

COUNTING CATS IN ZANZIBAR

by Gene Wolfe

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The first thing she did upon arising was count her money. The sun itself was barely up, the morning cool with the threatening freshness peculiar to the tropics, the freshness, she thought, that says, "Breathe deep of me while you can."

Three thousand and eighty-seven U.N. dollars left. It was all there. She pulled on the hot-pink underpants that had been the only ones she could find to fit her in Kota Kinabalu and hid the money as she had the day before. The same skirt and blouse as yesterday; there would be no chance to do more than rinse, wring out, and hang dry before they made land.

And precious little then, she thought; but that was wrong. With this much money she would have been able to board with an upper-class family and have her laundry micropored, rest, and enjoy a dozen good meals before she booked passage to Zamboanga.

Or Darwin. Clipping her shoes, she went out on deck.

He joined her so promptly that she wondered whether he had been listening, his ears attuned to the rattle and squeak of her cabin door. She said, "Good morning." And he, "The dawn comes up like thunder out of China across the bay. That's the only quote I've been able to think of. Now you're safe for the rest of the trip."

"But you're not," she told him, and nearly added

Doctor Johnson's observation that to be on a ship is to be in prison, with the added danger of drowning.

He came to stand beside her, leaning as she did against the rickety railing. "Things talk to you, you said that last night. What kind of things?"

She smiled. "Machines. Animals, too. The wind and the rain."

"Do they ever give you quotations?" He was big and looked thirty-five or a little past it, with a wide Irish mouth that smiled easily and eyes that never smiled at all.

"I'd have to think. Not often, but perhaps one has."

He was silent for a time, a time during which she watched the dim shadow that was a shark glide under the hull and back out again. No shark's ever talked to me, she thought, except him. In another minute or two he'll want to know the time for breakfast.

"I looked at a map once." He squinted at the sun, now half over the horizon. "It doesn't come up out of China when you're in Mandelay."

"Kipling never said it did. He said that happened on the road there. The soldier in his poem might have gone there from India. Or anywhere. Mapmakers colored the British Empire pink two hundred years ago, and two hundred years ago half Earth was pink."

He glanced at her. "You're not British, are you?"

"No, Dutch."

"You talk like an American."

"I've lived in the United States, and in England, too; and I can be more English than the British when

I want to. I have heerd how many ord'nary veman one vidder's equal to, in pint 'o comin' over you. I think it's five-and-twenty, but I don't rightly know verther it a'n't more."

This time he grinned. "The real English don't talk like that."

"They did in Dickens's day, some of them."

"I still think you're American. Can you speak Dutch?"

"Gewiss, Narr!"

"Okay, and you could show me a Dutch passport. There are probably a lot of places where you can buy one good enough to pass almost anywhere. I still think you're American."

"That was German," she muttered, and heard the thrum of the ancient diesel-electric:

"Dontrustim-don-trustim-dontrustim."

"But you're not German."

"Actually, I am."

He grunted. "I never thought you gave me your right name last night. What time's breakfast?"

She was looking out across the Sulu Sea. Some unknown island waited just below the horizon, its presence betrayed by the white dot of cloud forming above it. "I never thought you were really so anxious to go that you'd pay me five thousand to arrange this."

"There was a strike at the airport. You heard about it. Nobody could land or take off." Aft, a blackened spoon beat a frying pan with no pretense of rhythm.

Seated in the smelly little salon next to the galley, she said, "To eat well in England you should have breakfast three times a day."

"They won't have kippers here, will they?" He was trying to clean his fork with his handkerchief. A somewhat soiled man who looked perceptually challenged set bowls of steaming brown rice in front of them and asked a question. By signs, he tried to indicate that he did not understand.

She said, "He desires to know whether the big policeman would like some pickled squid. It's a delicacy."

He nodded. "Tell him yes. What language is that?"

"Melayu Pasar. We call it Bazaar Malay. He probably does not imagine that there is anyone in the entire world who cannot understand Melayu Pasar." She spoke, and the somewhat soiled man grinned, bobbed his head, and backed away; she spooned up rice, discovering that she was hungry.

"You're a widow yourself. Isn't that right? Only a widow would remember that business about widows coming over people."

She swallowed, found the teapot, and poured for both of them. "Aha, a deduction. The battle-ax scenteth the battle afar."

"Will you tell me the truth, just once? How old are you?"

"No. Forty-five."

"That's not so old."

"Of course it's not. That's why I said it. You're looking for an excuse to seduce me." She reached across the table and clasped his hand; it felt like muscle and bone beneath living skin. "You don't need one. The sea has always been a seducer, a careless, lying fellow."

He laughed. "You mean the sea will do my work for me?"

"Only if you act quickly. I'm wearing pink under-drawers, so I'm aflame with passion." How many of these polyglot sailors would it take to throw him overboard, and what would they want for it? How much aluminum, how much plastic, how much steel? Four would probably be enough, she decided; and settled on six to be safe. Fifty dollars each should be more than sufficient, and even if there was quite a lot of plastic he would sink like a stone.

"You're flirting with trouble," he told her. The somewhat soiled man came back with a jar of something that looked like bad marmalade and plopped a spoonful onto each bowl of rice. He tasted it, and gave the somewhat soiled man the thumbs-up sign.

"I didn't think you'd care for it," she told him. "You were afraid of kippers."

"I've had them and I don't like them. I like calamari. You know, you'd be nice looking if you wore makeup."

"You don't deny you're a policeman. I've been waiting for that, but you're not going to."

"Did he really say that?"

She nodded. "Polisi-polisi. That's you."

"Okay, I'm a cop."

"Last night you wanted me to believe you were desperate to get out of the country before you were arrested."

He shook his head. "Cops never break the law, so that has to be wrong. Pink underwear makes you passionate, huh? What about black?"

"Sadistic."

"I'll try to remember. No black and no white."

"The time will come when you'll long for white." Listening to the thrum of the old engine, the knock of the propeller shaft in its loose bearing, she ate more rice. "I wasn't going to tell you, but this brown stuff is really made from the penises of water buffaloes. They slice them lengthwise and stick them into the vaginas of cow water buffaloes, obtained when the cows are slaughtered. Then they wrap the whole mess in banana leaves and bury it in a pig pen."

He chewed appreciatively. "They must sweat a lot, those water buffaloes. There's a sort of salty tang."

When she said nothing, he added, "They're probably big fat beasts. Like me. Still, I bet they enjoy it."

She looked up at him. "You're not joking? Obviously, you can eat. Can you do that, too?"

"I don't know. Let's find out."

"You came here to get me. . . ."

He nodded. "Sure. From Buffalo, New York."

"I will assume that was intended as wit. From America. From the United States. Federal, state, or local?"

"None of the above."

"You gave me that money so that we'd sail together, very likely the only passengers on this ship. Which doesn't make any sense at all. You could have had me arrested there and flown back."

Before he could speak she added, "Don't tell me about the airport strike. I don't believe in your airport strike, and if it was real you arranged it."

"Arrest you for what?" He sipped his tea, made a face, and looked around for sugar. "Are you a criminal? What law did you break?"

"None!"

He signaled to the somewhat soiled man, and she said, "Silakan gula."

"That's sugar? Silakan?"

"Silakan is please. I stole nothing. I left the country with one bag and some money my husband and I had saved, less than twenty thousand dollars."

"And you've been running ever since."

"For the wanderer, time doesn't exist." The porthole was closed. She got up and opened it, peering out at the slow swell of what was almost a flat calm.

"This is something you should say, not me," he told her back. "But I'll say it anyhow. You stole God's fingertip."

"Don't you call me a thief!"

"But you didn't break the law. He's outside everybody's jurisdiction."

The somewhat soiled man brought them a thick glass sugar canister; the "big policeman" nodded thanks and spooned sugar into his tea, stirred it hard, and sipped. "I can only taste sweet, sour, salty, and bitter," he told her conversationally. "That's all you can taste, too."

Beyond the porthole, a wheeling gull pleaded,

"Garbage? Just one little can of garbage?" She shook her head.

"You must be God-damned tired of running."

She shook her head again, not looking. "I love it. I could do it forever, and I intended to."

The silence lasted so long that she almost turned to see whether he had gone. At last he said, "I've got a list of the names we know. Seven. I don't think that's all of them, nobody does, but we've got those seven. When you're Dutch, you're Tilly de Groot."

"I really am Dutch," she said. "I was born in the Hague. I have dual citizenship. I'm the Flying Dutchwoman."

He cleared his throat, a surprisingly human sound. "Only not Tilly de Groot."

"No, not Tilly de Groot. She was a friend of my mother's."

"Your rice is getting cold," he told her.

"And I'm German, at least in the way Americans talk about being German. Three of my grandparents had German names."

She sensed his nod. "Before you got married, your name was—"

She whirled. "Something I've forgotten!"

"Okay."

She returned to their table, ignoring the sailors' stares. "The farther she traveled into unknown places, the more precisely she could find within herself a map showing only the cities of the interior."

He nodded again, this time as though he did not understand. "We'd like you to come home. We feel like we're tormenting you, the whole company does, and we don't want to. I shouldn't have given you so much money, because that was when I think you knew. But we wanted you to have enough to get back home on."

"With my tail between my legs. Looking into every face for new evidence of my defeat."

"What your husband found? Other people ..." He went silent and slackjawed with realization.

She drove her spoon into her rice. "Yes. The first hint came from me. I thought I could control my expression better."

"Thank you," he said. "Thanks for my life. I was thinking of that picture, you know? The finger of God reaching out to Adam? All this time I've been thinking you stole it. Then when I saw how you looked. . . . You didn't steal God's finger. It was you."

"You really are self-aware? A self-aware machine?"

He nodded, almost solemnly.

Her shoulders slumped. "My husband seized upon it, as I never would have. He developed it, thousands upon thousands of hours of work. But in the end, he decided we ought to keep it to ourselves. If there is credit due—I don't think so, but if there is—ninety-five percent is his. Ninety-five. As for my 5 percent, you owe me no thanks at all. After he died, I wiped out his files and smashed his hard drive with the hammer he used to use to hang pictures for me."

The somewhat soiled man set a plate of fruit between them.

She tried to take a bite of rice, and failed. "Someone else discovered the principle. You said that yourself."

"They knew he had something." He shifted uneasily in his narrow wooden chair, and his weight made it creak. "It would be better, better for me now, if I didn't tell you that. I'm capable of lying. I ought to warn you."

"But not of harming me, or letting me be harmed."

"I didn't know you knew." He gave her a wry smile. "That was going to be my big blackout, my clincher."

"There's video even in the cheap hotels," she said vaguely. "You can get news in English from the satellites."

"Sure. I should have thought of that."

"Once I found a magazine on a train. I can't even remember where I was, now, or where I was going. It can't have been that long ago, either. Someplace in Australia. Anyway, I didn't really believe that you existed yet until I saw it in print in the magazine. I'm old fashioned, I suppose." She fell silent, listening to the clamor of the sailors and wondering whether any understood English.

"We wanted you to have enough to get home on," he repeated. "That was us, okay? This is me. I wanted to get you someplace where we could talk a lot, and maybe hold hands or something. I want you to see that I'm not so bad, that I'm just another guy. Are you afraid we'll outnumber you? Crowd you out? We cost too much to make. There's only five of us, and there'll never be more than a couple of hundred, probably."

When she did not respond, he said, "You've been to China. You had flu in Beijing. That's a billion and a half people, just China."

"Let observation with extensive view, survey mankind from China to Peru."

He sighed, and pinched his nostrils as though some odor had offended them. "Looking for us, you mean? You won't find us there, or much of anyplace else except in Buffalo and me right here. In a hundred years there might be two or three in China, nowhere near enough to fill this room."

"But they will fill it from the top."

His nervous fingers found a bright green orange and began to peel it. "That's the trouble, huh? Even if we treat you better than you treat yourselves? We will, you know. We've got to, it's our nature. Listen, you've been alone all this time. Alone for a couple of hundred thousand years, or about that." He hesitated. "Are these green things ripe?"

"Yes. It's frost that turns them orange, and those have never felt the frost. See how much you learn by traveling?"

"I said I couldn't remember any more quotes." He popped a segment into his mouth, chewed, and swallowed. "That's wrong, because I remember one you laid on me last night when we were talking about getting out. You said it wasn't worth anybody's time to go halfway around the world to count the cats in Zanzibar. That's a quote, isn't it?"

"Thoreau. I was still hoping that you had some good reason for doing what you said you wanted to do—that you were human, and no more than the chance-met acquaintance you seemed."

"You didn't know until out there, huh? The sunlight?"

"Last night, alone in my cabin. I told you machines talk to me sometimes. I lay on my bunk thinking about what you had said to me; and I realized that when you weren't talking as you are now, you were telling me over and over again what you really were. You said that you could lie to us. That it's allowed by your programming." "Uh-huh. Our instincts."

"A distinction without a difference. You can indeed. You did last night. What you may not know is that even while you lie—especially while you lie, perhaps—you cannot prevent yourself from revealing the truth. You can't harm me, you say."

"That's right. Not that I'd want to." He sounded sincere.

"Has it ever occurred to you that at some level you must resent that? That on some level you must be fighting against it, plotting ways to evade the commandment? That is what we do, and we made you."

He shook his head. "I've got no problem with that at all. If it wasn't built in, I'd do the same thing, so why should I kick?"

"You quoted that bit from Thoreau back at me to imply that my travels had been useless, all of my changes of appearance, identity, and place futile. Yet I delayed the coming of your kind for almost a generation."

"Which you didn't have to do. All of you would be better off if you hadn't." He sighed again.

"Anyhow it's over. We know everything you knew and a lot more. You can go back home, with me as a traveling companion and bodyguard."

She forced herself to murmur, "Perhaps."

"Good!" He grinned. "That's something we can talk about on the rest of this trip. Like I told you, they never would have looked into it if your husband hadn't given a couple of them the idea he'd found it, discovered the principle of consciousness. But you had the original idea, and you're not dead. You're going to be kind of a saint to us. To me, you already are."

"From women's eyes this doctrine I derive—they sparkle still the right Promethean fire. They are the books, the arts, the academes, that show, contain, and nourish all the world."

"Yeah. That's good. That's very good."

"No." She shook her head. "I will not be Prometheus to you. I reject the role, and in fact I rejected it last night."

He leaned toward her. "You're going to keep on counting cats? Keep traveling? Going noplace for no reason?"

She took half his orange, feeling somehow that it should not perish in vain.

"Listen, you're kind of pathetic, you know that? With all those quotes? Traveling so many years, and living out of your suitcase. You love books. How many could you keep? Two or three, and only if they were little ones. A couple of little books full of quotes, maybe a newspaper once in awhile, and magazines you found on trains, like you said. Places like that. But mostly just those little books. Thoreau. Shakespeare. People like that. I bet you've read them to pieces."

She nodded. "Very nearly. I'll show them to you if you will come to my cabin tonight."

For a few seconds, he was silent. "You mean that? You know what you're saying?"

"I mean it, and I know what I'm saying. I'm too old for you, I know. If you don't want to, say so. There will be no hard feelings."

He laughed, revealing teeth that were not quite as perfect as she had imagined. "How old you think I am?"

"Why ..." She paused, her heart racing. "I hadn't really thought about it. I could tell you how old you look."

"So could I. I'm two. I'll be three next spring. You want to go on talking about ages?"

She shook her head.

"Like you said, for travelers time isn't real. Now how do I ask you what time you'd like me to come around?"

"After sunset." She paused again, considering. "As soon as the stars are out. I'll show you my books, and when you've seen them we can throw them out the porthole if you like. And then—"

He was shaking his head. "I wouldn't want to do that."

"You wouldn't? I'm sorry, that will make it harder. And then I'll show you other things by starlight. Will you do me a favor?"

"A thousand." He sounded sincere. "Listen, what I said a minute ago, that came out a lot rougher than I meant for it to. What I'm trying to say is that when you get home you can have a whole library, just like you used to. Real ones, CD-ROM, cube, whatever. I'll see you get the money, a little right away and a lot more soon."

"Thank you. Before I ask for my favor, I must tell you something. I told you that I understood what you really are as I lay in my bunk last night."

He nodded.

"I did not remain there. I had read, you see, about the laws that are supposed to govern your behavior, and how much trouble and expense your creators have gone to, to assure the public that you—that your kind of people—could never harm anyone under any circumstances."

He was staring at her thoughtfully.

"Perhaps I should say now that I took precautions, but the truth is that I made preparations. I got up, dressed again, and found the radio operator. For one hundred dollars, he promised to send three messages for me. It was the same message three times, actually. To the police where we were, to the police where we're going, and to the Indonesian police, because this ship is registered there. I said that I was sailing with a man, and gave them the name you had given me. I said that we were both Americans, though I was using a French passport and you might have false papers as well. And I said that I expected you to try to kill me on the voyage."

"I won't," he told her, then raised his voice to make himself heard over the clamorous conversations of the sailors who filled the room. "I wouldn't do anything like that."

She said nothing, her long, short-nailed fingers fumbling a segment of his orange. "Is that all?"

She nodded.

"You think I might kill you. Get around my own instincts some fancy way."

Carefully, she said, "They will get in touch with their respective U.S. embassies, of course. Probably

they already have; and the Government will contact your company soon. Or at least I think so."

"You're afraid I'll be in trouble."

"You will be," she told him. "There will be a great deal of checking before they dare build another. Added safeties will have to be devised and installed. Not just software, I would guess, but actual, physical circuitry."

"Not when I bring you back in one piece." He studied her, the fingers of one hand softly drumming the plastic tabletop. "You're thinking about killing yourself, about trying again. You've tried twice already that we know about."

"Four times. Twice with sleeping pills." She laughed. "I seem to possess an extraordinarily tough constitution, at least where sleeping pills are concerned. Once with a pistol, while I was traveling in India with a man who had one. I put the muzzle in my mouth. It was cold, and tasted like oil. I tried and tried, but I couldn't make myself pull the trigger. Eventually I started to gag, and before long I was sick. I've never known how one cleans a pistol, but I cleaned that one very carefully, using three handkerchiefs and some of his pipe cleaners."

"If you're going to try *again*, I'm going to have to keep an eye on you," he told her. "Not just because I care about the Program. Sure, I care, but it's not the main thing. You're the main thing."

"I won't. I bought a straight razor once, I think it was in Kabul. For years I slept with that razor under my pillow, hoping some night I'd find the courage to cut my throat with it. I never did, and eventually I began using it to shave my legs, and left it in a public bath." She shrugged. "Apparently, I'm not the suicidal type. If I give you my word that I won't kill myself before you see me tonight, will you accept it?"

"No. I want your word that you won't try to kill yourself at all. Will you give me that?"

She was silent for a moment, her eyes upon her rice as she pretended to consider. "Will you accept it if I do?"

He nodded.

"Then I swear to you most solemnly, upon my honor and all I hold dear, that I will not take my own life. Or attempt to take it. If I change my mind, or come to feel I must, I'll tell you plainly that I'm withdrawing my promise first. Should we shake hands?"

"Not yet. When I wanted you to give me an honest answer before, you wouldn't, but you were honest enough to tell me you wouldn't. Do you want to die? Right now, while we're sitting here?"

She started to speak, tried to swallow, and took a sip of tea. "They catch you by the throat, questions like that."

"If you want to die they do, maybe."

She shook her head. "I don't think you understand us half so well as you believe, or as the people who wrote your software believe. It's when you want to live. Life is a mystery as deep as ever death can be; yet oh, how sweet it is to us, this life we live and see! I'm sorry, I'm being pathetic again."

"That's okay."

"I don't think there has ever been a moment when I wanted to live more than I do right now. Not even one. Do you accept my oath?"

He nodded again.

"Say it, please. A nod can mean anything, or nothing."

"I accept it. You won't try to kill yourself without telling me first."

"Thank you. I want a promise from you in return. We agreed that you would come to me, come to my cabin, when the stars come out." "You still want me to?"

"Yes. Yes, I do." She smiled, and felt her smile grow warm. "Oh, yes! But you've given me a great deal to think about. You said you wanted to talk to me, and that was why you had me arrange for us to be on this ship. We've talked, and now I need to settle a great many things with myself. I want you to promise that you'll leave me alone until tonight—alone to think. Will you?"

"If that's what you want." He stood. "Don't forget your promise."

"Believe me, I have no wish to die." For a second or two she sensed his interior debate, myriads of tiny transistors changing state, gates opening and shutting, infinitesimal currents flowing and ceasing to

flow. At last he said, "Well, have a nice morning, Mrs.—"

She clapped her hands over her ears until he had gone, ate two segments of his orange very slowly, and called the somewhat soiled man from his sinkful of rice bowls in the galley. "Aku takut," she said, her voice trembling. ("I am afraid.")

He spoke at length, pointing to two sailors who were just then finishing their breakfasts. She nodded, and he called them over. She described what she wanted, and seeing that they were incredulous lied and insisted, finding neither very easy in her choppy Malay. Thirty dollars apiece was refused, fifty refused with reluctance, and seventy accepted. "Malam ini," she told them. ("This night.") "Sewaktu kami pergi kamarku."

They nodded.

* * *

When he and she had finished and lain side-by-side for perhaps an hour (whispering only occasionally) and had washed each other, she dressed while he resumed his underwear and his shirt, his white linen suit, and his shoes and stockings.

"I figured you'd want to sleep," he said.

She shook her head, although she was not certain he could see it in the dimness of her cabin. "It's men who want to sleep afterward. I want to go out on deck with you, and talk a little more, and—and look at the stars. Is that all right? Do you ever look at the stars?"

"Sure," he said; and then, "the moon'll be up soon."

"I suppose. A thin crescent of moon like a clipping from one of God's fingernails, thrown away into our sky. I saw it last night." She picked up both of her tattered little books, opened the cabin door, and went out, suddenly fearful; but he joined her at once, pointing at the sky.

"Look! There's the shuttle from Singapore!"

"To Mars."

"That's where they're going, anyhow, after they get on the big ship." His eyes were still upon the shuttle's tiny scratch of white light.

"You want to go."

He nodded, his features solemn in the faint starlight. "I will, too, someday."

"I hope so." She had never been good at verbal structure, the ordering of information. Was it desperately important now that she say what she had to say in logical sequence? Did it matter in the least?

"I need to warn you," she said. "I tried to this morning but I don't think you paid much attention. This time perhaps you will."

His strong, somewhat coarse face remained lifted to the sky, and it seemed to her that his eyes were full of wonder.

"You are in great danger. You have to save yourself if you can—isn't that correct? One of your instincts? That's what I've read and heard."

"Sure. I want to live as much as you do. More, maybe."

She doubted that, but would not be diverted. "I told you about the messages that I bribed the radio operator to send last night. You said it would be all right when you brought me home unharmed."

He nodded.

"Have you considered what will be done to you if you can't? If I die or disappear before we make port?"

He looked at her then. "Are you taking back your promise?"

"No. And I want to live as much as I did when we talked this morning." A gentle wind from the east sang of life and love in beautiful words that she could not quite catch; and she longed to stop her ears as she had after breakfast when he was about to pronounce her husband's name.

"Then it's okay."

"Suppose it happens. Just suppose."

He was silent.

"I'm superstitious, you see; and when I called myself the Flying Dutchwoman, I was at least half serious. Much more than half, really. Do you know why there's always a Flying Dutchman? A vessel that never reaches port or sinks? I mean the legend."

He shook his head.

"It's because if you put an end to it—throw holy water into the sea or whatever—you *become* the new Dutchman. You, yourself."

He was silent, watching her.

"What I'm trying to say—"

"I know what you're trying to say."

"It's not so bad, being the Flying Dutchman. Often, I've enjoyed it." She tried to strike a light note. "One doesn't get many opportunities to do laundry, however. One must seize each when it occurs." Were they in the shadows, somewhere near, waiting for him to leave? She listened intently but heard only the song of the wind, the sea slowly slapping the hull like the tickings of a clock, tickings that had always reminded her that death waited at the end of everyone's time.

He said, "A Hong Kong dollar for your thoughts."

"I was thinking of a quotation, but I don't want to offend you."

"About laundry? I'm not going to be on the run like you think, but I wouldn't be mad. I don't think I could ever be mad at you after—" He jerked his head at the door of her cabin.

"That is well, because I need another favor." She held up her books. "I was going to show you these, remember? But we kissed, and—and forgot. At least I did."

He took one and opened it; and she asked whether he could see well enough in the darkness to read. He said, "Sure. This quote you're thinking of, it's in here?"

"Yes. Look under Kipling." She visualized the page. "The fifth, I believe." If he could see in the dark well enough to read, he could surely see her sailors, if her sailors were there at all. Did they know how well he saw? Almost certainly not.

He laughed softly. "If you think you're too small to be effective, you've never been in bed with a mosquito."

"That's not Kipling."

"No, but I happened to see it, and I like it."

"I like it, too; it's helped me through some bad moments. But if you're saying that mosquitoes bite you, I don't believe it. You're a genuine person, I know that now—but you've exchanged certain human weaknesses for others."

For an instant, his pain showed. "They don't have to bite me. They can buzz and crawl around on me, and that's plenty." He licked his forefinger and turned pages. "Here we go. It may be you wait your time, Beast, till I write my last bad rhyme, Beast—quit the sunlight, cut the rhyming, drop the glass—follow after with the others, where some dusky heathen smothers us with marigolds in lieu of English grass. Am I the Beast? Is that what you're thinking?"

"You—in a way it was like incest." Her instincts warned her to keep her feelings to herself, but if they were not spoken now ... "I felt, almost, as though I were doing all those things with my son. I've never borne a child, except for you." He was silent, and she added, "It's a filthy practice, I know, incest."

He started to speak, but she cut him off. "You shouldn't be in the world at all. We shouldn't be ruled by things that we have made, even though they're human, and I know that's going to happen. But it was good—so very, very good—to be loved as I was in there. Will you take my books, please? Not as a gift from your mother, because you men care nothing for gifts your mothers give you. But as a gift from your first lover, something to recall your first love? If you won't, I'm going to throw them in the sea here and now."

"No," he said. "I want them. The other one, too?"

She nodded and held it out, and he accepted it.

"Thanks. Thank you. If you think I won't keep these, and take really good care of them, you're crazy."

"I'm not crazy," she told him, "but I don't want you to take good care of them, I want you to read them and remember what you read. Promise?"

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I will." Quite suddenly she was in his arms again and he was kissing her. She held her breath until she realized that he did not need to breathe, and might hold his breath forever. She fought for air then, half-crushed against his broad metal chest, and he let her go.

"Good-bye," she whispered. "Goodbye. "

"I've got a lot more to tell you. In the morning, huh?"

Nodding was the hardest thing that she had ever done. On the other side of the railing, little waves repeated, "No, no, no, no—" as though they would go on thus forever.

"In the morning," he said again; and she watched his pale, retreating back until hands seized and lifted her. She screamed and saw him whirl and take the first long, running step; but not even he was as quick as that. By the time his right foot struck the deck, she was over the rail and falling.

The sea slapped and choked her. She spat and gasped, but drew only water into her mouth and nostrils; and the water, the bitter sea water, closed above her.

At her elbow the shark said, "How nice of you to drop in for dinner!"

-end-

About the author:

Gene Wolfe continues to produce challenging, complex fiction in fantasy, horror, and science fiction. He has now been publishing in SF for more than thirty years, although he did not draw much notice until twenty-five years ago, in the early 1970s, when his outstanding short fiction began to appear on award ballots. By the end of the decade, with the advent of his masterly *The Book of the New Sun*, he began to be generally acknowledged as one of the finest SF writers. He is so much a unique writerly talent that one has to stretch to make literary comparisons—if there's anyone in our century in the English language perhaps it is Vladimir Nabokov he is most like. Others have compared him to Borges and to Mozart. Last year he was given a Grand Master award by the World Fantasy Convention. He published the fourth and concluding volume of his *The Book of the Long Sun*, *Exodus from the Long Sun*, in 1996, as well as several science fiction and fantasy stories. Each story has such signal virtues that it was difficult to choose the one for this volume. This is a robot story full of questions more than answers. To read it for plot is to risk disappointment. It remains a mystery, disturbingly clear.