

Working Title: "Third Persons"

by Glenn Klopfenstein

PART ONE: "Conscience Bay"

CHAPTER TWO: "CONSCIENCE BAY"

Long Island—September 1, 1982

Those early summer mornings every other week, dark and chill, when the North Shore's tide was low at dawn, when he rolled out of bed to Charlie's ringing his apartment doorbell—for Charlie would not wait more than a minute when picking him up for work—those morning hangovers were the worst for Jon. He looked into Gracie's room, double-checked her Minnie Mouse alarm clock to make sure it was set to wake her at seven. Gail, Charlie's current fiancée, had promised to pick her up at seven-thirty and watch her for the day.

When they got to the cut-out in the woods on a plot of county land which opened to the mud shore of Conscience Bay, Jon was jolted awake by the ruts in the dirt path that gave them access to a littered parking area of flat grass just above the line of marsh reeds. On both sides of this eyesore of public land, the spacious lawns of mansions and summer homes stretched down to the shore. Night still covered the bay. Unseen and solitary, near and far, ducks awoke one by one on the open water with sharp, comical, echoing 'quack, quack, quacks.'

Awash in the livid light of a full moon, the three of them—Charlie, little Jared, and Jon—pulled on their hip waders and then hauled the aluminum boat from the bed of the pick-up and

down a shell-strewn decline to the mud flat. Charlie and Jon slogged the boat out, laboring through the suck of the exposed, knee-deep mud to the water line, and beyond, until the water was a few inches deep, enough to float and row. All the while Jared sat on the middle thwart huddled into his thin, lanky frame, shivering against the chill air, like some dutiful child prince being ferried he knew not where. By the time they were seated, and Jared had shifted to the back seat next to Jon, and Charlie had fit the oars into their locks and begun to row, rose petal tints of early dawn sprinkled the barely stirring surface of the black water. They were headed toward the reed islands that dotted the channel a half mile or so across the inner bay, a salt water pond that early American puritanical colonists had named "Conscience." It was the first of September, the first day of oyster season.

Jon hung his head and rocked with the gentle to and fro sway of the boat. They had not uttered a word until half way across the bay.

"Rough night, Jon?" Charlie asked with a hint of a smile.

"I was out late at the pub." Charlie knew his routine of slipping out of the house after Gracie was safely in bed and asleep to continue his beer drinking at the neighborhood bar, a couple of blocks down the street.

"Jimmy brings out a six-pack just to get through the early tides," Charlie said helpfully. Jimmy, a clammer who was especially adept at following Charlie to his spots and who pretended friendship with the brothers, or so it seemed to Jon, had not arrived yet. If he did not get there soon, Jon knew he would miss work altogether on one of the best money days of year. Serves him right.

"Fuck me. Just the thought of it..." Jon growled out loud, but what he really thought was that if he had a beer right now to relieve his suffering, he would drink it. Or, probably not.

The overhead mare's tails of high cirrus now burned bright crimson, a gentle breeze rippling the water into corrugations of gold and purple. The sun rose blood red through a stand of trees between the mansion estates on the far shore. He longed for the

warmth of the sun, just for now, because he well knew that in an hour or so would be the beginning of a torridly hot day.

Then it started. The talking wouldn't let up from that moment on.

Jared peeped, "Charlie, I'm cold."

Charlie, into the rhythm of his rowing, cast a smile at the boy.

"Charlie, I'm cold."

Then, "Charlie, I'm really cold."

Through the haze and grittiness of his hangover, Jon said, "Why didn't you wear something warmer?" The boy had been going out with them the entire summer, he knows better.

Jared looked confused, a distinct Jared-look, his eyes turning inward, just perceptibly cross-eyed. "Because, Uncle Jon, Charlie left so fast this morning and I forgot! Charlie, I'm cold!"

Each oar dipped with a silky splash in the molten gold water, one then the other, Charlie's arms circling. The leisurely way he rowed. Jon, on the other hand, rowed in the more conventional style: both oars striking the water in synchrony and pulling back—in and pull, in and pull.

"I told you to wear a sweater," said Charlie.

"But I'm cold, Charlie."

"I told you."

Jared's long face jutted out, and he enunciated each word with an earnestness that reminded Jon of a three-year-old. His voice went up an octave, "But—I—am—cold!"

Charlie laughed. Jon shook his head.

"It'll be warm soon," Charlie said, sternness edging his voice now.

"But, Charlie, I am cold!!" Spittle had by now coagulated at the corners of his mouth, and would stay gathered there in elastic foam for the rest of the day, like a cottonmouth snake. Disgusting. He had long ago given up ordering the boy to wipe his mouth. It did no good.

Angrily, Charlie whispered, "Jared! Not so loud, for Chrissakes, people are sleeping in these houses!"

Then quietly, responding with an exaggerated whisper that made Charlie chuckle again, Jared said, "Charlie, I am freezing!" The boy faked exaggerated shivers.

Jon pulled off his sweatshirt and shoved it into Jared's lap. "Here, just shut up, will you!" Now he would be cold. No "thanks" from the little shit, nothing. The boy would be silent for a few minutes at least.

These circular exchanges, of which Charlie and Jared never seemed to tire, would remind Jon of that Harry Bellafonte song his mother so loved, "There's A Hole in the Bucket." Sometimes their routines were as elaborate, and as funny. Usually, however, they were plaintive repetitions like this morning's—he was "hungry" or "thirsty" or "hot" or he was "cold"—repetitions that would not stop (and they had tested this a number of times) until Charlie finally took notice and attended to what the boy wanted. Unless Jon was the one to give in first, like he just did. As usual, Jon checked with Charlie, "You gave him his Ritalin, right?" Charlie nodded his head that he did.

But it had started and his head hurt. This was going to be a long day.

They neared the opening into the channel where the water from the inner bay funneled out. Charlie needed the oars only to steer now. So strong was the outgoing current that a person jogging along the shore would have had to break into a run to keep pace with them. The islands were a few minutes away. On each side of the narrow channel, houses with extravagant wood decks sat perched on top of the steep wooded cliffs, their decks overlooking the islets in the channel and connected to the shore below by long sinuous wood stairs, some ending at flotation docks to which were tied little sport runabouts or rigged-up fishing skiffs.

The clear water got deeper, then shallow again, as they raced over iridescent carpets of night-blue mussels. On a good morning

low tide, like today's, these mussel beds would soon be exposed to the air. Here and there, outlined in patches of sand, they flew over hundreds of perfect deep water oysters, the prized oval half shells that brought a quarter a piece at the wholesalers. They saw also with undisguised greed long thick ribbons of thousands of tightly packed holes, the tell-tale sign of soft-shell clams, or "steamers." They were concentrating only on oysters today, though. When the tide reached dead low, the three of them would walk back here with their wire baskets and plenty of burlap bags and just pick the oysters up. By the looks of it, if they were fast, Jon and Charlie could make in that single hour about as much as a full-time minimum wage worker could make in an entire week. Jared would make good money, too, if he hadn't given up work by then and started his mindless, solitary playing. Jon started to feel better, glad he had it in him this morning to get out of bed and suffer through his hangover. Once he was working, he would feel better. It was going to be a hard, long day, but a profitable one.

Jon took his first short break. The tide had turned. He looked northward to where the narrow channel twisted around an eastward bend like a flexed arm and where, he knew, it would merge in a few hundred yards with the wider, rougher open waters of Port Jefferson Harbor, which itself was directly fed through an inlet breaking through the barrier beach that ran parallel to the Long Island Sound. Port Jeff harbor, as local lore repeated, had served variously in colonial times as a haven for pirates and a port for British schooners—one of those factoids that automatically surfaced to consciousness without fail when his thoughts turned to that place. Along the walled-in upper arm of the channel where they were working now there were three successively smaller reed covered islands. At low tide each island revealed a variety of pebble and sand and mud beaches covered here and there with mussel beds and ancient shards of shell. For a couple of days, they would work this first island in the channel. By next week, they would be out to the third island where they would be able to peer around the bend at

the Connecticut ferries coming into and out of the deep waters of Port Jefferson Harbor.

By late morning, Jon had picked up and bagged over twelve bushels of oysters, Charlie about sixteen, and Jared at least two. It was already the most money Jon had ever made in one day. He flipped his wire basket over and used it as a seat. He needed another break. Jared played on the sand beach in front of him, the boy's clothes and arms and face covered with drying streaks of mud. He heard Charlie rustle in the reeds behind him, cracking the roots and razor-sharp blades of the reed-grass in order to peer through and find the well-camouflaged oysters in the mud. Charlie never took breaks; he had quit smoking years ago. Jon judged by the sudsy high water mark creeping in on the vanishing beach that the island would be covered by water in less than an hour. His lower back was sore. His clothes were soaked in sweat. A merciless sun throbbled overhead.

Charlie had told Jared last week that he was not going back to his Mom in Colorado. He was moving in permanently with Charlie, which meant also that Gail had just learned that she was to become a surrogate mother of sorts. He would be starting in a new school, in a new special education program. As Jon rested, he stared into the tidal pool by his feet, watching minnows circle and the tiny hermit crabs march to and fro. He gazed across the sand beach where at any given moment hundreds of steamer clams spit from their siphon holes silver threads of sea water, some high into the air, some low, and some in-between, reminding him of those synchronized water fountains in front of fancy hotels. The island heaved with life. Staring into the tidal pool at his feet, he indulged in the never-ending thoughts about cosmic determinism (if that hermit crab had not gone that way but another...), speculated on the nature of the "thoughts" that flashed through the microscopic brains of these tiny, very busy marine animals, so arbitrary were the decisions they appeared to make. Similarly, he had often wondered what it was like to be a filter-feeding mollusk—an oyster, a clam, a mussel, or, say, a barnacle. He had concluded that it might be

something akin to perfect zen meditation, the mind emptied of all thought; so that the pure sensation of sea water flowing through you is the refreshing assurance of being a life fully alive, nothing more. Until the jolt comes, and some disturbance comes along to pick you up and fling your encased body into a wire basket. The end of nirvana. Jon thought, we clammers are scavengers, the most primitive of occupations. But we are also active predators in wetlands ecology. My connection to the creatures of this beach, like this tidal pool at my feet, is as necessary as that seagull's connection, wheeling above now, to the shellfish it will drop later onto rocks and asphalt cul-de-sacs from the sky that day.

His thoughts turned to Jared. Jon watched him at play on the sand flat. As he often did, he felt guilty that he so disliked being around Charlie's adored little boy. He could not conceal his constant irritation around the boy, reminding himself again that he was the same age as his own Gracie. How did Charlie put up with it? His brother hardly seemed to notice. Jon resolved for the hundredth time to try to be more understanding. In some private game Jared had armed himself with a large stone. He was smashing something. Focusing now, rising from his makeshift seat, Jon could see that he was pummeling the intact head of a large filleted fish, probably a bluefish or a striped bass, that had washed up with the incoming tide. The intensity of the boy's apparent hatred for the fish head fascinated Jon. Over and over, again and again, in this god-awful heat Jared smashed the fish head with the stone. He kept saying something angry to the dead fish head which Jon couldn't quite make out. His morning dose of Ritalin had surely worn off.

"Jesus, Jared," Jon called across the beach, "It's dead already!"

To the boy's credit, Jon had noticed this summer, Jared would be somewhat self-aware, perhaps a bit embarrassed, when he called attention to his manic episodes. Today, Jared merely said, "I know it's dead," and stopped. He picked up his basket with two or three oysters in it and walked toward Jon.

"Are we going soon?" the boy asked. He turned his basket over and sat next to Jon.

“Charlie won't be done until the tide is in. You know that.”

“Aww, come on, stupid tide!”

Jon had often noticed that the boy lived in an intensely personal and personified universe, so that all malign forces arrayed against his well-being were “stupid.” This was yet another verbal tic he considered rectifying in the boy, but had long thought, ‘what's the use?’.

“Are you looking forward to your new school next week?”

“I guess so.”

“Is Gail being nicer to you?”

“She's a stupid witch!” said Jared.

“Come on, she's not that bad, is she?”

“Yes she is, Uncle Jon! She hates me!”

“Well, Jared, just try not to get in her way. It's just going to take her a little time to get used to you.”

“I doubt that,” Jared announced, scuffling his feet in the tidal pool. It struck Jon how the boy said this, without resentment, resigned to facts. He knew.

Jon doubted if he could help Jared much in his struggles with Charlie's newest fiancée. The boy was right. Her hatred for Jared was implacable. Jon had talked to Gail more than once about how unreasonable she was being. He sympathized with her feelings for Jared, but reminded her just last week that the boy was only one very fucked up little kid whose own mother didn't want him. But, “No,” Gail crowed, “You don't see what I see. He's a sneaky little bastard and I don't want my Heather growing up around him.” Heather was three, a fairly annoying little brat in her own right. Gail wouldn't let it go. She talked about Jared as if he was a malevolent force who was engaged in a sophisticated plot to discredit her and possess Charlie all to himself. But it was really Gail, Jon concluded, for whom it was all about ownership and territory. She would lose, eventually. That seemed pretty clear. As good natured as his brother was, he had his limits, and in recent months he seemed to be tiring of Gail. The only thing she was accomplishing, he warned her, was pissing Charlie off. But this had

no effect. Gail was confident she would prevail when it came to a choice between her and Jared, for that was where it was heading, probably sooner than later, and that Charlie simply had to ship Jared back to Colorado. There was no real choice for him in her mind. "Jared's not even his son!" she said, as if that fact alone settled the matter once and for all in her favor. He didn't bother telling Gail how attached Charlie got to baby and toddler Jared when he lived with Betty, and during the long summer months each year when school was out and Jared spent his vacations with Charlie. Gail, unfortunately, was beyond such nuanced considerations.

The tide was in. The anchored rowboat floated and swayed in inches of rushing sea water. There would be no room in the little aluminum boat for passengers. Jon ferried Jared and Charlie across a narrow strip of the deep channel to the mainland shore. They had to walk the half-mile or so in while Jon rowed their day's catch back across Conscience Bay.

He rowed back across to the island and loaded the boat, now precariously low in the water. Had there been any wind, he would have had to take two trips. As it was he still had to be careful of slow leaks and make sure to stop rowing to bale bilge water every few minutes. Water over the edge and it would sink like a stone. Helped along by the incoming tide, he was soon halfway across the glass waters of the bay. Swarms of ravenous gnats hung over the boat in shifting clouds, following him. He watched Jared and Charlie on the far shore pick their way through stands of reed grass, around docks, and across private beaches. The outraged violation these rich people felt when clambers trespassed, however briefly, on their property! Nothing could convince them that beyond the high water mark, the bay was public domain. They had bought the view. And out there in the water, he imagined how he must look to them: a miniature garbage scow inching its way across their view, a lingering pollution of the pristine scenery they owned.

It was well past noon by the time they had unloaded the boat, stowed it in the bed of Charlie's pick-up, and reloaded it, piled high with the burlap bags of oysters.

He reminded himself that Gail had promised to watch Gracie today. She often did this for Jon on early tides, drove all the way from Patchogue and picked his daughter up in the morning so she would not be locked alone in the apartment for the day. When school started, Gracie would be, on the days of late tides, a latch-key kid. What could he do? By the time they had driven across the island to the South Shore, it was mid-afternoon. Yet their day's work was far from over. Now they had to separate and cull the oysters according to their various marketable grades before delivering them to the wholesaler and to a couple of restaurant accounts Charlie maintained.

They unloaded the boatful of oysters onto the lawn at the side of Charlie's house into two waist high mountains, Jon's and Charlie's, and to the side Jared's miniscule pile. Hundreds of thimble-sized brown rock crabs scurried everywhere for cover in the lawn grass, many finding their way back into the mounds of oysters. Tiny sea lice, white shrimp-like creatures, twitched on the layers of iridescent pink and green scales of razor-sharp new shell which had formed during the summer on the lips of the oysters. When the oysters dried out in a couple of hours all this fresh vivid color and the symbiotic communities of microscopic animals would vanish, and these oysters, soon to appear on beds of ice in the display cases of fish stores and supermarkets, would become the drab grey rock-like creatures that most people thought fresh oysters looked like. The hot air was redolent with the pungent perfumes of low tide coming from the piles of oysters, an indescribably *fundamental* smell—luscious, fresh—in rough comparison, thought Jon, not so different from other strong and lovely earth smells, like cut grass, or freshly manured farm fields. The oysters now had to be “cleaned” with a hand hatchet of all the various bottom junk (stones, dead shell, and other oysters) to which the oysters had been cemented their entire lives. It was mind-numbing work that nevertheless required concentration to avoid nasty paper-thin cuts. The last thing they needed was Jared buzzing about trying to help. Gracie was occupied in the kitchen doing something with Gail and did not

want to play with Jared. Charlie decided to put the boy to work on an 'important' project. He retrieved a garden trowel from under the front porch and led the boy into a small clearing in the undergrowth that grew beyond his back yard lawn. Jared's job was to dig a deep hole to bury the mounds of bottom junk they cleaned from the oysters.

The afternoon wore on. The ratcheting rhythms of cicadas in the sagging trees overhead reminded Jon of childhood summers with Charlie in distant places. They talked about baseball in the humid heat of St. Charles, Missouri, of picking back yard peaches in Pennsylvania under orders from their father and the insane itching from the peach fuzz that would torture them through the long air-conditionless nights.

A couple of times, Jon took breaks to be out of the heat and to spend some time with Gracie and Gail. They were mixing batter for a cake. Gail kept praising the girl to Jon about what a great help she was. And Jon, grateful to Gail for watching Gracie, repeated his thanks without end, over and over.

"Do you know who I'm baking this cake for?" asked Gail.

"No, for Jared?"

"Hell, no! Tell your Dad, Gracie."

"We're making a birthday cake for Gail, Dad!"

"Whatever you do, don't tell Charlie. I want to see if he remembers." Then she added, "He better remember." She took a long drag from her cigarette, squinting her left eye against the smoke, "Where's the little shit?"

Jon told her what Jared was doing. Then he went back to work, bringing with him that first glorious cold beer of the day. They were almost done anyway. He told Charlie that it was Gail's birthday, and that he'd better get her something after he delivered the oysters if he knew what was good for him. Charlie had forgotten, of course, and with genuine relief thanked Jon for reminding him.

When it was time to deliver the oysters, Charlie glanced toward the backyard looking for Jared but couldn't see him. Then he

found him, laughing to himself. He brought Jon back with him to see. In the clearing where Jared was working, Jon saw only puffs of dirt flying up from the ground. It was then, tip-toeing alongside Charlie and looking over the rim of the deep crater at filthy little Jared furiously scraping up dirt with his little garden shovel, that marked the moment when Jon began to love the boy. Funny, he would think in the years ahead, how such simple moments can absolutely change everything. He understood in that instant his brother's affection for the boy. He saw that this was the child's lot in life, to be his brother's son, and for him, Jon, to be the boy's uncle. No one else would love this child; that was for sure.

#1 MISCELLANEOUS NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR:

What kind of person would the author's daughter, Gracie, become? That things didn't look bright for her future was an understatement: Mother: alcoholic, dead at age 25 from puking her brains out; Father: morose, isolated, also alcoholic, prone to fits of rage. Somehow, though, thanks almost solely to Mary—the author's third and last wife who took over when the girl was eleven--Gracie would emerge a functioning, eventually successful adult. She would become quite the well-to-do and flourishing young business lady in the computer programming field.

Whether abetted or not by growing up in early youth in the company of her strange and unpredictable Dad, the author has no clue, but Gracie would develop by her early twenties a rather poignant and iconoclastic sense of humor. A few years ago, Gracie created the popular web site called "Discouragement Kitten," a rather over the top satirical advice column. In responding to her delighted victims, Gracie uses language that would make longshoremen blush. You can go on the internet and check it out.

Or you can e-mail her. Ask her for some advice. Her e-mail:
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