Mr. Abe Story

Tom O’Connor*
Halfway down the dock now this Duffy dude pull him a pack of lifesavers from out his pocket. I'm on shore, watching the whole thing, and he don't know it. Then I see him put one them candy in his mouth, take two more out, and put one in the back of each his shoe. Then he kick his tip toe around — poking at the dock like he trying to get them candy to a easy spot in his foot. Then he go down the dock and git in the boat like nothing happen.

Now I know Duffy dumb. He nineteen and act like he only twelve. He big and fat and look like Baby Huey. Duffy just along because he T.C.'s brother.

Now T.C. come up behind me. He see what Duffy do. He have two spear gun and a airtank in his hand and he say, "What did Duffy just do?"

I say nothing so he say, "Did that idiot just put some lifesavers in his tennis shoes?"

I say, "Uh-huh."

And he say, "I don't believe he did that. I can't believe he's so stupid sometimes."

Well, T.C. go on down the dock as if he going to find out why his brother act so dumb. Now when he git halfway down the dock he stop too. Only he looking at the boat like he didn't know it not something fancy.

He look back at me and yell, "This boat looks like it's going to fall apart. Do you think it will make it?"

I say, "Uh-huh," kind of loud, but I don't think he too happy all a sudden. He white anyway, but now he real white. He twenty-two --- big too, only T.C. not fat — but I don't think he ready for one of Mr. Abe's trips. I think T.C. spend too much time in school.

Anyway, it good that Mr. Abe come catch up to us when he do (his leg git all broke up awhile back so he got crutches and walk kind of slow). Well he know what bugging T.C. right off, and he know how to git him not to worry about the fact the boat look like it gonna sink where it set.

"Of course it will make it. Jesus Christ. Do you think I would cross this part of the ocean, in this kind of weather, in a boat that I didn't think was sea-worthy?" Then he laugh because we all know he would. Mr. Abe almost been dead a couple of time, and now he feel so lucky to be alive that the scare of death don't slow him down no more.
"Let me tell you something," Mr. Abe go on, "this part of the ocean, from Pompano Beach here to Bimini crosses over the Devil's Triangle." He say this, real scary like, to make fun of the fact that T.C. afraid so T.C. have to act like he ain't. And it work. T.C. just walk on down the dock and clam into the boat, while Mr. Abe and me come up from behind.

I been to no ocean either. I just glad the way the air smell — like salt and bleach and fish and weed all roll into one — and I happy the ocean big and full of wave. But when we git to the boat I can't say T.C. don't have himself a point. Mr. Abe, he find us a old boat. But it more old looking than it is old, and maybe Mr. Abe right too. He own a used-car lot now for twenty-five year, and he been going over to the Bahama now at least once a year for just as long. He know what's going down.

Well, anyhow now, we on the boat too and we there just in time to see T.C. jump all over Duffy butt about them candy.

"Duffy," T.C. say, real firm like, like he his father or something, "why did you put those lifesavers in your shoes?"

Duffy look like he betray, like he know that T.C. going to razz him in front of us, so he don't say nothing. He just google eye us, so T.C. say again, "Duffy, why did you put those lifesavers in your shoes?"

"Why?" Duffy say.

"Because I want to know why you do such stupid things," T.C. say, kind of loud.

Mr. Abe guess what's going on, and he say, "He probably did it because I told him in the van that his feet stink."

Then Duffy pipe up to defend himself. He say, "My shoes smell because I don't wear any socks, and my feet sweat."

Then T.C. say, "So why did you put the lifesavers in your shoes?"

"T.C! So they'll melt and my shoes won't smell," Baby Huey say, like we all suppose to know.

T.C. smile even when he mad. He a computer salesman now. He use to work for Mr. Abe too — selling car at the lot. Mr. Abe taught T.C. how to be a real good salesman. Them two so slick and smooth when they git to selling something, it like they tongue just kind of reach out and lick your wallet clean before you know what's happening. Now T.C. out of college and find himself a high paying job where he wear a tie and carry a brief case. He only come around the lot to see Mr. Abe and me because we all still good friends.

Anyway, Mr. Abe laugh, and T.C. keep on and on teasing his poor brother about the dumb thing he do, and no one say another word about the boat.

I been fixing car for Abe Johnson now for twenty years. I know better than to think we going first class. I go sit down and I see the chair that I pick is a metal card-table chair. It's not really a boat seat. It a little tin chair that git welded on. It strong and all, and it has a old, red, looks like a rocking chair cushion on it that makes it soft and all — I mean, it just as good a place to sit as any.

But I notice when I sit down that the chair leans. Now I know it had to be Mr. Abe who weld the chair on because the top of the chair is weld to the side of the boat. To do that you had to tip the chair a bit, and the only one I know who would
tip a chair to weld it more strong is Mr. Abe. He do things like that. If you don't mind leaning the seat's fine.

And I don't mind. It give me a better sight of the ocean. In my fifty years of living I never did learn how to swim. Most the time I stay away from places I could drown. But I glad I decide to see the ocean now. The wind's blowing hard enough to make white caps on the waves. Seaweed and foam gathers on the docks and buoys. I hear the waves bounce against the boat and the other boats along the shore. I hear the wind and the seagulls. I just kind of feel the whole swell of the ocean beneath me — and it takes me back a bit. I glad I came.

Well now, it don't take long to pack everything up. Only T.C. and Mr. Abe is going scuba diving. I can't swim and Duffy don't want in no water where a shark be. We come to sit in the sun and fish. So it ain't long for we all set to take off. Mr. Abe git the motor going, T.C. untie the boat and it still ain't a raining.

As soon as we shove off and git going a bit the boat begin to bounce up and down and sound like a big tree about to split in half. This git T.C. going again and he tell Mr. Abe maybe he ought to slow down.

"What's the matter? Are you getting nervous again?" Mr. Abe yell down to T.C. from up where the steering wheel be. T.C. is sitting in the chair that's next to the top of the cabin, where Mr. Abe at. So Mr. Abe looking almost straight down at T.C. and he say down to him, "What's wrong, can't you swim?"

"I can't," Duffy say, from back the boat. He standing up, holding on the back rail, and it just kind of hit us all at the same time that Duffy seated as hell.

Everyone start laughing and T.C. tell him, "You could learn to swim if you weren't so stupid." T.C. say this forgetting the fact I can't swim either. He only mean to his brother, and that because T.C. still too proud to accept the fact that Duffy's brain run on only one piston.

"Don't worry Duffy," Mr. Abe say down, "I'll go a little slower, but we're not going in the water either way. Not while I'm the captain."

“What if the engine breaks?” Once Duffy git going on something he don't want to stop. But Mr. Abe don't say nothing, and soon enough we all back to looking at the water.

Mr. Abe invite me along on these trips every year but I never go. Until this year. For some reason I just felt I had to go and see what it's all about. Duffy about as sharp as a marble, and T.C.'s always riding him about something, and the boat's old — but I still happy. The ocean just seem so big it like it too big to even know we here. I feel sneaky, like I getting away with something.

Well now, I tell you, in a little while the sky turn a greyish green and a bunch them tornado clouds — the swirly kind — roll in and all a sudden I ain't feeling too sneaky no more.

And that’s when we all see it. Way off to one side now one ot them clouds come down out the sky and dip into the water. It must be ten mile off, but we all see how it lift the water up out the ocean then move itself around like a big mountain looking for something to chomp on.

“What the hell is that?” T.C. say.
"It's a waterspout. A tornado in the water," Mr. Abe say.

"Jesus," Duffy say, his eye gifting all big and everything, "look at the size of that. What would happen if we drove into it?"

"We don't want to drive into it," Mr. Abe say.

"But what if we did?"

"It would ruin our trip, let me tell you." A minute later another cloud drop down and another waterspout takes shape a ways behind us and that when Mr. Abe let go the steering wheel for a minute. He hobble down into the cabin, come up with four lifejackets, throw one at the each of us and yell, "Get those lifejackets on."

He don't have to tell me twice. I scared and I ain't shame to say so. I throw mine on and grab hold that metal chair like I got nine hands. If I get washed out the boat and drown it won't be because I wasn't hanging on tight enough. But T.C. and Baby Huey, they just stand there dumb, holding onto they jackets and looking at each other.

"Put on those jackets!" Mr. Abe have to yell again.

"What for?" Duffy yell from back the boat.

"Just put it on."

"You mean we might go in the water?"

"We might," Mr. Abe say.

"We can't go in the water. There are sharks in the water."

Mr. Abe look down at T.C. but he yell at Duffy, "Just keep those tennis shoes on Duffy. Those sharks won't come near you."

Well now, that all Duffy need to hear, and as soon as he start throwing his jacket on T.C. do the same thing. Only now he not smiling.

Well that old boat shake and creak and bounce up and down splashing water all over the deck. I think the boat lose some more paint but other than that it hold okay and it ain't long before things settle down again. That's the whole thing about the ocean. It big and bad but it don't know you there. Them waterspouts never came near us. Mr. Abe just keep on keeping along and soon them things just fly right back up in the old sky like nothing happen. Couldn't be more than twenty minutes later them tornado clouds move out and the weather break a bit and the water settle down and we take off our lifejackets.

Everyone save Duffy. He can't stop talking about how lucky we is long enough to unhook his straps. He keep on and on about how we almost die, and how them tornados would have tore us up if we drove into them and about how he wouldn't like having his leg hanging down in the water waiting for no shark to eat. Finally Duffy say to Mr. Abe, "Have you ever seen one of those things before?"

Mr. Abe cool. "Oh yeah, a few times now."

"Did you ever think you were going to die?"

And that when Mr. Abe tell his story.

Only it ain't no ocean story. Mr. Abe tell the time he hit by the car while riding his bike — the time his leg git broken. He say he turn around and see this car come flying over the hill behind him at about eighty mle an hour. That, he say, the time he thought he gonna die.
"Did it hurt?" Baby Huey ask, standing there like the Great Pumpkin with his orange lifejacket on.

"Hey, let me tell you something. It didn't even start to hurt until after I got out of the hospital."

The sun is out a little by now and the boat is running smooth so Mr. Abe turn around in his chair and looks down at the three of us. The boat ain't bouncing no more so Duffy has let go the back rail and he standing almost right between where T.C. and me be sitting. Mr. Abe has himself a perfect audience so he go on about how, when he git out the wheelchair and tried to walk on his leg — that's when he start feeling pain. He say it hurt so bad he think the doctors leave a scalpel in his ankle or something. He say one leg from the knee to the ankle came out shorter than the other and now all the world seem to slant. Inside his leg he can feel bone grind on bone and everytime he walk his whole leg shake with pain. One these days, he say, he gonna slice open his leg with a razor blade and reach inside and see if he can't find with his fingers the cause a what bugging him so. One the reasons he like scuba diving so much is because walking hurts. Even now, five years later.

Well, I sitting there on that little tin chair with that red cushion listening to Mr. Abe and looking at the big Baby Huey and his brother, and that's when I notice something. Something about T.C. He just sits there, not saying nothing. Now Duffy is all big eyed and quiet with the thought of broken legs and shark teeth. But T.C.'s look's different. I think something about that waterspout git to him. Or maybe now he knows that he act as scared and dumb as Duffy. I don't know. But looking at him I can tell his brain has just got run over by something. I think it's gonna be awhile before he figures out what hit him, and the pain settles in, and he has to start learning to think of other things.

Me, I git back to looking at the ocean. The water seems so much bluer, now that the sun is coming out.