

# Call Him Emmanuel

*It's hard to imagine anyone having the chutzpah to call a waterman of the water - and succeeding. But that's how the story goes.*

*By Jane Meneely*

Imagine this: A few deadrise workboats have sidled into the dock at, say, Harrison's packinghouse on Knapps Narrows. It's winter, and the diesel fumes are threading the icy breeze, stitching it to the musty smell of oysters packed into the bushel baskets stacked along the wharf. There are two men on every boat, and they're wrapped in sweatshirts and coveralls, ball caps smashed down across their foreheads. Their white boots are slicked with Bay mud and oyster slime. Their hands are lost inside heavy canvas work gloves. Rigged up across the sterns of their boats are the blackmetal armatures of patent tongs. An oyster buyer waits just inside the packing house door. His fingers cup the end of the cigarette he's trying to light. Next to the open door stands his truck, already half-loaded with oysters headed for a raw bar in Annapolis. He nods to the boys on the boats. They already know his price. No sense grumbling about it. It's never enough.

These fellows, these watermen, have been up since predawn, running their boats back and forth over the scant oyster rock, culling through what they pull up, throwing back more shell than they find live oysters, it seems. Now they're cold. They're tired. They're hungry. They're looking for their cash so they can cast off and go—back to their home slip and pickup trucks. Back to the wife, the kids, the La-Z-Boy and the good-for-nothing black Lab that hunkered down under the bed this morning and wouldn't come out. (Man's best friend? Hah! Not on the really cold days.) But first they have to shovel out the oysters, tally the bushels, sweep down the decks, gas up for tomorrow. . . .

Now imagine: A man walks up to them and says, "Come follow me." He's a stranger, this man—not even a waterman, by the looks of him. He's wearing leather workboots, laced high, and a tool belt around his waist, and when he talks it's with an unfamiliar twang. "Come follow me," he says.

The boys at the dock pay him no mind at first. They are focused completely on the work at hand. Shoveling, loading, tallying. The wind has more of a bite to it now that the sun's begun going down. Darkness starts to unravel the distant line of trees on the mainland, pulling their tangled branches back into the dark skein of night. Lights come on at the dock, steaming in the cold. One of the fellows on the boats stops to rub his hands together, uncrick his back. "Come follow me," the stranger

says again. The waterman swerves to face him. "You say something, honey?" he asks. His buddies stop, too. All eyes are on this guy, this stranger. An eerie silence settles over the dock. The oyster buyer inside the packing house hears the quiet and tenses up. Some damn fool out there on the docks, he thinks to himself, and he leans into the night air to better watch what's going on. Could be a fight. Hasn't been a fight in years.

"You say something?" the waterman asks again. He'd rather throw a punch right now than load any more oysters. If all that stands between him and supper is a cracked knuckle or a broken tooth, he'd just as soon start it up and get it done. "Come follow me," the stranger repeats. The quiet gets thick as swamp mist. Follow him where? But the man just stands there. He doesn't say another word. His dark eyes look straight at them. Into them, it seems. And something in those eyes holds them fast, devours them, pulls them in, turns them around . . . and suddenly they see it all from a different angle. Or so the story goes. Suddenly it's a

new world. Shot full of light. No room for La-Z-Boys. No time for dogs. Not even the wife or kids. "Follow me," the stranger says again, with finality. And he says it in just such a way that the fists relax, the chins soften. One hand lets go of a shovel and it clatters to the dock. Another hand fumbles with the handle of the old push broom used to sweep the oyster debris off the deck. Without a word one man follows the other, stepping off the boats and onto the dock, lining up like tardy schoolboys before the principal. No devil in their eye now. And the stranger turns to go, with the men following behind, fish on a fisherman's string.

Can you imagine that? Imagine that happening here, now—not with the cranky fishermen of Galilee, but with our own cross-grained watermen? Then imagine that there's a camp meeting up in Cordova. And these men, these same men, are leading the show, still in the thrall of this compelling stranger. And their wives are madder than spit. And their children wide-eyed and bewildered. And the dogs—well, let's not even talk about the dogs.

Suffice it to say that it would take quite a fellow to pull off a stunt like that. Someone with an almost suprahuman charisma. A fellow like that could change the world. And people would talk about it for years.

