WEATHERED WOOD

a short story

by

Judith K. Berg

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Weathered Wood

THIS STORY WAS INSPIRED BY A VISIT TO A SMALL FISHING VILLAGE ON THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST COAST DURING A VACATION BREAK FROM MY RIVER OTTER RESEARCH. FOG WAS MY FREQUENT COMPANION WHILE MOSEYING ALONG THE DOCKS AND EXPLORING THE LIGHTHOUSE AND ITS SURROUNDS, AS IT IS OMNIPRESENT IN SUCH LOCATIONS. THE ORIENTATION OF THE SHORELINE TO THE TIDE WAS JUST RIGHT FOR DRIFTWOOD TO WASH UP ON SHORE FROM WHATEVER ITS ORIGIN WITH EVERY HIGH TIDE. WHILE WALKING THE BEACH ONE DAY, I PICKED UP A SMALL PIECE THAT LOOKED LIKE IT CAME FROM A BOAT. MY IMAGINATION TOOK OVER FROM THERE TO CRAFT THIS STORY.

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A lone man walks on the shore of the rugged northwestern coastline. Large waves crash against the rocky sculptures they've worked so hard for millennia to create. Their thrust propels the sea gradually up to the beach and gently across the man's feet. He sits down on a driftwood log staring out at Nature's spectacle. What tales of mystery is the sea telling him? What tales of mystery could he tell the sea?

Maneuvering among rocky outcroppings, I walked past the lone beachcomber. I love exploring freshly created tide pools after the high tide expends all its energy and its waters recede back into the sea. So many diverse life forms cling on to survive after being left in this alien world.

I turned my attention to the lone man, wondering what thoughts were going through the mind of this wax-like figure. A large set man with straggly gray hair and beard, each line of his face could have been etched with a different tale from his life. He looked like an 'old man of the sea'. When I walked past him he neither moved nor spoke so I didn't say anything to him either. Each of us was a solitary being on a distant shore of life. Each of us liked it that way.

Returning to my exploration of the tide pools, I discovered tiny creatures whose ancestral history extends back millions of years. Did those ancient forms have the same survival issues as their current day relatives? I watched as some of the tiny creatures cemented themselves to rocky walls of their alien world, while others clung to yet larger creatures of the unknown. Each life form I picked to hold in my hand was carefully returned to its original place so as not to disturb its life cycle. They have enough battles to endure. When exposed after the sea recedes, land predators pluck them like fruit from a tree. When inundated with water, the sea predators pick them like sweets from a candy jar. Just like we humans, these creatures are never totally free of life's struggles.

I looked over at my human companion. He was still sitting quietly on the log, still looking out into the waters beyond. Was he thinking about his own struggles? He picked up a small piece of weathered wood, selected from several strewn across the beach. Maybe they were from the remains of a boat lost at sea. Maybe they reminded him of his last voyage. Maybe... He pulled a knife from his pocket and began to whittle the wood. *Ah! Maybe he is a wood carver.*

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The jagged rocks did not make a soft cushion on which to sit for a prolonged period of time, so I prepared to leave. The lone man remained in his statuesque position, only rotating his hands as he whittled his wood. The breezes whispered my good byes to him. I felt sure I would never see him again.

My purpose for coming to the coast was to make some observations of fresh water otters, more often called river otters, making their occasional short-term jaunts into the saline environment from the river which empties into the sea. I am an otter researcher. This excursion was actually a combination of work and vacation – my husband joining me for the vacation portion, and, our dog Shakeybear (he can't pronounce 'Shakespeare') joining me for the entire venture.

Early the next morning my husband and I went to the local cafe for breakfast. The conversation in the cafe was about the body of a man found on the nearby shore. It was at a place called "Windy Cove". That is where I saw my lone man! Maybe he decided to set himself free of his life struggles for his final voyage. The people at the cafe said it was a beautiful setting for the end of one's life. I naturally assumed they meant he took his own life. *Would a kind word from me have averted his demise?*

Having lost my appetite, I excused myself and walked to the cove. There I found policemen moving through the world where I had spent peaceful hours the day before – just like my 'old man of the sea'. I told one of the policemen about my lone man on the beach and he directed me to the officer in charge. As I walked over to him, I wondered what all these people were looking for. Wasn't a suicide a suicide? I felt like yelling out, "Let him die in peace!"

I introduced myself to the tall, handsome officer in charge. I described to him the man I saw the evening before. Immediately he called over a sketch artist. I thought that rather strange. Then he showed me a photo of the victim. It wasn't the same man! The dead man was much younger, thinner, and with dark hair.

The victim was found by two early morning beachcombers in the rocky outcropping where I previously explored. He had been stabbed to death. The time of death was estimated about midnight. I last saw the older man when I left the beach at about 7:00 p.m.

The police told me only that the victim checked into a local motel for a two-night stay. They thought he registered under an assumed name because there were no records of anyone with that name in the city he listed as his permanent residence. He paid cash in advance, so there was no credit card to trace. He arrived in a shuttle from the airport, so there was no rental car to trace. The police were very anxious to check out my 'old man of the sea'.

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After working with the sketch artist, I walked to the log where I last saw the lone man. It was still before the first high tide after the murder occurred. So, unless he was very careful, there might still be traces of his existence in this location – assuming, of course, he was the murderer. I searched but found nothing to indicate a human had been there. I did, however, find indications of several species of non-humans. I found the empty shells they once called home. Some were from those who permanently moved on from this world, like the victim; some from those who moved on to a new home, like the murderer. Then I remembered the weathered wood the old man was whittling. There were still several pieces scattered along the beach. I sat down to inspect each one individually. I found one piece of partially whittled wood. It looked like the beginning of a fishing boat. During the moonlit night, did the whittler start working on it while waiting to commit his crime?

A curious policeman walked over to me as I crawled along on the beach like one of my crab companions. With a suspicious look in his eye he asked, "Did you lose something?"

I laughed and responded, "No, but I did *find* something!"

I pointed to the piece of partially whittled wood. He bagged it for closer examination. Neither of us directly touched it. Neither of us knew if it had meaning. Neither of us knew if it was whittled by a murderer. On the wood appeared trace evidence of blood that might allow a laboratory to find a DNA match to the carver, and, perhaps even to a murderer. At least it was a potential clue.

A sea gull landed on the beach just inland from where the policeman and I were investigating. Maybe it was trying to help look for clues as it picked through some debris.

"Hey, maybe that gull witnessed the murder," I jokingly spoke to the officer.

"Yeah, but I don't think he can tell us much about it," he responded in a dry tone while walking away from me.

"*Gee, I don't think he appreciated my humor,"* I spoke softly to myself. *"Oh well, I tried."*

Alone again, I took a stroll along the beach. I encountered a dead gull lying upon a rocky ledge. It reminded me of the human victim. Then my thoughts turned to that of the lone man. If he was the murderer, he could identify me just as well as I could identify him. I didn't like that thought at all!

The next day my husband, our dog Shakeybear, and I drove a few miles further

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up the coast to a small town closer to my study site. From here my husband caught an airport shuttle to fly back to Denver to return to work. Shakeybear would now be my only companion for the rest of my venture. I had previously arranged to rent a small house to serve as the home base for my project and a resting place for us. I gave my local address to the police before we left the area of the murder. They wanted it just in case they needed me for an identification. I guess I *am* involved!

After my husband left, Shakeybear and I drove to my new study site.

"We'll be spending many long hours here," I told my canine companion. He cocked his head and looked at me with his understanding nature.

The location was near an old lighthouse where the river waters ended their arduous journey and lost their identity to the ocean. My chosen observation hours would extend from before sunrise into late morning, and again from before sunset into early evening. What beautiful and peaceful times I planned. Actually, it was the river otters that planned them for me. Realizing I would not necessarily see them every day, or even every week, my chosen hours might afford me the best opportunity to occasionally observe them. However, this secretive, elusive, and very mobile species wasn't there for my benefit.

Erasing the recent events from my mind and returning to my raison d'etre wasn't going to be easy. A light fog began gently rolling towards the river and the lighthouse guarding it. I expected this to become an almost daily occurrence, making observations more difficult. However, for now it just felt like a refreshing cleansing of my mind and body. The distant foghorn sang out its concern to sailors approaching the unforgiving coastline. Soon, the brightness of day surrendered to the darkness of night. I looked toward the lighthouse. It stood like a monument to the history of the area. Just think of all the battles it witnessed between men and the sea. Some won by men. Many won by the sea.

Shakeybear and I drove back to our little house. The backyard was fenced so he could safely explore. My next-door neighbors immediately took kindly to Shakeybear.

“If you don’t want to take him on one of your excursions, we would be happy to take care of him,.” one of them expressed. Since this was a small town, most people knew why I was here.

“Thanks for your offer.” I said. “I really do appreciate your kindness.” The only other person that I casually knew was the wildlife biologist for this district. He welcomed me when I arrived, but also made it clear that I was on my own. Although I liked it that way, having amiable neighbors gave me some comfort.

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Shakeybear and I got settled into our new surroundings. We also got settled into our new routine. The first six weeks went very well and I was able to make some meaningful otter observations. I heard nothing from the police and slowly began to forget the incident along the rocky shore.

When not at my study site I took time to explore my temporary home town. It was a quaint, friendly little town, surrounded by beautiful natural areas. A small fishing fleet bobbed up and down with the muted flow of the tide that gently entered its protected harbor. The jetty on which sat the lighthouse attenuated the force of the waves into mere dwarfs of their previous selves as they made their way towards the marina.

On this particularly rare sunny day, I decided to walk the docks and view the fishing boats. Along my route I eavesdropped on stories being exchanged among the fishermen. Their voices seem to rise in volume as I drew nearer; their stories probably also rose in exaggeration. I flashed a smile while walking past them. One particular conversation caught my attention. As a small group of fishermen mended their nets, they talked about a man called 'Lucky Jake'. I stood near them, pretending disinterest as I gazed out to the waters beyond. My ears remained sharply tuned to their conversation, however. Jake owned a small fleet of four fishing boats. However, times had been difficult so he couldn't make his loan payments. A bank foreclosure appeared imminent. Then about six weeks ago, his luck changed without explanation. He paid off his loan; the fleet was now free and clear of any debt. No one understood the turnaround of events, but they were happy for Jake. At this time they started calling him 'Lucky Jake'. Hmmm, did they say six weeks ago?

"Hey!" they yelled as a boat entered the small harbor. "Did you have a good morning, Jake?"

"Yeah, the best," was his reply.

As the boat drew closer I got a good look at its captain. I turned and walked away with aplomb, trying not to draw undue attention. There was no doubt; Jake was my 'old man of the sea'! I couldn't take the chance he would also recognize me. What should I do?

I walked along the dock which seemed to get longer and longer as I walked faster and faster. One of the fishermen yelled, "Jake will have fresh fish for a pretty lady."

I called back, "No, not today. I'm late for an appointment."

The message seemed to be echoed by other fishermen as I walked past them. My response was echoed in return. I felt like I was in an echo chamber. A chamber of

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horrors! Maybe I did have an appointment - an appointment with death. I could be easily described to Jake by his friends. *Where did all these fishermen come from?* They seemed to be multiplying – just like the interminable planks of the dock. *Make it end!*

Finally, I reached my truck. I felt my world collapsing around me. I got inside and locked the door. I was trembling to the point that I couldn't get the key into the ignition. My heart beat faster and faster. Tears started flowing like water from a heavy rain. I hoped it was over. *Why did I decide to walk the docks today? Why was I there at that particular moment when Jake drew into the harbor? Why …?*

I gained control of my being and drove from the parking lot, automatically heading to my small cottage. Shakeybear greeted me with his wagging tail and wet kisses. He sensed my distress as he licked the salty tears from my face. I told him my story. He cocked his head in his inimitable fashion as he tried to understand. His eyes expressed his concern.

"It's OK, Mommy Dog," he conveyed with his love. I hugged him and cried some more.

When I saw Jake on the fishing boat, I remembered a feature on the face of my 'old man of the sea', which I had forgotten. On the beach during our first encounter I approached him from his left side. When the captain of the boat approached the dock he turned enough so I could see his left side. A large scar on his face extended down from the corner of his eye. It was a very distinguishable mark, despite the distraction of his beard. How could I have forgotten it? This mark, coupled with his other physical features, erased whatever doubt remained that they were the same person. Jake also had a bandage wrapped around his left hand. The man on the beach was whittling the wood with his left hand. The victim had been stabbed by a left-handed person.

Shakeybear and I got into my truck and I drove to my study site. I wasn't yet ready to go to the police station. I needed time to think. We reached our destination and walked out to our location. We both sat looking blankly out into the water for otters. I wished we *were* otters so we could swim away from this horror. We listened to the distant foghorn. A new technology had taken over the duties of the old lighthouse – and installed much closer to the end of the jetty. Darkness slowly entered our world – in more ways than one.

"We must leave," I expressed to my companion.

Slowly we proceeded towards the lighthouse. The fog wasn't yet so dense that we couldn't see the white monument. Wisps of gray mist passed across its outer walls like spirits holding onto their past. I stopped. Next to the entrance stood a figure, a stocky figure with straggly hair and beard. I wasn't close enough to see details but the

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shape looked like Jake, my 'old man of the sea'. He was waiting for me. I couldn't move. My legs became entrenched into the earth. I knew it was over. Even if I could move, where would I go? The only path was past the lighthouse. The combination of jagged rocks and piles of driftwood surrounded by rough waters held me captive. Even Shakeybear didn't move or vocalize. The two human beings on distant shores of life had now come together. Would anyone ever connect us? The police probably dropped the case into a dead file. Some of my bones might be found one day washed upon the shore like those of the dead gull I saw the day after the murder. *Would anyone bother to try to find out who they belonged to?* My husband would continue to search for me and to hope, but to no avail.

I heard a blast from a nearby foghorn. It appeared to come from the lighthouse. That was impossible! That old foghorn hadn't worked for many years. My feet started moving but I didn't feel in control! The figure disappeared. *Had I been hallucinating?* Or was he hiding and waiting until I got closer. Shakeybear and I walked past the lighthouse and made it to the truck. There were no other vehicles in the parking lot. No one appeared.

I pulled out of the lot and onto the back road. The fog was becoming much thicker now. It encased me in a tomb of horrors! I inched along the roadway hoping to stay on the narrow pavement. I couldn't see anything. Suddenly, my truck slid off the road into the white abyss. I stopped. This made me vulnerable to the man at the lighthouse. I opened the door of my vehicle. My truck was now sitting between two large trees! It just happened. However, the trees might provide some camouflage. Shakeybear lay down in the nice carpeted camper shell. We had no choice but to stay where we landed. I remained in the driver's seat prepared for a fast getaway. *Get away to where?* Outside my vehicle is a world of the unknown. It’s a world that I fear. What is happening? I'm no longer sure if I'm dead or alive. Maybe I'm in the spirit world. Finally exhaustion took over and I fell asleep, becoming oblivious to my perceived danger.

Early the next morning the entrance to my tomb began to open as the fog lifted. I slowly opened my eyes and peered into a recognizable world. Yes, I am alive! Shakeybear reached his head into the cab and gave me a big wet kiss. I started the truck, got back onto the road and drove to my cottage. My neighbor was outside picking up his paper.

"You OK?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied. "The fog was too thick for me to drive home so I slept in my truck."

"Yeah," he said. "Here we must be prepared for fog like people in other places must be prepared for snow. Oh, you had a visitor last night. I saw him knock on your

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door, then leave when you didn't answer."

"What did he look like?" I asked.

"Ah, he was a rounded fellow with straggly hair and beard," he replied.

"Thanks!" flowed the word from my mouth.

There are some advantages to a small town and 'curious' neighbors. So, Jake knew where I was living and came for a visit. That was the disadvantage to a small town. Any person could quite easily find any other person, and particularly if someone is new to the area. I guess I will never know if he was or wasn't at the lighthouse. One thing I did know was that I must to go to the police.

I showered, dressed, ate a quick meal, then put Shakeybear back in the truck and drove down the coast to the police station. My contact officer was there so I told him that I found 'my old man of the sea'. It still didn't connect him to the murder.

"Well," he said, "we just received the DNA results from the piece of weathered wood and from some blood found on the victim that wasn't his own. The two matched."

Through further conversation, I found out that the victim was a loan shark from the east coast. He loaned large sums of money to desperate people, and at a very high interest rate. He was identified from a photo that had been sent over the wires to other states. The New York City Police Department responded. The guy had a long rap sheet. The NYPD knew where he lived; they checked out his apartment. Paper work they found showed he loaned money to a guy named Jake. Once their deal was consummated, the loan shark would own 51% of Jake's fishing fleet until he paid back the loan. The guy, Jake, lived on the northern west coast. The NYPD had expressed surprise that the loan shark didn't take one of his goons with him since he always dispensed the loans in cash. They figured he must have just been slipping. Yes, he slipped, all right, and it was his final one.

Once Jake was connected to the loan shark, the local police got his blood sample from the emergency clinic where he had gone for treatment of his injured hand the morning after the murder. It matched the DNA on the victim and the weathered wood. A further check with the bank that held his loan on the fishing fleet said he paid them back the entire amount in cash. The payoff occurred the day after the murder. Jake told the loan officer that a rich relative died and left him a metal box. When he opened the box, it was full of money.

He laughed and said, "My eccentric relative didn't believe in banks". The loan officer thought it a rather bizarre story, but since he knew Jake, he didn't question it.

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The police set up a meeting with Jake for that afternoon. They hoped to keep me out of it but I was told that I would probably have to testify at his trial.

"It won't be easy for you," he said. "The fishermen and their families are a very tight group of people. They won't take kindly to a stranger going against one of their own."

"Well," I said reluctantly, "I don't think I have much choice."

The officers arrived at the boat dock for the meeting. They were told that Jake had taken out his favorite fishing boat about two hours before. He was alone. The police tried to contact him on his radio. There was no answer. They waited a few minutes; if he didn't return, they would search for him.

While the police waited, they talked to the fishermen. The fishermen said they knew nothing about the events surrounding Jake's recent luck. The first time they saw his bandaged hand would have been the day after the murder. He told them, just like he told those at the emergency clinic, that he cut it when whittling some weathered wood. That was his favorite pastime so no one questioned it. When he pulled into the dock yesterday he asked the fishermen about the lady who walked away when he arrived. No one knew me but they described me to Jake. He seemed very upset after that. He must have recognized me as the lady on the beach of that fateful day.

Fog again moved into this little coastal town. The foghorns were emitting their eerie sounds throughout the gray world. I waited next to the phone. I waited to hear the results of the meeting.

There would be no results. There was no meeting. The local news told the story. An explosion destroyed and sank a fishing boat out at sea. The vessel was owned by Lucky Jake. No survivors were found. The word spread around that Jake took the boat out by himself that afternoon. It looked like he took his final voyage. No further details were available.

The police contacted me. They no longer needed me. The case was closed on the loan shark. The case was closed on Lucky Jake.

Only the police knew of my involvement. Only the police knew I had seen the 'old man of the sea' on the beach. Only the police knew my discovery of the weathered wood. I felt sad for Jake, but, at least he ended his life in the best possible way for him, at sea on his favorite fishing boat. He also paid the price for his crime by taking his own final voyage.

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I decided to pack up and leave the next morning. I feared that rumors would spread in this small town about the lady on the docks. It wouldn't take long to connect me with that lady.

A few hours of daylight remained, so I decided to take one last trip to my study site. I put Shakeybear in the truck and drove to the lighthouse. We arrived just in time to see a couple of river otters returning from fishing out at sea. This was a special goodbye for me.

The fog was again entering my world. I wanted to make sure it wouldn't encase me in its tomb so I lead Shakeybear back towards the lighthouse. Standing in the entrance I saw a stocky figure with straggly hair and beard. The gray mist was slowly encasing him. The dormant foghorn emitted one loud blast of sound.

Shakeybear and I ran as fast as we could to the truck. There were no other vehicles in the parking lot. No one appeared. It must have been an illusion! I drove to our cottage.

Opening the front door, I sensed fog as I entered. An unknown force drew me to my desk. Sitting on my desk was a special edition of the local biweekly paper. The front page featured Jake's story, highlighted by a picture of Jake and his favorite vessel. Next to the paper sat a finely carved weathered wood fishing boat. At the helm was a small, carved figure with straggly hair and beard.

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