

THE GRAY MIRROR

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Captain Jonah



Not so long ago in a city by the sea
There lived a retired merchant ship captain
Who had spent the greater part of his career
Sailing to distant and exotic ports of trade

After signing on as a cabin boy at 14
He quickly rose in the ranks to first mate
And then to captain at only 21
Not because he hailed from a wealthy family

Who owned a fleet of shipping vessels
But because he possessed a preternatural
Near genius aptitude for navigation
As well as mathematics and sway of men

Tragically, his promising career ended
Abruptly in his 13th year as captain
After a terrible accident on the deck
Spared his spine but left him with a limp

Alas, this was far from the worst of it
Since the accident had severed far more
For he no longer felt any connection
To the earth nor even his own body

As if dragging along two hollowed out logs
Or trying to inhabit a hollow corpse
Never quite inside or owner of it
Merely hovering around the perimeter

Walking on air but unable to breathe it
Touching the ground but unable to feel it
Observing life from his lofty heavens
As his earthly form occupied the space below

He oft felt like the fireplace in the parlor
A valuable and vital part of the household
Whilst stationary and immovable of itself
During his career he amassed a small fortune

Through his primage and cargo shares
As well as private trading of luxuries
Such as silk, tea, spices and porcelain
Combined with steady, lucrative incomes

From ship brokering and commodity trading
There was more than enough to keep
His large household of immediate family
And extended kin afloat indefinitely

As he observed his house full of strangers
Grow ever more distant and preoccupied
He wondered if it was his infirmity
Or had it always been thus?

He was weary of being an exposed
And vulnerable ghost haunting the halls
Alas, when he considered turning them out
His body froze and his feet turned to cement

His one true companion was Sirius
The former ship's cat who resided in his cabin
Now, aside from his daily roaming
He resided mainly in Jonah's study

Belly of the Beast

For a long time he dreamt of the accident
The sudden, violent squall out of nowhere
The screeching of ripping plates and popping bolts
As the hollow iron mast buckled and tore

Violently ripping into his muscle walls
And crunching his pelvic bones like sea biscuits
Four hours he lay pinned to the quarterdeck
The mast rolling with the ship's motion

Grinding into his pelvis with every swell
The crew used iron jacks and pulley systems
And mauls to hammer oak blocks and wedges
Every fraction of an inch, as the rolling ship

Caused the ropes to tighten or slacken
Too fast and the mast would roll and slice him
Too slow and he would bleed out
Finally, spikes and crowbars were used

To lever the gap and drag him free
In the midst of his agony something snapped
It was like a glowing golden hemp rope
An orange and red spinning wheel of flame

Suddenly shattering into cold jagged sparks
Before being sucked into a black void
As he watched the dead, gray embers
He felt an overwhelming sensation of drowning

He feared the deck was taking on water
Ere realizing it was his own body flooding
Into a shoreless, icy sea inside his own skin
A cold arctic blast seemed to extinguish

His passion, drive and connection to the earth
Abandoning him to a dark, bottomless vacuum
He lay in bed for several months in a state
Of near suffocation and loss of feeling

Particularly, in his body's lower half
His brain would command his legs to move
But they only obeyed as dead hollow tools
Condemning him to a life of strictly fixed

Habitual routines practiced from memory
As his form enclosed upon him like a coffin
His restless, unquiet spirit had no choice
Save to expand ever more up and outwards

Like a vast, open web scanning for every
Hidden threat and tension in the air
Alas, his own perimeter was left unmanned
Open to any passing whim and assault

Powerless to steer the ship through or away
Like a disembodied floating head and heart
Or a half ghost tethered to the wheel
He was no longer governed by will and drive

But haunted by the constant dread of being
Sucked into the vortex of his lower body
Leaving little energy for anything save
A stunted and purely mechanical existence

He was a ghost ship floating aimlessly
On celestial seas of abstract thoughts and ideas
Ingesting the addictive opium of dreams
To feed the endless trauma of estrangement

When what he really required was an anchor
To keep from drifting further out to sea
In a safe port where he might recuperate
Long enough to learn to walk the earth again

A Quiet Desperation

Nine years passed in quiet eventfulness
At least, according to the outside world
Where Jonah no longer fully resided
For practical purposes he was deemed fit

Or at least, as fit as he could hope for
Within the confines of medical treatment
According to the family physician's diagnosis
His deranged nerves could be traced

To lingering shock, pain and terror
Manifesting as a deep seated melancholia
His only means to reconcile his torment
Was to don a mask of unyielding reticence

Whether tending to his various investments
Or participating in the odd family function
He was obliged to use his dynamic will
To exert a rigid control over his environment

Thus, he managed to conduct business affairs
And household responsibilities flawlessly
Though in every other way he moved
Neither backwards nor forwards

His former life of adventure being reduced
To a series of strict and predictable routines
He occasionally perused his collection
Of rare books and ancient manuscripts

Whilst he found some reasonable advice
In certain Eastern esoteric philosophies
Strongly advising descent from the heavens
And venturing courageously into the abyss

He would consider it momentarily
Ere ascending back into the clouds
Unable or unwilling to confront the black hole
Such was his aura of quiet competence

Not many would have guessed it concealed
A soul drowning in daily, relentless turmoil
Staring into a void was exhausting business
And he was nearing the end of his tether

One evening when Sirius failed to return
At his usual hour for supper
Jonah donned his overcoat, grabbed his cane
And left the house to search for him

Cast Adrift

The pier was a brief walking distance
And now and again the cat ended up there
Attracted by the ever present odor of fish
Upon arriving he called out for Sirius

Who unlike many if not most felines
Actually responded to his master's call
He walked onto the pier and looked around
Then wistfully gazed out to the sea

Endeavoring to catch some small glimpse
Of a life so utterly lost to him
Finding no sign of Sirius, he turned to go
When he heard muffled sounds nearby

Leaning over the railing at the far end
A woman stared intently into the water
Her incoherent talking and whispering
Was interrupted by gasping, choking sobs

Even in the dim and dusky moonlight
Jonah's wide and wandering vision
Could easily make out her pale face
Wearing an expression of unspeakable grief

Another surprising change since his accident
Was his vision and perception of the world
Like a mariner looking through a heavy fog
He navigated people by reading the hidden

Textures, weights and shadows left in the air
Sharp, jagged edges of the angry and restless
The murky, oily fog of the deceptive
Or heavy granite blocks of most townspeople

He saw the present moment like a flat
Hollow and distant ghostly mirage
To see his hands or street was like looking
Through the wrong end of a telescope

Or watching a stage from the back row
Whilst his vast, sprawling inner dreams
And abstract thoughts felt near and real
Strangely, distance was separate from detail

Appearing in piercing, brittle sharpness
Every shift or microscopic movement
Flashed against his eyes like raw copper wires
He was standing motionless in place

When the woman suddenly looked up
'Are you a constable?' she demanded
If so, I have every right to be here'
'Certainly not Madame,' he replied stiffly

'Do I resemble a constable to you?'
'You might be a trapper out of uniform'
Suddenly, her expression softened
'Perhaps you really are an angel then?'

Captain Jonah was at a loss for words
Unlike the harsh static of the town
Or the oily fog of predators
Her fluid and magnetic gravity

Looked and felt like calm, gentle currents
So much the more startling to see his own
Slate gray shadow clinging to the outer edges
Of her violet, pink and ocean blue field

He knew the color intimately as the texture
Of the freezing, dead void in his lower gut
Seeing his internal torment wearing her form
Shocked him, but also offered a deep

Haunting sense of familiarity
As if she were a fragment of his shattered soul
He was still struggling to find words
When she climbed atop the railing and dropped

An Anchor

It was an awkward and ill planned attempt
Fortunately, the water was quite shallow
They visited a nearby public house and sat
Close to the potbellied stove in the middle

To thaw out and hasten the drying
Of her respectable if slightly frayed serge suite
Over a shared meal and hot toddies
Cordelia's spirits seemed to thaw out as well

She explained she had moved to the city
To live with her aunt and uncle
After the influenza took both her parents
A good three hours later they parted

He offered to walk her to the trolley shelter
But she insisted he not trouble himself
Thereafter, they met in public places
Such as the boardwalk or the trolley park

A local bookshop or nearby coffee house
He promised to let her pay her own way
Once she found work and got ahead of her debts
Indeed, the future looked quite promising

Since there was always need of a bookkeeper
As for Jonah, from the moment he waded in
To pull her out of the frigid ocean
And her field closed the distance enough

For her soft violet, pink, ocean blue
And waist down emerald green ripples
To overlap his frantic, sparking radar
It allowed the buzzing, painful sharpness

Behind his eyes to slow down at last
And the glass wall which separated him to soften
Granting overwhelming waves of relief
Like a battered ship gliding into a safe port

A Sad Situation

The last month had been his first spark of hope
And his only relief from private exile
Since the day of the tragic accident
Making him all the more solicitous of it

From the jagged, murky and heavy
And their probing, prying questions and opinions
For now, there was a temporary reprieve
As his family spent the season in Europe

Then early one morning he had a dream
Of being on the quarter deck during a storm
Only this time he was dragged overboard
As he struggled in the blue, gray churning water

He saw a soft, luminous violet light
And Cordelia swimming madly toward him
Suddenly, the light shattered into gray shards
As he watched the pale, dead embers

Spiraling down into the dark abyss
He saw she was run through with a harpoon
And frantically reached out for her hand
Before she could disappear into the depths

As he held fast there was a loud rapping
As if somebody were knocking on a door
He thought he must still be dreaming
When he heard the persistent knocking again

'Sorry to trouble you at this hour
But this woman claims you employ her
And would be willing to vouch for her'
A patrolman was standing next to Cordelia

However, he hardly recognized her
Gone were the gentle, pastel currents of light
Only sharp, erratic indigo static at her brow
Like a copper web firing blindly in the dark

The rest was bone white and pale silver gray
Her outer edge a frozen, brittle slate shell
He calmly confirmed every word of Cordelia's
Story about being his bookkeeper

Lately aggrieved by influenza deaths
And handed him a sum of cash exceeding
The vagrancy fine to settle out of court
The moment he closed the front door

The previously locked floodgates flew open
'I have no aunt and uncle,' she confessed
'My name is Stella and my parents are not dead
I got Cordelia from a story paper

I've lived under the pier for a month
Before that I lived in the public asylum
I was only discharged three months ago
They were happy to do it after nine years

It was so crowded and never enough beds
Only I had no place to go
I was afraid if I went home
They would only send me back again

So I made up a situation in the city
Otherwise, they would not release me
I am not a bookkeeper either
But I did look for work every day

'Til I ran out of money to pay my hotel
When I saw the constable this morning
I thought for certain he would arrest me
Then it's back to the asylum for good

I was so frightened it felt as if
My blood were draining out of my body
Now I just feel numb and frozen
Sadly, that is not even the worst of it

If I had told you my true situation
You might've really thought me mad
For who could believe such a thing?
I was mad and I am better now

Oh, if only things were so simple
Truly, I should not be walking the earth
I died nine years ago inside my body
But for some reason it still breathes

That is why I thought you were an angel
Or maybe somebody I was looking for
The whole time I was in the asylum
I had but one true friend and ally

Day and night he calls and cries for me
I thought he must be waiting on the outside
And might even meet me at the gate
I know if he were alive he would come

Therefore, he must be on the other side
But I could not even drown myself properly
Now I must live in-between two worlds
And he is left alone in that cold, dark place'

The Caterpillar

Jonah took her vitals and asked a few questions
Then fetched some tea and a light repast
He bade her lie down in his study to rest
Whilst he wrote to his family's lodgings abroad

Over the next few days and weeks
He quietly informed them of his change of plans
And instructed his solicitor to instigate
Such legalities and financial arrangements

As required for a fair division of assets
In coming months there was a good amount
Of opinions, objections and arguments
But every peaceful day that passed saw less noise

Until it eventually faded away
For the humble caterpillar seeks a quiet
Secure cocoon to melt into fluid
And become a new creature entirely

As the energy and feeling dropped back
Down into his lower body and legs
His poor lungs breathed in enough oxygen
And his wandering spirit finally settled down

Into its rightful and sovereign place
The coffin Captain Jonah had been living in
Finally creaked open to reveal not one
But two moths emerging from their cocoon