

PROLOGUE

The Fish Stick King of Love Canal

Many moons ago, a fisherman slogged out along his trawler's frozen steel mast until he was standing high above the eerily glowing gray water of Love Canal. Icy daggers of rain bounced off his cracked yellow slicker and white-bearded face as he decided that, yes, it was finally time to end his life and jump.

This fisherman, who was known around the docks as Mr. Pawl, was clearly unhappy. In fact, he was the single most unhappy fisherman on all seven of the high seas and all eleven of the lower canals. You see, he had lost his first wife to a freak passenger seat airbag accident¹, and his second wife had fallen victim to a bad can of button mushrooms with botulism². In an effort not to dwell on his misfortunes, Mr. Pawl took a third bride. This proved to be a fruitful union, and soon, Mr. Pawl was the proud father of an apple-cheeked, dark-eyed, rotund baby girl.

Unfortunately for Mr. Pawl, while his little girl was still a mere infant, she was kidnapped by a vicious gang of cotton-candy-hating, feral circus clowns³. After months of negotiations, Mr. Pawl was unable to secure

¹ You don't want to know the gory details, but let's just say Mr. Pawl's first wife was not wearing her seatbelt or a crash helmet.

² Hey, it happens. Not just to wives of Mr. Pawl, but also to children who don't listen to their parents and eat without washing their hands first.

³ So, next time you see a clown wandering around your local mall, take my advice and head for ^{the} hills. Run! Fast! Hurry!

his daughter's release, and alas, soon thereafter, his lovely third wife abandoned him.

And if that wasn't bad enough, she absconded⁴ with his secret fish stick recipe. This was a huge blow, because Mr. Pawl had a horrible memory and only wrote the recipe down once, years earlier, on the back of a used facial tissue. And now, without his used tissue and/or his wife, Mr. Pawl felt cursed, lost, and alone.

"Dagblammit!"⁵ Mr. Pawl screamed to the heavens.

Of course, Mr. Pawl could never forget how he'd coax all those little baby fishies into their small, rectangular homes, and then how he'd cheer for them as they grew into the perfect stick shape to fit side-by-side in those cardboard boxes found in the freezer sections of most supermarkets. But for the life of him, he could not remember the secret method he used to get all those salty-sweet, crunchy breadcrumbs to cling to the sides of the fishies. He had tried feeding breadcrumbs to his rectangular fishies, but that just left a crumbly, sticky, fecal⁶ residue on the bottom of his fish tanks and the shiny, naked fishies shivering in the cold water without their tasty, breadcrumb coats.

What was a poor fisherman to do? In this case, Mr. Pawl reckoned that throwing himself into the deep blue sea was his best option. That then, is exactly why, at this very moment, Mr. Pawl was throwing himself into the turbulent, icy, putrid waters of Love Canal.

⁴ A fancy version of stealing that involves thievery, ^{treachery}, and a fishery.

⁵ Dagblammit is a nice way to say, Oh, Fudge To Yo' Mama!

Mr. Pawl edged to the tip of the steel drag mast⁷. From where he stood, he could see nothing but gray water, gray clouds, gray rain. Yet, it's worth noting that life for Mr. Pawl had not always been this gray. He used to be young and happy and filled with a certain *joie de vivre*⁸. At fish-fries all along Love Canal, he could regularly be found wearing lampshades on his head, juggling live flounders, and performing other wacky life-of-the-party⁹ stunts.

Oh, what an appetite for life Mr. Pawl once had! He'd thrill at the stench of decaying, week-old catfish! He'd relish the deep, gurgling cry of two manatees cavorting at twelve fathoms! He'd love the joy of slopping around barefoot in stinky fish heads, slimy fish guts, and bloodied salt water!

"Oo-la-la!" he'd exclaim as he munched on raw fish eyes, swirling them around in his mouth like sourballs, until he could take it no longer and he'd *chomp-chomp-chomp* on them until they burst onto his tongue with the salty-sweet flavor of squishy ocular¹⁰ fluid. Of course, his greatest pleasure came from taking freshly chopped fish heads and putting them between two slices of soft Wonder bread, adding just a pinch of mayo, and *crunch-crunch!* Yumm-o!

⁶ *Fecal* is a nice way to say *number two*.

⁷ A trawler is not a sailing vessel, but it has large steel masts that drag otter boards and huge fishnets.

⁸ A French term that literally means joy of life, but really means being hap-hap-happy, which is a state of being that is foreign to most French speaking peoples!

⁹ It is commonly known that the single easiest way to become the life-of-the-party is to juggle live flounder and wear lampshades on your head, especially if you are a sailor.

It was during this happy, but messy period of his life that Mr. P. felt compelled to come up with a new way to eat fish. And only a few weeks later, VOILA, he concocted the magnificent idea of stick-shaped fish. Yes, fish sticks were his brainchild. His! No one else's but his! His!! His!!!

Okay, yes, sure, Mr. P. was also the genius behind tartar sauce¹¹. Yet, did he need credit for inventing the number one fish-related condiment? No! He was happy being known as the father of fish sticks and didn't care about the millions of dollars that were rightfully his from tartar sauce royalties¹². He never really cared about money. He just wanted a wife or child to love, and maybe, just maybe, to be loved as well.

But there was no love in his life, only loss. Mr. Pawl had worked hard for many decades, and what did he have to show for it? Nothing. Nothing, except his creaky 47-foot trawler, which was constantly leaking and smelled of dead blowfish. Mr. Pawl was a failure as a fisherman. The only thing he'd been able to catch all year was a cold. Mr. Pawl was at the end of his 130-pound test, fluorocarbon, high-impact, monofilament fishing line¹³ and ready to end it all by jumping into the cold, dark sea.

¹⁰ *Ocular* means *relating to the eye*, and lest we forget, fish eyes are a surprisingly tasty delicacy in many nations.

¹¹ Before Mr. Pawl, no one had ever thought of scraping the tartar off their teeth and making a creamy sauce out of it.

¹² These are the Mongol King and Queen of Tartar, who support their kingdom by making a few pennies every time you dip a piece of fried fish into a vat of tartar sauce.

¹³ Not to be confused with 129-pound monofilament, which is used only by amateur fishermen who don't know their ashtrays from their elbows

So, without further ado, he flung his body into the damp air and waited for the brittle crack of his spine snapping as he hit the brutal, briny waves.

But there was no *crack!* No spinal *snap!* Only a soft *whoosh* as a huge gust of wind blew Mr. P. right back to where he had been standing just milliseconds earlier, on his trawler's frozen steel mast.

Still depressed and now furious that he couldn't even succeed at killing himself, Mr. Pawl shook his head and turned around. This time, with the wind at his back, he knew he would surely succeed.

Once again, Mr. Pawl readied himself to jump. It was then, as he faced the other side of the canal for the first time all day, that Mr. Pawl saw something strange.

A box. Bobbing on the water's surface. It was a shoe box, wrapped in a clear plastic bag. And there was a sound coming from the shoebox. A gurgling. A crying. The box seemed to contain something that was alive

What could it be? A new kind of wailing sea-shoe?

Mr. P. scurried down the mast and ran to the starboard side--or was it the port side¹⁴? Mr. Pawl was never very good at differentiating between the two sides of his boat¹⁵. Either way, Mr. P. sprinted to the side closest to the floating box. He secured himself to the edge of the boat and reached out with the sharp tip of his fisherman's hook.

¹⁴ The two sides of a boat are not called *right* or *left*, and if you call them that, the maritime police will arrest you and lock you up in a room with a dead octopus for eternity or even longer.

Now, fishermen's hooks are designed to impale fish, not gently scoop up babies, so it was a tricky procedure. But even though he was not the world's greatest fisherman, he had not been out at sea for so many years without at least picking up some excellent hooking skills. Thus, with one graceful sweep of his arms, Mr. P. was able to hook the plastic handle of the bag holding the shoe box.

Ever so carefully, Mr. Pawl eased the box closer and closer to his trawler. When it floated within arm's length, Mr. P. grabbed, the box, opened it and was able to see the contents.

It was a baby! A shivering pink infant wrapped in a seaweedy-slick cloth. The winds of fate had rescued Mr. P. so that he might save this poor child. Maybe his life wasn't cursed after all.

Mr. Pawl took the baby in his arms and hugged him. As he felt the baby's warm breath caress his cheek, he fantasized about raising the child as his own.

Yet, as Mr. Pawl stared down at his precious cargo, he knew he couldn't keep the child. Surely, this baby's parents would be missing him something fierce. Keeping the infant would be a terribly selfish act. He had to track down the child's parents and give him back.

¹⁵ The main thing Mr. Pawl knew about the sides of a boat is that one should never lean over either side and pee into the wind, because that's not very sanitary for you or the fishies.

Mr. Pawl motored straight back to the harbor. Once he docked his trawler and deoboated¹⁶, he searched everywhere for posted signs featuring pictures of the baby. He even went to the Love Canal Convenience Mart and looked on the back of all the milk cartons, but to no avail.

After several hours of futilely searching for the child's parents, Mr. Pawl gave up and returned to his trawler with his newfound cargo. The child didn't seem to belong to anyone. He must be an orphan.

An orphan! Why hadn't he thought of that sooner?! Mr. Pawl picked up the sleeping babe and looked at him. Suddenly, the child spit out a trickle of seawater, laughed, and opened his sparkling sea-green eyes.

Mr. Pawl was smitten. He completely forgot about losing his fish stick fortune. Suddenly, he had a new reason to live. He knew what he had to do

Mr. Pawl would raise the little boy as his own. He lifted the baby out of the shoebox and held him against his chest. Tiny droplets of baby vomit spurted out of the child's mouth and formed a foamy rivulet down Mr. P's cracked yellow slicker.

As he held the child, Mr. Pawl felt a large lump in the baby's diapers. Ooh, the stench was worse than a ton of decaying chum and fish carcasses! For a tiny human being, this child had the potent digestive system of a large brontosaurus.

¹⁶ This is like deplaning, derailling, or defacing, but from a boat and not from a plane, rail, or face.

But Mr. Pawl was nonplussed¹⁷. He brought the child and his shoebox down the stairs of the trawler and into the galley. Even if he only had been a father for a short time, Mr. Pawl was still a master at diaper removal. As Mr. Pawl slid the disposable diaper off the purpley-pink child, he noticed something. This baby didn't have male genitalia¹⁸ like most boys.

In fact, this baby wasn't a boy at all. Mr. Pawl had rescued a girl. A beautiful, little baby girl with five cute, little webbed fingers on each hand and five cute, little webbed toes on each foot.

Most people might have been disgusted or shocked by webbed feet and toes, but not Mr. Pawl!

Mr. Pawl was a fisherman. He had spent his life among web-footed creatures, and he admired their ability to move so effortlessly through the water. Mr. Pawl firmly believed that, just because someone looked a little different or had a small peculiarity, such as webbed feet or hands, it was wrong to judge them. Mr. Pawl knew that all human beings are grotesque in their own peculiar ways. Though many people might not have webbed feet, per se, most probably have some other abnormality, such as belly button lint balls or stinky, cheesy¹⁹ armpits. As a result, people should not judge others; they should merely accept them for who they are and love them.

¹⁷ The opposite of being plussed, which means you are not affected by things and have put a new addition onto your home or trawler.

¹⁸ Don't ask, you know.

¹⁹ Not phony or fake cheesy, but stringy mozzarella cheesy.

That is exactly what Mr. Pawl did with the baby girl he'd fished from the ocean. He loved her as if she were²⁰ his own daughter.

One dilemma remained. What, oh what, would he call her? He knew this special child needed a special name.

Mr. Pawl racked his brains, but still, he couldn't think of one decent name for his beautiful baby. As he stared at her cardboard shoe box, he noticed some words printed on the top: Joan David.

He thought to himself, Hmmm. David is a nice name. That's it! David! Well, actually, David's not really a girl's name. Let's see. What about Joan? Hmmm . Yeah . Joan . Joan is a pretty name. I'll name her Joan!"

And that is how the green-eyed, web-toed, web-fingered baby in Mr. Pawl's arms came to be known as Joan.

²⁰ You would think this word should be *was*, but it is supposed to be *were*, because it is tense and rather subjunctive. If you don't believe me, ask your English teacher.

ANNOTATOR'S NOTE

I, Prof. Odysseus Malodorus, have dedicated my life to trekking the globe in search of the world's most profound grotesqueries²¹. I have amassed hundreds of notebooks and journals filled with sketches and stories documenting the existence of many of the world's most bizarre freaks²². For if a human or even non-human monstrosity is rumored to exist, I believe it is my destiny to hunt these creatures down, and, if they are being taunted and/or maltreated, safeguard their existence.

Even though this kind of freak-chasing sounds safer than the cut-throat atmosphere of the academic world that most professors inhabit, it is not. As the world's premiere authority on freaks, I must face death on a daily basis.

Thus, there's a mighty good chance I may be missing, lost or even dead by the time of this book's publication. Yet, please rest assured, no matter what state²³ of jeopardy or decomposition my body may be in, one thing remains certain. All of the events detailed herein are either real occurrences that I have personally witnessed or else, they are true incidents that other legitimate sources have recounted directly to me.

²¹ Mutants, monstrosities and just plain weird looking school-teachers.

²² Such as the Minnetonka Milk-Maid, Wanda Schwartz, who had quadruplets and four-matching functional mammary glands.

²³ There is actually a good chance I will be stuck in the state of Arkansas since there is such a high percentage of freaks there.

*Finally, please note that just because the characters contained herein do horribly grotesque acts, does not mean that you should run out naked in your backyard and try to duplicate these horribly grotesque acts, that is, even if you could. In fact, if any readers of this text even think of attempting to duplicate any of the grotesque oddities contained herein, there will be grave repercussions²⁴. Yes, before you can say, **Team Malodorus, LLC**, its lawyers will hunt you down, sue you for breaking and entering my story, move into your home, and eat all the good cheese in your refrigerator.*

*This book is already written. Your life is still an unfinished text. Make it interesting, fresh and grotesque in your own personal way! Live your life according to what you believe is right and wrong and not according to what some freaking character in a book says or does. Use your imagination to create your own truly grotesque adventures, instead of stealing those featured in **Tales of the Truly Grotesque**.*

-- Stay Malodorus and Truly Grotesque,

Prof. Odysseus Malodorus, B.S., M.S., Ph.D.

P.S. - I must take a moment to thank Creepy Little Productions for having the vision and the courage to publish this book. Madame M., your artistic genius is much appreciated. Without your ability to

²⁴ It is also rumored that Prof. Malodorus himself or a member of Team Malodorus, LLC, may arrive at your home and give you the longest TIME-OUT in

take my scratchy field sketches and turn them into genuine works of art, this book would not have been possible. Furthermore, this manuscript profited from the keen editorial eye and brilliant mind of the Chairwoman of the Board of Team Malodorus, LLC, Shana Smith. Many thanks and many hugs and kisses

P.P.S. - Even though I am constantly on the move, if you want to try to reach me, your best bet is to go to www.TrulyGrotesque.com.