

A Certain Type

By Joe Boz

The Western horizon had gone to blood, the wind picked up turning the November Atlantic to blue-black chop. Another day gone. For Amos Pratt, another piss-poor haul. A third of his traps pulled and less than a hundred pounds of lobster to show – a friggin embarrassment in any season. His lobster well looked like a fish tank; enough room in the fifty-gallon container for the spindly little bastards to crawl about and never even touch one another. Why even bother banding the claws? Amos stood in the wheelhouse of his Ellen Anne, trying to figure out how to program his drops into the fancy GPS system that had come with his new boat, wondering as he did what the benefit was of locating your traps faster if you weren't going to find anything inside them. It seemed no matter where Amos set his traps these days, no matter what direction he moved them in, he was coming up empty-handed. He'd be lucky to finish with forty-thousand pounds this year. Again, an embarrassment.

“Goddamn it.”

Amos looked back at Nate, his only sternman and wife's younger brother, who was cursing now at the trap he had been baiting, checking his finger as if he might have cut himself.

“You alright?”

“Yea.” But the curl on Nate's lips said different. “Hell with it.”

“You cut yourself?”

“I said I'm okay.”

Amos watched his brother-in-law lift the fifth of Orloffs he had brought along this morning – no more than a pint's worth left of it now – and take a long swallow before going back to finish setting the bait. Nate was twenty years Amos' junior. A big boy; thick-necked and round-shouldered, with back and arms that seemed tailor-made for tugging trap warp and loading gear. Aside from the drinking and the morning grouchiness, Nate had proved an invaluable helper. A life-saver, really. A third-generation lobsterman who, truth be told, had a much better feel for the ocean than Amos did. Even if he hadn't been family, Amos still would be giving him the extra percentage of the catch that he did. Not that that had amounted to too much lately.

Today Nate had been unusually pissy. Amos had picked him up on the way to the boat this morning and received nothing but shrugs and short answers since. Eyes always looking the other way. It was surprising since Amos had expected the exact opposite. Nate's wife, Shelby, had moved out on him a few weeks before, but last night Ellen had told Amos that Shelby was coming back to give the marriage another try. Good news, you'd think.

“Last batch ready to go,” Nate said, stepping back from the line of traps he had set up on the deck ramp. He released them and the traps began to slide, one after the other, forty pounds apiece, over the Ellen Anne's stern to splash into the dark ocean's depths. Nate, watching them go, brought the Orloffs up for more.

Amos walked back to the stern. “They go over okay?”

Nate shrugged. “I 'spose.”

“Maybe we’ll come back Friday and find something, huh?”

Nate shrugged again. He still wasn’t making eye-contact with Amos.

Amos didn’t know many fisherman whose strong point was talking, and he was no exception, but there was something that needed saying here. Amos took a breath and began. “Listen, I’ve been wanting to say to you that, uh, that you might have been right about this not being such a good spot. I mean, you probably were. I mean, I know you were. And, uh, I should have listened to you on it. A lot of times probably I should.”

Nate turned to Amos. He looked about to say something, but then just held out the bottle. Normally Amos kept his drinking to a minimum, here and ashore. But at this moment he felt like sharing a drink might be the thing to do. Amos lifted and swallowed. He grimaced at the sterile taste of the cheap vodka, but then was grateful for the heat that worked its way down his throat and began to spread in his chest. It made him cough a little. Nate took the bottle back for his own large gulp.

“Seriously,” Amos said after clearing his throat. “If the bad haul’s what’s got you riled...”

“Too fucking cold out here,” Nate said.

“Well, I can’t argue that.”

“Even the old shell haven’t come out this far yet. Probably won’t ‘til spring. We should have stayed in the channel with the rest.”

Amos nodded. “I know, I know. I just didn’t want to be fighting for space anymore, crossing lines all the time with everybody. I get so sick of that part of it.”

Crowded waters was, in fact, the part of the business that Amos disliked most. The competition close to shore was so fierce, even in the off-season, that lobster traps piled up on top of one another. Often, it could get personal between the crews. Tempers flared. Accusations were made. Sometimes threats. Molestation of equipment was becoming more and more common; lines cut, boats set adrift. There were a lot of lobstermen who believed that if they hauled a trap and, because your line had crossed theirs, your trap comes up with it, then they can help themselves to your contents. What anywhere else the same men would consider outright theft. Even Nate, when it came to ‘the lobster wars’, could become cutthroat, and had been frustrated more than once at his captain’s unwillingness to take what the State of Maine wouldn’t agree was legally theirs. For his part, Amos would just as soon keep a distance from all that. The whole reason he had gotten into lobstering in the first place was to avoid that sort of nonsense, to go about earning his living honestly and quietly.

He said to Nate now, “I was hoping we could find us a few spots out here all our own. I figured if we come across a good enough bottom, we could get an extra dollar a pound for the old shell we caught and that would make up for the difference in our count.”

“I know why you did it,” Nate said.

“Yea, well, like I said, I’m sorry. I know we both of us have to put food on our tables. Hell, I gotta pay on this new boat before they take it away from me. I’ve missed two payments already. I want to fill that tank as much as you do, believe me, it’s just...”

Just what? Just that he sucked at what he did for a living? That he couldn’t find a good bottom if the Lord Jesus came down and created one for him? That he had no real instinct for when to move his traps or where? That he didn’t possess backbone enough to fight for the harbor space that would feed him and his?

Before Amos was forced to finish his sentence, Nate said, "I don't care about any of that shit, Amos. I got other things on my mind."

Amos knew it. He said, "What is it? Is it you and Shelby? You two having more problems?"

Nate nodded out at the night, stars beginning to show now. "You could say that."
"Well...anything you can tell me about?"

Nate turned and looked Amos square in the eyes. He paused like he was trying to look even further into Amos. Finally, his blank expression broke and he said quietly, "It was an accident...but I don't think anyone will believe me."

"What was?" Amos said, pretty sure now that he didn't want to know. "What happened to Shelby?"

Winter dark surrounded, icy spray pestering from over the bow, the Ellen Anne drifting in place as Nate told it.

"Last night Shelby came home to me," he said. "We were going to start all over. You know about that, right? Well, anyway, right off she wants to get things straight. Says she won't stay even the night unless we do. We talk about my drinking and my temper. She doesn't want it anymore. I say I don't blame her, I'll try. I give in on everything. All I ask is she stops nagging me all the time. So, of course, we fought. Nothing changes with Shelby. She wants everything from me, but don't want to do her part. She don't want to believe she's capable of bringing any of it on herself."

Amos, finding it hard to be patient, said, "So? What happened?"

"I told her to leave. Get the fuck out. Called her something, a spoiled bitch, something like that, so she slaps me."

"What did you do?" Amos asked, fearing the answer.

"Nothing," Nate said, shaking his head. "I swear. I just told her to go back to her family's cottage, where she's been staying. Come back when she wants to meet me halfway. Then I headed downstairs to the basement to get my gear ready for today. Shelby, of course, she's can't resist following me down, telling me I can't just walk away from her like that."

"And?"

"And she fell coming down the stairs. She was wearing those shoes with heels, you know, all dressed up for me I guess. I didn't actually see her trip. I just...I heard the scream. By the time I come back to the bottom of the stairs Shelby was coming down head-first. She hit her head on one of the steps, then hard on the concrete at the bottom. At first I thought she had only knocked herself out. There wasn't any blood anywhere that I could see. But then when I checked for a heartbeat and breathing..." He shook his head.

"Sweet Christ," Amos said.

"They're going to think I did it," Nate said. "No one's going to believe me. They're going to want to put me in prison for the rest of my life."

Amos couldn't believe what he was hearing. He felt numb and weak. Like his brain had frozen up. He had always liked Shelby; a plain, mild-spoken girl who worked

nights at the 7-11 Amos sometimes stopped at. Now she was gone. Forever. And Nate...

“Hold it,” Amos said. “You still came out with me.”

“I don’t know what to do,” Nate said.

“What to do? Nate...you have to call the authorities. You have to tell them--”

“I been thinking it over and over.”

“Thinking what over?”

Nate said, “If I want to bring you in on any of it.”

“Bring me in?” Amos said.

“I need your help,” Nate said.

“My help? What are you talking about? To do what?”

“To move her. Shelby’s car has been in the shop for weeks waiting for us to come up with enough money to fix the transmission. She was taking the bus back and forth. I need a vehicle to move her back to that cottage.”

Amos said, “Are you crazy?”

“I don’t want to go to jail, Amos. I didn’t do anything.”

“They’ll see that, then. They got ways of telling what really happened. DNA and...”

“Bullshit,” Nate said. “You know how many innocent men they got sitting behind bars up in Warren?”

“Nate...”

“She fell,” Nate said. “We’re just going to make it look like it happened before she came to see me, that’s all.”

Amos was shaking his head.

“Amos...”

“I-I don’t think I can help you with this one, Nate. Not with this.”

“Amos, please. I’m your brother-in-law. Your sister--”

“I can’t, for Christ’s sake!”

“We have a policy,” Nate said.

“What?” Amos was shaking his head at his boots. Now he looked up. “What are you talking about?”

“Me and Shelby. You know – a life insurance policy. Two-hundred thousand on each of us. I’ll split it with you, Amos, a hundred-thousand dollars, I swear, I swear to God, if you just help me get out of this mess.”

Amos said, “You’re kidding me.”

“Do I look like it?”

“What if...I mean, it won’t work.”

“We’re just moving her.”

“Yeah, but--”

“We’re just moving her, Amos. A hundred-thousand dollars, just for going for a ride with me. Think about it, at least.”

Despite himself, Amos was. A hundred thousand dollars. Enough to offset a bad season. Enough to pay off the boat. Put a chunk on the house. Take a trip somewhere with Ellen like she wanted so bad...

“Amos...? I’m innocent, Amos... Amos, I don’t want to go to goddamn prison my whole life...Amos?”

Amos heard himself saying, "What exactly would we have to do?"

Simple.

Shelby had been staying alone at her family's cottage up in Winthrop. They would go back to Nate's, put her in the back of Amos' truck and drive her up there. There was a lake. They would lug her down by the water and place her so it looked like she came out in the night, caught one of her heels and hit her head on a rock. Since there was no blood back at Nate's apartment, there was nothing to indicate where the fall had actually taken place. Nothing to show she had ever come back to town at all.

Amos said, "How long would it take to drive to the cottage?"

"About an hour. An hour back."

"Your sister will wonder where the hell I am."

Nate had thought it all through. He said, "Call her. Tell her you're running late."

"Why would I be running late?"

"I don't know. Whatever. Doing more lobstering. You know, to make up for the shit season. Maybe you need some time to think or something. Whatever."

"That would make sense to her," Amos said.

"Sure it would," Nate said. "Just stick to the truth, right? My sister has one of her classes tonight, doesn't she?"

Amos had forgotten about that. "Yeah. Tuesdays. Stained-glass."

"See? So that's even better. Just leave a message on the machine for her, no conversation involved. Just, please Amos, make the call."

"I don't know," Amos said.

Nate, looking him square in the eyes again, looking deep into him again, said, "Course you do, Amos. Come on. Course you do."

Amos used his cellphone. He waited anxiously through the rings, through his wife's cheerful greeting and the beep. Then cleared his throat and started in: "Hey, Baby. I hope your day's going okay... Listen, I...I guess I'm going to stay out on the boat awhile tonight. We're fishing some new ground and I'll be running a bit late. Business isn't too hoppin' lately, as you know, we got to figure something out. I might just take some time to, you know, sit and think about things for awhile. Figure out what our options are." Amos spoke slow, trying not to let his slight inebriation show. He felt bad for the way this was going to make his wife worry. On the other hand, the eventual insurance money would solve some of the real-life worries to come. He told Ellen that he loved her, giving it some extra emphasis tonight, and, for a final touch, laid it on thick with: "Don't worry, Pumpkin, I'll find us a way out of this goddamned mess. You know I will."

Amos had never considered himself much of an actor, or even a good liar, but he clicked off thinking he had done a pretty good job tonight. He turned to see what Nate thought of his performance, believing his brother-in-law would be impressed, but, instead, found Nate sneering at him, pointing at him....

No...pointing a revolver at him. The little .38 Amos kept hidden in the hull below in case of trouble.

"What are you doing?" Amos said. "I keep that thing loaded."

“Life insurance?” Nate said through gritted teeth. “How could I afford any insurance on what you have us hauling in?”

Before Amos could ask what he was talking about, what he was doing, Nate made a quick step to Amos’ side and a shocking blast at his ear ended things.

Shelby made Nate wear a suit to the funeral. He argued that half the attendees would be in jeans and shit-kickers, a polo shirt at best, but she wouldn’t have it. When the discussion began to escalate, Shelby reminded him of all the promises he had made to her on the phone to get her to come back to him. Was he going start breaking them already?

Father Wilkins, the same minister who had married both Nate and Shelby and Ellen and Amos, delivered a decent eulogy, describing Amos as hard-working and good-hearted. Ellen gave a tearful farewell that even made Nate’s eyes well-up. Nate imagined that if a sentimental guy like Amos could have chosen a ceremony for himself, this one would have suited him fine.

At the gathering at Ellen’s house afterwards, Father Wilkins, glass of wine in hand, walked up to Nate and gave him a heavy clap on the shoulder.

“How’s she holding up?” He said, nodding to Ellen across the room being comforted by a circle of friends.

“Alright,” Nate said. “Best she can, I guess.”

Father Wilkins nodded. “Your sister’s strong.” Then he shook his head. “Poor Amos, on the other hand. Just wasn’t cut out for the life he chose, was he?”

“Guess not.”

“Some people just can’t see any other way out. Had he been acting depressed out on the boat?”

“A little,” Nate said.

Father Wilkins shook his head. “That message he left your sister – that was goddamned pathetic. I don’t like to talk ill of the dead, but it seems like Amos was the type that made a lot of bad choices in his life. Even that last big plan of his – life insurance didn’t pay a cent to your sister, I understand.”

“They don’t like to pay on suicides,” Nate said.

“No. Well it’s a good thing you’re there for your sister, then. Your wife tells me you two are staying with Ellen?”

“For awhile. She’s got that huge house to take care of. Kind of expensive for a woman alone.”

“Right. And the lobstering? Amos left her with that spanking new boat to pay for, too.”

“Actually,” Nate said, “I’m sort of taking the boat over.”

Father Wilkins grinned and gave Nate a sly wink. “I figured as much.” Then he lowered his voice, though, due to the wine, probably not as much as he thought he had. “Tell me the truth, son, the hauls have improved already...am I right? Huh?”

Nate shrugged, playing humble. “Getting better. I got a few spots I don’t tell anyone about. Once I get myself a decent sternman, then I can really get up to hauling full speed.”

The minister nodded, clapping Nate on the shoulder again. “You’ll do fine. Your father was a hell of a good lobsterman, I remember. Takes a certain type, for sure.” He raised his glass of wine to Nate. “Well, here’s hoping it’s in the blood.”

Nate was confident that it was.

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