

Harold and the Pirates

JP the Author

Forward

Hello reader. I want to thank you for at least starting my book. I have started it more than once, stopped, and went back to it. It's either a labor of love or a compulsion; I can't tell. I built a little world, and it's nothing without readers. If you read it, than all this work was a labor of love. If you don't, than I did it for the same reason people got Marlboro Miles or start heroin.

Without you, I am just a pile of words, a collection of little magnetic tics and tocks.

I appreciate this chance you are giving me to live in your head. The real estate is so fertile that everything just grows in there. I am in fact an American outgrowth myself. I am what was rattled loose from the fertile teeth that chewed into the soft fat of middle American dream.

My head feels like a freak-show sometimes. Under this aging face is a machine of vitreous that looks out, sees things, and converts them into things like this...

Left on the Beach

“The Men Under The Sea”

*They lie in quiet desperation,
where no one hears the screams.*

*See sweat see
its loosing itself from a salty sea.*

*quiet voices of self destruction whispering in the cold,
screaming wordless curses into the old
heads*

but it seems so long ago

so...

The sky was clear blue, and it seemed to cover the entire world in a cheery sort of tropical expanse that smelled like a floral hot humid blanket that had been left on the beach much too long.

Harold tried to remember if “Left On The Beach” was one of the drinks he ordered. His butler, confused at first, was happy to help Harold work through his issues with mixed drinks in a couples resort by himself. He drank happy things at first like “Blue Motorcycle and Pink Panty Pull Downs.”

He flipped through her Facebook and stopped on the last one that was taken when they were together. They were smiling.

Harold could feel his body trying to tell him something, but as the waiter got tired of bringing him alcohol; the drinks seemed to get less like sweet fruit and more like liquor poured in angrily and cussed at in heavy patoise. His arms and

legs were so heavy. He felt that his body would sit under the clear crystal tropical sky and bake forever. He wondered if one could will themselves out of existence without all the mess. “If he could just be something else,” she said. He thought about being something else, anything else.

His felt his stomach spasm around its collection of liquors, fried foods, and an antidepressant that died in vain. He felt it all sort of lurch up against his best efforts to hold it back. It was at this point that his bladder finally broke free, and he felt a sort of humiliating warm relief run around his bathing suit.

He looked at the ocean, which was so smooth like a freshly drawn bath. The resort had a giant yellow duck just off the end of the pier, and it bobbed like a toddler’s toy in the ocean.

And then he stood up.

His entire body seemed completely unprepared for this, and his feet felt like wet clay as he tried to refocus his vision.

The nausea that followed sent him lurching for the pier. If he could just get his head in the water, Harold

He could feel his stomach make a final effort to lunge its contents as he staggered toward the pier. He bent over, his mouth yawning open; and vomited in colors. He could see black spots gather around the corners of his eyes before the world sort of went black, and he could feel himself falling forward.

Trapped

Harold could smell the stale wet air of a men's room as he slowly opened his eyes.

Three men were sitting on a bunk opposite to his and were staring at him intently. He had the sudden thought of being dragged drunk into a room to be robbed or assaulted. Panic took over as he leapt up from the bed to lunge forward out the door and back to the beach.

The metal bar on the top bunk came as a complete surprise to Harold as his skull cracked rather harshly against the rusted metal, which only creaked in slight protest as Harold fell back onto the floor moaning.

"What did you do that for?" he heard an old man say as he laid on the floor in pain.

Harold moaned and held his head. "I panicked," he said. He looked around the small metal room. "I thought I was being raped," his voice sort of faded off at the end as if he was unsure of whether to make another run for it.

"You're covered in vomit," a voice said with a chuckle.

"And you aren't pretty," another voice said.

Against his better judgment Harold opened his eyes...

Three men sat on the opposite bunk and looked down on him as he lay on the floor with his head pounding. Harold looked up and tried to remember something about each of them. On television, the cops always ask for a description. Harold wondered if he would remember anything to tell them. He was terrible with names and had trouble remembering people that he was introduced too at parties. This would not be something he could explain easily anyway. So he did his best to remember something about them.

The first one was a tall thin man in his seventies that looked at everything with

sad smile and had resting apology face the rest of the time. He had a sort of beard that was trimmed close and uneven. His clothes were rumpled like he slept in them. He was so disheveled that it took Harold a moment to notice that he was wearing a uniform. It was khaki and had an embroidered badge with a rat on it. The rat wore an eye patch, and there was twisted cigarette between his teeth. He was sitting on a brain that had a knife stuck in it. It said "Psyops" on the the top and "Because Wounds Heal" underneath it in friendly gold letters.

Next to him was a rounded man with small round glasses that sat on a small nose. The rest of his face sort of spread out from there. He was quiet, a bit strange, and didn't look at anyone directly. He wasn't wearing any kind of uniform. He wore gray sweat pants and a gray shirt as if he were trying blend into everything.

Sitting next him was a short man with muscular arms. He gripped the mattress frame with large tense hands. He had dark eyes that glared angrily at the world through a thick nest of beard. He was sitting on the edge of the mattress staring at him intently.

"If this is a ransom, just know that I don't have anyone that cares enough about me to pay you," Harold said as he got up painfully and sat back down on the bunk bed. He rubbed the bruise that was blossoming on the top of his head. The room was completely metal, smelled wet and sweaty; and had a small door that swung in with one of those round handles that you turn in black and white World War Two naval movies.

The old man reached out and patted Harold's knee the way a father might do to comfort a child. "We know all about you. We know that you live alone and across from a chicken slaughter and packing plant." Harold felt fear start to creep around the weirdness. "Have you been in my house?" he asked.

The old man sighed and looked at Harold directly. "You don't even have a plant in that house that will miss you. It's just you, your job, and the stench of chickens.

"Where am I?" Harold said, feeling rather uneasy; because the answer was most likely awful.

The older man smiled, blinked his eyes and sighed uneasily as he looked at

Harold “We have a position in what you might call middle management, and we would like you to reconsider your current position at Reynolds.”

Harold tried helplessly to process what the man was saying. .

The angry man next to the quiet one glared at him through his dirty glasses on the end of his nose.

“You work as a middle manager for a company that is currently planning mass murder.” As he spoke, his voice rose in volume and pitch.

The older man put a hand on the angry one’s shoulder. He sighed and gave Harold a sad smile.

“What my friend is trying to tell you is that you aren’t just working for a company that makes a variety of plastics that pollute the oceans, kill sea life, and enter toxic chemicals into our food stream. No, Harold, I understand that you had to make a living. This is about the weapons contract with the government.”

Harold stared at the three men in disbelief. “I work for a company that makes plastic. It’s a real job. We don’t dump it into the ocean, and we are working on a degradable product. It’s single use a lunch container that breaks down in air. “ As he spoke, he began looking for exits. The door was a few feet away, but it was shut. “ It’s not like we can’t recycle it,” he said hoping to buy him some time.

“After the project, we are going to make an entire line of the stuff. They are even working on a toy line,” he said. He had hoped that maybe they were just eco warriors looking to get into the news.

The older man laughed. “Is that what they told you? What you are working on is called a Nerve Agent Dispersal System or NADS for short. The plastics degrade at a specific rate and can be made to look like anything. It’s designed to be used with a three dimensional printer system in the field, which connects to their three dimensional imaging system.”

“People are going to die,” the angry one said. He didn’t so much as look at Harold as look through him.

Harold looked at the three men in front of him uncertainly. "I don't know anything about NADS," he said.

The old man looked at him. "We know you don't," he said. ""Middle Management guys like you are a cover. Now that you know what I just told you, they are going to kill you. This is it Harold. You either work with us or your bosses bosses boss will kill you."

Harold decided that perhaps this was the best time as any to make a run for it. He lunged for the open door and managed to round the corner. He felt his shorts being tugged, and he wiggled out of them. He ran as quickly as he could down a small metal hallway away from the three strange men, NADS, and whatever else. It was dark, so the metal piece that his skull smacked into came as a complete surprise to Harold for the second time and seemed much worse. Blacking out for a moment was sort of a relief. He woke with a feeling of dread, even though his captors appeared to have left a bag of ice on his head.

He looked up to see the smiling gray face of the Captain looking down at him.

"Can we start over again," he said.

Harold rubbed the growing lump on his head, "fine," he said.

"You can just call me Captain. He pointed to angry man who stood by the door
"And that is Eugene. Eugene gave Harold a nod and pushed the quiet one in front of him. "Oh, and here is Patrick," the Captain said. "We really need your help and for you to put some pants on. Can you just get dressed and meet us on the bridge please," the Captain said as he left.

Don't Shoot The Puppy

“Look, it’s already been decided, I am not putting on pants, taking the aspirin, or doing anything, until someone properly explains to me what is going on.” Harold was standing naked at the front of the small metal room, where three large television screens filled one wall. They appeared to be showing various readouts of weather, current, course. Something seemed to be saying they were headed south east. This bothered Harold into thinking that he might not be anywhere near the resort. “They must be holding me on some kind of ship,” he thought.

The CCaptain, unfazed by Harold’s nakedness, brought a picture of a rubber duck on a computer screen in front of him. “This is the first NADS prototype.

Your subsidiary is selling these. The CCaptain handed the rubber yellow duck to Harold. He turned it over and could just read his company information printed on the bottom. It was hard to know what was true. Harold wondered if he could play along, until he found a chance to escape. “Look, what do you want me to do, quit my job?”

Eugene laughed “You want to be employee of the month at the death factory?”

The Captain picked up another rubber duck. “Everyone of these will contain nerve gas, enough to kill a lot of people in horrible ways. Some will get sick. The rest will be terrified and do all the dumb cruel things people do when they are scared. The plastic does degrade. When you set that degradation, you have a fuse. Your chemists can control the degradation can’t they?” the Captain said. Harold nodded but wasn’t convinced. Everything felt so crazy so fast, as if his life was rolling downhill and picking up speed.

“Why would anyone want to make death ducks. It makes no sense,” Harold said.

“Harold, will you please put some pants on,” the Captain said.

“Answer the question,” Harold said sitting naked in the Captain’s chair, leaning back with his legs spread wide.

“Damn it Harold,” Eugene said turning around.
Patrick snuck away so quietly no one had noticed he left.

“Okay, I will explain it to you,” the Captain said, sitting in a chair next to Harold. “Did you ever watch Steve Wilco?” the Captain said.

Harold snickered “That show with the lie detector?”

“Yes, that’s the one. Do you know how accurate it is?” the Captain asked.

Harold shrugged his shoulders.

“A lie detector knows your heart rate, your blood pressure, and your respiration. It’s good at fear. It detects and inspires fear. It’s invention comes from the idea that people that tell the truth have nothing to fear. So if you are afraid of the question, you must be lying. It’s a bit like witch dunking in that you drown either way,” the Captain said.

Harold wasn’t sure what to make of this. “The only time I ever watched the show was after a car accident. The commercials were all about workman's comp, structured settlements, malpractice and debt.”

“The show is about using a fear detector to interrogate people about child abuse,” the Captain said.

“True, but the show is trying to help the audience feel better about their horrible life, and the bar has been set really high” Harold said.

“Have you ever asked yourself why people do it?” the Captain asked Harold.

“No, I haven’t,” said Harold “I had thought they must pay them,” Harold said.

“They get a free ride and a hotel stay,” the Captain said twirling around in his chair.

“I’m not sure what else they get. Maybe a version of the truth, but not an objective one. For the show to work, you need faith in authority; but mostly you need faith in the lie detector test.”

“ And you are saying that all that faith is in something that doesn’t work?” Harold asked.

The Captain twirled around his chair quickly and stomped his feet down in front of him, facing Harold.

“You would be surprised how much work goes into creating that much faith,” he said.

“Does everyone know it doesn’t work?” Harold asked.

“Yes,” the Captain said getting up out of his chair and leaning over Harold. “Faith is about what you don’t know, what you think you know, and what you want to believe. It has nothing to do with the truth.”

The Captain excitedly started tapping on a black metallic keyboard that was recessed into a complicated looking control panel. “I have a little game that explain it,” he said.

The Captain brought up a game on the computer screen. It was a simple drawing of a gun and a puppy with the words “Don’t Shoot the Puppy” across it in a childlike writing font” Harold touched the mouse and the gun went off splattering puppy guts across the screen. They didn’t go away and sat in quivering animation all over the screen. A new puppy was placed in the center of the screen. A screen came up and said “Press Enter to Start”. Harold pressed enter and the gun went off again blowing another little animated body across the screen. “There was something mean about this game”, he thought. Harold pressed the space bar down and held it. Soon the screen was filled with puppy corpses. Harold looked at the game and looked at the Captain. “This game is frustrating and stupid,” he said staring at the screen. The Captain looked at the screen; the gun went off in quick succession, filling the screen with puppy gore. He gently picked up Harold’s finger. “What happens when you do nothing? Relax, and do nothing for a moment.” He walked away leaving Harold confused but happy to do nothing, so he did nothing. Well, not exactly nothing as he found himself glaring at the screen. The last puppy sat stupidly, wagging its tail amid the gore of the ones Harold’s space bar destroyed. The game flashed up a dialog box that said “Game Over, Press the Space Bar to See Your Score.” Harold wanted to do something. He wanted to smash the screen in but instead muttered a “fuck you” at the game, which played an odd midi file that sounded like an ice

cream truck. The dialog box disappeared. The puppy barked and slowly walked off screen. The game quietly closed itself.

“I’m not learning anything,” Harold yelled in whatever direction he thought would ring the Captain’s ears.

The Captain returned smiling. His lanky body moved with a certain fluidity that surprised Harold, who didn’t think a man his age could move like that. The Captain leapt over the arm rest of the chair next to him, and didn’t make the chair move on its wheels. It almost looked like he floated through the air.

“ People want to believe it's that easy,” the Captain said rolling a thin silver chain that had a stack of military dog tags between his fingers. “Everyone thinks oh I would have done the right thing. I would have done this or that as if this or that was even a thing back then.” He looked at Harold hopeful that he might have gotten through. Harold looked back confused. The game makes you face the reality that what you think is the right action, the action you put your faith in, could be manipulated and could be wrong.

In one quick motion the Captain grabbed Harold’s arm and injected something. Harold squealed and tried to pull his arm away from the Captain’s grip. He could feel the pinch, and began to feel groggy as black speckles filled the corners of the room and everything felt heavy.

“Whaaat,” Harold managed to say, his mouth hung open and his tongue lolled to one side.

“I’m sorry but we are going to the Glass Lake, and you would never do it conscious,” the Captain said as Harold drifted off.

He could see the woman standing in front of what was now Lecture Hall B. He had spent the week before not so much as reading her poetry, but absorbing it, wanting to stand as close to its flame as possible.

She was older than her picture, but she wore her age well. She was thin with a nice smile and she looked at the pampered middle class men and women with a sympathetic smile as she read poems about torture and the remains of tyrants and old wars.

He was young and fixated on her through her poetry.

“I named my book Angel of History,” she said smiling.

“The room we are in wasn’t designed to be a lecture hall. This building was once a hotel, and this room was a dance hall. It’s old, too old to hide time under a thick coat of paint. You can smell it. You can feel time whistling through the old timbers and ancient plaster. You can see what it will become as the rotting gray wood shows behind where the paint has peeled away from the walls. I want you to feel that time flowing like a chill.”

He sensed he and his class were like flowers in the spring, ignorant of the coming winter.

She looked down at her notes, smiling in a serene sort of way as she looked up at the students surrounding her.

“There is a painting of the same name. It left me with a cold sort of chill. Like an brightly oiled scar, it sits on the canvas as a reminder to all of...

It’s a feeling that was once described like this...”

She read from her notes.

“Angelus Novus, or the Angle of History is personified entropy in oil paint. If you haven’t seen it, imagine an angel with outstretched wings, falling as the winds from heaven blow it endlessly out towards the void. He faces an ever shrinking paradise as the angel falls. He can only look back. His arms reaching. His mouth open; silently screaming as he watches worlds form and burst like grapes in the wake of his destruction. The angle tries to

close his wings, but the winds force it back and force him to watch what we call progress.”

Swallowed Whole

The Captain nervously checked Harold's dive suite as Harold slowly opened his eyes and began squirming. He was wearing a thick wet suit that covered him in a tight sweaty neoprene shell. He had on a face mask that was starting to fog. The Captain shoved a thick rubber mouthpiece into Harold's mouth.

"It's very important for you not to panic. Breathe slowly in and out with deep breathes. Use very relaxed movements. And tell them your name." The Captain said as he quickly marched Harold into the airlock and strapped a weight belt around him. Stepping out, the Captain turned to Harold and gave him a hopeful smile. Harold still wasn't sure what was going on.

"Good luck man," the Captain said.

Harold began to feel the first tinge of real terror since the general anxiety he was under began to build.

"What do you mean good luck?" he said feeling a kind of lump in his chest. He could see Patrick and Eugene standing behind the Captain.

"Good Luck Harold." They yelled. He heard one of them say "Poor bastard".

"Wait", Harold screamed as he lunged for the airlock door. The Captain slammed it shut, locking it in place. Water began to fill the compartment slowly. Even inside his suit, the water felt icy. Harold bit down nervously on the regulator as the ocean steadily rose over his head.

The regulator hissed as Harold sucked in air underwater for the first time. When he exhaled, he blew bubbles, and it startled him at first. He had his eyes closed and felt them wiggle around his beard on their way to the top of the airlock. He screamed and opened his eyes, expecting a swarm of piranhas coming to eat his face.

His own bubbles still felt a little menacing, even as he watched them race towards the top of the airlock in rapid succession.

Eugene's voice barked out of the speaker. "You need to turn the handle on the airlock, once the green light is lit."

Harold strained to turn the tight wheel, that finally gave way with a metallic groan. With a slight push the door swung open, revealing cold, black; and he hoped, empty water.

"Make your way to the door, and just swim out. You are right over it," Eugene said, his voice no longer angry. Harold would have preferred angry, because he sounded afraid. Harold wasn't sure he could handle any more fear right now.

With a deep breath, Harold shuffled forward and tried not to trip over anything. He stuck his head out the door and looked down. He could feel a slight current and could see nothing but blackness.

"Guys, I don't think I can do this," he said backing away.

"You just need to swim down and swim back up. You are wearing my lucky weight belt, so you will be fine," the Captain said in a voice he hoped sounded calm. "It's going to be easy. Just push off the sub; and if you get scared, swim back," he said in a way that made it all sound easy.

Harold shuffled out the door and sank. The Captain's weight belt caused him to plummet away from the submarine. He tried to swim back but found the weights were too heavy. Grabbing the buckle, he tried to pry it off. His mask had a dive light on it that cut little slits into the darkness. It caught massive shapes moving underneath him. He thought they were undersea mountain tops at first, before seeing the massive tails.

Panic began to take over as he struggled with the weight belt.

The sharks began circling closer, until the largest swam up from beneath Harold. Its mouth yawned open and Harold could see rows upon rows of teeth, lining a cavernous mouth. He swam desperately against the weight belt as he drifted down farther. He felt himself land on a mountain of leathery hard flesh. He wasn't in the mouth, but he was close. The massive shark had him perched on the tip of its massive nose.

The other sharks circled him as the one underneath him sat motionless with

Harold clinging to its nose. Their eyes were large, coal black, and did not blink.

He struggled with the clasp on the belt, trying desperately to pull free.

He felt the shark start to move, and soon he was sliding off, screaming, clutching at the darkness as he felt himself pulled through the water towards death in a black suffocating cold.

He fell into something that felt like soft goo. He struggled against it. It was translucent and reflected his dive light. He sank deep and felt it seeping through the seal on his mask and into his dry suit. It seemed to swallow everything before he slowly blacked out.

The translucent liquid pulsed in swirling light, surrounded Harold for a moment, before gradually receding. The buckle on Harold's dive belt opened, and he slowly drifted up. Harold could see white bubbles and could hear a faint voice saying. "It's all so small."

Nightmares

The Captain swam in long graceful strokes towards Harold. He tried to ignore the massive shapes that moved in the darkness just within the dimmest reach of his dive light. He didn't think they would eat him. He told himself this over and over again as he swam towards Harold's rising form, fearing the instant flash of massive teeth surrounding a cavernous mouth.

He reached Harold and tried to both swim calmly and as quickly as he could without looking like the panicked animal that he was.

"You are going to be okay," he said to Harold. "In times of stress I like to talk to things that don't always talk back, like you for instance. I think I chose wisely with you. You are perfect. You are just flawed enough I think."

Harold's mind opened to darkness. It was a dream like darkness, thick and clingy like viscous mud. A room faded in, a library. It grew sharper, and soon there was an earthy smell of paper packed tight into a room, which mingled with the moldy smell of old carpet. The library seemed to be infinitely small and infinitely large in the same instant. It seemed only limited by his perspective.

He could hear a rhythmic sort of boom, like someone pounding on thick wood. He could hear clawing too, like a cat raking its nails across wood. He could see a box. A box made of heavy wood. A box with over sized metal hinges. A box with a lock that seemed to grow thin and rattle as something behind it pounded with deep thuds and the splintery sounds of ripped wood.

He could feel a sort of familiar and growing terror. The box seemed everywhere. Sounds of uncontrolled rage echoed as he looked for an escape.

The face that faded into view was both familiar and unrecognizable. It was an old man but his skin was slightly translucent and his eyes were completely black. His smile wasn't quite right either. It was thin and didn't match his face. It wasn't a happy smile. It was more like someone trying to do an approximation of a smile.

He was thin with skin that was so white, it was translucent. He stood crooked

with one foot out at an odd angle. He stared at Harold, unblinking, his eyes a solid black. He made a wet croaking noise as he moved his thin pink lips.

A soft squeaking noise interrupted them both. Jimmy Carter smiled sheepishly at them. He was pushing an old, dented television cart with an equally old television. He pressed a button on a silver and wood grain VCR that sat on a shelf under the television. With a loud click the VCR door popped open and with shaky hands, he pushed the tape in and pushed the door closed. The machine lit up and the clock blinked midnight as Jimmy Carter's face appeared on the dimly lit screen. He sat behind a desk and behind him was a grainy background of an office with flags on either side of him.

He smiled and began to speak.

“It's important to the assimilation process that you understand that we do this not out of revenge for what you have done to us, but as an attempt to save our species. Interstellar communication is difficult in that life will very often take its shared ancestry and perspective for granted. It assumes that it and its perspective is that of the universe.”

The Jimmy Carter on the television paused and smiled at Harold sympathetically.

“To have effective inter species communication, it is therefore necessary that we interface with an individual so that we can communicate effectively. This results in the destruction of the individual organism to develop an effective communication tool.”

Jimmy Carter on TV stopped and cleared his throat. He took a sip of coffee. He shuffled his papers and looked around uncomfortably.

“We don't know how you feel about this but would like you to know that any cruelty you feel towards you is unintentional.”

Harold could hear the box again. Its sound pulled at deeply familiar terror. He opened his mouth to scream but found he could only stand trembling and gasping a thin wheezing bit of air. The old man either always had tentacles for hands or they sprouted from his chest. Harold wasn't sure as they roped around his neck. He struggled to breathe, eyes bulging, as he felt them tighten.

Harold could hear a splintery crash over the ringing in his ears. He could see a dark shape behind his attacker. It moved in jerking uncoordinated movements.

Darkness began a slow decent from the corners of his eyes as he felt his breath being squeezed out of him.

The scream he heard was shrill, angry, like an animal wounded and ready to fight. He felt himself being tossed and let go. He tumbled into the darkness, opening his eyes long enough to see the old man being dragged crying and clawing into the open box. The monster turned her head long enough to look at Harold and opened her dark toothless mouth.

Harold woke screaming, naked, and handcuffed to a metal cot.

He was alone and in complete darkness. The air was damp and thick. He could hear a steady hum and could feel the bed shaking slightly. His ears were popping too as if he were diving to the bottom of a pool.

He was sure he was naked too. He could feel cold dark ocean surrounding him on all sides, ready to crack the sinking steel shell that creaked around him. He was sure that he could hear water too. He imagined the sea slowly creeping in, like a thief stealing the last bit of air as he spiraled towards the dark abyss.

“Hey Buddy”

Harold looked around in the darkness for the source of the CCaptain’s voice.

“How are you?”

Harold tugged on the handcuffs pinning him to the bed.

“I am chained to a god damn bed. That is how I am doing,” he said, his voice shook at the end making him sound more honest about his feelings than he intended. Harold could feel a rising panic in his chest, and he felt close to losing his mind in a fit of crying sobs.

“Please let me ou...” was all he was able to say before he heard the airlock being turned on the door. He could see a white wedge of light open the darkness.

When the overhead light was flicked on, it took him a few moments of squinting before he was able to see the room was clean and dry and not the dirty rat infested horror that his mind had imagined. He tried to blink back his tears that were starting a slow and embarrassing trail down his cheek. The CCaptain smiled and patted Harold's foot reassuringly.

"We didn't know how you would wake up," he said. "We've all been down there, but the effects are....unpredictable."

He released Harold, who sat up rubbing his hands. "I remember a woman, a terrible woman, and I remember that you dumped me out under the ocean with sharks the size of mountains," Harold said, trying to remember why he was mad.

Eugene stuck his head around the corner of the door, walked in the room, and stood next to the Captain. Patrick sheepishly walked in and stood behind them.

Harold tried to remember things but his world felt too much in a fog. He felt like he should be angry too, but he really didn't have it in him. He could remember being terrified beyond childhood nightmares, beyond any worry he may have had before. This terror was primal. It was the fear of being consumed, helplessly, in small chunks.

"Are we safe?" Harold asked.

The three men looked sheepishly at him, and he felt as though they were going to have to tell him something he didn't want to hear.

The CCaptain smiled. "We each have done what you have just accomplished, but the results have been strange. So your question has a few conditions. You are safe for now, and there may be a few side effects."

The CCaptain patted Harold on the head, and the three men hurried out of the room.

Rubber Ducky Seas

When Harold was finally able to close his eyes in the small cot that was packed into the living quarters, he felt the submarine rocking gently as it moved through deep silent water. The electric motors made a kind of hum that he could hear everywhere. Still, he felt tired; too tired to let any of the million of things that should have kept him from closing eyes and drifting into a deep sleep. He closed his eyes and felt pulled into it, like a fish on a line.

There was a familiar smell of paper and ink. He was in a library sort of. It felt like a dream, until he thought about libraries, things sharpened a little, and he was there.

There was a deep heavy thud, he turned and saw the box rocking back and forth, rattling the heavy metal chains that creaked as they moved. They were wound tight around the thick wooded box.

Harold heard a low guttural growl, as something inside began making a scratching sound like razors digging through wood. The box split slightly, and Harold could see two wild and angry eyes staring back at him. It gave a shrill scream as it flung itself against the heavy wood and steel box making another loud bang and causing the box to split enough that he could see a wild red mouth that opened wide to let out another shrill scream.

Harold opened his eyes, heart pounding, to another morning, staring at a deserted top bunk. The entire cabin was empty.

The ship was cramped and had a certain dampness to it that made it feel like the air clung to his skin and the smell of stale air was hard for Harold to get used too. Harold wondered what sort of terrors the day would bring and what his captors were doing.

but

There were other smells too. Harold thought he smelled black coffee, there was a fatty bacon smell, and the smell of something sweet. He also smelled something else. It reminded him of college campuses and liberal arts professors, but he

wasn't sure what it was. He thought he even smelled fried potatoes.

Harold got up and put on the bathrobe that sat draped over the foot of bunk. Nothing on the sub is a far walk, and he quickly found himself in the galley staring at an empty seat. The rest of the men were sitting at a small steel table and had plates piled high with ham and cheese omelets and bacon. There was a coffee machine at the end of a steaming stainless buffet table.

Fresh doughnuts were piled on the table at the end of the line. At the front of the buffet were a stack of trays with the ship's badge that said "Semper Optima" in official looking letters.

The food looked so good that Harold quietly filled a stainless steel sectioned plate with as much food as would fit.

He watched Patrick twist open a thing Harold thought was a pen. Inside was a little ceramic cup. Patrick opened a little jar and scooped what looked like honey into the little cup before screwing both ends back together.

Patrick hit the center button a few times; and it lit up, blinking blue. Harold was halfway through his breakfast, when Patrick put one end of the pen in his mouth and inhaled deeply, until the blue light began to flash. Patrick held his breath for a moment, and blew out a cloud of pine scented smoke that blew across the breakfast table.

Harold watched the cloud roll over the table as Eugene shoveled bacon into his mouth, ignoring the world and in a momentary bliss.

"What did you just do?" Harold asked.

Patrick laughed and gave Harold a smile before handing him the pen. "Try a bit, here, hold the button down and suck" Patrick said.

Eugene looked over at Harold "Suck on it like the rent is due," he said as he shoveled a large piece of bacon and eggs into his mouth.

Harold pressed the button and inhaled. At first he just tasted pine, and then his lungs began to burn.

He coughed and wheezed, until spots began creeping into his vision. Snot and tears welled up so bad that he needed a napkin to wipe his face.

It took two cups of coffee before his throat would calm down.

Patrick giggled as Harold's pupils became small black dots and his eyes began to go bloodshot. "We modified the life support systems to make a little grow lab in the engine compartment. The hydraulic press is great for making dabs.

"Making what?" Harold said as he felt a sort of buzz blow through the back of his ears. He could feel himself start to sweat.

"You just had a dab," Patrick said, pouring a thick line of sugar directly into his coffee.

"A dab of what exactly," Harold said feeling his head might float off his shoulders.

Patrick began to giggle, holding his sides. It was infectious and Harold felt himself sort of laughing along when he wasn't sure he had the joke.

"It's a dab of dab lunch sack boy," Eugene said in between gulps of black coffee.

This sent Patrick into giggle fits and it took him a moment to calm down. "Dab, concentrate, and wax are just names of plant wax extracted from weed plants. It's how we keep from killing each other." Patrick filled the pen again with dab and handed it to Eugene who inhaled deeply, until the button blinked. He exhaled a thick cloud and smiled, wisps of smoke clung to his wiry beard as he did. "That slays the dragon for a bit," he said.

Harold felt something loosen inside his chest, like a balled fist that had been clenched had relaxed. He felt content to just exist. Patrick handed him the pen, and he sucked it in deeply, feeling himself sort fade as he did. He coughed, gagged, and almost threw up his breakfast.

His head felt as though it were a balloon, bobbing about his shoulders and chatting about middle management.

He sort of felt like a middle manager. There was a certain comfort in the job that he missed because of the office politics and the general sense of dread everyone always carried around with them at the firm. Harold used to think that it was just that office, but every company had it in the same way they all had cubicles. There was this general sense of dissatisfaction that sunk into the carpet; everyone just ignoring it as the stench wafts down the halls.

He wasn't in a tin can of optimism, but somehow the cold metal walls of a submarine were better than the office. It was like the world was a little less black, and he wondered if it was the pen or the quiet camaraderie.

The day had an easy cadence with everyone cleaning up and moving on an unknown agenda that included game systems. He felt like a teenager over someone's house when their parents were not home as they smoked wax and shot at each other with fake guns. Every time Harold died, he found himself giggling. There was something sort of satisfying for him in getting second chances.

Meet the Family

Harold laid on his back and stared at the metal rivets on the ceiling. It had been built when he was born, the Captain said. His grandfathers generation built it in a dry doc for the government to fight someone else's grandfather over something that seems a little silly now. The war machinery living long after its purpose, needs a reason to survive, Harold thought. He remembered saying the Pledge of Alliance, a sort of oath to his country, throughout his childhood to a flag in the corner of the room. He remembered learning about Christopher Columbus as if he were an American folk hero, only to learn later that he was a genocidal maniac that murdered and enslaved the entire ingenious people on the island he discovered. He wondered if being lied to was part of the system.

The Captain had told him they were going to quietly change the world. He smiled and said that all it would take would be a little nudge. Just a little nudge and people don't have to suffer. "Just a little nudge, and the agency will not crack your skull with a round," the Captain said with a chuckle.

Maybe it's time to do a little nudge, he thought.

He wasn't sure what a middle manager was in the context of submarine crew, but he figured part of it was getting to know the crew.

He decided to start with Patrick.

Patrick spent most of his days in a small closet that he slunk in and out of to use the bathroom and to find food. He reminded Harold of an animal on a nature documentary cautiously leaving its burrow. He would always hurry back, and Harold could hear him lock the door from the inside.

Harold walked up to the door and knocked gently. He could hear Patrick typing furiously. He banged on the door again, and the typing became louder. Harold could hear a loud sucking sound followed by more typing. "I can't play right now Harold, Daddy has to work," Patrick wheezed as he shouted through the door. Harold could smell the cloud of dab that must have been filling the small metal room he was sitting in.

Eugene startled Harold with a tap on the shoulder. "What are you doing?"

Eugene asked as he leaned his stocky frame against the door, smiling, sticking a fat stubby finger deep in his ear and scratching it.

“I’m trying to get to know the crew,” Harold said. He could no longer hear Patrick typing and assumed he was listening.

“Well, what you need to know about Patrick is that he has the social skills of a tired toddler,” Eugene said banging on the door. Patrick began to bang back and the two men began shouting.

“Hey, let’s talk over here,” Harold said, grabbing Eugene’s hand and leading him back into the crew cabin and away from Patrick’s shouting.

Harold’s bed creaked as he sat on it. He pointed to the bed across from his, and Eugene plopped himself onto it, the springs whining as his weight settled.

“Patrick is a big man baby that needs to learn how to talk to people,” Eugene said. Harold nodded as Eugene scratched the corner of his wiry red beard. “He also never says thank you and will steal your sandwich.” Harold nodded again. Harold read in a forgotten middle management book that it was important to acknowledge someone’s feelings, even though their feelings had little impact on what you were telling them. Harold found the best way to acknowledge feelings was the sympathetic nod, and in rare cases, the shoulder pat. “So what do you do?” Harold asked.

Eugene pulled out a small black box from his pocket. “I upgrade, beat into submission, and make things run.” Eugene pushed a button on the box and a green light on the box began to flash. “I made this piss bucket a massive raspberry pi cluster with access to every system on the ship, so that troll could do his thing and not one thank you....ass hole”

Harold nodded and patted Eugene on the shoulder, who seemed annoyed at the gesture.

The green light on the box went out and was replaced by a yellow one. Harold saw the yellow one blink for a moment before a red one began to flash in an odd rhythm.

“What does the red light mean?” Harold asked pointing to the box. Eugene

looked at the small black box and sighed. “God damn it. It’s one fucking thing after the other.” He got up, slammed the door behind him with a boom that Harold felt in his chest. Harold could hear Eugene yelling, and thought he heard something being shattered into pieces.

Harold sat there alone for a moment, staring at the empty chair across from him. Everyone worked together like broken gears in this place, he thought.

The Captain

Harold found the Captain alone in the bridge. There were three empty chairs around three empty consoles. The Captain sat cross legged on a mat in the center of the room with his eyes closed, breathing slowly. He balanced ten lit candles on his finger tips. “This requires a steady awareness that has to be soft. Any negative energy causes hands to tremble,” the Captain said. “The key lay not in steady hands, but rather sensing the rhythm of the disconnect, swing the muscles to a counter beat, and the whole thing is rock still,” the Captain said smiling at Harold.

Harold watched the Captain. The wax from the candle burned down the old man’s fingers, which still didn’t move, until each hand was running with rivulets of wax.

“If you are going to interrupt Harold, now is a good time,” the Captain said, opening his eyes. His hands didn’t move.

“Your crew lives like raccoons. The angry one sits at the back of the ship locked in the engine room. He screams like a lunatic in there banging everything around. The entire ship smells like burning rubber, the lights go out, there is an ear splitting shriek, and then everything comes back on.” The Captain opened his mouth to speak, but Harold held his finger up to silence him.

“That’s not even the one that scares me. The one that scares me, spends his days in a supply closet, coming out for food before scurrying back in like a cockroach.”

The Captain started to speak again. Harold put his finger against the old man’s lips.

“There is a shower. None of you use it.”

“We conserve fresh water...” Harold held his finger up.

“You sit in here all day with your legs crossed like some sort of god damn Hari Hindu Buddhist asshole, while your team flounders.”

The CCaptain smiled. “Sit with me for a moment and listen.”

Harold sat down on the metal floor.

“This sucks; now I know there is a pile of dirt in the corner, my back hurts, and now I want to clean it. I know it’s there, and it is going to bother me until I sweep it up,” Harold said.

“Just listen, don’t do anything else, don’t judge, don’t think, don’t talk, and relax.” the CCaptain said, putting a finger to Harold’s mouth.

Harold sighed, and tried to shift his focus and just listen. He could hear the rhythmic hum of the engines. The computers around him had little fans, which buzzed like flies. He could hear the air purification systems making a soft deep roar though the ship. There was typing... Harold could hear the clicks and clacks of a keyboard being struck with heavy fingers. It went on for a time before Harold began to wonder where all the words being struck out like a blacksmith went.

The Captain smiled and handed Harold a small black netbook. “You don’t have a normal team I’m afraid. You have a team that is more in here than they are right here,” the Captain said tapping the netbook softly.”Also our communication officer is more of a blogger than he is a talker,” the Captain said smiling at Harold and chuckling.

“Why should I help you guys? You don’t even have a communication officer that communicates?” Harold said, ready to scream.

The Captain frowned. “He has crippling social anxiety, so we make accommodations. You sound like someone that wouldn’t let a blind man paint his house.”

Harold’s jaw dropped a bit, and it took him a moment to appreciate what had just happened.

“No, I wouldn’t let a blind man paint my house,” Harold said when he was finally able to breath.

“You do not understand your own handicaps,” the Captain said closing his eyes and breathing in slow steady breaths. He did not open them again, until he heard Harold close the door with a bang.

Harold opened the netbook, turned it on, and looked at the home screen. It was unlike anything he had used before. He clicked around through it, feeling stupid. A program came up called Polari, and things began typing and clicking by themselves, until a chat window popped up.

Harold saw it typing next to his name.
Harold198:Talk to him.

Greyman:What?

Harold1998:Talk to him

Greyman: Fine

Harold looked at the screen, unsure of what to do.

Greyman: What?
Greyman: wtf ssja

Harold stared at the blinking green cursor. He had worked with a few engineers in his life, and they were all a little weird in some way. But none were this weird, this way.

Harold1998: I was hoping to talk to you face to face

Greyman: why?

Harold1998: I just want to know what you do.

Greyman: I communicate what the captain wants to the masses. I'm the communication officer, it's in the name.

Harold1998: You haven't said a word to anyone in days.

Greyman: Because I have been busy COMMUNICATING!

Harold stared at the screen, scratching his head. He was chatting with a man on the computer, while he was close enough to hear him typing in the small metal closet a few feet from him.

“It would be easier to just talk to you.” Harold shouted at the small metal door.

Greyman: Easier for you, not for me.

Harold could hear the man rummaging around for a moment before hearing his office chair squeal as he settled his weight back into it.

He could smell an herbal smell, something that reminded him of high school art teachers.

The Trap

The Captain swam with slow deliberate strokes. Knowing it was a trap did nothing to slow his urgency

He knew she would make the prize worth it. She knew; he knew, and that as long as they played by the same rules, he would take the bait. But having this kill him was her job, and he wasn't going to make her job easy.

He could see them floating in the water thirty feet above him, bobbing alone in the waves. His dive bag was attached to his belt and contained the remote submarine. The water was cold and dark, and he could just make out the Sea Rat below him in the ocean, keeping pace with him in the current. He switched on the remote submarine and released it. He carefully maneuvered the remote controlled sub, just under the ocean waves towards a clump of yellow rubber bath ducks, which floated in a tight formation on the ocean's surface.

Selecting the one that appeared to be the transmitter was more difficult. Using the remote sub's claws, he grabbed it by the long thin antenna and began using the sub to pull it down.

He was evacuating the air from the mini submersible when the first explosion went off. He watched it sink uncontrollably towards the ocean's cold darkness below as he felt the shock wave rattle his brain inside his skull.

He felt himself losing consciousness, and thought that this might be where he finally dies, where the pain of past regrets would finally end somewhere in the ocean's dark bottoms. Teeth rose from the depths. He could see the massive white jaw below him; the sun above him, lighting the bone white peaks.

He closed his eyes and waited for the teeth, the ones the size of boat oars. Instead, he felt himself being pushed really fast into something hard and metal. He must have blacked out as he opened his eyes to Eugene pulling him into the sub as it began sinking fast into the deep.

Harold screamed as the water rushed into a bulkhead. Eugene rushed in after it with a wrench, cussing and screaming. Harold could hear the man banging the wrench and yelling about a stupid Chinese fucker valve.

He heard more banging and screaming. A large metal engine part was thrown through the doorway in a rage as it clanged loudly down the hallway.

Cold ocean water mixed with ancient ship grime sloshed around Harold's feet. The thought of drowning in a cold dark steel hull at the bottom of the ocean shook through Harold's mind like a chill.

Screaming he rushed forward at Eugene who was repeatedly banging a motor, while it sputtered and whined. He tackled Eugene, taking him by surprise. He managed to get him to the floor and sat on him. Eugene was much stronger, but the water and engine oil made it difficult for him to push himself up.

"Get the fuck off me," he screamed. Water was rushing in around them, and he seemed generally annoyed that Harold was stopping him from smashing things. He struggled and screamed for a few more moments before taking a deep breath. "Harold, if you don't let me up, we are all going to die." He said this in an tired sort of voice that almost made Harold get up. He didn't know how to fix the sub, but he knew that Eugene wasn't going to fix it by tearing it apart. Harold didn't know how to solve problems; he managed problems. He provided resources for problems. Fixing problems could get you laid off.

"I'll let you up once we have established some ground rules okay." Harold tried to remain calm with a tone of a stern parent. "I know you are frustrated and probably scared and that is okay but your behavior effects others."

Harold took a deep breath and found a more comfortable spot on top of Eugene.

"We are going to fix this step by step first, plan for contingencies, and make a flow chart."

"God damn it, just let me up," he screamed.

"No, I think you are still going to smash things," Harold said.

Harold had once attended a manager's workshop, where a very pretty woman explained what she called "Key Visionary for Success". She told everyone to imagine themselves completing a difficult task before actually trying. She had them do it, while her bright and happy voice walked them through a kind of guided meditation pep talk. He had imagined himself asking her out, taking her

to dinner, falling in love, and having fantastic wild fucks every night. When he saw her wedding ring, his imagination floundered on the shores of reality.

But it was either that or drowning.

“Eugene, I want to help you help us okay. You wouldn’t have this job if people didn’t think you were worthy of it. I know you can be successful.”

Harold settled his ass more deeply into Eugene’s back. “I want you to take a deep breath and imagine solving the problem. You solve it without getting upset and things come to you easily.”

“Let me up,” Eugene said. “I’ll fix this if you promise to shut the fuck up with the team building cock sucking.”

Harold nodded his head and got off of Eugene. Eugene picked up a pipe wrench that had been used to bash a tool locker and began wrenching off large crud covered hoses that attached to some kind of motor. The wrench slipped causing him to bash his knuckles. “Mother fucker son of a bitch,” he screamed as he picked the wrench up to bash the physical manifestation of his rage. Harold grabbed him. “Please don’t,” he said.

Eugene nodded and began to fix things. Harold watched him work with a kind of singular precision. There was a sense of calm that seemed at odds with his outbursts.

He worked for hours, silently, by himself. The water stopped leaking and the air stopped hissing. “I’m sorry I’ve been an asshole.” He mumbled this to Harold when he finished. Things were not the same, but they seemed like they were working when he collapsed back into his bunk.

Sleep

Sleep for the Captain was always a battle between anxiety and exhaustion. Anxiety usually winning, until he felt like his mind was trying to work with a heavy film. It would overtake him by suddenly, like a wave washing over him so fast that he wasn't sure if he was sleeping or losing track of time.

The sound of the explosion and the aftermath were almost instantaneous. There was a silence before the screams, a pause to take in the horror of what had just happened. There was the soft whine in his head and the feeling of being at the bottom of a pool.

He opened his eyes. His cot had been opened and his bed was made. He was tucked neatly into it, like a doll, and he had to struggle to free his arms from the hospital corners that Patrick had folded him into.

The room was dry at least.

His eyes closed again on their own, as if his brain was jerked away.

A week ago, Harold would have had a hard time sleeping at the bottom of the ocean in a creaking metal tube. His terror gradually gave way to exhaustion. Sitting in his bunk, his eyes closed; he started to slump over, aiming for the cot and trying to miss anything metal on the way down.

Harold could hear the hollow sound of flesh beating wood. It seemed to echo everywhere at once. It filled his head. It had a kind of desperation to it, like something caught in a trap. The box sat in the center of the room. He tried to ignore it. "Maybe it will stop if I pretend it is not there, he thought.

It did not stop, but rather gained size and the pounding got thunderous.

He could feel something inside it, something foreign. He could hear it faintly screaming. "Please let me out," the voice inside said. Harold approached the box. He could feel his insides get hot as he got closer, as if the terror might explode out of him. He could feel it clinging to the lid. It was shaking and he could feel its terror as if it were his own.

This terror made it hard to open the lid, and his hands trembled over the latch for a few moments. Before Harold could do anything more, the latch sprung open, and a howling wind slammed the lid open hard on its hinge.

Harold looked inside, and there was small gray wormy thing clinging to the side. When Harold looked past the creature; at the bottom of the box, he could see nothing. There was only black silence that may have went a few inches or an eternity. Harold wasn't even sure if the black silence was what filled the box. He felt it watching him and had a sudden panic as if he would be swallowed whole.

Co-Parenting

Susan heard the soft ding on her phone. “It’s him. I have him,” she thought with more hope than conviction. Mike snored rhythmically next to her, and the house had that early mourning quiet before the rising sun would bring the household to a frantic pace, her daughter getting ready for school, and her man going off to work. The dog barely raised her head as she put on her padded slippers and quietly slipped out of the bedroom.

She made her way through the house, so silently that even her cat slept though her shuffles to the cooler air of the basement.

She flipped open her phone to an encrypted text. Hopeful, she dug through her sewing box until she found the security box. It had a bio metric lock hidden under a price sticker and looked like an old cardboard box. This contained a few things, one of them being her key fob that showed her the eight digit pin to unlock the text.

“Trap tripped, no debris”

She wanted to scream, but held it in, tapping gently on her sewing table.

Finally, when she regained her composure, she tapped out her reply.

“END HIM!!!”

The CCaptain slowly made his way through the small airlock and turned on his dive light. The world outside was cold, dark, and gray. The sea bed lay before him in a flat featureless plain of soft silt. The darkness surrounded him as the dive light cut a thin slit into the darkness.

Tracking the remote sub’s location, he sighted his compass, attached his guideline, and swam off into the darkness.

Sucking air at this depth was like breathing syrup. The air in his tank had turned

into something like laughing gas as the nitrogen narcosis settled into his brain leaving a buzzed fog. His breath was soft and deliberate. "You only get a chance with your breath once, so make it count," was what the DI used to say. His movements were relaxed, and he adjusted his dry suit to a neutral buoyancy.

He drifted with the current along the bottom, kicking only to correct his course. He reminded himself to relax, slow his breathing, be calm. He was a ghost now, the cold darkness surrounding him, pushing him ever forward as he wound out the orange nylon cord to hopefully allow him pull himself home.

He could see the tracking light on the remote sub before his light was able to see the trap meant to finally stop him. The explosion had damaged things somewhat and everything was a tangled mess. Still, the bait was intact.

He cut the wires around each of the little bath ducks and tucked them away into his dive bag. Pulling the line taught he held his compass up, pointed the sight where the line went into the darkness. and rotating the little bezel on top, he locked in his course.

He couldn't so much as swim back as he had to pull himself back. His air gauge seemed to drop with each breath as he pulled himself forward through the relentless current of darkness that surrounded him.

He tried to stay focused and calm. Each pull, each breath, it's own little goal. This was another little gift from the DI. He remembered him now as a well meaning, but violently angry, little man that beat lessons into his students rather than see them come home in bags. He was known for having the lowest dropout rate in the Navy. He didn't want you to quit like some DI's. "Your personal failures are my personal failures, and I don't tolerate failure in my Navy." This earned him a steady supply of failures, who he either turned into viable working cogs or sent to the hospital.

The CCaptain dug his fins deep into the silty ocean bottom and rested for a moment. His fluorescent dive gloves seemed to fade in and out of focus. He didn't really have the right gasses at this depth. She probably knew that too. She also knew that he would go in anyway.

The ocean was a column of endless darkness that moved in a relentless stream of cold water away from the ship that crash landed there. His fingers sort of

doubled as the world went in and out of focus. He could hear his DI screaming.

“There are many ways to kill yourself on a deep dive, but panic could kill you in a bathtub.”

“ $PV=k$ Pressure multiplied by volume equals some constant k”

“You get up god damn it, you can quit on yourself, but you will not quit on me.”

He opened his eyes and realized he had lost the rope. The thin orange line slipped out of his fingers when his mind slipped out of consciousness.

He briefly thought about letting go, drifting off into the darkness forever to let the world burn.

but

His compass still glowed a soft green light and pointed a way forward. If he hadn't moved too far, it would probably point the way home. He dug his fins into the silt and inched forward, clinging to the bottom and scooting along, staring at the small glowing green needle. Keeping the compass needle between the marker on the bezel that showed the course he set earlier, he dug in and lurched forward slowly and methodically. Each step it's own little goal.

The sub generated an electric field that would swing the compass towards it when he was close. He had to turn toward the needle and hope he didn't narc out again.

The need swung just a tick over at first and then swung wildly over as he moved closer. Following just the needle, he scooted his face into the metal hull of the Sea Rat.

His vision blurred as he moved towards the airlock. Picking up the wrench he left, he managed to bang it twice just as black speckles filled his vision, and everything went dark.

Dear Anna,

You left an Anna shaped hole in me.

The stages of grief are denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Denial was something I did at the start, because I didn't want to believe you would do that to me. I had this sort of naive notion that you would realize that you were being presented a distorted picture of me. People tell me that you will realize the truth when you are older. They act as if time is forever for us and older is a guarantee for either of us.

Bargaining was next. I thought that if I did all the right things, you would stay.

Depression is my favorite, because it comes with a sort of hope that you can't find in acceptance.

I really think that it's incorrect to call it stages, because that implies order. It's more like a positive feedback loop, where the only termination point is acceptance.

Acceptance is like a final scar. It doesn't heal so much as cover the hole.

I hope this helps.

Love

Dad

The CCaptain opened his eyes to see the crew staring down into his bunk. He paused for a moment, listening to the various voices yelling inside his head. He waited until there was a sort of universal consensus before he gave the orders.

“Use the ballast tank to make us neutrally buoyant, but anchor us to the bottom. This ship runs on two things, lead acid batteries and the blood of our ancestors. Eugene, we need a little help from the generators. Harold, go to my office, and get the number nine envelope...” His eyes seemed to close against their will as he succumbed to exhaustion.

The Walk

Eugene walked back to the engine room and climbed down a small ladder. The first half of the lock was devoted to storage and the next was a munitions hold filled with silver nylon grow tents. The gurgling pumps and the intense LED lights were off as power was shutting down across the ship. He unzipped one of the tents just enough to stick his head in. He hoped maybe there would be a rush of oxygen, but instead there was just the overwhelming smell of OG Kush something. It was being inside the weed bag. He pulled his head out, and moved on.

The final small metal door led to the torpedo tubes where the current generators sat on their tracks, ready to be loaded and fired.

His brain began to fog somewhat from the depleting oxygen, and he knew things could not go long like this. The ship needed power for life support, or they would slowly asphyxiate.

He remembered how confident he was when he told the Captain that he discovered the key to underwater habitats, which lay in the invention he called the torpedo flower. “I welded a copper plug into the first torpedo door and installed a mounting plate on the inside of the door. All you have to do is just attach it here and fire the torpedo. The generator will fly out on a string until reaching the end of the cable, where it will unfold like a flower and spin in the current.”

“If you don’t fucking work, I’m going to look so stupid,” Eugene said into the small empty metal room. “You are going to fly away like a little bird on a string and when the cable goes taught, your wings will open. You will spin and send power along the cable into the battery packs. When it’s all done, you both will retract like good boys,” Eugene said to the two missiles, patting them affectionately. “You two be good boys while daddy is passed the fuck out.”

Eugene screwed the cables onto the mounting plates he installed on the breach doors. He shut the breach, twisting the lock to make it air tight. He flipped a switch and listened for the pumps to empty the tube. There was the click of electrical contact and a sort of deathly silence.

He wanted to scream. He almost did, venting his frustrations at a stupid world that was going to force him to die stupidly.

He could feel the cold chill that permeated the ship as the cold ocean water sucked away the residual heat from the hull. He cupped his hands to his mouth, blowing his breath on them to breath some heat back into them as he thought about what to do.

He briefly considered doing nothing, rolling himself up in blankets, and give way to the cold suffocating darkness. He actually did that for just a few minutes. He sat in the darkness, waiting for his heart to stop.

“Oh my god, this is so boring,” he said, before getting up and heading towards battery compartment. He figured if he was going to die, he wasn’t going to go like a bitch.

The battery compartment was underneath the engine room, down a long knee banging ladder to another dark part of the ship. He took the battery tester out of his pocket as he climbed over the cabling that ran to the racks of large heavy lead acid batteries. Thick braided copper cabling was bolted to each terminal. Eugene steadied himself as he felt his brain fogging. It took a few deep breaths before he could move.

He tested most of the rack before one lit up with enough power. Using a wrench, he pushed hard against the bolt that tightened the clamp down to the terminal. The bolt creaked slightly. He pushed hard “Fuck you bolt,” Eugene said as he felt it give way and stop. He looked at the bolt. The rhyme “righty tighty lefty loosey” went through his head along with the realization that he was tightening the bolt down and not unscrewing it.

“Fuck,” he screamed and kicked the battery rack. Pain shot through his foot as the heavy steel rack did not give way in the slightest to his anger and instead his foot took the brunt of his frustrations. The pain took his breath away for a moment and Eugene wondered if he broke his toe.

He could hear the voice again in his head whispering.

“You can’t do anything. You are so stupid. Give up. You are not good enough to

do this”

Eugene could feel the pain in his foot, and it brought the world into focus. The anger was still there, and it felt like a furnace as everything throbbed. He took the wrench and twisted the bolt in the opposite direction. The bolt held as he pushed with increasing pressure, and he could feel the metal crushing into his hand. This was a new pain, and he focused his anger on it as he pushed. With a twisting shriek the bolt turned as old flecks of rust fluttered to the floor. He did not stop turning until both bolts were in his hand. He put them in his pocket and stared at the battery he was going to have to push up and down a ladder with a broken foot.

He could feel his muscles send little shoots of pain into his shoulders as he lifted the battery up and walked awkwardly toward the ladder, swaying from side to side as he struggled with the weight.

He found he could go about six feet, before the weight of the battery and the pain in his foot made him stop. He could feel the air getting thin, and he felt like he got less in his lungs with every breath.

“You were dancing like a god damn monkey. You are so stupid.” Eugene could hear it in his head, followed by an explosion of violence. Little memories with teeth in the dark liked to strike like piranhas sometimes. His own anger felt like an ember on cold nights. It kept him warm, just enough.

Eugene dragged the battery down the corridor, cussing in wispy breaths. “Why the fuck are these things always so fucking heavy, so fucking dirty, so fucking full of acid, and never a god damn fucking handle.”

He managed to slowly duck walk the heavy battery down the corridor that seemed to get longer and longer with each step. He was afraid to stop, because the air was so thin now he might pass out.

His vision was starting to blur, and there were black speckles creeping around the corners of his vision. He heard the loud smack of battery hitting foot before he felt the white hot pain.

He screamed and picked the battery up with both hands. “Fucking piece of shit,” he yelled as he carried the battery the last half of the corridor. In that moment, there was just enough adrenaline for him to push the battery up the ladder as he

switched from his good foot to throbbing pain with each step. When he got to the top, he slid the battery forward and continued his climb up the ladder. He grabbed the battery and began the slow painful process of walking with it for a bit before putting it down and walking with it again as he moved it down the corridor.

The voices began their assault as he worked.

“You know I take medication, so I can fuck you,” her voice rang through his head like it did that night sending its own cascade of negative thoughts as it did.

He was unable to carry it now and just pushed it down the metal floor.

“I don’t care. I want an abortion. I am not starting things over with you.” He heard her in his head again as he scooted the battery down the corridor.

His limbs were heavy, and he felt so close to passing out that there was a real possibility that he had passed out in the corridor, and this was all a last minute dream before things went dark.

He was a bit surprised when he got the battery to the torpedo bay. He began pulling tools out of his pocket. He opened the service panel on the bottom and looked at the nest of cables that ran through the control board. He looked through the terminal, until he found the power to the torpedo pumps.

He began looping the wire on the power lugs.

The emergency lights were starting to dim, and he had to use a flash light to see the equipment in the dark.

His oxygen starved mind made dark shadows into dark things as he worked. He knew this, because he could see her. She was almost translucent, which made sense as what he remembered now existed in the scars that she left behind. She stood silently in the corner, so the dimming emergency lights barely lit her face in the soft crimson they turned as they started to die.

“You wanted me to be a monster, and now I see why,” he said as he looped the ground wire. She made a soft clicking sound that was a bit unnerving, but he didn’t stop “You need a monster to keep from looking at yourself,” he said as he

looped the wire around the battery terminals. He could hear the pumps start to whine, which meant water was being pumped into the breach.

“Well this monster refuses to give you what you want, how about that. I’m going to be happy one day, you dumb cunt.” He watched the shadow twist into odd shapes as he said this. He could hear the electric motors hum and hoped the torpedo generators would start to power the system.

He lay on the floor of the small room, taking small puffs of stale air. It was getting cold as the darkness began to close in on him.

He felt another cold chill, her face now right next to his. He could see her face starting to fade in places, and she looked more like an old memory than the ghost of a time long unraveled and dead in the real world.

“I like you like this. You finally shut the fuck up,” He looked into her glassy dead eyes as he said this. “I did everything I thought you wanted. I went to work. I came home. I paid the fucking bills. I took care of our kids.” He looked into her pale unblinking eyes. “What the fuck did you do. You sat on the fucking couch all day, and complained when I got home.” He smiled and laughed a little at the apparition. “You are the only cunt I know that can take lemons, water, and sugar, and make a shit smoothie.”

He could hear systems start to power on as strong ocean currents charged the system. The torpedo generators had wings that sprung from the sides as it went taut on the cable. The wings were spinning rapidly in the current, and the power transferred to the batteries.

Lights began to flicker on, and he could hear systems powering throughout the ship.

She began to slowly fade from his view.

Eugene felt as if the soul had been sucked out of him, but he was able to make it to last corridor where his bunk lay in the engine room.

Eugene banged on Patrick’s door with a wrench.

“Hey asshole, you’re welcome.”

#9 Captain's Notes

What to do if the sub is leaking air, and has dropped faster than the life support system was able to keep up with.

First, don't panic. most mistakes are made at times that are stressed.

Also, you wouldn't be here right now if you followed notes 1-8.

Second, make sure Eugene seals the sub. If he loses his temper, we die.

Once the sub is sealed, we repair the ship. Make sure Eugene stays calm. If he gets angry, we die.

The ship will take hours to charge. Seal the crew in thermal sleep bags, and have PPatrick run the script.

Nightmares

Soft red lights blinked in the near darkness as the ship ran on emergency power. The ship's generators hummed softly in the current as the ocean rushed by them. The charging system had needles that swung in time to the oscillations.

Patrick sat on his cot and stared at the black computer screen and the cascade of messages that flashed before his eyes as the shell script ran its course.

They were echos of commands as they were executed, running down a laundry lists of tasks and outputs. He could hear the ship respond as it followed the script. His eyes lowered, and he felt himself slowly give way to his exhaustion.

He was in their old house, and it was cold and dark.

He could feel her absence in everywhere he saw the signs of where she had been. He stepped in the door, and when he heard the click of the latch behind him, the full scale of emptiness swallowed him. It came with an audible pop as he slumped back against the door, slid down to the floor, and felt the loss fill him and seep out his pores.

Their focus had been one day, then one moment at a time, but now there were no more anythings. There was just him, alone.

He tried to speak but his voice had thinned to a ghostly whisper or desperate sort of wheezing.

He had wrapped himself into a tight ball in front of the door, unable to go any further and having no other place to go. He watched a thin sliver of light advance across the room from the front windows, until the room held a mid morning glow.

There was knock on the door, gentle at first, and it became more insistent with each passing moment as Patrick lay on the other side of the door. He slowly got up and unlocked the door, opening it to see an annoyed face on an enormous man with long dark dreads that hung down past his shoulders.

"Yo, we are movers. We are here a little early but can we start. We got a long day," the man said smiling after seeing the Patrick's bloodshot eyes. "Hey, thanks," the man said as Patrick walked out of the house, leaving the door open, without a word.

The sun rose overhead, bringing with it the heat of the afternoon as he walked past stores, highways, neighborhoods, and people. The look on his face was like a shield that kept strangers at a distance. He sat on a bench, when he found his blistered feet would no longer move; until a bus stopped, and the door opened. He got on, the driver not noticing or even looking up from his phone.

He rode the bus until the line ended, at the bay, waves lapping near the small station as the bus drove off, leaving him at an empty down town. He looked out at the empty beach. The water was still as glass, and he laid down in the sand with his eyes closed. He could hear the low gentle rumble of the highway and the soft hiss of the sea. The hot weekday sun beat down everywhere on the quiet beach. He could hear birds chattering; and faraway voices carried on a soft wind.

He wanted to fade away quietly right there in the hot dry sand like another washed up bloated corpse, but it takes more than that he thought. He opened his eyes and sat up. The world looked like it belonged to everyone else now, and there was nothing else.

He took off his clothes and slipped into the cold ocean, hoping to wash back up as something else, anything else.

Eugene lay on his cot and listened to ship's systems hum. He did his part; so if they all died, he wouldn't feel too guilty about it. His arms and legs felt weighted, and he felt his eye lids flutter as he finally surrendered to exhaustion.

Juvenile court was in the basement of the old country courthouse. Despite a recent attempt at renovation, the moldy smell of old building permeated the new carpet and through the latest coat of legal white paint.

The sign on the desk at the front of the courthouse read "No Cell Phones, No

Recording Devices.” There was a bored sheriff that sat behind the sign in a large leather chair on wheels. Metal detecting gates sat to his left with little red and green lights.

Eugene walked up to the desk. “Why aren’t cameras allowed in court, when what goes on here is public record?”

The officer wheeled his chair over to Eugene twirling it as it did, the wheels protesting the slight nudge under his weight. He looked Eugene in the eyes and held the stare for a moment.

“There is only one record here.”

He turned back before Eugene could even think of a reply.

Phoneless, there was nothing to do but stare at the worn office square patterned rug. His kids sat with their mother in the far corner of the waiting room. He sat slumped over at the opposite side, waiting for his lawyer. Occasionally, he would look up at his daughter. She smiled and waved when her mother turned to talk to her lawyer in hushed whispers. His ex was holding a giant notebook full of paper that she had tabulated and hole punched. He thought it must be filled with all the wrongs he did over their twenty years. He wondered if it was just him that had a folder filled with a record of bad behavior or was that a thing wives did.

The court room lay behind two large ornate wood doors. These were original with layers of varnish that smelled like old wax. It was guarded by a cop whose massive chest puffed out under his bullet proof vest. His shiny belt held a large black gun.

“Bob Smith,” The bailiff bellowed into the small room in an authoritative voice.

Eugene watched a man slowly getting up with his lawyer. He was in his thirties and walked in a kind of jerking motion, like a gear had sprung from his hips. His lawyer followed, typing on his phone and ushering the man towards the doors, which the bailiff had opened wide. A woman followed behind him. Her lawyer hugged her as she began tearing up.

The heavy oak doors snapped shut behind them.

Minutes later, the doors sprung open and the woman and her lawyer emerged in tears. He watched them hurry into the elevator.

Seconds later, the man and his lawyer emerged.

The lawyer patted the man on the back.

The man had this far away look. It was a look of someone who had just heard something that he hadn't quite believed yet. His mind was still in a kind of stupor.

The entire place had a kind of hum to it. The elevator rattle and dinged as people came in one way, went through the varnished oak doors; and with a few clicks and clacks, came out as something else.

The elevator doors opened to reveal a group of lawyers. They all wore a shade of legal gray, and had a sort of beleaguered look of worn dishevelment. Eugene's lawyer walked with the group as they left the elevator.

His lawyer was one of the many smiling faces he found on the yellow pages book that sat attached underneath a payphone in the corner of a 7 eleven parking lot outside his apartment. Broken glass and bits of trash glittered in the tall wild grass around it. It was a forgotten thing in a field of glittery broken bottles, and the whispers of plastic shopping bags stuck in the brambles.

The woman on the phone had a disinterested sort of tone, but guided him through the process. This was something that had been so well worn into the tracks of her mind that she did it almost automatically and with little thought. She explained that he would need three hundred dollars just to sit in the chair, and another two to three grand if you wanted to hire him.

His lawyer smiled when Eugene looked up at him, patted him on the back, and sat in the worn fabric chair next to him.

Eugene stared at the paintings of old judges on the walls. They were arranged by year, the oldest to the left. All wore black robes, white hair, and the painter seemed adept at contemplative Jesus expressions.

“They’re asking for alimony, child support and standard custody.” He smiled reassuringly. “Child support and custody are a given. I can argue alimony, but this judge is tough.”

He got up, left, hurrying off to some unknown errand, leaving Eugene to stare nervously at the carpet.

Time before court stretched out like the worn carpet in the old waiting room. An old electric clock clicked out the minutes as it’s hands swung inevitably forward with each clack like a cog keeping the machine synchronized.

His body felt like it was held together with frayed string, and he could unwind at any minute like a crazed top spinning away.

“Levie vs Levie,” He heard his last name called by the deputy.

His ex got up quickly , sniffing softly as her lawyer held her hand and gently guided her into the courtroom. His daughter followed behind her mother and gave her father a helpless little smile before being ushered into court.

He stood up and froze. He felt a sort of growing terror. His lawyer drug him forward by the shoulder with a sort of gentle smile and heavy grip.

The courtroom doors opened. Eugene and his lawyer walked through a center of long polished wood benches. They were like church pews, One row was occupied by police in dark blue uniforms and black ballistic vests.

The next line were the lawyers in various shades of soft grays and scrolling cell phones. They were armed with brief cases that they kept near their soft leather shoes.

The judge sat on a raised platform before two podiums. His wizened head peeked out of a wrinkled robe and crooked tie. He smiled, his eyes looked huge behind his thick wire frame glasses. They were a cloudy cornflower blue and seemed particularly focused on his ex’s lawyer.

She walked in with the sort of confidence that comes with being attractive, educated, and in your early thirties. She smiled a lot, and when she did, her glossy pink painted lips curled around whitened teeth.

“Your Honor, we would like to enter an order for Mr. Levi in regards to child support, alimony, health insurance, and the fair division of assets.”

The judge peered at a stack of papers with shaky hands and smiled with crooked teeth.

“Everything seems well put together, Ms. Prefect. Mr. Levi do you have any issues.”

Eugene opened his mouth to scream. He wanted to be the loose bolt that slammed the spinning gears hard enough rip the wheels off.

He felt gears move underneath his feet, and soon he was sliding along the hard surface. With the clack of the gavel and five minutes, he was on the elevator; same dumb founded expression as the man before him.

The captain drifted in darkness. It was a cold quiet sort of darkness. He felt bubble thin. Drifting along to defy gravity for a moment before some unseen point caused him to rapidly dissolve.

When he tried to hold still, he could hear the screaming; and if he waited longer, the smell of burning hair.

He thought he could be happy drifting this way forever, but then he could hear something else.

“Daddy?”

It was that little girl voice she used when she wanted something. He wanted to hold onto something. He wanted to hold onto her.

But like all the formless voices in the dark, the yearning was just more thing that tormented him.

Harold could hear begging.

“Please let me out,” the box said. It sat in the corner and had grown a mouth and sad eyes.

“What are you?” he said eyeing the box suspiciously.

“I’m lots of things.” “Mostly, I am your pain.”

The box smiled as it said this.

“Open me up so I can eat you from the inside out”.

Harold slid down a long wet tunnel. He could see a light up ahead. He flew through the opening and found himself staring through the eyes of himself at 5.

His mother was screaming at him, red faced lips curled. She had a wooden spoon in her hand and was swinging it wildly at him.

“You fucking bastard, what the hell is wrong with you?”

She was breathing hard, the veins in her neck bulging with her rage.

He could feel the fear and his heart pounding. The basement was cold and snow clung to the sides of the window well.

Unfinished wood stairs led up into the kitchen.

He wanted to scream, but nothing moved. He was a prisoner along for the ride as events unfolded.

Helpless, he watched as he was picked up by his shoulder and slung over a

recliner. He felt his pants being pulled down. His mother beat him with the wooden spoon. It stung , but mostly it scared him. He could feel himself put his hands in the way, feeling the spoon smack hard into his knuckles.

He felt himself being jerked around and then let go.

“Stay down here, and be quiet, you little shit.”

He could hear his mother stomp back up the stairs.

There was a loud deep thump on the floor above him. There was another, and Harold froze in terror.

The basement door flew open, the knob smacking into the unfinished drywall.

With a screech a female thing with long claws, fangs and red curling lips sprung down the stairs. It was naked with long sagging cone shaped breasts.

Harold found himself in control of his limbs as he ran to the corner of the basement.

He turned over a box of legos huddled in the corner under a shelf.

The thing stepped on the legos, screeching. Harold saw his moment and ran past it. He opened the door and went through.

Harold blinked in the bright lights of the library. In the corner was the old man. The box was closed behind him.

“Hello Harold, it’s time to talk,” he said as Harold panted to catch his breath.

A table appeared between the two men. It slowly became something Harold expected to see in a library. Something slightly defaced and institutional looking with a flower arrangement in an effort to add a feminine touch to what is otherwise a cheap press board table with fake wood laminate.

In the next instant Harold and the old man were seated in padded wood chairs at either end of the table.

“To put it in the simplest terms, I was supposed to turn your brain into pudding. Yes, I think pudding is a word you would use. You were supposed to vanish and in your place would be a human node that might think of something other than fucking, eating, and swimming. It’s like having your brain squished into a marble surrounded by teeth that tear through whales. Now I am part of you, and you are part of me. We have to live together.”

The man smiled as he looked at Harold in the eye for a moment before continuing.

“You are special because you almost lost, so now at least we can talk.”

The man held both his hands out.

“I am here to make a deal.”

Harold felt ready for a line of bull shit.

“What do you mean, almost lost?” he said, eyeing the sort of old man alien.

“Do you think I am afraid of that thing in the box?” He put both hands on the edge of the table. It’s been in here much longer than you have. Harold did his best to smile confidently. “I think we should let it out.”

The old man’s eye started to twitch. “That won’t be necessary.” “We are going to make a deal.”

Harold put his hand on the box and began to fiddle with the lock.

The old man’s eyes darted to Harold’s hands.

“Please don’t let it out.” he said in a frantic whisper.

Harold let his finger rest on the lock. The box felt eager to be opened. He twirled his finger around it.

“Please stop,” the old man said with a slith crack to his voice.

Harold smiled. He wasn’t used to having the upper hand, and he wasn’t sure

what to do with it.

The library looked like the one from his childhood that existed before the bells and whistles of the internet. There was a large card catalog in the center of the room. This was a heavy dark oak box with lion's paw legs. Its front was covered in a grid of little index card sized drawers with brass pulls with little white labels stuffed in tiny square frames above each pull.

On top sat a massive dictionary. It was opened in the center and a foot of thin pages fanned out on either side.

The old man put his hand on one of the drawer pulls.

"You never learned the dewy decimal system; did you?" The old man said smiling.

"You never learned how to use your own brain either," he said.

"I can help you. I can make you better." The old man flipped through the dictionary. The thin white pages fluttered softly as they fell.

Harold wondered what it would be like to be better and what cost that would entail. "The Dewy Decimal system was useful for maybe the first ten years of my life." "I will come to you on my terms, not yours."

Systems slowly went back online. The ship began to whisper as fans churned blowing air over hot pipes from the water distillation generator. Thermostats and valves flipped and clicked as the machines danced. The battery charging needles danced over full as the ship began the finishing touches before it retracted the generators, pulled the anchor, and drifted away with the current.

The seas were dark and quiet as the engines pulsed, guiding the ship along as the current rushed north towards colder water.

Large shapes trailed either side of the sub. Prehistoric shapes that undulated slowly in strong tight motions.

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