Lobster Rolls

Karen and I set off down the dock to the lobster shack which isn’t what the sign says. The sign says “LOBSTER ROLLS” and is no more interested in marketing than the pleasure craft anchored out in the cove. You can see the sandy bottom along the first part of the dock and further out the occasional flash of the silver belly of a bait fish rolling over down in the green-black water.

 The screen door squeaks and then clatters shut as its spring closes it. There is a mechanical cash register on a worn wood counter, a sliding-door cooler with soft drinks. No menu, no signs.

There is a man in his early 30s, not plaid, not lobster or clam boat, not Land’s End, not even L.L. Bean but simply, durably and practically dressed.

“Two lobster rolls,” I said. Most lobster shacks have shrimp rolls, steamers, but here the entire menu is painted over the door.

“You want claw meat?” I did; she didn’t.

He filled the meat into flat-sided New England top-slit frank rolls mounding it a manageable amount over the top and toasted both sides with butter. The rolls came with a small bag of chips, and a takeout tube of mayo.

We folded over the paper plates to form hammocks for the rolls and all. We walked back to two picnic tables on the narrow strand of sand a few feet from the hightide line drawn by dried seaweed empty crab claws, yesterday’s foam and any other light stuff that happened to be floating or drifting there when the tide went out.

The dog looked like a golden retriever and it was walking and acting like a “he.” He seemed to have a certain singularity and intensity of purpose like a major tournament tennis player or a fisherman fighting the big one. He approached us head on, staying within a foot of the high tide flotsam line with only an occasional glance out to sea. Most dogs would be working some other angle - an off-guard bird, a dead fish - but this guy was heading for us and there was a yellow tennis ball in his mouth. He was dry and fluffy as a dog with couch privileges.

We thought we knew what came next - the slimy ball dropped on the sand, the intermittent whining - but he just stopped a few feet short of Karen and sat down, alert, the ball still in his mouth. The ball explained everything that he had to say let alone thought about. He sat there until I cracked, walked over to him and threw the ball about twenty feet out. He crashed into the water scattering the killies and probably alarming the hermit crabs who dug themselves down into the sand.

He shook off at a measured distance just giving us a light sprinkle on our legs and shorts. He resumed his post for the 40 seconds it took Karen to give in. I decided that he had been educated as much as trained. He seemed to be reading our limits and preferences and knew how to keep us in the game. He had likely been allowed enough time on his own to acquire what is often called “street smarts.”

“Throw it as far as you can,” I said.

“Don’t worry,” she said and sent it about 75 feet offshore.

I would think that it would be hard to see the above water part of a tennis ball from the not very high perspective of a swimming dog’s eyes, particularly with a late morning breeze stirring up some low bay-side waves.

The retriever gauged the distance within 5 feet or so and began looking around, swimming in no pattern that made any sense to me but found his ball quickly, swam in and resumed his post, his tongue hanging a little longer out the side of his jaw.

I gave him a few more minutes to rest and then threw the ball about 40 feet. I wouldn’t mind wearing him out. It’s never a bad idea to wear a dog out, but I didn’t want to be responsible for him losing the ball.

We finished our lunches and played a few more rounds of fetch. As we were leaving we watched him walking back up the beach with his ball, probably heading for one of the small houses along the road that leads from town past the dock and ends at the inlet.