PAUL THEROUX

LOW TIDE

The woman with the have-a-nice-day face in the post office they call ‘Buttons’? The one that’s always saying ‘Can I share something with you?’ and then complains about her feet, ruined by Uncle Sam, how she has to spend so much time at the counter selling stamps that she has to put cookies into her shoes for arch support? That lost her husband to a brain tumor and always asks me about Alice in an irritating way, as if I lost her to a brain tumor? With the apron?

She stuck a leaflet in my box, not to me personally, but to one of those all-purpose addresses – ‘Box-Holder,’ it said, and it advertised a ‘Parenting Clinic,’ and I said to myself: ‘Parenting?’ So I said to her, ‘Now can I share something with you, Buttons?’ and handed it back – didn’t want it, didn’t need it, because there is no such word and now am I going to get huge bills addressed to me as ‘Box-Holder’ that I have to pay – Minimum Payment and New Balance – regular as the tide, whether I like it or not? She took the leaflet back. She saw my point.

The tide was still going down as I searched my stack of mail for a word from Skip or Larry – nothing today; and still ebbing as I read the young fellow’s T-shirt motto ‘You Are Dealing With An Animal,’ and I hurried towards his car to set him straight, but he drove off before I could say anything.

‘The hell are you doing, Stanley?’ I heard and turned and saw Ned Clark leaving the box lobby of the post office. ‘Chasing cars?’

‘One of these T-shirts,’ I said, pointing in the direction where the car had gone.

He just shook his head – could not have cared less about the way people advertise their aggression with T-shirts and bumper stickers – but who would notice in a town where the local garbage truck is lettered IRANIAN LUNCH CART?

‘Anything I can do for you?’ he said, as though to an invalid, and then took my arm to steer me through the parking lot.

I snatched my arm back and said, ‘As a matter of fact, yes. Can you explain what “parenting” means?’

‘All I know is that no one truly understands the dynamics of family life, and I suppose the best counsel is from the Bible, “Judge not less ye be judged.”’ And he tried to put his arm round me again. ‘As for Alice and the boys – sometimes people need space.’

All this gabble from my simple question; and I kept thinking, The tide is falling.

‘Ned,’ I said. ‘The word “parenting.” What’s it all about?’

‘It’s a gerund,’ he said, with his hands out.

‘It is no such thing. It is not even a word.’

He insisted it was, I swore it wasn’t, and finally to clinch his argument he said, ‘Any noun can be verbed, Stanley.’

‘Now I’ve heard everything,’ I said and just walked off as he called out Don’t go away mad – but who wouldn’t? It was low tide by the time I got to the landing.

I was still thinking about Skip and Larry, why they hadn’t written in so long, and trying to heave my boat across the mud-flats when I looked up and saw my children, both of them, standing there on the shore watching me; Skip and Larry, exactly the way they were when they were eight and ten, in their bare feet and bathing suits, with their skinny arms and bony shoulders, except they were black.

I said, ‘Don’t just stand there.’

They didn’t move.

‘Give me a hand,’ I said. ‘Look alive.’

Anyone could see that I was about to lose forty feet of line that had slid off the stern cleat as I plowed the skiff forward through the mud. And I was angry: low tide, because of all that business at the post office.

‘Pick it up,’ I said.

‘The rope?’

‘It’s not a rope, son. It’s a line. If you’re going to mess around in boats – grab it!’

He scooped up the line and at the same time moved across the mud to me on stepping-stones, finding one after another, his brother behind him, following him just as Larry used to follow Skip.

I took an end of the rope and tied a bowline through a hole in the breasthook and said, ‘Give me some slack.’

He just stood there.

‘Pay me out some slack,’ I said.

I thought: ‘I’ve been giving English lessons all morning.’ It was as though I had found myself on another planet, and at low tide it seemed that way.

‘Let go of the line, sonny.’

He threw it at me.

‘Doesn’t anyone speak English anymore?’ I said.

This made him very solemn and attentive, just like Skip waiting for me to set him straight. His face was smooth, his head shaved, the whites of his eyes were slightly flecked, and his skin black beneath little scaly ashes. His brother was a smaller version of him. They looked to me as children do – waterproof and unsinkable and unfinished – unfinished most of all. So many things they didn’t know, so much they couldn’t do. How would they ever learn? The world was all tall strangers to them. And their being black only made it all worse. Who had ever shown them compassion?

‘Hop aboard,’ I said.

They didn’t move. Onshore, a big bearded man in shorts yelled ‘Wallace and Ferdy! Get over here!’

They tensed, looking very compact, as they prepared to leap back on the stepping-stones.

‘No problem,’ I said. ‘They want to come with me.’

Only then did this bearded man look at me. ‘You sure?’

‘I’ve got two of my own,’ I said. I settled my oars into the oarlocks and eased the stern towards the boys. ‘Get in. One at a time. Hold tight.’

They glanced back at the bearded man as they did so, and I could tell they were relieved to get away from him. There was something tyrannical-looking about his beard, and the way he walked, those shoes. He watched us row away through the weedy water.

‘Ever been in a boat before?’

‘Nope,’ the big boy said.

‘Scared?’ I said.

He looked up sharply and denied it.

The little one said, ‘Hey, mister – that a Chinese boat?’

A gaff-rigged 40-footer was passing us. Red sails – and so the boy had drawn a simple conclusion. I told him what it was and made him repeat it, and then I held up a line and said, ‘What’s this?’

‘Rope,’ the little boy said.

‘Line,’ I said and got them chanting. After they had stopped I said ‘Don’t worry. You’ll learn. It took my kids years to learn these things. We’ll have to cram it all into a few hours today. But I’ll make you into two sailors, you’ll see.’

‘Where are your kids, mister?’

Something bothered me about being called ‘mister’ like that.

‘Call me captain,’ I said. They nodded and went quiet. ‘Which one of you is Wallace and which is Ferdy?’

The big one was Wallace, and the little one said that Ferdy was not short for anything. It was his whole name.

I said, ‘Got any brothers and sisters?’

‘Four,’ the little one piped up.

‘Six,’ Wallace said, and when the little boy challenged him with a look, Wallace said, ‘LaToya and LaRetta.’

I asked them to spell these names, and they did so.

‘They’s the twins,’ Wallace said. ‘They’s living with my father.’

‘Was that your father on the beach?’

‘Nope.’

“‘No, Captain.’”

‘No, Captain. That’s the Reverend. Of our church. Heavengate Baptist.’

‘Boston?’

‘Roxbury.’

Hot streets, black gangs, crazed Irishmen in cars racing by and screaming abuse at them, boarded up storefronts and brick tenements, junked vans and jalopies rusting by the roadside, radios playing too loud and planes descending overhead – never mind the rape, the murder, the mayhem – just the simple visible facts were bad enough; and they knew they were in heaven here, being rowed across the harbor.

They were sitting together, big and little on the thwart.

‘How old are your kids?’ Wallace said, and when I did not reply he added ‘Captain.’

‘That’s it, son. You’re learning,’ I said. ‘Twenty-one and twenty-four. They’re big now. But they were once your age, sitting there, just like you. They went to California. Why is it that people who go to California never seem to come back? And they don’t write letters. That’s not a California thing, is it? But they’re different. Know why? Because I raised them to be different. I taught them how to be clean-cut. Yes, sir. No, sir. I taught them the fundamentals. I kept them off the streets and on the water. You never learn any harm on the water. You give me a week or two – I could set you straight. I could teach you to row. Skip and Larry could row like demons. I had them sprinting across here, from the beach to the tip of the jetty. They didn’t learn that at school. Of course not. There was a smoking room at school. Imagine. For 15–16-year-olds. They had driver education. Naturally. So they could use their parents’ car. That was very hard on Alice. But, you know? I went up to the school and saw the principal. Henry T. Wing. I explained everything very carefully to him, the pressure we were under, the strain that driver ed was putting on our vehicle. I told him about Alice’s condition. Her hair had started to fall out in bunches, and nothing is more troubling to a woman than losing her hair. I’m dead sure that contributed to it. Notice how I am just dipping the oars into the water. Not trying to overdo it – just sinking the blades and gliding and lifting, and feathering slightly because of the wind.’ I took three more long pulls. ‘Does that answer your question?’

They had gone silent – we were in the channel and I was fighting a short breaking chop that had been whipped up by the westerly wind smacking the last of the ebbing tide.

‘What are the other ones called?’ I said.

They just stared.

‘Your brothers and sisters,’ I said.

‘Shonelle, Shanice, Valia, and Troy,’ Wallace said.

‘Interesting,’ I said, but privately I found the names heartbreaking, like brands of floor polish or shampoo.

‘Shonelle got married,’ Ferdy said.

‘Would you like to get married?’ I asked Wallace.

‘Maybe,’ he said.

‘You’re going to have to be more definite than that, son. If you meet the right woman there’ll be no question,’ I said. ‘A marriage isn’t just a romantic thing. Oh, sure. You’re all fired up at first, but you have to look at that woman’s face at breakfast the next morning. You’re going to have to plan and save. You want to keep your life shipshape. Like this boat. Notice how I coil the line? We had a knot in that line. Remember how I undid it before I coiled it? Marriage is like that. Think about it.’

This made a definite impression on Wallace, but then Ferdy smirked and said, ‘If you get married you can see her panties.’

I cut him off with, ‘We don’t need that kind of talk on this boat.’

‘Shut up, Ferdy,’ Wallace said, and looked towards shore.

‘Your wife belongs on a pedestal, and you don’t put her on a pedestal just so that you can look up her dress. Respect, that’s what I’m talking about. You don’t have to take your clothes off just to have a good time, sonny. What are you looking at, Wallace?’

‘Thought I saw the Reverend,’ he said. ‘I was going to axe him a question.’

‘No, you weren’t.’

He seemed hurt – baffled, anyway.

‘You were going to ask him a question.’

‘Mister, I have to go to the bathroom,’ Ferdy said.

‘You should have thought of that before we left,’ I said. ‘You’ll just have to hold on to it. I know it’s hard but it’s for your own good. See, next time you won’t make that mistake, will you?’

He winced at me and put his knees together, and I knew that no one had ever put it like that to him. He needed to be told that in just that way. I felt that I had nipped a bad habit right in the bud and I saw again Skip and Larry on that same thwart, and all the lessons they had learned in this boat.

‘What were you going to ask the Reverend? Something about the church service?’

‘Yup.’

“‘Yes, Captain.’”

“‘Yes, Captain.’”

‘How did I know that you were going to ask him about the church service?’ I said. ‘I guess I read your mind, didn’t I? See, when you get to be my age and been around like I have you don’t have to be told things. You know what a person is going to say before he or she opens his or her mouth. Used to amaze Skip and Larry. “Don’t tell me,” I’d say. “You’re hungry. You’ve got to see somebody. You’re going out of town.” Whatever. I’ll bet you’re in the choir.’

‘Yes, Captain,’ Wallace said.

‘I’ll bet you’ve got a lovely voice,’ I said.

‘Yes, Captain.’

‘Want to sing something for me? I love gospel music.’

He seemed to be thinking this over, and then he said, ‘Captain, Ferdy’s crying.’

‘That’s because he’s learning a lesson. Sometimes tears are a good teacher. And the more he cries the less he’ll pee.’

The child was shuddering. No jokes from him now. None of this If you get married you can see her panties nonsense.

‘What’s wrong, Wallace? Why don’t you want to sing? Would you rather do it tomorrow?’

‘Yes, sir, Captain,’ he said eagerly.

‘Suit yourself,’ I said.

We were now parallel to the end of the jetty, at the mouth of the harbour. ‘This is a steep and confused sea,’ I said, as the boat pitched. ‘What if we went over?’

And a wave slapped the stern and wet the boys as I spoke.

‘What if we just got swamped? What’s the first thing you’d do? Would you swim for shore?’

‘I sure would,’ Wallace said and became gray at the thought of it.

‘You’d be making the biggest mistake of your life,’ I said. ‘You never leave your craft. You never swim for shore. You stay with your craft until help comes.’

‘We gonna drown, mister?’ Ferdy wailed, and he began to sob.

Wallace said, ‘Captain, we got church.’

‘And I suppose you want to turn back?’

‘Yes, Captain.’

‘But you want to come out tomorrow, don’t you?’

‘Yes, Captain.’

‘You want to learn a thing or two about seamanship?’

‘Yes, Captain.’

‘What about you, Ferdy?’

‘Yes, Captain,’ the little boy said.

I was still rowing, and I thought how precisely like Skip and Larry they were at this moment, sitting in the stern nodding and agreeing. They were showing manners. And how long had we been out? No more than forty-five minutes. Give me a week with them – just a week, Reverend – and I will give you back two adults.

With that, I turned the boat and rowed back towards shore, still fighting the tide. But I made use of the time. We ain’t got but one, Wallace said, speaking of his parents. I explained the grammatical mistake and I thought; ‘No – you can count on me, and that makes two.’ I told them what had happened that morning at the post office, of the business with the leaflet, and ‘parenting,’ and Any noun can be verbed. We had a good laugh over that.

‘Be here tomorrow at nine sharp, so we can catch the tide,’ I said.

They said ‘Yes, sir’ – all politeness now – and scampered off the boat and up the beach. I didn’t see the Reverend but I suppose he was putting on his dog-collar. I wasn’t happy, but I was satisfied. I felt I had rescued the day and kept it from being a waste, and maybe saved a few young lives in the process.

That was yesterday. Today I went back, launched the boat and waited. Nine – ten – eleven. No sign of them. So I went out alone. It’s not funny when the water recedes and shows bottles and old rope and clam shells and crab claws and dead weeds on a long shore of mud.