

# When Life Hands You a Lemming...

by Tom Easton

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The image boys in executive row weren't too pleased when I drove my antique Escort to work. Within an hour the Vice-President in Charge of Making Grown Men Feel Like Little Boys had me on her carpet, and if she wasn't shaking her finger at me, she might as well have been. My uncle Brian would have called her a motherly old cow.

She looked the part, too, as she said: "You know the company policy, Cal. Machines scare the beasts, they look out of place next to the haybins and hitching posts, and we're selling Roachsters to replace cars. We expect our employees to drive them, not automobiles, antique or not."

I nodded. General Bodies was a genetic engineering shop, and the Roachster was its biggest product. I knew the policy.

"You usually do drive a Roachster, Cal. Why didn't you today?"

"Archie ran away," I said. Archie was my Roachster. I had named him because I liked him better than I had ever liked an automobile--even the Escort--though he was an ugly thing. He was cheap, safe, and--until now--reliable. And he had personality.

A Roachster was a cross between a lobster and a cockroach. Its cockroach ancestry gave it speed. Its lobster ancestry gave it enough size so a little gene-tinkering had made it grow to about twenty feet long. Bulges in the shell were passenger and luggage compartments once GB cut door and window holes. The controls plugged directly into its nervous system. Its wheels were more bulges; they spun on built-in hubs and were powered by the creature's legs, running on top of them. It ate garbage and hay, which were a lot cheaper than gasoline. And when two of them got too close on the highway, they would stop to stroke each other with their feelers. Collisions were impossible.

"Oh, God," she said. Her censuring mood evaporated. Now she was the worried business executive. "You think it went into the sea too?"

I shrugged. That was where too many of the things had been going ever since we had put them on the market six years before, though only in the last year or so had the problem gotten bad. We had failed to remove some basic urge from the Roachster's lobster genes, and on dark nights they would chew through their tethers and the walls of their stables and leave. They had been seen cruising the highways until they caught the scent of the ocean. Then they left the road and rolled cross-country to dive into the foaming brine. None had ever been seen again. And sales were down.

"We need to drop everything else," she said quietly, as if she were thinking aloud. "And find an answer to this. I'm sure the Committee will agree." She looked me in the eye and raised her voice. "I'll take it up with them later today. For now, Cal, that's your new assignment. Focus on this, this 'lemming effect.' And solve it." She gave me a big grin, proud of having named the problem, as if that was half the solution. She didn't know that we had been using the same term in the shop for the past six months.

In my office-lab a few minutes later, I cut up a potato and dropped the chunks down the sink drain. There was an aggressive crunch, a gurgle or two, and a bubbling noise. I told myself that we needed to make the pig a little quieter, though the old mechanical models had never been famous for silence.

I opened the cabinet under the sink and peered at the barrel-like body covered with short bristles. Small hooves jutted from top and bottom, the limbs themselves reduced to vestigial stumps. It had no neck, its head arising from the shoulders, the mouth and throat aimed permanently upward to meet the sink's drainpipe, its snout whuffling against the underside of the metal basin. It rested on broad haunches, plugged into a second pipe in the floor of the cabinet, fulfilling its intended function as an intermediate link in the plumbing.

The garbage disposal's odor suggested animal warmth, with only a faint pungency. There was no problem there. But yes, we definitely needed to make it prettier. Until this morning, that had been my job. Now... "Sorry, Freddy," I said. "I've got to figure out how to make Archie stay home."

It was too late for Archie, of course. It was also wasted effort. My mind was blank. And as soon as the Directive From On High came down, telling all us lowly technical types to get cracking on the "lemming effect," I did what I always do when I draw a blank.

I took a field trip. I packed up my wife and daughters and headed for the coast of Maine. We drove the Escort. On the way, I noted that there were a lot fewer Roachsters on the road. Civilian models, anyway. There were plenty of police models, cruising with their giant claws at the ready. I had never been surprised that putting Roachsters on the market had cut speeding drastically. Crime was down, too, ever since a Brooklyn cop had used his Roachster to tear through the wall of a third-story apartment and grab a suspected dope dealer. On the other hand, most people now called cops "roaches."

It was an easy trip to justify, since the "lemming effect" definitely involved the coast, and since lobsters equally definitely were a Down East thing. I didn't go to Florida or New York because I don't like unengineered roaches. And besides, I had grown up in Maine, the town I was going to was full of old friends and family, it was summer, we owned a cottage near the shore, and I had high hopes for the fishing. I figured a week or two would vent enough of the Cambridge and General Bodies pressure to let me think clearly again.

And it wasn't a long trip, either. From Cambridge to the Maine border was only an hour. But still, our spirits lifted when the high arch of the Kittery bridge hove into view. As we crossed the line, like every other expatriate Mainer I had ever talked to, we burst into song. Ours was "We're home because we're home because we're...."

The landscape wasn't really any different from that of New Hampshire behind us. We could see motels, stores, restaurants, and houses thronging on nearby land, though the Interstate was mercifully clean. On the other hand, the summer traffic was as thick as in the Boston suburbs. But the land felt different. We relaxed, and I said to Betsy, as I did every time we entered Maine, "Someday, honey. Someday we'll chuck it all and move up here for good."

"Amen," was her reply. Sadie, our older girl, had another opinion: "We can't! I wouldn't have any friends! And Jeff..." Amy, two years younger, said nothing, though I knew that she too would hate to leave her school and friends.

Once we had unpacked the car, I let my wife handle the obligatory visits to great aunts and second cousins. She took Sadie with her. Amy preferred fishing, and I took her with me to the town dock.

At the bait shack, I didn't see Old Ben Harms, who usually ran the shack. It was his boy, Young Ben, who stood behind the counter. We had known each other in high school, but our ways had parted at graduation. When I asked him where his dad was, he told me, "Had to go down to Bangor for a treatment. Got cancer, y'know."

I hadn't known, and I said so.

"Ayuh." He had used to smile almost all the time. Now he looked like he didn't know how. He reminded me strongly of his father. I wished we genetic engineers had been able to come up with a real cure for cancer.

Uncomfortable, I said, "I'd like some bait."

"Mackerel ain't runnin'," he told me. "Bluefish neither. Ain't seen either of 'em for a year."

"How about flounder?"

He looked over his counter at Amy. She, only eight, smiled up at him. One hand held her fishing rod at attention beside her.

"Might be a few," he said. "Try that float." He pointed to the farthest one in the chain. A two-masted sailboat was tied up to it. "That windjammer dumped a load of garbage this morning." He shook his head, and then he sold us a plastic cup full of mussel meat. I also bought a bag of Potster Chips for Amy to munch on.

I gave the bait to Amy and sent her down the line of floats to try her luck. I stayed on the dock to survey the familiar scene. The waterfront was quiet in its senescence, old paint-peeling buildings as decrepit now as they had been for years, though once they had been a chicken processor, a cannery, a shoe plant, a .... The town had been dying for decades, though it managed to show surprising signs of life from time to time. The old boat shop to the left was actually busy, with the girderwork of what seemed to be an addition to the shop under construction. On the other hand, the two men sitting on a bench not far from me seemed far more typical. I knew them, and eventually I found a seat nearby, where I could both see my daughter and watch them work.

They were repairing ancient lobster traps for the tourist trade. I watched as they braced the traps between their legs to remove punky, broken slats and install new ones, carefully weathered but still sound. They were also installing new twine funnels and bait bags. I wondered in what field these traps had been mouldering. Wire traps had replaced wooden ones before I was born.

I knew them both. Clem, the one in faded overalls, had been a farmer the last I heard; I supposed he still was, though the grey bristles on his cheeks made me wonder whether he had sold the farm and retired. Alf, just as bristly, wore a yellow slicker and high rubber boots. He had hung around the dock in that costume every summer, all summer, rain or shine, for as many years as I could remember. I had once heard him say that it was just in case some tourist wanted to take a picture of a gen-yoo-ine Down-Easter.

Clem looked at me when I sat down. "Hiyah, Cal," he said. "Ain't seen you for awhile."

"Been workin' up to Boston." I dropped into the speech rhythms of my childhood without thinking.

Alf laughed. "Turned into an out-a-stater yet?"

I smiled back at him. "Feel like one sometimes."

"Your girl won't catch much." Clem pointed at Amy with his hammer.

"Ayuh," said Alf. "Ain't nuthin' out there a'tall."

I glanced toward the bait shack. "Young Ben said maybe flounder."

"Nah," said Clem. "No mackerel. No blues. No cod. No flounder."

"Nuthin'," said Alf. His cheek bulged as he worked whatever he was chewing out of the way. His lips pursed, and he spat a stream of something brown over the side of the wharf.

"Damn good thing," said Clem. "Damn good thing them genetic engineers invented potsters." I looked for Amy. She had her hook baited and was paying the line over the side of the float. The bag of Potster Chips lay beside her, colorful in the distance. Potsters were a very successful hybrid of lobster and Maine potato.

"Saved the potato farmer, they did," said Alf.

"Saved me too."

"I heard about that," said Alf.

"I haven't," I said.

"Well." Clem drove a nail into a slat for the trap he was holding between his knees. "Couple years ago. I put in a field of peterkins. Seed company swore they'd grow to six-room size, even in Maine. Then I could slip foundations under 'em and have me a housing development."

I knew about peterkins. They were giant, genetically engineered pumpkins. Once they reached their full growth, they could be hollowed out, dried, treated with sealants and preservatives, and fitted with doors and windows. They had made the first real dent in the world-wide need for low-cost housing. General Bodies, even though it specialized in designer animals, had long envied Burpee for its success.

"But we got an early frost that year. They didn't make much more'n closets."

"Lose your shirt, then?" I asked.

"Nah. Sold 'em to the Porta-Potty folks. But I didn't make much profit, I tell ya. That's why I'm growin' potsters now."

Steamed potsters had a mushier texture but all the flavor of real lobster meat. Several of my local relatives grew them in their home gardens, and when we had arrived from Cambridge, we had been served "lobster" fresh from the garden. I wondered aloud whether anyone bothered to set traps for real lobsters anymore.

"No point," said Alf. "No fish out there. No lobsters. No clams, even."

"Nuthin'," said Clem.

"Unless you're into sports," said Alf. "Too dangerous."

I could see Amy's rod bend even from my distance. She stood up, yanking at whatever had grabbed her bait. I heard Clem gasp, but I didn't turn to ask him why.

In a moment, Amy pulled a small fish onto the float beside her. Alf said, "Pollock."

"Damn good thing," said Clem.

I turned toward their bench. They didn't look any different, but.... "What do you mean, dangerous?"

Clem shrugged. "They don't come into the harbor much."

"Unless there's a lot of garbage in the water," put in Alf. He leaned toward the edge of the wharf and spat

again.

"Ayuh. That's true. At high tide."

I looked at the water line on a post that now served only as a mooring. Once it had helped to hold up a neighboring pier. The tide wasn't high at the moment, so whatever they were moaning about didn't seem likely to pop out of the water right away. But the tide was coming in.

"Dammit!" I said. "What are you two talking about?"

"Wild automobiles," said Alf.

"Ayuh," said Clem. "The worst kind."

"They've turned against us," added Alf.

"Tear traps and drags into paper clips," said Clem.

"Slice nets all to pieces."

"Divers too."

"N they've pulled a boat or two down."

Amy caught another fish. I thought it might be a small flounder, but I didn't waste time peering. I called her in. The tide was getting too high for my comfort.

"People are staying off the water," said Clem. "That's a fact."

"Except the sport fishermen," said Alf.

Were they pulling my leg? That was a fine old Down-East sport, and though Roachsters had been running off to sea for over a year, I had never heard of anyone catching one. Briefly, I wondered whether the sport fishermen used harpoons, but I didn't ask. Nor did I ask what those sport fishermen did with their oversized trophies. I could just barely imagine the front end of a Roachster hanging over a mantle.

Amy ran toward me, fishing rod and bait cup in one hand, her stringer with its two fish in the other. Her expression was dark. "I wanta keep fishin', Daddy," she cried when she reached the base of the ramp that linked the wharf and the nearest float. "They're biting!"

That's what I was afraid of. I shook my head. "We've got to go, honey. We can come back tomorrow." At low tide, I added to myself.

When we got back to the cottage, Betsy and Sadie were there. It seemed that Aunt Emma, thank goodness, hadn't been home, but the other three had been. Amy bragged about her fish, and I listened to the family news my wife had managed to remember. I didn't tell her about wild Roachsters sinking boats and mangling divers. I kept to myself my vision of Archie rolling out of the sea to grab our younger daughter. I did tell her about Clem and Alf--she had met them years before--and their "antique" lobster traps.

That reminded Amy to look at her sister and say: "And guess what? Daddy got me a whole bag of Potster Chips!"

Sadie ignored the taunt. Betsy gave me a dirty look, as if to say, "Junk food!" I went to the kitchen for a beer.

The next morning, I checked the tide table in the paper. The first low tide would be a little before ten. I figured that if we got down to the wharf by 9:30, Amy could fish till lunchtime and maybe even catch some fish. A rising tide was always best.

When we arrived, Ben Harms the Elder was there to sell us more bait, and Clem and Alf were already in place. They looked as if they had been on their bench, decrepit lobster traps between their legs, at least since dawn, and perhaps they had. Coastal folk tend to rise early.

Alf started our conversation: "Them genetic engineers don't know everything. Can't even keep a car in its garage." He spat into the harbor.

I didn't believe he had forgotten my profession. Every time a new product hit the market, the local paper called me up. It found me preferable to a university geneticist, for I was a local boy, even though I didn't live here anymore.

I watched my daughter as I groped for a riposte. Her rod tip was twitching already, though the tide was slack. She reeled in, and I could see a small crab clinging to her hook. I said, "Lobstermen don't seem much better, getting scared off by an overgrown lobster."

Clem laughed.

I shook my head and added, "My own's out there somewhere."

"Forget it," said Alf. "They only run off when they're ready to molt."

"That shucks the plates," said Clem. As well as the lights and interior and all the rest, I reminded myself. Generally, Roachsters that were growing too tight in their shells--the owner could tell by their increasing sluggishness--went back to the dealer. In the shop, a hormone injection triggered the molt. As soon as the new shell had hardened, the dealer reinstalled the bumpers, lights, controls, doors, windows, and upholstery. Archie had gone through the process three times, each time coming home a little larger. He should have done it at least twice more before we had to trade him in on a trimmer model. Then depending on his condition and the demands of the market, he would be converted into a light truck, put out to stud on the company's ranch, or turned into pet food.

As far as I knew, no one had suspected any link between the runaways and molting. "How do you know?" I asked.

"If it did come in here, you couldn't tell it was yours," said Alf.

"Ayuh," I said. "It's gone. But how do you know about the molting?"

They looked at each other. "Why?"

When I told them about the new assignment that had sent me home, they shrugged. "The old shells wash up on shore. But never on the islands." Clem gestured toward the rounded shadows on the horizon. I got his point. The Roachsters obviously shed their harness soon after entering the water.

Then Alf said, "I know why they're running away."

I looked for Amy on her float. She had another pollock. Then I stared at him. He dressed for the tourists, yes. But he knew the coast, and I supposed he might know lobsters as well.

"Ayuh," he said. "I know lobsters. Roaches, too. Spent a few years down to New York when I was a boy."

Clem laughed. "Worked in a seafood place," he told me. "Health department ran him out."

Alf gestured with his hammer. "Whatever," he said. "Least, I've never been arrested for fakin' antiques." He turned back to me: "Roaches," he said. "They hate the light. Don't surprise me none a'tall to see 'em running away at night."

"But why the ocean?" I asked.

"That's their lobster half." He shrugged, as if to say that that much was obvious. Perhaps it was. I was already getting ideas about how to keep them in their stables. Maybe we could make them less photophobic, even photophilic, and keep them tethered to a nightlight. Certainly, I thought, we could strengthen the symptoms of impending molt and remove their ability to molt on their own at all.

A cry from the farthest float caught my attention. Amy was on her feet, her rod on the float-deck beside her feet. She was pointing toward the mouth of the harbor. I yelled, "What's the matter?"

She waved her arm and shouted back, "What's that?"

I shrugged and yelled, "I'll find out!" "That" was a ship that looked like a miniature aircraft carrier. It had a flat deck with a two-story conning tower to one side. A heavy railing surrounded most of the deck, leaving an unrailed working area in the rear. I knew it was a working area because it was overhung by a stout derrick and coils of rope littered the deck.

"What is it?" I asked Clem and Alf.

"Used to be a ferry," said Clem.

"Till the state put a new one on the run," said Alf.

"Never did scrap the old one, though," said Clem.

Several dark shapes were shifting back and forth in the railed section of the deck. "And those?"

"Sports," said Alf.

"Ayuh," Clem agreed. "Tasty, too. They sell 'em to the cannery." He gestured to one of the decrepit buildings along the harbor's waterfront. Steam was beginning to belch from a metal chimney.

As the converted ferry drew nearer, I saw that the dark shapes were actually roachsters. They were smaller than any on the roads, and they had no wheels, but . . . "Ayuh," said Clem. "Your runaways go wild and start breeding. And they ain't the same."

Of course, I told myself sheepishly. Not sport fishermen, not in the old sense. But fishers for mutants. For sports. Sports with claws, which might well make them dangerous to a small girl fishing by the edge of the sea. I swore that any more fishing we did we would do in fresh water. There were plenty of brooks and lakes around. "But how do you catch them?"

Alf shrugged. "No problem," he said. He pointed toward the boat yard. Immediately, I saw what I had taken for a new addition as . . . "Ayuh," he said. "Don't matter how big the lobsters get along the coast of Maine. We've always known how to build traps."

I hollered to Amy and waved her in. When she reached me, I said, "Want to go see?"

She looked where I was pointing, at the ferry approaching the cannery, and nodded eagerly. We left the wharf and put her fishing gear back in the car. Then we walked down the shore to where we could watch

as the ferry slid into a gap in the side of the cannery building and its bow railing folded down. Then the stern railing at the edge of the work area began to slide forward on rails, herding the milling Roachsters into the building. I noted that the swellings on their shells that would normally be carved into windowed compartments held a lower, more streamlined profile. I wondered how fast they would be on the road.

I found out soon enough. Shots echoed from the cannery building as workers began to process the catch. The catch objected, their bodies slamming against the interior of the building. We could see the walls shaking, and then the door to a loading bay sprang open. A Roachster charged into the open, saw freedom, and accelerated faster than my Escort had ever managed. But a single shot brought it tumbling to a halt.

"Happens all the time." I turned to see Clem. He had followed us. Now, as a crew retrieved the fallen Roachster, he explained a little more. "They taste just like lobster, and that's the way the company packs 'em."

I guessed that just maybe a can that was labeled "Roach Meat" or even "Roachster" would fall rather flat in the supermarket.

"Cost-efficient, too," said Clem. "Least, that's what they told my nephew. He works in there."

"They pay much, for the critters, I mean?"

Clem shrugged. "Dollar a pound."

And one of those wild Roachsters might run half a ton, easy. I could see why the cannery mislabeled its product and the sport fishermen kept quiet. They didn't want competition. But I was beginning to get an idea.

Over the next week, I did indeed take Amy fishing inland, and we caught a few trout. But I spent considerably more time talking to the sport fishermen and the cannery operators.

One evening toward the end of the week, I asked Betsy, "Do you still want to move to Maine?"

She looked at me as if I were crazy to ask. Perhaps I was. "Of course, dear. But your job's in Cambridge. We have to settle for these 'field trips.'"

"This one's done," I said. When her face fell, I told her about the molting connection. "All we have to do," I said, "is strengthen the pre-molt sluggishness. Maybe even fix them so they refuse to move at all. The dealers would have to fetch them for servicing, but . . ."

"But why did you ask about moving to Maine?" She had stepped closer to me while I chattered. Her hand was on my arm, and her eyes were anxious.

"Because we can do it. I want to quit." I told her why, and she agreed that it was worth a try.

The next morning, she began looking for a house. Then I called Cambridge, told them how to fix the runaway problem, and said, "I quit."

Then I opened my dealership.

That's right. The sport fishermen bring their catch to me now. I pay twice what the cannery paid, install the necessary controls, glass, upholstery, and other trimmings, and sell them as high-status, high-price vehicles. I don't touch their tendency to run away at the first opportunity. Sports cars are supposed to be high-spirited.



The cannery is still working, but it gets the sports only when they have grown too big for the road.

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