

Blackbeard's Lost Head

By

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Blackbeard stood on their anchored ship, his appearance every bit a reflection of his churning stomach. He stiffened and leaned forward on the railing, making the most of his 6'4" frame to see over the confused sea before him.

Smith looked up at him curiously, then to the sea, but saw nothing except ocean foam and spray emerging from the sloppy swell. Smith decided his captain's expression was more a stressed mind than concern over approaching vessels.

"You're making me nervous, Captain," Smith said. It was all he could muster, and it took some courage to say it. He knew Blackbeard hadn't been himself the past few days and today was no exception. The man was barefoot for some reason, his legendary boots still in his private quarters. Smith also noticed the captain's beard braids were loose, unkempt. Smith had seen him like this before. All the men had seen it. When in this melancholic state, the captain was particularly volatile, and the last thing he wanted to hear from his crew was that they were fearful or anxious.

But Blackbeard showed no sign of aggravation over Smith's confession. Instead, he placed his giant hand on Smith's head to quiet him. He stiffened again, as if he detected something besides the sound of wind and waves.

"You're a good man," Blackbeard finally said.

"You have your whole life in front of you. I'm here to make sure you live it."

"I appreciate that, sir. We know that. And we are loyal to you. I've never sailed with a more loyal crew."

"What are you doing here?" Blackbeard then asked Smith.

"Why am I standing here?" Smith replied, probing to make sure he understood. "You called me from the ship to come over here, perhaps about the masthead..."

"No, Smith. What are you doing on my ship? Why are you a thief?"

"I...I had no choice, sir. When the war ended, I had nowhere to go. The king had no use for us anymore...I offered my services, but the Royal Navy had many sailmakers."

"Your mum and dad back in England?"

"Dead, sir. King's evil."¹

"Both of them?"

"No, sir. My mum. Smallpox took my father."

"No brothers or sisters? Are you left to carry the family name?" Blackbeard pressed.

"That's correct, sir. Only me."

"And you were also a sailmaker for the Royal Navy?"

"Yes. Queen Anne's war. I know nothing else but sailmaking. I can't read or write."

As if their exchange suddenly reminded him of something, Blackbeard nodded, then reached

in his pocket and retrieved a letter. He didn't look at it, instead leaving it to his side within his giant hand.

"You will be hanged, you know," Blackbeard said. "Once loyal, then taken to piracy. They will hang you."

"Yes, sir. But they won't get us. I'm certain of that. Not while under your command," Smith said with his best confident voice, suppressing any hint of insincerity. It was yet another harrowing moment. When conversing with the captain, it wasn't wise to come off as patronizing.

"Have you ever wielded a sword?" Blackbeard asked, without taking his attention off the sea.

"Yes, sir. I had the best training while serving the king."

"In combat?"

"No, sir. But I'll do what I have to do..."

"You better get below," Blackbeard said gently, motioning with his hand. "We have some visitors, I'm afraid. Tell the others I'll be along soon."

Smith's eyes snapped to the horizon, now broken by a flotilla of ships.

"Hurry along, lad," Blackbeard said, and Smith obeyed, his first step becoming a sprint across the deck. He abruptly stopped at the hatchway, turning toward Blackbeard, who remained unmoved. The man appeared calm, contemplative even, and Smith somehow knew it would be the last time he would see him alive.

The first cannonball was high, tearing apart the bow railing before he had a chance to go below. The shot would serve as a valuable metric for navy gunners, Smith knew, and the coming barrage would be an indescribable hell of splintering timber and screams from the wounded.

Smith fell to the deck, catching a fragment of burning shrapnel to his head. He slipped in and out of consciousness for an hour, but saw little while awake, his eyes blinded by blood that spilled from his wound. In his mind's eye, he dreamed that Blackbeard wielded a giant sword, slaying the invaders at will, boots high and polished, his beard manicured as if attending a royal dinner. But Smith knew it was his concussed mind playing games. They were overrun. Finished. He feigned death, until he was poked by a blade which caused him to stir.

"Move, boy," the well-dressed officer said loudly.

Smith rose and willed himself straight. He wiped the blood from his eyes and stared at the deck cover with blood as if from a hundred leaking casks, joined by limbs and the fallen bodies of his shipmates.

"I'd kill you myself, but we are not the savages here."

Smith's head bobbed. He slumped to the deck again, and two British seamen were summoned by the officer to gather him up. They dragged him to the edge of the ship where he gazed in horror at a navy seaman triumphantly holding the head of Blackbeard. It had been separated from this body, his torso and legs laying ramrod straight on the bloody deck.

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The journey back to the port of Hampton, Virginia, was routine, except for the head of

Blackbeard proudly displayed on the bow. When the ship pulled into the mouth of the Hampton River, it would have gone unnoticed if not for the skull and unnatural beard swinging in the wind.

Smith lay alone among a row of empty *hammocks* slung below deck, his head pounding with pain. He wasn't surprised by the lack of security for his sorry state. He knew the less damaged crewmen were in the brig. He wondered who among his mates survived, but oddly, had waning sympathy for their condition. Friendship meant little, and loyalty even less, knowing that they would all be hanged.

Smith could hear chatter in the nearby master's quarters, and it sounded serious. His head hurt badly, but fear for his life focused his attention, and he soon realized they were discussing a plan to enter the mouth of the Hampton River.

"We have no authorization..." said a man whose voice he recognized. It was the officer who jabbed him awake on his pirate ship.

A stronger, more seasoned voice interrupted, and Smith guessed it was the captain. He possessed a posh academy accent and a practiced cadence.

"Lieutenant Thomas, this is not your decision," he said. "I welcome your opinion on this matter, but I am more likely to agree with Lieutenant Davis."

"If I may, sir, the idea that you and Lieutenant Davis have somehow conjured up this barbaric spectacle," Lieutenant Thomas continued, his voice loud enough for Smith to hear every word. "I objected to the decapitation of Edward Teach and displaying his head on this ship, and I was overruled. I want to formally register my objection to displaying his head at the mouth of this godforsaken river," Thomas said, pounding a table, snubbing his captain's bourgeois civility.

"Calling Blackbeard by his Christian name Edward Teach doesn't change the fact that we are dealing with barbarians!" came an angry voice followed closely by another strike on a table. Lieutenant Davis, Smith now knew. He had the voice of a combat marine, probably their commander. "These cowards understand nothing else!"

"Enough!" the captain said, and silence followed. "I discussed posting Blackbeard's head with the admiral before sailing," he said. "And again, I received neither an affirmation nor denial. I have no written orders, but an instinct of the command's desire, which settles it for me. We shall post the scoundrel's head as a warning to those who consider piracy a legitimate occupation in this life."

The captain ordered Lieutenant Thomas, despite his loud objections, to lower a launch with rowing men to steer the boat into port, and a second cockboat to carry the head and timbers to shore. "The men in the cockboat will join us in port after they have posted Teach's head. Is that clear?" the captain said.

"Yes, it is clear," Lieutenant Thomas responded.

"And Lieutenant Thomas?" the captain said.

"Yes, sir."

"You shall accompany the men ashore and participate in the posting."

CHAPTER 1

2025

Port Gamble S'Klallam Reservation (Little Boston)

Dodge Jones progressed through each of his shirts until they gathered in a bunch on one side of the closet. He stepped back and sighed, deciding his shirts were hopelessly out of fashion. His pants were too, but he figured nobody would notice them, as long as they weren't pleated. Nothing said the '90s like pleated dress pants.

But there wasn't time for deliberation on pleats or passing fashion. Tom's funeral was only a few hours away, and he had to wear *something*. Not going wasn't an option, though it crossed his mind. His house was within walking distance of the tribal gym where the funeral was planned. His absence would be noticed by those on the Rez.

The Port Gamble S'Klallam Reservation, colloquially known as the "Rez" or more often "Little Boston." The term *Little Boston* was supposedly coined by early New England loggers who decided Port Gamble Bay reminded them of a pint-sized Boston harbor. The name was appropriated by tribal members at some point, and today, many tribal members hold a fondness for Red Sox hats and jerseys.

Dodge never thought he'd come back to Little Boston, having left after high school with no intention of returning.

Dodge was of both S'Klallam and Navajo blood. His S'Klallam father had met his Navajo mother while attending boarding school in New Mexico in the 1960s. Dodge's father was never comfortable in the Southwest, and after a stint fighting in Vietnam, returned to Little Boston, abandoning Dodge and his mother in New Mexico. In 1978 when Dodge was twelve years old, his mother passed away from cancer and he left New Mexico and reunited at Little Boston with his father, a man he barely knew.

Dodge never quite fit in at Little Boston. He was bookish and uninterested in typical teen activities of the Rez like fishing and hunting. He often found himself alone at parties, adrift among his peers with generational connections to each other that he didn't have. Dodge left the reservation at the end of his senior year, headed to college in 1989 to study Criminal Justice, and then went on to serve with the FBI for twenty-five years at various posts. He married a white woman, divorced, and finished out his career in the downtown Seattle FBI office while living alone in the bedroom community of West Seattle.

It wasn't as if Dodge was a total stranger in Little Boston while living in West Seattle. He took the ferry over to vote in elections, attend the funeral of his father, and regularly visited his half-sister, Dana. But it was a murder case that forced Dodge to fully reconnect with his people in Little Boston. During the investigation, he learned of an ancient society within his tribe known as Black Tamanous. The society had been a fixture in Puget Sound for hundreds, if not thousands of

years. Its activities and rituals were largely secret even to those within the tribe, and completely unknown to the outside world.

The society's modern duty, as Dodge came to understand it, was to preserve the tribe's ancient culture which included protecting its important ceremonial items. The society, he learned, also wasn't above killing anyone who threatened it. Perhaps most surprisingly, Dodge learned that his half-sister Dana Jones was an important, if at times reluctant, leader within the society.

Perhaps it was learning about the rich history of his people, or maybe it was simple loneliness, that prompted Dodge to move from West Seattle to a house on the reservation upon retirement. There were also financial benefits. The waterfront home cost him nothing and there were no property taxes on the Rez.

But would anybody really notice the pants, except the usual fashionistas in the tribe? That would be Jenna. And Shannon. Joshua was the worst. Joshua always looked like that ridiculous guy on the cover of a romance novel with his traditionally long Native hair, skinny jeans, and fitted shirt strategically unbuttoned to reveal his muscled neck. And there was the pastor's wife. She was a white lady and would be there for sure, dressed appropriately and predictably judgmental, but Dodge decided her opinion didn't mean a whole lot.

But so what if I looked a little dated? I'm fifty-nine, and if I remember right, as a young man, I saw little difference between someone my age and Tom, who's now displayed in a coffin in the gym. At this point, nobody cares what I look like.

Dodge went back to his closet and picked out gray pants and a blue shirt, about 2010 vintage, and laid them side by side on the bed. Throwing all pretense of youth aside, he picked out a pair of gray slip-on tennis shoes for comfort. He reached for a bolo tie featuring a turquoise clasp, Navajo style. *Is it appropriate to wear a Navajo design for a gathering on the S'Klallam reservation?* But then he thought of Tom's good-natured ribbing about his half-Navajo, half-S'Klallam heritage. *I will wear it. Maybe Tom will rise from the casket and have something to say about it,* Dodge concluded, smiling.

He glanced to a full-length mirror on the closet door. He ran his hands through his graying hair, deciding he needed a trim, or maybe something more dramatic. He drew back from the mirror, then slightly forward, deciding the years remained regardless of the vantage point.

Dodge left his bedroom and made his way to the back porch to smoke a cigarette. He wasn't much of a smoker—maybe a pack a year, and only when his anxiety got to him. This was one of those times. He felt the loss of Tom, at times deeply, but it was his half-sister Dana he worried about.

She was grieving, Dodge knew, even though others couldn't see it. It didn't help that she found out she and her husband were expecting two weeks before he died. For Dana, there was joy and sadness mixed in a confusing and at times depressing cocktail.

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Dodge arrived at the gymnasium early just as Dana had asked. The gym doors were locked,

so he gave it a hard knock and waited for his sister. He turned and looked at the parking lot, now empty, knowing it would be full in a few hours and the latecomers would be relegated to parking on the street. Tom, the deceased, certainly had family and friends on the reservation, but Tom's prickly persona kept him from being the customarily beloved deceased. But none of that mattered for funerals on the Rez, which served as a way for tribal members to gather socially as much as it was for celebration of the dead. Many at the funeral wouldn't even know Tom. Some would be from other tribes who had simply heard of a funeral on social media.

Dana opened the door and Dodge greeted her with an embrace. She was dressed in a dark blue dress with long beaded Native earrings and similarly beaded hair clip. When he wrapped her in a hug, she smelled lightly of a pleasant, scented shampoo, a welcome contrast to the empty smell of a floor wax and hardwood. Dodge could see Tom at the far end of the gym prone in an open casket, a large screen above him.

Dana was like a daughter to the deceased Tom, who was widowed and childless. She had served on Tom's fishing boat along with another crewmember Nephi. Dana was a fisher. The significant presence of women in the tribal fishing fleet prompted the long-held name of *fishermen* to be updated to the inclusive title of *fishers*. The work was hard and dangerous, and though Tom received a higher share of the harvest as the boat owner, he was generous with Dana and Nephi when the haul was particularly good, or when he knew they were going through tough financial times. Dana respected old Tom, but she never let him lord over her. Upon retiring, Tom sold his boat to Dana under very reasonable terms and Dana continued to fish with Nephi as crew. As it is with many deaths, she didn't realize how much he meant to her until she heard he had a stroke that left him paralyzed on one side and unable to talk. She knew he wouldn't last long, and he didn't.

Dana and Dodge both turned toward the prone Tom in the distance, and Dodge held her hand as they stared at him.

Dodge looked down at Dana, her eyes bloodshot and her nose red. "How are you holding up?" he asked.

"Okay. I'm hoping my grief will subside, you know, so I can remember the good times with Tom. It's getting better, I guess. Thad has been great. And you have been the older brother I always wanted. I don't know what I'd do without the two of you."

Dodge smiled tenderly at his sister. "Listen, Dana, I know this loss is a lot for you, and on top of it all, you are the executor of Tom's estate, right?"

"Yes, it's me," Dana said with a sigh.

"How's it going? Any problems with the white side of the family?"

"Yeah, Tom's got a nephew in Tennessee with a hint of tribal blood who claims he was promised the house. But that's not true. Tom gave the house to Nephi, which is very generous, if you ask me."

Dodge noticed a hint of irritation in Dana's voice.

"Nephi's a good guy. He'll take good care of the house..." he countered.

"Yeah, I'm not sure Nephi is up to owning a house. He's still young."

"Dana, you've got a lot going on," Dodge pleaded. "No sense second-guessing Tom, or his

will.”

“You’re right. I seem to be getting caught up in stuff that doesn’t matter lately.”

“Did you find some pictures for the funeral?” Dodge asked, releasing Dana’s hand.

“Yes, I finally found a shoebox with old pictures inside. Along with some other things. Mostly Polaroids and old Kodak slides. Thad was working on cleaning up the faded colors and digitizing them all night—or whatever you call it.”

Tap! Tap!

It was Thad tapping lightly on the metal gym door. Dana hurried to let him in.

Thad and Dana married soon after she found out she was pregnant. They were an unlikely pair, according to the elders at the Senior Center. Dana was known as a tough-minded fisher who wouldn’t take no for an answer, and Thad the mild-mannered guy who was the tribal tech guru. But perceptions are always a poor substitute for reality. Dana and Thad forged their relationship quietly, away from the sight and judgment of other people. Thad found that Dana was indeed tough, but not the unflappable stalwart that people thought. And Dana saw that Thad was more complex and interesting than known to be, and nowhere near the walkover that people thought.

“All done,” Thad said, triumphantly holding up a thumb drive with his free hand. “I hope everyone likes the ones I selected.” He held a shoebox in his other hand containing the old photos that were scanned for the funeral.

“Thanks, Thad,” Dana said, gently reaching for his wrist and drawing him in. She kissed him and smiled, and Thad gently touched her stomach.

“Listen, I can’t stay,” Thad said, handing the box to Dana. “Having a little trouble getting the video to connect for everyone at home who can’t make it to the funeral...”

“Go, go! Don’t worry about us,” Dana said, and Thad turned to leave.

“Good to see you, Dodge!” Thad said, holding up his arm in a backward wave just as he opened the gym door to leave.

“Good to see you!” Dodge said, not sure if Thad heard him.

“It looks like everything is good here,” Dodge said restlessly, looking over the chairs separating them from Tom. “So why am I here? Why the early get-together?”

“Well, I went through Tom’s house and took photos of everything like I’m supposed to do for the estate,” Dana explained.

“Okay, and...I think I know what you’re going to say. There are some things that you feel belong to the society. Right?”

“Yes.”

“Put them in your house or give them to me, and I’ll keep the stuff for now,” Dodge said. He wasn’t sure if that was the right approach, but he didn’t want his sister worrying about it with everything else going on.

“Should I? I mean, we’re not talking about society artifacts. I mean, the ghost puppet is there. But it’s mostly papers, letters and such. Some of them are terribly old. People I don’t remember, and with this generation of boomers passing, I doubt anybody who remembers these people will be around for much longer.”

“Charlie will know,” Dodge said.

“Yes,” Dana said. “Amazing, isn’t it?”

“What’s that?”

“Charlie,” Dana began. “He’s a lifelong smoker. Never spent any time outside. Spent years drinking, and he’s still alive? And like totally there.”

“Genes, I guess,” Dodge said. He stared at the deceased Tom in his casket at the far end of the gym and shook his head.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Dana said. “What’s the deal with the open casket, right?”

“Yeah, well...I mean, it’s creepy.”

“It’s what he wanted.”

“I don’t get it. He’s not there. His spirit is gone.”

Dana teared up and Dodge felt awful. “Dana, I didn’t mean to... I mean, I’m terrible at all this.”

“It’s okay. I’m a mess. It just hits me when I least suspect it. That he’s gone, you know? Thing is, I agree with you. Here, take this,” Dana said, handing him the shoebox. “I still have things left to do before the service. The flowers will be here soon.”

“Okay, I’ll take it back to my house. I’m going to go have a cigarette and get ready for the spectacle. Are you sure there isn’t anything I can do to help?”

“Just being here is help enough,” she said.

Dodge headed outside to steel himself with nicotine before the mourners arrived.

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A giant screen loomed over Tom’s body, sometimes twisting from the breeze created by the opening of gym doors. This caused the carefully curated photos of Tom’s life to distort in a ghostly pattern over the lying Tom. Dodge took it all in with upright posture while holding a rolled itinerary. He sat in the back.

Dana made her way to a podium on a raised platform and mourners obediently shuffled to their chairs. Only a few whispers and an occasional child wondering aloud why they couldn’t go home broke the silence.

Dana adjusted the gooseneck microphone with both hands, and then some more when it wouldn’t stay still. And then she started her eulogy for Tom.

“Tom would have been shocked to see all these people here. He always seemed to have a knack for finding friends who would put up with him. I just didn’t think there were so many of us... Maybe Tom was surly to me for a reason. But after a while, I could see through it, and I found a kind man who cared about us and his tribe. Maybe it was hard to see, but Tom’s love for Little Boston was the one constant in his life. He was dedicated to our place and our culture. We are all fortunate to have known or fished with Tom. You know, to have him part of our lives...”

Dodge looked to his left, then right. He wasn’t exactly invisible, but he was surrounded by strangers which meant he might be able exit without offending family. It wasn’t the right time,

though. While Dana continued with her tribute, he reached for the box of photos at his feet and shuffled through the trappings of memories and small mementos, like pins and cheap rings. He selected an envelope and carefully opened it, pulling out a one-page handwritten letter. Each inked sentence was a masterful display of practiced penmanship. It was a long letter, and absent any context, didn't make much sense. But something caught his eye about halfway down.

...Lita and I talked as if she was family. And despite my attempt at burglary and the late hour, she offered a tour of the basement—an experience that will forever rest in my mind's eye. She told me that art deemed unfit or inconsistent with current teachings are stored in the basement. She was eager to show me the strangest item of all: Blackbeard's skull and a large gathering of his beard sealed in an ordinary box and hidden away in a forgotten corner of the building...

Dodge sensed he was being looked at by the woman next to him. He looked her way and nodded. She responded with a side eye, an indication that she found his reading rude. He sheepishly folded the letter, placed it in the envelope, and sat with his hands folded in gracious deference to Dana and, of course, Tom. By the end, Dodge thought Dana did an excellent job, even if he got three quarters of it. He spent the rest mulling over the letter and trying to reconstruct the time he visited an elder as a child where a piece of Blackbeard was in a jar.