

THE GRAY MIRROR

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Published by Silent Muse LLC

www.silentmuse.net

Captain Jonah

Not so long ago in a city by the sea
There lived a retired merchant ship captain
Who had spent the large 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 was finally promoted to captain only 21
Not because he hailed from a wealthy family

Who owned a fleet of shipping vessels
But because he possessed a preternatural
And near genius aptitude for navigation
As well as mathematics and crew discipline

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

However, this was far from the worst of it
For he no longer felt any connection to the earth
Like dragging along two hollowed out logs
As if he trying to inhabit a hollow corpse

Never quite inside or owner of it
Merely hovering around the perimeter
Like walking on air but unable to breathe it
Or touching the ground but unable to feel it

Watching his life from his lofty heavens
As his earthy form occupied the space below
Like marble bust or the fireplace in the parlor
A valuable or vital part of the household

Whilst being stationary or immovable
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 a lucrative and reliable
Income derived from shipping investments
There was more than enough to keep

His large household of immediate family
And extended relatives afloat indefinitely
As he observed his house full of strangers
Growing ever more distant and preoccupied

He wondered if it was just his infirmity
Or had it always been thus?
He felt weary of feeling like an exposed
And vulnerable ghost haunting the halls

And yet, when he thought of turning them out
His body froze and his feet turned to cement
Through his intense agony of his recovery
And subsequent agony of his altered state

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 the study with him

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 wave
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 overwhelmed by the sensation of drowning

And feared he'd been dragged overboard
Ere he realized it was his own body falling
Into a bottomless icy sea inside his own skin
A cold arctic blast seemed to extinguish

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

Particularly in the lower half of his body
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, its 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 void 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 decent from the heavens
And venturing courageously into the void

He would consider it momentarily
Ere ascending back into the clouds
Unable or willing 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 an abyss was exhausting business
And he was nearing the end of his tether

One evening, Sirius failed to return
At his usual hour for his supper in the study
Jonah donned his overcoat and grabbed his cane
And departed the house without a word

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 into 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
Wore an expression of indescribable 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 waves
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 inside 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 over 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 a public places
To visit the trolley park or take scenic walks

Visit the bookshop or a 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

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

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

Behind his eyes to slow down at last
As the glass wall which separated him softened
It granted overwhelming waves of relief
Like a storm battered ship in a safe harbor

A Sad Situation

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

From the jagged, murky and heavy
And their probing, prying questions and opinions
At least, there was a temporary reprieve
Since 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 great violet, pink and blue light
And Cordelia swimming madly to him
Suddenly, the light shattered into gray shards
As he watched the dead, pale embers

Being sucked down into the black depths
He saw she was run through with a harpoon
And frantically reached out for her hand
Before she disappeared entirely into the void

As he held fast there was a loud rapping
As if somebody were knocking on a door
Upon awaking he thought was still 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 violet, pink and blue waves
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 verified every word of her story
Of Cordelia 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 crowded with 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 scared I 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 really have thought me mad
For who could believe such a thing?
I was mad and now I am better

Oh, if only things were so simple
Truly, I should not be walking the earth
I died nine years ago inside my body
Yet, 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 outside somewhere
Or that he might meet me at the gate
I know if he were alive he would come

So he must be waiting on the other side
Sadly, I cannot 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
He then wrote to his family's lodgings abroad

To calmly inform them of his future plans
And instruct his solicitor to begin the process
Of legalities and financial arrangements
Required to disengage his assets from theirs

In coming months there was a fair amount
Of opinions, objections, arguments and bargains
But every peaceful day that passed
Saw the noise, friction and commotion outside

Fading away until it ceased entirely
For the humble caterpillar requires a quiet
Secure cocoon to turn itself into fluid
So it may emerge a new creature entirely

As the energy and feeling dropped down
Back 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