

My name is Quincy Mueller, but since the merchant marines I've been known almost exclusively as Muley. It has nothing to do with my character, however. Far from being obstinate or contrary, I'm in fact liberal and engaging. A more enthusiastic conversationalist you're not likely to find; sailors are lonely, I mean, and hungry for company. If anything, I suppose—and this just because I'm honest to a fault—I err toward the overbearing, as isolation is something I've had my fill of.

And yes, if you detect a hit of defensiveness in my voice, you're not far from the mark. That so much should have come from a simple misunderstanding one night twenty years ago is so far beyond comprehension that it's actually amusing, I think, or at least revealing of human nature.

But I get ahead of myself.

Never mind that you already know my story. That you more than likely grew up with it.

To begin, then, twenty years ago I was thirty-eight, salty and fully-bearded, recovering from a near-fatal accident which had left me convalescing for nearly fourteen months. During those weeks upon weeks in bed, the room uncomfortably still—I hadn't been landlocked for more than two consecutive months since my twenty-second year, when I thought marriage was the cure for loneliness—I could feel my skin growing pale and translucent, my lips becoming tender without salt to rime them. Because of the injuries to my throat, too, the doctors wouldn't allow me any tobacco; I couldn't even chew upon my pipe.

I'll spare you the fates I wished upon those doctors—curses I picked up in ports all over the world—but, looking back, I see of course that they more than likely wanted me out of their hospital as much as I wanted out myself.

Since the ninth month, I had said so little, even, that they called for a battery of tests to gauge my psychological health. Though I tried to tell them all I needed was a view of the sea, the smell of brine, still, they poked and prodded my mind until I did in fact shut down. I'm not proud of it, but, like the tarpon on the deck, his side still bleeding from the gaff, I'd flopped around as long as I could, and found that useless, so was now just staring, waiting for this ordeal to be over.

The nurses took turns rolling me from side to side to ministrates my sores and perform other indignities.

In my head, though, I was sailing. On the open sea, a boat pitching beneath me, I was beyond the reach of their needles and swabs and catheters and small, polite questions.

As the days passed, they came to my room less and less, content that my body would either heal itself in time or that I would, one day when they weren't looking, simply stop trying.

To them, I mean, even twenty years ago I was already an antique, a throwback to another century, another way of life.

And, if I'm to be honest here, yes, I did indeed stop trying, finally. But the body breathes whether you want it to or not. The heart keeps beating. Perhaps because it knows more than you do—knows that, past this experience, a whole new life will open up, and whatever infirmities persist, they can be dealt with one by one.

That's all in the future, though.

Right then, on my back in bed, miles from the shore, dose upon dose of antibiotic and painkiller pulsing through my veins, it was hard not to feel sorry for myself. To let that consume me.

It was finally a nurse by the name of Margaret whom I woke to one day. She was dabbing the wetness away from the corners of my eyes, and adjusting the various lines that went into and out of me.

"Does it hurt?" she said, her fingertips light on my right forearm.

I closed my eyes, made her disappear.

The next time I woke, however, she was there again. Evidently she'd been talking for some minutes, telling me about her social life, her family, her dreams and aspirations. I let her words flow over me like water and studied the cursive letters of her name, and watched as, in slow motion, like picture cards flipping one after the other, she pointed a syringe into one of the tubes that fed me.

How long this went on, I don't know. If I'd first seen her on a Wednesday though, her badge still new enough to be hand printed, then this was at least a Monday.

What she talked about the most was a certain boy named Billy, I think. How he'd wronged her and was continuing to wrong her, but she was going to show him.

I opened my mouth to tell her something but only emitted a rusty creak, my voice broken from dis-use.

She smiled, pursed her lips, patted my tender right arm and asked if I wanted to see the ocean?

Though I couldn't talk, still, she saw the answer in my eyes—I've always had expressive eyes—and, with the help of another nurse, maneuvered my atrophied body into a gleaming silver wheelchair, pushed me down hall after hall, my heart beating intentionally for the first time in months, the fingers of my left hand gripping the brown plastic armrest, her subdued laughter behind me tittering out between her closed lips.

If I could have spoken, I was going to tell her how, if she wanted, I might name my next ship the Margo, after her, and all the rest after that as well: Margo II, Margo III, Margo IV, a fleet of Margos fanned out across the shipping lanes from here to the South Pacific.

But of course that was just talk—I'd never owned my own ship before, and didn't have one waiting for me when I got better.

And anyway, where she was taking me was a joke of sorts.

She finally stopped our perambulations in the waiting room, with my chair pushed up to a small aquarium with exotic fish, and, every ten seconds, a treasure chest that would burp air up to the surface.

I closed my eyes, woke again to Margaret's hand on a syringe, then slept and slept and slept.

The next time I came to she was stroking the top of my left hand and talking about Billy again.

Evidently I was supposed to have forgotten about the waiting room, about the ocean.

I can remember ever shoal in every port I've ever drawn water in, though.

I shut my eyes and shut my ears and let her have my hand. Just that.

How long this cycle repeated itself, I don't know. My guess would place it at two months; after a while Margaret became a practiced-enough nurse that she could haul me into my chair herself, just by leveraging me with her hips and the brakes on my bed, and I was a practiced-enough patient to believe that what she was shooting into me syringe by syringe was salt water, and that the dreams I had were just the ocean inside, bending itself to the moon.

Instead of going to the waiting room now, she was walking me outside, her voice drifting around me. The air was supposed to be good for me, I think. It was stale, though; there was no salt in it, no spray, and the horizon was forever blocked by trees and buildings, the sky empty of properly-winged birds.

One day, as had to happen, I suppose, Margaret asked her question again: Did I want to see the ocean?

I tried to move my left hand to indicate that I got this joke, yes, thank you, how nice, but I don't think she was looking anyway.

Back in the room this time, instead of pushing the sharp nose of the syringe into the line that went into my injured arm, she instead emptied it an inch into my mattress.

"I don't want you going to sleep just yet," she said, winking.

It made my heart beat, not with fear, but, in spite of what I knew, hope.

That night—I could tell it was night by the window—she came back for me. Her shift was over; she had her overcoat on over her thin cotton uniform.

I opened my mouth to ask a question but she just patted my shoulder and swung me down into my chair.

As you've by now of course guessed, we weren't going to the waiting room and we weren't going to the paved walking path, but the back door, and, past that, Margaret's large car.

She folded me into the passenger seat, my chair in the trunk.

"Wher-?" I tried to get out, but she guided my hand back down to my lap, eased her car down the slope of the parking lot.

Across the road there were sirens, and, walking through a pool of light, a police officer with a dog on a leash.

Margaret tensed and smiled at the same time.

"One of the slobbering maniacs, Mr. Mueller," she said, nodding to the woods. "Probably just wanted to see the ocean, right?"

"Muley," I tried to tell her.

Even though the road we took was more downhill than up, which is to say we were heading generally closer to sea-level, I had no illusions. After the aquarium in the waiting room, I knew I was going to be lucky to even smell the salt through her air conditioner vents, much less feel any spray on my face.

At the same time, however, if this was to be an end to my suffering, then so be it.

I pushed my back into the cup of her passenger seat and waited for whatever was to come.

As I'd expected, instead of following signs to the marina or some other place of portage, she instead wound us through a maze of residential streets I could never retrace. Billy wasn't down any of them, though, in spite of her muttering his name. Vaguely, I had the idea that her intent was to induce pity in him by pretending I was her war-addled uncle; that, for a few minutes, he was going to have to pretend to be who I was supposed to be expecting him to be. Which is to say Margaret's.

The profanity seeping over from the driver's side of the car, too, though vituperative and heartfelt, still it was light, amateurish. I'd heard worse in Morocco at fourteen years of age, and just over a bow line tied improperly. How that Moroccan sailor might have cursed had his intended been with someone else, it burns my ears just to think about it, and makes me smile a little too. Other people's suffering can be comical, I mean, when seen from a distance. Even mine, I suppose.

That's not to say I can't still remember the fear that rattled up through me, however, when Margaret took her car from asphalt to gravel, and then from gravel to dirt. The trees crowded around us, made the sky small. I started breathing faster, so that she had to look over, narrow her eyes.

"This isn't a good time for this," she said.

I closed my eyes.

Under her thigh was a hunting knife, the kind with a rosewood handle and a brass finger guard.

At a certain point on the dirt road, she turned the lights of her car off, and, when we saw the tail lights she evidently knew, she turned her car off as well, coasted into a slot between two large trees.

For a long time then we just sat there, the two of us, and, slowly, I tuned into a new set of sounds: the woods. And, unless as I was mistaken—as it turned out, I wasn't—the taste of salt in the now-still, un-air-conditioned air.

The sea. She was close.

I tried not to let this knowledge flash across my face.

In her lap now, Margaret had a rope. She was trying to tie a knot but making a complicated job of it. My left hand floundered over almost on its own, guided the end of the rope up and under and back on itself. She appreciated this, pulled the knot tight, nodded a reluctant thank you to me and then would no longer meet my eye. Such is the way we treat the rabbit we're about to carve for dinner, I suppose.

It had felt good though, the rope against my skin again.

Margaret patted the noose she now had and stood from the car, locking all four doors before walking away into the darkness.

What did she need me for then? The knot?

I stared at the spot she'd disappeared into but couldn't figure it out, and finally consoled myself trying to roll my window down to bring the sea nearer. It was electric, though, and I had no keys.

How long I sat there after she left, I have no idea. If I slept, it was only for minutes, and if I hummed, it was only to hear my own voice. In the absence of monitors and pumps and footsteps, the world was rushingly quiet, and not close enough.

At some point, anyway, Margaret strode across a bare place between the trees. The rope was no longer across her shoulder, and the knife was held in her fist, low.

I tried rolling my window down again, and was still clattering away at the button when she was suddenly at my door with the car keys.

"Your turn," she said, smiling.

Sprayed across her shirt was blood that had dried almost black.

I nodded, gave my weight to her, let her heave me into my chair, pull me backwards through the trees, tump me into a clearing behind the car I was pretty sure was Billy's.

The reason I say this is that, hanging from a thick limb above the car was a man of no more than twenty-two. A boy, really. His hands had been tied behind his back, and his throat had been carved out. From years of handling knives, I instantly understood the angles: someone had sat on his chest and worked on his neck with a blade. Calmly, deliberately.

And then he'd been strung up, with a knot only a sailor would know.

Which was of course what she needed me for.

She pulled the empty wheelchair back into the darkness and I looked where she was looking: to Billy's car, its vinyl roof pattered with blood.

Through the foggy glass, facing forward-away-there was a girl.

I shook my head no, no, and, because the sea was close and because it didn't matter anymore, I found the strength to pull myself forward with my left hand. It was torturously slow, however, and filled my loose pants with twigs and dirt which nettled my bed sores. But the girl. I had to tell her, had to get her to leave, to live.

Because I couldn't stand, I of course latched onto her bumper with my left hand, and then on the fourth try was able to hook my right under her wheel well, pull myself forward by inches.

By this time she was aware of the sound I was, had locked the door, had, even though it wouldn't help her see, turned on the dome light and started grinding the starter.

She was saying her boyfriend's name louder and louder, and then shrieking a

little.

It didn't matter, though. All I had to do was pull myself up level with her window and tell her about Margaret, that we had to go now, that, that—

I didn't even know what. But something.

With my left hand I gripped the ledge of her back door, and with my right, the large functional hook the doctors were trying to teach me to use, I pulled hard on her door latch, my head rising even as the car started, pulling me up, up.

I couldn't hold the car there, though.

It dragged me for maybe ten feet, and then the straps on the hook let go of the stump my forearm had become and I was rolling in the dirt, Billy swinging above me, Margaret in the darkness all around, and this is how stories begin, yes.

But none of you were there for the part after the girl left, my hook clattering in her door latch, the part where I crawled arm over arm through the trees until first light delivered to me a beach, a surf, which I rolled in for hours, and have never really left since. Not longer than overnight, anyway. And, no, the name I had then, it's not the same I have now—the world is the world, after all—but my ship, my lady, she is the Margo. Not in honor either, but in defiance: six years after my escape from dry-dock, I read the account of that night, and found that the authorities had managed not only to scrub any reference of Margaret from the public records, but, because of the violent, infectious nature of her crime perhaps, they'd also erased the very hospital I'd convalesced in, so that all that was left for the newspaper to report was that a patient, deeply disturbed by having had to cut off his own arm off with the neck of a bottle to escape drowning, had escaped the mental hospital the town was built around, and succeeded in killing and hanging a young boy named William Jackson before disappearing, presumably, into the sea.

I'll admit to that last part anyway.