

Part One

Matty and Pokey

Life was okay, I guess, but not great and then I turned twelve. I mean; living in the town of Thomaston was okay when school was in session, because I could be with my friends and got to see them everyday, except on weekends and holidays, of course.

In 1963 I was twelve years old, my brother, David, was sixteen and my baby sister, Paula, was only four. In the part of town where I lived there were about twenty-five kids in the neighborhood, but the oldest of the youngest brats was eight and the youngest of the oldest bullies was fifteen. I was either haunted by older kids or pestered by little ones that would drive a sane twelve year old of his mind. So you see, I pretty much had to fend for myself, I spent most of my time alone.

On my tenth birthday my father gave me his old ten-foot painting pram, one he no longer used to row back and forth from his lobster boat, The Mary May, on Thomaston Island.

Pop found, in Grandpa's cellar as I remember, a small, I mean, really small sailing rig for the pram. Under sail my dad knew that this pram would be so slow that he christened her Pokey and he and I gave her a fresh coat of paint and lettered her name on the transom. I was as proud as you please. From that time on Pokey seemed to take on a new personality, one that only I could read.

Pokey became my dearest friend, after school, on weekends and during summer months. I look back on this gift as the best gift a boy in my situation could have gotten. It opened up for me a world that was mine alone and I did not have to share that world with anyone, not for a while, as it turned out.

I remember Mom being flabbergasted over the pram being given to me, "he'll drowned in that river the first time he uses that boat," she quipped to my father.

The significance of my father's answer didn't hit me for many years, "if he turns that pram over with that rig, I'll eat it," then, I remember clearly, he turned to me and laid out the boundaries within which I could sail, "James Creek along the back side of Gull Island and never, under any circumstances, into the River. Do you understand that Matty?" I let him know that I did and proceeded to create my universe.

The Agawam River is a tidal river that separates Thomaston Island from the mainland, part of which is the section of town known as Old West Thomaston. The Agawam River itself is less than six miles in length and weaves back and forth from north to south.

Gull Island is located in the middle of those six miles of Agawam River. The Agawam sweeps to the east around Gull Island and James Creek swings to the western side.

I was what people that live on "the island proper" call folk living in old West Thomaston, a Mainlander, I always had been. I was not a landlubber, though, like some of the kids on "the Island" considered us mainlanders to be. From the time I could crawl I had spent lots of time with my dad aboard The Mary May and by 1963, my twelfth year, I figured that I had spent at least ten of those years on the water, of course I had no conception of time. I considered myself a true "old salt", a real sailor, after all I had been sailing Pokey since I had been ten years old and there were kids in my class at school, "Islanders", that could not even swim.

James Creek starts at the northern most point of Gull Island and travels in all only about a mile. Looping due west around in a half circle James Creek then sweeps easterly back into the Agawam River and ends at the island's southern most tip. At its widest point the creek is only a little over two hundred and fifty feet wide. On both sides it is bordered by marshlands and marsh grasses and within these marshy areas are drainage ditches that when I was young I thought were little rivers and creeks to be explored like Lewis and Clark.

Gull Island is only three hundred yards wide at any point and most of the part that faces the mainland is marshland and when the tide is at its highest a big part of Gull Island is under water.

This was the extent of my world. Dad gave me a chart of that world, like a road map but for boats. I, with his help, waterproofed that chart and I took it whenever I sailed.