

Gone Whalin'

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DAY ONE

The day before Cormac McIlhenney woke up aboard a nineteenth-century whaling ship, his electric bill came in the mail.

Technically, the bill was for the electricity used by both Cormac and his roommate, Vance. But since it bore his name, the responsibility fell to Cormac. Were the bill to go unpaid, his credit would be damaged beyond repair and his hopes of eventual home ownership would be dealt a devastating blow. Even worse, the goons from the electric company might decide to come out and cut off the power, forcing him to eat all of the frozen entrées in the freezer before they spoiled. Finding the opportune window of time when the entrées had warmed to a palatable temperature but not yet spoiled would be difficult under normal circumstances; success would be almost unimaginable with no lights on.

Cormac furrowed his brow at the bill and hoped it wouldn't come to that. The amount due this month was \$63.21, nearly four dollars more than the previous month. This was most assuredly due

to Vance's ill-fated attempt at growing marijuana in his bedroom closet, an endeavor that required heat lamps to shine on the plants twenty-four hours a day. This had almost caused a fire when Vance attempted to warm his bath towel on one of the lamps while he was in the shower. Cormac hadn't approved of the plan, which required a naked Vance to sprint from the bathroom to the weed closet at hours when Cormac might be around to witness it, but Vance assured him that the luxury provided by the hot towel would outweigh any potential awkwardness it might cause.

The house nearly burnt down the first time Vance tried it. Cormac put his foot down once it happened two more times after that.

Yes, obtaining Vance's share of the electric bill would prove unpleasant, but Cormac was used to it. They'd been living together for three years. Assigned to each other as random roommates when they enrolled at Harrington State, they got the boot from the freshman dorms when a rat that Vance had been feeding bit their resident advisor. The RA had been a pleasant, forgiving fellow, and likely would have laughed the matter off, but it turned out that he was allergic to rabies. Cormac knew that the school couldn't let them stay in the dorms after that, but he sometimes wondered if the RA wasn't being a bit of a drama queen. How does one measure something like "percentage of mobility loss on your right side" anyways? It sure looked like less than 90 percent every time Cormac saw him wheel by.

After the rat expulsion, Cormac and Vance rented the place on Craymore Street, and had lived there ever since. A decrepit two-bedroom house far enough off campus to discourage regular class attendance, it suited their needs (mostly the need to not make the effort to find a better place). The paint flaked, the faucet dripped, and, should they ever need to access the attic, the landlord strongly discouraged them from breathing while up there. The rat had died twenty-four hours after Vance transported him there from the dorm. Cormac told himself it was a coincidence.

Holding the bill, Cormac walked out of the living room and down the short hall that led to Vance's room. He didn't like coming down here, and not just because rodent-induced paralysis had a non-zero probability of occurring. Cormac and Vance had never been particularly close. If asked, Cormac would probably describe their relationship as "by default." They'd had some laughs over the years, tried a few penny-ante get-rich schemes, and their band, Uncle Jemima, was actively seeking out their fifth-ever gig. But as Cormac steeled his nerve to knock on his roommate's door, he realized that he didn't even know Vance's parents' names. Vance had never mentioned them, but then again, Cormac had never asked. He hoped they were still alive.

Cormac banged on the door, intending to right this wrong and turn the corner in his relationship with his roommate. Vance eventually opened the door in his boxers, squinting, his hair matted on one side of his head and sticking straight up on the other.

"Are your parents dead?" asked Cormac.

Vance's eyes widened in terror, and he vomited on Cormac's shoes.

* * *

"I'm sorry about your shoes, Mac," Vance said as he entered the living room wearing just a towel around his waist. Cormac glanced at the shoes drying on the windowsill and scooted over on the couch, allowing Vance room to plop down next to him. The shoes would be fine in the long run, but the matter of the towel-clad figure next to him had quickly become a much more pressing concern.

Vance glanced down and made a minor adjustment to the towel. "You have to see it from my point of view, buddy: I really had to puke."

Cormac tried to size up what response might end the conversation the fastest and result in at least another layer of material between him and his roommate. He decided the direct approach was best.

“And what’s all this ‘dead parents’ nonsense?” Vance continued. “You know my folks are alive; my dad got held in contempt of court when he testified during RatGate and told the bailiff to—”

Cormac cut his roommate off. “Vance, you didn’t just take a shower, why the hell are you wearing a towel?”

“Ah, I wondered if you would ever ask. New strategy, buddy,” said Vance. “This sucker’s my ticket to dealing with these hot nights we’ve been having.”

Cormac sighed and opened a beer as Vance continued.

“Pure comfort. Air flow. Easy access in the can. One size fits all.”

“That’s a dress, Vance. You’re describing a dress.”

“That’s ridiculous! Do they make dresses with the Seahawks’ logo on them?”

Against his best instincts, Cormac took a closer look at the towel. Vance had drawn a crude Seattle Seahawks logo on it with a black marker. *Seattle* was missing a *t*, and Cormac was fairly certain that in the real football team’s logo, the bird was not shedding a single tear.

Vance turned and stared at Cormac. The towel shifted alarmingly. “You know what the best part of my day is, Mac? Getting out of the shower in the morning and wrapping this towel around my waist. I’m fresh, I’m clean. Sure, it’d be nice if the towel had been pre-heated . . .”

Cormac glared as he took a pull from the beer.

“But it’s still a great experience. I’ve got the whole day ahead of me. You know what the worst part is? When I take this towel off and get dressed. It’s all downhill from there.”

Cormac was aghast. Vance had really given this towel pitch some thought. He hadn’t expected this plea to his emotions. If he didn’t act decisively, the situation could quickly escalate out of control. Towels could become the de facto wardrobe at the Craymore Street house. Traditional clothing would be hauled off to the homeless, and any non-towel items found squirreled away would be burned on the spot. Vance’s reign as towel lord would be a cruel one.

“But Vance,” Cormac protested. “That’s not because of the towel. It’s because you don’t study and do poorly in school. You don’t have a job, you can barely pay your bills. Today you were lying in bed hungover until four in the afternoon.”

“And you know what brought me back? Gave me a second wind?” Vance asked.

“Purging your stomach of toxins by vomiting onto my shoes?”

Vance smiled coyly, shook his head, and tapped his finger on the towel.

Cormac rolled his eyes and was preparing to drain the rest of his beer when he noticed something. On the towel, right next to where Vance was tapping, were two letters. Vance hadn’t sharpied them on; they were monogrammed in orange thread: *CM*.

His initials.

* * *

Cormac navigated his ancient Volvo through traffic as Vance sat in silence in the passenger seat. It had been an ugly scene. Words had been exchanged. Threats had been made. When tempers died down, the situation was at a stalemate. Cormac had banned Vance from ever wearing his towel in the future, but he knew in his heart he would never be able to use it again either. Knowing it had touched Vance’s bare skin was more than enough reason to avoid it, but Cormac also wasn’t certain that the ink from the marker Vance had used was something he wanted coming into contact with his skin. Vance was itching his waist and thighs at the present moment. For the time being, the monogrammed “Seattle” Seahawks towel that Cormac’s grandmother had given him as an off-to-college present lay crumpled in a corner of the living room. Cormac would deal with it after band practice.

Band practice was the last thing Cormac wanted to be doing at the moment. Uncle Jemima’s practice sessions usually revolved around having a few beers and talking about how awesome the last show was. But with the last show having happened nearly two months ago, that particular discussion topic had begun to wear a

bit thin. Also, the long gap between shows was very much related to their dismal performance the last time they'd taken the stage. Vance had misrepresented both their musical genre and talent level to the sorority that had hired them. "BAND RUINS FORMAL," screamed the headlines of the *Harrington School Paper* the next day; "DEVASTATED SORORITY FOLDS," the day after that. The reporter who penned what ended up being a special eight-part investigation into the incident received a letter of commendation from Bob Woodward. Vance considered the gig one of the highlights of his life.

Cormac pulled into a parking spot outside the abandoned Chinese restaurant that Uncle Jemima used as a practice space. He put the car in park and looked over at Vance, who was absentmindedly scratching his leg.

"Look, Vance," said Cormac, as he turned off the ignition and pocketed the keys. "I'm sorry I got upset about the towel. It's just the—"

"The principle of the thing," finished Vance. "Yeah, I know. You've got principles. Everyone's got principles. I just don't know if the Mac I met three years ago would have gotten upset if I'd borrowed his towel, drawn a sweet Seahawks logo on it, and occasionally wore it around the house."

"He would have, I can assure you of that."

"All my towels are burnt, Mac! What am I going to do now? Dry myself with a sleeping bag? Haul a sleeping bag into the bathroom and dry myself with it every time I take a shower? Where, pray tell, would I hang that up to dry?" The frustration in Vance's voice was escalating rapidly. Clearly, the wound left by the confiscated towel was going to take some time to heal. He was now raving about surface area and goose down, and Cormac knew he had to put a stop to it.

"OK, Vance! Shut up! You can use the damn towel!"

Vance stopped shouting. He was breathing heavily.

"But only after you shower, OK?"

Vance nodded.

“Good. Now can we go inside? If you put some of that energy towards the drums, we may be able to have a semi-decent practice.”

Vance itched his leg.

Entering the practice space, Cormac was dismayed to see Uncle Jemima’s bassist, Joey, on all fours, mopping up some sort of spill with a bath towel. Cormac was wondering how on earth his day had taken such a towel-based turn when Vance piped up from behind him.

“Joey, the hell are you doing?”

Joey looked up, noticing his two bandmates for the first time.

“Hey guys,” Joey said in his half-stoned monotone. “Yeah, I spilled a beer and couldn’t find the sleeping bag, so I’m cleaning it up with this towel.”

Cormac strapped on his guitar and wondered if he’d been transported to a parallel universe. Vance supervised the final seconds of Joey’s cleanup efforts approvingly, then went to the fridge to grab beers. He popped the caps off with a lighter and handed one to Cormac. A peace offering of sorts. Cormac took a swig and wondered if maybe he was too hard on his roommate. Then he glanced down at his shoeless feet and abandoned that line of thinking. When he looked up, Vance had taken a seat on his drum stool. He was scratching his stomach with one of his sticks.

Willie, the singer, showed up a few minutes later, and practice commenced. Cormac had once observed that an Uncle Jemima performance was not unlike a livestock auction: loud, frenzied, and with many more losers leaving than winners. The comparison had only grown more apt after the sorority show when a goat had bit the chapter president. Nobody was sure how it had gained admittance, but, in retrospect, everyone agreed that the show would have been stranger if a goat *hadn’t* bitten someone.

The band had mastered a handful of crowd-pleasing covers. These were designed to lull the audience into a false sense of enjoyment, as well as reach a previously agreed-upon contractual minimum set length. Once these milestones had been checked off, Vance would bang his drum sticks together three times, announcing

a switch to a lineup of all-original tunes. The happy spectators who had been dancing to a Motown cover seconds earlier would find themselves assaulted by the rapid-fire guitar-driven histrionics of Uncle Jemima's surprisingly deep catalogue. Rending of garments and gnashing of teeth soon followed. God help him, Cormac loved it when they gnashed their teeth.

Songwriting duties were shared amongst all four members. Willie penned songs that spotlighted his pipes. Typically these were about wizards and demons, with occasional forays into how awesome BMX biking was. Joey exclusively wrote songs about partying. His songs were intricately woven tapestries of good times, willing babes, endless booze and drug supplies, celebrity pop-ins, go-karts, and swimming pools. Cormac didn't like to speak in absolutes, and he had only known Joey for a couple of years, but he was certain that the man had never attended a party that was 10 percent as fun as the ones he described in such great lyrical detail. At most of the parties Cormac had attended with Joey, the bassist ended up quietly sneaking off and locking himself in the room where the video game system was. The most recent song he'd penned was about setting a UPS van on fire and driving it off the roof of an orgiastic celebration into a fountain of beer. Cormac worried about him.

Vance wrote songs about rock and roll, more specifically how great it was to be in a band that played rock and roll. Pounding verses gave way to quick, shoutable choruses, and he always left plenty of room for Cormac to shred. Cormac never felt comfortable setting aside time for extended guitar solos in his own songs, but Vance always insisted on it. Cormac's guitar playing was one of the few high points of an Uncle Jemima performance. Of course, the band had lowered the bar for "high points" to pretty much "anything done on stage that was not an arrestable offence." The only other two items that might be considered high points were the eventual end of a show and the fact that so far the band had a flawless track record of not exposing their genitals mid-song. Of course, it had only been four shows.

An increasingly boozy practice concluded with a run-through of a new song Cormac had brought in. Cormac knew that his strength lay in his musicianship and not his lyrical prowess, but the thought of a set list that merely extolled the virtues of dragons, parties, and the band itself had inspired him to take a renewed interest in songwriting. He was proud of the latest tune he'd brought in, a more abstract, psychedelic number that had been inspired by a camping trip he'd taken the summer before. Of course, by the time they got to it, Vance's drumming was a half step behind, Joey had found his missing sleeping bag and was playing from inside it, and Willie was indicating his drunken hunger by replacing the lyrics with the names of the Mexican food items he currently desired. The plug was pulled on the practice quite literally when Joey attempted to stand up in the sleeping bag and immediately crashed forward, pulling the PA's power cord out of the wall and leaving an unamplified Willie channeling his inner Robert Plant to shriek an off-key "Burritoooooooooooooooooo" for about six seconds before noticing the cacophony behind him had ceased.

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Cormac sat in the driver's seat in silence as he waited for Vance to lock up. The band rented the practice space under one condition: that the owners of the practice space never find out that they were using a stolen key to access it without paying any rent. Vance had spearheaded this campaign, and like most of Vance's ideas, illegality was a definite, though not isolated, concern. The few times they had arrived for rehearsal to find another band already booked in the space, they had been forced to participate in an elaborate ruse, pretending to be janitors and tidying up the space while the paying customers shot them glares. Cormac found this annoying, even though the mess they were cleaning up was usually their own. But what irritated him more was that his bandmates seemed to somehow enjoy the act. Cormac blew up one day when Vance brought everyone press-on "janitor mustaches." Cormac didn't associate mustaches with janitors and was surprised someone out there was manufacturing them as an official product, but that was

the least of his worries. He accused Vance of deliberately scheduling their practice sessions when he knew another band had the studio booked so they'd get to pretend to be custodians again. Vance had acted hurt, but since then there hadn't been another mix-up.

Vance got in the car and Cormac started the engine. In theory, the night was still young, but Cormac didn't feel like doing anything with the clowns in his own band and especially not with Vance.

"What do you feel like doing, buddy?" asked Vance. "I don't know if he mentioned it to you, but Willie was planning on getting some Mexican food . . ."

Cormac wordlessly put the car into reverse.

"Maybe we should meet him over there?" Vance continued. "At the Mexican place? Mac?"

"Vance," Cormac said quietly as they took an illegal right turn on red out onto Main Street. "I've had five beers. I'm going to go home, take two shots of vodka, and go to bed."

"Sounds fun," said Vance. His tone was devoid of sarcasm.

Cormac didn't reply, but maintained a steady course homeward at a sly five miles an hour below the speed limit. After a few minutes Vance broke the silence.

"Mac, in the interest of full disclosure, I should probably let you know that I drank all the vodka in the house last night."

Cormac gripped the steering wheel tighter.

"Yeah, that's why I threw up on your shoes this afternoon. But you know I'm good for it, buddy. The vodka, I mean, not the shoes. The shoes are still wearable, was the consensus, right? Oh check it out, there's Willie."

Willie's pickup was stopped at a red light and as Cormac slowed to a halt in the lane next to him, Vance leaned out the window to try to get his attention.

"Willie! Hey Willie! Willie! Dammit, Willie!"

Willie eventually stopped pretending he couldn't hear the driver next to him and looked over. Realizing it was his bandmates and not a driver he had recently and drunkenly wronged, he smiled and waved. Cormac rolled his eyes when he noticed Willie was wearing

his janitor mustache. As Vance tried to ascertain whether Willie had stopped for Mexican yet, Cormac looked forward, willing the red light to change so he could get home before the day got any crappier.

It stayed red.

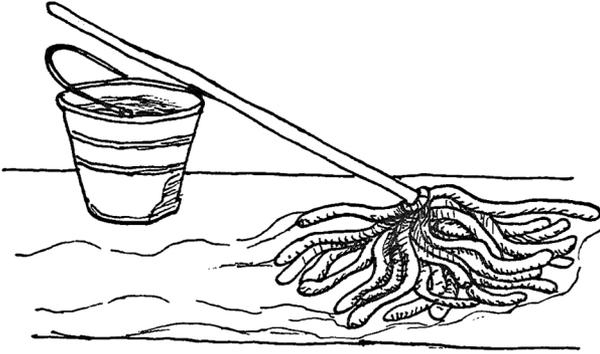
In the car seat next to him, Vance was trying to negotiate a trade for some food. Cormac looked to his left, where an elderly woman was crossing the street. She must have hit the crosswalk button, triggering an extra-long red light. In the passenger seat, Vance had applied his own janitor mustache to his upper lip in an attempt to sweet-talk Willie. Cormac heard honking behind him. He glanced in the rearview mirror and saw Joey waving. Next to him, Vance launched into a raucous duet with Willie of the alternate, Mexican-food-based lyrics to Cormac's song. The old woman inched across the street. Joey yelled something unspeakable at her and she shot him the finger. Cormac was considering blowing through the empty intersection when suddenly, the light turned green.

Dreaming of his quiet bed, Cormac stepped on the gas. His tires squealed, Vance yelled in protest, and Cormac realized that his roommate was still halfway out of the window, reaching for something. Cormac hit the brakes, the old woman dove to the ground in terror, Vance slumped back inside, and the burrito that Willie had reared back to heave at Vance splattered all over the side of Cormac's car.

Vance looked out the window at the explosion, then back at Cormac. The jolt from the sudden car movement had knocked his janitor mustache loose, and it hung vertically from his right cheek.

"Dammit, Mac!" Vance cried. "My burrito! Stop the car, I can still scrape some of it off."

Cormac envisioned Vance tied to the side of a mountain while buzzards in janitor mustaches pecked at his liver. "Vance," he said, as calmly as he could manage. "Your share of the electric bill is \$31.60. I want you to slide it under my bedroom door. It had better be there when I wake up tomorrow morning." Without another word, Cormac stepped on the gas and guided the Volvo home in silence.



DAY TWO

Ziro stood on the bow of the *Levyathan* and surveyed the ocean. The sea was calm. In a few moments, he would embark on a day of backbreaking labor, but this was his time to enjoy.

Life was not easy for a slave on a whaling ship, let alone what was potentially the worst whaling ship currently operating on the seven seas. As the sun began to peek up over the eastern horizon, Ziro looked around at the variety of tasks that awaited him that day. Nets required mending. Harpoons had to be sharpened. The plank needed to be extended by a foot and a half for some reason. But looming large, as it always did, was a seemingly endless swath of deck that needed swabbing.

Swabbing the decks had occupied the majority of Ziro's hours ever since he was promoted from galley slave to regular slave. The promotion came with no added benefits and greatly increased responsibility. In fact, the total number of slaves on the *Levyathan* had been, and remained, one. Still, it was nice to have your performance recognized.

Ziro had been a slave on the *Levyathan* for nearly five years. The ship's captain had discovered him at a slave auction while they were unloading in New Orleans. Ziro wasn't actually up for auction; he was only there because some sailors had told him it was a good place to meet women. As lady after lady threw themselves upon the auction block rather than continue to endure Ziro's advances, he took to the bottle. The captain had found him, barely able to stand and attempting to bid on a soup bone that a stray dog was gnawing on. Deciding to save himself a few bucks, the captain stole the bone from the dog, then clubbed Ziro over the head with it and dragged him aboard his ship. Months later, it dawned on Ziro that the sailors had been messing with him.

Since then, he'd lived the seafaring life. Ziro wasn't exceptionally bitter about the hand he'd been dealt. Back on dry land, he didn't so much have "friends and family" as he had "an increasingly large and angry group of people he owed money to." Now, aboard the *Levyathan*, his food and lodging were free, plus he had a chance to see the world, meet interesting people, and learn several new types of knots. Sure, he wasn't getting paid. But lately, that was a problem for more people on the ship than just the resident slave.

Ziro took one last look at the horizon and went to retrieve his mop. As he wandered toward the small cabin that doubled as the supply closet and slave's quarters, he tried to recall the last time the crew of the *Levyathan* had actually caught a whale. It had been weeks, maybe even a month since they hauled one of the great beasts out of the water. There were many reasons that the *Levyathan* had become a laughingstock in the whaling community: out of date equipment, ugly whalers, misspelled ship's name. But most damning of all of them was the crew's plain inability to catch whales.

No whales meant no pay. No pay meant angry whalers. Angry whalers liked to blow off steam by carving scrimshaw. Scrimshaw—artistic patterns and pictures carved into whale bones and teeth—was difficult to carve when faced with a lack of whales. This made the whalers even angrier. Even angrier whalers drank, vomited, and then Ziro swabbed.

Ziro didn't understand why the other men needed to decorate bones, let alone whale bones. There was always plenty of driftwood floating around that would be great for carving and engraving, but nobody ever seemed interested. Once, when a dolphin had become ensnared in their nets, Ziro suggested a whaler carve its bones instead. The enraged man had to be physically restrained from hurling Ziro overboard. After that incident, Ziro kept his mouth shut about scrimshaw.

Ah well, Ziro thought to himself as he pumped sea water into his bucket. Maybe today will be the day. The sky the night before had been full of shooting stars, and Ziro, like many of the men on board, believed they were a good omen. Superstition was common on board the *Levyathan*. Finding a dead seagull meant the crew should buckle down for a fearsome storm. Red clouds as the sun went down meant that good luck would greet a sailor the next time they went ashore. Just last week, they'd seen a pod of whales breaching in the distance. Rather than pursue them, the captain decreed it a sign that they'd have a record haul the *next* day. Instead, they caught nothing and one of their sails accidentally got set on fire. Ziro sometimes thought the superstitions went a bit too far.

Even so, he was excited to see what the day would bring. Five years into his forced journey on the *Levyathan*, small details still thrilled Ziro. The creak of the masts. The salty spray of ocean water. The vulgar shouts of a poorly trained whaler who'd once again mistaken port for starboard and thrown his harpoon into the wide open sea, missing out on a sure kill. You never knew what life at sea would bring next.

Out of the corner of his eye, Ziro saw movement near the entrance to the whalers' quarters. Somebody else was awake. He quickly shoved the mop into the bucket to wet it and started swabbing, hoping it would look like he'd been at it for a while. Ziro didn't fear any direct reprisal if he was caught slacking. If anything were to happen to him, someone else would have to perform his duties and most people on board, though only dimly aware of what their own responsibilities entailed, were reluctant to take on any

additional ones. This person would probably head off to get some breakfast without taking any notice of him or decide they were too hungover to be up and go back to sleep.

But this figure in the doorway wasn't doing either. He was just kind of standing there. Ziro stole a glance at him over his shoulder. The person looked confused. Squinting as if still half asleep, he looked to his left and then his right several times in a row. Ziro stopped swabbing and leaned on his mop, taking a closer look at the man. He had never seen him before in his life.

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Captain Anson liked to start his day with a rundown of the *Levyathan's* numbers. Today, like the day before and the day before that, this rundown took him about two seconds. Zero. That was the number of whales his supposed whaling ship had landed yesterday. The Captain glanced at the slate he had mounted on the wall of his cabin that displayed the quarterly goals he had laid out for the ship. They were still within reach. They'd just have to catch thirty-four whales a day for the next nine days, without breaks to sleep or eat. He supposed that many whales would pose a bit of a storage problem. Captain Anson jotted down a rudimentary sketch of a stack of whales, held in place by a quickly devised harness system. They'd need something like that once the whales started biting again. He'd have Ziro work on a prototype.

Anson pulled out his pocket watch and sized up the rest of his morning. He still had about an hour until most of the crew got up. As the streak of whaleless days grew longer, he'd been emerging from his cabin later and later. It gave the men confidence, he knew, to see that their leader had sequestered himself to remain deep in thought. He'd taken to ignoring the pounding on his cabin door, no matter how vigorous it grew. Whatever petty dispute the men needed him to settle on the deck was secondary to his current mission: devising a plan for the biggest whaling haul the world had ever seen.

He picked up the drawing of the harness system, and walked it over to the wall that the slate was mounted on. The harness system was just one of many innovations he'd devised during these early-morning brainstorming sessions. Tacked around the slate were drawings of catapults and flying machines, and one piece of paper that just said "ELECTROWHALES" in cool-looking letters. He grabbed the bottom of that one and took a closer look. He didn't remember writing it, or what it even meant. He debated tearing it down, but decided that he must have thought it was a good idea at some point in time, so it should stay. After all, he didn't want to toss what could end up being the missing piece to the whole puzzle just because it sounded kind of crazy. He moved ELECTROWHALES to a more prominent position in the center of the wall and tacked up the harness system diagram next to it.

Yes, the entire operation was shaping up nicely. Captain Anson stepped back to admire his work from a distance and nearly tripped over a stack of papers. It was an assortment of mostly maintenance requests from the crew with a few bills thrown in for good measure. He'd thought that forcing requests for repairs and new equipment to be submitted in writing would be an easy way out of having to fix or buy things. Instead, far more of his men had turned out to be literate than he'd anticipated, and demands had increased substantially. The captain eyed the top request with disgust as he gathered the papers together. "Think bigger, men," he said out loud. "Functional life jackets' aren't going to solve our problems!" He dumped the papers into his garbage bin and slumped back in his desk chair.

"If I could run the ship by myself, I'd do it. I'd do it in a second!" Anson lamented. Every day, there were complaints from his sailors to deal with. The captain raised his voice to a nasal pitch and mocked them to himself: "The sails have holes in them! This hardtack tastes like dog food! A wharf rat bit me and inside the first aid box there were just more wharf rats! For the love of God, captain, when are we going home?"

Home. That was a complaint he was hearing more and more often. He'd hoped that the weeks without pay might light a fire under the men, make them work a bit harder to haul in a whale. Instead it had just served to remind them that the shift they had signed on for had ended nearly a year ago, and that they just might be happier surrounded by their wives and children than living aboard a rundown whaling boat. He wished the men could be more like Ziro. Ziro kept his mouth shut and did what he was told, and he sure seemed happy. Anson often tried calling attention to this. He'd wander over to Ziro while he was swabbing and loudly say, "Boy, Ziro, how do you stay so happy? Maybe not having any material possessions or freedom is something we all ought to consider, huh boys?" Then he'd look around at the whalers and point at Ziro while grinning broadly, but nobody was fooled. Some of the men just pulled out their scrimshaw etchings of their families and wept.

Unfortunately, a trip home was not currently on the *Levyathan's* agenda and would not be added any time soon. For the rest of the men on board, returning to Nantucket meant a loved one's embrace and a warm bed. But only one thing awaited Captain Anson there: divorce papers served up by his harpy of a wife, Eleanor. Those divorce papers would mean the loss of half of everything he owned: the house in Nantucket, the summer cottage, the horse-drawn carriage. But most importantly, the *Levyathan*. And also, if you really wanted to get technical about it, *only* the *Levyathan*.

Purchasing his dream whaling ship had necessitated mortgaging the Anson's house. Stocking it with equipment meant the same for the summer home. Raising capital to hire a crew meant putting up pretty much everything else the couple owned as collateral. They'd actually gotten a fairly good loan rate, since before he took control of the whaling ship, Captain Anson had worked as a VP at a bank. Quitting his high-paying job had been another sore spot with his wife. That all of these events occurred spontaneously within a four-hour period on what he had forgotten was Eleanor's birthday did not help either. Nor did the fact that when he brought her down to the marina to surprise her with the christening of the ship, his

brother-in-law, Wellington, was already there, presenting *his* wife, Gertrude (Eleanor's twin), with a pristine new sailboat he had secretly spent all year crafting by hand for *her* birthday.

Anson was still confident that he could have emerged unscathed if his overcompensating jerk of a brother-in-law hadn't gone and named his boat after his wife. *Gertrude*—what the hell kind of a name for a boat was that? Sadly, Anson not naming the boat after Eleanor was underscored by the fact that he had misspelled the name he had chosen instead. On the card that accompanied the boat, he had somehow managed to combine the two naming faux pas. "Dear Ellenore," it read. "With every whale I haul aboard to render blubber down for lamp oil, I shall think of you. Happy anniversary. Please call me Captain from now on. Love, Captain Anson."

When the Captain sobered up the next morning and realized what he'd done, he decided he'd better smooth things out. Eleanor wasn't home, so he hustled down to the florist to buy her the deluxe "I'm sorry" package. Stopping off at a tavern on the way for a hair of the dog, he noticed his wife across the street. She was walking quickly, with her head down, clearly trying not to attract attention. Without even pausing, she turned into the office of the town's most prominent attorney, a man who specialized in quick and devastating divorce settlements. Anson quickly came to a horrifying realization: he didn't have any money to pay for his beer.

Knowing that a divorce was fully justified and would rob him of his new boat, Anson fled to the harbor. There, he convinced his crew to leave several days early, by using a shrewd bargaining technique known as "making promises he had no intention of keeping." He came to regard the technique as a patented Anson trademark.

The *Levyathan* hauled up her anchor and set sail in less than an hour. As the Nantucket harbor faded from view, he swore he could make out the silhouettes of his shrieking wife and the furious tavern owner he'd stiffed cursing his name from the dock. Captain Anson turned to his first mate and dramatically said, "First mate! Let's go catch us some whales!" Then he snapped his fingers and said,

“Hey! First mate! Hey! You!” Eventually he explained to the person whose attention he was trying to get that he had the great honor of being deemed the first mate of the *Levyathan*. The guy didn’t speak English. The Captain decided he didn’t need a first mate.

They hadn’t been back to Nantucket since. Anson knew the minute they docked there, he’d be served with divorce papers and he’d lose the boat. He couldn’t give Eleanor that satisfaction. Unfortunately, she seemed very determined to see the divorce through. Her attorney had started turning up in other towns where the *Levyathan* was docked. Anson wasn’t sure who was tipping her off, so he started keeping the crew in the dark about their destinations. He’d tell them they were sailing to Bermuda for shore leave, then dock at an industrial port in Halifax. These trust games worked both ways. His men grumbled that maybe someday it would be nice if he told them they were going to Halifax and instead sailed to Bermuda. Anson would just reply that the average high for Halifax in February was thirty degrees, so they had better change out of those swim trunks and goggles.

Even when the *Levyathan* arrived at a destination that he’d kept the men in the dark about, Captain Anson was reluctant to leave the boat. He started sending Ziro ashore wearing his clothes as a decoy. The ruse played out the same way every time. Ziro would step off the dock and be swarmed by legal underlings and process servers, all trying to hand documents to the wrong man, while Anson watched the scene unfold from his cabin, protected by the law of the sea. “If only Eleanor could see me now,” he’d think as he squinted through a dirty port hole at the man he’d captured into slavery while wearing only his underwear.

The next trip ashore wouldn’t be happening anytime soon though. There was no point until they had whales to unload and sell. Captain Anson decided he’d strategized enough for this morning. It was time to join his men on deck. He picked up his lucky spyglass and clipped it to his belt. If those shooting stars last night meant what he thought they did, today would be a busy and fruitful day for the entire crew. The damn decks had better be swabbed to hell and back.

* * *

When Cormac had woken up, he'd been confused and scared. This was fairly normal. During his three years at Harrington, he'd woken up in some confusing and scary places. Usually there'd be a clue nearby that would fill him in on where he was. A sorority pin on a nightstand, or a sanitation company logo on the interior of a dumpster. That would allow him to get his bearings and stumble home bleary-eyed, where Vance would fill him in on the rest.

Today, however, he wasn't finding anything. He'd woken up in a bunk bed, one in a tight row of a dozen or so, all of them full of snoring men. His first thought was that he was in the top-secret sleeping shed that the Harrington groundskeepers all slept in, where they were bathed in positively charged ions in order to dilute the harmful effects of the insecticide the dean forced them to use to keep the campus pristine. His second thought was how weird that first thought was. Seeing no immediate clues and not wanting to wake any of the men up, Cormac decided to head outside. Harrington was a fairly small campus; he'd hopefully be able to spot a landmark nearby and figure out where he was.

What the hell had happened to him? He didn't think he'd been that drunk when he went to bed, certainly not drunk enough to go wandering in his sleep. Maybe his frustration with Vance had focused him, made him feel more sober than he really was. But even as he made his way to the door, his feet felt unsteady beneath him, like the entire world was tilting from side to side. Maybe Vance had drugged him as revenge for the towel argument. If dosing your roommate's drink with powerful psychoactive drugs was now on the table as a legitimate response to a minor quibble over towel ownership, things were about to get a lot more interesting in the house on Craymore Street.

Cormac was pondering when he might have his first opportunity to fix Vance a reverse-revenge spiked drink when he pushed open the door and saw the ocean.

He stopped dead in his tracks. Either Vance had engineered a prank of colossally stupid magnitude or he was dreaming. And though Cormac was almost certain it was the latter, part of him kind of hoped Vance had pulled it off. The ocean was over five hours away from the Harrington campus. If Vance had somehow managed to transport him here, it would mean he was an actual supervillain. Cormac and his roommate had their differences, but he had to assume he'd be welcomed in on the ground floor of whatever diabolical enterprise Vance the supervillain had planned. It would sure beat finding a job after college.

But that wouldn't be necessary because this was definitely all a dream. And not a bad one, Cormac noted. The morning air was cool and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. Who knew, perhaps some sea wenches would make an appearance? Cormac immediately tried to concentrate really hard to get some sea wenches to make an appearance. Soon he felt dizzy, so he stopped before he burst a capillary. That was when he noticed he was not alone on the deck.

A man with a mop was twenty feet away, pretending not to look at him. Usually upon encountering a person whose profession involved mops, Cormac would respond in the same fashion and be delighted with the arrangement. But since this was dreamland, he figured he should be a bit friendlier. After all, you never knew when a mop-wielding deckhand was going to morph into a busty sea wench.

Cormac gave it just a few more seconds in case that moment was now, then decided to proceed with an introduction.

"Ahoy matey!" he shouted, raising a friendly hand as a greeting.

Cormac didn't know it was possible to convey disgust with a sweep of a mop, but the stranger did an admirable job of it. He was going to have to try another strategy.

"I just woke up in that room with a dozen other guys!" he said jovially as he walked toward the stranger. "Not a very comfortable bed, let me tell you! And man, how do you deal with the snoring in that place?"

“I don’t sleep in that room. I sleep in there.” The man pointed toward a rickety closet that appeared to be only slightly larger than a gym locker. A faint chemical haze appeared to emanate from it.

“It looks . . . cozy,” Cormac lied, as a rat staggered out of the closet and died. He had two strikes. It was time to turn on the McIlhenney charm and make a new friend. “I’m sorry if you took any offense to that, not that you should, it’s really not my business where anyone sleeps on this ship and who knows, maybe you choose to sleep there, it’s certainly possible that you’d prefer to be in there than you would in a room with a dozen smelly guys in it, after all . . .” It was at this point in his panicked ramblings that Cormac realized he had walked through the section of the boat deck that the man had just mopped and left a trail of dirty footprints. He stopped himself midsentence and tried another tactic. “Look. I’m having a dream. I’m really sorry about ruining your mopping, but if it’s any consolation, I’m sure I’m going to wake up soon anyways. My name’s Cormac.”

He stuck out his hand for the stranger, who looked at him with an uncertain expression before eventually shaking it. “Ziro,” he replied.

“Nice to meet you, Ziro,” said Cormac. “Is this your ship?”

“No. I’m a slave.”

“A slave! Cool!” Cormac exclaimed. Ziro looked at him like he was the dumbest person he had ever encountered. “What I meant was, that’s terrible. Humanity has a long way to go. One summer I worked as a busboy. That was pretty crappy, too.”

Now Ziro was giving Cormac a look that he recognized. It was the same half-amused, half-horrified expression that professors would use after he was called on to talk about reading he hadn’t done, and the professors realized this was the case and wanted to see how much further he would embarrass himself.

“But I was only a busboy for a couple weeks before I got fired. I suppose if you do a crappy job you don’t get fired.”

“They would starve me if I did a bad job.”

“Right.”

“And what is a busboy?”

Cormac started to describe his summer job to Ziro. While he explained the duties of a busboy to the slave on the deck of a large boat, he wondered what twisted part of his subconscious was conjuring up such a simultaneously bizarre and mundane dream.

“So the main thing to remember was, if you volunteered to take the garbage out to the dumpster, you’d have two or three minutes to sift through it for leftovers before anyone noticed you were missing,” finished Cormac.

“That job sounds terrible,” replied Ziro, as he lowered his head and started to mop again.

Cormac followed behind him, determined to force his dream in a more interesting direction. “So what do you guys do on this boat? Are you pirates?”

“Of course we’re not pirates. The *Levyathan* is a whaling boat.”

Cormac was taken aback. “Whaling? Like hunting whales? I didn’t know people did that anymore.”

Ziro didn’t take his eyes off the ship’s deck. “You’re probably thinking of the scare a few years ago when people thought that blubber was making whalers go mad. It turned out that was just syphilis. A very popular and very filthy prostitute nearly shut our whole industry down.”

Cormac mentally reversed his previous stance on sea wenches. The ravages of dream syphilis were not something he had any desire to experience. “I hadn’t heard about that,” he said. “But I thought killing whales was wrong? Aren’t they endangered?”

“I don’t know what that word means,” Ziro responded, not looking up from his mopping.

This poor slave has lived such a sheltered life, Cormac thought. Perhaps his mission in this dream was enlightening this uneducated rube. Maybe doing so would unlock something that his subconscious had hidden away. Like he had been a “slave” to routine, and the “whales” were actually his unrealized potential. He wasn’t sure exactly how this dream stuff worked; he’d been pretty stoned the time he watched *Inception*.

“Endangered means there aren’t many of an animal left. We’ve got a list of endangered species that people aren’t allowed to hunt or eat anymore.” Cormac assumed what he considered a fairly important-sounding tone. “I know you and your fellow whalers may think you can hunt these animals forever, but the truth is, there aren’t many of them left.”

Right as Cormac finished his sentence, a giant whale leapt out of the ocean and crashed back down into the water about three hundred feet in front of the boat.

Cormac continued, undeterred. “Indiscriminate whaling has decimated the once-thriving population of these noble animals.”

On the starboard side of the boat a pod of five or six happy whales surfaced to shoot water out of their blow holes.

“Ziro, it’s important to preserve these creatures, because when an animal goes extinct . . . they’re gone forever,” he lectured as two female whales on the port side simultaneously gave birth, one of them to twins.

Cormac abandoned his ecology lesson and bitterly surveyed the sudden activity in the frothing ocean. “Or maybe hauling one or two of them out every so often wouldn’t hurt anybody,” he conceded.

Ziro didn’t hear him. He was already on his way to alert the captain.

* * *

Ziro didn’t know what to make of the strange new passenger on the boat. Even though he wasn’t formally filled in on many of the matters that transpired aboard the *Levyathan*, Ziro was aware of just about everything that was going on. Swabbing the decks let a man observe things on the ship he wouldn’t normally be allowed near. Due to the undignified circumstances of his joining the *Levyathan*, most of the men took Ziro for an idiot and freely discussed sensitive matters while he was within earshot. He overheard important stuff like rumors of other ships’ record hauls and which men were scheming to go AWOL the next time the *Levyathan* docked. He

was also privy to a wide variety of trivialities: who was planning on getting a new tattoo or which of the men had bet each other a week's worth of salt pork to see who could go the longest without changing their underwear. One time, he was able to piece together that one of the other men had called out in his sleep for Ziro to save him. From then on, he was always sure to swab the other side of the deck when that guy was around.

But Ziro couldn't recall any mention of new crew members joining up. Plus, the *Levyathan* hadn't docked in weeks. This Cormac fellow couldn't have been out of sight the whole time. And why the hell did he keep talking about how he was dreaming? The whole thing struck Ziro as an ominous portent. More importantly, it increased the odds of something happening that he would get blamed for. But then again, Ziro hadn't seen so many whales in months. Maybe this combined with the meteor shower meant something special really was afoot.

But it didn't matter what Ziro thought, it mattered what Captain Anson thought. Ziro reached out and knocked three times. The door swung open almost immediately. The captain grimaced when he saw Ziro.

"Dammit, Ziro!" barked the captain. "I don't like seeing you before I eat!"

"I'm sorry, Captain," Ziro responded. "I didn't want to disturb you, it's just that—"

Captain Anson cut him off by thrusting some papers toward him. "No time for that. Take these plans—I want to see a prototype for this whale harness system by the end of breakfast."

"Sir, if you didn't want to see me until after breakfast, how were you going to ask me to construct the prototype that you want done by the end of breakfast?" Ziro asked.

The captain's eyes narrowed. "You think you're pretty clever, huh Ziro? Make it *two* prototypes by the end of breakfast."

"Sir, I think by very definition, there can be only one prototype at a time. The Greek root *proto* means first, it would be more accurate to refer to the second version as a—"

“Dammit, Ziro!” the captain shouted. “Give me those designs back!”

Ziro handed the captain back his papers, not without noting that in each of the crude drawings, the whales were all smiling. Captain Anson crumpled the papers into a ball and threw it in Ziro’s face.

“Now swab that up!” sputtered the captain.

“Sir, I can pick it up and dispose of it, the mop isn’t really needed.”

“You’re really pushing your luck, Ziro,” Captain Anson growled.

“Can I put it in your wastebasket?” Ziro asked, slightly crouching to pick up the wadded papers. “It’s closer than the main garbage can.”

“It’s full. Full of paper. Full of ideas, Ziro, big ideas. Been doing a lot of thinking. You’ve got to be ready when inspiration hits.” The captain looked proud.

“Sir, I empty your basket every night and last night the only thing in it was a banana peel, and I can see it right now and it’s still empty.”

Captain Anson glared at Ziro.

“Can I toss it in?” Ziro asked. “I’m pretty sure I could make it from here.”

“Give me that!” shouted the captain, grabbing the wadded-up ball from Ziro. “I won’t have you throwing garbage all over the captain’s quarters!”

Anson tossed the ball toward the wastebasket, coming up short by nearly three feet. He shot Ziro a look, then walked to pick it up. He threw it at the wastebasket again, falling short a second time. He finally picked it up from the floor and dropped into the empty basket. He turned around and stared at Ziro.

“Why are you still here?” he bellowed.

“Sir, I actually have some news that you may want to hear.”

“Well let’s hear it, dammit. I’m very busy!”

“It’s the whales, sir. There seem to be a lot of them very close by.”

“Whales!” shouted the captain as he strode through the doorway onto the ship’s deck. Outside, he pulled his spyglass off of his belt and peered through it. “How many did you see?” he demanded as he scanned the horizon.

“There had to have been at least ten.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” barked Captain Anson. Ziro watched him sweep the spyglass back and forth while the spray from the whales frolicking a mere twenty feet from the boat continuously stung his face. Eventually the captain lowered the spyglass. “It’s just as I thought,” he announced grimly. “Whales.”

The captain launched into one of his trademark whale-based tirades. Ziro had learned to tune him out as soon as his language grew theatrical and he began spouting spittle-flecked invectives that contained phrases like “foul hellbeasts of the sea” or “cruel Poseidon’s abominations.” Usually these rants reached a climax with the captain scaling the crow’s nest to shake his fist at the “detestable living embodiments of the tyranny of the seven seas” and informing them that he would “pluck them from the briny deep by the tines of Neptune’s own triton.” Ziro thought the more effective course of action would be to provide level-headed leadership to the often confused and directionless whalers, but the captain preferred to stick with his own methods.

Knowing that once Captain Anson got ramped up about the whales it would be difficult to get a word in, Ziro cut him off as soon as he could. “Captain, if I may . . . Shouldn’t we wake the rest of the crew up? Get the whales while the getting is good, so to speak?”

The Captain had been ready to hurl his wastebasket overboard in whale-provoked frustration, but Ziro’s words brought him back down to earth. He dropped the receptacle to the deck and looked at Ziro. “You’re right,” he panted, already winded. “There’s not a moment to lose.”

With that, Captain Anson strode off toward the bow of the ship. Ziro realized he hadn’t had a chance to tell him about the other bit of news, the strange stowaway aboard the *Levyathan*. “Captain!” he called after him. Captain Anson turned and stared at him, his hand twitching impatiently as it gripped his spyglass.

Ziro hesitated. “Good luck,” he shouted. Anson would find out on his own soon enough.

* * *

Rousting the rest of the crew out of their sleeping quarters proved difficult, as always. A crew of a dozen whalers was a dismal thing to deal with under any circumstances. If the dozen whalers had crippling hangovers, no scrimshaw to carve, *and* you were attempting to get them to do more of the same backbreaking manual labor that they hadn’t been compensated for in weeks, the encounter could prove deadly.

Fortunately, Ziro had a weapon at his disposal: his ukulele. Or rather, the latest in a string of ukuleles that had suffered gruesome fates at the hands of irritated whalers. Ziro didn’t take it personally. He knew that scorn was to be expected when you played the ukulele in public. Once, while busking in the French Quarter, he had asked a nun who was passing by if she had a request. She asked him if he knew “fuck you and that pussy guitar” without missing a bead on her rosary. Believing that Ziro had insulted the nun, a street performer on stilts ambled over and smashed the ukulele against one of the Quarter’s trademark wrought iron balconies. When the stilt walker guys started disrespecting you, it confirmed your place at the rock bottom of the busking totem pole.

As the broken ukuleles started stacking up, Ziro became quite handy at fashioning them out of found objects. Old cans, cigar boxes, even a wooden shoe that a Dutch sailor had hurled at his head. Even in its dilapidated state, the *Levyathan* had an abundance of raw materials he had learned to mold into ukuleles. Ziro had created this latest model out of an old tin of tobacco and some fishing wire before he went to bed last night. He knew it wouldn’t last long once the whalers discovered it, but he hadn’t thought it would be put to the test this quickly. Suffice to say, the burly crew members of the *Levyathan* were not fans of his music.

Ziro flung the door open and instantly remembered that every day he vowed to remember to hold his breath the next time. There

was nothing in the world quite like the smell of the whalers' quarters. Almost daily in New Orleans, Ziro had experienced depravity, vice, and the smells that resulted from the twisted mixture of both of them. But this was on an entirely different level. It smelled like sweaty beards and diseased mules. Half of a rotting fish lay on the ground near the door. Ziro turned and looked at the endless expanse of ocean not twenty feet past the door. Never mind what half of an uncooked fish was doing in the whalers' quarters to begin with, even the most scurvy-ridden of the men would have easily been able to throw it overboard without leaving the room. Instead, it lay there, making its own valued contribution to the horrifying potpourri.

Ziro wasn't sure how the stench of the quarters wasn't incentive enough to wake up at a reasonable hour, but the whalers seemed to be used to it. Even the bright rays of the early morning sun couldn't elicit a reaction other than louder snoring. Getting the men up to reap the ocean's bounty was all up to him. Reluctantly, he fingered a cord on the ukulele. As the strings vibrated ever so slightly, Ziro could have sworn that he saw the closest whaler stir in his sleep.

Ziro began to strum the ukulele. The only song he ever played anymore was a sea shanty he had written called "Treasures o' the Sea." It was long and bawdy, and had never been successfully performed in its entirety. The whalers hated the song, and as soon as the familiar melody drifted toward them, their eyes popped open, almost in unison. Groans and angry curses emerged from the cabin as Ziro began to sing from where he'd left off the last time.

*On Christmas day I gave my wife some brand new underwear,
"Put these on and prance around for me my lady fair!"
She opened the box and then my wife she turned and ran and hid,
"That's not some underwear," she screamed, "It's just a giant squid."*

*"It works as both," I told my bride, "Just let me demonstrate."
"You tie the tentacles like this, a basic figure eight."*

*Just then my neighbor popped on by, it gave him quite a shock
To see his friend a-standin' with a squid around his—*

OHHHHHH

*You can keep your diamonds, and you can keep your gold,
My wife don't care for any of them, those treasures leave her cold.
She might get them from other men, but won't get them from me,
The only gifts I give my wife are treasures o' the sea.*

On New Year's Eve I gave my wife—

At this point in the shanty, a grumpy whaler seized the tiny ukulele from Ziro's hands and bashed it against the cabin doorframe. The strings snapped instantly and the tobacco tin was dented beyond recognition. The bleary-eyed man tossed the remains of the ukulele over his shoulder and lumbered past Ziro. His fellow whalers followed close behind, grunting their approval at their colleague's action. Ziro was surprised he'd made it through the chorus.

"Go get 'em, guys," offered Ziro. "Lots of whales out there, lots of chances for a big score."

Upon hearing this encouragement, the last whaler to leave the cabin turned and stared at Ziro. Wobbling slightly, he walked back toward the cabin entrance, where he stomped up and down on the former ukulele. When it had been flattened to a thin strip of tin, he picked it up, walked to the edge of the ship, and dropped it into the ocean. He looked back at Ziro, spit over the side while maintaining eye contact, and walked to the bow of the ship to start his day. The half fish still lay less than a foot from where he'd been stomping.

* * *

Before Cormac really knew what happened, he went from being the only man on the bow of the ship to ducking thrown coils of rope and avoiding sweaty whalers. The hungover crew of

the *Levyathan* seemed surprisingly adept at springing into action. Whether any of that action would effectively capture any whales had yet to be determined. After two of the whalers hoisted sails pointed in different directions and the entire shipped creaked as the wind threatened to tear it apart, Cormac noted that leadership appeared to be lacking aboard the whaling vessel.

A man whom he presumed to be the captain (based on the fact that he had a spyglass and wasn't doing any work), seemed to be out of touch with the rest of the whalers. He had been the first person to emerge after Ziro abandoned him, and Cormac had attempted to introduce himself. But it was as if the captain hadn't even seen him. He just walked past him with a wild look in his eye, assumed a dramatic stance near the bow, and starting shouting things at the whales. Cormac thought he looked similar to George Washington crossing the Delaware in that famous painting. It was a good look. Powerful. Not that anybody seemed to be paying him any attention.

Cormac figured it couldn't hurt to pick this guy's brain. He navigated the maze of busy whalers and stood next to the captain. Cormac eyed the man and attempted to imitate his stance: one leg forward and slightly bent, left hand on hip. It felt incredibly unnatural. Cormac tried to address the captain.

"Hi! I Cormac. Whales . . . out there today. Ocean?" Dammit! It was impossible to talk when you were standing like this. All your concentration went into the posing. Cormac relaxed and assumed a more natural posture, but he quickly realized that the captain hadn't even noticed him.

"Harpoons shall pierce their flabby hides and the full force of the heavens will tear them asunder!" the captain was shouting.

Cormac attempted to engage him again. "You must be the captain," he said. "My name's Cormac. I'm having a really weird dream."

The captain laughed, but the crazed nature of it let Cormac know it wasn't at him, but rather at the whales that continued to swim all around the boat. As the captain raised his spyglass to his eye to survey the sea, Cormac thought about the last thing he'd said.

It was by far the weirdest dream he'd ever had. Not just the content of it, which was growing stranger by the minute, but the dream as a whole, which just *felt* different. He couldn't put his finger on why, but standing on a whaling ship in the middle of the ocean felt more real than any other dream he'd ever had. Plus, he'd also remained in the dream once he realized he was dreaming. That never happened to him. Usually he'd realize he was dreaming just as two cheerleaders were about to do something to him that could result in prison time for all three of them. But when he was aboard a smelly whaling boat and realized it was all in his head, then the dream kept on going just fine.

I should get someone to pinch me, Cormac thought to himself. Obviously, the captain was in his own world. The closest whaler to Cormac was a muscular fellow who was sizing up a breaching whale with his harpoon gun. Cormac sidled over to him, and was about to tap him on the shoulder when the whaler pulled the trigger. Unfortunately, the man was still half-asleep, and had somehow managed to load the harpoon in backwards. This caused the gun to fly overboard and gently glance off the frolicking whale while the confused and angry whaler was left holding a harpoon in his hands. Cormac thought better of asking this guy to pinch him.

Wandering through the rest of the activity on the *Levyathan*, Cormac was amused and astounded at the level of ineptitude he saw. Whalers heaved when they should have hoed. The man at the helm was using a sextant to stir an early morning cup of rum. Fistfights broke out over the right to harpoon a whale within point-blank distance, only to have the whale dive and emerge on the other side of the boat, causing another fight to break out over there. It became quite clear that even though they were in the center of a gigantic cluster of carefree whales, there was a solid chance that the *Levyathan* might not land a single one.

In the midst of all the chaos, Cormac found Ziro, calmly swabbing a quiet corner of the deck.

"It doesn't look like they're going to catch anything," remarked Cormac.

Ziro looked up at him. He paused for a second before responding. “That wouldn’t surprise me. It’s been quite a while since they’ve hauled one in.”

“Do they ever let you take a shot with a harpoon?” Cormac asked.

“No. That doesn’t really fall under a slave’s duties. The closest I ever get is sharpening them.”

“That’s great,” Cormac said dismissively. “Hey would you mind pinching me?” He stuck out his arm. Ziro looked at him, then looked around to see if he was being set up.

“It might wake me up,” Cormac offered. “From my dream.”

Ziro was torn. The last thing he wanted to do was pinch someone. But if there was a chance it could get this guy to disappear, he was all for it. Reluctantly he stuck his hand out, closed his eyes, and pinched Cormac’s arm.

“Dammit, Ziro!” an irritated voice bellowed. Ziro’s eyes popped open. Cormac spun around to see that the captain had left his perch at the bow and was now standing five feet behind them.

Cormac looked down at his arm. The spot Ziro had pinched was red with indentations from his fingernails. He suddenly realized that it had really hurt. But he was still here on the ship, and now the captain looked pissed.

“Did you sharpen these harpoons?” shrieked the captain.

“Of course I did,” stammered Ziro. “I sharpen them every night.”

“Well they can’t be *that* sharp! Because one of the men just shot another man with a harpoon and it just bounced off his chest!”

“Is that a bad thing?” Ziro asked. “Are you upset that it didn’t impale him?”

“Don’t get smart with me, Ziro!” snapped the captain. “I’m starting to think that the reason we’re not catching any whales on this ship is because you’re not keeping the equipment in shape. Look me in the eye and tell me you sharpened this harpoon last night!”

Cormac felt obliged to intervene. “That’s not a harpoon. That’s a loaf of bread.”

The captain looked down at the long baguette he held in his outstretched hand, not comprehending. Cormac let him stand there for a second, then took it from him.

“Yeah it’s definitely bread,” Cormac said. He tried to take a bite of the end of it, but it was well beyond stale. “Jeez! This thing is rock hard! The guy who got shot is lucky he didn’t bruise a rib.”

Cormac banged the loaf against the port-side railing. “How did he load this into the harpoon gun?”

“That particular harpoon gun is now quite broken,” explained the captain as the baguette eventually shattered. Half the loaf fell into the sea where an eager whale gulped it down and swam off merrily.

“Vile scavengers! The vultures of the sea! Dine on carrion while you can, you miserable behemoths, for the day of reckoning shall—” The captain abandoned his ravings as quickly as he had lapsed into them. He turned from the sea and stared directly at Cormac. For the first time on the ship, Cormac felt slightly uneasy.

“Ziro!” shouted the captain, not breaking eye contact with Cormac. “Who the hell is this?”

“That is Cormac, sir,” replied Ziro. “He says he’s dreaming.”

“Dreaming? That some sort of stowaway talk? You stowaways think you’re so big, with your fancy slang terms and stowaway code.” Cormac wasn’t sure what the stowaway code was, but he didn’t care for the captain’s tone, which was quickly ramping back up toward crazy again. He appeared to dislike stowaways almost as much as he did whales. “Life’s just one big pleasure cruise for you stowaways. Hiding in cargo hulls and eating free hardtack as you get sailed from port to port without doing a lick of work!”

“Captain . . . Er, sir . . . I’m not a stowaway. As a matter of fact I’ve never been on a boat before.” Wake up, Cormac, wake up! he thought to himself. A hungover morning with Vance was quickly becoming his more desired reality.

“Where’d you come aboard? Charleston? Up Canada way during that nor’easter? I know what the word is on the stowaway circuit. They’re saying my ship’s cursed, that I’ve taken desperate measures to turn things around. That one clear June night in a Louisiana port I found a crazy voodoo priestess who took me out to the bayou and told me the only way to restore my ship’s honor was to let three swamp pirates have their way with me, first the tall one, then the short one, and finally the Haitian.”

That was an awfully specific rumor, thought Cormac.

“Well, you stowaways can trade tales all you want on the rest of the circuit. But when you come aboard my ship, you’re at my mercy.”

That didn’t sound good. Cormac nervously looked around for any signs of the Haitian.

“You two!” shouted the captain. Two whalers who had given up on the day’s catch and were now passing a jug of rum shot him surly glances. Cormac noticed that Ziro had quickly grown concerned.

“It appears we have a stowaway. As your captain I order you to seize him.”

“Captain,” Ziro tried to interject. “Is this really necessary?”

“Shut up, Ziro, this doesn’t involve you in any capacity,” the captain snapped, before pausing dramatically. “We’ll make him walk the plank. Ziro, go set up the plank.”

* * *

Cormac noted that the same whalers who had been unable to pull off the whaling equivalent of shooting fish in a barrel had proved quite nimble at organizing a plank walking. They had grouped into rudimentary seating rows and one of them appeared to be selling concessions of some sort. Looking closer, it became apparent that it was just rum, which seemed redundant as most of the whalers were either clutching or being passed a jug of rum. Still, Cormac noted at least two sales while his wrists were being bound.

Ziro had been assigned that lowly task. In fact, he was the only one who was really doing any work at all. The two men who had

seized him had stood by menacingly for a while, but eventually wandered back to their fellow whalers. The captain was striding around, waving his spyglass and shouting about “the fate that will befall any vagrant who is caught stowing away on this courageous vessel!” In the water all around the boat, the whales were more active than ever, but nobody seemed to care anymore. A plank walking was evidently quite a big deal.

“I’m sorry to see this end this way, Ziro,” said Cormac. “You seem like a nice guy. I hope in my next dream you get dealt a better hand than slave.”

“Cormac,” Ziro replied in a low voice. “I’m not sure who you are, where you came from, or why you keep saying that you’re dreaming. But because I feel sorry for you, I purposely bound your wrists very loosely.”

“That’s very kind of you, Ziro.”

“It should delay your drowning by about three minutes,” the slave informed him.

“Why does a whaling ship even have a plank in the first place?” demanded Cormac, but the time had come. Ziro pretended to give the knots a final pull and then stepped back. He gave Cormac one last bewildered nod, then retreated to the back of the crowd. The captain issued a few final grand pronouncements, then made his way toward Cormac. The rowdy whalers quickly settled down.

Cormac was very frustrated. Dreams were not supposed to be this crappy. He seethed as he imagined the restful night’s sleep Vance was getting. Vance . . . Vance didn’t even have a bedframe, he just threw his mattress on the floor! Cormac had mocked him for this once, but Vance had deftly countered by asking him what purpose, exactly, a bed frame served. Cormac had been stymied. When he got out of bed the next afternoon, Vance made a big show out of how easily he could reach over and grab his shoes from the floor while he was still in bed. Cormac had never considered being unable to reach his shoes from bed to be too much of a burden, but once Vance had gotten it under his skin, their inaccessibility was all he could think about for a week.

There was no time to get worked up about that again, though. As drawn-out and strange as this dream had been, Cormac was fairly certain that it was all going to end once he took the plunge from the plank. You always woke up when you were falling in a dream. It was a reassuring thought, and as Cormac accepted that he'd be back in his bed in a couple of minutes, he realized he hadn't really seized the opportunity he'd been presented with. Here he was, having an entirely lucid dream, in a completely foreign setting, and he'd just gone about it like it was a normal day. He essentially had a get out of jail free card. Nothing he did here actually mattered. If there was anything he'd been eager to try in real life but feared the consequences of, now was the time to do it.

The captain took a final few steps toward Cormac and turned to speak to the crew. "My friends," he began. "We've been through quite a bit together. We've seen the glory of the Southern Cross on a clear night, and witnessed the majesty of the northern lights. We've also traversed the treacherous Bermuda Triangle, and heard the distant moan of sea monsters we feared would destroy us. Throughout it all, one thing has become certain: we are a tightly knit band of brothers here on the *Levyathan*."

A jug of rum whizzed through the air, narrowly missing the captain's head and exploding when it hit the railing.

"Dammit, who threw that?" Captain Anson shouted. "You miserable sons of whores aren't fit to crew a rowboat! I'd trade the lot of you for a dozen Chinese the first chance I—" The captain stopped midsentence and regained his composure. "As I was saying, we're a tightly knit group here, and the one thing we cannot abide is outsiders. Intruders. Stowaways." With this last word he turned and leered at Cormac, who rolled his eyes and hoped that on the off chance that Vance had woken up before him, he wasn't picking the marshmallows out of the Lucky Charms.

"Do you have any last words before you go to see Davy Jones?" the captain asked Cormac.

Cormac was surprised. He hadn't expected to be given a platform. Unfortunately, he didn't think it was the type of crowd

who'd appreciate being kept waiting while he hemmed and hawed trying to come up with something profound. Luckily, just then, he had a flash of inspiration. May as well leave dreamland with a bang, he thought.

"I have only one thing to say," Cormac intoned solemnly. He paused and looked at the crew and the captain. A big smile broke out onto his face right before he yelled out "can openerrrrrrr!" As Cormac shouted his final words, he turned to run toward the plank, already envisioning the titanic splash he was going to make. Within two steps he completely lost his balance due to his bound wrists, and on the third he hit a wet patch of the deck that caused him to skid and spin around 180 degrees. Cormac tried to keep running as he slid, but now he was trying to go in the opposite direction his momentum was carrying him. It was like he'd jumped onto a treadmill that was already running at top speed. His strides got longer and longer until he was essentially running in place on the wet deck. With his hands still tied behind his back and shrieking a noise that sounded like "BLAGARRRRRRGH," he was quite a sight.

The whole debacle lasted about ten seconds before his legs slipped out from under him and he crashed to the deck on his stomach. There was a brief window of silence where Cormac thought there was a chance that nobody had seen him. Then he realized the silence had happened because he'd hit the left side of his head on the deck and blacked out. As he regained consciousness, it became quite clear that the crew of the *Levyathan* had just witnessed the funniest thing any of them had ever seen in their lives.

The gathered whalers had erupted into hysterics. The men were doubled over, wheezing with laughter, pounding each other on the back. The already-prodigious rum consumption had somehow managed to triple, as whalers tilted back jugs to guzzle in between fits of giggles. Two blurry faces leaned into Cormac's field of vision.

"Dammit, Ziro . . . Dammit . . . Damn . . ." The captain sounded irritated, but had trouble getting more than two words out without snorting. As Cormac's eyes gradually focused, he saw tears of laughter streaming down the captain's face. Ziro looked slightly

more concerned, and Cormac wondered if the wetness from the constant deck swabbing had been partially responsible for his spill.

“Are you OK?” Ziro asked him.

The captain didn’t wait for a response. “Oh man,” he chuckled, “That was spectacular. I haven’t laughed that hard since Ziro thought that narwal was a mermaid.”

“Can you remember your name?” asked Ziro, as he helped Cormac roll over onto his side.

“You guys remember when Ziro tried to have sex with that narwal?” the captain yelled to the crew, who roared even louder with laughter.

“I’m Cormac,” groaned Cormac.

“And do you know where you are?” asked Ziro.

“No I don’t know where I am!” shouted Cormac. “I went to sleep in my bed, and when I woke up I was on a godforsaken ship in the middle of the ocean! There’re whales jumping around out there, slaves swabbing decks, I’ve got my wrists tied, and I probably just got a concussion, which is not something that should be happening to you in a dream!”

“Whoa, whoa, easy there,” said the captain. “Let’s not bring down the mood.”

“Go to hell!” snapped Cormac. His head hurt, his clothes were wet, his wrists were bound, and he wanted off the damn boat.

“Now there’s no need for that kind of tone.” The captain sounded hurt.

“Can you stand?” asked Ziro.

“I think so,” said Cormac. “I’ll probably need a hand though.”

Ziro reached out to grab Cormac’s arm, but the captain smacked his hand away. “That will do just fine, Ziro, we don’t need any more incidents today. You two!” he yelled at no two whalers in particular. “Get over here and help the stowaway to his feet!”

Two whalers who had failed to pretend not to hear the captain eventually stumbled over to where Cormac was sprawled and hoisted him to his feet. Standing made him feel lightheaded, and he leaned on one of the whalers for support. The captain stood and addressed everybody again.

“Well, I guess we were lucky enough to have a little pre-show entertainment. It’s too bad; in better circumstances, this stowaway might have made a fine sea clown, cavorting for our entertainment. Unfortunately, our policy is what it is, and I’m afraid you’re still going to have to walk the plank.” The captain paused for some obligatory hooting from the crew. Once it died down, he quipped, “Maybe take it a bit slower this time, though.” He then began to mimic Cormac’s tumble, taking long, exaggerated strides and sputtering like an idiot.

Cormac was furious. As the captain milked the laughs from the crew a bit longer, Cormac looked over at the whaler who was supporting him. His harpoon gun hung from his belt on the same side that Cormac was leaning on. Cormac looked back at the captain and, for a split second, he saw Vance in the captain’s outfit, running in place and making a stupid face. He closed his eyes and shook his head and the vision disappeared. But by then he’d already made up his mind.

He wriggled his hands behind his back and, true to Ziro’s word, the bindings easily slipped off. Quickly, Cormac grabbed the harpoon gun from the whaler’s belt and took a couple steps away from him.

“Hey, captain!” he shouted. The captain paused his impression and turned to look at Cormac. His face fell when he noticed the harpoon gun pointed directly at him. Nobody moved. After a few seconds, people started to look confused. Cormac realized that coming up with a clever quip on the spot was not that easy when you’d just suffered head trauma. He fidgeted with the trigger of the harpoon gun.

“Um . . . I may be the one walking the plank . . . but *you’re* the one who’s going to drop the anchor . . . in the crow’s nest . . . the next time the ship full of tea comes into the harbor . . .”

“What?” asked the captain.

Just then a huge whale breached right off the side of the ship. It let out a tremendous roar as it leapt out of the water, and a startled Cormac pulled the trigger before he could finish his meandering quip.

The captain flinched as the harpoon shot out of the gun. At less than ten feet away, it should have easily pierced his skull, but out of all the poorly maintained equipment on the *Levyathan*, the harpoon gun Cormac had seized was quite possibly the shoddiest. The shaft was bent and the tension was set far too high. As the stock of the gun splintered into a dozen pieces, the harpoon shot out at nearly a ninety-degree angle. It sailed over the side of the ship where it struck the breaching whale directly in the blowhole, killing it instantly. The dead whale fell back to the surface with a gigantic splash, soaking all who had gathered to observe the plank walking.

Cormac looked down at his hands, which held what was left of the harpoon gun. He glanced over at the captain, then quickly tossed the remains overboard. May as well dispose of the evidence, he figured. They landed directly in the center of the floating corpse of the enormous dead whale that everyone was already staring at. Dammit.

Cormac had never tried to murder someone before, so he wasn't sure what the proper etiquette was if the attempt failed. Was it "forgive and forget"? Or maybe "laugh it off over beers, then bash their head in while they're accepting your apology and telling you how they had always liked you"? It was probably one or the other. Cormac looked around and tried to spot a couple of beers.

The captain was making his way toward Cormac through the crowd of dripping sailors. His soaking face was blank. Cormac instinctively clenched his fists and hoped he wouldn't have to punch anybody. He glanced over at Ziro, who shrugged and took two steps backwards. As the captain approached him, Cormac felt his entire body tense up, but he quickly realized the captain was staring past him. Cormac stepped out of the way as the captain made his way to the side of the boat, where he stared at the dead whale.

In a low but determined tone, he spoke.

"If the sea's stomach be o'ercharg'd with gold," the captain intoned solemnly. "'Tis a good constraint of fortune it belches upon us."

Cormac felt like his attempt on the captain's life was being ignored. He was kind of irritated about that, but immediately decided to try to capitalize on it with some well-timed ass kissing.

"That's a beautiful verse, sir," he offered.

"Thank you, Cormac," the captain said, using his name for the first time. "I guess I just . . . Well, I guess I just felt inspired."

"Shakespeare," chimed in Ziro. "It's a line from *Pericles*. I made him flash cards."

The captain slowly raised his eyes from the whale and turned in Ziro's direction. They looked at each other for a few seconds before Ziro broke the silence.

"I'll go get my mop."

* * *

The remaining hours in the day all blurred together for Cormac. As easy as killing the whale had been, hauling it onto the boat and butchering it proved to be a colossal ordeal. The whalers were out of practice and their equipment was either misplaced or in disrepair. One of the whalers had been using the main hauling harness as a blanket and was reluctant to give it up. The stains on the harness looked too fresh to have been caused by a whale, and Cormac felt slightly seasick for the first time all day.

The process of hauling the whale out of the sea and onto the *Levyathan* reminded Cormac of a carnival game. Specifically, one of those carnival games that was rigged so that you could never, ever win it. Sure, in theory there was a great big prize just sitting there for the taking. But everyone who saw you trying knew you were a sucker for attempting to win it. And you were drunk. And your partners, who presumably had the same goal as you, would occasionally drop what they were doing and fight you.

All it was missing was an annoying kid pestering his dad to keep trying, just one more time, because he really, really wanted the prize. The captain filled this role ably. He had been giddy as a kid on Christmas from the moment they started hauling the whale

aboard. He skipped around the deck, barking orders to whalers who weren't listening and peeking through his spyglass at the mammoth creature. Every so often he'd rush over to a side of the ship and shout at the rest of the whales that this was just the beginning of what he had planned for them, and that they should fear the sight of the *Levyathan*, which represented grim death rolling toward them on every white-capped wave.

Once the men had finally pulled the beast out of the ocean, they began the even messier process of slicing it up. Cormac had never seen a chicken being butchered, let alone a giant whale, but even he could identify some inefficiencies in the crew's process. For example, one whaler took a machete and climbed into the whale's mouth. He hacked away for about twenty minutes and finally emerged dragging the whale's tongue behind him. Quickly, he walked to the side of the boat and pushed the tongue into the ocean. Satisfied, he downed half a jug of rum and leaned up against one of the masts for a nap.

The rest of the men were slicing off huge chunks of blubber and stacking them like gym mats. Rather than cut off reasonably sized pieces, the men insisted on trying to carve off as large a piece as possible in a macho display of their whaling prowess. This meant that instead of a nice, speedy process of blubber stacking, there were multiple times when a whaler would slice off a chunk that he had no possible way of manipulating on his own, not realize this until it was too late, and have the blubber topple over on top of him, pinning him beneath it. The whalers found this uproarious every time it happened, even though it looked to Cormac like some of them were temporarily losing consciousness down there.

The captain though, was delighted with the crew's progress. At one point in time he demanded Ziro bring him the whale's heart so he could messily devour it to intimidate the remaining whales that he presumed were listening to him just below the surface of the water. Ziro and four other whalers attempted to push the heart over to the captain, but it was substantially bigger than any of them and all the blood made it difficult to get a firm grip on it. Eventually

the captain clumsily ascended the heart with a boost from Ziro, and rather than eat it, sort of just stomped on it while he shouted for a while, eventually slipping off and landing on the deck with a thud.

By the time it got dark, the whale carcass had been rendered unrecognizable and hauled off to the ship's cold storage area. The satisfied whalers were covered with blood, guts, and rum. Having helped themselves to the newfound abundance of bones, they were happily carving scrimshaw.

The captain appeared to have yelled himself out, and was wandering between the busy men, complementing their work like a proud grade-school teacher. "Ooh, look at the scary shark on that one! Well, how about that, what a nice detailed map you've carved! Huh, is that . . . is that *me*, screaming in terror while the giant squid drags me below the surface? Hey, what's that tentacle doing!?"

Cormac walked over to the final patch of deck Ziro had left to swab. Cormac was exhausted after the eventful day, but Ziro, who was the only one on board who'd actually been working non-stop, showed no signs of tiring. This time, Cormac was careful to avoid walking in the recently swabbed area. Ziro stopped mopping as Cormac approached.

"Hey Ziro," he said. "Still swabbing the decks, huh?"

Ziro involuntarily glanced over at a spare mop leaning against his shack that had gone unused all day long. "Yes, Cormac," he sighed. "Still swabbing. How are you?"

"Well, the captain seems to have forgotten that he wanted me to walk the plank. I suppose that's a step in the right direction."

They both glanced over at the captain, who was tugging on a piece of scrimshaw, attempting to wrest it away from a whaler who had carved a picture of himself engaging in sexual relations with a mermaid who strongly resembled the captain. Cormac wasn't sure who it made look worse.

"You really were trying to kill him, weren't you?" asked Ziro.

"Well, yeah. I mean, not *really*, really. But sure, as much as you can in a dream, right?"

"A dream, right. This is all a dream." Ziro dropped his voice into a serious tone. "Have you ever killed a man before, Cormac?"

Cormac looked around to see if Ziro was setting him up.

"It's OK," Ziro reassured him. "You can trust me. Have you?"

"Er . . . Yes?" Cormac lied.

"Really?" Ziro grinned. "What happened?"

Ziro had put Cormac on the spot. His mind raced.

"I . . . I shot a guy."

"You shot him?" Ziro was skeptical.

"Yes. I shot him. Um, with a harpoon gun. Yeah, he was this mean captain."

What the hell was that, Cormac? he thought to himself. Stupid, stupid!

"Are you sure you're not just thinking of what happened a few hours ago? But with the harpoon actually hitting the captain?"

"Maybe . . ."

"Cormac, had you ever even *seen* a harpoon until today?"

That was it. Cormac's frustration boiled over. "No I hadn't seen a harpoon until today! I'd never been on a boat until today! And then I wake up on board some rundown whaling ship, where the only person who doesn't want to drown me is the slave, and I attempted a murder, and shot a whale, and I don't know what the hell's going on!"

"OK, OK," said Ziro. "Don't get too worked up. We're going to find out what's going on and get you where you want to be." Ziro resisted the urge to add, "Or perhaps eat you if the going gets rough." The last thought got Ziro thinking. "You must be hungry. Have you eaten at all today, Cormac?"

"Yeah, one of the whalers gave me some salt pork."

"Salt pork, eh? What'd you think of that?"

"It was terrible."

"Yeah," said Ziro. "It's the worst."

"It *sounds* good," said Cormac. "I mean, I like salt. I like pork. I usually put salt on my pork. How'd they screw that up?"

"I know what you mean, I know what you mean." Ziro chuckled. Then he quickly turned serious again. "But seriously, we often go for

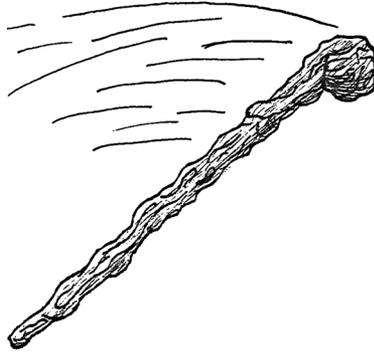
months where we don't eat anything else, so you probably ought to get used to it." He picked up his mop again and resumed swabbing. Cormac realized their conversation was over.

Not sure what else to do with his night, Cormac wandered to the bow of the *Levyathan*. The sky was clear and he could see more stars than he had ever seen in his life. Suddenly, he felt very alone. A sound carried over the calm ocean, a drawn out, mournful cry. Cormac wondered if it might be the mate of the whale he'd killed that morning.

"I'm sorry!" he yelled at the blackness of the night. "I didn't mean to do it! I'm so sorry!" He was scared, tired, and hungry, and wanted more than anything than to close his eyes and wake up in his bed. The cry persisted and Cormac found himself fighting back tears. That was when he realized that the sound wasn't coming from the ocean in front of him, but from the deck of the boat behind him.

A drunken whaler had whacked another whaler in the crotch with a sizeable whale bone. The unfortunate recipient was lying on the ground emitting a low groan, while holding himself and trying to catch his breath. It appeared that he had vomited. The other whalers were cackling with joy and passing jugs of rum.

Cormac took one last look at the beautiful night sky and went to find an empty bunk to lie down in.



DAY THREE

A loud crash woke Cormac. His eyes popped open. He quickly scanned the room. Hendrix poster on the wall. Beer bottle on the bedside table. Better yet, *existence of* bedside table. He sat up and silently rejoiced as his hopes were confirmed. He was definitely in his own bed in his own room. Cormac sighed and lay back down, about as relieved as he'd ever been in his life.

It wasn't that he doubted that he'd wake up back home. It was just that as his dream aboard the *Levyathan* had dragged on and on, he had begun to grow uncertain that he would wake up at all. But here he was. He could pull the blankets up tight, rest his head on his cool pillow, and . . . Dammit! Another crash? What the hell was going on out there?

"Vance!" Cormac shouted. "What the hell is going on out there?"

There was a quick sound of something being hastily pushed across the floor and then Vance's footsteps made their way down the

hall. He appeared in the doorway, not wearing a shirt. Thankfully a pair of jeans covered his lower body instead of Cormac's towel.

"Holy shit," said Vance. "He lives."

Cormac reached over for his phone and hit the lock button. The display said it was 10:40.

"What do you mean 'He lives'? It's only 10:40, what are you doing up? What are you doing in general? It sounded like the floor was going to cave in."

"Well, for your information *your majesty*, I am doing a little bit of home improvement."

A chill ran down Cormac's spine.

"Though if you're not interested in stadium seating couches," Vance continued, "I can put away my hammer right now. Jeez, I thought you'd be a little less cranky after thirty hours of sleep."

Everything that Vance had just said confused Cormac.

"What are you talking about?" he asked, as he pushed off his covers and spun around to dangle his legs off the bed. He looked over at his shoes, just out of arm's reach. Vance noticed too, and was smirking at Cormac the whole time he got up to retrieve them and sat back down to put them on.

"Stadium seating couches," Vance explained. "Just like at the movies, but with our couches. Going to put one up on blocks behind the other so when we watch TV, we can—"

Cormac cut him off. "I didn't mean the couches, Vance! You said I slept for thirty hours!"

"Well, yeah," replied Vance. He seemed confused. "You slept through the entire day yesterday."

"What?" Cormac was floored.

"I didn't know you'd had that much to drink, buddy! Probably shouldn't have driven home!" Vance headed down the hall back toward the living room. "Ol' Mac Van Winkle, ha!"

Cormac hit the lock button on his phone again. Band practice had been on a Tuesday. His phone screen said that it was currently Thursday. Cormac's head was spinning as he jumped out of bed and dashed over to his desk. Actually, it was more like it was throbbing,

specifically on the side of his head that had hit the deck when he'd slipped on the *Levyathan*. He reached up and rubbed it as he waited for his laptop to wake up. It felt like there could be a small goose egg beneath his hair, but no, that was impossible.

The computer clock confirmed that it was indeed Thursday. He'd slept through all of Wednesday.

"Vance!" he shouted as he got up from his desk chair. He stepped over the check for Vance's share of the electric bill and hurried out the door and down the hallway.

When he got to the living room, Cormac came face to face with the full madness of Vance's home improvement project. The couch was about a couch-length back from where it normally sat. Vance had raised it off the ground about four feet, precariously balancing it on cinder blocks, old newspapers, an overturned laundry bin, and Vance's desktop computer tower. Vance was attempting to climb onto the couch by stepping on a plastic tub of pretzels and gripping an extension cord that had been stapled to the ceiling. Several empty beer bottles were scattered around the project site.

"Just . . . gimme . . . a sec here, Mac," Vance said through gritted teeth, focusing all his concentration on trying to keep his balance. Cormac tensed instinctively, fearing a titanic crash, but couldn't look away. The couch wobbled as Vance managed to raise a knee onto it, then pulled himself up using the extension cord and swung around so that he was sitting down. An electronic whirring noise came from the computer tower, which Cormac realized was still running. Vance let go of the extension cord and looked very pleased with himself.

"Pretty sweet, huh?" he asked.

"It's ridiculous," said Cormac. "We don't even have a second couch! It's not stadium seating, it's just a couch up in the air!"

"I took care of the hard part first, Mac! You can always get a second couch. People just leave them on their porches when they're done using them. This is going to revolutionize things!"

A gentle breeze blew in through one of the living room's open windows, causing the entire structure to wobble uncontrollably.

Vance looked terrified for the few seconds it lasted. “We should probably keep that window closed from now on,” he said once it had stopped.

“Look, terrific, I don’t care.” Cormac cut to the chase. “What the hell happened yesterday?”

“You were out, Mac! I couldn’t wake you up! Shook you by the shoulders and everything. You were just zonked.”

“Jesus . . .” muttered Cormac.

“I know,” said Vance. “It was kind of wild. I’m glad you’re up though, I think after like forty hours of sleep you’re legally in a coma or something.”

“Well I’m glad you were concerned enough to put our couch up on cinder blocks,” snapped Cormac.

“Whoa, whoa! What are you so upset about? You missed some class, big deal! I didn’t go yesterday either. Actually, I probably won’t go today either—I think once you’re up here, you’re here for a while.”

This failed to reassure Cormac.

“Look, Vance,” he said. “I just had a really weird . . . dream.”

“Do you have any pulleys, Mac? I’m thinking they’re the answer to how you get beers up here.”

“No I don’t have any pulleys! Why in God’s name would I have pulleys!? I’ve never needed a pulley in my life!”

“That’s because you don’t think big, Mac.”

“Listen to me, Vance! I don’t think I was asleep yesterday. This is going to sound really weird but . . . I think I had an out-of-body experience or something.”

Vance pondered this as he adjusted himself to a lying-down position, a process that required intense concentration and precise movements. Cormac knew that what he had just said sounded crazy; in fact, he still didn’t entirely believe it himself. He didn’t expect Vance to answer right away, let alone believe him, but after nearly a minute had passed, it became apparent that his roommate had just fallen asleep.

“Dammit, Vance!” Cormac shouted. Vance woke up with a start, causing the whole couch structure to shake violently beneath him. Vance flailed his arms trying to get a grip on something stable. The only thing within his reach was the extension cord, which he reached out for, but it was too late. The couch toppled over with a gigantic crash, and Vance was left grasping the extension cord, which supported his weight for about two seconds before it too crashed to the ground.

Vance groaned. “Five minutes. I think that’s a new record.”

* * *

Frampton Q. Bickerstaff paced in his office, preparing to face the board. He had a feeling this meeting wasn’t going to be pretty. Encounters with the board rarely were. As dean of Harrington State, Bickerstaff was constantly butting heads with the board. The differences were mainly philosophical. Whereas the board pushed for a multi-tiered approach to education involving student/faculty relations, alumni involvement, and maintaining their national reputation, Frampton Q. Bickerstaff took a multi-tiered approach toward keeping his goddamn cushy job at any cost.

Dean Bickerstaff looked at his watch. The meeting was supposed to have started fifteen minutes ago. Perfect. He was right on time as far as he was concerned. Keep them waiting, the dean figured, make them think your time is more valuable than theirs. This was made sort of difficult by the glass wall of his office that looked directly out into the meeting room where the board was gathered. He knew the board members were staring at him as he paced—he’d accidentally made brief eye contact with several of them already. They’d pointed at their watches and tried to wave him over. Dean Bickerstaff had responded by pretending to be on the phone and making the “roll your window down” gesture that drivers give to one another. This had confused them. Good. One of the board members actually had the nerve to come over and knock on the glass of his office to try to get his attention, a move that Frampton deftly deflected by kicking over his garbage can so he could kneel down on the floor and put the contents back in it.

No doubt about it, Dean Frampton Q. Bickerstaff would address the board when he was damn ready to do so. And that wasn't going to be the case until he'd lit up one of his pride and joys, a big fat *Romeo y Julieta* Cuban cigar. He pulled one out of the humidor and took a long whiff, making sure to turn just enough so the board could see him through the glass. He had started smoking them to try to distract people from the fact that he was a quite un-deanlike five feet tall with shoes on. In reality, the huge cigar and constant cloud of smoke only called further attention to how strange the balding little man looked as he reigned over the Harrington campus. "Like a troll whose mom got knocked up by a chimney," one student wrote in his final editorial in the *Harrington School Paper* shortly before disappearing.

Dean Bickerstaff lit up the stogie and took an enthusiastic puff. He'd been the dean at Harrington for twenty-two years. His performance in each of those years had been adequate enough to allow him to return for another one. Along the way he'd become firmly entrenched in the university, establishing a web of bureaucracy and inefficiency that assured it would be a costly, difficult ordeal should the board ever decide to replace him. In case this wasn't enough, he'd attempted to assemble healthy blackmail files on all of the board members and most of the faculty. Where he couldn't find any actual wrongdoing, he'd planted evidence and committed entrapment. Keeping his job had become Frampton's top priority. Everything else, including actually *doing* his job, was a secondary concern.

The phone on Dean Bickerstaff's desk rang. He glanced over at it instinctively. Instantly, he realized he'd fallen into the board's trap. Those bastards were crafty. He looked out at the meeting room where they were assembled and sure enough, one of them was on his cell phone, looking at the dean and appearing mighty pleased with himself. Well, two could play at this game, the dean thought to himself. He walked over and picked up the phone.

"Dean Frampton Q. Bickerstaff," he said with a noble air.

"Yes, Frampton, we've been waiting for twenty minutes now," replied the irritated voice on the other end of the line.

“I’m sorry, who might I be speaking to?” Frampton said, looking the man who’d just finished speaking directly in the eye.

The board member sighed. “Look, if we could just—” but Frampton cut him off before he had a chance to win his sympathy.

“I’m sorry,” the dean said through the cigar that was clenched in his teeth. “I’ve got an incredibly important meeting with the board starting any minute now.” He spoke in his most patronizing tone as he reached over to pick up his beloved oak shillelagh, which was resting against his desk. “I’ll have to transfer you over to my secretary.”

The aggrieved board member started to protest, but before he had a chance, Dean Bickerstaff slammed the phone down. Without hesitation, he raised the shillelagh up over his head and slammed the knobby end of it down, shattering the phone into pieces. He smashed the shillelagh into the broken phone several more times, making sure to look out at the stunned board members while he delivered the final few blows.

When he was finished, the dean swept the pieces of the phone off the desk with his shillelagh. They landed in a pile of other assorted objects that had been reduced to debris by means of shillelagh beating. Finding himself surprisingly winded after the exertion of repeatedly lifting the cudgel, which was nearly the same height as him, he paused for a few seconds to catch his breath. When his panting had died down, Dean Bickerstaff looked out at the board with steel-eyed determination. “Sheila,” he quipped to an empty room as he took a puff on the cigar. “Hold all my calls.”

The dean was ready to address the board.

Gripping the shillelagh that had been in the Bickerstaff family for generations in one hand and holding his cigar in the other, Dean Bickerstaff walked out his office door, across the narrow hallway of the faculty building, and into the meeting room where the Harrington State board of directors was gathered. The board had five members, three men and two women, and Frampton held all of them in differing levels of contempt, ranging from “sputtering” to “outright.” In his opinion, a board, with all its voting

and discussion, was no way to run a school. As far as Frampton was concerned, only the iron fist of an all-powerful dean could get any results. Never mind that the board had been established as a direct response to the myriad abuses of all-powerful Dean Frampton Q. Bickerstaff.

Frampton had become dean after a brief stint heading the Commerce School at Harrington. He'd taken the job hoping to shape future titans of business, who would one day fondly reminisce from their opulent penthouse apartments about the dean who had given them their start, and then would give him a bunch of money or something. He hadn't really planned out many of the details, but he knew that all it took was one student from one class to be wildly successful, and he'd be ready and willing to ride their coattails.

Sadly, he had overestimated the quality of the students who he would be supervising. It turned out that Harrington's Commerce School had a bit of a reputation as a "*party* commerce school," which was not a concept that Bickerstaff was aware existed. Students enrolled in it looking for a good time, not an eventual job with a Fortune 500 company. This baffled Bickerstaff, as the Commerce School degree required an extra fifth year of study and had a substantially higher tuition than the regular undergraduate program. Nevertheless, the hard-partying Comm School students continued to shuffle into class late, reeking of last night's booze, at least when they even made it to class at all.

Not only this, but the role of dean was evidently not as important in the day-to-day lives of the students as movies had led Frampton to believe. Hungover students interacted with professors and grad student TAs every day. But the average student had no reason to ever encounter the dean, who was in charge of higher-level issues for the school such as hiring faculty and appearing at fund raisers. This frustrated Bickerstaff, who quickly realized it would be difficult to take advantage of successful former students if none of them knew who the hell he was. He decided to undertake a major image-enhancement campaign, which mainly involved hanging out in front of the Comm School building and trying to chat up

students who were too nauseous to make it into class. After a few weeks of making his presence felt, an article ran in the *School Paper* demanding that school security do something about the “gross little creep” who was “harassing Comm School students and is almost certainly a sex offender.” “Alleged pervert actually dean, we guess,” read the correction published months later on page C-17.

Commerce School Dean Bickerstaff was thus forced to rethink his long-term career path. The Comm School was a lost cause. Its reputation was a bright scarlet letter to any student of actual promise, and its presence on his résumé wasn’t going to do him any favors either. Bickerstaff knew he’d have to make his own luck, and by luck he meant “fraudulently successful results.” So the dean began an extensive campaign of cooking the books, adjusting test scores, threatening professors so they wouldn’t fail students who had passed out while taking their final exam. The written-off status of the Comm School meant that he was able to operate without the interference of anyone who might question his unethical and at many times illegal tactics. When Bickerstaff’s first year on the job ended and the numbers had soared in every single category, he was the new darling of the Harrington State faculty. With the impending retirement of the university’s beloved but ancient dean, he was fast-tracked to replace him. He’d taken over after one more year at the Comm School and now he never intended to leave.

Unfortunately, the only opposition to this plan now sat directly in front of him. Frampton shot the room a big grin, not bothering to take his cigar out of his mouth. He twirled his shillelagh as he took his seat at the head of the table and tried to think what trap the board might be trying to ensnare him in today. Hush-money payments were up to date and all faculty complaints had been suppressed. A shipping container of dead zoo animals that one of Harrington’s shell corporations was responsible for had been intercepted that morning by customs officers in Seattle, but Bickerstaff had been assured by his contacts that it was being handled and could not be traced back to him. Puffing his cigar, he eagerly awaited countering whatever his adversaries had to throw at him.

A man at the far end of the table spoke first. “Thank you for joining us, Dean Bickerstaff. We’re sorry for the impromptu nature of this meeting, but we just needed to—”

The dean interrupted him. “Did you leave a message?” The board looked confused. “With Sheila?”

It eventually occurred to the man what the dean was talking about. “Do you mean just now, sir?”

How thick were these idiots? the dean thought to himself. “Yes, just now.”

“That must have been what he was saying when we saw him talking to himself after he broke the phone,” said a man sitting next to the first man.

The first man started to catch on. “Sir, if you made some sort of quip about leaving a message with your secretary, we had no way of hearing it in here! You had just broken the phone into pieces and these glass walls are very thick, so I’m afraid that—”

“I’m sorry, I don’t recall your name,” Frampton said apologetically.

“It’s George,” the man said. “For God’s sake, Frampton, we’ve worked together for over a decade. I invited you to my daughter’s wedding last year!”

“Of course!” Dean Bickerstaff said warmly. He knew it was George. “George. The wedding was such a lovely affair.”

“You didn’t come!”

“Why, that doesn’t sound like me!” The dean did his best to sound hurt.

“You said you were undergoing treatment for esophageal cancer!”

“Well, I trust she got my present?”

“You never sent a present!” George shrieked. Clearly he was bearing some sort of grudge. “*We* sent *you* a present, because we thought you had cancer!”

“Well clearly you were misinformed,” said the dean, as he took increasingly aggressive puffs of his cigar while he waited for George to drop the subject. Eventually another board member spoke up.

“Dean Bickerstaff,” said one of the female board members, the one who had not been serving as long as the other. Frampton truthfully didn’t know her name, but he did know that he had her husband in his pocket. After months of being bugged about it, the poor man had done a coworker a favor and accompanied him on a midnight mission to poach clams from a nearby wildlife preserve. Little did he know that the coworker was a plant in the employ of Dean Frampton Q. Bickerstaff. When they arrived at the preserve with shovels and gunny sacks, men posing as federal agents “gunned down” the coworker with blanks and were prepared to do the same to the sobbing husband when who should appear but the dean. Frampton explained to the man how much trouble he was in, but he also reassured him that he was a man who was able to make his problems disappear. All the husband would owe him was a few small favors. The devastated man quickly agreed, an event that was framed on either end by two distinct pants-soiling incidents.

Since then, his wife the board member had demonstrated an alarming tendency to not receive messages or emails alerting her to emergency board meetings regarding the dean’s actions. She couldn’t explain her absences, except when they were caused by flat tires, which happened surprisingly frequently. Since board by-laws required all members to vote in order for a motion to pass, many key proposals had to be scuttled. The dean would always express dismay that the board would yet again be unable to impeach him, but he would insist that as much as he’d like to, he was far too respectful of the school’s by-laws to tolerate any deviation. Then he’d slowly drive by the board member’s home and make a throat-slashing gesture to the petrified man as he looked out the window. He loved being dean.

The woman continued. “We need to talk to you today about the *College Review* quarterly rankings. The new issue is coming out in just a few weeks.”

Ah, the *College Review*, thought the dean. Bane of the existence of any higher education administrator, the magazine was the definitive resource for ranking colleges. High school students and

their parents pored over it when deciding where to apply. The magazine rated every accredited college in the country on a rubric of dozens of factors. So established was the power of the *Review's* rankings that alumni donations and applications could sway dramatically based on moving up or down just a spot or two.

“As you know,” droned the woman, “the board takes these independent rankings very seriously. They’re one of the only concrete ways we have of evaluating your performance, and the performance of our entire university.”

Frampton wasn't hearing anything new. He gestured with his cigar for her to pick up the pace. The board member waved some smoke away from her face and continued.

“Now, per your original employment contract with the university, falling in any of the *College Review* rankings is sufficient grounds for your dismissal.”

Frampton tried to look serious, but the effort of suppressing his smile was too difficult. He let a broad grin creep across his face as he made himself comfortable in his chair. He knew what was coming next.

“But,” sighed the board member, “due to renegotiations that have taken place throughout your tenure, we are now no longer allowed to exercise our right of dismissal for performance in the following categories: Job placement. Class size. Faculty-to-student ratio. Number of classes taught by grad students.”

As the board member rattled off the list, Dean Bickerstaff thought back on his masterstroke of hardball negotiating. He had no choice but to agree to the *College Review* provision when he signed his initial contract. The school wouldn't budge on it and at the time he had no leverage. But as soon as he took office, Frampton began searching for ways to whittle away at the power the magazine's rankings held over him. Massaging the numbers for the whole university proved as easy as it had for the Comm School, but he couldn't risk losing his job over a five-point drop in something as trivial as the “percentage of students who graduate.”

“Extracurricular activities,” continued the board member. “Student volunteer opportunities. Alumni giving.”

Just when the dean had thought he was stymied, an opportunity had presented itself in the most unlikely of places. After several years on the job, he’d amassed a wide network of puppet regimes and informants throughout the school. Unfortunately, in the early days he didn’t have time to properly vet all of his underlings, and a few wild cards who had trouble taking directions caused some problems. When cars began exploding in the Classics Department parking lot, questions started getting asked, and the dean soon found his new autonomous reign being threatened before it had a chance to ever truly thrive. The solution demanded by the *School Paper* was the establishment of a board of directors that the dean would report to. Everyone had been stunned when Frampton quickly agreed to the new policy.

With just one little catch . . . The chagrined dean had appeared before the tribunal that was overseeing the board creation with his hat in his hands. How could he, the dean, assure the faculty that the car they had parked at the aquatic fitness center would not explode when he was forced to devote all his attention toward making sure Harrington’s *College Review* rankings weren’t dipping? Surely micromanaging the school’s ranking in “legacy admissions” was not as important as making sure another laughing-gas leak didn’t happen in the Econ Building, right? And dammit, if losing a point here and there in “handicapped accessibility” meant that he could avoid another incident like the plane carrying the Women’s Studies Department getting hijacked to Panama, he should by all means lose that point!

This confused the tribunal, and Frampton realized that this particular incident was actually not due to occur for five more hours. He excused himself to make a frantic phone call in Spanish to an airborne contact, and that embarrassment was avoided. The Women’s Studies Department could be dealt with later.

When the meeting eventually adjourned, Dean Bickerstaff had successfully convinced the tribunal to amend his employment

contract so that nine of the thirty-seven *College Review* rankings were no longer grounds for dismissal. And he was just getting started. As the years passed, whenever the newly established board had needed his cooperation, he'd negotiate another ranking off of the list. Before anybody knew what had happened, despite the terms of his original contract, the dean had eliminated every *College Review* ranking from the list of fireable offenses, one by one.

As the board member neared the end her list, Frampton was silently tallying them up in his head. Thirty-five, thirty-six, and finally, thirty-seven. She stopped reading and looked up at Dean Bickerstaff.

The dean yawned without removing the cigar from his mouth. This was the latest contemptuous gesture he'd been working on, and he pulled it off mightily.

"That was real nice, darling, I appreciate the refresher," Dean Bickerstaff chuckled. "But in the future, it might not be the best use of everyone's time to tell them what I can't be fired for. Right Gary? I'm sure you'd rather be planning your daughter's wedding, am I right?"

George bit his lip and fumed.

"Well Dean Bickerstaff," the woman said in a tone the dean didn't like one bit. "I was hoping we could focus not on what you *can't* be fired for, but more on what you *can* be fired for. Specifically the part I touched on earlier, the part that says 'Falling in any of the *College Review* rankings is sufficient grounds for your dismissal.'"

Why was she mentioning this again? Frampton didn't care for this roundabout manner of bringing up her original point. It was a rhetorical device he himself had used many times, usually before someone who had wronged him was about to be chloroformed.

After a second of uncertainty, the dean collected himself. "Well, yes, of course, but we've already established that none of those rankings can be used to—"

The smiles that had begun to creep onto the faces of the five board members made him stop in his tracks. What was about to happen?

“You can’t be fired for any of those thirty seven rankings, you’re quite right, Frampton. But the board has received advance notice from *College Review* that for the first time in over fifty years, they are introducing . . . a new ranking.”

Frampton sucked in too hard on his cigar and choked on a puff of smoke. He coughed so violently that his forward momentum caused his wheeled chair to push back from the table. Still sucking wind, Frampton tried to grab onto his shillelagh to steady himself, but he only succeeded in pushing the staff farther away. Reaching out to try to prevent it from falling, he found himself tipping forward out of the chair while it was still moving backward. The dean completely lost his balance at the same time the shillelagh did, and as his chair shot out from under him and he fell to the ground, the bottom of the oak staff clipped him on the chin.

Frampton lay on the ground, wheezing as he tried to catch his breath. He pawed around for his shillelagh and after several missteps that involved grabbing George’s foot and leg, he finally got a grip on the end of it. Pushing himself to his feet with the assistance of the shillelagh, he only now managed to draw a full breath. He unsteadily waddled over to his chair, which had only stopped rolling when it hit the wall. Pushing it back to his seat at the table, he leaned up against it and gasped for a few seconds more to make sure the room had stopped spinning, then crawled back into the chair.

The board looked about as amused as a group of unamused people could.

“A new ranking?” he asked, casually wiping away a string of drool that had nearly stretched down to his waist.

“Why yes, Frampton, a new ranking!” the board member said. It was her turn to be patronizing now. “The steadfastly traditional *College Review* has decided to get with the times and will now be ranking schools on a combination of ‘online buzz, social media presence, and assorted high-tech miscellany.’ They’re calling it the X-Factor.”

The X-Factor! Frampton was totally blindsided. “Well,” he sputtered. “I’m sure we’re pulling in great X-Factor numbers. After all, we’ve got a website.”

“We *had* a website, Frampton,” said George. “For the past three years it’s just shown a picture of you eating a sandwich. And our social media presence is laughable. The ‘HarringtonState’ twitter handle is owned by a German construction worker who only posts when he’s on the toilet.”

“At least we *hope* that’s when he’s posting,” interjected the newer woman. “The point is, *Dean*, she said with an audible sneer, “Harrington is going to debut at dead last in *College Review’s* X-Factor ranking. And if we don’t see some improvement in this ranking by the time the next issue comes out, we’re well within our rights to fire your ass.”

Frampton was floored, but he tried not to let it show. He extinguished his cigar on the table, stood up out of his chair, and gripped his shillelagh. The board had bested him with their broadside, but Dean Bickerstaff had a lot to throw back at them. He was happy to go without dignity, but he certainly wouldn’t go without a fight. He walked over to the door and swung it open, but stopped and turned to face the board before leaving the room.

“Who do I talk to,” Dean Frampton Q. Bickerstaff asked, “about getting a new phone?”

* * *

For the rest of his afternoon, Cormac had tried to explain to Vance that there was a decent chance he had spent the previous day aboard a whaling ship. He told him about almost walking the plank and trying to kill the captain and how he had been able to reach out and touch a whale that he himself had shot. Not surprisingly, Vance was not even close to sympathetic. It turned out that describing your out-of-body experience to someone was, for them, about as interesting as hearing you talk about your dream, only you sounded a lot crazier. The fact that Vance kept shooting longing glances at his incomplete stadium seating couch setup did not make the task any easier.

Cormac finally got him to stop by promising to help him buy or steal a second couch the next day. Vance's theory was that couches were more of a "weekday purchase" for most people, so that by waiting until the weekend, they'd catch sellers when they were desperate. The biggest-ticket item Cormac had ever seen Vance buy was a seventy-three pack of beer, which Cormac was fairly certain was a result of a massive assembly line malfunction and probably not fit for human consumption, so he didn't know where his roommate was getting this info about couch purchasing from.

Talking to each other about a matter of such importance was not the sort of thing either of the roommates were prepared to do without beer. Unfortunately, due to Vance's head start, they ran out before three o'clock in the afternoon. By this point in time, Cormac was feeling a bit stir-crazy, so he suggested they go to Mickey's, where Thursday was three-dollar pitcher day. Vance thought this was a great idea, but insisted that he needed to shower first. This made Cormac raise his eyebrow. Vance wasn't necessarily the showering type, and internally he questioned whether Vance just wanted a chance to strut around in his ill-gotten Seahawks towel.

But Cormac decided to take the high road. After all, turnabout was fair play, and he couldn't imagine a less pleasurable scenario than Vance starting to comment on *his* showering schedule. He sat on the front porch until Vance was done, then hopped in the shower himself. He'd forgotten that it had been two days since he'd last showered, and while that wasn't uncommon by any stretch, it felt really good to clean up. His skin had that tacky, gritty feel that comes from exposure to salt water, but Cormac tried to convince himself that it might just be caused by not getting out of bed all day. Yeah, maybe he was lucky and it was just some sort of horrible rash brought on by his filthy, unwashed bedding? Cormac briefly imagined a smiling, happy five-year-old version of himself being told that one day he would have that thought. This caused him to turn off the water and stand staring in silence at the shower wall for about five minutes.

After the shower, Cormac drove the two of them to Mickey's, the one bar in the college area that, as a matter of policy, did not care if you were twenty-one or not. Vance and Cormac had been coming here regularly since freshman orientation, but they rarely encountered many of their fellow students. Sure, Mickey's wasn't the friendliest place, and it definitely wasn't the cleanest place. But it had character! For example, Cormac had never seen a three-legged dog before he started coming to Mickey's, but by now he didn't even bat an eye when one of the several that hung around Mickey's limped over to his table. The bartender was a man with an eye patch who was sharpening an ax behind the bar, and the only other patrons in the place had the bleary-eyed look of hostages being forced to renounce their motherland on camera.

"Three-dollar pitchers! The best deal in town!" Vance crowed as they walked in the door.

They were ignored by the bartender for a long time until they realized they were just in his patch zone. Once they repositioned themselves where his good eye could see them, they quickly got served a pitcher and two glasses, then claimed one of the sticky vinyl booths that lined the walls. They made small talk for a while, trying to remember which classes they were enrolled in and where Uncle Jemima might get another gig. Anything to avoid rehashing Cormac's day aboard the *Levyathan* for the tenth time. It was only after they'd sucked down their first pitcher and Cormac sprung for a second one that Vance got a serious look in his eye, a look that Cormac instantly feared the repercussions of.

"Mac, buddy," Vance said while looking around to make sure nobody could hear him. "I've gotta ask you . . . Have you been doing any drugs that I don't know about?"

An eavesdropper might assume that a concerned roommate was attempting to start an intervention, but Cormac knew differently. Vance had asked him this question dozens of times before, when he wanted to do drugs and suspected that Cormac had some he wasn't telling him about. Sometimes, when Vance had already been doing drugs, he asked Cormac more than once in a night.

“No, Vance,” Cormac sighed. “I haven’t been doing any drugs without you.”

From the look on Vance’s face, he wasn’t entirely convinced. “You sure?” Vance asked, then looked around the bar again before leaning forward and confiding, “Because the time I did coke, I felt some pretty crazy stuff too.”

Jesus! Cormac nearly choked on his beer. Vance had done coke?! Vance was a lunatic when completely sober, who the hell thought it was a good idea to give him coke!

“Coke! Vance, when did you do cocaine?” Cormac sputtered.

“It was sophomore year, buddy. I would have offered you some but you were home for fall break. Besides, the guy who sold it to me ripped me off. It ended up being mostly borax or something.”

“Good God, Vance, you snorted a bunch of borax?”

“What? Snorted?” Vance scoffed with derision. “Psh, what is this the ’70s? No, no . . . Man that would have probably killed me, huh? No, I did the thing where you just roll up some foil then you heat the coke from underneath it and smoke that. It’s chill, you just put on some *Planet Earth*, pack up the alleged cocaine—”

“Freebasing, Vance!” Cormac shouted. “You’re talking about freebasing cocaine!”

“One, as I’ve explained to you, it wasn’t actually cocaine,” Vance lectured. “Two, what’s the big deal? People do it in movies all the time.”

“*Homeless* people do it in movies, Vance! Drug addicts in movies do it in apartments where babies die! Montages of a character’s descent into misery routinely end with someone freebasing as the haunting final image!”

“Anyways,” Vance said as he refilled his glass. “It made me feel like I was in a cartoon helicopter.”

“Well, I didn’t end up on the whaling ship because I freebased cocaine. Or borax, for that matter,” said Cormac.

“Well maybe it’s just all the subliminal messages I’ve been pumping through the house without you realizing it,” Vance chuckled. “Cormac, you’re on a booooooat!”

Cormac felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up. Vance couldn't actually do that, could he? He hoped to God Vance was drunk enough that he wouldn't remember that he'd had that idea.

Vance continued to ponder the matter. "Maybe you've got whales on your mind. Have you read anything about whales lately?"

"Vance, why would I be reading about whales?"

"I dunno, maybe you got assigned that book, what's it called, the famous one about the whale?"

"*Moby Dick*?"

"No, that's not the one I'm thinking of," Vance replied as he reached for the pitcher.

How the hell was Vance already refilling his glass again? "You asked me what the famous book about the whale is called and you're not thinking of *Moby Dick*?"

"Look, I don't know what the hell the whale book is called, Mac."

"Pretty sure it's *Moby Dick*. In fact the full title is *Moby Dick or, The Wha—*"

Vance pounded the table with his fist. "*Moby Dick* is about a lot more than a whale, Mac! It's about the limits of man's knowledge, the universal struggle between good and evil—at times Melville even delves into the nature, nay the very existence, of God himself! Now how about another pitcher?"

Cormac was floored. All he could do was nod.

Still bristling from his defense of the greatest American novel, a wobbly Vance stood up to get the pitcher refilled and immediately tripped on his own shoelace and collapsed to the ground. One of the three-legged dogs hobbled over and started licking the beer from the inside of the pitcher. Eventually a second dog wandered over and started to hump the first dog, who had moved on to licking Vance's cheek. It was an amazing display of dog agility, and one of the most hilarious things Cormac had ever seen. But after twenty seconds of Vance lying there motionless, Cormac thought that maybe it was time to go.

Vance was in and out of consciousness the entire ride home so his line of conversation tended not to be linear. At least he wasn't begging for Mexican food this time.

"When're we goin' to practish, Mac," Vance slurred.

"Band practice isn't until tomorrow, buddy, just relax," Cormac assured him.

"We're gonna rock it, I swear to God. An' we're gonna get another couch?" Vance asked as he fiddled with the left/right balance of the stereo.

"Vance, could you cut that out? Yes, we're gonna get a couch, it's gonna be stadium seating, whatever you want."

"Aw, you're the best, man. I can't believe you went sailing yesterday and didn't invite me," Vance said tenderly. Instantly this quiet wistfulness turned to rage. "I can sail, Mac! I've got a life preserver, dammit!"

"Ssh, ssh, I know you do, buddy. Here, play with the balance knob again, we're almost home."

As they pulled into the driveway, Cormac gave a little fist pump that they had made it home without incident. This was probably due to the fact that it was not yet 8:00 p.m., the sun was just starting to set, and most cops did not suspect that drivers currently on the road had had nearly a dozen beers already.

Cormac got out of the car and walked around to Vance's side. He opened the door and helped Vance to his feet. It wasn't a long distance to the door, but it took them longer than it should have. Once they got the door open, Cormac led Vance down the hall to his room, where he lowered his roommate into his floor bed fully clothed. Vance let out a loud snore, and Cormac saw the monogrammed initials of the Seahawks towel peek out from inside Vance's lumpy pillow case. That really seemed like an odd place to keep it. Cormac was nearly out the door when he heard Vance mutter, "Hey, Mac?"

Cormac turned and looked at Vance, who was still lying facedown in bed. "Yeah, Vance?" he replied.

"How did it feel when you shot that whale?" Vance asked.

Cormac thought it over for a second. “It was pretty cool,” he said as he flicked off the lights.

It seemed pretty early to go to bed, considering that the sun was up and he’d slept for the entire previous day, but Cormac figured a good night’s sleep could only help things. After all, they had a big Friday planned: songs to practice, couches to obtain, classes to avoid. Get some rest and start the weekend with a bang, that was his plan. Cormac lay down and tried to ignore the sun’s final rays shooting in through the window. His last thought before he drifted off to sleep was, it really *was* pretty damn cool, wasn’t it?

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