

CHARLES SCHMIDT

Salt Water Inlet, 2015
Oil on canvas, 38 x 58 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

RICHARD CHIAPPONE

XTRATUF

I'm up on my roof examining the iridescent green moss smothering the shingles when my granddaughter, Melanie, comes home from her mindfulness seminar, upset because someone stole her rubber boots from the meditation room.

It's summer in coastal Alaska, maybe fifty degrees, clouds like wet cement, a persistent cool rain seeping through the big spruce trees surrounding the house. Not a day you'd choose to spend on a roof, and I'm getting a little creaky for climbing ladders anyway. But suddenly a fifteen-year-old lives with me, and I'm taking my responsibilities seriously now. All of them.

From up here, I can see our town's namesake, Lost Bay, where a boxy white cruise ship appears in the layered mists like an invading troop transport. Across the bay, glaciers chew through the stony mountains as they have for millennia, and I'm reluctant to buy metal roofing that will outlive me by decades. Melanie pedals up the driveway on her bike, wearing her bright yellow Helly Hansen slicker. In spite of the cold rain, she's riding barefoot, and laughing out loud, an ominous sign that she's slipping again. By the pitch of her hilarity, I know this is going to be a bad one.

In the house, we shrug off our rain gear and she drops into a kitchen chair, quiet now, but eyes still wild as she massages her wet, wrinkled toes. She's ridden home barefoot through our puddled streets to avoid soaking the beautiful wool socks she knitted in rehab. She's adept with those long-paired needles. She's also learning to spin yarn, another activity I've encouraged since her arrival here a month ago. Despite the generational differences, our relationship has been mostly peaceful, most of that time, and I think we're going to be all right. Still, I've locked up my guns.

When Melanie was a week old, her father, my son, John, took his own life. Soon after, my daughter-in-law declared Lost Bay unlivable for a young widow: winters too cold, too wet, and too long; summers too cold, too wet, and too short. She took Melanie and left for warmer, drier climes. Over the intervening fifteen years, I've mailed checks to every major city in the American Sun Belt. I should have made an effort to see Melanie more often, should've sent for her sooner, and I know it. My wife and I split around that dark time too, and I never reached out to her again either. So, I'm on my own now with Melanie, and I have to remind myself that under the bright-blue haystack of

Melanie's doctors decline to put a definitive label on her condition, preferring the vague term brain chemical disorder.

hair, the spidery tattoos, those lips so heavily pierced they look like they've been riveted onto her face, lies a wounded teenaged girl. I've taken time off from my boatyard to be home for her. She is not to be left alone for long.

"Mel," I say, "do you have this under control, honey?"

She says, "Someone stole my boots from the fucking wellness center!" And then she's laughing again, the hysteria rising. She shrieks, "That's funny!" But knowing what's funny and what isn't can be a challenge for her.

* * *

When I was a kid, I had an Uncle Henry who laughed at all the wrong times. He'd been diagnosed with what was then called hebephrenic schizophrenia when *he* was a teen, and was in and out of mental institutions for most of his life. I overheard my parents discussing the barbaric so-called treatment Uncle Henry endured, and lay awake nights throughout my adolescence worrying where such a disease might next rear its awful head in our family. I got lucky. My son didn't fare so well. Now my granddaughter.

Melanie's doctors decline to put a definitive label on her condition, preferring the vague term *brain chemical disorder*. Combined with a fondness for recreational chemicals, that's a double whammy with a chicken-or-egg aspect that baffles me. I mean, cause and effect only makes sense when you can tell which is which.

Under advisement from my girlfriend, Ingrid—she's

the principal at Lost Bay High School and understands teenagers as well as any adult can—I'm keeping Melanie involved in wholesome activities until school resumes in the fall. Wholesome activities like mindfulness, knitting, and spinning. I'm aware that in bigger cities, "spinning" is done on bicycles that go nowhere, and may or may not be related to something called Pilates. But around here, spinning involves animal hair, skein winders, and a commitment to sustainability.

We are that kind of town. Or used to be.

* * *

Now that Melanie has the laughter under control, I want her to talk about the incident calmly. "Okay, someone stole your boots from the wellness center," I say, trying to minimize my astonishment. Lost Bay has only a two-lane road connecting it to the contiguous highway system of North America and seems to me remote from the ugliness of our times. But lately the guys at the boatyard tell me I should lock my truck every time I step out of it, and my insurance company suggests we unleash ferocious hounds inside the fence at night. I'm not buying their dire accounts of our condition. Not yet.

"Maybe it was an accident," I say. "Who would steal used boots?"

"Druggies." She pulls her thick socks out of a pocket and tugs them onto her chilled feet. "They'll scrape the enamel off your teeth if they can get five bucks for it."

I'm happy to hear her say "druggies" in the vaguely general way of people who have never even seen hard drugs. The deal I made with my daughter-in-law was this: I paid for Melanie's rehab, I get to make sure she stays clean now that she's out. Whatever the guys at the yard think, Lost Bay is still a hell of a lot safer than the many cities Melanie and her sun-seeking mother have tried.

"Druggies?"

Melanie shakes her head. "I'm telling you, Pop, they're taking over your town. Read the papers."

Despite its small size, our town has two weekly newspapers. It's our way of demonstrating our broad-mindedness, although the ideologies of the two are virtually identical. Melanie reads them both, and I'm encouraged by her interest in local news. I'm looking for positive signs in *everything* she does. That's not always easy. Yesterday she pointed out

an article about the extraordinary number of discarded syringes people have been finding on the beach near the ferry dock.

Melanie sighs. "Those were real XTRATUFS. Fuckers cost Mom a fortune."

She had, in fact, gotten off the plane in Anchorage wearing the brown, calf-high rubber boots and the giant yellow raincoat, looking like she'd escaped from a Winslow Homer painting. She wore them in the truck on the drive all the way down here to Lost Bay.

"I'm sorry about the boots," I say. "I'm sorry it ruined your meditation today."

Slipping into her clunky, blaze-orange garden clogs, Melanie confesses that she's not sure mindfulness is right for her. "Too focused. I sort of just got my brain back from the cleaners, you know? I want to let it wander wherever it wants to go right now. Is that okay?"

"Sure, honey." Frankly, I'm relieved that this didn't take hold. Mindfulness sounds suspiciously like the kind of thing a well-meaning enthusiast might insist her grandfather join her in. I'm determined to help her, of course. But if I have to become a better person myself, all bets are off. "Fine. Let's forget mindfulness for now."

"Didn't they used to, like, hang guys for stealing boots in the Old West days?"

"I think that was horse thieves," I say, picturing a cowboy facing a long walk across the desert in his stocking feet. A situation that seems not unlike living with a teenage girl at my age.

"Horse thieves, horse shit. I thought this place was going to be different."

"It is different. Or . . ." My pause is long, but unintentional, ". . . it was, once."

"It was different 'once'?" she snickers. "Oh, Gramps, you are so old. Is that painful?"

She has no idea.

But she's laughing in a healthy way now, and that's what matters. Even before her sickness had her giggling at phantoms, she was a kid born to laugh. In her earliest photos, baby Melanie flashed grins that could ignite a pile of wet kelp. Somehow, in the cosmic crapshoot of heredity, she dodged both her mother's and father's tendency to find a single tiny cloud in an otherwise sunny sky and stand shivering in its shade. Those two could suck the joy out of

Mardi Gras. Even at her craziest, Melanie never loses her charm. Not in my eyes.

"Come on," I say, "I'll buy you lunch at Ethereal." This is my idea of parenting. Melanie cannot resist the Ethereal Eatery. She loves the sheer goofiness of the name and the dreadlocked white teenagers cooking curried enchiladas and Thai-style pizzas. It's our town's nod to diversity, an attempt to shed a bit of our rustic provincialism.

It puts her in better spirits. "Great. You go grab a booth before the tourists snatch them all. I'll meet you there in a few minutes." She waves her phone at me. "Gotta call Mom first. You know how she hates to be disappointed."

"Give her my love," I say.

Melanie snorts, "Funny, Pop."

Before she can dial her mother, her phone rings. She recognizes the caller and answers cheerfully. I've got my coat on and am almost out the door when I hear her say, "No, silly, you can't get STDs from oral sex. Trust me."

Oh, good. This is *exactly* what I need now.

* * *

At the Ethereal Eatery, I slide into a booth, trying not to think about my granddaughter's self-assured dispensing of sex advice. The place is indeed mobbed with tourists, as reliable each summer as clouds and rain and returning salmon. Not the cruise ship folks with their big identifying badges; they get overfed like house pets onboard and want only to buy T-shirts and mugs. This is mostly the road-weary Winnebago and rental car crowd.

There is also a young couple sitting at a two-top by the big window facing Seaview Avenue. They're wearing Carhartt bibs, plaid flannel shirts, and brown XTRATUFS of their own. Obvious locals. They have their heads down low over the table, and I think they're praying, until Joni the waitress brings their coffees and they sit up. A cell phone lies faceup on the table before each of them, the screens radiant. They've been praying all right, but to newer gods than Jesus.

I recognize the boy—his dad used to operate the sling gantry at the boatyard—but I haven't seen the kid since he was in high school. They look like a lot of the twentysomethings you see around town these days, home from college and looking for work. Or not.

Ingrid, my cynical high school principal, says there

are only three kinds of kids in town that age: the ones who never managed to leave, the ones who left but found the outside world a lot less “snuggly” (Ingrid’s word) and scampered home, and outsiders here to sell dope to the other two groups.

I’d bet both testicles that these two are from the second category and have nestled into an apartment over the boy’s parents’ garage, eating out of Mom and Dad’s refrigerator and smoking our now-legal weed between bouts of youthful humping. Really, with that kind of setup, who looks for work? Seeing them makes me wonder if Melanie will ever find a life that passes for normal, even around here. Not to mention wondering who’s calling her about oral sex.

Through the front window, I see her pedal up in the still-falling drizzle. She dismounts, her heavy clogs and the big, stiff raincoat making her lumber like an astronaut. There’s a bike rack alongside the building, but she parks hers in the middle of the sidewalk, determined, I suppose, to prove to me just how larcenous my beloved town has gotten. As she sets the kickstand, I catch a glimpse of her small, silver-spangled face inside the rain hood, and ask myself once again whether a parent who presented his son with a life apparently not worth living is the best candidate to steer the next generation straight.

When Melanie turns for the door, her bike falls over and bounces off the tempered plate glass window with a resounding boom that nearly launches the young lovers out of their chairs. Every head in the place turns. Melanie looks at the bike, then inside at all of us watching her. She smiles, but I can see her mind is whirling. She can deal with one, maybe two small problems at a time. The stolen boots and her wet feet may have maxed her out today. I brace for her reaction.

She leaves the bike where it lies on the sidewalk, walks in, pulls back the rain hood, and brays, “Has everyone heard the good news?” All eyes are on her. “With luck, none of us will get what we really deserve!”

Her maniacal outburst worries me, yet I find the message comforting. Apparently, most of the tourists do too. They go back to their Korean chimichangas, their vegan fajitas. Girls with Melanie’s punk trappings are probably not all that unusual in the cities these people come from. And they’re getting more common here too. But Joni gives me a stern-waitress look, suggesting that Lost Bay is still

not yet the kind of town where people shout cryptic pronouncements at full volume in restaurants. I wave Melanie over to my booth. She takes the seat opposite and shrugs off the bulky raincoat.

I’m about to bring up the concept of “inside” voices, when I realize that the term might mean something completely different for someone with Melanie’s illness. Luckily, just then, Ingrid walks in. My Ingrid. She is nearly six feet tall and brilliantly blond. A former cross-country ski champ, she’s still frighteningly fit and considers ice climbing a relaxing leisure-time activity. Not a Norse goddess exactly, but as close to one as I’ll ever get.

Since Melanie arrived, Ingrid and I have not been spending much time together. Ingrid claims she doesn’t want to intrude. She’s thirty-nine and dates me instead of men her own age who might want to start a family, because she’s never wanted children. She says she’s “letting the clock run out.” That’s her business, of course. In any case, I don’t want her to play the hated surrogate mom role. I’ve seen that happen among friends in town. I wouldn’t wish it on anybody.

She spots us and heads our way.

“Hi, Ingrid,” Melanie shouts. “Join us? The old guy’s buying!”

“Well,” Ingrid says, “if Phil’s paying, slide over.” She drops into the booth at Melanie’s side. “I don’t suppose they serve steak and lobster.”

Melanie waves a menu. “The halibut with chipotle-tamarind pesto on a bed of massaged kale is the most expensive lunch thing.”

I can see I’m going to be the straight man at this performance, but I don’t mind. It’s good to see Melanie making Ingrid her partner in comedy, and I have to forcefully resist the vision of the three of us together for anything longer than a lunch. Ingrid will have no part of it. Actually, I’m not sure Melanie would either. I fear I’m alone in that dream.

Joni comes to take our order. She compliments Melanie on her neck ink. Wispy blue tree branches curl from Melanie’s sweater and reach for her earrings. Butterflies and tiny birds perch on the twig ends. Flattered, she yanks the hem of the sweater up and pins it to her collarbone with her chin, revealing to Joni—and everyone else—the tattooed tree trunk growing from her pink brassiere. When she stuffs four fingers under each cup and starts lifting,

I fear we’re going to see the tree’s root system, and more. Ingrid gently tugs Melanie’s sweater back down, and the two of them crack up.

Melanie howls, “He thought I was going to do it! He did! Admit it, Pop.”

Ingrid says, “I certainly thought you were.” More laughter.

Melanie’s discharge instructions included the caveat: “Coupled with the sometimes impulsive behavior common to her illness, Melanie has also learned to get attention by acting inappropriately.” I offered to pay them extra if they told me something I *didn’t* already know.

She barks like a harbor seal. “Your face! Oh my god! Hah!”

“Hah,” I say, and sip my coffee, happy that, however inappropriate, this was at least intentional humor, and her laughter is not the deranged cackle I’ve heard too often. It tickles me to see them having a good time together. We eat our lunch without further theater.

When she says, “Thanks for the grub, Pop. I gotta go to Kundalini,” I momentarily think Ingrid and I will have some time to ourselves.

Ingrid stands to let Melanie out of the booth. “Gotta go too, Phil. Thanks for lunch.” She leans and gives me a peck on the cheek that doesn’t actually touch my skin. Her hands remain at her sides. No contact at all. In her years working at the high school, Ingrid has seen dozens of problematic teenagers shipped up from the Lower 48 by one divorced and overwhelmed parent to live here with the kid’s other soon-to-be-overwhelmed parent—or, more and more often recently, a grandparent. She knows what the odds are of that working and is steering clear. I’d like to say that I can’t blame her. But I do.

Through the big window, I see them laughing again in front of the Ethereal Eatery. The taste of cumin lies heavy on my tongue.

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Later, I’m standing at my living room window, watching the Coastal Roofing Co. estimator stow his extension ladder on his truck and wondering if there’s some way to get Ingrid to ask Melanie about her apparent sexual expertise, when a Lost Bay police cruiser pulls up, a shock of blue hair visible in the back seat. I think it’s fair to say that

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nobody wants to see their granddaughter being unloaded from a police car. I assure myself that if this involved drugs, they wouldn’t be giving her a ride home. The two uniformed cops exchange howdies with the roofer and trundle Melanie to my front door. One is Officer Ted Coover. Ted won our king salmon derby last year and came in third the year before. The other is a stranger: young, shaved head, tiny ears, a concrete block neck.

I open the door, and Ted says, “Shoplifting,” before I even ask.

Melanie shrugs theatrically and pulls her lips back in a toothy rictus. She looks like a hyena, if hyenas went in for tongue studs.

Ted tells me she tried to steal a pair of expensive pants from Seaside Sally’s, the closest thing to a boutique in town. Which is strange, given that Melanie wears nothing but shredded jeans and thrift shop sweaters so shapeless they look like they’ve been used as sea anchors. With her phone conversation still echoing in my brain, I’m relieved it’s only shoplifting and not soliciting. Who knows what the voices in her head might suggest?

“Leather,” Ted says, and grimaces.

“Leather, Ted?”

“The pants.”

“Are they pressing charges?”

Ted shakes his head. “The school principal was there. Tall, nice-looking blond? She talked to the owner, smoothed things out, explained your girl’s problems.”

I should be delighted that Ingrid came to Melanie's rescue, but all I can hear is "your girl's problems." Is that the talk of the town now?

The young cop—his name tag reads Officer Durez—smirks and says, "You know, sir, we can't give a kid a pass on something like this more than once."

I'd love to wipe that look off his face. But he's thirty years younger than me and wearing a badge. I'm going to defer to the better part of valor.

I turn to Ted Coover. "Thanks, Ted. I'll handle it."

The look on Ted's face says, *Phil, what the fuck are you doing, trying to raise a mentally ill, drug-abusing girl? At your age?*

I hope mine says, *You're six months past due on last winter's boat storage, asshole. And I haven't made a peep because I know about your wife's MS. And because that's the kind of town we are here.*

When the police leave, all I can say is, "Leather?"

Melanie crumples, defeated for the first time in the weeks she's been here. She sobs and chokes and makes horrible, injured-animal noises. But what shakes me isn't the sound as much as the shape of her mouth, which, through my own tears, distorts into a gaping hole in her multi-pierced face. What is it I'm seeing?

* * *

When I was Melanie's age, I lived in a small industrial city in northern Michigan. One summer, I caught a black bass in our fetid local river behind the graphite factory. Coming from water that generally produced nothing but stunted bullheads and puny perch, the game fish was a rarity and a trophy worth mounting. My family couldn't afford taxidermy, of course. So I cut the fish's head off and set it out to dry in the summer sun, high on the roof to keep the rats off it. When the flies and maggots had done their jobs and nothing remained except the desiccated skin stretched over the skull beneath, I brought it down and varnished it, coat after coat, until it glowed like a live, wet fish again. Then I glued glass marbles into the empty eye sockets and painted them with glossy model airplane enamel: yellow rings around big black pupils.

I mounted the bass head on a wooden plaque and proudly hung it on my bedroom wall, and the fish glared out at the room with those bulging painted eyes, its mouth

gaping in silent laughter. The sun-hardened tongue pointed like an accusing finger, saying, "Look what you've done to me!" And I began to see it for what it was: the face of madness, something I feared more than anything in the world.

* * *

Melanie is laughing again. Too hard. Too loud. Tears demolish her makeup. Her eyes are frantic. I must look just as bad, because she yelps, "Pop! Are you all right?"

"Jesus, Mel, I'm trying here, honey. I'm not good at this, but I'm trying."

"Me too," she laughs. "I'm not good at this either!"

I gather her into a hug, her cold ear metal pressed against my neck. Through the wild strands of her very blue hair, I see her spinning wheel, her little wooden bench, her basket of yarn under our living room window, looking like an illustration of another time, another world.

Her phone rings and she pulls away and sniffs, "I've got to take this," and slips down the hall to her room, murmuring into the phone and leaving me standing there alone once more.

Outside the window, the roofer's truck backs down the driveway. The Lost Bay police cruiser remains parked out front. Officers Coover and Durez are filling out their report. And, on some level, it comforts me to know that they are doing everything they can to keep this town the kind of place I hope it still is.

Richard Chiappone is the author of three collections of stories and/or essays. His short pieces have appeared in national magazines, including *Gray's Sporting Journal*, *Playboy*, the *Sun*, and in literary magazines, including the *Missouri Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *Sou'wester*, *ZYZZYVA*, and others. Chiappone teaches in the MFA program at University of Alaska Anchorage, and lives in Homer, Alaska.

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Sea Fog, 2015
Oil on canvas, 18 x 32 in



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