

His walls were softening over time into a gray pudding. Each board had its own unique pattern of grain. The driftwood was smooth and bleached like bone, and faded, with wavy patterns like water. The shipboard timber was rough and dark, toughened by the decay of the ocean's battering, with defined and purposeful lines.

Eric regarded these diverse undulations endlessly. His mind was like that of a condemned man's, starving for a pinch of the outside, doting on each crash of a leaf, each sigh of the dust. In the enduring quiet of the afternoons he storied the interlocking sworls and knots of the wood. There, what looked like a funny shaped dog, lop-eared: a swipe by a butcher had taken an indent out of him when he'd been scrounging for scraps at his back door. There, a pug-nosed cat kept by an old whore with beaded-holes hanging together like pearls in her stockings: her gentleman callers brought half a fish for the ugly cat and happily paid half fare for her. There, two pig-tail braids, their end-tips taut like fresh straw-bales harvested in a yard which used to be familiar to him: the place where the face should be was an empty blur in between.

The wind outside would whistle and wait for him those somnolent hours.

Ghosts came to haunt him. He shared his cell with old memories and half-remembered dreams. Faces began to push out of the wood. A black smear of dark eyes and greasy, strangled hair, resolved into the face of a mate of his from the *Slipper*. Garrety. Always Garrety first. Garrety was on his mind.

All around him other faces from the ship struggled to bleed through. They appeared like stars in the night, one at a time. Each shaped itself in its own leisure, an eye here, next a curve of

a chin, a budding of whiskers and a gap-toothed grin. But Garrety was always there, prominent among them.

There was a knife....

Of the men from the *Slipper*, some were more tolerable than others. None of them would he have called a friend, but one or two kept secret brains in their bunks and could sway the rest on a particular matter without any of them realizing. These men Eric met with a consistent wind and stayed out of their way, never letting on that he could see that all the strings in the room led to their beds.

To the rest he was their begrudging hero, their portside brawler and pride. His fists were their fun, their cohesion, and that was fine by him. It put their money into his pockets.

There was a knife in the darkness.

The syrupy half-light of the lamp at the far end of the bunks was unable to push far into the resisting black. The men swung silently in their hammocks. The cradles of the waves gently pat-patted at the sides of the hull. Eric was unsure of why'd he snapped awake. He peered into the gloom, still seeing dreams shifting about on the edges of his eyes. They wanted to return to him, would die without him. He felt uneasy and strangely alert, like an animal suddenly wary in its den, and did not call his dreams back.

He watched as a dark square traversed the length of the yellow lamplight reflecting on his metal belt buckle hanging above him. Somebody was moving in the darkness.

Eric looked to the man swinging in the bunk next to him, dark-haired Garrety, the young lout who begrudged his duty in the mess, skipped his time on watch. He was a black wind which moved among them....

His eyes were shut.

Other patterns on the far wall looked like old boats, blots of sailing ships on a rough gray sea sinking lengthwise down the wall. Sometimes he could coerce them out of the wood grain after they'd sunk, but they never seemed to last long as they couldn't hold his attention, and they were difficult to locate again.

A multitude of his former mates added their eyes to his wall, but never the only eye that he may have welcomed, the eye that belonged to old One-eyed Earl. Earl had been three-score and five, easy, when Eric had met him, a good man; Eric had always liked him, as did most of the crew on the *Slipper*. If one could count teeth as part of a face, then with all his missing teeth Earl had only half a face left to him. He had one-eye, tiny ears, gums like the toe of a rubber boot. His lack was more than made up for by the big potato of his pocked old man's nose which only grew bigger as Earl became thinner and more frail. It was hard to not like a man so gregarious and ugly.

Missing an eye was as natural as day and night. Every dock had at least one man who managed amicably without an arm or a leg. Every boat had at least one hand who was missing fingers, or toes, an eye, an ear, burned, crushed, nipped, blinded. The black patch that Earl wore seemed no stranger than a glove. And on calm nights, when the waters were down, the hallowed bottles hollowed, the men would remember Earl and flatter him as if he were the Pope himself. They wanted to see his lost eye, to see what that lack was like.

A sight to see, the men would say shamelessly, boasting proudly to any new mate especially, as if Earl's missing eye was a talisman they had a share in. *Like a fistful of wriggling worms. Yessir. A sight.*

Earl hadn't been born with only one porthole. He'd lost it to a careless hook many years ago on a dock in Australia; the jelly was gone but the guts remained. Usually, blissfully rum

carefree, Earl would oblige the men who asked to see it. *One more slug. One more. Sally on down.* He'd take a swig, *Make it two for good measure*, then he'd lift his patch and wiggle the unattached nerves in their socket; *Make it three swigs for good luck.* The men would laugh and cheer. It was hard not to like a talent like that. They were at sea a long time. Men like Earl were valuable. And the new men would get clapped on their backs and remember Earl for the next run, when new faces might be around their circle.

It was Earl's shadow that moved through the darkness.

A blink of light, a strobe in front of the lamp, an edgeless bulk was hovering.

The ocean took the stomachs from the men where they lay, heaving the boat up on a big blown belly of a wave, deflating after suddenly. Noisily, the floor slid away. The boat was in no danger of capsizing, but the swells were deep that evening, bloated by the passing of some adjacent storm. The old *Lady* was tired and protesting loudly. Her wizened boards wanted to give up finally and rest, each to their own place.

No man should have been keen to Earl's presence above this racket, yet somehow it was the infringement of this moving quiet that had alerted Eric to a danger. He brought one fist up from where it was resting and stowed it behind his head. He allowed his eyes to shut just gently then, and measured the depths of the moments passing by the lengths of his breathing.

The darkness of the room had grown vaster as the last of the loud snorers had quieted. Eric saw the squat black bulk of the roving shadow sharpen near his feet, rising up as if out of an elder gloom. Rather he felt the menace there more than he saw, an ill presence like a visiting specter. His nostrils, pressed close to the roll of his bicep where he had his arm stretched over his chin, were as wide as dimes, and oddly taut, as if they could smell the sharp edge of the metal in the dark.

Through the stink of forty men the shadow came on slowly. Eric closed his eyes and allowed his pillow to enfold around his ears as the last slit of light from the distant lamp flickered. He heard his heart beating faster in the rough cloth.

But the shadow hadn't come for him. It had passed and in its passing Eric realized why. Earl meant to pluck out Garrety's eye with his knife if Eric guessed rightly, and it was none of his concern.

Garrety didn't dote on Earl the way the other mates did. He prodded Earl about his eye as often as he could. He'd throw things for Earl to try to catch and laugh at him when he missed, laugh loud and long to make up for the lack of other men. He called Earl a Cyclops in the mess one day, and Fabian, the captain's boy, knew a Cyclops was a monster with one eye. How Garrety knew he wouldn't say; he braced his pointy teeth and barbed his laughter. It had made Earl's lack a shameful thing, setting him apart for his mates; had made him a shrunken man from a storybook, not even a man; a monster. Simple slights like that hurt the most, Eric knew. Laugh at a man cold and mean like that often enough and he was liable to crack open and come spilling out at you with a knife, and maybe not even know that he was doing it.

The shadow was close. Teeth in that shadow. A long time coming. And shining edges.

Eric accepted the darkness, knowing no threat to him bided in it, and he followed the wandering flashes in the back flaps of his eyelids, and understood that there were vast depths of black ocean beneath him; and knew that it was that darkness about which he had to worry, not the darkness above; only a thin membrane of wood held him safely atop the crushing monstrosity of dark below. Pondering on the one kind of dark reminded him of the other, the small, the vast. It was best not to do that and he tried to listen instead. Some men stayed atop that darkness better than others.

Not that Eric could ever condone stabbing a man in the night while he slept. It was cowardly. Cowardly to stab a man in the darkness.

There was a nearby creak of a board.

But in this case, he had to admit, however cowardly, and it was cowardly, no doubt about it... there might be something like justice in it.

He turned his back to Garrety so Earl could go about his business unheeded. His nostrils were ready for the copper whiff of blood. The squelch of the blade, he reckoned, would sound like a wet sponge being squeezed free of its foam.

Indigestibly, the old timbers groaned. Sea, air, and the workings of men's hands came together in a boorish crescendo. The hull brayed and popped like a boiler under heat. Thirty hammocks strained under the weight of many day's fatigue. It was in this din that Eric heard the coarse rustling of a canvas shirt, the burble of a rubber boot buckling.

Close to him, a grunt of exertion broke the false quiet. A blast of breath. It had happened, whatever had been waiting. But the expected cry of pain didn't come, and Eric opened his eyes again, opened them wide this time.

Garrety had a hold on Earl's hand with the knife, holding it to a point over their heads. Garrety's hand cupped Earl's the way a father might tenderly cup a son's; Earl's hand fit snugly inside Garrety's. Hairy Garrety with his long spider arms.

The blade was still there, turned around to face Earl, moving towards his face. Garrety laughed, and it was a sound full of fists and nails, a true, disgusting mirth. The rest of men sat up in their bunks to hear it. No need to stay low and pray now.

Earl was old. In the end he hardly struggled, and it was a detailed cut that got gouged into his forehead, a second eye: an iris, a lid, a lot of long lashes, some as far as his hairline. A real mess.

Nobody moved to stop the two men, pressed together close as dancers. The men turned away, embarrassed for Earl, embarrassed for each other. Earl had brought a knife into the bunk room, meaning to use it. They turned back to their bunks and their private darks, having seen too much, knowing the guilt for it because they had gotten what they had wanted.

“I did you a favor old man. Aren’t you gonna thank me? I’m asking you to thank me.”

Eric could have mistaken Earl’s voice for a boy’s. *“Thank you, Garrety.”*

Garrety’s eyes had been shut.

Eric regarded the black smear of the wood grains and he remembered how Garrety had looked down at him while he’d still been holding the knife in front of Earl’s nose. It was a strange twist that Garrety had had to his gaze. Eric saw the blame there. He couldn’t figure a reason, maybe only that he had turned away so Earl could go about his work. He couldn’t guess. Garrety wasn’t a whole man as Eric knew it. Earl was missing an eye; what Garrety was missing wasn’t so obvious.

For a moment he thought Garrety was going to flip Earl’s other eye out of his head as well and leave him only the new, unseeing third. But he only pushed Earl aside and climbed into his hammock, and Earl, on the floor, didn’t look around, didn’t try to attack Garrety again. Without a word he rose and left. And Eric felt Garrety watching him the rest of that night. His eyes were shut, but Garrety watched him.

His eyes had been shut.

Reassured by the cool, rough, pressure of his stone bed, Eric fingered, as he often did, the precarious buttons on his shirt. It felt good to feel the smoothness of them. The buttons were a man's thing, not rock, water, or wind. It was a human reminder, which he needed right then.

Garrety hadn't strung five words towards him after that night with Earl, which had been fine. Garrety was no friend, no help mate. Garrety held a black mark inside him for all men. But Garrety had been one of the men who had dragged him to see that German doctor those many weeks ago.

Eric stared to his walls and he understood. For Garrety there might have been a drunken lapse into decency, then a private chuckle weighed far the other way to atone for it, a few bills pressed into plump German fingers.

Eric rolled over onto his side to gaze at the floor. He didn't want to be seen and no faces would blink back at him from there. The cold of the ground had crept into his vertebrae and the palm leaves crackled as he turned. Changing position helped. It would be a while before he'd have to move again.

What a drudge. What a bore. What a dreary drink of days.

Perhaps there was sleep? How low had the sun got now?

He lay in the darkness and made noises with his mouth. "Bloop. Bloop."

The hours came and went that way and Eric knew everything about his broad prison except when he would be allowed to leave it. Outside, the bowl of rice that the boy had brought rotted where he had set it down.