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 'pear as if ye'd grewed 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'nt 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-
monia 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 
caress—that the dark, green water flowed 
serenely by as if it had a majestic purpose 
—that a bass was splashing joyously 
in the shallows. 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.