

3/6/06

## Dying in Hull

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In the wee hours of February 12, 2004, Ethel Endicott Cobb clumped down her oak staircase to check the water level in her dining room. She always checked her floor when the sea was lowest, no matter whether ebb tide came during the day, or as, this time, in the dark of night.

Moonlight from the window reflected on the empty hardwood floor, a pale milky rhombus. A thin glistening sheen of still water lay over the wood, bright and smooth like mirror glass.

Blinking sleepily, Ethel sat her chunky body on the next-to-bottom step and leaned forward to press her big square thumb down into the rectangular puddle. She felt the moisture and withdrew her now-wet hand. Water slid in to cover the briefly-bare spot, and in seconds the surface was motionless and perfect, her mark gone.

She yawned and shook herself like a disgruntled dog.

Gunfire in the harbor had disturbed her rest; she had slept fitfully until the alarm had gone off. Well, she was awake now. Might as well start the day.

The rose-pattern wallpaper was rippled, discolored with many horizontal lines from rising high water marks. It was crusty at eye level but sodden and peeling where it met the floorboards. Above the waterline, Ethel had filled her dining room with photographs of the town of Hull – houses, streets, beaches, the roller coaster at Paragon Park – and the people who had lived there. Pictures of the past, left behind in empty houses by those who had fled and forgotten.

Ethel carefully touched the floor again, licking her thumb afterwards to taste the brine. "Wet," she muttered. "No doubt about it." For a moment she hung her head, shoulders sagging, then slapped her palms against the tops of her knees. "That's that." She rose slowly and marched back upstairs to dress.

Cold air drafts whiffled through 22 K's loose window frames as she quickly donned her checked shirt, denim overalls, and wool socks. The sky outside was dark gray with just a hint of dawn. Her bedroom walls were adorned with more photographs like those downstairs. As the water rose with the passing months and years, she periodically had to rearrange things, bringing pictures up from below and finding space in the bathroom, on the stairway, or in her makeshift second-floor kitchen.

Crossing to the white wooden mantelpiece, she grimaced and her unsealed letter and its accusatory envelope. Ethel read what she had written, scowling at her spiky penmanship, then folded the paper twice, scoring the creases with her fingernail. She sealed it in an envelope, licked the stamp and affixed it with a thump. Returning to the bed, Ethel stuck the letter in her shirt pocket and pulled on her knee-high wellingtons.

By the time she descended again to the first floor, the tide had risen to cover the bottom step. Ethel waded over to her front door and put on her yellow slicker and her father's oilskin sou'wester, turning up the hat's front brim.

The door stuck, expanded by the moisture. She wrenched it open and stepped out, resolving to plane it again when she returned. Closing the door behind her, she snapped its cheap padlock shut.

*Queequeg* floated high and dry, tethered to the porch by lines from his bow and stern. Ethel unwrapped the olive-green tarpaulin from his motor and captain's console. When she boarded her boat, the white Boston whaler rocked briefly, settling deeper into the water that filled K Street. After checking the outboard's propeller to verify that no debris had fouled its blades, Ethel pushed *Queequeg's* motor back to vertical, untied his painters, and poled away from her house.

She turned the ignition and the big ninety-horse Evinrude roared to life, churning water and smoke. Blowing on her hands to warm them, she eased *Queequeg's* throttle forward and burbled east down K to the ruins of Beach Avenue.

Dawn burnished the horizon, illuminating the pewter-gray scattered clouds. Submerged K Street was a silver arrow that sparked with a thousand moving diamonds. The air was bright with lemon cold, tangy with the scent of kelp and mussels, the normally rough winter ocean calm now that last night's nor'easter had passed.

She stood at the tiller sniffing the breeze, her stocky feet planted wide against the possibility of *Queequeg* rolling with an ocean swell, her hands relaxed on the wheel. They headed north past a line of houses on their left, Ethel's eyes darting like a general inspecting the wounded after battle.

As the town of Hull sank, its houses had fallen to the Atlantic, singly or in whole streets. These rich proud windward oceanfronts, unshielded from the open sea, were the first to go. Black asphalt shingles had been torn from their roofs and walls by many storms. Porches sagged or collapsed entirely. Broken windows and doors were covered with Cambodian territorial chop signs of the Ngor, Pran, and Kim waterkid gangs. Some homes had been burned out, the soot rising from their empty window frames like the petals of black flowers.

A girl's rusted blue motor scooter leaned against the front stairs of 172 Beach. Barnacles grew on its handlebars. Mary Donovan and her parents had lived here, Ethel remembers, before she moved to downtown Boston and became an accountant. A good student who had earned one of Ethel's few A-pluses, Mary had ridden that scooter to high school every day, even in the snow, until the water had made riding impossible.

Beach Avenue had been vacant end to end for years. Still, Ethel always began her day here. It was a reminder and a warning. Her tough brown eyes squinted grimly as the water chugged in the quiet, chill day.

"I could have told you folks," Ethel addressed the ghosts of the departed owners. "You don't stop the sea."

Sniffing – chill air made her nose run – she turned down P Street. For three hundred years her ancestors had skippered their small open boats into Hull's rocky coastal inlets, its soft marshy shallows, to harvest the sea. In the skeleton of a town, Ethel Cobb, the last in her family, lived on the ocean's bounty – even if it meant scavenging deserted homes.

Like 16 P just ahead. She throttled back, *Queequeg* surfing his own wash, and approached cautiously.

16 P's front door was open, all its lights out. The Cruzes have left, Ethel thought with regret. The last family on P Street. Gone.

Cautiously, she circled the building once to verify that no other combers were inside.

Decades of salt winds had silvered its cedar shingles. Foundation cracks rose like ivy vines up the sides of its cement half-basement. Sprung gutters hung loose like dangled fishing rods. She killed the steel-blue Evinrude and drifted silently toward the two-story frame house.

Luisa Cruz had been born in 16 P, Ethel remembered, in the middle of the Blizzard of '78, when Hull had been cut off from the mainland. A daydreamer, Luisa had sat in the fourth row and drawn deft caricatures of rock stars all over her essay questions.

So Manolo, the last of the Cruz family, had moved, Ethel thought sadly. Another one gone. Were any left?

She looped *Queequeg's* painter over the porch banister and splashed up 16 P's steps, towing a child's oversize sailboat behind her. The front door had rusted open and Ethel went inside.

Empty soda and beer squeezebottles floated in the foyer, and there was a vaguely disturbing smell. Ethel slogged through soggy newspapers to the kitchen. Maria Cruz had made tea in this kitchen, she recalled, while they had talked about Luisa's chances of getting into Brandeis.

An ancient refrigerator stood in a foot and a half of water. She dragged the door open with a sloshing creak. Nothing.

The pantry beyond yielded a box of moist taco shells and three cans of tomato paste. Ethel checked the expiration dates, nodded, and tossed them into her makeshift barrow.

What little furniture remained in the living room was rotten and mildewed. The bedroom mattress was green-furred and stank. The bureau's mahogany veneer had curled away from the expanding maple underneath. When Ethel leaned her arm on the dresser, a lion's-class foot broke. It collapsed slowly into the sawdust-flecked water like an expiring walrus.

Out fell a discolored Polaroid snapshot: Luisa and her brother in graduation cap and gown. I was so proud of her I could have burst, Ethel remembered. Drying the photo carefully, she slipped it into her breast pocket.

On an adjacent high shelf, built into the wall above the attached headboard, were half a dozen paperback books, spines frayed and twisted, their covers scalped. Luisa had been a good reader, a child who wanted to learn so much it had radiated from her like heat.

Pleased, Ethel took them all.

In the bathroom, she found a mirror embossed with the Budweiser logo. With her elbow, Ethel cleaned the glass. The round wrinkled grim face reflected back at her had fueled rumors that she had been a marine. The mirror would probably fetch a few dollars at the Southie flea market, maybe more to a memorabilia collector.

Only the front bedroom left to comb, she thought. Good combing. Thank you, Cruz family.

A vulture, Joan Gordon had called her once. "You're just eating decay," her friend had said with the certainty of a mainlander.

"I'm a Cobb," Ethel had answered thickly, gripping the phone. "We live on the sea. My grandfather Daniel Endicott was lobstering when he was nine."

"What you're doing isn't fishing. It's theft. Just like the waterkids."

"It's *not* like the kids."

"It's *stealing*."

"No! Just talking what the sea gives. Housecombing is like lobstering." She had clung to her own words for reassurance.

"What you take belongs to other people," her friend had said vehemently.

"Not after they leave," Ethel shot back. "Then it's the ocean's."

Joan switched tacks. "It's dangerous to live in Hull."

"Those folks that left didn't have to go. I'm staying where my roots are."

"Your roots are *underwater*, Ethel," Joan entreated. "Your town is disappearing."

"It is not," Ethel insisted. "Don't say that."

"Come live in our building. We have a community here."

"Bunch of old folks. Don't want to live with old folks."

"Plenty of people here younger than you."

"Living in a tower's not for me. Closed in, a prisoner. Afraid to go out. Wouldn't like it."

"How do you know? You've never visited me."

"Anyhow, I can't afford it."

She seldom spoke with Joan now. The subject had worn her feelings raw.

"Damn it, Joan," she said in 16 P's hallway. "Why did you have to leave?"

The front bedroom door was ajar in a foot and a half of water. She pushed and heard it butt against something. Slowly she craned her neck around.

The two Asian corpses floated on their faces, backs arched, arms and legs hanging down into brown water swirled with red. Ethel gagged at the stench. The

youths' long black hair waved like seaweed, their shoulders rocking limply. Catfish and eels nibbled on waving tendrils of skin and guts.

Retching, Ethel grabbed one of the boys under his armpit and hauled him over onto his back. The bodies had been gutted, bullets gouged out of their chests, leaving no evidence. Periwinkle snails crawled in bloody sockets where the killers had cut out their victims' eyes and sliced off their lips. Each youth's left hand had been amputated. Ethel searched the water until she found one, a bloated white starfish with a Pran gang tattoo on its palm.

She remembered last night's gunshots in Hull Bay. You did not deserve this, she thought to the ruined face, letting it slip back into the water. No one deserved this, not even waterkids.

Of course she knew who did it. Everyone knew who executed waterkids. That was the point. The men on Hog Island *wanted* you to know. They wanted Hull to themselves. The bodies were reminders. And incentive.

In the distance she heard the chatter of several approaching engines. More Cambodian waterkids coming. Hastily she wiped her mouth and rushed out of the house.

Jumping into the whaler, she untied *Queequeg's* painter and turned his key, shoving the throttle down hard as his engine caught. But not quickly enough. Before she could get away, four dark gray whalers surrounded her, Pran gang chop signs airbrushed beautifully onto their fiberglass gunwales.

"Hey, grandma." Their leader stood cockily in the stern of his boat while his helmsman grinned. He wore immaculate brown leather pants and a World War II flight jacket unmarked by spray or moisture. "What's your hurry? Seen a ghost?"

*Queequeg* rocked slightly as the waves from their sudden arrival washed underneath him. "Yes," Ethel answered.

"Find anything valuable?"

"Nothing you'd want." Unconsciously she touched her breast pocket.

"Nothing you can fence."

"Really? Let's see." His boat drifted up against hers and he leaped across into her stern, landing on sure sea legs. "You keep your stuff here?" He scornfully pointed at the plastic sailboat, mugging for his guffawing friends. He kicked it over with his boot and rummaged among *Queequeg's* floorboards. "Hey, Wayne! Huang! We got any use for taco shells?" He held them aloft.

"No, man," they answered gleefully.

"All right, grandma, guess we'll have to look elsewhere." He dropped the box and turned. As she started to relax, he wheeled. "What's in your pocket?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"In your pocket." He reached toward her throat.

"A letter and a photograph," Ethel said steadily.

"A naked man, maybe?" the Pran leader chortled, rippling his upright fingers. "Give it." She opened her sou'wester and handed the picture to him. Waving it like a small fan, he stepped back into his own boat. "Worthless." He pointed it at her like a prod. "Pran gang combs *first*, grandma. Understand? Otherwise the next

time I won't just tip over your toy boat. You understand?" He tossed the photo over his shoulder.

Ethel watched it flutter into the water, and nodded. "I understand."

He gestured and they started their engines, moving down P Street toward the empty house.

Ethel debated with herself. Keeping silent was too risky – they could always find her later,. "Check the front bedroom," she called after them.

He stopped the engine and swung back. "What?" he asked ominously.

"The front bedroom. Your two missing friends are there."

The Cambodian teenager's broad face whitened. "Are they – ?"

She nodded mutely.

For a moment his jaw worked. "Any ... others? A little girl?" he added in a whisper.

"No." Ethel minutely shook her head. "Not your sister Mi."

"Those bastards," he said, his voice soft and ragged.

"I'm sorry." She clasped her hands before her.

"*Sorry?*" he shrieked in misery, the hurt child suddenly breaking through his tough façade. "What do you know about sorry?" Their boats leapt away. "What do *you* know about sorry?"

As the sounds of their engines receded, Ethel very slowly let out her breath. Hands trembling, she engaged *Queequeg's* throttle and slowly circled. Sure enough, the snapshot was suspended about three feet below the surface. Ethel lifted her gaffing net and dragged it through the spot, scooping up the picture. The water had curled it and she dried it on her thigh, then returned it to her pocket.

Glancing back at the boats now moored at 16 P, she quickly cut in the whaler's engine with a roar, carving a double white plume behind her.

For the rest of the morning Ethel and *Queequeg* combed the alphabet streets on Hull's submerged flatlands. Nearly all of these houses had long since been abandoned, and she neither stopped nor slowed. Frequently she twisted to check behind her, but there was no sign of the waterkids.

By eleven she had finished W, X, and Y, tiny alleyways that nestled against Allerton Hill. Trees at its base were gray and leafless, drowned by the rising seawater; hard as iron, Ethel knew, silvered with salt and virtually indestructible. Terry Flaherty had lived on W, she remembered. A short chubby boy with big eyes and a giggle that never stopped, he was someplace in Connecticut now, selling mutual funds. Probably forgotten all the eleventh-grade American history she'd taught him.

As she passed Allerton Point, she looked across the harbor to glass-and-steel Boston. The downtown folks were talking about building walls to hold back the sea that rose as the city sank, but with no money, Hull literally could not afford to save itself. Every storm took more houses, washing out the ground underneath so they fell like sandcastles.

Ethel's house at 22 K was on the far leeward side, as safe as you could be on the manmade flatland, but even it had suffered damage and was endangered.

Town government was disintegrating. People no longer paid property taxes, no longer voted. Nobody ran for selectman, nobody cared. For protection, folks relied on themselves or bought it from Hog Island or the Cambodian waterkids. At night, the long black Peterborough boats moved sleekly in the harbor, navigating by infrared. Ethel stayed inside then.

Most of Hull High School was submerged, the brick portico columns standing like piers in the shallow water. The football field was a mudflat.

Forty-one years of history students, all gone, all memories.

When she was young, her students had sniggered that Ethel was a dyke. As she aged, firmly single and unromantic, they had claimed she was a transsexual wrestler. When she reached fifty, they had started saying she was eccentric. At sixty, they called her crazy.

The jibes always hurt, though she concealed it. After each year was over, fortunately, all she could remember were the names and faces of those whose lives she had affected.

Standing at *Queequeg's* bow, she left a long scimitar of foam as she circled the buildings. The old school was disappearing, windows shattered, corridors full of stagnant water. She had taken *Queequeg* inside once before to her old classroom, ghosting down the wide hallways over a bottom of rippling gray-and-white vinyl tiles, but was eventually driven out by the reek of decomposing flesh from a cat that had been trapped inside and starved.

Ethel closed her eyes, hearing once again the clatter of the period bell, the clamor as kids ran through the corridors, talking at the top of their lungs. Mothers whom she taught had sent their daughters to Hull High School. In her last few years, she had even taught a few granddaughters of former students. Made you proud.

The high school was shut down, dark, and noiseless. Seagulls perched on its roof were her only companions.

To break her mood, she swung onto the open sea and rammed the throttle full open for the five-mile run to South Boston.

The water, hard as a rock this morning, pounded into her calves and knees as the Boston whaler's flat bottom washboarded across the harbor. *Queequeg* kicked up spray over his teak and chrome bow as she slalomed among dayglo Styrofoam lobster buoys, tasting the salt spume on her lips.

Behind and above her, a cawing flock of gulls followed, braiding the air. *Queequeg's* wake pushed small fish close to the surface, under the sharp eyes of the waiting gray and white birds. One after another, the gulls swooped like a line of fighter aircraft. Their flapping wings skimming the waves, they dipped their beaks just enough to catch a fish, then soared back into line.

Hunting and feeding, they escorted her across the harbor until she slowed and docked at the pier.

"Hey, Jerry," Ethel said when she entered the store. "Got a letter for you." She unzipped her slicker and pulled it out. "Mail it for me?"

The storekeeper squinted at the address. "Joan Gordon? Doesn't she live in that senior citizen community in Arlington?"

"Old folks home, you mean."

"Whatever." He suppressed a smile. "You could visit her."

"No piers, no water."

"Then call her."

"Got no phone."

"No, from here."

"Rather write."

"Okay. What are you writing about?"

Ethel shook her head into her shoulders. "None of your beeswax."

"All right," he laughed, "we've been friends too long for me to complain. How you doing?"

"I get by."

He leaned on the counter. "I worry about you."

"Oh, don't start."

"Sorry." He turned away and resumed stacking cans.

"I'm okay," she answered in a smaller voice, touched as always.

"Hull gets worse every day." He looked over his shoulder. "I see the news."

"Nonsense," Ethel replied with bravado, dismissing his fears with a wave of her hand. "Newsies always exaggerate. Besides, one day *Boston* will be underwater too, same as us."

"I know." Jerry sighed. "I go down the bathhouse every Sunday for my swim. The sea's always higher. Maybe we should move away, like Joan did. Chicago or Dallas. Somewhere. Anywhere with no ocean."

"No ocean?" She laughed heartily. "What would I do in Dallas, Jerry? How would I live?"

"Teach school. You've taught me more right here in this store than all the history books I ever read."

"Thanks, Jerry. But I'm sixty-eight years old. No one would hire me."

He was quiet. "Then I'd take care of you," he said finally to his hands.

She looked through the window at the pier, where *Queequeg* bobbed on the waves. "Couldn't do it, Jerry." It was hard to find breath. "Too old. To move."

"Yeah. Sure." He wiped his forehead and cleared his throat. "Got your usual all set." He put two orange plastic bags on the counter.

"My check come through?" Ethel looked suspicious. "Can't take your credit."

"Of course it did. It always comes through. It's electronic."

She peered inside, shifting cans and boxes. "All right, where is it?"

He scowled and rubbed his balding head. "Hell, you shouldn't eat that stuff. Rots your teeth and wrecks your digestion and I don't *know* what."

"I want my two-pound box of Whitman's coconut, dammit."

"Ethel, you're carrying too much weight. It'll strain your heart."

"Been eating candy all my life and it hasn't hurt me yet. Wish you'd stop trying to dictate my diet."

"Okay, okay." He sighed and threw up his hands, then pulled down an embossed yellow box. "No charge." He held it out.

"Can't accept your charity, Jerry. You know that."

"That's not it." He was hurt and offended. "It's my way of saying I'm sorry I tried to keep it away from you." He gestured with the box. "Please?"

Ethel took the chocolates. "Thank you, Jerry," she replied somberly, laying her right hand flat on the cover. "You've been a good friend."

"Don't talk like that!" the grocer said in exasperation. "Every time you come in here, you sound like you got one foot in the grave. It's not wholesome."

"Was different this morning." Ethel sat down, the candy held tightly in her lap. Her voice was faint, distant. "This morning I *saw* it. Saw my future in the water. Sooner or later, I'm going to pass away. Probably later. No sense in denying that." She kicked her right foot aimlessly. "Maybe I should have accepted when you proposed."

"Still could," he said softly. "But you won't."

"No." She shook her head just a bit.

"Stubborn."

"Not stubborn." She was gentle. "Wouldn't be fair. You can't live in Hull. You've said so before."

"Ethel." Jerry wiped his hands on his apron. "I read the paper. Houses are falling into the ocean or burning down. Dangerous evil kids are running loose."

"I can handle the waterkids," she said defiantly.

"No, you *can't*," he insisted. "Thinking like that gets you killed. Drugs and crime and I don't *know* what. Why won't you leave?"

"It's my home," Ethel said in a troubled voice. "My family. Friends." She waved her hands. "My world. What I know."

Jerry rubbed his head again. "That world isn't *there* any more. There is no more Hull. Just wooden shells like caskets in waiting. The people you knew, they're all gone. It's past. Over."

"Got no place to go," she muttered, biting her thumbnail. "Endicotts and Goodwins have lived in Hull since colonial times. That's something to preserve. Elijah Goodwin was a merchant captain. Sailed to China in 1820. Put flowers on his grave every Sunday afternoon after church. Rain or shine or Cambodian kids. Put flowers on all the Endicotts, Cobbs, and Goodwins on Telegraph Hill. Telegraph's an island now, as it originally was, but they will still be in that ground when all the flatland has gone under. Somebody has to remember them."

"Cripes, don't be so morbid." He came around behind her, put his arm around her shoulder and rubbed it.

"I suppose." She leaned her head in the crook of his elbow.

Cars and buses passed in the street outside, sunlight reflecting off their windshields. He patted her shoulder.

She covered his hand with hers. "Thanks, Jerry. You're a good man."

After a moment, she rose and kissed his cheek, then hefted the bags, one to an arm. "Well, that's that," she called with returning jauntiness. "See you next Friday."

Lost in memories, she let *Queequeg* take his return trip more slowly. Islands in the harbor were covered with trees and shrubs, reminding her of great submerged scarred right whales. Scars are experience, scars are the body's memories. When she neared Hog Island, at the entrance to Hull Bay, she kept a respectful distance. The Meagher boys had lived there – Dennis, Douglas, Dana, Donald and Dapper. Their mother had always shouted for them in the order of their birth. Five rambunctious Boston-Irish hellions in seven years, usually with a black eye of a skinned knee.

No families lived on Hog now. Castellated gray buildings had grown upward from the old Army fortress underneath. Thieves and smugglers and murderers lived in them, men who drove deep-keeled power yachts without finesse, like machetes through a forest.

Tough sentries with high-powered binoculars stood lookout as she passed, scanning the horizon like big-eyed mantises, their rifles out of sight. Ethel shivered. Delinquent waterkids she could evade, but the organized evil on Hog was shrewd and ruthless.

The fish feeding on that poor child's face, Ethel thought. The people who still lived on Hull. The men on Hog. The Cambodian kids. One way or another, all took their lives from the remains of a town whose time was past. Eventually they would extract Hull's last dollar, and they would all leave. And, in time, the rising sea would engulf everything.

K Street was falling into shadow when she returned. Her house needed a coat of paint, but would last long enough without one, she thought wryly. The dark-green first-floor shutters were closed and nailed shut as a precaution, but her light was still burning in 22 K's bedroom window. Nobody's home but my lights are always on, Ethel thought.

A gang symbol was sprayed on her front door.

Pran chop, she realized with a sick feeling in her gut.

Her padlock was untouched, though the waterkids could have forced it with a finger.

The chop was a message: this is a Pran house.

Perhaps their form of thanks.

Safely inside, Ethel took off her sou'wester and slicker, shook the wet salt spray off them, and hung them on the pegs. She unloaded her groceries and stacked her day's combings. Tomorrow she would sell them in the Quincy Pirate's Point flea market.

All but the photo. Ethel took it from her pocket and smiled at Luisa's young face. She found a spot on the wall barely large enough and tacked it up, stepping back to admire her work.

As the sun set on the golden bay, she made supper: soup, salad, and cheese sandwiches that she grilled on the woodburning stove she had installed on the second floor. Seagulls wheeled over the marsh flats, snatching clams in their beaks. Rising high over the coastline, the birds dropped their prey, to smash open on the west shoreline rocks. Then the gulls landed and ate the helpless exposed animal inside the broken shell.

When she was done, Ethel went onto her upper porch and put down her bowl and plate. The birds converged, jostling for the last scraps, hungry and intense, like schoolchildren in gray and white uniforms.

Sitting in her rocking chair, her box of Whitman's coconut firmly on her stomach, Ethel thought about the letter she had mailed that morning.

Today the ocean took my ground floor. One day it will take my house. It's going to reclaim South Boston and Dorchester and Revere Beach and Back Bay. Folks will go on denying it like I've tried to, but it won't stop until it's through with all of us.

Enclosed is my will. Had a Cohasset lawyer write it up so it's legal. You get everything (yes, there's money, in a bank the lawyer knows). You don't have to comb for it, Joan. It's yours.

Except *Queequeg*. The boat goes to Jerry. He'll never use it, but he'll care for it, and it's no use to you in your tower.

After I'm gone, burn the place down. With me in it. At high tide so the fire won't spread. Nobody will bother you. Nobody else lives around here anyway. No one else has lived here for years.

22 K is an Endicott house. Always been an Endicott house. No squatters here. Give it all to the sea.

But take the pictures first. Put them on your walls. Remember me. Remember me.

Should have left years ago. Can't now.

Wish you'd stayed, Joan. Miss you.

Ethel

The houses around her were black hulks, silent like trees. The waxing crescent moon rose, silvering the ocean. Ethel heard the gulls call to one another, smelled the sea as it licked the beach. In the distance, boats moved on the bay, dots of green and red light, thin black scrolls of wake.

"God, I love it here," she said suddenly, full of contentment.

## Afterword

Hull is a real place, all the locations mentioned in *Dying in Hull* are real, and as I write this (2004), Hull is not under water. Indeed, retyping the story (written in the far-off days when drives were floppy and storage precious), I realized with a shock that it is set in a future that is now the past.

Yet if the city began to sink *tomorrow*, rather than in roughly 1988 when it does in the *Future Boston* universe, I can easily imagine that what happens to my fictional Hull could also happen to the real Hull.

*Dying in Hull* is part of the shared-world universe *Future Boston*, which the group of us who then comprised the Cambridge Science Fiction Workshop jointly developed (at my conception and instigation) from 1987 through 1990, its aggregated and interconnected short stories and bridge matter finally realizing book publication in 1994.

*Future Boston* is the kind of highly crafted, heavily invested, unprofitable labor of love that can be undertaken only by those with much more intelligence and energy than money. At one point I proposed a second volume but the other participants, weary of the creative strait jackets into which our commitment of mutual Heisenberg consistency (anything that is observed in a story happens, and binds everyone else), recoiled with a mixture of horror and inertia that deflated any hopes I might have had. Still, *Future Boston* remains, and the works in it are better – richer, more complex art – when read together than they are apart. I think every one of us who brought something to that universe still takes away something of our fictional creation.

*Dying in Hull* came early, when we had the broad sweep of our shared history – sinking city, alien arrival on August 22, 2014, and little else – and because of its early place, both in chronological and in world-development terms, it uses fewer of the joint creations that populate later stories. In editing it into the collected book, I retrofitted the faintest of hints (Endicotts percolate down through the years, and Mi Nyo comes to prominence in a life that spans the 21st century). But still, *Dying in Hull* is mostly itself.

I am a poor short story writer – not merely clumsy but slow in creating indifferent stories – but something happened in *Dying in Hull* that has happened for no other short work I've written. It was easy to write. Steve Popkes and I drove through the town one day and I went home and wrote the first draft. One polish through CSFW and it was done.

There is only one bit of structural technique – before starting the story, I listed every single physical manifestation I could think of, reflected in property or objects, that would connote or evoke death. Though the story is about death and love, I deliberately put *Dying* in the title, but then presented each image from my list without ever using *death*, *dying*, or any variant ... and used *love* only once, at the end, for recognition thematic punch. The rest just came of itself.

The short-story magic has yet to come again – but then, I'm only fifty ("My word," says Heinlein's Manuel Garcia O'Kelly as the last line of *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, "I'm not even a hundred yet"), and have another forty-plus years to write more fiction.

To this day, when I encounter other sf writers, I am astonished and flattered at how many of them instantly recall *Dying in Hull*. It struck a chord in me, as it seems to continue to strike others. And every time I fly into or out of Boston – as I am doing now, writing this little afterword from an exit-row window seat – I look down at Hull and can easily pick out the alphabet streets, Telegraph Hill, the high school, and Hog Island. I see Hull – my Hull – and smile to myself.

– David Alexander Smith  
*Flying over Hull, Massachusetts, April 29, 2004*

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