

## MILL POND

by

Abby Lipscomb

By the time Henry is born, the mill has burned to the ground four times and the farmers have fled. The schooners are gone from the cove and Henry's grandfather, "the Captain," who once sailed around the Horn on the U.S. Alexander, sells shellfish by the side of the road. By the time Henry is nine years old, his asthma has taken the place of all talk of a second child, and his grandfather has died. The pond, now ringed by summer homes, has become the subject of a dime-store postcard.

The attacks begin at night and last till morning. Henry wakes to the train whistle of his own wheezing. "Mamma," he croaks, and she is there in her blue flannel gown, setting up the vaporizer, opening the VapoRub. He imagines the tide rising in his chest. He is drowning in his own bedroom.

"It's okay," she says, laying a cool hand on his brow. "Take tiny breaths. Like you don't care." Breathing is suggestive, she's told him. Panic, a failure of the imagination.

"Tinier still," she says and reaches for the *World Book: Volume I*. There's only the one, bought with Green Stamps from the A&P, but it has "Amphibians." *Salamanders breathe through their skin*, she reads. *Tiny blood vessels lying close to the surface transport oxygen to various tissues and carry carbon monoxide back to the surface*. Henry fancies himself a salamander and his chest loosens.

By morning he's back on the window seat in the kitchen, soaked in sun with his legs tucked beneath him, counting mantises. His colony, nine praying mantises if you don't count the nymphs, inhabits the potted philodendron on the windowsill. Carefully, he pries flies off the fly-

strip and places them on leaves for the mantises to find. He sets out jar lids of water. He counts them and he cares for them and he's seen them mate; seen the male leap upon the female's back, only to have his head bitten off when he dismounts. Henry plans never to mate.

His mother takes longer to recover. Rises late and prowls about the house with a rag and a bucket, searching for dust, mold, and dog hair, though she's long since banished the beagle to the backyard. "It's that pond," she mutters as she scrubs. The house, a Cape Cod built with wood from the cooper shop where they made the barrels for the corn, has settled; its cedar shakes curled, leaving gaps where the wind skids through in winter. The house, she swears, creeps an inch or two closer to the pond each year.

"How are you today?" she asks Henry.

"Not good. Arnie died."

"Dust to dust," she says, wiping the oilcloth with her rag.

"They live longer outside."

"Outside is overrated." She pulls a frying pan off the rack and slaps down a few strips of bacon.

"What about a puppy with very, very short hair?"

"Sorry, no."

Henry grasps the mantis by its thorax and gently grazes a gauzy wing with his smallest paint brush. Arnie was one of the oldest, one of the first to inhabit the philodendron in the window. The nymphs die all the time, but it's sadder when the adults die. He finds them rigid, eyes gone flat, still grasping the underside of a leaf. He paints them to preserve them, with acrylic paints in little tubes from Klein's and four different-size brushes, the smallest with a tip

so fine he could paint a smile on a mantis's face, should he want to. Refurbished, he lays them on beds of cotton in small white cardboard jewelry boxes donated by his mother. He'll paint the metathorax black onyx. The arms, now frozen in prayer, turquoise. In life those arms snatched flies so fast he never saw them move.

Henry lifts the rainbow-colored mantis before the window and hums softly, imagining himself astride, gripping upper wing stems as they soar over the meadow, above the pond, above the Sound, and over Long Island to the Atlantic, where the wind whips the air clean of allergens.

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Rivers of light wash the bedroom wall, dazzling the father to consciousness. It's Saturday. Apogee tide. Clam house. He rises, pulls on khakis, a wool sweater, and canvas boots. In the kitchen, his wife stands before the GE range frying eggs, dark circles under her eyes, her pale hair lit white by the sun. His son sits at the old oak pedestal table, humming and waving his hand in the air, dimpled tubes of paint and an untouched bowl of cereal laid out before him. Beyond the window, across the meadow, the pond winks and glitters.

"What the hell is he doing?" the father says.

"Let him be. Had one of his nights."

The father thinks wistfully of his brother's sons. Scrappy, rugged boys who smell of the outdoors. Boys who'll set out upon the pond no matter the weather, as he and his brother used to do. Paddle leaky skiffs in summer, skate the inlets in winter. "Ice roulette," they called it, because the brackish water never froze over completely and someone always fell through.

"How about a boat ride today, buddy?" he says to Henry.

"Dad. I can't," the boy says, placing a bug in a box.

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His father didn't get it. Once, when his mother was down with the grippe, Henry had waked wheezing. He'd stood by his father's side of the bed, rasping for ages until his father noticed him and got up. Henry had to show him where the vaporizer was kept and where to plug it in. Henry hadn't believed he'd be able to fight the panic, with all the uncertainty, but eventually his father had gotten the steam going and Henry had handed him the *World Book*.

"What's this?" his father said.

"You read it," Henry gasped. "Amphibians."

"How about a story instead?"

This was how Henry learned that the pond had not always been a pond.

"Farmer lost some cows, see," his father told him. "Found them in a salt marsh off the Long Island Sound. The land was good for farming, so he bought it. Built himself a mill with a horizontal waterwheel. To grind the corn. A mill needs a waterwheel to power a grindstone, see. Gates to let the tide in and out. Turned the cove into a pond."

This is where his father lost him—at the gates. Henry listened again when the mill burned down, and later when his grandfather joined the Navy and sailed around Cape Horn. His grandfather had seen Mount Pelée erupt, sailed for days through falling ash. Brought back a piece of pumice to prove it.

"You come from seafaring people," his father told him as the vaporizer hissed.

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At the table they start up again. Not about him and his asthma; this time it's the father's brother.

“You have to talk to him,” his mother says to his father.

“Private business, Carol.”

“I walked *in* on them, Eb. Her and that fix-it guy. Disgusting.”

“I want to go to summer camp,” Henry says, surprising himself. “Nature camp.”

“Oh, honey.” His mother touches his arm. “You’d be wheezing the minute you got there.

Mildew, tents with musty cots. Right, Eb?”

“Well,” his father says.

“Camp, he wants to go to camp. Tell him he can’t go to camp.”

“Some kind of indoor puppy, then?” Henry says.

“No, no, and no,” his mother says, frowning at his father.

“Let him go to the clam house with me today. Get some air.”

“No,” she says, “absolutely not. Shellfish. Water. Wind. Your brother’s kids! Boys raised by wolves behave better than those boys.”

The wolf-boys, his cousins, live nearby. Henry has seen them from the kitchen window, whizzing down the road on one bike, the big one peddling standing up, another teetering on the handlebars, the small one clinging to the back fender—all of them hollering as the bike careened from side to side. When the bike went over, they wrestled on the ground, rolled around like a beast with six arms and legs. If one rose from the heap and lunged for the bike, he was dragged back into the fray. On his window seat in the kitchen, Henry held his breath.

The youngest, Simon, came to school on crutches, a cast on his leg. His face had been white, almost as pale as Henry’s. Simon is allergic too. Henry’s mother uses the boy as an example of what can happen if you’re not mindful of your allergens.

“I want to go,” Henry says. He could take Arnie in his box to show Simon.

“Let him, Carol. You could use a break.”

“Drop him at your mother’s, then. He shouldn’t be outside.”

A few days after the pond story, his father had surprised him with the pumice stone from Mount Pelée. He’d come back from the clam house on a Saturday, a grin on his wind-burned face, and set the pale gray, pockmarked piece of rock in front of Henry.

“See there?” his father said. “The pumice to prove it.” Henry set it on his dresser next to his stack of mantis boxes. It was light as a feather.

His grandfather could sail through falling ash because his grandfather didn’t have asthma, Henry reasoned. The old man had had plenty of imagination, however. He was called “the Captain” not because he was one, but because he wore waders and a captain’s cap and told sea stories at the clam house. Like how he’d left home at fifteen to run onions down the coast on the Henry Remsen, a ship so old they had to pack the hull with sacks of sawdust to keep it from sinking.

“It’s true,” his father said. “You can see the prow in the sandbar in the cove at low tide.”

Where did they put the onions if the hull was full of sawdust? Henry wondered.

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In the car the father pulls a pack of Camels from the glove compartment and lights up before he remembers the boy is with him.

“Good ventilation in a car,” he says, cranking open the window. “Your mother needn’t know.” The air is chilled and sweet with honeysuckle.

“You like bugs, do you, son?”

The boy raises his thin shoulders and lets them fall. “They’re praying mantises. Mantodea.”

“I saw you painting the one.”

“Arnie.”

“That’s just fine, Son. But don’t you want to be outside with your cousins?”

“I can’t.”

“Nonsense. Let’s not go to Grandma’s today.”

The boy looks out the window and sighs.

The father worries. He’s seen his son alone on the school playground—a thing no parent wants to see. Under the jungle gym, gesturing, talking to himself. The boy ran to him when he saw him. “The Young Naturalist,” his mother calls him, reminding the father of team-choosing for backyard baseball. Team captains leaving the weakest for last. The cheese stands alone. All he wants is for his son to be a boy who hangs out at the clam house on a Saturday. A boy who doesn’t have to find strange, lonely, constricted things to do. A boy who doesn’t paint bugs. What he wants for himself is another thing: relief. From being the only one who can make it happen.

But spring has come: the willow trees are feathered with candy-colored green, and the piles of dirty snow are gone from the side of the road. The pond will be coming alive too. The signets will have hatched in their nest on Rocky Hummock, and the oysters will have spawned. Larvae already making their way to the bottom of the pond, latching onto solid substrate in spite of fluctuating salinity, tidal currents, and planktonic predators. *Spat fall*, it’s called and it’s a wonder how any of them survive. *You do what you can*, his father used to say. *You mind the*

*gates and flush the pond. Then you wait and see.*

The crunch of tires on the oyster-cultch lot will always remind him of his father. After two years, he still expects to see the old man stroll out of the clam house in his waders and cap, grinning through his pipe. The Captain had given Eb and his brother free rein of the boats, the floats, and the meadows when they were boys. The clam house, built of heavy oak planks and painted white, was a portal from the tidy confinement of houses, lawns, and roads to open water and endless sky.

The Captain had figured it out when he came home from the Spanish-American War and could find no work. The farms had failed, the mill had burned, the summer people had begun to move in. *But see*, he liked to say, *all the while the farmers were plowing and planting and running the mill, the mill wheel was flushing the pond twice a day, and the oysters at the bottom of the pond were flourishing.* He'd bought thirty acres of oyster beds, built a clam house, and managed the gates. Soon he was selling oysters to summer people as well as to the Oyster Bar in Grand Central Station.

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The uncle is there in the parking lot in his tall black boots, his hands on his hips like a skinny Captain Hook. "Well, well, will you look who's here," he says, with every tooth showing. "It's young Henry, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir," Henry says.

"Sir! That's something I don't hear from my boys. Boys! Little Henry's here."

Three boys tumble around the corner of the clam house, kicking, punching, fighting over something dark with feathers.

The uncle dips a clam pail into the pond and pitches water at them. “Knock it off!” he says as they spring apart. “This is how you do with boys,” he tells his brother. “Just like with dogs.”

“What the hell is this?” he says, lifting the black mass of feathers.

“Nothing. A duck,” the tallest boy says.

“Well, let it be!”

The boys are chapped and swarthy, with dark hair well past the collar. Knobby wrists hang from torn sleeves and their shoes gape open. Henry feels their eyes on him and wishes he’d stayed home.

“Looky there,” the middle one says. “It’s the little prince.”

“Shhh,” says the tall one.

“Hey, don’t he look like his mama?” says the youngest. Simon.

The boy does look like his mother, the father agrees. Slight, fair-haired, pale-eyed, like a mollusk without a shell. Acts like his mother too, tense and finicky. Probably the father’s fault. A small child is a mother’s job, best taken over later by a father. But the asthma had come along, and he’d left it all to her. She’d gone overboard, cleaning the house, keeping the boy inside. The crew cut, his idea, was a mistake. Turns out Henry’s baby-blond locks had been covering a high forehead and a large cowlick. This, paired with the boy’s habit of stiffening and scowling when it was time to be civil, did not win him friends.

“Eb and I have to open the gates,” his brother tells the boys. “Do something constructive with your cousin.”

Henry inches toward his father, arms locked at his sides. “Dad?” he says.

“You’ll be fine, fella. I’ll be back straight away.” The father reaches out to rumple Henry’s hair, but the boy backs away.

“Behave yourselves,” his brother says. “No knives or spears or guns, ha ha.”

Once in the boat his brother slides the oars into the oarlocks and passes him the bottle. The wind picks up, rippling the dark surface of the water as the whiskey warms his stomach. Now is the time to speak, if he’s going to.

“Apogee tide,” he says. “Oysters won’t do with too much salt.”

“Nope.” His brother puts his shoulder into a stroke, sits back for the glide, and reaches for the bottle.

“Wife says she wants the storm windows down. She’ll want ’em back up by supper.”

“Women,” his brother says and shakes his head.

“Don’t know what they want.”

“Nope.”

“Fickle’s the word,” Eb says and winks.

A chevron pattern besets the surface of the water. The tide has finished its race to fill the pond and is about to turn back. The boat draws near to the mill race and the brother stands.

“Knew what they were doing when they built these gates,” he says, throwing a line over a piling.

“Got to have a way to collar water. Won’t work for you otherwise.”

“Yup,” his brother says and glances his way.

And that’s that. He’s glad it’s done. Not an easy task, telling your brother his wife is running around again. His brother, who never got on in school but was proud as punch to have landed the pretty, if loose-living, captain of the cheerleaders. But that’s what family is for:

helping out.

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“They’re gone,” Bobby says. “What do we do first?”

The cousins crowd around Henry, and he worries he smells of Vicks. The lobster floats bump up against the deck. Gulls shriek and wheel overhead. Henry pulls his shirttail out of his neatly ironed pants and stands up straighter.

“Your mother tuck it in, fella?” says Ralph.

“Our mama says she keeps you inside,” Bobby says. “In the house. Out of school.”

“I go to school,” Henry says, thinking about what his mother says about theirs. *Hussy.*

*Strumpet.*

“You ain’t never at the bus stop.”

“She drives me,” he says, rolling his eyes.

“We saw your dog was going to have puppies.”

“No, she was just fat.”

“Not what we heard,” Bobby says.

Ralph pulls a flattened Camel from his pocket and lights it. He passes the cigarette to Bobby, who takes a drag and passes to Simon.

“I’m hungry,” Simon says.

Ralph pulls a basket out from under the shelling bench, takes up a large blue-black oyster. He slips a knife between the lips, and twists. He slides the knife beneath the fleshy meat, and tips the shell into his mouth. “Chew once for flavor,” he says, opening another and offering it to Henry.

“No thanks,” Henry says. “I can’t.”

“You have to, fella. Ever heard of Casanova?”

“Who?”

“The guy ate fifty for breakfast every day, and I don’t have to tell you why.”

“Why?”

“For the women! C’mon!”

“I can’t,” Henry says, hating the piping sound of his own voice. “I’m allergic.”

“Ever tried one?”

“No. If I have even a drop of shellfish juice, my tongue will swell and my airways will close.”

“Who says? Your mother?”

Henry nods.

“Isn’t she the one who drowned the puppies and told you there weren’t any?”

“What?”

“How do you know if you’ve never tried them?”

“We can’t have them in the house. Dogs or shellfish.”

“Well, that explains why you’re an only child.”

“Yeah,” says Bobby. “His mother and father never do it.”

“Think about it, fella. Our father has oysters every day and we have three kids.”

“Does your mother eat them too?” Henry says.

“What?”

“Simon here is allergic to bees, but he don’t let it stop him,” Ralph says.

“Yeah,” Simon says, pointing to a dime-size pink scar at the base of his dirt-creased neck. “I got stung. Daddy made me an airhole with his Swiss-Army. Stuck a straw in it. I lived.”

“Hey, we only got an hour,” Ralph says. “Get the knives.”

The boys whirl into action, Bobby to the shelling bench to gather knives; Ralph to the back room, where he yanks the calendar off the wall and tacks it to a post out front. They move quickly, they’ve done it all before. The calendar—April—has a picture of a woman sitting on a rock wearing only her underwear. They snicker as they throw knives at her, but the knives are dull and clatter to the floor. Ralph ties a dirty rag over Simon’s eyes and stands him beneath the calendar with his arms splayed.

“Don’t worry,” Ralph says. “They ain’t sharp enough to cut much.”

“You know how to throw a knife, don’t-cha, fella?” says Bobby.

“Of course,” Henry says as he scans the pond for his father’s boat. The wind has picked up; he’d like to sit in the car.

A knife hits the deck, bounces, and lands in the nearest lobster float.

“Oops,” says Bobby. “Better get it. Dad counts ’em.”

“I’ll get it,” Simon says, lowering himself from the deck onto the six-inch lip of the wooden float. The float begins to sway as he inches toward the corner where the knife glints beside a pile of sleeping lobsters.

“Watch it, Si,” Bobby says. “They’ll snap off a finger.”

Slowly, Simon crouches and reaches. His lower back is scratched and streaked with dirt where his shirt has parted from his pants. One of the lobsters moves and Simon flinches. Staggering backward, he falls into the pond.

“Damn it!” Ralph says. “Do I have to do everything?”

Simon comes to the surface, arms flailing, gasping for air, and goes under again. Ralph and Bobby race to the back room, yelling for rope.

What do they expect? Henry wonders. They don't follow the rules, they don't dress for the weather, and they never think ahead. He, Henry, can swim, but he can't get chilled. He isn't even supposed to be here.

Simon comes up again, coughing, thrashing about, eyes wide-open like a drowning puppy. Henry kneels on the edge of the deck and reaches to him. Simon is like a porpoise, the way he leaps at Henry, grabs his arm, and pulls him into the water.

The water is darker and colder than Henry would have thought, but he does not panic. Tiny blood vessels lying close to the surface of his skin will transport oxygen to his various tissues, or the air in his lungs will cause him to rise again if he keeps his mouth closed. But then Simon grabs him by the neck and tries to climb onto his shoulders. All Henry's air leaves his body in one short burst of silver bubbles. This is how Henry learns that he is not, and will never be, a salamander. He is a boy who does not swim well, a boy who can drown. Tiny creatures suspended in shafts of light watch him sink.

Suddenly, the weight of Simon is gone and Henry's feet touch a soft, muddy bottom. He pushes upward, pulling with his arms, kicking his feet. When he breaks the surface, Ralph is there, grabbing at him, hauling him onto the deck where Simon lies shivering. Bobby wraps them both in a scratchy blanket that smells of wood smoke.

Henry cannot stop shaking. He is cold, but also angry. None of this should have happened. His mother should never have let his father take him. His father should never have left

him with these boys. He's going to have an attack and he's going to die.

"Damn, Henry!" Ralph says, clapping him on the back. "You saved Simon!" He offers a bottle in a brown paper bag and Henry takes a sip. It burns and sours, he wants to spit it out, but it warms his stomach and he reaches for another. His cousins chuckle.

"Lunch," Ralph says, prying open an oyster and loosening the meat. "Henry gets the first one."

This is when it occurs to Henry that things have been kept from him. The warm feeling in his stomach, for one. What "walking in on them" means, for another. Shellfish, and having a real pet. It's for your own good, his mother has said, and he's believed her, welcomed her cozy safety. But what if it's not? What if it's just a way for her to keep him with her because he's good company? Sensible and knowledgeable about nature.

"I think I will," Henry says, holding out his hand. He tips the shell and the soft briny meat fills his mouth. He gags. He swallows.

As the oyster makes its slippery way down his esophagus into his gullet, where millions of hysterical cilia alert his immune system of impending disaster, Henry has another thought: He is the hope of his family. His cousins aren't going to make it to adulthood, with their foolhardy ways. It's up to him, Henry, named after the Captain's first ship, to carry on the family line, and he'll need to eat oysters to do it.

At first it's just a tickle in the back of his throat and he coughs, but then, as the ruddy faces of his cousins press in, his tongue begins to swell. Their teeth are yellow and their breath smells of old eggs, but he can see that they care. When their faces begin to spin, he imagines himself with Simon on the school playground, under the jungle gym, playing pirates. The two of

them like brothers with their twin pink neck scars.

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From the boat, the clam house appears to sit above the water. The father rows, well within the rhythm of push and pull, lulled by the soughing of water against the bow. He's learned something from having a son. How life will whittle away at your dreams. The world is not your oyster. Likely never was. If he finds Henry even in the vicinity of the other boys, instead of sitting in the car, talking to himself and catching flies, he'll be satisfied. If Henry is within ten feet—twenty—of his cousins, scowling or not, he, the father, will consider the outing a success. What a fine sight that would be. Worthy of a postcard: cobalt sky border, green willow tree fringe above a bleached-white clam house, four strapping boys fishing from the deck, silver-blue pond in the foreground, tide moving out. He shades his eyes and searches for his son.

THE END