

Stuck in the Mud

Some years ago it almost seems like another lifetime now – I lived in a boatshed on the southern beach of Dangar Island on the Hawkesbury River. I had a dory in which I used to row back and forth across the river to Brooklyn. It was a great way to start and end the day, except when the tide was low, when getting ashore through the mud was a dirty, difficult business. It was annoying, but if you had told me it would one day put my life in jeopardy I would have laughed.

One cold but fine winter afternoon, I decided to stop at the Angler's Rest Hotel and have a couple of beers after work. There would be no difficulty rowing across the river afterwards in these conditions I reasoned, and you never knew who you might meet at the pub. As hoped, I met a few friends and enjoyed their conversation and three or four beers. I wasn't drunk by any means but perhaps not entirely sober either when I finally left the pub.

It was a beautiful night. A big yellow moon had risen over the hill and the sky was full of stars. I gazed at them, remembering nights at sea and dreaming of future voyages. I inhaled the crisp air, and the natural beauty soothed my melancholy. I remember being pleased with my decision to stop by the pub.

When I got down to the river, however, I discovered that it was low tide, and I had to wade out through the mud to my dinghy. I quickly sank into the black ooze, it was almost up to my knees after a few steps, and I found it difficult to extract my feet as I lurched towards the dinghy. I may not have been blind drunk but I was doing a good imitation, staggering from side to side. Just as I came alongside the dory, I lost my balance and fell backwards into the mud.

I tried to get up but the mud held me down like a giant suction cup. With considerable effort, I broke free, lurching to my feet, but my heavy jumper was now considerably heavier, caked as it was in mud, and I immediately lost my balance again, falling on my face this time. I was now plastered in black, stinking mud front and back, from head to foot, mummified in the stuff, which made the task of getting to my feet even harder. Again and again I struggled free, only to fall immediately. By this time my clothing was soaking wet and the intense cold had begun to numb my limbs. There was no way I could regain my balance.

Nearby, I could see a light in the residence above the marina. I called out, but my voice sounded feeble in the winter air. Nobody was listening. The tide, I noticed, was coming in. I began to fear that I was going to drown there, ignominiously, caked in mud like a bloody hippopotamus, unless I succumbed to hypothermia first. Then something in me rebelled. Drawing on some primitive strength, I hurled myself up, making no attempt to stand, only to travel in the direction of the dory. Talk about slapstick comedy! I flopped around like Charlie Chaplin, repeatedly landing on my face in the mud, but each time a little closer to the dory. It took several attempts but at last I landed in the boat. Saved!

I lay there for ages. Time didn't matter now. I was hyperventilating, out of control, my ribcage racked with convulsions, but something inside me was calm, detached. When my breath returned to normal, I pulled up my anchor and rowed home. The night was transcendental - the tide was well and truly in now, the moon high in the sky, a cold, white orb, and the river like a sheet of black satin.

I could have rowed all night, filled with the joy of being alive. The next morning every joint in my body ached and I spent the next two days in bed. I did not touch a drink for several years.

From Graham Cox's unpublished memoir.