Return To Beauty

GLENN FISHER

I wandered on down to Mort's and found him painting the bottom of a boat with tar. After a moment, he looked up. "Why if it ain't little Johnny Chambers," he exclaimed, "don't ye'pear as if ye'grown a bit."

"Not much," I said.

The old man laughed—a sort of a cackle. "You never was no bigger'n a minnit, but you was a spunky little dickens. I allus said, 'y can't guess the size of a litter by the size o' the sow',"

He put down his brush. "Whatcha got in mind, son?"

"I thought I might go fishing for a while," I said.

"You ain't got no pole ner bait. Fish ain't goin' to jump into the boat," he said cryptically.

I smiled a little—remembering. "I figured that I might swipe a pole and some bait from you like I used to do."

Mort snorted. "You was the durndest cuss fer that, wa'n't you! Howsomever, I 'low as I still got a pole or two you c'n use. Come on up to th' house."

I followed him and went inside. I suddenly remembered that I had never been in Mort's house before. It wasn't at all as I expected to find it. There were a lot of soft rugs scattered around on the polished floors and there were pictures on the walls. While Mort was gathering up tackle, I picked up a picture from the mantle to see if I recognized the people in it. It was a picture of a woman and a little girl but I didn't know either of them. Mort came in and found me with the picture in my hand.

"Them's my wife, Milly, and our little
girl. They both died before you was born-
ed. Year of the big flood—both got pneu-
moniy and died afore I could get ole Doc
Winters from acrost the river.” He paused,
musing. “Milly allus liked rugs and pic-
tures—never could seem to git ‘nough of
‘em. I like to keep things the way she
had y’ know.”

“They are nice,” I said, and put the
picture back on the mantle. Mort picked
up the tackle and I followed him out the
door to the boat. We cast off and rowed
upstream in silence for a while until the
old man spoke.

“Did the war rough ye up a little,
son?” I see y’ limpin’ a bit.”

“I was hit by a piece of flak over
Kure,” I said grimly, and he let it go at
that. After a moment he spoke again.
“Doc Winters’ boy, Jim, got killed over to
France durin’ the invasion, I hear tell. You
knew Jim, didn’ you?”

“Yes, we went to school together.”

“Jim was a good lad—woulda made a
fine doctor. Are you goin’ back to school?”

“Maybe,” I said.

“I hear you was studyin’ to be a writer
and doin’ right well. ’Pears to me it’d be
a shame not to go ahead.” He waved a
hand toward the shore. “Pull in a little
and I’ll toss out the anchor. They’s fish
in here.”

I did as he said and we put out our
lines. For a time we fished in silence and
then I got a bite. I waited until I thought
the fish was on the hook and then pulled
in but I missed the fish. Mort waited until
I had my line back in the water before he
said anything. Then—“Sorta lost your
touch haven’t y’, son?”

I looked at him to catch his expression
but his face was blank as he engaged him-
self with rebaiting his hook. “S’funny,
a worm’s jus’ about the onpertiest thing
you’d ever see but the fish loves ‘im,” he
mused.

Mort didn’t say anymore for a long
time—just sat with his eyes half-closed
watching his cork. Suddenly he looked up.
“Johnny, lad, how would ye put in words
how soothin’ it is to watch the water
flowin’ by liken it had to go somewhere
but wa’nt in no hurry to git there? Ye’ve
studied words. How you goin’ tell people
so’s they can understand how the willers
seem to be bendin’ over so’s they can kiss
the water—sadlike—’s if they were sayin’
goodbye? Or how good it makes you feel
to see a bass playin’ in the shallers like he
was havin’ fun jus’ bein’ a bass? Could ye
tell me, son?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Y’ could try. I allus said, ‘you can’t
ketch a fish ‘nless you go afishin’.”

He seemed so in earnest that I didn’t
have the heart to refuse. I began to look
around to take time to form my sentences.
As I did so, I saw that the willows did
reach down to touch the stream
in a sad
carest—that the dark, green water flowed
serenely by as if it had a majestic purpose
—that a bass was splashing joyously
in the
shallers. There was more. The little
wavelets gave to the stream a beaten silver
effect—a sunbeam laid a great golden lance
across the water—a diver-bird wheeled
crazily above and dived into the water and
out of sight. My eyes dilated until they
hurt, bringing tears. I looked at the old
man. “Isn’t it beautiful!” I breathed.

There was a tug on my line. With a
twitch of the pole, I set the hook—and
landed the fish. Mort was elated. “You’re
gettin’ back the touch, Johnny, you’re
gettin’ it back!” he said.