

Volume II
of the MUD Trilogy

The Red Tide

A Classic Words Novel

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CHAPTER ONE

Truth and the Good Life

Here is the thing about calamities: They happen when you least expect them. In an unexpected calamity, Mud the fish and his friends had risked their lives by going to the most dangerous island, Fragment Crag, to rescue Click the sandpiper. The risky rescue went well, but they had been lucky, and they knew it. Fortunately, their courage, their teamwork, and their careful planning had paid off, and every animal made it home to Sentence Island safely. Gradually, life returned to normal. The animals were happy again. They assumed that their days of calamity were now over. They were sure of it.

calamity: n. a disaster

Click, the rescued poet-sandpiper, wrote a ballad in honor of his friends who had saved him. Basing it on the well-known ballad by Lobster Burns, Clack's grandlobster, Click wrote his friends' names into the poem. Here is the first stanza:

Eeet TWEET eeeet BALDWIN CLACK eeet CLICK
Eeeet CLICK eeets MERP fweeet MUD,
Eeeet TURNER CLACK skeeeet BALDWIN freeep,
Eeeet MERP eeeet CLICK yeats FLOOD.

Mud observed that Click's own name appeared more than any other animal's, but no one wanted to discuss that.

Like all of his friends on Sentence Island, Mud tried to put the odious memories of Fragment Crag behind him. He tried to forget about the scary rat. He turned his mind to the ideas he enjoyed most: ideas

odious: adj. hateful

about sentences. He spent long, serene days discussing sentences with his amiable friends, and everyone said that he was making sentence progress.

Mud was proud of himself.

Life was perfect.

One sparkly morning, after a supportive rain had completed its responsibilities by sweetening the salt sea and watering the island's flowers, Mud had a good talk with Fidget, his cricket pal, and Click, the sand-piper whose little foot had soon healed from the injury suffered at Fragment Crag. They sat in the shade of a cooperative palmetto and talked about sentences, words, and truth.

“The more I think about it,” said Mud placidly, “the more I like what words do. Each word is like a chip of truth.”

Somewhere back in the jungle, Baldwin the big-horned beetle went vvvvvvooooom

serene: adj. calm, peaceful
amiable: adj. friendly
placidly: adv. calmly, serenely

through the air and banged into a big palm tree. “You buffoons!” they heard him cry.

When they stopped thinking about Baldwin’s latest collision, Fidget and Click looked back at Mud and waited for him to explain.

“For example,” he continued, “things have words. Each noun is the true name of a thing, so you have the thing itself, such as a snail, and then you have the noun *snail* that is the snail’s true name. *Snail* is the true name of a snail, but *fish* is not the true name of a snail.”

“Get it!” said Fidget. “Everything has two sides: the thing itself and its name, get it? There is a fish, and there is the noun *fish*. Language is like a copy of the world—in words.”

“Eeeeet!” said Click, who always expressed himself forcibly.

“Right now,” said Mud, I want a real

Language: Notice that Fidget’s favorite phrase, “Get it,” is reminiscent of the cricket sound: *cricket, get it, Fidget*.

breakfast, not just the noun *breakfast*.”

“Eeeteeteeteeteet,” Click laughed.

“So get it,” said Fidget, “there are many things on our island, and each of these things has its own noun, get it? We can make a true sentence about anything!”

But Mud looked troubled.

Fidget looked at Mud.

Click said, “Eet?”

“Well,” said Mud, “what if we do not have a noun for something? Could there be things that have no nouns—things that are nameless? Or what if there is a noun, but we do not know it? Can we still say true things when we do not know the true nouns? Take birds, for example. We know that Click is a sandpiper, and Cow Loon is a loon, but what is the noun for that bird up there?”

“Up where?” asked Fidget.

Mud pointed up with his left fin.

They looked up and to the left, and high above the sea their friend Julie, a gray seabird with long wings, soared in the sky over the marching blue waves, performing her morning inspection of the fish schools. She could see through the pellucid water all the way to the yellow, sandy bottom, and she was watching a school of thirty-seven striped fish conduct its morning parade practice, turning first left, then right in perfect unison.

The friends watched Julie glide in the wind, but no one knew that she was a tern. They did not yet know the noun *tern*.

They were stumped.

A bird with no noun?

Now Fidget looked troubled.

They stared down at the sand in profound silence until Fidget had an idea. “Get it!” he cried. “We could beckon Julie to land and ask her what kind of bird she is!”

pellucid: adj. crystal clear

profound: adj. deep

beckon: v. to gesture, inviting someone to approach

“That seems reasonable,” said Mud, relieved, “but how could we tell the truth in the meantime?”

“Eeeeet...,” said Click pensively, and they knew what he meant.

“So...,” Mud thought aloud, “if there are forty-seven nouns, does that mean that there are forty-seven things? Is it always true that if there is a noun, there is a thing it names?”

Click did not peep.

“Ummm,” said Fidget, who was not often perplexed. “Do you mean that a noun could be false? There could be a noun for something, but the thing would not really exist? A noun about nothing? A noun that was not true but false?”

Fidget looked worried.

Mud looked at him.

There was a moment of silence.

“You have heard of dragons, right?” asked

pensively: adv. thinking deeply and seriously

perplexed: adj. puzzled, baffled

Mud.

“Yes,” said Fidget.

“Eeeeeet,” said Click.

“Well, are there dragons?” asked Mud.

This put fresh light on the matter. Fidget did not know what to say. He had heard of dragons, but he had never seen one. Could it be that there were no dragons—anywhere—even though the noun *dragon* was known to every animal? Could the noun *dragon* be untrue?

“If I say,” added Mud, “that ‘A *dragon lives on Sentence Island,*’ then that is a perfect sentence, but it is not true....” His voice trailed off as he reflected on the meaning of his words. His countenance revealed the uncertainty he was feeling.

The three perplexed animals avoided eye contact and looked in different directions, each pretending to watch the sea, and

countenance: n. facial expression

Fidget moved five of his feet about to fill the disturbing silence. It was a melancholy moment; they all wanted every correct sentence to be true.

“Eeeeeet,” tweeted Click suddenly, and he whispered in Fidget’s ear.

It was not really an ear, but no one said that in Fidget’s presence, and to be blunt about it, none of them had ears. Not exactly, even though they often used the noun *ear*.

Fidget listened to Click’s little *eeeps* and then turned to Mud. “Click has an idea,” he said. “He was hesitant to say this aloud, but he thinks that there might be more than one kind of noun. There might be nouns for tangible things in the world, and there might also be nouns for things in the mind, for things that we imagine, for imaginary things.”

They smiled and began to breathe more easily. This was a reasonable idea. Mud and

melancholy: n. deep sadness
tangible: adj. touchable, concrete

Fidget were impressed with Click's insight. Once again, they had made progress by talking together and listening respectfully to an individual's idea. The imagination could have its own group of nouns for imaginary things. Not bad.

Mud, however, still looked worried. After a moment he cleared his throat and said, "First, if a sentence has a grammar mistake, then it is not true, right? If I say that 'A *rat are here*,' that sentence cannot be true because the noun *rat* means one rat, but the verb *are* means more than one rat. So if the grammar is wrong, the sentence is false. On the other hand, could we agree that if a sentence is complete, and correct, and about things that really exist, then the sentence always will be true? Sentences that are correct in grammar will be true? That seems reasonable."

"What?" Fidget asked.

“Eeeeeep?” Click asked.

“Yes,” said Mud. “A sentence that has no error in its logic must always be true. That is what I think...I think.”

Fidget stared at Mud, thought, stole an oblique look at Click, and then said, “All fish are ridiculous.”

“I beg your pardon,” said Mud, tremulous with astonishment.

“Ridiculous, get it?” said Fidget. “All fish are ridiculous.”

“Well,” said Mud, “I am a fish, and I hope you do not think I am ridiculous. You cannot mean that all fish are ridiculous!”

“Is there an error in the sentence?” asked Fidget. “Is there a mistake in the grammar?”

“Nooooo,” said Mud, his voice beginning to trail off.

“Then all fish are ridiculous, including you,” said Fidget, “because it is a correct

oblique: adj. indirect, at an angle
tremulous: adj. trembling

sentence so it must be true, get it? All fish are ridiculous. Furthermore, Mud the fish has a foolish mustache.”

“A mustache!” said Mud. “I do not have a mustache. Fish do not have mustaches.”

“Yes, you do,” said Fidget. “You must have a mustache because I said that you do, and I did not make an error in my sentence, get it?”

This was a singular turn of logic. It was too much to take in. Click fell over on his side with a poof, and Mud opened his eyes wide in consternation.

“But, but,” said Mud, “how can a true sentence not be true?”

“Exactly, get it?” said Fidget.

They spent the rest of the morning resolutely studying the difference between good sentences that are true, such as “*Up is the opposite of down,*” and good sentences that are not true, such as “*Up is down.*”

singular: adj. unique, remarkable

consternation: n. amazement

resolutely: adv. with purpose, with determination

They began to understand a maxim of good thinking: that to be completely true, the sentence has to agree with itself, but it also has to agree with the world. They began to understand that they should compare a sentence to the facts of the world to see if the sentence is reasonable. To be true, a sentence has to agree with the truth of the world.

It was most perplexing. They all tried to think clearly, they all tried to be honest animals, and they all had a wonderful time exploring ideas together. Each animal liked to hear what another one thought.

That is what life was like for the friends of Sentence Island—lots of profound discussions and no more calamities.

Or so they thought.

maxim: n. a short statement of truth

