

# SPARTINA



*John Casey*



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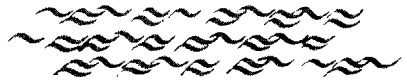
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*Also by John Casey*

An American Romance  
Testimony and Demeanor

***SPARTINA***





**D**ick Pierce swung the bait barrel off his wharf into his work skiff. He cast off and began to scull down Pierce Creek. He built his skiffs with an oarlock socket on the transom. He had to tell most buyers what it was for. In fact sculling was a necessity for him—this far up the creek it was too narrow to row and, except at high water, too shallow to put the outboard down.

The tide was still dumping and he let her drift a bit. A spider's strand broke against his forehead. A light mist came off the water but dissolved as soon as it got above the black banks. Dick loved the salt marsh. Under the spartina there was black earth richer than any farmland, but useless to farmers on account of the salt. Only the spartinas thrived in the salt flood, shut themselves against the salt but drank the water. Smart grass. If he ever got his big boat built he might just call her *Spartina*, though he ought to call her after his wife.

He always started off these fair early-summer days in a mood as calm and bright as the surface of the water. Everything was lit up silver and rose—the dew, the spider's webs, the puffs of mist, even the damp backs of the dunes on the barrier beach that divided the salt ponds, the marsh, and the creeks from the sea.

Where Pierce Creek joined up with Sawtooth Creek he let the outboard down and cranked it up. He could see the breachway and through the breachway the horizon, a pale streak. The skiff

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climbed onto a plane with ease. Eighteen-foot, but she was as light as any sixteen-footer, and almost as narrow. She held as much as clunkier skiffs, he didn't clutter up the inside with knees or thwarts. She was extraordinarily high in the prow; he didn't mind taking her out in moderate seas. The only thing he couldn't do was run a deep trawl of pots way offshore. And that's where most of the lobster were in summer. He dared go twenty miles out, but it wouldn't do him any good without the heavy machinery to haul even a single trawl of heavy pots and heavy warp.

Dick throttled down as he went past Sawtooth Island to line up for the run through the breachway. He could see the line of surf on the sandbar just outside the mouth. He nipped through and turned hard to starboard to follow the tidal channel around the sand. He cut back to port, feeling the chine and the skegs catch and hold through the turn, and so out onto the glassy swell; for all his troubles, his skiff was sinless, and her sweetness sweetened him.

He soured a little after he'd pulled ten pots—trash in all but two—spider crabs and whelks. A fat two-pound tautog which he kept for bait. After he'd pulled a few more empty pots he began to think of the tautog as supper. Things looked up—three small keepers, one more questionable. He put the gauge on it and threw it back. Five for twenty. The kind of day he'd put up with in August but not in early June. He ate half of his cheese sandwich and drank half of his thermos of hot milk and coffee. He considered whether it would be worthwhile moving some pots to a deeper hole. It was a couple of miles away, might have someone's pots there already. And that hole was more frequented by sport fishermen who weren't above pulling a pot if the striped bass weren't biting.

Dick had caught a pair of them at it once. He'd come round the rock just in time to see them drop his pot overboard. A college kid and his girlfriend in a deluxe Boston Whaler, all white fiberglass, white vinyl rubrails, and chrome rodholders. Dick had come alongside, jumped into their boat with his six-pronged grapple in his hand. He swung it against the kid's outboard casing, cracking the plastic.

Dick said, "I see you near one of my pots again, I'll put this through your goddamn hand."

The kid said, "I was just taking a look."

The girl said, "You're crazy."

Dick got back in his own boat. The girl wrote down Dick's boat number, cranked up her engine, and left.

It turned out it was the girl's boat. Her father sent Dick a bill for the engine casing. Dick sent it back with a note. "Your daughter and her boyfriend pulled one of my pots. That is stealing."

The father called him up. That was when Dick still had his phone.

"Mr. Pierce, my daughter tells me she and her boyfriend didn't take anything. Is that correct?"

Dick said, "They pulled my lobster pot."

"They may have pulled your pot, but they didn't take anything. You threatened them. You do that again, I'll have you charged with assault with a deadly weapon."

Dick said, "Go to hell."

The father was still talking when Dick hung up.

Some time later Dick went to Westerly on his annual round of banks. While he was waiting to see the loan officer, a man came up to him and said, "Mr. Pierce?"

Dick got to his feet and said, "Yes."

"Mr. Pierce," the man said, and Dick recognized the voice. "I've had a look at your loan application. If you'd care to step into my office . . ."



Dick thought of his application. The list of his jobs, the crews he'd quit, the crew he'd been fired from. His house. His mortgage. His wife's job as a piecework crab picker. His puny income from lobstering and quahogging. His pickup he was still paying for. His claim that his half-built big boat was worth forty thousand. His power tools . . .

Dick said, "Give me back the application."

The man said, "Are you saying you wish to withdraw your—"

Dick said, "Yes."

The man sent a secretary out with the form. Dick went around to the Hospital Trust, Old Stone Bank, Columbus. Nothing doing. At Rhode Island Federal Savings & Loan he got a woman loan officer. She suggested he get someone to cosign. Then they'd consider giving him half what he asked. At 17½ percent. On ten thousand dollars that was 1,750. Unless he built someone else a boat, he couldn't do it. If he built someone else a boat, then he wouldn't get his own boat built.

The woman said, "You're a family of four. If you depreciated your tools and your workplace—you work at home, right?—you could qualify for certain assistance programs for your family—"

Dick said, "Welfare?"

The woman took a breath and said, "Yes."

Dick didn't get angry with her. If she'd been slick, young, sure of herself, crossed her legs with a little scratch of nylon on nylon as she leaned forward, he might have blown up. But this woman wasn't sure of herself, was trying to be nice. Her cheap navy-blue jacket, the unevenly crushed ruffles of her blouse, the way she picked at the frayed leather corner of her desk blotter—were all awkward and nice. Dick said, "I know you're trying to help." The woman started to say something, Dick went ahead. "From what I've heard, welfare people come round to inspect your house. I've just told four banks more than I care to about my life. In the

second place, I've got a half-built fishing boat in my backyard. I don't mean a little dinghy. She's over fifty foot long, eighteen-foot beam. She's damn near the size of my house. The welfare people could see she's worth thousands and thousands of dollars. The wood and hardware alone. Even half built she's worth more than welfare allows. But I can't get anyone from a bank to come look at her, I can't get you to ask someone who knows half a thing about boats to tell you she's already worth more than I'm asking to borrow. You could ask Joxer Goode, he owns the crab plant—"

The woman said, "I know about Mr. Goode. . . ."

Dick said, "If I had a boat it wouldn't be a question of risk, I could sign up with Joxer Goode and haul red crabs. There are boats not much bigger than mine bring in twenty thousand dollars' worth of red crabs two and three times a summer. Joxer Goode has contracts in Providence and Boston, pretty soon he'll be shipping to New York City. His crabmeat sells at half the price of lobster, restaurants love his crabmeat, he's going to get rich. And the boats supplying him are going to make good money. He needs more boats, he can't get enough lobstermen to put out for crabs. They're stuck in their ways, and some of them are scared to go all the way out to the edge of the shelf. I'm ready to go. I need twenty thousand dollars and before next summer is over I could pay you your 17½ percent. That's just on crabs. On the way out and on the way back I could stick a few swordfish. At four fifty, five dollars a pound, average size two hundred pounds, that's nearly a thousand dollars a fish. I'd have to be missing both arms if I couldn't bring in an extra ten thousand from swordfish."

Dick pulled out the glossy green-and-white flyer he'd picked up in the bank lobby. He turned to the page with green cartoons. There was a house, a kid in a cap and gown holding a diploma with dollar signs flying around his head, and there was a big

motorboat. Dick pointed to the caption: "Let us help your dream come true."

The woman looked genuinely sad. Dick said, "Fishing-boat captains who own their own boats make around forty thousand a year. I've been on their crews, I've built two of their boats when I worked in the boatyard. I've been on the water my whole life. I could be making good money, and you tell me to go on welfare."

The woman said, "If it was up to me . . ."

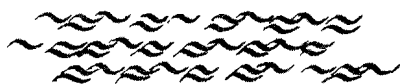
"Yeah, okay, you don't hear me cussing you. It's the way it works—when I've got the money, the bank'll lend me the money."

The woman squared up her desk blotter with her fingers. Dick said, "Thank you."

The woman said, "Have you thought of asking Mr. Goode to help you finance your boat?"

"Oh yeah. One of these days he might get time to take a look." Dick thought he'd talked enough for that day. He said thank you again and left before he got into the story of his miscue with Joxer Goode. He got into his pickup and got out of Westerly. He felt a sludge of depression. The pickup backfired as he slowed down for a light, reminding him he'd have to put in a new muffler. At least he hadn't got mad at anyone this trip, not so he said anything drastic.

Now, drifting on the swell, he decided to leave his pots where they were. He'd spend the afternoon tonging until he had enough quahogs to make the trip to the shellfish store in Wickford worthwhile. The quahogs put him in mind of steamers—summer prices had begun, and he had a scheme for steamers that would bring him several satisfactions. The moon was right, the tides were right. There was a risk, but if he pulled it off it would make up for a lot.



**D**ick had had this plan ever since a Natural Resources officer had run him out of the bird sanctuary. Dick had dug steamers on the inside beach of Crescent Pond his whole life. When they set up the bird sanctuary Dick was all for it; it meant the salt marsh would be pretty well preserved, from Sawtooth Creek all the way to the Green Hill restaurant. Dick still owned the sliver of marsh between Pierce Creek and Sawtooth Creek and he could still shoot ducks and geese on that edge of the sanctuary. Clamming was allowed, but the Natural Resources officer had run him out of Crescent Pond because he'd come in with his skiff. No motors in the bird sanctuary. Dick said he'd row. The officer got stiff about it, impounded his peck of steamers. The only other way to get to Crescent Pond was to walk the mile-long trail from the state parking lot. Easy enough if you didn't have a basket of clams to carry.

Tonight Dick was going to satisfy himself. He'd borrowed Eddie Wormsley's tractor with its front scoop. At eleven at night he got his two sons to climb on back, drove the tractor out of his own driveway, down the shoulder of Route 1, and nipped into the bird sanctuary, where a tree had fallen across the woven-wire fence and pushed it down. There was an old causeway that the farmer who'd owned the marsh in the 1800's had put in for his wagons to come and get salt hay. It was probably a hundred years old, silted

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over and covered with grass and bushes, but firm enough to keep the tractor from bogging down. The boys clung to the fenders, their feet on the clevis bar, ducking as the branches of scrub whipped past. When they got to Crescent Pond, Dick lowered the front scoop. The beach was bare twenty yards out—a full-moon low tide. Just up from the waterline Dick stuck in a corner of the front scoop and drove, cutting a trench fifty yards long. The moon gave enough light so that the boys could pick up the clams and toss them into the fifty-five-gallon drum Dick had lashed to the clevis bar and the back of the driver's seat. By midnight they'd filled the drum. Dick thought he heard the Natural Resources jeep on the seaside beach. He raised the scoop, the boys climbed on back, and Dick notched the throttle up to get them up the slope of sand and over the crusted lip of earth where grass and scrub began. Dick kept up his speed back along the swath he'd cut on the way in, the boys clinging like limpets to the back of the tractor, ducking branches and vines. Dick shut the motor off when he got near Route 1 and sent the older boy out to the shoulder to make sure the coast was clear. Dick drove the few yards necessary to get past Sawtooth Creek, then turned into the tangle of brush that was his sliver of land between Pierce Creek and Sawtooth. When he got in a ways he stopped, and he and the boys loaded gunny sacks with the clams, tied the throats of the sacks, and lowered them into Pierce Creek. Dick left the boys to finish with the clams on their own. Dick got the tractor back to his yard, up onto the flatbed trailer, hitched the flatbed to his pickup, and drove as fast as he dared to Eddie Wormsley's. Dick told Eddie what he'd been up to. Eddie laughed, but he got worried too. Eddie had been caught killing a swan the year before. The Natural Resources officer let him go, but he didn't want more trouble. Dick hosed down the front scoop and the rear tires and scrubbed out the treads of the front tires with a wire brush. Eddie made him pick

out the leaves and pieces of vine. Dick asked him if he wanted a cut when he sold the clams. Eddie wavered, finally said he'd better not. Eddie gave Dick a beer and then sent him home. Dick knew it must be late—Eddie was famous for his night hours.

Dick was up at dawn. He loaded the gunny sacks into his skiff and skipped past Westerly on the glassy morning sea. He sold the clams to a shellfish dealer in Connecticut for \$112.

He set some more pots on the way home, and pulled and rebaited his others. He was pinching with hunger by the time he got back. The tide was just trickling in, so he had to scull the last bit to his dock. He made himself a sandwich in the kitchen, but his wife, May, heard him and lit into him before he could start eating. She was weepy with anger. She took him to the boys' room. They were lying on their beds with the covers back, their legs and arms puffed up like wormy logs.

"Look at that! Just look at that!" May almost never got mad at him, and when she did he always felt awful, but this was worse than usual. Dick saw what had happened—the ride through the brush had whipped some cuts across their arms and legs—their hands were okay since he'd made them wear gloves to pick up the clams. Poison ivy had got into the cuts and scratches and foamed up in wet blisters and raw spots. May wanted him to take them to the hospital. Low as he felt, Dick resisted that idea. Dick said he'd get them something from the drugstore if they would go lie in the salt creek till he got back. "It'll sting some, but salt water'll pull the juice right out. I swear, May, it's the best cure. When I got fish poisoning all up my arm I cured it with salt water." May wouldn't answer him, but the boys did what they were told. Dick felt bad enough so he spent more than twenty dollars on tubes of cortisone gel.

By evening the boys felt better, but May was still sullen. After supper, when he was smoking a cigarette on the porch before the

mosquitoes came out, he found out why she was still so mad. "Parker stopped by to see you," she said. "He was here when the Natural Resources officers came by. He made it worse, his being here. Eddie Wormsley's one thing, but Larry Parker!"

"I should have told them to wear long pants. I am sorry about the boys, May."

Dick was amazed that didn't do it. He apologized to her once a month at most. May said, "I need some money to get the phone back."

Dick didn't say anything.

May said, "They want a fifty-dollar deposit."

Dick peeled it off the roll, let her settle back in her chair, and said, "I'm going down to the Neptune to see the ball game. Maybe I'll run into Parker."

He felt bad about that as he drove past Galilee, then he remembered he only had forty dollars left, and twelve hours before he'd had \$112. He put a five-dollar bill in his left pocket and swore not to spend more than that even if he had to buy Eddie a drink. Of course, if he ran into Parker, Parker would buy.



**P**arker had always scared Dick a little. Parker would do anything, that was part of it. And Parker seemed to know things about Dick that Dick didn't. Parker said he'd never get Dick into anything that he himself wouldn't do. That didn't strike Dick as much of an assurance.

Dick had gone off on some wild-ass rides with Parker. One time a few years back, Parker got hold of a motor yacht that the owner wanted moved from Newport to the Caribbean. The owner gave Parker a credit card for fuel, berthing fees and food, and two plane tickets back to Boston. The guys at the Neptune who knew Dick and Parker were surprised the two of them got along. But with just the two of them running the fifty-foot yacht, they didn't see much of each other the first week. After four hours on, one of them would wake the other up, say a word about the weather, and that was it. Each had a cabin of his own the couple of times they tied up at night. Parker was eager to get south, so they usually ran all night. With the owner's credit card on board, fuel economy was not a big item, so they ran as fast as the seas would allow.

Dick had loved the trip south. The boat was good, even in a half-gale. He liked getting a look at Chesapeake Bay, Cape Hatteras, the islands off Georgia. It was there Parker took him on a side trip in the dinghy. They went up a salt creek that cut into Ossabaw Island. "Lookie there," Parker said, "I'll bet it's the first time you saw one wasn't on a shirt." Dick looked. He saw the eyes blink first and then took in the body floating in the muddy water. He'd always liked Parker for taking the time to show him an alligator.

Parker got less amiable when he started looking for fun in the islands. He railed at Dick for turning in early, for getting cold feet at padding the expenses. Parker thought Dick was having a case of social nerves, that Dick was intimidated by the fancy bar life. Dick had to admit he was thrown some by the accents of the West Indians, the English, let alone the foreigners. Parker got into the act, even dressed the part. A pale sweater woven so loose you could just about see through it, no shirt. Cream-colored topsiders, no socks. But Dick could tell him apart from the carriage trade. Parker leaned forward, his eyes moved fast, and his mouth, with his bad teeth and gray fillings, was held in small and tight, even



when he was having a good time. Parker did have a good time. Dick saw that, envied him his nerve, and admired it.

It was funny—when Dick was with his friend Eddie Wormsley, Dick was the wild hair. When Dick was with Parker, Dick was the fuddy-duddy. But it wasn't just that, or the foreignness of the people or the sleekness of some of them, that put Dick at half-speed. It was the *place* that knocked him for a loop. The air, the sea, the islands. Dick had fished off Cape Cod, Maine, and Nova Scotia. All that was more or less the same, or at least understandably different. The West Indies was another planet. The air smelled different, touched his skin like silk. The water was the same salt water, but the colors were different, greens and blues he'd never seen. The movies and magazines hadn't prepared him. And it made him uneasy that he had very little idea what kind of bottom or what kind of deep the waters hid. The whole thing left Dick in a daze. They'd finally worked it out that Dick would put in the first part of the evening with Parker, then he'd turn in early and have the first part of the day to himself. Dick most often took the twelve-foot dinghy and just poked around, caught a few fish, turned them back.

Dick went along happily when Parker took on a couple of tourists he'd met in a bar. They paid five hundred bucks for two days and a night of fishing and gunk holing. Parker gave Dick 40 percent. That was fine with Dick, Parker was the ace at dealing with strangers. Dick did the work of keeping things shipshape, set up the fishing rods. Parker did the patter.

Parker and he finally delivered the boat to the manager of a yacht club. A day late, no problem. But then Parker cashed in the plane tickets, got them passage to Florida with another guy he met in a bar. Parker showed Dick the bus station in Miami and split. But Dick had four hundred cash in his pocket and all he had to worry about was May being sore at him because he got back a week late.