

The Gulf

by Philip DiGiacomo

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WHY WE LIKE IT:

We love the powerful drive for closure (even the title is symbolic) that haunts this psychologically layered narrative about a man confronting his demons and the skilful use of flashback to flesh out his character. The whittled prose sharpens the focus with diamond-hard realism: we feel the hot sun; see the burned grass, inhale the dust from the road and smell the ocean. The minor characters, drawn with aplomb, come effortlessly to life.

The Gulf Coast beach was deserted, not a person, not a bird, not a sound. A pale, pink curtain, quivering like the translucent bodies of jellyfish, rose from the horizon straight into the sky like the Northern Lights, casting a red glow across the sand and warm Gulf water. Allen's Grandfather Bill, as tall as an oil rig, stood high above the tree line in his overalls holding a crusty paint brush like an Olympic torch spreading a long white arc from east to west. In a booming, Moses-like baritone he announced, "I'm a Sherwin Williams man, won't use nothin' else!" He collapsed backwards like a cardboard cut out, the sky dripped a gooey mixture of pink and white and Allen woke up.

He was stuck to the plastic lawn chair and soaked with sweat. It was shady a half hour ago but now the sun slammed down on Allen's repo yard with a vengeance. The Missouri summer of 1985 promised to be memorable. Despite the sweat and heat, he was glad that the vivid dream stopped where it did. Before it got ugly and terrifying. Before his dead Grandmother's face came rushing toward him shrieking like a banshee. It was the dream that had left him shaking in his bedclothes late at night for years.

His big Rottweilers, Jack and Jill, shot out from under the trailer as the tow truck rolled into the lot with a Mercury Montego hooked up. Its owner, a vicious, cowardly man known all over central Missouri owed some serious cash and it was number one on the current repo list.

The tow driver, and Allen's sole employee, Wesley, cut the engine and jumped down to play wrestle both dogs until they raised a cloud of dust. They adored him.

“That's enough, Wes! We don't need to be breathing all that shit!” Allen waved his hands to clear the air and noticed just then that the Mercury was pink. Hot as it was, a quick shiver ran up his back. The color from the damn dream.

Wesley bounded over to the trailer steps facing Allen's lawn chair. His long stringy hair couldn't hide his jug ears, and his missing teeth gave him a comical hillbilly presence. He grinned while chewing a mouthful of bologna sandwich number one. There were two more in a Ziplock bag that his mother handed him each morning on his way to work at Allen's repo yard.

The Jack and Jill Recovery Company was named after the two dogs who were now begging for the little strings of bologna that Wesley threw in the air. They were gentle but looked dumb and mean. It was enough to make even the real low-lives count out the cash they owed with one eye on the dogs.

With his mouth now full of sandwich number two, Wesley said,

“Hey Al, I’ll tell you what, I’ll give you one of my sammiches if ya let me read you some scripture okay?”

Along with the daily sandwiches, Wesley carried a beat up white leatherette bible with a brass clasp and would read aloud to anyone, even Jack and Jill.

“No thank you, Wes,” said Allen, as he peeled himself off the lawn chair, “It’s just too hot right now.”

Allen ducked into the trailer for some water. On a day like this, you could run the tap forever and get nothing but warm. The mini fridge below the counter held plastic jugs of chilled water. Allen drank from one until his throat hurt and his hands stopped shaking and looked out the window over the sink at the rows of junked cars that filled a full acre, bound on all sides by tall Ozark pines. The sun glinted and danced over the metal, chrome and glass, making Allen imagine the gulf back home in Corpus Christi. He wondered what the beach looked like now, and what condition the old house was in. It had become his responsibility when his Grandfather died and he had avoided dealing with it going on seven years now.

Allen had left Texas the day after his high school graduation in the summer of 1969. Couldn't wait to get clear of the Gulf coast. Now he was in central Missouri about as landlocked and far from the ocean as you could get. But the disturbing dreams continued. They began when Allen was only six, the summer his Grandma was killed standing in less than a foot of water, stung so badly by a Portuguese Man o' War that her heart burst from pain and fright.

Allen had been crouching in the shallows, nearly a quarter mile south of Grandma and her beach umbrella when it happened. People farther along the beach were running hard past him in groups. He turned to see a crowd forming at the water's edge and heard voices shouting. Allen walked back until he spotted Grandma's umbrella. She wasn't sitting under it. He felt dizzy and began to run, the heavy bucket of shells banging into his leg. He let it drop and ran faster. He pushed through the knot of bathers in time to see two lifeguards laying a Red Cross blanket over something in the sand. It was his Grandma, her eyes and mouth open in a shocked, silent scream as they covered her face. He stumbled backwards towards a group of men and saw the Man O' War itself. Like pink and blue molten glass fringed in white lace. The men were digging a deep hole with their hands and using driftwood to push the big deadly blob into it.

The first letter Allen received from the County Development Commission had come nearly a year ago. They wanted to purchase and raze the house to make way for a new shopping plaza. Allen had yet to answer them. He pulled out the drawer under the counter and sorted through ketchup packets and plastic utensils and took out letter number two. It was stamped URGENT in red ink and had arrived only two days ago. Allen had not opened it but knew they were forcing his hand. He dreaded the task but he would have to go to Texas and deal with it very soon. Despite the terrible event that drove him away, his childhood home was a source of wonderful memories that could reduce Allen to tears if he let them. He had to do something. He couldn't let the old house be destroyed.

Allen topped off Jack and Jill's water bowls with the jug of cold water and put it back in the fridge. He stepped outside where Wesley was hunched over his Bible reading to the dogs. They stared at his index finger moving across the page, hoping for more bologna. Allen sat behind Wesley on the top step, rubbed his eyes and released a resigned sigh. "Okay Wes, try and read me something cheerful." Wesley jumped like he had sat on a tack.

"I can do that Allen!" "Just gimme a minute to find something real nice, okay?" Jack and Jill shot Allen a disapproving look and walked off in a huff to nap in the shade. "Take your time Wes, I'm not going anywhere, and grab a cold water jug for us too, would you?" Wesley vaulted the four steps as one and let the screen door bang behind him.

Allen pulled the newest letter from his hip pocket and tore it open. It contained just one page of official stationary, short and not too sweet. Since Allen had never answered their initial inquiry, they were now preparing to invoke eminent domain and demolish the house.

Wesley shot back outside.

“Okay Allen, I got it an it’s a goodun!”

“Where’s the water Wes?”

“The what?”

Another bang of the screen door.

Allen could not let this happen. He had to go back to Corpus. Wesley came sloshing back out handing the jug to Allen. He handed it back. “Wet your pipes Wes and let ‘er rip, I’m all ears.”

Wesley swallowed a mouthful of water, wiping his mouth with his sleeve, and cleared his throat. He stood up tall, gripping his Bible with both hands.

“I myself also am a mortal man, like to all, and the offspring of him that was first made of the earth.”

Allen tried to concentrate on the words but Wesley had pitched his voice so low that he sounded like Johnny Cash.

“ And in my mother’s womb was fashioned to be flesh in the time of ten months, being compacted in blood, of the seed of man, and the pleasure that came with sleep. And when I was born, I drew in the common air, and fell upon the earth, which is of like nature, and the first voice I uttered was a cry, as all others do. I was nursed in swaddling clothes, and that with cares, for there is no king that had any other beginning of birth. For all men have one entrance in life, and the like going out.”

Wesley snuck a peek over the Bible at Allen whose mind was clearly somewhere else.

“You want me to keep goin’?”

Allen reeled in his thoughts and smiled.

“That was perfect Wes, you could have been a preacher.”

A red blush rose from Wesley’s Adam’s apple all the way to his hairline.

“Aw, shoot no I couldn’t do that!”

“Well maybe not, but you gave me a lift just the same and I thank you for it.”

Allen stood up and squinted at the long pink car still hooked by the tow truck, it’s chrome grill shining like an angry catfish. It was as long as Grandpa’s Cadillac that he let Allen steer from his lap slowly along the beach roads so many years ago.

“Lets see the paper work on that Montego Wes, there’s something about that car I don’t like.” Wesley climbed into the tow truck to retrieve his clipboard as Allen slowly circled the car.

Allen’s grand parents were the only parents he had known. The fate of his biological parents was a cloudy subject never fully discussed until at thirteen he demanded that his Grandfather tell the whole story. It had been seven years since Grandfather Bill had lost his lifelong companion in such a terrible manner and he simply didn’t have the strength to refuse his grandson’s demand.

Allen's teenage mother had died two days after giving birth to him. The strain of eighteen hours of labor was too much for her heart, being weakened from a childhood bout with Scarlet Fever. Bill Jr., only nineteen at the time, could not face raising the boy himself and set off for the oil fields in Oklahoma where he died in a rigging accident no more than a year later.

Upon close inspection, the Mercury Montego was not in great condition. It was a '69 with the Cobra Jet 428 engine, torque-flight transmission, faded paint and a badly stained white vinyl interior. The most serious problem with the car was its owner, Ben Crowe, the nasty heir to the Crowe family fortune of supermarkets and liquor stores. Ben was forty but still lived in the baronial family home in Rolla, an hour drive north of the Jack and Jill Collection Company. Before Ben's older brother Sam went missing in Vietnam, the two boys were the terrors of Phelps County, raising hell by bootlegging and bullying. There was even talk in Rolla that they had raped a 14 year old girl but it was never proven.

Unlike most of the cars towed to the yard there was no money past due to a bank or a loan company. The \$3,801.34 owed on the car was for fines levied by the county on two years worth of broken traffic laws and they wanted their money. Not long after the car appeared on the monthly repo list, Wesley spotted it parked and unlocked behind Oscar's Café and Billiards, keys under the seat. Less than an hour later he and Allen stood looking at it.

"I ain't scared of no Ben Crowe," boasted Wesley.

“Well maybe you should be Wes. He’s real mean and he’s got money, never a good combination.”

“How come he don’t pay his bills then?”

“Why don’t you ask him? I believe that would be him now.”

A big Cummins diesel engine growled from the bottom of the hill getting louder and closer. The big white Dodge Ram pickup ground to a stop just behind the Montego raising a cloud of red dust. The windows in the cab were tinted black as midnight and the twin air horns on the roof ripped out a blast that echoed off the hills and brought both Jack and Jill to attention. They sat side by side, eyes trained on Allen’s left hand, waiting for the finger snap that would send them charging. Wesley froze half in and half out of the tow truck as Allen walked calmly over to the Dodge. The door was flung open and Ben Crowe slid to the ground.

He was only six years older than Allen but looked middle aged. Thinning hair and a thickening waistline had not softened him in the least. He spat, then spoke.

“What the fuck you think you’re doin’ repo boy?”

He glared at Allen with small black eyes set deep into ruddy flesh.

“Just doing a job for the County, Ben.”

“Well undo it goddammit and gimme back my car!”

“You can drive off anytime Ben, soon as I get three thousand eight hundred one dollars and thirty four cents.”

“Boy you better hand over them keys before I cut you and that retard over there.”

“We can’t do that Ben.”

“What the hell you mean *we*?”

Allen looked over at Wesley who now held a Mossberg 12 gauge shotgun angled straight down to Ben Crowe’s chest. Ben’s mouth moved but no sound escaped.

“How about I make you a deal Ben”, Allen offered.

“Like what?”

“You don’t need that old car when you got this hot new truck. How about I pay the county what you owe, I keep the car, and you go back home to Rolla with a clean slate?”

Ben was slow to answer. Allen turned back to Wesley.

“What do *you* think Wes?”

Wesley answered by loudly racking a shell into the chamber.

“I think Wes agrees with me. What do you say Ben?”

Allen could tell Ben was having a moment where he might draw the bone handle knife that was peeking out of his back pocket. The moment passed. Ben got dramatic all of a sudden, throwing his arms wide.

“Shit, it ‘aint even worth that much! You want it so damn bad, go ahead and buy the sumbitch, I don’t care!”

Ben spat into the dirt again, backed up and climbed into his truck, slamming the door.

“Don’t let me catch you two up in Rolla, so help me God!”

He fired up the truck and spun back around, bouncing down the dirt road. When the dust began to settle Allen walked over to Wesley who was still holding the shotgun.

“It’s not loaded is it, Wes?”

“Nope, but he sure thought it was, didn’t he?”

Allen and Wesley grinned at each other and Allen called to the dogs.

“Come here kids and look at our new car!”

Allen lay awake that night going over all he had to do before heading south to Corpus and the coast. He kept re-arranging chores in his head not able to clearly prioritize a damn thing. He couldn’t just dump the business on Wesley. He was too green. He had been quick on his feet though, dealing with Ben Crowe. Allen made at least one decision before sleep overtook him. He had to re-paint that damn Montego right away.

Allen was up at dawn and at the kitchen table writing a check when Wesley rolled into the yard with the tow rig. Allen allowed him to take it home most nights in case he spotted a car from the repo list on the way in.

Jack and Jill were bumping into Wesley’s legs keeping him off balance as he made his way toward Allen standing on the trailer steps. Allen held out the freshly written check and the Montego keys to Wes.

“Take this over to Mrs. Leach at the County office to pay for the Montego and stop by your Uncle Arley’s place, I got a job for him.”

Wesley carefully folded the check into his shirt pocket and snapped it closed.

“Arley don’t like to work no more.”

“Oh he’s gonna like this job Wes, tell him to set up his old spray rig in the barn and paint that ugly pink car for me.”

“What color you want it?”

“Surprise me, Wes, any color you want.”

Wesley was gone most of the day and Allen filled it with departure preparations. He paid a stack of bills, checked the stock of dog food and packed a duffle bag with clothes to last a week.

It was nearly dark when Allen heard a car rolling into the yard. He stepped outside just as the motion detector switched on the halogen yard light. What he saw was remarkable.

Wesley sat grinning behind the wheel of a rather handsome silver Mercury Montego.

“Your uncle outdid himself this time Wes!”

“He mixed in some extra hardener with the metallic lacquer so it’s tough as nails!

Wesley walked around the car followed by the dogs. He stopped at the trunk and keyed the lock. Allen came down the steps and crossed to the car.

“I’ve got a work related deal I want to ask you about Wes.”

Wesley raised the trunk lid and hauled out an enormous, battered brown suitcase.

“I got everything I need right here, me and the dogs will be just fine. When are you fixin’ to leave?”

That settled it. Wesley was smarter than he looked.

Allen did not suffer the dream that night because sleep eluded him completely. He poured over some old Texaco road maps at the kitchen table and chose a route south. He didn't care much for the interstates and they weren't close by anyway. He would take Farm to Market Rt. 19 down to Arkansas and pick up Ranch to Market Rt. 59 at Clarendon and take it past Shreveport, around Houston all the way to Beeville. From there it was a final hour along 181 to the Gulf. The whole thing would take about 17 hours and 960 miles with an overnight stop near Nacogdoches. Allen refolded the map and laid his head on his forearms at the table for what seemed like just a moment but when he jerked upright it was light outside and he could hear Wesley backing the tow truck up to the chain link fence. He stepped outside rubbing his stiff back. Wesley hopped down from the truck.

“I got it covered Allen, don't you worry.”

“I ain't worried about you Wes, but Texas is a mixed bag for me and I don't know what to expect when I get there.”

“Well, I expect you'll do okay.”

“I hope you're right.”

Allen tossed his duffle onto the seat and nestled his thermos of coffee against it and climbed in behind the big white steering wheel. The Mercury fired up and settled into a steady purr. Wesley grinned.

“Arley put a can of STP in there, sounds good don't it?”

“It sure does Wes. I better get going. I'll call you when I get there.”

Wesley stepped up to the car and handed Allen a bag of bologna sandwiches.

“Momma made extra.”

“Thank you Wes, that’ll be my breakfast. Don’t over feed the dogs okay?”

Allen pulled out of the yard and down the road catching a last rearview glimpse of Jack and Jill leaping all over Wesley.

It had been quite a while since Allen had found himself alone on what would be called a road trip. The Mercury ran straight and true, flowing up and down over the southern Missouri hills. When he crossed the border into Arkansas he was surprised when the driver of the first car he passed going north lifted an index finger up from the steering wheel in a salutation. He had to laugh, remembering that it was common practice in Arkansas to greet all oncoming vehicles in that way. Be it a family wagon, truck or tractor, everyone got and gave the one finger wave. Allen was feeling good. The long dreaded trip home was made bearable, even pleasant as he rolled past cotton fields where white tufts hung in the air and rushed past the car in a spiral wave. The bologna sandwiches were long gone and lunch time found him outside the hamlet of Magnolia where he stopped at a gravel turnout where Big Paul, an enormous black man in coveralls tended a cast iron smoker hitched to the back of his RV. Allen purchased a hot pulled pork sandwich and a tub of coleslaw and ate it while sitting on the hood of the Mercury. He washed it down with an icy Dr. Pepper and decided to hit the road before the need for a nap overtook him. He made a mental note to stop and see Big Paul on the way back.

He nodded off at the wheel a couple times in the late afternoon and refilled his thermos at a diner in Bossier City just outside of Shreveport. The skinny teenage girl at the

counter tried to sell him a piece of pie, and it looked real good but he had no room for it. The coffee was strong and he checked his map, glad that he would make it to Nacogdoches to spend the night.

The Starlite Motel had two singles left and he took one on the ground floor, easing the car right up to the door. Once inside, he opened the sliding window in hopes of reducing the mildew smell and fell back on the bed.

An unfamiliar sulfurous yellow light woke him and he needed a moment to recall just where he was. He fumbled for the lamp chain, got the light on and pulled the drapes closed against the parking lot security lights. Too tired to watch TV, Allen flossed, brushed and went to bed, setting the clock radio for 6AM.

Sometime later in that dark motel room, the dream came calling with a fury like never before. This time Allen stood in his swimming trunks as an adult, paralyzed, unable to help her or even shut his eyes as his Grandma slowly turned round and round while some horrible force screwed her deeper and deeper into the sand. Seawater gushed from her open mouth, choking off her screams as she reached for Allen, clawing the air between them. Thousands of gulls hovered above, blocking out the sun like an enormous umbrella, breaking their wings against each other and screeching in pain. Allen's entire body was seized with cramps and spasms yet he could only watch as his Grandmas head slowly sank into the sand, her eyes pleading until her last wisp of grey hair was gone.

Allen broke free, launching himself off the bed onto the floor, crashing the lamp and clock radio across the room. He crawled over the carpet like a panicked insect, blind and blubbing. He grabbed a fistful of drapes yanking them to the side, filling the room with yellow light from the parking lot. Covered in sweat and gasping for air, he stared hard at the bed, the mini fridge and a chair, looking from one to the other, forcing himself to breathe slowly and return to the room, to the here and now.

Thirty minutes later his hands were still trembling as he took a shower. He had made a decision. He would pack up at first light get the hell out of Texas and head back home to Missouri. He could not go through with it. Let the damn bulldozers come. An old beat up house was not worth losing his mind over. Did that make him a coward? He refused to look at himself in the mirror as he brushed his teeth. The bedside lamp bulb was busted so he placed a pair of dollar bills under the base and left the room key next to it.

As Allen stepped outside he realized he wasn't the only early riser at the motel. A young couple and their little boy were quickly loading up their station wagon from the room next door. The father gave Allen a suspicious look and held it a bit too long for his comfort. Ignoring the man, Allen unlocked the Mercury and tossed his duffle on the seat. The little boy who must have been five or six ran up to Allen holding a red plastic pail.

“I'm gonna fill this all up with sea shells at the beach!” he announced proudly.

Allen almost responded but the boy's father broke in.

“Leave that man alone Travis and get in the car right now!”

He meant business and the boy knew it. He was in the back of the wagon like a shot. Now it was the young Mom's turn to cast a sad, uncertain look at Allen. The wagon lurched back, spraying gravel and roared to the exit, turning south and peeling rubber all the way.

Allen stood by the open car door, ashamed that the family had probably heard him thrashing about in the night. He looked down to see the red plastic pail left behind by the boy. He put it on the seat and got behind the wheel. He turned the key and the pail rolled against his leg. As he shoved it aside he was flooded with memories of his childhood forays of shell collecting. Always searching for colorful new specimens, he would lug them home in one of his Grandpa's old paint cans and dump them in the bathroom sink. Sitting on a stool he would pick through them, inspecting and cleaning with an old toothbrush until Grandma called him to supper. The window sills in the old house were lined with his collection. Sand Dollars, Yellow Cockles, Angel Wings, Key Hole Limpets, Banded Tulips and Sundials.

The decision he had made while naked and vulnerable in the motel shower now felt wrong. He rolled down the window and drove slowly to the exit where he faced the sign that offered travelers two choices. 181 North or 181 South. Allen tried to swallow the hard lump in his throat. He missed his dogs and the piney woods already, but a left turn north would mean running away, just as he had done years ago. Maybe a right turn, all the way to the old house and the beach would bring an end to the dream, let his Grandma rest and set him free.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

My initial inspiration for 'The Gulf' was a series of actual events from my own childhood. Trauma comes in many forms when we least expect it, and the effects can last a lifetime. Fear can play havoc with our sense of self and sometimes requires a level of strength we don't always have at hand. Abandonment, isolation and a sense of loss scar our personal history. They say you can't go home again, but you can, just not all the way. My intention while writing 'The Gulf' (and others stories), is to render the concrete conditions of being human. My influences range from Raymond Carver, Lucia Berlin, Bob Dylan, William Trevor, James Salter to the history of film noir.

BIO:

Philip DiGiacomos' work has appeared in The Nervous Breakdown, 1888 The Cost of Paper, Fiction on the Web, Halfway Down the Stairs, Fishfood Magazine, Literary Manhattan, and The Examined Life Journal. He is a former painter and actor from New York. He is a former student of Lou Matthews and Colette Sartor at UCLA. Twenty-seven years ago he moved to a bluff on Pacific Coast Highway where he lives with his wife, the painter Hilary Baker. It's where he writes, reads, cooks and sometimes races an old Porsche.