small words here and there.”

“Beer, smelt,” jokes my father.

Ernie giggles. “Bank, wife.”

*He cannot read words*, I think. He can read his name, only his name. He cannot decipher the meaning of letters, feel connected to the significance they provide. I wonder where the meanings of words go for him. In my 12-year-old heart, I stumble with the idea that his world consists of only what he sees and what fish run in the waves.



I think of Ernie when I am given *Letters To A Young Poet* shortly after my father's death. It contains the only words that grant me any meaning, that express a sentiment that is clear: *Have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and books that are written in a foreign language. Do not seek the answers. They cannot be given to you now because you could not live them.*

In the months following my father's unexpected death, I think of how these words are out of reach to Ernie. They are beyond him in denotation, but perhaps their meaning resides somewhere in his cells, like fish in the ocean. The manners by which he and I derive meaning differ, but perhaps we would arrive at the same sensation of loss, depravity, or even love if confronted with death and all its intricacies. They are just words, and yet without my father, words are all I have.



I am back in the water, watching the waves. Ernie stands up shore, his face turned to the breakers as if sniffing the air for clues. A seagull hovers in front of me and a flash of light pulses in the water. My fingertips curl around the skirt of my net. I pull my shoulder back, sweep a wide arc with my arm, and fling it into the water. It hovers, extended, like a jellyfish before the *tink* of the weights hit the surface.

My father sees my throw, alerted to the movement beneath the surface, and he throws too.

We each wait a brief second, allowing the weights to sink just a bit, before we turn and pull the line that cinches the net closed around the school of fish.

We run up the shore, heaving our loads. I release the cinch and pull my net up. Smelt fall out, flopping silver against the dark sand. Bub jumps and grabs them with his hands; they shimmy, their bodies flipping in short spasms.

“There!” my dad says. “I told you they would come.”

Bub runs up and down the shore, returning with smelt pressed close to his chest. “Wow!” he says.

We shake our nets quickly, leaving a hundred flopping bodies, and quickly bundle back up. I hold the throw line in my left hand and wrap the top of the net over my forearm. The skirt of the net falls to my side, and with my

right hand I gather a few edges, like a lady holding her ball gown extended to allow her lead foot to waltz.

My father and I work together, throwing nets, running up and down the beach, the water draining behind us. His net is bigger, his reach wider. This is how I know my father: throwing nets in the Pacific, befriendng people, his glasses stained with salt water, his trust silent and compassionate. This is how I will remember him, his thick arms throwing, spinning a beautiful thing, his heart wild, the sound of our breaths and the cries of gulls crashing upon the shore.



This—the camping and fishing—is what we do. My father teaches high school so in the summers we can travel, fish, backpack the Sierras, paddle to the Arctic Ocean in a canoe. When I was eight, I sold ducks out of a pick-up in San Francisco’s Chinatown. Until I was six, I slept with the chickens I raised, waking to chicks nesting in my armpits, peeping from the folds of my sleeping bag. This summer, loaded with more smelt than we can eat, we will sell them to the cannery in Eureka, my brother and I will have our pick of candy from the store, and I will consider commercial fishing at the age of 12 a normal thing. My brother will never smelt. When he is 12, he will watch our father die in front of his eyes, will watch my uncle try and try and ultimately fail to resuscitate my father’s lifeless body. He will see these things, and there will be no smelting in the large and lonely void.

But today he is happy because there is a slippery pool of fish, and he huddles over them, pokes them, examines their jelly eyes and small, strong bodies.



The run is on, and all along the coast the A-frames are dipping their giant mouths into the waves. My mother helps Bub dig a second hole for fish. Sand clings to our faces and our hands are sticky with salt, our arms flecked with scales. Later we will load up our car with buckets and drive to the cannery where men with gloves and yellow bibs look at me as I stand next to my father to have our fish, my catch, weighed.





Six months before he dies, my father has routine knee surgery. He writes us all letters in the unlikely event that something happens during the operation. No one knows about the letters until many months after his death, when we find them amid a stack of papers on his desk. There is one for each of us, scribbled in felt-tipped ink on a pad of legal paper. Mine is eight sentences long and begins with the line: *Eat vitamins, tolerate people.*

I find the letter, the words of Rilke, devastating. *Patience. Tolerance.*

I will interpret and reinterpret this letter, these words, written in his hand to me, endlessly. They are all I have in the way of a goodbye; there are no more of them. I also find them the most comforting words in the world. They are funny, brief, and poignant. Yet time and time again I inspect this letter, these words, to derive meaning, to comb something from the depths, to find an insight or answer I have overlooked. In uncertain times, they supply the ghost, the memory, the surreptitious link to something tangible that living without a father often requires.

But however tempting, these words cannot explain, cannot account for every day as I face life without him. In their brevity I must not expect more meaning than they can offer. They are not answers for the moments when I need him most. Life is filled with depth and meaning, questions and laments that are lost among simple words. It would be easy to say they are a substitute for him, but if that were the case, they would fail. They simply, as physical traces of pen against paper, represent the unfathomable reminder that I must keep living. I must trust the shadows behind them, as I think Ernie might approach each wave despite the indecipherable, anonymous roar of the ocean.

At the very end of the letter, in clear script, to be sure there was no confusion, he wrote, "Keep the flame, I love you." As if that is all the knowing that can be done.



At night, our nets lie mute, incapable of memory. We sleep in the dunes, tired from the wind and the day. We listen to the elk moving through the grasses and think of the flash of stars and all the fish waiting for us in the depths. I hope tomorrow will be clear, the waves easier to read.