

Killer Clam Tide

Jim hastily pulled on his green rubber boots and wrapped the long yellow laces around his calves before tying them.

“Would you hurry up?” he asked his wife Maureen. The cold was already seeping into his bones—the kind of chill no soul can shake in the dark winter nights of the Pacific Northwest.

Maureen gave him a look borne of 30 some-odd years of marriage. “I don’t think the clams are going anywhere till we get there,” she said.

It was unlike Jim to want any company on one of these night digs. He had told her many times over the years she’d only slow him down, get in his way, and force him to stay out in the cold until she, too, got her razor clam limit.

Jim lit the Coleman lantern and adjusted the wick. Dark was coming in a hurry, and Maureen was grateful he was such an outdoorsman. No way could she have got that lantern going in the crosswinds of the beach.

“Give me your set of truck keys,” said Jim, extending his hand.

“My what?”

“My pockets are deeper. You don’t want to go losing your keys when you’re bending down retrieving a clam,” he explained.

Maureen had never lost a car key on the beach in all her 64 years, but she didn’t want to argue. She dutifully handed them over, then secured her clam net to her belt, pulled on a stocking cap, and followed Jim toward the waterline.

Night digs were not normally her cup of tea, and Maureen had been taken by surprise when Jim asked her to accompany him. “It’ll be fun,” he’d said. “A night surrounded by the lights of The Second City.”

The Second City was how they'd once referred to the romantic flickering of the lanterns dotting the beach during the winter clam season. My, how long ago that seemed!

There weren't a lot of people on the beach this night. Perhaps it was the wind that kept them away. Perhaps it was the roar of the pounding surf, driving the clams deeper into the sand and more difficult to find.

"Jim! Jim! Wait up!" Maureen called to his retreating back.

But Jim didn't slow his step toward the line of surf. If anything, he hurried faster, like a man trying to outrun the mistakes of his past—or his future.

Breathless, Maureen finally caught up with him right at the water's edge. Jim slowly swung the lantern back and forth, allegedly searching for the clam show that would tell them where to dig for their dinner.

Maureen watched his eyes in the glow of the lantern. There was something almost ominous in the way the light grotesquely distorted his face. Who was this man, her husband, who wore such an ugly air of arrogance tonight? What was he thinking that soured his expression so?

Jim had been waiting for just the right night, the right tide, the right cloud covering, to invite Maureen to join him out here on the beach. Tonight his plan was finally coming together, and it was that knowledge which gave him such a haughty, satisfied look.

"What time is the tide?" asked Maureen, breaking into his sinister reverie. "I haven't seen a single clam sign, and I'm getting cold."

"It's almost dark enough," replied Jim.

"What does dark have to do with the tide?" Maureen chided him. "Are you sure this is a good spot? I didn't see any emerging sandbars when you parked here. Maybe we should move on down the beach to where there are clusters of people already digging."

"No," said Jim. "You don't know what you're talking about. This spot is perfect. We've got it all to ourselves."

Maureen scowled, and stuck her hollow aluminum clam gun upright in the sand, pausing briefly to wonder why it was called a “gun” and not a “tube.” She adjusted her stocking cap, then waited for a wave to recede before she began stomping for clams. She carried the clam gun with her as she pounded a circular pattern around Jim, rimming the light beam of the lantern.

She completed her circle, and stood directly in front him, scanning back over her footprints, searching for the telltale clam show. Nothing. Looking up at him, she shrugged.

Jim was silent as a thin wave skimmed the beach, encircling their feet, erasing their boot prints, and then pulling back out.

“Shall I try here again, or shall we move down the beach a little?” asked Maureen.

Jim was silent, lifting the lantern as if to adjust the wick. But instead of greater illumination, the lantern suddenly went out, and they were pitched into blackness. Momentarily losing her orientation, Maureen called out, “Jim! I can’t see!”

But Maureen didn’t need to see Jim, because what she immediately felt was far more chilling than the ocean water seeping into her worn boots.

Jim had dropped the lantern, and calculatedly taken two steps forward. He’d placed his hands on her shoulders, gripping them tightly. He pulled her head close, and pressed his mouth against her ear. “I’m right here,” he grunted. “No need to yell.”

Maureen tried to back away. “Jim— Jim, you’re hurting me.”

“The pain is temporary,” he said, emitting a low, deep chuckle. His hands slid from her shoulders up to her neck and he began squeezing. “Too bad about you getting swept away by a sneaker wave tonight. Such a pity.”

Maureen couldn’t breathe. She struggled against his grip, but it did no good. She tried to drop to her knees, thinking to pull him down with her, but he was far heavier and stronger, and she knew she only had a few moments before she blacked out.

The sudden thought of her grandchildren passed through her mind, and the image of them all taking the giant pendulum ride at the county fair last summer. The pendulum

ride, that carried them heavily back and forth until it went so high it swung all the way up and around—

With every ounce of strength Maureen could muster, she flung her aluminum clam gun out and away from her body, then up and around in an arc high over the top of her head, just like that giant pendulum. She heard the resounding THWAAACK! as it connected with the side of Jim's head.

“Ooof!” Caught by surprise, Jim relaxed his grip and Maureen sucked in a deep breath of air.

But instead of pushing him away, Maureen reached up and grabbed the front of his jacket, pulling him forcefully toward her. Jim grabbed for her as he pitched forward, but being smaller and quicker, she stepped aside, and he fell on his face in the shallow water. She hesitated for less than a heartbeat, then took her foot and pressed it down on the back of his neck.

“Even a seasoned clammer has to watch his step out on the beach,” she said, through clenched teeth. When Jim stopped struggling, she reached down and retrieved her truck keys from his pocket. “You just never know when the Graveyard of the Pacific will be calling your name.”