



puget sound

fifteen stories

[cc long]

Puget Sound: Fifteen Stories

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Puget Sound

William Hauser, also known as Willy and Wham-bam, now the only remaining member of the rock-and-roll band of the ages, *Puget Sound*, a band that never played together except on this beach two months before this gray morning, looks out at Penn Cove where a pod of killer whales circle in seaweed-green cold waters, gulping down smelt, lapping up the bounty of the freakish appearance of a mass gathering of the silvery fish that come to lay their eggs on the gravelly beaches of the cove and are often raked up by avid smelt men who use wire mesh rakes and haul huge bounties of the succulent sardines out of the brine. The whales breach, flying in frenetic rhythm, the water not able to hold their enthusiasm for the smorgasbord, and land in a resounding body flop that echoes over the calm water.

The day is varying degrees of gray, the only color there is in the universe on this foggy September morning. The water rolls in and out, unleashing a rock-and-rolling schism of percussion that dulls the senses. Willy Hauser walks into the water in his Nike hiking shoes up to his ankles. The coldness makes him tingle. He is six foot two, lean; his short-cropped hair is black but shows traces of the blond that he had dyed it months ago. His beard is a stubbly dark shadow, a sign of not shaving for two days. He looks down and sees the smelt circling his tattooed ankles. He kicks them away and then walks back to the driftwood where his sleeping bag and duffle lie as proof of his night of passing out on the beach. People are looking for him. People are dead. He is in deep.

He sits and lights his Camel. What is his next move? He has to get the hell out of here but he has no money, no car, nothing, except the duffle bag with that magical artifact that had led him to where he is now. Gill dead. Danny dead. *Puget Sound* dead. And himself ready to die. Make that *deadly* artifact. How did he get to this point, to this place where it all began? Three twenty-year-old drop outs just laid off by the Useless Bay Marina with no real clue now or ever, lamenting, beer drunk, taking pisses in the cove. Gill with his acoustic guitar, Danny with his harmonica, and him with his sticks, beating on a can while Gill fingered an Oasis tune and Danny sang like a vintage rocker. They decided they'd start a band and call it *Puget Sound*. It was better than joining the army and getting killed in Iraq. They celebrated their decision by dancing in the lapping waves of the full-moonlit cove. That's when they saw something shimmering in the water.

They had all thought it was a silver salmon until Danny stepped forward and pulled the glimmer from the cold salty water. They fell back in awe as he raised it up and the face came into view, glittering gold, green and blue, intricate and old but not showing its age. It looked somewhat like the Seattle Seahawks' football mask but more ornate and precious. They thought at first it was a discarded mascot mask, but when they got back to Gillis' car, they realized it might be valuable. It looked like real gold with inlaid emeralds; but instead of taking it seriously, they just got drunker and headed into Coupeville and wore the mask around town like morons. They drank more and ended up at the Captain Whidbey Bar wearing the mask and dancing around like crazy cats.

That's where it started to go wrong. Lyle the bartender had called them over and told them that they might think about calming down before he had to throw them and their mask out. Then he asked to see the mask. He took a look and shook his head. "You dip shits better take care of this thing it might be worth some money."

They thanked him and flippantly yowled that of course it was worth something, and they were all going to be millionaires, rock-and-roll star millionaires!

In the corner unnoticed by them were a couple guys drinking whiskey and watching their antics. The whole world could know for all they cared; they were clueless about the mask's worth and about what ends some folk might go to get their hands on it. Hell, they didn't care; they were lost in delusions of limos, mansions, and all the cable TV you could watch, not to mention women by the truckload and booze that would fill lakes. They had hit the mother lode.

Then one of the strangers walked over and asked if he could look at the mask. After a quick inspection he offered them a hundred dollars for it. In their drunkenness they almost sold it right there and then, and if they had maybe none of this would have happened.

William smokes another butt, trying to figure out his next move. He has to get this mask back to Dr. Seymour at the University of Washington. Dr. Seymour would take care of it. He was the expert who had said that the mask was authentic and one of a kind. It was especially intriguing because the Northwest Indian tribes that had practiced shamanism had no access to gold and emeralds; this being the case it served up a lot of questions and might be a holy grail piece in the antiquities of the early Haida Tribe of Vancouver Island.

Dr. Seymour had also told them that the mask was surely treasured and magical, that it held mystical secrets of the ancient Haida. He begged them to leave it with him, but they had refused. As they left he mentioned that the mask might bring the carrier some bad luck. They laughed.

Soon after that, Gillis' car's brakes went out on Highway 20 and he went head on into a tree, killing himself. A day later Danny ended up dying in his shower, slipping on soap and crushing his skull on enamel. Both of the deaths looked like they were without fault and blame, just a part of the mundane tragedy of life. But Willy knew better: it was no curse; it was the strangers. He had noticed them a couple of times following him. He had reported it to the Island County Sheriff's office but was given no regard. His word didn't hold a lot of water in these parts. His past of petty crimes and lies had caught up with him. He checks under the bag to make sure it is there. It has a hold on him. The gold and emeralds sparkling and shining. It is polished and magical. Seagulls pick up clams and drop them on the rocks around him and then swoop down and gulp the salty contents. He is hungry but not that hungry. He never had a taste for raw clams. He lights another cigarette and presses his back against the log feeling the hardness. He wants to sell the mask but has no clue where to find buyers. He would even sell it to the diabolical strangers if they made themselves known.

He had thought about prying the emeralds and gold from the icon and selling them, but even in desperation and with a past that had been filled with participating in worse criminal antics than defacing antiquities, he could not bring himself to destroy the mask. He realized his only choice in this debacle was to give the mask to the Professor and see what he could get for it. He blows smoke rings. There is not going to be million-dollar payday; he isn't going to be a rock-and-roll star, but he might be able save his skin.

He thinks about his dead friends, feels suddenly feint, tosses his cig into the green sea and walks back to his sleeping bag and pulls the mask out of the bag again. He touches the

mask, puts it on his face and looks around only to find himself staring at a black Caddie driving up Highway 20 across the cove from him. He pulls the mask off and puts it in the bag quickly, nervously, fearfully, and runs with it up the beach to where he knows a rowboat is tied up.

He places the mask in the boat and jumps in as he saw the car screeches to a stop and two thugs jump out pulling out guns, running clumsily down the beach. He rows with all his might, whimpering in fear, heading for the pod of killer whales; and he ducks as he hearstwo shots fly over his head.

He sees the bullets plunk into the water near the whales. He yells to them that he would sell them the mask but they don't hear him. He watches as the men look out at him, now too far away to shoot. He lifts the mask in their direction and threatens to drop it in the water, right back where it came from. The men wave frantically and then start to run back to their car. He puts down the oars and watches.

He notices that around him the pod of killer whales circle his small boat, slowly. They do not threaten him. They seem just to be curious, making a fusion of squeaks and grunts. They are beautiful. Black with snowy white patches shining in the translucence of the water. Two adults and two pups. They hypnotize him in their circling hydro-dance and call.

He lies back with the mask on his chest and feels the shallow waves of the whales that circle. This slow ebbing and flowing and rock-a-bye-babying makes him sleepy. He closes his eyes and falls into a murky somnolence that is not quite sleep but more like mesmerization.

Willie feels as though he is going down slowly in a maelstrom of a whirlpool being pulled under the water by the circling of the whales. He tries to wake from the trance but can not and instead is brought into a watery world in a timeless history. He is on a canoe of Northwest Indians, rowing through inky moonlit salt water toward a large gathering of other Indians. The sound of laughing, singing, chanting carry across the water and one of his fellow rowers lets out a whoop that startles him and quickens the pace of the canoe. He focuses on the bonfire that sends sparks floating into the eternal ether of the night. He is an Indian going to join the potlatch. They row up onto the beach to the bellicose cheers of his brotherhood.

When the greetings settle, a rhythmic drumbeat drowns out and silences the celebration, drawing all the attention to the water. It is a calm, eerie fluid sparkling with moonlight. When all focus is on the hypnotizing watery blackness, out of it breaks—in a cataclysmic splash—a huge creature, water shedding off of it, wearing the mask. It wades through the water and then stands above them. The mask does not seem to be a mask at all but the head of the creature. Willie falls to his knees in awe, as do the rest of the tribe.

The creature—part man, part fish, part bird—then touches all of their heads with some sort of ointment. When it comes to Willie, the creature breathes humid hot breath on him and then touches his forehead; Willie feels the burn of the touch penetrate his being. He screams and feels like he is drowning. He swims in the blackness finally jerking out of his sleep almost tipping over the rowboat as he gasps for air and tries to right himself.

When he finally catches his breath, he hears a motor. He looks in that direction and

sees a small motorboat headed toward him from San De Fuca.

He picks up the oars but realizes that trying to get away is useless, and as the boat comes upon him, without thinking he stands, lifts the mask above his head, and in a yell he had never heard himself yell before, throws the mask into the murky waters of Penn Cove. The men on the boat watch and then shoot, barely missing his head. He falls back into the rowboat counting the seconds he has left in his life and hearing the motorboat cut its engine. He hears the men swearing. "Jackass, do you know what you've done! I'm going to kill you."

"You were going to kill me anyway!" Willie yells, slowly lifting his head, ready to die, coming face to face with a gun. The pistol whip that sends him flying back is violent; blood erupts from his nose. He looks up as he sees the man pull the trigger of the gun, but as he does, out of the depths of the water, breaching brine, a killer whale knocks the man from the boat and the bullet jettisons into the water. Simultaneously from all sides the whales slam into the motorboat, tipping it over and causing the other man to fall in, too.

Willie sits up, his face bloody, stunned but reacting quickly, rowing away from the splashing assassins who are being kept busy by the circling killer whales. One of the Orcas, the largest one, leaps out of the water and Willie stares in disbelief. There on its snout lodged on its face is the mask. The whale breaches again, the mask still attached! It is magnificent, the Orca over twenty feet long, black and white, hovering in the air with the gilded emerald laden mask on, seeming like it was a part of it.

Willie watches in amazement remembering his dream and the creature that had walked from the water and anointed him. This is what he is seeing now, and he watches as the masked whale rose again and again from the water.

He continues to row towards land watching the scene, hearing the screaming and swearing of the two thugs holding onto their overturned boat. He watches from land as the whale pod swims out of the cove toward open waters, the largest Orca continuing to leap from the water, mask sparkling on its head. And then they are gone.

Willie washes his bloody face in the salt water and notices the mark on his forehead. It could have been from the pistol whipping but he knew better; it is the anointment. He touches it and feels the impulse of spontaneous fulfillment. A force that he could not fathom had touched him and it had changed him forever. He listens to the still screaming thugs, picks up his sleeping bag and heads for Highway 20. He does not know where he is going or what he will do. He is following a destiny that all humans are privy to but most never realize. A pull toward something greater and more fulfilling, filled with magic and mystery.

He walks to the highway and sticks out his thumb and is picked up by the first car that is going his way.

Prayers and Cancer and Bombs

She sat at the kitchen table, letting her mind wander, looking at the headline on the paper, “Court declares Bush the winner, Gore wins popular vote by a landslide.” *We’re no longer a democracy*, she thought, *people get what they deserve*. It was all criminal. She was tired, up all night working. The Skagit River still and green in her short horizon. Mt. Baker rose up imitating Mt. Fuji against the blue sky, bluer than polished lapis, conjuring heaven. She wondered how it could look so beautiful yet be so defiled, so poisoned, so trespassed on.

The factory, the arsenic spewing pulp mill from hell, was about ten miles away but she could see the three smokestacks like soldiers puffing white smoke. She pounded a pack of generic cigarettes against the table. He used to hate it when she did that. She finally drew a cigarette from the pack and then placed the pack in front of her so it was squared up alongside the black, plastic remote with the red button. It was amazing what you could find on the Internet and how prayers are always answered.

She lit the cigarette with her Bic lighter that was concealed in a silver holder adorned with a silver raven of Northwest Indian design. He had made it for her. She puffed the cigarette to life, enjoying it.

A thread of smoke circled up and out. Billy, the cat, rubbed against her muddy leg and she picked him up and ran her long fingers through the long black hair. Billy purred and then leaped suddenly down to the yellow linoleum floor. His claws made a tapping.

It was about a year ago, he had come through that door whistling a Beatles tune, carrying a bag of groceries and a bottle of Chablis bragging he was going to make his world famous spaghetti. They had Haagen-Dazs Rum Raisin ice cream for dessert. Then at a commercial during a “Cheers” rerun he sighed, took a puff of his cigarette, and said, “Babe, I got cancer.”

It hit her like a pin poke, not hurting but slowly spreading until she was exhausted. Her small prayer of not having to tell him answered.

“It’s all right though, the doctor says it might not be bad. I gotta go to the hospital tomorrow for some more tests. The factory is paying for it all. It’s just lucky we got them or we’d go under for the doctor bills. That’s lucky.” He spoke it plain, with no emotion, as if he was talking to himself. She listened. He was only forty and she was only thirty-six. They had watched friends go through it. Far too many friends go through it. The whole gray thing. There was a very orderly chain of events before the cancer finished its work. She knew it would be no different for them. She knew she would be sitting here now a year in the future without him. But she didn’t know what it would lead her to do. All she could do was pray.

The chemotherapy started. She could remember them sitting on the steps in the back looking at the factory. They would watch the smoke puff up and disappear in the blue. He would say it like a TV set: “Lucky for us for the factory, without them taking care of the medical stuff, could you imagine the burden that would be set upon us.”

“Bless us,” she said softly, praying. She had it, too, but he didn’t know it. She found out a week before when she went to see why they had not been successful at having a

baby. She was told she had lymphoma. They told her the only thing she could do was pray and so that is what she had been doing, not for herself to be cured, but for the myriad of everyday wishes she had. And it seemed to be working. She prayed she would live longer than him so she would never have to tell him. She ordered her doctor to tell no one.

He was as bald as a cue ball and nauseous as a sick dog. Chemo doing its damnation. One day, because the smart voters of Washington State had decided that marijuana could be used medicinally, they gave her a pack of medicinal joints for his sickness from the treatments. They had never smoked marijuana before but they found it immediately enjoyable. She smoked with him out of curiosity and just to be with him. She remembered them out on the back porch, very stoned, him saying, “The U.S. Government grows some nice dope.” They laughed at that. When they had smoked up the first pack of marijuana cigarettes and then the second pack, she felt too embarrassed to go back so soon to refill the prescription. So she said her prayers.

One day she was at the checkout line down at the Pay Less and her dentist was in line in front of her. The young girl at the cash register had a pair of headsets on and was bobbing to the music, running the magic UPS lines across the computer light. When she had rung up his total, the dentist pulled out his wallet and a neatly rolled joint fell conspicuously to the floor. She noticed it but pretended not to. When she got home she phoned and explained her situation. He invited her over to his house.

“Very exotic,” he explained as he put an ounce of green sticky bud in front of her. She offered to pay but he refused her money.

“I was crazy to think that the U.S. Government could have quality anything. That dentist grows some mean pot,” he laughed, and coughed. “Want to see an impression. of Telly Savalas?” He lifted his cap off his head exposing his baldness. He liked to joke about it. He never seemed down about it. He had even nicknamed the chemotherapy treatments *kimosabe*. “Got to get my *kimosabe*,” he’d say on the way to the hospital, both of them stoned to the bone.

She often wondered if anybody ever suspected that they smoked so much marijuana. They were stoned all the time. People would visit and they’d be in their stonedness looking out. No one ever commented. She suspected that people blamed the “cancer situation” for any personality quirks. It was fun being stoned around people who did not suspect. He called their condition “an inside joke.”

They became connoisseurs of all that was sensual—music, ice cream, light, laughter. Lighting a joint one early morning, handing it to her, and walking to the stereo in the living room, he put on a Willie Nelson album full blast and came back to bed and they both smoked the joint and listened to Willie sing, ate coffee Haagen-Dazs ice cream and had sex all day. It was the last great day. Soon after that day, he died, coughing blood.

She stood, seeing a lone sea gull reflected the sunlight. It seemed in some ways the longest ten months of her life, in others, the shortest.

His last words were, “The factory will take care of you, and I love you. I will always love you.”

They took care of her all right. They took too good of care of her. Especially after she

finally reported her cancer. They had even paid for his funeral, including the slick white marble headstone. Many people had come to the funeral, some she did not know, but the condolences were mostly the same, gray and away. She had seen something then, a mask covering so many of their faces. It crawled. She remembered looking around the cemetery and how all the white headstones stuck out like glaring ghosts. She would not be buried there. She did not like them.

She picked up the glass full of the deadly concoction she had created. Enough Valium, Ludes, and Vioxx to kill a horse, with a bit of Doctor Pepper for taste. Her cancer had taken a turn for the worse since he died. That was all right with her. What she was going to do would be considered terrorism by most, but it was truly an act of desperation, even an act of unselfishness, of concern for others who were sure to suffer the same fate. What did she have left? She drank the poison in one gulp, picked up the plastic box she had set next to her cigarettes, and walked back to the porch through the screen door. It slapped shut behind her. She watched the smoke rise from the three smokestacks and recalled her husband's image, his laugh. At that, she pushed the red button on the plastic box; it detonated the bombs that she had spent all night wiring at the factory. She watched the three smokestacks crumble in front of her and heard the explosion and saw the smoke rise. She lifted her eyes to heaven and bowed her head.

How to Make a Totem Pole

The world was falling down around us and nobody seemed to notice. It was not just the dot-com world but the whole damn world. I sat in my office playing with my pendulum balls that banged against each other, causing a soothing click that stirred a Pavlovian response making me want to do it more, waiting to be fired, waiting to hear my stock options were worth zilch, waiting for the end of the world.

There was nothing I could do except watch the mice, that I had never noticed before, scuttle between their holes in the state-of-the-art air conditioners that were never turned on in Seattle. I looked out my window at the awesome view that I had taken for granted: Elliott Bay; the Olympic Mountains rising out the placid water, snow still on the peaks; the busy business of the harbor, boats both mammoth and small, churning and sailing down below me; the arriving and departing of jets from Boeing and Sea-Tac airfields leaving calligraphic jet streams; sea gulls, ravens and geese bouncing on the breezes above the harbor. It was the first time I had noticed any of it in months. But there it was, a view that should never be ignored.

Down on the pier some Pacific Northwest Indians were exhibiting their expertise at carving a totem pole, people gathered around watching the skill at which the Indians used their axes, hatches and blades to slowly produce image on top of image from the large log. They worked with skill and veracity, wood chips flying and the group of people watching steadily grew as I watched from above. The Indians definitely enjoyed their work.

I had done a really dumb thing, not the first nor the last dumb thing I will do. This was dumber than dumb but when you're dealing with dumbness the only thing you can do is be dumber because otherwise it's just a bunch of frustration. So that was my law, be dumber than dumb if you're going to be dumb.

'Death and dumbness are all I see.' In fact, those were my exact words at the company meeting that was called to inject some morale into the troops. The troops actually needed an injection of heroin after half the company was fired because of a loss of confidence in tech stocks. We were a dot-com selling outdoor gear on line and we had not made a profit for three years, since our inception. Still until three months ago the stock was worth over a hundred dollars a share and most of the hundred and fifty staff were millionaires from stock options alone. Now the stock was worth about three hundred cents a share, enough to buy toilet paper. Most of the millionaires were bankrupt and fired just in time for the U.S. government to not allow personal bankruptcy declarations. The joke was on us and you couldn't help but feel that most of the world was smirking delightfully at our hard times. We deserved it. As an industry we had been rubbing everyone's face in it for too long. What could we do besides feel sorry for ourselves; nobody else was going feel sorry for us.

So Mork and Ork took a meeting. Espousing a "new agency order" and waving an American flag, they spoke to us like children...like children. These dumb guys, *dumber* than dumb, were talking dumb things. And the grand finale was a declaration that everything was all right—don't worry, be happy. This, to a group of people who, on a daily basis, watched millions of dollars evaporate. The company was folding; everybody

knew that. Why were they lying, and why were they now standing to leave. Why weren't they taking questions? Why ask why?

So I didn't, I just blurted the now infamous words, "All I see is death and dumbness." And then if that was not dumb enough, I continued to furiously attack Mork and Ork over the whole ordeal, denigrating their management skills, their business philosophy and even their sexual prowess. What I said flew from me so effortlessly that I cannot recall all of it. In my delirium I pounded my fist and with a theatrical flare stood and stormed out of the room. Dead, dumb silence followed.

Now I was back in my office clicking my balls wondering when the axe would fall. Nels, the programmer whom I worked with, stuck his head in and said, coyly, "Brave man," and then darted away. Why shouldn't I be brave? I was born in the home of the brave? That started me wondering about the similarities between brave and dumb, but it became too conceptual and I returned to the clicking balls. I had work to do, but I really did not. The only thing I really had to do was to wait for the proverbial other foot to drop. The heat was getting to me. The phone rang.

"You said what needed to be said," Margaret's voice whispered, the only woman who worked there that I ever considered getting butt naked with. "But I wouldn't have said it. I couldn't afford to lose my job. Do you know how bad the market is, how utterly disastrous? I had a friend who lost her job at Amazon and has been looking for six months. Finally after the foreclosure of her co-op she had to take a job in Akron, Ohio."

"Akron?" I burst out laughing and could not stop.

"It's not funny; it's bad out there," she warned.

"It's horrific in here." I kept laughing.

There was a silence and then she lilted, "Good luck."

If it is going to happen, why don't they just get it over with? Why were these clowns torturing me? Because they could. Maybe I should quit, but then I wouldn't be able to collect unemployment. I was no-hero. I had no pride. I felt fortunate for once in my life for being single. My getting fired would hurt nobody but myself. Just me, me, me, me. Juan, the mailroom man, walked into my office carrying two thin envelopes.

"Whatever happens just remember you have a life; Mork and Ork just have jobs," Juan said, the lowest man on the totem pole, the wisest in the office, handed me the envelopes, my monthly pay check in one of them. I had forgotten today was payday, a usually celebratory occasion.

Suddenly Mork and Ork bumbled in. They wore clown outfits, or was this my imagination? I looked at Juan to see if he noticed. He didn't seem to, just as Mork and Ork did not seem to notice him. They shut the door behind them, apparently not even noticing Juan was there.

"Do you mind if we talk to you?" Mork said, smiling dumbly with big red lips, blackened teeth and bulbous nose, trying to make me laugh.

"Do you mind if they talk to me, Juan?" I asked.

“Juan, Juan, Juan?” Ork tripped over his over-sized clown shoes totally surprised by Juan’s presence. He honked his prank horn.

Juan looked at both of them, then at me. He smiled and left, winking at me. Did he see what I saw?

“How can I help you clowns?” I asked, trying to control my sarcasm, and laughter. I had nothing to lose. I started to wrap my mind around these kings in no clothes. Yes, I was to be fired and since I was no longer under their rule, my eyes were opened and my rancor overflowing. They looked at me as if I was supposed to fire myself.

“Yes, well, um, Marty, I think we’re going to have to let you go. It’s just not good for morale having you around. We want to start on fresh soil now. I think we’re going to have to let you go,” Mork repeated, confused, his big floppy ears jiggling.

“You think?” I asked. “Am I or am I not fired?”

“You are fired,” Ork stepped in and said forcefully and then honked his horn, “with six months severance. We’re sorry but now is the time we need high morale, single mindedness, and dedication to propel us to the top again.”

I whistled the big-top tune and turned and looked at the breathtaking view, again. “Yes you do,” I finally said never looking at them again.

They left tripping and hitting each other over the head with giant foam rubber bananas. I was sad, I was ecstatic, I was relieved, I was worried, I was afraid, I was happy, I cried, I laughed, I got drunk, I danced, I packed my office in a slow, fast way. A slow parade of compatriots shuffled by to pay their respect. They all looked as I used to look, fear in their eyes. The mice scrambled to their hole, scared of all the activity; soon they would have my office to themselves. I left death and dumbness via the elevator, no more dot-com millionaire, no more a man with a future. If I had a family I might never have told them and perhaps committed an ingenious suicide so they would get the insurance money. But I did not have a family and I did not have a job. I had nothing, but for some reason as I stepped onto Pike Street the smell of the Puget Sound wafted through me filling me with its bountiful mirth, the Pacific Northwest Indians carving the log into a totem pole echoed from the pier, the smell of fish from the Market torched my olfactory nerves, and a sense of peace gave me relief I had not felt in years.

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